

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

PISSPOOR HEROES

CRAIG STEVEN SANDERS
Spring 2012

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in creative writing and political science
with honors in creative writing.

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Thomas Noyes
Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing
Thesis Supervisor

George Looney
Professor of English and Creative Writing
Honors Adviser, Thesis Reader

Robert Roecklein
Lecturer in English
Thesis Reader

- Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of four literary works, preceded with a critical preface written by the author. The works deal with a variety of interrelated themes—the effects of alcohol (both negative and positive), ideas of political uprising (and the often misguided means of attempting to effect change), and the ultimate importance of forming alliances, friendships, real human bonds. Although the subject matter in each story is so drastically different from any of the others—from a semi-apocalyptic dictatorship where the oppressed left-handed people are the butt of every joke, to a misguided Communist who steals circus monkeys to do his bidding, to a kid obsessed with professional wrestling who crawls into his refrigerator on a hot summer day in Georgia, and finally to a couple of voluntarily unemployed young men thumbing their way through the Last Frontier in search of *something*. Influenced by the works of such renowned authors as Raymond Carver, Ernest Hemingway, and Junot Díaz, I hope to have produced a collection of works with some thematic relevance to the literary community.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	i
Table of Contents	ii
Critical Preface: A Place for Revolution, a Time to Drink	1
Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man	22
Circus Money and Bad Precedents	46
My Personal Instrument of Destruction	59
The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle	78
Works Cited or Made Direct Reference to in Stories	101
Annotated Bibliography	102

A Place for Revolution, a Time to Drink

Pisspoor Heroes is a collection of four stories that, individually, deal with corrupt regimes, misguided schemes, bulldozer rage, and friendly adventure. The personal and the political alike tie these stories together, and in each piece, there are men who get too drunk.

I want to talk a little bit about the effects of boozing on the different characters in these stories, but I also want to talk about their personal relationships—or lack thereof—and how these relate to their masculinity. The main characters in each of these stories are male, but there are moments of femininity throughout that inform their characters. I will conclude this preface by discussing some of my own experiences—life experiences and reading experiences alike—without which these stories could not have emerged.

Booze: When people ask me what I write about, this is invariably the one-word answer I give right away. I would not say that I consciously set out to write about boozing when I sit down to start a story, but, somehow, alcohol, that subject that so often manages to rear its toxic head in literary fiction, makes its presence known in each of the four works in this brief collection. There are, of course, more themes present in each of my stories—they would be rather simplistic pieces if there were not—but let me begin by demonstrating the ways a trope as common as alcohol can, within a single collection, manifest itself so differently: first as demotivator, then as instigator, then as means of personal destruction, and, finally, as a way to bring people together through liquid bonding.

The opening story of *Pisspoor Heroes*, a satiric little ditty called “Richard

Dictum's Left Hand Man,” after an epigraph from the Attica! Attica! song “Tyler and Marla Were Right,” begins, “I’m sitting alone at the bar, my nose in my glass, half watching the same old lies flicker on the television screen.” From the very first sentence of the collection, the protagonist's drink is made an integral part of his “inventory,” as the fiction writer Ron Carlson phrases it.

The narrator is angry. His anger stems from the oppression of the minority group of which he is a part—the South Paws, the lefties. Oppression of minorities is, of course, a very real problem in the world. As a straight, white, right-handed, meat-eating male living in the United States of America, I am not the poster-child in the fight for minority rights. I do, however, look with scorn upon a society that treats people differently because they are born with a certain skin pigmentation or because they happen to be attracted to members of the same sex. I do not think I am better at driving or other daily activities than my female companions just because I’m male. In fact, when it comes to certain “manly” tasks, specifically the setting of mousetraps, I call my mother or my friend Sydnee, both females. I do not have a significant other, but if I did, she would be a vegetarian.

Left-handed people are the forgotten minority—the minority of minorities. Or, at least, that is what I told myself as I wrote “Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man.” The truth is, outside of some cultures that say the left hand is to be used specifically for hygienic purposes, lefties do not really have it all that bad. They have their own scissors, their own batter's boxes, even their own water fountains (though the narrator would argue that these examples do not constitute “tolerance”). Regardless, this is satire, and it is through laughter at the sheer absurdity of Bent that I hope to allow my readers to gain a new

perspective on the very real problems of our own world—the oppression of lefties versus the oppression of, say, African-Americans or homosexuals. I make it a point to bring up the different civil rights movements throughout American history, though, to demonstrate that each movement is, in fact, its own unique event. The current plight of the homosexual is often compared very directly with the plight of the African-American, and the fact is that these movements are not synonymous. The problems faced by blacks—slavery, exclusion from the democratic process—are not the same as those faced by the gay and lesbian community, though gay men and women certainly face terrible discrimination. Likewise, lefties also face their own unique problems in the fantastical, semi-apocalyptic, absurdist city of Bent.

But back to booze. The narrator is angry. Some readers might hypothesize that his anger has something to do with his overconsumption of booze. While he certainly has had a bit to drink when this story opens, I would point to the fact that he is able to continue mostly coherent narration throughout the piece to support my belief that his inebriation is not total and that his anger does have at least some logical rationale behind it. In truth, the primary source of this narrator's anger has little to do with his own consumption of alcohol and so much to do with everyone else's, specifically the old left-handed drunks who fill Balboa's Leftorium. The narrator continues, “Balboa's is a total shithole. At the other end of the bar, a crowd of Bent's old drunks, all of them old enough to be the father I never knew, lifts their glasses, each with his left hand, each in silence. Fucking nobodies. Complacent bastards. This is their everyday.” The narrator's anger, then, is rooted not only in the horrible policies of the Dictum Administration, but also in the absolute complacency of the left-handed masses.

The characters in Raymond Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" are not being oppressed in quite the same way as the lefties in Bent. They do not have some mustachioed, Thai food-eating dictator reigning over every aspect of their lives, but they do have their own life histories, their own tales of crazed past lovers, and, of course, their own gin all working to paralyze them. As they drink, they muse but take no action, in much the same way as the characters in "Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man."

Alcohol abuse does not always run counter to the revolutionary spirit, though. In the story, "Circus Money and Bad Precedents," a drunken evening watching baseball highlights with a Boris Yeltsin-looking fellow at an Irish pub gives our protagonist, Eric, the gall to follow through with his friend Mark Skarl's plan to build an army for the proletarian uprising. This is the second time in as many politically driven stories that a character has been drunk at a bar watching baseball. Before I dreamed that Raymond Carver was rolling over in his grave, placing a curse upon the success of my writing career, I contemplated titling this collection *What We Talk about When We Talk about Baseball*.

When I started out writing "Circus Money and Bad Precedents," I had a couple of ideas. I knew, if I were not morally opposed to the idea, it would be a most excellent moneymaking scheme to train monkeys to jump on people's backs and steal their wallets for me. I also knew that if I were to steal monkeys from anywhere, it would probably be from the circus. These monkeys are already trained. They are already out of their natural habitat, too, so I would not feel too bad about stealing them. When I heard about the Russian American Kids Circus coming to the Byham Theater in Pittsburgh, everything else fell into place.

I knew from the get-go that Mark and Eric were going to try to steal these kids, but I was unsure as to whether or not they would be successful in their kidnapping plot. At any rate, they would have to face obstacles, and I knew the circus would provide these obstacles. As I wrote, I recognized that “Circus Money” is a total farce. Every move these characters make is absurd. While it concerns itself somewhat with capitalist and Marxist ideologies, it is not the satire that its predecessor is. In “Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man,” the prospect of kids' getting their left arms chopped off is presented in a way which is, I hope, simultaneously funny but a bit frightening. In “Circus Money,” the reader is never really worried that these kids will be taken, so I decided it would be silly to let it happen. The tone and personality of the piece, then, are what save the Russian American children from being kidnapped. Unfortunately, they do not save the multi-purpose building in which the circus is being held from burning to the ground.

It is the intoxication he feels from excessive smoke inhalation and the appearance of a second Boris Yeltsin-looking fellow that prompts Eric to remember the exact rationale that led him to agree to this crazy plot in the first place. “Ain't right,” is the phrase he repeats while drunk, and “Ain't right,” is ultimately the only thing he can say to describe Mark's plot. Eric's revelation is followed, however, by the burning building forcing the three men to take action, forcing them to follow the children and monkeys, a group that is much quicker on its feet than the fully grown men. Often we suggest that people think before they act—use their “best judgment”—, but this is an idea that does not quite fly in a burning building. Sometimes you just have to act. There is not always time to think. Earlier in the story, for instance, the fictional circus bureaucracy fails to come up with a suitable and timely solution for the problem of the rogue monkeys and

angry elephants—ultimately, this leads to a circus on fire. This parallels the bureaucracies of real life, the ones that cannot reach a timely solution for anything and are, for all intents and purposes, a circus.

From a story that is itself a farce, I move into a story that contains within it actual anecdotes of one of the real world's more popular forms of farcical entertainment: professional wrestling. Spoiler alert: wrestlers are people playing characters, the feuds between them are storylines written by writers, and the outcomes of the matches are predetermined. Sure, the good wrestlers tell a story as they go into the ring, letting each move grow organically from the last (like a good writer), but the ending, certain spots (big/risky moves, close calls, run-ins by other wrestlers), and the approximate match length are all contractually guaranteed.

I chose to incorporate wrestling into the story that would eventually become “My Personal Instrument of Destruction,” in part, because I was a huge wrestling fan from third grade up until I got sick of a guy named John Cena being shoved down my throat each week when I watched in high school. In beginning to think about writing the story, besides the nostalgia kick that came from spending an entire Saturday afternoon watching '90s wrestling clips on Youtube and calling it “research,” I was very intrigued by the metafictional potential of inserting actual scenes from wrestling into a work of fiction.

The events in the story—the kid getting himself stuck in the fridge (based on something my brother actually did as a child) and growing up to become a bulldozer driver (my brother is actually going to school to become a math teacher)—are made up, or, at least, the circumstances surrounding them are made up. The narrator is not a real person, nor are his parents, his supervisor, or the convenient store manager. All of the

sections about wrestling or wrestlers' real lives (or deaths) are real, though, in the sense that they have happened, that they aired on television or pay-per-view at some point. (The Undertaker is, in fact, 20-0 at WrestleMania, and although he has not technically retired yet, it is heavily rumored that he will do so before next year's event.) Here is the thing, though. The "real" events of pro wrestling are "fake." They are scripted and acted out by people playing characters. This is recognized within my story. However, as I have mentioned, all of the wrestling events referenced in the story are "real." They come from matches and interviews that were *actually* acted out. The "real" events of the story, though, those involving the narrator, his job, and his family, are "fake." They do not happen in any way in the real world. The dynamic here, then, is in the differentiation between what is fake and what is real and how that perception changes based on the vessel through which someone analyzes the situation. It is a complex dynamic that gives me a headache every time I think about this story.

Some people drink to get rid of headaches. I, instead, will use my headache to segue back into a discussion of the thematic significance of alcohol in this collection. "My Personal Instrument of Destruction" is, hands down, the story in *Pisspoor Heroes* that uses the drink to the darkest effect, and it is, because of that, the piece to which booze seems most integral. The title, a reference to a wrestling promo in which the notoriously evil manager Paul Bearer refers to the Undertaker, the narrator's favorite wrestler, as his "personal instrument of destruction," also refers to the bulldozer the adult narrator drives and, more figuratively, to the flask of whiskey he keeps under his seat.

A drunk dad whose kid grows up to be a drunk himself is a story that has been done before—this I know. There are not many stories that have not been written yet,

though. Where this story strives to differ from others is in its presentation. Most alcoholic narrators looking back on their childhoods probably do not tie every major event of their lives into what was going on in the world of wrestling at the time. The day the narrator crawls into the fridge is memorable because it is the day he crawls into the fridge, but it is also memorable because it is six days after the debut of the Undertaker's storyline brother Kane (again, people playing characters—Mark Callaway and Glenn Jacobs are no relation), six days after the legendary first Hell in a Cell match. He sets fire to the yard, and this is because he thinks he has to go through hellfire and brimstone like the wrestler Kane in order to defeat his father for the championship. This kid is kind of crazy, kind of weird. He lives for the farce. He has to live his life through this imaginary wrestling world, and when he becomes dissatisfied with the product the WWE is putting out, he cannot abide in the real world without artificially intoxicating himself.

Alcohol provides this fridge-dwelling wrestling fan an escape from a reality he does not feel like facing. His dad used to get a little too rough wrestling around the house when he drank, and now he is dying of cancer. His supervisor is going to a wrestling match just up the road, and the narrator was not invited. The convenient store manager tells him he will be rotting in hell soon. These are the things the narrator thinks about. Ultimately, alcohol is what destroys him. He does not die within this story, and he lives under the assumption that someone will find him before it is too late, but for all intents and purposes, he is done.

This dynamic of good versus evil, face versus heel, is another theme brought in by the metafiction of the wrestling trope. The narrator, for instance, is not sure if God exists, but if He does, the narrator thinks, He is probably not a face but a heel—not a good guy

but a bad guy. Anyone who has spent any amount of time watching wrestling understands that “turns” from face to heel and vice versa are a necessary part of the ongoing fiction. Sometimes a wrestler is simply not “over,” does not receive an adequate crowd reaction, does not “put butts in seats,” in his or her current character. A face who bores the crowd probably needs to do something to get under their skin to become a heel. Charismatic heels with memorable catchphrases often gain the crowd's approval. The face/heel dynamic is one that I could go on for pages about, but this is not an essay about how to promote a wrestling federation, so I will refrain from doing so.

The idea of things being black and white, the idea of good and evil as concrete, mutually exclusive concepts, is one that does not fit real life or, for that matter, the “real” world of my fictional story. Nor is the idea that someone can simply change from good to bad and have all be forgotten because they were off TV for a few months. These are ideas with which the narrator in “My Personal Instrument of Destruction” struggles. Who is good? Who is bad? Does his father turn face just because he is diagnosed with cancer? Even the notorious heel “Rowdy” Roddy Piper entered to a huge standing ovation when he came back after years to reveal his own cancer diagnosis. He never put anyone in the hospital with a tombstone piledriver, though. Where do we draw the line? When do someone's evil deeds cross a line that is unforgivable? How many times can Triple H reform the classic group Degeneration X with his friend/partner Shawn Michaels after almost ending Michaels' career with a sledgehammer? Questions abound, but perhaps it all comes down to the fact that none of us is a face. None of us is a heel. We are all tweeners.

The metafictional impulse continues in the final piece of *Pisspoor Heroes*, “The

World's Largest Ship in a Bottle,” a tale of a bearded American (*estadounidense*, to use the politically correct Spanish term with no English equivalent) named Danny and a usually drunk Colombian named Racho adventuring north on the Alaskan Highway. The metafictional element of the story is present in the protagonist's awe at the idea of placing a ship inside a bottle. Ever since a conversation I had in a tent with four friends on the beach in Homer, Alaska, in the summer of 2009, I have wondered myself about the process of putting a ship into a bottle. When I wrote the first draft of this story, I decided I had no interest in knowing. It is a mystery. Danny wants to know, but he never will.

There is no doubt, at least in my own mind, that a ship in a bottle is an intriguing thing at which to look. Good literature, also, is an intriguing thing for me to read. We do not know *really* how either of these things is made, though. (Please, if you know how ships in bottles are crafted, suspend that knowledge for the remainder of your reading.) I could sit here in my house and write pages upon pages about my writing process—how I come up with ideas for stories, how I move from sentence to sentence in each piece, how I revise, etc.—but I'm not sure anyone would find that helpful, myself included. Ron Carlson wrote a whole book called *Ron Carlson Writes a Story* in which he endeavors to do something like what I just described, and does so interestingly and well, but perhaps the most important thing revealed by the book is that the creative process from start to finish is an unfathomably complex one. To write about it, one must use one's brain to think about how one uses one's brain while writing. A tall order. Our brains cannot hope ever to understand this process fully. Our stories are our ships in bottles. They are weird, and although they might make sense when they are finished, how they come to be often makes no sense whatsoever.

The desire to construct the world's *largest* ship in a bottle, as expressed by Danny and implied by the story's title, extends this disjointed metaphor even further. You hear talk in literature classes about the “great American novel.” Greatness should not be a strictly American phenomenon, though, so let us extend this the world over. All writers, or artists in general for that matter, have to have at least a glimmer of thought go through their minds at some point about producing something truly great, an artifact whose greatness is recognized around the world—the world's largest ship in a bottle, if you will. We might keep going even though we deem this improbable, but we probably would not mind the recognition if it were given to us.

While, like “My Personal Instrument of Destruction,” “The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle” deals in the realm of metafiction, it is in its portrayal of alcohol where it differs so greatly from its predecessor. This is the first time in the collection, in fact, that alcohol leads to a positive end for the characters who use it. In this way, alcohol, or the use of it, can almost be seen as a growing protagonist throughout the collection. Almost.

In “My Personal Instrument of Destruction,” booze is an item of solitude, of depression for the narrator. In “The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle,” however, it serves as the item that ultimately brings the two main characters together, the drink that gives them the carefree attitude to fall asleep in the Alaskan Interior without their tent, the courage to move toward a real destination, whether their goals when they get there are clear at the outset or not.

“The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle” is, in addition to being a booze story, also a story about a developing male companionship. It is a sort of homosocial odd couple story. Racho starts out as the “drunken bastard,” the “*bastardo borracho*” of the salmon

processing plant where he and Danny work. He skips work to get drunk. He tries to take twenty straight shots of whiskey as part of a drinking game he plays while he is skipping work. He passes out and gets carried out to the side of the road by his friend, and is then completely content to wake up in a tent in the middle of the tundra the next morning and to start thumbing it north.

