



SKIP DAY-1959

"Fruit on alley five!"

That was Mac yelling at Mr. Jellburton, before ducking into the lockerroom to spike another Coke. Jelly Roll threw a gutterball but his form was good.

Mac and I, Pee Wee and George and JM made up the Sherman High bowling team. Ours was the only highschool team to qualify in the adult league. It was the last night of the season and the teachers were pressing us for second place. The next day was Skip Day when all the Seniors plus a few teachers were going to Minneapolis to visit our first shopping center, take in an Art Museum and maybe see a movie in CinemaScope.

Mac was our best bowler, with an average of about 195. The rest of us were only pretty good; 170-180 shooters. Mac was part-time manager of Paul's Lanes and could bowl all he wanted for the pittance of pinsetter's fees. He had his own ball and shoes; the rest of us rented our shoes and

picked our balls from the rack. Mac was unique; one of those guys who moved through the social strata of Sherman from sow's ear to silk purse. He acted like one of us but looked like one of them, whoever the us and them happened to be. His old man ran the hardware store and was middle class; not rich enough to be snobbish nor poor enough to be pitied for what he lacked. Everybody liked Mac. Even the teachers.

Mac could run an 11.2 second hundred yard dash and a four minute-twenty second mile. He could catch more crappies in an afternoon than anyone, always got a date when he wanted one and was devoted to his older brother Reggie. Reggie was about ten years older than us but most people treated him like a kid because he was spastic and slobbered when he spoke. I think only Mac knew how smart Reggie was. Every one else had trouble getting beyond Reggie's manner, which was: always polite, interested and intelligent if you had been at all close to his level. Reggie always had a book with him by someone I had never heard of. Never Grace Metalious or J.D. Salinger or Zane Grey. One day he'd be reading C.P. Snow, the next day it was Herman Melville or Faulkner.

To see Reggie for the first time, had to provoke laughter. He rode a bicycle around town, making deliveries for his dad, arms and legs going every which way. You'd swear he wouldn't make it another fifty yards. And the sight of Mac and Reggie bowling together was Yin/Yang. Mac as graceful as a gyroscope and Reggie as grotesque as a gargoyle. Mac was merciless with Reggie as only a younger brother can be. He bowled with more determination against Reggie than he did against the teachers. Even after he would beat him 250 to 110, he would brag and gloat like a goat. One day I heard Mac say, "You can't bowl for shit! It's a good thing you're smart or I'd be embarrassed to call you my brother."

Reggie replied, spit dribbling from the corner of his mouth, "I bragt arh hurnded. Wha ya wag. I ga da breansh an ygah da loogs."

And it was true. Mac did have the looks. Check our class picture. He's the one who looks like Errol Flynn.

Jelly Roll looked around to see who had yelled, his face flushed as red as his kinky hair. Jelly Roll taught Psychology and Civics. He would have been okey, except he tried to be pals with his students; the boys especially. None of us really needed a forty year old pal with a paunch and most of us resented it when he pinched our butts in the hall. Even if he hadn't been a fruit, he was still a teacher. Nothing could change that. The only good teacher I can re call, the one who set the standard, was Miss Vander Berg who taught Kindergarten. I loved her almost as much as my mother and with a precocious eroticism. Jelly Roll could probably offer an explanation for why I filled my pants in her class one fine fall day when I was five. I don't know why. I just did. I don't remember ever wearing diapers but I could have used some that day.

Miss Vander Berg smelled something foul and came around to check. She followed her nose as far as it would take her, then patted my deskmate's bottom. Dry as a nun's crotch. She turned to the next desk and checked another kid, I suspect, because she didn't want to hit on me. I fancied that she was in love with me. I had noticed how she lingered at my cheek when she kissed us all good day, each day. And my kiss was usually embellished by a hug. I suspected that she didn't want it to be me with a load in his pants. Me, the one she was waiting to marry when I grew a little older. I was the third one she checked and I still bless her for her tact.

"Perhaps," she whispered in my ear, "you'd like to visit the little men's room."

"Yes," I said. "Thank you. I think I would."

When I returned from the john, where I disposed of my Fruit-Of-The Looms, Miss Vander Berg met me at the door. My classmates were all sprawled on their rag rugs for the mid-morning nap. JM was there and Mac. Pee Wee and George hadn't moved to town yet.

"Maybe you'd like to take the day off, honey," she said. Honey is what I heard, first and foremost.

"Yeah – that'd be good. I got some work I could do at home," I said.

"I'm sure you do, Dear. Run along now." I loved her simply; profoundly.

"I'm s'posed to fix my old high chair for my little brothers," I explained. "They're twins y'know."

"I know," she said. "Tell your Mama congratulations."

"Okey. Bye. See ya t'morrow," I said and she kissed me. I wasn't embarrassed then, nor am I now. I was only fooled into thinking teachers were great. Little did I know it would all be uphill after her. Love in the beginning would turn into open animosity and proceed to guarded hostility.

