BASKETHEADS

By

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Chapter One – The Diner

It was July. July 12, 1972, I remember. The Independence Day celebrations were only now beginning to wind down. I was never a fan. It was never more than an excuse to celebrate, that happened to fall on the hottest month of the year. And this year, the hottest in years. The oscillating plastic fans in Laurie’s Diner were working triple time, to keep up. My air conditioning unit had been on the fritz for months, never cared much in the cooler months; that came back to bite me. But the diner wasn’t bad, they never had air conditioning, but at least they had the ice cream to make up for it. Usually, I got the hot fudge brownie, but no way was I indulging that craving today.

The air waved and swirled in the heat, making the dried-up brown leaves and yellowing grass of people’s neglected lawns look like they were dancing.

“How’s that sundae treating you, Hugo?” Kendra asked. A very pleasant young woman, long blonde hair, brown eyes, pale reding skin. If she spent another moment in the sun, she’d burn. I had helped her catch a cheating boyfriend a couple of years back. The diner was where I had always met with my clients before doing my work. She’d overheard and asked me to help her out.

“It’s a relief.”

“No doubt. I snuck myself a milkshake at lunch. Couldn’t take the heat.” She took a moment, as I ate another spoonful of my chocolate ice cream. “How’s Eddie?”

Eddie was at school. He’d like coming to the diner. We’d get dinner here often. He’d get the three-piece chicken tenders and fries for dinner, and the dirt and worms ice cream sundae for dessert. I’d get the Laurie’s club sandwich and a garden salad, with Italian dressing. And the hot fudge brownie for dessert.

“He’s good.”

“Good. He’s enjoying school?”

“I think so. He doesn’t like to talk about it much. But I haven’t heard from his teacher, so I suppose everything is alright.”

I’d never heard from his teachers. Even during the parent-teacher meet nights, they’d all have so little to say. The meets went so quickly, it almost felt the teachers were trying to get me out the door.

“Well, it could be worse. Better than hearing he’s a nuisance or got into a fight or something like that.”

She gestured with the half full coffee pot, the black liquid sloshing around in the round pot, but never reaching its black lip. I stopped drinking coffee years ago. It was no less than an addiction, near impossible to stop. It was that reason that I had to. As I wiped the sweat from my throat, I could no longer understand how someone could drink something so hot on a day like this.

“Well,” Kendra said, “I’ll let you get back to it.” I gave her a half assed smile, all that I could really muster under the conditions. How she was working so vigorously, I could never understand. She always was one to never let anything get her spirits down. It was an admirable trait, something that I could never replicate; I did try, at one point. I watched her as she made her rounds to the men and women at the other tables. Most of them were older, I suppose most of the younger folks were at work—it was a Wednesday after all.

It was strange; outside the world had seemed to have come to a standstill. Few cars passed, no one walked the streets, or rode their bikes, and no one sat out on their porch or their lawn with a red cooler with a white lid and cold, condensation-soaked Budweiser. Everyone sat inside, escaping the ghastly heat. Tomorrow was no better either; 102°F down from today’s 105°F. And no rain in sight; least, that’s what the weatherman said.

Parked at the autobody shop across the road, was a corvette stingray. Sleek, red with the white nylon top drawn back. I’d never seen it before, would have suspected that I would have; there’s not many cars in Bridgeford, especially not like that. I was never much into cars, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t appreciate a good looking one. Watching the door of the autobody shop, I waited for someone to come out and claim the vehicle. It was only maybe two, or three minutes before I gave up and turned to my mustard-yellow Datsun 510. An entirely unremarkable car. I’d gotten it only a month or two before me and Eddie moved to Bridgeford from Louisville; Eddie was only five at the time. I remember him curling up on the back seat with a pillow and blanket, tucked in between bags of clothes and boxes of papers and folders. It had ended up being about a five-hour drive—not including any stops we made along the way. I still remember the exact path we took; north along the 65 through Indianapolis, along the 31, then east through Fort Wayne, finally arriving at Bridgeford. It was a long drive, even for me. Packed to the brim, nearly busting the glass of the windows with all our belongings.

