

HOW TO BECOME FAMOUS
IN
HIGH SCHOOL

The Ghostwritten Memoir
Of a boy
Who became famous

Inspired by the Journals of
Beaumont Sirius Braithwaite

By
Grey Gheist

My name is Beaumont Sirius Braithewaite. I write because I
am a conqueror, and I lived to tell the tale..."

First Journal Entry
August 4, 1985

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters,
places and incidents either are products of the
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Dedicated to:
The Lead Player,
Who has been requested for encore
in a better country,

In despoiled honor is honor still,
and no lie or impostor will honor fill.

“Life is a moving treasure map
And wonder marks the spot.”
A. C. Braithewaite

The Braithewaite Pentalogy

1. How to Become Famous in High School
2. The Sunday Edition
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Introduction To the ghostwriter

When I was twenty-one I decided I would become an adventurer and so I absconded with the money sent me for commencement from the university — one semester shy of graduating — and traveled the world on my father's dime. I first went to Africa and walked the ancient plains and then to Egypt, to stand beneath the limestone Pyramids. Then on to the Mediterranean, where along its shores I journeyed back to the beginning of the Western world, that Peloponnesian isle where the Western myth began. In Rome I trod where Caesar trod and carved I with my finger into the dust on a shop-keeper's window the words Caesar spoke: *Veni, vedi, vici*: I came, I saw, I conquered. It is a peradventure the man never said that, but is also hearsay for over two-thousand years that he did — the expression has become as famous as he remains — and so its long historical precedence holds sway over whatever be true fact. In the ruins of Rome I perambulated over the place where it is believed the conqueror lay for three hours after the conspirators stabbed him. None now know for sure where that place is but the educated-guessers believe it to be beneath a common road, in a nondescript part of town — somewhere deep within the sewage. The day I was there an old gentleman was selling flowers to tourists from a dilapidated wooden wagon a few feet above where Caesar once lay down to bleed awhile. I bought a dozen red roses and strew them about the gutters in honor of the fallen conqueror. But it could be some other place, for as I said, the place where Caesar died is not known anymore; it is mere estimation. I scooped up a parcel of dirt anyhow; same as I had from the other world-famous places.

After a year of travel and high adventure I came back to America with memories of hearsay-history so keen it felt I also had lived and loved, conspired and conquered, been conspired against and conquered; I also had left my life's last breath in a forgotten place and been reborn and lived again. In one year I perused in leisure, as I walked among the ruins of the world, the gossip of the last thousand generations of man. All of recorded and unrecorded history had come to be perceived, at least in parts, by me. I learned from a living classroom, not as the professor would lecture, but as the world would instruct. I learned the world of man is a moving map on the spinning globe of planet earth and all that once was still spins and all that is yet and will be moves and will move. I brought home with me in Korcken glasses the dust of nations, as mementos that I had been to these places and had trod where the famous, great and dead had trod.

Dust... It is what all of us and our nations become and is where we come from. I had wished to see the world while I had the eyes to see and hear the world while I had the ears to hear and to know the world first-hand while my knowledge and hands were yet set in stone about anything. I discovered the world is a big place — until you travel it — then it becomes a smaller place and no matter where you end you do not forget having been nearly everywhere there is to be and those places remain in you and they become all places you ever go — all places become one place and one place becomes all places. When they found out I quit school and used the money for world-perambulation my parents disowned me but it was no big thing; I had never felt owned by them, anyhow. After globetrotting I eloped to California and married my dream, a fair lady I affectionately named Happiness.

By the time I was thirty-five I discovered Happiness was carrying on with others and not including me in on it. Don't get me wrong, I am not an overly-possessive man

and was glad that others found Happiness delightful and I was happy that Happiness found others delightful. But she could have included me. I did not wish to upset anybody's delicate equilibrium with such a flaky woman so I begged off. This was my own bed I had made and my own tale of woe. I set Happiness free to live her own life and went on without her. I had then a long tradition of unsuccessful living to look back on. In the time since I first dreamt of happiness many laughing dreams had been sifted through my brain, leaving behind torn synapses and a fractured soul. I had become a card-carrying member of the demimonde club and we did not believe that happiness was for us, so after a long and rocky marriage Happiness and I decreed it impossible to live together. I saw her as a failed dream and she saw me as a failed dreamer. My conceit about Happiness is that she was a coy, bright-eyed flirt who fools and knows all along she is fooling. But I was young. It was, perhaps, mostly some of my fault.

That was the mind-set I was in after living toward my fourth decade on this blue, hard-boiled egg, one dipped in strong drink and speckled above with silver specks of salt. But for the silver specks of stars I would never have known what to do with myself. They have always been my beacons, onward and upward, and all fool dreamers who have come to the knowledge of the world must use the stars to keep their ship of dreams stable.

So I was given — and threw away — a fine education from a prestigious university on the business and philosophy of the world. My parents had a fortune in money but were misfortuned in love and I have not seen either of them since the egg of the world became boiled. Both are now at peace. Not that they ever raised hell nor that their deaths are a great tragedy; they were old and were able to live their lives exactly as they wished. They were given all they could handle and hold; and then, too, one cannot miss too much what one never knew. They were

strangers I went through the early part of my life with and were it not for us sharing the same name I would not believe we were related. Ghost-like memories they made even when alive, as if the sheen of living could not reflect off them and give radiance but was absorbed by a sense of propriety that obfuscated all of their being. They were aged and letter-perfect and had me long after the era of my mother's fertile age. In the early years they called me their miracle baby, but I was never like them, and so the possible miracle of my being was gradually lost to them. They were all business and I was all something else. I looked on the world with curious eyes and they looked on it with acquisitive eyes and so we never saw the same things the same way.

So after betraying the benefits of my seventeen years of proprietary instruction and traveling the world I struck out to discover gold in California. I would be a writer — the greatest of them — and not a titan of business. I would be a poet — the summa cum lauded among them — and not a colossus of cash. I would begin by penning the greatest script of the biggest movie Hollywood ever made. I used the last of my graduation loot to rent a flat near the beach and got right to it, for I had to unlearn much and learn much more and after a long apprenticeship of fourteen years I had penned a dozen scripts and a baker's dozen of novels and had filled up journal after journal of ramblings on life even life itself would be discomfited with. Of these immortal works I failed to sell a single one; so then — and about time — came woeful me to the end of my first dream. Then I met a stranger who was familiar, but it is sure I had never met anyone like him. He informed me he had a series of tales he wished me to write and the first concerned his dead brother. All I had to do was connect the dots; the writing of the story had been done long before.

When I first met A. C. Braithwaite in the late summer of 2005 he smelled like freshly-minted mammon

— crisp, clean and hopeful. He promised to make it worth my while and since I had no while to barter with I took his offer. It sounded like a fun few months of work and I would then have enough to live on until the next hopeful script. Dreams are gambles we make as soon as we have the money to roll the dice, so with the currency to back them, dreams can always begin again. It is a rough truth that there is more hope to be found in hard cash than all the colors of all the sunsets of all the worlds to come. The big lesson Braithewaite would end up teaching me is something all of us need to learn sooner or later: *It's never too late to live happily ever after.*

The Dream of Youth is
PROLOGUE
To The Age

This is a story about a boy named Beaumont. His mother named him after a beautiful mountain, a bright star, and a great uncle. As for mountains, they need men so they may become named; and as for men, they need mountains so they may be inspired to climb. Beaumont's middle name was Sirius, named after the brightest star in the night sky. Stars need men so they may become named and men need stars to be inspired to wonder. It was Beaumont's father who handed to him the name of Braithwaite — an old English name. A boy needs a father for a name and a father needs a boy so his name might live on; but with each generation the meaning of a name changes. I am not wise enough to know what meaning Beaumont gave to the name his father handed him. Maybe you will be wise enough.

Endings happen all of a sudden and of a piece, it's the middle that takes the while, and the beginning, well that is always begun many, many times. That being said, this part of the story of Beaumont Braithwaite has a beginning, middle and end. As for the true beginning and ending of Beau Braithwaite, I do not know any of that. This universe is bigger than I know it to be and such matters are beyond my knowledge. Here are some few parts somewhere between the two. All I can promise is this small part of his story has an end. Any other promise is yours to make. Our lives begin with promise and our promise becomes our stories and our stories eventually end, and after our stories end only promise remains — for every single life is a dedication to the future.

To the young, one journey around a star is a lifetime; to the old, well, they have seen the far side of the galaxy many times by now and have decided all stars look the same. The young consider the minutes in each day as important as the old do the pills they take. The young count all that touches them essential; the old have already touched what they could and now wish to leave alone and be left alone — bleached now is the skin they die in by the day — yet in the growing obscurity that surrounds them are the colorful, fading memories of what they once touched. The young are they who do not believe they will become old. The old are those who find it hard to believe they once were young; there has been too many days and pills to count since then, and the strict discipline of mathematics has replaced the soft sentiments of life within their minds. Large numbers are an abomination towards the appreciation of life, for example: rich men and accountants. And how can the young not count most everything they touch, and that touches them, as vital to the sustaining, if not of the universe, their own existence? All is new to them. They have not seen any of this before. The old have seen everything twice, or so they believe — no matter how parochial they actually are. Men go to places exotic and see only what they are. But it is true: wherever we go, there we are. But it also is true that men should slough off their old skins and old thoughts, on occasion...

Beau Braithewaite sat on his bed and looked out the window. His lime-green curtains were open and outside was an ocean wherein those with eyes could breathe light from the close, bright star, but its tide was now ebbing, pulling back the ocean of light toward the other side of the earth. Another day was passing and the great ocean was waning. He studied the picture on the bedside table as the light passed across it. It was awash in melancholic, fading sea-light and the memories evoked by the picture were

ebbing in him also, all the bright colors were turning to black and white. The picture was a Polaroid of him and a girl named Jenny. Jenny's mother had taken the picture of them at the stone wall built by Jenny's father at the back of the property to keep the snakes on their side. In the picture, Beau is sitting at the top and Jenny is climbing up to him. As Jenny pulled herself up her mother snapped the picture. All that was a very long time ago.

He turned the picture down. It symbolized everything that meant anything to him and all of it was over now. That picture was the still-frame of a life he had lived and one he had hoped for. Now he sat in an empty place. He looked in his mind's eye upon creation and pondered on what he had come to learn from the days he had lived; he reflected on what he had come to believe. He was emptied of it all and left behind was the useless knowledge that beauty is only in the eyes of rare beholders and truth is only in the thoughts of some few believers and so the figments of men's imaginations accomplish more for beauty and truth than beauty and truth do.

None of this is what he had worked and hoped to evolve to. Since his earliest days he had been ambitious to discover the secrets of life. He never expected to arrive at a state of hopelessness by knowing that, except in the few who are beautiful, beauty does not exist, and except for the few who are honest, honesty is a figment. This negative philosophy depressed him; but being full of truth he would not delude himself about it and being full of beauty, could not escape it by becoming part of it, and being one of late, dark and bad luck, there came in that moment, as he gazed upon their picture, the final loss of a graceful hope to ever know in this world what he knew and felt within. His perceptions of existence had eclipsed his life and made of it a thing pitiful and pathetic towards any future. Or so he believed.

He twirled fallen stars on the ends of his fingers and picked up the D. E. Hemingway. He had now just to drink the last dregs of his wonder and complete the forgetting. That was his last hope of grace: to forget the last of dreams and of him. His anger was quiet and dead earnest.

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On set of:
"How to Become Famous in High School"

Setting:

A quiet bedroom in suburbia; August, 1984. Two boys on a bunk bed. One up top; one down bottom. Film crew busy making last minute changes. Director takes his place in THE CHAIR.

He calls out:

DIRECTOR:
ALL QUIET ON THE LOT!

A prop girl throws a klieg bulb on the bare concrete of the set. No worries. The sound of a smashing klieg light is the director's trademarked good luck charm before all his movies start.

DIRECTOR:
Lights, camera and...
ACTION!

Film is rolling...

.....

Ghost 1 writer

I never believed in spooks growing up, until me and my brother saw the ghost of our grandfather floating in the closet. It was around midnight, which I knew to be the witching hour, though some call it the spectral hour; either way, such is the time for much of the weird, odd and unexplainable things of existence to be going on. It happened while we were talking about girls and baseball. I had the high bunk and he had the low, my blanket was hanging over his bottom bunk, so I think I saw it first — a vagabond ball of ethereal, spectral light — bobbing around in the closet. My brother was pontificating on the mathematics involved in the Major League swing when he stopped in mid-sentence and that let me know he was seeing the same thing I was, but he whispered the obvious question anyway,

“Do you see that?”

“Yeah, I see it,” I whispered back, open-mouthed and slack-jawed.

We watched the glowing orb, about the size of a softball, move around in the clothes for awhile. There were no dreadful emanations coming from it — quite the opposite — there was a perceptible, celestial joy and love in the light. And we were too amazed to be timid, anyway. We checked the window to see if the light was streaming through it, but no light was entering from the window. The supernatural presence was independent of any source. We watched in wonderment as the ball bobbed like an apple in a bucket for about five minutes, then disappeared.

I know you must be deducing there was a scientific explanation for this light and I do not doubt you are correct.

The poor science of mankind simply has not codified the knowledge of ghosts and specters, yet. Or perhaps you believe we dreamed it, or that we missed the origin of the light from outside the window. But I say you are wrong, if that is what you think. We were both bright boys not inclined to the supernatural or fanciful. No. That was the ghost of our grandfather. We knew it was him as if he had just walked in the door, fedora on his head, shiny shoes on his feet, broad suspenders holding everything up and a chewed-up King Edward cigar in his mouth. It was sure him, come to say hello and let us know that everything was going to be alright.

We were fourteen. My brother was soon leaving again. He was going on to one of the most prestigious preparatory high schools in America. I was going on to the public high school in the town we grew up in. My brother was leaving me alone and I would not be seeing much of him until the next summer. But I never had seen too much of him, even before he started attending special genius school. He had loved a girl since they both were born on the same day in the same summer. When he came back they would spend their time together and by doing that, more than tripled, quadrupled, their own time to be alive. That is what love does for us — it expands our time to live. And the greater the love between two, the faster the time goes and also the longer it lasts. That is ironic, but nonetheless true. It is as true a statement as ever was made that two lovers can live an eternity in one lifetime. And you know for yourself that it is true — if you have ever loved eternally and been loved eternally. It is rare, but maybe you have known it.

So it was what they call a bittersweet time. This brother of mine was a born genius and it was never doubted that he would someday remake the world in his own image. He was the bright star and I was the thoughtful moon. I reflected the glow of his sun and he relaxed in the soft

reflection of my lunar ponderings. I was the minor satellite to his stellar majesty. It took me a long time to come to things; not factual things — I was as bright as he was with those — but emotional things. He smiled his way through life and I mused my way through mine. Things touched me too much. Nothing touched him but what he wished to touch or be touched by. I had to think through all the possibilities while he imagined them immediately; the future was diffused through the synapses of his brain and he took only what he needed from it and discarded all the rest. I held it all in and sifted out the heavy parts and sent them down to the furnace of my heart, where they burned bright colors. The future came to him naturally and the past stayed naturally with me. He saw all possibilities at once and simply chose the one he thought best — the future was easy for him. I saw all that could have been — the past was easy for me. My problem was the need to get to the bottom of things; his gift was to naturally gravitate to the top of things. He was born to be an engine of the world, always moving in his mind toward the future; flying there in his imagination. I was born to be a tree, slow to grow and ponderous in my thought.

When we were three I cried at the death of a fly. I could not believe the fly would fly no more. That idea struck me as profound and tragic for the poor fly. My brother told me if I were to cry for every fly that died I would not have time to live; to keep my tears in a deep well within me and not to let them out except for important things. On that day I decided never to cry again, except for important things. But I kept the idea that flies are important, at least to them. We learned from each other how to be different, yet to stay the same. There was never any competition between us; we lived and loved like two different versions of the same being.

Besides being a brainiac of the first magnitude, he was a bona-fide mechanical wunderkind. Our mother didn't

appreciate it at first, but since it eventually paid off in free repairs, she grew to be thankful. When we were twelve his I.Q. was measured so high the administrators deemed him too special for public education and sent certified genius documents off to special genius school in New England to have him educated properly. Since then I have not seen my twin brother except in summers between classes and on holidays. He was sickly in the earliest years of our youth and living in a rough neighborhood, I had to bail him out of many scrapes over the years. But he would probably tell you it was me who was the sickly one and he was the hero. You shouldn't believe it, even if he is a genius.

There were three of us born to the same mother on the same day, but the last of us — so the doctor said — came into the world without breath in his lungs or a beat in his heart. But we never believed it. We never saw it with our own eyes to believe such a thing. People believe too many things on hearsay. We imagined we walked side-by-side with our last-born brother, who simply had wayfared off somewhere and had not yet decided to come back around. He lived. Somewhere.

Mother taught us that the things of the spirit are as real as the things of this world. No greater brothers could a boy have than mine. When me and the brainiac brother-I-knew-by-name were four he tore a clock apart and put it back together. It then told the time backwards, but it worked. When we were eight he tore my bike apart and re-fitted the front tire shafts with extra-long pipes, which turned a regular BMX into a long-framed dragster. Until he was commissioned by another kid to build an even longer dragster — complete with hydraulic shocks that made the back end pop — I had the coolest bike in town. It was that experience which sold me on the bike being the most proper form of transportation. I decided early on that one day I would buy me a bike, the real kind.

As for ghosts, I see them as the obscure counterparts of our physical beings; obscure to us, anyway. We are not of the world of ghosts yet, so we know little about them. And most of us are like that while living: ghosts, obscure spooks, thin shades-of-beingness and barely recognized or known by any around us for who we truly are. But that particular ghost that night was famous to me and my brother. We knew its name and much else about it. We knew it on sight. We knew it was our grandfather. It would be awhile before I saw another specter but I never forgot my first one.

Ghost 2 writer

My bike of choice is a 1986 Honda Rebel; specifically a midnight blue one, with white lightning strikes so faintly painted on her gas can you have to look close to see them. I paid a friend to give her a special coat job, as the Rebel line did not come with special coats. She is not sleek, quick or fast; she is not what is thought of as a bad-ass machine; but she has always taken me where I needed to go and did it so cheap it was nearly free. Her straight-twin engine has never failed me in all the years I have driven her. And when the wind blows my hair just right, she is also my hair stylist; there is no better a hair-stylist than the wind from a bike. She is a fine lady with a good reputation and I keep her in good repair. She never allows me to miss a tune-up or oil change and has her ways of reminding me if I have forgotten. But I have a cracker-jack mind for dates and figures and rarely forget. I named her Milady Rebel the day I bought her. She protects me from the uncaring world. A good man is not complete without a good woman and a bad man is made less bad by the same; and the man who is not decided on being bad or good should find a good woman — who will make the decision for him. Every man needs a good woman, even if it is just a machine. And since I never married, my bike is my lady.

I also have a car, but she has been in the garage for years. I wrecked her long ago and have not driven her since. Time has made her a classic but with her time to sit she has become more like the middle-aged, flat-buttèd maid. I named her Blue the first day I met her and though the Rebel is my lady, Ole Blue is my girl, too. We drove around the world together, and did it all in the same city.

Please don't judge me. One man and two women is not a new idea. It's been tried before plenty. I am proud of Blue and I take care of her, but that relationship has become, as the years have passed, strictly platonic. But there is no accounting for my love with Milady, as there is no longer any possible potential for love with Blue. The Rebel, she is my one and only. She is perfect for a comfortable cruise and can lull me to dreams with her low staccato growl. It is a four-dimensional sound: aural, cellular, atomic and spiritual. You feel it to the deepest part. She is a demure lady on the outside and a true lady on the inside— she is exactly what she seems — and maybe that is boring to some, but I find that fact about her to my deepest liking. When she is not taking care of me she enjoys her beauty rest more than everything else. I park her next to Blue and they both sleep like two old, soft-nickering horses. In a word, Milady is my kind of lady, and just the way I roll.

In the fall of 1987 I bought the Rebel from the old man down the street. I say he was old, but now that I think about it he was no more than forty-five then. I took Milady on our first official trip that day — me, Milady and my flesh-and-blood girlfriend. We drove into the golden sun and beyond it into the starlit night and by twelve o'clock midnight the city was in a deep fog and we drove through that. Back then a gallon of gas cost less than a dollar and we blew a dollar-fifty's worth, but the memory is priceless. It sold me forever on riding a bike. We were three smiling saints flying through the low-flying clouds, completely free for the first time. Me and Milady have been together ever since. That memory is twenty-one years old now. It has been a short eternity.

Milady and I are riding this evening with our steadfast companion. Buttons is a black, curly-haired half-poodle and half-something else. She is thirteen pounds of pure love. Her eyes look like buttons and are as big and

black as the night sky and in them I see myself reflected perfectly. There is one simple way by which I know she loves me true: when I am sad, she is, too. I tie her to my waist with a leash and she sits on my lap composed as a Baptist church lady. She loves the hum of the Rebel as much as I do and if I leave her in the house and ride without her she looks at me when I get home with those sad button eyes and it breaks my heart. I don't like to break perfect hearts so I take her with me as often as possible. I once hid her in my long-coat and took her to church. She barked a couple times when the preacher's mike made that high-pitched noise microphones sometimes make. When the people looked at me with wide, judgmental eyes, I fake-coughed and the catastrophe of a dog-in-church-on-Sunday-morning was diverted.

It is a quarter to seven on the evening of September 19, 2008. We are traveling to my alma mater — Almost Famous High School — to see old faces that once were young faces. It is the Twentieth-Year Reunion of the Class of 1988. I received no invitation, but knew that it was to be held on this date at this time and at this place so we are going to crash the party with laid-back dignity. The school is only three miles from home. I remember this when I measured it in high school, from the same house I live in yet; been in the same damned place all my life. But I have the bike to pull up roots and travel where and when I want. It is not my habit to go too far or stay gone too long. All places are the same places and wherever we go, there we are. I've seen it all twice by now.

At the school I drive the Rebel under the tin-roofed, corrugated passageway that leads from the bus drop to the gymnasium and the west entrance of A-wing. It is the same corrugated roof I walked under my first day of school here, twenty-four years before.

By the end of my freshman year I had become cool enough to find rides, and by my junior year owned my own

car and bike. There is nothing more embarrassing in high school than arriving on a bus. It proves to all that one has not yet arrived. That is one of the rules of a hard world I did not make up. If it was up to me, buses and all who rode them would be as cool as everybody else. But fact is, the only cool bus ever made on earth was the Volkswagen T-2 models, from 1950 through 1979. Otherwise called the Hippie van, it was not a true bus but the forerunner to the mini-van.

I park Milady next to the juice machine and stroll over to the gym. A few old people loiter around the entrance. I assume they are friends of my classmates or perhaps some geriatrics who have wandered over from the old folk's home across the street. I enter and survey the damage. It's worse than I imagined. My first idea is I am at the wrong place. I double check.

It's the right place. Few of them resemble what they did twenty short years before. If the men have hair at all it is grey, but three-quarters are half-bald or worse. The women have lost their tight, shapely ends and now are pear-shaped and matronly. The jaw lines of eighteen have become the jowls of thirty-eight. It is the quiet battlefield of a two-decade long war: the mighty young have battled Father Time and the only casualties are the youths, while Father Time is unfazed. He has only accomplished what they dared him to do. They all once thought they were above growing old, grey and tired — and certainly not so soon. Life has been proving the young and arrogant wrong for a long time. And Father Time constantly brings forth a new generation with the same arrogance engineered into them. Time fails us in many things but it never fails to teach. There's only one way to beat Father Time and stay young and that is to die young. Most are neither so brave nor lucky.

I lean against the cinder-block wall near the door to watch. They are full of spirit. They haven't seen each other

since the last reunion and there is much to catch up on. I had a waking dream in 1985 of what I would do at this moment. It's time for that dream now. I take the pack of Lucky Strikes from my pocket and pull out a white stick and light it. I don't smoke — can't stand cigarettes — but this was the thing I had planned to do way back, and so it has to be done.

I was fifteen when I first saw in my mind's eye this picture: I would go to my twentieth year high-school reunion on my bike, wearing a leather jacket and smoking a Lucky Strike cigarette. And now, as I stood aloof and alone against the cinder-block wall, dragging on my coffin nail, I will admit I felt cool enough about it. I had tried to learn how to smoke when I was young but was never able to do it. Smoking is an art form and I was no artist then. It took the right teacher for me to finally learn. It's a simple trick, really: just a patient inhale. When I learned how easy it was I learned also a little something about myself: which is though I was slow in my heart about the heavy things, it just wasn't my nature to take the slow way to things outside of it. And in the deepest part of me that is what I am — just a heavy-hearted, non-smoking, black-jacketed, impatient rebel biker.

On the second patient inhale some of the smoke got caught in the scratchy part of my throat but I refused to cough it up. I didn't want to break the cool streak I had going. The cliché of the aloof, lone, tough biker, in leather and smoking a Lucky while leaning easy against a wall as he arrogantly surveys his peers is just a cliché that comes naturally to me. It is who I am. I was born to live out this formula on *how-to-be-cool*. I grew into it by nature, nurture and a perfect coming together of circumstance. And if it were not a cliché I would have invented it and made it one. It was my destiny from the time I watched Marlon Brando in *The Wild Ones* deep into a late summer's night in 1985. And now that it was finally happening it felt redemptive.

That nobody paid any attention was the *ne plus ultra* of this particular cliché. At the moment I lit that lucky and took the first drag, I had finally become an artist. It had taken a long time.

I wondered how it was these people once meant so much. Their opinions mattered. I could not imagine them mattering now. I had sifted through much thought and philosophy the preceding twenty years, and now as I looked upon them that their opinions had ever mattered toward much of anything was mind-boggling. They were good, decent people, for the most part. But that their opinions once had influence over my own thoughts was an embarrassing fact to wrap my mind around.

None of them noticed my presence. And even if they could have noticed — being so wrapped up in their stories — they would have thought I was one of their classmate's sons. I had not aged as they had. My face had changed since high school, but not like theirs. I still had a jaw. There were no lines under my eyes. My hair was long and curly and was still dark. I had sported a crew-cut all through school. They simply wouldn't know me if they saw me. And I liked it that way. It gave me room to think and observe. And anyhow, I didn't have anything to say to any of them. There was only one I came to see. I have been waiting a long time to see her. I looked for her ten years before, at the first reunion, but she was a no-show then. I scanned the crowd. I would know if she was present for there would be a distinct light among them. Maybe she would come later. The night was still young, even if all these people were old.

I walked back out and strolled through the courtyard beneath the giant oaks. When I was a teenager I thought the oaks and buildings were ancient artifacts built and grown early in the century, but fact is the place had been built only five years before I was born. Now the trees were twenty years older than they were then, a bit older than forty all

told, and evidently found all the growth they could find in the soil they had been planted in, for they were no larger than they had been when I was fifteen. That is what I soon noticed: everything was exactly the same, except for the people. I once had expected a cosmic change to occur in the atoms of things over the span of two decades. Then we go through the decades and see the only cosmic change is in us. Twenty years is not near long enough to make much difference in brick-and-mortar buildings and the limbs of oaks.

Ghost 3 writer

The city I grew up in is a regular, normal, average place; like most all other places. And all that has more to do with this tale than first meets the eye. It is the land of the Indian summer. Fall does not begin here until October or November. And sometimes, summer just continues on into winter, and there it hides in the cracks of old trees and comes out at various times throughout the cold season. Summer never goes away here for long, except at the top of the great mountain that sits, like an ancient and patient sire of all the smaller mountains and hills around it, a dozen miles beyond the city. But winter never fails to find its place at the top of the great mountain.

In the place they live people share a common community pride — or lack of pride — relative to its history and potential future. The basic thing is that men are prideful; it is in their genes. And pride goes hand in hand with possession. The denizens of a city own that city, just as each citizen owns his house and car. This particular city, set between large and small, and being just regular, well, it has an ultimate inferiority complex exactly as big as its dream to be more than what it is. Other subtle minds have seen this about this place before I did. And such a ubiquitous, pervasive inferiority complex is not all that uncommon a thing. The inciting factor that has helped this city's epidemic-of-inferiority occur has to do with the amount of famous personages that have passed through over the years. No truly famous person has ever been born here, but many of the truly famous have passed through.

That is why I call it Almost-Famous Town. The roadway that brought all those who once were famous to

Almost-Famous town — and by which they soon left again — was once as famous as they were. A transcontinental highway that was first a trail the Indians used to trek toward the setting sun. It runs directly through the middle of town and beyond that stretches from coast-to-coast across America, sea-to-shining-sea. Beginning in Georgia and running through hundreds of average-sized towns — among them Almost-Famous-Town — it attains its final destination close to Hollywood, California. At the Hollywood end, I have been told, there was a Holiday Inn where the tired fame-seeker could rest their feet before they stepped into the dream factory of sought-for-immortality. But all that is long ago now. The road has become what they call a broken-family road; it has been reclassified into various other named roads. Its glory has passed.

So it once was a road that could take the fame-seeker to all points on the American Moving Map that could make a person famous. But that is just hearsay for me, as I never traveled that far on it. What I do know is that of all the towns this long road travels through none have had more famous-person-sightings than Almost-Famous town, except Hollywood itself. It has been, at various times — and at this point has become yet again — a little Hollywood unto itself, and a little Nashville, and a little Las Vegas. It has it all, just in smaller quantity and quality. Movies have been made here; songs have been recorded; fortunes won and lost in the roll of dice. At least one great novel has been penned and untold more lived, but never penned; great portraits have been painted and classical music composed; one of planet earth's greatest composers lives here now, though he wasn't born here. The place is ripe for great, novel living. But despite all that there is still something missing that keeps this place, if not ashamed of itself, still not perfectly proud. Maybe it is because nobody truly famous has ever been born here. I don't know. And none of the rest knows either.

Whatever it is that is missing, it sure is not the belt and rod of the lord. Almost-Famous Town is one of the tight-clenched notches in the Bible belt and the admonishments of the Lord to children and other guilty sinners, with strong verbs and stronger rods, is part and parcel of the wisdom of the Lord given out here in abundance. The instruction towards the attainment of Heaven is bestowed here from the earliest age and carried on henceforth to the bitter end. Plaintive, repentant wailings and redemptive gnashings of teeth are to be heard here in quaint melody and holy chorus. The First Baptist Church in Almost-Famous is a mainstay of long duration and great fame, bigger even than the famous personages that have strolled amongst us.

I have the impression that the famous highway, coupled with this almost famous town, is some type of nexus that the obscure have to travel on their way to fame; for along with the famous are those who, just before or while they were becoming famous, traveled this road to get to their fame. It could be renamed the Obscurity-to-Fame Highway. Maybe traveling it gives one a better chance of becoming famous. Maybe there is an invisible power along it, like some kind of ancient Indian magic where, if the right soul travels along its path they are bound to become famous eventually. Whatever it is many of the famous and soon-to-become-famous have traveled this road, through this town, on their way to celebrity. I think it is a cursed road. Of all possible burdens put on a mortal creature, fame is among the heaviest of them. Privacy is peaceful. Fame never is. That is what I have heard.

Part of the Famous Highway, back in the Fifties and Sixties, used to be called The Strip; five miles of nightclubs, from The Whiskey Go-Go at one end to The Tap Room at the other. The Tap Room still stands but The Whiskey Go-Go was demolished by the 70's. I always wanted to go into The Tap Room, until I was able to, then

all of a sudden it meant little to me. The Strip was famous all over the United States. The famous people went there to entertain and be entertained. The list of celebrities that once enjoyed the refreshments of The Strip couldn't be writ, in small letters, across the long end of a telephone pole. Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr. and Frank Sinatra were known to frequent The Strip on occasion.

As we speak right now there is a quasi-famous movie star who happens to have been born here. It's little things like that which keep Almost-Famous Town believing that one day someone genuinely famous will come from here. And by coming from here, perhaps go back and allow the Almost-Famous citizens to put their hands upon celebrated garments. That kind of thing just doesn't happen often enough to make it common, which is the thing that makes being famous such a trick: fame is just becoming common all over; it is everybody knowing your name and saying Ohhh... and Ahhhh... But I don't put much stock into any of that. Not anymore.

So there is something about the place. It just breeds the hungry ambition for fame. It is a cliquish place, and wherever there are cliques, there are mottos. The two go together like high-voltage transformers and electrocuted squirrels. The motto of Almost-Famous Town is *Where People Are Friendly*. That is simple, inviting and jim-dandy sales literature. But you shouldn't believe it. They are friendly only to the famous or might-soon-be-famous. The Almost-Famous-City begetters and go-getters give no keys out to regular folk who are friendly to a fault; and there are plenty of those here because as many salt-of-the-earth people spring from this place as they do in any other place. Many fine souls here are not worried about something as feather-brained as fame. No ma'am. It is the ones who move and shake the place who are overly-worried about such matters.

A multitude of almost-famous actors and singers come from here. We have had our share of almost-famous writers, and one is almost-famous right now, making Disney-money hand-over-pen. He owns a big, white home in the posh section of town. I went to say hello one day but his curly white-haired poodle with a dreadful attitude chased me away. Rich, posh dogs have keen senses and can spot poor, obscure souls from down the block. We've yet to have a president or vice-president, or even an almost-won-it-would-be president, but politics and ambition are big here so it's bound to happen, sooner or later. At any given moment there are score upon score of Potomac-fevered young brains dreaming of their own laurel-wreathed glory.

The biggest star that ever fell here arrived in October of 1954. He was the lead singer of a quartet that went by the name of The Blue Moon Boys. They went on to become pretty famous, and when their lead singer became bigger-than-famous, they dropped the blue moon moniker and just used his first name. His fame kept growing and they eventually just used his initials.

The Blue Moon Boys once stopped to eat at the Southern-Maid Donut Shop half-a-mile from my home. Their picture is on the wall just above the table where they ate their meal at on that historical night. It is signed by all of them and under the lead singer's signature are the words, "That's alright, Mama G". The woman who cooked their meal also waited on them and after spilling a drink on Elvis Presley he said to her, "That's alright Mama G". That is her story and I believe it, because Mama G never lied.

Mama G is what everybody who knew her called Mrs. Gregorio. She was the wife of Mr. Gregorio, who had opened the place in 1946, when he came back from an extended vacation in France. Mama G told me, with a wink and much later, that she was getting ready to leave Mr. G, for he had been gone on his French vacation much too long and she was itching to have some fun, too; but he finally

gave up the high life, left his French mistress and came back. They then opened the Southern Maid Donut franchise and thought putting it at the intersection of one rural roadway and one famous highway, with no other business for miles around — save for the tree-and-shrub nursery about a half mile east of it — would be a wise decision. It was Mama G's smart idea to put a gas station and eatery along with the donuts, and so, as usual, the history of the world, though ostensibly owned and directed mostly by men, is a product of some smart woman behind some block-headed man, with nothing much bigger than donuts and French mistresses on his mind.

In 1946 The Donut Shop was the first eatery and gas station as you came into town, which helped Mr. and Mrs. G to make cash-by-the-barrel-head in the next decade and by 1956 they built a farm further down the road and stocked it with cows, horses and chickens. By the time I made it to The Donut Shop in the summer of '81 the city had annexed and eaten up the country-side half-a-dozen times and The Donut Shop by then was just an old, forgotten, run-down place, among all the new and shiny places. The neighborhood that had sprung up around the Donut Shop in the late fifties had become woebegone by the Eighties and the poor dwellers of that decrepit neighborhood — myself included — were now, for the most part, the only clientele for The Donut Shop. In the 40's and 50's it had been a fine place to go. But by 1981, nobody went there much anymore; at least not anybody famous. When Elvis left the building nobody near that famous ever went back. It is an obscure fact of history that when a gig fell through Elvis and The Blue Moon Boys were stranded in Almost Famous Town, but the small matter of a Western Union cash-o-gram soon got them back out.

I should have sent off for a Western Union cash-a-gram, but I never did, so I've been stuck here forty years. I

have traveled that famous highway; have ridden bikes, driven cars and walked up and down it, but the magic in it never touched me. But I am about as famous as I care to be; and I have been infamous once or twice, too. In both fame and infamy there's always somebody wanting to tear your clothes from your body and take your head home as a souvenir. But all that being said, there was a time when I cared for fame. I wanted to be famous in high school. Everybody does. If they say they don't, they are lying, or have not woken up to life, yet. I think everybody should be famous in high school, at least for a while, so they can see how small and ridiculous a thing it actually is. There should be a Famous Day for each high school kid — speak their name over the intercom and everybody on that day has to ask for their autograph. Or maybe have a raffle, make it a luck thing; mostly just like it is in the real world. Luck has far more to do with our lives than most who are lucky know or will admit. So this is the story of how I became famous in high school. It did not last long, but it happened.

Ghost 4 writer

High school does not begin on the first day of class but sometime in the summer before, when we are fashioning our first thoughts about it. It began for me and my friends at Mama G's donut shop. We weren't cool enough to hang out at the mall and didn't have the parents who took us around to places so we had to make do on our own. Looking back, the donut shop was worlds cooler a hang-out than the mall ever was but most didn't see it that way and the status of being uncool hung around our necks like a millstone. The cliques that define junior high and high school kids are the same cliques that define adults; nothing changes except when kids become adults they have their own cash to pay the dues that the cliques require. Rich kids don't have to pay dues, their parents pay them. But the poor kids, they pay dues. They pay the cost of not having the cash to make the dues to be in the cliques. I know it's a lot easier for the rich kids to go through childhood, just as it's easier for rich adults to go through adulthood. There is no struggle in having everything one needs except the conflict of deciding what fun to have tonight. The decision the poor have to make is if they will decide to let it bother them much.

I decided that last year of junior high I was not going to let it bother me anymore that my parents didn't have the clique money. It had begun to be a problem — that vast, dark-sea of difference between my family's lack of clique-money and the other's seeming plenty.

Truth is, I never thought about it until it started bothering the rich kids. They didn't seem to like that I was poor, and so they made jokes about it; made fun of my poor

clothing and my long, unkempt hair and where I lived and the car my parents drove. That is when I started wearing my hair in a crew cut. I wore a crew-cut from sixth grade through high school. It was junior high when I fully realized the difference. And the brunt of the hell came mainly from one guy. He was the mouthpiece for them all; the others didn't say much directly. And that was the difference that made me realize the difference: they had grown too shy to speak to me. The same people I had known and been friends with in elementary school had, by junior high, grown too shy to speak; as if to talk with a poor person would somehow make them poor, too. Later on I figured out it was their parents. They had warned them about the social disease that is poverty and how to prevent coming down with the malady was to not speak with those afflicted with it.

So it was a general disrespecting of poor persons in Almost-Famous Town. Not having a certain amount of cash makes human beings here of no consequence to anything and me and my friends felt it keenly. I think there were many factors why that was, and the prime factor being that Famous Highway that ran through the middle of town. So many of the famous to travel it, over such a long time, that it gave the people of Almost-Famous Town big-heads, while also giving them inferiority complexes; as they wished to be famous too, and not being famous, yet being a citizen of the world's most famous-person-nexus, well, that is what was bound to happen — a general arrogance all around.

