

# School



Gair Linhart

# SCHOOL

*The Early Education of Jack Elbon*

*A Novel by Gair Linhart*

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ALSO BY GAIR LINHART

## **DEDICATION**

For Bill and Agnes; Abby and Buzz

## 1 — WORRIES, WEREWOLVES AND BARNACLE BILL

*Older people ponder the ecstasies and anguishes that they have known. They scheme and dream of reliving the good parts. Occasionally, they may succeed for a little while—an exciting new lover! Or, perhaps, with a new car, boat, motorcycle, or horse. The wise soothe their longings with compassion and kindness towards all. But there is only one way that we can really return, and that is to remember. Though our memories aren't all happy, at least they are perfectly our own.*

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been a long, rugged night for me, and although my mom loved to drive, she never was very adept at shifting gears. My empty stomach—I'd been far too worried to eat breakfast—lurched right along with the maroon *Vauxhall* that Dad had bought for her to drive. Dad was always trying funny new cars that no one had ever heard of. He'd buy them, keep them for a year, and then trade them before Mom had burned out the clutch.

“Well, you're going to start doing all of your homework, or there will be no more allowance, or playing ball, or riding your bike after school. Your dad is not going to be happy. Why didn't Becky just send home a note with you?” my mother wondered, referring to my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Phelps.

My guts churned again because I knew why she had really been summoned to school with me, half an hour early. I tried thinking of an evasive answer but realized the futility, so I just kept quiet. At least, Dad was away on a business trip, selling tool steel.

As we heaved into view of the old brick pile, my mind turned ironically to our school song:

*Caledonia, on the Hillcrest,*

*You're the school we will always love best...*

Not with situations like this, I thought to myself, with a good deal of bitterness...

*Girl and Boy Days, all are joy days,*

*You have taught us the way that is true...*

That paddle of our principal, Mr. Chaffee, or Dad's belt, would be doing some truing up soon, the way things seemed headed; but was I really to blame for all of this? I felt a sense of injustice. What was I actually guilty of? In any case, we'd arrived in my classroom. Mrs. Phelps, who really was one of the nicer teachers, was expecting us.

The usual salutations and strained pleasantries were exchanged. Then Mom, assuming the persona of a stern Scottish librarian or grammar teacher—both of which she happened to be—got down to it, cocking a gimlet eye in my direction.

"We'll get him an assignment book, and he'll be doing his homework before anything else after school, and that's all there is to it."

"Oh, that..." said Mrs. Phelps, thrown a bit off track, as I had known she would be. "It's this matter of the police that I'm much more concerned about...didn't Jack tell you?"

"Uh, I was thinking it was the schoolwork," I muttered, feebly, feeling like a toad on a hot plate. I had copped to a lesser offense, the previous evening, just before bedtime; now my black soul was being stripped bare.

"Oh, no Jack...the police?" cried Mom, now the personification of crushed disappointment which was far worse than the stern pedant. I really did love my mother, in spite of the opposing roles that an unreasonable world so frequently thrust upon us.

Looking back, over more than half a century, it's hard to see George Boxhorn, or myself, at that age—seven? eight?—as being delinquents, but the cops had been alerted, so I suppose that we were.

Georgie could be bad, and I was easily led; but there was always such a puckish twinkle in his eye, that he seemed mainly bent on having fun.

*Caledonia, Caledonia...*

*In our memories, your colors will gleam...*

*They are green and white, you see...*

*They mean truth and purity...*

*Caledonia, we love you!*

\* \* \* \* \*

Georgie Boxhorn recently came to mind in this way: having somehow survived, well into a new millennium, I'd been searching for books from the old one. Late on a sunny afternoon, I had wandered into a dusty but favorite Salvation Army thrift store. Having discovered and purchased two rarities—Chamberlain's *The Passing of the Armies* and a 1948 edition of *Who's Who in Baseball* with Bob Feller on its cover—I tossed my change into the coffee can that was taking the place of the little red kettle that had been, I was informed, recently stolen. Gazing idly along the counter I saw free editions of the longtime "Sally Am" publication: *War Cry*! I flipped through a few pages and was suddenly looking at a tall—still puckishly smiling—Salvation Army Major who could only be the self-same George Boxhorn of my youth, little changed in this sexagenarian incarnation! Ho, ho, I laughed, wondering if his flock has any notion of their good

shepherd's mottled past. In addition to the incident that had been so upsetting to Mom and Mrs. Phelps, which had taken place during the first winter of Kennedy's presidency, remembrances of high school transgressions came flooding back as well. But the funny thing was that after the second grade, I didn't see Georgie much at all for many years; he had been sent to a special school. He only reappeared in my life—again with hell-quaking effects—when I was in high school, sort of bracketing my K—12 experiences (keep reading).

\* \* \* \* \*

The original issue was a miniature gang war that Georgie and I had instigated. It was to have transpired late on the afternoon of the previous day. Of course the whole thing never actually happened, due to Mrs. Phelps being informed that Terrance Runnels' mother had alerted the cops. Terrance and his younger brother David formed the core of the enemy army. Georgie and I, with a couple of others on our side, had stored many large, brown paper shopping bags filled with pine cones, rocks, and other projectiles, beneath leaves and snow, on 'Poop Island'—a well-forested place at the trisection of three roads where people did a good deal of dog walking.

At that age, I fancied myself to be a great fighter which was odd since I'd not been in very many, if any, real fights. But deep inside, I was always spoiling for combat. The subject of who was going to fight whom was always high on the list of discussed topics; I burned with sanguine desire.

This may have been simply male instinct. Another factor was, possibly, the centennial remembrance of the Civil War. We studied it extensively in school. We read *Grant's Memoirs* and *The Red Badge of Courage*. Nearly every lad owned a blue or gray infantryman's forage cap,



then for sale everywhere. Companies that normally sold baseball cards and bubblegum took to pushing disturbingly gory trading cards which we avidly collected. Walls of corpses! Bayonet impalings! Hangings of child spies! These and even worse horrors were ours to contemplate, in full color, for just a nickel.

More likely, I suppose, most boys—and plenty of girls—are just naturally pre-programmed to form alliances, fight, bully, and ostracize. Adults do pretty well too. Maybe rising above it all is the real lesson of life, if there is one.

Despite having been bullied, I was occasionally one myself. Georgie, however, could be really mean. “Monkey-face! Monkey-face!” I recall him labeling one hapless boy, whom he pursued, cornered, and then repeatedly spit upon. Such behavior may have provoked the troubles between us and the Runnels boys.

My first schools were Sunday school and summer bible class. Aside from Caledonia Elementary and, later, Kirk Jr. High and Shaw High School, our church was the center of almost everything for our family. In those days, it seemed as if *every* family went to one church or another, just as a matter of course. We were Methodists, although I knew that Mom’s family had been Presbyterians, back in Inverness, in the Scottish Highlands. Dad’s people had been Lutherans, over in western Pennsylvania. Catholic kids, who went to St. Luke’s or Christ the King parochial schools, were basically of an alien and often hostile tribe that lived among us. Georgie’s family was of, to me, a rather unusual religious persuasion: the Salvation Army, a basically Protestant church, structured in a quasi-military fashion. His father and grandfather wore uniforms and carried on with the basic “Army” pursuits of drying out drunks, forming brass bands, and helping the downtrodden while pushing, of course, Salvation. My family’s “Church of the Cross” did a good job, also, of convincing young miscreants such as I, that we were bound

for the fiery lakes; so I took care to repent frequently. I was encouraged to repeat the rather disturbing prayer, each night:

*Now I lay me down to sleep*

*I pray the Lord, my soul to keep*

*And if I die before I wake*

*I pray the Lord, my soul to take...*

Repeat it I did, along with partaking in soul-cleansing church communions, but my hunch was that I'd likely be vaporized by an A-bomb from the Russkis, the following day, so my eternity was still likely to be one of unrelenting agony.

No biblical tortures seemed as cruel, however, as that preschool meeting with Mom and Mrs. Phelps. Georgie and I had become friends, partly, because neither of us was considered to be a shining light of academic achievement; nor were we among the dumbest. I figured that I was as bright as any of the snobbish and popular brains in our class, but my report cards consistently disagreed, a humiliating condition that for years would help to feed my ornery—as Mom put it—nature.

Six weeks into the first grade, prior to my first report card, I felt that I was on a completely even footing with my peers. Girls were, apparently, nuts about me. Suzie Loffer, a cute, favorite playmate with braids, never parted from me without her standard farewell of: "I'll see ya when we're married!" Nancy Chuggle, my across-the-street neighbor, seemed wild about me too.

My teenaged brother and sister, Bobby and Clair, helped to spread the rumor that I had kissed Jessica Price in a closet while they, with her much older adolescent siblings, were having a party. Of course, after that first report card (I'd hidden in the basement), when it developed that she was one of the smart kids, any further such notions would have been absurd. Indeed, if I

developed an inferiority problem, it came from school, because during my early years at home, I was adored. Mostly.

My big brother Bobby, ten years my senior, was a piece of work. Dad said so, everybody said so, and everybody who has ever met him is saying it to this day. Usually, it was fun and exciting to be related to a whirling vortex of animal magnetism; it was certainly never dull. Occasionally, he would take me aside with grave countenance: “Well, you know, Jack you’re getting to be a pretty big guy, aren’t you? How old are you now?”

“Gosh, I’m four!”

“Mmm, hmmm...four,” he might reply, thoughtfully stroking his chin. “Well, I guess it’s time you knew.”

“Knew what?”

“Well, I hardly know how to break this to you...but Mom is a *werewolf*.”

“A werewolf?” Despite it being the golden age of horror movies, I was not allowed to watch them. Lassie and Timmy’s adventures were pretty hair-raising as far as I was concerned. I really had no idea what a werewolf actually looked like, but there was something familiar about the odious-sounding term.

“Yes, Jack...she isn’t like normal mothers. When the moon is full and the henbane blooms, she sprouts black hair all over her body and goes after the scent of fresh prey...”

“No, she—”

“Oh yes, Jack, she most certainly does. She most certainly does, indeed. Dad is usually able to lock her in the old coal bin in the basement, but he can’t always catch her in time. But this is a family secret, Jack; you must never, EVER tell a living soul!”

“Ah, nuts...”

“Especially not Mother.”

“Why not?”

“She’d never believe you, for one thing. And if she did know, she’d run to the church and beg to have a silver spike driven through her heart. It’s the only way of killing a werewolf.”

“Aw, nuts.”

The subject quickly left my mind as I went about my Saturday routines: walking Shadow, our beloved shaggy dog, trailing after “Robert” (to his amusement, I called Dad by his first name), and just messing around.

After supper, when eight-thirty and bedtime came, I was reluctant. To coax me, Mom offered to read to me. This she did; but soon we both had drifted off, side by side, on my bed, to the land of the dish and the spoon.

By and by I awaken. My drowsy eyes open. I sigh, stretch, and roll over... and...THERE’S A GREAT BIG BLACK THING WITH BLOOD RED EYES AND A HIDEOUS, GAPING, EVEN REDDER, GASH OF A MOUTH—SLAVERING, SNAPPING AND SNARLING AT ME—“NO! NO, MOM—NO! IT’S ME, JACK! DAD! QUICK—THE BASEMENT!—NOT TO THE CHURCH!—NO, NO—NOT TO THE CHURCH...!”

But having teenaged brothers and sisters during the very heyday of teenage-mania, and watching them worship their favorite deity which was, of course, rock’ and roll, then in its first careless rapture, made it all worth the effort. Purple People Eaters! Peggy Sue getting married! Short shorts! Bald Headed Sally! This seemingly endless font, direct from life’s throbbing arteries, bubbled up from our basement (not the side with the coal bin), from our little maroon record player, driving Dad, and plenty of other fathers, quite properly somehow, beyond all of their collective endurance: “...That all of our years of struggle, sacrifice, and privation should be

rewarded with this! ‘Be-Bop-A-Lula’ indeed!” they railed, rendering it all the more intoxicating to their dissipated progeny. It wasn’t my battle—yet—but I could sit back and enjoy it. Long after the funny old discs had been put away, they would reverberate, again and again, through all that my world was to become.

One of my big sister Clair’s assorted beaus visited our house on a motorcycle. “Who was that?” I asked as he was rumbled off.

“Oh, Elvis Presley,” Clair casually informed me. For years after, whenever somebody mentioned the king, I would nonchalantly comment, with honest conviction: “Oh, yeah...he came to our house. We know him.”

It was big hula-hoops (I had a heavy-duty, ribbed, rubber, pink one), big, heavy cars (we had one of those, too—a Pontiac), and big TV sets with *Bilko*—my favorite—and *Ozzie and Harriet*, with Ricky rockin’ at the malt shop, ending every show. *Sputnik* was up in the sky, with our dads pointing and explaining that, when the communists came, we’d all be waiting for the knock on the door that would come late at night.

I suppose that I was petted and pampered. Everybody seemed to like having me along. Dad took me on business trips with motels that had interesting ice machines and beds that vibrated if you inserted coins. In town it was off to the hardware store, or into the mysterious recesses of the Masonic lodge that was his life aside from us, with its strange emblems, ritual rooms, and pool tables—vast and green as football fields. He was perhaps of an age where he could appreciate and enjoy a child, with more patience than might a younger father.

Clair would take me, like a live teddy bear, to pajama parties, roller rinks, and bridle trails. She loved riding, although she was forever getting thrown, kicked, or stepped on.

Heading out with Bobby, on a Saturday afternoon, might mean the penny arcade where he was most lavish with his nickels, or the Shaw-Hayden cinema, where the sound effects that pealed from the “Voice Of The Theater” speakers, embellishing *Doctor Cyclops* or the Three Stooges, were impossibly enormous.

Although I secretly (Johnny Chuggle, the bratty, older kid across the street, infuriated me by telling me I was babied), loved Mom best of all, her endless rounds could be agonizingly boring. While the preacher was, as far as I could tell, glutting down his Sunday pot roast, Mom and I would still be at the church, separating the altar flowers, then taking them to the sick and aged. She was in love with museums though, which were all free in those days and conveniently close to her hospitals and old folks homes. Even if teachers found my spelling and numbers to be shoddy, they would—had they asked—have found me to be very up on my Devonian fauna or Renaissance painters.

Mom’s theology had been scandalous when she was in college during the ‘20s. She was a confirmed Darwinist; her easy ability to reconcile fossil records with the Old Testament was shocking to her Scottish family. My grandmother had followed her brothers from the Highlands to western Pennsylvania during the (perhaps, for them, not-so-gay) nineties. In any case, the natural history museum, with its dioramas of blue trilobites, or purple lungfish dragging themselves from the primordial ooze, was a favorite destination for us after our Sunday ministrations.

Rock ‘n Roll was just a small part of the music that was our lives. Bobby and Clair attended the prestigious Music School Settlement; they were prodigies of percussion, particularly marimba and vibraphone. Dad was very gung-ho on music at the time; both of these interesting instruments were usually clattering or, in the case of the “vibes”, fluttering up from our ever-

fascinating basement. Mom played the piano at Sunday school and the organ thundered in the church sanctuary. Liberace gave us Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff on TV; we brought home *Scheherazade* and the *New World Symphony*, along with all of the “World’s Great Music”, on our series of discs from the A & P store. Over on the West Side, and even in some East Side neighborhoods (not ours), frantic polkas dominated.

My heart became set on playing a silver cornet like the one that Tamara Boxhorn, Georgie’s intoxicatingly beautiful twin sister, played in the Salvation Army band. George played the Baritone horn, which pretty much left me cold. I figured that I could double as a bugler when I one day became, dream of dreams, a Boy Scout, or soon after—if I could hide my age—when I would join the military.

Poor Dad could not sing a lick. This worked out to his advantage with the “Corn Poppers”, a comic band that he was part of, along with his lodge brothers. Dad played a tuba made of a hose and a funnel, but his triumph was his portrayal of both the sailor *and* the fair young maiden in “Barnacle Bill”.

The band would vamp! Dad would appear at an upper window, in a wig with jiggling spiral curls and a bonnet.

*Who’s that knocking at my door?*

he would warble, staggeringly off pitch.

*Who’s that knocking at my door...?*

*Barnacle Bill the Sailor???*

As the Corn Poppers—stalling for time, to let him change—swelled to a crescendo, he would vanish only to reappear, at the doorway below, in the garb of the bearded gob:

*I’m miles and miles from across the Sea...I’m Barnacle Bill the Sailor!*

*I'm all lit up like a Christmas tree...I'm Barnacle Bill the Sailor!*

Soon the audience was rioting! No wonder he wound up with three hams, although he'd have been alarmed had he known the future.

Clair was two years older than Bobby, who was a decade older than I. As they each progressed through four years at Shaw High, they were in musical after musical play. I learned their parts, along with them. I traveled, in my imagination, to the *South Pacific*, to *Oklahoma*, and to *Brigadoon*. I learned of New York via *West Side Story* and of Japan from *The Mikado*. Gilbert and Sullivan put early notions into my head, of finding the ridiculous aspects that are intrinsic to authority. Of all satire—from Aristophanes to Mike Royko, to *Mad* magazine—Gilbert and Sullivan, to me, would ever reign.

All of that theater music, along with the rest, hit me hard. By the time Georgie and I got the cops called on us, I really wanted that silver trumpet which I felt sure would change my life.

Dad, however, had sunk a good bit into our big marimba and the vibes. The vibraphone is a sort of big xylophone on wheels, with an electric motor turning butterfly discs in long tubes under the keys, creating a silvery tremolo effect. We had a trap set too. I think he was hoping that I, also, would become a percussionist (vibes and marimba are classified as tuned percussion), so that he'd get more mileage out of those expensive instruments.

Maybe my lousy grades at school were a factor. Although just being around my family seemed education enough for me, possibly the fact that I was not doing well with such things as spelling and arithmetic played a part in the postponement of music lessons.

In many areas, my mom was a lady of great wisdom. She made one little mistake, though, which wound up changing my life. A college grad, who had majored in English and Drama, she should have known better; but Mom sometimes put too much trust in authority.



Long about 1959, some meddlesome ass, masquerading as an educational theorist, put out the word to the parents of new students in the East Cleveland Public School System: “To best facilitate new methodology, it is best that children do not begin reading before starting the first grade.” Mother, perhaps against her better mind, bought into it; as a result, I showed up for the first grade as a little blank slate, regarding the ABCs. The problem was that few of my classmates’ parents had paid the slightest heed to the learning “specialist” and his, or her, silly edict if they were even aware of it. Only I, a couple of hillbilly kids, and Georgie, who had what would now be called a disability (from which he apparently emerged without Ritalin or psychiatry), had been enrolled with no reading skills at all.

I was mucho proud of my little bookmark and my reader! I was excited about my progress with Dick, Jane, Puff the cat, and whatever the dog’s name was. How thrilled I was to see the letters take on meanings! I had chugged through *The Cat in the Hat* and was sinking my teeth into the famous feline’s sequel, when—suddenly—there was talk, all around, of report cards. Mine turned out to be all Cs. My academic career suddenly became a sort of ongoing living misery which, over the next decade, would become a sad way of life.

While I was merely behind with the reading, I was truly poor with numbers—always boring to me unless they actually served a useful purpose—in which case I fared well enough. I resolved to do better, but the other kids did better too; I became resentful and reactionary. In my neighborhood, many of the parents were literally rocket scientists at NASA or great technical brains at Case Western Reserve University; they’d been grooming their brats for Nobel prizes, from the cradle. My background, if more colorful, was far more general.

It was a very success-driven time. Kids from my stratum were expected to be college-bound and that was that. The—mistaken, as it turned out—perception was that only A or B+ students

would ever be accepted by any university. Mom and Dad weren't as demanding as some parents, but the stigma that I immediately felt from my teachers and peers due to my underperforming in the three R's—my handwriting was also bad—really weighed on me. I liked cute little girls, even then; suddenly my stock was way down. Our first-grade teacher, Mrs. Spahn, who in terms of shape, size, and hair color, put one in mind of a battleship, prominently posted all of our grades and seated us accordingly.

“Cynthia Erickson,” she admonished one browbeaten little sufferer, “you haven't got the brains you were born with!”

“Cynthia's Cooties—No backs!” was what the child, thereafter, endured from the other girls.

When Barry Hicks, knowing nothing of Nazis, while designing Indian symbols during art, inadvertently drew swastikas, Mrs. Spahn shook him till his teeth rattled like castanets.

I would be called to the blackboard to write things with chalk; the class would laugh, and my mind would become paralyzed with rage.

Regardless, my real education, from my (I now realize) brilliant family, never quit. Sometime that winter, I discovered Bobby's collection of *Classics Illustrated* comic books. Thenceforth I was away nightly, through the cobbled streets of Paris with Quasimodo and Esmeralda, or on the Mississippi with Huck and Jim. David Copperfield and Oliver Twist showed me that my tribulations were trifling in comparison to what boys in the previous century had, apparently, suffered. It occurred to me that society might continue to evolve if the ever-expected nuclear holocaust didn't occur first.

In spite of having lost much standing, I was not as utterly reviled as were those in the very lowest classroom ranking; but everything I tried seemed to flop! In art, I liked my drawings but

no one else did. I had not yet progressed in playing or understanding sports—passions among the other boys. My patchy career as a musician had not yet gained traction. And now, George Boxhorn and I were in trouble with the cops!

However, like most of the tempests which periodically raged through my short, sweet life, this one also blew itself out. I can't recall Dad's dreaded reaction, so it must not have been too bad. We just slogged ahead, through the gray winter slush, with little more than dreams of spring to sustain us.

Then—! Summer came, school was blessedly forgotten, and life could be properly lived again.

## 2 — REEL TO REEL SUMMER

“PSSST!—Hey, Jack!” came a voice from a clump of junipers as I made my way down Selwyn road. I’d heard of bushes speaking, in Sunday school, but this one was not burning, and I certainly wasn’t Moses. Peering through the evergreen branches into the dim grottos, I perceived Johnny Chuggle, better known to many in the neighborhood as “Snortball”. He was my across-the-street neighbor and surrogate brother, now that Bobby had joined the Navy. But what was he doing with the huge round mirror which normally hung on his parent’s living room wall?

“Get in here and help me,” he ordered. Contrary to my better angels, I slipped between the scratchy branches and into the cool gloom.

“What are you do—”

“Shhh!” he commanded with an authoritative hiss. Grab a side of this thing and help me.” The mirror was big and heavy, but we were able to raise it onto a low branch, where we balanced it tenuously. Johnny was older than me by three years and meaner than cat shit.

“Now if we just angle it up a little—no, not that much—just enough to catch the sun...here comes a car!”

To my horror, I realized that this young demon was actually attempting to reflect rays of the bright summer sun into the eyes of passing motorists!

Screeeeeeeeeeee moaned the brakes on a huge Ford Galaxy, driven by a man whom I thought I recognized as the custodian of our church. As he regained control of the big boat and slowly continued down Selwyn, Johnny chuckled: “Did you see that funny darkey? Hey, I wonder if they call us lighties? Hee, hee, hee!”

As alarmed as I was by the situation, I wasn't as surprised as one might suppose. Moving vehicles were ever-favorite targets for East Cleveland boys. During the long, long winters, throwing snowballs at cars was a favorite, though strictly forbidden thrill. Like the Eskimos with their many names for types of snow, we had a variety of snowball types. We had ice-balls. We had slush-balls. We had dirt-balls, gravel-balls, mud-balls, and, of course, buckeye balls—all with special cores. Despite admonishments from school principals, parents, and clergy, very few among us could completely resist the temptation.

Now it was apparent that Johnny was carrying on the forbidden hunt with weaponry suited to the summer months. Although I was sometimes easily influenced by these charismatic types, I realized that I was in way over my head with this caper. I was already moving, backward through the scratchy branches, towards what I hoped would be a means of egress—away from the street, in the direction of the backs of some garages. As Snortball began to upbraid me for my desertion, his mother's strident voice rent the humid summer air. I scrabbled out from under the branches like a sort of crab, catching a glimpse of Mrs. Chuggle making excellent time traversing their closely mown, lime-green backyard, towards the crime scene. She was toting her faithful, black, fabric-covered electrical cord, which handily detached from her iron. Today I suppose that she would be jailed as some sort of a monster mom, but she was really a very nice lady with a very rotten kid. Johnny was kind of tubby in those days and perhaps unable to squeak out the back way as I had. I could hear his squeals as I slipped quietly between the garages and strolled down a gravel driveway to the safety of Henderson Road. I would later spend a fitful evening waiting for our phone to ring, but today I was only swimming in the sweet summer of youth.

Summer *was* sweet due to emancipation from an angst-packed nine months of school. Parts of it were all right, and for some kids, it seemed easy, but for me, it involved a lot of stress and

humiliation. However, within the last couple of years, I had turned ten; I had learned to kick a football, tackle, and get tackled on grass, cement, or asphalt. I was still lousy in math but could figure batting averages, ERAs or on-base percentages along with the old geezers. I'd learned how to throw, pitch, catch, and bat: hardballs, softballs, tennis balls, wiffle balls, rubber-coated leagues, buckeyes, golf-balls, monkey-balls (Osage oranges), rocks, or crabapples.

I headed up shady Henderson Road, cutting right across every lawn like we weren't supposed to, ringing the doorbell of every likely house. I was selling mints to help pay for YMCA camp—my August dream trip of ten whole days! Bobby was in the Navy; I felt as if I'd been left standing on the pier.

I was an old hand at ringing doorbells. It was a way of life then, for kids, peddlers, or whoever, to ring doorbells. Nobody was afraid; everything was pretty open. The phone was black, it sat in the hallway, and when it rang somebody always picked it up and said "Hello." If nobody answered, the caller would know that nobody was at home.

Going door to door, I'd raked in tubs of change for UNICEF. I'd subbed for Johnny's paper route, both delivering and collecting. Through screen doors I saw all; nobody seemed to have anything that they wanted to hide. One old gent, whom I guessed had lost his voice box smoking or in the war, talked to me with a gizmo he held to his throat that gave him buzzing speech. Another invited me down to his basement to see rows of aquaria with schools of tropical fish, dazzling as gemstones! My fish were only a couple of goldfish which Bobby had won by tossing ping pong balls into fishbowls at the fair, but we were pretty fond of them, Mom and I. One day I came home for lunch and discovered that one had jumped out of the bowl and was looking dead and dried out, close to the heat register. In spite of my despair, Mom had remained calm: "Now it seems to me that I read somewhere..." She quickly ran a bowl of warm tap water and added salt.

Then she swished the fish about for a minute, and miraculously, chlorine and fluoride notwithstanding, he wriggled and swam! He was, thereafter, rather pale in coloration compared to his bowl mate. He swam with a sideways get-along but lived to a ripe age.

In spite of her way with creatures, when a local cur became stuck to Patches, our lady dog who had succeeded Shadow, all of her pans of cold water failed to prevent the eventual arrival of seven mewling and puking pups. To me, it was the most exciting night of my life since JFK's shocking win over Nixon! Dad, who had grown up on a farm, made them a long trough which he lined with tin and filled with oatmeal.

But the pups were now gone, and I only wanted to go to camp. I breathed a prayer and kept to the sidewalk while passing Judy Volker's house. Judy was a BIG girl in her early teens. For no reason that I knew of, she routinely attempted and often succeeded in tossing my wretchedly overpowered and outweighed body into the scratchy blue-green shrubs that fronted her house. What I ever had done to get on her ugly side I didn't know, but fearful thoughts of her kept me awake and fretting some nights. Perhaps it was my comeuppance for informing little Emerson Watts that my intention was to put him down the sewer. For the most part, I loved smaller children and treated them kindly; but I could be a devil myself, upon occasion.

Now I was at the door of the always-lively Klonz family. My friend Teddy Klonz was a Catholic School boy; but he did not hate and persecute public school kids, like some of the Irish and Italian kids did. His folks were more Hungarian or something. He was a year older than I; he'd somehow become a Boy Scout, two years ahead of schedule. He had a uniform and merit badges already. He employed a wide range of delightfully dirty words, the actual meanings of which were pretty hazy to both of us.

“Do you want to listen to our last tape?” he asked. The previous December, Dad had given me my most glorious Christmas present ever: a little battery-powered tape recorder with four-inch reels and a microphone. I hadn’t expected it but Dad, probably fascinated himself, had for some reason decided to get it for me. Soon, with a razor blade and tape, Teddy and I had become competent at splicing together comedy compilations of the most inspired, tasteless nature. Teddy had since earned himself his own tape recorder by selling magazine subscriptions, and we had a little studio set up in his attic where we recorded excerpts from our family’s old records and from the radio and TV, liberally mixed with our own asinine commentary and improvised dramas.

“Well, I’ve gotta sell these mints for camp—”

“Yeah, River Road Camp, where ‘Headless Hattie’ roams.”

“Who?”

“Oh, you’ll find out,” Ted leered ghoulishly. “You’ll hear her, whimpering in the night, looking for her head.”

“Aw, crap.”

“No, Jack....she was real. She was a little girl in Victorian times, who was run over by a team of horses on an August evening. She’d been chasing a ball or looking for her cat or something. Her head was pulverized to nothing; you can still hear her out there, late on summer nights, whining along the road, searching for it. Oh, it’s pitiful...”

“Well, I want to go to camp so bad I don’t give a hoot for ten Headless Harriets.”

“Headless Hattie, Jack...You’ll care alright if she comes scratching around your cabin’s door. They say her fingernails have never stopped growing. But I’ll come with you and help you sell your mints.”



“You aren’t going anywhere, Mister. You’re staying here with Benjamin while I go to the store.” Mrs. Klonz had materialized from the dim interior of the house. She was a veteran of the WAC; Teddy and I knew that resistance would be futile. “But I’ll take a box of your mints, Jack.”

“Thanks!”

“Come on,” said Ted. “We’ll listen to our tape, then we’ll sell your mints when Mom gets back. I’ve been doing some editing.”

In an attic dormer overlooking the Klonz’s shady backyard, he had his mad scientist’s laboratory established on a long work table. He pushed the start button, and our latest tape rolled!

Against soapy organ music—my would-be announcer’s voice:

*And now—housewives, fishwives, time travelers, and pencil-neck geeks—*

*It’s time for another episode of...*

*AS THE STOMACH TURNS*

Song Excerpt:

*PAPA, PAPA, PAPA, PAPA,*

*PAPA, PAPA, PAPA, PAPA—*

*OOH, MOW MOW!*

*PAPA—OOH, MOW MOW!*

*BANG!*

Teddy’s anguished, wailing voice:

*MY FINGER...MY FINGER—OH, MY POOR FINGER!*

Me, with a woman’s patient voice:

*Pick your finger up off the floor, dear, and feed it to the little doggy...*

Teddy, very deadpan:

*You kill me, mother.*

Announcer:

*But where's Dad?*

Musical excerpt from the Klonz Family's eclectic record library:

*Deedle deedle dum—Deedle deedle dum,*

*Bumbum, ba-bum, bum, BUM!*

*There's a burlesque thee—a—ter, where the gang loves to go,*

*To see Queenie the Cutie, of the Burlesque Show...*

The song that had impressed us—to say the least—sufficiently, to be included in our sound collage, was entitled “Strip Polka”, featuring an enchantress who provided her stimulating entertainment to a polka beat:

*Take it off! ...Take it off! ...All the customers shout...*

*Down in front, down in front, as the band beats it out...*

There were more lyrics, which I've forgotten, but:

*The hit of the evening is when out Queenie skips,*

*And the band plays strip polka while she strips!*

Although still a full two years from reaching the stage at which I would actually realize why, we had a burning interest in human anatomy, with all of its mysterious and hard-to-explain accouterments.

Often our terminology was confused. Earlier that year, I had arrived at a large Cub Scout gathering in the school gym. I observed a skulking contingent of my peers in a corner,

whispering furtively. Having received their cool appraisal I was informed, conspiratorially, that Mrs. Naderer, one of the den mothers, was the source of their panic.

