Jelly Beans for Mental Health.

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JELLY BEANS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Stories

by

Daniel Sullivan

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Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
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The Believer

(for Bob Carpenter)

I saw him in person only a few times, and I only really talked to him once — twice if you count the time I approached him in the alley behind the community hall in Perth. But I hardly talked to him that time. He was loading his guitars and things into the back of a beige coloured station-wagon. The car looked like it had almost as many miles on it as he did. I didn’t know what to say to him. What do you say to someone whose music has been such an important part of your life that you feel as if you are intimately connected to him somehow? He heard me approaching and turned around.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hello.”

“That was a great concert.”

“Thanks.”

“I just wanted to ask you...”

“Yeah?”

“...if you’re ever going to make another album.”

He turned away from me, back to the stuff he was loading into the back of the car. I wasn’t even sure that he had heard what I said. Then he turned back to me.

“Have you got fifteen thousand dollars?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“That’s how much it will cost me to make another album.”

I stood there feeling stupid and probably looking just like I felt. It had never crossed my mind that the reason he’d never made another album had anything to do with money. He had so much mystique surrounding him. I’d heard about him for years before I’d ever seen him play. His album had been a rumour in the music industry for ages before it was
actually released. I guess I’d always assumed that people like him could make an album whenever they felt like it. When I thought about it, though, I realized he wasn’t exactly a top-selling artist. It wasn’t like he’d ever been on MTV or anything.

“Anyway,” he said, “I’m not sure I liked the way the first album turned out. The producer went a little overboard, don’t you think?”

I was slightly stunned. He was talking about my very favourite record, and he seemed to be saying it was no good.

“Well, I hope you get a chance to make another one sometime.”

“Yeah? I don’t really care if I do or not. Making records doesn’t do anything for me, really. It’s all a big ego trip.”

As a conversation, this one was turning out to be hopeless, and I abandoned it as soon as it seemed polite to do so. I thanked him again for the concert he’d given, and for his music, and I wished him goodnight.

“I’ll see you later,” he said, but he was just being polite too.

★

It wasn’t that long afterwards that I did see him again. He was the opening act at a huge outdoor concert that Wendy and I attended late the next summer. I wasn’t that surprised to see him. I was aware, after all, that some of his songs had been covered by big name acts, so he wasn’t completely unknown in the music business. I’d guessed that the songwriting royalties were what he lived on.

I don’t remember all that much about his performance. I don’t even know which songs he played. After he’d gone off stage, and we were sitting there watching the stagehands set up for the main act, I was suddenly overwhelmed by a strange, but not unfamiliar sensation. My hands started shaking, and I could feel a little ball of anxiety beginning to swell in the pit of my stomach. It was the same feeling as the one I’d had the night I
cracked up. I started to panic. What if it was happening all over again? I didn’t ever want to
go back to that hospital.

I had to do something, but I didn’t know what to do. I looked at Wendy. She must have
seen the anxiety in my eyes. I’m not sure whether she knew what was happening or if she
just thought I was being restless.

“Why don’t you get up and walk around while you wait for the rest of the concert to
start?” she said.

I got up on my feet and looked around.

“Here,” she said, handing me our infant son. “Take David with you.”

She helped me put him into his strap-on cloth carrier, and sat back down, pulling a book
out of our knapsack and settling back to read. If she had any sense of the mental and
emotional turmoil I was edging toward, she didn’t show any concern about it.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I’m okay here.”

I don’t know whether it was because of the baby, or what, but the security guard made
no move to stop me when I walked past the barricades at the side of the stage. Behind it
was a mass of trucks and cars and tour buses, generators, power cables, television
cameras, men with walkie-talkies and a lot of exceptionally fashionable young women. I
wandered around between rows of cars and trucks, feeling a little excited about being
backstage, but a little bit lost at the same time, expecting to be confronted and escorted
away at any moment. My heart was still pounding furiously, but I was beginning to calm
down. David slept soundly, strapped to my chest, despite the sharp sounds and thumping
noises the crew was making as they tested mikes and turned on amplifiers up on the stage.

★

I recognized that station-wagon immediately, and as I approached it, he turned and
smiled. I couldn’t imagine that he really recognized me. I’d only talked to him for a few
minutes that one time, and that had been almost a year before. He had the tailgate of the
station-wagon open in front of him. On it were paper plates and styrofoam cups, plastic forks and knives, a loaf of bread, meat and cheese, jars filled with things like mustard and mayonnaise, and a plastic picnic jug.

"Want a sandwich?" he asked. "I've got some good salami. Rye-bread. Pickles."

"No thanks."

"Sure?"

"I'm not really hungry."

"How about some apple cider?"

"Okay."

He picked up a styrofoam cup and filled it for me.

"Thanks."

"Eating is a disease," he said. "It'll kill you eventually. But everybody's got it, and we're all going to die of something, so you might as well eat if you have food."

"Huh?"

"We all eat far more than we need to stay alive. It's kind of a sickness. But almost everybody has it. Myself, I try to deal with it, by fasting."

"Oh."

"That's why I wasn't very sociable that time you saw me in Perth. I'd been at a Buddhist retreat, and I'd just finished a twelve-day fast. I was kind of crabby after."

I couldn't believe that he remembered me from our previous meeting. I still didn't know what to say to him. I nodded my head towards the package of salami.

"I always thought Buddhists didn't eat meat," I said.

"Some do. Some don't. I'm not a Buddhist, though."

"You're not?"

"No. I've studied Buddhism. I've studied Christianity too. They're mostly pretty much the same thing. They're just practiced differently. I've studied a lot of religions, but I don't prescribe to any of them in particular. I'm not anything really."
“What makes you want to study religions then?” I asked.

“I dunno. I spent some time in a psychiatric hospital. I had a nervous breakdown. After that, I just started getting interested in different religions.”

Suddenly I knew that he and I shared much more than I could ever have imagined. Suddenly I knew exactly what it was that I wanted to tell him. Before I could stop myself, I had launched into a long-winded account of my own experience as a psychiatric patient. I told him about how afraid I had been, and that I’d been convinced that I was going to die, and about the things I imagined were going to happen to me when I died.

He listened to me intently. When I’d finished he gave me a pseudo-scientific, almost psychiatric sounding explanation of what he thought I’d experienced. It was the same kind of rationalization my doctor had given me. If it hadn’t been for the look in his eyes, I wouldn’t have known that he understood at all what I’d been talking about. But he knew. I could tell.

“That’s not all,” I told him.

“No?”

“When my wife and my friends came to the hospital to pick me up, I was still pretty scared.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It was a long drive home — almost an hour. My friend Paul was driving. When we left the hospital, he put a tape in the tape player. I was practically catatonic, and I think Paul knew that I didn’t want to talk, so he put this tape on.”

“And?”

“And... it’s like I was standing at the edge of the abyss, and the voice that came out of those car-stereo speakers walked right up the edge with me. The songs that he sang came right up and looked down into the blackness, and then took me by the hand and led me back home again.”

“So what tape was it?”
“Your album.”

He looked down at the tailgate and started wrapping up the leftover food.

“It’s nice to know those songs work,” he said. “I’m glad your friend knew what tape to play for you. Are you sure you don’t want a sandwich?”

“No thanks.” I said. “I’ve heard that eating is a disease.”

He laughed a big, deep laugh. We kept on talking for what seemed like hours. He seemed to know things about me that I’d never dared to tell anyone. When he looked at me, it was like he could see everything there was to me.

David started to wake up. I realized that Wendy was still waiting for me back at our place in the audience. The concert was almost over. I was afraid she’d be worried sick.

“I gotta go,” I said.

“I know.”

“I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah.”

He waited until I was a few cars away, then called out to me.

“Hey!”

I turned back towards him.

“I don’t know what happens when you die,” he said. “But I know one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You don’t go anywhere.”

★

Wendy was watching the band on the stage. She barely looked away when I moved in beside her. At first I thought she was angry at me.

“I’m sorry I was gone so long.”

“That’s okay.”

“You weren’t worried?”
“No. Should I have been?”

“No.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. I’m going to be just fine.”

★

We were staying at her brother’s place, not far from where the concert had been. I was awake most of the night, trying to tell Wendy about meeting him and about what happened — then just lying in the dark thinking about him after she’d fallen asleep. I woke her up early, before the sun was up. I wanted to take her to meet him, to introduce her to him.

The parking lot was strewn with garbage. A few of the trucks and buses had already left, but most of the entourage was still in place. It would be an hour or two before most people would be up and around. As we drove across the field of asphalt, a beige coloured station-wagon edged away from the mass of vehicles. I stepped on the brakes, but he passed us going the other way.

At first I didn’t think he’d seen me, but when I looked in my rear-view mirror, I saw him put his hand out the car window and wave. He didn’t stop, though. He just drove on across the parking lot, and out into the traffic on the highway.

★
Autumn ages us, turning our leaves and frosting our panes. Heels click, click, click against concrete. Days shorten and winds shift.

_It was the best of times, and it was the worst of times, and it was no time at all…_

On the one hand, the whole world seemed to be collapsing around me. Decay and depression were settling in everywhere. I was worried about everything. I was worried about the album we were making. I was worried about the cough I’d picked up on our last road trip; I couldn’t seem to shake it loose. I was worried about my body becoming weak from the punishment I was putting it through. I was worried about being out of touch with my family; I hadn’t talked to anybody who wasn’t connected in some way with the band for almost a year. I was worried about becoming cold and frightened and lonely. I was worried about dying.

_It’s all a matter of perspective, and ours have been permanently altered by events and abuses. From one point of view, the Captain is in charge. From another, there is only anarchy. I suppose it doesn’t really matter in the end. What really matters is not so much detail or technique, but something less tangible, for which there are no really appropriate terms. The best I can do is tell you…_

On the other hand, the band was really hot. We’d finished our first tour, still playing clubs but breaking out of the local scene, and we all knew that there was a buzz going around in the music business. We were making our first album, and I just knew that it was
going to be a killer. We didn’t have a record deal yet, but Leon had managed to get us some backers who were putting up a lot of cash so that we could work in a top notch studio.

My routine in those days was simple, and satisfying. I got up in the mornings, drank a coffee or a beer with Gunga Din, then we got in the car and drove to the studio, picking up the Captain and Janie along the way. We put in a four hour session every morning, laying down rhythm tracks then overdubbing leads and vocals. Leon had wanted to book session players for some of the tracks, but we all insisted that the album was going to be made by just the four of us. We were pretty wired all the time, but we stayed in control enough to make the music happen.

At first we thought it wouldn’t take us long to make an album — I figured it might take us a couple of weeks. At the end of a week, we didn’t even have bed tracks for five songs. Once we settled down and stopped trying to rush things, though, the songs came together like magic.

In the afternoons, sometimes we’d practice whatever we were going to be working on the next day, but sometimes we took the afternoon off. Those were the times when I would hang out with the Captain, either at his place or at the house I shared with Gunga Din. Sometimes we’d go downtown to explore the funky old farmers’ market together, cruising the stalls of brightly coloured autumn produce. Once in a while we’d spend the afternoon in the dank recesses of the Southside Bar & Grill, eating and drinking and talking about the band.

“Janie’s going to be a problem,” said the Captain one afternoon, while we waited for a plate of nachos and a pitcher of beer.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “What’s the problem with Janie?”

“It’s not just Janie,” he said. “It’s Gunga Din too.”

Gunga Din played guitar, and he was the one who’d introduced Janie to the band. She was the youngest one in the group, only twenty when she started playing with us. She was the one who gave our band its sass and sparkle. She had the kind of body the angels
sing about on hot summer nights way up in heaven. And she was talented. She and the Captain traded-off lead vocals, and she played keyboards too, but it was the violin that she was born to play. Between her fingers and the strings and bow there was an electricity that burned its way into the very soul of anyone who heard its song.

Janie was a real musician. I mean, she'd taken lessons from the time she was a little kid. The rest of us were sort of jungle musicians. We'd bang and strum and squawk and squeak and try to figure things out and make them sound right. Janie was always talking about cadences and tonics and harmonics and stuff like that. We didn't understand a word of it. Janie's parents had wanted her to be a classical concert musician. I'd had to fight with my parents for four years to get them to buy me my first drum kit.

"So what's the problem, Captain? What's up with Janie and Gunga Din?"

"She isn't happy. She doesn't want to be Gunga Din's girlfriend, anymore. He's not really her type. She's getting restless. But she doesn't want to make trouble in the band. She's trying to find a way to let him down easy."

*I don't know what it is, or why it matters, but it does. I know it. The Captain knows it. Even, perhaps, Gunga Din knows it too.*

My repeated failures of will had given me somewhat ambiguous feelings about myself. I always managed to see signs of achievement in my struggle with dope and booze, but I always crawled right back inside the place I was fighting so hard to escape. Maybe that was a sign that it wasn't the need that imprisoned me, but something else, more like... a... desire.

*If you want the truth, you are a fool. The truth is a dangerous drug. It will deceive you and tempt you until it has become an addiction, and the more you crave it, the harder it will be to obtain. Settle, instead, for peace...*
I didn't see it right away, and when I did, I didn't believe it. I'd always taken it for granted that Janie was Gunga Din's girl. It never occurred to me to think about her any differently. I just wanted to assure her that everything would be okay. I've known Gunga Din long enough to know that he was exaggerating his heartbreak. The guy loves to wallow in misery. It's part of his tortured artist pose. I figured he'd find himself an impressionable young sex kitten who'd swoon over him, and that would be that. I just didn't want Janie to worry about it. I never would have guessed what Janie wanted.

*Once, every language had a word for it. Once, all men knew what it was and what it meant. But somewhere in time, the word was corrupted and perverted and distorted by people using it to wield power over each other, and the word lost its meaning — then ceased to exist altogether.*

"Well it won't be the first time a band's broken up because of a woman."

I'd expected a different reaction when I decided to tell the Captain that I was falling in love with Janie. I'd hesitated at first, knowing that we'd both been kind of competing for her affections ever since she split with Gunga Din. But the Captain was married. I figured that made a difference. We all loved the Captain's lady, Sarah. She was like a den mother to us. She was the one we all looked to when we needed a dose of sanity or to come back to earth for a little while. She and their daughter, Alexis, made a perfect picture of stability and domesticity to those of us who were engaged in untethered space explorations. But to the Captain, she was something different, and the rest of us didn't really appreciate that _everything_ was different for him. He had a wife, and a child, and while the we were free to come and go as we pleased, breaking whatever hearts got in our way, the Captain had something very real and very valuable at risk when he played the game along with us.
“What do you mean?” I asked. I was slightly offended that the Captain wasn’t as happy as I was about my new-found love. “Why should this mean that the band is going to break up? I’m in love with Janie, and I think she’s in love with me.”

“It’s just not a good situation — not for the band.”

“It doesn’t have to have anything to do with the band.”

“What about Gunga Din?”

“C’mon, Captain. We both know that Gunga Din’s a chameleon. Remember the time he was going to convert to Islam because that Iranian chick told him she wouldn’t sleep with an infidel? He won’t cause any trouble. The band is what he lives for. And we’re all adults, aren’t we?”

“Maybe.”

“What do you mean?”

“I dunno, man. I just have a feeling that this party ain’t gonna last too much longer.”

Love...

I was feeling good about myself for the first time in ages. My drumming was really solid. I was drinking and smoking a lot less. My cough cleared up, and my health seemed to be improving. Sometimes I felt like I was on top of everything. And the music has never been better.

Love?

I remember a night. We were playing at the Midwest BMI showcase — Leon was courting the major labels, and this was our chance to show off our stuff. There were dozens of acts, and we were billed right in the middle. That night, Janie and I just couldn’t keep our eyes off each other. Backstage, we sat together, talking, drinking, flirting —
doing the ritual dances of modern romance, unconcerned about what others were thinking or feeling or saying about us. When it came time to play, I could hardly concentrate on my drumming, because I was thinking about Janie and watching her move. We only had a fifteen-minute set. And when they say fifteen minutes, they mean it. They give you a yellow warning light when you have one minute left. If you aren’t finished by the end of that minute, they turn off your power. We’d worked up a really tight set of four of our best songs. The last one had a hot guitar break in the middle. We’d practiced it over and over again about a hundred times. I knew Gunga Din’s solo well enough to hum it, but when he started to play it that night, it was like nothing I’d ever heard before. His guitar sounded as if it was on fire. Each note seemed to blaze away from the one before it and into the one that followed. He wasn’t just being his usual show-off self, either. It was something different. I was so amazed, I missed a snare beat. I’d never heard him play so well.

Love?

“The Captain doesn’t approve of all this,” Janie said to me one night. It was the first time we’d had a serious discussion about what was happening between us.

“I know,” I said. “He doesn’t think it will be good for the band.”

“He doesn’t think I’ll stay in love with you,” she said.

“Will you?”

She looked up at me, staring with those big, brown, soulful eyes, and I felt my knees tremble, even though we were lying in bed.

“You’re different from anyone I’ve ever met before,” she said.

And the mysteries remained intact, even in the striptease bars and underworld juke joints. We never failed in our purpose, even though we may have lost forever our one chance at salvation...
It started coming apart between us much more quickly than I could have ever expected. The nights were blissful and erotic. We were lost in each others arms, and then suddenly one morning it was all gone.

I was sitting up in bed, looking out the window — thinking. I must have been staring into space. I didn’t even notice her waking up.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“Us.”

“What about us?”

“I was thinking we should go away together.”

“We’re going on tour again after the album’s finished, aren’t we?”

“No,” I said. “I mean something else. We should just get on a plane — or a train or a bus — and just go away somewhere. Just us.”

“Where would we go?” she asked.

“Anywhere.”

“For how long?”

“Forever.”

The word hovered in the air between us. I knew right away that forever wasn’t something Janie was ready to contemplate.

“What about the band?” she asked.

“What about the band?”

“Are we going to just forget about the band? About the Captain? About Gunga Din?”

“We’ll send them a postcard,” I said.

“Don’t you want to be in the band anymore? Are you thinking of quitting?”

“I’m not thinking of anything, Janie, except being with you.”

She didn’t say anything else. Although I was still staring out the window, I could tell that she’d turned her eyes away from me. I never mentioned it again. I knew that it was
starting to be over. I knew that I'd never really expected what we had together to last. I just never expected it to end so soon.

We were talking about love — the kind of love that happens between a man and a woman — that commingling of sex and romance, emotion and desire that we see in all the movies, read about in books, hear about in songs and dream of in our empty beds. That is something called love, that each of us can know and understand and experience — if we're lucky. But there is another thing called love. It is somewhat less pretty, even more elusive, sometimes more painful, always more demanding...

It was Janie who quit the band. She just stopped coming to our meetings and practices and recording sessions. We went to pick her up on our way to the studio one morning and she wasn't home. At least, she didn't answer the door.

We went to the studio without her, but the session was a mess. I was too uptight to play, and the Captain and Gunga Din both knew something was very wrong.

"It's Janie," I told them. "I'm going to call and see if she's home yet."

"Oh, she's home," said Gunga Din, "but she won't answer the phone."

"What do you mean? Why not?"

"Because she's crazy, man. Don't you know that?" The look on his face told me something about Gunga Din that I'd never known before. I could see that he meant what he was saying about Janie, but I could also see that the spite and anger in his voice was directed at me.

"She's not crazy," I said. "Just a little mixed up."

"No, man. I'm serious." he shouted. "She's insane! Clinically insane!"

"Aren't we all," said the Captain.
You need to know something — that you think maybe I can tell you. You want something from me, don’t you, Gunga Din? I’ll gladly give it to you, but you can’t take it. Don’t follow me. Go your own way. The only thing I’ll ever have to give you is this — we are poor, miserable, unfortunate creatures, and there is only one thing that will ever be really important in this life. Without it, everything else is just another drug.

“They’re supposed to be the best burgers in town,” he said and ordered one for each of us.

“But, Captain,” I said. “I really don’t think I can eat anything in the state I’m in.” I was completely gone, but my lack of appetite wasn’t just due to my experiments with drug therapy for broken hearts.

“Stop worrying about the state you’re in.” said the Captain. “Just eat it anyway.”

“I guess you were right about Janie and me.” I said.

“Yeah. Well, being right isn’t making me feel really good about it, y’know.”

“I thought that you didn’t want me to get involved with Janie because you wanted her for yourself. I realize now that you were just trying to keep the band from breaking up.”

“I was just trying to keep you from getting hurt.” He picked up his beer, and almost sipped from it before he stopped short. “I’m not saying I told you so. You had to do it anyway. It didn’t matter what I thought about it. I would have done the same thing. Besides, the band isn’t necessarily over.”

“It’s not? Are we going to keep going without Janie?”

“Something like that.”

I used to know so much. Now, I don’t know anything. I can only feel, and feelings change.
We were working in the studio one morning, overdubbing leads on a new song I’d written. It was inspired by watching television footage of Margaret Thatcher riding in a bulletproof Jaguar through riot-torn Liverpool streets, but the song was mostly about a different kind of tragic scenario. Recording it was a struggle. Everything seemed so tentative. We had no idea what was going to happen if we tried to keep the band going without Janie. I wasn’t even sure that I wanted to.

