

1
Griff

MAIN STREET WAS SLICK WITH ICE AS I COAXED THE '56 Olds toward the crest of the hill. I inched past the state police barracks, the municipal building, and the lodge-like stone houses that lined the street. Suddenly the engine sputtered. I 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 I angled the wheels to the curb. The eleven-year-old Green Monster was my first car, and it caught fire often.

I could have stepped out into the freezing December wind, lifted the hood, and smothered the flames with the old jacket I kept on the back seat for that purpose, but I knew another way. I 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, my mind wandered to school and my current crush, Mimi Richmond. She was the quiet beauty who sat across from me in English.

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

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

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

Help for just about anything in Mount Pocono was seldom long in coming, so I sat and watched the snow. Minutes later, Stan Lukas rumbled up beside me in his noisy pickup. Stan's teenybopper daughter Sara rode to school on my bus.

Stan lifted his chin. "Jon, you alright?"

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

Stan parked beside me, blocking half the street.

"Your mom and dad doing okay?"

I winced, "Better ask them, Stan."

I lit a cigarette and pictured Mimi Richmond's gleaming emerald eyes set in white against her olive skin. The kids at school had heard that her mother was a Romanian gypsy. Kevin, Don, and I asked her about it one day. She switched her eyes nervously while we dangled in suspense for her answer. After a dramatic moment of deep thought, the winsome majorette shrugged.

"Yeah?"

Then all the guys wanted her.

I shook myself back to reality. In nothing but my shirt sleeves, I slid out the passenger side into the snowy cold, where Stan and I opened our hoods and connected my threadbare jumper cables.

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

After the boys asked Mimi to confirm her heritage, I realized that it may have been my last chance to ask her out. I remembered opening my 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?"

I walked away feeling equal parts of triumph and self-recrimination. My face burned hot, a dry knot had swelled in my throat, and the corners of my eyes stung. My personal mission to have a girlfriend

wasn't going well at all.

I 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 us. Locals waved "hi" while impatient ski tourists honked. Stan unhooked the cables, tossed them into the back, and I urged him on. I 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.

I would make it to work on time after all. Mimi fled my mind as I recalled how I landed my job at Leon Miller's Esso.

* * *

I had earned my first wages slinging soft-serve at the Tastee-Freez. At fourteen, I had been making all of seventy-five cents an hour, and soon realized that I needed upward mobility. One afternoon at the end of my second summer working there, I was manning the window when a familiar face showed up. It was Russell Reed, the tough kid from homeroom. Russ eyed my white bib apron.

"Is this where you work?"

Russ had the swagger of one not to be messed with. We were in the same grade, though he was two years older. His skin was lightly freckled, and he would curl his lip in school to show the teachers that he might 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 my eye, looking all mock-sinister, and shot me the finger. But when I shot the finger back, I was collared by the imperious Mrs. Johnson.

"Mr. Robertson!"

I quickly scratched my head with the finger.

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

I coughed. Hooked my collar and sweated like Wile E. Coyote.

"Gulp."

"You are very peculiar, Mr. Robertson."

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

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

Russell stood waiting at the window for an answer.

"So, is this where you work?"

"Yeah," I said, passing a cheeseburger and fries through the window. I 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 Wesley is your brother? *Shi-i-t*, he's funny as hell."

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

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

He waved me close. "Hey, do you like this ice cream job?"

"It's okay," I shrugged, but I had to think for a moment. I didn't much like the people, the hours, scooping hard ice cream, or the pay. "Well, 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."

I knew Stinky. He was an 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. I would have given anything to get a job working on cars, and Stoinky's slot would be perfect. I knew that I was college-bound, but this opportunity to work at Leon's would make saving money fun. I'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 me, I wrote in my tablet. I had wanted to be a writer since the sixth grade. I 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 my new job waiting for me, I 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 I wanted to be wild. Deploying what I could remember from parochial school, I prayed that I, too, could one day be wild.

Leon didn't say much when my mom dropped me off at work that first day. The man's small frame balanced on short legs, his powerful shoulders always squared. When I walked in, Leon was standing behind the counter wiping off a set of points with a rag. He greeted me 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 me the tool cabinet and how to write up and slide a credit card through the machine. I hung on his every word, his toughness and certainty, and the fact that he took me seriously. He asked me for my opinion about things, and nobody had ever done that before. One time, Russell told me that he thought I was smart.

"Everybody says so," Russ said.

I knew that wasn't true. "Naw. No, they don't."

At Miller's Esso, I worked rotating shifts with Russell, Junior Jarratt, a married guy in his twenties, and Soren Larsson, a smart kid who had dropped out of school in the eleventh grade. We 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.

My Tastee-Freez job had helped me catch on at Leon's all the sooner—I already knew how to work a cash register and be polite to customers. Besides, I also knew the basics about working on cars. My chain-smoking dad was the original DIYer, and I liked helping him. I liked helping Wes, too. We were comfortable doing mechanical work together because it spared us all from the awkwardness of conversation, the only kind we knew.

