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I gotta get serious | Some stories

Michael T. Warren

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I GOTTA GET SERIOUS

Some Stories By

Michael T. Warren

B.A., University of Kansas, 1986

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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Approved by

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

Date
For Kathleen--without her, this would never have happened.
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FULL IMMERSION

This Saturday night
my father, reluctant Indiana preacher,
sits on the top step of the nearly-full baptistery
smoking, dropping ashes into his hand.

I rub my eyes and
he straightens my hair.
Sorry to get you up, he says,
but I hate to leave you alone.

He dabbles the sole of his shoe
in the running water, tests it with his hand.
It's going to be another cold Sunday tomorrow,
you ever try preaching with wet underwear?

I test it myself and it's warm.
You have a bath tonight, squirt? he asks
and swoops me up squirming,
dipping me, wetting
the legs of my baseball pajama pants.

He puts me back on the step, laughing,
and I duck away from his hand,
hold my nose and jump in, deep,
baptizing my own giggly self.
HEIRESS, SUCCESSOR, NEXT IN LINE

There isn't a benediction for this. I am witness to the fact that nobody put their hand in the air, nobody leaned over and placed warm faithful hands on our heads and blessed us till the ends of our days.

Because when I was a little girl, the farm was an expanse of steamy woods, a place to look for snakes and skinks. Esau and I spent summer afternoons tipping over the chunks of limestone that littered the fields, catching the tiny ringneck snakes and lizards that scooted out as we lifted the rocks. And my father's oils and turpentine made the woodshed workshop stink, made Daddy's hair stink. We'd be outside playing and Daddy would call us in to the workshop. Esau, help me out, I'm struggling for a color here, he'd say. He'd point to a bare space on the huge canvas, then hand his palette to Esau. Esau was an expert at browns; he'd mix the color and hand it back to Daddy. I usually sat on the cement floor and watched. Daddy described me to Babe as "form-wise and color-poor."

One time Babe ran over the corner of one of Daddy's paintings. It wasn't really his fault; Daddy pretty often put
a painting in there without telling anyone, and the barn was always dark. I remember peeking in the doorway and seeing Daddy smirking over the splinters and torn canvas. I remember Babe leaning his heavy head on my father's shoulder, sobbing. I remember Esau scrambling backwards out of the door.

I won't talk about it, he had said.

I never saw Babe cry before, I said to him. This is so stupid, Esau had said, and he kept scrambling toward his bike. I hate this thing, so dumb, he called back over his shoulder.

We were what then, eight? My hair was so long then.

I remember that night they went to Kansas City. I remember that Esau and I knew then that Kansas City meant dancing for Daddy and Babe, a place they'd up and drive to when they felt the need to be themselves.

My toddler movies are different. I stand on Daddy's shoes and he swirls me around. Babe is in the background in his best straw cowboy hat, Esau is balanced on Babe's huge shoulder, his little legs hanging dead straight. Babe reaches back a couple of times and pulls Esau's thumb away from his mouth.

I always look surprised in those movies - nobody ever smiles.

In Kansas City I cut may hair short.

I deliberately chose a black Karmann Ghia to make the trip home--two leather seats, an exotic kitten of a car even if the
timing is off. Babe's pick-up works perfectly, and it's only a two-hour trip home. I don't want him to know I have it, is all.

From the highway I can see the new roof on the barn, a cluster of cattle along the fence of one of the fields Daddy never bothered to use. Esau's is the only name on the mailbox.

Babe is standing on the porch waiting. Saw your dust from the window, he says to me wiping his hands on a tea towel. You're getting posh, he laughs, peering into the car. Might want to invest in a tune-up, though, he says, straightening up, and then laughs again as he sees my face, I always loved that, he says, the way you frown with your forehead but smile with your eyes. C'mon inside, Judith, let's get you lunch.

But he turns and pauses at the door. He bends and puts his big hands around the back of my head. I think that he's going to kiss me, but then I look up and realize that he's taken off my earrings. He gently picks up my left hand and takes off the two rings I wear, then puts my jewelry in a dusty plastic bowl on the front rail. He takes me by the hand. It's just a little superstition, he says, leading me inside, just a little thing we do.

And there is Esau, right there in the living room, fiddling around with his tackle box, laying his lures out in little rows. Hey, Judith, he says, rising to give me a hug, I forgot it was supposed to be today that you were coming. He
takes off his hat and runs his fingers through his long red ponytail. I'm going to fish the pond this afternoon, he says, pointing to the tackle, and I'm washing everything up.

I reach out and pull my fingers through his beard. So thick, I whisper. Ouch, he says, yeah. Smiling, he sits back down to his lures. I already ate lunch, he says, you guys go ahead.

Babe sits me down and tosses me a dinner roll, still warm. Esau encourages whole grains now, he says. The boy really thinks they'll help your father and his digestive tract.

Will they? I ask.

Maybe some. Maybe. But it's not going to mean shit when his kidneys fail. Or his liver. Hell, another two months and they're going to have to start taking out Ike's body parts.

Babe butters another dinner roll and hands it to me.

Has he pretty much had it? I say, not meaning to.

He's pretty much wrecked, Babe says, but he'll rip you up some.

He'll wake up in a couple of hours, Babe says, handing me a roast beef sandwich and a beer. You'll need these.

Esau comes in and smiles. He says, Hi, Judith, is it suppertime yet?

Esau, boy, you just ate lunch, Babe tells him.

Yeah, Esau says, it's just I guess I'm a little mixed up. He turns to go, then turns back. Babe? he says, can you have time to help me with the fishing? This afternoon?
Reckon I can, Seesaw, Babe says.

And then Daddy is in the doorway, peeking around Esau's back. Knew I smelled woman in here, he rasps, laughing. Esau, get your ass out of the door.

Daddy, get one of those rolls Babe did up, Esau says, but Daddy just shoves him out of the door. Esau, he says, get.

Daddy's clumsy as a baby bird, tiny, his snow white hair tousled from sleeping. Judith, get here closer so I can at least touch you. His hug is still strong; his arms wrap carefully around me, then he locks his hands and squeezes. He brushes the hair from my forehead. Touches the shaved places just in front of my ears. So stylish, he giggles. He touches my eyes, my cheeks, my lips. No makeup, he whispers, my little natural girl.

Ike, Babe says, sit your butt down before you fall over. Daddy lowers himself to the floor very carefully. Is this a return for good, Judith? he asks. I didn't hear a moving van.

I'm sorry I didn't visit, I tell him.

I don't blame you, none of us do, he says. Except maybe Babe because you took his truck. Babe shakes his head. We were all nasty that time, he says.

Mostly you, Judith, but all of us just the same, Daddy says.

Esau pokes his head back in the door and says, Daddy, be nice to her.

I bend and sit on the floor across from Daddy, and he
reaches out his hand. Well, then, he says, let's shake and get on with it then. How's the singing, the music?

I accidentally let his hand slip through mine and he giggles. I sell cars, now, primarily, I whisper. But I have some chances coming up.

And the art stuff, the what-do-you-call-it?

Mixed media, I say.

Sure, he says, and that?

Daddy, stop. His hair is so white, and his eyes so blank, and his face so friendly. You don't know what I do, I say, you don't know what happens in Kansas City.

I tracked you down, Babe says, we know what you do. You sell cars. You haven't bought art supplies since you moved there. You hocked the guitar, then the tenor sax, then you sold the piano. You got the guitar and sax back when you sold your first Chevrolet, but the guitar has a broken pick-up and you're most probably out of reeds.

You don't do anything, Daddy says, his face going red. You don't do shit. You just steal your father's paintings.

I'm going outside, y'all, I say, standing up.

And someday, Babe yells after me, when I've got a mind to, I'm going to steal my goddamn pick-up truck back. His beer can hits the door frame behind me.

Esau used to burn up every dead thing he found; there's lots of dead things on a farm. Dried-up birds he found stuck
in the wire Babe had pinned over the window in the hayloft. Mice from Daddy's traps. Fish he found floating at the edge of the pond. Toads he accidentally stepped on. Esau used to take each one down to a great big oil drum down by the creek.

He'd burn each one very carefully. He'd toss little sticks and clumps of grass into the fire as they burned, but he'd never look in; he seemed to use the little puffs of smoke coming out of the drum to gauge the fire's intensity.

I left when I was seventeen, when Esau was seventeen. It was a horribly hot day; I had been painting in the workshop, and I came out into the sun soaked with sweat. I was finishing up a series of watercolors, what they were really was a group of paintings of Daddy's paintings. His agent had set up a father-daughter show in Wichita that I just felt foolish about.

Esau helped me with colors.

I found the three of them down by the burning barrel. Daddy was sitting in a folding chair at the edge of the creek embankment, and Babe was snipping away at Daddy's hair with his kitchen shears. Daddy had his shirt off, and Babe quickly brushed off any hair that stayed on the tablecloth he had tied around Daddy's neck. Esau was just sitting with his legs over the edge of the embankment. Every once in a while he'd throw a piece of stuff down into the creek.

Wow, Babe said, somebody needs a shower, goddamn, as I walked up.
Judith, Esau said, what I did was bust the tail off a skink. It was just a little baby one. He held up the tiny tail, which was still wiggling a little bit in his fingers. What I don't know is if I should burn it.

I said yes, he should, Babe said. The skink itself may be still alive, but the tail itself is dead, or is going to be dead. He turned back to Daddy's hair.

And I'm not so sure, Esau said, pulling a clump of grass and pitching it up into the wind. You see, because using that logic, I'd be sweeping up Daddy's hair and burning it, which would be silly.

I say toss it in the creek, Esau, I said. Then I turned to Daddy and Babe. The haircut was over. Babe had pulled the towel away from Daddy's neck and was rubbing his shoulder.

Daddy, I said, doesn't that itch? His eyes were closed and he didn't answer. Babe looked at me and smiled. This is Ike, he said, "It feels so good when I jump in the crick and rinse off." Daddy reached up and smacked Babe's hand, then giggled.

Daddy, I said, I don't want to do the Wichita show.

Sure you do, he said.

Your stuff is going to make mine look dumb. Nobody cares about my stuff.

You need the money, Daddy said. He hadn't opened his eyes.

Esau threw the tail in the creek. I got work to do, he
said, wandering off.

I'm serious, Daddy, I said, and his hands drifted to his eyes.

This could be ol' Ike's final show, Judith. My daughter would be glad to share that, I'd think.

Babe pulled Daddy back into the chair and began working his shoulders again. I walked over and looked at his new haircut, stepped on his fallen hair, rubbed it into the dust with my bare toe.

Daddy, I said, why are there 34 paintings up in the barn? Babe looked up.

Mistakes. Daddy said. Trash, ones I did that didn't work out.

No way, I said.