The late summer's day that set in motion my high school career began like all summer days around here: hot. It was a hundred degrees before The Price is Right went off the air at 11 o'clock and as I walked outside to meet the guys at The Donut Shop, Mother called out:

“Be sure to be home by two, you know I asked you yesterday to help me with the stove.”

“Yes, Mother. I’ll be home.”

She needed me to lift out the heavy parts, as she wanted to clean out the range, piece by piece. An annual rite of passage as the summer came to an end. It was her getting-ready-party for all the cooking of the holidays to come. We never had much, but Mother loved cooking, and the plates on Thanksgiving and Christmas were always fattening and festive, even if the company left something to be desired.

I took the shortcut through the ravine behind Jenny’s home. Before hopping the fence I looked back to remember...

Jenny and her family had moved away, for the second time, the week before. When I was five and she was four, Jenny had been my first girl. Then, when I was seven and she was six, she moved off and left me with my first heartbreak. But she came back — when I was eleven and she was ten. I had stopped the football game going on to stare, full of big bug-eyed wonder, as her family pulled up in their old driveway — home again. I asked the guys:

“What am I going to do? How should I go over?”

With your feet, they said.

That was the general consensus. It was far easier for them to say it than for me to do it. I did not have the courage, so we finished our game. I walked over later, just before the sun went down. Jenny opened the door and my heart missed half-a-dozen beats. I never got those six beats back. I gave them to Jenny. She had grown as tall as me, and she had something on her chest that wasn’t there before. Jenny was precocious. She smiled.

“Hey, Jenny...” I said; rather I whispered it, for I did not have the courage to speak out-loud.

“Hey...” She said back, without a hint of butterfly in her voice.

Her mother saved the moment by whisking me in with a hug. She proceeded to treat us just like the kids we had been when we were four and five, feeding us cookies and milk from what appeared to be the exact same colored Tupperware cups. But we had grown up some since and found it awkward. Or maybe we found each other awkward. I did my best not to stare at her precociousness, but was not completely successful.

After milk and cookies we took up just like we left off, by going back to her room to play. But we didn't know how to play together anymore and there wasn't much we could think to talk about. I soon remembered homework I had to do, which was a lie, because I never did homework. I was nervous in her presence and needed a break from my troubled emotions. I went back the next morning with a new confidence. Mother told me Jenny was as afraid as I was; just that women find it easier to hide. "Just go back and be yourself," Mother told me.

So I went back and was myself and found it to be the worst possible thing I could have done. Jenny was cold and aloof. She wouldn't look me in the eye; but stared at the boring brown-speckled floor tile in her bedroom. After attempting to make conversation for the tenth time I got up and left. It was evident she didn't like the real me. Something had turned weird and I never went back. They lived there another three years, all through junior high, and then moved off again, without us ever speaking another word.

She had been gone just a week, but it felt like forever. Missing her was one of those black holes that suck all life and the seeming possibility of life into itself. I had loved Jenny since the first time I saw her. Her eyes that day were as big as the blue sea; she was at her mother's door and she was three and I was four and I had walked over to ask her if she'd like to come out and play.

We had known adventures together. When we were four and five a green snake had chased us from the swing-set all the way to the back door. Her yard is deep and it took us awhile to make it. I saw my first movie with Jenny, *The Wild Wild West*. We screened it with our mothers in the auditorium of Almost Famous High.

We had been friends since our salad days with a tag-along fifth-wheel by the name of Sharon Maran. Sharon wore coke-bottle glasses and her name rhymed so that made it easy for cruel kids to make fun of it. They took the a out of her first name and put in an o and the a's out of her last name and replaced them with o's, calling her *Shoron Moron*, but me and Jenny never did. Later in high school others started calling her 'Shoron Whore-on'. But she brought that on herself. She was spoiled and had more toys in her room than a Toys-R-Us store. I tried my best to like her but my best efforts were doomed. She was prone to temper-tantrums but Jenny and I did our best to make her feel a part of our friendship. You had to feel sorry for that kind of person, if you were any kind of person. If somebody else had something she didn't have she would find a way to destroy it. The only pool we ever had Sharon came over and broke holes in it with her new clog-heel shoes her grandmother had bought her from Sweden. Her grandmother wore colorful dresses, white straw hats and had orange, wrinkly skin that hung off her elbows.

We never got to use that pool once. Mother had just pulled it into the back yard and went to bring the water hose around when Sharon stood in the middle of it and began stomping around with her Swedish clogs. I watched her as she did it; there was a gleeful smile on her face. When Mother came back with the hose, Sharon lied, without flinching any of her four eyes, and said it was an accident. I suppose it could have been an accident — if wearing clogs that your grandma had brought from Sweden and then stomping holes in hard plastic and smiling with an

evil-gee grin while doing it is an accident. Yes, I suppose there are all kinds of accidents. I am willing to admit to there being more than one way to define a particular thing.

The bottom line definition for me, about Sharon Maran, is that she was a real pain-in-the-ass; a walking bottle-neck of all that is screwed up with humanity and every bit of it encoded in her DNA. She was a natural lunatic to the asylum born; a happy greeter at the sanctuary of neuroses; a bona fide jack-ass, sent with P.O.D stamped on her forehead: Pain On Delivery. And she did not have the first clue about any of it. She was one who just came here to raise hell and have her own brand of fun.

On my tenth birthday I was given a Green-machine. That was something like a Big Wheel, just green, and much better. It had three wheels: two on the rear and one on front and the turning was controlled by levers attached to the back wheels. A spin-out could be effected by pulling the levers in opposite directions and if the speed was great, one could spin multiple times. It could turn on a dime and a kid could reach speeds, if his legs were strong enough and he was traveling a decline, of up to 30mph's. I once kept up with old man Murray as he came home from work in his '70 Dodge truck. He had an odd look on his face when he noticed in his peripheral vision something down and to the left. He glanced over and saw me on my Green Machine keeping speed with him. I gave him a smile, waved and took off.

I was more proud of that Green Machine than any gift I had ever been given to that point in the history of my life in this world; and to be honest, nearly since. I kept it gassed up and spotless; an oil change and new plugs at every ten blocks traveled. Then the day came when it mysteriously found itself crushed beneath the wheels of Shoron the Moron's stepfather's car.

I learned later how that happened. She had sneaked outside and placed it behind the wheels then demanded of

him to go get her a snow cone. She yelled that truth to me later on, while in the grip of one of her temper-tantrums. That is a fine quality of congenital liars who are also morbidly berserk. They invariably become angry and tell you what they did, just to hurt you worse. I had a Green Machine and she didn't — now I didn't either, and she felt terrific about it. Some people are like that. I had dreamed of that Green Machine for a year and the reality of it lasted a week. My step-father punished me for it. He wouldn't consider the idea I hadn't caused it by my own irresponsibility. I didn't understand that, for I had always been a responsible boy. But it's just one of those things and I am not complaining, just setting out the truth for an impartial world. Such is how it goes here in this big, blue world, much too often.

After pondering the past I let it go for the moment and jumped over Jenny's fence, walking the trail along the ridge of the thirty-foot-deep ravine that wended its way around the perimeter of the neighborhood. We began calling it Starlight Indian River — and eventually shortening it to Indian River — when we walked far enough down it to discover it originated from the great mountain ten clicks away. The mountain is famous for the legend of a starlight Indian. I had lived on Indian River for the last fourteen years and knew every inch of its wild terrain. During the summer it would gradually lose its water until you could walk across it in places. After the big storms in winter you could catch water moccasins as big around as your leg as they slow-crawled out of their underground tunnels, trying to get away from the water. They were slow because they were cold and some would drown that way if they couldn't make it out. If you caught one before he had fully extricated himself from his tunnel you could put your hands on its skin and feel how slimy it was. Some of the boys would kill them easy that way. But I figured it was a cheap shot to kill a snake while its head

was stuck in a hole. And besides, I never subscribed to the age-old idea that snakes were evil devil serpents. I saw them more like lizards that weren't lucky enough to get legs and feet.

There were trails all along Indian River, from boys who had come before us, and we made some new ones. Over the years we had fished out of that place at least a thousand crayfish, maybe ten-thousand. I always put mine back, and would secretly throw others back, too. I took extra pity on the one-armed crayfish. There is something extra-pitiable about a one-armed crayfish. One spot is perfect for sliding down on cardboard boxes and another specific to BMX bikes. In the winter of '80 the entire river froze over and we slid from the top of Broke-Neck Hill and across the breadth of the stream on plastic pieces we took from the garbage at the industrial plant. It was called Broke-Neck Hill because a kid had broken his neck and died there years before. His ghost was said to haunt the place, but I never saw it, so didn't believe it. In '79 we grew brave and crossed the giant sewer-water pipe that took us to the other side, where we scaled the hill and explored an abandoned industrial plant. The workers had set up a barrel-bull and we took turns trying to throw each other on it; on the way back across one of the boys slipped and fell in, disappearing for a long moment. When he came back up he was cut from groin to knee. Alligator Gars are large and mean. This one had severed the boy's leg, but after fifty stitches he was mostly fine, except for the limp in his leg. We called him Limp the Gimp from then on. I have forgotten his real name. And there was Big Mama, the legendary turtle as big as a Volkswagen Beetle; a legend, like the ghost of Broke-neck Hill, which I never believed. Until one day as I was stepping across Indian River — smaller rock to giant rock — and my brother looked back, his eyes big as tea-cup saucers, and as he pointed he whispered the immortal, never-to-be-forgot words:

“Big Mama...”

He was pointing at my feet, which confused me, as I was about to step onto a giant rock. When the giant rock moved and Big Mama plopped into the water and disappeared I felt the Holy Ghost descend upon me and my spirit left my body for a moment. I had just come a hair's breadth from being eaten by a snapping turtle as big as a Volkswagen Beetle. I had never believed the legend of Big Mama. But after I saw her with my own eyes, I believed. Indian River and the trails along it were a wonderland for poor boys who only had a bike and the day by which to amuse themselves. We probably had a lot more fun than the rich kids. By the last summer of my childhood in '84 we had all but stopped using Indian River for anything but a short-cut and Big Mama had not been seen or heard from for years.

You didn't need to know exactly where the donut shop was if you were within a quarter-mile of it. You just had to follow your nose. It is a sugary, wholesome smell and reminds one of their grandmothers, even if one never had a grandmother. On top of the shop is a huge neon sign that reads 'Donut Shop' and is the same one Mr. G put up so long ago. It stays on twenty-four hours a day and as I walked in I could hear the metallic hum of the neon. At night the sign read then and reads still: The Nut Shop, as the D and O long ago burned out and Mr. G gave orders never to repair it. So we called it The Nut Shop.

I waved hello to Mrs. G as I walked to the back, where the Pac-man and Galaga video games were. I was never big on Pac-man. I considered it completely without meaning, but I could play Galaga for hours. Killing invading space-insect aliens is meaningful, heroic work. I first gained the high score on this particular machine in '83, after two years of serious training. But as of June 14, 1984 I accomplished a thing none of us imagined anybody had ever done in the history of civilization; after three years of

struggle I finally went past the million point mark. It was a true red-letter day. Mama G put my name on a card, with my high score below the name, and taped it to the machine. We all were sure there was no one living who could better that score. And after I made that first million it was never terribly difficult to do it again. It soon became ho-hum and I gave up killing invading insects and saving the world, one quarter at a time.

Sitting at our table in the farthest corner was my two associates; Farty Marcelino and Pablo Sanchez. Farty's real name was Marty, but since he had a congenital-alimentary defect known as Irritable Bowel Syndrome it was deemed apropos early on by those who knew him best to call him Farty. I call Farty and Pablo associates because beyond our friendship and since the ages of eleven, eleven, and twelve-and-a-half (Farty was the oldest, and had failed kindergarten twice), we had become related by business when I employed them in my first commercial enterprise. We had a newspaper-throwing, siding-cleaning and yard-services empire that spanned the breadth and width of our two neighborhoods and encroached beyond it by our fourteenth year into the industrial section on the edge of the neighborhood, just beyond Broke-Neck Hill.

There are two sides to the one place, east and west. Meadowview Parc is the west and poorer side while Swan Lake is the eastern and richer side; it is richer-but-still-poor, and is where the high-end-but-still-low-ends live. We did the greater part of our business in Swan Lake, as the higher-but-still-lower-ends had more petty cash to spend on activities such as newspapers and yard work. Not to fail to mention they were more liable to pay for work performed, whereas the Meadowview clientele were liable to give an I.O.U and, if not a thank you, a shove goodbye.

We operated under the business title of The Shag & Golf Company. I founded The Shag in the summer of '81, after working a few weeks construction with my stepfather

for two dollars an hour and realizing I needed a better way to make a living. With my first profits I paid Mr. Little, the old handy-man down the street, to emblazon my company's title into a wooden plaque. Then I sat it on my desk and stared at it, dreaming of riches, until I fell asleep. I was proud of that plaque and what it represented. I planned to make a million dollars by my eighteenth birthday, mowing yards and throwing papers. I figured with a few hundred employees, I could do it by then. But being a boss-man and making money proved to be harder than I thought, and three years from the date of its founding, The Shag & Golf Company had but three employees to its credit, including the boss-man. But there are only so many yards to mow and papers to throw, after all; and getting kids to work is much more difficult a proposition than I originally thought.

Our sales pitch was simply stated, but not, in a low-end neighborhood, easy to sell. We wrote up flyers and posted them to the doors, saying, give or take, that there is no quicker or less expensive way to spruce up a home's low self-esteem than fixing up the lawn. How many homes have seen better days — sagging porches, out-of-kilter eaves, the siding falling off, windows cracked or missing altogether. These can be expensive and time-consuming to repair but as for the lawn, no matter the weeds that multiply or the moss that grows on the unmoving stones, all can be remedied with a few machines of destruction and creation, namely: the lawnmower, weed-eater, rake and blower. After the job of maintenance has been effected no matter the sad shape of the house it is attached to, that home's self-esteem is bound to shape up after the lawn has been repaired. Living in a run-down place there were plenty of homes with deplorable self-esteem. Unfortunately, the people who lived in those sad homes didn't care, so we had to re-tool and go at it with a different tack. We simply walked around and found the yards that were high enough for the city to post eviction notices, then we posted an

eviction notice, and soon enough, we had plenty of yards to service.

I was a trained surgeon with a high-powered weed eater. I could cut an edge down a walk as straight as a Baptist preacher. I handled the weed-wacker while Poncho worked the rake and blower and Farty manned the mower. We were a three-boy team that could do the work of two men in a day. If Farty didn't have to stop and break wind so much, we could have equaled three men. And sometimes we would find him reading under shade trees. Farty always had been an odd character.

I came up with the Shag and Golf name by the nature of the lawns I made my money by and there are three kinds of those: 1) The Shag-carpet Lawn, much like the texture and thickness of a 1970's shag carpet. 2) The Golf course lawn; much like your average, close-cropped and tightly-controlled golf course. And, 3) The African Jungle Lawn, which resembles an African Jungle. Each of them, by their names, are self-descriptive. Most prefer the Golf Course; tight, controlled and not a blade out of place. It is used on golf courses the world over and all anally-retentive old men prefer them. To attain the golf course cut one needs to lower their blade to within an inch or so of the blade root. This will cut out most of the green, but leaves the eye pleasantly delighted by the broad expanse of no blade higher than the others. The Shag is cut further up the grass blade, giving a soft, luxuriant look to the lawn and leaving behind all the green. When the Shag cut is performed properly it waves in the wind and can grow high without needing frequent cutting to make it look presentable. If one were to compare the Shag and Golf cuts to a hair cutting, the shag is like the wind-blown look of the romance-novel-cover-hero while the golf course is the typical general issue cut for your newly-mustered marine.

Some pertinent facts about grass is the higher you let it grow the more uniform all of the blades will grow.

This is why the Shag, though my personal favorite, would be a style we tried not to talk our clients into buying; the Golf needs cutting once a week to remain presentable while the Shag can go a month without need of maintenance.

The Golf Course is the hardest type of lawn to manage. By cutting short the blade you cut much of the green out, as the green is mostly in the end of the shaft. And also, and this is important, by cutting short the leaf the weeds have room to multiply. A Shag lawn will choke weeds out on its own so there will be little need for fertilizer. Also with the Shag you leave the clippings, letting them lie where they fall. You cannot leave the clippings on a Golf Course lawn, which would be a messy, unprofessional course. So it is a horticulturally-liberal mindset which makes up the lovers of the Shag and a horticulturally-conservative mindset which makes up the lovers of the Golf; all that said, it was a bang-up luck thing that the bible-thumpers of Almost Famous Town preferred Reagan in the early 80's. The Gipper becoming president in '81 went far toward helping me make my first Almighty Dollar in this world. A smart businessman always follows politics.

So I have learned many of the good and wise things I know by grass. Patience is learned by waiting for the grass to grow and mowing that grass down teaches how to conquer, one patch at a time. Horticultural-existential pursuits can teach a young man much about life, and do so in enjoyable fashion, for it is also a sport, no different than badminton, table tennis, football or NASCAR. It is sport for rich and poor, young and old. There isn't much money in it but there is much sweat-equity to be gained. I would venture to state that more people, on any given Sunday, watch the sport of horticulture than any other three sports combined. Sunday, because that is the most popular day for people to get out and mow their lawns. How often have you sat and watched the help manicure the lawn? It is a

certainly that lawn maintenance is planet earth's favorite, yet least glorified, spectator sport. I once watched our neighbor's daughter try to drive their brand-new Cub Cadet 50 inch, 25 horsepower 'Zero-Turn' riding lawn-mower up the mulberry bush. She drove straight for it and kept on going after she hit it. The blades caught the lower limbs and began chewing through the bush, climbing straight up like a giant, yellow, 25 horsepower snake. She was perfectly vertical in seconds. Had it not been for her father catching the mower she would have climbed over the house and mowed the shingles off the roof. Her reason for not turning was she thought the 'Zero-Turn' meant she could not turn the machine. So that is proof you have to possess a modicum of smarts to be competent lawn-maintenance personnel.

The African Jungle resembles the African jungle — sometimes, but not always, minus the Big Game. Speaking of big game, once we were mowing an African jungle when a two hundred and fifty pound Rottweiler came bounding up, a choke-chain attached to its neck, and proceeded to tackle Pablo to the ground. Farty went to Pablo's rescue and the Rottweiler tackled him, too. I had already saved them once and was staying out of this one. Besides, I knew the dog. He just wanted to play. After Tiny-tot sniffed Pablo's — and especially Farty's — butts, he let them go free and completed his rounds. The dog was owned by Mrs. Whipple over on G. I. Joe circle and its bark alone was enough to keep her feeling safe living without Mr. Whipple, who had come down with the Chinese Whooping Cough and died a few years earlier. It was really called Ann Scott Circle, but Farty had a former girl friend named Ann Scott who did him wrong and so we renamed the street to help him from thinking any more about her.

When we came across the African Jungle lawn we immediately posted an eviction notice and soon had a contract. This is actually my favorite lawn in the spring, so

as to let the wildflowers grow. It also shows the trees that the squirrels and birds have planted. There are many buried seeds in your average lawn and it would take less than a decade for it to sprout a forest if they weren't cut down. Your average lawn is a mini-cosmos in itself — like the star-forests that are seeded out in the heavens by materials within themselves and other star systems they are a part of. I read long ago in a science magazine that a new forest of stars is seeded every year somewhere; and I have seen with my own eyes many places that once were pristine, golf-course lawns that now are once again new forest', from materials that were inside them all along. That is a lesson for all of us, I think.

As for grass, it is the hair and whiskers of the earth and needs to be cut along its parts. Each lawn has a part and you can find it by paying attention as you cut. Some lawns need a cross-ways cut; others need an up-and-down cut. If the sun is out you can see the part by looking for the pattern in shadows. Maybe a better way is to say that some lawns are north-south and others are east-west.

The part, in concord with the edge, is what perfects the lawn. If you do not have a sidewalk around your lawn, I suggest you buy one and put it in. Even if there is no road, put in a sidewalk and edge it. And better yet, if there is no road, put one of those in and edge that. The tight-edged walk will give contrast to the lawn and all that will give the lawn its proper proportion. Proper proportion between lawn and edge makes for a phenomenon I call The Line. The line defines the lawn as it defines the edge. A perfect proportion of contrast and lines are necessary for near perfection in art and life. We cannot know the proper beauty of things without this contrast and line.

An example of contrast and line can be seen by the contrast of the heavens with the earth. For instance: scientists say the stars shine all the time, even in day; but it takes the contrast of darkness to see them. Seeing is

believing. The clouds give contrast to all things terrestrial, such as trees and buildings — and trees and buildings give contrast to man who build and climb them. As for clouds, sometimes but not always do they drop the water that makes green the lawn. When it has been longer than two weeks during the growing season that rain has not fallen, open up the spigot and do what the clouds should have done. Grass is green because of water. A neat trick, how colorless water will transform and become the green in the grass; or at least is the catalyst that allows the green to become.

I started The Shag and Golf for a specific reason: to make The Almighty Dollar. In the first year I grossed a thousand dollars, and after paying Farty, Pablo and business cost, brought home half that. In the second year I doubled that and in our third year quadrupled it. The fourth year was the break-out year, thanks mostly to three new and profitable industrial contracts. We made in fiscal year 1984 — before taxes and expenses — a total of \$7,833 dollars. I had achieved thousandaire status by the age of twelve and was a multi-thousandaire by the age of thirteen. I had more cash in the bank by the time I walked into the halls of high school than my parents had in theirs. When the bills were due and the cash was not available, I often made up the difference. By the summer before my freshman year my account stood at \$12,803 and change. I liked to write it out and look at it. I can still remember every figure to the dollar — and every date to the hour — that was important.

I did not make it a known fact that I was a mogul-in-the-making. Having a soft heart it would have been easy to lose that golden egg to schemers and dreamers. And I never considered wasting it on big-ticket togs. I utilized the secret of it. You can only know who your real friends are when the people you know think you are poor. Being privately rich, I had the upper hand while they believed

they did. I was playing poker with blind men who did not know they were blind. I learned early that you can come to know secrets about people by letting them think their own thoughts.

I had plans for that cash. One of the apartment complexes we cut the grounds of was a fixer-upper; I could buy it cheap and make a worthy return within a decade. The owner gave me the option of a down-payment of \$45,000. He promised to hold it until I had the cash, which I figured would be the winter of my senior year. We had started with the landscaping and by '82 included paper-throwing and by '84 were also cleaning sidings. We were bona fide juggernauts — young men with dreams and fire. Well, I had dreams. Pablo and Farty were just along for the weekly cash.

I sat and Mama G brought me my usual: a double-decker mushroom-burger and Texas fries. I was there every day by eleven o'clock and she had it steaming ready on my arrival.

I thanked Mama G and gave her the top of my head for the daily blessing of a kiss.

I turned, with a mouthful of burger, to Pablo. "How does Meadowview look?"

"Had it done by nine, Boss."

"What about Swan Lake, Farty?"

"Had mine done by eight, Boss."

They were best friends and it showed how they continually made fun of each other. I couldn't ask for two better friends or employees. We had been close since I had saved both of them in the first grade. Pablo had just moved in from Chihuahua, Mexico and the white pilgrims didn't take kindly to him but he and Farty made friends right off. The day Dirt-Clod started beating hell out of Pablo and then Farty — when Farty tried to intercede — was the day I met them both.

Dirt-Clod was the first guy I ever had a fight with. For a first-grader he was abnormally large and unnaturally mean and had the ugliest yellow eyes you ever saw and in the right eye there was the remnant of a dirt-clod somebody had thrown there. His head was as big as a basketball and his forehead took up three-quarters of it; it just kept going upwards and reached over the back of his head. He was the only kid in school with a receding hair-line. He was feared and hated all over school; even the older kids feared him and when I saw him beating up on Pablo, who I had befriended just that day, I knew it was my duty to try and stop him, but I did not know how I was going to accomplish that, for he was twice my size, was unnaturally mean, had a dirt-clod in his eye and a receding hair-line. These are impressive, intimidating things to a seven-year-old.

When Farty jumped on Dirt-clod's back I was momentarily relieved, thinking my help was not needed, but Dirt-Clod just pulled him over his shoulder and began pummeling both of them. So I ran and Bruiser-brodied Dirt-clod and that was the luck of the gods for me that I was able to get a hold on him while he was busy. I had him pinned and never stopped hitting him until he cried about it. And that was the unexpected thing: Dirt-Clod's yellow eyes tearing up. I had never seen a dirt clod in somebody's eye leak water before and it pulled at my heart. I had not imagined Dirt-clod was capable of crying. But there they were — big tears dropping out of Dirt-clod's yellow eyes and rolling down his face, like spring rain on a window pane. It taught me my first big lesson in life: people are not what they seem to be. From that day on Pablo and Farty were my true-blue friends. It is a natural law that when blood has been shed in the protection of some other those are then — even if from different mothers — become brothers of the same blood. I was never able to be done with either of them from that day on.

I was afraid of Dirt-Clod like all the others, but my grandfather had told me when I was a boy that there is nothing extra tough about a big guy; ‘There’s a little guy inside the big guy just like everybody else,’ he said. I never forgot those words and I have learned many times since how right he was. The place I grew up in is a tough neighborhood. One learns to be tougher.

As I ate my Texas fries I advised them, “You two guys need to serious up. We are about to be in high school. It’s the real deal now. Our entire lives are about to be set up for all time. What we do now is important for all other days to come.”

They looked at me like they always did when I talked like that. Pablo said, “What are you talking about, Ese? We got forever to decide about the future. You need to lighten up. You’re too damned serious. Life isn’t a joke, but it ain’t a damned constant church service neither.”

Pablo never got it, and I wasn’t sure what Farty got, except unspeakably dire luck about his bowels. I wanted out of this place, and I wanted it done yesterday. Maybe they were happy with their set-up, but I wasn’t. So I started The Shag & Golf to get out of here before I got used to it. I was hoping by graduation. I would live in my own run-down, soon-to-be-fixed-up, apartment complex.

Pablo’s eyes registered surprise when he saw someone walk in. We turned. It was our junior high’s head cheerleader and her happy squad of cheer girls, with their mother’s in-tow. Behind them swaggered in the most arrogant, blue-blooded, teet-sucker we had ever known: the most popular boy in school and the one always making fun of me. He was always walking around like he was tough, but we didn’t believe it. We knew better. Maybe that walk fooled the rich kids, but a poor, street-fighting urchin knows, on sight, the tough from the not-so-tough. He was all high-dollar show. Not to be believed. Personal

aggrandizement. They sat in the booth where Elvis's autographed picture hung.

Pablo wondered out-loud, "What are they doing here?"

Farty replied, "They must have decided to slum for the day."

I reasoned maybe they were just hungry. My two associates watched them out of the corners of their eyes; to see if the rich and popular ate like the rest of us, and sure enough they did; except they were more circumspect with it. The mother kept her napkin on her lap at all times. I had never witnessed such genteel behavior. They never once looked our way, which means they were not looking on purpose. Then the blue-blooded teet-sucker began casing the joint. I knew the behavior; I had seen it many times before. A group of kids would walk to the 7-11 and case the joint before stuffing as much penny candy as they could into their pockets. He was doing that now, looking around with back-stair eyes. Pablo said,

"Check him out, guys. He's thinking about something..."

We saw what he was thinking about when he pulled Elvis' picture from the wall and stuffed it in the head cheerleader's purse. They then got up and left, leaving cash on the table. What surprised me was that the mother had been in on the heist and didn't say a word. We were in a quandary. We loved Mrs. G, but these were the popular kids. We didn't have any jurisdiction over them. We were official zeroes and they were official heroes. That is what we thought that day, in the back of our minds. But it burned a hole in my soul as I walked back home.

I was late by ten minutes for the stove cleaning and Mother gave me hell about it. She had not been happy with me since a long time before. I knew it was because she was not happy with life. She had married a construction worker who barely kept the bills paid; a man who didn't like much

the idea of having step-children, and he let it show. He left no stone unturned in his attempt to make it known that he thought his step-children were worthless. But he was all she had so she never said anything. By my fourteenth summer she had become more like a step-mother than a real mother. I think all that cash in the bank didn't help matters out. I know it didn't with the construction worker. I was worth more than he was which helped him to think of me as worthless. He held everything he could think up against me. He was the reason I had a hard heart for bullies. He had been bullying us all since he had come into our lives. And there was a lot of bully to him; 250 pounds of lean, mean, soul-destroying, flesh-eating oppressor.

I knew he was an ignorant man when I was only five. It was easy to read it in his eyes. He never fooled me. And he didn't try. I had never met a man so proud of his arrogance. He killed happy spirits for sport; and made fun of the world from a tall, empty perch. I had tried to make a friend and father of him, but he wouldn't have it, so I let that dream go and it devolved into what it was destined to become. Mother and I argued about the stove and when I called her a liar about something she said, matter-of-factly:

“Wait until your step-father comes home. We'll see what he says about that.”

She had long used him to fight her battles with me. I loved my mother but she could be arbitrary and often took her frustrations out on me, reserving her better nature for my brother. I left to mow a yard and when I got back the giant was waiting for me in his lazy-boy recliner, his skin burnt red from the sun. The heat of the day was in his eyes and they looked at me with the condescension of the cruel and righteous. He was a hot pot getting ready to explode, but I still believed he was a man of some reason. I sat down on the bed before him.

“Your mother says you sassed her.”

“I didn’t sass her. I told her she lied; because she did. I never—”

Then insanity took up where the hope of reason left off. As he jumped out of his Lazy-boy he became a fiery-eyed demon and his green eyes burned red anger. His left hand caught my throat and it felt I had been wedged in an iron vise. He was an angry and awful god. He threw me on the bed and hovered over me. I had become his hundred-and-ten-pound rag-doll-scapegoat for all that had gone wrong in his life to that point. For an instant the world was stopped and time hung in the air, then all the energy in his body was put into mine when he dropped that giant hammer on my cheek. The energy transference jerked me like a cattle prod. I had been tired, but was energized now. It hurt like hell, but I was angry. I had always been the one with the spirit to stare him down, and I stared him down after that first blow, but I shouldn’t have. That pissed him off and he hit me again. The second blow took back all the energy that had been given with the first one and my body relaxed. The pain was too heavy to hold and I closed my eyes. A thing happened with the second blow that never had before — my spirit was broke. But he gave one more for good measure. It was the last one I could have taken.

I was on my back, looking up at the ceiling. It was spinning like the whirl-a-whirl ride at the fair. I was sleepy and slipped out of consciousness then came right back in; my mind was a detached observer and it told me this was an odd experience. There was no pitiful thought in my mind about the matter; it just reasoned I had found myself in an odd predicament.

When he released the vice-grip and sat back in his fuchsia-colored Lazy-boy an unanticipated moan escaped from my throat and I felt shame about it, for to hurt is human, but to give evidence of hurt is less than a man. I raised my head and saw him with blurred vision. He told me to go to my room so I struggled back that way. It was a

walk of disgrace. I heard the blows when they landed. They sounded like something outside of me, and I thought it a peculiar popping. I imagined planet earth had heard those pops and now I had to walk through the world to get to my room. I had been standing up to bullies twice my size for a lifetime in a neighborhood full of them and had never been beaten, but this was one giant, full-grown bully I couldn't whip. I was tired and beaten. Mother said nothing. She wouldn't even look at me. It was all peculiar, and so quiet.

I didn't blame her. The first thing Mother would do upon waking in the morning was drink a fifth of fear and the rest of the day she'd be drunk on it. She never got over her addiction to fear and it completely consumed her hope for life. The life she lived on the side of her fear was inconsequential relative to the fear which caused her not to live in the first place. We all know periods where we must rebuild our hope and faith. But some have that work to do all the days of their lives because by night-fall the work of the day has unraveled on them. It is a never-ending lost-cause battle for some. Something inside them draws it away as quick as it is made. I have wondered over the years if such is the lot of all men and I think it is; but most people, if they ever think about it at all, put it back out of their minds and get busy again filling the dark hole of non-existence with shiny things and busy work that, if not actually achieving anything, at least achieves for them a mind that is not riddled with self-doubt and baseless fears.

Mother's favorite after-dinner drink was a common scotch called Hopeless Insecurity; and she'd swig from it throughout the evening and be drunk by the Late Night News and face-down by sign-off. Sometimes she sipped her favorite scotch: Nameless Fear. But she never drank from it much. She saved Nameless Fear for special occasions. She kept as far away from her fears as she could and made sure never to name them so she wouldn't have to raise them and eventually send them on their way. When

you name something it is then yours and you have to take care of it. In a curious turnabout I believe she found a way for her fears to take care of her. They named her as their own and she never divorced from them or considered separating from them; she never raised them and sent them away.

I made it to my bunk and lay still as I could. I didn't want to move an inch, but to be motionless and contemplate, to set in my atoms the knowledge that he would never be a father to me. He would never see me as his own. I was thankful to rest, but soon felt my face expanding like a balloon. I got up and went to the bathroom mirror and saw the imprint of his hand on my face — a perfect outline of a giant hand, swelled up and bright red. I was fat-faced, ugly and looked stupid and I laughed about it. I could feel my heartbeat in my face, like a ticking Big Ben clock. I went and laid back down, until Mother came and told me dinner was ready. The construction worker had set his coke next to my plate.

“This is your soda pop,” He said.

I ate my mother's meal and drank my stepfather's soda pop and then I went to bed to sleep and to forget.

Ghost 5 writer

The first day of high school was promising. The energy in the air was of possibility and hope. And I had never, in my entire life to that point, seen more shapely triangular-hammocks than I did by second period. A boy dreams of high school from at least sixth grade on and by the time it comes he has filled the idea of it with so many impossible ideas that if reality intervenes it's bound to be a let-down. But reality soon intervenes. That first day is when The Great Future has been reached; the pinnacle of existence; the top of the mountain. And then, long before the end of that first day, one realizes he is at the bottom of the mountain and the climb has just begun. But it's exciting. Climbing is excellent for lungs and hearts.

I had never seen so many people in one place before. They came from all over the city; rich and poor, black and white, the haves and the have-nots; a true public school. Meshed together were the children of puritan, pilgrim, Indian, African and Asian; all the various races and classes of men in one place: the cliques. One begins with hope and joy, but soon the cliques prove that joy cost cash. In short: there is no meaner a place in the world than a public high school.

Just before last class ended the head football coach announced on the intercom that all who desired to try out for football should report after school in the boy's gym. He kept us long enough for a name count, and that was just time enough for the last bus to pull out. So I had to walk home on the first day of high school. I was an ignorant freshman and too dumb to walk the shorter route, but instead chose the longer way, along The Famous Highway.

It was blistering and humid and the highway was polluted with cars. I was a poor, no-name, no-friend, obscure vagabond, walking the path that ancient Indians had walked and famous Americans had driven. I had never walked along a roadway before — so it was a day full of new experiences. I saw many of the rich kids in cars with their parents that I had seen earlier. One of them yelled for me to get a job and I started to yell back that I did have a job, but they were already long gone. I noticed cars move much faster to people outside them than they do to people inside them. The sky was a deep blue, interspersed with gigantic, white, puffy late-summer clouds. I resolved that day, as I walked that busy highway, that it would all be different by the time it was over. I resolved that I would conquer this world of the white man, the Indian man, the Asian, pilgrim and puritan man. That I, Beaumont Braithewaite, would remember this day four long years from then and barely recognize myself. I resolved to conquer.

It was a five mile trip. By the second mile the fumes and heat began to wreak havoc in my brain. The road stretched ahead of me and after I passed the movie theater and saw the giant ad for *Ghostbusters* everything I saw took on the appearance of a Hollywood movie set. To pass the time I imagined I was a movie star and wondered what it would be about, this movie I was walking through. But I could not think of any lines to speak and there was no supporting cast to play against. I was the imaginary lead in the loneliest movie never made. And I had not a friend in the world to stop and ask if I could use a ride.

Two miles from home I was passed by Sharon Maran. She was in a car with upper-class boys. She leaned out the window and shouted something about me being a loser. Coming from her I appreciated it. She had lost her weight that summer before high school, on a Swedish diet of clog-heeled shoes and seaweed, and now found what she liked to eat best was upperclassmen.

By mile four I figured out my one line and began to recite it to the puffy clouds and the polluting cars whizzing by: “They will know me some day... They will know me some day....” It was my mantra that last mile; a mile that has stretched so far it has continued on to this day.

When I finally made it home Mother asked where I had been. I told her I had just played the lead role in Hollywood’s biggest imaginary movie, but she didn’t hear my answer, “Pack yourself a weekend bag, we have to go see your father.”

The first time I remember meeting my father he was thirty-two and I was seven. He began then to take us to his home for a week in the summer and on Christmas we would go with him and his second wife to her parent’s home in the campestrial woods. I remember once a man who passed us while we walked to the pool during one of our summer vacations. It seemed to my juvenile mind that the man was different somehow, but I could not make out why. Something was just out of a normal place. I recall the man wore socks with his flip-flops. Perhaps that was it. I had never seen anyone wear socks with their flip-flops. It looked uncomfortable and ruined the reason to wear flip-flops — which to my mind then and now is to go without hindrance — to be carefree and sock-less. The man glanced at my father as he passed by and my father looked sternly at the man. That austere glance told the man something, but I could not know what it was. It was just a moment and I wondered about it. I didn’t understand it then, but I get it now. My father was a stern man, at least on occasion.

On the trips with him he would buy us all the cokes and candy we wished for. And he always stopped when we needed to go to the bathroom. And he made sure we brushed our teeth. Father was attentive to needs. He was a man much different than most other men I knew then. He

listened to his children and responded to their questions. My father was a kind and thoughtful man.

I learned from one of his colleagues that he was considered a genius. And that was the defining characteristic about him, that he seemed smart without even opening his mouth. That was the kind of face and aura he possessed. He could fix anything with his hands. That gene did not pass down to his second-born son, but stopped in the first one. The man said he would come in and fix matters that men in much higher pay grades were stumped by. I was proud to hear that. My father was a genius.

When I was eleven and he was thirty-six I learned he had a seizure that presaged the end and gave him the knowledge of what was in him; a harbinger of impending death. That was a simple day at the office for the Scythe man but once-upon-a-lifetime-news for my father, as well the rest of us. I heard about it as I lay in bed one morning and listened to Mother talking on the phone. She thought I was asleep, but the bright sunlight spilling through the lime-green curtains had woke me. I hated those curtains, but I never did a thing about it. No boy ever thinks to do anything about curtains; except that he hates them.

I was young. I had then my entire life, minus those first eleven years just lived, ahead of me. Mother believed me to be asleep. But I was learning my father was dying that day from a new kind of virus in the world. It was pause for thought for a young boy who barely knew his father. But I knew him well enough.

Our few Christmas' at his second wife's parent's home in the country are favorite memories. Old country people, just like you see in the happy movies. My stepmother's father was a police chief, and his kindly demeanor put in me noble and honest ideas about police chiefs ever after. Her saintly mother made the best fruitcake you never ate. They had pine trees around their home that smelled like Christmas trees. One year they gave us giant

coloring books. I had never even imagined they made giant coloring books. I loved them both with an unaccountable attachment then on. And for those three Christmas' there were black trash bags full of presents. Just like Santa Claus. My father was a giving man.

