SKUNKS, ARMADILLOS, AND PORCUPINES:

DADDY, I CAN HAVE A GUN BUT WHY CAN’T I HAVE A PET?

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in English

By

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ABSTRACT

SKUNKS, ARMADILLOS, AND PORCUPINES:

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This collection of ‘coming of age’ short stories not only investigates the complicated theme of physical and figurative survival in a patriarchal world, both passive and hostile, it also explores specific cultural landscapes that create hybrid identity. In Borderlands Gloria Anzaldua claims that our whole understanding of identity has to be revised because all identities are hybrids, formed over time through the interaction of multiple cultures and is constantly being transformed by new encounters in the borderlands between one culture and another. There are multiple cultural landscapes in this collection that help create hybrid identity through the struggle of each protagonist. Some of these struggles include surviving poverty, violence, religion, Mother Nature’s onslaught, mental illness, death, and a lack of roots.
Inspired by the realistic struggle of African-Americans in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Will Be Watching God* and John Steinbeck’s examination of Americans during the Depression in *The Grapes of Wrath*, this collection is strung together like a pearl necklace, many stories exploring the ethical choices faced by the insurgent lower-middle class, influenced by each cultural landscape. First, a post WWII baby boomer generation entrenched in poverty deep in the hills of Appalachia. Second, there is Appalachian migration in search of a better life, and the struggle in rural Texas. Third, there is the broke and desperate outsider trying to survive the drug and gang culture of Venice Beach, California during the 1960-1970’s counter-culture generation.

Most of the stories are told in first person, the narrative arc driven by interiority. In one story, “Armadilla,” the inner struggle of the young boy is juxtaposed with the outer struggle of the armadillo to survive the barrage of gunfire. The quick pacing is realized by short staccato words and sentences representing rapid gun fire. Anzaldua says that the struggle has always been inner, but is played out in the outer terrains. “Armadilla” is about a boy’s inner struggle played out on the hostile Texas landscape. The armadillo’s thick leather hide does not protect the armadillo from the boy’s bullets, and the boy’s secret does not protect him from his father’s wrath.

The only story to extend beyond the scope of realism is “The Killing Chant,” a distortion story that explores the 1960’s culture of racism. Sigmund Freud claimed that distortion and disguise filled dreams, and literary texts, the unconscious wish was unacceptable and had to evade censorship. The story is about the hybrid identity of a fifteen-year-old boy who not only has Hispanic, Middle-Eastern, and African American heritage, but, most importantly, has grown flippers. What it underscores is survival in a
culture of bigotry and violence. And, with the use of metaphor and symbolism, the use of provocative and uncensored colloquial language, and the taboo subject matter of pedophilia, the story becomes an honest personal attack on innate prejudice and decadence. By writing this forbidden story, and though it is one of distortion, it may well be the most truthful story in the collection.

Friedrich Nietzsche said that truth was a useful illusion; one that served a fundamental drive to survive. This book is about survival and the truths told in each and every story will bring an understanding of what it takes for a boy to reach manhood, how to exist in a cross-pollination of cultures, and how to survive those cultures, especially those in a hostile world of patriarchy. Each survivor is an illusion on a landscape, a hybrid, transformed, into a product of what not only was, but, of what will be.
SECTION 1: Americana Personified

Cowboy Obsession

When I was five years old Mama took me to my first Western movie at a real movie house over in Lexington. It was just Mama, our sixteen-year-old baby-sitter, Linda Washington, and me. My sisters, Sassy and Bing, stayed behind with Mamaw Ginny. Linda had strawberry blonde hair, a good figure, and was our next-door neighbor. She was really pretty, with a small turned up nose, delicate hands, and big brown eyes with long dark eye lashes.

Mama checked the bus schedule from Richmond to Lexington, but Daddy refused to let us go on the bus. He said it weren’t right for two attractive young women and a little boy to be riding on public transportation. He said he’d drive us in his brand new car and drop us off while he went to visit his cousin Bobby Lee Johnson over at one of the horse farms in Versailles. Daddy said that although he liked westerns he was more interested in other things. The horse farms were some of my favorite places, with rolling hills of blue-green grass and white fences, littered with young thoroughbreds, many with foals. I loved to watch the colts and fillies run and jump trying out new legs. I just knew that someday I’d be riding some of them horses on the plains of Texas.

Mama let me wear my white Stetson cowboy hat, my brown suede vest and matching chaps, my leather cowboy boots, and my matching belt with six bullet jackets, three on either side of my belt buckle, and two holsters, each holding a white pearl-handled chrome-plated Colt .45 cap-gun. I wore a red handkerchief around my neck and Mama gave me a matching red handkerchief to stick into my right rear pocket.
I looked like a real cowboy. I hoped Linda noticed.

It was a really warm, sticky day as Daddy drove us to the movie theatre in his new yellow and black 1956 Chevy Nomad wagon with big, slick tires, slim white walls, and four deep set shiny chrome rims. Daddy said he’d bought it with money he’d made by winning a prize fight over in Cincinnati. Mama was mad at Daddy, saying we’d been living on squirrel and rabbit, with country greens, pinto beans and cornbread for the last month, and as soon as we had some money, instead of buying food for the family, Daddy went out and bought a dadgum new car. Mama was pissed, but Daddy had a way of getting back on Mama’s good side by whispering to her, kissing her neck and grinning and joking. People always said Daddy could “charm the stripe off a skunk.” And when he offered up a movie trip for us, Mama calmed down a little, and then totally forgave him when she saw how excited I was to go see a western in a big movie house over in Lexington.

The car seemed like it floated on the highway as Daddy clicked open his silver-chrome cigarette lighter and lit a Chesterfield that was hanging out of the corner of his mouth. Without taking his hands off the steering wheel and gear shift, he took a long drag of his smoke. The smell of his cigarette mixed with the exhaust smell from the Chevy made me dizzy. The Nomad rumbled and rumbled at every stop, and whenever Daddy hit a soft shoulder the Chevy would spit loose gravel from under its tires. My old man firmly gripped the Chevy’s big loopy steering wheel, and then gently let the wheel slide through his fingers and hands as he turned each and every curve. He glanced back at everyone in the car and grinned.
Once we pulled into Lexington Daddy headed over to the Lido Movie House on Franklin Street. Mama and Linda laughed and giggled, and then bragged about what they would do to the tall, handsome star of the movie if they ever met him. Daddy seemed to be annoyed as the cigarette smoke from his Chesterfield drifted up and curled over his thick sideburns and around his finely manicured pompadour.

“Handsome?”

“Yes, Jay, we both think he’s just dreamy.”

“Well, shoot, he should be. He’s a goddam American hero.”

I was curious. Who was this dreamy guy that was making Mama and Linda so giddy? Who was this guy who somehow made Daddy pissed and proud at the same time? Who was this American hero? I needed to know.

Daddy must have read my mind.

“Yep…John Wayne.”

He paused for a full three seconds.

“John Wayne is a goddam, certified American hero.”

Linda and Mama giggled.

“And he ain’t like some of those other sissy cowboys that sing and ride sidesaddle.”

Daddy got my attention.

“John Wayne can ride a real horse, and I ain’t talking about riding a pony the size of a little kid’s hobby horse. No sir-ree. I’m talking about a big stallion. John Wayne rides a goddam champion.”

Linda spoke up.
“Well, he can ride this cowgirl anytime he wants.”

Mama elbowed Linda while laughing nervously.

“Linda!”

Daddy shot a look at Linda and then at Mama. He grinned and took a long drag of his cigarette before exhaling.

“Yeah, I bet ole John Wayne would ride a pretty little filly like you in a heartbeat.”

“Jay, I don’t think that’s proper to talk to a young’un like that.”

Daddy exhaled more smoke while talking.

“Aw, I don’t mean nuthin.”

Daddy took one last drag and then flicked his cigarette out the window as he glanced over at Linda.

“Do I… Linda Lou?”

The conversation puzzled me.

“Daddy, I thought Linda’s middle name was June? Her mama always calls her Linda June.”

“So she does, Junior. So she does.”

Daddy smiled and pushed his sunglasses down his nose as he pulled up to the front of the Lido. Mama got out first and then Linda. As Linda stepped out of the Chevy with her right foot, Daddy reached over and pinched her on the butt. She glanced sideways at Daddy with a slight smile. Daddy turned to me and put his index finger up to his lips, smirked, and winked at me.

“Have fun, cowboy. Say hello to John Wayne for me.”
When we entered the Lido for the matinee it was empty. There was some old man who didn’t smell very good in a wheel chair sleeping in the back row of the balcony and that was it. We mostly had the movie house all to ourselves. The name of the movie that day was *The Searchers*, starring John Wayne and Jeffrey Hunter, with some really good side kick characters and a really mean Indian warrior named “Scar.” It was directed by John Ford who was known for beautiful photography and great scenery. There were sunsets and sunrises overlooking red and rust colored bluffs and canyons with lots of cowboy hats and Indian headbands with eagle feathers. Many scenes had guns and horses, and the cowboys and Indians were fighting for their lives. I tried to count the gunshots, but I lost track after I realized I couldn’t count that high. There were only a couple of women in the whole movie, an older woman, and a very young and beautiful actress named Natalie Wood. She looked a lot like Linda, with dark brown hair instead, but with those same big brown eyes. I think I fell in love with Natalie Wood that day.

In the middle of the movie, Mama said she couldn’t resist the smell of the popcorn no more and went to the concession stand to get some. Mama offered to get a Pepsi for Linda, and I asked for some Milk Duds or Bon Bons.

Linda and I sat alone in the theater watching the movie. The film’s hero, Ethan, is searching for his niece, Lucy, who has been kidnapped by the Comanche. Lucy’s fiancé, Brad, thinks maybe he’s seen Lucy, but John Wayne’s Ethan sets him straight with the truth.

“What you saw wasn’t Lucy.”

“But it was, I tell you!”
“What you saw was a buck wearin’ Lucy’s dress. I found Lucy back in a canyon, I wrapped her in my coat, buried her with my own hands. I thought it best to keep it from ya.”

“Did they…? Was she…?”

“What do you want me to do? Draw you a picture? Spell it out? Don’t ever ask me! Long as you live, don’t ever ask me no more.”

Linda started sobbing. I wanted to cry myself, but that wouldn’t be too manly, so instead I stood up and pulled both of my Colts from their holster.

“Bang! Bang! Bang!”

Smoke from the caps leapt from the guns’ hammers.

“Junior, what are you doing?” Linda asked through her tears. I slid my guns back into their holsters and turned to face her. The spent cap smell lingered.

“Daddy wanted me to say hello to John Wayne, didn’t he…Linda Lou?”

Linda looked puzzled as she wiped tears with her left arm. I pulled the red handkerchief from my back pocket and gave it to her. She dabbed her big brown eyes, and blew her nose. She looked so beautiful. I reached over, and kissed her on the cheek. She gave me a sweet, gentle smile, and lightly ruffled my blond hair before hugging me. I felt her breast on my face. My face felt hot. I slumped back down in the seat. After a long pause I looked at Linda. She looked at me. We smiled at each other in the dark theater. Everything was perfect.

That was the day I became obsessed with westerns and other things.
How Uncle Fuzzy Thunk Up the Banjo Song

Once upon a time we went to live with our Granny Hall and Uncle Fuzzy after mine and my little brother, Buddy’s mama was killed out on the highway in a car accident. I was almost four and Buddy was one and we been there ever since. We weren’t sure where our Daddy was. Granny said he was somewhere in Texas, maybe workin’ on a ranch or a farm or somethin’. Uncle Fuzzy said he was probably gamblin’, fightin’, runnin’ around, and moochin’ off of some woman. We resented Uncle Fuzzy talkin’ about our daddy that way. We were always plottin’ how to get even with Uncle Fuzzy, but Granny would tell us to knock it off, that we were kin and kin was blood.

Now, Uncle Fuzzy had bad teeth and a left leg that stopped growin’ when he was 12 years old. Granny, who was his mama and our granny, made him wear special orthopedic shoes, which consisted of a normal, regular shoe, and a high-steppin'-special-six-inch-insole-kick-the-crap-out-of-your-younger-pre-pubescent-nephews-shoe. Those younger nephews were me and Buddy. And that shoe was huge.