You shut up about those, lady, Babe said, and he started fussing around on Daddy's back, brushing away hair.

What are they for? I asked again and Daddy shrugged.

Okay, Judith, Dady said, they're for Babe. He spends fourteen years, he helps me raise twins, he deserves a little security in his older years.

It's like a pension, Daddy said. My eyes are gone, liver's going, there's not much left.

What's my simple young brother get for his older years? I asked Daddy, but I was looking at Babe.

Esau gets the farm. Esau can handle the farm, Babe said. Okay then, I said. I looked back once and Babe was
working his way down Daddy's spine. Don't look at me that way, child, Daddy said. I gave you my talent, didn't I? You're on your own.

Babe only had 26 paintings and a bicycle left the next morning. I had Kansas City.

I came in out of the fields and went to the house after Babe and Esau left to go fishing. I went up to Daddy's room. The curtains were drawn; the immense brass bed caught me by surprise.

I started fiddling with a vial of pills from the bed table, put that down and started messing with a plastic pouch of vitamins.

Daddy, I said, I need your help.

Daddy, I said, you can't feign sleep when your hands are scrambling.

Feign, he snorted, Scrambling.

Are you listening? I asked, and when he nodded I handed him a beer. He grabbed it too high. I pushed his fingers down to the middle of the can.

Thank you, he said. Go ahead and say what you came to. Mostly, I said, primarily, I came to ask a question of you.

I figured, he said.

If I told you I was doing a piece in Kansas City, a performance, would you come see it?
I don't know, he said, I'm blind.
There'd be music, I said.
No, he said.
I couldn't stand his voice, his quietly forceful voice, his raggedly stylish voice. I couldn't stand his robust voice, his pitying voice.
My voice worked just fine, loud, loud and screechy.
I said, See you, Daddy. Tell Babe honey goodbye.

When I ran out to the front door, ran over to my car, I saw Esau over by the barn, hauling a bunch of rotten lumber over next to a pile of old tires.
I walked over to him and stretched as far as I could and kissed him. Esau, I said, I'm glad you didn't go fishing.
Hi, Judith, he said. I don't much care for fishing.
Babe came around the corner of the barn. Esau, he said, pointing to the pile, this is just a bunch of shit.
I stretched again and gave Esau another quick kiss on his sunburned forehead. Goodbye, I said to him. I didn't look at Babe. Esau said, Bye Judith, then turned to Babe and said, That might well be, Babe, but I need help with this bunch of shit just the same.
I got in my car. I left.
Congratulations, I told him, and he carefully placed the handful of cigars back into his briefcase.

You know, he said, I'm happy and all but it's as if at some random time I shot off the starting gun for a 10K race with one single survivor.

And that little fella did the distance in two, maybe three days, while the rest of the wigglers went all-out, hell-bent through the poison cloud.

They perished by the millions (think of it) and he shuffled through their carcasses, made the finish line days after the spectators went home.

He got the prize all right, boy, but I'm having trouble marvelling properly over the good fortune of that one sperm.
NOTHING TO DO WITH PAIN

The main thing she taught him was that blood wasn't even a sign of pain, let alone the same thing. Watch, she had said, tearing a piece of skin away from the edge of her fingernail, squeezing blood across her tongue and from there onto her teeth. She rolled her eyes, staring at him with a pink grin, and then wiped the blood away with the back of her hand. See, she said, that had absolutely nothing to do with pain.

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How late are you, exactly? he asked her, and then dropped his eyes. I've been stupid, she said, but don't look at me that way. He pushed his fingers through her short, dark hair, but she did not look at him. I've never been particularly fertile, she told him, but that was more or less a lie.

When he saw her dog whining at the plywood partition, saw the afternoon sun come slanting down on the fiery cherry of her second joint, he wrapped the leash around his wrist and left her house.

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The third time they went out, after a large spaghetti
dinner, they sat on the wraparound porch of his house in rickety chairs, sipping whiskey and watching a fight unfold in the parking lot across the street. Has it been a long time since you kissed someone? she asked. He nodded, listening to a large gray car gun its engine, screech its tires. She poured another drink for herself. I am going to kiss you now, she told him. You will put your hand here. He felt her pulse through his thumb. She placed her fingers on his eyes, closing them gently. There you are, she said, there, I knew I wouldn't have to do everything.

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Her house was filled with carnival toys; they were the medium in which she worked. A shotgun rested on a pedestal in one corner, rendered inoperable by the hundreds of blinking doll's eyes that had been glued over every surface. A tapestry woven from her own hair hung near a window, speckled with tiny pale Santa Claus faces. There were oil paintings centered around a single toy from a gumball machine, self-portraits made from partially melted army men. Altered toys everywhere.

Whenever he could, he touched the tapestry, wondered about its softness.

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Once she peered over his shoulder as he wrote. Suddenly, she screamed and pulled him backwards out of his chair by his collar. Don't you ever, she screamed, don't you ever presume
to write about rape until you can tell me that you understand every fucking single thing about it.

He stared at her, not moving, but even so her fists caught him by surprise. She took him down and then kneeled on his chest, hissing, This is not a plot device, you bastard. One of his eyes was swelling, and blood began to seep out the corner of his mouth. She touched the blood and began to cry. Ssh, he said, it doesn't have anything to do with pain. He held her head as she cried.

---

One Halloween they were at a friend's buying a bag. They sat on a couch, smoking it and talking. Some other friends came by with the news of an accident they had seen on the highway. Bleeding clowns had been pulled from one of the cars, and two tiny children stood crying by the road with store-bought costumes on, the masks pushed up on top of their heads. They all sat there silently, lost in the story. Then he began to laugh, realizing only then that the bearers of the news were themselves dressed like Raggedy Ann and Andy.

---

They often slept on the floor of her carpeted sun porch. One night she came in after he was already asleep, knelt down and touched his face. I've been with another man, she told him, peeling off her shirt, and thought you should know. Thanks, he said, and went back to sleep. She began to rub his shoulders and sighed, uncertain.
On her refrigerator there was a topless picture of her from the instant photo booth at Woolworth's. That was what he was staring at when she stepped out of the bathroom grinning, leaping toward him. He was wrong! He was wrong! she yelled, jumping naked around the kitchen. She held his face in her hands. She pointed to the small pink smudge on her underwear. Don't you see, she said, we are off the hook. He smiled, and they kissed.

Oh, God, I've got to go, he said, finally. When can I see you again? Well, she said, I'm busy tonight... Me, too, he answered, well, give me a call tomorrow.

He saw her only one more time, a chance meeting in town. They exchanged embarrassed hellos. As she walked away, he saw her version of the unborn child tugging at its mother's hand, short dark hair moving softly as the baby danced and sang a song. His own version of the child wriggled uncomfortably in his arms; it pulled discontentedly at his hand. He pushed a damp lock of hair from the child's forehead.
LAURENT'S LAST DAY

Christian: When I saw Vigilante dripping sweat off the tip of his nose into every sandwich, saw the rookie Jimmie LaFay wrap a towel around the one already around his neck, watched the fry basket slide out of Laurent's wet hands and splash grease across the prep table, across and through a new batch of potato salad, I poured the first round of frosty mugs and passed them around.

It's barbecue bullshit, all right, gents, I told them. Be sure to holler loud when you need more beer.

Beer's okay? Jimmie asked.

It's what we get instead of paychecks, Laurent said. He was shaking his hands, letting them hang loose from the wrists.

The ticket wheel was about half-wrapped, it was a football Saturday, it was easy a hundred degrees in the kitchen; we were going down.

Jimmie, I said, you want to stir that stuff down into the po' sally?

Vigilante, I asked, is there anything you can do about the
nose business? I saw him shake his head as I headed into the dining room.

Laurent: Christian saw the basket slip out of my hands, but I don't think he saw how much grease burned my hands. When I could see Christian up front behind the register, I said Jimmie, don't do that. Stirring that in is nasty. Scrape that shit out. Throw it out.

Carl looked around at me. You on the rag? he asked.
No, I said, and then, Yes. Jimmie, I said, here, let me get it, it's my mess.

Laurent here, Carl said, is mostly okay, but when he's annoyed he acts like a fag.
Watch that, I said.
Relax, he said.
I don't want to hear it, is all, I told him.
See what I mean? Carl said to Jimmie. Case in point.
Fix sandwiches, Vigilante, I said. Wipe off your nose.

C: I was the supervisor. It was my job to run the register if necessary, keep the dining rooms flowing smooth, make sure the two kitchens were cranking, keep an eye on the two hundred pounds of meat in the back smoker, make sure that none of the waitresses were smoking in the restroom, make sure that the cooks wore jeans, not army fatigues.

Jimmie had come in at three, the new guy. Laurent took
him to the cutting board, lifted the afternoon lid off the meat, and lined him out. Brisket. Ham. Pepper beef. Pork, if and when we have it. Buffalo in the cooler. Chickens in the baby smoker in the other kitchen. Don't ever get caught carrying them without a plate under them. Four ounces is a Wheel sandwich. Five ounces is a Log sandwich, also a Medium dinner. Seven ounces is a Full dinner. Ribs. Wide bones is a Big End, little bones is a Short End. Slab is the whole thing.

Jimmie, I said, this is Laurent, the fastest there is. He is the one to teach you good from bad.

Laurent held up a steaming slab and grinned. Feedin' dead pigs to the war pigs, man, he said.

L: He seems okay for a supervisor, Jimmie said to me, sipping his beer. Jimmie, I said, after I was sure Christian was outside in the wood cage, let me ask you how much you're being paid.

$3.50 an hour, Jimmie said.

After almost three years, I said, I make $3.75. Christian makes $4.00. Keep that in mind when you're thinking good about him, but think about it too when he's being a dick.

Is he primarily a dick? Jimmie asked.

No, I said, he's okay.

C: Vigilante had come in at 3:30. I pulled him into the
walk-in as soon as I heard the smack of the time clock. C. V., I said, you don't by any chance carry around a little ganja pipe with your initials on it, by any chance? He got the big eyes and held out his hand. I gave him the pipe and said, don't keep it in the basement back behind the vinegar.

I think I need you up front once the rush hits, I said, but you can hit on these pans for an hour or so right now.

Sweet, he said.

L: I was telling Jimmie about nicking ribs, how to make sure you nip the cartilage between each rib so the audience can eat them, when people started washing in. Laughing people, groups of four, groups of five, tables of eight.

Jesus Buttfuck, Jimmie said.

Ten minutes, Carl said, then we don't have time to think.

I dropped two baskets of tater curls. I'm going to get in one last smoke before the deluge, I said. Jimmie, would you mind getting us a couple of pitchers of ice water? We're going to need it.

C: At four we started getting jumped, hammered good and steady. I was back in the back, spicing a round of ribs and loading them into the smoker. Laurent came back, kicked open the back door, and began rolling a cigarette.