Nineteen Eighty-one was the last Christmas. He brought me a Big Trak that turned out to be defective so he took it back and said he would send another soon, via the UPS. I waited for years on that delivery; but no luck. Even now, when the UPS truck drives by, I am hopeful. It could have been lost at the UPS factory. 1981 was the first Christmas he knew he was dying and the last time he ever visited. He had three more years to live and three more years to die. My father was a dying man. As for the Big Trak, it has been a long time to wait for that. But I am a patient man. We must always wait for the best things.

So on the first weekend of school our freshmen year me and my brother made the trip to see our father for the last time. We drove in my mother's father's car, with my mother's father, and that proved to be unfortunate. The old jalopy broke down in a cow-town and we had to wait three hours while they repaired it. My brother had made arrangements to miss his first few days of genius school to make the trip. Stepfather stayed home.

At the hospital they told us we had to wear gloves, due to them believing the new virus was easily transmittable. I refused. I would not wear gloves to touch my father. "Wear the gloves, son," spoke my father. Those were the first words I heard from him in three years. I put on the gloves. The only thing left alive about him were his blue eyes. They were extra large, as he had wasted away to skin and bone, but his eyes were as blue and alive as I remembered them. He looked upon his first wife and they both began to cry. He was wasted away and dried out, but there was enough water in him left to drop out the last tear. She held his hand and told him she had never stopped

loving him and he told her the same. My father was a loved man.

When they walked away I held back. I didn't want to let the image of my father go. I didn't want to leave him alone. I knew I would never see him again. How do you walk away from that? But he had told me how to do it a few years before: you just pick up your feet.

We had been walking through a grocery store and scuffling our feet along the smooth surface; the sound annoyed him and he barked at us to pick up our feet. He had not said it as a piece of fatherly advice, but that is what it became. I have learned many times since how difficult those words are to live by. Turns out that was as keen a piece of advice as any designed exclusively and on purpose by a father for his children.

My father died of an indifferent virus that slow-but-sure took all the strength he had in his body. If I speak the name of that virus many will judge the man's soul — having never known the first thing about that soul — besides the name of a virus that attached itself to the body around that soul. He died after the virus attacked his white blood cells, making it impossible to fight off the common cold and the flu and the various other little ailments that most of us slough off with a Tylenol and a day's rest. His last few years were malady after malady; illness that never went away, but was only added to. Some would say it was God's will. Some would say he got what he deserved; payment for sin and all that. Cancer was a part of the equation; the kind that people with this particular virus get. There's a special name for it, but names are labels that define particulars. What matter the label? It was cancer.

The best memory I have of him is when we were watching television and a chicken commercial came on. It was stupid and so we laughed and he began singing a song about stupid chickens while banging on the keys of his air

piano. We laughed long past the point of stomach ache. My father was a funny man.

On the first Sunday of October 1984, there was a ring on the kitchen wall-phone. I was reading on the couch and looked up. Mother looked at me. We had not talked of him since August but somehow we knew what that call was about. I watched her pick up the phone and speak into it. Her head shook a little, like a faint tremor inside her registering itself, and then she hung up. She turned and walked back to the bar,

“Your father died today...”

That’s what I call quiet news. You only get quiet news like that a few times in a lifetime. And that is a good thing.

I set my book in my lap and thought of all the years I had not known him and all the years I never would. He had parted from his family fourteen years before, in the month of October. Thirty-nine years and six months before that he had been born. My father died a young man, but I considered him then an old man. When he had parted from his family he had fourteen years to live and fourteen years to die. And now it has been many years. I grew to be glad he had left when I was a baby. It was his life he had to live, before it ended, and he only had fourteen years more to do it with. His life was not here. And I am glad for my mother that he left, for she had her life to live before it ended, and her life was not to be found within his. It was the virus I was angry with. But being angry with a virus is just as foolish as being angry with a man. But I did not see it that way then. So anger grew in me; a dark and earnest anger. And what greater virus inflicting the human race with death than this anger so easily transmitted between men? Perhaps people should wear gloves.

We made another trip. I sat and watched him. His face was a portrait painted by the hand of death; and a portrait painted also by life; but the portrait of life had run

its lines together now, and death daubed among it the maudlin colors. My father in his coffin seemed to me like he was playing the lead role in the saddest, loneliest movie ever made. All lines had been spoken and scenes played, save one — the concluding scene. His beard was thick and red and his face was gaunt, but there was peace in it now. That face had not been at peace three months before but now the struggle was accomplished. He had fought a long street-fight for three years and now — there was a quiet peace. I thought he was beautiful and it caused my young soul to pause. I held in my water but leaving the funeral home it began to drizzle and that was the catalyst for my own water to drop. I did not let them see, for I was not strong or wise enough then to cry in public. I had not cried since the death of the fly and it had become a habit I didn't want to break, even for this. Tears are private matters, anyhow. But I am not ashamed of tears. I've dropped one million, one-hundred-thousand and ninety-nine of them — give or take — so far and since then. My brother saw me crying and walked to me and put his arm around me and we walked in the rain away from our father.

The next day we buried him in the National Cemetery. Stepfather stood by my side when they wheeled him out. He had never stood by me before and never would again. My father was in a silver casket on a caisson with a flag draped over while the sun was shining and life was continuing and the happy little birds were chirping and it did not seem right and was a little unbelievable, even at that late point. They carried him to his safe spot and I saw from fifty yards away when the last light of a close star glinted off his silver casket as it disappeared into its dark hole. That was the last I ever saw of my father in this world. My father was a buried man.

My father died of auto-immune deficiency syndrome. I was never ashamed to speak that cursed name of an indifferent virus, nor will I write it in capital letters. I

have always believed he died in the morning, just as the first blue light of his last day peeped over. I don't know why I believe that, just a son's intuition. I think he had enough hope that last night to see one more day's beginning. And I consider that as the best final advice my father never gave me.

The anger that was germinating in me was not growing outward, but inward. There are two types of angry men in the world: those who blame the world, and those who do not. One is subjective and personal and eats from the inside. The other is selfish and vengeful and mean out of all proportion toward others. One eats outside in, the other, inside out. The inside out is the prime cause of what the world labels as evil. But there is little in man that is pure evil; but there are many souls who are selfish and angry and plenty others confused. I was confused in my soul as to why the world was so messed up; at least my own little world. We buried my father on a Wednesday and Stepfather stood beside me. But I knew the man standing next to me was no friend of mine, and never would be. Our fights were not over.

By Friday we were back home and by Saturday my brother was back at school. Stepfather had a special punishment he had been inflicting on me since we met: every Saturday night the wrestling matches would come on. Next to the Dukes of Hazzard on Friday nights, Saturday Night Wrestling was the only thing I looked forward to in the form of entertainment. He knew this and usually made up some forged rule I had broke and sent me to the bedroom to write lines; it did not take much for me to break one of his arbitrary, impulsively-decided on rules. The week of my father's death I had enough and that Saturday night, when Stepfather instructed me to write a thousand lines I went and did it. But I changed the words from what he had instructed to what I thought was more fitting and proper. I wrote, in long-hand and with severe, premeditated

intent, one thousand times: “I am going to run your big ass over in a giant Cadillac the first day I get my license to do it.”

I knew they didn’t hand out licenses to run big-ass men over with giant Cadillacs, but it was a progressive thought, nonetheless. I had never enjoyed the writing of arbitrary lines so much.

When I handed them in for his inspection his face grew red and his eyes beaded up and my face grew red and my eyes beaded up and he stood and I braced myself. As easy as one tosses a wet dishrag he picked me up and threw me across the living room. I went back for another one and he did it again. Mother came between us and he stalked off into the bedroom. I walked to the door and told him I was not afraid of him.

He stared with undisguised contempt and I gave back the same. I told him, calm and meaningful:

“Mark my words: You have pushed me the last time. And I will pay you back for every time you ever did it.”

He smiled without joy and told me, “Whenever you think you are man enough.”

“Okay. I’ll let you know.”

“Okay.”

Until that moment I had never felt hatred. But it felt right to do it, for the little moment it lasted. We hardly said two words to each other after that. He was just the big goon my mother slept with. He’d come in from work and go straight to his bedroom. He left me alone after that. It was no victory, but it was better than what it had been.

I had met him when I was five and he was twenty-nine. He was old enough to believe I was young and stupid and I was young and stupid enough to believe he was something like a god. He looked close enough to it. Closer to seven-feet-tall in his boots than he was to six feet, he had to duck under most doorways. But it was his hands that

completed the man and made him whole. Hands God would have, if he decided to come to earth in the flesh. And many were the men who had come the difficult way to know the power in them. He was as proud a man as ever was and it showed in all the ways that pride displays itself. He did not like his step-children. They were made of other flesh than his own. But I wished for a father and so I tried to adopt him. I had begun to call him dad when I was ten.

The first few months he simply ignored the word. Then he began to look at me after I said it from under his eye lids. The day we visited his kinfolk and I spoke that word he looked at me with such scorn you could have scraped it from his soul and poured it in a whiskey bottle and got angry, mad-dog drunk on it. I made up my mind to never call him that again. I did not believe for a moment he was any better than me, but the feeling of rejection was in me all the same. Many believe there are answers to all problems — and there are; theoretically. But in the real world real men do not deal in theories, but in practicalities. And some men simply cannot be changed from their decided course. Love is always the answer only in hearts that love. And it takes at least two to do that. But he would redeem himself in ways, and that was what I secretly wished for: that he would someday dig up the weed of bigotry and plant the seed of love.

The Monday I went back to school after my father's burial I walked to the bus-stop early. I wanted to be out of that place and alone. I sat beneath the Crape Myrtle tree at the corner and contemplated the leaves falling at my feet. These leaves made me to wonder on all leaves and the eternity they grow out of. The year was dying. I wondered if maybe we go on to know all of it and maybe we have already been here since the beginning of it or maybe we are just here for the time our bodies are alive and that is all we ever know. Maybe our one life is our only eternity. It is a heavy thought either way; eternity, or just one short life to live. We like to imagine our lives are long, but that is just because we are afraid of it passing and being done with — our one little chance to live — so we give ourselves the illusion it is long enough.

We are so happy to say hello to the new year and give little thought to the passing of the old one; but that old year is a portion of our lives we never get back. You would think we would be more sentimental about the time passed by, for our lives are so short a time to be, and so to enjoy our time best and stretch our time out we should be more jealous of our pasts and hold them closer. But I think to most the past represents our deaths here in this one little life. The past makes people fear what is coming. The past proves best that all things pass by soon; all things come to their end. It is our lives in miniature, the years that are passed and nobody wishes to look at that picture for it is also a picture of the future. I was sentimental about this year that was passing and was soon to be gone forever, as if it never was. I had lost much love I never was able to know but in my dreams.

We cannot miss what we do not know, we can only miss what we have known; and all we have dreamed of is what we have known. I missed him and the dream of him. I felt the dying of the year in my bones, and all that had died in it. The things we love the most have the capacity to make us live the most, as well kill us the quickest. I felt a bit of eternity in the pain I was experiencing from something so incredibly rare it seemed alien to this planet. The year was dying and no power in this universe could pull it back.

The bus came and I boarded and walked to the back seat. I looked out the window and watched the world roll by. All the trees were dripping their leaves and the year was falling with them. I took out my pen and notebook and composed a poem as the bus droned on and the vapid faces of the kids looked out the window or talked among themselves about nothing in particular.

TWO DAYS

Beginning in spring the buds ope and bloom
And then the summer,
When leaves grow and cover the world in shade
To give evidence of what God has made...

And we stand and sit and live a bit,
Beneath leaves which give to city dweller
The comforting idea of rural home
And then comes fall and nature's comb...

To brushes the leaves from the heads of trees
And they turn their colors and die
It is a magical trick to the eye
That loves all things naturally made...

No matter the number it has been seen
One does not miss the green,
For the shades that have taken its place give memory
Of beautiful things put in the eye

Of grace that is the year now completing
It holds one last moment to the tree,
Then breaks the binding tie and drops,
And completes the memory

So two days for each day given
Though in the week there are but seven
The day when the leaf drops and crumbles
Is when the heavens are oped back up
And every star revealed
So never-ending are the ways to wonder
And the ways of nature given.

What is love, I wondered. I imagined it is the one single thing we cannot truly control. It comes of its own will and perhaps if there is a God, it is the will of that being that makes it so. But I could not know. And I knew that nobody else could know. But many like to think they do. We all seek to control something — most of us, just our emotions — but many others would like to control the knowledge of a creator of life by saying they know the first, middle and last things there could be to know about such a being and possibility. Ambitious Man, who seeks to bend the world to his own will. And as man's ambition grows, he moves from wishing to will the world to his power to seeking to control God and universe by proposing he knows what there is to know about god and universe. And by ambition souls become corrupted with power and dreams of power and become then more ignorant than they

were when they had but simple ignorance and pristine wonder.

I theorized that was Stepfather's problem. His will had been thwarted. His idea of love had been defeated by reality, and he refused to bend his will to meet reality. In love there is supernatural energy. With that energy the world could be remade ten times over in the next five generations, though it took man to build this one over the last thousand generations. But men scoff at it, for men become vulnerable and must let fall the sword and shield while under its spell. It is trusting life to take you through the rough spots and to show you the beautiful parts. But men are too fearful to trust—

“BRAITHEWAITE!”

The driver was yelling at me from the door. Being deep in my thoughts I had not noticed the bus was unloaded and I was the last one on. I picked up my book bag and walked into the jungle. I made sure to put away my musings on love, life and God, to not walk there sweet side out — for I knew if I walked into the jungle sweet-side out I would go back home half-eaten.

Football practice proved to be a stellar experience. I saw so many stars from head-on collisions that you could have named the constellations swimming in my brain. I wasn't the biggest and I wasn't the smallest, but there was one thing I could do: hit whatever came my way. Sometimes it didn't work; other times it turned out pretty good. I took pleasure when it worked well, for the coaches smiled and said things like, “That's how to do it, Braithewaite!” Cornerback on the strong side was my position. With the anger boiling beneath the surface I found it easy to hit hard. With the weight training and weight gaining and my growth spurt coming in, I soon found my power growing as the fall months, and freshman season, came to a close. I had not found the way to get into the

cool-guy clique yet, but I bided my time. The coaches speaking my name over theirs made them dislike me more. They still saw me as an alien from outer space, but I would win them over, somehow. Problem was I wasn't sure anymore if I wanted to be a part of their clique. I began to see them differently, these rich and popular people. They weren't so cracker-jack as I had imagined them to be. From the day Teet-sucker stole the Elvis picture, and a thousand instances since, I was developing disrespect for them. It was a gradual shift. But I still wanted to be a part of something; I still wanted my own measure of fame. I didn't want to be a wallflower for the rest of my life, unknown and unheralded. I didn't want my moving-picture show to remain the loneliest film ever made.

They were a single giant iceberg that floated around campus; cool, aloof and powerful and wholly insignificant were the other, lesser floes that swirled by them. The first inkling of a thaw in the giant berg came one day after practice when the most popular girl in our class drove up in her convertible with all the members of the cheer squad, then drove off with a wink. Later in the locker room a buddy had a message from her:

“She told me to tell you she thinks you're cute, but not to tell anybody.”

“She said that?”

“Yeah, she thinks you're cute.”

“No, the other part; she actually said not to tell anybody?”

“Yeah.”

I never questioned her about it, even later when we became friends. And I stayed true to her injunction never to tell anybody. I didn't care that anybody would know such a thing. If it was not considered worthy of public knowledge, what good was it. I understood. I knew had I been from her place, she would have been proud to let everybody know about it. But I wasn't from her place. I was from the other

side of the tracks and she was from the right side. A thing I had learned long before was that beggars can't be choosers, and in famous eyes like hers, I was all beggar. So I accepted the false compliment and moved on.

A little later the yearbook editor took a picture of me and her in a pose he thought up himself. He instructed her to jump in my arms and he would get a candid shot of it. So she jumped and I held her smiling, celebrated person and I was mighty proud to be in that picture with the most notable girl in our class. The editor had an ulterior motive. I had, the week before, made fun of him to show him how it felt, after I caught him making fun of Farty's IBD. He must have gone home and plotted his revenge. He set that picture of us up, snapped it, and later inserted it in the yearbook. In the caption he wrote:

"Beaumont Sirius Braithewaite, some guy nobody ever heard of, is proud to be in a picture with the most popular girl in school.."

He told people I begged for the picture to be taken. I laughed when I heard that and then saw the caption. I *was* proud to be in a picture with her. He had the final say, but he had to write my name in the yearbook to do it, as well put me in a picture with the most famous girl. So it was a fine first lesson for me on the media being the label-makers and the readers believing what is printed and told. The media is, too often, the final authority of our lives, when the truth of what is printed in newspapers and yearbooks should be known for what it mostly is: sensationalistic propaganda, idle gossip and the grinding of axes. It is an old recipe perfected by the Romans, which is a simple four-part formula: one-quarter truth, two-quarters full lie, one-quarter half-lie and top it off with sprinkles of prevarication. If the story is to be sensational, it usually must be added to. The open secret of the trade is that a half-truth sells twice the ink as the simple truth and a full lie can build fortunes and create empires. Even the obituaries,

which are the Cliffs Notes of a life, are mostly fabricated, and if not fabricated, hold but a thimble of the truth and give mostly a happy yarn about a sad spool of thread that has come undone.

The little guy thought he had screwed me for all time, but in the pages of our immortal yearbook is that picture with me holding the most famous girl of our day. Even now that picture exists — and maybe ten million years from now, long after Armageddon, it will still exist — to show the guy who was proud holding the girl who was famous.

The bus was my method of transportation to and from school nearly all of my freshman year. By the end of fall I had not made introductions with the first cool guy. But freshman year to senior year is a long eternity. I had plenty of time.

My first meeting with the coolest, most famous guy in freshman class came in the courtyard — a broad expanse of oak and park set in the middle of the school's classrooms, like the courtyard of a castle. Teet-sucker was a genius at self-aggrandizement and personal elevation; a wily practitioner of the age-old art of bamboozlement. And most all that was accomplished by simple, un-tested chutzpah. The morning we met he was walking in a direct line my way, full of swagger. I was heading north and he was southward. As we drew closer it was evident neither of us planned to move east or west. At the last moment he stepped to port and stopped, scoffing as I walked by. I kept heading north. He had it in for me then on. We would meet a little later in a more direct way.

Wrestling practice began in December. My defensive coach on the football team was also the wrestling coach and he paired me up with none other than Teet-sucker. I believe he saw the rivalry brewing. In our first tangle I got lucky and took him down; knocking the breath out of him. I was worried he was hurt and let go to see him

gasping on the mat and everybody looking on with stunned faces. Coach winked and said, “That’s a boy, Beau. That’s the way to do it.”

From then on I had the begrudging respect of Teet-sucker & Co. Wrestling is when I began running. We would make laps around the perimeter of campus. The senior class wrestling state champion was long-shanked and deep-winded. He never talked much but he was full of wind and could run far and fast without stopping. Everybody was impressed but I figured I could beat him. I worked on running him down and by the second month I had accomplished it. By the third month he was so far behind I never thought of him anymore and by the first meet of track season I won my first mile race against a senior who had beat me by two points in a wrestling match a month previous. I would go on to be undefeated in my freshman year.

And that is what began my fame — an undefeated freshman track season. It was the media that did it; the intercom that blared my name out in every classroom in school on Monday mornings, telling how Beaumont Sirius Braithewaite had won another mile race. The first time I heard my name called out I was shocked as anybody else. I didn’t know they did that. People started looking at me different. Soon enough, everybody knew who I was and that I was a winner. People began asking me what my name meant, the Sirius part. I told them my mother named me after the brightest star in the night sky. By the end of track season everybody knew I was undefeated. People like undefeated winners. People want to know and be around undefeated winners. Winning makes bright stars of once obscure souls. Even rich and popular people like those kind of people.

They began smiling and saying hello in the halls. It was the end of freshman year and I had made inroads towards my fame. I was proud. Eat the elephant slowly, as

they say. I began telling the cool guys I was their champion. They'd reply back that they were my champion and I'd reply to that by asking if they had any blue ribbons. They didn't have any. It was grand fun and they came to see me as a regular human and not human trash from the east side of the tracks. The fame was building, slow but sure. My lonely movie was becoming populated with fellow actors and lines to speak.

But there was one who wasn't smiling or speaking — the most famous boy. Everybody loved him but me and he didn't have any love loss over me, either. His arrogance could be seen before he could. It usually went around the curve of the hallways to make sure one of the lower-classed kids weren't there for him to bump into. His stealing of Elvis' picture from Mama G had grated on my nerves since; more so for me not having had the balls to say something about it. One day that grating came to a head and a decision was made about it.

Every day after lunch we passed in the courtyard. Since our last close brush he generally went around me but on this particular day he was staying course. And he had back-up. Jimbo was the largest boy in the sophomore class and as big as the biggest boys in the junior and senior classes. He was smaller than Stepfather, but it didn't seem by much. He wore a black leather jacket and smoked pot. Smoking pot didn't make him meaner, except in my mind, which thought all people who smoked pot or did drugs were extra crazy. He was the center for the football team and had bovine-inspired bones. He was a large boy who everybody feared and told scary stories about. One of them involved three thugs at a place called The Bottoms, where all the hard cases went on weekends to raise hell and smoke joints. Story is that he cleaned the parking lot with them. So me, Teet-sucker and Jimbo were on a collision course — again. I wasn't moving an inch, and they weren't either. The inevitable happened and their shoulders into mine

brought me down. I looked up and saw Teet-sucker and Jimbo staring down at me with dark expressions. Jimbo pointed a cow-like finger at me and said,

“Today, after school. You’re mine.”

And with that they walked off.

For bully measure, Teet-sucker mouthed over his shoulder, “And be sure to watch where you’re going, *boy*.” Teet-sucker’s eyes were a piercing bright cornflower blue and his eyebrows had a weird thing going on with them; like Clint Eastwood in one of his westerns, except Teet-sucker wasn’t cool like Clint. I got up slow and brushed myself off. I was still seeing stars. I picked up my books and walked off. The grapevine in a school of two-thousand is a powerful force. Word-of-mouth got it out by the next period that I was fighting Jimbo after school. I will not mince my words: I was deathly afraid about the matter.

By the end of school, as I walked under the corrugated roof to the bus stop, I heard someone behind me say, “There’s an ass-whooping to be delivered today, and it’s got your name writ all over it.” I looked around to see Jimbo, with all the members of the Famous Boys Club beside him, each of them wearing Cheshire cat grins. They walked off toward the car lot and I walked to the bus, wondering what was going to come of me in just a short while.

I was sure of a couple of things: I had just ruined all chances at getting in with the popular crowd and I was sure I was not going to live beyond this day. I was sure I was about to meet my maker. And I was sure there wasn’t any good purpose to it. None I could see. Events had transpired against me; fate had mocked me; life had fooled me. The Pale Rider on the Horse of Death was galloping my way and the Pale Rider was grinning and I could see into his soul and it was pitch darkness — blacker than hell, damnation and death — and the death horse was frothing and spuming caustic acid from his mouth. This boy was

going to maul me. I feared for my immortal soul and mortal body. The atmosphere was static-electric. Everybody loves a good fight, and this one was going to be between the planet's most bad-ass boy and some kid they knew to be undefeated and who also, it was rumored, was a street-fighter, but surely nothing that could defeat this guy. They didn't go to see a good fight but a blood-bath and a beating. It looked to be half the school driving behind the bus that was taking me to my doom that day. Harold the bus driver didn't even pay attention to the long line of slobbery-mouthed savages and the Pale Rider and his Horse of Death behind us. When all the fell bastards on the bus began chanting, "There's an ass-whooping coming today, and it's got your name on it!" whatever morsel of morale I had to hold on to before was extinguished like a candle in a cyclone. I was shaking on the inside and truth be known — I was going to need a bathroom soon.

In the short history of my life I had never known fear like I did on the bus that day. Had not earlier been enough? They had sat me on my butt in front of everybody. They had spoken their peace. They had dared me to move and I had dared back. And they won. There was no sane reason for a blood-and-guts fight, which is what it would be. I had grown up in the hood, where the bullies are big and mean. I had been taking up for loud-mouthed little guys against bozos twice my size since I started going to school and had never lost. But this was the real world. This guy was the first-string defensive tackle and stocked full of steroids and large as a bull and just as mean. This was silliness and sure death, but I had no way to walk away from it. But I decided that is what I was going to do. I had to walk away from it. There was no way I could fight this Goliath.

A block away from my stop all the cars behind us did an odd thing: they pulled ahead of the bus and drove off. I had a moment's peace when I thought the fight had

been called off and Jimbo decided he needed to get stuck with his daily ration of steroids rather than fight me. That was a short-lived dream when I realized what they were doing. They were playing it smart by getting between me and my home. There were at least two-hundred of them, yelling and laughing and having the time of their lives. It was a party for them and the most famous boy was standing in the middle of the crowd and next to him stood Jimbo, head and shoulders above them all. I could see him from a hundred yards away, sitting on his pale horse. I imagined his smile. He had everything to smile about.

I picked up my books and headed out the door, white as a sheet. What happened next I never would have expected. Farty and Pablo flew from behind me like two angry bees in a direct line for the honey pot. On their faces was a look of death and mutilation. They were going to repay what I had done for them years before; they were going to bring the giant down for me. And they were going to lose. Everything in my mind turned in an instant.

Farty had rear-end-explosive motive power and Pablo was as fast as a midget quarter-horse and they both had a head start. It took me thirty yards just to catch them and by that point Jimbo had closed his thirty and so I had forty yards, give or take, to try and talk Farty and Pablo out of their suicide pact. I ran alongside and pleaded against their insanity but they were on a mission impossible and heard nothing I had to say.

Twenty yards... Jimbo was coming on like a hundred-ton diesel locomotive, steam rising out of his ears. The luck of that day was the same luck I once had with Dirt Clod. Jimbo had changed his goal — he was now on a straight-line trajectory for Farty and Pablo. The big bastard never saw me closing in on him from the side. My only job at this point was to keep Farty and Pablo from being crushed into their constituent atoms on the sidewalk. At the

last possible moment I leaped in the air with everything I had and our chests smashed together...

The atomic boom of that collision is still resonating somewhere deep in outer space. In my soul I can still feel the impact. I was sure, the moment before contact, that I was a goner. So I hit him with everything I had. I reached back into my forefather's lives and asked them for help. It felt like I had hit a semi. The energy in my body was transferred into his and his energy was given to me and for an instant the energies were equal; but only a quick moment. In the next instant my energy won out and his back hit the pavement with a thud that knocked out every breath he had ever taken and I was as surprised by all of it as he must have been, but I knew it wasn't over. I could feel the Pale Horse kicking beneath me. The frothy sweat and saliva of the Horse of Death was full of righteous, merciless anger and he was going to seek his redemption.

I held him down with everything I had to hold him with and hit him as hard as I could. When my fist joined with his nose I saw in slow-motion as his face changed shape and no longer looked like a face. The blood spurted out both sides and covered his mouth. I did not like it, but there was no stopping now. The battle had been born in him and I had to kill it in him, or he would kill me. He hit back and each blow that landed drew out my anger more and so I hit harder. The kids had turned wild — yelling and stomping around us in a vicious circle — young savage men with honest, ruddy cheeks and vicious little ladies with ponytails and ribbons.

After what took too damned long he had enough and told me to get up. I informed him I would not be getting up; not until he said uncle. He refused to speak the term so I hit him some more. He spoke the magic word. I got up. I felt like a bottle of Aunt Jemima molasses; everything was bleary and weary. I was so tired I couldn't see straight and had to focus to get my sight back. Pablo

had run off to find a bat and now was back with it, prepared to hit a home-run, but the park was cleared and everybody was quiet. I looked around, blood on my fist and face, but not my blood. Jimbo's nose, chin and forehead were split and his shirt was ripped in half. Both of us were spent. But there was a new thing in his eyes that had not been there before. He still was not afraid of me, but he wasn't so brave anymore, either.

I pointed at Teet-sucker and said,

"Tomorrow, bring me that picture you stole from Mama G." And I turned my back on them and me and my friends walked home.

The next day Teet-sucker brought the picture back. I perceived a difference in him; maybe that he was sorry about being the way he had been; that maybe his judgment had been wrong about me. But I didn't give a damn what he thought and paid scant attention to it.

"You alright, man?" He asked.

"Yeah, I'm alright."

"Cool." Then he looked at me a long moment,

"I'm sorry, man."

He gave me a cowboy's nod, patted me on the back and slow shuffled off. From then on when we saw each other in the yard we nodded hellos. Jimbo didn't come back to school for three days and when he did me and him were like old friends. I had seen it before. Sometimes you can make the best of friends with a guy after whipping him. The rest of the top-tiered guys gave me a wide birth and spoke my name with respect. It had become a brave new world. I took the picture back to Mrs. G, who was so proud to see it she showered me with old-woman-kisses and fed me a free double-decker burger and heaping plate of fries.

"How did you find it?" She asked.

"It fell out of somebody's jacket and I recognized it right off."

She winked and kissed my head.

Ghost 7 writer

I am not overly proud of it, but it is a true fact that I lost my G-rated view of the world at the clutches of Sharon Maran. We were fourteen and she was as poor a choice as could be made for me to become an initiate into budding manhood. I had been going to her home to read since we were grade-schoolers. She had lots of books. The last time I went over to read from her large collection of books was the day she showed me a different kind of book — *The Book of Life*. Going over to peer into *The Book of Life* was the last thing I had on my mind. I had never thought much of this famous-the-world-over book; in fact, I had barely heard of it. I was an unlettered young man. But she took the book out, opened it to page one and began to read to me from it. It is a spell book, of rhyme and rote composed of; and is readable by all men in all languages. Soon I was swooning from the magic in it. As far as books go, it doesn't have many words, and virtually no difficult words; it's mostly a picture book. But the pictures do speak. I had never heard such words and seen such pictures and I listened, looked and learned with rapt attention, eager enthusiasm and faultless observation. After reading to me she handed me the book and told me to read some to her. I had never read out-loud before and my voice cracked and I was made self-aware for the first time.

After the reading, things went southerly. A girl being evil doesn't stop a boy from being a boy. In fact, it often helps. But one can only read so much in a given day. She was into drugs and I had never touched them nor did I ever wish to, so when she offered me, after our interpretation of *The Book*, some pills I had never heard the names of before, and when I refused the gift she told me she could get me anything I wanted, I turned and walked

out the door and stayed clear of her. We were never close to begin with so it was an easy choice to make. And it was the right choice. But all the same, I lived to regret it. It's been a truism for a long time that Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. When men get scorned they complain, cry, maybe break somebody's nose, then cut the bond that ties. When women get scorned, hell opens up sooner or later and dead carcasses are thrown into the ash heap.

The end of freshman year was, all considered, a resounding success. I had made the beginning of a name for myself. The entire school knew me. I had an undefeated mile record, played some good football, was the victor in the most glorious street fight of my life — and there was the holding in my arms of the most famous girl in a picture for the yearbook. All this went together in a toothsome freshman year stew I ate with relish and felt sated from. There were three more years to go and if I could keep up the same rate of success and serendipitous personal aggrandizement, there would be no telling. Maybe I would end up the most famous boy and then the most famous girl — or any other I wished for — would no longer be ashamed of liking me secretly and would shout it proudly over the intercom. The dream of life and fame was alive and strong in me.

We spent the summer hard at work, throwing papers, cutting lawns, edging walks, raking leaves, and repairing gutters and screen doors. It was gold for us that the summer was wet and so the grass never dried up but grew lush all season. By the end of the season we had earned \$11,378; our best season so far. After the split and expenses I put away another seven-thousand. I had a shade over twenty-thousand Almighty Dollars to my name, and I was only fifteen. With further good luck, projected business growth and continued hard work, I would double that in another two years. That would nearly equal the required

down-payment on the complex. With the insurance money from my father's death, I would have the rest.

Mama G had to retire my high score on Galaga near the end of the summer when a young upstart came in and scored 1.3 million points. I had retired from the game but this immodest kid made it imperative that I come out, just to show who was boss. So the great battle of our time went down one Friday night at The Nut Shop — a civil engagement to see who was the greatest alien-insect-killer. We advertised it to help Mama G bring in more business. I made a call to the most famous boy and he called all his less famous boys and by the Friday Night Fight it was standing-only room. Mama G made cash by the barrel-head, just like in the old days. Before the battle I tried my best to stifle the young upstart's composure by offering him some free ice cream. I hoped to give him the brain-freeze, but he waved it off with a flick of his wrist. He was in fighting mode. There would be no poker tricks with this one. We faced off on August 23, 1985, a date which will live in the annals of video-game lore for all time. I had been secretly practicing my skills.

I had grown to nearly six-feet during the summer, and this kid was still no more than a wispy, weak-kneed eleven or twelve. He looked up, with the cocky assurance of the young and the bold,

“Old man, I am going to teach you now all about the fine art of alien killing. So don't talk smack to me, 'cause I ain't buying it.”

This brought down the house. I hitched up my dungarees and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Okay, young feller, have it your way. Your utter and complete defeat will be my supreme pleasure.”

I asked Mama G to do the honors. She turned on the machine. It was a double-play-capacity machine that allowed the players to sit opposite each other so we sat, a bona fide face-off. I won the quarter-toss and chose to play

first, scoring nearly five-hundred-thousand before being killed off the first time. He went all the way to six-fifty. I made up for it on the second round by jumping over a million, but I had six men at the bottom, and was feeling bully about it. His second go brought him beyond me again, all the way to one million and three. This kid was good; world-class, even. It was going to be a long night.

Mama G kept us stocked in cold drinks and chocolate shakes and after midnight we were getting tired, but neither was close to dying or giving in. I had three million and change and he was working on closing me out once again when the place blacked-out from a thunderstorm and the machine went dead. Over six million points total. A six-pack of sodas and as many shakes between us and both of us, in the end, having eternal glory stripped from our grasp by a lightning storm. All the kids had left but me and the other world-class space-insect killer and Mama G.

It had been turbulent night. The tempest had raged outside The Nut Shop while inside two young men bravely faced horde after horde of insect aliens as they attacked planet earth. And good ole Mama G, taking care of our needs while we fought to the death in the service of our world. Mama G told both of us as we shuffled out the door, “Boys, if all those aliens would have made it through, there’s no telling what havoc they would have wreaked upon our beautiful planet.”

We smiled and walked out into the later summer’s night, stretching and yawning. The storm had passed, leaving trash strewn about the place and water puddles reflecting the Nut Shop’s neon lights. We shook hands, parted ways and I never saw him again. Sometime I wonder if he was a figment of my imagination — maybe one I had to make up to do battle with. Whatever the case, I wish him Godspeed. He was a grand foe and gallant friend. I never touched a Galaga game again.

Ghost 8 writer

Sophomore year ran right by. For a long time we grow slow and then all of a sudden, we grow quick. For years we struggle and see no change and then one day, the change comes. They say a mind stretched to a new paradigm never goes back to its original dimensions. But that is not true. We go back by remembering the previous dimension. It is the prerogative and highest power of man to struggle himself on to a higher dimension, but that does not negate the being that was and remains our former selves. I remember the good boy I was before the end of sophomore year. I was naive to a fault; I believed in the goodness of all people everywhere; I thought, almost, that Santa Claus maybe was real, that all cops were honest and all doctors wished only to save lives, and didn't care for the cash, overmuch. I was green then and I miss that sometimes.

Since the week after the Jimbo fight I had been able to snag rides and so, when school started, I had no problem getting rides to and from school. This made returning to school an even better proposition. I hated that bus. There is an infantile quality to having to ride it. No high-schooler should be put through such torture. It makes the budding adult feel more like the child he once was complete, and now is only partly, and as the world begins to demand of him that he become an adult, still he must ride that infernal yellow contraption of flashing lights and high-seats and by so doing, helps with his confusion about the matter of becoming a man, while remaining a child. It is an abomination to the soul of the young who have the impossible struggle of maturing into adulthood.

I trained through the summer, running many lonely miles. I found pleasure in the pain and struggle of it. The thing I liked best was that it was dependent on my own will

to complete. There was no other telling me what to do and when to do it. If I failed at a run I was the only one to blame, not a team beside me or coach above me. I liked the solitary, one-man struggle of overcoming the weakness in my body and mind. In each run there were the questions to be answered: Will you give up? Is the pain too great? By the end of summer I was far stronger than I had been only three months previous. The wind in my lungs went deep and pain had become, if not my friend, my tutor. I made play of pain but pain always had the last laugh and made light-work of me. I decided to quit football a week into school. I figured I could win a scholarship to college in track. I walked into coach's office one day after practice and informed him of my departure from the team. He looked at me like I was crazy to even imagine it and said, "Braithewaite, get out of my office, can't you see I'm busy?"

Not that I could see. He was watching a taped Phil Donahue show. I reiterated my position. He clicked off the television and stood, putting his hands on the back of a chair. He looked at me for a long moment, then said,

"Beau, you can't do that. We need you."

Those were hard words. You don't let your buddies down, and you never let your coaches down. This is ingrained in the race. I dropped my head and thought about it. This was about me and my future. I had to stand by my decision. I raised my head and stated again my position.

He walked around the table and put his hand on my shoulder, "Bring your father here tomorrow before practice. Can you do that for me?"

"That would be difficult to do, Coach. My father is dead."

He shuffled his feet.

"Okay. Then bring your mother."

"Yes sir."

"Okay. Now go shower. I'll see you tomorrow."

He was thinking he could talk her into it. But he didn't know my mother well. She didn't talk much to me about my life and never once attempted to lead it, not even by a simple, single question as to what I planned to make of its eventual end. She had always given me complete latitude regarding my existence. I brought her in the next day. Coach was pleasant and asked if he could fix her a cup of coffee. Mother loved coffee like he loved football; she drank three pots a day and normally would never turn down a cup, but she did with him. By that sign I knew she would not allow him to sweet talk her. He relayed to her how essential a member of the team I was and how he needed me to stay on and see the season through. He finished his pitch by asking,

“Mrs. Braithewaite, can you please talk this numbskull into staying on the team?”

Mother didn't flinch in her chair, waver in her voice or bat an eye. She stared straight at him and asked,

“How much are you prepared to pay him?”

He did a double-take, then said,

“Well, Mrs. Braithewaite, we are not set up for that kind of thing. This is high school level play. We don't have budgets to pay our players, nor would it be legal to do so.”

“In a few short years Beau is going to be responsible for all his own bills. Even now he pays for most of what he gets. I have not told Beau what I think is best for him since he was a boy. I raised him to be able to decide such things for himself. He has come to the decision that track is the thing he must do for the sake of his future and so that is what I stand by. As important as your program might be, Beau's choice for his own future is, to me, just a little more important. I am sure you understand. “

I was proud. She had stood by me against the most powerful man in school. I had not been sure she would.

Coach shook his head and in that moment a scorn slipped into his eyes for me that never left. We were a football school. Nothing else mattered. From that day on not a single football coach was ever a friend of mine again. But I didn't miss them and I didn't miss football. Even though I could hit, I never liked it. It was too barbarous. These were human beings and I was being taught to hit them as hard as I could without an intelligent reason for it. The more I had come to do it, the more I didn't take to the lesson.

