



# American Vulgarities

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American Vulgarities

Shawn Branske

A Thesis in the Field of Creative Writing and Literature  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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## Abstract

A powerful point may be made from a base or offensive utterance, but a pervading stigma, rooted in the royal courts of England, exists when members of a “lower class” conveys the same point in the language of the people. This language is known as Vulgarity, and it punctuates literary works through a number of methods, such as emphasizing a thought, sentiment, or to present definitive details. Appalling, profane, and offensive language used in literary creations maintains a value beyond shock and awe, and coarseness is not the only modality of delivery. At one time, the mere discussion of bodily functions was deemed to be vulgar. Thankfully, authors have rebelliously employed a wide variety of vulgarity for over six hundred years to provide a more relatable and representational product that speaks to a wider audience. For all of the pomp, circumstance, and formality of royalty or exalted religious leaders, I have it on good authority, that their shit still stinks, just like yours or mine.

This thesis is an exploration of reality, the vulgarity, or commonality in us all. The fictional stories that follow, capture more than just pejoratives. They expose a small peek into common threads of American life. These are colorful notes to a life that would otherwise be relatively bland, and dull if not included. There is irony in overbearing rules followed to a tee, and especially so when done in the middle of war. Finding sexual and relationship wisdom amongst a group of dirt-bag vagabonds, from an unexpected source, is a sweet surprise. We need to celebrate the color in our lives, not bleach the fabric.

## Author's Biographical Sketch

Shawn Branske was born in Newport, Rhode Island in 1973. Being fourth generation Navy, he moved around quite a bit, and then enlisted in the Navy himself in 1991. Among other things, he has been a farm hand, bicycle mechanic, welder, vehicle fabricator, truck driver, crane operator, Sailor, non-destructive test examiner, coxswain, and a Naval Officer. He earned his BA from American Military University, and retired as a Submarine Engineering and Repair Limited Duty Officer in 2022. He has been to over 50 countries, loves the outdoors, and living a life of many passions.

## Dedication

This work is dedicated to Sister Bernarda. For grading, and returning, a young child's letters, I am at once pissed off, and eternally grateful. You were an exacting, loving, and unwavering bitch. Your contributions made this world a better place to live, and you will always be a Saint in my book.

## Acknowledgments

To acknowledge all of the people who helped me would take the entirety of this work in space, but I would be remiss to not mention amazing English faculty members who saw through my unconventional track record in writing. Amazing teachers and professors such as Drew Williams for the “show, don’t tell”, Michael Reed for “you have more in there”, David Freed for the “What is the story about?”, John Hamilton for the “path of convenience leads to...”, and of course the astute and diligent guidance from Lindsay Mitchell, who begged more than any horse track bookie “What are the stakes?”, have each and all, inspired me, even when they may not have known. If you have that special person in your life, find a way to thank them, and more importantly, find a way to convince them to keep inspiring you.

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## Chapter I

### Letters From Heaven

“Jim, we are dropping heavy amounts of ordnance on the enemy. I understand you have an issue with the messaging, and more specifically, the language they are using, but this is war.”

“Just because it is war, XO, does not mean we can escape the conventions of good order and discipline.” The younger man was pleading his case very poorly.

“Consider it this way...” the elder Mustang paused for effect, and pulled off his glasses, and leaned in close to say “this is a small, but very important moment where you have the chance to connect with your guys in a way that had previously eluded you.” He squinted his eye a little to drive home the point.

“Sir, please don’t make this an Academy thing again.” Jim said curtly. The young Lieutenant Junior Grade had been very stiff, and more than a few of the Mustangs and Chiefs had requested permission to ‘help pull the stick out of the privileged Junior Officer’s ass’. Some also wanted to quickly follow it up with a smart beating of said ass as well. The Executive Officer had frowned at the discussion when the guys brought it up, but laughed to himself later when he was alone at the expression.

“Morale means more to those guys on the deckplates than I think you can fathom.” The XO could easily have just told the young man to let the Sailors continue to

graffiti the ordnance as they chose, but being the good leader, wanted to take advantage of this teachable moment.

“I understand morale, sir. But, I also know what the UCMJ says about vulgarity, and profanity.” Jim pulled out a couple pieces of paper from a navy-blue folder, and the XO could see they had highlighted sections of script, and notes in the margins.

He waived his hand in a manner that said keep the papers to yourself. “I know what the rules say as well. I also know that some of this dust-up is also based on your faith. I won’t disparage either. Jim, you need to lighten up a bit, and realize, that managing, or better yet, leading junior Sailors to appropriately employ vulgarity, and profanity, whether verbal or written, is a bit of a balancing act.” He paused for a second too long.

“Sir, are you saying you are going to counter my order to cease and desist the practice?” Jim clenched and released one of his fists in frustration, and his face flushed with every new word.

“No, because that would make me the bad leader for you. I have tried to convince you that you are not doing the appropriate thing for those under your charge. I have tried to show you why this matters more than you can imagine, and why it is extremely minor in the total face of this war. But if, ... no... when your Chiefs, or the Master Chief comes to me, I am going to have to give them an audience. You do not want to begin a battle with the Goat Locker that you will lose in the end, and one that will follow you for a long time. Take some time to think this over a bit more before you do anything rash.” On

those words, the athletic middle aged man patted the much younger man on the shoulder, stepped beyond him, and left him standing in the empty wardroom alone.

\*\*\*\*

“Chief, don’t you wish you knew the body count of those mother fuckers we waste with each of these?” The young squid was being earnest in his query, but the Chief could not help but chuckle.

“Maaaaan, what you think you gon’ start paintin’ kill marks up on these here bulkheads? Lawd, LT would have yo’ ass fo’ that. Me? I think shit’s funny...” The Chief belly laughed, patted the kid on the back and motioned for him to get the lead out of his ass.

“I’m comin’. I’m comin.” The two of them hustled the pallet jacks down the narrow rows towards the elevator up to the flight deck. “We been loading these for days. ‘Bout time for UNREP right Chief?” He knew the underway replenishment ship was close, and that flight operations would have to pause for a day, so the carrier could take on the weapons and fuel need to keep up the bombardment of the enemy strongholds. The closed-circuit television replays of fighter and bomber hits on enemy positions had been out pacing movies in the evening requests, and all of the crew loved seeing their side kicking ass.

“I reckon. You’da thunk we’d blowed all they asses to the devil by now. But they jes’ keep comin. Motha’ fuckas.” Chief had been doing this business for over two decades now, and was deciding, with his family of course, whether he should retire or not after this deployment.

“How many days ‘til you gotta make the choice?” The younger guys always asked so many questions about life at the end of service.

“‘Bout 300, but who’s countin’? Shit man, I don’t even know if the ole lady want’s my ass home all the time or not.” He laughed pretty good at this notion.

“She’ll have your ass doin’ all kindsa ‘honey-dos’ for at least a year. Shit man, y’all just bought that new pad. She got plans fo’ yo’ ass.” The young buck smiled, and called the elevator down. “These might be the last for today. I think we ran all the sorties. So fuckin’ cool man.” He marveled at the sheer amount of destruction they had already unleashed during this deployment. Hundreds of these weapons had been successfully dropped, meaning thousands of tons of pure patriot revenge for those innocent folks he never met, and never would, his thoughts wandered in a micro-moment of sadness mixed with pride in the mission.

\*\*\*\*\*

As soon as the weapons got on deck, it took no time to see what the below decks folks had left for space on the weapons’ casings to send their personalized messages to the ‘faithful’. A young surfer from SoCal, had painted a carefully crafted peace sign on the side of a thousand pounder.

“Hey LT! Look there!” The Chief was shouting over the insane noise on the flight deck. “Now, that is fuckin vulgar! You don’t want profanity or vulgarity, but we are dealing death to a bunch of fucking heathens and savages. With a Goddamned peace sign, no less! Fuck them!” The Chief hustled off to help the Sailor move the ordnance into place.

The awkward letters of every soon-to-be ounce of retribution and vengeance scrawled into the rough surfaces of the quarter and half-ton devices were full of a well-deserved vitriol. Each of these infidels were more than happy to be sending the believers to meet their virgins.

The XO walked up behind the young LT supervising the evolution.

“Looks like the decision was made without your input.” The XO smirked a little. The LT screwed his face up tight.

“Did you undermine me?” He knew that was a dangerous thing to accuse out in the open.

“No. Sailors do Sailor shit. Maybe, one day you will learn before it is too late. For now, let them be, as they see the clear absurdity of your dictum. This conversation is over.” The XO walked away pumping his fists to the warriors with beaming pride.

## Chapter II

### Birthright

Oh shit. Not. Gonna. Make. It...

The car was sliding down the avenue at blinding speed, showing no signs of a chance to regain control. He had spent the night out with the firm's best brokers in pure debauchery. Hookers and blow. Insanely loud agro-metal was pumping through the speakers, and the entire world was going by in nanoseconds. Triple digits were still flashing on the speedo when the first impact occurred. After the second impact, the monocoque carbon fiber chassis broke up into hundreds of pieces, and the ensuing fire erased any of the contraband that may have remained. He missed that sexy beast already he thought, as he bear-crawled-stumbled away.

\*\*\*\*\*

All Causes Insurance. How may I help you. The call center woman's voice was unemotional and only slightly above monotone. She loathed this job.

