

WHEN I FINALLY SUCCOMBED

I remember the exact moment. I see by your smile you're skeptical. Loosen your tie a bit and let me tell you about it. Go on, have a seat here and open your mind. It's always an hour's wait or more for a table in the main dining room on a cruise ship. I'll bow out when your wife shows up.

Let me tell you right here and now, it didn't happen all that easy. But when it happened I knew it.

My partners as I will call them, Levi, Milton and I were living in boxes under an overpass at the time. We didn't mind living like that. We wanted it that way. Levi had been a med student at one time; Milton was due to inherit his father's mortuary, the only one for black folks in his home town. Very lucrative, you know. I was once a sales rep for a manufacturer of those super huge mining trucks used in the iron fields to haul ore, dirt and other waste. Believe me, when you sold one of those babies, it was like selling a mansion. Then I'd follow up with my customers for repair parts and modifications. I sold other large construction equipment as well.

I only took the job in the first place because I fell in love. I had convinced myself I could hold on to my ideals through it all. Going from a raging collegiate protester to an establishment sales rep was no easy transition. It required a new set of clothes, a different kind of car, a mortgage on a bungalow in the suburbs and a haircut. I was willing to do all this for my little Caroline who didn't give a rat's ass about politics or revolution and only wanted to spend her life making me happy. Or so she said. A rare find at the time, I thought. Tongue-in-cheek was my theme, do it tongue-in-cheek just to get enough stowed away to be able to shove it back up the corporate culture someday. Change the system from within, I rationalized to my old college buddies who shook their heads and fingers at me and warned that I was digging my own bourgeois future.

I traveled so much I began losing track of time. Before I knew it, Caroline had delivered us two children, a boy and a girl, and we were talking to an architect about building a new home. My boss loved me. Buster Bolton thought I could do no wrong. I had a knack for it. I loved to drink, play poker and drink, and did my customers. They were clods so when I took them and their wives to an elegant restaurant they thought they

had died and gone to heaven and spent the next six months bragging to their friends about it.

The problem for me was that I liked gambling too much. Poker soon became my obsession. I couldn't wait for dinner to be over so I could get to a game. Then I started skipping dinner. And Caroline got fancy on me. The more commission I earned the more Caroline spent. She grew whiney. So did the kids. Gimme-gimme, want-want, if you know what I mean.

I woke up one morning in a cheap motel room in Toledo even though I had no business there. It was ten days past the last day I could remember. That was my first binge.

Old Buster called me into his office for a pep talk. But instead of firing me, he sent me to a clinic. He even laughed about it and slapped me on the back. "Shit Robbie, that must have been quite a toot."

I dried out well enough to get back in the swing. But my good intentions and family nostalgia only lasted about three months. The more Caroline whined and the kids complained and the greater the demands Buster placed on my sales goals the more I gambled and the more I traveled and the more I drank. I couldn't stand to go home anymore. The suck of the universal vacuum became so powerful I could feel myself being pulled right down its dark corridors.

After the second binge, Buster was not so friendly.

"Goddamnit, I can't protect your ass and make excuses forever. Besides, you haven't made a big sale for over a year. Something's got to give here, son."

Luckily for me, I had an idea during my second week of rehab in the hospital. I lay nestled in a big bean bag in one of those group therapy sessions and had just tuned out of an accountant's sob story when it occurred to me that I could offer a lease-loan proposition that would give my customers and my company a big tax break. It wasn't a new idea. It had been done before but not by my company. Buster stuck up his fat red and blue nose at the concept but once I showed him my plan and the numbers to his boss, I was back in action.

"This may revolutionize the business, young man," Chester Valdrop, CEO, confided while Buster eyed me jealously from across the conference table. "It's an idea that will move us forward."

"That's exactly what I told him the first moment I read his proposal," Buster chimed in. I said, 'Let's get this up to Chester before someone else beats us to it. I'm proud of this lad, Chester. It's my reward for keeping the faith.'"

Once Valdrop shook our hands and departed for the airport, Buster sat on the corner of my desk and nodded at me confidentially. "You're a lucky sonofabitch, I'll say that for you. But it better work. If it doesn't...."

The scheme bought me some time. Within six months sales increased by leaps and bounds. I was Buster's whiz kid again and he was congratulatory and told me all his dirty jokes. Caroline took a moment or two out of her busy schedule at the club to hang up her fur coat and get naked with me now and then. The daughter tried to be civil, at least when she wanted something, and the son temporarily laid off calling me an old so-and-so at every opportunity.

I don't know how many binges there were in all but I do remember a gray Sunday afternoon in front of the fire in the living room watching a football game with the next door neighbors, Caroline and the kids. We started off with Bloody Marys, then switched to beer after brunch. Caroline did put together an excellent brunch.

The next thing I know I'm in Toledo again at the YMCA. Why Toledo, when I could have been anyplace else, I have no idea. "Aw, scew it," I told myself. "You can't beat the goddamn system. You can't have it both ways. You're either in it or you're out." I wanted to go back to my college days and be a protester again but the trouble with that idea was the time of the protests had given way to a whole national phenomenon of gimme-gimme, want-want. I refused to surrender. To me, my ideals were still intact. I decided to work outside the system this time. So I became a bum. You can call the way of life I chose to lead anything you want, itinerant, dropout, gandy, oakie, hobo, wino, homeless person, whatever. I prefer bum. It has a singular and noteworthy sound to it.

I traveled all over, put it that way. If I needed a few bucks for food and booze I picked fruit or swept floors or visited a soup kitchen. I liked sleeping outdoors. Gave me the feeling of what the frontier must have felt like. That is, if you get far enough from the

city lights or find a park big enough where you won't get rolled or beat up by the cops. I learned most of them were nothing more than psychopaths in uniforms. I feared them more than I feared the rats or the preachers who were always trying to rescue me from a fate worse than death. I took showers at the Y, used toilets in department stores when I was allowed to enter them, filling stations, friendly diners and cafes. Packed a roll of toilet paper I heisted from them.

Funny, once I hit the road, I lost my yen for poker and haven't gambled since. I drank plenty of cheap wine but I rarely got drunk and seldom woke up with a hangover. Must have been psychological. But towards evening I tried to hook up with one or two other bums for a little entertainment and some lively conversation. Safety in numbers.

That's how I ended up with Levi and Milton. I met Levi first.

He had the same idea I did. He was scrounging around in the huge bins behind a warehouse in one of the industrial parks looking for the kind of box they pack certain electronic equipment in. The advantage of these boxes is their tough clear coating which is longer lasting and water resistant in the rain and snow than an ordinary cardboard box. The trick is to find one long enough to cover most of the body when you sleep. Given that many people sleep in a semi-fetal position, the box doesn't have to be true body length. Just an approximation. These boxes are difficult to locate and, when located, are difficult to appropriate since they are expensive and often recycled and sometimes closely guarded. Not that they would get you through a major snowstorm or a freeze, a driving rain or a tornado. But they offered a sense of security, a roof close to the head like you might have felt as a child making a tent under your blankie, mom and dad in the other bedroom asleep or bouncing the conjugal bedsprings. If you should die before you wake, god your pitiful soul to take, that sort of warmish feeling.

Like me, Levi must have sensed winter coming. Birds were gathering in dark spinning balls in the sky and the air smelled like French Vanilla ice cream. Sure, you can always go south or west to sunnier climes but lethargy sets in and there's no motivation to make the move. Besides, people in the South don't take to bums so readily there. It's not good for tourism and the Haves don't like their linen-white vision of life dotted with the crumbs of aberration left by the Have-nots.

"Find anything?" I asked.

Levi was immediately secretive, pretending at first he didn't hear me. He kept rummaging through the stacked and folded boxes in a large container. He wore the standard threadbare stocking hat, a wayward Hasidic beard that skewed to the left, a scruffy oversized overcoat and blue and gray ski gloves. He kept opening and closing the lapel of his overcoat, obviously looking inside to make sure some hidden treasure was still there. Had I been inclined to rob him and smash his weird head into mush, I would have done so right then with the short iron bar I carried in my old promotional tote bag. I had no interest in killing anybody. I was only looking for a partner, someone I could trust and bounce a few ideas off of. In the dark Levi resembled a kind of scavenging animal like a raccoon or a possum. He looked at home in a trash bin or garbage pile. He surveyed me with his strange eyes.

