

ABSTRACT

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Strike Anywhere is a novel that follows Chance, a young man coming of age in the southern states. He leads the reader through his personal struggles as he attempts to define his place in the world, his family and his own sense of existence.

STRIKE ANYWHERE

By

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	ii
Chapter 1: Flat Fork	1
Chapter 2: Dummy	19
Chapter 3: Shadow Boxing	29
Chapter [BP1]4: Tuck Tail	35
Chapter 5: Halfway	67
Chapter 6: Ranchero in the Rain	80
Chapter 7: Smokey Robinson	98

Strike Anywhere

Chapter 1: Flat Fork

I saw a baby get born on TV once. It kinda slid out of his momma and the doctor lady held him upside-down by his feet and spanked him real good on his behind. He turned from blue to a bright purple, taking in air like a busted balloon. And the man talking over the TV set said: “at that moment, the child transitioned into his first moments of life” or some bullshit like that. Not for me though. I didn’t get any swift spanking that awoken me to this world. It was a boner in the back row of the school bus that pressed up against my Tuffskins that told me: *hey boy, wake-up to the world!*

She crooked her hand like a pitch fork and raked it through her pony-tail, pulling it away from her neck so the breeze could blow through, drying up little beads of sweat before they could roll down her back and disappear into her shirt, collect in all the twist-turns that bumped out the finest girl parts in Flat Fork. I wouldn’t say I had been undressing her with my eyes -- it was more of an autopsy. Reba Miller

was on fire, ears red from the Texas-sized sun cooking our school bus like a worm on a hot brick, baking all those books out of our brains so we'd stay dumb and buying bad country music and not rubbers; watching cock fights and humping our cousins. Reba had pulled out of her shoes and was tapping her bare heels against the floor of that school bus like she was last in line for the girls' room with a belly full of piss.

The quarter-mile gravel road that connected our school to highway 692 was in the process of being paved. Workmen pitched shovelfuls of steaming blacktop in front of the slow-moving road roller. School busses were detoured around the construction, clickety-clacking over sheets of plywood spread out like playing cards across the football field. A tall sign, cut into the shape of a cowboy boot stood roadside with fancy letters painted in gold and brown to look like twisting cowboy rope spelled out, "Hey Texas: Flat Fork High is Growing!"

My boner grew every time Reba Miller turned and looked at me. Not an even exchange, more of a, "what you looking at? Why you always looking at me every dang day? Dang!" It was the look Reba would give me that always caused me to turn away. But I had a brand new boner, and because of this, I slid my biology book up on my lap and pressed, keeping that look of mine on the back of Reba Miller's neck,

more freckles than the Milky Way pouring deep down into her shirt, twisting into connect-the-dot pornography every time she turned to look back at me, pressing that book down onto my boner like I was gonna break it. And then she popped her gum and said, “You gonna come and sit next to me, or what?”

I winked at her, stalling for time and she tightened her top lip in a way that let me know that my wink bought me just about three-seconds before she was gonna turn around for good. I kept that book pressed deep down on my lap, figuring that it could probably have stood there on its own if I had balanced it right as I moved up a few rows, against the bounce of that bus over those holey Texas roads, wearing that book like a belt buckle, managing my way into to the seat right next to Reba Miller. She was fine looking, but not like a pin-up gal or homecoming queen. Reba Miller was a jewel of the working class. She didn't wear high dollar clothes or make-up because she didn't need it. She had a natural beauty in its most sincere form; hair, red like rust and green eyes with eyelashes as long and as thick as telephone lines.[BP2]

“Whatcha reading?” she asked with a cocky little grin hid by the chewing of her gum, turning her head to look out the window as if she didn't even want an answer, but wanted *me* to know that she already

knew it was there to cover-up whatever was poking in my pocket. Like my boner had talked to her. Called her all giggly on the phone before school so they could plan on how they were gonna fuck with me in front of the entire ninth grade.

“Just a bunch of bullshit,” I said, sliding that book off my lap in an over-the-top motion like how a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat. Not to showcase my boner as much as I wanted to throw my cards up on the table, because if I was okay with the fact that my dick was standing straight up in my dungarees, then everyone else on that school bus would have to be. Reba’s cheeks were blushed and I don’t know if it was on account of that sun blazing over top our school bus, or if she was crushing on me, but the unsaid buzz that was snap-crackling between us was electric, like the way a TV feels when the volume is turned off – that subtle hum that makes your teeth vibrate, letting you know that a bunch of moving parts are working overtime, just to keep that TV set quiet. My toes went all tingly, like they get when I see Daddy tightening his fist.

Just then, some fucker tossed a firecracker out the back window of the school bus, right into a passing car. The car started swerving, honking its horn, wagging its windshield wipers, every ad-on that was

up-sold by the dealer was clicked on full crank while our bus driver was chugging along, music blasting through his radio, never checking his mirrors once. Reba turned to see who done it and in the length of that fuse, some crackerjack became famous because he done almost killed some lady and her baby with a fucking cherry bomb.

She followed us for a mile like the goddamn president had been shot, the whole time that school bus driver was slow-popping his head off-beat to some mixed-tape from a band that he was gonna play congas for once he saved up enough money to buy one. She finally whipped her station wagon up in front of the school bus and pumped her brake lights enough times for him to tune back into his surroundings and pull over. The whole time, Reba's digging her fingers into the back of her seat, twisted like taffy around backwards, not looking at the hollering match going on between that lady and the school bus driver, but at that fuck who lit the wick. Reba didn't care about the effect as much as she did for the enter-your-name-here's whose balls were big enough to cause it.

That bus driver pulled us all out onto the roadside and split up the boys from the girls so he could find out from the girls who threw the firecracker. The whole time I'm watching Reba and she ain't saying shit – keeping her lips together like she was raised right. That bus driver

came over to the boys and grabbed that wick-licker and said, “You got fingered by a girl! Bet that’s the first time it happened *that way* on this bus!” Then pulls him over to the front of the bus so no passing cars could see him. We all crowded up by the front tire and ducked down so we could watch from beneath the bus.

Driver said something like, “I know I ain’t suppose to hit kids” just before he knocks one upside that dummy’s head, then does it again, real quick like it was paddleball. Cupped his hand and popped it over his ear, muttering some shit he probably learned in Vietnam.

I lost Reba’s focus in the melee. Lost my boner too. The truth was, I knew I’d get that boner back, but seeing the way Reba went all dumbstruck when the drama unfurled, I knew I’d have to come up with something hardboiled that would make that cherry bomb look like soft serve.

I had to walk home on account of the school bus driver being taken in for questioning. My neighborhood only looked like it had a history, with tall oak trees that had rooted decades before the rows of identical pre-fab, one-story houses were assembled side-by-side in their shade. Daddy picked Flat Fork on account of it being a first generation town,

settled by the divorced and turned-out pieces of broken homes in hopes of starting a new life, or end an old one.

My brother Roy was outside our house, sitting in his car – a pale blue, 1963 Chevy II he named “Deucey” -- stretching duct tape over its Swiss-cheesed convertible top. As he pulled long lengths of tape to cover the holes, he pillow-talked Deucey like he was trying to slip her out of her skivvies. And when the car didn’t talk back, Roy would make up voices so he could carry on conversations with the car; get into arguments with it just so they could make up.

He had been bent on that car since he was fourteen after he saw an old lady driving it down our street with the top dropped. Roy found out where she lived and started working her over that day. It took Roy two years to get in tight with that old lady, mowing her lawn, raking her leaves, turning her out until he passed his driver’s test. Then she lets Roy behind the wheel and he starts doing big boy shit for her: running her to the pharmacy, or out to Past Orville to drop silk flowers at her husband’s tombstone. Before Roy turned seventeen, he told Daddy that he was gonna buy that car from that old lady for so dang cheap, he paid for half of it in nickles. After she signed that pink slip over to him, Roy turned his back on her like she had molested him. It took five-months before

she stopped calling the house, asking for rides to the doctor to get her pills. Roy said, "Her old man fought in a war -- they got services for that shit. Why you think people pay taxes?"

After she died, Roy drove me down to the funeral. Not so he could pay his respects, but because he wanted to scope her friends; see what they were driving.

I told Roy about my situation with Reba Miller, and as I spoke, he closed his eyes to take it all in; told me to sit shotgun in Deucey because he thinks best while knocking a few beers back on a long drive. I tossed my biology book in the back and took a seat. The black vinyl interior was a skillet from spending its day under open sky. Roy had cut out the seatbelt straps with a knife for no other reason than he thought it made his balls look bigger, and hung them over the rearview mirror. It made a sharp clack, swinging into the windshield every time he stopped. Roy dialed in a Honky Tonk station on the radio and told me that if I didn't know the song, I could just make up my own words explaining that it's was either gonna be about an empty heart, empty pocket or empty bottle.

"Here," Roy said, handing me a warm Blue Ribbon. "It'll help you think."

I cracked open my beer and sipped foam from the lid, still at the age where I didn't lust for the taste as much as I did the dizzy feeling it gave me. We rolled through our neighborhood and into the next where empty swing sets straddled balding lawns. Flat Fork was indoors, hiding from heat stroke. Pies sat on windowsills, not cooling, but cooking. Roy took deep sips and tapped the beer can to the side of his head to indicate that he was thinking.

"All of my good ideas come to me when I'm driving," Roy said. "It just opens me up to myself, and lets those unfiltered thoughts just kinda drip out."

"Yeah, I guess," I replied.[BP3] I kept quiet, waiting for an idea to hit, knowing that it was just a matter of time before that one of Roy's ideas came, or he got so fucked up that he'd do just about anything I asked him to – either way we were gravy.

"What the fuck's wrong with Daddy?" Roy asked.

I thought for a second and said, "Everything?"

"I mean, all a man's suppose to want is for his boys to do right, you know? Do better then him. But it don't matter what we do because Daddy's just gonna act on the way he's feeling right at that moment."

“You remember that time we went on down to Beaumont to visit with Pe-Paw when he had that hole in his neck?”

“Yup,” Roy said.

“The whole time we were in that cancer ward, my eyes were looking right at his hole, staring at it like I was peeking through a keyhole. Daddy was watching me to see if I was gonna slip up and do something against the way he taught us on account of it was Pe-Paw who had trained Daddy how to act like a man. Not how to be a man -- just act like one. The whole time Daddy was talking to Pe-Paw, he kept his eyes on my eyes that were stuck staring at that air-hole in Pe-Paw’s throat like a cuckoo bird was gonna poke out. Daddy’s nerves made him chat up small talk, and he might as well have been saying the moon was made outta cheese cause nobody was listening to him. Pe-Paw was thinking about the medicine that was drip-dripping all his pain away, helping him forget about that hole he was breathing through. Then Pe-Paw started to cough. When he did, he raised his hand to cover his mouth, outta habit, but nothing was coming out his mouth hole, it was coming out of that little one in his neck. When he coughed, something yellow shot out of that hole and landed right on Daddy’s eyelid. That was the last memory he had made with his daddy before he died. I knew that Daddy wouldn’t

have gotten hit by that cancer cough if he wasn't so worried about what was in *my* head, but after that day, he switched from you to me."

"It's not like I miss the way he'd come down on me," Roy said. "But I gotta admit that I'm a little bit jealous of all the attention he's been showing you." Roy was looking at me with that slack jaw he got when his beer buzz switched over into low-gear drunk. He was still driving straight, but only seven miles-an-hour in a thirty-five.

"The way I got it figured," Roy said, "it's not about doing the right thing for him, it's knowing when to wear the halo and when to hide. You just gotta act the way he wants you to at that moment – right or wrong." Roy said, burping it out of the side of his mouth like he was telling a secret while pulling the tab off another beer. I didn't really know what he was getting at, but I wanted to be agreeable with him while he was working it out in his own head. The truth was, Daddy fucked with me because it was his favorite thing, more than any pretty lady on TV, ice cream flavor, sunset or song on the radio.

The power steering belt purred as he turned into a worn out parking strip along Flat Fork Creek, squared in by a dozen or so pock marked telephone poles laid down end on end. This part of the creek called Normandy, was the closest Flat Fork had to an ocean. People would

collect during nice weather and stretch out on a blanket under the sun, or to take turns on the rope swing; light off bottle rockets on the Fourth of July and barbecue a pig to let the whole town know that you could afford it. Normandy got its name because it had a bank that rolled right into the water, worn down by years of bare feet that pounded the earth into a soft, clean silt. The creek was wide and deep, moving slowly through our town, collecting our wastewater, carrying it into the larger rivers that spilled into the Gulf of Mexico.

Roy stepped on the parking brake and grabbed a six of Blue Ribbons before getting out of the car. The trees lining the creek were choked with a wall kudzu so thick we had to push through the vines before the water could be seen. Roy sifted the ground for a flat stone to skip as I counted every bounce out loud. Not for accuracy as much as I knew Roy liked it when I was paying attention to him. He kept his eyes forward the whole time he spoke, looking across Flat Fork Creek to the other side, a good hundred yards away.

"I guess I was about fifteen," he said. "School had just let out for summer and I was staying out all night long, just fucking around. I had about a case of beer in me by the time I made it home and I'm stumbling. I was trying to push my bike into the backyard and when I

passed Daddy's Lincoln, the pedal ripped a scratch into the door. Not a little scratch – it dug through the paint. I tried to rub it out with my shirtsleeve, but it was deep into the sheet metal. I was all cross-eyed drunk, so I went inside with my fingers and toes crossed, praying that the old man was asleep, but as I pushed through the front door, I saw him drinking a beer and looking at the TV."