My previous season had garnered notice from a fellow who had made records himself. He was just a few years out of college and a professor but seemed ages old. Everything about him was slow as a turtle. He talked, walked and thought slow; he had all the qualities of the octogenarian except he could run six miles as fast as most eighty-year-olds drive it. He became young when he ran and when he stopped running he turned back into a senior citizen. He began coaching me and by the sophomore State Cross-country meet in October I came in sixth. The greater competition inherent in the upper classes and the fact I disliked cross-country helped with the poor showing. I never ran with my heart in a single cross-country race. The woods and trails were too full of beauty for me to turn my full concentration on the race. I noticed too much the leaves dropping and turning colors. But it was rigorous training for the mile coming in the spring. I would be ready then for the only event I cared to cross first in: the Iron-Horse; four laps around the track; sixteen-hundred yards of constant near-sprint. It is the most painful, heart-breaking event in athletics and there are no fall colors in spring to block the concentration, there is only the merciless black asphalt of the track. It is easy to keep one's mind on the race while pondering black asphalt.

I ran over five-hundred miles that winter. Nearly every mile was fast. I was full of life then and planned the

future in those runs. I was running away from the place I was in; the home and the neighborhood; the poor life and the sure death it represented to me. But my path always made a circle and brought me back. I was pushing myself to overcome the weakness in me. And I was storing up that strength for the fight to come. Life is a street-fight and so I knew I was going to need the capacity for it. The only picture of life I had experience with was that it is struggle, from beginning to end. One needs cellular strength for all that, and lots of air; an unending capacity to breathe. What is life, but the capacity and need to breathe? My lungs were strong and I made them stronger. I punished them until they stopped crying. If there was no pain in the run, I considered it a waste of time. The usual training run consisted of a six-miler, the first three were intense pain, but by the end of the third mile the pain had usually been beaten and I would begin to float. After floating a ways I could ask of the gods to take me to the level of the Zone.

In the Zone everything becomes smooth as glass and works fine; nothing hurts. It is a place somewhere between heaven and earth, where answers are found and one may become more than he was before. It is a sublime state of existence that world-class Eastern swami's attain after a lifetime of practice while sitting in caves. But that is the slow, old man's way of reaching enlightenment and physical perfection. There is another, quicker, more difficult and better way, and it is called the training run, beneath the stars of heaven and among the woods and wilds of men. Paving the asphalt and breathing through the mouth and nose, and through every wide-opened pore of one's being; struggling past the threshold of pain that will stop most mortals. It takes one to a place between heaven and earth. It is a key and keyhole to a state of mind that is as much a place as a real life place. It is a natural acid trip. It got to where I did not have to run to reach it; it would come upon me at quiet times and the atomic seeds of my mind

and body would expand like a blooming flower into the cosmos and with them my understanding and idea of the miracle of life, death, time and existence. It was a feeling of oneness with the entire universe; a state of improbable and marvelous physical, mental and spiritual proportions

What I believe the Zone to be is an alignment of body, mind and soul — juxtaposed in perfect synchronicity — with the energies of the universe. It was enlightenment; the slow dawn of the knowledge of the soul slipping into the pores of the corporal being. The seeking of it is an integral part of it. Most do not seek it. Most do not contemplate its existence. I knew about it by a natural perceiving and sought it by a natural need of it. And I found it often.

It's been a long time since I have breathed fire out of my pores and pulled from heaven its secrets. The closest I come to it now is when I ride the Rebel down a dark road and the stars are above us and everything is motionless. That is when the world is at peace and I am at peace and such is the closest I get now to the celestial. But it is just the memory of it that I am experiencing at those times. I cannot run now like I did then. My body won't allow it. I simply do not have the capacity to sweat anymore. And breathing like that is just an ancient memory.

In my runs I began to see it all differently from the way I had before. I began to comprehend the beauty in flowers, trees and green things on a higher level of understanding. The clouds in the sky took on shapes I had never noticed and the stars at night became a forest that I began to walk through in my daydreams. The money I had made and the money I was going to make no longer held such power over my imagination.

After the pain in the gut was broke I had time to collect the thoughts I had dreamed while sleeping. And eventually I came to realize that if a man has nothing much

on his mind and his soul is not burdened with too much thought and his body is healthy, fortune is no big thing to effect — if the man is half-smart and diligent; but if a man was burdened with all the other, then the wealth of this world was forfeit for the riches of the soul and his destiny becomes a matter negotiated among the gods. I was negotiating with the gods in those runs — seeking my true treasure — the treasures in my soul.

My longer runs took me to the foothills of the great mountain close to my home. It is called the Megas Jesse Mountain but my brother and his girl called it Blue Yonder Mountain. I ran through the pine woods and the path was, at places, clear and bright and at other places, dark as night; and sometimes the leaves were newly fallen and the copse was full of being and at other times the leaves were dead and no more were they for seeing. Sometimes I would stop and walk a ways and listen to the song in the woods. I wrote it all down and kept it in my heart's pocket, and when I made it to the broad and open expanse of the meadows I sat a spell and sang the tell, of woods and life and me. In that great mountain are mysteries and wonders of the human soul unlike any other place.

It was in one of my runs under the Megas Jesse Mountain when I decided to begin a journal. And on the first day of my fifteenth year I wrote the first words in it. I began running mostly for the strength to keep my posture when I became an old man; to become, one day, a strong, old man. That is what the old do — they stoop, lower and lower toward the earth that seeks them. I saw the old and infirm around me and never wanted to be that way — hardly able to move about, empty except of ankle-deep breaths and shallow seeing. I wanted to ford life to the depths the entire way through. I wanted the poetry of life to always have a place to sit and sing in me.

In my runs I wondered of dreams. What are they? It seemed to me they are the soul made manifest in thought.

And to ponder on dreams is to ponder on souls. But I am not sure of this now as I was not sure of it then. But it did seem to be so, when I thought upon it all, while running beneath the big blue moon and the tiny silver stars as they cast their lights over Blue Mountain.

I wondered of souls. I had heard that our souls are atoms of God's thought and the atomic thoughts of a God must be good. But even yet have I met with God to read his atomic thoughts and so yet remain ignorant. And any man that has not been to Heaven is also.

I wondered about thoughts. By what supernatural agent could thought become dream and dream form from thought? Where does such magic come from? God is the quick and simple answer. But if there be a god, I doubted God is its name. The only thing I was sure of is nobody knows anything. I didn't want quick and simple answers. So I delved deep into my wonder and tried to find my own answers. Where is life leading and where did it come from? I never figured out any of it. And that is good that we do not know. By never knowing about eternal questions, we remain in wonder. That is all I figured out: it is when we become sure that we lose our wonder and become less wonderful.

Dreams are in constant flux — sailboats in choppy seas; going in and out of possibility, in equal measure to our faith. I reasoned that if a man were to keep an even keel within his soul's ship, the ship of him would ever head in the mysterious direction of "due Dreams", which is a direction not printed on any sea-faring maps of the world, but is the prime direction on the moving map of the spiritual world, where souls that dream sail and see. I dreamed in those runs of long ago of the rare world that could be made by dreamers and their dreams. I believed then that no true, great and beautiful dream, by one who is beautiful, true and great, could ever be anything less than greater life for all — waiting at the end of dreams long

fought for, kept sacred and hard-won. I pondered on these types of things while I ran. And I wondered if others did, too.

I tried to hear the expression of the universe. I kept my ear to the conch shell of creation. I kept my mind and heart clean and true and what the shell kept whispering was one idea.... *Life*. So I ran as far and fast as I could, to feel the waters of the universe swimming in my atoms. I was seeking wonder's natural state. The young are ignorant about the world but more often know themselves better than the old do, if they will listen — and believe — the great things they hear.

Ghost 9 writer

The first track meet of '86 was held on a day so windy and cold it was sure that spring had been postponed. I was a sophomore, which meant I had to battle with upper-classmen two years my senior, a wide chasm in the mile. The best of them had been training longer than I had by a dozen seasons, having gone out on the roads with their fathers.

Nerves ran tight before the meets. The fear-of-death churned stomachs. Running a mile as fast as you can is not a smart idea. And I was still green to true pain. Football hurts. Wrestling is painful. Fist-fighting is bruising. But racing a mile is total pain in every fiber. And pain, like love, expands the human experience of time, and so makes the pain worse. In the mile, time slows down the faster you run it, and by the third lap every step taken forward is a step taken into another dimension. If you run it fast enough you can go straight into the future without bothering anymore about the present. I never ran it that fast, but I was banging on the door of the future near the end; I was getting close to experiencing the first soul-stretching pains of time travel. After crossing the line and stopping you soon come back to the present and are able to relax and experience regular human time again. I often imagined I could learn how not to feel pain, and so could bypass the present and run directly into the future, becoming one of the immortals who are not defined by any facet of time, but are part of all facets. I hoped to break and make records.

Dirk High was the senior every miler in our district feared. I saw him as the first real competition and took him seriously, but not overly-much. He would fall, like the

lanky wrestling champion of the year before. I would burn him down.

He beat me by ten seconds that first meet; my first non-winning mile run. He had an odd gait, running with his shoulders formal and his back straight, as if his parents were just behind him, prodding him to sit up straight and mind his manners. He was one of the rich boys from the classy side of the tracks and his status was manifest in his arrogant bearing. He never once shook my hand or looked my way, except when I finally overtook and went ahead of him. Then is when he saw me, and after that first and second-to-last beating of him, he finally shook my hand. For the arrogant, you must educate them to their weakness, display it to them, before they will shake your hand in friendship. And by that point, their friendship is meaningless. It is the savage heart in men that must ever be tamed.

Each week we ran faster, but I gained, each meet, a second or two faster than he did. I slow-caught him as the weeks wore down, till the district meet in late April. I knew I could beat him with my finishing kick. I closed from far out and too fast for his log-truck ending to match me. He was a fast turtle and I was a scrapper with a kick. He kept his pace over four laps, wearing down his opponent. I shadowed the leaders and went past them in the end. I ghosted him at district, sitting on his right, formal, straight shoulder and let him battle the wind. I joked with him as we ran,

“Hey, Mr. High, when are we going to start running today?”

He wouldn't tell me, so I asked, “Hey Dirk, how's the wind up there.” He gave no reply. I could have led him but I wanted to make it enjoyable for both of us. This was war. I could have beaten him several weeks earlier but had become sick and my times were thrown back. This was a piece of cake and I was enjoying the flavor. His arrogance

was the icing and belittling to himself and I was smearing it on with my own.

I held off his shoulder until the final three-hundred and then took off. “See you in the papers,” I said and I didn’t see him again until he shook my hand after the race was over. But I did consider him, if not a friend, a noble foe. He had pushed me to a better me.

Regional meet came in boiling and sticky; the worst kind of weather to run a mile in. I was feeling queasy beyond my norm and spent extra time throwing up in the bathroom. I was up against the famous boys from the north; a double threat. One a white-haired German arch-type with a jaw so jutting it assaulted the nerves of the sensitive soul I was beneath the surface of my stony, unsmiling exterior. He was an attack-dog with blood-lust in his steel-blue eyes. The other was a tall African with primitive, native fire in his dark eyes who had a stride as long as two of mine. Both were seniors and one appeared unbeatable and the other appeared invincible. It was the first time I felt I had no chance to win. And I was sick. It is not wise to run your guts out after having thrown up everything you had within them.

Mother came and brought with her my father’s second wife. It was the first and last meet my mother ever attended. Stepmother brought a camcorder and filmed while Mother yelled discouragement. I say discouragement, because that is what it ended up being. She didn’t know how famous I had become at the track and told me later how proud she was to hear them talk about her boy. The track fans had nick-named me “White-lightning” for my finishing kick — a move that, to this point, if I was in striking distance, had never failed to eliminate the competition.

We started strong, breezing a sub-sixty first lap. They ran shoulder-to-shoulder the first four turns so I was protected from the wind as I ghosted behind them. Then

something happened as I turned into the fifth corner. Mother was yelling to go faster and it slowed me down. The German and African pulled ahead like thoroughbreds and I slowed like a log-truck going up a grade. By the third corner of the second lap I had been passed by the field and Mother told me later this made my fan club wonder what was wrong. I didn't know myself, so I couldn't have told them. For the first time in my life I had lost the will to fight and was confused as to why.

When I heard the ringing of the bell lap I looked up the track and saw I was seventy yards behind the German and African. They were a mirage on a black asphalt desert; too far away now for me to ever catch. People were laughing and it was shameful, but I kept putting one foot in front of the other. At the top of the backstretch I saw the African and German begin their kicks as they headed into the third turn. Coach was standing in the infield near the 300 yard mark. He knew I could not catch them. I knew I could not catch them. No reasonable man could think it. As I passed him, eighty yards now back of the leaders, he told me simple words I have never forgot. In that slow, gruff old man's draw, he said,

"If you are going to do it, you better do it now..."

"*Do what?*" I wondered. There was no possibility of catching any of the field, much less the German and African with wings on their feet. They were a hundred yards up with a little over two hundred yards to go. "*Try*", whispered the universe. I took a deep breath, dug in, and tried.

I remember it well. I took off from the three hundred mark like Farty and Pablo had taken off from the bus that time. Mother told me later they all jumped and roared soon as I started my kick. By the fifteenth corner I caught the back of the field and passed them like they were log trucks. By the head of the stretch I was closing on the stone-jawed Teuton and long-legged Saharan. By this point

they had run out all their speed in a fast pace, and I had just run mine out with a two-hundred yard sprint. We were in labor with a hundred yards to go; each of us trying to give birth to our own personal glory. The curious thing about the final stretch of a mile race run well is that you cannot hear a pin drop. You are back in time now; back in the primordial past of man; seeking the meaning to life. You are stretching the space-time paradigm and the future is beckoning you to cross over into another realm. Your body is on fire, all of your atoms pleading for you to stop the madness, but you do not heed that reasonable request. You keep running. It is not until the finish line that you are allowed to stop. It is not until the future is reached that you are allowed to give your atoms a rest. The pain inside is too loud for you to hear the sounds outside. And that is what was odd about this moment; the stands were so loud with screaming people in their present moment that I heard it — like a sound from the future — calling to one who was in the past. I heard the stands roaring and it filled my ears with wonder. I had never known such pain before in my life; every atom was burning — all ten trillion of them — but I heard the roar that day.

I caught the winged-feet boys with ninety yards to go and we mighty young three struggled — footfall for footfall, down the final stretch. We were young gods of wind and war, blowing down the track, each burning up our life's essence to reach for laurels. None of us gave a step to the other and it was glorious. I had the thought that for my effort, which was total, I couldn't believe these guys were staying with me step for step. It was a hideous and excruciating nightmare at the time, but has since become a bonny dream.

It is an obscure scandal of ancient history that my chest broke the white tape first — and one-tenth of a second after that the German upended himself over the line after me. He had leaned too far in and no longer had the

strength to keep right-side up. Thankfully he had a strong jaw. He fell head over heels in his effort to break what had just been broken — the pathway to the present moment from the past we had just traversed. Except for a matter of an inch here or there, it was a dead-heat-win-by-a-nose.

Stopping that day was the most blessed thing I ever did. The pain was so extraordinary in those last eighty yards had I gone another ten I would have died on that track. My body was a block of concrete in the stretch. That is what attempting to run into the future will do to a body; it begins turning to stone. We were three stone boys. That I came in first that day I have always considered just luck. Maybe I caught the wind or something. We all gave an incredible effort.

That I got my first place taken away was another kind of luck. The coach of the German boy called a review and said his boy broke the line first with his flip. They renamed me second place and gave him first. My coach gave hell about it and asked me if I would like to refute the new ruling. I didn't see the big deal. Everybody with eyes knew who won. Everybody there saw it. My own stepmother filmed it. I laughed it off and told coach not to worry. Coach didn't understand my blasé attitude. He was confused. As I look back I see he was right. I should have fought that false ruling and took what was mine. How often does one win Regional mile? Coach told the officials the German boy should go into gymnastics — his flip was a perfect ten.

The local legendary sportswriter, who had been covering the sport beat in Almost Famous Town since 1955, wrote it up in the paper as, "The greatest finish to a mile race I have ever witnessed." I have heard others describe it as one of the most inspiring things they have ever seen firsthand. And that is my first place finish — to be in the hearts and minds of some few as an example of something like that. That is the fame my soul sought on that

first day of school, when I was walking home in the loneliest movie ever made. I had finally found a lead role and that they took it away officially does not take it away in the memories of some few. I was sure famous on that day, on that track and to the thousand or two who were in attendance. But I never did run track for fame; I ran to become fearless. I went a long ways toward that goal on that day in early May.

A week later we traveled south for State. I was the only sophomore in the 1600 meter. When we lined up I felt the inner inferno burn away all doubt. Coach had an uncanny ability, based on my workout times, to be able to pinpoint to the second what I could run in a race. For this race he predicted a 4:23. That would most likely win this meet as well break the Almost Famous High record, set in '65. That record had stood for twenty-one years and was past time for it to fall. Since I had first seen the picture of the boy who set it on the Wall of Fame outside the gym, I knew it was mine to break and make. There was no queasy in my gut about it. The upperclassmen snickered. I didn't reply. I would speak my peace on the track.

When the starter gun popped we leaped off the line. The energy built up after months of training was now in one single event. I set myself behind the two snickering leaders. I would float behind to gauge their strength and let them block the wind. In one 1600 meter race there are 16 turns to make before the final stretch. The whole trick to the mile is to turn strong. One knows within the first three turns if the training has prepared them for what is coming; if they are tough enough for the turns. We ran the first 200 meters in 27 seconds. It was a blistering college pace, but I felt light as a feather. My turning power was great this day. I had no worries. I read their spirits and they were sturdy, but I knew I would burn them down by the sixteenth turn. I smiled as we headed into the fourth turn. I was going to win this day.

Something unexpected happened as we passed around the first time and came in sight of the stands. I had never seen ten-thousand people before in one place. I was seeing them now; twenty-thousand peepers peeping at me. And then I saw another pair — my mother's. She was not there in person, but she was in spirit. And she was looking at me like the upperclassmen had looked at me and I heard her snicker as they had,

“Who do you think you are? You can't win this.”

Those imagined words were so strong and that face so belittling it took the wind from my sails as quick as if a becalm had come where a powerful wind had just been. I lost my heart that quick and the race in that moment. This was my mother. I did not know how to make her wrong and feel right about it. I did not know how to believe in me. Coach had not trained me on the invisible fifth quarter of the mile that all souls have to break through, some more than others.

I watched the two boys pull away from me like destiny. The future was drawing them forward and the past was pulling me back. And soon I watched the rest of the field pass me and by the end of the first lap I was dead last. I was running in a state of mind that was somewhere else. I did not feel my legs moving. By the last lap I crossed the line in a time slower than my first meet of the year. Coming down the home stretch I clearly heard the boos. There was no pain to mask the sound. I did not run into the future that day, but into the past. And even now, long after that run, it is shameful and nothing I can change or take back.

I had run just fast enough to cross the line dead last. I had to finish what I started. But there is no dishonor in coming in last, if that is the best one can do, but there is dishonor in not trying one's best; there is dishonor in giving up.

I wish I could go back to that day and do it different; show her she was dead wrong. I wish I could

have run into the future that day and set my name in the books and knew what it felt like to be a champion. I had been telling the boys at A. F. H. for a year that I was their champion and they had joked back that I wasn't. But it was me who proved them right and me wrong. Wishes are nice. Dreams are better. But breaking old records and making new ones is best of all. The boy who won that day ran a 4:23. In my wishful dreams I ran 4:22. That beat him, Coach's estimate and Almost Famous High's record by a second. In old dreams of mine there is a picture on the Wall of Fame since 1986 and it looks just like me, blazing across a white tape — the all-time fastest miler from Almost Famous High. But reality is, I am just the almost-fastest miler. And there are lots of those.

None of my friends, which now included all the famous guys, ever gave me trouble about my poor showing, but Coach was privately disgusted. A week later he told me after a training run that I knew enough to do it alone; he was setting me free. I trained through the summer and by fall of junior year I was running 4:30 miles over hills. I had experienced a quantum leap in my strength. I was going to decimate all competition in cross-country, even with stopping to watch the leaves fall along the way. I was going to annihilate state records in the mile and Almost Famous High's '65 record would be crushed early in the season. And it was all sub-rosa. Nobody knew my times but me. But there was another secret even I didn't know, yet.

I learned the secret in the first race of cross-country season. As soon as we took off from the line I knew I was in the wrong place. All the meaning to it had vanished. I had no reason to be there. As I peered into the ancient, dark forest that hugged the road I thought about it; I wondered about the raccoons and opossums that foraged there and the ancient men who had once stalked through the trees. Surely antediluvian men had been in these woods and had hunted antediluvian opossums and counted the ancient stars and

had lived, loved and died, generation upon generation. As soon as I came to the old Catholic church set off in the woods about a mile from the line I crossed my heart and set at peace this dead dream and stopped running. I turned around and walked back, and was, again and for the last time, last place in a race. My running career was over. I had lost my desire to beat anyone. I always finished what I started. And it was finished. There was no one to run for anymore and no place to run to and I was relieved. There would be no more grueling training runs.

Later on, when I opened up *The Book of the Past* and read its dusty pages I thought on what I had learned from all this. In the first race I ever ran I came in first. In the last race I ever ran I came in last. I learned to be a winner made you friends and to be a loser lost you them. I learned pain conquered was weakness overcome and was the real glory. I learned there are fears in us we know little about until the time when they come upon us — all of a sudden — as if they had never been there all along. I learned fears unknown can ruin our best efforts. I learned that waiting until later to read from *The Book of the Past* and not understanding our days as we go through them makes fools of men.

I just wanted to be happy so I forgot it all and concentrated on friends, who didn't care if I came in last place, for I had a new car; and to young souls who are yearning to be free, four wheels is the ticket to ride.

Ghost 10 writer

We ended up naming her Christine, after the evil car in the Stephen King movie of the same name. She was also red, like the car in the movie. I forget now what model and make she was. I have tried to forget everything about her, but have not been able to. She was dark as the grave and the memory of her is chilling. That she was evil and had a mind of her own all came to know for themselves who ever rode in her. On the outside she was cute and happy, which is what drew me to her. On the inside she was cute and happy, which is what sold me. She had new, space-age gauges that told me how much gas she had, if the oil was low, the pressure in the tires, when to shift gears for prime fuel economy, what the temperature was in outer space and what phase the moon was in. She even had a moon-roof for the nights when the moon was out and a sun-roof for the days when the sun was out. I was in love. She wasn't fast and she wasn't intimidating, but she was fun. I made many new friends with her. I was now the guy they came to for rides, and I gave rides to all who asked.

Me and the blue-blooded teet-sucker had become fast friends by the start of junior year. He lived in the posh section but his parents were struggling to pay the high rent. They couldn't afford him a car so he gravitated to me. I suppose he could have found plenty others but he chose me. Through him I came to know all the others. We would travel around and visit the homes of the rich and famous and by my close friendship with him my own name became better known. I didn't care at this point like I had before, but it was nice to have posh friends. We were sitting one day in his room and I had an idea. I voiced it to him:

“Why don’t we hang a sign for Homecoming on top of the school?”

His brows perked up like Philo Beddoes’. He grinned and said it was a good idea and was glad he thought of it. We planned the late-night event then called a meeting of his closest friends. Back in the old days of the late ‘80s you could scale to the top of your five-story-roofed high school and it not be a crime against God and State. We even requisitioned our Home Ec teacher to take pictures for the yearbook. The week before the event we worked on our sign, which ended up being two signs; one a gigantic sheet with artwork — or rather ten sheets sowed together to make one giant sheet — and the other a sign we perched on the edge of the highest point of the building, made out of Styrofoam blocks from refrigerator boxes. The sign on the top was ten feet high and stood out for miles around.

At midnight the day before the game ten of us set out to scale the walls. It was an official Black Op so we parked our cars out of sight over by the community college and, clad in camouflage, walkie-talkies, black-face, climbing gloves and scaling rope with swivel-hook, we ran and secret-agent-rolled our way across the dark shadows of the courtyard to the first level. There were two easy levels to climb before the third level, which required a seven-foot jump across and a five-foot jump up — over a deep crevice and up to the next level. One boy we christened that very night “Cheeseburger” couldn’t muster the courage or the spring for level three so he stayed behind and kept our flank protected on level two. The final level was a vertical climb of twenty-five feet, to the top of the theater auditorium. We had to use the rope and hook, and since it was mine, I was the one who threw it up and over. Thanks to beginner’s luck it struck the sweet spot on the first take. My cool factor shot up by a scale of ten. 007 never did it better.

We set up the Styrofoam letters, which spelled out “A. F. H. CLASS OF ‘88”. And then the large sheet, which, if memory serves, was an artistically-designed flyswatter swatting an insect of some kind. Then we made the call and scaled back down to ground level, where we jumped into the back of a 4x4 monster truck and had the event recorded for posterity. The black-op mission was a success, without a single fatality — except for Cheeseburger’s pride. In the picture you can’t miss me: I am standing in the center of the group, my arm around another famous buddy. But somehow they did miss me. When the yearbook came out the next spring everybody was given credit but the one who dreamed up the whole idea. I never inquired as to how that could have been overlooked. Maybe the editor I had hurt the feelings of the previous year still held a grudge. Or maybe it was because I was destined to become so famous they instinctively knew no name was needed.

Being upperclassmen held its perks. All the underclass girls looked up to us now. But I was never much of a ladies man. I didn’t feel the desire for women in general, just one in particular. I had in my mind the picture of this one girl and I disregarded all the rest. And even if a girl was pretty and caught my eye, she never caught my heart. I had been a one-girl-guy from the moment I saw Jenny back when I was five and she was four. Her being gone was no matter. I missed her every single day, but I never put a name to it.

So when the day came that I saw her sitting in a beige-orange B-10 Datsun in the parking lot after school, my heart began to twitterpate like it had the first time I saw her. I thought my peepers were playing tricks on me so I walked over and leaned in. It was one of those eternal moments. It was her alright, sitting in the passenger seat, her eyes as big as the ocean. And there was in me the same thing that had been there years ago: I couldn’t speak. She

smiled and I looked at her like I was stupid. I couldn't return the smile. My brain was a frozen mush. I stood up, confused and looking off toward the wild blue yonder. Had she not jumped out of the car and hollered my name and shocked me back into the present moment I am sure I would still be there, standing stock-still and looking off somewhere I knew not where.

“Beau!” she yelled.

That brought me out of my swoon. She ran around and embraced me. It was real life that inspires scenes like those in the old-time motion-picture shows, such as *Gone With The Wind*, *From Here to Eternity* or *Casablanca*. Jenny had come back and my life was made complete. With the granting of this one unnamed wish my junior year had just become one of those Latin-named years — an *Annus mirabilis* year — a year of wonders.

I took on the obligation of taking her home from school that very day. When we drove up to her domestic in the swish community, her mother was waiting with a hug and by the time I left I was fat with milk and cookies, just like when we were four and five. Nothing eternal had changed. Her parents had saved our love from fading into obscurity by moving back. We never considered we weren't together; it was the natural law of the universe that we were. We never inquired of each other if we were an item — if we were steady. That was for regular people who weren't sure. I took her out that Friday to Sizzler's and then we played golf at Mama G's Nut Shop. Mama G had put in a new mini put-put golf course behind the shop, hoping to bring in customers. But it was not to be. The only people I ever saw play that course was me and Jenny that night.

After golf we went to her old home and walked into the backyard. The weeds were high as our knees. The place had been rented out twice since she had been gone but was now empty again. She noticed the tree house,

“Look! It's still there!”

Her father had built it a decade before; tacking it up around the Mulberry tree. She ran to it and I followed. As she began to climb into it I held her leg,

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. It’s kind of old.”

“Don’t be silly. My father built this tree-house to last forever.”

She continued up the ten posts tacked to the trunk and I followed, but with misgivings. No handy-man tree-house, or the kids that play in them, last forever. It does seem to be that by the time the kid outgrows the tree-house the tree outgrows the tree-house. I knew this from direct experience.

We made it inside safely. She pulled me to her and asked,

“Do you remember what we did in here for the first time?”

“How could I forget?”

She reached up and kissed me and if you were alive then and noticed all the innumerable stars in the heavens stop in their course for a moment, it was because then is when Jenny kissed me in our tree-house for the second and last time, a long decade after the first time. I felt the earth shaking beneath me and knew I was beginning to swoon again, like I had the first time she kissed me, and like I had the time I saw her during the football game, and like the first time I ever saw her. Her lips were wet and moist and full of love and any man who knows wet-lipped love knows it is an earth-shaking event. I held her tight to stop the swaying and then it dawned on me... It was not the earth shaking, but the tree-house.

We didn’t have time to do anything but hold tight as the tree-house crashed to earth; the entire thing, all of a piece, to its eternal end in a terrifying second. It was only a ten foot, two second drop, but it seemed much longer. As the tree grew it had gradually pushed her father’s nails out of the wood and our added weight finished the extricating

job. But her father was a fine tree-house architect and the walls stood. Our tree-house had become a regular house, without plumbing, kitchenette, washer and dryer. I looked down to see the biggest eyes ever staring up at me. She was shocked, but happy. We had just tore our tree-house down in one fell swoop and lived to tell the tale. It was a perfect circle. Our childhood was now officially concluded.

After the initial shock wore off we fell down laughing and rolled in the tall grass until the funny wore off. Then we laid back and looked at the stars. I asked,

“Do you remember the time the snake chased us?”

“Yes! It chased us all the way from the back fence to the back door! That is why Dad put up the stone wall.”

We walked over and I raised her up to the stones then pulled myself up to sit beside her. Thanks to light pollution there was but one globular cluster I was able to point out, but still evident were innumerable stars, from four lights years distant to unknown light years, that coalesced into the panoramic starry sphere that is the heavens. We were thoughtful as we looked on, then she asked, her tone tinged with melancholy,

“Why did you say those things about me?”

“What things?”

She looked at me from the bottom of her eyes, her head bowed, making her bangs fall in front of her face. She shook her head and jumped from the wall. I followed.

“What things?”

She turned and caught me off guard, punching me in the chest. “You know what things! The things you told Sharon about me! That I was fat and ugly . . .”

She punched me in the gut with those words. The thought of it took my breath away and I sucked in air to get it back. She saw my reaction and wasn't sure anymore of what she knew.

“You never said that to Sharon?”

“I never said that to anybody. I could never even think that.”

“You promise?”

“She lied to you. She lies to everybody. She always has.”

It dawned on me what she was talking about. Years ago, when she had come back during the football game and the day after, when I had gone to her house and she acted weird. Sharon must have told her these awful things. Now I understood.

Ghost 11 writer

Wise men say our reactions to events are more important than events themselves. I would agree to that. By long experience and even longer time to think about it, I would agree twice to that. I saw Sharon in the hallway the next day at school. I had grown taller since the last time we talked while she was the same height she had been since 1981. She looked like the same twisted little kid she had always been, except now she was wearing a clown mask of make-up and a low-cut shirt to show off her cleavage. Her friend smiled as I walked up. I said,

“I heard an ironic thing the other day.”

“Oh yeah! What?”

“The ugliest girl I ever knew told the prettiest girl I ever knew that I said she was ugly... Can you believe that?”

Her quick change of demeanor told me she remembered. She bent her head and studied the floor. I reached and turned her chin back up;

“No. Look at me. That’s ironic, isn’t it? In fact, of all the ugly people I have ever known, the girl who said this takes first prize, hands down.”

Her eyes teared up.

“Here’s what I want: I want never to see or think of you again. You took away my best friend; you caused an innocent heart to hurt, and for what? So you would feel better about yourself. You spread unhappiness and disease everywhere you go. You are pathetic, selfish and cruel.”

Her left eye started twitching. Her friend’s smile turned to a snarl-grin. I walked away. And for a long time now I wish I had never walked up.

Not having athletics to take up my time, I spent the evenings hanging out with friends, working The Shag & Golf, or spending time with Jenny. I took my books home every day with the intention to study, but I never once took them out of the car. I had lost my desire for learning in junior high. I think it stems from the time I received an award for “Most Books Read” at the public library when I was twelve. I learned all I needed to know that summer.

One Friday night, during the first cold front of the year, I went out with the guys and drank alcohol for the first time. I had never drunk even a beer before so the hard liquor I ingested was bound to have a striking effect. But it didn't straight off, which confused me. I was under the impression you became inebriated right off. That is not always true.

We had driven to the stadium, scaled the locked fence and sat at the top of the bleachers. The view of the city from the top of the stadium is like a Norman Rockwell painting. The fog was rising over the valley and it set the streetlights to glowing. We talked of girls, football, baseball and girls and as we did, we passed back and forth a fifth of Jim Beam. It was the worst drink I ever tasted and I didn't understand why people drank it at all. It burned my mouth and throat and sent shivers down my spine. Anything that is a shock to drink was not made to be drunk. So I sipped it as they chugged it and after many sips, I still had not felt a thing. I began to complain about it, but they said to be patient, it would come when it was time. After polishing off the bottle we started back toward the truck and just as I was poised at the top of the fence I felt it, like the world had changed its direction and was now going in the opposite direction. I was twelve feet in the air, dangling at the top of the fence, and all of a sudden confounded. I hung on for my life and wondered out loud what was the matter. It had finally hit me — like a ten-pound hammer. I told them to come get me. I refused to move.

Boys are mean bastards. They didn't find it confounding. They understood exactly what I was going through, having been through it plenty by then. They started laughing and throwing rocks, which confounded me worse. Then they shook the fence and it reminded me of the time we rode the barrel-bull down at the plant. I held on good but there was something in me that needed to be let go of and the longer they shook the fence the more it insisted. Finally I let it go and vomited on the heads of all of them. They were drenched in Miss Margaret's lunch period apple sauce, mystery meat loaf and double-chocolate milk shake, plus the Joe Weider protein shake I had ingested after school, which included three raw eggs and half a cup of olive oil. I had plenty for them and did not mind. One of the boys had been bragging all night about his new leather jacket. He wasn't so proud now.

As they cleansed themselves off best they could I was able to reconnoiter my way down. It took awhile. When I made it back to planet earth I stood befuddled but grateful. They looked as stupid as I felt, covered in lunchroom stomach turds and Weider protein vomit. But I felt better. I was sure of only one thing at that moment: throwing up is an evolutionary device designed by the Creator of heaven and earth for drunkards who have drunk too much rotgut.

I told them,

"I feel a lot better now. Thanks guys."

I didn't consider they had done the favor out of charity, but I was feeling generous. They were cursing me as they peeled off their shirts and jackets. I didn't mind. Had they not shook that fence I would still be feeling queasy.

After they cleaned up and I washed my mouth out with some beer, we took off. McDonald's was the hang-out of choice for the famous and those who wish to become so. I saw Jenny right off. She was standing with her friends

near the tailgate of Jimmy Buffet's El Camino. It wasn't the real Jimmy Buffet, but he had the same name. He liked to tell everybody that he was named after his uncle, the famous Jimmy Buffet. He wore flip-flops, Hawaiian shirts and Bermuda shorts every single day to school and played on his guitar during lunch. Could have been that his uncle *was* Jimmy Buffet; I never heard any gossip to refute it. I walked over and picked her up and sat her on Jimmy Buffet's nephew's tailgate.

"Do you know how much I love you?" I asked. It took me two tries, but I said it.

"You are drunk, son! Why are you drunk? Who did this?"

I pointed at the boys, "They did it." I was wobbly so she jumped off the gate and tried to set me on it but I was too heavy so two of her friends helped.

"Son, you promise me you won't drink anymore tonight. Promise me..."

When she told me to do something I minded.

"I promise, Mama; cross my heart."

She often called me son and I often called her mama. We had been doing that since we were kids. We had always thought it sounded funny.

She noticed my shoe was untied so she reached down and tied it. When she came back up she had a funny look. She asked, "What did you just say to me?"

"Which part?"

"The first part."

I had to think real hard. Had to go back in my memory to three minutes before, when the conversation started. It was difficult, but I managed it. I knew what she was talking about.

"The love you part?"

"Yeah."

"What about it. Got a problem with that, Mama?"

“No, Son. I don’t have a problem with that. I would rather have heard it for the first time when you weren’t drunk, though.”

“Why does me being drunk lessen it? I have loved you since I was five years old and you were four.”

“Well that makes me loving you first then. I didn’t have to wait until I was five to know it.”

She wasn’t aware of what had departed from my mouth less than ten minutes before and did not give me time to tell her; she just grabbed my face and kissed me, right on the mouth. We had kissed many times before then, but this time was different. This time was post love. I was in a dream state. You know what I am talking about when the girl you love grabs your drunken face and plants a sweet, eternal kiss right in the middle of it, just after the first word of love has been spoke. I was drunk twice now; drunk on top of drunk; drunk with happiness and inebriated with eternal love. It was one of those eternal moments. Those moments never go away. Trust me on that.

Whatever happened the rest of that night I cannot recall. I believe it had something to do with a smoke-bomb and the police station, but that could be a dark and false rumor floating around in my vague memory. All I do remember without any doubt is that kiss and the immortal girl who gave it.

Ghost 12 writer

An evil car is hard to let go of. One needs to get places, after all. But it gradually dawned on me that Christine was devil spawn and I had to be rid of her. There was the night me, Teet-sucker and our friend Happy Bulloks traveled to visit Teet-sucker's girlfriend. It was a rainy night and this girl lived at the end of a winding road set off in the deep forest. The evening had begun in a drizzle and by the time we were halfway to little Red Riding Hood's house the dainty drops had become as big as tea-cup saucers and the winds were howling like banshees. We were raising hell and voice to the Stygian winds, which were buffeting Christine and making it a chore to keep her on the road; we dared those winds to do their best, and that was our mistake. When it finally happened, it was unmistakable: Christine took full possession of the soul of Happy Bulloks.

It was fated to happen. Happy Bulloks was an odd character. He had come to town in a spaceship and been dropped off at somebody's doorstep. This will be hard to believe, but true, nonetheless. Lucky for him it was a stylish doorstep and so his eccentricity was nothing that hampered his social life. Poor people who happen to be crazy are shunned and called names. Rich people who are crazy are called eccentric and are enjoyed for their special outlook. The day Happy Bulloks dropped into town he walked across the street and into his neighbor's pool while they were having a party. It was poor enough etiquette that he wasn't invited, but he had not even brought a pair of swim trunks and just stepped in fully clothed. The girls, at first, didn't know what to think about it but then, on further consideration, believed it the coolest act of spontaneous

party-crashing they had ever witnessed. But I make friendly light of Happy Bulloks. He was no alien; he just saw the world like one. And I appreciated that part about him.

Now he was seeing the world far differently than he ever had before: through the evil, pitch-black soul of Christine. Leave it to an evil car to possess the happiest one among us. I saw it when it happened. I was looking right at Happy Bulloks when the change occurred. One moment he was fun-loving Bulloks, the guy we all loved, and the next moment his eyes took on a demented stare. His face went immobile and there was no talking to him. He reached for the steering wheel and began pulling it side-to-side and so we careened from the right side of the road to the wrong side, over and over and over again. Me and Teet-sucker pulled at his arms with all our strength but to no avail. Demented Bullok's hand was locked on that wheel by the awful, evil powers of Christine. It went from fun to sheer terror, in the blink of a once-happy-but-now-demented Bullok-eye.

