



**Tough Guys
Bad Dudes
and Other Men
My Father Knew**

Lonnie Ray Atkinson

**A Farewell to My Old Man
and to Old School Masculinity**

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(written in 2018 and 2019)

Cover design by
Lonnie Ray Atkinson and Clayton Pollard

ISBN 979-8-9855830-3-8
UnsafeWords
unsafemedia.com

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A Tough Guy **(or: Most men would have waited to die)**

Any other night, he'd have seen them coming. But this night they waited 'til he was almost drowned. That's the only way they figured they could take him.

And it was true. Since his daddy, hadn't nobody even come close to figuring out how to whip Wayne's ass. He was a fighting machine. But it was also true that ain't nobody graceful after ten or so beers.

Pop didn't know why they did it. As far as he knew, Wayne hadn't ever killed anybody. Then again, reason don't really matter one way or the other. When it comes down to taking somebody's life, in that moment the only thing that matters is if you're set on doing it.

And these old boys were set on doing it. Or at least one of them was. The other was there just in case shit went sideways.

Lucky for them, Wayne was so out of it he didn't even know they were there. They could have been sitting there all night for all he knew. Just waiting. Waiting for the moment.

And as soon as the bartender stepped in the back to pull another case of beer, that was the moment.

It was quick. Wayne didn't even feel the knife; he just felt somebody grab his hair. Before he realized what had happened, the old boy had made it back over to his table.

Wayne looked down at the blood spilling onto the bar and then looked around the room. Everybody was conspicuously minding their own. All except for them two.

Half grinning, they raised their beers to Wayne and gave him a nod.

He looked back down at the bar, felt his neck, and then fell off the stool. When he made his way to his feet, the two old boys were already squared up, ready to finish him off.

But instead of a last stand, Wayne just staggered pitifully over to the bathroom.

Everybody in the bar thought he had just fallen over and died as soon as the door shut. Then about fifteen seconds later, they heard a boom. Loud as all hell. Then another. Boom. Boom. Like he was in there flailing, crashing into the stalls. Over and over. Boom. Boom. Boom. He was really fighting it.

Then it stopped. He must have given out. Everybody just looked down. All except for them two. They'd been laughing through the whole ruckus. And they were still laughing.

That is, until that door swung back open.

And the image they saw next put whatever fear of God was left in the world right square into those motherfuckers' hearts.

Wayne wasn't dead. He was alive. Standing there in the bathroom doorway, with a blade in his right hand and about five feet of old school public restroom hand towel wrapped around his neck.

Now, for anyone too young to grasp this mental image, back in the day public restrooms didn't have hand dryers or disposable paper towels. Instead, they had these giant contraptions on the wall, with one long roll of thick, wide, worn-to-hell cloth that made its way from one end of the machine to the other. You basically had to yank out a clean section to dry your hands on and then put out of your mind the filth you may or may not have touched just before.

Anyway, those who remember these machines know what kind of beasts they were. And if you had no choice to save your own life but to tear one of these big fuckers off the wall, rip it apart, and remove the towel from the rollers, you can imagine the amount of noise it might make. Boom. Boom. Boom.

You can also imagine the kind of adrenaline you'd have to produce to snap out of a 2am drunk, completely demolish a towel tank, and then fashion that shit into a makeshift wound dressing.

It's so fucking crazy that what he did to them two old boys when he came out of that bathroom almost seems like an afterthought.

Indeed, that's what made the story worth telling. Guys getting cut down in bars were a dime a dozen.

What happened that night was poetry, at least to tall tale tellers like my father.

One might imagine a man like that would have headed an empire had he been born a different time. Just the image of him standing there in the doorway with that giant mess of towel around his neck is the stuff of comic books.

There were plenty of bad motherfuckers in those days. What mattered was your story. And Wayne didn't just leave that night with his life. He left with a story.

It was as if that old boy had done him a favor.

Like most people, the stupid fucker hadn't ever cut anybody's throat before. Just a little bit cleaner and Wayne would have fallen off that bar stool and never gotten back up.

Instead, he ended up making him and his buddy's bed that night.

And, in the process, he made Wayne a legend.

The Gospel according to Willie

My father was overprotective. So much so that my friends would have to run across the street to get the ball when someone hit a homerun out of the yard, and I had to walk through the neighbors' lawns to get to my friend's place three houses down.

It didn't make any sense. We lived on a dead end. There was nothing to be afraid of.

Of course, he didn't tell me why he was that way. He was Daddy, and that was all I needed to know.

Years later, he told me about the two different times he'd found automobiles idling with dead people inside. The first was just one person. The second was a whole car full. Cold nights and old cars. He could remember their faces. They were just trying to stay warm.

He told me about the fat guy at the card game who started laughing upon being shot with a .22, only to pull out what he called "a real gun" and blow a hole clean through the other guy's leg and shoulder. He had no idea that while he was laughing that little bullet was bouncing around his guts. A few seconds later, he fell over dead. The other guy lived.

Not all his stories were of violence and death. But a lot of them were.

Having watched men be killed or barely escape being killed (himself included), my old man knew how easy it was to not see the obvious. Situations that should have been predictable. Ignoring signs that shit was going sour. All the assumptions that get you into trouble. All the opportunities to just get up and walk out.

Pop had seen (and done) some bad shit in his life. Enough so, that he was perpetually scared of what the world had to offer me.

At the same time, so many of those stories glorified violence and the giving of pain.

It was like this juxtaposition. My father could see the potential for violence in others, and he feared what it could mean for his family. On the other hand, he had a certain respect (maybe even an admiration) for aggression, and violence was imparted within his personal domain however he saw fit.

On a good day, my father stood 5'3". He was quiet but funny. He was pretty good looking, always looking younger than he was. He had two brothers and a sister. He was a high school dropout. He had a short stint in the military. He ran the streets when he got back. He married a woman, and they had two kids. The marriage didn't last. He worked in a factory for thirty years. He died in his yard when he was 62. His name was William.

Now you know almost nothing about my father. Which is to say - if that were the synopsis of a film, you wouldn't really be able to tell if the movie was going to be any good. For no matter how interesting a movie plot may be, its beauty or lack of depends more on the subtleties of filmmaking. The nuance and details.

Most of what I *really* know about my father comes from the memories he shared with me. And what originally started off as a fun side project to preserve some of his crazier stories has over time morphed into an agonizing farewell, dragging behind it enough nuance and detail to warrant a certain complementary, if reluctant, introspection.

The stories we tell are often a snapshot of our education, even if we don't always know why we're telling them. And like all oral history, if the stories are good enough, they'll become education for the ones they're told to. The tenor of the lesson relying upon how much self-examination the listener is willing to let go.

The content in this book is obviously second hand, and at least some of it was told to my father. As told stories are a matter of memory, rather than documentation, I like to think of my old man's as parables, not to be judged necessarily on the accuracy of their details, but more so in terms of what you can take from them. Similarly, I like to think of this book

as a collection of fucked up Sunday School classes, where in each chapter you're told a story and then given an interpretation of its meaning.

Interpretation, of course, requires context, as well as an inventory on what was included in the story and what wasn't. After all these years, I'm still reflecting on that. Trying to figure it all out.

And like any other layperson trying to make their way through a Sunday School lesson, I hope you'll bear with me if my own interpretation is at times lacking.

These are a few of my old man's stories. I wrote them the way they were told to me.

Some tough motherfuckers. Some bad motherfuckers. And some, just plain motherfuckers. These were the men in my father's life. Each, in their own way, contributing to his understanding of what it meant to be a man.

And yet the man I said goodbye to, the world in which he found himself, and the choices he made in that world ultimately proved the absurdity of those expectations and the frailty of old school masculinity.

A Bad Dude **(or: It all comes back to you)**

The baddest dude my old man ever knew was Jake. Jake was completely ruthless.

If there was a Hall of Fame for Bad Motherfuckers, he would have been in it. Except he would have had an asterisk next to his name.

Jake wasn't the kind of bad you wanted to be. He was the kind of bad you wanted to avoid. And that come from my old man, someone who couldn't get enough of a good movie villain.

The only assholes who even came close to being as bad were Jake's two brothers. And they hated his guts. He was just too mean.

It wasn't that he had whipped motherfuckers' asses. Everybody had whipped somebody's ass. It was that Jake took real pleasure in the degree to which he could hurt people. He tried to hurt them for a long time.

One night, after catching a warrant for hurting the wrong person, Jake got pulled over by a state trooper. The state trooper didn't know who Jake was; he'd just pulled him over for speeding and had run the plates.

Within ten seconds of being asked to exit the vehicle, Jake had gotten the upper hand and proceeded to beat the state trooper with his own gun.

He then drug him over into the grass and raped him on the side of the road. Cars driving by. Headlights passing over them.

It wasn't enough for him to get away. He had to hurt him.

After a short manhunt, and an even shorter trial, they eventually sent Jake up. And I don't know whether it was while he was awaiting trial or after he got sentenced, but at some point they paired Jake his first night in a cell with the most evil motherfucker in the joint. Notorious for his brutality, he was there to teach Jake a lesson. Out on the streets, Jake may have been a bad man. In the joint, he was just another notch on a badder man's belt.

Yet come next morning, the guards found Jake snoozing like a baby and that evil motherfucker huddled in the corner with blood all over him. Evidently, Jake had hurt him too, and for the whole night.

That's how bad Jake was. That he could sleep a few feet away from the man he had just destroyed and not worry about him trying to take revenge.

That's not to say it was like that from then on. Even the baddest motherfucker can only take so many men at one time. If they want you enough, they'll get you. And when they get you, that's when you have to start making some real decisions.

Lucky for Jake, the penitentiary gave him enough time and perspective that he started making the right ones. Enough so that he eventually got out and was able to set his sights on a normal life.

Pop said Jake came out almost unrecognizable. He wasn't mean; he wasn't looking to hurt anyone. He just wanted a shot.

He had reconciled with most of his kin, and while he was on the inside he had learned how to plant vegetables and flowers. When he wasn't working, Jake spent time with family and spent time in the garden.

A few months after he got out, on a nice sunny day, Jake was doing some gardening in the front yard, when some old boy rolled his car up in the grass, hung a sawed-off out the window, and blew Jake's face off.

And that was that.

When I asked Pop who the old boy was, he said he didn't know. He said Jake had hurt so many people, you couldn't know.

It could have been the state trooper. It could have been that evil motherfucker from prison. It could have been a whole lot of people. It could have been just some random asshole Jake had fought one night in a bar. Whoever it was had been living inside of the hurt Jake had given him for all those years. All those years dwelling on what he would do if he ever

got the chance. It had been almost two decades. And although that may have been enough to turn Jake around, it wasn't enough for that old boy to move on with his life.

When my old man told me that story, we talked about it for a long time. There was a lot to unpack.

We talked about Jake and how it wasn't that Jake was just bad. Jake was frightening. My old man figured as mean as his two brothers were, that it must have had something to do with their old man. Which made sense to me. Almost every bad motherfucker I knew had a father who relentless beat the fuck out of them. And almost every one of them ended up dead or in the penitentiary.

It made me feel lucky, what little I'd been hit.

We talked about the state trooper, how it should have just been a routine stop. We wondered if he stayed on after that. And if so, how he dealt with it. We wondered how everyone at the station looked at him, how they treated him.

I know how my friends were at the time. And had something like this happened to me, I'm sure they would have looked at me with a certain amount of sympathy; a couple of them would have even offered me real support. But I also know they would have reserved a measure of disbelief. Telling

themselves that it didn't matter how bad the other guy was, that they would have never let it get that far. They would have never let him do that.

I had seen the victim blaming that was heaped onto women. What they wore, why they were there, who they were. And yes, did they fight back (enough).

Nevertheless, in the eyes of most men (at least the ones I knew), women were seen as inherently weaker. Meaning, it was understandable that a woman could get overpowered. That understanding was not, however, set aside for a man.

The same way I had heard douchebags say something along the lines of "you know they wanted it" or "you know they liked it" about a woman, in the case of a man that grotesque suspicion would most certainly be there, lingering, almost unerasable.

It didn't matter who the other person was, how big they were, strong they were, or if they had a weapon. All anyone needed to know was that you were a man. It was up to you to figure out a way. There had to be something you could have done to not let that happen.

Part homophobia, part macho bullshit. But mostly fear.

For many, it seemed the only explanation for an occurrence they did not want to have to imagine. It was to truly acknowledge sexual assault.

When we pretended sexual assault was just something that happened to women, we didn't have

to put ourselves in their position. In other words, we didn't have to think about it. Like it wasn't happening. Like it wasn't something being done all around us. Like it wasn't something being done to people we knew, by people we knew. Like it wasn't something that could happen to us, or by us. Like it wasn't something that had been done to us, or by us.

And by us not acknowledging that, not only did we not have to confront our own ignorance concerning human sexuality and the bigotry that blossomed out of our insecurities, neither did we see the putrid irony that once again women were being tasked with absorbing men's pain.

Interestingly, the one thing we didn't talk about was the guy in the prison cell with Jake.

At the time, I figured it was just an implied lesson about that other dude's reputation and "no matter how bad you think you are, there's always someone else badder." But that's not the reason why my old man didn't bring it up. He didn't bring it up because it wasn't the moral of the story.

I remember Pop telling me, years before he told me the story about Jake, to try my best not to fight. It's actually something he told me quite a lot.

Most of the time, I would just nod and change the subject. I knew how overprotective he was, and I figured he was just evoking the "always someone

badder” adage. It just seemed like something your parent was supposed to say.

But one time, I did ask him. “Why not?”

My question was less curious than defiant. After so many times of hearing “try not to fight,” it started to feel like an insult, like maybe he thought I was soft.

I wasn’t ready for the answer.

“Because you might win.”

I asked him what he meant.

He said, “If you lose, but you put up a good fight, usually you don’t have too much to worry about. But if you win, you need to try and make sure you don’t win too good. If you win a fight good enough, you have to look over your shoulder, maybe for the rest of your life.”

Not too long after we had that conversation, a dude I knew named Malik was playing basketball on a street court and got into a fight with a kid he was playing with.

Malik won the fight. And I guess he won too good, because the kid came back a few minutes later and shot him.

Jake waited 17 years to have it come back on him. Malik didn’t have to wait but a few minutes.

That was the rest of his life.

He didn't know it was coming. He had gone back to playing another game.

The last thing we talked about was hope. Jake had come out of prison a lifetime away from the violence that had put him there. And even though he couldn't escape what he had done, it gave Pop hope that a man could find his way, even someone as wicked as Jake.

He told me that story a couple years or so after my mother had left. After twenty-six years of marriage, there were things he too could not escape. Not a decade later, he died of a massive heart attack; a lifetime of smoking and drinking had finally come back around as well.

And while it was too late to remedy either, he did his best to come to terms with the former. To admit what he had done wrong, to embrace the consequences, and to try and be a better person going forward.

And though he may have not been successful every day, I know he did try.

Those years in between drove home the true moral of the story. If you can, try and come back to your transgressions before they come back to you. Just know, sometimes it's easier said than done.

Just another kid

Part one: Feast

While most of my old man's stories of running the streets were of bad motherfuckers, almost all of his stories from childhood were of poor motherfuckers. And because poverty has its own way of toughening the fold, the first tough guys my father ever met were the kids he grew up with.

Everybody was poor back then. Of course, kids don't ever know how poor they are until they meet someone with a little more or a lot less.

The first time Pop ever realized the difference was when his friend Dennis asked him over for dinner.

“You wanna come over for Feast, Willie?”

“What's Feast?”

“It's when we eat real good on Friday night. I already asked Daddy, and he said it was ok. You wanna come?”

Pop told me he thought, “Hell, yeah, I'd like a feast,” but that he didn't want to look desperate. So he played it cool with a “Sure, thanks,” and then began counting down the hours.

Like a lot of families back then, Dennis had a bunch of brothers and sisters. Pop remembered sitting at the table with all the other kids, waiting for Dennis's mama to start bringing in the dishes. He said

everybody started banging on the table, chanting, “Feast Feast Feast!” until they all burst out laughing, Dennis’s daddy included. It was a good time already, and they hadn’t even taken the first bite.

Finally, Dennis’s mama came in the room and gave each of them a handful of crackers and set down a log of bologna in front of her husband. Dennis’s daddy pulled out a knife from his pocket and started cutting off slices.

Pop dug in with the rest of them, not thinking much about it.

Then when Dennis’s mama sat down and started eating hers, he realized that wasn’t an appetizer. That was the main course.

