

THE RUNNER-UP

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fiction

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iUniverse, Inc.
New York Lincoln Shanghai

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For my mother, Rita Mae

No other human being, no woman, no poem or music, book or painting can replace alcohol in its power to give man the illusion of real creation.

Marguerite Duras

Alcoholism is a search for a common language, or at least, it is a compensation for a language that has been lost.

Octavio Paz

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Vocation

I was 33 and freshly kicked out of the Navy for my enthusiastic alcoholism. I was sprawled across the ratty couch in my father's dive apartment in Gulf Gate Village, slurping warm beer, mooning about how my life had turned out.

"You gonna to get off that couch?" Chuck asked me. Chuck is my father. I'm Ray. I have no siblings.

The Match Game was playing on one of those endless nostalgia channels in the outer reaches of cable land. Channel 77 or so. "No," I said. "I'm biding my time. I'm ready for action. I'm catlike." I was also not yet drunk.

"You're going to have to get a job, or do something. You can't spend the rest of your life on a couch," Chuck said. Chuck had always been a go-getter. It was sickening. "I'm surprised they let you in the Navy with your attitude."

"They let anyone in the Navy these days," I said. "It's sad. I weep for our Navy. You're blocking the set." Chuck stepped out of the way. Gene Rayburn was cracking himself up with a question read off a card. Nixon was president back then. Or maybe Jerry Ford. Polyester pant suits for the ladies, wide lapels for the men. I noticed these things. Gene was holding a skinny, silver microphone that looked vaguely like a magician's wand. My father's TV was huge, maybe 36 inches, with stereo sound. Employee discount. In another month, the Devil Rays would begin another season of miserable baseball. The TV would come in handy, then, I thought.

The beer. It was purely medicinal. I could not function without at least a little alcohol. A tiny sip here and there. "Your liver is doomed," a Navy doc had

informed me in Level Three of the three-level program that was meant to cure me, to return me sober to my shipmates in the fleet.

I replied, "*Que será, será.*"

All of Chuck's go-getterism had led to nothing, to an apartment with ruptured stucco flaking off the walls in chalky, moist chunks. Go-getterism seemed over-rated from where I was scratching my bare beer belly. I rubbed my rough cheeks and chin. A moist beer-belch gurgled out from between my cracked lips. I reached into my boxers and gave my crotch a scratch. With my free hand, I felt around for my can of Stroh's, and found it down on the green shag. I chugged the rest. It was warm going on hot, and flat as all hell. "Beer cure," I said, and belched again, this time more lustily. "Go win the world, Chuck," I said. "I'll be right here waiting for you."

He straightened the wide-flat tie hanging stiffly from his neck. It was from the One Hundred Percent Polyester collection. And there was Gene Rayburn, on TV, doing likewise. *Très beau*. Chuck's entire wardrobe was permanent press and slick-to-the-touch. He had a head covered over with whirls of snow-white hair, combed into a ridiculous wave. The old ladies would love him today. They loved him every day, with all his flirting and winks. Oh, you wonderful man! Maybe he'd sell a refrigerator or two. I looked toward our own fridge, rusting in the kitchen. I hoped there was more beer in there. Or maybe something harder in the cabinet above the fridge.

Chuck was wounded by having a son so unambitious. I sat up, and my boxers rode down just a bit. I gave them a yank back up. "It will get better," Chuck said sadly with a touch of authority.

My mother left us when I was nine. Neither of us has seen her since. Before leaving, she'd pinned a twenty-dollar bill inside my best shirt with a scotch-taped note: "Ray—Be a good boy. Don't let your father win. Love, Mom." I still had the note. Somewhere. She'd left nothing for my father—save me, and a pot roast burning in the oven.

My father's ambition to swindle the world flamed out for a little while after that. But you can't keep a good man down forever. Eventually, his charm reappeared and we were back on a cash-money basis.

Back to me, though. My 12-year Naval career had left me with no discernible skills—job or social or otherwise. I was a gunner's mate. Excuse me, Mr. Prospective Employer, but I can break down a Mk 38 25mm machine gun system wearing a blindfold. And would you like fries with that? The BA in philosophy didn't help much either.

A couple of weeks before I was due to be released from Level Three at the Great Lakes Naval Hospital, I was given a short liberty. I walked myself down to the Eagle's Nest Petty Officer's Club and ordered a gin and tonic, neat, hold the tonic, leave the bottle. My leading petty officer happened to be sitting next to me, sipping a cool Bud Lite. He shook his head and smiled ruefully. We'd served together on an FFG out of Mayport. I'd been his leading petty officer at the time, back when I was so very close to putting on some khaki, still in control of my drinking. Sort of. Shore duty was something entirely different. "Don't overlook this infraction," I advised him, sitting there in my wrinkled and stained summer whites. He didn't, and the Navy embedded its boot print on my ass, even though we were fighting World War IV or V.

Chuck's old Taurus rumbled to life outside. I got up and watched him pull out of the parking lot, my fingers slipped between filthy Venetian blind slats. As he drove off, a hubcap fell off the car parked next to him and rolled alongside the Taurus for a moment before it keeled over. Early morning sunshine lit the dewy grass rimming the parking lot and bugs hovered around like a million shitty Tinkerbells. I could feel the heat pulsing through the window already. I turned the window a/c unit up a notch, then staggered into the kitchen in search of more booze. The Kelvinator yielded no beer. The cabinet above the Kelvinator was empty, save for half a bottle of Margarita mix. This was simply unacceptable. Now I'd have to get dressed. Now I'd have to leave the apartment.

I took a long, hot shower. No matter how much Dial I scrubbed into myself, I could still smell the sweet reek of booze seeping out of my pores. I tried shaving with Chuck's old safety razor. I nicked myself too many times and gave up. The underside of my chin would have to remain stubbly. My hands were shaking too much. I needed just a little something to become steady. I pulled back the shower curtain and looked around. Salesman, salesman. He must have some mouthwash. There it was, glowing green on top of the toilet tank. I leaned way out of the shower, across the sink, and grabbed it. There was half a bottle left, and I chugged it, standing there under the hot beat of the water,

wincing at the minty fresh pain in my throat. I felt immediately better, and managed to finish shaving. I even whistled there in the shower. I was sure I'd make it through the morning now. There was no rush. I tossed the empty plastic bottle through the open bathroom door and listened to it bounce hollowly across the hallway. I turned off the shower and got out, drying myself off with a stiff towel.

I rubbed the steam off the medicine cabinet mirror and peered in at myself. I'm not vain. I'm anything but. I'm an ordinarily packaged man. Average height, average weight, white as a sheet of typing paper, dark brown eyes that I cannot stand to look into, wavy brown hair maturing into silver. I can't remember spending more than a few seconds at a time looking at myself, ever. The sight of me sickens me. But this morning I spotted a zit, ripening like drowned corpse washed ashore, ensconced next to my slightly bent nose. I studied the zit as a scientist would, with an attempt at cold detachment. I decided to pop the zit. It had to go. The two-index-finger squeezing method didn't work, it only made it seem larger and the area around it turn tomato red. I dug around in the medicine cabinet and found a pair of eyebrow tweezers—eyebrow tweezers!—and used them like vise grips, compressing the zit until it yielded up white paste, and the subsequent dark drop of blood. The blood hesitated for a moment, then curled down around and beneath my nostril and stayed there, crusting up nicely. I rubbed at it a bit, then said fuck it.

I upended my seabag across the floor and found a chief's initiation t-shirt and a pair of jeans. I stood next to my bed, the couch, naked and sick, the air conditioner blowing onto my moist private parts.

About that nose. I broke it four times, most memorably playing catch with my father when I was nine. I'd spastically tossed the ball over his head and watched him chase it down the cul-de-sac. The ball kept hitting pebbles and leaping away from him, ping, plunk, ping, this way, now that way. It was funny, and I laughed. There wasn't much to me, four foot nothing and weighing nothing, and my father knew it, and I should have known better than to laugh at him. He caught up with the ball and chucked it my way with deadly accuracy, maybe 25 yards. Maybe more. He threw the ball with all the rage of a man who'd recently been abandoned. I stood there waiting for it in all my unathletic glory, my glove out in front of my awkward, immobile body, limbs askew, eyes half-shut in a wince, but afraid to move out of the ball's path. Afraid to look like a chicken. Cluck, cluck. The ball one-hopped the pavement and hit me square in

the nose. I heard the crack inside my head and treated it with the cold detachment that an accident prone kid can bring to moments like that. I thought, "That's an interesting sound. Perhaps my nose is broken." I fell slowly, slowly to the pavement, onto my back, turtle-like. "Yes," I thought. "My eyes are already swelling shut." It was interesting watching the sky disappear, replaced by glowing red eyelid innards. It was kind of like that science experiment involving a potato and toothpicks, where you're waiting to see what happens next. What happened next was my father took me inside the house, leading me by the hand. "I'm in-between jobs, you know," he explained. "So we're not going to the hospital. But that's all right. I know what I'm doing." We went inside the bathroom. I was totally blind. I could feel thick, arterial blood gooing up the works inside my nostrils. Chuck explained that he'd broken his nose many times playing football back in his high school glory years and that he never had to miss a down because his coach knew exactly what to do. Chuck shoved cotton balls, left over from my mother's residency, up into my nose, one after another after another. He left and came back with a pair of popsicle sticks and shoved those up there, too. By the time he was done, I was nearly insensate, with cotton crammed up my nose and into my ear canals and my eyes puffed shut. I could hear Chuck off in the distance telling me to get up, come on, get up, let's see some spirit. And the fuck of it was that I got up and showed some spirit. I shouldn't have done that. It raised all sorts of expectations in that man, the sort of expectations that someone like me is not likely to fulfill.

The other times that I broke my nose involved playing football. Once, playing Nerf football in the backyard of a friend's house, I ran into the back of the host kid's head.

A few years after that, after I'd given up the entire idea of athletics, I sat with my father watching football on the tube. Doug Flutie was running around on the field, somehow successfully avoiding death on each play. "See," my father said. "Doug Flutie's a little guy. And he can play." My father was certain that I had a quarterbacking future. He was delusional, of course, in a way that bordered on pathetic.

I replied, "There are some important differences between me and Doug Flutie. One is talent. The other is giving a shit."

Chuck shook his head vigorously, like a dog trying to shake the water out of his ears after a bath. As much as he liked to talk about the real world, and the toughness of making your way in it, he didn't have a concept of how the real world worked. He didn't live in the real world. He lived in some alternate reality where good looks and money and luck and talent didn't really count at all, and hustle counted for everything.

I dressed. I stood in the middle of his living room, in the shabby apartment where all his hustle had landed him, and I smiled. Smirked is probably more like it. Feel free to count this against me, too. I'm not proud of myself, or what I did next, which was urinate on the green shag next to his coffee table. I slipped on a pair of sneakers and left, leaving the door unlocked. Maybe some wonderful thief would let himself in and steal everything, and then I would somehow feel cleansed.

I ran into the adorable redhead who lived a few doors down from us. I'd seen her before. I called her *adorable* in my tiny head with all the contempt I could muster. Beautiful equals lucky. She'd be rich some day, too. It was only a matter of time. The beautiful people are born three steps ahead of everyone else and don't even know it. She was on her way up the stairs carrying a white plastic sack of groceries, and I was on my way down. I slipped past her without saying a word, just glaring at her, feeling my itchy contempt oozing out like a malarial sickness. She was wearing a bikini top and cutoffs, her flip-flops smacked against the soles of her pretty feet as she climbed the stairs. She made it to the top and shouted down, "What's your problem?" I thought, *They never do know—do they?—what it's like to sweat from nerves or work. That's my problem, my dear, but there's no use explaining that to you. It would be like explaining snow to a tropical rain forest denizen. Pointless and fruitless and exasperating. I'd never get to fuck one of these women, either. But I figured that they probably have no idea how to fuck. Not having had to work to get there, why would they work to do it properly? Later, on reflection, while I lay in bed at the VA hospital in St. Pete taking in non-alcoholic fluids through a bent straw, I would decide that there was something a little different about this one. There was something about her huge greenish-blue eyes. She shimmered with a lost insanity.*

So I guffawed down at the bottom of the stairs, sounding like the Navy chief I'd almost once become, gruff and world-weary and excited by asshole women. I'd given up on fornication some years earlier and had devoted myself entirely to

booze. Booze never yells at you for drinking too much booze. I'd given myself up for dead years before, for no reason other than I saw no good reason to continue living. I was too lazy for suicide. Life didn't interest me. I had no regrets at that point, standing there at the bottom of the stairs on the beginning of a sweltering Florida day. Later on that day, I would have regrets. Later on, I would drink so much that I would vomit blood all over the couch and the coffee table and the urine-soaked shag. Then I would be frightened into believing that perhaps life was worth a shot. Stay tuned.

I'm not a bar drinker, so that's not where I was headed. I was a mean drunk. I *am* a mean drunk. I'm full of sore-headed contempt for the human race, if you haven't guessed that by now. I was on my way to a former Seven-Eleven, which was now a liquor store.

When I was a student at Gulf Gate Elementary, I'd shopped at the Seven-Eleven, buying tangerine-flavored Now and Laters and green glass bottles of Coca Cola. Now, as an adult, I shopped at the liquor store. I recognized the beige, sheet-metal shelves. The liquor store owner hadn't bothered to replace them. Where the Wonder white and Pop Tarts used to be, now there stood my guzzle of choice—blessed, wonderful, cheap-ass gin in plastic 750-ml bottles. I bought two, while the wobbly, smirking clerk tsk-tsked at me. I shrugged at him. He was shaped like one of those inflatable punching clowns that rise back up jerkily each time you slug them.

I had nothing to be ashamed of, as far as I was concerned. I was participating in American commerce, most of which was suicidal in one form or another: Cars and choking carbon monoxide, fatty hamburgers and heart disease, cigarettes and lung cancer. He dropped the two bottles in a brown paper sack and shoved them over, along with my change and receipt. Still a little torched from my mouthwash repast, and feeling nostalgic for my solitary childhood, I decided to walk over to my old school and find out if the sight of it stirred anything inside. I wanted to feel something that morning, even while toting the magic liquid that helped me feel nothing.

I've never had any problem relating to children, dogs or lunatics, so I didn't have a socially phobic spaz attack. Before the second day of my chief's initiation, I had one of those attacks. To cure it, I stopped off at the NEX for a bottle of gin, and consumed the gin sitting in my little Toyota pick-em-up truck in the Nunn Beach parking lot. I watched my fellow future chiefs picking up trash

along the Lake Michigan shoreline, being good citizens. I exited my vehicle in a state of non-sobriety and, shortly thereafter, was escorted to the Naval Hospital for Level Three treatment.

