

“The Life & Times of a Southern White Boy”

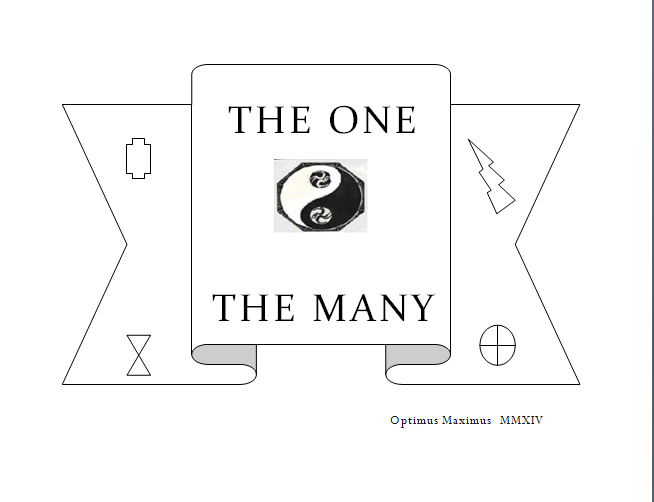
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Optimus Maximus, ‘The Earlier & Later Years’ collage + image OSDG mmxx  
  
  
THE BOYHOOD JOURNAL OF OPTIMUS MAXIMUS

My name is Optimus Maximus. I am a boy. This is my Journal. I am going to write about all the things that I think about life. THESE ARE MY SECRETS. If you read these words you must swear to keep them to yourself. (I get in a lot of “Trouble”, if you know what I mean so no shooting off to anybody what you see in hear.This way we can be friends) Anyway, this is my Journal. I am a *Genralist!* That’s not a General like somebody with an army. Although, I would like to have an army. I think I would make a fine General. I am brave. I can whistle real loud. I am good in the woods. Plus, I am hardly ever afraid.

I am a *Generalist* (that is such a NEAT word) because that’s somebody who likes everything and let me tell you, I LIKE EVERYTHING. I do. I swear. I like baseball (The Washington Senators), I like fishing (Sunfish are my favorites), I like reading (I will read anything including the ingredients on a shampoo bottle and even the tiny instructions for my Gram’s Brownie camera), I like hunting (bears – which I have not yet got one but I will, squirrels, possum, whaterver, you name it, I will hunt it, and I like living outside because outside no one makes you clean up your room or anything like that. GENERALIST: Someone who likes everything. That’s me. When I grow up, and I hope that’s coming soon, I am going to call myself OPTIMUS MAXIMUS – GENERALIST. I think that will look pretty neat on a fancy card. I think then I will be just like that guy Palladin on TV. His card says, HAVE GUN, WILL TRAVEL. My card will say WHAT DO YOU WANT? That will be fun. I will make a lot of money and travel around the world helping people find out what it is they want. (That is becasue I am going to learn EVERYTHING and people will pay me for it. I hope so!

OPTIMUS MAXIMUS – GENERALIST. *What Do You Want?* See? That sounds pretty good doesn’t it? Enough about me. Now let talk about books. I love books. (All of a sudden I wonder if I am writing this for you or me? What do you think? Who? You, or me?) That’s why one day you’ll need somebody like me! *Onward!*

Today, I have been reading a little book about George Washington. George Washington was the Father of our county. My country is the United States of America. It was discovered by Christopher Columbus (more about him later) and it was name *America* because of an Italian guy. George Washington, *Presidnet Washington* was a lucky young boy. He grew up in Virginia (I think) and his Dad had a farm. I mean a really big farm. His family was rich. I wish I was rich. He had nice clothes and plus, he had a horse that was mostly white and had black spots on him and his horse wwas faster than the horses of all the other boys. (That is not why he became President) He bacme Presidnet because he told the truth. Always. He chopped down a cherry tree and got caught and then he said I CANNOT TELL A LIE! I am sure he got a whipping but then he was good and that’s how come when he grew up he got to be a GENERAL and then PRESIDNET. I do not know my DAd. That does make me sad. I wish that I were glad. And one day know my Dad! *I am a poet! And I know it! Because my feet are a pair of Longfellows!* Hardy-har-har.

Can you tell that I using a typewrite to type this? You can? I know how to type! I have a ROYAL typewriter that was my Granddaddy’s. My Granddaddy is a hero. He got me this typewriter out of the attic (more about that later!) and Gram was a typist in Washington DC for a magazine or somethin’. ANyway, she makes me (MAKES ME!) type every day for fiteen minutes (15 MINUTES!) until my fingers bleed and then my brain bleeds out its brain parts and I have to scream *I CAN’T DO THIS NO MORE!* And then I get gingersnaps and milk. Pretty neet, hunjh?

lOok, I am tired. I am going to stop (for today) but If you come back tomorrow I promise I will help get what you want (if you still want somethin’) becasue I am OPTMIS MAXIMUS – GENERALIST *wHat do you wnat? g’BYE for NOW!*

*\* \* \* \**

*(th*his is exciting! ~~YES!~~)

Tommorrow: (That means today) Are you still here? You are? I am. I am glad to have you here! Oday, let’s go on. Washington he was a good President. He had woodent teeth. *Gosh! Wooden teeth!* CHOMP-CHOM~~O~~P-CHOMP!! – My Granddaddy has false teeth 9That means they are not reall but they just look real) Today hew as sleeping (he is a printer for the Government printing Office in Wahinton, dc which was named after General Washington and so he seep in the morining becasue he works at night (when I am sleeping!) so this morning I palyed a little trickee on him. Gram was in thekitchen havin’ her coffee and so I crept into his edroom and soft like a cat (Here kitty, kitty, kitty!) and I silently took out his false teeth from the glass of water next to his bed (O this is so exciting! Granddaddy was sleeping NSORE! SNORE! SNORE! z-z-z-z-z-) and then like a little cat I tiptoed to the end of the bed and his foot was sticking out of the blanket and I made his teeth act like his big toe was a sandwich and boy did I have fun! squeezing them on his big toe! He palyed a trick on me. I did not know he was really awake watching me out of the corner of his eye so he started moaning , real kindof soft at first and then more and more until his foot was jiggling and then like he was liking it or something he was all yelling and gram came running in the room and I was caught! CAUGHT! gRAM snatched the teeth from me and ran and put them in the water by the bed and grannddaddy grabbed me and pulled me in the bed with him and 9HE IS A BIG MAN!) AND then he got the teeth and BOOM! He’s got ‘em around my nose and Gram is screaming BILL! bILL! BILL! but he don’t care and I don’t care none eether. 9DO YOU know that I can spell better than this but its cauz i am typeing this! i can spell perfectly! isn’t that what you want?! I am usiing this to practise so that when i have to do my fifteen minutes i can faster and faster! More words! More COOKIES! (yuOU SEE, I know whatI am doing)) Anyway, we had a big laugh and I didn’t get in any trouble or nothing so that was good. Then Gram made me go put on my swimming trunks and I went down to Sandy Beach and played with my friend across the street, Millard Shoemaker. (They do not make shoes. He said it is an old German name but if it’s gErman why is is it in English?) Millard has a big sister and she is a beauty queen older than us.

Millard is older than me and so on and so on. Gosh, this is alot of work. (Good thing I like to talk.) I am plulm tuckered out as Granddaddy says so I will say g’might for now and just you remember, IF YOU WANT TO KNOW SOMEHTING, ASK ME. yours in faithful serveice, OPTIMUS MAXIMUS. Boy Generalist! ( I am! I am!) . . . . . . . . . !!! *Scrunch!!*

Optiimax, optimax, getyouuself some crackerjax!