Though the battle for moral supremacy was pitched, it remained undeclared. We were not really playing up the rivalry until that night. The teachers, however, had crept from fourth to third and if we wiped out they could pull ahead on the last night. Face to face, we could have beaten them easy and that would have been that. As it was, we had to beat Purina Feeds and the teachers were bowling against Joe's Skelly. We had to win our match and hope that Joe's boys would stomp the teachers. Joe himself was out that night, so we gave his boys all the help we could, anyway we could.

We hooted and hollared with obnoxious abandon, drinking spiked Cokes just like the big boys. Everyone drank out in the open except the teachers, trying to set a good example, and the five of us, trying to get loaded on the sly. Four Roses and Coke was the principle libation. Mac had his own bottle. The rest of us had to cop our drinks. We'd watch when someone got up to bowl, see where they put their drink, drink our own Coke down to the same level and switch bottles. We'd been doing it all season and no one had ever caught on. The only time we didn't pull this scam was against the teachers. They were always suspicious, so we had to buy our own and do shots in the john. That was fine. We wouldn't have wanted to drink from their bottles anyhow. It was bad enough that we couldn't smoke openly like they did. Three of the five smoked PallMalls and one smoked nickel cigars. I don't know if JM forgot that night or if he just decided, but I noticed he was smoking one after the other.

JM is my best friend. The one who drops in and out of my life like a brother without knocking or saying good bye. JM's old man, Sammy, treated me like another son when Poppy died. It was always Sammy and JM and me. Fishing, he supplied the rods and reels and bait. Hunting, he had an extra .20 gauge single shot for me with plenty of shells. And if we didn't catch anything, he'd take us to a Cafe and order pan-fried Wall Eye with home fries and stewed tomatos. If we didn't hit any birds, he would take us to a Cafe and order pan-fried chicken, mashed potatos with gravy and sweet corn. Sammy had the same tease every time. When we had finished eating, he would stretch and pat his stomach contentedly, then say, "Well boys – I hope you got some money to pay for this grub. I'm fresh out."

I would blanch every time but JM would just say, "Old joke, Dad."

When it came time for Father/Son Communion Breakfast, I was always invited to join JM and Sammy. After Mass and after the breakfast, Sammy would stand up in turn and introduce us. "I'm Sam Imhoff and these are my boys. Jack is the ugly one and Paco is the one with the curls."

I loved the man then and love him still. The night I gashed my foot, stupidly stomping on a florescent tube, Sammy was the one who squeezed out the bits of glass and bandaged me. Then he took JM and me out to Two-Mile Drive Inn for soft ice cream. I've often meant to drop Sammy a card, tell him thanks, but I never have.

Pee Wee and George were blood brothers, no doubt still are, but George was a year older. George fucked up one time and got kept back. It was in Junior High and Mrs Rizzo had been leaning on George pretty heavily. Or so George thought. Well, one day, George had enough. He walked up in the middle of class, grabbed her by the neck and pulled her across the desk. He was threatening to kill her and could have done it easily; she wasn't any bigger than a breadbasket and besides she had a bun in the oven. She'd been wearing loose blouses for weeks but hadn't fooled anyone. Pretty little lady though; gorgeous red hair, always looked like she'd just stepped from the bath. Her husband was just down the hall teaching math. Mr Rizzo had played fullback for Notre Dame but I think George must have blanked out that detail. Someone ran for Mr. Rizzo and someone else, perhaps it was me, said, "George! You better getcher ass outta here."

George looked up, with his hands still on the throttle, as if he had to consider the advice. "Right," he said and took off running. No one saw him again for three or four months. He only got as far as Death Corner before they caught him with one thumb in the air and the other up his ass.

That was how he described it later. They sent him 'up the river' to

Eldora. I didn't know exactly where Eldora was but I knew there were no paddles supplied when you got there.

George came back the following year, though I doubt he would have dared if old man Rizzo and his wife hadn't left town with their new baby. Well, George was still unpredictable after that, inclined to pull pranks, but he had mellowed a little. Jelly Roll, a few years later, forgave George and explained that it was probably just hormones out of balance that made him act like that.

We won the first game but so did the teachers. 'Gook' Richardson had thrown a 260. Shit luck. He was only about a 150 shooter on a good night. Gook taught History and was the Principal. But Gook, unlike Jelly Roll, made no attempt to be pals with anyone and he did not look like a prince. Thick glasses and buck teeth, he was six foot-four with a slicked back pompadour of dishwater brown hair and not to be fucked with.

Then there was long, lean and mean Langstrat, the shop teacher. Langstrat had an Adam's Apple that looked like a second nose. He once took JM by the collar and the belt, threw him head first out of shop, onto the marble floor and told him not to come back until he tucked in his shirt tail. Mean Mother! We didn't mess with him either.

Mr. Fortman taught Government and Glee Club. He died of cirrosis a couple years ago which explains alot. At least it explains why he was invariably abusive in the morning at Glee Club practice, then mellow and judicial in the after noon as he explained the Constitution. The man must have been sucking back a few at lunch.

