CHERRY JELL-O
AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

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CHERRY JELL-O
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Thesis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER                                                    Page

I.  STATION’S WAGON..........................................1

II. BOONGOGGLE..................................................4

III. CORN HUSKER DU............................................13

IV. WITCHES (HALLOWEEN EVE)..................................26

V.  LATE FOR SCHOOL..........................................41

VI. IT’S A LIVING...............................................45

VII. WEDDING DAY..............................................59

VIII. PUSH........................................................61

IX.  PRE-MORTEM................................................69

X.   SOCKS........................................................75

XI.  A SPECIAL PLACE..........................................78

XII. RAZOR.......................................................82

XIII. CUTPURSE................................................86

XIV. OTHER.......................................................87

XV.  PUMPKINS..................................................91

XVI. JUNKYARD................................................93

XVII. JIMMI THE WRASSLER................................100

XVIII. CHERRY JELL-O......................................110

XIX.  FURNACE RUN ROAD..................................115

XX.  ROADTRIP................................................135
CHAPTER I

STATION’S WAGON

After three weeks of hell it was over. Larry’s lover threw him out of the really nice house trailer with just the clothes on his back and one deflating air mattress. The mattress was the cat’s favorite place and the air oozed out through the claw pricks as Larry headed to the pull-off spot down by the river. At least he was wearing his nice cut-offs. The pull-off spot was the only place he’d really ever gone these last few weeks aside from the trailer, where they mostly watched the Game Show Network and fought during commercials. Although one time they went and bought beer and cigarettes. A lot of beer and cigarettes.

Two miles on a dirt road on foot with no shoes and an air mattress under your arm was one long row to hoe but Larry managed to stumble on. The tears from the break-up stung his thighs when he sat and rested every so often. Larry was a little heavy and underdressed, and the night
had a nip of autumn in it so Larry got up and trudged on, barefoot on the gravel road to the river.

The night was so black that Larry missed the little turn-off and wandered on for a hundred yards before he realized he’d missed it. When he found it back again, he tried to feel his way to the fire pit. That’s when his head bumped into a 1978 Buick Lafont station wagon. Larry dropped the air mattress. Truth be told, he’d been thinking as he was walking and he was thinking about taking that air mattress down the river, leaks and all, just to see how far he could get away. He wiped his nose with his hand and quit crying and sniffling and lit his lighter.

Yep, a Lafont. But a station wagon! No one ever let their cars down here. And there was a load of empty beer bottles all over the ground. There were always empties everywhere at the pull-off. Larry kicked a few from beneath the tires of the car.

He looked at the river. It was swift and cold tonight. He looked at his deflating mattress and the cold river as right then the car’s radio burst on. Larry got into the Buick quite excited and laughed at the feel of keys in the ignition. This was his chance, as the engine vroomed and he got ready to peel out. But the car’s
headlights shown on the tree right in front and a rope, tied from the tree to the car.

That’s how they lock their car? Tie it up like a horse? Larry got out and went to the front to look at the rope. It was knotted with a very expensive-looking knot and very taught against the car’s weight. So Larry lit his lighter and burned through the rope and when it did the Buick station wagon let loose and slid abruptly into the river.

Larry could only watch as his vengeance-escape-car floated and bobbed in the current just a few feet away and began to sink. Two faces pressed against the wagon’s back window, open mouthed—not screaming really, more like surprised at being so suddenly awake and sober all in one fell swoop, as the car was swept out of sight.
CHAPTER II
BOONDOGGLE

Gary from Indiana was way outta his league by then. Poor and busted again. He had an old car that looked the part and a handful of little foam footballs in the backseat. He even gave one of them away once without his autograph on it. A shame. Still he drove on through the mountains toward Tennessee. He had a case of exotic perfume that he swiped from the Burgundy Motel in Plainsworth the day before and he could damn well use the money.

By the time Gary got to Tennessee he was out of footballs and hungry. He had a trap in the trunk and caught a raccoon with it before sunup. The pelt and guts were worth $26.50 and he bought three nights in half a house trailer down by the river and still had $4.75 left over. Gary slept till dusk and woke up starvin’. He knocked on the door of the other half of the place and when no one came he went in and stole a whole raw catfish and
some bread to make a sandwich. He hid the case of exotic perfume under the bed to wait until tomorrow.

Donny was one of those guys who went to the gym. He didn’t go there to workout necessarily, but he did like to stand around the locker room naked, maybe just wearing matching tube socks in Green Bay Packer colors, and talk to the guys, maybe stand by the blow dryer and show off a little bit. It was his excuse to get out and to fool himself that he was working-out somehow. Nobody ever really spoke to Donny in the locker room except to say fag or queer. It was usually really nobody’s fault. Donny kept warm beer in his locker.

When Gary went to the free clinic he had to wait. For a pretty long time. His stomach was killing him. He started to look around. There wasn’t much to read unless you liked pamphlets. And boy oh boy there were lots of those. Urinary tract infections, gonorrhea, syphilis, genital warts, tooth decay and heart disease, cigarettes and blood platelets, perfume and cigarettes, ringworm, HIV, the dangers of dating older guys, dating older guys who might be HIV positive, they covered the most horrific ailments to be found by mankind. Then they called Gary’s number.
Donny was watching TV at four o’clock in the morning in his little room at the Bennington Motel when an infomercial about girls with acne came on for a whole half hour. I’d like a girl like that, Donny thought, but I wouldn’t know what to do with her slipper kiss.

Looks like October, feels like March. In the middle of February. It was so early it was still dark but the doctor was smiling. Gary told him about the catfish he’d eaten and how he was now poisoned. The doctor smiled some more and gave Gary some Tums and sent him on his way. Gary drove his old car back toward the trailer and thought about what he should do with all that exotic perfume. His guts were on fire and he saw a light so he stopped at this little bar for a drink. Gary spent two dollars of the $4.75 he had left on a tall glass of ice cold draft beer. Donny walked in at precisely 6:23 AM and sat down next to Gary. He ordered a can of oyster juice with a side of horseradish and a vodka chaser. “How ya doin’,” he said to Gary.

“That’s gotta hurt,” said Gary.

“Nah,” said Donny, “but it is an acquired taste, I’ll admit.” The tired bartender watched as the tired early
risers filed in and ordered their morning drinks. Donny said, “how’d ya like to be them?” He pushed the dark hair from his face. Gary said, “No way man.” They sipped their drinks in silence. Then Gary said, “I got a big case of exotic perfume that I’m willing to sell for cheap.” Donny shot his vodka and put down a dollar for a tip. “Let’s go,” he said. Donny had a dream, to be the best he could be, and not be like everyone else. It hadn’t quite come through yet, but he was a bettin’ man and he’d been bettin’ on this you’d better believe it. One chance in Hell.

By the time Gary and Donny got back to the trailer the little family from the other half sat outside their half of it staring at their campfire. “Someone stole our catfish” the littlest girl explained. “and now we’ve nothing for our supper tonight.”

“Fuck,” said Gary.

Donny said, “Go in and get the goddamn exotic perfume.” Gary got the case from beneath the bed. Donny said open it up and let’s have a look. Gary opened the case on the steps of his half of the trailer. The little family looked on from their fire with a certain hunger in their eyes.
“I should give them a bottle. For the catfish that’s killin’ me,” Gary reasoned. He twisted his moustache. “They could sell it maybe…”

“Hey you dumbass,” Donny said as he held one of the little sparkling bottles of bubbles. “This ain’t perfume. These are potions. Witches potions.”

Gary looked at the labels. They were written upside-down and backwards. “I thought it was some sorta French,” Gary explained. Donny flipped the black case around and read the various labels. “Plague, Lovesnorts, Ima-bima-bee, Precious-nice, Babble, a dozen or more in all. On the back of each ornate and elaborate bottle was a yellowed paper label with tiny handwriting. Donny inspected the one he held, Zombie Dance it was called, holding the tiny bottle with his fingers. It was round and curved and flowing without shape yet somehow square where it should be with dozens of glass spines jutting sharply from the surface. He squinted to read the label. “It’s the directions,” they both said.

“You take our fish?” the apparent father asked quietly a few safe paces from Donny and Gary. Gary turned to look at the guy.

“Well, to be honest, yes sir I did and if it makes you feel any better, the damn thing nearly poisoned me.”
“Well mister, I got to feed my family.”

“Here. Take one of these bottles of perfume. You can sell it in town. Or somethin’.

“Oh well...” the little man sighed, “What they smell like?” Without really looking he plucked the one called Plague from the silk case, pulled out the glass stopper and took a whiff. He dropped to the ground, dead.

“What’d ya let him go and do that for?” Donny hissed. “That was the “Plague” one for Christ’s sake.”

“Whoa—that shit really works,” Gary said. “We better scram-olla.” The little family ran to their poppa and each fell dead from the lingering poison. Gary and Donny tore off in the ’73 Pontiac leaving the family and the fire and the trailer door swinging wide open. But Donny had the case of potions resting on his quivering thighs. Blue smoke rattled from the motor as the duo sped the thirty-six miles to Kentucky. Three miles on the other side they pulled into a gas station with four little log cabins arranged neatly about the grounds—and Donny offered to pay for a night so they could figger out what to do with this chance of a lifetime setting in his lap.

“We could rule the world,” Donny laughed looking at the bottles lying on the twin bed of cabin one. “Look at this one, Fear and Flightless. ‘Put a drop in the sleeping
ear, your foe cannot run, but he surely will fear...you.’

Looks like some one wrote in the ‘you.’"

“So what good is that?” asked Gary.

“Think, man, think!” Donny picked his nose. “If
people fear you but can’t run from you, you can control
them. Like Hitler.”

“Man I don’t wanna be Hitler. I wanna play football
again.” Gary picked his nose as well.

“Who said you gotta be Hitler? Here’s another one.
‘Run and Jump’—the spell reads, ‘Take a drop with a spoon
of honey, your feats of strength will make you money.’”

Gary plucked the ball-shaped bottle from Donny’s hand.
“It’s almost empty. Lots of people must like this one.”

“Yeah, probably a lot of pro athletes...Probably paid
a lot for a drop of this too. Try it.”

“I’m not tryin’ it. Besides, we ain’t got no honey.”

“That’s just ‘cause it probably tastes bad. Here...”

Donny dripped a drop on Gary’s fingertip and he licked
it off. Nothing happened. Not right then, anyway. But
when Donny woke up from his nap, Gary was not in the log
cabin. Donny opened the door to the pouring rain and a
flash went past. Then it flashed past again. Donny
watched as Gary ran about the grounds leaping and jumping
and running really fast. He looked exhausted.
“I been...doin’this...for a while...” Gary wheezed with each pass, “And I can’t stop...”

“Yeah, but your getting in great shape!” Donny hollered encouragingly. He shut the door and looked at the potions. This shit really does work, he thought. “Jesus.”

When Gary wound down some time later he vomited and passed out on his bed in the cabin. When Donny couldn’t rouse him in the early morning, he decided it was a good time to split up. He left sleeping Gary the rest of the bottle of Run and Jump and threw ten bucks on the bed. Then he took the case and Gary’s keys and shut the cabin door behind him.

The Pontiac smoked and chugged up the mountain road and Donny turned the radio up way loud. He never saw the witch until she landed on the hood with the weight of three days of hatred and a toothy snarl of delight. The car flattened to the road as the huge creature smashed through the windshield with one giant black talon and pulled Donny’s head out by the roots, much like pulling the stopper from a bottle. The witch popped it into her mouth like a peanut and screamed and spit. Then she hooked a red claw through the handle of the case of potions and flew off as the old car caught fire.
Gary limped along the mountain road sore and stiff and angry. He had ten bucks, a few drops of potion, no car, no footballs, and a long way to go. He walked with his thumb out in case some one might pick him up. Gary looked to the sky when he heard the wind of beating wings and never, ever looked at the sky again.
Chapter III
CORN HUSKER DU

She wasn’t supposed to meet me. Not right then, anyway. So, I met her instead. By accident in a barn in the middle of a corn field.

“What’re you doing here?” she asked. Spider webs of dead corn silk clung in her hair. She brushed straw from her cut-off shorts.

“I didn’t know anyone was here,” I said. “So, what’re you doing here?” She eyed me for a beat and took a cigarette from the pocket of her red flannel shirt, the tails tied like girls do, above her bellybutton, and struck the match like a girl does, away from her face. Eighteen, I thought. Maybe twenty years old.

“Hiding,” she said, exhaling the smoke from her baby-doll nose. “This is where I come to hide.”

“Looks like I found your hiding place.”

“Yep.” Her root beer eyes glanced around, then back at me, up and down. She shifted her stance in muddy boots and
finger-combed the last of the corn silk from her hair.  
“I’m not supposed to be here, ya know.”

“Me neither. I’m Ray.” I took off my glove to shake her hand. “What’s your name again?”

“I haven’t told you my name. It’s Kendell. Daddy named me after a can of motor oil.” She laughed and touched the barn door open a notch to peek outside, then sat down on a hay bale and pushed out her cigarette on the rim of a tractor tire. The rusted John Deere listed a bit to the left as sunlight lit the fading dust and smoke. Kendell wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

“Motor oil?”

“Naw. Not really. Some guy.” She was maybe telling the truth now. “My dad’s-brother’s-girlfriend’s-grandfather, Candle. His name was actually “Candle,” but they spelled it wrong on my birth certificate.”

“Oh.”

October was warm that year. I took off my leather motorcycle jacket and hopped up on top of an upside-down fifty-five gallon drum. Then the barn door creaked open and a little kid’s head popped through.
“Ma says you better get home right now,” the little head squeaked. So much for hiding, I thought. Kendell said “shit” and picked up a four-foot length of heavy chain curled on the floor at her feet. “I gotta go.” I watched her long hair and tied-up shirt and cut-off shorts and muddy boots slip through a missing board on the side of the barn.

“Hey Kendell!” I called after her in the twilight. I still had my sunglasses on and I couldn’t really see her. I lit my lighter as she peered through the slit of the missing board.

“What!?” A stage whisper. A hiss.

“What in Hell are you hiding from?” The lighter began to burn my thumb. Kendall’s face was flushed, sweating, and I could smell rain.

“I’ll come back if I can,” she answered. My lighter went out as I saw her look up at the gathering clouds. It was getting dark fast. “Wait for me. And keep out of sight.”

Then she was gone.
Back then I was a kid out of school, out of work, and out of girlfriends. So I was out of money, too. I hocked the last of my college text books, sold the rest of my blood plasma, and hit up my buddy Jacko for a loan. Then I tuned up my motorcycle, borrowed a camera, and took a trip. Just to see what I could see. What I saw that day was a barn in a corn field. A pretty picture, I thought. So I stopped the Kawasaki and waded through the rustling corn to shoot a picture of a rustic barn the day before Halloween.

I’d forgotten that it was still Halloween. It fell that year in the middle of the week, so all the celebrations had happened the weekend before. A lightning flash and thunder rolled over the trembling old barn. Dust and straw and bits of wood sprinkled down from the rafters. All was still for a breath, then it started raining. Hard. I wasn’t going anywhere on the bike, so I ran out into it, forgetting Kendall’s whispered warning and pushed my bike into the relative shelter of the barn.

Kendell never came back that night. Probably hiding somewhere else. With my leather for a blanket, I tried to sleep. But the drumming kept me awake. The sound of wood against steel, clanging chains, chanting voices. I looked through the gaps in the barn slats and saw the red and
yellow of a far-off fire, down the slope of the corn field. Another thunderclap brought more rain, fierce and cold, and ended the racket. I fell asleep between two bales of hay.

“Happy Halloween!” Kendell’s mouth was about an inch from my ear and she about scared the morning’s piss out of me.

“Jesus!” I jolted upright and blinked at her. Her hair was soaking and clung to her face. She smoothed it back and smiled. “I’m surprised to see you’re still here.” It was still raining like hell.

“I won’t ride my bike in this shit,” I explained. “What happened to you last night?”

Kendell fumbled for a cigarette and sneaked a glance at the door. “Mother, that old witch, stayed up late. I couldn’t get away.” I was going to ask her about the voodoo ritual or whatever it was, but she changed the subject. “So, whatta you do?”

“Nothing,” I answered without thinking, “I mean, nothing right now. I been riding my bike...”

“Take me for a ride!” The rain had slowed and was now just a fine mist.
“I thought you were hiding. Or something.”

“They’re all asleep. Probably sleep all day after last night.”

So I started to kick the Kawasaki over, but Kendell stopped me.

“Not here,” she said, “Push it down the road a little.”

I pushed the bike through the sopping stalks up to the road. Kendell got on the back and I coasted it down a slight grade enough to pop the clutch and fire the bike. We rode for a while on the wet road. The air was warm but getting a chill to it. Dry-ice-fog covered the blacktop knee-deep while Kendell held me tight and that felt good. When she yelled in my ear to pull over, I felt even better.

“Stop here.” Warm breath in my ear.

I pushed the motorcycle behind the dripping boughs of a pine, like she told me to, then followed her down a path through a bleak stand of old trees. The path ended in a tiny clearing at the base of a huge tree. There were stones piled around a hole beneath it, and without a word, Kendell crawled in. Half a dozen fifty-five gallon drums stood upside down around the trunk. I looked back for my
bike, but I couldn’t see it through the trees. Then I almost checked my wallet for a condom, but Kendell hissed, “Ray! Get in here!”

She hunkered down into the hollow of the great old tree. “They’re all rejects anyway, momma says.” Kendell looked around like she was looking for something. “Momma says they like them barrels, like bein’ cared for...”