Racho does a lot of things that are troublesome to Danny's mind. The morning after his bender, he has still not sobered up, and at the diner where he and Danny eat breakfast, he gives the waitress a hard time, then later almost gets them sent out to fend for themselves in the middle of the night in Denali by saying the wrong thing to their driver. Danny, however, is relatively careful. He plays things safe. Yes, he hitchhikes, but he is careful not to rub anyone the wrong way. He gives the waitress professional distance and does not try to stir things up with anyone giving them a ride. Danny wants to appear carefree, but he has all these cares that hold him back—the way he is perceived by others, his personal safety and avoiding physical injury. It is not that Racho has no cares, but he lets the things he cares about propel him forward rather than hold him back—for better or for worse. He disapproves of the way everything in the world around him is becoming Americanized, even the term itself, “American,” which has been monopolized by the United States, and that pushes him forward on living his own American (Colombian) Dream.

Racho is not one to set the far-reaching goals that Danny sets, but their time together is the catalyst for Danny's ultimate change, his setting aside of his present cares—not inadvertently exposing himself in public, having shelter to protect him and his

friend from the elements—for the greater purpose of his future aspirations. By the end of the story, Racho's bottle is passed between the two of them in perfect, though linguistically confused, friendship. “Danny shadowboxes in the air, grabs the bottle from Racho's hands, and drinks. He truly is the epitome of ready.” They are together, and they are ready. At least, Racho will follow along. Maybe, though, as the end suggests, Danny knows now the goals are not always practical. You cannot set a tent up around a sleeping person. You are not going to build the world's largest ship in a bottle simply by proclaiming yourself ready. Maybe it is okay to understand when things are far off and to take a nap on the ground next to a good friend for a few hours. Again, as the end suggests, there is always more time to chase one's goals. All we have is time. Maybe it is a case for procrastination; maybe it is a case for living in the moment. Take it as you will. Maybe procrastination and living in the moment are the same thing, just with different connotations.

Politically charged duos rule three-quarters of this collection. We see the narrator and Rino in “Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man,” traveling through the treacherous, muddy back alleys of South Bent on their way to the bridge that leads them to Richard Dictum's Executive Mansion. They both roughly agree on their basic political worldviews on the state of Bent—though the narrator finds Rino suspicious and untrustworthy—but differ a bit in their proposed means. In “Circus Money and Bad Precedents,” Mark Skarl and Eric both think there are some overpaid shortstops in Major League Baseball, but Eric is not nearly the devout anti-capitalist that Mark claims to be (though he contradicts his own “beliefs” in a couple of very obvious ways). He goes

along with Mark's plans somewhat reluctantly and is, through most of the story, skeptical of the practicality of stealing kids from the circus to meet some radical political goal. Neither of these duos ends its respective story in quality friendship. One ends with a stabbing, the other a fire.

In “The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle,” however, unlike any of its predecessors, the duo is a success. The friendship works. Racho is plain offended by some of the things Danny says, and Danny does not even realize his offensiveness until after the fact. In the end, though, these are the characters who are friends. They put silly terms—American, imperialist, proletarian, revolution—aside along with petty political disputes. They are the ones who find what is really important—human bonding.

All the friendships—failed or not—in this collection are between two males. I do not want to be subjected to the old misogyny critique of Hemingway though. (I am not, here, making the argument that Hemingway was a misogynist.) Yes, all of the collection's main characters are males, but the appearance of female characters in each story or the characters' desire to find femininity drives the stories in slightly different directions each time. Also, where women are present and objectified, it is the fault of the characters. The narrator in “Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man” focuses on the oppression of lefties, but there is another problem his character only touches upon due to his own selfish nature. Women in Bent are absolutely objectified and treated as second-class citizens by Richard Dictum. Left-handed men's wives are taken by Dictum like property. I am not a misogynist, but Richard Dictum is. His misogyny cannot be a greater focus in the story, though, mostly for point-of-view purposes. It is not a primary goal of the narrator's to fight for the advancement of women. He is a left-handed man, and he wants

things to be better for left-handed men—or at least for himself. Perhaps in an expanded revision, the misogyny of Bent is something that could be explored further, but in a short work, I needed to focus on what the narrator's main concerns would be.

Masculinity in “My Personal Instrument of Destruction” is violent and, as the title suggests, destructive. The narrator's mother is concerned with the safety of work sites for construction workers and does not understand the boys' need to engage in dangerous roughhousing. She is the rational character here. The men spend their days destroying themselves and each other. Kind of silly, right? The narrator looks for role models in destructive men with nicknames like Dead Man, Phenom, and Big Red Monster who make their living in things called Hell in a Cell, Inferno Matches, Buried Alive Matches. Violence and self-immolation are a way of life.

In “The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle,” the friends' goals involve finding female companionship. I will confess that I find many Colombian women quite beautiful, specifically some of the ones with whom I worked during my own time in Alaska. This is something heterosexual men do—we find beautiful women attractive and seek their company. These two are no different from the characters of Nick Adams and his friend Bill in Hemingway's “The Three Day Blow.” While Nick talks to Bill about baseball and fishing to avoid talking about his recently ended relationship, Danny talks to Racho about mountains and big ships to supplement his strange quest to find love. There are always other things to talk about, even though love or carnal attraction is usually in the subtext. Both “The Three Day Blow” and “The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle” demonstrate that what we do not say is often just as important as what we do say. In my story, what the characters do say drives them forward and leads them to a decision

regarding what they usually are not saying.

Where Danny ends up, sleeping on the ground, in no hurry to continue forward on his quest to find a beautiful Colombian girl, is not meant to slight the prospect of romantic love at all. Well, maybe. It certainly is not meant to slight the prospect of female companionship. It is, in its rawest explication, a case for friendship. “A friend of [Richard Brautigan's, or the speaker of Richard Brautigan's poem] once said, / 'It's twenty times better to be friends / with someone / than it is to be in love with them'” (Brautigan 17-20). I have yet to figure out if I agree with Richard Brautigan's friend on this point, but I do know that, if you cannot find someone with whom to be in love, having friends is not a bad thing. Having a friend is never a bad thing. Sharing a drink with a friend is not a bad thing.

In the aforementioned book *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*, the author states, “I write from my personal experiences, whether I've had them or not” (Carlson 10). I think if I want to talk about what influences my writing, this is a good place to start. John Gardner defines fiction as “a studied simulation, through recollection and imaginative projection, of real feeling within the writer” (126). The ideas that end up projecting themselves in my stories have two primary sources—what I have lived and what I have read or heard about.

“The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle” is the closest to being based on experiences that I have had—I actually have met several Colombians in Alaska who like to get drunk, I actually did hitchhike to Fairbanks (though I did not quit my job to do so) with a good friend of mine (though not one of the Colombians), and we actually did drink

whiskey and pass out on the ground (though we purposely passed out on the ground because we lost our tent earlier in the day). While some events are lifted from real life, the characters, the dynamics between them, the theme of language and American imperialism—these are all products of the artifice of the creative process.

Crawling into a refrigerator, as I have said, is something my brother did as a child. I actually have a friend, the same friend with whom I drank whiskey and passed out on the ground in Fairbanks, who crawled into an icebox once, but I did not know that was how my story was going to end when I started the first draft of what would later become “My Personal Instrument of Destruction.” I was a wrestling fan as a kid, yes, but I did not start watching until 1999, and almost every wrestling reference in the piece comes from before then. I experienced watching these matches on DVD or Youtube, but I did not experience them live with a roughhousing drunkard of a father.

The first two stories of the collection are based on terrible yet (I hope) hilarious experiences I have only imagined having. They come from watching the news, following and studying political discourse. Combining my experiences with fascism through studying Hitler and Mussolini, my experiences with terrorism by hearing about Timothy McVeigh and Osama Bin Laden on the news and the backlash the latter's conduct has had upon the entire Arab community in the United States (changed to lefties for the purposes of my story), I created a hellish community, Bent, run by a man named Dick. My studies of Immanuel Wallerstein's *Historical Capitalism* introduced to me the idea of the proletarian uprising, and I wanted to tone down his arguments, make them funny, create a character who took Wallerstein's arguments a little too far in the wrong direction. Sprinkle in some wallet-stealing monkeys and a circus on fire, and you have yourself a

bit of a stew going.

To create bleak yet humorous settings and situations, I look to a couple of authors I have been reading since my junior year in high school, Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller. Particularly with “Circus Money and Bad Precedents,” I look to Heller's masterpiece, *Catch-22*, not so much for structure of the piece as a whole, but for how the piece's ending functions thematically. *Catch-22* ends with the protagonist, Yossarian, fleeing the novel's inverted, farcical justice system. He has immediate physical danger helping to encourage his escape, as a woman only referred to as “Nately's whore” tries to stab him, but when it comes down to it, what he is running from is the system that will keep him down, that will keep him flying way too many missions in their endless war. I do not claim that “Circus Money and Bad Precedents” has nearly the thematic or cultural significance of a novel as splendid as Heller's *Catch-22*, but the influence is there. Eric, Mark Skarl, and Boris Yeltsin all must run from something as the story concludes. They all must use their best judgment to do so. Yes, the building they are in is on fire, and that is what physically prompts them to run. However, one has to think they are actually running from something more. Eric runs from the misguided side of Mark Skarl, knowing that kidnapping is no way to reach economic equilibrium. Mark Skarl runs from everything—capitalism, a system set up to burn rebellion from within. Boris Yeltsin runs—well, he runs from a burning building, but maybe he runs for President of the Russian Federation or from the circus bureaucracy of which he is a part. This is just my readerly speculation. I do not know, really, from what a large man who looks like Boris Yeltsin could be running. He is a mysterious, mysterious man.

“Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man” is a much shorter work than *Catch-22*, but I

like to think of Bent as a world with the possibility of having the breadth of ridiculous characters that Heller's novel has. I do not think I could ever write a character as well as Heller writes the infamous Milo Minderbinder, but Bent definitely has some eccentric characters who could be expanded upon in a lengthened version. The narrator and Richard Dictum are the obvious driving forces. The two have striking similarities despite their opposite places on the political spectrum. However, characters as hopeless as Bobby MacDonald, as mysterious as Torie Kingsmen, and as insightful, rational, and heroic as Rino are what I hope make this world real. The narrator's reaction to these characters' realness is what I hope makes this story readable.

The influence behind the mixture of English and Spanish in “The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle” can be attributed to the Dominican author Junot Díaz and his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. I would not say I completely emulate Díaz stylistically (though that would be one of the best ways to write a story that is stylistically sound), but I do some things similar to what he does in *Oscar Wao* and was most definitely influenced by his writing in much of this piece. A mix of multiple tongues, as well as some eloquence with occasional vulgarity sprinkled on top, is the recipe here. The way Danny and Racho talk to each other—*Diez minutos más, hijueputa*—as well as the scene in the diner when Racho refuses to speak anything but Spanish to the waitress, when he claims to know no English—these are instances where the Díaz influence is notable.

Díaz's writing also influenced my writing of “My Personal Instrument of Destruction.” I have heard that Díaz, as part of the process of writing *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, did multiple in-depth read-throughs of several of the

fantasy novels and comic books his protagonist would have read—just to make himself extremely familiar with the things with which his character would be extremely familiar. Junot Díaz became, at least in this way, for all intents and purposes, his protagonist, the ghettonerd Oscar de León. With “My Personal Instrument of Destruction,” I had to spend entire writing days reading up on and finding videos of 1990s World Wrestling Federation events. Watching old wrestling videos, while it may sound like a leisurely activity, is work when you must constantly watch each event simultaneously from the point of view of a character who crawls into his fridge and later sets his yard on fire and also from that of his alcoholic father. Even the matches that did not make the cut, that are not specifically mentioned in the story, I had to know what these characters think about them. I had to know what these characters think about just about every important event going on in the world of wrestling during the scope of this story. The Montreal Screwjob—the infamous finish to the main event of Survivor Series 1997 where Bret Hart was actually unaware he would be losing his title, was not informed of the match’s outcome beforehand—is only mentioned in passing and not elaborated upon, but you had better bet I know how these two characters feel about it. Leave it to fiction writers to turn reading comic books and watching wrestling into labor.

I could talk more in this space about influential texts, but there will be more time for that in the annotated bibliography that follows these four stories. Suffice it to say, stories such as Ron Carlson's “Dr. Slime” and Tony Earley's “Charlotte” reinforce the importance of writing a story that has to do with wrestling, and the comic impulses of contemporary authors the likes of David Sedaris and Michael Czyzniejewski, or the late Douglas Adams, influence almost every paragraph I write. And Richard Brautigan's

Trout Fishing in America is another book I cannot get out of my head.

Finally, this is a collection of stories about heroes. These are not your Justice League or Fantastic Four type of heroes, though. You will not see them saving any day in any of these stories. The narrator of “Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man” will probably end up brutalizing you, injuring you beyond recognition if you try to help him in his cause. Even Eric, the voice of reason to Mark Skarl's insanity, fails to realize he can save the day until it is already much too late. The narrator in “My Personal Instrument of Destruction” watches his heroes on TV, watches them save some farcical day before burying alive or setting fire to the next farcical hero three months later. Even Danny and Racho, the real good guys in this collection, are pretty lousy heroes. If they are not careful, they could get drown, get themselves eaten, shot, killed from exposure. These are not the guys you want saving the day.

These are stories of would-be heroes. Pisspoor heroes, if you will. Enjoy.

Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man

*All the lefties dream their jerseys will majestically ascend
to the rafters of arenas where we celebrate dissent.*

~Aaron Scott

I'm sitting alone at the bar, my nose in my glass, half watching the same old lies flicker on the television screen. Balboa's is a total shithole. At the other end of the bar, a crowd of Bent's old drunks, all of them old enough to be the father I never knew, lifts their glasses, each with his left hand, each in silence. Fucking nobodies. Complacent bastards. This is their everyday.

The TV shifts to a scene from space, the stars aligned to spell out Richard Dictum's tasteless, cocky insignia, the same one he has plastered all over this godforsaken town—DICKED 'EM! The fascist stars fizzle and fade into the background as the shot shifts to a view of Earth and a man's deep, theatrical voice promotes the onslaught of Dictum's final solution.

“In a world without lefties...” Cue the half-speed snare drums, and my glass is broken on the floor. On the screen, kids in a field march to the beat of Dictum's right-handed rhythm, one fist in the air, the other, the left one, deep in their pockets. The Dictum Youth. After Richard Dictum announces his approval of this message, their annoying prepubescent voices shout out in unison his brilliant campaign slogan:

“Richard Dictum is always right!”

These are Bent's future leaders for fuck's sake.

An unfamiliar voice emerges from behind me. “Excuse me, sir.”

I turn around and see a new face in a Balboa's uniform. His name tag says “RINO.” For chrissake, he's holding a broom. “What the fuck do you want?” I ask.

“Sir, I just want to get underneath you to clean up that glass...if it's not a problem.”

I look at the broken glass beneath my barstool, which hasn't been replaced since the last century, and tell him his ass can go right ahead. I stand up but keep my eyes locked on him as he sweeps. He's new, and I don't know what he's liable to try.

Man, you gotta love these rickety ass barstools from the 1980s and '90s though—the pinnacle of left-handedness in America. Two straight decades of left-handed presidents: Reagan for eight years, Bush for four, Clinton for eight. Didn't matter what you thought of these guys' politics, you knew they brought hope. Hope for change.

I climb up on the bar to tinker with the back of the TV. The antenna on the shitty ten-inch set in Balboa's only picks up the few programs Dictum deems appropriate for lefties to view, mostly local Bent news and reruns of *Cops*, but I'm hoping if I mess with it enough I can pick up a few extra stations. It's 6:00, and the bar closes soon. Dictum thinks we can't be trusted after dark. I'm hoping to get some national broadcasts on here. Evening news, you know? I just want to hear some reasonable, equal opportunity lies for once.

Twist the wire. See some progress. I've been thinking, I round some of these drunk ass bums together, I can get myself a bit of a revolution going.

Old Bobby MacDonald pukes into his lap and collapses on the floor a few tables over. If I wanted to be cruel, I'd say he does it like a bitch, but I'm trying to move away from the cruelties embodied in Dictum's dominion over this town.

Something comes on the TV: “...isolated communities within America where segregation still exists in some form. All of my administration's investigations have

proven that these allegations cannot possibly...”

DICKED 'EM!

The feed goes black, and those two goddamn words flash across the screen. Any time I get anything worth watching to show up.

Fuck Richard Dictum.

I step down from my stool, sit back down, and the TV changes to a commercial advertising the low price of just \$49.95 for a case of Coca-Cola Classic at Dick's Grocery. Dictum added a huge sin tax on caffeine and nicotine last month. He said it was supposed to help pay for some of the new so-called improvement projects being put into motion around town, like the mass sidewalk reconstruction I worked on over on the North Side, but I've yet to see the effects of this tax reflected in my wage. If you ask me, what's behind the caffeine law is he just doesn't want us to stay awake. Yeah, we all know where the money trail really leads, but he wouldn't want anyone actually to be able to do anything about it.

Since the tax on legal stimulants was instituted, the underground cocaine trade has been booming in Bent.

The old men at the bar drink their drinks and don't speak. The room is silent, save the periodic, rhythmic clanking of glass against wood, the complacent belches, the less-than-satisfied sighs after each large gulp. Fuck it. Now is my time. I stand back up. I've got a speech to give.

“Lefties of Bent, gather! It is time for us to join together to end the oppressive reign of Richard Dictum!”

No one gathers. They all just sit still. Some speak to their neighbors, musing on

the sad state of Bent. This is their fucking everyday. I watch the new bartender, Rino, use his right hand to refill each patron's drink.

“Listen, all you bastards. Are you listening? We work our asses off every day for shitty pay to keep all Dictum's shit in tiptop shape, and for what? Every day, we cross that goddamn bridge to make the North Side look like such a goddamn paradise, and then once we punch out we have to crawl back across the bridge and through mud and packs of stray fucking dogs just to get here to drink our troubles away. And you guys have the gall to accept this bullshit? You people make me sick.”

“The Boss says it's necessary,” someone squeaks out.

“*The Boss*,” I sneer at the drunk fucks. “Who does he think he is, Springsteen? Born in the USA and don't even know that separate but equal don't fly no more? Hasn't for a fucking century. What, left-handedness isn't a protected minority trait under the Civil Rights Act? Fuck that.