As he spoke I found myself feeling edgy, like by Roy talking about it, he somehow looped me in to that scratch, and Daddy was mad at me for doing something that happened five years before.

"I guess I was beer-brave, because I walked right up to him and flat out told him what I done. He eyeballed me for a minute, and drummed his fingers on his armchair. I said something about it being my responsibility and that kind of horseshit you babble right before you think your gonna take a beating. He stood up and told me to hold tight while he went outside to look at the scratch. When he got back, he walked straight to his bottles and cracked the wax off of his twelve year-old scotch. He took a seat at the supper table and poured three shot glasses, right to their rims. He called me over to the seat beside him, eyeballing me the whole time and he said, 'Roy, there comes a time in a man's life when he looks into his son's eyes and he no longer sees that

little baby-child who use to wail for his momma every time he done pissed his pants. When you told me what you done did, I seen you clearly; not for who you was, but for who you're gonna be: a grown man who'll stand on his own two feet, and take up for his own actions.'

“He pushed a shot glass in front of me and raised it up and said, 'Tonight son, I drink to you. A man who's gonna play it like aces no matter what hand he gets dealt.' We knocked our shots back and Daddy lifted the third glass up high and said, 'this drink right here is for your Pe-Paw, and for the day he never saw me, as I see you.' He turned that glass upside down and spilled it right onto the floor, then leaned his head down on the table, rocking quietly like a loose tooth. I sat for five minutes, but he never lifted his head back up. I screwed the cap on the bottle and put the glasses in the sink. Neither of us never said nothing about the scratch, the sob or the scotch again.”

I took a swig that emptied my can, filling my mouth with warm beer so I wouldn't have to talk. Roy opened another and took a gulp before handing it to me. "You're the only one I can trust in this life, Chance.”

"Roy,” I interrupted. “Before you get queer on me, we gotta be thinking of something that's gonna get me back in with that girl, right?”

“Oh what, the school bus girl?”

“Dang, Roy. Yes!”

“I thought I already said it?”

“Well then, tell me again.”

“First you gotta do for me,” Roy said, “is get rid of that dummy in Daddy keeps closet. I can’t sleep with that thing around.”

Daddy had kept a ventriloquist dummy in the back of his closet -- a haunted little man dressed up in a suit like he was at a funeral. His head was pressed out of a yellowy plastic and painted up with rosy-red cheeks and black eyebrows that arched like toenail clippings, making him look forever angry. Daddy would pull him out to bounce him on his knee, pour sips of whiskey down his neck and yank the string that flapped his jawbone. It would make springs in the back of his mouth squeak, and jiggle his soulless eyes – eyes that would lock on to me and make me tell him whatever he asked me too. Daddy would pull him out every time he wanted to draw out a confession, or secrets from Roy or me. He trained that dummy to work in reverse; instead of him talking to us, we talked to him.

“Awlright,” I said. “I’ll get rid of the dummy.”

“I don’t just want you to put him in the trash can, I could do that myself. You gotta make it so Daddy never meets up with him again.

Drag him far away and bury him in a hole, or cut off his legs so that he crawl his way back up on Daddy's knee."

"Okay, and what is that gonna get me."

"You get him gone and I'll give you a gun."

"What?" I asked. "Like a BB gun?"

"Naw. What you gonna get with a dang air rifle? Pull it out and pop a pebble in someone's ass? I'll get you the real deal." Something about Roy talking about guns didn't sit right with me, and that's exactly what I liked about it -- that fluttering feeling I got when I felt at risk.

"So I get me a gun. What am I suppose to do with it?"

Roy was saying his sentences slow and I didn't know if was on account of him starting to slur, or drawl them out because he was making them up as he went along. Either way, I had nothing else to do than sit on that beach and listen to him.

"We're gonna twist the lead out of one of them bullets with a pair of pliers and plug up the shell with a pencil eraser. I saw it on TV once -- it's the perfect fit. Take that gun to school with you but don't pull it out until the bus ride home. Saddle right up next to that little lady and take a window seat. Once you get in position, drop the window open and flash me a signal. I'll pull up next to the bus, wag my middle finger at you or

some shit like that. When I do, I want you to point that gun out the window and pop a shot at me. Now, don't aim for my head -- even a pencil eraser could fuck me up. I'll yank the steering wheel a few times and then pull off the road."

Roy smiled, tapping his beer can against the side of his head. He was dead set on his plan and I knew the only reason he was gonna help me was because I said I would make that dummy disappear, but after the beers and gun talk, I told him I was all in. "Just let me smell your fingers afterward," he said.

We sat on the beach until the sun and moon switched places and the cans were empty. Roy had gotten to the point where he was slurring his words so bad all I could make out were letters. He kept on trying to say things, but I couldn't understand him. "All I hear is letters, Roy!" I told him. "You're talking alphabet soup!" And though I was still too young to legally drive, I figured better me than wind up prying a baby stroller from the undercarriage.

It was an oddly tolerable summer evening that had shed much of the day's heat. As I drove us home, Roy rolled up his window to lean against it. The air blew through the topless car like a make-up kiss -- an apology for the sun's punishment. As we slow-rolled toward home, I

watched the summer wind pull dandelion seeds from their stem and carry them above open lawns, laying them down to dry-out in the thoroughfare. I parked Deucey beneath the shade trees at the end of our street, woke up Roy and followed him into our house.

Strike Anywhere

Chapter 2: Dummy

Roy stumbled into the bathroom to lay down, placing his cheek on the cool of the tile floor. The bathroom walls were painted in a shade Momma called Easter yellow that she used to cover the fist sized holes in the wall; stepping their way from little to big -- like how a child's height is charted with pencil marks in other houses. Daddy wasn't home and I remembered how much I used to like taking advantage of the nights he was away. I'd follow momma around the house, pulling on her apron strings and try to make her guess what number I had in my head; make believe I was gonna stick tweezers in the electrical outlet just to watch her expression change.

She was sitting on the couch in front of the TV, pretending she hadn't heard us walk in. Momma enjoyed her time alone in the house and sometimes, acted as if her ears were clogged. It was her way of slowing things down a step, delaying it for that little bit longer. I had marked the floor so I could move around the house quietly, staining a spot on the squeaky boards with the tip of an ink pen where the joints

met. It looked just like the hole made by a finishing nail, but allowed me to hopscotch was into any room without the chirp of warped wood. I headed to Daddy's closet and quietly pulled opened the door. The dummy was hunched over in the corner, staring right back at me with those gone eyes of his, like he was trying to call my bluff – trick my mind into telling him what I was gonna do with him, or scare me into turning around and closing the door. I just thought about Reba and the way her fingers still looked pretty, even though she had bitten the nails to the nubs. And that boner she gave me, and what it would want me to do. I grabbed that dummy by the tip of his little shoe and lifted him up so that his jacket would fall and drape over his face. I dropped him on his head when I heard Momma walk into the room.

“Chance, you know you ain't suppose to be in here,” Momma said in a hollow tone. I gave her a wide smile.

“I wanted to surprise you, Momma,” I said. “See if I could fit into one of Daddy's Sunday shirts. Something real nice that a girl might like?”

Hanging on the bedroom wall behind her was a picture of our family, taken at the JC Penny portrait studio six-years before. With Momma standing beside her bygone image, I took notice of how

different she looked. She was still beautiful: her sharp cheekbones underlined big brown eyes that glittered with little specks of gold and looked soft, like Cattails in still water. But she had grown tired and broken down. Like when a stolen car has everything of value stripped from it.

She said, "What, like a sweetheart?" And her bright smile was tinted purple from wine grapes. I pretended like I was too embarrassed by the question to answer her. She filed through the hangers and pulled out a shirt -- still wrapped in plastic from the cleaners -- and handed it to me. "Here," she said. "This one might fit. Your daddy ain't wore it since your Pe-Paw's funeral. He won't even know it's gone."

I pulled it out of the plastic and off the hanger, slipped my arms through the sleeves and buttoned up the front -- the collar choking me like a sprained neck. I let the tails hang over my Tuffskins and lifted my arms. Not in front of me, like a mummy or a superhero, but out to the side, like Jesus on his last day.

"Chance," Momma said, curling her finger beneath her nose like she was gonna sneeze. "You're a *big* little man now."

She wiped her watery eyes and went back to enjoy the quiet of the house before Daddy got home to let her know if the coin toss of his

mood came up kisses or kicks. I unbuttoned the shirt off and wrapped it over that dummy's head, then carried him into the kitchen and jammed him into a Piggly Wiggly bag before leaving the house.

I walked the street with my head down, listing it only to check headlights so I could dodge Daddy's Lincoln if it turned the corner. As I was headed for the creek, a pair of kids passed me by on a bicycle. Not bicycles, but one bike. A thin, scrappy kid sat on the handlebars as his husky buddy slow-pedaled as if he had just learned how to ride a two-wheeler. They rode down to the end of the street then looped back around, headed in my direction. The kid riding on the handlebars had raw chicken-pox bumps all over his arms and face. Though his greasy hair hung past his eyes, I could tell he was staring me down by the way his bumpy nose parted through his bangs to point at me. His husky buddy was wearing hand-me-downs that fit so snug, when he rotated the pedals, a thick roll of doughy skin squeeze out of the gap where his shirttails and belt loops were meant to meet.

As they got closer to me, Chickenpox hopped off the handlebars, causing Husky to wobble to a stop -- dropping the bike down beside him. I had seen the Husky before down at Normandy, wading in the

water with a t-shirt on in the middle of summer, like that wet t-shirt was hiding his fatbody, keeping those floppy milk-jugs a secret. He'd duck down into the water every time a girl came by, try and make time with them with his chubby head floating on top of the water.

Husky pulled a yo-yo from his pocket and began spinning it back and forth, creating a sawing noise as it fell and chased back up its string. Chickenpox lit up a cigarette and began smoking it hard, and not in the way that was enjoyable to him -- more like he wanted me to know that he was a rule-breaker, taking in long drags and compressing the smoke into his lungs with deep breaths. Half the length of his cigarette was a glowing cherry as he rolled the filter between his finger and thumb like it was a movie prop.

Husky had put yo-yoing on pause to squint at me while Chickenpox pointed at his crotch while making loud kissing sounds. Who were these kids to fuck with me? I came back at them.

“Did a chicken pock on your pecker?” I asked.

“Yeah, she did,” he said. “Then I rode her back home on my bike and told her to be a good mommy and kiss you goodnight.”

“But I thought you two were faggots,” I said. “I mean, he’s huffing and puffing on that bike with his nose stuck in your ass crack.”

“What’d he say?” Husky asked, dropping his yo-yo into a sleeper. I sat the dummy bag onto the curb and stepped forward. “Dang, I think he’s bowin’ up on you,” Husky said, winding up his string.

Chickenpox brushed the hair from his eyes to take a look at me and I saw that his pupils were open full-bore, moving his fingers like he was fixing to swing. He stood a foot taller than me, and as he spoke, I watched his Adams apple roll beneath all the pocks on his neck.

“Hey honey,” he said toeing up to me and pointing behind me. “What’s that?” As I turned to check on the Piggly Wiggly bag, Chickenpox flattened his palms against my chest and shoved me backwards. I stumbled, but stayed on my feet. Husky recoiled his yo-yo from its around-the-world spin and stepped up behind Chickenpox. I eyeballed the two of them and thought about how I was able to stand up to Daddy’s dummy. I raised my hands and tightened them into fists. Chickenpox swung his head in a way that whipped his bangs to the side then raised his fists. He grunted something that I couldn’t really understand but I smelled his breath, like moldy newspaper.

As he cocked his pockmarked fist to throw at me, I realized I had no clear idea of what I wanted to do, barely forming any defense as he drove his knuckles right into my teeth. Stumbling backward, my heel

caught the curbstone and stars flashed like a photograph as the back of my head connected with sidewalk.

It wasn't as much a pain as it was a sick feeling, like every good feeling I ever had -- no matter how watered-down -- had just evaporated from me. The laughter of the two kids left standing stuttered through my head, like the sound was thumping against the blades of a ceiling fan.

Chickenpox stood over top of me while Husky spun his yo-yo, twisting the string of into a rock-the-cradle while singing a few bars of "rock-a-bye baby," to me as I rolled over onto my side. Chickenpox dug into the Piggly Wiggly bag and pulled the dummy out, holding on to its feet as he swung the dummy like a pickax, slamming its head against the curb. The dummy's jawbone disconnected and flapped like a broken bird wing as it sailed through the air, landing beside a parked car. Chickenpox dropped the dummy at Husky's feet as he unzipped his fly and pissed all over Daddy's dummy; his cotton stuffed body drinking it in like a sponge.

I wish they had just left me, laying there on the ground, looking at dummy's jaw bone sitting on the pavement like an overthrown horseshoe, I wished that I was alone so I could just pick myself up and

pretend that it didn't happen, but they took their time to settle into their seats on the bicycle.

I stood, picked up the jawbone and grabbed the dummy by the string on the back of his head, shaking as much of the piss out of him that I could, then stuffed him back in the Piggly Wiggly bag. They didn't even look at me before they rode off. It wasn't like they were ashamed or sorry, or even trying to ignore me. It was more like they had taken everything away from me and there was simply nothing left to see.

