

JOURNEY TO THE SCARS: A WHITE TRASH EPIC

by

J PATRICK RADER
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ABSTRACT

Inspired by the work of writers Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe and motivated by celebrity prevaricator James Frey, *Journey to the Scars: A White Trash Epic* is a memoir that attempts to redefine the genre by applying the ideals and themes of gonzo and new journalism. The opening chapter, “The Diary of John Doe Frankenstein” tells the story of a pivotal event in the author’s life. Immediately following this narrative of a near fatal motorcycle accident, the author/narrator’s reliability is called into question and the remainder of the memoir is the story of the author’s efforts to uncover the truth about himself, and more importantly, the events and motivating forces that led to the author’s almost near death experience.

Starting with a nonjudgmental look at the life of his parents before he was born, our unreliable narrator/author hopes to improve the reader’s opinion of him while also uncovering the true stories behind all the fictional ones he’s been telling himself and others his entire life. As he learns more about where he came from, he begins to try and understand why he has made some of the decisions in his life. Life is one long party for James Patrick Makowski, and he shares his experiences not as a victim of his choices, but as a lonely man who just doesn’t want to be left off of any of life’s guest lists.

In a final attempt to improve his credibility with the reader, the author retells the story of his accident with as much focus on factual detail and verifiable events as possible. His select poems reveal his attempts at emotional honesty while appending documentation is included for the purposes of veracity. Treating himself as a hostile witness, the narrator/author goes on to share the development of his literary integrity when he meets the most honest person he has ever

met—the drug dealing Dog. “Tales of the Dog” summarizes the author/narrator’s attempts to improve his credibility and why this quest has been so important to him.

Journey to the Scars: A White Trash Epic is the gonzo story of one man’s efforts to be his own messiah. The author/narrator, after realizing that his life to date has been in large part the result of his efforts to forget his past, J Patrick Rader begins his efforts to remember his.

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The Diary of John Doe Frankenstein

Unlike Mary Shelley's monster—and fortunately, for me—I was reconstructed using most of my own original parts. Granted, parts of me are still missing, but it beats the alternative. Which is being dead.

The sign at Eighth and Mariposa streets said STOP, but the threat of rain and the 600 cc's of Yamaha FZR that I was straddling urged me past the sign. I knew a summer, Colorado rainstorm would hurt. I was wearing shorts, a tank top and no helmet. I was barely protected from the elements. As I coasted through the stop sign, I gunned the engine and it stalled. I wasn't a very good motorcyclist. As unprotected as I was from the increasing rain, I was a hundred times more exposed to the Ford F-150 that was coming through my same intersection—without a stop sign to heed—in the opposite direction. I was doing less than 5 mph when the truck collided with me and the motorcycle.

Initial impact caught me from behind and completely separated my right arm from my body; only the skin of the limb kept it attached to my torso. Muscles from my shoulder and arm (deltoid, triceps) were either completely ripped away or shredded and dangling. My humerus was “split in half with at least ¼” inch of my arm “missing.” The driver of the truck had yanked the wheel hard to avoid me, but I was pulled underneath the braking F-150. The Yamaha's rear axle snapped and gouged a ½-inch scar into the pavement. Most of the flesh of my left knee and shin were smeared alongside the gouge. As the three of us (truck, bike and myself) hit the curb, the bike and I were thrown into the air. When I landed on my feet, my right leg, the 4 inches below my knee, exploded in a burst of bone, muscle and flesh. I fell to the ground, my own blood

softening it for my fall. The paramedics were surprised to find me still alive, my breaths gurgling through the blood flowing from my nose and mouth.

The brachial artery supplies all the blood flow to your arm. It's one of the largest arteries in the human body. 95% of the people who sever this major blood vessel die. The remaining 5% lose an arm. As I was rushed to Denver General Hospital (DGH), scant blocks from the scene of my accident, EMT's intubated me, so I could breathe, and tried to replace my rapidly dwindling blood supply. As they hurried to save my life, a team of emergency physicians was preparing to save my arm. When the truck hit me, my wallet had flown from my pocket. I was wheeled into emergency surgery a John Doe. It would be a couple of hours before they found out who I was and that I had a family.

In the meantime, apparently less concerned with learning my identity, a member of the Denver Police department had followed my ambulance to DGH with my Death Certificate, looking for a Dr.'s signature. Discovery Channel celebrity, and hockey-playing bad ass, Dr. Wade Smith kindly informed the officer, "we're gonna save this one," and sent the man back to the accident site to find my wallet. The policeman, being a consummate professional, located my wallet and courteously placed a ticket for running a stop sign in it. When I would come across the ticket, months later, the officer's fingerprints, made in my own blood, personalized the citation even more.

As hospital staff contacted my family in Florida, Dr. Smith and his crew began rebuilding me. Using a procedure normally performed on hip injuries, doctors reattached my arm, in spite of missing muscle, and repaired my severely fractured humerus using a metal plate and seven screws. An elaborate, medical Erector set was used to stabilize my right leg as doctors pondered on how to replace the missing muscle tissue of the damaged limb. I was kept in a coma while

these decisions were made and, up to this point, didn't even know I was still alive. Orthopedic surgeon, James Ferrari would tell my mom and her sister that, "[my] injuries were the worst [he'd] seen in all his years of practicing medicine."

Enough dirt and "road debris" was removed from my body to repave Lower Denver. Skin grafts were taken from my thighs to replace missing flesh on both my legs. Days later, after consultation with my family, muscles were taken from the right side of my stomach to rebuild my right leg. The external Erector set was removed. A titanium shaft, running the length of my leg from knee to ankle, and a handful of screws were used in the repair. Family and nurses then set about trying to roust me from my coma. Like any Alpha male, I'd like to think I came out of my coma like the calm, cool, macho guy all Alphas strive to be. My mom and her sister took a couple of days to reach me. When I did come out of my coma, just over four days after my accident, there was a lot of pain, even more tears (mostly my own) and the obligatory wailing of, "Why? Why? Why?" Fortunately, for all parties involved, there was also a fair amount of morphine being given to me.

After becoming conscious, I only stayed in DGH for a few days; watching July 4th fireworks over the Rockies from my hospital bed with friends. Apparently, the Doctors Frankenstein of Denver had a cohort in Florida. This worked well for my Floridian parents and I was transported to Orlando Regional Medical Center and the care of the man I would name Bone-Daddy, Dr. Dean Cole. Before I left, the irascible Dr. Smith brought a group of interns to the foot of my bed and told them, "We've done all we can do for this one. He's either gonna *get it*. Or, we'll see him again."

I could barely sit up in bed. *You won't see me like this again. I get it.*

Pumped up on morphine, with Mom taking me back to Florida, I was stretched across several backseats on a flight to Orlando. At Orlando Regional Medical Center (ORMC), the Doctors Frankenstein were replaced by the Bone-Daddy. There were pictures of surgical procedures and orthopedic devices he has patented hanging in his office. His waiting room looked a clubhouse for train wreck victims. People of all ages and sizes were being, or had been, rebuilt by the Bone-Daddy. During my first visit to Bone-Daddy's office as an outpatient, Dr. Cole told me he was selling his own motorcycle because of me. I also learned that the Bone-Daddy had been in Denver just before my accident, discussing with the Doctors Frankenstein the exact procedure they would use to reattach my right arm. When I left Denver, my mom was told that my right arm would be little more than "ornamentation" and that I would most likely walk with a limp for the rest of my life. The Bone-Daddy had another plan, entirely.

It's been almost five years since my reconstruction started. After over a dozen surgical procedures, 1000+ hours of Physical Therapy, and a year of living with my parents, I walk with an unnoticeable irregularity in my stride. You can break a pencil on my abs—the ones used to rebuild my right leg. In the summer of 2003, the Bone-Daddy stretched some tendons from the lower part of my right arm to assist the atrophied muscles of my right wrist and forearm. Twice-weekly Occupational Therapy (O.T.) sessions taught me how to use my right hand again. When my arm was initially re-attached, the radial nerve didn't heal completely; this nervous system short circuit left my right arm—from elbow to wrist—pretty much useless. Bone-Daddy figured, since I had plenty of working muscle on the underside of my forearm, the stretched muscles would function in place of the non-working ones. So far he's been right.

Until recently, I've been unable to perform such actions as a "thumbs up" or the all important "giving the finger." Bone-Daddy's final, surgical experiment on me, in conjunction

with a Wolverine-like orthotic device and the aforementioned O.T., has helped me regain the ability to nonverbally communicate “okay” and “fuck you” almost as normally as the next guy. Since my discharge from Occupational Therapy, I now only see the Bone-Daddy for semi-regular check-ups of my partially titanium skeleton. In December of 2002, I was a rare thirty-something graduate from the University of Central Florida. When I walked across the stage at my graduation and took my diploma from the President of the University, and then shook his hand, with my right hand, one might think that, that act alone would be the exclamation point to the statement, *I get it*.

Now that I am caught up in the tedium of daily living—my injuries being of notice only to myself—I can’t help but wonder if, I still *get it*. As I struggle for a meager living as a freelance writer, while I beg and scrimp for money that will help me continue my education, I ask myself, with greater regularity, “What is *it*?”

It’s not until one of those moments when I get caught up in the drama, pain and emotion of someone else’s suffering that I do realize that I *get it*. Buddha, or somebody else, may have coined the philosophy first, but I remember my warning from Dr. Smith, and I remember my own Mother telling me time and again, “This too shall pass.”

So, the lesson? Well, according to my Mom and Dr. Smith, if I were to abridge their shared philosophy based upon my own familiarity with pain and suffering, the lesson is amazingly simple in its statement, but incredibly difficult to understand and appreciate. To *get it*, is to know that *this is it*, and *this* too shall pass. Of course, I could be wrong, but I *get it*. And this too, shall pass...I’chaim.

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A Monstrous Realization: Frankenstein Unmasked

A funny thing happened while I was writing the narrative you have just read. A writer by the name of James Frey published a memoir he called *A Million Little Pieces*. It was the story of his recovery after his life's downward spiral into a world of crime and drug abuse. As the book gained national attention, thanks to its selection as a "Book of the Month" by Oprah Winfrey, it was discovered by an offbeat news web site called *The Smoking Gun* that much of Frey's nonfiction memoir was bullshit. Oprah flipped out, feeling that Frey's prevarication somehow damaged her spotless credibility and integrity. Turns out, it didn't. Oprah's still America's most beloved black woman bajillionaire, and to the chagrin of her beloved fans, that schmuck Frey got hit with a civil law suit that ended with him having to pay back millions of dollars to disgruntled readers. This literary lesson hit me hard and right on the chin.

When the story of Frey's prevarication broke, I learned that he came from a relatively well-to-do background and after screwing around without any personal or professional direction for several years after high school, wrote *A Million Little Pieces* as a way to make some money and, I can only surmise, as part of his rehabilitation. As a student of creative nonfiction, I read Frey's novel. I was not impressed. His literary techniques struck me as hackneyed writing and a bad writer's attempt to imitate the outlaw writing style of Hunter S. Thompson. Frey's failure to use proper punctuation, his use of phrase repetition and stream of consciousness writing style encouraged several people who were familiar with my own blossoming writer's style and my affinity for works that utilized Thompson's gonzo literary stylistics to think I would like the book. They were wrong.

Although it may be popular to say so now, I had a gut feeling that Frey was full of shit soon after finishing his memoir. I saw Frey's writing style as high school literature at best and I figured that his use of poetic prose was less of an attempt to give insight into his internal thought processes and emotions and more of an attempt to remain vague in areas of his narrative where he either didn't know the truth or was just making shit up about himself. Even as Frey reappeared on Oprah's show, after his literary lies were revealed, to defend the veracity of his book, the man did not strike me as malicious or evil. When the rather diminutive man who had pissed off Oprah's Legion of Housewives appeared on my T.V. to tell Oprah that he hadn't "lied" in his memoir, but was merely telling his story, "as he remembered it," I knew he wasn't a person I should demonize. Unlike all those irate housewives who had their lives allegedly changed by Frey's book, the revelation of its falsehood didn't make me dislike the man any more. No, in fact, I gained a modicum of respect for the man because the character I had met through his book and seen on *Oprah!* was a kindred spirit.

You see, gentle reader, I, like James Frey, am full of shit. He is a well-practiced, comfortable liar and I know this because it takes one to know one. I didn't know Frey and I were cut from the same cloth when I read *A Million Little Pieces* the first time, but as the news of his prevarication became a hot story and topic of conversation in my collegiate social circles, I started to figure out what about Frey's lying was pissing me off so much. First, I was pissed at the man because he had made himself a victim. His entire book was a series of stories about how he had been the victim of his own poor decision-making. He had come from a stable, relatively affluent home and instead of taking fault for his own actions that had nearly killed him; he said he was a victim of drug abuse. Hooked on crack, he said the rock made him do all the bad things he either made up or embellished. I hate self-made victims.

Secondly, I was pissed at all his readers who were so outraged because they felt like they had been victimized. I couldn't see how reading a book about a quintessential nobody, regardless of the debate surrounding its veracity, could change anyone's life. Maybe all those readers related to Frey on a different level than I was starting to. Maybe all those pissed-off Oprah-ites saw their reflections in the man who, for all statistical purposes, should have turned out to be just a normal schmoie, but for reasons that he couldn't control, ended up being a crack addict. Maybe all those housewives were just one missed Xanax prescription away from sucking on the glass dick of the crack pipe themselves. Maybe it was the shared suburban desperation of Frey's that they connected with and so they felt betrayed by his lies. Okay, so they were lied to, but they were not victims. They were standing up in the aisles of Oprah's studio screeching out their cries of victimization, but they were not victims. They made a bad decision by reading Frey's post-adolescent memoir and then made the even worse decision believing that there were life-altering lessons being offered up by the text. These countless, faceless, nameless women were now trying to make themselves victims of a man who had apparently faked his own victimization. Those women of Oprah's studio audience turn my stomach almost as much as the thin-lipped Frey does.

Following my motorcycle accident, I attended therapy for a few months. My therapist, whose name I do not remember, told me, "Those things that we often despise so much in others are often reflections of our own shortcomings." Now, back in 2000 when I was told this by my therapist, James Frey had yet to write his book. I had yet to even start writing about my own brush with death, but I was just as comfortable a liar as James would be revealed to be some five years later. In 2006, after the news of his sympathy-seeking deception had broken, my own narrative had been published online. As my graduate school classmates and I discussed Frey's

shortcomings as both a writer and human being, I was starting work on my own memoir as my thesis project for my M.F.A.

My story was going to revolve around the events introduced in “The Diary of John Doe Frankenstein” and then move into my search for an epiphany in the years that followed my own tragedy. For many years following my physical reconstruction, I would almost proudly tell people that my own brush with death had left me without any kind of epiphany often experienced by people who have Near Death Experiences (NDEs). Based upon my memory of the events of June 24, 1999—which are largely constructs of my written narrative—my Near Death Experience was shaping up to be unique from the countless NDEs I had read while researching the details of that day. I was going to write a tragic story of how a kid had grown up poor, without a stable father figure and was certain he would not live past thirty, would beat social, statistical odds and still go out like my Beat Generation idols. I thought the fact that my “Live fast. Die young.” philosophy had evaporated as I came out of my coma had imparted me with some kind of obligation to share a lesson with my readers. That misconception was only held until I became comfortable with the realization that I, like Frey, am a pathological liar. That fact is what really pissed me off about Frey’s exposure. If that asshole got caught in his literary lie, I was for sure going to get burned for mine.

That’s right, “The Diary of John Doe Frankenstein” is for all intrinsic purposes, a lie. Seeing as how I have no real memory of events, my initial narrative of “that day” is a reconstruction of the stories I had heard from doctors, nurses, visiting friends, my aunt Meegan, but mostly my mom. As I was coming out of a coma, and during my rehab, I had some serious memory deficiencies not uncommon to people in my situation. My mom gradually told me the story she had learned from police and doctors, and that she had read in her own perusal of reports

of the actual incident. I heard her tell it to social workers, lawyers, family, friends, new doctors, therapists, et al. In the earliest days of my recovery, the Need-To-Know list for what had happened and what was happening to me was lengthy and often did not include me.

The medical and psychological consensus seems to be that the events of that day were so traumatic, that if I were to remember them in any kind of detail, the memory could irreparably scar my mind much as the actual events of that day have scarred my body. Even now as my memory becomes recognized as an unreliable resource for my true memoir, I have to admit to having pieced together some fragments of events into memory, but to this date, many of the actual events still elude my personal narrative. That fact, however, has not kept me from telling my story. It took close to four years to produce the written record of the most seminal day of my life and another two years before I would start to question its veracity.

With the publication of “The Diary of John Doe Frankenstein” on a small, literary website that called itself *The Big Toe Press*, I started to realize that I was no longer posing as a writer. The fact that I had worked for a college newspaper as a staff writer and columnist had not aided me in the least in coming to this realization. I had seen my name in print, so had my parents. I’d even had some poems published, but I didn’t think I was a real writer. Seeing my own story in print in, pretty much, my own words, was like hearing an unfamiliar voice calling me by my full name. I knew the words of the story were mine. I knew the events those words described were lived by me, but because of my lack of real memory of that day, I had no ownership of the story. Because it was primarily confabulation, I was starting to feel some obligation to be honest for the first time in my life.

Strangely enough, my search for personal honesty and my quest to either begin building my personal integrity or find out when I had lost it, began with my construction of a fishing

story. There has got to be some irony in the fact that while trying to truthfully tell the events of a day that was of great philosophical importance to me, I would realize just how much of a liar I had become over the course of my life. It would also be that fishing story that would ignite me to not only learn the true events that occurred on June 24, 1999, but how I might have become such an unabashed deceiver in the life I lived before them.

Coincidence had brought my fishing story to my uncle Mike and set me on my path to being as truthful a writer as I possibly could. Uncle Mike was my first attempt at proving my own memory of an event to myself. I had written a narrative and the memory from which it sprang was not as reliable as I felt it should be. I planned on using Uncle Mike to verify my written memory. He was in Florida visiting my parents as I was starting to piece together texts that would become this memoir. My newfound desire to be truthful had led me to share the story with him. He did correct a handful of factual errors, but admitted that he remembers very little about that hot day on a lake in Umatilla. Oh, but I remember it. I remember it because the insight he shared with me on that day was impetus for my crock-of-shit-conversations and pseudo-philosophical depth for years to come. The characteristically short text of borrowed memory became the impetus for my own investigation into the veracity of what I had written. I had written as nonfiction. It was also the first time I had written the truth about myself.

Fishing with Uncle Mike

It was the earlier years of the nineties. I'm not real sure when the exact day occurred, but I do know I was no longer pretending to be a college student, but still pretending to be a corporate role model. It was also several years before my cousin Brian, who is 10 months my junior, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and before his dad, my mom's brother, Michael, left Brian's mom. It was when Uncle Mike was still something of a myth to me and my immediate family. It was an odd scene, that day on the small lake in Umatilla. I am not much of a fisherman and although Uncle Mike fished the streams and lakes of the Midwest and Northeast, freshwater fishing in Florida is not quite the type of sport he was familiar with. The two of us were quite the unlikely pair to be in a boat together.

Mike Echols is my mom's oldest brother. He went to Carnegie Mellon for his bachelor's in Physics and earned his M.B.A. at the University of Pittsburgh before getting his Ph.D. from California-Berkley. At this point in his life, when this fish story takes place, he'd been a vice-president of General Electric as well as been on the design team that developed the adhesive that held the protective tiles to the earliest versions of the space shuttle. He'd even found time to marry his college sweetheart and father four sons. My grandfather, when he was alive, often postulated that Uncle Mike worked for the C.I.A. Given my retrospection of the last two decades, I think Uncle Mike may have knowingly, with comic intent, fueled his father's creation of this myth around his life by sending him postcards and calling him from places like Belgrade, Warsaw, Kiev, Prague and other locations of Eastern European intrigue. He would only confirm ever having called his father from one of those places. In my opinion, this denial only added to

the likelihood of Grandad's stories being true and, as this mythic man and I sat in a flat-bottomed boat for the better part of a summer day, I was a complete believer in my grandfather's fantastic theories about Uncle Mike's clandestine career.

Uncle Mike visited his younger sisters, my mom and aunt Meegan, with semi-regularity, often coming to Florida on business with a little side trip to Lake County for golf, sleeping late and catching up with his distant family. On this particular visit, the Pennsylvania born and raised, New York resident who was Mom's iconic older brother got a wild hair across his ass and decided he was going to go fishing. During a previous trip to Florida with his family, while I was still in high school, a similar wild hair had convinced the hardly athletic Dr. Echols to try waterskiing. These days, fishing was as wild as Uncle Mike got.

We sat in the middle of the sky's reflection and Uncle Mike pinked under the unfamiliar Florida sun. Our fishing lines hung motionless in an even more placid lake. The fish swam deeper than our hooks as Uncle Mike and I drank beer from icy, cold cans, joked about, "This is why they call it fishing and not catching," and opined on everything from creativity, traveling alone, parenting, to the different kinds of love. As our cache of cheap beer dwindled, Uncle Mike's exposed scalp began to scarlet from the sun as his cheeks were beginning to do from the drinking of our cheap beer.

I was a recreational writer back then. My bad poetry and short stories often revolved around the girl I was trying to woo or Death. So, there's me, the pretend poet, with the real life genius and hypothesized spy, my Uncle Mike, catching a warm summer buzz as the sun quietly cooked us. The fish swam even deeper to avoid the heat and our conversations followed suit as Uncle Mike began to wax philosophical about Life, Death and what happens, "when our time here is done." Having lived in Florida most of my life, I am quite familiar with the effects of the

tropical climate when combined with just the right amounts of lazy activity and beer. I even knew back then, in my early twenties, thinking I had the world by the balls, that Uncle Mike was about to go all Plato on me.

“I believe,” he paused to sip his beer. I listened with Aristotelian attentiveness.

“I believe there may come a time in our existence,” the boat wobbled slightly as he turned and motioned across the lake. His movement sent creases in the mirrored sky we sat in, “I mean after this one.”

We both drank in the scenery of the small lake that surrounded us. Aunt Meegan’s dog, Einstein, sat on the shore and lapped at the clouds.

“I believe there is a very good possibility that there may come a time in our existence when pain would be a welcome experience.”

I’m not sure how I responded to Uncle Mike that day. Now, nearly twenty years later, knowing myself as I do, I’d not be surprised if my response to Uncle Mike’s insight was probably something just as equally thoughtful. Probably something real heavy like, “You’re so full of shit, Uncle Mike.”

Yeah, that sounds like something I would have said back then and I would have known because, at least at that time in my life, I was so full of shit my naturally blue eyes were probably brown most of the time.

* * * *

For over a decade following that afternoon of insight, I would quote my Uncle Mike’s revelation whenever a party conversation’s theme would switch to the philosophical or even theological. I always thought I sounded intellectual as I tried to not to slur over a plastic Solo cup

of hand-pumped, keg beer, “I believe there will come a time in our existence when pain would be a welcome experience.”

Invariably, there was always someone in the circle of conversation who was better read, and therefore not a pseudo-intellectual, and I was easily humiliated into sulking silence with a question like, “So, are you a nihilist?”

As I have admitted, I was a poser for many years. As a young adult, I didn’t really stand for anything. Even after five years of screwing around at the University of Florida, I didn’t have any personal convictions or self-styled dogma. My own sense of self was merely a patchwork of personality traits that I had lifted from the characters or authors of books I read. As an ironic testament to my own lack of depth of character, I defended my non-original, public persona by comparing it to the flaccid impersonations of shallow T.V. and movie personalities that many of my male friends were using for personalities. I wasn’t at those aforementioned parties pretending to be Chevy Chase in *Fletch* or *Caddyshack*, but I was there shirtless in coveralls pretending to be Ken Casaday from *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. I assumed my literary discrimination lent me the depth of character my peers lacked. I hadn’t read any Buddhist writings. I wasn’t familiar with the social psychology of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters, but I did know that those beatnik legends ate a bunch of acid, smoked copious amounts of marijuana and drank their weight in alcohol as they traveled across the country during the Summer of Love. Those were feats I was all too anxious to repeat. I was also ignorant of the fact that many of my cultural icons died at an early age.

In an effort to humanize myself, I have digressed from my original story. That day with me and Uncle Mike may have very well been a watershed event in my life. Unfortunately, given the aforementioned lack of my own character or depth, the weight of Uncle Mike’s revelation

wouldn't hit me for years to come. It would take one rainy day's bad decision and the subsequent years of recovery before I would actually get it—the lesson Uncle Mike had offered up for my dissection on the lake that day. On the path to my own realization that Uncle Mike had unconsciously set me on, I would meet many people, not all of them for the first time, who would tell me that my “getting it” would be essential to my recovery. *Had they all been on the lake that day?*

No, they hadn't. In fact, immediately following my accident, everyone I met—doctors, nurses, social workers, therapists, family members, friends, everyone—seemed hell bent on making sure that I “got it.” What all those well-meaning individuals failed to realize was that they were just confusing the hell out of me and that my “getting it” had nothing to do with what they thought “getting it” meant. Of course, with the literary luxury of the retrospect of nearly a decade since the date of my bad decision to run a stop sign, I can, with the slyest of grins, to whoever might ask, say, “I *get* it.” My answer often comes in response to the question of whether or not I learned anything from my accident. I realize that the pronoun *it* can be both singular and plural, but many of those who were insisting that my failure to “get it” had led to my bad decision were misusing the pronoun in its singular form. Many of the people whom I met only after my bad decision had mandated their inclusion into my social circle were also guilty of this pronoun misuse as well.

On a rainy June 24, in 1999, while riding a motorcycle from a baseball game to my apartment, I ran a stop sign and was hit by a pickup truck. That bad decision, as should be expected, dramatically altered the course of my life. Because this nonfiction text is an attempt by this writer at memoir, it must, by its literary definition, revolve around a central event. Before that day, my life, in my own opinion, was moving along at a pretty exciting, but directionless

pace. I can admit that I certainly would not have taken the time to write a memoir before the events of June 24, 1999. I must also confess that the notion of writing a memoir didn't become a conceivable reality until many years after I ran that stop sign, and after it became nearly impossible for someone meeting me to notice any vestige of the physical ravages I had survived.

Oddly enough, as I began my attempts at a literary reconstruction of the events of that day, the idea of whether or not I had *gotten anything* from my experience began to hamper and cloud my construction of that narrative. I kept getting hung up on whether or not there was a lesson to be learned for anyone else in my experiences. Ironically, it was as that simple narrative of the events of my life on June 24, 1999, evolved into this memoir that I started to realize I didn't have any memory of those events and most of what I was narrating as truth was at best hearsay and at worst, a big load of lies.

To the best of my real memory of that day, I got up late on a Tuesday morning with every intention of attending the day's Colorado Rockies' baseball game. The sky was grey and promised rain. Despite this foreknowledge, I borrowed my then-girlfriend's motorcycle and rode the short distance from my apartment in Longmont to Coors Field in Denver, Colorado. I woke up several days later in really bad shape. I'm talking—partially shaved head, metal sticking out of my body, various tubes inserted in all kinds of places around my anatomy which was covered in scabs and held painfully together with over one hundred metal staples—bad shape.

Not only is that a horrible narrative of what happened on that day, it's no impetus for a memoir either. There is certainly no lesson to be learned—by anyone—from that lame duck story. Somewhere between those events and the day I decided to write about them, it became very important for me to impart a lesson to you, gentle reader, and that desire almost motivated me to lie to you about not only the events of June 24, 1999, but the events of my life before that day as

well. Fortunately for you, gentle reader, it has only recently become more important for me to tell the truth than impart any wisdom. I will leave the judgment of the characters in my life, for the most part, up to you. All I can do is try to tell you about the more formative people and experiences I had in my life before that June day, and then tell you the real story of my life-changing accident. Afterwards, I will share with you some stories about a young man who became a beacon of integrity for me and how that drug dealer whose tragic past was far more dramatic than my own helped me decide to start being honest with not only you, gentle reader, but everyone else I should ever hope to meet from now on.

I will start my trek into truthfulness with the true story of my parents. I already know how the young couple named Prissy and Jerry could bring a liar such as myself into the world. I don't think it's any kind of excuse for either my propensity for prevarication or any kind of subversive motivation for my running a stop sign, but I will let you be the judge of that. I will just tell you the truth. I will also tell you that "The Diary of John Doe Frankenstein" is the only lie you will see in this text...As far as I know.

The Ballad of Prissy and Jerry

I popped out of Lilleen Kay Makowski around 8:30 in the morning of April, 21, 1969. Pennsylvania's previous winter had kept the 18-year-old newlywed close to her young husband, Jerome Joseph Makowski, and James Patrick Makowski, me, arrived eight months later and a month early to make sure baseball season began properly and on time. The high school sweetheart Makowskis were like Brenda and Eddie in the beginning of Billy Joel's "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant." The neighborhoods of West Chester, PA, are similar to those of the Piano Man's lyrics almost to the point of cliché.

Like the couple in the song, Lilleen and Jerry were "popular steadies." Jerry Makowski was a prankster basketball player who caught the light eyes of the dark-haired, more sullen Prissy Echols—No one called her Lilleen.—by goofily sticking a cigarette in his ear. In her words, "He was Robert Redford handsome. I was dumbstruck that anyone who looked like him would show an interest in someone like me." Jerry worked, went to high school, played sports and cracked jokes to avoid the pain and conflict of his home. His truck-driving, alcoholic father made the Makowski house a violent one. His father, Jerome, drove coal from the interiors of Pennsylvania's mining country to the ports of Philadelphia. He worked for his brother who owned and ran Makowski Trucking. Jerome owned his truck and ran from the heart of Chester and Lancaster counties to the commercial ports of Philadelphia every day. This schedule afforded him the luxury of being home to regularly practice the selective mistreatment of his children.