Gunga Din was trying to work out a lead part on his acoustic guitar, but the song needed something else too — something with more punch, but not overpowering like the electric guitar.

I looked at the Captain.

“Organ?” I suggested.

“Nah.”

“Piano?”

“Nah... It’s gotta be... I don’t know.” He looked around the studio. “I’ve got an idea. I’ll be back in half an hour.”

Gunga Din looked at me as the Captain strolled through the control room.

“Where’s he going?”

“Search me.” I had a suspicion that the Captain was going to get us a session player, and I was afraid that would be the beginning of the end for the band. We’d promised ourselves we were going to do the whole thing with just the band. No session players, no back-up singers, no strings, no bullshit.

I was brooding over a Budweiser, and Gunga Din was messing around with his guitar amp when the Captain came back. Janie was with him, carrying a bottle of rye in one hand and her violin case in the other.

“Well?” said the Captain. “How about a violin solo?”

I looked Janie straight in the eye. I was trying not to look as terrible as I was feeling.

“Well?” I said. “How about a violin solo?”
She looked down for a minute, then up at me again.

“There’s just one thing,” she said.

I felt my chest muscles tense in anticipation while I waited for her to tell us what it was.

She waited until I asked.

“What?”

She grinned her just-one-of-the-boys grin.

“You guys gotta help me drink this whiskey.”

We passed around the bottle while Gunga Din played the song so Janie could hear it.

“What we want to do,” said the Captain, “is to mix the guitar down flat and have you come in at the end of the song — a nice long solo, right up front.”

She shrugged her shoulders and took the bottle from me, taking a long swig.

“Ready whenever you are.”

I’d swear it was all my imagination if I hadn’t listened to it over and over again so many times since. As the tape rolled and the song started playing on the speakers in the booth, Gunga Din began the most delicate and haunting guitar playing he’s ever produced, and when the Captain gave her the signal, Janie’s violin came in wailing and moaning like there was no tomorrow. It was almost as if their instruments were connected by invisible wires, the way they talked back and forth, weaving together little licks and riffs and fragments of melody.

The Captain and I just stood in the control room grinning at each other. Even Dave, the engineer, was smiling. It was perfect.

*Love isn’t something you feel. It’s something you do.*

So much has been written and rumored about why the band broke up. I have to admit that we were responsible for spreading some of the rumors ourselves. We all knew the real reason why, but it wasn’t something we could tell *Rolling Stone* or *People* magazine about.
It was Janie. But it wasn’t Janie’s fault. It was just that she was so beautiful and so talented, and all three of us wanted to be her one and only. We all wanted her to ourselves. And she didn’t want to belong to any of us.

I know Gunga Din blames Janie. He’s said some particularly pointed things about her in public. I guess, when she broke up with him, he was hurt more than the rest of us were willing to recognize. *(In the end, we were all hurt, though, weren’t we.)* Gunga Din blames Janie because he realizes that she was playing games, and he refuses to admit that he was too.

I don’t blame Janie — not anymore. Not that I think she was so innocent. I just think the band was doomed from the start. Maybe we could have held things together for a little longer if Janie hadn’t been playing those little games — if we all hadn’t. But it couldn’t have gone on forever.

I tried to blame Gunga Din. It wasn’t hard. He was being such a jerk by the end. But it wasn’t really his fault that the band broke up. He just wanted something different than what the rest of us wanted. He wanted to be adored, and he wanted to indulge himself. That’s pretty well what most people who get into this business want, so I can’t blame him for it.

I’ve never been sure who the Captain thought was to blame.

I tried my best to see myself as an innocent bystander, caught in the cross-fire. But I have had to admit, at least to myself, that I was responsible for my share of the problems. I know that those last weeks, I refused to be anywhere near Janie unless I was stoned. I told myself that it would hurt too much otherwise. And in the end, it hurt her too much to see me that way. And I wonder now if that was why I did it — if I was really only doing it to hurt her. And when I found myself unable to stop, I expected everyone else to deal with my problem. That was the catalyst for the final scene; the big break-up.

*I pretend that I don’t know how, but that’s just an excuse. It’s so easy. And it’s so hard.*
We were in the kitchen at the Captain’s house. We were having another interminable
meeting to discuss the direction the band was going to take. The album was in the can. We
hadn’t finished the final mix, but Leon had shopped around a rough mix as a demo and
we’d been signed to a major label with more fanfare and hoopla than even the music
business was used to. We’d wowed them at another big showcase in L.A., and we’d been
written up in Billboard. Now Leon was working with the people at the label to plan a major
tour to give our album some support. Janie was threatening to quit again, but we all knew
that she would stay if we asked her to, if we stopped messing around and got down to
business. But I wanted something to be different too.

“I talked to Janie,” the Captain told us. “She just needed a little breathing space — a little
time away from all of us. But she’s into the band. She wants to keep it going.”

I was helping myself to a beer, only half listening to the Captain. I wanted the band to
keep going — yes. But would that be enough? I wasn’t sure I could stand to have Janie
back in the band without having her back in my bed — without having her. I was starting
to be suspicious about Janie and the Captain. He seemed to be the only one Janie was on
speaking terms with. They were getting pretty tight with each other. If they got too close,
that would make things complicated. Not just with the band, but with the Captain and
Sarah too. Their marriage had always been a pretty precariously balanced one. I wasn’t
sure if I could stand by and watch while Sarah got hurt. And I wasn’t sure that Sarah
would be the only one who’d get hurt.

The Captain was talking to me, but I hadn’t been listening.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Huh?”

“Listen to me, would ya? I told you to be careful what you say to Janie. Sometimes she
takes things the wrong way, so you just have to be careful not to talk to her about certain
things.”

“Like what? What things?”
I knew what the Captain was talking about, but I pretended not to. He just sighed in exasperation.

“Just try not to talk to her about anything but music.”

“Oh, great,” I muttered to myself. “That’ll make life really interesting.”

“Well, we don’t want the band to break up every week, do we?”

The Captain turned to Gunga Din.

“And you,” he said. “You’d better pull yourself together and stop mooning around like a lost puppy dog. Do you think anybody wants to be around you guys when you’re acting like you’re going to slit your wrists any minute? You should go out and pick up some girls. Get laid. It’ll do you good.”

I knew better than to think that junk-food sex was going to do either of us any good. For one thing, Gunga Din had already tried that option. A couple of weeks before, I’d awakened in the middle of the night to laughter coming from the kitchen. I had gone to see what was going on and almost walked in on Gunga Din and some chick screwing on the kitchen table. The thing that stopped me was that I almost tripped over my water pipe lying on the floor in the doorway. I decided to go back to bed. Neither of them saw me, and I didn’t say anything to Gunga Din the next morning. But I’d gotten a good look at the chick’s face, and I was sure I recognized her as one of the strippers from the Southside.

The Captain was talking to Gunga Din about the tour schedule Leon had given us. It was business, and I was trying to look interested. I wasn’t interested in much anymore. I was stoned, and it felt good to be stoned, except I kept falling asleep, and when I woke up, I needed to get stoned again before I felt good. And it must have been a week since I had anything to eat or drink besides nachos and beer. Just thinking about it made me start to panic. I was in trouble. Life was supposed to be fun and games, but nothing was fun anymore. Not the music, not the sleazy sex, not even the dope.

“C’mon, man. Wake up. Are you gonna pay attention to what we’re talking about, or what?”
“Sorry, Captain. You guys keep talking. I just gotta go to the can. I’ll be back in a minute.”

I went into the Captain’s downstairs bathroom and ran the water until it was really cold. Then I put in the stopper and filled up the basin. I plunged my face into the water and held it there until I was out of breath. Christ help me. I don’t feel so good. I dried off my face and looked at myself in the mirror. I was a mess. *When was the last time you washed your hair, you slob? Look at those suitcases under your eyes.* There was no fighting it now. I pulled my pipe out of my shirt pocket. A quick hit off this will do the trick. I lit the match and held it to the bowl of the pipe, but I hesitated before drawing on it. The face in the mirror was far, far away. I stood there for what seemed like a long time. The match burned itself out. I was still holding it there — it was almost like I was frozen, like I couldn’t move.

Suddenly, I was outside of myself, and I could see myself, and I knew what was going to happen. It was like I’d been shot through the head by a tiny diamond — I had an almost microscopic moment of clarity. I turned the pipe over above the toilet and watched its contents fall to the surface below. Then I dropped the pipe into the wastebasket. I pulled my bag of dope from my pants pocket. I dumped what was left in it into the toilet bowl, then I flushed.

When I went back into the kitchen, Gunga Din and the Captain were both looking up at me, like they expected me to say something. I thought for a second that maybe somehow they knew what had gone on in the bathroom — that the tiny bullet of truth had struck them at the same time as it had me. Then I realized that lately they always looked at me that way when I came out of the bathroom.

A wave of revulsion washed over me. It made me want to puke. *Was it that obvious?* I’d been going in there a lot lately, always coming out a whole lot better than when I went in. Too much better than what you’d normally associate with simple bodily relief. That questioning look on their faces had nothing to do with my little episode of revelation in
front of the bathroom mirror. They were wondering whether I was going to make it across the room without falling over — whether I was going to pass out again — whether I even knew where I was.

“So, Captain,” I said. “There’s something we need to talk about.”

“So talk, man.”

“It’s about this tour,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“You’ve been saying how much we’re going to have to shape up.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So, if I’m going to go on tour again,” I said, “it’s got to be under one condition.”

“What’s that.”

“That there’s no dope on the tour,” I said.

“Okay.”

“We’ve got to be completely clean,” I told him. “No weed, no coke, no pills — nothing. I don’t just mean me. I mean everybody.”

“Good.”

I felt a wave of relief wash over me for a few seconds.

“Wait just a minute.” It was Gunga Din. “What’s all this about being completely clean, all of the sudden.”

The nausea returned, only this time it was worse.

“Is there a problem with that, Gunga Din?” asked the Captain.

“Well what’s the problem with doing dope on the tour? It’s never been a problem before.”

“That’s right, it hasn’t,” said the Captain, “but it is now.”

My hands were starting to tremble. I wished I hadn’t flushed it all down the toilet. One more hit wouldn’t have made any difference.
“Well, what if I don’t want to stay clean on this tour?” Gunga Din gave me that same venomous look I’d seen the day Janie quit the band. “I mean, it’s weeks of gas stations and shitty food and motel rooms. If we can’t party a little, it’ll be murder.”

“Can’t you see I’m in trouble, man?” I was pleading with him. “I gotta quit partying right now, or I’m gonna die.”

“So quit,” he said. “I’m not stopping you. But that shouldn’t mean that I have to quit too. I mean, I’m not the one with the problem. You are.”

I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to tell him what a selfish son-of-a-bitch he was. But I couldn’t. My throat was closed up tight. I couldn’t breathe. It was too hot, and I was too dizzy, and I was ready to puke. I ran out the back door. I ran down the steps, and around the house. Sarah was in the front yard, playing with Alexis in a pile of leaves. I could hear her voice. I knew that she was talking to me, but I couldn’t hear what she was saying. I kept running. I didn’t stop until I got to the corner. I knew that Sarah was calling my name, but I didn’t turn around. I leaned against a lamp post long enough to catch my breath. I had to do something. I had to go somewhere. I had to get away from all of them.

_And what are the words? And how will I ever find the beat again? And who is the one who knows the reasons why? And where do I go?_

At least the guard was one of the ones who knew me by sight. Good old Terry. He’s always got a friendly wave or a smile.

“Evenin’, sir”

“Hi, Terry.”

“You aren’t booked in the studio tonight, are you?”

“No, Terry. I just dropped by to see if I could take a listen to our master. I had an idea for something I wanted to try.”
“Studio’s booked all night, tonight, sir. One o’ them new bands from England, wears ripped shirts an’ safety pins in their noses.”

“Oh yeah. Mind if I go in and check ‘em out?”

“You don’t go in for that punk stuff, do ya sir?”

“Not really. But you’ve gotta keep up with what’s happening. Right?”

“Well, go on ahead in, if you want. But I hope your group don’t start showin’ up here with no safety pins in your noses.”

“Don’t worry, Terry. I’ll just take a quick look and listen.”

I could hear the music from outside the door of the control booth. Nothing but power chords. Kind of boring after a while. I mean, we used power chords too, but you have to have something to set them off against.

I hoped the master tape was on one of the shelves in the outer office. I wasn’t too sure what Dave, the recording engineer, did with the ones that were still in the works, but there were shelves and shelves full of labeled tape cans in the outer office. It took me about ten minutes to figure out that the tapes were shelved by session dates, and not by the name of the artist. It took me another five minutes to find our tape. I hadn’t thought about how I was going to get it out of there, past Terry. I’d figured on going into the studio and doing it in there. I had to get going before the punk-rockers decided to take a break or something.

That’s when I noticed the cases. There were two electric guitar cases leaning up against a chair. They must have belonged to the punkers. I opened one up and tried to fit the big can of two-inch tape inside. Just a little too snug. I opened the can and took the reel of tape out. Without the can, it fit perfectly. I just had to hope that Terry wouldn’t remember that I hadn’t been carrying a guitar when I came in, and that he didn’t know me well enough to know that I’m a drummer, not a guitar player.

He was watching his little black-and-white tv when I came around the corner. He probably wouldn’t have even looked up if I’d just walked on out the door, but I thought it would be better if I just acted the way I normally do.
“Well, Terry. You don’t have to worry. I’m not about to go punk on you. Those guys sound awful to me.”

“I’m glad to hear that, sir. I don’t care much for that kind of music at all. And all them pins and razor blades just make ’em look ugly to me. I don’t know why they gotta dress up like that.”

“I don’t know, Terry. But, it’s not my cup of tea, either. So, I guess I’ll get going. See you later.”

“G’night, sir. You take care now.”

*It’s something you do.*

I knew where Gunga Din kept his gun. He didn’t think I knew he had one, but I did. I checked to make sure he wasn’t home. He didn’t keep it loaded, but I managed to figure out how to put the bullets in. I’d never fired a gun in my life. I hoped I wouldn’t shoot myself in the foot on the first try, and I hoped the neighbors wouldn’t call the cops. Of course, there’s no law against taking a little target practice in your own backyard, is there?

I placed the big reel of tape on the ground. I didn’t want to shoot right through the middle, where the plastic reel was. I wanted to shoot through the tape. I decided that if I aimed for the middle, I’d probably miss and go through the tape. I pointed the gun, and closed my eyes as I squeezed the trigger. I wasn’t prepared for how loud it was or for the recoil. I thought for a minute that my shoulder was dislocated. The bullet had gone right through, around the middle of the tape — about the fifth song, I figured. I put it back down, and fired another four rounds through it.

*There must be more.*

*More trips along downtown sidewalks — to the market. With rings on our fingers and bells on our toes, and music ringing eternally in our ears.*
More afternoons of good-natured jostling and hustling for the freshest, nicest apples and oranges and melons and tomatoes: cauliflower, eggs, cheese, sausage.

More hours harmlessly killed conversing in corners of taverns and strip joints. More beer and nachos and burgers and tequila.

More evenings shared with fine friends and fine music.

More mornings of unfolding the newspaper on the front step and discovering that the world still hasn’t blown itself to smithereens.

More, more, more...

"You did the right thing, man." said the Captain. We were standing in a long line at the grocery store, waiting to pay for the things Sarah had put on her list that we couldn’t get in the market — milk, frozen orange juice, breakfast cereal. The store was crowded, as that particular store always is; too crowded. It’s right downtown — four narrow aisles full of wrinkled old widows, illegal immigrants, laid off factory workers, scavenging for their subsistence — the oldest supermarket in the city, for the oldest and poorest people. They don’t sell many t-bones.

"You know," he said. "being in a band is like having an affair with a woman. The best ones always break up."

"Why do you suppose that is?"

"I dunno. I guess they’re just too intense. Too volatile. Some little spark comes along, and — boom!"

The line moved slowly. The cashier had to stop every once in a while to check on the price of something. No computer check-outs here. It’s just as well. I’ve noticed that one of the cashiers makes a habit of undercharging the pensioner types by a few cents on each item. I’d hate to think what they’d be eating if she didn’t.

"Hey, Captain, what do you suppose is with this guy?" I whispered, nodding at the old man in front of us in the line. Like everybody else, he was leaning on a shopping cart,
waiting. I’d just noticed, though, that his shopping cart was completely empty. “Are his groceries invisible, or what?”

I stifled a laugh.

“Don’t worry about it,” the Captain said, and he smiled, I guess because he hadn’t seen me laughing much lately.

“I’m not worried about it,” I told him. “Just a little curious, that’s all.”

Just before he reached the front of the line, the man with the invisible groceries pushed his shopping cart away, and picked up a tin of roll-your-own cigaret tobacco from the display in front of the cash register. I couldn’t believe it. He’d been standing in line, leaning on an empty shopping cart, for almost fifteen minutes, for one measly can of tobacco. He could have got it in a minute at the drug store next door. I guess it would have cost him a few cents more, though.

We paid for our groceries and started out through the heavy, no longer automatic doors, but the Captain stopped and turned around, reaching into his pocket for some change.

“We need some jelly beans for mental health,” he said, and he walked over to the candy and gum machines. He put a dime in one, turned the handle and collected a handful of jelly beans. He handed me another dime and pointed to the sign on the machine: PROCEEDS TO THE MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION.

It’s always harder than pretending. And yet it’s so much easier not to have to pretend.

He was putting the groceries away in the kitchen. I was pacing back and forth between the kitchen and the living-room. Finally, he couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Would you quit with the pacing? What’s the matter with you, anyway? You’ve been acting funny all day.”

“I don’t know, Captain. I feel like some kind of caged animal or something.”

“Don’t you know? You are a caged animal.”
He paused to think about what he’d said, then smiled as he turned back to the bag of groceries.

“Lighten up a little, man. Don’t take everything so seriously. After all, if you’re not having a good time, what’s the point?”
Breakdown

I knew there was something wrong with the car before I started out. I'd been meaning to take it in to get it fixed, but I just hadn't had time. I should have turned around before I even got on the Interstate. I had barely been able to get the car to crawl up to the top of the bridge. But I needed the part for my computer, and the only place I knew where to find it was in Madison Heights, out near the Oakland Mall. So I got on the I-75, and managed to get the beast to putt along at just under 50 miles an hour. I made it there, and I bought the part for my computer, and filled up the car with gas. The price here is about half of what it is at home.

When I pulled into the late-afternoon throng on 13 Mile Road, I was really having trouble getting the car to respond at all. It would choke and sputter and almost stall, then I'd hurtle along for a half a mile, and everything seemed okay again, until it would start to choke and sputter and almost stall again. The traffic was as thick and slow as a triple-decker peanut butter sandwich, and I wasn't really watching where I was going. I was watching the dash-board and looking around to see if there was a service station. When I saw the sign for the I-75, I pulled on to the ramp along with a line of other cars.

It took me about ten minutes before I realized that I was headed in the wrong direction. I was going North instead of South. I started looking for a place to exit, then there was a loud clunking noise in the engine compartment, and I felt the car losing power. I just managed to cross over onto the shoulder of the freeway before it rolled to a dead stop. Damn it.

I kept telling myself that it didn’t make any difference. I like to believe that it wouldn’t have made any difference if he had been white. I’m sure I would have been just as frightened. At the same time, though, I couldn’t escape the nagging suspicion somewhere in the back of my head that I was afraid because I was riding in a car with a black man. It doesn’t make sense to me. He was just a stranger helping out another stranger with a lift. I have never had any colour prejudice.

🚗

I remember when the Sanderson’s moved into the house at the end of our street. I remember the hushed and angry whispers of so many of the adults in the neighborhood. I remember Mr. Tweed saying to my father that he had nothing against coloureds, but he wasn’t going to let the property value of his house disappear overnight. I remember that my parents and the Tweeds never spoke to each other again as long as we lived in that neighborhood. I remember that Bobby Tweed gave me a bloody lip and said my dad was a commie.

🚗

The mechanic said he wouldn’t be able to look at it until the next day, then it might take a day or two to get parts. I called Wendy. She called her brother Jim. He would come out to Pontiac to pick me up. It would take him over an hour to get there. I asked the mechanic if there was someplace nearby where I could get a cup of coffee and a bite to eat.

“About a mile down the road there’s a Big Boy. Right across from the Chevy dealer.”

I set out to walk down the road to the restaurant. I didn’t get very far before I turned around. The wind was whipping right through my jacket, the cold creeping under my skin.
and rattling my teeth. No hat. No gloves. It was dusk, and there was hardly any place to
walk on the side of the highway, the snow was plowed only to the edge of the traffic lane.

The mechanic was surprised to see me back in his grungy little gas station office.

