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# The Death-Song of g-man

*by Gil Franqui*

Submitted April 2021

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## Origin of g-man

The collision startled him...

Brick smashing glass...

It crashed during the small hours of the morning, followed by the icy breath of winter. It woke him, and he climbed out of bed. He made his way circumspectly down the short hallway to the kitchen entrance, stopped, and reached for the light switch. A brick rested on the yellow linoleum floor of the tenement kitchen, sparkling in the light. Crystals of glass and ice stuck to it. The outside air gushed through the broken window and threatened the heat rising from the steam radiator in the corner. As cold and heat merged, the ghostly arm reached through the broken glass. Fingers unlatched the window cam. That cold gray arm turned to warm red and leaked on the yellow linoleum. When the blood met the floor, it transmuted into a fiery flame. The man climbed into the kitchen. The boy stared at the flame, then up to his sanguine father, who pulled broken fragments out the muscle of his forearm. All the while, snowflakes fell outside and blew through the broken window. *That peaceful snow-fall.* It brought g-man an ephemeral peace in the midst of chaos. The purity of the falling snow offered him only an evanescent purification. The flakes quickly changed their form. When he snapped out of his dream—the innocence ceased.

G-man lived in a first-floor apartment in the Eden housing projects in the northeast Bronx. On the block were eleven, six-story buildings. Seven apartments on each floor, forty-two per building. Roughly four-hundred and sixty apartments. But that was nothing compared to the Wall. Across the street stood the largest housing project in the Bronx—they called it the Wall. The Wall took up several city blocks with fourteen-story buildings and over two-thousand apartments. The neighborhood surrounding Eden and the Wall crammed together over 20,000

inhabitants. But this wasn't small-town America. It was one hood among many in the Bronx—full of drugs, crime and violence, all manifested in g-man's father.

The brick, the arm, and the blood became permanent memories in g-man. His father, the dope addict, squatted on roof corners like a gargoyle stabbing his arms. He was a fiend, a no-show father who decided to show up that night seeking money or food or a place to lay his head for the night before resuming his addictive ways. In reality, it was an ill-fated display.

But now his arm was torn. Why? Because the locks had been changed, and his only way in was through the window, but the windows were locked too. No big deal! He picked up a lone brick left behind from construction, stepped over the chains separating the lawn from the sidewalk in front of the building, and approached the kitchen window of the apartment. He just hurled it through the lower pane, then reached through the shards to unlock the latch. He climbed in, landed where g-man stood, and pressed a dish towel on the bloody arm. G-man looked up to him with squinted eyes. His father just looked down and didn't say a damn word. By this time, g-man's mother had got off the phone and charged into the kitchen, yelling the cops were on their way. She dragged g-man away from his bloody father. His two sisters, one older and one younger, had gathered in front of the kitchen entrance and stood there crying. His mother collected all three under her wings, and they exited the apartment.

They ran up a hill. The frozen snow on the ground clung to the exposed toes in their cheap-ass flip flops. One blanket around the four of them. They ran up the hill to the next tenement building where his aunt lived. They crashed through the lobby entrance door and ran down the hallway to the first-floor apartment. When his aunt opened the door and asked what the hell happened, his mother just looked at her and shook her head. Situation grasped, they fell down on the living room floor on top of the blanket wrapped around them. Their aunt brought

more blankets and pillows. His uncle and cousins, awoken by the clamor, were standing there gazing. Back in the other building, the cops were dealing with the bloody man at the apartment. They were safe and warm now.

Time quickly moved forward. G-man stacked his fragile memories one on top of another like precious family photographs. He deposited them into the attic of his mind, where they were locked away and safe. No one had access, no one could get to them, no one could touch them. At night he took them out and recollected. Not for celebration, but out of agony. He looked at them on special occasions too. Careful lest his memories fade. As he grew, he stacked more of them in that attic. They became heavy, cumbersome. Memories of getting his hair pulled at naptime in kindergarten by that suicidal boy who had an infatuation with g-man's long fiery hair. Some years later, that boy sailed like a baby pigeon out that fourteenth-floor apartment and splattered the contents of his skull all over the asphalt sidewalk below as that elderly lady pushed her shopping cart full of groceries. G-man saw the remnants of the boy's blood and brains on the sidewalk that summer day. Recollections of finding baby sparrows with Frankenstein while playing with their GI Joe's, and of the manner in which g-man attended to them. Memories of the first time he smoked weed with Carlos and Ezra. Crazy-man soaring high above the clouds. Drugs, booze, pot, hashish, mushrooms, LSD and mescaline trips. He dragged those lamentations with him when he hitchhiked 'cross country twice and met the loveliest and strangest unworldly people on the road—angels and devils hangin' together. He spoke to them and stole the truth they freely offered. The road is what he would remember. He was a hifalutin vagabond. Hitchhiking from Snohomish, back down to Seattle where the archangel Gabriel and Mephistopheles, who was in the form of a woman, offered him a ride. They spoke and he was given a choice. His memories were there when he sang his death song to the tune of Bowie's *My*

*Death.* The Bronx, Seattle, San Francisco, Mexico and Canada all heard his death song. Yet whatever is beyond that door still awaits g-man.

In the beginning of his memory, there was violence. It would relapse. The sins of the father were memorialized in his memory. It became for him a vision of fire. The blood on the yellow linoleum produced in him that vision. That spectral arm became the origin of his recollections. The contaminated blood in that arm flowed through g-man. It would be his destiny to repeat the sins of his father.

At the time of the snow, the brick, the glass, the blood and water, g-man didn't fully comprehend the impact of it all, nor did he realize the indelible mark branded on his psyche. Years later he tried to bring the shattered shards back into form. He attempted to bring them all together like the puzzle pieces of his subconscious. In doing this, maybe he would forget all the chaos, all the blood. He hoped never to be scarred like that ghostly arm. It was a vain hope.

G-man could not erase the brick and the man, and he never forgot the purity of the snowfall that eerie day. He would search unrelentingly for that purification. This is the origin of g-man.

## Dirty Boys

Hustle and I had been tight from the first grade. Back then he wasn't Hustle—he was Frankenstein. A large scar ran vertically down his forehead. Just like the crack on the forehead of Bela Lugosi's monster. The scar tissue traveled past his hairline almost to the crown of his skull. The hair on his head grew around it, exposing the remnants of a wound from when he was two years old, playing in his living room. He just stood up and grabbed a large, rectangular aquarium that came crashing down on top of him, splitting his head wide open. He was rushed to the emergency room and stitched up—lucky to be alive.

In the second grade, we were known as the dirty boys because we loved to play in the dirt. We dug up worms and played with our G.I. Joes. Hustle had all the regalia that went along with it. He was one of the few in our neighborhood who had a mother and father at home. That was truly unique. Most of us had been discarded by fathers and raised by single mothers. Later, I realized our moms were quite incredible. Forced by circumstances, they became strong, resourceful and independent. They were like a mother grizzly with cubs. They fed and nourished us, taught us how to provide for ourselves, and protected us from violence. Any potential threat to momma and her cubs would face being torn asunder. My mom led me safely through the Bronx wilderness for seventeen years.

Christmas for Hustle was entirely contrary to my own. One Christmas, when he was seven and I was eight, he'd been given the G.I. Joe Desert Patrol Adventure with a jeep and river raft, as well as the Mobile Support Vehicle. I received a G.I. Joe action figure with the Kung Fu grip, the life-like hair and beard, and the movable eagle eyes. I ran out the house to the dirt hill—Frankenstein was already there.



We played for a while in the dirt and quickly became filthy while digging for worms to run over with the desert patrol jeep. At some point, I noticed a sparrow's nest on a low branch of a nearby sycamore maple. When they landscaped our housing projects, they planted young sycamore maple trees all over the neighborhood. The unique pattern of the sycamore bark, speckled with various tones of greens and grays, looked very similar to the camouflaged combat fatigues of the GI Joes. The nest was concealed well in a pocket where the limb grew out of the trunk. Hidden and camouflaged as it was, my hawk-eyes still spotted it.

The nest resembled a woven grassy bowl and contained four recently hatched sparrows that sat with their yellow beaks spread wide and pointing straight up to receive food from their mother. Their eyes were closed and gray. They had long, pink outstretched necks and pink bodies. We could see their veins and tendons flowing into their little wings. They were trilling in unison. Frankenstein picked up one of the hatchlings and held it tenderly in the palms of his hands. He took the chick with him to the side of the hill and started digging for worms to feed it.

As he was digging, I was still at the nest.

I looked down at the three remaining chicks. Their mother screeched violently from a limb above me. I grabbed one of the chicks and yelled at Frankenstein to look my way. He turned to look. I held the chick by its wings and stretched them as wide as they would go. Its body dangled in the air between its wings. The head bobbed back and forth. Frankenstein yelled out "Nooooo!" as I ripped each wing off the chick—the wingless body dropped to the ground. It rolled back and forth trying to figure out what to do. Blood spurted out of the two hollowed apertures. I grabbed each chick and repeated the process. Then I snatched the one Frankenstein had and mercilessly yanked its wings off. There were four bloody, wingless bodies at my feet. I stepped on all of them and crushed their fuckin' dreams.

Frankenstein could do nothing. He was devastated by my heinous act. He just rolled on the ground like the chicks with no wings, his hands covering his face, hiding his tears. His dream of helping those soft and tender nestlings crushed. He bawled profusely.

Five years later, Frankenstein—now Hustle—reminded me of my crime. By that time, I must have blocked it out of my memory. I had no Polaroid moment of that day to add to the stack. If not for his reminder, I would've completely forgotten it.

“Yo g-man, remember those baby sparrows you hacked and mutilated? That was dirty, boy”

As I looked into Hustle's eyes, a cold blank feeling ran through me. At that point, I still had no emotion. I didn't love or hate those birds. I felt no pleasure in my action, neither pain. Emotionally I was vacant, empty. As time passed, my crime became a haunting bloody memory. Hustle's admonishment survives as a stubborn stain. I've soaked and scrubbed that memory—but it remains. There has been some fading, but the dirty remnants survive. I want that stain completely removed. But it can't be removed. It won't come out. It won't come out! It can't be removed. I'm crushed by it. No matter the amount of effort, it will remain a stain until, like the crushed wingless nestlings, I am no more.

## Teenage Wasteland

*April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
— The Waste Land*

April was always a fucked-up month for me. Instead of celebrating the warm air the vernal equinox ushered in, I was consistently grounded. Behavioral issues at school, announced by report cards that coincided with the initiation of the northern hemispheres' spring cycle. Two years in a row, my maternal warden locked me down. Fettered in our fifth-floor tenement apartment while outside, freedom rang with the sounds of kids at play. The crack of bats hitting baseballs, basketballs careening off metal backboards, cursing, arguments and fists—these sounds reverberated off the asphalt, shooting through my prison window. Day after day of my spring incarceration, the ecstatic sounds of America's free youth tortured me. Their joy stirred the bitterness of bondage in my heart. I craved freedom and fun.

On my thirteenth birthday, I was sprung from my prison. The first people I saw were Ezra and Carlos. When you don't see your friends for a lengthy period, somehow, they look different. Not older, not bigger, everything just feels a little off. Due to absence, the familiarity of my friends had waned slightly. Though, after a few moments, that old familiarity returned. After everyone grows up and leaves the neighborhood, that unfamiliarity becomes permanent. Carlos and Ezra wanted to go to Anton's Pizza Shop. I tagged along. On the way, we hit the Three Bro's Deli to grab some brew to drink with our Pizza.

Three-years older than me, Ezra was one of the few Jewish kids in the neighborhood. We sometimes used the pejorative "Jew-boy," We weren't anti-Semitic just immature and simply

didn't give a fuck. If we wanted to be funny, we called him "Jew-boy." If we got pissed, we called him Jew-boy. That retort was used in every argument with Ezra.

We had an eclectic mix of ethnicities in Eden—mostly Black and Hispanic, but there also were Jewish, Irish, Italian and Asian kids sprinkled into the mixture. In spite of any disparities, we all coalesced into a unified social tribe.

Carlos had dark features with a purple hue. God, he was exquisite. Stood six-feet-five at 17 years-old. He was a model of athleticism with a sculptured body like an ebony David that Michael Angelo sculpted. He had the ideal frame for baseball, football and basketball, and he competed equally well in every sport. His chiseled burgundy arms glistened and refracted the sun's light radiantly. There wasn't any fatty tissue to be found on his lean muscular frame. He'd tried-out for the Yankees when he was fifteen and damn near had a good showing until during batting practice, he couldn't hit the ball out of the infield. Turned out he used a cracked bat and didn't realize it.

I'd known Carlos since I was nine. The first day I met him, I jokingly broke a bottle in a mock fight with him. When I lunged toward him, he got startled and threw up his hands to protect himself. I accidentally sliced his elbow wide open. Blood poured out and on to the asphalt. Shocked us both! He went to the hospital and received a whole lotta stiches. That's how our friendship began. Carlos was one of my best friends. We stitched together many ludicrous memories after that introduction.

We stopped at the Three Bro's, on our way to Anton's. Picked up three quarts of beer. One buck each. We each were getting ice cold quart bottles of Colt 45 malt liquor in brown paper bags. I gave the guy at the cash register four quarters. It seemed any kid could walk into a

store in the Bronx, buy beer or cigarettes, no questions asked. I'd seen a 10 year old walk out the store with a pack of Kool's to smoke with his little friends.

We exited the Three Bro's and headed to Anton's. On the way, the topic of downing the whole quart of beer came up.

"You gonna be able to finish that bottle?" Carlos said.

"He'll waste it. He's a fuckin' little pussy." Ezra said, Before I could get out my reply.

God, I hated that shit. No one ever believed in me, and I always had to prove myself. Always thinkin' I'm a pussy just because I was younger and smaller. They rarely gave me a damn chance to prove otherwise. Fuck 'em! I thought

In Eden, the pressure to prove something persisted throughout my youth. I had to progress through many rites of passage. We spray painted yard lines on the back street and played two-hand-touch. Between dodging cars and city buses every few minutes, we'd get plays in. Before the game, we'd stand around the parked cars to choose teams. Immediately, I'd count the players, hoping that an even number resulted, and the last pick would have to be me. If it was an odd number, I stood as the odd man out—embarrassed, infuriated and fucked! At that point, all I could hope for was that someone would quit, or their mommy would call them home. I watched and waited entire games like a dog at the dinner table awaiting a crumb that might drop their way. Crumbs rarely dropped around me. No one ever seemed to give a shit either, and that pissed me off. So, fuck Ezra for doubting me. Fuck him for sayin' I couldn't guzzle that quart myself.

I told him, "Fuck you Jew-boy! I always finish."

"Bull shit! He said, "I've never seen you drink one by yourself."

The truth? He was right. Before that day, I'd never attempted to drink a whole quart of beer. But I wasn't gonna let him know that.

I didn't know if I could drink it all or not. It looked do-able. If it was a quart of Coke, I could drink it all, so why not beer. I wasn't going to punk out. Ezra and Carlos and everyone in the whole damn neighborhood would soon know I could down a whole quart without any help.

Shit, I sure as hell wanted to be able to do it. I wanted that recognition, that approval from my tribesmen.

Concurrently, I also wanted them to shut the fuck up about what I couldn't do. Their doubt impelled me to prove them wrong. This was the start of many dangerous exploits that I would attempt simply because pride would not allow me to do otherwise. Logic and reason did not prevail over social dignity and self-respect. So, when Ezra said, I was full of shit, and ain't never drank a whole quart by myself, I replied.

"Of course I have."

"When?"

"At my cousin's house." Ezra couldn't disprove that.

"Yea right."

"Yo, leave him alone," Carlos said.

We unscrewed the bottle tops.

First, we each poured out a little off the top, saying, "This is for the brothas who aren't here." I poured a generous squig out to help me along. We drank straight from the bottle with it still in the brown paper bag. I took long, gulping drinks to hasten the completion of the bottle. After a few gulps, I realized the formidable task before me. I did not like the taste of beer at thirteen. In the past, my little sister and I would sneak a quick drink out of some relatives can or

bottle left on a coffee or end table during holiday gatherings. The exhilaration of sneaking a quick sip was what we enjoyed, despite the taste. But now it was different. I had not yet acquired the palate for the salty, acrid taste.

We walked to the pizza shop and continued drinking along the way. A quart of beer is not conducive to sipping. It requires large, healthy squigs, so it can be finished before it gets warm. If I took too long to drink it, the remaining warm beer would be impossible to stomach. The three main obstacles were the taste, the size of my thirteen-year-old belly, and getting the job done before the beer got hot. The funny thing, I didn't consider the effect the alcohol would have on me. I was just concerned about my reputation, and that meant drinking that whole damn quart all by myself. I'm sure Carlos and Ezra were curious about what I would be like drunk. That's what it was all about early on—the entertainment factor of how stupid we all behaved under the influence.

My belly was swelling with the liquid, so I began looking for opportunities where I might surreptitiously pour out some of the brew. Just as I was thinkin' this Ezra—walking in front of me—turned around and said, “you better not throw any of it away.”

“I won't,” I said, wondering how in the hell he knew what I was planning. I looked up and recognized my boy Hustle coming towards us.

“Yo, here comes Hustle,” I said.

Hustle was walking briskly making a beeline towards us. Things were different in Eden since our GI Joe days when we called him Frankenstein. Dude was always makin' a beeline, head and eyes forward, didn't care who or what was on either side of him. That was just the way he moved. Always on a mission, always about makin' that money—undistracted by peripheral things. By the time he was twelve, he was the leading entrepreneur on the block. We called him

“Hustle” because one way or another, he would hustle up some money. He always had somewhere to go and something to do to make that “moolah.” He recklessly walked and talked faster than anyone of us.

Speaking in a fast staccato, he said, “What up, what up, what up g-man? What’s happenin’?”

What’sup Hustle, I said.

Where you goin,’ what ya doin’? “what up Carlos!”

Yo, what up hustle! Carlos said.

Yo Jew-boy, hustle said.

“Fuck you Hustle!” was Ezra’s quick retort.

“Yo, come with us to Anton’s,” I said.

“I’ll be there later, after my business.”

Hustle showed us his 38 revolver he’d acquired and said, “Gotta have one. Gotta hold tight my product. Always lookin,’ suspectin,’ watchin,’ got to!”

I stared at the 38, awed by the power it represented.

“Later man,” Hustle said, “I gots to make that money you know”

“Yo, be careful,” Carlos said.