Christian, he said, we're fucked. He opened the fire door in the smoker and I picked up a coal with the rib tongs and
lit him up. This load of hickory's not burning worth shit, is it, he said.

Nope, I said, it's green as Jimmie LaFay.

He's okay, Laurent said, he's going to be good.

I put a couple more logs on the fire and then tried to clean the soot off the temperature gauge with a green scrubber.

275, Laurent said, and you better come on up front. They're pouring in like the world's hungry.

Nebraskans? I asked.

Probably mostly, he said. The game's over and they look happy. He threw his cigarette into the fire.

L: Christian's up in a second, I told Carl and Jimmie, who were looking helpless as the waitresses started piling on tickets. I dropped two more baskets of curls and started slicing meat. I set up several orders of cole slaw and potato salad. I checked the Wells unit to make sure we had plenty of beans. I drank a bunch of the beer Carl handed me.

Category: Helplessness, I yelled out, and Christian came up behind me, frowned at the wheel, and said, That time we were out on the back dock and that guy drove up with his car on fire, jumped in the dumpster, and started throwing cabbage leaves on his dashboard.

Last time I voted, Carl said.

Jimmie? I said, and he thought a minute, still weighing
meat, then grinned and said, That time yesterday Christian called me up and said am I still looking for work and I said yes because I am broke.

Attaboy, I said, and Carl said Score, and even Christian smiled.

C: By 4:30 the wheel was wrapped. Laurent, I said, do you think you and Jimmie could handle the other kitchen? He just looked at me. We got to open it, I said. Soon. Laurent went out to fill his beer, and came back wiping foam from his mustache.

Sorry, Laurent, I said, just until Frick and Frack get here.

They're here, Laurent said, and he gestured with his beer.

And in came Hector and Li Po. Christian, Hector said, rumor has it you need help. The earring, Hector, I said. Li Po launched a little flurry of punches into my belly, and she left a little sting in the last one. You let him wear it, she said, or we're going to just go outside and fart around for an hour and not come in till the schedule says.

It's new, Hector said, looming over me and closing one eye.

Vigilante pulled a pepper beef out of the steam tank and started quartering it. Quit fucking around, he said, we need help.

Clock in, I said, sighing, smacking Hector on the
shoulder. When they went back to clock in, Laurent dropped a couple of baskets of curls, gently dropped them into the grease in a weird way. Christian, he said, those guys really piss you off, don't they?

Quit fucking around, Vigilante said, C'mon.

L: By 7:00, even though Hector and Li Po got the second kitchen open, the wheel was wrapped and there was a row of tickets all the way across the shelf under the heat lamps. We had Jimmie concentrating on sides and curls, which he did a good job on, and Carl and I were jamming on the wheel, but we were running out of gas.

At 7:15, Hector came over and passed out a round of towels and we threw the old sweaty ones down on the shelf by the plates.

Look, Laurent, he said, we're going to need help in the other kitchen. Is there any way Christian can come back and give us a hand?

I'll check, I told him, and he went over and hovered next to Jimmie. Who's this newness? he asked.

Jimmie LaFay, I said, meet Hector Legendary and keep dropping curls. We need a side of beans, too.

It's my pleasure, Hector said. He turned to me and cupped his hand around my ear. He's doing good, he whispered, then turned and shuffled over to the other kitchen.

Laurent, Carl said, check this: ham wheel, ham wheel,
brisket log, big end, ham wheel. I'm not seeing a brisket wheel.

I handed him a handful of brisket. Laurent, he said, placing his greasy palm on my forehead, that's not like you.

C: Laurent came and got me around 7:30, and since the dining room seemed under control, I went back to help in the kitchen. As soon as I got there, Hector came up and said, I think you're going to have to talk to her, Christian. Talk to who? I asked. The old lady, Hector said. See, what happened was Li Po threw a pickle from our kitchen to the other one, and she nailed Carl in the face. So he throws it back, but he hooks it through the waitress station and splam! he hits this grandma lady right in the eye. She's pissed.

With a pickle, in the eye? I asked him.

Sorry, Vigilante said.

Since I went up front this happened?, Laurent asked, and Hector said yep.

Christian, Laurent said, laughing, I think you're going to have to talk to her.

Laurent, I said, how do I do this? How did you do this when you were a supervisor?

I don't know, Laurent said, Carl didn't throw pickles when I was supervisor.

I said Laurent...

I don't know, he said, you apologize, buy her dinner, buy
the table dinner, I don't know. He was still laughing.

It was a pain in the ass.

L: After Christian went back to the dining room, Li Po came over to our kitchen and said, Sorry, Carl.

It's okay, he said, I just don't want to get written up again.

Christian won't do that, I told him. He's going to bark some but he's not pissed.

Jimmie came back from the walk-in and said, I can only find one more tub of ribs back there. Li Po said, I think he's right. She picked up a pickle and hit Carl in the back of the head with it.

That's okay, I said, the ones in the smoker are almost done. We've got enough.

Christian came zipping in from the dining room. I forgot to watch the smoker, he said. We're fucked, Li Po said.

C: I was about done promising that woman that we'd fire Vigilante when I realized that I hadn't been watching the smoker, which was bad. When Laurent and I got back there, it was at 140, which was roughly the same temperature as the kitchen.

Laurent said, Christian, we're going to have to crank this up. We're going to need these ribs in about 45 minutes.

Can we do that? I asked him.
Yeah, he said, just take a look at it every few minutes. You're going to have to run it at 425 if we going to be able to use these ribs tonight.

Damn, I said, Laurent, we were doing okay.

Just fire it up, Laurent said, I got to get back up front.

He came right back. Christian, he told me, don't write up Carl.

I should, I said.

Don't do it, he told me.

L: At 8:00 Boogie Schutz, the owner, came in with a bunch of his country club buddies, and Christian got panicky. He ran over to Hector and practically tore his earring out. He checked Carl's eyes, which were mostly just sullen.

Try to keep him out of the smoker room, I told Christian. You're running the smoker at over a hundred degrees above policy.

He's already back there, Christian said. He's showing off the restaurant.

Boogie came up to our kitchen a few minutes later. Laurent, he said to Christian, you got a good fire going back there. I threw a few more logs in, show the boys how it goes. C'mon, fellas, he said, let's go hit the sauce. Drown our sorrows, one of them said. Suck some beezo, another one said.

He poked his head back a minute later. You're doing good,
boys, he said. Assholes and elbows is the way I like it back here, I tell you, elbows and assholes.

C: At 8:30 it was Jimmie who noticed the smell. He went back to the walk-in, and came back and said to me, it smells pretty hot back there. Laurent and I ran back there and watched the temperature gauge crawl from 500 to 520. Christian, he said, if that gets up to 550 it's going to flash. He grabbed a towel and closed down the vent.

 Undo the hose, he said. Start spraying it down. We've got to get it cooled down. Don't open anything. The temperature was up to 530.

 What happens if it flashes? I asked.

 They didn't tell you? He looked at me. At around 550 the grease all burns at once, as I understand it. It won't have enough oxygen, so it will set up a vacuum, which might just blow the doors off, or it might blow up the whole thing. It blew Hector clear down the back steps that one time.

 We were spraying the wall of the smoker, which took up nearly the whole room, and the temperature gauge read about 540 when it blew. There was a dull thud, and then I felt a sting in my eye and I grabbed my face and sat down.

 Oh, shit, Laurent said, Christian, where'd it get you? He was trying to pull my hands away from my face, but I wouldn't let him.

 Christian, he was saying, where'd it hurt you, there's too
much blood.

*L:* I could hear sort a little whispery sound right before it went, but I figured it was just the grease hissing; I'd never heard it before. What happened was it blew the doors open, and they popped the latch right off, which was what hit Christian in the eye.

Li Po wet down a towel and washed his face to see if we needed an ambulance, but it had missed his eye. There was a big, long, ugly cut all the way across his eyebrow and down his cheek. Hector and I carried him out to Carl's car, since he was the only one who had a car, and Carl ran him to the hospital.

We shut down the second kitchen as soon as we got Christian off to the hospital. Li Po took Jimmie under her wing up front, and Hector and I cleaned up the back.

What happened to me was the same, Hector said, except it was one of the doors that knocked me down the steps. We loaded the charred ribs into garbage bags.

Broke two ribs, and I chipped this tooth, he said. Look here.

Laurent, he said, you're a lucky guy.

We cleaned the black fans the smoke had left on the ceiling and walls, then each grabbed a couple of garbage bags and took them down the alley and threw them in the florist's dumpster. Hector went back up front and helped in the
kitchen, and I spent an hour and a half cleaning the char out of the smoker. I scraped the solid burned fat off the bottom with a hoe, rinsed it down with the hose. I cleaned the debris off the shelves with a wire brush, sprayed the tiny black stalactites of grease off the top of the smoker. We were closed by the time I got back up front.

Break time, I said, when I got up front, and everyone followed me into the basement dining room. Hector poured us a pitcher and brought it down.

Jimmie, Li Po said, is the new barbecue angel. He's going to be good. It's about time we got somebody good. Jimmie looked at her and blushed.

What I hope, Hector said, is that Schutz started paying workman's comp on us again.

Laurent, he said, what's up? I looked at him, but said that it just bummed me out about Christian.

Just then Carl came downstairs. Hey, he said, Christian's upstairs in the car. He wanted everybody to know he's okay. Sixteen stitches, and his eye's swollen shut, but he should be back to work next week.

Great, Jimmie said.

Yeah, Li Po said, that's a relief.

I just looked at Carl and he shrugged.

Thank God, Hector said.
THE LAST PUNK LOVE STORY (1983)

It happened in Kansas on a Tuesday night. 
Same old hardcore three-chord death thrash. 
Same old clove vampires and pale leatherettes.

He was banging a little on the fringe of the dancers, 
but two tandem slammers hit low, pushed him down 
to the floor right in front of the band.

She was siting on stage tempting the stage crew, 
and he came up panicky, straight up her skirt, 
struggling to make sense of the folds of black satin.

Her frantic knees blacked his eyes and her legs 
confused him; her screams made it 
impossible to pull himself free.

Two of her friends yanked him away 
and she slapped him and spit in his face 
and then stopped. His eyes, banged and blinking,

made the accident clear, and she wiped 
his face with her hand. I'm sorry, goddamn, 
didn't mean to, your eyes, oh shit, God I'm

sorry, they said. She gently held up her fist 
and he tapped it with his hand and they grinned 
as the bouncer hauled him off by his hair.
FORGIVE 'EM

My good friend Thomas recently beat the shit out of his old girlfriend. Sasha, in an initial frantic phone call and letter, explained the injuries she sustained; she is still passing a touch of blood in her urine from the kidney damage, two of her ribs are cracked, and the bruise on her brain has jacked up her memory to the point that she has trouble reading a newspaper article. Thomas lost his job; he will no longer be helping adolescent boys learn to deal with the flash impulses that make them commit crimes. He is drinking full-time, painting in his spare time.