Crackers and bologna. Plain-ass bologna. That was it.

He looked around the room and saw how happy everyone was, enjoying the Feast.

And, in that moment, he felt fortunate, for the first time, to only be *so poor*. And, in that moment, he caught a glimpse of just how generous people could be, especially poor people.

When a block of bologna is a luxury, you’d think it’d be hard to share. But anyone who’s ever been around real poor folk knows that ain’t the case. And it definitely wasn’t the case back then.

Pop knew what it meant to appreciate what little you had, and he knew how important it was to

share. But them sharing their “Feast” was different. It was special and sad at the same time.

He hadn’t lived through the Depression, and this was the first time he had witnessed this manifestation of family. It wasn’t until later that he would hear the stories and begin to understand a new kind of family. Neighbors and strangers alike, cobbling together their kinship, finding themselves brothers and sisters in the scramble to survive.

It was special and sad at the same time. Special because it demonstrated humanity’s capacity for cooperation and solidarity. Sad because that recognition of family rarely extended to the families born out of so many *other* struggles.

If it had, there’d be almost no poor people in the United States today.

Part two: Tucked in

Pop had a lot of memories of how poor everybody was.

He told me about the first time he ever slept over at a friend’s house, and how none of the kids had beds. They had old army cots.

When they got ready to go to sleep, his buddy told him it was best to tuck in his blanket underneath his feet.

“I don’t like that. I like my feet to be free.”

“Nah, Willie, you gotta tuck it in. You’re supposed to.”

“But I don’t like it.”

“But you got to.”

“All right, whatever.”

When the lights went out, Pop waited a couple minutes, then untucked his blanket and let his feet breathe.

He just figured their old man had been military and that it was some protocol bullshit. About an hour later, he realized that he should have listened.

Having just gotten into a good sleep, he woke up to somebody pulling on his blanket. He said, “Quit it.” But nobody answered. They just kept pulling.

Finally, he opened his eyes and he could see the other kids were all asleep. And something was still pulling.

He leaned over the side of the cot and saw a couple rats trying to get a good hold on his blanket. He started shaking it, but they wouldn’t let go. Finally, just as one of them was starting a climb up the side, he knocked it off into the floor. He knocked the other off as quick as he could, and came to the conclusion that it was probably a good idea to put his blanket in under his goddamn feet.

Even then, the most sleep he could get was about thirty minutes the whole night. The remainder was spent watching for climbers, while the rest of them little tucked in fuckers snoozed away.

Pop said it was something he didn't think he could ever get used to, but for them it was normal. And though it definitely creeped him the fuck out, it didn't make him think any less of his buddy. Whether it was roaches or rats or a hole in the floor or a broken door on the outhouse, everybody had something. Something you could have been ashamed of.

Something you just got used to.

Part three: Six years old

Just like Pop had stories about his buddies, I'm sure they had their own story about him.

My father told me he sacked coal when he was six years old. Him and his brother. I didn't even know whether to believe him.

After he died, I asked my aunt if he was telling the truth. She said he was. She said she could still picture the two of them walking back up to the house, covered in coal dust. She said she could never forgive her daddy for making them do it.

My old man almost drowned diving for bottles. That was back when Tennessee still had the refund.

I can't remember where he said they were diving, but I remember him saying it was dark enough

in the water that you couldn't see where the bottles were. You just had to get to the bottom and fish around. The water was ice cold, so much so it was hard to keep your breath held for very long.

Still, times were what they were, and those extra few cents made you stay down there, feeling around, grasping, far longer than you knew you should.

By the time Pop found that bottle it was too late to get back up. He took a breath.

His friends got him out and worked on him enough to get him coughing. He said he remembered those few seconds before he opened his eyes. He didn't know whether he was dying or dreaming, but he could see the whole scene and he was at peace with it.

I remember wondering why he would be at peace with such a tragic death.

Now I think I know what he meant. I think he saw a moment in which he might be free of a world he felt trapped in.

It's what made his decision to get out of Nashville the first chance he got look like more than a youthful whim. It's what made him finding his way back so soon, to some extent, far more tragic.

Part four: How bad could it get

I used to love hearing my old man's friends' nicknames. People like Donk and Pineapple and Logchain. Yes, my father actually knew a dude named Logchain.

But the best nickname he ever mentioned was a kid he knew growing up.

I remember the story wasn't even about this kid; he was just someone Pop mentioned in passing.

I remember him talking about a bunch of his buddies out doing some silly shit, and he just casually mentioned that one of the kids was Hard Times Paul.

I immediately stopped him and said, "Who the fuck was Hard Times Paul?"

"Just some kid who had it bad."

I started laughing and couldn't stop.

I just kept thinking, "Goddamn, Hard Times Paul?!?"

First off, these were fucking kids. There was a fucking kid named Hard Times Paul. They actually called him Hard Times Paul.

Second, nicknames are normally given to you by your friends. That means that these kids, who were all either dirt floor poor or had fathers who beat the fuck out of them on a regular basis, looked at this kid's home life and said, "Oh yeah, you got it *real* bad."

I remember saying, "Goddamn, Pop, you all had it bad. How bad could it get?"

He just said, “Bad.”

I remember thinking, “No shit.”

“But how bad, Pop?”

“Bad enough to get the name Hard Times I reckon.”

Pop wouldn’t go into any detail. He just said that Paul had it rough.

I could tell it was better to relent on this one and just said, “Yeah, I guess so.”

I still laugh when I think about it.

Hard Times Paul.

Hard Times fucking Paul.

I know I shouldn’t laugh. But fuck it. Some things you gotta laugh at. Not because the injustice is funny, but because the world can be so absurd. And when it comes to absurdity, I figure you can either laugh at it or you can bark at it.

As long as you’re not laughing at the suffering (the suffering is serious), laughing can be a way of learning. Young men get their fill of the “there’s always someone badder” stories. I always found the “there’s always someone worse off” lessons far more valuable.

Not in the sense that you dismiss your own circumstances. The only people *that* benefits is rich motherfuckers.

But because it's important to identify the source of those hard times, and the injustice that connects you.

For it is precisely that connection that keeps us from losing our minds. It is that connection which makes us treat each other with dignity, no matter our luck in the draw. It's what made Hard Times Paul just another kid.

Still.

Goddamn.

What a fucking nickname.

You can't tell about a motherfucker

Part one: "That's my old lady"

Joe wasn't shit. A working stiff, middle-aged and balding. Quiet-like. A short little fat-ass with glasses. Almost invisible. He was the kind of guy you looked at and knew you could slap him across the mouth.

He didn't like crowds, but he loved his old lady. And she liked to play 9-ball.

So every Saturday night, Joe and Shirley would head to one of the pool halls in town so she could run the tables. Joe didn't even play; he just sat at the bar and drank. He never was any good at pool, and she liked to compete.

Shirley wasn't winning any pageants herself, but she was easily out of Joe's league. And in a pool hall on the right Saturday night, she had every wolf in the joint licking his lips.

Joe didn't mind though. He trusted Shirley, and she told everyone she played with that that was her old man right over there at the bar.

Most of the time, that was enough. But every now and then, somebody'd take a look over at Joe and figure there wasn't much stopping them from at least giving it a shot.

And when that happened, Shirley simply reminded them that that was her old man right over

there at the bar, and then politely found her way to another table.

The last thing Shirley wanted was to have a problem with somebody she was playing with. Having said that, she came up around pool halls and knew how to handle herself. So for the assholes who didn't get the message the first go round, she knew how to send it a second time.

Still, you hang around the joints long enough, and somebody's eventually going to push it. And one Saturday night, Shirley got into a game she couldn't get herself out of.

When her second warning wasn't good enough, she hollered out for the whole place to hear, "If you don't get your goddamn hands off me, it'll be the last motherfuckin' thing you ever do."

Now, I don't know if she believed that. But it was convincing enough that everybody had stopped their game to look over and for the bartender to cut the music.

Unfortunately, the one person who needed convincing the most wasn't hearing what she had to say. And what came next gave poor fat-ass little Joe no choice but to get involved, something neither him or Shirley ever wanted.

Now, I imagine, from the pool halls I grew up in and the way Pop described the ones he grew up in, that wasn't the first time Shirley'd ever had her ass grabbed or been called a bitch. But it was definitely

the first time she had been slapped in front of her old man.

And who knows, maybe that old boy wasn't even interested in Shirley's pussy. Maybe he was just looking to whip somebody's ass. He obviously knew Joe would have to come over there. It's the only thing he could do. That was his old lady.

The bartender yelled out, "Get on out of here, Tommy. You done done enough."

But Tommy didn't go anywhere. He just smiled at the little fat-ass walking his way. He even put down his pool stick. He wouldn't need it tonight.

"I mean it, Tommy. I'm calling the law, now. Get the fuck out of here."

Tommy paid no attention. He had a show to put on, even if no one else wanted to see it.

Joe didn't talk much, but folks in the hall knew who he was and knew he was nice. No one wanted to see him get hurt.

And yet they understood. That was his old lady. He had to do something.

Shirley was still on the ground when Joe made his way over to the table. Tommy quit smiling and raised up the back of his hand, all dramatic like.

All eyes were on Joe.

Joe didn't say a word. He just started cutting.

Focused only on the beating he was getting ready to dole out, Tommy never even saw the knife.

Within seconds, he was on the ground. Within a few more, he wasn't moving.

The whole place was silent. Joe still didn't say anything. He just walked back over to the bar, motioned for another beer, and waited for the cops to come.

Now, I couldn't tell you if Joe served time or got off on self-defense or what. I'm not even sure if I asked. I knew that wasn't the point. The point was that you just can't tell about a motherfucker. Pop wasn't even sure if Shirley knew that Joe had that in him. She just knew that he loved her and couldn't stand to see anyone hurt her.

Pop knew that Joe was the kind of man that had taken shit his whole life. And, for his own reasons, he was willing to take it.

What he wasn't willing to take was someone hurting the woman he loved.

It was a classic, albeit tragic, underdog story. The kind my father loved. A man can only take so much. There are certain things you just can't allow. And all that good shit.

Not to say those kinds of stories weren't true. But at the base of that truth often was a layer of grime.

“That's my old lady.”

The only answer a man like Joe needed.

The same went for my father, a man who would have also cut down any motherfucker stupid enough to raise his hand to my mother. I know. I almost saw it happen one time.

Of course, my mother didn't need my father to protect her from another man. There was a time, however, when she needed someone to protect her from my father. Or should I say, she needed the whole of my father's childhood to protect her from the man my father was going to become.

"That's my old lady."

When he said it, I'm sure he believed he meant, "I love that woman."

But how often do men like my father really (or at least also) mean, "I own that woman."

It's the only explanation, this cognitive dissonance. My mother was the love of his life, and by the time I was born he had raised his own hand to her more times than she cared to count.

I hate thinking about it. And I know it's a strange direction to have taken the story. But I'm still trying to understand my father.

Pop could tell a good underdog story. He could tell it because he could feel it. He identified with Joe. And the way he told the story, it was almost a fantasy.

But maybe that's because, for him, it's all it could be.

See, I'm not sure whether it's a reverence for the oppressed or some lingering resentment toward my old man, but there's a part of me that is inclined to believe, no matter how much shit you've taken in your life, if you're still willing (on the occasion when you are able) to punch down, you'll never truly understand what it means to be the underdog.

It's what makes stories like this strange to revisit. Knowing why Pop enjoyed it. Knowing how much he betrayed it.

My father's privilege didn't eclipse his oppression. If it did, he could have claimed ignorance. But he knew better. And knowing better while not doing better is to betray all that you've learned. It's to betray all the other underdogs.

Not to say that betrayal is a script he carried his whole life. It isn't. But it's one I have to acknowledge if I am to find what else there is to learn.

Then again, maybe I'm just stroking my beard. Maybe I too am veering too close to fantasy, and far too far off topic.

Seriously, who the fuck am I, talking about underdogs like I know shit about it? Lord knows those without courage like to romanticize the character of their heroes.

I don't believe in a Manichaeian world, and I sure as hell don't want to make the underdog into some kind of bullshit prop for the self-righteous.

Maybe Pop and I were both half wrong and half right. Maybe hypocrites can still be underdogs and vice versa. Maybe that's what makes our victories more than miracles. The fallibility. And all that pulls us toward selfishness and apathy.

Stories of the underdog can't just be as simple as overcoming the strength of one's opponent. Beating the odds is every bit rooted in identifying one's own capacity for weakness. That's where the fight begins. It's why so many of us fall short.

Part two: "Where's the party?"

My old man liked to drink at home. He liked to drink at home and tell me about nights he'd drank at the bar. He'd drank at the bar with guys like Stanley.

Stanley was all right. A stand-up dude. Stanley hit all the bars. Throwing 'em back with old friends and occasionally making a new one.

One night Stanley met Travis. Travis was putting a few away before he had to go meet his brother at a party. Stanley and Travis hit it off instantly. Laughing, singing with the jukebox, hooting at women. The whole nine.

Travis asked Stanley if he wanted to head over to the party with him. There was supposed to be some fine tail there, and he wanted him to meet his brother. He said his brother was a real dumbass.

Stanley told him he'd have to drive. Travis said that was ok. And off they went to the party.

The party was at a motel off Murfreesboro Road. One of them no-questions-asked joints. Always good for a party or a prostitute. Sometimes both.

As they walked up the steps to Room 212, they could hear the music blaring from inside. Travis said his brother had given him a key to the room, and it was ok for them to just come on in.

The weird thing was, when they walked in the room, they realized there wasn't anybody there. It was just a bunch of loud music.

Stanley looked around the empty room and said, "Where's the party?"

That's when he felt the barrel of Travis's pistol up against his cheek.

"You're the party."

Stanley instinctively put his hands up and said, "Whoa whoa whoa, man. What the fuck?"

"I said you're the party, motherfucker. Now take your clothes off."

Travis pushed Stanley hard onto the bed, and cocked the gun.

"What the fuck's going on, man? Why are you doing this?"

Travis leaned closer so he would be heard clearly. "I ain't here to answer questions, boy. Now get those panties off, or the next few seconds gonna be your last."

Stanley started shaking his head. "No way, man. I ain't taking my fucking clothes off. You're gonna have to shoot me."

Travis smiled. "Mmmmmm. Is that right? You think it's worth all that?"

"I ain't no punk."

"Oh, you think this makes you a punk? You think this means something? Son, this don't mean anything more than you're doing what you gotta do."

"I'm doing what I gotta do."

"I see. Well, how about this then? How about I don't kill you? How about I take your legs from you? Or how about I blow your prick off? You ok with that?"

"Come on, man."

"Don't 'come on, man' me. Now, the only person that's gonna know about this is you. And then you're just gonna walk out that door. And that's it. That's all it is."

Stanley just stared at the wall.

"That's all it is. Now you gonna be good?"

Stanley kept staring. Staring at a funky motel wall. And then he took his shirt off.

“Yeah, that’s more like it.”

He watched as Stanley undressed.

“All the way down. Cottons too.”

Stanley looked at the wall and obliged.

At this point, Travis instructed Stanley to move over to the chair and put both hands on the arms. “And don’t get no ideas. I’ll shoot you as quick as you blink.”

Stanley could see Travis in the mirror. Behind him. Looking at him.

Travis began to unbuckle his belt. Then his zipper.

With the music screaming into Stanley’s ears, it’s as if he could still hear the other man’s hand moving, into his pants, into his underwear, getting it out.

Then he felt the pistol across his back. His heart was beating inside his head. He thought, “It’s flat.”

He couldn’t feel the barrel. He balled up his fist. His heart, beating. Again, “It’s flat.”

This was it.

He swung backwards as fast as he could. And connected. Hard enough that both the gun and Travis fell to the ground. He got lucky.

I remember interrupting Pop, asking if he got away.

“I’m telling you the story, ain’t I?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Stanley told Pop he didn't know if the guy was dead or not. He had just left him there. He said the only thing he remembered about beating him was that, at some point, he couldn't see him anymore. It was just blood.

He had done what he had to do.

That's why Pop told the story. Stanley wasn't a badass. He was just some dude. A dude who found himself in a fucked up situation.

Now, to my surprise, Pop didn't make it a whole thing about the Big Bad Gay Wolf. Despite his own homophobia, he knew this was about more than sex or sexuality. It was about the capacity for violence. And the lust to inflict suffering on another person.

And while Travis may have been a wolf, there wasn't any big eyes, big ears, or big teeth to give him away. This too was a story of how you just can't tell about a motherfucker.

