



FREE Willie

A baker's dozen of brutally beautiful
stories by the most fascinating
raconteur you've never heard of.

by William F.X. O'Connell

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Anastasia in the light and shadow.

The very first thing she said to me was, “I’m Anastasia.”

She had pronounced the name ‘Anna-stay-juh’ but I took care to be more formal. I nodded gravely and said, “‘Ah-nah-STAH-ziuh’. I’m honored.”

She giggled delightedly. “Why’d you say it that way?”

“To lilt, to laugh, to dance, to dream. To fly, to sigh, to sing, to speak. To embroider the air, to perfect it with the perfect sound: ‘Ah-nah-STAH-ziuh’.”

She giggled again and that was answer enough.

She was four-and-a-half on the day we met. Not awfully, terribly short, but at no risk of scraping her head on anything. She had a round little face that had borrowed too much mischief to be cherubic but was angelic nevertheless. Her hair was brown and it was almost always almost everywhere; it was obviously brushed and tied and obviously instantly disarrayed by her mischievous wanderings. She was a beautiful child, beautiful inside and out, but her eyes were the crowning glory of her nobility. They were bluer than blue, deep and dark and purple, as purple as the crest of a dynasty. They were clearer than any gemstone, and they seemed not to reap the light but to sow it. For all the days I knew her, I could never see enough of those purple gemstone eyes.

“What’re you doing there?” she asked. I was sitting in the shade of a little olive grove reading a book. She was standing on something behind the block wall of the property next door, just her head and shoulders above the wall.

“House-sitting. You know what that means?” She shook her head and her hair flew into a more advanced state of disarray. “It’s like baby-sitting only easier.”

“Why’re you doing it?”

I shrugged. “The official answer is, I’m helping out a friend. The unofficial answer is, TV, refrigerator, hot and cold running everything. Does that make any sense to you?”

It might have or it might not, but we’ll never know, because she changed the subject. “I

have a kitten. His name is 'Sputin.'

I said, "*Rasputin*. Somebody likes Russian names. Say it: 'Ra-spyoo-tin'."

"Why?"

"Just say it. 'Ra-spyoo-tin'."

She said, "'Ra-spyoo-tin'." Her voice was high and sweet. And breathless of course. Her speech was good, but she had a tendency to thrust her words soundly through her upper lip. The tongue is a fearsome sword, but it takes time to master.

I said, "Children must learn to enunciate. Can you say that word? 'Ih-nun-cee-ate'."

She said, "'Ih-nun-sate'."

"'Ih-nun-cee-ate'."

"'Ih-nun-cee-ate'."

"That's it. Say it again."

"'Ih-nun-cee-ate'."

"Bravo! Well done. First you crawl, then you walk, then you run. If you work at it, you can master anything."

"Why?"

'Why?' is a dangerous question from a four-year-old. It may be a sincere request for more information and it may be nothing more than a doorstep to keep the conversation open. I said, "The purpose of mastery is mastery. The purpose of excellence is excellence. Can you say 'excellence'?"

"Sure I can!"

"Well say it."

"Excellence."

I said, "Excellent!" and she giggled.

"I have to go," she confided. "I'm s'posed to clean up."

“‘Suh-posed’.”

“‘Suh-posed’,” she replied.

I said, “‘Ih-nun-cee-ate’.”

She scrunched her face up in a scowl.

“Say it.”

“What for?”

“To lilt, to laugh, to dance, to dream. To fly, to sigh, to sing, to speak. To spin like a ballerina on the tip of your tongue, to glide across the universe and embroider the air with breathtaking sound.”

She laughed from her belly. “You’re silly!”

“You just figured that out?”

The next afternoon she announced her presence at the top of the wall by declaiming, “‘Ih-nun-cee-ate’.”

I nodded. “How do you fare, fair Empress?”

“You said the same word twice.”

“Homonyms. Words that sound the same but mean different things. ‘Hah-mow-nim’. Say it.”

“‘Hah-mow-nim’.”

“That was homonimble of you.”

“What’s *that* mean?”

“It’s a made-up word. When you master the words, you get to make up words of your own. It’s called wit, deservedly or not.”

I’m pretty sure that flew past her, but it didn’t matter because all she wanted to do was chat; comprehension wasn’t a grave necessity. And that kind of chatting about words set the pattern of our days, me in the olive grove and Anastasia at the top of the wall.

The afternoons were never very hot and the evenings were never very cold and, even though the pollen from the trees made my eyes water, the air smelled so green and pure and that little girl's eyes were so alive with the light of life that I couldn't think of any more enjoyable way to spend my time.

And you might think it odd that a little girl should tolerate so much word play, but the simple truth is that the prize children prize is a grown-up's full attention, and they don't care how it comes wrapped. For an adult, play requires a site, a uniform, equipment and a long list of rules. But a child needs no more than the sword of her tongue and the shield of her smile to conquer the vast empires of the imagination, to plunder abundance and always leave behind her more treasure than she could ever haul away.

“‘Ah-nah-STAH-ziuh’,” I said one afternoon. “Do you know the story of the first Anastasia, the little girl who had your name first?”

“I get to see the movie when I'm bigger.”

“Yeah, it's kind of scary. There's a mean old man named Rasputin, like your cat, and he makes people think he's a sorcerer. But the little girl isn't scary, even though a lot of scary things happen to her.”

“What things?”

“What really matters is that she gets lost, and she's so young that she forgets all about her family. She's a princess, an empress, and a lot of people hope that someday she'll claim her empire.”

“Does she?”

I shrugged. “It's just a story. The real Anastasia died in 1918 with the rest of her family. But people like to tell that story because it makes them think that the most remarkable, wonderful things can happen anywhere.”

She gazed upon me with a regal certainty. “They can.”

“I agree completely. It's the difference between royalty and nobility. Royalty is just a pose, just a costume. But nobility shines through everything, through the most wretched squalor ever known.”

“What are you *talking* about?”

“Every man a king, my Empress. Every fair maiden a fair princess in disguise. I never

met an ignoble baby. Can you say ‘igg-no-bel’?”

“No.”

“Hardly anyone can. But all the babies are noble, as noble as a kitten, as noble as a wolf cub. Warriors in their way and champions of justice, if only of their own. Sovereigns who cannot conceive of an alternative to sovereignty and masters of all they survey. But somehow the crowns and the crests of nobility erode away and all that’s left are scared little people chasing after the costumery of royalty, begging for something to kneel to. Do you want me to teach you something very noble to say?”

She nodded solemnly.

“This is the most noble thing I can think of for any human being to say: ‘Do your worst. I will not kneel.’”

She said, “Do your worst. I will not kneel.”

“That’s right. Just the words, no special emphasis. Nobility triumphs when it fearlessly faces tragedy. And that, my Empress, is the most remarkable, wonderful thing that can ever happen...”

Late one afternoon I said, “I know a very hard word. You want to try it?”

“Sure.”

I said, “Chiaroscuro. ‘Key-are-es-kyoor-oh’. Say it.”

“‘Key-are-es-kyoor-oh’.”

“Excellent!”

“‘Key-are-es-kyoor-oh’,” she said again.

“What *are* you teaching my daughter?” a woman’s voice asked from the other side of the wall.

“It’s just words, mama.”

“Whatever for?”

Very primly, very clearly, very precisely, Anastasia said, “The purpose of mastery is

mastery.” To me she said, “What’s it mean?”

“What?”

“‘Key-are-es-kyoor-oh’.”

“It’s the interplay of light and shadow. In pictures, in paintings – but sometimes I think it means the conflict between good and evil, right and wrong. We have pictures and we have words and we have songs and poems and stories, and that’s a testament to the triumph of the light, don’t you think?”

She shrugged and that was answer enough.

One day when the fall had come to pay a call upon the olive trees Anastasia climbed to the top of the wall to tell me she was moving away.

I bit my lower lip and blinked very fast, surprised at myself.

“What’s the matter?”

I smiled a tight little smile, a smile for keeping things in. “This never happened before. It’s always me who goes away, not the other way around.”

“Aren’t you leaving soon?”

“Couple of weeks. You’re right, of course you’re right. It’s just new, that’s all.”

And of course it took forever. I can bug-out in three minutes flat, but it took Anastasia’s family days and days to pack up and go. She came to the wall to talk to me every day and it was so nice and so awful, sweet words embroidered around a black crepe deadline.

I said good-bye to her at the curb in front of her house and I felt wretched and I tried very hard not to show it. Just a little kid, right? Just the most remarkable, wonderful thing there is, a young sovereign, wild and free.

I held her tiny little hands in mine and said, “Ingenuous. Can you say it? ‘In-jen-you-us’.”

“‘In-jen-you-us’. What does it mean?”

“It means a lot of things – open and honest and artless and innocent. But what it really

means is to be born free. It means to be born without being required to kneel. That's what you are, Anastasia of the purple gemstone eyes. Born free. The hard job is to stay free."

"Do your worst," she intoned with a regal delight. "I will not kneel."

I kissed her on the forehead and she climbed into the back seat of the waiting car and sailed forth to claim her empire.

How the bank robbed Bonnie and Clyde.

“Stick ’em up!” said Clyde. I swear that’s what he said.

My first bank robbery. I was right behind Clyde in line, so I saw it all. It wasn’t what I expected...

Behind the teller’s cage was Hello-my-name-is-Annabelle, the world’s most unflappable teller. She said: “Do you have an account with this bank?”

“Huh?! Lady, this is a stick up!” Clyde had one of those cheap little .25 caliber pistols, the kind that are guaranteed for three armed robberies or one family brawl. He was wearing nylon hose over his head so it was very difficult to tell that he had brown hair, brown eyes and a pitiful little attempted moustache. I don’t think his nose is really that flat.

“I understand that,” said Annabelle. “I asked you if you have an account with this bank.” The prim people worship Annabelle as a goddess: she is primness personified, right down to the last tittle and jot. Her mousy-brown hair was wound up in a tight little bun and her little half glasses rode half-way down her nose. She wore a forest green dress with the tiniest white polka dots. I couldn’t see her shoes, but I’d bet they have buckles.

“Oh, just put the money in the bag!” commanded Bonnie, Clyde’s moll. She’s an unbearably thin woman with bleached blonde hair and greasy jeans. She didn’t bother with a disguise, since the downtown of every city that *has* a downtown is crawling with unbearably thin women with bleached blonde hair and greasy jeans.

“I would like to do that,” said Annabelle. “But first I’ll need your account number.”

“I don’t have a damn account!” said Clyde. “Okay?! If I had money, why would I be robbing the damn bank?!”

“Well, if you don’t have an account, I’ll need eight dollars.”

“Eight dollars! What the hell for? If I had eight dollars, I could wait until tomorrow to rob the damn bank!”

“Non-depositor’s transaction fee,” said Annabelle. She tapped her pen on a little sign mounted on the counter: “If you don’t have an account with First American Interstate National Trust, we will be happy to process your transaction for a nominal non-depositor’s transaction fee of \$8.00.”

Clyde scratched his nylon-plastered chin. “What if somebody wants to cash a pay check?”

“Eight dollars,” said Annabelle.

“Money order?”

“Eight dollars.”

“Change for the bus?”

“Eight dollars.”

“*Judas Priest!*” Clyde observed.

Annabelle was not one to be distracted. “I’ll need eight dollars to process your transaction.”

I think Clyde might have shot her right then, but Bonnie said, “Wait. I got an account at this bank, I think.”

Annabelle said, “May I have your bank card, please?”

“My *what?*”

“Your bank card. Your ATM card, if you will. I cannot process your transaction without a bank card.”

Bonnie had an enormous purse, somewhat larger than a duffel bag. She sat down on the floor and began to pull things out of it. There was an amazing quantity of stuff in there and all of it was garbage, only dirtier. Finally she looked up in triumph. “I got it. I got it.” She handed the card up to Clyde who handed it to Annabelle.

Annabelle said, “Now enter your PIN number.”

Bonnie struggled to her feet. “My *what?*”

“Your PIN number. Your secret password. The number you enter when you use an ATM machine.”

Bonnie looked very confused but she stood at the little keypad and typed in a number.

“Incorrect. Try again.”

Bonnie scratched her head and tried again.

“Incorrect. Are you sure this is your card?”

“I’ll get it, I’ll get it.” Bonnie typed in another number.

“Incorrect,” said Annabelle.

I leaned forward and whispered, “The last four digits of your social security number.”

Bonnie’s face lit up and it took her only two more tries to get it.

“That’s correct,” said Annabelle and Bonnie beamed with pride.

Annabelle typed about twenty thousand keystrokes into her computer terminal, pausing now and then as the machine prompted her for more information. After an eternity she looked up and said, “This account is overdrawn.”

Clyde said, “Huh?”

“Overdrawn. This account is overdrawn. By... two dollars and fifty-seven cents.”

“Wait,” said Bonnie. “I got thirty, forty dollars in this bank!”

“That was five months ago,” said Annabelle. “Since then, we’ve deducted your account maintenance fee of seven dollars per month.”

“Great...,” said Bonnie. “Good thing we’re robbing the bank, because I’m broke.”

“It is a bit of a problem, though, isn’t it?”

“What problem?” Clyde demanded.

“I cannot process any transactions on this account while it is overdrawn. You’ll need to make a deposit to bring it into a positive balance.”

Clyde guffawed. “You mean we can’t rob the damn bank until we give you two dollars and – what was it?”

“The minimum cash deposit is five dollars,” Annabelle said primly.

“Wait,” said Bonnie. “I got it, I got it.” She rummaged through the many pockets of her purse, pulling out coins and crumpled up, greasy bills. “You take Food Stamps?”

Annabelle coughed softly. “No.”

Bonnie finally dumped her cache of cash on the counter top and Annabelle primly counted out five dollars.

“Now fill the damn bag,” Bonnie growled.

“There *is* one more small issue...”

“Oh great!” said Clyde. “What now?”

“There is a teller usage fee.”

“Sheesh!” Clyde exclaimed. “How much...?”

“Two dollars.”

Bonnie looked at the coins left on the counter. “I don’t got it...”

Clyde turned his gun on me. He said, “Gimme two bucks. Now!”

I said, “You must be joking.”

“Now!!”

“I’m sorry, but I’ll have to charge a ten dollar armed robbery fee, payable in advance.”

He screeched his frustration. There was a little boy behind me with a mayonnaise jar filled with rolled pennies. Clyde said, “Gimme two bucks, kid!”

Bonnie pounced on his gun arm. “No way!” she said. “I’ll rob a bank, but I ain’t rippin’ off no kids.”

A businessman three or four places back in the line reached into his pocket and pulled out a huge wad of bills. He peeled off two dollars and handed it to Bonnie. He said,

“I’ll pay anything to get this line moving.”

Bonnie gave the money to Annabelle, who turned back to her terminal and typed in another forty or fifty thousand keystrokes. Clyde finally had time to be nervous. He looked every which way, sweat pouring down his nylon-hosed temples. He was fascinated by the surveillance cameras, and his eyes darted from one to another. Bonnie was clearly bored, and she spent the time examining her nails. They were bitten down to the quick, and, if I were to guess, I’d guess that she planned to have some new ones installed with her share of the swag.

Annabelle completed her typing chores, and it didn’t take much longer than ten minutes. She took the bag off the counter and began to fill it with the cash from her cash drawer. When she finished, she looked up and said, “I’ll need eighteen dollars.”

“What!?” If Clyde had been a steam boiler, he would have blown.

“Eighteen dollars,” Annabelle said primly. “Excessive withdrawal fee.”

“God damn!” said Bonnie. “Just take it out of the damn bag!”

Annabelle shook her head. “It’s eighteen dollars over and above the amount of the withdrawal.”

“Christ on a crutch!” Clyde shouted. “Is there *anything* in this bank that’s for free?!”

Annabelle smiled brightly. “We are always happy to explain our fee structure at no charge.”

Bonnie said, “I give up. I just give up. I never thought robbing a bank would be so much damn trouble. Let’s go knock over a liquor store, where they got some sense.”

“Hell with it,” said Clyde, stuffing his gun in his pocket. “Let’s just *go* to a liquor store. We can cadge quarters ‘til we get enough for a bottle.”

Bonnie looked doubtful. “She’s still got our money...”

“Leave it!” He clawed at his hose-clad face. “Man, does this stuff *itch!*”

Bonnie scooped her change off the counter. “I don’t got enough for bus fare...”

“I don’t care! We’ll walk!”

They shambled out of the bank and Annabelle took the bag of money off the counter top. She fixed me with a prim little look. She said, “Next, please.”

Superman.

The little boy came gamboling up to me when I was just over the ridge. He was big for three, small for four, and cute by any measure. Brown hair, blue eyes and a smile as quiet as firecrackers.

I was cutting across the park on my way to the library, and I'd come a little closer to the playground than I had wanted to. Unaccompanied adults have no business being at the playground. It spooks the parents, and it ought to. For myself, while I like kids well enough, I don't much like what comes with them these days...

"I'm Shotterman!" said the little boy. He struck a menacing pose. He was wearing little blue shorts and a black Mickey Mouse tee shirt. He had Spiderman sneakers on his tiny feet.

"Hi, Shotterman," I said. "What are you?"

"Huh?"

"What are your powers, Shotterman?"

"Oh," he said. "I can shoot." He cocked his finger. "Pshew! Pshew pshew! Pshew!"

"Shotterman!" I announced. "Strange visitor from another planet with an uncanny aim and accuracy. Shotterman! Able to compete for marksmanship prizes on five continents."

Shotterman laughed with delight, as I knew he would. This was entertainment he thoroughly understood.