“And you guys remember Torie Kingsmen, don't you? Loyalist motherfucker. Thought 'cause Dictum was buddy-buddy with his pa he could get by as a South Paw in North Bent. Now he spends his days in a cell, left hand cuffed to the bars, force-fed once a week by guards. And he *liked* Dictum. Kids decades down the line will read in their history books and know Torie Kingsmen as the lefty who went to jail for thinking Richard Dictum was okay. Do you guys not understand this?”

It's not like these guys were always like this. I look around the bar and see all the old flyers from equality rallies lining the wall. Rallies from before everyone in this bar became content to be dicked over again and again. Before Richard Dictum had his way with all their wives, made them self-conscious about their perceived disability, these guys

had the fortitude to ask all the important questions.

A few months ago, I snuck myself into Dick's Sports Bar and Grille over on the corner of 7th and North E to catch some World Series action. Cubbies and White Sox in the Chicago El Train Series. Cubs going on two centuries without a World Series title, and that new lefty they called up in August was pitching. He hadn't lost a game yet. When I walked in, I saw a long bar full of eager fans in Sox jerseys throwing down some nachos during an early inning break. Half the righties in Bent must have been there, and every last one of them had their right arms up stuffing their faces with their left arms placed politely at their sides. Nobody bumped into his neighbor as he ate, and no unnecessary cheese dip was spilled on anyone's entirely too expensive jersey (though if you chose to buy a right-handed player's jersey, Dictum did subsidize your purchase).

The game was being shown on close to fifty of the highest quality uranium-enriched televisions throughout the building, displaying the players in such lifelike detail that you could even smell the sweat on their foreheads. Or maybe that was just the perspiration of the masses. I don't know. Of course, I understand that Bent couldn't and still can't afford to pay for the slightest upgrade to the TV set here at Balboa's. Perfectly reasonable.

I had to find a spot at the far left end of the bar in hopes that I wouldn't be noticed during the excitement of the big game. As the game went on, though, and the Cubbies' lefty still had a no-hitter going into the eighth inning, my drunken exuberance shone through, and I began to give myself away.

“Great game this guy's pitchin', eh?” I made the mistake of asking the righty next to me.

He simply glared at me and, noticing which hand I had inadvertently moved my drink to, motioned for bar security to come over and take a look at me. “Sir, what seems to be the problem here?”

“Officer, would you kindly take a look at how this man is holding his drink?”

“Oh...ah...hmm...we don't serve lefties here.”

“Oh?” I couldn't very well articulate a more developed argument at this stage of the night, so I took my shoes off, propped my feet up on the table, and said, “Then don't serve me. I'm jus' watchin' baseball.”

“We're going to have to ask you to leave.”

I couldn't believe he was asking me to get up and leave during such an important moment in baseball history. He was though. Two of his fellow right-handed cronies were approaching, and even in my stupor I could tell they weren't coming to assist in nonviolent admonition.

I picked up my shoes to get ready to leave. I thought a shoe to the face would make a clear statement. I heard the same was once attempted in Iraq. For better or worse, though, George W. Bush was an acrobatic motherfucker. As for my attempt, I was drunk, my aim was bad, and neither shoe found its target.

I've said it before, Richard Dictum wasn't born to run, but that's why he has hired help. As I ran to get the hell out of Dick's, I stumbled and was caught by one of Dictum's security officers, who dragged me across the floor and threw me back out onto the street. Such a waste of energy. I was on my way out there anyway.

I found out later the Cubs' no-no was broken in the 9th by a homerun of all things. Lefty, of course.

I've told this story to the guys in Balboa's, and they usually tell me it's my own fault. *Shouldn't have gone to the righty bar.* Goddamn pacifists. I drink where the game's on.

Here tonight though, from the shady confines of Balboa's, I continue to address the men of South Bent: "In a predominantly right-handed world, the consensus is that we should adapt to society's standards or be seen as outcasts. But why? When you're putting down your electronic signature for a purchase at the pharmacy, the machine's set up for righties. Some places used to have it set up so we could flip the screen around and use our left hands, but not anymore—not in Bent."

Some jackass stands up and chimes in, "I read in *The Right Review* that 90% of Bent gets great healthcare. That's the highest in the nation."

"Shut the hell up. Can't you see I'm giving a historic political speech here?"

He sits his ass down.

"Do you want to take advantage of the great weekly sales at the supermarket? Well, too fucking bad. You've gotta cut the coupons out of the newspaper, and good luck finding a pair of scissors you can use. This entire society is against us, and I don't know why you guys don't fucking want to do anything about it."

I'm about to tell them this is the last call, but the bartender, Rino, beats me to it. I don't give up hope. Someone has to feel the same way I do.

Minutes later, I'm the last one remaining. Everyone's cleared out for the night, going home to no wives and no kids. Dictum's cleaning up the gene pool. We can't even fucking mate. MacDonald struggles, but even he makes it to the door.

I just sit and stare into that goddamn television screen, waiting to pay my tab and

go home. Staring at those two words. When I finally leave this place, I'll just have to see them more, everywhere I go. Welcome mats, billboards, it's only a matter of time before Dictum, like in the commercial, takes over the constellations, too.

DICKED 'EM!

DICKED 'EM!

DICKED 'EM!

Every channel that used to be worth watching. Every building in town. All just to get back home.

“What are you doing here?” I say to Rino, who's at the table, I presume to kick me out. He must have forgotten about my tab. Well, all right then. If I can't start a revolution, at least I can get some free booze.

“I work here,” Rino says. “We're closed. What are you still doing here? It's getting dark. You don't want Dictum's men getting after you, do you?”

I don't need to answer this asshole's questions. I turn it back around on him. “I asked you first. What the hell are you doing working *here*, Rino? You're a righty.”

He tries moving his pen into his left hand but realizes he's been caught. “Okay, you got me. I'm a righty...in name only. RINO.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Ambidextrous, my friend.”

“What? If that's true, then why the hell would you choose to live with the lefties?”

“Well,” he says, looking around the empty bar, “I guess since it's just you...”

“What about me?” He's starting to piss me off.

“Well, everyone knows your feelings on the Boss.”

“Fuck him.”

“Exactly. Now may I speak?”

“Make it snappy, you fuck. Your tip depends on it.”

“Right.” He shakes his head. “Now, to begin, I tell you I once thought Richard Dictum was a great man. He had a vision for this community, and it was one people could believe in. New sidewalks, community centers, a competent police force to rid us of crime, the youth program. He was a leader anyone could count on.”

“Richard Dictum is always right. You write his fucking campaign speeches or something?”

“Well...yes, actually...I even came up with...”

“DICKED 'EM! You're saying you're the one responsible for all those fucking signs? Look at this TV. You're responsible for this?” He looks. He nods. I shake my head, disgusted. I grab his pen out of his hand. I could stab him in the fucking throat.

“Please, sir, be reasonable. I'm trying to help you.”

I put his pen in my pocket. I might need to write a letter later. I motion for Rino to continue.

“I always envisioned Dictum's Great Society as including everyone in Bent, but the more we worked at things, the clearer it became that only about ninety percent of the current population could feasibly enjoy all the benefits.”

“I think I know where this is going.”

“Well...yes. I started using my right hand almost exclusively at this point, needless to say. You see, Dictum thought a group needed to be oppressed before it could

truly prosper. At least, that's how he'd justify things to me. I don't think he ever really gave a damn about anyone but himself. Lefties weren't doing all that bad before he came along, I hear. Anyway, the blacks, he'd tell me, had their movement. MLK got the holiday, and then Barack Obama got the Oval Office. And the homosexuals. You know the Vice President's a gay man now?"

"Didn't ask, don't tell."

Rino laughs. "I'm talking to a real historian. Well, anyway, that's the approach I took, too. I didn't tell anyone about my ambidexterity, and I figured as long as I always used my right hand publicly, no one would ask. It worked for a while."

"For a while?"

"I started suggesting new policies—policies Dictum didn't like."

"Oh?"

"My suggestions were a bit too...well, to be honest, a bit too tolerant of lefties for Dictum's liking. Here." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wallet with some photographs in it, one of which is of him standing at a pair of water fountains. He hands it to me.

"That's right," he tells me after I study the pictures. "Righty and lefty water fountains. How do you like that?"

"And you call that...tolerance?"

"What else do you want to call it?" he asks.

"Separate but equal ain't tolerance." I stand up to leave the bar. "Tolerance is when you snort a line of good coke and fall asleep in your drinking chair. That's what I call tolerance. Let that sink in for a minute."

“I can get you to Dictum's house,” Rino says, monotone as hell, just as I'm about to reach the door. I turn around. I'm fucking intrigued.

“Tonight?”

“Tonight.”

“How?”

“Sit down.”

I don't like this shady ambidextrous fuck telling me what to do, but sometimes you just have to sit your ass down when someone tells you to sit your ass down.

“Anyway,” he continues, “I'd ask Dictum, what if left-handedness isn't a choice? What if it's a genetic defect? Shouldn't we help our diseased brothers adjust so that they can live life like we do—the right way? He'd just tell me that there have to be class separations in society. If we let them keep thinking they're equal, they'll start to think they're in charge. Can't have that, can we?”

“Now just you wait one fucking second, Rino. Genetic defect? Did you even watch the World Series?”

“Is this relevant? I'm not a big baseball fan.”

Is this relevant? Is this fucking relevant? The audacity. “You didn't watch the Series? Are you kidding me? South Paws owned Chi-Town for a week and a half, and we can't even play beer league in Bent.”

Genetic defect my ass.

Richard Dictum is always right.

Always right.

Never left.

A choice?

I'd choose it ten more times if it was.

“Well,” Rino concedes the point, admits his ignorance, “there may be something to lefties' prowess in sport. I don't know. But you have to understand, this didn't start with Richard Dictum. Outside your one-in-a-million pro athletes, there is no doubt that lefties have been oppressed for a long time—even the three Presidents this place celebrates. Reagan? An actor. Beats me why left-handedness became part of his shtick, though. Bush a one-term President and Clinton's legacy tarnished by scandal. But hey, let me ask you something. Why do you think Buzz Aldrin was the second man to step foot on the moon?”

This isn't too hard to figure out. “Fuck Neil Armstrong. Fuck the whole goddamn space exploration program,” I say.

“Anyway, whenever you're ready...” Rino stands up and starts toward the door. “Come on. It can't wait. Dick's holding a huge ceremony with the Dictum Youth tomorrow. He's going to...he won't be around the office. It has to be tonight.” I don't know why I should trust this guy, but no one else is offering me an in into Dictum's house. I follow. It's time.

We walk out the front door of Balboa's into the empty streets of Bent. With each step we sink into the mud a little further. Rino can probably hear dogs barking in the distance, but all I can hear is every building on the South Side shouting my name and those two words I hate so goddamn much.

Fred's Fridges & Appliances, now Dick's Dryers & Appliances.

DICKED 'EM!

Gas pumps off the hook, windows broken out. You don't need gas. What would you ever want to leave Bent for? I read the sign:

NO GAS (DICKED 'EM!)

South Paw Elementary, where the kids learn they're worth nothing if they don't bow down to Deity Dick Dictum.

DICKED 'EM!

Bent's Last Church of God. The Christians have been all but run out of Bent because, well, Jesus was a lefty.

DICKED 'EM!

I look to the heavens for an answer to my questions.

DICKED 'EM!

Are you there, God? Did you make your son left-handed just so he could suffer a little bit more? Did you?

DICKED 'EM!

“Fuck this...shit,” I yell. “Do you see this shit? How do you live with yourself? Those words. They're fucking everywhere.” I grab his shoulders and shake him, but he pushes me right off.

“Settle down,” he says. “You keep causing a ruckus, you're gonna get Dictum's men on us. You don't want that to happen, do you?”

He's right. And left. He's...correct. As much as I'd like to fuck those guys up for making me miss the Series and everything else they've done, they're the last people we want after us tonight.

“Here,” Rino pulls a packed bowl from his satchel and hands me a lighter. “Hit

this.”

I can't see very well in the dark, so I take a whiff. “This is fucking pot.”

“Yeah?”

“You don't have any hard drugs?”

“I need you calm, not fucking speedballing your way through Dictum's blockades. Now smoke the fucking bowl or stay back.”

It's a bit disappointing, but who am I to qualm over anything free in Bent? I put my left hand on the pipe and look for the carb but can't find it.

“Other hand, buddy,” Rino points out. Sure enough, I find the carb on the right and cover it up. “So you can hold the lighter with your left hand...you like that?”

This is another of those things he calls “tolerance.” Whatever. I hit the bowl and pass it back. A peace offering.

As we start walking across the bridge, I see the night guard at the north end jumping rope with the security rope. Admittedly, he's good. Double jump, straddle jumps, heel exchange, he knows it all. Nevertheless, I can't stop laughing or wondering why Dictum's man is doing what he's doing.

This guy just keeps on jumping until we're about halfway across the bridge and a motion-sensor spotlight shines on the three of us from the guard's tower. He finishes his show with a trick in which he puts his right and left hands together and jumps over the rope sideways, then reconnects the rope to its pole. He stands almost still behind his booth, but I can still vaguely see his shoulders shaking and his protruding left foot tapping on the concrete. Rino puts the bowl back in his satchel, and we move forward.

At the end of the bridge, Rino speaks before the night guard can go through his

ridiculous security checks. “Nice show, officer. Not quite sure if that's in the protocol, though.”

“My deepest apologies, sir. I can't afford my nightly coffee anymore, so I need to engage in some sort of stimulating activity to keep myself awake through the shift.”

“I see. And Dick...I mean, Mr. Dictum, doesn't provide you guards with coffee anymore?”

“He said he'd have to cut some of our benefits. For the greater good of Bent as a whole.”

Even Dictum's own men aren't allowed to stay awake.

“Right. And that doesn't anger you at all? You don't think there's anything wrong with that?” I've heard stories of police forces in Ecuador kidnapping their Presidents because of cuts in their benefits. Back when I was a kid. Nobody in Bent talks about that sort of thing anymore.

The night guard ponders a moment before giving the typical, practiced answer to Rino's question. “Richard Dictum is always right.”

“Fair enough. You think the two of us can take a little stroll over on the North Side? I've got a little project I need to finish for the wife by morning, and this here souther's gonna do the labor portion of the work for me.”

“I see. Well, I'm going to need to see your credentials.” He presses a button, and a screen pops out of the side of his booth with a pen on its right side. Rino grabs the pen with his right hand and writes in perfect cursive, *Richard Dictum is always right*.

“Very well, sir.”

The guard opens the gate to let us through. I stare the flamboyant fuck down for a

full five seconds before addressing him.

“Do you have a family?”

“I’m sorry?”

“A family. Parents. Fucking siblings. A left-handed brother who's better than you at everything he does? Do you have one, asshole?”

“I’m not permitted to answer any of your questions unless you have credentials.”

I wind up and spit my credentials in his face. He tries to seize me like I'm some kind of dissident, but Rino gets in his way. He holds the guard back with his left hand and pushes me to the ground with his right. “Don't fucking act up again,” he tells me. He then turns to the officer and shakes his head. “I’m sorry. You know lefties, more trouble than they're worth half the time. We'll be out of your way now.”

“You're going to have to head through the wash first.” The asshole cop won't take his eyes off me as he runs his left hand across his saliva-soaked face.

We enter the chamber attached to the north side of the guard's tower and stand still as high-pressure bursts of water assault us from both sides, allowing the mud to drip back onto the streets of the South. Several seconds more of extreme heat and we're clean, dry, presentable, and worthy of the right-handed world.

I don't know what's going to happen when we get to Dictum's mansion, but I'm ready for it. In the history books of the future, kids decades down the line will know me as the lefty who did everything in his power to bring positive change to Bent.

I'm ready.

The ground we walk on is stable. The North Star shines bright in the Bent sky tonight. Its southern equivalent pulsates somewhere, but I can't find it.

Rino leads the way. “Can you speed up, man?” I request kindly. “I’m ready to kill this son of a bitch.”

“We’ll be there soon enough,” he retorts, vague as hell. “And can we keep that talk to a minimum? This is a diplomatic meeting, not an assassination.”

Diplomatic meeting? Fuck that. Diplomacy didn’t free the slaves. Diplomacy didn’t stop the Nazis. Diplomacy is betrayal. I’m ready.

We walk through the well maintained neighborhood, past the big houses, the green grass, the patriotic flags: blacked out on the left, with a field of stars on the right.

DICKED 'EM!

These people hang their flags with pride, without a clue as to the degree to which their asses may soon be fucked. Association with a lefty is one of the highest crimes a righty can commit in Bent, and we’re being born at close to a ten-percent rate. Righties can’t stay away from us for long.

A few blocks more, and Rino taps me on the shoulder. “Look, my friend.” He points ahead.

Richard Dictum’s Executive Mansion. It’s right there. One straight path, surrounded on both sides by exotic South American plants straight from the Amazon, leads to his front stoop, a modest deck with a single rocking chair. I detest everyone in Bent who provides for this man.

In the center of the yard, there’s a statue of the Boss himself. Conceited bastard. He’s obese, morbidly. On his face, he wears a mustache, thick and well groomed. The debate rages as to which was Hitler’s dominant hand, but Richard Dictum is right-handed and proud of it—while his left hand is in his pocket, digging for change but finding none,

his right fist is clenched around the Bent flagpole, held high for all to see.

DICKED 'EM!

Standing there in his obnoxious suit paid for by the hard labor of Bent's lefties, he truly is quite the fucking figure.

“You design this statue, too? Huh, Rino?”

“I was a propagandist, not a damn sculptor. Can you just make sure you're quiet when we get in the lobby?”

At the front door, Rino lifts his left hand before remembering where he is, chuckling like a jackass, and knocks with his right hand. After a woman's voice tells us to enter and proceed to the front desk to state our business, Rino looks back to me and says, “Come on. It's time.” I follow. Indeed, it is time.