It was not a drive that I would like to do again, but a trip that was worth its destination. At least when contrasted to the starting point. Bridgeford was pleasant enough, but it was far from anything special. The worst part of it all was the lack of work. There were only six-fifty, maybe seven hundred people total, and all of them knew all others. So, I made my living wherever I could, even taking some jobs where the client paid me to follow them around and take pictures—mostly out of curiosity. Though I made the bulk of my living doing freelance work for the town sheriff. We’d gotten to know each other quite well. We even shared a beer some days. I’d even call him friend. Kenny was his name, Sheriff Kenny Schmidt. I had considered working for him in a more official manner, but something about the prospect never sat right with me. I had nothing against the job, or the men there, it was something else, something I never could quite place.

The stingray was gone now. I hadn’t noticed it leave, and I hadn’t caught the driver. Wasn’t sure if I’d ever see it again; if I had, I’d figure it out then, if not, then it didn’t matter anyway. But it still ate at me. I knew—consciously at least, that it didn’t matter either way, but in a deep facet of my mind, I needed the answer.

I pushed it to the back of my mind. Well, I can only say that I tried. But the truth is that more I suppressed it, the more it bubbled.

My spoon scraped the bottom of the now empty tin cup. I followed the lines of melted chocolate ice cream that bordered the sides of the scraped raw silver tin, and the condensation had abandoned the cup, soaking my hand. The lines ran up, down and across, tracing back the path of each scoop I took. And the more faded evidence of the previous people who used this cup. It mixed with the streaks left by the washcloth used to clean it through its apparent years of service. Not enough soap. Or not enough care on an individual level. It was probably thrown into a basin of lukewarm, mildly soapy water, wiped down for a moment then thrown on a rack to dry.

“Anything else for you?” Kendra asked. I didn’t notice her come up to me. She wasn’t holding the coffee pot anymore; probably waiting for more to brew. There was always someone who needed a refill. In her apron pocket, the blue Bic ball-point pen she always used to take her orders was opened. She must’ve just taken an order, forgetting to click it closed, if it was left for another moment, she no doubt would have caught it, and closed it. The tip was already beginning to lose its wet, glossy sheen, slowly growing duller as the ink dried out.

“An ice water. Can’t do much more than that, have to pick up Eddie soon.”

“Well, then I’ll get you that ice water on the double.”

“Thank you, Kendra.”

She leaned in and grabbed the empty tin ice cream cup from in front of me; the spoon spinning and swirling around, as she twirled the cup, keeping the spoon from tipping and falling out.

I turned my attention back out the window. Though, there was still nothing of interest happening. And more likely than not, there would continue to be nothing of interest happening. Though times do often surprise, just like that red stingray with the white roof. Perhaps it would return, and I might get a look at its owner? Or, going and speaking with the owner of the autobody shop was an option. It would help me cast it from my mind. But that was perhaps too bold an action for something so minor.

“Here’s your water,” she placed the cup of water in front of me, a drop of juice from the lemon slice on the rim, dripping down the side of the cup, collecting droplets of condensation as it went. “I brought your bill too.” She placed it beside the cup.

I scanned the bill, reading every line of every letter and number present. Nothing was out of place—not that I expected it to be so, checking every single bill I ever received was more of a habit than anything at this point.

I searched my pocket, digging around the mix of keys, tissues and loose fortune cookie slip that I had gotten when I took Eddie to the Chinese place on Peters Street a few days ago, grabbing my wallet. I never believed in those fortunes. I never believed in any fortune—all hocus pocus, give me money, grifting as far as I was concerned. But there was something about it, something that took me. Maybe I was just waiting for a big *I told you so* moment from the universe, maybe it was just the hoarder in me talking.

I flipped through the loose bills in my wallet, each one of them ordered by value, from front to back. I never kept any coins; they took up far more real estate in my wallet than they’re worth. Any that I did happen by, I gave to Eddie. They were worth nothing to me, but every time I set one in front of him, his eyes would light up, like he's seeing the great and good hand of God himself come down from the breaking of clouds. With it, he’d get himself some candy, or a small toy, if he could resist the urge to spend it immediately for long enough.