The predictable eventually happened: we ran off the road and began to slide through the water-filled ditch. Being in deep water, we lost control and watched in horror as we slid toward a telephone pole at sixty-miles-an-hour — we were paddling down shit creek — without a paddle. Demented Bulloks decided to let go of the steering wheel at this point and began yelling louder than me and Teet-sucker combined. Perhaps it was his yelling that broke the dark spell, for the car ended up less than a foot from the pole.

Teet-sucker and I got out angry. Confused Bulloks got out shell-shocked.

“What the hell Bulloks!” I shouted.

Confused Bullok's eyes were blinking. Happy Bulloks was coming back, but I could see he was still experiencing some of Christine.

“I don’t know. I am so sorry. Something just came over me. I can’t explain it.”

I had seen it. I knew about Christine. I wasn’t angry anymore with Happy Bulloks. We called a wrecker and on the way home I told them what I knew about Christine, that she was evil devil spawn. I told them I would show them directly what I was talking about the next Friday night. There was going to be a full moon then, which would make it perfect. Christine was evil. There was no doubt of it. I would show them what I knew.

On Friday night the bright, full moon did not disappoint. By the time the sun slipped over the mountains the lunar planet came up, casting a strange and supernatural glow over the farmer’s fields at the edge of town, where Juju’s road curves its way like a black-skinned serpent into the deep parts of the swamplands of Swan Lake. Swan Lake is an ancient ox-bow lake where legend is that blue Swans swim and the devil himself has a stylish domicile nearby. But it is a restricted lake and nobody I know has ever seen any blue swans or the devil. In slave days a giant bonded man by the name of Juju was falsely-accused of enjoying private relations with the slave-master’s wife. They strung up Juju and hung him twice, just to be sure, and ever since then Juju’s road has been a haunted road.

Swan Lake road ends and Juju road begins after the meandering, frog-filled Willow River and the bridge over it. Just past the bridge is the devil-worshiper’s church. They do not advertise themselves as devil-worshipers, but everybody knows it’s so. They attend meetings on Friday nights whenever the moon is full and they wear black robes with red sashes. You can see all this from the road as you pass by. They have sacrificial fires outside their building on Christmas, Easter and Halloween and long has it been that on Juju’s road, in the fields further down from the church,

one can often find dead livestock with signs of devil worship upon their hapless, cooked-to-burnt carcasses.

So this was a church of the Unholy and the Damned, that was sure. That church was proof, as well as all the other, that Juju's road is a place of omen and evil and the domicile of the devil. You do not go down that road at night, unless you live along it and have signed a contract with Beelzebub himself.

Teet-sucker was riding shot-gun and Bulloks was in the back with his own and Teet-sucker's giggler. I called them gigglers because all they ever did was giggle. As we passed the Church of The Unholy and The Damned each member of the congregation turned and stared at us. Had we just driven up that would not be eerie, but there was no way they could have known we were there, as I had turned off the lights and coasted up from a quarter-mile back. We were fifty yards from the church. How could they know of our presence except by the dark graces of the devil and his black magic? As we stared at them and they stared back, we grew quietly troubled. The gigglers stopped giggling and now whimpered that we should go — which Happy Bulloks and Teet-sucker seconded and thirded. I thought it a smart idea and gunned Christine and we headed further down Juju road, into the somber gloom.

That is when the real fun began. When I tried to switch the lights back on, they refused to light up. I toggled the switch, without success. It was dark but we could see well enough by the pale light of the moon. Thankfully, the cows in the farmer's fields to the west of us brought a sense of relief. Cows are good. As far as any of us knew, no cow ever worshiped the devil on a full moon night or lit sacrificial fires on the infant Jesus' birthday, so their bovine presence quieted our dangling nerves. When the lights finally worked we all breathed easier. Bullok's giggler wished to hear the radio, so Teet-sucker switched it on—

Static. He moved the dial—

Static...

And then the static stopped and the quiet lasted a moment, then from the Bose speakers came a primeval, atavistic voice that filled our ears and screeched across our souls like a pagan hag's fingernails across the hoary bark of an aged oak. It was a crackling voice and spoke with a forked-tongue in a language none of us had ever heard; but this we understood — it was not speaking words of love and beauty. I had been down this road during full moons plenty of times but nothing like this had ever happened. This was an entirely new dark trick. The devil was smiling and we were not. I reached to turn the radio off—

But it would not turn off....

Fearful Bulloks had been repeating one simple phrase since the voice in the radio had begun, “oh hell, oh hell, oh hell...” I politely asked him if he would shut the hell up. But he was not to be shut up. Weak, happy minds are easy pickings for the devil. I had to do something. Bulloks was about to go AWOL again.

I pulled the car over near a drive-way. There were two stone lions atop the brick post at either side of the drive. They looked like gargoyles in the dim light. I turned the car off and instructed everyone to get out. They filed out and we stood a safe distance from the car. Even with the car turned off, the keys in my pocket and the radio off, the ancient, evil voice continued. The gigglers were holding on to me, Teet-sucker was holding on to the gigglers and Bulloks was holding on to Teet-sucker.

One of the gigglers looked up at me with entreaty in her eyes and said, “I’m really afraid, Beau...”

A basic psychology dawned on me at that point. All of it was just blind, ignorant fear. Most everybody worships the devil and they don’t even know it, because most everybody believes in unnamed fear. I perceived that wisdom in that instant when the giggler looked up at me, her eyes bugged-out and stocked full of fright and all that

spoke a simple truth in her heart: she was damned sure there was nothing she could do about any it.

In that moment I said to hell with it; to hell with the devil and to hell with fear and to hell with hell. Who was this bitch devil? Who was she to lord over our souls, except that we allowed her to? I would not fear her. I peeled the frightened giggler off and stood next to Christine, listening to what this static-voiced donkey had to say. And I did not agree. I did not believe. I spoke to the voice in the car,

“You there, Miss Beelzebub — ‘Miss Devil-In-The-Radio’ — you with the fractious, scratchy, troublesome voice; I am here to tell you, to state it plainly, that you are the ugliest, hornswoggingest, kerfufflingest and most disagreeable and stupid she-dog on planet earth and I dare you to rise out of that damned radio and face me — man-to-soul-destroying-harpy-hellcat she-devil.”

I didn't actually believe the devil was stupid, as She has proven herself to be quite brilliant to play off people's deepest fears the way She does; and I probably put too much emphasis on the hornswogging, kerfuffling and harpy-hellcat part, but I had learned those words just a few days before and wondered how I would ever have the opportunity to use them in a sentence, and this seemed the perfect opportunity, so I was duly worried about it, because those were fighting words, for sure. And most believe the devil is male, and perhaps so, but I believe the devil would show her or himself in the flesh as a beautiful woman with a serious attitudinal problem, so all that is just how it came out in the hot part of that particular moment.

What happened next curled the hairs on all our necks. As soon as my speech stopped, so did the voice in the radio. If all the other could have been just coincidence, surely this could have been, also. But one cannot know for sure. We waited. It had been warm that day but now was cool, and the fog was coming in from the fields and covering the road. We all had been afraid, but now were

wondering — if I was going to live or die — and if it were death, what would cause it. The others stepped back from me. I stood my ground. The others were speechless. My speech had been given. We waited a minute or two, but there was no reply from the she-devil-in-the-radio. I turned to them,

“Come on, guys. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

They filed in, I started the car and we drove as fast as we could back the way we came. None of us cast a single glance toward the church when we passed. There was no time; I had Christine pegged. She was top-speed and we flew over that bridge — thanks to the bump in the road just before it — like angels out of that wicked place. It is true we were driving in an evil, devil-possessed car to do it by, but our faith was holding the darkness at bay for the while. When we made it to safety Teet-sucker looked over and spoke like the scriptural scholar he was at that moment, “I don’t think Beelzebub is the actual name of the devil, but one of his minor demons.”

Bullok’s giggler added, “And I don’t think the devil is a woman, either.

I shrugged and said, “Well I’ll let you all call him or her whatever you want to next time and I’ll stand back in the seeming safety of saying nothing.”

Teet-sucker’s giggler asked, “What does hornswoggle and kerfuffle mean?”

Teet-sucker instructed her, “Those are ancient scriptural words, synonyms for the devil and her ilk.”

We made a pact never to speak of it. The next week I was side-swiped at an intersection. I was not scratched but the driver’s side door was smashed in. I sold Christine at a loss and didn’t miss her or the money one bit.

Ghost 13 writer

I needed a new ride. I had an old truck I used for the Shag & Golf, but that was not proper for society. Down the street lived Old Man Little who had bought, the year before, a Honda Rebel. He would drive it up and down the street once a week, but never took it out into the city. The week before Christine was wrecked I saw the Rebel for sale outside Little's shop, but I paid little attention; the day I sold Christine I walked over and talked with the man. What he wanted I gave and I drove Milady away five minutes after walking up. For all practical purposes she was showroom new and I fell in love the moment I sat on her.

I drove her to Jenny's right off and we went for a ride in the country. The sun was going down and it glistened off the pavement like a golden ocean. Jenny's arms were wound tight around my waist and her hair whisked in the wind and tickled my neck and chin. Jenny beckoned me to go faster so I bore down on the Rebel and she took us to seventy-miles-an-hour. It wasn't fast, but it was fast enough. The hard road was behind us, the smooth road before us, the sun was above us and our future lives within us. We were traveling toward that future at seventy-miles-an-hour, just fast enough to get there on time. Neither the Rebel nor Jenny ever failed or rejected me when I needed them; both of them saintly souls, guardian angels and paragons of friendship.

I loved the Rebel but I needed a car, so Stepfather and I went car shopping. The first time I saw her she was shimmering in the sun and calling to me. I was looking at something economical and had spotted a Ford Tempo — nothing fast or eye-catching, but economical. Then I felt

that eternal feeling; something moved inside and whispered, “Hey you...” It was coming from the used-car parking lot. I looked and she was sitting in front of the office, all by herself but complete in herself. She had just rolled in and brought my future with her. It was love at first sight, just like the time I first saw Jenny. I said to Stepfather,

“There she is...”

“Well let’s go look at her,” he said.

She was less than a year old and had been driven by a soft-footed woman — at least that is what the salesman said. Not a scratch on her and only 27k miles. She had merely been broken in and was still a little wild. I could hear her lust-for-life in her throaty growl when we started her up and there was a pinging sound in the exhaust I never figured out, and I never heard it before or since in others of her make and model. I believe that was because she was happy she had finally found her one true love, after twenty-seven thousand miles on the road with strangers.

Since I didn’t know how to drive stick, Stepfather drove her on the test-run. But I didn’t need a test; I knew the first moment I saw her she was mine. And I knew her name was Blue. It was her paint job that compelled me to her — metallic blue, with pin stripes at the bottom. It was the year they brought in the third brake light, which they put on her at the top of her hatch-back. At night it lit up the passengers in the jump seats. One of the things the salesman failed to point out was the hatchback required no metal structure to support it, which allowed an unimpeded view of the Pleiades and innumerable other constellations.

The salesman informed us there was plenty of leg, head and arm space and the body design was world-class aerodynamics; nor did he fail to mention her superb handling and excellent fuel economy. I thought all those things would come in handy, depending on road conditions, wind velocities and other such matters. A rear spoiler and

pop-up headlights completed the trick. I spent the cash before we ever drove her off the lot. I paid them what they asked and not one penny more. I had learned to work hard long before then, but had not yet learned how to work smart. I ended up paying the cost of a brand new car, for a car that was a year old, but she was worth every extra penny I was too ignorant to haggle away.

Blue was a throttle-body fuel-injected, 173 cubic inch, 2.8 liter V6 Pontiac Firebird — sporty, yet polite and good on gas. She was happiness in a bottle that had an engine that spoke in a throaty, Marilyn Monroe voice — with a ping to it. She turned heads everywhere she went. And just because there were a lot of her kind around didn't cheapen her beautiful, curvy lines. And nobody had her paint job. Not in Almost Famous Town did I ever see another Firebird with Metallic blue. I learned later it was a special job done by the soft-footed woman. And the very best thing about Blue was that she wasn't possessed by evil.

After we wrote out the check and drove her home I got right to teaching myself how to drive a stick-shift. In the back yard sat Honky — a white 1976 Ford Pinto. She had been stepfather's work car but had sat sad in the back yard for two years. Honky was a four-speed manual so I drove her between the front and back yard about a hundred times, until I mastered the clutch and shift. We called her Honky because she had a horn malfunction. It was good that I was a quick-study because I don't think the neighbors could have taken much more of me driving back and forth in the yard with the horn constantly going off.

I was soon ready for my first run. The parents had gone to town and told me not to drive her, as she was not insured yet. But I had paid for her. And I was sixteen. And Blue was calling for us to go explore the world. I lit her six cylinders up and she spoke in her throaty growl. She was saying: "Go faster..."

But I didn't know how. I had taught myself how to drive a manual in the confines of a small yard. Thirty yards up and thirty yards back. No room for speed. I was following the rules and changing her gears at the prescribed settings. I didn't understand how to increase her speed from those strict parameters. When I got home that night I asked Mother how to make her go fast. She told me I would figure it out soon enough, then added, "And when did you start doing exactly what you are told?"

I had always been slow but trainable. Sometime later that week I caught on. My foot slipped and hit the gas and Blue roared ahead. It was disconcerting, for I was far over the proscribed gear change speed and thought the engine might blow up. And that is when I learned: to go fast, you have to break some rules. Then is when Blue and I woke up to life. It was one of those eternal moments.

Blue improved my famous factor a good deal. If I wasn't cool in the fall of 1986, there never was a cool guy who ever lived, and Fonzi, James Dean, Marlon Brando and Bob Barker were just figments of some Hollywood screenwriter's cool imagination. But it was no figment. It is true that Fonzi, Dean, Brando, Barker — and me — were real, living, men. I had reached the pinnacle of civilization on planet earth in the fall of 1986. I had not only reached the top-tier clique of cool guys, I *was* a cool guy. It could even be argued I was cooler than cool. I was the only one that stood up for the uncool, the nerds and the geeks and the poor, against my own peers. I was of both classes. I had crashed one class, but was of the other one. I was a member of the inner secret chamber . . . Yet then again, I was no part of either one. I stood alone.

I gaze upon the stars often; they are a never-ending source of wonder for me. Even now I do it, long after the last wonders of youth have faded. And I look upon mankind and men, and I see the same wonder there. Even now, long after the idealism about them has been replaced by the reality of them. There was, in the Sixties, a movement called the Age of Aquarius. It was supposed to be an age of human progress hitherto unknown to mankind, when all things good, bright and hidden are revealed; when the supernatural powers of men would come to be known. Many believed it had arrived with the Beatles, but the truth is they do not know when it will arrive, this golden age of men and thought, when peace reigns and war is conquered, when the thought of men will turn foolish barbarism to wonder and wisdom. No, there is no set time for such an age. And besides all that, the alignment of stars can never create alignment in men. Only men will ever do that — no matter what and despite what — the stars may say.

To me the stars speak of peace — every night they do — and all across the globe they speak of this peace. In them is the hung portrait of the heavens and that is peace sign for the entire world. They have, since man began, been asking of men to look and see and then to know — of man's own potential for the higher and nobler things. But the eyes of men are upon the earth too much to gaze upon the heavens and know their own potential for immortal things. In life we are in an experience we cannot fully comprehend but in bits and pieces; here and there we pick up a little part of the puzzle. Our problem is we have gurus and experts who believe they have the answer. But there is

no single answer to anything, except that the answer is life. Life is the only answer to all questions, and it is a long and drawn-out answer. Does your guru have the answer to life? Probably, which means they do not know what they talk about.

In the fall of 1986 my own Age of Aquarius had begun. Life was good. I had a bike, a car, a girl, a job and I loved them all. I had a future and was making money to get to it in the manner I hoped to. School was an incidental matter, but I enjoyed it the more I went. I had created the illusion of belonging, yet not belonging, and it was a balance beam my soul naturally took to. For the first time in my life I was in a state of social, spiritual and emotional equilibrium. And then the universe threw a curve ball. The stars of my personal Age of Aquarius fell from the skies and rained fire. It added to my inner anger that had begun to grow years before.

She had a blue-ribbon cough since the time I first knew her. Every night there was at least one of them: a long-winded expectorating that made one both annoyed and concerned. Annoyed because all she ever did about it was cough it out, until the next attack. I would hit her back with my palm to help her dislodge the mucus and after a few dozen blows she would be free to breathe again and she would look at me and say a light thanks with her watery eyes.

When she got on the oxygen she continued to smoke. Even with the tube in her nose. "Mother, if you blow yourself up, don't blame me," I would tell her.

"But I will blame you," she would say. And then she would laugh. But it wasn't funny.

"What are you going to do when she dies and you knew she could have lived longer, had you stopped her smoking?" I asked Stepfather.

"I don't think it's my right to stop her from being happy," he would reply.

“Killing yourself is happiness? Dying is happy? Are you going to be happy when she is dead and you are alone?” I asked.

He never had a reply to any of that, except that it made him angry that I spoke to him that way. But he never sassed back, because he knew I was right. Gone were the days when they had a counter-argument for my arguments.

She went into a coma in her own bed on November 16. She was entering the tunnel. But she was waiting for my brother; she would not go until he came back to say goodbye. He arrived that night and lay next to her and talked her out of it. He had that kind of power. After ten minutes of his whispers her left eye fluttered open and then her right eye and she beheld with her dying eyes the living image of the love and dream of her life, her first-born son.

She named him after the star system which is closest to our own. Alpha Centauri is in the Southern constellation of Centaurus and is less than five light years away from us, or a bit less than twenty-five trillion miles; which is not that far away — if you have a super-lucent star ship that can travel 25 trillion miles in an hour. To the unaided eye it appears as a single star but the secret of Alpha Centauri is that it is in fact a double-star, binary system, with a third star being gravitationally attracted to the other two. It was also the first star system to have its distance measured by a human astronomer, but is not formally recognized as such, due to the self-doubting scientist who measured it withholding his information because he didn't believe the incredible distance himself. I know all this, and much more about stars, because my mother told me. Back in her own Age of Aquarius she learned much of what there is to know of stars. She had been a poet who looked to the stars for her wonder.

We stayed with her two days then we slept. On the third day Stepfather knocked on our door at nine in the

morning and told us the quiet news, “Boys, your mother is gone.”

We went to her and it was true; she was gone, back into the stars that made her wonder — and wonderful. The day we buried her there were heavy grey clouds in the sky, but above them I knew it was clear.

I read somewhere that all we are sad about has to do with the past. It didn’t sound right to me, so I thought about it here and there — as the years rolled by and my sadness grew— and I saw it wasn’t the past I was sad about, but the future. From the earliest age I saw the futures of my peers being mostly built for them, while mine sat waiting for me with a scowl on its face and hands made into fists and not even looking at me, but over me. The future didn’t count me enough to warrant a direct look. So as the future grew and became more and more the present, my sadness grew. I figured that future was a thing to start officially upon graduation of high school. I knew it would be rough going, at best, to walk into the future with who I was and what little I had. It would be the same street-fight it had been all along, with all hands stacked against me. So I worked and willed that I would also walk into that street-fight with my own hands made into fists and a scowl on my face, and I would stare down that future and make it acknowledge me. You could have caught me often in those days with a far-away look on my face. I was looking into the future, willing it to know my name.

Every day I pulled blue water from the dark well and strained yellow hope from it then dripped it into the deep of my soul. Every day I worked and planned. I had already worked a long way toward my dream. I had, by the first of January 1987, thirty-three thousand dollars. Twelve-thousand more and I would be able to sign my signature on the complex. With that there would be hope.

So maybe some people’s sadness comes from the future; maybe most people’s, but not for me. My sadness

came from looking into the future and seeing nothing there. I fought to find a hope that more and more I believed was not to be found. But I was not without the hope of hope. I felt there was one chance for me and I was going to buy that one chance by mowing yards and raking leaves and doing a thousand other odd jobs. My mother and father were dead, but I was not. I was sad, but there was the deep well to draw from.

Many believe we must get beyond our past. But there is no way to do that. We are our pasts. Whatever was still is. If people really were to forget their pasts we'd all be walking around with our shoes untied. When people ignore their past they snub themselves, and what we snub rejects us also. My mother and father were in what they called my past now, except I would make them also my future by remembering and carrying them with me. I dropped no tear the day we buried her. I would keep those living relics of her inside me.

Ghost 15 writer

Farty had been fighting the dark force since he saw *Star Wars* in 1977. One of the ways he accomplished this was by sending messages through people's mailboxes. He imagined they were portals — worm holes he called them — to other dimensions of the space-time continuum and he was sending word to other star-troopers of important events transpiring here on planet earth. Arriving at the age of seventeen did not lessen his need to talk into mailboxes and send messages. In fact, his unusual behavior had only become more severe now that he was near full-grown and I did not then nor now fault him for it, for it is true that as we become men our responsibility to save the world around us only increases.

I gave Farty and Pablo rides to school every morning, and every morning Farty could be found talking into my mailbox. One particular morning he was talking animatedly and with diligence and when I told him to come along or we would be late, he remained. I backed the car to him and honked the horn three times but Farty remained unmoved. I asked him,

“Farty, what is so important this morning about your fight with the Dark Force that it's going to make us late for school?”

There were beads of sweat on his forehead; a tell-tale sign his IBS was acting up. He kept his head in the mailbox as he replied,

“We live, my dear friends, in The Gone Age. We are always going to get and when we get, we are only happy to then go and get something else. We are, my compadres, the gone generation. We are a society made up

of simple dreams and simple dreamers. There are no heroes among us; for all are heroes now, especially those who are not. We are a global conglomerate of bimbos. The typical female of the species has as her most sacred mission the look of her face and the cut of the cloth that covers her bronzed, orange body. The male of the species uses cars and muscles for the same thing. They speak the common clichés as if they invented them, then wait expectantly for others to award them for their creativity. Our fathers fail us when we are young and when we become fathers, we fail our children. We fail, as a group, to comprehend the smallest portion of simple theories that are spelled out in our day-to-day existence. Does Death consider us, for a moment, as viable candidates for competition against his chicaneries and deceptions? No, Death does not consider this; for we do not compete with Death, but are help-meets to Death; we are the despised — yet faithful — spouses of Death and till Death do us part do we live with Death; through sickness upon sickness we live with Death, and then die unto it.

Here in this God-forsaken world the savage believes himself civil and the nincompoop believes himself a Solomon and the saint is drawn and quartered by the sinners and the wise man's fate in a world of fools is to be considered a fool. Here on this blue rock the loving heart's fate in a world of hate is to be destroyed by its own love and so the hope of genuine society is destroyed as civilization builds — so called — bigger and better.

He trailed off and I thought he was done. But Farty had just begun,

“Dear pals of my blue heart, we are the Goneagers. The brave in all ages are rare, but especially in this gone age; this timid generational mix of young and old who all have become identical and indistinguishable. One man considers himself possessed of clever manners because he knows the vagaries and various modifications of expensive

liquored drinks; one woman considers herself a delicate mistress-of-society because she enjoys a maraschino cherry on top of her cheesecake; the pseudo-intellectual; the ersatz genius, these believe themselves scholars when they read — yet do not comprehend — the learned books. But I say verily unto you, my bovid simpletons, my fellow countrymen, my new-age Romans, all it takes to start a fire is but one match; all it takes to begin a revolution is but one last straw; all it takes to give courage to weaklings is but one last slap. Look to your left my friends and look to your right, then shake hands and smile. We are card-carrying members of the largest social club on earth; the Club of Liars. Even when people do not lie directly, they lie still.

“What fight do we struggle with, really — to get through life not being totally honest about anything real? The devil works in mysterious ways, my friends. And he always counts on men to go back to their basic component — which is fear more than love; bashful rather than brave. The devil has absolute and patient faith that the weak frights of men will keep men frightful and weak. These anxieties of men do for devils what angels wish would not be done. Why is this so? Well I don’t know why. Ask yourselves why. Ask why men have more fear in them than love, especially those who perpetually and obstreperously preach love. Those are too often the most fearful and less loving of all. Why are men such hypocrites? Do not answer that; the question is bombastic. In parting, I say to thee: to those who possess riches within, though all be taken away, these riches cannot be confiscated. And to those who do not possess riches within, though they be given all, no riches will be discovered in them.”

I would never see him the same way again. Farty Marcelino had just named the age. He had been hiding himself all these years, but now I knew there was a wise old soul behind his breaking of wind and seemingly mindless stance to life. He had been thinking all along.

While I listened with respectful awe Pablo had been picking his nose. I had nothing to say. Farty had spoken for us all. From then on I paid closer attention to Farty and when the next report cards came out I took a peek at his and saw, to my utter astonishment — and no little parcel of pride — not one mark less than A and most of his A marks bearing the plus sign. I was in the company of a scholar. Farty had failed his first year of school — twice — and now was among the brightest of pupils. I wondered how, and why, he kept it a secret, and then I realized: he was with his mind like I was with my money — secretive. Mr. Marcelino, too, was a poker player.

The best part of my morning was driving Blue to school. She was a smart girl and didn't need any further education so slept all day in the parking lot. It is built up now but back then the route to school was wooded. It had a dead-mans curve about half-ways down it, which effectively blocked the sight of any on-coming traffic. The dangerous secret about Blue was that she really wasn't fast, she just talked like she was. And up to the morning of Farty's Gone Age speech, I had believed everything she said. But on that morning I finally learned her secret. I became enlightened that Blue was not as truthful as she was beautiful. Since Farty's speech had taken up so much time, I was pushing Blue for all she had. We were in a hurry to go sit for seven hours.

Stretched ahead of us, just before Dead-Man's Curve, was a long line of cars and being anxious to get to class and learn wonderful things, I turned Blue into the oncoming traffic's lane to pass the line. Dead-Man's Curve was a quarter-mile off and I believed Blue could make it. But the young rarely do think things through; nor for that matter the old. Both just have different things they are idiots about. I was dead-idiot wrong about there being enough time. Even if I had a rocket-ship I would not have had time to make the curve after passing all those cars.

We couldn't miss what came up next — a pink tank, in the form of a 1972 Cadillac El Dorado. Nobody knows how much a '72 El Dorado weighs because the company never disclosed that fact, being embarrassed on one hand and wary on the other, that during gas shortages they were producing a car that could seat twelve — on the hood alone. The pink tank barreled around Dead Man's Curve right after I made the decision to gun Blue around the line. It caused an immediately confusing situation: no time to make it now; no other lane to drive around them; and I couldn't turn back, for the decision had been made to push forward, and so we were dedicated to that. I was at a loss so I pushed the gas pedal, thinking that would help me think faster, but it only brought the Cadillac closer quicker. Further confusion was added to general disarray when the Cadillac refused to slow down or turn off the road. Surely a demented madman with the death of young half-wits on his mind was driving that pink Cadillac. It did not appear they had even noticed us. Maybe they were confused, too. Drastic measures were required. Nobody on our right was giving us room to cut in. Everybody was confused.

Blue could not fly, so there was only one thing I could do. I swerved Blue into the ditch — and by the grace of Almighty God and my three guardian angels — we skimmed a hair's breadth by the whiskers of the giant Cadillac's grill. It was a gutsy, heroic move and Farty shit his polemical, storm-trooper pants that morning. The ditch was deep, uneven and composed of soft loam. We began shaving dirt sideways but superior driving on my part kept us perpendicular to the heavens. I fought to keep control and finally we were back on the road, where I had to fight again to right Blue's sideways spin she had contracted from the g-forces encountered in switching from road to ditch and back again. They never did it better in the movies. It

was a real-life scene straight out of the Dukes of Hazzard. We were Beau Duke, Farty Duke and Pablo Duke.

Pablo had his face glued to the window as we passed, staring into the Cadillac with a stupefied look on his face. When we regained our composure, he sat back in his seat and said, in a long, disbelieving whisper, "You'll not believe who that was..."

"Who was it?" We asked.

"You won't believe it."

"Sure we will. Who was it?"

"It was Kool and The Gang."

"The hell it was," We said.

"I *know* the hell it was. I said you wouldn't believe. But that was Kool and The Gang. I would know them anywhere; I have all their albums and 8-tracks."

Well, it *was* Almost Famous Town. I patted myself on the back. With consummate driving skill I had just saved the lives of everyone in my car, as well the lives of the greatest funk-pop band of the 1980's. We would all be able to go on and *cherish the love*.

I say Farty soiled his pants that day, but that was just a figure of speech. Fact is, Farty lost his IBD problem that very morning because of that close scrape. The fright of it scared all that spare fluff-and-fluss right out of him. He informed me of the good news later on, after he was sure of it. I had performed a social service that morning in more ways than one. Looking back I realize now that Blue could be a negative influence towards my becoming a responsible member of society. She got me into much trouble I never would have thought to get in without her.

Later that day she talked me and Teet-sucker into skipping school and going to Mr. Gatti's pizza, where we gorged ourselves on the buffet. I broke a record and ate seventeen pieces of deep-dish pizza and drank three large glasses of Dr. Pepper. We were two fat boys at the buffet. When we finished we sat back and looked upon our

protruding guts and felt slaked in our thirsts and satisfied in our appetites. We were young pearl gods and the world was our shiny precious thing and to do with our lives as we wished was our right. If we desired to cut school and attend the pizza buffet and eat seventeen pieces of pizza, then that is what we would do.

Teet-sucker asked, “Think we are going to get in trouble for this?”

I looked him in the eye — a dead aim, soul to soul — and reiterated the line from the movie we had watched the preceding weekend, “Badges? We don’t need no stinking badges.”

It took him a moment to understand. When he did he began to convulse with laughter, squirting coke from his distended nostrils. His laughter was contagious and so we both laughed until it hurt, and that was just the beginning. It turned into an excruciating, wonder-filled pain, the kind when your stomach is so full of pizza you can’t think and added to that, a gut-busting belly laugh that is without mercy and will not stop and the pain is fierce and true and it became one of those eternal, yet meaningless moments in life; one of those makes-no-sense laughs, yet makes perfect sense. At that moment, on that day, we were best friends and were sure nothing would ever stop us from remaining such. That is what a good laugh and a good cry with another can do, connect the dots in souls and make the big picture of life complete and understood.

After composing ourselves we contemplated the matter. Should we go back to school? We had already made the decision to leave school, what part of the future is there in retracing one’s steps? Why go back into the past? That was over and done with. No. We would travel into the future, to Molly’s-House-in-the-Woods, where it was whispered by a bird and overheard just this day there was a party going on — for there was always a party going on at

Molly's-House-in-the-Woods. We gathered our guts about us and left that place for Molly's place.

I should have taken another route, but being a fool, I took the same route back I had taken forward. As we drove by the school Teet-sucker remembered he had a fifth of whiskey tucked away in his letter-jacket in his locker. He thought it would come in handy, in case Molly's turned out to be closed. So we swung by and I waited in the car for Teet-sucker's return. Teet-sucker never did return, but Max Walden soon arrived, and in the hand of Max Walden was *The Whistler*. Many had talked about it, but only a select few had ever seen it, but now I could see it, plain as I could see Max Walden. A three-foot-long piece of pine wood, with holes drilled up, down and to the sides of it. And names were writ across it. You had to be extra-special to have your name writ on *The Whistler*. Long I had heard the name of the beast whispered of, but never had seen it until this day. Long I had heard that Max Walden whistles while Max Walden works, but I had never heard Max Walden whistle. I knew I would hear the whistle of Max Walden on this foul day. What had been a day of sun and fun had turned to Sturm und Drang.

Max Walden was not any relations to the Walden of Henry David Thoreau fame. There was not about this person the harmony and peace of mind one can find from contemplating the soft hum of summer insects floating ambitiously over a campestral pond set among the wafting scent of pine trees. No. Max Walden was a different sort of philosopher. Every person has an open secret about them; something about their body or mannerism that gives the inner soul away. The open secret of Max Walden was in the eyes. They were close-set, by which to see things in a tight frame of reference. And Max Walden saw nothing outside this tight frame of reference except what once had been taught to Max Walden. Max Walden was a vice-principle-ordinary — a person to-the-rules-of-conformity born. Max

Walden did not understand young pearl gods who fished for bright, shiny, beautiful things. Max Walden was strictly against the occasional pizza buffet during school hours.

When Max Walden walked up I knew it was all over but the crying. There would be no last minute reprieve. I wished, at that moment, that I had put on ten pair of underwear that morning and maybe had stuck a skillet in them. But it was just one pair of thin, Superman-themed underwear and my Levi 501's. This was going to be another eternal moment. Two in a day. Not bad.

I was marched like an absent-without-leave soldier to the office, where I met up with Teet-sucker again. I was instructed to have a seat while Teet-sucker was taken in the office and the door shut behind him. What I heard then was a sound so soul-numbing and awful that I will not describe it. Some things should not be described. The inhumanity of man against man has been recorded enough. But the sound of that flat, polished wood going across the buttocks of Teet-sucker reamed out of my soul forever more all sense of what I knew to be good and decent in this world. I feared for the mortal soul of Teet-sucker and then I feared for my own. A large concern swept through me for I knew I was about to meet with God. Teet-sucker made no sound that I could hear, but the sound of The Whistler was enough to make me never skip a class again. Max Walden really did whistle while Max Walden worked. That paddle was whistling Dixie and hymns of wonder, love and praise straight from the old-timey gospel hour. Evidently, The Whistler knew all of Max Walden's favorite hymnals. I wished to speak with Max Walden — man to man — and say that it was not necessary to spank me with that polished, lovely, whistling piece of pine, for my lesson was duly learned. But I knew that was fruitless. It would just make the blows harder. No. I had to ride the lightning on this one, just as my buddy had to.

My mind was racing and I attempted to divert my attention by figuring out exactly what the holes were for. I figured there was a more devious reason behind them than just the whistling they caused. I borrowed some paper from Miss Sewell the secretary and did some quick math: If the force due to drag is: $F = 1/2 \rho_{\text{air}} v^2 C_d$ where: $\rho_{\text{air}} = 1 \text{ kg} / \text{m}^3$ $v = 10 \text{ m/s}$ (assumed) $C_d = 1.28$ (flat plate perpendicular to flow) $A = .33 \text{ m} * .10 \text{ m} = .033 \text{ m}^2$ (assumed) $F = 2.11 \text{ N} = .47 \text{ pounds force} \dots$

So if my calculations were correct, drilling holes would reduce air resistance, the idea being that it could be swung faster and there would be no cushion of air at impact. So less air resistance would lead to a higher speed of paddle and more force at the point of spank. But I wondered if, at the sub-sonic speeds the average paddle travels at, combined with its small cross-sectional area, that the air resistance, either way, would be negligible...

Without having more time for theoretical research, I could not for sure know the true reason for the holes. Then a flash of my brother's genius hit me and I was sure of the real answer to the problem of The Hole Theory: it's the holes themselves. Think in terms of practicality and the answer presents itself: the skin protrudes into the holes. The holes act like reverse nails.

Holy Shit.

When it came my turn I walked boldly where many young men had feared to walk before. But I was shaking on the inside. I wondered why it had to be so large. There were no buttocks in school anywhere near that long or wide. A big paddle riddled with holes is a fearsome thing.

Now Max Walden was a mere mortal, that is sure, but was possessed of a pair of forearms that resembled a four-by-eight. Some people have cankles on their ankles, but Max Walden had cankles on Max Walden's arms. There was no feminine curve to those forearms. It began at the elbow like a block of cow flesh and continued on from

there, where it ended in a block of paddle-wielding paw. And the eyes, set in tight furrows and appearing closer together than ever before, spoke no mercy to me.

“Sit down, Beau,” Max Walden commanded.

I sat.

Max Walden put cankled blocks on cow-hips and leaned against the desk.

“I am surprised at you, Beau . . .”

And then Max Walden just looked at me for a duration, to let my curiosity about what Max Walden was surprised about sink in. What was Max Walden supposed to be surprised about? My mind was foggy about the matter.

“Do you know that you are a leader to your fellows? They look up to you, Beau. They follow what you do and say. And this is the example you set for them?”

Now I was surprised. I had no idea of any of this before now. My fellows looked up to me? When did this happen? I was just a kid trying to find his way in the world. I was just a squirrel trying to find a nut. But I think I know now what Max Walden was doing; Max Walden was putting *The Guilt* into me, which made Max Walden’s job easier. And it worked. I felt duly chagrined to know I had let my fellows down so. It was enough to make me wish to never let them down again. I went to offer this argument but it was time now.

“Stand up and put your hands on the desk, son.”

I did not like the sound of that. I almost didn’t do it, but the spin of the world is dependent on such following of orders and so I stood up and put my hands on the desk and what I felt next was a surge of electricity put directly into my buttocks from a piece of wood riddled with holes being swung by Max Walden, who had cankled blocks for arms. It stung like a hundred angry hornets and woke my ass up from a long and peaceful slumber. I knew my ass would never forget this moment as long as it lived. I didn’t feel I

could take anymore after the first lick, but Max Walden had more licks to give. I was sure of it.

Max Walden swung again, and hit exactly the same spot as had been hit the first time. It was evident by the swing that Max Walden was a paddling genius. I could see the wind-up in my peripheral vision, the twirling high in the air; it was high drama and full of well-honed art and I knew the circular movement added to the downward momentum of this big-league paddle swing. Swing number three burned like a million fire ants sticking their mandibles into my swelling rear-end and I knew it was the end of a long and wonderful relationship between me and my once-happy buttocks. They would never feel the same way about me again for allowing this to happen to them. I would not be walking out of Max Walden's office as I had walked into it.

As I winced I wondered on the immortal soul of Max Walden, what darkness lurked behind those snakey, short-spaced eyes? How could Max Walden do this to one of Max Walden's own species? I wanted to cry, to let out my pain in any way I could, but I would drop no tear in front of this bastard, though it is a truth I was crying on the inside. I was pleading to God now, but God could not hear evidently; or was it that God agreed with Max Walden? Number four effectively turned my ass into mush and then I felt the reverse-nail trick: my ass was now melting inside my pants and running down my legs. I had just become ass-less and pride-less. I had no more of either of them and I was about to put a stop to this once and for all but that was it. There was no more. Max Walden was done. Max Walden's cankles must have grown tired.

I did not agree with or understand any of it. It made no sense. If it was so important for me to be a good example to my fellows, what kind of example was I now, but an ass-less and pride-less young man who had been whipped by a Neanderthal with a piece of wood that

whistled? No. This made no frigging sense. The pain was too intense for me to be angry at the particular moment, but I would keep it in my pocket for later.

“You boys get back to class,” Max Walden told us, without shame in his voice. Walden had transferred all shame to us with the speech-of-examples to our fellows. But was the shame in us for having gone to the buffet, or having allowed ourselves to be beaten by The Whistler? That is what it was for me. I got the impression it made Teet-sucker feel loved and cared about, those blows to his ass. Teet-sucker believed. Teet-sucker was a sucker who had been duped. It goes back to that odd thing that happens in a soul when they have been beaten — they become friends and overly-respectful of that which has lorded over them.