Thomas has a new girlfriend. She knows about Thomas' problem, but she is convinced that it is something that he must put behind him. That will be tough, considering that there is a court date pending.

Yesterday, I received a postcard from him. On the front there was a poem, "Apology for Killing the Spider" In tiny pencil letters, in the corner, it said, "No. 9 of 75." The reverse was blank except for my address.

Thomas is a motherfucker, yes he is a motherfucker. That
is the easy part.

See this. Two years ago. Thomas and I are playing cribbage on a drafting table in the dining room, waiting in the house we all share for Jason to get home from work and for Sasha to come back with a twelve pack. Cigarette smoke hovers over the table. Thomas' long soul patch points straight out toward me, accusing me. I get him another beer. I'm not smoking.

Thomas says, "Franklin, if I open this beer, and if I drink this beer, I won't study for my exam, my last chance at reviving my social services degree. My academic career, my long struggle to learn to help society on a one-to-one basis, will be over. You know this, and you brought me this beer."

"Maybe you'll pass anyway." I tell him. He takes the beer.

His large gray eyes are staring at the dirty white house across the street. We both know that in a few minutes he will open the beer and drink it quickly, but for right now he pushes it away. He drops ashes onto the the wet top of the can.

"I could give a fuck about the American family," he says, but he doesn't pick up the beer. "I am one beer away from failure."

I deal a hand. "You just dealt me the joker, you asshole," he says. I take the cards back and begin shuffling
again, then pause and leave the room to take a leak. When I come back he grins and belches. "Don't blame yourself for this," he says, "hand me Jason's eyeliner." I throw out the joker and deal. Thomas blackens the sockets of both of his eyes."

"You know a piano inside out." I remind him. "Who needs the American family?" Personally, I am sick about thinking about Thomas' future. Personally, I am sick of the way he turns everything into watershed events. But the gray winter light is shining down through the window, and Thomas is smiling, handing me another beer. There isn't anything on television. We can't play any music until Jason gets home.

I get out my camera. Thomas is still playing with the eyeliner—he now has a Salvador Dali mustache. Jason will be pissed about the eyeliner waste, but what does he expect? I take the picture, saying "Now, Thomas, set your hair on fire." "No," he says, "not while you're shooting black and white." He goes into the bathroom and washes his face, and when he comes back tells me that he is an ugly bastard. I agree, so he goes back into the bathroom and comes out wearing a zebra-striped eye mask. I take the picture.

But then he grabs Jason's makeup case and skips gleefully into the bathroom. He emerges twenty minutes later, the zebra pattern extended across the rest of his forehead, his lower face, his neck. I bring the camera up, but he says, "Whoa, hold on." He strips off his T-shirt and raises his clenched
fists into the air, and with his signal I take the picture. He sprawls on the floor as if he's dead. I dump styrofoam packing pellets from the box Jason's amp came in on the floor around Thomas' head. He reaches down and put two of the pellets into his nose, then dies again. I take that picture.

Sasha comes in at that moment. She is dressed in an antique black satin dress, a faded camisole at the neck of her dress. She is wearing an antique cameo brooch with a profile of a man smoking a cigarette. The heel of her boots leave black marks on our hardwood floor. Jason is so in love with her that he is losing sleep, but just the same she bends down to Thomas and kisses him deeply. She laughs as she takes the pellets out of his nose, and they kiss again. They go upstairs hand in hand, but I sit at the table drinking until I hear them tuning. I see them daily, all the time, but I had no idea that something like this was due to happen.

When Jason gets there, we're already deep into a sweet funk jam. Thomas is still wearing the mask, Sasha is still wearing her boots. They're throwing smiles back and forth, each one making me feel like I should duck. Thomas has got the drum machine kicking a bass beat through the floor, and he's leading Sasha through a bunch of key changes that have me baffled. My tenor is in the shop getting the springs reworked, so I'm playing my metal clarinet, and since the thing is pitched in B-flat, I am spending most of the jam as a designated dancer. Every note I play sounds like Sousa, but
I'm trying.

Jason brings his upright bass along with his guitar, and he picks up things even further. Sasha picks up his hollow-body from the floor, straps in, and with a nod toward me and Thomas heads subtly into Dixieland. We're all going at once, but this horn is especially familiar with this particular road, and it takes me to a solo that speaks words. Sasha and Jason drop under for support, and Thomas is cooking on his own countermelody, and they let me go until my horn is full of spit. Then Thomas plays me some clues with his left hand, and I decrescendo, and then we both come back in with Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, and Sasha and Jason drop out. I can't keep that up long, so Sasha sneaks back in on her own guitar, throwing in some classical arpeggios, and then zang, she's got her distortion going and she heads into a song she and Jason wrote about the way the dumb old 60's generation sold our asses down the river. Jason is singing, and we all spend some time dancing on the grave of peace, love, and understanding, and since we're dancing anyway, we gradually swing back into the jam we started with, smacking ourselves together, slowly dropping out one by one until just the drum machine is left, and it's smacking us through the soles of our feet, and we know what we've done.

We sit around for a little while, drinking beer, listening to Jason try to explain how we could turn a reggae rhythm inside out and use it in one of the songs we are working up.
He is demonstrating, beating it out on the top of Thomas' keyboard, when Sasha does the stupidest thing. She bends her face down to Thomas, an unlit cigarette in her lips, to get a light from his cigarette. She holds his face steady between her hands, her index fingers tangled briefly in the small curls behind his ears. I freeze.

"What the fuck is this I'm seeing here?" Jason asks, smiling. "Is this friendly, or what?" Sasha realizes what she looks like and pulls her hands away, but it doesn't fly. Thomas looks at me and shrugs.

"This kind of fucks things up, I think," Jason says. "This kind of changes things."

"Stop it, Jason." That is all Sasha says.

"Thomas, what is this? Is this...?" Thomas looks at Jason and shrugs.

"Well, fuck this then." Jason says. He walks slowly to the stairs, then stops, picks up Sasha's guitar and begins throwing up a cloud of noise. I watch his face, which never stops grimacing as long as he plays.

"Jason," Thomas says, "it's not like you two ever did anything," and Jason stops playing and stares at him. Then he's whirling toward Thomas, swinging the guitar like a ball bat. I put my hand up between the guitar and Thomas' face, and I deflect the guitar, but my middle and index finger get stuck in the top string, and they are sliced open at the first joint, clean, to the bone. The swing of the guitar lifts me
up from my seat on the floor. I look down and see Thomas holding his eye where I hit him with my elbow. Sasha sees the blood and rushes over, pressing Thomas' sweat towel over my hand. Jason sees the blood and sinks to his knees, holding his head in his hands. I see my fingerbone peeking out from under a flap of skin and pass out.

When I come to, Thomas is wiping my face with cold water. "The peacemakers are fucked." he says.

Listen to this. Two years later. As nearly as I can tell, with what I know from letters and phone call conversations, this is how it happened. I don't know this from experience; I was thousands of miles away. I was in another state.

One nice autumn evening, Thomas and Sasha wind up at the same bar. A bogus white blues band is playing, but that doesn't matter, because Thomas is sitting with his new girlfriend, and he has money for beer, and his mojo is working. Sasha sees Thomas, gets a little nervous, and makes as if to leave, but Jason, now working the door at this particular club, suggests that she might as well stay, might as well get used to it. She sits next to Jason at the door and drinks a beer.

Thomas sees Sasha at the bar on a trip to get more beer, and he stops. Jason bristles, but there isn't much he will do. "Hello, Sasha, doing okay?" Thomas asks, and Sasha nods.
Then Thomas says, "How about this, Sasha, how about you get the fuck out of here? How about you let me get on with it?" Sasha just looks at Jason, so Thomas says, "Okay, then, I leave." He does, and his new girlfriend doesn't even notice.

About an hour later, acting on Jason's advice, Sasha goes to Thomas' apartment, hoping to "reach some kind of understanding." When she gets there she hears his piano in the living room. She rings the doorbell; he begins to play louder. She walks in, and he plays even louder, really smashing the piano keys.

"Please, Thomas, you know we'll keep bumping into each other. We go to all the same places." He keeps playing.

"We've got to be civil, don't we? We can't act like we don't know each other."

"I can't hear you, Sasha."

"Thomas. . ."

"I can't hear you, Sasha."

At that point she touches his shoulder, and he reaches back and pushes her, hard, shoving her backwards across a table. She tries to get up, but he has her by the shoulder.

"What is it you want, Sasha?" He lifts her face up, kissing her sloppily. "Is it this?" She struggles, but his huge hands grip her tightly, leaving marks that will later be bruises. She slips down to the floor, flat on her back, and he kneels on her chest. She is crying, unable to speak. He begins to bang her head on the floor, slowly at first, and
then more quickly. "I wish you could tell me what you want, Sasha." he whispers.

He finally lets her up, then shoves her again as she lunges for the phone. She slams into a door frame, then slumps to the floor, holding her side and sobbing. He begins to put everything she ever gave him into a box, then pulls her up from the floor and pushes her toward the front door, handing her the box. "There," he says, "Now maybe we can get on with it." He pushes her out the front door, closes it, locks it behind her.

She walks home, and falls straight to sleep on her living room floor. In the morning, she can barely move, and she calls her parents to take her to the hospital. She doesn't press charges, but after looking at the medical records, the District Attorney does.

I called Jason, asking what he knew about the beating, and he said, "What did she expect? Thomas told her to go away, didn't he? About a million times. She got a bad thing down on her, no question. But remember the lamp he threw? It's not like he didn't fire a few warning shots."

I pressed Jason, though. I asked if he had seen Thomas around since the beating, and he said, "Seen him? He's no different. I've gone out drinking with him. He doesn't remember a thing about it. He was drunk out of his mind. He doesn't believe he did what she's saying he did. He pleaded not guilty. He's still our friend."
In one of her letters, Sasha wrote "I still love him, and he knows that I do."

I feel like I have an appointment. I felt like I need to fly home, see some people, break one man's fingers, slap another one hard across the mouth. I got a middle finger I'd like to show them, show them how I've lost the articulation in it, show them how it doesn't spring off a sax key worth a shit. I should see Sasha, explain why she needs to move away. Then I have to fly back, get out of there quick, escape this stupid trap of forgiveness.

I don't, though. They've each written me; they'd each like to come up and visit, talk to me. They each feel bad.
A STORY THIEF PERFORMS

I pause. I drain my mind. I breathe deep.