My car has been stolen. He was still panting.

Which one sir. She was not surprised.

The 2014 La Ferrari. He blurted out.

Where did you last see it sir. She pulled up the details on the car.

At the Mobil near Jackson Square. I went to the bathroom. Came out. It was gone. I am on my way home. That was the best bullshit he could think of in a pinch. Also, the only gas station he could remember in lower Manhattan.

Did the police make a report sir. She was showing a little more interest now.

No police will come here at three in the morning. Not enough on duty. Incredibly, she does not get the gravity of this yet.

I understand sir. This will have to be investigated. The value of that car is \$4 million sir. She had finally figured out just what she was dealing with.

That is correct. It should get investigated. I am scheduled to leave the country later this morning on business. The best actor award should be considered here.

We will need an investigator to interview you. She had a hunch he was involved.

Please have them contact my lawyer while I am away. Do you have the contact info. I know you do, because I gave it to you right after I got a retainer, he thought. Did I say that out loud. Fuck, this coke is good.

Yes sir. The representative really did not like dealing with these Wall Streeters.

Thank you. He could not have said that with more disdain.

If there is nothing else I can help you with, thank you for choosing All Causes Insurance for your coverage needs. Form letter response, and back to the clinical voice.

No that is all. Thank you. Goodbye. Thank God I didn't slip up on that he thought.

Goodbye sir. The phone beeped the termination tone.

He coughed up a little blood. Limped three blocks. The numbness from the coke was starting to wear off. Body aches were growing, and his vision was narrowing.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ugh. Where the hell am I. Who the hell are you. He did not remember the alley he crawled into being such a hell hole.

Who the hell are you. This is my house. The older street urchin was incredulous.

Looks like a shitty alley to me. He gave a dry response.

That's my house pal. The older man reflected the same dryness.

Sucks to be you. For some reason, he felt superior, and yet, was in the same gutter as the older man.

You slept here too. Someone fucked you up, huh. The older man seemed honestly interested.

You could say that. How long have I been here. Scratching his disheveled head of shoulder length inky black greasy spaghetti.

Maybe a day or so. That was a nice suit. At least before the blood. Michael Andrews, correct. His matter of fact tone was jarring to the young man.

Yeah. How did you know. The young man thought those statements were the limit of clairvoyance.

I haven't always lived behind this dumpster kid.



Let me guess. You chose this life. The young man had a real special way of being condescending with words.

I suppose you could say that. A long series of unfortunate events led to this existence. The old man did not sound too frustrated by his current lot in life.

I'd say.

How did you fall from grace. Shouldn't you be scooting back to a penthouse, or jet setting to some international destination. The old man also carried a similar tone, and in a turn-about-is-fair-play kinda way, also delivered condescension.

Yeah.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sargent, from the wreckage, we only found the vin plate, and a couple minor items that were recognizable to identify the car. Nobody was here when it happened, and nobody saw anything.

Imagine that. Thanks Chief. Is it safe to tow away. The Sargent had seen enough for this scene.

Yup. Shame to see such a beautiful car up on a wrecker all smashed up. The Fire Chief and the Sargent had been to plenty of accidents together over the years, and had even shared some family outings on rare days off together.

I got word from the precinct it was reported stolen early this morning. He tipped his hat back in resignation.

Thief can't be too far. The Chief was guessing a bit.

Not sure about that. It was almost done burning when we got to the scene.

Damn shame. The Chief shaking his head, knew neither of them would be lucky to make in their lifetimes the value of what was left of the exotic in front of them.

Yup. End of shift, thank God. Have quiet day.

Same to you. Say hi to the missus. Just the start of my three day run. Hopefully this ain't a sign.

Same.

\*\*\*\*

I once had it all kid. Told 'em I was giving my share to charity, and going to devote my life to a better cause. Shit went sideways after that. Still wouldn't change it for anything.

Why didn't you go back when you fell on hard times. The young man was honestly curious, and that was out of character for his self-centered prickness.

Pride is a motherfucker kid. The old man toes at a couple errant pebbles.

Yeah tell me about it. How long can I hide here before being caught.

Caught by whom. What did you do. The indigent was concerned he would be moved again for the third time this year. That was his only real beef with his domicile.

Nothin. Just wanted to know how long before somebody comes looking through here. He was obviously lying.

Nobody comes here. This is my house. Those statements were facts as far as the old man was considered.

You said this before. How can you be so sure. He was healthily skeptical of anyone who chose to make this place their life terminus.

Let's just say I been here a while, and the beat guys know me.

Ok. You got anything to drink. I can pay you for it. The young man was sweating a little from some hidden pain, and the coke, and his nerves.

I ain't takin your money kid. You want leaded, or unleaded.

Leaded. I got a fierce headache. He hugged himself a little in a weird heat chill.

Are you dizzy, or nauseous.

Yeah. A little of both. I don't feel like moving a bunch, that's for sure. What are you some sort of street pharmacist or doctor. The kid was being a smart ass again.

Sounds like you got your bell rung kid. Maybe a slight concussion.

Well, I am kinda sore all over. He gently felt around his body to check for unknown damages.

Here, drink this. It will take the edge off. What happened to you kid. The old man handed over a paper mummified bottle with a clear plastic lip sticking out the top.

I am trying to piece that together. Some of it is a little fuzzy. I remember partying. It is coming through in flashes. This shit is rough. A drop of caramel colored gasoline hung at the edge of the young man's lip corner, mixed with a slight tinge of blood.

I ain't buying thirty-year-old scotch anymore kid. Why don't you look at your phone. You look kinda familiar. The old man wondered if this kid was some sort of smart idiot.

I thought the same about you. In a dirty sort of way. Good idea. Looks like I called my insurance company, and my lawyer. Business texts are slim, but it is... Holy shit, it, it's, Sunday. The kid was just realizing how much shit he was in, but maybe not.

Yeah. You slept a while, like I said, and fuck you. The old man had a small, hidden but oddly certain form of dignity. He thought all people should.

What got you here. Was it drugs. Things go bad at work. Wrong woman. Sick of the kids.

Why do those things always have to be the common denominator. No not drugs. Sure. I did them. But, once I decided to exit that life, I quit those too. Hell, couldn't afford them. Coke is too damned expensive, and especially when the expense accounts get cut off.

Tell me about it. The young man rubbed his head a bit more, and took another long pull from the bottle.

You like coke too, huh. Lots of guys in the business do. Nothing went wrong at work. Well, nothing different than it did for anybody else. Call it a clarity of conscience. I didn't want to continue my path. I didn't want be another robber baron in the line. It was the right woman. They were the right kids. I was the wrong husband, and father.

What's wrong with being a robber baron. Annd... is it that obvious what I do.

If you have to ask either of those questions, you are already too far.

Call it playing Devil's Advocate.

This conversation is insipid. The old man was getting curt in response.

Didn't mean to insult you, sir.

You didn't insult me, and don't fucking call me sir, kid.

\*\*\*\*

The greasy green and black walls captured weird light from the old sodium vapor lamps. A funk of old burnt up gear oil, solvent, whiskey, dank weed, push-cart-burrito farts, and two-bit cigars hung in the air like a moist lower subway platform.

Looks like the car belonged to some high-powered broker. The kid was walking out of the back office with a fresh printout of the latest heap in the stable.

No shit. He ain't gonna like the shape she's in now. The fat man in an old wife beater chomped on the half-smoked torpedo.

No shit. They only made like five hundred of those, man. The young man responded.

From a dark corridor, out stepped shiny shoes from under a long black trench coat. Four hundred and ninety-nine. This car needs to be left alone until our team can go over it. You two can take a break while I do an initial assessment.

Who the fuck are you. Can't you fuckin read. The sign said... Shop. For. Employees. Only. You. Ain't. An. Employee. So, get the fuck out. The fat man started to grab a wrench.

I am an independent investigator hired by the All Causes Insurance Company. They go to great pains to make sure their investments are protected. The six-foot-five specter adjusted his wire-rimmed spectacles.

Well la-dee-da. You got ID. The younger smirked.

Here you go sir. If you have any questions, call the number at the bottom of the card.

I will. The fat man snatched the card from the younger, and examined it carefully. Just a number under a familiar, but not immediately recognized logo. He should have.

While you do, do you mind if I take some photographs. He pulled a cell phone from his internal folds.

Nah. Just no funny business. Ok. The younger responded.

Yes sir. I assure there is nothing funny about \$4 million. The tall say dryly.

A faint phone ring tone was on the other end of the cell.

Hello, I am calling about... Oh, so you knew I would call. This is highly abnormal. Yes, I know who he is. Yes, I understand. Yes sir. The garage is yours. Thank you, sir. The fat man had a very blank stare on his face, and gave an odd eye gesture and slight head movement to the younger.

Did you get your questions answered sir. The tall queried plainly.

Yes. We are leaving. We will be back when you are done. The fat man was on the verge of hurried.

Thank you for your patience and understanding sir. The tall seemed sincerely grateful.

Lock up when you leave. Alright.

Yes sir.

\*\*\*\*

What kind of car was it. The old man was trying to keep the kid awake with questions.

LaFerrari. The kid was getting comfortable in a weird way on the cardboard.

