



BOYs



by

Scott Semegran



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For Lori

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About the Author

Books by Scott Semegran

The Great and Powerful, Brave Raideen

The little boy sat on the floor in his room surrounded by his toys--Micronauts action figures, Hot Wheels race cars, Star Wars action figures and vehicles, Evel Knievel doll and motor cycle, Shogun Warriors in various sizes, and a pile of Legos intermixed from various sets. His name was William. His mother called him Billy, just like his uncle who died ten years earlier in the Vietnam War was called, but he liked to be called William. More than anything, he liked to play in his room all by himself with all of his toys surrounding him on the floor. In his room, he was safe. He liked that.

He had a vivid imagination and enjoyed introducing the different toys to each other, intersecting their fictional worlds into one. The few times that other neighborhood children were allowed in his room, they had an issue with that, the fictional worlds colliding.

They all said to William, "Micronauts don't fight Star Wars people!"

"And why not?" William said.

"Because Micronauts aren't in the movie *Star Wars*, dummy!" they all said.

The other neighborhood children weren't allowed in his room after that. William spent most of his time after school in his room although he would occasionally venture into the back yard, a large grassy area with a tall oak tree in the back near the fence, a mostly completed treehouse perched up in its canopy. With two rooms to play in--one inside and one outside--his world seemed rather large; there wasn't much need to go anywhere else except for school. School, to him, was an evil place. He hated going to school.

William stood up one of his Shogun Warriors, the one called Brave Raideen (the tall one painted red and black with a bow and arrow and a crazy, silver mask that made him look like King Tut or something), and he said, "What are you going to do about that jerk Randy at school?" William made his voice as low and gravelly as possible to speak like what he thought Brave Raideen would sound like.

"I don't know," William said in his normal voice.

"You should do something to scare him *real good*," Brave Raideen said.

"Like what?" William said, curious.

"You should get the thing in your mommy's nightstand. That'll scare him *real good*!" said Brave Raideen, then laughing an evil laugh.

"Yeah!" William said, jumping to his feet. He tossed Brave Raideen to the side, opened his door, and ran down the hallway to his parents' room, his long, lanky arms swinging like those of a spider monkey. His mother heard him running and called out to him.

"Billy? What are you doing?"

"Nothing, mom!" he said, entering her bedroom and running around the queen-size bed to where her nightstand sat. He laid down on his stomach in front of the nightstand and reached under the bed. "Randy is going to be sorry he messed with *me*."

He wrapped his hand around the metal railing of the bed frame then slid his hand down the length of it until he found what he was looking for: a small key wedged between the mattress and the frame. He propped up on his knees and looked at the nightstand--a cheap Sears piece made of particle board to look like oak with various things of his mother's on top like a bottle of nail polish, a women's magazine, a lamp, an alarm clock, a remote control for the TV, a framed photo of William with his step-dad--then he slid the key into the keyhole above the handle of the nightstand drawer.

"I hope this still works," he said, whispering to himself, turning the key to the right, and then turning it to the left. The lock popped and he slid the drawer open. "Yes!"

Inside the drawer were three things: a Bible, a vibrator that looked more like a skinny curling iron than a sex toy, and a 25-caliber American Derringer pistol. That gun was considered a "lady gun" by firearms enthusiasts, but to William, it was James Bond's gun since it looked similar to the 9mm Walther pistol in the Bond movies. He picked up the gun and held it tightly, aiming at an imaginary target on the wall, picturing Randy's stupid face looking scared in his mind.

His mother called to him from the other side of the house and said, "Billy? Are you in my room?"

"Yes, mommy!" he said, putting the small pistol in the pocket of his shorts and closing the drawer. "I needed a tissue!" He locked the drawer and placed the key back where he found it then ran to his room.

"Please respect mommy's privacy and stay out of her room!"

"Yes, mommy! Sorry, mommy!"

Back in his room, he returned to his place on the floor and propped up Brave Raideen, restoring his majestic stance in the middle of the toy congregation.

"Did you get it?" said Brave Raideen, his voice as menacing as William could make it.

"Yes, I got *it*," William said. He pulled the gun out of his pocket and showed it to Brave Raideen.

"I have taught you well, young Shogun Warrior."

William smiled at Brave Raideen, pleased with himself.

William attended Crestridge Elementary School in Converse, Texas. He was in the second grade. Like most of his schoolmates, William lived in a nice, suburban neighborhood and he rode his Huffy bike to school almost every morning, unless it rained or was overly foggy. William didn't like fog. He worried the fog would eat him if he rode his bike into it. On the front of his bike, strapped to the handlebars, was a wire basket which he used to carry his lunchbox. The metal lunchbox had a cartoon image of Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia on the side--Luke wielding a lightsaber and Leia brandishing a blaster--while Darth Vader loomed over them from the sky. Inside the lunchbox was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a bag of Fritos, a Little Debbie cupcake, a Thermos of juice, and the 25-caliber American Derringer pistol. The gun rattled inside the lunchbox as it bounced up and down on the ride to school.

"I'm going to scare Randy *real good*," William said to himself as he briskly peddled his bike.

Later that day, while William stood in line for lunch, he knew he wanted to move the pistol from his lunchbox to his pocket so he could take it with him outside to recess, which immediately followed lunch. He asked his teacher, Ms. Brookshire, if he could use the bathroom before going into the cafeteria.

"Yes, you may William. Don't forget to wash your hands afterwards," she said.

"Yes, Ms. Brookshire," he said, then departed the line for the bathroom.

Inside, he locked the door to the last toilet stall, opened the lunchbox, and pulled out the small pistol. It's black, gunmetal shined brightly under the fluorescent lights in the bathroom, and he could see the muddled reflection of his face in its side, an unrecognizable, smeared facsimile of his face. He admired the pistol for a few seconds then slipped it into the front pocket of his Levi's Jeans. It fit snugly in his small pocket. Again, he was pleased with himself then left the bathroom to rejoin his class for lunch. When he got back in line, he accidentally bumped into Darren, a plump kid with frizzy hair, freckles, and a sassy mouth.

"Hey, watch where you're going, you dufus!" Darren said, irritated, then shoved William with his elbow.

William didn't apologize. He put his hand in his pocket and held the pistol grip tight, thinking of the look he hoped to see on Randy's face when it was time to confront him on the playground after lunch.

Behind the school and beyond a long stretch of blacktop basketball courts, the playground equipment majestically stood in the sun, waiting for the children to come out for recess. The school bell rang loudly and a sea of kids poured out of the back doors of the school, flooding the playground with laughter and screams and chatter, red balls bouncing and flying, and teachers huddling to gossip. Everyone enjoyed the respite from the school routine--kids and teachers alike--except for William. He dreaded recess every day because of that jerk Randy. Instead of playing, William stood at the corner of the playground, peering across the blacktop, keeping an eye on Randy's whereabouts around the swing set or jungle gym. Randy was not in William's class but their classes shared a segment of recess together, a twenty minute period of torture. After scanning the entirety of the playground, William eventually found Randy on the opposite end, wearing his usual fascist uniform--blue striped t-shirt, brown corduroy pants, white tennis shoes, short-cropped hair--and shoving a girl to the ground. William slipped his hand in his pocket and gripped the pistol grip.

"I'll show you!" he said, stomping across the blacktop, his face red. "I'll show you *real good*."

William beelined for Randy, both hands in his pockets, his face searing with anger and resentment and hurt. Any kid in his path quickly moved out of it, looking at poor William with confusion since he was generally considered a sweet boy by all the students and teachers. Randy, too busy laughing at the crying girl on the ground, didn't notice William until he was right next to him, huffing and puffing and panting and sweating. He looked at William's red face and laughed.

"You eat a hot pepper or something?" he said, stepping over the girl toward William.

William just stood there, huffing and puffing, his hand gripping the pistol in his pocket tightly, thoughts rushing through his mind like scenes in a movie. The visions in his brain caught his attention and the scene in front of him blurred out of focus. He imagined blasting Randy in the gut with his pistol and felt satisfaction while watching him crumple to the ground, his arms wrapped around his midsection, writhing on the ground in agony. The daydream faded to black with explosions like fireworks in his eyes. The next thing he knew, he was on the ground, his back in some gravel, Randy on top of him thrashing him about, then Ms. Brookshire lifting Randy by his shirt collar, scolding his bad behavior.

"You are going to spend some time in the office, mister!" she said to Randy, a sour look on his face. "You go right now. I'll see you there in ten minutes."

She released his collar and he sulked off, kicking a rock innocently sitting on the blacktop. Ms. Brookshire knelt next to

William and helped him up. He dusted himself off, his face still red but red with embarrassment, not anger.

"Are you all right, sweet William?" she said.

"Yes, Ms. Brookshire," he said. He did his best to hold back the tears but his eyes sprung a leak.

"Don't you worry. I'll make sure they punish that rascal *real good*."

"Thanks, Ms. Brookshire."

She instructed her class to line up to go back inside. William got in the back of the line, embarrassed and dejected. As his class made its way inside, William watched Randy approach the door closest to the principal's office. William didn't know what was going to happen to Randy but whatever happened, he hoped it involved a paddling and a call to his parents. He slipped his hand in his pocket to make sure the pistol was still there and hadn't popped out during the ruckus. Feeling its cold, metal body gave him a sense of relief while he followed his classmates back inside the school.

After school and in the backyard of his home, William dragged Brave Raideen with one hand across the grass toward the tall oak tree with the treehouse up top. In his other hand was a wad of action figures--Han Solo, Spider-Man, Batman, a Micronaut missing his head and one leg--cinched at the wrists by a rubber band. When he reached the base of the tree, he set the wad of action figures on the grass and placed a dangling rope hanging from the tree around the neck of Brave Raideen. Up in the tree, a pulley attached to the treehouse waited for William's queue to work and so he pulled on the rope to lift up Brave Raideen. William wasn't strong enough to carry Brave Raideen with him up the wooden ladder attached to the side of the tree. After Brave Raideen reached the top, hanging stiffly in midair like a condemned criminal with a noose around his neck, William shoved Spider-Man (his favorite) in his pocket while the other action figures held on to the rubber band so he could climb the ladder to the treehouse. Once up and inside, he pulled Brave Raideen into the treehouse with an old wooden cane then released him from the noose. He was setting up his toys when his mother called for him.

"Billy?" she said, yelling from the back patio, her floral-patterned kitchen apron around her waist, her auburn hair in a tight bun at the back of her head. "Billy? Are you in the treehouse?!"

"Yes, mommy!" he said, calling back.

"Come in when it gets dark, please."

"Yes, mommy!"