I hunkered down in too, and looked around the hollow of the tree trunk. It looked bigger inside than I thought it would be. “Who are the rejects?” I wondered.

“They’re them people momma does her ‘speriments on,” Kendell said quietly. She looked at me pushing her wet brown hair from her eyes. Blisters of raindrops or sweat maybe, glistened on her chest. “Momma pretends she’s a doctor, but everyone just calls her a witch.”

“Including you.”

“I’m her kid and I can call her what I want.”

“Well, yeah,” I said. “What kind of experiments?”

Kendell was looking around again, then at the 55 gallon drum in the middle of the hollow tree. She slid it ever so
slightly to reveal a hole in the ground. There was a light from down deep.

“She mostly just chops off their arms and legs and sees if they live and if they do she takes care of them like they’re babies,” she said so, matter-of-factly and wiped her nose with her hand again. I offered her the red handkerchief bandanna tied around my neck. I started to untie it, but she wiped her nose on her sleeve anyway, so I stopped.

“Where do they come from?” I whispered.

“Mostly from the Home. Momma gets some from the circus when it passes through.” Kendell was looking down the hole into the glow of light, like fire light. It was getting warm in the tree trunk and in the increasing light I could see other barrels and metal drums and various containers packed against the wood of the hollow tree. Kendell scratched her elbow through her thin shirt. “Sometimes,” she said without looking away from the hole, “she gets them from outta here.”

“Kendell!” An old woman’s voice screeched. Kendell looked at me wide-eyed and without a word, slipped down into the hole and slid the barrel back over top, leaving me
to face what ever it was that I was going to face.

“Kendell!”

It was really warm now in the tree trunk as I crawled behind a barrel to hide with my leather draped over me. I began to sweat.

Something crawled down the back of my trousers, many-legged and mean and biting. I unzipped my fly to let the goddamned thing out the front, and out it came, a big old wood-crawler, hissing and spitting and I crushed it silently in my left hand. It let out a stink to let everything else that was still alive know how dead it was, and that’s how the old lady found me.

She poked my leather with a stick and rasped, “What’s that ol’ stink under here?” I uncovered one eye. “Where’s Kendell?” Man, she was old. “She go down the hole again?” The old lady didn’t smell so hot either. She raised the stick like she was going to hit me with it.

“Whoa—hold on,” I yelped as I stood up. The old lady was tiny and spry, with eyes that glistened in the near-darkness. She whacked me anyway, just above the knee.
“Ow! Geeze!” I complained. “She went down there,” and as I pointed at the barrel, it slid aside and out popped Kendell, dirty and somewhat burnt with singed hair.

“I told you NEVER go down there,” as the old woman swatted at Kendall’s legs. “Get on home and get ready—tonight’s the party.” She looked at me with her one good eye.

“Well? What’re you lookin’ at? Get on outta here,” she hissed and started wapping my legs with that goddam stick. I scooted out of the tree trunk.

Kendall was no where to be seen, and believe me, I was looking. But she was gone and it was just beginning to get dark already. Goddamn time change. I waited for the old woman to emerge from the tree, but it began to rain so I kicked started the bike to get, at least, the hell outta there. As I had no place else to go, I headed back for the barn. I could see fires in the distance and what sounded like drumming on 55 gallon drums—oil barrels. Tribal thrumming on steel. And fire, fires burning through the trees. I wanted to sleep. The bike made her way through the slicing rain and rows of corn stalks to find the barn. Burned to the ground. Fuck. Happy Halloween.
I found some hay, some untouched bales that went unnoticed by the apparent fire that I think one day will be viewed as arson, and covered the motorcycle with it, to try to keep the seat dry and create a nest for me, warmed by the motor. I could see the house more clearly now and there were figures moving through the light. The rain became a downpour as lightning struck and exploded a tree near one of the fires. The figures stumbled and scattered and the drumming stopped. For a moment.

What went on after that is something I never talk about. But I can tell a little now. These figures began to start up the hill toward the barn, where it used to be. The house in the woods was in fact, an old church, and I could see it by the light of the fires as the steeple bell rang out midnight. I watched as they hobbled and clawed their way through the field, arms gone, or legs gone, some with one of each, burned and crying out. Yeah, I just watched. In the pouring rain from my nest.

They got to the place where the barn was and the ones with arms started pulling up barrels from the smoking wreckage, while the ones with feet kicked the red hot drums into a line across the corn field.
Down below, as the church bell tolled, the old woman’s voice sang, “Time to come back! It’s time to go home.”

And these things found their designated barrels and each without exception crawled into their own, knowing, screeching from the burning, and began to roll down the hill toward the fires and the church. Time to go back to Hell. Time to try again to get used to the heat and fire and torture. It’s now or never. The 55 gallon-redhotdrums spun and screamed and disappeared below. The rain came down and the fires went out with the shudder of the ground closing back up. I wanted so badly to sleep, nestled in the hay, safe and dry and warm, and something kicked my boot.

“You saw all that didn’t cha,” the old lady stood above me, glaring down. Her ragged dress barely covered her in the chill Autumn air, yet she was wet with sweat. And blood. “I’m here to send them all back. But I work on them, ya know, before they go.” She spit from her toothless mouth and scratched the crack of her ass. “They keep gettin’ loose, but I keep catchin’ them. I operate on ‘em—makes it harder each time for them to get out.” I stood up.
“You get them from that hole. In the tree?” Straw fell from my leather and I looked back at my Kawasaki as the old lady took my wrist. I followed her without complaint. So tired. I needed to sleep.

“Nope,” she pulled me gently toward the old church, past the barn that stood in the corn field again. “Mostly, Kendall gets ‘em.”
Leaves left the trees like butterflies as I tried to walk fast on the old dirt road just to get home and I hoped my step-sister Wendy was already there. Tomorrow was Halloween.

Wendy was going to be sixteen in December, and she came like a Christmas present when my step-dad, Darnel, moved in. She was the first girl I ever saw naked. It was mostly by accident, but I knew right then I liked her. Wendy hitch-hiked to Lordsville last year but she came back to the trailer in September to stay in my room on the top bunk. She wanted it like that, the top one because her feet could hang over.

I could only carry two pumpkins at a time so I had to go back for the other two, and that took me awhile. The wind drove me that early morning, but I wasn’t that little by then, and besides, I had boots on. One of the pumpkin’s stem’s broke off on my way back, so I carried it
like a football all the way down to the blue house trailer
our step-dad found for us last winter. Just me and my
step-sister and step-dad—sometimes, once he quit drinking
and all that again. And my mom on the sofa under an
orange and brown afghan watching the TV. We had a
telephone pole too, leaning with a light on top, but we
still only got channel fifty-four on mom’s TV.

I was the carver that year so I sat outside lopping
off the pumpkin tops, waiting for the ghosts to come.
Wendy came outside instead, still wet from the shower and
smelling like a girl, like Herbal Essence shampoo. She
helped me scoop out the brains, seeds and all, onto cookie
sheets to cook. Mom promised to bake them every year, but
she never did. No body ever did.

Mom was always a witch for Halloween. Trouble was, we
never had any trick-or-treaters because we lived in the
sandpits on the old side of town. She’d dress up anyway
with her kitchen broom and snaggly teeth to await the
kids. She had a yellow plastic floor broom that she never
used on the kitchen floor, and that old, pointy hat she
always had that she kept to scare trick-or-treaters with.
Every year she prepared a plastic pumpkin filled with
loose, orange Pall Mall cigarettes. But as long as I could
remember, the little kids never came ‘cause we lived in
those sandpits at the end of the road outside of the town. The sandpits were just north of Sandyside, where they used to dig out sand back before then.

Wendy wanted to go throw corn that night, so after dark we tried to sneak out while Mom was watching Queen for a Day re-runs but when we went out the door she screeched “Goddamnit, why do they hafta show toilette paper commercials on TV? Jesus Christ.” Then she yelled,” Get me a pack of goddamned orange Pall-Malls.” She already had a pumpkin full of them. I’d still buy them for her though.

I’d been doing that for two or three years now. Getting Mom cigarettes and throwin’ corn at cars that drove along Route Eight-hundred. I was going to be thirteen a week from tomorrow anyway. Wendy and I scooted on our butts and slid down the dirt bank around the tree roots and ran through the long corn field up to the road. On our way we snatched ears of hog corn and shucked them when we got up the hill behind the guardrail. We even got in the newspaper once when a lady reported us to the town cops for lighting the cornstalks on fire in the town square. I had the clipping taped inside my school locker to prove it.
When me and Wendy were shuckin’ corn, I watched her legs, still tan from summer. She had on cutoff jean shorts so short the pockets hung out and she used her thigh to roll the corn cob to loosen the kernels. There were wormy green apples to throw at the cars, and we crouched down behind the guardrail. I was glad it was just me and her tonight, and not Marty her boyfriend. When the next car came by, we splattered it with corn and Wendy hit the door with an apple at the same time I broke a head light out. The car screeched and stopped and we slid down the hill to the tall grass at the bottom to hide. When we heard the car drive off we climbed back up to our place behind the guardrail. The next car was coming.

We threw everything at it and the car didn’t screech. It slowed to a halt. A really big man got out, and Wendy ran and slid back down, but I was little and hid behind a mulberry bush to watch. He walked over to the guardrail and just looked out to the cornfield. Then he got back in the car and left in his brand-new 1970 white Cadillac.

Wendy came back up, crawling through the October weeds. Her flannel shirt was knotted at her bellybutton even though it was starting to get cold. She hunkered
down beside me. I was so close to her I could smell the Love’s Baby Soft perfume she wore on her neck.

No cars came by for a while, and then finally one came from the other way. We were ready with our ammo, but the car squealed and stopped right where we were. It was that white Cadillac. The big guy got out and he had a shotgun in his hand. He cocked it and shot it up into the night. Man. All the bats in the trees took off.

We stumbled and rolled down through the grass and got up running into the corn. He fired again and we fell to the mud. The Cadillac peeled off and Wendy stood first. So she saw it.

It streaked out of the sky on fire and hit with a kerthunk in the stalks behind us. Wendy went to see and I followed. A broom stuck stick-first in the mud, its straw burning like a tikki torch, and a black pointy hat lay just beyond. I saw the eyes of a cat shine through the dark of the corn stalks. Wendy crept closer as we squished behind her in the mud. A cape smoldered in the autumn frost and Wendy rolled the smoking body over. The blouse was torn open and the cat in the corn came over to sniff.

“It’s a three-nipple witch!” I came a step closer and the witch’s eye snapped open like pull-down shade, watery
and almost all white in the firelight of the broom. We took off through the corn rows to get back home. I had the hat, and Wendy had the broom, still on fire but she snuffed it out in the mud. As the corn leaves ripped and cut us I looked back to see the witch stagger and fall.

I tried to push Wendy up the dirt bank, standing on a tree root, with my little hand on her butt. She swatted me in the head. “Little pervert.” She laughed as she said it.

Hey— I was only trying to help. She reached down and grabbed my arm to yank me up. I looked back to watch the witch come. She was still kinda smoking as she pushed through the muddy rows. We made it to the trailer and slammed the door behind us. I put on the security chain. We still had the hat and the broom.

Mom sat up on the sofa for the first time since breakfast. Her tan stretch-pants split at the seam by her hip. There was a funny smell.

“You damn kids.” She was spitting now. “Get my Pall-Malls?
Poundpoundpound on the trailer door. I looked at Wendy and she looked at me and she said, “We didn’t go to the gas station.”
Poundpound.
Wendy held the broom and I had the hat.

Pound.

Wendy said, “We got you a real witch’s hat and her broom. Happy Halloween!” The broom was still smoking. It started to shake and make noise like starting a motorcycle.

Mom said, “Where’d ya get them things anyway?” The broom shook harder.

Poundpoundpound.

Then she said, “Who the Hell is that?” I went and slid the dishtowel that covered the little window to the side to see out. Mom used it like a curtain and it hung over the plastic, taped over the window hole in the door. I couldn’t see nothin’.

“Who’s that?” Mom stood for once. “Them’s them triskertreaters! I better put my costume on!” I knew she wanted triskertreaters even though she never had none up till now. But she grabbed her fake witch hat anyway and yellow plastic kitchen broom to go answer the door. She dropped her cigarette on the way and stamped it out with her slipper on the shag carpet. “That better not be your father.”

It wasn’t. Mom went to the door with her orange plastic pumpkin filled with orange, menthol cigarettes.
She slid fat and sideways past me and Wendy, so happy to wear her costume and that they had finally come. “Ma wait,” Wendy grabbed Mom’s free hand.

Mom opened the door with her pumpkin. The broom in Wendy’s hand stopped shaking.

“Happy Hallow…”

It was the three-nipple witch from the cornfield. She was holding her cowl closed. I stood on my toes to see her. She was wet and muddy and all burnt from being on fire.

Mom coughed and spit and announced, “Oh my god, it’s your aunt Mayzle.”

The old witch came on in, tracking mud over the linoleum with her cool, pointy boots. Her white hair was wet and hung down long, dripping. She just looked at me and wheezed, “Where’s my hat?” It was behind my back.

She looked me and Wendy up and down. She said where’s my broom? And where’s that little cat? “

Mom said, “This is your aunt Mayzle. I don’t think I ever told you about her.” I don’t remember that she ever had.

“You look old as hell,” Mom said. Aunt Mayzle said, “Well, you’re fat as hell.” She eyed me and Wendy some more.
“I wasn’t going to stop ’cause I’m busy and everything,” Aunt Mayzle hissed. She smelled bad like burnt hair and dead rats. “But someone shot me down. Need to borrow a safety pin.” Mom handed her a dishrag to wipe off with. Aunt Mayzle pinned her cowl shut without taking her eyes off us.

“I need them things for Halloween ya know.”

Wendy handed her the broom and then the witch snatched the hat from my white-knuckled hand. I fell backwards and smacked my head on the handle of the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink. An accident, sure, but she didn’t even help me up. She cackled and plopped down on the sofa instead, next to the TV and put her hat back on. The old couch didn’t have legs anymore, but mom liked it that way because she could fall ass-first and lay down to watch channel fifty-four that showed blacknwhite Queen for a Day re-runs from midnight till five A.M. She sat next to aunt Mayzle. That’s when Darnel’s old green pickup truck rolled into the mud of the driveway.

We always knew if and when he came home because his pickup truck horn did the mariachi thing. That’s one of the things mom hated about my step-dad. Aunt Mayzle and mom were sitting on the sofa, holding hands now and catching up just like old friends, when the old man came
through the door. He was mad all the time now, ever since he lost his job at the VFW. He couldn’t drink for free no more neither. His face was split open like a pumpkin. Wendy and I were still in the kitchen. I stared at her naked bellybutton.

Darnel looked at the muddy linoleum and sniffed the air. He peered around the corner from the kitchen. “What the hell’s she doing here?” He glared at the witch. “Nobody ever tells Darnel anything,” Darnel said. That’s when I knew he was pissed. He talked about himself like he wasn’t there. His face was bleeding from something. A fight maybe. I don’t think mom and him ever liked each other except for the two times they went to Niagara Falls to get married.

Wendy and I went to our room and I sat on the bottom bunk-bed and looked at my hands, like a little kid would. Somebody scratched on the window screen. Wendy looked out to see Marty, all sweaty and scared. Marty and Wendy were going together that September and were still together even at school. I watched them kiss sometimes outside, back by the pine tree. By two weeks ago, they looked like pretty good kissers. He must have run all the way to the sandpits from his ma’s house. Wendy pushed the window up and Marty pulled the screen out.
“Come on Wendy, let’s go get some beer.” Wendy crawled out the window head first into the arms of Marty who only ate apples so he was real skinny. He smoked marijuana too, just like the hippies did. I watched her butt slide out and took a chance on helping her again. This time she didn’t seem to notice my hand as much. But I did. They smashed into the weeds, then got up and ran away in the night, holding hands. I heard Darnel yelling.

“Hell, the only time the old witch ever stops by is on her way to Salem.” I took a look out the bedroom door to watch him standing with his legs apart in the archway, drinking mom’s beer. He still wore them greasy pants and the bowling shirt with “VFW ninety-three” on the back.

Mom said, “The only time you ever stop by is for beer money. Or to steal mine. My sister got shot down again.”

Boy did that piss him off even more somehow. I shut the door and went back to look out the window. A cat, the same one I think, sat in the leaves, looking at the pumpkins and the candles that still burned inside them. That’s when the moon came out from the clouds.

I heard aunt Mayzle say, “Well, I must be on my way, things to do before tomorrow, you know.” I peeked through the crack in the door. Darnel still stood in the archway with a can of beer. Mom sat beside aunt Mayzle on the
sofa, still wearing her stupid Halloween witch’s hat, the yellow plastic broom balanced between her legs. Mom said, “We never see you anymore.” She lit her cigarette.

“There’s a reason for that.” Aunt Mayzle looked at Darnel swaying in the kitchen. “I gotta go.” Mom got up too.

“Where you going?” He swigged his beer and sloshed foam on his shirt. “Nobody tells Darnel nuthin’.”

“Walkin’ my sister out, for Chrissake.” He stood in their way in the archway.

“The hell you say,” the old man said and he stood his ground, legs apart, beer in hand.

Aunt Mayzle shoved her broom handle in to his belly and mom swatted him in the head with her’s. He fell back on the kitchen floor and smacked his head on the handle under the sink and they ran out the door. I came out of the bedroom and ran past him to get outside. Aunt Mayzle was firing up her broom. It rumbled like a Kawasaki.