I carried the dummy down to the creek bank and climbed around in the junk people had ditched there over the years. A busted out car sat covered in thorn bushes with a roll of dry rot carpet skewered through its window. A doorless icebox leaned against an upside-down washing machine; rust killing them like cancer. I came across a three-wheeled lawnmower and tipped it on its side, letting the stale gasoline soak into the dummy's stuffing. I laid him face down in a rusted shopping cart and rolled him to the bank of the creek, before I lit him on fire. Black smoke and the smell of burning plastic carried up into the sky as I watched his plastic head bubble and bend in on itself as his stuffed body burn down to ash. When the charred head had cooled, I fed pebbles through his

eyehole like it was a piggy bank, packing it full, then tossed the blackened skull far into the creek, watching it disappear into the deep water before walking home.

I snuck back into the house and laid down on the bottom bunk in the room I shared with Roy. He was asleep above me. I couldn't lay my head in any position that eased the throbbing coming from the back of my skull. It thumped with my heartbeats and squeezed my brain. With my fingertips, I traced my lips to feel the swelling and the split that ran straight through my bottom lip like the Liberty Bell. I listened to the sounds Roy made from the top bunk.

He talked in his sleep, mumbling muddy sentences about the issues he was working through in his dreams. Sometimes, I'd talk back to him, not really to wake him up as much as I was trying to become a part of his dream -- blend in to his head and talk him into a better place.

That night, Roy was dreaming like he was a young kid, talking softly in a high voice. He talking like he was in someone's house and had opened a door by accident. A puppy had gotten out and Roy ran behind to try and catch her as she ran outside. He was calling after the puppy in his sleep-talk, but she wouldn't listen, she thought Roy was

playing with her as she ran right into the street. He started hollering in his dream, at a car as it sped down the road, but Roy couldn't get the driver's attention in time to stop it from rolling right over top of that puppy. Roy ran up and started whispering to the puppy, dead in the road, trying to convince her in his quiet kid voice that she wasn't truly gone. I felt the sting of the split in my lip as I pressed my tongue against it, listening to Roy sleep-talking above me, sobbing a child's apology to a puppy lying lifeless in the road.

Strike Anywhere

Chapter 3: Shadow Boxing

I tried my best to hide my lip from Daddy, but he took notice of it the next day -- right after he sat down at the supper table. He was looking at that split and choking his fingers tight around his milk glass.

“Oh, it ain’t nothing” I told him. “Caught an elbow in the face rough-housing on the school bus.”

He was staring at my split lip, seesawing his jaw side-to-side as I returned to spinning noodles with butter on my fork.

“Look at me?” he asked. I raised my eyes to match his. They were staring deep into my brain -- reading my thoughts like they were in print.

“Now look away,” he snapped. “Don’t you look me in the eyes and lie to me in front of a plate full of hot food I broke my goddamn back for.” I returned my gaze to the plate. “It ain’t only that you lied to me, boy, but you’re running around out there wearing my last name.”

Momma gave his hand a squeeze and said, “You know, some people are good at other things besides fisticuffs. You don’t *have* to be thick skinned to carry on in Flat Fork. Why, Chance here’s a whiz at numbers. He could balance that checkbook of yours upside-down with his eyes crossed, and you know how long it takes *you* to get it right.” He may have been shoveling noodles and butter into his mouth, but he was listening. I just kept my eyes on the floor, hoping that if I pretended myself invisible, I might just actually disappear from the conversation.

“What I’m trying to say is, everybody’s got something,” Momma said. “Now, isn’t that plenty good for your family name too?” He took a swig of milk, shook his head and spoke.

“Hell boy, I guess it ain’t your fault. After supper we’ll see what we can do about it.”

“Awlright,” I answered.

I didn’t know what he was getting at, and I didn’t care to find out. All I knew was the slower I chewed, the longer I had between now and later so I ate each noodle of that spaghetti like it was a mile long.

Daddy slung a pair of dishrags over his shoulder and called me into the back yard. He was pacing back and forth -- flattening the foot-tall grass into a square between the picnic table and mamma's clothesline.

"Now I ain't gonna ask what happened today, and you don't gotta tell me if you don't wanna. Hopefully, after tonight, you'll learn a thing or two that'll help it so you won't have to hide your face around your family no more. Now give me your paws."

I stretched out my arms. He folded the dishrags into strips and tied them across my knuckles.

"Make a fist."

I obeyed.

"Good. Hold 'em up," he said. "No, not like that. Keep your right fist up and in front of your face, like this."

I shadowed his every move, hoping not to excite him more that he already was. He shuffled through his arsenal of deathblows, combining the jab with the cross, the hook with the uppercut, encouraging me to keep my guard up and hit harder and faster with every blow. I went through the motions, throwing my ragged hands into his upright palms with my all.

“That’s it. Now keep them feet dancing, it ain’t easy to hit a moving target.” We continued until I was chasing my breath. The restless look he was giving me was one I didn’t recognize; somewhere between a grimace and a grin -- blunted either way. He took the rags off my hands and tossed them on the picnic table. I took a seat on the bench as he bent down so I could see his face as he spoke.

“Now, that was good Chance, real good,” he said, “but that don’t mean a thing if you can’t follow through with it.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“What I’m saying is, your mother can throw her rag wrapped fist into a pair of hands. That don’t mean nothing. It don’t mean you got the grit to throw your bare fist into another man’s face.” He squared me up and bent my arms into position. “Go ahead,” he said. “Hit me like I shown you.”

“How?” I asked, feeling the blood drain from my fists to my feet.

“One punch, free of charge -- right on the button,” he said, pressing his finger to his nose. “One good punch to the nose and a man’s blinded; he’s yours. You can take your time breaking him apart if you want, or, take him out quick.”

I held my fists up, keeping my face guarded with my right, just like he taught me. I rocked back on my heels, staring straight at his nose, watching the breath puff from his nostrils into the coolness of the air. His instructions replayed in my head.

“Come on now, Chance.”

I thought about what Momma had said. Though she might have stretched her words some, she didn't lie. Maybe scrapping wasn't what I was good at, but I did have something -- even if we didn't know what it was yet. I opened my fists and let my guard down. Daddy relaxed his brace.

“What in the hell are you doing?” he barked.

“I just wanna. . .”

He cut me off, pushing me backward with all his strength. The corner of the picnic table caught me, tearing my shirt as it dug into my back. “You're useless,” he said, picking the rags up and going inside.

I stayed down on the ground with my hand held against my tendered side, watching the shadows of a bat feeding on the moths that gathered around the porch light. I bit down on my split lip, making it bleed again, letting the throb flood my head and replace my thoughts of the day.

I carried myself inside, walked right past Momma and into the bathroom. After latching the little hook on the door I turned on the bathtub water so nobody could hear me.

Strike Anywhere

Chapter 4: Tuck Tail

Roy never even came home that night, but when I woke up, I saw the keys to Deucey on the floor – Roy’s lucky pink rabbit foot keychain. It took Roy four dollars worth of quarters and fifteen plastic bubbles worth of girl toys for him to pull that pink paw out of that vending machine down at the Piggly Wiggly. I picked up the keys and gave that paw a squeeze, hoping to milk enough from it for mine to change.

It was eight-o’clock in the morning when I left for school and the temperature was up near a hundred degrees. I walked right past the school bus stop and down to where Roy had parked Deucey, sitting beneath the widest shade tree on our block. Going to school on a day that dang hot felt cruel and unusual, so I spent the morning sitting in Roy’s car, waiting for him to turn up while I sipped from the stash of

Blue Ribbon I found in the trunk. It wasn't that I wanted to drink as much as I felt I should be drinking. I needed to enjoy everything good about that day because it felt like it might have been my last on earth.

I gave that old rabbit's paw another squeeze, running my thumb over its tiny toenails before putting in the key and driving Deucey to school.

When school let out, I popped the ragtop down and tuned some music into the radio. I shook one of Roy's Lucky Strikes out of the pack and lit it. I didn't care for the taste much -- it was for the look more than anything else, so I let it dangle, covering the split in my lip while squinting my eyes to keep the smoke out. I drove by the school bus stop, real slow, so everybody could see me. They did. Then, from behind the school kids, as if in movie-time slow motion, stepped Reba. Her eyes stuck on me as she stepped toward Daddy's car, lips trying their best to hide her smile.

There's one thing about Reba, she didn't walk like any ordinary 15 year-old girl. She swayed side to side like the insides of an old grandfather clock.

I yanked that steering wheel and brought me curbside without really thinking of anything to say.

"Where'd you steal this from?" she asked.

I told her, I won it in a nine-ball game.

"Dang, look at that lip!" she snapped all enthusiastic. "What happened?"

"I got pistol whipped."

She knew I was lying but didn't even care. Maybe she was just bored by the summer, but when I offered her a ride home, she said, "I guess," and pulled open the door. She slid across the seat, pulled her shoes off and snatched the Lucky from my lips, taking a drag and blowing the smoke through her nostrils as she exhaled. She twisted the rear view mirror to take a quick look at her face and when she twisted it back, I caught a peek of her in the reflection. She winked at me and I winked back before putting the mirror in its place.

"This is living right?" she asked me, her hair whipping in the wind behind her.

"What? Driving around with the top down?"

"Hell yes," she replied, and then said it again. Only louder.

"HELL YES!" I repeated.

Everything in a windy convertible with its top down had to be half hollered anyway, but this was something that would have been said that loud no matter how quiet the car was.

Reba lived just a few miles from my house and I ~~took~~ a wrong turn on purpose. Half way just to have more time with her in the car, half way so I could loop around and pass the school bus and flap those suckers my middle finger. When we got to her driveway, she didn't hop right out. Instead, I slipped the transmission into park and we listened to the end of the song.

I said, "How about you and me do something. Like go somewhere, or something? You know what I mean?" I wasn't making eye contact with her when I asked the question, and when I realized I was staring at that rabbit foot keychain, I snapped my head around to look at her. Her lips split into a smile, exposing a crooked and chipped front tooth.

"Like what. Go out on a date?" She asked.

"Sumpthing."

"because I can't do no dating 'till I turn sixteen. Daddy says."

"Awlright," I replied. Thumping my thumb against the steering wheel. We sat there for a second in silence.

“Maybe we could just get together for some studying?” I suggested.
“Go read a biology books and what not.”

She gave me a once over, holding that impossible look that meant she either loved or hated me.

“Uh huh, that’ll do just fine.” she said, punctuating it with a little wink. And I didn’t know which way she meant it, but either way, we were on for seven o’clock.

I didn’t want to go back home and have anything get between me and Reba getting together. If anything, I would have loved to frozen myself for a few hours so that nothing would fuck this up.

The power had cut off in all of Flat Fork, due to the fact that every air conditioner had been clicked on and the power plant just couldn’t take it. Every screen door in town was propped open; folks held court on porch swings and lawn chairs. While other kids my age coasted across sidewalks on two wheelers, I was coasting five miles an hour over the speed limit with my elbow leaning on a six-pack.

I made it to Reba’s house at 7 o’clock sharp -- she was outside waiting for me, barefoot in a red bikini top and white, paper-thin pedal pushers, the tie-string from her baiting-suit bottoms poking out the side

like a birthday present. Her hair was twisted up in pigtail braids revealing the galaxy of little freckles peppered across her shoulders and down the arms that hugged a textbook wrapped in brown grocery bag paper. Before I could open her door, she po-goed over the side and said, "Let's go." I pressed the gas.

"I told Daddy that we was going swimming over by your house, after studying. Case he asks," she said.

"We don't have no swimming pool," I said. "We don't even got a hose since I ran over it with the dang lawnmower." She just smiled, pulled a Lucky from my pack and lit it against the wind with one match, like she'd been doing it all her life. She slid her textbook beneath the seat and asked me where we were going.

"I don't know," I replied. "I figure we can head over to the library in Pastorville. They're open 'till ten."

She giggled and cracked open a Blue Ribbon. "I ain't even opened one book all year, and I ain't fixing to start the last month of school."

I turned onto the road that paralleled Normandy and followed it north toward the creek mouth. Deucey crowded the width of the two lanes, Reba tick-tocking side-to-side, absorbing the turns. The heat had

invited a handful of folks out for a sunset swim, but I pressed Deucey further upstream to where the banks were empty.

I slowed down as we drove along fenced in yard with a horse that was craning her neck beneath a tree branch, inches away from its goal of snapping off leaves to chew.

“Dang, that’s disgusting,” Reba snapped, shielding her eyes from the horses.

“Oh, he ain’t doing nothing,” I told her.

“I don’t care about what he doing, or not.” she said. “I just hate them fucking things.”

“What, horses?” I asked.

“Yeah, I hate them.”

“Why?” I asked.

“When I was like, nine or ten years old, my daddy drove us to the Forth of July parade that goes through Dallas every year. It was a big deal to him, he woke us up extra early so we could go down to the parade route and find a good spot to stand in. We ended up right in front and were the first to watch and wave as the parade floats passed. About the last I remember is seeing a girl in a silver-sequined swimsuit; she

was twirling a baton, throwing it higher than I could keep track of and I was thinking that I wanted to be just like her.

“What happened next, or the way my dad tells me, is that they were setting up some of them fireworks when one of them accidentally went off on the ground. It spooked one of the parade horses and he started bucking like he was in a rodeo, broke loose and headed toward the crowd, kicking his back legs up at all the men who were trying to take hold of him. My daddy picks me up, and tries to push his way through the people but they’re trying to get the hell out of there too. I guess I was watching that horse over his shoulder because he kicked me. Caught me with his hoof square on the top of my head and popped me right out of my daddy’s arms. That didn’t stop that horse though. He kept on kicking into people, bruising and knocking them down before someone finally wrangled him up.