Get 'emwhile they'e hot, Tasty when they'e cold

Remeember that I told you

Fortune favors THE BOLD!

Come away, come away, come away tiwth me. Into the woods we go.

aWWay we go. Into the woods… into the woods, into the woods we go . . . !!

Optimus Maximus

Boy Genealist

Shasyside,Maryland  
  
WHAT DO YOU WANT?-   
~ / ~   
  
 *-* INTO THE WOODS –

Optimus Maximuswas a young boy and a happy one at that. True, he would one day grow up and in so doing lose everything he treasured; not once, not twice, but three times he would lose everything that was precious to him. He would not, however, lose his soul. Buddha would allow him to keep it. Still, unknowing any of this, Optimus Maximus was a happy boy.

The woods of Shadyside, Maryland, are a place of wonder to behold. For a boy, they are a place of escape and self-realization. Fun and courage are intoxicants to a youthful spirit. Optimus spied the remnants of a tree house high in a great fallen oak. Idea pumped a heart. Still, he would not lose sight of his goal. Twenty yards angling southwest, Optimus had set a trap. A possum trap. Two hours of near total stillness, Optimus was not about to move nor allow his mind to wander.

Optimus was a determined young boy and he knew it would require great determination - and patience - if he were to succeed in trapping the possum. Optimus had already given him a name. *Arnold.* Silly, thought Optimus, naming this possum after his grand-uncle. Still, hours spent alone in the woods and the imagination runs free. Slowly, carefully, the possum sniffed his way to the cheese. *This is nuts* thought Optimus. He had come into the woods to practice how he might trap a possum. Optimus dearly hoped that one night he might come back with his grandfather, Bill Swett, hopefully bringing one home for a pet. *Gram would love that!* Snicker.

A lucky boy, luck ran to Optimus like ground water seeking out a stream.Smelling the cheese, when the nocturnal possum stirred from his lair, Optimus was giddy. Bug eyes. *My gosh!* Optimus had not told his grandmother that he had taken the last quarter-stick of Cracker Barrel. Even though sharp, white cheddar was her favorite cheese - she frequently enjoyed it as a late afternoon appetizer with her Gilbey's frosted gin - Optimus reasoned to himself, quite correctly, the contribution of the cheese was far outweighed by the glory accrued were he to succeed in trapping his quarry. Indeed. The possum moved closer.

Mary Frances Clements Swett*,* Optimus' grandmother, was a kind, loving woman. As a child in Albany, New York, Mary Frances lost her mother to tuberculosis. A frightening, consumptive disease, in the early 1900s its antibiotic remedy was yet discovered. Contagious carriers were quarantined. Consequently, Juliette \_\_\_\_ and daughter Mary Frances lived contemporaneous lives of solitude. Mary Frances was allowed to visit her mother only on Saturday mornings. Covering her mouth with a kerchief, from the bedroom door, girlish Mary Frances poignantly waved three fingers. *Hi, Mom!* Ancestral teachings such as these near broke Optimus' boy heart.

Cut off from her mother's love by the ghastly distance imposed between them by sickness surely made emotionally hard goings for them both. In any case, life shaped by her upbringing, Mary Frances could sometimes be quite cold.

When she noticed their Chesapeake bay house had been preternaturally quiet for some three hours, it made her wonder *Where's Optimus?* Finding no answer, nearly five in the afternoon, she decided it was time for hors d’oeurves and a cool gin n' tonic. Fixing her drink, she noticed that the last quarter-stick of cheese was gone. *Hmm . . .* Optimus' grandmother was not a happy woman.

His name was Optimus Maximus Marcy. A funny name. A bold name. His name, nonetheless. *What's in a name, anyway?* *Ulysses* he thought*. Now that was a fine name. Even if Grant was an old drunk. He was a bad-ass on the battlefield, wasn't he?* He was. Ask at Appomattox.

Optimus had been born Gregory Gonzales. Spanish surname, Optimus did not know his father. In his heart though, he knew filial pride. When his parents separated and then divorced, Optimus was only a small, small boy. He had no recollection of it. When he was twelve, his mother quit using her Gonzales married name. From a book she chose the surname *Marcy.* And that was that. In the privacy of his little boy world, his mother would lovingly call him *Gregory the Great!* Optimus liked that name. His mother explained that the name was also that of a Pope who, in times of great upheaval, had led the Catholic Church. Gregory the Great had brought Catholicism from Rome into England. The Church had outlasted even Julius Caesar. *Now there was a man! Caesar! Emperor!*

Optimus' grandfather teasingly called him *Jughead!* Optimus turned his head, a large head on a small boy's body, a head with ears wide like full sails; he turned to his grandfather and asked *Why Jughead, Granddaddy*?His grandfather walked over to the mahogany credenza in the hallway of their bay house. Unlocking it, he took out an aged corn whiskey jug. Its handmade masonry bore a two-color glaze. Tan and rich, deep brown. The finger hole on its neck was so the drinker could toss the small jug over the back of a raised hand and, with one finger, swill at its tawny bounty. The finger hole really did resemble a big ear. *Thass'a why* Granddaddy said. He laughed and Optimus laughed too. *Jughead!* Optimus thought *I'm’a take what he gives.*

One day Optimus walked quietly into the living room and approached his grandfather. He was sitting in his recliner listening to the Baltimore Orioles game on his transistor radio. Like his grandmother, Optimus was a Washington Senators fan. He casually addressed his grandfather. *Granddaddy? Eunh? Granddaddy, I'm too old to be called Jughead. Ya're? Um-hmm.* Optimus was five, already attending a private boarding school on a Ford Foundation grant for gifted children. Readers. That was Optimus. He would soon finish first grade and be skipped straight to fourth grade. Seven years old. Reader. Word-boy. Optimus Maximus.

*Whach'a want me to call ya? Optimus. Optimus?* His grandfather laughed a small, respectful laugh. *Optimus. Well, tha'ss you all right.* He lowered his paper. *Anythin' else?* Optimus screwed up his considerable boy courage. *Yes, Granddaddy. I want you to call me* “Optimus Maximus.” His grandfather burst out laughing, pulling Optimus close to him. *Optimus Maximus? Where'd that come from?* Optimus was glad that his grandfather was giving him a fair, just hearing.