It spoke to why Pop was so overprotective. It was a warning. You have to be careful. This could happen to you.

Or maybe it was less a warning than it was a question being posed. What would you do if something like that happened to you?

You had to do something. Didn't you?

It took courage to throw that punch. But the way Pop told the story, it was more an act of desperation. His body, his life, his human dignity. It was all on the line.

But the very fact that this story was floating around meant there was something else on the line. In other words, if Stanley had not thrown that punch, Pop wouldn't know a thing about what happened that night.

The way men looked at Stanley wasn't the way men looked at that state trooper. It made what Stanley did look almost like an obligation. As if Stanley was not still the victim of a crime.

As if the crime itself was somehow secondary to what was *really* at stake. And men act like they don't understand why survivors wait years to talk about their sexual assault (or why they call themselves survivors).

Our pathetic patriarchy spins manhood into a mantle, only to deem it something that can be lost forever at the hands of another. This mantle only slightly less ugly than the concept of female purity, also something vomited forth by patriarchy, and something to be lost forever at the hands of another.

All of which brings me to the saddest aspect of my reflection.

Of the various stories my father shared involving sexual assault (and there were a few), I don't

remember one that involved a woman. Likewise, of all the back and forth we had on the subject of getting pussy, I don't remember us ever having a conversation surrounding consent.

I don't know why. I just know my old man wasn't stupid. He knew what the world looked like. And if he chose not to talk about something that serious, it was because he chose not to pay attention to it.

It wasn't an absence of women. It was an invisibility.

I imagine my old man didn't have those talks with me because he thought I was a "good kid," or at least a better one than he had been. What he didn't take into consideration were the talks I was having with friends, some of whom were not exactly "good kids."

Years after I needed it the most, I realized how far a little bit of guidance might have gone. I could have used a few stories about men who had healthy relationships with their partners, men who didn't manipulate women for social or sexual gain, men who didn't mentally segregate women according to their perceived "experience," men who were able to recognize and overcome their own insecurities without first hurting those who were expected to trust them. I could have used those stories a whole hell of a

lot more than stories about badasses or mean motherfuckers.

Then again, maybe he didn't offer me those kinds of stories because he didn't have many himself. Maybe my father had needed those kinds of stories as much as I did.

The same way people defer to their own upbringing because they "turned out ok," I imagine my father thought there are some things you have to learn on your own.

Yet how often are those assumptions not only bullshit, but dangerous? It's enough that we even assume we "turned out ok." But to attribute strength and/or virtue to things we should probably be in therapy for might as well be a celebration of the violence about to start all over again.

Unlike my father, who also saw and felt the consequences of lazy assumptions, I actually believe that there are some things you *shouldn't* have to learn on your own. Because you really only have so much time. Before.

As long as we keep gambling on "good kids," assuming they're going to just get it right, we will perpetually find ourselves exhausted in the disgrace of having to coach our children how to best survive one another. As long as we live in a world where even the conversations about how to get it right are deemed uncomfortable enough to be unnecessary, we will

continue to act surprised as we choke down bad apple after bad apple.

And yet look at me talking about uncomfortable. Uncomfortable for whom?

Ask women if they feel comfortable, if they feel comfortable with the status quo.

Sure, being honest about the world we live in is often uncomfortable, especially when changing it may require you to take action and/or risks. Just like challenging tradition can be incredibly uncomfortable when those assumptions and expectations have been a key part of your identity.

Doing the real work of correcting institutions that for too long have nurtured male sexual entitlement may indeed be uncomfortable, especially to men who have not come to terms with the existence and history of privilege.

Yet is it uncomfortable enough that we *must* ask women (and we must *expect* women) to continue navigating a minefield of sexual assault? Might these conversations be seen as enlightening to some, as liberating to some, as a welcome challenge to some, as old hat, where-the-fuck-have-you-been, common sense starting points to *some*?

Or are they just so uncomfortable (for *enough of us*) that it is indeed preferable to deal with the 'Travises of the world after the fact'?

Because it's not just women and girls who suffer under this failure. It's men and boys as well. It's

anyone unlucky enough to be groomed for silent sacrifice upon the altar of patriarchy and religion, of shame and power, of century after century of sexual repression and coddled egos and conversations unhad because they were deemed merely uncomfortable.

Now if, by this point, you're rolling your eyes, like I imagine my old man would be, wondering how in the hell we got from a story about a rapist predator to the task of radically reorienting our collective gender psyche, it's actually the other way around. Not doing that work (and not having these talks) is how we got to the place we're at right now. The absence of certain circumstances is often just as impactful as the presence of others.

Until we sincerely address why so many boys will today, still today, grow up and devolve into no-self-esteem creeps and "incel" narcissists and all the acquaintances and dates and boyfriends and best friends (and, yes, coaches, teachers, clergy members, family members, and too too many assholes to list/remember) who every last one of them seemed like really nice guys up until the moment they weren't, we will deem the threats they advance as inevitable and see the comfort set aside for victims as *all we have to offer*. Our only advice beforehand being, "Do what you gotta do."

There's got to be more to the moral of this story.

Little Man

Part one: Yeah, you.

Pop slung open the door, barefoot with no shirt on. Just an old raggedy pair of jeans, he came off the porch almost running.

“Hey, motherfucker!”

The guy shot my father a look like he couldn’t believe what he had just heard.

“Yeah, you. Motherfucker! I told you not to pull up in my goddamn yard, you hardheaded motherfucker you. You got some kind of problem with your hearing? Got some kind of problem that you can’t understand when somebody tells you something?”

By this time my old man was about two feet away from him.

The dude must have been about 6’5”, 280. Looked like a fucking football player. He worked for the Nashville Electric Service and was supposed to check the meter on the side of the house. He had parked in our grass a couple times, and both times my old man had come out and politely asked him not to do it anymore.

Pop was willing to believe that the second time he just forgot. The third time he took as conscious disrespect.

I remember when the guy said it, thinking,
“Oh, no.”

“I don’t know what the big deal is. You park in the yard.”

I knew my old man. And that was just about the worst thing that dude could have said to him.

“It’s my goddamn yard, goddamn it. You stupid motherfucker, you. You want to try me? Is that what you think you want to do, motherfucker?”

And it went on like that. On and on.

I couldn’t believe what I was watching. My father was talking to this dude like there was no doubt in his mind he could take him. It was either raw confidence or raw foolishness. Maybe both.

It seemed almost inconceivable that Pop could put this guy down. He was literally half his size.

And there he was. Standing less than a foot away, looking up at this young man. His arm raised up so his finger pointed down into the young man’s face as he called him all kinds of motherfuckers.

I almost wondered whether Pop knew something I didn’t. And maybe that’s what the NES guy thought too.

“This is the third time I’ve done told you not to park in the grass. You do it one more goddamn time and you gonna see what happens to your ass. You understand me, motherfucker?”

The NES guy gave my old man a stare that made me think he was about to kill him. And yet my old man was unflinching. Pop waited for him to say something. Like he was daring him.

Finally, the NES guy nodded and said, “I won’t pull in the grass anymore.”

“You’re goddamn right you won’t. Now check the goddamn meter and get that piece of shit out of my fucking yard.”

Pop then walked back in the house mumbling something about what he was going to do if he caught him in the grass again.

I didn’t even really know what to think. I was just relieved he had made it back in the house.

I sometimes think back about that day and laugh, wondering how in the hell my old man could have won that fight. Better yet, how he could have believed he could have won that fight.

Now I know that wasn’t what was on his mind. It didn’t matter if he could win. What mattered was that he didn’t give a fuck. In that moment, my old man had committed. He had committed to not being disrespected, to not backing down. He committed in a way that would have given him a shot. He committed in a way that made him dangerous.

In that moment, my old man was all in, and that young man wasn’t ready to call his bluff.

And, yes, I know I'm supposed to point out that my father had a family to think of, and that some jerkoff NES worker obviously wasn't worth risking going to the hospital or going to jail. I know I'm supposed to acknowledge that there was some element of irrational macho bullshit that made him step to that dude the way he did.

And I do. I acknowledge all of it.

But I also know that's a little too easy. There's more to what happened that day than my father making more out of the situation than it needed to be.

There are certain indignities that you endure because you either have responsibilities to think about or you just don't have any other real choice but to take it. I'm not saying he was the most oppressed motherfucker in the world, but my old man had endured his fair share of those indignities. And after a while, shit gets old.

It's like holding your breath while being suffocated. It may keep you alive for a bit, but it only makes sense for so long.

It's not that some moron pulling his car up in our grass was this great injustice. It's the accumulation of real injustice that plays softly in the background, waiting for the perfect moment to be set the fuck off.

I can't excuse my old man's turn to violence. But neither can I judge him for feeling the way he did in that moment.

I see both genuine virtue and strategic value in nonviolence. But believing in nonviolence without addressing all the injustices that whittle away at your conscience is like being an advocate for free speech while ignoring how poorly information is handled and how insufficiently nurtured critical thinking is in society.

Or maybe I'm full of shit. Maybe I'm just making excuses, treading too casually into territory that pardons the kind of weak-minded choices that so often bloom forth dire consequences. I mean, for Christ's sake, that poor guy was just some working stiff who was probably thinking more about getting off work and watching the game than what some random customer told him a month ago. And even more, just because he was a big man didn't make him "the man."

Maybe it's just as simple as my old man having a bad day and not being able to control his temper. Maybe my father was just an asshole sometimes.

Or maybe it's everything. Maybe it's a complicated world and there's more than one moral to a given story. Maybe there's a part of me that likes that story because I haven't been able to shake that macho side of myself. And maybe I never will.

Or, who knows? Maybe I was just happy for once to see my old man literally looking to punch *up*.

Part two: Little man complex

They used to call it “little man complex.” I don’t know what they call it now. Or if they call it anything. Maybe it was just a stereotype that unfairly stuck with short men. I mean it’s not like tall motherfuckers don’t have their fair share of something to prove. It’s just that no one looks at a hot-tempered tall dude and attributes his insecurities to being 6’4”.

If there is truth to the stereotype, though, it must be pointed out that at least part of “little man complex” is a semi-warranted defense mechanism.

Whether it was cops, military officers, or just bullies in a bar, being 5’3” definitely caught my old man a lot of unnecessary shit. It’s the main reason he hated being short. It made him an easy target.

Of course, it’s not just short motherfuckers. No one likes being looked down on, being small in someone’s eyes. But when you’re actually small in stature, it makes it that much worse.

It was another reason why Pop loved telling stories about a little motherfucker giving it back to a big motherfucker.

I remember him telling me about a little guy he knew who had his life threatened one time while he was just waiting for a pizza. And it was actually the

dude working at the pizza joint who did the threatening.

As with most overbearing motherfuckers, this genius was trying to show out in front of the other geniuses he was working with. And like a bully with no second act, he wasted no time in resorting to disrespect. Where, instead of calling this grown man by his name, or by “sir,” he made it a point to address him as “Spark Plug.” Then, fancying himself a clever boy, he rinsed a couple laughs out of the always tired “You like pepperoni? ‘Cause I got some pepperoni for you. *Extra* pepperoni.” That type shit. Real *big man* shit.

There was just one problem. The little guy refused to respond. Leaving the pizza man with a choice. Either drop it or escalate.

“What’s the matter, Spark Plug? Don’t you know I’m just playing with you?”

But the little guy refused to play along.

“Ah, come on, Spark Plug. Can’t you take a joke?”

Again, he gave him nothing. And, by this point, the gag was starting to wear thin. The other guys had lost interest and were back doing what they had been doing before.

“Hey, boy. I’m talking to you.

Hey, boy! I said I’m talking to you.”

“Man, I’m just trying to wait on my pizza.”

“And I’m trying to shoot the shit with you, but evidently you’re too good to talk.”

The little guy just stared at the counter.

“Is that it? You think you’re better than me, motherfucker?”

“Please, just give me my pizza, and I’ll get out of here.”

“Oh, I’m gonna give you more than your pizza.”

The little guy continued looking down, at the counter. Staring at the menus, the napkins, the silverware.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you, boy.”

He just stared.

“I said look at me.”

Then the pizza man reached over the counter and grabbed him. Grabbed him by the shirt and the neck, like you’d do a kid.

He probably wasn’t even planning on hurting him. He probably just wanted to scare him or humiliate him.

Either way, the second he felt himself being pulled up onto the counter, Spark Plug grabbed a fork and shoved it into the pizza man’s eye.

“Right in that motherfucker’s eye.”

Pop laid those words out there and then didn’t say anything else. That was the end of the story.

I remember sitting there thinking about it for a few seconds before saying, “Damn.”

I never even got the little guy's name, which makes sense. It wasn't about the person; it was about the act.

This wasn't an act of self-defense. Well, let me rephrase that. When the cops show up, you say it was an act of self-defense. But this wasn't an act of self-defense.

It was an act of change.

There are people in the world that will try you as long as they know they can. As long as you let them. This was the kind of motherfucker that had been pushing up on people his whole life.

Spark Plug changed that shit. Right then and there. Right in that motherfucker's eye.

I remember how Pop told the story. He relished that image. Not necessarily because he thought the pizza man deserved to lose his eye, but that the pizza man represented so many men my father had grown up around who seemed to seek out their own validation in hurting those smaller or weaker than themselves.

He hated that shit. He fucking hated it. He hated that shit and yet he just couldn't see. Hating someone doesn't stop you from learning their ways.

Even though it doesn't make any sense, and you may never be able to admit it, sometimes the men you hate, sometimes the men that hurt you, are also

your role models. And you're stuck with a lifetime of having to clean up after the blood they've spilled.

I wish it were different. But right now it's not.

Shit talkers (and those who are quick on the comeback)

Part one: The Lotto

Pop used to play the lottery. He was just into his sixties and had worked in a factory for half his life.

At a gas station one time he was buying the Powerball, and some smart-ass (the way all smart-asses do when they think they're the first person to ever say some shit) tried to call him out on how dumb it was to play the lottery.

"You gonna spend *aaaall* that money like that."

"What ya mean?"

"Do you know the odds of you actually having your number come up out of *aaaall* those numbers?"

And I'll never forget Pop's answer.

"Yeah, I know the odds."

"Oh, yeah, what are they?"

"Well, way I figure it, they're a whole helluva lot better than me waking up tomorrow morning as CEO of Microsoft."

I still laugh every time I think of that shit. Not just because of how quick a comeback it was, but because of what it really said.

People ain't stupid. They know they're paying for a fantasy when they buy a lottery ticket. And as

long as they ain't spending too much of their check, I don't see anything wrong with it. A couple bucks for a moment or two of dreaming ain't all that bad.

Regardless of what the smart-asses think, regular folks ain't buying lottery tickets because they don't understand the odds of winning. They buy lottery tickets because they understand all too well that all that American Dream, meritocracy, just work hard and say your prayers, bootstrap bullshit is just what it is: some bullshit.

And even if they don't win, putting in a buck or two knowing some other poor motherfucker like you is gonna win and instantly become as rich as all the people who sleep just fine keeping you in your place? Well, that feels pretty fucking good too.

Part two: When the shit goes down

Years ago, my old man worked with a dude named Brent. And Brent was one of these doomsday fetish motherfuckers. The kind that like to daydream about the apocalypse, and how everyone is going to be fucked except for them.

He would always come in on Monday and tell my old man all the shit he had done over the weekend to prepare for the end. And then he would say, "What did you do, Willie?"

"I drunk a few beers, I reckon."

“Yeah, well, when the shit goes down, you’ll wish you’d done more than drunk a few beers.”

That was his thing. Always talking about “when the shit goes down.”

It was either “When the shit goes down, y’all are gonna wish you’d listened to me” or “Boy, I’m gonna be sitting pretty when the shit goes down.”

Pop liked the guy all right, but goddamn. You can only take so much of someone dancing on your grave.

So one Monday, Pop’s working on one of the machines when Brent comes over and starts shooting the shit. And like he knew it would, the conversation eventually found its way to dark times.

“So tell me, Willie. What are you gonna do when the shit goes down?”

“Ah hell, I didn’t want to tell you, Brent, but I worked it all out and we’re gonna be just fine.”

“What the hell you mean you gonna be fine?”

“Well, I got to thinking about what you said, and I figured you had a point. So I went out this weekend and bought me a gun.”

“A gun? What the hell you gonna do with one gun?”

“Well, I figure when the shit goes down, I’m going to head on over to your place and blow your head off. Then I’ll head back home, pack the old lady and the kids up in the car and then head back over to your place.”