“My daddy stood over top of me, trying to wake me up, but I wouldn’t, no matter how loud he screamed my name. My momma picked me up and pushed her way through the crowd like a momma whose baby just got hurt. She laid down with me in the back seat while my dad jumped in behind the wheel and sped me off to the hospital. I woke up at some point on the ride there and my mom said that made her

feel more scared, because I wasn't crying. She kept on saying, 'cry baby, cry!' but no tears would come from me. I couldn't even see her.

"At the hospital, they said the kick to my head gave me a concussion and caused hysterical blindness, but that I'd be okay. The doctor said I'm so lucky, that if I were to shave my head, you'd see a horseshoe stamped right into my skull."

"Dang," I said. "I mean, what else can I say but dang!"

Reba giggled and took my hand into hers; not like a mother grabs her child's for a church prayer, but with intertwined fingers, woven like lovers do. She directed me to pull into an overgrown parking area right off of the road. It was a small cutout framed by crumbling cinder blocks, just wide enough to fit two cars side by side. Lack of traffic enabled bright yellow dandelion flowers to sprout between the cracks in the gravel pave. I switched off the headlights but kept the keys turned half way so we could listen to Patsy Cline on the radio, drinking warm Blue Ribbon in the front seat of Deucey as the sun broke its yolk.

"Don't that breeze blowing through them Willow trees sound like dried rattlesnake tails?" I asked.

“I guess,” Reba replied. Her eyes opened up wide to the night sky, taking in looks as if a car with no roof helped her see the stars fresh, for the first time.

Two fireflies descended onto the dashboard. They were stuck together, one on top of the other, fluttering their wings to steady their landing while blinking slow and steady flashes of green light.

“Ain’t that a picture?” Reba asked.

“Uh huh.”

“They’re humping.”

“I reckon they are,” I replied.

“Look at all them other bugs, flying around the sky with a brain the size of a grain of salt, hoping for something to bump into.”

I took a sip of beer.

“They don’t live for but a day, you know,” Reba said.

“Who, the bugs?”

“Yup. They hatch and fly around, blinking their little butts, looking for another bug that appreciates the way they’re blinking. That’s the only reason they blink, you know. It ain’t so that they can look fancy for us, or so that they can see their way through the dark. They got that

bulb screwed into their butt for one reason; so they can blink it, and attract their one and only.”

“Dang,” I said. “How come you know all that?”

“My Daddy told me. He read it in a book.”

As she spoke, the fireflies separated. One fluttered its wings, slowly lifting into the sky; its mate sat still. With her fingertip, Reba flattened the remaining bug, smearing a streak of its glowing innards across the dashboard.

“He was gonna die tonight anyway,” she said. “His lady’s gonna fly off somewhere and lay their eggs on some Willow branch, then roll over and die too. This way, he can go quickly, with that sweet memory of her still fresh in his head.”

“How’d you know which one was the boy?”

She just smiled, wiped the squashed firefly wings off on my pants and opened her door.

We carried the rest of the Blue Ribbons to the creek edge and sat together, real close. Reba twisted the ends of her braids into points between her fingers, sticking just the tip through the sip hole of her can.

She let the beer soak in for a second before pulling it out, then sucked the suds from her hair.

“What you got going on there?” I asked.

“Nothing. Just the way I like to drink beer sometimes.”

She repeated the motions with her other braid, dipping it into my beer can then offering it to me. She gently traced the split on my lip before I took it in my mouth. It felt like a wet paintbrush, flattened against my tongue. I could taste her shampoo as much as the beer, but I sucked down the sip and burped. Her eyes squeezed into a squinty smile.

“You’re nasty!”

I was trying to read her between the lines and act a way I thought she might like. My heart was thumping, not fast, but heavy; strong in my chest.

Before I could figure out my play, she turned her head and kissed me right on the mouth. I hadn’t kissed before, except for maybe a peck during a spin-the-bottle game after Sunday school. The tightening in my Tuffskins told me Reba was no first timer. What I lacked in experience was compensated for with instinct. My lips stumbled over hers like they were in too-big shoes.

"Slow down, cowboy," She said, "I ain't going nowhere."

I looked at Reba and it defied proportion; a glance that lasted less than a second but carved a memory greater than some years do.

Her plump lips parted as her tongue reached in; I couldn't even feel the split on my lip, just the grain of her taste buds rubbing against mine like the fine grit sandpaper used on high-dollar furniture. I swept my hand slowly up and down her back, gentle over the bikini strap, appreciating the softness of her skin. Now, I had heard some people see fireworks when they kiss, while others might hear church bells ring. Not me. I felt a stinging pain all up on my legs and suddenly, it sparked into agony.

Damn it! I had rolled into a fire ant mound and they were chewing on my legs like barbecue ribs. I jumped up, smacking myself all over like a rodeo clown until every last ant was crushed. I thought, snake eyes – I crapped out. Reba just giggled, picked up the last two beers by the plastic holder and gently swung them as she walked to Deucey.

We got in and she cracked open a beer, swallowing half of it in two sips before passing it to me. Not only was Reba more of a lady than I had ever met, she was more of a man than me. I finished the beer, turned it upside-down and shook the last few drops out the side of the car. Reba lifted her legs up onto the seat, folding them beneath her like a lawn

chair. Her feet were two tone: pretty toenails up top painted pink, with blackened soles from being barefoot half her life.

"Put the roof on," she said. "I'm freezing."

It was no less than ninety-five degrees outside, but I wasn't in the arguing mood. The motor whirred as the top shimmied into place. Reba's eyelids were on the half shell, sending me a look I could feel -- like when people say that twins can talk without words, I knew what she was telling me. I leaned in and we started kissing again. She pulled on the back of my neck and blew heavy puffs of breath into my ear. We worked our way into the back seat and stretched out. Her eyes were clasped shut but I left mine cracked open a pinch because I didn't want to stop seeing her. She unlocked her knees and pulled my hips between her legs. We started grinding like dogs do; my bottom half was moving on automatic. She untied her bikini top.

Reba bent her knees and lifted her feet up, hooking her toes into my belt loops, and then slowly worked them downward around my ankles. Her pants were painted on. After I struggled with the snap, she directed me to hold onto the hem while she wiggled out of them like a Cicada from its shell.

Daddy once told me, "Life is about holding on through the tough times. Staying strong and keeping your grip when things turn trying." Not for me. That night, stretched out on the back seat of Deucey, I realized that for me, I've done the best of my living during the times I let go. Nothing else mattered but Reba and me. Every time I had flunked out, or fucked up or fattened my lip didn't matter. I just let it lift off of me and fly away.

We put our clothes back on, climbed up to the front and shared a Lucky Strike and the last Blue Ribbon for the ride home. We didn't say anything to each other the entire drive back. Reba leaned against the window pane, turning her head in such a way that didn't truly commit to either being inside, nor looking through the glass, shutting her eyes for periods of time much longer than a blink. I turned the radio on low and watched Reba's toes tighten on the floor mat as if they longed for tall grass to squeeze. [BP4]

Reba turned to me and said, "You know, I use to see you at that fish fry restaurant. You know how they have all them pictures of people who eat there all the time, tacked up at the cash register, next to all those bad checks?"

“Yeah, but we weren’t regulars – we only ate there once. They just took that picture because it was the last in the roll.”

“Oh, okay. So, I would look at that picture and think to myself, ‘why does that little boy look so blank?’ Because every time you see pictures of kids, they suppose to be smiling, but you were just had this empty look on your face like someone just blew out all your birthday candles.”

“I don’t remember,” I said.

“And I asked my daddy, ‘why do that little boy look so sad?’ But he didn’t know. So tell me.”

“That was when my momma made our family carry on down to the JC Penny portrait studio to get a family picture made,” I said. “It was the same day my fang tooth loosened and my daddy said, ‘I ain’t dropping half my paycheck on that there picture so you can look like a damn jack o’ lantern. Keep your tooth in your head.’”

I nodded because when my daddy said to do something, half of him wanted you to go against him, just so he’d have a reason.

While we were waiting, I wandered off to look at the wall of TV’s.”

“I love seeing at them TV’s turned on at once,” Reba said.

“Yeah, because we didn’t even have one in our house, so to see twenty of them on at once, even if most of them were just on commercials, gave me this feeling of warm calm, you know? Like all my thinking was being done for me, and if I didn't like what was going through my head, I could just click the channel. Then my daddy came looking for me.

"Chance," he said. "What in the hell you got going on here?"

"Just looking at TV," I told him.

"No sir. Not on my clock. We been searching high and low for you. Now what in damnation did you get on that shirt?" I was watching him twist his ring back and forth around his finger like it was the cap on a shook-up bottle, and he was just letting out the pressure.

I said, "Ummmmm," drawling out those m's for as long as I had breath. Trying to stretch out that short-lived moment between when I realized something was about to unfold, and it actually happening.

"It's blood, ain't it?" he asked, talking through clinched teeth. I took notice of a small, burgundy thumbprint on my sleeve.

"Goddamn it, what did I tell you about wiggling that tooth?"

"Daddy," I said, but couldn't find words to follow up with for an excuse.

He stole a quick look over his shoulder before burying his fist deep into my stomach. I folded in half like a jackknife and held on to the strength of his arm to keep me standing. Every muscle in my body seized. I had no breath to make a sound if I wanted to, which served me well. He leaned down and whispered, "You're lucky you're getting your picture taken today, or I wouldn't be worried about keeping you pretty."

Tears may have come down my face, but I didn't cry. I just wiped them away. I stayed two steps behind, just looking at his clinched fist as it squeezed like a heart pumping. Mom took notice of the stain on my shirt, looked into my eyes, then at the floor. I did the same. That night, on the ride home, daddy took us to that fish fry."

Reba nodded her head.

"I was sad because my tooth wiggled out in a piece of fried shrimp, and I swallowed it. Roy had just told me that the tooth fairy was gonna have to dig it out of my shit."

Reba said, "Dang, now I'm sad too."

I looked up and saw Reba's momma standing in the doorway of their house, her arm stretched inside, clicking the porch light off and on. Reba gave me a smile then scooped up her book, opened the car door and didn't even look back as she carried inside. I sat there idling, looking

at the house. I was hoping for something to happen. Something like Reba turning around and running back to the car, or her momma opening the door and waving me in. Instead, the porch light clicked off and I pulled away.

I turned the radio off and listened to sounds coming from Deucey: the rubber of the tires rolling across warm blacktop and the squeak of the suspension springs, the steady burn of fuel in the carburetor with the put-put of exhaust smoke leaving the mufflers. As I returned Deucey to its spot beneath the shade tree, I watched the jingle-jangle of Roy's keys as they swung in the ignition. And with the smell of Reba still stuck on my fingers, I squeezed the pelt of that rabbit foot keychain. [BP5]

I rolled up the windows and brushed cigarette ash from the seat cover, then pulled my shirt off to wipe fading firefly guts from the dashboard. I snuck inside my house, went to mine and Roy's bedroom and pulled out a *Playboy* from beneath Roy's mattress. I guess it was on account of me popping my cherry and all, but the girls between those pages just didn't work on me anymore. I had built up my immunity.

I clicked off the light and shut my eyes but couldn't get to sleep. My buzz wore down as my stomach became unsettled. I had the feeling of being homesick, only I was home -- it was Reba that I missed. I was winning my tug of war with sleep as the sun began to shine bright through the window, so I pulled closed the curtains and fell asleep right on the floor.

Next thing I saw was Daddy.

No matter how hard I wish for good things to happen, I always wind up crapping out. Sometimes I wish life was more like a pinball machine with a little loophole, so if you tilt, you still had two more tries to turn that rough reality into a replay.

"Chance, what in the name of Jesus do you think you're doing?"

Did he know about the car?

"Nothing," I told him.

His eyes were ping-ponging in his head like his instincts were telling him there was more to it.

"Are you trying my nerves boy? It's ten o'clock in the morning on a school day and you're lying here, sawing logs with your hand stuffed down your drawers," he said.

I looked around and Roy was gone.

"Daddy, I swear on the good book, I just laid down for a minute and..."

"Oh, bullshit," he said and got right to his point.

"Boy, let me explain to you where I'm coming from, because I don't reckon you understand. You ever heard the word humility? Six days a week I answer the telephone with another man's name. 'Merle Dickie Tires,' I say. 'How can I help you? Thank you for calling Merle Dickie tires, buy three, get one free.' It's bullshit and don't I know it. Why do I wake up every morning to the sound of an alarm clock laughing at me, drag myself into work for seven, work Saturdays and Thanksgiving? because I'm in love with my job? Most days I don't even feel the sunshine but through a dirty window. Maybe you think I do it for my ten-percent discount on tire repairs, or my two-week vacation that feels like it's a minute long and always seems like it's three years away. How 'bout the fact that I'm too broke down and tired to go work anywhere else? I'm miserable and I know it. I got no dignity and I've felt it for a long time. You think your mother wants to live with that? You think I want to live with myself? Why do I tolerate this kick in the teeth every day? So you don't have to. So you can live have a soft hands,

spoiled shit life and grow up to have the dignity of answering the phone with your own damn name."

I thought about what he said. I thought of giving him his predicted, "Yes sir," or a thank you for the bread on the table, but I had been pulling that card for too long; he had pushed me down too many times.