*I don't know really. It jus' sounds good. Like a Roman. There's a Roman named Maximus. Look here.* Optimus ran off to the bookshelf. He returned with the large Webster's. It must have been six inches thick or so. It took Optimus a minute to find the word. He did, showing it to his grandfather, pointing out the word on the page, holding it with his small index finger. *Optimist.* His grandfather read it to himself, whistled softly, and then, aloud, he read its final definition. *This world is the best of all possible worlds.* Optimus leaned in, staring at his grandfather, searching his face, hoping he would understand. He did. *Optimus? Go get Gram. Wait. Frances!*

*Bill?* Frances stuck her head from around the kitchen doorway, looking down the hallway to the living room, towards her man and their boy. His grandfather nodded wordlessly and she came to them. *Seems we have a new man here.* His grandmother cocked her head. *Seems that our boy is naming himself. What?* she asked. *Tha'ss right. Op-ti-mus Max-i-mus.* His grandfather smiled. His grandmother giggled. She looked down at Optimus, brushing away fine, blonde hair. *Are you sure?* Optimus nodded. *Yes, Gram. I'm sure.* His grandparents silently eyed each other. Life was too short to laugh at hope. They nodded and smiled the all-knowing smile. His grandfather spoke first. *Optimus. Get me some more coffee?* That was one of Optimus' favorite jobs. Serving up his grandfather's coffee. *Sure, Granddaddy!* He picked up the cup and saucer. Thusly crowned, he hurried off to the kitchen. Over his excitement all Optimus could think was *It is! It is! I am! I am!* And that is how Gregory The Great became Optimus Maximus. That's what Optimus thought of, standing silent in the woods, ten, watching his possum standing even quieter than he, inching towards the cheese. *Yes!!*

For a moment he allowed his mind to wander. The possum was not moving and neither was Optimus. He thought about the young girl he had kissed last winter. Karen. *Whew.* He was getting hot in the woody afternoon. He had liked the way she looked at him in the hallway at school. He remembered what her hair smelled like. How she smiled. Even that girl kind of walk. Optimus had liked her a lot. When he was grown, he would write about Karen and their first kiss. Optimus, the man, wrote:

**~ First Kiss ~**

“Excitement is an emotion not measured by the scientist’s hand. Moonlight's shadow reveals young lovers’ faces and feelings. Excited, expectation blushes. Humans walk an intimate, emotional high-wire, excitement an elixir counter-intuitively calming nerves. Under the stars, walking that wire high over the abyss, it is here where the winds of love blow.

In the backseat of a station wagon on a Southern winter night headed to bigger cities than twinkling stars can illuminate, close to me sits my love, my affection, my hope. Karen's hair is clean, straight and soft. It smells of Breck shampoo. Smooth skin twelve-year-old virgin that she is, sweet budding muse, Karen deigns her affections upon me. Alone in the darkness, wagon-wheels confidently roll forward. Mutually considered worthy of attention and friendship, our newly-found righteousness drives unfamiliar pulses. Oscillating boy-man, reverberating 'twixt opportunity and joy, welcomed, I discover a new groove.  *Mm-hmm . . .*

Saturday night. Kern Academy drives a group of kids to a Gulfport movie. It feels how I might imagine Jayne Mansfield might have felt attending a Hollywood opening. I cannot help myself. I love the excitement of all that glitters. I am my mother’s son. During the school week secret signals have been passed in a code unspoken, known only to children as they express and decipher to each other the intentions and deflections of social acceptance. From my imaginary tee-pee I have heard and felt her signals and have sent back wafting layers of affirmative smoke clouds. *Heart-beat.*

Karen sits next to me and our little bodies huddle close, away from the cold, foggy confines of the window glass and the missing heat from the front seat that does not make its way back to us. There are others in the station wagon but that is like saying there are grapes on the table when you are holding an éclair in your hands. In the boldest act of my entire ten years on this earth, I rather easily, calmly, slide my arm around her shoulder. I am the man. I pull her close. She comes. I like this thing called love.

Exertions such as these, scaling the heights of Olympus to chase down Cupid and Psyche, they are cause for breath catching and reflection. Entranced, we sit solitary as one and in the eclipsing darkness of oncoming headlights approaching and then, just as quickly, vanishing, we allow the hum of the passing roadway to lull us into greater oneness. Anxious, but happy, I prepare to confirm my masculinity.

There are two truths to every story. What we feel, and, what really happened. I felt like the most charmed guy in the world. I was, too. *Beat! Beat! Beat!* Karen was there for the offering. I breathed deep, once, twice; yes, I was very glad to be there. I knew, though, that Karen was also glad to be there*. Takes one to know one*. Having seen many a kiss, hoping to do as well, I was all cool afire in the mind. Ice and heat. Coming and going. Boy-man. What happened was this:

In the amber glow of our nocturnal universe, Karen’s cobalt blue sweater illuminates its own inner confidence. A silver chain necklace bearing a single heart rests between small but beautiful sno-cone-like mounds. She turns closer towards me. Gladly, I accept this offering on love's altar. My head dips to hers. Hers rises to mine. Warm cheeks graze ever so closely giving way to upturned eyes. As they meet and close in childish embrace, lips find lips and heaven and its wonders are indeed visited upon the earth. *BEAT! - BEAT! - BEAT!*

It will turn out that Karen and I will not marry. We will not grow up to have children. We will not grow old together and face our passing, hoping to meet and be blessed by the Immortals of common ancestors. But we will take a memory away with us from that winter night and it will serve as our beacon for the odyssey ahead. No matter what will happen to either of us, no matter how great or how painful is the journey we may face, on a Southern winter night we entered the Doors of Love and for one brief, shining moment all was well in the world. Such can be the powers of a magical first kiss.”

Optimus licked his kips at the memory. The possum took a step forward.

**Ω**

Optimus loved secrets as much he liked fishing. Which is to say, a lot. Four-feet, two inches, Optimus had a fishing pole almost as tall as him. His grandfather had given it to him as his very own and he treasured it. Once on the end of Woody ‘n' Detty's pier he had caught an eel on it and as he came running breathless into their yard, his granddaddy put down his green bottle of Rolling Rock beer and began to vigorously clap.

*Why, looky there! If ol' Optimus ain't caught his'self a damn snake!* Holding his catch up proudly, Optimus stopped dead in his tracks. *A snake?! That ain't no snake, Granddaddy! Tha'ss a eel!* Alive, the eel was all jumping up and down on Optimus' line, writhing the way you would too if you had a hook down your throat and a five year-old was jerking you to kingdom come. *Anguilla Rostrata -* it was over two feet.

His granddaddy came up to Optimus and put a hand on his shoulder helping to steady the weight of the great eel. *Wanna eat it?* he said. *Yes! I wanna eat it, Granddaddy! Let's eat 'em! Can we? Sure we can, Optimus. First though, 'gotta skin 'em. You ready? Yes, I'm ready!* The eel jangled and fought. Out of the water, he struggled for breath. Optimus climbed up onto a small ladder so that he might carefully observe this new and deadly man-ritual. He watched in stunned awe as his grandfather went to work.

First, he grabbed the eel by its slippery tail. In his great hands, the eel was no match for Bill Swett. His grandfather then slammed the eel's head onto a concrete slab table. A table he had made with those very same two hands - a table for which Optimus had also proudly helped stir the concrete - thusly stunned, the eel lay still. Slithery quiet. His grandfather opened the eel's mouth and reached deep into his throat extracting the hook. Setting it to the side, he looked down at a staring Optimus. Thinking he would play a little joke, his grandfather addressed Optimus like a secretive co-conspirator.

*Wanna look down his throat? Yes! Can I?!* Optimus was jumping up and down now, much like the eel had been just a moment ago. His grandfather pried open the eel's mouth and started to pass it to Optimus. *G'wan . . . Look inside. Put your finger down there . . .* Optimus looked up at his grandfather like he was crazy. *My finger?! Won't he bite me, Granddaddy? Na-a-h. He's dead.* But the eel wasn't dead. He was merely stunned, waiting for whatever might come next on this, his last afternoon on earth.