As for me, I resolved in that walk-of-shame back to class that I would never allow it again. Teet-sucker never imagined he had a choice. Teet-sucker was by far the most famous boy in school. He was so famous I wonder if ever there had been a more famous boy at Almost Famous High. I once had been somewhat respectful of it and a little bit awed, but as I came to know him better I thought, when I walked beside him, that I was walking beside a saphead and fool. Most of his successful efforts to be seen as cool were no more than a clown’s antics to gain laughs. And he was nobody’s true friend; he used them all as means to become famous by. I wasn’t sure any more about this guy. I wasn’t sure about anything anymore. It was all a lie — even Max Walden — especially Max Walden.

For the concealed truth about Max Walden is that his name was Maxine, before he changed it to Max. And she had been a female nun in a convent before she fell in love with another nun and they swore off their body’s sacred service to God for the love of each other. So then Maxine became Max and they decided to become educators of the young-and-woe-be-gone-truant-evil-doers. And this

is sure: there is no lesson like the one given by a paddle-wielding, six foot two-inch, three-hundred and fifty-pound clinically-insane-ex-nun-turned-man. That he was an ambulatory schizophrenic was quite evident. But even the crazies can teach the sane valuable lessons. Teet-sucker didn't learn that lesson. He signed over his soul to the devil-of-the-world that day. He gave it all up to gain the respect of one who had no respect for him. I was coming to understand that he was, in his heart, a loud-mouthed, over-confident follower.

Walden's Paddle was a nexus-key to the doorway of my nascent manhood. I was too old to be whipped into submission; that I understood right off. I understood right off that paddle was a means to keep me sane and tractable; to whip out the wild and unique; to make me one of them. Not many need it. Most do nothing outside of the proscribed rules. Most do not buck authority. So the paddle is not needed for the most and those that do need it, their fear of it pushes their soul back inside them and they become tractable and sane and same.

My own fear was evident to me before the pain and shame came — the shame of being paddled by another who had been told — and believed it true — they had the right to take a piece of wood and hit me with it. Had he stopped at two or three, my fear would have remained, but she took it too far and that last lick extinguished the last of fear in me and I decided at that moment that I would forever be wild and free. Farty was right: one strike too much can start a revolution; taking things too far can turn the tide in souls.

Max Walden helped me solve a riddle that day: I would live my own life by my own mind and not by others. For most others do not know enough to live properly anyway and few are good enough as proper examples. Walden beat out the last of fear in me about the matter with that last whistle. And that is what I finally figured out about those holes: *it is for the soul to escape from*, free and clear

— if the soul can manage it. Not many do. Teet-sucker sure didn't.

Ghost 16 writer

The universe, by its own example, teaches that all is possible and nothing impossible — and a wise mind will not qualify what is possible by the word reasonable, because none of this is reasonable; not a wink of our sleep nor a day of our waking makes any rational sense. The closest thing we have to absolute knowledge is that all sentient life in the universe is awakened by light. Light seems to be the conduit toward the apex of existence. And when the light is gone, everything appears to go back to sleep.

So for the most part, we are all dumb and lucky. We are not the creators of light, but the beneficiaries of it. Some are able to reflect the light within them and some seem to have no light to reflect and the rest are those who are the creators of their own light, made by their own hands, just like God did it; these are the ones who say, “I don’t believe in luck. A man makes his own luck.” And there are many of these, who believe they make their own luck by their own skill, and nothing else comes into play for them. Those are the truly lucky ones, who have had too much given and not enough taken away to know the difference between what they have made and what has been created for them while they destroyed; or while they slept. The truth is that without dumb luck, a lot of dim-witted people would be up Shit Creek instead of sailing down life’s Primrose Path. These are aphorisms and I cannot take original credit for them, for they are things patently evident to anyone who looks around and thinks about things. Just because few do does not mean one who does is extra wise.

In high school are many subjects taught, but the one subject taught most is division and antagonism. The heritage of the race is war. The creed of the race is victory, at all costs; this seeking of victory costs our souls and beliefs and goodness and all the things our parents teach us as children to believe in. The belief of the race is bloodshed and this makes it possible to become heroes, and it is in the heart of most all men to become one of those. But there is one other subject taught, not by the teachers or the parents, but by the students. It is taught and studied by the students to each other. Love is the subject and none of us then know a single thing about it — or so our parents tell us. But love in the young is unspoilt love; love in the young is when love is real and true and deeper than it will probably ever be again. Love in the old has too many things attached to it to be too real or deep. Marriage too often becomes a financial consideration and forever last only as long as the money does. Love in the young is honest; at least then is the best chance of it, if the lovers be honest. Jenny and I were honest. There was no corruption among us. There was no lie.

We were sitting on a blanket behind the concession stand at the top of the stadium. When they built the school they had moved in some of the Megas Jesse to build this little mountain. From the top of the stadium is the picture-perfect panorama of Almost Famous Town — with Blue Mountain to the northwest as backdrop — in the day it was a giant monolith and at night a dark shadow, like a giant recumbent Indian.

“The moon is up top tonight,” she whispered. We laid back and watched the clouds pass by. There were clipper ships and sailboats, speedboats and freighters. An armada was sailing over us, canvasses buckling in the wind. They flew in on the waves of the northern front, pushing south the stalled heat of the ocean. December’s

cold always had the ability to make me feel like a child again; to put in me the wonder of life.

“I thought about smoking some weed yesterday—”

“What!” She looked at me like my mother would have.

“I didn’t do it. Didn’t care to.”

“Who were you with?”

“Teet-sucker and Chucky.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be hanging around them.”

“Maybe so...”

She put her head into my arm and snuggled deep. I held her wrist and could feel her heart beat. It was quiet and everything was still, except the moon, which appeared to be moving like a round, white tug-boat, piloted by an ashen-faced old man with a crooked nose, among the clouds and clipper ships.

“Mother would be disappointed in me if I had done that. Chucky told us not to let it out, because he might wish to become president some day. Can you believe that?”

She laughed, “Chucky for president....” She looked up at me, “I would vote for you, if you ran for president. What would be your platform?”

I thought about it.

“I would make war illegal, road-kill and dog pounds would be done away with and cancer would be put on a Ten-Most-Wanted list. What would you do?”

“I would make you my Czar of Impossible-Things-To-Be-Accomplished.”

We laughed. I said, “Yeah. Impossible things... I thought it was impossible, once, that I would ever see you again. You left twice.”

“And I came back three times. When Dad told us he had been stationed back here I was so happy. I was coming back to you. And if they left again, I would find a way to stay.”

“You could stay with me. You could have my brother’s room. He is never home anymore.”

“Will you love me forever, Beaumont Sirius Braithewaite?”

“I find it the most possible thing I could ever do.”

Ghost 17 writer

Nineteen eighty-seven began on the first of January. But there was something different about it from all the years I had known before. It felt like the future was now my friend. Hope was growing in me. I saw the world differently and I believed it saw me differently, too.

To this point I had walked among the sad flowers, those that drooped and gave no color; no sunset blue shades of happy and gay, no rose scented fine bouquet, but those that drooped and stooped and were made of dull coloring, black and grey. I had felt, on more occasions than I could count, the eternal despair of mortal existence. I had wondered what it all meant and could never figure why. I had railed at the injustice that is so much a part of life and had despaired that I even must wonder why things must be so, when everybody else just lived and never seemed to worry. My brother was smarter than me because he never let ruminations like these come between him and his day. I had never been able to pick the lock that held my future. I was burdened with existence and its irreconcilable problems. But I felt the future was opening to me now, or I was opening to it.

Growing up is hard. It takes eighteen years to put off the open truth of childhood and put on the cloak of adulthood. We trade our time for a few dubious achievements and sometimes we find the trade unfair; and never do we find it what we originally thought it would be. Our brains are too small to understand the true nature of life and time; not when we are too busy concentrating on coming in first. We think our age is different and far from the other ages. But it's all one age, in the end — The age of

man. I sometimes think we should all try harder, while we can. And then, other times, I just want to watch football like everybody else.

The paramount wish among most of us is to finish first; to win the race. But what race is won by the one coming in first? Time has taught me the comical story behind all that. In time is enough time for all of us — to do whatever it is we can do. Time mocks us and our ignorant wishes. The comedy is that it is such a long race we all end up walking it. Life's mountain is so steep we all end up crawling on our bellies. And many times we fall from the mountain. Life is the oldest cliché in the world. The simple-minded call it a race. But that is a joke I never got, until I woke up one day and started laughing. What is it we are supposed to be first at?

There is a secret about older people the young have no idea of and it is even those who have conquered the world feel no different about it all than they did when they were seventeen. All the glory and power in the world cannot change a thing about who we are inside. The dreamers of gold, glory and green may end up winning the world, but who they are inside stays exactly the same.

I just wanted to leave this place. I never cared to change me for them. I just wanted to keep walking until this place was a distant place. But life is a two-steps-forward and six-steps-back kind of thing. And I think it is the steps back that end up being more important than the steps forward. That is what I see now.

I had sought for a measure of fame; I had sought to make common and beloved my name everywhere. This is why friends and family are so important; they give us our required measure of celebrity. Few do not have the wish to be famous, even just a little. Everybody wishes for friends and family, and that is the same as wishing for fame, just not as ambitious with it as some others. The things we do and have done our friends and family know about, and they

are always interested. That is the quality of both a good friend and fame — the quality of wonder. What makes a poor friend is the one who could care less. It is a simple matter, this Friends-Equal-Fame equation. The truly famous are those who have friends everywhere they go. Everybody knows them and nearly everybody likes them. I learned with Teet-sucker — the most famous boy in school — that he was no true friend of anyone but himself, for he had no true wonder or care about other lives, but only used them to augment his own fame. By the first day of 1987, the desire for my own measure of fame outside of true friends became not so desirable a thing in me.

But I wondered of it. There are few places on the earth obscure enough where the names of the famous are unknown. Some of the famous are probably even known to others on other worlds. But for the most part, our planet is obscure. We are not a famous planet. Maybe someday our planet will become famous for something. Some believe there are no other life forms of measurable intelligence, since we have not heard from them. But that is nothing more hard to figure out than the *Wall of Silence*. You know how the popular kids are too good to speak to the unpopular kids; or the rich won't speak to the poor. That is The Wall. Those extraterrestrials have no intention to speak with the denizens of so obscure and poor a planet as ours. Until we raise ourselves in the eyes of the Universe, we are bound to remain the obscure, uncool planet nobody cares about, brushed aside by the Universe's cold-shoulder of contempt.

The thing about fame that gives pause for wonder is the retroactive capacity inherent in it. When true fame has been accomplished, there goes back in time a golden flash to make holy all the days, moments and places the famous once were in and at — it paints everything touched by the once-obscure-and-now-famous a gilded hue. It is a singular phenomenon and nothing else but fame can do such magic.

But this kind of fame is rarest of all and happens only when a being has done something that is remarkable, not only to people of their age, but to all ages. The memory is what's important. Everybody hopes to be remembered, so that even when they are dead, they will still have friends. The desire to change the world and for the better; that is what we all seek to do on some level. The fame we get from our friends and family show we have, if not accomplished this by our own deeds, been afforded some measure of respect for at least being alive, and so, on a basic level, we are given and give, by a mutual charity of our friends and family, the idea of being sacred and worthy of remembrance. Woe to the soul who has no friend to hold sacred their name and keep it safe.

Stepfather brought a girl puppy home when I was seven he had found in an abandoned car. I asked if she could be mine and he told me she could, if I cared for her. She never once spoke my name, but I spoke hers from the age of seven to seventeen. I kept her name sacred and she kept me sacred; sacred was her life to me and sacred was my life to her. By February of '87 she was keeping to herself in the shed. She was dying. I refused to believe it and stayed away. Stepfather gave me the best advice about life he ever gave when he told me if I didn't go to her I would regret it.

So I went and took her from the shed and brought her inside and wrapped her in my letter jacket and we went for a ride on the Rebel. The stars moved that night just for us. I stayed by her all night and fell asleep just in time to wake for school. I thought she would be there when I came back. But that day I had to dig a deep hole, one I found impossible to fill. The impossible was accomplished by sundown. They say that March comes in like a lion and leaves like a lamb, but this late March day the winds were cold and bitter, but sacred was her grave. I was lucky to have met this one and been famous to her. Her eyes were

like the night sky, and I saw myself reflected there perfectly. She saw in me what I did not see then in me: a searching, sad, sensitive boy. My pain was her pain and when I buried her, I buried part of myself. Her grave is an obscure place in this world, but in me, a famous and immortal place. And that is what our friends do for us; they make us famous to somebody and our graves a place known and beloved.

On the last day of school we became, finally, seniors. Junior Year-end-Bash was held on Molly's farm. Her place was on the outskirts of the city, far down Juju road, where the cypress trees grow in ancient, alluvial soil. Rumor was her great-grandfather had been the very first to sign contracts with old Beelzebub, so none of us worried about that. The farmers of the Antebellum South had planted, along with the oaks, seeds of southern hospitality and it still grows wild there, that particular and pungent brand of cordiality only the South can offer. Being city or being country has nothing to do with where one is born or lives, but is a state of mind one feels most comfortable with. And every city boy who ever traveled into the country, and enjoyed it, became then at least a little country, just as every country boy who ever traveled into the city, and liked it, became then a little bit city. On Molly's farm we all became country boys and girls.

Our raucous yells that night could be heard for miles around and sure woke up the neighbors and their slumbering livestock; it maybe even woke up the devil, but she didn't make any appearances that I was aware of, so I presume she didn't mind. There was a three-story high bonfire that sent millions of fireflies flying toward the stars. And the stars themselves, in a setting where no city light intruded, could turn any citified soul into something it was not before; something better. It was a hearkening back to a daring and original state. On Molly's farm that night the straight-jacket of the city, and our youths, was sloughed off and our minds breathed, as if for the first time. I carried myself and various others in Blue to Molly's farm that

night. And we did not worry about uncanny voices from the radio, for Blue never was weak-minded like Christine. The trip was without incident and the bonfire three-stories-high made getting there easy; it was a bright light that lit up the woods and road from miles off and was a symbol of something that even now I cannot name. It was a good and wholesome and nourishing-to-the-soul unnamed kind of thing.

It had been a yearly event, since Molly was in junior high, to have a shindig at her place with all her friends. And Molly's father, being a pillar of the city, made concord with the fire and police about all the cars, noise and giant fire. This was the first year I was famous enough to go. I had never seen so much beer. Her father even had beer shipped in from Germany; an expensive brand by the name of Schafer. It tasted like cow-piss but being expensive, was supposed to taste that way. Back in the eighties, young people over the age of 16, if there were adult chaperones present, could drink a little and it was not cause for a social movement. It was a simpler, better time.

Hundreds attended. One boy had a truck that had a ladder you climbed to get in. He bragged all night how that truck could not tip over, for he had tried to do just that a number of times. He never considered you could tip it sure by running it off a bridge. We drove by an hour before sunrise the next morning and saw him in Willow River, his giant truck tipped over on its top and water up to the wheels. It could have been the work of the devil worshippers, as the evil church is nearby. Or it could have been the beer he drank, his own over-confident attitude and the sharp curve. There is no way to know for sure, for that night and all that happened in it are long gone. Amusing thing when you get drunk: sharp curves become a lot sharper.

I jinxed myself laughing at that guy. I was intoxicated also, and had my own sharp curves to worry

with. I took the last friend home by first light and being tired, wished to get home as fast as possible. I had driven this road many times before at high velocity and thought nothing of pushing Blue to seventy mph traveling it. What I had not figured on was the water puddle from the rain the previous day. I hit the brakes and Blue slid, straight for the front grille of a parked 1981 Bonneville. I had passed that same car without worry hundreds of times.

The impact stopped me on the dime. I shook the last of the drunk out and realized I was alive. I backed the car up and parked it and got out to survey the damage. There was a hairline fracture in the Bonneville, but the front bumper of Blue was crushed. I knocked on the door of the man's home for fifteen minutes before he answered. He called the law and they came and I was drunk, without insurance, license or registration, for I could not recall where I had put all that. But the cops were more than fair — because I had not hit and run — and just called Stepfather, who took me home and predicted I was just going to do it again.

But he was wrong. I never got drunk and drove again. I fell to sleep that night thinking how ashamed Mother would be. Stepfather put me on restriction for the summer, and made it stick by saying Mother would have done the same thing. And he was right. I parked Blue in the garage. But I took the Rebel out late nights to go see Jenny. We'd ride the back-roads beside the farmer's cotton fields. We'd usually end up at the walnut grove, where we'd park and lay under the stars and count them and dream of the future. We wished these nights would last forever, but they went by so quickly. I picked her up every night nearly and Stepfather knew I went out but he never said anything. We traveled wherever our whim took us, and except for work or Jenny, I stayed home; a self-imposed restriction to honor and mind mother. I paid half the bills now. It was a time of

thought and work and late nights with Jenny. It was the best summer of my life.

A week after my seventeenth birthday was a Tuesday; it was also one exact week before the start of senior year. Summer vacation was coming to a close and I was looking forward to senior year. I had just got home from a day's work when I noticed Sharon Maran's mother across the street, struggling with groceries. I ran over and took her bags and walked them inside for her, setting them on the counter. As I began to walk back out she asked if I would like to go back and see Sharon — "It had been so long".

I told her Sharon didn't care to see me.

"Oh, but I'm sure she does! Go back and just say hello. She would be tickled. She talks about you all the time. She always has you know."

I walked back to Sharon's room. I had not been there in years. The walls along the hallway were still the same yellow they had been when we were kids; except now the color was dulled and looked more a brownish yellow. I had grown up since I had been here; everything seemed smaller and of the past. I was walking into the bygone with each step, until I knocked on her door and it was 1976 again. When she opened the door the present came back. This was not the Sharon of '76. Her eyes were glazed over. I wanted to leave right then but part of me wanted to stay and ask her what happened. As terrible as she was as a child, I never imagined her becoming like this. It wasn't her appearance but what could be felt; the shadow of her soul rose out of her pores like angry steam from an acid-filled radiator. Her soul hissed and whispered dark secrets and her cleavage spilled from her low-cut, tie-died shirt.

"What do you want?"

I put my palms up, "I don't want anything. Your mother told me to come say hello. So... hello."

She smirked and her eyes turned to slits. Then her soul hissed to her one of its dark secrets and her demeanor changed in the instant it takes for meditative evil to understand itself. Her eyes grew wide when the secret made itself understood and she said,

“Well come in and say hello...”

Except for posters of the modern day movie stars and rock stars, her room was unchanged from when we were children. Bookshelves lined every wall and all the same books from our childhood remained. I scanned the volumes to find the one I remembered and picked it out: Shell Silverstein’s *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. Her mother worked at a bookstore and brought them home for her. I thumbed through it and read as she plopped herself on the bed.

“You just came here to read a book you read when you were a boy? You still a boy inside, Beau?”

She reached and pulled my hand to her. I pulled away. For a moment her face registered surprise, then she smiled,

“Still just a boy, huh?”

“Yeah. Just a boy... I’ll see ya, Sharon. I have to get home.”

She jumped up and barred the door. She pushed me back and said,

“You know I can give you anything you want. And you know what I’m talking about...”

Who wouldn’t know? She was the drug-dealer/streetwalker par excellence; only her mother didn’t know that and only because she refused to read all the writing on the bathroom walls.

“Thanks, but I’m not interested. I’ll be seeing you.”

I moved her out of the way and walked out. As I passed by I said good day to Mrs. Maran and she told me to come back soon. I privately wished never to return. And that’s a wish that came true. I have never been back.

Ghost 19 writer

The first day of senior year was more like a continuation of Molly's party. Children dream of senior year for a lifetime and when it happens, we believe we have made it. The freshmen were short in stature and ignorant in politics and the sophomores not much better. The parking lot was full of shiny cars and happy faces. Radios were blaring and people were yelling and the day was full of the energy of creation. I noticed Walden standing at the top of the steps, surveying the scene like a corpulent hawk that had caught and eaten far too many mice and was looking for more. The Whistler was in the right paw, swinging in the wind. Max Walden felt a showing on the first day of school was needed as a reminder.

I recall that first morning of the last year of high school perfectly. Possibility was in the air and you could reach and take a handful of it, gulp it down, and choke until you laughed. We had searched for the invisible future all our lives and now it was real and visible. Now the world was ours, ready to be picked and pressed into the service of our budding dreams. Old dreamers were dying all over the world and we were the new and up-and-coming dreamers. We were the future. I had concentrated on building The Shag & Golf over the summer and had lucked out with five new contracts. We had worked eighty-plus-hour weeks and in the end, after paying Farty and Pablo double what they would make anywhere else, I raked in a total of twelve-thousand, seven-hundred dollars in the summer season alone. Another season and I would be able to start a reputable real estate business and leave the shags and golfs behind. The future beckoned.

I walked to class that first day beside the same girl who had, three years before, said she liked me but not to tell anybody. She was destined to seal her fate as the most famous girl of our age by becoming prom queen and Miss A. F. H. And here I was, duly proud and everlastingly honored to be walking and talking as old friends beside her on our way to first period. Jenny was in DECA and got rides to work in the morning with her mother, but I took her home from school every day.

At lunch on the first day we made plans to redo the signs at the top of the school for homecoming in late September, except this time we would add banners across the courtyard, at the front of the school and along Almost Famous Highway. We agreed to add more people, including all the cheer leaders, as enthusiasm would surely be required for such a large event. We assigned some girls to bring hot chocolate, others to bring cheeseburgers, and called up the school photographer. By the end of our pow-wow it had become a near-public event. I personally contacted the year-book editor to be on scene and record the deed. And when I spelled out my name for him I watched his eyes. They registered a change and the corner of his lips turned into a slight, but certainly crooked, smile.

It was the next week — a Monday — when I finally became famous in high school. I was sitting in English class, working out the math of rents-against-mortgage on my future quarter-million-dollar apartment complex when I heard for the last time my name called over the schools intercom:

“BEAU BRAITHEWAITE, PLEASE REPORT TO THE OFFICE.”

I wondered what it could be. I excused myself and walked down A-wing. Walden was waiting at the far end of the hall, paddle-in-hand. I noticed from afar his close-set eyes trained on me. If he thought he was hitting me again with that paddle he had another think coming. I wondered

what it could be. Unless he was going to reprimand me for sneaking out and taking Jenny for rides on the Rebel during the summer, I couldn't imagine anything I had done to deserve punishment. When I made it to him he said, in a tone of absolute contempt:

“They are waiting for you in my office. Just go on in.”

Who, I thought. And why. When I entered I noticed two police detectives; one woman and one man, both short. The man looked like a small, stocky bulldog and the woman looked like a chubby, out-of-shape bulldog. I knew they were officers because of the golden badges hitched to their belts. They were looking at me the same way Walden had, with utter condemnation. Their eyes were close-set. I was confused. The man asked, “Are you Beaumont Sirius Braithewaite?”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you live at 1221 Pineview Street?”

“Yes sir.”

At this point he motioned for me to turn around, which further confused me, until he said,

“Beaumont Braithewaite, you are under arrest for molestation of a juvenile....”

That was the last thing I remember him saying. They handcuffed me and walked me down the hall, past the open doors of the classes and the bug-eyed stares of the students and by the time I exited the doors of Almost Famous High the Grapevine Gazette had spread the news to all points of campus. I had finally become famous, in a way I never imagined.

At the station they took me down another long hallway and into a room with a one-way mirror. They disappeared for half an hour then the woman came back. She was trying to act pleasant but was not able to pull it off. She told me she would like to talk about it. Talk about

what? She turned on her tape recorder and sat close to me, her legs nearly brushing my own.

“Do you remember what you did on Tuesday, August 11?”

I went back in my mind and tried to remember, but it was just another day among others and there was nothing I could recall special about it. I told her no, I could not recall anything about that day.

“Do you remember helping your neighbor with a bag of groceries on that day?”

Then I remembered helping Sharon’s mother with the groceries.

“Yes, I did help Mrs. Maran with her groceries that day.”

She cocked her head at me, like ‘gotcha!’, and rocked on her heels. Her confidence grew instantly.

“And do you remember on that day going back into Mrs. Maran’s daughter’s room and spending time with Sharon Maran?”

“Yes. I went back to say hello; Mrs. Maran asked me to.”

“Uh-huh...”

She turned to look into the two-way mirror at this point, with a little grin at whoever was behind it. I guessed the other bulldog detective. She turned back,

“Mr. Braithwaite, why did you attempt to rape Sharon Maran that day?”

The fat bulldog woman stood up, and being so short, it was as if she had not stood at all. She put her face into mine and started spitting, her saliva landing on my cheek as she yelled,

“Tell me why you did it! Why did you molest Sharon Maran!”

I was in a stupor. I replied, “I did not do anything like that.”

She continued with babble I could not make out and I realized this had gone too far. I told her the interview was over. She backed off and walked to the door, her recorder in hand. A few minutes later they walked back in, re-cuffed me and walked me back down the hall.

Some things hit you slow. Some things hit you quick and then some things hit every part of you all at once and with such power it floors your soul. I went from simple confusion to mental and spiritual disarray. I slipped from a happy reality into a nightmare in the blink of an eye. My reality had just become an incubus dream-state and I wondered if I was not sleeping in bed at home and needed to wake up. But I was not asleep. This was real.

They put me in a cell with old, drunken, blubbering and drooling men. One of them was caterwauling, singing a nonsensical song he made up about having sex with a woman and his words and ugly, scratchy, insane voice ground itself into my soul. Every time someone yelled at him to shut his fucking mouth it just made him sing louder his depressive, sick roundelay. I had been sent to hell. It was the middle of the day and these men were drunk, slobbering and insane.

An hour later they took me back out to have my picture taken and my fingerprints recorded. He studied my face as he turned knobs and dials one way, then another. It was taking so long I wondered if he was using a daguerreotype. I learned later why it took so much work. He was doing the smoke and mirror trick, adjusting the lights and shadow on my face to make me look like they wished me to look — like a darkened criminal. Later, when I saw my picture in the papers and on television, it only resembled me. It appeared as if I had been strung out on drugs for a month. They had aged me with ten years of hard living I never had experienced and I looked exactly like what they wanted everyone to see me as. When I saw those pictures and what they said about the man in them I thought

of my mother and for the first time since she died, I was glad she was dead.

I lost my initial confusion and became angry during the pictures. I had time to realize; time for confusion to be replaced with a definite sense of what was happening. I began to complain and a jailer said to me, "Well you shouldn't have raped somebody. Had you not done that, you wouldn't be in this position, now would you?"

I shot back, "How the hell do you know what I have done? You are as ignorant as a fucking rock about this matter. You believe everything people tell you, evidently, because you don't have a mind of your own to think for yourself. I am as guilty of trying to rape someone as you are innocent of being an ignorant fucking idiot."

It was the first time I had ever talked to a full-grown adult like that and he stood still as death and as quiet. I wasn't sure if my speech had made him re-think his thought about it or his brain was too addled to come back. They whisked me away into a bus with fifty others, chained at the feet and hands, and took us to the brand-new medium-security prison. It was an alien world and put fear into me like I had never experienced and never imagined it possible to fear. My world was turned inside-out. I knew my life was over on this day, for all practical manner of speaking. The hope of joy, love, success, they were all gone away now.

We had to pass back by the school on our way to the penitentiary. From the road I saw how the farmer's fields were perfectly aligned to the school and as we passed every little row went by, like a kaleidoscope; quickly the rows went by, faster and faster as the driver took us up to speed. It was a journey into another realm of being, one of darkness and evil and gnashing of teeth. I had just stepped into hell, and I looked upon the scenes of my youth and said good bye forever to them. I was no longer a part of that now, and I knew it. The devil was sitting on my shoulders

and she was heavy and burning and she shat into my soul an acid that I knew was death. She was speaking to all of them and they were all listening. My life and every good and beautiful thing in it had just been sentenced. The devil's seed of death had been shat in me and it was a creeping and crawling thing through my heart.

They gave me a cell with a man they called Preacher. They called him that because he kept the King James Version in his right hand and the words of God in his mouth. He had sprayed bullets into a housing project in the same city I had just arrived from, killing a dozen people, but had found God since then. He had a soft voice with a lisp and his demeanor was the incarnation of peace itself. He listened to my story and told me he believed. Told me he had a sense of knowing in him who was guilty and who was not and he knew I was not guilty. He told me to keep faith, that I would be out of this place before the next day struck the clock. "Believe this, young man; you will not see another day in this place. This I know."

Those words brought a measure of peace to me, but only because I was desperate for any stray ray of light. I wondered if he was just a crazy mass murderer who was talking just to hear himself speak and giving away hope because he needed it himself. He told me I would beat this demon and the truth would become known, but that it would take time to do it, and until then, I had to keep faith. "Keep faith, young man. Never lose your faith." I hear his words yet; but there was the time since then when I would forget them.

The day went by in a slow blur. I seemed to be the only one out of place and surprisingly, I felt real kindness from the men around me. I could see that most of them belonged there. They were hard souls, dark and worldly. They wore their crimes on their orange sleeves. Most of them wouldn't bat an eye to tell you what they did or would do. But the most of them seemed to have a sixth sense

about who was a criminal in their heart and who was not, and I saw, as the day went on, that they held an odd protection over me from the few who were truly dark. They talked more with their eyes than their voice; little comments to each other with nods of the head and slight movements of the eyes. “Stay away from this one; he is protected,” they said it without speaking a word. And that is what Preacher told me, “They know you don’t belong here. They are protecting you from the bad element, which are the guards who protect society from my kind. They are no good. You stay clear of them the time you got to be here, you here? You stay clear of them. Those are bad men. There is no redemption in them.”

I had walked into what I thought was hell, what was hell, yet found more spiritual presence in the men there than I had ever experienced among the Christians at church. The good here relative to the truly bad were easy enough to sense. They made no false moves here, designed to fool; because they were all tricky, or were among those who knew all the tricks. They gave no lie about who they were because all had who they were taken away — at least while they were there. The reason for them to lie about anything had been stripped from them along with everything else. And it was true what Preacher said, the evil emanating from the guards beat the evil in the orange jumpsuit-wearers by a wide margin.

At sunset I looked out the three-inch thick window. It was a late summer’s day and the clouds were fat and fluffy, like giant clipper ships, sailing slowly across a perfect sky. I had seen many sunsets just like this one, but never like this; never from a place I could not get out of. They had taken off the shackles around my feet and hands but I was still shackled; my entire being was fettered, especially my soul; and all of my future. It had all been warranted by the state. As I looked on that perfect sunset from a dark cave my entire future had been bundled and put

into a dark place. I was sure my life had been tossed from a cliff and fallen past a place of hope.

Preacher and I were sitting on his bunk and he was reading scripture out loud when the cell doors began to close shut. It was lights out time. That door closing was the dark metaphor of my life. I had woken that morning in my own bed, with my own life, and now, half an hour to midnight of a new day, I felt an old, broken and dark life replacing the new, bright and happy one I once had.

They turned off the overhead lights to the common area but there was still a dim light coming in for Preacher to read by. I jumped on the top bunk and lay down. Preacher's lisping voice soothed me some but the dread remained. I thought of my mother and smiled and then I stopped smiling. I tried to hold the contents of the deep well at bay and it made a sound that Preacher could hear, but he just kept preaching. And then I heard my name, for the second time in a day, over an intercom. I first thought it was my imagination. I wondered why they would be calling my name, at this hour. I wondered what else they had for me.

"Beaumont Braithwaite, get your bed roll and stand by your door."

The voice was modulated and precise. I stood out of the bed and asked Preacher what they wanted. Preacher smiled,

"What'd I tell you? I said you'd be out of this place before the day ended. You are going home. That is what they want. You are going home."

But I didn't believe it. I picked up my blanket and stood by the door. And by a white sorcerer's magic it opened. I stepped out and stood, not knowing where to go.

"Go on boy! Get yourself up to the front," said Preacher. I started walking to the front.

Preacher called out to me, "Hey Beau?"

I turned.

“When you walk out of this place, don’t you look back. You hear? Don’t you look back a moment. Promise me you will keep your eyes forward.”

“I promise.”

“Good. Now pick your feet up and get going.”

Pick your feet up... I smiled at that and walked to the front, passing all the men in their cells. They watched me go by with a combination of hope and despair in their eyes; hope that one day soon they, too, would be able to pick their feet up and get on; despair that it was not now, or any time soon, to be.

The desk guard was wearing a uniform with a shiny badge and the handlebar mustache on his face spoke, “Have a sit, Braithewaite.”

I sat while Mr. Handlebar Mustache filled out paperwork with some man in a brown leather jacket. When they finished the leather-jacketed man motioned for me, “You ready?”

“For what?” I asked.

He glanced at me like I was slow and then he looked around and waved his hands around at the place, “To go home, or would you like to stay in this shit-hole?”

Preacher had spoke truth. I was going home. But I still did not believe it. Not until I was home would I believe it. When we walked out I looked up at the stars, and it seemed I had never seen them before. We got in the man’s truck and he started it up and we began driving off but I still would not believe it. I was waiting for someone to come and stop us and take me back. But no one did. I was true to my promise to Preacher and did not look back. I smiled in the dark of the car to myself because I could not hold it in. We passed a sign that said it was twenty-two miles to Almost Famous Town and I thought I would walk it in freezing rain without shoes and would be happy to do it.

Before he drove me home the bondsman took me by his office in the seedy section, over by the century-old shotgun houses the railroads had set up for the coolies who had built the track. It reminded me of an old Hollywood black-and-white film noir movie; shadows and fog and seedy characters and secret doings. He made me fill out paper work and informed me I was in his official custody now and if I planned to leave town at all I had to inform him of where I planned to go and how long I would be before coming back.

When the bondsman dropped me off the streetlamps cast that film noir glow about the homes and shadows of 1221 Pineview. It took on a beauty I had not noticed since I was a child and seeing it all the first time. He who officially owned my life now drove away and I stood by the curb and remembered my mother teaching me how to ride a bicycle on the sidewalk when I was five and she was twenty-seven. I heard her voice in my memories, she was yelling to me, "Come on, Beau! You can do it!" And by her words that day I was given the belief that I could, and so I did. I sailed off from my mother for the first time ever that day, on a big bike in the bright yellow sun. And now it was just shadow and memory. There was no big bike and no mother and the bright yellow sun was not to be seen.

The kitchen light burned and I saw the large shadow step to it and pull the curtain aside. I walked up and he opened the front door. I stepped in.

I walked to the table and sat down. I looked around and it seemed now a place I was no longer intimately familiar with. He stood over me a moment, judging me; contemplating. He said,

"Well... What do you have to say for yourself?"

I looked up. Anger swept through me, but only for a moment. I was too shell-shocked and tired for anger.

"What do you mean, what do I have to say for myself? You believe this?"

“I don’t know what to believe. I just know they don’t hand out felonies for nothing. That is what I know...”

Those words showed what he really knew. I had nothing to say. I just wanted to go to my own bed. I stood and walked off. He called out, “I had to bail you out with my own money. I need that back.”

“I’ll go to the bank tomorrow.”

“It was seven-thousand dollars. I had to get a loan.”

“Seven-thousand?” I asked, incredulous.

“Seven-thousand. And they will not refund it. Even if this charge goes away, that money is lost.”

I lay down. I had just lost a day of my life to a nightmare and seven-thousand dollars and who knows what else. But I was in my own bed. And tomorrow I would be able to see the sunset from an open place.

I stayed from school the next day to go to the bank and withdraw the money. I had worked many hard hours for it and had been lucky to find the contracts to make it. And now I had to part with it over a lie. It wasn’t right. When I came home a patrol cruiser was parked at the curb, along with an unmarked undercover cruiser. People stood outside their homes, looking on. The officers got out and approached me. Two of them were the same ones who had arrested me at school. The chubby woman had a grin on her face when she said,

“Beaumont Braithewaite, you are under arrest for indecent behavior with a juvenile. You know what to do, turn around for me...”

Spring through fall Mother used to keep the front and back doors open in the morning to let the winds air out the place while she cleaned. We kept up the habit as a way to remember her. The morning after I came home from the Big House I slept till noon. I was more tired than I realized. Upon awakening I opened the doors, made a cup of coffee and went out to sit beneath the dogwood tree Mother had planted in '78. They found it on the side of the road in the woods. Mother's favorite tree was the dogwood and so Stepfather dug it up and they took it home. That little tree was her pride and it began dying when she did; contracting a mold that none of my medicine was able to help. I sat in the wood and iron-latticed bench beneath the dogwood and read from a book called *The Fifty Greatest Americans*.

I wasn't sold on school work being important, but my innate curiosity was coming back to me that year and I wished to know of heroes. I learned that day, if this book was true fact, that Sam Houston had been shot a dozen times with arrows and was tossed in a heap for dead. But Houston was not dead, or if he was, he came back to life, and then he stood to fight again and save the day. I was so enthralled by the story of Sam Houston I was reading over it a second time when I heard in my ear a squeaky child's voice asking if he could play with the kitten running around my door. The kitten had come up crying the week before. We had fed it three cans of tuna before it played out and sat fat on the kitchen floor to clean itself. We inquired as to its lodgings and it replied it had none so we gave it the option of staying on, as long as it kept all mice and crickets outdoors.

I looked up and three children, two girls and a boy, stood before me; wayward little street urchins of the Lupez De Lobos Family. I had known them since they were toddlers — nobody on Pineview Street could miss knowing them — for they walked inside everybody's home without introduction or invite and their favorite place to play was the middle of Pineview Street, usually while their mother got high on crack or shot heroin. Of all the indictable names in a nefarious place, the Lupez De Lobos' took the blue ribbon. "Sure," I said, and went back to my reading.

My grandmother once told me never to feed a stray cat, for it will then multiply; this from a woman who had a dozen of them, so she knew what she was talking about. But even Stepfather was unable to say no to this kitten. When he darkened our doorway he was skin and bones, had an eye infection and his tail was as crooked as a district attorney with the ambition of becoming governor. He was as miserable a little creature as either one of us had ever seen. So we fed him and Stepfather named him Whiskey. Truth be told he was stepfather's cat from the first moment; he would hold and pet the poor thing from the time he got home to the time they both settled down to sleep at night — Whiskey would curl around his chest then cuddle up in the giant nook of stepfather's neck.

I paid no further attention to the kids and went on with my reading, until a minute or two later when an older cousin of the children walked up and called them home. The boy had slipped inside through mother's open door. The cousin called for him three times — had to warn him of punishment if he did not come out — before he showed. And they walked off. And unbeknownst to me, for the second time in my life and in a week's time, another first-rate dweller of Pineview Street walked off with my life in their hands.

This one had been planned just as the first. The Lupez De Lobos family was infamous in Meadowview Parc for attempting to sue several national-chain grocery stores with fake slip-and-fall events, conspired between mother and father. And besides letting their diapered children walk down the street they were dabblers in the devious art of petty crime — as long as it didn't take too much imagination or brain-power, they were all for it. They, and those like them, are why I started The Shag & Golf — to earn the ticket out of this cesspool as soon as possible. When they heard of my charge, they thought another directly after it would do just fine for their own ambitions in life. A few days later I would hire a detective to go to their home and get their side of the story. The first question senior Lupez De Lobos asked the detective was how much reparation for the crime of his son being molested would they receive.