The treehouse was a six-foot by six-foot wooden structure, mostly enclosed, and sparsely furnished inside--a two by eight wood

plank was attached to the wall inside to function as a bench, a milk crate was turned upside down and used as a table, a throw rug that smelled like mildew and old dog lay under the milk crate, tying the room together. It wasn't much but to William, it was a boy's heaven. The doorway to the treehouse faced the back patio to his family's house and the window, the single portal on the opposite side of the treehouse, faced the wooded area behind William's house. The window's sill also served as a stage for William's dramatic reenactments of comic book or movie scenes, his action figures the pawns in his make-shift plays. He set Han Solo, Spider-Man, Batman, and the Micronaut on the window sill while Brave Raideen watched from the floor.

"Almost ready," William said.

Outside in the woods, some colored movement caught his eye. He reached under the milk crate for a pair of military binoculars--a wonderful present from his father last Christmas/Hanukkah--and he examined a tree in the distance with a strange blueish blob near its trunk. He discovered a face peeking at him, a face he was familiar with: Randy's face. Still wearing his blue-striped shirt, he peered around the tree at William's treehouse while William peered through his binoculars at Randy. And to his absolute, utter astonishment, Randy waved at him, a wilted gesture of surrender. William dropped the binoculars and rubbed his eyes. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was as if he was witnessing Darth Vader handing Princess Leia a bouquet of beautiful flowers as a peace offering, just plain weird. He picked up his binoculars and looked some more. Randy gestured if he could come over and William reluctantly nodded. He turned and sat on the floor, all his toys around him, and braced himself. 'What have I done?' he thought. 'What does Randy want?'

A few moments later, he heard the sound of someone scaling the tree. At the threshold of the doorway, the familiar short-cropped hair and blue eyes cautiously appeared, and then slowly the rest of Randy came in the treehouse, sitting on the floor and looking around curiously.

"Wow! This is so cool," he said. "I've seen this treehouse before but never inside. You're so lucky."

William smirked then looked up at the ceiling, an open space where the roof was unfinished, some leaves and branches poking through, and he sighed.

"Yeah, but Steve is too busy to finish. He works all the time. He's my step-dad."

"At least he does *something* for you. All my dad does is--" Randy said, then he started to cry. William was shocked at the sudden display of emotion from his bully. Randy turned his head to reveal a bruised spot on his jaw near his ear lobe. It was pretty clear, even to William, that he had been slugged and it looked like it really hurt.

Randy sniffled then wiped his nose on his short sleeve. "I just wanted to say I was sorry for shoving you at school today."

"It's OK," William said, embarrassed.

"No! It's not OK. I don't know why I did it. I guess I was tired of being bullied by my dad."

"Your dad?" William said, surprised.

"When the school called and told him what I had done to you, my dad got real mad. He said I was no good. It hurt so bad when he hit me that I knew I must have hurt you bad too. So I wanted to say I was sorry. Do you forgive me?"

"Ummm."

"No one made me come here and do it. I just feel bad is all."

"OK. I forgive you," William said, smiling.

"Yeah?!" Randy said, delighted.

"Yeah."

"The Secret Crestridge Handshake?" Randy said, extending his hand out to William. He was happy to finally be offered the opportunity to perform the secret ritual (which he knew by heart) with another student. I would tell you the choreographed steps to The Secret Crestridge Handshake but then it wouldn't be a secret anymore. The two friends completed the shake flawlessly and laughed. "We did it!"

"Yeah."

"What is that?" Randy said, pointing at Brave Raideen.

"That's Brave Raideen. He's a Shogun Warrior."

"Oh. Why is Han Solo standing next to Spider-Man?" Randy said, pointing at the window sill.

"I don't know. I like to make up new stories with all my toys," William said, sulking, waiting for a disapproving sneer from Randy.

"Oh! That's neat. Let's make up a new story together!"

Surprised, William smiled and handed Han Solo to Randy. They rearranged the toys together, setting the stage for a new story.

William's mother pulled the meat loaf from the oven, set it on the stove to cool, and then wiped her manicured hands on her apron. Her husband Steve, William's step-dad, would be home from work soon and he was almost always on-time--something William's natural father never was. They divorced when William was a baby and William spent some time in the summers with his natural father; the rest of the year he lived with his mother, Pam, and Steve (whom he called Steve, not Dad). Steve liked to eat as soon as he got home from work so he would have time to watch the evening news and deflate from his stressful day by drinking a cold Pearl Beer. Looking out the window, Pam realized it was getting dark and that William (or Billy,

as she liked to call him) was still out back, playing in the treehouse. She hadn't heard him come back inside and decided to fetch her son. She turned off the oven and went outside.

On the patio, she could see William's head bobbing around in the treehouse. She was about to call his name when she noticed another head in there, leaving her bewildered.

'Does Billy have a *friend* up there?' she thought. He didn't mention to her about having anyone over. How could she have not noticed? She called to William and he appeared, standing in the doorway of the treehouse.

"Yes, mommy?" he said, calling back to her.

"Do you have someone up there with you?"

"Yes, mommy. My friend Randy from school."

"Randy?" she said, sorting through the list of names of kids she knew from the neighborhood or from the school. The name seemed very familiar to her but she couldn't place his face. "Does Randy need to go home? Or does he want to eat with us?" she said.

"I don't know. Let me ask him," he said, disappearing back into the treehouse.

She scratched her head and pondered some more. 'Randy? That name sounds so familiar,' she thought.

A moment later, William appeared in the doorway, this time with his friend Randy, whom his mother had never seen in person before although she had heard William describe the bullying he received from Randy many, many times before. Not putting two and two together at that very moment, she was pleased to see her son playing with another child.

"Randy wants to eat with us!" William said.

"OK, come inside then," she said, raising an approving thumb.

The two boys quickly huddled and discussed something that Pam couldn't hear. When they were done, they separated, gave each other a high five, put about a foot of space between each other, and then braced themselves to jump. Before Pam could scream for them to stop, immediately worried that they would hurt themselves, the two boys were airborne. They dropped to the ground, quick and heavy like two sacks of potatoes, and when they touched the Earth, a loud bang rang out--the discharge from the 25-caliber American Derringer pistol in his pocket--startling the slumbering birds in the woods behind their house, setting them in flight. Both boys crumpled to the ground. Randy quickly got up. William did not.

Pam ran to her son who was laying in the grass in a fetal position. She knew he wasn't dead because he was moving but a large blood stain covered the majority of his right thigh. He was bleeding profusely and, not having any foresight whatsoever that this would happen, she didn't know what to do.

"Oh my god!" she said, violently shaking. She knelt next to her son and picked him up, wrapping him in her apron. She quickly took him in the house while Randy followed her inside.

Pam stared at her apron while she waited for her son in the lobby of the emergency room. Randy sat quietly in a chair next to her, playing with a Rubik's Cube she had in her purse, something she kept with her in case William ever got bored. She stared at the blood on her apron and marveled at the sheer amount of it and how it changed the colors of the floors from white and yellow to a dingy, brownish maroon. After William was taken away by some nurses, Pam asked Randy how William came to have her pistol in his pocket, but Randy didn't know. She wasn't quite sure what to think of that and, mostly, she felt extreme anguish for what had happened to her son and couldn't help but think that it was all her fault. She had purchased the pistol for protection in the years between divorcing William's father and meeting Steve, when there wasn't a man around to protect them. Once she married Steve, she thought of getting rid of the pistol but never did, being swept up in the busyness of newfound love. All of this was lost on Randy who was immersed in the perplexed profundity of the Rubik's Cube. She placed her hand on his shoulder and said, "Are you thirsty?"

"No ma'am," he said, not looking at her, still twisting the colored cube diligently.

"Should I call your parents?"

"I don't remember my phone number."

"You don't know it?" she said, puzzled.

"Nope."

"Well, I'm sure they'll understand when I tell them what happened."

"I'll probably get in more trouble," he said, sniffing.

"Why? It wasn't your fault."

"I'm *always* in trouble."

Just then, a doctor entered the waiting room, standing in front of Pam and Randy, a couple of fingerprint-sized smears of blood on his shirt, a clipboard in his hand, and a stethoscope around his neck. His name tag said "Dr. Masala." Pam quickly stood up while Randy continued to play with the toy.

"Ma'am, your son is going to be fine. The bullet went straight through muscle and didn't hit any bone or tendons. William is very lucky," he said with a slight Indian accent.

Pam raised her hands to her mouth, sighing heavily.

"Thank god!" she said, holding back tears.

"Let me ask you a question. Why did your son have your pistol in the first place?"

Pam stood there, stricken by guilt and shame, and didn't know what to say. She didn't know how her son got a hold of the pistol so her mind was a black hole that she was looking into for answers but not finding any.

"To be very honest with you, I have no idea how he got it."

"Mmm hmm," he said incredulously. "And why didn't you keep it locked up?"

"It was locked up in my nightstand, I swear."

"Mmm hmm," he said, scribbling something on the paper on the clipboard. "Well, when these types of incidents occur, we are required to call family protective services. You will be getting a call from them in the next few days."

"Oh, OK," she said, perturbed.

"You can see your son now. Have a nice night," he said, then turned and walked back into the emergency room.

Pam looked at Randy and said, "Do you want to go see Billy with me?"

He looked up, confused. "Who is Billy?"

"I mean, William," she said, putting her hand out. Randy gave her the Rubik's Cube then followed her into the emergency room.

A few days later, William sat in the cafeteria at his school, scarfing down his lunch--a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a bag of Fritos, a Little Debbie cupcake, and a Thermos of juice. He finished his lunch before all the other kids then sat at the end of the table, excited to go outside for recess. Sassy mouth Darren looked down at the brace around his leg, put there to keep his leg straight, and said, "How do you walk with that thing on?"

"I put one foot in front of the other," William said, smiling.

"Boy, you're a real genius. You know that?"

William didn't respond. He was too excited.

When the bell rang, William bolted outside as fast as he could with his gimp leg, heading straight for the playground. Waiting for him by the jungle gym was Randy who was wearing brown corduroy pants, white tennis shoes, and a red Spider-Man t-shirt. Behind Randy, a few feet away, stood his teacher Ms. Benedict. She watched William limp his way from the back of the school to Randy, who was patiently waiting for him. Concerned that Randy was going to start trouble, she decided to intervene. She stepped next to Randy and put her hand on his shoulder.

"There's not going to be any problems today, is there?"

"No, Ms. Benedict. We're the best of friends now," he said, smiling. "Really!"

"Well, that's great."

When William reached Randy, he put his hand out and they commenced giving each other The Secret Crestridge Handshake. Ms. Benedict was pleased seeing their little friendly ritual. Randy whispered something to William, and he agreed then limped to the other side of the jungle gym. He stepped on top of a short, cement wall, spread his legs into a stiff, heroic stance, raising one arm straight up, his finger pointing to the clouds. He indicated that he was ready.

"All right! Here I come!" Randy said.

"What is William doing over there?" said Ms. Benedict, shading her eyes with her hand, squinting.

"That's not William!" Randy said, scoffing. "That is the great and powerful, BRAVE RAIDEEN! Not even a bullet can keep down the Brave Raideen!"