“Get on,” she hollered at mom.

My mom hollered back, “I’m too fat.”

Aunt Mayzle said, “Just shut up and hold on. You’ve always been a witch—I just never told you.” The wind whipped up from the corn field and our three-nipple aunt grabbed my mom’s arm and took off left-handed, pulling mom
up so she could grab hold of the straw, and I watched their shadows fly way up there, Aunt Mayzle riding and mom hanging on, across the light of the Halloween moon. That cat came up and sat down beside me to watch them go. It was Aunt Mayzle’s cat I figured. We watched for a long, long time until the candles in the pumpkins went out.

Darnel woke up and came out the trailer door rubbing his head.

“Where’s that witch?” he looked up at the empty night sky. “Darnel’s head hurts.”

“She left with Aunt Mayzle.”

“Darnel knew she was a witch after the second honeymoon.” He rubbed his chin in a moment of clarity. “Darnel wouldn’t believe it though.”

Yeah she was a witch, I guess, after all. He threw the empty beer can down and we went back inside. I sat on the sofa to watch Laugh-In. Wendy and Marty were probably drunk by now and making out in the cemetery by the school. Everybody said it was haunted back then. I hoped Wendy wouldn’t get killed by some dead ghosts or something.

As soon as Darnel started wiping up the blood in the kitchen with Mom’s sweatpants there was a poundpoundpound at the door. I got off the couch to see what now. I
thought maybe it was cops. Or the big fat guy with the gun. I peeped out the torn-out plastic.

“That had better be your mother,” the old man looked up from his wiping.

It was Frankenstein, the Mummy, Dracula, and some little kid dressed like a cat instead. Frankenstein smoked a cigarette through the mouth hole in his mask.

“Trick-or-treat!”

“It’s trickortreeters,” I yelled.

“Christ. Give ‘em your mom’s pumpkin.” So I held out the plastic punkin full of cigarettes. Frankenstein reached in for a handful.

“You can have the whole thing,” I told them. Frankenstein snatched the faded pumpkin and stale year-old cigs and the bunch of them ran from us, and ran back up the sandpit road to town.

It was getting cold out and the moon moved down behind the hills. I sat outside the trailer for a while. Aunt Mayzle’s cat came back again and sat between my legs while I sat on the iron steps.

Darnel hollered, “Darnel says Get your ass back in here!” The cat jumped up and went in through the window. I went straight to my room thinking Darnel needs to tell Darnel to shut up. If mom ever came back they could go to
Niagara Falls again. Dumbass. I crawled into the top bunk to wait for Wendy to get home. That cat jumped up and pushed itself in beside me. She licked my cheek. I was going to be thirteen in a week and my eyeteeth were already getting bigger. I lay in Wendy’s bed with my arms across my bony chest, so excited I couldn’t wait for her to get home. I wanted to see her bare legs and belly, to smell the perfume on her throat. I wanted to surprise her.

Then the rusty screen finally scraped open. I almost peed.

Tomorrow is Halloween.
Shot-gun blast and then the second one and my sister grabbed my hand to lead me out through the rear of our house. We stopped by the peonies and looked back at it in the dark.

Wha’d ya make me do THAT for?

You’ll see, she huffed and led me on through a woods I couldn’t remember. I was running and sweating, and holding the gun. A burning lantern rested against a stump up ahead and she said to Put the gun in there.

Yup, you bet I did. I got sick for a minute then we put out the light and went on through the woods and I couldn’t see nothin’ since I’m night-blind, but we got to a place where we could sit and rest. I was kinda wired anyways, so I just wanted to talk. She was different than me though, and way bigger than I was back then, so I shut up quick.
I’m driving the car to Aunt Nancy’s, she explained, and you go up to town and wait for me at Jimmi’s Bar.

“Man-o-man! That’s two miles from here…”

She gave me five dollars.

So I walked the whole way up the road to Jimmi’s and went in and asked for a whiskey. Jimmi knew better and gave me a Coke instead. And a bowl of popcorn. That was good cause I was starvin. Aunt Nancy came in ten minutes later after that and grabbed me by the scruff of my green plaid jacket.

We gotta go. Now. Her dyed-blonde hair looked greasy in the bar-light and her breath was like something died. But I went right along.

We went up the road a while then my sister stopped the car. Aunt Nancy handed me the revolver. I looked down at my dirty, white lace-up shoes. I played trombone in marching band. Go on up there, she told me. So I did.

The muddy road was up-hill, in the rain, and by the time I got to the house trailer I was soaking wet and couldn’t see a godam thing. The dogs were under the fake front porch, trying to get out of the rain, so I went up and tried the front door but it was locked, and then I went around to the back and got in. I fired all six shots into the dark, and ran like hell back down the muddy road all
the way to the car, with the dogs barking and straining at their chains. I threw the gun through my sister’s open window and got in the back seat.

“Christ,” Aunt Nancy said. “Ya didn’t have to kill all of ‘em…”

I just sat in the back of the Fairlane and watched the trees whiz by. I could see the moonlight through the clouds and the rain on the windows. I was starvin’ and it was rainin and I knew by then I was gonna be late for school again.

My sister drove fast on Route 543 for at least 30, or 40, or fifty miles before they let me off at the truck stop. Aunt Nancy handed me twenty-five dollars.

We’ll be back after while, she told me.

I know.

I got out and went in. It was almost light out now and there were a lot of people in there. I was still starvin even more and sat at the counter and ordered pancakes, hash browns, oatmeal, three eggs, toast, biscuits ‘n’ gravy, a glass of milk, actually three glasses, and a piece of elderberry pie.

I spent all the rest of my change on Space Invaders, and when my sister and Aunt Nancy didn’t come back this time, the truck stop threw me out cause I was out of money
and just kinda hangin around the Space Invaders game. So I finally hustled over to Route 543 going east and stuck out my thumb. I knew, standin there in the rain as only one car went swooshing past, that I was gonna be late for school. Again.
So I stood watching the flame for awhile. The girl had gone upstairs sometime ago to watch them commit suicide. She took pictures now. A fat guy on Fourth Street paid good money for them, especially the good ones. I blew out the candle with a poof of breath, and walked outside before the shrieking and gagging and gunshots started. There were, I think, six Potentials tonight.

I lit a cigarette in the cool autumn air. It was nearly midnight, the week before Halloween, a time when business really picked up. Ever since congress passed the Right To Die Act two years ago making suicide legal, it had become all the rage. Kids wanting a taste of the final, ultimate thrill, and maybe a speck of notoriety, paid a fee (tax deductible) and waited weeks for their turn to legally off themselves. Of course the elderly, terminally sick, or terminally tired, welcomed the R.T.D. Act’s passing with a
collective sigh of relief. I was merely in it for the money.

I inherited the big old Victorian manse from my aunt Develle after she died a few years back. When suicide, or “selfdeath” as it was called, became a fad among the kids, (those under eighteen needed parental consent) I had a brainstorm. With a little cash and some gothic touches, I converted the upstairs of the place into a suicide facility, or “'Cide Parlor.” This time of year brought a two-week waiting period for a room. Yep, business was brisk.

Then, the sound of a gun—it sounded like a twenty-two—probably the cute redheaded girl in the leather jacket. She had been on the waiting list, I knew, for more than two weeks and she seemed impatient to get on with it. She’d gone upstairs with her Goth boyfriend over an hour ago. He was crying then, kind of pleading with her, but she was laughing as she munched a pistol-shaped sugar cookie.

The heavy front door burst open and the little redhead tumbled out into the smoky night. As she bled from her temple, she was sobbing, moaning, holding her head. Her boyfriend trailed out after her, laughing now. “You fucked up, honey,” he shouted, “I told you to read the godam’ directions!” I’d had the courtesy to have pamphlets made
up for the clients’ information. You know, how to load a
gun, how to tie a knot, proper etiquette, safety tips.
Apparently, she had failed to read it.

She nearly made it to one of the waiting taxicabs that
could take her to the hospital. She collapsed, however, a
few feet from the open car door. The boyfriend struggled
to lift her into the back seat. On busy nights like this,
a few cabs would hang around out front in case a Potential
would change their mind and need a ride home. They doubled
the fare, too, and no one ever complained. The cabbies
sometimes served as ambulances when an attempt was botched,
as in this case. More often than not, they served as
temporary hearses, shuttling the Successfuls to the county
morgue.

The boy climbed in next to her, his hands and
shirt and pants all bloody. He loosened his grip on the
poor kid to shut the car door, and she rolled off the seat
and onto the floor. As he struggled to tug her back up
onto the seat, the taxi roared off toward the hospital. I
watched as the taillights blinked out of sight. As I
turned to go back to the house, the night was split by the
sound of locking brakes. I looked as the taxi’s back-up
lights came back up the road. At the fork the cab stopped,
turned right, and drove off, slowly now, toward the morgue. The girl was a Success after all.

“Mr. Gladd!” Sister Eva was yelling for me. “I think that’s the last of them. You want me to start cleaning up now?” Sister Eva was an ex-nun, and a friend of my dead aunt. When she got fired from the nunnery, I gave her a job at my ‘Cide Parlor. She was a sweet, stooped little thing who baked sugar cookies in the shapes of guns and daggers. She always brought a big batch to the parlor where they were quite popular with many of the clients. They rarely asked for the recipe, however. “Yes, Sister, go ahead,” I hollered up the staircase. “I’d like to wrap things up at a decent hour.” Whatever a “decent hour” meant.

I busied myself checking the downstairs rooms for strays. In the bathtub of the bathroom off the kitchen I found one. She was pretty and young and on the nod. The spike lay in the folds of her short skirt, and her camera balanced on the rim of the commode. Spittle dribbled from her chin. My little photographer. I wiped her nursery mouth with a swatch of toilette paper, smearing black lipstick across her cheek. How sweet, I thought. I should keep her. For a while.
The camera was digital, so I took a peek at her evenings work. Wow. Quite grisly. I couldn’t even recognize two of the alleged Successfuls. Shotguns are thorough, but they sure ain’t pretty. Sister Eva had her work cut out for her tonight and I was going to have some time to kill. I looked down on the limp little beauty lying in the tub. Her eyes blinked open and she looked up at me.

“Hey, Mister Gladd,” she stretched and yawned, “Everybody dead?”

“As far as I’m concerned, Boo. Sister is cleaning up.” I never knew her real name, didn’t know if she had one. So I named her “Boo.” As she struggled to get out of the tub she swayed and slipped and I caught her.

“You’d better stay here tonight.” I scooped her up in my arms. “I’ve got some great porno videos in the basement,” I offered as I carried her toward the cellar stairs.

“Don’t forget my camera.”

The cellar was the one part of the house that was off limits to clients, visitors, and the press. Even Sister Eva was barred from entering. It was my private space, my little getaway where I came to relax. Last spring I’d had the whole thing done in a medieval torture chamber motif,
with lovely Dark and Dank nuances. I could really unwind
down here. Boo loved it.

“Wow!” she said in wonder, “It’s beautiful!” She
touched the gnarled oak platform of the authentic rack
lightly with her slender fingers. Each of her silver
death’s head rings sparkled in the candlelight. “Mr.
Gladd, where’d you get all this stuff?”

“Call me Sonny,” I smiled. “I guess I just acquired
it. Most of it came with the house and I found the rest.
I’m a collector of sorts. I collect all kinds of different
things.”

Boo boosted herself up to sit on the rack and swung
her dangling legs like a little kid on a swing. A high-
heeled pump dropped to the stone floor.

“Hey Mr. Gladd, I mean Sonny, get a picture of me!” I
picked up her shoe and handed it to her. She undid several
buttons of her white blouse and lay back on the rough wood.
Propped up on her elbow, one leg bent at the knee, the
other sloped over the side, Boo wet her lips. A wicked
giggle bubbled from her smile. “How’s this?”

“Nice,” I murmured getting her into focus, “You look
real nice.”

As I took pictures, Boo began to rip her black
stockings. She hiked her skirt and tore her blouse. As I
took pictures, Boo cupped her breasts and spread her legs. Then she asked for her bag. Boo wanted another hit.

While she did the mechanics of her shot, I popped in some porn. Grainy, black and white B&D. Homemade and illegal in the U.S. Boo’s eyes gave full attention to the bound, struggling women on the screen. I nudged her chin with two fingers and she closed her mouth and turned her flushed face to me, keeping her raven eyes on the action.

“I’d like a drink,” she said, slipping from the rack’s table. She walked up close to the television and stood in front of it, arms at her side, feet standing apart, watching. I handed her a double vodka. She took the glass and took a swig and looked up at me. “You should get some more pictures,” Boo muttered as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She set the empty glass on the T.V. “Do you have any rope around here, Mr. Gladd?”

“Yep.” I picked up the bottle to pour Boo another drink, but she took the vodka from my hand and tilted it to her lips. Her soft throat convulsed twice, and then again as she swallowed and backwash drizzled from her chin, dripping down on the swell of her chest. “I think there’s some cotton cord in the supply room.”

I took off my black jacket and turned on the light in the cramped closet by the furnace. I called it my Gadget
Room. Yeah, I got rope. And blindfolds, and handcuffs, and spreader bars, and ball gags, and butt plugs, and leather whips. And iron chains. I had to cover my mouth to squelch my glee as I selected a fun bunch of tools, taking care to see that each complimented not only the apparatus in the chamber, but Boo’s pretty body as well. Satisfied with my inspired selection, I locked the door and returned with my arms full.

My God. Boo leaned against the dark wood wearing just her torn stockings and stiletto pumps. Her auburn hair hung in her eyes and about her face. The bottle and what was left of the vodka dangled from her left hand. With her right, she combed her hair back, revealing baleful, blazing eyes, and wet, red lips.

“I only asked if you had any rope,” she pretended to pout. She turned toward me and candlelight flicked the down of her thighs and belly. Drops of drink shone on her pale breasts. “What’s all that, Mr. Gladd?” she asked, gulping the last of the liquor. She still called me “Mister” and I liked that.

“Well, Boo,” I said, arranging the various implements on the thick, studded table, “Think of them as teaching tools. Pretend I’m the teacher.” I took the bottle from her hand and with the touch of my fingertips she slid back
upon the table of the primitive machine. I adjusted the coarse blindfold over her closed eyes. She tried to speak before I sealed her lips with a thick strip of blood-red duct tape.

“Too late, my little Boo,” I whispered as I fastened the cord around her tender wrists. “You’re with me now…”

“What?”

Sister Eva was hollering something from the top of the stairs through the locked door. My jodhpurs were around my ankles. I wobbled over to the bottom landing and hollered up at the closed door. “Yeah?” I mean, “Yes? Sister?”

“I’m all done,” she announced with satisfaction. “I put the jewelry and watches and stuff in the cabinet.” Sometimes Successfuls preferred to do it alone and sometimes nobody showed up to watch. It just happened that way. I held on to their effects for a month, like I had to. Then I put them in a box and took the box to the bank.

“Thank you, Sister. Don’t forget to set out the trash. Thanks.” I turned and hopped back to my beautiful, bloody Boo. Sweat and spit and bright-red stripes slicked her stretched, moaning form. I was hard again. I pulled the blindfold off so I could watch her eyes. They languished half closed, then sparked wide open when I climbed up onto the gnarled wood and mounted her.
“Mister Gladd?”

My right eye twitched.

“Sonny?”

My right eye opened.

“I gotta pee.” I was passed out on top of Boo and most of my face was stuck to her neck.

“And I can’t feel my hands anymore.” I pushed myself up off of her. My stained shirt stuck to the dried bloody smears on her naked chest. She bled some as we peeled apart. I cut her loose.

“Thank you, Mr. Glad.” Boo sat up and rubbed her wrists. Electric snow hissed on the T.V. screen. I handed her a towel as she slid down off the rack. She went up the stairs with her tattered stockings bunched around her high-heels, the towel trailing. I watched her to the top with my pants around my ankles. I liked her.

Then Boo screamed. I jerked up my pants and bounded up the cellar stairs. Boo stood outside the bathroom clutching the towel. She pointed to the parlor.

She hissed, “It’s not dead yet.”

“It” wasn’t supposed to be dead. Not yet, anyway. “It”, in fact, was a “she.” A lovely young woman who used
to work for me. But she wasn’t lovely now. It seems I’d rather worn out another one.

“Jesus, Boo, looks like Sister Eva forgot to clean the Serenity Room again.” Boo frowned and looked at the drooling, twitching girl.

“She did it wrong,” Boo grimaced, “No one ever reads the pamphlet. You gonna let her try it over?”

“Of course, honey. Free of charge, too,” I said charitably. “She’ll have to pay for the drugs, of course, but, go get your shower. I’ll take care of this.”

When Boo closed the door I went and knelt by the girl. She was curled at the bottom of the main staircase.

“Roxxy?” Her face turned up to me. Not the face of the pretty photographer who came to work for me last spring. This face looked at me through wide, black-rimmed eyes. Her puffy lips cracked and bled as she gave me a smile. I noticed she had lost a tooth since I last fed her. “What are you doing out of your room, baby?”

Roxxy propped herself up on her elbow. “I wanted you to play with me again.”

“Honey, we just played two days ago.” The shreds of her lingerie vouched for that. Christ. I spent a fortune on that stuff. “We’ll play some more tomorrow. You want a
shot, honey?” I pulled her up and propped her against the banister.

“Please,” she breathed as she looked away toward the huge front door. “Yes.” I went to the kitchen to fix her shot. Then I called the fat guy on Fourth Street

“She’ll be outside,” I said, “About twenty minutes.” I never asked the fat guy what he did with all of them, the ones I couldn’t use anymore, the ones I’d finished with. But he took them all and paid me a hundred bucks a piece.