* * *

Those were the days before gas station self-serve, when a car arriving for gas rang a bell inside. I loved answering the bell. Grinning with a “Yes, sir” or “Yes, ma’am,” I’d stick a nozzle into the gas filler neck, check under the hood, and wash the windshield. It wasn’t long before I and my 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 me, he was patient and personable. In a callisthenic of efficient motion, he taught me 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 me 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. I had always learned better by watching than reading, and Leon taught better by showing than describing. We got along.

Once I started working at Miller’s, I did my best to act tough. I coughed through my first cigarettes and bought myself a pair of black engineer boots. I adopted a cool rhythmic walk and rolled my short sleeves to the shoulders. I dumbed down my speech, too, and found shorter words in order to fit in. And I cursed like a sailor. No, like a wordsmith, I thought. I was irrepressibly imaginative—everyone said so, even my parents. I combined slang. Found new dirty words in the special collection thesaurus at the library. I made combinations, inversions, and compound variations, though I eventually had to dial that back.

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

“No. Me? Nah, no way.”

I loved working at Leon’s, until one afternoon when things changed.

“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. I 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.”

My face flushed hot. At first, I shrank inside myself, washed in something like shame, until Russell whacked me 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, I unguardedly told the guys what had happened at Casey’s house the night before. Casey Nichols was a year behind me 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 we 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. We were playing Cream’s new album,

when someone came in with an Eagle Scout canteen full of vodka. Casey and I later found ourselves in the bedroom arguing about Hawthorne and Emerson, but with no particular thought of making out. I was observing the slow hula of a Lava-Lite, when I fell off the bed to the floor, bruising his hip.

My 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," I 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?"

I regretted my mistake.

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

I tried to imagine such a scenario, and thought I might try that very thing if I ever got the chance. But that made me think of Mimi, whose image provided only brief respite from the torment. I 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. I tried my best to make him laugh. For the first time in my life, in this garage culture, I began to feel like I could fit in. Teasing was simply the price one paid. However, the taunts sometimes got out of hand, like one day when I arrived at work.

Junior shouted, "Here comes Fall Out."

"Cut it out, fuckers."

Just then, Leon kicked my knee from behind me. I 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 my hand. He closed himself in the office, and I worried that my boss felt bad for tripping me. When Junior opened the door to get an inspection sticker, however, I saw Leon tipping back a bottle that he kept in the office.

Leon saw me. "Get in here."

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

* * *

By closing time, we were all a little drunk, and that's when the hazing 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 I had learned about disclosing, I got careless.

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

"Not yet," I 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 me and held me down on the wash bay floor. Leon yanked my pants down, but the hilarity had fled his eyes. He was dead serious about something.

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

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

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

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

Leon's eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched while gawking at me like that. But once I stood and pulled my 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."

I murmured, "Kind of volatile."

"Vol—what?"

"Kind of scary."

Junior neither laughed nor confirmed. He frowned at the empty Salems 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."

I took careful note—my hero, the first man to give me responsibility and make me feel good about myself, 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 longtime 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 *furious!*"

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

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 I drove a hapless tourist to his car near Paradise Stream Motel with water for his radiator. We 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. We 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 we 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 shut 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 his feet were twisted up with arthritis. The fronts of his unlaced sneakers were cut away so his toes could stick up.

Russell told me, "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 hollered. “I’ll get my re-wall-wer and shoot your ass, by Jesus.”

We made him say re-wall-wer over and over, laughing so hard tears squeezed out.

* * *

We worked that Christmas Eve, though it had been agonizingly slow. We watched the snowflakes fall beneath the lights at the gas island. We 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. Lock ‘er up.”

I thought I knew all about mood shifts from my older brother Wesley, but my 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, I thought it a disguise for some diabolical ambush on the unsuspecting codger. But Leon meant it. My first impulse was that I had no gift for Griff. I only had eight-five cents in my pocket, so I spent thirty of it buying him a pack of Luckys from the vending machine. The others guffawed as though I 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. We drove past the riding stable, past the turn for Pocono Forest Estates, where I would work a few seasons clearing brush. Weather didn’t bother us much in the mountains, not even when we were driving drunk. It took a pretty mean blizzard to justify closing school for even one day, though school would always close on the opening 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 as 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 our ears as we 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 us suspiciously as we filed into the cramped two-room trailer.

“Hello Haz.”

“Merry Christmas, Haz.”

I conformed, feeling empowered to add, “Compliments of the season, Griff.”

We fell onto ruined furniture piled thick with blankets because the springs stuck through. I 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 eyebrows used to be peaked 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 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. I sobered. I couldn’t stand to see tears. It was all I could do to hold back my own.

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

No one had actually chipped in for the gift Leon brought. He lifted his chin, avoided Griff’s eyes.

Leon pulled out a Jim Beam gift box. “Here, Griff. A little something from all of us.”

“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.

I watched Leon closely. He 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, he seemed almost boyish. People weren’t always what they seemed, I 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, for me, melted into a pool of sorry. I felt a deep pang of regret about the way we teased Griff. Now, I just wanted them to leave the man alone.

