



THE ONE THE MANY

The Life & Times of a Southern White Boy

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OPTIMUS

MAXIMUS

THE ONE

THE MANY

Optimus Maximus MMXIV

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!*

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*(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.

**Ω**

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.

**Ω**

- Part II *-*

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!!*

**Ω**

Ten-thousand or so days into the future, Optimus would meet the next Governor of Maryland, Martin O'Malley, and amidst the finery of the Baltimore Symphony, the Governor smirked, *Optimus, I don't recognize you with your clothes on!* They laughed the good laugh, the hearty man's laugh as their respective, beautiful women tilted their heads in wonder.

The two men had met in the health club, and there, among the sweat and the weights, Optimus had suggested to a young, charismatic O'Malley, then the Mayor of Baltimore, what he might have said to the press about the housing director he was boldly keeping, not firing, because of a few indiscriminate drinking remarks the director had made about gays. Optimus lent the Mayor his thoughts, and the Mayor said that he wished he had thought at the time to say it that way. From that day forward they were friends. Now, the Mayor was the Governor of Maryland, considering in his heart what it might feel like if, perhaps, he was President of the United States. Optimus was, too. Like everything else, he would approach it from the outside in.

In any case, the Governor had written a book, or, at least he acted like he had. It was called *Who Moved My Cheese?* And that's just what Optimus thought that ol' possum must be thinkin' right about now. You see, Optimus had sliced thirty feet of fishing line from his granddaddy's reel. He pierced the core of the white cheddar with the clear mono-filament, tying it tightly to his finger. The closer the possum came to the cheese, Optimus would wiggle-wrap another inch or two of the line around his finger, slowly drawing the cheese closer into the trap. The possum must have felt like he was drinking. Every time he would take a step forward, the cheese would take a little step back. Optimus, he was a smart boy. That he was.

**Ω**

When Optimus wasn't living with his grandparents, which is to say, the school year, he attended some of the finest private boarding schools the *antebellum* South offered. St. Scholastica was in Covington, Louisiana; St. Stanislaus; Bay St. Louis; Kern Academy; Pass Christian. The last two schools were in southern Mississippi. Optimus was a Southerner and he was damn proud of it.

Once, he had told someone he'd met that he was heading north for the summer. They asked *Where? Maryland* Optimus replied. The old fellow began to guffaw so hard Optimus thought there must be something wrong with him. But there wasn't. He was just laughing that Optimus thought goin' North meant Maryland. Optimus didn't like people to make fun of his Southern roots or his Southern accent. An accent he had, and every year, as Optimus came to hear more and admire the lilt and grace of the Southern spoken-word, his accent grew a little stronger. That was all right, though, for Optimus equally grew a little stronger every year, too.

As he brought the cheese an inch or two closer, the sunlight peek-a-booed through the branches of a great, fallen oak. Yes, Optimus had espied the tree-house in its midst and he knew that one day he would build a fortress there for all the neighborhood boys and girls to play in. Optimus was a leader and that's all there was to say about that. What Optimus wanted, Optimus usually got, even if it was a beehive of trouble. Trouble. That got Optimus to thinkin' about girls. *Now there's trouble* he thought.

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 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.

**Ω**

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

- Part III -

Mary Frances Swett, Optimus' grandmother, was finishing off her second tall gin n' tonic. Feeling a little tipsy, she looked up from the kitchen table to the red-faced, electric clock hanging above the sink. 5:45 p.m. *Where is that boy?* Standing, she felt the effects of the gin. She felt good about that, bad about Optimus. *I'll beat that boy's bottom when he comes home!* is what she thought. She meant it, too. Problem was, Optimus was getting bigger every year so Mary Frances had to swat him harder n' harder to do him any good. At least that's how she thought of it. *Hit him harder! That'll make him better.* Funny way to think or raise a child but that's how some grandmothers are. That's how Optimus' grandmother was. Ornery when drinking.

She looked out the kitchen window overlooking the yard and her flower garden. The flowers were as pretty as she was mad. Gram was as good getting mad as she was a gardener, which is to say, very good, and she was getting very, very mad. The driveway was empty, of course. Optimus' grandfather, Bill Swett, was in the nation's capital working his shift at the Government Printing Office. Sixty or so, Optimus thought of him like he did Abraham Lincoln, America's sixteenth president. Optimus thought he was a god. He treated him like one, too.

When he was four or five, his grandfather had beckoned him from the living room into the privacy of Optimus' bedroom. Optimus' bedroom was a magical place. He didn't think of it as his bedroom at all. It was his *room* - one day he would call it a *studio* - but at four or five, he just thought of it as a magical place where his Gram helped him keep all his shoes and clothes in perfect order, right down even to his sox and the little sailor suit she made him wear on Sunday mornings when the neighbors would take him to church. Yes, his room was a magical place. Quite the lucky boy, Optimus had his very own flashlight.

When his grandmother would put him to bed, Optimus would play-sleep for five minutes. Sliding the flashlight out from under his pillow, laying on his back, he started sending out Morse code messages on the walls and ceilings. Why these things make little boys giggle is one of the great mysteries of the universe. But, Optimus giggled indeed, happy in knowing that while his grandparents were on one side of the door doing whatever it is grown-ups do late at night, Optimus was a soldier secretly sending out signals on the other. *Pajamas with feet in them make you a magician!* This is true.

Yes, Optimus' Gram was an old battle-axe, but he loved her because she had taught him to tie his shoes on a really big wooden shoe and even though it had taken him over two hours and more than one flustered sigh or two, she had stuck with him even when he screamed *I can't do this!* She would shout right back *Yes you can!* As it turned out, she was right. He could tie his shoes. Every day, when Optimus tied his shoes, he thought of her and how much confidence his grandmother had given him. Optimus' grandfather placed a finger to his lips signaling quiet as he closed Optimus' bedroom door. *Sh-h-h-h . . .* His grandfather pointed mysteriously upward towards the attic.

**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**

Now, standing excitedly in his bedroom with his grandfather, Swett extended his six-foot, two-inch frame upwards towards the ceiling door, entryway to the attic.Pulling down the lock-ring, his grandfather carefully lowered its descending, natural wood staircase. Optimus thought this all rather magical. His grandfather towered above him.