"Thank you. This is a little thing I guess I wrote about six years old -- it's about something I've always wanted to do."

'The father, thirty-eight, plays lead in a band that does rockabilly covers in clubs across the Midwest. He's in Minneapolis today, but his daughter is in her bedroom as she arches her back and begins to laugh. She pinches the very tiny roll of fat on her lover's stomach. She immerses her fingers in the tight dark curls of his hair. The two of them will name their baby Morton, after her father. She is nearly sixteen. Her lover says goodbye.'

'How many women does he have in Minneapolis? her mother asks as the lover pases through the living room. I know about most of them, she says, tell me, does he have one in every city?'

'Susannah, you know we never played Minneapolis when I was with them, the lover says, and she doesn't look up as he
leaves. She is crying again, very quietly. Fulla shit Angelo, she whispers, my favorite man.'

'Her daughter has the letter M tattooed on the inside of her left ankle, and she traces it absently with her finger. With her other hand, she follows the lines of the manuscript as she reads. Mother? she calls from the bedroom, I like this pretty well, but what is this business about the Goddess of Light?'

'Charity, do you know what? her mother whispers, rehearsing. Your father and I are going to have another baby.'

'Mother?'

'The Goddess of Light is the mother of Truth, she yells back. She drops her head back down to the floor.'

_I lean back. I sip some water, indicate this break in the action._

'The Duncecaps stay in Mrs. Felker's house when they play Minneapolis; Morton stays in Mrs. Felker's bedroom. As soon as I get this goddamn button back on this goddamn shirt, he says, I'm getting out of here. He's pulled the thread too tight and the baby blue satin has puckered. Whyn't you unbutton a man's shirt like a normal human being, Emily? She leans into his shoulder and gently pulls the pucker out of the fabric.'

'You could just as well use polyester shirts with the lighting you use, Morton, she says, pulling the thread away from the shirt so he can cut it off neatly.'
'And you could just as well use polyester sheets, Mrs. Felker. And they both collapse back onto the bed. . . .'

I lean back a little further. I touch the water glass, then stop. I've really got to piss. I've got to piss and I bet that woman looking up here through half-closed eyes with her cigarette burned down so far because she's thinking about something else has got to piss and the guy who's sitting next to her who's looking through half-closed eyes because of the cigarette is getting pissed and their little blonde child doing Miss Wiggly all over her mom's lap has definitely got to piss.

'. . .and start using their tongues. Hey, you two, that's really ugly, Cedric, the bass player, says from the door. C'mon Morton, he says, we gotta get across town and set up.'

'Morton, Cedric says as they take the van across town, can I tell you something? You are much much much too old to be having hickeys all over your belly, man. That is some gross shit.'

'Morton looks over at him for a second and then pulls the rearview mirror over his way so he can straighten up his mustache. Cedric, you know what? he says, Elvis was a bum and he couldn't write music and he could only just barely play guitar and. . . .'

'All right, okay, Cedric says, I'll shut up, Jesus Christ.'

...and this story's got the cigarette woman somewhere back
in Reverieland. Look at that squint. She's getting pissed, look out, I'm not doing that to her. Whoa, the guy keeps touching her hand and shouldn't be, she is really into the reading, thank you. Hey pal, I'll thank you to knock it off right now. I am touching her in a much more important way.

I touch the page--another break in the action.

'Angelo sighs this time and leaves without saying goodbye; Charity settles more deeply into her chant. Her finger traces a box in the air; the box remains the same size even though her eyes are closed. Her mother tiptoes into the room and begins to put clean clothes away. Where do Angelo's shorts go, honey? she asks without thinking, and her daughter's eyes flutter open. Hmm? she asks.'

'Susannah leans over and gently pats her daughter's belly. I said that it is certainly restful living in the house of reproduction. New babies and lost men.'

'Where is Daddy tonight? Charity asks.'

'Vincennes, baby. Hush now, don't get me crying.'

'Go do some writing, mother, Charity says, giving her mother a quick kiss. You've got the idea, but that part about oneness needs work.'

'Angelo pokes his head back in the door. I can't leave yet, he says.'

'Susannah smiles and throws him his shorts. You go easy on her now, she says. You're a grown man.'

I don't know what his problem is but there are a lot of
people here, including me, who realize that you are not to be making contact with that woman while I am talking. I don't think I'm reading anything that requires even my full attention, but she looks damn serious and oh, man, not on her thigh, you dumbass, now how did you like that look. How about this, my friend, how about you discreetly take the little girl out somewhere where she can make weewee and the severe woman can continue to be severe and I can quit glancing up to indicate ...

...yet another break in the action.

'In Vincennes Morton has always slept alone, and he always enjoys playing there. This morning he takes out the motel stationery and the ball point pen and starts a letter to Angelo. Dear Angelo, he writes, you were absolutely correct when you said that we're in an absolutely untenable position, and I suppose I agree that you better marry Charity. Nonetheless, it is pretty damn strange to have an old friend get both my wife and my daughter pregnant within a half-year of each other. You were damn right when you surmised that there was no way the baby could be mine because I was playing that cruise ship during that two months when the child must have been conceived. I suppose it was honorable of you to fess up -- anyhow, I'll claim the baby. I already wrote Susannah to tell her that.'

'I still consider you a good guy, Angelo, and the best rhythm guitarist I ever played with, and now you are going to
be my motherfucking son-in-law, you bastard. If you don't take good care of my little girl, or if you ever tell her about Susannah's baby, I will shoot you down dead sure as hell.'

'Gene Vincent is still the God of Weekends, Morton wrote, your pal Morton. He picked up his acoustic guitar and absently began plunking out the chords to "Hound Dog." He started laughing and decided to play it for the encore tonight; he generally felt it was bad luck to play Elvis songs, but what the hell, it was Cedric's birthday.'

Their poor little child is whimpering. Listen, kid, I'm with you, baby, I'm hurting too. Maybe I can get your mom to sit up here and glower at the audience, that'd hold their attention; it certainly holds mine, and you and me we can go urinate in peace. Sorry, child, if I was your age listening to me would give me the miseries too.

These pauses.

'Angelo reads the letter in his own apartment, smiles, and then burns it and rinses the ashes down his sink. When he calls Charity, she is excited and says that Morton has written her and said that he'd be home for the wedding, that he is flying in from Lansing special just for that day. Angelo imagines that he can hear Susannah crying in the background. In two weeks you'll be living over here with me, Angelo says, does that sound okay to you? It does, she says. It's damn near to the high school, Charity, you could even think about
going back. I could think about it, she says.'

'Listen, Angelo says, I need to talk to your mom, wedding plans. Susannah, are you close to crying? he asks, when she gets on the line. No, she says. Well, I just got a letter from Morton and he's going to claim the baby was his. Okay, Susannah says, but that doesn't mean he's coming back. Maybe not, Angelo says, but maybe so. You know he tries to be a decent daddy.'

'Angelo, Susannah says, you are a child. I've got writing to do, she says, and hangs up.'

I don't believe it, she's taking the kid out. Damn it, I'm gonna say something revelatory and important while she's gone. That ought to confound her considerably.

"Listen, everybody, speaking of hanging up, I want to hang up here for a minute and interrupt myself. I know it's not standard, but I think I picked a story with too many names and y'all are looking confused."

"I'm going to tell you a story that happened to a couple friends of mine, no, it's a story about me and a friend of mine. Y'all know where Belize is? Sure you do, well I was living there a few years back. I got some money together and just moved down there, I lived in this little village on the coast. And I thought it was great, living in these little houses and none of them looked finished, because they'd leave the walls open for the breeze. And I'd spend my time hanging around talking to people and getting them to tell stories into
a tape recorder. I thought 'this is it' is what I thought, I'm just going to go home in a year or so and write this stuff up and it'll be a novel."

"So I wrote a letter to a friend of mine who I'll call Ajax, because he thinks he's so cool. I asked Ajax if he'd be willing to bring down about a trailer full of stuff I had in storage so I could live there for another year. He agreed to come down, said it sounded fun. Anyway, Ajax brings a trailer load of stuff down through Texas, across the border, no problem, all the way through Mexico, no problem, and heads east into Guatemala. He gets into Guatemala, driving an El Camino with a trailer in the back, when he heads down a long, steep hill into a huge valley. There aren't any other cars, or people, or horses, or donkeys or anything on the road, and he's thinking that's kind of strange, when all of a sudden he realizes that about fifteen jeeps full of men waving combat rifles are converging on him from all sides of the valley. He starts getting nervous, but there's nothing he can do really except stop the car, which he does."

"The jeeps pull up from all sides, but Ajax just sits there with his hands up on the steering wheel, because earlier that morning Ajax busted the zipper on the baggy pants he always wears. That morning he figured who cares, I'm just going to be driving all day anyway, I'll fix it tonight. But it doesn't seem right somehow to face about three dozen Guatemalan soldiers with his fly wide open."
"Their captain finally motions Ajax to get out of the car, and he does, very slowly, but then he reaches down to pull up his zipper, which at that point is really gaping open. He hears this funny crackling sound, and nearly ignores it, when all of a sudden he realizes that what he just heard was all the safeties coming off of all the combat rifles, and then they've got him down on the ground, feeling around all over his crotch for this gun he doesn't have."

"Ajax also doesn't know Spanish worth a damn, so he doesn't know how to explain. Finally, the captain tells the searchers to pull him up off the ground, and he asks Ajax where he's headed. When Ajax says Belize, he's in trouble all over again. Guatemala doesn't recognize Belize; they figure that when it gained its independence from Britain it became part of Guatemala, and it's a real thorn in their side that the rest of the world recognizes it as a sovereign country. At this point they're looking at Ajax like he's at least guilty of consorting with the enemy."

"By this time some of the soldiers have gotten the trailer open, and he's in big trouble. They pull out my color TV, my old stereo, my lamps, seven boxes of my clothes, a couple dozen crates of my books. Ajax gets more and more worried while they throw stuff around, but the captain explains that they're looking for drugs, and he clearly expects to find them. After about a half hour of searching the soldiers stop and shrug their shoulders. The captain takes Ajax aside and
explains that if he wants to take this stuff to Belize, it will cost him an import fee: five dollars to him and two dollars to each of the rest of the men."

"Well, Ajax brought along a roll of one dollar bills for exactly this purpose, and he makes the rounds, paying each man the import fee and shaking their hands, and then the men get back into the jeeps and begin to drive away, when all of a sudden something in Ajax snaps. Whoa, hold up, he yells at them, and they slowly stop and turn around. What is it? the captain asks suspiciously, looking at Ajax, and Ajax explains that he wants to sell everything to the soldiers. He points to the color TV and says to the head guy, for you, $3. Everything else, for anybody who wants it, $1. And so he sells all my stuff, and everybody turns out the best of friends, shaking hands, apologizing for bothering him, the works."

