

Sterling Road

Tales of Love, Lust, and Lug Nuts

Jon Robertson

Jon Robertson
219 E. Reservoir Road
Woodstock, VA 22664

540-459-2858
jon2012@shentel.net

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[1]

Griff

DENNY WICKHAM WAS COAXING the '56 Olds up steep Belmont Avenue when the carburetor caught fire again. With two violent coughs the engine died. The car began rolling backward downhill, so Denny absently angled the wheels against the curb. Black smoke wafted from the edges of the hood. The burnt circle in its center spread wider. The eleven-year-old Blue Monster was Denny's first car, and it caught fire often.

Denny could have stepped out into the freezing December wind, lifted the hood, and smothered the flames with the old jacket that he kept on the back seat for that purpose, but there was another way. He stomped the gas pedal to the floor and cranked the starter, by which the carburetor would eventually suck the fire down and extinguish it. For some reason, amid the smoke and the starter's repetitive whinny, Denny pictured Mimi Richmond, the quiet beauty who sat across from him in English class.

He continued to crank the starter—*ru-rouw, ru-rouw, ru-rouw*.

Mimi. When would he ask Mimi out on a date? Denny's problem trespassed far beyond shyness to a choking fear of letdown that haunted him inside. He hadn't always been like that. As a little boy, he had been fearless and free. He would rally the neighborhood for games of kickball or tag—all kinds of tag. They played car tag, cigarette tag, and freeze tag. He and the other boys hated girls, as boys do at eight summers, so it was logical to bully the loser into the most hideous of penalties: greet every tree on the block by a different girl's name, kiss its bark, and say, "I love you."

"Ewww! Gaggg!"

Hands around the sugar maple, *kiss*, "I love you Lynn."

Hands around the white oak, *kiss*, "I love you Julie."

Denny sure didn't hate girls now. Not now, he thought, as he cranked the Olds in the hope that the fire might huff out before the battery died. The fact was that girls mystified him, yet somehow he knew that he desperately wanted a girl to call his own.

The starter wound down to a plaintive *woww-woww*, but just before the battery died, a muffled pop told him that the fire was out. The black circle on the hood was now eight inches across. With the battery dead, he checked his watch. He'd be late for work.

Help for just about anything in Mount Pocono was never long in coming, so Denny sat and waited. Minutes later, Stan Lukas pulled up beside him in his pickup. Stan's teenybopper daughter, Sara, rode to school on Denny's bus.

Stan tossed his chin. "Denny, you all right?"

"Hi Stan—it caught fire again. Gimme a jump?"

Stan pulled up beside him blocking half of Belmont. As Denny lit a cigarette, he pictured Mimi Richmond's gleaming emerald eyes set in porcelain white against her tawny olive skin. The kids at school had heard that her mother was a Romanian gypsy. Denny, Kevin, and Don asked her about it one day. She switched her eyes nervously while the boys dangled from the precipice of her answer. After a dramatic moment of deep thought, the winsome majorette shrugged.

"Yeah?"

Then all the guys wanted her.

Denny shook himself back to reality. In nothing but his tee-shirt sleeves, he slid out the passenger side into the snowy cold, where he and Stan opened their hoods and connected Stan's jumper cables.

Just after the boys asked Mimi to confirm her heritage, Denny realized that it may have been his last chance to ask her out. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Mimi?"

"Mm-hmm?"

"You—going to gym?"

She angled her head. Her eyes widened, all curvy with the secrets of ancient fire dances. The corner of her mouth twitched.

"Yeah?"

Denny walked away feeling equal parts of triumph and self-recrimination. His face burned hot, a dry knot swelled in his throat, and the corners of his eyes stung. His personal mission to have a girlfriend wasn't going well at all.

Denny slid behind the wheel again and tried it. The diffident V-8 seethed to life. Stan unhooked the cables and Denny waved him on. He gunned the engine, yanked the shifter into Drive, and tromped it. The fenders heaved like an ocean swell from too much torque over bad shocks and springs, the rod bearings knocked, and the rocker arms chattered like sewing machines.

Denny would make it to work on time. He set Mimi aside and thought back to how he'd landed his job at Leon Miller's Esso.

* * *

Denny's work life began at age thirteen at the Tastee-Freez across the street from Leon's. He was earning all of seventy-five cents an hour and sought upward mobility. One afternoon at the end of his second summer working there, he was manning the window, when a familiar face showed up. It was Russell Waite, the tough kid from Denny's homeroom.

Russ eyed Denny's white bib apron. "Is this where you work?"

Russ had the swagger of one not to be messed with. He was in the same grade as Denny, though two years older. His skin was lightly freckled, and, in school, he curled his lip to show that he would comply with the rules, case by case. Some said he was dangerous. Russell spoke with authority about cars, fighting, drinking, smoking, and women. One morning in homeroom, he caught Denny's eye, looking all mock mean, and shot him the finger. But when Denny shot him the finger back, he got caught by the imperious Mrs. Johnson.

"Mr. Wickham!"

Denny quickly scratched his head with the finger.

"Mr. Wickham, are you feeling quite all right?"

Denny coughed, hooked his collar to sweat like Wile E. Coyote.

"Gulp."

"You are very peculiar, Mr. Wickham."

"Yes, ma'am. I know, ma'am."

Denny found that he was adept at clowning. It was an act that protected his secrets.

Russell was still waiting for an answer at the window.

"Is this where you work?"

“Yeah,” Denny said, passing a cheeseburger and fries through the window. “What are you doing here?”

Denny knew that Russ lived near Tobyhanna, so it would be odd for him to have driven to Mount Pocono for lunch.

“I work across the street,” he said. “Over at Leon’s.”

“Leon’s. Yeah. My brother hangs out there.”

Russell’s laugh bordered on a sneer. “You mean that crazy bastard Wes Wickham’s your brother? *Shi-i-t*. He’s funny as hell.”

Crazy? Funny? He couldn’t mean grumpy, silent Wes. Wes who responded to questions with a pained wince or a chastising grunt. Denny had never seen a funny side of Wesley. Nobody in the family had.

Russell crossed the highway back to the gas station, and Denny didn’t give him another thought. However, a few hours later, Russ returned to the window.

He waved Denny close. “Hey, do you like this Tastee-Freez job?”

“Sure, it’s okay,” he shrugged, but he had to think for a moment. He didn’t much like the people, the hours, scooping ice cream, or the pay. “Not really. Besides they’re closing up for the season.”

“Well, Stoinky just quit.” Russ leaned in. “Leon’s going to need someone on weekends, you interested?”

“I sure am.”

Denny knew Stoinky, an army kid who had just moved to the Tobyhanna Army Depot from a base in Japan. Denny would have given anything to work on cars, and Stoinky’s slot would be perfect. Denny knew he was college-bound, but this opportunity to work at Leon’s changed things. He’d walk out to the island and pump gas, check the oil, and wipe the windshield.

Later that night, like anytime something new happened to him, Denny wrote in a blue-lined tablet. He had wanted to be a writer since the sixth grade. He was smart with words and argument and often wrote thoughts, poetry, and stories at night under the covers with a flashlight.

Bolts.

Dog down tight.

Threads despairing

Under pressure. Bolts.

With his new job waiting for him, Denny slept well that night.

* * *

It was 1967, a few years before New Yorkers, Philadelphians, and Jersey-ites discovered that they could build houses in the Poconos for a fraction of the cost in Paterson or Chestnut Hill, and still only have a two-hour commute back to Metropolis. This was a decade before gambling interests started buying up the family-owned resorts. It was before the weekend traffic congestion. Before the long lines at every four-way stop sign, gas station, restaurant, grocery store, and church. It was a time of war protests and race riots in Detroit and Newark, the Apollo I fire disaster, the first issue of *The Rolling Stone*, and the year Elvis married Priscilla. Those were the days of *Born to Be Wild*, and *gawwd*, how Denny wanted to be wild. He employed his old parochial school skills to pray that he, too, could be wild.

Denny's Tastee-Freez job had helped him catch on at Leon's all the sooner—he already knew how to work a cash register and be polite to customers. Besides, he also knew the basics about working on cars. His chain-smoking dad was the original DIYer, and Denny liked helping him change the oil, rotate the tires, and flush out radiators. He liked helping Dad, and Wes, too, because mechanical work protected them all from the perils of intimate conversation.

When Denny's mom dropped him off at work that first day, Leon didn't say much. His small frame balanced on short legs, but he had strong arms and powerful shoulders. He had small eyes and wide cheekbones. When Denny walked in, Leon was standing behind the counter wiping off a set of points with a rag. He greeted Denny with a bemused half smile. His brows arched curiously.

“Are you here to work?”

“Yup. Yessir. Thanks Leon.”

Leon called Russ in from the bay. “Russell. Go ahead and show him around.”

Russ grinned. “Far fucking out.”