Such is the way of this world. The judge upped the bond for this second charge in as much days, he had said — with a glowering look over his spectacles — to ten-thousand dollars. In two days of devil's work I had lost what took me years of labor to earn. My face and name were in the papers and on television once again. At least for those two days, I was more famous than Elvis. My name was being spoken in the halls of A. F. H. by the minute. But I would not give up.

I pulled on my Dockers, laced up my boots and drove back to school on Friday. I was late and walked the path to class alone. Being Friday, the excitement of the weekend was in the air. I was looking forward to being back in my world. But I found that world had been replaced.

On my appearance in A-wing hall it went from a strident roar of high school kids screaming and yelling and scrambling to class to complete silence. I heard the mouths dropping down the length of the hall. It was the sound of

the grave; the sound of my death while yet alive. Two-hundred human beings had just ceased their speech and let their mouths hang open as quick as if God had commanded them to. I stood in the doorway, not believing. All of them knew my name now. Fame is a mighty power and if it is infamy, there is added to it the terrible element of fear.

I had become an imaginary creature to them; the monster under the bed; a gory figment in their dark, ignorant imaginations. The dark lie believed in their brains was writ on their faces in bloody letters. I was being judged by four-hundred eyes and *The One Mind*. I drew in my breath and began walking the gauntlet. I wondered if they would cast aspersions or stones. But no one spoke a word as they cleared a path for me. The quiet of the hall drew the curious teachers from their chalkboard flats and when they slithered out of their holes to see the cause of no commotion they, too, peered at me without a word spoken, but with a tome of judgment in their eyes. They were no different than the children. They *were* children. They, too, judged with *The One Mind*. They, too, were possessed by the unnamed fear. All the living love I had once known here, had once deserved and earned, had been murdered by *The Lie* and replaced by dead, putrid hatred. In three days I had stepped from life in a hopeful world into a shadow world that lurked over my shoulder everywhere I went. They would never think another good, honest or true thought about me. None of them knew the first true fact about any of it, but they judged me guilty; entirely and irrevocably sealed was their verdict about me and my soul.

I walked upstairs to my locker and took out my biology book and went to class. I went to sit in my usual chair in the back with the guys, but the expressions on their faces stopped me so I sat in the front, feeling the eyes of *The One Mind* burning into my back. Mr. Corker was a scientist and he always looked judgmental and without kindly emotion, so I felt no difference with him that first

period, but there were none of the antics from the guys there usually was. It was as dry a lecture as all the others had been, but now with the added sobriety of nobody cutting up.

By lunch I didn't question it anymore. None of my old friends were friends any longer. Teet-sucker and the famous boys were sitting in our usual chairs staring at me, except when I looked back, they turned their heads, as if staring into my eyes would turn them to stone. I couldn't eat and went to dump my tray. I heard their nasty comments. Teet-sucker spoke out,

“The elementary school is just down the road, Braithewaite.”

Everybody laughed. I stopped and thought about it. He added, “What are you going to do, Braithewaite? Molest me, too? Think of it like this, when they put you in prison you can keep the grounds mowed. That's all you were ever going to be anyway, just a yard man.”

I had the righteous and holy vision of ripping the brain out of his skull and throwing it in the trash can, along with the half-eaten soy burgers and peach cobbler. I let it go, walked out, didn't look back and went to the courtyard to sit beneath the oak trees. Every day I spent lunch with Jenny, Pablo and Farty. Even though I was quasi-famous since freshman year and Pablo and Farty were considered geeks by those who were fully famous, that sure never stopped me from remaining their friend.

The sun was shining and birds were hopping and people were talking in quiet hushes and the heat of late summer was laying heavy on every living thing. Jimmy Buffet was stringing his guitar. This was the same scene it had been just three days before, but now had become an alien world and I was the evil extra-terrestrial who had come to walk among the humans to be ridiculed and judged. I sat beneath the oaks and waited, but nobody showed. The warm winds were blowing the oaks and the

shadows of the leaves and limbs were playing across the concrete and I saw in them an eternity of dark things, until another shadow sidled up and sat beside me.

“What the hell are you doing, man?”

It was Farty. He wore a grin on his face and held a bag in his hand. He sat so close to me our bodies touched. He gave me the bag.

“I skipped and went to The Nut Shop and brought you lunch. I know how much you like Mama G’s burgers.”

I had always been strong, but I was not strong enough to stop anyone from being ignorant; I couldn’t reach into their minds and twist their minds to truth. The deep well was threatening my composure again and Farty saw this so he put his arms around my shoulders and hugged me. He held the well tight and rocked it and started speaking stupid things that made me smile.

One of the gigglers walked by and gawked and he told her, “Carry on now. There’s nothing here for you to see or understand... Go on now and do what I say.”

As the giggler walked off Jenny arrived.

Farty said, “Hey Jenny. I am sitting here rocking this big baby and telling him stupid things. Do you have any stupid things you would like to add?”

So Jenny sat and wrapped her arms about me and added her own stupid things and so I laughed and felt stupid and the love of two true friends. The people in high school had proved to be far worse than those in prison. I had thought it would be different. I never would have imagined my friends would believe any of this about me; but they did; all but Jenny and Marty; and if they did not believe it, were not brave enough to stand against it. All the girls who had once batted their lashes now hid their eyes. All the guys who had been afraid or respectful now dared me with their eyes. And the teachers were no different. Not one among them.

Half an hour before the last bell rang Walden came to the door of my class and asked the teacher if he could speak with me. As I stood Walden told me to get all my things and bring them with me. We walked into the hall and Max Walden said,

“Beau, we have all talked about it, have contacted the authorities about it, and we all feel it would be best if you didn’t come back to this school. If you wish to fight it just know there isn’t much you can do about it. You will lose. There are alternative schools for your kind to go to. So we think it best if you get all your things and leave before the rest of the students get out of class.”

I felt like I had when I learned of the charges put against me — a blow to my gut so powerful it went straight to my soul and knocked the life out. I didn’t know what to say. I tried to argue but was quieted with a stern look and wave of a hand,

“It’s been decided, Braithewaite. Get your things and go.”

I looked at the floor and fought a battle with the well again. I walked off with my head bowed and spirit broken. I heard the words,

“And don’t come back. Ever.”

Walden followed me to my locker and watched as I retrieved my things, then followed me out and watched me get in my car. Somebody had keyed Blue on both sides and sprayed obscenities on the windshield with shaving cream. I cleaned it off and drove away.

Ghost 21 writer

Stepfather was not much different from the kids at school. He gave me the benefit of doubt with the first charge but the second charge made up his mind. He, too, was of The One Mind. We never had spoken much but now he wouldn't even look at me. After leaving school I drove around for hours and when I made it home I walked in and stood at the end of the bar, looking at him as he sat on the bed watching television. He stood and closed his door. I didn't know what I was thinking, believing he was someone I could go to. I went to bed and slept fitfully.

The next morning I woke an hour before dawn with iron-clad fists. I had been dreaming of the movie they won't make of me when I'm dead. Hints of fall had arrived in the night. I pulled the lime-green curtain aside and looked out. An early bird fluttered by my window and its wings brushed against the pane. I thought the fall flies with her. And the starlight was on foot, shuffling slow across the grass. I thought the fall surely walks within it. The oak stood quiet in the shadows of the yard, and I thought fall stands also within the oak. And I looked in my memories where there were a number of falls and I wondered about the future falls to be counted among them. I decided to go for a run.

I had not run in a year, but I found it painless to get back into a pace. The muscles were strong and the lungs remembered. And having nothing to train for, I did not push it. I was enjoying the sight of the sky and stars above me and the smells of the earth around me. I let my thoughts run free.

I ran for three miles, past the interstate, and stopped on the bridge to peer into the brackish liquid of Willow River. The laggard, swirling waters appeared as a moving vision of eternity. I thought how we need to believe we go on from this life, because it is just not enough. If we are happy, we wish it to never end and if we have become sad, we hope for happiness to begin again. Here in the country the clouds had grown large and heavy. Where I had started they had been thin and wispy. It had been the clouds that kept me going, for as I ran I saw them changing, becoming big ships in the sky and laden with a cargo of dreams. At two miles, when I spotted the cloud-ships further on I had spoken out-loud, to the sky above me and the earth around me, that I would go a bit further, to meet up with the great ship-clouds. And so I had run to them, where they had massed northeast — where the fields begin and the city ends, over Willow River.

This is the land of silo, barn and tree; of farmland, oak grove and horse pasture, and reminded me of Jenny. It's everything she loves about this world. So I had kept going and looking up and all grew perfect and beautiful. I saw us in my mind's eye as we ran in the pastures and fields. When I made it to the bridge just before the devil-worshipper's church I stopped and lay down in the middle of the road and counted the stars. I had never seen so many of them. It was a vision of heaven all can see but few look at. I closed my eyes and set the memory of them in my mind, in case I ever needed to remember. To the left and right of me I heard the ducks and frogs in Willow River. I called up the memories of my life and they were richer memories now than they had been just a week ago. I remembered — for the sake of the giggling girls — playing as if there was a she-devil in the radio, when all along it was just the tape of a Middle-Eastern preacher speaking his particular gospel about his particular god. All that now seemed like another lifetime and another world.

Life is so big and eternal and we are so small and ephemeral. I thought but for Jenny, I was not known or cared about in this world. But for her, it would have been empty all along. I thought how most of us are lonely and alone, mostly. We are born, we live, and then we die, by ourselves. Most are just lucky enough to have people around between the being born and dying parts. I thought of my mother and the dead state of her body and wondered of the possible living state of her soul. We need Heaven and God, because this world is not enough. We do not have enough time. The dream of Heaven and God is the dream of life. I didn't know, couldn't figure out on the Willow River Bridge if there is a Heaven or a God. And I knew nobody alive can know this. But it is nice to think. It is our greatest ideal, to never die — to always have a father and a home to go back to, when we have had enough of the world. And it is comforting to believe that all this work it takes to become is not extinguished at the moment of death, but that we go on from this place and continue becoming. But I considered the possibility that maybe it is, and if so, how much more important are these days, moments, and hours of our lives; how important are our hopes and dreams.

When I made it back home I wrote a poem on the thoughts I had at the bridge and then showered and cooked breakfast, eating it outside under the dogwood tree. Then I hopped on the Rebel and drove to Jenny's home by noon. She was outside with her mother in the swing that hung from the oak in her front yard. As I walked up her mother, with awkward, down-in-the-mouth eyes, said hello and went inside. I sat next to Jenny. She had been crying. I asked her what was wrong.

She put her head in my chest and wetted my shirt. I knew what was wrong. Everybody knew what was wrong. I lifted her eyes to see the crocodile tears falling from them.

She picked up my hand and turned it over, tracing the lifeline in it with her finger,

“What if I forget what it feels like to hold your hand?”

She looked at my face and traced the lines of it with her fingers,

“What if I forget what you look like?”

Her own words made her sob the more and she began to convulse. Her words were hard to hear and they threatened to draw my own tears from the well but I had capped that well a long time ago.

“What do you mean? Forget what I look like; forget what it feels like to hold my hand?”

“They’ve told me I have to break-up with you. They told me we can’t see each other anymore.”

“What? How can they do that; how can they believe this about me, they know me...”

“I know. I don’t know how they can do this. They say they don’t believe, but we have to break up, anyway. They are wrong. They are so wrong.”

Jennifer Henry’s father had always shown a kind fairness toward me. When he walked out he asked her to leave for a moment, then he sat and looked at me with the grayest stare I had ever seen a man give and he said,

“Beau, you are like a son to me, but that is my blood daughter, and she comes first. I do not believe what they are saying about you, not for a minute. But we cannot allow you and Jenny to spend any more time together, not until this matter is settled.”

He put his hand on my shoulder. His words were final words so I didn’t try to think of anything to say, I just sat and did what I could to keep the tears in the well. He put his arms around me and bear-hugged me. For a moment I felt the future might be bright again. But then I remembered reality and felt the tears coming up from the well and that told the sad secret in me. The harder I tried to

stop the tears the faster they flowed up. Then he began to laugh, not a cruel laugh, but a loving laugh. And I soon began to laugh, too; and by that my tears were stopped from dripping out for the second time in two days and my fears were turned to laughter, as he bear-hugged and rocked me like a big baby in a swing. That moment was a third-place finish as the most beautiful moment of my life, the second having been with Marty and Jenny the day before and the first having been with Jenny not a month before.

After we laughed he stood and shook my hand and walked away. Jenny came out and we sat in the swing until the day began to die then we stared into the sunset like it was the first one we had ever seen, though we had seen thousands of them by then. We didn't know it, but it was the last sunset we would ever see together.

Since we were kids we had always wondered where the sun was rising as it was setting for us and we would change the name of the place each time we wondered of it.

"Fiji," she said.

"Timbuktu," I replied.

There were pink, orange and blue-colored clouds and the birds were flying like circus acrobats through them and the dragon flies were whizzing by and the clouds were moving off to the mountains to stay for the night. The clouds always went to the mountains at night and by an hour after sunrise were back from them, a traveling caravan of gypsy clouds.

It was the decree from on high that I had to let her hand go at her father's mailbox. I had to pull away and she had to let go. In the nine hours we had just sat in the swing and in the twelve years since I had been five and she had been four, we had spent an eternity together. I met Jenny when I was a young man and she was a younger woman, and I was glad then that she liked older men. And now I was seventeen and she was sixteen and we were looking back on our short eternity together and wondering of the

eternity ahead of us and feeling the weight of the past and the hopelessness of the future without each other. Her eyes were as red as boiled crabs and her grip was as tight as a live one. I pulled her hand from mine and started up the Rebel. I gunned the bike and rode off, but I looked back.

Over the years we had counted the stars countless times. She had asked me less than a month before, when we had laid under the stars in the cornfield, “Do you think the trees stay up all night to count the stars and then sleep all day?” As I looked at her standing beside her father’s mailbox I wondered if she would stay up with the trees tonight to count the stars without me. I knew I would never care to count them again. Leaving her that day was a tie with the second meanest thing I ever did. As I drove away the wind in my eyes made them tear up, but I counted that as water the wind had made. The contents of the deep well were safe.

Ghost 22 writer

I woke on Monday with my mind made up. I would quit school and get my GED. I was not going to waste my time at the alternative school. I had too much work waiting for me at The Shag & Golf anyway. And I could find plenty of hands to help with the work; we didn't need Pablo. And if I couldn't find anyone, we could do it all ourselves. There would be plenty of time to work now.

I drove to the Donut Shop for my noon burger. Mama G served me, but she gave no kiss to the top of my head and I could not taste any love in the burger and fries. I ate down-hearted, too sick to my stomach to enjoy it and when I finished I looked around the place and remembered and then I stood and put a twenty on the table for Mama G and walked out, saying goodbye to Elvis as I left.

Since the previous season we had been making the most of our money landscaping the industrial plants and strip malls. Most of them wanted the Golf cut, so we had plenty of weekly business in the long growing season. But for the same reason that they wished to keep the front of their buildings styled was also the reason they wanted workers with good reputations to keep them that way. Within the next week I learned I had lost every single contract that had taken me six years to find. Whether they were a business or personal home, none of them wanted me working there. In a week's time the Shag & Golf had become defunct; no longer a living, thriving entity. Within a week of the lie I had lost nearly all my friends, all my contracts, and all my money. After lawyers and bondsmen I was left with \$237.16 in my bank account. It was all gone.

The Friday I went home when I realized I no longer had a means to earn money I sat beneath mother's dogwood and looked across the street at the Maran's place. I had been warned not to go there, to not even look that way or speak a word to anyone who lived there. But I looked. I looked for an hour and my anger grew. Then I looked further down the street at the home of the slip-and-fallers and my anger grew. And all the anger I had ever felt before came back to me and was multiplied. My heart was pained from the adrenaline shots my anger kept putting into it. My anger grew more dead earnest than it had ever been. In a week's time I had went from the dreams of a hopeful child to the anger of a frustrated man. I missed Jenny and knew she was the only one who could take this anger from me. I jumped on the Rebel and drove to her home. Against her parents' wishes I was going to see her.

As I drove up I felt the last of promise in me die away. There were no curtains in the windows, no flower plants by the door, no cars in the driveway. A realtor's sign had already been placed in the yard. They had cleared out and taken Jenny with them. They were gone forever. The sun was setting. We had seen this same miracle just days before. But now the miracle of it had turned to ugliness and cruelty. The world and all of creation was mocking me. I had been stripped of all that was good and right and hopeful about my life and was left with just enough of an existence by which to know the full nature of my demise.

I cursed the beautiful mountains and I cursed the cloud caravans and the birds that flew among them. I cursed the colors of the setting sun. I cursed all the days I had ever known and all the days to come. I cursed that I was ever born. I looked into the future and saw the same as it was now, never able to live down a lie that all people would believe straight off, without ever knowing the first true thing about it. I drove the Rebel in Kevin Henry's yard and tore up the grass, pelting the house with dirt. I cursed

them for taking her away from me. I cursed the earth and all the dark men in it. My anger was complete. I wanted to rip the head off the first man to confront me. And I knew just the one who deserved it. I had promised him pay-back years before and I was man enough now. It was time.

I drove home and walked in the house. He was sitting in his lazy-boy, same place he had been sitting that day so long before. I went and stood over him and he knew what I was about. But he refused to look at me with that old smirk. Something new was in his face — he felt sorry for me. That spark of humanity siphoned off my anger against him, but I detested him for it. I didn't want anyone's pity.

As I walked off he said a letter from my brother was on the table. I didn't care to read the words of my brother. I walked to my room, shut the door and locked it. I went to my dresser, opened it, reached under the shirts and pulled out the ivory-handled .38 Smith and Wesson. Here was one who wouldn't leave me or fail me or believe evil things about me. The gun had been a gift from Stepfather to Mother on her birthday. She shot it only once. Stepfather was former military and found his emotional indemnity in guns. He had bought me a 4-10 gauge shot-gun for Christmas when I was twelve. We went hunting and I had the decision to kill or let live the biggest grey squirrel west of the Mississippi. That fat squirrel was less than ten yards away. I couldn't miss it and I knew if I killed it he would see me as his own blood. But I couldn't do it. I lowered the gun and my head that day and let the squirrel live.

I clicked open the cylinder and popped out the three-quarter-jack fastball. Stepfather had given me the bullet the day died, to hold for him until he asked for it. He had carved a cross in the tip so that on impact it would be sure to disintegrate and do unquestionable and absolute damage to his brain. But I never believed he would use it. He was too naturally mean to others to ever take his own life. And having killed everything else there was to kill his

blood-lust was mostly sated. I had never killed a thing and had never wanted to. But now my curiosity was at an all-time peak for murder.

I re-chambered the shell, locked the cylinder and spun it. One 158 grain bullet — capable of supersonic speed — in a five-chambered rocket launcher versus one one-quarter-inch-thick skull. There was a twenty percent chance of catching the fastball and an eighty percent chance of escaping the Cossack. I would let luck decide if I would live in this hell of a life or die and find peace. They call it Russian roulette and the odds are stacked in favor to the player but if the player loses, he loses everything. Or, if he wins, he wins everything. It depends on how you look at it.

I realized the gun needed a name. A gun used to murder one's self is much like a vehicle; it is a portal to another dimension. Since it was a Russian game I thought a Russian name would be proper. But I couldn't think of a good Russian name for vehicles. I thought of Gorbachev, but that was too Russian. Perhaps Alexandra? Too pretty. I couldn't think of any other Russian names so I said to hell with Russia and called it D. E. Hemingway — D. for Dead and E. for Earnest. It wasn't Russian, but it was apropos and handsomely beautiful.

For my fifteenth birthday Mother remodeled my bedroom, installing a new floor and painting the walls and putting in a sliding mirror door for my closet. I turned and peered into the looking glass. I didn't recognize the enraged being there. He was more dead earnest than any man I'd ever seen. I placed the ivory-handled .38 Hemingway against my temporal lobe and pulled the trigger.

It was the last few weeks of summer. September 4, 1987. Later that night I stood over Stepfather's shoulder as he sat at the kitchen table and read my brother's letter. When he read he did so out-loud and slowly, mouthing each word like it was an individual work of art; and he was the same with his handwriting. For a giant man with giant hands, he had the exquisite penmanship of an artist.

Dear Brother,

Most take things too seriously, but in your case I can understand.... Your job now is to lose no hope for the future. What has happened will make that difficult. But if anybody can do it, you can. I had a dream last night. You were on the top bunk and leaned over. You were quiet a moment and I wondered what was on your mind, then you said,

“Brother, life is just one long street-fight and I have had more of those than I care to count and when it's been too much I stick a toothbrush down my throat and throw it all up, then I cry over that damned sink and when I'm done I wash it down the drain and walk back out into that bloody, soul-sucking street; my broken fist balled and ready, fire back in the eyes, baby boy; fire back in the eyes.”

You laid back and rested a while then put your head back over and said, “It was written in the stars I would be a street punk, but you got talent; you got something. What you will hear I did, don't be overly chagrined about it, for it also was writ in the stars....”

When I woke I wondered on the dream and I remembered what you told that big boy in the park that time — that he probably didn't want to fight you because you have lucky hands; that they always did the thing needed. You remember? At an early age you came to realize you were

going to make out alright in any street-fight. The pugilistic art came naturally to you. And I know as well as you that you can't take credit for it, those hands act on their own. Where that warrior's knowledge comes from we never figured out — but they always hit their mark. And it is a wonderful skill-set for the place we grew up in — Savage Planet Earth.

That big boy didn't believe you. So you made a believer of him; and there has been plenty before and since. Now you are in the fight of your life. So you must not forget you have lucky hands and they picked a fight with the wrong guy. But it is your writing that will save you. You have real skill with that. What did you write? *You write because you are a conqueror and you lived to tell tale.* Now that is the true essence of you; a born conqueror. This you are now in is just another street-fight you will win. Here is the struggle. Here is the battle. So do not give up. Do your best. We Braithewaite's don't give any quarter when it comes to a street-fight. We hit them with everything we got.

I am going to make a call to the Gods of War on your behalf to help us in our cause because if there is one fact about this world I have come to know better than any other — and you are the one who gave me this knowledge — it's ALL a street-fight. And the one who can take the most pain is the one who will win. And what is your creed about pain? Pain is just weakness leaving the body. Do not forget your own philosophy. But sure, there may come the point when the pain becomes too much. That is when the spirit cracks apart and all the truth of a soul is left in the open for all to see. If you crack I'll be there to help you put yourself back together. Do not give up.

The fools will speak of you now, so remember: believe no fool and become no fool. You are wise. Close your ears to this foolishness and keep your mind and heart open. And do not forget the one thing this world cannot take from any man: To live strong.

They have lied about my brother. They gamble now — they roll the dice — that the lie won't be discovered. The value of a lie is that it contains the perception of value one is trying to keep in the mind of those believing the lie. With a failed lie the perception of value is lost in the mind of those who once believed the lie, relative not only to the matter in question, but to the failed liar who gave the lie. So when this lie is shown for what it is; when this lie becomes what it is destined to become — a failed lie — these failures will be held in contempt by those they once lied to. Give it time and the truth of you will make failed fools of them all.

This lie is powerful. This lie will spread faster than quicksilver. So you have a great story to tell after this fight, when the lie is shown for what it is and not what is now believed. Just hold steady and be brave. Do not lose the faith of that mustard seed that can move mountains.

You know our world runs by the lie. Seek the truth and you will have to go to the caves, far from land and men. But the ironic thing is truth ends up surfacing, even in the best sunk truth there is this buoyancy. Even the dinosaurs were hid for eons, but the truth of them came out. So do not lose hope. We will make it through this.

Contemplate this: if truth be our power (and it is), weak they make themselves when they lie. You hold the truth; you hold the power. Let us compare life to a race. Liars jump the gun and by doing that, disqualify themselves from the start. And if it happens they have bribed the line judges and are not right off disqualified, I have no doubt the truth of my brother will burn them down soon enough.

I am — your loving and older and wiser brother,
A. C. Braithwaite

He enjoyed playing up the fact he was my older brother — by a minute or so. I had never taken the time to read his letter in life. It was sitting on the kitchen table and I passed right by it the day I walked through to eternity. It was a good letter from a great brother. I wish I had read it before I decided to play roulette. I wish I had done a lot of things. But that last thing I did made all wishes here in this world, for me, impossibilities. Forever and ever, as the lovers say.

But there was one wish I was given — to stay or to go. I decided to stay. I had to finish the job of Jenny I left behind. I could not assuage her pain, but I could be close by her while she struggled year after year with the thing I did to her. I knew the long years would siphon off the grief. But it was grief that did not have to be; but it was and had to be dealt with. I learned something when I left the world of being and seeing — Jenny was now not just one, but two; inside her grew the seed of life we planted the night we went to the walnut grove and counted the stars.

When I died I was able to perceive Jenny's soul. I was given the spiritual knowledge of those I loved and who loved me. So I knew when she learned of this it would break her in an elemental way, and her pain would last, in a descending progression, over a lifetime. I felt that pain immediately, as she would come to feel it soon. The pain she was going to feel made pale the grief I had just gone through. It would not be her choice to feel it, but now was her destiny. She would not escape it. Pain is a natural evolution of any who choose to love, but the hurt she was going to feel was not natural, did not need to be, and was my achievement. I placed that burden on her soul with my

final act. Her pain was the choice I made. I did not realize all I did with that one act — how far into the future and deep into hearts it would go. And I did not know the pain I was giving to myself. I had just thrown away the only chance to make it right. I gave away the chance to lose and to win, to live and to love. All that and more, is the choice I made.

It wasn't true for me that I saw my life flash before my eyes. Maybe that happens with people who die natural deaths. Time stopped being a matter of reality the second after the big bang. When he heard the shot, Stepfather jumped from his lazy-boy and ran to the bedroom. Finding the door locked he broke it down with his shoulder and rushed in. He picked me up and the tears flowed from his eyes like a burst water pipe and he held my bloody head against his chest and yelled like a mortally-wounded lion. That sound filled the house with an eternal grief that I have never been able to shake loose of. But you don't hear anything in this sphere like you hear it in that one; it is the knowledge of sound you hear, rather than the sound itself. Sound, spoken words, unspoken words, they become a knowing here. In that lion's roar I perceived his knowledge of having done wrong by me; I felt in it his sorrow and he knew it then, too. And he knew he could never make it right. We both understood in that moment that he had loved me more than either of us had known.

He held my broken head against his chest and I was rocked once again like a baby. Finally he was holding me like I was his blood child and it was all I had wanted from him, since I had been five and he had been twenty-nine. He kept repeating the word *no*. He yelled it at first but it evolved into a soft poem, *no, no, no*. I had never heard his voice soft before, not relative to me. I did not know his voice could be weak. And I had never seen him cry but that one time and never imagined he possessed a single drop in him for me. I was learning secrets of life in my death.

After he rocked me awhile he gently set me back down, like a folded, wet dish towel. I sensed him think that he was thankful Mother wasn't here to see this. His mind was numb. He perceived how much my life was worth and wished for it back. He wished for me to be able to live again. But then he looked into my glazed over, dumb eyes and that was his thought — that my eyes were now dumb — and he felt shame that his mind used that word to describe my eyes. He couldn't believe my mind and every thought in it was gone. He stopped weeping and looked upon me and brushed his giant fingers across my eyes and closed them. This made him break inside like shattered glass and he picked me up and held again the bloody, broken remains of me. And I heard it — yet did not hear it — when he said,

“You were the smartest, toughest, best boy I ever knew.”

When he couldn't look anymore he laid me down on Mother's tiled floor and stood and then noticed my blood and brain on his shirt and it pulled the bitterness out of him. He yelled and split the broke-down door, which leaned now against the wall, with a massive blow.

Everything was crystal clear to me after the gunshot. I knew I had made the most profound mistake I could have ever made. And there was no turning back. My head was cracked open and my brains were spilled. That body wasn't even me anymore, but I missed it already as if I had been gone from it a hundred years. I had loved that body. It had been mine. It was my vehicle to travel through life in, and I destroyed it. For nearly eighteen years it had done a wonderful job for me. It had never failed me. I had not thought this through enough. I had given up too early.

After D. E. Hemingway, my grief was not taken away, but increased. I had destroyed every good thing that had been given to me, and all good things that could have been. I became a criminal when I pulled that trigger. Until

that moment I had never stolen a thing and then I stole an entire life. I became eternally absent in the lives of a few who I was needed to be in and became to them an invisible monument to despair. None of us had deserved the punishment. I had punished myself for being alive; sentient life — the rarest miracle of the known universe — and each life unique and I had extinguished the flame within with one blow. I suppose I felt I had not had enough of bad luck.

What happened after death is I slipped into a swoon, then stepped into a dream. Not a dream really, more a nightmare. It's not all it's cracked up to be. It's not so romantic a thing, after all, to shoot oneself in the brain. No. There is little that is romantic about putting a piece of lead into one's own brain. But the bullet is traveling supersonic, so that helps. It goes by in a flash.

The police officer was not right when he told Stepfather I didn't feel a thing. I felt everything. I felt eternity. I felt the burden of every day I had lived and every day I could have. I felt the burden of Jenny's pain, and my child's pain. I had messed with the energy of creation. On a small scale, the order of the universe had been upset. But these things happen all the time, and the universe had the answer for it. I was given a choice — to go on to some other place I could not see, but could perceive, or stay and face what I had done. I chose to stay. I wanted to make right what I had done wrong, as best I could.

So this is where I have been all these years since. Stepfather and Whiskey soon moved away and left me alone. The house was boarded up for five years before my brother rented it to a nice family. They have never known I was here and I never wished them to know. I have stayed in my time and place and permitted them peace in theirs. In '84 the parents hired Sears to put a grey siding over the clapboards and since then we called it the Grey House. And grey for me have been the days and nights since D. E. Hemingway.

But I have had much time to think and it has never been boring, for there is much to our lives we never think about that could be thought about. For a long moment, as my nerves died down, I was in a physical and emotional convulsion that could only be described as hell. I felt what I had done in every way there is to feel it. A sorrow came to me then that has persisted since. And I have long now known who the enraged being was I saw in the sliding looking glass that day; it was the devil. I knew she was a wily one, but I had no idea. She had me do what she couldn't do; destroy myself. I *knew* I hadn't recognized that face; for it wasn't me, after all. The devil finally showed for the streetfight I had dared her to. And she conquered me by having me conquer myself.

I have had much time to peer into *The Book of the Past* and figure out what life taught me. I won the first street-fight I was ever in. I won every street-fight after that first one. I was undefeated in street-fights — until the last one. And in that one, I lost — big. I learned from that failure that the devil is the hornswoggingest, kerfufflingest she-devil there is. I learned she can fool anybody, if they stop paying attention to love and more attention to what is not love.

One tear had dropped out of my glassy eye from the deep well. Stepfather thought it was a natural reaction — and he was right — it was the natural tear of a dying man full of grief. I should have dripped that tear in life, and all the others I refused to cry. Though I destroyed my brain my mind went on. In life, I was stuck in the moment. After life, the moment passed and I was completely dead, and that tear, representative of all the others, finally slipped out.

I say this part of me is me, but it isn't really me anymore, just the essence of me. I am no longer the same guy I was those seventeen years. I have become something more, and something less. I know it was a great mistake,

and that my work had been left barely begun. I am now no more than a floating thought in the air. I see everybody, but not as I once saw them, not as you see them. I see the little floating piece of thought in them that is what I am now; the gist of the person, the essence, the primal atom. The little part that is the real part, the part that doesn't go away, the part that doesn't wear designer clothes or expensive make-up or drive big cars and live in fancy houses. I perceive the part that is not, and cannot be, spoiled and ignorant and selfish and all the other little things we tend to become, here in the flesh.

When Stepfather broke down the door and found me he was touched by the same eternity I was. He found that small fraction within him I had just found — the fraction within that is larger than the whole of the physical being; the small part that is the big part — and he knew then how wrong he had been with me and felt the same grief a saint would feel. He was transformed in an instant and like me he knew he could never change any of it. There was an indefinable greatness about the spirit of my stepfather. It could not be seen by his achievements nor was evidenced by his great physical person, but was in the spirit. If you had ever stood in the presence of him you would have known it immediately, even if you could not have defined or recognized it. He was just like most everybody else is about it — the education of life and death was needed for him to know it.

I was wondering if she would show and then — after twenty years of waiting — there she was. The curve of her eyes bent the thoughts in my mind into a vase of beautiful rose-shaped thought. The lines of her face were the epitome of profundity. I had last seen her when she was sixteen and I was seventeen. And now she was thirty-six and I had long been beyond the numbering. She did not see me; didn't notice me. She could not; for she was of the living. None there had seen me and none could. But I saw them and I saw her. The long wait was over.

I remembered back to high school. She was afraid then to look too long at herself in the mirror; afraid of her own shadow; she was afraid of being hungry, so she ate; she was afraid of feeling full, so she purged; she was afraid of getting fat, so she starved; she was afraid of getting skinny, so she ate again; she was afraid of fear, so she acted as if. Her white-lie life was directed and controlled by the thoughts of others. Most people don't handle their fear that way, most throw it outside themselves. They destroy other lives to make their own lives seem less fearful. Anger is sad out-loud; sad is being angry quietly; one destroys and the other does, too, unless one thinks about it and finds the answer to anger, which is always found by finding love; love for some other and love for one's self. Those who are angry out-loud are seeking to master others so as to be masters of their own fears. And it never works. The vicious cycle is repeated by the ignorance created by blinding, soul-numbing fear. But some hold it in and if they do not discover the love, they destroy themselves.

Jenny had begun that path a long time ago. And then, after what I did, she was hit head-on with a wall of fear and by that, finally faced her own fears. And over much time, with her faith found in various places and times, she finally grew to love herself, against or with the world, however it be. And because of and for the new life within her, she rose up and conquered and her fears then skulked away, slow but sure, dissipating like the murky fog to the iridescent light.

I watched her walk into the gymnasium. As she passed by a ray of bright yellow sunlight streaked across her face and lit up her eye and in that flash was the familiar girl I had loved the first time I had seen her so long ago, back when she was four and I was five. I had no breath to lose and no heart to skip its beat but the memories of familiar and perfect things came back to me and I remembered the mislaid heart beats and lost breaths of long ago. I had never seen her look so lovely. She was amazing. Time had perfected her.

Everybody saw her, and like that day when I walked the gauntlet of A-wing, they all grew quiet. Their silence did not trouble her composed soul and she continued with grace across the floor, toward the back of the gym, where the placard was set up with names and dates and pictures of faces. She walked to it and read the name at the bottom and to the left:

Beaumont Sirius Braithewaite,
August 4, 1970—September 4, 1987

For days, weeks, months, maybe even years, you write on the calendar, "It's over, she does not love me." And then maybe comes the day when it is over; when the knowledge of failed love is eternally known. And you dare not mark that day on the calendar. You do not even look at that day. You leave what is done and over alone and you

walk away from it, for what is forever done need not be recorded by the weak and ephemeral hand of man. But with her I always knew she loved. I was lucky to know it; to perceive it. Since we were four and five, I had known it.

As she knelt and trailed her finger across my name, I whispered to her, though she could not hear, the poem she told me to write for her so long ago — that night in the walnut grove — the night our daughter was conceived,

“One kiss to give and one kiss to take — for eternity and love’s sake — and were I to give or I to take, this one kiss from thee, I could sink or I could fly, with a sweet and humble sigh, into eternity.”

In her eye grew the tear that long had held the last of her grief and she let it fall and she could not know, but I caught it and that is what I stayed behind to do. I had given her this great grief and it was my job to stay and take the last of it away, when she was ready to give it. And now it was done and I felt peace. Our daughter knelt beside her and held her and she looked like both of us. It was the first time I had seen her, though I had perceived her since my death. She was tall and her hair fell in curled locks and I could sense her rebel spirit but also in it the tempering of her mother’s tranquil wisdom and sweetness. Besides her mother, she was the most beautiful thing my living or ghostly eyes had ever seen. Here were my two true loves. I had failed them both, but they had not failed themselves. They had lived. They were conquerors.

The past, present and future are holograms; images juxtaposed each within the other. There is no real break or boundary between the various times, they are all one time, and the difference in them is only in the words we use to describe the one thing. But we live best in a natural order and Jenny had to come to forgive me before I could go on. I would depart when she let me know she was okay; when her forgiveness entered my being; when she gave me the

forgiving tear. But she loved me true, and so her journey to forgiveness took long.

There are much worse things than to be dead and buried. It is to be forgotten and unloved. It is to be alone and unknown. And there are many of those. Beneath your feet you trod over the remains of the forgotten. And perhaps with the cruel parts of your life you trod over the forgotten who are yet alive. But she never forgot. And because of that, it took her a long time to forgive.

I looked upon the people. None of their opinions had ever mattered. I had given to them the power that was within me — the one power we all possess — to believe in ourselves. The power was in me to be proud of me, just as I was, and just as I could have become. But I gave the future up for a past so insignificant that now it meant virtually nothing to anyone. Reunions happen for the same reason we build cemeteries, so people can get together and realize how much the past is both all-important and wholly insignificant, just as is the present. And how, cosmically speaking, the events and incidents of the past are, relative to this present moment and our future, always and eternally unfolding. Nothing is ever finished until we are. Important is the present and more important is the future. Important is the past, as lesson for present and future. But nothing is writ in stone except what we chisel there. It is our choice to chisel our fears — or our dreams — into stone; whichever one we choose to believe the most in.

I should have continued walking forward while the laughter and name-calling were behind me. They never did speak those loathsome names to my face nor did they laugh in front of me. They were quiet to my face and irritating behind my back. They were laughing hyenas. I should have realized the laughter was all about them and had nothing to do about me. I should have known the only thing they could do was laugh. And laughter is a pleasant sound, anyhow, if one would forget it's about him.

It's been twenty years and fifteen days since I pulled the trigger of D. E. Hemingway. I have a keen memory for all important figures and dates. And Jenny has finally given me the grace of her pardon and found her own long-sought for peace. I can go now.

I will leave the Rebel under the tin roof. There will come to be another dumb bastard to do what I did soon enough. Maybe he will find her and cruise over old haunts, to think about it all for awhile. Her low, staccato rumble will help him remember, and when he has remembered too much, that rumble will then help him to forget.

So I killed myself in the prime of life. Some men have done much worse, but many have done much better. But true honor is doing our own best and not comparing ourselves with others. It wasn't right that I did that, but I was so angry, and the moment presented itself, and so I let it all go in a moment. My suicide was a gift I stole for myself, but I have been paying the cost ever since. It didn't turn out to be much of a gift for anybody involved. I wish I could turn back the clock. But there is none of that.

Both spheres of life, the flesh and the soul, are unique. But to get to the one first we must make it through the other. The inner energy knows when it is ready. There is plenty of time and no need to rush things, not when the body is still fresh and bright. They are right about the candle-light paradigm. We *are* lights. And there is never noble reason to extinguish light in a universe that is dark. But then again, not all souls are iridescent. So those that are have extra responsibility to shine. And this is true: no dark soul would ever extinguish itself in the youth of life. It is only the lights that even think to do it. Do not blot out your light while walking through your darkness. Then is when the light is rising and the dawn is coming, to shine ever brighter.

