

# **STERLING ROAD**

Tales of Love, Lust, and Lug Nuts

# STERLING ROAD

Tales of Love, Lust, and Lug Nuts

## Other books by Jon Robertson

Permelia Lyttle's Guide to the End of the World

Dunkard Bottom

Apocalypse Chow (co-author)

a memoir

Jon Robertson



Belvedere Books

Woodstock . Virginia

*Sterling Road: Tales of Love, Lust, and Lug Nuts* by Jon Robertson  
(Copyright © 2023 by Jon Robertson)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, except in the context of reviews and fair reference, without written permission from the author.

First Edition, January 2024  
ISBN: 978-1-941252-42-0

For information about this and other Belvedere Books, go to [www.jonrobertson.com/contact](http://www.jonrobertson.com/contact)

Printed in the United States of America

**Publisher's Note:** The author and publisher disclaim any liability in connection with the use of the book, but claim credit for any benefits enjoyed, intended or otherwise.

**Author's Note:** This book is based on true events. The names, and other identifying characteristics of the persons depicted, including the author, have been changed.

for anyone who survived high school

## Contents

1. Griff	1
2. Good Vibrations	19
3. Skyline Inn	41
4. Maul the Man	61
5. Demon Possessed	75
6. Mushrooms	89
7. The Ruins of Yin	105
8. The Thornhurst Incident	123
9. The Cabin	137
10. Betrayals	157
11. Teardrops	177
12. Road Call	193
13. Breakdown	207
14. Make and Model	229
15. First Love	245
16. The Borrow Pit	259
17. La Comida	277
18. The Keeper of the Lake	299
19. Walking on the Moon	311
Acknowledgments	323
About the Author	325



## Griff

MAIN STREET WAS SLICK WITH ICE AS DENNY COAXED THE '56 Olds toward the crest of the hill. He inched past the state police barracks, the municipal building, and the lodge-like stone houses that lined the street. Suddenly the engine sputtered. He pumped the gas, but the carburetor caught fire again. Getting to work on time that day was not meant to be. With two violent coughs, the engine expired and the car rolled backward. Black smoke wafted among the snowflakes, so Denny angled the wheels to the curb. The eleven-year-old Green Monster was Denny's first car, and it caught fire often.

The boy could have stepped out into the freezing December wind, lifted the hood, and smothered the flames with the old jacket he kept on the back seat for that purpose, but he knew another way. He stomped the gas pedal to the floor and cranked the starter, by which the carburetor would suck the fire down and extinguish it.

Amid the smoke and the starter's repetitive whinny, Denny's mind wandered to school and his current crush, Mimi Richmond. She was the quiet beauty who sat across from him in English.

He cranked the starter—*ru-rouw, ru-rouw, ru-rouw*.

Mimi had been on his mind for weeks. When would he ask her out? Why did he choke up whenever he tried to talk to her? These questions occupied his thoughts while he hoped the fire would huff out before the battery died. Cars he understood. Girls mystified him, yet he desperately wanted a girlfriend to call his own.

The starter wound down to a plaintive *wowww-wowww*, but just before the battery died, a muffled pop told him that the fire was out. The black circle on the hood was now the size of a dinner plate. With the battery dead, he checked his watch. He might still get to work on time, if—.

Help for just about anything in Mount Pocono was seldom 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 lifted his chin. "Denny, you alright?"

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

Stan parked beside him, blocking half the street.

"Your mom and dad doing okay?"

Denny winced, "Better ask them, Stan."

Denny lit a cigarette. He pictured Mimi Richmond's gleaming emerald eyes set in 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 in suspense. 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 shirt sleeves, he slid out the passenger side into the snowy cold, where he and Stan opened their hoods and connected Denny's threadbare jumper cables.

Mr. Lukas winced, "Denny, put on a coat. Jeez."

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

"Mimi?"

"Mm-hmm?"

"You—going to gym?"

Her eyes widened, all curvy with the secrets of ancient fire dances. The corner of her mouth twitched, just so.