Who is left? Oh yeah – Garrit Rosen: Science, Visual Instruction and Sports Club (fishing, hunting and the like, not real sports). None of the real coaches bowled; not enough contact, I suppose. Fuck them! We would have

whipped their asses too, if it came down to it. That is if Coach Dalrymple could waddle onto the alley. 'Dimples' was 310 pounds, fancied himself a wrestler, and had at least four rolls of stomach, the last of which blanketed his tiny stump of a penis. Men, we were taught, had pricks; he was a prick but had a tiny little penis. He also had a tiny little wife who had our sympathy. We wondered how she ever found it, if and when she wanted it.

So, we had held Jelly Roll to 130 but the teachers scraped by. I was hot and loose and so was Mac. We both hit over 200. Mac had a groove; six straight strikes. "Seven more," he said when he shouldn't have. He got a split in the seventh. It always happens. You can't mention it when you're on a roll or you lose it. Mac knew that too, he was just tempting fate. He had already rolled three perfect games in league play, so he didn't have anything to prove. He was just being dumb.

"Such form!"

That was JM yelling as Gook got poised to bowl. Gook had an elaborate, totally useless delivery. He would double his ball around his wrist, making a full circle, and then let it go sideways. Any damn fool knew better. Split! 4-7-6-10.

"Hot damn," I said. "Keep up the needle, JM. "

"I think he knows who said that."

"So? What can he do? Are the grades in or are they

"They're in. Gimme some a your Coke." JM grinned and took a slug. We won our second game and the teachers lost theirs. The giddiness grew when we saw the frustration on the face of the enemy. But we kept quiet, for once serious. Langstrat came by on the way to the john. He stuck his gooseneck over the couch to see how we did, then shook his head. "Mac's hot – huh?"

"Sure is," Pee Wee said, looking up from the scoresheet. "Hot as a jalapeno. He's just locked us into second place."

Langstrat laughed, pathetically. "Ha – you know what Studs Lonigan said about second place, don't you?" He was challenging Pee Wee, who he knew never cracked a book.

"Stud who?" Pee Wee asked.

"Studs said, 'first is first and second is noplacement'."

With that bit of wisdom, Langstrat strutted away, taking a comb to his greased back hair. "What's that make third?" Pee Wee yelled after him.

Pee Wee was cute. He knew how to slip the blade in easy, with a big grin to lubricate it. It came from being the younger brother of George.

Pee Wee and George and I always set pins together. One night George was on 1&2, Pee Wee took 3&4 and I had 5&6. Pee Wee took off running in the middle of a game.

"Hey guys, split my action – be right back."

While Pee Wee was gone, George took an empty Seven Up bottle and drained his lizard into it. "Watch this," he said, grinning like a reptile.

When Pee Wee got back, George faked a swig from the bottle.

"Hey," Pee Wee said, "where'd ya git the pop. Lemme have a sip."

"Nah," George said, "Get'cher own. You'd drink it all."

"Nah – I wouldn't," Pee Wee whined. "Some brother."

"Well..." George seemed to be softening. "Okey – it's a little warm though."

"S'okay," Pee Wee said, grabbing the bottle. He meant to chug-a-lug it and he did. And it came up faster than it went down.

"You sum'bitch," Pee Wee said, diving into George's pit. He was hitting on George pretty good and had just grabbed a pin to finish the job

when the bowlers started hollaring for pins. George pushed Pee Wee away, laughing like a mad man. Pee Wee guzzled about a gallon of water from one of our coffee cans. The bowlers were still yelling and the boss was on the p.a.

"C'mon Pee Wee – let's have some pins."

"Let the fuckers yell," he mumbled. "I'm prolly gonna die."

Garrit was up in their game and I was up in ours. Judging from his name and his nose, I guess Garrit was a Jew. But at that time I had never heard of one. Of course I knew that Jesus was called King of the Jews but that's as far as it went. I assumed that made me one too, so I didn't give the subject much thought. It was in Art School, a couple years later, that I learned – the hard way.

I heard this guy Friedman say, in passing, "He just did that cause I'm Jewish."

I thought it was another way of saying 'swish' and repeated the information to a friend named Max Gingold. "Friedman's jewish," I said.

"Duh? So what?" Max said, blowing smoke in my face.

"So – nothing. Just stay away from him in the lockerroom."

"What's that s'pose ta mean?" Max had his hackles up, for reasons I didn't understand.

"Jeez – relax. If you don't know I ain't gonna spring it on ya."

"I'm Jewish too – y'know," Max said, proudly, standing up. I thought that was a bit strange. He didn't seem like one and no one, at that time, bragged about it; only a few admitted it. Max turned to leave.

"Then you oughta know. Listen," I said, "I don't give a damn if you suck cocks..."

That's when Max clobbered me.

In the course of explaining my black eye, someone wised me up. I sought out Max to apologize. He accepted my apology and called me a 'dumb fucking mackerel-snapper'.

