

A yellow background with a distressed, textured appearance, featuring a small metal bolt at the top center and areas of rust or peeling paint on the right side.

RESUME SPEED

STORIES BY GUINOTTE WISE



Wise's first collection of short stories, the award-winning *Night Train, Cold Beer*, was blunt, honest, cinematic. This collection, *Resume Speed*, is also visually keen, and each story gives you the impression of having entered a town where, though the city limit sign welcomes you, something is amiss. As each story ends, you punch the accelerator to get to the next. From noir to ironic, flash fiction to longer form, *Resume Speed* is an odyssey of exceptional storytelling. "I'll just give you a warning this time. Have a nice day," as the cop behind the mirrored sunglasses might say.

KUDOS for *Night Train, Cold Beer*, Wise's previous collection of short stories, winner of H. Palmer Hall Award

"...crazy ass, brain-jiggling collection (certifies) that Mr. Wise is the genuine item, an honest to God writer who knows how to put the hoodoo spell on readers, high and low, and no mucking around in the sleepy in-between." ~ Bob Shacochis, National Book Award recipient, author of *Easy in The Islands* and *The Woman Who Lost Her Soul*

"Guinotte Wise's Midwest evokes my own California Coastal upbringing, complete with rodeos (pronounced *row-day-ohs* where I come from), rural car romps, mystic views of pasts long gone, and lovely windswept landscapes bathed in Americana. It's like Guinotte Wise ate John Steinbeck, made him a part of him, and now old Jack (if you know him as well as I do) is the *him* of him. Yet these are stories for now. Feed on them and be nourished." ~ Jamie Iredell, author of *The Book of Freaks*

"Honest, blunt, wild, piercing, chilling, gloriously cinematic in their distilled heat. Like a whole series of little intense Tarantino movies, but subtler." ~ Brian Doyle, author of *Mink River*

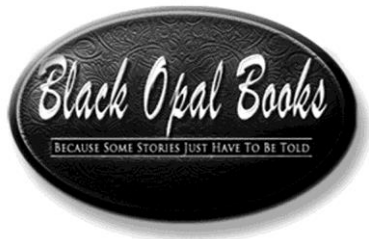
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GUINOTTE WISE

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*For Tim, who read most of these
and whose comments are taken to heart.
Get well. I'm writing more.*

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ARGO AND THE SIRENS

In June of 1955, on a humid Thursday, Brad Eastwood walked over to Elmer Apple's table at The Sportsman Cafe in Madill, Oklahoma, his hard hat in his hand.

"Mr. Apple?"

"Elmer. Mr. Apple's six foot under and good for him."

"Elmer." Brad introduced himself. "Me and my friend got shit-canned over at Worthington for not putting up with the foreman, Curry, anymore, and—"

"What form did this not putting up with him take?"

"Form. Oh. I knocked him asshole over teakettle off the bank and into Lake Texoma. Shallow enough where he landed but he was wet. Angry."

"Why did you do that?"

"He come at me after he called my friend George a nigger and I told him to shut up or put up."

Elmer wiped his mouth with a napkin and turned in his chair to face Brad. Elmer's expression was earnest and he gave Brad his full attention. "Why did he call your friend a nigger?"

“Well—” Brad smiled slightly. “—he told George to hurry up and George says ‘I only got two speeds and if you don’t like this one, I know you ain’t gonna like the other one.’”

Elmer laughed. “What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering if you had any spots open on your core-drilling rig.”

“For George of the two speeds, and you of the ready fists.”

“Right.”

“I’ll try you both out. Be at the low cutbank on the Oklahoma side at 7:30. I’ll pick you up in the *Lone Star* then.”



Elmer ran Tulsa Testers, a core-drilling outfit, and technically, he worked for Worthington Construction, so Brad and George would, *technically*, be working for their previous employer.

The barge was fifty by forty with two rigs on it, each with Mission mud pumps, and they drilled into the basin of Lake Texoma from the barge, bringing up cylindrical sample after sample from various depths in the rock. The lake was about 100 feet deep in the middle. On the sides of the barge was stenciled, white paint mingling with the rust, *ARGO*. It was named for the ship that Jason sailed after the golden fleece in Greek mythology, Elmer told them, as he often drilled for black gold when not in testing mode. Elmer called those who worked on his barge, Argonauts. “When people

ask what it means, you can tell them that, or the more common answer,” he said with a laugh.

The barge was moved every week and secured by thick cables at all corners to concrete “dead men.” The lake itself was a mile across where the bridge was being built from the Oklahoma side to Texas, and the core testing would last several months before they moved on. Maybe Brad and George would do well enough to move with Tulsa Testers. Elmer told them he’d make roughnecks of them if they were willing workers, that it was just like the oil patch, the testing work, and though it was a hard dollar it was a glorious dollar.

The next morning they were ready, with their thermoses and lunchboxes. Elmer waved from the *ARGO* far out in the lake, and they could see him starting the outboard on the little aluminum boat tied to the side of the barge, the sun flashing on his driller’s hard hat. The hat looked old fashioned compared to the short-billed hard hats George and Brad wore, like a WWI helmet, only aluminum. Brad thought maybe they’d get to wear driller’s hats if they did well enough, proved themselves.



They carried pipe from a neat pile and threaded sections in place, one after another, chain-wrench tightened it, then another. This went on until noon, at which time they broke for lunch under the shade of a canvas sheet on a box frame, open at the sides to the breeze. The barge was constantly moving, it seemed at first, but now they were used to it, their

centers having picked up the nuances of the lake's various moods.

"George," said Elmer.

George looked up from his thick ham and egg on white, smiled.

"Your speed is fine."

George and Brad laughed. Elmer made a fist at Brad, and they laughed again.



After lunch, they downed cups of water at the Igloo and Elmer pointed out the container of salt tablets. Elmer went to measure diesel fuel. Brad noticed the men on the Texas side moving toward the reinforcing steel they were tying, and used Elmer's binoculars for a closer look. Curry was standing off from the men eyeing the barge, fists on his hips, legs spread.

"C'mere," Brad said to George. He pointed out Curry, then started doing a tap dance, with his hand in a salute at his forehead. George joined him. Curry could see their crazy silhouettes dancing. He turned and strode off.

Elmer said, "Boys, I think there's a no-shit storm brewing over west."

They looked. A dirty gray curtain of clouds and rain was forming an anvil about a mile away. They rushed to chain down the loose pipe, tie down whatever would roll or be lost from the barge in rough water. By the time they finished, it

was too late to get to shore in the *Lone Star*, the waves swamping it.

“Sorry, boys, we can only tie ourselves to the rigs, now. Hope for the best,” Elmer yelled above the rain.

He helped Brad tie George, then he tied Brad next to him, leaving their arms free so they could get loose when the time came. Then Elmer slipped and slid to the other rig. The barge was shifting and yawing up and down with the waves. The temperature had dropped at least twenty degrees, maybe thirty.

A mountainous presence lurched and groaned toward them with a roar like a freight train only louder. “Tornado,” yelled Brad, but George couldn’t hear him. They were tied at ninety-degree corners on the derrick facing away from one another and the wind snapped their shirts, stinging their faces with the collars.

Brad’s hardhat blew off, clanged against the derrick and skittered like a live thing up and off into the dark chaos. The wind and rain hurt now, whipped and manhandled him like a mad drunken daddy. The floor of the barge took an impossible angle to the water, then slammed back down, and the waves leaped over their heads. He couldn’t see Elmer, some twenty feet away, then an instant of relative clarity, lightning maybe, showed a long two-by-four hit the rig to which Elmer was lashed, about ten feet up, spin around it, and it was gone. It had to have come all the way from the Texas bank.

Brad felt the plate steel beneath his feet shudder and pound like something alive was under the barge and clawing to come up through it. When the hail started, it was almost

orchestral, kettledrums, snares, poppity-pop and boom and click against the deck, depending on the size of the pellets hitting the resounding steel plate.

He cocked his head as the keening sound began. His first thought was the cables: they were stretched to breaking in the slate-gray frothing violence. And they did make a zinging sound when they yanked against the dead men deep on the lake floor. But this was different. It sounded like the middle notes of a pack of coyotes howling, but sweeter, less throaty yet more powerful. He recognized it as singing. It sounded like a hundred Patsy Clines and The Chordettes and The McGuire Sisters, all at once, yet it was like nothing he'd heard in his twenty-two years of living. It promised him calm, safety, loving arms, a continual crescendo of sexual reward, and more, if only he'd free himself from earthly ropes and bonds and slip out of the tempest's roar and churn, slide down into the tranquility of the voices' lair, just beneath the turbulent waves of Lake Texoma. Down there, the voices told him, they'd take over. "Leave your hard life behind," they sang, "we'll take you down the Red River in freshets to the sea where life began and where you'll begin. Down the Atchafalaya to the gulf, the warm gulf waters, where we'll play and love and sing with whales."

He believed it. He had a dim knowledge of the Red River, but had not known it connected with the Atchafalaya, and emptied into the gulf.

At that point a hail ball the size of a cantaloupe hit the derrick and his head, the steel taking most of the impact, yet he was knocked unconscious, head down on his chest, shirt

torn away from his bleeding shoulders by the razor wind. The racket intensified, the flotsam blowing through contained parts of the Worthington tugboat in which Curry and his crew had tried to reach the Oklahoma side, and almost had, until the boat was lifted into the air, twin diesels screaming with the sudden freedom from water resistance, the screws flashing.

A dead chicken flew through at eye level. A Zippo lighter slid across the steel deck, spun and stopped at the chained pipe pile where it chattered and jumped like a big chrome bug. Branches and vines carried from Texas whirled up into the howling gritty vortex, but the Zippo stayed, dancing in place.

George remained conscious during all this and the voices that beckoned to him sounded like Mahalia Jackson, The Shirelles, and The Supremes, among others, but not exactly if he had to describe the sound. Maybe a choir. But not right. Much more suggestive, although the choir singing he'd heard in church had made his mind wander under the robes. They, the voices, wanted him to be unhindered, even reckless—fear no man, no thing, no fiery crosses, and follow them into the lake, the depths, the kingdom come, and the slick bodies and the moaning pleasures thereof. Temptation. Release. An underworld of smoky saxophone, lubricious grinding, slowly tangled limbs, and no burnt aftertaste of shame, only wonders upon wonders, each better than the last. Could it be?

George couldn't swim, was afraid of water, yet he struggled with the wet knots and cursed the ropes that bound him to the derrick, cursed those who'd tied the knots. He wanted

his forevers to be with the voices. They wanted him as much as he wanted them, damn Elmer and Brad tying him like this. The knots were water-soaked, swollen tight. The voices, the forever, was leaving him to suffer on earth. He stamped his feet in frustration and yearning, the thick-soled workboots thumping the plate steel beneath him.

Brad heard the stamping and cursing from a groggy distance, although George was quite near him. He meandered in and out of consciousness, licking blood that came to his lips from his forehead. He wiped his face with his wet hands, looked at the blood on them, thought head wounds bled a lot, but he seemed to be okay otherwise. He was only then aware that the swirling dirty mass of water and sand and clanging things had left them and was chasing itself east on the lake with waterspouts and evil bursts of greenish light, its wall a revolving terror of rain, brush, and writhing shapes.

He looked over his right shoulder to the water near the barge. It wasn't calm, still white and choppy, but nothing like it had been. The barge was yawing on its cables, but all four had held. A dim memory, like a half evaporated dream, voices, promising. What was that? He attributed it to the knock on the head. His shirt had been torn off in the melee, strips of the denim remained under the ropes. He rested his head back on the derrick and let the swaying motion of the barge take over, not fighting for equilibrium, letting the ropes hold him.

The sun poked shafts through the clouds and rippling pools on the deck of the barge reflected into Brad's eyes. The Zippo winked at him from the chained stack of pipe.

Elmer's voice came from nearby. "The devil's beating his wife, boys. And we are three lucky sumbitches." He cut through George's ropes with a small pocketknife.

"Why wasn't you here earlier?" said George.

Elmer said, as he freed him, "And if thou shalt implore and bid thy comrades to loose thee, then let them bind thee with yet more bonds." Then he started on Brad's ropes. "Man you got socked pretty good by something, How do you feel?"

"I feel okay," said Brad. "Maybe kind of like I'm gonna puke, though."

"I tied myself facing into the storm like a fool. Got hit in the chest by a bird going about ninety, felt like a concrete football. We'll get us back to the Oklahoma side if that *Lone Star* is still there. You'll have to row, though. I think my ribs are cracked."

George stood at the edge of the barge, looking into the choppy water with a vacant stare. Then he helped Brad tug on the chain to the sunken *Lone Star*. They managed to get a winch cable to one of the oarlocks, pull it slowly to the deck, turn it keel up.

"I had a dream," said George. "Voices like a beautiful choir, like more than that, promising things..." His voice trailed off and he made gestures to show how fruitless it was to try to explain.

"I think I might have, too," said Brad. He looked into the water.

"It's the water sireens," said Elmer. "Help me get this motor off."

George poured water from a tray of box-end wrenches from the chain-link cage and began to loosen bolts, saying to Elmer, “You sit down. Broke ribs can stick your lung. We’ll get this.”

“The water sireens?” said Brad.

“The death angels. When you’re on bodies of water long enough, big ones, you’ll hear ’em during certain kinds of storms,” said Elmer. “I don’t want to say too much because they’re listening. They’re still here, I can feel them. But a wall of water half from the sky and half from the lake or ocean or wherever summons them up. They sing through your head is the best I can explain it. They use what you know and think about and dream up, and promise it to you in spades.”

“So they’re in your head,” said George.

“I didn’t say that. They *use* what’s in your head. It’s irresistible, what we fantasize. All the voices do is pry it loose. Amplify it. Feed it back to you.”

“They’re real?” asked Brad.

“I didn’t say that either. It’s a phenomenon. It’s...evil concentrated, whirled, whipped up.” He shook his head. “Hard to explain.”

“Jesus!” said George, and he backed away from the *Lone Star*, eyes wide.

Brad looked, and the hair on his neck rose. It was a body, bumping along the side of the barge with what looked like a Ku Klux Klan hood on his head. But the hood was just a trick of vision. It was a shirt pulled up over his head with holes in it. He was face down in the water, arms spread out

Christ-like, the shirt floating to a wavering hood-looking point above the shoulders.

When they'd wrestled the sodden body onto the deck, they turned it over on the now steaming steel plate.

"It's Curry," said Brad.

George said nothing, his face impassive, head down, eyes hidden in shadow.

"One speed, now," Brad said. "Sorry, didn't mean to speak ill of the dead."

And he began laughing, trying not to. George looked at him, thought of their little dance before the storm, and he began laughing too. Elmer watched them, quizzically. Their hysteria wore down and the laughter sputtered.

"There might be more out there, boys," Elmer said. "I know you're not laughing because it's funny..."

"No sir," George said. "Nothing funny about any of this. I just can't help it."

"I know. We'll all be fine in time. We've been through quite a lot."

The Army Corps of Engineers sent a boat out to the barge to pick them up. Another boat was sent for Curry's body. Brad had picked up the Zippo lighter and stuck it in his jeans pocket. On the way back to the Oklahoma side, he remembered it, took it out to look at it. The Army Corps guy was a speed demon, the small boat jarring Brad's teeth as it hit each choppy little wave, making it hard to see the inscription on the lighter.

It was inscribed UKA, which he knew to be United Klans of America. It was probably Curry's. In any case, it

was bad luck, evil, like the storm that blew it to them. He let the hand holding it trail in the water, released it, turned to watch its silvery shape descend.

One thing sure, thought Brad, he would never get caught in a storm on water again if he could help it.