The blood rushing through my veins pulled me up from the bed while the thoughts burning in my head were carving their way into words. His eyes flash as he registered I had some backtalk, and before I could even spit one out, he backhanded me right across my face. The ruby from his class ring cut deep into my cheek like a log splitter.[BP6] *Dignity?* He didn't even give me the dignity to speak.

I didn't tuck tail and run to my momma, or turn to cry into my pillow like he might have been expecting. Instead, I looked him right in the eyes. A look he couldn't return. My whole life I viewed Daddy as a force more fearsome than God, but at that moment, I saw him for the broken man he truly was.

He twisted his ring back and forth on his finger like a hula-hoop and I didn't break my stare until he left the room. *How could things have been so sweet just the night before and turn so sour?*

I chased out of the house looking for Roy and as I pushed through the front door, I saw him pulling Deucey into the driveway. I ran up along side the driver's door.

“Roy,” I said. “Go on and give me a ride down to the beach, huh?”

He took one look at my face and said “Hey piñata face, why'd you steal my car?”

Momma came outside and I did my best to make it obvious I was showing her my back. I was whispering to Roy, “Come on now!” But he just rolled up the window in my face. Not as dramatic as I think he had wanted on account of the top being down.

Momma came up and said, “You know that sometimes people got something that they're trying to let out?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about, momma.”

I pulled on the handle and opened the door. Roy grabbed at it late and he and I got it something of a tug of war match with it. I took advantage of my feet being planted and gave it a yank. Roy tipped out half way, a pony bottle of High Life slipped from his hand and rolled toward the curb. As he leaned back inside the car, I snatched a handful

oh his hair and twisted it to strengthen my grip. He reached for the column shift.

“I’m gonna drop this mother fucker in reverse if you don’t let go, Chance!” He shouted. “And mow you over with the door!”

I needed a second to think. I pulled Roy’s hair half way into the doorjamb and shut it – pinning him in the door.

“Dang Roy,” I said, “momma’s trying to say something!” And I rose into a tone of grave seriousness, not because I cared what she said, but I wanted to hoodwink Roy into thinking there was something way more important, at present moment, than beating my ass. You fumbled for the door handle, but the way his body was situated, it required more contortion than he could manage. He pulled the cigarette lighter from his jeans and began lighting the strands of hair locked in the door hinge to break his hold.

“Now, what were you saying, Momma?”

“I was gonna tell you that sometimes people get these things growing inside of them that they just gotta let out. And sometimes that thing pushing its way from the inside is a good thing, like a baby, or love, and sometimes, it’s trying to work its way out because it’s bad for us, like how a splinter does; how all of that puss builds up around it like

a bubble until it just bursts through the skin and pops that sliver of wood out.”

“Okay,” I said. Roy was wagging that flame under his hair trying to singe himself free. The smell of his burning hair was making momma’s eyes water.

“All that stuff that grows inside of us gets so big that it just has to come out, one way or another. Understand?”

“Are you having a baby?” I asked her.

“Oh lord no, Chance.”

“Then I have no idea.”

“I guess what I’m trying to say is, I know your daddy’s got a real funny way of showing you he loves you.”

“You think so?” I said, pointing to my cheek.

“But he *does* love you. And you too, Roy. He loves you boys so much and he’s trying to help you.”

“Do you think you wanna get out of the house and go stay with your Uncle Hank for a stretch?” And as she asked, I couldn’t tell if she was crying. Not because she was covering herself up, but because Roy was leaned over in my ear laughing at me.

Roy told me that when Uncle Hank was in the army, they did all sorts of science experiments on him that pickled his brain. He lost one of his fingers in a “classified incident” and would always run his three-fingered rake between my daddy’s car seats, searching for loose change and gum. When he looked at you, one eyeball would be looking the other way, and when he talked, his bad breath would disorient you while he’d spit little pieces of whatever he was eating four hours before, right on your lips.

“What? Hell no, momma,” I said. “You can’t even stand that man and he’s your brother!”

“Now that’s not right.”

“Maybe, but it’s true!”

“Come on now, Chance. You know how that man was with his meat. He was the best dang butcher the Army ever did see. They said he could eyeball a pig and see it like a diamond cutter sees a stone. Just from looking at it, he could tell where to make the cuts to separate fat from meat, and meat from bone.”

“Well, why don’t he do that no more?” I asked.

“It ain’t his fault he don’t wanna be a butcher no more,” She said.
“Some people just burn out.”

“I heard that,” Roy said.

“Mom,” I said. “Uncle Hank kinda spooks me out a little. Besides, I got the start of something real sweet happening right here.”

Mom added, “Some things gotta be learned outside the schoolhouse.”

I didn’t say anything. Instead, I bit into the gash inside of my cheek, still raw from daddy’s backhand.

I asked her if she would be the only one who took me to the bus depot, and by the grace of god, she agreed. She even let me talk her into driving past Reba ’s on the way. I knew I wouldn’t see anybody, but the feeling I got from that house, knowing Reba was just on the other side of those curtains, was enough to put my stomach at ease.

I pulled the seat lever to recline, and watched Mom rub the heel of her hand while managing the steering wheel. She hard pressed her fingertips in a spin cycle, generating the papery sound of dry skin as she strived to free her worries like a genie from a lamp.

By the time we arrived at the bus depot, her palms were red and swollen. Momma pulled a shoebox from the back seat and handed it to me.

“Here’s a little something for you to carry with you,” She said.
“Why don’t you go ahead and wait for the bus ride to open it.”

“Alright.”

“Don’t loose hold of it, now. It’s got an envelope with some cash in it for your Uncle Hank to make groceries with and what not. I got one in there for you too.” I looked at Momma and flooded my thoughts with the idea of me staying home, repeating it loud in my head in hopes that she might somehow hear what I was thinking, and it would change her mind.

“Listen to me, Chance,” she said, grabbing hold of the back of my neck with those hands rubbed rough and bone dry like stale biscuits. “You’re gonna have a real good time, I just know it. Your Uncle’s been through a tumble or two and he’s always managed to pull up aces. Just try and get something from your stay with him, you hear? Before you know it, you’ll be back home again and richer for the experience.”

I looked down at my shoes.

As Momma pulled me in for a goodbye hug, I could feel her choking back the emotion. She wasn’t one to bottle her tears and as we pulled apart I realized that it wasn’t only for my benefit -- she was struggling to hold it together for her own reasons. And if she were able to convince me that she was standing strong, then she might just believe

it herself. She said that she loved me and left while I waited for the bus, not knowing exactly which direction I was headed.

Strike Anywhere

Chapter 5: Halfway

I had never taken the bus before, the truth being I never really had any place to go. The thought of traveling never crossed my mind much as I got to see much of the world through maps and postcards.

I took the bench seat in the last row, right next to the toilet. The stench creeping through the door worked like a scarecrow -- nobody wanted to sit close to it and I wanted to be alone. The bus ride was near 14 hours, punctuated by small town stops and regional facts that cracked across the intercom. I watched it all through the window as we slow-rolled through the turns of Texas, across tributaries and into the wetlands of the Pelican state. The air-conditioner struggled to cut the heat of sunrays beating against the bus while passengers fanned folded newspapers at their faces. I slid the back window open and thumbed

through the shoebox, separating what I felt was mine from what I was gonna pass on to Uncle Hank. Momma had addressed an envelope to Hank stuffed with \$200 cash and another with \$40 for me. I reached into my sock, pulled out the roll of 67 two-dollar bills and wrapped it with the twenties, then pushed it back down into my sock. Momma had wrapped three tins of Deviled Ham in newspaper packed beside a few bars of soap, a tube of toothpaste, a plastic comb and a laminated bookmark from our church with a length of fancy gold twine looped through a hole at the top. There was a drawing of one of the Wisemen carrying a lamb on one side with psalm 31 typed out on the other:

*In thee, O LORD, have I taken refuge;
let me never be ashamed;
deliver me in Thy righteousness.
Incline Thine ear unto me,
deliver me speedily;
be Thou to me a rock of refuge,
even a fortress of defense, to save me.
For Thou art my rock and my fortress;
therefore for Thy name's sake
lead me and guide me.*

I pinched the bookmark by the gold string and held it out the window, letting it flutter in the wind against my hand like a playing card in a bicycle spoke, before it finally pulled free. I stretched out across the

seats and shut my eyes, thinking about Reba and our time together as I was slowly rocked to sleep by the rhythmic rumble of the road.

A few hours later, I woke to the vegetative smell of slow moving water. It was the last stretch of my ride to Halfway. The bus traveled slowly atop a narrow, gravel hump of a road that bisected the bayou. Giant bald cypress trees sprouted from shallow water on both sides; Spanish moss hung from their branches like dirty laundry; knobby cypress knees fingered their way toward shore. The bus driver recited town facts over the intercom as we drew toward our destination. "Halfway, Louisiana is located at the bottom of Assumption parish on the perimeter of the Atchafalaya basin -- one of the largest deltas in the United States. The Atchafalaya Basin is approximately 20 miles in width and 150 miles in length. With a population of 732, Halfway is among one of the largest towns in the area."

The sun had nearly set and the twinkle of house lights polka-dotted the outlying region. The bus pulled its air brakes and let me out at a place called the "Turnin' Point Diner," located at the foot of a dead-end road where all traffic is forced to turnaround. The Turnin' Point wasn't

anything more than a double-wide trailer skinned in thin sheets of stainless steel, with wider windows cut into its side. Pick-up trucks and street rods crowded the oyster shell parking lot as salty smoke smelling of fried perch tail drifted from the kitchen vent. I knew I was in the right place -- this was the heart of Halfway -- but Uncle Hank was nowhere in sight.

I stepped inside the diner to drop some coins into the cigarette machine and exchanged looks with a girl sitting at the counter. She was about my age, her pretty face was painted up in heavy blue eye shadow, framed by feathered hair; her body squeezed into too-tight jeans. She watched me with both elbows planted on the counter, sipping her coke through a bendy-straw, a wad of pink bubblegum stuck to the bottleneck like it was being saved for later. I found the lever for Lucky Strikes and pulled out a pack before heading back outside, hoping to fly low until I felt out the town. Roy had warned me of the small towns' recipe for recreation. Or, as he called it "4-F's 4-Fun: Fightin', Fuckin', Fast cars and Fine strawberry wine."

I squatted on the curb and lit a smoke to pass the time, letting the match slowly burn down to my fingertips. I lit another cigarette off the butt to draw out the head rush, and by the time it was through, I noticed

Uncle Hank barreling down the dirt road with one headlight burned out, just like him. He was driving a 1964 Ford Ranchero, which isn't truly a car *or* a truck; it's both and neither at the same time -- a transvestite of the auto world. A Ray Price tune was turning over the radio as Uncle Hank accompanied it with the wrong words in the wrong key.

He pulled up right next to me, jumped out and took a quick look before pretending not to recognize me. A fine actor seeing as I was the only guy besides him at the Turnin' Point, not wearing shrimp boots. Uncle Hank was as identifiable as a Siamese twin nudie dancer. The tattoos he covered his arms with while in his early twenties had long faded into memories of Mardi Gras gone by.[BP7] Blurry black cats and snakes chased their way around wide-lined pin-up girls; a spider web spanned across his elbow. His forearm featured a naked lady sitting inside a Martini glass, spreading her legs open wide while holding four aces in her hand. A big banner rolled beneath her reading, "Man's Ruin." And that's exactly what he was: a ruined man; his autobiography stained into his skin. Uncle Hank's black hair stood tall, slicked up into a pompadour and a shiny rhinestone belt buckle in the shape of a horseshoe stretched around a pair of his signature coveralls. They were the same pair he wore to Sunday service during his very *last* visit to

Texas, when he kept elbowing the Pastor for "One more hit of that blood of Christ." Watching Uncle Hank doing his best to appear incognito, I wondered, *how many people in Half Way clutch their cigarettes with a three-fingered paw?*

"Uncle Hank!" I hollered. No reply, he was deep in character.

"Uncle Hank, it's Chance." He shot me his meanest squint.

"Who's that there? Do I know you? You the Law or something?"

"Yeah, I'm the fucking law," I said. "And I'm arresting you for littering, so pick your dirty ass up off the street."

If I was going to survive three weeks, I would have to show him I was grown now.

"Goddamn it boy, you shot up like a dog's dick since I seen you last."

As he stretched out his hand to greet me I read the letters T.C.B. tattooed across the remaining fingers of his right hand. He got right to business.

"Now, you got something for me?"

I pulled the envelope from my back pocket with "Hank" written across the front in Mom's script. He tore through it like a Christmas

present, pulled out eight twenty-dollar bills and took a big sniff. His nostrils made a whistling noise as he drew air.

"Don't be mad because I didn't vote for you, sir. I reckon—you must have been a damn good President," he said, planting a kiss on the bills. "You hungry? All I done had was a sailor's breakfast topped off with a liquid lunch. I owe it to my public to keep up my figure. Let's get to it." He pushed the door open and didn't look back, or offer a hand with my bag.

"Turnin' Point's got the best damn southern fried chicken in the parish, no, no, scratch that, best in the state," he announced before the door swung shut.

Here I was, sentenced to three weeks with a loose nut as my keeper in a town named Half Way, so called, I imagined, because it was exactly half way between nothing and nowhere.

We sat down and ordered two specials: fried chicken, mustard greens, black-eyed peas and corn bread, washed down with an ice-cold Coke. I finished half my plate before letting Uncle Hank have at it.