There is a large poster of Neil Armstrong on the moon on the right wall. Fuck him. Rino walks up to the desk to talk to the woman. It's Cheryl MacDonald, Bobby's ex-wife. I stay back, not wanting to be seen.

A list of the top hitting first basemen in big league history hangs by the door. Albert Pujols is at #2, but #1 is crossed out. I can make out what looks like a capital L and a capital G, and I know it's the hall of fame left-handed hitter, Lou Gehrig. Dictum's rewriting sports history. This is it. He's done. I walk up to the desk where Rino is still waiting for service.

Cheryl's on the phone, assisting some lost Dickhead. “If she puts the rattle in that hand again, you need to discipline her. Mr. Dictum will *not* be happy if she's still doing that when she reaches school age. Put it in the right hand, and don't forget to reinforce good behavior. Give her a treat once in a while. Uh-huh. All right, well, yessir, have a

good night.” She hangs up the phone and looks to Rino. “Can I help you, sir?”

“Ah, yes, I'd like to see Dick.”

“Dick who?”

“Dictum. I'd like to see Mr. Dictum. It's important. I'm an old associate of his.”

“And do you have an appointment with the Boss, Mr. *Associate*?”

“Just tell him Jay's here.” Jay? What happened to Rino? The double-crossing motherfucker. I must be patient, though. On my toes.

She sighs and picks the phone back up. After several moments, she speaks. “Mr. Dictum? Yes, there's someone here to see you. Says he's an old associate of yours...says his name's Jay. No, he just said it's important.” She looks to Rino, or whatever the fuck his name is. “He says you caught him at dinner. He wants to know if you'd like to join him.”

“That's fine,” Rino replies.

“He says that's fine,” she says back into the phone. She's about to say something else, but she spots me standing behind Rino and stops. “Excuse me for a moment, Mr. Dictum.” She sets the phone down. “What are *you* doing here?” she asks me. “What business does a lefty troublemaker like you have meeting with the Boss?” She was always holding Bobby back. This was when he had a sober bone left in his body. Once there was no more need to keep him restrained, Good Ol' Dick Dictum came in and swooped her right up. “Why, the things you used to...”

“That's enough,” Rino interrupts. “He's with me. I said it was important. It involves him.”

“My apologies, sir,” she says, picking the phone back up, “He has one *other* with

him. I know, I know. He says whatever's important involves him. Okay, yes, I'll tell them." She hangs up the phone. "A guard will be down to take you up. Oh, and Jay? Keep the souther under control."

"Bobby's been doing just fine, so you know," I tell Cheryl.

"That's great," she says. "Keep him quiet, will you, Jay?"

Rino looks to me and raises an eyebrow.

A large guard enters the lobby through a door to our right and motions us forward. It's time.

We follow him through the door and up a set of dark stairs, all ominous and shit. I have to do this. Goddamn it, for the Buzz Aldrins and Lou Gehrigs of history, I have to fucking do this. It's time to bring a new regime to Bent. It's time to show the righties what it's been like under Dictum. A stopped clock at the top of the stairs says 3:59. I have seen the wrong done to me. It is time to uphold my cause.

I look from Rino to the guard to the door, knowing Dictum lies just behind it. Three against one. I'm being delivered to mine enemy. My head on a platter. Crucifixion's in my future. I think now that this is where the Balboa's crew may have been helpful.

But wait. Maybe this is what it takes. Maybe that's all leftykind needs is a martyr—a motherfucking messiah. My martyrdom will mobilize the masses. Yassur, Emilio, Bobby Macdonald, all the guys in Balboa's will take to the streets. Torie Kingsmen will break from his bars. Richard Dictum will be dead by the end of the year. I cross my heart. I never knew my father. It all makes sense now.

We enter Richard Dictum's kitchen. It smells like Thai. He's wearing that same

obnoxious suit from the statue outside. Obese, yet distinguished. He thanks his guard and tells him to go downstairs, then instructs Rino and me to take our shoes off on the mat and to sit down at the table. Rino sits first, and I move in and sit at his right. A single, grandiose chair is set on the other side of the table, adorned with diamonds from the mines of Africa and the finest cherry lumber of the forests of Pennsylvania. A bottle of wine more expensive than Balboa's has ever seen sits casually as the table's centerpiece.

We sit in silence as Dictum opens a cupboard with his right hand, grabs one plate with his right hand, sets it down, grabs another with the same hand, and repeats. He scoops chicken and rice from a pot onto each plate with his right hand, carries each plate to the table individually with his right hand, sets one in front of his chair, another in front of Rino, and the smallest portion in front of me. From the same cupboard with the plates, he grabs two wineglasses...individually...with his right hand. You get it. This is the obsessive-compulsive nutjob who runs Bent.

He walks over to the table with a knife in his right hand and cuts the cork in half, pushing the rest into the bottle. Apparently it's difficult to pop a cork one-handed. The arduous dinner preparation process continues for a few more moments, ultimately leaving Dick and Rino with tall glasses of cork-littered wine and myself with a sippy-cup of orange juice to enjoy our meals.

“Eat” is Dictum's dictum. He and Rino grab their forks with their right hands and begin to feast. I sit still and listen as Dictum makes small talk with his old associate.

“So how've you been, Jay? I assume you've heard about the big ceremony tomorrow. I think everyone's really excited about it. Only thing is, we ain't been able to

find an anesthesia strong enough to help the kids through the operation. Doctors are telling me they'll have to feel it a bit. Real shame, eh?" He coughs up something vile and wipes it from his face with his left hand. "But as you know, they really only need their right hand. We're gonna start tomorrow with that. It'll be open to the public if you'd like to stop by."

"I'm sure it will be a lovely ceremony, Dick," Rino says. "If you don't mind me saying, though, you don't sound so good. Cough's gotten quite a bit worse, eh?"

"Yeah, you know, it is what it is. Doctors tell me I won't be here much longer. All the stress been getting to me, you know? Anyway, we don't need to talk about me, Jay. I see you brought a friend. He don't seem hungry." He extends his right hand across the table at me. I don't budge. "Little shy, are you? Come on, eat up, boy."

He takes his hand back and watches me. Rino keeps eating. I don't look away from Dictum's mustachioed face, and his eyes don't leave mine. I grab my fork with my left hand and stab a piece of breast meat.

Rino continues to eat with his right hand. Our elbows collide, and he spills a small bit of rice on Dictum's fine tablecloth. He then does the courteous, ambidextrous thing and switches to his left hand. I look at him, confused, and wonder just what the hell his game is. Dictum just stares us both down.

"Excuse me, Jay. Why exactly is it that you two came here?"

Rino sets his fork down and speaks. "We're here to enter diplomatic relations with you. Let's talk about South Bent."

Dictum coughs and chortles. "All right, Jay. What about it?"

"Independence."

“South Bent independence, eh?” Dictum laughs and coughs once more. “A novel idea. So just who among the lefties do you think could run South Bent?”

Rino looks from Dictum to me and back again. If I can't be a martyr, make me king, I think.

“I will,” he says.

That bastard, Rino, I knew I couldn't trust him. It was all a fucking power grab from the get-go. I stand up, pull him from the table, and shove him to Dictum's kitchen floor.

Dictum just sits back and laughs as I open up and wail on Rino. I feel something poking in my pocket—Rino's pen I took earlier. I point out the sharp end and thrust it repeatedly in his right hand. Stab. Stab. Stab. He screams. The little ambidextrous bitch screams.

“These are the people you want to lead, Jay? Look at yourself. On the ground. Did you know anything about this guy before you brought him here? You probably just met him tonight. These lefties, they're all the same, Jay. I tried to teach you, but you never learned. Grandpa Dick always told me the trouble they made when he was growing up. 1995: Oklahoma City, Timothy McVeigh, left-handed. There used to be a group of terrorists called al Qaeda, run by a no-good fucking souther named Bin Laden. These are bad people, Jay.”

I drop Rino's pen on his chest and stand up, leaving him to squirm. I look to the fucking Boss himself. This time it's time for real.

From the corner of my eye, I see a shoe fly and hit Dick Dictum—not an acrobatic motherfucker—square in the nose. “But it took a left-handed President to kill

him, you dumbass!” yells Rino, as his left throwing hand falls back to his side.

As I stand at Richard Dictum's left side, both of us in shock, Rino raises his right hand skyward, holding his pen and revealing his gaping stab wound, his fucking stigmata. “Bent must pen it,” he gasps, “*The Plea for Partial Ambidexterity.*” He holds the pen firm in the air, holds his left hand stiff, and makes one final skin-puncturing motion of equality.

Circus Money and Bad Precedents

Small Russian American children, ages six to sixteen, dressed in extravagant garb, dance, juggle, fly through the air, and balance their nimble figures on unicycles in the poster adorning the front window of the local CoGo's. Mark tosses Eric an anticipatory glance.

They've stolen from the circus before, but it has always been comparatively petty things like monkeys. A monkey does not want to be kidnapped, but it does not have the capability to alert the authorities as to its whereabouts. Eventually, it adapts to its new habitat and becomes a semi-productive member of the household. Proportionally, as much so as could be expected, considering its natural genetic inferiority to humans, the other primates. Eric responds to Mark's glance by staring dismissively at the ground and shaking his head, his eyes obscured by his Calgary Flames cap.

Eric follows Mark up the winding staircase to the seventh floor and to the apartment marked "SKARL" with the hammer-and-sickle doorknob. Opening the door, they see four well trained circus monkeys dusting the cupboards, vacuuming the carpet, and setting the table with two full-sized microwaveable TV dinners.

"You've taught them to use the microwave?" Eric is flabbergasted and amazed.

"They learn fast. Next month we're hoping to master the stove." Mark motions over to his favorite of the servant monkeys, whom he has named, tongue-in-cheek, George Walker, after the 43rd President. They stole George Walker about a year ago from the Q.E.W. Traveling Circus in Ontario. Mark hands the monkey a slightly overripe, smashed and bruised banana from his pocket.

"You've had that in your pants all day?" Eric asks in amazement. "I thought you

were just happy to see me.”

Mark ignores his question, his adolescent joke. “Wine?” he asks.

“No thanks, I don't care to drink.”

“Suit yourself,” says Mark, as he pops the cork and pours himself a glass of red wine. He has yet to train the monkeys to pop corks. At Mark's hand motion, George Walker sets down his delicious banana and brings Eric a glass of water.

Midway through their virtually silent meal together, Mark sets down his plasticware and looks up at Eric. “Just listen to me,” he says, and tosses back that same anticipatory glance from CoGo's.

“No.”

“What? Why not?”

“I'm not about to get into the business of kidnapping.”

“It's not kidnapping.”

“What is it, then?”

“Building an army.”

At this, the artificially manufactured mashed potatoes on Eric's plastic fork fly into the face of Larry Harmon (not the actor who portrayed Bozo the Clown, but the monkey named after him), a slightly less skilled monkey stolen the same day as George Walker. “You've got to be kidding me.”

“No, I'm not. Down, Larry.”

“What in the world could we possibly need an army for?”

“Seriously? The proletarian uprising.”

Thinking strictly stereotypically, Mark's logic makes sense. They're Russians.

The proletarian uprising is in their blood. And they're kids. Still plenty of time to come up with a reasonable plan by which actually to overthrow the government before they're ready to be soldiers.

“Because they're...Russian?”

“Yes. I already have a box set aside to store them in during the gestation period.”

“Gestation period? What are you even *saying*, man?” He picks up his fork and takes one last bite of salisbury steak then stands up and approaches the door.

“So I'll see you Saturday?” Mark asks.

Eric simply stares at the ground and shakes his head, then walks out the door.

Friday night. Mark has yet to hear back from Eric about kidnapping the Russian American kids (though he really doesn't think it's technically kidnapping). He, George Walker, Larry Harmon, Patty, and Wallerstein are sitting peacefully around a fire in the middle of the park, only a matter of yards removed from the community playground. It's probably illegal to build a fire here, but, then again, whatever's in that self-rolled cigarette he's using said fire to light is probably illegal, too. And it's *definitely* illegal to use monkeys to steal people's wallets for you.

It's really a clever thing he has going here, though. Whenever a particularly affluent-appearing person walks by, Mark gives a quick command, and one of the monkeys (they take turns) runs over, jumps on the person's back, and steals his or her wallet. Think about it. If a monkey's jumping on your back, the first thing you're going to think to do is not to check for your wallet. In all likelihood, you're going to be flailing around like an idiot trying to get that monkey off your back. In the following moments,

you'll most likely wonder why or how a monkey ended up on your back. By the time you notice your wallet is gone, it will be nearly impossible to make any cop take such an absurd accusation seriously.

To make matters worse, Mark's monkeys, in particular, will never leave a trace of evidence. As soon as they get the wallets back to the fire, they throw them in. Legal tender up in flames. The funds on burnt-up credit cards can usually be recovered, but that's okay, as the action is primarily symbolic anyway. The loss of family photos is an unfortunate but necessary consequence.

After four wallets, a sufficient number for one night, Mark checks his cell phone. Nothing. Mark wishes Eric would just sign off to this plan. As far as he can tell, it's perfectly flawless.

On the walk home, Mark decides to stop off at the box office (which is kept open late at night for this very purpose of people who decide the night before the circus that they absolutely have to go) and puts down the cash (so he does take *a little bit* from the wallets, enough to survive) for two tickets to the Russian American Kids Circus. He signs his name on the line, *xMark Skarl*, and exchanges twenty-five dollars for two uniquely watermarked slips of paper, and the transaction is complete. If nothing else, at least he'll get to watch some impressive acrobatics for double the market value.

Eric sits at the Sixth Street Pub, sipping on some beers, adding in the occasional two-ounce glass of Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey to round things off. Sports memorabilia and cloverleaves line the walls; Eric thinks Mark would find a way to discuss the place's disgusting aura of capitalism if he were here.

The regulars stare him down with some amazement, along with other typical drunken expressions such as stupor-induced blankness and inexplicable anger. Two empty bottles sit on the table in front of him, along with a single empty shot glass. Eric is already spilling his hard-earned malt beverages all over himself, handing out tips of an exorbitant nature to the bartender (admittedly good at her job) just for being cute (even going so far as to try to slip a dollar bill into her conveniently protruding cleavage on one occasion—Eric finds this hard to do with her on the other side of the bar, though), and offering analyses of the night's baseball highlights.

“Fielder's choice? Ain't even a damn...ain't even a damn hit?”

The old man next to Eric at the bar puts his arm around him. “I been telling the boys he's worthless,” he says. “Wha's yer name, kid?”

Eric tells him and continues his analysis: “Catch the ball, damn it,” he yells as the shortstop fields a ground ball.

“Funny kid,” the old man slaps him on the back. “You hear they paying this guy 15 mil? And what's he batting, buck fifty? Ain't right, is it?”

Eric squints to get a better look at a patch of white hair on the old man's head. “No,” he says, “no, it ain't right. Ain't right at all.”

“And you got, you got this other guy putting up numbers, something like, what, three homers a week, making chump change?”

“Chimp change?”

“Damn near league minimum.”

“Ah,” Eric says, adjusting his cap, “league minimum. Ain't right.”

“You're damn right it ain't right. \$500,000 a year for numbers like that?”

“Ain't right,” Eric says. He remembers something he heard Mark say and adds, “Equal pay for equal work.”

“Damn,” the old man says, “we'd have half our players begging on the streets.” He thinks for a moment before continuing, “But I like your style, kid. It'd improve the game, you know?”

“Game's a damn circus,” Eric says and gives the old man a cryptic half-eyed smile.

Mark still hasn't heard from Eric about the Russian American Kids Circus, now less than twelve hours away. He sits in his relaxing chair, contemplating bed, stroking the furry cranium of George Walker. Deciding he might as well give it one last go, Mark taps the send button on his cell phone twice to redial Eric's number.

“Yeah,” Eric answers.

Mark isn't expecting to hear Eric's voice. “Oh, hey,” is all he says at first.

“Doin' all right, Marky?”

“Uhh, yes, yes, doing fine. So you down for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?”

“The circus.”

“Circus? Damn circus. Ain't right.”

“You been drinking?”

“Ain't even...you know how much that shortstop makes?”

Mark knows for a fact there are some overpaid shortstops. “It's not right.”

“Damn right it ain't right. I'll put an end to it.”

Mark is liking this new attitude of Eric's. "That's what we need those kids for."

"Ah," Eric says.

"So you want to put an end to overpaid athletes?"

"Damn. Yeah. We can do that?"

"We certainly can. I'll see you tomorrow."

The next morning, Mark sits with his monkeys outside the circus house, thinking it seems a bit easy the way he got Eric on his side, thinking he might not be reliable for long. A box marked "G.P." lies next to them.

"Don't worry, George Walker," he says, scratching the monkey's belly, "we just need him on our side today. Once we have our army, no one will be able to stop us."

A young Russian girl walks past, holding the hand of a large Boris Yeltsin-looking fellow. She squeezes tighter when she sees the way Mark Skarl eyes her caretaker.

"Traitor," Mark spits, angry with the man for looking like the first leader of post-Soviet Russia. At this word, George Walker leaps from his arms onto the back of Boris Yeltsin, playing peek-a-boo with the man's eyes. The little girl giggles a little. Little kids think monkeys are funny. Boris Yeltsin doesn't.

"Get...this...monkey...off my back," he yells. He reaches for George Walker's arms but lands a fist in his own eye when the monkey pulls back. As George Walker looks to Mark for approval, though, Boris Yeltsin grabs him by the neck and throws him to the ground.

The yelps that emerge simultaneously from George Walker and the little girl are enough to make the mild-mannered Mark Skarl burn with rage. "He's a curious monkey,"

he yells. "Now you leave him be, old man." He clenches his fists as if to engage the much larger man.

"What do you American say...you want...a piece of me?" He laughs at what he thinks is a joke. "Control your monkeys, will you?" George Walker crawls back to his master and pushes Larry Harmon, who has taken his place in Mark's arms, to the ground.