"Hey, there, buddy, I'm one of yours. Nothing to be scared of here. I'm just looking for a nice outdoor hotel. Pay no attention at all. I won't bother you," I said casually in the cold damp partly-lit night.

Levi continued to sort through the cardboard real estate for quite some time without speaking. I decided to take my own parade of homes tour and selected an out-of-prime one-story bungalow about eight by five by four in mint condition. What they might call a "peach" in a slow real estate market.

"An excellent choice," Levi said out of nowhere. Contrary to his unorthodox mien, he still had the precise young voice of a precocious, potentially obnoxious graduate student. In that brief instant when he turned his face towards me I saw his tiny round wire framed glasses, a memory of the days of tie-died shirts and berets.

"New in town?" I asked.

"Been here quite a while actually. Keep to myself mostly."

I decided to pop the question anyway.

"Found a great spot under an overpass on the interstate. Tucked way back behind the uprights. You could build a small fire and nobody would notice. The streetlights there are too bright and the cars too fast to notice much more than trash along the speedway. The cops can't smell the smoke for the exhaust fumes. Better claim it early though. Any interest?"

Levi didn't answer but pulled at a box stuck in the back end of the pile. I grabbed hold of the lower section and together we slid it out into and out of the security lights. Shows you the differences between people. His box was six by four by two. He liked the ceiling right next to his face with more room on the side to toss and turn.

We stood a minute looking at it.

He pointed up to his mouth. I had to squint. "Got beat up about a month ago. Lost three teeth."

"Security in numbers," I said.

"Actually, I've come to that conclusion myself. But I'd rather be alone than with a dead head." He pulled his wire framed glasses away from his eyes to get a closer look at me. "You're still all there, I see," he said.

"So far," I laughed.

"We'll need a third to make it work," he said inspecting his box. "That's the hard part."

I agreed with Levi. One to stand guard at the campsite for security while the other two take turns sleeping.

"Come on," I said. "I'll show you the spot."

It took two hours to slide our winter homes behind us across the West Bottoms, through alleys, quiet side streets and deserted parking lots, avoiding any lighted streets or intersections or storefronts to escape detection by roving bands of teenagers or cops who enjoyed making guys like us their sport. Though Thanksgiving Day was only a few days off, a light snow had begun to fall and the wind whipped through the alleys and around the corners of buildings. We had access to our urban cave by means of side streets whose old wooden bungalows sat dark and dead asleep.

I clicked on my flashlight so Levi could assess the possibilities. The spot was well removed from the street that ran under the overpass, a good two hundred fifty feet or more. The overpass was actually the beginning of a closed exit ramp at the end of an old commercial district used by heavy trucks delivering supplies and removing trash. Our future home sat in the wedge where the overpass connected to the other side of the bluff. The wedge formed a natural miner's shack. The dirt floor mused in a soft loam kept dry and clean by the heavy cement overpass. It sloped downward gradually to the street.

Three thick cement uprights stood just off the street and up closer to the wedge. Two shorter supports, about five feet wide, protected the front view of the campsite. Looking up at it from the street with its dirt composition and stunted ragged trees, tall brush and scroungy bushes on the slope, litter of the ages, beer cartons and old newspapers flapping around, the uprights were a forbidding sight, not likely to attract positive attention. It couldn't be seen looking down from the overpass above. More trees, bushes and weeds concealed it from view on either side. At twenty-five feet wide and about twenty feet deep, it was roomy enough, I thought, for three boxes. You could stand full height more than halfway into the wedge. The peak best for sleeping and dry storage. It looked unspoiled and cozy and, if you didn't mind sleeping downhill feet first, a comfortable place to hide out. I was surprised no one had found it before.

"Too small," Levi complained right away.

"Maybe. But the box will help. You can be on the end if you like."

Levi sighed. Like me, he didn't want partners. Hermits liked being hermits. But we didn't like to be beat up either and we weren't prepared to freeze to death.

Levi lifted his lapel and peeked under it. He stuck his hand under his coat to squeeze something inside.

"My stash," he candidly admitted.

"You don't have anything to worry about me, little buddy."

"I hate that," Levi said, sniffing and poking his glasses back up near his eyes. "I hate this 'little buddy' shit. I really hate it."

I thought he was going to come right after me.

"Sorry. Just a friendly expression, I guess."

"No matter where I go or what I do, it's 'little buddy' this, 'little buddy' that. It gets old real fast."

"Sorry," I said again.

Levi and I unfolded our boxes and arranged our bundles. I had already lifted my wine for the evening and had managed to salvage eight good pieces of chicken from the dumpster at a fast food place, plus three small cartons of slaw, several fairly fresh biscuits and a fruit pie. These I shared with Levi. He ate hungrily, wiping his fingers on his coat and checking his stash.

I feared he might be a catatonic. He had that look. I don't mind a little conversation and I feared he'd go quiet and just come and go. But, in fact, he was more of a cunning paranoid, slinking looks back over his shoulder, his eyes gleaming with rodent awareness.

I told him who I was. I told him how I came to be there and that I didn't know exactly why. Generally, it had something to do with rebellion, with defiance. Defiance against the way everything was. Defiance against useless work and against family and against government and against bullshit and against death and against having to shit and against cars and against broken hearts and against money and against cops and against pain.

"That's certainly a lot to be against," Levi said in the manner of a practiced therapist.

He listened patiently to me until the wine made me more of a listener than a talker.

"I don't know why I'm here either," Levi began. "I just had to get out. My father wanted me to be a rebbe and my mother wanted me to be an obstetrician and my fiancé wanted me to be a lawyer so we could live on an estate on Long Island. I just wanted to walk. Walking is what I like to do. I used to walk all over Manhattan and Brooklyn and Queens. So one day I just kept walking. I'm just a wanderer and I do what wanderers do. I just wander and wonder," Levi chuckled nastily through his beard.

"Ever think of going back?"

Levi thought. He didn't answer for a long time. I assumed maybe he had gone into a stupor.

"Never. I couldn't go back. My fiancé was a beautiful girl but I could never live up to her expectations. Besides, it's been quite a while and, knowing her, she's probably married a certain cousin of mine who, as I recall, was fond of saying he found real estate partnerships fascinating. I never found anything like that fascinating, only what I could see right in front of my feet. Back then, nothing I had interested me. Not too much does now."

I could almost agree with that. It was hard for me to get excited about much.

"Anything you miss?" I wondered.

At this question he paused even longer. I thought I could see his eyes glaze over in the secondary freeway light.

Finally, he sighed. "Yeah. The Cars. I miss hearing The Cars."

"The Cars?"

"Yeah, you know. The band. 'Let the good times roll'..." he tried to sing.

"Oh. I guess they came after my time."

"How old are you anyway," Levi asked, the wisp at the bottom of his beard twisting up and right.

"I don't remember," I answered honestly. "There's a lot of things I don't remember. Maybe I just forgot The Cars."

"Gosh," Levi gulped. "Forgot The Cars!" he wagged his head sympathetically nodding to an unseen companion.

"Do you still remember all the old stuff?" I asked, stirring the dirt with my Salvation Army tennis shoes.

"I remember everything," Levi said, rising up and retreating to his box.

"I see," I said absentmindedly.

I myself thought about going back from time to time to my young family but any nostalgia I might have felt for Caroline when she was still sweet and before she blossomed into a rapacious materialist bitch kept me running. The warm glow I felt after a brief period of feeling tender to my wife and two children whose BMs quickly gained form and substance, the noxious odor of their diapers, faded fast and they quickly learned the art of blackmail. The appearance of teeth introduced acquisitiveness and halitosis, pulling and tugging behavior, a whininess in the voice that more than matched their mother's nasal drone. From that it was Star Wars memorabilia, Barbie dolls, video games, fancy jackets, space age bicycles, and such other accumulation of crap that I began to suffocate from TMS, you know, too much shit. They had somewhat paralleled Caroline's demise in my esteem, only her teeth had been sharper and hungrier except in that one place where I had looked for her to be more voracious. No, I couldn't go back to any of them, didn't want to and would never recapture that tiny interval of joy I felt.