Jerome was married to Dolores. I don't know if they were ever in love, but by the time I was old enough to label them "Granny and Pap-Pap" for the grandchildren who would follow me, it was obvious that only their hardcore, Eastern European Catholic roots were keeping them married. Jerome was old school, life-hardened Polish. Dolores was from Lithuanian polish and pomp. I don't know when Dolores realized she had married a foul-mouthed truck driver, but I'm certain it happened after her last child was born and before she moved into a separate bedroom. Jerome and Dolores had four children. While their oldest son and younger daughter were alienated and abused by Jerome, the second-oldest daughter and second born son could do no wrong in their father's eyes. Unfortunately for Jerry, he was the oldest son. The little girl who would become my Aunt Jo and the last Makowski I would ever speak to, was Jerome and Dolores's youngest daughter and carried her childhood anguish for most of her solitary adulthood. In the few conversations we had, Jerry and I never talked about his childhood. Even my well-read and well-spoken Aunt Jo said little of her growing up except that she was "very unhappy for most of [her] childhood." Despite its subversive violence, to Prissy the Makowski household was much closer to her ideal of what a family should be than the one she grew up in.

Prissy's home life was comparably more violent, but similarly, deceptively Cleaver-esque in appearance. Whereas Jerome was selective in the mistreatment of his children, Prissy's father, Champ, was violent toward all four of his offspring. Her older brother, my Uncle Scotty, was on the receiving end of most of Champ's violent outbursts. That fact kept him angry for decades. Not yet the subject of his father's fantastic storytelling, Prissy's oldest brother, my Uncle Mike, tried to be out of the house as much as possible. Prissy always tried to be the great peacemaker of the family and the protector of her little sister Meegan, but she was desperate for a family of her own.

Prissy was thrust into a role of maternal leadership early in life. The Echols' home lacked the superficial stability of the Makowskis' mainly because the Echols family lacked a nucleus. While Jerome's job afforded him the luxury to be home to regularly to abuse his children, Champ's job as an oil pipe-liner for Mobil took him all over the globe and brought him home at erratic intervals. When she met Jerry, Prissy described her home life as one of "virtual servitude." She had been preparing most of her life to be a homemaker. Her naïve plan was to make her home with Jerry Makowski mainly because he came from a family that, on the surface, seemed much more normal than her own. Prissy's domestic Cinderella delusion was fueled by the extreme dysfunction of her own household.

Though I never saw any real display of her father's violent temper, all of his children can reflect on moments where their father was, without hyperbole, "the meanest man on the face of the Earth." Prissy's mom must have been overwhelmed by Champ's anger and her foolish decision to ignore her mother's advice and marry the first man who asked her. Prissy was five years old when her mother killed herself. Prissy and her siblings went to live with relatives of Champ's that I have only ever known as Paw-Paw and Daddy Mack. The time the Echols family spent without a mother and father are the stuff of hazy memory to Prissy. Daddy Mack was Grandad's uncle. According to family legend, in their youth, Daddy Mack and his wife, the woman I and many other generations of children called Paw-Paw, were quite the striking couple. They were beautiful, in love and would stay happily married until the close of the twentieth century. I am of the opinion that Prissy's domestic delusions began to take their shape as she lived with the much more idyllic family that Paw-Paw and Daddy Mack were raising. She rejoined the Echols family after Champ had remarried and regrouped his clan in Pennsylvania.

His new wife and the Echols' new matriarch, Jane, was from privilege. Her mother ran a home where the wealthy could place those members of their family who might lack the polish of their peers. Retarded Rockefellers and autistic aristocrats were sequestered in swank settings for a modest fee by Jane's multi-widowed mother. She came from wealth the Echols children had never seen. She carried herself as if she expected to be waited on by Champ's children because she did. After his death, Jane's divorce from Champ's children was quick, cold and welcome. Though Mike, Scotty, Prissy and Meagan accepted the daughter that Jane brought with her and the son she and Champ had together, their stepmother remained aloof to their affection for as long as I have called her "Nanny."

Whether it was Jerome's oafish brutality, or Champ's spite disguised as discipline, or the varying detachment of both their mothers that kept them away, neither Jerry nor Prissy spent much time at home. In all actuality, the pair had little in common except for their violent home lives, a similar circle of friends and a love for the music from Motown. Jerry was infamously irresponsible and Prissy was well-known "to be a bitch at times." They were young. They were in love. They were both trying to get out of their miserable homes and make newer, happier lives for themselves. They just knew that their new family would be happier than the ones they were fleeing. Hell, it was the late sixties; the whole country was infected with a similar optimism.

* * * *

April 21, 1969. *Today is a good day to be born*

As Prissy Makowski waited for me in the Delivery Recovery Room to arrive from being cleaned-up and complete her own little, domestic cliché, she chatted up a young mother who was holding her beautiful newborn who had just come into the world via caesarian section.

In 1969, giving birth through a c-section was like asking a surgeon to meticulously open up a wrapped Christmas gift and carefully remove its contents for you. On the other hand, natural childbirth was more like asking the same surgeon to jump up and down on that very same gift until its contents shot out of the box. Prissy had given natural birth. As a result of my exit from her body, her precious gift didn't look as angelic as her new acquaintance's. Being a preemie, I had no hair (not even eyelashes) and no toenails. I was still in the larval stage of development when the doctors popped me out of the womb. The nurses had put purple gentian violet around my mouth to sanitize it and I had quickly explored my oral fascination by dying my feet and hands purple through drooling, careful placement in my mouth. I was a hairless, purple-foam-mouthed, pink slug wrapped in surgical blue.

As she was handed her newborn, Prissy pointed to her acquaintance's far lovelier child, "How come my baby doesn't look like that?"

* * * *

Trying to start a family fresh out of high school forced the young Makowskis to miss the Summer of Love. Prissy remembers her and Jerry's years in Pennsylvania as a string of disappointments as the reality of her life failed to live up to her well-crafted dream. Through their proximity to Jerry's parents, Prissy was starting to discover that though his parents remained married, Jerry's family was most certainly not the ideal family she was planning. In her own words she was "supremely disappointed" that the Makowskis did not conform to her belief of what made a family and she "began to despise them, with the exception of Mary Jo because she was just a child. I resented the way they treated Jerry." If Prissy was going to raise her dream family, it would have to be away from the Makowskis and preferably out of the North East.

Prissy had made her decision to leave Pennsylvania as she and Jerry were packing up their small family (them, me, a dog and a cat) to move into a new rental home. As a child, even after her own family's reunion, Prissy had spent time with Paw-Paw and Daddy Mack's only child, my Aunt Peggy. Peggy was married to the boisterous John L and they were raising their family just outside of Tallahassee, Florida. As Jerry was strapping the last of their belongings to the couple's Volkswagen Beetle, Prissy had already determined that she and her child were moving to Florida. Prissy was close to Peggy and John L.'s oldest child, Vicki, and it only took a welcoming affirmation that Prissy would be welcome with family to the Sunshine State before she presented Jerry his options, "move with me and your son to Florida or get left." While she regrets the way she may have treated her young husband, she knew he wouldn't leave her because, "no matter how miserable they are, the Makowskis stay married. That's how they are." And no matter how resentful she says she was towards Jerry's parents for their mistreatment of him, she didn't appear to treat him much better.

The tie-dyed sixties had bled into the more electric seventies and the unknowingly dysfunctional Makowskis of Florida were at least living in proximity to families the judgmental Prissy approved of. Jerry found a job with the phone company splicing phone lines along the dirt road highways of Florida. In the seventies, a full decade before deregulation, everybody worked for the phone company in Florida at one time or another. Walt Disney was only secretly buying up swamp land outside of Orlando. Rumors of a Florida based Disneyland were little more than barroom conversation fodder. Mickey Mouse was still a relative unknown resident on the East Coast and it was the Southern Bell Telephone Company that employed many of the state's residents before the Mouse came to roost. Unskilled and uneducated, Jerry worked long, dirty

hours as a cable splicer as Southern Bell spent millions of dollars maintaining the pole-based phone lines that criss-crossed the still largely undeveloped state.

Florida was, and still is, a place of re-invention. When Jerry and Prissy arrived at the peninsula, they were looking to reinvent their own unhappy home lives with a family of their own. At least Prissy was. I think Jerry was just along for the ride. After settling in their new home state, the young couple looked to add another child to their fold. Prissy's second child, Matthew David, was still born. They had only been in the Sunshine State a few years before the doo-wop altruisms that had defined their young love began to unravel for these children of the sixties. Despite the professional success the change in geography was bringing to Jerry, Prissy was starting to realize she didn't want to be married to him. As a young adult, I would be told that, "Jerry wasn't a bad person. He was just a shitty father and husband. I kept expecting him to step up as a father and he never did."

* * * *

Their divorce in 1974 went the way that many similar proceedings of that era went. At times, it was peaceful, two young adults realizing they were growing in different directions. Other times, it was more like Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep in *Kramer vs. Kramer*. There were tears, shouting and such, but I never witnessed it. I was never in a courtroom and don't remember anything about the dissolution of their marriage. When I was in high school, Prissy relayed a story to me about a time she and I were riding in the car together. At the time this car ride took place, I was only four years old and I turned to her and matter-of-factly told her, "You and Daddy are getting a divorce." I don't remember the conversation and according to my mom, I wasn't upset about it either. Even before I knew how to write, I was developing the

stereotypical ambivalence of a journalist who reported only the most emotional and personal of news.

The maternal bias of Florida divorce courts was infamous so Prissy didn't have to fight for custody. Until I was about eleven years old and he moved to New Jersey to once again be closer to his own family, she had to fight with Jerry to keep him interested in me at all. I never saw those fights. I never saw Mom cry when I would get upset because he had pulled another no-show at a birthday party or school event. I never knew that the elation I showed whenever my delinquent father sporadically cared to spend time with me crushed my mother. She tried to protect me from the discord that our home had descended into and ended up creating the myth of the "See-You-on-the-Weekend Dad" for me. I never saw what went on behind the scenes when Prissy would call Jerry to remind him or to demand he spend time with me.

After Jerry moved to New Jersey, I visited him for two summers and even went to live with him for a year while I was in the seventh grade. He had settled in Flemington, a small, furrier town that was known in the surrounding burghs for its proximity to a large shopping mall and newly built cinema multiplex. Realizing things weren't always better at Dad's—he had a new wife and son—I went back home to Mom. After I did that, I didn't hear from Jerry for almost fifteen years. I would like to think that as I flew home to Florida after living with my biological father for almost a year, I realized how my desire to draw Jerry's affection had hurt my mother for so many years. Unfortunately, I had inherited Jerry's ambivalence towards Prissy's emotions of the past and it is my curse to this day.

The beauty of a writer's retrospection is that it allows you to remove yourself from the onus of assigning guilt to anybody but yourself. Prissy busted her ass as a high school-educated, single mother in the seventies with no familial support to raise her son as best as she could. Jerry

had decided to make his first wife and child a distant memory. We were just going to have to forget him as well. He would make that amazingly easy for us. My inherited ambivalence toward my mom was transferred to Jerry slowly, over about twenty years.

The Exoneration of Prissy and Jerry

I have never blamed either one of my biological parents for what happened to me on June 24, 1999. I can neither blame them for the lifestyle decisions I had made that led up to my decision to run that stop sign at Eighth and Mariposa, but I am on a hunt for epiphanies here, people. What is there to be gleaned, for application to my own life, from the decisions and lives of my parents? To be perfectly honest with you, gentle reader, nothing.

Prissy was eighteen when she married the seventeen-year-old Jerry. Though I was not the reason for the marriage; contrary to my earliest held beliefs, the wedding of Prissy and Jerry was not a “shotgun” affair. My imminent arrival so soon after the nine month anniversary of the newlywed Makowskis did not sit well with Dolores Makowski, but Prissy was not real hung up on the Makowski matriarch’s morality. She had a pretty healthy distaste for the Makowski family that cemented into genuine disgust after she married their son and got to know Dolores and Jerome better.

My mom had more issues than a collector’s bookshelves of *National Geographic*. Because of her own disastrous home life, Prissy was hoping to amend the lifetime of mistakes and mistreatment she had suffered for eighteen years. Unfortunately for the young bride, she set herself up for a failed marriage, making similarly poor decisions like her deceased mother. Champ was handsome when he met the Bucks County, PA farm girl he would eventually marry. Jerry’s charisma was similarly effective on the daughter that Champ’s young bride would never live to see marry. Prissy would never blame her past or bizarre family history for her failed marriage. That fact makes it seem relatively easy for me to exonerate her for any parental

shortcomings she may have realized after I was born. She was little more than a child herself as she waited for me in the Delivery Recovery Room. Raised mainly by Champ's angry disciplinarian's hand and without a mother's guidance, she hadn't the vaguest notions as to what it meant to be a woman much less a mother. Jerry was, at best, a man-child with a solid work ethic and no earthly idea as to what being a good father meant. He was, at worst, the same person I was at seventeen. I didn't treat Prissy very well at that age either.

But, as I have said, this is not an indictment of my child-parents. Even as I approach forty years old, I cannot get past the fact that they were still teenagers when I was born. Given every cultural bias that I have acquired throughout my lifetime, I am stunned that I am not in jail or dead by a hand other than my own. As a "product of divorce; raised by a single, working mother with no successful father figure," sociologist's statistics would have me believe that given the fact I am nearing forty and have yet to serve any hard prison time, I am anomalous to those statistics describing of similar background to my own. According to a study published in 1993 by the *Journal of Legal Studies*, 53% of all incarcerated males are from broken homes. A survey by the same journal also revealed that 80% of the rapists surveyed in prison were from homes of divorce where the children were raised by a single mother. Compound all those descriptors of my home life with the fact that we were very poor and my youth's conclusion as an incarcerated "Product of Divorce" statistic seems almost a given.

So, as fucked-up as my parents were when they got married, and as fucked-up as they remained even after their divorce, according to statistics, things could have been much worse for me. I am not a rapist nor have I ever served any jail time. If nothing else, the young Makowskis can take away the fact that they did not bring another rapist or felon into the world; but I was not raised by the young Makowskis. I was raised by the highly delusional Prissy who was hell-bent

on building her fantasy family with me as a part, if not cornerstone, to this pipe dream, but at least I am not a time-served felon or rapist. No, I had bucked the stats and grown up a relatively respectable member of society. Jerry and Prissy are off the hook.

There has to be some irony in the fact that I believe Jerry would breathe a secret sigh of relief upon hearing of my exoneration of him. That guilt is probably the most fatherly emotion he has ever felt toward me. Even though the most recent photos I have of him are over ten years old, I can imagine how our conversation would go.

There would have to be some physical contact. We're both tactile people. I'd probably put my hand on his shoulder. We'd look each other in the eye—we're about the same height.—and I'd just tell him. “Jer, you're off the hook on this one. You can in no way be held responsible for the lifestyle decisions I made. I did not run that stop sign because you were a bad father.”

He would press a thumb into his temple and stretch his hand across his forehead like a visor as he mulled my pardon. We share this gesture despite my having no memory of seeing him do it before I was in my twenties. “No hard feelings?”

I imagine he would probably break away from my light grasp and hold his arms open for a hug. Do I think Jerry Makowski is that simple of a man?...Yes, and for that reason most of all, I have to let him off the hook.

As I will soon share, Prissy's parenting pardon, while much more deserved, would probably not be accepted. She feels some responsibility for my actions because she feels she wasn't the best mother she could have been to me. And while she has tried to be the best parent she can be, she would tell me herself, “Jerry just gave up being your dad. He needs the pardon. I'm still trying to be your mom.” Given what I have learned about my parents' origins, I cannot hold those Billy Joel clichés responsible for the man I was on June 24, 1999.

Stories of My Non-Nuclear Family

Immediately after the divorce, Prissy and I lived in Lake County, Florida. There were places I can't remember, but my first home of memory was Golden Gem Estates trailer park in Umatilla. Times were tight before we made the move to Umatilla. Mom relays stories of counting out Cheerios for meals before our move into the first home she would ever own. She eventually stopped having to count Cheerios, but thanks to the charity of neighbors, we did eat summer sausage every meal for a month. Prissy initially worked as a legal secretary for a handful of men who were probably taking pity on my undereducated, single mom. These men were all characters pulled from a grab bag of Abbey Hoffman clichés. From neurotics, to alcoholics, to womanizers, the lawyer jokes you have heard your whole life were practicing law in Lake County in the 1970s. Eventually, after we settled outside of the Golden Gem orange juice factory the trailer park was named after, she went to work for Howard "Skip" Babb and Mike Hatfield and our lives slowly became less of a struggle.

In their naively optimistic beginning, these attorneys took any and all cases. The first offices of Babb & Hatfield were above an abandoned bank that still sits on Main Street of Umatilla, Florida, and was a short walk from Umatilla Elementary School. During my first, and second to last, year of public education, I would walk to the attorneys' offices after school and then go play with my friends who lived in the neighboring area. While Mom and the bong-hitting barristers that she worked for filed divorces and kept felonious miscreants from prison, I would goof off around town or at the houses of classmates. When I was in the first grade, video games were just gaining popularity at pizza parlors and Lake County had yet to acquire an arcade. The

Atari 2600, Neanderthal predecessor to today's homo superior home gaming systems, was still unheard of so, my friends and I mostly played by pretending. In the course of a week's play, I would be any number of characters from my imagination, books I had read or movies or T.V. programs I and my playmates had recently seen. These childhood games would lay the groundwork for my years as a pretending adult.

During the week, I tried (like any other kid) to fit in with my peers at school. After school, I just tried to remain under Mom's radar not wishing to add to the level of stress she felt trying to provide a home for us. Our weekends were often spent amidst a gaggle of families that we had no blood connection to, but a stranger walking up on these gatherings wouldn't know it. As strays, we were often taken in by more stable families. Jimmy Buffet was just becoming popular as Florida's balladeer and there was always somebody's uncle playing guitar as we all sang along to his rendition of Buffet's latest release and the grown ups smoked joints from the payment received from The Coptic Zion Church of Florida. There were always two types of brownies at these cookouts. There were "brownies" for the consumption of anyone in attendance at the gatherings as well as "brownie brownies" that had been infused with some of the sacrament from the Coptic Zion Church. A result of their legal openness to accept any client's case, Uncle Skip and Uncle Mike represented the Zions. We called them "ganja men," because the State of Florida wouldn't let them smoke marijuana in church or anywhere else if the State had anything to say about it.

Uncle Skip and Uncle Mike were great defenders and determined to support the ganja men's right to smoke reefer wherever they pleased. I'm not sure if the "ganja men" ever legally won that right, but quick research revealed that as of 1994, "ganja men" in Florida were still being prosecuted as criminals. Uncle Skip eventually quit smoking pot recreationally (and most

likely entirely) and was elected Public Defender for Lake County. He married a woman named Ginger and raised two sons. He's living *la vida normal*. Being out of the loop of Lake County politics these days, I'm unsure as to whether or not he's anywhere near as idealistic as he used to be, but I do know that the Jimmy Buffet-crooning character I witnessed as a child is no longer a public persona of his. I ran into Uncle Skip at a convenience store years before my accident. At the time, he certainly seemed cynical enough for politics to me.

"Most people who are in prison deserve to be there," I'd heard him say as I waited in line behind him. This was a far cry from what I used to hear him say late at night as he crooned along to Buffet's latest LP long after most people had left the weekend's festivities. Today, I can't help but wonder how many lies he's had to tell to get to where he is. I'd be willing to bet one of my titanium limbs that he's had to lie about his Parrot Head's past.

Uncle Mike married H.L. (Honey Lamb was her real name. I shit you not.) and brought some demon spawn onto the planet in the form of his two daughters. While I have never met the Hatfield girls, their tantrums are infamous in the small town's coffee talk. I will occasionally see his name in the paper and laugh as I realize just how little he has changed since those *Havana Daydreamin'* days out on a lake in Umatilla. He's definitely not as cynical as Uncle Skip has become, but he's not as financially secure either. I think if I was to ask either of them, they'd each think they got a better deal than their former law partner.

To hear Jimmy Buffet today makes me think of Uncle Skip and Uncle Mike and makes me believe that any individual has complete control over his own destiny. Those two men started in exactly the same place and have ended up exactly where they want to be, and polar opposites of each other. I like that about each of them. Though neither they nor I knew it at the time, they were also introducing me to those gonzo ideals that would, decades later, characterize my own

life and writing style. If only in my memory of them, those two men were larger than life and, at one time, represented ideals that were equally mythical—sticking up for the little guy and our government and laws are not always right. When I first met them, Uncle Mike and Skip were out to have an impact on the world and whether they realize it or not, had a tremendous impact on the daydreaming son of their secretary. Later in my life, after being exposed to the work of sixties revolutionary Oscar Zeta Acosta, I couldn't help but wonder if Acosta, Babb and Hatfield, P.A.s could have ever been a reality. I like to think, had Acosta lived longer and moved to Florida, it just might have been a real possibility.

After she had been working for the outlaw attorneys for a handful of years, Prissy was joined in the Sunshine State by her baby sister, Meegan. Meegan had spent her youth with the earlier mentioned Paw Paw and Daddy Mack. It was at their home in St. Petersburg, FL, that I first met the people I, at the time, could only guess were Grandad's parents. They were soft and friendly—a stark contrast to the tough leather of a man that was Champ Echols. Regardless of their blood ties to my mom and me, they were family and provided the avenue that allowed my aunt Meegan to come to Florida and start her own reinvention of self. She brought my infant cousin Stacey with her. The pair soon settled in a trailer park in Paisley, FL—just north of Umatilla—and despite Paw Paw and Daddy Mack and their offspring having lived in Florida for many years before Meegan's arrival, I felt as if Mom and I were no longer alone in the Sunshine State. We now had our own family nearby.

* * * *

Soon after I had started the second grade, Umatilla Elementary officials called Prissy to the school to discuss my recent testing for a learning disability. Apparently, I was “unruly” in

class and my teachers thought it might because I could not comprehend the material. They couldn't have been more wrong. I don't remember learning how to read. I do know that I could read in the first grade and only Russell Ettinger could too. I also know that in the second grade, those same, non-reading rednecks from the first grade were holding me and Russell up. By the second grade, I had become bored by public school. When I tested at astonishing levels, surprised school officials called Prissy to re-evaluate their plan of action. She removed me from public school at the end of that school year. Testing revealed to my teachers that I possessed an above average intellect that they were ill-prepared to encourage. Feeling like the public schools were ill-equipped to teach me, Prissy enrolled me at Faith Lutheran School in neighboring Eustis. It was a painful decision for her, especially after she realized she would have to squeeze Jerry for the money to get me a better education. I never heard any of the fights she had with him to get the tuition money for my next five years of education, but I know they took place.

I attended Faith Lutheran until the eighth grade. The school didn't have a high school or I'm sure I'd have gone there. Despite my having attended Umatilla's Baptist Church for most of my life, the Lutherans welcomed me into their fold. Being in a private school, most of my classmates were from comparatively affluent families. Nobody I went to Faith Lutheran with had ever lived in a trailer park and as far as they were concerned, neither had I. I was smart and funny. Those traits helped me to adjust to the vastly different demographic of students who attended my new school. Compared to Umatilla, Eustis was "the big city." Compared to Umatilla Elementary, Faith Lutheran was Harvard for pre-teens. Being an above average student and a mediocre athlete who hustled, I fit into the small, cliquish community of students with relative ease for a "poor kid." I was never picked on for not having the most fashionable clothes or for not being up on the latest trends, but I was the product of my delusional mother and was well-

versed in making others believe whatever I wanted them to about myself. At least, that's what I thought.

I was still a student at Faith Lutheran when the Atari 2600 did come out and while most of my private school classmates owned one, I was still pretending to entertain myself. I owned an incredible set of Legos as a child and though Prissy couldn't afford to keep up with my friends' technological acquisitions, she tried to make up for it by supplementing my Lego collection with that company's most recent catalog additions. We were still poor, but we'd been much poorer. I had seen our move from the Umatilla trailer park into an apartment in Eustis as a move up the social ladder. I never realized the importance of our trailer to Mom. Our small, two-bedroom singlewide was the first home Prissy had ever owned. When we moved out of the trailer, we were leaving not only my first home of memory, but Prissy's first major move of independence as well. The event was probably a lot harder for her than it was for me, but that thought wouldn't cross my mind for another twenty years. The apartment in Eustis was far less embarrassing for this kid than a trailer in Umatilla regardless of who held the deed to the property. Even after that perceived social elevation, I didn't invite many people over. They had multi-storied houses with steps to their bedrooms. I had steps to my front door.

In our final years in Umatilla, Aunt Meegan and her new husband, Kent, began to host the familiar, familial weekend gatherings at their lakefront house in Umatilla. Meegan had met the Disney imagineer as he was wrapping up his education at Lake-Sumter Community College. The seventies were coming to a close and Walt Disney had well established the now exploding Central Florida landscape as a vacation destination. While completing his education, Kent had been hired by Mickey's corporation to help plan the construction of the newest addition to the Magic Kingdom, Epcot. Stacey was soon joined by a younger brother, Justin. Given Meegan's

proximity to her sister, and my having grown old enough to babysit, she and her husband had free childcare. Prissy now had family that would watch me on those rare occasions that she did something social that could not include me. The arrangement seemed to work out well for both families. More often than not, it was Meegan and her husband who would require my services before Prissy required theirs. Fortunately for me, one of the perks of being Stacey and Justin's regular babysitter was that I often accompanied them to company sponsored events at the theme park. As a result, I probably visited Disney just as often, if not more than, many of my wealthier classmates. This familial connection to "the happiest place in the world," provided me with unique social currency that I was not afraid to spend in my circle of pre-teen friends.

I'm sure there's some dichotomous opposition, if not irony, in the comparison of Meegan's arrival in Florida to Prissy's migration to the Sunshine State. Several years after arriving in Florida with her new husband and child, Prissy was a single mom trying to make ends meet for her small family. In a much shorter period of time after she came to Florida, Meegan had gone from a single mom just barely scraping by, to become a wife and mother of two. For some odd reason, Meegan had come a lot closer to Prissy's idyllic family faster and with less effort than her older sister, but Prissy's baby sister had her own emotional baggage.

Meegan divorced Kent, and he returned to his home state of Nebraska. Meegan went on to marry a Umatilla local, Wayne Kicklighter, and they had son, Aaron. Stacey moved from home right after graduating from high school and does her best to remain far enough away to make her visits back to Florida a pleasant surprise. Justin lived with his father in Omaha for a while, and his current military life makes his visits to the Sunshine State even more remarkable than his sister's rare appearances. Aaron is wrapping up high school and attempting to parlay his baseball skills with his above average, athlete's grades into his ticket out of Lake County.

I grew up with Stacey while hearing tales of Justin and Aaron's childhoods from Prissy. After Stacey and Justin left, even she seemed to concentrate less on maintaining a relationship with Meegan. Prissy reasons that the growing distance between her younger sister and herself is because, "Meegan becomes more and more like Champ every time I see her." When she was a young adult, Stacey alluded to Meegan's harsh discipline, but knowing both factual stories and legends of his cruelty, I can only imagine what the second generation of his household discipline resembles. I imagine that my aunt Meegan can be frightening. Hell, she helped drag me out of a coma. That kind of effort takes tenacity, which is a not-so distant cousin of mean.

I obviously didn't have any lack of a familial connection. I grew up knowing Paw-Paw, Daddy Mack and their clan as holiday relatives. Despite my never really knowing how I was related to them and theirs, on occasional holidays Prissy and I would spend time with their more nuclear familial formation. Grandad and Nanny Echols made semi-regular appearances to all our residences as we found a place to settle. When I grew old enough, I even spent extended visits with my Echols grandparents after Champ retired and they settled in Cape Coral, Florida. Their youngest child, my uncle Todd, spent many summers avoiding Champ's ire much more successfully than his siblings, and Todd and I remain close to this day in spite of the fact I haven't spoken to his mom in close to a decade. So, I guess even the most normal of family relationships that I experienced as I was growing up were far from traditional.

While I don't think my non-nuclear family needs to be exonerated, I do feel it necessary to tell you, gentle reader, that I do not hold my lack of a non-traditional family experience to any level of culpability for what happened to me June 24, 1999. As strange and strained as our relationships have been—starting before I was even born—my familial relationships have been as casual and unkempt as I have made them. My collection of aunts, uncles and questionably

related cousins, from at least the Echols side of my extended family, were all at least cameo characters in my childhood. Even after the divorce of Prissy and Jerry, in spite of how alone I thought my mom and I were, we weren't. Even after Jerry became a nonentity in my life, I did grow up with a family. It just wasn't mine. After learning the Makowskis weren't real concerned with my upbringing even though I shared their name, and seeing the various members of the Echols clan battle their own neuroses and psychoses, I started to feel as if I didn't have any family.

After her divorce from Jerry, Prissy was no less determined to somehow construct her familial ideal. As had been her fashion, she stayed too long in an unhealthy relationship while attempting to perpetuate an illusion of domestic harmony. She had done this her whole life. Breaking this habit would be hard and she would learn that lesson from a man I never called "Dad." I wasn't taking my cues on how to live my life from the Makowskis, the Echols or even Prissy's boyfriend of over two decades. I was learning my lessons about life from Prissy's example. Unfortunately for me, because of her insistence on facade, I would never see just how miserable she actually was. I would, however, learn how easy it was to lie to others and keep them at an emotional distance.

Unbeknownst to many of her friends, and even me, Prissy was neurotically unhappy for most of the 20th century. I didn't know this fact until I was well into my twenties. She was unhappy because her life was not how she wanted it to be and she found herself lying to everyone, herself included, about that truth. Statistics have already told us both, gentle reader, that my not having grown up into a rapist criminal was not the societal norm. After growing up with a man named Kip Young as my primary paternal influence for most of my life, my lack of

criminality is damn near a miracle. With Prissy as my maternal influence, it's no small surprise to me that I became the liar I am.