Griff’s old eyes met mine—I’d never before noticed the beauty of blue eyes bleached with cataracts and age. Trying to catch my breath, I broke the stare and reached into my pocket.

“Here, Griff,” I 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, Jonny 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.

I settled back into the cushions, pleased with the compliment. “If you say so.”

All of a sudden, I swooned from the heat and cigarette smoke, cramped as I was with the men on the lumpy blankets. My 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.”

I was the only one who laughed at Soren’s joke.

“What’s so funny, Fall Out?”

“*Gift of gob*— Nothin’.”

Leon told me, “You are one weird kid, Fall Out.”

“That’s what they say.”

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. We sipped quietly as Andy Williams sang *Silent Night*. The alcohol stung my throat, and for a few minutes time stopped, suspended in Williams’s mellow croon. I still wasn’t used to hard liquor. After a few minutes, I was watching myself from a distance. In my head, I could hear my mother’s voice calling me from far away. It always happened when I was in trouble.

Jo-o-n. Jon, time to come home.

Russell elbowed me, waking me from the daydream. He 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 us. 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 we were all getting drunk. I thought the booze was going to Griff’s head and questioned to myself the wisdom of giving a bottle of bourbon to an alcoholic, even 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 me.

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

“Yeah, Leon. I do,” snorted 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.

I liked how good it felt to make people laugh, but seeing Griff laugh at himself like that somehow hurt. I 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. I had my own private pain. I was always at war in my head about what was right and wrong and who was at fault. About whether anybody liked me, and about whether I liked myself or not. My dad and my older brother—I lived with a certainty that they didn’t like me much at all.

I was feeling all this as I sweated and smothered in the airless trailer. The alcohol had made me dizzy. My head hurt, and I 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 sorry 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, causing it to fire with a deafening blast. Chunks of wood spat into my ear as everyone else dove for the floor. My ears whistling, I sank deep into the cushions, unable to breathe. Protest from my stomach probed the back of my 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 surprise. Then he shrieked, “Phuck you, I—I was aimin’ at Junior!” and his laugh was a dry hiss through fleshy gums.

Leon checked my head and chest. “Jon? Jonny, you all right?”

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

Leon could find no bullet wounds. “Jon? You aren’t shot, are you?” My stomach contracted as I flicked wood splinters from my hair.

I felt around my 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 my throat. I had never been drunk before. My mouth tasted like bourbon and kerosene. Suddenly, I dove headlong into the filthy little bathroom. Down on my knees, I hurled violently into the stinking toilet, the porcelain stained brown with urine. I hurled from the foundation of my soul, purging everything, gush after gush, my eyes streaming from the violence of it.

I wretched on after my stomach was empty, until my belly cramped.

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

"Jonny, are you all right in there?"

Laughing in dizzy hilarity, the other guys were "yucking" in time with me. The gunshot, and the awful nicknames, and the liquor, the cigarettes, and Mimi Richmond all spewed out of me. I wanted air. I didn't want to be wild anymore. All I wanted was to be home in my bed.

After a minute, the spasms slowed. I gasped a few breaths and splashed my face in the sink, which was glazed with black dirt and soap scum. My eyes lifted, and in the mirror, I saw an unfamiliar face.

The face was skinny, old, and drawn. Bits of vomit mixed with pimples. 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?"

I 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.

I laughed. Waved them off with my hand, but I needed air. Fast.

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

I 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 of us staggered out into the snow crunch and icy wind. On the way back to Mount Pocono, Russell retold the night's hilarity, though I didn't join in much. Once we arrived at the station, I got into my car, where my breath quickly frosted the windows. I drove home shivering from my very soul, and wiping vapor from the windshield because the heater in the Olds had conked out a week ago. I could still taste vomit. The nausea hadn't let go, and I would have to get past my parents.

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

Dad would ask the questions. He always asked the questions. "Tomorrow's Christmas. What the hell are you doing coming in at midnight?"

Mom adjusted her glasses, leaning against the refrigerator.

"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."

"Alcohol!" he thundered. "Christ almighty! Who gave you the booze. I swear I will rearrange his face."

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 this—whisky. Everyone drank a little. I didn't like it. Really. It made me sick."

Dad cocked his jaw. "And then you *drove home*?"

I looked at the floor.

But Dad hauled off and smacked me across the face. Mom recoiled, her eyes wincing.

My face was hot. My jaw hurt, and my ear was screaming. Tears escaped. Dad's smacks could always jolt tears from their hiding place.

Mom tried reason. "What if you'd hurt someone, Jon? 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. I mean it."

I escaped upstairs to my room, careful not to wake my brothers. In bed, I cried soundlessly beneath

the covers. Why did Dad hate me? Why did Dad hit me all the time? He never hit my brothers. It had been a long time since I'd thought about suicide. The image of my strung-out face in Griff's mirror, stinging fresh hot now from the smack, roused that old darkness up. Roused it all back to life inside me.