Eric arrives about twenty minutes later. Mark has calmed a bit but still paces and mumbles profanities about Boris Yeltsin. He now carries a large sheet of cardboard on which "Need 2 TiX?" is printed in obnoxious letters.

Eric tosses a confused glance Mark's way. "What are you doing?"

Mark tosses a "What did you just ask me?" glance back at Eric.

"I said, what are you doing?"

"Selling our tickets." Mark thinks the answer would be obvious if Eric would just read the sign he's holding.

"What, we're not going? Why don't you just burn them?" Eric deems it necessary to remind Mark of his politco-economic views. "You're a Communist...remember?"

"And what part of being a Communist says I need to waste my money on these tickets when I can get them for free by ripping off these idiots? George and Larry will get the tickets back. That won't be a problem. And if you weren't hanging around me making a scene, they'd be able to slip them into your sack without anyone noticing."

"Really thought this one through, eh, Mark? I tip my hat to you." He tips his hat in Mark's general direction. "You realize the show's not even sold out though, right?" He points to the box office, indeed still quite open for business, no one even in line for

tickets.

Mark sets the sign down and shakes his head. “I swear sometimes...let's go. Pick up that box.”

Eric obliges, carrying the box as they walk toward the entrance. “What's this for, anyway?” he asks Mark.

“The gestation period, I already told you.”

Eric sighs, still skeptical, but vaguely remembers rationalizing this as the only way to solve the unjust economics of Major League Baseball. They push forward.

After waiting in a short line, the group of primates walks into the Russian American Kids Circus, flashes their passes at the doorman (Free admission for monkeys!), and congregates in a discreetly selected location near the elephant pen to go over the plan. A list of rules is posted on the inside of the door—no whistling, no peacock feathers, just to name a couple. Old circus superstitions.

“Okay, I think we'd better stick to the younger group,” Mark starts. “The teenagers will resist too much and make a scene. Here's what we're going to do. George and Larry will stay back here and rile up these elephants. This way, anyone who matters will be handling that, and we're free to sneak back to the young boys' room and throw them all in that box for transport. Train for ten-fifteen years, we got ourselves an army.” He beams with pride. “Oh, and Eric?” he adds.

“Yeah?”

“Watch out for Boris Yeltsin.”

“Who?”

“Big old Russian dude with white hair. Took over for Gorbachev. Come on, man.

Get it together. He's got beef with George Walker, too.”

Eric nods in reluctant agreement, not really believing the first President of the Russian Federation to be in attendance.

“Well, you ready?” Mark asks, though he gives Eric no chance to answer. “Go get 'em, boys!” George and Larry leap the fence into the elephants' pen and quickly latch onto their tails and start swinging back and forth, jumping from elephant to elephant. A crowd gathers around the pen, most assuming this to be some sort of impromptu act. “This won't take long.” He tugs at Eric's shirt, and they walk with Patty and Wallerstein away from the elephants toward the dressing rooms.

They're not twenty feet from the pen when a chorus of trumpeting beasts echoes through the hallways. “Told you,” Mark says, as, within seconds, the Moscow Circus retirees who run this event dart past them on either side toward the distress signal. “Cue the Disaster March,” Mark smirks. “Alert the audience!”

The assembled audience watches as elephants storm the main floor, chasing each other in circles. Larry Harmon is surfing USA on the back of the largest African elephant. George Walker jumps from one's head, latches his tail onto a swinging trapeze rope hanging from the ceiling, and leaps through the menacing ring of fire to another rope on the other side of the floor. He has not forgotten the training from his past life. Kids laugh. Parents quizzicate. Circus staff debate how long to let this go. George Walker completes one encore and scurries out the door in search of his comrades. Larry Harmon launches himself off the elephant's back into the audience.

* * *

Mark and Eric have made it to the dressing area. The monkeys run ahead to scope things out. Mark assures Eric they'll let them know when they smell young boys nearby.

The walls are draped in the white, blue, and red of the Russian Federation. The only remnant of the building's normal role as the town multi-purpose center is a photograph of a local swimmer posing with the governor after a recent gold medal performance.

Patty stops in front of a doorway, points, and calls to her master. "Good girl," Mark says and whistles her back to him. "Well," he looks to Eric, "let's go get those kids, eh?"

Eric nods. He knows it must be done. He carries the box, follows Mark to the door.

As Mark reaches for the knob to open the door to the proletarian uprising, two large hands grasp and squeeze tight the shoulders of both him and Eric from behind. Mark manages to squeak out through the pain, "You...were supposed...to watch...for Boris."

Indeed, it is this Boris Yeltsin-looking man who stayed back to look over the kids while everyone else tended to the elephant problem. Of course, Mark thinks, someone would stay behind to be with the kids. Of course it would be Boris Yeltsin.

"What do you do?" Boris throws the both of them against the wall. "Why are you here? Do you know nothing? You do not whistle in dressing room...you fool."

They've stolen from the circus before. Both Eric and Mark know you simply do not whistle in the dressing area. You just don't do it. Cue their Disaster March. Their time is up.

* * *

Larry Harmon has moved from the elephants to the crowd of people. He's on their backs, stealing their wallets. It's all he knows to do. The kids still laugh. The parents have begun to suspect foulplay. One African elephant is ramming the Russian American Kids Circus's obscenely expensive lighting system. The circus bureaucracy is working toward an evacuation strategy.

Boris Yeltsin has Mark Skarl and Eric by the throats, Patty and Wallerstein pinned down with his size 20 boots. He doesn't know the half of their plans. Whistling in the dressing area is serious business. He's contemplating what to do with them when George Walker screeches and leaps onto his back, wrapping his tail around the massive throat of the Russian. Boris lets his captives loose to focus on the small primate that's jumped him for the second time in less than an hour.

Eric can't help but look upon the strange face of George Walker with adoration. The sight of a monkey that has his master's back is one that truly warms his heart. He remembers briefly the day they stole George Walker in Ontario, how he half-joked to Mark how his features were reminiscent of then-President Bush. He can't help but smile, watching a large Russian man struggle with an animal a quarter his size.

He's so lost in these thoughts of circus monkeys and bad Presidents that he fails to notice Mark entering the young boys' room, looking finally to gather the army he needs.

The lighting system is down on the main floor. It's fallen into the burning ring of fire. The wires catch. The blaze expands, and smoke fills the room. Parents and kids

alike run for the exit. Circus officials determine that everyone will use their best judgment. Larry Harmon runs to the center of the floor and tosses the faces of Presidents into the flames. It's all he knows to do.

Eric squints at the white hair on the Yeltsin lookalike's head and gains a vague recollection of the man at the bar last night. He's pretty sure they can't be the same person. That guy was talking baseball. Nevertheless, as he watches Mark Skarl attempt to lure six year old Russian American boys into a box, he thinks of a phrase he repeated so many times the night before

“Ain't right, Skarl,” he says.

“Huh?” Mark doesn't look his way, doesn't toss him a glance of any sort.

“It ain't right.”

Boris Yeltsin, having thrown George Walker to the ground once more, agrees. “It is not right.”

“But you said last night...” Mark starts.

“How much that shortstop makes? That ain't right either. A lot of things ain't right, Skarl.”

A vague scent of smoke fills the hallway. “You smell? We must leave, I think.”

“We *should* have been out of here by now,” Mark lambastes the Russian.

“You burn down building?” Boris yells.

But before Mark can answer “Indirectly,” the kids and the monkeys dart toward the rear exit, and three men, using their best judgment, decide to follow.

My Personal Instrument of Destruction

They never told me the fridge didn't open from the inside. They didn't think they had to.

You know, now that I think about it, my parents never told me not to drive a bulldozer for a living either. Sure, the pay is okay—you'll get that working for the union—but the work is unsatisfying, and the nights are way too long for a single fifth of whiskey to suffice. Dad, at least, had to have an idea about the job's tedium. He worked construction for the Georgia Department of Transportation the whole time I was growing up. He must have spent two years, cumulative, flipping signs off the Panthersville exit on I-20. STOP. SLOW. Every time Mom would see anything on the news about a flagger being killed on the job, she'd have a fit. She'd write letters to every state capitol in the country, urging them to do something. She even sent a picture of me crying once, along with, in my sloppy cursive, *Slow down. My daddy works here.* Just a few years ago, I did end up seeing what looked like my shoddy penmanship on a sign while I was driving through South Carolina.

Mom called me last week to tell me Dad had been diagnosed with liver cancer. He'll die all right, but at least it won't be on the road. At least it won't be at work. He's only fifty-six. Mom wants me to go see him, but I'm living up in LaFayette now, and it's a two hours' drive back home to Panthersville. A hard two hours.

GE manufactures stoves and ovens at the plant down the road from my house. There's a plot of hilly land near a RaceTrac gas station on the outskirts of their property where they dump all their unsold, outdated appliances. I'm working a job there tonight—gotta find a place to bury all this garbage. They're giving the land back to the community

for a charter school or something. Whatever.

The old man at the RaceTrac always has judgment in his eyes. He reads the newspaper, like Dad used to; there's plenty to judge in there.

I'm working alone tonight. My supervisor is usually with me, but Total Nonstop Action Wrestling is taping an episode of Impact! up in Chattanooga tonight, and he was able to get his hands on a couple of tickets. He didn't even ask me to go, knowing full well how much I used to love wrestling as a kid. Maybe if I had told him how Dad never took me to a match even though he always promised when it came near us. Maybe then he would have considered me.

"Just make sure there's no dumbass kids hangin' out in any of them ovens," was his main piece of advice when he headed out at the end of last night. I told him I didn't think we'd have an issue with kids crawling into ovens in Georgia in August. Fridges maybe, but definitely not ovens.

I give the engine its full revs and reach under the seat for the stainless steel flask Mom gave me last Christmas when I went home. It's decorated with the sticker she stuffed my stocking with: **IT'S A BULLDOZER THING**. I move it to my lips, tip my head back, swish the liquid around in my mouth for a few seconds, and swallow, waiting for the sharp burn to hit my heart before I get on with my work.

Dad and I used to watch wrestling together every Monday night. Living in Georgia, Ted Turner's brand of WCW rasslin' was popular, but we always watched the World Wrestling Federation's counterpart, Monday Night Raw. Dad had been watching WWF since the '80s during the peak of Hulkamania, and they had my favorite wrestler,

the Undertaker. When the lights went out and his gong sounded, I would get goosebumps every time. Just a couple years ago, he retired 20-0 at WrestleMania, one of the most iconic figures in professional wrestling history. I was eight years old in the summer of 1994 when Dad first started letting me stay up late to watch Raw with him. Hogan had just jumped ship and signed with WCW, and Dad was in the process of burning or ripping to shreds all of his Hulkamania memorabilia. I remember going back to school at the end of August, and there were still a couple kids at recess talking about Hogan's big debut at WCW's Bash at the Beach pay-per-view against Ric Flair, but I had my sights set on the WWF's upcoming extravaganza, SummerSlam, in which the Undertaker would be in the second half of a double main event facing, of all people, an impostor version of himself. Dad called him the Underfaker. Needless to say, I was stoked. I couldn't wait. Not one but two seven foot tall Lords of Darkness would be gracing the squared circle; there was no way this wasn't going to be good. The real Undertaker, I was told, would go on to win with the help of a mystical urn carried around by his crazy obese manager, whose name was Paul Bearer. At the time I didn't appreciate the pun.

Dad was more excited for the other main event, the steel cage match for the title between WWF Champion Bret Hart and his brother Owen. He talked about how the brothers' more technical style was what the business needed and how their match wasn't just trying to make a quick buck off a ridiculous and gimmicky storyline. I guess that was reasonable, but I couldn't help myself being excited by the Undertaker. Gimmick or not, he was great.

Mom always asked us, "Don't you boys know that crap's fake?"

Did she honestly think we believed that a supernatural being in the form of a

human could create lightning bolts and make his eyeballs go into the back of his head?

“Yes, dear,” Dad would reply, “we’re not stupid, you know?”

A sharp pain goes through my neck. I apply pressure with my flask and try to use it as an icepack, but the summer heat keeps my liquor warm. It’s been twenty years since SummerSlam ’94, but I still feel the effects some nights. I remove the flask, tense up my right arm, and wince.

The Undertaker scared me when I first saw him on one of Dad’s tapes I found lying around. He won his match in less than a minute and then carried his opponent from the ring in a body bag. So I had a tough time understanding why I was supposed to root for him in ’94. Dad had to explain to me the difference between faces and heels—good guys and bad guys, respectively—and why, based on the kind of heat, or crowd reaction, they received, promoters decided to turn wrestlers from faces to heels, or vice versa. He showed me the tape of Shawn Michaels, one of his favorites at the time, superkicking Marty Jannetty and throwing him through a barbershop window, and he explained to me that this was nothing more than a heel turn. If they needed Michaels to turn back face at a later juncture, which they did on numerous occasions, it could be done, and the audience would be forced to forget about his betrayal of his tag team partner. Three months was typically thought to be the extent of the average viewer’s memory range.

I still remember Dad’s reaction every time either of the Hart brothers came close to escaping the cage and attaining victory that night at SummerSlam. Leaning forward in

his chair, wiping the sweat from his brow, he slammed back nervous swigs of beer. He must have gone through at least a six-pack in that half-hour match—not to mention whatever he went through watching the five-match undercard. He was belligerent, pupils wide, but he still knew a great match when he saw it.

“What a match...what a match,” he repeated again and again.

After thirty minutes, the two brothers had clearly worn each other out. Everyone could tell the match was close to ending. Bret, the champion, was incapacitated, and his brother Owen was ascending the inside of the cage, looking as if he would soon be the victor. As he reached the top of the cage, Bret, the Hitman, climbed up the cage after him. Owen was already descending the outside of the cage by the time the Hitman reached the top though. He was surely about to become the new champion until Bret got a few strikes in at the top of the cage, causing him to fall down the side of the cage, getting his legs trapped in the links of the cage and tangled up in the ropes. Bret Hart promptly took advantage of the situation, jumping from the side of the cage, and with both feet hitting the floor, completing the successful defense of his championship.

Dad was ecstatic. He jumped from his chair, crushed his empty can in his hand, and threw it at the TV.

In his more rational moments, Dad would tell me Owen was the greatest wrestler never to win the title. After Owen’s accidental death on pay-per-view in 1999, Dad called off work and let me stay home from school the next day to grieve. At SummerSlam ’94, though, he was the heel, and Dad was embracing the role.

“HITMAN! HITMAN! HITMAN! Come on, son, get into it!” He wobbled around, flexed, and ripped what I recall to be the last of his Hulkamania t-shirts straight

off his chest, motioning his hand towards me in a challenging gesture—a challenge I readily accepted.

Dad switched to his deep announcer’s voice. Even in his inebriation, he was able to pull it off without flaws. “The following *non-title* contest is scheduled for one fall. In the ring, originally from Cedartown, Georgia, weighing in at an impressive 245 pounds...he is the heavyweight champion of the world...the Black Bear, *Oso Negro!*”

The couch became the turnbuckle, and I climbed to the top rope. “Are you finished, *Oso?*” I asked Dad.

“And his opponent...from pitiful Panthersville, Georgia, having never won a single match in his entire wrestling career, weighing in at a flabby 85 pounds...Porky Pissant.”

Porky Pissant? “I’m not a pissant, Dad,” I yelled, readying myself to launch at him with the bell.

“What’s he gonna do?” Dad mocked me, covering his eyes with his hands and jogging in place for a few moments. The arrogant heel. The fans at the United Center in Chicago erupted in boos as Jim “The Anvil” Neidhart and more of Owen’s familial cohorts stormed the cage to assault the champion. I lifted both my arms as high as I could toward the ceiling, trying to get the crowd on my side. Looking both ways before jumping, I launched myself at Dad’s bare chest in a diving crossbody. If I could have hit that move, it would have been all over.

But no. Not that way. Dad removed his hands from his eyes and caught me just in time to avoid defeat. He slammed me to the living room carpet and strutted over my flailing body. Not even bothering to acknowledge the crowd, he made a quick slitting

motion across his throat and pointed to my body, already down for the count. The end was near.

Dad lifted me and turned my nimble carcass upside-down, my tiny eight-year-old chest heaving against his fully developed, sweaty and hairy monstrosity. As he prepared to execute the Undertaker's signature move, the tombstone piledriver, a woman in the crowd shouted for him to stop. "What are you doing? He's just a boy! Drop him right now. You can't *do* this." It was Mom, the love interest of the heel, trying to stop him from going too far.

But Dad shook his head, dropped me to the ground and covered me for the 1-2-3.

Mom took me to the hospital. She told the receptionist things got a little rough wrestling around with friends. No, she wouldn't be pressing charges or holding the other kid's parents liable. That wouldn't be necessary. We'll just have to be more careful in the future.

I could have broken my neck, but the doctor said it was just a bad strain. I guess I was pretty lucky. I would be ready to go again within the week.

I like to think of SummerSlam '94 as the night Dad turned heel. There were moments after that when he showed some compassion, made brief face turns, if you will, but the general trend was heel. He always turned back heel, usually just when the crowd was back on his side.

Our feud continued for the next few years in a mostly passive-aggressive fashion. He drove me to school. We watched wrestling together. We disagreed on who the best wrestlers were.

I decided to crawl into our refrigerator in 1997, shortly after the Undertaker's brother Kane made his debut. The Undertaker and Shawn Michaels were at the end of a lengthy feud, which was culminated at an event called Badd Blood in October, in the first ever Hell in a Cell match. It was like a steel cage match but crazier. The cage enclosed the entire ringside area, and it had a roof sixteen feet above the wrestlers. There was no escape.