Russell demonstrated the tire machine, showed him the tool cabinet, and how to write up and slide a credit card through the machine. Denny hung on every word. He admired Russ. His toughness and certainty, and the fact that he took Denny seriously. He asked Denny for his opinion about things, and nobody had ever done that before. One time, Russell told Denny that he thought he was smart.

“Everybody says so,” Russ said.

Denny knew that wasn't true. “Naw. No they don't.”

At Miller's Esso, Denny worked rotating shifts with Russell, Junior Jarratt, a married guy in his twenties, and Soren Larsson, who had dropped out of school in the eleventh grade. They made repairs and worked the gas island. Most of the time, the guys worked unsupervised and handled the easy repair work: grease jobs, oil changes, mufflers, tires, belts, batteries, and tune-ups. The intense and moody Leon handled the more complicated repairs. He also inhabited the back office, where he did the books, ordered parts, and napped on an old couch.

Those were the days before self-serve, when a car arriving for gas rang a bell inside. Denny loved answering the bell. Grinning with a “Yes, sir” or “Yes, ma'am,” he stuck a nozzle into the gas tank, checked under the hood, and washed the windshield. It wasn't long before Denny smelled of grease, gasoline, and sassafras-sweet Go-Jo hand cleaner.

Leon's thin brown hair slewed out from the back of a mechanic's cap. He wore blue utility pants and shirt, the sleeves rolled up above the elbow, with “Miller's Esso” embroidered in white above the pocket. His ears stuck out some, and his boxy, unshaved jaw was always set. Leon was smart in mechanical things and in his observation of people. Whenever he was alone with Denny, he was patient and personable. In a callisthenic of efficient motion, he taught Denny how to break down tires, install studs in snow tires, and cut off a rusted muffler with the air chisel. He demonstrated how to change the oil, replace a battery, and clean the contact posts just so. He showed him how to safely operate the lift, check an electric motor armature on the growler, and gap spark plugs.

Whenever Leon spoke to people, he assumed a position of interest: his knee jutted out as he rested his right heel on his left instep. Denny admired him. He had always learned better by watching than reading, and Leon taught better by showing than describing. They got along.

At Leon's, Denny did his best to act out a tough persona. He started smoking cigarettes and bought himself a pair of black engineer boots. He dumbed down his speech, found shorter words in order to fit in, and he learned how to curse like a sailor. No, like a wordsmith, he thought. He

was incorrigibly imaginative—everyone said so, even his parents. He combined other slang. Found new dirty words in the special collection thesaurus at the library. He made combinations, inversions, and compound variations, though he eventually had to dial it back.

“Hey new kid? You tryin’ to be smarter than everybody?”

“No. Me? Nah.”

But gas station culture accelerated to a new level one afternoon, when Denny was introduced to ball-busting—world class ball-busting. Before his eyes, Leon morphed into new lifeform—a lethal prankster with a cruel glint in his eye.

“Hey peckerhead—you left your soda on the tire machine. You gonna buy one for the air compressor, too?”

Leon had a keen radar for the uninitiated. All it took was a misspoken word, a zipper left unzipped, or some unguarded anecdote from a weekend date. Whatever Leon picked up on, he’d start with a jibe that led to a nickname, and ultimately an institution. Denny started out as Fire Alarm, owing to his incendiary Oldsmobile.

“Here comes Fire Alarm.”

Heat flushed his face. At first, he shrunk inside himself, bathed in something like shame, until Russell whacked him on the arm.

It didn’t take much to for the torment to turn ugly.

One day, Denny unguardedly told the guys what had happened at Casey’s house the night before. Casey Nichols lived over on Center Avenue, on the far side of the big hill where they held the soapbox derby races each year. She was artistic and may have been the first bona fide hippie in Mount Pocono, though in 1968 they didn’t have anyone to compare her to. She had been the first to stick a flower on her shoulder bag and buy Arlo Guthrie’s *Alice’s Restaurant*. She took piano lessons and led a bumpy life in the shadows of her missing father and footloose mother, whom she seldom saw. In the pre-Woodstock age of Cher and Twiggy, Casey was thick around the middle.

One night while her mother was away, Casey threw a party. They were playing records, when someone came in with an Eagle Scout canteen full of vodka. Denny and Casey found themselves on the bed talking about Hawthorne and Emerson with no particular thought of making out. Denny was observing the slow hula of a Lava-Lite, when he fell to the floor bruising his butt. His fatal mistake was telling Leon about it.

For some reason, Leon knew all about Casey. He squawked, “Fall Out can’t even handle Casey Nichols.”

Junior jumped in. “She musta showed it to him. Scared ‘im out of bed!”

Denny grit his teeth to drive down the anger—now he was Fall Out?

“Jesus, I thought you said *pulled* out,” snorted Soren. “You have to grab them love handles and use ‘em for leverage. *Ugh.*”

Yet, he tried to imagine such a scenario, and thought he might try it if he ever got the chance. But that made him think of Mimi, whose face provided only brief respite from the torture. Denny protested, explained, and tried to deflect the onslaught, but it was useless. Leon’s victims simply couldn’t win.

Competition was keen to accelerate a joke to farcical levels of humiliation. If you were good at turning a phrase, Leon would sometimes bestow upon you the token of an eagle’s laugh. Denny liked jokes and words, so he tried his best. For the first time in his life, in this garage culture, Denny felt like he fit in. Teasing was simply the price one paid, however, things sometimes got out of hand, like one day when he arrived at work.

Junior shouted, “Here comes Fall Out.”

“Cut it out, fuckers.”

Just then, Leon kicked Denny’s knee from behind him, and he landed painfully on the corner of the lift.

“I’ll be okay. I’m okay.”

“*You’re* okay? Hell, I was worried about the lift.”

Leon later slipped five dollars into his hand. For some reason, the incident led to Leon drinking that night, sipping from a bottle he kept in the office, and the torment worsened. Though Denny and Russ were underage, Leon poured them each an inch of Rock ‘n’ Rye into foam cups. By closing time, the guys were a little drunk, all but Denny, who had merely touched the cup to his lips. Because of the burn, he didn’t drink much of it. They shut off the lot lights outside and hogtied Junior with fan belts. Junior whacked Russell on the butt with a radiator hose. Forgetting the lesson Denny had learned about disclosing, he carelessly let it slip that he hadn’t gotten laid yet.

Suddenly, Leon shouted, “Blue Balls!”

The guys shuddered, hee-hawed, and got ready for what they called a “Blue Balls Campaign.”

Before Denny knew it, Junior was holding him down on the wash bay floor, while Leon and Russell yanked Denny’s pants down.

“You must have blue balls,” Leon hollered, and dug through a tool drawer until he found a can of blue spray paint.

They pulled his shorts down and with an intense squint in his eyes, Leon commenced to spray paint his balls blue.

“Hey Blue Balls—we wanna see you fall out of bed.”

Denny hollered. “No! No, cut it out you bastards. *Leave me alone.*”

Leon’s eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. Something in Leon’s eyes scared Denny. Once he stood and pulled his pants up, the party was over. Leon grabbed his keys and stomped out. He got into his car, a powerful old 1958 Cadillac, and sped without looking across Belmont, where two cars slammed on their brakes, horns blasting, to avoid hitting him.

“That man shouldn’t drink,” Soren said. “It brings on fits.”

Junior neither laughed nor confirmed. He looked at the empty Salem slot in the cigarette machine.

“Fuck.”

Soren added, “And whenever he feels it coming on, he drives like a maniac.”

Denny took careful note—his new hero had flaws.

But even when Leon wasn’t there, the ball-busting didn’t stop with the guys at the station—Junior and Soren were masters, and it even carried over to certain customers, which Leon condoned. One day, Mr. Snyder brought in his new Plymouth Valiant for gas. Those cars had slanted six-cylinder engines, which apparently everyone knew about but Mr. Snyder.

Soren opened the hood and hollered, “Snyder! Look! Your engine fell over!”

With his silver eyebrows cavorting, Snyder hovered over his engine like a terrified mother over a blue-faced baby.

“Oh, no! Oh God, *no!*”

“You can’t drive it like *that*, Snyder,” Soren told him with a straight face. “It ain’t safe. You’re lucky you brought it to us in time.”

“I just bought this car, Soren. Oh gawd no. My wife will be *furious!*”

Once in the office, Soren had the guy in tears as he fake-dialed the dealer, the police, and the Army Depot, before finally telling the man it had all been a joke.

Not even old Mrs. Ledbeater was spared. A shaky wraith of a woman near ninety, she would jump spastically at loud noises. So whenever she came around, they'd gun the deafening impact wrench or purge the air compressor. One time, Junior and Denny drove a hapless tourist to his car near Paradise Stream Motel with water for his radiator. They decided to take a customer car that had no passenger door. Junior filled a pail to the brim with water and balanced it on the man's knees. They drove the scenic route—around the Knob at forty mph. That was before cars had seat belts, so the man was chalk white by the time they reached his car and got him on his way.

And then there was Griff.