And now, out of the Navy, I was free to drink as much as I wanted, I thought. I listened to the slap of my sneakers on the cracked, weed-choked pavement, while toting my brown-paper load. Gulf Gate Elementary School, the sign informed me. I stopped next to a short cyclone fence and stared out into a field of children, all of them flitting around. At their feet were thousands of dandelions, some yellow, some in sneeze-inducing cotton puff form. Bees danced along the tops of the flowers, a moving, roiling carpet of yellow and black. The children ran through the bees without a care. There was a Maypole out in the field. No, it was a tetherball set. *Thwak, thwak!* Jungle Jims and swingsets proliferated. I leaned on the short fence and watched the children for a while, serenaded by their brutal chatter.

“Hey, are you one of those child rapists?” this tow-headed snot asked. I hadn’t noticed him before he spoke.

“Nope,” I said.

“Because they taught us all about you,” he said.

“No kidding,” I said. I accidentally dropped my bag over the fence and the bottles slipped out and slid across the crabgrass. “Pick those up for me, willya kid?”

“Give me a dollar,” the kid said.

I pulled out my wallet and gave the kid a dollar. He snatched it from my hand and ran off laughing, calling out, “Loser!”

I vaulted over the fence and retrieved the two bottles and placed them back in the bag. On my way back over, I got snagged on the top of the fence and lost the bottles again. There’s a lesson for you junior alcoholics out there: Glass bad, plastic good.

Loser. It’s widely considered the most damning word in the American lexicon, and it sums up my life neatly. Rather than cringe at it, I embrace it. I’ve never won anything in my life. Sometimes I even tried to win, like when I was in high

school running track. In those instances when I'd put forth tremendous effort, I always came up one short. I finished second consistently, even with women. I have more second-place trophies, certificates, medals than I know what to do with. I have them in a shoebox somewhere, waiting for me to sift through. So much silver, and not a speck of gold. It makes me giggle.

I picked up the bottles again, and again placed them in the paper sack. My t-shirt was soaked through with acrid sweat now, as the roiling sun arced through the sky. A bell rang and all the kiddies trudged on inside, leaving the bees to rub their bottoms across the dandelions in peace. "Shake your groove thing," I said aloud.

A dog ran up to me and wagged his tail triumphantly, like I was some sort of doggie source of the Nile that he'd just discovered. Really, his whole second half was gyrating so wildly that his back feet danced across the broken pavement. "I must smell like meat," I said to the dog.

"Bark!" the dog commented happily.

"I wish I had something to give you," I said. I bent down and scratched the area above his tail, which he was more than happy to let me do. At least it slowed down his ass-end hula.

"Wug, wug," the dog commented happily.

His insane owner was sitting on an aluminum lawn chair staring over at me with a slanted smile slitted into her mushy face. I can tell when someone is insane. Drunks have this power, you see. "The war continues!" she said, standing up. "Philpot, how are you?" she shouted over. She made kissy-smoochy noises at the dog.

The dog gave me this look like, "You wouldn't mind taking me home, would you? I'm not a bad guy."

"Am I Philpot, or are you?" I asked the dog. I moved on to scratching his ears and he released these incredible noises from deep in his body. I wish I could have made a woman make those noises. I'd have ended up a much better man.

“Philpot, Philpot, quit scratching that dog and bring over the hooch!” She staggered over toward us in her sweaty floral-print housecoat, a clear plastic showercap fitted over what remained of the hair sprouting from her pink scalp.

“It is I who am Philpot,” I said to the dog. “Not thee.” He rolled over and I scratched his belly, hitting his sweet spot on the first try. More of those wonderful groans came rumbling forth. A march of ants made their way through one of the many cracks in the sidewalk. “What’s your hurry ants?” I asked them.

A shadow draped over the dog and the ants and me. Above us, obscuring Mr. Sun, was this great mass of woman, maybe 60, who had an eye on the bag of liquor I’d set down next to the dog. Her face was a gray haze. “Just a taste today, Philpot,” she said, her voice lowered conspiratorially. “Just a smidgen.”

“Please,” I said. “We’ve known each other how long?” Perhaps 60 seconds. “Call me ‘Phil.’ I insist.”

“You can call me ‘Maggs,’ then,” she said. She licked her lips, hulking above me in a magnificent silhouette rimmed in a flaming corona.

“Break out the glasses, Maggs,” I said, feeling convivial all of a sudden. “I’ll be right over. Right after me and the pooch have finished our business.”

She was satisfied by that and toddled back across the street.

“Ginger ale, Maggs!” I shouted after her. “Or orange juice and seltzer! It’s morning, you know!” Was it morning? I peered up at the sun. It was all over the place up there, blotting the blue out of the sky, drenching the earth with its terrible candescence.

“Right, right!” Maggs shouted over her shoulder. “Then you can tell me crazy Navy stories. Like last time.”

I began to doubt that I’d only known her the last 60 seconds. *I must not black out, I thought. I must stay in control. I must not name myself Philpot ever again.* I’ve known so many people without knowing that I knew them. It is a problem.

“Come on, Philpot,” Maggs said. She was entering her house. “You, too, Festus.” The dog got up and bounded after her. I, too, followed.

I'd like to say, "What followed is a blur." It was not a blur. I remember every ridiculous minute of it. There was sitting out front in aluminum lawn chairs, waving at the kids charging away from school. There was gin and ginger ale, gin and seltzer, gin and orange soda, gin on the rocks. There was a stand-up-fall-down-and-right-yourself. There was lighting a hula-hoop on fire and trying to coax the dog to jump through it, and the subsequent burnt hand. There was turning on the sprinkler to douse the flames.

There was Maggs' husband calling out play-by-plays on the current war on TV. The U.S. took a town. Hoo-rah! Gimme a splash more gin. Boy does my hand hurt; you should have that looked at; I'm thirsty; more gin!

There was, alas, a lack of gin.

"I must sally forth, Maggs," I said to Maggs. "Adieu, Festus," to the dog.

There was getting lost and falling asleep on someone's sidelawn next to their trashcans. There was being awakened by racoons. There was a fight with a racoon, and running away from the racoons. There was another stop at the liquor store, this time bearing bloody shins and a blistered hand and grass-coated back.

I somehow managed to get back to my father's apartment, yanking myself up the outside stairs via the handrail, my opposite hand wrapped around the brown paper sack with two more bottles of gin enclosed. Inside, I found a steam vac and cleanliness where once there was splendid disorder. I didn't bother to close the door behind me. My father's bedroom door was locked. I found a plastic cup in the kitchen and brought it over to the ratty couch and continued drinking well into the night, not watching TV, not doing anything but drinking.

Then it was morning, and there was the salty, bitter taste of blood and acid in my mouth. I sat up and recoiled from it, and from the paste of blood that had cascaded from my mouth and onto the couch. I began to shake uncontrollably. The will to live is strong, even when living seems pointless. I stumbled into the bathroom and saw my face, the face of a dead man. The face of a living corpse. And I was, for the first time in years, actually afraid for my life. I knocked on my father's door. "Chuck," I said. "I need to go to the hospital." I was surprised, as was Chuck. "I think I may want to live."

Learning

I think Gus was the best friend I ever had. We met in boot camp at Great Lakes. We were in the same company. One day, the company was all gathered together in the dayroom in the basement for some fucking reason. I don't remember what it was. We all stood there in our denim bellbottoms like it was the Disco Era, instead of ten years hence. Our names were spraypainted on our asses in chalky white. I looked over and saw Gus, and it was like he was a long lost friend. I walked over and shook his hand.

We bullshitted for a while in that basement. He was married, with one kid and another on the way. We had the same taste in music, punk mostly. The same taste in just about everything. We'd both had hard-scrabble childhoods. His in Texas, mine in Florida. His father was retired Army. He'd spent some time around the army as a kid, so when he'd lost his job, and with another kid on the way, he'd decided to give in and join up. It was like catching up talking to him. We both felt the same way. Years later, he asked me why I'd walked over to him. I really didn't know.

We went through the Air Force Special Weapons School at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver together. The Air Force was nothing but luxury compared to the Navy. They had real beds instead of racks, for instance. Real food, too.

We shared a cab from the airport to the barracks at the air force base. After we were checked in, we were sent over to the mess hall across the street. The guy who escorted us over there was named Roy Lush. Roy smoked like a chimney we both noticed. The Air Force mess hall was totally different than the galleys we were used to. For one thing, you could talk in there. It was set up like a pleasant suburban restaurant. And the food was edible. After we sat down with our food, Roy asked us if we'd ever eaten out a woman on the rag. "No," Gus

said. “No,” I said. We were smiling at each other, waiting for the punchline. We weren’t disappointed. “Tastes just like cocktail sauce.” Roy was from Queens and had that accent, so it sounded even worse coming out of his mouth. He later told us that he planned on becoming a congressman.

We were there from November until the following March. We’d hang out, go to art museums, sit in each other’s quarters and shoot the shit. He’d show me pictures of his bombshell wife and the baby at home. We were like a couple of 12-year-olds, really. Always pulling moronic pranks, tossing off biting remarks. After we graduated, we promised we’d keep in touch, then didn’t. I was sent to San Diego and pulled a Westpac on an ancient carrier, the Shitty Kitty. Gus was sent to Norfolk, Virginia, where he worked for a four-star.

After my two miserable years in the Orient, I was sent to the Military District of Washington for some shore duty that involved pretending to test out new weapons systems. My barracks were on Fort Myer, which is adjacent to Arlington National Cemetery. My workplace was five miles away at the Nassif Building, which was built in 1960 to last 15 years. Because of all the computer equipment plugged into the outlets, it regularly caught fire. I had to ride a green military bus to work every morning. One morning, a few weeks after I got there, I saw Gus walking past. “Hey, Gus,” I said, leaning against a wall. “How the fuck you been?”

“Ray!” he shouted, and ran over to me. I gave him my phone number at work and told him my room number at the barracks, then caught the bus.

That night, we caught up. His boss, the admiral, had been sent to Panama to run the operation down there. He was a disagreeable man. Gus didn’t mind working for him, except there was a lot of travel involved and it took him away from his wife and two kids. He was in town taking a two-week class. He showed me pictures of the wife and two kids. The kids were blond just like the wife. They looked like her, too. President Bush the First was fighting with Congress. Most of the tourist traps in town were shut down with a sign in front of them that read, “X IS SHUT DOWN DUE TO BUDGETARY CONSTRAINTS.” It pissed us off because we wanted to go to the National Gallery of Art. Instead, we bought beer and got sweaty drunk that night. Then we made a perfect mockup of the sign using art materials I’d stolen from work. It read: “THE JFK ETERNAL FLAME HAS BEEN SHUT DOWN DUE TO BUDGETARY CONSTRAINTS.” We planned on snuffing JFK’s flame at the cemetery

next door and putting up the sign. Unfortunately (or fortunately), we were so drunk that we got lost in the cemetery. We managed to find our way out. Gus went back to his barracks and I went to mine.

We had a blast for the two weeks. Then Gus would show up in Washington at odd intervals, always in a rental car that Uncle Sugar ponied up the cash for. We'd go see punk shows at the 930 Club, or see art house movies, or crap movies. We find strange places to eat, or bars to hang out in. We went to art museums. Gus told me that his wife, Deb, was getting jealous of me. He suggested that I fly down to Panama for a week and hang with the family.

I should have said no.

I flew down there, and to me, things seemed bad between them. They did nothing but argue. I grew up in a house where my parents did that, and all that I wanted was for it to stop. But the thing was, Deb and I got along really well. It wasn't like it was between Gus and me. But I liked her. She was direct. Deb said at one point during that week, "Why don't you two go homo and fuck each other in the ass?" To which Gus replied, "Bend over, Ray." I grabbed my ankles. Deb kicked me in the ass and sent me sprawling. After that, Deb didn't object to me as much. She was puzzled by the painting, though. "You *like* that painting?" she asked me. When I replied in the affirmative, she said, "Both of y'all are weird."

Turned out both of the kids were weird. They may have looked like Deb, but when they opened their mouths, it was pure Gus. Holden, the younger one, was the stranger of the two kids. Nicole was quiet, but had her moments. Deb seemed to resent missing out on half the jokes.

I left the Navy and went back to school.

My first real job in what I thought of as my new, post-military life—but it was really a just short break away from Uncle Sugar's sweet tit—was with a college newsletter. I was back in school after an escape of over five years. I thought of it that way, too, like I'd run away from the prison farm and now was back, but on my own terms. I was a wealthy student this time around. I had my G.I. Bill, I had this job writing three or four articles for a monthly newsletter, which was

distributed to the faculty and staff, and, once a month, I had my reserve drills down at Naval Training Center Orlando.

Oh, and during the summer, I went with my reserve unit to a reserve base in Virginia ostensibly to train, but really we just fucked off and drank beer and told stories about when we were really in the shit, which none of us really had been in. We liked to think of ourselves as hard, so all of us agreed that we were, in fact, hard. The only thing I can remember from one of those reserve getaways is that Michael Jordan and his Bulls stomped hell out of some other team in the NBA Finals on this massive TV set, while all these drunk sailors in their sweaty dungarees stomped and shouted, Hoo-rah! and drank ungodly quantities of beer. I think we spent that whole exercise in the enlisted club, and no one checked up on us.

I was drunk most of the time for those two years. No one seemed to notice, or care, so I didn't care. I kept on drinking. Beer hardly had an effect on me after a while, so I took up with gin. I stumbled into class drunk every morning after a tall, refreshing screwdriver, or in the afternoon with a stomach bubbling and sloshing over with gin-and-tonics.

The articles I wrote for the college newsletter, for the edification of faculty and staff, were lumped into digest form four times a year and mailed off to distinguished alumni. These moneyed ex-students were supposed to, upon reading my deathless prose, part with boodles of cash as they contemplated the glorious works that our beloved alma mater was inflicting on humankind.

I carried my sorrows around campus with me. They showed plainly on my face, and many people avoided me. Some, however, found all that decomposing unhappiness and putrid gin stink attractive. Those people were hard to shake off. They'd sidle up to me during and after class with knowing grins on their faces, intimating that they, too, knew that life was a wretched proposition and that they, too, would be drunk if they didn't care so immensely about their grades. You see, Dad would kill them if they didn't get good grades. Dad had invested mucho cash on their educations. I could understand that, couldn't I?

Of course I could. I was drunk. Nothing was beyond my ken.