“The blouse she’s wearing, Elbon... You can see right through it... You can see her ‘tips’!”

“Oh, uh...really?”

(Scornfully): “You mean you didn’t see?”

“Uh, yeah...Yeah!...I could see her *tips*!” It would be a full year, at least, before I got straightened out regarding that misnomer.

*Turn Blue! Stay Sick!*

our tape continued, plagiarizing heavily from local B-movie, TV hosts.

My voice, in a mincing manner:

*Little Miss Muffet, sat on a tuffet,*

*Eating her curds and whey.*

*Along came a spider,*

*Who sat down beside her, and said:*

Ted’s voice:

*Gee, you have hairy legs!*

On and on wound our puerile comedy tape, but we were interrupted by Ted’s younger brother. “Benny’s two buns...weigh ninety tons,” intoned Teddy, to the grave notes of *Beethoven’s Fifth*.

“Shut up Teddy, or I’m tellin’ Mom! And I’m telling her you’re making a dirty tape!”

“Heck, it’s Mom and Dad’s record in the first place. I wonder if they ever went to a burlesque show?”

We were captivated, during our regular morning explorations of box scores and baseball standings in the interior sports pages of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, by the imaginative and descriptive advertisements regularly placed by the Roxy Burlesque Theatre—“Located at the corner of East 9th and Chester”—not too far, in fact, from the baseball stadium.

“Rusty Bustle! Honey Bee! Tempest Storm!” pandered the ads, with sizzling illustrations. No wonder we were rabid!

“Dad probably went when he was in the army; but not Mom, I don’t doubt...”

We resolved that we’d better practice playing strip poker ourselves to make sure we’d know what to do, should we ever meet any girls like Queenie.

“I wanna play...” piped Benny.

“Forget it. You aren’t even getting boners, yet.”

“I am too. I had one this morning. I rolled over too fast and cracked it on the mattress. It hurt... Teddy, why did God design us to get stiff that way? Isn’t it funny that we do, and girls don’t even have anything there to *get* stiff and they—AHHHG...Stop or I’m tellin’ Mom!” he squealed, as Ted began whipping him with a leather lanyard. I shut up, not willing to admit that I was as puzzled as Benny.

I gazed yearningly at a bugle that Teddy’s Uncle had played in the army. Earlier, that same eventful year, I had embarked down what was to be a boulder-strewn road, as a horn-blower.

For some reason, I was enamored of the trumpet. Taking pity, Dad had driven me out Mayfield road, to Motter’s School of Music. There I was given a lesson and a rented cornet. At a subsequent lesson, the trumpet teacher listened to me, excused himself, and then reappeared with two colleagues: dour-looking sausage and sauerkraut old guys, with their hands deep in the pockets of their waist-high, baggy trousers. As they drank in my sputterings, their brows

furrowed even more deeply; their frowns sank to new depths. With closed eyes and shaking heads, they gave it to us straight: I hadn't the lip. It was a God-given thing that one had or didn't, and I didn't. But...BUT!—they felt certain that a bright future might await me should I care to try the SLIDE TROMBONE! It had, they explained, a bigger mouthpiece which would suit me far better.

So we went home with a dented and rather moldy-smelling old slush-pump and a big green trombone method book—joyful—at least for the present. Dad kept a good beat on our old snare drum with the sparkles; we would play and play old songs like “Long Long Ago”, “Tenting Tonight”, or “After the Ball”. We never were happier.

But now, the bugle on Ted's wall caused me to sigh wistfully for my first love. Herb Alpert and The Tijuana Brass had become the rage, topping the charts; the trombone seemed to never get the good parts. Also, playing the trumpet would have seated me closely to Tamara Boxhorn, in the Caledonia orchestra.

Mrs. Klonz was heard below; we thundered downstairs and outside to freedom. My intention of selling mints, however, was waylaid by a huge softball game that was shaping up, right there in the middle of shady Henderson Road.

Two captains squared off. A bat was tossed and they worked their way up, hand over hand. They both professed to have control of the bat's top and, hence, the first pick of a team member.

“All right then,” said Chuck, a gangly captain of fourteen. “We'll do it this way,” he proceeded, pointing quickly back and forth between himself and Billy, his chunkier (Birdie Tebbets comes to mind), opposing field general, in rhythm to the poetic words:

*“My mother and your mother were hanging clothes.*

*My mother socked your mother in the nose—*

*What color was the blood?"*

"Blue."

*"B-L-U-E spells blue and so the first pick goes to —*

"Oh, dang" as the fast chanted rhythm that nobody could pre-plan left him pointing to:

*"you" (Billy).*

I guiltily thought of the mints I should be selling, but was frozen by the question of how early I would be picked, or—shame of shame—not picked at all. As it turned out, Ted and I were each chosen in fairly early rounds. Neither team wanted Benny, who was young and tubby; but Ted loyally said that he would only play if Ben could too—at least as an outfielder.

"I don't have my glove, though," I protested.

"Aw, you don't need a glove...It's just softball."

Softballs, in truth, were not very soft at all, I reflected with trepidation; but Teddy, also a righty, who was to be on the opposing team, offered to let me use his mitt while his team was batting.

Our baseball field had the four points of a diamond, but it was long and attenuated. It spilled over the curbs and bordered front lawns of homes in the areas of first and third base. Front windows were dangerously within the range of foul balls, as were those adjacent to much of left and right fields. I was sent to shortstop, which suited me because I knew I'd be fielding in the street instead of trespassing on front lawns. I had delivered papers on that block and had been in this sort of trouble already.

Our pitcher was Holmsey (Jane Holms), a rather pretty, athletic, fifteen-year-old string bean of a girl with a lethal blue dart that dove like a nighthawk. In the third inning, I knocked down a line drive by Ted that would have torn off my jaw, but was unable to make the out as my throw

was high to Stevie Hagen at first. First base was on the sidewalk but my throw pulled him onto the front lawn of the “Three Crabbys”. One of this elderly trio of sisters was stationed at the attic window, another on the second floor, and the main one in the front living room. This spinster came onto the front porch and began to scold, but Stevie—ever the diplomat—enjoined her to do something very rude.

“Well, that’ll about do it for my shutout,” observed Holmsey. She was correct because within three minutes, an aproned Mrs. Klonz, employing the same direct attitude that had won her stripes in the Women’s Army Corps, swept from her house and onto the field. Obviously, she had received a phone call.

“That’s it. Ted and Benjamin—get inside and wash. You, Mr. Hagen—you march over there and apologize.”

“But I didn’t say anything,” whined Steve, cur-like.

“He told her to cram the ball up her crack!” piped Benny, eager to provide background information.

“Into the house—NOW!” Mrs. Klonz repeated while acquiring a grip on young Steven’s collar, frog-marching him towards Miss Gimler’s driveway. But a screen door slammed, and Mrs. Hagen—Steve’s Mom—emerged from down the street, wearing only a flimsy bathing suit.

“Don’t you touch my son!”

“Your son needs to have his mouth scrubbed out with Drano.”

“Stevie said he didn’t say anything, and he doesn’t lie...”

“Stevie *is* a little liar...so are mine. They all are. But when mine are rude to their elders, I box their ears, and that’s exactly what yours needs—and I’ll do it too!” As she was speaking, she was giving Stevie a really proper shaking which caused his teeth to rattle like Yahtzee dice. She

then tossed him at his peroxide blonde mother who had been trying, unsuccessfully, to pull her lower swimsuit down over her wriggling white rump.

“Now hear this,” Mrs. Klonz addressed the still lingering ballplayers, “Henceforth, you will take all ballgames to the schoolyard or to the lot behind the store. Cross me at your peril.”

Doubting her not at all, I retrieved my box of mints, from the shady spot where I’d left them, and slunk away towards home, regretting my sagging sales quota.



### 3 — RIVER ROAD CAMP

Miraculously, however, the great day finally came in August, and Dad drove me out to Y camp. We had received specific lists of items that we were required to bring: swim trunks, certain numbers of jeans and socks, raingear, postcards for writing home, and buddy burners. A buddy burner was a small camp stove made by coiling a long strip of corrugated cardboard into a shallow can. Many candles were then melted into that can, which produced a hot flame for camp cooking and even some warming. Somehow it lasted for the whole ten days of camp. Most meals, however, were not taken in the woods but in the large dining hall where the occupants of some twenty cabins congregated, three times, most days.

The great man who was our chief was named Bill Quenzer. He blew reveille, retreat, and taps, on an army bugle, with a virtuosity that I could only dream of. Throughout the camp and within our cabin, I found myself mixed with a strange species—West Side boys. Some were descendants of Appalachia; their fathers had come north to work the steel mills. Others were Puerto Ricans—a pair of brothers named Mario and Frankie lodged in my cabin. Cabin number eight, ours, had two counselors: Harley and Carlo. Carlo was a large young man who suffered badly from hay fever and was down on his cot a lot. Harley was an affable, soon-to-be-senior at Shaw High, with crooked teeth but a nice smile.

“We’ll be heading into the woods, but I don’t know if I should take you guys to any really hairy places...”

“We want to head for the wilds!” we assured him.

“Well, I guess that’ll be alright...Hattie rarely comes out before dark...”

“Who?”

“Headless Hattie. She was a poor child whose head was crushed by horses, while she was playing in the road, back in the eighteen-hundreds.”

“Aw, bull,” scoffed the boys; but I, remembering Teddy’s seemingly corroborative account, was somewhat disquieted.

“You guys will sing a different tune, the first night she comes scratching at the cabin door, sometime after midnight,” interjected Carlo from his cot. “Some of you will be begging to go home. But don’t worry...she’s only been able to actually get at a *few* guys over the years. Like all dead people, her nails never stopped growing; so just pray that these door latches hold up. And don’t wet your cots...it’s a big, smelly pain in the neck the next day. Use a can.”

In the mess hall, all twenty cabins of about seven boys apiece got together for meals. Bill Quenzer, the camp director, while not an especially big man, carried himself with an aura that was admired by all. All cabins would be competing in a broad spectrum of skills: swimming, camp-craft, latrine cleaning, etc. Careful records were kept on a big board. Near the end of the ten days, selected members of the top cabins would be eligible to participate in the highly ritualized: Order of the—something or other—I can’t recall...Arrow? Owl? Moose? Bullfrog?—ceremony.

After chow, Bill would lead the throng in song—no instrumental accompaniment of any sort, just his simple, magnetic voice—clear as his bugle calls that set the pulse of the camp. Even the sorts of tough guys who never sang for love or money just had to join in, or echo his call and response numbers:

*Oh, the preacher went down—*

*(Oh, the preacher went down),*

*To the cellar to pray—*

*(To the cellar to pray),*

*He found a jug—*

*(He found a jug),*

*And he stayed all day!*

*...I ain't gonna grieve, my lord, no more!*

There was “Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines”, “The Great Titanic”, and more serious airs like “Old Dog Tray” and “The Ash Grove”. But no matter how corny or sentimental, Bill’s music always made a boy, or the young men who were our counselors, forget their problems and fears for a little while. I was able to forget my increasingly severe homesickness. A cabin-mate, perhaps, could forget the mean guys who had baited and humiliated him for being fat and unable to swim. A lonely counselor who had received devastating news, that the girl he loved was dating another in his absence, forgot his troubles, too, when Bill Quenzer led us in singing, after dinner.

I did like softball, the craft hall, swimming, etc., but I couldn’t wait to be off and into the woodlands. We studied the leaves and roots of many tree and plant species, the names of which we quickly forgot. Most of our hikes followed creeks or small rivers. Paradise lay in the deep pools at the feet of waterfalls.

“Grab it Grab it!” I had flipped over a flat rock at the bottom of a brook, surprising a salamander with vivid red dots. But I froze at the critical moment, afraid to touch it. I faked a missed grab, letting the creature escape, to the scorn of all. But eventually, I made a net and improved. I had a fascination for amphibians and turtles. As much as I loved them, more than one captured toad or newt ultimately expired due to neglect or stupidity.

Mike was from the West Side but was not a “spik” or a “ridge runner”. We got into long discussions about women. “It seems like lots of guys get worked up about different things about girls, but I like their bosoms best,” Mike confided. “I don’t know what’s the big deal about the little bit of hair that they have down there.”

“My friend, Scott Falspagh, had some little photos that he kept rolled up and hidden—up inside of his bike’s handlebars? Behind the rubber grips? When he first showed them to me, I thought they were wearing rubber suits, but they were real—they were really naked. At the (Cleveland) art museum, there are all kinds of paintings.” It was true. Mom’s Victorian perspectives were somehow put on hold if the subjects were Venus and Phoebus, or Leda and the Swan. In the armor room, I had been electrified at the sight of a huge Titian featuring Diana and her nymphs being ravished by reddish, horned Satyrs. The ladies were returning from the hunt, with slain deer and frisking deerhounds. Their breasts were quite exposed, and their cloven-hoofed admirers were forcing their attentions in most ungentlemanly fashion.

Because of the camp being all men and boys (other than the matronly cook and nurse), the female of the species seemed to be a frequent topic. Late at night, after we were supposed to be sleeping, I would hear the counselors talking. “I’ve never been the type to run around very much, like Ward or some guys,” confided the Adonis-like Paul, a counselor from the adjacent cabin, who had slipped in for a chat. Ward was a legendary girl chaser from my neighborhood; I’d seen him cuddling with a variety of babes, at the park, the drugstore, or elsewhere.

“No, all I want is one good girl,” Harley agreed. “But they’re hard to find. I haven’t had a letter from Marie for a while, and I’m getting worried.” Even in my callowness, I was all sympathy, there on my cot, feigning sleep.

“My brother dated the same sweet girl for six years. They were going to get married. Then she suddenly quit him for a grease monkey named ‘Hairball’.”

“Wow,” replied Harley. “That’s pretty rugged. Getting dumped is bad enough, but for a guy named ‘Hairball’?—I think I’d kill myself.”

We had plenty of rainy days. Mike and I read voraciously—everything from The Hardy Boys to Jules Verne and Sir Walter Scott—oblivious of literary quality. We played the card game “Authors”. Entranced by the titles—*Kidnapped*, *The Mysterious Stranger*, or *The Charge of the Light Brigade*—we resolved to read them all.

My homesickness returned. Self-perceived tough guy notwithstanding, I missed my mom. I also missed Dad, Clair, Teddy and Benny Klonz, Patches, Nancy Chuggle, and even Snortball. Some kind soul took notice, and I was allowed to phone home once or twice.

On a dreadfully rainy night, after about eight or nine of the ten days of camp, it was made known that some of us from the top cabins would be taken on a long nighttime hike to receive Order of the—I still can’t remember—Eagle? Redskin? Porcupine?—awards. We were sternly warned that, on the coming trek, regardless of anything, we initiates were under NO circumstances permitted to murmur so much as a SINGLE WORD. Wearing our raingear, we tramped over long muddy paths through a dreadful soaking storm, led by counselors with big flashlights. One boy, from another cabin, began to cry. Frankie, from ours, let loose with an expletive in Spanish, having tripped on a root. Counselors were dispatched to escort them back to camp.

Eventually, the rain stopped; we found ourselves in a clearing, atop a hill. Canvas was removed from an enormous pyre of firewood that had been carefully stacked in a crisscrossing pattern. It must have been twenty feet in height! The tower was lit; the blaze was tremendous.

Bill Quenzer appeared; he offered a prayer to the great spirit of the universe, and an invocation of sorts—equating the great conflagration to a mighty symbol of our sublime achievement. Each boy's name was called; the great man shook our hands, and we were awarded certificates commemorating the glorious occasion. Next, a very long canvas, perhaps six feet wide by fifty yards long was produced, and we fifty or so boys were instructed to lie side by side on our backs. A second such canvas was spread over us, to protect us from continuing mist and drizzle; only our heads were exposed.

An elderly Englishman, who was some sort of high-up figure in the YMCA, was introduced. He had been a British soldier in India, ages earlier. In an East End accent, he spun a long yarn of his experiences, quelling riots and uprisings. "The Mohammedans and 'indoos alike, you see, were provoked by false rumors that their musket cartridges had been greased with renderings from pigs and beef—animals which, in their pagan ignorance, they held as being profane or sacred. When the mob erupted in our sector, there was only our brigade to maintain control. First, we moved in with batons—swung in a figure-eight pattern—up to the chin, then down upon the crowns of their 'eads. Our lads worked valiantly, but there were just too many of the insurrectionists. So the order was given to fall back, and the rifles were brought forward. We were ordered to aim low—to shoot to kill. This did the job, and we were able to continue with the duty of bringing Christ and civilization to the countless 'eathen souls of the great subcontinent." He concluded with an admonishment that we stay pure in thought and deed, with particular reference to some of the bad language he had had occasion to hear during his stay at camp.

Next, the sky, having cleared and the light from the great blaze having somewhat abated, a knowledgeable counselor used a tremendous, eight-battery flashlight to point out constellations.

But my eyelids were growing heavy; by the time he had begun to trace the belt of Orion in the sky, I was somewhere out there too. I awakened just once, hours later, only for a moment. In the distance, I heard a truck on a highway—highballin’ to some promised land. It seemed like the sound of my own free, future life—written already, out there in the stars, no less distant.

\* \* \* \* \*

The last night of camp was traditionally skit night. Old favorites, albeit new to first-timers like me, were dusted off and retooled:

*In search of truth, a pilgrim traveled to the mystic East.*

*Athirst for knowledge, he did ford twenty rivers*

*and traversed as many mountain ranges.*

*In a cave, on a ridge, above the source of the Ganges,*

*The Holy of Holies gave forth with his meaning...*

Here an audience volunteer was recruited.

*To acquire, my son, the perfect knowledge that you pine for,*

*You must bow and salaam to the three great entities,*

*Residing in the three great kingdoms, visible from this high place...*

The unfortunate dupe who had been drafted was cajoled into bowing in the three “cardinal directions”, while slowly and solemnly intoning their names:

*O-wah...*

*Ta-gu...*

*Si-am...*

Faster and faster, the tempo of the incantation was imposed by the clapping of his campmates and the canny crowd, as the poor fellow was compelled to rotate and repeat, ever and ever faster:

*O-wah...Ta-gu...Si-am...*

*O—wah...Tagu...Si—am...*

*Oh, wha...Tagoo...Siam...*

*Oh, wha...Ta goos...i am...*

*Oh, what...a goose...I am...*

*Oh, what...a goose...I am!*

Similar chestnuts included “The sap’s still running” and “The viper is coming”, unworthy, perhaps, of more elaboration. Awards were given, with consoling honors going to some who missed the cut for the great night hike and confabulation. Songs were sung, and even the homesick, such as I, felt such a glow of good fellowship that we were almost sad we’d be heading home in the morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

Screee....scritch, scritch, Screeee...whimper, whimper—My eyes snap open from a deep slumber! Screee...scritch, scritch, SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!! My veins freeze, my hair springs; odious whining—like that of a ravenous coyote, tortured by hunger gnawing at its vitals—or something much worse—is scraping, scraping—beneath our cabin’s windows—trying them, pulling them—working towards the door!... Scritch, scrabble, scrabble, scrabble, *SKEEEEEEERRRREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!*



“HEADLESS HATTIE!!!!” It’s all true! Now the door is banging! She’ll be on me any second now, rending and tearing, with her vile corpse’s nails that have been growing and growing for ALL OF THOSE YEARS! I fumble at my scout knife—it won’t open—A DIM FIGURE LOOMS! I hurl the chunky, closed jackknife, with all of my might—

“OUCH, GODDAMIT!”

The lights come on and Carlo, our large hay fever suffering counselor, is scowling and rubbing a rapidly swelling ear. “What the hell did you throw that for, ya goofball?”

“I thought you were Hattie...”

“Aw, jeez, don’t you know there isn’t—”

“—He means,” says Harley, who has materialized and is examining Carlo’s ear with concern, “he means, can’t you tell the difference, in size, between a fullback like him and a little girl without a head?” The other boys are in an uproar—some suspecting fraud; others as frightened as I.

“Well, it was dark and...”

“Never mind...Just get back in your cots, and we’ll look for tracks in the morning.”

## 4 — GUILTY

But summer's heaven never lasted. Early in the twentieth century, a fever for efficiency and production set in. Motion study experts strove to wring as much ordinance and weaponry as possible from the patriotic, or otherwise compelled, factory women and draft-exempt men. A great war must be won! Machine gun bullets had to be timed to fly between airplane propeller blades. Efficiency was everything. In this context, it's not hard to understand why some consortium of meddlers would feel the need to rank school children into an age-based class system. It replaced the mixed-age model that produced Mark Twain and Booker T. Washington. In spite of its most glaring defect—the absurd notion that children advance uniformly across a spectrum of subjects, year by year, as a function of their chronological ages—it has lingered on and on, like an old rotten tooth that should have been pulled ages ago. It defies the most elemental truth about learning: skills must be built upon *existing*, more fundamental skills. Untold millions of bright, capable kids sour on school—dropping out as early as possible—due to the stress and humiliation of being pushed forward, year after year, into subject levels that they are not prepared for. “You all get this, right?” the teacher asks, regarding algebra, geometry or trig.

“Oh, yes,” the wizards answer, while those like me are still struggling with fractions, decimals, or division—wondering why we should care. Others have similar feelings about dangling participles or diagramming sentences, but the one thing that we can never do is to admit that we are lost. And the one thing that the age-based education system can never do is to ask us where our talents or aspirations lie, or whether those interests might be worthy of

encouragement, while mastery of basics in other fields might suffice. What can mere children possibly know about themselves?

\* \* \* \* \*

“Jack?” Johnny Chuggle asked, with a menacing tone in his voice, one winter’s evening.

“Yeah?”

“I see that in our *Cleveland Telephone Directory*, the one by the phone down in our basement, you circled with a pencil the name of Harold Balls.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t,” I lied transparently.

“But you did, Jack. I’m sure of it. Harold Balls would be a man who also goes, at times, by the nickname of ‘Harry’. You recognized the double meaning, and you circled it. Who else would have?”

“Uh, Nancy.”

“No, Jack, and I’ll tell you why. Little girls Nancy’s age don’t joke about guys named Harry Balls, but boys your age do. You’ve been telling Nancy dirty jokes.”

“No!” But of course, Snortball was right. I had been doing just that, although the phone book’s desecration had actually occurred a year earlier. It was all very unfair because Nancy was highly precocious and as far advanced as I, if not more so, in such matters. In fact, her tutelage, along similar lines, had resulted in my receiving severe, spontaneous corporal punishment. Way back in the third grade—I was now in the fifth—I had been overheard regaling the boys in my class, while standing in line in the corridor, with a ditty that Nancy herself had taught me:

*Robin Hood, Robin Hood—running through the grass...*

*Little John, Little John, kicked him in the—(another name for a donkey)*

*Robin Hood, Robin Hood—running through the halls...*

*Little John, Little John, kicked him in the—(last name of Harold, of the telephone directory).*

My teacher, at the time, had been a woman named Mrs. Unger—a big bruiser. I don't know if she actually heard the naughty lyrics that I had sung, or whether her outrage simply sprang from the noisy glee that I had inspired among my fellows. Talking, however—much less laughing uproariously while lined up in the halls of Caledonia Elementary School—was a serious offense. We returned to the classroom, and she closed the door. Without a word, she came to where I was imprisoned in the tandem of my little desk and its attached chair. Methodically, with her face a dark purple, Mrs. Unger began to wallop me, again and again, with ham-handed blows to my upper arms and shoulders. My bladder opened, and my corduroys were flooded. Still, without comment, she resumed lessons. Hours later, as I carried my books home in a strategic manner, my loss of control was, for reasons unknown, not remarked upon; but I could not assume that the truth of my situation was not perceived by all.

Reflecting that it had probably been Johnny in the first place who had taught Nancy the “Robin Hood” doggerel with its anatomical references, the injustice of my present predicament involving the circled name of Mr. Balls stung all the worse. Pointing this out, however, might have tended to further implicate me, and Snortball was already prescribing what form of remediation was to be offered.

“Jack,” he continued, in his matter-of-fact manner, “you have exactly two choices. You can confess to my parents and yours that you did this to our phone book while you were with Nancy. This you must do by tomorrow morning at the latest. Or, right now, or tomorrow morning, before

school, with me as a witness, you can put snow into the mailbox on the corner. Should you choose that course of action, I will report you at once for tampering with U.S. mail—a federal offense that will remain on your record forever. You’ll probably be sent to reform school. You must choose, Jack—you must choose.”

That evening, my being was enveloped by a scarlet mist of guilt and the worst kind of anxiety. Unable to sleep, I reread *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, a favorite of mine. However, I found little solace. The torments of the anguished characters, which should have rendered my tribulation pale in comparison, somehow failed to assuage my abject distress. In the morning, I slipped out the side door to avoid Johnny.

Throughout the day, I tried to comfort myself with the knowledge that although I had chosen to endure the shame of being pilloried as a filthy-minded young beast, at least I would not be a felon.

Before dinner that evening, Mom summoned me. “I want you to run this bag of walnuts over to Libby (Mrs. Chuggle). Don’t be long, dinner’s almost ready.”

“Mom, I can’t—”

“Just hand them into her and get right back—your father’s hungry.”

Reflecting that the hour of doom was upon me, I sulked across the street. The light was on in the garage. Its door was open; a weird sort of whining, teenage, juvenile delinquent music that I had never heard was emanating from within. I later found that I had simply had my first exposure to “Louie Louie”, then riding high on the charts. I furtively tried to slip by, to the front door—but there was no getting around Snortball.

“What have you got there, Jack?”

“Walnuts, for your mom.”

“Give them to me. I’ll take them in. Uh, Jack...”

I steeled myself for the ax to fall.

“Um, Jack...Have you ever...I mean, with her being your sister and all....Have you ever happened to see...um, Clair’s, uh...boobs? I mean, in the bathroom or anything?”

*Clair’s boobs?* What did this have to do with my dreadful fate?

“Er...yeah,” I answered warily. Clair had moved out years earlier to become an X-ray technician. She was now engaged and getting married in the spring.

“Can you tell me what they’re like?”

“Oh, kind of pear-shaped, I guess...”

“Kind of pear-shaped...*kind of pear-shaped...*” Johnny’s eyes had glazed over, and he was looking strangely distant as he echoed me with warm emotion.

I opened my mouth to ask him when he intended to reveal the facts of my foul transgression, when—like the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus—I was struck dumb with the revelation that *he had forgotten about the whole thing!* The radio DJ remarked that “Louie Louie” was certainly a gasser, but that the “Beetles”—whoever they were—were coming. I reminded Johnny (if he was capable of hearing me), to take in the walnuts. Then I whirled and flew home with winged ankles.

## 5 — FAMILY MUSEUM

During my final year at Caledonia Elementary School, my parents seemed to have their own preoccupations. I would hear them up late, talking in anxious tones. On a cold afternoon in the early spring, Mom picked me up at school; we headed down to University Circle.

“Are we going to a museum?”

“No, Jack, we’re going to the VA hospital. Your brother’s there, now.”

“But I thought he was in New York.” Following an honorable discharge from the Navy, Bobby had landed a plum role as a folk singer in a Tennessee Williams drama in the Big Apple. We’d been very proud of him; Mom and Dad had gone up to see the show. “Is he hurt?”

“Robert is having emotional problems. Do you remember the Cuban Missile Crisis?”

“Yeah.” I could hardly forget—the consensus at school had been that universal doom was imminent.

“Well, they pulled him out of the ‘Blue Coats’ (Bobby had been in the elite Navy Band, performing for ambassadors and presidents) and placed him on guard duty, for which he was completely unqualified. There was a fire, and a killing, and later on in New York—oh, Jack, promise me that you’ll never use dope...”

“Dope?” I had never heard the funny word, but we had arrived.

I carried a box of things that Mom had prepared. We were checked in and taken down halls lined with windows that had wire inside of the glass, then, through heavy, secured, steel doors.

Bobby was wearing slippers and a sort of gown. He looked puffy and terribly different than he had a year earlier when he had been home for Christmas during his dramatic triumph. His normally gut-splitting jokes seemed feeble, but I laughed anyway, trying to help.

“Hey, remember when you tricked me about the ear lobes?” I asked him. He nodded and smiled, but it was plain that he and Mother had things to discuss. So I pulled my stack of baseball cards from my pocket and found a chair in another part of the large dayroom—ignoring the soap operas on TV, also, diverse unsettled souls who directed their attention towards or away from us with equally disturbing affectations.

It was easy to get lost in my Topps baseball cards for a simple reason: the most unimaginably rapturous, glorious, fortuitous, superlative, euphoric dream of dreams had come true—Colavito was coming home! Cleveland had early springtime pennant fever and was pinching itself continuously because of the miraculous return of “The Rock”! I was too young to be jaded about sports. I cared not that we’d traded our most gifted young pitcher and two others, and I was too naive to know that pitching, as they say, is truly ninety percent of the game. I was, like most of C-town, smitten because OUR LOVED ONE—ROCKY COLAVITO—WAS COMING HOME! I think I cried when I heard the news.

For me, it had started on a summer’s evening in ’59. The Elbon men: Dad, Bobby, Uncle Jack, and I, had gone to my first Big League ballgame. I little knew what I was in for, but looking back, as an experience, it probably ranked at least as highly as: my best-ever night of sex, sunrise at the Grand Canyon, hearing myself for the first time on the radio, my first kiss, skin diving in Jamaica, performing at the George Bernard Theatre in London, my first acid trip, feeling the first thrilling tickle of a fish on my line, my first Rolling Stones concert, seeing the Van Gogh paintings throbbing on their canvases in the Orangerie in the Tuileries Gardens, Halley’s Comet, *La Traviata* at Covent Garden, dating—for a time—the girl with the biggest tits in town, etc., etc.—I simply cannot overstate it.



Between them, my dad, brother, and uncle had seen ballgames featuring sundry eventual Hall of Famers, from Ruth and Gehrig to Ted Williams. Dad and Uncle Jack had grown up near the smoky city, where most of them had come to play the Pirates. Here, at Cleveland Municipal Stadium, they'd seen Bob Feller, Larry Doby, Joe DiMaggio—Rocky Colavito's self-proclaimed inspiration—and, on that very night in '59, we'd all see Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra, and the Yanks!

Although our titanic 80,000 seat stadium overlooking the azure lake was not full, it was the largest concentration of humanity that I'd ever seen. The grass of the diamond was the greenest west of Ireland. The smells of cigars, roasted peanuts, and hot dogs were more intoxicating than Chanel Number Five on Sophia Loren. Percy McKeon, who went to our church, was an usher; he upgraded our tickets, seating us very near to the front row of the right-field line, mere yards from Rocky Colavito! Although possibly buffed by the aura of his fame and great talent, Rocky was the most handsome man I'd ever seen. He had a cleft chin, huge forearms, and jet black hair. He was Valentino, Apollo, Hector, and Achilles in one. Like the last, a foot affliction rendered him human—Rocky suffered from unusually flat feet. Nothing that one would notice, looking at him, but those feet kept him from the military draft and kept him in right field, rather than center, where speed is critical. But his right arm was a bazooka, as we would witness in the third inning, when he threw an eighty-yard strike to home plate, putting out a runner from second—his body parallel to the ground after the release.

Modest and gentlemanly off the field, he was a flashy devil on, with patent mannerisms that would seem gaudy in any other, but natural for Rocky. At the plate, he would, between pitches, slowly and repeatedly point his big bat right at the pitcher's head, while scowling ominously. The crowd would go mad, and it seemed to work on the pitchers, too, because he was among the

home run leaders, season after season. Once he even hit four in one game—still an unsurpassed record. On our night, he smashed two, bettering Mantle who slammed one (batting left), and all of the other Yanks.

In the field, after he'd gotten beneath any fly ball, he made it a point to pound his glove with his right fist before making the catch, endearing him to his fans all the more.