Old Griff came around twice a year to fill his dirty plastic Clorox jugs with kerosene for his furnace. The guys hooted at his faded red relic of a car, a Borgward, from which chunks of rust dropped whenever he slammed the driver's door. The tiny, frail geezer was funny for a lot of reasons. He may have weighed a hundred pounds all dressed, but he was a thousand pounds of ornery. He had no teeth at all and walked in this jerking glide because he was twisted up with arthritis. The fronts of his unlaced sneakers were cut away so his toes could stick up.

Russell told Denny, "Griff's dangerous on the road. If you ever get behind him, give him plenty of room."

Junior had dubbed him "Road Hazard."

"Hey Haz. Let me know once you get home, so I'll know it's safe to drive."

"Aw now, just phuck you, Junior. Ya startin' already?"

Soren, who towered over Griff, stepped up to him and looked down. "Were you always this short, Haz?"

"Aw, I can lick all you cocksuckers with my hands tied."

At seventy-eight, Griff shouldn't have had to put up with needling from a bunch of smart-ass kids. But Griff was starved for attention, and they had learned how to bust balls from a pro.

"Road Hazard!" Leon hollered as he emerged from the office. "Hey, you got your teeth in today?"

The folds of Griff's spotted face rose up to his freckly scalp and his voice thinned to a siren. "Leon, you phucker—how you doin', boy?"

Griff had been a customer of the Esso station when Leon's father ran it. He'd been a laborer before he got too old to work. He lived alone on Social Security in an old aluminum trailer on Sterling Road, just past the ruins of old Doc McGinny's mansion. Sterling Road was all country back then, populated by trees, fields, and an occasional farm. It began at the Five Points intersection, heading northeast toward the town of Sterling, Pennsylvania.

One by one, the boys filled Griff's Clorox bottles with kerosene, cranking the hand pump with dramatic pauses from a tank in the corner of the garage. Griff complained over every spilled drop, and his toothless curses set them howling.

"Phuckers! Quit spillin' it all over. *Awwww*—yer gonna stink up my trailer."

"What do you care, Haz?" taunted Leon. "I think you drink this stuff, you old dipso."

"Now just phuck you, Leon," Griff would holler. "I'll get my *re-wall-wer* and shoot your ass, by Jesus." They made him say *re-wall-wer* over and over, laughing to tears.

The boys worked Christmas Eve, which had been pretty dead. So they watched the snow falling in the pump lights. The boys hadn't expected the boss to come to the station at all, that night, but at around eight o'clock, just as freezing rain began strafing the windows, he pulled in

with Junior riding shotgun. Junior had cleaned up with a change of clothes and his hair combed. Leon had changed into clean mechanic's blues. Same dirty cap.

Like a bantam rooster, Leon took a wide stance in the doorway.

"We're closing early." Leon placed an A&P bag on the counter and flexed his chest. "We're gonna go wish Road Hazard a merry Christmas." Impatiently flipping a key ring around his thumb he commanded, "Lock it up."

Denny thought he knew all about mood shifts from his older brother, Wesley. But his sixteen-year-old mind couldn't comprehend this kind gesture from the CEO of mean streaks. At first, Denny thought it a disguise for some diabolical ambush on the unsuspecting codger. But Leon meant it. Denny's first impulse was that he had no gift for Griff. He only had eight-five cents, so he spent thirty of it buying him a pack of Luckys from the vending machine. The others guffawed as though he were joking.

That night of Griff's kamikaze Christmas Eve party, Sterling Road was a black-ice mirror of freezing rain and wind-blown sleet. Leon drove the road deftly, curving and dipping beneath bare gray trees and past stubbly fields. They drove past the riding stable, past the turn for Pocono Forest Estates, where Denny had worked a few seasons clearing brush. Weather didn't bother them much up there in the mountains, not even when they were driving drunk. It took a pretty mean blizzard to justify even one day off school, though the schools always closed on the first day of buck season.

Griff's tiny trailer squatted in the gray sleet on the roadside corner of a frozen field. The aluminum hovel rattled with dead vines and the wind whistled around a TV antenna. The only sign that anyone was home was a dim brown light glow in one of the windows. Ice spat into their ears as they rapped on the door.

Griff cracked it open, hollering, "What the phuck, Leon! Did ya come to bust my balls some more?"

"Naw, come on, ya old fuck. Let us in. We brought ya some Christmas cheer."

The elfin hermit regarded the four suspiciously as they filed into the cramped two-room trailer.

"Hello Haz."

"Merry Christmas, Haz."

Denny conformed, feeling empowered to add, "Compliments of the season, ya old fuck."

They fell onto ruined old furniture piled thick with blankets because the springs stuck through. Denny noticed that Griff stored all those dirty bleach bottles in every nook. The place not only stank of kerosene, it was sweltering in there.

"Are you phuckers here to play tricks on me?"

Leon assured him, "Naw, Haz. Look—we brought ya presents."

Griff thought a moment and the bumps where his brows once were poked up. He smacked his lips as he searched for words. The old man softened. His voice cracked.

"Well, this is nice of you boys—if ya aren't *bullshittin'* me," he gummed. "I don't get any visitors no more." He squinted his eyes open and shut and whispered. "Last of my family died—thirty odd years ago, now."

A tear glinted in Griff's eye, and the taunting stopped. Denny sobered. Denny couldn't stand to see tears. It was all he could do to hold back his own.

That rattling furnace put out a lot of heat, so Denny was soon sweating. With the smell of fuel, he finally understood why Griff didn't want kerosene dripping down the outside of the bottles. He wished that he had been more careful.

No one had actually chipped in for the gift Leon brought. He lifted his chin, avoided Griff's eyes. "Here, Griff. A little something from all of us."

Leon pulled out a Jim Beam gift box.

"Aw, Leon—you're a phuckin' peach. A *rotten* peach—but a phuckin' peach, and I mean that."

Griff cradled the box like it were an infant.

Denny met yet a third Leon that night, one who had softened into something like a priest making a pastoral visit. Leon seemed somehow smaller, even affectionate toward the old coot. Amid all the ribbing and deviling, Leon seemed boyish. Denny observed that deep inside, people weren't always what they seemed. *Which personality is real?* he wondered. *Am I fake or real? I'm real. Yeah. I am real, and I swear I'll always be real. I'll never compromise who I am. Just as soon as I figure out who I am.*

The *Andy Williams Christmas Special* flickered on Griff's snowy black-and-white TV, and the joy Denny once felt fooling the old guy melted into a pool of sorry. Denny felt sorry for the way they teased Griff. Now, he just wanted them to leave the man alone.

Griff's old eyes met Denny's—he'd never before noticed the beauty of blue eyes bleached by cataracts and age. Trying to catch his breath, Denny broke the stare and reached into his pocket.

"Here, Griff," he said quietly. "I got you a pack of Luckys for Christmas."

Griff regarded the pack oddly. He drew his head back to get a better look through his bifocals. "Aw, now, Denny boy, that's real nice. Maybe you're not a dirty bastard like the rest of these cocksuckers. I think there may be hope for you, sonny." Tears jockeyed down the fine wrinkles in Griff's face, and he fidgeted with his feelings.

Denny settled back in the cushions, pleased with the compliment. He tried to make a joke of it. "Sure, Griff. If you say so."

All of a sudden, Denny swooned from the heat and cigarette smoke, and cramped with the men on the lumpy blankets, and his stomach was turning from the oily stench of kerosene.

Suddenly, a laugh burst out of Griff. "By *gawd*, let's all drink to the phuckin' season."

Soren snorted smoke through his nose. "Well spoke, Haz. Ya got the gift of gob."

Denny was the only one who laughed at Soren's joke.

"What's so funny, Fall Out?"

"'Gift of gob—' Nothin.'"

Leon told him, "You are one weird kid, Fall Out."

Griff pulled the Jim Beam out of the box, and Leon poured a little into some stained old coffee cups. His brows arched in boyish surprise as he poured the whisky the way a priest pours wine at communion. They sipped quietly as Andy Williams sang *Silent Night*. The alcohol stung Denny's throat, and for a few minutes, time stopped, suspended in Williams's mellow croon. Denny wasn't used to hard liquor, so after a few minutes, he felt like he was watching himself from a distance. Whenever he felt that way, he could hear his mother's voice calling him from far away.

Denny? Denny Wickham time to come home. Why don't you ever listen?"

Russell elbowed Denny, waking him from the daydream he'd found himself in. Russ glanced at Leon and snorted phlegm. Then Junior cleared his throat, stamped his feet on the floor, all in place of thinking of something to say. Junior had a way of irritating Griff worse than the rest of them. Leon poured more whiskey.

That momentary peace made Junior edgy. "Whaddya watchin' on TV, Haz? A blizzard?"

“Damn it to hell, Junior,” exploded Griff, squeezing the fleshy peaks of his brows. Junior tried to keep it in the humorous groove, but it was plain, after the third whiskey, that they were all getting a little drunk. Denny thought the booze was going to Griff’s head and questioned to himself the wisdom of giving a bottle of bourbon to an alcoholic for Christmas.