That may have been one of the longest conversations Levi and I had. He slid out of his box early every weekday morning, flailed himself to loosen up his stiff limbs and

wandered off for most of the day. We folded our boxes and hid them to one side of the overpass and kicked dirt up over the ashes of the fire. He returned in late afternoon and was usually there when I came back from my rummaging expeditions. On weekends he went with me to look for food. He spent a lot of time digging inside large public dumpsters for newspapers and magazines. He leafed through them quickly, tearing out whole pages and stuffing them into his coat. He caught me peering over his shoulder one morning as he began to rip out an article from the Wall Street Journal. He shoved the entire section under his arm and gave me a look that would have blacked out half of New York City.

I have to admit being curious, even nosy. I became obsessed about his stash. I don't know why. Believe me, I leave people alone. I'm respectful of their business. But the way Levi stuck his hand into his coat and squeezed his stash, as regularly as blinking, invited me to know more about him. At night, right after eating (Levi didn't drink then), he unfolded his box, spread his goods around him and turned on a tiny pen light. I could see him out of the corner of my eye, laying on his back, holding something small up towards the ceiling and shining his light onto it. He did this every night except Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights when he relaxed a little and joined me for a walk or sat with me by the fire.

One Saturday afternoon I visited my friend, Elvira Lump (my last name for her). She had an apartment at one of the old hotels downtown. Let me tell you about Elvira later. As I climbed, then crawled around the back the embankment to our campsite, I noticed Levi's heavy overcoat folded in a neat bale against the cement. I called out to him but he didn't answer. He might have been relieving himself or the victim of foul play, I wasn't sure. My first impulse was to reach into his coat for his stash. That's human nature, don't you think? I had to have a look. I crouched down beside the coat, cocked my ear, looked both directions, and felt around for it. At one time, his coat was expensive and well made and had a wallet pocket. The stash was inserted in an old leather folder the size of a large wallet and bound by two thin black ribbons. I quickly untied them and flipped open the worn leather packet. His stash was about two inches thick and comprised of newspaper clippings cut about the size of dollar bills. Maybe play money? I thought. Each clipping had circles drawn in the top corners with a black marker and numbered in

denominations, like \$5, \$10, \$20, \$50. stopping at \$100 dollar bills. Some appeared to be sections of stock index reports, others excerpts of articles but in no special order or arranged with any apparent rhyme or reason. I flipped through them as a banker might thumb a wad of bills. I wrapped and tied his stash up quickly and stuffed it back into the wallet pocket. Levi appeared at the corner of the overpass wall and I turned quickly away from his coat and pretended to look in the dirt for something.

He didn't spot me at first. When he did, he hurried to his coat and pulled it back on.

"Diarrhea," he said. "Three days now."

"Maybe you should go to the clinic."

"No, I'll be ok. Something I ate."

I began assembling lumber scraps I pilfered from a lumber yard down the way to start a fire. It took a while to get the fire going and Levi sat shivering next to me. He looked too thin without his coat, tiny like an underfed boy, even with several sweaters buttoned one over the other. Yet his eyes had the fervor of a man with a mission.

I sat there all night drinking the rest of my wine and looking into the fire trying to figure out Levi's stash. Was it just a fetish of some kind or could it be that little Levi, coming and going as he did, could it be with his interest in the financial pages of newspapers and magazines, could it be that he...?

The icy wind on the day before Thanksgiving blew everything sideways. The snow, at least, had been limited to flurries and less than two inches. But I could tell from past winters we were in for a cold wet one. I almost regretted not heading south.

I had persuaded Levi to come with me to the Thanksgiving dinner laid out by the faithful over at the cathedral. They held their celebration a day early, probably so they could be with their own families. There would be Thanksgiving dinners all weekend. The next day, Thanksgiving Day, the inner-city churches, mostly black denominations, put out a spread. Sometimes they fed us absolutely delicious ribs and barbequed chicken. Then it was turkey and dressing again Friday, Saturday and Sunday, and if we chose to go to the Methodist food kitchen on Monday, we could be sure to eat leftover turkey and dressing. I went to all of them because the gravy kept the food hot. I never tired of turkey and dressing. Besides, they'd throw in black olives, carrot sticks and stuffed celery on the

side with spicy dips. Those olives tasted as precious as chocolate truffles. You can keep your sweet potatoes though. I don't care who fixes them or how.

I thought the dinner would be a good place to locate a third resident for our urban commune. I was hoping that my old pal, Milton, might be there and Levi could meet him. I'd spent parts of winters with Milton before. Even though he acted a bit strange at times, I felt he was solid and loyal. Because he was a black man, I figured from experience, you could count on Milton once he gave his word. In addition to wine and vodka, Milton smoked weed and shot up when he could afford to. That's when I either had to be a best friend or exit quickly. When he was under the spell, he was very hard to understand. Almost sounded like he spoke his own brand of baby talk. But he was tall and strong and violent and nice to have around for protection. I didn't know his whole story, just that his father had made a lot of money in the mortuary business and had sent Milton to school to learn the trade. Milton dropped out after a semester, been drafted and sent to Vietnam to be a grunt. He came back a real mess and spent two years at the VA hospital. He still wore an army jacket, filthy broken-down fatigue boots and a black stocking hat, even in the summer.

We were laying out on the grass of a nearby park mesmerized by the stars and brave with booze when I decided to ask him:

"Why in the hell, in the middle of the goddamn war, would you drop out of school for a semester?"

He changed the subject.

"Sheet. Hain't gettin' old Milty round no daid people no more. No way. Not me. Gives me bad assed dreams. Huk uk uk uk uk," Milton laughed, baring his mouth of gold-starred and missing teeth. Then he turned and grabbed me by both collars with one big hand nearly cutting off my wind pipe. "Don't you ask me bout none of that sheet again, you hear me, you fat little dickhead."

Then he stared up at the stars exhaling his joint and laughing intermittently, Huk uk uk uk uk from down deep and choking in his throat and hacking foul quids.

Earlier that same summer Milton came upon me under attack by three teenagers who had jumped me from their pickup. It was a wild windy night, the trees shaking and boogeying and swinging their mop heads side to side. A haze dimmed the moon and

down below the wheels of cars screamed across the pavement. You could hear voices, male and female, shouting and laughing and arguing in the distance. The street was well lit, lined with taverns and liquor stores and diners, bright lights shooting up in Roman candle glare. I trailed the action, money spilled on the ground, unopened food, full packs of cigarettes, thrown away beers. The pickup truck surprised me, slid to a stop by the curb. I was bent over digging into a sack of untouched cheeseburgers and cold fries.

They must have been football players, as big and mean looking as they were. They smelled young, as musky as skunks. Their heads were barbered short and their foreheads lined with determination — i.e. intent on beating us into a stupor. One had a ballpeen hammer and the other two marched forward with silly grins and baseball bats, the great pastime of white American suburban youth of that era.

"Down you go scumball," the blond with the ballpeen hammer ordered rather casually I thought, considering the consequences to my person and raised his modern-day mace above my head. I don't know if he knew a solid blow would have killed me or not. I raised my fist to protect my head and, thanks be to the Lord, he was six beers into pissing in the wind and his swing wobbled in its arc, missing my head, and caught the fat of my hand. I felt myself go down, the pain driving deep into the bone to my elbow. The other two moved in on me raising their bats.

The roar Milton let out caused all of us to stop mid-motion. It was the roar of someone mortally wounded, a beast charging the hunter who had just shot it in the head. Milton ballooned to the size of Mighty Joe Young. He came at them with sixty arms and thirty legs. I lay where I was and covered my head with my arms. I could hear glass shattering, bodies thumping against metal, horrified screams, young men's voices in nightmare states. The only sounds Milton made were his monstrous roars. He soon appropriated the ballpeen hammer and one of the baseball bats and took turns bludgeoning the pickup and the three callous lads, bleeding now from their heads and mouths, holding their arms and thighs in pain. I saw Milton swing the bat full force with both hands, a home run swing, directly into the rib cage of the blond high school football star and heard the home run crack of the bat breaking ribs and watched the homecoming king grab himself instinctively and curl to a fall in front of the pickup. Milton left him to his groaning and circled the truck, systematically pounding fenders and hubcaps and

windows while the other two rolled painfully to their sides and propped themselves up little by little on their bloodied fists. One managed to jump back into the driver's seat and start the engine. The other tackled Milton and rolled him over. While Milton staggered out of breath to his feet, the third kid, a shorter, heavier boy, helped the blond back into the cab of the truck. The driver fumbled with the stick, jerking the pickup in and out of gear. Milton weaved after them holding the bat in the air and slammed it down on the tailgate over and over yelling, "Hue! Hue! Hue!" like that city in Vietnam until the pickup jerked again into gear and squealed street dirt and trash backward into our faces.