*Optimus? Did I ever tell you? I can teach horses how to read. That's what I did in the Navy. My job was to teach horses how to read.* Optimus was awe-struck, again. Having been on a pony before, he wanted to learn more and his grandfather knew it. He pointed up the stairs into the darkness. *Up there are the secrets to teach horses how to read.* Optimus knew he had the best grandfather on earth. He could not wait.

*What'll we do, Granddaddy? Do? Sh-h-h-h-h. Gram doesn't know.* Swett quietly climbed up to the ladder's second step. Now, he looked even bigger to Optimus. He lowered a hand. *Climb up.* Optimus did. Narrow, the ladder was a tight fit for two. Hoisting him to chest level, with his arms Optimus held on to his grandfather's neck. They shimmied upwards a step at a time. He whispered softly *Grab that light switch.* Through the eave of the vent Optimus could see neat little triangles of late afternoon sunlight peeking through. They cast small white shadows onto the blackness. *Okay!*

Optimus felt the same sense of giddy that he felt whenever he played Candyland. *Look at all this stuff!* he thought. There was plenty to see. Swords. Flags. Steamer trunks. Suitcases that looked like they had been somewhere. Somewhere good. Optimus was not yet finished observing even half of the attic's contents but his grandfather signaled his attentions by pointing to the far corner near the eave.

*Optimus? See that black bag?* Optimus nodded. It was a doctor's black medical case. *Inside of that black bag are the secrets to teach horses how to read.* Optimus could not believe his luck. *When you're grown, Optimus, that bag will be yours and then YOU'LL have the secrets. Got it?* Optimus nodded again. This was such secret information he could do little else but stare at the bag in near tremble. His grandfather rubbed his cheek with his beard. Optimus giggled. *Sh-h-h-h. Let's go back down.* And that is how Optimus acquired the secrets to teaching horses how to read. It was as easy as pie. *The secrets in the bag are now mine. Well, when I'm grown. Hurry!*

Ω

If you don't ever test life's boundaries, well, then you don't know where they are. Standing alone in the woods, Optimus wasn't exactly thinking those words, but, in a way, his actions were. He did not know the time but he could tell by the dusky sunlight slowly drifting onto the Eastern Shore that darkness was soon approaching. Within the wood's maze it was growing even darker.

Optimus thought it must be close to 8:30 in the evening. His grandmother had been taking a nap when he left the bay house some six hours ago. Told no time to be home by, Optimus knew that, technically, he could argue with her that he wasn't really late. Testing boundaries. When you're young, see, that's how you learn where they are. Besides, Optimus loved arguing with his grandmother. She was a good thinker and a fiercely passionate woman. She made Optimus think better and he knew it. Even when he lost at their arguments which he often did, after all he told himself, she's the boss and I'm a little shrimp, he loved to mix-it-up with her. And they did mix-it-up. *Give and get!* That was those two.

**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**

Morning. In unison, the entire room arises. *Holy cow! I am amidst a herd of boys!* Energetic, smiling, boisterous, enthusiastic, short to tall, skinny to fat, nine to eighteen; to Optimus *These guys sure seem like they know what they're doing!* They did, too, whereas Optimus only wished he knew what he was doing. Mouth shut, Optimus quickly follows their lead. Bed, made. Onto the lavatory. Immediately, a first test. *Can I walk around in my underwear in front of all these other guys?* Optimus is so much younger, smaller, and naturally thinner than any of the other boys that the moment gives him great pause. *Man, what a scene!* *Should I just jump in?* Boys. Boys.

Optimus does not know it, in fact there is no way he could know it, but the truth was that Optimus Maximus was a unique young boy whose mind spun freely with ideas great and small; ideas that captivated most of his waking moments and allowed him in almost any given situation to, perhaps, exercise a greater freedom of thought than is typically thought to be the typical mind of a typical young boy. In the final analysis, all comparisons of mind are but mere speculation. As we have seen, Optimus Maximus was not a typical young boy. Taking a moment amid the action, Optimus thought hard.

*Well, if they can do it, I can do it! SWIM PARTY! Hey, look at me! I’m walking around in my underwear! In front of dozens of other guys! Huh? How about that?* His next test was intuitive. How could he act like all this newly- found camaraderie was natural and that he was just "one of the guys.” *Ho-ho-ho, ladies! Shadyside boy I am! I can jump off a pier! From the railing!* Only a few weeks ago Optimus' grandmother had given him an illustrated copy of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Reading it twice, once for the story and a second time to almost literally move himself into that story, surrounded this morning by a sea of youthful masculinity, Optimus quite easily imagined himself as a cabin boy to a band of pirates. *Oh, yes! I can do this! I can!*

Lavatory duties done, the boys all quickly dressed. One of the older boys loudly shouted out *On to the chow-hall!* In unison, the other boys shouted back the same. Wanting to fit in, Optimus yelled out *On to the chow-hall!* The other boys snickered as they picked up the pace heading out in cliques and scrums. Caught up in the whirl and excitement, Optimus pulled on the sleeve of an older boy. *What's a chow-hall?* Older, he sneered.Sneering was not a word or attitude of which Optimus was familiar. Not yet even from his grandmother when she was drinking. *It’s where we eat, Dumbo*. Optimus recoiled. He knows who's Dumbo. He's the big-eared elephant in the movies. Big-eared himself, Optimus thinks *Dumbo,* huh*? Well, I guess not everyone here is going to like me.* Imagine that.

Optimus' new life among these young Catholic Spartans was a quick-pulsing blur. Blessed with a photographic memory of events and feelings, years later, serving the artist's muse, Optimus would learn to 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 bastion, having just skipped from first to fourth grade, I am ahead of my academic peers by two years. At this school, however, I quickly realize that I have no chronological 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 enormous differences between us are in any way affecting me, internally I seek ways to balance and reconcile that both physically and emotionally I am two years less developed than these my academic, tribal peers.