A NIGHT AT THE JUBILEE ROOM

It was the late nineteen-fifties. Cold War, boom times, mixed ebullience, and dread were served up in fairly equal amounts. The same can be said of most eras, I guess. The difference was, I was young, full of hormones and optimism, and a rebellious nature that dismissed all the admonishments about “starving artists” and getting a certain kind of higher education so I could land a “real job,” an adult job. I’d spent three years at two other colleges and made a break for the Art Institute in my home town of Kansas City. I felt like I’d been sprung from prison. This was the life. Paint and draw and drink. Holler on the street corners. Cut loose. I ran with a group of shaggy rebels and the girls were not only free with sex, some demanded it. I was where I was supposed to be, was the overwhelming feeling I had about it.

But I had no money, so I worked various jobs to make ends meet. I worked in the campus cafeteria, at a Philipp’s 66 station, then I got a night job in a mortuary. I was on duty there from six to ten at night, ushering the bereaved into staterooms, as they called them, to see their favorite dead

people. Then from ten on, I was free to study or sleep or roam the place all night until six in the morning. So, six to six, twelve hours in a mortuary. Thing is I had to have a “decent” haircut, and wear a suit. People would die in the early morning hours and off we’d go, me and Verne, to pick them up, bring them back for draining, prep, etc. I didn’t do any of the latter, of course. Nor did I watch any of it. That was just too strange to consider. Nights could be, as you can imagine, kind of depressing without getting into the formaldehyde and suture aspects.

There were lighter moments, like the night manager, Bill Hanrahan, helping us lift someone from the gurney, and change falling out of the dead guy’s pockets. “Lunch money,” he’d shout, but he’d put it in a manila envelope, with rings, watches, keys, whatever. Then he’d ask me what size shoe I wore, and I’d tell him, and he’d look at the guy’s shoes and say, “Too bad, too small. Alligator, too,” or something like that.

He had a spiel he’d do when a bigwig would occupy the stainless steel draining table. He’d say “This old boy was a big power in the newspaper business, but now he’s on the great leveling table.” He’d put his palms together, then spread his arms wide, indicating the table and the person, and he’d say it theatrically, like an old time preacher, with his lips all pursed and he’d draw out the word “great” as he spread his arms. “Now he’s where we’ll all be some day, no richer, no poorer than any of us. The greeaaaaat leveling table. Yessir.”

Sermon over, Verne would open up his Wall Street Journal to check his stocks while the night crew would start laying out their tools. And I'd leave to study, sleep, or roam the halls of the quiet, elegant old building.

I'd take the phone some nights. Bill's girlfriend called and thought I was him, said she wanted some information on burying a stiff. I was speechless. She said, "You say how long is this stiff? And I say about eight inches," and she brayed like a donkey, I swear.

Made me laugh. Or some giggling girl would call and say "I'm dying to meet you," and hang up amidst her slumber partying friends' shrieks.

You'd think a mortuary would be spooky at night, but it wasn't. The halls were tastefully lit and full of good paintings. Seascapes and landscapes. Early California expressionists. They had some money tied up in art.

I'd get a clean dead-sheet from the linen supply, take off my suit and hang it carefully, wrap up in the sheet, and sleep on one of the comfortable couches in an empty stateroom. If I was lucky, I'd sleep clear through to six, dress in my school clothes, and head to class. Sometimes, though, Verne would wake me at some small hour and tell me to get dressed, dead people alert. I was Verne's assistant. He was a night man by choice.

Off we'd go to a hospital, old folks home, or private residence where the death certificate had been signed by a doctor. I'd drive, Verne would sleep. We always used a Plymouth wagon, black like the Cadillac hearses, and with a small mortuary name in the side windows. The side windows had

screen-like panels in them but you could still see in. There was a track on the back floor that would accept the gurney wheels and then you could lock it in place so it wouldn't roll it around. We'd strap the body in, check the covering sheet, lock it in. Anyway, that's where Verne would sleep on the way over to pick up a deceased. He'd lay on the gurney, hands folded on his chest until I'd get to the address.

One night about three a.m., we pulled up to a stoplight, him in back, on view through the side windows, and a carload of girls pulled alongside. They started hollering at me, they were obviously enjoying a night of partying, and I looked over.

“How are things at the mortuary?” one yelled.

“Kinda dead,” I said.

They all laughed and then Verne sat up, wondering what all the noise was. They hauled ass, the driver lost control of the car and hopped a curb, bumped into a traffic light. Not our problem, said Verne, so I drove off when the light changed.

One evening we had to pick up a body at a party. Nice house in Leawood, a fashionable suburb of KC. Two brothers lived there, both doctors, one had passed away during the party. That didn't stop the festivities. We had to say “Pardon me” about ten times just to get the gurney past knots of guests who were talking, laughing. The bar area was the worst, just getting through the people who didn't want to give up their place near the booze where a Black bartender was busy making and pouring drinks. He smiled sadly at me, as I asked people to move, shook his head almost impercep-

tibly. I smiled back, rolled my eyes, and he winked. The dead doc was in a back bedroom, on a bed with a bunch of coats and hats. I looked at Verne, but he'd seen it all, had no expression.

Verne flapped out a crisp, knife-edge folded sheet, laid it on the gurney. We adjusted the scissor legs of the gurney down to bed height, rolled the doc onto it, pulled the sheet over him head to toe, strapped him in, rolled back out through the noisy party. It was about eight o'clock at night, shame to shut the party down so early. I guess that was their rationale. His brother followed us out to the wagon, drink in hand.

"We were expecting it, actually," he said.

"So you had a party," I wanted to say, but didn't.

"Bad ticker." He patted his chest with his free hand. "Mine isn't the best. We might see you boys again soon."

Verne muttered to me, "Two-for-one special, Doc. Hurry it up, though."

I snorted, turned it into a cough. "Well, sure sorry, Doctor."

He looked over his shoulder at the house. "I'd better be getting back. You have the papers, right?"

I reached into my suit breast pocket, pulled them out, put them under one of the straps holding the sheeted body.

"Bye, brud," he said, lifting his drink in the deceased's direction. "He'd want it this way," he said to me, smiled, and turned, walked back up the sidewalk.

"Fuck's sake," Verne said, chuckling.

We hefted the folded-down gurney into the wagon, locked it in place.

That night we had another one, at a hospital. An older woman died, maybe seventy. We had to pick her up and carry her to the gurney this time, the way her bed was situated and all the monitors around it. I had her shoulders. Her head fell back toward me and she made a harsh gasping sound.

I almost dropped her. “Verne, she’s alive!”

Verne explained that dead people often made noises due to trapped air in their systems, that, sadly, no she was not alive. He said he’d seen people move in the prep room, maybe their arm would go up and fall back on the stainless steel table, once in a great while someone would sit up. Another solid reason for me to stay out of there, I felt.

I disliked wearing a suit and tie every night after classes, and my one good blue suit was getting shiny at the elbows and knees. I started looking for a different job. It wasn’t just the suit thing that got to me, it was like a quick succession of things. One night when I couldn’t sleep, I was outside the mortuary, a Spanish style building, having a smoke, even though back then you could smoke inside just about anywhere. I noticed a roil of black smoke coming from a chimney on a separate building that Verne had identified as the crematorium. Someone was being reduced to ashes and it bummed me out. The smoke obliterated the stars near rooftop, then became a part of the night sky.

I flipped the cigarette butt into the parking lot and looked at the stars. It wasn’t the first time I’d looked at the cold stars in the vast sky and thought about how insignificant

we all were. Then, that night, Bill, the night manager, woke me up. “Get ready for a long night, plane crash landing at the airport.”

Verne was pulling body bags from some storage facility and I was wondering what the hell I would do at such a scene. Turned out the plane belly-landed okay in foam, and everyone was safe. I couldn’t shake the scene in my mind, though, after all the talk of other nights not so fortunate.

Then, about eight o’clock one night, a friend of my folks’ was wheeled in. A woman I knew, who’d choked on a piece of steak at a restaurant. Dead. I recalled how lively she’d been, pretty and fun. I went to the prep room to make sure, could be someone with a similar name, and there she was, naked on a prep table. I felt like I was intruding. It was her all right, I could tell by the face and hair, but she was anything but vivacious, now; her skin tone was slightly blue. My eyes strayed to the rest of her, her breasts, stomach and pubic hair, the slight rounding of her stomach and mons. The thought that I was seeing a friend of the family naked, defenseless in death, struck me as over some line, boundary, that I’d crossed, and the information seeping through my brain—that here was an attractive woman about whom I’d once had thoughts of a sexual nature when she was alive—was so offensive I turned and walked out, feeling slightly ill.

“See a ghost?” said Verne.

I hurried past him to the greeting area, where I woodenly escorted people into various family staterooms, a new appreciation of the finality of death forming in my mind. At ten o’clock, I readied for sleep, as usual, but finally got up,

dressed in my morning school clothes, and walked around the mortuary, looking closely at the oil paintings, the brushstrokes. I tried to read my notes for a test coming up, but my mind wandered.

I reflected on death. I was twenty-one, had bounced around in college, gone to two universities, and now the Art Institute, aimless in a way, but embraced college, figured if I worked I could just keep going, spend my life in college. It wasn't as expensive back then, and there were scholarships and hardship grants. Seemed a decent way to live, at least for a while.

But now, death was a constant thought. I'd seen death before, even though I hadn't been in the military. And Vietnam was looming. I needed to get away from the mortuary—it was corrosive somehow. It brought the specters too close. I wasn't cut out for this, even as a temporary situation. I decided to make it more temporary and gave notice.

Back at school, I put the word out, looking for a job that would allow me to attend classes during the day, an evening job would be best. I checked the bulletin board, considered being a vet's assistant over on Main Street, a clinic I'd seen. It was daytime and weekends. But that had to do with sickness, pain. I kept looking.

I stopped in at Dave's Stagecoach Inn for a beer. Several of us had done a mural on his walls in the poolroom—Dave was art institute-friendly. I asked Dave if he knew of any part time jobs that would fit hours such as mine.

“You free evenings?” he asked.

He told me to check with Mike at The Jubilee Room over on Main. I was familiar with it, had dropped in a couple of times. It was an older person's place, a sports bar, in that boxers and reporters hung out there. Kind of a dive, but a cool dive if you know what I mean. Fedoras, loosened ties, some working stiffs, construction guys in their coveralls, not many women. I knew who Mike was—ex-fighter, tough-looking guy with a worked-over face, cauliflower ears, beefy, gray hair in a bristly crew cut, looked like a movie convict. White shirt, sleeves pushed up, bar apron, he'd take drinks and beers to tables and booths, pick up something that looked like close enough payment, sometimes more, sometimes less, say in a WC Fieldsian drawl, "Whatever's fair..." But it always seemed to work out.

I sat on a barstool at the end where I might catch him for few minutes in a semi-private conversation.

"Hi, uhh, Mike?"

"You old enough to drink, kid?" He squinted at me from the other end of the bar while scraping the suds off the top of two draws with a wooden ruler-looking thing.

"Sure. Been here before."

"Were you old enough then?"

"Yessir, I was," I said.

"What can I get you?"

"Well, I heard from Dave that you had a night job available, bartender, I..."

He set the two beers down in front of me, said, "The two gents in the booth by the window, hats hanging on the clothes hook. They run a tab."

I picked up the draws by the handles, felt somewhat unsteady and out of place moving around the tables, set the beers down on their booth table, and picked up their empties. They continued talking and merely nodded at me.

I returned to the end of the bar, and Mike handed me a tray with a bottle of Schlitz, a glass, and what looked like two bourbons on the rocks. "Table by the shuffleboard. Get three dollars and forty cents. They'll tell you who gets what drink."

I came back with a five and Mike made change. "Cheap bastids didn't tell ya to keep it, eh?" He slid the change at me. I dropped it off at the table where three questionable-looking guys stopped talking as I did so. Probably planning a bank robbery, I thought.

"Get back here and make what I tell ya," Mike said, motioning with his head to behind the bar. I stepped up a couple of inches on some slatted flooring, again, feeling conspicuous, though a bit taller. I assumed the rails were for spilled beverages but they seemed odd to walk on.

"Two draws, two shots, a scotch and water."

I looked around for the mugs, found them, started filling one.

"Slower. You'll get all suds that way. Tilt the mug some." He sort of drawled everything out of the corner of his mouth in a forced higher register and, if he was imitating WC Fields, he was doing a damn good job of it. I chortled appreciatively.

"Somethin' funny, kid?"

“Uh, no, sir,” I said, immediately realizing this was just the way he talked naturally. “I’m just wondering what I’m doing.”

“Well, if you don’t know, how the fuck you gonna be my night guy?”

I grabbed two shot glasses and reached for a bottle of bourbon. He stopped my arm. “When they just say shot, use this.” He pulled a bottle of Colonel Lee, handed it to me.

It had a pour cork in it, I glugged two pretty healthy shots, but not too full to carry.

Mike nodded, approvingly. “Now when they name a whiskey, this here’s a list for cost. Most everything’s the same except for Chivas and Wild Turkey. It ain’t rocket science, and it ain’t art school.” Then he added, “Mitch.”

“How’d you—”

“I never forget a face, a name, or how someone acts. You was polite to my ol’ lady when she was helping out one night. Shitty tipper, but hey, you’re a student.”

I hadn’t been in there for months, hardly remembered that time the woman waited on us, but vaguely formed a picture of her in my mind. She’d been harried, not particularly memorable. “How is your wife?”

“Shot in a holdup.”

“Oh, shit! I—I’m sorry—”

“Her own damn fault. She held up a federal marshal, fucker was armed. Doing five to twenty for that.”

I couldn’t speak.

He said, “Scotch and water, c’mon, c’mon.” He pointed to a lower-priced Scotch. I poured, looked for a tap. He

touched a pair of chrome knobs, said “Always use this for water, this for soda. They want Coke or 7-Up or whatever, use the bottles.”

“Who gets this?”

“End of the bar. Beer and Scotch first. Come back and get the shots. Those three clowns in suits. I was kidding about the ol’ lady. She’s fine.”

I brought a ten-dollar bill back. Mike showed me how to open the cash register for a sale, counted out the change. I laid it on the bar nearest the guy who’d paid and he slid a dollar bill at me.

“Thanks,” I said, took it to Mike, who told me to stick it in my pocket.

It went like that the rest of the night. Mixed drinks, cocktails, beers, and shots, nothing fancy. I made change from the register. It was a fairly busy night so I didn’t have much time to worry about how I was doing, I was just doing.

During a lull, he showed me where a sap was under the bar, and a sawed off shotgun, shells. He said, “Never use these. They’re here for moral support only.”

“You ever use them?”

“Once or twice. Hell ain’t half full, but it got a little more crowded couple years back.”

“Would you tell me about it?”

“Nope. Talkin’ about that shit is bad luck.” He began pulling glasses out of the soapy water, rinsing them and turning them upside down on the grated drain area after holding them to the light. “Never leave soap bubbles on glasses and

mugs. Keep a pot of coffee going until closing time. Some guys like Irish Coffee, some cops come in just for coffee.”

He poured the burnt old coffee out, made a fresh pot.

“That shotgun?” he said. “Most of the time we got customers who carry a piece, couple PIs, plainclothes cops, a connected guy or two. They like us and there’s no use goin’ for that scatter gun. They’ll take care of you, anything comes up. And that’s why nothin’ ever comes up. Only a fool would try to rob this place. But then there’s a lot of dumb fucks out there. You’re in here alone? Someone comes in who’s hinky? Step on this.” He pointed with his foot to a large button on the floor by the cash register.

“Empty the drawer of ones, fives, tens, give it to ’em. The hundreds and most of the twenties go here, as they mount up.” He dropped a twenty-dollar bill in a slot by the register, opened a door beneath it showing a combination safe.

“You don’t know the combination. Lock doesn’t work. Door pulls open any time.”

I had to assume that he knew all about me from Dave who also knew my folks and probably vouched for my character and any virtues. Mike was not a careless sort. And this first night trial by fire was the best way to see what I was about. It worked, and the night flew by to when he clicked the house lights twice for last call. Another half hour and I’d be heading back to my rented room and blessed sleep. No classes until ten. If this job paid anything, it was perfect.