Optimus looked into the eel's mouth and proceeded to stick his finger down its long throat. Irritated, the eel clamped down hard on Optimus' small finger. Surprised more than hurt, with the eel biting on his finger Optimus jumped, spinning 'round in a great circle, screaming at the top of his lungs, *Grand-Daddy!!* His grandfather laughed hard, slapping at his thigh. He reached for his Rolling Rock commencing a ceremonial toast. *To Optimus Maximus - Great Eel Catcher of the Chesapeake Bay! Hip-hip-hooray!!*

Optimus was surely not liking the angry attention of the eel still clamped hard on his finger, but as he spun round in a great circle, white clouds whirling against blue sky, Optimus certainly loved the sound of being the Chesapeake Bay's great eel catcher. *Yes! That's me!* he thought. *If Granddaddy says so, it must be true. It is true!! I am!*

Entirely amused with himself, on the eel's next pass Bill Swett grabbed it mid-section and with expert skill quickly unhinged its jaws from Optimus' finger. Optimus was snuffling and huffing as young boys do when they try to hide their fear or a tear. Seeing his grandfather laughing, Optimus figured it must not be so bad after all. He did not know that, unlike his grandmother, when drinking, his granddaddy got funny, not mean.

Bill Swett had grown up on his family’s share-cropper farm in Southern Pines, North Carolina. A beautiful, misty place, memories of his grandfathers, ancestors born before and who fought in the Civil War, *Rebels*, Bill Swett honored the traditions and mores of the very best that the hardscrabble, agrarian South offered up as tribute in its young men. He carried the eel over to his outdoor workbench and by example proceeded to train Optimus - not his blood grandson but he thought the best grandson a man could have - in the fine, necessary arts of killing and skinning a snake-like fish. Optimus was fascinated.

Swett began assembling his tools. Nail. Hammer. Needle-nose pliers. A long boning knife. Grabbing the slippery eel behind the head, it, still lurching for its life, Optimus' grandfather proceeded to nail the eel's head to the tree. It flapped wildly. Then it stopped. Quiet. Swett cut a thin surface line around the eel's neck. Loosening just a bit of the filmy outer skin, his grandfather applied the pliers. Slowly, but with great strength, Swett stripped the eel's skin downward in one long, smooth motion. As he did, the eel writhed. *Granddaddy? Is the eel alive? No, son. He's not. Those are his nerves. His nerves, Granddaddy? After you die, some of your nerves stay. Those are his. He's all right.* So that's how Optimus learned to skin an eel.

Finished the skinning, Swett took the long boning knife and began to filet the meat of the eel. Two-inch pieces soon yielded a small pile of fish flesh. The head, bones, and skin of the eel reminded Optimus of dinosaurs. Optimus was quite familiar with pre-historic animals. He read about them for hours in his room, staring at the pictures, some of them with cave-men in them. He wondered what it would have been like to have been a cave-man. *Can you imagine that? Having to fight with or run away from wild animals!* He shuddered, wondering if he would really fight or run. *I would fight!* he thought to himself. *Then I would run!*

His grandfather collected up the remnants of the eel. Nodding his head as if to say *You did good, eel* he walked through a row thick with red tomatoes and green beans, past the rhubarb, towards the majestic sunflower plants and strawberry vines growing on the cinder block fence. The cinder block fence he had built with his own two hands. Optimus had helped him carry them for their plastering. One at a time. Each taking all his little might and bluster. They were a good team. Onto the earth, Swett scattered out the eel's remains. He looked down the row at Optimus. *Tasty meal for the cats tonight.*

Optimus' grandmother was not home on the day of the great eel catching. She was in Baltimore, in the hospital for the weekend having something done to her called *surgery* in parts and places of the female body for purposes of which Optimus was not at all certain he understood. Still, she had told him *I'll be all right. I'll be back home on Sunday. And you and Granddaddy can then wait on me hand and foot! Hand and foot!* and she cackled at herself, loudly. Mary Frances Swett had a good sense of humor.

Optimus and his grandfather went into the kitchen. A kitchen of which the cabinets, windows, walls and flooring Bill Swett had built with his own two hands before Optimus was born. After coming home from the Second World War, serving four years in the Sea-Bees’ South Pacific expedition in New Zealand, forty-something-year-old bachelor Bill Swett found his bride in Mary Frances and there in Shadyside on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay he proceeded to build a bay house for her. What a man.

In the kitchen Optimus and his grandfather took out a large skillet and began heating up the electric stove. Optimus liked to watch the coil grow a fiery, white-orangeish-red. He would put his little hand near it and imagine what it would be like to be burned by something like that. He could not imagine it. Swett seasoned the eel meat and dusted it in white flour. The oil in the skillet began to smoke. *Why is it smoking, Granddaddy? Oil smokes when it gets hot.* The eel popped around in the skillet, the oil splattering.

His grandfather got out another Rolling Rock from the fridge. *Can I open it, Granddaddy? For ten cents. Ten cents! I don't have ten cents, Granddaddy! I guess then you ain't got NO sense then!* He laughed a horse snicker. Optimus knew when he was getting his leg pulled. His grandfather handed him the beer bottle. Optimus liked its pretty green color and the white painted horse and horseshoe emblazoned on the bottle's face. Optimus noticed things like that and appreciated them. He was fascinated by many things. He took out the hard, shiny bottle-opener from its drawer. *Whoosh!* He giggled *Gosh, that's a neat sound!*

Optimus and his grandfather sat at the kitchen table, his grandfather sitting in the chair closest to the stove where his grandmother usually sat. Optimus sat in the chair normally reserved for his grandfather. Straw-sipping his Hi-C box, he liked the view. They talked of manly-boy stuff while Swett sipped at his beer. The eel burned.

They laughed about this together while making white bread, burnt eel sandwiches. *Here, put a lot of ketchup on it. Ketchup'll make anything taste good.* Optimus thought it a fine idea. He loved ketchup. When his Gram came home on Sunday she laughed *You two bachelors! You can't do anything without me!* And that was her running joke for the rest of the summer. *Bachelors!*

**Ω**

The possum had not moved an inch in nearly a quarter-hour. Neither had Optimus. He was getting hungry. He had not eaten since lunch's two p,b&j's, peach, and glass of milk. Now he was also thirsty. But what he could do? Optimus knew he couldn't move. That would be giving up. A boy of ten schooled in the Greek classics, Spartan, he wasn't about to give up. The wily possum was now only six inches or so from the trap.

Optimus did not think he could stand still much longer. He needed to pee. *What in the heck am I going to do now?* He knew what he was going to do but he didn't want to think about what it would be like when he finished. But he did what he had to. Still as the possum, Optimus relaxed his tight belly and began peeing inside of his pants. The pee absorbed quietly, first into his white, fruit-of-the-looms, then, across the front and down his trouser crotch. *Gosh, that feels good. I needed that.* The possum twitched.

Relieved, Optimus did not move. Under a rising Venus, Optimus thought about his ten, almost eleven-year-old life. Excited by life, there was never a day he woke without thinking to himself *What might happen today?*

**Ω**

When we are young, we experience feelings for which we know not yet the words. For whatever reason, Optimus' mother Muriel had on a Sunday night under cover of darkness brought her seven-year-old son to St. Stanislaus all boy's school. Optimus did not recall saying goodbye to his mother. His former hysteria as a four-year-old reading prodigy tearfully shipped off to St. Scholastica on a Ford Foundation grant had passed.

Going away to school was now old hat for Optimus and he looked forward to the excitement in his mind of this time being with all boys. At St. Scholastica Optimus had been one of only twelve boys amidst over three hundred girls. Nice if you were past puberty; at four, Optimus was still in short-pants. The girls would just have to wait.