Intensifying our obvious differences is the curiously delicious celebrity attached to being 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. In an educational institution that took learning seriously, I was ecstatic in my element. Seven-year-old boy, am I telegraphing this too much? As I walk down solitary country train tracks holding hands tightly with excitement and fear, sometimes inseparable lovers, sometimes implacable Holmes-Moriarity foes, each is 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?*

**Ω**

In the summery woods of Shadyside, darkness has descended. Venus has given way to a nearing full moon. Optimus stands on his feet, sleeping. How does one sleep standing on their feet, anyway? For Optimus, the trick was simple. Still, still, still . . . z-z-z-z-z. Only the sound of his grandfather's booming voice woke him. Like the country caller that he was, Swett sang out in the night woods: *O-P-T-I-M-U-S-!-!* *O-P-T-I-M-U-S-!-!* Optimus rolled his head in a quick snap. *My God! I'm in trouble now!* The possum was nowhere to be seen. Neither was the cheese. Optimus would have a night to remember.

**Ω**

In the distance Optimus could see a lantern. Kerosene, the only kind his grandfather would carry, it was swinging back and forth slicing through the brush and barb. Optimus was scared. He had every right to be. Little did he know that it was nearly 11:30. He knew that he was in trouble. Big time. *What in heck am I gonna say now?* It wouldn't have mattered much to his grandfather, anyway.

He had driven as usual from the G.P.O. back to the bay house, his shift ending at ten. A drive of forty miles, the big turquoise Mercury with black interior knew every winding curve of the road on Route 50. Nearly three thousand miles from its start in California, Route 50 ended in Maryland. Or began, depending which way you were coming from. Swett was coming home after a long night printing secret documents. That was his specialty. A trustworthy man, a man beyond reproach, the government had asked him to head up their Top Secret printing division and Swett did what he was asked. Always. That night, he had printed up thousands of fliers to be distributed by air-drop over the shores of the Bay of Pigs. The government was planning to invade Cuba before week's end and Swett was the only working man in America who knew it. His was a lonely vigil. He very much wanted a drink.

Home, he was surprised to see all the lights on. All of those except the light in Optimus' room. That was to be expected. He should be asleep. A bit of anxiousness crept into his step as he parked the Mercury under the carport and quietly closed the gate. He walked to the rear door, past the whirring pump house - Frances must be showering for the pump to be running - past the divit sign hanging by the door that read *Knock gently, friend. What e'er betide, the kettle's on, so come inside.* Optimus' grandmother greeted her husband at the door. Her face was red and swollen. She had been drinking and crying. Swett embraced her. She felt good in his arms.

*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**

- Part IV -

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!*

**Ω**

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!*

**Ω**

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.

**Ω**

- Ridin' The Line -

It was Easter weekend. Good Friday to be exact. Optimus was deep in Eastern Shore's gravelly back roads sliding and slinging his red bicycle like a bull snake on a desert rock. BMX racing not yet invented, Optimus inspired his part. Up a dirt hill, jump, fly, spin; land. Or crash. *Shake it off. Pick it up. Get it on. Move 'em out. Ride, boy, ride.*

Optimus had ridden twelve miles to Lawson's Corner. There was a sign there pointing the way to *Mayo Beach*. It did not say how far away it was. Optimus had looked it up on his grandfather's Texaco map early that morning at the kitchen table. It looked to be about five miles or so. Five miles. *That ain't nothin'* he said aloud. *Wha'cha doin?* his Gram asked. *O, nuttin'. . .* He did not tell his Gram what he was up to. It would not have mattered. She would not have believed him. Some of us never learn. Optimus did. Usually, the hard way. Secrecy was vital to him. Imaginations work better under cover of purpose and identity. Optimus was many people. He knew that. Protecting and serving his many selves was his secret mission. Secret agents don't spill the beans.

His grandfather lay in bed, still sleeping. After his shift at the G.P.O. he would drive home, have a Wild Turkey or two while quietly sitting in his chair, half-reading, half-listening to Frances tell him about her day. Maybe something Margaret or Irish said. Somewhere, someone she might have visited on foot in Idlewilde. She enjoyed her life at the bay house. Wife of William L. Swett was a nice, pleasant thing to be. Swett was an honored man within the Idlewilde community. Of it. For it. *Quiet about it.*

Idlewilde was less than a hundred people, maybe sixty or seventy homes spread close to the Chesapeake shoreline. It started where State Road 226 ended, down at the curve near the pier. That's where Shadyside legally ended. Not so in Optimus' mind. *No, Sir.* Past the curve was the Idlewilde Community Pier. It was kept up by the locals, money collected from small annual dues, the yearly Labor Day *Bingo!* and sweat from the brow of the men who every spring got into their boats and affixed onto the creosote pilings a heavy mesh netting for keeping out the jelly fish. They could sting and sting bad. Optimus knew that well, better and more often than he wished to, but he wasn't going to swim fenced in all the time and, besides, the real contests of manhood were diving fifteen feet from the top rail of the pier into the Chesapeake's briny waters, swimming across the fifty-or-so yards to Sandy Beach where the children waded. Optimus had once waded there as a small child with his mother. That day was fun. Another time there, an older boy had dunked him hard and so many times that Optimus thought he might drown. He had thought that boy cruel and unnecessarily bullying. Optimus hated bullies. It came to serve him. For the good.

Last night while Bill was sipping Wild Turkey, Frances told him that she thought Optimus was smoking. Her evidence: every few days her pack of Newports seemed lighter and lighter. Optimus wished she had smoked Marlboros, the cowboy brand. She did not. *She's a woman.* he thought. *Only girls and black people smoke menthols.* Still, petty thieves can't be too picky and Optimus wasn't. He purloined a few of her smokes nearly every day and went down to the lower part of the pier and secretly puffed away.

After breakfast, Optimus' grandmother laid out the plans for Easter weekend. Bill and Frances' friends, Frank and Barbara, were coming down from Washington to spend the holiday. Optimus' grandmother usually wore nice clothes in the bay house. Slacks and ironed sleeveless blouses. This morning she was dressed in a way that made Optimus laugh to himself. His Gram looked like a Southern shanty-woman in her work jeans and t-shirt. *T-shirt!* thought Optimus. He had never seen his grandmother in a T-shirt. With her thick, nutmeg hair wrapped in curlers under an Aunt Jemima bandana, Optimus smirked, careful to not let on how silly he she looked.