Then there was my boss, the editor. I'm being immensely kind calling her an editor. Linda was a hippie, really, puked up from the Wonderful Golden Age of the Sixties into a comfortable government job in the Nineties, in which she did

no actual work. She merely waited for me to do my work. Then she would find a word, some word, somewhere in the article, that was wrong. Oh so terribly wrong. The reason the word was wrong was because of how young I was. “So young, so young,” she’d groan to me all the time. She told me that her war, way back in the Wonderful Golden Age of the Sixties, was a *real* war and not a *fake* war like the one that I had marginally participated in. I brought in an AP photo of one of the fake burned corpses from the fake war so that she might see that actual killing had taken place. She refused to look at the photo. Instead, she told me that Americans hadn’t gotten themselves killed in droves, therefore the war was fake on our side, if not theirs. This kind of logic made sense to her hippie brain.

That and snidely reminding me of our age difference whenever we’d meet for what she termed, “editorial discussions.” During these discussions, she would go over whatever stories I’d turned in, and attempt to trash them, thereby making herself appear to be earning a paycheck. She always had this contemptible look of pity fixed on her face, like she pitied me for being so young. “So young,” she’d groan wistfully, shaking her head with pity, pity, pity. Every argument ended that way, as if her age had conferred upon her some vast reservoir of wisdom. Her age had conferred upon her some wrinkles, which were crusted over with makeup. Her age had conferred upon her a bleak squint, and severe, marble-like eyes. Actually, she’d probably always had the severe, marble-like eyes, a real pair of steelies. In those eyes was a winter-harsh arrogance, unearned by anything like tough life experience or some taxing decision-making. Oh, it was an ignorant, self-absorbed squint, I think now. I hated her. Before those discussions, I would get as drunk as I could. I would limit myself, though. I still had to be able to stagger over from my shoebox apartment across the street from the university. I would test walking back and forth in my apartment. Satisfied that I would not vomit or stumble in her august presence, I’d have one last stiff one, often directly from the bottle, and lope across the street giggling or crying, unshaven for days or weeks sometimes, depending on when my last reserve drill occurred.

She was so totally self-absorbed that she never noticed. She never asked me if I’d been drinking. I’d plop down in the chair across from her and say, “Let’s have it,” and would check my watch like I had some place to go.

Then she’d find the egregious word, ten paragraphs down, second line, and would go on and on about it for ten minutes and would tell me that she was

covering for me with the dean but didn't know how much longer she could cover for me with the dean, because the dean was a hard-hard man.

"The dean," I informed her one day, "is a pussy." I belched lustily.

"What?" she said.

I winked at her. "The ol' hearing going now, too, grandma?" She was ten, fifteen years older than me, tops.

"Come back when you're ready to discuss this piece seriously," she said. "So young, so young." Her snottiness made me want to reach over and crush her nose by squeezing it between my index finger and thumb until she screamed and blood gurgled out of her pursed, judgmental lips.

I yanked myself to my feet. "Roger-dodger," I said. I swung myself out of the room and sat down next to her secretary, this white trash lady named Wanda. Yes, the immensely lazy Linda actually rated a secretary. Oh, our tax dollars and our tuition dollars! We wonder where they go. It would have been easier to take the stipend that Linda received and flush it down the nearest toilet.

Wanda, who did all the copyfitting and the actual design of the newsletter (and the quarterly alumni magazine) in Pagemaker, sat there snickering. "Bout damn time somebody said boo to that uppity witch," Wanda said. Wanda had this great sprayed-up hairdo, like a time warp from 1954. Her hard eyes were earned. You could tell just by looking at her that life's kindnesses hadn't been spent in her proximity.

"Le's you and me go have a beer there, Wander," I said, affecting a Cowboy Rex-type accent.

"You had enough, boy. You better cut down," she said.

"Noted, pard," I said.

But a conspiracy had been hatched. Monthly, I brought a diskette with the stories on it to Wanda, and she placed them directly into the electronic template. We cut Linda out completely, though I did provide a printed-out version for her to vivisect for our editorial discussions. Wanda let me in on this secret, you see. Linda never looked at the final version of her newsletter, the one she edited.

One of my professors actually recognized my name one day as she read out the class roll. She said, “You’re the one who writes that clean and funny prose for the newsletter, aren’t you?” She smiled at me. It was one of the nicest compliments I’d received as an adult, other than one conferred upon me by an ex-girlfriend before we’d commenced dating. Hers was, “You’re not normal, are you?”

None of the students knew what the professor was talking about, of course. None of them were faculty or staff. None of them were wealthy alums.

This nonsense went on for two years until I graduated. Not too much later, I was back with the military—I thought for keeps.

Gus applied to Officer Candidate School and was accepted. Deb would call me up once a week to let me know how he was doing, and to shoot the shit with me. This became a pattern whenever Gus was at sea. She would have to call me, like I was his proxy. Gus rented a car and came down on a weekend pass about halfway through school. “I saw a bunch of signs coming down here,” he said.

“No,” I said.

“Cafe Risqué,” Gus said. “A day at port is a day wasted. So let’s waste the day profitably.”

I didn’t want to have to lie about it to Deb. Gus dragged me there anyway. It was a strange strip club. It used to be a diner. The inside was lit in florescent lights. The music wasn’t exactly loud. And they served diner food. Meatloaf, for instance. There was a counter with stools that had been turned into a makeshift stage. Old toothless regulars sat on the stools and conversed amiably with the dancers. “Where’d you git that scar, sugar?”

“It’s an appendectomy scar, Hank.”

“Here, have a five.”

“Ain’t you sweet.”

It wasn’t what Gus had been expecting. Me neither.

We spent a couple of days roaming around Gainesville. Gus noted the negative ambiance of Gainesville. A mass murderer's trial was supposed to get started soon. We ate at the Athens Diner, the place where I'd worked my first two years of college, before the Navy. I'd told him all about it. He had to see the dump.

About an hour after he left, Deb called. "How was he?"

"Thin, but okay," I said.

"Did you two go to a strip club?"

"No," I said.

"You're lying," she said.

"Me?"

"You're a terrible liar," she said.

"It wasn't much of a strip club," I said.

She got pissed off. Everything got smoothed out, though. I told her that I knew that Gus would never cheat on her. And I did know that. He didn't have it in him, and she was his dream girl, everything he always wanted in a woman. His eyes would glaze over when he talked about her.

Gus was assigned to CINCPAC fleet. He and Deb invited me out to during my first summer back in school. I rode the train out there. Four days out, four days back. In between, we had some fun. But Gus and Deb continued to have these fights. One night, we were watching an Elvis movie on the tube. I don't remember what Gus said to her, I just remember how furious she became. She slammed the door hard, stomped out to their car, and peeled out driving away. She came back later and they made up, but the whole episode kind of scared me. I tried to explain this to Deb one time when she called me during my senior year. "Aw, that's just what marriage is like," she said.

At the train station, Holden sat down next to this girl who was a little bigger than him. He was six or seven by this time. He seemed smooth, in a way that a child should not be. Like he might offer the girl a martini any moment. He said to the girl, "My penis is as big as a Vienna sausage." The girl got up and walked away. We all laughed.

“His father’s son,” Deb said.

When I graduated, I went out to San Diego. I didn’t have anything better to do. Deb let me move in with them for a while, about six weeks, while I tried to find an apartment and a job. I couldn’t either. We’d sit on the back porch of their house in Navy housing and drink beer, smoke cigarettes, watch the stars and talk. But there were still the blowups. Deb started confiding in me more when Gus wasn’t around. She was worried about Gus’s sex drive, which didn’t seem to be slowing down over time. “It’s you,” I told her. “You drive him crazy.”

“I don’t believe that,” she said. But it was true. Maybe it was all the worship of her body that upset her. She was almost thirty. She was certain that her body was beginning to sag. It wasn’t, but you couldn’t convince her of that, and it wasn’t my place to convince her of that.

I took the kids down to the park every day and taught Holden how to swing with the wooden bat I’d gotten at Cleveland Indians bat day years and years ago. Nicole would play outfield. Then the two would switch off. If girls came by, Holden would have to sprint off and hit on them.

One time, Deb told me, he wandered off from his class to a pep rally for the local high school. His grade school was right next door. He found the cheerleaders before they went on, walked up to one and said, “I need a hug.” All the cheerleaders gave the little shit a hug.

I reupped. Soon, I was on an FFG stationed out of Mayport, Florida. Sometimes my father would come by, driving our old Ford Taurus. He was always getting fired because his bosses were idiots, and he couldn’t help pointing that out to them. The Navy took me back as a second class petty officer. I took to the bottle again. Secretly, I thought.

Gus was sent on six-month Westpac. Deb was frantic. She called me every night, just about, and talked endlessly about how she thought that Gus must be screwing all those Asian chicks. “He’s not,” I told her. “He’s in love with you.”

“I’m almost thirty,” she said. It was an obsession with her, what she thought were her fading looks. She also resented the children because of their Gus ways of thinking. She was beginning to hate him. She was sure that Gus’s voracious appetite for sex was independent of her. I couldn’t convince her otherwise.

She began to wear me down. Now I began to wonder if Gus was screwing around. No, not Gus. It wasn't in him.

I made Petty Officer First Class and moved in with a Filipina, the daughter of our ship's master chief. Deb would call me there, but Lani would limit the calls. "I don't think it's healthy," Lani told me. "You talking to that married woman every night."

"What does that have to do with anything?" I asked.

"You don't think that woman is developing feelings for you?"

Whoa. I stepped back. I told Deb, "We've got to cut down to once a week, okay?"

"Okay," she said. She was hurt, though.

A week before Gus was due to come back, she called me up. "I don't know what to do," she said. She'd fallen in love with the lifeguard at the Officer's Club pool. She was thinking of running away with him and dumping the kids on Gus. "They're his anyway, really," she said.

"Don't do it," I pleaded with her. "Please don't."

"Don't you tell him about this," Deb said. "If I decide to stay, it would ruin our marriage."

When Gus came home, I received a call from him. "I think Deb's screwing around on me," he said. He was the most depressed I'd ever heard him. And I knew all about the other guy, that was the thing. But I thought, if I tell him his marriage is all over. But if I don't, I'm being dishonest with a guy I'd trust my life to. I didn't tell him during that phone call.

I talked to Lani about it. "I told you not to talk to that woman! See what happens!" I was an incredible screw-up at that point. Also, I was drunk every night. Should I have kept on talking to Deb? Did my not talking to her drive her into another guy's arms?

Gus called up and said, "She left me." We talked for an hour or two. I put him on with Lani, a veteran of divorce. She'd been married to another drunk, another sailor. She gave Gus an earful. She put me back on with him.

I said, "I knew about him."

He said, "I know, Ray. Deb told me."

"I should have told you about that guy when you called. I swear to God, I should have."

"What good would that have done?" Gus asked me.

But something happened. Things fell apart with Lani. I was certain that I'd been instrumental in breaking up Gus's marriage. I went to sea for six months on a Mediterranean cruise, and brought along green-dyed gin cleverly concealed in Scope bottles. Gus told me that he didn't blame me, not at all. I visited him at his next base, Norfolk, when the kids were off visiting Deb and her new husband in California. We were still friends, but something fundamental was missing.

We kept in contact for a while, but weekly phone calls became monthly ones. Then every few months. Then not at all.

Hilltop Apartments

Shortly after my mother left us, my mother's brother offered my father a fresh start. Every opportunity was exciting to Chuck, at first. His ambition always ran somewhere over the horizon. I was ten.

The new opportunity was managing and maintaining a small complex of apartments on the North Trail in Sarasota. The apartments belonged to Uncle Wayne, who'd won them from his wife in a divorce contest. His ex-wife continued to write the authorities about the lack of safety at the apartments. Esther had always enjoyed my father's company, his salesman's charm. Perhaps Wayne thought that installing my father at the apartments would cause Esther to call off the hounds. Or maybe Wayne felt sorry for Chuck, Chuck being unemployed in the middle of stagflation and all.

Chuck had been out of work for months. "I couldn't sell air conditioners to Arabs right now," Chuck said. "Goddamn Arabs."

I rode shotgun next to him. Mom had been gone many months by that time. I still had the twenty-dollar bill she'd pinned inside my shirt before she'd left. The cash was tucked inside my left sneaker. Chuck would find it sooner or later, when his instincts came back to him. Being abandoned had caused those instincts to dull.

"I thought Iranians weren't Arabs," I said.

"They're Arabs all right," Chuck said bitterly.

We were heading down from Tampa. Everything we had was in the back of the station wagon. The rest had been repoed, save our ratty couch, which we'd driven down to Sarasota in the dead of night on a rented trailer.

“Walter Cronkite said they speak Farsi—”

“Who gives a shit,” Chuck said. He ran his fingers through his salt-and-pepper hair, fluffing it up. His hair was his best feature. It was mostly salt by this time, even though he was only 33. A convoy of military trucks passed by us, in a rush heading south. “Where do they think *they’re* going?” Chuck asked me.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“You don’t know a lot,” Chuck said. He checked himself in the rearview mirror. He seemed pleased with what he saw. An old lady pulled out in front of us in a Cadillac. She wasn’t interested in accelerating. “Goddamn!” Chuck shouted. He slapped the ceiling of the car, then used that hand to lay on the horn. “Did you see that?” We charged past her.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Listen to you. ‘Yeah,’ and ‘I don’t know’ and what the hell kind of man are you going to make?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Figures,” Chuck said. He rubbed his chin. “What I need to get is one of those new razors. I need a closer shave.” He talked like that for a while, mostly about grooming. I didn’t need to say anything during those times and could look out the window at the Aussie pines with their grey beards of Spanish moss, the various bits of flying and crawling exotica, the heat shimmers up ahead and the occasional grove of orange trees. A jet fighter cracked the air above us. “It’s war,” Chuck said, shaking me out of my daydreaming.

“Really?” I asked him. “Already?”

“What the hell do you think? Do you ever pay attention, any attention at all?”

“I guess,” I said.

“He guesses,” Chuck said.

They broke down out in front of the apartments, two teenagers in a brown and rust van. The girl mocked the boy's efforts, as he peered into the van innards from inside the van. He'd removed a plastic engine cover between the two seats and sat poking at the clicking and hissing engine. The driver's side and passenger's side doors were both wide open. It was a window van. I rode over on my bike. We'd been installed, Chuck and I, at the apartments for about a month.

"Look," the girl said. "It's the welcome wagon."

The boy looked up. He said, "And yet he has no wagon."

"It's a philosophical question, like a tree shitting in the woods," the girl said. "Like, does a tree shit in the woods if you don't see it?"

"You have it all wrong," the boy said, turning back to the inscrutable engine. "That's the pope shitting in the woods."

"You want me to call someone for you?" I volunteered. "I can do that."

"What a cute kid," the girl said. She had dirty-blond, shoulder-length hair and was deadly thin. Her half-closed eyes sparkled with secrets. Her lips were twisted in an ironic grin. "Come here, cute kid." I foot-rolled the bike a little closer. If she'd told me to leap off the Siesta Key Bridge, I would have. She leaned over and pinched my cheek. I blushed. "Look at him," she called to the boy. "He's blushing. You're missing everything, Buzz."