And here's a little something *I* understood: He doesn't have a dad, not at home. Little boys don't crave male attention when they're getting enough of it. The nation is crawling with little boys looking for big boys to play little boy games, and I knew without being told that Shotterman was one of them.

"Who are *you*?" he asked.

I knew what he meant. “Nothingman,” I said.

“Nothingman?”

“Nothingman! A vanishingly small amount of substance, barely here at all. Nothingman! A homeopathic quantity of humanity.”

He looked at me as if he wasn’t quite sure if I was serious in my nonsense.

“Hunter!” called a voice from the benches over by the swings. Shotterman blanched a little.

“*Hunter!*”

“Is that your name? Hunter?”

“No, I’m Shotterman.”

“Hunter Ryan Daniels! You get your butt over here and I mean this *instant!*”

I winced. I can get enough of that stuff. “C’mon,” I said. “Let’s motivate.”

We walked back over toward the playground equipment and Hunter went “Pshew!” at anything that moved and a lot of stuff that didn’t. He broke away and leapt, landing knees first in the dirt. He was surrounded by three or four plastic trucks, and he said, “C’mon, Nothingman. Let’s go get the bad guys!”

There were two thick little women sitting on the park bench. I looked over at them, to see if one or the other wanted me to clear out. They ignored me and they ignored Hunter and they ignored everything except their animated conversation. He was on his own, and I rather expected he would be.

“Okay,” I said, plopping down on the ground. Women sometimes play little boy games, but they don’t do it well. I don’t know if it’s ineptitude or condescension on the part of the women or some subtle pheromone that adults can’t sense, but little boys play little boy games with men and not with women. “Let’s go get the bad guys, Hunter.”

“You mean Shotterman,” he said solemnly.

“Right. Shotterman.”

“But I’m not Shotterman anymore.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Well, then, who *are* you?” I scrunched my shoulders and turned my palms up and Hunter laughed.

“I’m Mouseman!” he said.

“Mouseman!” I intoned. “A mysterious creature from a distant galaxy, he craves meat and vegetable scraps. Mouseman! Able to chew through walls in only several hours.”

He went “Gnaw, gnaw, gnaw, gnaw!” to show me his impressive gnawing powers. His teeth were straight and white and perfect.

“Did I tell you my sister’s moving in with us?” one of the women said to the other. I knew by her voice that she was Hunter’s mom, the woman who had bellowed before.

“Isn’t your sister an alcoholic?” her friend asked.

“Yeah.”

“And didn’t you say she’s a drug addict?”

“Only sometimes.”

The friend chuckled at that.

“But the thing is,” said Hunter’s mom, “I’ve got to do something to get more money in the house.”

“What about Hunter’s daddy?” the friend asked.

“You mean Mouseman,” said Hunter, although they weren’t listening to him. He was pushing his trucks around in the dirt. This activity must have required 100% of his concentration, since he would not look up.

“Oh, sure!” spat Hunter’s mother. “*He’ll* help, but only if I give him joint custody!”

The friend took her time answering, a cloud of doubt on her face. “...But your sister’s a drug addict...”

“I don’t care! I’m not giving that son of a bitch joint custody!”

“Wow...,” said the friend. “You must really hate him...”

There was a ball on the ground and I picked it up and threw it hard. “Mouseman!” I said. “Go get it before the bad guys do!”

Hunter sped off and I turned to look at his mother. I said: “You hate your ex-husband. Do you hate your son?”

“What!?!”

“That’s who you’re hurting...”

“Yeah?” she sneered. “And who are you to tell me how to raise my kid?”

I shrugged. “Me? I’m Nothingman, a vanishingly small quantity of civilization in a world turned to savagery.”

She simply looked confused, which was just as well.

Hunter came dashing back and I stood up. “I gotta go, sport.”

The sadness in his eyes was immense. When you never get enough male attention, it seems like the men in your life are always saying goodbye.

I fixed his mother with a glare and she squirmed uncomfortably. I said, “Little boys need their daddies.” She wanted to protest but I held up my hand. “Little boys need their daddies. You don’t have to like it, but that’s the way it is. Give it some thought...”

“I like my daddy,” said Hunter. “I think he’s *Superman*!”

“I think mine is, too, Hunter.”

“You mean Mouseman.”

“Right.”

Freeing Jefferson's slaves.

“Mark Twain said, ‘In the first place God made idiots. This was for practice. Then he made school boards.’” There was a smattering of uncomfortable laughter throughout the school gymnasium, accompanied by pained looks from the dais, where the school board sat. “I’m not here to talk to practiced idiots. I *am* here, though, to stand up for Huck Finn.”

And yes, Uncle Willie was giving a speech. Wearing a jacket and tie, no less – finest quality thrift shop haberdashery. I was shuffling through Jefferson, Oregon, shuffling my way to somewhere less moist, when that gray and soggy city was struck by the national craze to ban Twain’s “Huckleberry Finn” for using the N-word.

The N-word, in case you were wondering, is “nigger”. Not “north”. Not “nitrogen”. Not even “nebulous nincompoop non-communication”. It’s “nigger”. I think it says something rather profound about the life of the mind in latter-day America that we have become used to conversing in meaningless euphemisms. “Intestinally deficient,” to say the least of it.

Anyway, you know the story; it shows up in the papers five or six times a year. Some snotty little proto-teen decided that blowing off her homework was a human rights issue, and some sleazy little ‘educator’ made a media circus out of it. It is a testament to the progress of the Politically Correct “idea” that it is now possible to be a jackass by proxy. I showed up just as the school board members, hand-crafted idiots made with pride by a skilled and practiced god, were gearing themselves up for the predictable denouement.

“And why *wouldn’t* I stand up for Huck?” I asked. “In some ways I *am* Huckleberry Finn. In some ways we all are. And, like Twain, ‘I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.’” More laughter, maybe a little better humored.

I had a copy of “Huckleberry Finn” in my hand and I was gesturing with it like a TV preacher with his bible. I said, “You can ban this book if you want to. You’ve got the power and I can’t stop you from using it. But I’d hate for you to ban it in ignorance. I’d hate for you to ban it without knowing what it is, what it *really* is.” I fixed the little proto-teen with a stare, pinned her with the arrows in my eyes. “I’d hate for you to ban

it without knowing what it says.”

The little teenlet squirmed uncomfortably, but her troubles had just begun. Speaking directly to her, I said, “What is it that you found so offensive about this book? Does the ink smell bad to you?” A little laughter, a little more squirming. “I don’t like the color of this cover. It’s too bright to be vermilion, too dark to be russet. It looks like blood. Are you offended by books that look like blood?” There was a little more laughter, scattered and nervous, and the little girl was furious.

“You know what’s wrong with it!” she spat. “It uses the N-word!”

I shook my head. “No, it doesn’t. It uses the word ‘nigger’. Many times. Hundreds of times. Twain had a reason for using that word. Can you tell me what his reason was?”

She said nothing, just glared.

“Well, then, can you tell me which use of the word ‘nigger’ you found offensive? Jim is black. Is it offensive when *he* uses the word ‘nigger’? Huck is ignorant. Surely we can’t hold him at fault for not knowing any better than to use bad language.”

“It’s the author!”

“Indeed. Do you think Mark Twain wanted to insult black people by using the word ‘nigger’? Is that the purpose of ‘Huckleberry Finn’, to insult black people?”

She started to say something then stopped herself.

“Is *that* what Twain was doing with the Duke and the Dauphin? Is that what he was doing with the Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords, making fun of black people? Is the incident involving Colonel Sherburn intended to malign *black* people?”

Her face was a mask of confusion, as I knew it would be. “Do you mean to say that you are ‘offended’ by a book you haven’t even read?”

“I— , I— , I read *enough* of it!”

“You want to ban a book you haven’t read. You read just enough to make up an excuse to quit, didn’t you? And in preference to admitting that, you’ll make it impossible for every child in this school district to read one of the most important books ever written. Your parents must be awfully proud...”

I swept the room with my eyes. “Because this book is not intended to malign *black*

people. The purpose of ‘Huckleberry Finn’ is to malign and insult and ridicule *white* people, to grab them by the scruff of the neck and rub their noses in the mud of their own hypocrisy. Could it be that the mud runs as thick in Jefferson as it did in Colonel Sherburn’s Arkansas?

“Huck Finn is an ignorant savage, enslaved by his nature and by his failure to rise above his nature. When he dives into the Mississippi to save Jim, *that* is when he becomes a human being. He is baptized, born again in the womb of the muddy river. He is America’s Moses; the water is parted by his body and the slaves are led to freedom – but the slaves are white, not black. A hundred and twenty years after independence, thirty years after emancipation, Twain commanded white America to cast off the chains of ignorance and prejudice, to *practice* what Thomas Jefferson so eloquently preached: That *all* men are created equal – black, white, brown, yellow and red. Huck Finn became a human being when he rose above his nature and his prejudices and his avarice and his appetites and his passions and his fears. He became a human being when he resolved to stand for justice no matter what the cost.”

I turned my gaze to the school board. “What do *you* stand for...?”

I spun back to the audience and walked my eyes from face to face. “This is what teachers do. I have no idea what ‘educators’ do. Gobble up tax dollars and quack like ducks, I guess.” Pleasant laughter. “Screech like chickens when you call ‘em on it.” More laughter. “But *this* is what teachers do. They grab you by the scruff of the neck and say, ‘Un-ac-ceptable. Your appetites are *not* proof. Your passions are *not* proof. Your craven prejudices are the perfect *opposite* of proof. Your precious feelings demonstrate nothing, justify nothing, *prove* nothing.’”

I looked back to the proto-teen. “If you had been lucky enough to have a teacher, instead of this collection of god-mangled idiots, you would have read ‘Huckleberry Finn’ by now. You could have moved on to ‘Lord of the Flies’, which is about school boards.” That joke was pushing things, I know; irony is the hardest of mettles. “If you were lucky enough to have a teacher, you could get yourself an education.”

I swept my eyes across the room again. “We were all of us born ignorant, just like Huck. Born naked and squalling, covered in blood and mucous and bilious excrement. We are born as animals, savage and helpless and terrified and outraged and completely incompetent to do anything about it. And thus would we remain, until we died, minutes or hours later. Except that each of us was lucky enough to have a teacher – a lot of teachers – when we were young. They taught us to feed ourselves and to walk and to speak and to use the bathroom – a thousand and one things that toddlers do routinely

and animals do only in performance.

“But education doesn’t stop when we’re toddlers; that’s when it *begins!* And that’s when we hand the reins over to the ‘educators’, the ‘professionals’. And they take children enslaved by their ignorance and lead them to the charnel house of tedium, teaching them *nothing* and leaving them no outlets for their energy but self-destruction. Is *this* what you went to all that trouble for, so your children could grow up to be book banners, book burners, self-righteous champions of eternal savagery?

“The job of a teacher is to lead children – and adults – *out* of the slavery of ignorance. If you had been lucky enough to have a teacher, you’d know that. The job of a teacher is to induce you to rise above your appetites and your passions and your prejudices and your fears and your feelings and to impel you to use your *mind*. For an instant. For an hour. For a day. For a year. For a lifetime. The job of a teacher is to teach you to *conquer* your fears and your prejudices and your aversions, to say to them proudly, ‘You *will not* enslave me, for my mind can master *anything!*’

“The job of a teacher is to command you to rise above the mud and excrement that is your inheritance from nature and grasp instead the legacy left you by all those great minds who lived before you.”

I pointed my finger right at the little proto-teen and said, “*You* are made of the same stuff as Socrates. The same stuff as Michelangelo, Copernicus, Beethoven, Shakespeare. You walk the same green Earth that Twain himself walked. You read his books – or refuse to – by the light of the same sun. There is nothing you cannot reach – if you find the right teacher.

“And the job of that teacher is to lead you out of the slavery of darkness and into the freedom of the clean, clear light of knowledge, of wisdom, of reason. To be the Moses of your mind’s liberation and help you build Jerusalem right here, in Jefferson’s gray and soggy land.”

I held my copy of “Huckleberry Finn” aloft – like a bible, like a sword, like a torch. “I don’t know how many teachers you have among all these ‘educators’. But I know this: This book is one of the finest teachers you will ever have. If you ban it, you will condemn yourselves to wallow in the mud. And you will belong there.”

The echo of my voice died to silence and the silence hung heavy in the air. I had begun to wonder if I was going to get a free ride out of town on a rail. But then a big, beefy man at the back of the gym stood up and clapped his hands together hard. He applauded with a slow cadence and, one by one, all around the room, people stood up and joined

him. Surprised me, really. I figure there's always one or two folks who are willing to listen to what I have to say, but not very many. It wasn't everyone, even so; a stout minority of 'educators' and school board members sat scowling, their arms crossed, their lips pursed in tight little lines. But the parents and the real teachers rose, one at a time, applauding not Twain nor my frail defense of him, but their own love for justice and their will to grasp it.

And then, surprise of all surprises, the little proto-teen stood up and started to clap. I'd like to hope she was a little wiser for spending an hour with the muses. More probably she was mooing with the herd, not knowing that for once this group of people was *not* a herd. At the very least, she was chastened and chagrined. And after all, victory is where you find it. I tossed my copy of "Huckleberry Finn" to her, lofting it over the crowd. She caught it with one hand and held it high – like a bible, like a sword, like a torch.

Huckleberry Finn jumped in the river to free a runaway slave. And he's freeing slaves still, in Jefferson and everywhere people seek deliverance from the bondage of ignorance. Huck became a human being when he resolved to stand for justice no matter what the cost. We become more perfectly human when we do the same.

Xavier's destiny.

“Madre de dios...!”

Mrs. Marquez said that, and it seemed a fair estimate to me. Everywhere we looked in the overlit room we saw things of wonder and beauty and uncontested menace. Despite the din, I heard myself groan, and I wasn't utterly sure I'd done the right thing. Walking through the valley of the shadow of death in a grade school cafeteria is one thing. Pushing an underfed eight-year-old boychild ahead of you is another.

The road I walk is the path that separates the straights from the crooks, the pencil-fine line that splits the people we call “decent” from the sneaks, the freaks and the side-show geeks. I have a scruple or two, painted and waxed, so I don't quite fit in among the bungled and the botched. And yet I *do* have an itinerary, and I *don't* have much of an agenda, so the quality folk are never dismayed to see the back of me. Neither fish nor fowl, always on the prowl, quick to resign from any community that would even consider having me as a member. This is the life I've chosen for myself, after all, and I'd be daft to beef about it.

Still, there are Other Matters to consider. Among them: I've been nineteen-years-old forever, but I've been nineteen for a lot of years. I'm making a buck or two more than I ever have before, and staying in one spot a day or two – or a week or two, or a month or two – is not only more desirable than it ever was before, it's suddenly financially possible where it never was before. Plus which, I don't love the cold and I do love the sweet smell of orange blossoms. And to make a belabored excuse slightly less laborious, I'll just come out with it: I hung out in a half-big town halfway from nowhere for so long that I got myself well and truly hooked in a scheme straight out of the handbook of the straights.

I was renting week-to-week at the Orangeview Estates, and my next-door neighbors in the tiny four-plex were Mrs. Marquez and her scrawny little manchild, Xavier. Xavier was a Cub Scout, and I helped him enter the Pinewood Derby. No kidding. Not quite singing hymns and selling Amway, but damned near it.

Orangeview Estates promotes itself as an apartment complex, but it's actually more like a crude motelization of superannuated picker housing. Picker housing is wood-frame

and stucco, because you don't have to import labor to build wood-frame and stucco, and it's four-plexed to keep the plumbing – such as it is – cheap. Mostly the real pickers live in their trucks, because they go for the winter produce before the citrus comes in and move on to the summer crops after the citrus plays out and because their trucks are rent-free. The picker housing used to be owned and maintained by the growers, but by now a lot of it has been sold to become palatial family residences available by the month, by the week or by the day, cash in advance if you please.

If you imagine a very seedy motel room and then cross that with a run-down shack, you're imagining a home much nicer than the Orangeview Estates. On the other hand, the rent was dirt cheap, the aroma from the orange groves was heavenly and the irrigation and the shade from the orange trees kept everything nice and cool. Back on the first hand, the neighbors mostly ran from unsavory to completely gruesome. There are half-big citrus towns all across the desert, and there's nothing to do in any of them except work for the growers. Year-round work is rare and the pickers move along. The people who stay have nothing to do but make trouble, and they're good at it. As an expression of tacit racism, the desk clerk had put me in among the respectable folk at Orangeview Estates.

To my left were the Sandovals, an ancient couple who went to mass every morning, then tended the church and rectory grounds all day, then went to confession every afternoon, then came home and fell asleep before they could possibly have time to sin or even think about it. Surely they are destined for the highest pinnacle of heaven – unless they are cast to the beasts for wasting so much of god's time.

To my right were Mrs. Marquez and Xavier. Very much "Missus" Marquez. The only times I saw anger in her eyes were when someone called her "Ms.", or worse, "Miss". Every once in a while, some old crone would wonder too loudly where Mister Marquez might be found. When that happened the anger would still be there, but Mrs. Marquez would have her chin so high you couldn't see it. She was *in* Orangeview Estates, but she was not *of* it, and she never forgot that simple fact, and she never let anyone else forget it, either. She was a cook in the home of one of the larger growers and she carried herself with a mien that would not have looked at all out of place in fifteenth century Madrid.

To the right of Mrs. Marquez was the Hernandez family, Hugo and Juanita and five giggling daughters, all crammed into a space that seemed to me to be too small for my one small self. Hugo knew that Xavier needed a father's guidance, and I think he might have been a little hungry for a son, as well. But Juanita had daggers in her eyes, and she made it plain in a hundred non-subtle ways that she would be happy to lend Hugo to

Mrs. Marquez as soon as the mysterious Mr. Marquez evinced himself and made that generosity unnecessary.