*Optimus, we've got company comin' later. I'm going to do a good spring cleaning. You go out and ride your bike. Stay out as long as you like, but be home for lunch, okay?* Optimus was delighted with this new found block of freedom. *What time's lunch, Gram?* She glanced up at the red Sunbeam. 9:05 a.m. Mary Frances thought to herself in an equation. How much work could she get done before Optimus would start getting into trouble? *Let's say between twelve and one. You be here and we'll have tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches.* Mary Frances knew how to play Optimus' game. *That's your favorite lunch. Don't be late. I won't, Gram.* He meant it too. That he would later choose another interest which would interfere with keeping his word was a matter for another time. *Bye, Gram.* Optimus started out the kitchen door. *Wait!*

His grandmother was taking out a package of cheese ‘n' crackers from the cabinet. *Take these. In case you get hungry.* What she meant was *I doubt if even you know if you're going to be home on time .* She thought but she did not say it. Her heart hurt. She wondered if the pain was of the body or of the mind.

Frances and Bill Swett loved Optimus dearly. They put their essence into their friendship with their grandson. Indeed, it was a friendship. The three loved each other. Yes, they equally loved Optimus' big sister, Maddie. Madelin was a sweet darling, always good to Optimus. Optimus, however, lived in his own world, right alongside Maddie - when she was there. But, there was no denying; the bond between fatherless Optimus Maximus and Grandfather Bill Swett was beyond calculation. Everyone could see it. Everyone respected it. Still, while Optimus was a thoughtful, charming, most loving boy, on the other hand, truth's interests deserve an airing in the sun.

Sometimes, Optimus' derring-do personality got him into mights of trouble. Optimus never courted trouble. Simply, Optimus had read Alexander the Great's exhortation: *Fortune favors the bold.* Finding it eminently sensible, when faced with prospect of reward, provided it was of manageable risk, Optimus never doubted that the more interesting path typically required risk. On those occasions when he would fail - risk requires inherent acceptance of failure and Optimus thought no differently - he forgave himself, quickly. Still, others weren’t always so accepting of Optimus' exceptionalism. To them, sometimes to a lot of people, Optimus could seem like a smooth-operatin', boy version of the damn devil hisself. Such is the way fate casts net.

Optimus headed his bike westward, away from the beaches of Mayo and back towards Lawson's Corner. *Time to head home for my favorite lunch.* Nearly noon, crackers long ago eaten, Optimus pedaled hard in the mid-day sun. Easter weekend, *Already pretty hot*. Whirring oak shade felt cool. *C'mon, let's ride the line, eyes closed.*

**Ω**

- Ridin' The Line; Part II -

Optimus rode along the road, his road, the road to everywhere and then some, a road that meant so much to him - things like freedom, excitement, love, hunger, nourishment, salt air, anything, everything; the crack of a hard-sewn baseball smashing against the maple ash barrel of an Alvin Dark bat; the belch roar of a lo-o-o-o-ng yellow school bus pulling up to the bus stop next to the open field; the lap of a wave licking the jetty rocks; the push-pull of a moored boat swaying 'tween its posts; honking geese flying low over Swamp Poodle sussing out feed; Swamp Poodle, my Granddaddy owns that; it is my island in the stream, a place where few are brave enough to follow and where one day I will build my house and listen for the geese; Optimus rode and rode, excited that he was going to be home on time for his lunch - *Tomato soup and grilled cheeses! She knows me! That she does!* He pedaled hard.

At ten years of age, reason and common sense are not always evident in the pubescent mind whether boy or girl. Optimus' mother Muriel had told him that girls mature quicker than boys. Optimus thought this a silly notion. Flexing his arm muscle, a boyish movement that always made his sophisticated mother roll her eyes, Optimus announced *My arm is bigger than any girls!* His mother merely laughed and said *You'll see.* Optimus knew one thing: no matter the place, time, endeavor or circumstance, only brave men were successful. Even if he had to swallow his boyhood fears, and of those, he had plenty as does every boy reaching to tautly stretch his DNA, Optimus pedaled hard down the wide macadam leading into Shadyside.

Past Swinburne’s Market; here with a friend he had once purchased Indian Head chewing tobacco making himself near sick; past the Shadyside Market, wishing he had seventy-nine cents for a balsa airplane; he didn't, he’d spent his money earlier that morning at Lawson's Corner; thirty-five cents for a pack of red and white Marlboros – he’d hidden them in the front folds of his underwear; pedaling his red and chrome bicycle, the box rubbed against his thighs and abdomen; Optimus didn't care; when he held the box in his hand he felt like a grown cowboy; and even if they sometimes made him dizzy and lightheaded, he liked the idea of being a man, so the cigarettes were for him, and if he had to hide them, then, that is what he would do. *See?*

Every fulfillment required work and Optimus was no slouch. Secrecy was a concept Optimus was quite comfortable with. He did not think it either right or wrong. He knew that Frank, the very *Uncle Frank* that was coming later that afternoon, that he worked for the CIA as an analyst, but to Optimus, it only meant that his Uncle Frank was *A spy!* and whether Benedict Arnold, traitor to America's revolution, or the good spies that helped the Allies win the Second War and thereby keep his grandfather alive, Optimus was comfortable to withhold facts if in so doing it served what he believed a higher cause. A full pack of Marlboros was a higher cause.

Leading out of Shadyside into Idlewilde, the last stretch of road was thick, beautiful leafy oak, shadow and light peek-a-booing at every turn. Optimus turned left, past the corner where a local man kept an artist studio - a man of whom one of Optimus' older and mostly unlikable friends, David Plumber, had once said *He's a queer! Let's throw rocks at his place! Let’s break a window!* Optimus did. Just one. His heart was not into it. Queer or not, his mother was an artist and Optimus knew some kind of kinship must have existed between them so, feeling bad, he stopped. She’d said *There are no lesser people*. Shame. Quietly.