He gave me a twenty, said I had the job at more than the mortuary paid, and the tips I got, so I was euphoric. It

seemed like a busy fun job and the time went fast. I could study at slow times. Maybe sketch the customers.

I worked with Mike a couple of nights until he felt comfortable leaving me on my own, but he only did that on slow nights. He was always there on weekends and Wednesday, which was a heavier night for some reason. Hump day, he called it. On a Monday, when I was alone, a gent and a lady dropped in. She was well dressed, attractive, wore green, a redhead. The guy had on a suit and tie and fedora, pocket handkerchief. He looked a little like a hood. Cold eyes. I think they were slumming and he had hoped to come upon some fighter or someone he may have known.

At any rate, she said she'd have a sidecar. He had a cocktail, easy enough, but I had to go to the Mr. Boston drink book for hers. I'd heard of a sidecar but didn't know the ingredients, and told them so, but also told them to bear with me. I made the drink, even to the fine point of dusting the wet rim of the delicate glass with sugar.

She drank it, no complaints, and the guy tipped me well. She sat at the bar and twirled a bit coquettishly, happy with a buzz, or the occasion.

I think he played some Fats Waller on the jukebox. Probably lovers or having an affair, thirty-five, maybe forty. She eyed me several times, and smiled when I noticed. Even winked once.

Then The Angel came in. He stopped on his way to the bar, a bit surprised I guess that Mike wasn't there. The Norwegian Angel, a pro wrestler. I knew who he was from his framed picture on the wall among the boxers, ballplayers,

and a couple of B-movie actors. He raised his chin at me as a greeting, took a stool down the bar from the couple.

He was huge. And his face was unusual, sort of pushed in in the middle, pronounced forehead and chin. When he smiled, it looked painful. Mike had told me if The Angel ever came in, give him one on the house, maybe two if I felt like it, but at least one. He'd pointed out his signed picture to me and I'd been transfixed by the way the big man looked. Mike had said, "Gambler. In over his head with the mob, poor SOB."

The condition he had was called acromegaly and Mike said it's a bitch to live with, all kinds of side problems—headaches, vision changes, skin tissue thickening, but the main one was what they used to call gigantism, and the resulting overgrowth of various areas. The redhead called attention to one of those areas—his hands.

In a rather loud voice she said to her friend, "My god, Floyd, look at his hands!"

I found myself looking at his hands, and they were quite large, fingers like cucumbers. I looked back up at him and said, "Yessir, what'll you have?"

"Draw beer, shot of Turkey."

By that time, the redhead was next to him and her gentleman friend was standing where he had been, looking mildly amused. He lit a cigarette with an expensive-looking gold lighter, pushed his hat back on his head slightly, watching her.

"I've seen you somewhere, haven't I?" she said to The Angel.

“Could be,” he said. “Movies. All bad. The ring. I wrestled for years.”

“Movies. That’s it! A scary one.” She had hold of his right hand and was sort of caressing it, examining it.

He extricated his hand, said, to me, “Got a fifty-cent piece?”

I pulled one from the cash register and handed it to him. He took a very ornate trophy ring off one finger and held it above the bar, dropped the coin through it, smiled at her.

“Floyd, c’mere, you gotta see this,” she said, excitedly to the other man. “His finger’s so big, you can drop a half-dollar through his ring.”

Floyd gathered up his change, left a bill on the bar, and sauntered over. The Angel looked at him, and his face changed. He lost some color or something then let out a sigh.

“It’s okay, finish your drink,” Floyd said.

The Angel licked his lips and looked at his hands. Then he downed the shot, took a long pull on the beer.

Floyd handed some keys to the redhead. “Go get the car. Pull it down the street about a block that way. Leave it running and stay behind the wheel. Wait for us.”

I thought about the shotgun. But nothing was overtly wrong. Except Floyd was there to take The Angel away.

Two guys in a booth kept hollering “Medic!” One of them was circling his hand in the air for another round.

Floyd looked at me. “How old are you, kid?”

“Twenty one.”

“You got fifty, sixty years, you work it right. Those guys want a round. Get it.” He didn’t smile, he didn’t frown, he looked neutral. It was all the same to him.

I nodded at the two in the booth. “Be right there,” I said.

I didn’t push the button on the floor when I walked toward them, wiping my damp hands on my half-apron. It wouldn’t have done any good.

Mike had said The Angel was in over his head on a gambling debt. I guessed Floyd was there for that reason. The Angel’s ring was still on the bar after he and Floyd left. I put it in the safe. He never came back for it.

SPEAKING FRENCH IN KURTZ TERRITORY

Summer nights on the Marais des Cygne were like I imagine the Amazon to be, deep in Kurtz territory. For no really good reason we were on the inky water in a sloshing leaky johnboat with a finicky trolling motor, rocking a little or a lot, depending on what was going on. Drunks checking trot lines at midnight. That got us to pitching and rolling with unnecessary gestures and stumbling movements, cursing, laughing, trying to figure out what the hell was on the line stringers after I dropped the flashlight into the water. It stayed on as it sank, the light descending, disappearing. The spookiest part was Pete slipping overboard and silently swimming away under water. There were three of us; Cobb, Reno Pete, and me, Travis. Cobb is my uncle, Pete's younger brother, and Pete is my old man. One scary dude. Cobb idolizes him and I'm terrified of him. I respect him, but sort of like I respect a mean bull.

I never minded going out night fishing or checking trotlines with just Cobb. Looked forward to it. He and I would drink, smoke his LaCygne Green, talk about women, star formations. It was relaxing. But with the old man along, I always, and I mean *always*, felt like it could be my last night on earth, my last moments alive. It appeared unshakeably in my thoughts that he would snap, kill me, then Cobb. It would be by knife and drowning. Or by muscle and skin, shirtless Pete, sheened with sweat, would use some quick snaky move, and I'd get those tattooed arms front and back of my neck, his big hands on his biceps or elbows, and my windpipe flattening like a blacksnake on the hard-top road to the St. Cyr Compound.

We were all St. Cyrs, but Pete went by different last names. Wood. Ward. Wanz. And the people he ran around with called him Reno Pete. I never knew the history of that and never asked. Pete is not a guy who invites questions.

Anyway, Pete would slip overboard almost every time out, we never knew when, just that he wasn't in the boat anymore. It always freaked me out. It made me want to cry, and I'm not a little kid. I could hold my own with any badass in the bars around Linn County, even down in KC. I felt unbalanced when he was around or had just been there. Like a flywheel with a chunk out of it. And nervous. Mary Ellen said it was just a pronounced father/son rivalry, that it was as old as the Indian burial mounds visible from my bedroom window.

I lived on the compound with Cobb and my aunt Vinita, right on the Marais des Cygne wildlife refuge. Outbuildings

and barns scattered around. I had a whole building all my own, a shed-roof two-story corrugated steel building that we insulated and made into a loft apartment. Slick as anything in the city. We glassed-in the whole top north side with patio glass doors we found in KC at a salvage joint. That sun was like...freedom. It blasted in there from the marsh side of a morning. Nothing out there but geese and cranes and miles of marshy land and trees. Beautiful. Fucking lump-in-the-throat amazing. Big-ass cranes took off in slow motion like overloaded C5, transports. Foxes looked for mice pretty much out in the open and one had her litter under my front stoop. I liked to watch them leap in the tall grass to get a bird's-eye view of what's in there.

The old man. If it ever came to a showdown, I would flat give up, give myself to it like to an unbeatable monster in a movie. Hope for mercy but not expect it. Funny thing is, he's never hit me. He's a killer, I'm sure of that—things said not quite out of my hearing by family. I think people like him have only two speeds. You just don't ever want to hit that switch. After my mom died, years ago, he got a little meaner if that's possible. But he was only dangerous if you pressed him, got into his face, or wronged a blood relative.

I heard the Zippo clink behind me and jumped enough to make the boat move so that I grabbed the side. I caught a glimpse of Reno Pete's face as he lit a cigarette, his eyes dead black marbles in the glare. He winked, or I thought he did.

I yelped when a hand stroked my shoulder in the dark.

“Goosey, ain’t he?” Pete’s voice from the corner of his mouth, pulling on the cigarette, the glow fulgent on his face then down again.

It was all I could do not to whimper. I started to reach for a beer in the cooler, but then realized I had to pee. No way I was standing up in that boat in the middle of the *Marais Des Cygne* and risk going overboard into that womb-warm weird-ass water. It was only weird when Pete was around. It was benign any other time.

“I gotta take a leak,” I said. “Can we get over to the bank?”

No one spoke. Thank god, they didn’t tell me to just piss over the side. Someone started the trolling motor, and we headed to a mud bank. I climbed out, welcoming the relative solidity of the muddy bank, slipped a little in my pull-on Converse sneakers as I moved upward to some more or less horizontal, grassy ground. The trees joined at the top over the narrow stretch of the *Marais Des Cygne* where we stashed some trot lines, so it was tunnel dark with only a few stars visible through the heavily laced canopy. I started to pee but experienced a stricture when I heard movement. Then I didn’t hear it anymore. A rabbit, maybe a snake, something off to my right, but I still couldn’t urinate. Damn. I wasn’t like Cobb and Pete, natural woods creatures. I stood until a stream started, half expecting them to start hollering at me, but saw two glows in the boat—their cigarettes, heard them talking low, indistinguishable. Finally, I was relieved and zipping up when the scream came. Jesus! It was maybe 100 feet in front of me in the woods. Was it a woman? A big

cat? Some fucking Hobbit-like thing that lived in the wildlife refuge, like a chupocabre? I wanted in the boat and out of there but ran into Cobb who was heading up the bank.

“Wh—what the fuck?” I said.

“Were you hollerin’?”

“Wasn’t me,” I said, sliding down the bank on my ass. Cobb grabbed my T-shirt and stopped my slide.

There was Pete by the boat, calm and collected. He’d bundled some greasy shop rags and wired them to a stob, lit it with his Zippo. I noted that he’d tossed the three-prong anchor into the mud bank so we wouldn’t lose the little boat.

“Mind me to bring extra fucking flashlights next time,” he said, “since junior here likes throwin’ ’em in the water.”

This was a scene out of some Huck Finn nightmare, Pete holding a torch, his hair wild, the flames throwing deep shadows on his face, making it look like a tribal mask. I’d smoked some of Cobb’s powerful LaCygne Green, had some coffee and Jack Daniels—the chemistry inside me was bubbling surreal.

“It come from over that-a-way,” said Cobb, pointing in the flickery light.

I followed them, rather than wait in the solid dark on the greasy bank. We skirted a thorn tree, parted some tall trash growth, and made our way into a pine-needle floor with fallen trees and old growth giants forming a pretty solid tent overhead, but with holes big enough to see some stars and moonlit clouds. Pete stopped, motioned for us to be quiet. His torch wouldn’t last much longer. Pieces of shop rag floated down, gossamer as silk, showing the weave of the

fabric as it disintegrated. I was fascinated by the pink floaters, when Cobb said, “There, ten o’clock,” and they took off to their left.

I’d never heard Cobb say anything like that and I laughed, it was like an old war movie with pilots talking about bogeys, I mean ten o’clock would be up in the trees wouldn’t it? What a weird fucking night. Both Cobb and Pete had been in Vietnam, but I bet nobody said ten o’clock there. Maybe he’d said “There, to the left,” and I got it scrambled.

Cobb’s pot did that to me. He grew it in the wildlife refuge, and in his pastures by the fence line, and in horseweed where the planes would never see it. He knew where every plant was. It was supposed to be number two in the world, he said, due to the peat and rot in the refuge. It said so in a book. LaCygne Green was originally hemp in WWII.

“Hemp at ten o’clock,” I said, real low, and started laughing again.

I was sort of snorting and huffing to myself in my own pot world when I heard Pete say, “Over here. Cobb, you won’t believe this shit.”

Then the torch died. I stopped where I was, maybe twenty feet behind them. Pete lit his Zippo and waved it over a white form on the ground. Then he cursed and flung the lighter down, due to heat I guess. All I saw in that flash was what looked like a woman on the ground, sprawled naked.

Cobb had pulled his lighter out and they located Pete’s Zippo. It *was* a woman’s body on the ground.

I got closer so I could hear what they were saying. "...Raleigh's wife, LeAnne, I'm pretty sure," said Pete.

"How do you know?" said Cobb.

"That tattoo on her thigh, rose with the stem coming out of her cooter," Pete said, preoccupied.

"When the hell did you ever see that?"

"Never mind. I think she's dead. Nothing we can do for her now," Pete said.

"We can't just leave her," Cobb said.

"Right. The three of us out here, drunk and stoned. Why don't we just call the sheriff as soon as we can get in cell-phone range?"

"You think Raleigh killed her?"

"Could be. She was fucking around on him. Crystal whore."

"Why here? The son of a bitch, right in our back yard, damn him..."

"Or it coulda been one a those meth-heads from town. Who knows? Thing is, no matter who or what, if we report it guess who gets the hard look and the blame?"

"Shit," said Cobb.

"She's gonna come up missing," I said. "And if they find her back in here, turkey buzzards circling, like that, well, they're gonna ask us about it, anyway."

"Unless nobody ever finds her," Pete said.

"How's that happen?" I asked.

"You two go on back to the compound. I'll see you in the morning."

Cobb said, "Come on Travis," and gave my T-shirt a tug.

I followed him to the johnboat by sound and got caught up in some thorn trees. “Wait up, Cobb. I’m in this fucking thorn thicket.”

I didn’t hear him come back for me and I started when I felt his big hand wrap around my elbow and followed where he pulled me. The thorn trees had bit me about ten places.

On the way back, I asked, “So what’s he gonna do?”

“Disappear her at first light, walk on back.”

“Disappear?”

“You don’t want to know the details.”

Once a game warden had disappeared in the Marais des Cygne. I was pretty sure the trolling motor on the transom was state property. The story I got, years ago, was if you want someone to disappear, gut them, put thirty pounds of log chain inside them, wrap the body in pig fence and slide them in one of the deep backwaters for the carp and cats. Cobb said there were catfish in there big as a man. In a week or two, nothing would be left but pig wire, bones, and chain. It never surfaced. We had a cache of tools and wire half a mile from here.

As little as I’d seen of the white form on the ground, I felt sick at the thought of that. Someone had done her in, someone who knew the woods. Cobb said she was a meth whore, far gone, used to be hot in her day, went wrong after Raleigh started beating on her. Raleigh was a mean drunk and, by rights, ought to be the disappeared one.



It was the following week that we got wind of the search party. They might comb the backwoods where we'd been, on foot and horseback. Cobb was beside himself. LaCygne Green was scattered throughout that area and sure to be discovered.

"That fuck, Raleigh. I think he's behind this. Brought her in where the plants are," Cobb said.

Pete just lit a Pall Mall. "Don't worry about it."

"Growing on government property, that's some real time, man. Don't worry about it? Shitfire. You think he's gettin' back at you for her cheatin' with you?"

"That was ten years ago, Cobb. They weren't even married. Anyway, I found her clothes out there and took 'em to Loud Thunder park. That should focus the search over there."

"If they find 'em."

"They will."

Sure enough, on the news from Kansas City that night, there was a tip about the missing LaCygne woman's partially burned clothing turning up at Loud Thunder, and off they went to search that area. Waves of people kneeing through the cheatgrass, horse trailers in the parking lot, no clues found. Then, like most of those searches, it sort of dried up when the excitement died down and nobody stumbled over a corpse. After the media exposed the seamier side of her life, there were no candle-light vigils for her. TIPS hotline didn't yield anything and it all sort of blew over. Raleigh was questioned at length but with no body and a couple of questiona-

ble cohorts alibiing for him, the small sheriff's department cold cased it pretty quick.