And with that, Hustle went down the street to the school bus stop where a group of potential teenaged customers were hanging out.

After our short walk to Boson Road, we arrived at the pizza shop, and ordered two slices each. Anton threw them into the oven to heat up. Carlos asked Anton for some cups to drink our beer.

“He drinks beer?” Anton said incredulously while looking at me.



“Yeah, so what!” Carlos said.

Anton rolled his eyes and turned to the counter to get us three Dixie Cups. I was halfway done with the beer, and I felt I couldn't drink much more.

“I gotta take a piss,” I said, and I walked toward the bathroom with my bottle.

“Me too,” and Ezra followed me into the restroom.

I was fuming because he's following me, and I'd have to figure out another way to pour out the remainder of my quart. Why didn't I wait until they went to the bathroom first?

At that point, I was fucked. I couldn't pour any out in the restroom, and I wouldn't be left alone in the pizza shop. Anton threw our pizza on some paper plates. We retrieved them from the countertop and doused them with salt, pepper, garlic, oregano, and red pepper. I greedily ate my pizza hoping it would make me thirsty enough to want to drink more. The plan backfired. I'd always heard pizza and beer went well together, but when I picked up the beer and took a squig, the taste horrified me. The pizza and beer combination nauseated me. But I had to forcibly sip that beer. My bottle was only halfway done. Completing the Herculean task set before me seemed unlikely.

Suddenly, I began to feel lightheaded and slightly dizzy. I knew I had to finish the beer or be ridiculed, but the buzz made me care less. In fact, I felt jovial and untroubled. I couldn't shut up. The effects of the beer had come upon me unexpectedly and abruptly—I didn't know how I would keep myself together. I had never before felt intoxicated. I took another bite of pizza and wanted more garlic, so I reached over to grab the tall glass shaker without realizing how my motor skills were greatly impaired. I knocked over the shaker right into Ezra's lap.

“Come on, ya dumb ass,” he yelled at me.

He dusted off his lap and picked up his pizza for another bite when the greatest idea since the Italians invented pizza dawned upon me. I looked at Ezra and yelled, “You’re the fuckin’ dumbass,” while I swiped my beer bottle with the back of my hand and knocked the quart bottle in his direction. It was beautiful. I bitch slapped that beer bottle just like a pimp does his ho. The bottle landed in Ezra’s lap, soaking his pants, then dropped to the floor, shattering.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Ezra yelled. “You can’t even handle a little beer without getting wasted.”

And that was the point. It didn’t matter if I completed the entire quart after all. I stood approved because in Ezra’s eyes I had “gotten wasted.” I rose up knowing my plan had worked magnificently and said, “I’m not wasteeeeeed...” At the same time I said this, I slipped on the beer saturated floor and fell on my ass. Ezra and Carlos busted out with hysterical laughter.

Anton was pissed. He started cursing us in Italian and in broken English said something about Ezra and Carlos givin’ the young kid beer. He’d had enough of us, and he kicked us out of the pizza shop. We grabbed our pizza and hustled out yelling, “Fuck you Anton! Anton continued cursing us in his Sicilian accent. The moment we crossed the threshold of the Pizza shop door, there was a loud screech of heavy tires from the busy Boston road in front of us. Then a thump. A woman across the street screamed out “Oh my Godddd!” Just then, it occurred to me that Hustle was supposed to meet us at Anton’s.

There was something familiar in the nonstop howling of that woman. Everything happened so fast—my mind transitioned from Anton cursing us out in Italian to the screeching tires and then the eardrum breaking shrills of the woman across the street.

I recognized the voice of Hustle's mother. She ran towards the enormous yellow school bus stopped on the street and blocking the traffic. Vehicles were diverted and moved slowly around something on the other side of the street behind the bus. We walked towards Hustle's mother and noticed something that first looked like a dog run over in the street. But then I saw the blood-soaked clothing. Ezra and Carlos were right beside me. God, fuck,

"It's Hustle!" I said.

"Fuck out of here!" Carlos said.

I recognized the shirt he had on when we saw him an hour earlier. I had invited him to the pizza shop, and he said he'd be there later. He must have been on his way to meet us. Shit! He had moved in his usual bee line, aiming right for the Pizza shop—never saw the bus until it was upon him. I recognized the shirt, only now it is full of blood. He lay flat with his face down on the filthy asphalt. Carlos leaned his tall frame down, wrapped his muscular arms around me, and put his head on my shoulder. I put one arm around him as Ezra and I looked at Hustle's mother in the middle of the street. She was on her knees, bending over the body of her son. She was a nurse that worked at Misericordia Hospital. She stared at her blood-stained hands and didn't seem to know what to do with them. Hustle's mom just looked around at the crowd with her palms up asking why. The front wheel of the school bus caught Hustle's left leg on the top of his heel and forced him flat down, his face crushed into the asphalt. His body went down in the same linear direction as the bus tire. It crushed Hustle from his left leg, up his spine and the back of his head. His beige school shirt and khaki pants were soaked in maroon. I stood stunned—Ezra at my side, and Carlos on my shoulder.

The beer, Ezra's bullshit and Anton's curses meant nothing anymore. The image of the wingless baby birds and their crushed bodies five years ago flashed through my mind. I had

removed their means of freedom— and then I crushed their dreams. Later, we found out that the bus driver was under the influence of PCP. Rumor had it, Hustle sold it to him fifteen minutes before the accident. Sold it to the bus driver at the corner near the Three Bro's Deli where we last saw him. Can you believe that shit? Hustle almost beat the bus to the pizza shop.

## Mister Softee

Raffy was home from reform school in Peekskill. He arrived back in the Bronx that hot muggy Saturday morning. He was my best friend, the craziest kid I knew. In the fifth grade, Raffy stabbed a girl in the eye with a sharpened #2 pencil. What the hell he did that for, I don't know. Spent most of the years after that incident committed and incarcerated. He was touched in the head the wrong way. There were two types of crazy in Eden. The first was simply performance-crazy, like Crazy-Man, who was a lunatic but for exhibitionist reasons only. The second was clinical. Raffy was clinical.

I was fifteen at the time, and Raffy was two years younger than me. My mother was best friends with his mom. We were like cousins, tight from a very young age. I had hardly seen him after he was carried out of Eden, kicking and screaming, to reform school the previous fall. After that, he was home one weekend during a snowstorm, when he talked his older sister Ruby into going with me into the stairwell, where she allowed me to do unspeakable things to her. That snowy weekend he stole a shitload of weed from his stepfather, and we tried to smoke it all in one day before he returned to his purgation. Of course, we couldn't, so when he returned to juvey, I became the beneficiary to the entire contents of the Ziploc.

So, that summer after he was sprung from Juvey, Raffy and I headed behind P.S. 112 to meet up with Carlos and Ezra to play a game we called strike-out.

The back of 112 was part of the larger park and playground attached to the housing projects in the Wall. Every summer afternoon, kids were yelling and screaming on the swings and monkey bars. Older kids played basketball. The dribbling could be heard behind 112 where we played strike-out. People were playing paddle ball on the handball courts. The sharp crack of the wooden paddles hitting the hard, black balls against the concrete walls echoed with the basketballs and screaming kids on the swings. There were also Puerto Rican dudes playing congas and timbales. The Afro-Cuban rhythms were the background to all the summer sounds that afternoon and always went late into the evening. It was a Bronx summer day. We were free. It was spectacular.

On the back side of the school's red brick wall, we had spray painted a square box that represented the strike zone. The box generally covered the distance from our chest to our knees, depending on how tall or short the batter was. When a ball was pitched and hit the box, it was a strike. If it missed the box, it was a ball. From there we simply counted balls and strikes. We used a sponge ball purchased at the hardware store on the other side of The Wall and either a wood or aluminum bat. We mostly played one on one, but we could also play two-man teams with one pitching and one fielding. A good pitcher dominated and was extremely hard to overcome.

Behind 112 was the schoolyard and a couple of fences far behind the pitcher. Beyond the fences was a shabby lawn with garbage and broken beer bottles, and beyond that was one of the fourteen story buildings in the Wall. Any grounder or pop-up was an out if caught. Of course, a strike-out was an out. Any grounder or pop-out that was dropped or out of range but in fair territory was a single. A hit that landed in between the two fences was a double. Over the two

fences and on the crappy lawn was a triple. A blast that bounced off the building on the fly was a homer. We kept a mental tally of baserunners and the score.

Raffy was horrible at sports and a horror in life, but I loved him. Together we played against Ezra and Carlos—both formidable baseball players. Carlos had tried out for the Yankees at fifteen. Ezra was known as one of the best amongst us because he had all the requisite skills: good hitter-good-arm-good-glove. We were doomed, except that I had recently learned the secret to throwing a wicked curveball. I had experimented with it enough to have figured out the angles, the speed and spin. I could make it swing across the batter or make it dive straight down into Dante’s frozen 9<sup>th</sup> circle of Hell.

Carlos was up first. My curve erased him quickly. Ezra next! I released the ball on an angle. The ball spun and shot straight for Ezra’s head. He jumped out of the way, fooled, as the ball spun across his face and curved at the right moment hitting inside the box with a thump!

“Stike!” I yelled.

“No fuckin’ way,” Ezra yelled back. “It almost hit me!”

“It curved right into the center of the box—it’s a strike!”

Carlos had been studying my motion. He said it was a strike, so Ezra conceded. I went on to strike him out. Carlos came up to bat a second time. My first pitch jetted above Carlos’ six five frame, then broke straight down and hit the box.

“Strike!”

“No way,” Carlos said.

“Yo, it was a fuckin’ strike!” Raffy said

I decided to mix it up and throw a fast-ball right down the pipe. Carlos was ready. He swung and with a snap, rocket-launched that fuckin’ ball on a straight line over the fences and towards the building. It hit a window on the 8th floor and crashed through the glass. Some of the shards dropped to the dilapidated lawn. Immediately, three bald headed kids stuck their heads out the broken window and yelled that they were going to kick Carlos’ ass. Raffy, Ezra and I cracked up. Carlos calmly looked up and told the kids to get the fuck out of here.

After Carlos’ homerun we heard the familiar music of the Mister Softee truck up the street. It drove past 112 and stopped in front of the entrance to the park in the Wall. The music stirred the neighborhood and spurred the children to act. Kids yelled up to their mothers, to throw down some money. Mothers wrapped several quarters in a napkin and hastily threw the constructed package out the window, yelling, “Get me a vanilla cone with sprinkles,” Kids caught the coin-filled napkins and took off at top speed across the busy street to get in line.

Mister Softee sold soft-serve cones, shakes and sundaes. A blue and white cargo van converted into an ice-cream selling machine. It had a PA speaker on top and sold shakes, sundaes and cones. “Mister Softee” was written with red ink in cursive along with the image of Mister Softee himself, a cartoon figure in a blue sports coat with a red and white bow tie and a soft serve cone head.

I guess the truck was a symbol of patriotism with its red, white and blue and a symbol of freedom and the entrepreneurial spirit of Americans. Ice-cream equates with fun, which equates with liberty and freedom. The Conway brothers out of Philadelphia in 1956 had first decided to convert a delivery van into an ice-cream delivery machine, in the late 70s in the Bronx, Mister



Softee sold ice-cream during the spring and summer months to the sugar addicted youth of generation X.

“I’m gonna get some ice-cream,” Raffy said.

I was pitching, and he was behind me to field any pop-ups or grounders.

“Get me a vanilla cone with sprinkles.” I said. Raffy took off for the truck.

Ezra yelled, “Get me something.”

“Me too!” said Carlos, leaning towards the direction of Mr. Softee, on the verge of taking off himself. Raffy turned around and flipped them off.

“That’s my man,” I said.

Ezra said, “Fuck you! Yo, Carlos, here’s a five spot. Get me a toasted almond bar and whatever you want.”

Carlos shot after Raffy. Raffy had quite the head start, but Carlos had the speed of a gazelle. They both headed for the entrance to the park, where the line was already forming. The whole time the music blasted out in the PA’s high pitch frequency. The line stretched from the side of the truck to the fence at the entrance to the park. We could see them running through the soft-ball field, the basketball and the swings area. They stopped when they reached the end of the line. Of course, Carlos arrived first.

I turned towards Ezra and asked if he was ready. He shook his head affirmatively. I rocked and released the ball towards the upper right corner of the box in order to jam him up. As I released the ball, I heard a loud skid—a driver urgently hitting the brakes. At the same time,

Ezra hit a missile right at me. Instantly, the ball careened off my chest knocking me over. Ezra ran towards me and helped me up.

“Are you alright?” he said.

“Yeah, Who the hell got hit?” I said.

How the hell do I know, he said.

We saw a crowd of people encircling some immobile body in the middle of the street. The impact from the sponge-ball hitting my chest throbbed. I had tried to duck, but I wasn't fast enough.

As we started towards the accident, my stomach stirred in anticipation. Who was lying in the middle of the street? What condition were they in? We wanted to gaze at the injured person, mangled and bloodied, soaking in the imagery of the scene. These kinds of incidents happened all the time in Eden. Someone run over by some vehicle or some other type of accident. It was all entertainment. Except if it was someone we knew and loved.

As I got closer to the crowd, I saw Carlos standing in front with his head hanging down. Carlos was tall. Raffy was short. I assumed he was standing with Carlos but not visible to us due to the crowd. We heard the siren of the ambulance approaching. The crowd split open to allow the paramedics access. That's when I recognized the clothes the victim was wearing. Raffy's shorts, his white high-top converse sneakers, and his white tank-top. He wasn't moving. There was blood all over him and all over the street. His dark skin was torn open.

A Ford Econline van hit him, and the impact hurled Raffy about twenty feet in front of the Mister Softee truck. He landed on his head and busted the crown of his skull wide open. For

reasons I didn't understand, the paramedic picked him up by an arm and leg and flung him onto the gurney. Raffy yelled out in agony. I realized he was alive, and I cried.

Raffy's mother and stepfather were running out of Eden towards the accident. His mom urgently asked me if it was Raffy. I shook my head, and she let out a scream and cry and ran to the back of the ambulance. The paramedics let her in and sped off to Jacoby Hospital with sirens blasting. Raffy and I were born at Jacoby. Would he die there? I did not know. His stepfather grabbed me. We ran to the parking lot in the back of Eden and sped off to Jacoby with Raffy's sister Ruby in the back.

I learned the full story later.

Because Carlos beat Raffy to the Mister Softee line, Raffy, in line behind Carlos, smacked the hell out of Carlos's neck as hard as he could. Carlos immediately turned towards Raffy and went for retribution. Raffy shot off like lightning past the line of kids, past the front of the Mister Softee truck and darted into the street without looking.

When we arrived at Jacoby and saw Raffy in that hospital bed, he could hardly speak. His head was wrapped like a mummy. He would have to recover significantly before he returned to Juvey. In tears, I leaned close to him in that hospital bed, kissed his cheek and told him I loved him. Then I took his sister Ruby to the stairwell.

## Beneath the Elevator

I had him bent over holding him in a snake-tight headlock. The same was true of me. Each constricted the other. We tangoed cheekbone to cheekbone. In the struggle, our lips grazed. The wetness of his saliva stuck to the corner of my mouth like a misplaced kiss. The stench repulsed me. I'd had enough of this fuckin' guy.

It was our fourth clash in three days. I'd won the previous three. In my mind, I was undefeated. But Wayne wasn't ready to accept defeat. He wasn't beaten down enough. So really, it all was just one long battle that lasted four days. I had to admit there was no quit in this guy. I had to make a statement. An emphatic one at that. This brawl would have to be our last. Now my intention was to put his ass in a coma! I didn't give a fuck. The youth of Eden surrounded us in a huge circle. Crazy-man was there. Failure was not an option. Ezra watched and said nothing. Carlos told me to bury him.

I escaped from Wayne's headlock, kept my right arm tightly around his neck and immediately began to beat his face in with my left fist. I heard the thumps of my knuckles as they hit his face and forehead. I had full control of his upper body—only his legs were free. So, I reached down and got my left arm behind the back of his thighs while maintaining the tight headlock. I quickly lifted his entire body off the ground and placed him in a cradle hold. I held him and rocked him like a little baby. A sudden look of surprise appeared in Wayne's eyes. "Put me down motha fucka!" he shouted.

“Whatever you say.” I swung him up above my head and flung him down hard onto the concrete sidewalk. The crowd went silent as his boney knees and thick skull met the concrete with a thump. The concrete turned red around his head. Wayne wasn’t moving, he was out cold. In a moment he awoke, rose, and stumbled home as if he was drunk. Crazy-man, Ezra and Carlos quickly surrounded me and were jumping up and down excitedly while grabbing my shirt and patting me on the back and head. After that settled, we all agreed to meet back in front of my building after I cleaned up and changed. I went in my building and called for the elevator and took it to my fifth-floor apartment where I stripped off my blood-spotted sweat-pants and threw on some jeans.

Growing up in Eden was no paradise—it was tribal. We were required to prove our courage almost daily. Many times, it demanded one-on-one combat—that male chauvinistic bullshit. The dispute with Wayne meant something significant in terms of my reputation. The four-day battle, with its climatic and emphatic end, improved my rep. I was no punk. From that point forward, I was someone to reckon with. If anyone attempted any bullshit with me, they’d know it wouldn’t be easy—they’d best be prepared to tangle.

There were rituals in the transition from boyhood to manhood, like a Native American tribe in post-modern America. We had our rites of passage to go through. We were young and brave and eager to prove our intrepid character. The sense of power after successfully executing some foolhardy stunt was unmatched. We were like young Apache braves who stalked a grizzly for days until they were able to reach it undetected, so they could grab a hunk of fur from its ass and run like hell with proof of their fearlessness. That young brave would be publicly honored by the entire tribe. That’s exactly what it was like for us.

To gain standing in the neighborhood, we had to prove ourselves as unflinching warriors. Status meant respect. Respect was necessary to our daily survival. The fight with Wayne sealed my warrior status, but it didn't end there. There would always be another challenger. I needed to build on that rep by a performance of extreme bravery. Stunts that would inspire. Exploits that rendered awe. The most dangerous stunts involved life or death. Success meant that I survived them and built my rep; failure meant death. If I didn't die but was maimed and crippled for the rest of my life, I would have plenty of time to dwell on my stupidity and wallow in my ignorance until committing suicide and ending it all. That day was the day for my reputation to soar or crash.