Fables of Another Failed Father Figure

Soon after her divorce from Jerry, Prissy became seriously involved with Kip Young. I didn't know until I was almost an adult that she had met this man before her divorce. As I have told you, Prissy has told me, meeting Kip was what pushed her to divorce Jerry. After meeting the older, married man, she knew she couldn't cheat on her husband. She could lie to herself and others about her happiness, but she could not lie to her husband. She believes that Jerry was just as unhappy as she was, but he would have never suggested divorce. He would have stayed unhappily married to her to this day because, "that's what Makowskis do." Maybe the Makowskis were just better at lying to themselves than she was. Well, it wasn't what Prissy would do and at it wasn't something the new man in her life would do either. The pair divorced their respective spouses and over the next two decades were about as close to married as two people who don't live together can be.

I have always thought Kip was a cool name, going back to my pre-teen exposure to Robert Heinlein's sci-fi in *Have Spacesuit: Will Travel*. Kip had two kids from his previous marriage, a boy, Danny, and an older daughter, Josie. They were both graduating high school as I was wrapping up my time in private school. Danny was a jock and always off playing some organized sport that Kip invariably coached. I never really grew close to him. Josie, on the other hand, was a perk for my mom. Prissy's relationship with Josie's dad had given her a built-in babysitter. I can only guess that Prissy saw our new non-nuclear family as a lot closer to her ideal than the more traditional one she had left.

Surprisingly, Josie relished this idea and thanks to her influence on me, by my final year at Faith Lutheran I was the hippest kid in school. My first concert was The Clash at twelve years old. I had French kissed a high school girl by the sixth grade thanks to one of Josie's friends wanting to teach me to do it right so my future girlfriends wouldn't suffer as she was suffering at the time. Josie was, and is, gorgeous. Before giving birth to my niece in 1986, she had huge tits. To this pre-teen boy, she was the coolest person to walk the planet. To this adult man, she still is.

Mom and Kip always left Josie with a set of car keys when they brought her over to watch me. "In case of an emergency" was the disclaimer. Well, whatever rock and roll sensation happened to be playing in Orlando that particular night was an emergency to my new sister. I had been to more rock concerts before high school than most of my Faith Lutheran friends would ever attend. With my sister's charisma, and great rack, I met more rock legends than a detox counselor at Betty Ford: Greg Allman, Steven Tyler, Joe Perry, Cher, the Van Zandt brothers of Lynrd Skynrd, Randy Rhoads. We would watch them perform on Friday nights, meet them some of them backstage afterward, and then hang out with the families of the crew on Saturday. We always got back home in plenty of time to make a mess of my mom's house before she and Kip got home. I have only just realized why Josie enjoyed babysitting me so much—the car. I have also recently learned that when Josie's charisma or tits couldn't get us backstage at a concert, my leukemia did. I do not have leukemia.

* * * *

My mom dated spaceman Kip for over twenty years. He would often ask her to marry him and she would always refuse. We would have these twisted father/son talks as I rode with him to the store after dinner to get my mom a Pepsi. Growing up, there were never soft drinks in

the house. An occasional treat for Prissy, I never realized that the main purpose of our trips were so that Kip and I could “talk” at her request. For many years, our talks were more about him and my mom than my movement toward maturity.

“Kip, how come my mom doesn’t want to marry you?” I asked on more than one occasion as we drove to get Mom’s Pepsi.

“Cuz she’s such a good housekeeper.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Whenever she gets mad, she kicks me out and keeps the house. I got to have my own place to go to.”

By my senior year of high school, Josie and I eventually figured why Kip had his own house. It would take my mom several more years to learn of his remarkable cocaine habit and string of other girlfriends who were far less matronly and domestic than Prissy was. I guess the “Ass, Gas or Grass. Nobody rides for free” bumper sticker stuck to the passenger-side visor inside his truck should have warned me. After her graduation from high school, Josie opted for the family of my mom and me over the one she was born into. She would often rattle my bedroom window late at night claiming “something spooky” at her single apartment had sent her to our house. Mom would wake me up for school the next morning to find Josie had usurped my bed and left me to sleep on the floor. I was a hard sleeper and had probably begun the night in bed before being tossed out by my sister’s wrestling Freddy Kreuger in her sleep.

I never grew very close to Josie’s brother, and when my mom finally did catch on to the reality of Kip’s duplicitous ways, he went with his father while Josie stayed with us. Kip recently died of a stroke. The wages of sin is death. Danny occasionally calls my mom, and he and Josie meet for motorcycle rides on sunnier weekends. I always send him my best. Josie says he always

asks about me. I never called Kip “Dad.” I think that’s why Danny and I were never that close. Kip Young was the major paternal influence in my life for many years, but he wasn’t very fatherly. Dig this. My senior year of high school, he took my mom on a weekend cruise. I, as was expected by my classmates, threw a hellacious party in their absence. I thought I had returned our house to its regularly immaculate condition before Mom and Kip hit dry land. My secret soirée was revealed by a dryer full of towels and a forgotten condom wrapper discovered on the ledge of the shower. Kip’s reprimand was brief as we took the familiar trip for Mom’s after dinner Pepsi.

“Throw a little party this weekend, son?” He tapped the broken Trojan wrapper in his open palm as we sat in the driveway of the duplex Mom and I had moved into just before my starting high school. Our trip to get Mom’s Pepsi had been in silence as he figured out what to say to me.

“Uh, yes sir.” Even though I had lied to Prissy about throwing a party, Kip scared me enough to be forthright.

“Well, you’re grounded for two weeks. Your mom wants you to find some volunteer work to do over the weekends too. Go coach at the Y or something.”

“Yes sir.”

He had turned to exit my confessional of his truck. “Oh yeah. One more thing.”

“Yes sir?”

“Don’t leave your rubbers in the shower. It upsets your mother.” He flipped the carnal evidence at my chest.

I only saw a few of the fights between my mom and Kip. The really bad ones took place while I was the University of Florida pretending to be a college student, but I had experienced Kip's brutality on two occasions during my time as a part of his dysfunctional family.

The first time I experienced his potential for violence, I was less than ten years old. After he and my mom had worked all day one summer Saturday re-tarring the roof of our Umatilla trailer, Kip decided I was going to stay home while he took Prissy out to dinner. Despite a trip to a nearby convenience store for junk food bribe that was my payment for staying home alone; despite the fact that I was a latch-key kid and very comfortable staying at home by myself, as Mom and Kip backed out of our trailer's covered car port, I threw a tantrum. Prissy saw and heard my outburst as they tried to leave for dinner. As she remained crying in the car, Kip burst into the trailer to, "bring the horse shit to an end." He held my head in the toilet as he lectured me on being respectful to my mom and letting her enjoy some "personal time" without me "to worry about" as he flushed. He told me that I would "grow up and be a man" starting as soon as he pulled my face from the bowl. His fatherly advice was as succinct as Prissy's would be. I kept a healthy fear of Kip Young for many years after that day. Whether or not my violent baptism in the toilet was a rite of passage, I couldn't tell you, but the only other time I saw Kip as angry as he was the day he tried to flush me down the toilet was several years later when I witnessed a brawl between him and his son.

Danny began drinking heavily at an early age. A true Southern man, his tastes ran from bourbon to Budweiser. I don't know what fuels his self-destructive behavior, but I know he was getting drunk with regularity before he graduated from high school. I also know that it is his affinity for alcohol that is causing his body to start failing him before he turns forty-five. When he was early in his twenties, Danny's drinking wasn't killing him as overtly as it is now. After he

had graduated from high school, held numerous jobs and lived in a number of places far seedier than Prissy and I'd ever inhabited, Danny came back home to live with Kip. Just as I was preparing to start high school, in a short-lived domestic experiment, Mom and I were living with Kip as well with even Josie being a part-time resident. It wasn't long before our contrived attempt to realize Prissy's domestic dream was torn apart.

I can't tell you the specifics of when the fight between Kip and his son occurred. Nor can I be helpful in discerning what motivated the confrontation, but I do know Danny was very, very drunk and that the father and son fought like two grown men hell-bent on killing one another. They pulled down bookshelves. Crashed through coffee tables and furniture. They punched and kicked each other like mortal enemies. They cursed each other like demons, but they both bled. I watched them try to kill each other until Danny was physically thrown from the house and was driven away. I think it was Josie who smartly spirited him away because she would tell me years later, "Beanee [that's what she called him because as a toddler he only ate VandeCamp's Beanee-Weenees] was drunk and all amped-up on coke. At that time, the Old Man was clean because of your mom. When the Old Man was clean, he didn't put up with anybody doing that bullshit. When Beanee showed up at the house all coked-up, the Old Man freaked." I can count the number of times I've heard Josie call Kip "Dad" on one hand.

Even with its violent and destructive nature, Prissy's relationship with Kip was one of the longest she had ever been in. Its eventual dissolution was no celebration for my mom. She knew she was only getting older and farther away from her dream and it was the fear of being alone that kept her involved with Josie's "Old Man" for over twenty years. Surprisingly, the vicious relationship that was imploding in our house during my high school years had little impact on my high school experience. By my teen years, I had mastered my mom's neurotic lying ability to

levels of borderline psychosis. High school did not start off all that easy for the kid who had grown quite comfortable in the small, tamed classrooms of Faith Lutheran, but because I was a teenager and more comfortable liar it would become a haven from my unhappy home.

I was also discovering that as I became more independent, I was having much more fun than anyone else in my house. Having borne witness to more violence and discord than I ever wanted to as a child, I had no taste for it as a teenager. As an adult, I've come to understand that violence is little more than an expression of one's inability to communicate in any other manner. It is the most Neanderthal form of communication. Fortunately, I have shared the only instance where Kip felt it necessary to communicate with me as such. Based on Josie's tales from her and Danny's youth, they were often spoken to in Neanderthal. My mom will only recall "one or two times" where she held conversations with Kip in his native tongue.

Kip Young gets no exoneration from me for what he did to my mom. Josie told me she thought he looked scared when she visited the broken husk of a man on his deathbed in the hospital. Her adoption of pagan philosophy and subsequent diagnosis with cancer before the Old Man's passing made her more forgiving. When she described the speechless, helpless collection of bones in sagging skin that used to be the man she had feared for so long, I felt like Jack Nicholson in Tim Burton's original *Batman* movie—the villainous clown Joker dressed as a circus clown for a mob hit...*Hello, Kip. It's your Uncle Bingo. Time to pay the check.*

A Mother's Fatherly Advice

I walked the short distance through Evergreen Cemetery and its adjacent neighborhood to the law offices of Merritt and Watson after my first and lousiest day at Eustis High School. Prissy had taken the job in Eustis just a year or two after I started at Faith Lutheran and was comfortable enough with these employers to have me come to their office after school. These Real Estate and Personal Injury attorneys weren't as familial as Uncle Skipper and Uncle Mike, but they paid her better and helped facilitate our move from the Umatilla trailer park. Besides, the seventies were veneering over into the eighties and nobody was all that familial in the eighties. Even though John Merritt and Ron Watson were not adopted family, I had walked to the attorneys' offices because I couldn't stomach the bus ride home.

When I walked into my high school's cafeteria for the very first time, I didn't know a living soul. A few of my friends from Faith Lutheran had also transferred to Eustis High, but did not share my lunch period. I walked into the cacophony of the cafeteria like the geek from every high school movie produced in the decade that I attended high school. Somehow, over the course of an all-too-brief summer, I had become Anthony Michael Hall in *Sixteen Candles* or *Breakfast Club*, take your pick. I was going to have to build a whole new circle of friends. This realization struck my fragile, teen ego like Judd Nelson's raised fist in the latter-named film. In the privacy of an empty conference room, I relayed my pitiful story to my mom.

“Well, sir. What are you going to do about it?”

I was shocked by her question. “What?”

“Are you going to walk here every day in tears, or are you going to meet people and enjoy the next four years of your life?” She made it sound so simple because it was, as long as I only told people what I thought they wanted to hear. My flimsy, adolescent honesty disappeared that day.

When I initially shared the story of Prissy’s fatherly advice to me, many of my friends, especially those that were writers, would say things to me like, “So, just like that. You changed who you were? It couldn’t have been that simple. You couldn’t have gone from miserable freshman to on your way to being senior class president that easily.” Whether or not they, or even you gentle reader, believes me when I say my adolescent social metamorphosis was as simple as turning a switch is really not that important. That day in an attorney’s conference room, I decided I would do whatever took to enjoy myself in every possible situation. I wasn’t sure how I’d accomplish this goal, but I was going to have fun for the rest of my life. I started my second day of high school with newfound focus.

For the next four years, I would tell anybody anything if I thought it would make them like me. For the next four years that philosophy would work. High school egos are well-known to be fragile. When you’re as duplicitous as I was at that age, the naïveté of your peers combined with those fragile egos makes for your popularity. When you’re telling distraught, teenage girls exactly what they want to hear, they will like you. When teenage girls like you in high school, you’re popular. Plus, I had the bonus of my pre-pubescent kissing lessons.

In her high school days, Prissy was often sullen and withdrawn. Like her, I had mastered the act of remaining elusive and aloof about my home life. To her extreme opposite, where she would create an idyllic goal for herself and then delude herself into thinking she was nearing its accomplishment, I would just discern what others thought about me and then lie about who I was

in order to, at my discretion, agree with or antagonize their perception of me. Prissy tried to live her fantasies while in high school. I tried to delude myself into thinking I could be everybody's friend. I may have accomplished that goal. I merely diverted the attention of my peers away from my own demons and towards those of others.

When I spoke at my high school graduation as president of my class, I recounted a much more romanticized version of the story of my first day of high school to my classmates and their attendant family members. The girl I had dated throughout high school came down from the University of Florida to hear me speak. My former girlfriend who had graduated the year prior to me commented on the change in my personality over the preceding four years. I thought she was being complimentary when she commented on how radically different I'd. I've only just realized that she was trying to warn me about the asshole I was slowly turning into.

"You were so shy. What happened?" She had her arm around me as we walked from the football field and four years of adolescent melodrama. We had stopped dating after she graduated the year before. It was 1987 and I'd become a model of the self-serving superficiality that has since characterized the "Me" decade. Carolyn was a year older than I was and, like me, knew no one her first day at Eustis High. I, like her, graduated as Senior Class president and editor of the yearbook. She rose to popularity by remaining elusive about her own fucked-up home life, but remained true to herself. We shared the former characteristic, but not the latter. We grew slowly apart even though she, like Josie, preferred my family to her own malfunctioning, nuclear one. So, Mom kept her even after we stopped dating and even attended Carolyn's wedding. Prissy visited her and her family often. Hell, Carolyn's kids call my mom "Grammy P."

Always wary about how my friends and family will perceive my literary interpretations of themselves, I can reflect on my high school career and remember the best fatherly advice my mom ever gave me and see the exact moment where my life went from being subsidized by fabrication to one of almost complete confabulation. I came to her in tears that first day because I was miserable and felt powerless to change that fact. High school was shaping up to be no fun for me and she let me know I wasn't powerless to change my life. Problem was I had misinterpreted her advice. She was telling me what I should do and instead, I set about doing just what she had done at that point in her life. If I couldn't be happy, I would lie enough so it seemed as if I was. I wasn't real sure what would make me happy. I thought my personal philosophy, however iniquitous, worked pretty well for the remainder of the four years I was at Eustis High School. I had much more fun in high school than I would have expected after my first day. For the five years that I fucked around at the University of Florida while polishing my prevaricate prowess, I thought it was enough to be content with the women, drugs and beer procured through my prevarication. My search for fun became a never-ending hunt for a party mainly because my mom's recollections of her high school experience were devoid of stories where she was enjoying herself. Determined not to repeat her experience, I was going to make sure I had fun no matter what.

My twisted interpretation of Prissy's fatherly advice had most certainly improved my high school experience, but because I lied my way through it, I came away from my formative years at EHS with nothing but an overwhelming urge to get the fuck away from Lake County. I felt as if I was too big, too smart, too something for the slowly growing haven for RV-owning retirees. I had fallen into the trap that most pathological liars end up in—I was starting to believe my own bullshit about myself. As this falsified self-realization happened, my increased,

superficial, high school popularity and my own self-inflated ego lifted me farther and farther away from that gentian-violet-smear, hairless infant that Prissy and Jerry had brought into this world. The day Carolyn and I walked away from my high school graduation, I was even more remotely distanced from that shy freshman that she had been friends with less than a year before. By the time I was of the age when Prissy and Jerry had begun their efforts to have a child, I definitely did not share my mother's fantasy need to create an idyllic home life for myself. While I was no less delusional, by the time I was Prissy's age I had inherited more of Kip's do-what-you-want-when-you-want-and-who-gives-a-shit-what-anyone-else-thinks attitude and my young friends were just naïve enough to misinterpret my increasingly egocentric personality for independence and individuality. Years before I or any of my adolescent friends would realize it, Carolyn and my mom knew I was becoming an asshole. Me? I just wanted to get as far away from Golden Gem Estates and the stigma that gets associated with a Southern kid who grew up in a trailer park.

At seventeen, Prissy and Jerry tried to escape the dysfunction of their respective families by starting a new one with each other. By my seventeenth birthday, I had created a whole world for myself that essentially revolved around my egocentric perceptions of the world around me. Like Prissy, I continually lied to myself about the violent turbulence of my home life. Like Jerry, I wasn't very responsible, but where Jerry was just thoughtless, I was calculating and premeditative, knowing that I would just drop an activity, friend, obligation, et al. if something else suited my tastes or seemed more fun. I had seen how Kip treated other people and discerned that despite his barely having a high school education and having to perform manual labor for a living, he was still having a relatively good time. He lived just as he chose. The fact that he died scared and alone had yet to occur. So, I must have just selected those aspects of his personality

that I liked and assimilated them into my own artificial persona. His more negative traits would take a few months to manifest themselves in me, but I was well on my way to causing my mom just as much pain, and more, as his violent, duplicitous, drug-fuelled lifestyle soon would.

Let's Get this Party Started Right, Y'all

Coming from a private school into Florida's public education system, I was placed in all Basic Education classes my freshman year. As a transfer from a private school, I had to prove my academic mettle to the Lake County School System before being placed in classes that were more suited for a student who had only ever seen one report card without an "A" or "B" on it. The ease of my academic schedule afforded me a great deal of free time to pursue extra-curricular activities. I attended countless class meetings. I joined committees for things like homecoming float construction, dance organization, pep rally motivation, whatever would keep me away from my house. As I have told you, Prissy was magical in her ability to cover up just how unhappy she was. Despite her efforts to disguise the depths of her depression from me, her mood sat heavy on our home—wherever we lived.

Following my tear-stained traumatic first day away from the small, familiar classrooms of Faith Lutheran and my mother's fatherly advice, I learned that the president of my freshman class, Ken Spears, was a latch-key kid living in the neighborhood in between the attorneys' offices and the cemetery. With several hours to kill each day after school, I became fast friends with Ken and, because of his political ties to our class, had a direct conduit of information that would keep me abreast of activities that would keep me away from Merritt & Watson during the week and away from home on the weekends. My friendship with Ken most certainly had the desired effect on my freshman year. Even after my miserable first day, my freshman year of high school was predominantly fun. Ken had so much fun our freshman year, he repeated it.

For those first three years of my high school experience, my definition of fun was innocent enough. My miserable first day mainly revolved around walking into a packed high school cafeteria and not knowing a single person. High school was much more fun after I stopped eating lunch alone. Outside of school, my friends and I had a definition of fun that mostly included harmless pranks like toilet-papering peoples' houses, sneaking contraband from Kip's hidden stash of *Playboy* magazines, stealing the occasional street sign and acquiring the ingredients for recipes out of the *Anarchist's Cookbook*. It was the late eighties, almost twenty years before the Columbine tragedy, and high school boys building small bombs to blow up wasps' nests wasn't a call for alarm. I can remember a particular incident where after an attempt to make napalm resulted in little more than a foul-smelling stain on our driveway, Prissy was not so much upset by my attempt to make a volatile, flammable substance, but because I had just left that foul-smelling stain on the driveway to our duplex after my failed experiment stopped interesting me. The "napalm incident" is a nice encapsulation of my high school philosophy. If I found an activity, a class or even a person that I thought was fun or entertaining, my attention's focus was rivaled only by my enthusiasm. Of course, as is often the case with the intensely interested and under-motivated, as soon as I stopped enjoying myself or being entertained, I lost *all* interest.

My high school academic work became more difficult each year as faculty became aware of my potential, and I went from being in classes that were almost remedial my freshman year, to gifted student courses my sophomore and junior years and Advanced Placement coursework to end my high school classroom experience. With less than a thousand students moving through the halls the entire time I was at Eustis High, popularity was less about *which* clique you hung out with and more about how many *different* social circles you moved in. I was a smart kid stuck

in classes where I obviously didn't belong that first year, but the friends I made were still people I saw in the hallways even after I stopped writing pop quiz answers large enough to be seen from a satellite.

My after school meeting and eventual friendship with Ken Spears unconsciously translated into a vicarious friendship for my freshman classmates who might not have normally socialized with their class president. Ken would make sure I knew about upcoming events, meetings, etc. and I would invite my classmates from "Remedial English for Farmers" and "Math with Blocks." I'd like to think that at least some of my classmates became more involved and enjoyed their own high school experiences because of my own desire to know as many people as I possibly could wherever I went. My own silver tongue, quick, adolescent friendships, my academic initiation into a small, public high school and a desire to never eat lunch alone were just the right ingredients for my John Hughes transformation from class unknown to class president, but I never liked the geeks nor the popular guys in those movies.

* * * *

About six months before my graduation from high school, I received notice of my acceptance into the University of Florida. Florida was not my first college of choice. It would only be decades later that Prissy would tell me that I had been accepted to my first choice, the University of Southern California, but she had told me I had not because, "there was no way I could afford to get you to California for a day, let alone four years." I will let you, gentle reader, determine whether or not that act of prevarication rates exoneration. Feeling like I had to settle on a school that, unlike a majority of my classmates, I was not really interested in attending, I

decided to make the remainder of my senior year of high school as much fun for myself as I could. I saw the spring of my senior year as an excellent opportunity to prepare myself for the type of fun that Kip's former *Playboy* magazines had told me I might find at one of *Playboy's* "Top Party Schools." With directions from Kip's magazines and a subscription to *Rolling Stone* that Jose had bought me in eighth grade and renewed every year, I had a pre-college curriculum in mind.

As I coasted through my last semester of high school, I was the worst kind of liar—a smart one that lied mostly to himself and his mom. Sure, I had disproved criminal statistics about kids from broken homes by just getting accepted to any college, but the fact that I was not the thief or rapist sociological statistics had predicted I would become did not make me any less criminal or any less immoral. However, my talent for half truths and my own exaggerated criminality made me quite popular. As I have said, my friends and I weren't criminal as much as we were mischievous, but by our last year of high school we were adding alcohol to our exploits.

Less than a decade before I graduated, many of Josie's and Danny's friend enjoyed the privilege of drinking legally their senior year of high school because eighteen was the "Legal Age of Consumption". This law did not hold true for the Class of 1987 to which my friends and I belonged. Fortunately, in my circle of close friends, handsome Eustis High swimming star Kevin Bishop had a birth date on his driver's license that, with a little documentation doctoring, could be amended to look as if Kevin had been born in 1966 instead of 1969. Bill Gates and Steve Jobs were still out West building microcomputers in a garage somewhere and Al Gore and his cronies were still developing the Internet on paper. Altering a driver's license took little more than a razor-sharp X-Acto knife and a steady hand. With careful choice of where we shopped for our contraband, Kevin was able to avoid careful scrutiny of his obviously doctored driver's license.

Once Kevin had grandfathered himself into legal drinking status, the convenience store we would visit on a Friday or Saturday night to purchase our six packs of Budweiser Tall Boys was not very conveniently located to any of our regular social haunts around Eustis. The twenty-minute nighttime drive down state numbered roads to backwoods stores like Jiffy Market, Junior Food Store or Buck & Doe's Market was often the entire evening's adventure.

With a swimmer's body, Florida boy good looks and his doctored I.D., Kevin Bishop was quite the high school icon. After I met him through Ken Spears my first year, Kevin introduced me to a mop-topped doctor's son who would become my best friend and remain my only close friend from high school.

Ted Comfort didn't have to lie to be popular, but he did anyway. He was the good-looking son of local anesthesiologist, Dr. Comfort. I kid you not. Ted's dad, Dr. Tex Comfort was not only an anesthesiologist, but he was the son of a dentist. In my opinion, Dr. Comfort the anesthesiologist is almost as humorous as Dr. Comfort the dentist on a business card. Providence had granted Ted all the social status that I was working and lying my way toward. Detached parents had caused Ted to lie to himself about his own emotional availability. A kid who would do anything to be popular teamed up with a kid who couldn't help but be popular was a dangerous mix. Being barely fifteen when we met, we were still too young to get into much trouble until our junior year. Though my penchant for lying had started to regularly get me into trouble with Prissy I lied to her about everything in my personal life I either knew or thought she wouldn't approve of I was still able to avoid school fights and police run-ins that were not uncommon for many teenagers living in rural Lake County.

I was blissfully ignorant of my infantile immorality and its effects on my mom's fragile psyche, but I thought I was smart enough to avoid getting caught in any big trouble. I was also

still doing what I needed to get into college. Though we no longer lived in one, I knew an education was my only way out of the trailer park. Prissy was still struggling to keep a roof over our heads, food in our bellies and clothes on my elongating back, and left me fairly independent to make my own bad decisions as long as there was no criminal element in my poor decision-making. It wasn't until I started getting caught in my lies about my social antics, which were becoming increasingly more dangerous, did she and I have our earliest confrontations. While our conversations about my increasing proclivity for prevarication were never as "Neanderthal" as those with Kip, my constant search for experiences that were pleasurable, regardless of risk, and then lying about my activity were starting to unravel Prissy's fantasy family just as painfully as the day of her realization that she didn't love Jerry.

Around the time most of America was starting to enjoy the prosperity and fluorescent clothing of the late eighties, Ted and I were modifying our definition of fun. Though not actually old enough to be members of the "Me Generation," he and I certainly subscribed to the more egocentric tenets of that generation's ideology and because Ted had an older brother (named after where he was conceived—Duke) who was a student at Florida State University and was a stereotypical "Me Generation" collegian, we had unusual access to the more hedonistic tendencies of his social set. Duke was the influence of Ted's pre-adolescent years that Josie was to mine. By the time we were seniors in high school, Duke was nearing graduation from FSU. This academic coincidence and the Dr. and Mrs. Comfort's frequent trips out of town for extended weekends were significant factors in mine and Ted's introduction to psychedelic drugs.

By April of 1987, we had settled into a relatively predictable social routine. As a graduating senior, class president and editor of the yearbook, my last semester of classes was dominated by things like my yearbook obligations and being a teacher's aide to Mrs. Beeler who

was also the yearbook faculty advisor. The only real academic work I did at school in my waning months was in Advanced Placement English and Pre-Calculus classes. Though he was destined not to walk at graduation—he tanked Pre-Calc—Ted pretty much shared my schedule. Our mornings were spent in serious academic endeavor—well, mine were—and afternoons were frequently spent off campus. Eustis High seniors enjoyed off-campus lunch privileges. For the majority of my classmates this meant quick runs to Wendy’s, Mickey D’s or the local favorite King’s Barbecue that ended with car hood picnics in the parking lot. On most days, for Ted and me, this meant our school day was, for all educational purposes, over.

Class was often in session even long after the last bell had rung at EHS. That was our euphemism for doing bong hits. Invariably, as one of us held in our first hit from Duke’s bong (regardless of *his* presence at our pot smoking session), he would creak, “Class is *now* in session,” and then release a cloud of smoke to a shared laugh. Though Ted had discovered his older brother’s hidden stash of porn, pot and paraphernalia the summer before, we hadn’t started raiding his stash until after the New Year. I wouldn’t smoke pot until I knew I was getting into college. I don’t know if Ted started smoking before that or not. I do know that the handful of my classmates whom I have seen in social situations since graduation were all quite surprised to hear that their senior class’s president and vice president were “stoned as shit” (Ted’s words) their last eighteen weeks of high school.

We had obviously both known that Duke was “into drugs,” but his parents thought he was “long out of that phase” in his life. Well, he wasn’t, but Duke’s prevarications are not the impetus for this story. It’s the locus of my pathological lying that I’m trying to discover and my mom is of the opinion that I must look back at my past decisions to see where I went wrong. So, I have been attempting to do just that, gentle reader. In the movies I was growing up on, in the

books I had read and the comic books I had re-read, and in my mom's Baptist opinion, there was always an event—"a turning point"—where one must make a choice... Good/Evil, Right/Wrong, Vice/Virtue, Ying/Yang, Freak/Square, On the Bus/Off the Bus... They are all the same. Given the virtue of your perspective, gentle reader, I may have made that choice much earlier in my life. When I started drinking beer (even after Kevin lost his I.D. and Florida's DMV technology caught up with our less-than-unique forgery methodology); when Ted and I started skimming from Duke's hidden marijuana, those were all important points where one could say I made a life-altering decision. But none of those decisions saying, "uh, sure," to that first proffered can of beer; deciding that, "since we know where Duke's pot is, let's smoke some,"—seemed a logical syllogism; these are both major decisions where in popular literature and film, and Prissy's personal mythology around my life, I made the wrong decision. I believe my moment of decision was made on that night I did psychedelic drugs for the first time. I do not believe it was a bad decision to eat psilocybin mushrooms, but it was life-altering.

For Ted and me, the particular Friday night began as many others had. Though the exact date of the experience escapes us both, we agree it was growing critically close to graduation. I rebounded my memory of the event off of Ted through the phone.