And so I'm sure that's why Mrs. Marquez turned to me with the problem of the Pinewood Derby. I might have looked straight and respectable to the management of the Orangeview Estates, by comparison with most of the tenants, but this is not a flattering evaluation. And there is no one who has talked with me for five minutes who will confuse me with the decent folks. Merely *being* the gringo in residence at the Orangeview Estates raised eyebrows, even among the crooks. The boy had been walking with me every afternoon, but I hadn't bowdlerized my speech to protect his frail sensibilities. I was telling him the straight and brutal truth, which I can be counted upon to do with everyone, and I hope I was doing him some good in the long run. But it might not have come off sounding so good in the short run, especially to a mother who couldn't quite figure out how to cut the cord. I had no idea how much of our conversations he was carrying home to his mama. Couldn't have been too bad, I guess, considering.

In the citrus towns, in the winter produce towns, in the cotton towns, in all the little half-big agricultural towns of the desert, the growers and their year-round gringo care-takers account for about ten percent of the population. But they control everything. In situations like that, we expect to find lousy public schools and excellent private schools. That's the way it is back East, up North. But the people who settled the deserts had great faith in the public schools; the public schools and federally-subsidized irrigation are what made 'em what they are today. Since the growers are compelled to pay for public schools, and since they control them anyway, there's no cost to them to sending their own children to the public schools. You can take it as a rule of thumb that the public schools will be excellent wherever they are controlled utterly by people with money who know what they want.

Certainly that was true of Xavier's school – at least for the children of the growers and their year-round gringo care-takers. The schools had an academic track that was as good as any you'll find in a magnet school in a big city. They also had a barrio track for los niños de los barrios; you didn't learn much, but there was no threat you'd be found truant, especially when the fruit was full on the trees. But if Mrs. Marquez was not *in* the aristocracy, she was most certainly *of* it; she bulled her way past every obstacle to ensure that Xavier was enrolled in the academic track, not the barrio track. He was much better prepared than the gringo children, since she leaned all over him at home, but it was her persistence, not his preparation, that won him his place.

It was the right thing to have done, but sometimes the right thing comes at a high price.

Xavier is short and thin and he wears glasses. His mother makes him wear dress slacks and leather shoes to school, and blinding white shirts and neckties. He has an immense vocabulary and a painstaking way of speaking. He can explain anything to anyone, and he will happily do so, with or without invitation. We all know how things work, and so we all know that Xavier couldn't be asking for it any better if he had a flashing neon sign on his forehead that said, "Asking for it!" The mildest taunt I heard was, "Ha-ha-ha-ha-vee-air!" I'm sure more and worse was said out of any adult's earshot.

And that's the way things are, not an excuse but a recognition. But I don't always much like the way things are, and that's why I started inviting Xavier along on my walks. I didn't expect to change much, and in truth I don't ever expect much to change. But nothing changes if you leave it alone, and everybody's gotta take a side. Thus does Brother Willie put one toe over the line into the land of the straights.

The Pinewood Derby thing kind of slipped in there sideways, and it wasn't until much later that I realized just how much Mrs. Marquez had staked on my unreliable tutelage. On its face, the Derby is pretty much nothing: Cub Scouts build and race small wooden cars. But what it's really about is a comprehensive introduction to manly virtues. Our mamas teach us and teach and teach us until we move away and *still* they keep after us. But what they teach us are *their* ideas of virtue: Wash your face, brush your teeth, clean your room, pick up after yourself – and phone home. The Pinewood Derby strives to impart self-reliance and foresight and application and persistence and intense competition and good sportsmanship. It's also supposed to be fun, but, clearly, the primary objectives are didactic.

When Mrs. Marquez showed up with little Xavier and the Official Pinewood Derby Racer Kit, I was more than a little dubious. I like those manly virtues just as much as the next guy, but I wish they were a little more portable. Also, I silently cursed Señora Juanita Hernandez and her stupid jealousy; surely this was right up Hugo's avienda, and he'd probably be *good* at it, besides. But, play or fold, the cards you're dealt are the cards you've got, so I agreed to read the rules and give it some thought.

The rules were pretty clear: Fathers – or those who play them on TV – were consigned to a strictly advisory role. The racer was to be built by Xavier, and I was to limit myself to consulting with him and, in a pinch, lending a finger or two. That didn't seem too hairy until I talked things over with Mrs. Marquez. Her rules were a little more stringent: Xavier was not to use knives, saws, chisels, drills, files or power tools. I explained to her that the racer kit consisted of a block of pine, drilled for the axles, and some little plastic wheels; without tools, Xavier would be racing an unadorned slab of wood. Her resolution was monolithic and I couldn't fathom how the school board had

managed to hold out against her. Finally she agreed to let Xavier do whatever damage he could to his block of pine with sandpaper. I didn't tell her that sandpaper can cause nasty abrasions. And neither her English nor my Spanish were good enough for me to get across the idea of emasculation, not that it was really my place to bring it up.

Anyway, daily progress reports about the car became a part of the fragile web of intimacy I shared with the boy. He busted his butt on that racer, and it showed. Pine is a soft wood, and coarse sandpaper puffs it away fast. But "carving" with sandpaper is a serious proposition; it's an art Xavier essentially invented for himself, since everyone else carves with knives and saws and chisels.

There was more, of course. I was doing that fatherstuff, to the extent I understand it, which amounts to teaching boys how to be men, and, in other circumstances, teaching girls how to relate to men. You can't pick up a magazine without discovering what poor specimens of humanity men are. "Men make lousy women!" a woman's magazine will reveal. "Husbands are not the best wives!" discloses a journal for married women. "Fathers are inadequate mothers!" a mother's magazine proclaims. And the rejoinder to all those with a deathgrip on the obvious is: "Well, duh!"

A father is the provider, his most important job. If he neglects it in order to preen as an ersatz mommy, the children suffer. A father is the moral leader, obliged to take it on the chin again and again; that's how children learn how to take it on the chin. A father is the defender, the one who confronts the burglar when mom and the kids are hiding under the bed. Fathers are everything we claim to admire when we use the word "manly" and everything we affect to despise when we use the word "male", but, at bottom, fathers are not mothers. We need mothers to do what mothers do, and we need fathers to do what fathers do, and when children are denied one or the other, they suffer. You won't read this in a women's magazine, and you won't read it in a men's magazine unless it's tattooed into a well-tanned navel. But it's the truth.

But the main job of being a father is simply being around. I'm not congratulating myself for what I did with Xavier, because I knew it was temporary. He didn't have a father all of a sudden, he just had a weak little prosthetic, and that only for a while. But I taught him what little I could of the manly art of manliness, what little I know. A little bit of swagger, not too much. A little bit of strut, just a touch. A little bit of courtliness, rough around the edges. A little bit of mischief, creeping through the hedges. A man rolls up his sleeves and gets to work, and you can say it with a smile if you can't say it with a smirk.

One day we were out walking and Xavier led me to a bitch with a new litter of pups.

Xavier had a thing for puppies and I had the idea that it was a point of contention between him and his mother. The dogs were down in the little light-well of a basement window, a tight fit but defensible. The runt of the litter kept getting pushed aside, pushed aside, pushed aside, all the way down the line of teats. He'd scramble over the bodies of his brothers and sisters and try to worm his way back into the fray, but he just got pushed aside, pushed aside, pushed aside, again and again and again. I pointed it out to Xavier, because, frankly, I never pass up an opportunity like that.

"They're always going to treat him that way," I said. "He'll always be the littlest, and because he is, he'll always get less milk. Even after they're weaned, the bigger dogs will still push him around, just because he's small. He's lucky he's a dog. Someone will come along and decide he's *so, so* cute because he's so tiny, and he'll get adopted. In the wild, he'd be a sitting duck."

"Why doesn't he *do* something?" Xavier asked.

I shrugged. "He's a dog. He can't think. He doesn't know why he's always getting pushed around, and he can't think of anything else to do. If he could think, it would be a different story."

"If he could think he wouldn't have to get pushed around."

"He doesn't have to. He just does. If he could figure out the problem, he could solve it. Just like you can, when you figure out a problem." I write children's stories for adults; writing children's stories for children is child's play.

Another day, another walk, he said, "I need a name for my car."

Proving my mastery of witty repartee, I said, "Huh?"

"My car. All the kids name their cars and paint the names on the sides. I keep trying to come up with a name, but nothing seems right. Not yet."

"It'll come."

"I guess so..."

We had wandered pretty far from home and I didn't like the looks of the neighborhood we were wandering into. There was a frisky little hound up ahead of us, and I knew Xavier wanted to go commune with that dog. I shook my head. "Not that way."

"Why not? What street is this?"

“Via de los lobos,” I said.

“How do you know? I don’t see any street sign.”

“I know the signs, Xavier. This is the way of the wolves. This is no way for you to go.”

He snorted. “You sound like my mother.”

“I sound like my father.” I looked down the via de los lobos and saw the squalling babies – naked but for dirt and snot – and the dead cars and the broken glass and the broken lives. I said, “I’d like to chase away all those wolves and tear down all those hovels and build one big house down at the end of the road, a hacienda for your mother and for everyone who works as hard she does. I’d name this street via de las aguilas, and you and I could put a big sign right on this spot.”

“What would it say?”

I swept my hand across the sky, painting the words in wide, sweeping arcs. “Via de las aguilas. Why crawl when you can soar?”

Xavier laughed at that, but I knew he wasn’t laughing from mirth.

About a week before the Pinewood Derby we were out walking on a day that was cool and cloudy, dank even. But the orange blossoms had come in full and rich and sticky, and I just wanted to walk and to *breathe*, to bask in a perfume sweeter than any made in France. Xavier was still puzzling about what to name his car and I was worrying about my place in his life and somehow or another I managed to say, “Xavier, do you know about destiny?”

He gave me a smirk that I am quite sure irritates the crap right out of his classmates. He said, “Destiny is fate. To be destined is to be *pre*-destined, ordained by god and unavoidable.”

I nodded. “That’s what the dictionary says. But that’s not what people really mean when they use the word. Nothing that people do – nothing that matters, anyway – is unavoidable. And if there’s a god, he sure isn’t ordaining everyone’s thoughts, words and deeds. But if destiny doesn’t mean ‘unavoidable’, what do you think it means?”

He smirked again. “If it doesn’t mean ‘unavoidable’, it doesn’t mean anything.”

I smirked back. “Have it your way.” I walked and smelled the orange blossoms and

waited the little snot out.

“Well...?” he finally said.

“Well, what?”

“Jeesh! What do they mean by destiny?”

I could have toyed with him some more, but I didn't. “Well, looked at one way, they mean nonsense, just like you said. But *if* they mean nonsense, then the implication is that the things people do are simply random. If they're not unavoidable, they must be causeless, right?”

“...That doesn't seem quite right...”

“Give the man a cigar!” I said. “Who controls your actions?”

“...I guess *I* do...”

“Give the man another cigar! God doesn't control your actions, and your actions aren't random, like the toss of a coin. *You* control your behavior, guided by an idea of who you are and what you do and don't do. When your mother says, ‘It's my destiny to raise a good son,’ that's just an idea, not fate. When Hugo Hernandez says, ‘It's my destiny to provide for my daughters,’ that's just an idea, not fate. When Roberta Sandoval says, ‘It's my destiny to bring glory unto god,’ that's just an idea, not fate.”

Xavier pushed up his glasses. He said, “But an idea's just an idea. You can change your mind whenever you want.”

“Sure can. What happens if you do?”

He scoffed. “What? Nothing?”

“Think twice. On the *via de las aguilas*, they say, ‘Hard work always pays off.’ On the *via de los lobos*, they say, ‘Hard work never pays off.’ Hugo Hernandez works hard, and sometimes it pays good, and sometimes it doesn't. Your mother works harder than anyone I've ever known, but it hasn't bought her that hacienda. But Hugo and your mother and the Sandovals live on the *via de las aguilas* because they *believe* hard work pays off. Not because it always *does*, but because they believe it *will*, if not today then later, if not for them then for their children. What happens if they change their minds?”

He said nothing, just pulled at his chin.

“Via de los lobos, Xavier. It’s not one or the other, not right away. But if you’re not trying to soar, you’re trying to crawl. In life, you have to pick a road and walk it, and destiny is the name we give for the destination we’ve chosen. It’s a choice, an idea, and you can change it at any time. But you can’t pick the via de los lobos as your destination and expect to find yourself on the via de las aguilas.”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and we walked and walked. Finally he looked up at me and said, “What’s *your* destiny?”

“Balls first.”

“*What!?*”

“Balls,” I said. “Cojones.” I pointed at my crotch just to leave no doubt. “Balls first through the universe. If you want to mess with me, I’m not holding anything back. I won’t cower, I won’t cringe, and if you manage to kick me, I won’t give you the satisfaction of the smallest wince. I walk. That’s what I do. And I walk balls first.”

He laughed and laughed, and after that he giggled. I walked balls first through the orange groves and wallowed in the scent of the blossoms.

“I just figured out what to name my car,” he said.

“So tell me.”

He scrunched up his face in indecision. “No. Not yet.” He laughed diabolically.

Oh, great, I thought. He’s going to name his damn car “Balls First” and his mother is going to *cook* my cojones. I said, “Fine. Keep your secrets.”

He smiled a smug little smile. “I think I will...”

I went to pick them up on the day of the big race, and that was when Xavier finally showed me his car. Basically, it looked like a block of wood that had had all of the edges and corners rounded off by sandpaper. There was something clearly resembling a cockpit in the middle, and although it was as big and as boxy as a police cruiser in a thirties gangster film, it was beyond all doubt a car. The paint job was extraordinary, cobalt blue with orange and yellow flaming racing stripes. Astride the cockpit, where the doors would be located on a real car, the car’s name was painted in yellow with orange detailing: “Xavier’s Destiny”.

And I cursed myself for having such a big mouth. “Xavier’s Destiny” is a fine name for

a car that wins, but what about a car that loses? We draw conclusions about life – about ourselves, about the universe – from hopelessly incomplete data. This is irrational, I suppose, but it's what we do. It's what we *all* do, and it's what we *have to* do. We name our destiny, our planned-for destination and our location right now, on the basis of our irrationally drawn conclusions, and what we become, ultimately, is what we *expect* to become. We can think, so we are not doomed like that scrawny puppy to getting the short end of every teat. But thinking takes practice, and unless we learn to think very wisely and very well, we stand at tremendous risk of dooming ourselves, simply from reasoning badly about inconclusive evidence. We can become anything we dare to let ourselves imagine. But when events fall disastrously short of our expectations too many times, what we dare to let ourselves imagine can become very, very small.

But Xavier couldn't foresee any of that, and he was so proud of his car he seemed to glow. Surely all he had done would transcend any race results. Despite being horribly circumscribed by his mother's proscriptions, he had mastered those manly virtues of self-reliance and application and persistence. Competition and good sportsmanship could not be beyond his moral range, and my only concern was that "Xavier's Destiny" did not come to symbolize a month of hard work culminating in defeat.

And it was in that miasma of elation and trepidation that I entered the grade school cafeteria where the Pinewood Derby would be held.

The cars were *amazing*. They were sleek and low-slung and aerodynamic and utterly, utterly gorgeous. Clearly, not a single one of them except "Xavier's Destiny" had been built by a child, but they were beautiful nevertheless. It says a little something about the minds of overcompetitive adults that they would go to such enormous lengths to teach their sons the unmanly art of cheating, but they *did*, in fact, go to enormous lengths.

The cheating was pandemic, to the extent that one might as well not call it cheating. Clearly, it was expected that the cars would be built by the fathers, with or without their sons' advice, and I realized I might have done better by Xavier by talking to the dads rather than reading the rules. I don't know what I would have done if I *had* talked to the dads, since I agree with the *actual* didactic goals of the Pinewood Derby – manly virtues, not male vices – but it left Xavier in an awful spot.

"It's okay, Xavier," said Mrs. Marquez. "Not everybody can be the winner."

"No," I said. "If you try hard and lose, you're a winner who just didn't win today. But if you give up, you're a loser."

Xavier nodded solemnly. "Balls first," he said.

Mrs. Marquez gave me a sharp look, and I had the idea that I might have been fired on the spot as prosthetic father if I had hung around. Instead I led Xavier through the crowd to the weigh-in. The excitement was palpable. There are only thirty Cubs in Xavier's pack, but with moms and dads and brothers and sisters and grandparents and friends, there were close to two hundred people in the cafeteria. Children were racing back and forth, shouting and shrieking, and the din was incredible. The weigh-in crew checked the width, length, clearance and weight of "Xavier's destiny," and it passed all the tests. The car was an eighth of an ounce shy of the five ounce weight limit, and it occurred to me that that might not be a bad thing.

We went over to the race track to prepare for our first heat. The race track is just a big ramp cut into lanes. The cars are motivated by gravity alone; they roll down the ramp and the one to get to the bottom first is the winner. Since there were so few Cubs, there were only two lanes, and the competition would consist of a series of heats, tournament style, a pyramid of competitors collapsing down to a single champion.

"Xavier's Destiny" won its first heat convincingly. The big, boxy car got off to a slow, lumbering start, but it gathered velocity all the way down the hill and finished well ahead of the sleek low-rider it was pitted against. Xavier jumped up and down and crowed with excitement and even Mrs. Marquez looked a little more hopeful.

We drew a bye in the second round, so we got to watch as some of the most fearsomely beautiful cars, elegant machines with whimsical names like "Orange Julius" and "The Orange Avenger", were eliminated. While I was watching the races a dad stepped up to make small talk – to be snoopy, that is.