"And who are you supposed to be?"

"I'm Spider-Man. Duh!"

Randy left Ms. Benedict behind to join his friend on the other side of the jungle gym.

Good Night, Jerk Face

My dreams were sturdy when I was young; they became more fragile as I got older. Summer of 1986. All I thought about was the car I hoped to get for my 16th birthday the following summer. That was all I thought about when I was 15, all day, all night. I thought I had a pretty good chance of getting the car I wanted too because I lived in a pretty good neighborhood and I thought my dad made pretty good money, and the majority of my friends got good cars for their 16th birthdays. The odds looked pretty good in my favor, at least. Plus, I made good grades. It seemed like a no-brainer to me. The car I wanted was a 1980 Mazda RX7. I really, really, really wanted that car, preferably a stick shift even though I didn't know how to drive stick shift, let alone drive a car.

Every summer since I could remember, I spent a couple of weeks at my grandparents' house in Moore, Oklahoma, probably to give my parents a break. During the drive from San Antonio, Texas to Moore, I read the classifieds of the *San Antonio Light* newspaper, scouring the used car section, looking for Mazda RX7's for sale, particularly 1980 models or ones that were close to that year like the '78 or '79, just not an '81 cause they were different. I found a few for sale with prices ranging from \$4,000 - \$6,000. That seemed like a pretty good deal to me even though I had no idea really what a good deal was for a car. I was only 15. I didn't know shit.

"What are you looking for?" my mom said. She was somewhat thin with auburn, short cropped hair, kind hazel eyes, and had lightly freckled pale skin. She gripped the steering wheel of her Toyota Camry confidently and sat up straight, ready to bear the heavy burden of the long, boring drive to Oklahoma.

"The car I want for my 16th birthday," I said.

"What makes you think you'll get a car for your 16th birthday?"

"Isn't that what you get when you turn 16?"

"Sure, some kids get a car for their 16th birthday. What kind of car do you want?"

"A 1980 Mazda RX7. Stick shift. Silver."

"Ha! A sports car?"

"Do you think dad will get me one?"

"I don't know. You'll have to ask him."

"What do you think he'll say?"

"Trying to guess what your dad will say at any given moment is impossible. You'll just have to call him and ask him. OK?"

"OK."

I read the few ads for used RX7's over and over, imagining what they might look like, thinking that they were probably all like new, lightly used, hardly dirty. I imagined myself in one, driving it to school, impressing the shit out of girls, making my friends jealous, and stuff like that. It was a damn, good daydream.

The drive to Moore seemed to take an eternity.

My mom only stayed one night in Moore. The next morning after we arrived, we sat down for breakfast with my grandparents. My mom wanted a good meal before she started the drive back to San Antonio, a drive that took seven hours or so, depending on if she stopped to pee or not. She seemed to be in a hurry to leave. I was distracted. All I could think about was the car I wanted.

My grandparents were both well-worn and travel-weary, both reaching their 70s without experiencing too many life-threatening diseases or personal fiascos that would leave scars like most of their contemporaries had. My grandfather moved his hunched-over frame with the grace of a cowboy shuffling a two-step, his elderly chuckle filling the room with joy, his snappy demeanor always punctuating his interactions with dirty jokes or whacky riddles. My grandmother was as thin as a stalk of wheat, her left hand gripping a highball glass of scotch on the rocks, her right hand pinching a Virginia Slims 120 cigarette with an ash two inches long. They asked a million questions about everything except for what I was really thinking about. My grandfather noticed my unusual behavior.

"What cha thinking about, son?" he said.

"Cars."

"Oh yeah, which car?"

"He wants a car for his 16th birthday," my mom said.

"Which car?" he said, a smile slithering across his face, his arm around my shoulders.

"A Mazda RX7."

"Ooo! Those look fun. And with rotary engines, too."

"Yeah. Rotary," I said, uneasy like, not sure what he was talking about.

"Must be expensive," he said.

"Not if it's used."

"True. It'll be cheaper than new."

My mom was completely uninterested in this conversation but my grandfather liked cars, liked working on cars. He was curious, at least. My mom finished her breakfast, grabbed her stuff, kissed me goodbye, and was out the door as fast as she could go. I didn't get a chance to tell her to butter my dad up about getting me a car for my 16th birthday.

My grandfather placed his hand on my shoulder as I watched her drive off. He squeezed my shoulder gently.

"Are you sure you want a Japanese car? How do you feel about Fords?"

I had a thing for sugary cereals. I could eat almost an entire box in one sitting. Fruit Loops, Lucky Charms, Smurf Berry Crunch--practically any cereal except for the bran varieties--I could scarf down bowl after bowl. My grandparents knew this about me. When I got up for breakfast, I discovered dozens of boxes of cereal, waiting on the kitchen counter. My grandparents didn't eat cereal so I knew it was all for me. They preferred to eat eggs, bacon, toast, the eggs coated with salt and pepper, the toast covered with margarine, the bacon burnt to a blackened crisp. I grabbed two boxes of cereal--it didn't matter which ones--and sat down at the table. I commenced to scarfing them down. My grandmother cackled as she watched me.

"Good thing we went to the store before you got here," she said.

"Mmm hmm," I said.

"Do you want any orange juice?"

"Uhh uh," I said, shaking my head.

My grandfather shuffled into the breakfast room from the kitchen, the morning paper in his hand. He sat down at the breakfast table, pulling the plastic wrapper off the rolled up newspaper, then unraveling the paper on the table. I watched him, with my mouth full of half-chewed cereal, spreading the sections across the table. He liked reading the newspaper during breakfast.

"Why do you have to cover the whole goddamn table?" my grandmother said.

"There's a lot of sections in here, dear," he said.

"That newspaper is dirty. We eat here."

"Well, I *know* we eat here. It's a breakfast table, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's a breakfast table, not a *reading the newspaper* table."

"Well, for Christ's sakes, I didn't know you had such an aversion to the morning paper."

"Well, I didn't either until I watched you spread the filthy thing all over the table."

They went on like this for ten minutes. I continued to scarf down my cereal. My grandfather turned through the different sections of the newspaper, looking for the editorial section, to the displeasure of my grandmother. He liked to read the editorial articles and comment about them aloud to whoever was around. It made him feel invested in the community, I guess, to speak about these civic matters, even though he didn't do much else about them. He found the classified

section, lifted it up in front of him, spread it open, and ruffled the pages.

"Look here, my boy. Let's see if there are any Mazda RX7's for sale here in Moore. You know, for fun!"

I set my spoon in the bowl and chewed the remainder of what was in my mouth. He turned the pages, scanned them, turned some more. He blurted out car maker names in alphabetical order: Audi, BMW, Buick, Cadillac, blah blah blah. The suspense was getting to me. It irritated my grandmother.

"You're not buying him a car," she said.

"I know that, dear," he said.

"Then what are you looking for?"

"Because I'm curious, dear."

"Curious about what?"

"How much they... Mazda!"

"You're gonna get his hopes up."

"Oh, stop it. Mazda, Mazda... here. 1979 Mazda RX7. Used. Automatic. Blue. Needs work. \$4,100."

"\$4,100?!" she said, shocked, like it was an insane amount of money.

"Does it have a stick shift?" I said.

"Nope. It says automatic," he said.

"Oh."

"Here's another. 1980 Mazda RX7. Used. Silver. 5 speed. Excellent shape. \$5,999."

"5,999?!" my grandmother said.

"That's what it says, dear," my grandfather said.

"Does it have stick shift?" I said.

"That's what it says, my boy." He looked over at me, a big grin stretched across his face. Pretty quick, the grin turned downward and a look of concern appeared on his wrinkly face. "You know, you need to talk to your dad first about this. Otherwise, it's all pie in the sky."

A feeling of disappointment sunk in my stomach.

"I know," I said.

"I'd love to help you look for Mazdas but it would be like looking through a fashion magazine thinking you're going to get a date. That's not a good thing to do, is it?"

"No," I said.

"Why don't you give your dad a call today and ask him about it?"

"OK."

"That's my boy."

I poured some more cereal in my bowl and started another round. This time, it was Count Chocula. I was still hungry.

I sat in my room by myself, on the floor, the newspaper spread out in front of me, the used car section open wide. There seemed to be the same amount of RX7's for sale in Moore as back home, a few in the same price range, \$4,000 - \$6,000, more or less. I felt a sense of relief for some reason, like an affirmation that my hope to own this car was achievable, because my research would reveal the same thing to my father. I believed my father liked that I did research, looked into things, absorbed some information from various sources, at least tried to be informed. I was still scared to call him, though. I worried that he would say no. He was a dream-crusher. He could be a real sour-puss when he wanted to be, particularly with me. I looked at the rotary phone and sensed my father's dark cloud form in the room. It seeped through the phone line and hung over my head, heavy, dreadful.

I stared at the phone for an hour. Then another hour.

After a deep breath, I picked up the phone and dialed my father's work phone number, the rotary dial grinding back and forth, the numbers clicking in the handset. The line rang and rang. He finally answered.

"Colonel Bennigan," he said.

"Dad? It's me."

"Hello son. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I've been thinking."

"Yes?"

"Ummm..."

"Make it quick. I'm very busy."

"Well..."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," he said. I heard a bang on the other end of the line, like the handset was dropped or tossed or whacked, and some grumbling. "Excuse me, Sam. Can you call back when you have a clear idea of what you are trying to ask?"

"Dad, I know what I want to ask. Next summer, I will be 16."

"Yes?"

"And I was hoping I could talk to you about the kind of car I'm going to get, when I turn 16."

"You're not getting a car for your birthday."

"But..."

"If you want a car, then I suggest you save your money. Get a job. Make lots of money. Save for a car and the cost of owning that car. There's gas. Oil changes. Maintenance. Auto insurance. My god, the auto insurance! Owning a car is a big deal, a huge expense. Are you prepared to pay for these things?"

"No. Where do I get a job?"

"I have no idea. You think you're so smart. If you're so smart, then you can find a job. Are your grandparents feeding you?"

"Yes."

"Good. See you when you get back." He hung up the phone.

I put the handset on the cradle, wadded up the newspaper into a huge crumpled ball, and threw it in a trash can in the corner of the room.

I spent the remainder of my time at my grandparents' house formulating a plan for finding a job and a couple of weeks later, I was back in San Antonio. My grandfather advised that I scour the want ads when I got back and I did just that. The want ads were mostly a place for potential salesmen, it seemed to me, and I didn't want to be a salesman. I heard that a lot of kids my age had jobs in restaurants or fast food places but I didn't see ads for jobs at those types of places in the newspaper. I asked my mom where I should look and she suggested I look in the phone book for listings under restaurants. I did that. They were in alphabetical order so I looked for the businesses that were on the road in front of my neighborhood: Blanca Road. I called them one by one and asked the same question when someone answered.