Anyway, Jewish or not, who cared. We all pretty much liked Garrit. He taught us how to tie flies, run the movie projector and showed us his collection of handmade bows and arrows. He had the head of a fifteen point buck mounted and hanging on his wall. JM and I went bow hunting with him a few times; sat on a platform up in a tree, downwind from a saltlick and picked off my first deer. It was only a three point but the venison was tasty, sweet and more tender than a bigger one would have been. That's what Garrit said when he saw I was disappointed. I couldn't bring myself to mount the head and Garrit said that was okey too. So, I guess it was okey with me if he did.

Garrit was only around for two years and when his contract ran out it was not renewed. Some of us were real pissed about that but Garrit just shrugged it off. He started to say, "Some people just..." And then he shrugged again and walked away.

Garrit threw a strike and JM cheered. "Way ta go Rosie!"

JM had slipped. We always called him Mister Rosen, even when we were out hunting with him. Garrit unfurled his fist and gave JM a little wave. I converted a 4-6-10 split to back up two strikes, then felt myself slipping. Whoever spiked that last Coke had done it about three to one.

Mac was sipping shots between each frame but he hardly ever showed the effects. "It's the Irish in me," he explained. Well - I'm Irish too but we were drinking Kentucky whiskey and that was my excuse.

George was holding his own and so was Pee Wee until he got caught

making the switch. Pee Wee finessed it nicely, said it was just a mistake and made a face. That encounter left Pee Wee nervous so I passed him my drink. He took a swig and winked at me. "Hey George," he smiled, "wanna drink of my Coke?"

"Sure," George said, eagerly. Then, "Wait a minute, no thanks brother."

Pee Wee shrugged. "Tough titty said the kitty but the milk is good." Then he took another shot and passed it back to me.

"Hey Solly!" Pee Wee yelled. "What's happenin'?"

Solly always came in to watch us bowl. He was a misfit kid who had never done anything wrong; who no one had anything against; who always had a job and would do any kind of work. And still, he could not count a single close friend in town. Not one of us, male or female, student or teacher, accepted him as a pal. Not one of us ever set foot in his house or invited him into our own. On the other hand, only one person had ever tried to fuck with Solly. One was enough to spread the word.

Some plow-jockey (from his Sunday-go-to-meeting pickup truck with amber studded mud flaps) called out, "Hey Whitey! Whyn't ya join the Klu Klux Klan? Ya won't even hafta buy a sheet."

Solly ran down Mainstreet alongside the pickup, opened the door on the run, pulled the peckerwood out and let the truck keep rolling. The pickup spit and sputtered to a stop against the rear fender of Doc Sparrow's new Buick Roadmaster, while Solly stomped a mudhole in the redneck's ass.

Solly, you see, was born an albino. His father took off, after inquiring, "Hey Doc – is the kid always gonna be pink?" His uneducated mother was left, at the age of 21, to forage for Solly and four other (non-

pink) children. Mr. Vanderbilt sought his fortune elsewhere. The Vanderbilts were one of those county families, shuffled from county seat to county seat but never asked to sit down.

Solly took a seat near the exit in the back row and nodded in our direction. I raised my Coke to him and Solly applauded when Langstrat picked up a spare. Then he did the same when George got his. "Whose side ya on?" George hollared across thirty feet and fifteen heads. Solly blushed a spectrum of alizarin crimson then got up and came over.

"I didn't want to tell the public but I'm for the underdog," Solly whispered to George.

"That's okey," George allowed. "The teachers gotta have a cheerleader too."

"I knew you'd see it my way, George." Solly smiled and went back to his seat after refusing George's offer of his Coke. No. Solly did not drink either, nor smoke.

Pee Wee and George came from one of those county families too. There was an endless stream of them over the years. Most families would stay a year and then the county would pay their bus fare to the next county. And so on. Pee Wee and George's family had stayed on. The old man was a drunk but he somehow managed to hold a job butchering for one of the grocery stores. We heard the old lady did a little business on the side which embarrassed the hell out of Pee Wee and George. None of us gave a damn. They had another brother too, who they called Sister. Eldon tried out for cheerleader and lost but he was sweet and never bothered any of us. So we let him hang around sometimes. Then George would come along and chase him off. So, mostly, Eldon stayed by himself or stayed home patching up the old lady after the old man got done with her. We only got this part

in bits and pieces and never probed for details. Once in a while Pee Wee or George, usually George, would say something like, "I'm gonna skin that sum'bitch." Then he would clam up and get moody for hours.

Well, the teachers lost their game quick, so we coasted the last few frames and blew ours too. It didn't matter. The standings were by total games. "You guys better straighten up by tomorrow."

That was Gook, ominously.

"Try any of that in Minneapolis and you're in trouble," Langstrat threatened.

"Watch your step," Jelly Roll winked.

Fortman didn't say a word, just downed his Coke and stomped away.

"Good game boys," Garrit said. We said thanks to Garrit and slapped him on the back.

"Buy ya a burger, Garrit?" Mac said. "Hey – where's Solly? I wanna buy him a burger too.

"Thanks Mac," Garrit said, "don't mind if I do. Solly took off.

Mac mixed Garrit a Coke and brought it to the booth.