"So two days later Ajax shows up at the village where I'm living. And I tell him that it's good to see him, we'll have some fun and stuff. But he cuts me short, says that he sold all my stuff. And I look in the trailer, thinking he's joking, but he's not. And when I ask him why? he just says, I just paid them for what you're going to steal. And he gets back into the car like he's going to leave."

"But I grab the car keys and say, What the hell are you talking about? And he says you come down here and live for nothing and tape stories that don't have anything to do with
you hoping to be able to sell them to some American publisher so some fat-ass pale Americans will be able to say Coo, coo, coo, ain't them Central Americans quaint."

"And I say hold on, Ajax, that goddamn TV was going to pay my rent for a year, fifteen months if it kept working, and Ajax hit me in the jaw and knocked me on my ass."

"You make me sick, he screams, give me the keys. I shoved them down further into my pocket."

"I just dealt with a bunch of soldiers who could have had anything they wanted off me and they settled for $75. I got no respect for you, you lousy thief, he yells at me."

"It's not my fault it's cheap down here, I said."

"It's not cheap for them! he screamed. And look, he said, you had the balls to have me bring down 4,000 boxes of books in English, you motherfucker! What was the point of that?"

"I can read down here, I said."

"Read Spanish, asshole, he said."

"Look, I told him, there are stories down here that need telling. . .I started."

". . .and nobody's telling them unless they're told by a white American? Man, he said that's beyond typical American; that's typical anus, and I was on my ass again. I didn't get back up because I was too sheepish to get back up."

"Anyhow, so that's about how I was a story thief and how I quit doing it. I drove back up to Chicago with Ajax later on that day, and he gave me one more bit of advice; he said this:
Writers make things up, asshole. So now I make things up, which brings me back to Morton."

A smiling pause.

'The night after the wedding Morton was in Indianapolis, and he was exhausted. Charity had been chanting silently every moment up until the vows, and afterwards he didn't have a chance to say anything to her except Good luck. Angelo had been skittish the whole time, maybe expecting the punch in the head that Morton had already decided not to use. But with Susannah, Jesus Christ, it was the first time he'd seen her in three months, and she only said one thing: You best be coming back, Morton. And all he'd said was, Susannah, I've got to play out the contract, but I'll be back in 5 weeks. He gave her a quick kiss and then they both skittered away. He had a plane to catch.'

'That night the crowd was pretty sparse, and Morton stepped up to the mike and looked for the person who had the I-know-you're-singing-to-me look, and he found her, a hard looking woman around 45 who looked like she'd seen something mean recently. Well, he said, looking at the band, Be-Bop-a-Lu-La, and the woman was smiling, and he had only just started singing.'
BABYSITTING

As soon as I open the door, it is my job. Hey Streetboy, I tell the short, middle-aged man who's trying to slip away. What is it we both know about you being in here?

He holds up a drink. I sigh, but it's hard for the bartenders to keep track. It's your last, I say, trying to smile. A large, drunk woman says Hey, leave him be, he's my guest. No, I say edging Streetboy toward the door, he doesn't come in here. Finish it, I say, pointing toward the drink. He gurgles it down, mumbles something like, Streetboy'll be back. I know he will be, and I'll boot him again. Cycles of the earth, heartbeat follows heartbeat, one foot after another, I'm behind the bar. The hands want a beer, the head opts for coffee.

Bon soir, I smile to one of the bartenders as she hands me a Kamikaze. Friday night, she says, and we drink. We need some help with I.D.s, she tells me, so I grab a penlight and hit the floor. Happy hour on Friday is generally an older alcoholic crowd, but a few youngsters slip in.

May I see your I.D., please? I ask them. Oops, weird wrinkled paper bullshit. Nothing with a picture on it? Nothing else? Only this? Sorry, but I'm afraid you'll have
to go. I know... 

Marcia's voice climbs up above the growl of the crowd, above even the "At the Hop" compilation turned up double loud. So they bring this old man in to me, she's saying, and I'm supposed to help him. The cop who brings him to me says, Please be nice to him, we'd let him go except the drugstore guy is being a complete dick, wants to make an example. The old guy is sittin' in my swivel chair, spinnin' a little, lookin' completely whipped. We talk a little, turns out this little Captain Kangaroo's in for swiping a box of Tampax supers. All I can get him to say is this, and he seems to feel it explains things... My wife, you see, has been dead for thirteen years. 'Her crowd cackles, and she catches my eye.

Hiya, I say, as she catches my elbow.

Hi, she says, Will you keep an eye on me? Please? I'm tripping pretty hard.

Sure, I tell her, Any problems yet?

Except I'm talking too much, no. I just want to get home okay. She touches my arm again.

Okay, you got it, I tell her. Come check with me, how 'bout? I'm at the back door tonight.

She smiles and heads back to her audience.

I turn and notice a solo drunk trying to crush a highball glass with one hand. Hey, Captain America, I whisper into his ear, I don't want to bug you, but if that breaks, it is going
to cut the living fuck out of your hand.

He squints up at me, angry, and then puts the glass down. You're all right, man, he says holding out his hand. You really care. I take his hand and help him up. You're ready to go home? I ask. He nods, looks into my eyes. Will you help me? he asks, after a long pause. Together we get him into a cab. He blows a kiss as the cab pulls away.

Jesus, I think, I really do not like this. It becomes time to take money for the band. On weekends, it's always either rock'n' roll with a tinge of blues or blues with a tinge of rock 'n' roll. You know, I tell a frat boy who's bitching about money, the best thing about this band is that there is absolutely nothing derivative about 'em. Yeah, he says, I guess you're right. They are a good time band. You have one, I say with a wink.

I sit at the back door, watching pick-ups fizzle, watching anyone who raises their voice, watching the time. Fights are rare, but I only have to sit and take money besides watching for them, so I spend a lot of time imagining my next move if a fight does break out. That guy, I think, I'd throw coffee in his face. That guy, I'd talk to. That guy, God, I wish he wasn't in here. Him, I don't fuck with. This Friday's Mr. Danger.

Marcia comes to sit next to me every once in a while, and we talk about books. She is writing a book about a porn star who is supporting three children. She tells me about her
three children. Friday is her night out. She is doing fine. The kids are wonderful, they really are. On most months she receives support payments from two of the three fathers, so she can't bitch too much. Little Janey, her baby is really beautiful. She nearly died, did I know that, from herpes contracted in utero. How can I be so stupid, she says. Her tears surprise both of us, and I pull her into the back hall to compose herself. Of course, she says, I just told you I have it, didn't I? She has never talked this much to me before.

I don't think I'm tripping so much as it's just that I'm drunk. I like you, she says, I trust you. She pats my arm and goes to sit down.

Can you dance with me? she asks, later. I sip the beer she has brought for me. I'm sorry, I tell her, but I've got to sit here until the band quits. She bites her lip, but when I ask her if she's okay, she says yeah and pulls one of her friends to the dance floor.

At about midnight a group of bikers roll in, and there is not much I can do but welcome them. They are really pretty nice guys, but they have a taste for minor trouble that makes my job tough. Their head guy asks me how I'm doing, and we chat for a while about the suckass weather.

He asks me to keep an eye on his hat while he tries to get his hair untangled. For fifteen minutes he brushes his long black hair in the back mirror. As he finishes, I hand him his
hat, and he gives me a nod and a much obliged. We are now allies of sorts.

Marcia comes back, and it is apparent she is fading fast. You make sure I get home, okay? I nod, but she shakes her head. Write a note, she says, write me a note. What should it say? I ask her. That you will take me home, she says, swaying. I write a note on a napkin--I will make sure this woman gets home--initial it, hand it to her. She takes it and stumbles back to her place.

Just as the band quits playing, Mr. Danger makes his graceless move toward violence and I cannot relax. A skinhead biker has already chatted with him twice about moving on the women the Harley guys came in with, really very polite about it. Mr. Danger, however, is sort of big, and a hothead, and a fool, and he sits next to the skinhead's old lady. The biker is smoldering next to the bar, and as soon as Danger reaches up to touch her face we all move at once. The other bikers instantly have Danger corralled, skinhead is coming in for the kill that is probably his by rights, and I am in the middle with my hands down, my major line of defense being, Not here, gentlemen, take it outside, too many other people will get hurt. A table gets knocked over, glasses break, a sleepy little drunk falls out of his chair, but I survive with a minimum of jostling. The head guy begins to pick things up, and I explain to him that they are going to have to leave. No problem, hoss, he says, my people are out of here. He gathers
everyone up and apologizes again as they leave. This done, it takes both of us doormen and a bartender to toss out Mr. Danger. It seems to usually work this way. We are all three perfectly willing to pound him, and he doesn't understand this. After some nose-to-nose with him, we manage to toss him out.

Later, just when I think things have leveled out, I notice a man passed out at the bar, and he's starting to knock things over. It's my responsibility to get him out, so I put one hand on his shoulder and whisper Hey, man, you gotta go. C'mon, man, time to go home. My lips nearly touch his ear. He doesn't move, and, in fact, one more motion will probably take him off the stool. He is well-dressed. He is still clutching a bottle of beer.

I push the bar stool back under him. The bartender gives me the sign that means the man has to go, one way or another. I put one hand on the man's chest and pat him carefully on his face. Are you understanding? I ask him. He looks up as if to say something, but his eyes are closed, and his head drops again before he says anything.

I sigh, glance at the bartender, and then quickly take away his beer. I hand it to the bartender, and she sweeps it up and away with a motion that must seem taunting, but she's fed up with him. He jumps up in a flurry, yelling Hey! Hey! You give that back! I need that, he yells, I paid for that, hear me?
I tell him one more time that he's got to go, trying to show him with my eyes that arguing is stupid. He takes a step toward me and says You get away from me, or I will fuck you up. I realize that he sees the whole situation as one on one, so I raise my hands, palms forward, and take a step back. Leave, I tell him. Now.

I hear him smash the exit sign on the way out, but that can't be helped. I thank the men who massed behind me, backing me up. So much wasted gentleness, I tell the waitress, when she brings my beer to the door. She brings me a couple more that she opened accidentally, and I'm grateful.

We all drink a bunch of beer to get the fight out of us, but my stomach is in turmoil. We do a round of Kamikazes, but it doesn't help. I just get drunker.

Just before close I find Marcia sleeping in the pool room. I shake her and she looks up. Hey, she says, we have a contract, remember? I can get you a cab, I say. No, she says, I need my car first thing in the morning. I'll drive you home, I guess, I tell her.

She can barely make it to her car, but I resist the temptation to just carry her. I sigh as she plunks down in the passenger side because I know full well that the address she tells me is a thirty minute walk from where I need to go. A promise, though, is a promise.