"Yeah?"

Denny walked away feeling equal parts of triumph and self-recrimination. His face burned hot, a dry knot had 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 turned the key. The diffident V-8 seethed to life. Cars veered into the other lane to get around them. Locals waved "hi" while impatient ski tourists honked. Stan unhooked the cables, tossed them into the back, and Denny urged him on. Denny 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 after all. Mimi fled his mind as he recalled how he landed his job at Leon Miller's Esso.

\* \* \*

Denny had earned his first wages slinging soft-serve at the Taste-Freez. At fourteen, he was making all of seventy-five cents an hour, and soon realized that he needed 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 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 he would curl his lip in school to show the teachers that he would comply with the rules on a case-by-case basis. Some said he was dangerous. Russell spoke with authority about cars, fighting, drinking, smoking, and women. One morning in homeroom, he had caught Denny's eye, looking all mock-sinister, and shot him the finger. But when Denny shot the finger back, he was collared 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 and sweated like Wile E. Coyote.

"Gulp."

"You are very peculiar, Mr. Wickham."

"Yes, ma'am. Everybody tells me that, ma'am."

Early in his life, Denny had learned the value of clowning. Being funny became a safe place to hide.

Russell stood waiting at the window for an answer.

"So, this is where you work?"

"Yeah," Denny said, passing a cheeseburger and fries through the window. Denny knew that Russ lived near Tobyhanna, so it would have been odd for him to drive to Mount Pocono for lunch. "What are you doing here?"

"I work at Leon's," he said, thumbing across the street. "Miller's Esso."

“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 silent, grumpy, 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 over 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 ice cream job?”

“It’s okay,” Denny shrugged, but he had to think for a moment. He didn’t much like the people, the hours, scooping hard ice cream, or the pay. “Not really. Anyway, they’re about to close up for the season.”

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

“I sure am.”

Denny knew Stinky, a Polish army kid whose family had just transferred to the Tobyhanna Army Depot from a base in Japan. He was the kid they axed from the school wrestling team for throwing kids around with jiu-jitsu. Denny would have given anything to get a job working on cars, and Stinky’s slot would be perfect. Denny knew that he was college-bound, but this opportunity to work at Leon’s would make saving money fun. 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 his 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 in the glare of a flashlight.

Bolts.

An aggregate alloy.

Dogged down tight.

Threads under stress

Hold me together, 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 buy 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*, the first heart transplant, and the year Elvis married Priscilla. Those were the days of *Born to Be Wild*, and *gawwd* how Denny wanted to be wild. Employing what he could remember from parochial school, he prayed that he, too, could one day be wild.

Leon didn’t say much when Denny’s mom dropped him off at work that first day. The man’s small frame balanced on short legs, his powerful shoulders always squared. 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 over wide-set eyes.

“Are you here to work?”

“Yup. Yessir. Thanks Leon.”

Leon called Russ in from the bays. “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 his every word, 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.

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. He liked helping Wes, too. They were comfortable doing mechanical work together because it spared them all from the occasional awkward conversation, the only kind they knew.

\* \* \*

Those were the days before gas station 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’d stick a nozzle into the gas filler neck, check under the hood, and wash the windshield. It wasn’t long before Denny and his clothes smelled of grease, gasoline, and sassafras-sweet Go-Jo hand cleaner.

Leon was never without his blue mechanic’s hat, his thin brown hair sticking out the back. He wore blue utility pants and shirt, the sleeves rolled up above the elbow, with “Miller’s Esso” embroidered in white above the right pocket, “Leon” above the left. 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 had always learned better by watching than reading, and Leon taught better by showing than describing. They got along.

Once Denny started working at Miller’s, he did his best to act tough. He started smoking cigarettes and bought himself a pair of black engineer boots. He adopted a cool rhythmic walk and rolled his short sleeves to the shoulders. He dumbed down his speech,

too, and found shorter words in order to fit in. And he cursed like a sailor. No, like a wordsmith, he thought. He was irrepressibly imaginative—everyone said so, even his parents. He combined 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 that back.