But the Rock was not the only brilliantly colorful character on our team that year. In fact, playing for us was one of the most complex, driven, clutch players in baseball history—also a Golden Glove award winner: Jim Pearsall. I knew nothing about it at the time, but Jimmy Pearsall's courageous autobiography, *Fear Strikes Out*, tells of how he overcame the intense stress and resulting psychosis that his life in pro sports had generated within him. (By the time of my visit to Bobby in the VA ward, I had, in fact, read *Fear Strikes Out* and was, thus, not entirely unexposed to the fine edge that genius walks.)

On that night in '59, with the score tied in the ninth, Mantle hit a long line drive to right-center that seemed to just rise and rise. Jimmy Pearsall had to race back and back while veering towards right. Rocky had the sense to defer, but it looked hopeless; the ball had just too much velocity and, seemingly, height. At that time, the Cleveland outfield had a long, gradually curving, fence that demarcated the home run line. The go-ahead run was racing for home. All seemed lost, but Jim Pearsall got there somehow, put his right hand on the fence, lifted his body superhumanly high, looked back over his shoulder, and snared the rocket in the web of his glove. I can close my eyes and still see it, more than half a century later. Dad and Uncle Jack said they'd never seen a greater catch, and they recalled Willie Mays making his against the tribe, in the '54 World Series.

To Cleveland's agony, Rocky Colavito had been traded the following winter. I had remained an Indians fan, but our hero was gone. For five years we had been wandering in the wilderness. But now, the miracle—Rocky was coming home!

I continued to devour the statistics on the backs of my cherished bubble gum cards. We were placing a lot of hope in our ace lefty, "Sudden" Sam McDowell, who had been a strikeout king again last season. He too would succumb to his human side; his romance with fine whiskey would take a toll on his spectacular talent. Years later, Sam Malone of the TV series *Cheers* was said to be modeled on Sudden Sam McDowell.

I had been present at the pitching debut of Luis Tiant, our crafty righty from Cuba. I was reflecting that the photo on his card did not capture his wily essence, when—

"Aaaahhhhhmmmmmm...."

What the heck? Startled, I realized that a dark-skinned man had occupied the chair next to mine. But he wasn't sitting on it—he was squatting, with his feet up on its seat, staring at me intently with beet-red eyes. On his head, he was wearing a white cloth, wrapped like a turban...

"AaahhhMMMMMMMMMMMM!" he moaned, even more loudly—I pulled away, alarmed!

"Somthin'....somthin'...SOMETHIN'! SOMETHIN' has crawled up inside o' me..."

I looked around, frantically...Where in the heck was Mom? Where in the hell was Bobby?

"SOMETHIN' HAS CRAWLED UP INSIDE O' ME AND DAHD!" (Died)

"Oh, uh...sorry..."

"Yassuh! Somethin' has FO' SHO' CRAWLED UP INSIDE O' ME AND DAHD!!!!!"

"Er, I..."

“Ah am tellin’ you... AH AM TELLIN’ *YOU!*... SOMETHIN’ HAS—YES, INDEED—CRAWLED UP INSIDE O’—”

“O.K., Luther, time for meds. A large, white-coated man with one eyebrow had arrived.

“Y’all GOT to get this hea’ thing...this hea’ THING THAT HAS GOTTEN ITSELF UP INSIDE O’ ME AND D—”

“Come along, Luther...you’re disturbing our guests.” Blessedly, Luther allowed himself to be led away, just as Mom and Bobby returned.

“Holy, Jeez...where were you? That guy scared me!”

“Oh, he’s harmless, Jack,” said Bobby. “You should meet some of the others. All I can tell you is that if you ever think you’re going nuts, the nuthouse might be the worst place to get sane again.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, and I’m pleased to see that the lobes on your ears have not gotten any bigger—there may be hope that you will have a few more good years...”

“Balls,” I grinned, glad that Bobby seemed a bit more upbeat; he’d even remembered one of his old pranks that had become a family joke.

I had been about four years old, making him fourteen at the time. Mom and Dad had been entertaining guests downstairs. Bobby and I had been playing a game of Old Maid, using the 1930’s Parker Brothers deck with the amazing, vividly colored characters. There were two cards each of: Nosey Newser (the scowling editor, up to his chin in glue pots), Tubby Tooter (the Fat Clarinet player), Gloomy Gus (a hateful old man), Flatfoot Floogy (the police dick), Steppin’ Sam and Sassiety Sal (well-dressed colored folks), Buster Bottle (the noisy milkman), Cranky

Cluck (the crabby schoolteacher who foreshadowed some that I'd one day meet), and, of course, just the one card of The Old Maid, done up in her pearls, fan, and pinkish-orange hair.

I'd won two games in a row and was feeling quite full of myself, when Bobby, staring at me intently, said: "Oh, no..."

"Oh, no what?"

"No, dear lord, no..."

"WHAT?"

"Jack...come over here, into the light..."

"Why?"

"I need to get a closer look...I only hope and pray..."

"Hey, what are you doing? Leave my ears alone—"

"No, lord...not my baby brother...Not my own, precious baby brother! But it's true...it's true!"

"What's true?"

"Jack...I hardly know how to tell you..."

"Tell me what?"

"It hurts me to have to tell you this, but now there can be no doubt."

"No doubt? About what?"

"Poor Mom...It'll kill her..."

"WHAT? WHAT? WHAT?"

"Jack... you have LOBES—ON YOU EARS!"

"Lobes?"

"Yes, earlobes."

“No, I don’t!”

“I’m afraid that you do, Jack. I’m afraid you do.”

“So what?”

“Well, Jack...I’m afraid that it means you’re going to die.”

“NO!”

“Yes, beyond a SHADOW of a doubt...this means you’re going to die.”

“Nuts. I’m gonna ask Mom and Dad.”

“You can’t go down there now...they’re having a party...”

But before he could stop me, I’d run downstairs. Mom and Dad, who were very social people, were having a card party—their Five Hundred (rummy) club. But they were apparently between games; the men were smoking up a storm and talking about sports and politics; the ladies were just gabbling, as usual. They began to fuss and coo over me, but Mom interjected: “Jackie, why are you down here? We already decided that this is a big people’s party and that you’d stay upstairs with Bobby.”

“Mom, do I have earlobes?”

“Do you have—what?”

“Lobes on my ears—Bobby says I do...”

“Well, yes, dear, you do—”

“WAAAAAAAAOOOAAHHHHHHHHHH!” The men dropped their cigars, and the ladies broke off their gossip in mid-scandal.

“Jackie!—”

“WHOOOOOAAAGHHHHHHHHHH Am I going to die?”

“Are you going to die?”

“YES—AM I GOING TO DIE???”

“Well, of course, dear, someday, but someday everybody is going to—”

“WAAAAGHAAAAAGHOOOOOOAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

Dad was, by then, at the foot of the stairs: “Robert....ROBERT!” he hollered, uncertain about details, but hip to Bobby’s habitual lines of jive. True to form, Bobby responded first with innocence, then with righteous indignation: “Holy Crow...I was only trying to acquaint Jack with some basic facts regarding human physiology and the basically ephemeral nature of all living—”

“Never mind any of that, *Buster*,” stormed Dad. “Just forget about your canteen dance on Friday night. And you can spend tomorrow sweeping and cleaning out the garage.”

By that time, I had been mollified with punch, cake, and bridge mix. The card party resumed, and I fell asleep on the couch, with a good deal of ambiguity remaining, in the minds of most, regarding the entire incident.

However, there at the VA hospital, in spite of his attempt at lightheartedness, through the recalling of the (retrospectively) funny incident, Bobby’s present situation made smiling difficult.

Since we were down in the same vicinity, Mom suggested that we head for a museum. It always seemed like a good way to chase the blues, something we both badly needed on that gray afternoon. She stopped at a candy store and purchased a large box of pecan turtles. The lagoon in front of the art museum was frozen over. Rodin’s *Thinker*, by the front steps, looked as if he was dreadfully cold, too. The museums were free, back in those days. Dad was on a business trip, so we would probably eat dinner at the fine museum cafeteria. In the marble entry hall, another bronze sculpture—that of an archer, poised to shoot—reminded us of another joke. The figure’s

extended, muscular body was positioned in such a way that his left leg was raised, and extended far before him, with his foot positioned high upon a rock, as he prepared to release his shaft. Entering on another day, we had heard a small boy remark: “Look—that man is going to shoot his own foot!”

Today we skip the rather gloomy armor room with its tapestries and my shocking Titian, featuring Diana with her nymphs and the horny satyrs. In the high, glass-ceiling atrium, with its palms, brick walls, and enormous pipe organ, opaque light filtered in; it was almost possible to forget the grim winter outside. Mother found a chair and sat down with her writing paper and her never-finished correspondence. Equipped with four turtles, I headed off into the kaleidoscope of space and time.

For the past year, on Saturday mornings here at the museum, Mom had had me enrolled in a loosely structured drawing and art appreciation class. Rafts of older grade school kids, such as I, would be given a thin, flat board, paper, pencils, colored chalk, and a small folding stool. After a brief talk about an artist, style, or period, we would then be sent forth, simply to draw. My talent for direct representation was very limited. But we were never graded or belabored with the endless harangues given at school. We were encouraged to copy or to otherwise reflect upon any of the limitless possibilities that were everywhere. Hindu Goddesses with eight arms! Discus-throwing Greeks, with rippling muscles and anatomically correct genitalia. Renoir’s nubile maidens, frolicking in their bath! It seemed funny that the beauty of human physical nature, held in low esteem at church on Sunday mornings—and, by Mom, when it came to *Playboy* magazine—was exalted within this temple.

On that late afternoon, I just wandered. I was too drained from seeing Bobby to think very hard about anything. Looking at exquisite furniture from the Age of Enlightenment, I noticed



that it seemed to have been far better made, without the help of power tools, than our contemporary desks and cabinets. In the same gallery, miniatures of Napoleon pouted and posed, reminding me of simpering photos of Elvis. I had to remind myself that the foppish general had been no pantywaist, leading charges and having horse after horse shot from beneath him. In a large oil on impossibly smooth canvas, Cupid with lavish, silky feathered wings reclined with a staggeringly beautiful Psyche—both naked as a peach. The serenity of their smiles kindled, within me, a longing for such romantic contentment, although its attainment seemed as likely as my being able to reach up and touch the planets.

During the previous autumn, Dad had noticed (*“Dad! Dad! Out in the yard! One squirrel is giving another squirrel a piggy-back ride!”*) that, unlike my precocious brother, I was a late bloomer. He gave me a peculiar look and, looking terribly uncomfortable, sat me down to do his best to explain what was what and what went where.

“Well, you see son, a man puts, what he has...where a woman—his wife, that is—doesn’t have...and, using...um, what he has...he plants his seeds...”

“Seeds?” (I was envisioning watermelon seeds.) “But Dad—what if he misses?”

Dad looked twice as uncomfortable as he had. “Oh, well, you see son...a man actually puts what he has, *into*, where a woman—*his wife, that is*—doesn’t...uh...have...with what he has...to plant those seeds.”

*Dad’s gone crazy!* I said to myself as he did his best to communicate this most startling of revelations.

“Bobby never told you any of this?”

“No, Dad.”

“Well, now you know.”

“But Dad,” I ask, skeptically, “why would the man *do* something like that?”

“Well, to make a baby.”

“A BABY?”

“Yes! He plants those seeds to make a baby.”

“Well, alright, if you say so,” I’d replied, thinking that I’d really have to look into this a good deal further.

Subsequently, Teddy Klonz and I had spent hours and hours, walking around our block, trying to piece together elusive particulars relative to the subject.

Now, gazing at the painting, although I was certainly no expert, I could better appreciate the serene nature of the lover’s smiles. With a sigh, I traipsed on, gnawing at the third of my four pecan turtles. Through a window, I noticed that the winter darkness was already descending. I decided to head for the modern art wing, with its melting clocks and floating eyes. Then I’d have to find Mom, so we could head for the cafeteria.

“Hi, Jack.” Startled, I turned—it was Carol Byrd!—a girl from my class at school.

“Carol! What are you doing here?”

“Oh, Ron is doing a project for his history class at Shaw, and he let me tag along. I love the Egyptian room, especially the onyx cats.”

“Aren’t you afraid a mummy will get you? Hey, everybody’s always wondering about the mummies...but what about the daddies? There must have been daddy mummies, too...”

To my amazement, Carol was actually laughing at my stupid pun. I had never considered her to be one of the top beauties, but that afternoon, something in the way that her nose and eyes sort of crinkled up when she smiled, I found to be most enchanting. Her hair was not exotic, glossy black like Tamara Boxhorn’s, or gossamer, golden blonde like that of Jessica Price; but

for the first time, I noticed the pretty way that her brown tresses fell down onto her forehead and curled behind her ears. She wasn't one of the great brains either and had never seemed stuck up.

"Jack, you haven't been coming to dance class after school on Thursdays—"

"Shhhh!—my Mom is around here somewhere, and I don't want her to know."

"Don't you like them?"

"Oh, they're all right. But Breen usually convinces me that it's a drag, and he gets me to ditch out to play football or box or something. Did you hear that Cassius Clay is going to fight Sonny Liston again, pretty soon?"

"I don't like those greasy boxers—especially that Cassius Clay with his big mouth. Miss Clarke is letting us play more of Herman's Hermits and the Beatles, now," Carol continued, referring to the dance instructor.

"Really? When I went, she just had us doing the box step and the jitterbug."

"What groups do you like, Jack?" James Breen, my newest and best friend, was somewhat of a music snob. He had me listening to jazz, and I still liked the Tijuana Brass; I'd collected most of their albums.

But remembering hearing some records at my Cousin Peggy's in Pennsylvania, I answered, uncertainly: "Uh, the Rolling Stones..."

"Really? They're so ugly..."

"Yeah, but their music is really great, though. Hey, do you want a turtle?"

"Oooohh, I love turtles."

"These, that my mom likes are with pecans instead of the usual walnut ones."

"Mmmmm...Why did your mom pull you out of school early today?"

"Oh, uh...I had an eye appointment."

“I may have to get glasses too, but I really don’t want to. Why do you keep your hair cut so short, Jack?”

“Oh, well—I thought I might play football at Kirk next year if I’m big enough.”

“Better stick to playing your horn in the band, Elbon,” interjected Ronald Byrd, who had arrived to round up his younger sister. “Those jungle bunnies at Kirk and Shaw will bat your ears off.”

“I can tackle, though—I could be a linebacker. And I can run. They could make me a safety...”

“Stick to your horn, Elbon. Stick to your horn. That’s what your family’s always done best. Hell, your brother’s a legend.”

“Bye, Jack,” said Carol. “See you tomorrow.”

“See ya.” I resolved that, regardless of Breen, I would be at dance class the following week.

It wasn’t to be, though. In fact, just finishing the sixth grade at all would be the best I could do. Backpedaling after a high fly ball in an early spring softball game, I tripped and fell backward, painfully fracturing my right wrist. A hand-to-elbow cast forced me to learn to write with my left hand so that I could pass my courses.

## 6 — PUPS AND PIGSKINS

When the cast finally came off, early in the summer, the doctor told us that playing football in the fall at Kirk Jr. High would be completely out of the question. This was an awful letdown because our town that year was at the glorious pinnacle of the football universe. Unlike my beloved, but usually fifth-place Indians, the Cleveland Browns were world champs, with perhaps the greatest player in football history on our team!

Near the end of the preceding December, Breen had grown insistent regarding the approaching NFL championship game with the heavily favored Baltimore Colts.

“Upper deck tickets are just ten dollars—we can be there!”

“Where would I get ten bucks?” The sum seemed enormous, especially at such short notice.

“Borrow it from your Press route.” There were ways to re-appropriate money owed to the *Cleveland Press* to one’s own pockets for limited periods of time, but such embezzlements were risky and much forbidden.

“Everyone says the Brownies are going to lose, anyway...”

“The bull if they are! Not with Jim Brown. And it’ll be freezing cold that day. The Colts can’t stand the kind of cold we have up here.” It was true that opposing teams were sometimes overwhelmed by the wicked, subzero winds that swept into our colossal stadium, which sat on the shore of the grim, gray lake.

“How are you going to get the money?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get it,” said the Breenzer. “I’m telling you, this is the one chance of your life, to be in on something this great!”

Dad was no help. He was driving out to Uncle Jack's, outside of city limits where the game wasn't blacked out by the network, to watch it on TV. Ten dollars for just one football ticket, much less twenty for two (plus parking), had he been inclined to take us, was way more than he cared to unbelt for. Mom was against it too: "Those boys are too young to ride the 'Rapid Transit' all that way. What if it storms again?" But it was decided that if we could raise the money, plus the transit fare, we might attend.

We ran our financial problem past Johnny Chuggle, who was now a high school freshman. "Save your money. Even with Jim Brown and 'The Toe', the Browns'll get creamed." Lou 'The Toe' Groza was our record-holding, can't-miss kicker. A big galoot, he could play offensive tackle, as well.

When we convinced old Snortball that we were intent on going, he was fertile in the idea department. "Well, whatcha' could do, would be to plant a cherry bomb or M-80, with a cigarette fuse, in a trash can close to one of the gates. When it explodes, the attendants will run towards the sound, and you can use the distraction to slip in. Nobody will see you, especially if you time it to go off just after the kickoff when the crowd is mostly inside."

I was horrified, but to my relief, Breen, who was sort of a straight-arrow type in some ways, objected. "Well, we don't have any cigarettes or cherry bombs, and we wouldn't have seats to go to—there'll be none empty for a big game like this one. No, we've gotta earn the money, somehow—and fast, 'cause the game is in eight days."

Johnny and his dad (Ed, "Pearly" Chuggle—Mr. Chuggle, to us), were the types who rose with the sun to read and reread every line of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, starting with the sports and ending with the personals. They even read the legal notices. This gave Johnny another idea:

“The big dog show is downtown this weekend. I’ve made good money carting dogs, in their crates or cages, up from the lower level parking garage to the main floor, where the show is.”

“Carting them?”

“Yeah...All you need is some little means of conveyance. You can make a dolly by nailing old roller skates or buggy wheels to four boards. You can make a handle, with rope. Those dog owners come from all over. They’re loaded, and they tip really well. Hell, I’ll go too! I’ve almost got enough for my GTO when I’m sixteen, but I’m still short.”

I marveled to myself how some guys were natural money magnets. In any case, it sounded more reasonable than the cherry bomb scheme, so Breen and I headed off to build our dollies with whatever lumber and wheels we could scrounge.

Saturday morning, Dad and Pearly—always pleased to see capitalistic enterprise—drove us downtown. As always, they were full of pithy advice: “Don’t let those colored boys, who are bound to be there too, muscle you out. But don’t get into fights with them either—they’ll oftentimes be toting razors. Better to come home live chickens than dead heroes.”

The competition, however, wasn’t too fierce among us touts, there in the vast parking garage beneath the huge convention center. There were maybe twenty of us all together, and the incoming dog people just kept coming and coming in their big cars, hotel limos, taxis, and station wagons. We ascended in ramps and elevators to a world I’d never seen! Red carpets were everywhere. Velvet ropes and fencing delineated show areas, grooming areas, waiting areas, viewing areas, judging areas, awarding areas, and pooping areas which the dogs often failed to observe. There were bars and dining facilities and, of course, every size and shape of man’s best friend—not to mention dog’s best servants—their owners. Many seemed to be rather big-hammed ladies who felt compelled to stuff themselves into tight, tweedy outfits. But as

predicted, their servile husbands tipped well, usually a quarter but occasionally a fifty-cent piece, before seeking the solace of the wet bars. As busy as I was, I vaguely noticed that Johnny—ever the hustler—was forming a sort of an alliance with the main dog show guy, who had a lot of clout regarding the complex operations of the main floor.

Down below again, Breen and I carefully loaded our dollies. I was ready to roll with a big hound of some sort, and he had gingerly stacked three cages, each with a little Shih Tzu, “Pom”, or similar foo-foo dog within. The matronly lady who was their owner was clad in a heavy white fur coat—it was bitterly cold outside—of stylish cut. Hubby was about to depart in the chariot, to dutifully park—but wait! In the manner of all womankind, she had forgotten her gloves or something. Hubby braked, and she turned away from her pampered little beasts. The bug-eyed rascal in the top cage promptly elevated a hind leg, letting fly a surprisingly copious jet of amber, number-one fluid directly at the back of the pale (ermine?), fashionably-cut fur coat of his mistress and meal ticket! Within those first critical milliseconds, my jaw, as well as Breen’s, fell a foot; our eyes locked, registering the single urgent question—should we raise an alarm? Since the font seemed as if it were going to have staying power, and because it seemed likely that she’d spin on her heel, becoming drenched in front as well as in the back (jeopardizing our tips?), our cries remained frozen in our throats. What she didn’t know might not hurt her—at least for a while.

Johnny, being a couple of years older, had assumed the role of foreman. “Uh...hey, buddy! Your fare is the one after this one...we were next, here.” He had no trouble dealing with the sometimes encroachingly overeager black gentlemen who were also working the show. By and by, when the incoming pooches and people started to dwindle, he said, “Come on, upstairs...I’ve got it fixed.” We were each given a maroon jacket with phony brass buttons, a broom, and a



long-handled scooping device. We stayed busy but were allowed to watch. Admiring the skills of the working and herding breeds, I realized that there was much more to the canine species than dragging their owners around on leashes, or barking all night in the yard until being brought inside.

We returned to the show on Sunday and, following our weekend of work, we were able to head to the Stadium box office to procure upper deck tickets for the world championship NFL game. Even after paying the outlandish price of ten dollars, we had dough left over from our dog show earnings.

Although like most in our neighborhood, we were ambivalent about colored people, fullback Jim Brown was a major deity in our pantheon. With his high cheekbones and imperviousness to all pain and punishment, we figured he was maybe a quarter Indian. Season after season, he carried the Browns—who we felt should have been named for him—on his mighty, mighty shoulders. Unlike Rocky Colavito, who stayed for hours after games to sign autographs, he seemed to care little for the fans, the team owners, or for public opinion of any sort.

“You know that Jim Brown wanged that girl,” said Johnny, with shocking directness, regarding a paternity suit against our hero which was raging in the newspapers.

“Well, I guess a guy like him would have a lot of temptations coming his way,” observed Breen. “The girl might be lying, though, to get at some of his money.”

“The players don’t really get paid all that much by their skinflint Jew owners,” replied Snortball, with characteristic candor. “Not even Jim Brown.”

Following one of his amazing, grueling, grinding yardage gains—festooned with gorillas from the opposing defense—Jim Brown would rise slowly and walk to the huddle, conserving

every atom of power that he would need again in a few short seconds. No intelligent coach was fool enough to force him to appear to hustle, after a carry. Not that Jim would have, anyway.

On the great day (thirty-four degrees, with the wind chill making it seem more like twenty-three), the game was scoreless at the half. The great John Unitas had been smothered; but so too had our Dr. Frank Ryan (maybe the most underrated quarterback in football history), along with his favorite targets of Paul Warfield and Gary Collins. “The toe” was bootless. Even Jim Brown struggled.

In the second half, though, Ryan began to hit—Collins (game M.V.P.), three times, in the end zone. Groza kicked two three-pointers. Dick Modzelewski and our defensive assassins were impervious. Final score: Browns: twenty-seven, Colts: zero.

As the game was winding down, Snortball shoved someone else’s partially-eaten hot dog down to the lower level and onto a lady’s head, defiling her beige pillbox hat with ketchup and relish. I’m afraid I flipped a few peanut shells, too. We were somehow discovered; two burly ushers informed us that we were leaving, but that was OK with me, since I was frozen like a mackerel, and we beat the rush. Part of me regretted having spent my ten hard-won dollars on a game that had turned out to be a blowout.

\* \* \* \* \*

But Breen had been right—it was a once-in-a lifetime thing. Also, telling young people (*“You mean there wasn’t always a Super Bowl?”*) about it now, is a reliable way of getting excused to go to bed.

## 7 — EUCLID BEACH PARK

The arm-length cast came off of my badly busted wrist, and a new, shorter one was installed, as the summer dragged on. We were nervous, 'cause Junior High School was a big deal, with a homeroom, lockers, various classes, subjects, periods, and a cafeteria, etc. Coincidentally, Breen's father was the assistant principal at that temple of doom, and my friend was determined to prove himself both academically and on the gridiron. My fracture, lackluster grades, and prowess with the slip-horn pretty much ensured that I'd be a band rat instead. James Breen's pressures were pretty strong. A large eighth-grader named "Buck" from down the hill and the other side of Euclid Avenue had been widely quoted as having said: "Ah'm gonna knock the slop out of Mr. Bree-enz's little boeh!" As James' best friend, I knew that I'd catch my share, too. I'd shed my illusions of being a warrior. The previous summer at the swimming pool, after I'd picked a fight with another skinny kid from a rival group of guys, I'd lost my courage between the shower and the parking lot. When it came time to exchange fisticuffs, my knees had actually knocked—and he was a scamp compared to who we'd be meeting up with at Kirk!

Come July, my right arm was finally free of plaster, but somewhat thin and frail. It was East Cleveland Day at Euclid Beach Park, and our whole city (East Cleveland is a separate city from Cleveland) was attending. Euclid Beach was an amusement park of the grand old sort. No fly-by-night carnival rides there, but massive, massive, perennial contrivances designed to fire every possible human emotion. On the Ferris wheel, in the great dance pavilions, and in the "Laugh in the Dark", romance reigned. In the penny arcades dwelt competitive spirit—Mom and I were crazy for "Skee-ball"; others were greedy for sawdust-filled, gimcrack prizes. Some of the rides were thrilling and dangerous, even stomach-churning. The kid's rides, too, were brilliant in their

sensory detail, and it was not uncommon to see adults on them. Not only did we have a carousel with gloriously carved horses and exotic animals, but a racing-go-round where we became jockeys, in fierce competition. Best was the fast-galloping Western Pony Express, where each rider was equipped with a heavy hog-leg revolver. At various intervals in our revolutions, an ugly bandit or depraved Comanche would menace from behind a rock or cactus. If we aimed well, the miscreant would light up with an immensely satisfying CLANG!

The funhouse was a chapel of dementia. On either side of its exterior stood gap-toothed, fleshy Laughing Sal and her kooked-out hubby, whose name I no longer remember. Their helpless, infinite chortles honked out of brassy speakers and across the universe. Gals foolish enough to embark in skirts while crossing a bridge-like structure across the front of the place were violated by rude, loudly hissing blasts of air from below, exposing to all their legs, stockings, garters, and panties. Startling metal mice whizzed around one's ankles. Massively stacked barrels teetered and threatened to crush all who would pass them. Objects sprang out and mirrors distorted.

The Laugh in the Dark was even scarier—we floated in tiny boats through stygian channels. My dream of dreams was to one day make the voyage with some darling girl who felt compelled to cling tightly to me, her fearless protector.

The saltwater taffy, popcorn balls, custard, and cotton candy, all were freshly pulled, stuck together, frozen, or spun right before you. The calliope music was from a real calliope. The dance halls featured swing bands, polka bands, and all sorts of music.

Breen was still in his misogynistic phase, and I, myself, falsely professed to be of the same persuasion. “Are you coming down to the beach, Jack?” asked Carol Byrd, whom we had encountered with Tamara Boxhorn, their bathing suits wrapped in towels.

Before I could answer, Breen abruptly said, “We have other plans.” Then he turned on his heel and strode off. Not knowing what else to do, I shot at them with a mini squirt gun, with which I had been surreptitiously vexing park patrons. The girls ran off squealing; but Carol’s innocent query rekindled within me the cherished hope that she and I were mutual, secret admirers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Years earlier, Bobby had been my older, all-knowing, Euclid Beach mentor. A profligate spender, he always had ribbons and ribbons of the nickel tickets that could be used in so many ways. Certain rides were off-limits to small ones, such as I had, then, been. I had pined for the opportunity to embark on the “Flying Turns”—by all accounts, the most blood-curdling of the park’s three titanic roller coasters.

“The ‘Turns’ are like no other coaster,” Bobby had explained. “As small as you are, you’d likely be thrown out and cut to ribbons by the wheels of the next car. How would I explain that to Mom? Ya see, most roller coasters just stay on their tracks. But with the Flying Turns, way up there above the trees, there are curved wooden shoots that the cars tear through, sideways. Their momentum just carries them, and little guys like you would fly out. Come on—let’s try the Dodgem cars. They’re safer, somewhat.” He sat me between his legs, and for ten rapturous minutes, I aggressively slammed us around the polished floor, bashing and being bashed, most satisfyingly.

Next, I begged, “Let’s go on the ‘Rotor’!”

“No, Jack...you’re gonna be too small for that one too. But there’s an observation deck; we can go in and watch.”

The Rotor was a building that contained a monstrous, vertically positioned, spinning drum. Patrons filed in, then stood in a circle with their backs flat against the cylinder’s vinyl-padded, inner curve. For just one ticket apiece, Bobby and I were granted admission to the observation deck above. By the admission window, there was a horizontal line posted, which designated a minimum height requirement for riding the Rotor. At that point in time, I had been too short by half. Even as observers, the tension had been palpable.

“What makes the people stick to the walls, Bobby?”

“Centrifugal force. That’s how, if you spin a can of water above you on a looped rope handle, the water won’t spill out if it’s going fast enough.”

“Oh.”

“But I’ve got to tell you, Jack, that while this ride is safe for the vast majority of people, who will stick like they’re supposed to, a tiny percentage have something different in their physiological makeup—in their gravitational center—which prevents them from hanging up there on the wall like they’re supposed to. It’s an awful thing.”

“What happens to them?”

“Well, they don’t stick; they slide down and are ground up in the huge gears, down below. Euclid Beach spends thousands on insurance and settling lawsuits every year over people who die that way or who wind up in the treetops by the Flying Turns.” Even as he was sharing these dreadful revelations, ominous rumblings could be heard, deep in the bowels of the infernal machine. The lights dimmed dramatically, as all available electricity flowed to its awful motor.

Slowly at first, then faster and faster, the huge tube and the people began to whirl. With a suddenness that made my gut drop along with it, the floor fell away! Some of the rider's faces were pale green; others were blue. One lady's dress had flown up, over her face, and she vainly struggled to get it back down. A strange rictus had frozen the features of others. But all were indeed stuck like flies on flypaper...weren't they? Yes, even the fat ones...BUT WAIT—one slender, bald-headed, gentleman of short stature was lower than the others. His head was at chest level of most. "Bobby! That one man—"

"Yes, I know," my brother responded, grimly. Even as the Rotor picked up speed, the bald-headed man was definitely slipping! There was no denying that his head was now at belt level of the other spinning people! Horror seemed to be registering on his face, too, as he seemed to be desperately digging in with his heels and elbows.

"BOBBY!"

"Yes, I'm afraid he's a goner, poor devil. It's something in his internal density."

(Half a century later, Mom, who by then was in her early nineties, yet sharp as a razor, was discussing me with my lovely—but like myself, no spring chicken—lady friend. As mothers are apt to do with wives or sweethearts of their sons, she was embarrassingly describing my early childhood. "He was a *chickenhearted* little boy," she stated bluntly. "When Roy Rogers would get into trouble on television, he'd run into another room." It was true. At that age, I had a lot of empathy for all, especially those in desperate trouble).

So seeing the man clearly sliding, a trail of slippery sweat above him, towards his grisly doom, I, true to form, simply closed my eyes. This wasn't even TV—this was real! I just could not look.

After an eternity, the hum of the machinery slowed. I heard a deep sliding whoosh—perhaps it was the big, round floor, coming back up. Excited voices came up from below and around me.

“WHAT HAPPENED?”

“Oh, well...you should have seen...somebody threw up, and due to the weird vacuum created by the centrifugal field within the internal vortex, the person’s vomit just hovered there in the middle of the chamber, and then it—”

“NO! NO! WHAT HAPPENED TO THE MAN WHO WAS SLIDING DOWN?!!!”