"Filled this one to the top – didn't they?" Garrit smiled.

"You better let that settle," I warned Garrit.

"Oh – I see. Thanks for the tip." He took a sip. "Great Coke."

"Even the Queen of England can't buy a better one," Mac said.

"You suppose she drinks Coke?" Garrit said, doubtfully.

"I hear she uses it for a dootch," Pee Wee said.

"Ooooooh," Garrit said. "That tickles.

Garrit gobbled his burger, downed his Coke but declined to hangout with us for a while longer. No one wanted to go to bed that night so we

drove around, finished a fifth of Canadian Club, before going home to change clothes for Skip Day.

When Pee Wee and George didn't make the seven-thirty deadline, JM said, "Fools couldn't take it – probably passed out on the lawn, right now."

Solly's seat was empty too but no one really expected him. The bus pulled out of the athletic field onto Highway 69 and bounced over the tracks. Down the line of converted boxcars sat Solly's home and next to it was the one where Pee Wee and George lived. I looked out to see if they were sprawled on what JM had called 'the lawn'. The lawn was, rather, hard packed dirt with not much to distinguish it from the oiled gravel road. I couldn't see anyone but the Sheriff's cruiser was turning down the road. Better not be there, I said to myself.

Thanks again to the alphabetical seating (no matter how juvenile the system) I was sitting next to Sandra Osterman. "Don't mind me," I said. "I gotta catch a few winks. Didn't get much sleep last night – none in fact."

"Go ahead," Sandra said as she peeled off her nylon mink coat. "Don't let me keep you awake."

"You could – y'know," I replied, staring at her fuzzy pink sweater. The sight of which reminded me of those Hostess SnoBalls.

"What do you mean?" Sandra smiled, coyly.

"I – I just mean you've caused me many a sleepless night."

I don't know why I said that. She hadn't. I had hardly ever given her a thought and I had known her since Kindergarten. I wondered if she remembered, or ever knew, how I dropped that load in my pants. My momentary embarrassment passed. As Freshmen, Sandra and I had a

small duet to sing in HMS Pinafore but that was the only time I had ever touched her. I brushed her breast with my wrist once in rehearsal and Fortman told me to strive for a more abstract intimacy.

"Why Paco! You never told me – what a waste." Sandra was teasing. We were both Seniors, yes, but not in the same social circle. She was, I thought, merely trying to be a good sport.

"Lissen Baby," I pastiched a Bogart/Garfield accent, "If yer amenable we could ditch this crowd when we hit the city an' you an' me could – maybe – see the sights. If ya git my message."

"It's okey with me, Johnny," Sandra jumped in with a pretty good Mae West. "I'd follow yew ta tha ends a the oith."

"You're swell," I said. "Now I gotta get me some shuteye."

"Sure thing, Darlin'," Sandra said, then, reverted to her own voice. "Say? I hear you did in the bad guys last night."

"No more than they had comin'. We wuz real gentle wid'em." I must have been grinning like a jacklit coon.

"That's not what I heard..." Sandra was almost singing

"What. What did you hear?"

"I heard," Sandra leaned over and whispered. Her breast was softer than it looked as it flattened against my arm. "I heard Mr. Richardson and Mr. Fortman talking about holding back your diplomas. What'd you guys do, anyhow?"

"Nuthin' much. It's not a crime to be obnoxious." I was swaggering. "Well Baby – if he does then I giss we'll jus' hav'ta lean on 'im a little. We have friends – y'know – who are not unfamiliar with violence."

"What good are violins?" Sandra said.

I couldn't tell if she was just lame or trying to make a joke. I thought

of machine guns in violin cases... I was sleepy...I thought I was falling in love... I knew I couldn't carry on like that for three hours on a bumpy bus. So, I passed out after Worthington with the smell of a rendering plant making me nauseous. When I awoke, outside of Shakopee, Sandra's head was on my shoulder and my neck was paralyzed. I had to move and in doing so, awakened my sleeping beauty. I tried to pick up the play were we left off.

"Hey – good mornin' Darlin'. Give us a lil' kiss."

"Why Paco! On the bus?" Sandra had forgotten her role.

"No – on the face, Baby."

Sandra smiled and looked around. Everyone was dozing or chatting when she gave me a peck on the cheek. I got an erection but maybe It was just that I had to pee pretty bad.

As we stepped down from the bus, in the parking lot at SouthDale, I took Sandra's hand and said, "C'mon kid here's our chance. Time to skip – make our get away."

I was half serious, half in love and totally hungover; looking for diversion. Sandra said, "See ya later," fluttered her eyes and puckered her lips, then ran off to join the other cheerleaders.

The girls all headed for the shoe stores and we bought a big bag of oranges. JM, Mac and I crowded into a pay stall in the john and shot up. JM had the hypodermic he swiped off the dentist's tray and Mac had the Vodka. Three dozen oranges with 10ccs of Vodka in each. There was a shot left in the bottle for each of us. The brunch hit hard so we had a couple ChiliDogs to wash it down. Then we went looking to get lucky.