"Are you hiring?" I said.

"No," the mysterious voices all said.

San Antonio was a pretty big city and there were a lot of restaurant listings. When I eventually got to the "D" listings, I came across a Greek restaurant that I had never seen before. It was called Demetri's Greek Restaurant. I tried to imagine where it was on Blanca Road or what the front of it looked like. I couldn't for the life of me imagine it. I called anyway.

"Are you hiring?" I said, gripping the handset tightly.

"What?" a lady said. "Hold on." The phone crackled, a hand over the mouthpiece muffling the sound. I could still hear her yelling a question though, asking if they were hiring or something. The muffling went away. "Yes, we're hiring."

"Really?!"

"I said yes, didn't I?"

"Oh OK. What do I need to do?"

"Are you 16?" she said.

"Yes," I said. I lied. I wasn't 16.

"Then come here and fill out an application. We'll see what happens."

"OK. Thanks!"

She hung up the phone. I jumped up, tossing the phone handset, landing in a triumphant pose, hands stretched to the sky, feet planted to the earth spread wide, a big grin on my face. I called to my mother and explained the good news. She seemed pleased at my enthusiasm.

"Would you like for me to drive you down there?" she said.

"Yes, please," I said.

"OK, then brush your hair, brush your teeth, and put on clean clothes."

I ran to my room to get ready. I was ready in five minutes.

I had no idea what I was going to be doing for my first stint as an employed person. Being that I was a young kid, the possibility that I could be doing something meaningful or important seemed plausible in my mind, although the reality was that "meaningful or important" were relative to my experience in the world outside of my parents' home. I was in for an awakening.

"What position are they hiring?" my mom said.

"I don't know."

"Aren't you curious?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you ask then?"

"I don't know."

"Hmmm. You don't know what you are getting yourself into?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

I sat quietly in my mother's Toyota Camry, the cold, conditioned air enveloping my body, some Top 40 music playing on the radio, Lionel Ritchie or something. I watched the different businesses as we passed by, wondering if they were hiring too, and what it would be like to work there: a convenience store, a sandwich shop, a dry cleaner, a paint store. We also passed my high school, Abraham Lincoln High School. Since it was summer time, it was closed. The parking lot was empty except for one car, a bright red Ford Mustang, somewhat new, with shiny alloy rims and glossy trim, freshly coated with Armor All. A boy I recognized from school stood next to it, leaning in a cool fashion against it, smoking a cigarette by himself. I didn't know his name but I sure did recognize him. He looked cool as fuck. I watched him smoke and he watched me gawk at him until I couldn't see him anymore. I daydreamed about owning a Mazda RX7 and challenging him to a drag race. I daydreamed about our race the rest of the way to the restaurant.

When we arrived, I recognized the strip mall. We had passed it a hundred times but I didn't ever remember shopping there or parking there before. We went around to the back end of the strip mall and my mom parked in a spot directly in front of the entrance of the restaurant. I had never been inside before and had no idea what to expect or what the interior even looked like. I didn't even know who I was supposed to talk to. My mother handed me a ballpoint pen and

my identification card for being a military brat. The photo of me on the card was really embarrassing. I looked like a complete dumb ass.

"Do you want me to go inside with you?" she asked.

"No. I'll be fine."

"OK. Well, call me when you're ready for me to pick you up. OK?"

"OK."

She kissed me on the cheek and I got out of the car. She peeled the car out like the wine at home was sitting on the couch unsupervised. Once her car was gone, I went inside.

The restaurant was sparsely furnished and split into two areas. The first area had a couple of tables with checkerboard tablecloths, a beverage area with a soda fountain, a tea dispenser, and a water dispenser. There was also a counter where you ordered your meals with a huge menu on the wall behind it with an open-air kitchen, a grill, deep-fryer, cutting area, prep area, a lean-in cooler, and a beer / wine cooler. The second area was a dining room that was up two steps and separated from the other area by a low wall. In the dining area were a dozen tables, four tops with checkerboard tablecloths, salt and pepper shakers, and a large white candle on each. There was a painting or two of some Greek landscapes--pastures, the Parthenon, and shit like that--and that was about it. It was pretty minimal. I would find out later that this minimalism was useful for parties or wedding receptions held at the restaurant since Greeks liked to toss dishes around and break them when they were celebrating and getting drunk on wine or ouzo.

After standing around for a minute or two like a dumbass, I was greeted by a woman who was petite with curly dark brown hair, short on top and longer in the back. She wore dirty white jeans and a blue Polo shirt with the name of the restaurant on it: Demitri's Greek Restaurant. The jeans and the polo shirt looked like they had been submerged in olive oil then washed then repeated like that over and over. She had a nice smile but looked very tired, as if she had been working 21 days straight without a day off. She extended her hand to me.

"Hi! My name is Desmona. My brother owns the restaurant but I help him run it. You here to apply for work?"

"Yes, but how do you know that?"

"You have a pen in one hand and an ID card in the other and you don't look like a customer. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Tell you what. Demitri is busy unclogging a toilet but all employees get one free meal with every shift. Do you want to eat something while you wait?"

I looked at the menu and my eyes glazed over. I had never eaten Greek food before and everything on the menu might as well have

been from another planet. I had no idea what any of it was or what it might even taste like. I stared at the menu like an aborigine whose eyes were peeled at the sky, watching a jumbo jet tear through the clouds, stunned.

"I guess you haven't had Greek food before," she said, shaking her head. "I'll get you a gyro. If you like that then you'll be on the right foot. Sound good?" I nodded. "Have a seat over there and fill out the application. I'll get it for you."

I sat down and she quickly brought over a piece of paper, dropped it on the table, then went back into the kitchen to make my meal. Before I could even finish filling out the contact information section, she was back at the table with my food. In a red basket lined with red and white checkered tissue paper was a large gyro sandwich, hand cut fries, and one dolma. It was the most divine smelling food I had encountered in weeks.

"Enjoy! Demitri said he'd be out in a minute," she said then vanished to the back of the restaurant through a door in the kitchen.

I examined my food and took a big whiff. The gyro sandwich was the size of a massive burrito, meat and onions and tomatoes and tzatziki sauce spilling out the front of it. I took one bite of the Mediterranean sandwich and immediately fell in love. What had I been missing all my life so far? My taste buds exploded and I worked on that sandwich like a riding mower taking down an overgrown lawn. I must have been a real sight to see because Demitri was laughing up a storm when I noticed him for the first time, standing next to me, all five feet of him, his hands on his hips, laughing and laughing. He didn't look much different than his sister Desmona, about the same height, similar curly hair but cropped shorter in the back, same dirty white jeans and a blue Polo shirt.

"I love watching people eat my food for the first time. It's like a food baptism," he said, extending his hand to me. "I'm Demitri and this is my restaurant." He saw that I was holding my sandwich with a tight, saucy grip. He put his hand in the front pocket of his jeans. "Nevermind. Well, finish up your meal and meet me in the back so we can get started."

"Don't you want me to fill out the application?" I said, my mouth still half-full of food.

"You want to work, don't you?" I nodded. "Good. We'll finish the paperwork later. Let's go!"

He clapped his hands then vanished to the back of the restaurant.

In the back was a storage room, a walk-in cooler, a few prep tables, and a dishwashing station complete with a massive, stainless

steel sink and attached dishwasher. It was mostly pretty clean but in slight disarray. There were some shipping boxes to be unpacked and some bussing bins filled with dirty dishes to be unloaded. Demitri seemed very proud of his restaurant. He stood there in a manly stance, his fists firmly pressed into his hips, like a short Superman prepared to take flight. I wasn't all that impressed but what did I know? I didn't know shit.

"So, this is where some of the magic happens. You'll be doing a lot of work back here, washing dishes, cutting fries, unpacking shipments from Greece."

"Your food is from Greece?" I said.

"Most of the ingredients are from Greece. I have family over there. They send me the good stuff, mostly, for cheap. It's not authentic Greek food unless it's from Greece, right?"

That seemed like a reasonable statement to me so I didn't say anything. Demitri had a look about him that reminded me of the actor Tom Selleck, mainly because he had a big, black, bushy moustache and curly dark hair in a similar hair style, but Demitri was barely five foot one and he smelled like olive oil instead of tanning oil.

"All right, kid. Be careful of the water coming out the faucet because it's hot. And when I mean hot, it's hot enough to melt dried tzatziki sauce off the plates so be careful. Got it?" he said, pointing a finger into my chest.

"Got it," I said.

"Follow me."

We walked to the back of the storage room to a door that lead out into a hallway where the one restroom was for the diners, the hallway then lead back out to the dining area. But we didn't go out to the dining area. Demitri used his foot to prop open the door to the co-ed bathroom. The smell of a messy turd wafted out.

"The bathroom is usually very clean except this old man came in here after eating a large Greek salad and three servings of baklava. He was in here an hour and blew a gasket. I like to keep it clean in here... for the ladies. I need you to clean this up before the dinner rush. Got it?"

"Got it," I said.

"Follow me."

We went back into the storage room and stepped in front of a table with three very large tins on it. The tins must have been four or five gallon containers. They looked like humongous tuna fish containers without labels. Demitri slowly turned one around, looking for something.

"These came in today. Feta cheese. I need you to open these, take the cheese out, put the cheese in a plastic bin, pour some of the brine in, and cover the bins with Saran Wrap. Got it?"

"Got it," I said.

"Good. Here's a can opener to open these. Please don't cut yourself. Got it?" he said, pointing a finger into my chest. He really liked to do that, point and poke me, even though I was taller than he was. Then he left me alone.

I examined the can opener and didn't recognize its shape from the ones my mother had in our kitchen at home. In fact, it looked more like an antique scalpel that you would see in an old movie than a can opener. I gripped it tightly in my hand and turned one of the large tins around, examining it. There were some indentations on the top that seemed like a logical place to open it so I placed the sharp tip of the can opener there and pressed firmly, trying to puncture the top of the tin. Instead, the impenetrable top rejected the opener and my hand crumpled. The can opener pierced my skin and blood gushed from it, deep crimson red. It dripped on the metal table. I called for Demitri but he didn't respond.

The next thing I knew, I saw black.

I opened my eyes and Demitri and Desmona were wrapping my hand with something, like a towel or a rag, and I was sitting at the front of the restaurant. I was out of it and I didn't really understand what was going on. I could see that they were talking to me but I didn't understand what they were saying. I was lightheaded and groggy. To my surprise, my mother appeared in front of me and helped me stand up. She hung my good arm around her shoulders and helped me walk to the car. As she opened the door and helped me sit down, I heard her consoling Demitri and Desmona and they seemed concerned about me. She put the seatbelt on me, rolled the window down, and closed the door. As she went around the car to get in, Demitri leaned on the car door, looking in.