What a shame. Nice ride. Think anybody is tracking your phone. The old man started to get to the point a bit more directly.

Tell me about it. Maybe. Probably. Hasn't been too long yet. I don't know. Why do you care. How did you know it was a car that did this.

In your sleep. You mumble. You also stink like booze, cologne, and gasoline. You also didn't have a bunch of other noticeable wounds or damage. I don't like extra visitors, and I don't need questions in my life.

You stink like shit. The young man instantly regretted snapping back to the man who had been very hospitable, despite his environment.

No need to get personal.

Sorry. You didn't deserve that.

No. No I didn't. You mad at your old man. He tilted his head a bit to examine the younger man's face in the twenty-watt light a little more.

What. The younger man knew what he meant, but couldn't believe he asked it. That was the foulest question in his head, despite him having asked more than one stripper about her "daddy issues". He knew he could be a privileged prick sometimes.

Why else would you act like such a child. You have the world by the balls kid.

What do you know. Do I know you.

No. But ... maybe. The old man tilted his head the opposite way like a German Shepherd does, only without the flopping ear.

My father left when I was young. My mother sent me away to Dragon School less than a year later.

Good school. This was not a question.

Very. The kid knew this was not a question.

Think someone will be looking for you, or that car.

Definitely. Who are you hiding from.

Why are you trying to run towards a brick wall kid. This was turning into a very short and fast chess match, one that the old man was light years ahead of the younger man. The streets give a person insight that shelter, fine food, and new oxfords do not. Let alone, a LaFerrari.



What. You are the one hiding out in plain sight. Why not move to Florida, or somewhere more comfortable to be...

To be... to be what. I know what I am doing kid. Do you. You seem to be the one intentionally fucking up a good thing. He snapped, and did not regret the lesson to the younger man. It was being given for free. He should be thankful. Bastard.

You should talk.

I made a conscious decision to not continue my path. You are doing it destructively.

What the fuck is the difference. The kid was quick, and especially so for being hurt.

Touché.

\*\*\*\*

I am an investigator hired by the All Causes Insurance Company. Can you show the way to the department that can provide me with the police report for an accident that happened Saturday morning, about Three AM, involving a 2014 LaFerrari.

Sir, you will have to go to records, down the hall. The front desk watch was filling out logs, but was taken off guard by the tall in his long black trench coat.

Thank you. His tone seemed so gracious.

You are welcome. The watch smiled thinly.

\*\*\*\*

Immediately following the tall's departure, the watch turned to see the Sargent walking towards him from a few feet away.

Sarge, did you just hear that guy asked about...

Yeah. I heard. Word like that travels fast, I guess.

Yeah. Should I have someone check him out.

Nah. I got it. The Sargent slowly made his way in tow of the tall.

\*\*\*\*\*

Excuse me sir. The Sargent's thick New Yorker accent was oozing off each word.

Yes, Officer. How may I help you. The tall was looking down at the uniform openly.

It's Sargent. Thank you. Well actually, I was hoping you could help me. He said in the most disarming tone possible.

How is that. The tall was curious.

I overheard you in the front asking about an accident from a couple days ago.

Yes, Sargent. Is there a problem. The tall immediately regained his character.

No. It's just, that is a very peculiar case.

Oh. How so. The tall said quietly.

Stolen car. No driver. High value. Very. High. Value. The Sargent chopped those words intentionally for the tall.

That is why All Causes hires me. They are very concerned about protecting the assets they cover.

The. Assets. They. Cover. The Sargent took off his hat, looked at it a bit, replaced it upon his head, and then slowly motioned the tall to follow him.

Yes, Sargent. As he walked by his side, but slightly back as if he were supposed to have a scythe in hand.

What do you need to know. I was there at the scene. They slowly moved back up the hall towards the front desk.

I would just like a copy of the report for the company.

Ok. That is easy. But why in person. Isn't that... peculiar. The Sargent knew most companies just used the internet, emails, and databases shared. The Sargent made a couple hand signals to the watch, and the watch walked away.

No. The tall said quiet but quickly.

Why.

You said it earlier Sargent. Very. High. Value. There is also the matter of the insured. Has he been found.

We didn't know he was missing. Has someone filed a Missing Persons we don't know about. The Sargent was trying to get more from the tall, but he was a smooth customer.

No. Not yet. The family, and the Company are concerned on his whereabouts.

I thought the agent on the phone said he was leaving the country on business.

You take your investigation seriously. The watch approached silently.

It's my job, and my duty.

Here is your report sir. The watch handed the tall his requested report.

Thank you.

\*\*\*\*

The end of the day was approaching, and the last vestiges of twilight were entering the alley due to an odd reflection off a glass covered building down the way.

Got any more of that jet fuel. The young man squinted a bit towards the old man.

Sure kid. Here. Knock yourself out. The old man butt end handed the bottle over.

Thanks. Goddamn. Doesn't get smoother does it. The younger wiped his mouth with his jacket sleeve.

Nope. Does the job though. When are you going to go back. The old man wondered how long the younger was going to hide.

Just kinda working on that plan now.

Better think quick. Here comes the man. The old man pointed up to a shadow.

\*\*\*\*

The shadow moved a couple steps right once he noticed the second set of feet behind the dumpster. The younger now saw it was a uniformed Sargent from NYPD.

Hey Sir. How ya doin. The old man looked up at him with a familiarity.

I'm alright Sarge. How's the missus.

She's ok. Keeps feedin me too much, as you can see. The Sargent patted a small but growing case of Michelin Man.

A large truck had stopped outside the alley a few dozen yards away.

She's a fine cook.

Who's your new friend. The Sargent tilted his hat back a little while thumbing towards the younger man.

Just another guy down on his luck. He's alright. Been here a couple days now. I don't mind.

New friend. You got a name. You got ID.

Yes. Sargent.

Says here Julia. Ramon Julia Jr. Ramon. What are the odds.

None... Sorry you got caught up in this Sarge. The old man was much faster than the other two could ever have expected. Nobody heard anything over the truck engine pulling away.

\*\*\*\*\*

A senior police officer with the NYPD was found dead in Manhattan's Financial District behind a dumpster early this morning. A full-scale investigation has been launched, but no suspects have been identified.

### Chapter III

#### The Damp Panty Parade

The filthy gathering of vagabond derelicts casually passed around the sweetest smelling dank herb, two or three joints at a time as the sun was showing her earliest twilight. The majority of the raucous jokes and antics has subsided, and the topics had turned more esoteric, and yet at the same moment more to the core of mankind. Curly, the elder roadie in the group, who had once toured with the Stones on the Steel Wheels/Urban Jungle Tour, started imparting sage knowledge upon the remaining two junior roadies. He began the topic for the occasion, for all the vets in the round to share with a couple dudes new to the roadie game, their wisdom and experiences in the celebration. The elder roadies began to wax poetically about the successes, frustrations, excitement, thrill of the chase, and secrets-of-the-life-mystery behind what he called The Damp Panty Parade.

“Music is a language boys.” He said to the group, and then looked straight to the elder of the two pieces of fresh meat. “... And I ain’t deaf to it. But, I have pretty near always harnessed it at the right time after most of these shows. I seen hunerts of concerts over the past forty-something years kid, but, I am still, to this day, mystified by the Damp Panty Parade.” He kinda groan-spoke as he exhausted the pungent smoke in a smooth billow.

The tall and sinewy kid with greasy locks of straw, whom everybody called Skinny Chris, screwed his face up into the inevitable question. Before he could stammer it out, Curly continued, using full arm gestures for effect.

“When the mass exodus begins at the end of each show, out goes the last opportunity with all those chicks. Worst part?” He paused, like a humorous magician would, right before the reveal. “The band already *did* the *hard* part for you. They got ‘em all revvvved up and ready. Almost for nothin’.” He smiled and grabbed the next roach delicately from the mountain of a man, Big George, next to him. He was BG to most of the guys, BUT NOT THE NEWBS. Because, he insisted, “...they didn’t even know how to get out of their own way, let alone say shit” to him. The Newbies could not tell if he was bullshitting or not, but none were ever willing to risk the consequence.

“Curly, mannn, that shit is the same at the bars too! Especially those with a good live band. Ever notice how many of ‘em never want the night to end when they pour out at closing time?” BG squinted as he pictured the scene in his head with a thin smile. Almost in unison, the others who knew, nodded north and south. The two young bucks still seemed a bit perplexed. Maybe they were just too freaking tired and wasted, but the rest of the crew loved this topic, so they indulged a bit.

“These two new booties don’t know shit, huh?” Psycho Larry grinned a bit with the brightest white teeth from behind the salt and pepper. He was smart, handsome, and resembled Sam Elliot in a way. He always had a couple ladies around, but those ladies wouldn’t keep hanging around, especially once they found out he had done about a year at Byberry Mental Hospital in the violent ward after a crazed months long LSD run.

“That shit, well it was the early seventies... you know... Zeppelin and the Doors...” was

the line he used, to get the ladies to stay. Most instinctively knew, that level of insanity could reappear without warning.

“Psycho, you seem to have pulled more tail than all of us combined, but you are no stranger to ladies walking away...” BG ribbed him gently as only a 350-pound bear-of-a-man could.

“Ain’t no shit there, big man... ain’t no shit.” Psycho sheepishly grinned to the ground, and kicked at some pebbles. BG backhanded him with a few bratwurst sized fingers lightly on the shoulder.