“There ain’t nothing wrong with my TV, ya phuckin’ Pollack,” Griff yelled. “Maybe I like it that way.”

Once Junior reignited the ball-busting, they all fell in—all but Denny.

“Sure,” Leon muttered, “and you like how all your fingers and toes point in different directions.”

“Yeah, Leon. I do,” whined Griff, holding up his gnarled digits. “Besides, there ain’t nothin’ wrong with ‘em.”

The little trailer rocked with guffaws.

Denny knew how good it felt to make people laugh, but seeing Griff laugh at himself like that somehow hurt. He knew what it was like to be singled out. To stand there and take it. To suffer while waiting for somebody to say it’s all going to be okay or the relief of turning it into a joke. He had his own private pain, too. He was always at war in his head about who’s at fault what was right and wrong. About whether anybody liked him, and about whether he liked himself or not. His dad and his older brother—he lived with the knowledge that they didn’t like him much at all.

Denny was feeling all this as he virtually smothered in the airless trailer. His head hurt. He wanted desperately to leave. The alcohol made him dizzy.

Soren took a turn laying into Griff about how he never got any women. But Griff was slurring his words now.

“You phucker. I was very popular with the ladies when I was your age,” he yelled hoarsely, in slow motion. “Ohhh—I’ll fix your ass, Soren.” And Griff reddened, wrinkles straining white in his face. “*I’ll fix yer wise ass.*”

Junior mock-haymaked his dukes. “Come on, Joe Lewis. Put ‘em up.”

But the now drunken Griff pulled a gun from behind a cushion. “I’ll plug ya with this *re-wall-wer*, so help me *gawd*.”

Junior hooted, weak with laughter, as the heavy gun wagged up and down in Griff’s frail hand, pointing approximately in Soren’s direction.

Russ ducked from the line of fire, hollering, “*Put that thing down, ya old coot!*”

Just then, Leon lunged for the gun, and it went off with a deafening blast. Chunks of wood spat into Denny’s ear as everyone dove for the floor. His ears whistling, Denny sank down deep into the cushions unable to breathe. Protest from his stomach probed the back of his throat as Leon pried the gun from Griff’s stiff fingers.

“Griff, ya old fool,” he hollered. “You shot Fall Out.”

Griff sat there with his lips quivering, his startled eyes focusing in terror. Then he shrieked, “Phuck you, I—I was aimin’ at Junior!” and his laugh was a dry hiss through the fleshy ridges of his gums.

Leon checked Denny’s head and chest. “Denny? Denny, you all right?”

Junior found his breath. “Griff, you are bat-shit crazy.”

Leon could find no bullet wounds. “Denny? You aren’t shot, are you?”

Denny’s stomach contracted as he flicked wood splinters from his hair. He felt around his body.

“I think I’m okay, but my ear—it’s, like, screaming.”

Junior belched. “Hey, Haz, I think I’d feel safer if you took us out for a drive on the ice.”

A sick lump swelled in the back of Denny’s throat. He had never been drunk before. His mouth tasted like bourbon and kerosene. Suddenly, he dove headlong into the filthy little bathroom. Down on his knees, he hurled violently into the stinking toilet, the seat stained with dried brown urine. He hurled from the foundation of his soul, purging everything, gush after gush, his eyes streaming from the violence of it. He wretched on after his stomach was empty, until his belly cramped.

He could hear them on the other side of the thin door. Leon’s garage voice was back.

“Denny, are you all right in there?”

Laughing in dizzy hilarity, the other guys were “yucking” in time with him. The gunshot, and the awful nicknames, and the liquor, the cigarettes, and Mimi Richmond all spewed out of him. He wanted air. He didn’t want to be wild anymore at all. All he wanted was to be home in his bed.

After a minute, the spasms slowed, and he gasped a few breaths. He splashed his face in the sink, which was glazed with black stains and soap scum. His eyes lifted, and, in the mirror, he saw an unfamiliar face.

The face was skinny, old, and drawn. Bits of vomit mixed with pimples, and the eyes were red, narrow, and afraid. The teeth were stained with nicotine and the shaggy hair peppered with wood splinters.

Soren hollered on the other side of the door. “Hey Fall Out. You comin’ out or do we go in after you?”

Denny pushed the acid nausea back down, like flames into a carburetor, and inhaled the courage to wobble back out there.

“You can’t handle your liquor, kid,” brayed Griff, the gun incident now forgotten.

Denny laughed. Waved them off with his hand, but he needed air. Fast.

Mercifully, Leon decided it was time to call it a night. They said their good-byes at the door to a grateful Griff.

Denny said, “Merry Christmas, Griff. It’s okay that you almost shot me.”

“Thanks, boy,” Griff sniffed. “Thanks for coming to visit me. All o’ you. You’re all a phuckin’ peach.”

The four men staggered out into the snow crunch and icy wind. On the way back to Mount Pocono, they retold the night’s hilarity, though Denny didn’t join in much. Once they arrived at the station, Denny got into his car, where his warmth frosted the windows. He drove home shivering from his very soul, and wiping vapor from the windshield because the heater in the Olds had conked out a week ago. He could still taste vomit. The nausea wouldn’t let go, and he still had to get by his father.

He entered the house through the basement garage door, and tiptoed upstairs to the kitchen door. He listened for the TV. No. It was midnight. Surely his mother and father had gone to bed. But it wasn’t to be. As soon as he opened the door, the light snapped on.

“Tomorrow’s Christmas. What the hell are you doing coming in at midnight?” Dad would ask the questions. He always asked the questions. Mom waited by the doorway.

“Leon and the guys—we went and wished Griff a merry Christmas.”

Dad leaned in. “What’s that smell?”

“Dad, I don’t feel too good, O.K.?”

“Booze,” he thundered. “Who gave you the booze, I swear I’ll clobber him.”

Mom pleaded, “You’re only sixteen.”

Mom worried. Mom always worried. She worried about all three of her boys, and she worried about Dad, too.

“Griff. He had—whisky. Everyone had a little. I didn’t like it. Really. It made me sick.”

“And then you drove home?” Dad hauled off and smacked Denny across the face. Mom recoiled, her eyes sour at Dad.

Denny’s face was hot. His jaw hurt, and his ear screamed. Tears welled. Dad’s smacks always produced tears, as though jolted from their hiding place.

Mom tried reason. “What if you hurt someone, Dennis? What if you killed someone?”

But Dad wasn’t finished. “If I ever catch you drinking alcohol again before you’re twenty-one, you’ll walk the roads until you’re done with school.”

Denny hurried upstairs, careful not to wake his brothers, and cried silently under the covers. Why did Dad hate him? Why did he hit him? He never hit his brothers. It had been a long while since Denny thought about suicide. His face in the Griff’s mirror followed by the pain in his jaw had powered it on again.

[2]

School Dazed

DENNY WAS TWELVE WHEN THE FAMILY MOVED to the Pocono Mountains. Dad had taken them there from Wheaton, Maryland, in the Washington, D.C., suburbs.

Wesley G. Wickham, Sr., had served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. The grandson of a Scotsman, his good looks didn't transfer exactly to his boys. He had worked as a machinist mate aboard a destroyer working convoy escort in the North Atlantic. After the war, he married a girl from the far north who was typing in the War Department—Denny's mother—and got a job printing punch cards for IBM. Mom was Catholic. Dad had no religion, at least that he ever spoke about. After their marriage, Wesley, Jr., came first, and then Denny, and they bought a small brick post-war house in Wheaton. Little brother Brian came along a short time later.

Denny's father got a rare opportunity—the offer of a job, not operating a machine, but in selling and developing tabulating cards for the data processing industry. It was a big leap for a man of little education, and Mom and Dad agreed to take the plunge. So, the colorless, cookie-cutter neighborhoods of Wheaton gave way to the mountains of Northeastern Pennsylvania landscape. It was a rolling land of forests, lakes, rivers, ski slopes, sprawling old wooden inns, and emerald golf courses.

Moving day had been taxing on the family, and Denny was exhausted from carrying and unpacking boxes. The drive was the longest they'd ever taken, and Denny's head was a movie of white road stripes sliding by. Sleep didn't come right away, as Denny snuggled down to bed in his new room. After an hour or so, exhaustion from the move won out, and Denny fell deep into a deep indigo sleep.

In the pre-dawn darkness, however, the boy was startled awake by the breathtaking pleasure of blissful pulses somewhere down below. They seemed to stop time. The ecstasy propelled him high above his general angst. His new home in the mountains had come with the secret awakening that all men know.

Just before he awoke, he had been dreaming. He was reliving a vivid scene from when he was eight years old. It was 1959, and the family was still in Wheaton. Like every morning, he was walking the two miles to St. Francis School through quiet post-war neighborhoods, when a swirl of autumn leaves blew up around him. Just then, a movement caught his eye. It was two houses away on another street. Standing on a back porch was a girl in a red coat. She had spotted him, too, and smiled. Nearby was a half-rotted oak tree, so Denny hid behind it. He took a cautious peek and found her still looking. The girl was older and had short blonde hair. They locked eyes, and she waved to him before disappearing back inside. The girl's glance had filled Denny with a happy fizz.