"It was a Friday night like any other and we were planning a relatively small get-together." Ted knew I was looking for his "facts" to confirm my version of the story.

"Yeah, but Duke showed up."

"Exactly. Stump was like, 'What are you doing?' and I said, 'We're having a little get-together,' and he was like, 'Uh, no you're not.'" We laughed because I'd forgotten that we used to call his older brother Stump behind his back. Duke Comfort resembled the 5' 5" stump of a promising Redwood tree cut before its first centennial.

“That’s right. That’s why I had to throw people in the pool.”

“Well, first Duke showed us the big bag of mushrooms he had. He told us only we could stay. We got a hold of pretty much everybody and told them my parents hadn’t left.”

“But Jenny Stewart showed up with a couple of her friends.” I was starting to recall hazy moments.

“Yeah. She shows up with a couple of girls that are all hoping to score with my brother’s friends...”

“But that was later,” I interrupted.

“Oh yeah. You were definitely tripping when you threw her in the pool. It was funny as shit.”

I remember the ritual that took place an unremembered amount of time before I began dispensing unwanted baptisms to teenage girls in the Comfort family pool. Duke stood behind the bamboo bar that separated the living area from the dining room. Ted and I sat in the bulky, padded barstools that matched the bar. We nursed cocktails in large, plastic tumblers. We were partying with college kids. We drank liquor to fit in. We were about to eat mushrooms because we’d been invited to. We both read *Rolling Stone*. I was starting to read Hunter S. Thompson’s *Gonzo Journalism* and Tom Wolfe’s *New Journalism* and sharing my insights with my best friend. We had a grasp of the definition of cool that these media subscribed to. We knew that psychedelia was an intrinsic part of that definition. We sought to define ourselves as that kind of cool.

For those not in-the-know, psilocybin mushrooms grow in cow shit. The ambitious psychedelic-experience-seeking person can find these keys to Huxley’s “Doors of Perception” in select cow pastures across the Sunshine State. In the late decades of the twentieth century,

farmers began feeding their cows with a grain treated with a chemical that would prohibit the growth of the mushrooms. Even in the 21st century, if one looks hard enough, there are those rare pastures where farmers are making their own feed, and their cows' shit produces these foul-smelling, psychedelic treats.

Unfortunately, regardless of cleaning or days removed from being in cow shit, the mushrooms still reek of manure and taste like what I imagine cow shit to taste like. Duke dangled a plastic baggie filled with dried button tops and stems before our less than impressed eyes. We didn't know how bad they smelled until Duke waved the open bag a good foot away from us. He handed us each a small handful of dried caps and stems that looked like the types of mushrooms I'd seen on pizzas. I ate those mushrooms without hesitation and popped Duke's withered communion into my mouth just as nonchalantly. As soon as the taste of dried, aged cow shit hit the back of my throat, I knew I was going to throw up. One look from Ted told me he shared the expectation of regurgitation. We didn't vomit right away. We chewed what may have just been cooking mushrooms dredged in manure, but weren't.

Either twenty to thirty minutes or a geological era later, we stood in Ted's backyard staring down at the contents of our stomachs. I don't remember seeing any mushroom pieces, but I do know that even if I had, it wouldn't have mattered. Hands on my knees, intently staring at a line of drool stretching from my mouth to just above the wavering soil, I knew I was starting to trip. My mind had left while I was throwing up. The psilocybin had tricked my body into providing the diversion for my mind's escape. As I half-knelt trying to collect my long-since-departed thoughts, the universe was sneaking up on me. I stood up and was caught by the late afternoon sun setting over Lake Eustis—most of which could be seen from the giant picture window that made up the entire southern wall of the Comforts' living room. The sky was all blue

and the sun hung in the distance out of sight. The poet's blue sky was reflected perfectly in the breadth of the unusually boater-free lake. I've always admired a breath-taking sky, and this was no exception. As I turned away from the moment, I was caught even more unexpectedly than by the original image by the sky's reflection in the Comfort's giant picture window. I was surrounded by spilled paint, Florida cliché, blue skies. For either a heartbeat or until the sun set, I was flying.

My landing was uneventful and so was most of mine and Ted's first hallucinatory experience together. We went spent most of the evening as Duke had intended by feeding us our psychedelics hours before his guests arrived—out of the way and readily maneuvered by the merest distraction. Ted and I spent most of the night glued to his VHS copy of *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* that we watched on the big screen in the living room. We have no idea what took place in the rest of the house behind us. We did, however, argue against the fireplace's dissenting opinions on our topics of conversation. Mushrooms were proving to be quite the pleasurable disconnect from reality. Until Jenny Stewart showed up.

“Duke was all, ‘Get your little, slutty girlfriends outta here!’” Ted reminded me. “We were arguing with the fireplace about whether or not Darth Vader really was Luke's father. Jenny and some other chicks were all standing by the pool looking like Madonna wannabes. We strolled out there and I asked them to leave. Jenny started giving me some lip so, you just picked her up and threw her in the pool.” I had no memory of the event's specifics; only of its occurrence. “She and her girlfriends were all pissed because they'd worked so hard to slut themselves up. Duke and I were pissing ourselves, and you, you just walked back into the living room and started watching *Indiana Jones* like you were getting back from having taken a piss.”

Apparently, the girls left in a shared huff and flurry of ruined hairdo. Ted and I spent the rest of our evening watching a storm break across Lake Eustis from the comfort of his overstuffed living room sofa.

I didn't do psychedelic drugs again until I left high school. My exposure to people who used drugs had been limited to seeing only the damage that those who make the choice to do drugs are capable of. The books and magazines Josie was feeding me told stories of the fun and spiritual side of drug use that I had now had a glimpse of. The literature I had started to read before that night at Ted's house became my literary canon after my experience. I graduated from Eustis High intent on experiencing this new level to my good times at a school infamous for devouring incoming freshman just like me. Ted failed pre-Calculus and was sent off to boarding school in Worcester, Massachusetts. The punishments of the wealthy are far less severe than those of the poor. If I'd have failed pre-Calculus, I'd have been doomed to live out my days in Lake County, Florida, with aspirations toward the trailer park I had left as a child.

Unfortunately for the money Ted's parents spent to send him to boarding school, he did not learn the lesson all uninterested parents send their children away to learn. He did learn some really cool party tricks and the drug habits of the wealthy's offspring, but that comes up later. I had learned how to turn up the level of experience of my partying and was hungry to learn more. The Jimmy Buffet lyrics my mom sang with her friends held new meaning and depth. The rock music of Aerosmith, Queen, the Clash, et al. that Josie was adding to my musical tastes became anthems to my own experience.

At my orientation at the University of Florida, the group I was touring the campus with was lead into a small auditorium. There were about 50 future freshmen with a parent or pair. The

captive audience of fidgety students and sweaty parents was probably around two hundred people as the relaxed cheerleader told all the future students to stand.

“Lock eyes with someone standing in front of you.” He paused while we shuffled around trying our best to look as collegiate as possible. Like we knew what was coming. “Look to your left. Look to you right. Now, look behind you.” After each instruction, we were given enough time to form the expected, optical relationships. “Only one of the people you saw is going to be at Florida this time next year.” Most of us slumped back into our shoddily padded chairs.

Later, as we all filed out of the room I would later visit as a classroom, Prissy pulled on my arm so I bent down to hear what she had to say.

“I hope you were paying attention during that part about less than 20% of incoming freshman make it through their first year.” I had missed the statistic. “Neither one of us wants to know what would happen to you if you flunked out.”

“No ma’am.” I squirmed from her grip. I knew where the keg party was that night. I wasn’t flunking out of any *Playboy*-ranked party school.

I didn’t flunk out of UF after my first year. My John Hughes/Cameron Crowe cinematic fantasies of high school were just changing location and growing more adult-themed. There were fewer than 150 students in my graduating class. There were five times that number in my 8 am Calculus class and at least 400 people in my 10 a.m. Sociology class. Prissy calls it “Big Fish/Little Pond Syndrome.” I was a big fish in the small pond of Eustis High, but arriving at the University of Florida showed me I wasn’t as high on the social food chain as I had imagined.

I knew a handful of people who had graduated from Eustis and gone on to UF. They were all in disparate social groups, and none of them seemed to be having as much fun as I thought

they could or should be having at college. Me? I was ready for the next, bigger party and my experience at Ted's house had shown me that I could handle it.

The Party Goes “Furthur”

I joined a fraternity my freshman year because I still didn't want to eat lunch alone. The University of Florida's smallest cafeterias seat in the hundreds. My first two collegiate roommates were randomly assigned by the university and admitted social outcasts in high school. My own self-confidence was so over-inflated I needed the social comfort of like-minded individuals to keep me from feeling so alone. With Jerry being a non-presence in my life and other Makowskis reduced to a signature on Christmas and birthday cards, I had separated myself from the Makowkis with little discouragement from them. Prissy's relationship with Kip was imploding all over the house she had finally purchased on her own, and I couldn't have been more geographically or emotionally removed from the conflagration. My new friends called me “J.P.” and I visited Lake County with less frequency than I visited my professors.

I didn't flunk out of UF. As I was prone to do, I just lost interest in the academic aspects of life in and around the university. I quit registering for classes. Of course, I had quit attending classes that lost my attention. Eventually, as my friends matured and graduated, or merely flunked out, I lost interest in the goings-on at my fraternity house. For two years, my entire time as a student at Florida, I posed as a college student pulling a cumulative GPA under 1.0. If my time in high school can be described as an attempt to live a life like those in the John Hughes films I was watching at the time, my years posing as a college student are best described as my attempts to have a collegiate experience like those in the *National Lampoon* films I was watching with my fraternity brothers. After that nearly three-year-long haze of beer, bong hits, booze,

drunken sex, various other recreational drugs and intramural sports, I was bored when what I had expected from college was pretty much what I was experiencing. I needed a new party.

I had been told during my auspicious freshman orientation lecture that “At the University of Florida, it is much harder to find someone to study with than it is to find someone to go to a party with.” *So, quit studying and go with them to the party.*

When I pledged, my fraternity assigned me twenty-five-year-old sophomore Tom Kleinman as a “big brother.” Tom indoctrinated me into the world of binge drinking, late night poker, road trips, pranks involving the unusual relocation of farm animals, getting free meals from restaurants and lying to sorority girls. By no small coincidence, we fell off the academic grid around the same time and moved into an apartment together about a mile from campus. Tom got me a job as a short order cook at a popular bar and restaurant. No longer distracted by academics, Tom sought new and illicit ways to increase his income. When not working or sleeping off the effects of a previous night’s exploits, I was in search of the next big thrill.

I ate more mushrooms on multiple occasions and sniffed Freon through a homemade gas mask. I swallowed innumerable prescription drugs and chased them with every liquid their labels warned me not to ingest with them. I ate LSD in paper, liquid, gel and sugar cube form. I snorted cocaine and heroin, but drew the line at sticking a needle in my own vein. When the nineties brought Ecstasy to the drug scene, I “tuned in, tuned out and went to work late on Monday,” just like *Rolling Stone* said you were supposed to. As I ate all those drugs and attended all those parties that were just like any tell-all rock and roll biography I’d read, I’d forgotten about what had happened while I was bent over my knees that late afternoon in Ted’s backyard. The universe snuck up on me.

I met Tom Kleinman when I was seventeen. I was barely a decade removed from my barefoot playmates in Golden Gem Estates, and the New Yorker-transplanted-to-Miami Tom was a worldly-wise globe trotter in the eyes of a kid from Lake County. Almost five years after our initial meeting we were roommates, co-workers and often, co-hosts of memorable (consumption permitting) parties. Almost a full decade before Ricky Martin's appearance on MTV, Kleinman and I worked, partied and played like we were living *la vida loca*. Then, the crazy Moroccan that owned the restaurant we worked at hired a new waitress and bartender.

When Tammy and Memorie came to work at Farah's on the Avenue, Tom and I were two of the scummiest, directionless dirtbags you could ever meet, but we could throw one hell of a party. To raise money for expenses that could not be resolved by our income as cooks, Tom was a bookie and I sold pot. We drank to excess and had the manners and grooming habits of Neolithic plains dwellers. In less than a week after the doe-eyed, robust breasted Tammy, and the soft-lipped, liquid sexy Memorie—I kid you not, that was her real name—started punching their time cards in the kitchen where Tom and I spent forty-plus hours a week sweating, Tom decided to take action. Seeing either one or both of the objects of our desire clock in to work one particular afternoon, Tom pulled me from my culinary task-at-hand and informed, "We gotta have a house meeting tonight!" He spoke with an urgency that I did not recognize. Something big was going down, and as had become my expectation, I was going to be in on it.

Previous house meetings had normally revolved around domestic assignments, money due for bills, my wearing Tom's clean laundry without permission, or planning for the next party or road trip. That evening after work, Tom had an edge, a sense of expectation as we hurried home in his late model Trans Am. We got home and Tom turned on the stereo and the ubiquitous Led Zeppelin or Van Halen CD began to provide background music for the dramatic monologue

that Tom had prepared in his head. I smoked a bong hit and settled back into the couch awaiting his soliloquy.

Having waited for me to exhale so he had my full attention, Tom began his speech, “Look at us, JP,” he was standing in front of me with our foot locker/coffee table separating us. We were similarly dressed in t shirt, baggy shorts and high top sneakers mainly because most of my outfit had come from Tom’s closet. We were similarly stained with foodstuffs from Farah’s and both had needed to shower and shave before our day in the kitchen had started. “We are scum bags.”

He was right, but we *were* enjoying ourselves. I was quick to remind him.

“Yeah, but we can do that and still not live like this...” He spun around with his arms outstretched. My eyes followed him around the living/dining area of our dirty apartment. I eyeballed the “DIP” road sign hung behind a pyramid of empty Copenhagen snuff cans. I tried counting the CDs that seemed to collect in random spaces: the floor—in odd stacks, the dining room table—fanned-out, in the middle of our ragged *mama-san* chair. I squinted toward the countless posters of the Manhattan skyline that papered our walls. I wondered where we had gotten all the different beer bottles that formed various monuments all around my field of vision. “We have got clean up our act.”

As Tom inhaled to begin his plan for our makeover, the reason why he had been gripped with a seemingly sudden desire to domesticate himself appeared on the scene. From the window in our living room, Tom and I watched as Tammy and Memorie bounced out of Memorie’s gun metal grey Nissan and laughed their way to our door. Tom was standing in the open doorway as both girls squeezed past him into our apartment.

“Work was dead so, we got cut early. Everyone told us you guys left in a big rush today.” Memorie was scanning our apartment as I just had, but with a much more critical eye. “We came by to see what was up.” She mussed my greasy hair with French-manicured nails, “Ugh. You need a shower.” She dropped on top of the CDs in the *mama-san*.

“You both do.” Tammy was scanning the skid marks left on her t shirt by her brush with Tom as she had squeezed into our apartment.

“Hi, ladies.” I tried not to be the dork Memorie’s presence made me feel like. Tom had steamed off into his bedroom. He returned with two cigars and a lighter. I was relieved not to be alone with the two women we were attracted to.

“Get up, JP. We’ve got to take a walk.” He turned toward Tammy. “JP and I have some serious shit to discuss. You girls are welcome to stay here until we get back.” He walked outside our apartment and waited for me to join him.

As we walked away from the girls and our apartment, our discussion was mainly a litany from Tom about what he perceived to be our most major character flaws. “We both need hair cuts and you’ve got to start showering every day. We gotta get back in school. We need to clean up our pig sty of an apartment. We gotta stop drinking so much. We have got to get our shit together...” I now knew what Tom was excited about. We turned back toward our home. “These girls are hot, working toward degrees and we have got to change our image if we want to be more than just party buddies with these women.” I now knew exactly why Tom so motivated.

We had become fast friends with Tammy and Memorie because it was our apartment where most after-work parties took place. We were funny and seemingly intelligent. Because we were such dirtbags, we knew the girls were out of our league and they knew they were safe. I had confessed my growing attraction to Memorie and Tom had shared his affinity for Tammy. Tom

was falling in love. I just thought Memorie was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life.

As we walked back to our apartment, Tom's litany became a list of the actual efforts that would be required for our transformation into more appealing men. We were to start that evening. "We've got to clean our fucking house. We need to do laundry," he stopped walking. "You have got to stop wearing my clothes." We continued our casual pace. "We'll clean our own rooms and bathrooms and split the rest of the house...I'm gonna go by campus on my day off. We gotta be more serious about work..."

We arrived back at our apartment to find the two girls drinking beers and reuniting orphaned CDs with their cases. In a move that would be predictive of their personalities, Tammy had started straightening up our apartment while Memorie went to get the beers. The four of us would spend the rest of the night drinking while we cleaned the apartment. I believe the girls even spent the night.

Tom and I pulled what I believed to be social transmutations of Mormon proportions. While Tom was actually cleaning up his act, I was doing what I had been all along—posing. Tom eventually moved in with Tammy, and she had even talked him out of some of his more nefarious money-making schemes. I moved in with Memorie and we continued to spend our time together doing what we had met doing—drinking. When not working toward her degree in Parks, Recreation and Tourism, the fantasy-flight-attendant-hot Memorie was a formidable drinking partner. Our dates were characterized by the unique locations where we would either wake up or get discovered. While Tom and Tammy built the relationship that would lead to their eventual marriage and children, Memorie and I drank like rock stars and fucked like porn stars. It was true love by all accounts.

As the carefree, egocentric eighties ended and we began the last decade of the twentieth century, Tammy and Memorie graduated from the University of Florida, Tom was actually attending classes and I was moving into my mom's house outside of Leesburg. The plan was, I would work and save money so Memorie and I could move in together after she returned from an internship on Andros Island in the Bahamas. I kept my job at Leesburg Regional Medical Center for about a year following the phone call from Memorie where she informed me she had met somebody else who could provide for her in financial ways that I never could. She had realized my grand lie about the possibility of our future together. She had just lost interest and moved on.

I met Amy Kinsey on the rebound from Memorie. She was a Recreational Therapist at the hospital where I worked as a PT Assistant. We had common interests like baseball and roller coasters and she was interested in me. That interest made her attractive to me and we started dating. Prissy liked Amy because she was "nice"—she didn't do any drugs and rarely drank alcohol—and came from a normal, nuclear family. I had started going back to school, was appearing more responsible and less motivated to become a Merry Prankster clone. Prissy attributed my behavior change to the realization of the vanity and fruitlessness of my earlier lifestyle.

I was beginning to tell the greatest lie I would tell to date in my personal history. I would lie to myself and my mom like I always had. I would lie to Amy and her family like they never expected. My lie: "I just want to live a 'normal' life." "Normal" was by the smiling definition of both my parents and Amy's. I had been more places, met more interesting people and broken more laws in my five years since high school than Amy had ever dreamed possible—mainly because I lied a lot. She assumed I was settling down. My wilder days were behind me. I had led her to believe all these things.

We met and dated for just under a year before my sudden departure from Leesburg. I drove to work one day, realized how much I hated hospitals and the majority of people who worked and resided in them as I walked into the hospital, exited and drove back home. I packed up my white Mercury Horizon with everything I owned and drove to Tampa. I signed a lease to the first ghetto fabulous apartment I looked at and took a job with the first restaurant that offered me one-Bennigan's. After almost two years of working in the hospital and a semester's worth of Physical Therapy prerequisite courses, I had lost interest. Hell, I'd lost interest in working at the hospital months before quitting, but hung around because of my increased interest in Amy.

Almost six years after my graduation from high school, my mom was happy and content, but I was still restless. I had given her away at her wedding and was seeing her enjoy a level of personal happiness I had never witnessed. She was in love with her husband and he loved her. My mom had found happiness and while I wasn't paying attention. Even after my move to Tampa, Amy and I continued our relationship as Amy built a relationship with the newlywed Raders. Our mutual exposure to my parents' happiness, and her having grown up in a nuclear family, gave Amy and Prissy a similar domestic ideal for me. Amy believed she would be the one to settle me down. I lied enough to encourage her misperception. It wouldn't be until after we were married that I realized geographic separation was one of the main reasons why mine and Amy's relationship lasted as long as it did.

Lying All the Way to the Altar

As was becoming my character, the woman of my life motivated me beyond mediocrity. In less than two years after leaving Leesburg like the Colts out of Baltimore, I was offered a job traveling the country to teach the “Bennigan’s way” to employees of newly opening stores. The mid-nineties was a period of major expansion for corporate restaurant chains like Chili’s, T.G.I. Friday’s and Bennigan’s. Good waiters and waitresses were often recruited from one restaurant to another in the middle of their shifts, and companies were quick to promote from within to prevent defection. After six months of traveling around Florida as a “Corporate Trainer” for the increasingly popular, Irish pub themed bar and grill, I returned to Tampa and the newly relocated Amy. She was always glad to see me when I returned from long, exhausting road trips where I essentially lived in a Bennigan’s restaurant for weeks at a time. I liked the part of being domestic that had someone waiting for me when I arrived home. I liked the fact that I could live an entirely separate life while I was on the road. As I traveled around Florida, I visited bars, partied and stayed in hotels like I was a rock star. When I got home, I was a loving boyfriend and surprisingly domestic roommate. I was still completely irresponsible, but making enough money to appear like I was much more together than I was. I continued to lie to Amy about our future together and, when traveling, continued to party like I was a third-year sophomore at UF.

In the restaurant industry, one’s recreational drinking and drug use must become a major distraction before your superiors take notice. When training at my first store openings, I partied hard enough to earn a reputation among my peers, but avoided attention from our corporate bosses. I was calculatedly charismatic as I instructed small groups of twenty-somethings on

delivery techniques for the Monte Cristo sandwich and was eventually offered a job as a corporate training representative for Bennigan's. I spent the next two years of our relationship traveling the country teaching what I would discover to be the ever-evolving "Bennigan's way" as the company began to open new stores all over the U.S. I was starting to think Amy's domestic desires and my recent professional success might be the right combination for my happiness. I was at least feigning my comfort around her parents and was starting myself to commit the dangerous lies I had started telling her to keep her in my life. "Sure, I'd like to have children someday.", "I can't imagine a family with anyone, but you.", "I'd love to live closer to your parents." I told them all to her.

While most of my lies to Amy were lies of omission about how I spent my free time when away from home, I never had to lie to her about my fidelity. I doubt I was ever really tempted, but I was monogamous. After my stint of extended professional travel, I was made a manager on team in St. Petersburg. I was commuting from our apartment in Temple Terrace and we were settling into a predictable, domestic routine. I had already lost interest in our relationship when I told Amy I was offered a transfer to Denver, Colorado. Part of me actually thought she would refuse my invitation to move to the alien Rocky Mountain State.

"Only if you marry me." Her response *did* surprise me.

I had the good job with good prospects. We were living comfortably and were upwardly mobile. What the hell? "Uh, okay."

"Say it. So I know you mean it."

"Amy Kinsey, if you come with me to Colorado, I will marry you." As she kissed me under the Florida sun for almost the last time, she started planning her wedding. She should have known I didn't mean it.

* * * *

My entire relationship with Amy Lynn Kinsey was almost seven years long. We were married for eighteen months. When I traveled with Bennigan's, my fidelity was legend among my co-workers. As I settled into Denver and looked for a place for us to move into, Amy packed up our lives in Florida. It would be nearly a year before Amy and I made the drive from Tampa to Westminster, Colorado. Despite my declining interest in our relationship, Amy was still making plans for our future together. I was still in search of my next party.

It was barely a year after moving to Colorado, when I was offered a job by Dave & Buster's (a kind of Chuck E. Cheese for grown ups). They were paying better than Bennigan's and were a young, exploding company; the opportunities for advancement were presented to me as unlimited. Dave & Buster's also looked like a more fun place to work. My first year at work for D & B, I learned they had plans to expand into Florida. Though I loved the Mountain State, Amy hated Colorado. It was too far away from her family and she missed her Southern roots. I had no roots. I loved Colorado. I realized she and I no longer shared the same plans for my life. It was only after that realization that I hired Jennie Whiteman as a cocktail waitress and office assistant.

Unlike Amy's commitment to our marriage, my relationship of indiscretion began subtly, over time. Amy and I had lived in Colorado for just over a year when we returned to Florida to get married close to family and friends. After our honeymoon, we returned to Colorado where the remainder of the honeymoon came to a screeching halt. After she "had" me, Amy became less concerned that our differing goals and aspirations were taking us in different directions and instead, focused on the realization of her domestic dream whether I was interested or not. I

initially lied to her and myself and made half-hearted efforts to see if our divergent paths could be reunited. On nights where I would return from work only hours before she had to wake up and go to work, I would follow my fourteen-hour workday by staying up and teaching myself how to make different kinds of breakfast. Amy eventually told me that she “just couldn’t eat a heavy breakfast so early in the day.” She suggested I just try to get some sleep instead of “wasting [my] time.” Well, since my going through the motions of trying to connect with the stranger that was my wife, was not working like I thought it should, I completely lost interest in my marriage.

I was soon traveling for Dave & Buster’s as they began to open new stores across the U.S. With my wife working sane nine-to-five hours and me, the times when I was actually home in Colorado, working twelve-plus hours a day, it wasn’t long before we merely lived in the same house. If we didn’t have concurrent days off, we wouldn’t see each other for as long as two weeks at a time. Apparently, this was okay with Amy. It was not okay with me. I would later learn that Amy’s parents had lived similarly after they first got married. “Eventually,” they would tell us, “your lives will become more like ours.” I had seen the life of Bob and Gilda Kinsey and was not in the least bit interested in modeling my own after it. I stopped calling Amy multiple times from work. She stopped coming out to see me at “Chuck E. Cheese’s for grown-ups” and I started living less like she was my wife and more like she was a troublesome roommate I was forced to be mindful of. Amy stopped coming to pick me up at the airport after business trips soon after that. I started going straight to work after I’d get back from traveling.

Eventually, the cocktail waitress and office assistant I had hired started picking me up at the airport. My marriage had fallen apart due to a lack of shared interest. I had no interest in being married at all, and Amy was just hoping for our marriage to begin resembling her parents’.

My affair began because Jennie Whiteman offered to have sex with a man whose wife had not shown any interest in sex in almost six months. Jennie and I had a torrid affair that revolved mainly around our ability to drink and do drugs for several hours at a time before having sex for a handful more hours. We didn't talk to each other about anything other than our own failed relationships and what unusual places we would try to have sex in. Amy discovered my infidelity thanks to Jennie's ex-husband who called one night while Jennie was retrieving me from my latest road trip. Amy was shocked and never saw it coming. She thought we were happy. She had assumed the bump in our relationship was just a phase while we tried to find professional success and that after I was settled into a career, our relationship would evolve more into the domestic model her parents were providing for her. I told her that her ignorant bliss did not surprise me given the household she grew up in. As Amy made her plans and motions to return to Florida, I set about trying to kill myself in the slowest, most pleasurable way possible.

* * * *

Mine and Amy's divorce was far quicker and easier than Jerry and Prissy's. We were DINKs (Dual Income No Kids). We had split up our property before even seeing an arbitrator. We didn't own much and Amy wanted as few reminders of her time with me as possible. Since I had ruined Amy's ideal, I agreed to pay for her fantasy wedding that had failed to produce a lasting marriage. At least, that was the lie I told the arbitrator. I think Amy was more frightened by the stigma of being the only divorcee in her family than of actually losing me. I simply did not care. Jennie and I had started a little six-month binge of hardcore drinking, drug abuse and kinky sex. The dissolution of Amy's marital mirage had little effect on me. I'd lost interest in our relationship long before I packed up to drive to Denver by myself for the first time. Somewhere

between Faith Lutheran School and Dave & Buster's, I'd lost sight of the seventh commandment.

Less than three months after filing for my divorce, mine and Jennie's relationship began to crumble as she learned my desire to extend the party also affected the intensity of the emotion I had told her I felt for her. I was interested in my own good times and Jennie had wrongly assumed I would take her along for the ride. I'd lost my job at Dave & Buster's—they didn't take kindly to mine and Jennie's indiscretions—and was even more directionless than I had been when I moved to Tampa almost five years earlier. Jennie didn't care, she was in love. I was on an unconscious mission to commit as many of the deadly sins as I could. I was quickly approaching thirty years old. By all accounts of the rock and roll literature I had grown up reading in Florida, only the good died young. As a proud cheater, liar, thief, binge-drinking dope head, I was the sultan of sin. The wages of sin is death, but I would yet again prove to be a statistical anomaly.

I was riding the motorcycle Jennie's ex-husband had left parked at her apartment around town only because I knew he would see me and it would incense him. Days before my near fatal accident, Rodney called her to threaten me. Of all my cardinal vices, Pride was usually the sin that motivated me toward other iniquitous acts. I told Jennie's ex-husband to go fuck himself and my feigned hatred for a man I barely knew only encouraged Jennie's passion. I think I enjoyed my access to Rodney's motorcycle as much as I enjoyed the access to Jennie's panties. I had lived for nearly thirty years doing just what I wanted whenever I wanted to. I had lived a life of duplicitous vice and was not concerned in the least with the effects my lifestyle was having on others. The good times I was enjoying had made me blissfully shortsighted. I was destined to run a stop sign on that motorcycle because I wasn't looking for it. By the summer of 1999, I wasn't noticing anyone or anything that said, "Stop."