Of course, Dad and I both knew the event was scripted; of course we knew the winner of the match was predetermined. That didn't stop him from taunting me in the weeks leading up to the event with his guarantee that the Heartbreak Kid would find a way to overcome the odds and defeat the much larger Undertaker. Paul Bearer, angry with the Undertaker for no longer accepting his managerial services, had been claiming for weeks that Kane, who had presumably been killed as a child in a fire at a funeral home (something he blamed the Undertaker for), was alive and would be coming soon to enact some sort of revenge against his older brother. Sure enough, as Michaels was bloodied up and barely conscious on the mat, the lights went out, satanic organ music played, and a seven-foot masked monster dressed head to toe in red and black made his way to the ring through hellfire and brimstone. He ripped the door from the cell, entered the ring, incapacitated the referee, and delivered to the Undertaker his own signature tombstone piledriver, allowing Michaels to make the cover and get the win.

Dad and I were both in shock. Michaels would go on to win the title from Bret Hart the next month in even more controversial fashion, but the Kane/Undertaker storyline was one for the ages. Yes, Dad's guy won that night. But this was an angle much bigger than one night, one match. As the brothers' rivalry, partnership, and

subsequent return to rivalry developed over the coming months, Dad and I couldn't wait for what came next. We loved it.

The Saturday after the Hell in a Cell match, Dad stayed in bed through the early afternoon. "Feeling a bit groggy," I believe were his words. Mom was home, paying me no heed, sitting on the couch watching tapes of hit new shows *Ally McBeal* and *Dharma & Greg*.

"Dad!" I yelled in his ear, trying to wake him. His breath reeked of a flavor I wouldn't fall in love with for another half a decade or so. "Wake up, Dad. Come on, Mom wants to go get lunch," I lied, thinking lunch was a prospect that could rouse any man, especially as hearty a champion as Dad was. His snoring only grew louder, so I took my little eleven-year-old, prepubescent left hand and squeezed the man's nostrils together. He coughed and rolled over, so I grabbed the pillow from Mom's side of the bed and hit him with a shot across the head. In my mind I was nailing him with the business end of a steel chair.

"The hell?" he let out in a barely coherent yell, hopping with a start that pushed me to the floor. "Damn it, kid. You wanna grab me a glass of orange juice then leave me the fuck alone?" He placed Mom's pillow over his head as I turned around to head downstairs to the kitchen. He was snoring again by the time I got out the door.

I walked down the stairs past the living room, past Mom still immobile on the couch, into the kitchen. Pizza crust on the countertop, broken bottles in the sink. I opened the fridge. Sure enough, there was Dad's orange juice on the top shelf, next to a half gallon of expired milk. Three beers on the bottom, a shelf on the door for

condiments, and a drawer full of lunch meat.

When you open the fridge, all its goods are illuminated. This is convenient for when you need to come downstairs to grab a quick drink or bite to eat in the middle of the night. Open the door, and there you are. Dad liked to stand in the fridge light eating cold cuts and drinking OJ straight from the carton in his tighty-whities after stumbling to the kitchen at 3 AM. Scraps of salami would often decorate the refrigerator in the morning, remnants of Dad's inebriated, middle-of-the-night feasts.

I stood in the cool breeze of the fridge for a moment, contemplating. I started to close the door and saw the light go out as I was about to shut it completely. I pulled the door back open and saw the light come back on. I repeated this process a few times. Clap on. Clap off. I sat on the floor, Indian style, and thought for a moment. I looked behind me. Mom and Dad were nowhere to be found.

I stood up, opened the door, and crawled in. Why not?

Of course there's no handle on the inside. Why would there be? So I strategized. I reached up to the door shelf, attached myself to a bottle of Jack Daniels honey dijon mustard, and pulled. I pulled that door the whole way shut, bumping my head off the door in the process, and the shelter around me submerged into darkness.

In my head I heard the Undertaker's gong ring. I shuddered a bit before remembering what Dad told me, that I had nothing to fear. The Undertaker wasn't real. Mark Callaway was just a man doing a job, playing a role. He couldn't hurt me.

What fridge makers don't do is provide you with a means to turn the light on while the door is closed. Why would they?

* * *

Digging holes always makes me sleepy. My supervisor won't be back until tomorrow. I could crawl down in deep, take a dirt nap. I wouldn't wake up for nothing. The Undertaker was buried alive four times in his career. I wonder, did he ever get used to it? Did he ever even grow to like it maybe? Of course, I know he always had a trap door to safety. But sometimes you just wonder.

When the Undertaker first went off on his own, Paul Bearer tried to lure him back, telling him, "You are my personal instrument of destruction." The flask is empty. I need a refill.

In retrospect, crawling into the fridge was probably a mistake. There's not a lot of room to move around in a refrigerator, and it becomes a challenge to stay warm in there.

They don't put emergency blankets inside fridges.

My first course of action was to try to open the door. I pushed once. It didn't work. I pushed again. It didn't work. I adjusted myself to the possibility that I'd be in there for a very long time.

My own personal Hell in a Cell. There was no way out.

I wipe the sweat from my forehead. It's the hottest night of the summer, and my overindulgence on whiskey isn't helping to control my perspiration. I fondle the empty flask in my hand and put the bulldozer in reverse. My personal instrument of destruction makes the trip up the hill with me to the RaceTrac. I'm not supposed to take the dozer from the yard, but I don't care. I need to pay that old man a visit.

The road up is blurry, but I manage. I keep the dozer in reverse. It's faster. In a dying town like this, there aren't enough cars out this late at night for me to worry too much about hitting one. There's a flagger up the road telling me to veer left and slow down. In an effort to defy him, I fully release the gas pedal, opening the throttle and maximizing my acceleration. I don't think he notices. Even at my quickest, I'm slower than most. Eight miles an hour up the hill I trek. Do any of these construction guys even work? Flip the sign. STOP. SLOW. That's all I see tonight, all I've seen the past three weeks.

I shut the bulldozer off when I get to the parking lot and step out. Everything hits me at once in half a second as I stand up for the first time in hours. The lights are on in the RaceTrac. The old man's still behind the counter, still reading. He has to have that paper memorized by now.

I struggle up the sidewalk to the outside wall, my guide to the door. When the bricks turn to glass, I know I'm getting closer. Caressing the taped-up block letters designating this week's hot dog specials, I make my way forward. My knees crash on something—an ice machine. I can't make out the price. I think it's on sale. It's free if you can outrun the asshole working there. Smirking, I stumble to the front of the icebox. I open the door, shut it, and open it again. The second time I grab a bag of ice and put it up against my neck. I apply pressure.

I think about Monday Night Raw. Good Ol' Jr, Jim Ross, the long-time play-by-play guy, commentates my life. *Bah gawd King, what's the Phenom gonna do with that bag of ice? The Dead Man has lost it, King!*

I bask in the frigid icebox air, then throw the bag back in and close the door. I'm

here to make a purchase.

After my drunken body crashes through the door, the old man finally looks up from his paper. No hesitation: I grab a six pack of Red Brick and take it to the counter.

“Sir...” the old man starts, pointing to the notice beside the cash register about serving visibly intoxicated persons.

“Ring 'em up.”

He shakes his head.

“You got no fucking spirits and now you won't sell me beer? Your dad dying? Your dad dead? Ring 'em up.”

He reaches for the phone.

“Don't do it. Ring 'em up.”

I think of Dad fifteen years ago during the height of the WWF's Attitude Era. Stone Cold Steve Austin, the beer-swilling bastard, the classic antihero. I'd watch in nervous approval as Dad imitated the Texas Rattlesnake—shaking two beers up, pounding them against each other in the air, and spilling more all over himself than he ever actually drank. Mom would come into the living room and tell him to calm down, tell him he's making a mess. He'd flip her Austin's token double bird and recite his classic catchphrase to me: “DTA, son: **Don't Trust Anybody.**”

I give up. I give the old man the one-finger salute and trip to the door, leaving the beers on the counter.

“You're crazy as hell, and you need Jesus,” he yells. “You're gonna rot in hell, kid.” That's not such a scary thought, I think.

* * *

I remember feeling my limbs begin to stiffen. My stomach growled at the salami above me—I still hadn't had lunch—but I couldn't reach up to make the grab. I tried to cry, but no one would hear me anyway. It could have made a good picture for Mom's construction site safety campaign, but who knew when she'd be there to take it?

You have to have a lot of faith not to go crazy hanging out in a dark refrigerator for any extended amount of time. I tried to pray, but all the prayers I knew were bedtime prayers.

If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.

At eleven, this sort of thing scared the hell out of me. One night before bed I asked Mom, “What if God's a heel?”

She looked at me funny for a second, then grabbed my right foot and examined it. “A heel, eh?” I nodded. “Well, I like to think God is everything. Heels.” She took my foot, released it, and grabbed my nose. “Faces.” Then she brought me into a full embrace. “And everything in between.”

“God is good guys *and* bad guys?” I asked, confused, but warm in Mom's hug.

“God is just good, but bad guys can become good guys if they talk to Him.” Like Shawn Michaels when he was born again? I never asked Dad what he thought of him after that.

“So you don't think there's any way God's a bad guy?”

“No,” she said, “what would make you think that?”

“Well, He *did* flood all those people.”

“They were bad guys, though,” she reminded me.

“But couldn't they have talked to Him?” I thought it was a reasonable suggestion.

“They wouldn't. That was the problem.”

I still didn't understand. “Wasn't Jesus all about forgiveness though? He wouldn't have flooded all those people, would He?”

Mom had to think for a bit on this one. “No, no He wouldn't have.” She started to laugh before composing herself. “Having children changes people.”

“Do you think God is nice to Jesus?”

“Of course He is. He's His son.” She smiled and tucked me in, kissing me on the forehead, then turning around and shutting my light off on her way out the door.

Owen Hart died at work. It was an accident. He fell from the rafters, chest-first onto the top rope.

When you start following wrestling beyond the televised matches and storylines, you can't help but be depressed. WrestleMania XX ended with Eddie Guerrero and Chris Benoit in the ring together celebrating with their respective world title belts. A year and a half later, Guerrero, a recovering drug addict who had finally seemed to get his life back together, was found dead by his nephew in his hotel room in Minneapolis. A year and a half after that, Benoit killed his wife, his son, and then himself just down the road from me in Fayetteville.

What if Dad had done the same? No, he wouldn't have. It's still real to me, damn it. These are real people. There's nothing supernatural, nothing fake about them.

And in 2000, when the Undertaker returned from a groin injury on the Monday Night Raw the night after the Judgment Day pay-per-view and rode around the ring on a motorcycle blasting Kid Rock, I knew something was wrong. Don't insult my

intelligence by calling this abomination Big Evil. It was then I gave up hope on there being something sacred about anything. If the Undertaker can go from a fear-inducing, tombstone piledriving figure of doom and death to *that* joke, then what *can* you believe in?

In the fridge I yawned. Curled up in the fetal position, I wished I could have lain down. I reached up to the meat drawer, grasped the hinge—my mind stuck on the salami.

I thought I heard something. The Undertaker's gong rang in my ears. His catchphrase pounded through my head.

REST...IN...PEACE.

“Let me out of here,” I yelled. “Come on. Come on. Mom, Dad, it's time for lunch. Somebody, open the fridge. Kane? Kane? Let...me...out.”

Nobody came. If anybody heard me, they didn't care. I wound up and punched the door. It didn't budge.

Eventually, I stopped caring. Either someone was going to open the door, or they weren't. A holiday on ice. I had to take things as they came.

I didn't care. I plain didn't care. My clothes were cold, though. I remember that. I took my Undertaker shirt off because it was so cold. In retrospect, that was probably a mistake.

By the time Mom opened the door and found me, I must have been in there for over an hour. I had stripped down to my boxers and was rubbing at my knees. Everything was blurry then—or maybe I'm just remembering it blurry now—and I

remember Dad, finally awake, asking me, with what I think was a straight face, “Just chilling, man?”

Mom told me later she couldn't get me off the ground for another twenty minutes. She told me I was mumbling something about the fire, the funeral home, Kane. I was calling for Kane to save me.

Dad was the heavyweight champion of the world. The year after I crawled into the fridge, I set the backyard on fire. Kane and the Undertaker fought in an Inferno Match in April, in which fire surrounded the ring, and the Undertaker was victorious by setting his brother on fire. In June, at the King of the Ring pay-per-view, Kane challenged Stone Cold Steve Austin for the title in a First Blood Match as the second half of a double main event, while in the first half the Undertaker decimated the deranged wrestler Mankind, from the Boiler Room, in the second Hell in a Cell.

The first words Kane spoke on television: “If I do not win the title, I will set myself on fire.”

I sent this same message to Dad when I issued my own challenge. When I poured gasoline through the yard and set his precious lawn ablaze, he had to know I was serious.

The fire department came, and Mom set me down for a good long talk.

I told her I had to beat Dad for the title, and I'd go through hellfire and brimstone to do it. I was twelve years old.

Dad came into my room that night before I went to bed. “You know I should kick your ass for doing something like that, right, son?”

I nodded.

“I’m not going to,” he reassured me. “Your mother wouldn’t approve.”

I nodded again.

“No more playing with fire, you hear?”

I nodded a third time.

A few hours later, I woke up to go to the bathroom. I looked out into the backyard from the bathroom window and saw a small fire, around which Dad sat alone. I saw him throw something in and back away. A few seconds later, an explosion like breaking glass. The next day, in addition to the charred remnants of what I destroyed, I found an empty beer case, several empty bottles, shards of glass spread about with no consideration for the barefoot traveler.

Outside the RaceTrac, I get back in the bulldozer and start it back up. I swing it around until it’s aimed at the convenient store.

The old man just reads his paper. Has he really already forgotten me? His mistake. Nothing is sacred when you drive a bulldozer. No charter school, not even any cemetery—definitely not this convenient store.

Business is about to pick up, folks.

I don’t follow through, though. I climb out of my seat and step down, let the bulldozer fall idle. Walking up to the unattended ice machine, I peek inside the store to make sure the old man isn’t paying attention. He’s still just reading the newspaper. I open the door to the ice machine, glance at the old man once more, and crawl in, closing the door behind me. Wasting no time, I strip to my boxers right away.

I don’t bother to check if the door opens from the inside. Someone will need ice

eventually. I'll sit and wait. They'll ask me what I'm doing in there, and I'll tell them I'm just chilling. I'll crawl out with frozen limbs and pretend to bang a gong. They'll fear me. They'll think they have to.

The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle

Danny runs out of the frozen blast cell, pushing a half ton rack of frozen salmon. When he got here last week, all he could smell was dead fish, but his nasal passages have since frozen. He's bearded. He's built. Sixteen hour days have their perks, mostly monetary, but as Danny gazes through his hat and beard net at the beautiful Colombian girl on the sorting line, he knows he needs to leave. If it's true what his friend Racho tells him, that the best looking chicas stay south, then he has to go there to find out for himself. *¿Más hermosa que ella?* Holy smokes.

Danny's ready to hit the Seward Highway, stick his thumb out, and just go. He looks at the clock on the wall. It's only 9:00 PM. There's still plenty of daylight left.

Racho's not at work tonight though. He is instead back at the inn playing a card game called Horse Race with a Filipino man, a Bering Sea fisherman claiming to have learned English from the movie *Scarface*. The concept of Horse Race is simple. To start, four cards, each of a different suit, are drawn from the deck to serve as the proverbial horses. The track is made up of any number of cards, usually around seven, set face down on the table or floor or other suitable playing surface. At the inn, they use an old pool table that's missing an eight ball.

The starter flips the cards from the rest of the deck and moves the horse of the corresponding suit forward one space each time. Once a space has been reached or surpassed by all four horses, the card marking it is flipped over, and the horse matching the newly flipped card's suit is moved backwards one space. Whichever horse reaches the end of the track first wins.

As this is a horse race, bets are placed at the outset. If the suit you choose loses, you take the amount of drinks that you bet. If the suit you choose wins, you give them out to other people playing the game. Racho has just put twenty drinks down on hearts. Racho's a whiskey man. He's all heart.

"I'm Tony Montana," says the Filipino man. "You don't fuck with me. You don't fuck with diamonds. You see this stack of cash?" He pulls out a stack of U.S. currency, close to a hundred bills high. The top and bottom bills, at least, are hundreds. "You know, man, I take this back to the Philippines, this stack's like ten times as big. I'ma throw hundred dollar bills at girls. I'ma get lucky every night for a month, you know, man?"

"Flip the card, *amigo*," Racho's already a few shots in, and he's a bit impatient. The mild-mannered Moldovan who bet one drink on spades sits quietly. A pretty blond from eastern Washington bets a few drinks on clubs and eyes Racho. She's interested but tentative. She ignores the Moldovan because she was previously unaware of Moldova's existence as a country. Only a Moldovan can locate Moldova on a map. And Tony Montana? Well, Tony Montana scares her.

"You fucking cock-a-roach," Montana shouts as he draws a heart from the deck, moving Racho's horse side by side with his own. Next, the first spade of the game is drawn, and the card marking the first space on the track is flipped over. Diamonds. Montana moves his card back one space.

"You wanna play rough?" He picks up the next two cards, looks from Racho to the Moldovan with a smirk upon his face, adds a wink for the cute blond, and sets two diamonds down on the table. He is, of course, obliged, per his namesake, to tell the other

participants to say hello to his little friends.

The Moldovan and the Washington state girl casually down their required drinks, while Racho starts slamming. Twenty up, twenty down is his plan. Historically, this sort of thing does not end well. He gets through eight in two minutes before dropping the bottle and throwing himself at the floor to search for it through the blur.

Danny returns an hour later after his shift to Racho crawling on the floor, hugging the leg of the pool table. His embrace was initially targeted for the leg of the eastern Washington girl, but she has since transferred to the disease-ridden couch in the corner to pass out. All limbs are equally huggable when you're blacked-out drunk and five thousand miles from home.

“*¡Bastardo borracho!* Drunken bastard!” The Filipino man shouts at the Colombian on the floor. In his own inebriation, he's taken to bilingual repetition of this nickname.