I couldn't tell Mary Ellen about it. She thinks we're all jack-pine savages down in the refuge anyway, but she's interested in us with her anthropology degrees. We come from French fur trappers who settled all along the Little Blue and the Missouri and the Marais Des Cygne way over a hundred years ago. She finds that fascinating. I find her fascinating, so it works out. I threw some French at her once in a while, making sure I pronounced it right. Old lady Chouteau in LaCygne at the Refuge Tavern coached me in French. Her people explored Kansas in the 1700s. Most people around here pronounce it "lay-seen" but not her. Anyway, she explained how to drop the last letter of certain words and how to form the word while saying it. Sometimes you have to hold your mouth funny to say it right. When Mary Ellen spoke French to me, I nodded and smiled, not understanding a word of it. Or I said "*Mais oui, mais oui*" in an absent-minded way and pretended I was looking for something under the bed, something I couldn't find and which caused me to say, "*Zut alors!*" I didn't fool her but she loved me for trying.

So, Mary Ellen was asleep and I was awake but drowsing luxuriously the morning Raleigh showed up. My aunt Vinita was in Oklahoma visiting her sister in, you guessed it, Vinita, the town she was named for. A few minutes later I was thankful she was gone for the weekend. I heard some horn honks out there and the dogs raising hell. We've got

two biters, blue heelers. The rest of the dogs are hounds that just make noise and then look around like, “Where am I?”

I got up, slipped on some cargo shorts and my sneakers, and, yawning, went on down the shaky spiral staircase and out the back door which faces the gravel drive.

It was Raleigh’s truck. Cobb had the two heelers under control and Raleigh was standing by his open door.

“What can I do for you, Raleigh?” said Cobb.

Not friendly, not unfriendly. Raleigh was not highly regarded anywhere that I knew of. Cobb’s neutrality seemed ominous. It was unusual for anyone to venture into the compound uninvited. I tensed up. Was Pete here? I wondered. That question was answered as he came ambling up from the metal shop building, wiping his greasy hands on a pink industrial rag.

“Raleigh,” he said, “Shit it ain’t noon yet, what are you doin’ up so early?”

“Funny,” said Raleigh. “I’ll get right to the point, boys.” Then he just stood there as if he forgot what he was going to say.

Cobb and Pete both cocked their heads, like they were trying to hear some far off music, or like, “Yeah?”

Raleigh’s unkempt hair shot out from under a grimy John Deere gimme cap and his beard was between needing a shave and growing out for real. The gun rack in his back window held a cane that he used to prod livestock through the chute at the auction center in town. He was red eyed and both his hands were jammed into a light hooded sweatshirt that he didn’t need on such a warm morning.

That's when I suddenly figured he had a gun in one pocket. I suppose Cobb and Pete knew right off. I was behind him, and unnoticed, so I started moving up closer to him. Pete gave me a shake of the head, no, so I stayed where I was. Pete was a ranger in the army and had been in lots of fixes back in the day.

But there was always that final fix, I remember thinking.

"I know you knew where LeAnne is," Raleigh said.

"Wish I could help you there, Raleigh, but she's probably in Denver or somewhere by now," Pete said.

"Think she's alive, do you?"

Pete didn't reply, just stood there looking at Raleigh, still fooling with the shop rag. Cobb's hands hung by his sides, slightly out from his body. I could feel the tension in my neck, my knees.

"I know she's not," Raleigh said, and he smiled—or tried to.

I got the idea he was trying to be cool in his own little movie here.

"What I'm here about is a business thang," he continued.

Pete just laughed, more like blowing some breath out with a smile.

"I want in on the LaCgyne Green," Raleigh said. "Half."

"Why, Raleigh, they ain't no such thing. LaCygne Green is a myth."

"Or else, I'll get some search parties going on a brand new tip that she's buried somewhere back in that marsh you like so much," Raleigh said, gesturing with his head back over by the lake.

“Better do that, then. The other fairy tale ain’t workin’.”

“Hot damn you, Pete, think you’re so fuckin’ cool!”

That’s when Raleigh pulled the gun, but it hung up on the sweatshirt pocket by the hammer and, in trying to get it loose, he fired it wild somewhere into the ground between him and Pete.

Right on the echo of that report, another shot came from where Pete was. Then another. He’d had a snub nose in the shop rag. He was standing sideways, aiming carefully, one hand at his side, like in a duel. The shot made a popping sound. The first shot had confused Raleigh, being just bird-shot in a .38 shell, but it had gotten him in the head and shoulders, little blood spots blossoming on his forehead.

The second one got him in the left chest and down he went. The more intelligent hounds had vacated the area, but one of them was interrupted in mid-scratch and sat there with the hind scratching leg sticking up in the air.

“Move his truck into the barn, Travis,” Pete said, walking toward Raleigh’s downed form. “Now!” he said, when I just stood there.

Raleigh’s truck was filthy and smelled of booze and cigarette smoke. Beer cans rolled around in the bed. I thought of something Cobb had said, way in the past, when someone had brought up Raleigh as a useless, mean prick. “No shortage of Raleighs in this world,” he’d said.

When I got back, Raleigh wasn’t there anymore. I didn’t know how to process what I’d seen. One less Raleigh in this world. The one hound that had stuck around was sniffing the ground where he’d been. I figured I’d better check on Mary

Ellen since she'd not come down to see what the racket was. My knees were beginning to shake. I'd have fucked up the confrontation. He'd have gone back to town, talked to anyone who'd listen about the marijuana and where it was. I'd have gone to jail. Etcetera. I'd just seen Pete kill a man, and not in a panic either; he'd been clear-eyed and calm. Man! I climbed the spiral stairs to the sun-flooded bedroom. Holy shit, oh dear.

“Bring me sweet rolls, sweet boy?” she sat up, stretched, looking beautiful, her small white breasts contrasting with her tan. “Petit pains sucrés?”

“*Mon dieu!*” I slapped my forehead. “I forgot. I have something better.” She hadn't heard the honking or the shots. “Listen, I've been thinking about going back to school.” She perked up, interested. “Even moving to KC. To be close to school and you. What do you think?”

STRONG, THE PINK

Strong was a lot of things. He fought Golden Gloves in high school and tried to get Teale to fight, but Teale didn't like getting the shit kicked out of him by some skinny Black kid at the Salvation Army gym in downtown Kansas City. He also hated sparring with Strong, because, though they were friends, Strong was a serious fighter and didn't pull any punches with him. Teale understood this and didn't want to appear less than manly, but he said no to any more boxing. Back in the '50s they didn't wear protective headgear and the club refs didn't really care what went on with the kids.

Besides the pain, Johnny Teale didn't want his face changed around too much, as girls seemed to like it the way it was. Maybe a little scar on his cheek, or over an eye would be neat, but he could probably get that from the crazy way Strong drove his 1941 Chevy. At least he wouldn't have to experience the dry mouth and the trembling knees that pre-fight jitters gave him. All the kids his weight and age at the gym were bad news. Strong would coach him before the one-

minute rounds but, once in the ring, he was pre-psyched and ended up with his gloves in front of his face just trying to keep from being punched in the nose.

Lee Strong was also a Pinkerton his senior year in high school. He called it being a pink. It was kind of like being a private detective. He and Teale would go to one or several of the Katz Drugstore chain after school and time the soda jerks after ordering iced tea or cokes. They could get hamburgers, too, or BLTs. All Strong had to do was keep the receipts and Pinkerton paid them. Strong kept a record of how long the Katz employee took, how they acted, if they loitered or ignored customers, that sort of thing. Teale couldn't believe that such a job was available. Sit around and eat and drink and, if anyone was nasty to you, you had them. In the 1950s this was forward thinking.

Strong also plied his trade in other departments. He even bought Trojan rubbers from a woman employee in the prescription drug area, although they didn't require a prescription. They just kept them out of sight, like Playboy magazines.

"You're nuts!" Teale said.

"What about them?" Strong said, just as loud. Both the transaction and the answer flustered the lady behind the counter, Teale could tell. He knew better than to say that to Strong, as that was his stock rejoinder, and it always embarrassed him, as it did now. Strong grinned as he paid the lady.

Strong's eyebrows were kind of like upside-down Vs, and they gave him a mischievous look, or, at times, a rather amazed demeanor. The tipoff that he was not someone to

fool with was his build. He could be pretty scary, looking at some would-be adversary with that amazed look, as though he was thinking, *You really want to fuck with me?* And he did kind of invite attention.

Today, he was wearing some weird kind of pants that reminded Teale of sailor pants. They had a panel in front with buttons on either side and they were tight around the thighs. They even had bell bottoms. Shit, Strong could wear a purple tutu if he wanted but Teale wished Strong wouldn't wear this getup when he was with him. Teale could tell that people were looking at those pants. No back pockets and tight around the butt.

If he'd known Strong was wearing them today, he'd have found some excuse not to be seen with him, but it was too late. Strong had picked Teale up in his Chevy as he was walking home from an impromptu Saturday baseball game in the park near his house. Strong got stuff like those pants in stores around Eighteenth and Vine where the Blacks shopped. Sometimes they went to record stores down there and got used 45 RPM records for a dime that were wild. One of the songs kept running through his mind, "Drinkin' Wine Spodeeodee" by Stick McGhee and His Buddies. Wild. Stuff you'd never hear on the radio. Maybe Strong was part Black or something. He really seemed to like their talk and clothes and all. Thing is Teale was immediately attracted to the music. It had...danger in it, or something...power maybe. It had drive. They called it rhythm and blues. Some of it was like the new Rock and Roll, but more primal somehow. He wondered if liking the rhythm was a flaw or something. His old

man wouldn't tolerate him hanging around that part of town. His old man said they weren't fully real people even. Teale didn't believe that, but he didn't say so, not at home.

Anyway, Strong was one of them, it seemed, when they went down there. They knew him, called him "strongman," and he called them "blood." They even went there at night, to Charlie's Blue Room on session night, Thursdays, when musicians from the audience would get up and play, some of them white people. This was KC in 1957. Things were happening. It was a restless time for Teale.

Strong was cool and at home wherever he went. But he was unpredictable. After they left the Brookside Katz store, and were driving through a residential neighborhood, he gunned the '41 Chev and started knocking over garbage cans that were on the street, left there by the pickup people.

"You're nuts!" Teale shouted, laughing, hanging onto the dashboard.

"What about 'em?" yelled Strong, aiming at another garbage can. After hitting eight or nine of them, sending them crashing and rolling into yards and up onto sidewalks, he suddenly became docile, looking both ways at a stop sign, driving off slowly like an old lady.

Teale loved cars, even that Chevy, and couldn't understand why anyone would dent a fender just jacking around.

It made no sense to him. If he had the car, he'd lower it, put dual Smittys on it, and primer it, for a start. It wasn't a bad car, even though he was a Ford guy. He planned to buy a used Ford V8 flathead when he turned sixteen, a couple of months away.

“You know what a superman is?” Strong was looking straight ahead as he drove.

“Yeah, Clark Kent goes into a phone booth and—”

“No, no,” Strong interrupted, only mildly annoyed. “Ever read Nietzsche?”

“We don’t have that yet.”

“And you won’t, either. You have to go to the library. Look up ‘existentialism,’ too. Look up ‘experiential philosophy.’ Rimbaud.”

“Sure thing, Strong. Next time I’m there.”

“Well, you need to *live*. You need *experience* if you’re to rise above the proletariat. So we’re going to experience a robbery.”

“Not me, man. That’s wrong.”

“Depends. If we rob hoods, it’s not wrong. We’re only gonna do it once, for the experience. You have to experience everything, to really be alive.”

“Wh—what hoods?”

“Biggs Poolroom, downtown on Twelfth Street. You know it?”

“No.”

“It’s across from the penny arcade. We’re going to go case it, right now.”

“But not rob it, right?”

Strong didn’t answer. He just shifted into a lower gear and slammed his foot on the accelerator. When he turned a corner, the tires squealed, and Teale was thrown against his door. This was a new one for Teale. Strong often talked about different philosophies and things that were above

Teale—the atomic bomb, infinity, time, light speed, and interplanetary travel. But those things were just things to muse on, not put into practice.

This experience thing, where did it come from? It seemed Strong was the most experienced high school senior he knew. Why did he have to rob a pool hall? That made no sense at all.

He'd go along if all they were doing was casing it. That appealed to his sense of adventure and gave him a spine shiver of excitement. It was sort of like when he was a little kid hunting communists, spying on neighbors in his grandmother's old part of town one summer, and watching the McCarthy hearings on the black and white TV. Maybe he'd make a good Pinkerton.

“Just casing this place, right?” he asked Strong.

“Right,” Strong said as he shifted down for a red light.



The pool hall was on a lower level than the street. Strong and Teale descended concrete stairs to the door. An old pawn shop sign with three globes, that hung above the door, had been adapted by painting numbers on the globes, and a sign beneath it said *Biggs' Billiards*. They entered tentatively, their eyes adjusting from the brightness outside, to the semidarkness of the long, largely unadorned room. It was cooler in here though stale with tobacco smoke. Ceiling fans moved slowly. Billiard and pool tables were spaced all the way to the back with green porcelain shaded lamps hanging

above them from plain cords that were fed by a conduit that ran along the middle of the high, tin-paneled ceiling.

Two tables near the front were occupied—one by a couple of young toughs in their twenties, with cigarettes dripping from their lips, who eyed the boys with contempt, the other by two businessmen in rolled-up shirtsleeves and loosened ties, whose hats and jackets hung on hooks on the wall.

There were wooden benches in tiers as though for spectators, on one wall. An uneven row of photos hung on the wall above the risers of bleachers.

The man perched at the counter, on a high stool, Biggs himself probably, wore a white shirt with pale raised stripes, buttoned at the neck, and suspenders. He was short, bulky, and his unusually black hair was plastered back with pomade or some out-of-fashion substance that made him look '40s gangsterish, to Teale, who thought Biggs looked dangerous.

“How much?” Strong said.

Biggs folded his arms across his chest and nodded, almost imperceptibly, at a cardboard sign to his right, said out of the corner of his slash mouth, “Snake it’d bit ya.”

The hand-lettered sign said, *Straight pool, 25c hr. Billiards reserved, no play, pay up on leaving, no chg less than 1/4 hr. last hr.*

Strong walked past the man. Teale followed, nodding at the man who ignored him. Teale stopped to read inscriptions on some of the photos that hung on the wall, noting that Minnesota Fats had played here. Then he was jostled by one of the toughs who was walking around the table, looking at his shots.

“You looking for trouble, dickhead? Guess what. Here it is.” The guy stood his cue against the fat outer rail and shoved Teale into the wall. He then flicked his cigarette at Teale’s face but Teale instinctively slapped it away. Before anyone could do anything else, Biggs was between them, surprisingly fast.

“Settle up and get out. We don’t put up with tough guys here.” Biggs had the young man in a choke hold and was dragging him toward the door.

At the counter, he told him a sum and was paid by the now-shaken young man who spilled some change and bills on the counter and said, “Jeez, Tony, I didn’t mean to. The kid fucked up my shot—”

Biggs resumed his seat. “Out. Don’t make me hurt you.”

Teale thought he looked like a bullfrog on a toadstool. The other player quietly set his cue in a rack and followed his companion out the door. The remaining players continued their game, talking in low tones. A closer look at them informed Teale they were not businessmen, as he’d first thought. One wore a flashy watch. The other had on a “Mr. B.” collared shirt and a pinky ring that caught the light when he coaxed the cue ball smoothly toward the corner pocket, kissing a striped ball in.

“You went into a good stance to defend yourself,” Strong said. “But you don’t box in a pool hall. Forget the rules on the street.” Teale was shaking, but somehow exhilarated by the narrow escape. “You coulda took him,” Strong said, matter-of-factly. “I’ll show you a couple ways later. Surefire, if you go quick. That’s always the secret. He who

hesitates gets his clock cleaned.” He picked out a cue and rolled it on the table for true and straight, picked it back up, said, “Rack ’em, streetfighter.”