Crazy-man was fuckin' nuts. He'd already pulled off some harrowing stunts. They produced more anxiety for those of us watching his lunacy than for him. I guess that was the point for him. He was given the epithet Crazy-man for a good reason, and he celebrated his lunacy every day. He relished in performance. Crazy-man was a star who reveled in the stage. It was his rapture. He outperformed us all. No one came close. His exploits were always daring and usually foolhardy. One day we were hanging out at the bench in front of my building drinking and smoking, when he disappeared. He took the elevator to the sixth-floor, ran up the stairs to the roof, opened the door, walked over the flat tar roof and climbed over the barrier fence. Then he lowered himself down off the side of the building and held the lip of the metal flashing with both hands. But that wasn't enough for Crazy-man. He had to push it to the limit. With one hand he held on to the roof while yelling down to us saying, "Yo, look up!" He just went to that rooftop and hung off it for no reason but the applause.

Crazy-man was our Crazy Horse. We revered him. I saw him as my shaman, a medicine man that would show me my vision quest. It came as no surprise that it was Crazy-man who

inspired me to perform the most foolhardy stunt that threatened to cut my life short. It was foolhardy and misguided, but it was my vision quest.

After I cleaned up from the fight with Wayne, I took the elevator down to the lobby and went into the next building where a bunch of friends were hanging out. It was dark by now. Crazy-man, Ezra, Carlos, Shuey, Hooch, Tank, Little-man, Fat Ronnie and I were all there. We drank Colt 45, smoked some weed and played blackjack for quarters.

After gambling a while, Crazy-man considered the idea of climbing down into the elevator shaft to look for money or drugs. People dropped shit all the time either by accident or to get rid of evidence. Dumb shits didn't know the secret to accessing the elevator shaft to recover their stuff. Crazy-man did. He found a hanger outside and manipulated one end through the hole in the upper right corner. After he opened the door to the shaft, we both jumped down to the bottom of the pit to search. I found a joint, and Crazy-man flicked his Bic lighter and lit it for me. I took a huge drag, held it in my lungs, and passed it to Crazy-man. He grabbed it and took a couple of short quick drags. Tank, Carlos, and Ezra were looking down at us. We handed them the joint and they each took a drag then handed it back down to me.

"What the fuck's goin' on down there?" Shuey yelled from across the lobby where he was playin' cards with Hooch, Fat Ronnie, and Little-man.

"g-man found a joint," Tank said.

"What the fuck! pass the shit over here!"

"Too late! It's almost gone."

"Fuck y'all!" said Shuey.

We finished the joint, and that's when Crazy-man presented the idea to me to hang underneath the elevator while Tank brought it to the top floor and back down.

I quickly told him that I was down!

I had assented without hesitation. I thought about it for a second and a swarm of buzzing flies started to stir in my gut. I spoke so damn quickly, and there was no turning back now. There was nothing I could do but perform this stunt with Crazy-man. I had committed to the task, and there was no legitimate way out now, or I'd be called a pussy. There was only one way out—get the stunt done and over as quickly as possible.

Crazy-man yelled up to Tank and gave him the plan. Tank was in charge of the elevator. He stood as the only one in the group who could be trusted. He was to take us to the top floor then, without hesitation, without delay, immediately press the lobby button and bring the elevator back down. We would be hanging underneath the elevator all the way up to the sixth floor and back. There could be no screwing around. Anyone else would've thought it funny to try and scare the shit out of us by hesitating at the top. Or they might stop at different floors, forcing us to hang on longer. Some of these dumb asses didn't know when a joke could go too far. But then again, I was the dumbass about to hang beneath the elevator.

Success meant fame. Failure meant our demise.

No one else had ever partnered with Crazy-man in any of his dangerous deeds. We'd just witness the madness and celebrate it. This would be astronomical, a master stroke, Crazy-man's most notable work. Whenever this feat was retold throughout Eden and the Wall, it would be said that crazy ass g-man did it too. This was my vision quest.

With my beer muscles flexed, I was ready to make Eden's Hall of Fame. I swallowed my fear and hid it from Crazy-man and the rest of the tribe. I put on a confident cocky smile. Tank was ready for the count down.

"Don't fuck around Tank," I yelled up to him.



“No shit,” He said.

“Bring that bitch down as soon as you get to the top.”

“Don’t worry,” He said.

They handed down the Colt 45. Crazy-man and I finished drinking it and threw it across the hallway yelling “let’s go motha-fuckaaaaaaaasssss,” and the bottle hit the Terrazzo and shattered into oblivion.

Ezra closed the elevator door shutting Crazy-man and me into our mausoleum. Tank went up the stairwell to retrieve the parked elevator on the second floor. Crazy-man and I were looking up at the undercarriage of the elevator. There was a dark metal framework loaded with wires and a single bright incandescent lightbulb underneath the elevator car that shined down on us like a resplendent heavenly luminary.

I looked down and forced out a chuckle attempting to ease the lump in my throat. Little-man knocked on the front of the elevator door and yelled into the crack “you’s crazy!”

We were shut in, entombed. With the elevator door shut, the safety mechanism was disengaged, and the elevator could now operate.

Tank got in the elevator and yelled down to us “ready!”

“Fuck yeah!” Crazy-man said.

As it came down, Crazy-man told me to get on one knee and lower my head, which I did. When the elevator reached the bottom and stopped, Tank held the door waiting for Crazy-man to give the green light to proceed upwards. We seized a metal bar attached to the frame, and Crazy-man yelled up for Tank to get the bitch moving. Tank in colluded lunacy complied. He was the most responsible amongst us, the most trustworthy, yet, not once did he say, “maybe you guys shouldn’t do this,” not once did he try to talk us out of it.

Tank hit the button labeled “six,” and the elevator’s pulleys jerked the car and yanked us upwards into jeopardy. It moved slowly at first and we stood up while holding on. Then we were gently lifted off the shaft’s concrete floor. The joints of my shoulders and wrists strained under the stress, but my muscles and grip held me in place. From the moment of lift off, the gravitational force acted to bring our bodies to a bloody and splattered end. I looked down and watched my high-top Nike’s slowly rise above the shaft floor. The space between the swoosh and the bottom gradually increased. The elevator approached and passed the second floor before our bodies did. This was the point of no return. It was only about a 10 foot drop. I could’ve let go and safely landed on my feet. For a moment I seriously considered it and thought I would. It was fear that compelled me to continue. Not the fear of death or getting hurt. It was something worse, the fear of ridicule.

Beyond fear, another idea was working here. I desired transcendence. I would not only transcend my tribesman, my brothers, but I would complete my vision that Crazy-man set before me. The spirit of rugged individualism was in my DNA. As that lone light under the elevator, I would be my own star. I would command all light, all influence, my own fate. Nature’s survival of the fittest challenged me, and I would trust myself to see it through. Either way, I would transcend!

After we passed floor two, and I was committed to seeing my quest all the way through, I knew Crazy-man had provided me with everything he was capable of. I was on my own now. My nerves intensified. I looked at him, and he was holding on to the bar while walking up the shaft wall like an episode of Batman & Robin when they walked up the face of a building. He was performing, but I was in full control of my own fate. I held on for dear life.

After the Batman walk, Crazy-man decided to do a few pull-ups. Beyond the pull-ups, Crazy-man had peaked. There would be no further transcendence for him. Like a boxer having been a champion, been to the highest plateau and having no place higher to reach for, he must descend from there.

By the time we reached the third floor, Crazy-man's exercise regimen ended. We both hung on and continued ascending. The bottom was about thirty feet below us now. We were in the realm of the unknown. Would we make it to the top and back down? That was certainly the plan. Or would we slip and drop down hitting the floor with a loud thud.

Confronting fear was part of my vision. I saw Wayne drop hard on the concrete during our fight earlier that evening. I heard the painful thud when his bony knees and elbows were slammed into the concrete. I could see and hear the hard thump of the elderly lady whom I watched as she willingly flew out her window the last year and landed on the cement stairs. The reverberation of her bones and body when she crashed into the cement remained in me. I saw how the stairs crushed her facial bones and left a grotesque indentation from her forehead to her chin. And her hair, man her hair flat matted due to the drying blood. My vision demanded that I confront fear. Not only confront it, but I was to challenge and engage with it, which really meant the emptying out of my fear by confronting the source of it—death!

Would the elevator exact revenge on me for the dropping of Wayne? Did the old woman see me staring at her as she sailed to damnation? Did she know I was breathing in her last moments on this earth? Did she realize in that moment that was the only thing she had left to give? Was she aware as I stared at her crushed face and body, and I saw her open her mouth for her last gasp of oxygen? Broken teeth and all. Did she in that moment beckon me?

As I floated over the elevator shaft floor, those images moved at light-speed through my mind. Not willing to succumb to fear, I gripped that bar with no intention of letting go until safely on the shaft floor.

We steadily floated straight up and gained the fourth floor. I looked down. The incandescent bulb illuminated us, but the shaft floor was no longer affected by the light. Sweat ran through the pores of my forehead. The saline stung my eyes. I wanted to wipe but couldn't afford to risk releasing one hand. I did my best to wipe the perspiration from my eyes with my rotator cup and bicep. Passing the fifth floor, the vision quest was almost halfway done.

When we approached the top floor, the elevator abruptly jerked and vibrated before it fully stopped. All upward momentum ceased, and I anticipated our descent. I could feel the great void beneath my feet. The darkness pulled at my feet endeavoring to suck me into its oblivion. The palms of my hands were wet with sweat and my grip became more tenuous. I had no choice but to wipe one hand dry while maintaining a tight grip with the other. Then I switched my grip and wiped the other hand dry on my jeans. I had a clean grip at this point and was ready to descend.

“Tank get this motha-fucka back down!” I yelled.

Tank frantically pressed the lobby button over and over. I estimated that the elevator should have been in its decent by now. Tank yelled down to us that he couldn't get it to move—it was stuck! Crazy-man yelled back something like, what the fuck do you mean it's stuck, hurry the fuck up and get it going.” The whole time, Tank was in a panic, desperately trying to do just that.

Panic had reached me by now, and the choices of what to do were limited. We couldn't just hang there until the elevator decided to move. We were hanging from the sixth floor, sixty

feet or more—from that height, there was no chance of survival. Fat Ronnie, Carlos, Ezra, Shuey, Hooch and Little-man had ran up the steps to the sixth floor to see what the hold up was. I yelled up to them saying something like no fuckin' questions. Just do this and do it fast. Get everyone to the fifth floor, and unlatch the door with the hanger. Carlos, being the fastest ran downstairs to get the hanger. Tank, Ezra, Shuey, Fat Ronnie and Little-man went down to the fifth floor.

Tank yelled through the elevator door saying, “Yo, we’re gonna open the door. You’re gonna have to swing through the door opening like the man on the flyin’ trapeze into the hallway. We’ll catch you and bring you in safely. Trust me!”

Carlos ran back up to the fifth floor with the hanger and opened the door. Crazy-man and I were hanging between the fifth and sixth floors. Tank and Carlos stood on each side of the doorway and as far forward as they could be before stepping out into the abyss. They had one arm holding themselves securely and were looking up at us. We could see the look of dismay on their faces. We couldn’t see the faces of Ezra, Fat Ronnie, Shuey, Little-man and Hooch, but we could see their torsos and legs, and we knew there were enough people to help catch us and pull us in. I thought we actually had a good chance of getting out of this shit safely.

Our feet where about four or five feet above the threshold of the fifth-floor doorway, and our midsections where almost parallel to the lintel. Crazy-man and I would have to swing and let go. Carlos and Tank would need to securely a grab us and prevent us from falling backwards into the shaft. The others could help once our momentum was heading forward. Little-man and Hooch wrapped their belts around Carlos and Tank in order to prevent them from falling into the shaft when they grabbed us.

Crazy-man told me to go first. I began swinging back and forth while holding the bar tightly. On my third backswing, I yelled out for them to get ready, and then swung hard forward, and yelling, “now!” And I let go. I went flying feet first through the doorway passed Tank, Carlos, Little-man and Hooch and landed flat on my ass on the Terrazzo floor. Tank and Carlos had tried to catch me, but everything had happened so fast that I sailed right past them. Ezra and Little-man helped me to my feet. I looked down and saw blood all over my shirt and on the floor. I didn’t even feel it when it happened, but when I soared through the door opening, my forehead clipped the top of the door lintel and gave me a nice gash. I took my T-shirt off and pressed it to the wound, relieved I was on solid ground.

Next, we yelled for Crazy-man to start swinging but to watch out for the top of the door opening after he let go.

“No shit, he said.”

We knew he’d have no problem. He began to swing back and forth. Crazy-man being Crazy-man decided to show off, so he let go of one hand and began swinging with the other clamped on. We yelled at him to stop fucking around. He made his final swing back and forth. As he was coming forward, just as he let go (he was still swinging with one hand), his hand slipped altering his momentum. He came flying through the entrance into the hallway feet first but instead of his back being parallel with the floor his chest and face were. He landed in the hallway doing a backwards belly-flop. Carlos and Tank had no chance to grab him. When he hit the floor with his body, the impact jerked his head forward and slammed his chin into the terrazzo breaking his jaw. We helped him up, but he was out of it.

We gathered together and walked down the stairs to the lobby. In spite of the injuries, we all celebrated not thinking about how much noise we had made the whole time during the

incident. When we reached the lobby, NYPD Housing Police and some of our mothers were waiting for us. Kelly the neighborhood Housing cop radioed for an ambulance to look over our injuries. He asked what happened? We told him we were play-fighting in the elevator and got a little rough, and that the elevator was stuck on the sixth floor. He radioed maintenance and let everyone go with stern warnings regarding disturbing the peace. The ambulance took Crazy-man and me along with our mothers to Misericordia Hospital.

Later that night when we returned from the emergency room, everyone was still in the lobby of the building where the elevator stunt took place. Crazy-man had his jaw wired and went home with his mother. I had about twelve stitches in my head. I sat and joined in playing blackjack, a quarter a hand. Everyone quietly played. Not a peep. None of the usual laughing, jokes or jeers. The silence was broken by little-man when he said,

“Yo g-man, “I didn’t think you’d go through with it!”

“You were wrong” I said.

Then Little-man, with his half-closed eyes and ruffled forehead spoke out of the left corner of his mouth and said,

“Yo g-man!”

“Yeah,” I said.

You’z Crazy-man!”

“Yeah,” I said, and I smiled and shook my head.

Crazy-man had created his own urban legends, and that day I was able to write myself into that mythology with the elevator stunt. He was our Crazy-Horse. He was our spiritual guide and leader. The spirit of Crazy-man would live on within me for years and years. Like Siamese

twins, he and I would be eternally conjoined by the vision beneath the elevator. After that day, I would increase but Crazy-man would decrease. That was the last stunt for Crazy-man. It was his Masterstroke, his Magnum Opus, his greatest work. He sat at home and healed from that broken jaw, and we seldom saw him after that. Years later, he settled down, married and had three daughters. If anyone ran into him somewhere in the city, he asked them not to repeat his legend to any of his children. He distanced himself as far from his youthful exploits as he was able.

Not long after the elevator, I desired to escape the inner-city, so I joined the Navy. It would instill discipline and provide me with opportunities to mature. That was the idea. The Navy did provide that for me, but it took a little time for that realization to reach me. I was stationed out west in Seattle where I continued my purgation. The process of purgation partly involved emptying myself of the idea of Crazy-man. The purging involved making urban legends of my own but in a different town. It turned out Seattle would become my *alma mater*. She would witness and endure the further lunacy of g-man while nourishing my maturation.



Chad in our room, ass in air, Chad my bud,  
 I'm holding the door open, staring, hard on it—a bud  
 wants to spring forth to full blossom. He's naked and clean—  
 two legs springing up on either side of his ass  
 in between them—the moisture.  
 I'm still staring, Chad's goose head swiveled backward—  
 eyes at me, smoke  
 emitting from his ears.  
 Seattle spawned fertile green.

—The Emerald City

## Hangin' with Chad

Chad and I were roommates at the Sand Point Naval Station in northeast Seattle. We met my first day on the job. Both of us were barely 18 years old. A red-eye carried me from New York where I was home on leave for two-weeks. I had been to Navy boot-camp for several months during the icy winter days north of Chicago. A week after New Year's Day found me at Communication school in weather perfect San Diego. After that, back to the Bronx for two-weeks of the same old shit before I left. What else was there to do but drink and smoke, the only difference this time was the exit strategy. It was six hours from Kennedy to SeaTac Airport on a Friday night in March. Arrived early morning the next day in Seattle. It was a rainy Saturday on April Fool's Day. Grabbed a cab to the base and was given a temporary room in the barracks. First thing Monday morning, I reported to work in the Radio Shack.

Chad let me in the secure area and said they'd been expecting me. He stood 6-feet-five-inches and was a happy-go-lucky hay flingin' farm boy from Fort Dodge, Iowa. I would become his counterpart, the cynical brick throwin' city-boy from the Bronx. In spite of our disparate backgrounds, our personalities were quite compatible, and we'd converge and form a lifelong ionic bond. Chad loved KISS. As soon as he found out I was from the Bronx, he couldn't contain his exuberance.

He said "Really! You're kidding! Do you like KISS!"

"Knights in Satan's Service? I said.

"Yeah, that's right"

"They're okay" I said.

"You know they're from the Bronx right?"

"No I didn't. Not much of a KISS fan, but Ozzy got me to sell my soul to rock & roll" I said.

"Well, you're going to like KISS—they're the best. I play their records all the time. Seen them live many times. Des Moines, Omaha, Chicago, Kansa City, Saint Louis, Drove there from Fort Dodge, Iowa where I grew up. I have all their autographs. I'll show you a picture of me at fifteen with Gene Simmons. His tongue stretching towards the sky! That Dude is totally Radical!"

"Cool." I said. Now catch your breath. Gene Simmons is awright, but c'mon man! Freddie Mercury, Robert Plant, their super-vocals dude, without a gimmick like Simmon's tongue. Saw both bands at MSG. They were thundering. After the concert while riding the subway back to the Bronx, I couldn't hear the piercing screeching wheels of the subway train. Queen is comin' here in a couple of months, and I'm gonna see 'em again. You need to go too!"

“Okay, but you’re coming to see KISS in a few months when they play at the Seattle Center. You will worship them like I do.”

“Not sure ‘bout that, but I’ll go.”

In Chad’s mind The Bronx was the birthplace of the rock gods—Kiss. He was unaware it was really Bedlam. But, since I came from the birthplace of his heroes, he and I connected quickly.