“Too cold to walk that far,” I told him.

He nodded his head toward the self-serve pumps, where a man was just finished filling
up his gas tank.

“Why don’t ya ask this fella for a lift down to the Big Boy,” he suggested. “I bet he’s
headed down that way.”

“Nah. I’ll just wait here, if it’s alright with you.”

“Suit yerself.”

I swear I hadn’t even looked at the man he was pointing to out at the pumps. I was just
tired and worried about my broken down car, and I didn’t particularly feel like begging
another lift from a stranger. It wasn’t until he came inside to pay for his gas that I realized
that the man was black, and I felt that same twinge of guilt I’d experienced already once
that afternoon.

It isn’t colour. The fear has been there for years. It goes beyond black and white. It
comes with the territory.

When I called him the next day, the mechanic told me that it was going to cost over a
thousand dollars to get my car fixed. The transmission was shot, he said, hinting to me that
the car wasn’t worth that much money. I could hear the hopeful anticipation in his voice,
and I knew that he had already calculated how much he would offer me for it and how
much profit he would make when he’d fixed it and sold it to some other sucker. No way, I thought. Now I’m going to get that beast fixed no matter what it costs. But I’m not going to let you make another cent off this deal.

I called my uncle at his welding shop out in Novi. I knew he’d be able to recommend another garage to me. I was surprised when he told me to have the car towed to a shop in Ferndale.

“Ferndale?”

“Yeah. I know it’s a long tow, but they won’t rip you off. Whatever the towing charge is, you’ll make it up on what you’ll save on the transmission job. I take both my trucks to them, even if I just need a tune up.”

When I was a kid, I loved going to Detroit. My parents took us often, shopping, visiting relatives and friends, to the library, the art museum, to concerts on Belle Isle. It was always an adventure. It represented a kind of vitality and excitement that I didn’t know existed anywhere else. I remember one summer afternoon when my mother took my two older brothers to a double-header at Tiger Stadium, and my father took me and my sister shopping downtown. I remember riding in the old-fashioned elevators in the big department store, the toy department that was bigger than any I’d ever seen before, the hot fudge sundaes in the cafeteria, looking out the window high up above the city.

When I go to Detroit now, I can’t help thinking about my friend, Bill, who lives in Ann Arbor. I really don’t know him very well, but he was very supportive when my father died. I talked to him long-distance about my decision to quit my job and go back to school.
“It’s just that I’m tired of beating my head against a brick wall,” I said.

“No, I understand,” he told me. “I’ll miss doing business with you, but when you lose somebody that close to you, it tends to put things into perspective a bit. It makes it harder to keep doing things that are really trivial compared to what’s really important in your life.”

“I’m not sure that I know what’s really important in my life,” I said, “but I think it’s time I found out. One thing’s for sure. This job isn’t it.”

“I know exactly what you’re going through. I told you about my brother, didn’t I?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Almost a year ago. He was coming out of a corner store in Detroit. Somebody walked up and shot him. Right through the heart. That was last December. It still seems like just a minute ago.”

It comes with the territory.

My uncle was right about the garage in Ferndale. The total bill came to just over five-hundred, including the eighty-dollar towing charge. I was amazed at how much easier the car was to drive. It hadn’t run so well since I got it. I felt really good for the first time all week. I thought about the days when I used to drive over to Ferndale to buy records. I wondered if the record store I used to shop at was still in business. It had been only two or three blocks from where the garage was. I couldn’t resist the temptation to check it out.

It was still there. The sign was changed. The inside was different too. For one thing, it was a lot brighter. What had been a funky little hovel filled with just about every album ever made was now a lot like the chain outlets in all the malls. Bright lights, big displays.
No LPs; just CDs and cassettes. No cardboard record jackets; just plastic casings. No screeching heavy-metal on the stereo behind the counter. Instead, rap music…

They still had a better selection than any of the stores at home. I found a couple of CDs that I hadn’t been able to find before. Older stuff that had been re-released but probably wasn’t even distributed in Canada. I stood in line to pay for them, amused that all the new technology meant that the stores had to invest heavily in security systems that could detect someone walking out with CDs and cassettes in their pockets.

The store was no-longer staffed by young, long-haired white kids. Except for the kid in front of me in the line at the cash register, there were no other white people in the whole store. He was about nineteen, clean cut, well-dressed. As the line moved up towards the cash register, the kid in front of me picked up a postcard from a counter-top display. The picture on the card was a famous black-and-white photograph from the early sixties. Two black men in suits and ties greeting each other.

When it was his turn at the cash, he handed his tapes to the clerk and held the postcard out to him.

“What are these guys?” he asked.

The clerk pointed to each of the figures in the photograph.

“This one is Martin Luther King,” he said, “and this is Malcolm X.”

“Really? Malcolm X?”

“Yes, sir. That’s who it is.”

“I didn’t know that Malcolm X and Martin Luther King even knew each other.”

“Oh, they knew each other. This picture is from the only time they ever met, though. It was around the time Malcolm split with Elijah Muhammed. He was starting to be interested in the work that King was doing. They might have even worked together, but Malcolm was killed not long after this was taken.”

The clerk looks up from his young customer and sees that I am listening to their conversation. He points to the picture again for my benefit.
"You remember those times, don’t you?" he says, and he smiles the warmest smile I have seen in days.

"Yeah," I say. "I remember."

I hoped that he heard the same wistful yearning in my voice that I heard in his — not for the past, which we both know is gone, but for something that is missing in the present.

I decided to drive through the tunnel, instead of taking the bridge. At the line for the tollbooth, a young man was going from car to car asking for handouts. I kept my window rolled up. My doors were all locked. As he approached my car, the line began to move forward, and I was spared the nuisance and the trepidation.

At the other end of the tunnel I declared my two new CDs, but didn’t mention the five-hundred dollars worth of auto repairs. The customs agent waved me on, and as I pulled out into the downtown traffic, I heaved a familiar sigh of relief.
Helping Out

Sam was going to be more famous than Muhammad Ali. That's what he said the first day I met him. It would have been quite an accomplishment, since Ali, having recently regained the heavyweight championship title, was the most famous person on the planet at the time. Not that I ever took Sam seriously. He was obviously crackers from the word go.

"They're going to call me The Man With the Dimes," he said. "And I'm going to be known all over the world. Here, have a dime."

He put down his briefcase and slipped a bright new coin from the roll he held in his hand.

"I'm going to give people dimes wherever I go, and I'm going to be famous."

He had that look in his eyes — that unmistakable far-away look — a vacancy sign on a dark highway.

"So... what brings you in here to the Tribune? Mr. ...ah?"

"Victor. Sam Victor's the name. Pretty soon people all over the world are going to know that name. They'll say, there goes Sam Victor, the Man With the Dimes."

A copy-boy pushed past Sam on his way to the composing room.

"Say, young fella?" The copy-boy stopped and turned towards him.

"Have I given you a dime yet? I don't think I have. Here, have a dime. Just call me the Man With the Dimes." The copy-boy took the coin and hurried away, looking over his shoulder.

"So what brings you to the Tribune, Mr. Victor?"

"Oh, you can call me Sam."

"Okay, Sam..."
"By the way, what's your name, fella?"

"Neil Walters. What is it we can do for you?"

"That's just it, Neil. I want you to do something for me. I want you to help me get to be famous. Maybe you could start by putting my picture in the paper."

His relentless grin was beginning to unnerve me.

"Uhm... Mr. Victor, we don't just put people's pictures in the paper just because they want to be famous."

"Oh, I know that, son. I'm willing to pay for it."

"You what?"

"How much does it cost to get your picture on the front page? I can give you cash. No problem."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Victor..."

"Sam."

"Okay, Sam. People don't pay us to get their picture on the front page of the paper, Sam. When someone does something interesting or exciting that we think is newsworthy, we take their picture and put it in the paper. It doesn't cost them anything."

"Oh." Sam stopped grinning for the first time since he'd come in. Instead, he gave me an exaggerated look of disappointment. "So how do I get to be famous, Neil?"

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have even been talking to him. I was the lowest man on the totem pole, working the afternoon shift in the newsroom. Willard Addison was the City Editor on our shift, and normally he or one of the more experienced reporters would have had to deal with a kook like Sam. But that particular day happened to be Willard's birthday, and just about everybody had gone out to help him celebrate it. Tim Drummond, a photographer about my own age, and myself were the only news staffers in the building.
“We’ll only be gone an hour or so, Neil,” Addison had said. “If anything at all comes up, give me a call over at the Press Club. The number’s written on the wall next to my desk.”

It had been quiet for the first fifteen minutes; then the Man With the Dimes came in. At first, I was just going to humour him a bit and send him on his way. A guy who goes around handing people dimes is harmless enough, I thought. I was caught off balance, though, when he started handing out hundred dollar bills. The first one he gave to me.

“If you really want to become famous, Sam,” I told him, “maybe you should think about hiring a publicist — somebody who can help you promote your image to the media.”

“Why, that’s a good idea, Neil! I think I’m going to do just that. Here, I guess I better pay you for your advice.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a thick wad of clean bills. “Here’s a hundred dollars. Do you think that’s enough?”

“Mr. Victor — Sam, you don’t have to pay me anything.”

“Take it Neil. I intend to use your good advice, and I don’t want to use it without paying for it. No sir, I’m not going to take advantage of anyone.”

I took the hundred, just to look at it. I’d never seen one before. It was half a week’s pay, then. Sam misinterpreted the look on my face.

“It’s not enough, is it Neil? Here’s another hundred. You’ll have to help me out. I’m not sure what I should pay for all this advice you’re giving me.” He thrust another crisp bill at me.

“No, Mr. Victor, I can’t—”

“Why — sure you can. You could use the money, couldn’t you? And I intend to pay you for every piece of advice you give me. Here, have another dime, too.”

I was very uncomfortable about the whole situation, and worried about what Addison would think if he came in. I was trying to think of a way to get rid of Sam, when Tim Drummond strolled over to where we were standing. I don’t know whether he’d seen Sam
handing me the money, or whether he thought there was a news story brewing, but he had a camera in his hand, and it gave me an idea.

“What’s up, Neil?”

“Tim — you’re just in time. This is Mr. Sam Victor. I want you to take his picture. Sam, this is Tim Drummond, our number-one, award-winning photographer.”

Tim’s eyebrows shot up, and I turned and winked at him.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Drummond,” said Sam. “Here’s a dime. They call me The Man With the Dimes. I’m going to be famous. I’m going to be as famous as Muhammad Ali.”

Tim glanced my way and nodded in understanding.

“Do you want to take my picture now, Mr. Drummond?”

“Sure. You just wait here, and I’ll go get a flash attachment.”

Tim rolled his eyes at me and headed back to where he’d left his camera bag. I turned around and Sam’s lunatic grin was bigger than ever.

“So, you’re going to put my picture in the paper after all, eh? You’re a good man, Neil. How much should I pay you?”

“Uh... look, Sam, there’s no guarantee that your picture’s going to be in the paper. I just thought we should have one on file. That way, when you get yourself a publicist and get to be famous, we’ll already have your picture.”

“Say — that’s good thinking, Neil. You’re a pretty smart boy. How’d you like to come and work for me? You could be my publicist. You’ve got some pretty good ideas. Let me give you another hundred dollars as an advance.”

“No, Sam. I’m a reporter. I wouldn’t know anything about being a publicist. Besides, I like the job I have.”

Tim was back with his camera bag by then, and I had him take a couple of shots of Sam. I could tell he was trying not to laugh. I’m not sure he even had film in his camera.
Sam insisted on giving Tim a hundred dollars for each picture he took. Tim's eyes opened as wide as mine had when he saw the wad of bills Sam pulled from his pocket. He didn't hesitate to take the hundreds Sam offered him.

By the time we'd convinced Sam to leave, he'd given nearly a thousand dollars in hundreds to myself and Tim, a hundred dollars each to Sally from classifieds and the kid who brought around the coffee cart, and dimes to everyone who passed by the desk. He finally agreed to let us get back to work if we promised him to meet him at the Holiday Inn the next morning at eleven o'clock.

"We'll have a meeting, boys. We have a lot of work to do, and I want to start right away. I want you to make me famous by Christmas time."

"Goodnight, Mr. Victor."

"Don't forget — Holiday Inn, room three seventeen, eleven o'clock."

"Sure thing."

As the door closed behind him, Tim and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Can you believe that guy? Is he for real?"

"I don't know, Tim. I don't know, but he sure has a lot of dough."

"Yeah, he'll be lucky if he isn't mugged on the way out of the building, the way he's been flashing that wad of hundreds around." Tim was joking, but it occurred to me that it wasn't that much of a joke.

"Hey, Tim. Maybe one of us should go after him and make sure nothing happens to him — make sure he gets to his car okay."

"Want me to go?"

"You'd better. Addison'll kill me if I'm not here when he gets back."

I was staring at the six brand new hundred dollar bills I'd laid out on my desk, when Tim rushed in all out of breath.
“Man, you wouldn’t believe what’s in that guy’s car,” he told me.

“What?”

“The back seat is filled with bags of money. He says he has twenty-thousand dollars in dimes. And that briefcase he was carrying — it’s full of hundred dollar bills. He opened it up and showed it to me.”

“That does it.”

“What?”

“I’m calling the cops.”

“How come?”

“Look Tim, we can’t keep this money. I don’t even know if it’s real. It could be counterfeit. It could be stolen. Who knows? I’m going to call the cops and have them check this guy out.”

“What’s to check out, man? He’s a nutcase who wants to give his money away.”

“Maybe he’s crazy, or maybe he’s just acting crazy because he’s up to something, but if he’s carrying around that kind of cash, there’s something wrong. Where did he get it? Is it his money he’s giving away, or did he just knock off a Brinks truck?”

Inspector Van Toorn said that there’d been no major robberies in the last week, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything.

“It could be stolen money that he’s been sitting on for a while,” he said. “Guys who pull big bank jobs — armored cars, that kind of thing — they don’t usually spend any of the money until the heat’s been off for a while.”

“Well, I don’t know for sure that it’s stolen money, Inspector.”

“That’s true. It could be counterfeit. The hundreds anyway. You don’t usually get counterfeit coins, though. You said he had a lot of dimes, didn’t you?”

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“Yeah. He really seemed kind of off his rocker, if you know what I mean. I’m just concerned that he had so much money on him. Even if it is real and it is his money, he’s taking a chance of being robbed, carrying so much around with him and flashing it around and everything.”

“Well we’ll look into the matter. You said he wanted to meet you at his hotel room?”

“Yeah. Tomorrow at eleven o’clock. The Holiday Inn. Room three seventeen, I think.”

“Okay, we’ll check it out.”

“In the meantime, what about all this money he was handing out?”

“Maybe you’d better bring it in to the station, just in case. Just drop it off at the front desk. Ask the sergeant to give you a receipt.”

Tim looked like he was going to cry when I asked him to give me the money so I could turn it over to the cops. Sally, in classifieds, was completely in agreement with me.

“I don’t want that money, anyway,” she said. “I think there’s something very fishy about that guy. I’m glad you called the cops. He gave me the creeps.”

Getting back the hundred that Sam gave to the kid with the coffee cart was another matter.

“I don’t got it, man.”

“What do you mean, you don’t have it? I saw him give it to you.”

“So? He gave it to me, didn’t he? So it’s mine.”

“Yeah, well it could be counterfeit. Or it could be stolen money, so you better give it to me, ’cause the cops want to take a look at it.”

“That’s too bad, man, ’cause I ain’t got it.”

“What?”

“I already spent it.”

“Where? Where did you spend it?”
"The press room."

"What?"

"Jimmy LaRoche, in the press room. I bought two bags of Columbian off him — look."
He lifted up the change tray in his coin box to show me the dope he had stashed there. I
reached for the two bags.

"It’s really good stuff, man. Want to try some?"

"No. I’m going to get that money back. What does Jimmy LaRoche look like?"

"Hey — that’s my stuff, man, you can’t take it."

"Suit yourself. But don’t blame me if it turns out that hundred was counterfeit and the
cops start coming around asking questions about it."

"I’ll take my chances."

Addison was half tanked by the time he and the rest of the guys got back to the office.
Their hour long break had been stretched to nearly two-and-a-half hours. The newsroom is
usually pretty quiet up until about nine o’clock. People are usually home, having supper,
watching television. Unless there’s a fire or a car crash, there’s not much happening but
rewrites, anyway. After dark, that’s when things start to pick up. Shootings, stabblings,
brawls, drug busts, drunk drivers plowing into parked cars — those are the kind of things
we end up covering on our shift. I’d gotten to be pretty well known in all the hospital
emergency rooms in town.

Addison wanted to know if there’d been anything happening while he was gone.

"Not much," I told him. "There was a kooky guy in here who wanted to pay us to put
his picture on the front page — that’s about it."

I didn’t mention about Sam giving away all that money. I was still kind of scared that
Addison would be mad at me, especially if he found out that I had Tim taking pictures of
the guy. Addison was in a rare good mood, and I didn’t want to be the one to bring him back to normal — not until I had my break, anyway. I was late getting it as it was.

I walked down to the police station after I’d grabbed a burger and fries at the diner on the corner. All the time I was eating, I was nervous that I might lose the money, or that I might have handed the waitress one of the hundreds instead of a ten. It was a relief to me when I finally handed the bills over to the desk sergeant. He wrote me out a receipt and told me he’d turn the evidence over to Inspector Van Toorn. I told him to remind the Inspector to call me if he came up with any information on the case, and then I went back to work. I felt good, then. I had that really upbeat feeling you get when you know you’ve done the right thing.

Inspector Van Toorn called me at the office the next day.

“You were right, Mr. Walters.”

“About what?”

“About this Sam Victor. He’s a squirrel alright.”

“A squirrel?”

“Yeah, and he’s lost all his nuts, if you know what I mean.”

“What about the money? Was it real?”

“Yes it was. Cold hard cash. And it’s his money too. He didn’t pull a bank job or anything. It turns out he’s the brother of a police officer who was killed in the line of duty about a month and a half ago. He was the beneficiary of two life insurance policies. A total of almost half a million dollars.”

“Holy smokes.”

“Yeah, I guess he just got the money a couple of days ago and stepped right off the deep end.”

“Has he given much of it away, yet?”
“Nah. A few grand. You were the first person he went to see. I met him at his hotel and told him not to give away another dime until I checked out his story.”

“So, what’s going to happen now?”

“His daughter’s trying to get power of attorney. There’s going to be a court hearing next Friday. I told her I’d keep an eye on her dad until then.”

I guess Addison was right. If I was any kind of a reporter, I would have realized that there was a hell of a story going on. But I was part of it, and it didn’t seem like news to me — just a kind of sad story about a guy who went crazy when his brother died. By the time it became a news story, I was so deep in it, I guess Addison had every right to fire me.

When Addison called me into his office and introduced me to the two police detectives, it didn’t even occur to me that it had anything to do with Sam. It had been almost two weeks since I’d spoken to Van Toorn, and as far as I was concerned the matter had been settled. I was kind of surprised when the older detective mentioned Sam, and from the look on his face and the look on Addison’s, it suddenly occurred to me that I was in some kind of trouble.

“We have a few questions we’d like to ask you, Mr. Walters. About a gentleman by the name of Sam Victor.”

“Yeah,” said Addison, “and when they’re done, I have a few questions that I want to ask.”

I didn’t like the tension that seemed to be brewing. What had Sam done now?

“Mr. Victor’s daughter has received a court order giving her power of attorney over her father’s affairs.”

“Yes. I know.”

“How do you know, Mr. Walters?”
"I... uh... I mean I don’t know. But Inspector Van Toorn told me that there was going to be a court hearing."

The younger detective wrote something down.

"When did you last speak to Inspector Van Toorn?"

"The day after Sam — I mean Mr. Victor — came in here. Wednesday before last. What’s going on here anyway."

"Well it seems, Mr. Walters, that before the court order was issued, Mr. Victor turned all his money over to a person or persons unknown who assured him that they would look after it for him. Over four-hundred and seventy-nine thousand dollars."

"Holy shit! You don’t think it was me, do you?"

"We are investigating a number of suspects, Mr. Walters. You are one of only a few people who knew that Mr. Victor was in possession of a large amount of cash."

The cops never really suspected me of anything other than being an idiot. They were just playing their hands close to their chests, partly because that’s the way cops do things, and partly because they were embarrassed about who their prime suspect was. It turns out that Inspector Van Toorn called in sick to work the day after I talked to him. It turns out that Inspector Van Toorn never came back to work again. It turns out that Inspector Van Toorn turned up on a flight to Rio de Janeiro only a few hours after I last talked to him. It turns out the Inspector couldn’t resist the temptation of a half a million dollars in cash.

"Tell me, Neil," Addison said. "Explain it to me slowly. How does a reporter with four years of journalism school get himself involved in a story like this and not even know that it’s a story? How?"

"I just —"
"You just blew it. That's how."