Buzz poked his head out of the driver's side doorway. The head bobbed on his neck. His greasy brown hair was all over the place. "That's right," Buzz said. "Name names. Dig up McCarthy and prop him up in a lawn chair. How many communists are there in the State Department?" A drugged smile. He went back to the engine.

"I'm Sissy," Sissy said. Cars zoomed past. A pink sheet of paper tumbled end over end. We stood on the dusty gravel by the side of the road. She smiled sweetly at me now. "What cruel bastard gave you this haircut?" She ran her hand across the top of my neatly shorn scalp. I blushed again. I looked at her bare brown navel, which was nestled between her halter top and cut-offs. I could see the strings from her bikini bottom sticking out of her shorts. When I didn't answer, she said, "I'm such a terrible hostess. Would you like something? A drink? An aperitif, perhaps?"

Understand, those were different times. We weren't all inculcated at school to believe that drinking and smoking were horrors beyond horror. We all looked forward to waving around fake ID's, smoking cigarettes, and drinking and driving. "Just Say No" was still in the future.

"No, I'm fine," I said.

"Give him a beer!" Buzz shouted.

"Quit looking at that engine!" Sissy shouted back. She smiled at me, like the two of us were sharing a hilarious joke. I smiled back at her. She said, "Would you like a beer?"

"Yes," I said, mostly because I didn't want to disappoint her.

We walked to the back of the van and she opened the back doors. Resting there was a styrofoam cooler, beach sand crusting its bottom. She popped the lid off and reached down into the ice water and produced a Red, White and Blue. "We stole this from our father," Sissy said.

"*That dickhead,*" Buzz said. He was sitting Indian-style in front of the engine, staring dazedly at it, like a skinny Buddha worshipping the fruit of Detroit.

"He's a misguided man, our father," Sissy said.

"He's an asshole," Buzz countered.

"His parents—" Sissy started.

"—are dead," Buzz finished. "But that's no excuse."

"Sure it is," Sissy said.

"Quit defending that piece of shit," Buzz said.

"I'm not—"

"—you are."

"Have another beer," Sissy said. "And quit being an incredible shit. Entertain our guest. It's not too often we have guests over to our rolling home."

“You live in here?” I asked her.

She opened my beer for me and handed it back. Pink-chipped fingernails. “Yes and no,” Sissy said.

“Mostly no,” Buzz said. “Fuck it,” he said to the engine, and crawled back toward us on his hands and knees. He fished a beer out and cracked it open. “I hate Florida,” he said, a bit too bitterly, I thought. I watched him chug the beer.

“What’s wrong with Florida?” I asked him.

“Nothing,” Sissy said.

“Everything,” Buzz said. He crumpled then tossed the empty can over his head. The van floor was littered with empty packaging.

There was something creepy about the two of them. Something like vaudeville.

“Here he goes,” Sissy said to me.

“Old people, heat, humidity, ‘it’s not the heat it’s the humidity,’ Alpha 66, boat owners, manatees that boat owners run over, old people dying behind the wheels of their Cadillacs and mowing people down post mortem, concentrated orange juice...” He stopped, sat up and peered out at traffic. “I’m so fucked up,” he said. “Do you mind driving?”

Sissy said, “I’d drive. But the van is broken.”

“No it’s not,” Buzz said. “It’s out of gas.”

“You dickweed,” Sissy said. “I just gave you ten dollars.”

“And you smoked up every bit of it, didn’t you?”

She sighed. “Buzz.”

There was a service station right on the corner. An attendant was already out on the sidewalk, looking hungrily down at the van and wiping his hands on an oily rag.

“Drink your beer, kid,” she said to me.

I drank the beer. All of it. It was disgusting. I winced as it went down, but I didn't throw it up somehow, and almost immediately felt better about the world. Everything looked brighter.

"Hilltop Apartments," Buzz noted, glaring across the street. "Where's the fucking hill?"

"I don't know," I said, feeling a bit off-kilter. "It belongs to my uncle. I think he may be nuts."

"Yeah," Buzz said. "We all are. Just a little."

The FBI rapped on our door. I knew they were the FBI because they looked just like they did on TV, with dark suits and unornamental ties, short hair and pistol bulges. Both men wore dark sunglasses and flat, affectless expressions. I opened the door.

"Hey, kid," the agent nearest me said. "Is your daddy home?"

"I guess," I said.

"You guess," the agent in the back said. They were nearly identical.

"He must be around," I said. "I'm letting all the air conditioning out."

"Can we come in?" the second agent asked. "It's important."

"Strangers," I said.

"Show him your badge, Buck," the second agent said. "Don't be a stranger."

Buck showed me his FBI badge. I couldn't help myself. "Cool!" I enthused, just like a little kid or something. I winced at my immaturity. "Come on in," I said, affecting cosmopolitan style. "Do you want something to drink?"

"I'm okay," the second agent said.

Buck sat down on the ratty orange couch. The second agent sat next to him. They both had their hands on their knees. "Get your father," Buck said.

I looked at a clipboarded list on the wall, like I was studying up on which apartment he was supposed to be in. Then I went out the door and ran down the block to the Tiki Lounge. I burst in, splashing daylight all over the regulars, which mostly consisted of men, but included a woman who wore the same electric pink tubetop every day, her hair piled ridiculously atop her head. She was fixing her makeup, peering into a tiny compact. All the patrons winced at me.

“What is it?” Chuck asked. He was sitting on the stool closest to the door.

“Shut the door, kid,” the bartender, Benny, said. He was a barrel-shaped man from Chicago, who pronounced “thick” “tick” and “three” “tree.”

I let the door hiss shut behind me. I peered over at the only woman in the bar. She noticed me and smiled.

“You’re not supposed to be in here,” Chuck said.

“It’s the feds,” I said. “They’ve tracked you down.” I was certain that my father was once connected to the mob. I’d seen mobsters on TV, and knew in my bones that my father had once been one of them. I had a recurring vision of him mowing down coppers with a tommy gun, while cackling insanely.

“Quit screwing around, Ray, and tell me what’s going on,” Chuck demanded. “Somebody’s toilet back up?”

“No, really, FBI guys,” I said. “They’re sitting on the couch. They want to talk to you.”

Chuck drained his beer and got up. “If you’re jerking me around, kiddo...” He let it hang there. He yanked open the door and I followed him out. He stayed two steps ahead of me all the way back to the apartment. He jerked open our door and demanded, “Who the hell are you guys?”

The agents stood up. This is it, I thought. This is where my father shoots it out with Johnny Law. “Top of the world, ma,” I said. I saw flames dancing around the four of us.

None of them paid me any mind. Buck showed him his badge, which my father dismissed with a nod. Buck then produced a photo of one of our tenants. The

nervous, young guy in apartment three. In the photo, his haircut was much shorter than mine. "Apartment three," I said.

"Apartment three," Chuck said.

"Do you have a master key?" Buck asked.

"Sure," Chuck said. He reached into his pocket and produced it.

"Come with us," the second agent said.

Chuck followed them out the door. He turned to me and said, "Stay here."

I ran back to my room. From there, I could look out at the vast, weedy yard that stretched behind our row of apartments. I watched as the tenant in apartment three ran from the feds, his legs pumping wildly. The feds calmly ran after him, not even producing their weapons. The second agent caught up to the tenant first and tackled him. I opened my window and heard the tenant crying out, "No! No! No!" The agent smacked him on the side of his head and he stopped talking. He wailed pathetically instead. They handcuffed him. I shut the window, but continued to watch. They pulled him to his feet and led him across the weedy yard. Some of the weeds were as big as cabbages.

Chuck walked into my room and yanked shut the drapes. "Sit down," Chuck said. I sat on my bed. It had Star Wars sheets on it. Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker were dueling. "That guy deserted from the Navy," Chuck said. "He's a drug dealer, too."

I could hear the tenant now. He and the agents were right by my window. I could hear the guy crying in great choking sobs.

"This is just great," Chuck snarled bitterly. "Where the hell am I supposed to find another tenant who pays in cash?"

Chuck took me down to sign me up for school. There were laws that said I had to go. Afterward, we stopped for ice cream sundaes at a Rexall drug store. The counter stretched for a mile or so. The drug store was a hangout for circus freaks, both former and current. There were probably some aspiring freaks in there as well. I liked the place immensely, but Chuck got the heebie-jeebies.

“Look at all these freaks,” Chuck said. Nearby was a lady with a beard, or a very effeminate man with a beard. She sat slurping on a vanilla shake in a frosty glass. “Eat up, willya?”

I took my time, sitting there. I spooned the ice cream slowly into my mouth and peered around at all the people. I can’t explain it. Something like serenity passed through me. I didn’t want to leave.

“Jesus,” Chuck said. “Freaks.”

“In here, we’re the freaks,” I said.

“Bullshit,” Chuck said. “A freak’s a freak, no matter.”

“A freak’s an abnormal person,” I said, dipping my spoon into the sundae and taking out the smallest portion I could without being obvious about it. “Abnormal in here is us.”

“Where do you get these ideas?” Chuck asked me. “Who have you been talking to?”

“No one,” I said. “I don’t talk to anybody.”

“You musta got this nonsense from your mother when she was still around. Don’t worry, it’ll wear off in time,” Chuck said. “I hope.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked him.

“She left you, didn’t she? Left you with me?”

I stopped eating and looked up at him. He was too perfect-looking a man. There was something freakish about his lack of freakishness. I imagined him on display at the carnival, in cage that said, “SALESMAN.” The barker would warn the kids not to show their wallets to the salesman. “Do not look into his eyes, kids! He will spirit away your money! He will drive you insane!”

“Stop looking at me like that,” Chuck said. He drained his glass of water and said, “I’m leaving. You coming along, or what?” He got up, peeled off a five from the wad in his pocket and dropped it on the counter next to my half-eaten sundae, turned and strode away.

I dropped my spoon to the counter and watched it rattle for a moment, mesmerized. I hopped off the stool and chased after him.

Bay Crest

As I was saying, my mother left us when I was nine. Neither my father nor I have seen her since. Before leaving, she pinned a twenty-dollar bill inside my best shirt and scotch-taped a note to it: “Ray—Be a good boy. Don’t let your father win. Love, Mom.” I still have the note. Somewhere. She left nothing for my father—save me, and a pot roast burning in the oven.

She was a Polack. That was my father’s explanation for her disappearance. “If I’d married an Irish gal...” he started. We were sitting on the ratty orange couch in the den. It was a big house for two people. It seemed so much larger now. We sat there together staring off into space. I noticed the patterns in the wood paneling. “Dad,” I started out.

“No,” Dad said. “No more of that. Call me Chuck.”

“Chuck,” I said.

“That’s the spirit,” Chuck said.

“Chuck,” I said, trying it out again.

So on that day I lost both of my parents. Even though both were still alive, I was an orphan. The country had become informal as we spun down the toilet. Our president was Jimmy. My father was Chuck.

“You need anything? Anything at all?” Chuck asked me. “Here,” he said, reaching for his wallet, “Let me give you some walking-around money. Hell, with this inflation it won’t be worth a damn tomorrow.” He gave me a ten. “Let that inspire you. Turn that ten into a twenty. Turn the twenty into a fifty. Show some drive.”

As if to illustrate the strange turn our lives had taken, it was raining in the front yard and the sun was shining in the back.

I remember some of the beforetimes, before Mom took off.

Mrs. Washburn, the nice Jewish lady who lived across the street from us when we still lived in Ohio, babysat me one day when I was very small. She'd insisted on it. She liked the effect that I had on her children.

Before I headed back across the street, Mrs. Washburn gave me one of her kids' discarded G.I. Joes. It was one of the original ones, about eight inches tall with red, solid-plastic hair. He had a fine, pink saber-cut scar across one of his cheeks that I admired greatly. I admired it so much that I wanted one of my own.

"Did you thank Mrs. Washburn?" Mom asked me. She was wearing black plastic sunglasses, she always wore sunglasses, and a dark dress.

Mrs. Washburn was wearing a dress similar to my mother's. Both of them had sprayed-up, black-dyed hair. "I'd keep him if I could," Mrs. Washburn said. She knelt down and grasped my chin with her long fingers. Her nails were perfectly manicured and cherry red.

"Thank her for the doll, Ray," Mom said.

"It's not a doll," I said. "It's G.I. Joe. He kills Nazis." Joe winked at me from my hand. "Give me my bayonet," he said.

"He wasn't too much trouble, was he?" Mom asked. She was sucking on a cough drop. I could hear it clicking on her teeth as she spoke.

Mrs. Washburn combed my hair with her fingers. "No trouble at all," she said. Which wasn't true. Earlier on, I was outside with her two kids, Lisa and Mike. Lisa was my age and Mike was a little older. We walked to the edge of the woods behind the Washburns' home. There was an incline there between the lawn and woods that looked like a cliff to the three of us. I said, "There's an old man in the woods."

"No there isn't," Mike said.

“He snatches kids. Grinds them up. Makes meatloaf out of ’em,” I said.

“I don’t believe you,” Lisa said, leaning onto her older brother. They had dark hair and darker eyes. Lisa was wearing a jumper. I was wearing brown corduroys and a yellow mock turtleneck. Mike was dressed as a cowboy. He even had pistols strapped on.

“Those pistols won’t help you if you fall into the woods,” I said. “That old man’s quick.” The air always smelled like a tire fire in Akron. “Smell that?” I did a little sniff-sniff. “That ain’t tires. That’s kidloaf.”

They backed away from me, which gave me an idea. I backed away from them, my back to the woods. “Yessir,” I said. “If you fall into the woods, you’re a goner.” I felt the edge of the incline with my heel and deliberately slipped down the slope. “Nooooo!”

The two of them shrieked and ran away.

I rolled over on my back when I reached bottom and looked up into the dying trees. I put my hands behind my head. I saw a robin red-breast hopping from branch to branch. Then I tried to get back up the little slope and slid around on the slick dead leaves and realized that I was stuck at the bottom. I stood up and peered into the woods. I saw people out there, maybe teenagers. I decided to walk out to them and see what was going on. Dead branches crackled under my feet. A leaf fluttered past. I heard a crow caw. I was a secret agent. No! I was in the FBI tracking communist agents. I whipped up my pretend walkie-talkie and my pretend snub-nose revolver. “Roger Wilco,” I whispered. “Niner-niner-niner.” I crept up on three teenagers and tried to hide behind a tree, but they saw me walking up. They were all drunk and wearing flannel and ragged clothes. The two boys had bushy hair and the peach-fuzzy beginnings of beards.

“Look at the little kid,” a girl with flipped-up blond hair said. She was eating orange juice concentrate out of the can with a white plastic spoon. The woods around them smelled stranger than usual.