Her pretty face lived in his head all that day at school and into the night when he finally fell asleep. He couldn't wait to see if she'd be there again the next morning, and she was. She was standing on the porch as though waiting for him. She smiled again and made his heart warm and close.

The girl was there Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday mornings that week, as he shyly peeked from behind the tree. That Friday, he stayed longer than he should have, and made up the time by

running the rest of the way to school. He wondered why the girl didn't have to go to school like the other kids.

Saturday morning, the sound of sirens penetrated the muffle of the wind, and, as neighborhood boys did whenever a siren blew, Denny hopped on his bike and raced to see what had happened. He rode up to Inwood Avenue only to find that the big oak had given in to the wind and fallen smack across two backyards where it had cleaved the girl's house in two, right down to the ground. Shingles and broken wood littered the yard.

Inwood was closed to traffic, but the kids got through. Police cars and firetrucks surrounded the house. Denny's heart raced as officials picked through the wreckage carrying axes. He stood by his bike and inched as close as the police officer would let him. He strained to see the girl in the red coat and see her big eyes again. He had never once spoken with her. Had never seen her up close.

Denny asked the policeman, "Are they okay?"

"We don't know."

"But—"

Suddenly, one of the boys breached the barricade, and the policeman chased after him.

Denny simply *had* to find out what happened to the girl. He walked his bike over to a fireman who was rolling hoses.

Denny's voice cracked. "Are they okay?"

The man shrugged. "Look at the house. What do you think?"

But at that moment, an ambulance sirened away toward Dennis Avenue.

"There's someone in the ambulance," Denny told him. "Who's in the ambulance?"

The young fireman's eyes soured. He was either unwilling or unable to answer.

* * *

The night of Denny's ecstatic awakening, he had been dreaming about the mysterious girl. In the dream, however, the tree was still in its place and her house stood untouched. There she was, standing on her porch again, waving to him. In an instant, however, she appeared beside the tree a mere arm's length away. She stepped toward him, grinning, and her kind eyes warmed him, just as his body burst in the primordial pulses of life.

Denny's revelatory dream vanished in the solvent of daylight, and he and his younger brother, Brian, got up early. The small two-story house had been built in the 1930s and had a shady yard of oaks, maples, cedars, and pines, surrounded on three sides by shoulder-high mountain laurel.

Mom and Dad were busy making everything perfect in the new home, so Denny and Brian hopped on their bikes for some serious reconnaissance. They rode down Belmont through the village, one long block of gift shops, taverns, a camera shop, a fire hall, and a pharmacy.

"That's my post office," Denny declared.

"Oh yeah? Well that's my movie theater."

Denny was not to be outdone. "Then that's my bar. And that's my bar. All the restaurants are mine, and the fire hall, too."

They pedaled along every street in Mount Pocono, which was located smack in the center of the honeymoon capital of the world. They rode along Fairview, up Oak, down Center, across Belmont and back to their house. They pedaled down nearby Knox Street, which led them to the

big green Skyline Inn and the startling twenty-mile view across rolling lowlands to the dramatic V of the Delaware Water Gap.

“Wow!”

Brian updated Denny. “Dad said that’s New Jersey on the other side of the Gap.”

“We can see all the way to New Jersey!”

“Yeah. Hey—let’s go this way.”

The road led them to the circle of the Knob for an even wider view. From there, they could see all the way from Skytop to Camelback. The famous resorts appeared as dots in the landscape. They could even see the roof of what would soon be Denny’s new high school way down in Swiftwater. Denny and Brian were only two years apart in age, and had been buddies as kids. They did everything together, and straddling their bikes on the Knob that day, they reveled in the panoramic vistas, pine forests, souvenir shops, and log-cabin restaurants. The move had been a huge improvement over the drab D.C. suburbs.

That night, they sat in the dark in Denny’s room with the window open. They’d never heard katydids before, and marveled at the call and answer messages they seemed to trade back and forth.

Denny imitated the sound. “*Itch, itch, itch.*”

“*Ootch, ootch, ootch,*” Brian answered.

And they mocked the katydids until they laughed themselves silly.

In the steamy days and nights of that first summer, the boys’ ever-widening expeditions brought them to mountain ridges and green valleys, cold springs, waterfalls, ledges of dripping moss, and forest floors of pine straw and gray boulders. They also discovered the local hangouts—Brock’s Pharmacy to play pinball, Mama Lu’s Pizza, and the Fire Hall to shoot pool. But the best fun of all was crashing the resorts. There were lots of places to hide at Buck Hill Inn, Pocono Manor, Strickland’s, and Mount Airy Lodge, where they dodged security, swam in the pools, and pretended to be guests.

On their bikes, they found every deserted path, driveway, and dirt road, and rode them up and down, smoothing a path for time trials in which they put the machinery of their legs and bikes through tough performance tests.

Every weekend, they watched car races on TV. They picked out their favorite drivers and waited for the glorious crashes in which fenders, tires, and whole cars flew skyward. The boys were car crazy. They saved their money to buy model car kits and even assembled a working visible engine kit.

In early August, however, eldest brother Wesley upped the ante by buying his first car: a yellow ‘57 Chevy two-door. Denny and Brian asked him to take them for a ride, but he only winced. Opened the hood and studied the engine.

Mom was standing nearby and squinted pointedly at her oldest son. “Wesley. Your brothers would love to have a ride. Come on.”

Wes slammed down the hood. Between his teeth, he muttered, “Oh, all *right.*”

Wes reluctantly took the boys for a ride, their eyes on fire with admiration of the yellow beauty. Wesley was five years older than Denny and had always had his own life and friends, so it was a treat when Wes paid them any attention.

Denny tried to engage Wesley in conversation. “Wow, this is such a cool car, Wes.”

Wes eyed the road. He jerked his head in answer, and the empty place in Denny’s heart widened.

Brian asked, “Hey Wes, you gonna soup up the engine?”

“It’s only a six. Maybe I’ll swap in a V8.”

The boys sat in silence beside their brother in the front seat as he perfunctorily drove out Fairview toward Pocono Manor. Wes’s silence hurt. It always had. All Denny ever wanted was acknowledgment. Any kind of approval from his father and big brother alike.

“Did I do something wrong?”

Wes exhaled as though the question had taxed his impatience. He simply would not answer.

Denny walked away from the car ride with a renewed sense of guilt and regret, for what, he didn’t know. At least having a car of his own was now a visible blip on his radar screen.

Whenever Denny and Brian rode their bikes, the two-wheelers became their stock cars. Every straight road was a homestretch as the boys screamed through the gears—*waaaah-waaaah*. And they cut turns too sharply, crashed, and got hurt. They dubbed every missed turn Dead Man’s Curve and returned often to perfect their bicycle fishtails and crash in the dirt just as violently as possible.

“That wreck was *so* cool!”

“The best wreck yet.”

They often returned home bleeding, their clothes ripped, exhausted and happy.

* * *

That first summer of exploring the village streets ended on a rainy Labor Day weekend and the sudden immediacy of school. Starting over in a new school strained the strongest of kids, but it terrified Denny. He had hated school since the second grade, so he felt less than confident in his stiff new shoes and clothes. Brian would start fourth grade at Tobyhanna Elementary, but for Denny and Wesley, it was the new jointure, Pocono Mountain Jr.-Sr. High School. Wes was a starting senior, and Denny would begin seventh grade.

Mom cajoled Wes that morning to drive Denny to school and make sure he got where he needed to be. It was only Denny’s second ride in the ‘57 Chevy, and with the rare privilege of Wesley’s company came the anxiety and pressure for Denny to ask or say the right things, to in some way compel Wesley to acknowledge Denny’s presence.

“So, how’s it running, Wes? You gonna put in the new engine this fall? How fast will it go? You graduate in June—what are you going to do?”

But as usual, Wes didn’t answer.

“We’re here,” Wes finally said.

But somehow, they had gotten the starting time wrong and arrived fifteen minutes late. They were immediately sent to the guidance counsellor, who doubled as vice principle.

Mr. Shelhamer glared with cold hazel eyes.

“You’re late. Don’t you know better than to come late to school?”

Wesley apologized. “We’re sorry—it’s our first day, and we just moved here, and—”

Shelhamer slammed a desk drawer.

“Did they let you come and go as you please at your previous school?”

“No.”

“Well why do you think you can get away with it here?”

Wesley stiffened. “We don’t.” Wes tried to explain again, and Denny could see Wes’s famous temper heat up. “Like I said, we just moved here and—”

“*I heard what you said, smart ass.*”

Wes didn’t like that at all, and Shelhamer read it in his face. He smiled.