We flashed our fifties routines at every girl we met and told them we were staying at The Radisson. "C'mon down. Party tonight." A few girls

asked for the room number, 'just in case'. We didn't have one yet, so JM said, "Just tell the elevator boy to take you to Iowa. He'll know where that is." Some of the girls said, "Hey – great."

When we had collected about twenty possibles, we stopped cruising; figuring we were good for at least 25%. And these were all prime Scandanavian blondes, any of whom would do just fine if they showed. We were sure they would and discussed what to do if too many arrived at the suite at the same time. We were already calling our room a suite. Take the farm from the farmboy and the ego soars.

The museum was okey. I'd never been to one before; never remember seeing a real painting. The art in my house was a framed reproduction of The Lone Wolf on one wall and a plaster Sacred Heart Of Jesus that my sister Lucy had painted with enamels. JM had been to a few museums and said the Cezanne here was a pretty good one. I didn't see what he saw but I took his word for it. There was one picture that I did like though. It was called Lucretia, painted by Rembrandt. The woman, Lucretia, had a bloody dagger in her hand and had just done hari kari before posing for the artist. JM agreed it was a good Rembrandt, then joked about how fast he must have painted. "The broad looks a little pale – doesn't she?"

Mac was out on the museum steps, sucking oranges and sweet talking any girl who passed by. I guess he'd decided it was time to get laid and was nothing if not diligent. He collected four or five more 'maybes' then took a nap in the sun. He was cradling the bag of oranges like a Teddy Bear when we came out.

The hotel was better than the museum. I'd never stayed in one but JM had stayed in plenty. I didn't know what illicit ideas a hotel can

provoke, almost demand. Maybe it was the oranges. Anyway, what with one thing and another, we were having a good time. We told a few other guys and a few of the more playful girls about the party we were planning. I wanted to get word to Sandra but knew that was unlikely. The chaperones were doing their job.

Gook and Fortman were on our floor and their wives were with the girls. The clerks had been told not to reveal where they were and they admirably kept the secret. We didn't care. We were on six so we just walked up and down each floor until we heard giggles. They were on nine. Who cared? I did. I wanted to pull my scam on Sandra one more time. Give her another chance to run amuck in the Twin Cities. I had about thirty bucks and figured that would get us a room somewhere. I was taking it right to the final fade. That's the way fantasies work, unlike dreams where you always wake up in a cold, wet and empty bed.

"Too bad Doc's not here," JM said. "We could finance the whole trip."

That was true but Doc was gone; graduated the previous year and with him went Daddy Doc's bankroll. Doc was the one with the money whenever we played cards. And we played cards whenever we needed some money. It wasn't really fair but we felt it was equitable. I mean, he could have caught us anytime. Almost every Sunday night we would play for matchsticks; ten cents per. We played a cut throat game called In-between. It was a fast and efficient game, not requiring much in the way of ingenuity or concentration. And with a case of beer at each corner of the table, concentration started at nil and ended when Doc was broke. JM, Mac and I would then split the proceeds after dropping Doc at his house.

"Yeah," I agreed, "too bad."

Gook stuck his buck-teeth in the door and announced that everyone was leaving for the movie in ten minutes. When he left, JM said, "Fuck Skinnymascope, le's go see some cootchie-hootch."

"I will buy that," I said, slowly. Mac laughed.

"I'm the only one who'll pass," he said. "You guys and your ducktails are dead in the water. I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

"Spare us," JM said.

"Besides, you're both drunk." Mac was definitely smug and perhaps would have been right, except JM and I both had new IDs. I copped mine from Bobby when he was home on leave and JM spliced his license so neatly, no one would notice.

And thus we found ourselves down on lower Hennepin at Connie Linquist's Stare'n Bare Bar. Two other guys came with JM, Mac and me but they left when the bouncer laughed at them. The cover charge (one dollar for the tits and ass) was cheap enough but forty cents for a shot of rye and a glass of beer was ridiculous. Such a deal we scarcely noticed the strippers. We had seen strippers before, plenty of times. Every year, in fact, we would slip under the tent at the County Fair to watch the butchers and bakers, hands in pockets in mad time with the gyrations of the stripper and to the tune of Circle Jerk.

"Too bad Pee Wee and George didn't make it," I said. "I bet they're pissed off – hangin' around the alley."

"What's this nostalgia shit?" JM said. "Les' drink one for Pee Wee and George..."

"And Doc," I said.

"...and Doc an' then shut up about who ain't here."

"Les' drink one for eash of 'em," Mac said.

"Thas only fair," I agreed.

Then the fog set in. When it lifted a little, I found myself in a foul smelling black and purple room, studying the remnants of the days indulgence. I looked away in disgust and tried to focus on some scrawled message; someone was trying to tell me something about not pissing in my ashtray. I couldn't make it out. I threw my cigarette in the urinal and went back to the study of my output; my forehead pressed against the cool brick wall. The milky orange conglomeration was non-descript except for an orange seed or two next to my cigarette butt. I remember being vaguely interested when I heard Connie Linquist introducing Rita Gushingam and Sprinkle Plenty, who she said would be entertaining us with various water sports. Yet I kept walking right past JM and Mac.