Brent looked pretty dumbfounded.

“Hell, the way I see it, with all the food and supplies you been stocking up on all these years, we ain’t gonna have to worry about nothing.

Or at least that’s my plan anyways - when the shit goes down.”

Pop said Brent never mentioned the shit going down ever again.

Now, should Pop have said it? Probably not. Is it still one of my favorite stories? Absolutely.

Though, I should mention, as the years have gone by, I’m starting to see it in a different light.

“When the shit goes down” is a story tied to its time. What makes it funny (and relatively harmless) is the relative innocence in my old man’s co-worker.

Today, however, the story wouldn’t work. Today, it wouldn’t have mattered if my old man went out and bought a gun, because Brent would have already had thirty guns, and a grenade launcher.

Today the fetish isn’t about surviving. It’s about killing.

Even though Brent didn’t take the joke too well, it was still a joke.

But in the world we currently live in, there’s a for real fuckload of people out there who fantasize

about putting a bullet into another human being and not feeling the slightest bit of guilt about it.

And, hell, fantasize may be putting it lightly. It's not so much the absence of guilt, but an eagerness for the chance. I would go as far as to say there are folks actually praying for the day.

Praying for the day when they can find themselves killing others and able to get away with it.

And by *others*, you know what I mean.

In the last couple decades, the culture of the gun has been welded to the culture of bigotry, sold to the current Brents of the world as a new and improved masculinity. And despite whatever human progress we have achieved, this most recent incarnation of virile inadequacy makes the worst of masculinity in Pop's day look *way* less repugnant than it should.

Of course, I know I shouldn't be surprised. Like before, like always, these are the men who believe the world is theirs to defend (who else but its rightful owners). These are the men who believe, when it is all over, they will return to the place they belong. These are the men who believe with all their heart that they, and only they, have it all figured out.

And yet they haven't the slightest understanding of what has happened to them. They might as well be junkies, addicted to fear and its saccharine justifications. Their critical thinking skills

lost to a growing list of insecurities and a storm of propaganda.

They believe they are the last of the good men, yet so little of their conscience remains.

The only answer is more guns. The only answer is more guns. The only hope is that they will be granted the chance to be proven right.

In the meantime, they prepare for that day and pray for the strength to kill them all.

Part three: The robbery

The only good thing about a shit talker is coming back with something that shuts them up. But every now and then you run across a situation that doesn't leave you any option but to sit there and take it.

Mikey was working nights at a liquor store when one night he got robbed. He'd been robbed before, so he knew the routine. Eyes down, speak when spoken to. Don't get any ideas, just give them the money.

And that's exactly what he was prepared to do this night. Only this night, the man with the gun had something else in mind.

Pop said the man with the gun told Mikey he wanted him to smile for him. And not just that, but he wanted him to smile the whole time he was in the store.

He told him he wanted it to be genuine. No fake shit.

“If it looks fake, I’ll put a bullet through it.”

I already knew what was coming next. This was the moment in the story where Mikey, an otherwise ordinary dude, would have to pull some extraordinarily badass shit in order to save his own life.

And I was right. That’s precisely what happened. I just had no idea *this* is what he would do to get through it.

For, as soon as the man with the gun finished giving his instructions, Mikey made his move. And his move was to give the man with the gun exactly what he asked for.

Wide. Corners up. Beaming.

A smile. As pure as he could push forward. As sincere as the barrel commanded.

Mikey was familiar enough about armed robberies to know that unless you’re positively ready to die, you don’t call anybody’s bluff. So when the hammer came back on that .38 special, he understood there was no room for posing.

“Hmmm, that’s nice. You keep it just like that. The whole time.”

Mikey nodded and kept smiling. He then walked over to the cash register and kept smiling. He

put the bills in a bag and kept smiling. He handed the bag across the counter and kept smiling.

And that was it. He had done it. Just like he was told to. The only problem was, when he got the bag, the man with the gun didn't run off like they normally do.

Instead, he stood there. Pointing the gun. Second after second after second after second. He pointed the gun. And watched. Waiting. Daring him to break. Daring him to not smile.

Now, truth be told, the man with the gun probably wasn't in the store maybe four or five minutes, meaning Mikey probably only had to smile for about three and a half. But if you've ever tried smiling a full smile for even a minute, you know. That shit hurts. Hurts like hell.

Try it right now. Try it for a minute.

Then think about doing that for three and a half minutes.

It must have seemed like an eternity.

After a while it became so unbearable, Mikey was smiling through his tears. But he wanted to live, so he held it. As tears ran down and over that smile, he held.

Then, just like that, the man with the gun walked out. He didn't explain himself. He didn't say

anything insulting or witty or profound. He didn't say anything at all. He just left.

 Mikey let go of his smile and called the police.

 Pop said it was one of the coldest things he'd ever heard anyone do. It wasn't just some smart-ass joke. It was sadistic.

 To corrupt this most elemental embodiment of joy. Knowing how this would stay with him. Long after.

 The saddest thing about it, Mikey went back to work the next night. Pop said he needed the money.

 I remember the way he said it. It was a harmony I wished he didn't possess, that no one possessed.

 I remember thinking that the story was like some kind of bad metaphor.

 How many of us are robbed on a daily basis of our wages, our productivity, our ideas, our opportunities, our dignity, our rights? How many of us swallow that humiliation because we feel helpless to do anything about it?

 Not because they have a gun on their side (though they do have a few of those as well), but because they have the weight of the system on their side.

And, yes, we too are expected to smile as they do whatever they want to do.

It's not enough that both our economy and our government shit talk us while repeatedly betraying our expectations of human decency. It is that we are expected to feign happiness. To raise a glass and add cheers to unjust laws and unwritten rules. To pledge allegiance to all the myths that hold us hostage.

To force someone to smile is to force someone to lie. And you know. They expect the lie. The hope being that if we lie long enough, we'll believe it. We'll believe those smiles are real. More importantly, so will they.

Three and a half minutes. It's something you can comprehend, something you can see.

How often do we rationalize (and therefore normalize) *certain* violations to the point that we no longer even detect them?

Hierarchy

Part one: Honorable Discharge

I know, the same as with one or two of my own, there's a certain amount of license taken in the telling of an old story. Having said that, there's a difference between embellishment and bullshit. That's why I was always impressed that, after conferring on a number of occasions with family or family friend, Pop's stories always seemed to check out.

Still, every now and then, I had to wonder if a particular story was true. Especially if Pop was the only one there at the time.

I knew my old man was honorably discharged from the Air Force, and I knew he wasn't hurt. I have no real reason to disbelieve his telling of why he was sent home early. I do, however, wish I could have been there to see it firsthand. Not so much to verify his remembering on it, but more so just to witness the balls on that young man and the look on that other motherfucker's face.

Pop had volunteered. When he went down to sign up, they told him there was a good chance they could send him to Vietnam. He told them he didn't care. He just wanted to get away, go somewhere else.

Luckily, they didn't send him to Vietnam. I'm not sure where all he was sent to. I only know for sure that, at some point, he was stationed in Spain.

Anyway, according to the story, he was on base somewhere overseas (maybe it was Spain) and some high(er) ranking officer thought he would get his nut off by fucking with someone underneath him.

I think Pop said it was pushups. No reason, just a display of power. Showing out in front of the pack.

Too bad for that dude. All he got in return was a nice, fat "Go fuck yourself."

"What was that? I don't think I heard you right, boy."

Because isn't that what you do? Act like you didn't understand? Ask again so they know you mean business? An act of mercy almost. Obviously, they'll answer right this time. There's no way anyone would...

"I said, 'Go fuck yourself.'"

Now, I don't know how discipline works in the Service, but Pop said his response landed him in front of some military doctor, I guess to figure out if he was fucking crazy, talking like that to a superior. And then once it was evident that he was not actually out of his mind, he ended up sitting in front of some big wig on the base.

The big wig asked him if it was accurate that he told a ranking officer to go fuck himself. Pop said

yes. He then asked him why he would do such a thing. To which, Pop answered as honestly as he could.

“Because he was an asshole.”

“That’s how the doctor reported you described the encounter.”

“He was an asshole too.”

The big wig then asked Pop if he understood that admitting to such put himself at risk of being put in a hole for a nice long while.

Pop said, “You asked me what I said. That’s what I said.”

Then something miraculous happened. The big wig paused and just looked at Pop for a few seconds.

Then he said, “You really don’t want to be here, do you?”

“No, sir.”

“Is it this place, or is it the Service itself?”

“I guess it’s all of it.”

The big wig then told Pop that he respected that he was willing to be honest in the face of having his entire ass handed to him, and that he respected that not everyone was cut out to be a soldier.

“Son, I’m going to sign a few papers here, and you’re going to get to go home.”

“Thank you, sir. I would appreciate that.”

“But in order for me to do that, you’re going to have to promise me that you won’t tell anyone else ‘go fuck yourself’ before you get on the plane.”

“I believe I can do that, sir.”

And that was the end of my father’s career as a military man.

Now, whether that’s the exact way it went down I’ll never know. And I’m not sure it even matters how true his version of events was.

Because, see, even if a story isn’t true, there’s a reason why you tell it. There’s something you’re trying to say, some lesson you’re trying to impart.

And the lesson my old man was trying to bestow upon me is that *that* kind of hierarchy is a crock of shit.

I say *that* kind, because it wasn’t that my old man was some kind of anarchist or dissident. In fact, there were times in which I was quite disappointed in his deference to authority and the concept of hierarchy, including on matters of the military.

But whenever we talked about the way the world worked, he always stressed how much he hated someone using their status to fuck over on someone lesser on the food chain.

And that’s why, regardless of whether that shit really happened (which I actually believe it did), this is most definitely a true story. Not in the sense that I expect you to believe it too. But more in the

sense that there is an undeniable truth underlying it that should give us all hope.

For no matter the time, no matter the place, as long as a man can invite indignity or even injustice upon another simply due to his title or the ornaments on his sleeve, you can bet there's gonna be at least one wily motherfucker (with hundreds/thousands/maybe millions more on the verge of) telling that man or that system, in words or in deed, to "Go fuck yourself."

Part two: Poor but white

My old man told a cop one time that if he didn't stop fucking with him, he would come across the fast food counter he was working at and "stomp your goddamn brains out your head."

Pop said he hadn't given the cop a reason to start any shit; he must have just been trying to look big in front of his partner. Then again, he didn't need a reason. He had a badge.

Lucky for Pop, the cop's partner knew his buddy had gone too far and told him as much. Pop said it's the only thing that saved him from going to jail or worse.

But we all know it wasn't the only thing.

Pop may have come up poor, but he was still white. And even if you are stupid enough to believe a

black man could threaten a cop like that today and get away with it, you're not stupid enough to believe it could have happened back then.

From badges to bosses, my father told me countless stories about poor and working people getting taken advantage of, getting knocked down, getting ruined. Although he would never call capitalism out by name, he was clear-headed about class injustice.

Not one for talk of revolution, he saw economic oppression as one of the burdens of living, something immovable. Something he had to carry every day of his life. Something that left him cynical and often absent of hope.

That, of course, was only part of it.

Although he may have admitted it a few times when pressed, not one time do I remember him volunteering any reference to his privilege. When the truth was, in spite of whatever institutional hard knocks he had endured, Pop also walked around with privilege, every day of his life. It may not have been the same privilege as what rich people walk around with, every day of their lives. But it was privilege nonetheless. It was real, and it made the difference more times than he would have felt comfortable conceding to.

Just take this story and the story about getting let out of the Service. Pop chalked that shit up to

luck. Not the luck of being white, but luck like a fluke or a small miracle.

Like most of us, when Pop saw luck, he saw the exception and not the rule.

The exception was him getting away with some shit *despite* the food chain. The rule was the extra benefit of the doubt he received *because* of the food chain, or rather the adjacent food chain he rarely concerned himself with.

Luck is about the odds. And whether or not you like to say the words white privilege or address the consequences of institutional racism, deep down in your heart you know the fucking odds.

But what happens when so many of us don't acknowledge the odds? Well, I think you know that too.

A couple years before Pop told me this story, a buddy of mine actually punched a cop in the face and walked away without getting his wig split. He didn't even get arrested.

And wouldn't you know? When I heard about what happened, I (my father's son) didn't think about what would have happened had my buddy been black.

Instead, I only thought, "Wow, he sure was lucky."

Part three: We have to let you go

It was considered a good job. Pay was pretty decent. Benefits were solid. Lots of overtime. Good enough that you were willing to put up with the indignities.

Even then, there's a lot you can walk away from on the right day. The pension is what made you stay.

Like Christians long suffering for the promise of Heaven, that pension dangled in front of an hourly worker's nose every time they were forced to eat shit.

And that pension is what made the company look for any excuse that would hold up against the union contract to dump an hourly worker on their ass, especially if that hourly had seniority.

Sometimes, they would get creative. Creative enough that they could afford the extra insult of having the news delivered by some fresh out of college prick who had never worked a real day in his life.

Drill had to call him Mr. Davis. The kid couldn't have been 25, but he demanded a prefix.

Yet when Mr. Davis made the trek downstairs to introduce himself, he said, "I hear they call you Drill."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Mr. Davis."

"Yes, sir."

He asked if they could speak some place less loud. So Drill showed him over to the room where the janitors' supplies were kept.

"I guess this will do."

They both leaned against opposite walls, and the young Mr. Davis then proceeded to rattle off all the company's woes concerning competition overseas, government regulations, and industrial setbacks, sprinkled in with some Management School nonsense about the need to hit data markers and greater efficiency in factory workflow.

He then smiled, explained some bullshit loophole in the union contract, and said, "The guys upstairs wanted me to thank you for all you've done. You're welcome to work through the rest of the day, and we'll just cut you a check for severance. No hard feelings, Drill."

Quick and painless. Not even waiting for a response, Mr. Davis extended his hand.

Drill just looked confused and said, "You mean I can't come to work no more?"

In poorly rehearsed sympathy, Mr. Davis responded, "I understand that this may come as a surprise, Drill. But you know the company is really going through some tough times right now. It's really a tough time for everyone. And that's why we appreciate you being understanding about this."

"So you're saying I *can't* come to work?"

This time with a little less feeling, “Look, Drill. I really wish I didn’t have to be the one to tell you all this. But that’s the job I’ve been given. So I’d really appreciate you working with me here. It’s nothing personal. This is just a procedural thing.”

Now, I don’t know if Drill was really not understanding or whether he was just trying to make the young Mr. Davis squirm in his own shit. Either way, the third request for clarification was sure to wear on the kid’s nerves. “I just want to make sure I’m getting this straight. You’re saying I’m not going to be employed here anymore?”

“Yeah, dude. That’s what I’m saying. That’s what I’m trying to *tell* you.” Mr. Davis had finally lost his Management School composure.

Drill just looked at him.

The kid looked away and shook his head. “I’m trying to make this as easy as possible. I really don’t need a guilt trip; it wasn’t my decision. Just try to be mature about it.”

Drill just looked at him.

“Ok, I get it. This sucks. But it is what it is. Why don’t you just knock off early, and we won’t cut you for the time.”

Mr. Davis then turned to walk out, when Drill said, “Mr. Davis, sir. I just want to make sure I understand something, when you say--”

“What, man? What can’t you understand? No, you can’t come to work anymore. No, you’re not

employed here anymore. We don't need you. You're a worthless asset... Is that what you want me to say?... In case you haven't noticed, there's a lot of people getting laid off around here. And I didn't make that decision. I'm just the messenger.

So I would appreciate it if you could take it like a man and save yourself a little embarrassment.”

Drill looked downward. “Hmm.”

He then walked to the door.

Except when he got to the door, he didn't open it.

Seeing Drill turn the lock on the door, the kid said, “What are you doing?”

Drill turned around and began. “You said what you said. Now I'm gonna say what I got to say.”

“Open the door.”

“I give twenty-seven years of my life to this company. I ain't missed many days, and I ain't never got in any real trouble. Now, I know I may not be as smart or as important around here as you are--”

“Look I don't have to--”

“Nah, motherfucker, you do have to.”

Drill squared up on him, as Mr. Davis quickly shrunk into a listening pose.