After our talk about KISS, he asked where I was staying in the barracks then he introduced me to our supervisors and disappeared. He was friends with the Petty Officer in charge of the barracks, so he found him, requested and immediately received a room change.

He reappeared with keys and said, “Hey, g-man! We’re roommates now. After work, let’s get our stuff and move. I got us the best room—it’s a newly renovated penthouse on the top floor of Barracks C.”

I was immediately impressed by Chad’s influence. After work, it took us all of ten minutes to put the few items we owned into our sea-bags and carry them to the new room. Once we moved into the penthouse, we ripped out centerfolds from our Playboy, Penthouse and Hustler magazines. We hung them on the walls all over the room, like wallpaper. We put the scratch-and-sniff centerfold on the inside of the entrance door. Chad had his bed on one side and mine on the opposite. There was an alcove between us that led to a window where the dormer protruded out from the roof. The structure of the barracks was of a steeply graded A frame three stories high. There were several other dormers along the line of the roof where other sailors were housed. Some weeks later, while high and highly influenced by my experiences back in the Bronx with Crazy Man, I went out that window and walked on the wet roof to surprise one of the sailors bunking in another room. Halfway there I was the one surprised. I had slipped and fell

face first on the asphalt shingles scraping my chin. I'd come dangerously close to slipping off the roof and hitting the concrete below with a loud thud. Too Close. I never tried that in wet weather again.

After we set up the room, I was ready to get some beer.

"What time does the club open?" I said.

"Around eight! Chad said.

"Shit, another hour...

The club was located on the base just a one-minute stroll from our barracks. It was our hunting ground to score what we needed to boost our self-esteem and reduce our sense of loneliness. For the first time, we were on our own. We had to make our own way in this life. Being young, we felt lost and lonely at times as we tried to cope with maternal deprivation which really meant it was time for our fuckin' asses to grow up and realize we would have to extinguish the burning yearning for our mothers forever and come to the realization that we would never know them as had nor see them in the same light. We would burn the effigies of mommy once and for all. We compensated in the same manner that most young red-blooded American males in the 80s who missed their mommy's compensated, we endeavored to have as many chicks that were willing to be had.

"...Follow me." Chad said.

Down the hall we went to where the soda machines were located.

"Will this do? Chad said.

In front of us were several soda concession machines that advertised Coke, Pepsi, 7 Up, Dr Pepper.

"Fuck! I'm not interested in soda pop right now Chad."

“No fuck-head, look again.” He said.

Next to the pop machines were several more machines. I was pleasantly surprised. Instead of soda pop on the button labels, there was Bud, Miller, Coors, and a local beer sold in Seattle called, “Rainier.”

“Only on a military base,” I said to Chad.

We went back to the room for some change and had enough to purchase eight cans of beer, fifty cents each. From that day forward, I kept all my change in a jar locked in my wardrobe. Those machines were always well stocked and came through for us many times after hours when the stores and bars were closed.

We went back to our room, cracked open our beers and offered a toast to ourselves, our rock gods, and for that matter the entire ideal of teenage decadence heralded by the slogan “sex, drugs, rock & roll.”

About a month or so later, Chad bought a green station wagon from one of the civilian employees that worked in communications with us. He made cash payments to her every payday. It was going to take him about six months to buy the vehicle outright. She would transfer the title to Chad after the car was paid in full. He allowed me to borrow the car basically whenever I needed it.

We had met some local girls and invited them to the club to party with us. One Saturday night there was a party in west Seattle. They wanted us to be there. Chad had the mid-watch that weekend, so he couldn't go. He let me borrow the car, and I went by myself. After the girls and I partied for a while—drinking, smoking some weed—I was ready to go. I jumped in the station wagon and pointed it towards Sand Point Way. In a flash, I approached the base where there was

a sharp bend on NE 65<sup>th</sup> street. The alcohol and weed had my head swirling. I felt right and nothing could stop me.

I sped down that road and lost control of Chad's station wagon at that curve. The car crashed head-on into a telephone pole and slammed my face into the steering wheel. I crawled out the broken window with blood flowing profusely from my nose. The entire front-end of the wagon was demolished and smoking, and the front wind-shield had disintegrated. The fence to the base was right where the crashed occurred. I ran and jumped the fence into the base, found Chad and told him, "Man, I fucked up!"

In the end, my broken nose eventually healed along with my broken wallet. Big-hearted Chad offered to pay half of what he owed on the car if I'd pay the other. Could not let him do that. The remaining payments were mine and I wished hard it'd never happened.

My last payment on the wagon was completed a few months later. Chad was still a little pissed at me for killing his only ride. Never blamed him for that.

Soon he found a way to get me back at me for the crash. One night, he knew Maggie, the Master Chief's daughter, and me were up in the room doin' what we did, and he decided to walk in on us.

Oh Maggie, I knew I loved her the first time I observed her from my barracks window during that perpetually rainy autumn. She was with that little ass punk Hospital Corpsman from Oregon who had an immaculate orange Datsun 720 pickup with the chassis floating right over the wheels. Out of Jealousy, my desire was to beat his ass unconditionally. Maggie was a thin High School long distance runner. At sixteen, she was gorgeous and a perpetually horny. I fell in love with her and knew I'd fuck it all up before long.

Maggie and I were in my bed naked when Chad opened the door and stood there for an inordinate amount of time. With a forced cynical smile and devilishly raised eyebrows, he disingenuously pled forgiveness saying, “Oops! Sorry g-man uh Maggie” while his eyes sopped up the scene. On exiting, as the door shut behind him, I heard his mischievous Snoopy-like snicker, “Hee hee hee, got em.”

A few weeks later, on a Friday night, Chad left for the club while I was getting out of my uniform and putting my civilian clothes on. I was to meet him there shortly. The club was in the basement below the Chow Hall under a green awning and down a small flight of stairs to enter. On the right, past the restrooms was the bar. It was dimly lit with a dark red carpet and mahogany stained wood tables and chairs with plush maroon upholstery. There were a couple of pool tables and other tables and chairs to eat and drink at. The kitchen in the back made burgers, fries and pizza. There was a nook with video arcade games like Space Invaders, Pacman and Donkey Kong. We had almost everything we needed in the club. Drugs too! There were numerous times while on government property, I walked out in front of the club and was handed all kinds of drugs. Acid, mescaline, mushrooms, you name it. One time an acquaintance recently on an excursion in the Cascades near Rainer, pulled out from the back seat of his car a huge brown paper shopping bag full of psilocybin mushrooms. I ate a shitload and somehow ended up alone and carless at the cockcrow hours about 40 miles north of Seattle in Snohomish. That was my life around the hub of the Enlisted Men’s Club at the Sand Point Naval Station.

I arrived at the club and could see Chad on the other side of the room sittin’ with some girl I didn’t recognize. I hurried into the restroom to take a leak. On my way out, I walked and zipped up when Chad rushed by me with that chubby chick and said, “It’s time g-man!” And I knew what that meant. That was our code, “It’s time.” That meant no walking in the barracks

room we shared. No interruptions. Do not disturb! After what he'd done to me and Maggie, did he really think I was bound to that rule now? But, I was impressed. My man had quickly scored. They passed me, and I watched them disappear up the stairs of the basement club and out into Seattle's cool misty October night. The chubby chick wore a plain loosely fitting dark blue dress and had her dark hair in a bun behind her head. At the top of the stairs, she looked back at me with sad brunette eyes. Chad was like a wide mouthed Pacman set to devour the chubby chick with a thousand bites.

I knew what I would do, but I needed to give Chad some time before I did it. *Pay back's a mother fucka!* A few weeks ago, I told Chad, "It's time!" Did he take heed? Did he honor that? Neither would I. I went to the nook that contained the Arcade game machines. I had business to attend to first. The nook was located in a small recess in the back of the bar. I grabbed a beer, pulled the Zippo out of my pocket and clicked it open. The smell of the petroleum fuel that emanated from the fuel soaked felt pads of my Zippo lighter floated up to my nose. I maneuvered the flint wheel with my thumb and lit a Marlboro. After positioning myself carefully in front of the Donkey Kong machine, I dropped a quarter in the slot. I had to break the high score of that asshole whose three initials were KNG. He and I would go back and forth weekly, beating the high score of one another. GMN then KNG. KNG then GMN again. I didn't know him; I never met him; I had no clue who this fuckin' guy was! But I hated the son-of-a-bitch. I wanted to smash his fuckin' face into the display screen, breaking the glass with his forehead and ripping open large bloody lacerations across his face that a plastic surgeon would announce as irreparable. I would destroy him. After playing for about an hour or so, I had pushed KNG down to fourth place. The score screen had three rows and read:

RANK	SCORE	NAME
------	-------	------



1ST	11600	GMN
2ND	11450	GMN
3RD	11100	GMN
4TH	9600	KNG

If he ever dared showed up again to play my machine, he would have to outscore my three higher scores above his puny initials. At this point I had that fuck-head KNG whoever his phony ignoble ass was!

After reclaiming the crown on the Donkey Kong machine, I decided against pay-back for Chad walking in on me and Maggie. I didn't want the back-and-forth charade to continue in perpetuity, so after a couple more beers and a few shots of Tequila, I figured Chad's deed was done and decided to head back up to my room to see if he wanted to head to the U-district to cop some of that moist green skunky smellin' bud that could only be found in Seattle at the time.

Before Seattle, all I knew was the dry green and brown leafy shit we copped in New York City. It was dry and crunchy, and, like tobacco, was perfect for rolling up and being smoked like a cigarette. We'd recruit Crazy-man to roll evenly measured tight joints for us. Gave him one for his labor of rolling up the bag for us. The first time I copped weed in Seattle, I thought the bright green and moist bud was a hoax—some fake shit a bogus dealer was trying to pawn off as real pot and get over on us. I was pissed and ready to beat the shit out of the dealer, but Chad schooled me, telling me "you don't roll it, you smoke it through a pipe." We smoked it, and I got born again. The next furlough, I flew to New York with several ounces of the shit stuffed in my pockets along with 25 hits of LSD on a sheet of paper, each tab had a Phoenix emblem. After smokin' that Seattle bud, my Bronx friends got born again too.

I exited the Club and walked down the sidewalk to where our barracks was located. I opened the door and ran up the three flights of stairs to our room on the top floor. There was a locked door at the top of the stairwell which I quickly unlocked and entered the hallway. Our room was immediately to the right after coming out of the stairwell. I figured Chad's hasty dalliance was surely over by now. I unlocked and opened the door to our room and immediately beheld Chad on top of the chubby chick going at it. The sight of his bright white ass in the air, and the legs of the chubby girl spread out on either side of him would burn itself indelibly into my mind. The moment I walked in, Chad turned his head and said,

“g-man!”

He bobbed his head sideways toward the door signaling me to get the fuck out.

It felt like a hundred years before I made the move out the door. Everything around me stopped. No one moved. Chad was on top motionless. The chubby chick's legs and feet ceased to respond to Chads motion. I stood halfway in the room holding the doorknob.

I thought about what it might mean to me that Chad's white tan-less buttocks were high in the air, and her two legs protruding out of each side of him with the pale soles of her feet pointing at the ceiling. It was an untoward image. I didn't ask for it, I didn't want it. So much time elapsed between his leaving of the club and my opening the door. I thought they'd be finished and sitting on the bed fully clothed drinkin' beer. The scene startled me. It felt like a curse or voodoo. Walking in on either of us was anathema. We had set the rules and thoughtlessly broke them. That was our lives. Rules made no difference. We did whatever the hell we wanted to do speedily and recklessly.

I suspected the image of Chad's ass high in the air would stick with me like an undesirable vision forever. I'd be seventy-five, and the specter of Chad's bright sparkling white

backside in the sky would silently creep in and overwhelm me. The manner of the chubby girl's attire seemed to me to indicate some otherworldly origin. Was she a witch or Amish? I did not know. I suspected maybe a fallen Amish. No one dressed like her with that plain dress, simple shoes and her hair in a bun which was greatly disheveled after her brief courtship with Chad. She seemed to dress out of her time. Her appearance was not evil, just anachronistic, which spooked me and produced an eerie feeling in my gut. I wondered where she came from and what brought her to the point of offering herself entirely to Chad.

Chad had pushed up her dress over her plump breasts. His weight compressed them into soft white mushrooms. Her head was turned opposite of mine looking at the sensuous wallpaper next to Chad's bed.

Chad continued to motion with his head towards the door signaling for me to get the hell out. All this probably happened in a few seconds, but as I was in that room holding the door open, staring at Chad's big white ass, I snapped out of my trance

“Oh, my bad!

And as I turned to exit,

I said, “Let's go to the U-Dub when you're done.” and I shut the door, ran down the stairs, and went to the club.

Sixty thousand *men*,  
 U.S. Casualties in *Nam*.  
 Uncle *Vin*  
 died like a stray cat, *man!*  
 Snuffed out like a '*nat*,  
 Bouncin' Betty-land *mine*.  
 The yellow *men*  
 became the number one *item*  
 for the ambush *team*  
 to squash. Their *aim*  
 was to de-blood their *veins*.  
 They found them leaning against *tin*  
 structures, some squatting on a *mat*,  
 The enemy they wished to *tame*,  
 were safely asleep in the *nave*  
 of their village church, *in*  
 a boiling *vat!*

—Vietnam Anagram

## Hangin' with Maggie

Maggie was the daughter of a Vietnam Vet Master Chief. A former Navy Seal Commando who saw plenty of action. He carried a shitload of things into the jungle and pulled a shitload of bodies out. He had fought from 68-70 and was involved in the infamous Tet Offensive, some real *Apocalypse Now* shit, a fucked-up trip into the heart of darkness.

Maggie was around four when her father left her for Nam. She told me of her memories of him as a happy-go-lucky 25-year-old always picking her up and bouncing her on his belly, giving her horse-back rides, feeding her, bathing her, making her laugh with goofy painful facial expressions, and then, all of a sudden, he picked her up, kissed her goodbye, and was gone for what was an eternity to her. When he reappeared, Maggie had to reacquaint herself with him—he wasn't the same anymore. She didn't understand why back then, but she sensed something was different. He was not as jovial with her. He hardly broke a smile. She'd softly ask him, "Daddy, why don't you smile anymore?" She remembers asking this question many times as she grew older. She could never get at the answer. The response was always the same—he'd just turn away and say nothing. The love was still there. She knew that. But the man who left for the war, was not the same when he returned. He was damaged by the war and became a sorrowfully depressed Vietnam Vet.

Maggie's mother, too, was unable to penetrate through his depression. Having grown weary of his melancholic state, she abandoned them both. She got divorced and moved to San Diego where she hung around the military installations looking for her next husband by sleeping with a different guy every other night. Despite her father's lack of attention, Maggie hated her mother because she flat out didn't give a shit about her, so Maggie opted to stay with her father. After the divorce, they lived in Hawaii, Alaska, California and then Seattle.

When I met her, she was sixteen and still trying to solve the conundrum of her father. I told her the war just fucked him up. It was as simple as that. I'd said at least your father came back to you after the war, and he's been with you ever since. But my father was a heroin addict and disappeared when I was three. I never saw him again. I didn't know if he was alive or dead, and I didn't give a shit either way.

After I left Chad and that Amish looking chick, I returned to the Enlisted Men's Club and took a stool at the bar. Maggie approached me from behind and nudged closely up to me and reached her arm around my shoulders then began to rub my earlobe with her thumb and index finger. With the back of her other hand she surreptitiously reached down and brushed the crotch of my button fly Levi's. Christie, her best friend, who happened to have the biggest pair of knockers on the base—hell! maybe in all Seattle—sat in the barstool to my right.

“Where's Chad?” She said.

“What do you care?”

“You're such an asshole, g-man!

“We all have one, except maybe you, since you're so full of shit.”

“Go to fucking hell! I don't know what you see in him, Maggie.” Maggie giggled and brushed my crotch again.

“Maggie recognizes the beatitudes of my evil genius” I told Christie.

“What the hell are you talking about? She said and rolled her eyes around her skull.

Chad suddenly strolled up to the bar alone. Where the Chubby Amish girl he had just banged went, I had no idea. She disappeared just as mysteriously as she had appeared. He skipped up to Christie and sat next to her. She immediately threw her arms around him and planted one right on his lips.

“To what do I owe this?” Chad asked.

“Oh, you're not owed it.” I said while snickering. Chad and Christie both threw a look at me.

Christie turned back to Chad and said, “I'm just happy to see you,”

“You should’ve seen him a little while ago.”

“What!” Christie shot back at me with attitude.

I ignored her and said, “We’re goin’ to the U-District. Why don’t you guys wait here until we get back?”

“We already have some” Maggie said.

“Fuckin’ A, why didn’t you say so? Let’s get outta here!”

“We could go to the lounge of my housing unit and watch MTV,” Maggie said.

For some reason, we thought it was okay to go to the Chief’s barracks to hang out. It never crossed our minds, not even Maggie’s, how dangerous that decision could be.

The four of us made our way out of the club and into the cool misty Seattle night. Chad and I both had our arms around the girls. This was our kind of love. We knew something would screw this up at some point but didn’t care.

We followed the wet sidewalk. Firs and pines lined the lane down towards the Chief Petty Officer’s Barracks. We kicked decaying pinecones out of our path and into the street. Chad aggressively kicked one and slipped hard on his ass. We laughed hysterically. I pulled out my metal pipe and we smoked some of Maggie’s bud on the way to the barracks.

No matter what the season, the summer sunshine or misty winter rain, the prevalent gray day-sky or the blackness of night, Seattle always seemed green. Maybe it was our being so young and green, or perhaps it was our youthful potential to grow and reach greener pastures. Or maybe it was just the weed. Seattle’s flora sung colorful phrases. The young evergreens seemed to say to the worried gray sky, “See me. I am green. You sing old songs of gray and darkness, but I sing brightly, in color! I am not gray and dreary like you!” Regardless of the dark melancholic Seattle night, our youthfulness, like the firs, was bright green and promised to

elevate us from the lower mundane, up to a higher truth of ecstasy. In our euphoria we rushed towards the barracks where Maggie lived with her father.