Danny sits down on the couch next to the passed out girl. He looks at the figures on the wall: a coonskin cap hanging from a rusty nail, a stuffed fox with the beadiest of yellow eyes hanging from a rope taped to the wall, a page from Robert Frost—“Nothing Gold Can Stay”—tacked diagonally in the corner. Most interesting of all to Danny, though, is the model ship that sits alone on the highest shelf. The name *Gina* is imprinted on her starboard, and the men on her deck all collectively marvel over a single king salmon held high in the hands of a bearded Alaskan native, an Athabascan. Why this one fish is gazed upon with such esteem when several thousands of such fish are caught by any given boat in a single salmon season is only the second most intriguing aspect of this

ship, though. The *Gina* is about six inches high and completely enclosed within an old Northern Light whiskey bottle. Danny wonders how this ship could have ended up inside this bottle. The mouth is not nearly wide enough for it to fit. It just doesn't seem natural.

The Filipino man crashes on the pool table. Danny sits amongst the comatose and stares at the ship in a bottle.

When his eyes are red from staring and he has dreamed his way south through the Pacific to the port city of Tumaco, Danny stands up and walks to the center of the room. Racho is still cuddled up with the pool table, beneath the exposed and hairy belly of Tony Montana. Danny doesn't even try to rouse him. He just lifts him up. He's always looking ahead.

Danny tries his damndest to stick his thumb out far enough for someone driving past to see, being careful not to drop his friend's drunken carcass on the road's gravel shoulder. It must be after midnight. It's getting dark.

Under most circumstances, two is the ideal number of people to hitchhike. With three or more, you're severely hindering your chances of getting picked up due to sheer logistics. Those folks friendly enough to offer rides to strangers simply do not often have room to pack a whole lot of people into their cars. And two is better than one, well, because serial killers and rapists tend not to travel in pairs. It's the comfort factor. You're simply not as sketchy if you have a friend with you. So Danny feels somewhat fortunate, at first, that he is strong enough to carry Racho and that no one else was around or awake to try to tag along when they left.

The problem Danny faces tonight, though, does not really have much to do with numbers at all. He and Racho add up to two people, but two is way sketchier than one

when one is being carried by the other like a drowned fisherman.

Danny hasn't even made it a mile out of town, and already the added weight of Racho is changing this from an incredible journey to an impossible one. A rusty old pickup slows down for him but speeds away when the driver gets a better look at what's in Danny's hands. He can always, he supposes, jump off the road and find a comfortable patch of grass on which to pitch a tent in the tundra before it gets too dark. After a few moments of contemplation, he does so, rolling Racho's body underneath the guardrail and hopping it himself. He tries to lift his temporarily comatose friend once more but lacks the strength; he opts instead to drag him down the hill, taking precaution not to get him caught on any sharp branches.

"HEY BEAR!" he yells as he tiptoes down the hill, trying desperately to keep a hold of Racho's legs. Again, it's just a precautionary measure. There's probably not even a bear nearby, but you always want to alert a potential bear of your presence so as not to startle it. Bears, like humans, are most prone to attack when they are startled. If Racho were awake, he would complain of Danny's prejudiced, unfounded assumption that all grizzlies understand English. Certainly, there must be an at least somewhat prominent population of Spanish-speaking bears. If Racho were awake, he would supplement Danny's shouts with his own: "*¡OSO!*"

Racho awakes about four hours later with the sunrise. He looks to his right and sees Danny sound asleep with his pack under his head. His beard is growing in red, and his mustache almost covers his upper lip. Racho sees the door to the tent on his left, struggles to unzip it in his morning blur, and eventually crawls through onto the spongy

terrain of the tundra. Righting himself, he ignores the vivid coloration of the morning sky, focusing his attention solely on the prospect of finding somewhere to drain the fluids he consumed last night. Although he takes no special care to avoid the sinkholes, his boots are not completely submerged in any of them; they serve only as a minor annoyance on his journey towards one of the many small lakes found throughout the biome. It just seems natural to urinate in a lake, to contribute to the water cycle. Just a few short months ago, all of this was frozen. Racho has slightly less difficulty unzipping his pants than he did with the tent, and he produces a dark yellow stream of recycled liquor into the lake, all the while fighting off the gigantic, persistent Alaskan mosquitoes. Over generations, the deathly cold of the Alaskan winter has toughened these bugs up so that they are perhaps the most annoying of their kind on Earth. Typically, one does not want to expose an area as sensitive as the genitalia to these creatures, but this is no typical morning for Racho. He has to pee. Bad. And he's not entirely sure where he is.

As his bladder is slowly depleted, Racho reflects upon the previous night. He thinks he might remember hearing something about a big horse race coming up somewhere around here. Maybe it was farther north, closer to Talkeetna. He's not really sure. Regardless, he thinks he might remember being intrigued by this horse race, even though it never would have been the sort of thing that interested him back home.

He thinks he might remember hanging out with a Cuban drug lord, as crazy as that seems to him. He thinks he might remember this man making some disparaging remarks about him or his people, or at least having some sort of beef with someone in Colombia. He's not sure with whom said beef could be though. He doesn't know why said beef exists. Mmmm. Beef.

He doesn't remember leaving the inn or why they left or whom they got a ride with or how far they made it. He assumes they rode with some nice fisherman type or local entrepreneur, but he can't figure out why yet. They probably made it about fifty miles. Danny probably didn't even help him put up the tent.

"*¡Qué putas!*" he curses, swatting a mosquito away from his midsection as he zips his pants up.

As Racho reenters the tent, Danny grumbles something incoherent and lifts his arms above his head before dropping them back to his side and shoving his face into the dirty clothes compartment of his pack. The clean clothes compartment smells almost as bad.

"*Buenos días, amigo,*" Racho exclaims, towering over his sleeping friend, still struggling a bit to keep his balance. Danny's only retort is to feign deep sleep by beginning to breathe more heavily. "*¡Amigo!*" Racho yells, throwing an ace of spades he doesn't remember putting into his pocket last night at Danny's ear. "Wake up. Come on. Let's go. *Vámonos.*" He doesn't know where they are, but he wants to keep going, at the very least to get away from these mosquitoes.

"Ten more minutes," Danny enunciates, shifting the bulk of his sleeping bag to protect his ears. Racho, confused, deems this request reasonable and sets the alarm on his watch.

Precisely ten minutes later, Racho grabs a hold of Danny's torso and shakes him as if he were using him to reel in a ninety-pound Chinook. Humans are more closely related to bears who attack when startled than to salmon, though, so instead of getting Danny on a boat, heading and gutting him, and selling him at market for a few dollars per

pound, Racho gets slapped across the top of the head and verbally assaulted in his own native tongue. “*Diez minutos más, hijueputa,*” Danny lambastes his overly persistent friend. He figures if he speaks Spanish he might have an easier time getting through to the Colombiano.

“Let’s go, amigo. Come on,” Racho rubs the top of his head where he was hit, but the pain he feels is really a nagging sensation throughout his whole body.

“Dude, you’re still drunk.”

“So? Let’s go...American.” That last word always resonates with a sort of disdainful emphasis when Racho says it. It’s somewhat odd that he uses the word in this way because, as Colombia is a part of South America, Racho himself is an American. The American English lexicon has developed in such a way, though, that Racho cannot refer to his friend from the United States as anything other than an American. In his native Spanish, he can call him *un estadounidense*, but United Statesian is simply not a ringy bit of terminology, so it doesn’t translate into English.

Danny doesn’t think through all these lexicographic details right now; he’s thought through them too many times before. Embracing the fact that Racho doesn’t seem to question the fact that they’re no longer at the inn, he simply sits up, scratches his earlobe, looks at Racho with scrutiny, and shakes his head. “Where do you want to go?”

Racho shrugs. “North?”

It’s a lot easier to get a ride when one member of your party isn’t passed out drunk, being carried by the other. Within a few minutes, they get picked up by a dock boy on his way into the next town for a supply run, and they ride in the bed of his truck

for about ten miles, clapping their hands to trap mosquitoes but failing every time. They get dropped off outside of a modest diner, yell their thank yous to the dock boy, and jump from the bed of the truck. Danny eases his way down, using a tire for balance, but Racho takes no such precaution as he leaps to the adjacent park bench, struggling to maintain his balance in his morning stupor. Racho kneels at the feet of an elderly couple depicted on the large sign in front of Todd & Sarah's, and Danny shakes his head and walks through the door.

While Racho is vomiting on the founders, Danny seats himself and orders a large pancake platter from the server, a petite native girl probably in her early 20s. Though he's not quite sure where he and Racho are trying to get to today, he knows if they're going to plot their route with any sort of ambition, he's going to need to be well nourished by a hearty and healthful breakfast, as only pancakes can provide.

While he's waiting for his food, Danny thinks. He just thinks. If you were to ask him, he'd probably tell you he's fantasizing about going down to Colombia and ditching Racho to run off with some cute little Colombiana girl (and part of him always is), but the fact is, he can't get his mind off that ship in a bottle, the *Gina*. How does it work? How can he make his own?

By the time Racho joins him, he's already made significant progress into his flapjack stack. "Feeling better, Drunken Bastard?" Danny asks between bites.

"*Cállate, gringo,*" Racho grabs a pancake off Danny's plate with his bare hands, rips a piece off with his teeth, and throws the rest down on the table. They do have manners in Colombia, but Racho has lost his in all the time he's spent in the North.

When he gets some solid carbohydrates in his system, Racho thinks more

rationally and makes an effort to understand the duo's current position. "Why did we have such hurry to leave the inn last night?"

"You don't remember?" Danny starts with the truth: "Dude, you were so wasted." Then, he adds a lie: "We got the boot from that place pretty fast after you tried to pick a fight with the owner. I jumped in to help, but there was really no hope from the start. They told us to get the hell out of there or they'd call the police. I guess we're out of a job now. You really don't remember anything?" As a precaution, he may not want to let Racho know it was his choice to leave.

"*No, nada. Bueno*, I'm glad to be out of that place."

"You are?" Perhaps Danny's precaution was unnecessary.

"*Sí*. I'm ready to see somewhere new."

"We were only there a week," Danny says, skeptical of Racho's desire to leave so soon, but, realizing he shouldn't argue against something that supports his own ambitions, he adds, "Yes. So where do you want to shoot for today?"

"Talkeetna? Fairbanks? *No me importa*."

"Fairbanks is a bit far, but I guess we'll play it by ear."

Racho looks at Danny with befuddlement when he says this, not understanding what playing with ears has to do with hitching to Fairbanks.

"What's in Talkeetna?" Danny asks.

"*¿Caballos? No sé*. What do you want to do?"

Danny doesn't know much about horses and doesn't really care to learn much about them. "I want to build the world's largest ship in a bottle."

Racho squints and raises his eyebrows a bit at this proposition, then nods.

“*Primero*, you are going to need the largest bottle of the world.”

Danny hasn't thought of it like this. “You know, you're right. That might be the hardest part. But think about this. We could open up a restaurant just like this one. 24 hour breakfast, retro stools at the coffee bar, pictures of famous people and important events on the wall, a jukebox, the works. Apple pie and vanilla ice cream for dessert. Except it would be on the world's largest ship in a bottle. Slap this baby in the middle of the desert, say, Nevada or Arizona, and people are going to travel hundreds or thousands of miles just to see it. What do you think? Really captures the spirit of America, right?”

“What, your boat an imperialist?” Racho chuckles, but Danny just shakes his head. Danny's server walks up to the table and sees Racho shoving pancake down his throat and throwing his scraps on the table. She scowls but still refills Danny's ice water. That's her job.

“*Hola, mi chiquita*,” Racho addresses the waitress, noticing the Alaska flag's Big Dipper pinned onto her blouse.

“I'm not your *chiquita, hombre*. Now are you gonna order anything, or are you just gonna mooch off this burly fellow all morning?”

“No English,” Racho exaggerates in the shrugging of his shoulders and grabs some more pancake off the table. “*Pero me gusta tu oso mucho, hermosa*,” he adds, motioning to the constellation on her pin.

“Is this guy telling the truth?” she asks Danny.

Before Danny has the chance to reply, Racho butts in, standing up and shaking his shoulders in a seductive Colombian dance. “*Baila conmigo, chiquita*.”

She backs away slowly. Something about a man drunk at 6AM with no English

and with pancakes falling out of his half-open mouth perturbs her. Perhaps there is something, too, in the fact that he can move his shoulders so fluidly without even budging his hips.

“*¡Cálmate, bastardo borracho!*” Danny been getting good service thus far, and he wants that to continue.

“*¿Qué es tu problema?*” Racho asks. “*Sólo quiero bailar con la mujer.*”

“*Estás borrachísimo, idiota.*” Danny feels the need to point out Racho’s drunkenness and idiocy once more. “*Ella está ida.*”

“*¿Qué?*”

“She’s gone.”

“Oh.” Racho looks around the diner and sees that the petite waitress is helping someone at a different table, so he sits back down across from Danny.

“So what was that all about, buddy?” Danny wants to know.

Racho kicks him from under the table and whispers, “*La mesera es bonita,*” raising his eyebrows provocatively.

“Okay? And not speaking English helps...?”

“*Amigo,*” Racho interrupts, as if it what he is about to say is obvious (and it is), “*el español es muy sexy.*”

Danny can’t argue with that. “Fair enough. But don’t you think you were a bit...forward? I think you scared her away, *amigo.*”

“I’ll give her a good tip; then she can’t resist.”

“Okay, well, do you want to get on that tip now?” Danny asks. “I’m full,” he lies, just wanting to get out of here before Racho does something ridiculous.

Racho nods and throws *dos mil pesos* amongst his pancake scraps on the table for a tip. Danny doesn't bother to explain to him that pesos are not acceptable currency in the United States. He's sure he already knows that and that he's ready to jump at the opportunity to label him as another American with a superiority complex.

Approaching the petite waitress on his way out the door, Racho makes sure to get a last word in. "*Osita bonita,*" he says, shaking his shoulders, "*¿ven conmigo?*" He holds the door, a self-made gentleman, ready to take her away.

She just stands there for half a minute before addressing the Colombian's advances. "You're cute," she says. "I'll admit that. I don't know what you just called me or asked me to do to you, but yeah, you're cute. You smell like whiskey and fish, though, and you're awfully forward. Not much separating you from every other guy who comes in here, to be honest. I hope you enjoyed your meal at Todd & Sarah's, and please, have a wonderful Alaskan day."

"No English" and "*Te amo, osita*" are all Racho yells as he and Danny walk back toward the road.

"Do you ever think about going back?" Danny asks as they stand with outstretched thumbs at the exit of a gas station parking lot in Wasilla.

"What for, to win Horse Race with that man?" Racho asks, having had his memory refreshed as to some of the details from last night. A van with three empty rows of seats drives by, its driver not even contemplating to stop for them. A light drizzle falls upon the hooded companions. This is Alaska. This is summer.

"No no, *idiota*, back home. To Colombia. You can't tell me you don't have *una*

novia bonita back there.” After seeing the way Racho approached the last attractive female they encountered, Danny doubts greatly the likelihood that Racho has anything resembling a steady girlfriend back home, but he doesn’t want to say so out loud.

“Well, *amigo*, there is a *chica* I left in Anapoima, but...*no me importa*. I would like to return to Bogotá one day to see *mi familia*, but for now I want to, how do you say, see new things?”

“I see. Well, I’ve been thinking about going down there one day. Anapoima’s nice?” He hopes it’s not too forward of him to ask about the town where Racho’s *chica* was when he left her.

Racho doesn’t take it this way. “*Hermosa, amigo*, beautiful. *Montañas*, green everywhere. How far can you see?”

“I can see pretty far ahead of me, buddy.” Danny tries to put his thumb down fast as he spots an Alaska State Trooper approaching. It’s unnecessary though; the officer waves and keeps driving.

“What about the girls?” Danny inquires. “Do ugly Colombian girls exist? Every one I’ve seen is absolutely beautiful. Where are the ugly chicks?”

“*En tu país, amigo*. In your country,” Racho laughs. “No no, I kid, there are some, *pero* most are *bonitas*. We like to hide *las feas*.”

“Funny. Pick up the tent. We have a ride.” After watching close to a hundred cars drive by, finally, an offensive-sounding early ‘90s grey Chevy Lumina pulls to the side of the road. The two long distance pedestrians sprint towards their salvation; the driver pops the trunk and yells back to them to throw their stuff in.

“Where y’all headed?” he asks as they move back onto the road. Inexplicably,

many people in Alaska speak with southern accents.

Danny, sitting shotgun, looks to the backseat with a consulting glance towards Racho, but his friend offers no response. Ultimately, Danny answers, “As far as you can take us tonight.”

“I’m headed to Fairbanks to help muh dad on a construction job. I can take y’all that far, but you might be settin’ up in the dark tonight.”

“I’m sure we can manage. Thanks a lot, man. We really appreciate it.”

“*Gracias*,” Racho thanks the man.

“*Gracias*, eh?” the man chuckles. “You from Mexico or sump’n, buddy?”

“Colombia,” Racho mumbles.

“The hell you doin’ way up here? You ain’t got no sexy little Latina girl back home? Huh?”

“I just want to see somewhere different,” Racho explains.

The man laughs. “Well, you got somewhere different, all right. You ain’t been up here a winter yet, have you? It don’t even get *this* cold in South America, does it?”

Racho shakes his head. “Not where I am from, no...very hot. In the mountains, though.”

“Ah yeah, ya got that right, kid. Hey, if you guys goin’ to Fairbanks, you ain’t gonna try to live like that guy, are ya? What was his name?”

“Christopher McCandless,” Danny answers, mechanically. He’s read *Into the Wild*, and he’s heard this whole thing before. Evidently, Alaskans don’t care for people who think they can survive in the Alaskan bush with minimal provisions. And ever since Jon Krakauer’s book got made into a movie, the collective bitterness of the Alaskan

populace has been unparalleled.

“Yeah, him. He died, y’know? An idiot if y’ask me. Dumbass didn’t even bring a compass. Y’all do have a compass, don’tcha?”

“No,” Danny answers, somewhat embarrassed.

“The hell? I mean, ya don’t really need one if yer stayin’ on the road. There’s only one road. But bah gawd, don’t be like that guy.”

“I promise we won’t be like that guy.”

“I’ll shoot ya myself before I let ya die like that guy.”