While they played, Biggs answered the phone and turned toward the street. Strong ducked down as though to tie his shoe. Teale missed a shot. About thirty seconds later Strong stood, walked around the table looking at his shots.

He said to Teale, in a low voice, “Taped a gun under the table. For when we come back.”

Teale’s mood dipped, and his face must have shown it.

“Don’t worry. When we come back, we’ll take it with us. In a week or so. Just checking to see if it’s still there. I put it there last week.” He grinned, his expressive eyebrows dancing upward.

“You’re nuts, Strong.”

“What about ’em, Teale?”

The other two men were wearing their fedoras, carrying their coats, leaving. As they settled up with Biggs, Teale heard him say, “Sorry to kick your boys out, Sammy, but rules, you know—”

“No sweat, Tony. They’re tryin’ a get their bones—impress us. They gotta learn how to behave in public. Good lesson,” said the man with the Mr. B. collar, as Biggs helped him on with his suit jacket.

What he couldn't hear was when the other man said, in a lower voice, "I think them two are your table number four gun guys. The one was looking under the table."

One of the men glanced at Teale and Strong.

The one named Sammy, said, "Want us to take care of it?"

"Naw," said Tony. "I unloaded the piece anyway. If they use it, I'll just shoot 'em." They laughed and the other man slipped into his jacket unassisted. They left, and Teale and Strong were the only customers.

Strong handed Teale his keys. "Go get the Chevy. Park at the bus stop around the corner from the penny arcade, heading south. Watch for me. You drive, we'll just drive off slow."

"Aw, no, Lee, don't—"

"You'll just be driving, no big deal. Timing's perfect. I need you, Johnny. You'll see. Slick as a gut."

"Shit, you said—"

"I know. But it's right. It's time. We won't ever do it again--that's when they catch you. Come on, man, you've got the easy part."

Teale felt like he did right before he fought one of the glowering kids at the Salvation Army gym with no referee, just some uncaring guy at the bell. Sometimes they let it go more than a minute, he was sure of it. He flinched a little, when the bright sunlight hit him, stopped on the steps to the sidewalk so his eyes would adjust. In his mind, he tried to rationalize what he, they, were doing, but came up blank. He knew he was crossing some line and would never be able to

retract it. It would end up on the minus side. Shortly, he would be a criminal.

They jumped him as he passed the alley on the way to Strong's car. The blow from the sap one of the pool hall toughs hit him with sent him far into a black unconscious state with some red fireballs along the way, but the blade sliding into his liver killed him.

At the pool hall, Strong paid Biggs for the time and replaced his wallet, sailor-like, in his waistband with half of it hanging out.

Something wasn't right about the gun. The tape wasn't the same. Something. Well, at least Teale would get the rush, the experience. He'd tell him later that it was a no-go. He smiled and stood in front of the pool hall for a moment, allowing his dilated pupils to close some before he crossed the busy street to the penny arcade.

EXHUMING CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT

From twelve on, life showed more signs of being the bitch everyone promised it would be. At fifteen, I was old enough to have considered suicide. Wild swings of weirdness—bird-brained hilarity to shadowy melancholy. I couldn't drive legally yet, but I rented motorcycles with my paper route money and a friend's driver's license. I'd seen Marilyn Monroe naked. This was in 1954. The friend, Ray, whose license I borrowed, had shown me the first issue of a magazine called *Playboy* and Ms. Monroe was curled up on a red satin sheet in the altogether. I think it cauterized some part of my brain and turned me into a sex fiend. I never recovered.

So, at fifteen, I was trying to figure out a way to say goodbye to my childhood. A ritual. A viking funeral-like passage. This was a distressing time. I still sort of liked flying model airplanes; hiding behind the big velvet couch waiting, in vain, for someone to sit on the woopee cushion I'd planted there; reading *AIRBOY* comic books while eating a peanut butter and Fritos sandwich. Goodbye Hopalong Cas-

sidy, too. Especially since Ray told me about seeing him at the Shrine Rodeo, in an echoing concrete runway waiting to ride into the arena. He'd smacked his horse in the head and said, "Settle down you lop-eared cocksucker!" Two counts against him. Growing up is painful shit. Acquisition of unwanted knowledge. Ray, of course, thought it was funny.

I decided not to make too big a deal out of the ritual. I would put childish things in a Folger's coffee can, tape it up, wrap it in tinfoil and bury it five steps north and ten steps west of the base of the clothesline post in the back yard of my grandmother's house. It didn't have to be goodbye. It could be a time capsule. Just in case, I would draw a map, so that, years later, I could dig it up. Or maybe the following summer. Or never.

Items:

One Lone Ranger Atomic Bomb glow-in-the-dark ring.

Fifty years later, I questioned such a thing. Really? An atomic bomb on a ring, purporting to be a Lone Ranger artifact? As they say in online shorthand, WTF? But, yes, there was such a thing. Look it up on eBay.

*One Little Orphan Annie decoder
the size of a small compact;
One box of roll caps for a cap pistol;
A pack of Black Cat firecrackers;
One tin of Surefire Itching Powder;
A standing liberty quarter, almost smooth;*

A mercury dime;
An empty Co2 cartridge;
Six .22 shells;
One Handshake “Joy” Buzzer;
A tiny Popeye flip book;
Three of the best aggie marbles I’d ever owned;
One marble sized “steelie” steel bearing;
An Indian head penny
An aluminum star token stamped with my name,
from Rockaway Beach;
1 shotgun shell, 12 gauge;
One Roy Rogers pocketknife;
One cherry bomb;
A bumper-car pass from Fairyland Park;
A Mexican peso;
A pair of X-ray glasses that were a big gyp;
A Griesedieck Beer bottle cap;
An ad for plans to build a King Midget automobile
from Popular Mechanics;
And last, but no way least, an ornate 1948 Captain Midnight
Pocket Decoder, with a coded note.

I could only remember the preamble. “I, Thatcher Hornbill, do solemnly...something, something, something.” I wanted to read what this fifteen year old Thatcher had to say.

The two decoders in the coffee can unraveled ultimately disappointing commercial messages from Ovaltine, but could be put to other uses involving dirty words and teacher-

indecipherable notes in classroom settings. And, of course, my solemn oath of growing up or whatever.

Okay, wipe away some fifty, fifty-five years. Bam. Gone. No shit, just about that fast, too. Women. Children. Homes. Cars. Marriages. Lake houses. Dreams of wild success. Zap 'em. Gone like summer wages. Gone like the wild goose in winter. Hoffa. Casper. Invisible gone.

Stop motion, freeze frame. Screech to a halt. An emotion surfaces. Examine the SOB. Nostalgia, that's what it was. Not the noblest of emotions, yet not unpleasant.

Put that sucker under the lens of a fresh-poured Jack Daniels. Blow it up. Turn up the Spotify of *Moonlight in Vermont*. My god. Those times. Those mellow, slow unbuttoning of blouses, Chanel released from secret places times. Oh. Go back a little farther. Back to boyhood. Backward, turn backward, O Time, in your flight, make me a child again, just for tonight.

It was in that coffee can at my grandmother's old house, my boyhood. When she died, they sold the house. The neighborhood was deteriorating. Car washes, pawn shops, loan sharks opening up storefronts a block away by the old stone Catholic church we'd attend on those warm summer Sunday mornings, Gregorian-like chants and soft bell ringing lulling me to moist open-mouthed sleep, inhaling incense like opium.

If I could find that coffee can, I'd start over, do it all right this time, from fifteen on. I actually believed this.

Have another drink, Thatcher.

Don't mind if I do.

The neighborhood was all Black now. I was all White. Had to figure this out. Mac-tens being the weapon of choice around the old 'hood. I couldn't just march in there, unarmed, with a shovel and start digging. It would require stealth. Nerve.



The next day, a bit hung over, I turned at the corner where the Dairy-Freez used to be. A thrift store occupied the land now. Barred windows. A giant banana sat out front, to draw attention, I guessed. It got mine. It was about two blocks. *To Grandma's house I go.* I drove right by it because it was not the same. There was an asphalt circle drive in the front yard. A For Sale sign in front of that. A rusty white pickup with toolbox sides, ladder racks, sat in the drive. Once turned around, I pulled in, gazed at the stucco house. Looked pretty good, actually. The screened in porch had now become enclosed and part of the house, making it appear bigger, I supposed, though the whole house seemed smaller than it did when I was a boy. I knew that happened, but I was always surprised, wanted to remark on it to someone. My second-story sleeping porch room still had windows all the way around. Dormers, roof, all the same shape. Used to be zinnias, peonies, lilacs all across the front, circling around to the side yard. All gone. The tree that I used to climb down from the sleeping porch room was still there but bigger. Fifty years bigger. Hammering and circle-saw noises from inside brought me back to my mission—reconnaissance. This

would be easier than I thought. I could walk right in. And I did.

A couple of workmen, one White, one Black, kept on working. I waited until one paused, looked at me.

“Hi. I used to live here a long time ago. Okay if I go upstairs, look around?”

“Sure, Knock yourself out,” the White guy said, resumed cutting a piece of plywood on sawhorses, the circle-saw whining industriously, fresh sawdust smell. The Black guy started a nail in a door frame, banged it home with two satisfying thwacks, hammer held almost loosely in his hand. Why did people say knock yourself out. It was smartass. Gratuitous. Knock *yourself* out, dick brain.

The stairs seemed more narrow, although I knew they weren't. I paused at the room where my grandmother died in bed, attended by my aunt and father. She didn't know me. After the funeral, I stopped by the old house and her presence was quite strong for a moment or two.

I passed my old man's room, tiny. Did I smell pipe tobacco? Did his ghost roam these narrow hallways? Did hers? She would play Chopin at the old baby grand, a cigarette in her mouth, long ash drooping, frowning against the smoke curling into her eyes. Swaying back and forth on the bench, hands diving into the keys. What a ghost that would be.

I'd have gone up to the third floor but it didn't interest me. I headed for my old room. It had shrunk along with the rest of the place. Right now, it was just a little side room they called a sleeping porch and now it was full of floor tile, boxes of stuff, fixtures, coils of wire. I tried to imagine the radio

going, the fan, the magic of anticipation of a free flight airplane I'd made, affixing the small glo-fuel engine to the firewall, the snort of its first breath of life, the angry whine as it sucked fuel.

I looked out the window to the side yard, my purview in the yearly summer visit to my grandmother's house. The clothesline was long gone, no more posts. There used to be a birdhouse on another post, a marker from which to count steps to the buried coffee can. It was gone, too. As a small child, I shook that post to see the birds that lived in the little house atop it. They were wrens. My wish was granted. Out they came on red alert, pecking at my head, chasing me into the house, me shrieking in the treble ranges. Live and learn. That was my don't-fuck-with-the-birds lesson, even little ones.

I shot a mental azimuth to where the can might be, fixed the points in my mind. That was when I knew I was serious about this, I was sober, pretty much, even though the Starbucks double espresso I carried had brought a little of the buzz back. I was actually, physically here in this house. Did I believe the can would take me back to age fifteen? My answer surprised me. Sure. Heck, yeah. Stranger things had happened, but not much. There was magic in believing.

I left. The two workmen were somewhere else in the house. Their radio played old Stones. "Mannish Boy." I wondered if the workmen go back and forth between hip-hop and rock and roll. How did they agree on it? Flip a coin? The rapper Fifty Cent came to mind.

In the side yard toward the back, I stood in the approximate area of what I envisioned from the sleeping porch. The back yard had completely changed. Used to be a natural-stone retaining wall to a higher yard and a little jungle-type area separating the yards. I used to climb the wall, cut through Gustafson's yard on my way up to Troost Avenue and the used comic book place. I'd trade comics there, two for one in the musty store. Troost wasn't exactly elegant, even back then.

Okay, the birdhouse post would have been about here. I paced off the steps, taking care to compensate for my adult paces, taking smaller strides. This general area. I looked about for something to stick in the untended lawn. I laid an X of sticks there and snooped around the detritus of rehab laying closer to the house. Aha. A rusty wire with a tattered Day-Glo pennant that must have been used to mark water lines or something. I jabbed it into the earth where the X was. I'd bring a metal detector if I could find one. Or not.

Witnesses might think there was buried treasure, wait until I unearth it, kill me. The whole deal was problematic. If I only had a shovel, I could dig right here and now, get the hell out. But I'd have to come back. I felt like a ghost drifting around here.



One night. Two. Jack Daniels. The old songs. Public TV fundraising with Doo-Wop put me over the top. Now *those* were the days, Thatcher. Heck with it, I was goin' in. Flash-

light. Spade. Plastic grocery bag in case the can had disintegrated. Work gloves. Pistol? No, I'd talk my way out. Cops, neighbors, I'd think of something on the way over. A plausible story. I looked at my watch. 10:15 p.m. The time of night put limits on plausibility.

I'd take my wife's quiet Civic but, since she passed away, I never renewed the plates. Okay, the Volvo wagon with the gutter muffler. Should have fixed that. *Just go.*

Troost at night. Women in shorts and halter tops walking. Leaning into car windows, music booming out of the cars. How could they even hear each other?

Not my problem. I turned at the banana, drove slowly to the old house, parked on the street. No signs of life at the house—dark, driveway empty. I located the wire with the pennant in the shadows.

The streetlight beam was blocked by the corner of the house. Good, I'd be digging in the dark. I chunked the spade into the ground, tossed aside a little pile of dried dirt and grass. Again. I was warming to this.

“Don't fucking move.” Then a strong light. A dog's growl on top of this.

“Oh shit,” I said, quickly, involuntarily.

“Thass the dog's name,” the voice said. “So many people have called him that, he answers to it.” Maybe a chuckle. “Drop the shovel.”

I did. But I didn't put my hands up. This might be it. Program, as an army buddy used to say. I turned slowly toward the light. The voice sounded like Samuel L. Jackson in *Pulp Fiction*. The light dipped to the dog on a choke chain

and leash. Pit bull, all teeth and sinus noises. Then the light flashed on a nickel-plated Desert Eagle. Light back in my eyes. I supposed he was holding the fucking .45 sideways.

My eyes, accustomed now to this apparition, relayed to me that his flashlight was on a headband, dog leash in left hand, big stupid gun in right hand.

“Dog also answers to ‘Fuck me, I’m outa here,’ and ‘I think I shit my pants.’ He likes the first one as it means a chase, and he *always* wins.” Chuckle for sure.

Suddenly, I was tired of this. “Fuck you, your dog, and your Desert Eagle. What a stupid fucking weapon to carry around. You rob fast food places? Hold it sideways and scream like a little girl to open the cashbox?”

Silence. Dog sits down.

“I am not the perpetrator here,” the guy said quietly.

“And me with my sp—shovel, I am? You got gold back here? Bodies?”

“It’s my yard, dawg. It’s night time. People get killed around here just for showin’ up. White man with a shovel. Man.” The light on his forehead swung back and forth sadly as he shook his head. “Mm-mmmp.”

“Look, let me dig about a foot deep, find what I’m after, and I’ll just scamper on home. After replacing the divot, of course.”

He sighed heavily. “White people.” The light swept back and forth again. “All right. Dig.” His “all right” came out “aaight.” He walked to the front porch, came back without dog or gun. He now had a long cop-looking flashlight

which he trained on the beginning of the hole. No weapon was apparent but I was not going to test that assumption.

I put out my hand. "Thatcher Hornbill."

"Really?" It comes out as a laugh. "Sorry. Mine's Rayondo Renard."

"Rayondo? Sugar Ray Renard, the fighter?"

"Used to be," he said.

I forgot my dry mouth, the slight tremor in my knees. "Damn. I followed you in the Olympics. And after, of course. Wow. You were fantastic!"

"The past. I don't dwell on it."

"That last fight with Trumbull. You out-boxed him, out-classed him, held him up at the end—"

"Like I say, all in the past. What are you digging up here?"