At Stanislaus the man who will be Optimus' new charge, Brother Bosco, takes him by the hand and with flashlight leads them through a maze of red brick labyrinth. Up a flight of stairs, opening a door, Brother Bosco casts the light ahead. *Bosco* thought Optimus. *My favorite drink!* On either side of a long room are two rows of young male bodies sleeping on white-sheeted, cast-iron, military style beds. Full of quiet breathing, the room is starkly silent. Confronted by the sheer numbers of older boys he knows he will have to face in the morning, the feeling Optimus is experiencing for which he does not yet know the word is *apprehension.*

Down the long row, Brother Bosco’s beacon led the way until it alit on an empty bunk. Bending down, he whispers to Optimus *Strip down to your underwear*. Good boy, he complies. He signs to Optimus to fold his clothes. He does. He motions for him to follow him back up the long row of bodies to a bathroom. He instructs Optimus to pee and wash up, handing him a toothbrush and paste. Again, he complies. Optimus thinks *Gosh! I feel like I'm in a prison movie!*

Brother Bosco leads Optimus back to his bed. Turning down the sheets, he instructs Optimus to bed for the night. Optimus climbs in, the sheets smelling of a new kind of fresh and clean. *Industrial.* A whispered acknowledgement of good nights and Brother Bosco turns away. Black robe and beacon return down the long aisle of young bodies to the lone door from which they entered. It opens. It closes. Locks. Darkness. Optimus lay quietly in his new bed.

*Why am I here? Where am I? Who are these other people?* Optimus drifted between childish comfort and unspoken conversation in an attempt to re-secure the compass within himself. Country boy and city boy, dreamily, time became meaningless. His wakeful state of mind grew rubbery. In the vapors of sleepiness, Optimus heard soft-shoed footsteps approaching. *What's going on?* he asked himself. A flashlight lead a walker's way down the long aisle of bodies. It stops at his bunk. The light extinguishes. In the darkness a figure looms over Optimus. Suddenly, his sheets are pulled back. A hand reaches in and touches between his legs. It passes up and onto the folds of his underwear. Beneath it lays Optimus' little pee-pee. Optimus lay quiet and frozen. The hand moved over and around him. As quickly as it came, it vanished. The light led a path away. Unsure of what has just happened, Optimus retreated into exhaustion. Sleep.

**Ω**

The possum had not moved an inch in nearly a quarter-hour. Neither had Optimus. He was getting hungry. He had not eaten since lunch's two p,b&j's, peach, and glass of milk. Now he was also thirsty. But what he could do? Optimus knew he couldn't move. That would be giving up. A boy of ten schooled in the Greek classics, Spartan, he wasn't about to give up. The wily possum was now only six inches or so from the trap.

Optimus did not think he could stand still much longer. He needed to pee. *What in the heck am I going to do now?* He knew what he was going to do but he didn't want to think about what it would be like when he finished. But he did what he had to. Still as the possum, Optimus relaxed his tight belly and began peeing inside of his pants. The pee absorbed quietly, first into his white, fruit-of-the-looms, then, across the front and down his trouser crotch. *Gosh, that feels good. I needed that.* The possum twitched.

Relieved, Optimus did not move. Under a rising Venus, Optimus thought about his ten, almost eleven-year-old life. Excited by life, there was never a day he woke without thinking to himself *What might happen today?*

**Ω**

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**Ω**

Optimus' new life among these young Catholic Spartans was a quick-pulsing blur. Blessed with a photographic memory of events and feelings, serving the child artist's muse, in his personal locker where he stowed his ‘Royal’, Optimus would daily write down exactly what he was experiencing at St. Stanislaus, his first time to be alone in a vast company of men.

**St. Stanislaus**

I am assigned a locker cage for my clothes. Number 228, *thank-you very much*. I am so proud to have my own little space. I neatly stow my skivvies, socks, pants and shirts, and after I get them dirty they will magically reappear again right in front of my locker for me to gracefully re-stow them. The best part is it has a combination lock! *Whoa!* I am very excited with this new thing. You understand, a combination lock involves *secrecy.* Only *I* have the number! Just me! And, I have it *memorized!* 21! 7! 14! Second, I have been told by one of the older boys that it is *indestructible!* Naturally, I have to ask him what that means.  *It means it can’t be broken . . . Oh . . . ?*

Can’t be broken? *Really?* The first time I can arrange to find myself alone in the locker hall I attempt to confirm his hypothesis. I pull hard on the lock. I yank on it, repeatedly. Totally absorbed, I take off my shoe and begin hitting it with all my might. *Bam-bam-bam!* From behind comes a voice. One of the older boys is staring at me. He calmly asks *What are you doing? Uh . . . Nothin’. Just checking to see if it’ll hold.* His eyes roll backwards in his head. He lays an arm around my shoulder. *C’mon, goof. We’re late for Mass.* Goof, huh? Why would he say that?

Entering this all-male tribe, me having just skipped from first to fourth grade, I am ahead of my class peers by two years. At this school, however, I quickly realize that I have no same age peers. I am seven and will turn eight next year; the other boys in my fourth grade class are between nine and ten. Although I try to never let on that the huge differences between us are in any way affecting me, inside I am torn up, sometimes sick to my stomach so I find ways to balance whjat the Spuartans said about mind, body, spirit. I am two years less grown than these my academic, tribal peers. I ain’t standin down for nobody.

Besides our obvious differences, I’m a celebrity! An academic “boy wonder.” As well as the youngest and smallest boy in a school of hundreds, I am always ever present with a smile. I am not stupid. I am happy. Go along to get along. I’m in an a good school that takes learning seriously, and I am pumpedbeing here. Seven-years-old, am I telegraphing this too much? As I walk down the country train tracks from my dorm I feel like I’m fighting with excitement and fear, like movie star lovers, or even Holmes and that eveil Moriarity, each daring me or the other to jump. Impressionable, missing my grandparents, mom, sister, my little dog Badger*,* I attend Mass and ask *God?* *Can you see the future? Show me what I got?*

I tell you what. I ain’t seein’ God got much to say.

**Ω**

*What's wrong, Frances? It's Optimus, Bill. I don't know where he is! He's been gone since my nap nearly two this afternoon! I walked to the pier, over to Woody ‘n' Detty at Danes; Margaret and Irish; the postmistress; no one's seen him. He's bad, Bill, but he's not this bad, is he? Do you think he's run away?!* Swett was not a big talker and Frances had just said a lot. They sat down at the kitchen table. *Lemme think for a minute* Swett said. Frances kept talking. She almost liked talking as much as Optimus.

*I guess he got up from his nap before me. He was gone when I woke and I didn't think anything of it. Why should I? He's a boy. When I had a cocktail around five, I noticed the last of the cheese was gone. Why would he do that? He likes the Kraft slices, not that sharp cheddar. What would he want that for?* Swett was thinking. Listening to her, he still could not put out of his mind the coming Cuban invasion.

*Frances, try to relax. He's a smart boy. He's probably all right. Did you call the hospital?* Optimus' grandmother drew up in surprise. *The hospital? In Annapolis? No!* Swett stood up tall. *I'm going to change clothes and go look for him. You call the hospital.* That was that. Bill Swett saved words like rich people saved money. Now, walking out deep into the woody trail, under light of full moon and lantern, Swett called out for his grandson.