The Poetic Reality of my Pseudo-Resurrection

June 24, 1999. *Today is a good day to die.*

I rode the motorcycle to Coors Field for the “Businessman’s Luncheon”—that’s a weekday afternoon baseball game—because I knew I’d be able to park right in front of the bar owned by my friends Steve, Alan and Chris Black. The Falling Rock Tap House was a regular haunt or place of employment for most of my other friends and, during home games of the Colorado Rockies, we shared it with large crowds that assembled at the brothers’ Black bar and grill before and after games. We acquiesced to these crowds because not only were we glad to see our friends prosper (high sales usually meant free beer for friends of the ownership) but also because the Falling Rock was less than a block from Coors Field’s main gate. We haunted the Falling Rock not because of its proximity to Major League Baseball, but because of the beer. With close to a hundred taps, “the Rock” as we called it, was internationally known for its diverse, omni-changing menu. We would have hung out there regardless of geography. This combination of my favorite bar being so close to my favorite local sports venue, and my kinship with the owners, made for extremely close, and free, parking for me on those days when such a commodity was at its rarest.

Pulling up to the corner of 20th and Blake Street, my regular ticket scalper met me as I coasted alongside the curb of 20th onto Blake Street proper.

“What’s going on, motorcycle man?”

Colorado’s lack of a helmet law made me easily recognizable to my pre-game acquaintance.

The sky's hints of grey I had seen on the ride to downtown had me hoping for a discount, "Looks like rain," I tried to bargain, "Cutting any breaks?"

"It ain't gonna rain today, boss. My boy Sammy Sosa's in town. God likes to have clear skies to see all his homeruns."

I agreed to the usual ticket price plus his surcharge. I was a regular, so the surcharge was reasonable for the quality of seats I needed to feed my baseball addiction. My baseball jones required that I sit behind a dugout. I preferred to be in the first ten rows. The scalper always had seats and always hooked me up. I'd been living in Denver for close to four years and buying tickets from this guy for about two season's worth of Colorado Rockies baseball.

"Hey, my mom's coming to town this weekend from Florida. Can you hold me a pair of sweet seats for when McGwire's in town?" My mom's as big a baseball fan as I am. I knew she'd enjoy seeing the St. Louis Cardinals' Popeye-armed first baseman crush homeruns in the rarified, Colorado air.

"Sure thing, motorcycle man," He pulled my seat for this day from his stack of tickets. "I got your back. I'll hold you two right behind the visitor's dugout for Saturday."

"Cool."

We slapped vertical palms and surreptitiously exchanged cash for a ticket to the day's game. He slid the cash into his pocket and I slid my ticket into a pocket of my jeans shorts. Transaction complete, I teased the throttle and started to walk the bike away from the curb.

"Hey!" The scalper caught me before we completely parted ways. "You ain't gonna ride your mama on the back of that motorcycle is you?"

I laughed at the thought of my Southern Baptist Mom on the back of Yamaha crotch rocket. "No, we're gonna have lunch down the street at the Falling Rock before the game."

“I’ll see you there on Saturday, then.”

“See you then,” I waved to my semi-regular acquaintance and putted the half-block to my regular, game day parking spot in front of the Falling Rock’s slowly crowding patio.

* * * *

As was the norm for Colorado Rockies’ baseball games at the close of the twentieth century, both the home and visiting teams combined for over twenty runs. Sammy Sosa’s appearance at the stadium that was over a mile above his sea level, Dominican home was not disappointing to me, the scalper—nor God by his account—and we all got to see him crush two homers into the stratosphere. My pleasant day at the ballpark—I didn’t care who won or lost as long as there were homeruns and cold beer—started with a trip to the basement of the stadium. Coors Field has a microbrewery in its basement. Connections I had made through the Black brothers of Falling Rock had made the brew master of the basement a friend of mine. This relationship equated to free beer at the stadium for this baseball fan. After nine innings, 35 hits, 22 runs (10 of them earned), 5 walks and 13 strikeouts and several trips down to the basement to sample brews straight from the fermentation vats, I made my way back to the Rock to plan the evening’s mischief with my friends.

As I weaved through the postgame crowd assembling at the bar, my friend Bryan, having ended his work day at the bottom of the ninth inning, met just inside the doors of the old wood Falling Rock. We hugged like we always did when first seeing each other.

“Peester! How was the game?”

“The Rockies still suck, but Sammy is one bad mutha-.”

“Shut yo’ mouth!”

Since my move to the opposite side of Denver, my friend and I had not seen much of each other. That didn't hamper the fact that we spoke our language of literary and filmic references whenever we did get together. We were both excited about the opportunity to spend time together following our regular, baseball day schedules. We stood at the bar as we were both handed unasked-for beers and surveyed the blossoming crowd.

"Looks like it's going to be busy tonight." As the general manager of a different, popular sports bar, I was programmed to make those kind of observations.

"Yeah, I want to get out of here." Bryan scanned the crowding bar for his girlfriend. "C.J.'s not here yet. Let's go out back for a minute."

I followed my friend, who by no small coincidence had gotten a job at the Falling Rock with a handful of other people that used to work for me, through the bar's small kitchen and past its extensive beer cooler. We crossed through a small door into the alley behind the Rock and its neighboring watering holes.

Standing in the unpopulated alley, we sipped our beers and smoked a bowl of marijuana out of Bryan's small, metal pipe as we planned our actions for after the moment's respite. With the consumption of our first bowl of pot and half our respective beers, we'd determined that C.J. was missing in action and that we needed to smoke more pot.

Bryan held his hit and sipped his beer as I put the lighter to the pipe and lit its frosty green contents.

"Whatthefuckisgoingonouthereyoufuckingpotheads?!"

Steve, of the brothers Black, burst through the backdoor slamming into our quiet, smoke-filled alley.

“Jesus Christ!” Beer shot from Bryan’s mouth as the door burst open with Steve’s energy sending a wave between us.

I shook the beer that had splashed onto my arm from my glass when I jumped at Steve’s entrance onto the dirty street. Bryan playfully slugged the bar owner on the arm. Steve laughed at his own joke.

“What’re you guys doing?”

I finished the hit he had interrupted and passed the pipe to Bryan, “What’s it look like?”

“I mean despite the obvious, stoner.”

Steve Black didn’t smoke pot, but was tolerant of the indiscretion in others as long as he didn’t feel endangered. With Bryan and me being as infamously goofy amongst our peers as we were, Steve never felt endangered in our presence.

“I’m going to catch a ride with P back to my place,” Bryan held his hit as he passed the pipe back to me, “and then he’s going to go get his truck.”

“We’ll probably end up back here,” I added before smoking.

Steve turned on Bryan with a sudden seriousness. “You’re an idiot if you get on that bike with him.” He spun toward me with equal intent. “And you’re a fucking idiot if you get on that motorcycle.”

I didn’t think I was as fucked-up as Steve did.

I was a fucking idiot.

* * * *

Comparing My Death to Those of Vallejo and Justice
Él murió en Paris...He died in Miami...

I died in Denver just as an impending rain became realized.
In retrospect, it's a surprise the Cubs and Rockies weren't delayed
and no surprise Sammy Sosa hit two homeruns.
I died on my way home from that matinee—
like Vallejo, on a Thursday.

Dressed as my friends, whom I had left drinking
in the Falling Rock just blocks away from Coors Field,
fetal raindrops bit my exposed skin, a foreshadowing of pain,
as I motorcycled away from beer-fueled debates on the day's baseball.
Unlike Justice, I wasn't very old at all.

I was dead. Blood, red as the STOP sign I had run,
sponged into the black macadam of Mariposa Street.
Wailing emergency vehicles mourned my passing
bringing aquamarine strangers to the fight for my life.
I died on a Thursday—not as valorous as Vallejo.
I died in the rain—not as judiciously as Justice.

And like both those poetic corpses,
I have turned poetically prevaricate death into verses

* * * *

The sign at Eighth and Mariposa streets clearly read “STOP,” but the threat of rain and the 600 cc's of Yamaha FZR that I was straddling urged me past it. The fact that I was missing time to drink and smoke pot with my friends prompted my decision. From experience, I knew summertime, Colorado rainstorms hurt. I was wearing denim shorts, a Denver Nuggets tank top and no helmet. Raindrops hit me like high speed acupuncture needles. Drops like falling shards of glass bounced off the bill of my backturned Tampa Bay Devil Rays cap. I was barely protected from the elements and, as I coasted through the aforementioned stop sign, I gunned the engine. It stalled. I wasn't a very good motorcyclist and, as unprotected as I was from the

increasing rain, I was a hundred times more exposed to the Ford F-150 that was coming through my same intersection—without a stop sign to heed—in the opposite direction. The truck’s twenty-two year-old driver slammed on his brakes and pulled his steering wheel hard to the right trying to avoid me. My speed at the time of impact remains unknown. The driver claims to have been doing around 30 miles per hour when the truck struck me.

My right shoulder was caught from behind, by the truck’s left, front quarter panel. My upper body was deeply bruised to the backside of muscles and my exposed skin tore against the headlight and left quarter panel of the late-model white Ford. The force of the impact separated my right arm from my body. My arm was completely torn from my shoulder with only a thin stretch of skin keeping the fractured limb attached to my torso. Deltoid muscles from my shoulder and the triceps of my right arm were either completely ripped away from their points of origin or shredded and dangling from shattered points of insertion. About six inches from its shattered head, my humerus was crushed into finger-nail-sized chips.

The truck braked violently toward the curb and my legs were dragged underneath it with the tangled mess of metal the motorcycle had become. With the sudden introduction to the concept of inertia, the Yamaha’s rear axle snapped with the fragility of my bones and the thick metal screamed a half-inch deep scar into the pavement. As the machines screeched and howled to a violent halt, most of the flesh of my left knee and shin were smeared gorily alongside the axle’s gouge. The metallic screaming came to an abrupt, final crash when the vehicles and I hit the curb of Mariposa Street. I was thrown into the air.

According to rumored stories of eyewitnesses, I landed on my feet, far enough away from the smoking truck and crushed motorcycle, so that I was not easily seen from the steaming truck. Having landed with such freakish grace, my right leg, about six inches below my knee, exploded

in a burst of bone, muscle and flesh. Pieces of my tibia and fibula spiked into the ground like shrapnel from the skeletal grenade my leg had become. According to EMT reports, my right humerus was “split in half with at least a quarter of an inch of the bone missing.” My humeral artery dangled from my arm, spraying my life into the air like an angry, red sprinkler. Both the limbs on my right side spat blood viciously into the air. I fell backwards to the ground, my own blood having softened it for the fall.

The motorcycle had come to rest invisibly under the truck. Upon arriving at the scene, EMTs thought there had only been one vehicle involved in the accident. Soon after being alerted by witnesses and the young driver of the truck that there was more than one vehicle involved in the accident, the paramedics were shocked to find me still alive. My choking breaths gurgled through the blood flowing from my nose and mouth.

My research has shown me that this would have been one of the more appropriate times for me to have a Near Death Experience (NDE). I have no recollection of the events in this portion of the narrative what so ever. This story is the result of over five years of research, personal interviews, and review of reams of documents. There isn't any published research, that I could find, about people who can't remember an NDE. I assume stories about people not being able to remember much aren't as exciting as white lights, out of body experiences and seeing God. I know I came about as close as one as I can to dying only because I have been told by several doctors I should be dead. Given the damage to my body, I *should* have died on June 24, 1999.

The brachial artery supplies all the blood flow to your arm. It's one of the largest arteries in the human body. Ninety-five percent of the people that sever this major blood vessel die. The remaining five percent lose their arm. I have once again beaten the statistical odds by surviving

and keeping a relatively functional right arm following my injury. The humeral artery carries as much pulmonary importance as the brachial artery. If both arteries are severed, around 20% of the blood in the body gets pumped into the air with each heartbeat. I had ruined both of them on the right side of my body and should have been a fatality statistic—another bonehead dying on a motorcycle without a helmet. The EMTs, however, had another plan. Long before ever meeting me on that day, they had decided to save my life. The average adult has about ten pints of blood in their body. As I was loaded into the ambulance, those friends of Lazarus worked to get a second pint of my life's fuel back into my increasingly bloodless, but bloodied body. For the moment, only their professionally frantic efforts and my unconscious stubbornness were keeping me alive.

If I wasn't going to die on the side of the road, my death would then most expectedly have to be in the back of the ambulance. My mom would later be told that given the severity of my injuries, my corpse should have been discovered by paramedics. I had severed two major arteries and for another time in my life, I was going to have to beat the statistics. By all mathematical probabilities, I was going to die before reaching the hospital. If I was going to have that life-altering NDE I have since read so much about, this would have been probably the second-best time and place for such an epiphany. According to my research, there is no record of my ever having "flat-lined" or having to be "resuscitated" while en route to the hospital. With the multiple traumas my body had suffered, compounded by the extreme loss of blood, I should have died on at least two different instances in my experience. If only to be immediately revived by the coolly phrenetic EMTs, I should have died. I did not, and according to multiple, textbook definitions of Near Death Experiences, I did not have a legitimate NDE that I can recall. I am sorry if you are disappointed, gentle reader. All I did was survive.

I was rushed to Denver General Hospital (DGH), luckily less than three blocks from the scene of my accident. On the short trip, paramedics intubated me, reinflating my lungs so I could breathe as they tried to replace my body's blood supply. Hurrying to save my life, a team of emergency physicians were preparing to save my arm and leg as they reviewed notes on a procedure they would try for the first time on my fragmented humerus. When the truck hit me, my wallet had flown from my back pocket. Unconscious and unknown, I was wheeled into emergency surgery a *John Doe*. It would be a couple of hours before anyone found out who I was and that I had a family. After the first round of life- and limb-saving procedures were complete, I was a John Doe Frankenstein—an anatomical hodgepodge of surgical steel, titanium and emergency tissue transplants.

My hours of anonymity, but not a Mary Shelley caricature, waned. While my life and limbs were being saved at DGH, the police at the scene of the accident were wrapping up their administrative responsibilities. An officer arriving from the accident scene brought a Death Certificate for *John Doe*. After being refused a signature on my Death Certificate by badass emergency orthopedic surgeon and Discovery Channel celebrity Dr. Wade Smith, the officer was sent back to the chaotic mess of the disappearing accident scene to find my wallet. A social service worker and friend of my ex-wife recognized my name and face from my found driver's license that the ironic Denver Police Officer eventually gave her. I've never seen evidence of the Death Certificate. I guess John Doe got a pass that day too. Called in from a recreational hockey game, where he passed the time between rebuilding bodies when on-call, Dr. Smith had decided long before his arrival into surgery, "This one's going to make it."

He relayed that fact to the cop saddled with being my Grim Reaper. I guess with my having cheated death, this particular representative of Denver's Finest felt some Aesopian lesson

was yet to be learned. The officer Lazzarri’s comedic genius was revealed to me months later as I removed the blood-stained ticket he wrote me for a “Moving Violation” from my recovered wallet.

Enough dirt and “road debris” was removed from my body to repave Lower Denver. Mom would later tell me, “The only parts of your body that were safe to touch were the top of your left hand and face.” My only guess was that Denver was trying to recoup some of the cost of repair to their road. It had already cost me over a pound of flesh. Over ten percent of the skin from my legs needed replacing. Grafts were taken from the flesh of my denim-protected thighs to replace missing epidermis on both of my legs.

Around a week after my initial series of orthopedic surgeries, after consultation with my mom—who arrived in Colorado a day earlier than originally planned— muscles were transplanted from the right side of my stomach to rebuild my right leg from just below the knee, down to right above my ankle. The external Erector set that had held my leg together until this procedure was approved and completed was removed. A titanium shaft running the length of my fragmented tibia and fibula and a nearly a dozen blue titanium screws were used in the repair. A heavy metal plate and another handful of screws were used to temporarily rebuild and reattach my arm. After the gory, smithy work of rebuilding me had been completed (for the time being), my Aunt Meegan, Prissy and nurses then set about trying to roust me from the coma I had been kept in.

* * * *

Prissy’s trip to Florida was suddenly no longer motivated by her desire to see her son and to speak with him about the self-destructive path she just *knew* he was on. She had been to Atlanta only weeks after making the arrangements to come and see me. While she and Carolyn,

who was living in the ATL at the time, were on their way to a Braves game, they stopped and chatted up a woman who was on a street corner reading people's palms.

Prissy always had a "sense about things" and while not admittedly one who would put even a modicum of belief in the words of a palm reader, she felt like she's "always been able to just know things about people." On a lark, they both had their palms read. Carolyn's tale has faded from my memory, but I'm certain it involved a moment of the uncanny. Eerily, and to Prissy's disconcerting wonder, the curbside palm reader told my mom that of her five children, I was the one who "wasn't finished." Following my accident, my mom dropped even a casual interest in the arcane. She prefers to "not even care to know about that stuff." Whether or not her surreal encounter was a true precognitive experience; she will never admit to me.

Call that moment on the street corner psychic Karma, dumb luck, freak occurrence, kismet, coincidence or just a mundane moment granted mysticism only from a literary perspective, that strange woman telling her I "wasn't finished" turned her worry for my well-being into fear for my health. My mom tells the story of her departure to Denver from Orlando International Airport with a similar sense of detached mysticism.

Prissy made quick travel arrangements and was on her way to Denver within hours of hearing about my accident. She called her baby sister, and Meegan joined her without hesitation. My dad drove my mom and Aunt Meegan from Umatilla to OIA, and after a quick kiss, hug and agreement to phone as soon as was possible to his wife, she and her sister darted into the terminal. The nation was still two years away from the tragedy that has since become referred to as a numerical reference to a date. Americans traveled like they were going on an expensive, tedious, time-consuming ride at a poorly run amusement park. Security was what you got when

you bought traveler's insurance from a portable booth set up in the airport. Given these simpler times, one could arrive at an airport with only minutes to spare and still make a flight.

My mom ran through the doors as quickly as her weekend gardener's legs would carry her. She arrived at the end of the line waiting to check in long before being able to see the counter. As politely as possible, she moved to the front of the curling, slowly-pumping artery of luggage and people. At the front of the queue, a middle-aged woman waited for the next available attendant. My mom approached the stranger and fought to remain calm as she told her story.

"My son is in a hospital in Denver. My flight leaves in less than half an hour."

Oddly intrigued, "Do you know what hospital he's in?" the woman asked.

"Denver General..."

The next available ticket clerk waved toward the trio of women.

"...I'm a nurse there. They have some of the best doctors in the country." She nudged my silent mother toward the counter. "You wouldn't want a better bunch of doctors working on him." Prissy and Meegan moved stiffly toward, the attendant, as the woman told her, "He's in good hands."

I think my mom saw a greater metaphor in the woman's words. She and my father are active, tithing church members. "I wish I would have gotten that woman's name," I would later hear her say as she retold the story at her oldest brother's sixty-fifth birthday.

* * * *

The Intensive Care Unit at DGH is affectionately called “the Denver Knife and Gun Club” because most of its inhabitants are recovering from either near fatal stabbing or gun shot wounds. A certain amount of cynicism circulates through the staff and family members are made to tend to their own wounded in the gymnasium-like ICU. The secondary consequences of any, near fatal, bad decisions are immediately reaped by the decision-maker’s family members, who are usually just getting involved with their arrival to “the Denver Knife and Gun Club.”

“You had to pass through a metal detector to get into the ICU. There weren’t separate rooms; it was just like a high school gymnasium. There were bodies and beds everywhere with no walls separating them.” Now, my Mom relays her retrospective description with more awe than repulsion. “There were piles of dirty, bloody linens by every bed. The nurses made no bones about the fact that it was a very ‘hands on’ experience for the family members that were there. We did everything.”

I’m told this was a more trying experience than either Mom or Aunt Megan would ever let me believe. Between sponge baths, linen and dressing changes and exercising my rebuilt body, they spoke to me incessantly; trying to roust me from that senseless, nether world where I had taken up recent residence. I don’t know where I was, or where I had been, as my family talked to the sleeping science fair project they hoped would regain consciousness and become the person they loved. I was both of those.

“Pat. Pat. It’s Mom.”

I’d mumble something incoherent through dry, cracked lips.

“Pat? It’s Mom. Do you know where you are?”

“I’m in Texas.”

She'd be rattled by my lack of comprehension, but excited by my reaction, "What happened to you, Pat? Do you know what happened to you?"

"I was thrown by a bull," I'd creak.

She'd get teary-eyed until a nurse would tell her, "Don't worry, hon. Last night he was in Philadelphia and he had been shot. He's getting closer."

It was Aunt Megan who retrieved my first hoped-for reaction. June had leaked into July and her and Mom's efforts to wake me from my week-long nap were getting more insistent. The pair was trying everything they could think of to get me to respond. They'd been told that once I reacted positively, their reactions would encourage me to further responsiveness. About eight days after my running a stop sign, Aunt Megan tried again to roust me as Mom changed my mummy-like dressings, but unlike those who had been embalmed, I was coming back to life.

"Pat. Pat!" Megan yelled.

I was starting to react more favorably to their efforts, but the two of them were tiring.

"Pat. Pat!" Megan shouted, "Who is the biggest Nebraska Cornhuskers fan you know?"

Now, when trying to wake someone from a coma, one does not use an "indoor voice." For my diminutive Aunt Megan to practically shout her allegiance to Colorado University's (located less than an hour from the very spot where she stood in her funky-colored Converse) arch rival Cornhuskers took balls of steel. Just the memory of the grin of recognition that crept along my face brings all three of us to tears even now.

My response, "He-heh...Aunt...Meeegan," makes us pause at every retelling of the moment.

After regaining consciousness, I could not yet grasp the scope of my injuries. Immediate concern of my family members seemed to be over my lack of appetite. I just wanted the pain to

stop. That's why people don't come out of comas. When you do, the pain starts. My first memories of consciousness are of white hot pain. I couldn't discern which limb hurt more. As far as I knew, every cell in my body was suffering some sort of traumatic pain. I'd not read Chuck Pahaluniak's *Fight Club* yet but, my pain was not "a white ball of healing light." It was searing and crippling. No longer needing intensive care, I was moved from ICU through a hallucination where my mom and Megan drove me to the front entrance of DGH and helped me from the backseat of a Buick LeSabre that Jerry's mom owned back the eighties, and into the hospital. After I had been settled into a private room, where I could begin a whole new set of hallucinations, Aunt Megan had her own family to get back to in Florida. Mom and I were alone in Denver.

* * * *

Psalm of a Broken, Little Boy

As my rebuilt body was forced through a day's therapeutic routine,
my winces and grunts fell in time with the machine
I'd been strapped to. You turned away from the sadistic scene.
You'd broken no bones, but I saw my pain in your eyes.

I saw you cringe as each new doctor prodded and poked
my shattered frame. I kept my suffering private, choked
back my tears as scrubs-clad mechanics marveled at their work and joked.
It was me that'd been scarred, but it's you that cried.

For days I never knew you were there. Your only comfort was your sister,
who'd come with you. For hours both of you'd try to wake me with a whisper,
"Friends have been by...", "A pretty girl was here. You just missed her."
Lonely boy in a sterile, cold room, I slept despite no lullabies.

Those days would fade, sooner than thought, and become months we'd
both work to put behind us. All this agony from a STOP sign I failed to heed.
I've long since shaken my walkers and canes, but I haven't told you since I've
been freed;
far too old to want my Mommy, I still needed you by my side.

You'd broken no bones, but I saw my pain in your eyes.
It was me that'd been scarred, but it's you that cried.
Lonely boy in a sterile, cold room, I slept despite no lullabies.
Far too old to want my Mommy, I still needed you by my side.

* * * *

I'm told my immediate prognosis was "optimistic." The Doctors Frankenstein of Denver were led by Dr. James Ferrari. He figured my reconstructed right arm would be little more than "ornamentation" and that I would most likely use a cane for the rest of my life. On the bright side, I had months of therapy and a handful of further surgeries in my near future. My more immediate future revolved around getting me out of DGH. At the insistence of a hospital kitchen worker, who had been assigned the task of making me eat by Aunt Megan before she left, I was eating semi-regularly and gaining strength. The Doctors Frankenstein were planning to send me to a local rehabilitation center which equates to "an old folks' home." This idea sent my mom into a tailspin. After learning of the doctors' intentions, she started planning her move to Colorado so she could oversee my rehabilitation. She drove back to my empty apartment that night planning how she would tell her husband she was moving to Colorado.

I am the second youngest of all my acquired siblings. My parents were years removed from not living alone. Dad's response over the phone to Mom that night was calmly simple, "Bring him home."

I left DGH on July ninth. My memories of my last week in Colorado are dominated by the notion that the light fixture over my hospital bed resembled an over-sized version of one of those old fashioned, two-piece ice cube trays like they used in the fifties. I was waiting for it to empty its giant-sized contents on top of me—every day. As my body throbbed, the pulsing of the world around me caused the old fixture to flex as if being twisted to dump its contents. My

family made plans to fly me back to Florida. The Doctors Frankenstein of Denver were consulting with the orthopedic surgeon in Orlando I would later name Bone-Daddy and who would continue my skeletal macramé and metallurgy.

* * * *

Bone-Daddy

Bone-Daddy gone cut me deep.
He's waitin till the ladies in white has left.
He waits till I'm asleepin.
He gone to slip inside me.

Jesus' Daddy, he done built me once.
I went an tore myself all up.
Went to needin the Bone-Daddy
so's I could be put back correck.

Bone-Daddy gone to work on me.
Him with all his bolts, nails and screws.
Him with all his hammerin and metal-workin.
Put me back his own way.

Mama an Daddy, look at me they own way.
Like I'm they child, they own skin—
Sometimes like I was a pup, curlin up in they lap for the night.
Now,

Bone-Daddy look at me in his own way.
Him, like a blacksmith lookin to my bones—
he fixed his own self—
his long day's work.

Or like a farmer, lookin to his field—
he sowed his own self—
his long, life's work.

Bone-Daddy gone cut me now.
He gone before the sun get too high,
before the day get too hot.
He gone to sew me here his own self.

* * * *

Dr. J. Dean Cole had been in Denver only months before Sammy Sosa and the Chicago Cubs. He had discussed with doctors Smith, Ferrari and others about the very same reattachment and reconstruction procedure that holds my arm to my body today. He was going to do some further carpentry on my arm to deny Dr. Ferrari his prognostication on my reattached limb's status as "merely ornamentation."

As the doctors planned for the more medical obstacles involved with my move, my mom packed up my life with my ex-wife's aid. I'd not spoken to Amy since our divorce. I'd done her wrong by breaking the vows of fidelity, and I'd done so unrepentantly. Our divorce had cleared less than thirty days before my accident. We'd been separated six months after having been married less than two years. We were together almost eight. When her friend from DGH's social services called, she told Prissy she "knew something was terribly wrong."

"Amy, I think we've got Pat in here," her friend had told her over the phone.

"How bad is he?"

"Do you know how to get in touch with his family?"

Amy's call to my mom was a shock to her for myriad reasons. She'd told Amy she couldn't respect my actions, but I was her son and she would always be there for me. As they determined the importance of objects that did not belong to them and uncovered parts of my life neither knew about, they passed the time discussing my return to Florida. Amy worked in rehabilitation centers. She agreed with the decision to move me back to Florida, professionally and personally.

She asked my mom, "Has he asked about me? Said my name?"

Prissy, knowing Amy was still holding onto threads of her own domestic fantasy, tried to be as gentle as possible, “No, he hasn’t.” They finished packing up my life and parted ways. I’d left Amy months earlier. I hope she left me after that conversation.

* * * *

While others made life-altering decisions for me, I passed the time by increasing my body’s tolerance of morphine and awaiting the eventual, crushing fall of those giant-sized ice cubes. I can remember my friend John Fuller coming by with a *Playboy* and an *ESPN: the Magazine*. After he left the magazines, the letters looked like text from a Japanese manga comic but, the women of *Playboy* were beautiful and naked. I awoke the one morning with my first erection following my return to semi-awareness. I hadn’t given any thought to the possibility of my losing this most basic biological occurrence, but I tearfully shared my revelation with any willing listener the day of my discovery. Being illiterate for the rest of my life failed in comparison to not being able to get a boner.

I was kept in a coma for around seven or eight days. The first date I can really remember is July second. A day or two after the return of my masculinity, my friends Bryan and CJ stopped by on July Fourth. We watched fireworks over the Rockies from my room’s window. The exploding fireworks were an easy metaphor to the explosions of pain my body kept igniting even after those over the Rockies were long faded. During my last days in Colorado, I was never alone. Hospital staff, friends, family and pain kept me company. I could decipher written words, but my most constant companion could prove to be a formidable distraction to any task. Even today, pain can make the words just fall off the page and I’m left with a jumble of letters at the bottom margin.

Pain can be so intense it supersedes visual metaphor. White, hot bursts; spiky, gold flashes like lightning; steady, red thumps; these familiar descriptions fail to compare to the screaming that your body makes as it starts to realize how much of itself is missing or has been replaced by metal. Pain doesn't need to breathe. Its screaming is incessant. On an exceptionally bad night, I could hear stitches stretching or the sound of my bones pushing their way through torn muscle to rejoin fractured ends; the screws in my body squeaked as they turned in the wood of my bones. On quieter nights, the sound of blood being pumped through recently torn sutures would lull me to sleep like ocean waves. If not, there was always more morphine.

I left Denver General on July 9, 1999. It would be three years before I returned for a friend's wedding. I was leaving Colorado having enjoyed myself most of the five years I lived there. I did what I wanted when I wanted just as I had since making the decision to do so back in high school. Being an adult just gave me carte blanche to behave as juvenile as I desired. I was paying the consequences for being in a hurry to get from one good time to the next. It would take a couple more parties for me to figure that out.

In my last hours at Denver General, the irascible Dr. Ferrari brought a group of interns to the foot of my bed and told them, "We've done all we can do for this one. He's either going to *get it*, or we'll see him again."

I could barely sit up in bed. It hurt me to breathe the words; *you won't see me like this again. I get it*. I didn't know it at the time, but I was lying to Dr. Ferrari. It would be quite some time before I figured out what *it* was.