After the left turn the road was pretty straight all the way down to Hattie's. There you could see the Chesapeake from the bluff. Optimus made the turn and started to pump up his courage. *How many times have I ridden this path? A million? I know this road. It knows me. It is my road. It is Granddaddy's road. We know this road. Center stripe. In the middle yellow; that's it. Eyes closed. Try it. Done. ONE BLUE MOON - TWO BLUE MOON - Open. Yes! That's it! I did it! Again! While you've got the rhythm! Close! ONE BLUE MOON - TWO BLUE MOON - THREE BLUE MOON! Open! Yes!*

The spot to Hattie's was still about a quarter-mile away. Optimus figured this would be his last chance to prove out that he really knew the road, but Optimus wanted more than proof. He wanted to increase the staggeringness of the accomplishment. Pumped, hungry, alone, full of youthful vim and a newly found masculine vigor leaking from his heart into the veins coursing from brain to body, Optimus was certain he could improve upon his new skill. *I am now going to attempt a trick that only a Wallenda would do! Only a Wallenda!* The Wallendas were a famous high-wire act in the Barnum & Bailey Circus; Optimus had seen them with his sister Maddie and Uncle Charlie in New Orleans. The whole idea of daring circus performers - lion tamers! - elephants! - bareback horse riding! - acrobats flying through the air with the greatest of ease! - these were real people, real human beings, people who had used their minds to master their fears.

Mature or immaturely, Optimus was afraid to ride his bicycle with his eyes closed *and* no hands - *No hands! –* but, intuitively, he knew that if he did not try it, it would never happen, probably ever, and he wanted to be as forward and courageous as his circus heroes. It took only a second or two. Optimus’ courage surfaced. *Faster!!*

The faster Optimus pedaled, the greater his adrenalin kicked in. Optimus was convinced that, for a Wallenda, the benchmark of extraordinariness must be seven to ten seconds. If with eyes closed *and* no hands he could ride that long while still staying as close as possible to the yellow center stripe, then, indeed, this would be a heroic achievement. At least that is how Optimus thought the newspaper of his mind would herald his feat. BOY SETS CYCLING RECORD is how he saw it. Eyes shut tight, hands in the air like a celebrating marathoner, Optimus pedaled harder ‘n' faster.

*ONE BLUE MOON! TWO BLUE MOON! THREE BLUE MOON! FOUR BLUE MOON! FIVE BLUE MOON! SIX BLUE MOON! SEVEN BLUE MOON!* Open eyes.

*YES!!* Optimus slowed down a bit, delightedly high on achieving his goal. It was a heady one, indeed. *I’m’a good, am I ain’t?* It was an achievement, but not one that he would share with anyone; especially not his Gram or his Granddaddy. Optimus knew that if he told them it would just be trouble, and, since he always seemed to have enough of that sort of thing, why go look for more, huh? *Gosh* he thought, *If I told Gram she’d just yell at me, anyway. Still, that was pretty nifty, wasn't it? Yes, it was!!*

Optimus raced towards home glad he was going to make his lunch time with her. He loved his Gram and now, with achievement realized, he was happy, proud that he was going to keep his word. As Optimus made the last curve past Felicity Cove, he could smell the salty Chesapeake blowing up from the bay. It smelled like good and fun. *Just another hundred yards or so to the pier and we'll almost be there.* He was hungry and sweaty. Happy. Optimus Maximus was a happy boy. That he was. *Last straight-away! Let's try it one more time! Here we go!!!*

Optimus pushed hard, typically, harder than most other boys. That was just him. Optimus didn't match himself against other boys so much as he matched himself against his imagination of the great men of whom he knew - Washington, Jefferson, Napoleon, Hannibal, Lincoln - even Floyd, his mother's bad-ass boyfriend - great men, none of whom were his father. Yes, he had the best, most interesting grandfather in the whole world, but, at the end of the day, almost every single day of his young life, Optimus knew that in the lonely corridor of his heart which begged for a father's love and which, always, went unanswered, there was no way to overcome that hole of loneliness except by extraordinary feats of bravery and courage. They alone pushed Optimus to believe that belief in the self could overcome any deficiency of the heart.

Giving himself one final attempt at glory and greatness, Optimus pedaled harder and faster than he had ever pedaled in his life, eyes closed, full-speed ahead. In the brief nanosecond when Optimus opened them, his eyes disbelieved that he was no longer riding the line; that, in fact, he was flying in mid-air, soaring over the muddy roadside ditch, now, turning at a soft right-angle, his bicycle angling softly with him; it was as if he were in a staccato dream, incrementally advancing freeze-frame after freeze-frame.

He saw the yellowish green of the watery grass; the rich brown of the muddy earth; the great oak providing cool shade; briefly, he saw the houses to his right, not the ones on his left; as it all rushed forward at him in a blinding, blurry speed, it began to occur to him *I am not in control. I am aloft.* Optimus turned his body so as to not crash head-on into the metal-pipe fencing. It was the best he could do. Under pressure, Optimus always did his best. *Turn!* He did. His taut little body slammed into the pipe fence with a force that broke bone, bruised organs, and brought him from speed to an instant stop. The clang of the crash rang out in the sunny mid-day air. Optimus blacked out. Gone.

**Ω**

Mary Frances did not believe it when the ambulance pulled up outside the bay house. To her, it was a scene in reverse, as if she were watching her own self preparing to be carted away. *Why is an ambulance here?* she thought. Shadyside was a small community, less than five hundred people if you counted them all and no one ever did. And like most self-sustaining, respectable small communities, Shadyside had its own volunteer fire and ambulance squads. Frances was stunned. *That's Johnny . . . Johnny's at the door. The lights on the ambulance are flashing. I am not dreaming. I must go to the door. Johnny! OPTIMUS!!*

Johnny was only twenty-two but he felt like he was growing up quickly. Mrs. Swett was a respected member of the community, Bill Swett's pleasant wife; she, who sent Optimus to summer Baptist Bible camp; who donated ten dollars every year to the South Shore Bingo and Raffle; he could see she was unprepared. Shanty-woman washer-woman is how she was dressed. Still, he would just have to go ahead. *Mrs. Swett. Get your things together. It's Optimus.*

Mary Frances wanted Bill home then. She wanted Barbara and Frank to be there. Carl or Lil. Noni or Pete. Margaret or Irish. Not the Schroeders across the street. Maybe Sis or Frank next door. For a moment she thought about her daughter, Muriel, Optimus' mother. She should be here. Mary Frances pulled at her hair. The bandana was tight over her curlers. She knew she was in work jeans and t-shirt. It would all just have to do. *Johnny? Is Optimus in there?* She pointed out the big plate glass window, the one Optimus had broken with a hard ball hit a bit too hard a few years ago - *One hundred and twenty dollars!* - she could not believe it was so expensive or that he could have hit it so hard. So be it. *Yes, ma'am. We need to go now.* All of this had taken less than a minute; like all us when these kinds of things happen, the moment seemed like a day.