I filled a fresh syringe and grabbed two outdoor-sized trash bags. The shower was still running as I passed the bathroom on my way to Roxxy. She was dozing in a sliver of sunshine. “Here ya go, honey.”

I was closing the front door as Boo came out of the bath. She was clean and shiny and not bleeding anymore. She looked at the place where the girl had been. “Thank God,” she said, “She get it right this time?”

“Yep. Hey!” (Like I just had the most marvelous idea. Well, I did.) “Don’t move. I’ll be right back!”

I bolted upstairs to a locked, perfumed closet and returned in a moment with new, black stockings, fresh cotton panties, and a thick, steel collar. Boo’s eyes lit up.

“Pretty!”
“Try them on.” She dropped the towel and dipped her painted toes into the silk. I poured oil on her breasts and belly and butt, as she smoothed up the stockings around her glistening thighs. “Do you like me, Boo?”

She looked at me through half-closed eyes and pursed her lips for a kiss.

“Good. Because I want you to work for me. Full time. All the time.”

“Wow. I don’t know.” Then she laughed. “What’s it pay?”

The fat guy’s truck rattled to a stop in front of my big, old house, the one Aunt Develle had willed to me.

“It’s negotiable,” I smiled and rubbed my chin. “How much would you need?”

I heard the fat guy as he tromped up on the porch to hoist the bulging trash bag. His fat feet stomped off as he trudged back to his truck.

“Enough to get by, I would hope.” She looked at me, smiling as she slipped the steel ring around her tender throat. It clasped shut with a neat click. “And, I would hope, room and board would be included.” She felt the collar for a button to unhook it. I dangled the key to its lock in front of her face. I caught a whiff—a trace of fear.
“Room and board, eh?” The fat guy’s truck spit and farted to life, thank God. As they drove off, I began to plot Boo’s next lesson. “Yes, my prize, you may stay here with me.” I took her hand to guide her to the cellar steps.

“In fact,” I chuckled and touched my thumb to her lips, “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”
CHAPTER VII

WEDDING DAY

Snow on the leaves was bad luck they used to say if snow came early and it did this year, it seemed like, but really it was just at the right time. Pumpkins that survived the smashers still sit on beaten stoops, frosted with snow and faceless in the cold, wondering what’s next. When the cars go past they swoosh the snow and leaves to the side and catch the side-walkers in their wake. Winter’s a-comin’ and bad luck with it. That’s what they say, anyway.

I was gonna get married, but not today—that would be real bad luck, but we could say a prayer for those who do have to get married today. Wow, it’s really coming down. The pizza guy goes past. He can see me on the second floor and waves at me through the blizzard. Then it’s Pete on the phone. He has an anecdote for everything regardless.

I tell him I’m not going to the wedding because it’s snowing. Pete lives in Tucson Arizona. He says he
remembers when I met her. Tells me I don’t need that and remembers the time he didn’t go to his wedding either. Not because of snow, but because it was too hot. It was just too hot he explained and so he didn’t go. “Not because I didn’t want to,” he said. “But because I had to.”

I thought that I didn’t have to if I didn’t want to, and because of the early snow that is bad luck as they say I wasn’t going, even if it meant breaking up with her. I knew this would piss her off no doubt, me not showing up at the wedding. But it was really coming down.
"I coulda’ done THAT a lot better."

"It’s not like you exposed yourself to the whole class."

"I didn’t expose myself to anyone—my FLY was open for Christ’s sake..."

"Yeah, but you weren’t wearing underpants.’"

"That’s my choice."

"So waddaya gonna do?"

"Find something else, I guess."

"Shit."

He felt straight for nearly twelve minutes and put his stuff into an old suitcase. He was pretty good at “Connect Four,” but bad at chess.

“That’s too bad,” said Low, “too bad.”

Donny took all of his tools.
Not that it was ever bad living there back then. It wasn’t. There was food, blankets, light bulbs and a flush toilette. Lots to like, teaching people, and like he always said, “No one went hungry, but no one ever learned a Goddamned thing.”

The bus took off in a diesel flash from the terminal that once was a gas station and ended up God-knows-where, and that’s where Donny got off. In the dust with his suitcase full of tools and his last two pair of underpants. Got off the bus and found a job right then.

The church needed some milling, and what they did was mill church meat in Godknowswhere. Donny worked for two-and-a-half days, grinding. He could do that sometimes at least. He wondered and asked what it was for. The preacher wondered as well.

“I’ve yet to sample it,” he offered, “But try it, if you dare.” Donny looked at his hands.

The preacher said, “You’re a teacher!”

“Was once.” Donny turned toward the path that led to the blacktop road, suitcase in his hand.

“You owe me some money, ya know.”

The preacher gave Donny twenty-five dollars cash for the two and a half days.
“Ten dollars a day,” the preacher said, “Not a penny more.”

In the steeple way up was a secret that only the preacher would tell. The one only Donny could keep.

The girl followed Donny down the dirt patch to the lone bus stop. She had a kitten in her arms. The cat was wide-eyed and bushy and she said, “Take her with you.”

“Right,” said Donny as the rest of his old sneakers washed away and left him barefoot. The bus pulled up. She flung the cat at him and he caught it left-handed by the scruff. No one was boarding the bus at this stop except Donny and he hurried to get on board with his suitcase and tools and a cat in his hand.

“What’s THAT,” the driver demanded.

“A cat,” Donny explained. The driver dumped his cigar and pushed up his cap.

“Not on this bus buster.” Donny looked at the blue-eyed little face and for a moment his heart almost ached. Then he tossed the cat back out the door.

“How’s that?”

Yep. That was okay by him. The bus driver asked Donny how far he was going and did he have a ticket.

“I got twenty-five bucks—how far can I get on that?”
“I can take you all the way to Freemon, but after that you’re on your own.” Donny sat in the last seat by the window and saw the kitten watching as the girl ran back in the rain and the bus pulled away.

He never liked cats anyway.

Twenty-two miles down the road the bus stopped to let on another single passenger. He flopped down fat next to Donny in the only available seat as his ball cap fell off and his paper bag of peanuts went everywhere. His ear phones were so loud that Donny couldn’t help but hear moaning and grunting and breathing and, well, the noise of sex.

“I’m a porn freak,” the guy explained over the clamor of his Ipod, “But I can’t watch it anymore because of my mom—I can only listen to it—I listen to it all the time.” He grunted and moaned as he fished around for stray peanuts. Donny finally fell asleep with his suitcase between his knees to the sound of sex and woke up as the bus stopped short in the early mist of old Freemon.

Vol sat on the stone steps next to the parking lot by her building wearing sunglasses at night in the rain. She was still pretty she thought, but not like new girls. They were so hot now. Vol had a bed and a window and a stoop
with a parking lot. And an old black cat that she called Dumpster. He ran amuck and she let him.

There was nothing extraordinary about Vol except for her buzz-top hair cut, big fake tits, and the fact that her cat got everyone else’s pregnant. She could get him fixed if she had some money. Oh, she’d get enough money to fix him, but he’d run off and she’d spend the money she had to fix him on cigarettes. She still looked pretty good though.

The bus came through on Tuesday nights but it was really four o’clock Wednesday morning and Vol could see it pull up if she got home in time. Tonight she got off early and sat on the stoop in the drizzle and wondered where her cat could be. Another old night, hair all wet and that old song about the rain ran round and round in her head. She could deal with that at least with a smoke. Vol hadn’t had a cigarette since the day before last and needed one now pretty bad.

Donny knew he knew a guy from Freemon—but he couldn’t remember his name or his phone number for that matter, so when the bus let him off he just headed toward the rusted, greasy downtown where the lights were, and walked in the wet with borrowed shoes.
“Too late,” said Donny, in his beaten coat. Streets of brick all wet and up hill to downtown. He walked with his suitcase to the only light ahead, a sign that glowed “OPEN.”

“We ain’t open yet,” the guy said and turned off the “Open” sign.

There’s a lot to be said for sunshine. In the morning after a good rain everything at your feet loves being trampled and kicked, and the school kids kicked Donny awake as he slept by the side of the building.

“Don’t push me,” he rolled over awake.

“Fuck you!” a running kid yelled back. Just a little tiny kid yelling “FUCKYOU!” and kicking. Donny needed to make a phone call. The OPEN sign was now open. The old man, Omar, nodded so Donny dialed from the phone inside and Low picked up.

“I need the rest of my money.”

“Well...not today buddy. Hey! You owe me.”

“It’s been almost three days!” Donny pushed back his hair. “I can’t even bum money anymore to buy cigarettes to trade for food stamps to get fucking money...”

“Don’t worry,” Low said, “It’s all comin’.”
Nice to hear in the morning sun. The old coat was drying out and stank from the four or five lives it had before. Donny asked Omar if he needed any help.


Donny stood out of the sun in the shade of the building and bounced the golf ball he found last night for most of that day. A kid rode by on an orange skateboard.

“Barn door’s open!” His face was tattooed and his little head was bleeding.

Donny bent his head to see. Yup. Sure enough. Then a sour taste in his mouth.

I’d do this anyway.

I’ll do it later.

His suitcase fell over in the old gum and glass of the sidewalk and popped open. Donny’s big wrench fell out, silver now in that day’s sun and he put it back in again and pushed it shut with his foot.

Omar opened the heavy door and asked Donny if he still wanted the job. Yep, he sure did. So Donny started work in the building with the OPEN sign glowing in the window. He’d only been inside that one time yesterday, and now he got to really see what the place looked like. It smelled like chicken, maybe. The carpet was sticky this time, in
this town, un-clean. Some sort of shop no doubt. And something Donny could no doubt do for ten bucks an hour.

“This is perfect,” Omar says.

Donny says, “I know.”

Vol stood on her stoop looking for Dumpster. A hunk of green cabbage and a cup of diet milk for lunch and she waits for the clock to strike and call her to work. Steeples downtown ring every afternoon to begin those evenings’ services and that was the call for Vol to go on downtown. Dumpster saw her and followed for a hundred feet until Vol turned the corner. She gathered him up.

“Now you find me.” She held him and walked all the way to Fourth street where she put him down and scooted him away. The pipe organ was her other passion.

Donny couldn’t bear the guilt of this new Goddamned job. Omar said he’d get used to it after awhile, but after twelve hours, Donny was ready to call it quits.

“Hell, I thought I’d like it.”

Omar frowned, “So did I.”

“Where’s my tools?”

“Still downstairs.” Omar went to the front and turned off the “Open” sign. Donny got his suitcase and his tools out of the basement.
Omar told Donny that he owed him for twelve hours of work. Donny said that this one time it’s on the house.

When Vol left work that night she got home in time to look for her cat and in time to see the bus -- the one that came in when she got off. No one got off the 315 West-bound tonight, as they rarely ever do, but tonight, someone got on.
“I don’t understand you,” he said and shot her in the head. He’d been creepin’ about for some time so it finally felt good. The snowfall on the streets was soft and quiet as he crept away to find his car down the block and vandalized. Parked there for maybe ten minutes. And now the mirror was torn off and the driver’s-side window smashed. I can’t do nothin’ he thought and sulked for a second.

A second later came a woman ‘round the corner, not bleeding but looking as if she should be and running from a nun with a knife. He jumped into the car in the nick of time. The nun slipped and slid down the sidewalk and stopped herself by plunging the knife into the ice like a mountain-climber.

The running woman was black and white in all the right places and got in the car and said “I gotta go”

“What’s that fragrance?”

“Meat. Salt. Whatever”
“Oh. Yeah.” He started the car. The nun got up and lashed at the window with her Bowie knife. She finally fell over and they zoomed off in the wreck, trailing sparks.

It was the best decision they could have made. He drove out past the houses and bones and streetlights into the dark and found a place to pull over.

“I can’t talk to you right now,” she said. “I just quit the nunnery. The nun-hood.” She tried a kiss.

“Okay.” He got out and opened the trunk. He took out a box kite and assembled it in the beams of car light. Snow was thick on the bare branches and he thought for a moment about heading south.

“What’s your name?” she hollered from the smashed-out window.

“Jake,” he answered. He fired off a round from the gun and tried to fly the box kite in the winter air. Jake ran up and down the road to get the kite aloft. A puff of wind chill finally took it and he stood on the road, away from the lights, and flew the box kite while he hummed an old tune.

“There’s something I’d better tell you,” she hollered through the smashed out window as Jake flew the kite in the dark.
“Nope. Don’t,” he said.

Headlights appeared and came down the road toward them. The car went past spraying slush and Jake let the kite go. It flew off to nest in a nearby tree as he got back in.

“I’m Gertrude,” she said, but you can call me Ruby.” The lights were coming back.

“That’s what you had to tell me?” The car pulled up behind them. A wolf climbed out with a tree monkey on his shoulder.

“Not so fast,” said the wolf. The tree monkey snarled. The wolf looked at Jake then at Ruby. “Hell, I’d eat her,” he said to Jake. “Oh, and ‘go fly a kite’ is merely an expression.” The tree monkey, a water-eater, whispered in the wolf’s ear. Murder. Killer.

The wolf looked at Ruby. “Don’t look at me,” she said, “I’m a nun.” She lit a smoke.

“Uh huh” said the wolf licking his chops. The tree monkey grinned like a tree monkey can and jumped through the smashed out window into the smoky car.

“Take me with you”, he rasped.

“Okay,” said Jake as he sped off to leave the wolf without his monkey.

The monkey climbed down and clung to Ruby’s chest.
WOWGODDAMNIT, Ruby said.

“My whole fucking life is a wreck,” the monkey said.

“We’re desperate. Get used to it.” Jake grabbed the monkey by the scruff of the neck and placed it neatly in the back seat. He squirted and squirmed a bit but then seemed to get used to it. Ruby took off her habit. Red hair fell loose and damp across her face and fired her green eyes. “You may be desperate,” she said, “I just needed a ride away from the nun-hood.”

“Too late,” said Jake. “The wolf’s behind us now. And gaining.”

“Yep,” squealed the monkey from the back seat. “He does that.”

Jake swerved down the dirt street spitting snow from worn-out tires. The wolf was indeed gaining. Up ahead was a fork in the road.

“Left,” screamed the monkey from the back seat.

“Right,” said Ruby from the passenger side. She grabbed the wheel and pulled it hard and the car went right in the flash of lights. Cops had lined the old road in wait. Jake slowed and stopped.

“Get out,” he told Ruby, “and take the monkey.”

“You were never right,” Ruby said.
“And I was never wrong,” said Jake. She slammed the car door shut and the monkey stood up on her left shoulder and waved his paw. “I never dream about my teeth anymore,” he whispered in Ruby’s ear.

Jake ran the cop blockade in his big black Oldsmobile. He knew the wolf was in hot pursuit, so he moved fast and forward.

“I should’a not shot my girl like that,” Jake said aloud while he drove and whipped up the winding gravel road, running from the wolf and the eight cop cars.

One by one the flashing lights were left behind in his rearview mirror as Jake sped on in the big car while Ruby and the little tree monkey watched all the cop-lights and tail-lights and sirens dissolve in the mist over the faraway hills into the winter night.

Only one car remained, idling a hundred feet back with the headlights still blazing in the falling snow. Ruby walked with the tree monkey on her shoulder to the empty car and got in. She put her habit back on and turned off the motor. They sat and watched through the windshield and waited.

Jake looked again in his mirror as the last of the lights dwindled and went out, blinking off like bug lights—all gone now in the dark night. Lonesome.
“I shouldn’t-a killed her that way,” Jake mumbled again as he checked his mirror.

First he saw the ears. Next he saw the eyes. Then he saw the fangs. Strands of drool ran thick, streaming from a grinning jaw.

“That’s what I thought as well,” said the wolf from the back seat. “You should’a done it like this.”
CHAPTER X

SOCKS

It was cold in the woods, but Roger peeled the socks from his hands anyway. They were too small, the socks, so he threw them away. There was a nice big tree and he sat for a minute back from the path to watch the frost from his breath and to look at his hands—nothing special, scarred as usual. Roger’s feet wore workman’s gloves that fit better than the socks did, but didn’t fit all ten toes quite right. Roger was on vacation.

He shouldn’t have used the socks, he knew that, not the way he did, but this time was his time and he knew that too although his third wife warned him, “Don’t try to escape.” Well, he wasn’t. Trying, that is. If he was trying, he wouldn’t have taken the socks. Just the gloves for his feet that didn’t really fit. Rabbits brought rubber bands and he secured the gloves on his feet enough to get up and walk on.
Now it was night and much colder and the dew on the damp grasses around him sparkled with starlight. Roger wished he’d never thrown the socks away. He’d played a joke and after, forgotten his coat but had his lighter and a whole box of cigarettes so he started smoking to keep warm. As he walked, he thought about what a sorry vacation he’d picked this time, mostly spent running or lost, and now both, in this place he knew nothing about.

After a rest he saw light through the trees. He stood up and approached the noise and shook his head. A whiff of beer, the smell of popcorn. Of all things: a bingo game all the way out here. Roger looked up at a cloudless midnight sky and shuffled with his work-gloved feet down to the bingo tent.

He started to skid and tried to stop but couldn’t, not with those gloves on and wound up bashing onto Delores and Dorcus, twin sisters who play here nearly every night.

“B-Bingo in the woods!” Roger stammered as he stood up and dusted himself off.

“What. Never heard of it before?” Delores sneered as she marked “N-5.”