I found a guy, she says, but I ditched him.

You handled that fight very well, she says.
When we get to her house, she invites me in. I tell her I'll walk her to her door. You are very nice, she says, as she turns to go in. I can't believe you are so very nice.

I begin the long walk, not home, but instead to a house where a woman expects me, and I need to be with her. I stop in a park bench, and stare into the dark, but it's starting to rain, and I have to get up and keep walking.

From the edge of the park I see a dark shape in the middle of the street; from where I am it looks like someone's hit a German Shepherd and left it there. It's a busy street, and I think, well, it's be nasty if it got hit again, so I decide to move it out of the road.

I get to the dog and realize it's clothes and then realize it's a person, a girl. As I bend over, she sits up and looks at me. She's bleeding from her head, her face, her arms. Her eyes are crazy. No, she says, no, don't. I take a step toward her and she gets up and she begins to back up, crossing her arms across her face. I take one more step and she's running, back across the park. She's fast, running, and I'm slow, fat. In a few seconds I realize that chasing her is a dumb idea for a lot of reasons. Since I'm back at the bench, I sit down, hold my face in my hands. I'm scared, so scared that it takes me a few minutes to realize I'm crying.

In a minute I will go call the police, try to figure what happened. For now, though, for now I will just sit here and try to figure out what I know.
"I feel like a shill with a glass stomach," he said. The bartender was ugly. A blast of cold air accompanied by the smell of rain surged into the bar as a woman passed through the door. The smoky air in front of her parted for a moment and then closed back in. She walked up to the bar and squirmed onto a black leather stool. The whiteness of her long fingers hardly contrasted with the whiteness of the white Russian she ordered. A tiny piece of hotdog stuck to her white dress right where her love button would be. Didn't matter; he thought, it wasn't her.

"But the booze is getting to me," he said. The bartender didn't hear him. He twisted open a Mojave Imploder, held half the capsule to his right nostril, and inhaled.

"Hey!" the ugly bartender hissed as he rubbed the purple scar on his face, "there's devices for that shit, and you do it in the bathroom."

"Sorry, sport," he said and popped the other half into
his mouth and washed it down with the last of his draft beer. "I'm a little dry over here, sport. Give me something a little stronger and a little bigger."

The bartender poured him a schooner of Guinness stout. "You headed up or down, Smiley?"

He shrugged and walked away to a vacant table. The woman in white followed and sat in the chair across from him. "I'm a nurse in the ER at Sanctified Mercy Hospital," she said. "What do you do?"

"I work at the crematorium and pound bones into powder with a rubber mallet. I substitute teach on the side."

"My granduncle was a Nazi. He was also an asshole," she said and flicked the piece of hotdog off her uniform.

He gently reached into the schooner and picked it up out of the foam. "Oh cyclops of the night, of brainless genius," he said.

"Oh, I love literary people," she said. She shook a cigarette from a pack of Eve Extra Longs and put it between her red lips. "Gotta light?"

He pulled a stick match from behind his ear, struck the head with his thumbnail, and held the flame to her cigarette. "I hate it when women smoke."

She sucked in and half the cigarette turned to ash. "Hey listen, I have a good story, listen." The smoke made her words sound like they came from inside a cloud. "I was a nurse for the World Health Organization. They stuck me out in
a leper colony on Laccadive Island. We had it under control. People were stabilizing at the very early stages. But then people started dying – dying all over the place of kidney failure. Leprosy doesn't do that. We were stumped and all that time people kept dying for a year. Then we figured it out. Tylenol had been available on the island for five years. A couple pills a day stopped the pain." She giggled. "Turns out the poor bastards decided that if two pills stopped the pain, twenty-five would cure them." She softly punched his shoulder. "That much Tylenol is toxic, Jack." She took his chin between her two fingers. "Analgesic deaths," she whispered.

He pointed at her chest. "Are those real or did you have a mastectomy at some point?"

"Okay," she said and got up and walked away.

The ugly bartender walked over to his table. "Strike out, Smiley?"

"Not exactly, just pissed her off. What's the little lady drinking?"

"White Russians."

"Send her a shot of vodka and a glass of milk. It's on me, I'm not a complete jerk. Oh, and by the way, if you keep picking at that scar of yours, you'll break it open. It'd be a real mess then."

He steered himself to the bathroom. A full length mirror
hung in front of the urinal. He looked down into the urinal. He hated those cigarettes butts, god how he hated those cigarette butts, especially the ones with filters; they didn't break up completely when he pissed on them, like his daddy's aircraft carrier did in the Pacific during World War II when a Jap torpedo blew it to shit.

"More than two shakes and you're playing with it," said the dwarf standing on the milk crate at the urinal next to him.

"Hey, I think you got blood in your urine," he said. "Just kidding." He looked in the mirror and saw himself languidly dangling. It always looked bigger from up here, he thought. He zipped up and looked back at the mirror. Damn, he thought, those fucking piss stains.

He walked to the sink. There was graffiti all over the wall, all of it so stupid he couldn't even think about it. Except for one. He took a matchbook out of his back pocket and wrote the number down.

He sauntered up to the bar. "I feel like Mr. Bojangles at 78 rpms," he said to the ugly bartender. "The Imploder. Too high, too high, too high, too high. Give me a velvet ditch. Heavy on the sewer water."

"What's the magic word?"

He tossed a twenty dollar bill on the bar, grabbed his crotch, and walked back to the table. As he sat down, a woman
walked through the door. She smoothed her aquamarine aerobic suit down over her hips. She looked around. "Hey!" Her gravely voice rose above the Stones song that blared from the neon jukebox.

"Hey, Lola," he shouted.

She saw him and stalked over to his table. "Good to see you, Lola. Don't sit down, you're sweaty," he said. "Sit on down."

"Am I going to be in the way?"

"Contingency plans, babe. I believe in contingency plans."

"Here ya go, Smiley," said the ugly bartender as he shoved a tray with thirteen ditches toward them. "You owe me fifty cents." A new song started on the neon jukebox. "Lola?"

She reached into the Bull Durham tobacco bag she kept on a string around her neck and pulled out a couple quarters. "Any calls for me tonight, Sport?"

The bartender shook his head, laughed, and walked back behind the bar.

She raised one of the drinks in a toast. "Encountered any obstinate bones lately?"

"No, have you?" He polished off his first and picked up another.

"No, but I'll tell you what happened down at the cow clinic today." She emptied another drink down her throat. "This old fart called up from his ranch, okay? He says he's
got this problem with this young Charolais bull of his, like it's lying on its side and quivering out in the pasture just beyond the house, he says, the god damn thing hasn't gotten up for a day, it just lays there and shakes, so the vet says 'I'll be out there,' and he drives out there and you know what he finds? He finds a dead Charolais bull, which is worth two grand I'll have you know, and there's a couple dogs that have been chewing on its belly so that they're deep inside its guts, and that's what made the damn thing look like it was quivering, those two dogs. Lazy rancher. But what the fuck, we charged him for the visit anyway." She sighed and picked up another ditch.

The door opened and a woman wearing a purple fox skin coat stepped in. The way his head whipped around made Lola say, "I'm intrudin'." She picked up a drink from the tray and headed over to the pool table where the dwarf was chalking up his cue. The woman in purple sashayed up to the table and picked up one of his drinks.

"Hey Jim," he said. "Maybe I'll play some pool, maybe later. But this walkin' up to my table shit is no good."

Jim turned away. He waved Jim back. "Don't play with Lola. She'll whip your ass. She did it to me once."

Jim turned away. He waved Jim back. "The moustache is almost gone."

These ditches are beginning to gutterize me, he thought.
He pulled out his Vick's inhaler and breathed deeply seven times. Much better, he thought as the back of his head felt like it peeled away. He shoved his chair back from the table and started to stand up. Maybe I should ask Lola to dance, he thought. Naw, nobody dances to Dylan, and he sat back down.

He raised his fist up into the smoky atmosphere and yelled, "Party!" No one looked at him. "Fuck me to death," he muttered under his breath as he sat back down. Lola looked over at him and smiled. He shook his head.

From outside came the squeal of brakes, followed by a pregnant pause, then the sound of clashing steel and breaking glass. Everyone in the bar looked towards the door. The eight ball bounced off the table and onto the floor. It rolled up against the neon jukebox. A young boy rushed through the door. "I need a towel! Quick, give me a towel," he screamed. The bartender tossed him a wet bar rag. The kid dashed back out the door.

Bad shit, he thought and downed another drink. Some poor bastard's probably maimed for life. It made him think of his cousin with the cleft lip.

He looked around to see how the other people had taken this intrusion. At the table next to him a skinny man wearing a raspberry beret shook like a withered blade of bear grass in a midwinter chinook. He put his hand on the shaking man's shoulder. "Hey buddy, what's up?"

"Wow man, it's like I can't explain the connection, but
"Go on, man."

"It was this U.S.O. show. I was stationed off the coast from Guam. It was Christmas. Bob Hope was comin' to entertain us. Ahhh, I don't know, it'd just probably bore ya."

He handed the jittery man one of his drinks. "Go on man, if it bores me, I'll let you know."

"America needs more guys like you," he said and downed the drink. "Me and Tremaine figured we'd get the jump on all the other guys and showed up for seats an hour early. Tremaine had this huge boil on his neck. Like I'm talkin' massive, ya know? The boil was so bad that he couldn't hardly move his head around, it hurt so bad. Anyway, we were sittin' there waitin' for Hope and the sun was blazin' down on us. It was like it was hot enough to french your fries. I swear to God it was that hot. So we're sittin' there waitin' in the sun, just waitin'. The other guys started filing in and there was only about fifteen minutes till Hope came on. Then I heard this sound and felt this warm wetness against my face, kinda simultaneously like, ya know? It was his boil. It exploded. The sun did it, I guess. It splattered all over the side of my face and onto my uniform. I never did see Hope, I spent the whole time cleanin' myself."

"That's it?" he said. "That's all there is?" He looked around and out of the corner of his eye he saw someone come in
through the door. "Here, take these," he said and handed the man three ditches.

She was perfect, wearing black leather exactly the way he wanted it worn. The zippers, the nylon...even the studs laid out perfectly, just the way he'd always pictured it. But it wasn't her. If only it'd stop raining I'd go home, he thought and raised the last ditch to his lips. "You been had," he muttered to no one.
DOCTOR QUANTICO'S DILEMMA

Doctor Quantico with his little tiny hands
picks away dried blood
from the stitches and the hair
and says, Why he got a hole in his head?

The Kennedy General resident explains
that the patient's brother-in-law
got smashed and dealt the patient
a quick what-for with his hammer.

We went in with the gizmo, he says, and took out
that piece of his skull, hammer-sized,
but he had a lot of pressure built up
so we tapped him, took out a bunch of fluid.