When you are a ten-year-old boy and adore your grandfather as did Optimus, even if you are in trouble, big trouble as was Optimus in now, still, trouble or not, it was always a sublime, manly pleasure for Optimus to see his grandfather. Even as he trembled. Optimus yodeled back easily *G-R-A-N-D-D-A-D-D-Y*, criss-cross swinging his arms in a futile attempt to signal his position. No one knew it, not even Swett, but Optimus' grandfather was in the critical early stages of night-blindness. He could not see Optimus' outline although, under light of moon, young Optimus could easily see his, even if he hadn't been carrying the lantern. Another night, eight years in the future, Swett's night-blindness would nearly kill all three of them. Bill. Frances. Optimus. Only Optimus' quick-thinking would save them. Turnabout.

Right now, Swett trudged forward through the woods, relieved to find his grandson. Looking closely, Optimus recognized that his grandfather was carrying his shot-gun. *Holy Shit! This is worse than I thought!* thought Optimus. He was not a boy who cursed for cursing's sake - like, say, to show the other boys he was a soon-to-be-man. No, Optimus was genuinely concerned. *Why is Granddaddy carrying his shotgun?* Swett broke through the last of the holly brush, his boots momentarily snagging on the viny underbrush. *Boy?! Here, Granddaddy.* Optimus ran up to his grandfather and threw his arms around his waist. Saying nothing, his grandfather embraced him. Swett was not big on hugs. Two in one night was a record of sorts. They did not speak for a long moment. Optimus was the first to pull away. *Granddaddy?! I got a possum!!*

**Ω**

Bill Swett did not scold Optimus. Swett was glad that he was safe and unhurt. He was not glad that Optimus had so upset his grandmother and he would deal with that, later. Setting the lantern down on a log, shotgun resting across his lap, the two sat and talked in the August woods night. Fireflies competed with the light of the moon.

Swett said one word. *Cheese?* Optimus ignited. *Granddaddy! I had a possum! I swear I did! I come out here after lunch and took me some cheese -* Optimus always liked to speak with what his mother snippily called "bad English," meaning double-negatives and wrong tenses, simply because that's how real, common working-folk spoke in the South and that's who Optimus most admired, the working folk. People like his grandfather - *n' I cut some line off your reel and tied the cheese to it and set up Uncle Carl's beer case right there and dang, I swear Granddaddy, that possum come out that tree hole smellin' the cheese n' I couldn't believe it, really. I never thought he'd come bein' day n' all that, but he did, so when he did, I decided, heck, I'm a stay!*

Swett listened to the story and wished it had been him. He had done similar things in his youth in Southern Pines and now that he was in his twilight years, he wished that Optimus might be able to do whatever it was that thrills the heart of a child. Childless, Bill Swett, revered life. The fact that he knew in the week ahead many young men were soon going to die - even if Cubans - only made more precious Optimus' naiveté. The pint bottle in Swett's rear pocket was beginning to feel uncomfortable on his hip. He stood up. Optimus looked up at him. *What, Granddaddy?* Swett placed a hand on his shoulder. *What say? Go look for that possum? Ready? Really, Granddaddy?!* Optimus, once again, could not believe his luck. His grandmother always said *Optimus, you could fall in horse manure and you'd still come out smellin' like a rose.* Optimus figured it was time for him to smell like a rose. *Sure, Granddaddy! Let's go!*

Swett turned up the lantern to its fullest. The forest blew up light like a yellow dream. Optimus was sure he could see deer and cougar in the distance but that was only his imagination. Swett checked the safety on the shotgun, a 12-gauge that had belonged to his daddy, a 1907 Remington to be exact, a beautiful, rugged piece that Optimus loved to hold and hoped he would one day be able to fire. Swett slammed shut the double-barrel casing. *Le'ss go!*

Swett did not think they had a blind man's chance in hell to find Optimus' possum, or any possum for that matter; without dogs there was little hope they would run across one, but if they did, it could be fun, and if they didn't, if all they did was walk fast through the woods, Swett knew that it was important to teach Optimus to never give up on the task at hand no matter how slim the odds. They walked fast, cutting through a trail worn by hundreds of years of native Indians, animal stock, hunters, walkers, and, mostly, dreamy young boys. Optimus hurried ahead, delirious that instead of being shot by his grandfather, he was actually embarking on his first real possum hunt. *I think I see him, Granddaddy!* He did not, but it sounded so good to say. He was happy.

For some time the pair, grandfather and grandson, hiked through the night Maryland woods, a moment like no other, long past midnight, in God's garden of Eden Optimus was, never ever knowing such fun as this, hoping forever he would never let himself grow up or distance too far from the spectacularness of a summer night, alone with nocturnal nature, the crackling of branches, the sounds of cicadas and whispery gods, the tramp of his grandfather's boots behind him, the tail of Optimus' coonskin cap tickling the nape of his sinewy, bony shoulder blades; the lantern in his right hand swinging wildly left to right, forth to back, high to low. Optimus fairly ran. Swett, huffing, did his best to keep up with him. He did not see the small limb sticking out. Swett tumbled, striking his head on a stump. The scrape of flesh and tissue tore across his forehead. He blacked out.

Running ahead, Optimus yelled out *I'm sure I got him, Granddaddy!* And he ran forward faster and faster. In a moment, in the yellow arc of kerosene and quiet, Optimus realized he was alone. He spun around and found nothing. *Granddaddy!!* Optimus panicked. Ten, a big man in his mind, a small boy in the world. *Granddaddy!* Nothing, again. Optimus began running to whence they had come. It was no more than thirty yards; to Optimus, it felt like thirty miles. The lantern illuminated a sweaty, crumpled figure passed out on the leafy forest floor. *Granddaddy!!* screamed Optimus. Blood trickled down Swett's temple.

**Ω**

Optimus set down the lantern and cradled his grandfather's head in his arms. It felt strange to him, child holding the man. Rubbing his grandfather's stubbled face with his own smooth cheek, Optimus pleaded. *Granddaddy? Granddaddy? Are you all right, Granddaddy?* The blood from Swett's cut smeared itself across Optimus' own forehead. Swett felt small hands on his face and for a moment wondered where he was. The yellow kerosene light and the leafy woods overhead brought him to. *Optimus? Yes, Granddaddy! Are you all right, Granddaddy?* Swett struggled to sit up. It was hard given that a strong little ten-year-old held him in what felt like a near head-lock.

*I'm all right. Lemme go.* Swett sat up. He rose to one knee. The shotgun lay next to him. He did not feel the cut on his head. *Listen* he said. Rising, taking his weapon in hand, Optimus helped him up. Six-two, once again, he steadied himself on the boy's shoulder. *Look here. Go on ahead, back to the house. Tell Gram I need some whiskey.* Optimus thought this all rather surreal, even if he didn't yet know that word; he knew what it felt like. *Optimus. Don't say nothin' to her 'bout this, ya' here? Nothin'!* Optimus nodded vigorously. *I won't, Granddaddy, I won't.* Swett lifted Optimus' chin. *I'm'a all right. I need time to rest. You okay? I'm'a okay, Granddaddy. You?* Swett nodded. *Can you find your way back and then back again?* For his grandfather, Optimus could do anything. *Yes, I can.* Swett turned Optimus' body eastward, back to the bay and their house. He slapped hisbottom hard, like one would do to a horse. *Now git!* Optimus bolted. Running for love is so easy. Even easier if you are a child.

**Ω**

Mary Frances was sober and wide-awake. Every few seconds she would look up from her chair in the kitchen to the red, electric clock hanging above the sink. A Sunbeam. 1:45 a.m. She could not believe it. There had been no word at Annapolis General that any ten-year-old boys had been checked in that evening. That made her feel better, although it did not lighten her burden.