“Well, just as he was being sucked into the abyss, they threw a special hook down in his direction. I think he may have gotten hold of it, and that, definitely, he was possibly not crushed—but it’s hard to say. In any case, they’ll never let any word get out about it. Hey, are you hungry? I am. Do you know that the hot dogs at the beach pavilion, not far from here, are really good? They have sauerkraut and pretzels too...”

\* \* \* \* \*

Years later, as Breen and I traipsed along among the same rides, gobbling frozen custard, I told him the story, omitting only a few parts. “We’ll go on The Rotor later,” he responded, unconcerned. “Don’t worry, I have an iron stomach. Here’s the Penny Arcade. Wow, look...you can win Rat Finks!”

At Miller’s drug store, on Taylor Road, was a gumball machine which dispensed unbelievably desirable plastic figurines of the West Coast street-rod icon, Rat Fink. There was a mania, there in our rust belt town, for all things having to do with California, surfing—we usually had to stick with the sidewalk type due to Lake Erie’s rocky break walls—and hot rod



art. Guys took to wearing iron crosses on chains as they sailed along on their skateboards with a transistor radio held to an ear, tuned to the wailing harmonies of the Beach Boys. I'd collected nearly, but not quite every, available color of the beloved potbellied rodent with his shrug and guilty grin. Soon, there at the penny arcade, I'd allowed myself to be swindled out of more tickets than I'd intended, pitching darts at balloons to finally acquire a greatly coveted two-inch baby blue bit of plastic with an intrinsic value of maybe one-tenth of a cent. We squandered even more on Skee-ball and then realized that it was now or never, for the big rides.

We debated the merits of the three coasters and decided it had to be the Flying Turns. The line was long, and the screams emanating from far atop its complex trestles were disquieting. Breen was nonchalant, however, referring again to his cast iron gut, and I did my best to assume a similar air. We each passed the height requirement and paid with our tickets.

Slowly, with a deep disturbing rumble, our car (or coffin?) was brought up by a greasy-looking guy who worked a massive lever. We were seated. A restraining bar was lowered onto our laps, irrevocably latching with a deep, dreadful *ka-chunk*. After a fretful minute's wait, the chain drive began its rhythmic clatter, and we began our exquisitely maddening, long ascent. I thought of Mom and Mrs. Chuggle, in some shady pavilion far below. There, if not for my foolishness, I could be safely relaxing, feasting on baked beans, deviled eggs, sandwiches, and cool lemonade—hearing only the soothing drone of the nonstop raffle prize drawing announcements, rather than the torture of the clanking chain!

Finally, we crested the peak of the mountain of wood and iron. We hung there at the top for a long, bladder-challenging moment...

Then: "YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

We seemed to be falling straight down! But in the manner of all roller coasters, we swooped back up and tore onward, driven exclusively by Newtonian physics. As Bobby had described, all those years ago, this coaster was unique for its highly polished, bowling alley-tight, tongue-and-groove curved wooden channels, through which our car now flew. We thundered along at impossible angles, practically sideways, first one way and then the other! I remembered Bobby's grisly accounts of mangled bodies in the treetops and, with eyes closed, began to repent of my sins: *"I'm sorry I stole change from Dad's dresser! I'm sorry I tried to peek into the girl's locker room at the pool! Forgive me for cheating on the math test last May..."* But now, blessedly, we were upright again and slowing down.

My panic turned to self-congratulation. What a man I must be, to have survived such a trial—the most frightening ride at Euclid Beach! Enhancing my glory, Breen, immediately upon disembarking, lost the popcorn, cotton candy, and custard that he had consumed earlier. "I don't get it," he gasped... "Normally...normally I have—"

"—Yeah, an iron stomach. Come on, let's get cleaned up and find some shade."

We made it to the little forest close to the beach and ran into Tamara and Carol, who appeared to have acquired sunburns. Without making any direct reference to the effect of the Flying Turns on Breen, who was still looking pale, I gave, with feigned modesty, an account of my heroic mastery of the devilish ride.

"Weren't you scared at all?" asked Carol.

"Hell, no. It's just a rolley coaster, like any other." Tamara—in spite of the way that she was filling out her one-piece bathing suit—frowned at my cussing, being Salvation Army. But Carol—who, I noticed with great interest, was also showing some little curves—looked suitably impressed, so I plunged forward. "I'm thinking of going on the Rotor next. Wanna come?"

“Uh, I’m about outta tickets,” Breen demurred.

“I think I got sunburned,” remarked Tamara. “I don’t think I want to rub my back against that leather—or whatever it’s made of—wall you get pressed up against.”

“Me neither,” Carol agreed. “We’ll watch, though, from the up above gallery.”

“Well, let’s go,” I said, unable to believe my luck in having two actual cute, popular girls willing to spend a ticket apiece to witness my valorous exploits.

As we approached the funny building, with its false front façade, we could hear the ominous rumblings and shrieks coming from within. The girls and Breen were deep into their conjectures of what junior high school would be like in the fall; they didn’t notice my growing uneasiness. I recalled the small, slender, bald-headed man, whom Bobby had so many years earlier tricked me into thinking had been devoured by the monster. He had been about my size. Coincidentally, I was reading *The Fires of Spring*, by James A. Michener. The young protagonist had worked for a spell at an amusement park like Euclid Beach. People did die horribly when the coasters left their tracks, or at least in that novel they did. Might this not lend credence to the dangers of the Rotor?

As I paid for my ticket, Bobby’s words came back: “While this ride is safe for the vast majority of people, who will stick like they’re supposed to, a small percentage have something different in their physiological makeup—in their gravitational center—that prevents them from hanging up there on the wall like they’re supposed to. It’s an awful thing...they don’t stick, and they slide down and are ground up in the huge gears, below...”

What a load of Bobby’s usual crap, I said to myself as I observed the excited but happy folks who were assuming places in the circle that I was now a part of. It was dinnertime for many, so our group of riders was small, with plenty of space between most of us, with the

exception of a couple who held hands. *Could the smaller number of riders somehow affect the centrifugal pull?*

I was dimly aware of my Caledonia classmates' conversation above me: "Of course, you know, they'll call us flats—that's the term for seventh-graders down at Kirk," remarked Carol.

"James!" Tamara asked Breen, "Won't it be tough, with your dad being the assistant principal, who is basically the dean of boys who does all the punishing and everything? And we girls can only wear midi-blouses, skirts, and flat shoes!" Tamara was one who enjoyed getting dolled up, but then she even looked adorable in her Salvation Army uniform.

Breen, who had even less sense with girls than I (not a lick), responded by showing off the pink and green Rat Finks that he'd won at the arcade.

"Eeeeeoooh," intoned Carol, predictably. "Couldn't you have won Troll Dolls?"

Then, from far below, there came a ghastly deep whine and then a shuddering rumble that made my bowels feel as if they'd dissolve. Next, the lights dimming as in a Frankenstein movie, every available volt needed to spark the monster's electrodes, slowly...*inexorably*...the drum began to turn! Faster and faster we whirled. Then suddenly—like a gallows platform falling from beneath the condemned—the floor dropped away! By then I'd lost all interest in impressing anybody. My eyes—and hopefully other parts of me—were tightly shut. I was back to my praying, as on the Flying Turns. But something in the suction from the back force that occurred when the round floor dropped, like a cork from an inverted bottle, seemed to pull me with it; when my eyes opened, to my abject horror, I saw that I was already, at least two feet lower than any other rider! Even worse, some seemed to be actually laughing and enjoying themselves, the fiends! In vain my fingernails and sneakers tried to find purchase on the Naugahyde or vinyl that lined the drum; but, as the sweat poured from me in pints, I continued my slow steady slide,

undoubtedly leaving above me a very unattractive trail of slime, as might a snail or other invertebrate creature. I tried looking up, but the vertigo was too much to bear. Looking down, I saw only the chilling void of the leviathan's gaping maw. Now, as I'd known would happen, my head was at the level of the other riders' knees. The irony of their laughter, as my grisly fate crept nearer, tasted bitter as bile; in spite of my crablike attempts to grasp the ungraspable, I slid even further with the slowing of the revolutions. Oddly, my head seemed to be spinning in the direction opposite the drum and my body. It was too much—I'd tried but had failed...

"Jack...JACK!"

"Let me give him another whiff—he'll come out of it. Don't worry; it happens all the time..."

My eyes opened. Tamara and Carol and a burly ride worker were over me looking worried.

"Here he is...You'll be all right, Bud—have a drink of water..." My head was on Carol's knees; the sun had given her a lovely, cinnamon flush, and her lips quivered.

I felt carpet beneath me—"Do you mean the floor came back up?"

"Of course the floor came back up. You think we let people fall down in there? They'd be crushed!"

"I know," I said ruefully, "believe me. Where's Breen?"

"He's run to find your folks..."

"Oh, no!"

But happily, Breen had, in his excitement, forgotten where to look, and the girls—from whom I had milked all possible sympathy—and I found Mom and Mrs. Chuggle before he did, likely sparing us from much additional consternation.

## 8 — BAND RAT

When September and Jr. High finally rolled around, because of my wrist being still fragile from the fracture, football was out. So, predictably, in addition to all of the usual regular subjects, I became second trombone in both orchestra and in the stage (dance) band. I found myself spending much of my time, high above the clouds, in Kirk's ancient and storied attic band room, or down in the entrails of the old building's thousand-seat theater. While I was still not overly excited about the parts usually scored for the trombs, I was undeniably second chair—rare for a “flat” or seventh grader, in the slip-horn section. The repertoire, darned good, was comprised mainly of time-tested music with a few show-tune medleys tossed in. Among other things, we were being groomed to play in the pit for lavish musicals at Shaw High, in a couple of years. I liked the dance band music with “Begin the Beguine”, “String of Pearls”, and music by George Gershwin, Tommy Dorsey, and Benny Goodwin. But how could it compete with what was coming out of my radio? In spite of all predictions, the music from England was just getting better and better, and so was what we heard from Detroit, both coasts, and everywhere else. The music we played at Kirk was enjoyable, but what we heard on our tinny little transistors was everything that we were! At night we slept with it under our pillows:

*I've got this yearnin', yearnin'...*

*Feelin' inside me...*

*Deep inside me...and it hurts so bad...*

the girl sang. More and more, the face I saw in my romantic fantasies was that of Carol Byrd, and I had sort of decided that “one fine day”, when all was ripe, we'd go together.

Elsewhere things were much tougher. For some silly reason, while never having gotten the hang of long division, fractions, or decimals, I'd been shuttled, along with other kids from my neighborhood, into advanced algebra and physical science.

The system was far more driven by what students were SUPPOSED TO KNOW than building on what they ACTUALLY DID KNOW. Whether it is the fault of the parents, the teachers, the school, or—as in my case—the brain-lazy student, the bottom line is always the same: IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO BUILD UPON FUNDAMENTALS THAT DO NOT EXIST. This is why kids quit learning and leave school.

“Jack, are you doing all of your studying in math?” asked Mr. Breen, James’s father, the assistant principal, cornering me at my locker at 3:30.

“Yes...yes, I am,” I hopelessly asserted.

“Jack, you’ve really got to get over this habit of yours, of lying. I’ve talked with Mrs. Kopinger and looked at your grades. You are failing.” At thirteen, I was still not beyond tears; my lower lip tried to pull down, in response to the blunt confrontation. Mr. Breen was a lean, six-four tower and reputed to swat really hard, although such punishment was usually employed for disciplinary rather than academic failures. “If your grades aren’t up to par, I’m not sure you’ll be able to continue with the dance band or join the wrestling team this winter.”

The athletic competition was fierce. In my phys ed class, eighty boys lined up in rows; we all wore white gym shorts, t-shirts, and shoes. We each also had a jockstrap and, in our gym bags, a tube of athlete’s foot treatment. Failure to be able to prove possession of any of these items resulted in one swat.

The colored boys all had very closely cut hair with a little part razored in. They might have all used the same barber. However, one extremely hard-muscled boy, Lucius Pinkney, had

something completely unique: a four-inch pouf of hair in front! This idiosyncrasy, along with a generally combative and flamboyant nature, made him the talk of the school. It also drove the administration mad, but somehow he could not be forced to cut off his outlandish pompadour. He, big Buck, and Early Hope, as gridiron demons, made things grim for “Mr. Breenz’s little boeh”, but pipsqueaks like me were usually beneath their notice.

“You got no hair on your balls,” observed a down the hill boy, who had gone to Chambers Elementary, scrutinizing me in the shower.

“That’s ‘cause I don’t need any.”

“You don’t need any?”

“Hell, no. Not to whip your ass.” Like iron filings to magnets, other boys of all sizes, shapes, and hues, including Breen, were immediately crowding around, as we made our way from the shower to the locker room.

Times, locations, and wagers were being projected, but the gym teacher, Mr. Fletcher, also had a nose for trouble, and he interceded. “OK, you two—upstairs to the mats.”

It was November, and we had been learning all manner of wrestling holds and maneuvers in gym—from the starting positions to takedowns and pins. But I was mad, and when the command was given to “WRESTLE!” I forgot everything and just went nuts—madly scrambling—then pinning him. In the usual way with boys, we afterward became friends, but also quite normally—for girls too, surely—I was left with a few doubts about how I was developing.

My perpetual friend Klonz had, in our camping tent in our backyard the previous fall, under flashlight, demonstrated exactly the sort of silvery seeds that Dad had been talking about, relative to the reproductive act. He had even offered to help when my efforts to achieve similar results failed. The comparative attributes of suntan lotion and Brylcreem were debated.



“I wish we could get some girls to come over,” I had said.

“*I’d* like to get a *woman* in here,” he replied hoarsely. Maybe we can go down to the drugstore and find one, or pick one up coming out of the bar across the street.”

Such a notion was too preposterous for comment, but we’d bicycled down to Washington’s anyway, where we’d acquired illicit—in my case—*Mad* magazines instead.

Something had changed about Dad since Bobby’s troubles had begun. He’d figured that all of the music, art, and culture had deprived Bobby of a trade and of common sense about work and responsibility. He figured he’d screwed up somehow, as a father, but that he would manage at least to save his younger son. So my Saturday classes at the art museum had been stopped. Mildly warped stuff like *Mad* magazine and Friday night horror movies with beatnik hosts were also banned. He’d latched onto a massive metalworking lathe, had it moved into our garage, and had resolved to teach me toolmaking—as unlikely an endeavor as Klonz thinking we’d be picking up overdeveloped broads on our bikes. My disdain for math became amplified, in proportion to its essentiality in machining.

“Fernie” (Fern) Thalassa, my English teacher, was the sort of voluptuous woman of Teddy Klonz’s dreams. She’d sit on the front edge of her desk, her supple legs crossed under her short skirt, balancing a shoe on the toes of an extended foot. “What was the basis for the satire of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Jack?”

“Uh, well, the animals were all supposed to be equal after they’d run off the wicked farmer who was their owner, but by and by, the smarter ones duped the dumber ones and took over, and revised their motto to saying that some animals were created more equal than others...”

“No, no...upon what is the allegory based? Can’t any of you young cretins tell me? Yes—Mr. Breen?”

“The intrinsic flaw which inevitably ensures the failure of collectivism. As soon as a permanently designated class of decision-makers is established, corruption and subjugation are inevitable, and general conditions become even worse than under a system based on free enterprise. In particular, George Orwell is parodying the Soviet Union.”

“Yeah—but,” I responded, out of turn, “in that book by Nikolai Gogol, the serfs weren’t having any picnic, either, getting ‘knouted’ and flogged left and right. Maybe the next revolution will even things out more—like Jefferson said about the liberty tree needing to be periodically watered with tyrants’ blood...”

Fernie smiled. She liked my writing—she said it was elemental, and she often gave me As. Her encouragement was valuable because Mom—my real writing coach—was usually focused on trying to pound grammar into my dense head.

However, I was demoted, across the board, because of my rotten grades in math and not being “up to my potential” in other subjects like Spanish. I could gibber along pretty well in “spik” but was dreadful at conjugation. In science, I was hip to Harlow Shapley’s cosmic theory which states that all matter—everything in the universe—is constantly evolving, the same as are living things, but I could not remember atomic weights. So when January came, I was canned out of the whole “track” of my courses and sent down to all-new classes with way dumber kids who were mostly from the down-the-hill elementary schools. They didn’t even let me stay in English and History where I was doing well. It was humiliating to be exiled from all of my Caledonia peers. Some, like Breen, I knew were beginning to avoid me. More and more, I just hid out in the band room, where at least I felt useful.

\* \* \* \* \*

By and by, I started to drift over to our church on Sunday evenings, for the Junior MYF—Methodist Youth Fellowship. Many of the kids attended junior high schools other than mine, and it was nice to be around some who were unaware of my academic, hence social, humiliations.

On a Friday afternoon, I packed a bag to leave for a weekend MYF retreat at Methodist Camp Klein—way out in the sticks somewhere. There, after supper and fellowship activities, the main interest was dancing. Soon the young beasts were double clutching to slow records in a manner that alarmed the adult chaperones: “Come on...let’s see a couple of inches of daylight between you kids...and let’s play some livelier numbers next...You know darn well that this is not dancing... it’s only an excuse for belly rubbing...this is *not* the Friday night canteen at the Y...How about the jitterbug?”

Thanks again to Breen, I had missed out on those notorious Friday night dances at the Lee Road YMCA and was yet again socially crippled. But there at MYF, my ineptitude as a swinger contributed to the beginnings of my friendship with Victor Hoffstader, who would eventually (keep reading) become universally known as “The Possum”. Although very good-looking, Victor was nearly as hopeless as I was regarding girls. He played the cello and was tremendously gifted at drawing, and he had recently begun to get serious about painting in oils.

“Holy crap—cards designed by Salvador Dali?” I said to him. “Are you kidding me?” We had found a corner table to try playing gin rummy, and he had whipped out a fabulous deck.

“Yeah, you can get these at the Dali Museum...they’re nice, but I’m really into deco decks from the twenties and from the late eighteen hundreds.”

“Wow. I’ve been collecting Jokers recently.”

“Yeah, some of the Joker designs are fantastic. I have 1890s ‘Steamboats’, and ‘Squeezers’, and a ‘Best Bower’—from just after the Civil War. But I’m really crazy about transformation decks.”

“Wow!” I repeated although I was hazy about some of the forms of gaming ephemera that he was referring to. As it turned out, Victor collected many things: bottle caps, light bulbs—some very old, with pointy vacuum peaks—animal skulls, which he sketched from many angles, speakers, maps, radios, records—some on wax cylinders—pulp fiction and comic books of the “Strange Tales” type, and lots more. In spite of these nerdy interests, and although he did not wear mod clothes or actively pursue the chicks, he, like most of us, was apparently nuts for rock ‘n roll and many other types of music. He had with him a smallish tape recorder with six-inch reels; it was just cranking out with everything! (My little machine, which had so admirably served myself and Klonz, had long since expired.)

“I used to do this too—record from records or the radio to make funny tapes with my friend Klonz—he’s a Catholic kid. We’d put the mic in front of the speaker to record. Is that what you did?”

“Naw, I use a patch cord. You just hook it onto the speaker wires with alligator clips. You have to take the radio’s back off, though.”

“Wow. We never thought of doing that.” It was clear that I might learn a lot from this budding Da Vinci. “Is that the ‘Hollies’?”

“Naw, that’s the Easybeats. They’re from Australia.”

So, for the next two days, while other kids were groping each other by the record machine, or trying to slip into the woods, Victor and I played cards, listened to his many tapes, and talked. By Sunday morning, we had gone through his pop compilations, which included more cerebral

stuff like Simon and Garfunkel, and Bob Dylan, then on to Bartok and Shostakovich, which he had recorded from albums of his father's. He had shown me his brilliant sketchbook in which he had drawn, with startling accuracy, many of the kids and our chaperones as well as pine cones, animal skeletons, and other natural objects. But the funny thing about him was that, for all of his phenomenal knowledge and talent, he was completely without guile or condescension. In fact, he came off to most as being rather simple and naïve. He was strong enough but completely inept and indifferent about sports. Like Klonz, who had recently moved with his family to Detroit, he had an earthy sense of humor and was quick with a crude or ribald crack or observation. By Sunday afternoon's departure, I had a new best friend.

\* \* \* \* \*

At school, things weren't getting much better. As an eighth-grader and now first chair trombone, I was given the awesome responsibility of opening the band room each morning at eight o'clock, so that the other band kids could drop off their musical instruments before heading back down to their other classes. We were expected to practice on our instruments each evening at home—yet another area in which I shirked. Although I had volunteered for the coveted post, I was frequently tardy. "Where have you been, Elbon? We're all gonna be late!" My angry peers would be seated on the steps, fretfully waiting.

"Hold your horses...I'll let you in...Uh, oh...where's that key?"

"Oh, no—he forgot it again!"

"Well, hang on, I'll go down to the office and get the copy from the secretary..."

"You're a mess, Elbon!"

That second year at Kirk, I'd tried out for football, but to my disgust ended up a bench warmer. I was pretty fast and, I thought, a good safety but the coaches thought I was too light to hit hard enough. In the inner team scrimmages, I tried defending against some of the hardest receivers in the district, who would go on to be all-state stars. There was Early Hope: "Come on Ailbon...Y'all can do yo' best but what can y'all do about me?" Lucius Pinkney, with his fabulous pompadour, was another blinding flash. He was big, lean, and tough as a tiger. Breen had put on weight and made first string linebacker, but he continued to treat me like stale cheese. I suffered through punishing practices and rode the team bus to diverse locations, but found being a third-stringer to be more and more tiresome.

Dad would catch our games when he could: "Teams need lots of back-ups too, son; if you hang in there, your chance will come..."

I begged the coaches for field time, but they only smiled and said: "We'll see." Somehow, I became something of a jester who could often make even the toughest athletes laugh. One night in the showers, with most of the team within hearing, I quipped to the hundred and seventy pound, steel-muscled Lucius: "Meet me outside, Budzo...I'm gonna knock that fuzz right off of your head!"

"Shut up, purple deeick," he shot back at me, commenting on a very embarrassing condition, which had, lately, afflicted my prize possession. Laughter erupted from all sides, as I slunk off to dress.

I had been worried, but now I was terrified! Our eighth-grade curriculum included health class, mandatory for all boys. Among many things of which I'd known nothing, including types of the "dope" that Mom had warned me about (part of Bobby's problems, apparently), we had learned about loathsome diseases such as syphilis. Now I knew that I had it—what else could it

be? The Bible warned of the sin of Onanism, or solitary vice, and I was clearly reaping the wages. Worse, I knew that I was allergic to penicillin, having had a dangerous reaction as a baby. Now, blindness, insanity, and painful death would be my reward. How, though, could all of that compare with the shame I would endure? Now I'd never go steady with Carol Byrd, much less marry her after college, as I'd planned. How could I break Mom and Dad's hearts by revealing to them the depths of my degradation? I couldn't; that was all. That night I'd pack a duffle, leave a note, and head for the rail yards.

Heading down Henderson, towards home, I passed what had been Klonz's house. He was to blame for all of this, by showing me how he achieved the rapturously good but sinful feeling, that summer night in the tent. After that, I'd taken to experimenting, using various techniques and sources of inspiration. Nothing, however, had produced the desired results until I'd had occasion to try again in the bathtub. Eureka! Huzzah! Callooh-Callay! I'd discovered the secret! The essential catalyst was obviously a type of Mom's liquid soap. But would the magic only occur in the bathroom? Having sneaked a small quantity of the astringent soap into a small container which I kept hidden in my trombone case, I'd discovered that I could replicate the highly pleasurable sensation without having to take a bath! I'd resolved not to overdo it; but certain things like seeing Tamara Boxhorn at the pool or Mrs. Tweeten in her garden next door, working underdressed, had had me repeatedly spending time alone in my room. Damn that Klonz! He must have it by now too, or the clap, whatever that was, at least! I thought about calling him long distance, but knew I'd hear about the bill.

Too worried to eat much supper myself, I crept upstairs to pack for my new life as a vagabond. Football practice in the cool October wind had been tiring, however, and I fell asleep instead.

Next morning, I felt slightly better. Having missed the chance of a nocturnal departure, I decided to wait until that night. In health class at ten-thirty, I carefully reread the chapter about venereal disease. There was something about the whole situation that didn't quite add up, but I couldn't tell what.

There was no football practice that night. Instead, I had to rehearse with a brass quartet that I had joined, to compete in the regional solo and ensemble contest. I felt bad, knowing I'd be letting the other three guys down by my impending desertion. Hopefully, they'd find another trombonist in time to receive at least a "two" rating with a green ribboned medal, rather than the white ribboned medal which would have signified a "one". As we blew our way through Wagner, my eye was drawn to my open trombone case with the little jar of Mom's soap, next to the trombone's slide oil. Tenuous tendrils of light were trying to break through the inky clouds. As I left the practice room, I dropped the little soap container into the wastebasket. "What was that?" asked Clingenpeel, the French horn player.

"Oh, just something I don't need anymore."

As it turned out, Dad was out front waiting for me. "Come on. We're going to Sussex Fish and Chips for dinner." I realized that I was starving—fresh Lake Erie perch with butter and lemon was hard to resist.

"Dad, I'm thinking of quitting football...I'm tired of never playing."

"Well, you know, son, we've never had quitters in our family..."

"Maybe I can get my grades up if I'm not busting myself up with all of this football every other day." I knew Dad didn't much like anybody in the family getting busted up about anything since he was always paying the medical bills. Also, Bobby had recently been arrested at a "Mary Jane" party, whatever that was, in University Circle. The legal bills were hitting Dad hard, even



though the lawyer he'd hired was from our church. A dream of my father was that at least one of his kids would attend college. He'd had to quit school, in order to support his family during the Depression. Although he wanted to teach me toolmaking or machining, should I need a trade to fall back on, he still hadn't given up on his last hope of there being a college grad in the family, in addition to Mom.

“Well, stick it out for one more game, and see if they play you. Then, I guess you can quit if you think it will help your studies.

## 9 — DO YOU WANNA DANCE?

“Don’t worry, there’s no way you could have gotten VD if the only girl you’ve dated was ‘Miss Rosie Palm’.” It was Friday night; I’d confided my concerns to my new friend Victor Hoffstader. While I was pretty sure, by then, that the dry cracking that had affected my little man had simply been the result of Mom’s liquid soap being left on there too frequently, the health book talked about diseases going dormant for periods of time, only to reemerge more virulently than ever. It was great the way Victor took my situation seriously, without laughing or making me feel stupid.

A dance with a band was being held in the basement of our church that night. We were walking down to it together. The crisp autumn air and having the remnants of my fears dispelled put me in exhilarated spirits. “Oh, I’ve dated girls,” I heard myself lie brazenly, “but nothing that could have caused this.”

“Where did you take them?”

“Oh, to the art museum and to Euclid Beach,” I replied suavely, thinking of my chance encounters with Carol. At least, my fibs weren’t entirely cut from whole cloth. Although Victor lived just five blocks from me, his home just was over a dividing line that put him into another school district.

Through the gothic side doors of the Church of the Cross we entered, then down the stairs to Fellowship Hall. The place was jammed with kids from many schools, who were drinking Coke and jabbering excitedly. Presently, the band members took the stage, down at the far end. I was amazed to see Dave Billington, from Kirk, strapping on a big solid wood guitar with just four heavy strings. He’d never been in band or orchestra at school, and I couldn’t imagine him

knowing one note from the next. The drummer, Rick Panuska, did play in the Kirk orchestra, but I'd never seen him behind anything but the tympani or a huge pair of concert cymbals as he patiently counted out the measures before his chance to make a big crash. Another rather tubby guy from Kirk, with long dangling bangs that hid his eyes, plugged a baby blue Hagstrom guitar into a Sears Silvertone amp—and then it happened! The shimmering introductory arpeggios to “The House of the Rising Sun”, swept thrillingly through the hall, sounding exactly like the famous recording by The Animals. I'd had absolutely no idea that anybody outside of a clever recording studio in London could produce such sounds! If anybody had looked my way, they'd have seen me gaping and goggling. Obviously, I'd missed a lot while hanging out with Klonz or Breen on Friday evenings, for movies and popcorn, or going bowling. The band's singer was an older guy; I don't think he was even from East Cleveland. He was a real live wire, strutting about with his big Electro-Voice microphone—out to the very edge of the stage, singing in a throaty, growling voice:

*Ah, cain't git no....satisfaction...*

Things got more and more frantic with the kids who were, so far as I could tell, just wriggling around like hooked worms. I didn't see much twisting or other dances that I could recognize, much less the box step they'd been teaching us when I'd ditched dance class back in sixth grade. The greasers, in their checked pants and Ban-Lon shirts, were shaking up a storm, right next to the mods and collegiates; there was, surprisingly, no hint of friction. Of, course, being up the hill, no brown faces were present.

“Not too bad for a pickup band, I suppose,” commented Victor at break time. My head spun towards him in disbelief.

“What?!” I'd thought they were ready for *Shindig*.

“Well, they only played moldy old songs with no harmonies or anything. You should hear the bands out at ‘Teen Town’ (a famous dance, held regularly at another church). These guys could really use an organ or a sax or something. Hey, we’re close to the Caledonia ravine...come on...I want to try out my new flashlight.”

Although talented, erudite, fine-featured, and even wearing a paisley shirt, Victor was—I thought—looking even more nerdy than I, with the big, brand new, rubberized flashlight dangling from its special clip on his belt. Furthermore, there was no sign of Carol or Tamara or any of my other main heartthrobs, not that I’d know what to do in such an event. I was glad I didn’t mention Carol’s name when I’d fabricated dating experiences. I didn’t want Victor to know what a liar I could be. Sometimes I didn’t plan to make things up—they just popped out. The ravine in summer was a mysterious, deep cut of leafy green (gold and red, this time of year) trees, and gray shale, that sliced through the neighborhood. Though forbidden, it was an irresistible magnet for boys and, occasionally, love birds. Nimbly, Victor followed one of the innumerable paths, down its side, to a ledge curtained by grapevines. With a razor-sharp clasp knife that hung from the other side of his belt, he sliced off two dry, gray tendrils the circumference of cigarettes, which he lit with a Zippo. “Do you know Tommy Nordstrom, from our church?”

“Yeah,” I said, exhaling the sweet smoke.

“He knows where to get M-80s.”

“Wow...those are like little bombs. I’ll stick with my ‘Black Cats’—they’re loud enough.”

“Well, if you change your mind, we’re going down to Little Italy tomorrow to get some.”

“I’ll come too if my old man will let me. He quit his job and started his own business, selling dry peen machines; but he’s doing machine shop work in our garage too, to make ends

meet. He might want me to work on the lathe. I hate it, though. What I'm supposed to be turning down to pencil circumference, I turn to crochet needles."

"Well, don't cut your pecker off. You know, they say there's a wild man who lives down there in the bottom of this ravine, by the creek somewhere."

"Yeah, I've heard that—they say he runs along the ridges down there, naked!"

"Well, better him than me, 'cause it's gonna be getting real cold soon. Wanna go back?"

As we went back down the stairs to the dance, the band was grinding out a slow number. I noticed a kind of cute, bespectacled, but somewhat chunky girl named Betsy Pearson, from the seventh grade, sitting alone and possibly glancing our way. I had a sudden notion, possibly fueled by the keen air, the grapevines, and the Coca-Cola. "Come and dance—do you want to?" I found myself asking her, thinking it would be good if I got in some practice, should I meet Carol Byrd somewhere like this, sometime.

"OK," she said, pleased.

At first, I tried something like that box step or what I could remember of it, from the one dance class I hadn't cut, but it wasn't working. Realizing that the other couples were doing little more than clinging to each other like barnacles, I pulled her towards me. As her small, firm breasts squished against me, my little friend, who had caused me such other troubles of late—to my shock and embarrassment—actually began to make *himself* known, both to myself and, inconceivably but undeniably, to Betsy Pearson! I expected that she would shudder and pull away, outraged, but amazingly, she pulled herself more tightly to me. So this was what it was all about! What a dumb cluck I was. "Uh, do you like this band?" I asked, hoarsely, determined above all else, that my inexperience should not show.