“You see, my kid has medical problems and needs a lot of help. And my wife, she died giving birth to her. And that means there's only me... That's why I spent twenty-seven years in this fucking hole. Twenty-seven years of having people like you walk around

here and talk down to me. Like I'm some kind of dog or something. Well, I ain't no goddamn dog. I'm a man who's trying to come to work every day and do right by his little girl. And you motherfuckers gonna tell me after twenty-seven years you don't know me? Twenty-seven years, and my daughter ain't gonna be able to get the help she needs anymore? Well, let me tell you something. I may not be all that smart, but I know it ain't as simple as all that. I know there's a way. And you're a smart kid. You're college educated. So here's what you're gonna do. You're gonna figure out a reason why they can't let someone like me go, and you're gonna go upstairs and tell them that. And I'm gonna keep coming to work every day."

"Look, I know you're upset. But you have to understand there are certain things I can and can't do. And that's something I can't do."

"No, you can do it all right. You just don't want to do it. But you can do it. You can figure out a way to say the right thing, and they'll keep me on. And you're *gonna* figure that out."

"I told you, there's nothing I can do."

"Well then, I gotta kill you."

"Hey hey, man. I don't know what you think is--"

"Don't 'hey hey' me, motherfucker. You come in here and tell me that tomorrow this company doesn't know my goddamn name anymore? Like I'm nothing? Because if I can't put food on the table and

give my little girl the help she needs, I ain't nothing. So if that's what you're telling me, then I'm telling you - you gotta die. Because, to me, you ain't nothing."

By this time, Mr. Davis wasn't posing anymore.

"And if you think I'm just talking big, you're wrong. I will kill you dead as shit. And then I'll kill myself. And then my little girl will get the insurance money and social security, and my brother can afford to take care of her after I'm gone."

"Then why kill me?"

"Because I know you can convince them they need to keep my ass, *and* I know you don't want to get killed. But I'm telling you if you don't do this for me, I ain't gonna think nothing about taking your life, just like you didn't think nothing coming in here and taking mine.

And it don't matter if you tell plant security or the police or whoever. If I say you're dead, you're dead. Even if I gotta wait for it. Even if I gotta get someone else to do it. You need to fucking know. We in the same boat right now. And unless you can figure something out, we're both dead.

Now I'm gonna ask you one more time... Are you telling me - that tomorrow I can't come into work?"

A few seconds went by before Mr. Davis responded.

“You know what, Drill? I think I'm gonna put in a few words for you upstairs and make sure we don't lose such a valuable employee.”

Drill smiled. “That’s very nice of you, Mr. Davis. I'd really appreciate it.”

Then he stepped aside to let Mr. Davis pass. Softly adding before the kid could make it to the door.

“Son... don't call my bluff.”

Mr. Davis just looked at the door. “We’ll see you tomorrow, sir.”

“See you tomorrow, Mr. Davis.”

Now, with as many workplace shootings as we’ve had in this country, I shouldn’t like that story as much as I do. Hell, I shouldn’t like it at all.

And yet I do. I love it. I love it now like I loved it all three times Pop told it to me. And so did every person I ever told it to. Man or woman. Every one of them. Loved it.

So why?

Is it because we believe that Drill was just bluffing? That maybe he shouldn't have done it, but in the end he was able to keep his job (and keep providing for his daughter), so no harm no foul?

Or is it because we believe that Drill wasn't bluffing? And that he was doing whatever he had to do in that moment to defend what was left of his family?

I actually think it's the latter. Not that I believe that Drill would have been justified in killing that kid, or that anyone I told it to believes that. But when I say Drill was defending his family, I mean that he was defending against real harm. I believe he was defending against violence.

Whether bought-ass politicians will ever cop to it, regular people know that violence comes in more forms than what the cops will show up for.

Oil companies, pharmaceutical companies, vulture funds, foreclosure machines. You can't even keep up with the shit they pull on us, much less calculate the lives ruined and/or lost.

So when a man is faced with losing everything to a fucking loophole in a contract that only exists because our employers are soulless barnacles, it's hard not to root for a man like Drill.

I remember the factory giving my father a watch for hitting 25 years. I remember Pop looking at the engraving, saying, “Ain’t that some shit?”

“What is it, Pop?”

“How they gonna give me a goddamn watch?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that after 25 years at that motherfucker, I think I know what time it is.”

My father knew what irony was. And he knew that the major crimes in his country were pulled off by men in designer suits. The same kind of men who hired Ivy League lawyers to figure out a way to get rid of men like him and Drill before they could get a taste of their hard-earned pensions.

He knew the insults and the humiliation Drill had had to put up with. He had also put up with it, for 30 years.

I’m not going to go into all the shit he told me. I’ll just say it was enough for him to admit to me after his retirement that there was more than one time in which he had thought, himself, about killing somebody at work.

He had actually told me years before that he wasn’t surprised when there were workplace shootings. He said he was surprised that people weren’t snapping every day, three times a day.

I’d never known how much he hated being there. I’d never known the humiliation he endured.

When people talk about the violence that comes out of economic injustice, that's not some philosophical ivory tower shit.

From labor to the market, from church to the home, hierarchy often makes men brutal. It makes them creative with their brutality. And those who have not bore witness to the more jagged ends of that creativity are always surprised by the reactions of those who have.

And maybe that's what makes this story so good. The creativity. And the determination to not go out like a chump.

How many of us would have simply grit our teeth (or maybe even made a small scene) before helplessly clocking out and making peace with the violence being visited upon us? In other words, on almost any given day they can pull that same kind of shit on us (or really whatever kind of shit they want) and because *society* doesn't acknowledge it as violence, they know they can get away with it.

Well, not that goddamn day.

And not that motherfucker named Drill.

Lonnie Ray

I'm named after my father's father. I only know him from a few pictures. He died early, before I was born.

Considering the complexities in my relationship with my old man, I was always curious about Pop's relationship with Lonnie Ray. Yet it's something my father wouldn't give me. Even when I asked him, he would either change the subject or say something along the lines of, "Ain't nothing much to say."

It's not that he wouldn't talk about him at all, but it wasn't a subject he liked to reminisce about.

I do remember one time we were at my grandmother's house, and she had an old, framed picture of my grandfather. It was him and two other dudes. They must have been in their early twenties. They were trying to look cool; Lonnie Ray was in the middle.

They were dressed in suits and hats, the way men dressed at the time. They looked sharp.

I asked Pop who the other two guys in the picture were.

He just shrugged his shoulders and said (a little too) casually, "Gangsters."

I always thought that was a funny response. And of course it made me want to know more. Unfortunately, Pop was never in the mood to oblige.

What I know of my grandfather I had to cobble together from other members of the family. A few conversations with my aunt and uncle, a little from my oldest cousin. Most of it actually came from my mother.

If I'm doing the math right, my grandfather would have been a kid during the Depression years. He would have known what that kind of surviving was about. He would have seen what they had to do.

Poverty already gets its licks in on you. Yet having talked to my great great aunt at length about that string of years, I knew those times were especially traumatic (I'm actually surprised there hasn't been any scholarly work on Depression era PTSD).

It was something my Aunt Jessie never shook. It was something the children never shook.

I don't have a complete picture of all the things they did; I just know it was what they felt they had to do. And it would be a little too easy, if not unfair, for someone like me to judge the hustle that grows out of years so bleak.

All of which is to say that my grandfather was a hustler. He hustled to make ends meet and to make sure that neither him nor his family ever fell on such hard times again. Eventually he put together enough

to buy a small market down the way from their house. It wasn't much, and at the same time it was a lot.

And though there's this kind of badass connotation to hustling and being on the grind, running from poverty is not always a noble endeavor. After all, this was the man that sent his sons out sacking coal when they were both still losing their baby teeth.

That's not to say there weren't some pretty good stories from his days putting shit together (my favorite being the one about him fucking over on White Castle). But, as I get older and have to think about the security of my own family, I'm much more interested in how that drive, to never again find himself in that place, shaped his role as a father.

A little while after Pop died, my sister told me a story he had shared with her about his childhood. It was one I had never heard before, but one that explained a lot.

He had told her about the first time he ever got to fly a kite. I'm not sure what age it was, but from what she said he must have been young enough to not feel embarrassed about his joy.

He was in the yard and was by himself, which meant he had to figure everything out on his own. Which meant the second he got that baby to take off, it was a sweet sweet moment.

He said it couldn't have been up in the air for more than a minute before his old man came storming out of the house, yelling.

“Get that goddamn thing down right now. You're gonna scare the cows.”

That's all he said. And that's all he said because that's all that was needed saying. I'm not sure if it was even their cows. It might have been a neighbor's cows. I just know that cows were money, and money took precedence. And apparently that was the last time my father ever got to fly a kite.

That is, until I was a kid.

I used the word joy earlier because I only remember seeing joy in my father's face a couple times when I was a child. And one of those times was when he taught me how to fly a kite.

If I had known, I would have made a greater effort that day. Unfortunately, kites just weren't my thing, and I was of an age that I didn't know how important it would have been to fake interest.

I'm sure it disappointed him a little, seeing that it was one of the only things he had ever initiated we do together. Yet he didn't exactly push the issue when I handed the kite back to him.

I remember the smile on his face. It makes me cry just thinking about it. He was so goddamn happy.

I remember being confused. Thinking he was acting weird. It was strange to see my father in a

moment of joy, and sober. A moment that belonged to him.

I think about how a kite works. And how I didn't understand the magic of it. I saw it as work. And keeping it from hitting the ground made me anxious. I didn't understand. It's not about how long you can keep an object in the air. It's about it being in the air at all.

The point is not to steer something. It's to go with, something that is free. Watching this object dance in the wind. Watching yourself. The joy of flying is not on the ground. It's when you recognize. The kite is not the object. You're the kite. That's you up there. Lost and graceful.

Pop told me about sitting behind the counter at the market on weekend nights as a teenager, wondering if this was the night he would be shot. He wondered every night.

When someone opened the door, that's what he wondered.

My father never got to be a kid. Not really. Not in the way that I did. Not in the way he deserved.

There was always something owed. Always some money that had to be made. Always something.

He didn't complain about this directly. Instead, he told me that his father had it way worse than him. It's the reason why he put up with working

a job for half his life that made him want to throw the other half into a bottle. Because his old man had seen it way worse.

It makes sense to me now. That he would excuse the way he was treated because his father had had it worse. It's the same excuse he used for the way he treated us.

Because he had had it worse.

My father loved his father. And yet I know what he thought of him.

I know because of a story he told me about his cousin. Back when they were kids, his cousin thought the world of my grandfather. Thought he hung the moon.

One day, Pop asked him why he thought he was so great. Then, as part of the story, he listed off all the reasons why his father was not a man to be looked up to, much less adored. It was the only time I ever heard him talk bad about his old man.

It was brief, but striking. Less an admission than a confession almost. Then he gave me his cousin's answer.

"Because he stuck."

His cousin's old man had walked out on them. And for all my grandfather's faults, he was at least there. It meant something that he was there for them. And Pop realized, one more time in his life, that as bad as he had it, somebody else had it worse.

That was always the lesson. Appreciate what you have, even if it's not much. Some people don't have that. It meant something to have more.

It's an important lesson for sure. To exercise one's empathy is to build a foundation for community, for solidarity.

But is it enough?

My father saw giving us a better life as not being as bad as his father. And he did just that.

But is it enough? Is it enough to not be as bad? Shouldn't we have to do better than just a little better?

My grandfather drank hard liquor, ran around on my grandmother, and was abusive. My father drank beer, he didn't run around, and he wasn't as abusive.

Pop went to work every day and made sure we got an education. And I know he really did want better for me, in a much different way than his father had wanted better for him.

But I also know he had more to give than what he gave. What he offered us was not what he had the potential to offer. I'm not sure whether he didn't know it or didn't believe it, but he had more. It was there.

And it's just not enough to be better than someone else, especially when that someone else had less. It has to be about your own potential.

And yet I know my old man thought he was doing the best he could. He thought that because we *all* like to think that.

And though it's rarely true, there's a reason why we feel that way. And that's because the world we live in is fucked up. It's heavy, and it's unfair. And it's oftentimes brutal.

The world my father came up in is more fucked up than the one I came up in. And the world my grandfather came up in was a fucking basketcase.

My grandfather told my father, before he died, that he was proud he never killed anybody. It's one of the only things my old man ever mentioned. And it's something he mentioned casually.

I remember when he told me, I thought, "What a hell of a thing to be proud of."

But now I think I understand.

My old man wouldn't tell me stories about his father. Still, that sentence provided me with a great deal of context. And I believe if we are to learn from others' stories (even from those we think may have little to offer), it's important that each generation seek out and hold onto as much context as possible.

My father loved his father despite all the things he told his cousin. He loved him because he knew the context, and he held onto that perspective long after he was gone. I guess I'm doing something similar for my old man with this book.

The difference is that I'm not making excuses.
If I make excuses for my old man, I'll make
excuses for myself. And I don't want my child to ever
feel the need to make excuses for me.

I wish I could have met my grandfather. I
would have liked to have heard his stories. I think I
know now why my father wouldn't tell me any.

Dollhouses

Of all the stories Pop told me about bad motherfuckers, all of those motherfuckers were white. All except for one.

Richard was a black dude Pop worked with at the plant, and someone he spoke of with immense reverence.

He never told me how Richard got his reputation. He just said that, even with all the shit talkers and macho assholes he worked around, nobody fucked with Richard. Nobody.

To my delight, the story he did tell me about Richard was far more interesting than the usual highlights of some epic beer joint brawl.

Richard had a hobby. And every now and then he would share what he was working on with Pop.

One day, it would be a door. Another day, it would be a chair. Another day, a set of curtains. Each project undertaken with the most delicate care.

A labor so fulfilling it couldn't just be told; it had to be shown. And so Richard would bring in this labor. Each piece, carefully wrapped in a special cloth. Each piece, small enough that he could still pack a sandwich (both carried in his lunch pail).

Richard, the man who everyone knew not to fuck with, had a dollhouse.

Actually, he didn't have a dollhouse. He had multiple dollhouses.

While most of his friends were out fishing or watching the game or getting tanked at the bar, Richard was at home decorating a tiny bedroom or painting the numbers on a miniature mailbox.

An obvious passion, he took each and every detail gently serious. And the way he described everything. Like it was real.

It was as if he had grown up there.

As you might expect, Pop was caught off guard the first time Richard started talking about it. At the same time, he was touched that Richard felt comfortable enough to share with him. And when Richard shared why, it really got to him.

Richard told Pop about his life. Not all of it, but enough for Pop to understand.

There were things he needed to run away from. Things that wouldn't let him breathe.

And yet those things wouldn't allow him to forget.

The best he could do, if he was going to survive, was find a way to not remember. So for years, that had been his life, striving to not remember.

Of course, most of the things we do to survive that kind of pain leave little room for life. With few options left, Richard made the choice to imagine.

To make believe. To create. A neighborhood. A world. An existence. A million miles away from the hurt he couldn't bury. Something that didn't resemble all the things he knew.

My father understood that kind of hurt. He had seen men deal with it by drinking and drugging themselves into the ground. He had seen them deal with that kind of pain by causing pain to others, including the ones they professed to love the most.

So many of those men were his role models. So many of those men left their own examples of what it meant to be a man.

But so did Richard. It was stories like this, memories like this, that weighed on the other side of the scale. It's what allowed our conversations to be more meaningful, more enjoyable. It's what allowed my father to reach for change.

Most of the men in my father's life shared about the hurt they had done to others. Richard had shared with Pop the hurt that had been done to him. He was secure enough to be vulnerable in front of another man. He was brave enough to not give in to everything that was trying to pull him down.

Of course, this isn't a story of triumph. Richard needed help, probably a lot of help. He

needed to find a healthy way to deal with his past and proceed into a future outside the escape he had found in that neighborhood of dollhouses.

One thing he needed and was able to find, in my father, was someone to listen. Years later my father found that in me. That's what allowed us to start over.

I wish I could find Richard today. I would hug his neck and tell him thank you. Because I don't want to think about what mine and Pop's relationship, particularly our last few years, would have been like without the few people like Richard in my old man's life.

Yet as touched as I am by this story, to know my father shared that with another man, even more that he shared that with a black man, I should admit that, in the end, this was more or less a story about *a black friend*.

Not to say their moments were not real. They were. Their moments were ones of trust and understanding. But they were just that. Moments.

My father's relationship with black people and other non-whites, and in particular his acknowledgement of racism's impact, was in moments.

Like when my old man told me that the one recording artist that could get all the rednecks in a beer joint singing together was Fats Domino, and the

conversation that followed regarding black musicians' contributions to both American culture and the American psyche.

And?