I stepped out from behind the tree. “Are you guys communists?” I asked them, hopefully.

They all laughed at me.

“C’mere, kid,” the blond girl said. She crouched down. I walked over to her. She jammed the white spoon into the concentrate and rubbed my hair with her free hand. “Who gave you this fascist haircut?” Her teeth were all orange.

“You guys are hippies,” I said accusingly. I didn’t want her to stop rubbing my head. They all laughed, louder this time. “My dad says hippies are ruining this great country.”

“Ray!” Mrs. Washburn shouted. “Get away from that girl.”

I turned and looked at Mrs. Washburn. The girl gave me a little shove in the back. “Go to your mommy,” she said.

“She’s not my mommy,” I said. I started to cry, for whatever reason.

“That’s not a nice thing to say,” the girl said, and gave me another shove, this one harder. I fell onto my stomach. The leaves were all brown. Tiny holes had been drilled through them.

Mrs. Washburn picked me up. “You children should be ashamed of yourselves.” She held me like a mother would. I stopped crying and rested my head on her shoulder.

The kids laughed some more.

Mrs. Washburn carried me through the woods. “You’re very brave,” Mrs. Washburn said. “But you should never do that again.” She sang something to me in a foreign language while carrying me back.

“He’s no trouble. Bring him over anytime,” Mrs. Washburn said to my mother. I was grateful to her for not ratting me out and smiled my relief at her as my mother took my hand.

We looked both ways and crossed the street. Mom said, “I should make you go back there and apologize for whatever you did, tiring out that poor woman.”

“What did I do?” I asked her.

“You always do something,” Mom said.

Mom walked to her room to take a nap. She was always nervous and tired. I watched her go. I held G.I. Joe out in front of me with both hands and admired his cool gory scar. I took him into the bathroom with me, where my father would shave in the morning before going to work. I sat G.I. Joe down on the edge of the sink. G.I. Joe said, "Land ho." He gave me a thumbs-up. I climbed up on the sink and opened the medicine cabinet. I found the little box filled with injection razors. The razor blade would pop out of these boxes and would go into a holder on the top of the razor handle. I'd seen my father do this dozens of times, but I couldn't seem to make the little razor pop out. "You and me, Joe," I said. And the razor popped out, slicing open my thumb. I dropped the box and razor into the sink and stared at my thumb. Dark red blood gushed from my new thumb crease, drizzling down my palm onto my wrist. It was the coolest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

I ran up the stairs to my mother to show her.

"Can't I leave you alone for a second?" Mom asked me. She made me raise my hand above my heart and took me downstairs. When it didn't stop bleeding, she packed me and my sister up and took us to the emergency room.

A few years later, we were living in Tampa. My father was a typewriter salesman and had brought home a huge, industrial typewriter, which I was fascinated with. I loved to punch the keys and hear it clack. My father had signed me up for judo lessons at the Boys' Club. He thought that I needed toughening up. I had dragged the typewriter out and placed it onto the dining room table. I had an assignment to write 100 times, "I WILL NOT BE DISRUPTIVE IN CLASS." I loved that word. Disruptive. It had such pop and menace to it. I decided to type the assignment. Clack-clack-clack, clack-clack.

I could look through the kitchen at my mother who was sitting on the couch in the den, drinking a Manhattan to prepare herself for my father's arrival home. I saw her take a sip. She was watching a soap opera. Mom set her drink down on the TV tray and got up to check on the dinner. I watched her walk over to the stove and open it up. She put on her oven mitt and lifted the lid on the Dutch oven. The skin and meat were slipping away from the bones on the chicken, which meant that it was almost done.

My mother was a horrible cook.

"Go wash your hands," Mom said.

I slid out of my chair and took off in a little jog. I decided to do a judo roll. I hadn't yet perfected my judo roll. This involves placing your hands out in front of you, fingertips-to-fingertips, palms down, and rolling your body from palms, to right elbow, to back, to butt, to standing again. I had it all down but the standing again. The running start gave me some momentum and I rocketed through the roll, and for the first time ever I was standing again. And, bang, I slammed my forehead on the wall. I was used to hitting my head by this time. Nothing to it.

"What was that?" Mom shouted. "Are you doing something weird?"

"Sonic boom!" I called back. We lived near MacDill Air Force Base.

"I know you!" Mom shouted back.

I walked into the bathroom to take a looksee.

It was wonderful. There was blood and a little flap of skin and I thought I could maybe see my skull under there. Blood was flowing down the side of my face. It was like some kind of wonderful dream. I had to share it with someone.

"I'm Vincent Price!" I shouted down the hallway. "I'm the Mask of Red Death!"

It was time to show my mother. Boy would she be mad, and probably about the dent in the wall, too. I ran down the hall. The blood was gushing now. It wouldn't do to get it on the carpeting. I tried to staunch the flow with my hand. The blood oozed between my fingers.

She was in repose on the couch. "Hey, Mom! Look!"

"I knew it," she said, swinging to her feet. She dragged me by the hand down to the bathroom. There was blood all over the place. Manson Family A Go-Go. She made me lay down on my back and put my feet up on the rim of the tub. She opened up the cabinet under the sink, which was filled with every type of bandage known to mankind. It wasn't like she wasn't used to dealing with my wounds. She wiped it up the best she could and said, "I guess we're going to have to go to the emergency room. Again." She wrapped my head in gauze and carried me to the family truckster, depositing me in the backseat. She wrote a note for my father. "Took Ray to hospital. Dinner in oven."

Mom had prepared a Banquet frozen dinner, turkey slices in thick gravy, along with instant potatoes and a can of creamed corn. My father was shoveling it down, not really looking up at us. In between bites, he spoke of his latest attempt to find a job and how he found the boss lacking.

Mom interrupted him. "So you were offered a job, but didn't take it?"

"That's not what I said," Chuck said.

"Look at me," Mom said. "Look at me, you great man you."

Chuck sat up from the plate and dropped his fork. "What? What now?" he said, irritated. He glowered over at her, his arms crossed. I sat in the space between them at our little kitchen table. I watched his face change. "Jesus Christ," he said.

"The kid," Mom said, nodding in my direction.

"I'll say what I want," Chuck said. "I pay the bills around here."

"No you don't. I do," Mom said. She had a job at Maas Brothers selling china to rich folks.

"How are we supposed to support it?" Chuck said. "Tell me that, smart guy."

"Smart *gal*," Mom said. "I'm a woman. Remember?"

We'd all stopped eating by this time.

"Support what?" I asked finally.

"Shut up, Ray," Chuck said.

"Dad?"

"Shut the fuck up, Ray," Chuck said.

"Listen to your father," Mom said. "I mean, *really* listen to him. Listen to what comes out of his mouth."

“Give me a break,” Chuck said.

“I’m not having this kid,” Mom said, patting her tummy. “I’m not having any more of your kids.”

“You can’t do that,” Chuck said. “You need my permission. Don’t you?”

“Watch me,” Mom said. “Watch me need your permission.”

My grandparents drove down to Florida from Cleveland with Uncle Dick and Aunt Helen the summer after my mother left. My grandparents claimed not to know where my mother had run off to. My father, nursing a back ailment from a car accident, was laid up in bed, in traction, watching the TV day after day on a 12-inch black-and-white Magnavox. He’d be there when I got home from school, taunting President Carter for giving the Panama Canal to the Panamanians and for going weak in the knees concerning all the religious nuts in the Middle East. “Look at the rat,” Chuck said. “He’s a born traitor.”

Aunt Helen was my grandmother’s sister. My father did not like those people. They ate funny food and chattered in a strange language. They were Cleveland ethnics from the west side.

Uncle Dick and Aunt Helen were renting a place in Clearwater for the summer. The grandparents dropped them off over there before coming to our little house in Bay Crest, a carport and rusting-cars-on-the-lawn neighborhood near Tampa International Airport and not too far from McDill Air Force Base. Jets zoomed overhead. Sonic booms rattled the sliding glass doors and kitchen cabinets. The grandparents pattered up in Gramps’ white Plymouth Valiant; the engine ticked noisily after the car shut down. It was not yet the height of summer, but it was drippy hot. A neighbor girl and I were in the front lawn playing catch. There were empty patches of grass where my mother had had me pulling weeds, not realizing that the weeds she had me pulling composed our lawn. Crab grass. We were so new to Florida then.

I dropped my glove and the ball, and ran over to the car. Grandmother got out and cooed to me in her scratchy, sing-song voice. Gramps swung open his door and said to me, “You throw like a girl.” He lit the cigar in his mouth with a silver Zippo. Gramps had once been in the Cleveland Indians farm system as a

power-hitting first baseman. He'd also been a semi-professional boxer, before settling on a career in civil service. He worked for the government for 40 years, retired, and worked for another ten as a clerk at Halle's department store. He was a blunt, unsentimental man. "Get the bags," he said to me, smoking. He handed me the keys.

I unlocked the trunk and saw Samsonite cases that were bigger than I was. I wasn't very big, especially for my age. This, along with my mouth, led to my getting beat up more often than most boys. I never let the bigger boys win. They got tired and gave up instead, not wanting to look like complete monsters with my blood all over their hands and my face.

The grandparents were going to leave in two days and take me with them. Chuck painted this as a fun trip—festive, he put it—but the reality was that my father was no longer supporting us.

Mom had had a job at Maas Brothers in the mall, selling china to skeptical retirees. But now she was gone. It was decided to export me to Cleveland for the summer, where I would be clothed and fed by relatives who were not hampered by severe back problems.

My father could hear cash registers ringing with every twinge in his back. He was sure that this was the grand payday that was due him. The insurance bastards would have to pony up—eventually. Wouldn't they?

I somehow managed to drag the suitcases in. The grandparents were staying in my room. I was sleeping on the couch in the den. Chuck's former marital room was set up as pathetic hospital-like quarters, where he could receive lawyers and health professionals, and moan in pain. My mother had brought home a plastic water pitcher and cup to complete the illusion sometime before her quiet exit.

I walked down the hall toward my bedroom, following my grandfather. He strode purposefully ahead of me, still presenting the bearing of an athlete at age 70. He stopped at my father's room and looked in at Chuck, said a few words. I heard my father reply. Then my grandfather turned away from the doorway and after two steps, spat in disgust on the linoleum. Then he saw me. He bent down and said, "It's probably best you didn't see that."

"I did see it," I said.

“A boy should respect his father,” Gramps said.

“I guess I do,” I said. “I think I do.”

“There ain’t much there to respect, but do your best,” Gramps said.

“I’ll try,” I said. That seemed to finish the exchange. Gramps stood up straight and stepped past me.

A couple of days later, we were on the road.

My grandfather insisted on hewing to his own internal speed limit—45 miles per hour—on the Interstate. This was before the mandatory national speed limit of 55, so in some places my grandfather was driving at 30 or more miles per hour below the speed limit. Truckers and other drivers honked their horns and flipped him off. This was proof, Gramps said, that the country was full of idiots. Gramps did all the driving.

Grandmother couldn’t drive, and didn’t want to learn. She sat across most of the bench seat in front, her bum knee propped up, chirping out instructions and sucking on mentholated cough drops. She got the bum knee from selling shoes at Taylor’s and washing the floors of rich people in Shaker Heights. She complained about Gramps’ constant cigar smoking, about the temperature of the air conditioning inside the car, about the last restaurant we ate at, but he declined comment. Then she spotted a sign somewhere outside Valdosta, Georgia. It said that for every fill-up, Stuckey’s would give you a free pecan log. At the next exit featuring a Stuckey’s, Grandmother claimed bladder problems. As she hobbled off toward the bathroom, she said, “You might as well fill up.”

Gramps drove up to the pumps. The attendant hustled out. He popped open the hood for him. “She wants the damn pecan log,” Gramps said grimly. The attendant topped off the tank and handed Gramps a pecan log. It was maybe a quarter’s worth of candy, wrapped in thin plastic. “Here’s the damn pecan log,” Gramps said, handing it to Grandmother when we got back to the car.

“Oh, I don’t want it,” Grandmother said. “It’s for Ray.”

I gobbled it down back on the Interstate, as semis and tractor-trailers and pickups and cop cars zoomed past us, honking their horns and telling us off. Two exits further down the highway, another Stuckey’s sign.

“Ain’t no way I’m stopping,” Gramps said.

“It’s for Ray,” Grandmother argued. And argued. We passed by one Stuckey’s, but Grandmother kept on Gramps, wearing him down. After Macon, we didn’t miss too many Stuckey’s. The problem was that the pecan log wasn’t free with a top-off. You had to put eight gallons in the tank, not a tiny drip of gas that barely made the counter click. The attendants gave us such a look. It was hardly worth a hand squeeze on the pump. And Gramps had to wink and nod at them and bribe them for the damn pecan log, which was immediately dispatched back to me.

I got sick of them quickly.

A peach basket was procured at another Stuckey’s, a nice wooden one with an old-timey emblem glued to the side, and it was placed in the trunk, where the logs could ferment without making us sick. It was summer in the south, and we had plenty of air conditioning in the car. But none in the trunk. The week-long trip to Ohio dragged on. “Get off the road, you old fart!” *Etc.* And an endless supply of Stuckey’s along the highway to feed Grandmother’s obsession. One pecan log after another went into the trunk.

We finally made it to their little street in Cleveland. They lived in an Irish neighborhood on the far west side called Kamm’s Corner, a few blocks from a rapid transit stop. Chuck grew up there. His family, when they were alive, had lived in the house across the street. The men had worked in shipbuilding and had died, one after another. His mother was in a home somewhere. We never visited her. We pulled into the driveway, along the dual concrete strips, and stopped in front of their garage, which was well behind the house. I got out of the car and stretched. I watched a robin splash around in the birdbath in the backyard. Flowery bushes rustled out a sickly sweet smell. Gramps opened the trunk and handed me the peach basket. “Look at it,” he demanded.

I looked in the peach basket. All of the pecan logs had melted together in a beige, nutty lump. Clear pieces of plastic jutted up above the mess. “See what happens?” he went.

But that wasn't the last time he said that the summer I stayed in Cleveland. He said it one more time:

He decided that we men should take in a ballgame. We took the rapid transit into the grayish-brown abandoned center of Cleveland so we could watch the Cleveland Indians in their natural habitat. He'd spent the summer teaching me to throw like a man. We'd used his old ball mitts, including the ancient first baseman's mitt that he'd used in his minor league days. Catching the ball took two hands. We brought the gloves with us to our terrible excuse for a ballpark, Cleveland Municipal Stadium. It was a shambling mess of a place, built during the Great Depression in an unsuccessful attempt to lure the Olympics to town. Like Cleveland, it was brown and grey and mostly abandoned. Chief Wahoo, in the sign out front, looked apologetic, or embarrassed. You couldn't blame him, really. The Indians had been in last place my whole life. They would continue to be in last place all through my 20's, and into my 30's. We sat by ourselves somewhere on the first base side and watched our pathetic ballclub perform batting practice. "This ain't no ballclub," Gramps said, waving his cigar toward the field. "Don't pay no attention to them. They ain't no good."