"Okay. I blew it. How was I supposed to know Van Toorn was going to rip the guy off?"

"You were supposed to know that when a crackpot is going around giving away hundred dollar bills, it's a story. A news story. A human interest story. That's what we do here. We tell stories. Except you — you don't know it when a story hits you in the face."

The Tribune tried to downplay the incident, embarrassed that their own reporter — now former reporter — was involved. The cops wouldn't have minded too much. They were even more embarrassed. Unfortunately, the local television and radio news shows had a field day, and it didn't die down. The networks picked up the story. Then it was on the wire services. You can't blame them really. Like the idiot I was being at the time, I gave interviews to anybody who asked. They made me out to be either a well-meaning moron or a lying crook in cahoots with the crooked cop — no one wanted to believe that I didn't want to keep the money Sam had given me.

It wasn't just that one story that I screwed up. There were others that Addison didn't know about. I think of some of them now, and I cringe. How could I have been so stupid? I remember a phone call I got from a friend of mine who worked for the Cancer Society. Some guy with cancer, who'd had his leg amputated, was going to run across the country on his prosthesis.

"Who cares?" I said. "That's not news."

My problem was that I took the job so seriously. I took everything too seriously. I still do. That's why the job I have now is so perfect for me. It's okay to take something like teaching little kids seriously.
I met Marsha in teacher's college. I still don't quite understand what she ever saw in me, but I fell in love with her at first sight. She helped me make it through the course. I'm sure I never would have gotten my certificate without her. And I don't just mean that she helped me with the homework and stuff. She helped me keep my head screwed on straight. I was still pretty bummed out about being fired by the Tribune, and she helped me to believe that it was all for the best.

"Look at it this way," she said. "If they hadn't fired you, you wouldn't have gone back to school, and we would never have met, right? I think it's obvious that we were destined to be together, don't you?"

How could I argue? I was in love.

At first I didn't even know it was him; it's been so many years. He seemed like just another looney street person. I kept passing him on my way to work; he seemed to always be out walking his peculiar beat at that time of day. Like anybody else who saw him, what I noticed first and foremost was that strange kind of turban he wore. It was a towel or something, that he had wrapped and pinned on his head — not wrapped around like a turban, but sort of folded over the top of his head. Even on the hottest days of the year, he had that thing on. The kids at the school where I teach call him Mister Diaper-Head. And you can't blame them — that's what he looks like. He passes by the schoolyard every afternoon at recess time. He has a funny way of walking, as if he hears music that no one else hears, as if he might be just about to dance an Irish jig.

I can't say I paid that much attention to him at first. After a while, though, something about Mister Diaper-Head started to nag at me. Then one day, I was putting money in a parking meter, and he passed me on the sidewalk. First, I noticed the briefcase he was carrying, then I got a good close look at his face. I was so startled I dropped the dime I was trying to push into the meter. It was Sam.
I hadn’t seen him since that first time at the Tribune, but I’d thought about him a lot for years afterward. At first I resented him — he cost me my job, my career as a journalist. Then I started to wonder what I had cost him. Now I knew the answer. I was doing alright — teaching school, happily married, thinking about starting a family. He was stomping around the streets day in and day out, collecting junk and carrying it around, talking to himself because he was so crazy nobody else would ever talk to him. I know he was crazy before, but I kept wondering if what he had become was partly my doing.

I’ve decided that I have to do something for Sam. I want to help him somehow. I’m not sure what I’m going to do, but I have to do something. I don’t think I can live with myself anymore if I don’t. Marsha thinks I’m crazy. She says it’s not my responsibility anymore. It never was. She says my responsibility is to my family, and that Sam’s family should be looking after him. I’ve explained the whole thing to her over and over again, and she understands how I feel, but she says that I shouldn’t blame myself for what happened to Sam — that something like it would have happened to him even if he’d never met me.

“If you want to blame anybody, blame the bank. They’re the ones who gave him all that money in cash without even raising an eyebrow. You said he was cuckoo, didn’t you. They shouldn’t have given him the money without checking with his daughter.”

“I don’t think the bank can stop you from giving away your own money, even if you’re crazy. Anyway, even if I’m not responsible, I still think somebody should do something to help the poor guy.”

“You do what you have to do, Neil. But it’s a good thing I’m in love with you, ’cause I think you’re starting to be a little bit cuckoo yourself.”
I find Sam right where I expected to find him, sifting through junk in the vacant lot under the bridge. I’ve seen him there before. He never seems to take anything. He just picks things up, mutters to himself, then throws them down again. I watch him for a few minutes. He swings his briefcase around the way the little kids I teach swing their lunch pails. I don’t know what I am going to say to him. I don’t know whether he will remember coming to see me that night at the Tribune office. I am afraid of him now. I have that vaguely sinister, vaguely threatening feeling that I get from the bag ladies and junkies who cruise the alley behind where I live. I don’t know why it should bother me to see them there, but it does.

Sam picks something up, holds it up to the light, then tosses it down again. Finally, I suck in my breath and start to walk slowly across the cracked concrete and stubble of weeds. When he hears me approach, Sam turns towards me. By the look in his eyes, I can tell that he’s as scared as I am. Then, suddenly, that big goofy grin spreads itself across his face.

“Neil!” he says. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, Sam,” I tell him quietly. “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m excellent, Neil. Just excellent. You know, excellence is a rare thing these days.”

“Look, Sam. I just wanted to say — I’m sorry about what happened. About the money.”

“Oh, now don’t you worry about that, Neil. That was a long time ago. Besides, what do I want with money?”

“It’s just — I feel bad about what happened.”

“Don’t feel bad, Neil. I didn’t want the money. I just wanted to be famous. And I am. I got my picture in the paper. Remember?”

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“Yeah. I remember.”

“You know — everywhere I go, people talk to me. I’m famous, Neil. I’m more famous than Muhammad Ali.”

Just as crazy as he ever was. I’m sure that no one ever talks to him. I’ve seen him. I’ve watched him trace his circuit through the city, over and over again. He never stops, except under the bridge. And no one ever talks to him.

I keep looking out for Sam. Sometimes I follow him around the city, staying a block or so back, to see where he goes, to try and find out what he does all day. It’s always the same thing. He walks a huge circuit around the West end of the city. Always the same route, the same relentless pace, turning at the same corners, stopping at the same places. I want to know what he is looking for, why he is the way he is. I’ve watched him go home at night, to a rooming house downtown. At least he isn’t sleeping in doorways.

“Forget it, Neil. Just think about something else for a while.” Marsha is cutting my hair. I have a job interview tomorrow. I have applied for a job with the county school board. We’re hoping to sell our house and move out of the city. We’ve never liked the neighborhood we live in. We only bought the house we have now because it was in a convenient location, halfway between my work and Marsha’s. Everything’s changing now. Now she wants to have a baby, and I’m pretty sure that I do too, but she says she won’t even think of getting pregnant until we live in a better neighborhood.

“Forget what?” I pretend that she hasn’t caught me at it again.

“Forget about Sam. There’s nothing you can do for him. Just leave him alone.” The blades of the scissors nip at my earlobe.
“Ouch! How do you know I was thinking about Sam?”

“Because that’s all you ever think about anymore.”

“I can’t help it, Marsha. There must be something I can do to help the poor guy.”

“No there isn’t, Neil. Sam is crazy. He was crazy when you met him, and he’s still crazy now. You’re not a psychiatrist, Neil. What makes you think there’s something you can do to help him?”

“I just feel like I should. That’s all.”

“Why?”

“Because…”

I’m not sure whether it’s because I really don’t know, or because I don’t want to admit why I feel like I should be helping Sam out, but I hesitate to answer her, and then it’s too late. Marsha doesn’t say any more, but I know what she is thinking. I listen to rhythm of the snipping scissors for a minute before I attempt to redeem myself.

“Anyway,” I tell her, “if it wasn’t for Sam, you and I might never have met each other.”

“How do you figure?”

“It’s because of Sam that I got fired from the Tribune, and that’s what made me decide to go to teacher’s college, and that’s where I met you.”

“So?”

“So, if Sam hadn’t gotten me fired, we might never have met.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She holds her hand mirror up in front of me so I can see how the haircut looks. “I think they would have fired you anyway.”

He is standing on his toes, peering over the top of a garbage dumpster. It’s Saturday morning and the sun is shining. Sam is humming to himself.

“Hello, Sam.” I greet him quietly, trying not to startle him. He doesn’t look up, and I wonder at first if he has heard me at all.
“Hi, Neil,” he says, still looking at something in the dumpster. “It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is, Sam. It’s a beautiful day.”

“Are you going to follow me around again today, Neil?”

“What do you mean?”

“You followed me almost all day last Saturday, didn’t you? Are you going to walk today, or did you bring your car again?”

“I’m sorry, Sam. I didn’t think you would have noticed.”

“I noticed.”

He speaks absently, still standing on his toes, still intent on whatever it is he sees inside the dumpster.

“I’m sorry about last Saturday, Sam. I won’t follow you anymore. I just want to know if there’s anything I can do to help you.”

“Gee, Neil. That’s real nice of you.” He turns and looks at me for the first time and holds out his briefcase too me. “Hold this, will you?”

Before I can answer, I am holding the briefcase, and Sam is scrambling up the side of the dumpster and over the top. I hear an enormous thud as he lands inside.

“Are you okay, Sam?”

“Just fine, Neil.”

I stand on my toes, but I can’t quite see over the edge. Then he is standing up inside it, grinning in triumph as he holds up a large plastic pail and inspects it for cracks.

“Oh, she’s a beauty, now isn’t she? Just perfect, I’d say. It sure is a beautiful day, isn’t it?”

I hand Sam his briefcase and ask him if I can buy him a cup of coffee.
“Boy, that sure is nice of you to offer, Neil, but I’m not supposed to drink coffee. Do you suppose I could have a hot chocolate instead?”

“I’m sure you could.”

We walk together to a donut shop a few blocks away, although it is difficult to keep up with Sam. He takes great, gangly strides that have a complex rhythm I can’t quite get in sync with. A block away from the coffee shop, a strange thing happens. A police cruiser, passing the other way, slows down as it passes us. Sam begins to mutter underneath his breath. I can’t make out what he is saying, but he is obviously annoyed at something. The cop riding shotgun rolls down his window, and at the same time the driver begins honking the horn. Sam screams. He wails and moans, and sputters out broken, unintelligible syllables. The cops laugh and roll up their window as they speed off down the street.

Sam is shaking his fist and cursing them long after the cruiser is out of sight.

“Why did they do that?” I ask him.

“I d-d-dun-dunno, Neil. I h-h-hate c-c-cops; th-th-th-they make me s-s-s-so m-m-m-mad.”

Sam doesn’t elaborate about his hatred of cops, and I am afraid to ask him. I am afraid that I already know what caused it.

At the donut shop, I order a large coffee for myself and a hot chocolate for Sam. I watch him as his hungry gaze roams across the displays of donuts and muffins and pastries.

“Would you like something to eat with your hot chocolate?” I ask.

“Gee, Neil. That’d be real nice. Do you think I could have one of those?” He points to a huge, triangular shaped pastry, topped with a film of chocolate icing and oozing fake whipped-cream from all three sides.

“Sure,” I tell him, and I nod to the girl who is serving us. I’m trying not to be embarrassed about standing in a donut shop with a man wearing a diaper on his head.

We sit across one of the tiny tables, not talking, just sipping our hot drinks. By the time he is finished, Sam’s face is half covered in chocolate and whipped cream, but he doesn’t
seem to notice or to care. He takes his last bite of pastry and washes it down with a long last swallow of cocoa, holding the cardboard cup straight up to make sure he doesn’t miss any, then smacks his lips with an exaggerated sigh of satisfaction. He watches me, quietly, as I finish my coffee.

“Tell me something, Neil,” he says. “How come you’ve been following me around?”

“I’m just concerned about you, Sam?”

“Concerned?”

“Yeah. I want to make sure you’re okay.”

“Why do you think I might not be okay?”

“Well... I don’t know. I guess I’m worried about whether you have enough money. About whether you have anybody to look after you. Stuff like that.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry, Neil. My daughter looks after all my money. She pays my rent every month. Mrs. Sheridan cooks all my dinners for me. She’s a real good cook, you know. She always makes a special dinner for me on Sundays, and on Saturdays she lets me eat my dinner in the tv room. She has these tables that fold up and I can put my plate on one of them and sit on the chesterfield and watch tv while I’m eating my dinner. That’s pretty nice of her, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, it is. That’s really nice of her.”

Sam stares out the window, as a police cruiser pulls into the parking lot.

“Can we go now, Neil?”

“Sure, Sam. I’m done my coffee. Let’s go.

It’s my week for recess duty. I don’t mind too much. I’d rather be out here watching the kids play than sitting inside listening to the other teachers moaning and complaining. I won’t have to put up with them much longer anyway. Not that I expect it to be all that different at my new school. It’ll be a change though.
I am standing near the fence, watching the grade three boys on the new wooden play structure that sits in the middle of our asphalt school yard. They are engrossed in an elaborate game involving a television superhero that I’ve never even heard of. It is almost time for the bell, when I see little Andy Cowan reaching for the higher rungs of the structure and missing them. He falls hard, but I can tell that he isn’t badly hurt. Instead of running over, I wait for him to come to me. He is the smallest of the grade threes, and I think that hurts more than the scrape on his knee.

“It doesn’t look too bad, Andy. When the bell rings, we’ll go in and wash it up and put a band-aid on it.”

I am crouched over holding Andy’s foot in one hand, brushing away bits of stone and dirt from his knee, when I hear someone call my name. I turn to look. It’s Sam. I haven’t seen him for a few weeks, but he’s the same as ever. He giggles and lifts his briefcase in greeting.

“Beautiful day today, isn’t it?” He grins and goes on his way, bouncing on his heels past the school yard. I always meant to ask him why he wears that thing on his head. I suppose it doesn’t matter though.

I look down at eight-year-old Andy, who is obviously amused and amazed by Sam.

“Tell me something, Andy. Do you know who Muhammad Ali is?”

“Nope.”

I point to Sam, who is standing at the corner waiting for a light to change.

“What about him? Do you know who he is?”

“Sure I do. That’s Mr. Diaper-Head. Everybody knows that.”
Getting Wood

David pulls the old Ford pick-up over to the side of the road.

"See that dead poplar over there?" he says. He is pointing to a tall, dead tree about twenty yards away. It is leaning through the forest, almost at a forty-five degree angle. "That'll be a good one. It's good if you can get them leaning over like that. When they're lying on the ground, they go all punky and rotten inside from the moisture."

He gets out of the cab, pulling his chainsaw after him. He tells me to get the axe out of the back of the truck. I follow him into the woods, toward the big poplar he pointed out to me from the road.

We are getting in firewood for the winter. I've never done this before. Since my wife and I moved out here to the country a year and a half ago, I've been doing a lot of things I've never done before,

I stand and watch, while David cuts the tree down. I'm anxious to be helpful, but I guess the most helpful thing I can do right now is stay out of the way. The tree crashes to the ground, and David immediately starts to cut it up into logs about a foot-and-a-half long. I see now that my job for the rest of the afternoon will be to get these lengths of log out to the road so we can load them into the truck. The forest is too dense and the underbrush too thick to bring the wheelbarrow in here.

David finishes cutting up the tree and heads deeper into the forest to look for another dead one to cut down. Soon I hear his saw start up again and after that the sound of a tree falling through the forest.

Before long I am able to carry three or four of the narrower logs, or two of the larger ones, at one time. I work hard, at a fast pace, enjoying the fresh air and exercise, not caring that my feet are soaking because I forgot to wear rubber boots.
After about half an hour, I'm starting to be a short of breath, and the muscles in my arms and legs are sore. I carry one of the biggest logs out to the road and set it on its end, so I can sit down and take a little rest.

The memory comes to me unbidden — the connection is unavoidable. I haven't willed myself to think about that particular time in my life. It just comes flooding back to me, drawn by the sound of the chainsaw and the smell of freshly cut wood.

I don't think either one of us had ever seen or even imagined anything like what greeted us at the crest of that hill. It left me feeling hollow and desolate. We had happened upon a valley — or what had once been a valley — about two or three miles wide. It was completely gutted, stripped of every tree. As far as we could see in either direction stood thousands upon thousands of dead stumps.

Gunga Din gasped at the horror of it.

"If this is how they get wood," he said, "I don't want to ever have anything made out of wood. Not even a house. I'd rather live in a tent somewhere."

We were on our way to Seattle, to visit our friend Jack. The band was booked to play at the West Coast BMI showcase in L.A. — we'd just been signed to a major label recording contract — but we weren't travelling together. Gunga Din suggested that the two of us leave a week early and go up to Seattle and see Jack. We'd meet the Captain and Janie in time to rehearse a bit for the showcase. We'd decided, unwisely, to drive rather than fly. Gunga Din said it would be like going "on the road" in the old days. We'd pack all our instruments and equipment into the back of his LTD and drive off into the sunset.

By the time we reached that clear-cut valley, we were both ready to rip each other's throats out. I had shared a house with Gunga Din for nearly two years, but I'd never had as much trouble getting along with him as when we were cooped up together in that stupid car for three days straight.
Instead of trying to point out to Gunga Din that entire forests do not have to be gutted like that in order for people to build houses, I lost my patience with him. It had been a long drive, and our friendship had been strained already before we left home. It was the summer of our discontent. Our relationships with each other, and with the rest of the band were teetering on the brink. Within a month, the band would be nothing more than a rock’n’roll trivia question. By the end of the year, Gunga Din and I would stop talking to each other altogether. That afternoon, I just used his foolish comment as an excuse to tell him off.

“You’re a fine one to talk,” I said. “Look at yourself. You’re driving across the country in an expensive, gas-guzzling car; you wear nice clothes, made out of polyester and acrylics; you eat whatever you feel like eating, whenever you feel like eating; and you do, as a matter of fact, live in a house — a very nice house, with lots more room than either you or I really need. If you feel like you have all the answers, why don’t you just go and live in a tent then? But for God’s sake, do it. Don’t just talk about it.”

I knew right away that I was out of line. I was being as ridiculous as he had been. And I hadn’t made either of us feel any better. We were tired after three days of travelling, and we were both upset about what we saw in that valley. I shouldn’t have taken it out on him. The rest of the day, we hardly spoke another word to each other.

Later, when we got to Jack’s place and had a bit of a rest, it seemed like it was something we should just forget.

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Gunga Din and I really should have had a lot more sympathy for each other. We’d both had our hearts broken by the same woman. Instead, though, we blamed each other for all our troubles, which were more complicated than either of us would have admitted. I was plagued by a serious drug and alcohol problem, which was exacerbated by my depression over splitting up with Janie. Gunga Din was in a state of confusion brought on by the
failure of his latest adopted religion to get him through his own hard times. I look back on that whole trip and I see that it was then that my paranoia began to be a problem. It was then that I lost my respect for Gunga Din. Later, I would stop trusting him, and after that, I would stop trusting anyone.

We'd been in a band together for almost five years. We'd struggled together through the long climb toward success. We'd shared dirty, roach-infested dive motel rooms and driven back and forth across the country enough times together that we had our own personal oil stains on most of the major interstates. Now that we were on the verge of making it — our first single was going to be released at the showcase — we couldn't stand to be with each other.

My drinking always made Gunga Din mad. He didn't mind me doing dope. He did enough himself that he couldn't complain about that, but for some reason he got mad as hell whenever I had a drink or two (though I rarely ever stopped at two). As for him, I could have forgiven him anything, if he hadn't tried to make me hate Janie.

We'd agreed to drive straight through from Chicago to Seattle — we'd take turns driving while the other one slept. The only problem was that, whenever it was my turn to drive, Gunga Din didn't sleep. He talked and talked and fooled around with the tape deck and drank cup after cup of coffee. So when it came his turn to drive, he hadn't slept at all.

"Don't worry," he said when he took the wheel in northern Idaho, "I'm up. I'm up. I'll be good for at least four more hours. You just get some sleep. Don't worry about a thing."

The next sound I heard was metal grating against metal.

"What the...?" As I opened my eyes, a hubcap flew past the window.

"Holy shit!" Gunga Din muttered.

"What the hell's going on!?" I screamed.
"I must've dozed off for a second."

"Stop the car!"

He pulled over to the shoulder of the road. We were into the mountains, and we were headed down a pretty steep incline. I got out to check for damage. Nothing, except a big scrape in the fender and a missing hubcap.

"Get out of the car, Gunga Din. I'm driving."

"What's wrong?"

"That was a guard-rail back there! We almost got ourselves killed! Get out of the car. I'm driving the rest of the way."

I had to take black beauties to keep awake, but I trusted myself, strung out on speed, more than I did Gunga Din stone-cold sober. By the time we got to Seattle, I wasn't capable of driving more than thirty-five miles an hour, but there was absolutely no way that I was going to turn the wheel over to Gunga Din.