“I’m on vacation,” Roger explained then offered, “I brought cigarettes.”
“Sit down,” Dorcus the other twin advised, “and shut up—here’s a marker.” Dorcus handed Roger a bright pink felt-tipped marker and a score card.

“N-5...” the bingo caller called out as Roger looked around for the first time at all the other players. Women. A hundred of them. Everyone was a woman and all of them were twins.

Roger said to Delores, “I’m probably the only one here with work gloves on my feet...”

“Shhhh,” said Dorcus. “N-5,” said the caller. Roger looked at his bingo card. All twenty-five squares had N-5 scrawled on them—“No no no,” Roger said,” No no, this ain’t It... I’m on vacation...” The bingo caller called out N-5 one last time and the night was perfectly black, the moon long gone as the rubber-band-rabbits came back pink with glowing red eyes bleeding and Delores and Dorcus and everyone finally called out “bingo.”
“Well wha’d ya go down there for anyway?” Boris asked his little sister.

“I was looking for something,” Na’sha said matter of fact. “But I couldn’t find them.”

“You just went down for a look like always.”

“No, I was looking for the Halloween decorations if you must know.”

“So where are they?”

“They’re gone, I guess”

“Mother’s gonna be very angry again,” Boris warned. He looked at his little sister’s clenched fist. “What’s in your hand, Na’sha?”

“None of your business,”

“Let me see.”

Na’sha unfurled her delicate hand. “See, he gave me another one.”

“How many is that now?”

“Just six. He only has ten. Had ten.”
“You shouldn’t bother him. You know mother doesn’t like it”
“I know. But I just can’t help it. He says he loves me.”

Boris and Na’sha went into the parlor and sat next to each other and held hands.
“He always remembers your birthday. He never remembers mine.”

“Maybe I’m special. Besides, it’s not like I get one every year.”

Boris agreed, “Nope, just the special birthdays.”

“Like when I was twelve and I got a pony from mother.”

“Yep, just like that. Special.” Boris looked at his little sister. She was still quite pretty. Cute even.

“Did you see his face this time? Did mother feed him today?”

“I took him some of my cake.”

“And he knew this was a special birthday?”

“I guess. But I don’t know what’s so special about it.”

“Mother says you’re seventy-five years old now.”

Na’sha nodded, “But I don’t believe her...”
“Well,” Boris observed, looking at his withered hands, “this finger he gave you still has his wedding band on it. Your golden anniversary birthday.”

“Oh.”

“Put it with the other ones, I suppose?”

“Yup. In my little red finger box.”

“That smells bad ya know.”

“I know. But I can’t throw them out. He loves me.”

A groan escaped the cellar. “He loves me a lot.” Na’sha felt sorry for Boris. Daddy never cut off anything for him. Maybe because he was the oldest. Or because he was the boy.

“Daddy would know too, wouldn’t he? He always keeps a calendar on the walls. With his knife.” Na’sha held her hand like she was carving a wall with a big knife.

“I didn’t think mother would let him.”

“You know how she always says no, then changes her mind.”

“He’s had that knife since nineteen-fifty-four.”

“I know. We gave it to him for his birthday.”

“He won’t talk anymore, will he?”

“He tells me he loves me, but that’s about all. Why won’t you ever go down there? To at least let him see you?”
“Because you know damn well that mother won’t tolerate that.”

“Maybe he’d cut off something for you sometime,” Na’sha sneered. “Maybe that’s why you never get anything.”

“I just don’t like looking at him in that room mother made for him.”

“And he doesn’t like being looked at,” Na’sha wanted to be honest. “It’s like he’s ashamed of his little hole. Mother could open the door every now and again. Like for a special day. Like Halloween.”

That’s when they heard the ’54 Pontiac heave and roll into the over-grown driveway.

“Jesus,” Boris glanced at his wristwatch then the oaken front door, “Mother’s home.” He slowly stood and balanced on his wobbly seventy-eight-year-old feet. “We’d better get this place looking like Halloween. For Daddy’s sake.”
He cut them off every chance he got. Warts. On his face like someone threw a handful of sticky pencil erasers at him and they stuck. Warts on his face that disguised his nose and made his lips protrude and shut his chin off, warts that covered his head. Those Goddamned warts so when he got on that bus warts an’ all and sat down next to her he knew she couldn’t see them, the warts and no one else could either, except for the bandaids that covered the cuts where he cut the warts off. With a one edged razor blade that he always took with him.

Eddy got off four sticks down the line and backspaced, big long strides to the train station. The men’s room there had a mirror. He was tall enough so that the mirror chopped off the top of his head. When the train came he stopped looking and jabbing and put on band aids and got on board for the city. The train door closed and caught his case and he thought about the things he lost. He’d lost a cat in a rubber match once and he was not about to let that
happen again. Aunt Gabriella made pies out of Cicadas that only she would eat. Shit like that.

The city was new to him, this big city, and he headed to the restroom at the main train station to find his razor blade and chip at his face but his mouth looked wrong. There was light when he walked out.

Eddy had a box of blue tip matches from Ohio and old shoes from Polsky’s, the old department store, that he wore for special occasions. Big city, Eddy thought, better wear my shoes. He dumped the matches on the train tracks and kept the box because that’s what she told him.

“I gotta get rid of these warts,” Eddy said

“I know,” she said. “Come see me.”

It was that easy, Eddy thought and walked through the beads of a door to a room where she sat and gave Eddy his relief.

“Get a room. Sleep,” she offered when she finished.

Eddy touched his face. She flicked her bony finger at a bit of blemish from his bleeding cheek.

“Perfect!” she exclaimed. Eddy found a room down the road. It cost too much, sixty-eight dollars, so Eddy sat on the bench outside of the Burger Wank and waited for the spell to finish.
“Won’t be all done till tomorra’ She said. So Eddy sat on his hands and waited. The razor was in his pocket and he took it and threw it away. But the thing is, she said, you gotta put it all some where, so bring a little empty box”

Okay, Eddy said, I’ll dump out the matches. And there was something to be said for Eddy’s resolve. The matches wound up wet and gone and Eddy put the empty box in his pocket. Just like she said to.

“And when that number five shows up you get on it and leave that match box on a seat,” she winced,” and get off at the next stop—and get the train back home”.

Eddy walked the miles back instead, thinking of a place to stay and thought about his stupid little office, the one where he could sleep all day with his feet up, horns in his hands, cough syrup and not talk to her. The moon was like milk when he did not. The number five went past, spraying mist and mud. He could go there at least to itch his face and sit in the dark. Ahh, he had an old razor there too.

There’s light at the end of the tunnel, man, this much Eddy knew, toweling off his new face. The mirror in his office was new—
And rusty saw blades under the floor boards, which he found in time to saw himself in two! Eddy was so pencil-skinny anyway and he figured it out, the way to saw himself apart every chance he got. Then he thought again about her and sneezed and remembered his bicycle.

“Quicker,” he said and pedaled off in half with a wet, red, empty match box.
CHAPTER XIII

CUTPURSE

The cutpurse ran through the streets with a purse in his hand, dodging and bending into the side alleyway as the cops ran past in the drizzle. When they came back he was up over the fence and gone like that.

The full moon came as the rain moved out and he waited by the dumpster and counted as high as he could before he got up to go home. It was bad this time, but it was his birthday. And mother had a cake. He ran as hard as he could in the full-moon night and waited under the window.

The purse had a quarter in it and a cat’s pooper-scooper, and a rock—a piece of cement that maybe he’d keep this time. He put the quarter behind his ear and let the purse outside while he went in to find his cake, candles burning, setting on the big table, all 29 candles lit at once and Grandma Eva started singing “Happy birthday.” Uncle Bill waved a little American flag.
A glass of Clammotto had his name on it. He gave the scooper to Grandma Eva to serve the cake with and kept the concrete rock in his back pocket as a reminder.
I know what I was supposed to look like. I know what he wanted me to look like—big tits and long legs in lean black jeans with stiletto boots and a black leather jacket snug across my boobs with Ray bans and wild long black hair.

But I don’t look like that. Yet, anyway. Right now I’m sixteen years old and I love power-pop punk and Chuck Taylors and baggy sport coats. I’m five foot three with a blonde pony tail and “Abercrombie” on my sweat-pant ass. I smell like lilac soap and I might start smoking cigarettes. I think he hates me, but he’s gonna hafta listen to this.

I wait tables sometimes at Johnny’s ‘Getti Shack and one night I stayed to help the dish washer finish up. I kinda liked him, ya know. So I was helping out and it was real late when we left. As I walked to the back door, I felt a rumble like a big truck goin by, a woosh like a jet, that lasted a few seconds, maybe, like five or ten, but by
the time I put my jean jacket on and went outside it was gone. So was my dishwasher-boy.

It smelled like motor oil or gas burning with rotten eggs. I mean, it sucked. And there was mist all over the parking lot, but it smelled like smoke. Foggy, rotten-egg-smoke. Then I saw this couple just sitting there, staring straight ahead.

“Jesus Christ,” the bug-eyed girl hissed, “Did you see that?” Jesus Christ no I did not. She stood up from her seat on a parking lot concrete stop and came up next to me. Her boyfriend got up and stood beside her. He was kinda fat and sweaty. He wondered if I’d seen it too and by then the smoke was gone but it still stunk bad. The girl took my arm and yanked me along with her and started talking.

“We were just sitting in the car talking,” she was saying, “When these two cars pull up. They pull up on either side of us and two people, or what we thought were human people, got out of the cars. Then they walked over to that drum—see that drum over there?” She pointed to the other end of the parking lot. I could make out a big old barrel leaning in the shadows. It kinda glowed and it was smoking, like it was real hot. The bug-eyed girl said her name was Lilly. She kept talking.
“Anyway, the man was really tall, I mean really tall like seven feet and the girl was, well, I guess just a girl. A woman. They didn’t really look at us—I don’t think they knew we were here. At first.” Lilly pointed to their car. “We were sitting in the car freaking out.” She was really starting to freak ME out. Lilly had me by the arm and then she put her arm around my waist and the boyfriend took my right arm by the wrist. We walked across the parking lot to the smoking barrel. Lilly looked up at the sky.

“This is where they stood,” Lilly explained. They held me tight. “This barrel, right here, this one started to glow, and it got hotter. The tall guy stood here with the woman.” She brought me closer to the barrel. It was an old fifty gallon drum and I could really smell it now. The man was holding on to me for dear life.

“We better go back to the car,” Lilly said. I had my little red Honda and I wanted to go back to it too.

“But we gotta tell you what happened.”

So I hiked up my pants and sat on the hood of my car to listen.

“We just sat in the car watching and the tall man took the woman and held her hands with the barrel between them, held hands around it, and as we sat there, no shitting,
there was a blast-off from the barrel—I can’t describe it any other way”

The fat, sweaty guy spoke up and let go of my hand. I wiped my hand on my shirt and started to get into my car. His sweaty drops fell on me, God. He said, “The light from the barrel that blasted up, into the sky, higher and higher until the clouds lit up”—“Yeah,” Lilly cut in, “Like a thunder storm...” The sweaty fat guy was wetter and wetter and said, “He blasted her off into space.”

That’s when they let go of me. That’s when they let go of me and said how the tall guy came up to their car and put his hands on the hood and he was so tall he could lean all the way up to the windshield.

Lilly said, “All he did was wag his finger at us. Like he was saying ‘Don’t ever, ever tell a soul.’ That’s all he did.”

There was my car and their car and one other car left in the parking lot. The extra one was the woman’s who went up to heaven, I think. The fat sweaty guy held on to my hand when the headlights, then the cars came and I tried to roll up the window.

Two of them again.
Well I carved that old pumpkin once when I was younger and put it on the porch to be wrecked by vandals and began to learn a lesson in that as I grew older and made more pumpkins they got bigger and more ornate—but not so much so that they were admired by anyone because you see after awhile all the pumpkins begin to look alike I’m not kidding but for just once I’d like to see the whole business just taper off a bit, and slow down to a pace that’s livable, loose as kittens but smooth like French pudding, thick like fudge or February poodle shit, pouting like my mom reading TIME magazine without the toilette being involved and languishing alone steam boned and melancholy free but programmed to take a flash photo every sixty seconds without the use of filtered cigarettes or other devices that could detract from the spectacle with or without the rest of them all back home near the river and all the while the leaves fall in autumn and still look green.
The candle in the pumpkin stood on the stoop corner of the upstairs banister but instead of letting it outside I marveled at the way it spooked up the stairwell and Jesus Christ, mom showed up blowing her nose and bitching about Time Magazine again so I had to have her notice the pumpkin my latest and if she didn’t just about have a hysterectomy over that so I stopped pointing at the pumpkin and showed her into my apartment to look at all my decorations that I collected over the many years without so much as a plan and mom told me to get rid of them and right then Julie showed up to say her piece to me and I wasn’t quite ready for that and shut the door on her because that was the best thing right then although I regretted it later when she showed up again with a big pumpkin-carving knife and carved a scary face on her left inner thigh without so much as a “Hello”.
Gerald was known around his neighborhood for always having a small, dead animal in one of his pockets. He liked to fondle them while he smoked cigarettes, although right now he didn’t have any cigarettes or pockets, so he simply held the hard little mouse in his left hand.

“So how much money you got?” Warren asked. Warren was Gerald’s latest new friend.

“Two dollars and seventeen cents.”

“And one dead mouse. When ya gonna get rid of that thing anyway?”

“When I’m good and ready.”

Between them they had four bucks and change. Gerald twisted the tail of the rodent until it finally broke off.

“That’s enough for a pack of smokes and a box of Ding-Dongs,” Gerald observed as he closely examined the tail pinched between his fingers. “Let’s go to the Gas-For-Less. I’m hungry!”
Gerald was fourteen and Warren was twelve and they had been friends for nearly a week. Gerald taught Warren how to smoke while enlightening him on the virtues of mouse, toad and cockroach carcasses. Warren admitted that they made a good team.

It was a cold February day and they welcomed the warmth of the gas station, heated by two small electric space heaters.

“What can I do for you boys?” Mr. Carlson had run the Gas-For-Less for as long as Gerald could remember, which he figured was a pretty long time. And for as long as Gerald could remember, Mr. Carlson had worn the same filthy white shirt with pen blots on the pocket and food stains down the front. Gerald spoke up while Warren grabbed the Ding-Dongs.

“The Ding-Dongs and a pack of Camels. For my dad.”

“I though your dad quit.” Mr. Carlson looked suspicious.

“He did, but he likes to keep a pack around in case he changes his mind.” Warren admired Gerald’s talent for thinking on his feet.

Mr. Carlson frowned at Gerald’s explanation, because he knew the old man wasn’t around in the first place. He sighed and put the Camels in the sack.
Outside, Warren asked impatiently, “Where we gonna go to eat? You get five and I get five.” Gerald knew exactly where to go. He pulled the remaining change from his pocket and saw that they had enough for bus fare to the junkyard.

“Ever been to the junkyard? We can talk to old Smitty and hunt around for stuff.” Warren agreed.

The bus was nearly empty and the boys sat opposite each other in the back. Gerald had lost his mouse somewhere. He pushed his glasses up on his nose as Warren eyed the sack in his lap. “We’ll be there in ten minutes. Just wait.”

The bus stopped a hundred yards from the entrance of the city dump and they pushed open the chain-link gate and made their way to the middle of the mounds of trash to Smitty’s old shack. A rusted ’63 Impala sat near the porch, and Gerald knew that he’d inherit it one day. It didn’t have wheels or a working engine, but it had a steering wheel and bucket seats and that’s what counted.

Smitty opened his front door when he saw the boys coming. Gerald went first clutching the cigarettes and Warren followed with the Ding-Dongs.

“Get in here out the cold!”
The boys plopped down on the greasy sofa and tore open the box to devour the chocolate treats. Smitty watched the fat one, Gerald’s latest friend, as he wolfed the Ding-Dongs. Warren licked the last of the black crumbs from his baby fat fingers. Smitty coughed and cleared his throat.

“Hey Gerald, who’s your little friend?”

“This is Warren. My new best friend. Can I check my traps now?”

Smitty set mouse traps around the place to keep the vermin population to a manageable population.

“Go on, and keep what you find.” He put the tea kettle on to boil.

Gerald went to the kitchen to check his trap line. This was fun because Gerald considered himself a trapper and this was his trap line. Low and behold, he’d got one. A little fat mouse the size of a thumb. Dead, unfortunately. Gerald liked to find them with a little bit of life left, so he could play with them. But a dead mouse was better than no mouse at all.

“Smitty! Got one!” Gerald held the dead mouse by the tail, triumphant. “Okay!” Smitty rejoiced. “You’re a Hellofa trapper boy!” He smiled his toothless smile.

Warren was admiring Smitty’s collection of animal skeletons. It was quite a collection and included cats,
dogs, squirrels, possums, and some larger bones as well. The kettle began to howl and Smitty made the boys two cups of his special tea.

"Ya like bones, do ya?" He handed Warren a steaming cup. Warren nodded.

"Well, I got lots more out in the shed." He referred to the windowless tar paper shack out in the back. "Even got a real human one if you want to see it." Warren looked at Gerald.

"Go on," Gerald frowned, "I seen it a million times." Actually, Gerald had never been inside that spooky old shed. Smitty never let him.

Warren gulped the last of his tea, and Smitty lead him to the shed and shut the door after them with a click. Gerald went outside, as he usually did, to sit in the junk Impala and pretend to drive it. After a wild ride through the Grand Canyon followed by a nearly impossible climb up the face of Mt. Everest, Gerald felt sleepy and crawled into the back seat and pulled some smelly, rotting blankets over him and was soon asleep.