Milton leaned heaving on the end of the bat, heaving, trying to catch his breath. He alternated grinning and grimacing and spitting blood. It was the first time I heard his baby talk and knew it thereafter as a sign of him going into some kind of untouchable madness.

"Muvafucks. Weeble stinky-wy poo poo ho's. Peepee they pants. Show they ass. Huk uk uk uk. Tsst. Tsst. Tweeney beebees. Uk uk. Tweeny beebees."

My hand was broken, no doubt about it. I decided to go to the General Hospital to see if they would set it. I left Milton there in the street. I thought he might turn on me. But Milton followed me, his head down, dragging the bat behind him. He couched in the bushes outside the emergency room smoking joints. When I walked out four hours later, my hand and wrist in a cast, he followed me to the campsite and curled up next to me and we slept until the middle of the next day.

I felt so scroungy and beat up I decided to spend what little I had left on a half day at a downtown hotel so I could shower and shave and sit on a toilet. I took Milton with me and we cleaned up pretty good. I went to the Chinese market and persuaded the old Chink, bad hand and all, to let me scrub vegetables and haul out trash and garbage. The cash from that, plus some shrimp and fried rice from their deli, gave me enough provisions for a couple of days. I bought us some wine and vodka and we made camp in the same park.

I found Milton to be something of an intellectual. When he didn't mix his moonshine and marijuana, he talked up a storm in a normal voice.

"That old Plato, man, that Plato had it all over Ari, huk uk uk uk. I seen the shadow, man, I seen the shadow myself. That's why I'm just fixin' to die. Can't kill

myself, no. Cain't do that. Hurt too much, see what I'm sayin'. No, I'm dyin' slow n' easy on all this shit, this booze and funny smokin' shit."

That was the first time I asked Milton a personal question.

"Now Milton, why in the hell you want to die for?"

He glared at me.

"Sorry," I said, trying to preempt an outburst. "I'm just an inquisitive sort."

"Huk uk uk uk. My mama say you a nosey sumbuck, she."

He lit a joint, sucking it for all it was worth.

"Now see these teef." He pushed back his gums with his index finger to show his gold teeth. "That be my savings account. But I don't plan to spend none of it. Goin' to gnaw my way to the grave, man, goin' to chew me a hole big enough to dance in. Goin' to dance with my shadow into that black sky."

He shook his head.

"Sons a bitches. Sons a bitches. No reason for me to live now. It's gone, man. Snuffed out. Gone."

We drank ourselves to sleep and, when I woke the next morning, Milton was gone.

That's how it was with Milton and me, just now and then, but always on good terms.

I finally persuaded Levi to go with me to the cathedral for some turkey and gravy.

A line had already formed along the quaint winding cobblestone walk to the back entrance of the parish hall. I immediately spotted some of the regulars, years older looking and missing more teeth than I remembered them from the Thanksgiving before. The new ones were younger, with long matted hair and blood in their eyes.

"Hey, Roy," I heard someone shout. (That's what I still go by now, it's Roy, Roy Fowler).

"Hey, Shitfingers," I waved back, moving up the line with Levi at my heels.

"Get to the back of the line," several of the youngsters protested.

"Don't worry, boys, just here for a chat," I said. "Calm down. I've got all day myself. Don't get your mules buckin'. Just want to visit a minute and then I'll move along."

"You better, you old fucker," a lousy looking lout blustered, shaking his fist at me.

I turned back to my old friend.

"How you shakin', Shitfingers?"

"Not so good, Roy." He cleared his throat and hocked a brownish quid into the newly fallen snow.

"You always say that, Shitfingers. I can't recall when you said you felt good."

Shitfingers dipped his head down and grinned big and wide showing his rotting teeth and black gums.

"Aw hell, Roy. You know I ain't long for this life."

"Come on, you. You haven't changed a bit since we caddied together at Rolling Hills Country Club. How long's that been? Ten years or better?"

"A lots of Thanksgiving suppers, I guess. Never know if I'll make the next one is all."

Shitfingers, still grinning wide and ugly reached down into his old blue jacket and pulled out his Bull Durham.

"Still rolling your own I see," I said, nodding at the white pouch and packet of cigarette papers that earned him his name. His face never looked more yellow nor his fingers more brown. His teeth were an absolute mess. "I didn't know you could still buy that stuff."

"Oh, I got my sources," Shitfingers chuckled. "Yessir, I sure do." He rolled himself a stogie in a wink of an eye and had it lit up and his gear back in his pocket before I could get another word out.

"By the way, Shitfingers. This is my new sidekick, Levi."

I stood aside thinking Levi would move forward to shake his hand. Shitfingers stuck out his mitt but Levi just looked down at it, his hands under his arms as if to keep them warm. Shitfingers hesitated a second and drew back his hand. He laughed nervously.

"Well, nice to meet you, little buddy, real nice. You take care of Roy for me, will you?"

Levi snorted. I guess Shitfingers took his snort as some kind of answer because he yanked back his chin affirmatively.

"Where you staying these days?" I jumped in to fill the sudden quiet.

"Oh, mostly in the shelters, Roy. I ain't as young as I used to be. I can't stand the cold as much. Oh, sometimes I go to the mission of an evening. I still caddy some. But it was a rainy old summer this year."

"You telling me. Well, Jerry (his real name), I better get on back in line before somebody pounds my butt down flat. You have a good meal."

"Oh, don't you worry about me. I'll eat my share, Roy."

He showed that tooth-busted grin of his and nodded three or four times. I'd paid my respects to the old timer and motioned for Levi to follow me to the rear.

"That was a waste of time," Levi muttered. "I thought maybe you were angling for something."

"Now, Levi, people aren't a waste of time. I've spent some long nights with old Shitfingers. He's an ok guy. Might help you out someday."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Levi sniffed.

"Okay, so what if he has the face of a bulldog and the teeth of a possum. He's always as friendly as can be."

"I'd be friendly too if I were him."

"Well, he gives you something to be thankful about then, doesn't he?"

Levi went quiet on me.

"By the way," he said after a pause, "I don't appreciate being referred to as somebody's sidekick. Who do you think you are, the Lone Ranger?"

"Just an expression, lad," was all I could think to say. Believe me, Levi could be hard.

He didn't say another word to me through the whole meal. The turkey was a little dry that year, I thought, and there was an overabundance of cranberries, probably a filler for the shortfall on stuffing and gravy.

I ran into Whiskey Bob and decided to sit across from him.

"Well, if it isn't Sir Robert himself," I smiled setting my tray down.

"Howdy, Roy."

Bob was a man of few words as they say. He earned his moniker one night after he plopped down a whole day's worth of caddying money on a fifth of good bourbon. Just as he was leaving the liquor store, he caught his heel on the curb and the sack with the whiskey bottle in it fell straight out of his hand. Those who were with Bob that night swear about what happened next. The bottle hit the curb and bounced back up waist high. Bob waited for the bottle to reach his hand, wrapped his fingers around its neck and continued walking without missing a beat. Now that's class, you hear them say. What Bob, once an affluent lawyer, had was class.

I've never seen a bum more neatly dressed even when his clothes were faded and worn. His salt-and-pepper hair was always beautifully parted and styled and his face cleanly shaven. He could have been the President of First National Bank That's how gentlemanly he appeared. A little pickled looking, I admit, but wait until the President of First National Bank goes through a recession or two, and let's see what he looks like.

Even the blue noses Bob caddied for on a regular basis talked to him as though he was a somebody, with reverence, in quiet voices, and seemed to respect his opinion. Maybe he was somebody once. Some said he'd been a famous attorney.

"How you been, Bob?"

"Oh, nothing short of satisfactory."

"Haven't seen much of you."

"Oh, been living with my son and his family. I guess I'll stay until spring and head out again. His wife's a little fussy."

Levi snorted. Maybe that was his way of laughing, snorting through his nose. He just toyed with his dinner. Maybe that's why he was so skinny.