Now, Uncle Fuzzy was about six years older than me and about nine years older than Buddy. He teased and taunted us almost as hard as all the other kids in his grade teased and taunted him. They teased him about his rotten teeth caused by his thirst for soda pop, about his danglin' participle of a left leg, and mostly about his huge, huge shoe. All the kids were pretty mean to Fuzzy, but there was one kid in particular who tormented Uncle Fuzzy. His name was Billy Joe Truman.

So, not only was Billy Joe Truman the meanest kid in school, he was the richest kid in school. His parents bought him school shoes, church shoes, work boots, sneakers to play ball in, and even sandals to wear to the swimmin’ hole. And whenever Billy Joe
got into trouble, his parents always got him out of it. In fact, most of the time as soon as someone found out that Billy Joe was involved in some mischievous act they would look the other way. Billy Joe got away with everything. So, of course, eventually Billy Joe became the coolest kid at Madison High. He was the quarterback on the football team, the shortstop on the baseball team, and the power forward and scorin’ star on the basketball team. He was the first to buy and wear a letterman’s jacket, the first to get his own car, and the first to have a steady girlfriend. But, to Uncle Fuzzy, it seemed like Billy Joe’s main reason for livin’ was to humiliate him. He called Uncle Fuzzy the shoe. If Fuzzy was talkin’ to a pretty girl, Billy Joe would walk up and put him into a headlock, scrub his head top with his bare knuckles and spout out boldly, “Hey, girl – is the shoe botherin’ you? He best be puttin’ his best foot forward?” Billy Joe would shove him away and then snort, hoot and holler. Normally the girl would start laughin’ too, and before you know it, Uncle Fuzzy would cower before turnin’ multiple shades of red, lower his face, and hobble for the door almost in tears.

When he’d get home he’d immediately start in on us, flickin’ my ears and callin’ me banjo boy – for that boy in that Deliverance movie. And he’d jump on Buddy and tell him to squeal like a fat little pig. “Wee! Wee! Wee!” Then he’d start singin’ out the Duelin’ Banjos song. We’d start cryin’, and then we’d run and jump up into Granny's arms while she sat in her big old wooden rockin’ chair by the pot-bellied stove. She’d shush Uncle Fuzzy and then hug us and rock us while singin’ some old mountain song. She’d sing and hum until we fell asleep.

When Uncle Fuzzy turned nineteen he finally got his pre-adolescent leg amputated and fitted with a prosthetic. After about a year he was able to master its use,
and when he had his pants on no one could tell he had a fake leg, he walked with a very slight almost unnoticeable limp. At night he would take the leg off and the only time we were reminded of Uncle Fuzzy’s disability was when he hopped to the restroom. THUMP...THUMP...THUMP... That and whenever we ran into Billy Joe Thurman. Billy Joe always asked Uncle Fuzzy what happened to the shoe, said he’d love to buy it for sentimental reasons. He’d chuckle and swagger away as Uncle Fuzzy steamed.

Now when Uncle Fuzzy turned twenty-one Granny was able to get him on some kind of Federal program that would pay for a complete set of dentures, uppers and lowers. Granny already had her own dentures and the both of them used to soak their dentures in glasses, side by side on the kitchen counter. Me and Buddy thought they were disgustin’, but for some reason we were drawn to them like a magnet. We’d sit side by side just starin’ at ‘em. Sometimes I’d even dream about ‘em. One night after starin’ at the ‘em for a little while for some reason we started doin’ Uncle Fuzzy’s banjo song. We giggled and then laughed and from then on, we called ‘em dueling dentures. Every chance we could we’d bust out into Uncle Fuzzy’s Duelin’ Banjos song. Sometimes the both of us would dance and clog along, and in the end we’d fall down from laughter and exhaustion.

One time we ran into Billy Joe and some girl who’d come down from Eastern Kentucky Teachers’ College. When he saw Uncle Fuzzy’s new teeth, he grinned and winked at the girl. He asked about Uncle Fuzzy’s shoe, said he’d really like to have it. I told him to knock it off. Billy Joe snickered, “Well, hell, Junior. If I can’t have Fuzzy’s shoe then maybe I could have his false teeth.” Uncle Fuzzy slumped and Buddy put his arm around him. Billy Joe guffawed, obviously showin’ off for the girl who laughed
nervously as they scooted off. Uncle Fuzzy and Buddy glared after them.

Okay, so Uncle Fuzzy wasn’t always mean to me and Buddy. And in turn we weren’t always mean to Uncle Fuzzy, but we did have our moments.

When I was sixteen and Buddy was thirteen, we stole Uncle Fuzzy’s leg and his dentures while he was sleepin’. Uncle Fuzzy screamed bloody murder at us as he chased us around the house, onto the wrap-around porch, out into the front yard, then the back yard, then down to the corner, the whole time hoppin’ on his one good leg and threatenin’ us with a wooden crutch raised high above his head and toothless mouth. We’d run past Johnny Hall’s place and his whole family’d be sittin’ on the front porch eatin’ watermelon like they always did. They’d wave to us and laugh at Uncle Fuzzy when he came hoppin’ by. THUMP...THUMP...THUMP... Buddy and me laughed and laughed and in time Uncle Fuzzy laughed with us, that is after he caught us and got his leg back. Buddy dropped Uncle Fuzzy's false teeth somewhere durin’ the chase and we never did find them. Granny ended up havin’ to buy Uncle Fuzzy a new set of dentures out of her savin’s, and for a while she was madder than a junk yard dog on a short chain.

The followin’ year we heard that Billy Joe Truman was in a serious car accident, his face had been busted into a dozen pieces, and his leg was broken. He was in intensive care in the hospital. Granny gave us a “get well” card, and told us all to go and show our respect. Uncle Fuzzy refused; said if he went, he'd only want to give Billy Joe a piece of his mind.

So, off Buddy and I went. When we got to Billy Joe's room he acted like he wasn't too glad to see us. His face was bandaged up and his left leg was propped up by a pulley and in a full cast all the way up to his hip. He started askin’ where the gimp was,
and smirked while remindin’ us of the pranks he used to pull on Uncle Fuzzy. He called Buddy Squirt and me Junebug. At one point he made Buddy give him a drink of water from a big blue tumbler next to his bed. Billy Joe was such an asshole the whole time we were there. I was so glad when we were able to peel away.

On the way to the truck I remembered I still had Granny's card. So I told Buddy to go ahead and get in the cab and wait for me as I headed back to Billy Joe's room.

“Junie Pie, what the hell are you doing back here?”

“Granny said to give you this here card.”

“Throw it on the chair. Give me a goddam drink,” he commanded me.

As much as I resented the way Billy Joe treated me, I reached over and handed him the big blue tumbler. He drained it like a big ole porker emptyin’ a hog trough. I heard the ice clang to the sides of the tumbler. With all his injuries Billy Joe’s face looked distorted and for a second I almost felt sorry for him. And then I remembered who he was.

“Now get the hell out of here, you Dickhead. I need to sleep.”

I set the blue tumbler down on the bed side table and as I did I peered into the cup. And to my surprise, there wasn’t any ice in the tumbler. Instead there sat Uncle Fuzzy's missin’ false teeth.

Billy Joe told me to “beat it” again. I said my goodbyes, and smiled all the way back to the truck. When I got there I slid into the driver’s seat and looked at Buddy. He grinned at me. I grinned back at him. We sat there for a moment softly hummin’ Uncle Fuzzy’s Duelin’ Banjos song. When we finished we nodded to each other and grinned again before I cranked the ignition and we headed back to Granny and Uncle Fuzzy’s.
Daddy’s red and white 1955 Ford Fairlane slowly lumbers down a lonely dirt road toward Lake Conroe. The long, winding worn path cuts through a forest of pristine pines interspersed with a smattering of white birch and dogwoods. Grass wet with dew separates the two ribbons of reddish dirt from each other and from the tree line on either side which is edged with woodland plants for groundcover. The old man decides to drive slowly so he doesn’t pitch up any dust. I can see that the moist topsoil covers packed mud so there won’t be any dust kicked up this morning, but, I don’t dare say anything to him about that fact. His temper is such that I have learned to bite my tongue. Because of his reactions to my implied misdeeds I often make a choice to be silent, and as a result have been labeled shy by anyone close to our family.

Power pole after power pole zigzags against the western tree line looking out of place. The sun rises above the eastern treetops penetrating lower branches, blinding anyone looking in that direction. Remnant fog patches hover over the power lines. A pair of woodpeckers create a piercing percussionist’s symphony on a lone birch tree.

It is a brisk morning, but I am not cold.

Suddenly Daddy pulls the Fairlane to a halt. The dust remains on the ground. Squinting through his cheap filling station sunglasses, the old man stares at the tree line. He pauses and takes a deep breath before he whispers with urgency in a low tone.

“Quick, boy – get your gun.”

I reach into the back seat and pull out my Model 12 pump-action .22 Remington rifle. The Remington is loaded and ready for bear. Of course there hadn’t been any bear sightings around Lake Conroe in over ten years.
Daddy pushes his sunglasses down to the end of his nose, and, without taking his eyes off of something at the tree line, shoves a box of .22 Smokeless Rim Fire Cartridges into my hand. It’s an old red and silver Union Metallic box that looks like something from the 1880’s, and knowing how cheap Daddy is, it might just be that.

“Right tree line, boy. Two o’clock.”

“Whaat … is it, Dad?”

“Sssshhh – Armadilla.”

We have Nine-Banded Armadillos in our part of Texas. I know because we studied them in school. Daddy, a true backwoods country boy, calls them *armadillas*. There is no way I am going to correct him and say O – armadillo – O – Dad. One time a spilled glass of milk at the dinner table almost cost me my left eye. No way am I going to interrupt his train of thought and question his intelligence. I only have one good eye left.

“Open the door. Sneak up on the hood.”

I do what I am told. Daddy puts his index finger up to his lips warning me to be quiet. I slowly open the door and climb out. He nods at me, reminding me to not spook the *armadilla*, so I gently and quietly close the door. I glance at Daddy. His stern face motivates me to continue moving forward. When I get to the front of the Fairlane I jump up onto the hood. The wetness glides me completely over to the other side of the Fairlane’s hood. I fall to the muddy ground below, but luckily I am able to hold the gun upright. When I spring back up I look at Daddy’s face. I can’t tell what he is thinking. He is somewhere between disgust and hysterical laughter. Embarrassment clouds my
mind as I try to knock the mud off of my tan jeans. I know if I don’t get the mud off Daddy won’t let me back in the car.

“Dammit, hurry up. He’s still sitting there.”

I climb back up on the hood of the Fairlane, this time lying flat on my stomach, stretched fully across the hood. My Remington is pointed in the direction of my target. With my good eye I line up my aim. I keep praying that the rising sun won’t blind my view. Or maybe I keep praying that it will blind my view. It does briefly as a bead of sweat runs down my forehead; I draw the small thick body of the armadillo into my gunsight. This poor little soldier of the forest sits in the clearing basking in the early sun, impervious to danger thinking he is protected by his layers of leathery hide. Another bead of sweat runs down my forehead and into my right eye. It burns and my eye blinks uncontrollably. My breathing turns to panting. My internal clock ticks thunder. I squeeze the trigger.

BLAM…

The acoustics of the two-sided canyon of pine trees makes the echo of the gunshot sound more like a .30-06 instead of a .22. My bullet penetrates the protective armor of the poor defenseless animal. He runs a couple of feet before falling with a thud. His armor does not protect him this day. Nothing does.

“Atta boy – you got ‘em, Son!”

Daddy is beaming from ear to ear. Finally I have done something he is proud of. I let out a cheer.

“Woohoo!”
Maybe the old man really does love me. As I peer across the open field to the tree line, I see the blood-splattered armadillo’s lifeless body. I feel numb. This unfortunate innocent animal’s death makes Daddy happy. And even though I am happy that Daddy is happy; my hands, my feet, my nose, and my ears feel the sting of frost-bitten cold.

I wonder if this is what a cold-blooded killer feels like.

The old man makes me sit on the hood of the car the rest of the way to the lake. I am the hood-ornament. Daddy watches me. I sit tall and proud.

BLAM… BLAM… BLAM…

Every quarter of a mile or so, Daddy pulls over and forces me to shoot more armadillas. I slaughter at least thirty on this momentous day. Blood and guts cover tree trunks and power poles. Their lifeless bodies discarded like old hubcaps. Daddy hoots and hollers all morning long. He is so proud of me. But I have a secret. I am sick to my stomach and on the verge of throwing up. I can’t let him know. I have to protect myself. As we head on down the road to the lake the old man grins at me and I smile with ambiguity. He stares at my reaction a little too long, penetrating my armor of deceit.