Smitty’s special tea sometimes produced wild dreams and Gerald dreamed this time that he was driving the Impala for real, and as he rounded a corner going really fast, Warren stepped right out in front of him. Gerald tried to
stop, but he hit Warren at about ninety miles an hour and his fat body exploded before his eyes. Gerald woke and sat bolt upright to see Smitty looking in the window at him. It was dark out.

“What time is it?” Gerald rubbed his eyes.

“Past time for you to get home, boy,” Smitty had his hands in his pockets.

“Where’s Warren?”

“Long gone,” Smitty said as he looked toward the gate. “He looked for ya and figured you probly left. He went on to the bus stop.”

“Figures.” Gerald lit a cigarette and said so long. He made his way through the gate, which he closed behind him, to the stop hoping Warren would be there waiting. He wasn’t. Musta got the bus before.

He remembered the mouse in his pocket and was fondling the soft little body when the down town bus pulled up. Gerald was carful to keep it in his pocket so the driver couldn’t see. Smitty had given him some change for the fare and Gerald made his way toward the back where he could pet his mouse without the driver seeing. He plopped down across from a grubby fat kid. The kid had a greasy mop of hair and dirt around his mouth. There were oily stains down the front of his ragged Cleveland Browns jacket.
Gerald carefully took the mouse from his pocket and twisted its tail around his little finger. The greasy fat kid took notice.

“Hey! Where’d ya get him?” the kid whispered.

Without taking his eyes off of his prize Gerald replied, “I got him at the junk yard.”
In 1975, that summer, me and Jimi were best buds, and my younger, third cousin Johnny made us a trio. Jimi was a pretty big kid for only being thirteen years old. He was nearly six feet and weighed probably one hundred eighty pounds. But most of it was pure baby fat, pubescent baby skin—pink without a glimmer of peach fuzz. His orange hair was cut in a flat top, and his green, tiny, close-set eyes were in a perpetual squint in the bright summer sun. Jimi was imposing nevertheless due to his size and how naturally weird he looked and even the big kids left him alone.

On Saturday mornings we’d go over to Jimi’s trailer. His mom worked at the laundry mat, so we could watch wrasslin’ as we called it, live from Canton, Ohio, without interference. When “The Marauder” finally kicked the shit out of “The Dark Avenger” for the last fucking time, we’d all go outside and play “Wrasslin’” in the dirt in the front yard. I was always the “Jackal” and my cousin Johnny was always “The Hulk,” although the Hulk was really a super
hero. But Jimi was “Jimi the Wrassler.” Me and Johnny didn’t care who he was because we would tag-team Jimi and beat the shit out of him till his mom came home. She was a short, stocky, tired woman with graying, long, greasy hair and when the rusty station wagon squeaked up the dirt driveway, me and Johnny would stop pummeling Jimi and stand up innocently and say “HI Mrs. Johnso!” and book it home to eat supper. Mrs. Johnso would scream at Jimi, “Get your ass in the house and wash your filthy hands for Christ’s sake. I got pizza!”

One day when me and Johnny went over to Jimi’s to watch wrasslin’, we went in but Jimi wasn’t there. Then he burst from the bedroom in a costume and smacked me right in the face and I fell backward with my stinging nose and crashed into the fake fireplace. Johnny, the chicken, ran back outside and hunkered down behind the rubber-tire flower beds that were choked with dead weeds to see what would happen.

“I oughtta kick your ass, Jackal”

Wow. Jimi wasn’t Jimi any more. I looked up at his costume starting at his shoes. Cherry Red high top Chuck Taylors, yellow knee socks with orange stripes, his old “The Thing” golden-plastic
Halloween costume from third grade with his mom’s red old-lady underpants over top and a red scarf. That was it.

I stood up touching my nose.

“Where’s your mask?” I asked Jimi. “And your costume says ‘The Thing,’ not “Jimi the Wrassler.” Johnny opened the screen door and stepped tentatively inside. He took off his ever-present orange stocking cap which he wore even in the heat of July.

“He needs a mask,” he said to me. “What’s with ‘The Thing?’”

“Told ya, asshole,” I said. To Jimi.

“I don’t need a mask anyway. I’m Jimi the Wrassler.”

Mask or no mask, now I had to get a costume and then Johnny would too. Shit. I was gonna be fifteen next year, almost allowed to be driving, but I still played with these children. That summer was the first time I got arrested. The summer of Jimi the Wrassler.

Jimi didn’t want to play wrassin’ that Saturday because he didn’t want to ruin his brand new attire, so me and Johnny went home to make our costumes. We wanted to beat his ass even more.
After supper, it was my dad’s night to go to the bowling alley, and mom always watched “The Walton’s.” I quietly took the golden, fuzzy nylon bath rug from the bathroom and poked two holes in it. With a shoe string it became my cape. I took a white tee-shirt and drew a picture of what I thought a jackal looked like in black marker on the front. It came out looking more like a dog, but since I ’d never really seen a jackal, I figured Johnny and Jimi would get the idea. I wore my football pants and football spikes, and as a final touch, tied a red bandanna around my forehead. I wore thick, black-rimmed glasses and couldn’t really wear a mask. Not even on Halloween.

I called Johnny from the rotary phone in the hallway.

“You got your costume, man?”

“Yeah. Mom’s watchin’ “The Walton’s. I’ll meet you at the park.”

There was a little town park about half way between our houses and in three minutes we were admiring each others handiwork. Johnny wore his older sister Linda’s brown knee-high, naugahide boots with three inch heels and dirty white elastic knee pads pulled over his knees. He had on his red and gray gym trunks from school, that had a built-in jockstrap and one elbow pad on his left elbow,
with his favorite green “The Hulk” tee-shirt and topped off with the orange stocking cap.

“Pretty cool, man,” I beamed, although I never understood kids’ Halloween costumes that were simply a plastic suit with a picture of the character they were supposed to be emblazoned on the front. With a plastic mask of the creature that had holes to breathe and see through. Barely. Perfect for child molestationers of the day. It was more like an advertisement for the character.

“That cape is cool, man” Johnny said.

“Yeah, but I have to put it back in the bath room or mom’ll be pissed.”

We hung out on the merry-go-round and smoked cigarettes until Johnny’s mom started yelling for him.

“See ya tomorrow, man,” said Johnny.

“Cool man, “ I said.

The next Saturday when we met at Jimi’s, we all admired our costumes. Jimi seemed especially proud because he had taken our wrasslin’ to the next level. It changed us too, in a way, because none of us wanted to ruin our costumes. I couldn’t get my bathroom mat dirty, and Johnny couldn’t break his sister’s boots, so we didn’t wrestle as violently and took to faking our fights more, more, actually, like our heroes on TV. And Jimi sure didn’t want
to get his torn, or even dirty, because he wore it all the
time now, except to church and trumpet lessons, or when his
mom had to wash the stink out of it. I think it began to
make Jimi more confident.

One day we were at the Iseley’s, the grocery store
downtown. Jimi had on his costume, but me and Johnny were
dressed regular. It was hot and the air conditioning felt
good blowing from above the electric door. As we stood in
line at the cashier, I had a pack of cigarettes in my hand,
hoping Debbie the cashier wouldn’t care that I was under
age, and Johnny had three ten cent Snickers bars. Jimi was
in front of me and didn’t have anything. He was standing
tip-toed in order to look taller, so I wondered if he was
going to try and buy a rubber again. When it was his turn
he turned around to look at me and Johnny with this crazy
grinning smile and with a banshee yell, he tried to jump up
on the conveyor belt, but had to get up on his knees first
and stood up and hollered, “I AM JIMMY THE WRASSLER!”
Johnny ran behind the Dolly Madison cupcake rack and I
stepped back to look up at Jimi. Most of the other eight
or so customers were looking at Jimi as well.

“Who?” asked old Mrs. Dickens. “Jimi the wrassler,”
Jimi said again, although with far less bravado.
“That’s what I thought he said,” whispered Mrs. Spankle.

Jimi looked disappointed that no one recognized his costume, but stood bravely nevertheless, arms folded, squinting down at his victims as his red scarf fluttered in the wind of the air conditioning. For about ten seconds. Then quick-thinking Debbie the cashier turned on the conveyor belt and Jimi began to stumble. He managed to stay on his feet long enough to grab the Muscular Dystrophy donation jar, and as he fell off the end, it flew from his hands and smashed on the linoleum floor by the store’s front door. Jimi got up and yelled “I SHALL RETURN!” and dashed for the door before it automatically could open and got knocked down again. He got back up and waited until it did, and was off down the street. No one really noticed however because most of the customers, including old Mrs. Dickens and Mrs. Spankle were on their hands and knees picking up pennies and nickles and dimes and even the occasional quarter. I was right behind Jimi with my unpaid-for prize Winstons, leaving Johnny to fend for himself.

I caught up with Jimi eight blocks later in front of the school. He was huffing and heaving with his hands on his
thighs. He’d lost his scarf some where, and his yellow
socks had fallen to his ankles.

“Whadya’ go and do that for dumbass,” I panted.

“’Cause I felt like it, asshole.” Jimi threw up and
threw up again.

I took out two cigarettes and gave one to Jimi. “Ya know
Abby’s gonna arrest you, man,” I coughed. Abby was the town
cop, an old guy retired from the tile factory who had some
kind of authority and had a red light on the roof of his
pick up truck.

“Yeah, well he’s gonna arrest you too, man, for stealin’
them smokes.

We sat on the school steps to wait for Abby to find
us. It was no use to run unless we were running off
forever. Besides, I was trying out for football that fall.
Sure enough, here came ol’ Abby in his pickup with the red
light turning and blowing his coach’s whistle. The dirty
brown truck didn’t have a siren, much to Abby’s chagrin.
He wasn’t really a real cop so he couldn’t have a siren.
Just a red light and a whistle. We put out our cigarettes
behind our backs.

“YOU boys get your ass over here,” he commanded. He
was in the Korean War in the Fifties and wore his army hat
with the black plastic brim. “What the hell were you
“Well, get in. I’m takin’ ya down to the courthouse and callin’ your folks.” I thought again about running anyway, but my dad would just beat my ass worse. Abby made us sit in the court house till our folks got off work, and Jimi’s mom came first scowling and saying how embarrassed she was to have raised a robber. Jimi cried and said how sorry he was and Mrs. Johnso grabbed his fat pink arm and pulled him to the station wagon. She made him take off his wrasslin’ costume and ride home in his underwear. He never wore it again. At least in public.

When my dad showed up, visually pissed, Abby told him that I had cigarettes in my possession, which got me more ass-whacking and I was grounded till school started in three weeks. I couldn’t even go to football practice. Plus, me and Jimi weren’t allowed to see each other or talk on the phone. It was going to be a pretty lonely existence for those three weeks.
But one day soon after the robbery, Johnny my cousin showed up at my door while Dad was at work and Mom was shopping at a different store because she was still embarrassed to show her face at Iseley’s. Johnny had like, ten packs of Winston’s in his windbreaker pockets. And he was wearing his “the Hulk” tee-shirt.

“Wow, man. Cool!” I exclaimed, truly amazed. “How’d ya get all these?”

Johnny had a wicked smile on his lips.

“Oh, I bought ‘em,” he said, in an offhand way. He glanced sideways both ways. “From Debbie down at the store.”

Johnny looked over his shoulder and added, “With the money I stole from Muscular Dystrophy.”

I’d never seen Johnny, The Hulk, my chicken-shit cousin, look as proud. We went out back and chain-smoked almost a pack before my mom got home.

“We gotta give some of these to Jimmi, ya know.” Johnny said, “Yeah, as long as he promises not to wear that fuckin’ costume again.”
CHAPTER XVIII

CHERRY JELL-O

Margie peeled off her jeans and folded them carefully before she lit them on fire with her father’s Zippo. Her mother knocked on the bedroom door.

“What in hell are you doin’ in there?” her mother shouted through the shut door.

“Nuthin,” Margie coughed. “I’m getting’ ready for school.” The flames spread from her jeans to the quilt on the bed. Margie smashed out the only window in the room and crawled through the shards of glass, cutting her thigh just above the knee. Her mother screamed.

“Margie!” she seethed. “Goddamnit! I’m gonna’ beat your ass with your father’s belt when you open this door!”

Too late Margie’s mother realized too late. The bedroom door exploded and caught Margie’s mother on fire. Margie was two blocks away, walking to school in her panties. Two boys whistled at her as they drove by in a
faded red pickup truck. Margie pulled her t-shirt down to cover her dimpled butt. She was late for Algebra. She heard her house explode and could not even look back at it. Margie didn’t have time for that shit anyway. The school lunch menu included tomato soup that day, she just remembered. And cherry Jell-O. She tugged at her shirt again to cover her dainty underpants. Margie hated Algebra.

Mr. Thompso could not help but notice Margie’s agitated state when she arrived at Algebra class nearly fifteen minutes late. She took her seat as Mr. Thompso cleared his throat.

“You ain’t got no pants on, Margie,” Mr. Thompso observed.

“I know,” Margie explained, “They caught on fire.”

“Oh. Well then.” Mr. Thompso went back to teaching Algebra, and Margie crossed her legs and looked at the blisters on her right middle finger. She didn’t have an Algebra book any more. Her mother sold it and bought canned cat food with the money. They didn’t own cats, so the food just sat on the shelf by the basement door. The house was probably burned to the ground by now. Margie thought about lunch and tomato soup with cherry Jell-O. Her stomach growled. Mr. Thompso cleared his throat again, trying to
explain something about Algebra. It was no use. The bell rang and Margie got up to go. Her t-shirt was too short and the other kids could see her panties. Margie was out of cigarettes already, and it was only 9:30 in the morning. Mr. Thompso was trying to assign homework for the weekend.

Bud was Margie’s one friend, and he could not wear socks anymore. His father paid for Bud’s haircuts, so he could only get them on holidays and Fridays. Today was a Friday, and Margie went with Bud to the Hair Salon.

“Where’s yer pants at?” Bud asked Margie.

“They caught fire, so I gave them to my mom,” Margie revealed.

“Oh.” Bud looked at Margie’s bare legs and dimpled butt. “I like yer shirt,” he said.

They walked to the Hair Salon holding hands. Margie needed to get home and get money for cigarettes. Bud made her promise to call him later. He hoped they could go swimming or something. But Margie couldn’t really promise Bud anything. She has a feeling she was going to be in big trouble. Bud kissed Margie’s hand and she walked off toward the smoke of home.

Margie’s mother sat in the fire truck and looked at the smoldering remains of what was once her dream house. She wore her tattered terrycloth bathrobe and navy blue
pumps. Boy was she pissed. She saw Margie coming down the street.

"Why ain’t you in school?” she shrieked.

"’Cause they threw me out ‘cause I ain’t got no pants on,” Margie lied. She glanced at the charred timbers then at her mother. “I need five dollars for cigarette.” A fireman was rolling up a hose. Margie’s mother got out of the fire truck.

“Your father’s gonna beat your ass with his belt when he come home and sees this,” Margie’s mother nodded toward the place where the dream house used to be. She reached into a pocket of her ragged robe and pulled out a can of cat food. She reached in the other one and produced a ten dollar bill.

“Buy yerself some pants while yer at it.”

Margie snatched the money from her mother’s hand and headed back toward school. It was almost lunch time and boy was she starvin’. Margie was allergic to Jell-O.

Bud caught up with Margie about a block from school sporting his new hair cut. She offered him a cigarette. Bud took it and lit it with his father’s black bic and asked Margie if he could have her Jell-O. He remembered she was allergic.
“You can have it if you come with me later to buy some pants.” Margie offered. Bud pulled on the cigarette.

“Someone said your house burned down,” Bud said, exhaling the smoke. “Jesus.”

“Yeah, I did it to piss off my father. Mom’s pretty sure he’ll be pissed.” Bud and Margie held hands in the lunch line. She gave Bud her cherry Jell-O.

“Cool,” Bud said.

“You’re welcome,” Margie replied.
One soft early summer night I rode my war-surplus sidecar motorcycle to Maddie’s place, down by the tracks. The bar was on the first floor of a last-century three-story brownstone with room enough between the front door and the road for five or six cars. There were two tonight and I parked the motorcycle under the painted, rusting sign lit up by one lone light bulb. Maddie’s is where I went when I had no place else to go.

A guy and a girl sat at the bar talking quietly and two older men sat at a table smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. I looked at my reflection in the glass behind the bottles. A mop of salt and pepper hair looked back through black sunglasses atop a worn leather jacket. Nineteen forty-six, I say to myself. Whew. And it was almost midnight. Maddie (Madeline to her face even if she knew you) brought me my whiskey.

“Look what the cat drug in,” she smiled as she pushed the glass to me.
“Hey Madeline.” I took a grateful swig.

“She ain’t been in”—Maddie divulged before I could ask. Maddie smoothed her bright-red hair as I rolled a smoke. “Yeah”—I said—“I know where she is”—I didn’t though. And I was satisfied with that because maybe I wanted this night for something else besides her. The girl at the bar got up to play the jukebox. Her boyfriend gave her money.

The band on the box was still jumping as midnight came and went. I finished another drink and with a glance at the mirror I got up to go. “I gotta owe ya for the drinks”—

“I know, Ray.”

The bar business had been good to Maddie— it had made her rich early on, and this place was more like a hobby now than a business, a place for Maddie to while her time. She was a real looker back a way before the war. Now she looked mostly tired, as if her face had grown into it. But the ghost of her young beauty was still visible at least to me.