Mary Frances had the presence of mind to remember her purse. For a brief instant, she wanted a drink but knew better. She did not want to leave the house. She wanted time to heal itself, correct its course. She wanted Barbara and Frank to already be there. She wanted Optimus to be sitting down with her at the kitchen table eating the just freshly made grilled cheeses. *Did I turn off the soup?* Johnny could see that Mrs. Swett was going into what he had learned in fire-fighting school was called *shock.*

Johnny put his arm around her as he would for his own mother. *C'mon now, Mrs. Swett*. She did. Out the front door and past the hydrangeas; through the gate and now under a weird flash of red and yellow strobe; across the street Millard's grandmother had come to her door, staring over Frederick Ave., herself stunned at the rarity and commotion. She watched Frances climb into the back of the ambulance. She did not see her face, only her large arms pulling herself up the chrome hand rests. Fate was not at her door. It was at Frances and Bill's. As the ambulance began to pull away, she breathed a sigh of relief. Fate glanced in her direction. She felt a strange chill. The siren made a hypnotic, echoless wail as it passed by the Chesapeake waters.

**Ω**

Dream is dream. Ask the dreamers. They are dreaming and it is as if they are awake and it is all real. It's just that they're not, and they kind of know it, too; so they dream and they dream and they dream a little more. Mary Frances was in her own dream. Annette was cradling Optimus' head in her hands. *Optimus. Stay awake now! Don't go!* Mary Frances wondered where or what Annette was talking about. *Where would Optimus go?* she thought to herself. She could not reach out and hold him because the single bay of the ambulance was not wide enough for both two people and the gurney upon which Optimus lay. She contented herself to merely lay her hands upon his feet. She noticed one of his black tennis shoes was untied.

Johnny drove the ambulance smartly. It was his first time on duty to have heard the station call - a loud, low droning from the firehouse rooftop - a sound that sounded like a civil defense siren; a dark tornado of sound. He was on his lunch break at the lumber yard smoking a cigarette when the sound began. Tossing the butt, he ran for his car. It was a turquoise and white Ford Fairlane 500. When Johnny drove it down Frederick Ave. one day, when it was brand new and he was as proud of it as the beautiful girl he was dating - Cheryl, Millard's big sister, Millard, Optimus' best friend even if he was four years older than Optimus - Johnny had told the inquisitive six year-old Optimus that the 500 meant it could go five hundred miles an hour. Optimus believed him, too. Optimus steadfastly believed in the wonder of life and all of its fantastic impossibility. When Johnny heard that Optimus had gotten into an argument with his grandmother over how fast his car could go, it cracked him up. Just shy of nineteen at the time, he was proud of this story and he came to enjoy telling it with a straight face.

Right now he worried if Optimus would live. He did not want a boy to die on his watch, especially not Optimus whom Johnny had known since he was sixteen. He had dated Cheryl since forever, junior high, and if you ever went to Frederick Ave. in Shadyside, you knew who was Optimus. Whether by bicycle or foot, handshake or smile, walking, usually running the fifty yards to the corner to get everyone's mail or morning and evening newspapers, yodeling, because it sounded fun, Optimus was as much a part of Frederick Ave. and Idlewilde as the people and oak trees themselves.

Once, Johnny had been playing cards outside on the front lawn of the corner house near the bay - it was Zach Miller's place, him a welder - and when Optimus had walked up, his hair buzz-cut so short the older men liked to give him *noogie -* Zach stopped the card hand and announced to the men *Here comes the Judge! Optimus Maximus! Smartest boy in Shadyside!* As the men passed him around, each laughing while giving him a short shot of noogie, Optimus snorted and played along. *How 'bout a Pepsi, son?* Optimus was happy to be with the men. He enjoyed the company of strong men. Thinking of Bill Swett, a serious older man, Johnny knew that he had better stay serious himself. There was no traffic on Route 226. Just woods and houses, past the old wooden elementary school, the market, the Sunoco station, the barber shop, the post office, another half-mile and they would be at Dr. Smith's office. Johnny pulled on the siren cord next to the door. *Just ride the line* he told himself.

Mary Frances was beginning to get air into her lungs. It felt like she had not breathed in almost five minutes although she knew she had. She caught her mirrored reflection on the ambulance wall over Optimus. She turned away to look at her boy. It was not the modern world of *Emergency!* on a television reality show; there were none then; it was not a neat, clean episode of Dr. Kildare. It was only Annette, the postmistress' daughter holding her grandson in her arms, sometimes giving oxygen through a mask. Mary Frances knew she was lucky to live in Shadyside. Normally, she and Bill lived in the District, keeping the bay house for the summer and special weekends.

Last year, her daughter Muriel had called from New Orleans and, crying, had said *Mom, it's Optimus. He's not happy. He keeps running away from home. He says he won't stay here anymore. He says he wants to come live with you and Granddaddy.* Mary Frances and Bill did not think twice about it. They gave up their apartment and had Optimus flown up. Now, in the bay house, the childless older couple had their son.

Annette, by sheer chance, on her lunch break as a checker at the Shadyside Market, had walked across the road to say hi to her mom at the post office. Her mother was Martha. Not only was she the post mistress, she was also Frances and Bill's Swett's back-fence neighbor. She lived on Catherine Ave. and the cinder-block fence behind the Swetts’ vegetable garden was the wall to her side yard. She was glad when Swett had built it. It gave her privacy too.