"They're OK."

“The bands are much better out at Teen Town.”

“I didn’t know you went to Teen Town. I’ve never seen you there.”

“Oh, uh—I get around,” I replied lamely, trapped again by my own deceit.

“Well, maybe I’ll see you out there, sometime.”

“Maybe so.” The song ended. “I’d better look for my friend.”

“You’d better. Tell him that the girl he’s just been dancing with is the town pump.”

“The town—? Oh...uh, OK. Well, bye.”

“Bye.”

## 10 — HIGH SCHOOL JOURNAL

*Writing is a tedious, lonely business. Even old guys in their sixties would rather be engaged in favorite pursuits: digging holes, cutting brush, drinking beer, rambling with the dogs, shooting pool, watching old movies, drinking beer, railing about today's youth, fishing but not catching much, perusing flea markets, ogling women who are way too young, playing cards, drinking beer, plinkin' cans, burning brush, dialing radio talk shows, grilling or smoking whatever's available, drinking beer, etc., etc.*

*So when I found among old papers—most of which should have been burned long ago—a journal which I had kept for a few weeks while in high school, I did not hesitate to include it here. Whether my primary purpose in doing so is to add authenticity and color to the narrative or to get this tome finished so that I might return to my usual (fairly) harmless, preferred activities, I will allow the reader to decide. True to form, my younger self only stuck to the diary for a few weeks. Be therefore assured that your humble narrator will presently return, in dogged pursuit of his twin missions: to enthrall and to enlighten!*

\* \* \* \* \*

### JACK ELBON'S FRESHMAN JOURNAL

If I had to describe myself, I'd have to say that I am in some ways a strange kind of weirdo, not cool like some of the kids, although I've always had a lot of friends with the exception of a few

bad enemies. Too often, I've been sort of a second banana type to some pretty strong personalities, although I've had a few disciples of my own. Mainly, I just feel like some sort of smaller moon in a solar system full of large tugging planets such as my teachers, my coaches, my friends, or my bosses at work...also my big sister and brother, and Mom and Dad, who are more like suns or stars, pulling even harder. Pretty soon they are all yanking at me in too many directions at once, until I think I'm an amoeba and will split, only not in two, but into an assortment of different pieces! I am dumb, I am smart, I am lazy, I am a hard worker, I am honest, I am a liar, I am cute, I am ugly, and so on and so on until I have to go and read a book or hack around doing something to forget it all, even if it means neglecting everything else I'm supposed to be doing. When I say that I am lazy and a liar, I'm not exaggerating, as you'll find out if you keep reading. Those two things are probably my worst faults though, and even if I've done a few mean things, at least I've repented at church and have mostly been kind. Some of the trouble I've gotten into has been my own doing, but it seems as if I've been mostly drawn to those types who would lead me astray. Right now, for instance, instead of working on Algebra in this study hall, in the hell-pit of a high school that I attend, I am writing this. My friend Klonz, who moved away last year, is an off-wall personality like me. He suggested in a recent letter that we should keep journals. I said 'sure'. Only he's insisting that we tell the stark truth throughout, so I agreed 'cause—what the hey—no one's probably ever going to want to read anything about our rather boring lives, anyway. But in case anybody ever does, I'm going to stick with the most interesting people and events and leave out the dull ones. But I've really gotta start reading my (ugh) chemistry book here, soon. I've got to at least pass my other classes since I'm flunking Algebra. Man, is Dad is gonna be mad, but things can't get much worse between me and him



than they have been lately anyhow. Too bad, 'cause we were always such good friends, back in the old days, when we'd go fishing and to ballgames and everything.

Maybe I'm wrong in describing Shaw High as a hell-pit. Not that it isn't hellish—it absolutely is—but it's more like the huge, grim, towering chateau where Edmond Dantès was imprisoned in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, my favorite book until Clair's hubby Pete, my brother-in-law, left *The Fires of Spring* on our coffee table by accident. Kirk Jr. High, where I went for the past two years before this one, was big, too, with three stories, plus the band room (my hangout) in the attic. All of the elementary schools in East Cleveland disgorged their teaming huddled masses into Kirk, but Shaw High is twice as big, I guess 'cause there are four grades instead of just two. I gaze across this jammed cafeteria study hall at students from all four grades. Funny how the colored kids all congregate in one area like they do, at lunch. Their guys wear bright, bright shirts and matching pants of all the rainbow's colors, and so do the greasers who are sitting in their own section, with their girls and their big beehive hairdos. This is ironic, 'cause those "racks" and the colored kids generally hate each other and fight all of the time, but dress the same. Also, those same greaseballs only listen to Motown and soul music, which is also impossible to figure.

All of the girls at Kirk and Shaw have to wear skirts of a certain length, flat shoes, and middy tops, complete with a "well-pinned" dickey, that's supposed to keep guys from peeking at their breasts. This uniform is mainly supposed to be so that the girls from poor families don't feel bad about not having enough clothes and sweaters and stuff, but on Fridays, they can wear what they want, and a lot of them try to dress like sex bombs.

Speaking of which, I see that Tamara Boxhorn is hard at *her* math book over there. I've existed in tragic adoration of Tamara since grade school when I ran with her brother Georgie.

She really got to me (and many other tortured souls) with her long, black, curly hair, pretty face, and more recently, Cleopatra shape; but of course, she's dating some upperclassman, with a haircut that makes his head look like a light bulb. But even if she weren't, I'd probably still have about zilch of a chance with her, even if I wasn't skinny as a pipefish, and if my skin hadn't gotten bad, or because of how my career as a Romeo got stifled due to James Breen who was once my best friend. I remember the year it got started 'cause it was the year the Beatles came to America—1964?—I think it was—the winter after Kennedy got shot.

I was in the fifth grade, and Breen came to my class at Caledonia that year. He was kind of a *Field and Stream*, super he-man type, and even though I was sweet on a lot of the girls, especially Carol Byrd who I figured to be—like the song—“Just My Style”, he convinced me that females were for the birds. We were deep into boxing and football and stuff, and he got me to skip out on dance class, and before you know it I was socially fractured. Of course, last year in the eighth grade when he got interested in girls, he ditched me as a friend. But to hell with him, the snob.

Growing up, I spent tons of time at the home of the Chuggles, across the street. Johnny, who they used to call “Snortball”, will tell you himself that he was a rotten kid. He's actually a senior here, now, but he has oddly turned into a very nice guy, although I don't see him much. He worked hard and got himself a pretty blue GTO as soon as he was sixteen—he'd been saving from being a caddy and other jobs for years. He got a girl at once, then he wrapped his “Goat” around a pole out Monticello Boulevard late one night. No one was hurt, thank God, and he got himself right back into a black convertible of some sort that he's always babying and polishing. He has been a solid citizen since; I wouldn't be surprised if he gets married after graduation. Anyhoo, Nancy Chuggle and I grew up kind of like siblings since Clair and Bobby (mine) had

split home soon after they graduated. We got into all kinds of troubles, me and Nancy, but we had big fun playing casino and tripoli, and poker dice with various old cards, chips, canasta trays, and other stuff our parents had lying around. For some warped reason, I started collecting old cards, especially the Jokers. I liked the art deco styles and other art on a lot of the older cards and on some of the newer ones. Nancy was a card collector, too, but she was more interested in the art on the backs. By the way, I was pretty close with Nancy in a lot of other ways—we slept in the same bed a lot, and we shared secrets. We both got in trouble for being caught going to the bathroom behind the Molina’s garage, which is adjacent to the Chuggles. Or, we would put a blanket over a card table to make a tent, and we’d sleep under it, too. At a certain point, Mrs. Chuggle said: “Little boys and little girls of a certain age don’t sleep together,” and stopped it all, but can you believe it? I had no idea why. But I told Klonz I’d be brutally honest, and so I admit that I was a late bloomer.

Anyhow, I may be skinny but I’m like Charles Atlas compared to this bird from MYF, now attending Heights High, who has become my best friend since Klonz moved. His name is Victor Hoffsteader. He’s an artist and musician, and he leaves even me way behind in the kooky bookworm department. He turned out to be kind of the opposite in many ways of Breen, my ex-friend, but we hit it off right away. Not only does he collect Jokers like I do, but just about everything else—especially recordings and books. He’s nuts for old pulp fiction—strange tales and horror, and stuff. He got me reading Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith and other weird writers that I wound up liking; but of course, I’ll read almost anything printed with ink if it keeps me from algebra and chemistry. Last night I said I was going to the library to study, but picked up—oh, no—there’s the bell! I’ll really be a dead duck in math class, now...

\* \* \* \* \*

Well, it's now Monday, four days later, and I am right back here in this same forty-five-minute study hall, where I left off writing last Thursday. I am living proof that humiliation cannot kill a person because, if it could, I would be dead. The Shaw High Cardinals played their archenemies Collinwood, at home, and at halftime, our marching band came out first. Us trombones are usually in the front row, to keep our long slides from poking marchers' butts in front of us. Back at Kirk, I was first trombone last year, but now I'm about fifth because the first two are really good players—seniors—and 'cause the next two are better marchers than me (we didn't march at Kirk). Irregardless (yeah, I know, it's supposed to be regardless, but I like saying it that way to make Mom, a strict grammarian, jerk and writhe)—irregardless, we came flying out, playing “Suwanee” at a very fast pace, with our row leading. We were supposed to run—while playing—to the thirty-yard line at the far end of the field. As soon as our first row—the trombones—hit that thirty, the entire marching band was supposed to about face and head back in the other direction, us now in the rear, leaving an extra two feet of margin so we still don't goose any Baritone horn players, who are now just ahead of us. Well, I had a lot on my mind, due to trouble at home, and I forgot to spin around at the thirty, but the rest of the band did, and I kept going for about five yards before I realized that I was all alone. Well, I think it would have been best if I'd continued into the end zone and right out of the stadium—and existence, for that matter—but retrospect is 20/20 like they say. So what could I do, but turn around and try to catch up? But I realized fast that this was a mistake since the whole huge stadium exploded into laughter as I ran, trying to close the substantial gap that had opened between me and the band, due to they and I having been headed rapidly in opposite directions for some several seconds. If I could have just

rejoined the trombones in time, things would have been OK. Tragically, when I got there, the rows had dissembled, like they were supposed to, and gone into complex pinwheel configurations that were spinning in opposite directions. I did locate my pinwheel but had trouble getting into my place. On the end of a trombone slide, I guess you know, is a spit valve with a sort of longish, protruding lever. Sad to say, I got it hooked into a key on the instrument of a saxophonist who was in an adjacent but oppositely spinning pinwheel. As we struggled to get unhooked, the other marchers in our respective wheels became log-jammed, and things sort of dissolved in that part of the field. If the problem had remained isolated, things might have resolved themselves, but a marching band is pretty complex and interdependent, and quite a general panic ensued. You'd think they'd give the drum major some sort of signal for an emergency backup plan, but I guess not.

Well, poor Mr. Cherubini, our band teacher, told me that I was the “worst marcher in the band” and then he revised it to “that he had ever seen” and it was a horrible nightmare for me, down there in the big room that the band goes to, beneath the stands after the game. Bobby and Clair were legendary musicians in the Shaw High music department, ten years ago, so my disgrace was even more amplified. At least Mom and Dad were not in attendance, and if I'm lucky, not Carol Byrd, but the rest of the universe was, and I'd kill myself except for knowing how happy it would make all of the bastards. I guess I'll go on living, as this might be my best vengeance upon them. I did call Klonz, in Detroit, to see if he was interested in our joining the Merchant Marine or something—also Victor Hoffstader from church—but nobody wanted to run away, so I'm still here, at least for now. Victor, who plays the cello, has built himself a Heathkit electric guitar. I am thinking of getting one myself, or a Farfisa organ. I was fed up with the trombone a long time ago, anyway—there's that damn bell.

\* \* \* \* \*

In English class, this morning, somebody circulated a note that read: “At exactly eleven o’clock, drop your pencil.” Mr. Corvelle is probably the most sadistic teacher that I’ve ever had. He doesn’t give swats like the others, with paddles with holes drilled in them to let the air whistle through so that they burn you even worse. Mr. Cherubini, up in the band room, uses the Cello sticks, that are predrilled for the metal rod on the cello’s bottom. He bends you over a desk in his office and tells you: “Just look way out there—across Lake Erie—on a clear day you can almost see Point Pelee, in Canada,” then, whack! But he doesn’t really hit all that hard like Vicheck or Zook, who raise welts. At least those guys are somewhat normal, compared to Corvelle, and hey—if they didn’t give swats, the school would be just anarchy. I’ve only gotten swatted maybe six times, total, at Kirk and Shaw. Corvelle has one guy, a student named Maurice Babb, who has his desk up front, next to his. He calls him his “Sergeant-at-Arms”. If a student gives him displeasure, he motions to Maurice, which is a signal that he should go to the miscreant, grab a good bit of their hair, wrap it around his fingers and yank! This he does very hard and it can produce tears, especially in the girls. Other times, Mr. Corvelle does his own dirty work. Once I had gotten a haircut too short for Maurice to pull, so he used another of his favorite punishments on me—I can’t remember what for. Mr. Corvelle came behind my desk, reached from behind me with his very strong hands, and hooking his thumbs behind my back he squeezed and rubbed my collar bones with great power. I slid down in my desk—you’d have to—but he hung on, rubbing and rubbing, burning those collar bones, till I wound up with blisters! The guy really is not normal—I may egg his house one night. Anyhoo, this morning at eleven, exactly when the

second hand on the big clock hit the twelve, thirty kids—everyone, I guess, except Maurice—dropped their pencils, producing a uniform clatter.

The bastard's eyebrows did shoot up, but I suppose as cruel a dictator as he has dealt with insurrections before. "Oh, no, this will not work out well for any of you...You suppose that because you have acted in concert that I will be unable to react, but you are very wrong. All those carrying a letter grade of A in this class shall now carry a B. B averages are now C averages, Ds are Fs. Failing students must now redouble their efforts if they hope to pass. At four o'clock today, each of you will return to this classroom for an hour of writing essays. If a single one of you fails to return, the sessions will continue each afternoon. No, no, my friends, you will find that this will not work out well at all—not for a single one of you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Something really rotten happened on Saturday, and I still feel bad about it. I've been hanging around, some, with a guy named Mike Vandergriff. He's a year younger than I am, but he lives on our block down Selwyn, and we started hanging around together some. He's an object of desire for the eighth-grade girls at Kirk...Nancy Chuggle and her friends all write his name on their tennis shoes. He has a bass guitar and I like fooling around with it—It's actually pretty easy to play, compared to a regular guitar 'cause it has just four strings. He can't play it worth a crap but I find that I can just plunk along with records, finding the right key by ear, which he doesn't seem to be able to do at all. I've been thinking of getting myself one if I can scrape up the bucks. Anyhoo, he and his brother had somehow captured a very large snapping turtle—a foot and a half across, at least—in a pond somewhere. I don't know how they managed it without losing

any digits or anything. It was a genuine alligator snapper and ornerier than hell. It could nearly bite through a broomstick. They'd been keeping it in a heavy, old, galvanized garbage can.

Well, I was over there on Saturday after lunch, messing around. Mike had been talking about killing it and varnishing its shell. We were in their garage; I had the bass guitar plugged into its Fender amp—way nicer equipment than Mike is worthy of—and I was playing along with an old but great album by Paul Revere and the Raiders (you ought to listen to their blood-curdling version of “I’m Not Your Steppin’ Stone”—it makes the recording by the Monkees sound like watery pabulum). Between songs, Mike said: “I’m sending Mr. Turtle to turtle heaven,” and with that, he lit a water-proof cherry bomb—a powerful thing with the power of an M-80—and tossed it into the garbage can. Either the turtle bit or the concussion in the water was sufficient because following the thunderous explosion which cannoned water throughout the garage—up to its ceiling, in fact—the turtle was dead. I was pretty shocked, but Mrs. Vandergriff came out and they all seemed to agree that the reptile had never known what had hit it, making the whole situation seem almost humane. Somehow, Mike and his brother got the turtle opened up and I, with my clasp-knife, assisted in the grisly business of emptying its large carapace, onto their driveway. We marveled at how long the creature’s intestines stretched out, along the sidewalk and down the block.

When I got home, I smelled something like fish. Mom commented on it and I said: “Oh, I helped the Vandergriffs clean out a turtle.”

“That’s nice dear...do they keep it in an aquarium? How did it get dirty?” I explained, rather matter-of-factly, what had happened, and to my terrible consternation, Mom began to cry.

“Please, Mom—I didn’t even know they were going to do it—they just did and I was there...”



“That’s alright...I know boys kill things, but I never thought you would...”

“But I didn’t!—I’ve never killed anything, except when we go fishing...and I always feel sorry for the fish! Heck, I even feel sorry for the worms!”

But now Mom was weeping even more uncontrollably, and I was crying too. “It’s all right,” she said...I just remember when we had a turtle pond after you and your dad brought home the turtle you’d found crossing the road by Lodi...you named it ‘Lodi’ and it ate lettuce, and it lived in the garden for so long...”

“Honestly, I didn’t even know they were going to do it till they did...but they are a pretty mean family in some ways and spoiled too...I’ve been thinking of not going over there again, anyway. Honest, Mom...please don’t cry...”

“It’s all right...it’s alright...” she said, through tears that scalded me like boiling water. But I knew it wasn’t all right at all, and my weekend was wrecked.

\* \* \* \* \*

The pencil-dropping incident and Mr. Corvelle’s detentions made me miss marching band practice last week—every cloud having its silver lining—so this morning, I went to Mr. Cherubini and asked him if I could switch out of the marching band and into the concert orchestra. He looked as if he would shed tears of rapture, and he nearly broke his pen, writing out a schedule change for the main office.

I thought that I might go out for the wrestling team when that starts in a couple of weeks, but something happened in phys ed this morning that I find disturbing, to say the least. Our huge cavernous gym at Shaw High has—among other accouterments like medicine balls, pulley

weights, and Indian clubs—thick, heavy climbing ropes that ascend to its distant upper reaches—at least forty or fifty feet up. I’ve never been very good at climbing them—I’ve only made it to the top once or twice. Well, Mr. Gallo, our Gym teacher, had gone to his office for something, and guys from all four grades were just hanging around. I’d shot off my mouth about the wrestling team, and Jarvis Skinner, a varsity grappler, cornered me with a pugnacious attitude.

“Elbon, there’s an unwritten test that you have to pass to be on our team.”

“Aw, bull...anyone can go out, and I’ll bet I’m pretty good for my weight—”

“Shut up ya flat—I’m talkin’ to ya,” ‘Skinny’ said with a painful poke to my solar plexus.

“You can be on our team when you can do this...” and with a running leap, he swarmed up the nearest climbing rope with stunning speed.

What happened next made me swallow my chewing gum. My gut is still queasy an hour later. Here I should say that each of the six ropes is fastened at their top by a heavy iron ring to one of the massive I-beams that serve as rafters for the gymnasium’s lofty ceiling. My best guess is that the ropes are spaced at distances of about six or eight feet between them. To my horror, upon (very rapidly) reaching the top of his rope, Skinny, using just his fingers to grip the bottom ledge (imagine a capital I, with horizontal serifs) of the beam, traversed the substantial distance to the next rope. Before he had, like a tar of Her Majesty’s Navy, even slid clear down, another, then, another of the varsity guys were flying up other ropes to perform the same potentially deadly feat.

“Ready to try, Elbon?” barked Skinny, who had barely broken a sweat. As my mind writhed for an excuse, Mr. Gallo returned and dismissed the class.

I hear they are hiring at the Burger Chef, out Mayfield Road. Maybe, if I can work there, after school and weekends, I can save money for a bass guitar or a Farfisa organ. I don’t think I

should have quit my paper route just to warm the bench with football at Kirk, or to get made a fool of in marching band here. I had more liquid capital when I was a kid of eleven! What a shameful nothing I've become.

I have other mouths to feed, too. When we used to walk home from Kirk—it was two miles—first up the steep hill, via Lee Road or Taylor—at the foot of the hill was Mr. Cobb's greenhouse, where he raised and sold tropical fish and plants. Mom and I always loved our goldfish, but when I saw what he raised in there—fancy guppies, jewelfish, white cloud mountain fish from China, pearl danios, and all the others—I had to get our little five-gallon aquarium up and running again. Soon, however, I found a ten-gallon tank with a cracked side in someone's trash on garbage day. I fixed it, then it turned out that Clair and her hubby Pete had gotten me another, even bigger one, for my birthday. That was fine 'cause I needed room for more and more types of fish. Then Breen sold me his two 'Jack Dempsey' Cichlids, big hungry things that were black with iridescent spangles. It's a good thing the guppies keep multiplying since those Dempseys are always hungry. Dog food works in a pinch, but lean chicken is better. Now the basement is getting full of aquariums, and Dad is getting sore about the electric bill from their filters and heaters and lights and everything, but I seem to keep latching on to more and more fish. I need to get a job.

\* \* \* \* \*

Well, I have not written in this journal for a couple of weeks because I got hired, out at Burger Chef. The first thing they did was to give me a putty knife and send me out into the parking lot to scrape up chewing gum. I griped about doing that, so they gave me a try behind the cash register,

but my drawer kept coming up wrong—sometimes over, sometimes under—so I was exiled back to the lot. For a few days, I wire-brushed and painted the cement parking posts and dividers. More recently, they’ve had me down in the basement, working stock. I’d actually rather be doing these things, though, ‘cause if I’m out front taking orders I’m afraid people I know will see me wearing the stupid paper hat and Burger Chef shirt, and laugh at me. This actually happened last Friday night, but it was just something I had coming.

There’s this girl Betsy, who I started going to Teen Town, some, last summer, to run into. This was because she seemed to like me and ‘cause I thought she was kind of cute and funny, although kind of plumb-shaped. I danced with her a few times, and she even called me on the phone once, to ask me to a dance back at Kirk, which she still attends, but I made up some excuse that I couldn’t go. Then one night outside Teen Town, after it was over, I thought maybe she wanted me to kiss her. Victor—the dickens—was getting cozy with some other chick, over on the steps. So I went to kiss Betsy, and her me, but our teeth clicked together in the process, which for some reason sort of unnerved me. So I just said goodnight, and she laughed and said goodnight and went to rejoin her girlfriends. Well, I know it wasn’t right, but I started avoiding her after that. Breen had seen me dancing with her and said “You can do better” or something along those lines, and Victor thought so too, although he was too polite to say so; and I figured that after I got a job and made some more money, I’d be ready to try to get with Carol Byrd. So I started avoiding Betsy if I’d see her, and not calling her back, the couple of more times that she called. I knew her feelings were getting hurt, but I figured better to just stop things there rather than to hurt her worse, when I probably would get with Carol, hopefully before too long.

At any rate, Friday night at Burger Chef, they were short-handed out front, so they had me bagging orders behind the counter when Betsy and her friends happened in. “Well, look at

‘Beetle Bailey’ with his uniform and his little hat,” she commented, icily, to the approval of her girlfriends, who were looking at me as if I’d crawled out of a drain. “Something smells rancid in here—I seem to have lost my appetite.” It was the old story of the woman scorned, even though I’d had no intention of being unkind. Oh, well—Victor is getting good on his Heathkit electric guitar and amp, and I’m practicing chords on the piano at his house. I’ll buy an organ soon, and it will be us that those girls will be going to the dances to hear.

\* \* \* \* \*

Things have now just about hit rock bottom with me and Dad—my whole life, actually. I was minding my own beeswax when the old pill came down to the basement. “How’s work going son?”

“Oh, fair...I’m actually thinking of quitting.”

“Quitting?”

“Yeah...I put money down on an electric keyboard, at Mayfield Music. I’ve been working on chords on the Hoffstader’s piano. Victor is getting good at guitar. You know he’s a trained cellist and his fingers are already strong and nimble...we think we can have a band...”

“What about the trombone?”

“Oh, Dad, nobody wants to hear a trombone anymore.”

“Son, you quit football last fall, track in the spring, marching band this year, and now you want to quit your job after just a few weeks? Never quit a job unless you have another one lined up that pays better.”

“Don’t worry about it, Dad.”

“What are you doing there?”

“Just replacing burned-out bulbs in these aquarium reflectors.”

“Those don’t look like aquarium bulbs...”

“It doesn’t matter. Normal bulbs work just as well.”

“Where did you buy them?”

“I got them from Mom’s broom closet, but don’t worry...I’ll replace them.”

“Son, you just keep trying to muscle more and more of everything that you want. Now you’ve put money down on something new when you’re not taking care of things that you already have, and you’re talking about quitting your job before...”

“Alright, alright, Dad...don’t get your panties in a twist—”

WHAM! My teeth rattled and white light flashed; Dad had fetched me a backhanded clout that rocked me down to my socks!

“Everything that you want, you want exactly when and how you want it!”—WHAP!

“I’d have given my left ball to have been able to play on a football team with every sort of modern equipment, but only because you weren’t happy with your size and your field time, you quit!”—SMACK!

“After years of lessons that cost hundreds of dollars, and the brand new trombone we bought you, you want to quit that too!”—WHACK!

I was rapidly coming to dislike having my head clobbered, and I tried grabbing the old man’s wrists...“Don’t you dare lift your hands to your father! When I was accepted to trade school to learn tool making, during the Depression, I was as grateful as a man can be, and you’ve no use for that opportunity that I’ve given you either, and now you tell me you’re going to quit your job? After three weeks? Well, things are going to change around here, and there’s going to

be an end to this quitting and giving up on every damn thing! I'm from the school of hard knocks, and I'm about to start knocking!"

By that time, I was crying and really mad myself. "Well, I sure didn't want to quit drawing at the art museum on Saturday mornings, but it was you who made me quit that. I know I don't draw all that well, but it was something I needed, to help me with everything else that I want to be, and you made me fuckin' quit!" This gave him half a moment's pause, so I flew up the stairs and out the side door; then I ran and walked the three miles to Clair's house for sympathy and a warm sofa.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Actually, you know," said my sister over a cup of Constant Comment orange pekoe tea, "Dad has mellowed. When I was dating an Italian boy when I was at Shaw..."

"Yeah, I remember...Bacchi Boo..."

"Yes, Bacchus Budini...he had the cutest muscles! Well, Dad threw him off of our porch and cracked several of his ribs."

"Jeez!"

"But you know that things haven't been going well since Dad quit at 'Darwin and Milner' to start 'Elbon Sales and Service'. Now it looks like he will be working the night shift at the GE factory, as a machinist, to make ends meet."

"Really?"

"Yes. It's an awful disappointment for him that having his own business hasn't worked out very well. And he's been worried about Mom since she went back to work at the library."

“I have been too. Why does she have to work at that library down there in Hough where the riots were?”

“Well, she doesn’t, but you know Mom. That was where they assigned her and she says that they really need her since no one else wants to go into that neighborhood.”

“Wow.”

“But really, Jack, Dad’s right about one thing—you need to get your high school diploma, so you’re not stuck at Burger Chef forever.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You’ll probably be on your own more, with them both working so much. You can spend some time over here.”

“Thanks. I’d like to practice some, on your piano. I know I’ve started too late to ever be a Van Cliburn or anything, but I have good rhythm in my hands, if not my feet, and I can pull together chords, even if they’re mainly ones I’ve made up myself. Even if some people criticize me for not playing exactly like the records, Victor is open-minded and doesn’t mind us having our own way of playing.”

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*Here ends my high school journal. Perhaps more was written; if so, it is now long lost. As threatened, we must now pick up the threads, as best we are able, with the questionable hindsight of an old reptile—a survivor of comets and glaciations—who has somehow escaped extinction...*



## 11 — PRINT SHOPS AND STRIP POKER

Although Dad could have a hot temper, his generally good nature usually resurfaced pretty quickly. The following weekend, he had a suggestion: “Jack, I know you aren’t very happy at Burger Chef. I have a lodge brother, an elderly man, who has a print shop down on Euclid. He needs help; maybe you’d find the work down there more interesting. Why don’t we run down, and you can meet him?”

“OK.”

Mr. Carlton was an affable but quite ancient veteran of “The Great War”.

“Yes, we marched around Flanders Field, some,” he said in answer to my queries. His hands and eyes were still steady, and he could set lead type like lightning, but the white-haired man was clearly of diminished vitality overall.

I was also introduced to a smiling homely man who was seated on a low stool by a fast whirling four-color offset press. He was Jimmy Kelterbach, the journeyman printer. He looked almost exactly like “The Carpenter” in the Tenniel illustration from *Alice in Wonderland*. A jolly-looking chubby lady named Simona completed the staff.

“Our last apprentice, Lon, joined the paratroops to fight in Viet Nam, but he died over there.”

“Oh—I’m sorry,” I said.

I tendered my notice at Burger Chef, offering to keep working for as long as needed. “No, no—you can quit now—no problem! Good luck with your new job! We’ll cut you a check right away,” said Dave, the manager, a bit overeagerly I thought.

Things went alright at Carlton's for a couple of days—then it became Dickensian. A print shop, with all of its complexities, and letter presses as big and powerful as triceratops dinosaurs, can be a bad place for a dreamy lad.

“I told you to count me sixty of that blue stock—you only gave me fifty!”

“Who in the hell distributed italic type into the boldface drawer?”

“Come in early Saturday morning and use plenty of (carbon tetrachloride) solvent on those presses!” No wonder Jim Kelterbach was smiling when I met him—he knew he had a new slave. It's a wonder I still have a liver.

Simona lost her jolliness, pronto, as well: “Whoever keeps missin' the bull's-eye in the restroom (a grim cubbyhole, far in the rear of the shop) had better get things swabbed out back there, or I'm goin' home!” Although not being guilty of that transgression, I was the obvious choice as swabber.

My predecessor, Lon Pruitt, whom I respected for his valor and love of country, was somebody I got tired of being compared to.

In spite of it being apparent that I'd never make a printer, much less a typesetter, I was useful in some ways: “Here comes Mrs. O'Shea, and her invitations still aren't done—quick Jack—get out front!”

As the others fled to the back door, I'd be doomed to face the livid customer: “MY DAUGHTER'S WEDDING IS THIS SATURDAY—WHERE ARE MY INVITATIONS?”

“Uh, I'm sure they'll be done soon—”

“DONE SOON? THAT'S WHAT YOU SAID YESTERDAY! IF THEY AREN'T DONE TODAY, SOMEBODY IS GOING TO GET A TURPENTINE ENEMA!”

Dad, however, was off my back, and I was making better money. Soon I paid off the Wurlitzer electric piano that I'd decided on instead of the organ. Since Mr. Carlton was too good of a Mason to fire the son of a lodge brother, and because I wanted to keep things peaceful at home, I wound up working at the print shop after-school afternoons and during the summers, throughout the rest of my high school years.

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The horrors of the war that had taken Lon Pruitt's young life were now seen in every living room, every evening. Regardless of one's feelings about it, draft exemptions for college students seemed terribly unfair to anyone looking at it objectively. Even the students, who stood to benefit, saw the injustice. Dissent was everywhere.

Walking home one evening, I encountered Mike Vandergriff, killer of snapping turtles, in his driveway.

"Come on...I'll play you the new record by the 'Psychedelic Nigger'."

"The who?"

"The 'Psychedelic Nigger'! You mean you haven't heard him yet? 'Hey Joe' or 'Purple Haze'?"

"No," I shrugged, thinking it must be some kind of crazy stage name. But it was clear that music was changing with the times—everything now seemed rife with symbolism, subtleties, and double entendre.

After we'd listened to both sides of the strange-sounding but compelling 45, I asked: "Hey, could I play with your bass for a few minutes? My friend Victor and I are arranging some songs for a band we're going to be starting."

"You mean that weird skinny guy who lives on Rushleigh?—Hey, I'll play bass for you guys!"

"Uh, well, maybe." Although very good-looking, I knew that Mike Vandergriff had no feel for making music at all.