Outside in the night, fat dark thunderheads rolled fast beneath a waxing moon and the streetlamp dimmed to show the rain start up so I pushed the bike seventy-five feet and under the awning of the filling station next door.
It was the only other building on this end of Furnace Run Road and had gone out of business after the new road went in. This used to be the main road into the northwest side of downtown but now traffic went elsewhere. Maddie’s persisted though, mostly due to the old customers. I rolled another smoke to wait for the rain to stop.

I could hear the 2:15 coming through from the northwest. As the locomotive approached, the ground rumbled, windows rattled, and the Madeline’s sign swung back and forth. The train passed within four feet of Maddie’s north wall and if you were inside when it did, the neon blinked, and glasses clanked as the floor boards jabbered underfoot like a V2 rocket was headed this way.

The train dopplered its way out of earshot as I walked back through the steady rain to the front door. I was going to need a place now and I had to ask Maddie before she closed up. Maddie was putting on pink lipstick. Her horn rims hung by a chain around her neck and rested on her magnificent bosom.

“There’s the cot in the back—have at it.” She handed me a half bottle of my whiskey and cleared her throat. “If you need it.” She shut off the neon and locked the door. “You can help me sweep up in the morning.”
“Okay,” I said.

I really didn’t need the whiskey to sleep as I was tired anyways, but I drank half a glass as I sat in the dark. Then I fell asleep finally and had dreams about my folks.

The rain stopped by morning and I swept out the joint and put the stools and chairs back down. Maddie gave me coffee and a powder sugar donut. Then she gave me two bucks when I was leaving. “Don’t mention it,” she said.

I saw that my motorcycle with the sidecar was gone as soon as I stepped outside. It wasn’t hard to steal because it only had an on-off switch with no key. And I had a pretty good idea who stole it, too.

I set off at a trot toward Butch Deetz’s house about three-quarters of a mile toward town. I owed him fifty bucks from Christmas and he’d been on me lately about paying him back. He answered the door in sunglasses, filthy ripped jeans and no shirt or shoes. I got a memory of him crying in Industrial Arts class in high school. Now he was big, mean and ugly.

“I sold it already—got twentyfive. You still owe me twentyfive.” Butch rubbed his nose with a dirty paw and held out the other one.
“She was worth a hundred easy, Butch.” I looked him square in his good eye. “Dumbass.” The eye lit up.

Without a word he reared back and popped me right in the nose. I fell over and my shades fell off. I grabbed them and got up and he slammed the door in my face. Then he stuck a shot gun out the side window and fired a shell in my general direction so I started running back to Furnace road holding my glasses in my hand as I ran and I did, all the way back to Maddie’s, winded and pukey. I didn’t even find out who he sold her to.

There was a cherry tree full of ripe sour cherries next to the gas station and I filled my pockets. I sat leaning back against the empty gas pump, spitting the pits at the dusty road and watched the occasional car splutter past. I had a vague notion that my sidecar scooter might roll by, and when it finally did, I almost didn’t notice. Then I was up and off running after it so fast that I tripped over the gas station cat sunning himself. He reowed and scooted out of my way as I resumed my pursuit. The girl on my motorcycle saw me running after her and hit the gas. But that only caused the old bike to flood and sputter and stall. The girl tried to start it. I caught up quick and grabbed her arm.
“What do you want?” she pleaded. She had on a leather football helmet and aviators goggles. There was mud on her face. And underneath all that, I could tell she was pretty.

“That’s my bike.” I held her tight by the arm. “How come you’re riding it?”

“I bought it off Butch Deetz this morning. For a hundred dollars.” I let go of her.


“Yes,” she said.

“Well that’s my scooter. Godam Butch stole it off me last night. How do you know Butch, anyhow?”

“My ex-husband—he’s dead now—used to run with Butch before the war an’ all.” This girl looked way too young to have a husband, dead OR alive. She took off the football helmet revealing mounds of auburn hair. She had pretty big boobs, too, now that I was really looking at her. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes already rolled. Store bought. I lit it for her. “I’m Jess,” she said as she stuck out her hand for me to shake.

I took it and squeezed kinda hard. A soft little girl hand. “I’m Ray nice to meetcha.” A big old school bus
roared by with a hundred screaming kids. The last school day before summer vacation. “And I’m telling you Butch stole it and sold it to you.”

She pulled her hand back. “Got any papers for it?”

I thought, no, not really. I’m pretty sure she was stolen when I got her. “Nope,” I said, “Not really. Not with me.”

She watched me with dark green eyes. A strand of hair hung between them across her pug nose and curled at the corner of her faded mouth. She brushed it from her face. Maybe she was somewhere in her twenties. Then it hit me—

“You’re Sloppy’s wife. Were.”

“Yep. That’s me, Missus Sloppy.” They got married while I was out in Nebraska working the farms while hiding from the fucking war. Sloppy got killed before I got back.

Jess wore cutoff shorts and I stared at her sunburned legs. The payphone on the side of the boarded-up station began to ring and I looked up from her legs at the ringing phone, surprised that it still worked. There was a time when my friends knew they could sometimes reach me at that number, so I had a natural urge to answer it and took a couple of steps in that direction. The girl started the bike when she was out of my reach and spun off in a whirl
of gravel and smoke and dust. I turned and watched her look back at me. She stuck out her tongue like a little kid and was gone over the rise in the road. I walked over to the phone booth and unhooked the chipped black receiver. The old brown and black cat watched me from a safe distance.


*****

Della Sands was late and that really just pissed her off. Her earrings didn’t match and now she couldn’t find the left side of a pair of black and pink stiletto pumps. She was also out of liquor and cigarettes. Della was quite fond of them both. The cab in the driveway tooted for the fifth time. “I’m commin for chrisesake!” Della shouted. “Gimme a minute.” Then the phone started ringing as she found the shoe and she let it ring. Della knew it was Ray calling. It still rang as she went out the door.

After fifty-one rings, I hung up. My dime plinked in the coin return and I dropped it in my pocket. The night was clear and warm as I sat against the gas pump sucking on a cherry pit watching the cars pass every now and then. The cat was nowhere to be seen. Della was avoiding me, I knew that.
All I needed was a place to sleep and some money so I could try to buy back my bike. Della was usually good for one or the other, and on a good day she could be good for both. But without her tonight, I had no choice but to steal my motorcycle back. I wasn’t really doing anything else anyway and I remembered more or less where Sloppy used to live, so I set out in that direction a little past midnight.

Della sat at the horseshoe bar down at the four lane bowling alley on the south side. She checked her face in the mirror of the little gold compact and, satisfied, snapped it shut with a swack. Della hadn’t touched the long neck bottle of cold beer that sat sweating on a lace coaster in front of her. She asked the guy behind the bar for the phone.

"Is it local?"

"Yeah," Della said.

"Don’t yak all night."

"I won’t," said Della. She unclipped an earring with a blue oval piece of glass that glittered and put the receiver to her ear and dialed the number. The gas station phone rang and rang.

*****
It was a lot longer to Sloppy’s than I remembered. Either that or I’d passed it. Or I was lost. Geesch. I stopped trotting and started walking, breathing deep in the damp night air. The midnight moon was almost full tonight but I stepped in a godam puddle anyway that swallowed my left boot whole.

I hadn’t been down this way since I been back and it looked different now. I tried to recognize street names and buildings but damned if anything looked familiar. I’d only been gone a little over five years but it all looked different. There was a phone booth with a light two blocks down. I grabbed the frayed phonebook and flipped it open to look for Sloppy’s address. Maybe he was still listed. He wasn’t. But there was a little dive across the street with a Duke beer sign ablaze its tiny window. I crossed the narrow street and put my hand on the latch. Baseball box scores blared from a radio. I shoved the battered door and it scraped open and I went in. The barkeep stopped talking to his one customer when he saw me. I leaned against the bar. “Beer,” I said.

The barkeep wiped off the spot in front of me and set down a foamy glass of draught.
“Say guys,” I said to them, “I’m looking for an old buddy of mine.” The one customer grunted. The barkeep said, “And whom might that be?” Very formal.

“Dan Joseph. Everybody called him Sloppy—Know him?”

“Yer too late. Old Sloppy got himself killed, oh, about a year ago. Last summer on Okinawa.” The barkeep tossed the towel over his shoulder. “Shot himself in the head.”

I didn’t know that. Wow wee. I took a big swig.

“Knew’im ?”

“Yeah,” I said, “We were buddies growing up.” I looked down at my beer and remembered the time we caught half a mile of railroad right-of-way on fire. Twelve or thirteen years old playing with matches. My old man beat me and he beat Sloppy too because Sloppy only had a mom to beat him. We went in different directions in high school and then he went to the war.

I shook my head. “I didn’t know he shot himself,” I said.

The barkeep poured himself a shot of top shelf bourbon. “Yeah, they gave him a dishonorable discharge for being yella. Even after he was dead.”

Jesus Christ, I thought. Jesus Christ.
The one customer piped up. “His house ain’t around here tho’. It’s clear up by the trestle. Ya know where that is don’t you?” Sloppy must’ve moved since I saw him last. His house would be the one with my sidecar parked somewhere near it I figured.

“I’ll find it,” I said and slapped two bits on the bar. “Keep the change.”

*****

Della told herself she was not going to get drunk tonight, but as soon as she hung up the phone, she snatched the neglected beer bottle and chugged it down in one fell swoop. To hell with Ray, she thought. He only came around when he needed something anyway, so to hell with him.

The bowling alley roof leaked different places at different times and right then it was drip-dripping on the bar stool next to Della. That just pissed her off so she took her foot and nudged away the stool, but the drips hitting the floor was worse. She moved herself and her empty to the other side of the horseshoe. She hated that side however because it was closest to the lanes and they were hopping tonight. Godam Ray.

Della had seen Ray exactly three and a half times since he’s been back. And really, the half-a-one didn’t count. Of course that was all Ray’s fault. He was spooked
about being a deserter and wasn’t sure if he was still in trouble because the war was over now. And we won, even. Then he gets a motorcycle. With a sidecar. A war-surplus sidecar motorcycle. Della was pretty sure Ray saw the irony in all that. That it might even piss some people off. But that was Ray—a true pisseroffer. She ordered up another drink and asked for the phone again.

I stood in the doorway of a desolate building waiting for the rain to stop. It came out of nowhere from the north west and I got stuck on one of the old brick streets that wound up from the valley into the small hills. That’s where the train tracks entered town over the trestle. I remembered there was a strip of four or five gray shacks shoved up against the railroad tracks on this side of it and one of them had to be Sloppy’s. But now I was stuck in this pissy doorway looking down at my muddy boots ankle deep in wet newspaper and broken glass. And there on the ground lay exactly 7/16s of a twenty dollar bill—not quite enough to redeem for the full value. I picked it up anyway and pushed it down into my front pocket.

Maddie’s phone cord reached all the way out the front door and she answered it and stepped outside the noisy joint.
“Hello—Maddie-line?”

“Who’s this—Della?” Della’s chewing gum snapped and cracked in Maddie’s ear. She asked if Ray’d been around.

“He was here for a drink and scooted off awhile ago.”

“Godam Ray,” Della said. Maddie told her he was kind of waiting for her last night.

“Yeah—he wanted to come over—sleep over—without a date or anything.” Della took a drink. “He’s different since he came back.”

Maddie said she’d tell him when she saw him that Della called. Della pushed the phone away as she hung up and picked up her beer.

As I hiked up the bricks through the last of the storm, collar up—head down, I thought about the girl, Sloppy’s widow Jess, Jessi, Jessica even. Maybe. About how a kid like that went through her old man shooting himself and in the war to boot. I thought about her pretty face and sunburned legs. I thought a lot about her big boobs.

The wire fence by the tracks was all mashed down from generations of tramping over it and I followed the path that walked along beside the railroad. A faint street light leaned up ahead and spread dim shadows around a row
of shacks. They were dark and sad and as I got closer gave off a sweet smell like rotting fruit. I stopped quick at something sudden in the path. An old grey skunk waddled along in front of me stopping to snuff and scratch before he found a hole to duck into. I gave it a wide berth.

My scooter was parked right under the lamp. Shackled, shit, to the pole by a chunky rusted chain that looped through both back wheels. Rain water puddled in the side car. Shit again. I waggled an iron spike loose from a rotted tie and with a dozen thwacks mashed open the lock. I threaded the chain through the spokes and lights came on as I was pushing the cycle away. Rifle shots sliced the night as I kick started her and tried to ride off. Then it felt like a baseball bat smacked the back of my left arm. Holy shit, somebody, shit, shot me. The scooter careened out of control and ran over that poor old skunk as he tried to run then the bike took me and the stink right over the rails and stalled smack in between them. Skunk spray hung in the air.

“You gimme back my motor cycle Ray Raynershine right now I ain’t kiddin’.” I held my arm as I looked back and saw a little silhouette with a gun under the light.

“You SHOT me,” I yelled just as the whistle of the 2:15 blew and the rumble of the night train shook the
rails. She was right on time tonight. I tried to start
the motorcycle then Jess ran fast and tried to help me yank
her away from the tracks. We stood holding hands and just
watched hopeless as the almighty locomotive exploded the
bike without slowing an inch. The flames on the metal
shards splattered in the weeds began to wick out as I
walked a little ways and picked up the side car wheel. It
was bent and broken and the only recognizable piece left.
I laid it between us at our feet.

"Gadammit Ray."

"Look who’s talking." I squeezed my bleeding arm.
"You shot me for Chrisesakes. I didn’t know you liked the
scooter that damn much. I was going to give you the
hundred as soon as I got it—Jeesus." Jess said she was
godam sorry and I said maybe I should look at my arm and
Jess walked me to the house on this end of the row. All
the lights in the rest of them were on now and people were
out. Jess had the gun in one hand and my arm in the other
like she was taking me prisoner.

"Hell’s gone on?" someone said. We didn’t say nothing
just walked in the house and shut the door. She helped me
take my jacket off.

"Wasn’t trying to hit you," she said tearing the
sleeve off my shirt. "That’s a relief," I said and tried
to chuckle. There was a lot of blood but it looked like the bullet went clear through and missed the bone and came out the front of my arm. Hurt like hell, buddy. Jess tore bandages from a men’s white shirt and tied them tightly around my wound.

“Splash on some of this—you stink.” She gave me a little bottle of Sloppy’s cologne.

“I killed that poor skunk,” I said. “Wouldn’t have if you hadn’t tried to kill me.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “You’re gonna hafta go to the hospital ya know.” She passed me a glass of whiskey she poured from a jug.

“In the morning maybe. I’ll see.” She poured herself one too and we just sat on the sofa mournful in our common loss.

“I only had that scooter for two weeks,” I said.

“Yeah well I only had her for a day. Godammit Ray.” A picture of Sloppy looked at us from the end table. It was the genuine Army one and he had his uniform on. I poured more whiskey from the jug.

Della was godam drunk by now and got a taxi to Maddie’s before she shut up for the night. Maddie poured
two bourbons and Della took a gulp. She took an open pack of chewing gum and put a piece in her mouth.

“I ain’t drunk over Ray,” she said between chews. “I think maybe I’m just sick an tired.” She tried to blow a bubble but ended up spitting the gum across the bar.

“Oops! Sorry!” Della got another piece. “I’m just lonely is all.”

Maddie poured one more nightcap that Della surely didn’t need.

*****

Jess sat next to me and rolled me a smoke, her little hands working the tobacco and paper, her pink tongue twisted just so, in effort. All the while she glanced every few seconds at Sloppy’s army picture. Finally I reached over and laid it face down on the table. Jess stopped licking the cigarette half way and looked at me then the face down picture then back at me again.

“I been wanting to do that for a long time,” she said at last. “A real long time.” She finished rolling the cigarette and lit it and gave it to me. Then she flung an arm around my neck and kissed me flat on my mouth. The warm taste of liquor and cloves and blood drew me in and I
held her with my good arm to pull us chest to chest and push the kiss back hard until she broke free to bite my throat under my Addams apple. I twisted her ponytail to draw back her head. My eyes locked with her’s. All she said was, I don’t believe this. And all I could say was, Yeah I know. When we finally slept, warm and safe right then, outside in the night between the rain and the moon my dreams swirled and flew like fireworks.

I woke up salty and sticky and real bloody mostly from my wound. Jess redressed it while she boiled water for instant coffee as morning birds cleared their throats in the fading moonlight and we sipped strong coffee and looked at my arm. It bled some while she wrapped it.

“I’m gonna go.” It was getting light.

“To the hospital,” she made me promise.

“Yeah. I guess.” I picked up the broken wheel on the porch and she leaned up to kiss me, a cousin’s kiss on the lips. I got up on the tracks to walk back downtown. Maybe Maddie could swap out that half a twenty I had in my pocket. I decided to head there anyways and snatch a few hours sleep in the back. I’d left the window unlocked from the night before. Anyway I wasn’t sure what time the hospital even opened.
The milkman meandered down Furnace Run road when I got off the tracks at Maddie’s. I went around back to let myself in but somebody must’ve gone and locked the window so I tried to jiggle it open.

“Who’s that?”

“Della? It’s me, Ray—let me in.”

She must’ve been too drunk to do so because the next thing I saw was Butch Deetz’s squinting, one-eyed face framed in the glass pane.

“Yeah? What do you want?”

Ten seconds ago I thought I knew. Now I wasn’t so sure how to answer Butch’s question.

“I’ll come back,” I said. “I gotta go to the hospital.”