"What do you do for a living, Mr. –uh..."

I said: "Willie."

"So, uh, what's your line of work, Mr. Willie?"

I hate that question. The straights don't like it that I don't have a straight answer for them, and I don't like it that they don't like it, and, truly, I'd have many more good things to say about humanity if we'd all just learn to let each other *be*. With a smile if not a smirk, I said, "I'm an itinerant raconteur."

"Say *what*?"

"I'm an onomatopottymouth with time on my hands. Is that all right with you?"

“Hey, yeah, sure. Live and let live, that’s what I say.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said. I grabbed Xavier by the wrist and snaked to a different corner of the mob.

By the third heat, only eight cars remained. Of the twenty-two vanquished Cubs, a good ten showed up to cheer for “Xavier’s Destiny”. Surprised me, since these were the same boys Xavier went to school with, after all. But they knew that his car had something absent from all of theirs, a kid as the builder. The boys stood on either side of the track and shouted, “Ha-vee-air!, Ha-vee-air!, Ha-vee-air!,” as “Xavier’s Destiny” rolled to another victory.

The crowds grew larger in the fourth heat, more Cubs plus their brothers and sisters and even some of the parents. Little Xavier was becoming a small sensation, first because he had dared to race a car he had made all by himself, and second because that car was *winning*. The shouts of “Ha-vee-air!” were deafening, and the screaming when “Xavier’s Destiny” won again made my ears ring. The victory was a squeaker, which gave me pause, but the worst Xavier could do from there was second place, and that’s not such a horrible fate for a boy on his first try.

In the quiet of my mind, though, I thought that first place was out of reach. In the fifth and final heat, “Xavier’s Destiny” would face the car entered by Billy Chisholm, the pampered get of Big Bill Chisholm, a grower who had a big say in everything that happened in town. The car was named simply “Chisholm”, and I had watched it weigh in. It was low-slung and small and sleek, and you would think it couldn’t weigh more than two ounces. But, in fact, the pinewood had been carved outside and in, and the pine shell had served as its own crucible for a pool of molten lead. “Chisholm” was basically a lead slug surrounded by pine. This is all perfectly legal, of course, and the car had weighed in at a gnat’s breath under five ounces. “Chisholm” was astounding, the definitive Pinewood Derby racer. If Xavier lost, he’d lose to the best-engineered car in the race.

When the cars were lined up at the starting line, the noise was incredible. Virtually everyone was cheering for “Xavier’s Destiny”, even Billy Chisholm himself.

His daddy upbraided him. “What’s wrong with you, boy? Don’t you know it’s you against him?!”

“No, Dad. It’s *you* against him. You’re a grown-up. You can do anything. He’s a kid, but he’s beat every grown-up in the room. If my car wins, a grown-up wins. But if his car wins, a *kid* wins. Wouldn’t *that* be something?”

Big Bill growled, but what could he say?

Xavier shook my hand, a somber little manchild with a lot on the table. He pulled me down and whispered in my ear. “Balls first through the universe, right?”

“Right,” I whispered back. “And if you get kicked, you grit your teeth and keep on walking.”

He nodded gravely and turned to face his destiny.

Despite myself, I held my breath when the race started. “Xavier’s Destiny” got off to its usual slow, lumbering start, but it steadily gained speed, just as before. But “Chisholm” had the same weight advantage plus a low, sleek profile to the wind; it seemed as though it could slip *between* the molecules of air. Halfway down, “Xavier’s Destiny” was clearly behind and the room seemed to fall silent except for a throbbing hum that might have been an echo of the cheers of the on-lookers and might have been nothing more than the ringing of my own ears. My tongue was caught between my teeth and I was biting down hard, hard, hard, and I realized that nothing, nothing, nothing would make a difference now.

And just then “Chisholm” popped a wheel. It doesn’t take much impact to knock a wheel off of a Pinewood Derby racer. The axles are basically just big nails, without even a cotter pin to secure the wheels – although this is an innovation we might expect to see on the “Chisholm II”. Very probably, Big Bill had worried the wheel on and off too many times, stressing the plastic until it was as good as useless. Anyway, the car popped its right, rear wheel and went skittering sideways down the track until it shuddered to a halt. “Xavier’s Destiny” crossed the finish line and the crowd quite literally went wild.

“Ha-vee-air!, Ha-vee-air!, Ha-vee-air!” the children shouted. Someone had a tape of Gary Glitter’s “Rock and Roll, Part 2,” the definitive joyous noise of indoor sporting events, and some of the boys were shouting along with the call and response part: “Hey-ay! Ho-o! Hey-yay! Ho-yo!” Big Bill Chisholm was shouting that they ought to run the heat again, but since two other cars had been eliminated with popped wheels, he didn’t get anywhere. One of the boys started to bellow, “Speech! Speech! Speech!,” and soon the other boys joined in. “Speech! Speech! Speech!”

Someone thrust a microphone into Xavier’s hand, but it was much too loud for him to be heard above the shouting. “Xavier’s destiny–” he started and stopped. He smiled with pride and wonder as the noise washed over him. “Xavier’s destiny–” he tried again, but it was still too loud.

Someone bumped the gain on the amplifier and his tiny voice boomed throughout the room. “Xavier’s destiny,” he said, and the crowd fell silent.

Xavier looked to his mama. Mrs. Marquez had her hands clasped at her chest and she was smiling around a big lump in her throat. Her eyes were welled up with tears of pride and joy for her pride and joy, and I don’t think she knew just then what she had gained that day, and what she had lost forever. He looked to me and nodded, a gesture of respect for me – and for himself. He smiled to me, to his mother and to the universe.

He said, “Xavier’s destiny is the way of the eagles!”

Tête-à-tête in Tombstone.

When the shadow blocked the doorway of Johnny Ringo's, everyone in the bar looked up. The door was propped open and traffic was brisk. The glare of the late afternoon sun fought the gloom of the little taproom to a draw. But then gloom captured the turf enduringly, and we all looked up to see why.

The stranger leaning against the doorjamb was long and lean and very relaxed. He wore black wool trousers pegged at the ankles over ornately-tooled snakeskin boots. His dove-grey top coat fit him like a glove. Beneath it he wore a rich brocade waistcoat and a white linen shirt open at the collar. He had eyes the color of coal and flowing brown hair that spilled halfway down his back. His handlebar moustache was trimmed and combed and waxed to perfection. A red silk cravat finished the ensemble, that and two nickel-plated Colt 45s with carved ivory grips. The sidearms were mounted high, at his ribs, and a double-barreled shotgun, breech open, was slung across his left arm.

And even though Johnny Ringo's is the tourist trap for the sophisticated tourist, still everyone gawked. Everyone except one man in the corner at the end of the bar, a man nearly perfectly concealed by the gloom. He looked up at the stranger in the doorway and there was genuine fear in his eyes.

The stranger was looking right at him. Looking right *through* him. He didn't stare, he glared, and the room fell deathly silent – not a nervous cough, not a stolen breath. The fearful man tried to hold the stranger's gaze but couldn't. He looked down at the drink before him on the table then looked up again quickly, something furtive in his eyes. The stranger nodded slowly and said, "I'm your huckleberry."

Some moron guffawed in recognition but this didn't relieve the tension, it added to it.

The stranger stood up straight and snapped the breech of the shotgun closed. He hefted it high in the air and the bartender snagged it with two hands. He mounted it on two pegs over the back-bar. He said, "Howdy, Doc."

Doc nodded, saying, "Walter." Lithe as a cat, he threaded his way past the close-packed tables to the juke box. He pulled a silver dollar out of the pocket of his waistcoat and spun it skyward. Without seeming to look for it, he grabbed it out of the air as it came

down and deposited it in the machine.

While he was selecting tunes, the frightened man in the corner stood up and headed for the door. “Leaving so soon, Andrew?” Doc said without looking up. He tapped his fingertips on the grip of one of the pistols. “I thought you and me might have a talk.”

Andrew slumped back into his chair, and Doc left him there to sweat a spell.

And not everything is as it seems. It’s Tombstone, of course, but Tombstone in 1995, not 1881. Doc Holliday is indeed an expert killer allied with the forces of good, but the killings are all make-believe and the forces of good are comprised of the Historical Commission and the merchants of Allen Street. Doc and the Earps and the Clantons and McLowrys and assorted other pistoleers put on a gunfighting exhibition every afternoon at two. The rest of the time they’re just plain folks, just plain folks in very fancy Victorian garb.

And of course, it’s Doc and the Earps and the Clantons and McLowrys – the real historical figures, however embellished – who have made Tombstone a tourist mecca where other towns of the Wild West are barely of interest to historians. And on Allen Street, they know how to milk the tourists for all they’re worth. Up at the Bird Cage Theater, near where Curly Bill Brocius shot Marshall Fred White, things are pretty much undisturbed, but the sight of unmolested verity comes at a price. And down at the OK Corral, again for a price, you can stand on the actual spot where history – however embellished – was made. In between, on both sides of the street, there is nothing but hoke and smoke and filigreed forgeries of the very highest quality.

But what fun those forgeries are. The gunfighting exhibitions are run out of Big Nose Kate’s Saloon, a saloon that never was. It’s a restoration of the old Grand Hotel, where Dr. John Henry Holliday and Big Nose Kate Elder frequently stayed, so that ought to count for something. The Continental Saloon stands where the original Continental didn’t, and the Oriental, Wyatt Earp’s first toehold in Tombstone, has no occidental presence. The saloons are as authentic as Disneyland, but somewhat pricier. They are surrounded by gift shops and antiques emporia and flyblown little restaurants offering authentic sourdough pizza and superannuated ice cream. At the height of Tombstone’s notoriety, it was estimated that one edifice in three was devoted to providing what might be called the sporting man’s pleasures. Things have changed, but not much: Now one edifice in three is devoted to satisfying the cravings of idle voyeurs.

And alone against that tidal wave of Allen Street cant stands the lowly Johnny Ringo’s, a fragrant little bar that could be transparently transplanted into any seamy

neighborhood in America. No fluff, no bluff, no souvenir stuff, just cold beer, cheap wine and all the distilled spirits a thriving ghost town can provide. The beer was three dollars for draft, to be sure, but even an anti-tourist tourist trap has to fleece the tourists. That's what they come to Tombstone for, after all, and it's bad for business to disappoint them.

I was standing at the bar and paying two dollars a pop for short Pepsis. I don't much care for alcohol, but I'd lost the stomach for the more authentic places up the street. Even though soda never costs much where there's liquor for sale, I had volunteered to pay the two bucks over Walter's protest, because I know bar space is at a premium in a bar. And standing with my back to the bar, elbows on the brass rail, I had a good view of Doc and his victim.

The first of his tunes came up on the juke box – “Angel From Montgomery” by John Prine. Doc grabbed a chair and swung it high in the air, bringing it down across the table from Andrew, the shrinking man. He sat on the chair backwards, planted his elbows on the table and suspended his chin on his palms. He smiled soft and slow with a gentle malice. He said, “Now ain't you a daisy?”

If Andrew said anything, I didn't hear it, and I didn't hear anything he said through their entire conversation. Walter came over to the table with a bottle of whiskey and a polished silver cup. He poured out a double or perhaps a triple shot. Doc gently tapped the bottle with his fingertip and Walter set it down on the table.

“I thought that was just in the movies,” I said when Walter strode back behind the bar.

“It is,” he confided. “That bottle's filled with Earl Grey tea, room temperature.”

“So you don't make anything on Doc at all?”

“You kidding? Nobody leaves when he's in here. If he stays an hour, we'll be three deep at the bar.”

I looked around and saw it was true. Every gawker in the bar – myself included – was gawking at Doc, which only added to Andrew's monumental discomfort.

Doc said, “I heard you were in town, snooping around over there at Kate's. Tombstone is my town, boy, and you cannot spy upon me without my finding it out. I am not and never will be a pillar of this community, but I am well acquainted with a pillar or two, and Tombstone can keep no secrets from me.”

Andrew said something I couldn't hear but Doc replied in full voice. "Did you think I might strike you, Andrew Covington? Did you think I might shoot you with my pretty pistols?" He ran a finger sensuously along one of the ivory grips. "They're loaded with blanks, Andrew. Just black powder and wadding, make-believe bullets in a make-believe town."

Whatever was said made Doc Holliday rear back and laugh raucously. "Hate you? Hell, boy, I'm *grateful* to you. You loosed me from the tar baby and stuck yourself instead. All you took from me was a bag of nothing, and you squandered everything you had to get it!"

Andrew looked every which way at the eager faces of the gawkers and even though I couldn't hear him, I knew every word of what he said: "Please! Keep it down, will you?!"

"Keep it down? Hell, I want to shout it from the rooftops! Listen here, boys! Andrew Covington stabbed me in the back and it saved my life. Nobody's ever betrayed me the way he did, and nobody's ever done me a bigger favor. Here's a toast to Andrew Covington, liar, cheater, sniveling whiner and professional backside kisser!"

The gawkers roared and drank. However Andrew replied, he did not hit Doc, which he surely deserved, and he did not get up and walk out.

The room fell silent and from the jukebox John Prine confided, "There's flies in the kitchen. I can hear 'em there buzzin'. And I ain't done nothin' since I woke up today..."

Doc chuckled and said, "Look at you, boy. You're a mess!" This wasn't literally true. Andrew didn't look all that hale, but he was middling healthy for a tourist: a little flabby, a little flaccid, a little weary-looking. But he was withering under Doc's scrutiny, and the humiliation before a crowd of strangers wasn't doing anything good for his posture. "You know who gets hurt by a lie? The liar. The person you tell a lie *to* may make a little mistake based on the false information you're handin' out. But the liar is hurt *forever*. When you tell a lie, you can't ever forget what you say, for fear you'll slip up. You have to portray that lie every day, every which way, no coffee breaks and no vacations. You have to supervise yourself all the time, and your own spontaneity becomes your worst enemy. And you have to keep tellin' that lie until half-past-stupid, until it's obvious to *everybody* that you're full of shit. But even *then* you can't come clean, because, if you do, you're exposed as a liar.

"That's the burden you took on, Andrew Covington, to steal a job you're incompetent to do..."

“Hell, yes!” some drunk shouted. “You tell him!” The juke box whirled and a new platter dropped down, Bonnie Raitt singing “Luck of the Draw”.

“You got me fired, boy, good and plenty. And for a while there I was pretty pissed about it. But do you know what I found out? I discovered that by deceit and subterfuge you’d managed to steal from me everything in my life that I hated. I can work again, Andrew, and I owe it all to you. Shelley at the gallery told me you were scoping out the paintings. They’re good, aren’t they? As good as anything I ever did, and *much* better than anything I did while I was doin’ that uptown tap-dance.”

Andrew said something I didn’t hear.

“Yeah, well, that’s just the way it is. These good people come to town and they expect to see cowboy paintings or wildlife paintings or landscapes, and instead they stumble across what I’m doin’. Most of ’em walk away, but a few, a precious few see what’s there, and they take a canvas home. Art is the stuff that sticks with you, art is the thing that won’t turn you loose. It would be nice to make something that would seize everyone, but maybe I can’t do that. But I can grab one or two at a time, and that’s enough.”

“These things we do to keep the flame burning,” Bonnie sang, and it’s more a hymn than a song. “And write our fire in the sky. Another day to see the wheel turning. Another avenue to try...”

Doc said, “I’m doin’ that because of *you*, Andrew Covington. Without your slimy little underhanded political games, I’d still be wasting my life for money I never had the time to enjoy. Now I shoot the bad guys for a few bucks, sell a painting or two for a few more, and I have all the time I need to work. What have *you* got to show for your treachery?”

Treachery is a word you don’t hear every day. More’s the pity.

“Bullshit!” said Doc. “Tell it to your mama, son. If you’re so satisfied, what are you doing *here*? You’re looking for a way out of your own, boy, but there isn’t one, not for you. You gotta keep tellin’ them lies, tellin’ ’em over and over again. You’re their *prisoner* boy, and they ain’t never gonna let you go. You traded your *life* for a bag of nothing, and ain’t nobody gonna let you trade it back. Least of all me.”

The gawkers were gulping this performance down, and Walter was pulling off beers so fast that the floor beneath his feet was slick with the stuff.

“Now that’s where you’re wrong, Andrew. I have no reason to hate you. I have no reason to hit you or shoot you or slash the tires on your car. Nature will exact every ounce of retribution I might want from you, every ounce and a thousand pounds more. Look what’s become of you already! And you have sentenced yourself to *life* in your prison of lies. How could I ever hope to hurt you worse than you’ve already hurt yourself?”

Andrew said something else I didn’t hear, and Doc replied, “No, sir. I am merely telling you the truth. A truth, I’ll concede, that you want very much to avoid. Betraying me was destructive of your character. Spinning your web of lies was destructive of your character. Coming to Tombstone to spy on me was destructive of your character. Permitting me to berate you in this way is destructive of your character. Your *sole* objective is self-destruction, and you have sought me out in order to blame me for it.” He called out over his shoulder: “Walter, jot this down for inclusion in ‘Doc Holliday’s Compendium of Pithy Aphorisms’: When committing suicide, make sure it’s someone else’s fault.”

The third of Doc’s juke box selections began to play. It was a bootleg 45 of a haunted Bob Dylan playing the piano and singing “She’s Your Lover Now”.

Doc stood up and stared down at Andrew Covington, his black eyes boring through the flaccid man like no bullet ever could. “I’m done with you, boy, but you’ll never be done with me. You’re nothing to me, but I’ll always be everything to you, always the living symbol of everything you cheated yourself out of, everything you could have had but gave up for the sake of a bag of nothing. For every day of the rest of your scab-encrusted life, you’ll think of me. Your every thought will turn to rationalization and your every rationalization will turn to self-reproach, with no relief short of death. You’re gonna make an ugly corpse, Andrew Covington, and that’s *all* you will make of your life.”