Where was the gratitude for this contribution, beyond merely thinking or possibly saying out loud that old Fats was “one of the good ones”? If Fats Domino were just some cat off the street, would he have commanded the same respect in those same beer joints? Fats Domino's talents were undeniable. Still, if Fats had taken on the activist path of a Paul Robeson or a Nina Simone, I doubt that memory of “Blueberry Hill” would have been as sweet.

Moments. Like my old man expressing his heartfelt admiration for Bernard Hopkins, his life lead and the example left. To come out of prison and not only beat the odds, but to become a champion. To not have the raw athletic gifts of other belt holders, and yet to become an all-time great based on nothing more than discipline, determination, and a no-shit attitude. To keep winning, to even have his best days in the ring, long long after he was in his fighting prime.

And?

As much affection as my father felt for Bernard Hopkins, it was a bootstraps admiration. What did it mean to “beat the odds”? Was it him beating the odds of being an ex-con? Or was it him beating the odds of being a black ex-con? Was it him beating the odds of the boxing game, going from rags to riches? Or was it really him beating the odds of being a black man in America?

My father saw B-Hop as the exception to the rule but didn’t spend too much time examining which rule, or who made the rule. We didn’t talk about all the reasons why young black men find themselves in the criminal justice system nor what it means to their lives thereafter. We didn’t talk about institutional racism and codified discrimination. We talked about what a success Bernard Hopkins was, but not *all* the reasons why. For every B-Hop opponent my old man and I rooted against, there was never a mention of that (extra) opponent he and every other person of color had to face down each day of their entire lives.

Moments. Like Pop choosing to sit with the black workers in the cafeteria when he first got on at the plant or sitting on a black man’s shoulders at a Lynyrd Skynyrd concert.

And?

What worth do mentions of this type offer? Proving my father was ok with proximity to black voices, to black bodies? Did that make him less racist than other whites who couldn't stomach such *indignities*? Certainly it did. To what degree was he *less racist*? I'm not sure. It's a low fucking bar with us. I know it and you know it.

When I would hear him talk about this stuff, I was proud of him. Because that's how racist the world I grew up in was. For what more were these than moments? Acknowledgements and anecdotes. Each one superficial, unanchored.

Sure, I remember my father damning cases in the news of blatant discrimination or brutality against black men and women. But I also remember him being unable to contain his visceral hatred for men like Jesse Jackson.

He preferred to see the individual story, but not the trend that story supported. He would shake his head and say how bad it was, as long as the story only went on so long. As if black people were only allowed so much time for each grievance.

And if the story went on long enough, he would find himself on the defensive, posturing about how hard he had also had it.

My old man despised the hierarchy that had been so many times used against him, yet he tacitly endorsed the hierarchy that had been used against

people of color. And when people of color were loud in their resistance to *that* hierarchy, the hierarchy he absolutely had benefited from, he was annoyed.

It wasn't necessarily the content of their claim that he couldn't take. It was how they came to stake it. He could accept a black leader demanding justice; he couldn't accept a black person doing so with flair.

He knew they were right. The brazenness of their truth telling, though, felt like a personal attack. As if he was having his nose rubbed in injustice.

I'm sure if you would have asked him why he felt this way, he couldn't have told you. After all, he was willing to acknowledge what racism had done to them. The problem was that he wasn't willing to acknowledge what racism had done to him.

The first school my father sent me to had to quit conducting the annual "slave auction" fundraiser shortly before a black student was old enough to be in it. Just like my father quit using racial slurs around me the year I switched to the local public school and would for the first time have classmates who were black.

The first school was private. It was a Christian school with small class sizes. My old man had made the decision early on that he would work his ass off to put his children in a school that he knew would give them a good education.

That's at least what he told us. The fact that the school was almost entirely white was hardly a coincidence. So many of my classmates came out of that school, out of that setting, religious and racist. Or should I say religiously racist. They would certainly never admit to the racism part. But who really does?

Luckily, I was given the chance to unlearn some of that shit before it became harder to unlearn.

I just attended my 25-year high school reunion and was able to embrace some of the men and women that saved me from who I know I could have become. They don't know they saved me, but I know it. I know it because I'm still unlearning.

The irony is that Pop didn't send me to the local (at the time about 80 percent black) public high school because he had a change of heart. He did it because he went on a 12-week strike the summer before my freshman year and couldn't afford two sets of tuition at the Christian school.

It wasn't Pop who rescued me from that setting. It was a bunch of greedy shiteels trying to take away his benefits.

It was the consequences of economic hierarchy and the class dynamics of a labor dispute that offered me the education I was so desperately in need of. All of which allowed me to ask questions years later about religion, racism, and capitalism.

Questions I'm not sure I would have ever felt comfortable asking.

I was taught in a Christian school that doubt was a sin. My teachers then proceeded to equate certain questions with doubt.

I think about how much that robbed me of in those important early years of development. Likewise, I think about how much of our lives racism robs from us.

It makes me think about Richard's dollhouses. Richard had constructed a world he could escape to, because the one outside his imagination was so awful.

How many of us, my father included, myself included, have chosen at various times to live in the same world that Richard had to flee? How many have stayed in that constructed world because of how disturbing we are *told* it is outside our pathetic ideologies?

And how many of us might still be wards of those same ideologies, growing our capacity for suspicion and hatred, equating our questions with doubt, all if not for circumstances so random and/or ironic? Circumstances, at the time, we might not have even noticed.

Ain't my bag

David had been, as Pop put it, big man on campus. Star of the football team, a real high school hero. All the girls had wanted to date him, and all the guys yadda yadda... A big motherfucker pretty much his whole life, he was a beast on the field. And the few times he had to, he'd shown he could take care of himself off the field. He was what they used to call a man's man.

The reason why Pop liked him so much is because none of that shit went to his head. He acted like a normal dude and treated people right, even when half the school was lining up to kiss his ass.

One night, years after he'd hung up the cleats and the helmet, David ended up sitting next to Pop at the end of the bar. Pop said they laughed and talked until they were both head hanging drunk.

Then about a half hour before closing, David leaned over and said real quiet-like, "Hey, Willie. Suck your dick."

Between the jukebox and the other drunks competing with the jukebox, it was just loud enough that Pop couldn't be sure he'd heard what he thought he'd heard.

"Run that by me again."

David leaned in a little further. "Suck your dick."

He'd heard him right all right.

"Naaaah, David. That ain't my bag, baby."

"Oh my God, Willie, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to... I don't know what I was thinking."

"It's ok, David. No problems."

"No, Willie, I shouldn't have said that to you. I'm--"

"It's ok, David. No problems."

They both just sat there.

"Let me get you another beer, Willie."

"You don't have to do that, David."

"I want to, Willie. I do. I want to."

"Ok."

David ordered two more beers. Him and Pop sat there for a little while, drinking in silence. Finally, David leaned over again. "Please don't tell anybody I said that, Willie."

"Don't worry, man. I ain't gonna say nothing."

"I just want you to know, I'm sorry I--"

"It's ok, David. I ain't never had no problems with you. I ain't got no problems with you now."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure, David. No problems."

Pop took another swig of his beer and never spoke another word about it until almost thirty years later when he told it all to me.

Now, like all stories he would tell (especially while he was drinking), after I had heard it once, I

would end up hearing it more than a couple more times down the road. And even though I was impressed by my old man's reaction to David the first time I heard it, the second and third time around I started to feel a little conflicted about it all.

It always felt kind of like he was patting himself on the back for not being a homophobe. And knowing where he came from, that may not be all that bad. But that's what makes the beginning of the story just as important, if not more important than its end.

See, I know I could have started this story with his old friend sitting down next to him at the bar. But I included those first two paragraphs because that's the way Pop told it. And he told it that way because it wasn't as much about him getting approached as it was about who had approached him.

In other words, this wasn't a random story where Pop was simply casual with the situation. It was a story about the moment he realized there was no real difference between him and the man sitting next to him, the man who he'd just found out was gay.

And, again, that being an actual realization may not be all that shameful of an admission, knowing where my old man came from. But there's a reason why it was so easy for Pop to have *that* moment with *that* man.

To my father, David was the epitome of masculinity. Part tough guy, part bad motherfucker, he seemed to check off every last macho box you

could think of. That's why outing himself didn't change anything in my father's eyes. David was the same man, because he had always been a man.

A few years after Pop told me that story, I had a conversation with a friend's husband about his overt homophobia. I asked him how he would feel if his son came out to him. He said he'd be pissed and wouldn't know what to do. Not so much because he couldn't accept that it was true, but that after his son came out he would have a hard time seeing him as a man.

For him, it wasn't about love or sex or God or any of that morality shit. It was about his definition of manhood. In his eyes, his son being gay would have meant the ruining of his manhood.

Like most men I grew up around, my father couldn't stand to see a "flamboyant" gay man. He would always say something about how he didn't care what people did, he just didn't see why they had to throw it in his face like that.

It wasn't until the talk with my friend's husband that I understood he wasn't really referring to their sexuality. Similar to the way he winced at the boldness of black leaders calling out racism, it ran my father (and men like my father) up a wall to see a gay man hold the same truth before his eyes and demand that he look.

“I am a man.

This is to say, ‘I am a human.’

The reason why I have to ‘throw this in your face’ is because men like you refuse to see that you’ve been wrong about what makes you either. You’ve been wrong about it your entire life.”

I think about the fear in David’s voice, asking him not to tell anyone. It’s probably the first time my father had ever heard him scared.

I think about the first two paragraphs of this story, and how it would not have been the same story without those two paragraphs. Those first two paragraphs are what made David worthy of Pop’s acceptance.

I think about the fear in David’s voice and how it shouldn’t take someone like David for someone like my father to acknowledge the humanity of an entire swath of the population.

I think about what’s changed since those days, and what hasn’t.

In those days, David couldn’t risk anyone knowing. In those days, when you thought of a man you thought of David.

And David was a man. But not because of those first two paragraphs.

I wonder when or if he ever came out.

There was no reason for it

I'd gone over to hang out with Pop. We were watching the news. Some anchor was interviewing some pundit. It was pretty standard. Except this one pundit was on fire. A lot of the usual suspects phone it in for the paycheck, but this one had her shit together. I hadn't seen her before and was immediately impressed with her take on foreign policy. Quick, nuanced, and no bullshit.

She was just finishing up a point about our government's relationship with the Saudi royal family when my father blurted out, "Whose dick did you suck to get on TV, you whore?"

It was out of nowhere, and violent.

I just looked at Pop.

He sat there for a second. He almost looked surprised.

He put his head down. "I shouldn't have said that."

It reminded me of how old white people sometimes exhibit starkly racist language when they pick up Alzheimer's. It's both shocking and embarrassing for family members, all scrambling to assure the black nursing home staff, "I swear I don't know where this is coming from. My entire life, I never heard her say anything like that."

And some of the time they're telling the truth. Some of the time they aren't aware of what was buried deep inside of their loved one, going back all the way to their childhood.

I don't know if it was a person or persons, or if it was just the world in general, that put that kind of misogyny in my father, but I know it wasn't buried. It was just something he had learned to suppress. And while I believe that suppression was conscious, I'm not sure if he understood why he had those kinds of feelings in the first place. I certainly don't imagine he ever took the time to ponder it.

We were just sitting there, quietly watching TV together. There was no reason for it. It just came out.

That was years after the divorce. Years after he owned up to why she could never come back, why she could never forgive him.

I remember fleeing. Her mouthing the words "get ready to go." I was to put on my shoes and wait until he went into the bathroom to take a piss. We had it down to where we would be out of the driveway before he even knew what happened.

Sometimes we had a place to go. Sometimes we had to find one. I can still remember the drive. Like it was last night. Listening to the radio with the

windows rolled down. Random streets and cool night air. I know I was a child, but it's a hell of a thing to be nostalgic about.

My mother was doing her best to not blackout while she was driving.

My father should have served time. He beat my mother.

After I was born, he quit. Yet what came after was worse. You can ask any torture victim.

Assault and battery is a crime because it has been done enough to men to make it one. There is, however, no sentence for psychological abuse within the home.

There is no sentence for language.

That's the part I witnessed. Words so hurtful they would outlive the man who spoke them.

I knew about the way things had been before because my mother would tell me about it when we were fleeing. She said, "Bruises heal."

She was trying not to blackout while she was driving.

By the time my mother finally divorced my father, things were different. He still drank, but he was no longer abusive. That was around the time when Pop and I were starting to have real conversations.

It seems too easy to say he wasn't the same person. He was the same person. He had the same potential, that same capacity. He just wasn't making the same choices.

In the years that followed, we would build a relationship. It wasn't really repairing what had been done, and it wasn't really starting over. I'm not sure either is possible.

I don't really know what it was. I just know that, for most of my childhood, I hated my father. Yet I loved him before he died.

So how do I square that? How do I square loving someone who hurt my mother so bad that just witnessing it was a trauma I've never fully gotten past?

My mother loved me and sacrificed for me in a way no one else in my life ever could. She made sure I was able to explore my interests and curiosities. She let me take chances. She listened to my nonsense. She made sure I was able to play. She gave me a childhood. And she did that in the middle of all that pain.

I can still hear the words. So I know she can still hear the words.

My mother endured all the hurt my father could give her because at the time she thought that was the best thing she could do for her children. And as much as I wish she hadn't, I understand why she

did. And I can never ever tell her thank you or I love you enough to repay that.

So how do I square it?

Am I supposed to take into consideration where he came from and try to understand how he ended up this way? Does it matter? Could that ever matter?

If I did take that into consideration, I would know that my father had no excuse for not comprehending what verbal abuse can do. From work, from bullies, from authority, from his father. He knew. He was surrounded by it. He told me what it did to him. And yet he let them become his teachers.

Am I supposed to give him the credit owed a dog who's been beaten and becomes mean?

No. My father was not a dog. He was a man. And he did what so many men, what so many weak men, do. He took his feelings of powerlessness out on those with less power in *his* life. He repaid the ones that hurt him by hurting the ones he swore to himself that he loved.

My father endured his own pain to provide us with a life better than his. He did that because he loved us. I know that.

But he didn't change for us. Not when we needed him to.

He had the will to provide for us. He didn't have the will to not hurt us.

So how do I square this?

If I told you I was going to befriend a stranger who had done the things my father had done to his wife, you'd think there was something wrong with me. If I told you that I thought that person was worth being friends with, you'd wonder if I was excusing their behavior.

At the very least, you might question how I could become close with that person.

So why is it any different for my father? There is nothing logically that says you have to apply a different standard of justice to family. But we do, don't we?

Is it that my father deserves it from me, but not from you? Or does my father deserve nothing, and those actions constitute the entirety of who he was?

Is a person's humanity locked inside their worst moments?

Is there time to make, something more than what we've known? Or is it always too late?

Could there be room for reconciliation? Could there be room for redemption? Or what if these have yet to be sought?

Can you still love that person? Can you love the humanity left in them?

Like King believed in Christian love for the cops standing across the bridge from him, can I love someone who has done so much damage? Is it not that kind of love that allows for forgiveness?

Of course, I'm no longer religious, and I don't believe in forgiving someone who hasn't asked for it. Nor do I believe you owe someone forgiveness just because they do ask for it.

Having had to say he was sorry to my mother so many times before, I don't know if my old man saw much worth in forgiveness. What he did seek was a chance to do something different. Not really a second chance; that was already long gone. But a chance to not waste the time he had left on this earth, the time he had left with us. To give us something that he should have but hadn't.

I knew why my mother couldn't give him that. She even tried, for a while. But it wasn't something that she found, and it wasn't something she had to find.

She did, however, want me to have a relationship with my father. Like Pop's cousin, her father had walked out on them. And having reached out to see if there was more there and having gotten in return years of silence, she knew the harm in not knowing.

Sure, I didn't *have* to give him that either. I could have just told him to go fuck himself. Like I would have a stranger.

Yet I didn't.

Was it because I wanted to understand him?
Was it because I wanted to understand myself?

Was it about helping him? Hoping he would change? Was it that I wanted something better for him?

Or was it just because he was blood and that was enough to make the time?

Are we not often forced, or at least succumb to the cultural weight of family, to continue sharing space with a person that has wronged us? And is it not that time and proximity which stop us from closing our eyes to the threads we have in common, even when we have tried so hard to deny them?

It is easy to damn someone to hell when you do not have to breathe their air. Every formerly estranged family member knows this. Every former zealot knows this. Every former bigot knows this.

Believe me. I'm a little bit of all three.