“And when you do, bring that fifty you owe me.” I still had that half-a-twenty. I held my gun-shot arm.

“Uh, yeah. I’ll come back.” I walked back out front to Furnace Run to make my way downtown to the hospital. I picked a pocket full of cherries and thought about money. The gas station cat watched me as he sat by the phone booth. It started to ring, but I just walked out to the road and stuck out my thumb for a ride. I had a feeling I’d never see that cat again.
CHAPTER XX

ROADTRIP (BASED ON A MOSTLY TRUE STORY)

One summer, two years ago, I had to get away, to get out of Akron, and go somewhere else, so in August I took a trip to Flint, Michigan for the vacation I never got that summer. The plan was to drive my van to a Renaissance festival where a dear old friend, Paddywhack, was selling her handmade jewelry. “Hell, Flint Michigan’s only ‘bout three-four hours,” is what she told me. I got ready to go.

That Sunday I took my old van on a to a Sears’s automotive center because they were the only place open, to get her aligned, for the advertised price of $19.95, and ended up shelling out $360 for new brakes instead, on my credit card. Well, not exactly my credit card actually, but nevertheless, I would have a new front end. I sat outside the mechanics’ bay that sunny morning and looked at my soccermom van up on the hydraulic lift. Vehicles look a lot different when they’re jacked five feet up and I got a good look. One hundred fifty thousand miles had not been kind to her, but I okayed the work anyway. The van was a
non-threatening mud -brown with even less threatening dirt-
brown trim–hardly something a kickass punk rock drummer
would be seen in, but she had room to haul all the band
gear, so last year I succumbed to soccermom status, soccer
ball decal and all, life-sized on the rear window. I tried
to peel it off with a razorblade to no avail. As it was
actual size, it attracted nine-year olds like an ice cream
tuck when I was stopped near soccer fields and my attempt
to scrape the thing off tore the vinyl and fucked up the
effectiveness of the rear windshield wiper. The van did
have a cassette player however, and I could play my vintage
punk rock bands which I still dearly loved.

After I took the back seat out I had a place to sleep
once I got there, to Flint, and threw in the requisite
toothpaste-toothbrush, deodorant-cologne-condoms-cockring,
100 proof vodka, a hair brush?, my journal with a ball
point pen and pencils, some pot and a little pipe, socks
and underwear. Plus four or five kick-ass punk rock tee
shirts and three packs of orange Pall Mall Ultra-light
100s. I snorted some 5-hour energy drinks, donned my
ripped motorcycle leather, pulled on the oldest punk rock
boots I had and hit the road for Flint at five O’clock,
just in time for rush hour. I lowered my script Ray bans.
Toledo was further away than I thought, further away than most people think it is, so that, in itself made Flint further even and I got lost for the first time that night. I pulled into the back of an I-90 tollbooth and pissed underneath the spy camera. Then I meandered up to the toll booth guy and waited for him to have a minute. He was a bit surprised when I knocked on the booth’s window while he yakked on the phone and picked his scurvy nose. I forget how threatening I can look in my leather and sunglasses to those who don’t know me. Tollbooth man took two steps back.

“What the hell you doin’ back there anyway?” the toll man asked as he hung up the phone. He picked the receiver back up just in case.

“Lost. Need directions. Had to piss.”

He was nice enough, wondering maybe if I was up to no good. He rubbed his chicken neck and picked his nose some more. A bottle leaned out beneath his cash drawer and he kept looking at it while he kept looking at me, then finally recommended that I head back to the route 23 exit and get the hell out of the toll booth parking lot for Christ’s sake. I gave him two bucks for his advice and for the toll I didn’t pay.
Once I got headed north again, I got mixed up in Detroit and had to get directions. Try getting directions in Detroit. Try getting directions out of Detroit while you’re in Detroit. No one seemed to know what I was talking about. It was no use. So I just drove, and long after that, found myself headed north again. My old leather jacket hung from the back of the passenger seat with the pot in the pocket, the unopened vodka in the Styrofoam cooler. By midnight I was tired and pissed and thanks to the wonders of vitamin B-12 still able to drive 100 mph up and down route 23 looking for the exit. Overhead highway signs told me I was close, but by then gasoline became an issue. I filled up and used the very last of my credit card to do it, then drove 100 mph up and down ten miles worth of Rt. 23 some more, as I tried to find the exit they told me to find. Totally crazed, I turned that soccermom down the ramp of exit 00AA for the hell of it and parked in the nearest office building parking lot I saw. I got out of the van and sat on a picnic table in the chill night, the first night that summer to tell me fall was coming. I went to grab my leather when my phone buzzed. We had a signal. They were coming to get me.

As I waited then waited and sat and thought, I thought about that liter of vodka and half-bottle of blue Gatorade
and as it took Paddywhack two hours and forty-five minutes from the festival site to find me, I had a festival right there on that picnic table in the parking lot all by myself.

When they showed up, my ass was wet, my clothes were damp from dew and I was rather drunk. The headlights from their pickup swept the front fender of the van as I stood pissing. Paddy jumped out, can of beer in hand, and hugged me, yelling, “We found you!” while I got some pee on the front of her jeans. Although I hadn’t seen her for many years, she was the one and only Paddywhack. Still pretty and red-headed, compactly petit with an ever-expanding canvas of tattoos, she belied her nearly fifty years. I wondered what her twin sister, Maddie, would look like these days. Maddie died in a horrible cheerleading accident nearly three decades before. “Died from cheerleading,” Paddy always said with a peep of her smile and a flash of chagrin. Maddie wouldn’t look like Paddy now, no matter what, I knew, as I released my hold and we got in our rides. Her friend Jason swigged his beer and Paddy yelled from behind the wheel, “Follow us.” So, I tried to.

I drove behind them on our way to the campsite. We had to pass through the town of Fenmore, and that’s when
they swerved and that’s when I hit a concrete doughnut in the middle of the street. Goddamnit. The van’s airbags fired, saving my life no doubt, but ruining my right shoulder in the process of deployment. The thing explodes outward at something like 200 mph I discovered. The Dodge went left of center and landed upright on the railroad tracks. I got out to look, stunned and confused and bloody, then crawled back in it to start her up. I figured I’d better get the fuck outta there, where ever that was. When she didn’t work I knew something was wrong. I got out again and stood staring at the mangled frontend. The front wheel was crammed nearly into the passenger compartment and so was the bumper. Somehow the headlights still blazed in the smoke and steam and mist of the night.

I got in again to try and revive the three wheeled vehicle, to maybe limp her to the fairgrounds. Then, a stroke of bad luck. A Fenton police officer was just leaving his shift when he saw it all happen and was at the van’s window within a minute. I sat looking at him innocently. The officer asked me if I was okay. Yeah, more or less, I knew. I got back out, bleeding and stumbling about, to gather what was left of my composure and my leather and cigarettes to staggered to the sidewalk. The cop introduced himself as Ricky. Then three more cops
arrived and within seconds I was introduced to them. All four were called by some variation of Richard: Rick, Ricky, Dick, and Dickey.

“You Okay?” asked Ricky again.

“Yeah yeah yeah—don’t worry,” I said to the officers, “I have Triple A, and I’ll get this thing towed in no time!” I was simply going to call for a tow and didn’t really need the help of Fenton’s finest. They watched as I passed the field sobriety tests for DUI. But the cops weren’t buying it. They discovered the half-empty bottle in the van and the pot and pipe in my pocket.

“Little old for this shit, ain’t ‘cha bub?”

By then, Pattywhack and Jason had come back to the scene As they were legally drunk as well, I held out little hope for their help, and was handcuffed and taken the one block to the Flint police station for safe keeping. They drove me one hundred or so feet to the city jail, handcuffed in the back of a black two-hundred-thousand-dollar-Cadillac SUV, and I blew .2 on the blower thing, two and a half times past being drunk. I was at the “extreme level” of drunkenness. And I felt fucking great. Yakkin’ and chatting as they asked me about my marijuana use, which I said was marginal at best, and Ricky either didn’t
understand what that meant, or else he did. But Dick had further questions.

“Ever been arrested before?”

“Nope. Not that much,” I lied.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

I sat handcuffed behind my back as I watched sweat drops form on officer Dick’s shaved head. His mirrored aviator sunglasses slid down from on top and stopped at the bridge of his nose. He pushed them back up.

“I mean, yeah, but nothing bad. Not like this.”

“You had DUI’s?”

“Yeah. Some. I think.”

He went to the criminal computer to check my past. Only three DUI’s, all from Atlanta, showed up.

“Three DUI’s is a felony in the state of Michigan, irregardless of where the perp got convicted in the past.”

So, I now not only had totaled my van, which was ostensibly left of center and parked on a railway right-of-way, I was also found to have a controlled substance along with paraphernalia, had an open container of 100 proof vodka, two Penthouse magazines, a prior girlfriend’s left “fuckme” stripper shoe and a photograph of her in it, a pair of her forgotten panties without her in them, cough syrup with codeine, a bunch of pills which were legit meds,
half a hoagie all the way from Akron, some playing cards, and syringes which were for my diabetes. Plus a felony. Couldn’t exactly call mom to pay my bail tonight.

Still handcuffed, I was driven in the police Cadillac SUV the twenty-two miles to the county hospital. Still didn’t have charges or tickets, but I was in the custody of Ricky-Dick as I was now calling him. He smoked cigarettes too. That’s why he handcuffed me with my hands in front, so I could smoke cigarettes with him. I sat in the back of the black Cadillac and asked him if he thought I was drunk.

“Off the record,? No more than I am.”

“That’s what I’m saying, Ricky-Dick,” I said.

We had one more smoke outside of the Genesee County Hospital before I was admitted. Then I was handcuffed to a gurney and escorted on my back by Ricky-Dick and an orderly to the room where I would be for the next five hours. And Dick sat right next to me, and talked about his tragic life.

Seems as though his little blonde high school sweetheart died from excessive cheerleading which developed into cancer a year before, and once she was buried, he had to settle for this hot brunette, with whom he now slept.
“How do you get past something like that?” I asked Dick.

“I’m still getting past her.” Dick looked away. No doubt.

I got xrayed and aside from my obvious facial wounds and swollen arms, I was deemed fit for incarceration. After five hours I was taken back to the Flint City jail, but because of my infirmaries, I had to do my time at the county jail instead. Although it was way past his shift, Dick volunteered to drive me there. Handcuffs in front so that I could get in one last smoke with him.

“The thing I miss most about my first first wife,” Dick remembered, “Was the way she made me feel.” He exhaled and leaned against the front bumper of the police Cadillac.

“Whatta ya like about the new one?” I wondered.

“Her boobs.” Dick flicked the butt at the butt can by the door. “You gotta go man.”

In the county jail the intake officer removed the cuffs then I removed my boots and leather jacket. I went through the doors to lock down and waited, handcuffed to a steel bench, along with that night’s fellow miscreants. There were thirteen of us, half boys, and the other half,
drunk girls with bad tattoos. Bad girls with drunk tattoos. And not a one a prostitute. That’s what they all said.

By then it was around five AM and I was hungry, even for jail food. Ahh, but perhaps not this jail food. Two pieces of white bread with a scoop of onions between. And an orange. I noticed all the black dudes were keeping the orange and losing the sandwich. I offered mine to Laguna, the girl chained next to me, and after she socked me in my bad shoulder, I put it under the steel bench where I noticed everyone else put theirs. I also noticed that we inmates could pretty much unlock and lock back our cuffs, in case we had to use the toilette, get a drink from the scabby drinking fountain, or to try to sleep under the steel benches. I was ready for that.

When I gave up my boots, I received a pair of plastic slippers that smelled like feet. Many, many feet. But they were something to rest my head on, and I smeared the orange peels all over to mask the stench. I re-cuffed my leg and crawled underneath out of the way to try and sleep.

Sleeping on concrete is mostly impossible, no matter what condition you might be in. My condition was pretty bad and I couldn’t get a blanket even. So I curled and
scooted against the wall to wait for the charges to be brought against me.

When I stood before the police officer, he asked me if I understood the charges that were brought against me. I said yes I did, although I had no idea really. Just trying to be cooperative. Then I stepped back against the wall for my photo and went back to my handcuffs on the steel bench.

By eleven o’clock that night the cops gave me a bit of blanket, and I was so tired that I passed out. The jail doctor woke me at three AM to test me for my diabetes and other meds that were never administered to me. I was somehow okay. A half an hour later my name was called and I was given my belongings: my leather jacket, my pointy boots, which the female officer much admired and asked me where I got them—“New York City,” I replied, and my wallet. My driver’s license was in it, but my cash was not. Instead there was a check in the amount of $90, twelve dollars less than what I came in with. There was a processing fee the officer explained.

“So where am I going to cash a check in Flint at three in the morning?”

“there’s a Sunoco two blocks down. Maybe they’ll do it.”
So I walked out of jail in Flint, Michigan at 3:30 in the morning with the clothes on my back and a check for $90.

I plopped down on the concrete steps in front of the jail and gave myself an insulin shot, the first in nearly two days, and saw the Sunoco sign two blocks away. The cigarette tasted good as I headed to the gas station in the warm summer night. My leather was draped over my shoulder as I entered the place, and the Indian dude cashed my check for five dollars, as long as I bought some beef jerky and a pack of smokes. I asked him if he knew of a cheap motel as I now had about $70 to my name, and he told me that he wasn’t from around there. No kidding.

Back outside, a cop pulled up. Oh boy, he came to take me back to jail. After all, I didn’t have one ticket to prove I was arrested, and I figured that they’d forgotten to give me my citations. I walked up to his window and he rolled it down.

“Evening officer.”

“Evening.”

He was drinking a Bud Lite.

“Could you tell me where the nearest hotel is?”

“Nope. I ain’t from around here.” He swigged his Bud.
“I’m on patrol.”

As he drove off, I noticed a man crossing the road to the gas station. He was obviously coming from jail as well and I asked him where I could get a cheap place for the rest of the night.

“Two blocks down, make a right and go three blocks. It’s called the Town Manor.”

I took his advice and in twenty minutes I was dinging the bell at the front desk. An Indian guy was on duty and I got a room for $37 for six hours. The sign in the lobby advertised food, a burrito and a cheese burger were offered, so I asked for a cheese burger.

“We’re out of cheese burgers,” he said defensively.

So I got a microwaved burrito and found my room. To lie in a bed, no matter how lumpy and smelly was simply Heaven, and I fell asleep without the joy of eating my burrito. I awoke to Paddywhack’s phone call.

By the time I showered, she was waiting in the parking lot and we drove to the court house to get my paper work. The only thing they had for me was the towing slip to get my truck out of impound. It was two blocks away, and when we arrived, I realized that the truck was a total loss. The guy said it would cost me $80 to be able to get my
belongings out of it. I only had $67 by then and he took $65 of it, leaving me $2.

“Go get you and your girlfriend some coffee.”

Paddywhack took me out to the campsite to relax and figure out what I was gonna do. I still had some money in the bank and we figured that I could get a bus back to Akron for fairly cheap. In the mean time, I had a blast.

Paddywhack travels to renaissance festivals making and selling her beaded jewelry and as this was Wednesday, the artists, actors and musicians were off work. So I got to hang out and meet a bunch of them. At the bonfire that night, they all said the same thing: get the hell out of Michigan.

So, the next day I did. Paddywhack drove me to the bus station but we were too late, so I waited for the next one to Cleveland. It arrived at six o’clock, bound for Detroit, so I was privy to all the northern suburbs. Dear God, I thought Akron was depressed. Unfortunately, I was so awake that I couldn’t help but look out the window at the once prosperous towns that lined the road. My shoulder and face ached the entire seven hour trip and after seventeen stops, the bus rolled into Cleveland at midnight, where my guitar player and his girlfriend picked me up to take me home.
Now all I had to do was wait for the mail and the summons to Flint to face my charges, ones I could only imagine. I was so afraid of having to go to jail and losing my license and my teaching job. School started three days later on that Monday and I went, teaching three and taking two classes for my degree. And I waited.

Until Thanksgiving weekend. I got a notice to appear in court on December 6. By then all of my friends had assured me that the police had forgotten about it all, but obviously they hadn’t. So I tried to finish up the semester as best I could. And on December 5 my old buddy Terry Walker drove me to Fenton Michigan in a rented car to face my fate. We slept in a hotel on the outskirts and went the next morning to the courthouse downtown.

"The courthouse is out at the mall now," the pretty officer told me, "By the Hampton Inn." No shit.

In the meantime I’d secured a lawyer from around there and he met me. I plead not guilty which took all of two minutes. He set our next court date for a week later on December 13. Terry and I drove back to Akron. My lawyer called me the following Tuesday.

"They dropped the charges. Plead guilty to "Driving while visually Impaired."
I began to cry tears of relief, and the next Monday I drove back to accept my fate. On the way to my court appearance, I was pulled over by a local cop from Stinkville for making a U-turn.

“I aint from around here,” I told him.

“Nope, you ain’t, but you made an illegal u-turn. Don’t do it again.” And he let me go. Geesch.

I stayed at the same motel and walked, this time to the mall court house. Thirty minutes later I was a free man, aside from various fines and some probation. I still had my drivers license however and a relatively clean slate, considering. I was simply exhausted and drove back to Akron.

I was about two miles from my exit at White Pond drive when a box flew from a flatbed truck going north and hit my rental car in the front end. The damage was $500 and I’m still trying to pay that off. A comeuppance, perhaps?

Regardless, I’m spending this year’s vacation somewhere close, like L.A. As in Lower Akron