The whole world was different when we got to Jack's place. Jack's whole life was different. He got up in the mornings and went to work every day in a guitar store downtown. It seemed like he was living with a different girl every time we went to see him, and was always on the verge of either getting married or having his heart broken. That's what made him such a great songwriter.

That summer, Jack lived with Anna, and they shared a little apartment on the top floor of one of those run down buildings in downtown Seattle that used to be luxurious and were on their way to being slums. It was clean enough, and cheap — the kind of place that attracted all kinds of artists and writers and other social outcasts. Jack told me that he and Anna were the only heterosexuals in the whole building.
We had planned to stay in a hotel, but Jack and Anna convinced us that it would be much more convenient if we just crashed at their place. When it came down to it, hardly any of us slept at all the first week. I don’t know how Jack managed to drag himself to work every morning after jamming with us half the night and then partying until the sun came up again.

We’d been staying with Jack about a week when the idea of going camping came up. We all wanted to do it, but we weren’t very organized about it. We just went out and bought a bunch of stuff and loaded it in the car and set out on the highway, driving away from the city. We didn’t know exactly where we were headed. We were just driving up into the mountains, figuring that the right place to camp would just present itself to us.

We kept passing by state parks and campgrounds, but both Jack and Gunga Din said they’d rather camp out in the real wilderness; just find someplace away from the main road and set up camp. Anna said she didn’t care where we camped as long as there was a river nearby.

Gunga Din was driving; I was trying to be more tolerant.

I spotted a narrow side-road and told him to turn off. There might be a good place to camp up there. It turned out to be an old logging road, and it went practically straight up the mountain for about a quarter of a mile. Then it wound its way across a sort of open plateau to the edge of the cliff, where it stopped completely.

“Well,” I said. “I guess this is it.”

We got out of the car. It was obvious that we weren’t the first ones to come up that road looking for a place to camp out. We found the charred remains of a campfire, piles of empty beer cans, spent shotgun shells scattered on the ground, and a generally bad feeling about the place.
“This is great,” said Jack sarcastically, kicking a pile of beer cans. “Let’s go get some more beer and some guns, and we can come up here and be real macho men for the weekend.”

“Sure thing,” I said, half-joking along with him. “Sounds like a fun time, but what happens when the previous tenants return?”

“Let’s get out of here,” said Anna. “This place gives me the creeps.”

For Anna to say that a place gives her the creeps, it had to be pretty bad. She was a tough, street-wise kid from New York City. Her parents ran a grocery store in one of the worst neighborhoods in the world. She grew up in a place where most kids never have a chance to escape from the poverty and despair that surrounds them. She was smart and studious, though, and had managed to win a small scholarship to a university thousands of miles away. Jack had told me that Anna was completely naive about some things, especially the day-to-day intricacies of the life of a university student. He was always having to help her do things like get her registration forms in order, or figure out how to use the on-line catalogue in the library. But she could open any lock with little more than a nail file, and she could swear in at least four languages.

I guess being in that place had stirred something in all of us. We drove on in silence, looking for another place to camp. I kept thinking about that valley where all the trees had been cut down. I kept thinking about all the logging roads in the mountains. I wondered to myself what was going to happen when all the trees were gone, when the lumber barons and paper companies had used up all the wilderness and all the strong men who’d conquered the wilderness.

I turned around in my seat to look at Jack. He had his arm around Anna. She had nestled her head into the crook of his shoulder. She was looking up at him too, but he was staring out the window, absorbed by the mysteries of the dense forest we were passing through. I turned back to look at Gunga Din again. He was frowning as he concentrated on the road ahead, his forehead contorted with a kind of puzzled displeasure.
“What’s the matter, Gunga Din?”

“Nothing, really. I’m just tired of seeing the world turned into a garbage dump.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

We finally settled on a campsite that was acceptable to everyone. It was getting late, and we were all feeling a little more willing to compromise on the location. Anna complained that it wasn’t near a river, but it was right on the slope of a mountain, and it was as pretty a spot as we could have asked for.

Jack and I went off to look for some wood to build a fire with. It wasn’t as easy as we’d imagined. We were in a state campground, and we were surrounded by trailers and recreational vehicles and every sort of camping set-up imaginable. Any wood that wasn’t firmly rooted to the ground had been carted-off long ago. The woods around our campsite were so thoroughly picked over, there was hardly a pine needle on the ground.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to do without a campfire,” I said after we’d circled the whole campground.

“Aw, man. We have to have a fire,” said Jack. “Anna will be so disappointed if we don’t. You know, this is a big experience for her. She’s never been camping before. I don’t think she’s ever even seen a real fire outside of a tenement.”

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll take another look around.”

We tramped through the campground again — it seemed hopeless. The other campers were happily ensconced with all the comforts of home in their trailers and motor homes. Some of the people who had tents set up were cooking or heating water to wash dishes on little table-top camping stoves. There weren’t any open fires. A few of the campers stared at us as we passed by, as if only some kind of deranged and dangerous person would be wandering aimlessly around a state campground at dusk.
“Let’s give it up, man,” I said. “It’s getting too dark to see.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

As we walked back towards our campsite, I noticed an old couple walking in the other direction. As they approached, I knew that the man was going to say something to us. He was probably about seventy years old. She looked even older than that. Her eyes were barely open, and from the way she just stared straight ahead, I don’t think she even knew we were there. She just stood there, drooling slightly, her mouth ajar and her hands trembling, while her husband stopped to talk to us.

“Nice night,’ he said.

“Yeah, it is,” I said. I wasn’t used to talking to old people. It made me a little uncomfortable.

“This here’s a pretty nice park, huh?”

“Oh, yeah, I guess so.”

“Where are you boys from?”

“Seattle,” said Jack.

“I’m from the East,” I said.

There was a kind of awkward pause, then Jack asked the old man if he knew where there might be a good place to look for firewood.

“Oh, you wouldn’t find any around here,” he told us. “It’s as bare as a carpet where the campsites is. Go on up the mountain a ways. You’ll find some soon enough. Folks don’t seem to like to get very far from their cars when they’s campin’ out.”

We thanked him for the advice and wished him a good night.

“Good night to you,” he said and took the old woman by the arm again. “I’d best finish takin’ the missus here for her walk. We takes a walk together every night about this time. Gotta get exercise, y’know, even when you’re old like us.”
Jack and I sat up late that night beside the dying embers of the fire, talking and sharing a bottle of wine after the others had gone to sleep. He told me that he and Anna were getting serious about each other. He’d been thinking that maybe they should get married.

“I love her a lot, you know,” he said, “but it’s hard for me to imagine myself being married — settling down and staying with the same person for the rest of my life. I mean, look at that old couple we met tonight. Did you see that woman? She was practically a vegetable. But that old guy takes her out for a walk every night, to make sure she gets her exercise. That’s devotion, man. That’s dedication. I just don’t know if I’ll ever be capable of that kind of commitment.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know what you mean. Ever since me and Janie split up. I keep wondering if I’m destined to spend my life truckin’ around in rock’n’roll bands, drinking and doing dope, or whether I’m going to... meet someone.”

The aching and throbbing in my arm muscles has subsided a little now. My wet feet are too cold for me to sit still any longer. I look up into the back of the pick-up. It’s nearly full. David’s saw has been buzzing constantly since we got here. We’re going to have more than one load for sure. I get up and follow the drone of the chainsaw over to where David is. I’m just in time to see a tall, dead maple tree crashing to the ground. As I approach, David is examining the cut he made, running his finger across the exposed wood.

“Look at this,” he says. “We’re getting these just in time. Another year and they’d be no good for anything.”
The Miracle of the Camaro

It didn't take too long for the news to get around about Rufus winning the lottery. Not that he won the big prize or anything. He didn't even win second prize, which is usually at least a hundred thousand. But when five out of six of Rufus LaCroix's lotto numbers came up last Easter weekend, it was the first time anyone in town had ever won more than ten dollars in the lottery.

At first he couldn't believe it. He was in the Legion with his brother when he found out. Raymond went next door to the 7-11 store to check the winning numbers. Raymond played at least ten different sets of numbers every week, but Rufus had been playing the same six numbers for over a year.

Rufus always thought that if he won the lottery, he'd jump up and down and shout and holler about it. But when Raymond assured him that he really had won $2,914.34, Rufus just sat there like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a transport truck. It was Raymond who jumped up and down and shouted and hollered. They were both half in the bag already, because they'd been paid that afternoon by Jim McGregor for doing the drywall in the apartments he was making above his store. Rufus and Raymond weren't the best drywallers in town, but they were the cheapest. They pretty well didn't care what they got paid, as long as it was in cash and the Social Services never found out.

While Raymond went around the bar slapping everybody on the back and buying them drinks, Rufus slipped quietly into the Men's Room to take a leak. It was a lot of money, that's for sure. It wasn't like winning a million dollars or anything, but it was more money than anyone in the LaCroix family had ever had all at once.
The family somehow had got wind of Rufus's good fortune. Everyone was there when they stumbled home from the Legion at closing time. Aggie had let the kids stay up late. Raymond's wife, Patty was there. She had the receiver of her nursery monitor plugged into the kitchen counter. Her little one was asleep at home, which was in what used to be a garage right behind Rufus and Aggie's place. Pa LaCroix was there, and Big Joe, drinking tumblers full of Pa's homemade wine. In the far corner of the kitchen, Ma LaCroix had settled into a half-sleep across two chairs set to face each other. Even when Rufus and Raymond came home and everybody cheered and the kids all jumped up and down, Ma just opened one eye for a few seconds and dozed off again.

Everybody had a suggestion about what Rufus should do with the money.

"You oughta get one o' them satellite dishes and a big screen TV," said Raymond.

"You just want one of them so's you can watch the porno channels," said Patty.

"That's not true. I'd only watch the porno during half-time." Raymond winked broadly, and everyone chuckled.

"How about a trampoline," said one of the kids. "We should get a trampoline."

"Nah. A swimmin' pool. A pool'd be better than a trampoline."

They argued and badgered one another like that, until Ma LaCroix swung her legs down from the chair with a grunt.

"It's Rufus's money," she said. "An' Rufus'll decide what he wants to spend it on. Let's all get on home and everybody get some sleep. C'mon, Pa."

Rufus had known all along how he was going to spend the money. Once the initial shock had worn off, it was obvious — once it was clear that he wasn't exactly a millionaire. If he'd won a million, he'd be able to do all the things his friends and relatives had suggested. He'd probably think up a few more besides. Not that he had anything to complain about. He was almost three thousand dollars richer, and he knew that there was
probably no way he was ever going to have three thousand dollars all at once again. Not if he lived for a million years. He knew that if he didn't think of something good to spend it on, he'd fritter it away a little bit at a time, picking up people's bar tabs and pretending he really had won a million. There was only one thing Rufus had never had that he always wanted, and that was a car. Not just any car. Rufus wanted a cool car. He wanted a particular car. He felt a bit silly about it, because it was something he'd wanted when he was eleven years old, and something that would have suited him when he was nineteen, but now he was almost thirty-seven, and he wasn't sure if having a car like that would be okay. But he still wanted it. He wanted a Camaro. Not a new one; the new ones looked stupid. Rufus wanted a classic, an early model Camaro — one with chrome.

No one in the LaCroix family had ever bought a car before. No one in the family had ever driven anything other than a pick-up truck or a flat-bed, and these always came from Hubert LaCroix's wrecking yard over in Pottersville.

Rufus went to see Nigel Klink at Klink's Esso.

"I thought you might be in this week," said Nigel.

"Yeah, I wanna talk to you about buying—"

"She's not for sale anymore."

"What?"

"I decided not to sell her."

Rufus knew what was going on. Nigel was trying to boost up the price. Nigel knew Rufus had almost three thousand dollars to spend, and the asking price for the car was only two thousand.

"Nigel, you've had that car for sale for almost a year. How come you decided not to sell it?"
"I dunno," said Nigel. "I was thinkin' I might put plates on her myself, y'know. Put her on the road again. She's still in real good shape."

"Yeah, but it need's a lot of work, don't it?"

"Not that much really."

"Huh."

Rufus stood in silence while Nigel studiously cleaned the distributor cap of David Honeydew's Econoline van. Rufus worried only for a minute. Then he almost smiled, but didn't in case Nigel looked up. Nigel was playing a game, but he'd picked the wrong game to play with Rufus. Rufus was better at this game than anybody in the county.

"So the car ain't for sale no more, eh?"

"Nope."

"That's too bad. Guess I will think about gettin' me one of them satellite dishes, then. See ya around."

"See ya."

Rufus let Nigel stew for two solid weeks. To make sure he didn't tip his hand, he never once set foot in the Esso station the whole time. When he judged Nigel to be just about ready to come to a boil, he had Raymond drop in to Klink's at morning coffee time.

Three quarters of the male population of the town dropped into Klink's sometime between seven and nine in the morning, six days a week. It was the men's version of the beauty parlor — a place to stand around, sipping Nora Klink's wretched coffee as if it didn't taste worse than the gasoline out in the pumps, tell a few jokes, talk about the weather, and trade gossip. Gossip is the solid currency of small towns, and every town has a place like Klink's, where people can go to stand around and gossip without feeling idle. They're patronizing an important business establishment, after all, and people do have to make small talk while they are conducting affairs of commerce.
As with most of the town’s other institutions, the LaCroix family were not exactly prohibited, but neither were they made to feel particularly welcome at Klink’s morning coffee hour. No one complained of their presence, but no one missed them when they left. But when Raymond LaCroix dropped into Klink’s at eight-thirty on the second Saturday after his brother’s big win, he was a welcome sight, for it was not only Nigel who was dying to know if Rufus had spent the money yet. The serious gossips in town had taken to speculating how long it would take for him to spend it and whether or not he’d have anything to show for it when it was gone.

Nigel was relieved that he didn’t have to come out and ask for himself.

"Jeez," Raymond moaned. "I need a coffee real bad."

He pushed at his temples with his fingertips. Raymond was not a particularly good actor, but he had enough experience at being hungover to play the part convincingly. Besides, no one in town expected Raymond to be anything but hungover at eight-thirty on a Saturday morning.

Nigel poured coffee into a styrofoam cup and handed it to Raymond.

"Cream? Sugar?"

"Nah. Black coffee’s what I need this morning."

"You and Rufus go out drinkin’ last night?"

"Yeah. We were over in Pottersville. We went to Corky’s and the Imperial, and I think we ended up at Fiddler’s, but maybe we went somewhere else. I’m not sure."

"Really tied one on, eh?"

"Holy mother, did we ever. Rufus was buyin’ drinks for everybody. I was seein’ triple by the time I got home. Do you know how hard it is to drive straight when there’s three sets of white lines goin’ down the middle of the road?"

"So, Rufus was buyin’ the drinks, eh?"
“Yup,” said Raymond, “he’s been a real generous guy lately. He was buyin’ drinks for people he’s never even met. Lord knows how much the bill came to, but he didn’t care. He gave the barmaid at Fiddlers a fifty-dollar bill for a tip.”

The truth was that Rufus had become much more careful about money since his big win. Having so much cash all at once was so new to him it made him nervous. He knew himself well enough to know how easily he could fritter it away. It was frustrating. He always wanted to win the lottery so he’d be able to spend money without even thinking about it, so he could buy drinks for everybody in the bar every weekend, and get the kids a trampoline and a swimming pool. But now that he had a little bit of what he always wanted, it was almost worse than having nothing at all.

To the assembled throng at Klink’s that Saturday morning, what Raymond told them only confirmed what they were sure was true anyway.

“Say, Raymond,” somebody asked, “how long do you think it’ll take before Rufus gets it all spent?”

“Can’t say,” Raymond answered. “The way my head feels this morning, maybe he got it all spent last night. One thing’s sure, anyhow. He’s workin’ on it.”

When Rufus pulled his Pa’s flatbed up to the pumps on Monday morning, he laid it on thick and went in for the kill.

“Fill ‘er up, Nigel,” he shouted with a grin, “and check the oil for me too, if you don’t mind.” No-one in Rufus’s family had ever asked for more than five dollars worth before.

Nigel hopped around the old truck like his pants were on fire. Rufus almost chuckled to himself at how nervous he was. When he’d brought the dipstick around to the driver’s side to show Rufus, Nigel tried to act really casual, but he couldn’t bring it off.

“Say, Rufus,” he said. “Are you still interested in that Camaro?” He was shifting back and forth from one foot to the other.
"You said it wasn’t for sale," Rufus reminded him.

"Yeah, but my dad wants me to get it out of the garage, so I gotta sell it."

Rufus knew that was a lie. Nigel’s dad was a henpecked twit who wouldn’t tell Nigel to bring in the mail unless Nora ordered him to. He’d never tell their one and only child to get his white elephant of a car out of the garage. Not in a million years.

"Well, Nigel," said Rufus. "I wished you’d of told me that last week. I mighta had enough left to buy her off ya. But I ain’t too sure how much money I got left."

"I’d take eighteen hundred," said Nigel hopefully.

"I don’t know," Rufus said. "Let me check how much I got left."

Rufus pulled his battered old billfold out of his hip pocket. Although the bills were wadded and jammed into it in a mass of confusion, his careful counting of the cash was merely a pretense. He had deliberately stuffed his wallet with exactly the amount he intended to offer for the car.

"Gee, Nigel," he said. "I’d sure like to buy her from you, but all I got left is $1,347 and some change. It’s too bad. Last Friday, I mighta had the eighteen-hundred, but me and Raymond went into town for a couple o’ beers." Rufus shrugged his shoulders.

Nigel looked like he might start to cry. They both knew that Rufus was the only one in the county who was even mildly interested in the old beast.

"Tell you what, Rufus," he said. "I’ll let you have it for $1,347, if you want. You’re gettin’ a steal, but Dad says I gotta get it out of there."

Rufus smiled, almost proud of all his missing teeth.

"I’ll take it," he said, and the relief was clearly visible on Nigel’s face. "Just one thing, though. You’ll have to throw in the fill-up. I ain’t got another dime."

Raymond had to bite his tongue the whole time they were towing the car over to their side of town. If he’d known that Rufus was going to waste his money on an old wreck, he
wouldn’t have had anything to do with the whole scheme. Finally, when it was parked beside the house, he couldn’t keep quiet anymore.

“I can’t believe this, Rufus,” he said. “I can’t believe you bought this old heap.”

“She’s a beauty, ain’t she?” Rufus replied smiling.

“I didn’t think it would be this old,” said Raymond.

“It’s a classic,” said Rufus. “A real classic car.”

For the next few weeks, Rufus was a man possessed. He made almost daily visits to his Uncle Hubert’s wrecking yard, and he spent the rest of his waking hours working on the car. Years of keeping old pick-ups running long past their time had given him an expertise beyond that of most Class A mechanics. It wasn’t long before he had the motor timed and running like a brand new spinning top. Then he turned his attention to the body work. Aside from a bit of rust, it was in pretty good shape, and soon he had it sanded off and was priming and painting like there was no tomorrow.

The last detail he wanted to take care of before he got it plated and on the road was the chrome bumpers. There were only a few real rust spots, but the chrome itself had gone dull, and before he drove that car through town, he wanted to have them absolutely gleaming. He didn’t want anybody to be able to say that he’d squandered his fortune on an old wreck. He wanted people to look at him and say, “Wow, man, that car’s a classic.”

Uncle Hubert gave him the name of a company that would re-plate the chrome for him. It was going to cost him a big chunk of change, but it would be worth it to see those babies shining in the sun again.

It was only after he’d re-attached the bumpers to the car that he noticed the flaw in the chrome. It looked like one of the rust spots was starting to show through the new plating.
Damn. He'd have to take the thing off and take it back to get it redone. It was late, though, and he'd have to wait until morning.

The next morning, he was about to go out to work on the car when Raymond dropped by for the first time in almost a week.

"That car's starting to look pretty good, Rufus," he said.

"Yup," said Rufus. "It's almost ready to roll. I just got one more detail to take care of."

Rufus showed Raymond the flaw in the chrome. It was moist now, like something was oozing through the new plating. Raymond bent down to take a look. As soon as he got close enough to see it, he jumped back in surprise.

"Jesus," he whispered, crossing himself furiously.

"What's the matter, Raymond?"

"Holy mother, look at it," he said, pointing at the spot in the bumper.

Rufus looked. It was kind of strange looking, but it was just the rust showing through.

"What?"

"Don't you see it?"

"I don't see anything but a rust spot. What do you see?"

"It's the Madonna! She's on the bumper, and she's crying."

"Huh?"

"The Madonna... Mary... the mother of Jesus..."

Ma LaCroix was the only one in the family who took religion really seriously. They were nominal Catholics, attending church at Christmas and Easter and for family weddings and funerals. But Ma went every Sunday. She said she could hold her head up high in the presence of God, which is more than she thought most people in town could do.
Before Rufus could say anything, Raymond had summoned Ma and Pa to have a look at the apparition in the bumper. Ma barely said a word. She crossed herself too and stared at the bumper for a minute or two. Then she went to get the priest.