As my family and physicians prepared for my relocation, a great deal of energy was spent by nurses, and the friends I was soon to leave, making sure I understood that though my recovery was far from over, I was going to recover. But, there was going to be pain—lots of it. And,

nobody wanted to talk about that. Given the fact that I was hardly more than a doped-up collection of bruises, scabs, sutures, surgical staples and stainless steel, I really wasn't much of a conversationalist, nor was I capable of the kind of depth implied by Dr. Ferrari's comment about getting *it*. At the time, my "getting it" was coming to the realization that the light fixture above my bed was not a giant, old-fashioned ice cube tray. Having recently vanquished the demon of my cryophobia when introduced to Dr. Ferrari's philosophy, I was feeling pretty invulnerable despite my inability to hold my own head up.

Soon after learning that I would be leaving for Orlando in the next 24 hours, I cracked the indecipherable code that had been the English language just a few days before. I was on a roll. As I lay in bed with my open, proudly perused copy of *ESPN: the Magazine* on the unfolded table that hung over my lap, I thumbed the button of my morphine pump a few times unaware that I was slowly being weaned off the narcotic. I glanced over at the copy of *Playboy* John had left me, smirking at the memory of flipping through its contents earlier in the day and suddenly realizing that I was reading the words. I was just as excited by the return of this ability as I had been of my "morning wood" just a few days prior. This same day's reading of the gentlemen's magazine had reassured my erectile function and I relished that notion with a self-satisfying smirk as I faded into the dull thump of pain the diluted morphine had made my awareness.

With the retrospect of nearly a decade, a great deal of that time spent investigating and writing about my accident and subsequent, resultant experiences, I have come to the belief that it was on that day, when Dr. Ferrari made his comment; when I discovered I could read again; when I learned I was capable of recurring erections, I'd decided I would make a full recovery. When Ferrari talked about "getting it" and I was able to shakily lean forward and mumble to him that I "got it," I thought he was referring to my return to independence. It seemed to me at the

time that his idea of “getting it” was whether I not I returned to society as a productive member and that the decision was completely within my power to make and achieve. Even at that moment, less than ten days after my bad decision, I knew I was going to walk again. With the ability to ambulate and at least one functioning arm, I knew I would make my way back into life as I had known it.

I hadn't had any grand philosophical epiphanies. I certainly hadn't even begun to think about what choices in my life had brought me to my current condition, but I knew my time spent as a bed-ridden, throbbing, and heavily medicated slab of surgically reconstructed meat was temporary. My goals were all short term and determined by parties other than myself. In my closing days as a soon-to-be-emeritus member of the Denver Knife and Gun club, they were objectives like: two meals in the same day, while also being able to sit up on the side of my bed under my own strength for a period of minutes that would stretch into the double digits. The brown-skinned, male nurse who, at my request, had shaved my cranial-tube-scarred head to resemble his own scar-free scalp, led this routine that was celebrated with a high five and a can of chocolate Ensure brought up by a woman from the kitchen who would watch me drink the small can of vitamins and pseudo-chocolate. We would celebrate the empty can with another high five.

As I spent my last night in DGH, I knew I'd return to Colorado in better shape than I was leaving. The fact that I was still alive sat on my chest with the weight of the mountains outside my window. I couldn't quite yet grasp the fact that I had cheated death. I knew that I was in bad shape. My right leg was encased in a cast to just below the knee with a large hole cut into it for the swollen, protruding muscle that had been transplanted from my abdomen. I was told the swelling would dramatically decrease over time, but as I lay in bed that night, the swollen,

throbbing tissue more closely resembled a giant, destructive leech rather than a result of surgical reconstruction.

My right arm was still numb from the carpentry-like procedures and gentility that the Doctors Frankenstein had employed while reattaching it. I couldn't move it at all. Hell, at this point I was reacting as if I had already lost the limb. I was too caught up in relishing the fact that I had still had one functional arm to be concerned about the possible loss of the other.

As I was loaded onto a gurney the morning of my big move back to Florida, I celebrated a pretty substantial victory over which I had no control. Robert Rader, the man my mom had married years prior to my own failed marriage, had told her to "bring [me] home." Though I'd never spent a night in the Rader house, I was going home.

My aunt Jo Makowski, from my biological father's side, expressed her shock and dismay to my mom over the fact that Jerry hadn't even bothered to call out to Colorado after learning about my accident. I viewed these events with the same detachment that I was using to cope with my apparent lack of a previously favored right arm. I used to be right-handed. As of my departure date from DGH, I was left-handed. As I struggled to help a new team of EMTs prepare me for travel, my dependence on my right arm began to fade. Before my accident, I had been rebuilding a tenuous relationship with Jerry Makowski. As I rode in the back of an ambulance, I came to realize that he, like my right arm, was not going to be a willing participant in my rehabilitation. I also came to realize, later, that Robert Rader, like my left arm, was extremely capable and interested in my rehabilitation.

Months after my return to Florida, after my right arm began to regain functionality and I was clearly entrenched as a member of the Rader household, my mom and I were caught up in the tedious logistics of getting me back onto the grid so I could return to my more functional role

in society. We were tabulating unpaid bills as a result of my hasty departure from Denver, when Mom suggested we send my long distance phone bill to Jerry asking for just a modicum of help in this most trying time. The unopened envelope was returned. With the same subtlety in which I was slowly becoming left-handed, I was also becoming a Rader. In accordance with my evolving, personal dogma, I would celebrate the little victories. I hadn't realized that one man, Jerry Makowski, was not interested in my recovery. On the contrary, I was celebrating the fact that for the first time in my life, I had a father who was very interested in my well-being and his name was Robert Rader.

* * * *

It was two years after receiving my bachelor's degree when I approached my dad about changing my last name to his. I was applying to grad school and looking at my college diploma that bore the name "James Patrick Makowski" when I made the final determination that I no longer wanted to be a Makowski. Actually, it appeared to me that the Makowskis had just lost interest in me—again. It didn't seem fair to me that the man who had shown little interest in my existence, outside of his donation of genetic material, should be able to celebrate, even if unknowingly, in my accomplishments. It was Robert Rader who had said, "Bring him home." It was Jerry Makowski who had returned my unpaid phone bill. Robert Rader's mom was saying prayers for me and lighting candles in the small, Lutheran chapel near her home in Iceland. Jerry's parents hadn't even bothered to call and see if I was still alive. Robert was calmly encouraging. As Mom and I rode the emotional roller coaster that is indicative of any recovery from tragedy, Robert was a stoic, steady rock that never doubted my personal ability to rebound from my injuries, nor our family's ability to help me back on my feet.

It was Robert Rader who told my mom my choice to study Creative Writing was the right one because it was what I wanted to do. Prissy had been tainted by the results of my thirty previous years of personal decision-making. Robert felt like I was on the cusp of change. He was right, but I would remain on that cusp for a few more years. Even after I moved out of the Rader home and became a Rader myself, I was still a “work-in-progress” and still trying to unknot the jumble of potential lessons that could be revealed in my life prior to 06/24/99. Jennie had moved to Florida, realized we were no longer looking to gain entrance to the same parties and then moved back to Colorado. I was back in Florida with no desire to re-connect with the life James Patrick Makowski had left when he moved to Gainesville.

I started graduate school at the University of Central Florida determined to find a personal identity while I developed my literary voice. I had lived the type of life that many of my creative writing classmates could only hope to fall prey to. In the nearly ten years since I had lost interest in academics at UF, collegians had grown considerably more conservative and I no longer had to pretend. The truth of my life had grown stranger than the fiction I had been making up. The universe had snuck up on me again. This time, I was going to write about it.

Tales of the Dog, Part One: Meet the Dog

I decided to write about Roy several months after having met him. *Roy Dickson, Entrepreneur*. I'd seen his business card. It was given to me by the redneck who lived across the street from me and my collegiate roommates. Our neighbor snorted cocaine. Roy sold it. My roommates and I smoked marijuana. Roy sold that too.

“What kind of stuff you write?” The man who I would later call “Dog,” but refer to as “the Dog,” asked me one hazy afternoon. He rolled a joint on my recently published profile of a fifty-year-old, female bounty hunter, and saw my name underneath the scattered marijuana.

I hadn't started grad school yet and the barely paying freelance work I had been doing wasn't very creative, but I showed my writing to him anyway: marketing brochures, operations manuals, and a couple of columns from my stint as a fake journalist.

“You get paid for this?” He made no attempt to hide his incredulity.

“Uh, yeah.” Of course, I was indignant.

He flipped through my portfolio laughing at my attempts at Op/Ed buffoonery. “Some of this shit is funny.”

I chuckled as I passed the second joint I ever smoked with Roy back to him. “I'd like to write about you.”

“Yeah? What you going to write about me?”

“I don't know yet. I may not even be cool enough to write about you.”

He was holding in the smoke from the hit off the joint he had just taken. He was unusually baritone as he delayed exhaling and informed me, “Don't worry. You ain't.” He filled

the space between us with smoke and laughter. Though we were probably too high to know at the time, we would do that often over the next few years.

* * * *

“Ol’ Roy’s been through some shit.” Leaning against the open tailgate of his truck, my neighbor, Redneck Rich, extended a bottle of Bud Light in my direction.

I politely waved off his offer and pressed him for more information on the Dog. Rich had known Roy for most of their lives. Roy was becoming a regular visitor to our house, and not always in a feloniously professional capacity. Since he lived across the street, Redneck Rich was a regular attendee to our weekends of barbecues and beer drinking.

“Hell, I’s the first one to call him Dog.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?” I thought it was because Roy greeted his friends with, “What up, Dog?” I was wrong.

“The guy is fiercely loyal.” Rich pulled a sip from his longneck, never taking his eyes from mine. He was making sure I understood the seriousness with which his statement had been made. I furrowed my brow to let him know I was along for the ride.

“Like how?”

“If the kid is your friend, he’s got your back. He’s stood up for me against dudes that were bigger than you. [I’m about 6’ 3”, 220lbs.] And if he tells you he’s gonna do something, it’ll be done. No matter what.”

As my neighbor relayed them to me, specific acts of the Dog’s loyalty sounded more like acts of retribution to me. He’d helped Rich stomp an ex of his baby sister; he’d stolen a house full of furniture back from some woman’s “asshole husband”; he’d withheld a “well-deserved

ass-kicking” from a friend who’d robbed him... Throughout the afternoon’s narratives by Redneck Rich on Roy’s character, there did seem to be a subversive morality. In tales that were often surrounding drugs or theft, Roy consistently defended the weak and believed wholeheartedly in the bond of trust between friends. It was when the weak had been taken advantage of, or a trust had been violated, that the Dog became a “soldier.”

“I’m just a soldier in the wrong man’s army,” Roy later told me after showing me the “soldier” tattooed across his abdomen in gothic font like a member of Tupac Shakur’s East L.A. set.

“I don’t think you’re that simple, Dog,” I told him. “That’s why I’m trying to figure you out and write about you. There’s more to you than gold teeth, tattoos and a checkered past.”

“Yeah? Well, I ain’t trying to figure out nothing.”

Roy was loyal. Redneck Rich had planted and affirmed that description. He had a sense of ethics. I’d arrived at that conclusion on my own. The Dog’s dogma just didn’t conform to the more suburban senses of most Americans. Roy was a drug dealer, a convicted felon without a proper high school education and yet, for some odd reason, I’d be okay if he dated my little sister. That odd reason, I was only just discovering, was because the Dog was honest.

* * * *

“So, if you write about me, what’re you going to say?” Roy continued breaking up the compact bud of marijuana on the coffee table and after determining its preparedness for smoking, packed it into a heavy, glass pipe. A moment’s silence was broken by the spark of a lighter he touched to the bowl.

It was good pot. Heh, it was very good pot, and Roy and I had been smoking for well over an hour. I'd called him earlier in the day—not in the morning, or even before 2:00 in the afternoon. He kept appropriately odd hours for a drug dealer, so I figured on calling up the Dog sometime between *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Oprah!*. My timing was impeccable. Our phone call was characteristically terse.

“Yo.”

“What up, Dog?” Roy's usual greeting came from me, now.

“Nothing. What's up with you?”

“Chilling. Come over. Bring my sister.”

“All right. I'll be there in a minute.”

For the uninitiated, one must be rather surreptitious in one's choice of euphemisms when speaking of illegal narcotics over the phone. The Dog will tell you he personally doesn't “give a shit about all them stupid codes people be using.” But, I find the invention and elocution of alternate phrases and metaphors for drugs to be one of the more fun aspects of the culture. Soon after I'd met the Dog, the circle of pot smokers that I had been associating with referred to marijuana as “a sibling” or, dependent upon possession and quantity, “your siblings.” Given the fact that Roy often had varying qualities of marijuana for sale, offering the pot smoker a choice for their high, it had become necessary to delineate the sibling euphemism even further. Regular, cheap pot—regs, schwag, reggie, etc.—was called “your brother.” Good pot was called: kind, K.B., larry, etc. and referred to as “your sister.” Precise quantities were never discussed over the phone. More likely than not, Roy would have how much you, and anybody else with you, might want on his person. If he didn't, he'd go get it. Our mutual friend, regular customer of Roy's and local bartender, Dylan, told me that's why he called Roy “the Dog.” My own reasons differed.

So, the Dog showed up at my place just after *Judge Joe Brown* and brought my sister. She was looking a pleasant, frosty green and smelled like a hidden Jamaican valley on a late summer day. After my first hit from Roy's pipe, the world was a whole lot rounder, slightly greener and a little bit funnier. We smoked our first bowl and numbed our minds further with Playstation 2's *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. At this point in our personal history, we'd known each other for close to a year. On this smoke-filled day, the irony of tattooed, gold-teethed, Fubu-wearing, drug dealing, juvy-time-served Roy playing a video game where one imagines one's self as a drug-dealing, gun-toting, hooker-killing, prison time-served street hood struck me as particularly humorous and I shared the source of my laughter with him.

"That's some fucked up shit, ain't it?" The Dog shook his head. For just a brief moment, I could see the twenty-something kid who'd grown up either on the street or in some state institution. The walking hard luck cliché cut straight out of a John Singleton movie, who, despite this life, was still just a twenty-something kid chuckled. The PS2's controller hung limply from his soft-looking hands, "I'm just like the dude in this game. Besides all that obvious, fucked-up criminal shit. I'm just like him." His eyes hardened up turning from blue to gray as he mulled over what he'd just said. He was not that aforementioned kid anymore. I'm not real sure how old he was at that moment.

The mood turned a little serious, but I was curious to see where he was taking his self-actualization. "How so, Dog?" I pressed.

"When a kid turns on this game and starts playing, this guy ain't got a choice. He's a criminal. No matter who turns the game on, no matter where they are in the world, this motherfucker," he nodded his head toward the TV screen where he had just controlled our digital gangster to carjack a Ferrari, "he's gone always be a criminal."

I took what I figured to be his polemic bait. Roy's not real educated but will read anything he gets handed. He dropped out of school in the eighth grade and got out of jail after he finished his G.E.D. After he was arrested for Breaking and Entering—he was caught breaking into someone's house.—the Dog served eight months in Orange County Florida's Correctional Facility. Though he was only sixteen at the time, he was charged as an adult. Genetics made Roy an “habitual offender” from birth. His crystal meth-addicted mother probably figured Roy *would* end up in jail. She wasn't even around long enough to see him celebrate his second birthday. She had put a bullet through her chest two decades before Roy could catch a ride home with his Alcoholics Anonymous counselor from Orlando's less scenic community of 33rd Street correctional facilities. The Dog doesn't speak of her very often except to say, “She's dead now.”

Fortunately for Roy, but not by suburban standards or by any stretch of even the most sympathetic, bleeding heart liberal's imagination, his dad eventually cleaned up his act. The Dog told me, “Prison helped straighten him out and made him see things differently.”

This microscopic move away from the chemically-hazed underground back onto the grid by his father did not go unnoticed by the Dog, and he doesn't blame his lifestyle entirely on his uninvolved parents. In his own words, his mom, “is buried somewhere,” and his dad, “is trying. We both are,” working to make Roy's future a little more Middle-American than his past. This is not to say that Roy was striving for the American Dream of a house replete with picket fence, two-car garage, a doting wife and 2.3 children to complement the capitalist ideal of a five-figured career. No, the Dog's vision of the American Dream was less inspired by Norman Rockwell and more a result of a *New Jack City* perspective on the world around him.

Like Nino Brown, Roy was trying to make as much money as he could in this lifetime. “That's all anybody is trying to do—look out for themselves. You got to be out trying to get yours

because there's a billion motherfuckers out there trying to take it from you." It's from this philosophical standpoint that Roy begins to unwind his own moral ethics.

"So, it's a dog eat dog world then?" I asked after trying out my New Jack metaphor on him.

"Hell yeah."

"What about your friends?" I avoided the obvious allusion to family. Even as stoned as I was, it seemed apparent that those kinds of altruisms didn't apply in the Dog's case.

"Shit. Just cause you like somebody don't mean you got to trust'em explicitly. Anybody—I don't care who they are or say they are—if forced to choose between they own life and somebody else's, that somebody else is fucked."

At this point in my evolving understanding of the Dog's character, I could only assume that he thought this way because his own mom opted for death over raising her own son. Drugs can be a horrible thing, to paraphrase Rick James, but when the underbelly of capitalism is the only world you know, they can also be your only way out from underneath the onus of poverty. I can't help but wonder how many of America's allegedly best and brightest, who are Roy's age, would be able to rebound from a childhood characterized by neglect and death as successfully as he has. But wait, the guy's a drug dealer! He's not risen above his station to become a productive, contributing member of society. He's a contributor to and facilitator of this country's downward spiraling morality.

Fuck that and fuck you, "society," for making me think that way. The Dog would make Nietzsche proud. If he ever read Nietzsche—he prefers fantasy novels and computer hardware technical brochures—Roy would learn that style is what the crazed, syphilitic German philosopher touted as the only praiseworthy and attainable manifestation of humanity's search for universal

truth. Nietzsche would probably draw the same conclusion about the Dog that I have. Roy is Nietzsche's prototype.

"I don't know about all that shit. I'm just trying to get mine." Throughout my exposition on Nietzsche and how he, Roy, was the iconic human described in Nietzschean philosophy, he'd been shooting rival gangsters on the streets of digital San Andreas. He dropped the controller to pick up my cat who had meandered into our frivolity. The Persian purred loudly as the Dog scratched his head.

My rant, paraphrased for the purposes of this narrative, hung heavy in the air like our pot smoke had earlier in the day. Having determined neither one of us was high enough for his comfort level, Roy left my cat in his lap and started to break up some more pot to smoke. The afternoon had oozed into early evening as I verbally wrote my characterization of him—in his company. As the day had waned and our conversations evolved, my writer's notebook had inconspicuously appeared in my hand. I had given myself a hard-on with my connection between the Dog's lifestyle and Nietzsche's views of the individual. The money shot was going to come when Roy agreed with my description of himself. Well, running with the porno metaphor, I didn't get my money's worth and came away from my theorizing with a case of literary blue balls. The Dog wasn't buying my Nietzschean slant on his life story one iota.

"See, that's what I'm talking about," he pointed at my notes and looked me in the eye, so he knew I was listening, "Doesn't matter who I am, or where I came from. Doesn't matter how I get what I get. I ain't hurting nobody. I ain't forcing nobody to do anything they don't want, but even all that shit don't matter." The cat stepped from his lap as Roy took a break from his relaxed rant to hit the pipe and passed it to me. "People are going to think how they think. Why should I get so hung up on what people who ain't got no idea on what my life is like, or how I

grew up? They're making their judgments thinking that everyone grew up the same way– the way they did. And when they see some motherfucker like me they can't understand how I can look the way I look and live the way I live cuz they ain't got no fucking idea as to how I came into this world.”

Roy stood as he delivered his spontaneous soliloquy. His voice barely raised above a conversational level throughout his diatribe. His arms were open exposing the blue-green tattoo of Earth with the phrase “The World is Ours” cursived over the western hemisphere. His bottom row of gold teeth was barely visible in his broad grin. He reeked of irony and satire. The pipe had frozen halfway to my lips. Somewhere between Nietzsche's death and Roy's almost comically ironic self-actualization, night had fallen outside and I'd just realized I didn't have the slightest notion as to where in my house the afternoon had slipped away to. I looked between the cushions of the couch for something that would make me cool enough to be in the room with this guy. Without even knowing it, he'd proved my literary vision of himself.

“You gonna hit that or what?” Slapping back down into the scraped leather of my couch, Roy pointed to the motionless glass pipe in my hands.

I needed to get back to the rounder, funnier place the Dog and I had started the afternoon in. The goofy place where all stoned people hung out and ate cookies and Doritos. The place we had been before I had started to chew up and digest Roy's character so that I could throw it up on paper later. He'd caught me with my mouth full, and large chunks of my raw literary vision of him were hanging from my teeth. Characterization–hell, writing–should be less barbaric than I was making it. I was embarrassed and hit the bowl hard–twice.

“But you're not immoral, Dog. You're polite, well-groomed...” smoke rolled from my mouth.

“What’s all that got to do with anything?”

“Well, bad things are supposed to happen to bad people. But, by ‘normal’” (I made obligatory air quotes.) “standards, bad things happened *to* you and that’s why you do bad things now—i.e. sell drugs. With you, unlike with Nino Brown, you didn’t go bad and start doing bad things. You were bad, went good and now do bad things because it’s all you know. It’s all you’ve had access to!” Being stoned had reduced my vocabulary to Cleaver-esque levels of description.

“You still ain’t saying nothing don’t nobody don’t know already!” He’d taken the pipe from my hand, realizing that either I was too stoned or he was not enough.

“Dog. You sell drugs and occasionally help fence stolen merchandise. On the celestial scale of sins, those aren’t really that bad. In fact, one could argue that those are more crimes against the laws of humanity than they are broken Laws of God. I’ve met plenty of people who would attest to your loyalty as a friend. Hell, that’s why I call you the Dog, those oppositions make you defensible as that ‘product of the system’ right-wing America says doesn’t exist! You’re the antithesis to ‘bootstraps mentality’ while simultaneously representing the ultimate realization of capitalism! You’re Nietzsche’s wet, fucking dream, man!” I was standing and speaking at a volume I imagined Roy had probably reserved for break room beat downs at one time in his youth. I’d practiced this definition of Roy on Redneck Rich in the recent past.

“Sit down, motherfucker. Getting all excited and shit. Smoking weed’s supposed to mellow you out. Here,” he extended the warm pipe, “hit this.”

Poofing back into the couch, I started to realize just how stoned I was. In three heartbeats and a breath, I stood up with purpose. “I got to get some of this shit down.” I moved through a

haze of metaphor and marijuana toward the hallway, my bedroom and my computer. “I can’t be that stoned. Some of this has got to work.”

It had been lifetimes since I shot from the Dog’s company to begin writing something to go underneath the cool title I’d typed months ago.

My subject stood in the doorframe of my room. “What’re you going to write about?”

I’d known Roy for almost a full year and was still wrestling him to paper. “I don’t know. I was thinking about the time your buddy Rodney robbed you of your safe in broad daylight by throwing it out your bedroom window. Or the time he told those two dudes to rob you at gunpoint. Or the time you were going to beat up that other dude, but then he was turning himself in to the cops for something else. Or the time...” He interrupted my rundown of stories he’d shared over our friendship.

“You know all that shit, but you don’t know what to write? You must not be that good,” and he strolled back to the living room and the PS2 laughing to himself at me.

Nietzsche was so right.

Tales of the Dog, Part Two: It's a Dog's Life

“You’re not trying so save him or anything stupid like that? Are you?” My friend Katie and I had just returned from having dinner with the Dog and a friend of hers. She was admittedly a little taken aback by the man whom I, and many others, call “Dog” and refer to as “the Dog” in our conversations. “He doesn’t talk much, does he?” she concluded for the moment. “I mean he’s not rude or anything like that. But, why did he come out with us if he has never eaten Thai food and had no intentions of ever eating it?”

Katie had made plans to meet a friend of hers at a hole-in-the-wall Thai restaurant and knowing my own passion for good food, thought I might be interested in going with her. Well, the day she called to remind me of the commitment, I just happened to be hanging out with Roy Dickson, the Dog. He and I had been sitting around my house doing what we were slowly becoming infamous for—smoking pot. I, as is my fashion, had completely forgotten about my commitment to Katie and in a move of spontaneous diplomacy asked Roy if he wanted to join Katie, her friend and me for dinner. Being hungry and high at the time, he accepted my invitation.

Dinner was no remarkable social event. The conversation was laughter-inducing at times and frivolously mundane at others. The Thai food was good and worth the commission of directions to the restaurant into my long term memory, but not its name. Much to the chagrin and surprise of Katie and her friend, the Dog ordered ribs and politely waved off any attempts to get him to globally expand his culinary tastes. It was several days after this apparently

uncomfortable event—for Katie—that she had approached me about my relationship with the Dog.

“What makes you think I’m even qualified to save anybody?” I wasn’t offended, but a little surprised by Katie’s inquiry.

“Well, you do have a bit of a messiah complex,” she deadpanned.

I laughed at my friend’s observation. “That may be true, but my *saving* of Roy is only an ancillary effect of my trying to save the world.” Katie has a Master’s degree in English and does not smoke pot. These facts cause me to raise the grade level of the lexicon I use when speaking with her. I do this not only to make myself seem smarter in Katie’s presence, but to also affirm her own intellect, which she sometimes doubts. She was cynically aware of this accommodation and attributed it to my aforementioned messiah complex.

In our conversation following her physical introduction to the Dog, I had been working on the nonfiction narrative “Tales of Dog” for about a year. I was sharing different drafts with fellow writers and trying to put to bed my attempts to turn my friend Roy Dickson into a literary character. Katie provided such a sounding board for my efforts. She’d met him on paper while I was struggling with the challenge of wrestling Roy’s depth of character into my writing. I was starting to think that the statement I had made nearly two years earlier at our meeting, “I may not be cool enough to write about you, Roy,” was truer than I realized. I wasn’t having any trouble writing about the Dog, but not turning him into a cliché or cartoon proved to be a challenge. I respected Dog. I respected Katie’s opinions as both a writer and a friend, but I think she misunderstood the motivation behind my friendship with Dog. See, I originally met Roy because he was a drug dealer and I, on occasion, liked to do drugs. I remained friends with

him for myriad reasons, none of which had anything to do with saving him or his choice of profession.

“I don’t know,” Katie continued, “I don’t think he said twenty words throughout the meal.”

“So, you expect any friend of mine to be loquacious?”

She laughed at my retort. “I don’t know. Does he talk when just the two of you are hanging out?”

“No, Katie. We just sit in silence and do bong hits.”

She playfully punched me on my arm. “I didn’t think that, you asshole. I don’t know. It just seems odd that an educated and seemingly respectable guy like yourself would hang out with...”

I interrupted her. I’d had similar conversations with other people about our friendship, “A thug like Roy?”

She was offended and a little embarrassed, “That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Yeah, it was and I’m not offended. If he was here right now, neither would Roy. The Dog is acutely aware of how intimidating his appearance can be to some.”

Roy’s bottom row of teeth is capped in gold. His arms and legs are a collection of tattoos that make him stand out in a crowd of bikers. “The world is ours” cursive across the globe, “Dirty South” and the emblem of Henry Rollins’s old, hardcore band, Black Flag, permanently inked into his arms draw people’s eyes as they instinctively and protectively make sure they are still in possession of their wallets as Dog passes by. Roy was admittedly a criminal, he sold drugs for Christ’s sake, but he was not a thief. He’d told me, “I’d done my share of stealing as a teenager, but many lonely nights in an 8’x10’ cell helped me grow out of that.”

Ironically on the heels of his admission, I had come to the conclusion that Roy was one of the most honest people I had ever met. His appearance combined with the duality of his character was what motivated me to write about him. It was also why he remained my friend. I shared this insight with Katie, but she, like so many others who have tried to wrap their heads around our relationship, found its complexity eluded her.

* * * *

Roy's transformation from my friend into a literary character took over a year. He was very involved in the creation and editing of "Tales of the Dog" and not shy about correcting my factual errors or letting me know when he thought something I had written just sounded "stupid." I had toyed with using fictionalized conversations between me and my cat as "Tales" became less about Roy and more about the writing process it took to bring him to paper. The meta-fiction debates between me and my cat, Puck, were my attempt at Bill Waterson homage as well as an expository device to illustrate the difficulty I was experiencing in trying to make sure Roy's literary character paid respect to its source. I dropped the sections of text with dialogue between me and Puck before sending the piece out for publication. The more disciplined and less gonzo writers that I knew were adamant about their ill ease with my use of a talking cat in a nonfiction narrative. Knowing that I am in no place to set any literary trends, I acquiesced to the recommendations that I cut Puck's character. Roy thought the critics of the cat were "stupid." Unfortunately, editors liked Roy's story without the cat. Publication of "Tales of Dog" may have given me some literary validation, but the Dog was not impressed.

"They fucked it all up, man," he tossed a copy of the college literary journal that had published my attempt to prove that I was cool enough to write about Roy to the floor. "They

changed all the cool parts. It's not even the same story anymore." The Dog was still brutally honest about what he was thinking.

"Yeah, but it got published, man. You're a literary character now."

"So," he lit the joint he had been rolling as I educated him on the perils of publication.

"You see, Dog," I hit the pinkie-sized spliff and continued Roy's edification; "I really don't give a shit about what happens to something I write after I'm done with it." I exhaled a thick cloud of smoke and hit the joint again before passing it to him.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm sure I could have wrangled with them over editorial changes, but to be honest with you, I really *don't* give a shit. I never look at the proofs editors send me and don't even read my own shit after it gets published."

"Get the fuck out!" He exhaled smoke and continued; "You bust your ass writing something. Then, you send it in and hope some asshole that don't even know you will publish it. And then, you have to let them change it?" He was rightfully incredulous.

"Yeah, that's pretty much how it works, bro."

"That's fucked up."