Does he know? Burning liquid from the back of my throat floods my nostrils.

The sun is coming up and now I am freezing.
Baptism

On Christmas day, a few days after my thirteenth birthday, I got to try my new Winchester single shot lever action .22 out in an isolated bay on Galveston Island. The cool, slender metal shaft and finely grained wooden stock felt good in my hands, even though the firing kick left a blue-n-black bruise on my young, tender right shoulder. Daddy laughed, and gently massaged my shoulder, telling me that manhood would bring on lots of bruised body parts and to get used to it. He smiled at me and said he was happy I was such a good shot, glad that he hadn’t wasted his money on this gift that he seemed so proud of. After all, this was not a broken down used gun from some old, retired hunter too elderly or too sick to hunt anymore, no sir, this was a brand spanking new model, fresh out of the factory. He seemed so proud and told anybody and everybody who would listen, how much he paid for it, a whole twenty six dollars, “Nuthin’s too good for my son,” he’d say.

Daddy was excited as he drove the whole family out from Houston in his two toned Chevy with white tuck-n-roll Naugahyde seats. He loved his Chevy, and was proud of it, too, having spent all morning washing, waxing, and polishing it. Unfortunately, my little brother, Buzzy dripped some strawberry ice cream on Daddy’s steering wheel and driver’s seat.

Daddy came unglued.

“Jesus H. Christ, Boy! What the hell is wrong with you?” He smacked Buzzy upside his straggly blond head. Buzzy let out a scream. His cries alerted the neighbors who immediately rushed to close their blinds.
“J. C., he’s only a baby.” Mama, a petite woman with soft dishwater blond hair, a small, turned-up nose, a dimpled chin, and a kind demeanor, spoke barely above a whisper.

“Hush, Woman! Don’t you talk back to me!” Daddy shot Mama The Look, his dark bushy brow wrinkled, black eyes glowering and glaring at you, like a mule with blinders ready to kick, or a prizefighter ready to unload a right uppercut to a helpless foe. The Look was an immediate attitude adjuster. If we saw The Look we knew we were in big trouble. It was our family secret.

Daddy slung Buzzy out of the Chevy, and onto the ground. Mama said nothing as she sheepishly picked Buzzy up, comforting him, drying his tears. Buzzy’s pain was Mama’s pain. I remember how sometimes I hated Daddy. I wondered why Mama didn’t hate him. Maybe it was because of church and her faith. Maybe that’s why when Daddy washed his Chevy that morning, Mama walked us to Sunday school. Maybe church was Mama’s escape.

Church was the same as usual. Slow. Tedious. Boring. After the main sermon Mama promised the pastor that we’d all get baptized next week. The preacher couldn’t believe that me at thirteen, Sassy at nine, Bing at six, and even Buzzy at three had avoided Baptism, especially with Papaw Luther, our grandpa, being an assistant pastor at The Church of Nazarene. But, Mama assured him that we would all get baptized right along with our baby sister, Poogie, the following week. The ushers slid by with the day’s offerings. The short stout pastor glanced at them, smiled smugly, and stroked his thin mustache. He gave blessings to parishioners, offering two-handed handshakes, and
occasional slaps on the back or shoulder. He always seemed to squeeze my hand a little too long.

After church, Mama marched us over to Malone’s Creamery on Fanning Street. Even though Daddy had her on a tight budget, Mama had put a little extra aside, and let me get three scoops of my favorite, chocolate fudge. Mama let my sister Sassy have chocolate fudge, too. Sassy, chubby-cherub-cheeked with long straight blonde hair, always had to have what I had. Of course she pouted because she only got one scoop. She pushed out her lower lip, trembling as it set on her small double chin, faking tears until Mama gave her a bite of Baby Poogie’s vanilla cone. Sassy glanced at me, and stuck her tongue out in defiance.

Bing, with big brown eyes and curly brown hair, lapped her pistachio cone in a slow methodical circle, grinning ear-to-ear between licks, showing off deep dimples. Buzzy, blue eyes framed by yellow eyebrows, and shaggy towhead blond hair, impatiently bit his strawberry cone from the top. The two of them grunted and giggled wickedly at each other, ice cream smeared on lips, cheeks, and noses. They snickered and guffawed like they had in church that morning, when the offering plates were handed to them by the church ushers, who then urged them to pass them on to the generous little old ladies wearing pill-box hats. Mama had bought Daddy his favorite too: Rocky Road in a cup. She didn’t get any for herself, and I realize how she sacrificed constantly for her children. No wonder Daddy always said Mama was a saint.

Mama really didn’t want to go to Galveston that day either, but she didn’t say anything, another sacrifice for her little lambs. My brother and sisters wanted to go; boy, did they want to go, happy to get out of our captive house, tired of being locked up,
isolated from our friends and our relatives. Daddy always said, “It’s for your protection,” whatever that meant. I thought at the time that maybe that was Daddy’s way of taking care of his family, but now I’m not so sure. I think it might have been his way of keeping control over his family. I wish I could give him the benefit of the doubt.

We drove past the “world’s first cloverleaf highway.” My brother and sisters giggled and laughed, a little overactive. Daddy had to pull over. He kept reminding us that “children need to be seen and not heard,” and that the purpose of this trip, was to “try out big brother’s new gun.” I remember thinking that even though I was a teenager, Daddy still treated me like a child.

For most of the day Daddy kept the gun in his possession. He acted more like it was his gun and not mine. I wasn’t gonna argue with him. Daddy was Daddy; he was going to do things his way and he’d be the first to tell you, “I got everything figured out and under control.”

Unfortunately, my old man got the Chevy’s tires stuck in the sand that day, back in one of Galveston’s isolated bays. I wondered if Daddy had that part figured out. Of course, he acted like he did. He decided he’d play the hero and walk the “ten or fifteen miles back to the nearest town to get us a tow truck.” Daddy must have thought I was pretty dumb for a thirteen-year-old. There was only one town on Galveston Island, and that was Galveston, less than four or five miles away. A restaurant and a bar were about two miles back, and although the sun was setting, I knew Daddy could make it in half an hour.
“Maggie May, you make sure these kids don’t get outta’ this car ‘til I get back, ya hear?” Daddy always called Mama by her nickname. Everyone else called her by her proper name, Mary.

“I will.”

Daddy grumbled something under his breath, and then turned to me. “Junior, you help your mama with the lil’ ones, ya hear?”

Daddy must have thought everyone in his family was hard of hearing.

“Okay, Pops.”

“What’d you say, Boy?”

“Uh…Yess-s-sir.” I stuttered slightly and changed my attitude immediately to the respect that he demanded. I didn’t want to see The Look.

“Well, all right then. Put your gun in the trunk.”

Whew! I dodged a bullet as I avoided Daddy’s glare.

After I placed my Winchester in the trunk, I climbed into the Chevy, and locked the doors. Mama sat in the driver seat with nine-month-old Baby Poogie, whose black hair was sweaty and matted from her afternoon nap on the short pink linen blanket she drug around with her everywhere. Mama was still nursing her, so the baby had to stay close. I jumped into the back seat with Buzzy, and Bing. Sassy sat in the front, shotgun position next to Mama. Daddy grabbed the old silver canteen he never shared with anyone. He took a long swig, and smacked his lips. He did that every time he drank from it. When we asked him what was in it, he’d laugh and call it his “holy water.” He always made sure he brought it with him on every trip. He wasn’t going to leave it behind that night. Looking back, I realize now that he probably couldn’t help himself. Eventually,
the old man’s “holy water” did him under, but that’s another story. Mama settled in with Baby Poogie, Daddy put on his coat, and left on foot, without kissing any of us goodbye. I guess he figured he’d be coming right back.

The sun sank below the horizon, and a gazillion glittering stars broke into the huge expansive black sky above. A biting breeze blew in from the open sea, and I remember the temperature dropping ten to fifteen degrees, as some ominous gray clouds stampeded across the sky like a herd of heifers. Buzzy and Bing excitedly rolled up windows to help block the stinging wind.

We settled in and then we…waited…and waited…and waited.

Eventually, Mama had me open the trunk and pull out two old blankets that we used for picnics on the sand. They were rough and scratchy, but they helped us keep warm as the temperature dropped even more. I glanced at my Winchester, and thought about firing it up into the sky, to maybe attract some rescuers, but I figured Daddy would probably get really sore at me if I did. So, after picking it up and rubbing smudges off the barrel, I put it back into the trunk. While out of the car I noticed that the tide had rolled in and the water’s edge was only about ten to fifteen feet from the Chevy. When Daddy left, the shoreline was about twice that far from the car.

“Mama, you think the water’ll rise anymore?”

“God not willing, Honey.”

Mama always called me Honey, an ingrained endearment that was hard for her to change. I always kind of liked it, even though I knew she called everyone Honey. I wasn’t sure she knew what I was asking, but I let it go. Baby Poogie and Buzzy were getting cranky, crying loudly, in unison at times, droning on like a sacred chant. Sassy
and Bing were punching each other, jumping back and forth between the front and back seats, just like they had done that morning in the church pews. Mama was doing her best, but I knew she didn’t know how to do The Look. That would have probably settled everyone down. Every time I tried The Look I failed miserably. The kids cried, and got crankier, crankier, and crankier. Christ! Where was Daddy when we needed him?

Three hours turned into four, four hours turned into five, five hours turned into eternity. I glanced out the car window. The tidewater was up to the edge of the Chevy.

“Mama, the water’s touchin’ our car. Think we should get out?”

“The Lord’ll take care of us, Junior.”

I couldn’t believe Mama was going to leave this one up to The Lord, but I was just a kid, a thirteen-year-old. What did I know? I knew she was afraid to disobey Daddy, but he wasn’t here. I decided to drop it for the time being.

After we munched on some soggy potato chips, Buzzy and Baby Poogie fell asleep around twelve o’clock. Sassy and Bing finally settled down, singing some school songs. The night was pitch-black, other than a few stars. The moon temporarily peeked through the brooding charcoal clouds overhead.

“The wheels on the bus go – round ‘n’ round – round ‘n’ round – round ‘n’ round.”

My Winchester was still in the trunk. I thought about asking Mama if I could get it out. I mean, what if some killer came up to us in the middle of the night, I could use it to protect us. Eventually, I figured it probably wouldn’t be a good thing to have a loaded gun in a car full of little kids, so I decided to drop that, too.
Everyone dozed off for a while. When I woke up, a big full moon had risen out over the bay. Shadows of moonlight, stars, and clouds temporarily glistened over the glassy water, peaceful, tranquil, and though more and more clouds were rolling in, I understood how a sailor could be lured to the sea. Hypnotized momentarily, I didn’t realize the tide had risen half way up our door.

“Holy shit!” I blurted out.

Mama hugged a stirring Baby Poogie and said nothing as she gently rocked back and forth. Light raindrops started hitting the windshield. Within seconds the raindrops became heavier and consistent. A sudden gust of wind let out a whistling howl.

“Mama!”

“What, Junior?”

“We need to do something.”

“Settle down, son. Jesus is gonna protect us.”

“Mama, I don’t think Jesus has seen how fast this tide’s a risin’.”

Buzzy started crying. Mama reached over and pulled him up next to her and the baby. She rocked both of them in a rhythmic pattern, singing and humming an old church song.

“Jesus loves me, yes I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

For a few minutes I didn’t know what to do. The rain started coming down in sheets. Mama continued to hum, sing and rock. I continued to watch the surging water rise. Within a few minutes the tide was up to the edge of the windows.

“Mama!” I screamed. “We gotta get out of this here car!”

“Junior, what has got into you?”

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“What has got into me? Dammit, Mama, we’re gonna drown!”

She looked at the water for the first time.

“Mama, I’m gittin’ these kids out of this car right now! If you wanna stay and let Jesus save you – then fine!”

Mama took a deep breath, closed her weary eyes, a single tear ran down her cheek, and with all her energy gone, simply nodded. I jumped into the front seat and opened the passenger door. The freezing seawater came rushing in, and each of the kids was pulled under the surging water. I was able to grab Bing immediately, and Sassy jumped on my back. Daddy always said I was big for my age, and at thirteen I was almost as big as an adult. Buzzy jumped into the backseat, up on top of the back window, safe for the time being.