By the time night fell, news of the Miracle of the Camaro was spreading across the county. Father Shannon held a special rosary and prayer service over at the church, but many of the faithful refused to leave the driveway. Rufus just wanted to take the bumper off and take it back to the chrome plating factory, but he knew he’d have to let this thing run its course.

Some people came and looked at the bumper for a minute and then shook their heads and walked away, and Rufus knew that he wasn’t the only one who saw nothing but a bad chrome plating job. But for every one that walked away, one or two others came along and fell to their knees in the driveway. People Rufus had never seen before were out there in the dark praying to the bumper on his Camaro. All night long, he kept going to the window and looking out to see if they were still there. At first there were a half a dozen candles flickering in the dark. By midnight the whole driveway was glowing.

By morning, Rufus gave up and went to bed. The car wasn’t his anymore. It belonged to them now. All those people kneeling in the driveway. The TV cameras and the newspaper people. He’d never drive that car through town now. Nobody would see him and say, “Wow, man, what a cool car.” They’d all point and say, “Hey, isn’t that the car with the Madonna in the bumper?” They’d cross themselves whenever he passed by. He’d park outside the Legion and come outside to find gangs of old ladies standing around his car saying the rosary. It was too depressing to think about. What bothered him the most though was that he couldn’t see it. He’d looked at it a hundred times. He’d squinted his
eyes. He'd even tried saying a Hail Mary. All he could see was a rust spot in the chrome. All that time and money spent, and he couldn't even see the miracle. He was going to stay in bed for a long time. And then he was going to take what was left of his lottery money and go buy a few rounds down at Legion.
The Accident

It wasn’t the first time I ever saw a dead person. I’d seen my grandmother all made up in her coffin at her funeral, and I’d seen pictures of dead people. I guess what surprised me, though, was how quickly he turned from a person who was alive to one who was dead.

It was summertime and I was hanging around outside the Seven-Eleven store. I was either fourteen or fifteen — I can’t remember which. I was on my bike, I remember that. I was thinking about going home, but there was nothing to do there either. It was the air-brakes on the transport that made me turn to look. I was just in time to see the truck hit the car, and the car go right clean through the hydro pole. It just snapped it off, like a giant toothpick, and the top part of the pole bounced up and down on the wires, like they were bungee cords or something.

I wasn’t sure whether to run for help or to go over and see if anybody was hurt. I saw the lady in the store dialing the phone, and I knew she was calling for the police or an ambulance, so I rode my bike across the intersection to where the accident happened.

The truck’s engine was still idling. The driver was just climbing down from the cab, looking dazed and sheepish. I ran past him to the wreck. The driver’s side door was completely crushed in — there was no way it was going to open, so I ran around the other side. The door was locked, but when I looked in the window, I could see that it wouldn’t be any use to try to open it. He was dead. His head was flopped back almost behind the seat; his neck must have been snapped. But it wasn’t just that. I could tell by the colour of his face that he was dead.

I hardly remember anything else about that afternoon. Just bits and pieces. The sirens coming closer and closer. The screaming and yelling. The firemen cutting the car open.
Sitting in the back of the police car, telling them over and over again what I saw. The truck driver’s nervous pacing. The newspaper reporter asking me questions. It all kind of blurs together in one hot sticky afternoon. But even though I only looked at it for a few seconds, I can still see that man’s face as clearly as if it was in front of me right now. He must have been alive when the truck hit him, but he had been dead a long time by the time I looked through that car window.

I guess I was pretty proud of having my name in the paper the next day. I can remember sitting on the front porch with my brother and some of my friends, waiting for the paper boy. I’d already told them about a hundred times everything about the accident. We pored over that front page for what seemed like hours, reading bits of detail out loud to each other. I was a local hero for an afternoon, but part of it hurt to think about, and that was the part they all wanted me to tell them. *What was it like seeing the dead guy?*

The first dream was just kind of scary. I kept seeing his face over and over. It wasn’t like it was in the car. His eyes weren’t rolled back, and his neck wasn’t broken. But his face had that same colour. It was pale; all the blood was drained out of him. It wasn’t just pale, though. It had a funny colour to it, a kind of greenish hue. I realize now that it was probably because of the green coloured interior of the car, but back then I was sure that it was the colour of death, and in my dreams it was even more frightening than when I glanced inside that car window.

The dream was all mixed up with the guys in the neighborhood, and the police, and the insurance investigator who came to see me about the accident. I kept trying to tell them that
it wasn't my fault, that I had just been hanging around the store. The truck driver was telling everyone that it happened when he swerved to avoid a kid on a bicycle, and that meant me. That meant they thought it was my fault. The dead man kept trying to say something, but no-one could understand him. His lips were hardly moving, and he was just mumbling something over and over, but it didn't sound like anything at all.

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The second dream started out the same, but this time I could hear what the dead man was saying. Nobody else seemed to be paying any attention to him. I knew that he was talking to me.

"Tell Chris," he said. "Tell Chris it's all right. Tell Chris. Tell Chris."

The cops and everybody were still asking me questions, but I wasn't listening to them.

"What?" I asked him. "What do I tell Chris?"

He looked me right in the eye, and all the other people seemed to fade away, and it was like they had never been in this dream in the first place. There was just me and the dead man.

"Tell Chris it's alright," he pleaded. "Tell her I'm okay."

"You're dead," I told him. "You were killed in a car accident. I saw it happen. I saw you die."

"Tell Chris," he said again. "Tell her you saw me. Tell her everything will be okay. Tell her I wasn't hurt."

"Where is she?" I asked. "How do I find her?"

"Tell her you saw me," he repeated. "Tell her I'm okay. Tell her I still love her."

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It was three o'clock in the morning, and I knew I wouldn't be able to get back to sleep anyway. I found the copy of the newspaper I'd saved. I hadn't paid too much attention to things like the man's name (it was Gregory Manning), or his age (he was twenty-three), or that he had a wife named Christine and a six month old son. I'd only paid attention to the places where they quoted my description of the accident and told about the damage and the death. The address was in the phone book. It was only about a mile and a half away. Just a few blocks past the Seven-Eleven.

I was a little bit surprised when she answered the door. I guess I'd been expecting her to be dressed all in black, and to still have tears running down her face. She was wearing blue jeans and a t-shirt, and she had the baby riding on her hip. I guess I was surprised too at how young she looked. It seemed like she was about the same age as my sister, though she must have been older than that to be married and have a kid and everything.

"Yes?" she asked. "Didn't you collect already this week?"

She thought I was the paper boy.

"Um... I'm... um..."

She looked at me impatiently, as if she had a lot more important things to do than stand in her doorway waiting for me to spit out whatever I had to say. And anyways, I didn't know what it was I had to say.

"I saw your husband..." I started.

"Oh," she smiled. "You're the witness, aren't you?"

"Um... yeah. I saw the accident, sort of."

She invited me inside, and asked me a few questions about where I lived, and where I went to school and stuff like that. She didn't ask me anything about the accident, and I was
glad, because I didn’t feel like talking about it, especially to her. She offered me a coke, and she got one for herself too. Then I told her about my dream.

At first she sort of smiled, like she didn’t tak... it too seriously — just a kid’s bad dream. But when I told her some of the things her husband had told me to tell her, she started shaking. When I told her the part about him saying that he was okay, that he wasn’t hurt, she started crying. Not little tears rolling down her cheeks, the way I’d imagined. She started heaving and moaning and making noises deep in her throat. The baby started to howl too, and I started to wish I’d never come over in the first place.

“Wha... what... else... did he say?” she sobbed.

“Uh... he said to say that he still loved you.”

That did it. I wanted to run, but I couldn’t. All I could do was sit there looking at my fingernails while the poor lady cried and cried and cried. The baby was having a fit of his own, kicking and struggling in her lap, so I went over and picked him up, and started walking around the room with him, the way my dad did sometimes with my baby brother. It kind of worked. The kid calmed down a little anyways, and so did she. She got up and went and got some kleenex and blew her nose.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Me too.”

I wanted to be nice to her, so I offered to mow her lawn for her. It didn’t look like she’d mowed it since ‘he accident.

“Sure,” she said. “If you can figure out how to start the lawnmower, that’d be great.”

When I was done, she offered me another coke. I didn’t really want to hang around anymore, but I was really thirsty.

“How much do I owe you?” she asked.
“Nothin’,” I said. I was kind of embarrassed. “I don’t want to get paid. I just wanted to help.”

“Okay,” she said. “This time, I won’t pay you for it, but how would you like to come back every week and mow it for me? I’ll pay you two dollars every time.”

Two dollars was pretty good for mowing her little yard, so I said I would, but I sure hoped I wouldn’t have to watch her cry like that again.

We sort of got to be friends after that. She paid me to baby-sit for her sometimes, and I shoveled snow for her in the winter, and the next spring she asked me to help her clean up her garage.

“I haven’t been able to go in there since Greg died,” she told me. “It’s all his stuff, and I don’t really know what to do with it.”

We never talked much about the accident or anything, except once in a while she told me about what the lawyers and insurance guys were working on. They came to my house and got me to sign an affidavit. Because I was underage, they said, I couldn’t be subpoenaed, but I told them I’d be willing to go as a witness if Christine needed me to.

I never saw Chris cry like that again, but she asked me one time to tell her about that dream. I told her what I remembered, and she looked a little sad, but she didn’t cry. She asked me if I ever had any more dreams like that, but I told her I didn’t.

Mostly, when I baby-sat for her, it was just for a couple of hours, while she went out with one of her girlfriends to a movie or something. Usually Robbie would be already asleep, and I’d just drink cokes and watch TV until she came home. Once she joked that
maybe she should lock up the liquor cabinet, so I wouldn’t be tempted, but she wasn’t serious and it didn’t bother me. I’d tried drinking a couple of times when I was in Grade Eight, but it just made me barf, and it didn’t seem like as much fun as some people thought it was. Besides, I wouldn’t take anything of Christine’s unless she offered it.

On New Year’s Eve, the second winter after the accident, I baby-sat Robbie while Chris went out to a party. She said she’d pay me double because of New Year’s, and she said she’d try not to be too late, but she definitely wouldn’t be home before midnight. I made myself a bowl of popcorn and listened to a Pink Floyd album with the sound turned down on the TV so I could watch the ball come down in Times Square at the stroke of midnight.

I must have fallen asleep on the couch, because the next thing I knew, Christine was shaking me by the shoulder.

“T’m sorry,” I said. “I guess I just dozed off.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “It’s really late.”

“What time is it?”

“About four.”

She was standing over me, and she had a funny smile on her face. I could smell her perfume and cigarette smoke mixed with the smell of drinking. At first I was embarrassed because I’d fallen asleep when I was supposed to be baby-sitting, but as I rubbed my eyes and tried to wake myself up, I realized something that made me even more embarrassed. I had a hard-on, and Christine was staring right at my crotch.

Her funny smile turned into a little giggle.

“Were you having a nice dream?” she asked. She reached down and touched me through the front of my jeans.

Before I knew what was happening, she was lying on the couch with me, kissing me and rubbing herself up and down. I could feel her boobs pressing against my chest, and it made my hard-on even harder. In a minute, we had tumbled off the couch and she was pulling at my belt. I didn’t know if it was because she’d been drinking, or because she
wasn’t used to undoing a guy’s pants, but she couldn’t get the buckle undone, so I reached down and did it myself.

After a couple of weeks, Christine stopped trying to call me. I wouldn’t answer the phone. I told my mom that I was tired of baby-sitting and I didn’t want to talk to her, because she’d make me feel sorry for her because her husband was dead, and I’d end up going to baby-sit, and I really didn’t want to. My mom thought I was being rude, but she believed me, anyway. The truth is, I wanted to see Christine again, but I was scared. I was scared because of what we did that night, and because of the dreams I had about her dead husband. I felt stupid, but part of me was afraid that she’d want us to have sex again, and I guess part of me was afraid that she wouldn’t.

It wasn’t like I didn’t want it that time. I did, sort of. I wanted to find out. I wanted to know what it was like. But when it was over, I knew for sure something I’d kind of figured all along. I wasn’t really very interested in having sex with girls. I guess I’d always known it, I just never admitted it to myself.

I saw her again once about a year later. I had my driver’s license, and I got a job delivering prescriptions for one of the neighborhood drugstores. When I saw her name on the receipt, I almost didn’t take it, but I was afraid I might get fired if I didn’t. I delivered all the other prescriptions before I went to her house.

She answered the door in her bathrobe. Her nose was red and her eyes were all puffy. She had a bad cold, but she smiled anyway when she saw me.

“Hi there,” she said. “Long time no see.”
“Yeah,” I said. “Long time.”
“How are you doing?” she asked.
“Pretty good,” I said. “I got a job.”
“Moving up in the world, eh?”
“Huh?”
“I bet it pays more than baby-sitting.”
“Yeah, I guess.”
I told her I was sorry she was sick, and she said I should come over and see her sometime when I wasn’t working. I said maybe I would, but we both knew better. She must have started getting her prescriptions from a different pharmacy after that, because I never had to deliver another one to that address. Sometimes I hoped I would, but it never happened.
God's Best Fruitcake

She wasn't content to ask me just one question at a time. They came in little bundles, grouped according to subject.

“Do you feel like you have a special relationship with God?” ... “Do you talk to God sometimes?” ... “Does God talk to you?” ... “Does God tell you what to do?”

I just closed my eyes and shook my head no. I knew they were all trick questions. She was looking for an opening — something she could use to keep me there, to keep me crazy. And I knew that a person like her, if she even believed in God at all, believed that God was an abstract and very theoretical being whose realm was completely restricted to the afterlife and never overlapped with reality in this life. I knew that she wanted me to tell her about being in God's living room, about having tea and fruitcake and talking to God about art and literature and reality. Then she would have everything she needed to keep me here — until I was cured — until I believed that my experience had been a hallucination, a manifestation of a mental illness, with no basis at all in reality. But I know better. I know there's no such thing as reality.

“But Mr. Robbins, you told the doctor who admitted you here last night that you had been talking to God.”

It was true. I'd said that. He seemed like a nice enough fellow. I didn't even know he was a doctor. I thought the orderly was the doctor.

“Were you talking to God last night, Mr. Robbins? Was God talking to you? What did you say to each other?”

“I was pretty crazy last night. I said a lot of crazy things. I'm okay now, though. I just want to go home and go to bed.”
“Do you think you’re really okay? You were in a very confused state when they brought you in here. We don’t know what caused this episode. Perhaps there is a physical problem. We will need to do some tests. Blood tests, a physical examination, maybe some x-rays.”

“How long are you planning on keeping me here?”

“We think you should stay in the hospital long enough for us to completely evaluate your physical and mental condition. At least a couple of days. Possibly a week.”

Christ Almighty, I thought. If they keep me here, I really will go crazy.

I remember the beginning of all this. It was several years ago. I was on the Greyhound bus, from Windsor to Toronto. I was on my way home — to my new home in Ottawa — from my first visit with my family since I’d moved away the Christmas before. I was reading an anthology of short stories I’d picked up somewhere.

It was a story about a man who goes to a baseball game and sits next to an angel. The angel offers to let him trade his own life in order to bring back a baseball player named Thurman Munson, who had recently died in a plane crash.

But it was more than just a story. From the way it grabbed me and made me sit up, and from the way it got inside me and made me feel like I was more awake and alive than I’d ever been before, I knew it wasn’t just a story. It was like I’d discovered something about myself that I hadn’t known before.

I didn’t pay too much attention to the name of the story’s author. But a couple of years later, when I picked up a copy of a book called Shoeless Joe in a remainder bin outside the W.H. Smiths store on Sparks Street, I must have made the connection, even if it was only subconsciously. Before you know it, I had served two terms as president of the local chapter of the W.P. Kinsella Appreciation Society.

I’ve read every word he ever published, made photocopies of his entries in Who’s Who in Canadian Literature, Canadian Authors Almanac and the Baseball Fiction Writers Yearbook. My relatives and friends got used to receiving copies of the latest W.P. Kinsella
book for Christmas every year. Once I even went to White Rock, B.C., where he lives, and drove around for an hour or so. I could have gone to his house — knocked on his door and introduced myself to him as his biggest fan, but I didn’t. I didn’t really care so much about meeting him. I wanted to get a feeling for him, to find out about the place where he lived, see where he bought his groceries and where he gassed up his car. I didn’t consider myself a fan, in the ordinary sense of the word. I thought of myself as more of a connoisseur of modern fiction. And like a connoisseur of fine wine, I had one favourite vintage.

The orderly on the day shift was a big guy — bigger than me even — with a big bushy beard. But he was a gentle man. He wore a plaid flannel shirt and blue jeans, and he reminded me of a big teddy bear. He knew the minute he laid eyes on me that I didn’t belong there. He could see it in my eyes — and I could see that in his. It helped to reassure me that everything was all going to be okay. He was there when I first woke up that morning.

“How are you feeling?”

“Pretty horrible.” I said. It felt so strange to talk. I had talked so much the night before, but I hadn’t ever been sure what weird babble was going to come out of my mouth next. I felt calm now, but my mouth felt like I’d had armies marching through it all night long.

“You had a pretty rough night, eh?”

“Yeah - pretty rough.”

It had been building up inside me all evening, but I thought when I went to sleep it would all go away. It probably would have, too, if I had been able to get to sleep. I lay there in the dark, twitching and rolling — feeling myself losing my grip. No matter what I tried to focus my mind on, it kept racing away out of control.
I tried to hide it from Wendy, but she couldn't help noticing that my whole body was trembling.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

I didn't know what to tell her. There were gigantic bursts of colour and light exploding inside my brain, and images flashing one after another behind my eyelids. I tried to tell her.

"Ngggghhh."

My tongue had turned into a thick, pasty lump. I struggled to free it.

"I... th-th-think... I'm h-having... a n-n-nervous b-b-breakdown."

I knew I was flipping out, but I didn't have a clue what to do about it. Neither did Wendy. She tried her best to get me calmed down. She tried reading to me from one of my favourite books, hoping the story would lull me to sleep. It actually had the opposite effect. Not having to focus my eyes on the page meant that I could close them and let the characters become real inside my head — and that just made me more confused and more frightened.

We tried getting up and going downstairs, but by then I was pretty far gone and not making much sense. My thoughts were all rational ones — and in some ways connected — but they were happening so quickly — thousands of neurons exploding one after the other — that even I was having trouble keeping up with them, making sense of it all. To Wendy, I must have seemed like a raving lunatic. And she could see that I was terribly distressed.

"What should I do?" she asked.

"Get help," I managed to tell her coherently.

"Who should I call? Should I take you to the hospital?"

I nodded my head. I think it was even my idea that she should call for an ambulance.

*Something like this happened to me once before, a long time ago — around the time Wendy and I first met. It was kind of an out-of-body experience. I remember when it*
started. I was sitting out on the back porch at Paul and Debbie's house. They were the closest friends I had at the time, and I'd been spending the weekends at their place. I'd probably had a couple of beers that night, but I wasn't drunk.

Paul went in the house to get something. From where I was sitting, I could see him as he entered the dining room, where Debbie was clearing off the dinner dishes. Then suddenly, I was in the room with them. But at the same time, I was still sitting out in the folding patio chair on their back porch.

The weird thing about it was their conversation. They were talking about me, but there was something distinctly somber about the tone of their conversation. They were talking about me, but it was all in the past tense.

The arrival of the ambulance in front of the house — the red beams sweeping across the living room wall — convinced me that I was the centre of some bizarre tragedy — that I was, in fact, already dead. I didn't quite understand why I was still able to get up and put my jeans on over my pajamas, as Wendy told me to do, but then being dead was a new experience to me.

The ambulance attendants came in to get me, and I asked one of them if he was God. He shook his head, laughed a little and said, "No, I'm not God." I asked him, "will you take me to see him? Because I'm dead now, and I'd like to meet God." He laughed again, this time a little nervously, and took me by the arm and led me out into the waiting ambulance.

Wendy came to visit me. At least they let her in to see me. She said that my whole family had heard about what had happened. This surprised me, because I still wasn't sure yet myself about what did happen. She said my sister thought it must have something to do with a car accident I'd been in once, when I'd had my head banged against the windshield.
She said I never should have accepted the $500 settlement the insurance company had offered me. My brother's wife said she'd bet it was some kind of a flashback caused by all the drugs I'd taken in the sixties. My parents thought it was just a case of old fashioned nervous collapse, brought on by stress and overwork. They thought I just needed to take some time off. I was actually glad to hear that they all had these theories. I wouldn't want them to know what really happened.

_I have never even considered the possibility of not being one hundred percent sane. I can be a bit goofy sometimes, but I am a writer, after all. That's not the same as being crazy. Except for that one very strange evening, I've never had any reason to really question my own sanity. And I can certainly understand why that little event landed me in the nut house. But, even though I don't completely understand what it was, or what caused it, I know that it wasn't really a matter or sanity or insanity._

My memories of the time we spent in the emergency room are pretty vague. I've sort of been able to piece together a picture of myself mindlessly babbling to Wendy about sex, trains, the Grateful Dead and the letter "I". Every so often I would scream at the nurses and orderlies about wanting to see either a doctor or God himself. Eventually they got a doctor up out of bed, and from what I gather, he told them to give me some tranquilizers and send me to the psychiatric hospital down in Brockville.