Come to think of it, maybe *that's* why I made the time. Maybe I knew in my heart I too would need others, one day, to offer me a chance to prove the rest of my humanity. To give me a chance to do something different and warrant the entertaining of my latter contributions.

Anyway, for some reason, for whatever reason, I made the time. And I'm glad I did. My mother was right. It made a difference in my life.

As I write this book, I'm still realizing the extent to which our time together mattered.

And yet as meaningful an exercise reflecting on these stories has been, I wish there would have been just as many pages about Tough Dames and Bad Broads.

Granted, it might not have been the same kinds of stories, but I know for certain there were strong women in my father's life. And like it is for far too many women still today, the true manifestation of their strength was often lost in the assumptions that underlie the roles they were assigned.

This is not to essentialize or beatify the women in my family. They all had their own flaws. They all had their own fuck ups. But that's what makes the load they carried and the way they sacrificed that much more impressive.

Be it my own family or the other houses I grew up in (and I bet if you look around your own, you'll testify to the same), so many of our women, for reasons rarely of their making, prove to be far tougher motherfuckers than our men ever will. And I believe a good deal of my most confused/challenging years

would have been a far sight different had I been hearing their stories as well.

A long and unfulfilling conclusion

Hyenas

Derrick Bills may not have been the baddest motherfucker my old man ever met. He was, however, bad enough that if you knew him, or had at least heard about him, you probably weren't going to try pushing up on him.

Now, part of being that bad meant that Derrick could hang out in places most people would be scared to step foot in. The kinds of joints you might get gassed up enough to visit on a dare, and then you might just get your ass rolled up in a carpet and dumped in the woods.

Anyway, this was the kind of joint Pop was in. Sipping on a beer, alone at a table, waiting on an old friend to come through.

I'm not sure whether Pop showed up early or Derrick was just running late. Either way, it didn't take long for the hyenas to start circling.

I guess they saw a little guy by himself and figured it was easy pickings. Pop was a stranger and nobody else but the bartender was around.

Like usual, it started with questions. Bullshit ones, the kind you grin when asking.

Pop answered the first question. The second question he just said politely that he didn't want any trouble.

When the third question came (that is, after they stopped their laughing), that's when Pop knew it was time to make a move. There was five of them, each one bigger than him. And not being sure whether they meant real harm or just wanted to toy with him, Pop wasn't looking to hang around and find out.

When he got up from his seat, they started to move in. They were standing between him and the door, and there really wasn't anywhere for him to run.

So not ten minutes into sitting down in this place, Pop found himself swinging a metal chair at five motherfuckers' heads.

Now, if you've ever had to swing a chair before, you know that, even with the adrenaline going, you can only effectively keep five assholes at bay for so long. Lucky for Pop, before one of them could get a good rush in on him, the door flew open behind them and, "Hey, goddamnit!"

All five of them turned around ready to whip whoever's ass was dumb enough to take that kind of tone. Yet when they saw who had taken it, all five of them got ready to eat their own shit.

"Oh, hey, Derrick. How's it going?"

"How's it going? Motherfucker, how do you think it's going? I come in here to see my old friend and I see that he's got to swing a fucking chair around

his goddamn head to keep you assholes from putting hands on him?”

“We’re sorry, Derrick. We didn’t know he was with you.”

“Sorry’s ass. I’ll smack the shit out of you, boy.”

The dude just put his head down. Two minutes before, he was the ringleader. Now he wasn’t shit.

“That’s right, you better put your head down. In fact, why don’t y’all get the fuck out of here before my friend and I stomp all your goddamn asses.”

Ten minutes later, Derrick was drinking a beer, shooting the shit, not thinking a thing about the five guys who had my father ten minutes earlier almost shitting his pants.

Do you need me to take care of this

I've known a couple of guys in my life like Derrick. I've even had to rely on a couple of them to keep some older and bigger dudes from beating my ass. And while it may be thrilling to watch a bunch of puffed-chest shit talkers instantly bow down to just one person, it's scary to imagine the hurt one has to accumulate to get that kind of reputation.

Of course, the waiting for a bad motherfucker to show up and save his ass wasn't the most important part of my old man's story. It was the swinging of the chair.

From Stanley defending his body to Joe defending his old lady to Drill defending his job (and thus his daughter), if Pop believed something was yours to defend, especially when you only got so much, he understood doing all you had to do to defend it.

I remember him asking me one time, "Do you need me to take care of this?"

I was fifteen and some old boy had pulled up in our driveway, jumped up out of his ride and was asking for me.

He was older, bigger, and from the look in his eyes, my father could tell that he hadn't showed up to play video games.

And Pop was right. The dude knew I used to go with his girlfriend and knew that we were still

close. So when he couldn't find her anywhere around, he figured she might be with me. Worse, I knew the dude had a hot temper and could have most definitely beat the fuck out of me, and quite possibly could have beat the fuck out of Pop.

But that's not what scared me. What scared me was "Do you need me to take care of this?"

Although I was sweating bullets, my father wasn't. He knew that old boy was dangerous. He sized him up and knew that fighting him was a serious risk.

And he calmly said, "Do you need me to take care of this?"

I knew what that meant. I knew why he was calm. And I knew the situation didn't warrant anything near that.

I said, "Ain't nothing wrong, Daddy. I got it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, Daddy. Don't worry about it."

"OK."

I walked outside and cleared it up with the dude, and he got back in his car and left. No problems. The whole thing was over in less than a couple minutes.

And in those two minutes, the whole time I was thinking, "Please don't get aggressive. Please don't get loud." I knew my old man was in the kitchen, watching out the window. Waiting. Calmly.

I was his kid. And even if it was over something as small as an unjustified asswhooping, my old man was willing to go down that road to defend me.

I think about the asswhooping my old man would have got in that bar and how scared he was, swinging that chair.

I think about how much worse he would have taken in prison. And how calm he was, offering to face such a possibility.

All that love and instinct. It feels like a betrayal to acknowledge how shortsighted it was. For him to be there for me in a moment, only to risk not being there for so long after. To try and be a good father with an act that could end up leaving your family high and dry.

And, goddamn, just how irrational it would have been. After all, that old boy was just a kid himself.

Then again, I don't want to be self-righteous. Twenty-five years later, I would understand that feeling. To feel like you would do anything. And yet I now see the irony in my father's devotion.

He didn't even know who I was. He knew *what* he was defending, but he didn't know *who* he was defending.

He just knew he loved me. He just knew he was supposed to.

Violence

I think I was thirteen. I was sitting on the couch. Pop was sitting in the chair. We were watching TV. He was half lit.

I don't remember exactly what I said that set him off. I just remember he didn't like the way I answered a question. He thought I was being smart with him.

He stood up out the chair and started talking shit to me, daring me to be a smart-ass again. I didn't say anything.

Then he got up in my face and said, "What, you ain't got nothing to say? You ain't gonna say nothing?"

Then he slapped me.

It was a short slap. More with his fingers than his palm. More forceful than hard.

And yet it hurt. His hand was rough from working. He knew how to send the message. The message of course wasn't pain. It was humiliation. It was him showing me how little power I had. I can still remember it, like it just happened.

I gave him what he expected. Tears welled up in my eyes. Enough that they couldn't hold them.

And as I felt the heat swarming in my face, I could see he was pleased with himself. It had been a long time since he had slapped someone like that, that

someone being my mother. I imagine he enjoyed the familiarity of it.

What he didn't expect was me jumping up and yelling, "Don't you *ever* hit me again! Ever!"

I knew in my head this was the moment. I had heard other guys talk about it. I had seen it in movies. This was definitely it. Shit was about to change. He had to realize he couldn't do this anymore.

Just like I expected, he looked surprised. He must have thought I was just going to sit there and take it, like I had taken everything else before. But not this time.

Even though I was only thirteen, I was pretty strong. I was already as big as he was. I played multiple sports and was coordinated. And he was half lit.

I stared at him. As serious as I had ever looked at him in my life.

He just smiled and put his arms out. Hands lowered, palms forward. Almost like asking for a hug.

"Mmmmm. You wanna fire me up?"

His smile got bigger.

"Then - fire - me - up!"...

I used to fantasize about killing him. Thinking how I could pull it off. My go-to was pushing him through the living room window. I figured the glass

would do enough that, if I had to finish the job, it wouldn't be that hard.

This was that moment.

And when I saw his face, in that moment, it caused me to look inside myself. I could tell that he wasn't bluffing. He was ready for whatever came after that.

I finally realized. I was not. All the daydreaming and telling myself what I would do when the time came just blew away like a tiny statue of ash.

I was scared and full of shit. I ran outside to the utility room and cried for an hour and a half, contemplating whether I should run away from home.

Drinking and Violence

I don't really know what masculinity is or is supposed to be, or if it's supposed to be anything. I do know that men like my father saw being a man as being part provider and part purveyor of violence. And like so many men, my old man couldn't see how the conditions of the former only made his already distorted view of the latter that much worse.

My father was a hell of a provider. He went to work for thirty years at a place he did not want to be. He deprived himself of vacations so we could get the vacation check as extra. He worked overtime like crazy; I remember one time him pulling seven 12s for multiple weeks in a row.

He did that because he loved us and that's how he knew he could show it. And yet his definition of being a provider rarely translated, especially to a child, into love.

All the stuff that did he left for my mother. Partly because of gender roles. Partly because he was exhausted.

After he had given all that the day could take from him, he filled his nights with trying not to process how much that was, trying to forget everything else he was losing.

Maybe he wanted more for his existence than going to work in a factory every day. Maybe he wondered whether his life could have been different

under different circumstances. Maybe he wondered whether it could have been different under different choices.

Maybe he felt trapped. Maybe he felt guilt for feeling trapped. Maybe he felt obligated to clock in and be miserable because he did love us. Maybe he felt it was too late to entertain what life had to offer him and figured the best he could do was focus on what it had to offer us.

The world he had grown up in had conned him into believing that sacrificing was synonymous with suffering. And as long as you showed up the next morning, the system didn't care how you compensated the night before.

Now, some could say that I'm making excuses. That there are millions of people who have to put up with that same shit every day, except they don't go home at night and drink themselves into the distance.

On the other hand, doesn't pointing to the millions of others out there *taking it like they're supposed to* only strengthen my point?

It's easy to say that life isn't fair. Because it isn't. I just think that it doesn't have to be this way.

So often the helplessness that so many of us feel (quite rationally) manifests as depression. And just because not everyone drinks away at that

depression doesn't mean they're all dealing with it in a healthy manner.

I don't make excuses for what my father did when he drank, but I completely understand why he drank. It doesn't mean I'm not mad about it. There are things I saw and heard and felt that I will always be mad about.

But I'm just as mad at those who profess that life has to be unfair, that perhaps it even should be unfair.

At best, this is cowardice. At worst, it is a celebration of our despair and all we do to deal with it.

To say "life isn't fair" is really to say "do not bother asking why." It is a condescension that mocks our oppression. It tells men like my father the best you'll ever be able to do is a 12 step.

I don't know whether there is a gene or whether his love was weaker than his will. To us, it didn't matter. Neither is it a chicken or egg thing. I know which came first.

And while I do not blame my father's transgressions on his drinking, to reflect on his actions and not interrogate his addiction would be naive.

Like many (if not most) of the motherfuckers he thought were *bad*, my father was really just sad. He

would never say it that way, but I could see it. It was in everything he stared at.

Of course, without enough drinks, you couldn't be sad and be a man. *With* enough drinks, you could brush off the night before's violence and feel at peace offering hollow apologies.

Not all men have to get drunk to hurt you. Indeed, it did not take a bottle to get my father mean, nor was his addiction the source of his temper. It did, however, bring out the worst of what he thought to be masculinity. And, by that, I mean it was a door to the severity of his violence.

Now, I'm not equating masculinity with violence. Nor am I saying that every man sees masculinity as violence. But how much space does violence take up in our definition of masculinity?

Enough so that my father would have engaged in the type of violence that could have easily lost him his freedom (thus giving away the chance to be in my life) to save me from little more than a few bruises.

And, again, it's not that I don't understand the instinct. That kind of love is both a creation and an investment that is easy to protect at all costs. But it is our inability to control our other emotions which gives that love to absurdity.

How faithful are we to our definition of love when it contradicts our identity as men? Or to put it more bluntly, how do we bend our definition to fit that identity?

When we focus conveniently on our duty as a protector. When we tell ourselves there is no difference between being a protector and being a disciplinarian. When we recognize violence as a necessary tool for both.

When we tell ourselves this violence is not satisfying, that we merely reserve it as a right. When we rest confident in our moral clarity, not merely to judge but to impose our physical will upon the ones we love.

How do you love and love and love and love and then knowingly hurt the one you love?

It is when we are more comfortable with the part of our identity we believe requires violence than we are defining and/or demonstrating love.

Violence always makes for the best irony. And you can tell yourself all day that what you are doing is discipline. It is still violence. Hitting your child is no more justified than my father hitting my mother. In fact, most of the arguments made for hitting children are similar to the arguments men make in the moment as to why they *have to* “discipline” their partners.

I chose not to drink in part because I did not want to wager what is inside of me. I am writing this in part as an aid in my attempt to discontinue the cycle of violence my father found himself in. Not just for my own child, but for the love I have for him as well.

I do not want to pass on any more damage.

The other slap

The last time my father slapped me in the face was not a physical act. Yet I still hurt from it in a way that I no longer hurt from the one previously mentioned.

I think I was 22. I was working on a novel at the time. I had written a small book of poetry the year before and had given it out to family and friends. To my knowledge, it's the only thing of mine Pop ever read. At the time that meant a lot to me. I guess it still does.

My old man knew how smart I was. Maybe in his eyes a little too smart, or at least a little too curious.

He didn't like that I wasn't rushing toward a career. Having told me my whole life how important it was that I went to college, I think he was personally insulted that I wasn't utilizing my degree the way he thought I should. He had worked his whole fucking life so I could have that piece of paper. And there I was trying to write the great anti-American novel.

He saw my writing as a reckless distraction from what I ought to be focused on. He no longer recognized the longing to be fulfilled.

He was full-on drunk this time. Berating me about my writing. Telling me I was lazy. Talking about how I didn't know how lucky I was to have

that piece of paper. He had a gift for committing to a point long after he had used all the necessary words to make it.

It must have been an hour or so in. "...and I don't even know why you're writing another book anyway. I thought your first book *sucked*."

Writing about it now, I realize readers may not find those words to be all that bad. But the way he said it, and the way he looked in my eyes when he said it, he might as well have been turning a switchblade.

He knew how much writing meant to me. He knew at that point in my life it's the only thing I believed I had.

And, hell, he may very well have been right. That first book may have sucked. But that's not why he said it.

He said it because he knew this time was different. This time I was older, bigger, and had enough of his rage in me that I knew I could have hurt him. I could have hurt him the way he hurt my mother. I could have hurt him the way I wanted to when I was a child.

That's why he did it.

To show me that he still had the power. It was him telling me that I didn't have it in me. Not like him.

I wasn't man enough.

And he was right. At least by his definition of what it meant to be a man.

And as much as I know I did the right thing by doing nothing, as happy as I am with my own definitions of what it means to be a man, that doubt he left is still with me.

The way I used to fantasize as a child about what I would do to him if the moment ever came, I still fantasize today about how I could have brutalized him in that moment.

And. For that reason. He won.

It was his last act of violence towards me. He would never need to hurt me again.

The common thread

I don't know if Pop actually hated my first book. And truth is, it doesn't really matter. I do wonder, though, what he would think of this one.

I imagine he would think I was full of shit for some of it. And for some of it, he'd probably be right. But I also know he wouldn't dismiss it.

For better or worse, these were the lessons he left me. Some he meant, some he didn't.

The men in his stories were just as much a part of his education as any classroom he ever sat in. And as he told those stories to me, they became a part of mine.

I believe my father's intention for a legacy was that he worked hard to provide for his family and that he tried to be a better father than his old man.

That's why, no matter how many pages paint him in a fucked up light or how much he would disagree with my take on shit, I think he'd be ok with me writing this book. Because, whether or not I find a considerable audience for it, I believe the reflection this project required will prove invaluable in preparing for the challenges I face as a father.

And, after it's all said and done, I might just end up being more than *a little better than*. And I know my old man would be happy about that.

Still, intentions don't always translate into consequences. And the common thread in these stories runs throughout my father's bequest. If I have a shot at ending up *more than just better*, it will be despite this *other* legacy.

Violence.

Sometimes receiving. Sometimes defending against. Sometimes giving.