I shouted back at him. “Buzzy! You stay right there ‘til I get back, ya hear?” He grinned at me like a little monkey with a secret, ready to pull a fast one on an unsuspecting victim of some silly game. Little did he know the danger we were in.

Mama was able get out of the car with Baby Poogie in her arms. I held her up with my right arm, guiding her through the downpour to a sand dune that rose above the now turbulent surf. I carried a bawling Bing with my left arm, she straddling my left hip. Sassy clung to my neck from behind, piggy-back-style. The steady rain fell, turning into a tumultuous downpour. I set the girls down on the hill next to Mama, and covered them with the two blankets to protect them somewhat from the rain. Sassy and Bing hugged each other and broke into tandem tears. I turned back, and headed to the Chevy for Buzzy.

“Buzzy!”
It was pitch-black, and cold. I could barely make out the Chevy’s shadow in the torrential onslaught. With the tide still rising, I worked my way back to the car and slid into the backseat. Buzzy wasn’t there.

“Buzzy!”

The water was up three-fourths of the way inside the automobile. I held my breath and dove into the car’s cabin, and as I did, I clipped the center console with my head. I blacked out momentarily. After resurfacing I cleared my head, and then eased back down under the icy water’s surface, methodically working my way along the floorboard, over the middle hump, to the driver’s side, feeling the diamond tuck-and-roll, working my way back to the passenger side. I searched the back window area. My fingers were starting to go numb from the freezing gulf water. I couldn’t find Buzzy anywhere. Panic set in. My head felt light. I blinked uncontrollably. Fearing I might pass out in the frigid water, I rose to the ceiling of the car gasping for air.

“Ahhhhh!!!”

When I did, I came face to face with a face.

It wasn’t Buzzy’s.

I wished I had my gun.

The face belonged to a stranger, a drifter, a beachcomber type with a full sandy streaked beard, bushy blond caterpillar eyebrows, a long thin nose, and black eyes, eyes wild and frightening. He wrinkled his brow, lowered his forehead and stared, glared really, eyes not blinking, glowering at me like a hungry shark eying an injured swimmer. It then dawned on me that this strange man, who had somehow crawled into Daddy’s half submerged Chevy during this storm, was doing The Look. I knew I was in trouble.
For a split second, as he and I stared into each other’s eyes, I remember thinking – *this crazy maniac is gonna kill me.*

Then, without warning, a huge powerful wave crashed through the Chevy’s open doors. I gasped for air between gulps of cold seawater. While fighting to survive, I lost hope, as my short thirteen-year-old life passed before my eyes. Drown or be killed, it didn’t matter. I finally surfaced, salt burning my eyes and nostrils. I realized he was gone. Then just as suddenly, and without warning, a small hand grasped my hand.

It was Buzzy.

I’ll never forget that night, watching the Chevy get swallowed up by the Gulf of Mexico. I remember seeing the trunk open and wondering how that had happened. Within a half an hour Daddy’s prized possession, disappeared completely. I had witnessed the magical power and strength of Mother Nature.

The thunderstorm lessened to a drizzle. A calm came over the bay. Sitting up on the sand hill with my family, I hugged a shivering Buzzy. We could have all drowned. Oddly, no one else in the family saw the stranger that night. He appeared, and then disappeared. My Winchester somehow ended up on shore, just feet from where our family was huddled. I’m glad I didn’t shoot the stranger, but if I had, I would have had evidence he was real.

The rest of the night and morning we grouped together on the knoll, wet and freezing. Eventually, the rain stopped completely, and the tide started rolling back out to sea. As the clouds lifted, I found the North Star in the skies. Mama said it was the Star of Bethlehem, and she immediately started singing church songs we all knew. After a
couple of moments Bing and Sassy joined in. Eventually Buzzy tried to join in, the best a three-year-old could. Baby Poogie nursed on our mother’s milk, watching contentedly.

I sat silent, numb to the world.

Daddy and a search party reached us about five in the morning, just as the sun started to rise. I remember he acted like he was some kind of hero, but he was drunk, had red lipstick smeared on his cheek and shirt tail, blood on his torn shirtsleeve. His coat was nowhere to be found. He still managed to give our whole family The Look as if it was our fault the tide came in, and swallowed his precious Chevy. As he wiped the lipstick from his cheek, he examined it, and shot another glance at his family. This time he tried to hide his guilt. Mama said nothing, but I felt her pain. I wondered if Jesus was still protecting her.

Without moving I gripped my wet Winchester and glared at my old man like sharks eyeing wounded prey.
Death of a Legend

In small town Texas during 1968, baseball is God.

Every beer joint, pool hall and country café in every small town is crammed with able-bodied cowboys, truckers and farm hands who relive tall stories about the big games of their past. They aren’t talking about the race riots in the northern cities, or the campus upheavals across the country, or even the drug-using hippies of the Haight-Ashbury. They aren’t talking about whether or not Viet Nam is a good war or a bad war, or about how many soldiers are coming home in coffins. The chant of, What are we fighting for? might be ringing out across the country, but not in Texas. The talk is always about the big game this week. Everybody will be there. The players will play their best. The fans will root their hardest. Everybody will talk about the play of the game. Every fan will talk about the best player. Every player will want to be the best player. Every best player will become a hero. Every hero will become a legend.

On this particular spring afternoon, Taft High School’s Armadillos are playing for The 1968 Southwestern High School League Championship. Balloons and banners announcing the game line the fence of the Armadillos’ finely-manicured baseball diamond. Mickey Roy Dunn, Jr., an intense, thick-barrel-chested youngster stands at bat. Mickey’s glad to be there, but his heart pounds at a rapid pace. The scoreboard reads two outs in the bottom of the tenth and Taft High trails three to four.

Brightly painted signs read T & A – ALL THE WAY. The Armadillo players eagerly stand on the steps of the dugout with Coach Ryan, a middle-aged favorite uncle of a man, watching their teammates struggle. One by one, the Armadillos turn their T&A hats around to the cry of RALLY. Coach Ryan puts in a plug of chew and yells. “Let’s do
it, Boys!”

B.J. Dickerson, an athletic pretty boy is on third base and Jimmy Blake Johnson, the team speedster is on second base. Mickey Roy digs in at home plate, pawing at his divot in the batters’ box. The count is two and two with two outs. Cindy Lou, a petite and very pretty teenaged girl, paces the first base fence line.

“You can do it, Baby!” she yells.

“Come on, Junior!” shouts B.J.

Mickey peers at the pitcher, a tall lanky southpaw, who throws hard with blazing speed. He reminds Mickey of “Sudden” Sam McDowell. Mickey tries to concentrate, but he keeps thinking about his government class from 5th period, and how Mrs. Hutcherson cried over the assassination of Bobby Kennedy two days before, and again that morning after the capture of James Earl Ray, Martin Luther King’s killer.

“Let’s go, Mick,” encourages Coach Ryan.

“See the ball, Junebug!” Jimmy Blake shouts from second base. “A little bingo, Kid!”

Mickey hears all the pleas, but he still can’t stop thinking about Mrs. Hutcherson. Her shameless passion ignited discussion in the classroom about JFK, Sirhan-Sirhan and Jack Ruby. Some students thought Jack Ruby, a Texan, was a justified hero for killing Sirhan. Mickey wasn’t sure.

Chuy Saenz, a behemoth teen of 6’5” and 290 pounds is in the on-deck circle swinging a bat fit with a hitting-donut, over his head. Chuy’s muscles bulge as he swings. “Hey, Pendejo?” Chuy grins. “You don’t get on – you’re taking my sister to the prom!” he guffaws.
The crowd howls. Mickey Roy stares at Chuy. A thin smile crosses his lips. He takes a deep breath and nods with determination.

Coach Ryan spits tobacco juice.

“Come on, Mick. Just a little contact!” he shouts out.

The opposing pitcher reaches back and throws. Mickey Roy closes his eyes and swings. BLAM!!! Mickey hits a line drive to the gap in right center. B. J. scores easily as Jimmy Blake rounds third and heads for home. The right fielder picks up the ball and lets go with a monstrous heave. Jimmy Blake and the ball arrive at the same time.

B.J. screams, “Slide! Slide!”

“Hit it, Cabron!” shouts Chuy.

Jimmy Blake tries to slide around the tag, swiping home plate with his left hand. The catcher lunges at Jimmy Blake, ball securely in his catcher’s mitt. The two of them collide in a cloud of dust. The crowd falls to silence, as the catcher turns to show the umpire he still has the ball. The umpire signals.

“Safe!” The crowd erupts into cheers. “Yes! Armadillos win! Armadillos win!”

Mickey Roy exuberantly runs into home and jumps onto the pile that includes Jimmy Blake and B.J. As they roll on the ground laughing, Mickey Roy looks up and grins at a stoic Chuy, who feigns indifference as he offers a hand to Mickey Roy.

“’Bout time you listened to me, Pussy.”

Mickey Roy bangs his muddy cleats on the blacktop before he tosses them over his left shoulder, along with his old canvas bat-and-ball bag. He smiles as he shakes hands with the various fans offering their adoration. Many of them call him hero.
Mickey chuckles. He thinks about how he didn’t feel much like a hero earlier in his social studies class when Mr. Bricker asked him “Mr. Dunn…what is the biggest threat to United States safety: Mao Tse-Tung and his cultural revolution, or, Fidel Castro and the Cuban-Missile-Crisis?” Mickey panicked thinking Bricker was asking a trick question as he blurted out, “The biggest threat to the U.S. is the military draft.” Some of the kids giggled, but Mr. Bricker didn’t see the humor and admonished Mickey in front of the whole class. Mickey felt humiliated then, but now the fans are slapping him with enthusiastic high fives.

Mickey politely peels away and heads toward his car. In the distance he sees Cindy Lou wearing his beige and orange letterman’s jacket leaning up against his ’65 Nova. He can see she is reading a letter. As he slowly ambles toward Cindy and the Nova, Armadillo fans continue to offer salutations. As Mickey approaches, he watches Cindy fold the piece of paper and put it into the jacket’s pocket. For a moment, Cindy smiles. Mickey appreciates her gentle beauty, the way her shiny brown hair usually falls softly onto her bare shoulders.

Mickey Roy opens the driver’s door and glances at Cindy. “Damn, I thought I’d never get away.” He unzips his bag and tosses it onto the back seat. He reaches over and rearranges his glove and his spikes before zipping it up again. He dusts the dirt off of his baseball pants before taking his T&A hat off. He slings it into the backseat. It lands on top of his blue and green ice chest.

Mickey unlocks the passenger door and Cindy Lou climbs in and quietly exhales, “Great game.”

Mickey opens the ice chest and pulls out a Royal Crown Cola. He fingers his
keys, which contain his church key. “Yeah, I guess so.” He grunts as he tries to force his bottle cap off. “Dang, I can’t get this cap off, my darn hands are so swollen.”

Cindy takes the bottle and his church key. “You’re my hero.” She gently opens the cola to his amazement.

Mickey responds with an uncomfortable chuckle. “I don’t feel much like a hero.” He takes a long draw on his soda pop, leaving about a third. He burps and then glances at Cindy. He does a double take. “Hey… have you been crying?”

Cindy breathes deeply before she responds, “I’ve got something to tell you.”

Mickey Roy looks at her and replies simply, “What?”

There is an awkward pause. Cindy Lou starts to tear up but doesn’t say anything. Mickey Roy is concerned, and he tries to find something to say.

“Cindy Lou, I’m sorry about last night.”

“It happens, you can’t hit it out of the park every time, now can you?”

“I guess not. I just...” Mickey can’t find the words. After a moment Cindy retorts. “I don’t hold you to blame, Junior,” she replies.

Mickey Roy searches, “You know…I love you—but I just don’t know if it’s the right time to get married or not.” He nervously takes another swig of his soda. “Look what’s happened to my cousin, Johnny and his family.”

“Well, then… when is the right time to get married?” Cindy asked.

“I dunno,” Mickey responds.

There is another long awkward pause as Mickey searches for the right words. Cindy fidgets with her keys. Mickey takes another sip of his RC. He finally figures out what he wants to say.
“Look, I really appreciate your daddy offering me the job at the hardware store and everything, but I’m getting a lot of pressure to go to college. I even thought about joining the army. Heck, I might even get drafted and sent to Viet Nam.” He takes his last gulp of pop. Finally Cindy responds.