"Don't worry kid, you got the job. You seem like a good kid even though I asked you not to cut yourself. Go home and get better and I'll see you in a few days. I gave your mom your schedule," he said, a big smile on his face, his bushy moustache sitting above his white teeth like a furry hat. I could tell he felt sorry for me though. He slapped the car roof and my mother drove off.

As we went, I looked in the side mirror and saw him waving at us. I heard him call out, "Good night, jerk face!"

My mom looked at me, puzzled, and said, "He must not speak very good English."

We drove home.

The next day, I was sitting in my room, the auto classifieds sprawled out in front of me on the floor. I looked for the elusive 1980 Mazda RX7. I held a marker in my left hand because my right was wrapped in ace bandage and gauze, still tender and sore from the cut. I usually wrote with my right hand but my left was good enough to circle ads with a marker. I read the listings under the Mazda section carefully, listed in chronological order from newest year to oldest, and I heard an enthusiastic auctioneer in my head, calling them out with a speedy, Redneck accent. It made reading the ads much more enjoyable that way to me. I then was interrupted by a knock at my door.

"Come in."

"Your mother wanted me to give you this," my dad said, poking his head in. He handed me a pill and a glass of water. "It's a painkiller."

My dad was short and stalky and kind of pudgy in a way a bull dog can be those things except he didn't have a loveable side. He was all business all the time, no fun.

"Thanks," I said, gulping the pill down with water.

"What are you looking at?"

"Huh?"

"There, in the paper," he said, pointing. "What are you looking at in the paper?"

"I'm reading the classifieds. For cars."

"I'm not giving you a car for your 16th birthday," he said, staring at me.

"Uh, OK."

"You'll need to save up for a car yourself."

"I know. That's why I got a job."

"If you keep cutting yourself on the job, pretty soon you won't have a job. Shape up."

"OK."

He left my room and closed the door behind him. I stared at the door for a moment, making sure he wasn't going to come back in. He didn't.

I looked down at the paper and the auctioneer continued his chant in my head: *I have a 1979 Mazda RX-7 in very good condition. Let's start the bidding at \$3,900. You, there, in the pink shorts, \$3,900! How about \$4,000? Who will give me \$4,000? The little fella, there, good-looking kid, \$4,000! Now how about \$4,100? Who will give me \$4,100?*

The water that shot out of the sink hose was scalding hot. Demitri was not kidding when he said the water was hot enough to

melt dried tzatziki sauce off the plates and silverware. Tzatziki sauce, a combination of yogurt mixed with cucumbers, garlic, salt, olive oil, and other wonderful ingredients to make a divine sandwich dressing, although delicious served cold and fresh, turned to cement when exposed to air too long. It was a dishwasher's nightmare. I blasted the plates with the hot water to get that shit off but when it didn't work, I had a scraper to use, like a windshield ice scraper but smaller. Washing dishes and bussing tables in a restaurant was an eye-opening experience for me as a young man. I didn't have to work at Demitri's for long to realize that people were pigs, absolutely disgusting slob. Not only was the tzatziki sauce difficult to get off plates, imagine getting that shit off walls or window blinds. Ugh.

That was the majority of my work, washing dishes and bussing tables, although I also was asked to clean the restrooms, take orders, cook food, and prep ingredients. Every once and a while, I was also asked to be a taste-tester. I liked that job the most although it was pretty infrequent. Demitri had family members doing all kinds of things for him, cousins doing bookkeeping, his aunt doing his taxes, his sister managing the place, and so on and so forth. But one of his secret ingredients for success was his mother, who gave him most of his recipes and who also baked his baklava, which if you didn't know, is the most amazing dessert in the world--a rich, sweet pastry made of layers of filo filled with chopped nuts and sweetened with honey. Hers was to DIE for and I'm not kidding. She would bake a tray of it at her home then bring it in to the restaurant and sit the tray in the back area on the prep table behind where I washed the dishes. Every time she put the tray down, she would tap me on the shoulder and when I looked at her and the baklava, she would wag her finger in my face as if to say, 'Don't touch!' And every time she left, I always took a piece for myself to eat when no one was looking. That was the one thing that made washing dishes somewhat bearable: amazing baklava. I'd shove the entire piece in my mouth and enjoy it while I blasted dried tzatziki off dinner plates.

A few days after my hand healed up, I was back at Demitri's, a rubber glove covering my wounded hand, washing dishes, bussing tables, and cleaning the bathroom. As I said, it didn't take me long to realize just how messy people were when eating out in a restaurant. I found all kinds of disgusting things, food smashed on the walls and under the tables, boogers and gum stuck under everything, tampons and wads of paper towels jammed in the toilet, urine in the bathroom sinks, turds smeared on the bathroom walls, and more too disgusting to talk about. It was a goddamn nightmare, if I say so myself. Demitri took it all in stride though.

"As long as they're paying me for their meals, I look the other way for everything else--mostly," he would say to me.

"What would make you not look away?" I asked one time.

"Well, maybe murder..." Then he laughed so hard that I knew even murder could be overlooked for a price. "Now, go bus table seven. They just left."

Table seven was occupied by a young family, a man, his wife, and a little baby; the man and the woman not much older than 18, the little baby a demon spawn. The parents looked like they had survived a horrific event, their hair matted down, their clothes in tatters, their eyes weary and their shoulders slumped. As they ate quietly, their baby destroyed everything it could get its little paws on, the salt and pepper shakers dismantled and emptied, napkins wadded and torn, sugar packets ripped and tossed, straws bent and jammed into crevices, food smashed on the table, and water flung on the floor. When they were done eating, they scooped up their baby and quietly left. Demitri laughed at me as I stood over their disastrous remains, table seven turned into a miniature representation of the city dump. It took me a good twenty minutes just to pick up the food and trash and another ten minutes wiping and cleaning the chairs, table, walls, and floor. The only thing worth salvaging was part of the *San Antonio Express-News*--the other city paper--and the only section that wasn't drenched in tzatziki sauce and olive oil: the classifieds. I folded it and placed it under my arm for safekeeping.

When my shift was over, it was late in the evening and my mother wouldn't be coming to pick me up for about an hour so I ordered my free meal and sat at a small two-top by myself. I had fallen in love with their gyro sandwich and fries and looked forward to eating my free sandwich almost as much as receiving my paycheck. As I ate, I read through the classified section from the newspaper I saved from table seven. With a ball point pen, I marked each Mazda RX-7 that looked interesting or promising even though I had absolutely *no way* of buying it. But to me, it was like keeping my dream alive, my dream of owning that car, when I looked in the classifieds. Demitri watched me from the kitchen and eventually came over to my table. He cocked his head to the side and tried to make out what I was doing. He read some of the listings out loud.

"1979 Mazda RX-7, red/black int, 5 spd, factory sunroof, clean, fun sports car to drive, cold A/C," he said, slowly and deliberately. "You looking to buy a car?"

"Yes."

"And you want one of those little sports cars?"

"Yeah."

"So you can get special lady in it?" he said, snickering. He slapped my shoulder pretty hard.

"Maybe," I said, rubbing my shoulder.

"Is that why you wanted to work here, to save money for a little sports car?"

"Yes."

"You know, it really doesn't matter what kind of car you have as long as you have a car that runs with an air conditioner that works. That's all you need."

"But I like this car."

"Sure. It's nice. When I go out on dates, I take the delivery truck, the one out front."

"You pick up dates in the delivery truck?" I said, horrified.

"Yes, the delivery truck. It has cold A/C and a cassette deck. Super nice!"

I didn't know what to say because it was so weird to me but I smiled anyway, a forced smile like when an old lady calls you hot or good-lookin' or something. Demitri was very impressed with himself.

"You have a driver license, kid?" he said.

"Yes," I said. I lied.

"Good, I may need you to deliver food some time, just so you know. You can drive stick shift?"

"Yes," I said. I lied again.

"Good. I'll let you know. Good luck finding a sports car," he said, then walked behind the counter. "I have to dump some frying oil out back. I'm leaving right after so I guess I'll say goodbye to you. Good night, jerk face!"

He laughed really hard then disappeared to the back.

After I worked at Demitri's for a few weeks, my parents began to drop me off in quicker, more hurried fashions. At first, they parked right in front of the restaurant in a parking space, hugged me, told me they'd see me after my shift, and waited for me to go inside. Then they stopped parking in a space and just pulled up front to let me out, no more hug. Then they stopped at the entrance of the parking lot to let me out of the car and quickly turned around to exit the lot. It got so hurried that they were slowing down to a crawl and practically shoving me out of the car. Although I appreciated them taking me to work since it was six or seven miles from our house, I couldn't help but feel like I was a burden to them in some way. Asking me to get out of the car at the side of a busy street was a pretty good hint that they were trying to get back home as soon as possible, without concern if I made it inside of my work or not. One evening, after getting out of my father's pickup truck and watching him tear off, I decided to checkout some of the other stores in the strip mall. Demitri's was at the far end of the mall so I made my way under the overhang and perused the front of each shop, looking in the windows, checking out what and who were inside. There was a jewelry store, a nail salon, and insurance salesman--all the standard strip mall crap.

One of the stores was a dancing apparel store called Capezio. They sold clothes for tap dancers and ballerinas and shit like that. As I walked in front of the store window, I saw a girl inside that I knew, a pretty girl from school, a really beautiful thing. Her name was Kirsty and she was in my math class. She was also on the dance squad at school and apparently into tap dancing since she was looking at some tap shoes. All I can say was that every time I looked at her, she crushed me, just swathed my heart with ooey, gooey, teenage emotional lustiness. Her smile was like a million stars twinkling in the night sky and my heart was the moon. I knew her well enough and had spoken to her a half dozen times so that when she saw me, she waved and motioned for me to wait where I was, to not move. I froze in place, nervous. She burst out of the store, her arms open wide, and hugged me. She smelled like strawberries and cream and laundry detergent, a delicious combination.

"Sam! What are you doing here?"

"I'm walking to work."

"You work at Capezio?" she said, puzzled.

"Oh, no no. I work at Demitri's," I said, pointing to the restaurant. "Over there. I bus tables, wash dishes, and things like that."

"Oh! That's cool. You saving for college?"

"No, a car."

"Cool!" She placed her hands behind her back and twisted one foot nervously around on the cement sidewalk, then her mother rapped on the window, waving at her to go back inside. Her mother's hand-waving embarrassed her. "Oh God! She's so annoying," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah," I said.

"Well, when you buy your car, will you take me for a ride?"

"Yeah," I said, turning red in the face.

"Great! See ya, Sam!"

She went back into Capezio and I walked to Demitri's so I could start my shift. The ooey, gooey, teenage emotional lustiness returned and put a skip in my step. When I got to the front door, Demitri was sweeping off the walkway outside the restaurant. He had a big grin on his face.

"Pretty, pretty girl," he said, sweeping in a way that looked like he was mimicking a waltz, like Mickey Mouse in that movie where the broom sticks came alive and danced around.