I pulled out a one-dollar bill and handed it to Kendra. “Don’t worry about the change.”

“Thanks. Have a good day and tell little Eddie I say hi.”

“Will do.” Of course, I wasn’t actually going to; no one actually does. More than anything, it’s a social formality; an acknowledgement of the person. It would do just as much to say *I was listening to you when you mentioned this person*. I probably wouldn’t even be telling Eddie that I was here. Not that I was looking to hide anything, just that I didn’t want him to think he was missing out (he always hated missing out).

Deciding what parts of reality to teach, and which to omit was one of the most difficult facets of parenting. You wanted them to learn and grow, of course—but not too quickly. You still wanted them to be a child forever; or at least for as long as possible. That was always a frightening prospect. Watching them grow was the greatest part of parenthood but having them grow was the worst. Even though Eddie was still very young; I’d already begun to see it happen. It was in the little things: spoke of school subjects and homework rather than the games he’d play with his friends, the light in his eye when ice cream was mentioned didn’t burn so bright as it used to. He asked for sets of Lego and Meccano for his birthday and Christmas instead of action figures and stuffed animals.

I continued to toss it around in my mind, on the way out of the diner, and to the car. Looking back, feeling like the time I had with him was already up. He was only ten, but that didn’t help the feeling. I remember his eighth birthday; the time we went to DC when he was five; his birth; all like it was another day in the week. Even now, all of those memories clump together in a mass, conglomerating in a manic mix of the highest highs and lowest lows of my life—all like they happened this past month, rather than these past eleven years.

I opened the heavy door of the Datsun, standing there a moment for the numbingly thick, near volcanic air to vent. The smell of old leather and slowly roasting metal emanating from the space the door left behind. The dark brown leather seat near turned red. I could see the heat coming from it. If I had touched it, I’d no doubt scald myself. Even the visual of blistering shoulders, forearms, neck, and legs was not a fun one. I’d have to sit in a bath of ice for the next week at least to chill that off. I leaned in, turning the AC dial all the way up, the vents immediately chugging and choaking to life, as they expelled a light gray cloud of powdered dust. But it did little to quell the heat.

The backseat had a large brown, red, and dark green knitted wool blanket stretched over it. It was covered in stains, small tears, and mismatched patches where I had covered larger rips. It made it easier to clean, just take the blanket out and whack it off over the side of the porch, then run it through the wash and it was good to go for another few months.

I leaned into the car, careful not to touch any of the leather on the seat, stretching to reach the forward most corner, and pull it up to the front. The blanket limply draped over the leather seat. It was a big blanket, far bigger than was needed to cover the seat; the sides and corners hanging over the edges, like a child sitting in disappointment, dresses in the ‘ghost’ costume their parents got for them half an hour before sending them to beg for candy at neighbor’s doors every October 31st. The tassels around the edges slowly swinging as they hung.

I sat. Slowly, making sure that every bit of the seat’s surface was covered. The blanket itself was warm, but nowhere near the scorching degree that the leather was. I could already feel the sweat begin to form along my neck and back, feeling the air close in on me as it swirled around the vehicle. Just to think, some of these people in the lot, or going down the street drove around in their black vehicles. Just imagining the sweltering heat gathered in those made me sick. They look nice, but if I were to get one of those, I’d go north. Far north, beyond the border. But I could never afford that: the car or the trip. And now? It’s too late for that.

Chapter Two – Canned Food

The car had cooled by now. It was taking all its life to keep up, but it was. The AC let out this horrible rattling noise that seemed to choke with each bump hit in the road, before continuing to rattle on only a moment later. I would have gotten it looked at, but I knew that even if it was just loose bolt, or worn blade, the shop would charge the fucking world to have it fixed. Fixing it myself wasn’t an option—I’d only end up busting it more, and getting a new car was out of the question all together. As long as it didn’t collapse on me in the middle of an intersection, I’d be fine.