People in the mountains had already learned that you didn't mess with Wes Wickham. Quiet as he was, he didn't take disrespect from anybody, and he loved to fight. Back in Wheaton, Denny had seen him with friends punching each other's fists until someone gave up. He'd seen them play bloody knuckles with decks of cards. Wesley never relented. Never called uncle. Never cried, as though he thrived on the pain. For all the reasons Denny needed his brother, he was also scared of him. Denny held his breath as Wes strained not to launch himself over the desk. But the man wasn't finished.

"And you drove to school without a permit. You have to have a special permit, idiot."

Wes enunciated, "I didn't *know* that."

Shelhamer leapt to his feet. "Ignorance of the law is no excuse."

"I'll *get* one. I'll get one, all right?"

Shelhamer bared his teeth like a dog. "You *do* that, smart ass. Now, here's how it's gonna be. You will be on time at this school, or you will be expelled—I'm going to be watching you two. So far, you've earned yourselves three days of detention. Do you have anything else clever you want to say?"

Wesley's blue eyes iced over in fury, but he said no more.

"Then the both of you, get out of here."

Denny was sweaty with shame. He thought the error must have been his fault. Maybe he told Wes the wrong time. *Yeah, it must have been me*, he thought. After detention that first day, Wesley drove home, again with nothing to say.

"I'm sorry," Denny said. "I'm really sorry, Wes."

But Wes only squeezed his jaw.

The brothers completed their three days of detention, and, from then on, Denny took the bus. He would never, for the rest of his schooling, consult a guidance counsellor.

* * *

The new school was an even tougher gig than Denny had imagined. He had transferred from a tiny suburban Catholic elementary school, where all subjects were taught by one nun in the same classroom, to a public junior-senior high. He had transitioned from walking to school to taking a bus. He had also been delivered from child to teenager and from play forts to the disciplines of work. He'd lost his familiar cadre of friends and landed in a sea of strangers, most of whom were taller. Kids at Pocono Mountain were bussed in from all over the Poconos. From as far away as Mountainhome and Blakeslee, and from Tannersville to Tobyhanna. Some came from farm families out in the West End, and others were the children of transient soldiers stationed at the Tobyhanna Army Depot.

To Denny, the school seemed as big as a city. He spent the first two weeks adrift and confused. *What's my locker combination? Where's B Section? What's my next class?* Everything conspired against his confidence, notwithstanding the changes in his body, his voice, and outbreaks of acne. The worst part was that most of the kids stampeding around him had known each other in elementary school.

Denny was slow to make friends, but when he did, their last names invariably began with *W*, owing to alphabetical seating in homeroom. There was Sarah Weaver, who used a questionnaire to interrogate boys in whom she was interested; tall and brooding Don Willoughby, who would do whatever anyone dared him to do; and Russell Waite, the tough kid in engineer boots, shirt sleeves rolled up, a remnant of the switchblade fifties. There was also Kevin Waldmann, a

football player with a goofy sense of humor who made Denny laugh and who laughed at Denny, which inspired them to be a comedy act. Denny discovered comedy to be far easier than conversation. They'd sketch Mr. Moss's long ears, the ears continuing onto a second and third sheet of paper. Kevin never knew what Denny was going to do next, and Denny exploited the element of surprise.

One day their doddering old science teacher, Miss Conlon, snapped at Denny.

"Mr. Wickham, stop juggling the magnets. What's the matter with you? Do you want to go see Mr. Shelhamer?"

"I fear not death, forsooth, but make haste from hernia. Your threat shall suffice, and my juggling I shall cease herewith. Thank you."

Kevin laughed so hard, Miss Conlon threw him out.

For revenge, they dripped water into Miss Conlon's compact of cheek rouge. They tested paper airplanes, threw spitballs, laughing in tearful convulsions, and terrorized student teachers. There were no limits and no shame.

Denny and Kevin clowned with all their other W friends in the classrooms, assemblies, and the cafeteria, which became especially interesting the day Don Willoughby discovered that a carrot cube placed on the handle of a fork could be launched in such a way that it stuck to the ceiling. When it came time to be called on in class or take a test, Denny hit a panic wall. There was nothing funny about schoolwork. The only thing that came easily was the writing. Every week, he counted the minutes until Friday afternoon. He cherished every minute of Saturday, and hated being assigned chores on his day off. But Sunday evening brought fresh dread.

Sunday nights were the worst, when the family sat together, watching *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color* on their black-and-white TV set. Denny's stomach knotted during the theme song, "...the world is a carousel of color *color, color, color...*" and his throat squeezed tight with the anxiety of bedtime and a fitful sleep that would quickly segue to, "Denny, get up! You're going to miss the bus."

School was only one of irritants that troubled his sleep. Most kids around there didn't care much about race riots, or the war, or the monk who set himself on fire in Saigon, but Denny cared. He worried about all those things, especially one day before Thanksgiving, when all 400 students were called into the gym for an unscheduled assembly. The principle, Mr. Brighton, approached the microphone. "President John F. Kennedy has been shot and killed in Dallas. School will close early today," he said. "Gather your things in an orderly fashion. The buses will be waiting out front."

Kids rode home hollow-eyed and quiet, even the noisy kids on the back of the bus. Girls were weeping and also some boys.

For the first time, Denny and Brian were a part of something bigger than themselves. They arrived home to a quiet, empty house. They were somber, more from everyone else's reaction than from a true understanding of what had happened that day. They turned on the TV and watched the replay of events. Mom soon arrived home early from work, also in tears. She hugged each of the boys, crying on them like she had when Granddad died.

"Our dear, dear president. They killed President Kennedy."

Dad came home a while later. Not skilled at expressing much emotion beyond anger, he sat with them, he interlaced his fingers behind his head and wordlessly watched. Wesley came in time for dinner, a pack of Pall Malls in his shirt pocket, but had little to say. That night, Mom and Dad allowed something usually forbidden in the house: the TV played in the living room so they could hear the news as they ate dinner.

The family watched TV all weekend. Schools and businesses were closed on Monday. They watched disbelieving as a black-veiled Jackie Kennedy walked down Pennsylvania Avenue holding John-John and Caroline's hands. The horses' hooves clopped over the slow somber drum beats. Brian wept silently. Denny held back tears to be as strong as Dad and Wesley, but Mom cried enough for all of them.

* * *

Denny had found a good friend in Kevin Waldmann, and they often visited each other's homes. Their mothers took turns ferrying the boys via matching Corvairs between Mount Pocono and Mountainhome, and their adventures played out magnificently. The boys spent entire days talking like Pookie, the lion puppet on *Soupy Sales*, which they watched on TV every day after school. During class, they passed a progressive nonsense poem back and forth until, after a month, it was nine pages long. Kevin was in a higher math class, while Denny excelled in composition and term papers. Kevin played football and was in the band, while Denny played chess and joined the ski club. Kevin's parents were better off than Denny's, but that didn't bother him. He enjoyed Kevin's house because he had all the newest games, gadgets, and electronics kits. Kevin even had a color TV in his bedroom. Together, they built a shortwave radio from a kit.

The boys stayed friends for several years. On the night of the release of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, Denny and Kevin camped out in the backyard of another friend, Grover, with a purloined bottle of blackberry brandy. Denny loved acting up. He was staggering around in the dark, emoting like Anthony Quinn in *Viva Zapata!* but in fake Spanish, when he tripped and sliced his hand open on the broken bottle. Grover's sister stifled a smile as she bandaged him up. She never said a word to Grover's parents about the boys being shit-faced.

One Sunday, during an especially frigid winter, the boys hiked through deep snow, miles out in Mountainhome behind the S.S. Kresge estate, far from the nearest road. They were already beyond exhaustion when they found themselves stuck in hip-deep snow drifts. They could barely move and worried that they'd freeze to death after dark. One leg at a time, they climbed their way back to the road and had to explain to Mrs. Waldmann why they were so late getting home. Another time, Kevin saved Denny from nearly sliding off a forty-foot cliff. His fingernails were packed with dirt from digging into the ground.

Denny loved to make and take dares, even at school.

"Hey Kevin, let's skip school. Right now. Come on. Let's go."

"I will if you will."

"Fuckin'-A, then, man. Let's go."

Kevin laughed. "Aw, Wickham, naw, you're crazy."

One snowy Monday morning before first period, however, Denny started in again. "I'm skipping school today for sure. I bet you're chicken-shit."

"Fuck you, Denny."

"*Au contraire*, Kevin, fuck you."

With mock defiance, Kevin strode deliberately toward the doors at the end of the hall.

Denny matched his stride.

"Oh, yeah?"

"*Ye-aa-hh!*"

The boys burst out the C-Section doors and broke into a run. Without planning or coats, they made for the woods, and were soon galumphing like prison escapees for Route 611.

Once they reached the highway, they found themselves at the Amber Club, where they thumbed a ride to Pocono Manor Inn. The only problem was that while jumping across a ditch, Kevin's inseam had ripped out, and his whole leg was open to the cold air. He tried to hide the rip in the car of a weird goggle-eyed man who gawked hungrily at Kevin's leg the whole way.

"You play on the football team, big guy?"

"Yeah."

"I live near the Manor. You can come in, and I'll make you some cocoa. Really, you could."