Later, we stood up for the National Anthem. Other than the 7th inning stretch, there was no real reason to get up, other than to flag down passing vendors.

Immediately, the Indians got down to the grim business of losing. It was 9 to 1 by the 7th inning, and storm clouds were dragging themselves in across Lake Erie, threatening to snuff out the game before it could shamble to its pitiable close. Thunder clapped off in the distance. I came back with the beer vendor, who I had to chase down and drag back to Gramps. Gramps overpaid the man for the beer, took a sip, and set the beer down. Then he said to me—waving at the empty crumbling stadium, the lumpy field, the horrible team, the threatening, polluted sky—"See what happens?" And he stuck a cigar in his face and lit it, thus ending conversation. It is a sin to waste even a cheap cigar.

That night, after Grandmother tucked me into my mother's fluffy old bed, I realized that someday I would die. I would die, and I would be no more. I would no longer exist. It did not cause me to cry, but I didn't sleep either. I stared up at the ceiling and thought, See what happens when you hope. See what happens when you dream. See what happens when you work all your life. Everything falls apart, no matter what. The city you worked in, slaved in, loved

in and lived in dies. The team you root for dies. The sooty skies are swept away by pitch-black and rain. See what happens?

The grandparents' room was right next door. I could hear them both sawing great stacks of lumber in there.

"We're going to die," I said to my absent mother. I imagined her under the covers next to me.

"Not me," she said. "You maybe."

"You, too," I said, my voice cracking. "You're going to die." That hurt more than my own death. I didn't think I could live without her.

"Not before you," she said flippantly. "So I'm not sweating it."

"See what happens?" I said in a cruel imitation of Gramps. "See what happens?"

"Give it a rest," my ghost mother said. She rolled over and pretended to sleep.

When we went back to Florida, a week later, we did not stop at Stuckey's. Stuckey's was not mentioned, even when their huge signs stared us in the face. Somewhere in southern Ohio, the radio signal from Cleveland weakened, and the Indians faded out. It was a mercy. The Yankees were killing them.

Sunshine

The summer I turned 15, the state of Florida entrusted me with a learner's permit and my father with his car. He was a traveling salesman and I became his chauffeur. He cranked the passenger-side bucket seat back and allowed me to drive him around with no parental direction, just a hand drawn map clipped to the visor to show me the way. It was demanding at first, but after a few days of hard driving I quickly learned what a car can and cannot do. I turned the air conditioner up to freezing, and Chuck allowed it. He even let me play tapes for a few days until his ears couldn't take the cacophony of punk rock anymore.

"What kind of music is this?" he asked after he cracked.

"Music *music*," I said. It was the Germs. I parked in front of a print shop that was out by itself off a two-lane blacktop. It was marked "#2" on the map. Heat shimmers, mosquitoes and turkey vultures whirled around. A cow pasture surrounded.

"Don't get lippy, sunshine," he said. "Sunshine" is what he called customers that he secretly loathed. We went into the print shop. I stood around absorbing the air conditioning while Chuck bullshitted at the owner, who was missing a couple of digits off his smoking hand. The owner puffed on a robusto, his knuckles and finger-stubs inky black. After a while, Chuck gave up and we stepped back outside. It was a horrible day, about 100 percent humidity and 93 in the shade. "You know why I called you 'sunshine'?" he asked me, after we got back into the car.

"No," I said.

“Because you’re so bright,” he said. Then he laughed. It wasn’t a happy laugh. It sounded like a series of dry hacks. “Ray of sunshine.” He laughed some more.

The car was a Ford Taurus, fresh off the assembly line. He’d been salesman of the year three years running. It was the first new car we’d ever owned and I was proud driving it. It seemed sleek and ultra-modern, like something from the future. “You could fit a pallet of paper in the trunk,” Chuck noted when he bought it. “Or five dead bodies.” Hack, hack, hack, chuckle, chuckle. Chuck sold paper to print shops all over southwest Florida. It was a good racket, he claimed.

At the time, I was running track. I hadn’t yet discovered booze, really. That would be in the future. In the present was a five-mile-a-day regimen of jogging intermixed with sprints. I ran the quarter mile, one lap around the track. I was down under the one-minute mark, just enough to finish a close second no matter whom I raced. Chuck had come out to a few races, even though he did thought that track wasn’t much of a sport. He wanted to pretend like he was interested, which was nice. After one race, in which I finished second, he told me that it looked like I had quit just when I had the race won. In the final turn I’d lost my wind, and was passed by another boy with the same small torso and long spindly legs that I possessed. I watched him sprint by me and was not surprised or discouraged in the least. “You lack a killer instinct,” Chuck informed me sadly. “My own kid.”

After work every day that summer, I would put on a pair of gym shorts and a pair of Nikes and would hit the road. The dim sun would caress my bare back as I jogged down the narrow asphalt roads in Gulf Gate Village, past old people in aluminum lawn chairs and kids playing kick ball. Occasionally, a mosquito truck would cross my path and mist me with Malathion, or a Trans-Am would honk and the occupants would question my manhood.

I could outrun just about anybody. It was that final stretch, though. It killed me. I couldn’t get past it. I would lead races and feel fine, then my legs would suddenly give out on the final turn and some kid who was drafting me would leap past, while I staggered across the finish line, cramps eating my thighs, my stomach heaving up thin puke awash with acid. Spit, spit, then rinse out with Gatorade. Here’s a bit of silver with ribbon on it, kid. Here’s a slightly smaller trophy than the one you’d hoped for.

The coming school year I would win. I would show everybody. That's what I thought. No killer instinct, my ass. I would win once, and that would prove that I was not a loser.

Chuck told me tales from his boyhood as I drove him through the brilliant glaring daylight that is Florida in the summertime. He told me about his mother's long illness back in the Sixties, before I was born, and what a help my mother had been during that time. She lived across the street from him in Cleveland. Her family was the only one on the block without an Irish surname. "They were nice," Chuck said. "Even if they were a bunch of Polacks." Chuck's father worked at shipbuilding, and so did his brothers. His mother lay suffering in the hospital, and the menfolk would come in when their varying shifts ended.

Around four in the afternoon, a gully-washer of a rainstorm would flare up and the sky would turn black and the windshield wipers couldn't keep up. I'd pull to the side of the road and turn on the emergency flashers, and Chuck would continue his stories.

The illness. Chuck could not bring himself to tell me exactly what it was. There was shame attached to it, whatever it was. And it slowly robbed his mother of her senses. She often mistook Chuck for one of his brothers, even though Chuck, being the youngest, was often left alone with her for hours and days at a time. His father took to drinking at the local tavern before he staggered in the door, and would sleep on the davenport under the dull glow from a floorlamp. Chuck would go out and look at his old man, asleep with fatigue and alcohol, and feel a sharp rage rip itself through his body. His fists would bunch and he would walk over to his old man, who lay groaning and jerking on the davenport. He would say to himself, I will not be like him. I will be more than a worker.

"You have to be daring," Chuck told me. "You have to take risks. That's what sales is all about."

The storm would pass by and the tremendous late day sun would be hanging over the horizon like a threat, burning the rain off the road. You could actually watch the droplets return to the sky.

I'd turn over the ignition and turn off the emergency lights and pull out onto the road again. More often than not, another driver would flash his highbeams and honk his horn because I'd forgotten to check the rearview.

Chuck told me that you have to look at the man you are selling to like he is stealing money out of your pocket. "That son-of-a-bitch has *my* money!" Chuck made me repeat after him.

When his mother died, he sat there holding her hand in the hospital. "She had this terrible smell, this death smell. That's the only way I can describe it. Your mother was there, too, standing outside the room in the corridor. My brothers, my father were nowhere. They weren't even around," he said. "Later, my father died of asbestosis. My brothers of accidents. I'm all I got left. Me and you, that is."

It was a touching story, I guess. But he told it in a such a way as to make me feel as if he was taking me for a chump, just like one of his customers, whose money did not belong to them, whose money was rightfully my father's.

We'd get home and I would put on my gym shorts and sneakers and stretch in front of him while he sipped a cold Schlitz from the bottle, sitting on the ratty orange sofa that moved with us everywhere we went. Then out the door I went and around the neighborhood, slapping mosquitoes off myself as I jogged along, usually running under a sprinkler or two just to cool off. Three miles, then five miles, all summer long. Windsprints and long-striding jogs. I felt like a gazelle, like a world beater, that summer. It was the best I ever felt in all my life.

"Pull over!" Chuck shouted. He was sitting upright for once.

I pulled the Taurus over to the side of the road, carefully and deliberately. I checked all my mirrors. "What happened?"

"Didn't you see that dog?"

"What dog?"

"Jesus," Chuck said in disgust. "Slip out my door and follow me."

I thought I'd hit a dog and suddenly felt terrible. I didn't even hear anything. I followed my father along the gravel on the side of the road, next to the drainage ditch that paralleled the two-lane-melty blacktop. The ditch was filled with green algae and bugs and other wild things that leapt out and plopped back down into the murk before you could identify what they were. The chirping and shrieks of bugs and animals from out in the woods was loud enough to almost be terrifying. A short, barbed-wire fence separated us from all that chaos out there. I couldn't help feeling that it was all waiting to grab us and suck the marrow out of our bones.

Or maybe I was being melodramatic.

We got back to the dog, a medium-sized mutt that was at least half-German Shepherd. The dog's head was submerged in the muck, if it had a head, its guts crawling with maggots. The dog had been dead for quite some time, maybe days.

"What kind of bastard hits a dog and just leaves it out here to rot?" Chuck asked me.

"I don't know," I said, staring down at the dog and feeling relieved that I wasn't the bastard who'd hit him. The dog's rot-stink was a bit overpowering. I suddenly felt the urge to vomit. I swallowed hard and asked, "What should we do?"

"Well, you didn't hit the dog," Chuck said. "And I sure didn't." He turned on his heel and headed back for the car. I stood there over the dead animal and felt ready to heave. I backed away from the dog, my hand over my mouth, and trotted toward the car, behind my father. He got in the car first, so I had to hop up on the road and look behind me, keeping an eye peeled for traffic, of which there was none.

I started the car back up and pulled out onto the highway. A pickup truck swerved into the other lane and laid on his horn. He disappeared as quickly as he'd appeared. I gasped in the fresh air conditioning. We were alone on the road again, and again my father had the seat back cranked all the way down so he could rest his tender back.

"I had this dog, see," Chuck said. "Dumbest fucking dog ever. He chased buses when they came down our street, burrowing under the fence in the front lawn,

doing anything he could to go after those bastard buses. He hated those buses. Man, what a stupid dog. Your mother, of course, loved him. She loved all sorts of lost causes.”

“What happened to him?” I asked, stupidly. “The dog?”

“He caught the bus one day, bit it right on the tire and didn’t let go. Rotated around and smack, smack, squish!” Chuck laughed grimly. “Dumb dog. The bus driver didn’t even slow down.”

A radio station Chuck listened to had a contest in which there was only one loser. They called all the winners daily to inform them that they would not have to go to Cleveland. The winners all went along with the gag, whooping it up when they received a phone call from the DJ. On the final day of the contest, the DJ called up some guy and informed him that he had lost the contest, that he had to go on an all-expenses paid trip to Cleveland, that he would have to go to a ballgame there and watch the last place Indians lose. The loser even went along with the gag. “Ah, jeez,” he went, in a familiar accent. “Darn it.”

“I’m trying to remember when Cleveland became a laughingstock,” Chuck said from his reclined position. “When was it?”

“Didn’t you tell me the river caught fire one year?” I asked him. I squinted at the road up ahead. There was someone up there, his right arm jerked up, trying to hitch a ride. He was almost obscured in heat shimmers.

“That was the year you were born. Or the year before. I can’t remember,” Chuck said.

There was nothing for miles. I knew that. I’d been driving Chuck’s route for two months now. I slowed down and prepared to pull over to give the guy a lift. What he was doing out here was beyond me. “Why’d the river catch fire?” I slowed way down now. I realized that it wasn’t a guy as I got closer. It was a girl.

“Is there an accident up ahead?” Chuck asked. “Why’re you slowing down?”

“There’s a girl,” I said.

“A hitchhiker,” Chuck said.

“Right,” I said. “Or maybe she needs help. I don’t know.” I slowed way down. Chuck cranked the seat up and looked at her. She looked like she’d been out on the road her whole life, maybe twenty years. She was young and old at the same time. She was weathered. She wore Birkenstocks, cutoffs and a flannel shirt with no sleeves.

“What the hell,” Chuck said. “Go ahead, genius. But if she sticks us up, it’s coming out of your end.”

I had no idea that I *had* an end. I pulled over and she cautiously approached the car. I hit the button to unlock the back doors and she shoved her duffel bag in, then herself. She sat directly behind me. “Thanks,” she said. Her voice sounded like she’d swallowed broken glass, road grit and pull tabs. “Mind if I smoke?”

“Roll down your window part way,” Chuck said.

She hit the little button and down the window went. She lit up. I watched her in the rearview. She squinted around the car, trying to make out her surroundings.

“What’s your story?” Chuck asked her.

“I don’t have one, mister,” she said. Her roots were red, but the hair on top was bleached to an orange-blond. Fine wrinkles radiated from her eyes. Her hand shook as she smoked. The nails still had chips of purple polish on them. Sun freckles dotted her leathered skin. She blew the smoke toward the window where it dissipated. She finished her cigarette and tossed the butt out the window, then rolled window back up. “You two sure like your car to be cool. It feels refreshing after being outside.” Her voice was almost friendly.

“How far?” Chuck asked her abruptly.

“How far you going?” she asked back.

“Next town,” Chuck lied.

“Next town’s fine,” she said.

We didn’t speak for twenty minutes. I kept peeking at her in my mirror. I wasn’t sure what I expected out of her.

We pulled into Punta Gorda at three in the afternoon, when the sun was past its highest arc and everything wiggled in the heat. Off in the distance, out in the gulf, the afternoon's thunderstorm readied itself to blackout our skies and temporarily drown the world.

"Here's fine," the woman said.

I pulled off the highway. I was an old hand at pulling off the highway by this time. She neatly snatched her bag and yanked herself out of the car in one smooth motion. The car door slammed shut.

I pulled back on the road and was greeted by the grill of a semi looming in the rearview. The semi blasted its horn.

"No more hitchhikers," Chuck said.

Did I mention that Chuck had invited a lady friend into our house? Her name was Gladys. She was in her mid-30's and wasn't really a looker, though she wasn't homely either. She moved into my father's room with him. It lasted about half the summer. This was the last time I witnessed my father with another woman.