“What do you want to do?”

“I dunno! I just know I gotta get out of this pit stop town somehow!”

Cindy stares at Mickey Roy for a moment, then, “You want out?”

“Yeah,” he responds with no energy.

“Does that include taking me?”

Mickey Roy doesn’t answer, he just sighs. Hurt, Cindy Lou throws her keys into her left hand and with her right hand she flings her door open.

“Oh, God,” Mickey knows he has crossed a line, even though he doesn’t understand how and by how much.

Cindy’s eyes tear up. Mickey recognizes her beauty and he feels sad. She jumps out of the Nova, takes Mickey’s coat off, throws it onto his seat. She pauses for a second and looks deep into Mickey’s empty eyes. After realizing the futility, she slams the door and runs off.

“Cindy!” Mickey shouts after her.

Cindy Lou doesn’t answer and continues running. Mickey Roy doesn’t go after her but he leans over to the passenger side and yells out the window.

“What’d I say?”

Mickey Roy peers out the windshield of the Nova deep in thought. He ponders being a hero today. He remembers the guys rolling on the ground laughing. He envisions
Chuy offering him a hand. He reflects upon Cindy Lou crying softly.

Suddenly the passenger door opens and Chuy gets in replacing Cindy Lou. He is sipping an Orange Crush in a thick glass bottle. He and Mickey Roy look at each other for a moment without saying a word. Finally Chuy asks.

“Did you tell her?”

“Yeah,” Mickey offers.

“Did she take it okay?” Chuy questions.

“I dunno – I guess so.”

“Well, good.” Chuy offers the bottle to Mickey Roy who takes a long swig without thinking and drains the bottle dry.

“Hey, Gordo!” Chuy fakes anger.

“I’m sorry Chuy. Leave me alone for a while, okay. I’ll pick you up later tonight.”

Without hesitation, Chuy reaches into the ice chest in Mickey Roy’s back seat and pulls out a Pepsi Cola. He pulls a church key off of Mickey Roy’s key chain dangling from the ignition, and opens the bottle. After taking a long drink, he opens the door to leave.

“Hey, I already put my sleeping bag in the trunk, Mi hijo. You better not get any ‘trunk gunk’ on it, Pussy, or your ass is grass.”

Lost in thought Mickey Roy nods as Chuy slams the car door and rambles away. After a moment Mickey Roy picks up his letterman jacket and starts to put it on. As he does he feels something in the pocket. He reaches in and pulls out Cindy Lou’s note. It reads.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brandy Ann Dunn</td>
<td>Johnny Will Dunn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becky Lynn Dunn</td>
<td>Roy Dean Dunn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jenny Sue Dunn</td>
<td>Billy Mack Dunn</td>
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<td>Ronnie Renee Dunn</td>
<td>Tyler Blake Dunn</td>
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<td>Donna Verdine Dunn</td>
<td>Stevie Ray Dunn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lucy Amber Dunn</td>
<td>Ricky Lee Dunn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet Carolyn Dunn</td>
<td>Mickey Roy Dunn, III</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mickey Roy throws the letterman’s jacket onto his back seat while keeping the letter in his left hand. He reads the names over and over. Suddenly Mr. Bricker and social studies jumps into Mickey’s head. He thinks about Chairman Mao’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and Castro’s Bay of Pigs dilemma and Nikita Khrushchev’s threat of nuclear war. He thinks about the Haight-Ashbury. He thinks about his cousin Johnny moving his family to Detroit, hoping for a better life. He thinks about Detroit’s changing economics, its poverty and its race riots. He thinks about the death of Malcolm X and the rise of The Black Panthers. He thinks about the on-campus anti-war demonstrations sweeping the nation. He thinks about civil rights marchers, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivering his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. He thinks about Johnny’s layoff from the Ford Motor Company. He thinks about soldiers dying in Viet Nam, not knowing that someday Jimmy Blake and B.J. will be among its casualties. He thinks about Sirhan-Sirhan shooting Bobby Kennedy. He thinks about James Earl Ray shooting Martin Luther King. He thinks about Lee Harvey Oswald shooting JFK.
He thinks about Jack Ruby. Is Jack Ruby the hero his classmates claimed he was? Mickey Roy realizes Jack Ruby is no hero. He thinks about Johnny having to move his family back home to Texas. For the moment Mickey Roy thinks about all the broken lives, all the broken promises, all the broken dreams.

“Hey, Mickey Roy!” an able-bodied cowboy with a longneck in hand, yells from a passing pick-up truck. “That was one helluva game today, boy.”

“Thanks, man,” Mickey answers quietly.

“Ya’ll gonna celebrate?” When Mickey doesn’t answer, the cowboy speaks up. “You do got a girl, don’t ya?” the cowboy snickers. Mickey Roy is blank. The cowboy continues, “Bubba, you gonna be one helluva livin’ legend,” as he clicks his beer on his side-view mirror, toasting the hero.

“Go Armadillos!!!”

He guns his motor and his pick-up truck spits loose gravel as he peels out.

“Yee haw!!!”

There is a funeral in Mickey Roy’s brain as an imaginary 40-ounce Louisville Slugger slams against his cerebral cortex. He doesn’t feel like a hero. He certainly doesn’t feel like a legend. Reality hits him right between the eyes like an errant fastball.

Baseball in small town Texas --- just doesn’t seem that important anymore.
Man Beaten By Eight Officers Caught on Film

AP – VENICE, California – A middle-aged family man who recently relocated his family to this bohemian beach community in California was apprehended and beaten in front of his house by eight police officers after he allegedly manhandled and bullied neighbors. It was also reported he beat his wife, his son, and five neighbors including a plumber and an ex-prize fighter. Police were called after paramedics were dispatched to service medical aide to three different individuals. The suspect then threatened officers before starting a scuffle that hospitalized three officers and the suspect. A concerned neighborhood advocate caught the whole altercation on film. The incident is under investigation.

Lately police cars have been cruising in and out of our neighborhood, around our block, and past our house like sharks circling an injured sea lion pup on a single chunk of rapidly melting ice. I wonder why? Could it be because of the New Year’s Eve fight Daddy had in the middle of the street with all the neighbors, and a whole squad of Venice’s finest officers? Or it could be because I’m dealing uppers, downers, weed, and acid to all the kids at Venice High School, especially the hot little young chickies who are willing to give it up for a chance at tripping to black lights and strobe lights, while grooving to the pounding guitar licks of Hendrix’ Voo Doo Chile, or the ticking
metronome of The Chambers Brothers’ *Time Will Come Today*, or the steady throbbing bass of the Iron Butterfly’s *Inna-Godda-Davida*? Or could it be because of the counterfit twenty dollar bills the Hells Angels have been circulating from the Venice Canals, down along the boardwalk, to Pacific Ocean Park and Santa Monica Pier, all the way to PCH and the Pacific Palisades? Or could it be because of the race riots, the unrest over in the ghost town section of Venice, black gangs, and Hispanic gangs fighting over street corners.

Or, maybe it’s just the cops doing the job that the voters pay them to do.

Daddy surely isn’t one of their favorites. After all they did beat him up out in the middle of the street, seven or eight of them, pounding on him with their batons. He held his ground for a couple of moments and even got the better of two or three of them. Having been a middleweight boxer in his early twenties and even though he was now middle aged, over two hundred pounds, and out-of-shape, Daddy could still pack a punch. Unfortunately, me and Mama were at the end of a lot of them. That particular night Daddy beat Mama up pretty bad for slow dancing with some neighbor who tried to feel her up. Daddy was a true mountain man, the jealous type, and he went berserk.

“Hey, what the hell do you think you’re doing with my wife?” my old man screamed at Jim Dvorkovik, a Polish plumber who used to fix our toilet and sinks for free.

“Jay, he weren’t doin’ nuthin’,” Mama jumped in.

“The hell he weren’t!” Daddy shouted.

“Relax,” the man relented. “We were just dancing.”

“Dancin’? I seen where you had your hand. You like that nice round ass of hers,
don’t you, pretty boy?”

Daddy called Jim pretty boy because of Jim’s good looks, and Daddy knew Mama had told Pilar Allanys, our next door neighbor and David, Jr.’s mother, that she thought Jim was good looking. I’m sure that really pissed Daddy off. Of course he was always pissed off, ever since my brother Bimmy died.

*One two three*
*What are we fighting for?*
*I don’t give a damn*
*Next stop is Vietnam*
*Five six seven eight*
*Open up the pearly gates*
*Be the first on your block*
*To have your boy*
*Come home in a box*

*Country Joe and the Fish*

The sun was warm that day, the red tide put a stench into the salt air, and I was thinking about how pissed off Daddy must have been. Every time I drifted off, Black Butchy Red jabbed me. He kept trying to pound into my head that I needed to *use* my brain.

“Listen, kid, all you got to do is go up to the counter and ask for a fifteen cent candy bar, a fucking Hershey with almonds, a Mars bar, Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup or whatever, it doesn’t matter. Give him the fucking twenty-dollar bill. He’ll give you the change, a full nineteen dollars and eighty-five cents. You give me fifteen dollars, and you keep the change. Easy enough?”

“Don’t you think they will want me to buy more than a fifteen cent candy bar?” I
ask Black Butchy Red. He glares at me.

“Hey, Junior, I don’t give a shit what you buy or how much you spend. Buy five, or six, or thirty-six candy bars for all I care. The deal is you get five bucks per twenty. Got it? If you want to buy shit for four and a half dollars, hey, that’s your fucking business. You’re just cutting into your own goddamn profit, man, not mine! Okay? Do the fucking math.”

Black Butchy Red could be so persuasive.

*Hey little brother, how you doing?*

*This fucking place is a fucking hellhole. These local gooks, all of 'em, are barbarians, actual, living savages. They live to fuck and fight. It's what they do. It's all they do. They got no respect for anything, not for their families, not for each other, not for themselves. They cling and claw at each other as a way of life. They play soccer with dead chickens, and force their four and five-year-old sons into human cockfights to defend the family honor. What the fuck? Remind you of some of the shit our old man used to pull? They make Daddy seem like a fucking amateur. These assholes are hardcore, roaming packs of savages, heartless beasts who feed on each other’s Neanderthalism, fucking jungle men with assault weapons. I’ve learned how to sleep with my eyes open.*

*Oh, and get this, Junior. They consider hygiene and indoor plumbing to be products of the devil. They’re still figuring out how to work a cigarette lighter. Talking to these idiots about improving their quality of life is like trying to teach a monkey how*
to hold a pen; eventually he just gets frustrated and sticks you in the eye with it.

OK, enough. I have to get back to my hole. Covering my tracks in the bush takes a lot of practice, but I'm really getting good at it. These fuckers will never catch me. One of the guys, Freddy, a soldier from Fresno, told me this Old Russian proverb: Pray to God, but keep rowing to shore. I’m rowing little brother, I’m rowing.

Love you,

Bimmy

P.S. Give mama a kiss for me, and stay out of trouble with the old man. When I get back I’m gonna turn you on to some really good shit I discovered over here.

Where was I? Oh, yeah, Black Butchy Red could be so persuasive. God was being persuasive too, commanding me like a captain mariner shouting out orders from his starboard perch.

I’m coming for you son, as soon as you clean the galley table, and give to Mable, whatever you are able, but make sure you finish your geometry homework after this creative fable. I wrote that. You’re a poet, and you know it, when you show it, hope you don’t blow it. Bob Dylan wrote that. Catch that stingray, kid, the one
that stung Buddy Benson and killed him last year in the breakwater off the Marina Del Rey beach, catch it before it kills Bimmy again, catch it before it turns into the Killer Bunny Rabbit that hops off...

hoppity hoppity hop...hop...hop...
hoppity hoppity hop...hop...hop...

I slowly open my heavy, scratchy eyes to waves of shadows and stucco grains on white ceiling. Black Butchy Red is a faded memory. I breathe deeply; close my eyes and drift back into my dream.

bop…bop…bop…knock…knock…knock…

“Huh?” My eyes open quickly.

Knock…knock…knock…

“Shit.”

The knocking continues as I suck in stale air, gathering my conscious thoughts. I glance at the clock sitting on the coffee table in front of the recliner I’d been sleeping on, next to the glass bong I inherited from my brother. I guess I could call it mine now that Bimmy’s dead.