The Chief's barracks housed all who held the rank of E7-E9. The apartments were like small suites with a living room, kitchen, bathroom and several bedrooms all in one space, unlike the small rooms for lower ranking enlisted men like us who shared public showers. They also had a large public Television lounge on each floor. This is where we went because the Master Chief was home in bed. As soon as we entered the lounge, we turned the Sony Trinitron TV to the MTV channel and kept the volume low. The video "Hungry Like the Wolf" was playing. Chad sat down on a worn brown recliner, and Christie plopped herself right on his lap and put her arms around his neck. They sat like this watching TV.

Two French doors with white lace curtains led to an adjacent room with a full-size blue couch and matching loveseat. This room had access doors to a large restroom like the one in the movie *Top Gun* where Maverick tried to score with Charlie. Our high was peaking, and we had meandered into the restroom while making out. Maggie locked the door behind us. I stood with my back against the door. We pulled each other's pants down. Maggie was upright facing me. We were fondling each other when Maggie pressed hard against me. Our bodies were burning. She straddled her right leg up and over my hip. We tried to solve the conundrum but failed. Maggie ordered me to sit down. I liked her commanding tone, the desire, the desperation. I slid down, keeping my back against the door and felt the cold tile on my cheeks when I reached the floor. Maggie sat on top of me, wriggling and trying to receive what I had to offer. After a second failed attempt, we went outside of the relative safety of the restroom to the blue couch. Maggie laid down first, facing upwards and beckoning to me. It didn't take long from there and we were done.



We lay together on the couch in each other's arms for a while when we heard the volume of the TV get suddenly louder. We sprung off the couch into the main lounge where Chad and Christie were making out to a blasting "Rock the Casbah." I quickly turned it back down questioning the level of their intelligence. They ignored us. Christie was still sitting on top of Chad in the recliner. Maggie and I sat down on the couch next to them. I put my arm around her, and she rested her head on my chest. As I continued scolding them, the door suddenly swung open startling us all. Maggie's father abruptly entered the lounge.

Chad's arm flew off Christie, and she immediately sprung to her feet in front of him. There was nothing Maggie and I could do but immediately disengage. We were caught. I stared at the massive Navy Seal Master Chief from the couch. There was a controlled anger in his eyes as he stared at us. The control of someone who'd been conditioned by combat. I could see he wanted to burst. He was Brutus, and I was Popeye with no spinach to save me. I knew the TV volume would get us. I gave Chad an angry glance. The Master Chief loomed over the entrance removing any opportunity of escape. I wriggled helplessly. Maggie would somehow have to save the day. Not a word had been exchanged between any of us. Time seemed to stand still. It seemed her father had been standing guard at that door for hours.

The Master Chief looked down on me and Maggie then Chad and Christie. Back and forth a couple of times. I could see his mind calculating the scene and filling in all the blanks. Quickly, he concluded his computation, looked at Maggie and calmly but sternly called out her name while motioning her to the door. She sprung up and off the couch, looked at me with sad eyes, and followed him down the hall into their quarters with Christie right behind her. Chad and I looked at each other and got the hell out of there before the Master Chief changed his mind about anything that would end up out of our favor. We went back to our barracks, grabbed a few

beers from the machine, toasted our successful escape and hoped the girls were okay. Assured we'd see them the next day, we crashed.

Lying in my bed, I become aware of how good it felt to be with Maggie. Being with her was different. The experience itself felt different, felt new. In some way, I felt a truer connection to Maggie than I had ever felt in any other relationship. It was something in the heart, in the psyche, in the soul. It went beyond temporal physical fulfillment. It superseded the physical and perhaps went higher into another realm. Was this true love? Was this an experience of a higher human connection? In the silence of that soft Seattle night, I felt a lucidity I'd never known. Though I would begin to grasp this higher truth, it would be a while before I would understand it, and even further before I would have the ability to respond maturely to its revelation.

Maggie sought connection more than anything else. So did I. Like two insignificant tributaries in time, we arrived at this moment and flowed side by side and then merged into one river. As I lay in my rack that night thinking about Maggie, I thought I might have loved her. And yet, I sensed the merging would only be temporary. We'd separate back into our own tributaries. To that point, nothing good ever seemed to last for me. Some of it was beyond my control but, there also was my inability to recognize what was required of me to help the good last. I felt I would cruelly discard Maggie before long.

I fell asleep.

Early in the morning, I was awoken by loud knocking on the stairwell door by my room. Maggie was in the hall, banging on the door and screaming my name at the top of her lungs, I rushed to open the door. She entered the room. She was crying and looked sick at heart. Chad sat up on his bed and asked if everything was okay.

"My father is hanging, out in the lounge."

I didn't understand.

"You mean he stayed in the lounge the rest of the night? I asked.

"No! He's hanging in the lounge by his neck." she hollered. "I don't know what to do."

I was half asleep and originally thought she had got in an argument with her father, and he crashed in the lounge. Her urgency snapped me out of my fog, and I felt nervous and cold.

I ran down the hall to the phone and called Shore Patrol who then called the local authorities. I told Maggie to stay with Chad and ran to the Chief's Barracks and saw him hanging by his neck. The authorities quickly arrived and cut him down from that beam in the lounge above where Maggie and I had made love the night before. They took him away. I answered some of their questions about the last time I'd seen the Master Chief.

Maggie's mother was notified and on her way from California. The police took Maggie with them and placed her in foster care until her mother arrived. Then there was the funeral. She wanted me to go, but I couldn't bring myself to accept her invitation. Maggie went back to San Diego with her mother.

After that, Maggie called me every day from California. I was cold. After a while, I'd simply avoided her calls. I arranged for my coworkers in the Radio Shack to take a message. When the barracks phone rang, I had the other sailors tell her I was not in the room.

Death made me cold. I had seen it. The death of the baby birds at my hand. The dog that was brutally murdered and left in a large puddle of his own blood in my tenement lobby by gang members rehearsing the coldness required to kill. Kids and adults who flew out of windows high above the concrete. Hustle run over by that bus. Overdoses, stabbings, shootings, hangings. Now

cold death had followed me to Seattle. I thought I might escape the cold. The scene of Maggie's dad hanging by his neck made me contract and distance myself from Maggie. Though I didn't mean to treat her with that same frigidness, my mind could not find an outlet for the warm expression present within me. Fear is cold too! And it chilled me. When Maggie needed me most, I froze. Scared shitless of the connection death brings between the living, I failed.

About a year after her father died, Maggie showed up at the Enlisted Men's Club.

While ordering a drink, I saw her coming into the bar. There was a crowd of people blocking the view. I saw through their translucent bodies—past the enlisted men and women drinking Budweiser, past the pool tables with Navy Seals in drunken argument over who was the greatest bad-ass amongst them, past the arcade with Donkey Kong, Pac Man, and Dig Dug machines, and to the entrance of the room where the bouncer, Hank, hugged her and pointed in my direction. I watched Maggie get closer to the bar, her head swiveled port and starboard to the extent of her periphery like I imagined an eagle's would as it searched the landscape for its prey. Her eyes were as wide and beautiful as two open mouths. I was sure they would lock in on me and then her wings would fold back, her legs would extend, talons unlock, and she would swoop down upon me.

I put my head down and blended into the crowd. I made my way to the opposite side of the room and slipped into the band room. Chad was sitting at a back table with his pitcher of beer and Tequila. He yelled my name, but I ignored him and at top speed headed for the backstage door. I hastily made my way through the kitchen and out the back door then shot down the back ally towards the Chiefs barracks and stopped running. I stood on a verdant green lawn close to the ten-foot barbed wired perimeter fence that shut out the civilians. The evergreens lined up near the fence afforded some cover from Sand Point Way.

The November night was cold and wet. Fog rolled in. The evergreens gave in to the fog, as my love for Maggie gave in to fear. I was on the run—a fugitive afraid of connection. Maggie’s search for me would be fruitless. I leaned against a fir and coped with my fears as I had always done. I filled my small metal pipe with the fluorescent green Seattle bud and lit it. I inhaled, held the smoke inside my lungs, then exhaled coughing a bit and waited for Maggie and the world to go away. I decided I’d go to the three girls house in Lake City and stay for a few days, hoping Maggie would have gone back to San Diego by the time I returned.

Chad had followed me out of the club. As I was smoking, he walked up to me. I looked at him. He softly said,

“What’s up? Maggie’s in the club looking for you.”

“Yeah, I know.” I said and handed him the pipe.

## Big Trouble

At first, we went to the three girls' house, we both drank a fifth of Jack Daniel's chased with Coca-Cola while the girls were watching videos on MTV—after that, all the trouble began.

The three girls lived in the Lake City section of northeast Seattle. It wasn't too far from the base at Sand Point. They were Navy Hospital Corpsman, who worked at the infirmary and they were my friends.

When we arrived, the girls let us in. Since we were underage, they had purchased two fifths of Jack for us. We headed to the kitchen while the girls watched TV in the living room.

I'd met Raphael at the club about a month prior. He said he was a Don Juan and could get any girl. He also said he was a pimp while in High School. I didn't believe either claim. But he was a Brooklyn boy, and I was from the Bronx. That's what connected us. It wasn't long before we became partners in crime.

Raph devoutly believed the real Don Juan was one of his progenitors. When I assured him Don Juan was a fictional character in numerous literary works, he just laughed and said I was crazy for using the word "literary." When young native New Yorker's like us converged, it meant compulsive forces would heat and stir the tribal urges within us which meant we would be compelled to prove some crazy-ass bullshit to one another. It wasn't too long before the brink boiled and spurred us towards a reckless eruption.

He was stationed on the USS Implicit, a minesweeper docked downtown. Minesweepers were small ships with wooden hulls meant to avoid setting off magnetic sea mines. I was surprised that the Navy still made use of those World War II style minesweepers. Apparently, the Soviets were still using those types of sea mines. We were at the height of the Cold War with the USSR, and the military took every action to stay prepared for the Soviet threat.

Most of us young enlisted men prepared for that threat by ignoring it and partying our asses off.

I immediately cracked open my bottle of Jack and poured my first drink.

We stood at the kitchen counter drinking while the three girls were in the living room talking and laughing and watching MTV. The kitchen was adjacent to the living room, so Raph and I could see and interact with the TV and the girls.

The MTV logo flashed on the screen and Martha Quinn talked about MTV being the world's first video music channel and it's in stereo and it's true and we love it. We finished one and poured another. Then Quinn announced the next hour of music which looks promising with George Harrison's song about John Lennon who was shot blood dead in front of the Dakota building in Manhattan a few years previous. Video's played and we drank.

Near the end of the hour, Squeeze's song about being tempted came on, and I thought about my temptation Maggie who was lost to me. This put me in a funk again, so I drank two shots in a row, and chased them with Coke. Then Quinn introduced Pat Benatar with white headband singing about someone's love being like a tidal wave spinning out of her head. My heart was already broken because of the careless way I had treated Maggie, and she was out of all my trajectories and orbits—gone forever. And I had to accept it. We drank half our bottles by this time.

The Three girls kept on watching MTV while Raphael and I got drunker and drunker. I knew the girls since my early days at Sand Point, and we had partied together many times. Their house was our “after hours club.” Chad and I pulled many all-nighters at that house in Lake City. On this night, my boy Chad had to work at the Comm Center. Too bad for him!

The girls had said it was okay for Raphael to come over but only if I kept an eye on him. I assured them I would not let anything get out of control. They knew me well and trusted me, but Raphael, they weren’t convinced of him yet. So far, the girls ignored him and after a while he reciprocated. I jokingly said something like what happened Don Juan. He grunted and drank straight out of the bottle.

After a couple of hours of watching MTV and bullshitting and the three girls paying no attention to Raphael which made me laugh inside, we both finished our bottles and decided to head back to the base. We said our goodbyes to the girls and wobbled out onto 130<sup>th</sup> street to begin the three-miles trek to the base.

It was a December night in Seattle—cool and misty. We thought to catch a bus, but they took way too long to wait for. Raph bragged about doing it with a girl in Brooklyn on an empty bus while the driver drove his route. I said something like, whatever Don Juan. We walked through the residential neighborhood and passed by a tan Honda Civic. It was double-parked and running with no passengers inside. This could certainly add some excitement to this routine night of drinking.

Raph looked at me and nodded towards the car, and I knew what he meant. I could see some guy in the doorway of a house near the car talking to someone. The house was situated back some distance off the road, and there were firs and spruce trees in the front yard and evergreen shrubs lining the walkway to the house. The people at the door had an obstructed view



of the car, and I didn't have a clear view of them. Urgently, Raph opened the driver side door and got in, closing the door lightly! I started for the passenger seat. "Go! Go! Go!" I said. Raph fumbled with the gear shift not knowing how to drive a manual transmission. He laughed and moved the gear shift back and forth, zigging and zagging through the H pattern of the shifter, and I told him to press the clutch, and he had no clue what a clutch was and we're going to be in big trouble if he didn't get that thing going immediately.

Hearing the ruckus, the guy turned around towards the street. I had my eyes on what I could see of him. He ducked down to look through the spruce to determine what was going on. Now I'm thinkin' about jumpin' the hell out of this car because the guy noticed his car kept jumping and conking out as Raphael fumbled with the clutch, gear shift and accelerator while laughing the whole time, and I know it's time to get the fuck out of the car and haul ass.

When the guy grasped the situation, he yelled out "call the cops!" And darted towards the car.

We both jumped out and took off down the wet street. As we approached an intersection, I shouted to Raph to split up and meet back at the base. I took a hard-right and dashed towards NE 125<sup>th</sup> street while Raphael hustled down the street towards Lake City Way.

It wasn't long before I heard sirens all around. What to do?

I was freakin' out. I can't go to jail, not while in the Navy. My instincts kicked in. The sirens were getting closer, so I broke left into someone's yard and jumped the fence into the back yard and ran around to the back of the house. The lights were on. The house was raised and there was room to crawl under, so I dove underneath the house. I reclined on my belly under the house peeking out for any cops and K9s.

On the street, lights and sirens approached my location. I heard the owner of the car yell out, "one went this way!" I prayed intensely saying, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, please!" I Hoped no one saw me jump the fence. Some dogs barked ferociously in a yard not far away. Blue and red flashes hit the wooden fence around the back yard. The cops drove up and down the street with their sirens off; the lights blazed and refracted into the back yard of the house.

I nervously lay under that house for quite a while till everything around me became silent. Then my nerves quieted down. I thought I might not get caught. As the thumping base notes of my heart started to settle, I began to hear sounds from the house above me. Voices were muffled by the flooring above me. Forks and knives clanked loudly. They appeared to be voices of a man, a woman and two or three young children. The family talked excitedly about the cop cars and the commotion coming from the streets. They ate dinner directly above me unaware of my corpse buried beneath them.

After a while, they rose to clear the table and clean the dishes. I could hear them as they worked together then suddenly the kitchen above me was quiet. I lay there contemplating my situation. Why did I get in that car? Why didn't I tell Raph that that was bullshit?

As I lay under that house, I thought about some of the stupid shit I had been involved in. I considered the wake of my decisions. *I thought about Maggie.* How I fucked her over. How I fucked up that whole situation. I had seen her recently and danced with her at the club. It was a slow dance. I felt passion and pulled her closely to me resting my head on her shoulder. It felt good. I missed her. I wanted her. I kissed her neck. She pulled her head back and pushed me away. I didn't pursue it any further and I should've. I never saw her after that. Ever.

A couple of hours passed, and I felt it was safe to venture out and work my way back to the base. I knew the squad cars would be on alert for us. I'd known cops. I'd had my ass kicked

by them back in the Bronx. I knew to be vigilant. Like a rat, I slowly crept out of my hole and on one knee looked all around. I saw and heard nothing. In a flash, I jumped the fence and made my way to the street. I Zigged and zagged through many back streets. Then passed an elementary school, a high school and private homes until I reached the apartment complex across the street from the entrance to the Sand Point Naval Station.

I hastily crossed the street and opened the door to the walk-in-entrance of the base. Petty Officer Krupski was on duty, so I just gave a goofy British salute with the palm of my hand facing towards him, and said "What's up Krup? He waved me in. I waved back and walked around the counter he was standing behind and proceeded through the door into the base.

When I stepped out, my heart was relieved. Now that I was safe, I remembered Raph? Did he get caught? Is he still trying to make his way back to the base? Did he go back to the three girls house and ask for a ride? That would've been dumb. Maybe he went back to his ship. All were possible. Then again, he probably got caught because he chose to run towards the busy and wide open Lake City Way, and it would've been easy for the cops to scoop him up there on that main thoroughfare, and the owner of the car who definitely could ID us would've ID'ed Raphael and he was probably sitting in a cell downtown as I sat in the Enlisted Men's Club drinkin' a beer waiting for him to show up.

I finished the beer and headed to the Comm Center to fill Chad in on all the excitement of the evening. On the way, I passed Raphael's barracks and thought, why didn't I check to see if he was in his room? Even though he was stationed on that Minesweeper, he had a room in the barracks. He usually stayed there when his ship was not going out to sea. I entered the barracks and knocked on his door. The door abruptly opened and there was Raph. We grasped each other in a full embrace.

“How in the hell did you get back? I said. And “why didn’t you wait for me at the club?  
“I’ve been back for over two hours,” he said, “Come the fuck on in.”

Raphael’s room was small. It was furnished with a bed, a tall wardrobe locker, an end-table with a few drawers, a desk and two chairs, and a small refrigerator.

I entered the room and to my surprise there was a fine woman in a tight red dress with a black shiny belt around her waist and her tight thighs to her ankles were fully exposed and she wore a head band that held her shoulder length locks firmly above her forehead. The headband was secured by an oversized safety pin. She looked like Pat Benatar, I thought. She sat on the bed looking at us smiling.

I didn’t recognize her. I gazed at her exposed thighs. I needed to identify who, what and where. There was a gap of silence when Raphael suddenly spoke up.

“Gina, this is g-man, he’s from New Yawk too. He’s down with me. Say hello”

“Hello” said Gina.

I nodded and said, “what’s up.”

How’d you get back Raph” I said.

I ran down to Lake City Way, and Gina’s punk rock ass was at the stop-light waiting for the green when she saw me running. It was pure luck. I met Gina two weeks ago at the U-Men show downtown, and there she was sitting at the stop light.

“You’re a lucky son-of-a-bitch” I said.

“Yeah, Gina yelled my name as I was sprinting across the street. I recognized her voice and immediately skidded to a stop and looked back. She told me to get the fuck in. I got in and the rest is history.”

I told them how I hid under the house, heard a family eating dinner above me and after a few hours I crawled out and made my way back to the base. Gina laughed and remarked how creative that was.