Curly continued “I seen this happen everwheres. Hard core metal in shitty dive bars, and in even *shittier* small towns, from folk music in the small-town park, to the Dead in Golden Gate Park, from up-and-coming singer-songwriters, certainly headed for fame in coffee shops, to those slightly beyond their peak, but still insanely talented. From crooners in redneck honky-tonks, to massive stadiums, filled to the brim with fainting fans over bubblegum pop stars.” He was getting on a roll as Island Byron prestidigitated another fresh joint at the back of his hand, from seemingly nowhere. “Minus one small thing. The truly disappointing aspect to it the whole scene, is the sheer number of times I went to one of these events, and while packing the gear up for the next show, I watched the Damp Panty Parade leaving all around me. Hell, even when I wasn’t working pack out, there I would be, rigid and ready as a Texas Horned Lizard. Yet, the missed opportunities for a hook-up during the mass exodus from those shows, well... it’s always been nothing short of... astonishing.”

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As Curly took a hard tug on the joint, Byron began his story in a seafarer's style of telling a tale. "Boys, I can see it like yesterday. This was the very event that led me to want to be a roadie." Byron's eyes got squinty, and he cheesed a bit. "The Guns N' Roses *Use Your Illusion Tour* concert really sticks to my memory, kinda like a wet t-shirt to big tits. All my mates had to do dumb shit like work, attend school, or some other bullshit thing I couldn't have been bothered by at the time. I had even invited a second cousin through marriage..."

"You sure it was through marriage?" Psycho ribbed him with a sly grin.

"Mighta been your momma, come to think of it..." Byron shot back with a wink. "But anyways... she had other shit going on in her life. Well I'll be god-damned, I wasn't going to miss this show for nothin. So, I set out to the venue all by my lonesome."

Byron continued. "The whole show seemed surreal. The music was powerful. I had a choice lawn seat surrounded by a bunch of folks who were having the time of their lives! They were all enjoying the music, screaming, dancing, whistling, showing their tits, "teaching" me how to roll a twenty-dollar-bill to use as a coke straw off of some other chick's tits. T'was a fuckin' good time! I didn't drink too much then, as I was still under age, but people were sharing everything. I mean everything. There was so much leather and lace walking around, and even my young cherry ass was getting hot chicks to flirt with me, and kiss, and rub around on me. Then the music stopped." The whole group's eyes got wider, even though some had already heard this story in the past. Everyone remembers their driving moment to become a roadie.

“Maannn.... Jim Morrison had this part nailed from the beginning.” He emoted the pang of angina. “*When the music’s over, turn out the lights...*” he sang with alarming clarity and tone (The Doors). “That dude professed a hard fact, *at least* seven years before I was born. Cheers Jimbo.” He raised his amber bottle to the sky and took a swig, as did others in the round. “I knew from that moment, I wanted that entire ride as often as possible, for as long as possible.” He took another drink and smiled with satisfaction.

“Where was I? Shit... oh yeah... The second encore had concluded. The screaming and whistling had subsided to singular hoots and hollers as people piled out of the venue. A random whistle here and there. Lots of folks super charged up. Smiling, temporarily deaf, and talking real loud. Sweaty hard-bodies from dancing and all the other afternoon activities. And in that moment... that is when I noticed the Parade for the first time. In real time. Prior to that point, maybe I hadn’t been as observant, but it was clear as day this time. People were checking each other out, but not one person I saw who went to the show single, left with someone else. The couples, who hadn’t fought or split-up, remained coupled-up to the parking lot. This was the first clear example I can remember of the Damp Panty Parade.” Byron laid the revelation out on the table for all to share like a Thanksgiving feast.

He chuckled a little, and then continued, “I am not sure what to call the dude version of the Damp Panty Parade. I assume chicks think it’s the Stingy Cock Cavalcade or something.” He laughed at his own wit with a few others joining. “You gotta remember kid,” he said directly to Skinny Chris sitting silently next to him in rapt attention. “...this was in the time where the hook-up culture gay folks was still going full throttle, so they probably were not suffering the same blue-balls shuffle like I was. Hell,

to be honest, I was a little jealous of their sexual proclivities.” He was caught in his thoughts for a minute, when Curly brought him back.

“Annnnd...??” Curly nudged him.

Byron snapped back to this world. “Shit man. Annd... Like I was saying before I was sooo rudely interrupted...” Curly soft punched him in the arm, and smiled. “I sat on the back of my truck to be loaded, and just fucking sat there. Totally man. Fuckin’ dumbstruck. Yeah, as I watched as the insane So-Cal traffic piled out of the Orange County Fairgrounds like it does after one of those mega-shows. You know?” He began grinning again as he looked around for those who knew the feeling. His pride welled up like a fount of climactic effervescence. “Check this out... At that moment, I had it down to simple math. It was pure and simple fuckin arithmetic! Out of all those cars, which there must have been, what, like, 25,000, minimum bro. Pouring out, and *JUST HAD* to have at least 20-30% filled with single straight...annnd yes, “of age” for you perverts in the crowd... single straight chicks. I was assuming an average of 25% meaning 6,250 cars had an average of 2.5 chicks inside them. That equaled almost 16,000 chicks who not just wanted, but at that moment *NEEDED DICK*. Sure, I was at a serious disadvantage being a single dude, and an unknown to the crowd, but seriously, what kinda fucked up star pattern creates this seemingly never-ending gaggle of pussy, only to let it just roll out the gates, without even throwing a sympathy fuck to a guy?” He was pretty proud of himself at this point.

“Shit maaan...” BG said. “Byron, I didn’t even know you could count bro.... Let alone do those quick calculations.” BG was now belly laughing with the rest of those in the round.

“Fuck y’all. Libido is a powerful thing man. Gets a mind racing.” His speech tempo accelerated with his excitement of the memory. “Check this out... After that show I had mentioned this phenomenon to a few friends of mine, and most said the something similar. There were very few who had a couple odd anecdotes, but most were right in line with my woes. The only hook-ups they got, were the ones they brought to the shows.” He smiled proud of himself, despite feeling obviously dejected. “Back before I travelled, I had the wide variety of friends from sportos, to geeks, to stoners, to loners, to farmers, to just plain Janes and Jakes, and now I added in the road crews. Very few of them when asked, said different. Now you tell me, how can that be? How is it that those other dudes, and everyone here, all seen the same phenomenon, and all at different times? Maybe if we had some blow, but those days are fading fast too...”

“Yeah man, the 80s-to mid-90s really changed the scene man.” Chimed in Curly.

All of a sudden Psycho had a moment of pure clarity, and added plainly: “That is a no shitter. When I joined the STP tour in ‘92, the post-concert scene did not change. Sure, away from the concert scene, things had changed for me, as life had accelerated in almost all facets. Hooking up with chicks in general, was better away from the venues. It seemed to happen much easier, but that is the story of my life. To quote Social Distortion. Meanwhile, the post music show Damp Panty Parade had marched on without end it seemed.” They all looked around at each other in a bit of wonder.

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A long pause happened while beers were refreshed, and a new round of joints were rolled for the crew. Even the Newbs were refreshed, and hungry for more of this

priceless connection to the vets. Not to mention the bud was good, and sunrise was just moments away.

As if the rising sun spurred on his open-air confessional, “After being out of the booby hatch, and back on tour for a couple years, I had settled into the groove a bit better in my head.” Psycho was coming at this in a more serious tone than the others. “Those years after the break were for me, a source of clarity, as years prior to falling apart, well... they were a complete fucking blur. I was so fucking stoned all the time, I don’t remember half of the shows I worked. The bud wasn’t this good, but the acid was WAAAAY better maaaannn...” He almost seemed to go on a micro-trip, and then snapped back to his story clear as shine. “I had some good friends I could trust, and kept a few old ones for the same reason. I used to go work local shows in various venues in SoCal, but one regular local gig that stood out to me was the coffee shops. Especially this short-lived joint, Java Joe’s, in OB. I was working a normal nine-to-fiver, so, during the week, I could no longer go get smashed out of my gourd every night with the young bucks in the parking lots post-show. I would hang out with some friends, and listen to some cool local bands, and help traveling musicians who would pop in for an acapella set or two, and maybe return again, and maybe not. Funny side story? One of those was a then little-known singer at the time - Jewel Kilcher. I must have watched her and the Rugburns a couple dozen times during that period. They were literally sleeping in their cars and her in that van. It was a much different scene from the Doors, and I knew a *BUNCH* of the women who frequented the spot.”

“Most people would smoke a little grass in the parking lot, watch the shows, drink a bunch of coffee, and split. Oddly, in the same manner as the much bigger shows.

Maybe a few of us would roll down the street to grab some tacos and beers, but then split in the same way we arrived. I took a couple girlfriends to see those shows. That was the only way I was leaving after working and getting laid afterwards. Also, it was the only way I was going to fucking sleep after drinking copious amounts of coffee and watching good music performed just feet from me. Thank fuck I never liked cocaine, or 55-hour energy the kids take today.” The circle laughed lowly.