I felt rebuked, and something else. Maybe silly. The welterweight champ was dismissing his own past, and I was looking for trinkets in a Folger's can.

"A sort of time capsule." I told him about the contents of the can, the decoders, the circumstances surrounding the burial.

"Captain Midnight," he said. "That's you."

I continued digging. It was obvious the hole was going to produce nothing.

"Look," he said. "Why not come back in the daytime. I know where I can borrow a metal detector. Tomorrow after ten a.m., ten thirty, okay?"

I left the shovel. We shook hands again. He watched while I walked to the station wagon, started it, drove away.

Maybe he was taking my license number but I didn't think so. Sugar Ray Renard. A hero of mine. I drove home, west and south to the suburbs. He was obviously part of the vanguard moving into the somewhat blighted areas, renewing, resettling. He was about ten years younger than I was. I watched his career arc up, then suddenly plummet like so many fighters. But he'd kind of disappeared. No articles or TV mentions of him that I'd seen. Sugar Ray Robinson came out on a US stamp, another hero of mine. But Sugar Ray Renard vanished. Now we were digging in his yard. A horn sounded behind me at a stoplight that had turned green. I waved, lurched ahead.

As I pulled into my driveway, I turned off the ignition and thought. Sugar Ray was a young sixty or maybe fifty-five, somewhere in there. Still working probably, at whatever ex-fighters did when they vanished from the ring. Opened a gym? Worked at UPS? Who knew? That house wasn't cheap. And if he was the one rehabbing it, he had to have some bucks. I hoped so, for some reason. Inside, I poured bourbon into a faceted glass. My hand shook as I lifted it to my mouth.



I pulled into the smallish circle driveway a few minutes before the appointed time. A Cadillac Escalade with black-tinted windows sat in the semi-circle of asphalt. Hanging from the rearview mirror were a pair of miniature boxing gloves. Sugar Ray appeared to be doing well.

He came out, dog and a shambling sort of person with him, a kid? Looked like a kid.

Sugar Ray motioned to me to get out of my car, walked closer. “This may be distasteful to you, but it calms everything down, both the dog and the kid see it and think everything’s okay—we have to hug is all and laugh a little bit, then they cool their jets, and life goes on at the Renard household.”

“Ahh. Not at all distasteful. I’d be hugging one of my heroes. Had you been older, and me younger, I’d have had your poster on my side of the bedroom door. As it was, I had Annette Funicello. And, later, what’s her face with the feathery hair and big tits.”

He laughed, I laughed, we hugged, patted one another’s backs, eyes on the kid and dog. The dog immediately lost interest, wandered off, and peed on my tire, the boy stood and clapped his hands sort of, something off about the boy, young looking, maybe ten, maybe twelve, but large, maybe even obese, but his face was that of a Down Syndrome person.

I was taken aback, hadn’t ever thought of it, since I’d never seen a Down Syndrome Black kid, would have, if questioned, opined that there wasn’t such a thing, that only Whites, maybe Asians, were susceptible—wasn’t the term at one time, way back in my childhood, mongoloid?—and there hadn’t been many, period. It hadn’t seemed to have happened back then, just as cancer had not seemed like a prevalent disease. At any rate, here he was, a Black Down Syndrome kid, I was sure of it. He had that slightly distracted

look, a sweetness about him that invited the kind of hug his father and I had just shared. His father? I didn't know that. I would wait for any explanation if one was forthcoming, otherwise I'd just shut up.

Sugar Ray turned to the boy. "C'mere, hon, want you to meet someone."

The boy advanced, shyly, looking down, sideways, anywhere but at me. Then he fixed me with that look, through glasses. "Hello."

"Hello," I said, too quietly, cleared my throat, said it too loudly.

"This here is Cap'n Midnite," Sugar Ray said. "Shake."

The boy put out his hand. "Foyd. Mah name." We shook.

"Floyd," said his father, to me. "After guess who."

"Aahh, Patterson," I said. "Great name indeed."

"He's a sweetheart, Floyd is. My man." He put his arm across Floyd's ample shoulders. "Seventeen. Docs said he wouldn't make it past twelve. It's him and me."

"I did." Floyd beamed. "Fav yeos." He held up a hand. "How old Cah Midnite?"

"Up there, Floyd. Do this ten, twenty times." I opened and closed my palms again and again. "Too many."

"Too many?" He seemed incredulous. "Nah too many, no," he said seriously.

"Life is pretty important to Floyd," Sugar Ray said. "He wants me to live to be a hundred. Right?"

"Den you kin dah," said Floyd.

"Thank you, hon."

It was obvious they had discussed this at length. I felt close to tears. Old people have to watch that shit, we cry easily. I cried at *Peanut Vendor* by Stan Kenton when it played on a late night jazz station. It was a song Fran and I had heard for the first time at a Kenton concert way back in the '50s, at Swope Park. Funny, I could remember everything about that balmy humid night—the breeze, the flash of the brassy music, the drive home in my old Ford. Yet I could hardly remember what fucking day it was and when I had a dental appointment.

“Well, hon, go get that metal detector, and be careful bringing it, go slow okay? It’s not ours so we have to be extra careful.”

“Okay” Floyd clapped his hands softly and spoke some words as he walked to the house, taking this mission seriously, as he probably should. I knew nothing of metal detectors other than that they seemed expensive, possibly fragile. The dog was ambling along with him, wagging his tail and looking up at him, sensing this could possibly have a fun component. And maybe it could.

“Floyd’s Special Olympics, a swimmer.”

“Do Special Olympics kids box?” I asked before I thought better of it.

“Special Olympians don’t need to,” he said. “They’re tough all on their own. A non-threatening tough, you know? Better than us.”

I nodded, compressed my lips, hoping to look thoughtful.

Boy and dog and metal detector emerged from the house, dog sniffing whatever parts of the instrument he could reach,

interested. A pit bull never looked less frightening than this one, almost comical in its puppy-like enthusiasm. Something was up and he wanted in.

Floyd handed Sugar Ray the appliance with both hands, as though proffering a ceremonial sword to a candidate. Sugar Ray took it.

“Thank you, hon. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Show on th roh.” Floyd adjusted his glasses with the classic one-fingered push at the bridge.

Sugar Ray turned the appliance on, donned the headset, made some minor adjustments, then began sweeping the area with the detector plate about an inch off the ground. He looked at us and smiled as he walked, seemingly aimlessly about. He tossed a penny on the ground, swept over it, grimaced as it shrieked shrilly enough that I could hear it from the headset. “Son of a bitch works,” he said.

“Suvva bidge works,” Floyd said to the dog, who was clearly pleased. Floyd moved from foot to foot in anticipation.

“Here, you try for a while, Thatcher.” Sugar Ray removed the headset, handed the whole rig to me. “You know where you buried the thing. Generally.”

“Very generally. I might start over by where the wall was, and sweep systematically.”

I put the headset on, adjusted it, swept over the penny for a baseline sound. Sqwaaawk. The dog cocked his head. Nothing, no sounds, then a peep or two. Turned out to be a pop-top tab just under the soil.

I worked outward from the wall, wider and wider, then I heard it, strong and steady in one spot.

“Shovel,” I shouted. “Please,” I amended.

Sugar Ray handed the shovel to Floyd who turned it over to me, gravely.

I took a deep breath. Floyd mimics the breath. Sugar Ray held both hands up with fingers crossed. The dog whined.

The soil here was sandy and a couple of shovelfuls removed the dirt from a small object, not a coffee can. It’s a bottle opener. Rusty and old, but by scraping my thumbnail across the etched lettering I could read Smitty’s Tap, and an address in Independence, Missouri. I handed it to Sugar Ray.

Finally, Floyd was sweeping the device around haphazardly when he apparently heard a signal, and homed in on it. He dropped the metal detector and began digging with his hands. The dog joined in, throwing dirt backward between his legs, stopping, sniffing, starting again, whining. I took the shovel and joined them. It was the time capsule. I pulled it gingerly out of the hole. It wasn’t buried very deep. The tinfoil was filthy and fell apart easily, but the can had retained some of its color, though rusted. The tape covered areas were intact, and the tape pulled apart fibrously.

“Wait. Go no farther,” Sugar Ray said. “This is a fifty-year-old time capsule. First we get a table cloth or something to empty it onto. And a cold beer. Bud, Thatcher?”

“You bet. Bud. And Floyd?”

“He gets a Diet Rite, he likes those. Makes him belch. And that makes him laugh. Don’t open anything while I’m gone. Thatcher?”

“I won’t.” I put my hands in the air. Floyd did the same.



Floyd did belch and laugh. We all laughed. Then Sugar Ray flourished a sheet on the ground. I dumped the contents of the Folger’s can on the sheet, but carefully. Magical pieces of the past clinked and rustled, artifacts of Mu or Atlantis couldn’t be any more fascinating. Sugar Ray reached for one of the coins, then hesitated, looked a question at me.

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Man, this is old. Standing liberty,” he said.

“It was old when I had it. I gave coins like that to the ice cream truck guy.”

“Bud Lightyow! Bud Lightyow!” Floyd exclaimed. He was looking at the Captain Midnight decoder. I looked at Sugar Ray.

“Buzz Lightyear, he’s saying. His favorite character from *Toy Story*. Looks a little like that.”

I could see Floyd was excited, but he was keeping his hands off for now, almost dancing in his desire for this piece. It was also the piece I most wanted to examine, to rub as though a genie’s lamp. I wanted to read the coded piece of paper that had survived with it, see what gibberish I had written as a kid. I handed it to Floyd and he looked at me. “Bud Lightyow for me?”

“For you,” I said.

Sugar Ray was perturbed. “Naw, Thatcher, it’s part of your childhood stash, man, you can’t—”

“Look at him,” I said. “Do *you* want to take it away?”

Sugar Ray smiled, shook his head.

Floyd patted the decoder, held it next to his cheek. He examined it closely, sat down in the grass with it. He was in another world.

“I can’t remember making anyone that happy in years. It’s his.”



Someone called to me. It was my grandmother. It was time for church. Last week I hid in the bushes by the little wall and they gave up, went without me. My aunt, my grandmother, my dad, they all climbed into the old ’41 Dodge and left. And there were no consequences. They just figured I was playing somewhere out of earshot. I grabbed the taped-up Folger’s can, the shovel, and concealed myself in the bushes. They called again, halfheartedly. Then I heard the car’s gears grind as they pulled out to the street.

I came out, peered around the corner of the screened-in porch. They were gone. I felt a little guilty, but not too much. I’d gotten my white Sunday shirt dirty somehow. My blue pants had dirt at the knees. I placed the can into the hole and shoveled dirt over it, replacing the grass and patting it firmly in place.



It was a mystery to Sugar Ray where Floyd got the odd—obviously old—object with the space suit guy on it. He called it his Buzz Lightyear but it was really nothing like the *Toy Story* plastic toys they got for his birthday. It was metal and tarnished and old. It said Captain Midnight Decoder. Sugar Ray felt a strong current of *deja vu*, then it passed.

“Where did you get this, Floyd?”

“You frien. Cah Midnaht.”

“Oh, let him keep it,” said Maddy, the boy’s special needs companion, laying the day’s mail on the kitchen table. She forgot to tell Rayondo she’d had to sign for one letter from a law office.

Sugar Ray handed the object back to Floyd, and as he did so a tightly folded piece of paper that was taped to it came loose. He unfolded it carefully, saw a series of numbers. That night after Floyd was in bed, he took the decoder object from the bedside table, sat in the kitchen with a pencil and paper, and turned the wheel of the decoder to the letters that corresponded to the numbers.

“I, Thatcher Hornbill, do solemnly put to rest my childish shit, not knowing what lays ahead, maybe riches, maybe death, maybe Marilyn Monroe touching my ferndike.”

Sugar Ray was laughing, trying not to laugh too loud, wheezing, the laughter coming out in gasps. What a white name, Thatcher fucking Hornbill. Marilyn Monroe, oboy. This was something. Ferndike. He shook his head, his shoulders bobbing with laughter he was trying to hold in. The dog

laid his head on Sugar Ray's thigh, looking up at him, sensing merriment.

Upstairs in his bedroom, he laid his change on the dresser, not noticing the worn standing liberty quarter among the coins. The dog padded into Floyd's room, lay down by the side of the bed. Sugar Ray brushed his teeth as the TV in his dark bedroom flickered and a night newscast mentioned, in passing, the death of TL Hornbill, prominent insurance executive who had died in his sleep the previous week. A controversy was stirring among some distant relatives about a new will he'd had drawn up.

DESERT DOG

I'm a rover and a rambler and a high desert gambler!" I sing snatches of things I make up and real songs quite loud, quite loud in my Kenworth tractor Desert Dog with its GPS and satellite wireless, Bluetooth, computer screen, DVD-player and iPod station, and a high octane CD sound system that equals any luxury boat on the road. I am Hooked Up. I can listen or I can sing, or both. I love it.

"You have the most *awful* singing voice," Priscilla says, with real astonishment but with smiling affection. "A cross between an even more tuneless Johnny Cash and bad George Jones karaoke."

It sounds fine in my head. She puts up with it in good humor. She is a school teacher and has such patience. A wonderful trait along with hotness which she also possesses. Lucky kids in her class spend more time with her than I do.

I am sitting at the top of an icy-looking hill, idling, in the foothills of the Rockies heading east, the kind of hill that's a brake-killer on good days and this is not your good day. I want to get to the flatlands and make some time.

It's dusk, cloudy drizzle, thirty degrees, weather lowering. I look down this long winding snake-ass thing and I see my death, and the fear rises in my thorax. I don't know exactly what a thorax is but it seems like a cross between my throat and my esophagus or something that would carry bile up the tube and spread it around like evil under my tongue and I'd swallow it back down, leaving an aftertaste of burnt truck stop coffee and bacon. Maybe ozone. I think, *Why* did I take this up, this over-the-road madness? I am a huge flaming fireball of a news story waiting to happen, then the pretty girl with rosy cheeks and pumped-up lips looks at the male anchor she's messing with and says, and now for a lighter look at...what, maybe a secret Santa story.

I can't back up. And if it's icy, there's no way I can steer through this serpentine slither without at the very least jackknifing and shearing trees, guardrails punching through the saddle tanks, and—

“Shoot,” I say, pulling out onto the roadway, “here we go, you sonsabitches,” addressing my humorless dad and my grandpa, “I'll see you in hell in about one minute and a half.” Gears up, speed gaining, nothing coming, I take the whole middle of the road.

I ease off as I head down, hoping Desert Dog don't break traction, no turning back now, I'm all in. I tap the brakes, just tap them, air from the system shushing me in an angry little pssht. No yawing or slewing, no thorax-sickening, sphincter-tightening spinal frisson. *Like* that frisson, Priscilla. What a *word!* Like your *Freixenet* champagne. Chills. Up your spine, down your gullet, my girl Priscilla us-

es words like a poet. She teaches English, gaining speed, can't gear down, hit a skate of black ice. Oohhhhh shitfire. No, she's straight, she's moving, the road ain't iced, just that one black-ice bad-ass patch, hanging onto the curve, not so snaky as it looked from up on top.

Whoa, shit dawg, now we're talkin'. Desert Dog is gonna make 'er. I got her name feather-ghost striped on the doors. Shines in the sun in a leaded glass blue and blue-green against the dark blue. Oh, man, we did it, faced the abyss and beat the bitch.

I snap open a CD, one-handed, Joe Bonamassa, slide it into the player slit which sucks it in like...well, I can't say, as Priscilla does not like the metaphor, but it makes me smile and affects me well below the thorax, I'll say that. I turn it up and Joe wails, *wails*, plays that thing like a banshee in heat in Dante's hell circle number three. "Oh my," I say out loud. "Oh *my*."

Black smoke a-blowin' over eighteen wheels, I am feeling it in my blood which flows like good synthetic forty-weight oil at 190 degrees, viscosity, just right. I am steady as she goes rollin', workin' for the man ever night and *day*.