In all my time here after D. E. Hemingway I had never floated. It was never time. Now it was time. I drifted

up, above Jenny and into the rafters and out of the gym. It was freedom. I was finally loosed from my long age to be tethered. They say the years go by quick after twenty-one. I don't know about that, I never made it to twenty-one. But the years after death go by slowly. I counted every minute. And now they were over. I allowed my soul to escape the bonds of earth and passed out of the gym and above the school and the moon was in the sky and the first stars of evening were high above me. The sun had dipped beneath the horizon and its after-glow was pastel pinks and blues up top and dark reds down bottom.

I kept floating upward; a vagabond aviator in flight to a better country; a lonely soul paddling a rowboat on the tranquil ponds of the moon. The lights of the city were blinking on and a few miles over I could see the outline of my old neighborhood and the Indian River coursing around it like a giant moccasin snake. I would never go there again, and was glad of it. So long I had stayed in that place. I knew that place too well.

Meadowview Parc was a land of make-believe; but it was no fairy tale place. You had to act as if you were happy if you wanted to know anything of that experience. I never did act as if I was happy. I just acted naturally and honestly and as I felt it. Marty was right; I was too serious about it all. I didn't have enough imagination to live a fairy tale among a nightmare. Or maybe my version of the fairy tale was a somber tale.

The last memory I sifted through as I looked on Meadowview Parc was when we were young and Mother would call us in as the last light of day escaped the world and everything was set in that soft, blue-milk glow. We would race home and since I was faster I would let my brother win by a step. That was when all was right and beautiful with the world. I looked up and saw the faint lamps of Heaven. I floated toward them until the lights of the city grew dim and the lamps grew bright. The stars

reminded me of an ancient Latin phrase Mother used to say — *Astra castra, numen lumen* — the stars my camp, God my lamp. I was making my way toward camp. I noticed the dark parts of the heaven were easy to spot among the bright lights of stars and as I flew toward the bright lights the dark, sad parts of my soul were no longer necessary and I let them go.

Soon I perceived a familiar globe of ethereal light — about the size of a softball. It was grandpa. “I told you it was going to be alright...” And then another diminutive glowing globe; it was mother. And just beyond her was dad. Mother was calling me home again and it had been a long time so I flew to her. Buttons and I floated among them, perceiving beautiful and familiar things. After I looked back one last time, we departed toward the celestial.

That's a wrap

Epilogue

This was a love story of a girl named Jenny and a boy named Beau. It was a story of life and a story of death. From the beginning it was a ghost story. It was not a happy story. But it could have been; it should have been, had he not forgot for a moment that he was born to be a conqueror.

Beau lived in the land of the Indian summer. Fall does not begin here until October, sometimes November. And then again, sometimes summer continues on into winter, and there it hides in the cracks of old trees and comes out at various times throughout the season. Summer never entirely dies here, except at the top of the great mountain. Beau died in the final days of summer, but like the Indian summer, he lived on, too — in the hearts of some. And he lives on yet, in a better country. Better were it to have been that he lived on otherwise, at least for a little while.

At the request of A.C. Braithewaite I pulled this tale from the journal of his brother. Beau lived on earth from 1970 to 1987, as for what came before and after, none of us can know.

I traveled with A. C. Braithewaite to his brother's grave in the late winter of 2006. It was a quiet place, as all cemeteries are. There is an invisible, holy cathedral over graves. People become thoughtful and hush their mouths when they walk there. It is a natural reaction when we see our eventual fates, to become hushed and ponder this mystery.

The Braithewaite Memorial Park is private and situated three-quarters up the Megascopsus Mountain, otherwise known as Blue Mountain. A panoramic view of the great mountain is given to one who sits in the

Braithewaite cemetery and shimmering below is First Light Pond. The Megas Jesse is mighty as mountains go, but there is also about it a hushed and sensitive calling to the gentle parts of a soul. It is sky, brought down to earth and it is earth, brought up to sky. Here men can walk and be as high as birds fly; here men can crawl and still be among clouds; here is the perfect still pond of Heaven wherein men can swim and be free and see best in its reflection what is brightest in them.

The Braithewaite family plots are located at the bottom of an incline where the light of day is held in a bucket of leaf, forest, rock and earth. It is surrounded by purple and red Crape Myrtles and Japanese Maples and there is a large oak — planted by Grandfather Braithewaite in 1960 — at the head of the plots. Under the Grandfather Oak is a black granite bench, long and curved like a shapely woman, set on stones in 2001 by A. C. Braithewaite. Inscribed in it is the Braithewaite family motto:

‘To the stars I aspire, for they do not weep and are
immortal...’

Here rest three generations of Braithewaite’s. The grandparents are within the roots of the oak. Next to them is their son and his first wife — Braithewaite’s mother and father. A. C. had his father reinterred in 2001. Next to them lie Beau and the still-born triplet brother. We sat on the granite bench and read the sonnet Beau had written for the child and A. C. had commissioned to be chiseled into the light blue granite sepulcher over its dust.

After reading he looked off and studied the great mountain awhile, then turned and studied me. He was speculating something, but I could not know then what it was. He said,

“Beau wrote this sonnet for our dead brother. But we never believed this grave held the remains of our brother. It never seemed to either one of us, or our mother, that our brother was dead. There was just a feeling we all had about it...”

He pointed at the earth and called it Death and said,

“This bastard Death does not fear us. And he will mock us by turning our flesh back to dust — but first — we may mock him by not fearing — not a damned thing need we fear. And if, by our hands and minds we may make something he cannot destroy, we will mock him forever.”

At this point in his life Braithewaite was worth over a billion dollars, all earned in the last few years from payouts from the planet’s largest companies; given so that he would not bring to light his discovery which would revolutionize the world. About his burgeoning fortune he said it was just the beginning and there was no telling how much it could end up being. Since a teenager he had worked on an old family recipe for fortune and flight and it was nearly ready to sprout wings. He said the money had never been his reason. And it was easy to believe him when he said that.

Despite his wealth he was not ostentatious and wore on his wrist a cheap Timex, telling me when I noticed that it is not the value of the watch that is important, but the value of what the watch represents.

He checked his Timex now, then hid it in the sleeve of his long-coat and said,

“Most of us never seriously consider suicide and unless we become the recipient of a mortal disease with no cure in sight — other than the disease of Time, which all the living have contracted — most of us believe we never would try it. As for me, I enjoy the fight too much. I like the odds, which are stacked against me. But I understand my brother and those like him. All I know for sure is no man has the wisdom to judge another who has decided such

an act should be his fate. Surely each man decides his final fate, but we all help each other along the way toward our eventual evolutions. To not see this, in our smallest acts and words, is to remain without the subtle judgment afforded mankind.

“An awakening needs to occur now, among men and their minds and souls. Many look to religion or the stars for answers but the answers are in the minds and hearts of men. In men are the answers to men. Where is the love? It is in hearts. Where is the peace? It is in hands. Where is the evolution? It is in minds. The seeds of these answers are not in stars or old creeds, but in new men and new deeds.”

He stood and we began walking further up the mountain. There was half an hour until twilight. He continued,

“I say I would not commit suicide, but I know that is ignorant. Suicide is the sharp point reached after a push and a fall; a fall reached by many adverse and convoluted circumstances. Few of us put to walk in the worst, most painful shoes know how far we could walk and how long it would take us to get there. When all hope for life is gone from a being, that being becomes changed. And then old creeds give way to new creeds. Few know what they would do. All are capable of making that choice. But this life and world is not fair in its meting out of joy, life, pain and death. Most of us will never know such a state of hopelessness that most suicides reached. Most of us are much too famous with our own families ever to imagine that the obscurity of forever, the dark of a grave, could be a better thing than the sunlit earth and the love of our families. And most will never contract the worst disease known to man: social disease. Take away all love and goodwill you have among friends, family and even acquaintances, and what do you wonder your world would look like; what do you believe your thoughts would look

like? If you are like the majority of lucky persons, you cannot have any idea of what all that would look like. Count the lucky, famous star you were born under, my friend. Count it twice.”

We had passed into the pine forest that surrounds the cemetery. The falling sun was casting the shadows sideways, making the trees appear of two parts; one of straight wood and one of leaning apparitions. I said,

“I have never believed that suicide is an act of cowardice, but of bravery. The real shame is that such a brave act is not used towards a constructive end. An act of rebellion against what they believe is — with good or no good reason — a world that has rebelled against them. The deadly act of the suicide is more a shame on society than the suicide. When the young and physically healthy do it, it is sure a shame on the society they found themselves in.”

I was less than two weeks older than Braithwaite but I supposed his full-time concentration on business kept him in poor shape. He had to sit on a pine log to rest and catch his breath. After he found it, he said,

“The ancient Greeks believed that love conquers all. When a human being feels there is no more love to be had for them that is when they kill themselves. It takes a long time to get to such a state of mind, so all along the suicide was failed by key others. We, as a race of beings, will never truly be great nor evolutionary until we, as a whole, know and live the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. All who have chosen suicide felt disconnected from society — by society. Less sensitive souls would never kill themselves; not all care for love. And then again, many of these less sensitive souls have had so much love they cannot comprehend that not all others have been given the same. They believe their strength is the product of their own royal being when in fact it comes because they are famous with their family. Their mothers, fathers, siblings

and friends think they are greater than Elvis. And maybe they are — and maybe they are not.

“The lie that helped my brother decide to kill himself was one nearly all believed and those that did not still would not defend him against it. The molested truth that was the hidden beauty of Beau could have become his greatest victory, had he given it time. I see it every day, truth is a poor, obscure, mocked beggar and when he finds himself among proper society is summarily kicked from it. The dark lie against the life of Beau Braithewaite became Chatty Gossip and Chatty Gossip is the most popular guy around. Chatty Gossip is a murderous thug. He is friend to no man, but speaks well to all men, to put a good front to fool them by. His words are daggers he presses into backs.”

He was in the past now and the anger there furrowed his brows and made his face like stone. I could feel his ire rising. His eyes were on the forest floor but he was not seeing the leaves. He was seeing the world his brother had walked through decades before. He said,

“Chatty Gossip is the shadowy, lurking coward in men, and like all liars, would never be caught speaking truth or being truth. He hides his face and speaks the lie and none know his name, but all know his words. This Mr. Chatty is truly the most famous among us. He is our best proof that we are not yet so civilized or kind a race of beings. Reason. Impartial observation. Logical analysis. These mental powers are the basis of virtue, and are alien concepts to many. Men destroy first and only later ask wise questions that could have prevented destruction; if they ask at all. The suicide is the most succinct method of our own genetic engineering towards self-destruction. The lot of men kill more, if in less direct ways, than heart disease and cancer do. Every man should ask himself if he be a part of the answer to life, with his particular words, thoughts and deeds; or if he be part of and bringer of death. If a man is

quiet and brave enough to ask this question of himself the answer will come to him.”

He shook his head and a tear dropped out of it.

“I failed my great brother.”

He said it matter-of-factly as he dropped a few tears into the mountain; they fell onto the log where they dripped into the leaves and seeped back into the mountain that made him. They were antique tears he kept preserved in a jar; the deepest kind that never dry out. When he finished watering the magic spring that is in the mountain he stood and shook his head clear of his anger and sadness and we continued walking. He said:

“A lie is, at its essence, an emotion — a philosophy and creed of death. It is the seed of hate and destruction and is the alpha and omega of that which is unreasonable, insane and wrong-headed toward victorious living. It is darkness. Truth is, at its essence, an emotion — the philosophy and creed of life. It is the seed of being, love and happiness; the alpha and omega of that which is good, true and meaningful. It is light. When the poet seeks for beauty and finds it, it is then a natural unfolding of this beauty to become truth. Truth is the epitome, the alpha and omega, of human intelligence — the keystone power of master spirits. Hate is the nadir of the human soul and is the power used by those who are afraid; and the number of those is legion.

“And so even good men use hate as their basis for living far more often than they use love; for if they do not lie, they more often pay for subscription to a lie than they do the beautiful truth, and so cannot be considered lights in a dark world. The various degrees of the lie still lead down to the same nadir. And the bulwark of the nadir rests upon this: that most naturally and normally good men find it easier to believe the ugly gossip-monger than they will believe the beautiful truth-speaker. Lies cause the preponderance of anger in society. And no noble and good

man speaks a single lie or pays good money for a subscription of dark hearsay against any other. Anger in a good and wise soul can accomplish good and wise things; but anger by the good, who are also sad, confused and broken, can only lead to destruction of what is, or could have been, beautiful.”

We had crested a hill. Two dozen miles northwest of us the city could be seen — Almost Famous Town — with its bright lights and tall buildings looking like dots, stood on the horizon; a sentinel guarding society. He pointed to it;

“In that place, too damned often, ignorance is the status-quo and is honored. Most try to do and be good but gross ignorance makes their efforts null and void, as if they sought evil directly. This world is a mess since the beginning. We need a new push towards a higher evolution.”

We walked out of the forest. Above us the Megas Jesse climbed, its peak cutting the sky. It is a glorious place, and makes one feel incredibly large and improbably small. Braithwaite smiled. He and the dust of this mountain, and the dust within it, was the central region of his being. He said,

“Ignorance in the young is pure and pristine wonder, and this wonder is the ironic quality that brings about their deaths by their own hands — when that wonder has been shut off by outside forces. My brother believed his chance for wonder had been extinguished. And when that idea crept into his mind, darkness replaced wonder. Wonder in the young is the soul in a perfect state of existence, having a body, all senses can be developed, and having health, no will is needed to know and grow. All appreciation for life, for every green blade of grass and every wonder in the world, is available to the young who wonder naturally, but in a society that does not admire wonder, this power has been cut down; the green meadow

of life has been shorn, and the dust of the centuries that fills the mouths of the old is spread to the young, and young saplings become brittle trees that croak and groan under the weight of time. Jealous are the old trees of the saplings shooting up about them, soon to overshadow them. And so, too, are the young, jealous of those who are filled with wonder. My brother knew a great wonder....”

Braithewaite checked his watch, then he flipped the top of it and what looked like a cheap Timex turned out to be blue-chip. He spoke into it,

“We’re waiting on you, Captain Rogers.”

From the watch came the voice of a woman, sounding as distinct as if she was standing next to us,

“Be there in two minutes, Boss.”

We were far from road or car and I wondered how we were going to get back to the city. A driver had taken us to the cemetery and left. Now we were two miles deep into the mountain

He tapped the watch and said,

“When you have something precious and wish to keep it secret, hide it in plain sight by making it appear common. I have been mugged twice while wearing this watch, and neither time did they ever ask for my watch. I don’t think I could have given them money to take it. This watch has a GPS sensor, allowing a few others to know my whereabouts at all times. It has a computer interface I can display on nearly any surface, and is, considering its size and weight, pretty much indestructible. The thing I like best about it is its alarm clock. It has a distinctly annoying sound that never fails to wake me. You see, it’s not really a Timex, in fact, it is not any brand. I suppose you could call it a Braithewaite. There is no other watch like it in the world. In this watch is the work of my life.”

He put his hand on my shoulder and eyed me close, “I need you to remember that. The work of my life is in this

watch. There may come a time when it is important for you to know that.”

There came the sound of a helicopter. It flew in from the direction of the city and set down thirty yards from us. We boarded. It was my first time to ride in a helicopter. Braithwaite clapped me on the back and laughed as I looked out the bubble window at the earth below, grinning like a toddler on his first merry-go-round.

The Mighty Melancholic

I left **A. C. Braithe waite** for a trip northeast. He had given me a ticket to ride *The Mighty Melancholic*. It is an old train he reconfigured and set back on track. It would take me past Blue Mountain and on through the countryside to a place in the Northeast. There was a man he wished me to meet; another tale to ghostwrite. Before the train arrived I sat in the coffee shop at the station and scribbled some final notes on the story of Beau. A man in a born-rich suit asked what I was writing and when I told him, he replied,

“While I mourn the loss of any life, I temper that mourning with the contempt I hold for anyone who commits the selfish act of suicide, an act which only creates a lifetime of pain and sorrow for the loved ones left behind.”

I deliberated on what I wished to say, and then I said it:

“You hold contempt? Who are you to hold contempt over sad souls? You are nobody to judge, friend. Why do you not hold contempt for yourself, for holding contempt for something you do not understand? I think you should start small with your scorn, friend. It is ignorance like yours that causes such an act in the first place. It is not contempt we should hold for our fellows, but understanding, patience, commiseration. Anybody who has chosen to take their own life is in a place — was in a place — that the lot of men cannot fathom. And being ignorant they hold this contempt in place of knowledge. They hold contempt in place of understanding. They hold contempt where their humanity should be. But all that goes back to the lot of men are not complete humans yet, just the hope

of it. Contempt? I hold contempt for ignorance in the face of the possibility of knowledge. Men find the getting of truth contemptible; I find that contemptible. It is easy to judge and hard to understand. I say hold yourself in contempt, friend.”

The man in the born-rich suit now held me in contempt, which was nothing I was unacquainted with. He folded up his paper and huffed off. I quietly wished him further good fortune, in order that he could feel haughty enough to hold contempt over his fellows as a means to not hold contempt for himself.

I first felt it, then heard it... a rumble that increased exponentially. The engine that moves The Mighty Mel is a diesel locomotive, but Braithewaite also had the train outfitted with a steam pipe and I heard from the boiler plate the piercing expression of escaping vapor. The Mighty Mel's engineer coasted the locomotive into the station, blaring on the horn. The sound filled the depot with the clamor of creation, waking up the atoms in me.

I took my case and hopped the three steps onto the train. After the rest of the passengers were seated the conductor called out, “All aboard The Mighty Mel!” And that was the engineers cue to release The Melancholic from its stasis and we began rolling out of the depot, clickety-clack along the track. Blue Mountain was dead ahead. I looked out the window and saw the geese returning north; dozens of them, in the most perfect V formation I had ever seen. It was the first of spring. The honkers would make it there before me, but I would meet up with them soon enough.

I closed my lap-top and stretched out. I watched a man and his son playing checkers a few rows over. The boy was beating his father and giggled every time he captured one of his father's pieces.

“King me, Dad,” said the boy. And the father put one of his checkers on the boy's and made for the son

another king, by which the son would use to destroy the father's hopes of winning a checkers game.

I thought how often the parents are often just as confused as the child, and the children should not hold this against them, but should be patient. The father is king to the child and the child, someday, to become king to the father. And both parties need patience with the matter of kings and their making — and unmaking.

My own father felt more like a friendly stranger than a father and had died an old man when I was still young. My mother felt less than a friendly stranger. I watched with fascination at the camaraderie between these two. They were most famous with one another; two best friends and except for the couple decades of time between them, there was little that was different to separate them. Some are, indeed, so lucky. I thought upon it all, these bonds that make and break us; these famous ties that bind.

As Braithewaite had said, the death of hope is not when we run out of love for ourselves, but when we run out of the hope of being loved. And there is nothing contemptible about that. It is a beautiful sentiment that a being would destroy themselves over the loss of hope of loving others and being loved in return.

A human life is like the four seasons. There are seasons of life and seasons of death and seasons between the two, where the season of life takes its time to come fully into being and where life takes its time to go out of being. Every life has its seasons. The young who kill themselves have not been in enough seasons to know that soon will pass this season of death and life will bloom back in.

I don't believe there is a single or same answer to man's problems; each life is different to each, but if there were, perhaps the one answer would be love. Hope keeps all of us from taking our lives. Sadness is the end and epitome of all emotions as death is the end and epitome of

life, but to be and remain loved is to stay the hand of sadness. We fear the burden of love but fear more to be without it. Grief and love, they are expressions of life into single emotions. Suicide is the expression of both grief and love into a single action. So there is no single answer to our problems except the choice of life. But life is no quick or easy answer to any problem. Life is deep and there are as many levels to it as there are souls to live it. The human soul is every bit like the four seasons of this world.

Night came and moonlight and starlight fell upon the sleeping boy. The father covered him with a blanket and brushed his hair as The Melancholic chugged northward. As the boy slept I wondered what dreams of being and glory churned in his mind. Inside him was the kernel and seed of his love, and like starlight, it would need an object to fall upon to be illuminated. He would have to meet and know some soul in the future by which to display for him the love already growing in him. Hopefully that object would be true to him and he would be true to it; and if not all that, he would remain true to the love within.

Light and love remain invisible until some object illuminates them. A broken life is merely one that has need to be put together again. The truest state of our existence is an invisible state of being but what cannot be seen can be felt. Those who contemplate suicide are feeling — not death in them, but life — but that feeling, juxtaposed with their feeling of hopelessness, is not in accord with this feeling of life within. But with time and faith, the feelings of life within and the reality of life without will and can become reconciled.

Beau came to feel he was completely alone and totally misunderstood. But loneliness is common. Being misunderstood is common. And all of that is wonderful, if we stop to think about it. Who genuinely understands anything? Most of us do not understand ourselves. The

wise bask in the glory of their own obscurity and inability to know themselves. They enjoy that they change as they seek to know themselves. The more we come to know ourselves, the more we become something we cannot know the full knowledge of. We peel away ignorance and there is just that much more to know that we could never know. We strip away one layer and find ten more. A basic inability to understand is wrapped within all our atoms. We would like to know ourselves completely, but we are secrets unto ourselves. The mysteries of the universe swim in us. It is a false grief given to those just beginning and a blessing to those who have been in it a while to never truly be known or understood. We learn enough after a few decades that it is a nice surprise to realize we can never know complete the one thing we should know best — ourselves. They are intractable fools who think they know themselves. They are those who know only what they have been told and never changed a single thing about it. Life is easy for this kind. Life is much harder for the few who wonder and seek to know — themselves — and know they will never fully accomplish it.

In this world it is easy to look down upon, and up to, all men. In all are superior and inferior qualities. In all souls is a somber, sovereign king and silly, jesting fool. Some are more one than the other, and no one truly knows the mystery and recipe of how to build a checkered king; often it is just lucky jumps that make it. But there is one way to build a sovereign within and that is by simple truth. Here in this world, who is wise enough to know the act of the fool from the deed of the king? Often it happens that circumstance makes a fool of the wise and wise of the fool. There is luck involved no man can master or know. We judge too much.

To those who are sad I would say: so maybe there is no one to love you and maybe there is no one for you to love — at this time. Maybe you are not famous with

anybody. Maybe the worst of fates have begun to gnaw away at your existence and you believe there is nothing to be done about it. But you have Lady Life to choose to love and be loved by; and if you have strayed from the love of Lady Life, Lady Nature will bring you back to her; she is a faithful mistress to Lady Life and will bring back to life all who stray from her. To walk a ways with Lady Nature is to never be without the love that begets all other love. Maybe what you love has been taken away, or so it seems today. But patience has built, destroyed and then built again the greatest of mountains. So marry Lady Life, keep Lady Nature on the side, and never expect any other two to be so faithful or so perfect as these, for there simply are none who can maintain the perfect proportions of being that Life and Nature keep in their lovely bosoms.

Those who grow old have lived their lives one single moment at a time. They have strung together the years, months and days into a blur of existence. They die over the years. The suicide attempts, and is successful, to die in one single moment. But it is not really their lives they seek to extinguish with one bold pass, but their pain, all the pain they have known, could know, and will know. But no man is strong enough to do all that and so their entire being is extinguished. Few young men who ever killed themselves really wished to die. No woman who ever took her own life really wished to be a beautiful corpse. And what is truest of all and what they must remember is that life is a many-colored thing and pain is how life mixes the colors.

Flying within the supersonic three-quarter inch jacketed bullet that killed Beau was also the lie. And where the bullet is faster than the speed of sound the lie travels at the speed of thought; which turns out not to be terribly fast in those who believe, right off, the lie, but there is a quality about thought far more deadly than speed, and it is the

power of ubiquity — it travels everywhere. A lie can make a treasure possible or ruin a treasure; great and awful are the powers of a lie, while truth merely makes it possible for more truth to become. And we all know what truth is; truth is beauty, boring and profitless to the many; rare and measureless to the few. Yet when the few gain it, this of which there is too little of here, it is often disfigured and destroyed. Men put into the world what they are and take out of the world what they are not. When they perceive what they faintly know to be beauty they despise it because they do not possess it. They mock and lie against it and destroy it.

Why is it de rigueur for humanity to be destructive? Because it fulfills a basic human need — it improves the hoped-for-self-esteem of those who destroy. The enjoyment of other's misfortune is the quick path for one to feel better about their own lack of fortune. Is there remedy for this? There is remedy for everything. But what is possible and what is practical are divergent. Until the world is full of confident, happy souls, Chatty Gossip will always have a seat of honor at the richest and poorest of tables. Until then, we will have it where big savages rule by expertly speaking the big lies and little savages learn to rule by awkwardly telling little lies. Everything starts small, especially the lie and its liar.

A.C. Braithwaite had me write this story not for those who are happy and famous but for you who are sad and obscure — sad perhaps not from your own doing, but from having been born in a world that destroys what is beautiful and good by a natural disposition and inclination; obscure — not because you are unworthy of being famous, but simply because you have not discovered yet where your fame waits. This book is for the sensitive soul who finds this world a difficult proposition; for the honest and brave soul who has to walk the gauntlet. I hope these words mean something to you who are sad and obscure and help you

struggle and not give in to *the lie*. I hope you ball up your fist up and head back out. I hope you decide to fulfill your greatest of possible destinies and become a conqueror, and live to tell your tale.

At his office the last morning before leaving, A.C. told me I reminded him of Beau. We were on the twenty-eighth floor of his building. He was at the window, looking toward Blue Mountain, the smoke from his cigar swirling around him like a gossamer female genie. He said,

“You don’t look like him. He looked exactly like I do, we were identical twins, but you remind me of him; the same soul, the same mind, the same *je ne sais quois*. You two could have been brothers, and certainly the best of friends.”

“What do you think he would say about it all, if he were here with us?” I asked.

Braithewaite chuckled.

“Oh, I believe he is here with us now. He’s always been here, in my spirit and thoughts. I think I know what he would say. But you know him now. What do you think he would say?”

I thought about it a moment. “I think he would grab us around our shoulders and say it’s all about laughter, my friends. It’s all about laughter. And then he would laugh and explain why:

“People? They know nothing about everything and everything about nothing. Let them judge. We should scoff at the fool who would judge his master and honor the master who would teach the fool. We should mock the man or day that would think to beat us, as we learn from those that have done so. And all the blood the days could pull from us we should give with grace, for in our center we are completely, irrevocably, unbeatable — no matter how broken the body or the life, the spirit will rise in us at all costs. To hell with death! To hell with failure! To hell with

brokenness! We will live! We *will* live. And then we will write the tale that we lived and bled to tell, and by that, become conquerors — as the lovers say — forever and ever. For that is what life is, at its best and worst — a doomed, but beautiful, love-affair — between us and life.”

I finished and took a thoughtful breath, then said, “That is what I think Beau Braithewaite would say.”

A.C. put his arm around me. He grinned and I saw what seemed to be a secret flash through his eye,

“Yes, I am certain of it. That is exactly what my brother would say.”

Beau's Last Entry
Sept. 4, 1987

I decided to begin a journal of my life because I thought it would be important to look back on when I was old to remember the good and bright things by reading about them as if for the first time. In my talks with the old too many say they cannot recall the details, and I figure the same might become true for me one day, so I wish to record for later what I feel important about now. I made it a habit early on to ask the old what they thought the secret to life was. And I have come to know that few know any secrets. That makes me realize there are either no secrets or the secret must be discovered by each of us. And maybe secrets are nothing we are allowed to know while here...

Beau's Sonnet to the Dead Infant

The dust of dreams was upon this newborn,
As dew upon grass in the morn
And he heard the whispers of the universe
That all created in prose and verse
Had yet to be composed, or cursed
And all that was possible and yet to be
Was yet possible for new-sprung eyes to see...
Yet here now sleep his bones to dust
But here no ending to his soul's beginning
Here is hope that life o'er death is winning
There is no law of earth requires a soul to dream
It is decree of Heaven that makes it seem,
That hope is man's means to regain
The dusty soul its immortal gleam.

Martin Marcelino's
Valedictorian Speech
May 21, 1988

Principal Dean, distinguished teachers, proud parents and my fellow students, I dedicate this speech to a boy I knew and a young man I loved. He is not with us in person today; he has traveled on to a better country. But his spirit lives in me as an example of what is fine and excellent. By his example I came to be here today, [by never giving up](#) and working hard toward goals I believe are noble, life-sustaining and life-enhancing.

We spend our days going to live, but never quite arriving — and it is fear that holds us up — it is fear that keeps us from living and from loving; and not just those close to us by place, blood or circumstance, but all living beings and all facets of the diamond that is existence. We are creatures capable of flight; we are beings with wings, but are stuck in a sticky web and our fears are the spiders that spin it. By fearing to love, we forfeit life and its living. We are afraid to give love and we are afraid to take love and so life is less than it would have been, because of our fear of taking and of giving love. When love stands before us we fear it directly; when love lies behind us, we fear its memory and when it stands ahead of us, we fear its beautiful possibility. So we do not live and love as well we can, because we fear so deeply. We are too afraid to reach and touch.

There is a greater bravery inherent in loving than in any other human endeavor. One day mankind may reach, as a whole, the knowledge of love and come to love at last as one species; and that is when an age will begin that we today cannot but imagine in our most beautiful dreams. But

all that is just my opinion and it was the opinion of the boy who is not here with us today.

I want to recite a poem the lost boy wrote the day he died. I think it appropriate to all of us, and for the rest of our lives it will be appropriate. He titled it:

The Prophecy

What if I were to die tonight,
My astral soul, its slumber
To be awoke by heavenly flight,
My brain to be made dumber
By decay, worms and water
That soaks all coffins under...

What if I were to die tonight,
My youthful body dead
My legs, arms and hands well tucked
Within my earthly bed
Would friends remember good things to them
That once I'd said?

What if I were to die tonight,
No future days my own
The days and years now passed had been
To me a given loan
And now across all space and time
My spirit's left to roam...

What if I were to die tonight
My days of wonder past
And looking back upon my life,
Remark how very fast
The years had grown from day to day,
From birth to death is vast...

What if I were to die tonight
My love's heart full broken
From words that I had not,
Or maybe had sure spoken
I'd fly to God and ask him if
My body could be woken...

What if I were to die tonight
To join my father old
Who in the Earth for many years
Has lain intimate with cold,
Now in Heaven together we'd
In hands together hold...

What if I were to die tonight
And all the souls I love
Would they visit me and say good things
In fine days there above?
And wish one day our souls to fly
On wings of turtledoves...

I am but ten years and seven,
And it's neither my choice nor wish
To so early enter Heaven
But if tonight, by the light of the moon
And the twinkling of angel light
I am to pass from life so soon
Then prophetic, these words, I write...

These are the emotions and thoughts of nearly every young person wondering of life and their possible part in it. I grew to know Beau Braithewaite as if he was my own brother. And I wish I could turn back the clock to tell him what he knew, but had forgot, that the struggle that will come to us is the struggle that will become us. We do not

control our fate; we take our fate as it comes, and from and by that, we become our destiny. And beyond all of that, we are really all just floaters on the great sea, willy-nilly.

At your homes sit your yearbooks in a shelf. Their pages are white, crisp and fresh. They are newly printed pages of life just lived. But time will come when your yearbooks become tear-books, and in them you will peek, to remember the friends you once sought and the hearts you once taught, what it was to be young and good. I do hope that is the lesson you taught...

To you who are young, when the pages of your life are yellowed from time that has passed and your soul has mellowed from dreams that have died and your ship has sailed and your soul's been sold and your tale's been told... There will be remembered joy in these hours so look back with fond memory at these moments of life, when the page was white and the ship was bright and your soul was fresh and your tale was, too; before mother, father and sibling knew, that proof of life — and death — are true. Before your yearbook becomes a tear-book remember to laugh and to love until you cry, and to live until you die.

A DIATRIBE On the Art of Living

What profit a man, if he loses the whole world,
yet gains his soul?

Before leaving on Braithewaite's train I journeyed to Pineview Street where Beau and A.C. grew up. It is a winding street with old trees and if you go there and pass in front of [1221 Pineview](#) you will notice a line of pine trees well over a hundred feet tall standing as backdrop to the Greyhouse. They stand in rows in a backyard two houses over and surely began to grow long before these homes were built, which could mean this was maybe once a pine forest. The renters who had come five years after his death and stayed for thirteen years had recently moved, so the place was empty, at least of corporeal beings. It was night and the clouds had dropped and turned to fog. I walked around the place. The north wall, up to the windows, was covered in English Ivy and the place resembled a forest of ash, oak and maple. The grass was thick and shag cut, and the dark cobblestone walkways and concrete sidewalks were edged tight. There was a post lamp under the front ash near the driveway, setting a soft, angelic glow in the front yard. The dogwood was long gone and in its place stood a Silver Leaf Maple fifty feet high. A bell had been attached to the tree and the tree had grown around it. I rang it. Its crystal note broke the silence a moment then all was quiet again. I walked into the back yard and saw the sacred, obscure grave of Buttons, covered over with a concrete marker and the name and date of her who he had loved and been loved by: *Buttons Lies here; born in the Summer of 1977—died in March of 1987.* In the southeast corner of the yard — half-standing and half-leaning — was the

dilapidated remains of the garage where Blue and Milady Rebel had been stored. They were long gone but I imagined them still here, softly nickering to each other as they slept, waiting for their owner to return.

There was an old wooden ladder set on the ground at the back of the house. I set it against the grey siding and climbed to the roof to sit at the peak. As I thought on it all the fog lifted and the stars became clear, all innumerable number of them. I began to count them and imagined the strong, finally-happy-ghost of Beau Braithewaite sitting so close to me our spirits were touching.

What killed Beau Braithewaite, as much as the cross-threaded .38 and his own decision to put it in his brain, were the judgments of those around him. Appreciation is the art of the artist and Beau was full of appreciation — he was an artist of life. Being an artist made him more sensitive than others; both to dying and to living. The work he was attempting to create was the soul within and that art-in-the-making had been shat upon by judges who knew no art because no art was in them.

Men are judges because they do not possess the capacity of poetry and philosophy; because they cannot figure out the distance between stars; because higher math escapes them; because the symphony is only a gift to them and never a gift they can give; because the sublime art of appreciation is a thing beyond their own poor art of depreciation. Man is the thinking animal, except that too many will not, do not, think. The brain of man is the pride of man and man's portal to his own sacred humanity, but too many stand at the portal and do not venture in. All we owe to our mind, which comes from work applied to the brain, but many are the lazy who will not do that work. Men are arrogant so as to hide their inferiority. They will no more admit to what they do not know than they will admit to what they do — if the thing to admit to is their

own mental fallibility and spiritual failure. So they judge others, based on the flimsiest, flakiest particles of fact or half-fact or no fact at all.

A word from a bird is good enough for most and from there all knowledge is bound and set. They assume much because it is light work to assume and be done of it. They would rather adopt their presumptions than give birth to their own thought relative to the matter under consideration. And so soft thinking succeeds among men who would rather some other do the work and then hand them the answers than seek for themselves their own knowledge. Too many, if made to purchase their own knowledge from the riches of their own mind, would go bankrupt. So being mentally poor, men must consider their opinions as knowledge; consider it as their own all they have been given and what they have taken from those around them. The pooled opinions of society make it easy for charity cases to appear mentally solvent. Men are too lazy to think up and ask the right questions and if they do, are not thorough with the answer, and so truth eludes them. And it is despairing to know that social courage is the thing most really lack about this matter. It takes absolute courage to think one's own thought and live by it. The physical hero gives over their life in a moment; the struggle is quick to end. The spiritual hero — which is demanded of any who desire a genuine and honest life — writes over the course of a lifetime the book of their own thought; are authors of their own lives; and such always comes at the expense of a common fame and easy popularity.

Death is the end of our day here. We have but one day to live and if we are not given as long to live in it as some others we may feel short-changed. But that is foolish, to feel we have missed much or had much taken away. We are terribly mortal and to feel we have missed a part of a moment so infinitesimally small as a day, a year, a decade, or even a lifetime, is much like a May fly to feel, if it

misses out on a minute while its May fly brother goes on to live another minute, that he has lost much. It does us no good to be discomfited about missing some small thing as time. For we will miss in the future exactly as many days as we have missed in the past, which is all of them. Our lives are just a single day, after all. So in this day is the day of decision — to truly live by our own minds and souls — or that of others.

Life is a rare miracle most treat as a commonplace. But thanks to the artists — and the artist within us — we can come to know it. And so we should not miss it. We should live it honest and the best way our instincts tell us to. We should be ourselves and impose ourselves on a hostile, yet beautiful world. Life has always been cliché to the Goneagers; they do not take it seriously. They do not understand and realize the miracle. And so death-by-suicide — the suicide done at once or over a lifetime— the death of us all by becoming a member of the Goneagers — has become cliché also. But one can begin a new story on any given day. For it is not true what they say — that all has been seen and done under the sun. Only those with no imagination would ever believe that one.

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This tale was writ from no precedent, pattern or “heroic archetype” but from principle, experience and observing firsthand the ways of the world. As for those famous enough for critics let *them* heed critics. I am too poor and obscure a writer to need or heed a critic. My critic was Beau, who stood over my shoulder while I completed the final draft from his first draft. It’s been arduous and I tire of his incessant direction. Writing a novel is like painting a mansion with a q-tip. Twice. If I took liberties with grammar, style, subject or structure — and I am not sure about any of that — I at least left truth intact; of that I’m sure. If this obscure tale becomes famous they will

probably call it a book for young people. And as usual, they will only be half right.

I am Beaumont's Plato and this book, in the Classical Greek sense, is apologia. Beaumont Braithewaite was the teenage, modern-day counterpart of the Socratic tragedy, which is reenacted all over the world in all places and on any given day. Like the Athenians who condemned Socrates, Beau's Almost Famous citizen-prosecutors and condemners left no testament, so their actions long ago dissolved in forgetfulness to present reality; as dissolved as the noble dust of Socrates. But by Beaumont's yellowed writings are their actions — worthy of common and self-condemned dust — refigured and named true.

The power of labeling might be mankind's third greatest power, to name anything they wish in various ways, depending on their purpose. And like the number of pretty dresses and the number of persons there are to decide which pretty dress to wear, in the end a decision must be made on which dress to wear. Decision is our final choice to make about everything and is maybe our second greatest power. Too often the common method of making our best decision is to check with the proper authority overseeing our decisions...

High school eventually ends for all of us, but then we go on to Planet Earth High School, where we become freshman adults; short in stature and politics. Freshmen many remain while those destined for great position often are the most sophomoric in their outlooks, but those destined to graduate will learn their own truths bit by bit, while gracefully discerning the truth of others by judging only their entirety. And that is surely man's greatest power: simple truth.

Too many adults look to others for their own truth. Buck authority. Decide to be the sole author and authority of your own life. Write your own book. Name your own book. And wear what *you* believe to be the prettiest dress.