“I had a few different girlfriends during the period, but in the spaces between, the Damp Panty Parade marched its way through my path out of EACH and EVERY music show I ever worked, or even those I went to with friends. Male or female. Hell, I had a few chicks that tried to hook me up at those local shows with other chicks. Guess what? Fail. A few of them thought the phenomenon was funny, and would come over to my pad for a nightcap, and then *we* would wind up fucking! We’d roll around in the sack laughing about it in the hours and, if I was lucky, the days following. Thank god for good mercy pussy.” Mostly laughs in the round, minus the two youngbloods. “Do you newbies ever get anything?” Psycho probably scared them a little with that comment. Wide eyed and chin tucked with a sideway glance from each.

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“Hey, this ain’t a Negative Nancy pity party boys, and to quote the late great Rick James “This is a celebration bitches!” BG chimed in (whilst cracking a new cold beer and hitting a fat blunt at the same time) to break the short silence that followed Psycho’s soul baring monologue (Chappelle and James). “This is a celebration of the power of desire, and the funny shit it makes some young bucks do in the spirit of the flesh.” Profundity seemed to come easily to the big man, even if roughly delivered. “Consider this shit to

be Exhibit A: We all spend disgusting amounts of money, time, and energy on chasing the holiest of holies all over the planet, and mostly just to beat the odds. Not that this is a gamble. In the end, it is about the statistic of attrition. As I would wear away the number of opportunities from the number women on the planet, much like petals from a rose, eventually I would pull away enough petals, to find the one that suited me, or, much closer to reality, decided I wasn't the biggest toad on that lucky and fortunate day of redemption. Rising from the ashes. Keep swinging the bat with earnest effort, and you are bound to hit the ball. I think my batting average must have been in the sub-minor league, like .0002, or some shit. But I never failed to walk back to the plate for another chance." BG took a massive lung filler, paused, and exhaled a smoke grenade that seemed to obstruct view of the rest of the circle for a minor moment of reset.

"Now, Exhibit B: Remember the statistics we heard in high school, that the average boy thinks about sex once every seven seconds? I can attest to that being very close, depending on what else is going on at the time." He paused to collect himself for a moment. "I guess, if it was spread out over the course of a day, that might actually be low. I am sure that if I counted the time, added up, for each time I rubbed one out, plus the day dreaming, that total time probably quickly added up to equaling one solid month of pure mental masturbation marathon out of EACH YEAR! I say this considering that most guys I knew spanked it *AT LEAST* a couple times per day during their teens and early twenties." He pondered this further with a pause and stroke of his dark rusted-steel-wire-wheel whiskers. "One good buddy of mine in the Navy, said he once stayed home from school to jerk off to funny shit like the "Price is Right" girls, and the underwear section of Sears catalogue. Thirteen times. In. One. Day. Not even good porn. He said he

wore his dick raw. I believed him. No lube is that good. Helllll, in the eighties, no young kid got good lube, even if there was something better than lotion, we didn't know. Dumb boys with hard dicks. So, thinking about sex over 8,000 times per day is not a big surprise." The round nearly fell out hearing this anecdote. The laughter was amazing. Even the cherries understood this, and probably identified with the scenario personally.

"Why is that number important? It is important because that means a boy on the prowl, if not a complete social ignoramus," he placed a hand sideways to his mouth to share with Greaser Tim, the other newb, who had coolly moved in between him and Psycho to share another joint, but loud enough for all to hear, "... this is being very generous as most guys that age are degenerates, at best.." and now louder for effect "...will attempt to hit on as many girls per day, as they see as potentially willing, ... to not slap the shit out of them... in front of the entire breakfast crowd at the local Egg Stop!" Again, the group broke out laughing, as he continued. "This is even when focused on that one special girl in his life. Until she is "officially" his, he has to keep trying. Everywhere. The grocery store. The library. The gas station. School. Work. The bus. During sports practice. Watching television. The dinner table. The toilet. Everywhere. Me personally? I just *HAAAD* to keep trying to beat those odds, the odds that most chicks would just take the easy route, and say "Fuck Off" as so many often did." He chuckled, and downed the beer in his bear paw hand.

Skinny Chris finally blurted out "B-b-b-buttt... what if I did get a chick on a tour stop? Especially one that I liked? Like, more than just for a fuck....?" His eyes were sincere and begging for some of the wisdom of the round. The veterans all looked at each other with the same thought.



“Don’t you guys have daddies to teach you anything?” They all laughed, except the two in question.

Curly chimed in more seriously. “Hey kid... I hear you. I had honestly wanted a good healthy relationship all along, and even most of the other guys on tour loved the idea of having a solid steady girlfriend. Hell, that’d take off half the pressure after shows. Then the only pressure was to keep trying to get back home, into their panties, and enjoy that time at home, at least until the road called again.” He looked at the others in the round sincerely. “Me? I was sincerely interested in what they liked, and what they didn’t.” He looked into all the other eyes again, and in the round, each of them reflected those same desires. This was some honest soul baring. “They seemed so alien, yet I knew, women were more than half the population. The different ways they thought about things was then, and still is today, well... intriguing.” He paused to take a well-timed hit, and blew out a thin long stream of smoke for all to ponder a few seconds. “Some of this shit was a social construct you see? But... some of it was something sooo much more magical, and a complete mystery to me. So, I talked to them, asked what they thought, what they wanted, and tried to listen, well... as best as my horny little lizard brain could handle.” He was dropping pearls to the Newbs. Were they listening?

“Shiiit man... Some of my *best* friends were chicks. But, I was too freaking stupid to know that most of them were giving me all of the signs they wanted more than just friendship. Dumb as a brick. Man, I spoke with one of those girls from high school that I should have noticed, many years later. This was after she and I were both happily married to other people, and her with a few lovely children. We were at a funeral for a mutual friend. Hong Kong no-shitter here... She told me she was so frustrated with me during

those years, because apparently, the Goodyear Blimp could have flown overhead, flashing bright and bold a message stating “So and So wants your meat missile!” and I would have been oblivious. We laughed a lot, shared some good memories, and I thanked her for the enlightenment. I haven’t spoken to her since, but I was truly grateful she would share something so personal, so many years later.” Curly toed a few small pebbles at his feet. “Intentional and interactive dialogue with the opposite sex means so much, but, in retrospect, I wasn’t sure I always listened. Nah. Positive. I only heard every tenth word for digestion. Maybe.”

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A shock in life most often comes from the blind corners of any situation.

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Out of nowhere, Newbie Two - Greaser Tim, spoke. From word one, the group got quiet, outside of the occasional hit on a joint.

“The first time I took a girlfriend to the opera for a date, I remember the glee we both had on our trip from the house, to sexual innuendos at dinner, and the light sensual touches during the show. We were young, very hot for each other, and the performance was so amazing that we could hardly wait to get back home to tear each other’s clothes off. Never even made it to the bedroom. The finale of passion on the floor, on the sofa, in the kitchen, and back on the sofa had been the result of rapidly uncorked tension. Passed out on the sofa draped in one of the throws.” This bomb shell went off in the crowd with the intended effect, measured in micro-seconds. Analyzing all that had been said, and yet, in such a short recitation. Dumbstruck to say the least. The fucking Newb numero two.

He had more to share than any of the entire round would have ever thought. *THIS*, was true insight. A truth beyond the faintly remaining pimples on his face.

He calmly continued. “That moment in time was different from any rock show, for so many reasons. We looked and felt great. Dressed to the nines. Young, virile, fit, well-coiffed, clean shaven, makeup, perfume and cologne. Excellent wines and cocktails. Gentle breeze on a late spring dusk. Long gazes into each other’s eyes. Gentle touches, brushes, and light kisses on the neck or lobes. Amongst hundreds of people, but isolated into our own fantasy, for the entire evening. The rock shows never had that same mutually developed tension building exercise.” His excitement from the moment, and the pain of the love lost brought a tense smile, tear, and fervor to tell the rest of the tale. Youth in love. He grabbed the blunt from a jaw slacked BG, and dragged a massive lung buster.

Exhaling he continued. “Sure, the rock show was sexy, it was hot, but sensuality of that evening at the opera... well... fuck.” He wiped his eyes with a flannelled sleeve. “It seemed to be a much more potent elixir in the end. We happily picked up our strewn about fineries the next morning, after sharing a wonderful, but still disheveled existence. Reveling in tenderness at breakfast, half clothed, and most of all, together. Mind and soul. There was no walk of shame later that morning. Being in a relationship, yeah, that was the very best ever for going to shows. There was, and still is, the Damp Panty Parade, but I was one of the lucky mugs getting to take a pair of them home. To have the pleasure to take them off afterwards. I never lost sight of the fact that there were other people there at the show doing the “single girls with girlfriends” thing, and “guys with their bros” doing the same. Doubt any of them took someone other than their crews home

that evening.” A fucking pin could have dropped, and it would have sounded like an atom bomb at that moment.

“A couple years later, I went to the symphony once alone, and I truly enjoyed it without thought about the opposite sex. I think my focus was changing to relish the moment, rather than solely focusing on the Damp Panty Parade as I entered or departed. Call it maturity, call it age, call it growing out of ADHD, call it whatever you would like, I was just glad to be alive and there in the moment, rather than distracted from the main event.”

As BG and Curly slowly walked away, they both looked at each other stunned, despite being stoned, drunk, and tired as shit. “I never saw that shit coming Curly.” The big man said frankly.