I hear myself laughing. Sometimes I talk. I say my dailies when driving, prayers for Priscilla, for the dogs, our home, our safety. I always sing. Joe makes me want to dance but I can't bounce around too much in DD. She likes a precision driver. And then there's the load all chain-boomered down on the bed, hauling power plant sections tarped and ominous, looming and official like a government load of

something they don't want you to know. But it just looks thataway, those black tarps flappin'.

Load of doom. Doomload download at Alton or East St. Louis. Let me outa these Colorado Rockies. Across the plains. Flamelicks from the blues virtuoso Bonamassa the master bender of Fender. But I don't know what he plays, Gretsch, Gibson, what. Matters not. He could make a Chinese banjo quote Shakespeare.



Kansas. Flat and windswept with Priscilla's Capote lurking, licking his lips still looking at Klutter luck or lack and...Hank Jr. sings, as do I, "Hey, little water boy bring the buck, buck, bucket down, *quack, quack*." Always makes me laugh, lifts my spirits, good thing on this flatland wheat-land weed-land express.

Truck stop looms, Desert Dog and I dust it, shine it, don't intertwine it, flashing by. I back off and the pipes rap at the waitress there who—maybe tired, maybe worried about a mammogram, maybe her kid sassed her—told me to eat shit and die when I questioned the freshness of the pie. Everyone has bad days, I said to her, and she said sorry, and I tipped her fat, but it leaves me sad, so I pass. Another one in fifty miles, forty minutes. I check my radar detector. It's flashing red, red, red, means only that it's on.

I dial from Jim Rome to Dave Ramsey to Rush Limbaugh. They seem flat as the Kansas-scape, I think Elvis! Yes, "Blue Christmas without you." My phone rings. I

snatch it up, pull the charger connection out of it. It's Priscilla.

"Hey," I say.

"Where are you?"

"Truckin' through Kansas but don't tell my momma, she thinks I'm a piano player in a whorehouse."

"Funny."

"Uproarious. Knee-slapping. Side-spl—"

She interrupts. "Be serious for just a second."

"Like a doggone heart attack."

I hear her blow nose air sort of like a laugh but not quite.

"When are you home?"

Home being California, the high desert, actual location Hemet. Home in Hemet.

"I will be in Hemet, California 9:16 p.m. December twenty-second."

"Perfect."

"Better than perfect. Unless, of course, you forget my present and are dressed up to go out instead of butt nekkid."

"We *are* going out during the holidays, truck boy. And you *will* look nice."

"We are and I will. Tell me something sexy."

"Old truckers never die, they just get a new Peterbilt."

"That's old."

"So are you." She laughs.

Can she be disparaging of my age, the difference in years between us?

"I've been reading the books you gave me," I say.

"Good. Which one are you reading now?"

“That one by Kant about reason.”

“Really? I don’t remember giving you any philosophy books.”

“I made that up. Me and Wikipedia.”

“You goofball. I’ve got to go. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Blue Christmas” swells in the cab, all the better because mine won’t be blue. Mine will be sun streaming in the venetian blinds, lolling in bed, and then cooking brunch and the dogs bumping around me. Opening packages. I have gotten her presents at Neiman Marcus in Dallas, DD idling at the loading dock in back.

“Blooooo bloooo Christmas without yoooo.” Elvis smirks and dimples as he croons and moons and DD is humming at an eighty sweet spot and Kansas will soon be a memory into Missouri, east to Alton Illinois.

I light up a 420 Marley. I holler around it, “I’m a smoker, I’m a toker, I’m a midnight broker, I’m a joker, and a Fokker and an Absaroker.” This rig cost me, but if you live in one half the time, be happy. Desert Dog makes me happy. Lights everywhere, blue dots in back, illegal maybe but nobody says anything. Sleep compartment, I keep it clean, like to sleep in comfort, shower at stops—when the money’s good, in good motels, prime rib and a Manhattan on the rocks, read myself to sleep.

“Lap of luxury,” Priscilla says about some things.

Her lap *is* luxury and I’m a luxury-hound. She doesn’t like too much referencing of the hot spot, the blue dot, the fox trot. But she inspires me, leads me, educates me.

It's not like she is trying to improve me—she just likes teaching. And I'm raw stock she can make something out of. She says I'm smart. Nobody ever told me that. It's great to have a teacher who cares. They say you remember the good ones all your life. This is especially true of me, a teacher's pet for sure.

Whoa, shit, some little sporty number passing me and my radar detector is squawking Smokey X-band, there goes *that* guy's Christmas bonus. Yes, here he comes hot on his ass. Nailed in Kansas in the unsympathetic wheat stubble!

Me and the Desert Dog hauling ass and power plant parts. I hit the all-windows-down button, fresh clean razor-cold Kansas air jets the cab, scrubs the cigar smoke from the plastics, leathers, and chromes, freezes my earring.

A little kid in the back of a Volvo wagon pumps his arm, I give him two blasts of DD's double airs. He claps his hands. We both laugh. It's Christmas.

WHAT WADE CLOVER DID

THE SUMMER OF 1958

Wade Clover was made to work down in the stagnant, humid air of the sweltering cofferdam as a sort of punishment. But what the foreman, LaWayne DeFeo, didn't know was that Wade preferred it. He loved it, actually. While down there in the airless pit, its steel-encased sides oozing foul-smelling primordial Oklahoma mud at the seams, he'd discovered a way to handle a two-man job all by himself. And this had caught the eye of the field super, Ken Burdock, who told LaWayne that Wade would soon be his equal, in line for a foreman position. Which caused LaWayne to grind his teeth, make fists.

"You okay, LaWayne?" Ken said.

"Fine. Just dandy. Thanks for askin'."

"Thought you were having a seizure of some kind."

"Naw." LaWayne watched the superintendent stride off, kicking up red dust as he headed for the air-conditioned

business office, a trailer set into a clearing in the tangled jungle-like wilderness.

LaWayne hated Wade, fucking college student working in the summer, then just as the shit weather turned and got more pleasant, off he'd go to some cushy campus, all monied up from the summer, spend it on pussy and beer and brag about how he'd built a bridge across Lake Texoma. And it was *art* school, to boot. What the hell kind of grownup job does that prepare anyone for?

LaWayne had banished Wade to the cofferdams with the biggest air hammer he could find, told him to cut off the steel-reinforced concrete pilings at the engineers' marks about two foot from ground level.

Cutting piles was, essentially, a two man job, one man bulling the heavy body of the hammer, holding it sideways, chisel end horizontal to the piling, the other man operating the chisel and cutting around the column. The exposed ends of the piles were anywhere from eight to fifteen feet tall, and four feet in diameter. That fucking Wade had looked at the job, clambered back up the rickety ladder, got himself a rope from the supply trailer, and climbed back down.

LaWayne watched, eyes slits, lower lip pushing hard against the upper. Wade tossed the rope over the top of the piling, secured it. He tied the other end to the air chisel so it swung freely about two feet off the ground. Then he pulled his goggles over his eyes, aimed the pneumatic tool end at the piling, and began to cut, concrete chips flying. When he'd hit reinforcing steel, he'd move over, cut some more. LaWayne kicked what he thought was a dirt clod but it was

the stub of an old tree root sticking out of the ground and it damn near broke his foot. He hopped around like a wounded crow, cursing.

By the end of the day, the pilings looked like a concrete-chewing team of beavers had been at them, ready for the welders to come and cut the re-bars and knock them over. The worst thing was, the super had gone down into the hole to ask Wade what he was doing, came back up with a smile on his face, so LaWayne couldn't take credit for the idea. The damn kid was always coming up with stuff like that.

The next day, one cofferdam closer to the lake, Wade chipped away in his green-goggled world, singing at the top of his voice. Al Hibbler's "Unchained Melody," with all the high parts. Nobody could hear him anyway with the machine gun rattle of the air chisel.

LaWayne appeared now and then at the edge of the cofferdam, hollering down at him to climb up, perform some make-work task. Wade ignored him, erasing his words with the violence of the hammer, concentrating on the fissures appearing in the concrete. LaWayne would soon go away, figuring it was too much trouble and beneath his station to climb down and wallow around in the mud to get Wade's attention. He'd throw a dirt clod, but the field super would yell at him about safety and the new outfit OSHA that was becoming such a pain in the ass. He could shut down the compressor but that would get him chewed out.

About mid-morning, Wade felt eyes on him. He was being watched by someone, but not the foreman. The sun was getting higher, coming on ten o'clock or so, and when he

looked up, there were figures silhouetted against the light—three men in suits, jackets over their shoulders, and to one side, away from them and closer to him, a woman. A breathtaking, tanned young woman with a scowl he could see, even though the large sunglasses she wore obscured a good deal of her expression.

She wore a white sheath dress, sleeveless, and the sun behind her revealed a form that rendered her companions invisible. Legs spread some, pulling the skirt taut, her fists on her hips, her feet in spectator pumps, solidly planted. The stance was one males are familiar with by the time they're teens. It said, "I'm pissed and this is going to last." She appeared to be looking straight at Wade.

The suited men paid no attention to her, talking and gesturing off toward the lake where the bridge was headed. Clover was suddenly conscious of his slack-jawed immobility and the emphatic silence from the dormant air hammer. Sounds were filtering down to him. Birds. A generator. The talk of the men. Something like *deja vu* was disorienting him, dizzying him. This was backwoods wilderness Oklahoma and you didn't see women in white dresses and heels here, thirty miles from the nearest Coke machine.

Somehow he felt as though he'd been in this scene before. He activated the hammer and it almost got away from him, bouncing crazily on the piling. He felt his face flush red beneath the tan and the grime, even then knowing no one could see that with goggles, hard hat, and red clay dirt overlying his features.

He chiseled for about ten minutes, really getting down on it before he dared look up again. When he did, they were gone, all of them. He shut the hammer off and listened for voices.

The mud beneath him jiggled from the pile driver sinking another piling down the line, the chunky sound coming after the shockwave. Compressors chugged on or off, expelling air. The tracks of a crane being moved clanked and squealed.

He let the air hammer swing free on the rope and climbed up the crude ladder the carpenters slapped together for these holes. Time for a water break, and he wanted another look at the lady in white.

Maybe he'd dreamed it. He fantasized a lot down there in the green-goggled world. Sang to the girls he had known, would know. Time streamed in a different way in the cofferdam and sometimes he wouldn't hear the whistle blow at five o'clock. Once, he continued on until the shut-down compressor ran out of air and he was alone on the job site. Whistle-bit as they say.

It was already above ninety degrees that morning. The ice block had melted in the galvanized Igloo water cooler. He filled his hard hat a quarter full with water and put it on. Next best thing to a shower. Then he swallowed two salt tablets from the dispenser, washed them down with paper cups of the almost cool water.

"Clover, you bonehead, no wonder we gotta fill them fuckin' coolers four times a day. When are you done with the pilings?"

LaWayne's voice seemed unnaturally loud to Wade. Everything did when he stopped hammering. Birdcalls stood out.

"I should be done by approximately 4:59 p.m.," he replied, flashing him a generous smile. He affected a hipshot stance and flapping hand gesture. LaWayne had tried to get a rumor going that Wade liked boys, and Wade used it to full advantage to end conversations with him quickly.

LaWayne's eyes slid sideways and he exhaled sharply, making a hasty departure. He tried to emulate the super's purposeful walk but his foot still hurt and he appeared to be making way on the deck of a ship in a storm.

Weird way to walk, Wade reflected. Could it be a visual reference to the tractionless rumor of my fruitiness?

Wade looked around for the woman in white. Nothing. A lone dust devil on the dirt road into the job site. Sky the color of steam. A sharp whiff of diesel fuel.

He crumpled the paper cup and tossed it into an empty drum.



JJ Bandy, a young laborer from Texas and beer-drinking buddy of Wade's, approached. "Gonna be a hot one, Rembrandt," he said, swabbing the headband of his hard hat with a bandanna. "Whooeee!"

"You're sure of that. I'm trying to plan my day, and the weather is important to me."

“Hot. Bank on it.” JJ grinned as he filled a cup. “You see the VIPs?”

“Yeah. Who was that?”

“Old man Worth, hisself, and some ass-kissers,” said JJ.

“And the vision in the white dress?”

Bandy’s quizzical expression made Wade think perhaps he *had* imagined her. He dropped it. They made plans for their usual payday steak dinner at the Lake Texoma Lodge and Wade climbed back down into the hole.

He sang the songs of the day to the staccato accompaniment of the air hammer: “Heartbreak Hotel,” “Maybelline,” his favorite “Unchained Melody” again and again.



Showers, clean T-shirts, clean jeans. JJ and Wade started most nights with a chicken-fried steak or catfish at The Sportsman Cafe and coasted into too many beers and slop eight-ball or shuffleboard afterward at The Spot Tavern. Madill was situated in the only truly dry county in Oklahoma, so the beer was 3.2, and no booze, no “clubs.” Wade was saving plenty back for tuition and expenses at the Kansas City Art Institute. Friday nights, JJ and he would splurge at the new Texoma Lodge motel in Kingston, and sometimes drive across to the Texas side, look for girls and never find any.

They usually ended up sitting on the hood of Wade’s ’54 Ford in the Madill town square, talking about their futures, while the locals circled with their radios up loud. They were

both going to be wealthy—JJ in cattle or oil, Wade as a famous painter.

The Lake Texoma Lodge was mint factory-new in '58, another tangible result of the postwar boom that seemed to have no end. Three hundred air-conditioned rooms, cottages, its own landing strip. The boys passed the sign that heralded rates \$5.00 and up, Fine Food, Swimming, Boating, Fishing, Golf. A big red boomerang-looking device pointed toward the motel 300 yards away, the only building in sight on the huge lakefront.

The coffee shop was a precursor to later Dennys and IHOPs. Chrome banded tables, Naugahyde booths and a waitress station with order slips on a carousel and a service bell the short order cook would slap. “Three burgers! BLT nekkid!”

They studied the mimeographed menu backed by imitation leather with cattle brands but nothing listed would sway them from the T-bone steak and baked potato with everything.

She came in for cigarettes. Wade's back was to her in the booth, though he turned to look when he caught JJ's open-mouthed expression. Once more dressed in white, though this time a kind of tennis outfit.

She glanced in their direction and Wade saw that her eyes were gray-green, hair a dark auburn with sun-lightened accents. A swimming pool tan and a figure that would dilate eyeballs. Silver bracelets jangled, no ring that he could see. She paid the cashier and was gone like a light being turned off.

“Be right back,” he said to JJ, sliding hurriedly out of the booth.

She had paused outside another, more formal dining room, opened the cigarettes, and was tapping one out. Everyone smoked back then, and they smoked anywhere.

Wade was tongue-tied, but he had to be here. “You like white clothing,” he barked inappropriately. *That was unnerving*, he thought. *I’ve presented myself as a psychopath, or a dope.*

She turned to look at him, a line appearing between her eyes. He could tell she was considering flight. God, she was beautiful.

“I—is something wrong?” she stammered.

“I just—I saw you this morning at the job. In white? I work there. I wondered why you would be at such a place. And dressed up, you know, in white.” *Good god*, he thought, *quit babbling.*

“Not by choice,” she said, finger-combing her hair back to reveal earrings with dangling stones that matched her eyes. She seemed to relax, perhaps considering him harmless. “We were flying to Dallas and stopped here. And unless you’re a cop, that’s all you get.”

An imposing fortyish man in golf slacks and polo shirt approached. “There you are, Lily. I looked for you in the dining room—” He took Wade in at a glance.

“Daddy. This is one of your bridge builders. Seems the job is with us wherever we go.”

Ignoring Wade’s outstretched Zippo, she lit her cigarette with a butane tube that looked like a gold lipstick.

The two men shook hands. Wade was awed. George Worth, himself, second generation owner of Worth Construction. The older man put him at ease, asking him about his job and telling him inside stories about the new safety outfit called OSHA, and the Corps of Engineers monitoring the very work he was doing.