Bob — he's the orderly I told you about — he thinks that what happened to me was that I'd been pushing myself down a certain path all my life — that I'd been trying too hard to control my destiny, and that maybe I was on the wrong path. He said that I'd probably been so far from finding the right path that I needed to have something severe, something frightening happen to me to make me change directions, and to see that I'm not the one who's in control.
"I don’t understand what happened, though. It wasn’t a hallucination. It was real."

"Maybe you’ve been trying too hard to understand. Sometimes strange things happen, and we have to just accept them and go on with our lives. If you spend too much time trying to understand why things happen and what they mean, that’s when you end up getting in trouble with yourself. That’s what’s happened to most of the people in this place."

"Well, I’m okay right now. I mean, I’m in control and everything. But what if it happens again?"

"If it happens again, let it happen. Don’t worry about trying to stay in control all the time."

"But, I could end up in here for the rest of my life."

"Not if you don’t let it scare you. That’s what happened last night. That’s why you ended up here. But you’ll get out soon. And if it ever happens again, just remember that there’s nothing to be scared of. Then there won’t be any reason for you to end up here."

"I think I understand."

"Good. Now all that’s left is for you to go on with your life. Enjoy it. But remember, it’s not your movie. You aren’t even necessarily the star. You might only have a walk-on part. Maybe you’re not even in it at all. Maybe you’re just the key grip. So stop trying to be the director all the time, and just enjoy it."

The fact that the ambulance had left the earth wasn’t as surprising as the view through the back window, from out among the stars — and the silence. One minute, we were on the bumpy back road, heading toward Brockville. The next minute, we were drifting through space, and it didn’t seem to matter where we were heading. It was so quiet and peaceful. I thought, “now I’ll finally be able to get some sleep.” I closed my eyes, and I would have easily fallen asleep if I hadn’t started to change shape. In a way it was a relief, because they’d put the restraining straps on too tight when they put me on the
stretcher. First my feet twisted around so that my heels were together, and I felt them sort of flatten out. Then my head suddenly felt long and flat, and the rest of my body seemed stretched into a long thin column. I tried to imagine what this new shape I was taking looked like. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I felt distinctly like the capital letter “I”.

As suddenly as I had changed shape, I felt myself change back again, this time from my head down to my feet. When I opened my eyes I was no longer strapped down in the back of an ambulance, but standing in a small room that reminded me vaguely of my own study at home, where I do my writing. There was a desk underneath a window, with a shelf of books to one side. But the books on the shelves all had titles that were unfamiliar to me. There was a typewriter on the desk, but it was an older, manual model. Mine is an IBM Selectric.

I’m not sure who was more startled when she walked into the room. We both kind of jumped.

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” she said. “It’s just that I’ve never tried this before, and I wasn’t exactly sure what you’d be like in person.”

She was a plump little grey-haired old lady, wearing an old-fashioned house-dress and flat-soled, black leather shoes. She had a pair of bifocals on a string around her neck, and her eyes actually twinkled at me when she smiled. I knew right away she was God.

“How did I get here?” I asked her.

“From right through there,” she said and pointed to the typewriter. “I have been expecting you, of course. I was just putting the kettle on for tea, and I have some of my best fruitcake left over from Christmas. Do you like fruitcake?”

“I don’t get this,” I said, when she’d explained the situation to me. “How can you be W.P. Kinsella? He’s a real person. He’s a man. I’ve seen his picture on the dust jackets of his books. He wears glasses, and he has bushy sideburns and a beard!”
"Oh, that," she said, twinkling her eyes at me. "I had to give them something. You wouldn't expect me to give them a picture of me as I really am, would you? Then who would buy my books? People don't like to think that someone who looks like me could have any imagination. Frankly, people don't expect writers to have any kind of imagination at all. They think that everything we write about is something we've experienced personally. They think it all has to be autobiographical. Where would the fun be in that? Anyway, I can assure you that I am the one and only W.P. Kinsella."

"So let me get this straight," I said. "What you're telling me is that I'm just a character in a novel that you — W.P. Kinsella — are in the middle of writing. Is that it?"

"Oh dear. I can hardly keep it straight myself. It's either that, or W.P. Kinsella is just a character in a novel that you are in the middle of writing. It's one or the other. I'm sure of that. Would you like some more tea?"

I saw the sign as I was leaving what they call the day room — that's where all the real crazies spend all their time. I was on my way back to bed. The drugs they gave me made me terribly sleepy. The sign said: YOU ARE ENTITLED TO LEGAL COUNSEL. IF YOU WISH TO SEE A LAWYER BUT CANNOT AFFORD ONE, A LEGAL-AID REPRESENTATIVE IS AVAILABLE ON AN ON-CALL BASIS. PLEASE SEE A STAFF MEMBER FOR DETAILS.

Holy Christ! I never thought of that. I went to find Bob.

"What do you want to see a lawyer for?" he asked.

"I want to get out of here. I don't belong here, Bob. I'm not crazy. I want to go home to my family."

"You don't need a lawyer for that," he said.

"I don't?"
"No. They can't keep you here against your will. They'd have to prove that you're a threat to either yourself or someone else. From what I can see, you're not the violent type. And you're not suicidal, are you?"

"So how do I get out of here?"

"Just go over to the nurses' station and tell them you want to check out."

"Just sign this paper, Mr. Robbins. It says that we've advised you that you require further treatment, and that you are leaving the hospital against medical advice."

She pushes the paper across the desk. I glanced over the faded, photocopied type. I stared for a moment at the space for the signature. "What the hell," I thought to myself. "Give them something to think about later on." I'm not really sure why I did it, but it made me wonder a bit about the night I talked to God and whether She had gotten things the right way around or not.

Wendy was there, with Paul and Debbie, waiting to take me home. I didn’t mention it to them, and I never told anyone else, but the name I signed at the bottom of that piece of paper in the psycho hospital was W.P. Kinsella.
As usual, I was sitting in the corner with a book. The burger and fries I'd ordered just a few minutes before were already settling into a knot of sludge in the pit of my stomach, and I still had fifteen minutes with which to indulge in my daily escape. Reading had become more important to me than ever. It had become a shield. And it was a lifeline, keeping me connected to the world I'd left behind.

I kept telling myself that I was only there for a year. Two at the most. I planned to work until I had enough money in the bank to do something else — maybe go back to school, maybe travel. There was no way I was going to be stuck working in an auto plant for thirty years, no matter what my dad thought. I kept myself distant, detached from the other guys in the plant. There might have been others there like me, but I didn't seek out their company. I knew that I had to keep to myself if I was going to be able to escape.

"Hey, Perfesser."

I knew right away that he was talking to me. I was aware of the nick-names the guys in the department had for each other, especially the scatological ones for the foremen, but I hadn't been sure until that minute what they would call me. I looked up and into the face of the last person in the whole plant I'd want to have a conversation with. I took in Zeke Fontaine's looming frame, the scraggle of beard only half hiding the scars on his cheek, the black t-shirt with a cigarette package rolled up in one sleeve, the bulging biceps, the tattoos scattered from the tops of his arms to the backs of his hands. I was too numb with fear to answer him. I just looked up blankly, pretending that I didn't know it was me that he wanted.

He looked at me as if I looked as stupid as I was trying to act.
"Yeah, you... Anybody in there?"

"Huh?"

"You play euchre?"

"Huh?"

"Euchre. Y'know — card game?" He tilted his head toward a table by the door, where two other men were watching our exchange. They played cards together at every break, but there was usually another guy — a big dumb-looking guy from the piston house. "We need somebody to make up four. You wanna play?"

I didn’t know what to say, but I felt like it probably wasn’t in my best interest to refuse his invitation.

"Okay... sure."

"You know how?"

"Yeah. No problem." I hadn’t played euchre since grade school, but I was confident that it would come back to me.

Zeke introduced me to the other two guys. I already knew Marteau Clou. He worked on the machine next to mine. He was a hard-wire little guy from Belle River — probably the only francophone in the plant who wasn’t known as Frenchy. No one who made the mistake of calling him that ever made it again. I’d had a few short conversations with him, but could make sense out of only about half of what he said. His speech seemed always to be punctuated with everything from fits of menacing snickers to gales of hysterical laughter. His sense of humour, whatever it was, didn’t seem to translate very well, and the wild look in his eyes made me suspect that he was wasn’t necessarily playing with a full string of lights. I got to be his partner in the euchre game.

The other card player was Gilbert Jones, a big black man, who stood at least six foot six and must have weighed close to three hundred pounds. I’d seen him around the department, but I wasn’t really sure what his job was. He never seemed to be doing any work.
The game of euchre came back to me almost as quickly as I had hoped it would, and by the end of the lunch break, Marteau and I had taken almost every hand.

"Shit, Perfesser," Zeke said as we got up from the table. "You're pretty good. Next break you can be my partner."

"Next break?"

"Yeah. We'll play again at ten o'clock break."

"Oh... I thought you just needed somebody to play this one time. What happened to the other guy you used to play with?"

"Reggie? He's in jail."

"Oh."

Making friends with any of the lifers was not something I relished, least of all with Zeke and his pals. Lifers were the ones, no matter how old or how young, who would never do anything else but work in an auto plant. Most of them had married young and started families that they had no other way of supporting. What I hadn't realized until I knew Zeke was that there were two kinds of lifers.

The usual guys were the hard working ones, trying to hang on to some kind of self-respect and striving toward some lower-middle-class dream. They were the guys who were always looking to work extra overtime. Some of them had been born and brought up in the same slummy neighborhood as Zeke, sons of immigrants and exiles, living near the plants because it was the only part of town that would have them. Their parents had wanted something better for their kids, and they were trying to earn it, trying to pull themselves away from the hole and make something even better for their own kids.

Zeke was different. He'd spent his early adulthood in the merchant marine, and he'd never expected to know anything better than what he'd grown up with all his life. He counted himself lucky to end up working shifts instead of doing time or lying in a morgue. He was a lifer, alright, but he never worked any overtime. Most weeks he missed one or
two days of pay. It really didn’t matter to him how much he earned — it was always gone before the end of the week. He wasn’t striving toward anything, except survival. He introduced me to a world I didn’t know existed, although I worked in it every day.

It bothered me a little that I didn’t mind giving up reading during breaks as much as I thought I should. I was beginning to enjoy the card games, the cursing and swearing, slapping a trump card down in triumph and arousing the good-natured wrath of men that, until recently, had scared me to death.

I guess part of the reason I’d always avoided guys like Zeke and his friends was that the differences between us were so obvious to me. I always figured that they would resent a guy like me. I had graduated from high-school. I lived with my parents in the suburbs. It never occurred to me that they might like me.

By the end of the week, I’d proved myself as a euchre player and had earned an invitation to go out with the boys after our shift — to the Legion hall for a couple of beers. I wasn’t sure that I wanted to be all that well accepted. I was still a little bit scared. But, at the same time, I was fascinated. I figured I couldn’t get into much trouble in the forty-five minutes between the end of the shift at midnight and last-call at the Legion.

I couldn’t believe how much beer three men could drink in less than an hour. I noticed that Gilbert hardly drank any more than I did. But Zeke and Marteau were both hammered by the time the anthems were played at closing-time. I had to laugh to myself at the sight of Marteau, barely able to stand, trying to keep to attention for “God Save the Queen.”

I remember driving home that night, realizing how much the few beers I’d had myself had gone to my head. It was then that I figured out what it was that Marteau had been babbling to me about back in the bar. I hadn’t been able to hear him over the noise from the jukebox. He’s said something about “empar” and about how “de lawyer do me off, cost me four hundred each time.” Suddenly, I understood what “empar” meant. I had thought it
was something in French, but I realized that he had been telling me about being charged with impaired driving.

At the end of the next week, we rotated shifts and we were on midnights for two weeks. That meant there’d be no going to the Legion after work. After a midnight shift, most guys just wanted to get home to bed. Not Zeke, though. The first night of the new shift, he told me that he and the other guys were going over to his house after work for a couple of cold ones. I said I would go too. I was starting to feel like I was a part of something, and I didn’t want to be left out. As it turned out, though, Gilbert and Marteau both begged off, and I was the only one who went with Zeke to his place that morning.

Zeke’s house was only two blocks from the factory gate. By ten after eight, we were standing on his back porch, Zeke pounding on his own back door.

“Jessie!” he shouted as he banged his fist and shook the door handle. “C’mon. Open the door. It’s after eight o’clock. Open up.” He turned to me with an almost embarrassed, apologetic look.

“Don’t you have a key?”

“Yeah. But she deadbolts it when I ain’t here.”

“Scared of burglars?”

“Nah — rapists. I keep tellin’ her she don’t have to worry about anybody rapin’ her but me. Jessie! Tell yer boyfriend its time to get his pants on and go home. C’mon, Jess. I got a friend out here with me. We need a couple-a beers.”

A sleepy and annoyed-looking woman’s face appeared at the door.

“Hold yer horses, Zeke. Don’t bust it down.”

I have often tried in vain to recapture the feelings that struck me when she opened the door that morning and I saw Jessie for the first time. It was the most incredible mixture of lust and awe and envy and pity and admiration. It was love at first sight. Her hair tangled and matted, make-up smeared across her cheekbones, her obviously pregnant belly
straining the front of her grungy terry-cloth bathrobe, she was the most beautiful, the sexiest, most desirable woman I’d ever laid eyes on.

I felt just a little uneasy, as if, had I not been there Zeke and Jessie would have had a fight just then about him being locked out or breakfast not being ready, or something. But then again, maybe they would have gone straight up to the bedroom. Zeke introduced me to her and, as we sat down at the little formica-topped kitchen table, he asked Jessie to get us each a beer.

“There’s only two left,” she told him.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“I bought a full case yesterday.”

“Yeah, and you and your brother sat here all afternoon and drank most of ’em.”

“Well there were more than two left when I went to work last night.”

“Yes, but your brother was still here when you left.”

“Danny only left me two beers? I’ll kill the son-of-a-bitch, next time I see him.

Jessie went to the fridge and got out the two beers, opened them on a bottle opener attached to the kitchen counter and handed us each one.

“I’m goin’ to take a shower and get dressed,” she said. “I’ll be down in about twenty minutes. If you want breakfast, there’s Cheerios in the cupboard.”

While we drank our beer, Zeke told me about the neighborhood he lived in — the one he’d grown up in, and I carefully avoided telling him anything of my own bland and distinctly middle-class background. He’d grown up just around the corner. His father and step-mother still lived nearby. His dad had been a scrap-metal dealer, but lost the business because he drank too much and couldn’t keep the books straight. Never made any money at it anyway.
When I heard the sound of the shower running in the bathroom upstairs, I became almost totally distracted. All I could think about was that Jessie was standing naked in a hot steamy room just a few feet above me. Thinking about her made my insides feel like they were melted butter and made me acutely conscious of the sorry state I looked after an eight hour shift. My jeans and work shirt were caked with factory grime, my face was dirty, my hair was greasy, my big steel-toed boots made me feel old and clumsy. I just wanted to leave before Jessie came downstairs. The shower stopped running, and for an instant I thought Zeke had been reading my thoughts.

“Pretty shitty, huh?”

“Huh?”

Zeke nodded his head toward the ceiling, and I realized that he thought I’d been staring at the cracks in the sagging, yellowed plaster.

“How come you don’t fix it up?”

“Ain’t my responsibility. It’s the landlord’s. He ain’t gonna fix it.”

“Why don’t you move?”

“Can’t.”

“How come?”

“How would I get to work?”

“You could get a car. I only paid five-hundred for mine. It’s nothing special, but it gets me to work and back.”

“I can’t drive.”

“Huh?”

“Lost my licence.”

“Oh.”

“Two girls, sixteen an’ seventeen, walkin’ down the sidewalk. Lost control of the car. They both bought it. It was the shitty steering on my dad’s old car, but they charged me with criminal negligence. Lost my licence for life.”
In the silence that filled the room, I became aware of the bumping and thumping sounds in the room above us. Jessie was drying herself off.

"C'mon, Perfessor, let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"To get some beer. You got any money?"

"Yeah. I got about twenty bucks."

"Good." He went to the bottom of the stairs and called up to Jessie. "We’re goin’ out for a while. Don’t worry about breakfast. We took care of ourselves."

"Zeke?" She came down wrapped in a big bath towel that barely went around her swollen middle, and did nothing at all to conceal her desirability. "Where the hell d’you think you’re going?"

"Just out."

"Just out, huh? You’re goin’ to the bootleggers."

"So?"

"Don’t come cryin’ to me to bail you out if Chan gets raided again."

"He ain’t gonna get raided again."

Zeke opened the door and waved me out. I’d heard talk about the bootleggers that did business near the factories, but I’d never thought I’d be going to one. The idea was a little bit scary to me, but mostly it was exciting. I asked Zeke what Jessie had been talking about when she’d said something about it being raided.

"Chan got busted a couple of weeks ago. There was a guy workin’ on the telephone line out behind his house. Remember that Sunday a couple weeks ago, when it was really hot, somethin’ like a hunnerd degrees?"

"Uh-huh."

"Chan does a lot of business on Sundays, ’cause the bars an’ the liquor stores is closed."

"Uh-huh."
“So anyways, this guy’s out on the pole for a couple hours. When he comes down, he tells Chan how hot an’ thirsty he is. So Chan sells him a beer.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Turns out the guy’s an undercover cop. Next day they raid the place. Busted everybody an’ took all the booze away.”

“Bad deal for Chan, huh? He should’ve just given the guy a beer.”

“The joke was on the cops though.”

“Yeah?”

“They got the address wrong on the search warrant.”

“Huh?”

“See, Chan’s place is a legal duplex. He lives on one side, with his mother — she’s about ninety years old, don’t speak no English — an’ he runs the bootleggers outta the other side. The house is in his mother’s name, an’ he pays her rent for the one side.”

“Uh-huh”

“So the cops got his mother’s house number on the warrant instead of his. He don’t have one up or anything, but legally, the bootleggin’ side of the house is a separate address.”

“So?”

“So legally, they were only supposed to search her side of the house. They didn’t have a warrant to search the side where all the booze an’ stuff is.”

“So what happened?”

“Chan’s lawyer got all the charges dropped, and the cops had to give him back all his stuff. It was so fuckin’ funny, man. You shoulda seen all the people out on the street clappin’ and cheerin’ when the cops brung back all his cases of beer an’ liquor an’ stuff.”

Chan’s place wasn’t all that far from Zeke’s. Chan was an unpleasant, scowling little man, and his kitchen was even more depressing and drab than Zeke’s. There were two men already sitting at the table drinking beer. One of them had a shot-glass of whiskey in front
of him, too. Zeke knew them both — he nodded in recognition to each of them but didn’t introduce me. Chan brought us both a bottle of beer and we sat down at the table. Because I had the money, I took out my wallet to try to pay Chan for the beer, but he was already out of the room. I laid my twenty-dollar bill down on the table, the way I would in a bar, if I was waiting for the waitress to return so I could pay her. I couldn’t help noticing that the man with the shot of whiskey was visibly trembling and could barely get his beer bottle to his lips without spilling it. From the bits of their conversation that I overheard, it was apparent that they’d been drinking all night long.

I didn’t notice Chan coming back through the beaded curtain until he was standing over me screaming in Chinese.

“What the—?”

He grabbed the twenty-dollar bill off the grey plastic table-cloth and waved it in front of me.

“You try get me in trouble again?”

“Huh?”

“You no leave money on table! I get in trouble with cops. You drink beer, okay. Then you pay. This not a hotel, okay.”

“Okay, okay. Take it easy.”

“Yeah, you take easy too, fuckin’ right.” He stalked through the beaded curtain again, scowling more than ever, muttering Chinese curses.

“Chan’s a sweetheart, ain’t he?” Zeke smirked as he raised his bottle and took a long swig.

We’d only been sitting there a few minutes when another man came in. He was tall and burly and had a grotesque scar running down the side of his neck from his earlobe. He greeted Zeke by name and went to Chan’s fridge to help himself to a beer.

“Still workin’ in the plant, Zeke?”

“Yeah. You, Tommy?”
“Just started workin’ construction up in Sarnia. Know anybody lookin’ for a job? They just fired the whole afternoon shift.”

“The whole shift?”

“Yeah — one of their cranes disappeared last Thursday night.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh... They fired the wrong shift though.”

“How’s that.”

“Somebody on the day shift got the crane.”

“Hah.”

“Know anybody who wants to buy a crane? Worth a hundred grand. I’d take fifteen.”

Zeke just laughed an shook his head, then took another long swallow of beer. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“How the hell do you steal a crane?” I asked.