The clock reads three a.m. My blue robe hangs open, my nakedness a reminder of the late hour. I pick the bong up and force it down between two throw pillows on the brown sectional, before throwing a third pillow on top. I pull my robe closed, and tie the belt as I hobble to the poolside door. I fumble with the lock.

Knock…knock…knock…

“Hold on!”
I open my folk’s pool house door just wide enough to see who’s banging on it at this ungodly hour. Two huge brown eyes look up at me. Big, full, pouty lips follow as a sexy little brunette named Layla forces the door open just enough to scuttle in. She reaches up, grabs my full head of hair, and offers her tongue, soft and wet, as she gently nibbles on my lower lip. She then parts the front of my robe, slides her hands around my naked waist, cups both butt cheeks, squeezing them while pulling me to her bosom.

I forget her name for a second.

“Hi.” She huskily whispers.

“Hey.”

She purrs like a panther. “Miss me?”

“Yeah...” I mutter back to her as I kiss her deeply, and caress swollen breasts under a see through white cotton blouse. Her nipples respond and stand erect.

She queries me, “You got any Lilly F-40’s?

“I don’t know,” I toy with her.

“I’ll make it worth your time,” she counters. I smile, reach over and put my Hendrix’ *Are You Experienced?* album on the stereo.

*Foxy Lady* blasts away on the phonograph. I glance at Layla’s teeth when she looks up at me, smiling slyly. The black light makes her teeth appear whiter than they really are. I smile back knowing my teeth probably look whiter, too. The strobe light flicks, in rhythm, but somehow seems out of control. My head swims in circles as I try to remember if I have anything to trade Layla. She doesn’t seem to be in any hurry.

For some reason I am still buzzed from what I smoked in Bimmy’s bong. I start thinking about how Pilar Allanys told her husband David that Mama thought Jim, the
Polish plumber was good looking, and David then in turn, told Woody’s dad, Woody Woods, Sr., who told Mr. Kim at the corner store, who told Lewis, the neighborhood gossip, who told my old man during one of their weekly card games. Daddy told Lewis to mind his own business, before he punched him, and broke his nose. What a way to end a card game.

I know that pissed the old man off. Throw the New Year’s slow dancing incident on top of it, yeah, Daddy went crazy. He punched Jim four or five times before Jim turned and ran, and when Mama tried to calm Daddy down, he slapped her. David, Sr., an ex-boxer himself, tried to step in and set things straight, but Daddy knocked him out with one punch. Woody Woods ran to close and lock his door. He didn’t want anything to do with Daddy. And, Lewis, well, let’s just say he disappeared behind drawn curtains and iron gates.

The old man grabbed Mama and started driving her head into the rock garden, inflicting multiple gashes into her hairline. Blood gushed out in spurts and completely drenched Mama’s blond hair, turning it a wet, bright crimson. I jumped in and Daddy hit me so hard in the stomach that he knocked the wind out of me. I fell to the ground and struggled to breathe for about five minutes. We’re not sure who, but someone called the cops, and once they came, that was the end of Daddy for the night. At some point the cops were talking to him and all of a sudden, he lunged at one of the officers and the cop went down like a felled redwood, Daddy on top of him. Three other policemen drew their clubs and started pounding on his back. He then reached around and tackled two of them at the same time, sending them sprawling backwards. Four more cops brandished their billy clubs, and the eight of them started hitting Daddy on the top of his head, in the
face, in his ribs, on his legs, his neck, his back. They were relentless. The old man got a few punches in, but they beat him mercilessly. Mama stood there, a bloody mess, screaming the whole time. I looked at her, then at Daddy. I didn’t know which one was a bloodier mess, him or her.

A middle aged Hispanic man sells cucumber and mango slices out of his small red and white cart on the corner of Broadway and Electric Avenue, about two blocks from where a young black teen was wounded the week before, after a confrontation with a gang of cholos. The vendor’s faded red umbrella shades him from the sun as it beats down between puffy white clouds. The man has a small radio tuned to a Mexican Tejanos station. The music competes with a gentle breeze, which rustles the dry leaves in the jacaranda trees that line the street. He smiles and hums along with the music.

A group of five black teenagers with big Afro hairdos come strutting around the corner. A couple have pitchfork combs stuck into their Afros, while the others wear Dodger caps turned backwards, bright blue jerseys with bright white numbers on them, baggy blue jeans, white smiley tennis shoes, and thick ropes of gold and silver around their necks. Each one has a blue hanky hanging out of his right rear pocket. They approach the vendor who shields the sun from his eyes with his left hand. The tallest teen leans down to the man.

“Hey Dude, pack your shit and move it.” The man looks perplexed. The thug looks to his gang members, and then back at the man. He raises his voice to stress his importance.
“I said, beat it!”

The man rises, shaking his head.

“No comprende.” He speaks softly.

The gang members mumble amongst themselves. The leader pauses, and then snickers as the man gently adjusts a picture of his wife and two small children on his cart window.

“No what?” The leader lets out a loud chortle.

“Let me compendia’ for you, Hee-zuus!” The gangbanger reaches into his waistband and pulls out a .22 caliber handgun, a Saturday night special. His companions smirk, encouraging him. He points the gun at the innocent family man’s head. The gang leader grins and licks his lips.

“Adios, brother.”

The man whimpers slightly as he squares, ready to meet his fate.

Daddy is a bloody pulp when he finally collapses unconscious from the baton beating. There would be no local gang of middle-aged men to save him or take revenge for him, no one to champion his cause for his neighborhood, or champion the rights of his people. There would be no clergyman to beg for saving his soul. There would be no riots of protest. No riots of conformity. No marches for hope. At first we think he is dead. Two officers draw their guns, just to be safe.

Mama screams. “Jay!” She cries, tears intermingle with blood, as they drag my moaning father away as he regains consciousness.

“Jay!”
“Bail me out, Baby!” He counters, his eyes peer through red rivers of soaked hair, mixed with blood, sweat, and Mama’s tears. Steam escapes through his eyes, nose, and mouth. More steam escapes from the nape of his exposed neck, as the policemen lead him, handcuffed to their waiting patrol car. His once clean white shirt is filthy, dominated by a mixture of red and black.

“I will,” she answers obediently, although she is unrecognizable, both eyes slits almost swollen shut, abrasions on her forehead and chin, lacerations under both eyes, nose blooded, hair crimson red.

“I love you!”

“I love you, too!”

Time stands still. The two of them make me sick. Not because of the way they look. But, because of who they are. The cops listen, glance at each other, then me, and then back at each other. They just shake their heads side to side, black eyes glaring, just like the circling, cruising sharks they are.

My next-door neighbor seventeen-year-old David Allanys, Jr. pulls up in his cherry red ’63 Chevy Impala. He revs his .327cc motor, Glasspacks exploding, just to let me know he’s there. His car rumbles and shakes the ground. Some little blonde bombshell sticks her head out his driver window, resting her breasts on David, who sits behind the steering wheel, grinning. After throwing her head back, golden hair bouncing on soft shoulders, she pushes her sunglasses down to the tip of her nose, and shoots a toothy smile directly at me. She then turns, and flips a peace sign to the cops. I’ve never seen her before, but I’m intrigued. I wonder if she likes Lilly F-40’s.

David gives me the old navy salute to signal me to meet them in my pool house.
I can’t wait to watch his little blonde squeeze take a hit on Bimmy’s bong while tripping to Gracie Slick and The Jefferson Airplane. But I want the tide to calm before heading back to shore. So, I decide to wait a few minutes. I also decide not to tell David that my dad knocked his dad out. He probably wouldn’t give a shit anyway, but you never can tell.

*Pray to God, but keep rowing to shore.*

*I’m rowing little brother, I’m rowing.*

For some reason, I start thinking about Bimmy. How good he looked in his uniform. I miss him. He was the only one who told me the truth. I’ve decided I don’t want to be a fighter like my old man. No, I want to be a lover. I think Bimmy would have approved.

I pull out a Hershey bar and take a bite. It doesn’t taste like bait. The cops watch me like chum in water, and I wait for them to blink.
The Killing Chant

The strangest shithead I ever met was Sanchez who was born with two flippers, literally, two little fleshy colored nubs sticking out of the side of his torso. I didn’t know he had them until years later, but I knew the fucking kid had a problem from day one. Every time I saw him he was crying or whining.

“Whaaaaa! Whaaaaa! Whaaaaa!”

I remember asking his mom, “What the fuck is wrong with this little shit?”


“Leave him alone? His asshole whining is annoying the hell out of everyone. Half the guys in the motorcycle club want to kick the shit out of him.”

She rolled her eyes at me and then whisked him away to their little yellow cottage over on Holland Canal. I kicked down my kickstand, locked my steering, and opened a beer to settle my nerves and clear my head.

The killing chant reverberates, echoing in my head. “kill…kill…kill…” A pain shoots from my left temple to my right temple, and then back again. “kill…kill…kill…” My head throbs. I stare at Sanchez. Pimples and a thin wispy moustache surround his shit-eating grin. His eyes sparkle and dart, thoughts bouncing inside his head like a pinball machine, or maybe like some degenerate-dope-fiend-wino waiting for a handout in front of a rundown liquor store. I can see he is thinking of some complaint to bitch or whine to me about, something that no doubt bugs the shit out of him.

“Kill…kill… kill… the mother-fucker!”

I want to kill him! God dammit!
I want to kill that fucking whiney little zit-faced punk. Yeah, I want to kill him, him and his stiff, little flippers, his fucking secret stiff little flippers. That would probably ease my pain, and cure my headache. Oh, I’d like nothing better than to shoot him, or stab him, and then cut those fucking flippers off and throw them into the fucking deep fry. Then I’d put those two crispy little flippers on a bun, add onions, pickles, tomatoes, and mustard before serving them to the next asshole who wants change for a $100 bill.

But, you see, I know what’ll happen if I do kill this prick. I’ll go back to prison. I will be alone, but I’m already alone. Alone for years, stuck, stuck in a world of dead end jobs, stuck in a world of isolation, stuck within my own throbbing head.

Contained.

Restrained.

Enclosed.

Stuck in a world of nothingness, a world of inside the inside, like a Russian nesting egg, void of anything connecting me to other people, leaving me void of human touch and the ability to find love. Shit, even Sanchez with his fucking flippers has a girlfriend.

Fuck him! And his flippers!

Okay, you know what I really want? I want a tank full of gas, rubber on the road, wind in my hair, a bike constantly in fourth gear, bad memories in my rear view mirror, and a shit-ass perfect tattoo to fulfill some hot little groupie’s dream for the night. Or, maybe, I’d just like to find a little town in middle America to lay down some roots, where I can rest my tired aching ass after a long ride on the highway, a place I can call
home. Maybe I’d settle for a good woman whose bed I can park my shoes under for longer than a night, shorter than a lifetime, one willing to accept me for what I am, and not for what I earn or what I own, no judgment, no criticism. Maybe then, I would find some relief. Maybe then I would stop frantically searching for humanity. Maybe then I would be able to end this never-ending pain in my ass, and this never-ending pain in my pulsating frontal lobe.

Sanchez burps. I stare at him. I decide if he opens his fucking mouth with anything even remotely resembling whining, I’ll do it. I’ll just kill the prick and move on. I drift back, thinking about what had happened earlier at the Dixie Dogs’ front window.

There were three of them, one had a gun, and the other two were voices in the shadows. The voices echoed loudly.

“Don’t shoot him, man!”

“Kill the mother-fucker!”

Things really got serious when the third dude shoved the cold steel plated gun into my face, and threatened to shoot my pale white ass. Add those two background voices arguing over whether I lived or died, I wanted to make sure I savored the moment. That’s when I realized that all life was made up of moments; moments of fear, moments of hate, moments of regret. For instance, my second biggest regret was that I didn’t get to know Sanchez better, so that maybe I could have latched onto the one thing that would have allowed me to feel his humanity, and maybe have avoided that whole damn robbery situation. But, once those two background voices grew louder, and the gunman started to lose his cool, I figured that I would never get to see flipper boy
Sanchez again.

I come back to the present moment. Sanchez is bent over, tying his shoes. I look at the top of his head. His dark hair is matted, and greasy, like he hadn’t shampooed it in at least a couple of weeks. Again, I wonder how in the world did he ever get a chick? He straightens up, and finishes buttoning the front of his shirt, before yanking his shirttail out. For some reason, and I don’t know why, for some reason I smile through the pain as I watch him trying to hide his flippers. *Those fucking flippers.* My goddamn head feels like it’s ready to explode, my headache at level ten on a scale of one to ten, ten being the worst.