I gobbled my dinner in less than ten minutes and joined the seconds line. There must have been a couple of hundred of us. I was mopping up the last of my gravy when I spotted Milton picking his teeth near the exit. Believe me, I was sure glad to see him. Levi might make for a long winter.

"Get enough to eat, Milty," I said to the back of his head. Same old stocking cap.

"Hey, Roy," he laughed turning around. "Don't tell nobody, he bent to whisper towards my my ear, "but I got me a deal on some leftover turkey's been saved for me by

Leon and Charlie in the kitchen. They owe me, you see, for some good smokin' last summer down in the park. Want to split some wiff me?"

"Be honored. Speaking of deals, I found a nice spot to keep me out of the snow. You interested?"

"Aren't thinking' 'bout no shelters, you?" he snapped.

"No way."

"You know me better than that. Ain't nobody goin' to stick his ramrod up my backside."

We laughed together. That was our joke.

"I got us a third. He's kind of quiet but reliable. See him. That little Jewish feller over there."

"I seen him diggin' in the trash bins downtown. Hangin' around the banks. It's a wonder they don't kick his nasty lookin' ass outa there."

"He's a little strange. But look at us, Milton."

"Who you callin' strange. Huk uk uk uk, now. I need to kick your ass more often."

"Well, you want to give it a shot?"

"Mize well. Hey, you meet me around back in about ten minutes, ok?"

"We'll be there."

I got Levi's attention and we strolled past the hangers-on and through the trees in back of the churchyard to the kitchen. Milton was leaning against the trash bin puffing on a cigarette.

"This is my new acquaintance, Levi," I said.

Levi's beard did a little twist. "Thank you for that," he said.

"Pleased to meet you" he said to Milton and extended his hand.

"Pleased too," Milton pumped his hand. "We goin' to get along just fine, little buddy. You hep me, I hep you. We eat good and drink bad, you see what I mean, huk uk uk uk. Yessir. Can't go wrong with old Roy neither."

A few minutes later a man in a cook's apron hustled out of the kitchen on his tippy toes with a large aluminum serving pan well-covered with aluminum foil.

"Even up?" he asked Milton, looking scared as hell.

"Even up, young man," Milton answered, pulling the pan towards his chest. "You did good, Leon. I'll remember you come next time."

Leon looked as if God himself had given him absolution.

"Got to run, man. 'Preciate it."

Milton turned towards Levi and me.

"Now this what I call leftovers. Huk uk uk uk. Nothin' better than a turkey sammich. Now for a visit to the Quickstop."

"Let's get you situated first, Milton. Where's your gear?"

"Got it hid down the street. Let's go find it."

Once found we headed back to our new quarters, Milton holding the aluminum pan, Levi and I carrying his two bags of stuff. It was too early, four in the afternoon, to appropriate Milton's sleeping quarters, so we headed to the little all-night store and shoplifted mayonnaise, pickles, green olives and bread while Milton paid for a pack of cigarettes.

"Sheet, man, you dint order no lettuce. Gotta have lettuce," Milton teased. I don't know how he did it. Levi and I waited down the block. Milton came back with a head of lettuce, tomatoes, and seven or eight Snicker bars.

"Now that's food, man. You can't have no turkey sammich without lettuce."

After dark, Milton and I went back to the industrial park to select his box.

"You too picky, man," Milton complained. He was in a hurry, edgy. I think he needed one of his funny smokes.

"How many times you want to do this, Milton? Let's get you one that will last."

"Sure. Sure. But don't need to dick around all day pickin' out no box. Sheet. Get us a box and be done wiff it."

I grabbed the first wax coated box that looked big enough for him and we folded and drug it back to the overpass. Very awkward. Didn't slide well. Thank god Levi had decided to be part of the team. He had the fire going and the sandwiches ready to eat.

"I managed to slip a few sodas in my coat," Levi announced proudly, squeezing his stash. "I hope you like strawberry sodas."

"Hey, man, anything to wash it down wiff. You did good, man," Milton said, scrunching his big hand around Levi's neck. "Let's eat, ok." Milton was getting the shakes.

"Here, have a snort." I passed Milton a pint of vodka. He swallowed about half of it.

"Oh, yeh. Praise the lawd" he sighed, settling near the fire and biting into a sandwich. "Now this is it. All right, thank you, Jesus."

Milton, as usual, stayed up late drinking the rest of the vodka and my wine and smoking marijuana cigarettes he painted with pink liquid opium. I don't know where Milton got the money for that stuff. I was too afraid to ask. I just know he started on it early every evening and slept later every day.

I wouldn't say we lived together in marital bliss but we got along. Sometimes Levi pouted. Sometimes Milton had tantrums. Sometimes I brooded. When one of us was down, the other two were up. If I came home emptyhanded, Levi crawled up the hill with a sack of ribs and French fries. The only difference being that Levi seemed to have bought his meals brand new while Milton and I typically returned with leftovers.

The nicest part of the day was just after dark, the fire going, food at hand, drink on its way, the three of us, Milton and me settling back, Levi in his box shining his flashlight around, hearing the pop and spit of the lumber or if Milton got lucky a bundle of firewood from outside a supermarket. For Milton, those four or five hours, were his day. When he woke, usually just before noon, he was outright cranky. I did my best to keep him in vodka. It worked better than a shot of heroin. But those nights around the fire with Levi joining us now and then, made it all worthwhile.

"Now this is livin', man," Milton often said. "A nice fire, cozy feelin' in the stomach, no hasslin'."

Levi nodded. For some reason he respected Milton. I never caught him twisting his beard in a smirk at Milton or anything he said.

On the other hand, Milton stayed skeptical about Levi. I don't know if it was his standoffish manner, his abstinence from booze or his plain weirdness. When Levi wasn't around, Milton puzzled about him.

"Now, Roy, what's this sheet about sticking his hand in his coat all the time? He got a gun in there? A heart murmur? Huk uk uk uk."

"No, he calls it his stash."

"He holdin' out on us? Got money in there?"

"No. I've seen it. He doesn't know I've seen it. Just a wad of newspaper clippings marked like money. It's crazy stuff. Don't worry about it. It means something to him but nothing to us. I don't know what he does with it. Makes him feel secure I think."

"Huk uk uk uk. When I get looney like that, you go ahead and shoot me, Roy. I don't want nobody seein' me looney. Just go ahead and blow to my brains, you hear/"

After Christmas and New Years when all the dinners and the hospitality dwindled to just about nothing, it got really cold. It snowed more that year than it had in all the previous ten years combined. You couldn't get dry or warm. We spent as much time as we could in libraries, convenience stores, friendly church basements and public buildings like the Post Office but after a while those people get on to you and hustle you right back out into the cold. Rarely did we step inside a shelter during the day. Never at night.

Of course, we started growling at each other and it seemed that Milton spent most of his time complaining and blaming the cold and the snow and the lack of hospitality on poor little Levi.

"They handing out blankets tomorrow at the mission," Milton announced one cold gusty night late in January. "Who goin' wiff me to get him one?"

"I'll be there for sure," I piped in. "My poor old army blanket stinks like a backed-up toilet in a Mexican railroad station," I added shooting for hyperbole.

Levi snorted.

"Bout you, Levi? You look like another blanket would do you good," Milton said.

"No thank you."

"See," Milton turned to me, "ain't nothin' I can do to make that boy come to."

"I'm not a boy and it shouldn't make any difference to you whether I get a blanket from the mission or don't get a blanket..."

"Now, watch that smart mouth, boy..." Milton started to raise up.

"Hold it, guys, hold it." I stood up in case I needed to part them. "We've got the whole night ahead of us. And tomorrow is tuna casserole at the soup kitchen."

"No!," they both shouted with big grins.

Then the three of us stared pickle-faced and dead-eyed into the red coals.

"All of this," Levi proclaimed, making a sweeping gesture of the three of us in turmoil, "is simply precipitated by the brutal onset of winter."

"Whadja...?" Milton raised an eyebrow.

"He means it's too fucking cold," I interpreted.

"Now," Milton smacked his fist into his hand, "I get-ja, lil buddy." He clasped the back of Levi's neck in a big brotherly way. "You ok, Levi. You right about that nasty fuckin' snow."

I waited for an opening before making my announcement.

"I'm sure glad you two can get along. I'm going to leave you for a short spell. I'm going to be gone a few days and..."