While I was trying to tune his dusty instrument, a pal of his showed up.

"Hey, Muzzy. What's doin'?" asked Mike.

"Any chick I can. You?"

"Well, Friday night, I got this chick who lives over on Spangler—you may know her—her name is Carol Byrd—to play strip poker. She ain't all that cute but her jugs have really gotten big! Man, we got just about everything there was to get off of that chick!"

"We?"

"Yeah, my brother was here too, with Nancy Chuggle, but we couldn't coax Nancy out of her bra. We got her blouse off, but then she just started taking off her earrings, and shoes, and stuff, when she'd lose. But that Carol—wow! We'd stacked the deck some, and mixed them rum and Cokes from my dad's bar."

"Ha, ha" laughed Muzzy. "You should have called me."

"Oh, well...fuck 'em and forget 'em."

My back was turned to Mike and Muzzy as I pretended to concentrate on the instrument; otherwise, they'd have seen the color drain from my face. I felt as if I'd been kicked in the guts—I was actually nauseated.

“Jack and me are starting a band, but I don’t know about his nerdy guitar player,” said Mike.

“Victor Hoffsteader has more talent in his *shit* than you’ll ever have in your worthless life,”

I erupted. “Stick this bass up your ass till it comes out your mouth!”

“What—”

“OUT YOUR MOUTH!!” I repeated belligerently, as I stalked out of the garage and down the street.

“Jeez, who jerked his chain?”

## 12 — DOWN A CRACK

At the beginning of the new school year, I was surprised to find, complacently seated in my homeroom, none other than my childhood pal Georgie Boxhorn. Apparently, he'd returned from his stint at the "Special School" he'd attended for several years. Although five-foot, ten inches in height, he'd retained his deceptively cherubic smile. We somehow, naturally, resumed chumming together as we had as boys.

"Have you tried smoking Tarragon?" he asked, one afternoon after school.

"No, what's that?"

"It's a common spice, but they say that smoking it gets you high like real grass. I got some from our kitchen, but I don't have anything to smoke it in. Doesn't your dad smoke a pipe?"

"He used to, but he gave it up. He got rid of all his pipes except for an old one that was my grandfather's."

"Can we borrow it?"

"Well, he keeps it in his dresser drawer, but I don't like the idea of using it."

"Isn't he working the swing shift?"

"Well, yeah..." I had been feeling terribly discouraged with work and school, and with life in general, particularly since my dreams of getting with Carol Byrd had blown up. Just as I'd made up my mind to forgive her for her reputed escapade with Mike Vandergriff, she'd started dating a senior, even wearing his letter sweater.

It seemed as if all anyone talked about then was "getting high, getting high", and I was open to any escape from my rotten existence. When we got to my house, Victor was waiting on the

porch with his guitar, thinking we'd practice, but he was easily persuaded to join us in our smoke.

Granddad's old briar pipe was of typical size and shape, only it had a hinged dome of metal screen that came down over its bowl. It was easy for me to snag it since Mom was still at work, down at the library in Hough. "I don't want to stink things up around here. The house two doors down is for sale and vacant. Let's just slip into its garage and smoke in there."

"How do you guys feel?" asked Georgie, after a few puffs.

"I don't feel a thing," said Victor.

"A little queasy, that's all," I reported. "This stuff tastes like cat shit—uh, oh...OH, NO!" A small, ornamental steel ball, which had adorned the top of the pipe's little wind dome, had come unfastened and bounced to the cement floor. "Get it!" Too late—to my horror, we saw it roll to the back of the garage and disappear down a deep crack in the concrete. We found a wire and other probing implements, but the little sphere eluded us.

"Damn it all...now it's gonna be my ass!" I wailed.

"Maybe your Dad won't miss it," suggested Victor.

"Of course he'll miss it, and that'll be the end of our band."

"We can't let that happen," said George. "Don't worry...we'll epoxy something onto there. Let's see. It was bigger than a BB, wasn't it?"

"Way bigger, Georgie. You always were good at getting me into trouble."

"Relax. How about a ball bearing? Look, just slip it back into your dad's drawer and cover up that part of it with a handkerchief or something. He'll be tired when he gets off of work."

"He's gonna smell it."

"Wipe it out with rubbing alcohol. Don't worry—just leave everything else to me."

Sleep was impossible that night until I heard Dad come in, pop a beer, then another, finally retiring sometime after two. As a result, I was late for school the next morning; but as I entered homeroom, Georgie gave me a comforting wink.

“Take a look at this cabinet hinge,” he said as we merged into the crowded hallway, heading for our respective first-period classes. “Tell me that one of these little balls on it won’t be perfect.”

“Yeah, they’re the right size, but how—”

“Hold it right there, Boxhorn...you too, Elbon...” The sadistic Mr. Corvelle, who, to the consternation of all, had left his teaching position to become assistant principal at Shaw High, had materialized from nowhere. “Why do you have that hacksaw?” I noticed, for the first time, that Georgie was indeed carrying such an implement along with his books.

“For shop,” George answered without a blink.

“What’s it doing outside of the shop?”

“I brought it from home ‘cause the ones in there are dull.”

“You’re the one who’s been breaking into lockers, aren’t you? Sawing off the combination locks. You too, Elbon?”

“No!”

“We’ll see. Come with me and no talking. You up ahead, Boxhorn, and you, Elbon—follow us.” Shrewd martinet that he was, he kept us separated to keep us from corroborating our stories. It turned out that Georgie wasn’t even taking shop that semester. I just continued to plead ignorance, which was basically true, although I’d figured out that my friend was going to use the hacksaw to cut one of the little orbs off of the cabinet hinge, for replacement of the one we’d lost from granddad’s pipe. How could I reveal that, though?



Our lockers were searched, which turned up nothing, but when they found the epoxy cement on George, which was to have facilitated the mending of the pipe, we were in even deeper waters.

“How long have you been sniffing glue, Elbon?” probed Corvelle, still fishing. “Don’t roll your eyes at me, boy! I’ll have you expelled!”

“I didn’t even have any glue on me.”

“So you *have* been sniffing glue!”

“NO, NO!”

“You two were doing or plotting something—you know it and I know it. Now, what was it?”

“I was only talking to him.”

“About what?”

“Uh, our homework.”

“You’re lying, Elbon. From now on, I’m on you like ugly on an ape—and on the company that you keep.”

## 13 — FIVE WINGS

On a Sunday evening at MYF, while the group was discussing how Christ would have felt about contemporary issues, I realized that my wallet was not in my back pocket. I glanced around me, at the surrounding floor, but didn't see it. I figured that I had just neglected to grab it, leaving home and that it was in all likelihood still on my dresser.

Afterward, by the Coke machine, Tommy Nordstrom, an older guy with long hair (like I'd have had myself if Dad would have stood for it), said: "Here—you dropped this." To my surprise, he handed me my wallet. "By the way, there's something in there that I heard you wanted. Check it out later."

Upon inspection, I discovered five dollars had vanished, but that there was a flat packet of aluminum foil in its place. Victor went to school with Tommy—there must have been some discussion of the Tarragon incident.

"I've got some real grass for us to smoke now—no more of your kitchen spices," I informed Georgie the following Friday.

"It's a good thing I fixed that pipe—I told you I could," answered Georgie, incredibly assuming that I'd be willing to risk borrowing it again. His substitution of the little ornament from the cabinet hinge had worked well, and it was unlikely that Dad would ever notice, but I was determined that it would remain in his drawer henceforth.

"You're out of your mind. You can come up with a pipe or cigarette papers, this time."

"OK, I'll pick you up later. My parents and Tamara are going to a church conference this weekend—I'm dropping them off at the airport."

Georgie had recently gotten his driver's license. He picked me up after dinner, in his family's station wagon. "They sold me a corn cob pipe at Washington's drug store. I said it was for my dad's birthday."

"What about matches?"

"I've got them too. Where should we go?"

"Anywhere, but we've got to pick up Victor, first."

Shortly, the three of us were parked in the shadows on the edge of the ravine behind Caledonia, my old school. Unlike the tarragon, this stuff had a deep, pungent taste and scent.

"So this is what everybody's talking about!" raved Victor, showing signs of elevated spirits.

"I don't feel a thing," I remarked.

"Well, I'm feeling pretty good," said Georgie, cranking up the radio. His folks, like Victor's, appreciated fine music; there was an FM radio attached beneath the dashboard. But Georgie had rolled down the dial from their classical station, and the new "underground" music that everybody was talking about was jamming out. "Let's cruise the library and see if there are any girls."

"Good idea," I agreed. "Then we can honestly say that we've been there."

"Are you serious? Go into the library in this shape?" Victor was obviously wrecked. I wondered why I wasn't, but the music and cruising with my friends had me feeling happy, too.

We left Victor in the car, being blown away by the music, and traipsed on in. A lovely, blond librarian, in her early twenties perhaps, was behind the desk. "And what can I do for *you*, Mademoiselle Librarian?" George asked her, at once. "Is your name, by chance, Marion? If not, it's surely Venus? Or Helen? Or Josephine?"

“You’ll find the children’s room straight ahead and to the right, sonny.” Clearly, she was used to punks like us. “And keep it quiet.”

“*Merci, merci, mon cher.* I imagine I’ll need help with the card file, soon...I do hope you’ll take me in hand—”

“I said keep it quiet!”

Nancy Chuggle and a friend were at a table, apparently getting their weekend homework done early. Relieved to see no sign of Carol or Betsy or any other of the Sirens who haunted my dreams, I went over. “Hi, Nancy. My but you’re diligent, getting your assignments done early. Been to any card parties, lately?” I’d taken every opportunity to razz Nancy since hearing of her part in the naughty poker game in the Vandergriff’s garage.

“Any youthful indiscretions which may have occurred in my distant past would seem to pale in comparison to what I’ve been hearing lately about you guys. It’s in all the slam books too—*Mr. Stoner.*”

“Oh, no.” I had clearly gained the reputation of being a loadie, without the benefits of ever having gotten loaded. Slam books were steno pads that made the rounds, being filled with page after page of gossip, innuendo, and tittle-tattle. Notoriety, I reflected, might be better than being the social black-hole that I’d always been.

While teasing Nancy about the strip poker game, I’d also—cunningly, I felt—probed for further intelligence as to what had actually happened. Nancy had told me that she and Carol Byrd had actually left the Vandergriff’s *together* that night, rekindling my hopes, for a spell, only to have them cruelly doused again, by Carol’s subsequent romance with Mr. Letter-Sweater. Cute chicks only stay available for fleeting moments, I realized, not for the last time in what would be a long and treacherous career. If you’re gonna make a move, make it fast.

George Boxhorn seemed to feel the same way. “Hey,” he beckoned to me, in a very audible whisper. “In *Photography* magazine, the last time I was in here, there was an article about the topless bathing suit, with pictures and everything.”

“Let’s go look—”

“No—wait...I have a better idea!” He returned to the desk. “Um,” he said to the frosty blonde, “Do you by chance have the latest copy of *Photography* magazine?”

The lovely gal slowly smiled. “Oh, do you mean the one with that new bathing suit?”

“Yeah...Yes! Ya’ see my friend and I are photographers...Hey, aren’t you a model?”

“Oh, no, I’m just a librarian, but why don’t you two just wait here? I’ll be glad to get it for you!” Now, Nancy’s table and the whole room were tuned in.

“Here you are,” said the beautiful young woman, returning and handing the magazine to me, of all people. Let me know if there’s anything else I can help you with...and good luck with your photography!”

Unable to believe our luck, we retreated to Nancy’s table...Here it was—right on the cover! “The Challenge of the Topless Bathing Suit—Page 23”...Flip, flip—OH, NO! Pages 23 through 31 had been cut out of the magazine!

“Probably some other goatish boys did it,” laughed Nancy and her chums.

“I’ll bet it was Miss Driver (the elderly head librarian) or Goldilocks over there,” remarked Georgie, gazing ruefully at the smugly smiling Goddess who pretended to be absorbed in the card files.

“Well, we’d better get back to Victor before he runs down your car battery.”

Our friend stated that he couldn’t possibly go home and face his folks, the way he was. Since his eyes looked like pickled red onions, we were inclined to believe him.

“How come I don’t even feel the stuff? I want my five bucks back,” I griped.

“You just need a boost, that’s all, ‘Bonny’.” Georgie had lapsed into calling me by a childhood nickname that I never liked much. “Do you have any moolah, Vic?”

“Uh, yeah, I have about two bucks—maybe three...”

“That’s all we need! We’ll repay Jack for footing the bill for this party, so far. Anyway, it’s just a quarter till eight. I’m payin’ for the gas so we’re all even...”

“Even? Well, maybe I’m lousy at math but two plus maybe two only equals four, so you guys are still flyin’ on my coattails, but that’s ok...I’m not cheap, just thrifty...Hey, where are we goin’?”

“First to the drugstore—then to Mr. T’s. But Victor back there has reached his legal limit as far as additional stimulants are concerned.” Giggles from the back seat confirmed that this might be a wise policy.

Georgie darted into Stonebreaker’s Drug on Noble, emerging with a small bag. “Thanks for the two spot, Vic. I have a cough and so does Jack.”

Down Noble hill we flew, west on Terrace, across Euclid, then down to Hayden Avenue (or, up north, geographically speaking, towards the lake). There are a LOT of people living between Euclid and the lake.

Pulling up in front of a seedy-looking package store, Georgie said, “OK, Victor...wait here and hold the fort. Jack—come with me.”

“Mista’ T!” he exuberantly addressed a black man behind the counter, who wore a beret and sunglasses.

“Hey thea, baybeh...How you bee-en?”

“Hangin’ in, hangin’ in. I’m back at Shaw now.”

“Look out Shaw High!”

“Hey, T...we need a bottle of Ripple...just a small one.”

“Well, ah don’ know...Who’s yo’ fre-end?”

“This is Elbon. He’s alright.”

“Ailbon? I went to schoo’ with an Ailbon...Man could he play the vibes! Just like “Bags”

(Milt Jackson of the Modern Jazz Quartet, I figured out later).

“That’s my brother!”

“Yeah, Jack’s a musician, too.”

“Sheeit, boeh...Y’all got the pedigree! What flavor y’all want? ‘Red’ or ‘Pagan Pink’? I got Boone’s Farm too—it’s pretty hip...”

“Just the red Ripple, T. And a couple of cups, too. ”

“No probs, baybeh...Just be careful, he-ah? Say hi to the Major, but don’t tell him y’all was he-ah! Hee, Hee, Hee!”

“I won’t if you won’t, T!”

*How many more times...Treatin’ meeee, the waaaaay, you wanna do...*

*I’ll give you all I have to give...rings, pearls...*

Victor was still blitzed out on the music and the weed. “I can’t believe it...this band, with Jimmy Page from the Yardbirds, has just three instruments—him, drums, bass, and a singer—and they’re playin’ the whole album on this college radio station I found, way down here at the end of the FM dial...Hey, let’s load that pipe again...can we?”

“Hold your water...let’s sit down by the lake and watch the waves break,” said Georgie, flying down (up) Eddy Road. Soon we were watching the huge, silvery waves crashing on the

massive blocks of rock, which protected the city. Georgie mixed Romilar cough syrup, from Stonebreaker's Drugstore, into the wine from "Mr. T's" package store.

"How do you know Mr. T?" I asked.

"He's 'Army'."

"Are you kidding me? When he said to say hi to the Major, he meant your dad?"

"Yeah. There're all kinds of people in the Salvation Army, just like in your church—any church, I suppose."

"People from the Methodist church don't sell hootch..."

"Nah, just reefer. Speaking of which, get busy with that pipe, Mr. Victor." Soon the car smelled like a rope factory that had caught fire. I was starting to feel floaty from the codeine and alcohol.

"No one is fishing tonight," I mused aloud. "Funny, how she can be so violent, like this, and smooth as silk other times. Dad and I went out on Uncle Jack's boat last summer, and we caught perch as fast as we could pull 'em up. People were way out there too, in little sailboats and canoes...never a ripple on the water..."

"Well, the wind is howling down out of Canada tonight, that's why."

"When we docked at the 9th Street pier, there were old black guys waiting. They had forty fish all filleted for us, clean as a whistle, by the time we had the boat hitched up. Mom and Aunt May fried 'em up and we were eating within an hour. I'd like to have a boat someday..."

"Well, you don't wanna eat fish from the lake, every day, ya know.... Did you see—the river caught fire down by the flats? Those chemicals and the mercury get into the fish, too, at least down there."



“That’s why you need a boat—to get way out there. Oh, well—I’ll have one, one of these days if we ever graduate and I get a decent job...If I even stay around here, that is. Bobby’s back in New York, and he’s doing well again. I may go and see him this summer. Hey, Victor, I’ve got enough money saved up to buy those two mics from Billington tomorrow.” Our band now had two brothers playing with us—Tim and Sam Di Fiore, on drums and bass.

“Great...we’ll be ready for our gig. How much do they want for them?”

“They wanted ten dollars apiece, but we’re getting both for fifteen.”

“That’s a steal! Sorry, I’m pretty broke...”

“That’s OK...you came up with our speakers which are worth more.”

Georgie started the car, backed away from the lake, and zoomed south. I marveled that our partying had apparently not affected his driving. Except for an enhanced aura of conviviality, he seemed unchanged. “I think we’ll head to the university next. The radio said there are bands playing tonight at the Thwing Hall Ballroom, and I happen to know that pitchers of beer are just fifty cents.”

“Maybe we can meet some college girls!”

The first band exemplified the “Revolution”. With hair like that of the “Furry Freak Brothers”, ranging from long and stringy to big and puffy, they wore fringed leather coats, floppy hats, and lots of red, white and blue. Day-Glo paint was enhanced by black lights. They encouraged people in the audience to join “Students for a Democratic Society”. Victor and I were impressed, but Georgie less so. “Sure, we should stop carpet bombing cities in North Viet Nam, but these SDS types are just dupes of the commies. There’s nothing democratic about them—it’s just doublespeak. Let’s see about that pitcher. Let me get it, ‘cause I’m the tallest...I need a quarter from each of you guys...”

“Weed? Speed? Blotter acid?” a frizzy-haired young man, with ferrety eyes and a top hat, asked Victor and I, with surprising directness.

“Uh, no thanks,” I answered, somewhat abashed. This was, after all, a great temple of learning, wasn’t it?

“Hey, you guys aren’t narks, are you?” the weasely guy, who had been subjecting us to cool appraisal, suddenly asked. The term was new to me.

“Narks?”

“Cause if you are, my brothers and I will get you.”

“Take a walk, buddy,” interjected George, reappearing with a golden pitcher and three glasses. “We don’t need anything, that’s all.” Weasely slunk away.

A folk singer with a plaintive voice had taken the stage:

*I knew a girl with curly black hair...*

*That curled and tumbled down over her breast,*

*If she should be there, see if it still curls...*

*For that is the way, I remember her best...*

Somehow, his singing, with just six strings finger-picked, touched me far more deeply than had the band with its Marshall amps, feedback, and pompous dogma. For a moment, my eyes teared.

“Wow, look at that gorgeous chick...and she’s with a black guy!” goggled Victor, washing down his second beer, perhaps too quickly. The girl really was pretty; George and I stared too. If these hippy chicks would go with black dudes, there might even be hope for us!

Suddenly, a uniformed campus policeman was by our table. “Do you boys go to school here?”

“Yes!” and “No,” Victor and I answered, simultaneously.

“They mean not yet, sir. We’ll be enrolling next year.” Georgie interjected.

“Yeah? Well, let’s see some ID. You can’t be here, much less drinking beer, unless you’re eighteen.”

“Oh, we didn’t know—”

“Sure you knew. I was gonna let you stay for the music, but now I’ve gotta run you. Goodnight.”

“But—”

“I said goodnight!” We had been eighty-sixed.

“Wow...I’m starved,” said Victor, as we climbed into the Boxhorn’s car.

“Well, we’re low on funds,” said George, “but I heard that at the Elite Bar B-Q, down on 105th Street, chicken wings are just twenty cents each.”

“Are you kidding?” responded Victor. “White people never go down there, especially at night.”

“Aw, come on...we’re just folks. Who’d wanna mess with us?”

I, too, was feeling flush with courage, mainly liquid, and warmth and oneness with all mankind. “George is right. As long as we’re putting out positive vibes, no one will even notice us.” Again, George swung our faithful boat northward.

Inside of the busy joint, however, the fluorescent lighting was very bright. Upon entering, I immediately felt like a bug under a microscope. Though our presence elicited no adverse comment, we were plainly noticed. As Georgie, in his nonchalant way, began to engage in banter with some of the patrons, I began to feel whirly—things seemed to be spinning.

“I’m going to the restroom,” I said, noticing a sign indicating its location.

“Lend me a buck first, wouldja?” asked George.

“Yeah, yeah...” I’d still have fifteen of my hard-earned dollars left, to buy the all-important microphones tomorrow, and a buck for wings, too—if I could eat anything. In the men’s room, I sat for a spell on the throne, just to regain my sea legs. At least, I didn’t think I was more than slightly nauseated, thank heaven. After just sitting with my eyes closed, I felt a little better. I washed my face with cold water, combed my hair, and stumbled back out. George and Victor were eating in a corner booth. A new crowd had come in, and I took my place at the end of a rather long line. I glanced up at the posted bill of fare, long enough to see, among other offerings, that chicken wings were in fact twenty cents per. The clock said it was just after eleven; I should be able to get home and into bed, just before Dad got home from working his swing shift.

I finally made it to the order taker. “Five, please,” I said, starting to feel a bit dizzy again.

“Fahv?”

“Yes, please.” I’d considered not eating at all, but had decided I’d better, to avoid seeming rude. I could just eat one or two wings and then slip the rest into the fridge at home—no, better not—there would be questions best avoided. Georgie could take them to his parents’ fridge. It had been a fun evening, but I began to wonder what was taking so long with my little order. My bleary eyes observed, without really registering, cardboard boxes being filled with biscuits, coleslaw, chicken breasts and drumsticks, corn on the cob, potatoes and gravy, and napkins. As each box was folded closed, then bagged, it was stacked with others, just beyond the cash register. Somebody must have gotten in a big order ahead of mine, my subconscious mind was thinking while my main thoughts were busy imagining how good the “Steamboat Jokers”—the name we’d given our band—would sound, singing through the genuine Sure microphones we’d

be acquiring tomorrow. I glanced at the clock again—ten after, now. I'd better not encounter Dad...he'd almost certainly know that I'd been—

“Fifteen dollah.” I looked around to see who the very large, white-aproned man at the cash register was addressing. All I saw was a longish line of impatient faces behind me.

“Fifteen dollahs, please, suh!” He couldn't possibly be addressing me, COULD HE?

I began to sputter like a tea kettle—“Fifteen dollars?”

“Yesuh...fahve dinnahs at three dollah each is fifteen dollahs...”

“Five DINNERS?”

“Yasuh...They's people behind y'all now, so please pay on up!”

“But I just...I just wanted—”

Behind me, I heard impatient murmurings and mutterings; I suddenly realized that the whole place had gone quiet, except for Georgie and Victor, who, oblivious to my plight, were jabbering away in their booth, the twits. An even bigger man in a chef's hat, with arms big around as my thighs, stepped out from the kitchen.

“Uh, fifteen dollars?” I stammered.

“Yesuh.”

With a sigh, I pulled my wallet from my pocket.

\* \* \* \* \*

In spite of the embarrassing financial setback, we were able to procure, on credit, the needed microphones. In spite of their quality, our singing was not much better. In an effort to improve the band, I had enticed a flashy lead guitar player named Rich Gunnison into joining us. He had

long blond hair and played a genuine Fender Stratocaster that was covered with decals and bumper stickers, such as a prominent red and blue one advertising “STP”.

“What kind of name is that—the ‘Steamboat Jokers’?” he asked, after a practice.

“Well, some decks of playing cards from the eighteen-hundreds were called ‘Steamboats’, and their Jokers were of a banjo player on a pier, that we liked...”

“That name’s no good. Everyone’s talking about Owsley getting busted...I’ve been thinking we should call ourselves: ‘The Owsley Incident’.”

“Yeah! That’s way better!” chorused the Di Fiori brothers.

“Hey, wait a minute...Victor and I started this band, and...”

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this,” said Victor, “but my parents told me I’ve gotta quit. They said I could play the MYF gig, but then, I’d have to focus on the cello and my school work if I was gonna be able to get my driver’s license. But since there are two guitar players, I guess I’ll just split now, so you guys can move ahead without me. Sorry...”

Clearly, things were spinning out of control. “Who’s Owsley, anyway?” I asked Gunnison.

“Man, don’t you read *Rolling Stone*?” He cooks most of the best acid that’s out there—Blue Cheer and White Lightning. His lab getting busted is the main cause of this shortage.”

“Well, I guess if that’s the name you guys want, we can change it...”

\* \* \* \* \*

The gig at our church hall was a disaster. It was the weekend before midterm exams at both Shaw and Heights High. Nobody had ever heard of us; only a few kids showed up. Based on the huge mob that had been at the dance that Victor and I had attended the previous year, I had told

Gunnison and the Di Fioris that each guy was going to get paid five dollars. I'd figured that with a twenty-five-cent admission charge, we'd rake in plenty. Rather than admitting that I'd misrepresented the amount we were getting paid, I blamed our getting stiffed on the MYF officers.

“What a rip-off!” said Gunnison, as we made our way upstairs. “This is the last time we play here—in fact—” To my horror, he grabbed an empty Coke bottle, unzipped his jeans, and filled it with twelve ounces of urine which he then poured down *into* the internal mechanism of the church's Coke machine.

The resulting unpleasant odor lingered for weeks, reminding me of the whole depressing affair each time I attended MYF.

If this wasn't bad enough, I gradually became aware that Rich Gunnison and the Di Fioris were rehearsing without me—I had been kicked out of my own band!

## 14 — PACIFIST

The literature and history that I had steeped myself in since I'd learned to read, was often graphic in its depictions of man's cruelties. Victor Hugo, Dickens, Mark Twain, and all of the great ones pulled no punches. Home alone from school, at too early an age, I'd watched televised dramatizations of the Nuremberg Trials which had rendered me physically ill. But even that recent holocaust had seemed to be of a bygone era. Now, on a nightly basis, we were seeing the ravages of war right on our TV sets. Maybe I was right in thinking that it was a machine that was out of control and needing to be reined in. Or maybe it was just the same as any war, only there had never been color TV cameras zooming in, close, before. If being against it might lend some glamor to my hitherto vacuous persona, so much the better. In the manner of youth from every era, I was eager to establish my conformism as a non-conformist. My hair grew as long as Dad and Shaw High would permit. If I could slip away from school, I would head down to Public Square for the big anti-war demonstrations.

"Hey, girlie girl. You been downtown haven't ya? Down at the protests, haven't ya? Or are ya just a faggoty boy, downtown, sellin' your ass? Or both? I'll bet you're both..."

"Uh, no. Excuse me—"

"My brother got fucked up over there...Fucked up bad...do you think he should have got fucked up, over there in those jungles, for nothin'?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm just on my way—SHIT!!!!" (I am now on my ass, on the hard cement.)

"Look," I try to reason, "you don't even know me, and I don't know you and I won't fight. I—UNNH"... a hard heel-kick smashes into my ribs...



“Oh, you’ll fight alright,” snarls the stranger—a man in a blue windbreaker, who has accosted me getting off at the Windermere—a pretty name for an ugly place—Rapid Transit Terminal, prior to hiking up Noble Hill to home.

“UNNNHH”...this pointy-toed kick lands on my kidney...

“You’ll fight or I’ll kick your guts out through your teeth, and then I’ll kill you, you faggoty, chickenshit son of a whore...”

I have, in debate class, taken multiple sides of the very issue at hand—the war—and feel capable of examining it from all perspectives, including that of my present, rather slope-headed bohunk of an antagonist, his possibly valiant but unlucky brother, not to mention those of Ho Chi Minh, our own president, Christ, Buddha or myself. I might, however, explore these obviously emotional viewpoints with more alacrity if I were not engaged in a rapid reverse crab walk, hoping my retreating hands will encounter a board, tree limb, or bottle—all possibilities, here on the periphery of the parking lot of the Windermere bus yards, or that I might manage to land a shin-kick, preferably sooner rather than later. This guy is big and solid, and I am hurting badly already, and he has not yet even started on my head or my gut, although he’s tried, but missed, and—A ROCK!!!—or more likely a large chunk of asphalt, or, hopefully, brick has MIRACULOUSLY come under my hand, so I roll, like I did playing tackle football on paved surfaces years ago, and I hop up, jumping backward, and I PITCH the blessed object, with all of the aim, accuracy, and follow-through that a lot of summers of baseball have put into my arm—and it is a fastball STRIKE above his nose; he staggers back. I hope I’ve killed or badly stunned him or that he is a smoker and can’t run, but I don’t look back to see because I have TAKEN FLIGHT!!!! And he’ll have to be very fast to catch me...DAMN...my palms are bleeding, my left wrist feels broken, and my ribs seem cracked. Hopefully, he lives down here somewhere,

probably, and I will hopefully, hopefully, never see him again. Time spent in all of those sports, that I've quit, has saved my ass!

\* \* \* \* \*

Georgie had acquired a cute girlfriend named Lisa Lerner and had become a good deal preoccupied. This was probably for the good, given our trouble-plagued history. Victor, thinking very linearly, also equated having a driver's license with nights of passion; hence, he had focused, like a laser, on becoming a driver.

Having come to an uneasy truce with Dad about most things, I realized that my driving would entail borrowing his or Mom's car just when I was at a stage of wanting mainly to live and let live, avoiding familial snags and entanglements. So I rode "shank's mare," or my old bike, or used the dreary public transit system, carefully avoiding the Windermere terminal. I practiced the piano at my sister's and stayed there some, too. I read constantly and avoided my schoolwork as much as possible.

\* \* \* \* \*

Billy Friday, who was a year younger than I, was another kid I had met at MYF. On a Friday evening, we scored two hits from Tommy Nordstrom, whom we had met at Ruckison's Drug Store. We knew it was supposed to make you see God. We thought we'd just hide out in the Friday family basement that night, but Mrs. Friday loaded me into the family station wagon at seven o'clock and drove me home. Georgie and Lisa, who had never tripped, rescued me.

Heaven knows why, but Georgie took us to a pool hall/bowling alley up at Severance Center Mall.

The greasers, in their Ban-Lon shirts and Regal shoes, each with a pastel-colored or chrome-plated rat-tail comb poking up out of a back pocket of their checked or pegged pants, strutting and posturing about the pool tables, struck me as the funniest sight that I had ever seen! I was convulsed with laughter. Thankfully, those tough shit greaseballs thought I was too pathetic to beat up.

Next, I pulled my few dollars and change out of my pockets, then flung it up at the ceiling. Georgie and Lisa grew alarmed and dragged me out of there.

A monkey, carved from a coconut, in a shop's window "had been intended to be Buddha," I explained. It was all so apparent now...The answer was...*that there wasn't any question!*

After I'd settled down some, they drove me home where I watched the wood grain on my bedroom's woodwork swirl and crawl. Luckily, Mom and Dad were away...That time!

\* \* \* \* \*

That summer, I was allowed to ride "the dog" (Greyhound Bus) up to New York City to visit Bobby. Mom let me go because he had completely cleaned up and become a health and fitness nut. He was doing well in the theater, and, with his vibraphone, he starred in jazz clubs.