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

“No. Me? Nah, no way.”

Denny loved working at Leon’s, until one afternoon when things began to change.

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

It turned out that Leon had another side. This Leon had a keen radar for vulnerabilities. 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.

“Here comes Fire Alarm.”

“Aw, cut it out.”

Soren echoed out in the bays. “Hey Fire Alarm, did that junker of yours catch fire yet today?”

“Naw. Come on.”

Denny’s face flushed hot. At first, he shrank inside himself, washed in something like shame, until Russell whacked him on the arm.

“Get in the game, new guy. What are ya, scared of your shadow?”

But it didn’t take much for the torment to turn brutal. This was ball-busting. World-class ball-busting.

One day, Denny unguardedly told the guys what had happened at Casey’s house the night before. Casey Nichols was a year behind Denny at Pocono Mountain. She lived on the far side of the hill where the volunteer fire department held its annual soapbox derby races. 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 absent father and

distant mother, whom she seldom saw. In the pre-Woodstock age of Cher and Twiggy, Casey was thick around the middle.

Casey had invited friends over while her mother was away. They were playing Cream's new album, when someone came in with an Eagle Scout canteen full of vodka. Denny and Casey later found themselves in the bedroom arguing about Hawthorne and Emerson, but with no particular thought of making out. Denny was observing the slow hula of a Lava-Lite, when he fell off the bed to the floor, bruising his hip.

His fatal mistake was telling Leon about it.

"Hey, Fire Alarm. How come you're limpin'?" Leon crowed. "You finally get laid last night?"

"Naw. No such luck," Denny grinned. "Was talking to Casey Nichols and fell off the bed. It hurts."

"Fell off the bed!" Leon knew all about Casey, as he'd gone to high school with her mother. He squawked, "You mean you can't even handle Casey Nichols?"

Junior jumped in. "She musta showed it to him. Scared 'im out of bed!"

"Fall Out," Soren yelled, laughing his ass off.

"Hey Fall Out," Leon smirked. "Did you fall out or pull out?"

Denny regretted his mistake.

Junior made fists and yanked back his elbows. "You have to grab them love handles and use 'em for leverage. *Ugh.*"

Yet, Denny tried to imagine such a scenario, and thought he might try that very thing, if he ever got the chance. But that made him think of Mimi, whose image provided only brief respite from the torment. Denny tried to weather the onslaught, but it was useless. When Leon revved up, you just couldn't win.

The competition was keen to accelerate the worst 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-like laugh. Denny tried his best to make him laugh, like he did with Wesley. For the first time in his life, in this garage culture, Denny began to feel like he could fit in. Teasing was simply the price one paid. However, the taunts 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. 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. He closed himself in the office, and Denny worried that his boss felt guilty for tripping him. When Junior opened the door to get an inspection sticker, however, Denny saw Leon tipping back a bottle that he kept in the office.

Leon saw him. "Get in here."

Though Denny and Russ were underage, Leon poured them each an inch of Rock 'n' Rye. Denny pretended that the liquor didn't burn.

\* \* \*

By closing time, the guys were all a little drunk, and that's when the ball busting took a menacing turn. After they shut off the outside lot lights, they hogtied Junior with fan belts. Soren whacked Russell on the butt with a radiator hose. Forgetting the lesson Denny had learned about disclosing, he got careless.

Soren brayed, "You gettin' any regular Fall Out?"

"Not yet," Denny laughed. "But soon. I've got prospects."

"Never got laid?" Leon shouted, "I bet you've got blue balls!"

The guys shuddered, hee-hawed, and jockeyed for what they called a "Blue Balls Campaign," which they had clearly done before.

"Fall Out! You're up!"

They grabbed Denny and held him down on the wash bay floor. Leon yanked Denny's pants down, but the hilarity had fled his eyes.