“Sir, that won’t be necessary.”

He doesn’t shoot them. He keeps driving.

Racho dozes off as they drive past the turn-off for the road to Talkeetna about an hour later. There’s still another four hours to Fairbanks, and he’s been up for close to seventeen.

“Smoke weed, man? Course ya do. I got some in the glove box if ya wanna buy some.”

“I’d be glad to, but I really don’t have the cash to spare right now, you know?”

“Understand. I got some powder in the back yer Colombian friend’ll like.”

Danny thinks about how Racho would react if he was offered cocaine based purely on his nationality. “I’m not sure he’ll go for that. Thanks, but sorry.”

“Sokay. So what’re you guys plannin’ to do up here if not get yerselves killed?”

Danny shrugs as he takes in the Alaskan countryside. It’s surprisingly very green as they move into the Interior. “I want to build the world’s largest ship in a bottle.”

“That so?”

“Yes. And I’m going to open up a restaurant in it. Nice little American style diner with apple pie and ice cream. It’s going to be a major attraction.”

“Ah see. And yer gonna open that up in Fairbanks?” While Fairbanks is often a comfortable seventy degrees in the summer, it can reach lows of seventy below in the winter. Not ideal for a major global attraction.

“Well, no, I was thinking maybe somewhere in the lower forty-eight. Possibly the Southwest?”

“So what's in Fairbanks?”

Danny thinks a long time before answering. “A destination.”

“Ya might wanna wake yer friend up for this.” As they drive through Denali National Park, it is still just light enough to make out the figures of the snow-capped mountains in the distant red sky. The dense fog above the scattered, thin coniferous trees gives the road an ominously secure aura. It’s a unique feeling, ominously secure.

“Yeh might see some animals soon,” and, sure enough, a lone wolf crosses in front of them just a few minutes later. You usually want to avoid a lone wolf in the wild because it tends to be rabid, but from the confines of this Chevy Lumina, its arbitrary trajectory seems almost majestic.

“Over this hill, ya should be able to see the Mountain.” The native Athabascans call it Denali. The Great One. The High One. As they ascend the hill driving the Alaskan Highway, the Mountain comes into view for a brief moment. At the end of a long field of dispersed shrubby stands, base to summit, the world’s tallest mountain.

Everest is higher, but it cheats by sitting on a plateau. Take that, Himalayas. With exceptional eyesight, the inhabitants of the Lumina could spot a bald eagle flying near Denali's peak; the Mountain dominates the landscape for this moment.

“Is all Alaska this *hermosa*?” the freshly awoken Racho asks. He is reminded of Anapoima but is awed even more by this monstrosity of nature, perhaps because it is something new. “Where is the ugly Alaska?” The driver simply smirks and descends the hill, leaving the Mountain behind.

Danny can't stop thinking about the Mountain. “How does that work? How does something that big get made? It just doesn't seem...natural.”

“How does a ship fit in a bottle?”

“I don't know.” Danny now finds himself caught in a twofold conundrum. “But wow. Mount McKinley.”

“Stupid American imperialist,” Racho raises his voice to Danny. “Mount McKinley is American name for Mountain. It is called Denali.”

“Hey man, I didn't name it; I just like looking at it.” Danny would like, if he could, to appreciate the Mountain for just what it is: a really big mountain.

“Now I don't take too much stock in that there McKinley feller. Guy never even *came* to Alaska. I call't the Mountain; you can call it whatcha want.”

Racho is livid. “You Americans think everything is yours. You think you can take the whole world. The name American. You think you can change the name of the Mountain.”

“Hey now, no need for the hostility, *amigo*. I *said* I don't care whatcha call it, but, bah gawd, don't question America. You know where you are? I can stop this car and let

you out right here. That guy didn't live, and neither will you."

"Please, sir, let me talk to him." Danny looks his Colombian friend in the eyes and respectfully disagrees with him. "No, Racho, I don't want to take everything. I just want to go places with really big mountains and look at them. I want to go back to Colombia with you and find a cute little Colombian bride to spend the rest of my life with."

"Okay, okay, that's what I'm sayin'," the driver says, requesting a high-five. Danny and Racho simultaneously interject, telling him to put his hand back on the wheel and watch the road. Probably the best move for the safety of everyone.

"And Racho," Danny continues, "I want to build the world's largest ship in a bottle. Is that too ambitious? Is it?"

After the drawling driver drops them off just outside of Fairbanks and continues to his hotel to get a good night's sleep before doing bridgework all day with his father, Danny is not ready to sleep. He sits on a stump roasting a dumpster marshmallow in his and Racho's handcrafted fire. He thinks.

Racho returns to the fire with a three-quarters full fifth of Canadian Hunter whiskey after relieving himself in the Chena River. He hands the fifth to Danny. Danny takes a hefty shot and hands it back, wincing.

"¿*Nunca duermes?*?" Racho has a legitimate concern that Danny never sleeps.

"I will later." Danny looks at Racho with his whiskey. It's been a long journey today, but what have they accomplished? "Do you know where that river empties into?"

Racho looks back through the trees to the water behind him. "*No sé.*"

“Me either. Probably somewhere beautiful.”

“Or somewhere very cold,” Racho reasons.

“Do you want to finish that bottle tonight?”

“*¡Por supuesto!*” Danny doesn’t have to ask Racho twice to kill a fifth of whiskey.

“But I want to put a boat in there.”

“A boat?” Racho takes a shot, thinking that a boat is as good a reason as any to keep drinking, and passes the bottle to Danny.

“Yes, a boat. You know?” He, also, takes a shot and passes the bottle back to Racho.

“Sí, pero...this will not be the world’s largest ship in a bottle.”

“No...you’re right, but you have to start small to think big.”

“I guess so, *amigo*.” Racho takes another shot and again passes the bottle to Danny. Danny sets it down at his side for the moment.

“I’m still not sure how we’ll get our boat in there though.” Danny looks to the sky and can see the just the faintest glimmer of the aurora borealis, as much as anyone can hope to see in the summer. He points to the multicolored lights, and Racho follows his finger with his eyes and nods.

“Well, what do you want to do tomorrow, *amigo*?” Racho asks, ready to reenter reality.

“I don’t know. I want to go Colombia. Can we go to Colombia, Racho?”

“Home?”

“*Your* home,” Danny specifies.

“It will take more than a day.”

“That’s fine.” Danny’s looking ahead, and there’s no need for precaution. He has time.

“And I need a visa to go into Canada. I don’t have one.” That will present problems.

Danny takes another shot. “Why go through Canada? There’s all of the Pacific that will take us straight to Tumaco. Can’t we take a ship?”

“A big ship?”

“A big ship, Racho.”

“So you can imperialize and take over my people, American?” Racho takes the bottle from Danny’s side and drinks a sizeable gulp.

“You know that’s not why. This isn’t about who’s American. This is about a journey. This is about doing something.”

“Building the world’s largest ship in a bottle?” Racho thinks he is catching on.

“Forget that for now. Our ship needs to go somewhere; our ship needs to be something before we can expect people to care about its being in a bottle.”

Racho has nothing to say, so he takes a shot. That doesn’t help him think, so he takes another.

Danny isn’t finished. “Let’s sail to Colombia. Let’s go to Anapoima. You left your girl there, you said? She has friends, right? Let’s go.”

“You don’t want to hitchhike in Colombia, *amigo*,” Racho chuckles.

“Your point?”

“How do you want to get from Tumaco to Anapoima?”

“I don’t know. You know people there, don’t you? We’ll figure it out when we get there. But we’re going. I’m set. I’m ready.” Danny shadowboxes in the air, grabs the bottle from Racho’s hands, and drinks. He truly is the epitome of ready.

Anapoima is a destination. The world’s largest ship in a bottle is a goal. A far-out goal. Danny’s looking ahead. He wakes up on the ground with his friend Racho beside him. They never did get around to setting up that tent last night. Danny smirks and stands up, walking to the river to empty his alcohol-filled bladder. He can’t wait to meet his Colombian bride. She’ll be beautiful. He knows she will be. They all are.

A racehorse lives its whole life seeking only its jockey’s destination. The finish line. A reason to keep moving. A prize for accomplishing one’s goals as early in life as possible. Cash money. A ribbon.

Anapoima is a reason to keep moving. Danny and Racho are not racehorses though. They are more like two friendly rivals in the gold medal game of a high stakes pool tournament where someone has decided to wander off with the eight ball. The goals are there, but the means are gone.

“Ah-nah-poe-ee-muh? Anna-poimuh?” Danny struggles to pronounce the name of his new favorite city.

A boy is panning for gold in the river with his father. “Look, Daddy, I found a nugget,” he squeaks.

“Nugget,” Danny whispers aloud, waving at the two amateur prospectors. The father waves back but shakes his head and walks with his son to a different section of the river.

Danny looks down at his still undone undergarments, chuckles at his lack of precaution in public, and pulls his pants back up. If nothing gold can stay and Robert Frost was right, he thinks, then he can't stay in Fairbanks for long. Not much longer anyway. He walks back to his and Racho's makeshift campsite and starts to pitch the tent around Racho's sleeping body. Not sure of how to put a tent up around a sleeping person without waking him, though, he gives up and lies down on the ground next to Racho. It will still be morning for a long time. He has a long time.

Works Cited or Made Direct References to in Stories

- Attica! Attica! "Tyler and Marla Were Right." *Napalm & Nitrogen*. 2009. CD.
- BloodBath: Wrestling's Most Incredible Steel Cage Matches*. Perf. Bret Hart, Owen Hart. World Wrestling Entertainment, 2003. DVD.
- Brautigan, Richard. "It's Raining in Love." *American Poems...YOUR Poetry Site*. AmericanPoems.com. 20 Feb. 2003. Web. 10 Mar. 2012.
- Carlson, Ron. *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2007. Print.
- Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead, 2007. Print.
- Frost, Robert. "Nothing Gold Can Stay." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Nina Baym. Shorter Seventh Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008. p. 1963.
- Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. New York: Random House, 1983. Print.
- Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961. Print.
- Hell in a Cell*. Perf. Undertaker, Shawn Michaels. World Wrestling Entertainment, 2008. DVD.
- The Legacy of Stone Cold Steve Austin*. Perf. Stone Cold Steve Austin, Kane. World Wrestling Entertainment, 2007. DVD.
- Littman, Adam and David Murray. "Monday Night Raw: June 2nd, 1997." *The Year in Rawview: 1997*. 6 June 2011. Web. 18 Oct. 2011.
- Scarface*. Dir. Brian De Palma. Perf. Al Pacino. Universal Pictures, 1983. DVD.

Annotated Bibliography

Baxter, Charles. "Against Epiphanies." *Burning Down the House*. 1997. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2008. 41-61. Print.

The fiction writer Charles Baxter writes in this essay about the silliness of characters who suddenly have revelations or epiphanies in fiction. Epiphanies are cop-outs. They do not adequately represent what characters would *do* in a given situation. Baxter stresses instead the act-out ending in fiction, referencing Raymond Carver's "Viewfinder" ending with the protagonist throwing rocks off his roof. The penultimate story of *Pisspoor Heroes*, "My Personal Instrument of Destruction," makes use of this type of "act-out" ending, as the narrator ends the story not by having some profound thought but by crawling into an icebox.

Carlson, Ron. "Dr. Slime." *A Kind of Flying*. New York: Norton, 2003. 398-412. Print.

Ron Carlson's "Dr. Slime" is *the* story I turned to in the early draft stages of the story that would later become known as "My Personal Instrument of Destruction." The protagonist in this piece attends a local wrestling event with his brother's lover, at which he learns to appreciate the artistry involved in his brother's portrayal of the bad guy wrestler (heel), Dr. Slime. Working with the author himself at a workshop in Chautauqua, New York, I realized the metafictional potential of using the world of studio wrestling within a work of short fiction. Because of my time with this story and the man himself, I was able to work through the revision process to bring the proper emphasis to the wrestling scenes in my own story.

Carver, Raymond. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. 1974. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. 137-54. Print.

A story that features four people sitting around a table drinking and talking about love is one that cannot avoid annotation in this collection. Some of the very bad events these characters talk about can be attributed to booze. Then again, what brings them together, for all intents and purposes, is the gin that they drink. Domestic violence, as in "My Personal Instrument of Destruction," is brought about by alcohol abuse—and in Carver's story, the characters do not have the excuse of wrestling-influenced roughhousing. While the ending is not as optimistic as that of "The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle," it is similar in the way that when the liquor is gone, the characters are out of things to do or say.

Czyzniejewski, Michael. "The Elephant in Our Bedroom." *Elephants in Our Bedroom*. Westland, MI: Dzanc Books, 2009. 42-44. Print.

This story is relevant not only because it features an elephant, like "Circus Money and Bad Precedents," but because of the comedic impulse behind the use of this elephant.

People simply do not win elephants in card games, though the intoxicated Racho in the beginning of “The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle” probably thinks he has won a horse. In the end of “The Elephant in Our Bedroom,” though, the strange sleeping situation leads the narrator to muse on something much more important. Indeed, the end of “The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle” also features a strange sleeping situation, and although the mood of my narrator's musing is quite different from Czyzniejewski's, it is of equal importance in the grand scheme of the characters' lives.

Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead, 2007. Print.

This novel is a significant influence to the writing of *Pisspoor Heroes* in a number of ways. Díaz's unique narration style had direct influence on the voice of “Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man,” the first draft of which I began while reading *Oscar Wao* for the first time. The mix of Spanish and English, as is mentioned in the critical preface to this collection, influences the writing of “The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle.” Perhaps Díaz's greatest influence on my writing, though, is evident on a processual level, as my process of meticulously watching and rewatching the biggest matches and storylines of the 1990s World Wrestling Federation to get into the head of my narrator mirrors his process of reading and rereading the comic books and fantasy novels adored by his protagonist, Oscar de León.

Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961. Print.

The absolute absurdity of the world in which Joseph Heller's protagonist, Yossarian, is forced to live is mirrored in many ways by the city of Bent in “Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man” and the persecution of the left-handed people. The ending of “Circus Money and Bad Precedents” is, of course, influenced by Heller's ending, though not consciously so as it was written. The ridiculous characters in Heller's novel, especially Milo Minderbinder, one of my all-time favorite literary characters, influence much of my writing, especially the first two stories of *Pisspoor Heroes*. The incompetence of the military bureaucracy is akin to the circus bureaucracy alluded to briefly at the end of “Circus Money.” The character of Richard Dictum is similar in many ways to Colonel Cathcart in their constant ruining of the protagonists' lives and their love of power.

Hemingway, Ernest. “The Three Day Blow.” *In Our Time*. 1925. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930. 45-61. Print.

Ernest Hemingway's “The Three Day Blow” is a story of a homosocial relationship, in which one man, Nick Adams, is mourning over a recent break-up by talking to his friend Bill about baseball and drinking to fishing. There is drunk baseball talk in the first two stories of this collection and even some fish in the final story. Where Hemingway's influence is most evident in *Pisspoor Heroes* is in the male bonding and friendships throughout the collection. “The World's Largest Ship in a Bottle,” especially, sees the two male *amigos* seeking female companionship and something more from their lives—many of their conversations resembling, to an extent, that of Nick and Bill in “The

Three Day Blow.”

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-five*. New York: Random House, 1969. Print.

I could write about half of Kurt Vonnegut's library in this annotated bibliography, but *Slaughterhouse-five* will have to suffice. Like Heller in *Catch-22*, Vonnegut takes a very serious historical event, the firebombing of Dresden in World War II, and adds degrees of absurdity and ridiculousness to it. Of course, one could argue that real life is absurd, and I would not argue against them. The opening piece of this collection, “Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man,” plays off a lot of my Vonnegut love, even down to what some readers find to be the annoying repetition of a simple catchphrase: DICKED 'EM! I hope it doesn't kill the story. So it goes.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. *Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilization*. London: Verso, 2003. Print.

So this is not exactly a literary text. Nevertheless, its influence upon my writing of “Circus Money and Bad Precedents” is unprecedented. The talk of the proletarian uprising and the commodification of everything is one of the driving forces behind this story. One has to think Mark Skarl has read the works of Immanuel Wallerstein. He might not understand them completely, but he has definitely read them. If there is any lesson to be learned about *Historical Capitalism in Pisspoor Heroes*, it is this: please know what you are doing before you try to start a revolution. Please.

Wolff, Tobias. “Bullet in the Brain.” *Children Playing Before a Statue of Hercules*. Ed. David Sedaris. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005. 331-37. Print.

With “Bullet in the Brain,” Tobias Wolff has created a simply excellent short story. The focus on one main character, while creating a scene of a roomful of on-edge people is one mirrored by the opening bar scene in “Richard Dictum's Left Hand Man.” Although the narrator is not robbing the bar, parallels are drawn with his yelling and violent impulses. Everything coming down to a simple, grammatically incorrect phrase—“They is” or “Ain't right”—and its having something to do with baseball is paralleled by the ending of “Circus Money and Bad Precedents.” “My Personal Instrument of Destruction” has a potentially fatal ending for the narrator that has to do with memories from his childhood. You get it. Tobias Wolff is an influential guy.

ACADEMIC VITA of Craig Steven Sanders

Craig Sanders

117 Yarnell Street

Kane, PA 16735

css5113@psu.edu

Education: Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, Penn State University, Spring 2012.

Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, Penn State University, Spring 2012.

Minor in International Studies.

Honors in Creative Writing.

Thesis Title: Pisspoor Heroes

Thesis Supervisor: Thomas Noyes

Related Experience:

Fiction Editor of *Lake Effect* (an internationally recognized literary journal published through Penn State Erie, the Behrend College)

Supervisor: George Looney

Fall 2011 and Spring 2012, also served as Assistant Editor from 2008 to 2010.

Awards:

Outstanding Creative Writing Major (2011-12)

Corey N. Farrell Memorial Scholarship

Penn State Behrend Chancellor's Award

McMannis Trust Fund Scholarship

Kennedy Fiction Award, runner-up

Dean's List

Pi Sigma Alpha, national political science honor society