I asked, "Why is it you got that T.C.B. tattoo across your fingers, Uncle Hank?"

"What you think I shoulda got, F.T.W.? I ain't gonna get no J-O-B with no F-T-W across my N-U-C-K-E-L-S," he explained before snapping a chicken leg in half to suck the marrow out. He gestured with the broken bone as he explained.

"Listen, I wasn't trying to flash my celebrity around your paw's place when I done come up for a visit, seeing as I got to respect him and his castle and all. But around these parts, I'm what you might call a living legend, on account of I was in boot camp over in Fort Hood with the King of Rock 'n Roll."

I looked around the Turnin' Point to see if this might be a leftover from his parking lot act. I said, "Seriously?"

"That's right, your ol' Uncle Hank and Private Elvis Aron Presley of the 'A' Company, Second Medium Tank Battalion, were blood brothers, yes sir. That's why I done got my T.C.B. tattoo. I guess you could say it was out of respect for the King. Me and Mr. Elvis Presley: *Takin' Care of Business.*"

I wasn't quite sure what he was talking about and I didn't really care to find out. It did explain why he kept on with the waitress saying things like, "That ain't what I ordered, *Return to Sender*," and "Don't be

cruel sweetheart, why don't you get me a hunka-hunka that sweet potato pie."

We finished supper and Uncle Hank bummed a cigarette off the waitress, then turned his pockets inside out, looking for a book of matches. I hadn't smoked a cigarette in front of family before, but I pulled one out of my pack and lit it, then extended the match to light Uncle Hank's. I watched him process it, weighing right and wrong, struggling with the fact that he was the adult for the first time in his life, and that he should probably say something responsible, but the temptation of having a smoker in his company, and the free cigarettes that accompany that seemed to be what motivated him to keep quite. Our waitress flipped the door sign from open to closed, and told us that we could sit while we finish our Cokes. She turned the jukebox music up loud and hummed to it as she swept shrimp tails and hush puppy crust into a dustpan. The short-order cook filled a tub of dirty dishes and pie plates with scalding water, steaming the diner and fogging the windows. I took my fingertip and tried to write *Reba* backwards on the glass.

"What?" Uncle Hank asked. "You got a little piece of something waiting for you back home?"

"Naw," I replied.

“Cause you don’t got to worry about that here. Half Way’s stocked with just about everything a man might need.”

“So I see,” I said, looking around at the empty diner.

“Don’t be like that, boy.”

“It’s not against you, Uncle Hank,” I said. “I just got my own route to travel, and right now, Half Way ain’t a stop.”

He picked up his Coca-cola glass and sucked down the last sip, then circled his straw around the ice cubes.

“I gotta say, that hurt my sensibility just a little bit. We’re family, nephew, and the way I see it, you’re here. Am I correct? Or are you still in Texas? Because the way you’re acting, I don’t think you really know.”

The waitress came by our table and picked up our Coca-cola glasses. I took the last drag of my cigarette and squashed it in the ashtray as Uncle Hank nutshelled what he was trying to say:

“You can go ahead and flap your wings like a pretty little butterfly, float from sunflower to sunflower, sniffing the sweet smells. Or, you can saddle up, put your stinger on and buzz like a bee. Who knows? Somebody little lady might just get stung.” He said as he stood up and headed for the door, making a loud buzzing noise as he exited the

Turnin' Point. I pulled my money-roll from my sock and peeled off a two-dollar bill, dropping it on the counter to supplement the thin tip. Outside, Uncle Hank was jogging around the Rancho, flapping his arms up and down.

“You a butterfly or a bee, boy?” He asked.

I threw my bag into the bed of the Rancho.

“You wanna drive home, bee?” Uncle Hank asked.

“Hell yeah,” I replied.

“Well then, say it.” He was still flapping his wings, buzzing between every other word.

“I wanna drive,” I replied.

“Did you say something, butterfly?”

I said, “The bee wants to drive.”

“BUZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!”

He was laughing hard and breathing heavy as he stumbled over to the passenger side of the Rancho, grabbing tight onto the door handle just to hold himself up.

I got in and started her up. Uncle Hank explained how he had built the motor from scratch. A 289 topped off with a four-barrel carb and custom dual exhaust. He may not have known how to read or write but

he could turn a wrench. He bolted an after market tachometer into the dash and screwed a 13 ball into the shift lever "for good luck."

I rode the redline as Uncle Hank directed me through the shortcuts of Half Way. He cracked open a beer and took sips while fidgeting with the CB radio that hung beneath the dashboard. While the signal strength suffered from a lack of a proper antenna, Uncle Hank repeatedly barked trucker slang into the microphone, with no reply.

The route we followed pulled us out of the marsh that framed the Turnin' Point and along a narrow dirt road. We zigzagged through tall cedar trees, lead by the headlight of the Ranchero. Mailboxes marked thin driveways that broke into the dirt road, connecting hand-built houses and trailers. While the humidity still clung to my skin like a fly strip, the dank bayou air dissipated as we traveled further across solid ground.

Uncle Hank clicked off the CB radio and began to speak about his days in the service.

"Yup, me and the ol' King were pretty tight back then. Taught me some of them Rock 'n Roll 'trade secrets' deep down in a foxhole one night. Told me it was my responsibility not to abuse my gift, but to share our vision with the rest of the world. It's my calling, ya see. That's why I

keep myself round these parts Chance, it ain't for me, it's for my people."

I skidded to a stop in his yard, a small clearing of browned grass, tucked between puffy sycamore trees. His old Airstream singlewide trailer was up on cinder blocks, tilted slightly to the side. The tires had disintegrated; the screen door was kicked in and tied shut with the elastic waistband from a pair of underwear. The Airstream's traditional aluminum shine had long since tarnished. Parked beside it was what looked like a broke down ice-cream truck with the hood pulled off.

Uncle Hank made a theatrical *tada!* gesture with his arms while getting out of the Ranchero. "There she is Chance," he said. "My million dollar idea. Right there in your ol' Uncle Hanky-Panky's back pocket."

"What, that ice-cream truck?"

"Hell yes!"

I said, "If that truck was a dog, I'd tell you to put her down."

"Dang boy, you just ain't getting it. You never heard of supply and demand? That's right, Nephew, there ain't no other ice-cream truck for ten towns."

It seemed like the truck had been parked for years. The white paint had grayed and a thick green moss crept up one side. All the pictures advertising ice cream bars and cold drinks had long since cracked and peeled.

I asked, "Does it run?"

Patting his palm on the side of the truck, gently, as if he were calming a wild horse, he said, "A little transmission work, maybe a belt or two, a brake job and some suspension work then *look out!*"

"You ain't gonna be no ice cream man, Uncle Hank."

"Bullshit, It only needs three things," he said, as he counted them out on his three fingers: "T, L and C. When I get those bells a jingling, people are gonna be *throwing* money at me. "Come on, let's have a looky-look."

He lead me inside, squeezing between tall stacks of manuals and apple-barrels filled with pieces-parts. It smelled like dirty laundry and made a dull humming noise.

"How long you had it, then?" I asked.

"Oh, just about two summers now."

"Well, why ain't this hunka-hunka love running yet? You been too busy spreading the King's message to put the fix on it?"

"Boy, don't you get wise with me. One of them front tires is brand new. Besides, I done fixed the most important part already. Now stand back."

He made some sort of a pelvis thrusting, invisible hula-hoop presentation before sliding open the lid to the icebox. A moist cloud of cold air simmered from the box as the truck's hum got louder. Uncle Hank whispered "Whoosh" in my ear.

Before me was what looked like seven or eight cases of ice cold *Pabst Blue Ribbon* packed side-by-side in the icebox. My cheek hurt as the smile pushed its way across my face. Uncle Hank reached in fishing out two cans.

"To the King," I cheered as we toasted two cans together.

We stayed up past three in the morning, carrying on. I lost count after six Blue Ribbons and Uncle Hank was drinking two to every one of mine. Uncle Hank explained that while Half Way didn't have a whole lot of the big state money rolling through, like other parts of Louisiana, everyone in Half Way had a hustle that got them through life – to pay for their day by day. He said that while some folks may have had more wealth on paper, the fact was that they actually had *less*. For those paper-rich people to keep all of their things afloat, they had to give more of

themselves. Uncle Hank said that when you give so much of yourself to paper, there's less left over for everything else. And owning things like cars, boats and houses, actually make you poor in spirit.

I stumbled into the Airstream and bumped around looking for the light switch, before giving up and laying down in the dark—on the first soft spot I could find. Uncle Hank stayed outside listening to the Rancho's radio; sitting on the tailgate and swinging his feet back and forth while sipping on his cold beer. I closed my eyes and began slipping into sleep as Uncle Hank sang along to the Elvis song that was playing:

*“You've got to be strong, you'd better hold on,
'Cos only the strong survive.
You've got to be a man, you've got to take a stand,
Only the strong survive.”*

Strike Anywhere

Chapter 6: Ranchero in the Rain

It was my thirst that woke me that next day, choking me to my feet. The Airstream, silver and puffy like a pan of Jiffy-Pop popcorn, collected heat like sunrays were money. I figured Uncle Hank was still sleeping so I worked my way over to the icebox, looking for anything wet. I pulled the door-latch like a slot machine lever and it was empty. Like a low-roller on his last nickel-slot, I turned to the kitchen sink and spun the spigot all the way until it stopped. It was bone dry. It seemed the Airstream was lacking the electricity it needed to work the water pump, the icebox, and the fan. I figured Uncle Hank might have an angle on some water so I stepped over to the bedroom.

"Uncle Hank," I hollered. No reply. "Uncle Hank, you got anything to drink in there?"

I drew the towel he had pinned-up, dividing the front-half of the trailer from the back. His bed was empty. I figured he might have been out picking up some parts for his Ice Cream truck with the money Momma sent him. He had shed a pair of petrified underwear at the foot of his bed sitting next to a near empty box of fried chicken livers, with a breadcrumb trail leading right to the can. Hanging on his bedroom wall, was a framed picture of Uncle Hank's Army troop; Elvis Presley right in the middle.

I heard the Ranchero's V-8 rumbling down the road so I stumbled outside. I could barely keep my eyes open more than a squint as the noon sun magnified my sore skull. He pulled to a stop right next to me. I barely took notice of the stranger sitting in the front seat as I leaned through the window.

"Y'all got something to drink?" I asked.

"Always," Uncle Hank hollered, holding up the beer he had stashed between his legs. The sight of it made me dry heave before I could yank my head from the interior.

"Looky like the boy woke-up thirsty," Uncle Hank said, elbowing a chuckle from the man sitting shotgun. A smile exposed the stranger's missing front teeth.

"Hand him one of them 'Donald Duck' O.J.'s Lucien, would ya?"

The man reached into a paper bag and produced a small tin can of juice. I popped the top and downed it in one shot.

"Can I get another," I asked.

"Now you got to leave Lucien some of that juice for one of his world famous mixed drinks. You ain't lived till you tasted one of his Greyhounds. Talk about smooth, *hot diggity*."

The man let out a popped-lung, wheeze-like chuckle as he handed me another can. I sat on the bumper of the Ice Cream truck and thanked Jesus for the juice he had provided, as the two men stepped out of the Rancho.

"Chance, stand up. I want you to meet the second most famous man in all of Assumption Parish. It's my pleasure to introduce you to, 'Lucky' Lucien Faucheux: pin-striper to the stars."

His handshake was strong and rough, like a lifetime of unskilled labor had built it. Plump veins the colors of faded Easter eggs criss-crossed his arms.

"Nice to meet you, sir," I told him.

He seemed uncomfortable in his own skin as he scratched at it. The cigarette between his fingers trembled between deep drags as he smoked it down to the cotton, eyeballs bouncing away from any true commitment of eye contact. Uncle Hank did all his talking.

"Yup, ol' Lucien's inside his head half the time, but don't pay it no mind. The man got struck by lightning years back, fine-tuning a television antenna during a thunderstorm. Gave him a twitch and stuttered up his speech, but this sunuvabitch can roll a straight and steady pinstripe the length of a school bus."

Lucien smiled, then spit. Uncle Hank scratched his balls, lit up a Lucky Strike and cracked open another beer – all in one swift move.

"Guess you could say he's a man of few words," Uncle Hank continued. "But when he do talk, it's about visions of the future. You see, when Lucien got struck, that lightning bolt left him with more than just a monthly disability stipend; it delivered this man a true gift, worth more than any government check."

"Alright?" I said, hoping to fast forward through Uncle Hank's suspenseful pauses.

“But you knew I was gonna say that; now didn’t you?” Uncle Hank said, putting his hand on Lucien’s shoulder. “That’s right, Chance. This here man’s got E.S.P.”

Lucien clicked into a look with me to let me know that this wasn’t standard Uncle Hank bullshit, and stuttered out the words, “Real deal.”

I rustled out another can of Donald Duck OJ out of the bag and when I was half through, Lucien offered me a hit off his liquor to top it off. His hand steadied as he extended his half-pint, pouring a stream of gin through the can’s sip hole. I gave it a quick spin to mix the liquids and raised it to join Uncle Hank’s toast.

“To you.”

They weren’t like Daddy. Uncle Hank wasn’t gonna be watching over my shoulder, hoping I would fuck up just so he could have a reason to holler or knock me around. Uncle Hank let me know they were schooling me to the ways of the world -- breaking me in. I asked him when we were gonna get around to fixing the Ice Cream truck. "In due time, boy," he replied, "in due time."