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

They pulled Denny's shorts down and with an intense squint, Leon commenced to spray paint his balls blue.

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

Denny hollered. "No! Ow, cut it out you bastards, that burns. *Leave me alone.*"

Leon's eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched while gawking at him like that. But once Denny stood and pulled his pants up, the party was over. Leon wordlessly grabbed his keys and stomped out. He jumped into his car, a powerful old 1958 Cadillac, and sped across

Main Street, where two cars slammed on their brakes, horns blasting.

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

Denny murmured, “Kind of volatile.”

“Vol—what?”

“That was scary.”

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.”

“When he gets like this, just stay out of his way,” Russell mumbled. “Out of his way.”

Denny took careful note—his hero, the first man to give him responsibility and make him feel good about himself, had problems.

Even when Leon wasn’t there, the ball-busting surged beyond the guys who worked at the station. It even carried over to certain long-time customers. 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!”

Snyder’s silver eyebrows cavorted as he grieved over his engine like a worried mother.

“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 *furios!*”

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.

They didn’t even spare old Mrs. Ledbeater. 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 by four times 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 closed 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 a 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 the man, “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 the boys had learned how to bust balls from a pro.

“Road Hazard!” Leon hollered as he parked his car. “Hey, you forgot to put your teeth in again.”

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 out on Sterling Road, just past the ruins of 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 plastic 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. *Awww*—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 agonizingly slow, so they watched the snowflakes fall beneath the lights at the gas island. They 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, Leon 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 ‘er up.”

Denny thought he knew all about mood shifts from his older brother Wesley, but his sixteen-year-old mind couldn’t comprehend a third version of Leon and this kind gesture for an old man that they all tormented. 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 would work 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 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, Griff.”

They fell onto ruined furniture piled thick with blankets because the springs stuck through. Denny noticed the kerosene bottles tucked into 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 used to be 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 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 an infant in his arms.

Denny watched Leon closely. The man 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. People weren’t always what they seemed, Denny thought. *So which personality is real? And what about me? 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 fun of hazing the old guy melted into a pool of sorry. Denny felt a deep pang of regret about 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 into the cushions, pleased with the compliment. “If you say so.”

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

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

Soren snorted smoke out 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 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 still wasn’t used to hard liquor. After a few minutes, he was watching himself from a distance. He could hear his mother’s voice calling him from far away.

*Denny? Denny time to come home.*

Russell elbowed Denny, waking him from the daydream. 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. Junior tried to keep it in the humorous groove, but it was plain, after the third whiskey, that they were all getting 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’ bastard,” 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. He laughed, “Besides, there ain’t nothin’ wrong with ‘em. Look at ‘em. They’re fine.”

The little trailer rocked with guffaws.

Denny liked 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 making light of it. He had his own private pain. He was always at war in his head about what was right and wrong and who was at fault. About whether anybody liked him, and about whether he liked himself or not. His dad and his older brother—he lived with a

certainty that they didn't like him much at all.

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

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 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 uncertain hand, pointing approximately in Soren's direction.

Russ ducked from the line of fire. "Put that thing down!"

Just then, Leon lunged to grab the gun, but it fired 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 damn fool," Leon 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 his fleshy 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 porcelain stained with urine, dried brown. 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. 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, sorry, 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 swallowed 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, Russell 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 va-

por 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 past his parents.

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 so good."

"Booze," he thundered. "Who gave you the booze, I swear I'll punch his lights out."

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 was screaming. Tears escaped. Dad's smacks could always jolt tears from their hiding places.

Mom tried reason. "What if you'd hurt someone, Dennis? What if you'd 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 without a car until you're done with school."

Denny escaped upstairs to his room, careful not to wake his brothers, where he cried silently under the covers. Why did Dad hate him? Why did Dad hit him all the time? He never hit his brothers. It had been a long time since Denny thought about suicide. The image of his strung-out face in Griff's mirror, stinging hot now from the smack, roused that old darkness back to life.