"Huk uk uk uk," Milton laughed, swaying from side to side, slapping his knees and chanting, "Goin' to see Miss Elvira? Huk uk uk uk. Tsst. Tsst."

It was true. The snow, the gray days, the general lack of friendliness had torn open the emptiness at the bottom of my bundle. The blues. I needed a little love.

"Oh well, you can get along for a few days. It's just over the weekend."

"Goin' to see Miss Elvira, goin' to see Miss Elvira..." Milton kept singing in a teasing voice.

I was actually gambling that Elvira Lump would be home and she wouldn't have another man with her. She wasn't a prostitute exactly but she went to bed with a lot of men and wasn't too picky, let's put it that way. Usually, her paramours left her with a gratuity, be it a bill or two, half a ham or a half dozen steaks or booze of some kind. Come to think of it I hadn't seen Elvira since last February.

Her real name wasn't Lump. That was a nickname I gave her name due to a misfortune involving her right cheek. I knew her long before then. Met her in a bar right down the street from where she rented some rooms on a more or less permanent basis at an older hotel. Had such a good time drinking and laughing and dancing to the juke box she drug me home with her and we've been good friends ever since.

"You can put your boots under my bed any night, Roy," Elvira Lump told me again and again.

I found Elvira to be somewhat mentally slow. Her brain didn't always register. Just meeting her on the street you'd think she was more or less normal. But spend a few days with her and you'd soon discover just about everything she said was a repeat of what what she might have heard on television.

"You bet your life," she told me one day when I asked her if she'd ever been to California.

"Where in California?"

"Sittin' on the dock of the bay."

"What town would that be?"

"Why, that'd be up near Omaha, you idiot," she laughed and slapped me so hard on the back I nearly died coughing.

Yet she made it day by day. She lived on a pension of some kind, a modest check she received every month from the Federal government. I suspect she may have been married to a soldier, maybe a Vietnam War casualty. I don't know for sure but she did well enough on her government money. She told me she was raised in a private orphanage; the benefactor anonymous. I wouldn't say she was well taught about how to live on her own. More like she was well trained.

All she did day in and day was lay in front of the television or go drinking in one of the lowlife bars in her neighborhood. I've watched her sit on point in front of the television until it went off the air and get up to watch it again first thing in the morning. Smoke, laugh, watch television and eat what food she bought. She was kinda pretty too, not next door pretty, seductive without trying to be. Had shining dark hair cut short and well endowed, clean as Clorox and always dressed in her thrift store finest.

She kept a meticulous apartment and a bright white bathroom with an organized medicine cabinet. The hotel then was owned by the manager. The building was well maintained. It had a coin operated laundry room where the appliances really worked. The janitor was a silent older white guy in a tattered brown baseball hat who seemed to be everywhere all at once.

I noticed the lump growing in the middle of her right jaw one year at the beginning of summer. I thought it might be a spider bite. But it kept on growing. Gradually, it took on the appearance of an ant hill and oozed a gooey white substance

from time to time. I told some of my buddies she might have cancer and tried to get her to go to the clinic to have it looked at. Didn't bother her a bit. Kept on laughing and smoking and watching television.

Well, one night that fall the sonofabitching lump exploded.

"No shit, Roy," she told me. "Here I was sailing into the sunset, snoring to beat the band, when I heard a loud pop. Damn near made me schizophrenic. I was wet from head to toe, a Grace Kelly swimming pool. I switched on the light and there was pus and blood from here to eternity. Dripping from the ceiling, sliding down the wall..."

The night clerk said he thought Elvira had been shot, walking down the steps into the lobby in her nightie, hands help up in disbelief, her face bloodied and jaw blown open.

"Kept asking me, 'Who did it? Who did it?'" Elvira laughed when she told me.

He called her a taxi that drove her directly to the emergency room at General. Turned out to be nothing more than an infected boil. But it had to be stitched up and to this day she has a scar the size of a half dollar in the middle of her cheek.

So now you know how she got the lump.

Believe me, I left Levi and Milton with a great degree of recalcitrance. God knows what might become of them without me but the truth is I do get down about twice a year, once in the early days of spring and again in the dead of winter. Feel real blue. So I had to take a chance on leaving them with their troubles and hoped Elvira would be there to invite me in. I could hear her television blaring as I plodded up the steps to her apartment on the top floor — the sixth floor — a kind of suite if you could call it that. She had a parlor with four large windows, a dining area, two separate bedrooms, a nice bath and a fairly usable kitchen given such old appliances. The two middle windows in the parlor also served as doors that opened onto a small balcony. I've cooked many a steak out on that balcony. To top it off, she had a view. The hotel, being in the old part of town, was only a few miles from the river and since no skyscrapers had yet been built between the old district and the river, Elvira could sit in her parlor or on the balcony any day of the week and literally look for miles out over the river, the treetops of the original neighborhoods and into the suburban beyond.

She knew how to play a few pieces on an ancient piano the owner stored there and kept in tune. She couldn't read music but kept song sheets propped above the keys that might give someone the idea she could. A music teacher at the orphanage discovered she could somehow remember the notes and play fairly well if only in a repetitive fashion.

I used the stairs because I didn't trust the elevator. The doors halted, opened and closed in short bursts. Once opened again the elevator jerked up and down and ground to a halt with a grating sound. I shrugged once I read a recent inspection certificate in a glass case above the buttons.

After my first visit, out of curiosity I guess, I checked out the boiler, a distinguished one, something of a jalopy, that put out wonderful steam heat. The city made the owners replace the hot water tank regularly and keep the outside trim painted and in good repair. Urban renewal. So, you can see, as opposed to freezing my butt off and feeling blue, Elvira Lump was an inviting interlude in the life of a bum.

I held my breath and knocked on her door. She was laughing along with the canned laughter of the television audience.

I sucked in my breath and let it out slowly. Then I knocked my usual code — ratta tat tat...tat tat.

"By god and by gummy," I heard her sweet voice exclaim from inside. "That you, Roy?"

"You alone, Elvira?" I asked through the door.

"Alone, if not beaten and betrayed." A Whiskey Bob expression she learned from me. Bob was one of my first bum friends.

"Could you use a little company?"

"No. But you could. I'm right in the middle of a my favorite teevee show."

They're all your favorites, I thought cynically.

"I won't interfere."

"Just a minute."

I could hear the bottoms of her old silk slippers scratching on the planks of the wooden floor. She unfastened the chain, turn the bolt lock and fiddled with the inside

door key. She yanked the door open so hard it banged against the wall. She blushed. Glad to see me.

"Well, if it isn't Bluster Brown. Come on in you dirty old dingaling."

"Don't mind me, Elvira. I'm still upright. Go back to your program," I said grabbing my travel bag and moving inside.

"Roy, you sure do look like an alley rat," she laughed and pointed to one of the spare bedrooms. "Go shine up real good. You hit me on a good night. I just got over my period."

I doubt she still had periods but I guess it pleased her to think so.

I entered the bathroom with a bounce in my step. Bless her little heart. While I undressed she ran a hot bath and loaded it with bath oil beads. I slid down into a cloud of sweet-smelling steam and foam. She brought in a stack of fresh towels and washcloths and hung an old flannel bathrobe on the inside door hook. God only knows who all had worn it. She took a deep breath and slipped right out of her sweatshirt and blue jeans, lowered her panties with her thumbs and climbed in just opposite me, pulling me towards her by my shoulders and kissing me full blast on the mouth.

"You lousy old bum. You taste like dirt," she said and relaxed backwards. "I been thinking about you. I bet you was out there freezing your ass off."

"It's my heart's gone cold on me, Elvira."

"Shoot. You ain't got a heart, Roy. You're just like that guy in the Three Musketeers."

I had to stifle my laugh. The Wizard of Oz? I didn't correct her.

"What's so funny, puke face?"

"Oh, I just feel so happy being in this tub with you again. Overflowing with joy. Let me put it that way."

She grabbed a bottle of thirty-nine cent shampoo from the end of the tub.

"Here. You better let me scrub up that tangled up old knob of yours. You got more tangles than Lassie's ass. Here. Turn around."

I maneuvered around to face the spigot and she knelt up against me to shampoo my hair. She ran her fingers over my head real slow and deep, massaged my neck muscles, let her tits flop over my shoulders.