"Yeah, it is Dog. Yeah, it is," we passed the next few moments in smoking silence.

* * * *

Soon after meeting him, I started writing about Roy. As I started drafting stories about him, I decided I would write a trilogy. "Tales of the Dog" was the first part of that evolving effort, but that initial title would later become the name of the entire series. With the publication

of the introductory installment, the pressure was now on me to fulfill the literary commitment I'd made to the Dog and his character to write the next two parts of his story.

"Well, it ain't all just about me." He had adroitly recognized that by writing about how I wasn't cool enough to write about him, I was writing about myself and my craft as well. "And even if it was, you still ain't cool enough to write about me." I shared his soft laughter as we slapped palms at the joke.

"With publication of your story, I have, in effect, proven to readers that I am actually cool enough to write about you." I stood to my own defense.

"That don't mean shit. You ain't proved nothing to me. You are," he sat up straighter in his chair mocking me, "in effect, still a nerd." We laughed in unison. We'd done that a lot, often at each other's expense, in the nearly three years we'd known each other.

* * * *

Before actual publication of "Tales of the Dog," Roy had come to my house one afternoon specifically so we could talk about what I would write in the second installment. I had just moved into a new place and my new roommates, though tolerant of our illicit indiscretion, did not smoke pot themselves. The Dog and I respected their choice and took our smoking sessions to the back patio of my rented, suburban, shared home. The backyard was surrounded by a wooden privacy fence to protect us from prying eyes and populated by a handful of shade trees to shield us from the Florida sun. We smoked from a pipe as the Dog rolled a joint.

"I can't believe you're taking the Puck parts out of your story." I had shared with him the cynicism with which many of my peers and professors had treated my use of a talking cat in nonfiction. "Puck was the coolest part."

I hit the pipe and handed it to him, “Yeah, it’s weird. All the writers I know tell me to take him out and everybody else that’s read it says leave him in.”

After lighting a bowl for himself, he handed the pipe to me. “So, what’re you going to do?”

“I don’t know, bro. Everybody seems to be missing the whole *Calvin and Hobbes* thing I’m trying to do.”

“Fuck’em.” He never looked up from the joint he was rolling.

At this point in our literary friendship, when “Tales of the Dog” was nearing its eventual publication, I was increasingly determined to see if I could turn my friend’s life into literature. I was excited by the fact that Roy was so receptive to me writing about him, and a little surprised by how participatory he had become in the writing process. My friend and fellow student of nonfiction, Susan, ended up breaking down this unusual writing process that had developed between us for my own understanding as she shared our company later that same afternoon. She’d met the Dog on paper and in person on a handful of occasions.

“It’s not just the fact that you guys are pretty much stoned or getting that way throughout the whole story that makes it gonzo.” She continued her comparison of my work to that of my literary idol, Hunter S. Thompson. “It’s the fact that you start out writing about your subject, the Dog, and end up talking more about your writing and yourself that makes it gonzo. The fact that your subject has become involved in the writing of an essay about him gives his character even greater depth. You should try to get that aspect into your story. That’s even more gonzo than the drug stuff.”

Susan had joined us somewhere between the end of our first joint and about half way through our second. Though she did not join us in our afternoon respite, the friend she had brought along to get some pot from the Dog did.

Susan's friendly acquaintance spoke deeply as he held his hit tightly in his lungs and offered his sardonic opinion on my work's gonzo-ness, "Yeah, you're just like Hunter S. You start off writing about something in particular, or in this case, someone," he motioned toward Roy as he handed him the joint, "and then go off on a tangent. The Dog's like your Oscar Zeta Acosta."

"Who?" Though Roy read a great deal of whatever caught his attention, he wasn't quite familiar with the father of outlaw journalism's lawyer and literary sidekick.

"Dr. Gonzo, man." Roy stared at me blankly. It may have just been that we were very high, but I tried to see if I could get him to make the connection for himself. "Benicio Del Toro in the movie, man." The Dog's got a DVD collection to rival Blockbuster. I knew the cinematic reference would help.

He was counting the small handful of twenties he had been given by Susan's friend in exchange for two ounces of some green, Mexican smoking weed, "Oh."

"So, does that make you Johnny Depp?" Susan's friend was rolling a joint from the pot he had just purchased and arched an eyebrow at me.

With a delicate dance of fingers, Roy passed me the shrinking joint we three had been smoking and addressed his client's comment, "He fucking wishes."

I shook my head as the patio broke into laughter.

* * * *

“I’m serious, Dog. I got to start working on the next part of your story.”

We had met for lunch and were stimulating our appetites with a taste from Roy’s current cash crop. We smoked out of a pipe on our way to stuff our faces.

“You’re the writer. What the fuck am I supposed to do?” He chuckled at my anxiety.

“I don’t know, anything interesting going on in your life these days?”

“There’s some shit that’s going down, but I don’t know if I should tell you. Litigation is still pending on some people.” He revealed his gold teeth in a broad, flashy grin. He knew what I was going to say.

“Oh, fuck that, man. Now you have to tell me.”

“All right, but this one ain’t really about me.” His smile was childishly mischievous.

As we pulled into the parking lot of a small strip mall, we silently agreed to have lunch at Boston Market. The few minutes it took us to enter the establishment, order, get our food and grab a seat in the mostly empty restaurant was too much time for me to wait on the Dog’s latest tale. Roy and I both prefer to take lunch after the regular working crowd. As a freelance writer, the professional hours that I keep are comically similar to those kept in the less legal profession of my friend. The place was empty, except for staff, so I knew I could easily coax him to tell me this latest non-suburban, most likely felonious adventure.

I pressed him for his story through a mouthful of macaroni and cheese, “So, what the fuck is up?”

“Well, I don’t know if I should be telling you this, but what the fuck...”

The Dog’s a walking library of fucked-up stories about people who live in a fashion that most Americans don’t want to know about. Most of the characters in his tales are members of that seedy underbelly of American society that the super religious and/or conservative of our

country would rather lock up and ignore. The more moderate majority of this nation simply chooses to ignore them. Roy and most of his other friends are so far off the grid that concepts like voting and civic responsibility are greeted with blank stares or comments like, “My responsibility is to me and my own.” When I see these kids, most of whom are in their early twenties with one or two kids of their own, I look at the circumstances surrounding their lives before their drop off the grid. Most of 21st century *enfants de les terribles* had childhoods that were characterized by violence, abuse and neglect. I find it relatively easy not to pass judgment. I’ll chalk that up to my earlier mentioned messiah complex.

Roy’s crystal-meth addled mom killed herself before he was out of diapers. His dad had been in and out of prison for most of the Dog’s life. Roy, in his own words, was “just trying to get mine.”

There’s a surprising softness to Dog. Despite the fact that at first glance he looks like he would have no problem removing your valuables from your bloody corpse, his blue eyes are soft, his laughter is without malice and contagious. When he gets excited, he reminds me of my kid brother. He’s an electronics junkie and anytime a new PC game title or piece of advanced computer hardware is released, it’s a “must have” for him. As we pushed our lunch around plastic plates that afternoon, he shared his story with a comparable enthusiasm.

“You know that chick, Sterling, I used to fuck around with, right?”

“That one that you were seeing a while back?” I had a fuzzy memory of a blonde, slightly athletic girl who had only recently left her job as a stripper. She was also one of the few women Dog had introduced me to that didn’t have a runny-nosed, shit-weighted-diapered baby attached to her hip.

“Yeah. Well, you know we used to stay with Dave and Donna?”

He wasn't really looking for an answer from me. I nodded and continued to stab at the croutons in my salad. He talked around his meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

“We was staying with them for a while until I had to get away from the crazy bitch.”

This transient lifestyle is not uncommon among Roy's friends outside of the circle of ones he's made through me. These kids don't vote. They don't read magazines. They don't have any legal, binding ties to wherever they're living at the moment. Most don't even get mail. “It's usually only bad news anyway,” they will tell you. Dog has all his mail sent to his dad's house. In fact, we had recently shared a laugh because the convicted felon Dog had been mistakenly summoned for jury duty. He was a lot closer to the grid than many of his friends would ever be, but I have digressed.

“So, where's she at now?”

After he filled me in on Sterling's current living arrangement— she was still living at Dave and Donna's house where he had left her weeks earlier— he continued his story. “She hit me up the other day because we recently had been chilling together.” Admittedly the Dog is not one to turn down a “nice piece of ass” and despite her being a “crazy bitch,” Sterling was apparently a nice piece of ass that enjoyed his congress. I chuckled at his admission. “She wanted me to meet up with her so I could help move her shit into a new place.” He paused to swallow a bite, “So, I met up with her. She was driving Dave's truck and had these two money orders for about two thousand bucks that she wanted me to cash for her.”

“Why didn't she cash them herself?” I interrupted.

“That's what the fuck I said!” He motioned for my patience with a plastic fork. “One was like five hundred bucks and the other was like fifteen hundred. She was all like, ‘I don't

have I.D. and if you'll take these to the check cashing place and cash them, I'll give you like two hundred dollars.”

“So, what'd you do?”

“I ain't stupid!” He's not. “I asked her where she got them and she was all like, ‘Oh, I found them.’” We shared a laugh because, apparently, Sterling in her stupidity did think Roy was stupid. I guessed it was because she didn't realize she was just “a nice piece of ass.”

“She's got these ‘found’ money orders,” I made appropriate air quotes, “and wants you to cash them?”

“Yeah.”

“How stupid does she think you are?” My stoned interviewer's skills were at their repetitive best.

“Apparently, she thinks I'm pretty fucking stupid, bro.”

We'd both finished eating, but had not moved from our seats. I was anxious to hear where Roy's story was going to take me. He knows the stories he tells me fire my imagination and he baited me appropriately.

“I told her, ‘I'm not trying to be a dick or nothing, but you got me all fucked-up if you think I'm going to cash them for you. Those things are in the place's computer and if they're reported lost or stolen, I'm busted on the spot!’ She tried to convince me that wasn't the case, but I just knew better.” He was warming up and so was his storytelling.

Even though our meal was over, my lunch was not. I was not done chewing this most recent tale of the Dog. “So, what'd she say?”

“She was like, ‘Fine! I'll get someone else to do it,’ and she called this jüg up.”

Not as well versed in thug jargon as my friend, I needed some clarification. “Jüg?”

“Yeah. You know, crackhead.”

I nodded my understanding as we collected our empty, plastic plates and took them to the trashcan by Boston Market’s exit. Full of food, and me full of anticipation, we left the restaurant and lazily walked across the parking lot to stop under its lone tree. Roy brazenly lit a joint and we smoked under its canopy. He took a deep drag, passed the joint to me and continued his colorful narrative.

“So, I rode with her to the Amcott where she’s wanted to cash them and she met up with this girl and her baby.”

“The jüg?”

“Yeah. She went over to her car. I waited in the truck. I didn’t want no parts of that shit.” He paused to smoke. “The jüg went in and Sterling waited in her car with her baby. About ten minutes went by and Sterling walked back over to Dave’s truck where I was.” As his story unfolded I was hooked. Baby-toting crackheads, larceny, fraud; these were all the ingredients of petty crime noir. “She asked me if I would stand by the car and keep an eye on the crackhead’s baby while she went inside to see what the hold up was. As I’m standing by the jüg’s car, this guy came running across the busy ass intersection near the strip mall the Amcott’s in. I was like, ‘damn, that dude’s in a hurry.’”

The combination of marijuana, the word “jüg” and the Dog’s story were making me giggle in spite of the more tragic elements of his tale. He continued with a stoned man’s grin.

“A couple of seconds, later that same guy came running up to the Amcott just as Sterling was coming out the door. He grabbed her and pushed her back inside.”

“Holy shit!” Stoned or not, the story would have had me gape-jawed.

“The first thing I thought was, ‘Damn! This fucker’s fixing to rob the Amscott!’ So I moved closer to see if he was armed. Just after I got closer, this van screeched up right in front of the Amscott—right in front of me. I saw Donna in the van, put two and two together and realized it must have been Dave who ran across the street and shoved Sterling back inside the Amscott.”

“Get the fuck out! What’d you do?”

“I knew the cops would be there any minute so, I threw a bag of weed I had in my pocket underneath some car I was standing next to. The jüg ran out of Amscott, jumped in her car and hauled ass. I went over to the van Donna was in to see what was going down even though I pretty much knew what the deal was.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“Yeah. I asked her what was going on and she told me Sterling had stolen her rent money.”

“The two money orders,” I surmised through the haze of marijuana that had enveloped my brain.

“Uh-huh. Donna asked me if I knew anything about it and I told her, ‘Nah.’ and gave her the key to Dave’s truck because I had pocketed it after Sterling asked me to watch the crackhead’s baby.”

“So, what’d you do?”

“Well, I half wanted to leave and half wanted see what went down. I figured I was far enough away from the action so, I sat on the curb to watch the shit hit the fan. I had just sit down when, two cop cars came flying into the parking lot and skidded to a stop about a foot away from me. The cops busted out of their cars and almost trampled me running toward the Amscott.”

“Dude, that’s a little too close for comfort.” We had stopped smoking, but had not moved.

“That was enough for me. I got up and walked over to a CVS drugstore, bought myself a drink and started walking towards home. I looked around for a few minutes and appreciated the fact I had just avoided committing a crime. The sky seemed a little brighter. The grass was a little greener. I was happy as hell to be walking home and not taking the ride my friend was.”

There was a moment’s pause as we both enjoyed the sky of the day we were in. We walked back to his car in quiet contemplation. I opened the heavy, creaking passenger’s door and slid in.

“Dog, the real life stories you tell me are stranger than anything *anyone* could make up.”

“I know,” he shook his head. “It just sucks because Dave and Donna gave her a place to stay until she could get her shit together and she winded up stealing from them.”

“Yeah.”

Roy started his car and we sat for another collection of heartbeats in silence. I was way high and the sagging header liner on the ceiling of his car touched the top of my head just enough to make me swat at it every few seconds like I was chasing away invisible gnats circling my head. When we got back to the university where I was temporarily working, I got out of the car and posed the question I had been pondering during our silent ride.

“So, you planning on keeping on seeing this girl?”

“I don’t know, dude. The first thing I got to do is get over to Dave and Donna’s and make sure they know that I didn’t have anything to do with her perpetration.”

I walked around his car and we slapped palms through the open driver’s side window before we parted ways. “You heading over there now?”

“Got to, bro. I want to make sure we’re straight,” and with a roar of his bad muffler, he drove off to make things right with Dave and Donna.

As I talked to my friend Katie later that same day, all I could think to say to her as I relayed the Dog’s story was, “Maybe it’s not him that needs the saving.”

As I spent time with the Dog and writing his stories, I grew more comfortable with the writer I was becoming. I was also surprised by how my desire to truthfully tell the tales of my at-one-time-felonious friend was pervading all my writing. Prissy would hope this newfound affinity for the truth might leak into all aspects of my life. I was trying to prove to myself that I could more than take drugs like Hunter S. Thompson. I, like Roy, was not really concerned about people’s perceptions of my personality, but unlike the Dog, I was concerned with what people would think about my writing. I had no trouble separating myself from the nonfiction stories I wrote. Hell, most of the memory of my memoir had been appropriated from the stories of others. I just wanted people to know that regardless of the veracity of what I might say, what I wrote was always an effort at getting as close to the truth of events as I could get. So, maybe I didn’t need saving either. Maybe it’s you that needs saving, gentle reader.

Tales of the Dog, Part Three: Old Dogs, New Tricks

I'd put a tremendous amount of literary pressure on myself to tell Dog's story as a trilogy. Along the way he'd changed from the character that looked back at me from those stories into a man who looked at those tales with relative nostalgia. I like to think that Dog's tales have been given some degree of permanence by being published and to some degree by merely written down. I'd also like to think my telling of stories about people most of the country ignores is a move toward finding my literary voice. My late nights are far less phrenetic and certainly less entertaining to strangers. I no longer have the Mötley Crüe desire to do all the drugs, drink all the booze and fuck all the women, but I still have that desire to be in those situations where these sins are being committed.

In an attempt to stop posing as anything, in an attempt to become the writer I have been my whole life, I latched on to Roy. Roy was a criminal, a drug dealer and a kid whose childhood tragedies shamed my own. Only Roy didn't seem to suffer from the same metaphysical angst that I did. I was much more respectable than Roy was, at least by Prissy's standards, but she was more impressed with the Dog's brutal honesty than she was with any of my academic achievements to date. I was learning how to re-organize the priorities in my life and getting fucked up was starting to become less important than my telling of fucked-up stories.

My youth had made me a liar. Now, as I learned how to be the writer I had pretended to be for most of my life, sub-cephalic scarring made me a confabulator. As much as I wanted to tell the truth about Roy, myself and my own life, I couldn't remember specifics about events when I sat down to write about them. I became dependent on the characters in my true stories to

help me tell their stories. I jokingly referred to myself as a no-talent hack because my first drafts of nonfiction narratives were most often far removed from the actual way events occurred.

Now, gentle reader, I have learned that if I do not know the particulars of a story, I've got to take the time and research them. I have learned that when writing about iniquity-filled evenings, the participants are reluctant to confirm or deny their activities. Not all my subjects are as open and honest as the Dog. Not everyone I know cares to be written about. So, I have been forced to write about myself. I have learned that being honest about one's self does not encourage others to be honest about themselves in my company. That is, except for the Dog. Only, four years after I've met him, the Dog doesn't sell drugs anymore.

“Just got to be too much bull shit. I hate not having any money, but I'm glad to be rid of the bull shit.”

“Yeah, but stories of your life as a pipe layer are going to be nearly as exciting as stories of your thug-ness.” I was watching him lose interest in my literary attempts to make our friendship a trilogy.

“So. I ain't living my life for some fuckin' stories. I been tellin' you all these years, I'm just trying to get mine.” Apparently, felonies were no longer helping Roy get his and I was just going to start trying to get *mine*. And that, gentle reader, is all any of us can do.

I'm not real sure what Roy's is, but I do know that for the purposes of my writing this narrative, *mine* is just getting those stories down on paper for you, gentle reader. It is important for me to get these truths down on paper: these truths about my family and past, the truths about my most formative years as a young adult, the truths about people I have known as I've become the man who talks to you now, the truths about how I got to be the doped-up, possibly prevaricate poet who tells you stories that may or may not be true. But those stories I have shared

with you are all true, gentle reader. They have to be true because the only person they matter to, the only person that these stories' veracity is dependent upon is you, gentle reader. And you gentle reader, are probably just the senile, Alzheimer's-riddled old man that I will become.

The wages of a lifetime of sin is death. Having beaten death and social statistics for most of my life to date, I am expecting to live to be very old. Old enough to forget that I was ever young. So old in fact, that I will have forgotten why I hurt more than the other geriatrics on my wing. Old enough to not be able to explain the countless scars that have leathered and stretched across my sagging body. I've got to tell these stories as honestly as possible because the wages of sin is not death. It is forgetting that you were ever alive and young. You need these stories to be truthful, gentle reader because if they are not, you will never recognize yourself. And it is you, gentle reader, from whom all these stories come. Now, got to bed, you tired old man.

APPENDIX A: THE PARAMEDIC'S REPORT

4-0001-6404-8

**DENVER HEALTH
PARAMEDIC TRIP REPORT**

*1-1
11/11
W-10/11*

TRIP #	DATE	TIME	COCOA OUT	DRIVER	Report #	of	Total Reports due for this Ambulance's Trip
4613	6/24/99	1759	TD - 9	22812	950	2	
LOCATION	ASSISTED BY	RIDER	SPONSOR	AMB #			
911 / 1000-1111	FD, PD			18			
LAST NAME		FIRST NAME		M.I.	AGE	SEX	DOB
						M F	
ADDRESS				CITY	STATE	ZIP CODE	PHONE
INSURANCE (Type & #)							DH #
							2096142
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DGH	<input type="checkbox"/> KSR	<input type="checkbox"/> APH	<input type="checkbox"/> ARMC	<input type="checkbox"/> CNL	<input type="checkbox"/> ETT	Immunization	
<input type="checkbox"/> UH	<input type="checkbox"/> PMH	<input type="checkbox"/> RMC	<input type="checkbox"/> LMC	<input type="checkbox"/> FAL-GOA	<input type="checkbox"/> EKG	Restraints	
<input type="checkbox"/> SAH	<input type="checkbox"/> BHC	<input type="checkbox"/> PSL	<input type="checkbox"/> NND-AST	<input type="checkbox"/> DPT-DTX	<input type="checkbox"/> IV	Single	
<input type="checkbox"/> SJH	<input type="checkbox"/> TCH	<input type="checkbox"/> FAMC	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> O ₂	Shared	
					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> R _x	Trintmt/No Trint	
OTHER DESTINATION							PATIENT VALUABLES
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Base Contact	<input type="checkbox"/> RFD - PIR - POV - PAT - TNR - MEC		CODE IN		ICD9 (Office Use Only)		
Homes	M.D.	10	9 - N/A	END MILEAGE - START MILEAGE - TOTAL MILES			
TIME	PULSE	B/P	RESP	PUPILS	CARDIAC RHYTHM	SaO ₂	EYES + VERBAL + MOTOR = GCS
0711	120	120/120	24	=			4 3 2 1 5 4 3 2 1 5 5 4 3 2 1 = 3
0714	120	90/120	24	#			4 3 2 1 5 4 3 2 1 5 5 4 3 2 1 = 3
				MECHANISM OF INJURY/ILLNESS			
				FROM STAIR			
HISTORY, PHYSICAL, MANAGEMENT, COURSE							
<p>5'7" Pt. 175 lbs. 12/24/99. 1759. T-DONE. MORTALITY MUA T-DONE @ SIDE @ KILCO. PT UNDER FOR... D² PL FANT... RESP. HEAVY... T-DONE... ADD S/S... D² PL... P... AD... PL...</p>							
PROX				AUTHOR'S SIGNATURE			
<input type="checkbox"/> CARDIAC	<input type="checkbox"/> RESPIRATORY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SEIZURE	<input type="checkbox"/> DIABETES				
MEDICATIONS				AUTHOR'S SIGNATURE			
ALLERGIES				AUTHOR'S SIGNATURE			

As much as I can discern from the nearly illegible handwriting on this report, there is no evidence of a Near Death Experience. There is no noticeable mention of the need for resuscitation and the bulk of this document is made up of a list of my injuries. Every circled “R” or “L” in the report is the description of an injury on either the Left or Right side of my body. I don’t need to count the circled letters. I can count my scars.

APPENDIX B: THE EMERGENCY ROOM REPORT

DHMC EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT VISIT 4000184048

CC/Accident: MCA Arr D/T: 06/24/99 18:20 Makowski, James Sex: M
 How Arr: DH Amb Init Rm: 2A Cond: C Triage Cat: 1 DH#: 2096142 DOB: 04/21/69 (30Y)
 Prev ED Visits: Unk Insur: SelfPay OKed by: FIN: 36771682 Visit: 06/24/99

Physician's Note:

(Subj) 30's appearing male, unknown identity, involved in high speed MCA unhelmeted. (+) L.O.C. nasally intubated in field → nonresponsive E GCS = 3 PTA. O₂ available. P spontaneous movement on initial arrival.

(Obj) (V) 124/87, 125, intubated, 917. Sat bagged. Unk; unknw or, unresponsive to painful stimuli; multiple wounds. HEENT: Small @ Lead laceration post. PEEYamm i slightly reactive. TM's clear @. Nares ETT on @ @ P: Tobacco present & obvious injury. facial lacer without step-off. Neck's (+) collar; vms: noted. Cardip: S₁/S₂ @m/sfr. Tachy. Resp: Bagged E clear/ = BS @. Chest: @lar, @abscam @asepitus noted. Abd: soft, (+) BS @R/L. Pedal: Good tone, nl priate, Hmc @be. Ext: Multiple trauma → @ shoulder (scapula deformity E ED Course: axilla wound. @LE avulsion @ knee (large) E Road rash. @LE open tib/fib fx. Multiple abrasions. Post tone: Good pulses x 4 extremities. Neuro: GCS = 3 on arrival → 10' later noted to move all 4 ext and open eyes to voice. Difficult to assess neuro status 2° to intubation / injuries. ORTHO / SURG / NEUROLOG CONSULTS in ED. Multiple fx's → to OR then SICU. Lab/X-Ray/EKG Results: Films: @ Shoulder dislocation, humerus fx, scapular fx. Pelvis (-) ve. C-spine (-) ve c-x @ (-) ve. @ Tib-fib @open fx, comm/diplaced. Final ED Assessment: CT Chest: Tiny @ pneumonia CT Head: (-) ve CT Spine (-) ve. CT Abd/pelvis: (-) ve. T/U-s (-) ve. Met: 48 → 46 Discharge Plan: Assess @ Blunt Trauma No BAT. @ Clean @ C-@. @ Small @ pneumonia TO OR for ORTHO @ Open @ Tib/fib fx. @ Arms. *224* repair tib-fib then @ humerus fx/diplacement. @ Resp failure SICU Admit. @ Scapular fx. Time Pt Left ED: 2159 Final Pt Condition in ED: @ Good @ Fair @ Serious @ Critical D/C Inst Sheets: Prescriptions: @ D/C Home @ D/C To Jail @ Xfer to: @ Admitted to SICU. Room: 200+ Care Giver: Prof #: @ Other: EM Resident: Prof #: 076529 @ Return to ED PRN @ ED Return Date: @ F/U Clinic: Date: Attending: Prof #:

FO8-006 (Rev. 7/95) DH Template: Form 1 Printed: 06/24/99 18:22 @ SMS OIC @ Fin Audit @ Log Sign-Out @ Copy

Again, looking for evidence of an NDE, this ER report is a list of the damage I did to my body. Even as I wrote this story for you, gentle reader,—less than ten years removed from 06/24/99—I am forgetful of just how traumatic my injuries were. Hell, I'm obviously forgetful about most events in my life. I also happen to be savvy enough to know that Oprah would require documentation such as this to make my story all the more believable. We should both know by now I am not a very reliable narrator.

APPENDIX C: THE ACCIDENT REPORT

STATE OF COLORADO TRAFFIC ACCIDENT REPORT
 AMENDED/SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT UNDER \$1,000 ACCIDENT

MAIL TO: State of Colorado
 Motor Vehicle Division
 Traffic Records
 Denver, CO 80261-0515
 SHEET OF 5-6213

CR 447 (REV. 1/87)

ROOT CODE		AGENCY CODE 990913420		DOR CODE Recd	
DATE OF ACCIDENT 06/24/99		CITY DENVER		AGENCY DENVER PD	
TIME 1750		OFFICER NUMBER 2477		OWNER NAME DA LAZZARI	
NUMBER KILLED 0		NUMBER INJURED 1		SIGNATURE [Signature]	
DATE OF REPORT 06/24/99		LOCATION ROUTE STREET ROAD W. 8th Ave		MILES FEET 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 OF MARIPOSA ST	
INVESTIGATED SCENE <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	TOTAL VEHICLES 2	DISTRICT NUMBER 9612	PUBLIC PROPERTY EMPLOYEE	PHOTOS TAKEN 202	RAILROAD CROSSING
CONST CODE	ON BRIDGE	INCOMPLETE REPORT			
VEH #1 OR BICYCLE # PEDESTRIAN # PARKED	VEH #2 OR BICYCLE # PEDESTRIAN # PARKED				
LAST NAME FIRST MI MAKOWSKI JAMES		LAST NAME FIRST MI			
STREET ADDRESS 300 W 123 RD		STREET ADDRESS			
CITY STATE ZIP WESTMINSTER CO		CITY STATE ZIP			
BUS PHONE 98-212-1086		BUS PHONE			
DRIVERS LIC NUMBER M1042169		DRIVERS LIC NUMBER			
PRIMARY VIOLATION ROW STOP/YIELD INT		PRIMARY VIOLATION			
VIOLATION CODE 54-120		CITATION NUMBER X-235766		COMMON CODE 373	
YEAR MAKE MODEL 99 CAMARO		YEAR MAKE MODEL 99 CHEV		YEAR MAKE MODEL 99 CHEV	
L.C. PLATE R7311T		L.C. PLATE 15749PH		L.C. PLATE 15749PH	
VEHICLE ID NO JY3AHHE05TA102556		VEHICLE ID NO 17CEK14T3XE156570			
VEHICLE OWNER LAST NAME [Redacted]		VEHICLE OWNER LAST NAME ELITCH GARDENS			
ADDRESS [Redacted]		ADDRESS 299 WALNUT ST DEN CO			
TOWED DUE TO DAMAGE BY TO TO POUND 30226		TOWED DUE TO DAMAGE BY TO 30205			
TO UNDERCARRIAGE		TO UNDERCARRIAGE			
INSURANCE CO NO POI		INSURANCE CO I.I.G.		INSURANCE CO I.I.G.	
POLICY NO		POLICY NO T737968516			
OWNER DAMAGED PROP LAST NAME FIRST MI		OWNER DAMAGED PROP LAST NAME FIRST MI			
ADDRESS CITY STATE ZIP		ADDRESS CITY STATE ZIP			

VEH#	POS	RESTR	SUBJ	SEC PROT	RZ	AGE	SEX	NAME-ADDRESS
1	1		1	4	4	30	M	#1
2	1	1	2		1	23	M	#2

Recd. 7/16/99

VEHICLE #1 (MAKOWSKI) TRAVELING SIB ON MARIPOSA ST., AT AN UNKNOWN SPEED, STRUCK OR WAS STRUCK BY VEHICLE #2 [REDACTED] WHO WAS EIB ON W. 8th AVE AT A STATED SPEED OF 30 MPH.

[REDACTED] MAKOWSKI NO STATEMENT

NOT TO SCALE

POSTED STOP SIGN

W. 8th Ave

ONE WAY

8th Ave VIADUCT

MARIPOSA ST

990913/20

DGH #1 TRIP 4618 TO DGH.