“You should’ve stayed with me,” Raphael said.

“Now how in the hell was I supposed to know if I ran a few more blocks with you, there would be Gina sitting at a stop light waiting to rescue our asses? The only real possibility for escape was by splitting up.” I said.

“I know. Like I said, it was pure luck.”

“We both were lucky as hell. We could’ve been in big trouble sitting in a cell downtown right now.” I said.

“That’s bull shit,” Raph said.

But it wasn’t. I didn’t want to think of the consequences of that. The call we’d have to make to our superiors. A Navy JAG officer arriving at the jail in his dress blue uniform. He’d speak to the judge and spring us. Perhaps charges would be dropped, or more than likely we’d be charged and either must plead guilty for auto theft and throw ourselves at the mercy of the court hoping for leniency. Or, take a chance with a trial. Either way, when the state of Washington was through with us, we’d have to answer to the US Navy for violating the UCMJ and could’ve been court martialed, jailed, and thrown out of the military with a dishonorable discharge.

After the activity of the evening, I was ready to go home and sleep everything off.

Gina said. “You guys are crazy and lucky. Now I gotta takeoff.”

“No not yet,” said Raphael, He said it urgently, right on the end of Gina’s last syllable.

“Just one more beer, please baby. I’ll get it”

Raphael didn't wait for an answer. He went to the mini bar at the end of his bed and pulled out two cans. He scooted sideways past Gina, sat and handed her a can and tossed one to me. It was tight in Raph's small room. He and Gina were sitting on the bed, and I sat in a chair between the wardrobe and his bed. I was against a wall and the only way out the door was to walk sideways between them and the wardrobe closet.

"Stick around a while g-man. I got big plans" Raphael said.

I thought I'd better leave quickly. Raphael was after Gina, and he wanted to do his thing.

I had drunk so much that night, I didn't feel like anymore anyway.

"Nah, I'm gonna leave." I said.

"No need to rush" Raphael said.

"I have to go too" Gina said.

"C'mon Gina, don't go so quickly. Stick around for a little while," Raphael said.

I started to smell something not so pleasant. We both had wanted to leave, but Raphael had urged us to stay. I could understand him wanting Gina to stay, but why me? I just got out of one mess with Raphael, and I damn sure wasn't gonna stick around for whatever his plans were with Gina. I knew I needed to get the hell out of there.

Raph grabbed Gina roughly and started making out. She was resisting at first, but in a moment, she started to give in to Raph's seduction. I could see him force his wet tongue between her lips. His left hand started to move into areas of passion. At first Gina was resistant, but then she started kissing him back, kinda. It seemed she tried to appease him but not because she liked it.

Raphael continued making out roughly with Gina. I was sort of trapped in on all sides

with the wall, wardrobe and Raph. We were all squeezed into that tight space. It wasn't long before Gina abruptly pulled away from Raphael and stood up.

"I have to leave!" she said.

She was closest to the door.

"Nah, not yet!"

Raphael wrapped his arms around her and started kissing her neck while his hands rubbed all over and up her red dress. Gina wasn't interested. Raphael planted his face in her neck and kissed her all over while he felt her up.

Gina stood still, while whispering to Raph that she had to leave.

"No no" Raphael whispered close to her ear.

He was rubbing his hand all over her breasts and then ass.

I had stood up and was ready to scoot past them. Raph looked back at me and nodded his head towards Gina. He repeated this with his lips moving without sound saying, "come on man, come on!"

Just like the car, he was trying to lure me into this situation. I wasn't biting this time.

Raphael rubbed himself all over Gina saying "oh baby" over and over while urging me to join in. Gina wasn't saying no, but she wasn't inviting me either. Raphael compelled me to join in. She didn't respond to his suggestion.

While kissing and rubbing Gina, Raph reached one arm back behind him groping for my hand. He got hold on it tried to place it on Gina's breast. He was looking at me smiling while pulling my hand toward Gina and with his other arm, pulling her body closer to me. Gina turned her head and looked at me. I looked at that red dress and saw my hand about to massage her body. I was momentarily confused, tempted by the fruit of seduction. Then at that moment, in an

instant, in a flash—I thought of Maggie. I snatched my hand back before it touched Gina.

Raphael urged my participation and Gina had not invited it. Like shooting white light, the better impulse prevailed.

“Nah, this isn’t right” I said

“What do you mean? C’mon man!”

Raphael raised his eyebrows and pointed his head at Gina indicating to me she was ready for my participation, but I didn’t feel it. I became repulsed by Raphael’s proposition. Gina wasn’t fighting, but she sure as hell wasn’t inviting either. I knew that I needed to get my ass out of this scene. It all seemed too close to something that could produce really big trouble.

“I’m going!”

Raphael looked at me like I was a sucker, and I didn’t give a shit what he thought. I had done a lot of stupid shit to prove myself back home and in Seattle, but I damn sure wasn’t going to involve myself in anything that looked like the makings of this. My immaturity had its limits.

I would not let Raphael force me over that line. Had I allowed it, Gina would have been violated and my conscious, my character, would have been destroyed by Raphael. I drew the line. I was right and I knew it. Doing the right thing refreshed me. Invigorated me. Energized me! I was spurred to action.

“Gina, you ready to go?” I said.

Raphael was holding her tightly with both his arms around her.

“No no no! Don’t even try it! She’s not going anywhere!” he said while giving me an angry stare. I could feel his power wane.



I didn't give a rat's ass what he thought. Gina's head was on Raphael's chest and facing towards the door. He was holding her firmly, but she had immediately turned her head towards me when I asked if she wanted to go.

"Yes!" she said.

But she didn't say it in the cheerful way after having a positive and fulfilling experience. It had the hue of hesitation caused by fear. She looked somewhat paralyzed by the traumatic event.

"Let's get the hell out!" I said.

And I extended my hand out to her. She swiftly grabbed it and snatched her purse off the bed. Raph reluctantly let go of her, and we exited under the hail of his hatred.

Gina got out the door first. Once out, she let go of my hand to wiggle and straighten her skirt then grabbed my hand again. I stopped at the door and stuck my head back into the room. I looked intensely into Raphael gaze.

"You're some fuckin' Don Juan alright!" I said.

Then I turned about and clasped Gina's hand, and we and walked briskly out the building to her parked car. I watched till she drove off the base.

## After the River

At the main gate, we signed in Zana and Angie. It was a short walk from there to the Enlisted Men's Club. When we arrived, Chad and Zana went into the club and saved us seats at the center table facing the stage.

Angie and I stood at the top step of the entrance smoking under the green awning and hearing the hard-hitting drops ping rapidly. She stood shorter than me with her face at the level of my chest. She was small breasted and twenty-five-years-old. Angie never wore a bra. Usually just a tight tee-shirt designed to keep them from flopping around like mini tacos. I wasn't crazy 'bout her. But Maggie was long gone, and I had nothing better to do. Despite my indifference, Angie was always on my jock following me around like lint.

As we smoked, I strove to persuade her to go to my room for an oral excursion. She declined saying, "then you won't go home with me." That was accurate! She stood in front of me on the verge of succumbing to my pressing her when she abruptly smashed her cigarette into the sand and went down the steps saying she's going to check out the band. I put mine out and followed her in.

We found Chad and Zana and sat at the table. The band played for a while, and I determined they sucked, so I left Angie and went outside for some fresh air and smoke.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle. Having been a Seattleite by then, it held no impediment. I walked out on the wet street and noticed Phil standing behind his car with the trunk open. He was a Hospital Corpsman who worked in the infirmary with the three girls. He looked at me, smiled, looked down into the trunk and motioned me over to him. I approached him and he opened a large brown paper shopping bag. I looked down into the bag. When I perceived the contents, my greedy eyes fell out of my face then rolled inside that bag.

Psilocybin mushrooms!

“Where in the fuck did you get all those?” I said.

“We went up to Sno qual mie. And these my brother are only a small part of what we harvested,” Phil said.

Phil’s speech paused between syllables and words for emphasis. Just a quirk of his. I always wished he’d just get it out quicker.

“Shit!” Was my one-syllable response.

“g-man my man help your self!”

I didn’t pause but rushed right in. I grabbed a handful of mushrooms and shoved them into my mouth like a bunch of doughnut holes.

“Enjoy!” He said.

I gave a muffled, “Thanks dude,” and chewed then swallowed the mushrooms that were crowded into my mouth.

Phil said, “I trust you have plans to be up all night!”

I told him I’d be going to Snohomish.

“Hey man, be careful! Phil said. We passed the Snohomish area on the way back here. We heard the river was at flood stage. Trees logs all sorts of shit was floating down it.

“Really,” I said. With my stomach full of psilocybin mushrooms, I payed no attention to Phil’s warning. I hurried down the stairs back into the band room. Clouds of cigarette smoke filled the room. I made my way to the table and sat down again next to Angie.

“Where’d you go? She said.”

“I went outside to smoke.”

“The band is lousy.” She said.

“No shit!”

I looked at Chad and Zana across the table and said, “Let’s get outta here!”

“You betcha!” Chad said. “Let’s just down the rest of the pitcher.”

He filled all our glasses, and everyone drank theirs down. Then we got up and left.

Angie and Zana lived next door to each other in the same duplex about thirty or so miles north of Seattle. In the past we’d drive up and Chad would go into Zana’s side of the house, and I would go into Angie’s, and we’d all do our thing. In the morning, we’d go out for breakfast then Angie would drive us back to the base. That was the routine lately.

Big Red and Ole Yella, two older women that frequented the Enlisted Men’s Club, observed our exiting and quickly followed us out the door.

Big Red received her nickname because of her long red hair and her immense girth. She always dressed elegantly. She wore a violet blouse that billowed and wondered around her massive breasts, the blouses hemline skirted around her hips then settled on her silk slacked thighs.

Ole Yella was a hippie in her fifties. She was thin and wore a Beatles T-shirt and jeans. Two weeks ago, Sal got stupid drunk and went home with her. We saw them both walk out the club together and they disappeared for the rest of the night. The next morning a sober Sal approached me in the chow line. His head was ashamedly low as he said, "I can't believe what I did!" I cackled and guffawed over and over. He said she yelled out the savior's name while they did it.

Ole Yella was ancient to us because we were so young. But she was cool to hang with—that is—until she got too inebriated. Then she became one of the wild ones, hunting down that loving feeling gotten from any unsuspecting sailor she could get drunk enough to overlook her age.

We had begun walking to the gate when Big Red yelled out to us saying they needed a lift home. They lived about ten miles from the base in Bothell. We would drive through there on the way to Snohomish, so it wouldn't be out of the way. Angie drove a 1972 two-door Chevy Chevelle. Six-five Chad, and Zana, who had smooth lengthy legs, along with Ole Yella, filled the small space in the back. Big Red sat in the front passenger bucket-seat. I settled comfortably on her lap and rested the side of my face directly above Big Red's paps. Angie drove with her jealous periphery on me.

It was raining again.

We were all drunk and everyone was laughing at my perch on Big Red's lap. Angie was faux laughing as many do when they are really annoyed about something but don't want anyone else to know it.

I was as thin as a Q-tip and around 130 pounds with shrooms soaking, digesting and absorbing into my system. I sat like a toddler on Big Red's wide thighs with her arms wrapped tightly around me. It felt good. My insides had begun to register the effects of the shrooms.

*My heart pumped and palpitated. It sent warm psilocybin infested blood to my shoulders and head. The magic atoms and molecules quickly spread throughout my entire body. The euphoric effects made my shoulders shudder. My chest was inflated. My heart felt on the edge of some kind of action. I transformed into mystic and oracle—seer and son of a prophet—a carrier of visions.*

It came suddenly and overwhelmed me. No one in the car knew I had eaten mushrooms, and I felt no compulsion to tell them.

Sitting side saddle on Big Red's lap, my arms around the bulk of her waist, I bent my head down and peered into the divide of her huge breast.

*I viewed flowing colors. Big Red's long cherry hair flowed down the back of the seat, out the closed door, and onto the moving asphalt road. And her snowy breast. I saw white milk shoot out from her nipples like Bronx fire hydrants in the summer. The milk rushed out and all over me. It filled the seat and floorboard of the Chevelle and followed her hair pouring out onto the road. The Chevelle left a wake in the river of red and white that trailed off behind us and flowed into Lake Washington.*

I Looked down at her ivory breasts and pulled her blouse out and away from them and said, “Mommy give me milk!” I kept repeating those words, “Mommy milk, mommy milk, mommy milk.” Chad was laughing his ass off in the back, as were Zana and old Yella. We laughed uncontrollably while I looked down and repeated “Mommy milk!, Mommy give me milk!” I talked like a baby and held on to her like she was my mother. Big Red had tears in her eyes she was laughing so intently. Angie let out some forced laughter intermittently. But her eyes betrayed her. She was compelled by the crowd who were cackling and tee-heeing continuously. But I was sure she craved to switch places with Big Red.

This continued until we arrived in Bothell. Angie parked the Chevelle in front of the apartment complex where Big Red and Old Yella lived and abruptly rushed them out with her words. I opened the door and got off Big Red’s lap to let her and Old Yella out.

We said our goodbyes, and I jumped back into the passenger seat. Angie hit the peddle and we screeched out of Bothell towards Snohomish.

Soon we were close to the Snohomish River. We came upon a detour sign diverting us from the bridge because of rising river. Angie slowed down wondering what to do. We encouraged her to drive ahead slowly, and if the water was too high, we’d just turn around. She approached the bridge cautiously. We saw water covering the road in front of the bridge. It didn’t look that high, so we told Angie to drive on. She moved the vehicle slowly. Her scrunched forehead and eyes along with her mouth crumpled revealed the intensity of her concern. Angie was the oldest of the group. She had me and Chad by seven years. Zana was twenty. Angie had the most experience and should’ve been making the decision to turn that Chevelle around. But she didn’t—instead she looked to us for guidance. We foolishly told her to drive on!

We heard the tires sloshing through the water and the splashing water hitting the side panels of the car. We told Angie to slow down a little. The closer we got to the river, the higher the water rose. When we reached the bridge, the road was covered with water. The green frame of the steel girders stood erect above the water line. We told Angie to drive in the middle of the road under the green steel girders. There were no other cars on the bridge, just the Chevelle. The girl's duplex was not far on the other side. Angie looked terrified, but we compelled her to move forward. The Chevelle's tires contacted the deck of the bridge, and we proceeded across. The bridge was not very long, so we figured we could scoot across it in no time and be at the duplex within five minutes.

We were partway across when water quickly poured in through the doors. Before we knew it, the engine drowned, and the car stopped. Water promptly filled the car from the floorboards to the seats. Outside, the water moved swiftly around and over the hood of the Chevelle. We had to get out.

I opened the passenger front door and stepped and pulled the seat up so Chad could get out of the back seat. The passenger side of the car was close to the green girders on the right side of the bridge. Angie got out of the driver's seat and just stood hanging on to the door. The water was chest high for her and the momentum of the river was pushing us all to the right. Zana got out of the car and stood close to Angie holding on to the car door. Chad and I fought the current to get around the car where the girls were hanging on for dear life.

We made our way around the car and grabbed their arms then started to make our way to the other side. We couldn't tell where the edge of the road ended, but we had the steel girders on the right and left to guide us. If we stayed inside of those girders, we knew we'd remain safe.



Accidentally stepping off the road and sinking in the powerful current of the Snohomish, would've meant someone's demise.

We had begun making our way across the bridge trying to stay in the center space of the girders. We were fighting against the weight of the water and the current. The water was up to our waists. No one was laughing about milk anymore. The effects of the psilocybin persisted, and I felt no sense of danger.

I pushed ahead against the weight of the current. Debris gathered and crammed against the steel trusses seeking a path through. Chad and Zana clung to each other tightly and lagged behind us. The current was pushing them towards the girders on the right.

Angie gripped my waist tightly. She held me from behind and followed me with her head rested on my back. But the water and the current proved too much. Her arms would slide off, and I'd turn around a grab her then she'd put her arms back around my waist. We'd repeat this process as we pressed forward.

The current and the darkness made it difficult to stay in the center of the road. I turned around to locate Chad and Zana. They were well behind us and pushed over to the right. The girders on each side looked like five letter A's. Angie and I kept getting pushed right by the current. We were in the middle of the third A, the halfway point across the bridge, when I realized how far the current had pushed us towards the girder. It was like they had crept closer to us when we weren't looking. We were now on the extreme right-side of the road. Frightened, Angie switched her position from behind me and moved to my left. When she did, I felt her hold slip. I quickly turned towards her and watched her head disappear below the dark surface.

Without hesitation, I reached my arm down into where I saw her disappear and got hold of her jacket by its collar. I jerked her up like snagging a river trout and up popped Angie chocking and spitting water out from her mouth and nose. I got her back up on the bridge, and she looked right in my eyes. I saw the terror begin to dissipate as she realized she was back on the surface of the bridge. She had stepped off the edge and fell into the murky darkness. And just as quickly, I snatched her out of that flooded hell. It all happened in the vacant space of a camera flash.

Angie almost lost that day. I don't remember any strain bringing her in. It all seemed so effortless. The mushrooms influenced my reaction and I had acted swiftly. Was it my instant reaction that saved her or just pure luck? I don't know. But we all knew in that moment we had witnessed a miracle. Chad and Zana had caught up to us. They had witnessed Angie's baptism. Relief came over them when I reeled her in.

Angie held me tightly with both arms wrapped around my waist. I held her with both my arms. The sky sobbed and drenched us with large drops of rain. We were soaking wet from hair to soles. We circumspectly made our way across the bridge and to the road that led away from the river.

On the riverbank, we were relieved. It was like a revival. We repented and our sins were washed away with that river. After the river, there was a kind of weightlessness. Our burdens were lightened. It felt great to be out of the water. The duplex was now very far from the bridge, and we arrived there quickly. I flew high from all the excitement and the potent mushrooms that were still streaming through my system.

Angie went into the bathroom to take a shower. I couldn't sit still. I dried myself as best I could with a towel.

My mood changed rapidly. The emotions of the night mixed with the mushrooms wouldn't allow me to rest still. I felt bound and confined in the duplex with Angie. I had no intention of spending the night with her at this point. The shrooms had given me a sense of boundless energy, a feeling of euphoric invincibility. I had to go. I walked out the house and back to the road towards the bridge. I felt like I could walk all the way back to Seattle—and I planned to do just that. It had stopped raining by this time, but my shoes were still soggy from the river.