"Yeah," I said.

"You take her on a date?"

"Not yet."

"I'll let you borrow the delivery truck for your date if you need a car."

I almost told him by accident that I didn't have a driver license but I stopped myself from talking. I went inside and started bussing tables instead.

Later that night, the restaurant was busy as hell. We were packed, every table was full, and there was a line out the door waiting to order. It was nuts. I had been bussing tables and washing dishes pretty much nonstop for a few hours straight and it didn't seem to be letting up. The kitchen was going bonkers, cooking everything on the menu. Demitri seemed to relish it, the unexpected influx of paying customers. He wasn't very good at predicting when this type of rush was going to happen but when it did, he loved it. He ran around like a madman, cooking, taking orders, cleaning, restocking, everything. He was a one-man show which wasn't good for the rest of us working for him. When he saw a cook wasn't cooking fast enough, he would shove him aside and take over. When he saw that other tables were dirty while I was bussing, he would take the bus tub out of my hands and bus tables. He was crazy. Now that I'm older, I get what he was doing; he wanted to succeed. But back then, I thought he was just crazy.

At one point in the evening--and I don't even remember when--I was in the back washing dishes and Demitri came rushing back there, his eyes open wide with panic, the calligraphy of veins in the whites of his eyes flaring brightly, and he screamed at me.

"Sam! Sam! I need you to deliver some food! Come up front now!"

Panic immediately set in. I did NOT know how to drive. I didn't even have a driver license. I didn't know what to do but I went up front anyway. I didn't want to get yelled at by my diminutive, freaked-out boss. Demitri shoved some plastic to-go containers in paper sacks, shuffling receipts, writing things down. He looked at me, frantic.

"I have five orders I need you to deliver, most of them to the neighborhood right behind this mall. I'll load the truck but you got to go. OK?!" I nodded. "Come on! And don't worry," he barked to the waiting customers. "We have plenty of delicious Greek food for all of you!"

He handed a bag to me and grabbed the other four bags, all cinched at the top. We weaved through the customers waiting to order and went out the front door, Demitri's arms flailing, the to-go bags swinging wildly. He opened the passenger door of the truck and tossed them in, grabbed my bag and tossed it in too. He handed me the keys and a piece of paper, a serious, grave look on his face.

"Can you drive stick-shift?" he said, looking me straight in the eyes.

"Yes," I said. I lied.

"Good. Reverse is to the right and down. Got it?"

"Yes," I said. I didn't understand what that meant.

"Four of the deliveries are right back there, behind the trees." He pointed to a row of trees behind the mall. "The last one is farther up Castle Hills." He handed me the keys to the truck. "Go!"

He ran back inside the busy restaurant. I opened the driver side door and got in the truck. The seat seemed low and narrow and the stick shift was a long stick that protruded up from the floor board with a replica of the Parthenon as the shift knob. There wasn't even a shifting pattern on the top of the Parthenon, only its ancient visage molded in plastic. And just as he claimed, there was a super nice cassette deck and knobs for A/C on the dash, a pretty nice setup. I didn't know what to do so I sat there for a moment, wondering if my lies had gotten me in a tough spot. Pretty soon, I saw Demitri's red face in the window of the restaurant, glaring at me. In a matter of seconds, he was back outside standing next to the truck. I rolled down the window with the manual turning crank.

"What's the problem?!" he said.

"I don't know how--"

"The clutch needs to be in all the way to start it," he said, pointing to my left foot. "I forgot to tell you that. Push the clutch." I pushed it to the floor with my foot. "Now crank it!" I put the key in the ignition and turned it. The truck started. "Now go!" he said, running back inside the restaurant.

The truck was parked in such a way that I could ease forward if I turned the wheel to the left. I didn't have to back out of a spot, thank goodness. First, I pressed on the gas and the engine revved wildly so I let off the gas. Then I slowly eased up on the clutch and I felt the truck want to go. I pushed the clutch back in and took a huge, deep breath. Knowing what I know now about driving a stick-shift, the truck must have already been in first gear because during the next hour, I never *ever* moved the stick-shifter. I didn't even think about it. I just kept both hands on the wheel, slowly eased off the clutch, and pressed on the gas pedal when I needed to. The truck eased forward and I slowly drove the truck toward the exit at the back of the parking lot. When I felt I needed to brake the truck, I slammed the brake pedal with my right foot, screeching the truck to an abrupt stop. Since the clutch was out, the car would die, choking back to sleep. I repeated as Demitri commanded, putting the clutch in then cranking the ignition and it would start again. Like a mortally wounded tortoise, the truck eased forward slowly then lurched again to a complete stop. It was frustrating and totally embarrassing but I didn't know what else to do. I wasn't going back to tell Demitri I lied to him about knowing how to drive stick-shift.

Little did the truck know that for the next hour it would be put through a torturous, grueling workout of its transmission that it had never, ever experienced before in its trusty life. A delivery journey that should have taken ten to fifteen minutes at the most took over an hour. A noxious fume of burnt lubricant and oil wafted into the truck and singed my nose hairs while a plume of grey smoke surrounded the poor truck as it started and stopped. My neck ached from all the whipping around it had to endure, slight whiplash. My poor excuse for driving must have been a strange sight in the quiet neighborhood.

When I reached the first house, the driver-side front tire lurched over the curb onto the lawn while I tried to park. The truck belched itself to sleep. I grabbed their bags of delivery food and ran to the door, knocking furiously. A pudgy, old man dressed in a loose bathrobe--can of Pabst Blue Ribbon in one hand, a Pall Mall cigarette in the other hand, his thin, white hair sticking up like a cockatiel crest--opened the door. He looked over my shoulder quizzically at the horrid parking job on display in his front lawn.

"Sorry I parked in your grass," I said, looking back at the truck, white smoke rising from under the hood, the smell of burnt rubber in the air.

"Keep the change," the old man said, taking his food then slamming the door in my face.

The next delivery was maybe a quarter mile away, at the most, and it took me a good fifteen minutes to coerce the poor truck to get me there. No matter what I tried to do, no matter what gentle motion I attempted to shuffle between my feet, the truck would not cooperate with me. Like a raging bull within the death throes of a bull fight, I battled the beast to submit but its obstinance and pride got the best of me. I felt like the truck was about to explode when I reached the second house. I was able to keep the tires off the lawn this time. When I lifted my foot off the clutch, the truck violently lurched forward then died.

I ran to the door with their delivery. Again, I furiously knocked on the door. I knew I was taking entirely too long to deliver their food. A tiny old lady opened the door--a margarita in one hand, a Virginia Slims 120 cigarette in the other, wearing a loose fitting mumu with the gaudiest floral pattern I had ever seen adorned on an article of clothing--and she gazed over my shoulder at the smoking delivery vehicle in the street.

"You're not Demitri," she said, puzzled.

"No ma'am. I'm Sam. I work for Demitri," I said, running my fingers through my hair, attempting to fix myself up.

"Oh, that's too bad. I always look forward to Demitri visiting me. He usually comes inside and chats with me."

"Really?"

"Yes, and if I'm lucky, he'll give me a nice foot rub."

"Oh... well. I'm kinda too busy for--"

"Did you forget the baklava?"

"I don't think so." I handed her the delivery bags and she handed me a \$20 bill. I patted my pockets but I knew I didn't have any change.

"Keep it," she said. "You really look like you need it." She smiled at me with her stained dentures and bright pink lips then winked at me and closed the door. I couldn't get the image out of my mind of Demitri rubbing her wrinkly, knotty feet, a pervy grin peeking out from under his bushy moustache.

Back in the truck, I read the delivery instructions, mapping in my mind the next destination, when I realized that there were no more bags in the truck to deliver. I stared at the passenger seat for ten, maybe fifteen seconds, as if I stared hard enough they would reappear, but they didn't. I then looked on the floor board, behind the seat, out the back window at the truck bed to see if they magically moved from inside the cab to the outside of the cab without my knowledge. The bags weren't there either. I must have inadvertently given the rest of the food to the old man with the cockatiel hair and the old lady with the floral mumu. A part of me was disappointed in myself for messing up my first delivery assignment, but another part of me was relieved that I could go back to the restaurant and resume my normal duties of washing dishes and bussing tables. I only hoped I could make it back to the restaurant with the truck in one piece.

When I got back from the long, torturous ride, I parked the truck the best I could at the farthest point in the parking lot from the restaurant. I was surprised it made it back, seriously. As I walked to the front door of Demitri's, I looked back at the truck, smoke rising to the night sky, the smell of oily, singed motor components in the air. I knew I broke it but I wasn't going to admit it to anyone. I decided to just pretend everything went well. Inside, the long line of hungry patrons dissipated and so had Demitri's furious pace. He stood next to his sister behind the counter while she took the last of the dinner rush orders. He was counting stacks of cash, a big grin on his face, a happy tune hummed under his breath. He saw me come in and winked at me.

"There's my boy! How did it go?"

"Fine," I said, making a beeline to the back.

"You have some money for me?"

"Yeah," I said, pulling the bills from my pocket and tossing them on the counter. I dashed to the back as quick as I could.

"Wait! There should be more money," he said.

I didn't reply. I put on my apron and washed dishes.

Most nights, when I wasn't at work, I was at home. And most of those nights, I thought about owning a 1980 Mazda RX-7. Or, if I couldn't find an '80, then I would have been OK with a '78 or a '79, just not an '81 because they were different, and I didn't want one of those. My dad would bring the newspaper back home from work where he took it to read while on a coffee break or in the crapper, or wherever he was when he wanted to read the newspaper. I would pull out the auto classified section and take it into my room so I could scour through it, marking listings that sounded close to what I wanted with a colored marker, usually green, my favorite color. Also, if I had a few extra dollars on me, I would buy a copy of *Auto Trader* and scour that magazine for ads too, but they usually seemed to have a crappier selection of cars. I wasn't sure why that was, but they rarely had many listings for Mazda RX-7's. They mostly listed American cars like Chevys and Fords and Buicks and shit like that but I looked anyway, just in case.

On the floor in my room, I laid sprawled out on my stomach, the newspaper and *Auto Trader* magazine spread out in front of me, a series of colored markers next to me, different colors for different marking emphasis, green usually meaning "YES!" and the other colors meaning lesser versions of "yes" or "ok." I listened to Scritti Politti while I scribbled on the pages. My dad knocked on the door and popped his head in, giving me a sour look.

"I've been knocking on your door for 30 seconds," he said, his lips twisting into a disappointed pretzel.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't hear you."

"Sure, sorry. Don't you have homework?"

"It's summer, dad."

"Right. I need to talk to you for a moment, OK?"

He entered my room and found an uncluttered spot at the corner of my bed to sit down. I pushed the newspaper aside and sat up, crossing my legs. He seemed a little excited, which was very unusual for him. His demeanor was usually either sour or bitter so anything other than those two emotional states was strange for the rest of us in the family. A crooked smirk appeared on his face.