As much trouble as Optimus was for her, and, oh, he was plenty of trouble, even if he didn't mean to be, she prayed her agnostic prayers, praying to the God that Optimus prayed to when Carl and Lil took him to church on Sundays. She prayed to that God *Help him. Protect Bill. Thank you. I believe in you.* This she said, although she only meant it because she needed her prayers answered more than she needed to be right as to whether or not there really was a God. She may not have known *cosmology* but like a female Hemingway, Optimus' grandmother was one hell of a crap detector.

A smart woman, an educated woman in the sense that she herself, even though raised in a foster home, her taking care of her younger brother Arnold from age eight, that's when her mother had passed away from her tuberculosis; eight, the same time that their father, Clements, in a move not uncommon or heartless for the times; a single man working as a traveling salesman, now a widower, he placed his two children into an orphanage and wished them well. Still, Mary Frances had educated herself by reading books. Wherever Optimus turned in his life, there were books. Books. Books.

When she had met Bill Swett, she was the front-office receptionist for Newsweek magazine. Not bad for an orphan girl from the roaring twenties raising her own daughter, alone, during the Great Depression. Such is the fate that was Mary Frances' as a child. This throwing of her and younger brother Arnold to the emotional wolves forever marked Frances. Throughout her life emotional intimacy was as hard to extract from or be received by her as are gold flakes embedded in black rock.

When she heard the sound of the gate opening, she jumped up. Anxiousness ran to the door. Optimus did not even make it inside. His grandmother grabbed on to him at the concrete bird bath, the one Bill had made for her birthday four years ago. Wordlessly, she clutched Optimus to her. It seemed to her he was growing by the minute. Only a moment ago he was at her knee, now, she held him in her strong arms, his around her great waist, his face flat against her rising chest. Big-breasted, they were like fluffy pillows, soft and firm all at the same time. Optimus loved her and he was sorry to himself that he had run out on her like that. Crying, not knowing why, maybe because it would make his grandmother feel better; he wasn't sure, but he knew he needed to apologize. He stopped his tears as quickly as they had started.

*I'm sorry, Gram. I was just in the woods. Thas'all. I'm sorry. I fell asleep.* They both stood up straight. *Where's your grandfather?* Optimus knew he had to get this right. That he had to say the story to her in the way that she wouldn't ask him too many questions and that he wouldn't give any wrong answers. It was tough to fool women, especially her.

They walked past the silent pump house to the back door. They entered the kitchen bright with fluorescent. She turned round to look at Optimus and right away saw his blood-smeared forehead. She screamed. Rushing to him, she brushed away his cap revealing smooth, sandy blonde hair. *What has happened to you?* Optimus did not know he wore his grandfather's blood on his face. If he did, his smile and pride would have grown even bigger. *What is it, Gram?* She examined his forehead closely. *You're not cut!* Optimus was not sure what was going on but he knew he needed to get the hell out of there before he spilled the beans about his grandfather's fall. *Gram!! I'm all right! Must'a been'a little somethin' earlier. Gram! Granddaddy stayed back.* Optimus thought quickly. *We're huntin' a possum! Granddaddy sent me back for whiskey!* Mary Frances' eyes grew big. *Whiskey! A possum! What?!* Optimus knew better than to let her ask another question. Any more questions and he'd be doomed and he knew it. *Gram! Hurry! Granddaddy's waitin'!*

Optimus said this with remarkable confidence, like it was totally natural for a ten year-old to be gone all day and night and then to just run in the house breathless at two in the morning commanding she fetch a missing grandfather a bottle of whiskey. She started to say *Why . . .* but she did not. Bill Swett was the man of his house and she was the woman of it. If it was whiskey he had sent for, it was whiskey she would send. She knew that no matter what, Bill would not have wanted the full gallon bottle sitting by the sink counter. No, he would be thinking of the little corn-plug, jug-eared whiskey bottle he kept in the credenza. It had belonged to Optimus' great-grandfather and his before him. If anything, the Swetts were a careful people.

Mary Frances rushed to the other room, unlocked the cabinet, immediately returning with her charge. She whispered to herself. *Thank you, God, for answering my prayers.* This time she believed it. Now it was her turn to commandeer her grandson. Having birthed and raised a daughter, Optimus' mother Muriel, to Frances, Optimus also felt like a son. Strangers thought so. *Attractive woman.* *Nice boy.* Who could blame her? No one.

She looked down at Optimus. For a brief moment she thought how silly and heroic this all was, like nothing Bill ever did on his own. Swett did things wordlessly. Optimus. Not of Swett blood-line. Watching him, Swett having raised him in the ways of being a boy-man, he often thought Optimus was sometimes more of a Swett than Swett himself. That's why he's doing *something* out there Mary Frances thought.

When she wasn't handing them off whiskey at two in the morning for the most improbable of reasons *Possums! Whiskey! -* she laughed to herself - *Bachelors! -*  she would sip her gin n' tonic, letting her heart tell her its truths. Frances had premonitions. She feared that Optimus was headed for a fall. Mary Frances knew that the world was not really at all like the world of heroes and dreams dancing in Optimus' mind from the many books he read; the many miles he walked; how many speckled sun fish he could catch at will; how many crabs he cornered, the hours he slogged along at dawn in tennis shoes on the shore waters of the Chesapeake; how easy was his aim, he could knock a squirrel senseless with a sling shot; his endless bike rides to the sun and back; she knew his life was heroic dream and she worried that he would wake up and find it out. She didn't want it to happen. Not yet.

She hurried him to the kitchen door, now the sending-off point for her very own little Pony Express. She started to pat his bottom but caught herself. Instead, she rubbed his back. *Hurry! Your grandfather's waiting!*

Optimus loved all this attention. He loved that adults knew that he knew everything they were saying; that he could understand emotional inflections behind the briefest of words, deciphering their subtle tones, and it thrilled him that because he could keep his senses about him, move forward under pressure, that they came to trust him on missions. She did, and she was. *Go on!* He rushed to hug her. She would have none of it. *Don't you dare break that bottle! That was Granddaddy's daddy's! I won't Gram!* Optimus darted off. Past the Mercury, kick-tapping the gate open, leaping the ditch, onto the gravel road, he sped down Frederick Ave. as fast as two flying feet could skip. Which is to say, fast. Very fast.

Optimus imagined that one day he would be a sprinter in the Olympics representing his country, the United States of America. *Yes, I will make that my goal.* Optimus raced past Uncle Carl and Aunt Lil's, past Uncle Pete and Aunt Noni's; all of them friends, all knowing and contributing to Optimus' upbringing; past the Fitzgeralds' and their two little black and white Scotty terriers barking under the smoky moonlight. Optimus didn't care. In his mind, he was Hermes. *Yes! I am Hermes on the dime!*

An objective person might have, perhaps, deduced Optimus as unusually ebullient. Prejudiced against imagination, they might also have said Optimus wasn't always right-in-the-head. They would have been wrong. Optimus was perfectly fine. Having no other brother to compare himself with, he was content to rotate on his own axis. Optimus ran like the last young Mohican brave he imagined himself to be. *I am!* *I am!*

In the woods on the stump that had spilled him, Bill Swett sat with the lantern low. Deep in thought, he quietly listened for Optimus' footsteps. Swett thought of his friend Frank. An analyst at the CIA, clandestine, Frank was easy going, immersed in smoke and mirrors. He and Bill had known each other almost twenty years, meeting in The District, Washington, DC. After the second war, Swett had set up shop as a printer. Honorable, his work within the community yielded his meeting and befriending many fine people. Fine people have a way of sussing each other out. Frank and his wife Pat, Carl and Lil, Margaret and Irish, Swett had many lifelong friends from among the first group of people he befriended in Washington. Much like Lincoln.