"Time to fold," I declared and they both looked like they were happy someone had suggested it.

Curfew was one hour after the movie let out. That was the way it was written on our information sheets. The chaperones, of course, assumed we were all going to see CinemaScope. We were counting on that assumption; basing our case on it as we slogged our way back from the Stare 'n Bare Bar. The sidewalk was slapping back at our feet and every few steps it would inexplicably shift without warning.

"We'll jus' tell 'em we wen'to a triple feature Mar'in and Loose," I said, rationally. "They can't argue with'at. Especially Fortman – he's always ravin' about 'splicit grammer."

"Wish triple feature – wha's plain?" JM was worried. "We'd bear gid our stories straight an' make damn sure we seen what we say we say we seen. Bastards'll prolly quiz us on it."

"I nos't a double bill back on Hennypinny," Mac said. "John Ford

fes'val."

"Wish ones," I asked.

"Don' mak'nee differnce – make sumthin' up."

For the first time, Mac was showing his condition and it made me nervous. I always counted on his balance of good will to get us out of scrapes.

"Here's one," he said. Then Mac proceeded to invent a bloody western and damned if it didn't sound familiar. JM and I had him tell it one more time and the second time it was even bloodier than the first.

"Shee – it!" I said. "Yew oughta write pitchers, never pass a Legion a Decency though."

"Pffft," Mac scoffed but I could tell he was pleased. "Any body could do that. There's only about four differnt stories an' I seen 'em all. M'brother Reggie knows 'em back wards and forwards."

I thought I could recall a couple more but that was about it, so I didn't challenge Mac's count.

We had to knock on the heavy glass turnstile door to get in. "Big fucking city," JM said, softly, to the nightclerk. The clerk either ignored him or didn't hear. My mouth tasted like last years jock strap. My tongue crackled when I tried to swallow.

"Shit Creek's runnin' here fellas," I said when I saw Gook and Fortman waiting in the lobby. "An' I don't see any paddles."

I was dying for an orange as we filed through the lobby, heads down. The brothers grim cut us off at the elevator.

"Where's the other two?" Gook said in greeting. "What other two is that?" JM asked. "Or is it which other two?"

Fortman ignored JM's grammatic confusion. "The brothers," he said.

"Didn't you notice? They didn't make the bus." JM seemed to be the only one who could hit back but I could see even he was on the ropes. Mac was sinking fast, almost on his knees, looking punch drunk.

"No – I didn't – lucky for them." Fortman said.

"Wha'do you mean?" I said with all the innocence I could muster. I was getting sober since I upped the big chuck. Sober enough to be a little scared and less than cocky.

"Curfew is long passed, wouldn't you say?" Gook was livid but obviously trying to maintain dignity.

"Why – the movies just let out. We came straight back, din't even stop ta eat." JM said politely, then pushed it too far. "Anything open here? I'm starving."

"The movie let out at eleven. It's now 3:30 – smart ass. And you can starve for all I care. Save us some trouble."

"Ohhhh – I see," JM said, as if he suddenly understood and could now explain it all. Here came the pitch. "We didn't go to CinemaScope. My folks took me to that months ago. We saw a coupla great westerns. What were they? Mac? John Freed – wasn't it?"

Mac caught the pitch. "John Ford," he said, then he went into his scenario. Fortman cut him off before a drop of blood was shed.

"You boys got a surprise coming," Fortman said, shaking an empty Coke bottle in our collective face.

"Sir?" Mac said, looking puzzled and taken aback. It was a gesture out of an old movie and not well executed.

"I think it's safe to say," Gook was becoming restrained, "that there will be three sad additions to summer school." Then he reverted to hostility. "Now – git yer asses in bed. Bus leaves in four hours."

Back in the room (our suite, while we were gone, had mysteriously reverted to a crummy little room with one bed and a fold out cot with a little foam pad) JM said, "Wheeew!"

Mac and I felt a little less talkative. We all went straight for the bag of oranges. There were six left and Mac had some Snicker bars in his bag. We sat on the floor by the light of the TV watching the weather girl walk all over a map of the U.S. telling us the temperature in Tucumcari. "It's hot in here," JM said. "Open a window. I'll open the door – get some cross ventilation."

That's when he found the note on the floor. "Hey," JM said. "Which ones were Olga, Elsa and Alma? They were here – fuck Christ sake."

"Whatty ya mean? Lemme see." Mac tore the note away and read: "Lissen 'Some party! Why don't you jerks go back to Ohio or where ever you belong. Betcha couldn't get one hard-on between the three of you...' those twats," Mac said then remembered. "Ohhhh shit! Those were the ones – remember the ones outside a White Castle. Olga had the biiiiig knockers. Mmmmm-shit! She coulda played windshield wiper on my face all night long."