Martha and Frances liked each other. Martha always brought her stamps once a month and Frances would give her two dollars and Martha would give her the stamps as they chatted over the wall of the fence in the shade of the huge sunflowers. Sometimes they shared food treats. Buttery cupcakes and such. Shadyside was like that. Annette's mother had asked her to run to the house and start the big Easter roast she had prepared that morning. Annette did.

Some things people never know. They are unknowable and we live our lives unaware that other things have happened which affect us, but we do not see them, or hear of them; still, they affect us all the same. When Annette had left for Idlewilde, she did not know that Optimus had been lying in the ditch unconscious for nearly an hour. She did not know that the old lady across the street from where Optimus lay suffered from dementia. She did not know that the old lady had come out and tried to wake the boy and for a moment he had come to. The old lady had said *Where do you live boy?* and Optimus had replied *I am Bill Swett's grandson on Frederick Ave.*

The old lady's house was only about a block from the turn at the pier where Shadyside officially ended and the open field marked the beginning of Idlewilde. *I don't mess with Idlewilde folk* is what she sniffed as she turned and walked back across the road into her house leaving Optimus lying in the muddy mess. *Dementia.* When Annette drove by she slowed a bit, thinking it was a boy exploring for god-knows-what. As she came to the pier she looked in her rear view mirror and noticed the bicycle was strangely parked upside down. A slender hand pulled at the air. She hit her brakes and sped backwards; tires squealing, a terrible badness began rising in her.

Mary Frances wanted to ask *Is he all right?* but she was an educated woman and she knew he was not all right and that she would have to wait. In a moment they would be at Dr. Smith's and Dr. Smith would keep Optimus alive for her. She was sure he would. He was a good man. He could practice anywhere but he chose to give his heart and time to Shadyside. He would save Optimus, of that Mary Frances was sure. *I am praying to you, God.*

Dr. Smith helped Annette and Johnny wheel Optimus into his patient room. There was no blood on his face. *Good, so far* he thought. Optimus could hear voices. It felt like hullabaloo all around him but he did not care. His grandmother held his hand; he did not know it. He felt his pants being pulled down. His grandmother gasped when Dr. Smith removed the pack of red Marlboro's from Optimus' white underwear.

Mary Frances did not believe that this was happening. Dr. Smith ran his hands over Optimus' smooth, tender body. He thought for a moment how lucky it was that Optimus was young and sturdy, all youthful muscle and spring. He rolled Optimus over on his side. He could see the purple skin and welt along his left ribs. He imagined this is where he had struck the fence. Pushing in the flesh, Optimus screamed but did not hear it. He only felt it. Mary Frances screamed too. Dr. Smith turned to Johnny. In a commanding voice, he said *Hospital!*

**Ω**

The ride to Annapolis was eighteen miles, twenty-one from the bay house. Each mile brought a little more city into perspective. They passed Lawson's Corner, none of them knowing that it was here only a few hours ago that Optimus had bought his Marlboros on his morning ride to Mayo Beach. They turned left and sped off, cars in every direction courteously pulling over to the side like people did then, like they should. Optimus was not right in his mind. Darkness and vapors were breathing themselves into his lungs and young brain. He was visiting a strange place. It was the river Styxx.

**Ω**

- The River Styxx -

The river Styxx was a place of myth and imagination. Optimus knew of it from his many books on Greek mythology. His family fed Optimus' imagination like someone from Kentucky would feed and train a frisky, strong-chested colt - with promise and attention, always aware that no matter the work, their charge was a thoroughbred - remembering that every Derby winner started off as a leggy, young colt. That was Optimus. And his family accorded Optimus no less deference. As the ambulance sped its way into the heart of Annapolis, Optimus' grandmother once again began to pray. For a confirmed agnostic, being Optimus' grandmother, Mary Frances prayed a great deal. She hated to pray; more so, she hated to see her prize lying unconscious. She sacrificed her pride in reason for an unknowable, greater good. Such are the ancestors.

Edith Hamilton was Optimus' favorite author on the Greeks. Her small book, *Greek Mythology for Children,* provided Optimus hours and days of fascinating stories: gods and goddesses, heroes and villains, brave and fearless men, too many to count; *Surely, I am one of them* he thought; but amongst their manly counterparts, it was their wives and women, beautiful women, smart women, talented women, sneaky women, but women nonetheless, they were always in the mix of things just like it was in Optimus' own upbringing - he counted to himself: *One, two, three, four.* He was counting his mother, Muriel; his sister, Maddie; his grandmother, Mary Frances; and his great-grandmother, Gramma Howell. Dream is dream. Ask the dreamers. Optimus rolled with the sway of the ambulance turning corners as if it were an eyes-closed ride in a favorite amusement park.

**Ω**

*Five, if you count Annette! Her hands feel cool and nice on my face. She is shouting at me to stay awake; to stay with her; I'm not going anywhere; where is she going; where are we going; it is all dark and clouds rise; sail along; there is no sun; I am in where I do not know. Women, women, women everywhere. Women wherever you go. Women waking you up. Women giving you baths. Women making you dress. Women feeding you. Women scolding you. Women taking the lead - women are natural leaders are they not? I see this with my own eyes every day. Women singing songs and teaching them to me. Women holding your hand as you cross a street. Women laughing at your upside down smiles. Women clutching you closely and holding you as they tell you are great and special, that one day you will grow up to be a great man and they will be proud. Women making you nap and BE STILL! But you are not still. You are never still. You are Optimus and the women in your life are the most and dearest lifeline to the world that any fatherless boy could have. Women. Warriors. Protectors. Leaders. Very well. They are what they are. I, Optimus Maximus, I am a man. Right now, a boy. Soon, a boy-man. I am young, but they say I am full of promise. I accept my life as it is. I am making my way to manhood amongst the company of women. Look at me. Here on the River Styxx. Ya' ever seen a more happy boy?* Optimus dreamed and dreamed. Women, women, everywhere.