Denny and Kevin exchanged worried glances.

"Naw, thanks. We just had our cocoa."

"I'm floating in cocoa, man. For sure."

Denny spoke up. "Hey—you can actually just let us off here. Really. Like now."

Once they reached the Manor, they had to get hold of a sewing kit so Kevin could stitch up his pants leg. They asked at the gift shop where a familiar looking lady that Denny couldn't place found one for them. In the men's room, they argued about how to thread the needle.

"Naw. Not that way. I've seen my mother do it. First, you wet the thread and twist it."

Trying to thread the needle, Kevin stuck his finger.

"Ow!"

Now blood drops bejeweled the open seam.

Denny mock ordered, "Gimme that."

He threaded the needle and commenced to sewing. He clumsily achieved a series of cinches as one might make tying down a tarp. At least the gap was closed.

"Hey look. It's the latest Daniel Boone style from Paris."

"Danielle Boonay."

Out in the corridors, they peacocked around the Inn like Tom and Huck, pretending to be guests—important guests. Kevin always had big cigars on him that he stole from his father, so the boys lit their cigars and walked the lobby and halls emitting blue puffs and boasting to each other about their stock portfolios and Montana real estate. They played billiards and ping-pong and helped the lifeguard fold towels and fed him bullshit about their fathers being high in the government, and how they had arrived by limousine from New York to await their fiancés, who were models in Milan, and on and on. The lifeguard didn't buy much of it from the boys, neither of whom had started shaving yet, but he was happy to let them do his work.

The junior bigshots returned to the halls and relit their cigars, when another familiar looking lady approached them. This time, however, it was Denny's mother. They froze on the spot, their cigars quivering between their teeth.

"Don't you think it's about time this holiday comes to an end?"

The lady in the gift shop had been the mother of another friend who rode Denny's bus. Mom wasn't angry. She was almost never angry. She had her limits, though. A small, trim woman with an oval face, she wore winged glasses and was always with a cigarette between her fingers. She drove the boys back to school delivering a lecture that she must have composed on the way to pick them up.

"Don't you know that skipping school will make you ignorant? You're only cheating yourselves, you know."

"Yes, ma'am," said the well-bred football player.

"Sorry, Mom," added Denny.

“But that isn’t the worst of it, Denny and Kevin. Tell me, what will become of you without an education?”

“I don’t know,” the boys said together.

“I’ll tell you the worst heartbreak of all—it’s the *dishonesty* that you have demonstrated today. Denny I didn’t teach you to be dishonest, yet every time I turn around, you’re lying or hiding things.”

“Sorry Mom. You’re not going to tell Dad—are you?”

“I haven’t made up my mind on that, Dennis.” As they got out of the car, she pressed her lips together. “Kevin, you know I have to call your mother about this.”

“I figured, Mrs. Wickham. Sorry.”

Once back in fifth-period English, Denny was in despair. The fun had been taken away, and he would likely have to face his father when he got home. He maintained his sanity by becoming one with the second hand on the classroom clock. Once home, he found out that Mom had ultimately told Dad about skipping school.

They sat across from each other, each with their fingers laced. Denny looked at the tabletop.

“Skipping school, huh?”

“Yeah, we—. It seemed like a good idea—. Yeah.”

Strangely, Dad seemed more amused than angry. “It’s boneheaded thing to do. Suppose we never do it again, Dennis. Just never do it again.”

“I won’t. It wasn’t very much fun anyway.”

Denny climbed the stairs to his bedroom, where he stared out his bedroom window, watching Wesley lovingly wash his prize Chevy in the driveway, smoothing the sudsy sponge along her curvy fenders, polishing her headlights, and chamoising her sensuous trunk.

At least he looks happy for a change.

Despite Dad’s warning about skipping school, and with no thought of the consequences, Denny and Kevin skipped school again. They took off every Monday after homeroom for the next eight weeks, and no one ever found out about it.

* * *

School field trips provided a wide playing field for unauthorized fun. During the tenth grade, Denny and Kevin sat together on those trips. Denny wanted a girlfriend as much as he wanted a car, but when the pressure to get a date arose, the requisite skills eluded him. For Denny, the anxiety just wasn’t worth it. Having a best friend took that pressure away.

One of those trips took them to Expo ’67 in Montreal. Something awakened inside Denny as he walked among the ultra-modern buildings and technological wonders of the pavilions. But the stronger pull was the old city of Montreal. Maybe it was because his mother’s family had Québécoise roots and spoke French whenever they got together. Whenever Mom cursed in French, the boys knew they were in trouble. Denny wanted to experience the city, but he wanted to do it alone. He didn’t tell anyone when he escaped the group, hopped on the Metro, and wended his way downtown.

Denny felt deliriously free while wandering the streets of Montreal. The sound of French in his ears soothed him, and even though he couldn’t speak it, the anonymity gave him confidence, wandering giddily untethered from the weight of his life. He was browsing in a bookstore when he got an idea and sought out a posh men’s shop to buy something in particular.

The mustachioed proprietor asked, “*Puis-je vous aider?*”

Denny wanted a beret to wear. One of his favorite programs on TV was *Combat!*, and the character, Cage, looked really cool in his.

“I’d like to buy a *bear-ay, see voo play.*”

The dapper man looked mock-puzzled for a moment and then corrected Denny’s accent.

“Ah—un *béret.*”

The high-quality felt beret cost him six bucks Canadian, and it fit perfectly. He cocked the beret on an angle and boarded the train back to Expo feeling *tres* cosmopolitan. Once he found his school group again, the kids told him he looked cool.

A vice gripped the back of his arm.

“Mr. Wickham—I see that you’ve been shopping?”

It was Mr. Danovitch—field trip wrangler and a man who framed his questions in a way that made it impossible to lie. He was a little bald guy, beyond retirement age at around seventy.

“Yes sir.”

Kevin rolled his eyes away, miffed that Denny had gone without him.

“Mr. Wickham, I encourage independent social studies, but if you’d gotten mugged or shanghaied, I’d be the one to deliver that happy news to your father. Now, wise up!”

Mr. Danovitch contributed money out of his own pocket for those trips. In one year, he took busloads of kids to Gettysburg, Philadelphia, and Radio City Music Hall. That inflamed some of the other faculty on its own, but there was more. He had also carpeted his classroom and bought seat pads for the desk chairs. He had a shortwave radio in the classroom, and made a log circle out in the woods for the students that he called Socrates Park. Almost in defiance of the bully football coach, Mr. Blaine, who shouted down the hall ordering kids around, Mr. Danovitch stood outside his classroom every morning with an armload of newspapers, hawking them like an old-time newsboy.

“Extra! Get your *New York Times*, five cents. Extra. Extra.”

For all his efforts, certain teachers and schoolboard members accused Mr. Danovitch of being a communist. If Denny understood anything, it was being falsely accused. He admired Mr. Danovitch for his courage and would remember him as one of the best teachers he ever had.

* * *

Two weeks after the trip to Montreal, Denny and Kevin planned an elaborate adventure for the coming weekend. Kevin’s mom was to drop him off at Denny’s house, and they were going to hike the Erie-Lackawanna tracks from Belmont all the way over to the Knob to see the crystal mine—a shallow hole in the cliff high above the tracks where kids risked their lives digging for quartz crystals. Denny had been there many times. He was fascinated with geology and especially loved the clear crystals, sometimes a half inch to two inches long, that he brought home and kept in a plastic box. Kevin had never been there, so Denny felt proud to show him a cool place that Kevin didn’t know where they would harvest crystalline treasures from the earth.

That Saturday morning, however, Kevin called to say he couldn’t come over.

“Oh, okay. My mom could bring me over to your house instead.”

“Well—it’s just that there’s something I’ve gotta do. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

But Kevin didn’t call Sunday morning. In school on Monday, he seemed standoffish.

Denny asked, “Hey, wanna go to the crystal mine next weekend?”

“Thing is, I can’t.”

“Hey, what about Friday? We could steal golf carts ‘n’ stuff at midnight.”

Kevin grinned. “Naw. I really can’t.”

“How come?”

“Well,” Kevin hesitated. “See—I have a date.”

It took a moment for that to sink in.

“A date? You mean with a girl?”

“Yeah, with Nat.”

It was someone named Natalie Garland, a girl that Denny didn’t know.

“Yeah. Okay.” Denny grinned nervously. “Hey—well then, maybe we could do something after that.”

“Sure.” Kevin avoided his eyes. “Maybe.”

Denny felt low and lonely without his rock-solid best friend. The rest of the week, they still goofed around in class together, but enthusiasm had dwindled. Kevin’s weekends now seemed booked with his official girlfriend. Not only that, but Kevin and some other guys started a band together. Denny attended one of their rehearsals as they tried to learn *Louie, Louie*, *Daydream Believer*, and *Satisfaction*. Their first gig, as it turned out, was also their last. It took place at the Rink in Mountainhome, though Denny didn’t attend. Instead, he stayed home with a plan to ride bikes in circles under the streetlight with Brian, or spy on the town council working late in the municipal building. But Brian was busy. Not just miscellaneous busy—he was taking a girl from his class to the bazaar at St. Mary’s Church.