"I have a coworker who has an elderly mother selling her car. It has extremely low miles and is in excellent shape, like new really. She only drove it to church or the hair salon a couple of times a month. It's practically new!"

"What kind of car is it?"

"A 1977 Toyota Corona. It's brown."

"A Toyota Corolla?" I said, worried.

"No, it's called a Corona. I hadn't heard of it either but that's what it's called."

"Oh."

"Oh? Is that all you have to say? This is a good deal and a great used car."

"But I was hoping to save my money for a Mazda RX--"

"You're not getting a Mazda RX-7. I'm buying this car. It's too good a deal to pass up. They only want \$2,000. Heck of a price!" He stood up and put his hands on his hips. "I'll let you know when I'm going to pick it up and I'll transfer the money you've earned from the restaurant into my account when I need it."

He stepped over the newspaper and left my room. I sat there for a moment, an image of the car I wanted still lingering around in my brain, looking down at the ads in the newspaper and the scribbles and the lines I had drawn into a colorful constellation of circles and arrows and exclamation points and stars. I got back down on the floor, laid on my stomach, grabbed a marker, and looked for more ads of Mazda RX-7s.

The next shift I had after the "delivery incident," I called in sick. I was worried that Demitri was going to be mad at me for messing up the delivery truck. I was also worried he knew I lied about knowing how to drive. When I called in, his sister Desmona answered. I told her I was sick and that I wasn't coming in.

"OK. I'll tell Demitri," she said and hung up the phone.

A few hours later, Demitri called me at home.

"You OK?" he said. I could hear his moustache rustling against the headset. He sounded concerned yet upbeat and a little anxious.

"Yeah."

"You're not going to die, are you?"

"No."

"Good because you're one of my best employees. I need you. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Get some rest and I'll see you tomorrow night."

"OK."

"Good night, jerk face!" He hung up the phone.

I wondered if he had even driven the delivery truck since the other night. I certainly destroyed the transmission on that thing. In fact, I was pretty certain I caused catastrophic damage to it. Although, come to think of it, I wasn't absolutely sure. I was just a dumb kid. Anyway, he didn't sound angry on the phone so I decided to go to work the next night, like he wanted.

My mother gave me a lift to work the next evening. As we passed by my high school, I looked for the boy with the bright red Mustang but he wasn't parked there. Nobody was in the parking lot I

recognized except a security guard sitting in a parked golf cart. A wispy sigh seeped out of my mouth as I looked out the window at the school. My mother placed her hand on my shoulder.

"You all right, sweetie?" she said.

"Yeah."

"You don't sound OK. You're not sick, are you?"

"I'll be fine."

"Are you looking forward to getting your new car? Your dad tells me it's in really good shape."

"Yeah."

"Sheesh. Don't get too excited, Wordy McTalkative," she said, sarcastically.

"I was really hoping to get an RX-7."

"Not that again," she said, lifting her hand off my shoulder. She peered out of her window. "Jesus. You've got a one-track mind."

I didn't speak the rest of the way to work. She pulled up to the curb at the shopping center, I got out, and she sped away, her Toyota Camry leaving a plume of dust, smoke, and gravel hanging in the air. As I walked toward the restaurant, I looked around for the delivery truck. I didn't see it anywhere. The worry I had the night before made a dramatic return, a feeling in my stomach like a hunk of cement tossed in a placid pond, and I was certain I was going to get fired. Or worse, yelled at by Demitri then having him call my parents. Ugh. After I entered, I headed straight for the back and immediately began washing dishes. Demitri didn't come around for a long while and I couldn't figure out why. Eventually, after worrying about it through five loads of dirty dishes, Desmona came into the back, bringing more dirty dishes from the dining area.

"Hi Sam," she said, setting the dish tub next to the sink and turning around to walk away.

"Is Demitri here?!" I said, blurting it out like a game show contestant beating the buzzer to end a big-money round. I took a deep breath when I realized just how stupid I sounded.

"No, he's out, doing a few things. But I know he wants to talk to you, about something important. He told me to tell you that."

"What about?" I said, nervous.

"How do I know? I'm not Demitri."

"He didn't say what about?"

"No. Now, get back to work." She left.

Her comment made me even more nervous. He knew. And I knew he knew that I didn't know how to drive and that I fucked up his delivery truck. The dread weighed on me, a lot, so rather than seek out Demitri, I just skirted around the perimeter of restaurant business. I stayed in the back mostly, but when I had to come out to bus tables, I walked along the walls of the dining area, like a ninja except carrying a bus tub and wearing an apron, trying not to be

seen. I wasn't very good at it though. Demitri found me rather quickly.

"Sam, I need you outside. It's important," he said when he found me, a heavy hand on my shoulder, a serious tone in his voice.

"Is something wrong?"

"I don't know," he said, confused. "You tell me?"

"Ummm."

"Just come with me, please."

I followed Demitri through the dining area, through the front door, and outside in front of the restaurant.

"You wait here," he said, running off around the side of the building.

I didn't know what to think and expected the worst. It was bad enough that I knew I wasn't getting the car I wanted but to lose my job as well would have been too much. What would be next? My parents getting a divorce?! Jesus.

As I stood there waiting for Demitri to do God knows what, I heard a rumbling sound, not too different from the sound of some kind of drag racing car, a deep, gurgling, mechanical roar from behind the building. I could feel the rumbling through the concrete under my feet and as it got stronger and more forceful, Demitri appeared from around the building driving a monster-sized, white pickup truck so large that it was comical. It was huge and loud and ridiculous. In the driver seat of the massive off-road truck, Demitri appeared diminutive in size, small like a toddler sitting on a phone book trying to look out the best he could. He rolled down the driver side window and unfurled a magnetized sign that he stuck to the outside of the door. It read, "Demitri's Greek Food DELIVERS! Call 49G-REEK!" After reading the sign, I looked up at him, hanging out the window with a big shit-eating grin on his face. He looked like a kid getting ready to unleash the fury of impatient hands on Christmas morning presents. He turned off the engine, opened the door, and jumped down. He firmly placed his hand on my shoulder, as he liked to do.

"Sam, my boy, this is our new delivery truck. What do you think?"

"What happened to the other truck?" I said, meek and worried.

"I don't know. Something was wrong with it but that's not your fault. It was old and rundown and... well, it was time for something new. This truck will pay for itself as *advertising*! It makes a statement." He placed his hands on his hips in his masculine, super hero pose.

"You can't miss it," I said, a little happier, relieved.

"Exactly, my boy! And you, YOU are my new delivery driver."

"What? Me?!"

"Yes, you. I need to increase revenue. The restaurant is too small to fill with more customers. I must get my food to the people who want delicious Greek food but don't want to wait in our long lines. What do you think?"

"It makes sense."

"Good," he said, squeezing my shoulder tighter, leaning in. "Do you accept this promotion?"

"Yeah."

"OK. Go wash up and take that dirty apron off. You have deliveries to make."

He slapped me on the back and gave me a little shove. I ran to the back area of the restaurant, washed my hands and face, yanked off my apron, tossed it to the floor, and ran back out front. Demitri handed me the key to the monster truck--well, it wasn't really a monster truck in the literal sense but it was massive nonetheless--and told me he'd bring out the deliveries. I climbed up into the beast and sat in the cushy driver seat. The steering wheel was wrapped with a fuzzy cover, black like the rest of the interior of the white truck. I adjusted the seat and the rearview mirror, wiggling my posterior to make myself more comfortable for only my second outing in an automobile. Crazy to think but true. Demitri soon came back out with a single to-go bag in his hand. He smiled as he looked up at me in that giant, gaudy, delivery / advertising truck.

"Just one to-go order for now. More will come later, I'm sure. This order is for Ms. Cazamine who lives right back there. She's the old lady who--"

"I don't have to give her a foot rub, do I?"

"No, my boy. No foot rub," he said, smiling. "Now, take your time. Get used to driving this thing. It's your new office! Ready?"

"Yeah."

"Turn it on."

I turned the key and the engine roared to life, smoke billowing from out back, the chassis shaking, and some loose paneling inside rattling. It possessed power that I had never experienced before. I felt its power through the seat right through my testicles. It was divine. I closed the driver-side door, waved to Demitri, pulled the column shifter, put the truck in "D," and slowly drove off. I immediately found it easier to drive without the manual shifter and I paid extra attention to not punch the gas too hard. I really didn't need to. Once I lifted my foot off the brake, it accelerated itself.

I slowly pulled out of the parking lot and navigated the truck to the neighborhood behind the restaurant. The sound of the truck must have been to that quiet neighborhood like when the Japanese first were aware of Godzilla in the distance, the ominous, rumbling noise from behind the mountains, or beyond the horizon scaring the soy beans out of the unsuspecting civilians, never having heard that

sound before. The few kids still running around and playing kickball or dodgeball or whatever ball game they were playing in the dimly lit late evening ran for the curbs and looked on, their mouths agape, their eyes wide, at the massive white truck with a caricature of Demitri on its side rumbling through their sleepy neighborhood. Some of the kids even dared to toss empty soda cans into the bed of the truck but none of them were able to hit the target. I waved at them like a fireman driving through his precinct in a shiny, fire truck.

When I arrived at Ms. Cazamine's house, I paid extra attention to not run over the curb or park in her lawn again. I killed the beastly truck and jumped down from the cab with the to-go food in my hand. After I rang the doorbell, I experienced a little *déjà vu* when she answered the door. There she was--a margarita in one hand, a Virginia Slims 120 cigarette in the other, wearing the same loose fitting, god-awful mumu she had on before--with a big, nicotine-stained, toothy smile on her face. I knew exactly what she was thinking: foot rub.

"You're not Demitri," she said, bitter disappointment in her voice.

"No ma'am. I'm Sam. I work for Demitri."

"Oh, that's too bad. I always look forward to Demitri visiting me. He usually comes inside and chats with me."

"I know. Here's your food," I said. She gave me a \$20 bill.

"Keep the change," she said, taking the food, a little frown on her face as she closed the door. I didn't care. I ran back to the truck, opened the door, and hopped in the cab.

I felt a euphoria that I hadn't experienced in a very long time, a feeling of joy and adventurousness, a feeling that was more like an inner voice that told me to enjoy myself, have fun, go wild. I heard Demitri's voice in my brain insisting to take my time. When I started the truck, I decided to go somewhere first before heading back to the restaurant. I decided, right then and there, to go see that girl Kirsty, my math classmate, my crush. She didn't live too far away and I didn't think it would take too long to pay her a visit.