“Neither did I, and to be honest, I never cracked the code to the Damp Panty Parade either. Probably for the same reasons my wife left...” he said as Psycho caught up to them at the bus. “That young kid has the right idea for sure.” He scratched his wiry head of hair.

“Boys, I never thought I would say this, but... I think the masters just got a lesson from one of the pupils.” He smiled wryly, and opened the door to the bus.

The ragged group joined in smiling happily at the rising sun, and one by one stepped in reflective silence to their road bunks as the rest of the busses and trucks came to life.

## Chapter IV

### Faster Than The Past

There was once this fella who hung 'round the local service station, went by the name 'a Willard. Weren't nuthin special, an' kinda stank a bit like a hot near-empty bottle of Beam an' cheap cigar ashtrays. Wore ol' spotted coveralls with a cut-sleeve dingy white v-neck, and heavy scuffed steel toes without socks ever' day. Knew everthang 'bout a 'Glide transmission, full floater rear ends, an' Quadrajets in ol' Mopars. Din't work at the station, but helped out when one 'a da boys got stumped on 'a tune, or maybe the rare clutch job. Willard's salt an' pepper wire brush beard always had a bit o' egg sammich saved for later, and his stained red "Loose Rear Ends Tightened Here" trucker hat was always cocked a bit off an' back. 'Gainst his Doc's orders he liked to gnaw on cheap two bit cigars, or maybe a twist of plug, and talk 'bout bein' on the road racin'. Him and his buddies were regulars listenin' to each other's stories of hot cars, and fast women.

In general, Willard was a jokester an' full of stretchers, but three days a year were solum an' serious to this ol' timer. The day his momma died, Memorial Day, an' most of all, the day his bes' friend got burned up in a flamin' Fuelie dragster. He always felt like he had more to give in racin', but he was jes' all broke up over losin' Jack. Jack was like a brother to Willard back-in-the-day, and they'd found some good tricks to goin' real fast. Lots of fellas still use a bunch 'a those same tricks to this ver' day, and many a day he

still thinks 'bout those times. Willard felt his ticker still had one more championship on the clock 'afore he'd be layin near ol' Jack.

Back then in '69, he was a Crew Chief and gear man. Later after gettin' tired from life on the tour an' havin' to chew on them nitro pills, he became just a local station fixture. Cause, a thing like that, well, it changes a man. He din't talk much 'bout none of them ol' times. But, those three holy days, he'd get all slicked up, an' shuffle to the 'cemetery to pay his respects, like clockwork. Finished those few days pretty hard in the can, but he din't get mean. He bawled in 'a buncha tall beers chased by cheap whiskey. An' after shuttin' it down, he rumble-stumbled back to his trailer at the edge of town. His ol' high-dollar Airstream was from back-in-the-day when he was draggin' all over the country. His sponsors gave it to him after bein' handed the Wally in '68.

The Wally's a fancy brass plated statue on a fine walnut base in honor of NHRA founder Wally Parks. A racer gets one for winnin' one 'a them big Nationals events. So many 'a racer has spent his last dollar, drop 'a blood, sweat, and tears tryin' to get one. They'd only to wind up drunk, broke, broke-down-bodied, an' worstly, lonely in chasing that trophy. Willard had one. No joke. Cleaner'd 'n his Snap-ons, and still gets a smile outta the ol' fella ever' time he'd look at it under the light. He always done this getting' out the door to the track when the Tour's in town. Ol' Willard loved takin a few slugs o' whisky, an' getting' revved up with some hot rod tunes a'fore shootin' out the door to troll the pits in qualifyin' rounds.

He knew most of those fellas wrenchin' under fadin' light on all kinda rods deep into the night. He'd stop by a few special pits to pay respects, shoot the shit, and give a pointer or three. Maybe he'd tell a few stretchers, probably more'd n' a few dirty jokes,

and offer a nip o' the hip flask to the really good ol' boys. He had a real knack for hearin' odd ticks and clicks from them mechanical injections, and blower setups. Same goes for watchin' smokin' points of tires going down the 1320 (he wadn't a real fan 'a the NHRA switch to the 1000 foot tracks, but guessed it was safer in the end). He knowed exactly what the deal was when those tires smoked too early or lurched too much out the box. Many a young buck would try to lure him over to their pits when they clutches was jes' not quite right.

Not gettin' it right in the pits is dangerous business. Nobody know'd this better'n Willard. He was damn near the best wrench round, an' he still missed somethin' on Jack's car. When Jack's engine let loose mid-way down the track, the pieces flew like grenade shrapnel ever' where. The hot oil, an' burnin' nitro goin' over 200 mile-an-hour burnt him up, an ol' Jack died after a few days of agonizin' pain. Willard had been cleared in the investigation, but he felt pretty broke up 'bout the whole business. The press, and other racers eventually let him to his bottle. Over time, Willard found his way back to the tracks on big race weekends, and 'specially qualifyin' rounds away from the cameras.

One 'a these qualifyin' Friday nights, Willard knew there'd be a young buck who'd been movin' up in the ranks. This kid, Jimmy, been tryin' his luck in Nostalgia Top Fuel races all over the country. Jimmy was just that kinda young buck Willard had been watchin' real close through the years. Of course, there was the wreck with the boy's gran-daddy, but Jimmy din't know much 'bout that. The crash happened while his granny was carrying Jimmy's daddy, back- in-the-day. His daddy had been kept away from racin' after his granny had such a hard time facin' those dragons who'd taken her

man. The mystery of it all lured Jimmy, and his blood burned for fast cars since he's a youngin'. Willard had been followin' the smaller racers 'round the country to see who was startin' to make a mark on the Nostalgia Top Fuel circuit.

It wadn't no surprise to Willard that Jimmy was using that raw talent to get close to the top. He'd be always just a technical or mechanical misstep away from the final rounds each weekend. Determination, hard work, and strong racin' blood lines kept Jimmy in the hunt through elimination rounds, but then he'd slip that clutch, or smoke them tires half-way down the track. Where Jimmy was goin' astray was clear as day to an ol' wrench like Willard (and a few of the other old timers in the pits), but that is the where secrets lie, in the pits. There wadn't nobody gonna tell Jimmy the obvious.

From the stands and pits during Thursday and Friday runs, Willard saw the boy dialin' in mid-8 second bracket and smoking the tires a third of the way down the track. A few key things stuck out in Willard's mind, and he just knew he had to be real smooth about how to drop the inside dope on Jimmy without getting too involved. Willard had to keep his distance. Even though the wreck had been nearly 50 years ago, the searing pain of feeling helpless as his good friend burned down the track all alone still haunted him. He made sure not to get too liquored up so his advice sounded legit. Keepin' sober had his mind racing to the causes and solutions to the performance of the car.

He knew the pill selection for the mechanical fuel injection was off, and he also knew the setup on the clutch cannon and lever weights were out of adjustment enough that tire pressure changes alone were not going to keep the machine hooked up. These details were where Willard was unequalled when it came to ol' style tuning. Back then, it was a pure art. Now there're computers in most race cars which track every doo-dad and



go-fast gizmo imagined, but these Nostalgia cars were all analog. Drivin' them ol' rails was part science, part art. But truth be told, it's mostly art. Mechanical, fire-breathing, 3500 horsepower, front-engined death dragons. Willard tamed these dragons enough for those people who had the foot, instinct, and guts to run flat out for a quarter mile. The driver had to tie their skills together with a wrench like Willard to cut good startin' light times over and over, and eventually advance in rounds to win race weekends.

Jimmy was cuttin' good light times, and just as importantly, was able to keep the machine straight when she got loose. Those skills are heavily dependent on genetics, and Jimmy had that in spades. His reaction time, and his uncanny ability to feel what that dragon was doing from the seat-of-his-pants made it seem like he had a 360° birds-eye view from the outside. A racer can't jes' be taught that stuff. It can be honed, and damn near perfected. But those last fractions of a second, well they come from down deep in a racer's bones, not some book or "medicine" bottle. His gran-daddy was a natural, and despite never having know'd his gran-daddy, Jimmy could drive the hell out of a car. What he din't have was years of wrench experience in his pits. Jimmy'd studied what he could over the years, along with a couple buddies at the track showed him a thing or two, but he was no Willard, by any means.

Willard know'd that a young buck with guts enough to strap into one 'a these land rockets could also be a wee bit guarded when it came to strangers (especially ol' drunk sloppy ones) comin' 'round to give pointers for nothin'. Just so happened that an ol' buddy of Willard's who'd crewed for Dan "Piece O' Cake" Fastone had a pit right 'cross from Jimmy's pit. Bob had one a' them Cacklefest® cars meant for showin' folks what it was like back-in-the-day, but these dragons were kinda locked up in a pen of concrete

jersey barriers. Hell, Jimmy had the same damn thing that goes down the track over two 'hunert mile-n-hour just a hunert foot away, but folks still wanna see 'em settin' still.

Don't make no sense, but Willard knew there's bread in that machine. Sponsors still wanna get their name out there, and the kiddos still love seein' them dragons breathe at night. So, they'd pay them ol' timers to build up these nitro cars, an' have a few of em' lined up next to each other to show a crowd what these ol' front engine dragsters sound like up close and personal. Not much later, they started racing these Nostalgia Top Fuelers, and Jimmy had been trying to climb the ladder 'round the circuit getting' real close, but not winnin'.