I folded down the tailgate of the Ranchero and wrapped my t-shirt across my eyes like a pin-the-tail on the donkey game. It held off the

sunlight and doubled as a pillow as I laid my head down in the bed of the Rancho and drifted off while Uncle Hank “talked business.”

When I awoke, I didn't see Uncle Hank or Lucien anywhere. I figured they had left for the shade of the Airstream. As I sat up from the bed of the Rancho I noticed a kid sitting in the driver's seat of the Rancho, listening to music the radio. He looked around 14, skinny, with his hair cropped short. His eyes were extra-large and filled with that cold, bare blue that looked like they were distant, no matter how close you got. As I approached, he cranked up the window, never taking his eyes off me, never blinking. When I stretched for the handle, he slapped the door lock down. He was too skinny to scrap with so I tapped on the glass. He turned the radio up.

“What you doing,” I asked, hollering through the window. “Trying to kill my battery? Turn them keys off.”

“Hank said I could,” he hollered back in a high-pitched voice, “on account of Grandma lets him plug his ice cream truck into her trailer.” I looked at the ice cream truck and followed a chain of orange extension cords -- knotted at every connection – stretching across his lot and into the next.

“Awlright, but Hank ain’t the only one who drives this here truck. If that battery’s spent, I’m stuck”

“Who are you?” he yelled.

“Chance. I ain’t here but for a few weeks staying with my Uncle Hank.”

“Your uncle said he took a bullet for Elvis Presley so he could come back to Memphis and make all them records.”

“Who told you that?” I yelled.

“Grandma.”

“Who’s Grandma?”

“Just my grandma.”

“Who are you?”

“My name’s Sadie,” he shouted with a straight face.

“Sadie? What’s that short for?”

“Nothing.”

“What’s that, a nickname?”

“No.”

“Ain’t that a girl’s name?” I asked.

“Yeah. I am a girl,” she answered.

“You don’t look like no girl.”

“Got lice a few months back, had to shave my head and throw out all my clothes. Now I just keep it cut short cause it feels good,” she said rubbing her hand over her scalp. It was the first time she looked away since I saw her. Dirt was packed beneath her fingernails and sweat outlined a faint, blonde moustache across her lip.

“Your uncle ain’t the only one in this town with a story,” she said.

“How do you mean?” I asked.

Sadie turned down the radio and unlocked the door, sliding herself over to the passenger side of the Ranchero and putting her feet up on the dashboard.

“Take me somewhere,” she said.

“You got something particular in mind?”

“Just drive me in a circle, I don’t care.” she said. “It don’t matter how big or how small, just so long as it takes an hour for me to get back here.”

I opened the door, sat down in the drivers seat and started the Ranchero, revving the engine a few times before popping the clutch. I guess part of me didn’t believe Sadie peed sitting down, looking at her dressed in those droopy jeans and baggy white t-shirt, so I asked her, “Do you get your period and all that?”

“Yes,” she answered as if she was exhausted with me already.

“Well how come you try and look like a boy?” I asked her.

“I don’t *try* to look like a boy, I just don’t try *not* to. When I had to throw out all my clothes, I just picked out whatever was free at the Salvation Army. I don’t care if it’s boys clothes.” Sadie scratched at her head like she had fleas while I made exclusively left turns, carving a wide circle around Uncle Hank’s Airstream as the sky swelled with dark rain clouds that stifled the sunlight.

“That doesn’t seem, I don’t know, not *proper* to you?”

“It don’t matter,” she said. “I should be dead now anyway. I was born a blue baby. Grandma told me that imbecile cord done wrapped around my neck like curtain string and tried to make me dead before I got born.”

“So that’s what makes you special?” I asked.

“Yup. On account of I was spared by Jesus,” she said, “And I ain’t even afraid to die anymore because I been spared so many times now.” as she began a countdown on her left hand.

“When I was five, I stuck a skate-key right into the electric socket at the roller-skating rink. The man said that it was them rubber wheels that saved my life, but I know better. All it did was turn my hair from

curly to straight. On my seventh birthday, I ate four pellets of strychnine out of a rattrap behind the 'Turnin' Point' diner on account of they looked just like sugar cubes. They pumped my stomach but all it did was make it so I stay skinny. One time, when I was ten, it grew so cold that the whole parish froze. Only happens every hundred years or so. I was walking back from school when I fell through the ice on the Bayou. Grandma said she knew something was wrong cause the dog kept on barking. When I didn't come home, she let the dog loose. He led her right to me. They said I got so cold, my heart stopped pumping. Grandma hadn't seen no one that shade of blue since I was a baby. They kept me under a electric blanket in the hospital for five days. All it did was make it so I stay pale."

I slowed the Ranchero to a stop and turned to read her look, and she was looking right back at me through those eyes -- vacant, like when someone becomes so hollowed out by bad things happening to them so often, they just carve a face so it'll act as a placeholder, like a scarecrow, or a cigar store Indian. I couldn't figure out if she thought it made her indestructible, or if she just didn't care if she was shattered. Heavy raindrops began pelting the Ranchero's windshield, hard and fast. "You trying to say you got nine-lives or something?" I asked.

Sadie rolled down the window and held her hand out, palm cupped to collect the rain. “Believe what you wanna believe. I do got nine-lives, but not like no cat. I got nine-lives on account of Jesus.”

I looked in the rear-view mirror noticing the bed of the Ranchero had filled halfway with water; an empty Donald Duck O.J. can shuddered in the pelting rain. I tried to think of what I might say to her, what kind of response Sadie might have been looking for, but instead, I kept quiet and put the Ranchero into first, spinning the tires in the mud while whipping sloppy circles around the Airstream for the rest of the hour.

We drove the Ranchero over to Sadie’s grandma’s trailer to play the clock radio and sift through all of the near-death keepsakes she had collected over the years. While Grandma’s place was just a hundred yards from the Airstream, it could just as well have been across worlds. The canvas canopies were bright orange and unfaded by the sun, holding off the rain without any pinhole leaks. It was constructed to look more like a house than anything roadworthy; skinned with textured vinyl siding tinted shades of brown to mimic wood grain; sturdy wood flower boxes strategically placed to conceal the tires, bridged by lattice trim that

skirted around the undercarriage. Unlike Uncle Hank's, everything in Sadie's grandma's trailer worked, from the faucet, to the door, to the lady who lived inside.

Sadie sat across from me at the kitchen table clicking through some presets on the radio before dialing in some Zydeco music that she said was native to the bayou. To me, it sounded like someone jammed a harmonica into the respirator of an iron lung while they kicked a fiddle across the floor, chaffing chubby thighs together in fat-ribbed corduroy pants while some lady cussed them out in French.

She took the lid off of a shoebox, turned it upside down and emptied a baker's dozen hospital bands on the kitchen table. While sifting through them, Sadie said, "This one here's my triple-threat," holding up a yellowed bracelet with S. Vuskovich typed across the face.

"How so?" I asked.

"Well, this is from the time I fell through that ice. After they picked me up, the ambulance near skidded off the road on account of the freeze. Now that's twice. When I got to the hospital, they couldn't feel no pulse so they was about to send me down to the meat room when Grandma starts hollering 'warm her up, warm her up!' They did and my pulse

picked right back up where it left off. That's why I call it my triple threat," she explained, handing me the bracelet.

"If you had to pick it, how would you wanna go?" she asked.

"Shee, I don't know. The thought never crossed my mind," I answered.

"Well, if you *had* to pick it, which would it be?"

"Since you're the expert, why don't you tell me. How should I wanna die?" I asked.

She squinted her eyes down, quietly rocking from side to side.

"Car wreck," she said. "Just like Jimmy Dean."

"Quick and painless. I'll take it," I said.

"Oh no, you'll feel it awright. You'll feel your bones buckle and break on impact, as metal bends and tears through your body. You'll feel cold cover you as the last drop of blood spills from your heart onto the highway," she said, as her fingers formed fists. I just looked out the window.

"You wanna split a cigarette?" I asked. She nodded and we went outside beneath the cover of the trailer's canopy.

I lit one up and took a deep drag before passing it to Sadie. "Don't worry, if you get lung cancer, Jesus will save you."

“You don’t see it, huh?” She said, blowing on the cigarette’s cherry and looking down at her feet.

“I just don’t understand why you gotta be talking about it so much.”

“What’s the first three letters in my name?”

“S-A-D.”

“What that spells?”

“Sad,” I answered.

“And what’s the last three letters in my name?” she asked.

“D-I-E.”

“What that spells?”

“Die.”

“Well. . . now you know,” she said as she ran her fingers back and forth across her scalp.

“What you think,” I asked her. “That’s some Christian code from Jesus? He done planted an idea in whoever birthed you’s head, so they could namedrop and tip you off somehow so that you could unlock his message hidden in all of those close calls with death?”

“I don’t know *how* he did it, but he *did it*,” she said, singing the last two words like they were from a nursery rhyme.

“Well if Jesus likes you so dang much, then how come he didn’t just let you die the first time?”

She just giggled a little and stepped out from beneath the canopy into the rain, bouncing up and down with her hands held straight up in the air, and I realized that this girl was living in a goddamn trailer in the woods outside of a small town in southern Louisiana, and that shoebox full of shrinky-dinks was probably all she had to go on. Her Jesus Saves routine was more than just small talk, it was her nametag -- the one thing that made her shine in a town full of long days and quiet nights.

Watching her dance around in that rain, splashing in the puddles that collected in tire ruts, I knew she had to be all girl. Not just because a man would never do some goofy theatrics like that, but because as the rain washed over her, it soaked her baggy clothes causing them to stick to her skin in a way that revealed her lady shapes for the first time. Looking at Sadie’s dark nipples through that wet shirt, I thought about what Reba might be doing right at that moment, and if she had learned that I left. While I wanted to get back to Flat Fork in a hurry, I didn’t want to return to fill the same shoes I wore when I left -- they didn’t fit me anymore. I’d be walking back into that town wearing a new pair,

long and hard, that would stomp on those shoes that daddy kicked me with, make him wish all his little piggies had gone to the market.

Thinking about Reba gave me a boner so I told Sadie I was gonna head back over to the Airstream to look for Uncle Hank. I guess I didn't want her to see that I had a boner, or to think I got that boner on account of her bouncing around in that wet t-shirt, but mainly, I wanted to go back to the Airstream and jerk off before Uncle Hank got back.

I got in the Rancho and followed the orange extension cord chain like breadcrumbs, back to the Airstream. I circled it once to see if there were any signs of life but it looked clear. As I tugged it into neutral and reached to turn the key, Uncle Hank poked his head through the hole in the screen door and made some kind of motion that implied he wanted me to come to him. I looked at my boner and then back at Uncle Hank. He had been walking in the rain, black hair tint had washed down his cheeks giving him the look of a coal miner. Normally that would have killed the chubby, but the thought of Reba kept it strong. I slipped the shifter into reverse and figured if I drifted backwards slowly enough, Uncle Hank might not even realize I was moving. As the tires began rolling, he swung open the door and started waving his arms to get my

attention. I pressed harder on the accelerator pedal and three-point turned my way into a different direction.

Even though I wanted to get some privacy, I didn't want to go far. Aside from not knowing anything about Halfway, the gas gauge was bobbing between empty and fumes. I chugged past Sadie's trailer, and further down the narrow dirt road past the next mobile home, and another. I passed seven of trailers on the strip -- small tree-cleared plots carved just big enough for a doublewide and a dog. I continued driving until I couldn't see a trailer in sight. I became aware of how tropical Halfway truly was. Ferns sprouted from tree holes, cedar trees anchored deep in the dirt where elephant ears sprouted from, spreading their leaves wide to absorb light. Trees that had fallen over during hurricane season were hosts to lush green life.

I pulled the Ranchero as close the tree line as I could and pulled the hand brake, watching the windshield wipers flap back and forth. I hadn't even had a shower since I was with Reba, and as I zipped down my fly, I could faintly smell her wetness in my pubic hair. I pressed down on my boner and it felt brand new. Like dipping it inside Reba worked like some kind of a baptism and it was wondering why I was about to jerk off like I use to before that boner had been born again? I had fucked a girl,

so why was I gonna jerk off like a virgin? I thought about it. Why was I tugging with that calloused index finger positioned right at the top of the totem pole? That finger was overworked: dialing phones, picking boogers, counting out change, why was I gonna put something that coarse right up next to my dickhead when that tender little pinky is just dancing around all dainty-like on the other end? And why does the hand does all the motion when I wanted it to *feel* like I was fucking. I spit into my palm, turned it upside down, and as the worn wiper-blades trilled arches across the glass, I bit down onto my shirt collar, and humped my hand.

After I finished, I stayed put in the Rancho, wiping away the condensation from the windshield and looking up into the branches of the cypress trees that hung above me. I watched as a banana spider bounced, holding on tight to the threads of her web as she was hammered by rainfall.

Strike Anywhere

Chapter 7: Smokey Robinson

Days in the Airstream soon faded from glory as the money ran its course -- turning into “liquid assets” as Uncle Hank put it. “This town’s so damn broke,” he said, “we can’t afford but one season: Summer!”

He had spent the last of momma’s money on a new watchstrap; brown leather pressed to look like alligator skin. Uncle Hank sat down on the tailgate of the Ranchero for forty-minutes fighting with his three fingers to thread that watch-pin through his new strap. Once he had pushed it through, he said, “Have a looky-look boy – that’s cut from a real-live alligator tail,” stretching his arm to give me a closer look.