Gladys had a job at a local real estate office where she worked with a former third baseman for the White Sox who was also named Ray. Her Ray had once been in a World Series, but had lost. He'd also played in Japan during his long downslide. Now he was getting a divorce and was trading in his collection of baseball memorabilia for cash. He also wouldn't sign a baseball card or a baseball or anything unless someone paid him cash money. Gladys talked about this White Sox Ray a lot. It was as if his celebrity had rubbed off on her, though he didn't have much celebrity now that he was a has-been.

I came in one evening after my long run. I was dripping wet and sore tired. I sat down on the rug in our Florida room in front of the box fan and let it cool me for a while. Then I realized that I was in the house alone. I could feel it, that no one was there. I got up and walked into the master bedroom.

I opened up the drawers in the bureau one-by-one, sliding them cautiously open like a thief who knew he was going to get caught. I tried my best not to

disturb anything, even the thick coating of dust that lined the tops of the drawers. I opened them and peered in. The bedroom glowed orange from the setting sun blazing through the window with its thin yellow drapes. I saw a drip of sweat plop on a drawer top and took a quarter step back.

I found her drawer.

I don't know what I expected. Maybe I expected some sort of sexual thrill, even though I felt nothing like that toward her. She kept her hair sprayed up elaborately and strewn throughout her hairdo were freshcut flowers. She wore too much makeup most of the time, and her clothes were beyond garish, even for a resort town like ours. She wore big floral print muumuus even though she wasn't fat.

Her bras were all enmeshed together on one side of the drawer. On the other side, she'd wadded up her panties.

I had nothing against her, but felt nothing toward her either. I hadn't acted sullen around her. I was, if anything, too respectful toward her. I even called her Miss Sullivan, even though she wanted me to call her Gladys.

I stood staring into that drawer for a while, then slid it closed silently and left the room and took a shower. I dressed and made dinner, a meatloaf. I even mashed some potatoes and boiled some green beans. It was another of my functions around the house.

Chuck came in smelling like a brewery. He sat down at the kitchen table and ordered a beer. I popped open a cold Schlitz and dropped it in front of him without a peep.

Gladys came home a few minutes later and complained that Chuck smelled like a brewery. Then I gave her a cold Schlitz and gestured toward her seat. I served the both of them and ate my dinner standing over the sink. Gladys continued her monologue about my namesake the baseball player and discussed with herself the clever things he said and the Japanese swear words he'd learned overseas.

Chuck and I took it for as long as we could. Without a word, Chuck moved his operation into the Florida room and clicked on the TV set. I cleaned up Chuck's mess. Gladys had hardly eaten a thing. She picked at her green beans

and finally gave up. I tossed her food down the disposal and listened to it grind up down there. I finished cleaning up while she continued talking about Ray the White Sox guy. I shook my head agreeably. Each word out of her mouth became a chore to listen to. Finally I closed my eyes and said, "Miss Sullivan, please." I went back to my room and closed the door.

A few days later, I found myself alone again in the house. Chuck was at a local watering hole. Maybe Gladys was out showing a house. Who knows? I went to their bedroom again and opened up the drawer, again, staring in at Gladys' undergarments. But this time I felt something different. I'm not sure what. Maybe it was rage. I slammed the drawer shut and took my shower.

This happened a few more times until Gladys finally caught me. She stood in the doorway, this look on her face, shouting, "What the hell are you doing? What are you doing?" She was angry enough to stomp over to where I was, naked from the waist up and dripping sweat, and glare defiantly into my face. She cocked her hand back like she was going to slap me. I noticed in her hair a gardenia as big around as a tea saucer. The gardenia had an embalmed scent that was nauseating. What she saw on my face stopped her. There was something there that she could not slap. She dropped the hand and said, "Your mother." She went into the master bathroom and shut the door. I heard the lock click. It took Chuck an hour to talk her out of there after he returned from the bar. Within a week, she moved out.

And in, of course, with the ex-jock, whose divorce was finalized.

This development did not phase Chuck in the least, claimed Chuck. Reclined in his passenger seat, he listened to the radio go in-and-out and toot its nonsense at us as I drove us through his sales route. He made a couple of comments about the whole break-up as he saw it. "Win some, lose some, I guess," he said, staring up at the car ceiling. "She was a crazy broad anyway," he commented, smoothing his hair back with his thick fingers. "Let's face it."

The folksy-voiced man on the radio was telling us about *karoshi*, a Japanese term for company men who've worked so hard that they collapsed at their desks. The folksy-voiced man's concern was that America was falling behind to people who work harder, that we'd gotten soft as a people.

“Those dumb Japs!” Chuck hooted. “What a bunch of suckers!”

“But they’re ahead of us,” I said. “They’re winning.”

“Bullshit! They’re just doing all our hard work for us,” Chuck said.

Outside, palmetto bushes whipped around in a hard wind. I was having trouble keeping the car on the road. “But the Japanese are buying up all our real estate,” I said.

“Overpriced,” Chuck said. “A few years from now, we’ll buy it back from them. Cheap.”

“They sell most of the cars,” I said.

“Who do you think owns their car companies? The big three! That’s who!” Chuck whooped. “Look, this country wasn’t built by the hard work of Americans. It was built by the hard work of imported labor. First it was convicts, then slaves, then the Irish and Chinese. Now it’s South Americans. Americans don’t do backbreaking labor. The smart ones don’t, anyway. That’s immigrant thinking! Once you break out of that immigrant thinking, you’re not a sucker anymore. You’re in! Those Japs, they’re building all our stuff for us, killing themselves so we can live in luxury. And where does the money go? It comes right back here, to America. We sell them our overpriced junk and land, we sell them our overpriced stock, then they put a bunch of money into these things, go bust, and we buy it back cheap! That’s America, son.”

“That’s not right,” I said, sheepishly.

“Immigrant thinking. You gotta break out of it. Shouldn’t have let you spend that summer with your grandpa. He’s an okay guy and all, but he’s a goddamned sucker, too. Don’t be a sucker!” Chuck was all aglow with thoughts of capitalism, his hands laced behind his head, smiling up at the car ceiling.

The wind blew the car half off the road. I steered it back up onto the asphalt with a quick jerk. I looked down at the speedometer and realized I was doing 85. I slowed down.

“Quit screwing around, kid,” Chuck said. “Keep your eyes on the goddamned road.”

The summer of running paid off, for the most part. I made the varsity squad, even though I was too young to be on varsity. They gave me a big felt “R” for Riverview High School. A metallic, winged foot pin graced the “R.” I was a track star, which didn’t mean shit at my high school. I ran the quarter mile in under a minute. I was winning races, getting familiar with the glow of victory at meet after meet. I made All-County, and it was all downhill from there.

Second-place, second-place, second-place.

My legs would turn to lead in the last turn, my lungs would catch fire. The final sprint down the stretch became a fight against morbidity. In my swan song race, I dropped to my knees and vomited onto the track, while all the other kids sprinted past me. Chuck sat up in the stands. I turned my head for a moment and saw him up there, pretending like he wasn’t disgusted. Afterward, he made his way down to the track, where I was pretending to stretch my legs, wearing my thin maroon track suit, the “R” stitched onto the front. “You don’t have to do this anymore if you don’t want,” Chuck said, kneeling down next to me. He was smiling when he said this, and not amiably.

“Okay,” I said.

“What you should do with all this time instead of wasting it, is get a job,” Chuck said.

“Right-o,” I said.

“I know a guy,” Chuck said.

And that was that. I gave up.

I was having one of those moments of empathy that I’d heard so much about. It was about 9 o’clock on a Saturday night and somehow I’d ended up with Wayner, this 30-ish gay guy I worked with. Everyone assumed he was gay, anyway. Wayner lived with his mother in a high-rise condo overlooking Siesta Key Beach. Sugar white sand and placid Gulf of Mexico, seagulls snapping at a kid’s hamburger and chicks in low-rise bikinis. Wayner claimed to be able to see the drug boats coming in across the Gulf at night. But that’s not where we were.

We were a mile from the condo on a bridge spanning Sarasota Bay. He'd convinced me to go to yard sales with him all day, cruising around neighborhoods scummier than the one I lived in with Chuck. He was looking for a Hummel to replace one that he'd accidentally smashed when he was stoned. His mother was going to kill him.

The guy was loaded, both moneywise and boozewise. I kept making him stop at Seven-Elevens to buy me Mickey's Big Mouths. "It's the price you pay when you ferry ol' Ray around, by god," I informed him, stinking drunk by 5 in the afternoon. He took dainty chugs of MD 20-20. "If I'm in his shoes," I was thinking, "I'm wasted all day, shooting those fucking Hummels with a gas-charged pellet gun." We were driving around a circus neighborhood. He figured circus-types were all Central Euros, and he was probably half-right. Central Euros were bound to have Hummels. There was some festive-looking crap piled up in some people's lawns—you know, like those fancy lamps with the tassels hanging on the shade. More pellet gun material.

My fingers smelled like pepperoni, and had smelled like pepperoni for going on three years. In a few months I'd be going to college, and I swore up and down that I'd never work in a pizza joint again. I imagined myself working in a bookstore or a nightclub. Maybe a bar. Maybe booking cool bands for a bar. Who was I kidding? Getting my ass kicked in a bar was more like it. Then getting tossed out into a puddle of beer piss in the alley.

The car screeched to a halt. I jerked my head around, looking for chicks. As far as I was concerned, that was the only legit reason to subject me to whiplash and make me spill my beer on myself. Then I remembered who I was with. But when I saw what stopped him, I smiled like a motherfucker. "Is that a space-suit?" I asked him, making a bad attempt to wipe the spilled malt liquor off my faded and ripped pocket tee-shirt.

"It's an asbestos suit," Wayner said, whispery flakiness in his voice. "For movie stunts."

I turned my head and smirked at him. "Well?" I went.

"Um," Wayner went.

I forced him out of the car, verbally mind you, and marched him over to buy it for, like, a hundred bucks or so.

A few hours, and much alcohol, later, we were standing near the middle of the Siesta Key Bridge—me squirting him with lighter fluid, him with his arms up, the whole shiny suit on. “It’s important,” I reminded him, preflame, as I doused his chest, “that you shriek loudly.” I tossed the empty can over the side of the bridge and a few moments later we heard it splash into Sarasota Bay. “Don’t worry about it,” I said. “It’s not that far down.”

Some muffled angry words came from behind the asbestos hood. Something like, “I hate you, you crazy fuck.”

Yeah, they all said that. Then they did exactly what I told them to do—which was, invariably, something incredibly stupid. I dug around in my pockets and found a book of matches. “Learn to be an artist in your spare time,” the matchbook promised. Opportunities!

I stepped back and tried flicking matches at him, one at a time. They went out before they ever got to the suit. “Poor stupid fuck,” I thought. “Poor guy.” All empathetic and shit. Then I lit one match and used it to light the whole book and tossed the whole flaming hunk at him. Poof! he went, scorching my eyebrows and hair in the process. My hand hurt, too. I leapt backward away from him. Boy did he shriek! It was just as I’d imagined it. He jogged back and forth along the bridge sidewalk, screwing up his nerve to make the jump. Cars puttered past, like nothing was happening. It got too hot in there, and he was really shrieking something awful. Then he vaulted over the short rail and on down into the water. Plop. Fizz, fizz.

I ran like hell down the bridge, and jogged across the street, serenaded by honking horns and squealing tires. I walked quickly, waving my hand around in the sweaty night air, the hand hurting like hell. “Maybe he drowned in that suit,” it occurred to me. “Maybe I’m partially to blame.” Man did my hand hurt. My face hurt, too, but not as much. On the way back to my van—parked across the street from Wayner’s mom’s place in the Siesta Key Beach parking lot—I stopped at a Seven-Eleven and bought another Mickey’s. I chugged half, then poured some on my hand. It didn’t help with the pain a bit. I got to my van and started it up, popped the clutch, and drove toward the North Bridge to get off the little island. No way did I want to go by the Siesta Key Bridge and see possibly dead Wayner again. I was afraid I might see his ghost flaming on the side of that bridge, maybe flipping me the bird.

Bleed Me White

Then again, I think that maybe I'm not all that interested in living. At least, not so long. If you think about it, 33 isn't even middle-aged. I mean, most men live to be older than 66, right? So maybe I have 40 years left. Think about it, 40 years! Forty years stretching out ahead like a vast barren desert. The fuck of it is, I can't even go back to drinking. I've tried. I've lost my taste for it. It's like being abandoned by your oldest and dearest friend when you lose your taste for alcohol. Most alcoholics would love to be in my shoes. Not me.

So what to do with all that time, those 40 years? Do I take up knitting?

I remember.

I remember there was this young sailor in apartment three when I was ten and my father was managing a hotel. He told me about buying a Filipino girl from her father for the night using a cheap wristwatch as currency. Shortly after he told me about that, the FBI nabbed him. There was the girl named Sissy, whose van ran out of gas in front of those apartments. She told me about watching her father beat her brother with a belt, over and over, while her brother stood taking it, not even giving his father the satisfaction of a squeak. There was my dear friend Gus' father, an Army medic in Vietnam, who told me about tagging bodies all night one night after extended firefights during Tet, then waking up after four hours of sleep to more bodies, enough to cover a football field. And I never once asked these people, "Why are you telling me this? Why the fuck are you telling me this? Why *the fuck* are you telling me this?"

I became a sailor. I was kicked out of the Navy for being an alcoholic. Then I nearly drank myself to death. My father helped me check myself into the VA

hospital. He warned me never to darken his door again. He couldn't abide a son who was a loser.

After leaving the VA hospital, I acquired a job working grill at a diner on the North Trail in Sarasota, a shabby part of the now artsy-fartsy Florida town in which I grew up, and to which I'd returned in ignominy. I managed the night shift, in addition to cooking the food. I was backed up by an irritable dishwasher, a flyweight cashier and three chubby waitresses who also worked the soda fountain and the drivethrough register. Even though the diner was in Bumville, we catered to an effete crowd. They came to snicker ironically at the dump and to pick at their authentic diner meals, nibbling bits and pieces of nicely larded food. The crowd was composed of college kids, mostly, the well-heeled sons and daughters of the landed gentry. They'd come to Sarasota to study at New College and the Ringling School of Art, certain that their impractical degrees would piss daddy off properly, and thus separate them from the capitalist crimes of their parents.

In addition to cooking, I also matriculated at Ringling, mostly as a way to coax my long-dormant G.I. Bill money out of hiding. The five hundred bucks a month wasn't much, but it paid rent on a nearby efficiency, a bicycle's ride away. They let me screw around on computers for a few hours a day and called it electronic publishing training.