Then he asked Wade to join them for dinner. Wade told him he was with a friend in the coffee shop, another bridge worker. Worth insisted “my boys” join them. Lily rolled her eyes a bit, blew a feather of smoke out of the side of her mouth.



“Appears Lily is violently opposed to flying now, at least in our little Beech Bonanza,” Worth explained, as they were seated. “We hit some turbulence. It happens. Anyway, she refuses to go on to Dallas with us and I’m trying to figure out a way to get her safely back home.” He turned to her. “Not even a day at Nieman Marcus will get you back in the plane?”

“Not a chance in hell.”

“No need to swear, Lily. I have a thought. You all go on ahead and order.” Worth dropped his napkin in his chair and left.

JJ was staring at Lily’s breasts.

“Stop it,” hissed Wade.

JJ arched his eyebrows comically and smiled.

“So, Wade—” She looked at him appraisingly. “—that was you down in that big hole in the ground? You look a lot better cleaned up.” She tapped her cigarette on the side of the heavy glass ashtray. “Though you had a certain amount of noble savage appeal. Like James Dean with muscles.”

This was going much better now, Wade felt.

“LaWeiner will get a full report on this deal,” JJ said out of the side of his mouth, and he snorted. LaWeiner was what he called LaWayne.



The car was a gleaming black 1956 Lincoln Premiere convertible with air conditioning. A Worth field car for the Oklahoma job. They had ones just like it on bridge sites in Caracas, Venezuela, Omaha, and Dallas.

The arrangement was simple. Wade had no blemishes on his driving record. His old man was a friend of a Worth VP and his character had been vouched for. Plus, there was the LaWayne scuttlebutt that he might not even like girls. He was to drive Lily to Kansas City, stopping overnight in Tulsa. Wade was to be paid any missed wages plus \$100 up front for expenses.

Then he was to return the car to the Lake Texoma Lodge air strip, park it in the Worth hangar, where his car would be waiting. At a certain age, one takes things for granted. This was all so strange to Wade that it actually wasn't. He knew that eventually he'd wake up and none of this would have happened.

Mr. Worth shook his hand and his eyes narrowed slightly. “You seem like a bright boy and I hear good things about you. I don’t need to get all paternal and ominous, do I? Remind you of far-reaching consequences?”

“Yes, sir. No, sir.”



Lily proposed they put the top down after they were out of sight of the lodge. He pulled over into a picnic area with a shaded grove and marveled as the whirring top folded itself neatly behind the back seat.

“Don’t look!” she cried, insuring that he would, and she somehow removed her bra from under her sleeveless blouse, then she knotted the blouse ends up under her breasts. She leaned over the seat and opened a bag, fished out some cut-off jeans, said, “Don’t look,” again, and slid out of her slacks, skinned into the tight very short jeans, and curled up on the seat, lighting a cigarette. She flipped her cigarette hand toward the windshield, said, “Let’s hit the road, Wade.”

Wonderful dimples, he thought. Likeable, too, even if she was rich.



She rested her bare feet on the dash, and truckers blasted air horns as they passed, commemorating a fine pair of legs, Wade imagined. He was with them one-hundred percent on that. She swung them around and put her feet in his lap, wig-

gling them. He corrected the trajectory of the big Lincoln which seemed to be leaving the roadway.

“I’m hungry, Wade.” She stretched out “Wade” and made it all sound vaguely salacious.

They idled into the gravel lot of a roadhouse outside of Atoka. Few vehicles were in evidence. A flatbed farm truck with stake sides. A car with different colored fenders and doors. A rusted pickup. Wade wanted cowboy hats for both of them, and pistols. They would take a pocket watch from the proprietor, empty the till, fill a bag with Moon Pies. The Bonnie and Clyde moment passed, but this girl was affecting him.



They played eight-ball at that place, the sunlight slanting in on the green baize tabletop through dusty windows, the locals watching them and drinking beer from bottles. She leaned over the table for a bridge shot and gave the gallery an eyeful. The jukebox played Ernest Tubb, Lefty Frizzell and, once, Dean Martin singing “Memories Are Made Of This,” and they danced to that one, all wrapped around one another like the high school prom.

A slim old man in pressed Wranglers and a well-stained Stetson entered. “Whose Lincoln?” he asked the room.

“Ours,” Lily said, glancing out the window at it.

“Nice rig,” he said.

“It was our wedding present to each other,” she said.

That, somehow, pleased the elders, and rounds were bought. A large, weathered woman in a housedress and slippers said “Awww.”

Wade was charmed by Lily’s ease with the people, sitting at the bar with them, not making fun of anyone, but telling small harmless lies that perpetuated the first one.

They left with a bit of a buzz, promising to send cards, and contemplating a future together. Wade etched the place into his mind for a painting or two.



In McAlester, she said, “Find me a phone.”

“If you’ll pose for a sketch,” he said.

“You bet. Got any change?”

“Nude,” he said, as he emptied his pocket. “I’m an artist,” he added.

“Okay, but I’d rather you’d wear clothes, at least to draw in,” she said sweetly, as she opened the door.

He sat in the car as she talked on the payphone. Her free hand chopped at the air from time to time.

She became agitated, and he heard her say, “Pregnant? You wish, shit for brains!” and she hung the phone up with more force than was needed, three or four times.

They drove in silence for a few miles, pulled in at a Dairy Queen. “So who were you talking to?” he asked casually, after blowing the paper from his straw.

“None of your business.” A pause. “My ex-boyfriend.”

“Ex as of when?”

“As of that phone call.”

“I couldn’t help overhearing—”

“You don’t want to pursue this.” She said it slowly, quietly.

“Pursue what?” he asked innocently. “Want the top up or down?”

“Leave it down.” She looked at him, holding an unlit cigarette in one hand, a lighter in the other, her elegantly nailed thumb idly turning the flint wheel. “Are you going to go?”

Wade sat with his back against the door, one arm draped over the steering wheel, the other on the back of the seat. Giving her his best James Dean look, he wished he had worn cowboy boots instead of PF Flyers.

“Are you being someone?” she asked. “Am I to guess?”

He turned to the wheel and started the Lincoln, coloring only slightly.



“Shoot,” said Burdock, leaning across his desk, rolled-out plans held down by rocks and old gears. He tried to feign interest in what LaWayne had on his mind.

“I’m thinkin’ a vacation would do me good. You know, get me—”

“Hell, yes, LaWayne. You’ve earned it. If Wade was here, we’d try him out in your place, but one of your boys can take over. How much time we talkin’ about?”

“Week oughta do it.”



Outside Tulsa, top up now, Wade pulled the big Lincoln into a decent-looking motel with a steakhouse across the highway and beer joints scattered about. They discussed going into Tulsa proper and checking into a hotel, but decided to stay where they were. Back from the motel office, he said, “Convention in town, I got the last room, looks like we’ve got to share.”

She blew out a little snort of breath, smiled. “You are full of shit as a ten-pound robin.”

“Nice talk,” he said, as he waggled two room keys in the air.

“Nice try,” she said, snatching a key.



The restaurant reminded Lily of a steakhouse in Aspen, and that got her started on ski stories, and vacation times, but Wade had little to add since he’d never been on a vacation with his folks, except to his and his sister’s grandparents in the summer. Then their folks took off on their own vacations.

Nervously, he’d bought a bottle of vodka at the liquor store outside the restaurant, and pursuant to Oklahoma laws of the time, poured it into “set-ups” of tonic water while they ate and talked. After a few of the vodka tonics, they decided they were having a grand time and became more clever by the minute.

About that time, LaWayne's 1950 Chevrolet limped into the motel parking lot, steaming and rattling. He pounded the steering wheel until he noticed the company Lincoln parked in front of a room at the other end of the lot. He walked to the motel office and requested a room as close to the Lincoln as he could get.



Lily and Wade walked arm in arm from the restaurant, Wade carrying the fifth of vodka in its paper bag.

"I think you tipped that waitress too much, Wade. I'm a little jealous."

He was overjoyed to hear it. The waitress had flirted with him, and that just made the night even better. They hurried across the highway, and Wade kissed Lily when they reached the other side. It was not a smooth movie kiss—both were unsteady and, by the time they located their mouths, they were filling one another's cheeks with laughter. Neither noticed the 1950 Chevy parked as far away from the Lincoln as the nearly empty lot would allow.



In Lily's room, she said, "Take off your clothes."

"I'm sorry?"

"You said you wanted to paint me in the nude."

"*You* would be nude. But I didn't bring any paints. I have a sketch pad in my suitcase." Wade took his suitcase to

his room, after dropping hers off, brushed his teeth, splashed water on his face, and returned to Lily's room. She wanted to see his sketch book and he allowed her to look at a couple of pages.

"You are really good, Wade." She was engrossed in the book, turning pages slowly, even reverently. "Is this yesterday?" She'd come to the last page and his reconstruction of her standing at the bank of the cofferdam, the light behind her.

"I wanted to draw it before I lost it, you know, before it faded in my mind."

She looked up from the sketch book. "I'll pose for a drawing. But if I don't like it I get to tear it up."



LaWayne sipped a beer in his room. Holding a water glass to the knotty pine wall had revealed only that people were talking in the next room. He couldn't make out what they were saying, just laughter now and then. He'd have to get more aggressive in his detective work if he was going to get anything on Wade and the boss's daughter. The opportunity was immediate and would require action.

He wished he'd thought to bring a camera, but hell, he didn't know how to use one, anyway. This would take bold moves and poker bluffing. He crackled the can in his hand, tossed it in the wastebasket. Wade's goose was as good as cooked.

LaWayne eased his way out the front door, looked both ways, and checked the front window in the room that evidently Wade and the girl were in, though the Lincoln was parked one doorway away from it. Not enough clearance in the curtains to see anything. He stood out in the parking lot, smoking, thinking. Then he strode to his room, and the sliding glass door that opened out to the back and a swimming pool patio, soft drink and ice machines. No one was out there. A woods out back emitted night sounds, and he jumped as the ice machine dumped a crackling new load. The chlorine smell blended with the smell of newly mowed grass.

LaWayne sidled up to the sliding glass door and was pleased to see a crack of light where the curtains weren't pulled shut. He almost choked when the girl walked by in bra and panties and curled up on the bed. He saw Wade settle himself in a chair across from her and it looked like he was drawing her in a large book. Shit-fire, there she was, ready for it and the college boy was making a picture. He heard Wade say, "Technically, that's not nude."

"Use your imagination," she said. She reached for a glass. "I need some more ice."

Wade stood, laid the sketch book in the chair and took her glass.

Oh, shit, thought LaWayne, he's comin' out to get ice.

He almost tripped. One of his cowboy boots kicked the door as he turned to run to the privet hedge around the pool and threw himself down behind it. No one came. Wade had used an ice bucket in the room. LaWayne got up, slapped grass clippings from his shirt and jeans with his cowboy hat.

Back in place, he now had to take a whiz. He decided to go in the grass by the door while he kept an eye on the girl. This turned out to be problematic as he had a good start on a woody and therefore couldn't pee. He held it in one hand, eyes averted from the girl, hoping it would go down, but he was thinking about her.

“Freeze, you fucking pervert.” The voice was ten feet behind him. “Turn around slowly. Slowly. Now. Talkin’ to you, bub.”

He turned slowly, still holding his penis, which was now quite limp. He was facing the motel night man and a cop. He quickly stuffed it back in his pants, and zipped up, catching it in the zipper. “Eiy yi yi!” he yelled and danced as he unzipped and freed himself.

“Easy there, hoss, quit hoppin’ around,” the cop said. “Git yourself shot that-a-way.”

“That’s not him,” said the motel night man. “Unless there’s a ring of ’em. Fact is, he’s a guest, I think.”

LaWayne was cuffed and escorted to the patrol car parked in the front lot. Wade and Lily emerged, fully dressed, from their separate rooms, talked to the night manager, who relayed their news to the cop.

“He ain’t the peeping tom we’ve had trouble with, Officer. He’s the feeble-minded cousin of the male guest, Mr. Clover, who’s escorting the girl back to KC and the cousin to a home for people like him. He does this all the time, and they apologize. They’ll take care of him, and there won’t be no more trouble.”

They heard the name Worth Construction Company and some “uh-huh”s and “I see”s. And LaWayne was uncuffed and presented to Wade.

“Keep this jasper inside until you leave, please, sir. We’ve had some problems around here and he could end up in county lockup,” said the policeman. “That could be tough on a person like him.”

LaWayne all but growled.

“You bet, sir. I’m sure sorry.” Then Wade whispered, but so LaWayne could hear, “He’s kind of an embarrassment, Officer, but harmless as all getout. Could I get a copy of the police report so I can let the folks at the home know? They should, you know, keep him contained.”

“Oh sure. We got all his info. Oklahoma boy. Says he was workin’ on a bridge in Madill, but he musta made that up. Just stop in precinct three. They’ll be glad to give you a detailed copy.” The officer handed Wade a card, shook his head. “Wavin’ his johnson around like that, he *should* be in a home.”

LaWayne stood, hat in hand, next to Wade, looking down at his boots.

“LaWayne, go to your room. Now,” said Wade. “We are going to have us a little talk about your antics.”

His lips were compressed as he stifled a laugh. Ol’ Bandy was going to eat this up. The police car dipped and bumped onto the highway, throwing some road dust and gravel. The night manager looked at Lily appreciatively, then gave Wade a two finger wave and headed back to his office.

“Night, night, Wade,” said Lily.



In LaWayne's room, the crackling tension seemed radioactive and rather enjoyable, at least to Wade.

"I want you to know, I wasn't, you know..." said LaWayne, his face turning red.

"Spying? Peeping? Playing with yourself?"

"That last. I wasn't doin' that."

"The evidence would seem to be contradictory," Wade said. "You had your...ah...member in hand when you turned from the window. I believe they called it inappropriate exposing of oneself in the police report. Weinie waggin' to you."

"I was tryin' ta take a whizz, but, well, anyway, I got to now. Bad."

"Well, go." Wade dismissed him with a flap of his hand, made sure LaWayne heard his puff of annoyed forbearance.

When LaWayne came out of the bathroom, Wade said, "Way I see it, LaWayne, is you want to be real careful back at the job."

"I saw you and her undressed, remember. Her, anyways. And you was there."

"Hmm. Guess I'll be making copies of that police report. No telling who'd like to see that."

"Okay, okay. I get it." LaWayne seemed in real pain.

"Have a good night's sleep, LaWayne." Wade dug in his jeans pocket for a quarter, flipped it onto the bed. "I understand those Magic Fingers beds are a little bit of heaven. This'll get you ten minutes." He practically skipped from the room. "Enjoy!"



“Why do you keep promoting that LaWayne guy?” Lily asked, a couple of years into a marriage, for which mutual lust had provided the booster rocket, but true respect and conviviality would keep in orbit.

“Well, Lil, he’s very good. Plus that old adage, keep your friends close, but your enemies closer. And I actually like the ol’ boy.”

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About the Author



Guinotte Wise has been a creative director in advertising most of his working life. In his youth he put forth effort as a bull rider, ironworker, laborer, funeral home pickup person, bartender, truck driver, postal worker, ice house worker, and paving field engineer. A staid museum director called him raffish, which he enthusiastically embraced—the observation, not the director. Of course, he took up writing fiction and poetry.

Wise welds and writes on a farm in Resume Speed, KS. His first collection of short stories, *Night Train, Cold Beer*, won the H. Palmer Hall Award for short fiction. His novel, *Ruined Days*, and his anthology, *Resume Speed*, are available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and wherever fine books are sold. His work has been seen in over forty literary reviews and anthologies, including *Atticus*, *Thrice Fiction*, and *The MacGuffin*. More of his work may be seen at <http://www.wisesculpture.com> His wife has an honest job in the city and drives 100 miles a day to keep it.