Rarely, if ever, finding an alternative. This is the legacy of old school masculinity.

I will never know the degree to which my father's education impacted me. It took years to even begin to untangle my own issues with masculinity and the dynamics of power. My own shames, my own struggles.

Even now, I'm trying to assess my reaction to these stories, or rather my reaction to the violence within them. Excitement, amusement, attraction. Even if I blame the appeal on their absurdity, I chose this specific handful of stories because they have always been my favorite.

Our legacies depend on how we manage, how we interrogate, the collision between circumstances and choice, between conscience and power.

How much of men's violence stems from not being able to properly deal with either the misuse of power or a gross imbalance in power? And how much

does the entitlement to power and its reserved right to violence only intensify with each layer of privilege?

For many, these are quite uncomfortable inquiries. And yet the answers that matter most come from that which is hardest to ask.

I have no idea what the entirety of my legacy will be. I only know that I must work to leave my child (as well as anyone who reads my work) what was lacking in my own coming up.

Questions.

The good stuff

I say that my old man was better than his old man, but not as good as he could have been. And I believe that.

But the truth is I don't know dick about my grandfather. Because my old man didn't like to talk about him, I had to write that earlier chapter from pieces I collected here and there.

I don't know the relationship he had with his children. I don't know the conversations they had. The moments they had.

I don't know what it was like to be in his presence. I don't know what kind of charm he had, what kind of sense of humor he had. I don't know how he treated strangers. I don't know what his demons might have been. What little I was able to put together was not very flattering. Outside of a couple funny stories, it was mostly the bad shit.

But the reality is I don't know who he was. I only know that my father loved him.

Having written all this, it makes me wonder how much Pop actually knew about him. I probably knew my old man better than almost anyone, and there are entire pieces of his life I know nothing about. Not just secrets (and there were secrets), but jobs, relationships, dreams. Whole elements of his existence missing from my image of him.

Every now and then I'll learn something really good or really bad about Pop that seems to contradict what I thought I knew. And for a moment, it kind of fucks with me.

The same way that I had to grapple with how I can love someone who did my mother so wrong, I often think about how you can care for someone so deeply when there will always be so much you will never know about them.

Loving someone is not to fully know them, but to understand them. And to understand someone is to make peace with their humanity.

You will never know all the things that went into making the person you love who they are. You will only know enough to keep or lose their love.

Connection is about finding what you need in others. Not just what you need to receive, but what you need to give.

In that sense, love is an ongoing exchange of needs. And all you will ever really know, in any given moment, is what you offer one another.

The love you agree to is about those expectations. And the most honest expectations start with a certain degree of compromise.

Knowing only the bad shit, I don't know why my old man loved his father. And with what I've offered you in these pages, it may be hard to understand why I loved mine.

I could try to explain it. I could list his endearing qualities. I could share some touching moments, anecdotes of our friendship, wisdom he shared.

But what would you really know? If I wrote another book worth of those moments, what would you know?

The point of this chapter is no more to convince you why my father was worthy of being loved than other chapters were meant to convince you he was worthy of hating.

Truthfully, the point of this chapter is me coming to terms with why I wrote all this in the first place.

Clearly, some of it is me simply dealing with his death. A way to say goodbye.

And yet I know. Airing your old man's dirty laundry is a hell of a farewell, especially as you're spilling so many words building up your love for him.

But maybe that's fitting. To illustrate the achievement. That some sort of redemption is possible.

The first memory I have of my father was him enraged, yelling from a chair in the kitchen with a tall boy Budweiser sitting next to him on the table. His face was blood red and puffy. He looked like a monster, a demon. The louder he yelled, the bigger his face seemed to get.

The last memory I have of my father was my sister and I leaving his house after hanging out and watching a movie. We were all laughing and in a good mood. My sister and I both gave Pop a hug, kissed his cheek, and exchanged “I love you”s.

There was a lot of work that went into those years in between. I'm glad we put them in.

I loved my father both because and despite. Like his father, there were more despites than because, at least early on.

I try my best not to reduce people to simple descriptors like good or evil. Moreover, I believe anyone who would dismiss and/or sacrifice the good because of the evil doesn't understand the human capacity for both. To do so is to deny the capacity for wrongdoing in themselves.

Still, a part of me feels like this book is a betrayal. To my father, my grandfather, our family. Why is it ok for me to call him out on all the shit he wouldn't have wanted people to know just because he's dead?

Maybe it says something about the way I look at death and how I view life as a whole. Maybe it's a testament to my own struggles with not being able to forgive myself for things I did when I was young.

I don't know.

I just know that I don't feel guilty for writing it.

For all the sins my father committed, I do not damn him to hell. I know where his journey ended. And it was a much better place than where he was when I first met him.

Never got to

I was pulling third shift at a hotel in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, when I heard the name.

Some radio program was doing an interview with Drew Barrymore, and she said at the moment she was reading a lot of Bukowski. She also said that she had a craving for tea and oranges that came all the way from China. Because I liked the L. Cohen reference, I figured it might be worth checking out this Bukowski dude as well.

The first page I read, it was like I was hearing my old man's voice. Not saying just anyone could write like Hank, because they most certainly fucking can't. But if my father had been a writer, that's the kind of shit he would have written about. Maybe that's why, as unsettling as it often can be, Bukowski's work still seems almost soothing to me when I read it.

Sadly, Pop didn't read anything more than was required to get by. He wouldn't even watch a subtitled movie with me. So when I bought him a copy of *Post Office*, I knew it was a long shot.

"Now, Pop, I know you don't read too much, but you should read this. It'll be worth it."

"Ok."

When I had to go through his belongings, I found it in a neat little collection of odds and ends I had given him over the years. I cracked it open to a

random page, read a few sentences, and was immediately reminded why I got it for him. I thought about how Pop and Bukowski would have gotten along swell, that is until one of them got a little too drunk and the ashtrays started flying. I started laughing and imagined my old man laughing with me. I read for a little while, then closed it up and held it for a little while longer.

I could tell it was the first time it had been opened.

My old man dropped out of school in the ninth grade. I'd always figured it was because he wasn't cutting it. After he died, my uncle told me that before he quit, Pop was an A student.

Thinking about that resurrected a memory, which my mother confirmed, about Pop having to teach himself advanced mathematics for a job they wanted him to do at work.

It's those type of things that fuck with me. I don't know what Pop's life could have been like; I only know he ran the streets the first chance he got. Like a fruit fly, he ended up trapped in a bottle. And before too long, work had beaten the adventure out of him. By the time I met him, he just wanted as little drama in his life as possible (with the regretful exception of the drama his drinking caused us).

Most of the stories Pop shared were memories from back in the day, during a time of his I'd never seen. I couldn't tell you one real memory he made during the years he told them to me.

I'm sure he would tell me that the time spent with me and my sister were good enough memories. And I agree. The time we had in those years was good. The best we ever knew of him came out during that time.

But that's not really what I mean.

My old man lived as much as he thought the world had to offer someone like him when he was young, and almost none of what it had to offer someone with freedom when he was older.

He folded up half his life and neatly deposited it into the piggy bank of a company that changed names four times. I don't know what he might have done with another shot at it. I just know he had more in him than that.

For benefits and a pension, my father settled on being unfulfilled. By the time he was free, he no longer had the imagination to write a final act.

My old man never got to experience the mastery that was Bukowski. And I know he would probably answer, "Why do I need to read it? I lived it."

I just think it would have been nice for him to have seen the language. There are too many for which

the sum of their circumstances seems to add up to little. It doesn't mean they do not have poetry within them.

After all the boozing and fighting and toiling had done to his body, Hank found a way to explore his gift, to develop it, and then award his caste an opus too beautiful for the dismissers to dismiss.

And it's not that I believe my old man had a symphony waiting to pour out of him. I do, however, believe he had more to offer, more to try, than just being better than his father.

I flew a kite with my daughter this past summer at the beach. Unlike my reaction too many years ago, she loved it. She got the hang of it within seconds. As I watched her guiding it through the wind, I had to step away.

Tears welled up in my eyes as I pictured my father with her, holding her hands, looking back and forth between the sky and her smile.

I want that so bad for him. And yet I can't give it to him. Some people long for just a few minutes with the one they lost. I just want to give my old man a few minutes to meet his granddaughter. To hug her and kiss her and to laugh with her.

I don't know what kind of relationship I would have had with my grandfather. I know without a doubt, though, the kind of joy my daughter would have brought my father. And I know the kind of person he could have been in her life.

Unfortunately, a lifetime of smoking and drinking made sure that would never be anything more than a lump in my throat.

So fuck it.

I guess I should wrap this fucking thing up.

Scared

The last night my sister and I shared with my father was perfect. It's the kind of night we would have wanted had we known he wouldn't be around much longer.

I can't say the same for the months that led up to it.

My old man didn't have any hobbies. He had routine. To my dismay, a great deal of that routine increasingly consisted of sitting on the couch, staring at cable news.

By the time he retired, he was watching TV upwards of twelve hours a day. Twelve hours a day, sitting in a box, staring at a box.

And what came out of the smaller box made him afraid.

Aside from his routine of going to the store, the gas station, and a few other necessary errands, he confined himself to a modest, familiar survey of land. He locked himself inside what he owned and let the box tell him what was going on outside.

Whenever I would come over, he would tell me about crime and terrorism and all the crazy shit he knew was happening on the other side of his door. As if he had forgotten that I was the one living out there. Not him.

It got to the point where our weekend visit was becoming a drag.

Not too long before he died, I got us tickets to a fight that was taking place in town. I could tell how uncomfortable Pop was, being outside the house in a foreign environment. Going somewhere he'd never been, sitting in the middle of all those people. He didn't know his way around. He didn't know the routine.

It was as if he wasn't allowed to enjoy himself. Commenting on all the things that he wasn't used to. Asking how long I thought we were going to be there. By the time the main event rolled around, I wished I hadn't bought the tickets.

When we left, we had to cross a busy intersection. Pop wasn't used to crossing the street at a crosswalk. It was dark, and we were in the city. I remember him looking around at all the cars. It was a pretty big intersection, and it was Saturday night traffic.

When the walk light hit, I said, "Let's do it," and started out for the other side. About halfway across the street, I turned to say something but no one was there. I looked back and there was my father. Frozen. With his hands together, looking down at the ground. I motioned for him to come on, but he wouldn't. He couldn't take a step forward. He was scared.

My old man had gone from someone who used to run the joints with abandon (and someone who I saw with my own eyes jump in a giant motherfucker's ass like it wasn't shit) to someone who wasn't even able to cross the street. He actually had to wait for a large group of people to cross before he was willing to do it himself.

I remember being mad at him. It was embarrassing. All those years talking shit to me. I can still see him there. Paralyzed on the sidewalk.

And I guess I probably wouldn't have been as disappointed if all he had lost was his courage. But in those last few years, that box ate away at his wisdom.

I watched it happen. What it did to him. It was like witnessing someone surrender all the things they knew to be true, little by little, until all they were left with was the message.

Years of savvy lost to orchestrated fear.

He lived in that message, and it made him angry, cynical, defensive, cold. Just like they wanted him.

We would argue over things that made no sense. He would say things I couldn't believe I was hearing.

I found myself endlessly arguing with the most manufactured of concerns. Seeing him became exhausting.

My father was scared for me when I was a kid because of all the bad shit *he* had seen and done. Now he was scared for me because of all the bad shit they told him *those other people* were doing.

And still, I could excuse it. If for no other reason than knowing his fear was out of love. What I couldn't see past was him fearing for his own safety.

Sure, he would sit out on the porch and drink a beer. But the farthest he could see was the beginning and end of our dead end street.

It's almost funny to think how much venturing out for a jog might have helped him. That the only thing he really had to be afraid of was his own lifestyle.

He could have gone for a jog. He could have gone to the movies. He could have gone to Mexico. He could have dated. He could have enrolled in adult education classes. He could have went and played fucking bingo.

Instead, he rotted away in that hole, giving his mind and his body over to the box.

I didn't know that man, and I didn't want to spend time with that man. I still feel guilty for thinking about it that way. But goddamn. The man I knew swung a chair at five motherfuckers' heads when he was in danger. He may have been scared, but

at least he was willing to fight. He didn't feel helpless. He felt like he had a chance.

The man the box left me with had none of that.

I've heard that sometimes people in hospice care can have what they call a surge or a rally right before they die.

And I know it's not the same thing, but that's kind of how I think about that last night we spent with Pop. Because when I say he ended in a better place, I mean it.

After months of apathy and negativity, he just completely snapped out of it. And for one night, we had the best of him.

I couldn't explain it. It was so good, it was almost like he knew.

His brother found him three days later. In the backyard. Near that big pile of limbs. The coroner said it's possible he had been out there from the day before.

All I could think, all I could picture, was him out there alone. And how scared he must have been, so far from help.

I want to believe the coroner when he said it was probably instantaneous. That he wouldn't have

seen it coming. That he wouldn't have been conscious.

But tonight, ten years later, I find myself again, crying, thinking, "Was he scared? How long was he out there, alone?"

All the things that would have gone through his mind. Go through mine.

Goddamn, Daddy. I wish I could have been there for you.

I'd like to believe

My old man showed me one time where he kept his pistol. He told me that Aunt Jessie had told him where she kept hers. She told him that the moment it became clear she was losing her mind, she was going to blow her brains out. She told him she didn't want to go out that way.

Aunt Jessie died in a nursing home, with Alzheimer's. She never made it over to the gun.

I remember the look in my old man's eyes when he said, "That's how fast it happened."

I knew what he was getting at. And I knew, probably like he did, that he wouldn't make it to the gun either.

That's how fast it happens.

It was his one justified fear. He had been in the room with Aunt Jessie when she died. He had been there for her in those months leading up to it. Holding her hand, hugging her neck. Listening to her tell him about the men coming into her room and stealing things. About the children peeking in her window. Calming her down when she got too excited. Not knowing what to say when she asked if he had come to take her home. Every visit.

It's the only solace I took in him dying when he did. I know he didn't want to go out that way.

Better to go out on a sunny April morning, in your own yard, birds chirping and breeze blowing, than to go out not knowing who's come to visit you or how bad the halls smell of piss.

I'd like to believe that realization was the last thing to go through his mind, that his last couple breaths were spent laughing to himself at how he really did dodge a bullet. That his last act on earth was telling that asshole Death it was perfect timing and that he too could go fuck himself.

I'd like to believe that. But I have no reason to believe it. Which is oddly comforting, because I neither have reason to believe he spent his last moments in fear.

If I have any reason to believe anything, it can only be that my old man went out the same way he had before, all those years ago, diving for bottles.

Was that how it was, Pop? Where you could see the whole scene, at peace with it all?

Knowing you were finally free. And knowing you had left us the way you wanted.

Who knows, right?
Wishful fucking thinking.

The best I can do

So where does that leave me? With my father, with this book? As goodbyes go, ours was pretty damn good. That's what makes calling this a farewell seem a little less than sincere. I'll probably never be fully done with this subject, and I'm not sure if I'm satisfied with where I'm stopping. I just know I've said all I needed to for now, and I don't feel like putting any more on the page.

Sometimes I listen to the sound of his voice from the message he set on his answering machine. It's only a few words and it's not very good quality, but it's the only recording I have of him.

As I rack my brain over how to bring this to a close in a way that's not too sappy or trite, I think about that basic little greeting and what it does to me when I hear it. And I imagine my old man telling me I'm wasting too much time trying to look cool.

“Fuck it. It's your book. End it how you want.”

Of course, what I want is one more goodbye, but that shit ain't never gonna happen.

So if the best I can do is to pretend,
then I guess I'll do just that
and leave you a message instead.

“Hey hey, Pop.

I just wanted to say hello, tell you I miss you.

I still think about you. I still look through your things.
I still talk to you when I watch a good fight.

Sorry for making you look like an asshole with all this.
You know where we stood.

I recently put that old headboard of yours on your
granddaughter’s bed.
It looks like shit, but it felt good to pass it on.

She asked about you. I told her you were long gone
away.

She said, ‘Like the dinosaurs?’ I said, ‘Yeah, like the
dinosaurs.’

I’ll kiss her cheek for you.

I’ve got a hundred other things I want to tell you, but
I know I only got so much time to talk on this thing.
So I guess I should go.

If you were here, I’d tell you, ‘Good times.’
But you’re not. So I’ll just say, ‘I love you, old man.’

Don’t worry about me. I’ll be ok.

Your boy”