Off of the tip of Long Island, in an ocean as warm as a puppy's belly, we swam with a million tiny fluorescent jellyfish, luminous silver as were the stars that dusted every corner of that summer night's sky. I tried my best to communicate some of what was inside of me. "I don't know what I'm looking for, Bobby, but I have been looking...I read the Bible, and I'm not sure

about what Christ actually said, or if he even lived, or if it matters. I know that religion has been used too often as a way to enslave or murder, but then, I think of Mom and all she's given to the world. Since she's showed me, with her great heart, what a Christian can be—if I can even try to live my life with her kindness, or even aspire to her goodness, then maybe I'd be a fool to completely turn my back on ever having a little part of the faith that she's tried to give us. Sometimes I think it's just claptrap, but other times I think that it's part of our precious heritage. You know how, whenever things have gotten hard for our family, she's said: 'We'll have faith in the Lord and he'll see us through like he always has'—? The funny thing, Bobby, is that it always *has* worked! But then I think that if an omnipotent, almighty God would allow all of the injustice and suffering, for little children even, in a universe of His making, then logic tells me that He and the devil are, in fact, one and the same..."

My brother, the philosopher, lying next to me on the warm pier, was quiet for a spell before speaking.

"Here tonight, our being together by this ocean, under all of these stars, is heaven. So we know that it exists. Somewhere, for someone, during every moment, the kingdom of heaven is happening...always. Maybe *this* is the kingdom of heaven and we've attained it. Maybe tonight is eternal because you and I will always have it. But somewhere, for someone, during every second, hell is happening too...I've had a taste of it and so have you, maybe. But for some, it really seems eternal...it lasts their whole lives. Somewhere, at all times, judgment is falling on someone. Maybe every day is Judgment Day and those who spend their lives waiting for any of these things are waiting for things that are already right here. Somewhere every second, always, someone is dying—and in that same second a baby is born—the breath of life leaves one and

comes into another...Maybe *this* is the eternity that religion speaks of...not before or after this life...but *now*...now, and always!"

But I had drifted away and was off among the Pleiades.

## 15 - HALLOWEEN

Later that August, on the final night of the Feast of the Assumption festival, Teddy Klonz, who was in Cleveland for a visit, was staying with his Italian cousins in Little Italy, down Mayfield Hill. I was supposed to be meeting him in front of Presti's bakery at six-thirty. That was where I was standing when the unthinkable happened. All of the side streets that lead from Euclid Avenue, up and over to Mayfield, had been blocked to vehicular traffic so that the whole neighborhood was a pedestrian street fair. No dark-skinned person, unless they were from somewhere other than greater Cleveland and unknowing, ever, *ever* walked through "Murray Hill"—another name for the area. Very, very ugly things had happened on those occasions. As a courageous library sub, Mom, amazingly, worked not only at Treasure House—the library in the riot-torn Hough ghetto—but at Alta library, right here on "the Hill", across the crowded street from where I stood in front of the bakery.

Teddy was late, so I was just savoring the smells, sounds, and colorful sights. "Over/Under" tables did brisk business. Neapolitan music piped through tinny speakers. A religious procession with priests and frilly-dressed little girls made its way through the crowd; statues were carried upon the shoulders of men who wore sunglasses. After dark, maybe there would be fireworks.

"A car! What's it doin' in here?" Who let it in? It's a zoon! The driver is a zoon!" To my stunned disbelief, a large tan sedan driven by a brown-skinned lady had somehow penetrated a barricade down East 123rd Street; it was now slowly trying to make its way forward through the roiled mob!

"It's a zoon! Get the zoon! Get the zoon!" Only feet from where I stood, a throng of men, and some women too, their faces masks of hatred, had begun to rock the terrified woman's car!

They began bouncing it, front to rear and side to side, rolling it crazily. Hands grabbed at the driver side door; fingers found their way into the partly open window—they pulled the door open a bit and she frantically pulled it closed—now they pulled it again...this time she barely got it to shut. Clearly, she would not succeed again.

Within those few long, long seconds, my inner voice spoke: It's come...your time has now come. You'll maybe die, but if you don't do something, here, you'll be like *Lord Jim* with your whole life ruined forever, because of a moment's cowardice...You've got to move NOW because they are going to drag her into the street—this is your war, and you are now in it—now is your time, and you *have got to*—

“ANIMALS!!! GET AWAY FROM THAT CAR, YOU ANIMALS! LOOK AT YOURSELVES, YOU DIRTY ANIMALS! BACK AWAY, ALL OF YOU—BACK OFF, AND LET THIS CAR TURN AROUND!”

It was Mr. Presti, owner of the bakery shop. He was just a short, little old man in a white apron, with curly white hair, and flour on his hands, but he was the entire horse cavalry. He flew, with the courage of a terrier, at the crowd, pushing some aside, clouting others with gnarled fists.

“Aw, she shoulda' knew...she shoulda' knew...” protested the craven mob...but their bloodthirsty mania had been snapped; most of the antagonists shambled away, still muttering. A few righteous souls had emerged, and they helped to clear a space large enough for the big car to get turned around...I thought I recognized one of Teddy's cousins; sure enough, Klonz, now a big galoot himself, materialized as well. The poor lady, obviously badly shaken, was able to head back down the side street, whence she'd come, and away to safety.

“How do you suppose she got through the barricade and routed into the crowd, anyway?” asked Klonz. We had lost our taste for being at “The Feast” and had grabbed a ride from his cousin Tony, up to my house.

“Probably the creeps who were at the point where the street had been blocked off waved her through, just to be mean,” said Tony, who was a very nice man. “They’re capable of anything, some of them.”

“I worry about my Mom, working at the library down there,” I remarked.

“Your mother is a very respected lady—no worries there, bud.”

Dad was relaxing on our back porch, having a beer. “Well, well...Teddy Klonz! Looks like you’re nearly a grown man! I guess you fellas are both old enough that I can offer you a beer?” It was a warm evening, and we each accepted. “What do you think you’ll do when you graduate, Ted?”

“Well, you know, my dad works for the Boy Scouts of America, so it’s sort of in my blood. I made it to Eagle and then was an Explorer, so it looks as if I’m going to try for a job with them—probably with *Scouting* magazine. I’m going to major in Journalism at the University of Michigan.”

“That’s wonderful! I wish your friend Jack would start considering his future.”

“I have, Dad.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah...in fact I’m already living out the future, right now in the present.”

“And how, may I ask, is that?”

“As a poet, of course. Time or space means little to us. In fact, my poetry is of such a profound nature, that I don’t even need to write it down...I just stand back and let it all *be*.”



“When you aren’t going through groceries like a steam shovel.” A horn honked; it was Dad’s bowling night. “Well, there’s Pearly...Good to see you, Ted...Maybe some of your good sense will rub off on Baudelaire over there.”

“Ha, ha...Bye, Mr. Elbon.”

“What an old pill.”

“Your dad is a cool guy, Jack. There’s a lot of him in you, even if you can’t see it.”

“Gad, I hope not.”

“Do you remember when we went to that Boy Scout jamboree at the Geauga County Fair?”

“Hmmm, I think so.” I had dreamed of being a Boy Scout but had lost interest soon after becoming one. I’d blown bugle calls on my trombone, for the troop, but they just did not sound right. Also, some of the goings-on in the tents after “lights out” had alienated me.

“That was the one where we built that rope bridge for people to walk across.”

“You guys built it...I’m hopeless with knots.”

“Well, do you remember that one evening when we slipped away and went out on the midway? We rode some rides and saw the Sword Swallower...”

“Oh, yeah...and that Frog Boy.” We had been enticed by a brightly painted sign depicting a happy little guy, named Jo Jo, gaily hopping from lily pad to lily pad. Inside the flimsy structure, though, under a glaring bulb, we’d seen only a very small colored man with sadly twisted limbs, being fed large moths.

“Yeah, when we told your dad about it he said: ‘Do, you know, boys, people like us do not pay to see unfortunate people like that exhibited. That sort of thing is for lower classes, and I know you’ll pass it up the next time.’ And do you know Jack; I’ve never forgotten how he put it to us, without bitching us out or anything, but by appealing to our better selves. No, your dad is a

cool guy, and a lot of him is in you, even though it's hard for you to see. We had a lot of good ball games, here in your yard..."

"Yeah, we were hard on the neighbors."

"Their windows, too."

Purple twilight fell, filtering through the Morning Glory vines which embowered our porch.

"Where's your mom?" Klonz asks.

"At the church, I guess."

"Do you remember the Halloween we egged all of those houses?"

"Oh, yeah...that turned out to be a real black stain on my character."

"What—just because we pulled some pranks?"

"No, no...I never told you, but I ratted out those guys who were with us, there at the end, throwing the eggs...I'm still mortified by it..."

"Ha, ha! I didn't know those guys very well...but I remember the bag of dog shit and the kid from two doors down that your mom made us take along...us like commandos, and him in his tramp's costume..."

Teddy's memory was good—better than mine, possibly, since he wasn't trying to blot parts out to avoid remorse and shame. That year—I'd still been in junior high—there had been a weekly TV show about a cat burglar, perhaps turned to an agent of justice. He had spring-loaded knives up his sleeves, and he nimbly buzzed up, down, and across buildings with thin ropes and diminutive grappling hooks. Like him, we'd dressed in black and charcoaled our faces. For weeks, we'd assembled clever pranks to play on those deserving our revenge, and milder tricks to play on younger kids. We weren't really interested in candy, but we'd had to pretend that we were regular trick or treaters, to deceive our folks. We'd been assembling our gear for weeks:

rubber worms to drop onto children from tree branches, gruesome sounds on our little tape recorders, and even a long piano wire that would be fastened to a large suction cup to adhere to windows and be worked with a violin bow. It was capable of producing the most disturbing moaning sounds within a home. These and other necessities had been cleverly hidden in parts of the neighborhood where we'd need them. We'd been just leaving when Mom gummed up the works.

"The new boy who just moved into the neighborhood? He's about your age...He's going with you."

"No!"

"Yes, I've met his mother, and she's very nice."

"Mom, we've got things all planned out—we can't have another guy come..."

"What, exactly, do you have all planned out?"

"Well, nothing, but—"

"His name is Greg...Greg Barr. He's going with you or you aren't going at all."

Making things even worse, Greg Barr, a plump affable sort, had turned up wearing a costume that was anything but surreptitious: "I dug out my old faithful tramp's outfit. Thanks for taking me with you!"

"Uh, sure Greg...sure." Over his shoulder, he toted a bright red bag on a stick; his duds were covered with colorful patches, and his worn-out shoes flapped loudly on the pavement. Klonz and I donned small black masks, and we set about Halloweening in the normal fashion.

"Aren't you guys getting to be a little big for this?" asked Mr. Chuggle, when we rang his doorbell."

"Yeah, this will probably be our last year."

We stuck with it for a few houses, sprinkled a few worms onto Benny Klonz and his chums, also onto Nancy Chuggle and hers. Then we revealed our main motives to Greg, who—as it turned out—was also a fan of our cat-man on TV.

“...so you see, we’ve had this all planned out. You can stick with us, but it might be hard for you to run in those shoes...”

“Hey, I get it. Thanks for not just ditching me. I’ve got enough candy anyhow...I’ll catch you another time.”

“Thanks for understanding, Greg...you’re a good guy.”

Our first target was to be the abode of the mean caretaker of the McCracken retirement home. He had chased us on multiple occasions for taking shortcuts across the grounds, even roughing us up once or twice. Having wormed his way through shrubbery, Ted wet, then attached the large suction cup to a central area of the large, front picture window. I pulled tight and stretched the long piano wire while he sawed away on it with the cello bow which I’d abstracted from the band room at Kirk Jr. High. “Give it some more rosin...that’s it!” The cable began to wail and groan. Indoors, it must be sounding like a lost soul’s cries from Hades: “AAAAWWWEEEEUUUUUUUUOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMAAAUUUUHHHHHHOOO OHHH”

“It must be driving him to the brink of madness!”

“OOOOOWOOHHHHHHMMMMMMMMYYYYYYYAAAAAGGGGGGGHHHHHHH HHHHH”

“We’d better let up...we don’t want to actually take the man’s sanity...”

“You’re the ones who are nuts...nobody is home, at this house.”

“BENNY!!!” Ted’s younger brother has slipped up from behind, startling us a good deal.

“Somebody must be home—the lights are on.”

“Nah, we rang the doorbell already. No one’s here.”

“Well, thanks for the info—now beat it,” Ted ordered.

“No, I’m gonna stay with you guys. I’m stayin’, or I’ll tell Dad all about what you’ve been up to. I saw you hide that bag of dog poop and the lighter fluid by the Kratchner’s. The eggs, too, in the ravine—”

“All right, all right! What a little pill!” At the time, Ted Klonz—and even Benny—had frequently subbed for me on my big paper route. We were continually being stiffed or swindled out of our collections by Mr. or Mrs. Kratchner.

Mr. Kratchner had even cheated us on a big lawn job we’d slaved on. “You only pulled some of the weeds,” he’d sniffed, two weeks after he’d been due to pay us—after it had rained hard and new weeds had sprung up.

FLOP onto the front porch went the big, accelerant-soaked, brown paper shopping bag that had been generously filled with fresh dog-do.

WHOOF! went the flame as it whooshed up.

DING-DONG, the front doorbell was supposed to ring but didn’t, according to my ears, which were excellent. We should have realized that these misers would have silenced it or would be hiding in a back room to avoid buying candy.

“NO ONE’S COMING!”

“THEY’VE GOTTA BE!”

“BUT THEY’RE NOT—THEY’RE HIDING, ‘CAUSE THEY’RE SUCH CHEAPSKATES!”

“BENNY—GO BANG ON THE DOOR—”

“SCREW YOU!”

“GRAB THE HOSE!!! THE PORCH FLOOR IS BURNING...GET IT OFF!... KICK IT OFF!!!...YECCHICH!!!! THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO BE STOMPING IN IT—NOT US!!!”

“Well, I’m going home to count my candy,” said Benny, after the conflagration had been subdued.

“Good, ya little cootie. Let’s go to the drugstore and reconnoiter, Jack.”

“OK.” On the way to Stonebreaker’s on Noble, we picked up the eighteen eggs we’d stashed in the Ravine. We each had a Coke. Then we decided that since our other capers had been such failures, we’d better just call it a night. Loitering in front of the store, however, we encountered Hicks and Panuska, two guys from my class at junior high. They were more than eager to help us launch our oval missiles—especially when appraised of our intended targets. On the same block resided: Mrs. Grootheimer, the vile-tempered old shrew of a German teacher, Mr. Norton the science teacher, a mean bastard who seemed to delight in dissecting frogs and other innocent creatures, and Milton “Stanky” Petronovitch—the oafish industrial arts teacher with legendary BO. In their same vicinity was the home of someone Klonz had it in for—I can’t recall who or why. Barry Hicks and Rick Panuska weren’t the sharpest pencils in the drawer, but they were more than happy to assist us in our projected bombardments. With four guys, it seemed like it would be easy to dash by the four targets and efficiently discharge our many eggs. This we did and we were soon home-free, aglow with a wicked sense of accomplishment that made up for our earlier flops.

Now, years later, reminiscing with Klonz on our porch in the twilight, my shame at what happened next made it difficult for me to continue my confession. But since my friend was now

living far away, I continued: “Well, we got away with it, as you know, but I never told you what I did the following Monday. It was maybe the dumbest thing I’ve ever done.”

“What?”

“I don’t even know if I should tell you...”

“Aw, come on...it’s all ancient history, now.”

“Well, at lunchtime, there at the Kirk cafeteria, I ran into old Stanky Petronovitch, one of the teachers whose house we’d egged. Feeling all cocky, but obviously not engaging a single brain cell, I said to him: ‘I heard your house got egged on Halloween’.”

“What? Ha, ha!” laughed Klonz.

“Yeah, I wasn’t planning to say it but I just blurted it out, trying to show off to some other kids. I didn’t know what I thought he’d say, but like I said, I wasn’t thinking *at all* when I opened my pie-hole. Right away he said: ‘Come with me,’ and I knew I was cooked. He marched me down to his office, sat me in a chair, and cornered me with his huge, smelly, gorilla-sized body. ‘Who threw the eggs?’ he asked me. ‘Oh, well...I just heard some rumors,’ I told him, and he said, ‘Just tell me who you heard the rumors from, Elbon,’ and I said, ‘Well, I’m not sure I remember,’ and he said, ‘You’ve requested to be transferred out of my industrial arts class,’ and I said, ‘Yeah, my dad is a tool-maker and we have a lathe and a drill press at our house already, which is why I’d rather be taking something else.’ After more of my evasions, his face turned purple, and he grabbed me by my collar and lifted me up and said, ‘You tell me who egged our houses or you’ll stay in my shop class and you’ll be sweeping it out every afternoon at three-thirty!’ and I said, ‘I heard something about it maybe being Hicks and Panuska’.”

“Well, they were rounded up and made to go to three houses—not the one you targeted, but to the other three, and go up on ladders and wash off the eggs. I was positive that Hicks and

Panuska would figure out that I'd snitched, but amazingly, they figured they'd been seen and that my black outfit and charcoaled face had concealed me, but like I said, they never had been very swift on the uptake..."

"Ho, ho—they never figured it out?"

"Not that I was ever aware of, although I sure wasn't gonna ask them. I thought it would occur to Stanky eventually, too, but he was no mental giant either. Of course, I was dumber than all of them put together for blabbing in the first place. It really was about my darkest hour."

"Well, did you count your toes, afterward?"

"Count my toes?"

"Yeah. If you still have ten, you didn't shoot any of them off, and you hopefully learned something."

"Yeah, hopefully. It makes my blood run cold just recalling it, though."

\* \* \* \* \*

*That summer's evening would be the last time that I would ever see my friend. Postponing his college plans, Ted Klonz enlisted and made Green Beret. He died valiantly—in pursuit of his dream of freedom for all.*



## 16 — RED NIAGARA

Although I was not a cigarette smoker, this was the reason that Georgie Boxhorn, Lucius Pinkney—who now had a huge, puffy “Afro” hairstyle—and I were suspended on the very first day of our senior year. As a card-carrying rebel, I’d done my best to get hooked, but having never enjoyed the nasty things, I had abandoned such efforts. In actuality, we’d been standing outside of a back exit door smoking a large joint of marijuana. The stuff still failed to make me high, but smoking it with friends seemed pleasantly communal, enhanced my (desirable at the time) “freak” status, and I liked the taste. It reminded me of the grapevines we’d once smoked in the ravine. We’d been discussing something, and while doing so I’d allowed the thing to go out in my fingers. When Mrs. Kurf, an elderly teacher, suddenly materialized in our midst, I’d actually been gesticulating with it, to emphasize some point. As was customary among many at the time, Lucius and Georgie had, moments earlier, each lit up KOOL menthol cigarettes. Apparently, that aroma had masked the odor of the reefer, or Mrs. Kurf didn’t know its smell because no mention of it was ever made—only of cigarettes.

“How long has this been going on?” Dad asked me shortly after midnight, upon arriving home from his shift at GE. That morning, in Mr. Corvelle’s office, I had realized the imperfection of a defense strategy wherein I explained that I had been merely smoking dope and not tobacco. So, in responding to Dad, I had little choice except to say, “Aw, Dad, I don’t really smoke...I was just being sociable.”

So acute was his (and Mom’s) disappointment that I resolved to abstain from all illicit substances until my graduation in June, at which time I would, at last, be free from school’s

bondage. I also elected, both at school and at home, to remain mum on the chocolate mescaline we had ingested just before the interrupted smoking session. It had all made for a very long day.

\* \* \* \* \*

That year should have been easy. I'd finally worn out the math and science departments; they'd had enough of me, and I had long since wearied of them. There were courses I enjoyed, such as Russian History and Behavioral Psychology. Some of Klonz's good sense must have rubbed off on me because I also was enrolled in Journalism, taught by the twenty-two-year-old (cuter than a speckled pup) Miss Sarah Fall.

Miss Fall, a fresh graduate from Wesleyan Teacher's College, taught us a few things, like having a "nose for news" and including "who, what, when, and why" in a story. But in a funny way, I actually started teaching her. My thousands and thousands of hours of diverse reading, big city living (she was from Hicksville), and overall experience had somehow made me—at seventeen—wider between the ears than she. I was at the height of my flaming, self-righteous, youthful, brash idealism with all its irreverence. Most importantly, I made her laugh. (Note to young men: laughter is often, although not always—never apply the word "always" to anything regarding females—a more powerful aphrodisiac than looks, brains, brawn, or money. Look for the ones you can make laugh and focus on them).

Unfortunately, my heart had flopped for her, and I was plagued by my old shortcoming: failing to strike when the iron was hot. She actually invited me to her house on a few evenings, but once there, I never got up my nerve. Maybe she'd have rebuffed me, but subsequent

experience tells me that my odds were at least fifty-fifty. Of course, by today's standards, the consummation of our attraction would make her a criminal—but times were different then.

I remained true to my resolution to avoid the wicked weed, with all of its stigmas and intrigues. Adults, at the time, were very alarmed by the purported evils of it or any of the “psychedelic” substances that so intrigued us. They were forever telling us about young people who “went up but never came back down” or of kids who had “flashbacks” and jumped out of windows, although we never knew any. They seemed to be almost relieved when their kids demonstrated normalcy by merely using alcohol. Weed might get me arrested or expelled; beer and wine were more customary rites of passage.

So aside from spouting revolutionary claptrap to the impressionable Miss Fall, or anybody else who was silly enough to listen, I was well-behaved that autumn. Heading into the Christmas break, I was actually getting all As. I had gotten my driver's license, and Clair and Pete were going to sell me their old Chevy Bel Air station wagon for a hundred bucks, in the spring.

For Victor, getting his license had not been the magic key to romance he'd dreamed it would be. “I got Wendy Herrington to park with me in the lot by the ravine back of Caledonia (a favorite spot for neck-birds) after we'd gone to the movies. She was getting pretty warm and I thought I was gonna get somewhere. But then, an old Plymouth panel truck came careening along, honking its horn. A guy was hanging a moon out of the passenger window, which immediately broke the mood I'd gotten Wendy into. The driver turned around and came back through, to moon the cars that were parked on the other side? Well, this gave one greaser time to jump out of his ride—he hopped up on the truck's running board and put his cigarette out on the guy's arse! I about laughed my own butt off, but Wendy just wanted me to take her home after

that, and she hasn't gone out with me since—as if it was my fault or something. I haven't gotten one ounce of nooky since I've had my license.”

“Maybe you should try offering some relaxing libation to your dates.” Since my trip to New York, I'd hinted vaguely of thrilling conquests, which more penetrating analysis might have revealed as being unlikely for someone traveling by Greyhound bus with a bag of sandwiches.

Victor, however, was eager to believe and ready to consider any suggestions. “I've never drunk anything but that beer we had, that night down at the college. Maybe I'd better practice some myself before I try anything out with Wendy.”

“I'll get Georgie to get us something from Mr. T's. We'll drink it at the MYF retreat, next Saturday night.”

The winter retreat, for some reason, was to take place right in the church. We were supposed to bring our sleeping bags. After wholesome activities, prayer, and eats from the kitchen, the guys were supposed to crash in one area, and the girls in another, all under adult supervision.

At a quarter till eight, fifteen minutes early, Victor and I were to be found in our Church's spacious men's room, seated in chairs normally used on Sunday mornings by wayward husbands, for the respite of a quiet pipe or cigar. From my bedroll, I extracted three small but potent bottles of Ripple wine. “One of these is Billy Friday's—he paid for it. I guess we should wait for him...”

“Naw,” said Victor, “MYF is starting soon. Gimme mine.”

“Well, it is yours, I guess, but maybe we should wait till later when everyone's gone to sleep...”

“Gurgle, Gurgle...Glug, Glug, Glug...”

“Hey, Victor...ya know you don't really want to—” I tried to advise.

But he had already poured down three-quarters of his bottle. “Wow...this is great! So this is what it’s all about! No wonder Bacchus always looks so happy in those Renaissance paintings! ...Gurgle, Glug...We’ve gotta get some more of this stuff!”

“No, this is all there is, and now you’ve drunk yours...”

“BULL-FUCKIN’-SHIT!...GIMME THAT ONE...”

“But it’s Billy’s...”

“WELL, BILLY BOY IS JUST OUT OF LUCK! HE SNOOZED AND HE LOOZED! HA, HA! THE BOY HAS DONE SNOOZED AND LOOZED! HEE, HEE, HEE! Glurp, glurp...DON’T WORRY BONNY...Glug...I’LL SAVE SOME FOR YOU...THIS STUFF IS GREAT!” I heard footsteps on the stairs, heading down to Fellowship Hall. My friend had gotten drunk faster than I had known was humanly possible; it was clear that I was going to have to get him out of there. I had taken only a couple of sips from my bottle. Knowing that it was snowing outside, I took another belt, capped the vessel, and led Victor up the stairs and out into what had become something akin to a blizzard.

When Georgie had dropped off the wine, he had apprised me of a party at the home of a boy from our class. We set off in that direction, through the driving flurries and deep drifts—Victor singing, laughing and raving. He had received a lovely pair of big, warm, leather gloves for Christmas, a few days earlier. Wearing also, a heavy coat, stocking hat, and big rubber boots, and warmed from within by the red fuel, he was obviously enveloped in a euphoric marshmallow cloud. I, however, had expected to be remaining inside of the warm church that night, so was less suitably dressed. Our destination was at least a mile distant, and with wet frozen feet and my hands poorly sheltered in my pockets, my spirits were less buoyant. Halfway there, I pulled out my bottle for another, hopefully warming, snort.

“Hey—me some too...” said my friend piggishly.

“You’re crazy...you’ve had two bottles already.”

“Hey, man—Ah’m one TOUGH HOMBRE and Ah likes mah JOY JUICE!”

I took a second gulp and let him drain the remainder of the bottle which he then threw at someone’s front steps, with an emphatic smash. Away we ran, myself alarmed, Victor, chortling with glee.

Scott Falspaugh’s dad had obviously done well in recent years. Their home in Forest Hills was of modern design; its interior was done up in a high-class, contemporary fashion with furniture of an oriental influence. Georgie, whose girlfriend was tight with the Falspaughs, answered the doorbell. He had grown tall and handsome, and he was well dressed and groomed, moving easily among all social circles, from this high-toned gathering to Bohemian riff-raff such as Victor and I. A fire blazed on the hearth while amorous couples cuddled in softly lit corners—I thought I saw Carol Byrd and her fullback.

“Come on in, you two, but take off your boots first.” A fleecy white rug, the likes of which I’d never seen, covered much of the exquisite parquet floor.

“Where’s Scott?” I asked.

“He’s in the billiard room. We’ve been drinking champagne. Would you vagabonds care for a glass?”

“HELL, YEAH!” expostulated Victor, who was having a good deal of difficulty removing his galoshes. As he struggled with this absorbing task, I was able to point at him and shake my head, in silent communication with George. After a few embarrassing remarks to the company, my sozzled companion stretched out on the feathery white rug and descended into a deep snooze.

With a glass of bubbly wine—the first I’d ever tried—in hand, I followed Georgie to a room with an enormous pool table. “How ya doin’, Elbon?” asked Scott Falspaugh, in a congenial manner. Do you want to play?”

“Yeah, sure, in a little while. I’ve gotta let my toes and fingers thaw out first.”

“We’re playing rotation. Have you played it?”

“Yeah, but I’m not used to such a flat table and straight cues. They’ll probably put me off my game.”

“Who’s your friend, Jack?” asked Georgie’s girlfriend Lisa, whose father was an esteemed doctor.

“Oh, that’s my friend Victor, who goes to Heights High. He’s a great artist and musician, but he’s had a little too much holiday cheer. He’s just resting...he’ll be OK. I’m gonna go sit by the fire and try to get warm.”

On my way to the fireplace, I stepped over my friend who was gently snoring. To my surprise, George’s ravishing sister Tamara Boxhorn was sitting alone by the fire. At the art museum, there is a painting by Renoir titled *Young Woman Arranging Her Earring*. With flushed cheeks, carmine lips, and dark curly hair, Tamara looked very much like the coquette in the painting. I considered trying to tell her as much, but instead just said, “How ya doin’, Tamara?”

“Oh, pretty well, Jack. I hardly see you since you quit band. Do you ever play your trombone anymore?”

“Well, do you know, I played it twice last week, with a brass ensemble for Christmas—once at our church, and then down at the big Methodist church on Euclid. It was fun...those black folks really sing up a storm, especially at Christmas time. But otherwise, I rarely touch it. I’ve

been practicing the piano. I imagine you've been playing your cornet a lot, with the Salvation Army, this time of year?"

"Oh, yeah. Our parents and grandpa have it all planned for George and me to go into the 'Corps', but sometimes I think I'd like to try just being myself for a while. I heard you went to New York...that must have been exciting..."

"Yeah, I'll probably head up there once we graduate. My parents want me to go to the community college, but after thirteen years, I'd like to see what life might be like, free from school."

"Frank" (the guy she'd been dating) "is at Oberlin College. I've been accepted there..."

"That's fantastic, Tamara..."

"I suppose so...Frank's family is Army, too. He won't stop till he's a regional commander. He didn't even come home for Christmas, so he could get a jump on his courses for next semester. He—Jack...you're shivering!"

"Yeah...walking over here, I stepped into a deep icy puddle, and my socks are still soaked..."

"Well, take them right off, and put them here by the fire..."

"I can't do that..."

"Then sit here by me and put your feet up...there! Isn't this champagne yummy?"

"Uh... yeah!" I'd hardly sipped any of the sparkling elixir...I took a good swallow and noticed that a curious glow was teasing my nose and ears.

"I read your articles in *The Cardinal*; they're really funny," Tamara remarked, referring to the Shaw High Newspaper. "I'm surprised they let you print some of them..."



“Oh, well, you don’t see the ones they don’t let us print. But Miss Fall is for free speech and—”

“I hear she’s for lots of free things!”

“So am I! I’m for free education. It’s there for anyone with a library card—”

“How about free romance? How do you feel about that, Jack?”

Tamara had a teasing, frisky aspect about her that I’d never seen before, and I began to frame a frisky, teasing answer, but a large athlete loomed beside us. “Hey Elbon, is your friend dead or just ‘*playing possum*’?” The commentator, myself, Tamara, and CERTAINLY not Victor had any inkling that my friend had just been rechristened with a name that would remain with him for all of his days. History was being made.

“He’s meditating,” I replied to the nameless jock. “Have you read *Siddhartha*? No? You should. If you had, you’d understand. Hesse had a way of linking the everyday with the eternal—”

“You always have been full of it, Elbon. I don’t think he’s breathing. Hey, buddy...are you in there?”

I suddenly realized that Victor’s snoring had stopped. Alarmed, I noticed that he had, in fact, gone stiff as a plank. I threw myself down to his prone figure. “VICTOR!” I yelped, giving him a shake. Nothing! I jabbed his ribs. STILL NOTHING! He was rigid! Really worried, I grabbed his ears and shook his head. To my relief, he took a deep choking breath, then another, and from somewhere far within he asked: “Where are my gloves?”

“Where are your gloves? How should I know?” I had reached the point where I was about fed up with all things Victor. *Playing possum—what next?* While no Hugh Hefner, it had begun to dawn in my callow knob, that sipping champagne with—in my opinion—the cutest girl in my

class was a dream from which I had no wish to awaken. I returned eagerly to Tamara, wondering what would happen if I suggested that she warm my cold hands in hers. “The thing about Hesse,” I began, but was interrupted by further rumbling from the Possum—this time louder:

“WHERE ARE MY GLOVES?”

“Why? Are you leaving, I hope? If so, I’ll surely help you find—”

I now reach a point in my narrative where I must consider the delicate sensibilities of my readers. I believe that I once read or saw somewhere that, in an attempt to improve on nature, Niagara Falls is—or was, at some time in the past—lit by powerful floodlights of varying color. Imagine, if you will, the deepest of red hues projected upon that most mighty of floods. Such a visualization MIGHT in some small way give an inkling of what transpired next, at least in terms of volume. It should be noted, however, that while the prevailing direction of the thundering falls of Niagara is downward, the cascades of red erupting so suddenly and emphatically from my friend assumed more of an arching, lateral trajectory. This is not to say that the feathery white rug was spared—little in that room was spared. Instances of uncommon valor were many: there was the lad who selflessly shielded his date by throwing himself over her, exposing himself to the maelstrom. Tamara heroically braved the deluge to grab a corner of the formerly pristine carpet, pulling part of it out of the way, preventing it from being completely inundated by the crimson tide. An enterprising underclassman grabbed an empty brass ash pail from next to the fireplace and endeavored to redirect the Possum’s titanic eruptions. His well-meant efforts, however, had no more effect (putting it as my father would have) “than a fart in a hurricane”. And I, having toppled from a pinnacle of delight into a deep abyss, in less than the twitch of a pig’s tail, sat stunned—was there no limit to my ill-fortune?