Doc Holliday turned and stalked away, leaving poor Andrew Covington to his shame and his misery and his liquor.

He set his authentic whiskey bottle on the bar and Walter handed him the shotgun. As he walked toward the doorway, a man stepped up to block it.

It was the real Johnny Ringo, the real authentic make-believe Johnny Ringo from the gunfighting exhibitions. He said, “Doc, tomorrow I’m gonna burn your skinny ass!”

Doc Holliday gave a courtly nod and smiled with the confidence of a man who is armed with two six-shooters and a scatter-gun, the confidence of a man who is armed

with a mind like a laser and a tongue like a razor, the confidence of a man who is not *disarmed* by even the smallest doubt. He said: “You’re a daisy if you do.”

Prufrock's honor...

In the end the men and women come and go, betraying everyone they know...

Prufrock stood and bowed slightly, holding out his arm like the maître d' at Aldo's Pasta Bar. In a vague and broken voice, he sang, "Isn't it romantic?"

Surely as romantic as any strip mall diner during the lunch rush.

Madame Bovary gave the smallest nod, a niggardly morsel of attention. She slid her considerable self into the booth and picked up the menu, leaving Prufrock to clean up his own grand gesture.

"How's your day going?" Madame Bovary asked without looking up from the menu.

"Not too good. Mitch called me into his office just as I was leaving."

"Oh?"

Prufrock rubbed absently at his sparse moustache. He's a vague man altogether, not quite anything at all. His hair is not quite red and not quite orange and not quite pink. It might have been clean, but it didn't look it; it fell off his head in greasy strands. He's bald in the most depressing way, the infinite forehead, and, perhaps to compensate, he wears a pony-tail. Not one of those silly braided yuppie pony-tails, but a full shock of hair tied up with a rubber band – uncut, unstyled, unkempt. And his hair, seemingly, is the metaphor of his life. His face is ugly, which is nobody's fault, but it is also painted with vague reminders of his unkempt emotional life – covetousness, petulance and a boundless resentment. His clothes were of good quality but a little rumpled, a little crumpled; I thought I caught a whiff of the hamper, but I could be mistaken.

"He actually accused me of having a drug problem," Prufrock said. "Can you believe that?"

"Huh? Why?"

"Oh, you know, just stuff." Prufrock was staring at the salt shaker. His hands were busy, and so were his feet.

“What stuff?” He had her full attention, but he didn’t notice.

“You know, I’m always late. I leave early a lot. I take these long lunches every day. I’m always so distracted. He said I’m making him look bad, and he wanted to know what the deal is.”

Madame Bovary took her time responding. “...What did you tell him?”

“Nothing. Just that I’m having some problems at home. In a way, it’s even true.”

Madame Bovary smiled a smug little smile. “In a way...”

She’s an exceptionally porcine creature. I speak not of her girth but of her attitude. It’s easy to picture her hoarding things, even things of no value, hoarding them for no reason at all. Her fat swallowed the definition of her features and left her a little puffy everywhere. She is not wholly repulsive to look at, although she’s far from attractive, and, like Prufrock, she bears the scars of a lifetime’s hostile emotions. What she lacked in natural endowment, though, she made up for in effort. She primped and pouted and preened like a bad parody of a bad stripper, and, by granting and withholding her titillations, she teased poor Prufrock into a dither. Swine before swine, I think, but it keeps them away from the pearls...

“There’ll be hell to pay if he ever figures out what’s going on...”

“He should mind his own business!”

Prufrock smiled, a tight, bitter little smile. “This *is* his business. I lied to him, and I’m lying to my wife. If he finds out, he’ll wonder what else I’m lying about...”

“...Do you think he suspects anything?”

He couldn’t have looked any more pained if someone had reached into his torso and pulled out a kidney. “I have a sterling reputation for integrity...”

“Darn right!” said Madame Bovary. “And who deserves it more than you?”

Prufrock couldn’t bear to look at anything. His eyes finally stopped on me, sitting in the booth across the aisle. I shook my head as if to say, “No help here, buddy.”

“And what if he *does* find out?” said Madame Bovary. “Big deal! Didn’t you say you’d sacrifice everything for me? Didn’t you say that you want to squander everything you have, just to make sure nothing in your past can compete with me for your attention?”

Didn't you say you want to impoverish yourself, so you can grow fat on the nectar of my love?"

Prufrock pushed his fork around, searching in vain for the right way to say the wrong thing. "...My career means a lot to me..."

"More than me? Is that what you're saying? That some stupid *job* means more to you than I do? You said you loved me more than *anything*! Did you mean anything except your *job*?!" There weren't any tears, but the delicate napkin swabbing was just as effective.

"Honey, you know that's not what I mean! It's just that..."

"Just that what?" Madame Bovary's eyes were like stones. She was drumming her fingers on the table.

"Just..." Prufrock pushed the fork this way and that way, but he couldn't find anything under it. "Oh, nothing..."

Madame Bovary nodded knowingly. "That's what *he* does."

"That's what *who* does?" Prufrock demanded.

"He pulls back. Whenever we start to get a little bit close to *my* issues, he distances himself."

"Are you saying that's what *I'm* doing? Is that it?"

"Oh, no!" She laughed unconvincingly. "You're not at *all* like him, honestly."

"Honestly?"

She held up her hand like a Girl Scout. "You have my solemn word of honor."

That seemed to placate him, but even a whipped dog can growl. After a moment he looked up, his face half frightened, half triumphant. He said, "*He* has your solemn word of honor, too..."

"And what's *that* supposed to mean?!"

"Nothing! Nothing! I was just thinking out loud, that's all."

“Thinking about *what?*”

Prufrock took his time answering, but there was no help for it. “...It just seems so funny to talk about your solemn word of honor, considering...”

“Considering *what?*”

“Well... You know!”

“Do you think I could lie to you?” Madame Bovary demanded. “After all I’ve gone through to be with you? I lie to my husband every day. I lie to all my friends and I make my friends lie *for* me. I lie to my children, to my parents, to my boss and everyone at work. I steal money from my family to spend on you. I cheat my family of time to spend it with you. There isn’t anyone or anything I haven’t corrupted for the sake of our love. Do you honestly think, after all that, that I could lie to *you?*”

Prufrock was abashed. “When you put it *that* way...”

“Our relationship is based on – what?”

“Trust,” he said. If he had a tail, it would have been thump, thump, thumping on the seat.

“That’s right,” said Madame Bovary. “Trust and a commitment to total honesty. I don’t mind telling lies to *him*. He can’t see me for what I am. Not like *you*.” She snuggled up to him with her eyes.

Prufrock snuggled back, basking in the glow of the moment. Then he said, “He doesn’t suspect anything, does he?”

She laughed again. “He trusts me *completely!*”

“...You sound almost... *proud.*”

She smiled smugly. “Well, maybe I am.”

“Yeah? Well how do you know he’s not running around on *you?*”

“Please! His word is his *life*. He’d eat broken glass before he’d break his word to *anyone!*”

“...Unlike me, huh?”

“That’s not what I meant!” For the first time in their lunch date, Madame Bovary wasn’t quite in control. “You’re not at *all* like him. Sure, he lives for things like honor and integrity and fidelity. But he doesn’t give a *damn* about my feelings. When I’m with him, I feel like something inside me is dying, just withering away to dust...”

“And when you’re with me...?”

She smiled, and it was a smile of genuine warmth. “I feel like a teenager again...”

They mused and eye-cuddled together from across the table. Madame Bovary nibbled delicately on an enormous corned beef sandwich and Prufrock measured out another little bit of his life with a coffee spoon. There is worthiness, which is difficult; it can never be supplied by another, and it can never be faked. And there is worship, which is demanding; you can fake the virtues the worshipper worships, but you dare not falter. And then there is adulation, which is very, very easy; it is wholly faked, and the price is never higher than quid pro quo. They basked together in the glow of their romance, the romance made so much more grand and perfect because it was so bungled and so botched, so frantic, so furtive, a grand and perfect fraud.

Prufrock finally broke the silence by saying, “You are my *queen!*”

Madame Bovary wriggled the royal fundament on the naugahyde upholstery. She ran her finger along the top of his hand. “You’ve really given up everything for me, haven’t you?”

“Everything! I have nothing left to hold me back or bargain with me for tribute. I have no pride, no purpose, no integrity. No honor. No courage. No resolve. No regrets, even. I have nothing. I *am* nothing. I lay myself prostrate at your feet, vulnerable to any injury you might inflict upon me. I have destroyed myself that I might be worthy of you...”

Madame Bovary actually giggled at this, and who could blame her?

“I am dung for you,” said Prufrock. “No, I am *less* than dung. I am the fly swarming the dung. No, I’m the maggot *writhing* on the dung.” She winced and he added, “I’m sorry to be so graphic, but I’m trying to make a point.”

“You’re making me *sick*. ”

From the back of the diner a gruff voice called out, “You’re not alone, sister!”

She gave him a dirty look and he switched to an urgent, insistent whisper – which carries much farther, of course. “I used to think that love was trading value for value. But that was before I met *you*. It was my values – my fidelity, my integrity, my honor – that I had to give up to have you, and I did it gladly! I’m nothing, that’s all. Just nothing. And I’m all yours...”

“Forever...?” she teased.

“Forever.”

“I know it,” said Madame Bovary. “You can’t do this twice, after all. You can tell your family and friends that your marriage was a horrible mistake, that it’s killing your spirit. They won’t like it, but they’ll live with it. Once. But you can’t play that tune a second time, not ever.” There was no face-saving way he could ever escape her, and I imagined that inside her mind there was a little girl skipping around chanting, “No more competition! No more competition!” Inside his mind I pictured the words, “No choice!,” with the sound of a jail cell door slamming shut.

As if to underscore who was the jailer and who the jailed, she turned to me and gave me a smutty wink. It made me want to puke.

He didn’t notice, thank god. The last thing I needed was an altercation with a jealous middle-aged, pony-tailed geek. That wink meant nothing and I knew it. She’d probably never sleep around on Prufrock for love or lust. Revenge is another matter, though, and I’d put nothing past her if she comes to despise him as much as she despises her husband. Her hatred is her proof of her victimization, and her victimization is her license to victimize. And the one question the love-struck adulterer never dares to ask is this one: If she’ll do it *with* me, why wouldn’t she do it *to* me?

But even a whipped dog can growl. No choice! No choice! No choice! Prufrock looked at nothing and said, “It’s much more demanding than marriage, isn’t it? More... *binding*, somehow... It’s almost like... blackmail, isn’t it?”

“What did you say to me?!”

“Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!”

“*What* did you say to me?!”

“Nothing! Honest! I didn’t mean anything!”

She slid out of the booth and stood up, which isn't nearly as dramatic as standing up abruptly from a table.

"Where are you going?" Prufrock whimpered. Any whipped dog can whimper.

"What do *you* care?"

"Honey? Don't go! Honey, I love you! You know that, don't you? I didn't mean anything, honest!"

Madame Bovary, Prufrock's *queen*, gathered up the considerable royal dignity and bustled out of the diner.

In the silence, I thought I heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I don't think they were singing to Prufrock, though...

I looked at him and said, "She'll be back."

He didn't look up, just scowled at his sandwich. "How do you know?"

I considered and rejected three replies before I arrived at one he could comfortably misunderstand. "You were made for each other."

He smiled dreamily. "Yeah..."

"Yeah. Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy gets girl. Every day. Just like in the movies. Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, every day for lunch. Teenagers forever with your damp butts stuck to the vinyl..."

He started, not sure what he'd just heard. "Who *are* you, anyway?"

I smiled. I swear I didn't snicker. "I'm the eternal footman, I guess. It's a living..." I stood up, plopped a dollar tip on the table and walked out into the sunlight.

The Desperation Waltz.

“Hey, Tommy,” Jimmy said without looking up from the newspaper he had spread out on the bar, “what’s Reubenesque mean again?”

“Jeesh! It means ‘fat’. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“Statuesque?”

“Fat.”

“Weight proportionate?”

“Fat.”

“Full figured?”

“That means *really* fat. Whaddaya doin’ that for? We got a whole club full of babes here. How do you expect to get next to a girl in the personals?” He thumbed his own chest. “Tommy Klein, he knows better. Tommy Klein is an operator. You just stand back and watch me work.”

This is the truth: I don’t even like bars. I can go for years at a stretch without taking a drink, and the last place I’d be tempted to drink would be a bar. But I had come to a club that is not but ought to be called Desperation to see a singer and songwriter, a chanteuse named Celia Redmond who is making a name for herself.

Desperation is my pet name for the dumpy little country bar stuck right in the heart of the big city. The real name is “Country City” or something equally forgettable. It’s a costume bar, really, as phony in its way as a gay bar or the tap-room at the American Legion Hall. Country transplants and the children of country transplants and would-be country transplants put on clothes they don’t wear all day, speak in an affected diction and dance and drink until the house band strikes up “The Desperation Waltz” at midnight. Desperation is a place to escape from the real life of the big city: Office work, factory work, construction work – and unemployment.

Jimmy and Tommy were not untypical of the crowd, just more immanently pitiful.

Jimmy's a gentle giant of a man, as broad as he is tall. His hair was cut down to the scalp and he had a fringy little mustache and his neck was very, very red. Tommy was dapper. If Jimmy had asked me what dapper means, I would have told him: "Short, and overcompensating for it." He was trim and toned without actually bearing muscles and his cowboy costume fit him snugly. His hair was unconvincingly brown for a man with crow's feet around the eyes and he wore enough Old Spice for a dozen desperate aging men. Jimmy was slowly nursing a bottle of beer but Tommy was throwing back Seven and Sevens, one after the next, and belching delicately behind his hand.

"I don't see what you got against the personals, Tommy. I think it must take a lot of guts to put yourself out there like that."

"Yeah, sure. Guts. You can't see 'em. You can't touch 'em. And you sure can't dance with 'em. Take that one over there." He pointed to a pretty little girl in a starched white cowboy shirt and blue jeans. "She'd be all right if she'd drop a few pounds."

"Stuff it," the girl said. "My baby loves me just the way I am."

"He'd have to," Tommy scoffed.

Jimmy shook his head slowly and went back to reading the personals.

That was when Celia came on. The house band cut off the dance music in the middle of a song and all the dancers inside the split rail dance corral shuffled back to their tables, back to their drinks. At the far end of the room a single spotlight illuminated a bone thin blonde haired woman in a white sequined gown sitting behind a baby grand piano. She introduced herself not at all, just nodded her head and began to play and sing.

*She did you some permanent damage
You're still kinda trusting but it only goes so far
She did you some permanent damage
How can I touch you when you're nothing but scars?*

*I knew when I met you you had some things to get through
I took one look and saw the pain in your past
But I let my guard down caught you on the rebound
It hurt me to watch you but I thought it couldn't last*

Her voice was low and slow and haunting. It cut through the crowd noise easily and soon enough there was no crowd noise. Tommy tried to make some rude comment

about her appearance but Jimmy and everyone around him shushed him to a resentful silence.

*She did you some permanent damage
You're kinda suspicious but it don't mean a thing
She did you some permanent damage
How can we make music when you can't even sing?*

*You tell me she's done now I'm the only one now
You call me late at night to say you're always so alone
You tell me you need me can't wait to see me
But when we're together there's just nobody home*

*She did you some permanent damage
The ghosts in your eyes they're haunting me too
She did you some permanent damage
I wish I could help there's not a thing I can do*

*I must have been crazy to think I'd be your baby
I'd be the one who could help you start again
Thought I'd break through you get in next to you
Now I know I'll always be on the outside looking in*

*She did you some permanent damage
You're still kinda trusting but it only goes so far
She did you some permanent damage
How can I touch you when you're nothing but scars*

*She did you some permanent damage
Permanent damage
That's the way you are...*

At the end of the song the piano chords faded into a stunned silence and it was a moment before the crowd burst into applause. Drinks and bottles of beer were sweating untouched on tabletops and a few people, Jimmy among them, were wiping away tears.

“Hey, what’s the big deal” Tommy said. “I mean, she’s a looker, but she’s no spring chicken, is she?”

“Shut up, Tommy.”

“Hey, what’d I say? I wouldn’t kick her out of bed or nothin’.”

“Shut *up*, Tommy.”

Tommy scowled and downed another Seven and Seven.

Celia started playing an up-tempo tune and she played through two full verses to give the dancers time to get back out on the floor.

*If you can't compromise don't
Don't say you will if you know you won't
Don't stay with me if you're just playing a part
Don't give your word if you can't give me your heart*

*Don't ever feed me a line
If it's just water don't say it's wine
If it's a fever don't tell me it's more
Nothing worth having's worth lying for*

*If you resent it don't stay
It's not just me that you'll betray
A bad performance won't turn lead into gold
We'll both get nothing but we'll both get old*

*Don't cheat yourself out of life
There's more to marriage than just taking a wife
If there's no one at home you're hurrying to
It's just a graveyard you're hurrying through*

*If it's not right then it's wrong
If there's no poetry it's just a song
Everything crumbles when it's built on lies
There's never anyone behind a disguise*

*If it's not me it's not you
Better than nothing will never do
Better late than never is a much better plan
If I can't love me I can't love any man*

*If you can't compromise don't
Don't say you will if you know you won't*

*Don't stay with me if you're just playing a part
Don't give your word if you can't give me your heart*

She played a few more songs and then the spotlight dimmed and the house band took over, playing covers of country radio hits and the Macarena by request. Celia found a place at our end of the bar and deflected one would-be suitor after the next. Tommy gave it a shot, of course, and was shot down with dispatch.