FUCK!

This is killing me. I have to do something to relieve this pain. Doctors say there are many solutions to curing a headache, including decapitation. I need to find one.

What can I say about Sanchez? He was always a whining geek. The first time I saw him, as I stated earlier, was when he was a baby but then I didn’t see him again until after he turned eleven. He had become the stepson of Mad Melvin, a Nazi-Low-rider from Culver City that I used to ride with and buy speed from. Now five years later, Sanchez was almost grown up, a full six feet tall. It surprised me a little bit when he came to work at Dixie Dogs. He was a kid who was the product of various bohemians, beatniks, hippies, and bad boys from the Venice Canals of Southern Cali, and he had grown a wispy little mustache that only a future serial killer or an IRS agent might wear. Step-dad Mad Melvin was a big dude who used to beat Sanchez and his mom before splitting and leaving them for long periods of time. Mom was a doe-eyed mulatto with
pearly white teeth from the Caribbean, one who passed for being white. Somehow they both survived and the kid had now reached high school age.

Sanchez was born normal looking, too, except for those two small flippers he had coming out of both sides of his torso. He kept them a secret, and the only reason I knew about them was because I walked in on him, when he was changing from his own nasty pig-shit-colored t-shirt to our starch-white Dixie Dog button-up with the southern flag serving as a front pocket. Two little flippers laid limply by his side. When he realized I was staring at them, his face turned red, his breathing became labored, and his ears and flippers started wiggling back and forth furiously, as he did a manic version of the Curly Shuffle.

“Hey, relax, man, I really don’t give a shit.”

He settled down, and even though we never talked about it again, his flippers haunted me for the rest of the week.

Sanchez’s blood father was a geeky Middle Eastern cat, black hair, and very Caucasian white in appearance, just like Sanchez. In fact, Sanchez was so white; you couldn’t even tell he had any Negro blood in him. That had been a good thing for Sanchez, because step Dad Mad Melvin was a frequent visitor to the state penitentiary where he had developed a secret meanness for blacks that clung to him almost like a smell. Melvin and I used to be in the same chapter of the Brotherhood, before my parole officer told me to “Drop out or go back to the joint.” So, I tried to go straight for a while. I took the extended fork off my hog, stopped wearing colors, stopped hanging with guys like Melvin, and took a leave of absence from my club. I became such a goody-two-shoes I couldn’t stand myself. Now, there’s the fucking power of prison.
During Mad Melvin’s many jail house vacations, Sanchez had lots of *uncles*, some white, some black. His mom referred to them simply as *the dawgs*. Sanchez said they all seemed like the same person, indistinguishable. I think she dated the *black dawgs* just to piss Mad Melvin off. Melvin hated blacks, and he bragged he’d “killed a couple of niggers” during the Watts’ Riots. Mad Melvin was an asshole who bragged a lot, so nobody knew what to believe, or what not to believe. Sanchez’s mom never stood up to Melvin about that shit either. I guess she didn’t want to get her head bashed in, even though she and Melvin had what were known as fights of the century. She’d spring forward and sail through the air, she had hawk like wings, landing on Mad Melvin’s broad back, her fingers scratching and clutching at his throat.

None of Sanchez’s *uncles* stayed long, and all of them abused Sanchez in some way or another. I heard that early on, one of them, Milky Lee Brown, a militant Black Panther type, even got arrested for forcing the then ten-year-old Sanchez to fondle him while driving through a Church’s Chicken drive-through. The plump, pimple-faced-white-girl, who worked the window, and wore a nun’s habit for a uniform, was shocked when she saw Milky’s large, black cock gripped by little Sanchez’s small pale pink hand. Sanchez was crying, but he told the cops that he liked his Uncle Milky *dawg*, respected his National Whitey Suicide Day, and always obeyed him. I wondered if Milky knew about Sanchez’ flippers.

Anyway, Milky got arrested and sent back to prison, where as a young black man, he felt most comfortable anyway. He got thrown onto a roadside renovation chain gang that included the habitually departed Mad Melvin. Sanchez’s mom must have laughed her mulatto ass off when she heard that two of her abusers, the Black Panther
and the Aryan Racist were shackled, and forced to work together in the hot sun.

Sometimes the penal system does serve up justice.

Like I said, Sanchez was the new guy at Dixie Dogs, had been there about a week or so, and he fucking complained constantly. He literally whined like a little bitch – a little bitch with flippers. Like I also said before, somehow he was able to get a girlfriend, too. Norma wasn’t that bad looking. Nice, firm little tits, big beefy ass, and $1,000,000 legs. I couldn’t figure out what the hell she saw in Sanchez. They had a few similar interests, but mostly they just complained constantly to each other, whining about fucking Viet Nam or race riots, or Nixon or some fucking hippy dickheads in San Francisco. I imagined that they whined and complained to each other all night long.

Well, my evening shift at Dixie Dogs was turning into a nightmare. Old Woman Wang, the owner, an overbearing four-foot-ten-inch-bitch-on-wheels-with-an-attitude, had me scheduled to finally train Sanchez for the night shift. Even though I was the night manager, I felt more like a god damn babysitter, but I was the only one that Wang let know where she kept her gun. Wang made me wear a little paper hat, a bow tie, and long sleeves to cover my tattoos. I had to keep my beard trimmed, my hair up in a ponytail.

I think Wang got off on my tattoos, but she insisted, “Dey bad for bizness.”

I wanted to tell her “go fuck yourself,” but I knew she would call my P.O. No way was I going back to prison, and I needed a job to make my Harley payment, so, instead I just shut my trap, and smiled at the old zipper-faced-broad.

After Wang left, I nibbled on a Yellow Mustard Dog with red onions, and had a cup of Commie Coffee. Sanchez snorted as he gulped down three Naked Dang D’nang
Dogs smothered in American cheese, and our secret special sauce, Killer Kitchen Katsup. I ignored his gulping, gasping, groaning, and eventual belching, and even though I felt a headache coming on, I went through the mechanics of showing the fucking moron how to use both cash registers, the front cash register and the back cash register, which was for the drive through customers, and hidden behind the milk shake machine. Then I showed him how to clean the grill, empty the steamer, refrigerate the unused dogs, rewrap the unused buns, and how to fill the mustard and catsup bottles. I showed him how to prep the cheese, onions, and tomatoes for the next morning’s shift, and I showed him how to empty the hot grease from the fryer. Then I made sure we had just enough dogs and coffee left to sell to the last minute crowd that stopped by after the bars closed. The only thing left to do was sweep, mop and clean the shake machine. My head was throbbing and Sanchez was really getting on my nerves with all of his bitching.


“Shut the fuck up!” I shouted to relieve my pain. “Look Man, just take out the trash, okay?” I took a deep breath, disgust escaping through clinched teeth.

A wounded Sanchez looked like the clichéd deer in headlights. He dragged the trash, shuffling across the parking lot, head hung low like a dog that had just gotten a verbal thrashing for taking a shit in the house. I kind of felt sorry for him. I closed my eyes and shook my head side to side to relieve my tightness. Sanchez returned with the empty trashcan, his eyes avoided my gaze. I sighed.

“I’ll finish the shake machine myself. Go on, go call your chick, man.”

Sanchez jumped for joy as he tripped over his own feet rushing to get to the back
room. You would have thought fucking Elvis was coming to town. He was so excited that he could call someone he could bitch, moan, cry, complain and whine to who wouldn’t put him in his god damn place. His enthusiasm was sickening. My headache was killing me, but… I’ll bet his flippers were becoming erect.

*Those fucking flippers!*

After a few minutes of quiet, my nerves started to settle down and my headache seemed a little better. It looked like the bar crowd was going to pass us by that evening. It was two a.m. straight up. I turned to flip the overhead lights out when out of the corner of my eye I saw three silhouetted customers, no doubt bar hopping *dawgs*, slink up to the front window. One was a big dude, the other two were twins with beady eyes.

“Can I help you?” I politely asked.

“One coffee.” The biggest of them mumbled avoiding my eyes. He wore a gray tweed cap pulled down over a nappy head of black hair barely above his ebony eyes.

“Cream and sugar?”

“Black.”

I turned and poured one black coffee for the trinity of strangers.

When I turned back around with the coffee, the big guy shoved the biggest handgun I had ever seen in my fucking life through the window, and firmly pressed the cold steel barrel against my exposed right nostril. He threw a dark, dingy burlap sack onto the counter.

“Fill the bag up, mother-fucker!”

I did my own version of clichéd deer in headlights. I recognized this dude as a lifer type. I knew he meant business.
“Hurry up, or I’ll blast hole in your white ass!”

While admiring his poetry, I opened the cash register and filled the bag. The gunman increased the pressure of the gun barrel. I was concerned he might blast my nasal passages all the way across the street to Mickey D’s. In the background, the twins started pacing back and forth very quickly.

“Don’t shoot him, man!”

“Kill ‘em, man! Kill the mother-fucker!”

I slid the burlap gunnysack across the counter toward the gunman. He glanced into the bag, and then his eyes darted to mine. He glared.

“That’s it?”

I nodded as I tugged at my long sleeve shirt. I knew that if he saw my swastika, I would be one dead fucking white guy. I said nothing about the second cash register. Dumb assholes didn’t do their homework. The gunman put his thumb on the gun’s hammer. I gulped. He leaned into me, nose to nose, gun under my chin. He grinned a wicked smirk, and whispered.

“See ya, cracker.”

He cocked the gun. The twins chanted. I only heard one of them.

“Kill the mother-fucker!”

Time stood still. I closed my eyes, ready to meet my fate. Was this going to be my last night at Dixie Dogs? Was this going to be my last night… period? I realized Sanchez was in the back room, on the phone probably whining, bitching and moaning to Norma. I thought I probably would never see him or his fucking flippers ever again.

It got very quiet.
When I opened my eyes…they were gone. The twins’ pleading kept ringing in my head.

“Don’t shoot him, man!”

“Kill the mother-fucker!”

KILL THE MOTHER-FUCKER???

Whoa!!! What the fuck was I thinking? I had one of those moments. A moment of

Why had I not given up the back cash register? Was I trying to be company man? Was I trying to be a hero? Did I have a death wish? Was I just plain stupid? My eyes felt like they were ready to explode.

Sanchez is complaining on the phone to Norma when I hurry into the back room, something about equal rights for the handicapped. He has his feet propped up on the accountant’s desk, and the stale stench in the air tells me he’s been farting in the small office. His shirt is unbuttoned and he jumps up, buttoning it quickly. I know he’s probably been playing with his flippers.

“Get off the phone, Sanchez. We’ve just been robbed.”

“What? Holy shit, Norma! I’ve gotta go! Junior’s just been robbed! Crissakes, we’re probably gonna be here all night now. The cops are gonna come. They’re gonna have to question us. We’re gonna have to fill out paper work. This sucks!” Sanchez cups the phone. “Hey, Junior, you think Old Lady Wang will pay us overtime?”

It hits me like the proverbial ton of bricks. I now know why I didn’t open the back register. I was stalling, hoping Sanchez would come out, and the gunman would shoot his ass. Sure, the gunman would have been a reasonable guy. He would have
recognized Sanchez for what he is, a fucking guy lacking humanity. Sanchez is that fucking guy every killer kills because he fucking deserves it.

And – he has those flippers...those fucking flippers.

Hot blood rushes through my temples and forehead. Maybe I just wanted the gunman to shoot my ass. That way I would never, ever have to listen to Sanchez whine, bitch, or complain again. And I would never ever have to think about his flappable floppy flippers again. That twin who kept pleading, “Don’t shoot him, man!” may have saved my life, but I’m not sure that was what I wanted. “Kill the mother-fucker!” That other twin’s plea should have sealed my fate.

I continue staring at Sanchez, who babbles while searching for some blank time cards. His chatter is incessant, squeaking like sneakers on a brand new gymnasium floor.

“Shit yeah, overtime baby, yeah!”

He sings.

“I’m gonna buy me a Cadillac, buy me a Cadillac.”

I close my eyes, trying to block out his voice. I take a deep breath, clinch my teeth, tighten my lips, and exhale through my nose. My pounding headache is worse than ever. Flipper boy grins, oblivious to my pain, oblivious to any danger. He snorts.

“Shit, Junior, ain’t this a bitch?”