“Denny, you wanna come with us?”

“Go with you? No way. Go on. Have fun.”

Instead, Denny watched a war movie with his dad, a pastime they shared together. Dad had fought in World War II, so Denny asked questions.

“This is why we’ve got to trust our government on Vietnam, Dennis,” Dad said.

“Communism will spread if we don’t fight for our freedom.”

“But we are free.”

“Well. We didn’t take Hitler seriously until 1942. Sometimes a war just has to be fought.”

Denny went up to his room, feeling uneasy about the war. Dad and Wes scoffed at the student protesters, but Denny paid close attention to the Teach-Ins and the Dow Chemical napalm protest in Wisconsin. That monk had burned himself on purpose, Denny thought. But the children had no choice. *Why are we burning the children?* he wondered. Denny lit a candle and held his finger in the flame as long as he could—not very long.

“Ahhhgh!” he yelled.

Wesley ran over from his room. “What are you hollering about?”

“I was holding my finger in the fire.”

“What for?”

“To see what it feels like to burn.”

“You are seriously fucked up. You need help.”

Denny’s finger throbbed, as he smoldered for a while on the edge of his bed. *Yeah*, he thought. *I’m fucked up*. He looked out the window for a while before picking up his journal and pen. He finally wrote out some phrases to purge the war raging inside him.

Dark in my coffin, I hear the

Flames snap in the screaming

Just out of reach, I can.

Do nothing to ease the pain

* * *

In the coming days, Denny felt empty inside where a hurt itched at him. It was something he hadn't felt since he was a boy. The hurt pulled down on him like a magnet in the earth, making his limbs heavy and slow. It became harder to get out of bed in the morning. He didn't know it at the time, but he and Kevin drifting apart was as much a function of Kevin going with Nat as it was both of them maturing out of their comedy act. Denny watched them in the hall at school, their faces animated, their eyes locked on each other, Kevin's arm around her waist, and Denny was a stew of resentment, admiration, and envy.

Denny spent the next several weekends with nothing to do. He hiked by himself. His loneliness somehow brought the girl in the red coat to mind, how he had missed her for weeks after the tree crashed her house. He never did find out what happened to her. And the wet dreams continued. He didn't want to be the pimple-faced dork who couldn't get a date. The urgency flared like gasoline in a fire, and, out of desperation, he got right to work.

From this mission, no female was safe. He crashed through his shyness like a truck through a wall. On the bus, he took turns sitting with Nancy, Brenda, Betty, Beth, Pat, Kathy, and Linda—sometimes all on the same bus ride.

He began, "I bet you can't guess what I'm thinking about."

"It better not be what I think it is."

"No, it's just my car."

"You have a car?"

"Not yet. But I will soon."

Finding a girlfriend seemed as hopeless as it was urgent. He felt himself sliding off the edge of a cliff, his fingers clawing the earth to keep from falling. He felt so foolish. No, he told himself, like the song said, *You Can't Hurry Love*. But redouble his attentions, nonetheless. He committed to an intense survey of the girls in his classes and prospects that he had overlooked while goofing off with Kevin.

One of them was Millie Robinson.

Millie was a petite, dark-skinned girl whose mother came from the Philippines. When she spoke, she enunciated clearly, something even the teachers didn't do, and she most often walked alone.

"Hi Millie."

"Hello Dennis," she said, with a tilt to her head.

"Do you think," Denny pressed on, "that we could—sometime maybe have—"

"Dennis, would you like to come to square dance class with me Saturday night?"

Without even a microsecond's thought, he burst out, "Yes!"

With no chance to change his mind, Denny had signed up for square dance lessons at Memorytown. His mother thought it was adorable and his father rolled his eyes.

Brian winced. "*Square dancing? Are you nuts?*"

Getting the footwork right was hard, and remembering the calls was harder, but he soon got the hang of it. Once the two changed partners, they looked for each other and welcomed the familiar comfort when their sweaty hands clasped together once again.

Somewhere between the do-si-dos and allemande lefts, Millie pulled Denny by his hand and led him outside into the shadows behind the barn. She checked quickly for chaperones, and immediately pinned Denny against the wall.

"Square dancing," Denny croaked, "It's not like I expected."

“Nothing ever is,” she replied

And she laid her warm lips on his and the buttery, tingly feel woke him, and he kissed with her for the longest time as the cool evening breeze dried the sweat from their necks.

Dennis remembered to breathe. “Whew—Millie. Wow.”

“You are so cute, Dennis Wickham.”

She smiled, her lips poised just so, and he kissed her back. Afterward, she hugged him.

“Come on, we gotta hurry back in. My mom’ll be looking for us.”

The following week in school, Millie wasn’t around much, and within a month, she and her family had moved away. However, Denny pressed on with his mission. He made a date with Dolly Norgren, whose family operated a gun range. Denny’s mom dropped him off for the date of target shooting, but Denny and Dolly just didn’t hit it off. She herself was an expert marksman on the high school rifle team, and Denny felt proud just to hit the target at all.

“Well,” she said as the sun set, “at least you’re a better shot than I thought you’d be.”

Denny asked a girl named Nicki if she wanted to go bowling in Stroudsburg, but canceled because of how humiliating it would be to ride with the girl and his mom all the way to Stroudsburg. He simply couldn’t have his mother making corny comments all the way there and back. There was also the double date in which Denny and a new friend, Hoach Honick from Tobyhanna, took two girls to the Casino Theater to see *Bonnie and Clyde*. Stephanie Comstock was a sophomore with long brown hair and an uneven smile that Denny thought alluring. She’d be perfect, he thought. Whenever he saw her on the field during gym, he lusted for her without shame. This will be it, he thought, as the Kansas police slow-motion blasted Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty full of holes.

After the movie, the four of them walked through the woods out behind the theater, and Denny just knew it was the beginning of the beginning. They held hands all the way to the old stone cistern, where they stopped a moment to smile at each other. Now that Millie had turned him into an expert, he leaned in to kiss her. That’s when he realized that her father, who everyone at school said was a genius of some kind, had somehow fed Stephanie a garlic-heavy dinner before she left the house. Denny would be well into middle age before he could eat garlic.

There was also a skinny girl, Karen Flannery, whom the boys called Scarecrow because of her long face and big lips. He went parking with her in a car full of other kids, and mustered the courage to kiss her. She kissed him back, making him wet from his chin to his nose. It was brief, but so stimulating. She was nodding, her smile full of promise, when she suddenly pulled away.

“Wait,” she interrupted. “*Wait.*”

“What’s wrong? What is it?”

“I want whisky,” she whispered in his ear. “Do you have any whisky?”

“Whisky?”

He tried to kiss her again, but she put her hand over his mouth.

“Whisky. I need whisky.”

What Denny said next sounded alarmingly like his father. He smacked his forehead. “Karen, for chrissake, you’re only fourteen.”

She shrugged, tongued his ear a moment and whispered, “It relaxes me.”

The unobtainable had turned out to be attainable with the unobtainable.

Denny’s quest also included girls new to the school. One day, twins from Ohio made their debut in algebra class. They were the daughters of an army officer and so cute that Richard Arnold pounced on them right away. Not one, but both of them. There was also Pat Wright, a pretty, well-dressed brunette who wore enough make-up for the whole class. Everyone, including

the boys, girls, and teacher, watched her take her seat in the back next to Don Willoughby. What turned out to be even more amazing was that Pat and Don fell in love at-first-sight, would stay together all through high school, and marry right after graduation. Except for Don, Pat Wright was out of the question for every boy in both hemispheres. Denny concluded that the meet-up had been fated by forces beyond anyone's understanding.

And then there was Mimi Richmond, the silent, honey-skinned blonde who sat near him in English. Denny assumed that her silence indicated deep thoughts. He would work on Mimi. She would be his quarry. Staring across the aisle at her, he inhaled a chest full of determination—and his elbow knocked his books onto the floor so loudly that Mrs. Altmiller had to sit and hold her head for a while.

* * *

By Christmas vacation, Denny had found some new local friends to hang around with. He also had Brian, and had completed a few actual dates. He had a little money in his pocket that Christmas, so he and some friends ended up at the canteen at Pocono Manor, where Denny and Hoach had learned to ski. They were devouring Cokes, burgers, and fries when Kevin Waldmann and some of his Barrett Township friends turned up. Denny hadn't seen Kevin outside of school since before Thanksgiving.

“Hey. How you doing?”

Denny grinned big. “Okay, man. How's it going?”

The boys played the pinball machine, shot pool, and laughed about old times.

“Remember the time your pants ripped?”

“Yeah. Your mom called my mom.”

They laughed about the Kresge mansion, skipping school, and the dangerous near-miss on the cliff. All the while, other kids fed the jukebox and replayed *Snoopy vs. the Red Baron* and *Good Vibrations* without end.