CLEAR WHEN SOLID

This report, filled out after my wallet was found, contradicts my memory of ensuing rain. It also contradicts my mom's version of the accident where "both vehicles were doing less than 10 miles an hour at impact." D.A. Lazzari filled out this report and wrote me the ticket. I am guessing that he is also the one that showed up with my Death Certificate. Discussions with police officers outside of Denver have told me that incidents without a fatality are no less demanding of paperwork than those where there are survivors.

APPENDIX D: THE TRAFFIC TICKET

THIS IS A LEGAL DOCUMENT - READ BOTH SIDES

Last Name: MAJKOWSKI, JAMES Middle Initial: FR

Complete Home Address - Inc. Apt. No.: 500 W. 125th Ave

City and State: WESTMINSTER, CO Zip Code: 80031

Service Lic. No.: 93-212-1086 State: CO Phone Number: 303-438-1086

DOB: 04/21/69 Race: W Sex: M Hgt: 5'10" Wgt: 170 Hair: B Eyes: B

Employed By or Social Security Number: _____ Bus. Phone: _____

Veh. Make: YAMAHA Model: R701T Color: Black License No.: 1A7011 State: CO Reg. Exp.: 12/99

Approximate Location of Offense: in the City and County of Denver, Colorado at W. 8th Ave @ Mariposa St

Date of Offense: 06/24/99 Time: 5:30 AM PM CDL DMV HVAC

C.R.S. R.M.C. VIOLATIONS AND POINT ASSESSMENTS (in Parentheses)			
<input type="checkbox"/>	34-23 Commercial Motor Vehicle (2 pts.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	34-122 Failure to Yield Right of Way at Intersections (2 pts.)
<input type="checkbox"/>	34-23 Commercial Motor Vehicle (2 pts.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	34-123 Failure to Yield Right of Way at Intersections (2 pts.)
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Accident Personal Injury/Death Significant Property Damage

Other Violations: (Give Code # & Describe) _____ Points: _____

The undersigned states that he or she knows or believes that the aforementioned offenses were committed by the defendant against the peace and dignity of the people of the City and County of Denver and of the People of the State of Colorado.

Complainant: DA UNZARZI Ser. No.: 34-11

I certify that a copy of this summons and complaint/penalty assessment notice was duly served upon the defendant according to law.

Date Served: 06/24/99 By: 34-11 Bur: 9-863

You are ORDERED TO APPEAR BY DENVER COUNTY DISTRICT COURT, Room 100, 1480 Cherokee St., in the Denver City and County Building to take a fine or appear in court as stated. If the appearance date falls on a Saturday, Sunday or Holiday, you are due to appear on the next Court business day.

PENALTY ASSESSMENT: If this box is checked, payment without court appearance is permitted.

IF YOU CHOOSE TO APPEAR IN COURT, ADDITIONAL COSTS MAY BE ASSESSED

IF YOU PAY BY MAIL, DO NOT GO TO COURT

Payment must be received **5 DAYS PRIOR** to your court date or you must appear in court.

If payment is mailed within **30 CALENDAR DAYS OF SERVICE**, you may receive a reduction in both fine and penalty points assessed. This does not apply to State (C.R.S.) violations.

<p>Fine Amount: \$ _____</p> <p>Traffic Bureau Costs: + \$4.00</p> <p>V.A.E. Surcharge: + \$12.00 (Municipal Charges Only)</p> <p>TOTAL POINTS: _____</p> <p>PAY THIS AMOUNT</p>	<p>Fine Amount: \$ _____</p> <p>Traffic Bureau Costs: + \$4.00</p> <p>V.A.E. Surcharge: + \$12.00 (Municipal Charges Only)</p> <p>TOTAL POINTS: _____</p> <p>PAY THIS AMOUNT</p>
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TO PAY BY MAIL YOU MUST SIGN THE BACK OF THIS TICKET

SUMMONS: If this box is checked, YOUR APPEARANCE IN COURT IS REQUIRED.

This is a scan of a copy of the ticket I received for running the stop sign at Eight and Mariposa. The circled stains are my blood. I'm pretty sure we didn't even locate this ticket until well after the 10/29/99 court appearance date. My attorney informed me of the subsequent arrest warrant that was issued for me. Legally, I was a fugitive. Thankfully, the feds didn't come after me like some half-scared, Cuban kid. The ticket cost me \$73 and nearly \$700 in attorney's fees. At least they didn't send "Dog the Bounty Hunter" after me. He was chasing Colorado fugitives at the time.

APPENDIX E: THE DOCTOR'S OPINION



DENVER
HEALTH

DEPARTMENT OF ORTHOPAEDIC SURGERY

November 9, 1999

Your Community
Health Partner

FREDERICK N. MEYER, MD
PROFESSOR & CHAIRMAN
HAND SURGERY

To Whom It May Concern:

Re: James Patrick Makowski
Denver Health Medical Center
MRN #2096142

ANTHONY P. DWYER, MD
SPINE

JAMES D. FERRARI, MD
SPORTS MEDICINE
KNEE AND SHOULDER SURGERY

STEVEN J. MORGAN, MD
ORTHOPAEDIC TRAUMATOLOGY
ADULT RECONSTRUCTION

WADE R. SMETH, MD
ORTHOPAEDIC TRAUMATOLOGY
ADULT RECONSTRUCTION

DALE H. CARNEGIE, DPM
PODIATRY

Mr. Makowski is a 30 year old male who on June 24, 1999, was involved in a motorcycle accident. He was treated at Denver Health Medical Center for his injuries. I was the Orthopaedic attending on call the day of his injuries. His injuries included a right grade IIIB open tibia fracture with fibula fracture, a right open humerus fracture, a right scapula thoracic dissociation, a right shoulder dislocation with greater tuberosity fracture, as well as left thigh soft tissue injuries. On the night of admission, he underwent external fixation and debridement of his right open tibia fracture, his right humerus fracture was plated and his shoulder was reduced. Fortunately, he did not suffer a vascular injury to the right upper extremity. However, he did suffer a complete avulsion of his brachial plexus nerve roots. He eventually underwent a repeat irrigation and debridement and intramedullary nailing of his right tibia fracture with subsequent rectus free flap for wound coverage. Fortunately, he did not suffer any significant pulmonary or intracranial injuries and he progressed quite well with the limited therapy he could perform and was eventually discharged on 7/9/99.

The injuries sustained by Mr Makowski are some of the most severe musculoskeletal injuries which anyone could sustain. An isolated open tibia fracture takes, on average, approximately six months to heal and usually requires supplemental operations to encourage healing. The degree of severity in his open tibia fracture was quite high as it required free flap for wound coverage. Certainly, it will be well over a year until he has regained full use of his right lower extremity, and that is if his progress continues to go as it has. With regard to his right upper extremity injuries, in my ten years of orthopaedics at major trauma centers across the country, I have never seen a more severe upper extremity injury in someone that has actually survived the accident. To review, not only did Mr. Makowski break his humerus, but he also dislocated his shoulder, fractured the greater tuberosity in his shoulder, fractured his scapula, had a disruption of his sternoclavicular joint and had a scapular thoracic dissociation. This injury occurs when the upper extremity is essentially ripped off the thorax without damaging the skin. Essentially all his nerves to his upper extremity were avulsed in the injury. There is no likely way for him to regain full, complete use of his right arm. In general, these injuries are observed for a period of approximately one year prior to any more reconstructive operation is considered

777 Bannock Street Denver, Colorado 80204 303.436.6131 fax: 303.436.3123

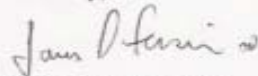
To Whom It May Concern
Re: James Patrick Makowski
November 9, 1999
Page 2

on the scapular thoracic dissociation. At that point, tendon transfers are an option as well as fusion of the scapular thoracic articulation or glenohumeral articulations. In some cases, if there is absolutely no use in the upper extremity at the hand, an above elbow amputation is recommended. In the meantime, he is having delayed healing of the open humerus fracture. This will likely require a secondary operation to encourage bone union.

There is no doubt that his injuries and their subsequent improvement will last beyond twelve months. He definitely needs assistance to continue to aid in the medical treatment of his injuries. His injuries require continued occupational and physical therapy to ensure an optimum outcome will be reached.

If I can be of any further assistance to you in this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



James D. Ferrari, M.D.
Director of Sports Medicine
Denver Health Medical Center

JDF:rc

Dr. Ferrari wrote this letter for me as I was applying for Social Security and Medicaid benefits. I had been denied benefits after my first application. Doctor Ferrari was a lead physician at the Denver Knife and Gun Club and for him to say, "The injuries sustained by Mr. Makowski are some of the most severe musculoskeletal injuries which anyone could sustain," was an eye-opener for me. I have learned that an "open fracture" indicates a space between the fractured ends of the bone. A "grade IIIB open fracture" means there was a space greater than 1" between the fractured bone ends. There can be no doubt that Dr. Ferrari has seen some "severe musculoskeletal injuries" in his years as an attending at DGH. It's a dubious honor to be remembered by him.

He knew how seriously I'd been hurt as soon as he saw me in surgery for the first time. When he asked me that day in my hospital room if I "got it," I had no idea just how much damage I had done to my body. It wasn't long after receiving this letter from one of the original "doctors Frankenstein" that Prissy read it to me. In November of 1999, just five months after my accident, I was still concentrating on getting back to the party I was missing—somewhere. Physically, I am certain that I have reached Dr. Ferrari's "optimum outcome."

**APPENDIX F: THE CORRECTIONS BY PRISSY TO MY VERSION OF
HER LIFE**

panspeak@hotmail.com
Printed: Monday, November 13, 2006 4:51 PM
From: Priss Rader
Sent: Monday, November 13, 2006 11:50 AM
To: "PATRICK RADER" <panspeak@hotmail.com>
Subject: The Tales

While I know that your story is compiled of the stories of others, along with you own memories composed in part of the stories of others, I think that you will have to reconstruct, at least in part, some of those stories to keep them out of the realm of complete fiction. So, by way of providing the facts necessary to do that, and also just to share what little I know about my family, I offer the following:

The Indian Princess

It was in fact, Papa, not Mother, who was the family Indian Princess. Just how much native American she actually was, I do not know. I do know that it must have been substantial as I heard that Peggy and John L's kids, as Papas grandchildren, were entitled to some education financial aid by virtue of the percentage of native American blood still in their veins by the time it reached that generation. The beauty of the 3 Smith sisters, Maudie, Clara and Ruby, I am told, was legendary, with Papa (Maudie), being the most beautiful. I don't remember much of Aunt Ruby. but I do remember Aunt Clara, who I thought was a real beauty and by far the nicest of the 3. My Dad told me that Papa and Daddy Mack were such a handsome couple in their youth, that people actually would stop to turn and look after them. Maybe truth., maybe Dad's truth, but they were a handsome couple well into their later years.

I am pretty sure Daddy Mack had native blood as well, but I don't know from where, or who much. He was the brother of your grandmother, Inez Jesse McClure, who at 14, and married to a much older white man, Lewis (Lace) Echols, became the mother of your Granddad. Daddy Mack had a number of brothers who I never met, but I never knew of another sister. I never spoke with him about my grandmother and do not know what their relationship was. I know she left my father with her husband, and went on with a life without either of them. Daddy told me she died in her mid 30's, the cause of which I am uncertain., but drowning was mentioned by someone He said when he received news of her death, he went to a movie theater and cried, alone in the dark theater. Even an absent/bad mother apparently is better then no mother at all, because he obviously grieved her. Both of my fraternal grandparents were long dead before I was born. My father never took me to Texas to share his heritage, or to be introduced to any friends/relatives who were living there. As you know, we never were told much about any of our extended family on either side, and what little Dad shared with me came at the end of his life when we spent many hours alone together, and he was too sick to do much more then talk.

Mother

My mother, Carolyn Helen Widmeyer, was born and raised in Bucks County, Pennsylvania in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country where all good German Americans lived at the time. She had a touch of the regional accent and sometimes utilized coloquialized phrases in her speech. Her mother and father were divorced, something almost unheard of in that time. I only met my fraternal grandfather once when Jane Burney took me to my mothers gravesite (the first

time I had ever been there), and then to meet him. It was a brief and strange meeting. He cried and I am certain that not knowing his grandchildren had not been his idea. During the brief period in which I knew her, my grandmother, Nellie Widmeyer Beebe, was married to Morris Beebe, a kindly fellow who smoked cigars. She was a quiet, old looking, heavy set woman of whom I remember almost nothing. I remember their house, and that she had a small, metal music box that played Let Me Call You Sweetheart.

My mother had an older sister, Sara, who I think pretty much raised her. I know that Aunt Sara adored her, and what few photos and stories I know of her came from Aunt Sara. Mike and Sooty stayed with Aunt Sara and Uncle Karl briefly after Mother's death. Dad never spoke often or kindly of them, and by the time Dad had moved us all into the house together in Downingtown, we were not seeing them at all. I rekindled my relationship with them after I married Jerry, and went as often as I could to visit and took you along. I always found them to be loving and caring, and extremely saddened by the fact that Dad had not allowed them to have a relationship with their nieces and nephews. I wrote to her a number of times after Robert and I were married, and her last letter was written to me just days before her death about a year or so ago.

Mother and Daddy

My Dad left Texas in his early 20s to catch up with Daddy Mack who was pipelining here and there. According to Dad, he and a life long friend had been working in Louisiana, but work had been rained out for a number of days, so one night Dad said if it rained the next day he would hop on a bus and go hook up with Daddy Mack, and, of course, the next day it rained.

Dad, around 25, 26 at the time, met Mother when he came to live and work with Daddy Mack & Papa, who lived next door to Karl & Sara in West Lawn. Mother was a senior in high school living with them. He went with her on a hayride and apparently they fell into a kind of ambivalent love, which I think is the only sort of love my Dad was capable of. I suppose she was in the kind of love 18 year old girls are in, particularly when the attention comes from an older man. Although they never spoke ill of Daddy, Aunt Sara once confided that she urged Mother not to marry the first man who asked her, but apparently it went in one ear and out the other, I do not think my mother was ever a naturally happy person. Don't ask how I know that, but I am sure of it. I once asked Scotty if we were a happy family when Mother was alive, and he said no- I have only a few personal memories of my mother, all of which have surfaced in recent years. My memory of her begins and ends with the night she died.

It was either April 18th or 22nd, 1957. One of those dates was her birth date. The other the day she died. I do not remember which is which. The table was set for dinner, and spaghetti sauce was on the stove simmering all day. Mickey Mouse Club came on the TV at 5, and I was allowed to watch it. Apparently my 3 siblings were also in the house, but I have no recollection of that. I went upstairs just before 5 to put on my slippers, and passing her bedroom door knocked. She said not to come in because she was sewing me a dress for Easter. The details of what followed the rest of that evening are not germane to your story, so I will not put them down here, but if you ever want to know in some quiet *moments* just between us, I will share them, It is not painful to recall them, but I don't know that I would want to face the words on the written page, even after all these years.

I can't really remember how old was when Jane entered the picture. Pam was her child from a prior marriage and is only 10 months younger than Meegan. Todd was their only child together. To Granddad's credit, he treated us all the same, hence the reason you probably never realized Pam was not a half sister, but a step-sister.

Jerry and Prissy

Yup. Guess that was us... an early version of Brenda and Eddie, I was an emotionally and mentally unstable 16 or 17 when we met. Skinny, flat-chested, with frizzy hair and a very unfashionable, and for the most part, worn wardrobe. All serious issues at that age and stage in life. Jerry was a very nice boy... and drop dead, Robert Redford handsome. I was dumbstruck that anyone who looked like him would show an interest in someone like me. It seems that I am a person who mostly lives in the present, and therefore, unlike your Aunt Jane who remembers every detail of our youth, I don't have a lot of really solid remembrance of my emotions or events from past lives..., my life with Kip is much faded, even though it was without doubt the most intense period of my life on every level, I suppose Jerry loved me in a boy's way, which is not to be taken any less seriously because of youth. I don't remember how I felt, I had no life skills, Was a virtual servant in my home, and no one had ever had one single discussion with me about what was to become of me after I finished high school. Dad returned to Africa in March of 1968, and Jane and the girls, and I assumed me, were to join him in June, I had no idea what I was supposed to do there, I had never held a job of any kind until after Dad left in March, when I took a part time job working the counter at a local drycleaners. I could not even drive, No one in my family had ever given me any driving lessons, and that job was left to friends at a later time, I suppose I got married because I did not know what else to do. 18 year old brides were not that uncommon in 1968.

Although you arrived a month prior to attaining our 9 month anniversary (much to the dismay of your grandmother), we did not marry because I was pregnant. If I was, we did not know it. My sense of urgency in getting married was not because you were on the way. I am not sure where the urgency came from, but it was there.

I had a very unrealistic idea of married life. Like you, I was a polished liar, and most of my life consisted of lies and pretend, and until I learned Gust in the last 20 years), that no lasting success, peace or joy can occur until you live in the truth, I continued to knit of my version of the world, and life just got more complicated and difficult. I was supremely disappointed in the fact that my in-laws did not conform to my idea of family. I wanted the Walton's, and the Walton's, they were not. In some ways they were worse than the Echols version of family. I never heard my father speak with the foul tongue of Jerome, As soon as I realized they were not going to fit into my idea, I began to despise them all, with the exception of Mary Jo, who was only a child. They were, in my mind, a despicable bunch, and I resented the way Jerry had been treated,

I don't think it would serve any purpose to detail the decline of our marriage. It never should have happened in the first place. We were too young, too different, just too, too, too, Divorce was my idea, I had already met Kip and while still the consummate liar, was just not the type to be a cheater, At the core I have always been a pretty straight arrow on issues of morality, and have always had a religious center, so just could not, and would not live that duplicity. I don't think Jerry was any happier than I, but think he probably would have stayed married just because

that is what the Makowskis do, Neither was it his idea to come to Florida. We were packed to move into a different rental location, and I just decided I no longer wanted to live on the east coast, I had always hated living in the north even as a child, and lived for the summers near Peggy and John L in whatever southern town, even if it was just to live on the edge of a real family. I called Vicki and asked 'if I could come with you to Florida, and when she agreed, I told Jerry I was leaving and he could come or stay. I think he still wanted to be a family, and he came, I further justified the move because his friend and coworker had told me Jerry was involved with a married woman at work, whose husband had found them out. I never asked Jerry about it, I was always a great homemaker, cause that was all I knew, but was never a good wife, I did not know until several years into my marriage to Robert, even what marriage was or meant. If he was not a great husband, I think it was mostly because he too did not know what one was. I hope he knows now. I truly hope he has enjoyed happiness. I apologize sincerely for any hurt or unhappiness I inflicted on Jerry. I have no apologies or excuses for his relationship with you. He was in complete and total control of that, and he will have to answer for himself.

Still, I don't know why he failed to step up as a parent. I find it difficult to believe that he was a hurtful and mean spirited enough man to conduct himself as he did just to hurt me, He was, by all accounts, a nice guy. He never really had the ability to hurt me, because I don't think I ever cared enough about him, and I say that with some shame. Other than his relationship, or lack thereof with you, I quit having any, zero, thought or feelings for him the second he walked out the door. I regret that I did not, at that time, have the ability to have any honest discourse with him about anything. Honestly, I am not even certain today how much of what I remember of "us" is truth or lie. The few facts I have shared here are truth, of that I am certain.

If I had it to do over would I have married him? Yes. We made you, and for all the heartache, hard work, and still unresolved issues that has brought, the sheer joy of it has been unsurpassed and unequaled by anything that has yet to occur in my life. I can still call up the emotion I felt when holding, or even looking at you, as an infant. It was, and still is, a miraculous feeling. And this (all of the above), my Son, is THE TRUTH.

* * * *

Mom has obviously always pleaded with me to be more truthful than I am. As I have shared my stories with you, gentle reader, this memoir has been an exercise in just that. Unfortunately, without much true memory to rely on, I am forced to write my version of personally historical events and then share them with those parties that receive recognition in my narratives. What I then write as "the truth" is actually just a compromised narrative of events that all the characters can agree upon.

Unfortunately for Prissy, I've never really put much credence in her biblical notion of truth. I've grown up watching reality become virtual and truth become as subjective as the definition of the word "is." What used to be easily recognized as "fake" has become the accepted reality even though we all know it to be manipulated. Now that I have a clearer understanding of what the people in my life were like when they were my age, I understand how no matter how hard I tried not to make similar mistakes to Prissy and Jerry and Kip, I was almost doomed to because I had no other adult models. No matter how hard Prissy wanted me to do as she said. I have only done as she did. My mom is a much more honest person now—with herself and me. Perhaps, I will begin to follow her new model.

APPENDIX G: THE DOG'S EDITS, NOTES AND NARRATIVE

I can't get Roy to sit down long enough and write his stories for himself. The two pages of hand written narrative I've included in this Appendix is as close as he'll come to writing his own tales. While he was certainly involved in the creation of Part I, I was stunned by how involved he was in helping me write Part II. Roy wanted to make sure I was "getting shit right" and "not just making it up." He became concerned about the readers' perception of his character and wanted to make sure they understood how complex he was. I've always told him that the best way for him to impact his literary perception of himself is to invent it. "That's what you're doing," he tells me.

I guess I feel it's just too convenient for me to meet a character like the Dog, and then just downright cliché that he would make me realize the many things about the kind of man I was as I wrote stories about the kind of man he was becoming. Given my literary paranoia that results from being a student of nonfiction during an era that brought us such noted plagiarists as Jayson Blair, Phillip Glass, Doris Kearns Goodwin and the earlier maligned James Frey, I feel it almost mandatory to include these pages in my Appendix as proof to you, gentle reader that he actually did exist.

Roy's bottom row of teeth is capped in gold. His arms and legs are a collection of tattoos that make him stand out in a crowd of bikers. "The world is ours" cursive across the globe, "Dirty South" and the emblem of Henry Rollins's old, hardcore band, Black Flag, permanently inked into his arms draw people's eyes as they instinctively and protectively make sure they are still in possession of their wallets as the Dog passes by. Roy is admittedly a criminal, he sells drugs for Christ's sake, but he is not a thief. I have also come to the conclusion that Roy is one of the most honest people I have ever met. His appearance combined with the duality of his character is what motivated me to write about him. It's also why he remains my friend. I shared this insight with Katie, but she, like so many others who have tried to wrap their heads around the relationship between me and the Dog, found its complexity, like that of Roy's character, eluded her.

Though he had done his fair share of stealing as a teen age he had since grown up through his many lonely nights in a 8x10

* * * *

Dog's a walking library of fucked-up stories about people who live in a fashion that most Americans don't want to know about. Most of the characters in his tales are members of that "seedy underbelly of American society" that the super religious and/or conservative of our country would rather ~~forget~~ **Lock up and forget about** Roy and most of his other friends are so far off the grid that concepts like voting and civic responsibility are greeted with a blank stare or a comment to the effect of, "My responsibility is to me and my own." When I see these kids, most of whom are in their early twenties with one or two kids of their own, I look at their circumstances, their childhoods that are usually characterized by violence, abuse and neglect and I find it relatively easy not to pass judgment. I'll chalk that up to my earlier mentioned messiah complex.

Roy's crystal-meth ~~addled~~ **addled?** mom killed herself before he was out of diapers. His dad has been in and out of prison for most of the Dog's life. Roy, in his own words, is "just trying to get mine."

plastic plates, he shared his story his story with a comparable enthusiasm.

"You know that chick, ~~Amy~~, I kind of been seeing, right?" **Sterling, I use to fuck with**

"That one that you were seeing a while back?" I had a fuzzy memory of a ~~brunette~~ **Blond** slightly athletic girl who had ~~only just recently started buying her alcohol legally~~ **recently left her job as an exotic dancer.** She was also

* * * *

diapered baby attached to her hip.

"Yeah. Well, you know ~~she used to live with Dave and Donna~~ **We stay** ~~those people that I used to stay with back in the day?~~"

He wasn't really looking for an answer from me. I nodded and continued to stab at the croutons in my salad. He talked around his meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

~~"Amy was staying with them for a while until she moved into where she's at now."~~ **We** **till I had to get away from** **That crazy bitch.**

This transient lifestyle is not uncommon among Roy's friends outside of the circle of

"So, where's she at now?"

After filling me in on ^{Sterling's} Amy's current living arrangement, which ^{where he} was really just a change ^{had last left her, with Dave and Donna} in geography, he continued his story. "She calls me the other day and wants me to meet up with ^{We been chillin', you know me, I'm not the one to turn down a} her so she can ask me a favor." he pauses to swallow a bite. "So, I meet up with her and she has ^{nice piece of ass,} these two money orders for about two thousand bucks." ^{She needs some help moving her shit to her new place} "Each?" I interrupt. ^{she told me she had no ID.} "That's what the fuck I said and ^{she asked me to do her a favor. she asked me if I could cash these two money orders for her.} if you will

you take these to the check cashing place and cash them, I'll give you like two hundred dollars."

"So, what'd you do?"

She was in Daves Truck and

* * * *

~~"Dude, I was bugging out. I just made a sharp turn away from the check place but tried to stay close so I could see what was going down. I had to stash a sack of weed under some car because I was bugging out so bad."~~

~~"That sucks. So, a van pulls up. What, were they like S.W.A.T. or something?"~~

~~"Nah, dude. The chick she stole the money orders from gets out of the van. I figure after Amy tried to cash them, the people at the check place called her because the other chick bought them at that same place."~~

~~"So, you're just standing there as the woman gets out of the van? Did you know her?"~~

~~"Dude, I used to fucking live with her and her husband!"~~

~~"Before Amy?"~~

~~"Yeah! That's why I was like, 'I don't know about cashing those for you,' because I had a bad feeling that she lifted them from Dave and Donna."~~

~~It just sucks cause~~

~~"These people gave her a place to stay until she could get her shit together and she winds up stealing from them?"~~

* * * *

We'd both finished eating, but I was anxious to hear where this story is going. Roy

knows that the stories he tells me fire my imagination and he baited me appropriately.

in not trying to be a dick but you got me fucked up if you think I'm going to cash em. They got them
"I tell her I won't cash them for her, but I'll go with her if she wants. So we wait for this friend of hers to drive us to the place."

Shits in there computer and if they are reported lost or Stolen I'm busted on the spot! she tried to convens me That wasn't the case but I knew better!

We left Boston Market and lazily walked across the parking lot to stop under the lone tree

in the strip mall the restaurant sits in. Roy brazenly lit a joint and we smoked in the parking lot

where only his car sat under the canopy of the shade tree. After lighting the joint and taking a

deep drag, he passed it to me.

N1
"We get to the place and I wait in the car when she goes in," he continued his narrative,
P1

about ten minutes
"a couple of minutes go by and I'm starting to think 'something ain't right.'" Continuing our

smoke, we walked back to his car as he story developed and piqued my interest further. "So, ~~she~~

sterling was watching the baby, who was in the jugs car.
get out of the car and start walking toward the place."

She came over to me and asked me to stand by the car and watch the baby while she went to see if I could

"Did you go into the check cashing place?"

"Fuck no! As I'm walking toward the place, this van and a police car pull up."

what he hold up was. So I did. As I was

"Get the fuck out! What'd you do?"

standing there I notice this guy ~~running~~ *running* through

the intersection of the busy ~~as~~ *highway*.

I think
To myself damn this guys in a hurry. *thought*

N2

N1 "So she says 'fine I'll get someone else to do it' and calls this 'jüg' up."

"Jüg?" I wasn't versed in this "thus" jargon

"Yeah you know a crack head! Well we got to the Amcott and this girl shows up with her baby. P1
So Sterling ~~went~~ ^{went} and talked to her, I stayed in the truck. I didn't want no parts of that shit.

N2

A couple second later the some guy is now running in front of the strip mall that the Amcott was in. Just as Sterling was coming out the door ~~he~~ ^{he} grabbed her and pushed her back in ~~the door~~. The first thing I thought was damn this fucker is fixin to rob the Amcott. So ^{as} I'm looking to see if he's armed, ~~and~~ a van scerts in, in front of me and I see ~~the~~ ^{right} Dongg in the ^{van} car. I putt two and two together and relize that it must have been Dave that was running. ~~Knowing~~ ^{Knowing} that the Cops will be there any minute I get the bag of weed out of my pocket and throw it under the car I'm standing next to. The jüg ran out ~~to~~ the Amcott, and jumped in her car and hauled ass. So I went over to Dongg to see what was going down, though I pretty much knew what the deal is. I asked her whats going on and she tells me that Sterling

had stolen her rent money which was two
money orders. She asked me if I knew anything
and I told her. Naa. So I gave her the
key to the truck ~~with~~ ~~wit~~ ~~wich~~ I had pulled
out when I went to watch the baby. About
that time a "cracker" pulled up. So I walked
down to the ^{end} edge of the building and sat
on the curb. ~~I wanted to~~ I half wanted to
leave and half wanted to see what went down
I figured I was far enough away from the
action and out of no where two cop car
come flying in and park about a foot from
me. They get out and almost trample me
heading for the Amcott. That was enough
for me I got up and ~~started~~ walked to
the CVS, I went in bought me a drink and
started walking towards home. I was looking
around and I took a few minutes to enjoy
and appreciate my surrounding. The sky ~~and grass~~
~~seemed~~ ^{seemed} a lil brighter, the grass a lil greener.
I was happy to have been taking a walk and not
the ride my friend was takin. ~~And they say you~~
~~can't teach an old dog new tricks!~~
save for last one

This is the Dog's "Money Order Story" in his own words. I love how he's even started looking toward the third installment as he essentially wrote the impetus for the second. I laugh at how he chose quotes for "cracker" but not "jüg." He hasn't explained his reasoning to me. He really was right first time he told me, now almost five years ago, "You ain't cool enough to write about me."