I must have lost my sense of direction because I could not find the bridge or the river for that matter. I was out of the town and walking down a lonely two-lane highway. It was gravely dark. The gray gravel reflected what little light there was that hit it. I couldn't see much of the asphalt road to my right or the grassy ditch off to my left. Beyond the road and the ditch, nothing was visible but the darkness. Every so often, I would see a pair of headlamps coming down the road towards me. Right before the car's lights could expose me, I dove off the road and into the ditch to my left. I did this when cars came from either direction. I repeatedly dove into the ditch for the next few hours. I had an eerie premonition that someone would shoot me. I imagined that someone driving by would stick a shotgun out the car window and blast me. I wanted to live not be blasted.

Blinded by darkness, I couldn't see much of anything. I wandered down that country road. I could hear the night. Insects and then some large animals snorting. They were deep-chested grunts that came from just off the road on the left side of the ditch. Probably some horses or cows and bulls I thought. Animals, domestic or not, scared the shit out of me. Being from the city, it was unusual to me. I wasn't sure if I'd be bitten or trampled by them. Out all alone in the night with the animals to my left and the occasional vehicles to my right felt threatening. The

shrooms in my body soon waned. An uncomfortable feeling began to overwhelm me. I wondered how in the hell I got to this place, and how the hell I was going to get back to Seattle. I wished for the day and light and kept walking and diving and hoping to reach some safe outpost.

Suddenly I came upon a street that veered off the main road. There were, what I perceived to be, new houses recently constructed. The trees in the front landscape were young with sticks tied to them for support. At the first house I reached, I walked on the lawn next to one of those young trees and fell under it. I lay in the yard under that tree pursuing sleep. I was exhausted from the shrooms, the river, the walking. The rain had ceased long ago, and the stars illuminated the black night.

I was flat on my back looking up at Orion. His belt always attracted my attention, but the real beauty was in Betelgeuse's appearance. Sure, Rigel luminated brighter, but it lacks the color of Betelgeuse's reddish flare. Betelgeuse blazed like a forest fire in the sky. Orion, the mighty hunter! Homer said Achilles' eyes were shining like the late summer star, the star of Orion's dog. Orion works well as the starting point for reading the stars. I followed its belt down the sky and it pointed to the brightest star of them all, Sirius, located in *Canis Major* below the hunter Orion. I felt like a lonely hunter lost in a dark green forest waiting for the break of day to discover the way out. Unable to fall asleep, I stood up to resume my walk.

I needed to get to a town, any town, in order to get back to the base in Seattle. Wherever I had wondered that night, Seattle would still be to the south. Hitchhiking was the only way outta here for me. If someone could take me to the nearest town then I could find a bus station and get back to Seattle. So I decided to risk being blasted by a shotgun.

I got on the road and walked. Soon, a few cars went by. I walked backwards with my thumb up, but no one stopped. After a while, another car approached. The car slowed down when the driver saw me. He pulled over ahead of me and stopped. I ran. It was a rusty old station wagon. Its taillights were the winged type. The back seats and rear cargo area were packed to the hilt with what looked like junk. I got up to the front passenger side of the car, and an older woman cranked down the window. I looked across her at the driver, a man with a straw hat. His white locks flowed shoulder length out the bottom of his hat. The woman also had a straw hat. Their faces and dress revealed the wear and tear of a difficult frontier lifestyle. The old man asked where I was goin? I told them I needed a lift to the closest town in order to get back down to Seattle. They told me to hop in!

The old woman slid over, and I sat down and closed the door. The old man hit the gas, and it felt heavenly to be driving down that road after all the walking I'd done.

“What’s yer name? The old man said.

“g-man”

“g-man, you FBI? He said laughing.

“No, it’s a nickname.” I said.

“You from Seattle?”

“No, I’m stationed there in the Navy.” I said.

“The Navy! Where’re ye from originally” He said.

They looked to me like country hillbillies, so, probably because I saw the movie *Deliverance* when I was ten, I had this crazy thought they might kill me if they found out I was a City boy, so I lied and made like I was a country boy.

“Outside Albany, New York.” I said because I’d visited family there and knew it was country.

“Oh, Okay. I’m Gabe” he said, “This is my wife Sara.”

I said it was nice to meet them and thanked them for the ride. They said it was no trouble at all and asked how I liked the state of Washington compared to New York? I told them how I had loved the state of Washington from day one. It was so beautiful and clean. I was amazed how clean the streets and roads in Seattle were.

He told me how beautiful the state of New York was, or rather New Yerk is how he said it. He said, He’d been to New York a long time ago with Sara.

He looked at me with raised eyebrows and nodded his head up and down, and said, “Ever been to New York City?”

I felt like he knew I was lying, he knew I was a city boy, and he was letting me know that very thing with his look, his eyebrows and his nodding. In reality, there was no reason to lie, and he was telling me just that. Lying to God is like lying to your mother. God knows you better than you know your own self.

Gabe didn’t wait for an answer but said, “A fellas got to be careful out here at night by himself. People are very particular ‘bout strangers in these parts.”

Sara just kept shaking her head up and down and mouthing mm hhm, yup, yes sir! I didn’t reply not knowing where Gabe was going with that remark. I felt my heart beating a little faster and I wondered if I had made the right choice in getting in the car with these old hillbillies.

Gabe went on saying, “Problem is people just don’t treat others right these days. Seems like they can’t stand being ‘round folks for too long before there’s a problem. Big problems with crime today, and no one stays married anymore.

“Ain’t that right angel.” Gabe said while looking at Sara.

“Mmmhmmm!” Sara responded.

Gabe continued saying, “The biggest problem in this country is everyone lies all the time, nobody’s honest, everyone’s afraid of the truth. Even ‘bout the smallest things that don’t much matter. People just lie for no good reason. Seems simply out of habit more than anything.”

Gabe was talking while driving down the road towards the town. He wasn’t speeding but he wasn’t driving slowly either.

“Yer want to know what it is that’ll help there g-man? Gabe said.

“Yes sir, what’s that.” I said. My voice cracked a little out of nervousness knowing I had just lied to Gabe about where I came from.

“No matter how persuasive a person thinks they are, they should always remember...”

Gabe abruptly ended his sentence omitting whatever objective he was aiming for.

I gave him a minute, then said “What?”

“Gabe said, “What?””

What should people always remember Gabe? I said

He Chuckled and said, “I’m glad ye asked. What people should always remember is this...”

Then he leaned a little past Sara in my direction and whispered, “The Lord knows.”

He said it eerily. He didn’t say it like a preacher or an evangelist who was trying to proselytize me. He didn’t say it in any religious sense. It was more a conviction for him, something he unequivocally believed. And I could tell it was truth, his truth, and he passed it on to me free of charge.

I sat there for a moment in silence.

Then I said, “The Lord knows what?”

Gabe said, “Not what! Just remember, just always remember, the Lord knows.”

“Ain’t that right angel.” Gabe said while looking at Sara.

“Mmmhmmm!” Sara responded. She shook her head up and down.

“You’re an angel” Gabe said.

“Soar you.” Sara said.

“I’m glad we were able to pick you up. We’ll get ya safely to town where you can catch a ride back to Seattle. Don’t ye worry!” Gabe said,

I had lied, and Gabe somehow knew it. I lied out of fear. Fear of being killed by hillbillies. I identified Gabe and Sara with the characters in the movie *Deliverance*. I felt silly. I realized there was no need to lie. Gabe had set me free with his “the Lord knows” statement.

I was somewhat comfortable now, so I turned my head to see what all the junk in the back could be. There were eyes staring at me out of the junk from every side of the back seat and cargo area. The eyes had multi-shaded round faces attached to them. They were children’s eyes, meek and innocent. The faces with eyes looked out in all directions. I abruptly turned away then looked again. Now they appeared as the faces of young angels, child-angels. Their eyes looked at me out of the junk they were buried in. Their faces had shone. They seemed to be saying goodbye to me.

Gabe drove on into the main street of some small town north of Snohomish. He pulled over in front of an all-night diner.

I sincerely thanked Gabe and Sara for the ride. As I opened the door to get out, I looked at the back of the station wagon and the eyes in the junk followed me.



“Looky here! You take care of yerself now g-man. It was a pleasure meetin’ ye!” Gabe Said.

I thanked them again then stood up and stepped out of the car. I put my two hands on the door and looked at Sara and Gabe with a smile on my face.

Gabe Said, “Ye be good city boy! “The Lord knows!” He said. Then he sped off. With half smile, I shook my head side to side and waved as they drove off.

I went into the diner, sat in a booth, and had a cup of coffee. The waitress pointed across the street to where the bus stop was located. She said it was an express bus and it would take me nonstop all the way back to Seattle. It would be there in less than an hour she said.

After my coffee, I went to the bus stop and waited. I caught that bus all the way back down Lake City Way then got off and walked the rest of the way back to the base. It was around seven in the morning when I got back into my barracks. I climbed into bed and slept till around seven that evening.

I woke up and went down the hall to the public restroom where I showered, shaved and dressed. I was ready to head down to the Club. I stopped back at the room to put my towel and things back into my locker. When I opened the door, there was my roommate Chad with Zana and Angie waiting for me. Angie jumped up and punched me dead in the chest.

“Where’d you go.” She said.

I told them about the mushrooms I had taken, and how I just couldn’t sit still, so I left thinking I’d walk back to Seattle. I relayed the entire tale of the evening after I had abruptly left and how I had walked on the side of the road for hours.

“I was so afraid when you left.” Angie said.

“Why?” I asked

She told me, “You don’t understand. There have been people found shot on the side of the road the last few weeks.”

So that’s why I was diving into the ditch every time a car drove by, I thought. That was my death premonition.

I told them how I dove into the ditch every time a car drove by. They couldn’t believe it. I detailed the rest of the morning about hitchhiking and how Gabe and Sara picked me up, my conversation with them, how I lied because I was scarred they would kill me for being a city boy, how they’d dropped me off at the diner, about how I realized the eyes in the back of the wagon were a shitload of Cabbage Patch dolls, and the bus trip back, the rest of the entire adventure.

Angie punched me lightly in the arm and said, “Thanks for saving my life last night.”

“No extra charge,” I joked.

“No serious, I didn’t get to thank you properly.” She said.

“Not necessary, the Lord Knows,” I said.

“What are you getting religious on me?”

“No.” I said, “But last night’s shroom trip, with the baptism and miracle of saving your life at the river, and the two angels I met on the road, it was as religious an experience can get. I’m a changed man now.”

Later that evening at the club I gave myself a two-beer limit. I made Angie aware that I would make a new start in my life. I’d slow down my drinking and stop my drug use. I would not play anymore games, especially with woman.

She thought that was good until she realized my plans didn't include her. But I couldn't lie and keep the charade with her going because I knew, "the Lord knew."

I transitioned from boyhood to manhood in Seattle, from adolescence to a full-fledged adult. My beloved Seattle was my mother now. Everything does change. Nothing stays the same. No matter how good the present is, it will not remain. Life is always in flux, and I would have to learn to adapt and move ahead.

Maggie was gone. Chad was reassigned and left Seattle. Soon I would be reassigned to a ship in Long Beach. After two years, I was abruptly kicked out of that nest. Forced to leave my maternal Seattle. Though I craved to, I'd never return.

## Memory and the Influence of Books in *The Death-song of g-man*

*The Death-song of g-man* is a coming of age story. More specifically, it is a collection of short stories that tell the tale of a generation Xer who came of age during the latter half of the 20th century in America. Half the collection takes place in a decayed New York City during the 1970s and 80s. The second half is situated in the green, clean and pristine city of Seattle in the early 1980s. *The Death-song* is transitional in that it reveals aspects of American life as one century waned and another was about to be ushered in.

Why would anyone care about the seemingly mundane and ordinary life of a gen-Xer growing up in America? When it comes to reading fiction, there are so many flavors and a plethora of options to choose from. Some might prefer the entertainment value of commercial fiction. Others enjoy an aesthetic of difficulty where one works their way through an elaborate plot and a labyrinth of detail and derives pleasure by working out meaning.

*The Death-song of g-man* is neither commercial, nor is it aesthetically difficult. *The Death-song* contains themes of alienation, loneliness and despair at times. Some of its subject matter spotlights drug and alcohol abuse, misogyny, mental health, relationships, sex and other matters of coming of age. It may be appealing to some but may not be desirable to others. Ultimately, it depends on an individual's reading preferences. Let me provide some reasons why one should consider reading *The Death-song of g-man*.

*The Death-song* definitely is influenced by the western literary canon. It is a western book with western thought because g-man is from the occident, not the orient. However, the *The Death-song* is not entirely without an eastern presence. Salman Rushdie's *Shame* is echoed in some of the Seattle stories of *The Death-song*.

Sherwood Anderson's, *Winesburg, Ohio* has the main character, George Willard, coming of age in rural nineteenth century Ohio. Anderson writes about what he calls the grotesque, which really is the falsehoods that people make their own truth and hold on to in their lives and seen in their relationships, in their behavior. *The Death-song* expresses themes of the grotesque when g-man embraces bad ideas as truth. For example, the tearing of the birds, drug and alcohol abuse, the elevator stunt, the mushroom trip and more. He acts on them and ultimately discovers they are not the good or the feeling of the peaceful snow that he sought out ever since "The Origin of g-man." I find Anderson's concept of the grotesques somewhat complex. In my copy of *Winesburg, Ohio*, my annotations written on the pages of "The Book of the Grotesque" state, "What people show you as there truth are really falsehoods or lies, but they present them as truth, that is the grotesque." People can live their entire lives in falsehood and never know it. G-man's search for the peaceful snow is really a search for stability and truth. He wrestles with the bad in life which helps him discover the good. The idea of the grotesque can be seen in other modernists works that follow Andersons, *Winesburg, Ohio*.

One of those is James Joyce's *Dubliners* about early twentieth-century life in Ireland. Joyce wrote his short story collection about the people of the city, Dublin. *The Death-song* gives a reader a detailed view of the life and experiences of a generation Xer in the Bronx as *Dubliners* reveal the life and intimacy of the citizens of Dublin almost a century before g-man. Further on in this essay, I discuss Joyce's influence on *The Death-song* several times.

Hemingway's *In our Time* contains short stories set in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Midwest America. One could read *In our Time* and track Nick as he comes of age, and then read *The Death-song* and compare the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Midwest to the later 20<sup>th</sup> century in an eastern American city.

How important is Tim O'Brien's semi-autobiographical work *The Things They Carried*, which is about a male first person "I" character and his experiences during Vietnam-war-era-America? *The Death-song of g-man* expresses themes of war, and the impact of those experiences on a person's life during the Vietnam war. *The Death-song* is almost entirely written using the first person "I" narrator.

Does anyone still enjoy the auto-biographical stories of Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*? These short stories are mostly situated during the latter part of the twentieth century in a decaying town in Iowa. They are filled with drugs and alcohol abuse and many experiences while under the influence. *The Death-song of g-man* expresses similar subject matter but in a different setting with different experiences while under the influence of illicit substances. How similar yet distinct an experience is Denis Johnson's character, in "Emergency," walking into an emergency-room with a knife through his eye compared to Raffy, in "Mr. Softee, stabbing a girl in the eye with a sharp #2 pencil.

*The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Sherman Alexie's auto-biographical work about growing up as a young native American on a reservation during the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century gave readers a look at what it was like to be a poverty stricken native American at that time. *The Death-song of g-man* runs parallel in time with *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. As Victor was coming of age on that reservation near Spokane Washington, g-man was going through his tribal rites in the Bronx. Victor and g-man are both a part of a

homogenized Generation X. The authors of both came of age in American poverty. They share similar experiences and express similar sentiments, even though they grew up in America 2,500 miles away from one another. Of Course, when I say Victor and g-man, I'm really implying the authors.

David Foster Wallace, also a Gen-Xer, placed the setting of his novel, *Infinite Jest*, slightly into the future of early 21<sup>st</sup> century America, yet the characters and their problems with drugs, mental health, the desire to be entertained and death proclamations all reflect the period of latter twentieth century America and its youth. *The Death-song of g-man* reflects aspects of *Infinite Jest* with its tales of degradation and hope in a decaying society.

What was it like to be a youth in the Bronx during the later quadrant of the twentieth century? *The Death-song* gives one person's view from that period, yet it also reveals how many gen-Xers thought, hoped, dreamed and contended with the challenges of youth. Baby Boomers and Millennials, who are the bread of a today's generational structure in America, can learn about the smaller generation sandwiched in between them, by reading *The Death-song of g-man*.

In thinking about the forerunners of the western canon, a writer is generally aware of those works that have come before him. Harold Bloom theorized about an anxiety or apprehension in an author as to whether his or her own work will measure up or even excel beyond what has already been said and written. Perhaps some writers don't care about what came before their works, but I care to the extent that all artists are influenced by someone or something (work) that came before them. If my work reflects an influence of the past, does what I create add anything new to what has already been created? Upon completing the writing of *The*

*Death-song*, I am confident that all I have gleaned from western writers and western thought contributed to my work being a new expression that reflects my own unique experience.

The initial seed for *The Death-song of g-man* germinated as an undergrad taking various creative writing courses. Many of its stories began as poetic works in fulfillment of projects for these courses. As a graduate student, the concept for the project began to grow vigorously. Studying the great ideas of Western Civilization helped hone the ideas and themes.

The first story in the collection is titled “The Origin of g-man.” It is important to note that g-man, unless starting a sentence, is never capitalized. This is a Joycean influence. In his stories, James Joyce utilized names with meanings that tied into the story. In the *Dubliners* story “The Dead,” Joyce’s main character is named after the archangel Gabriel. The first character of the story is a female named Lily. According to the footnotes of the Penguin Books collection, “*Lily*, The flower of that name is symbolically associated with the Archangel Gabriel...” (Joyce 305). I’ve endeavored to do a similar thing with symbolism in the name “g-man,” allowing the reader to speculate on an interpretation. The reader can think about the symbolism and make an argument as to the reasons for the unusual lower-case “g.”

Additionally, this utilization of the lower-case initial is because of g-man’s year of birth which puts him into, in generational theory, the category of Generation X. Generation X has a large cohort of baby boomers preceding them and a huge group of millennials that follow after. Gen X is a smaller population cohort compared to its predecessor and successor cohorts. The larger the number, the greater the attention. Gen X, being small, is almost a forgotten generation. They were discarded by former generations as slackers and lazy-do-nothings. Today, they are generally dismissed by Millennials. The lower-case g-man reflects the smallness of his cohort



and how small, insignificant and unknown g-man feels in society. Perhaps this is part of his motivation to excel during his rites of passage.