I think we all faked our disappointment a little. I think we all felt relief. I think we all doubted we could have pulled that one off. I know I did. I don't remember falling asleep. I woke up on the floor staring at the test pattern for channel 3. JM had the double bed and Mac was fully dressed, sleeping on the cot.

The three of us were segregated in the back row of the bus as if we had something contagious. JM and Mac were out as soon as they hit the seat. Sandra threw me a few glances which, I imagined, had a trace of admiration sprinkled in. A trace of regret, I thought. I was feeling pretty

good, considering, and slept most of the way home. It was raining when the bus dropped us off at the athletic field.

JM took off running. Mac hopped in his car and was gone. Only Sandra was waiting, in the rain, for me. She said, "Here" and thrust something in my hand. I called for her to wait but she kept going and slid into the front seat of her daddy's new BelAir. I looked down at what she had given me. Her graduation picture, signed, Sandy. I turned it over. There was a note: Dear Paco, I had fun with you on the bus. I'm sorry I couldn't say yes to your invitation. You understand. Be sure and come back to 'good old Sherman' after college. All the best to a nice guy, Sandy.

Ha! She thinks I'm going to college. Nice note though. Once again I thought I was in love and conjured Sandy into Natalie Wood. I was James Dean, picking her up in my chopped and channeled '49 Merc, wearing my Levis and white shirt and red nylon windbreaker.

My reverie was soon aborted by a barricade of Gook and Fortman. "Tell your buddies there'll be a Board of Review about your behavior in the past few days." Gook said that then walked into the school.

"Border Review? What's that?" I yelled after him. It sounded like they were telling us to get out of town before sundown.

Gook turned back and said, "Just be there. Sober – if you're half as smart as you think you are."

I got soaked walking home but it felt great. My ass was in a sling but I didn't care. I knew I was done with that place and that they couldn't really touch me. I wasn't going to college and they could jerk all over their god damn diploma. None-the-less, after a good nap I called JM and Mac and told them to meet me at the bowling alley.

JM wasn't as sanguine as I was when he found out about the Border

Review. He was planning to go to college. That was what Sammy wanted. Sammy had even offered to pay my tuition if I wanted to go with JM. I had turned him down, not because I didn't appreciate his generosity, I just had my fill of school and teachers. JM was so distracted he didn't hear what Mac and I were picking up from a trucker at the counter.

"...hear he sliced 'im up like a sausage."

"Yeah," the waitress was saying, "Isn't that something. Never been anything like that around here since I can recall."

"Where's the killer?" A guy next to the trucker asked.

"They's probly two of 'em. Both of 'ems on the lam. I hear tell one of 'ems been up the river before."

Something was sounding familiar.

"What happened to their Mama?" the waitress asked. "I've see her around – can't say as I know her though."

"I knew her," the trucker said. "She's beat up pretty bad but won't say nuthin' 'bout the kids. Won't even say whether they's the ones did the cuttin'."

"He's the guy over'ta Red Owl, ain't he? The one that cuts meat?"

Whoa! This is where Mac turns to me. "You hear that Paco? JM! Wake up! You hear that?" Mac was looking back and forth from me to JM to the trucker.

"Hear what?" JM was irritated; trying to work out his own dilemma. "Hey Mister!" Mac yelled. "Who you talkin' about?"

He knew as well as I did.

"Where you been? Ain't you heard? They's two kids cut up their old man last night. It's all over the county. There's even a 'tective here from Sioux City interviewin' folks lookin' fer people who know the kids."

"What kids? Who you talkin' about?" I wanted the names too, and yet I didn't want to hear.

"You know," the waitress said, "those two who live out by the tracks. Hell – you know 'em. I seen ya bowlin' with 'em."

"Pee Wee and George?"

"Yeah – that's them."

We all got up and went outside and stood around in the drizzle with little to say. It was one of those days when things begin again. A day that marks the passage of time. After a while we all went home and none of us saw each other for a few days. I stayed in my room alot, listening to records.

We never did get called in for Border Review. I guess our crimes seemed pretty petty after that. The town was buzzing about the affair all summer but the detective from Sioux City left after a few days. He talked to me once and asked the same questions he asked Mac and JM. Did we have any idea where they might have headed? No. I never even knew where they came from. George had always talked about running off with some rodeo but I didn't offer that information. Had they ever indicated hostility towards their father? Not so you'd remember, I lied. Pee Wee and George were gone but after talking to the detective, I felt like the one who had escaped.

As far as I know they have never been caught. Every chance I get, I ask anyone who might know if they have heard anything. I've moved around alot since then and once in a while I'll see someone who looks like either Pee Wee or George. It always shakes me up. Today, 20 years later, I saw a guy in Grand Central Station who looked exactly like Pee Wee. Exact, except for the three piece suit which I could not picture Pee Wee

wearing. We met at the Croissanteria. I looked him in the eye and said, "Pee Wee?"

He looked back. His smile turned briefly to a look of surprise. "Do I know you?" he said.

"Anyone ever call you Pee Wee?"

As soon as I asked, the guy no longer looked like Pee Wee. "Not as far as I can recall. My name's Paco."

Then he winked and walked away.