“How’d you do?” Jimmy asked.

“Oh, forget her!” Tommy muttered. “Just another depressing babe with ‘issues’.”

Jimmy shrugged. “She sure can sing.”

I walked over to her and said, “May I speak with you?”

She gave me a slow smile of genuine amusement. “I’m not god, am I?”

I smiled back. “Only when you write.”

“And when you sing,” Jimmy added.

“It’s just country music, fellers,” she said in an affected drawl. “Just the waltz, plucked and strummed, with lyrics. No counter-melody. Nothing but layered harmonies. And a high warblin’ voice like a hound dog bit by a hedgehog. You think I’m joking, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“But I’m not. It’s the English ballad grafted onto the Viennese waltz, and the charm of it is that the simplicity of the music leaves all the room in the world for the lyrics. If you want it to be stupid, it’s the stupidest music there is.” She started to sing softly, just loud enough for me and Jimmy and Tommy to hear:

*The humor is forced
The bathos is boring
And everything’s smothered in schmaltz
It’s the music of degenerates
The degenerated waltz*

“What if you don’t want it to be stupid?” I asked.

She smiled a tight, bitter little smile. “What if you don’t?”

I shrugged. “I hate everything about country music except for the things that I love. Like everything else, it’s almost always desperately about nothing. But unlike everything else, sometimes it’s desperately about *something*. I like art that’s about something. That’s all I like in art, I guess.”

“Boy,” she said in her affected voice, “you got no bidness talkin’ about art and country music in the same mouthful of words.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I don’t sell enough beer as it is. I don’t pluck and I don’t strum and I’m too close to a piano bar singer for some of these folks anyway. So please don’t start talking about art. They won’t be able to run away fast enough.”

I said, “You underestimate your audience.” Jimmy nodded agreement.

“I think I overestimate their tolerance for pain. Songs about *something* do all right on the radio, but these folks came out to dance and get drunk. If you want to play in bars, sing up-tempo songs about nothing.”

“Sing songs about shex,” Tommy slurred.

“Okay, so why do you do it?” I asked.

She looked down at the bar. “That’s another story.”

“I have time.”

“What are you, a reporter or something?”

“Or something.”

She scowled at the bar. “Look out for your own.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Nothing. I was married once, a long time ago. I had two children.”

“I have two children,” Tommy said. “Two children? No, three children. Three ex-wives, three ex-children, three child-support payments.”

“Look out for your own,” Celia said.

I started to ask another question but she stood up and strode back to the piano. When the spotlight hit her she said, “Over at the bar there’s a reporter ‘or something’, and I think he wants to know if a white girl can sing the blues.” She started to play another slow ballad.

*For all the bitter shades of blue you put me through
For all the stains of hungry pain I washed out of my clothes
For all the nights of dreary fear of what you wouldn’t do
I’ve had to face the brutal truth everyone around me knows
And maybe bitter shades of blue are all you’ll let me show
But baby I’m not blue today I’m indigo*

*For all the blasts of shattered glass my dreams became
For all the cries I locked inside where no one else could hear
For all the sly beguiling lies all different all the same
I’m trading your opacity for one vision crystal clear
And maybe shattered shades of blue are all that you’ll permit
But baby I’m not blue today I’m violet*

*For all the passions passing leaving ghosts undead unmourned
For all the wasted days spent playing games I couldn’t win
For all the years the salty tears of life always unborn
I’ve pushed us to the end at last so my life can begin
And maybe ghostly shades of blue are all that you require
But baby I’m not blue today I’m sapphire*

The song had been very quiet, very much a piano bar kind of country. But now the piano came up strong and full and Celia’s voice came up strong and full to meet it.

*Maybe baby shades of blue are all that you can see
But baby I’m not blue today... I’m free...*

Again the crowd was stunned to silence. A good ol’ boy tried to steal a kiss and a good ol’ gal stomped his booted foot good and hard.

The spotlight went out on Celia and the bartender hollered out, “Last call!”

From the center of the riser the singer of the house band counseled, “Last call, my friends. Y’all know what that means. Last call is when the Fairy Godmother comes

down and turns every fair maiden into Cinderella and every proud man into Prince Charming. One last drink, one last dance, one last song. It's 'The Desperation Waltz'."

By this time Celia was standing next to me at the bar. She said, "Everybody goes home lonely, but nobody goes home alone."

I laughed. "On that cheery note, can I walk you to your car?"

She looked at me through squinted eyes. "Yeah."

The crowd from Desperation had spilled out on the sidewalk, desperate people milling about in the desperation waltz, silently sizing each other up and silently tearing each other down.

When we had left the throng behind us I said, "That was a beautiful song."

"Thank you."

"It wasn't the story, though, was it?"

"How'd you know?"

I shrugged. "Everyone cried but you. You said you *had* children. What happened to them?"

"What are you, some kind of voyeur?"

"Sure. Just as much as you are. A collector of impressions. A spinner of yarns, a teller of tales. I like to think that on my very best days I manage to shed a little grace. What happened to your children?"

She smiled and it was the most painful smile I've ever seen. "What do you think it means to be selfless? People say that word all the time. A selfless devotion to the poor. A selfless pursuit of excellence. A selfless regard for the needs of others. What do you think it means?"

"You tell me."

"There was a time in my life when it was very important for me to be selfless. I was committed. I was radicalized. I was empowered. I was organized. I was everything except alive. Marching here, protesting there, meetings, pickets, sit-ins, sing-outs, one-two-three-four we-don't-want-your-dirty-war. I was selfless. I was without a self.

When I thought about doing something for my own sake or for my husband's or for my children's, I'd talk myself out of it. I had two little girls and they needed a lot of my time, but there were poor little children all over the world who needed my time, and who was I – who was *I* – to put my own children first? My daughters wanted bikes, but I convinced them and convinced myself that the money was better spent on our causes. I was raised Lutheran and my husband was raised Lutheran and there was a Lutheran school right across the street from our apartment, but I convinced my husband that private schools were elitist, so our girls went to public school on the school bus instead."

We were walking slowly down the street, murkily lit by widely-spaced streetlights. "Go on."

"Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"If you can bear to tell it, I can bear to listen."

"It's not that much to tell. One day we all woke up late, so my husband had to drive the girls to school. A truck driver in a hurry ran a red light and killed everyone I loved. I bought bikes for the girls and buried them with them. It was a stupid thing to do, but I wanted for that to be the last stupid thing I did."

We want for the horrifying to be outsized and intentional, the devious plottings of a mastermind of evil. But the horrifying is almost always small and banal and common, much too common. Celia was stoical and grim, buried twenty years deep in her grief and her guilt. I said, "But you couldn't have known..."

"Life isn't about what you can't know and can't do. It's about what you can know and can do. I couldn't know my children would be taken from me so young, both at once, but I knew they'd die someday. And the worst of it is, I would have neglected them forever. I was wrong, and I learned my lesson. Exactly one day too late. I don't want to be absolved for anything. That's the *last* thing I want. Pretending your past didn't happen is just another kind of selflessness, isn't it?"

"I guess it is."

"I'll do like you. I'll try to shed a little grace instead." She stopped in front of a dusty brown Toyota. She said, "You're not coming on to me."

"Is that a question or an observation."

“An observation. An expression of surprise, if you want to know the truth.”

I chuckled. “Aren’t *we* the vain one? Should I make an effort to join the vast host of men you’ve rejected tonight?”

“You must be happily married.”

“The opposite, I think.”

“*Un*happily married?”

“Happily *un*married.”

“You’re not...?”

“No, I’m not gay. And I’m not indifferent. I’m just not like that.”

“A gentleman. Who’d a thunk it?”

“Go home,” I said. “Sleep and don’t dream. Shed grace when you write and when you sing.”

She smiled. “Same to you, bud. Look out for your own.”

I walked my way back up the dark street and when I got back to Desperation, Tommy was leaning against the wall. Jimmy was beside him, coaching him as he puked up one Seven and Seven after the next.

Jimmy nodded to me. Looking at Tommy, I said, “What do you think it means to be selfless, Jimmy?”

Tommy looked up at me and sneered. “It means you didn’t get laid either, smart boy!”

People who think the worst of themselves think the worst of everyone. It’s baked in the cake.

“Oh my darling,” Tommy sang and puked.

“Oh my darling,” he sang and puked.

“Oh my darling, Tommy Klein. You’re a boozier. Three time loser. And your name is Tommy Klein.” He puked again, the vomit splattering all over his cowboy boots and

carefully pressed jeans.

I don't even like bars. But grace is where you find it. And everybody's gotta take a side.

I said, "Look out for your own, boys."

Cinderella's memories of the zoo.

Cinderella was in a snit, and who could blame her? She was an orphan swarmed by a family of strangers, accidental intimates, pushy and intrusive and unwelcome. And the most distant stranger of all was the original Prince Charming, the man she had expected would always be beside her.

Physically distant, too, for he led the little brood, prancing on the balls of his feet, ostentatiously trying too hard, while Cinderella dragged her small feet at the rear, palpably punishing Prince Charming. Once he flounced back and tried to jolly her into joining them, into becoming one with them, but she blew him off with a furious shake of her head, horse-whipping him symbolically with her imperious, impetuous, long brown hair.

And something tells me it's *all* happening at the zoo. I was sitting on a bench watching the Galapagos tortoises fornicate, a surprisingly delicate, amazingly time-consuming process. The post-modern delegation from the Brothers Grimm came trundling up the path, and they made a fine exhibit, too.

Only a fool would call them a family. They were a composite, an ungainly grafting of two diseased trees. If you keep your eyes open you can spot them all over, whisper-shouting through clenched teeth at the mall, squabbling over dinner at Denny's, caucusing in sub-groups at gas stations and national parks. He's responsible for his kids, if he has any, and she's responsible for hers, and the children, ultimately, answer to no one. Very sad. Very stupid. Very common.

I didn't pay them any mind, not then. If you've seen one tragedy, you've seen one too many. But I caught up with them again on the Zoo Train, a sea serpent's idea of the ideal golf cart, designed for people who would rather sit than see the animals. And I didn't go looking for trouble, neither; I was sitting peacefully, placidly, blessedly alone when they invaded me. I was waiting for the train ride to begin, and they tumbled into the row of benches ahead of mine, puncturing the quiet with random and raucous thrusts of sound.

The Wicked Stepmother was not the loudest of the bunch, not by half, but she was certainly the busiest. Picking at the Wicked Stepbrother's clothes, lecturing the pouting

Cinderella, brushing at the Wicked Stepsister's hair, bossing Prince Charming around. She was a porcine excrescence on stubby legs, and her little round face was dominated by an expression that was both smug and profoundly stupid.

"Are we having *fun* yet!" she shrieked in a tone that mocked jocularly by being hostile. Her demand was directed at Cinderella, who glared in return.

The Wicked Stepbrother's face was smeared in a technicolor history of his day's devourings, chocolate and cotton candy and a slurpee and who knows what else. He was maybe five years old, and he wasn't evil, just practicing for it. He was batting at Cinderella's hand, trying to get at some small treasure she had clenched in her palm.

The Wicked Stepsister was impenetrably, imperviously, imperturbably wrapped up in the rapture of her own conversation. She yakked and she chattered, she blithered and blathered, and not one of the others paid her the smallest attention. In truth, her discourse was interesting, full of fact and insight, but her words seemed almost like a barrage – the best defense is a good offense.

The Wicked Stepmother jostled her with an elbow, temporarily interrupting her monologue. "Why don't you tell your sister what you've been doing in school." At the words "your sister" Cinderella blanched. Her face, until then haughty, went blank with rage. Very carefully, very decorously, she stood up, hopped down to the tarmac and climbed up into the bench beside me. As symbolic gestures go, it was nicely done.

Prince Charming's chief skill seems to be looking the wrong way at all the right moments, but now he tried to intervene, however ham-handedly. "But—" he started, then started over. "But aren't you *glad* you've got a new sister and brother? You've got a whole new *family*! Isn't that something!"

Of all the many flavors of dishonesty at Uncle Willie's Palatial Emporium of Lies, hustling children with faked enthusiasm is easily the most repellent. By the sour expression on her face, I'd say Cinderella came to the same conclusion.

"Oh, come *on*, honey," he wheedled, betraying his knowledge of the truth by pretending to deny it. "She didn't mean anything by it. Would you rather she called you her stepsister?"

Ice burns when it's cold enough and Prince Charming winced and looked away when he saw Cinderella's icy glare.

The Wicked Stepmother couldn't leave bad enough alone, though. She didn't say

anything, but she kept turning back and looking at Cinderella. Sometimes furtively, sometimes angrily, sometimes hurtfully. I had the idea she was trying things more or less at random. I also had the idea that the shame of being spurned was far more important to her than the reason for the spurning. To her credit, Cinderella ignored her entirely.

And to my credit, I said nothing – for a change. Instead, I waited for the Wicked Stepmother to look away for an instant, then I tapped Cinderella gently on her clenched fist. She looked up at me with pale blue eyes, sad and defiant and enormous. I shrugged and she opened her hand as though it were a treasure chest. In her palm was a tiny locket on a delicate gold chain. “He was trying to take it from me,” she said, pointing the Wicked Stepbrother.

“Is it from your mom?” I asked.

Her chin quivered and I thought she was about to bawl. Instead she said, “*He* gave it to me.” She gestured with her head at Prince Charming. He displayed his talent for looking the wrong way at the right moment.

And without being told, I knew the rest of the story. Cinderella was visiting her daddy’s new home. His new wife, who was not her mother. His new children, who were not her brother and sister. Not really his children, but she had no way of knowing that. A father’s relationship is to his children. A mother’s relationship is to her children. But a stepparent’s relationship is to his or her new spouse, and the relationship to the children is indirect and attenuated. That’s *why* the composite families shout and squabble and caucus, because they’re not really families. They can’t be. Everybody knows the stepparent is an after-market add-on, spare parts. And everybody pretends not to know. And everybody betrays the pretense, constantly undermining the stepparent’s false status by affecting to uphold it.

But Cinderella couldn’t know that. From her point of view, *she* was the spare parts. Her daddy had abandoned her – or so it must have seemed to her – and now he had replaced her and her mother with a brand new family, complete and ready-made. She had been robbed of her father and he had been robbed of his fatherhood and both of them were doomed by blindness and longing to race frantically after vain substitutes for the treasures that can never be replaced.

Very sad. Very stupid. Very common.

But everybody’s gotta take a side...

I said: “It’s hard to believe it’s so cool today when it was so hot just last week. Fall has fallen, resoundingly.”

She giggled, and that was good enough.

“I was swimming this time last week. I jumped in the water, and I got some up my nose. And just for an instant I was eight years old again. I had a pure and perfect memory of being a kid and getting water up my nose every time I went swimming. Does that ever happen to you?”

“I always get water in my nose. In my ears, too.”

“That’s not what I mean. Did you ever have a memory that’s as perfect as a dream? The other day I smelled a two-stroke engine, and it just about knocked me over.”

“What’s a two-stroke engine?”

I smiled. “I’m not going to explain internal combustion engines, not without a blackboard. A two-stroke engine is a simple little gas motor. You find ’em on garden equipment and motor boats. That’s what was so weird about it, though. I smelled that motor and it took me back thirty years. I felt like I was standing on a dock launching a fishing boat with my grandfather. I could smell the motor and the water and the fish and the dirt and the nightcrawlers. I could hear geese a long way off and I could hear my grandpa whistling, and it was just like I was right there, all in a flash. Does that ever happen to you?”

The Wicked Stepbrother had turned around and he was watching me with rapt attention. His chin was planted on the back of his bench, and he wasn’t missing a word. His mother was straining to turn and straining not to turn and doing everything she could to interpose herself between Cinderella and me, everything except actually planting her fulsome fundament between us.

Cinderella scrunched her tiny little shoulders in a shrug and I said, “I can think of a hundred little things like that. Camping out or riding my bike on dirt roads or bouncing around in the back of a pick-up truck loaded with Halloween pumpkins or looking at a great big yellow moon and wondering why it was so big.”

“I know why it was so big,” announced the Wicked Stepsister, launching into an endless lecture about perspective and proportion.

I said: “The point is, my past isn’t gone, it’s all right here.” I rapped myself on the

noggin and the Wicked Stepbrother laughed with a wicked delight. “The good part is, it’s all in there, pure and clean and perfect. The bad part is, I didn’t pick what’s there, it sort of picked me.”

“What’s *that* mean?” Cinderella asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know, precisely. When you live, you just live. You don’t think, ‘I must remember this, I must forget this.’ You just remember and forget, and you don’t have a lot to say about it. But you do have a *little* to say about it.”

“What?” she demanded. Who could resist a hook like that?

I shrugged again. “I’m too stupid for this job. I think you find what you’re looking for, so I guess the thing to do is look for things in your life that you hope someday to find in your memories. Does that make sense?”

“...Not really.”

“Well, *something’s* gonna go in there, and it’s gonna come back out, again and again, pure and clean and perfect. If you live for pain, if you treasure every little wound, if you pick at your scabs so they never, ever heal, that’s what you’re going to find in your memories. But if you live for happiness, for the joy and accomplishment you can find in life, then *that’s* what you’ll find in your memories.”

Cinderella said nothing, just looked thoughtful. The Wicked Stepmother looked like she was about to bust a valve.

“Do you know the word ‘wrest’? As in ‘wrestle’?”

Cinderella shrugged. The Wicked Stepsister said, “*I* do,” and launched into a dictionary definition.

I said, “To wrest something means to take it away by force, like you might wrest a weapon away from a bad guy. I want you to remember that word, because the most valuable thing I know is this: To live, to love your life, you have to wrest joy from pain.”