Eddie’s school wasn’t far. Bridgeford Elementary, it was called. Wonder how they came up with that gem of a name. Laurie’s diner was halfway between the school, and home. It was the reason we chose to go there in the first place—it was convenient.

I clicked on the radio, channel 67.3. They’d been playing David Bowie’s, The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars, non-stop since its release a few weeks before. Can’t say I was ever a fan of his stuff, a bit too extravagant for my taste. But Eddie enjoyed it. Though he had always been a fan of music, no matter the genre, or artist. He had accumulated quite the collection of records over the past couple of years. Any enthusiast who saw it would agree—not quite a vast demonstration of culture like some, more accomplished collections, but certainly possessing the possibility to be.

I pulled into the school’s small parking lot. It was full, though the deceptiveness of that wording is almost laughable. There were only a few parking spaces in the entire lot. Most of them were taken up by the vehicles of the teachers and other staff. The vehicles of the parents were on, idling in their spots, waiting for the bell to ring and their children to emerge from the school’s thick, splintered wood doors. It was a miracle they never had a major incident regarding those. Even just looking at them caused the mind to wander to macabre and grotesque places. Now, that’s something I could have fixed. I may know jack shit about cars, but sanding, and down a door, that’s something I can do. But I didn’t decide to be a carpenter.

Sure enough, right on time, the bell rung out, and like a heard of sheep pouring out to pasture, searching the rows of cars to find the one for them. Eddie walked among them, sticking out like the black sheep of the heard, his plain black backpack over his shoulders and a binder under his arm. He wore a plaid collared button-down shirt, tucked into his dark blue jeans, that were folded up at the cuffs. His brown hair rounded around his head, only splitting around his forehead, down the center.

He was the only kid not looking around. He didn’t need to; I was always sure to park in the same spot, further from the door. While all the other parents scratched at their necks to get as close to the door as possible, siting ‘efficiency’, I got in the lot, Eddie jumping in, then driving off, even before the other students find their parents.

Just loke every other day, Eddie climbed into the passenger seat of the car, dropping his backpack and binder at his feet, that barely touched the floor.

“How was school?” I asked him, not expecting much of a response.

“Fine.”

There it was. Can’t say I blamed him though, school was always a drag for me too, sitting there all day, listening to adults who think they’re better just for being older, tell you every way you’re wrong. All the while wishing you were anywhere else, doing anything else. I much rather would have been thrown out into the world to figure it out for myself—get my hands dirty. Instead, we get school. Twelve years of sitting on our asses getting nothing done but inflating our own egos. And it only gets worse post-secondary. One year of criminal psychology was enough to tell me that. And only that.

I laid into the brake pedal, pushing the stiff grip of the gear shift into reverse, and pulled out of the spot, shifting into drive. We coasted along, watching all the other children struggling to find their parent’s car near the school’s entrance, massing in the middle of the driving lane. Just as every day.

“We’re doing a drive at school.” Eddie said.

“Yeah? A canned food drive?”

“Yeah. There’s a pizza party for the class that donates the most.”

“Well, don’t think we have any at home. We can run to the grocery to pick some up if you want.” We finally made it to the parking lot’s exit, the mass only now beginning to disperse. As we pulled out, the lane became filled with the now full cars of the parents trying to leave.

“Okay.”

“You get a pizza party?”

“Yeah.”

“The kids get their parents to fill a bag of cans. And the kids get a pizza party for it?”

“It’s dumb.”

“Yeah, it’s dumb.” I sighed, looking down at my hands that sat atop the wheel.

I had to pause for a moment, recalibrating the path in my mind to account for the detour to the grocery store. It wasn’t a long trip—it was Bridgeford, nothing there was a long trip. It only added a minute, maybe two to the overall travel time.

The man on the radio chimed in for his hourly check in. He mentioned, once again, the release of David Bowie’s newest album, a small handful of facts about it; the number of albums sold, some critic’s comments, among other things, before completing his script with the current time, and weather, then returning to the music.