“Wow, that’s real nice, Uncle Hank.”

“See that,” he said, extending his arm closer. “It’s cut from a piece of the jaw bone -- you can still see one of them gator teeth sticking up in there,”

When I got my eyes up close to his watchband, he snapped his hand at me, clamping onto my ear while growling out alligator chomping sounds.

“Good one Uncle Hank,” I said. “You got me.”

He had laughed himself nearly out of breath, still locked onto my ear with his paw.

“Awlright, Uncle Hank, go on and let me go now.”

“You know the rules,” he said. “Say uncle.”

“I just did.”

As he pulled his hand back, the pin popped out of the watchstrap and fell to the ground. I took a seat on the tailgate of the Ranchero and fanned away the gnats circling my head while Uncle Hank sift through the tall grass.

“Uncle Hank,” I asked him. “When do you think we’re gonna get into fixing up that ice cream truck over there?”

“I don’t know,” he said looking up into the sky like he was searching for a sunset or rain cloud to use as an excuse. “Maybe

tomorrow. Besides, I gotta drive Lucien down to the check-cashing store. Today's payday -- hot diggidy."

He asked me if I wanted to come but the thought of dragging along on the coattails of Lucien's disability check wasn't the high I was looking for. After Uncle Hank took off in the Ranchero, I went to the ice cream truck. While I didn't know how to wrench on the engine to get it running, I figured I could take to some of the rust spots, wipe away the mossy film that skimmed its glass. I started by pulling out all of the crates that were stacked inside, separating things into three piles of keepers, throwaways and things Uncle Hank was gonna have to decide on himself.

I stacked the manuals and wiring diagrams inside on the passenger seat in case a burst of rain blew in, then took to the bumpers with a jar of naval jelly and steel wool I pulled from one of the crates. The sun was beating strong on the top of my head as I crouched down, scratching away at it with the coarse hairs of the steel wool working against the rust that had pitted deep into the chrome.

As I worked, my mind began spinning circles too. I thought about Reba, and how I'd ask Roy to try and find her phone number so I could call her after I figured out what I was gonna say. I pictured Daddy sitting

in front of the TV in the air conditioning, laughing at the fact that he sent me to a place that was completely unplugged.

I took to the front of the truck, pulling the steel wool apart into pieces small enough to fit between the slats of the grill. My arms were powder-coated in an earthy orange from the rust particles that had collected on my skin. I could taste it in my nose hairs from breathing it in. When the rain came down, arriving the same time it had the day before, I pulled off my shirt and used it with the rain to wipe away the naval jelly that had dried on the chrome. As I wiped it away, I saw my reflection in the bumper, smiling at how shiny I had gotten it in just an afternoon. The grill looked like it was fresh out of the box. I went inside the ice cream truck and sat on top of the sliding metal doors of the cooler, watching through the wide sales window, as the rain come down. I slid open the cooler door beside me and fished out a cold beer. Uncle Hank and Lucien had emptied all but three cans, and the first one I swallowed went down so easy, I chased it with a second one right quick. With the last beer in my hand, I thought about how Uncle Hank was gonna be looking forward to it, expecting it to be there when he went to fetch it. He'd understand, I thought to myself as I pulled the tab. I did a hard day's work for his truck and now I was just takin' care of business.

When the rain died down, I changed into a clean shirt and followed the extension cords on over to Sadie's. As I was coming up on the trailer, a pickup truck pulled up to the steps of the trailer and sat for a minute with its engine running before a woman peeled out of the truck cab, tapping ash from her cigarette as she waved goodbye to the driver. She popped dainty smoke rings from the side of her mouth as she took notice of me. Her blonde hair was pulled back tight and twisted into a bun, skewered on top of her head with a sharp number-two. One strand hung across her face with a curl that bounced like a finger calling, "come closer." Her waitress outfit clung to her bee-stung curves like gravy. Lacey was spelled in fancy cursive on her nametag.

"Evening, Ma'am," I said. "I'm here to see Sadie."

"Who you think you're calling ma'am," she said, hands on her hips, cigarette perched on her lips, bouncing out with her every word like it was a telegram. "I got a right mind to bend you over my knee, only by the looks of ya, I think you'd like it."

"I didn't mean no disrespect," I said.

"Yeah, I'm a grandma, and I'm proud of it, but that don't make me old, now do it?"

Now I know Sadie called her Grandma, but she didn't look like *my* grandma, she looked even younger than my mom. She was acting mad, but smiling the whole time. I couldn't figure her out.

“How old do ya think I am there, baby boy?”

“Shee, I don't know,” I said.

“Old enough to smoke?” she asked walking toward me letting a wake of smoke break from her nostrils.

“I suppose,” I replied.

“Old enough to drink?” she asked.

“I'd guess,” I said.

“Well, let's hope so seeing as I got me an ice-cold beer tucked in my icebox justa calling my name.” She cupped her hand around her ear and squinted her eyes at me like I was crazy for not hearing that that beer hollering for her. “So how old you gonna say I am, baby boy?”

“Ummmmm.”

She fast-stepped over toward me and while poking me with her pink press-on nail and said, “Don't think to hard honey, you might spring a leak,” leaning in to whisper the rest. “I'm forty-two, but I put 'em on like dog years. Call me Lacey. You can call my momma's momma,

grandma.” I could smell on her breath that the beer in the fridge wouldn’t be her first of the night.

“You got anymore of them cold ones inside?” I asked.

“Yeah, but before you come inside, you gotta fetch my kitty, you heard me? No telling what one of them doggies might do if the got a hold of my kitty,” she said.

“Awright, I’ll get your cat. What’s its name?”

“Smokey,” she said, “Mr. Smokey Robinson.”

“Like the singer,” I asked?

“You’re smart. Now get him inside,” she said walking real slowly toward the trailer feeling that my eyes were taking her in.

“Smooogie. Smooogie Rooooobinson.”

“What in the hell you doing?” she asked.

“I’m trying to fetch your cat.”

“That ain’t how you call a kitty,” she said.

“Well, I ain’t never called a cat before.”

“You got to show that kitty love, so it’ll wanna come, understand? None of this, Smokey, Smokey bullshit. You got to sing to it, just like the song: *ooh-wee-ooh . . . baby-baby.*”

I watched her, pursing her lips as she drew out the notes and shook my head.

“You gotta ask yourself how badly you want that cold beer,” she said, stepping into the trailer.

I took a look around to make sure I was alone before letting out a line, “*ooh-wee-ooh . . . baby-baby.*” Nothing. “*Ooh-wee-ooh . . . baby-baby, ooh-wee-ooh . . . baby-baby.*” No cat -- no cold beer. I figured I wasn’t being authentic enough so I opened up and pushed the next line out with a higher pitch that was more true to the song. “*Ooooh-weeee-ooooh . . . baby-baby, ooooh-weeee-oooooh . . . baby-baby.*”

“What in the hell you doing,” Sadie asked. I hadn’t seen her creep up on me.

“I’m calling your grandma’s cat,” I snapped, turning to keep my face from her.

“Grandma ain’t got no cat. Now come on inside.”

Grandma was inside her trailer sitting at the table trying to cover her grin with sips from a longneck. She had changed out of her waitress uniform and into a pair of cut-offs and a sleeveless t-shirt that said

“Highway Miles” across the front. She pointed at a longneck sitting on the table and said, “There’s my apology.”

I twisted the cap off and she held hers out to clink the bottles together. I raised mine to Sadie and said, “Here’s to you not getting ran over by a stampede of wild horses and earning another hospital band tonight.” I started chuckling before I realized my joke had brought down the room.

“Now one thing we don’t jinx is my Sadie,” Grandma said. “She done had her arm yanked on so many times by God that every day he leaves her here to be with us is a blessing. Understand?”

“Understood.”

Sadie sat her Pepsi cola can down on the table and clicked on the radio to let some Zydeco music in. She twisted her torso as Grandma tapped in time against the tabletop with her press-on nail, unable to keep her head from bouncing to the scratch of that washboard beat.

“Tell me the best memory you got,” Grandma said.

“What you mean, like something that happened to me?”

“*Me-mo-ry*,” she said, sounding it out like I was dumb. “Think about that word. Something you *re-mem-ber*. I always ask people shit like that cause I work for tips. I figure if I get them thinking about

something good that happened in their life the first time they meet me, then it plants a seed deep down in their brain that sprouts into money every time they sit at my table. So tell me..." she paused, to ask Sadie for my name. "Chance. what is the best memory you got, Chance?"

" I d o n ' t k n o w . "

"Don't try and act like your to tough for that when I know you're just a piece of sugar cane – husk on the outside, with a sweet middle!"

Sadie fetched a pair of longnecks from the fridge and opened one up for me. I didn't want to be rude to the ladies, especially when they had opened up their trailer to me. I didn't think it'd be right to talk about Reba so I racked my memories searching for a good one.

"Come on, Chance," Sadie said. "I just seen you serenading a make-believe cat, how much more of a sissy would it make you just by saying something good you remember?"

"Christmas Eve, when I was eleven, our family had loaded into my daddy's Lincoln to drive down to the closest house of worship for the nine o'clock mass. We hadn't driven anywhere as a family since my Pe-Paw was dying from cancer the year before. Daddy was ill at ease that whole drive to Beaumont, switching radio stations six times a song; when the signal would fade, he'd start in with fast talk, ask questions but

not listen for answers. Tap his wedding band against the window glass and twist the radio knob, trying to tune them thoughts of his daddy dying right out of his head.” [BP8]

“What a sweet memory,” Grandma said, getting a hard laugh from Sadie before turning the volume down on the deejay that started talking between songs. “Get back to Christmas eve.”

“I hadn’t even been inside a church before. Its windows were sprayed thick with that snow-in-a-can, and they had built a little Manger out of chipboard with scaled-down wise men gathered around a plastic Baby Jesus with a light bulb in his head. We didn’t stay for the whole service on account of my brother Roy drank too much eggnog and threw up on someone’s twice-a-year clothes.

“On the ride home, when my daddy went to loosen his church tie, his top button popped off, bounced against the windshield and disappeared in the defrost vent on the dashboard. I tightened up like someone just light the fuse of a firecracker because I thought he was gonna pop, but it must have been that holiday music playing on the radio—Daddy just let it go. He turned it up a little louder and began to sing”

“What song was playing?” Grandma asked?

“It was Elvis,” I said. “Blue Christmas.”

“Dang, does everyone in your family love Elvis?” Grandma said, before breaking into the song:

I'll have a Blue Christmas without you.

I'll be so blue thinking about you.

Decorations of red on a green Christmastree,

won't be the same dear,

if you're not here with me.

“I love that song,” Grandma said, looking at Sadie. “I played that song every single day you were in the hospital after falling through the ice.” Then hand-signaled Sadie to grab her another longneck.

“I leaned in and join my daddy for the second verse,” I said. “And when headlights from other cars shone behind us, I saw that he was looking at me in his rearview. And the whole time I was crooning with Daddy, I felt connected to him by more than just the music on the radio, or the words in that song.

“When we got home, my brother Roy went to the bathroom and threw-up for a straight hour while we sat in the living room and listened to him. I must have been eyeballing the presents under the tree because

Momma said, 'You're okay. Santa did you right.' And Momma knew Roy had told me Santa wasn't real when I was five, but Santa was like her flimsy king of hearts that held up her Christmas house of cards, and if we ever try and call her bluff, we'd be playing fifty-two-pickup instead of opening presents."

"That's a little odd, huh?" Grandma asked.

"I guess," I said. "Maybe he took some of the pressure off of her -- someone to put the blame on when that tall tab tally came the first week of January. So when Momma went to check on Roy, my daddy said,[BP9] 'Hey. Chancie, what you looking for under that tree, this?' I spun my head around in a hurry to see him holding out his High Life bottle, tapping his finger against it to echo its emptiness. 'Go get me one, huh?' he said.

"When I went to fetch him a cold beer from the icebox, I held the bottle in my hand and shook it up and down a bunch before giving bringing it to him."

"Your daddy doesn't sound like that would have gone over too good," Sadie said.

"I don't know why I did it," I said. "Right after I gave it to him, I wanted to take it back, but I just turned my back to him and waited for

the top to pop. ‘Chancie,’ he said, but I pretended I didn’t hear him. ‘Chancie, one of them old ladies done squeezed my hand real tight during a church prayer. Help me out, huh?’ He said. I turned around and he was pointing the cap of the bottle at me like a pistol.”

Grandma and Sadie were wearing expressions like they knew Daddy.

“I told him that I don’t got a bottle opener. ‘That don’t matter,’ he said. ‘it’s a twister.’ I reached for it with both hands and pulled it close to me, pulling the sleeve of my sweater over the cap so I could get a good grip as I twisted it open. The suds spewed out of the top, soaking my Christmas sweater and dripping onto the floor. I crab-stepped to the side and tensed up my stomach, but what hit me was a sound.”

“What sound?”

“It was Daddy, red-faced, eyes watering, folded over as he pointed to the mirror that hung above our fireplace. He grabbed me and pulled me up onto his lap and shows me the reflection of the icebox.”

“Dang,” Sadie said. “He saw the whole thing.”

I clicked the radio back on, letting the Zydeco change the subject for me. Sadie picked up her Pepsi can and did a little two-step in the cramped kitchen of the trailer.