Doc Quantico touches the tube
poking out from behind the ear
and nods.

Do you drink? he asks the patient,
and when he nods asks, A lot?
and when he nods bends over and whispers
Good to have a hole in your head.
Lets out evil spirits that make you drink.

But when he gets the X-ray,
Doctor Quantico sees the tube,
which should curve gently
between the skull and the brain,
head straight across, directly
to the center of the patient's mind.

Oh, boy, says the Doctor,
Oh, boy, ho boy, oh boy.
NEUROSIS IS A LUXURY

Our Father, I was up early Sunday morning, you saw my raggedy soul down there in the front row with the rest of the gigglers. I realize it was improper to swallow a Stelazine before visiting, but in my condition you do what you must to avoid scenes, so what the fuck. Listen, Jody the Drooler said his prayer was answered when he saw me in worship; it's pretty meager inspiration you dole out for us problem people, Father. I told Jody that I was in search of my kid, and he said that's just what you explained to him, that I was a lost child in search of guidance, and he was mighty glad that I was able to locate you.

Listen, would it be too much trouble to explain to Jody that dead cats frequently stay dead?
Besides that, I reckon I need your help in helping this letter find my kid.

I trust in Jesus,
Ignatz (not my real name)

Mon. A.M.

Dear Child,

Let me say that I'm operating on the assumption that you were in fact generated and born, and depending which end of emotion is shaking my tatterdy ass, that assumption either tickles me or rattles my bones. Little shaker, you are by rights entitled to everything I have, but I reckon I gave you too much already.

See, I'm a little worried abut your genetic makeup.
Enough chemicals have wound up in me, one way or another, that I would guess that all that's left of my chromosomes is a little biological squib, a little implosion for the protection of the species. And your mom, well now, she was an absolute fine woman, but she was coded for misery, pure. Every cell of every tissue, programmed for some sort of unhappiness. I don't hold out much hope, but if you make it to adulthood I hope you at least make it up to neurosis.

And see, my time is limited. I close my eyes, I know that the whole world is sending various hordes to finish me off. Ugly conquistadors are flying up from the south on hobbled ponies, bellowing, "Do the right thing before you kick, peckerhead!" From the west, tiny little wise men teeter toward me whispering that it is best, when dead, to go ahead and fall down. From the east, an endless procession of my Caucasian ancestors creeps toward my brain, chanting "You're wasted. Die easy." The north torments me because nothing comes from there. It's got me pretty uneasy.

And I never have any time to try to correct things. I work all the time, and even when I'm not working I'm doing stupid shit like bringing the Iraqis their coffee. Those guys were pretty embarrassed to realize I had 'em pinpointed, but Jesus, three sunglass men and a political prisoner stand out in this whitebread town. Yesterday, I took the best brew I know how to make down to their car, and most of 'em were grateful, but their prisoner gives me a sullen look and flies
slow birds out of each of his hands, even with manacles on, by pinching the coffee between his knees. I respect that guy.

Because see, one afternoon I took the Iraquis an ad from the newspaper because I wanted them to translate it. And their lead guy, a tall guy who I generally get along with pretty good, he looks at it for a second, tosses it back to the prisoner, then gets out of the car and kicks me whop! in the chest with the flat of his shoe. I end up bang on my ass and sucking wind. Imbecile American, he's yelling, kicking me in the eye a couple times, that's Farsi! Iraqis speak Arabic, you fool! And then the prisoner starts to translate: Americans are the spawn of dogs, happy only when they can kiss their own tail. Their children deserve no better than the lies of false ways, and so on.

And that tall Iraqi bends down and he says, The sin you are going to burn for is that of knowing only the language you were born with.

That's what I'm getting at.

Mon. P.M.

Back from work. Child, listen, your mama was a wreck, and I admired her, but she was unreliable. In her manic phases, she was always moving to a different town, because in her depressive phases she'd hole up in a place for a month or six weeks and then all of a sudden burn it down, at which point she'd immediately commence a manic phase. She was nice but
dangerous—I was careful not to hang around her place on a night when I was likely to pass out.

But matter of fact about it, too. I mean, she'd give you the rundown right off, part of the first impression. And she was cool, no doubt. We had some fine trips together, out of town as it were, and my Valium allowance helped her out no small amount.

Which reminds me, Batiste has been bugging me too. This morning in the bathroom he was in there bugging me. Says Stiv, you're looking a little mortal today, what with those little lines around your mouth. Your eyes looking a little green, too, right in there around the white parts. I told him don't talk to me when I'm shaving, but he says we're both in here we might as well talk. I said Batiste, you trouble me, but he's just grinning and wrapping that same old towel around his head. I said Batiste, am I really looking bad? Batiste?

He's looking at me a long time, he's smiling, he's putting his hand on my shoulder. Romaine, he says, I do believe it's the polyester slacks you're wearing, man. Don't take me wrong, man, they're spiff, but they don't make you look so good. And I told him, Yeah, well, they may not make the women hot, but they keep my legs warm.

It's cool, Batiste says, and he looks down again at my pants. Some plaid shit, man, he says, shaking his head, but aside from that you're gettin' boobs and your nipples lookin' sad.
You know some cruelty, Batiste, I said, you're a mean one, man.

Don't know shit 'bout mean, Stella-man, Batiste says. Just a clown, man, a motherfuckin' clown.

Tues. A.M.

Your mom nearly never slept, kid. She and I would meet at night, you see, and be awake at night, and we'd talk and sit around or prowl the streets. She was a lovely woman, child.

But prone to sinking down and weeping. That was her miseries, and I had to quit selling the Valium from my prescription and start giving it to her to keep her from getting sad and frantic. But one night she wasn't feeling well, and we're in her room. She says to me, Jimmy, I don't mumble and I don't piss in public and I don't slobber and I don't carry trash possessions around in little carts and I don't drink and I don't curse anybody and I ain't preaching and I never asked anybody for 87 cents and I primarily don't even look at anyone bad, but you are the only one in town who's willing to look me in the face.

And I said darling, you got beautiful brown eyes and an allowance from your Daddy and I do believe we'll do okay. She swallowed the pill I gave her and I had one myself and we sat still. Then she jumped up and tore at her eyes and started screaming, in spite of the pill, started yelling about somebody should put a bullet in her head. We had candles
burning, and she was running around the room trying to catch things on fire and I was running around trying to blow the goddamn candles out. Then it was dark and she just slammed herself onto the bed weeping. So I held her in these lunatic arms of mine, and after about probably four hours she looks at me and says, well, this is a surprise, man, coming from a Lithium bandit like yourself.

Which at that point made me think of this other time in the bathroom speaking with Batiste. I was getting ready for work, you see, and shaving again and shit, and Batiste come up to me and lays his hand on my shoulder and says Jack, I've been feeling bad about your case. And I looked back at him and said what are you getting at, Batiste? And he said, look at you, getting all ready for eight hours of washing dishes, man, combing your hair and shit. See, man, and you are a sick man, a real-life outpatient on Thorazine parole, true?

And I said yeah, it's true, but I gotta go, I'm in big trouble if I'm late.

And Batiste says hear me out, Mr. Transmission Trouble, hear me out. And don't take me wrong, man, but I've noticed that sometimes when the scrip strength's not right you sometimes chat with folks that aren't always there? Psychosis is what that is, Ace. And I said, well, shit, Batiste, I can't help it--nobody ever asked me if I wanted to be crazy. And he says Cool, but not what I'm getting at. Now see, you're a nut from the word jump, Jackson, and they're making
you hold down a motherfuckin' job. But if you were neurotic, man, a tidiness compulsion or mother fixation or had some other little mental twitch, they'd send you to a quiet place to get better, everybody'd be making allowances for your weirdness, man. See, man, I figure neurosis is a luxury and should be taxed as such — it's better than being healthy, you got a constant handy excuse for acting goofy. But if you wind up psychotic, man, you take it in the butt. They iron every last goddamn wrinkle right on out of your brain and then slave you out on bullshit jobs, man. I hate seein' that shit happen to my friends.

So I'm thinking Batiste is absolutely too sweet, and I'm thinking about his concern, and then your mother says this. She says, James, it is a drag fucking somebody on downs, and if you are serious start moving because you haven't moved for maybe five minutes and you're smashing me. And I looked at her for a minute, and your mama she was lovely, and I reached down and held her hips in my hands and I was moving right and she was moving right. No. I reached up and pulled her robe down across her bare shoulder, slowly traced her spine down to the tip of her tailbone. No. I took the sheet off of us and lit one candle and rubbed her legs, which were firm from all the walking. No. I can't remember how it went, but I tell you it went, cause I'm crazy but I'm not that motherfuckin' crazy.

And I slept good that night, and when I got up your mom
was gone. She left this note.

Dear James,

We shouldn't have done that but I'm glad we did but now I'm going to have a kid and I know because even crazy women know. I'm just leaving and I'm not going to burn anything up. I thought sometimes about when everythings went how I would keep you out of it but I will sort of miss burning everything up.

I took your pills,
Blue

Tues. P.M.

A long day, kid, and I need to finish this up, but a lot of stuff happened to me. See, I saw Batiste this morning, and he was standing in the bathtub, looking out the bathroom window, and I said Bastiste, what's up? And he said, oh man, you know those Iraquis down there in the Buick? And I said yeah, and he said, and they had that Shiite cat in there all tied up? And I said yeah. Well, said Batiste, the Iranian just got away, man. Those other three were out of the car doing something with the engine and that Iranian kicked open the passenger door and scammed, man. Fuckin' A, and he was positively the most rapid Shiite I ever saw running, man, zing! and he was up the alley and gone. Iraqis couldn't even have time to fire their guns, man.

We giggled a bit and he put his towel on his head, and then said he had stuff to do, but then he turned at the door and said Yo, man, don't forget your pills, and I said yo, Bastiste, you take 'em, and so he took 'em and grinned.
So I went down to take the Iraqis some coffee, and I took four cups so as not to let on I knew what happened, and they all looked kind of sheepish as they took it. So I said hey, where's the other guy? and the tall guy said he couldn't take the pressure. They all three look at each other for a second and then asked me do I need a job? And I said what do you mean, job? And they said we need another guy. And I suppose I looked dubious, because the tall guy said he was sorry about the time he kicked me because he had been having a lousy day, and besides, even though I didn't know Farsi from Arabic it was okay because I apparently knew fluent maniac, and we all four laughed quite a bit. So I may be crazy, but I recognize an opportunity when I see one, so I said okay, I'll take the job, only can I wear ropes instead of manacles, because I have a metal allergy, and they agreed. So I start tonight, I've called my supervisor and explained everything. It's a new start.

All my love,

Your Daddy

P.S. Thank you, Jesus.