I could attempt to recreate the sounds which emanated from Victor during his time of crisis. I could invent descriptive phonetics such as HWAAWWAALLLPPP or RUURRRRLLLL or HOOOOOOOPPP, but I fear they would pale in contrast to the visceral nature of their reality.

Georgie, hearing these renderings, and the screams of the room's other occupants, ran in and—in a commanding manner that undoubtedly now serves him well as a major in the Salvation Army—got Victor headed down the (blessedly) tiled hallway to the bathroom. Scott Falspaugh had blanched at the sight of the rug, but Tamara, like her brother, kept a cool head. The thing was rolled up and transferred to the basement laundry room. There, I was put to labor with Woolite and a scrub brush, over utility tubs, with instructions to use only cold water, which did not relieve the dreadfully chilled feeling I'd endured all of that evening.

When I'd finished working hard at this wretched task, I lugged the damn wet thing into the warm furnace room and stretched it, as best I could, across some sawhorses. Returning upstairs, I found that "Possum"—this was now properly his handle—had been hosed down, stuffed into his coat, boots, and, yes, his gloves, and Georgie and Tamara were about to trundle him back to the church via the Boxhorn family station wagon.

"You're too wet to go outside, Jack," George observed correctly. "You'll get pneumonia. Have something to eat—there's food in the kitchen. I'll take you back later."

It was still only about ten o'clock, and more kids were showing up, oblivious to what had transpired. Aside from the missing rug and the scent of Pine-sol, the evening's revelry continued much as it had before. After a bowl of warm stew and a spirit-laced eggnog, I returned to my position at the warmly blazing fire, which had been stoked with more logs.

My neighbor Nancy Chuggle had arrived at some point. "You seem rather subdued, Jack. I heard your friend tossed his cookies."

“Yeah, it was really embarrassing. It wasn’t my fault though...he got greedy and chugged way too much wine. It’s pretty nice of Scott Falspaugh to let me stay after all that...thank God his parents are away.”

“Well, I guess you know about the ‘party favors’ that Laura Lerner has been distributing to everyone...”

“Party favors?”

“Well, yeah...she’s been helping herself to her father’s medicine samples again...they give tons to doctors like him, you know...”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes...tonight she’s been distributing ‘reds’.”

“Oh...what do they do?”

“They’re a barbiturate...I’m surprised that a ‘head’ like you wouldn’t know...”

“Do you know, Nancy, I’ve gotten a bad reputation for very little real reason. Since we got suspended in September, I’ve actually been leading a very moderate life, just so that I can graduate in the spring. I have no interest in any downers or uppers of any sort. I was only trying to celebrate a little bit, being halfway through the school year with mostly all As.”

“You’re wise, Jack...those pills are really bad to mix with alcohol.”

“Yeah. Georgie and Tamara are sure taking a long time to take Victor back to the church...”

“Somebody said they were going down to Hayden on a beer run.”

“Oh. Mr. T’s. I’ve been there.”

“For being Salvation Army people, they sure party hard.”

“I had no idea Tamara did, but I guess everybody does these days. Hey, don’t tell your folks you saw me here. I’m supposed to be at an overnight retreat at our church. They might blab to mine.”

“Don’t worry...I’m not supposed to be here either. Well, happy New Year, Jack...congratulations on pulling your grades up. Soon you’ll be free.”

“Yeah, but for what?” Nancy toddled off, and I sat for a while, gazing moodily at the fire. For the first time in a seeming eternity, my feet were something less than frozen. I remembered that I’d seen, in a large room on the other side of the kitchen, a grand piano. I pushed my way through a gaggle of noisy, increasingly rowdy kids, and through to the quiet room. I knew that I had started too late and without the training to ever be a real pianist. I could only play in four keys (or eight, counting their minors). I couldn’t read piano music, which was mainly scored in treble clef—the trombone had ruined me for that; try as I might, those treble clef notes only looked like bass clef notes to me. I couldn’t play fast and my singing was pretty bad. But I could *hear* music, and in my heart, I knew that I could write songs that were as good as anybody’s if I could just get the chance to listen to myself. But how could I, with everything else in the universe constantly shouting at me?

This piano was a LOT nicer than the uprights at the church or at Clair’s, and a whole different species from my little Wurlitzer. Together with generations of instrument makers and musicians, who over the ages had developed this one-person symphony to be commanded by whoever should sit down and stay at it, I was able to blend nameless chords—some, perhaps, of my invention. I was away on the coattails of everything that I’d ever heard that had moved me—trying not to lose the beat which is the real soul of it all—thrashing at times, sailing others. I must have been at it for at least half an hour when I realized I wasn’t alone—“Tamara!”

“Who wrote that piece, Jack?”

“What piece?”

“What you were just playing...”

“Oh, it’s just something I’ve been fooling with...Did you get Victor back?”

“Yes, but he got sick again, right on the steps of your church hall. We couldn’t just ditch him there, so I went in with him, down to where your meeting was. It was cute...he wouldn’t tell them where he got the wine, but I’m afraid they know you were with him, and that Georgie was involved. That one boy? Willy Wednesday?”

“Billy Friday.”

“Yes, that’s the one...he tattled on you guys, but Possum was OK, so I left. Thank heavens he *was* just playing possum...I thought he had died. Did you get warmed up, Jack?”

“Oh, yeah...yeah...I sat by the fire and thawed out.”

“Now *I’m* cold.”

“Come sit by me and I’ll play that for you again,” but when she sat down, she was against me and my lips, incredibly, found hers. Aside from clicking my teeth against Betsy Pearson’s braces, that night after the dance at Teen Town, I’d never had this happen. I was adrift on a sea of heaven.

Cupid’s ship, however, quickly capsized. “Hey, Jack...your mom’s out in the driveway!” It was Georgie with Scott Falspaugh.

“My mom?”

“Yes! You’ve gotta get out there, before she tries to come in here or something, and sees everything that’s going on! Here’s your coat...now go...”

“But...”

“GO!”

Mom’s Rambler American—Dad had given up on the foreign cars—which always blew a lot of exhaust, was billowing extra-copious volumes of vapor clouds, like Yellowstone fumaroles, due to the cold.

“Mom, I’ll be coming home in a little while...”

“You’re coming home now, buddy.”

“Mom, listen, I was just...”

“GET INTO THIS CAR NOW!”

“Please don’t do this to me, Mom...I ought to be able to go to a holiday party...”

“Not when you lie to your father and me about going to the church and then sneaking off...”

“I was going to stay at the church, but we had to leave because...uh...”

“I KNOW WHY YOU LEFT...GET INTO THIS CAR NOW!”

“I WISH YOU WOULD LISTEN TO ME, YOU OLD COW!”

“You rotten guy...*You rotten, rotten guy*...Your dad is working in that cold GE factory night after night, with his gouty arthritis, just to try to give you a chance at a good life, saving money and praying you’ll go to college like he dreamed of but never could...and all you can do is your best to cause trouble for everyone around you...”

Mom was crying now, which usually tore right through me. That night, however, I felt only rage at having had my divine dream with Tamara interrupted. As a result, I said hurtful things that no one should ever say to a person they deeply love. “I’M NOT COMING HOME—IN FACT—I MAY NEVER COME HOME! TELL DAD TO ENROLL IN COLLEGE HIMSELF IF HE WANTS SOMEONE TO GO SO BADLY! I’VE HAD SCHOOL RAMMED UP MY

ASS MY WHOLE LIFE, AND I'M PRETTY SURE THERE'S A WHOLE OTHER WORLD OUT THERE, AND I'M READY TO LIVE IN IT!"

I slammed the car door and headed back towards the Falspaugh's house, keeping my footing only with difficulty on the frozen pavement. More snow was coming down. With even more gear-grinding than usual, Mom lurched into reverse and rolled away, enveloped by cumulus vapor clouds.

"Oh, you're back," said Scott, inside the front door, with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm.

"Yeah...I just love your folks' grand piano." Upon returning to that room, however, I found an empty piano bench. I prowled back through the kitchen. I surveyed the big room with the fireplace, then the billiard room, but I saw no sign of Tamara or Georgie.

"Oh, they split a few minutes ago," Scott responded to my query. "Hey—maybe you'll help me haul that rug back up here...it can finish drying out by the fireplace."

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day I rang the Boxhorns from my sister's, where I had spent the night. Mrs. Boxhorn answered: "No, George isn't here...I don't know where he is...Tamara? Why her father drove her out to Oberlin College early this morning. She's staying there over New Year's Eve. Jack?..... Jack, are you still there?"



## 17 — THE ROXY

Possum was very contrite about his wine bender. He was grounded for a month, having enlivened the church retreat with more upchucking, but was allowed to have visitors. We started jamming again in his basement, which he had long since adapted for studio use. He was very good-humored about his new nickname and had even begun referring to his cellar abode as “The Possum’s Lair”.

I was too green, at the time, to realize that Tamara had actually done me a favor by pinching things off fast. I suffered badly for a while, but at least it was a clean break, unlike some affairs of the heart which linger long and malignantly.

My anti-war articles in the school paper grew more pointed—Dad called it rabble-rousing. I had sort of created a monstress out of my journalism teacher, Sarah Fall, or maybe it was just the times. She began dating a young member of the Black Panther Party. He actually seemed like a nice, shy guy, but I pointed out to him that when you boiled it down, racism was just racism and that, in that respect, his comrades weren’t much different from the KKK. “In fact, the last time I checked, your ‘Panthers’ are being duped by Mao and his mass-murdering communists.” When I wrote an article to that effect and Miss Fall refused to print it, subsequently ditching me as a friend, I realized what a lonely life it can be to live with one’s own free mind.

Georgie and I were in trouble again with the cruel martinet, Mr. Corvelle. George’s girlfriend’s younger sister Laura had been continuing to help herself to their doctor daddy’s med cabinet and distributing “reds”, “yellow-jackets”, and other treats to her sophomore class friends. I couldn’t be sure about George, but I knew that my involvement was nonexistent. Regardless, when the girl was caught, we were somehow implicated and our lockers were searched.

Mine contained “underground” newspapers like *The Burning River Oracle*, *The Village Voice*—which I’d brought from New York—and *Zap Comix*. While not my primary interest, they all contained some matter of a prurient nature, which Mr. Corvelle, in communication with Mom, called pornography. I had apologized to her after the night Possum drank too much, and things had been OK for a while. Now it seemed I’d hurt her again—just by doing nothing! Georgie’s locker had yielded nothing illicit.

Eventually, spring break arrived—just eight more weeks to go! Possum was out on break too, from Heights High. “I want to go downtown, to Kay’s Bookstore on Prospect,” he said, over the phone. “They have old pulps by H.P. Lovecraft that I need—art books, too.”

Kay’s Bookstore, a creaky old place of at least three levels, had in fact EVERY sort of book. I’d gone there with Bobby, years earlier, and loved the idea of going again. “We can catch the bus to Windermere,” Possum proposed, “then take the ‘Rapid’ the rest of the way to the Terminal Tower.”

“Naw, we’ve gotta catch a bus to the Cedar Rapid Station. I can’t go to Windermere...”

“Why not?”

“Oh, a guy tried to kill me down there after the protests...”

“What happened?”

“Oh, nothing...I hit him with a brick.”

“Some pacifist you are.”

“Yeah, that has occurred to me too.”

On a chilly April morning, we boarded a bus. “What’s that under your coat?” I asked Victor.

“My dad’s camera...maybe we can get some urban shots that I can use to paint from. I’m fascinated by the spring greenery and pastel blossoms, emerging among the rusty decay that we’ll see from the ‘Rapid’.”

“Whatever blows air up your skirt. I’m gonna read my paper.” By and by, after our one transfer, we were downtown. We emerged, up the vast granite ramps, through the vast marble corridors, from the deepest roots of the city beneath the Terminal Tower. When rail was king, smoky trains from all points had poured in; now it was just the Rapid Transit (commuter train) that ran from the airport on the far West Side, over to East Cleveland, stopping at all points between.

The “Voo” on Prospect, was en route to Kay’s bookstore. Downtown, with Bobby, back in the old days, our first stop had always been there. Record Rendezvous was the actual name of the place. Bobby could at least listen—they let you play records—to the jazz and R&B that were his passions, should his cash be limited. His tape recorder ear would let him hear, learn, and later play the music, note for note. Our primary mission into Kay’s had been comic books: Superman, Green Lantern, and *Classics Illustrated* were our favorites. That morning with Possum, traipsing my way up the old wooden stairs, I was not sure what I was looking for. It didn’t matter though, because I knew that as always, there would be enough to absorb a person for a lifetime among the tons and tons of books, magazines, and all matter of ephemera stacked floor to ceiling, accessed by ladders, and blanketing acres of horizontal surface. God forbid there should ever be a fire. Possum was drawn to the miles of old pulps. Soon he was settled down with a publication entitled *Startling Tales*; its colorful cover featured a chromium sphere that hovered over a cobalt landscape. I was pulled into a large, brilliantly illustrated compilation of Gilbert and Sullivan operas. An easy hour slipped by. I wound up purchasing the biblical volume *Exotic Aquarium*

*Fishes*, by William T. Innes, priced at just a buck—Kay’s was apparently unaware of its actual value—and a copy of the first *Playboy* magazine that I’d ever viewed; its photos still had a galvanizing effect on me.

“Hey, let’s go over to Coney Island Hot Dogs,” Possum suggested after paying for his newly acquired treasures. “I’m hungry.” We wandered along colorful Short Vincent Street with all of its flash and tawdry charm. We passed the Theatrical Restaurant where the New York Yankees partied up a storm whenever they hit town. When Dad had been doing well, selling tool steel for Darwin and Milner, we’d eaten there often; Tony Bennett and Jack Teagarden had been among the featured entertainers. After our chili dogs, we goggled at the rather run-down Roxy Burlesque Theatre. Huge photos of the great queens of strip-tease adorned the box office: Irma the Body, Tempest Storm, Gee Whiz, Ann Corio...

“Are youse guys just gonna look, or buy a ticket? Ya don’t wanna miss Rusty Bustle, who goes on soon,” beckoned the man at the ticket window, with a salacious leer.

“Uh...sure!” we responded. We’d figured that still being somewhat underage, we’d not be able to get in, but the man showed no interest in seeing our IDs.

Only some seats were occupied in the threadbare old theater. Excited, we went down to the very front row, right at the edge of the stage. A wheezy routine by a comic with a putty nose, and a couple of girls—ostensibly “peelers” themselves—was in progress. “Hot damn, Rosie...I just got back from visiting my new girlfriend, up in the state of Maine...”

“Bang-er?” (Bangor)

“Well, not yet...I just met her,” (rim shot—Possum laughs; no one else does).

“But seriously, she has a brother who plays golf...he asked me would I like to play...I says sure. Well, after eighteen holes, we’re back in the clubhouse and we take a shower. We’re gettin’

dressed and I see him pullin' on a frilly pink girdle. I asks him, 'how long have ya been wearin' that thing?' and he says, 'Ever since my wife found it in the glove compartment of my car!'" (Rim shot—I laugh, nobody else does). "But Dolly," he addressed the other gal, "I heard ya got married..."

"Yeah."

"Tell us about your honeymoon..."

"Well, when we got to the motel, there was a bed with a coin box attached. I asked my new hubby what it was for, and he said, 'Ya put a quarter in and it starts to vibrate.' I said to him: Well, honey... save your money...*put a quarter in* and *I* start to vibrate!" (shake, jiggle—multiple rim shots, multiple laughs—curtain).

"That one named Dolly looks real familiar to me," I said to Possum. "Have you ever seen her before?"

"I don't think so..."

"Well, I'd bet my life that I have...I just can't place her..."

The lights went up and an unseen announcer reminded the patrons that there were still specials being served back at the bar. Apparently, we'd come in near the tail end of the "lunchtime" show, because next, it would be time for the headliner. I was rather nervous and wished to appear nonchalant. I wished we hadn't sat clear up front...what if someone was back there, observing us? To appear relaxed, I leaned back, pulled out my paper, and pretended to read, even after the announcer intoned: "And now, ladies and gentlemen, the Roxy Burlesque Theatre is proud to in-tro-dooce, the world-famous, Miss Busty Russell—er—that is to say, Miss Rusty Bustle!"

The help may have gotten busy back at the bar because nobody remembered to re-dim the house lights or to turn on the spots. The star, whom I had expected to teasingly emerge and slowly disrobe—little by little, glove by glove, stocking by stocking—was perhaps disgruntled by the ignored lighting, the band that had dwindled to an organist and drummer, the mostly-empty house, and possibly the spectator who was dozily reading. She strode directly to the edge of the stage, right above us, cast a gimlet eye at ME, tapped a high-heeled toe, chomped a few times on what may have been Juicy Fruit, then, getting right to the crux of the matter said: “I’ll drop one of THESE on your head...THAT’LL wake ya’ up!” and without further ado, she shoved the red-nailed fingers of one of her shapely hands into her bodice, pulled forth a soft pink appendage, shaped like a football but three times larger, and released it to plummet like an H-bomb directly down towards myself and the Possum!! Like a perfectly aimed bowling ball, she scored a strike as we tumbled and cowered, eliciting the first real roar of laughter from the audience that afternoon. Smiling triumphantly, with the help of the now inspired duo in the pit, she launched into a routine that was no more demure than her entrance had been. We were wide-eyed and bushy-tailed after that, to say the least. At the end of her performance, she tossed her g-string to Possum, but it was intercepted by an alert old geezer who reached forward from the second row.

“That’s it, folks...you are all welcome to come on back for the matinee show, starring Rusty Bustle, along with local stars Tootsie Roll, Clara Barton the Naughty Nurse, Rosie the Riveting, and Dolly Madison and her creamy cupcakes. Thank you, and please watch your step heading out,” said the unseen announcer.

“Hey,” I said, “We only saw the end of the show. Let’s find that ticket guy who gypped us! He ought to let us back in at two. I want to figure out where I’ve seen that ‘Dolly Madison’.” But the box office proved to be empty.

“That’s OK, Rusty Bustle was worth it! I wanna walk down by the flats and shoot some more film before we head home, anyway,” said Possum, referring to Cleveland’s gritty, riverside steel-mill district. Hang on a minute...let me get a couple shots of the Roxy...what a place!” While he jockeyed to get some good photos of the picturesque joint’s exterior, with its marquee and the explicit photos up above, I crossed the street to get a closer look at the contents of a pawn shop’s window. In less than a minute, however, it began to rain—first a sprinkle and then a downpour. Sheltering our precious Kay’s books beneath our coats, we ran back up to Euclid and were just in time to jump on a bus that was heading towards home.

## 18 — BELLS AREN'T RINGING

“Bye, Jackson...bye, Jacqueline...we’re all gonna miss you a bunch—even Dad.”

“Well, they’ll be happy with two hundred gallons to swim in, and you can always come and visit.”

“Thanks, Mr. Cobb.” I had taken my prize pair of eight-inch Jack Dempsey cichlid fish to their new home at Mr. Cobb’s Aquarium Greenhouse down on Euclid. With farewell flickers of their spangled tails, they swam off into the huge fish tank that housed his large, older pet fish, Oscars and such, that were not for sale. I’d been phasing out all of my finny friends in anticipation of a projected move to New York.

“When’s graduation?”

“Friday night—I’ve got my cap and gown already.”

“You’ll look funny with all of that hair poking out from under a mortarboard.”

“I promised Mom I’d get a haircut...that’s where I’m going, right now.”

“No college plans? You should be an ichthyologist.”

“Naw...after thirteen years of school, I just want to try learning on my own terms for a while.”

“Well, good luck, Jack—and come see us.”

“Sure. I’ll bring them some nightcrawlers. That’s their favorite dish.” I climbed into my recently acquired ‘63 Chevy Bel Air station wagon—my pride and joy. It leaked a little oil onto our driveway, which Dad hated, but otherwise, it ran well.

Dad had a lodge brother named Charlie Rooper with a daughter, Mavis, who was in my class. Mavis was all right, but she ran with an entirely different crowd than I did. To my



embarrassment, and hers too I'm sure, our parents were throwing a party for us, with a graduation cake with our names on it, etc. I was far more interested in getting to Scott Falspaugh's, where there was going to be a keg in the backyard, along with who knew what other delights. Mom and Dad and the Roopers were, perhaps, celebrating having no more kids to raise, as much as anything. Pearly and Libby Chuggle from across the street were coming—it was obviously going to be more of a parents' party than ours, but that was okay; they'd suffered plenty, too.

It was only Wednesday, though. Graduation wasn't till Friday night. During lunch, I finished emptying my locker's contents into my splendid blue car's spacious aft quarters. I couldn't have loved it more if it had been a Jag or a Stingray. We, seniors, weren't really expected to do much that week, except to sign yearbooks and such.

Something about the twinkle in Georgie's eye should have warned me, as many times as I'd seen it over the years. "Help me with this, will you, Jack? Just steady the chair a bit."

"Steady the—what are you doing?" Georgie had hopped nimbly onto a chair, next to a wall, at the end of a first-floor corridor.

"Do you mean to tell me you've never noticed?"

"Noticed what, you jackass?"

"That the bolt head that secures the bells is exactly  $\frac{5}{8}$  of an inch. At least, I've always been pretty sure it was—I never really checked until now—but sure enough, I was right!" To my increasing consternation, I saw that George had fitted the business end of a box wrench onto the bolt head holding the center of a ten-inch iron school bell.

"With both of us, Jack, we can have them all in five minutes."

"You're crazy...anyway, I haven't got a wrench."

“Well, I wasn’t positive about the size, so I grabbed this crescent wrench too...it’ll do for you...”

“Go to hell! What would we do with them any—” but Georgie had already dumped the heavy bell out of a window into accommodating shrubbery below.

“Don’t tell me, Jack, that in all these years you’ve never noticed that all of the bells are at the ends of the halls, where the windows are? And it’s hot today—they’re all open.”

“Forget it! There’s no way I’m—”

“That’s OK. I’ll have them all down myself, in ten minutes, but I know you’ll at least stand lookout for an old friend. You’ll run no risk. If you don’t want to have a direct role in the most glorious event of—”

“Give me the fuckin’ wrench, you ass...”

“There’s our boy! Now, you just do the third floor—and the ones outside of the band room and the swimming pool. I’ve got the second floor, the gym, and auditorium. There should be bushes under windows close to most of them, but take this gym bag, in case you’ve gotta sneak any out.”

George was right. The bolts spun out easily, compared to the routinely rusty ones on our old cars and bicycles. I removed and dispatched my allotment of bells in short order, dumping them down into the awaiting flora. It was especially fun bombing them down from the third floor! It was one of the two afternoons per week that I was excused from school to work at the print shop. My skullduggery completed, I simply slipped away to Carlton’s.

That evening, Nancy Chuggle came over. “It was chaos, Jack...like anarchy. When the kids all finally realized that the bells weren’t going to ring, they revolted. Down by the big cafeteria study hall, it was more of a riot, they say.”

“What?”

“Yeah, apparently some of the greasers started fighting with the colored kids. The hippies went outside and started smoking weed. Corvelle tried to herd everyone back, with the PA system, but everybody pretended not to hear. Almost everyone just went home early. Even the teachers were happy. Without the bells that dictated their movements for years and years, they all just became discombobulated, like rats being let out of a Skinner Box.”

“Gee, I wonder how—”

“Oh, everyone knows it was you and Georgie—”

“WHAT!!!!???”

“Yeah, somebody squealed—Rick Panuska’s name was mentioned. I just thought you’d want a report.”

“Thanks a lot, Nancy. I was really hoping to be too worried to sleep tonight.”

“Well, forewarned is forearmed. At least now you can prepare your defense. Good luck, Jack.”

I considered telling Mom that there might be trouble brewing, due to a prank that I’d gotten involved in, but decided against it. Why worry her before it was necessary?

At twelve-thirty, I heard Dad come home from the swing shift. He’d had heart problems recently. Hopefully, my stupidity wouldn’t finish him off. By rereading hundreds of pages of *The Lord of the Rings*, I got through the endless night. I finally fell asleep at five a.m.

## 19 — BEST FRIENDS

At school, at eight-thirty, people were milling around excitedly. “I owe you a big apology, Jack.” It was Sarah Fall, the young journalism teacher I’d been so nuts about. “You were right about the Black Panthers...Bobby’s split with them, thanks to you.”

“Oh, uh...nothin’ to it, Sarah. It seems like I’ve got other problems today...”

“Yes, they have George in there now. They say neither of you will be allowed to graduate; I think it’s awful. They’ll be coming for—”

“ELBON!” It was Corvelle, hands in his baggy trousers, smirking with satisfaction. “My office. The police are waiting. MOVE!”

Down the long, crowded hallway we proceeded, with me in front. “Uh, ya know Mr. Corvelle, if the cops are involved, I think I’d like to have my dad or some legal coun—”

“MOVE, BOY!” As he barked out the words, he painfully slammed the back of my neck with the tough V between his thumb and first finger, jolting my head forward.

BIFF! It was nothing but a good old-fashioned punch in the nose, but I had whirled, and my left jab had shot out involuntarily, landing my knuckles with what may have been some degree of the pain that his blow to my neck or one of his swats, or hair-pulling punishments engendered. But I knew that my ship was now sunk; I took flight.

“Sheriff! Sheriff! He’s gone insane! He’s assaulted me! Stop him...STOP HIM!”

But I had split through a handy fire exit. Opening it had sounded clamorous alarms, and the school dutifully disgorged its teaming hordes into the early summer sunshine.

Away I flew—a blur of “Artesian Turquoise” in my surprisingly responsive, six-cylinder Chevrolet machine. Zigzagging up and down side streets, I seemed—for the moment at least—to

be free from pursuit. Having made it to the Hoffstader home (and the Possum's lair), I pulled clear back into the driveway and parked by the garage; my car would be out of sight from the street. Heights High had ended its term already. Victor was now the graduate that I would never be.

His nice mom, suspecting nothing, greeted me warmly as always. "Victor is downstairs—he said he was developing pictures."

"Don't open the door," said Possum from behind the wooden door where he'd set up his little darkroom by the laundry tubs. "I'll be out as soon as I get done hanging these prints up to dry. It looks like we got some good ones, that day we went downtown...I'm just now getting a chance to develop them, now that school's finally over. What a relief that is!"

His innocent words were salt in my wounds. The tidal wave of events that had flooded my life, in less time than it takes for the earth to spin around once, coupled with my having slept only one hour, had me feeling that I certainly must be tangled up in one of those long, long, winding dreams of endless horrors and frustrations. I could not possibly have socked Corvelle on his schnozz...I could not conceivably have caused riots and false alarms, brought disgrace to my parents, and become a fugitive from justice...not in such a short time. One moment I was draining my aquariums, then, suddenly, this! I actually threw my head back and tried to open my eyes to awaken from the nightmare, but an ache where Corvelle had jolted my neck, and the fact of still being in the Hoffstader's basement, made it clear that it wasn't a dream...it was real! I staggered, from where I stood, to the other side of the cellar, to the knotty pine finished room where Victor had his studio and sleeping quarters. I sat down on the long, comfortable sofa, tilted sideways, closed my eyes, and was gone.

“Oh, there you are,” said Possum, from where he’d been working at his easel. “You’ve been sleepin’ two hours. I thought you still had school this week...I guess you skipped out. Hey, these photos turned out really good...the cloudy skies, that day we went downtown? They gave these shots sort of an ‘El Greco’ effect...”

“Victor, I’m in such bad trouble...Georgie too...it was his fault mainly, but today I really shagged the cat. I guess, when it’s dark, I’ll be heading for New York. I hate to go without saying goodbye to Mom and Dad, but they’ll be watching for me ...”

As I blathered on, I listlessly gazed, without really seeing, at the fruits of Possum’s excellent photography. He was right—the spring dogwoods, blossoming among the rusty machinery and ruins of the dying city, made for wonderful contrast in his big, glossy, black and white prints.

“Who will be watching, where?”

“The cops of course—our house. They’re probably there already. Mom’s at work, but poor Dad...Oh, it’ll kill him...oh, oh, OH! Why can’t I just turn back the hands of time a few hours?”

“Jack, you’ve got to get a hold of yourself! Stop this gibbering and tell me what’s happened, from the beginning...Jack...JACK!? Talk to me... I’m really getting worried...JACK?....JACK!!”

“Uh, Victor...”

“Yeah?”

“VICTOR!”

“What?”

“IT’S HIM!”

“Who?”

“AND HER TOO! HE’S ACTUALLY WITH HER, HOLDING HER ARM! I TOLD YOU I’D SEEN HER BEFORE!”

“WHO?”

“DOLLY! DOLLY MADISON AND HER CUPCAKES! SHE WAS A SENIOR WHEN I WAS A SOPHOMORE! HER REAL NAME WAS SHERRI SCHOONHEINZER!”

“I WISH YOU WOULD TELL ME—”

“CAN I HAVE THIS?”

“A picture of the Roxy? Well, sure I guess...”

“CAN YOU PRINT MORE? DO YOU HAVE THE NEGATIVE?”

“Well, yeah...it’s back there—”

“Print me some more of these...Please...PLEASE! Print me some more of these and DON’T LOSE THE NEGATIVE!!!”

“Why would I lose the negative?—”

But I had already flown up the stairs and away.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Well, sure Jack...We can project this into a front-page template of the *Cardinal*, but why would you want to publish a photo of an old Vaudeville theater?” Miss Sarah Fall, the adorable Journalism teacher with a radical bent, had just arrived at her home at four o’clock. I’d been waiting on her porch since three.

“Look at this guy—with the girl—coming out of the front doors!”

“Why, it looks like Corvelle...”

“IT IS CORVELLE! School was out that week, for spring break, and he’s with a girl who was at Shaw two years ago! She can’t be twenty-one yet, but even if she is, it doesn’t matter—I’ve got him by the shorties!”

“Well, I can easily mock one up tonight, but I wouldn’t be able to print more than a couple—”

“That’s all we need...just a couple for our purposes. Probably just one will do.”

“You’re going to blackmail him!”

“Heavens, no! I’ll just employ some gentle persuasion. Hmmm...Scott Falspaugh’s father is on the school board...He’s an affable guy...I even played pool with him once! He’d be interested, but I don’t think I’ll even need to see him.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It is Friday evening at nine-thirty. Dad and I are together on our back porch. Fireflies, down in the yard, glimmer through Mom’s morning glory vines. Happy laughter floats out through the screen door.

“Well, son...Mavis is leaving...I’m sure you’ll be wanting to be on your way too, to be with your friends. Have a beer or two, but please be careful. Your mother and I are so proud of you...”

“Do you know, Dad—I think I’ll just stay here and have another piece of my graduation cake. You and Mom are the best friends that I have!”

**THE END**



## SUGGESTED READING

***The Math Myth: And Other STEM Delusions***

By Andrew Hacker

***The Fires of Spring***

By James A. Michener

***Introduction to Montessori Method***

The American Montessori Society

***Narcissus and Goldmund* and *Beneath the Wheel***

By Hermann Hesse

## **ALSO BY GAIR LINHART**

***EVERYTHING THAT YOU FEEL!*** – Novel: [www.GairLinhart.com](http://www.GairLinhart.com)

***CRAZY BLUE CITY*** – Novel: [www.GairLinhart.com](http://www.GairLinhart.com)

***POEMSONGS*** – Poetry / Song Lyric Compilation: [www.GairLinhart.com](http://www.GairLinhart.com)

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