Willard'd been talkin with ol' Bob Strong, an' he mentioned Jimmy had pestered him somethin' awful over the past couple meets. Jimmy real bold like, tole Bob he's gonna make sure he pits right across from Bob's show ever' time, until Bob helps him sort out his ride. Jimmy's hard headed like his gran-pappy was, says Bob. A few of them insiders from back-in-the-day knew'd the whole story, but never said nuthin' out loud outta respect for Jimmy's gran-daddy. Bob tole Willard he'd been brushin' Jimmy off a bit on account 'a knowin' Willard had a plan for the boy. Bob still owed Willard a favor or ten from back-in-the-day racin' against "Mean Jean" Sullins all over hell and back. Bob knew when the time was right he'd just drop a hint about ol' Willard, and he'd done just that on the last Friday he seen Jimmy. Jimmy got all revved up, but over nothing' really, 'cause all Bob had tole him was that he know'd an ol' timer who had some free time on his hands, and a ton of back-in-the-day knowledge. Bob tole Jimmy he'd give'm a special signal when the ol' timer came 'round so's he could play it real cool when Willard approached his pit.

Willard jus' grinned from ear-to-ear when ol' Bob laid it out to him, and offered him a snort from the flask. Bob sipped real lightly, but acted like he took a mean swig in appreciation for Willard's kindness. They shot the shit for 'nother half hour or so, and Willard walked up the lane a bit to get a corn dog. After 'bout 'nother half hour, Willard drifted on over to Jimmy's pits. Willard liked the throwback nod in metallic green an' gold paint and name on the car. Before the season, Jimmy had looked through a bunch of old pictures, and after a buncha' head scratchin' decided to call it "Pot O' Gold" on account 'a his Celtic roots. While he ain't found gold yet, he had dumped quite 'a bit 'o coin so far, without a win at that. Willard's mind quick-like snapped outta' the past, and mentioned to the lanky "kid" wrenchin' on the rail that he might wanna' try a few slight changes if he wanted to start hookin' up.

Jimmy gave the ol' timer some guff just to make it clear he got this far all by hisself, and who told the ol' timer he wanted advice anyways? Willard knew he was gonna' get some gas from the kid just for pipin' up, but instead of pushing it, he just asked Jimmy a few simple seat-'a-the-pants questions. Does she shake a bit once the clutch is dumped all the way? Does she sometimes stumble a little before burnout? A few more detailed tech questions, and Jimmy was hooked. He was sure the ol' timer knew his way around a drag car in a certain kinda way only an ol' wrench who ran these cars hard really would. He stuck out his hand an' introduced hisself as Jimmy, and asked if the ol' timer had any other tips. Willard gave him a few things to try to fix a couple issues. As Jimmy feverishly wrote down the highly technical information, he started in on a machine gun fire of other go-fast questions. Willard smiled, and said maybe later as he walked away.

Jimmy know'd better'n to follow Willard, as he'd been warned by Bob. He turned right back to the rail, and got right to work on checkin', measurin', adjustin', and re-checkin' and measurin' the fixes he been told. He was so close he could taste that race bubbly, and feel the weight of that trophy. Almost as much though, he wanted that check that comes from winning. Sponsors don't pay if you ain't sprayin' the crowd at the end of the races. So, he did what he knew he had to do. Kept his head down, and focused on each step like it was open heart surgery. He made sure everything was jes' right. Before, he only had the nitro dragon sitting between his legs, but now he knew he had 'a take care of business if he's gonna' see ol' Willard back in his pit ever agin'. Ignorin' prime inside dope from an ol' wrench like Willard could be taken the wrong way, kinda like disrespec'.

Jimmy prepped the car, got it up on the stands, an' fired her up. She was purrin' like a giant fire breathin' dragon ready to wake up quick. The methanol got her started smooth, but once he flipped over to nitro, the hallmark cackle of 3500 horsepower started shakin' the ground, poppin' the air so loud folk's ears within 50 yards damn near burst, and best of all – electrified the air for all around to enjoy and fear at the same time. Jimmy could tell straight away that the fixes Willard had showed him were priceless.

Willard may have disappeared from Jimmy's sight, but he din't leave that track. He went down close to the burnout box, and blended into the crowd, but still close enough to hear the machine working as she pulled up to the line. The tires were getting' wiped down, and the last-minute adjustments were happening as Jimmy slow rolled through the water box. At just the right time... he lit that bitch up like all hell was

chasin' him down. The ground took a pounding that only one thing can dish out – TOP FUEL.

Smoke and rubber flew for yards up an' back as Jimmy struggled to keep this mad machine under control. After letting off the throttle and slowin' 'er down, he came to a stop an' real slow like backed 'er up to jes' before the line. He lined up an' paused for jes' a flash. Jimmy could feel it in that burnout. Pot O' Gold was burnin' better'n ever before, and he was ready to take his shot. He said a quick silent prayer, and inched her toward the line.

All of his senses were on fire just like what was comin' out the weed burners on each side 'a that motor right there in front of him. He was slowin' time down now. Each hundredth of a second ticked by with a thud, and his eye blink took an hour. He tensed up his gut, squeezed that steerin' wheel so hard he was reshapin' it, and squinted ever so slight as the last yellas lit up. He never saw the full green as he hit the throttle so hard and fast he was doin' a hunert in under a second. Gone was any of the previous shakes, and Pot O' Gold felt like she was just barely off the ground flyin' smooth as a baby's butt. Before he knew it, jus' over six seconds passed an' he was shuttin' her down. Five lengths ahead and still pullin' away before the finish line.

The return tow behind the work truck was electrifying for Jimmy. He had no idea where this fella come from, but he was gonna be forever grateful for this ol' timer. Who jes' handed him his first ticket to the finals against Joey "Tunes" Morelli? Jimmy thought his machine felt so strong she still had a bit more to go as he was shuttin' her down. Back in the pits during tear down, Jimmy noticed she was runnin' cleaner'd 'n ever before. Not only was she faster, but cleaner meant she'd last longer too. As he was

talkin' with one 'a his crew 'bout how these tweaks had made the difference that last round, Willard showed up.

He was slow tippin' that flask a bit harder now, and a slight grin could be seen under them whiskers. He told Jimmy she still had a couple tenths quicker in her if he done a few things different. Willard handed Jimmy a' old greasy thick little notebook he'd been keepin' in his back pocket. He tole him he'd been savin' it for a special time, an' since Jimmy had overnight before finals he might find some other places where he'd gotten a little off track. Jimmy started studyin' the pages real hard like his life depended on the secrets inside this ol' timer's head. A crowd had started to gather round the pits, an' Willard faded away into the crowd. When Jimmy looked up, he couldn't see Willard anymore.

All night long Jimmy double and triple checked ever' thang on the car. He compared decades of racin' notes from the mind of a mystery racin' wizard, makin' adjustments from damn near the very front to the chutes in the back. He din't wanna blow his big shot for the finals in the rapidly burnin' next few hours. He paused a few times during wrenchin' to think 'bout where ol' Willard had gone after that last round. The crowd had come to ask for autographs, which was a new one to Jimmy, but they could feel it too. They knew it wadn't luck he's in the finals.

Willard spent the night tippin' back a bit harder'n normal the fifth he bought on his shuffle back to the Airstream. The smooth caramel liquid heat got the fire burning a bit hotter'n usual, and Willard knew he'd better sleep a bit 'afore the finals.

Willard woke a bit late and sore, but with enough time to get down to the track to check how the adjustments were comin' on Jimmy's dragon. When he got there it was easy to tell Jimmy had only got a couple hours of sleep, bein' up all night wrenchin' an' all. Ever' thang on that car was perfect. There wadn't nobody doin' no wrenchin', an' the whole crew was eatin' an' gatherin' gear for the startin' line. The whole team was all peppered up talkin' 'bout how Pot O' Gold was set up jes' right. An' hell if she wadn't.

Willard asked a few technical questions that only Jimmy woulda know'd after diggin' into the notebook all night. Jimmy smiled, an' tole Willard bout the ever' last detail he had covered, includin' some key tweaks he'd come up with on his own after puttin' a few things together. Willard tole Jimmy he'd be watchin' from the tower today to get a good view of the whole run in the finals. Then Jimmy reached out and shook the ol' timer's hand and said he owed him everthang. Willard said it warn't nothin', and he still had more to show Jimmy.

Jimmy an' his crew got everthang loaded up in the truck, an' went down to the lineup for the start. At the same time, Willard shuffled to the tower.

Willard began the climb up the stairs, an' his chest started getting' real tight. He paused mid-way up, an' popped one a' them glycerin pills he'd been keepin' in a small tin in his overalls pocket. The relief was damn near instant, and he picked up a breath or two an' rolled into the booth like nothin' happened. He know'd a fella name a' Sam up in the booth callin' the race who let him sit an' watch from up high. They'd been drinkin buddies back-in-the-day, an' even raced a couple times together. Willard offered Sam a snort from the flask, an' he accepted with a big smile.