She whispered it: “Wrest joy from pain.”

“Wrest joy from pain. If you remember that much, you’ll remember this day forever.”

She said it again, louder. “Wrest joy from pain.”

The Wicked Stepmother glared at me, and I would have been delighted to know whatever it was she thought she might want to say to me. The simple truth is that I'm a subversive, and I do nothing to hide it. But not very many people know *how* I'm subversive. And who is going to get in the way of a man who's talking a little girl back from the depths of misery? I'm sure the Wicked Stepmother wanted to, though, more from censorious impulses than understanding. Prince Charming was quietly delighted to have me solve his problems for him.

I said, "Do you know the story of Cinderella?"

"She got married to the prince!" said the Wicked Stepbrother. The train was moving, snaking along like a gaggle of Shriners on tricycles. It wasn't safe to jump off and back on, so the little boy climbed over the bench and hopped down beside me, tucking himself under my arm. Prince Charming tried to haul him back over but he wrestled free then handily wielded the rusty scalpel of stepfather emasculation: "You're not my daddy! You're not the boss of me!"

I ignored all these events. "It's just at the end of the story that she marries the prince. Here's what *really* happened," I confided.

It's not the story, it's the storyteller, and I have proof: The Wicked Stepsister closed her flapping yap and turned around to listen. The Wicked Stepmother was ostentatiously not listening with all her might. Prince Charming seemed to be grateful to be temporarily relieved of all the indefinite responsibilities of his tenuous non-position.

I said, "Cinderella was a little girl who lived with her mother and her father, and she was very happy. But then her mother died. She was sad for her mother, but she was happy that she still had her father. But then her father married a very wicked widow woman who had two very wicked daughters."

"They were mean to her!" said the Wicked Stepbrother.

"They were mean to her," I agreed, "but she still had her father, and she was happy when they could be alone together. But then her father died, and Cinderella was all alone. She was an orphan, but no one knew it. They thought she had her stepmother and her two stepsisters, but really she had no one left at all. She was all alone, but no one could see that. It didn't matter that they were mean to her, that they made her do all the work. What mattered was that she had lost her whole family and no one knew it, no one could see the truth."

To their credit, the Wicked Stepsister and the Wicked Stepbrother both had tears in

their eyes. Cinderella's eyes were glassy but defiant. I said, "Wrest joy from pain," and she nodded.

The train was stopped by the baboon exhibit. I looked at my watch. "Gotta run, my lady. Empus-tay ugit-fay."

She giggled. "What's *that* mean?"

"It means time flies right over your head."

Prince Charming turned and said, "Thank you."

I smiled a sweet, subversive smile. "If you only knew..." I looked into Cinderella's big blue eyes. I said, "Wrest joy from pain."

She said, "I'll remember," and I knew she would.

The Wicked Stepmother felt compelled to reassert herself. "Say good-bye to the nice man," she said in a sing-song, saccharine voice.

To her credit, Cinderella ignored her entirely.

I touched my fingertip to the end of her tiny nose, the only Fairy Godfather on call at the zoo. "Don't fall for the first idiot who rubs your feet."

She giggled, and that was good enough.

Mary Canary on her way to feed the pigeons.

“I married myself a quiet man. He told me so himself, many times. When he was drunk, he’d shout it to the world.”

Mary Canary said that. She says stuff like that just to make sure no one’s listening. And no one on the city bus was, no one except me.

And Mary Canary is not her real name; she just calls herself that. Her real name is Maria Carnase, and I had to work on her quite a while to get that out of her. She’s not quite homeless, not quite penniless, not quite elderly and only mildly odorous. She’s bone thin and desiccated, and her flowered tent dress fit her like a tent. Her hair is not quite white and she wears it under a net. She had on cheap sneakers and compression hose bunched up at the ankles; seemingly, there was no flesh on her legs for the hose to compress. She has a bus pass and a mission. The bus pass is paid for by the taxpayers, but the mission is all her own.

“I like the sound of a pedal steel guitar. It makes me think of a cat curling up for an ear-scratching.”

A college girl with a black ponytail stared hard at her paperback book. An office geek whistled softly through his teeth and looked every which way except at Mary Canary.

“When it gets too quiet, I can barely hear. I can’t hear myself sigh for the roar of the silence.”

A very tall, very thin black man got up and walked to the front of the bus. He stood hanging from a pole as if he were about to get off, but he didn’t.

“If I look behind my eyes, I can see the naked face of god.”

A portly little man who had gained a pound or two since he’d bought his suit adjusted and adjusted and adjusted his necktie.

And Mary Canary said, “I think you’re noticing me.” She said that to me, of course.

“Yes, I am.”

“You’re not supposed to do that.”

“Why not?”

“Nobody does.”

I shook my head and smiled a gentle smile. “Everybody does. And you know it.”

She shook her head, too, but it was as if she were throwing something away. She said, “Would everyone who notices me please stand up?”

Ms. Ponytail snapped a page and read even harder. The office geek discovered something fascinating in his fingernails. The black man stooped over and peered out the window, as if he were trying to decide if this was his destination. His Portliness adjusted and adjusted and adjusted his necktie.

Mary Canary threw her palms out. “You see?”

I said: “I do.”

And I do, too. I’ve never left America, but I’m old enough to have lived in a different country. In the America I grew up in, “democracy” didn’t mean “one man, one vote,” it meant “all men are created equal.” When I idealize the America of my youth, I like to think of the Diamondback rattlesnake or the Saguaro cactus: Heavily armed but peaceable unless provoked.

But the *actual* symbol of that America gone by is the mongrel dog. The myth of the mongrel dog is the myth of American democracy: The mongrel has the good qualities of all of the pedigreed breeds, but none of the crippling disadvantages of generations of inbreeding.

Probably, the Americans of the nineteenth century prospered so well so quickly not because they were mongrels but because they were the first humans in history to be let off the leash, at least for a while. But the creed of democracy – one person is fully the equal of the next – persisted well into the twentieth century. Snobbery and social distancing were never fully banished, of course, but from the Revolutionary War right through to the Second World War, there was a more than countervailing spirit of a democracy we might call Jacksonian. If we weren’t equal in the quality of boots we wore, we were equal in the quality of mud we slogged through in our boots.

And that democracy is gone from America. Among the most perfectly Jacksonian class

of people, the class to which Mary Canary and I belong, social distancing is the rule, rarely broken. Not *by* us, mind you. *To* us. This is so much a part of the air I breathe that I rarely think of it, except when someone like Mary Canary calls it to mind.

True fact: My fellow citizens have outfitted me with the most fundamentally perfect disguise. They refuse to see me, and therefore they *don't* see me. Except they do. Except they don't want to. So they don't, damnit!, no matter how much effort that takes.

"I'm going to feed the pigeons today," Mary Canary said. She held up a huge clear plastic bag filled with bread crumbs.

"Wow! Where'd you get all that bread?"

"Food Stamps," she said solemnly.

I stifled a chuckle.

"I have an energy allowance from the state, so I can afford to toast it all. It takes a long time to toast this much bread."

"I'll bet."

"And I have a bus pass to take me down to Tremont Park. That's where the most pigeons are."

Everyone on the bus was not listening to Mary Canary, not listening with all their might.

"Admit it," she said. "It's funny isn't it?"

"What is?"

"Feeding the pigeons. No one wants pigeons to live. Why would *anyone* want filthy, disgusting pigeons to live? No one wants them to live, they just don't want to see them die."

I believe in holding people accountable for what they say and do. "Why is that funny?"

She held up the bag of bread crumbs again. "Who paid for this?" She cackled.

I said, "I see."

“They don’t want me to live. They just don’t want to watch me die.” She cackled again, louder, and the portly man shivered.

Speaking loudly enough to carry up to the thin black man still hanging on up front, I said, “Everyone you treat with this scorn is somebody’s mother or somebody’s brother or somebody’s niece or somebody’s son. No one wants to believe it, but it could happen to you, too.”

And everyone except Mary Canary was not listening to me, not listening with all their might.

She said, “When I close my eyes, I can see all the way to the edge of the universe.”

“Oh, give ’em a break.”

And Mary Canary treated me with the perfect injustice that is the hallmark of the America that has finally distanced itself from democracy:

She pretended to ignore me.

A canticle for Kathleen Sullivan.

I got to the hospital after visiting hours, but the nurse led me to the room anyway. “There hasn’t been anyone,” she confided.

I pursed my lips in grim acknowledgment. “That’s why I’m here.”

Inside the room the patient looked like purple death. It was a critical-care room, bright and white and cheerfully clinical. The bed was surrounded by apparatus, with lines and leads and probes and IV tubes running to him. The only unbruised part of him that I could see were his eyes, and his eyes were more deeply wounded than anything.

I’ll tell you his story, but I won’t tell you his name. His name is yours. His name is mine. His name is legion...

I pulled up a chair and got as close to the bed as I could. I wanted to see his eyes. I wanted him to see mine. His jaw was wired and he was breathing through a plastic tube mounted in his throat, which makes for a fairly one-sided conversation.

“I just came from the funeral,” I said. “Biggest one I’ve ever seen. The procession must have been two miles long. Kathleen Sullivan, mother of six, grandmother of two, with two more on the way, loving wife of Brian Sullivan – in the newspaper it’s just something that’s there, like the basketball scores or the stock tables. People die every day. People are born every day. It doesn’t seem to matter very much.”

I shrugged. “I think it does. I’ll tell you a story: About six months ago there was a woman driving down Endicott Avenue. Driving very safely, five miles an hour below the speed limit, doing everything just exactly right. There were some schoolboys riding their bikes on the sidewalk beside her, and, all at once, one of the boys decided to dart out into the street, right in front of her car. She stood on the brake pedal, but it was already too late. Screech, crunch, tragedy. The boy was killed instantly.

“She saw it, of course. His little schoolfriends saw it. Half a block away was the crossing guard, and she had never stopped barking at those boys to be safe on their bikes. She saw it all, too. That boy’s parents had to live through everything they’d always dreaded, and the parents and relatives and friends of everyone involved had to

try to help pick up the pieces.

“Was the driver at fault? Surely not. She was doing just what she was supposed to do. The crossing guard? She couldn’t have foreseen it, couldn’t have prevented it. The boy’s friends? The boy himself? They were just being kids, taking stupid chances because they can’t see ahead to the consequences. The dead boy’s parents? You can bet they blame themselves, but I’m sure they had leaned all over their son about bicycle safety.

“The fact is that no one was *culpable* in that death. But everyone involved is answering for it. Can you imagine the driver’s nightmares? Can you hear the screams of those boys as they wake up, night after night, reliving the accident? The crossing guard, questioning herself day after day, asking what she could have done differently. The parents, haggard and sleepless, no one to turn to, maybe not even each other. None of them earned this punishment, but they live with it anyway. Not for days or months or years – forever. The nightmares will *never* stop, and we can only hope that they’ll come less often in time.”

I looked to the floor, a safer place to put my eyes. “Every death matters. I hear people talk about killing other people – killing criminals or supposed bad guys overseas or just joking about killing people they don’t like – and I wonder what it is they’re thinking. There is no casual death, no easy death, no safely, comfortably *abstract* death. There’s only the real death of real people, the death that results in endless, boundless, horrifying grief even when *no one* is at fault. How could anyone be *casual* about that?

“I can make their answer; I’ve heard it often enough. They claim that they can kill and not be injured in the way that driver was – hurt utterly and permanently – because killing their victims is an act of justice. The irony is that criminals say much the same thing, that it doesn’t hurt *them* to hurt people, even kill people. I think the hurt is there, it’s just much deeper. It’s like scar tissue, so thick it can’t be penetrated. They claim not to be hurt by murdering people, but I think it must be because something inside them is already dead. In that way, the people who witnessed that awful accident are luckier, even though they seem to be suffering so much worse. If you can’t bleed, you can’t heal...”

I cleared my throat, but I couldn’t look up. “Kathleen Sullivan was the consummate mother, a model of perfect performance. I didn’t know her. I wish I had. She was everything I admire on this earth, a champion of the very *best* values. Her husband, Brian, was out in the world, bringing home the bacon, and she was in charge of hearth and home, kith and kin. The children all went to Catholic school, then they went on to

the best Catholic high schools. They're a prosperous family, but they've earned every penny they have, and they've given a small fortune away. Everywhere you look you see professionally loathsome people spitting at the family, and everywhere you don't look there are families like the Sullivans – happy, productive, committed people raising happy, productive, committed children.”

I was having trouble blinking back my tears. “Kathleen Sullivan was a Catholic. Not a Christmas and Easter Catholic, not a Sunday-morning Catholic. She was a Catholic all the time, all the way to the core of her being. When one of her children left home, or one of her grandchildren, when one of her friends or her children's friends left her house, she would trace the sign of the cross on their foreheads, a small prayer for the small miracle of safe travel...

“Someone should have done that for her...”

I was quiet for a long time, until I was sure I could trust my voice. “Just a second later, just a second before she got into her car, just the tiny amount of time it takes to trace a cross on a forehead, and you would have missed her. Blind drunk, a hundred miles an hour in a Corvette, a big dumb dork all wrapped up in a fiberglass condom, all set to penetrate *something*. She and her daughter had been to the theater, did you know that? A nice little mother-daughter thing, a girls' night out. Not much of a play, not much of a memory years from now, just the kind of thing that they did together. I expect they were chatting, when you hit them. About the play or school or who has a crush on whom. No huge drama, nothing of any great moment, just more of the current of love that had always flown between them.

“And then, all at once, it was over. Screech, crunch, tragedy. A Land Rover, the safest car they could afford, and they worked hard to be able to afford a car that safe. But your little Corvette got under them and flipped them. Kathleen Sullivan, dead on arrival. Margaret Sullivan, critical but stable. She was in her wheelchair at the funeral, the wheelchair she'll be in from now on. I think her mother would have been proud of how strong she was...”

There were tears welled up in his eyes, and that was what I had come to see: If you can't bleed, you can't heal. “The hospital's all dressed up for Christmas. More sad than cheerful, I think, tiny little twinkling lights trying to compete with the glaring fluorescents. But there's so much tragedy here, so much illness and sadness and pain and death. The people who work here are very tough, trying to spread cheerfulness and hope however they can.

“I don't see any Christmas decorations in your room. No cards. No gifts. No flowers.

No friends. Where are all your good-time drinkin' buddies? Where are your friends from work? Where are your folks...? The nurses care about you, you know. They want patients to have visitors no matter how they got here, no matter what they've done. But a nurse told me that I'm your first visitor. A stranger, more a hobo than anything else, and yet I'm the only person who took the trouble to visit you in the hospital. Why do you suppose that is...?"

He was crying for himself by now, not for Kathleen Sullivan. "I brought you a Christmas present." I pulled a book out of my bag and held it up where he could see it. "It's a biography of Ignatius Loyola. Do you know who that is? He founded the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, which in turn built Catholic schools – grammar schools, high schools, colleges – all over the world. People say, 'What can one person do?' Well here's a man, a single, solitary man, who changed all of Western civilization, who did more to spread the philosophy of reason than any other person in human history.

"That's not why I brought you the book, though. The interesting thing about Loyola is that he was a vile and vicious man when he was very young. He gambled. He chased women. He drank and drank and drank. You're a victim of your own laziness and stupidity, but it wouldn't be going too far to say that Loyola was actually evil when he was young. But then he got sick, and while he was laid up he read a biography of Jesus.

"It changed his life. When he recovered he taught himself Latin so that he could say the Mass. He was ordained and started to rise through the ranks of the priesthood. He founded the Jesuits and served as the right-hand-man of the Pope. He changed his life completely. Here's another thing people say, 'We are what we are. A leopard can't change his spots.' Ignatius Loyola changed his *life*. He went from being the worst sort of man to being one of the best specimens of humanity ever to grace the earth. And he did it by an act of will, by resolving to change his mind, to change his heart, to change his behavior. To do better where he had done badly."

I smiled a tight little smile. "I don't know if you believe in God. I don't, to say the truth. But I revere Loyola, for the gift of reason he brought to the least of us, the smallest and the weakest – and therefore most in need of the treasures only reason can bring. And I admire him for the way he took the dross he had made of his life and spun of it the gold to form those treasures only reason can bring..."

I sat in silence for a long time, just looking at him. "Lives collide," I said, "and everyone suffers, guilty or not. It's Christmas at the Sullivan home, a big brick house set back from the street. The decorations have been up since Thanksgiving, blue and green and gold. But the decorations are just a sad reminder of the joy that has always

been theirs, *should* always have been theirs. By now Brian Sullivan is wandering that big old house, searching for something he never could have lost. The children are sitting, saying nothing, staring at nothing. Those two little grandchildren want to rejoice in their Christmas, and they can't understand why everyone else is on the verge of tears."

I put the book on the table by his bed and stood beside him, looking at his bruised face, looking into his wounded eyes. I said, "And here we are, Christmas at the hospital, just you and me and all the cheer we can find in blinking diodes. There are people who would say that you deserve to have died in that crash, but I don't believe there is any justice in death. Every death matters. Every *life* matters. And yet I don't believe your life was miraculously spared by God. You just got lucky, that's all.

"But I *do* believe in redemption. Not the redemption of Jesus – *after* death. But the redemption of Ignatius Loyola, the conscious choice to do better in the midst of chaotic life. You have a second chance. You have to live with what you've done, live with a grief much worse than the Sullivans are going through, much worse than that poor woman on Endicott Avenue. You have to live with the knowledge that you *caused* a death, that you *crippled* a young girl, her life barely begun. But you are still alive, and while you're alive there is still a chance for you to rise above your past, to do better where you had done badly."