Tommy looked at me for the first time.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m a friend of Zeke’s... From work.” He looked over to Zeke, who nodded his head almost imperceptibly as he took a small sip of beer.

“In that case, kid, let me tell you. Stealin’ a crane is easier than you’d think. It’s hidin’ it ’til you find a buyer that’s hard.”

“Are there a lot of people who’d be willing to buy a stolen crane?”

“You’d be surprised.” He took a swig of beer and sighed. “I’ve got a contractor in Michigan that’s interested. But I’d have to get it across the border. I could sell it in Toronto or Montreal, easy, but I ain’t about to drive it down the 401.”

It was easy to start spending my mornings after work with Zeke. I didn’t have anywhere better to go. He always wanted someone to have a beer with. And I was always drawn by the prospect of seeing Jessie again after an almost endless midnight shift. I didn’t really
understand what attracted me to her. She was different, that's all. Most of the women I'd contemplated were either pictures in magazines, all their parts air-brushed to perfection, or they were the girls I'd known in high school, who'd spent half their days applying make-up and pimple creams, and making sure their clothes fit them as perfectly they did the mannequins in the stores where they bought them. Jessie was different. She was sexy even without all that. And I was entranced.

Except for one time, I don't think Zeke ever noticed the way I looked at his wife. We were on the porch. Gilbert Jones might have been there too — I don't remember for sure. What I do remember, though, is the way Zeke looked up at me suddenly from his beer and caught me staring at Jessie. I looked away, but he had seen me, and he knew what I was thinking. He just looked me straight in the eyes, and I didn't dare look away. Jessie stepped back into the house to get more beer.

"Perfessor," he said. "You know how I can stand all this?"

"All what?"

"Workin' my balls off all night long, puttin' up with all the bullshit they pile on us. How I can pour half my life into that grease pit and the other half into this rats' nest, knowing I'm never goin' to have anything but a shitty life in a shitty town, and prob'ly my kid never will neither. You know how I can stand it?"

I'd always figured that Zeke's salvation was in a nice cold bottle of beer, and I said something to that effect, trying to lighten him up a bit.

"That's bullshit! I like my beer, but beer don't make my life worth livin'."

I looked down at my feet.

"What does, Zeke?"

"Her." I looked up. Zeke nodded his head towards the kitchen door. We could both hear Jessie's footsteps as she approached the other side of the screen door. "I've put everything I am into that woman. She's my whole life."
Gilbert Jones taught me a trick. He came to my machine during an afternoon shift with a screwdriver in his hand. Gilbert was the department's utility man. He'd worked on every machine at one time or another, but mostly he didn't do any work. His ability to make himself scarce was the result of many years devoted to the perfection of the art. He was able to take great advantage of his position as the only dark-skinned employee in the department. Zeke said none of the foremen dared to say anything to him because they knew they'd have a grievance filed against them for racial discrimination.

He watched me as I hustled to beat the machine. I was annoyed at the distraction. I was trying to make production early, which wasn't that easy on my machine. As soon as it started a cycle, I'd unclamp the two finished rods, grab them and hang them on the line. Then I'd grab two more from the conveyor and slap them into place. I'd get them clamped and have my hands on the buttons by the time the cycle was through. Allowing for breaks and a couple of inspections every hour, I'd have production in six hours or less, if I didn't break any tools. A broken cutter or drill was a drag, because it didn't count as down time, but it set you back if you were trying to make production.

Gilbert looked around to make sure no-one was looking, then he took the screwdriver and pushed it up through a small hole in the bottom of my machine's control panel. There was a loud clunk and everything came to a complete stop. Gilbert grinned.

"This baby'll be down for at least a hour. Better call Shitface Sam. You gonna need an electrician."

"What'd you do?"

"I dunno. Friend of mine's a electrician on midnights. Showed me how to do that when I worked on this machine. Said 'if you ever need a break, just stick a screwdriver up in there.' Can't hurt nothin'. Just stops it dead 'til they get a electrician to reset the panel."

I called for Sam, the shift foreman, who was not too pleased to see my machine down. It was the last stage of production for connecting rods before the caps were put on them.
and they were graded and checked and shipped to the motor line. Sam was always on the
verge of a heart attack about something.

“What the fuck did you do?”

“I didn’t do nothin’. It just stopped.”

“Did you press the reset?”

“Uh-huh.”

Sam pressed every button and every combination of buttons on the control panel at least
twice before giving up in disgust. I could see the panic in his eyes when he realized that he
was going to have to wait for an electrician. The company electricians worked on their own
time. They were all young guys who’d gotten their journeyman’s papers by apprenticing
with the company, but they all knew they could leave any time and take a job with the
hydro company that paid just as well, maybe better than what they were getting.

Sam kept muttering at me like it was my fault the machine was down. I shrugged my
shoulders. That was between Sam and his general foreman and the plant manager and the
electricians. I was just an hourly. I just did what I was told. The whistle sounded for the
dinner break. I headed off to the canteen.

Gilbert had his reasons for showing me that little trick. After the break, when everyone
else had gone back to their machines, we stayed behind. Gilbert took a straw from the box
beside the pop machine and led me out the back door of the canteen to the area where the
skids of unfinished rods and cams and crankshafts from the foundry were stored, waiting
to be machined into working automobile parts. We stepped behind two rows of skids
stacked to the ceiling. Gilbert pulled a tiny plastic bag out of his shirt pocket. In one corner
of the bag was a small amount of white powder.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Coke. Ain’t you never done coke before?”

I shook my head.

“Then you’re in for a treat, boy.”
It was the first of only two times I ever tried cocaine. The next time was a few week’s later, at Zeke’s stag party. I had just assumed that Zeke and Jessie were married. He’d told me she was due in a month and a half. One Friday night, about half an hour before the end of the shift, Gilbert and Marteau came over to tell me I was invited over to Gilbert’s place after work. They were giving Zeke a stag. He and Jessie were going down to city hall the next day to get married.

The stag was a six-hour blow-out of drug and alcohol consumption, accompanied by pornographic eight millimeter films. To this day I’m not sure if it was the cheap whiskey or the close-ups of so many genitals that made me nauseous. I tried in vain to calm my stomach by sucking steadily on the stem of a water pipe that Gilbert kept filled and stoked all night long.

It was at the stag party that Zeke told us he’d transferred out of the department. Starting the following Monday, he was going to work on the motor line.

“Why de fuck you gonna do dat?” Marteau asked him. We all knew that production department jobs were the envy of every poor sucker that was stuck on the motor line. On the line, you worked non-stop from bell to bell, and you didn’t get paid through your lunch break, so the shift was half an hour longer.

“It’s the only way I can get any time off.”

“Huh?”

“Jessie want’s us to go on a honeymoon. They won’t give me any time off, ’cause I’ve called in sick too many times. The motor line shuts down for retooling in August, so I bid on a job on the motor line. I’ll get two weeks off.”

“You’re nuts.” I said.

We must have all been looking at him like he’d lost all his marbles. He just shrugged his shoulders.

“I can always bid back into the department after I have my vacation. Maybe I’ll bid on a job in the Piston House.” The Piston House was air-conditioned, and it was a production
department, like ours, so it was the place we all wanted to be. But you had to have years of
seniority to get into the Piston House. Zeke wasn’t fooling anybody. He was doing
something stupid and he knew it. Everybody wanted more time off, but we all knew that it
wasn’t worth taking a job on the motor line to get it.

I didn’t see Zeke much after the stag. It wasn’t very often that we were on the same
shift, since the motor line only worked days and afternoons, and our department worked
three shifts. I never did get back the fifty dollars I lent him. About three weeks after his
transfer, he showed up in the department to pass out cigars. Jessie had delivered a baby
boy. I can’t remember what they named it. Zeke was as proud as any new father has ever
been. I had that cigar for years after. I never smoked tobacco.

Maybe he did bid back into the department after that August, but I wouldn’t have known
about it if he did.

I only used the trick Gilbert showed me one time. It was early in September. I was tired
and bored. I’d brought a screwdriver to work and left it in my locker, just in case. I had to
be careful if I was going to put my machine out of commission for a couple of hours. The
foreman could send me to work on another machine, if he was short-handed, and if it
looked like my machine was going to be down for the rest of the shift, he could always
lend me out to another department. Usually, though, I got sent to the repair station. It was
easy work, going through rods that had failed quality control and testing them, honing
them, replacing missing bolts, tightening nuts, marking the really bad ones to be sent back
to the foundry. There was no production quota, so I could set my own pace. It was one of
those jobs that the foreman gave you just to make sure you looked busy when the general
foreman or the plant manager came around. The nicest thing about it was that I could sit
down, instead of standing on a little iron platform for eight hours straight.
It was early on in a real quiet midnight shift, and Gilbert had already told me that there was nobody missing, so I wouldn’t get sent to another machine. He said there were a couple of bins full of rods down in repairs. I figured I should take a chance. The screwdriver stopped my machine dead in the middle of the cycle, just like it had for Gilbert. I waited ten minutes, then I called the foreman. He tried to reset the panel, did his usual cursing and swearing, then, just as I expected, sent me down to the other end of the department to work on repairs.

At break time, I got to really take advantage of having my machine down. We were supposed to have two ten minute breaks and a twenty minute lunch break every shift. If my machine was down, or if Marteau’s was down and I didn’t have any stock for mine, I could stretch each break by a good fifteen or twenty minutes. I didn’t want to get caught sitting around the canteen, so at the end of the break, I walked back towards the repair depot, but instead of going back to work, I kept walking past the first aid station and the union steward’s office, out into the little fenced in yard where they stored old machinery waiting to be refurbished or sold for scrap. If the foreman came looking for me while I was gone, I could always tell him I had to go take a leak. Chances were good, though, that he’d be busy enough keeping the department running and trying get an electrician to fix my machine, that he wouldn’t think twice about where I was or what I was doing.

I liked going out into that little yard whenever I could get a few minutes during a midnight shift. There weren’t any floodlights on that side of the plant, like there were in the parking lot, and I liked to just lean up against one of those old machines and stare up at the sky. While all the presses pounded and the grinders screeched inside the plant, I’d stand out there staring at the stars and let myself think about something else besides how many cycles I had on my counter and whether or not I should check a couple rods on the tester to make sure the cutter wasn’t going too deep.

That night, though, I had something better to do than look for shooting stars. I’d scored a couple dimes of hash just before work that day, and I hadn’t had a chance to try it out yet.
When I was sure that nobody had seen me come outside, I ducked behind one of the rusty old megaliths of sheet metal and iron, and I rolled myself a big spliff. When I walked back inside, twenty minutes later, I felt good, like it was going to be summertime forever. And it was beginning to look like the shift was going to go by fast.

I was having fun, playing with the Locktite we were supposed to use when we replaced a missing nut or a bolt. It was translucent red, and it reminded me vaguely of that stuff that comes in all different colours, in little white tubes, that you can use to write “happy birthday” or something on top of a cake. I was stoned enough that I would have been tempted to taste it, if I hadn’t read the warning on the label about all the dire consequences of ingesting the stuff or getting it in your eyes.

I don’t know how long the foreman was standing there staring at me, while I tastefully decorated the opening of a bolt hole on a rejected rod, but when he shouted, I literally jumped off my stool.

“What the fuck d’you think you’re doin’?”

“Huh?”

“You’re supposed to be repairin’ those, not makin’ sculptures out of ’em.”

“Uh… I was just tryin’ t’make sure I got enough on it.”

“Sure. You were fuckin’ the dog is what you were doin’. Well, you can go see if you can get away with fuckin’ the dog over in Crankshafts.”

“Huh?”

“The electrician buggered your machine up good. It’ll be down the rest of the shift. Go see the foreman in Crankshafts. He’s shorthanded, and they’re even further behind in production over there than we are.”

I’d worked in Crankshafts for two weeks, before I’d bid into Connecting Rods. I hated cranks. They were heavy and awkward, and the machines were all old and temperamental.
The controls and guards had all been retrofit to meet up-to-date safety standards, and it was always hard to get the parts in and out of the machines.

They put me on the Number Three grinder, the one that polished the cranks and drilled out the oil holes. It was a bitch to operate, because you were supposed to check all eight cranks on every piece to make sure the holes were all there. If they weren’t, it meant that there was a drill bit broken off inside the machine, and you had to get the foreman or the utility man to change it. In rods, you could get away with putting parts on the line that weren’t a hundred percent. They’d be caught in the tester, and if not, so what? But in cranks they expected you to check every piece. That was a drag, because you could never get ahead. The line behind you was always full, so you never got to stop for even a minute.

I’d probably done a hundred cranks or so, and I was trying to get a rhythm going, but it was hard, because I wasn’t used to it, and sometimes I would pick a crank up with my hoist and have it all ready to put in the machine, then the cycle would finish and I’d realize that I needed the hoist to get the finished part out before I could put another one in. If I had known I was going to have to work in cranks, I wouldn’t have smoked the hash.

I guess I just wasn’t thinking at all. I sure wasn’t paying any attention to what I was doing, I know that. I must have just put the crank into the machine, holding the hoist in my left hand and the controls in my right, ready to take it out again. I saw it sitting there, and as I lowered the hoist onto the crank, I wasn’t sure if the cycle was just starting or just finishing. As I pushed the clamps of the hoist against the crank and started to raise it up, I realized my mistake, but it was too late. I swear, everything happened in slow motion. I saw what was going on, watched the machine’s heavy iron clamp close against my hand, but I had no time to react and pull it out of the way.

The first sensation was the strangest. I felt nothing at all, not even what you’d call numbness. Then there was a little bit of tingling — then incredible heat shooting up the length of my arm — then the searing pain. Instinctively, my arm pulled away, and as I
drew it toward me, I knew that part of my hand was still in the machine. I grabbed at it even before the blood started gushing out, and I screamed.

I screamed so loud and long, I thought my lungs were going to heave themselves up out of my chest, but nobody heard me above the droning and humping and squealing of the factory. I started running. I ran down off the platform beside the machine and started careening through the department. I nearly knocked over a guy with a broom pushing a pile of iron filings into one of the grates in the floor.

“Hey! What the fuck?” He yelled after me, but I kept running.

The general foreman was coming out of the office as I ran by. When he saw me holding my hand, still screaming, his face turned white for just a split second. Then he grabbed me by the shoulders, and started pushing me in the other direction.

“First Aid!” he shouted. “Stay calm ’til you get to First Aid.”

He grabbed the handle of the door at the first aid station, threw it open and guided me inside, all in one motion. I had stopped screaming for a second, but the pain was unbearable and I started again as soon as the nurse sat me down. While they rushed back and forth with gauze and ice packs, holding my bloody and mutilated hand, I fought the impulses to throw up and to faint that were welling up inside me. My screams turned to sobs, though the pain seemed only to increase by the minute. There was nothing I could do. This was really happening.

It had been six years since I last walked out the plant gate, and it had been almost that long since I’d even thought about Zeke or Gilbert or Marteau. When I quit my job there, it was like they all ceased to exist. The money I got from Workmen’s Compensation wasn’t as much as I would have expected to get for losing three fingers, but when I put it together with what I’d already saved, I decided there wasn’t much point in keeping on. My parents
begged me to quit, and though the company assured me that I could bid on just about any job on the plant floor and it would be mine for life, I knew that I really didn't want to go back to work. I had made all sorts of vague plans about travelling around the world, but in the end, I didn't do all that much travelling.

When September rolled around again, almost a year after the accident, I enrolled in the Journalism program at the university. After graduation, I had worked for a year and a half at a couple of the small-town papers out in the county. I had started my first job at the city daily a couple of months before.

I was supposed to be a junior copy editor, but most of my time was spent writing heads and decks. Sometimes I got to cover a meeting of the county council or the local school board, but I had already concluded that I would never be a hard news reporter. I didn't have it in me. I couldn't walk up somebody's sidewalk, knock on their door and ask them for a picture of the son or husband who'd just been killed in a car crash. I couldn't stomach it, and that was the kind of thing all the younger reporters got stuck with.

I really didn't mind writing heads. Most of the guys I worked with thought that every minute they spent writing headlines was somehow keeping them from their destiny of a long, illustrious career as a prize-winning investigative reporter. I knew better. I'd had those dreams, too, but there was always something a little bit cold and painful to wake me up from them — like the pain that visited the place where my fingers used to be whenever the weather turned cold. I didn't want anything special. I just wanted never to have to work in a factory again.

Writing a good headline was a challenge. Most of the guys just tried to get the gist of the story as quickly as they could and slap something in that fit the space. I liked to read as much of the story as I could and write something in just a few words that would tell people what the story said. I took a little more time doing it, but I knew that I was never going to get called on the carpet for writing a misleading headline.
It was a story about a gruesome murder that had occurred late the night before on the east side of the city. I was trying to be extra careful, because it was my first chance to write a headline for the front page. The story hadn’t even been in the early edition. We were bumping something to make room for it. It was one of those horribly sad domestic murders. The woman had been shot twice with a shotgun in her own apartment. Her two children had been left unharmed, roaming the apartment, apparently unaware that their mother was dead. No sign of forced entry. Police said the perpetrator was probably known to the victim. The kids were being cared for by the Children’s Aid Society until her estranged husband could be located.

I was skimming over the lead paragraph the second time, when it started to sink in. The dead woman’s name was Jessica Fontaine.

It wasn’t just that she was somebody I had known once, very briefly, years before. There was something else bothering me, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. When the Final was on the presses, I headed out to the parking lot. I didn’t feel like going home. I sat in my car for a long time, my hand on the key in the ignition, staring at the windscreen as it fogged up with warmth and moisture of my breathing. I remembered the woman I’d met perhaps a half dozen times, always early in the morning. I remembered how beautiful I thought she was, and how I envied Zeke. I thought about those early mornings of drinking beer in Zeke’s kitchen, or on his back porch, watching the rest of the world come to life and start a new day when we were just finishing ours.

It hit me like a freight train. Suddenly I remembered what else Zeke had said that morning he caught me staring at Jessie. She’d heard everything Zeke had said about her being the reason his life was worth living, and he knew that she’d heard him. He was mad at me, but he seemed to be mad at her, too. His back was to her, but he knew that she was standing just inside the screen door, and he raised his voice just a little bit louder to make sure she didn’t miss what he had to say.
“You know what I’d do if she ever left me?”

“What would you do?” Jessie taunted him from the safety of the kitchen. She couldn’t see the look on his face. I knew that he was in no mood to be playful.

“If she ever ran out on me, I’d kill her. I’d get myself a gun and blow her head off.” He looked at me and lowered his voice again. “And she knows it, too.”

I pulled my key out of the ignition and got out of the car. I walked back towards the newspaper building. The first trucks were just starting to head out from the loading bays. One of the circulation boys was just putting copies of the Final into the coin-box in the lobby. I stopped long enough to look at the by-line on the murder story.

The newsroom was virtually empty. One junior reporter earnestly typing something and a couple of editors doing a post-mortem on the just-finished edition. They told me the reporter I was looking for was gone for the day, but they said I’d probably find him at the bar in the Press Club.

I wasn’t part of the Press Club crowd, but I saw a few familiar faces when I walked in. I had someone point him out to me. He was standing alone at the bar, so I walked up and introduced myself.

“It’s interesting,” he said, when I’d told him my suspicions, “but the husband didn’t do it. It was her boyfriend. The one she left the husband for.”

“Her boyfriend?”

“Yeah, he’s already in custody. They just haven’t filed the charges yet. It’s a cut and dried story, really. They were both so drunk they probably didn’t know what they were doing. The cops said her blood-alcohol was off the meter. The coroner said if she hadn’t had her head blown off, the alcohol might have been enough to poison her. The boyfriend says they’d split a bottle of vodka and had more than fifteen beers each. They were working on their second case. He doesn’t deny the shooting. He says it was an accident —
they were playing around and the gun went off. They’re charging him with second degree, though. It’ll probably come down to a plea-bargain in the end.”

“What about her husband? Where was he?”

“Oh, he’s got an alibi, alright. He’s on an offshore oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. They finally got through to him today. He’s flying back to get his kids. You say he’s a friend of yours?”

“No. Not really a friend, anymore. I knew him years ago.”

I wheeled my car out of the lot and into traffic. I drove through the city in a daze. When I got to my exit, I didn’t turn. In a few minutes, I was out in the countryside in the twilight. The early thaw had left huge pools of water in the flat fields I drove past. My head was pounding. I drove and drove, away from the city. I didn’t know where I was going, I just knew that I didn’t feel like going home yet.
VITA AUCTORIS

Daniel Sullivan was born in 1958 in Detroit, Michigan. He attended Vincent Massey Secondary School in Windsor (1971-74) and Peers School in Oxford, England (1974-75). He was a student at the University of Windsor at various times from 1975 to 1979 and again beginning in 1991. He obtained a B.A. (Hons.) in English Literature and Creative Writing in 1993 and is currently a candidate for the Master's degree in English Literature and Creative Writing.