That tub was caked with grime by the time we let it drain and dried ourselves off. I went to the mop closet and came back with a scrub brush and cleanser and gave it a thorough rubdown and rinse.

"That could've waited, Roy."

"I never like to leave a dirty tub."

"Well, I never liked a dirty tub either."

She sure was in a good mood.

"What'd you bring me, Roy, besides an old heartache?"

We sat on her sofa, me in the flannel bathrobe — it smelled freshly washed — looking at the lights on the other side of the river. I pulled my bag closer to the sofa with my feet.

"First, a little perfume."

She opened the box, then the bottle and splashed some around her neck.

"I ain't never smelled this kind before. It sure is different. I kinda like it."

"It's the kind those hippie girls wear these days."

"Smells kind like raisons. Does it get you going, Roy?"

"That's why I brought it, honey."

"Then it's good enough for me."

Next I pulled out a red nightie set with matching silk panties I stole at the department store.

"Whooooee. Where'd you steal this?"

"Macy's," I lied because I couldn't remember.

"Boy, I ain't never had a red one before. Most guys like seeing me in black."

"That's because they never seen you in red before."

"I'll go put it right on."

When she came back, I had to whistle. She could have stood toe to toe with any of those gals at the Follies Bergere.

She curled herself next to me.

"Let's see. I wasn't expecting you but I got us a fine pot roast and all the fixin's just waiting to get shoved in the oven."

"Yum, yum."

"I also got us a half gallon of gin and two bottles of red wine."

"Hot dammy. But I ain't done yet. I also got you a little something for your neck."

"Boy, you been keeping the dicks at Macy's busy."

I held it up. A red glass heart on a gold looking chain.

"You sweet bastard. You know how to keep my knees open. In the meantime, let's open up some gin."

We had us a time that night. Gin always did make us a pair. Decided to let the pot roast wait in the fridge for another day. We laughed and drank and jumped into bed. It had been such a long time since I slept with a woman. I felt more alive and human. I thought, "Carpe diem."

We slept well into the afternoon. I may not have opened my eyes until evening if it wasn't for the television and the smell of the pot roast in the oven.

"When was the last time you watched a football game, Roy?" I heard her ask from the kitchen..

"I can't remember when," I mumbled, feeling drugged and beat up.

"When you're ready, you go on in and take another bath and try shave off any leftover scratchy spots without bleeding to death. You should see my neck. Then we'll just cozy in and watch the football game."

I'd forgotten it was Sunday. Yes, it had been many years since I watched a football game. Never did care to waste my time that way. I thought, "Why, sit there all that time watching someone else having fun?"

I took my time cleaning up, shaving slowly, holding the hot wash cloth over my face. I could still smell that perfume throughout the house. Afterwards I sat like a newly swathed babe on the sofa wrapped in the flannel bathrobe.

"Here, honey," Elvira said, handing me an ice cold beer. It was just the right thing. I'd never seen Elvira so happy.

It wasn't until late that night waking from a bad dream that I thought about Levi and Milton. Oh, Lord. Those boys out there in the cold and me snuggled cheek to cheek with Elvira Lump. Gosh darn, I had to get back.

But come morning I'd lost the energy to do anything but be with Elvira. I was her good helper. We cleaned her place up good and washed all the clothes. She sent me down

the street with some money to buy food and cigarettes and more gin. After three days running we were both so sore from hopping into bed every five minutes we had to lay off a few days and just eat, drink and watch television together.

I didn't notice the time go by until the next Sunday rolled around and the football game was on again. I still didn't care much for football but Elvira did. "I like to see those muscle-bound galoots grab their balls and pat each other on the ass," she told me. "Does something for me."

The next day I ran into Levi at the small grocery store several blocks away. At first he pretended not to see me and I was trying to do my best to hide out. I'd go up one aisle and he'd go down another. But he snuck up from behind.

"Where in the fuck have you been?" Levi's words stung me through the middle like God's voice on Judgement Day.

I looked him eyeball to eyeball.

"I got tied up."

"No shit."

Levi looked back and forth and squeezed his stash. "It's getting pretty bad. I don't want to pressure you but Milton's getting stranger by the day. He keeps following me. I can't get anything done. He keeps picking on me about every little thing."

"I plan to come back soon."

"How soon? I thought we had some kind of deal."

"We do, Levi. We do. I get in these moods sometimes. They don't last long. I'll be back."

"When? We're freezing our ass off."

"A few days."

"A few days! I don't think we'll make it."

"What do you mean by that."

"Just hurry, that's all."

I gave Levi a slap on the back and handed him a five dollar bill.

"Hold it together, kid. I'll be there."

I hurried back to Elvira's as best I could with the groceries. Elvira could tell I was upset.

"Don't leave yet, Roy. We're having such a good vibration. I could get used to you hanging around."

"I know, honey. But I've got my team out there in the cold and it sounds like they need their quarterback. Don't worry. Let me get things straightened out and I'll come back."

"Sure you will. Next year sometime. Well, don't expect me to sit around and mope over you."

"Now, Elvira. You know me. I never stay away long. I always come back."

I stayed that evening and the rest of the next day with Elvira and the next. I hated leaving her. Maybe I truly loved her. I had to force keeping focused on my departure. That last night we fixed a couple of steaks and jumped in the sack three or four times. Along about ten o'clock the following morning I got dressed in my warmest gear and slung my bag over my shoulder, grabbed the handles of two small suitcases I kept there filled with my inventory and kissed Elvira goodbye at the top of the steps. She stood looking down at me looking small and grim.

My journey through the bottoms back to the freeway took me several hours. For one thing the snow hadn't been plowed in the side streets and it had drifted, two, three feet in some of the alleys I was using as shortcuts. The wind was wet and unrelenting. I had to stop and take a breath now and again, dig into my bag for a neckerchief to cover my face. I was only a half hour into it when I wanted to turn around and go back to Elvira's. Believe me, it took the little bit of character I had left to keep pushing ahead. Truthfully, I couldn't have stayed that long with Elvira anyway. Eventually, her lack of — what? — a fully-developed brain and the meaningless flashing and noise of the television would have driven me to drink. I mean, serious drink.

I hobbled across the freeway in pack-rat fashion dodging the traffic. Seemed to me as though the cars speeded up once they saw me.

The drifts at the bottom of our little abode stood at least four feet high. Levi and Milton did have enough sense left not to leave a trail. I quickly found their path.

I could hear Milton laughing and talking and that made me feel merry. Just to think Levi and Milton could learn to converse and get along and share side by side. I crossed over behind Levi's box and saw him and Milton seated by the fire. I thought the

fire a little too high for the situation, too likely to attract attention. Coming to the campsite from that angle I had to start out in a crouch and slide down slowly to keep from busting my head. I slid the suitcases in one by one. I approached Levi and Milton from the rear. What I saw was the back of Levi's head and his coat. He seemed to be leaning on an elbow, listening maybe. Milton had his full back to me. He was laughing and talking and stoking the fire. I tried to make as much noise as I could to alert them to my return. The last thing you want to do at a campsite like that is startle someone. But neither of them turned around to greet me. I walked behind and past them both, past Milton on his left side and down below him and the fire.

"Hey, Milton," I hallo-ed as cheerfully as I could.

He kept stoking the fire, hotter and higher.

"Milton, it's me, Roy."

"Huk uk uk uk uk. Tsst. Tsst. Stink-wy poopoo ho'. Goin' to see, Miss Elvira, goin' to see, Miss Elvira. Nasty old peepee ho'."

"Well, I'm back, Milty."

He still didn't seem to notice. I couldn't figure out what he was on. The air smelled as rich as a rock concert and bottles were strewn everywhere. Hadn't been policed for days.

Then I saw the money. Lots of money. Hundred dollar bills, a thousand dollar bill and other denominations everywhere. The fire burned smokey, you see, and I thought maybe I was dreaming. I picked up a piece of paper and it was a stockbroker's receipt, a cash transaction for a security of some kind. There were more receipts and hundred dollar bills. The edges of the money lifted right and left in the small amount of air that sifted through the opening to the outside. Some of money was blown into the fire and began to curl. Partially burned money lay on the edges of the rocks we used to form the pit.