Somewhere far down the hall a choir of children was singing the *Canticle of the Bells*, their voices high and sweet and perfect. The tears were rolling down his cheek, and I wet my finger in them. "If you can bleed, you can heal... For Kathleen Sullivan, may she rest in peace. And for you." Very slowly, very gently, I used the wetness on my fingertip to trace the sign of the cross on his forehead. I said, "Do better..."

How to slay dragons.

And now I am a man-killer.

We live with the consequences of our choices, and we cannot fail to live with all the consequences of all our choices. *Sic semper nobis, sic etiam mihi*. Thus always to us, thus even to me.

Your money? Or your life? Your mind – the means of your life? Or your life – the end of your mind’s devising? Lie or die? Can any such choice be made? And if it can’t – what then?

What if you choose neither?

What then?

I got mugged, that’s what happened. Or almost mugged, anyway. On New Year’s Eve of all days, the very last day of the bloodiest century in human history.

I live on the edge of a world you barely know about, that place you read about in the newspaper, that fetid cavern that seems to house everything that is vicious and venomous and vile. I’m not interested in vice except as the object of derision, which is why I’m on the edge of that world. But I know the price of living where you do instead, and I choose not to pay it.

So I was out on New Year’s Eve. Not out partying, not out driving drunk, not out shooting off fireworks or shooting off my mouth. I was out because that’s where I am almost all of the time, out walking the empty streets.

Since before Thanksgiving I had been wandering within a mile or so of a big-city shopping mall. Not for any reason, but simply because I lacked the reason to go somewhere else. I see your story in what you do, in how you behave. If your story interests me I will stick around to watch you. Until I understand you. Or until I think I do. Or until I get bored.

This is a fact, and it might be news to you: Stray dogs don’t stray far. The population of vagrants who infest the neighborhood around a big-city shopping mall is pretty stable.

Homeless people, winos, addicts, runaways – you think they come and go. But in fact mostly they come and stay. They might sleep in a different place every night, but once they get to know the merchants and the restaurants and the dumpsters, they're not quick to move on to the unknown.

So it was no surprise to me that my would-be, wanna-be mugger was known to me. Not a friend, not even a nodding-acquaintance, but someone I'd seen again and again in the past weeks.

He was a tweaker, a methamphetamine addict. Just a kid, not even twenty, but he was dying. Even before he tried to mug me he was dying. He had an uncontrolled infection in his right leg, an immense pus-filled edema. Like all tweakers he was as thin as a ghost, but his right leg was swollen, from his ankle to his thigh, to the girth of a trash basket. He walked that way, as if his leg was embedded to the hip in a trash basket.

I had been watching him, catching sight of him when he was there to be seen, because I knew he was going to die. He needed to be in an ambulance. He needed to be in an emergency room. He needed to be in a hospital. Instead he was dragging his swollen leg from parking lot to parking lot, from dumpster to dumpster, from ecstatic high to crushing low, from the shivering cold to the endless shivering sweats. He was going to die, and I was going to let him. So were you.

But each of us is master of his own fate, and thus it was even for him. He mugged me, or tried to, at the shrine of St. Mary outside a Catholic church. And there did he die, his face lit in his last moments by the flicker of votive candles. *Sic semper tyrannis*. Thus always to tyrants.

I was lighting candles for my dead, sitting cross-legged on the concrete before the statue of Mary. There was no one around, of course, and the shrine was out of sight from the street. He came upon me from behind, and it wasn't much of a sneak attack considering that he had to drag that trash basket of a leg behind him with every pace. He stopped right behind me, and it was only when I heard him pull back the hammer of a revolver that I began to be concerned.

Without turning, without taking my eyes away from my candles, I said, "Go ahead."

"Wuh?"

"Go ahead. Kill me."

"Hey, man, I don't wanna kill you. I'm just rippin' you off."

“No,” I said. “That’s not what you’re doing. But it doesn’t matter. I won’t let you steal from me.”

“You won’t *let* me? How are you gonna *stop* me?”

I smiled, though only the Blessed Virgin could see my face. “Just like this.”

“Huh?”

“Just like this. I will not permit you to steal from me. I will not despoil myself in your behalf. I will not pretend that your will is mine, that your mind can cause my behavior. I will not cooperate with you.”

“Say *what?*”

“You pretend that your gun controls my behavior. That because you’re holding that gun, you can control my behavior. But you know this is false. That’s *why* you have the gun. If you could control my behavior, you wouldn’t need the gun. We both know the truth: Only *I* control my behavior. And I will not volunteer to affect to pretend to believe that the truth is untrue. I won’t lie for you, to buttress your insane illusions.”

“But– I can fucking kill you!”

“Sure you can. Go ahead.”

“Wuh?”

“Go ahead. Kill me. Be a killer. Be a murderer.”

“But... Don’t you want to live...?”

“Not like that, not ever.” I spun myself around so I could look up at him. He was filthy and feral, of course, his clothing more rags than fabric. The seam of his right trouser leg was ripped up to the waist, and the great swollen mass of that infected leg was right in my face. “Look at me,” I said. “What do you see?”

To this he answered nothing.

“Do I look like a straight to you?”

“Not hardly.”

“Do I look bent?”

“Not really. There’s something different about you.”

“That’s exactly right. I’m not straight and I’m not bent. There are only two choices, and I choose neither. So what am I, if I’m not straight and not bent? Am I a circle? A spiral? Maybe I’m a coil, bouncing from place to place. Refusing to lie, refusing to die. Refusing to kill, refusing to be killed. Refusing to enslave, refusing to be enslaved.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about choices. The choice is to lie or to die. To pretend that people with guns can control my behavior, or to let them kill me. The straights choose to lie. The bents choose to die. I choose neither.”

“I’ll fucking kill you! I’ll do it if I have to!”

I shifted my weight onto my left hip. “This is your argument: Rather than die, I should prefer to live knowing that I have groveled before the likes of you. I won’t do it. I will not lie for you.”

That was one twist too many and I knew it. He would never have become a killer, not in a world of cooperative victims. But he was swinging the gun around to aim it at me, and I did not hesitate to punch him hard, right in his infected leg. It was so swollen that it burst with a splash of pus, and he collapsed, screaming. And as he collapsed he squeezed the trigger on his gun and it went off, tearing through his own intestines.

“What the fuck did you do that for?” he groaned.

“I told you. I choose neither. I won’t lie for you and I won’t die for you.”

“So now *I’m* going to die!”

I didn’t say, “And whose choice was that?” Instead I said, “If we can get you to the hospital, you should be okay.”

“No. Three weeks in the hospital. Three months in County. Then three years or more in prison...” He was sobbing, doubled over in pain.

I didn’t argue with him. I leaned my back against the edge of the shrine, then pulled him over to lean against me. I put my arms around him and said the Glory Be over and over again.

“Are you Catholic?”

“Sometimes. When it matters.” I switched to the Hail Mary, because it seemed twice appropriate. “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.”

And there did he die, embraced by the man who had caused his death, vaguely lit by the candles in the shrine of Holy Mary. *Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat ei.* Eternal rest grant him, O Lord, and let light everlasting shine upon him. I kept saying the prayers even after I knew he was dead, only getting up when the New Year’s fireworks erupted into the sky.

I propped him up against the shrine, then went to call the police from a pay-phone. I told them where to find the body, then I walked away. And I just kept walking, my clothes smeared with pus and blood. What used to be a community is now more like a concentration camp, and reporting a crime is a good way to get sent to jail – especially if you look bent to a straight.

So I kept walking. I am among you, but I am not one of you; I will not yield to you. I was ashamed of myself. I *am* ashamed of myself. Will be until I die. I never wanted to cause a death, not even to avoid my own. But we live with the consequences of our choices. Thus always to all of us. Thus always even to me.

But my wanna-be killer died on the very last day of the bloodiest century in human history. By the time I had reported his death, it was a new year, a new century, a new millennium. And that, at the last, is what I’m writing about.

I’ve been doing this, walking this nation and writing about what I see, for more than twenty years now. In that time, I’ve evolved four rules for these stories, the Willie stories, and this one breaks three of them. First, a Willie story is almost always short, and this one isn’t. Second, a Willie story is almost never self-revealing, and this one is. Third, every Willie story has at least one joke, and this one has none.

But the fourth rule stands: Every Willie story is about you. You think they’re about the people I’m making fun of, but they’re not. They’re about you, about people who are basically honest and decent, but who come to be complicit in everything that is vicious and venomous and vile. Not from loving vice, but from failing to love virtue.

Your mind or your life, lie or die. That’s the demand at the bottom of your tax return. Lie or die. That’s the threat they issue to your son, compelled to register for military enslavement. Lie or die. That’s the threat they make to your employer with thousands

of pages of regulations. Lie or die, all day, every day, everywhere you turn. Lie or die, again and again, for every day of your life.

And every day of your life, you choose the lie. You choose to cooperate and to pretend to surrender control of your life, to insist by your actions that some other mind can control your behavior, but your own cannot. You lie and you lie and you lie, and millions of innocents die. And you yourself persist only by refusing to acknowledge your groveling. Your mind – the means of your life, the awareness and memory and anticipation of your actions – becomes the enemy of your survival. To be aware that you have desecrated the glorious gift of human sovereignty is the path to self-slaughter, so you must slaughter self-awareness instead.

This is a mistake.

The worst, most loathsome, most vicious tyrant on the Earth is no different from my late, unlamented non-mugger. He is nothing without your cooperation. Without your active *voluntary* cooperation. Even I am apt to say “compelled this” and “coerced that,” but in actual fact, human *behavior* cannot be coerced. Only human *bodies* can be coerced, pushed around like mannequins. Human behavior can only be initiated by an act of will originating within the person acting. It cannot be caused or controlled from the outside. If you refuse to cooperate with the tyrant, he cannot *cause* your cooperation. He can push you around, even kill you, but he cannot cause you to initiate *any* purposive action.

You live in chains. In this awful century just passed, more than 150 *million* innocent people died in chains. And yet every person ever born was born free – unalterably, inviolably, immaculately free...

And the tyrants know it. That’s why they have guns. That’s why they want to take away *your* guns. Again and again they demand that you lie or die, and they never for a moment doubt that you might choose neither. And they bluster and brag that you never will, and they toss and turn in sleepless nights, because they know someday you shall. *Sic semper tyrannosauris*. Thus always to dinosaurs.

Choose neither. This is my wish for the Third Millennium. Choose neither, that we might finally become a fully human race, neither killing nor being killed, neither enslaving nor being enslaved, neither seeking to control others nor pretending to surrender to their control.

Choose neither. Because this is the only *human* choice.

Choose neither. And the dragons will be slain.

I wish you peace,

William Francis Xavier O'Connell
01/01/2001

Uncle Willie's manifesto: If the words aren't worth etching into stone, get someone else to write them.

This is a story about a story, so fasten your seatbelt. At any moment, we could be plunged *three* layers deep in narration, like that daredevil Emily Brontë, who first taught the English-speaking world how to do this job.

Here's what happened: I was in Houston for a while last Summer, about which more probably never. I got around by bus, easy enough to do for anyone who likes to wait and walk. One sweaty afternoon I sat down on a bus and to my right, scratched into that semi-indestructible stuff they use to line buses, were these words:

Do your worst. I will not kneel.

I wrote that, a long time ago, in a story called [*Anastasia in the Light and Shadow*](#). It's my own favorite of the Ramblin' Gamblin' Willie stories, and I know other people love it, too. There really is an Anastasia, so you know. The story is all mine – the world is my sock puppet – but that little girl must be old enough to vote by now.

But it's the scratching in the wall that's interesting to me. I think I may have less authorial vanity than is common, plausibly because I have less reason for it, and less use. If I make the mistake of counting my money, I suffer a long contemplation after a quick calculation; it's enough to ruin my whole day. But the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls – or bus walls in cities more suburban – and that is success as almost no writer ever has it.

When I was a young guy in Fun City, I got around town, for the most part, on the Seventh Avenue IRT – that's the 1, 2 and 3 trains for all you tourists. You step up to the platform to wait for the train and to your left will be a cast-iron girder, rough as an alligator when it was poured but smoothed and sculpted and rounded by decades' of high-gloss latex paint. And scratched into that paint, just at eye level, will be this:

Pray.

On every girder. On every platform. In every station. Hundreds of girders, maybe

thousands, all inscribed “Pray.”

Do you want to dismiss it? Are you at your ease only when the world is small and stupid and undemanding? Yes, someone has OCD – maybe several someones. But the effort it takes to scratch those four little letters into hard, thick-slathered paint, and then to do that again and again, girder after girder, day after day, station after station... If you’re looking for commitment on this earth, you found it.

But normal people aren’t like that. They work, they play, they veg out in front of the idiot box. They read, but not seriously, as anyone can discover by hurrying down to the bookstore before it shuts down for good.

Once in a while someone gets lucky, and he reads a few words that stick with him, and he will quote them back to his family and friends when the moment seems right. The author will have found a space inside that reader’s brain, and they will be married together in that small way forever.

Rarer still, it can happen that a person will read something that will change his whole life. It can be nothing or anything, and the author may not even know which of his words were the catalyst, but a few simple words on a page can help to remake and redeem an entire human life. How awesome is that?

And even still more rare, a reader will be so moved that he will take a pen-knife or a paperclip or the bent tine of a fork, and he will scratch the words that have altered his life forever in a place where someone – anyone – everyone – can see them.

This is the authorial act on that reader’s part, to spread those few words as far as he can, to speak them not to anyone in particular, but to shout them out to a world that *needs to know this*. It’s communication – not so much suasion as a simple clasping of hands – but it’s benevolent magic, too: The reader is transported to a newer, cleaner, better life *by the act* of inscribing those words into the substance of the universe.

This is success for an author. Money and acclaim are just so much toilet paper, here today, gone tomorrow – and good riddance. Emily Brontë owns all of your mind and none of your money, and you never even think to criticize the convoluted story structure of *Wuthering Heights*, so enthralled are you by Heathcliff and Cathy and that pansy-ass beta loser next door.

I want to write memorably. If you talk to a normal writer, you’ll hear all kinds of ornamental bullshit about means and modes and goals and objectives. I want to write memorably. The words you don’t hear in that sentence, because you’ve never learned

to listen for them, are these: “To myself.” I want to write memorably *to myself*.

If you remember something I’ve written, so much the better. If I write a few words that end up changing your life for the good, better still. If I push you to the point that I pushed some enraptured soul in Texas, a point where you are changed so much that you must embroider the universe in celebration, even better. But I’m not doing any of this for you. I’m doing it for me. I want my words inscribed in *my* brain, where I can see them, like a trail marker, forever.

The conquistador Marcos de Niza chiseled a mark into the stone of South Mountain, south of where Phoenix is now situated, when he and his troops were there in 1539. Who is Marcos de Niza? He’s a few paragraphs here and a long footnote over there. He’s a high school in Tempe, not far from South Mountain. He’s nobody. But that mark of his is coming on 500 years old, and it could still be there 500 years from now.

Authors die, but their ideas need not. I am vain enough to declare that I lack the everyday flavor of authorial vanity, but I more than make up for that with the other kind. There is no place for me in the bookstore – and, for god’s sake, why would there be? But there is room for my words on the wall of a bus, and it could be I have etched my way into stone, somewhere, by now.

I write for myself, so I am always fully compensated for my efforts. But since Houston I am aware that I actually stand a chance of standing with Miss Brontë, to be paid best by readers who only discover my writing after I am dead. Readers who will forgive my ignorance and my infelicities and love my words at their best, love the very best ideas I have unearthed in a lifetime of quarrying.

I like that I get to talk to those readers. I like that I get to talk to you. But, really, I just like to write, to tell the truth as beautifully and as memorably as I can. If that makes your life better, I’m glad. But I know it makes *my* life better, and that’s what *I* get from my writing.

Can I scratch those seven words

Do your worst. I will not kneel.

into the walls of the universe? Seven hundred more? Seven thousand more? Seven million more? None at all?

It doesn’t matter. This is how I live my life, and this is how I make my life better every day. If you read along, if I help to make your life better, that’s wonderful. But this story

about a story could be the lynchpin event in my life, the one I'm always looking for in *your* life.

To your eyes that little bit of scratching on the bus might be nothing, a minor artifact of random vandalism. To me it's a potent sign that I might actually be doing the job I want done. But to the person who did all that scratching, it's everything, at least for a little while.

Fiction is for saps, but if you're not a sap for your own fiction, you're the worst kind of sucker. Give the people what you think they want and you'll end up with nothing, stacks and stacks of toilet paper. But if you give your self what *you* want, if you say the words you need more than anything to hear, and then you share those words with anyone willing to live up to them, your ideas just might live forever.

And how awesome is that...?

Did you like this book? Then do your self these favors:

- **Assert yourself.** I will have other books like this coming soon. If you would like to know about them when they are published – or to see new Ramblin' Gamblin' Willie stories as they are being written – [speak up](#).
- **Tell your friends.** Clue 'em in by email, on social media sites, on your weblog or in blog comments. If something here made you feel better, [share your joy](#) with the world.
- **Buy my books.** [Visit my web site](#) to find out how. I like to work, so I don't hate working for free, but I kinda like to get paid when I do good work.
- **Sponsor my work, if you can.** I would like to write dozens of books like this, each in a different city in America, and I am recruiting partners to help make that happen. It's a simple idea: You defray some of my costs, you own 20% of that book. There is essentially no royalty income now, so you know, but there could be in due course, particularly if Hollywood goes back to measuring profits in dollars and cents instead of competing for empty praise over empty theaters. [Raise your hand](#) if you would like to be a part of something amazing.