He chuckles, “Haw!” then sings.

“Gonna buy me a house on a hill.”

Slaps his thigh, “Yeah!” and continues.

“Buy me a house on a hill.”
I watch, more glare than stare, as Sanchez sings with his twangy voice, and unconsciously strokes his flippers under his shirt. The synapses of my brain are ready to fire missiles. I can’t go on living in this moment, waiting for the throbbing pain to subside.

Sanchez’s whiney voice drones on, I glance at his starch-white Dixie Dogs shirt imagining how underneath it are his disgusting flaccidly limp little flippers. I wonder if they are getting stiff with all his crooning, caressing, and moaning.

*Those fucking flippers!*

My head explodes, hot blood firing in every direction within my cranium.

I know the cops aren’t going to be here for at least another ten minutes. I realize that this is one of those moments, my moment. Only one thing will alleviate my pain. I will finally get relief. I will finally find peace. I glance at Sanchez. His shit-eating grin overpowers his pimples and his serial-killer moustache. I open the desk drawer where Wang keeps her gun. I pick it up. It feels right. It feels like it belongs in my hand.

Sanchez sings and the killing chant rings soundly in my ears.
Swimming Upstream

“Without struggle there is no recovery.”
Frederick Douglass

A single black crow flies overhead and caws, creating a syncopated rhythm worthy of the symphonic dirge of the day. Wind gusts down a hollow canyon sending small ripples across the slow moving river bend to their eventual destination on a far bank where they disappear. Red and pink salmon, with thousands of unfertilized eggs, struggle against the current, swimming upstream to their final spawning ground. I sit cross-legged on the wooden swing bridge, swaying back and forth over the shallows of the Jedediah Smith River in California’s redwood forest.

A squeal from my six year-old alerts me. Ryan runs along the tree lined shore throwing red chinaberrries into the water for a family of ducks. He cheers each time one of the waterfowl catches a crimson berry in mid-air. I smile. There is a large hooded drake, and a smaller spotted brown-beige hen followed closely by twelve little chicks dressed in dirty charcoal-brown-beige down plumage. They bob up and down on the tiny swells in the water squeezing, jostling, and jumping over each other in attempts to capture the small berry prizes, often leading to temporary conflict. Their outbursts of “Quack!” are occasionally calmed when Ryan hurls a bull’s-eye into one of their open bills. Ryan snorts and smiles. He waves to me. I watch his laughing eyes, his little boy smile. His soft blond locks fly in the wind as he skips and darts along the shoreline in the warm sunshine. He mumbles to himself as he climbs over a downed sequoia at the river edge.
Need a cold beer, I rise from the bridge and glance at Ryan and the ducks before unzipping my khaki fishing vest. I cross to an old white ice chest Daddy gave me after he bought his motor home last year. Mama and Daddy spend about four to six months a year on the road. The old man still has that restless, rambling, roving spirit that’s kept him and Mama moving from town to town, county to county, state to state. I am surprised Mama has stayed with Daddy all these years, especially after everything he’s put her through. Mama’d be the first one to tell you that the lord got her through. Maybe she’s been right all along.

They call me when they are up in Montana or Minnesota, or one of those god-awful cold states starting with “M.” Daddy tells me about all the fish they’ve been catching; sturgeon, walleye, Chinook salmon. He always asks me if I’m catching any. Of course sometimes I embellish, that’s what fish stories are about. I might tell him that I caught four crappies, two small-mouth bass, a whole boodle of bluegill and a six-pound striper. All lies.

I am very careful to pick fish indigenous to the lake or river I am fishing. Daddy spent many hours trying to teach me about the small mouth bass we would catch in the Kentucky River and catfish in the Mississippi. He also taught me about flounder and red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as trout in the streams of the Sierras, and butter-mouthed-perch and halibut of the Pacific Ocean. The old man knows his fish and if he catches me in a lie he will give me hell. I know deep down he loves me, but in so many ways I’m still his little boy, the little boy who never lived up to expectations, the son who never manned up in his old man’s eyes, the one who was soft and sensitive, the kid who was a total disappointment. Even after all these years, no matter what I do, he won’t
change his point of view. Daddy is stubborn and hardheaded. In some ways, he’s just like the salmon fighting to swim upstream. Eventually, like them, he will die. But, when he does, the old man will have to do it his way, and he’ll continue struggling and fighting to his last breath. He argues with me, just so we can be angry at each other. I lie about the fish, just to even the score.

The jarring power of a jackhammer outside my office window jolts me awake. Miss Tyler, my new secretary, stands before my desk. She has her pen and pad in hand. She lays the morning paper and daily briefs from upstairs on my desk. She is a pleasant young woman, not bad looking, rather handsome looking in a business way; she is punctual and thorough. She wears a black form fitted skirt, black high heels and a short sleeved red sweater with a large cream-colored “K” high on the left breast. I ask her to make us coffee, and she agrees with a smile. I reach into my desk and pull out my daily calendar. The jackhammer stops momentarily. I gather my thoughts and smile, reminded of the pounding pitter-patter of Ryan and Kyle’s feet running through the house last winter with our two dogs in hot pursuit.

The jackhammer startles me, bringing me back to the present moment I keep trying to escape. Miss Tyler reenters with coffee on a sliver tray. She has two large porcelain cups, sugar, sweeteners and a silver container with cream. I wonder if she already knows I like my coffee very blonde. It’s the way I learned to drink coffee with my grandfather back on his farm in White Lick, Kentucky. Papaw said it was a southern thing, to like our coffee blonde, sweet, and hot. I smile at the memory and stare at Miss
Tyler’s “K” as she fills my cup with coffee. She notices and tells me her nickname is Kitty.

Last year the boys called a leopard “a kitty” when my wife Laurie and I took our boys to the zoo. Laurie took the lead, pulling five-year-old Kyle and the then four-year-old Ryan around the hilly little animal park. That day we laughed a lot at the monkeys and the orangutans and especially at the chimpanzees. One of the chimps shocked us when he did a mirror exercise with Kyle. Kyle would touch his nose and the chimp would touch his nose. Kyle would touch his chin; the chimpanzee would touch his chin. But when Kyle blew the chimp a kiss, the chimp stood up and bent over backwards to Kyle and blew him a raspberry. What a set up! Kyle and Ryan laughed so hard, I was afraid they would pee their pants.

The boys then discovered a single humped camel that stared at them while chewing. Laurie explained to the kids that the camel was chewing his cud to help with digesting his food. Of course the boys had to do impressions of the camel and both of them ending up biting their tongues. To Laurie’s credit, the tears turned to laughter as she subtly redirected their attention to another camel spitting in rhythm. “One, two, three – spit. One, two, three – spit. One, two, three – spit!” The tears stopped and impressions were replaced by thoughtful reflections of every animal we came to into contact with.

At one point Laurie and the boys were watching a leopard. The beautiful, lithesome feline stared straight ahead as she circled back and forth in her small iron and cement cage. She walked the same path over and over and over again. For several minutes I watched Laurie balance both boys up on the railing, looking past the safety
glass, into the leopard’s cage. Laurie’s loving gentleness was so apparent in the way she touched our sons. Sometimes I felt guilty about the way I disciplined them. Kyle, although inquisitive, was extremely aggressive, both physically and emotionally exhausting to whomever was trying to watch him at any given time. Ryan usually tried to keep up with Kyle, by exhibiting an overabundance of energy. My patience was constantly challenged, and sometimes I lashed out at both of them, trying to control their behavior. When the two of them were together, patience was a character trait that left me in about three minutes. Laurie was already into four or five minutes with them at the leopard’s railing, and she was still keeping them under control. She was good at directing their inquisitive energy toward positive conclusions. I was envious of her innate ability to control and love at the same time.

She made me want to be a better dad.

As I admired my family, suddenly, Laurie grabbed the boys by their hands, and stormed past me, past the children’s petting yard, past the long legged pink flamingos and straight toward the zoo’s administration building. When I asked her what was going on, she told the boys to tell me. Both of them, in unison, yelled that they were going to demand “the zoo suits give the kitty a bigger cage.” Without breaking stride I followed my little family as they plowed ahead with purpose. My little boys were four and five years old, and they were already learning how to be activists.

Amazing!

Mama calls me this morning from Idaho or Iowa or maybe Ithaca, someplace starting with the letter “I.” She calls me Junior for the first time in years. She gets my
attention. Mama says that Uncle Earl and Aunt Ida Mae have extra concert tickets for
the bowl to hear The Oakridge Boys. She’s trying hard to get me to see other women, to
stop being a hermit as she calls it. “Jesus don’t want you to be alone.” Mama thinks that
another woman would make me whole again. She asks me if I’m eating yet. It’s amazing
that mothers instinctively know that breaking bread seems to cure the ills of the world. I
should tell her I’ve been eating chicken soup for the last few months, trying to heal all of
my wounds. I don’t want to admit that I don’t know how to cook. Laurie had always
cooked for me, and the boys. I feel helpless now without her. I have a feeling Ryan is
pretty sick of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese; I know I am. Thank god for the microwave; I
couldn’t have survived without it. Even Ryan is getting good at using it.

Cheerios has become our other staple.

Of course Cheerios had always been a staple in our family; Sunday mornings
used to consist of me making Cheerios for the kids, and coffee for me. I’d grab the
Sunday paper; sit the boys down next to me on the big oversized sofa in the den. They
would watch television while I would peruse the sports page and search for weekly book
reviews.

During one of our last Sundays together the boys told me they were confused.
Ryan said they wanted to know what a missionary position was. My hands started to
sweat, my pulse started to race, my heart almost pounded out of my shirt. Laurie and I
had decided to always tell our children the truth. It was our way of overcoming the
suspicion, false pride, and tall stories that came from my Appalachian culture, and the
guilt, distrust and denial of her Jewish culture. A bead of sweat ran down my forehead
and onto my nose as I wondered how I was going to handle this birds and bees speech to
my young sons. Kyle chimed in, “They said they were going to South America to take a missionary position.”

“What’d you say?”

“I said they were going to South America.”

Laurie came in from the bathroom, and we laughed for three minutes. The boys didn’t have a clue why we were laughing. I remember looking at their puzzled little faces and feeling a warmth and love for them unequaled. Laurie and I reached over and hugged both of them tightly, gently kissing their little foreheads between alternating winks and smiles.

While Ryan runs along the tree-lined shore throwing red chinaberrries to the ducks, I get to participate in his joy. I sit cross-legged on the old wooden swing bridge. Swaying back and forth over the river, I watch him shriek with exuberance as a bluegill jumps out of the water and steals a chinaberry from a frustrated mallard. My heart skips a beat when he momentarily falls down in the shallow water after wading in to help a flustered duckling. I let him recover his footing on his own. He jumps back up with a goofy, little chuckle. I see Kyle in him, and I see Laurie in him. He holds up two little fingers to let me know he is okay. I realize he is flipping me the peace sign. Laurie would have been so proud of him.

_The mystical raven caws, crow-hops three times, and waves his mighty wings as he leaps into soaring flight far above the hollowed canyon. The river rushes down the gorge and gradually slows to a bend with a sandy beachhead. A pair of_
redheaded woodpeckers pepper bushy branched oaks and redwoods with their
delicate, strong beaks, as the lonely salmon fights the current to swim upstream
to her final spawning ground.

We are finally getting back to normal. Ryan is in first grade, which is normal. He
plays soccer and basketball on weekends, that’s normal, too. He plays Frisbee with our
dogs, Harvest and Butters. Normal. Me? I’m taking Kitty to see The Oakridge Boys. I
think that is normal, too. At least Mama would think so.

Today the ice chest is full of sodas, beer and juices, my tackle box is full of lures
and jigs, and my favorite old fishing pole from when I was a kid, is fully baited and
thrown out into the water. A red and white floater bobs up and down on the surface of
the river. I throw it out there, not for Daddy, but for Ryan. I don’t care if I catch any fish
or not. But when I do, I make sure Ryan comes over and we release it right away. I like
that. Ryan likes it, too. He says “fish should be free.” Not bad for a six year old on the
mend.

The interesting thing about releasing fish after catching them is this. When a fish
is released; it will always fight to swim upstream. While that might seem like the
antithesis to recovery, it really isn’t, because the struggle is what helps the fish build up
his strength and endurance. When that endurance is built up, the fish has a better chance
of surviving.

Ryan fell down today, but he got back up and waded upstream.