That was when we pulled into the parking spot. Unsurprisingly, it was near empty. Only a handful of cars occupying the lot. The bright white lettering, outlined in trips of green lights, reading; *The Bridgeford Grocer*. The white, yellowish fluorescent light spilled from the large panes of glass that lined the front of the store. Even from this distance, it shot straight through my eyes, stinging my mind. I always hated that glaring, manufactured light. It’s not natural. Especially when contrasted against the cheap plywood bins of naturally vibrant husks of corn that sat out front.

“Come on kiddo, let’s get this over with.” We got out of the car, Eddie peeling his shirt from back, I aired my shirt cuffs, and the collar of my yellow chambray.

As expected, the store was nearly empty. Only one cashier sat, reading a copy of Asimov’s ‘The Gods Themselves’ while waiting for the two women in the store to finish their browsing. The store was cool, hitting like a wall of ice, against the sweltering heat on the other side. We weren’t in the store for long. I wanted to get home, so we passed up and down a couple of aisles, grabbing cans of whatever was there, along with a few cans of pork and beans for home. I always enjoyed them—not only because they tasted good, but because they were easy to cook. Throw a can in a pot on the stove until it was hot enough, then pour into a bowl and eat. I was never one who enjoyed cooking—it was never my job.

We were at the cash, checking out even before the women, who still strolled up and down the aisles, occasionally picking up a piece of fruit, or a bag of shredded lettuce, inspecting it carefully, eventually putting it back down. The cashier, a young man, no older than seventeen grabbed the cans, one by one, punching in numbers on the register, before looking up to me. “Total’s eighteen-fifty.”

I took a twenty from my wallet, he took it, fitting it under the small clay cat paperweight used in please of the broken cash lever. Fishing two quarters from one of the other cups in the register, handing them to me, picking back up his book, of which he was about half-way through: all in one smooth motion. I grabbed the bag had he’d loaded with the cans, and Eddie and I made for the door.

I winced. It always amazed me how quickly a person could become conditioned to something without noticing it happening. For a short while, in the grocer, the permanent scent of salt and sulfur, mixed with the sharp smell of limestone from the quarry had been replaced with the fresh smell of ripe produce and chilled cold cuts.

A small handful of cars whizzed past, churning up the settled dust on the road. Across it, an old woman sat on a rickety wood bench. Her hair was white with shirt curls, she wore a gray and blue sundress. She looked entirely ordinary, perhaps mid to late seventies, holding her pale wicker basket full of various berries on her lap. Though it wasn’t her looks that was odd. She did not move, her eyes fixed to Eddie, following him as we entered the Datsun. Though I suppose older folks usually had an affinity for children. Maybe it was the air of nostalgia they’d get remembering their own childhood. Either way, I wanted to get home; sitting here would not do any good.

We got home a few minutes later, it was quarter-to-four. That awkward time between getting home, and dinner. It was too early to start cooking, but not enough time to start doing anything else. Eddie had some homework to start on; math I suppose. He didn’t like math—always was more of a history kid. He liked to learn about the past, how things got to the way they are, though I think it was the *why* of it all that fascinated him more. I could tell, he would get frustrated when he didn’t know why. Why someone did something, why they believed something. Suppose he got that from me. His mother was the opposite—perfectly happy as things were, content to not question any of it. That way of living was easier, no doubt. But I could never help myself; asking questions—Eddie too, I think. That’s probably why he didn’t like math. Why does 1 represent a single unit? *Well, that’s just the way it is.* Why does ’x’ represent multiplication, ‘+’ addition, ‘-’ subtraction, *it doesn’t matter, that’s just what we use.*

Eddie sat at the table, his black backpack sat by his feet, opened, like a mouth, the zipper, the teeth. His blue, spiral bound math notebook opened in front of him, pen sitting in his left hand, hovering above one of the multiplication problems. They were doing the tables; by the looks of it. He had gotten to the sevens. Seven times six.

I sat on the couch, in front of the TV. Not watching anything; there was rarely anything to watch anyway. I was never into movies, or shows, all just fake drama for entertainment. Never could get behind it.