Kieran, the angry dishwasher, sidled up to me as I finished up a patty melt. I slathered it with grilled onions, hacked it in half, dumped some half-hour-old fries next to it on the white porcelain plate, dropped the whole mess on the crossover and binged the bell. Kieran had hair the color of dried, sticky blood and boiling jade eyes, his white lips contorted into a sneer. "So when are you going to let me work the drivethrough?" he asked for the umpteenth time.

"Quit bothering me about it," I said.

"What's the use in teaching me how to work the drivethrough if you're not gonna let me work it?" he asked, a tick of a growl in his voice. He was approximately half my size, and I'm about average. A pair of whiteknuckled fists shook at the end of stringbean arms. A Ramones t-shirt covered over a concave chest.

"Fine," I said. Usually I let one of the waitresses handle the drivethrough and paid her worker-bee wages instead of her usual waitress half-wages (plus tips), and let her wait a couple of tables on the side. But Kieran had been awfully

insistent about wanting to learn a customer service trade. He was possessed by the idea of upward mobility and its relationship with proximity to cash. Perhaps he wanted to rub the ones and fives out of the register against his acne-spotted cheeks. I agreed to teach him because we could always use another hand up front during a rush. And besides, I figured his lack of social skills might drive away customers. I'm lazy.

I don't so much sleep at night as skim across the surface of it, lightly caressing its skin.

It was a dead night. I sat on a stool behind the counter next to the grill, staring blankly around the restaurant. I got up and made more coffee. Kieran went over to the drivethrough to count the cash there again. I looked up and saw a stunning woman sitting at the counter. She was young, maybe 20, with a poofy mane of blond hair and a beautiful shape, from what I could see. She was in a leotard. I brought over some coffee.

"I've been cleaning," she said. "Trying to get my apartment clean." I could see a new shiner on her left eye now that I was standing in front of her.

"How's the cleaning going?" I asked her.

"Slow," she said. She folded her arms in front of her on the counter and rested her chin on top of them. She looked up at me. The eye was swelling shut. "Aren't you going to ask me about my eye?"

"What happened to your eye?"

"My boyfriend hit me," she said.

"Bad housekeeping?" I asked.

"Something like that," she said.

"Can I get you anything? A beefsteak for your eye?"

“You can talk to me,” she said. “I’ve seen you in here when I get off work. I have to drive past here. You look sad.”

“I’m tired, that’s all,” I said.

“Don’t kid a kidder,” she said. She sat up and stared down at her coffee. She had huge tits for someone her size.

“You’re a dancer?” I asked her.

“At Trader’s,” she said. “Don’t knock it. It pays the bills.”

“I didn’t say anything,” I said.

“You got that look on your face though,” she said.

“Don’t mind me,” I said.

“Can you make me something?” she asked. “I’m too tired to decide. I left my money in the car. I’ll be right back.” She slipped off the barstool and walked to the door. She was wearing only the flimsy red leotard. It was cut high on her hips in a way that left her tanned bottom mostly bare. She probably saw me watching her in the reflection off the glass front door. She glanced back at me with her one good eye. I was turned on and sad and disgusted with myself all at the same time. She had no shoes on and walked across our beaten and littered parking lot barefoot.

I rushed over to Kieran. “Do you see her?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” he said, staring out the window at her hungrily.

“So I’m not imagining her,” I said.

“No,” he said. She opened her car door, a rusty Buick, and leaned in reaching for her purse. “Jesus,” Kieran whispered. He shook his head. “Graveyard shift.”

I walked back over to my spot at the counter. I had no raging hard-on and hated myself for it. My grease-stained cook’s apron would have covered it up, mostly. I peeked down. Yeah, mostly.

“Did you get a good look?” she asked me.

I turned my head away.

“That’s okay,” she said. “Everyone gets a good look.”

I saw her smiling at me out of the corner of my eye.

“You didn’t make me anything,” she said.

It was true. “Chicken fingers,” I said. “And fries.” I dropped in the chicken fingers and some fries. I hit the timer. The fresh grease sparked and bubbled.

She opened her little vinyl purse and took out her makeup kit. “Woo-ee,” she said, mostly to herself in her tiny mirror. “That’s quite a shiner.” She tried to pat on some makeup, but it wasn’t doing any good. She finally gave up.

The alarm went off and I pulled the basket up out of the fryer, shook some grease off, and dumped the contents in a waxpaper-lined wicker basket. “Sweet and sour sauce?” I asked her.

She smirked. “Yeah. Sweet and sour.” She kind of chuckled, but without any mirth. I gave her three little buckets of dipping sauce.

I made her a cherry cola, with an extra squirt of cherry syrup, and brought it over. “It’s like a mixed drink,” I said. I handed her a paper-wrapped straw. The tips of her fingers touched mine for a moment, but it didn’t feel the way I wanted it to. I wanted electricity. I wanted to go find her boyfriend and beat the living shit out of him. For all the good that would do.

“Thanks,” she said.

We sat together mostly silently while she masticated her food ever so slowly. She never touched her coffee. I took it away. After she finished the rest, I took the glass and basket away. She tapped her red chipped fingernails on the counter. “I guess I should go home,” she said finally.

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” I said.

“Maybe,” she said. She slipped off the stool and stood there in front of the counter, sadly beautiful. “Your floor is cold,” she said.

I leaned over the counter and stared at her pretty, dirty feet. I peered in her good eye. I thought, "She's a nice girl, but no one will ever see that."

"How much do I owe you?" she asked me.

"Don't worry about it," I said.

"I don't want you to get in trouble," she said, opening the purse again.

"Please don't," I said. I meant to say, "Please don't go home."

She snapped shut her purse. "Okay," she said. She beamed at me for a moment and the smile faded away. She padded out of the restaurant. I watched her get into her car and drive off.

A few minutes later, a bum came in and asked what time I took out the trash. I offered him fresh food if he mopped the floor. He glared at me as if I'd spat in his face and stormed out. This happens, with a different bum, just about every night.

These dreams I have contain no people. I'm walking through the woods alone, without rest. I'm buffing a waxed floor in an empty galley. I'm tying my shoes over and over again. No sound.

Kieran argued with the customers in the drivethrough, but they were not college students. They were serious. So was Kieran. He said, "I'll meet you out back, motherfuckers." And he headed that way. I followed behind him. He was fast, though, that kid. Faster than I was. The two men he'd threatened were out back in our poorly lit parking lot. Kieran didn't break stride. On his way, he picked up a piece of rebar that was on the ground, just scooped it up without slowing down. I chased him.

The two men wanted to bump chests for a while, but Kieran wasn't interested. He walloped one of them on the ear. The man crumpled soundlessly.

His confederate ran toward his car and hopped into it. Kieran shouted, "That's right, motherfucker." But the confederate was not leaving. He came back with

a handgun. It was a 9-mm pistol. The same type that I'd broken down and cleaned a thousand times in the Navy. He walked back over with the pistol leveled at Kieran's chest. I walked in between the two of them, my hands raised up above my shoulders.

"This ain't none of your concern," the confederate said.

"Go ahead," I said.

"What?"

"Go ahead," I said. "Do you need me to close my eyes?" I walked slowly forward. "Go ahead," I said again.

I heard the slap of Kieran's shoes on the pavement behind me. He'd run for it.

"Come on," I said. "What are you waiting for?"

"You crazy," the confederate said.

The wounded man got up and walked over.

"My head hurt," the man said.

I closed my eyes. "I'm ready," I said. I leaned into the weapon. I could feel the muzzle against my chest.

"Let's get outta here," the man whose head hurt said. The confederate pulled down the weapon. I opened my eyes in time to watch them drive off.

They left me standing there, like a jilted bride.

I saw her at the AA meeting, sitting across from me in a plastic lunchroom chair, her makeup perfect, everything perfect. She does not recognize me, I thought. Good.

She was the adorable redhead who lived next door to Chuck.

It took me a while to find this AA meeting. I would go from one to another looking for my surrogate family. In one, it was geezer alcoholics who had tip-

pled too many martinis. In another, it was actual skid row types, the kind of men who fell too far for too long to pull themselves up.

After much searching, I found my meeting at the VFW hall. Bikers wearing biker colors, old vets, and me a Navy man. I stood up and told my story.

Hi, I'm Ray and I'm an alcoholic.

Hi, Ray.

There were many knowing nods.

At the end, after the Lord's Prayer, during which I mouthed the words and held tight to calloused hands on either side of me, I tried to sprint out the door. But the adorable redhead caught up with me and grasped my elbow. "Hello, neighbor," she said.

I felt my throat constrict. "I owe you amends," I said.

She smiled at that. "Buy me a cup of coffee," she said.

We walked to the back of the meeting hall, back where the old veterans drank. Yes, our meeting was held in a bar amongst bottles. On top of the bar was a tureen of coffee and a stack of styrofoam cups sheathed in plastic, one end of the plastic ripped open. We each took a cup and poured ourselves coffee, black. We sat down at a nearby table. The place was nearly empty. Most of the pack had jogged outside to smoke.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Let's not start off that way," she said. "Do you have a sponsor?"

"How old are you?" I asked her. She looked like a teenager sitting there in the half-light of the bar.

"Old," she said. "Older than you think, anyway. How long have you been sober?"

"I got out of the VA nuthouse about five months ago. So I guess that makes six months."

"Why didn't you take a chip?"

“I’m not celebrating,” I said.

She shook her head. My God, she’s young, I thought. She caught me staring. “Stop it,” she said. “I’m 22, okay? I’ve been sober for a year. Do you have a sponsor?”

“No,” I said.

“You can’t go it alone,” she said.

“I know,” I said, like I knew.

“My name’s Hanna,” she said.

“And...?”

“And I’m an alcoholic,” she said, and smiled brightly. It was a smile that could break a thousand hearts, give or take a few. She sipped her coffee carefully. She was wearing a fishing charter t-shirt. “Kill ’em and eat ’em!” it said on the sleeve. On the front was a blue-green Marlin leaping over her perky breasts.

“Hi, Hanna,” I said.

I was pushing an empty shopping cart through Publix, looking at the aisles of food products, and not really interested in any of them. It was habit that brought me here. It was a place to be. I’d lost 30 pounds in six months, and I could feel more weight-loss coming. I banged my cart into my father’s cart. His was similarly empty. It was the dead of night and we were nearly alone in the well-lit store.

“How’s it going, Chuck?” I asked him.

“Oh,” he said. “It’s you.”

“Smile, Chuck. You’re on candid camera,” I said.

“Always with the wisecracks,” Chuck said.

“Didn’t realize that you shopped here, Chuck,” I said. “Chuck, Chuck, Chuck.”

“You can call me, ‘Dad,’ if you feel like it,” he said.

“That ship has sailed,” I said. “Chuck. Thanks for taking me to the VA.”

“I had to throw out that old couch,” Chuck said. “The smells and the stains on it, you know?”

“I’m supposed to make amends with the likes of you, Chuck,” I said. “Let me buy you a couch.”

“Too late,” Chuck said. “Got a tremendous discount on one at work.”

“Always working the system,” I said.

“That’s me,” Chuck said.

“So do tell, Chuck,” I said. “Are you looking at me, thinking, ‘That son-of-a-bitch has my money?’” I smiled as cruelly as I could at him. “Just wondering.”

“I tried,” Chuck said, his face gone dark. “But you wouldn’t listen. I tried to tell you about this world and how you could somehow survive in it, but you wouldn’t listen to a word I said. If you’d listened—”

“How do you listen to a father who insists on being *Chuck*?” I asked him, all the smile gone. “How do you do that? I’ll tell you something. You weren’t *warning* me about anything. You were *working* me. I needed a father, and instead I got a huckster. Mom told me not to let you win. I should have listened.”

I pushed my cart past his and he pushed his cart past mine. I went to the liquor aisle and surveyed my old friends. There was no real temptation. None at all. It was nostalgia, that’s all. Then I pushed the cart away from there and bought a rotisserie chicken, lemon-pepper flavored, and a diet Pepsi. I didn’t see him at the register and didn’t see his car outside. That’s the problem with living in the same town with a man you despise. You’re bound to run into him sooner or later.

I took the chicken home and ate every bit of it, leaving a barren, sucked-clean skeleton on the TV tray.

About the Author



I was born in Ohio, in a town just outside of Cleveland, a few days after Christmas 1963. My memories of Cleveland are of filthy snow, smoky bowling alleys and banged knees turned crusty-scabby. My family moved around a lot when I was a kid. We ended up dropping roots in Sarasota, Florida.

I worked in restaurants for seven years, from my teens up through my early twenties. I tried to master my anxiety, my panic, my sense of impending failure. I failed.

I was working grill at a Steak n Shake in Gainesville, Florida, and contemplating flunking out of college. The guy who was working the drive-through asked me if that was my bitching motorcycle parked under the awning next to the picnic tables. I said yes. The meat on the grill sizzled. I imagined that it was talking to me. I'd been working graveyard four years, and going to school full-

time. He told me about tanker boots, very cool, which featured a leather strap that circled around your ankle. He told me that the army gives that kind of cool shit away. The cock at the Vietnamese restaurant next door crowed three times. A car drove past on 13th Street dragging a muffler. Sparks. The guy told me that he was going to join the army, probably tomorrow. I went with him to the recruiter's office—unimpeded by lack of sleep.

The army had three very important questions to ask before allowing me to join: 1. Are you a communist? 2. Are you a homosexual? 3. Are you plotting to overthrow the United States government? I answered “no” to all three questions. As luck would have it, there wasn't a question four: Are you nuts?

I started out as a PFC in September 1987 and ended up—4 years, 2 months and 13 days later—a Spec-4. I spent a couple of years in the reserves, but as anyone who was ever Regular Army would tell you: The reserves don't count for shit.

My little sister Nancy was gunned down at a Pizza Hut restaurant in Brandon, Florida shortly after midnight on May 27, 1992—my mother's 56th birthday. As a result, my family disintegrated. It's all very tragic. Believe me.

Somewhere in there, I went back to school and got a degree. Then I wrote junk mail, mostly hospital newsletters. One of the articles I wrote was “‘Mommy, I don't feel so good’: What to do when your child has the sniffles.” Another had to do with a whirling bathtub and its miraculous effects on oldsters at the Bohemian Home for the Aged. I wrote a few articles for credit card inserts, too, encouraging people to spend, spend, spend. I quit. I took electronic publishing courses for a time so I could collect the rest of my GI Bill. Then I taught at a community college. I kept chewing on life, even though it had lost its flavor.

My books include *Small Town Punk*, *Midnight in Monaco*, *Carl versus the Men from Mars*. All proceeds from sales of these books go into the John L. Sheppard Pre-Memorial Beer Fund. For more, including free electronic copies of my books, go to my website at home.earthlink.net/~shepdog.

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