Swett knew that Frank must not only have known about the Bay of Pigs, it would have been part of Frank's job to plan and execute it. Swett would not call him. That would not be right. Swett sipped from the small flask taken from his hip pocket. The whiskey tasted good. Relaxing. The August night was peaceful. Swett enjoyed his sit in the woods. What man wouldn't?

**Ω**

In the distance, Optimus yodeled. Turning up the lantern, Swett sang out a turkey trill. It made Optimus snort and laugh as he ran. He tried to trill back but a good trill is a trait acquired only by long practice. Pink-faced and heavy-breathing, Optimus ran up. *Granddaddy! Here it is!* He felt like Phedippides of Athens. Optimus thrust the one-eared jug high into the air. He knew he had won a contest. His grandfather snorted. *Hand it over.* Optimus loved to hear his grandfather's snicker. His grandfather had tested him. Optimus had answered.

The two sat on the log by the lantern and were quiet. Swett had returned the flask to his pocket. He unplugged the jug and drank a long, satisfying guzzle. *That'll cure ails.* Optimus knew to not waste words with his grandfather. He was the only person in the world with whom Optimus always thought about what he was going to say and how he was going to say it. Not that he couldn't be spontaneous with his grandfather; he could and he was. It was just, well, it was *curious* to Optimus. Optimus who saw everything.

He knew his grandfather had been country raised. He didn't think that his grandfather had finished high school and he dared not ask in case he hadn't. Optimus would never embarrass his idol. He knew that his grandfather had run away from home at fourteen - already six feet - to try to join up with the Army, shipping overseas to fight the first war in Europe. He had told Optimus that he made it as far as Philadelphia before the Army found out his true age, not sixteen, and they had shipped him back home to Raleigh. Swett had walked the entire 107 miles back to Southern Pines sleeping in the woods.

It was stories like these that absorbed Optimus like water and sand in a marine sponge. Optimus did not know his father, he had only seen pictures of him; one, his favorite, his dad pushing him along on a tricycle. When Swett talked, which was not often, Optimus listened hard like a good son. And that's what had made him so curious. He wanted to know if his grandfather could write. *Write!* But it was true. Optimus had spent every summer with his grandparents since he was four years old. Other than his name, Optimus had never seen his grandfather write a single word.

Oh, he had seen him with a pencil many times. Swett kept a carpenter's pencil on his workbench and would send Optimus to fetch it whenever he had to mark a board for cutting. Optimus had noticed how he handled the pencil. Like it was a tool. An extension of his finger. That's not how Optimus thought of a pencil. He thought a pencil was for playing hang-man or drawing birds in the sky; keeping track of the score in Scrabble; or writing poems about the Washington Senators. He didn't think the pencil was just a piece of lead encased in wood. It was a magic stick. Not to Swett. To Swett a pencil was a pencil. Mark. Cut. Return.

Optimus noticed that his grandmother always made the lists for everything they needed. A real list maker was she. When Swett needed things from town, he would call Frances out to the garden and she would sit or stand like a dutiful secretary taking the boss' dictation. Swett never wrote a thing on any list that Optimus had ever seen. Yes, he signed his name. Optimus saw him do that on Saturday mornings as Gram would spread out the few bills and he would sign the prepared checks *William L. Swett.*

Optimus' grandmother had told him that the *L* stood for Loudric. *Loudric!* Optimus thought that the funniest backwoods name in the world but, smartly, he kept that notion to himself. It was even funnier when his Gram told him that the little black doll she kept on her dresser was named *Loudrica!* Optimus thought all of this hilarious. Still, he did not believe his grandfather could write. Even when he showed him his reading trick.

Swett called the six-year-old Optimus into the living room. Sitting in his big chair reading the first of his three daily newspapers - the man could read like hell and he did every day - newspapers, that is. Never a book. Never a magazine. Newspapers. Optimus came in from his room where he was putting together balsa wood airplanes. Optimus imagined that if he could make enough of them he would recreate Pearl Harbor. He had three, so far. Gram bought him one every two weeks if he was good. The going was slow. *Coming, Granddaddy!*

Swett put down his paper. *Go ask Gram for a mirror.* That was it. That's the way he talked. The facts. That's all. Optimus slid down the linoleum floor in his sox and underwear, hop-skipping over the step, down into the kitchen. *Gram!* Mary Frances turned, startled. *Stop that! You'll break your neck! Or I will!* Optimus ignored her, safe in the knowledge that he carried the imprimatur of his grandfather's request. *Gram. Granddaddy wants a mirror.* Optimus thought the world stopped for his grandfather and in their house it did. Frances called out *Bill? What kind of mirror? My make-up mirror?* Optimus stood on the steps miming his grandmother's words back to his grandfather who could hear them perfectly well without his antics.

Swett had a vocabulary of grunts, each of them appropriate to the situation. Optimus had them all memorized. *A-a-n-n-h-h* meant yes. Optimus turned to his grandmother, nodding. *Yes, Gram. That's what he wants.* Mary Frances went into the bathroom closet returning with the mirror. Optimus sped off, once again slip-sliding in his sox. *Stop that!* but he didn't. He presented the mirror to his grandfather as he imagined himself a returning Columbus handing a map of America to King Ferdinand of Spain.

*Hold the newspaper.* Swett took the mirror in hand and turned in his chair, Optimus holding the paper at his back. *Be still, worm.* Optimus held still. Marvelously, Swett, backwards in the mirror, began reading word for word, line by line, the front page of the Washington Post. Optimus was dumbfounded. *How do you that Granddaddy?! Secret. Top Secret. No, no, really, Granddaddy! Tell me! Can't. Won't. Granddaddy!!*

But it was of no use. Swett wasn't talking. He went back to his paper. Optimus ran back to the kitchen, once again sliding and hop-skipping. His grandmother was opening the little jar of saccharine pills she used to sweeten her coffee. *Can I put them in please?* Optimus liked to hold them as they were the tiniest pills he had ever seen. She let him. He whispered in her ear. *Gram, Granddaddy just read a newspaper backwards in the mirror.* She leaned back in her chair nodding proudly as if to say *See, that's why I married him. Your grandfather is the smartest man in the world.* She didn't say any of those things. She just kept nodding and smiling. Optimus thought his grandfather was the smartest man in the world, too. But he didn't think he could write. As they sat quietly together in the woods, Optimus no longer cared if he could write.

Swett stood up, signal that it was time to head home. *Must be goin' on three.* Optimus had never stayed up this late except for flying on airplanes to come visit his grandparents. They began walking the mile or so to the house. He was beginning to feel sleepy. What his grandfather said next woke him up. *You were wrong to stay out so long. No excuses. Possum don't mean nothin'. You're gettin' a whippin' when we get home.* And that was it. Nothing else was said for the rest of their walk. Swett carried his shotgun. Optimus, the little whiskey jug. The night was cool. The moon, setting. Mary Frances met them at the door. She gasped at Swett's cut. Reaching out to touch him, he brushed her away, wordlessly banishing her to the living room. She nodded. Swett took the belt from his trousers. *Optimus. Turn off that light.* Obedient, he did.

With the thunder came a rain.

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