*The Death-song of g-man* is separated into two parts. The first five stories take place in the Bronx. The second four in Seattle. As a result, the first part is called the Bronx tales and the second part the Seattle tales. These two major cities of the United States are located on opposite coasts and are separated by three thousand miles. They both are the setting for this collection in the creative thesis.

The first story to discuss is “Origin of g-man.” In this story, I tried to create an eerie and mythical atmosphere by the presence of snow and snowing. Compare “Origin” to Joyce’s “The Dead.” Joyce creates an eerie, gloomy setting by the use of the snow. Gabriel learns that his wife loved another prior to their marriage. This new knowledge leaves the husband wondering if his wife had ever truly loved him. One argument for the symbol of the snow is that snow unites life and death. In general, there are two ways to respond to snow. One is to enjoy it and play in it. That is life. Another response is to reject its presence because cold, ice and freeze accompany snow and are unpleasant and potentially dangerous. This is a rejection of death. In “The Dead” the snow is constantly around. Gabriel rejects the snow and protects himself from it by wearing galoshes, but ultimately he cannot avoid the coldness he feels after learning his wife loved another and is still affected by that love when she cries while hearing an old Irish folk song that reminds her of the boy who loved her and ultimately died for her. It becomes a freezing ice in Gabriel’s heart because he realizes he can never match the level of love this boy had displayed for his wife.

In “Origin of g-man” the snow represents the binary of life and death as well. The story reveals the first memories of g-man, whose drug addicted father returns to his tenement

apartment on the first floor to find out he is purposefully locked out. It is snowing outside, and when his father breaks the window, the snow enters the house and melts. The cold snow meets the warm air in the apartment and changes to water. Water symbolizes life. G-man's experience is one of seeing death in his father who was dying of addiction, yet his entire life is set before him. The snow represents death for g-man's father but life for g-man. Snow also represents purity and quietness for g-man. He likes the snow and its promise of life and peace in the midst of this dark death experience.

The first story also alludes to the theme of memory in *The Death-song*. G-man stacks his memories like polaroid pictures. He occasionally brings them out to view them and recall the context of the images. He also protects his memories, lest the sun and weather erode them. Sun and weather being time which erodes memory. The author excavates, collects and cultivates memory and recollection as one mines for diamonds or gold and silver. Dave Eggers, in the 2006 *Forward to Wallace's Infinite Jest* said, [The author David Foster Wallace or the "I" first-person narrator named ["Hal"]] "Seems to be heading ever-inward, into the depths of memory and the relentless conjuring of a certain time." The author and the character, g-man, crave memory. It is important to the author to salvage and preserve memory by writing. G-man is mostly injured by memory, but like Homer's Odysseus, he continues on his odyssey, endeavoring to make his way home. The last story in *The Death-song*, "After the River" takes g-man on an odyssey from Seattle through several trials outside of Seattle where we see g-man struggling to find his way home to the Navy base.

The second story "Dirty Birds" is reminiscent of Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*. Denis Johnson stated that his collection of short-stories, *Jesus' Son*, was greatly influenced by Babel's work. Babel is known as an author who utilized strong imagery to depict the 1939 invasion and

occupation of the Red Army in eastern Poland. Johnson utilizes strong imagery in his work of the exploits of several addicts living in Iowa as they engage in drug use and petty crime. The later chapters of *The Death-song* portray g-man involved in similar behavior as the miscreants in *Jesus' Son*. "Dirty Birds" utilizes strong imagery to display the early stages of decadent behavior in g-man.

The title "Teenage Wasteland" is a combination of the poem by T.S. Eliot *The Waste Land*, and the song by the rock group The Who, "Baba O'Riley" from their album *Who's Next*. The refrain of the Who's song is "teenage wasteland / it's only teenage wasteland / teenage wasteland / oh yeah / it's only teenage wasteland / there all wasted!" My recollection takes me back to the age of fifteen or sixteen, smoking pot in One-Eyed-Jake's father's apartment, popping wheelies on his father's spare wheelchairs while his father was admitted to the VA hospital because of an old Korean war wound, and Jake going wild when Baba O'Riley came on the ghetto blaster tuned into the NYC rock station. Jake sang the refrain "teenage wasteland" with such emotion that I never forgot it. The irony was that he was around 23 years old, well past his teenage years. It was an emotional reaction when the music and lyrics evoked fond memories in Jake. This scene has stuck in my recollection as if it happened yesterday. And that is the point. The story of "One-Eye-Jake" is one that begins in innocence and ends in tragedy. G-man, so young, takes a bite of the apple. This is one of the stories that I plan on adding to the collection of *The Death-song*. Digging deep into memory and recollection is what gave birth to *The Death-song*, and it is what impelled it forward to completion. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* expresses this idea of remembrance at the beginning and throughout the poem. The first four lines are the epigraph to "Teenage Wasteland."

"April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.”

There is a blend of memory and desire in Eliot’s poem. He expresses that this mixed pairing of memory and desire will stir dull roots, awakening them after the long cold winter and causing them to sprout. *The Death-song* contains the sprouted dull roots of my memory transferred to the “I” narrator and then into character g-man.

In Hemingway’s first short-story collection, *In Our Times*,” the story, “The Battler,” contains a character that struggles with mental health. The fourth story in my collection, “Mister Softee,” has a character that has mental health issues, but the entire story doesn’t deal with the mental health issue in the fashion that “The Battler” does. In “The Battler” Hemingway builds tension from the moment Nick meets “Ad,” a prizefighter who describes himself as crazy. Ad maintains a friendly disposition towards Nick until he has an abrupt behavior change and threatens him. At the story’s crescendo, Ad’s friend, Bugs, knocks Ad unconscious with a black-jack just before the prizefighter was going to give Nick a beating.

In describing the character Raffy in “Mister Softee,” his mental health issues are addressed at the beginning, but the story turns away from that subject matter to describe a type of baseball that inner-city youth played in the Bronx. The ice-cream truck named Mister Softee doesn’t enter the story until about three-quarters into it. I titled the story with the same name as the ice-cream truck because the entrance of Mister Softee is the turning point of the story. “The Battler” and “Mister Softee” stories have several parallels. Both have important characters with mental health issues. Both stories open with the mental health issue tension and build to a crescendo about three quarters of the way into the story. The crescendo in both stories are incidents where the characters with mental health receive additional brain trauma by being knocked unconscious. The difference is in how they each receive the blow. Ad gets hit in the

head with the black jack, while Raffy hits his head on the asphalt street after getting hit by a speeding van. After that crescendo, both stories have a decrescendo that helps alleviate the tension and bring the reader calmly to the story's end. After that, the story's tension returns to the same level as when it begins.

Hemingway's reporting style writing with its short, to-the-point sentences is something I've endeavored to incorporate into the whole work of *The Death-song* because of the effectiveness of communicating an image. Several parts of "Mr. Softee" contain that news reporter style of writing: For example, Carlos hitting and breaking a window with the sponge-ball, and the three kids who stick their head out the window. Also, Raffy getting hit by the van leans towards that journalistic style. As a teenager, I went to a magnet high school in the Bronx that offered courses in Journalism. I was taught to gather the Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How and report on those facts. That early training in writing has stuck with me and is a part of my writing style.

The last of the Bronx tales is "Beneath the Elevator." This story has gone through three different genres. It first appeared in a course on the informal essay as an undergrad. Soon after, in a poetry writing class, it was rewritten in the poetic genre. It went through many phases of the editing process and has become part of a series of poems that I called the *Purgation of g-man*. The poems were a collection of personal near-death experiences. Near-death, not in the sense of almost dying, but rather, they were incidents in my life that had zero room for error, or I would not have survived. "Beneath the Elevator" was one of those. It morphed into prose after I took a course on advanced fiction writing. This is where my love for writing prose fiction began to really take off.

I was introduced to the works of Jack Kerouac in high school. His *Roman à clef*, or Novel with a key, *On the Road*, really spoke to me. He wrote novels that were based upon actual events from his life and the people who he knew in daily life. The people in *On the Road* were actual people, but the names were changed. Most of his friends who read his novels knew exactly who was who. His spontaneous and confessional style was what I tried to imitate early in my writing career. I had read somewhere that Kerouac's goal was to write a collection of novels that would tell the tales of Jack Duluoz called the *Duluoz Legend*. Most of his novels fall into the collection of the *Duluoz Legend*. Kerouac set out to be the great modern mythmaker of the epic. *The Death-song* has a mythical element to it as well. G-man becomes this mythical character by the end of "Beneath the Elevator." He is initiated into the hood hall of fame after the elevator stunt. His exploits with Crazy-man would be retold for years and repeated to the next generation who would pass it down from there.

As the main character of the mythical *Duluoz Legend* was Jack Duluoz, the main character of *The Death song [Legend]* is g-man. Similar to *On the Road*, *The Death-song* is a *Roman à clef*. The autobiographical subject is obviously the author's own experience with slight alterations, reversals, substitutions, and at times embellishments of the actual facts of the author's history. The names represent real people in the author's life. I'll let you guess who g-man identifies with. Crazy-man was a guy I grew up with whom we called Crazy-..... for reasons observed in the novel. He had an African American mother and an Italian father. His crazy nature was more performative than clinical. The real Raffy or ..... in "Mr. Softee" was actually both clinical and criminal. I recently learned that he was released from prison after spending most of his adult life incarcerated. Carlos or my good friend ..... did have the chiseled body of an African American David statue. He was great at every sport. He was also into music and

dreamed of being a rap artist. After several decades, I spoke with him this past year. He still smokes pot and dreams of being a rap artist. I suggested he give it up. After he graduated from high school, Tank, or ..... , entered the police academy and spent 20 years with the NYPD. He saw many acquaintances we grew up with go in and out of the local precinct he worked at. If he was a writer, he'd have better stories than me to tell. There is some of the key to *The Death-song*.

One final aspect of “Beneath the Elevator” but an aspect that is true of the entire *Death-song* is how pop culture pops in and out of the stories and produces familiar imagery for most readers. In “Beneath the Elevator” when g-man and Crazy-man are lifted off the elevator shaft floor the narrator says, “I looked down and watched my *high-top Nike's* slowly rise above the shaft floor. The space between the swoosh and the bottom gradually increased.” Nike has been a popular brand of athletic shoe since the late 1970s. The reader may imagine their own Nike brand shoes rising above that elevator floor. David Foster Wallace incorporated pop culture in his novel in *Infinite Jest*. In fact, He also incorporated the imagery of the Nike brand when describing how Harold and his Uncle Charles feet looked next to each other while sitting in a University's Deans office. “The high traction sole of my complimentary *Nike sneaker* runs parallel to the wobbling loafer of my mother's half-brother.” The Nike sneakers next to the wobbling loafer also allude to the age difference between Harold, a high school senior, and his uncle.

The myth of g-man went national after the elevator incident. He joined the Navy and was sent to a base in Seattle, Washington after boot camp. That is the time frame when “Hangin' with Chad” begins. While all *The Death-song* stories follow each other chronologically, there are gaps of years in between in the Bronx tales. The Seattle stories all take place within a tighter time period of about two years. “Hangin' with Chad” and “Hangin' with Maggie” are two separated

stories that have the closest interconnection of all. “Chad” comes first in time because it takes place upon g-man’s initial arrival at the Navy Base in Seattle. Then “Maggie” is meant to be a continuation of the Chad story, with no gap of time between the two. That was not initially intended: “Chad” and “Maggie” were originally one story. But after writing the story, and then realizing I had so much material, I decided to break it into two stories with one following on the heels of the other. This is a variation of what Sherwood Anderson does in his story collection, *Winesburg, Ohio* where the story, “Godliness, a Tale in Four Parts, tells of the genealogy of George Willard.

In the “Maggie” story, the Master Chief plays a prominent role, even though only appearing as himself two-thirds into the tale. He is based on the father of a girl I dated while in Seattle.....The Master Chief’s character, beyond being the father of Maggie, contains two significant elements of my autobiography. One is what a huge impact the Vietnam war had on me growing up while that war was happening. The second is the suicide by hanging by one of my favorite uncles when I was 10 years old. The imagery of the Vietnam war on television and in newspapers and magazines left indelible impressions on the young minds of generation X, especially young boys. With WWI and WWII movies and the live footage of Vietnam constantly on television, it is no wonder war imagery dominated a young generation Xer’s mind. That would be the reason for the Vietnam war appearing in *The Death-song* as well as other poetic works that I’ve written.

How many classics of the western canon contain war themes? *The Iliad and The Aeneid*, just to name two major classical works of Greek and Roman antiquity. The Modernists lived through the first World War and wrote about it. Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf and Isaac Babel’s *Red Cavalry* all contain either war itself or major war themes.



Let us not forget Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, about a young man being drafted into the Army and sent to Vietnam. War is a major theme in all these writings and many others because unfortunately war is a human condition. All these books have influenced me in one way or another. Some of the reasons why and how they have had an effect on my writing, I've already mentioned. Septimus Warren Smith, a character in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, left an indelible impression on me.

The Master Chief is comparable to Woolf's character, Septimus Warren Smith, a working-class veteran who returned from the First World War bearing deep psychological scars. Septimus committed suicide by jumping out a window. He was portrayed as deeply depressed by what the experiences of WWI did to him. I incorporated the same idea of depression in the Master Chief. Septimus, the Master Chief and my favorite Uncle were all deeply scarred and depressed individuals. They all battled with mental health because of some tragic circumstances in their lives. My uncle was actually a prewar Army vet, so it wasn't the war but other things he endured that made him mentally unwell. I sensed his sadness when I was just a boy, but of course I did not then know why. The representation of my uncle as the Master Chief is an example of what makes autobiographical fiction, fiction.

Petronius's *The Satyricon* follows the life of two young first-century Roman citizens and a 16-years-old youth slave through a period of degradation and debauchery. "Big Trouble" in some ways reminds me of some of the debauchery in *The Satyricon*. Just as the three characters of *The Satyricon* at times find themselves in big trouble that they will need to be extricated from, so G-man and Raphael experience the same. One interesting aspect of the title of *The Satyricon* is the mythological Satyr that is imbedded in the early novel's name. It is well known that the Satyr was represented as part human, part horse, and sometimes part goat and was noted for

riotousness and lasciviousness. In classical Greek and Roman myths, the Satyr was said to seduce and rape the nymphs of the forest. In “Big Trouble” both g-man and Raphael go on this journey of debauchery involving binge drinking, petty crime and attempted rape. Raphael, who claimed to be a Don Juan is really a Satyr in disguise. G-man falls under his spell but retains his human side and never transforms into a Satyr himself. Like “Beneath the Elevator, he escapes by the skin of his teeth. Eventually he breaks free of Raphael’s hold and draws a line for himself that he will not cross over. This is a turning point in the life of g-man that is not fully realized until the end of the final story in the collection, “After the River.”

“After the River” contains religious and spiritual themes initiated by a mushroom fueled trip. G-man has a turning point at the end of “Big Trouble,” but still has not realized how to stay out of big trouble. However, a major awakening occurs as a result of g-man completing his journey in Seattle. In some ways, this is g-man’s odyssey, or perhaps his odyssey includes his entire time in Seattle. He has to go through the underworld to make his way home. Anyway, “After the River is an odyssey for him. In this story, he is baptized, sent on a journey and meets angelic-like characters from the spirit world. He is given advice along his journey that helps him find his way home. The end of “After the River” shows g-man claiming to make decisions that would make him a more ethically responsible individual. This paves the way for future works in the g-man legend beyond *The Death-song*.

I plan to add four additional stories, not yet written, to this collection. The first two would go into the Bronx tales’ part of *The Death-song*. The working titles are as follows: “The Frisbee,” which is a tale about g-man and his friends walking into a supermarket while an armed robbery was in progress. The second is “One Eyed Jakes are Wild,” which I talked about in some detail during the discussion on “Teenage Wasteland.” “Mexico” and “San Francisco” are the

working titles for the second pair of stories, and they would fit into the Seattle Stories. In both stories, g-man is twice temporarily assigned to a Mine Sweeper and cruises to Mexico and San Francisco respectively. Both involve near-death experiences that challenged g-man to snap out of his immaturity and start living responsibly. But it doesn't happen until "After the River," we think.

As far as my future thoughts are for *The Death-song of g-man*, I plan to submit very quickly some individual stories for possible publication in various literary journals, magazines, periodicals, etc. Since the setting of the stories are in Seattle and New York, I'm curious if any journals in or surrounding those cities might be interested. Of course, I'm not limiting myself to only those areas. I'd like to research and learn more about publishing stories, and then target those that may have a history of publishing works like mine. I think stories like "Dirty Boys," could possibly work in the short story or the micro-fiction genres. "Beneath the Elevator," with its very unique experience may be have a good chance of getting published. From the Seattle stories, I think all of them would be good stand-alone stories. I do plan to continue to edit them further; however, many are in good shape currently. At some point after some of the stories are published, I will seek to get the entire work published as a collection.

Overall, *The Death-song of g-man* has been a fleshing out of memory for me. As Egger's said of Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, I headed inward into the depths of my memory and conjured up a certain time. The "certain time" for me was the time of a young person in America. Some of those certain times were good, and some were not. Yet the good and the not so good were homogenized in *The Death-song*. There was the joy of playing "strike-out" behind P.S. 112, and there was the pain of Raffy almost getting killed by that van. There was the not so good, in fact, terrible idea of hanging under an elevator up to the sixth floor, and the exhilaration of

having survived it. The elevator memory for me, today, still makes me cringe. Cringe in embarrassment for being that stupid, that naïve, that foolish, but also there is a trembling when I think about how I put my young life into such a danger. But also, the joy that I lived to tell the tale is there.

One benefit of having a memory is that we can recall both the good and the bad. The point of recalling the good is celebration, and the point of recalling the bad is not to make one depressed, but rather, to remind us of what we have learned along the way and how we have grown into the people we are today. The bad came with the good, and the good can't be separated from the bad. I think that summarizes *The Death-song of g-man*. It is a homogenization of the evil and the good that g-man experienced while coming of age in the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century. And the concept of good and evil in my recollection of the western canon brings me to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. And Milton always brings me to Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*. Did g-man need the bad to achieve the good? As The Steve Miller Band sang, "You know you got to go through hell / before you get to heaven."

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