Sam patted ol' Willard on the back, 'an said it was damn good to see him back in the pits with Jack's blood. Willard din't think many outside him an' Bob knew the whole deal. Sam winked, an' reminded Willard of Winter Nationals in '70 when Jack's widow brought Jimmy's daddy to the track in memory of Jack. That trip had jes' been too much for Jack's widow, an' she disappeared after that. Took that boy off, an' kept him clear of tracks to her las' dyin' breath. Willard'd lost some of that time in the fog of Beam he said. Willard got up an' walked to the edge of the booth towards the track with the binoculars checkin' over Jimmy's car in the line up from afar.

As Jimmy creeped her up to the line he could tell everthang was right as rain with Pot O' Gold. The gauges were all right on time, an' the crew had finished all the last minute tweaks need for these ol' girls to get lit up. The fire breathin' hemi between his legs was cacklin' 'bout as smooth as 3500 horsepower can. The burnout was perfectly violent, an' maybe even a little extra long. In the lane next to him was Joey "Tunes", who looked over as the two cars began to stage up. Joey had found good luck in the last few years with a couple Nationals wins, but he din't have Willard in his corner thought Jimmy. Jimmy's fastest ET earned him lane choice an' another advantage. Maybe just the one he needed to take home his first Wally.

Willard thought Jimmy done leaned a bit hard on her durin' that last burnout, but the kid had instinct. Jimmy knew what the dragon was tellin' him more than them gauges on the dash. Willard watched as Jimmy slowly deep staged Pot O' Gold. The time was startin' to slow, and the air at the track got real thick. All of the sounds began to warp, and the thunderin' cackle turned to cannon shots minutes apart. Willard's chest started getting' real, real tight again.



At the same time as Willard's hand reached out to brace himself, Jimmy saw the last yellas turn, an' he dropped the hammer so hard he thought he'd punch through the floorboard. The people in the stands became a blur of multi-colored lines, an' as he passed mid-track he saw Joey's ride go up in a smoke ball from lunchin' his motor. Jimmy din't let up though, he stayed in her harder'n ever before.

Willard felt the ground shakin' jes' as seen the board light up with 5.45 seconds at 265 mph. He couldn't believe it. Jimmy had made his first finals, set the track record, and beat Joey "Tunes" for his first Wally all at the same time. He felt so proud and redeemed after all these years to be able to have a hand in winning, with Jack's blood no less.

Willard never felt his head hit the table as he passed out from the massive coronary on his way to the floor.

## Chapter V.

### The Mattress

Allen Fink was never going to be accepted into the cool kid's club, invited to Friday night beer bashes, or date the homecoming queen. He was one helluva good reporter though. Ever since grade school English class, he knew he would wind up photographing and writing about local news, the human flora and fauna of Jerkwater. For such a small town, it was a target rich environment. There was always some sort of drama, and the changing seasons brought new local happenings from spring festivals, to fairs, to harvests, to winter gatherings. All ages of the community socialized in their unique manners, and Allen was quite often there to record the happenings on Front Street, as well as those on the back steps of skid row. From grade school, where he sat behind the popular kids, to high school where he was a wall flower at the dances, to getting a job on the local paper, he saw it all, but was rarely seen himself. Allen found himself staring blankly at the rusting heap in front of him that late summer day, knowing it represented exactly what he hated about this shit hole town.

“Who the fuck in their right mind would look at this sad piece of history, to think “I am so proud that our first sexual encounter as a couple happened here in this shitty, rotting, and abandoned junk yard?”” Times were different then, Allen thought to himself. “The weekend spring through fall bonfires the local popular kids would have were legendary”. Losers.

Allen again spoke into his recorder.

“Old man Brand had a couple hundred acres, and while he would bitch to the local constable in public, in private he would also never call the coppers when he had caught kids out there throwing a raging party. The few kids who had cars would pile in a bunch of other kids, and the rest would make the few mile hike out along the railroad tracks to celebrate the moon, the sun, the fog, the stars, or whatever excuse they needed or didn’t, to really just celebrate being young. Most would just bring beer or wine, but every now and then somebody had hard liquor or good pot.” Allen couldn’t even buy pot, so from sophomore year on, he would just grow his own he remembered. Sometime that same year they tagged his hallway locker in bright red “FAG!”

“Those who were able to, would convince a girl to go out there to the party with them, and some did, and some of those, would eventually get so hot and heavy, they would wind up screwing in the back seat of one of these junkers. Somewhere along the line, one of those cheap foam, single sized mattresses was brought out here, and thrown into the back of this massive two door Series 62 El Dorado. This mattress likely saw more people screwing than the cheap motels in town.” His stomach turned a bit at the revolting thought of either location being used for anything related to a tryst.

“This mattress supplanted what used to be a backseat inside a massive hulk of steel and chrome. There were no sheets on the cotton jacketed foam, and it took on strange musty odors and stain spots over the years from heavy usage. Chivalrous gentlemen would take off their jackets or flannel shirts to protect the back side or knees of the fair maidens who had elected to share their time. There were some odd footprints on the ceiling of the car, and somehow, the headliner had never fallen.”

He wondered why they loved this place, even though he grew up there, he suddenly felt that odd foreigner feeling he knew from childhood. He knew their names, and they knew his, but there always seemed to have been a disconnect. Like he was watching their pathetic lives through a fishbowl. He wanted to shake the pebbles up. He was going to dish some details in an anonymous piece. Why was he treated like the doormat, he wondered? Because he had a moral compass, and wouldn't try to date rape inebriated girls in the junkyard? Fuck them.

“After Brand died, he left the junkyard to his eldest son, but he was never there, so the yard just rotted and filled with overgrowth. Eventually kids found somewhere else to go party on a weekend, but for a couple decades it was the party spot in Jerkwater, U.S.A.”

Allen only had one good friend in school. Jose. Jose had grown up there also in the closet. He too had to move away to become who he really was. A few years passed, and they found each other away from the town, and they both returned together as a couple once times had changed in Jerkwater.

“The captain of the local high school football team, Chad Stokes, had spent more than his fair share of time fogging up those windows when a kegger was thrown. The captain of a football team has so many responsibilities, that the release of pressure was almost mandatory. He would have the mind bogglingly difficult situation to choose heads or tails from the coin flip, and suffer the burden of carrying that exalted and most precious label in the yearbook. High School Football Captain. Forever. The true leader of the team was usually the quarterback, but the title of captain meant so much more. He

was a god in his own mind. Those girls practically owed him their flowers.” The sarcasm and vitriol was dripping from his every word.

He continued.

“Karen Grimalkin was the picture-perfect squad leader for any American high school cheerleader. Early to blossom physically, bubbly buxom blonde, outgoing, and absolutely mentally vapid. She was also the embodiment of that old mattress. She had been bounced upon nearly as many times, but thankfully had cleaned herself up after each use, and kept the stains only on the inside.” He relished the thought of this being transcribed for publishing. It might not make it to paper though. The gentry here tended to protect the royalty.

Allen began to pour it on now.

“Karen and Chad knew each other since early grade school, but she thought he was much too worldly for her. His family had not moved to town until he was in the second grade. He was an outsider in her mind. “A learn-ed hunk” she would tell her family and friends. Until they finally hooked up in senior year, she wondered if she would ever be enough for his charms. Until that time, she had eluded his lures of heavy cologne, cheap beer, and a letterman’s jacket. Ironically, he thought the same thing about her, since her family was one of the founding families of Jerkwater. She was royalty to him. He had tried many times to curry her favor, but she always seemed to be too busy juggling the affections of five or six other boys at the same time. On more than a few occasions, she found herself juggling those five or six boys at the same time in the same

room. She was very popular.” This was recited in a matter-of-fact tone into the mic, and he wondered if they ever realized their own lamentable existences.

“That Karen and Chad would be together permanently after high school ended was a given. They deserved each other, and neither had any need to leave Jerkwater. His dad was the number one car salesman at the dealership for the past twenty years running, and his mother was a jubilant lush at the local Eagles Club. Karen’s father was President of the Jaycees and an electrical contractor, and her not-so-behind-the-scenes-drunk mother owned one of the few boutiques in downtown Jerkwater. The two couples knew each other, and often fondly remarked about how the union of the families would be wonderful for all involved.”

“Chad would learn the difficult art of being a salesman at the only dealership for a thirty-mile radius, and Karen would study hard to fill the shoes of becoming a boutique queen. Being insipidly stupid, they knew the road ahead would be fraught with challenges, and limited means for their first years together, but they would persevere together.”

“Their parents died in a horrific single car accident where Chad’s dad was hammered, and driving the two couples home from a New Year’s Eve party at the Eagles Lodge. Chad and Karen inherited the houses and insurance money, and both were the only-child in each family. They no longer needed to work, but did so as each of them had begun affairs with people at each other’s work. They were the envy of the entire town. Their affairs were completely unknown to all of Jerkwater. Until now.”

“Karen was sleeping with Chad’s head mechanic, Allen’s husband Jose, and Chad was not-so-coincidentally sleeping with Jose too. Sometimes, for nostalgia, on that old mattress in the junkyard.” Fuck Karen and Chad for stealing him away.

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Allen transcribed the last words, gave it a solid review, uploaded the story to the town website in vivid detail, and all of it there for the entire world to read. He had sold his home, cashed in his retirement, and was leaving forever. His parting gift to the town would leave them speechless. He titled the piece:

“Long Live the King, Queen, and Fool of Jerkwater!”

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