I started the truck. It roared to life and I drove it north on Blanca Road, past my high school, past the other small businesses I daydreamed about working at, past my parents' neighborhood to Kirsty's neighborhood, Lincoln Estates. When I turned in, the squirrels and grackles scattered in several directions, making way for the monster truck and its underage driver. I drove down a few blocks and turned on a street I remembered my school bus turning on before, a street I was pretty sure was her street. After passing a few houses, I found the one I thought was hers and I parked in front. The rumble of the truck set off some motion detectors on the house, flood lights sparked to life to illuminate the driveway. I killed the engine,

hopped out of the cab, pulled the magnetic Demitri's Greek Food sign off the side of the truck, and tossed it in the bed. I made my way up the walkway to the front door. A pair of hazel-green eyes peeked through the beveled glass of the front door. When I rang the doorbell, the door quickly opened. It was her, my crush, Kirsty.

"Hey!" she said, nervous and a little confused. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought you lived here."

"Obviously!" she said, rolling her eyes, snickering. "That's funny."

"Yeah."

"Did you need something?" she asked, cocking her head slightly, looking at me then over my shoulder at the huge truck in front of her house. "Is that yours?"

"Yeah," I said. I lied.

"Pretty cool. Must be nice having your own truck."

"Yeah. It's cool."

"Cool," she said, extending her right foot forward, then swirling it around as if she was writing a note in cursive on the door threshold.

"Want to go for a ride with me?" I asked. Then her mom started yelling something from deep inside the house. "It won't take long."

"A friend is at the door mom! I got it!" she said, yelling back at her mother. "She's sooo annoying." She rolled her eyes.

"Sorry if I came without asking."

"No, it's OK. I promise. I just have a lot of homework to do. Can I get a rain check?"

"Yeah."

"Was that the kind of car you really wanted to buy with the money you made from your job?"

"No, I wanted something else, actually."

"Well, I don't care what kind of car you have as long as you take me for a ride. Deal?"

"Deal," I said. I could feel my face getting flushed.

"I gotta go. See you at school." She smiled before closing the door.

I walked back to the truck, hopped in the cab, and drove that beast back to Demitri's.

Fall of 1987. All I thought about was my girl Kirsty. That was all I thought about when I was 16, all day, all night. We talked about eloping to California because she wanted to be a movie star. I wanted to be an artist so I thought that was a pretty OK idea. We both were ready to leave home and we made plans while driving around in my 1977 Toyota Corona, a car I partially paid for with money I made working at Demitri's Greek Food. I didn't work at Demitri's anymore

but I still would go there every once and a while and eat a gyro sandwich with my girl. She didn't care much for Greek food but I didn't care about that. I loved her anyway.

We made crazy plans, together, all the time talking about what we would do and where we would go. When we were in my little shitty car, we were in our own world. We listened to the Pet Shop Boys and drove around all night, the cold, conditioned air blowing from the dash vents, *West End Girls* playing on the cassette deck, the two of us dreaming of living in California, Los Angeles or maybe San Francisco, anywhere but San Antonio, Texas.

The Discarded Feast

1. Dinner from the G.D.A.M.

We sat across from each other in the small living room of my small apartment, on the floor around my beat-up coffee table, piles of coins and dollar bills on top, two tall boys of beer on ratty paper coasters from the restaurant there too, counting our tips. It was not a good night for tips but the quantity of coins and bills looked deceiving in their unorganized state, looked like we had a lot more money than we actually had. We enjoyed the optical illusion, briefly. We smiled as we pushed the piles of coins and bills around in front of us then raised our cans of beer to toast.

"To Pasta Warehouse," I said.

"To Pasta Warehouse!" my friend Alfonso said.

"Cheers!"

"No, say it the Mexican way. When you toast, say 'Salud!'"

"SALUD!"

We touched our cans together then gulped the cheap beers, crushing the cans when we were through, tossing the cans to the side on the floor, returning to organize the coins and bills, hoping to make rent. We were an odd looking pair of friends. I was lanky and short and white. Alfonso was massive and tall and Hispanic. But what we lacked in commonality of outward appearance was made up by similar character traits of kindness, empathy, and extreme loyalty. We were good young men and good friends to each other.

"You count yours. I'll count mine. Let's see what we got," I said.

"All right," Alfonso said.

We each counted our loot, stacking coins by type, stacking wadded dollar bills, slowly but surely. When everything was accounted for, we looked at each other unenthusiastically.

"Wha cha got?" I said.

"\$19.43." Alfonso said. "Wha choo got?"

"\$21.25. I win!"

We both laughed a hearty laugh, one filled with exuberance as well as relief. It couldn't get much worse.

"You *are* the winner. Of what, I really don't know. Want another beer?" Alfonso said.

"We're out."

"The GODDAMN has more tall boys for 99 cents. I think they're still open."

"Let's go!"

We left my apartment and hurried down the indoor hallway toward the building exit. My apartment building was old and kinda rundown and a little neglected and the floors squeaked and cracked as we ran down the hall, a loud racket that was annoying to all the tenants of the building. We knew this and shooshed each other as we changed gears to a speed-walk. All we could think about was more beer.

SALUD!

Outside, we careened through the parking lot, walking briskly. The apartment complex--probably built in the early 1970s from the cheapest building materials possible--was nestled in some hills covered in live oaks and the asphalt covering the parking lot rolled and humped and curved its way to the main street. We sped-walk with purpose: beer.

"Are you worried that we don't have the rent?" Alfonso said.

"Nah. If I need to, I will call my folks for help. Don't worry about it. OK?"

"OK."

"Or we can just pickup extra shifts."

"Another eight hours for another \$20 in tips?"

"Yep."

"Lame."

"I know."

The convenience store was on the corner across the street from my complex: The G.D.A.M. Or, as we called it, The GODDAMN. The G.D.A.M. actually stood for something along the lines of Gerald's Deli and Asian Market considering the owner's name was Gerald and he was Asian and he sold Asian stuff as well as sandwiches. But to us, it was The GODDAMN. That's where we bought our beer, cigarettes, and cat food, and sometimes dinner. A couple of bucks went a long way at The GODDAMN.

Inside, the owner Gerald sat behind the counter, surrounded by display after display of scratch-off lottery tickets and penis enlargement pills and energy drinks and condoms and candy bars and, well, you name it. Gerald knew us and always greeted us when we came in his store late at night.

"Hal-oh, my friends!" he said.

"Wazzup, Gerald!" Alfonso said.

"Got Miller on special. In the ice."

"Thanks Gerald."

We dug in the trough of ice, pulling out two tall boys of Miller beer. 99 cents each.

"We should probably get Mr. Whiskers some dinner too," I said.

We perused the pet food aisle and grabbed a can of cat food. 50 cents each. Back at the counter, we placed the beer and cat food on it for Gerald to see. He had a sly grin on his face like one of the

creatures in the cantina from the movie *Star Wars*. The skin on his face was smooth and pale except around his eyes, where crow's feet--pointed and jagged like arrowheads--revealed the wisdom buried deep in his skull. He was an amiable dude except there was something about him that let you know he'd be ready if the shit ever went down. It wasn't exactly the best part of town, for sure.

"I got Marlboro on special. Buy two, get two free. Want some?" he said.

"Yep." I said.

"Beer and cat food? Looks like a party night," he said, cackling afterwards, stuffing our purchase in a brown paper sack--a cartoon of his face emblazoned on the side.

"Yeah, it's party time," Alfonso said, sarcastically.

"Oh friends, life is *hard* but beer always make it better. Enjoy! See you tomorrow." He slid the brown paper sack across the counter to us.

We smiled and waved goodbye and walked out of The GODDAMN and crossed the empty street. To our right, the city skyline of Austin, Texas, stretched above the street in the distance, glowing with a mix of fluorescent and phosphorescent and neon lights, a few skyscrapers poking the night sky, wispy clouds slithering behind them. Just a mile or so away, it seemed to us like thousands of miles.

"I wish we could go out tonight, have some drinks, meet some chicks, get our dance on. Something. Anything, except sit at home doing nothing," Alfonso said.

"Yeah," I said.

Back in my apartment, we plopped down around the coffee table, opened our beers, took some swigs, and I opened the can of cat food, the sound of the lid bending and crackling and popping open, called to the cat, who appeared instantly, meowing and purring and nuzzling and flustered. Alfonso got a kick out of my cat's crazed behavior.

"Ha ha! Look at Mr. Whiskers. He's psycho!" he said.

"Poor little dude," I said. "I forgot to feed him this morning and we were gone for over 12 hours."

I set the can of cat food on the carpet and Mr. Whiskers devoured it in a matter of seconds. He purred contentedly, rubbed his kitty face along my leg, rubbed his kitty butt along Alfonso's leg, then jumped on the couch to give himself a bath.

"He's good."

"He's lucky to have you as an owner," Alfonso said. "I'm lucky to have you as a roommate, Seff. I don't know what I would have done if you didn't help me out."

"No worries, buddy."

"As soon as I save up some money, I'll get my own place," he said, looking down with what I could only discern was shame.

"Don't worry about it, stay as long as you want."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. It's kind of nice having a roommate, actually. Mr. Whiskers likes it too, another hand to scratch him."

"Cool."

"Cool."

"We gotta get some better shifts at the P.W. Why do they give all the good shifts to the females?"

"Cause they're hot!"

"True. True. But we gotta get some more cash. You need to talk to Laura Ann about switching or picking up some of the shifts the females got."

"Why do I need to talk to Laura Ann?"

"Cause she *likes* you."

"No, she doesn't. She's way, WAY out of my league. WAY OUT!"

"Nah, I've seen her checking you out. She likes you."

"No, she doesn't. Quit saying that and getting my hopes up."

"It's true. You should talk to her, pick up some good shifts and help a brother out. Do it!"

"OK, I'll talk to her tomorrow."

"Do it now."

"But I don't have her number."

"I do," Alfonso said, a sly grin stretching across his face. "I got her digits."

"How do you have her digits?"

"That's none of your goddamn business, I just do. A pimp has to have his hooker's digits!"

We cackled uncontrollably, rolling over on the floor, beer flying here and there, Mr. Whiskers bolting out of the living room for a safer hangout.

"Seriously, though. She digs you. I can tell," Alfonso said.

"Sure."

"Whatever. What time's your shift in the A.M.?"

"I got the 10 which means I have to be there at 9:30. When's yours?"

"10:30. I'll just ride with you and hang out before my shift. Cool?"

"Yeah, cool."

"Want to watch *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka*?"

"Duh."

We turned on the tiny TV, which was hooked to a massive stereo system with large speakers, one of the few things held over from my previous life of comfort from upper middle-class privilege in San Antonio, Texas, a life that seemed like an eternity before our current life of slight desperation, basically a few missteps away from destitute poverty. We barely had enough to live on and were quite a ways from

making the rent. But, we still had a couple of weeks before rent was due and we had each other and sometimes that's all you need to survive, sometimes that's all you need to hold off reality a little bit, to make things more bearable. That and something to laugh about.

SALUD!