I followed the money up to Levi's boots and saw his coat was open and the inside seam at the hemline ripped apart exposing more money. I looked up to say hello to Levi when I noticed his face wasn't right. That's all I can say about it. Just wasn't right. His wide-rimmed glasses sat askew on his forehead. His stocking cap lay behind his head. At first I refused to look at his left eye so I moved down to his beard — as straight as a flagpole. Then I moved back up to his left eye. The eyeball had been knocked out of its

socket and laid haywire on his cheek. The eyeball looked directly at me. I could see Levi was freshly dead. Dried blood matted his beard.

That was the moment, I tell you, the exact moment I gave in. I could feel my shoulders drop, my chest collapse, my bowels turn to mush and my dick shrink. I thought to myself, "What in the hell am I, a grown man, doing out here in subzero weather with two bums, still raising the fist of some kind of misplaced adolescent defiance?" Hell, the system was there, probably had been there since the beginning of time and anyone who defied it could easily end up with a crushed head and a frozen ass.

"Milton, what in the hell...?" I was kneeling in front of the fire, my arms raised in disbelief. The fire reflected on Milton's beard, his mouth ajar, his gold teeth exposed and shining, his army jacket and shirt wide apart, a gold cross dangling on his army green t-shirt.

He laughed and laughed and sucked on his roach. A bloodied steel pole about two inches in diameter and four feet long teetered across his lap.

"Wat sneaky-wy weeble muvafuck. Holdin' out on old Milt-wy. Freed'n my ass'n off n' he rich sumbich. Huk uk uk uk uk. Goin' Flawda, me. Goin' down to Flawda n' fuck wat rich white juicy women, me. Huk uk uk uk uk."

I couldn't understand much after that. But I did place together what had happened. Milton was too smart to overlook what I had chosen to ignore. Somewhere deep down I knew Levi was one of those eccentric rich eccentric people who chose a life to be a bum. I had guessed, as you may know by now, he visited a stockbroker most weekdays and kept his accounts in cash. But, what the hell, that was his business. That was Levi's business. I wanted no part of it.

I decided immediately to join Milton by the fire as though nothing had happened. I just listened and laughed.

"Done stoved in his haid, me. Wang. Wang. Shoulda seen wat muvafuck pop. Huk uk uk uk. Now, I says, here what you get, holdin' out n' me freed'n my ass off. You just bend down smart fuck and take your beatin' like a man..."

I kept feeding him vodka and lighting his roaches. I knew from experience that Milton would eventually fall asleep sitting up and once passed out would be a goner until late the next day. I waited until he was stone cold and stabbed the inside of his forearm

with the end of a burning log until I could smell the hair on his skin sizzle. When he didn't react, I gathered up as much of the money on the ground as I could. Finders Keepers. The rule of the road. It would never help Levi. God knows what he might have had hidden away in bank accounts or money markets.

I ripped out the rest of Levi's overcoat and found tax returns, more receipts and IRS forms as well and enough money to line four more coats. Later, in a hotel room, I would count almost twenty thousand dollars which was all I could carry since many of the bills were wadded up. Felt I had to hurry.

I rolled Levi to his side, nuzzled him onto my shoulder, not as heavy as I thought he might be, pushed and shoved him through the gap to the outside and very carefully traced my path down to the street under the freeway. I carried him almost two blocks to the exit, walked up it midway, crouched up and down like a spring and heaved him over the guard rail pretending I was the front end of a car. He tumbled over the embankment out of view into the snow. They'd find him, sure. But it would be a couple of days or maybe weeks. Another vagrant stumbling into a hit-and-run.

I kicked snow over my tracks and climbed back up to the campsite. I left Milton two hundred-dollar bills and rearranged the fire to give him some warmth without catching him on fire. I found his blanket and laid it over his body. Before I started back down the hill, I turned and slid the steel pole off his lap and flung it as best I could into the darkness.

I made it to Elvira's on the devil's adrenaline.

"Something bad's happened," I told her through several involuntary huffs and puffs. "I've got to leave town fast. Real fast." I told her in a hurry. "You want to go with me."

"You know I cain't do that, Roy."

I knew she wouldn't go with me but I asked just to leave a pleasant taste in her mouth. I knew she'd cover for me if it came to that. I didn't think it would and it didn't.

Well, to make a long story longer, I shaved at her apartment, dressed in the business suit, shirt, tie and shoes I kept in one of Elvira's closets for emergencies. I left her apartment at four in the morning, kissed her goodbye and stuck a wad of bills down the front of her blouse, and stumbled through the snow to the train station with the two

suitcases, one stuffed with cash, and caught the early train to Toledo. You know, it felt good to be on that train, as shabby as it was, to be warm. I watched the dull gray fields of snow and tumbledown farm buildings sliding by like humdrum dreams. I wrapped that train around me like an expensive fur coat. I let it pull me, no, drag me along. It felt like a serving of regular food to be sucked in, softly slowly, firmly, to a warm center. I kept seeing Levi's eyeball reminding me of what it was like out there, waiting for the real world to beat me down, bully me, make me suffer, kill me before my time. I could see why men fight to reign supreme, to control, to make deals with the devil.

When I got to Toledo I suddenly realized I had no business there. To this day I can't figure out why I kept waking up in Toledo. I sat for a while trying to think of a big city (other than Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Miami) where nobody knew me. From one train to another I finally set off to greater Miami. I decided it offered the most easily available graft, had decent weather and lots of hotel and motels for me to lay low in for a while.

Oh, it took months to get established. I rented a room at a motor lodge and bought me a third hand junker, an old blue Plymouth, to get around in. I had to laugh at myself. I began to behave a little like Levi, checking my stash every few minutes.

It wasn't easy to get my identity papers. Took me several weeks and cost me a pretty penny. The hardest was Social Security. Once I got that sucker I was in business. Had to deal with a lot of sleezy folks to get all that. Greasy, greedy bastards. But all of us with any ambition eventually has to deal with them. We just don't know whom we are really doing business with.

I opened a bank account and signed up for credit cards, bought more decent dressy clothes and rented me a condo with a swimming pool in the suburbs. I keep its location to myself. It was a time when the banks were chasing money like the pack of crazy wolves they are and loaned me plenty, albeit at a usurious rate. I decided to play the game like everybody else only I did it in the truck parts business, one I knew so very well. Hit 'em where they ain't, right? I found me a unique little niche in the truck parts business nobody wanted to fool with. Left Miami and rented an abandoned factory outside Chicago. All those huge trucks and construction equipment I sold many years before were breaking down. The customers had gotten into the habit of buying new ones

every three years or so and sending the old ones to the used construction equipment market. That was until the economy got sour again.

During that time I traveled around the country buying up parts from junkyards and such. Nowadays they've gone fancy and call them scrap metal salvage companies. Think of it though. I bought all that inventory with a line of credit from the bank. Didn't cost me a penny of my own money upfront. Then I set up several junk yards around the country and charged my customers nine, ten times my cost. I bet old Buster's nose would have burst had he known how I had turned the tables on my sad story. Eventually I went fully computerized and all that. Sold the whole shooting match a few years ago for millions. Good timing. Just before the recession. Now here I am getting ready to have a fine dinner and enjoy a three-week cruise in the Caribbean with my lovely girlfriend, Mary Ellen. What a brilliant woman! A CPA who does all my taxes as well as loves me up.

Hey, wait until you see the brunches they put on: All you can eat: eggs, sausage, fruits of all kinds, pastries galore. And the buffets! Carved beef, hams, spiced shrimp, Oysters Rockefeller, succulent desserts. We just stuff our faces the whole trip, guzzle Champagne like it was water, dance all night and generally make fools of ourselves.

See, that's her over there visiting with our friends. Oh, she's gained a few pounds recently but then, by golly, so have I. Now what I like about her is that she will be grateful for the fancy booze and the fine dinners we're going to have. May sound strange but Mary Ellen and I took some of the proceeds from the sale and started a foundation. Gives supplies to the soup kitchens, cash for food and rent money to bums, winos and ex-cons, the real people in this world whose families didn't come over on the Mayflower. Kind of makes us feel like Robin Hood and Maid Mary Ellen. Take from the rich, give to the poor. Play the game better than the other players, that kinda thing. In this dog-eat-dog world I want to be the dog that eats first.

Well, Mary Ellen's waving at me to hurry over. Nice talking to you. I can see this is your first cruise. I'm sure they'll be seating you soon. Enjoy your dinner and the show.