**Ω**

- Boy of Many Dreams -

My sister Madelin is beginning school at St. Louis Cathedral in the French Quarter. Me, I listen nearby. Maddie in first grade, I spend my days in the Basin St. Projects, 321 Basin St. Passing a nice, fall day with Great Gramma Howell, we leave the projects and head out into the Quarter for a walk. Gramma Howell says we are taking an *expedition!* The world is tall and vertical. Me and Great Gram are short and shorter. Knees look good to me. Gramma Howell is my friend. Taller than me, though, when she stands next to someone else, I can see that she really is little like me. *Gotcha!*

We travel along smelling beignets n' black coffee. Great Gramma Howell is a chatter-bug. She is not only my friend, she is my tour guide, explaining the world step-by-step, block by block. It is incredible how much she knows. Her words are like a song. Yes, that's it, she must be singing a song. When she talks, I am able to listen to every word and know right where she is, where we are, where we are in the story and in the world. We are right here. New Orleans’ *Vieuxx Carre.’*

We parade into an open-air market shopping for red beans and rice and French baguettes. *Let's slather it up with French’s mustard!* *Let's make gumbo full of fresh shrimp, celery, bay leaves, thyme, okra, rice, Tabasco, and everything else!* Gramma says *Like* *fried plantains dipped in egg batter, sautéed in bacon drippings, blot dry n' dust with brown sugar n' cinnamon; and, of course, Optimus, the very purpose of life itself - live crabs.* *Live crabs?! Live crabs! Wait!!* My big-headed, masculine bravery entitles, nay, requires ME, not YOU GRAMMA, but ME, to carry them home safely; in part to protect YOU, Gramma Howell, from a potential Ponchatrain Blue Crab attack! . . . And . . . to inculcate within me the initial vestiges of self-bravery – *Look, Great Gramma!* These little suckers are obviously armed and dangerous and I now say that is up to ME to monitor their safe transport home . . .

Mid-morning, the September humidity swelters. Peeking into the brown paper bag is like staring into the face of the Devil’s Den itself. Horror. *Look, Optimus!* I do. There they are. Right in front of me. Little monsters. Wickedly scrunched eyes, foaming mouths gnashing and chewing on awaiting opportunity; everywhere thick little bulging Palooka arms waving with insidious menace; rapid, scissor-movements *Watch your fingers, Optimus!* A regular little traffic cop was I as we marched home.

Great Gram seems secure in my thinly-ribbed, navel-gazing, swollen pot-belly, pubescent presence; up into the immaculately clean and well-worn second story, wooden-floored apartment with the incongruously huge, totally exposed, belt and blades kitchen window fan sucking in and out a mixture of re-circulating hot and hotter air; me and Great Gram a tandem Duo of Death at the two-sided kitchen sink we are.

She, boiling a huge aluminum pot of water on the adjacent stove in preparation for *L’demise du Prochain Ponchatrain*; cleaning vegetables for gumbo on her side of the aged, white porcelain sink; me, on the top step of a ladder carefully leaning over my newly-created Basin Street Crab Ocean alive and teeming with irritated little fellows vainly seeking a non-existent crevice in which to hide; I, regularly poking at them with wooden-handled long tongs, alternately screaming and shuddering with fear and delight. Adolf Eichmann, still in the news and minds of the World War Two survivors known to me as adults, Eichmann or the Fuhrer had nothing on me, man, merciless little fellow was I. *No Fear* Great Gram grabbing the tongs away from me and hurtling the mean little bastards into the boiling, perfectly seasoned piquant waters, the crabs and me screaming for all we’re worth; me, so tickled excited I have to leave in the middle of the execution or else I’ll pee my pants. *What’s a fella to do?*

Minutes later, back from my daydream excursion where I have mimed her late husband putting out a fire with what I believe to be a humongous fireman’s trench-hose, returning to my ladder’s watchtower post, an eerie calm has descended upon our former chamber of mayhem; soft, sweet smells of crab boil seep up from the pot, wafting under the cabinets in steamy little breathable clouds. Ours is a world at peace. *Let me see them!* I shout to Great Gram.

She is not even five feet tall so she must climb up a step with me on the foot ladder, precariously balancing me on her right hip while she lifts the pot top with the hook end of a long metal spoon. The faint pink steam rapidly rises revealing an extraordinary Crab Boil Chamber of Death. The now bright red crabs lie still, each having found a separate peace. I am simultaneously frightened and afraid. *What if it were I in there?* But it is not. I am on the ladder with Great Gram. *It is the crabs looking up at me!* Now, I am pleased. A regular Davy Crockett I am. With the help of my Great Gram, I have now successfully traversed my first rite of manly passage! Hunt or Be Hunted!! Fight or Flight!! Win, Lose or Draw!! Get out or I’ll Get You, Sucker!! O thanks, thanks, thanks to you, Old Woman! Ole! Ole! Bravissimo! Encore!Encore! *Great Gramma! Hey! Let’s Eat!!*

**Ω**

Dream is dream. Ask the dreamers. Optimus rolled and rolled. *Yes* he thought to himself *The sway of the river current feels jus' like riding the big Zephyr roller-coaster at Lake Ponchatrain.* Optimus had loved visiting its boardwalk, walking the long and airy beachfront esplanade with his sister and Uncle Charlie, Great-Gramma Howell's grown youngest son; Charlie drove a cab but lived at home with his widowed Mom, the better of which to give her care and for him, fresh underwear. When Optimus was long grown a man, the time when he would spend a summer in the mountains of the great West preparing himself spiritually and physically to meet for the first time his father, Uncle Charlie would then confess to him that he had been abducted by aliens in the middle of the French Quarter and taken up high into their craft. Returned to Earth, now Uncle Charlie admitted he was a different man. But that would be then. This was now. Optimus rolled along on the gurney not at all aware or caring of where he was, who he was, or what it was. It just all was. Women.

**Ω**

The little Hansel and Gretel-styled cuckoo-type clock in bright, if faded, reds and blues; its earnest and demure Bavarian figures emerging from their side doors and meeting touchy-kissy in the front of the house, it was given to me by an elderly neighbor woman in the projects whom, by some reason unknown to me, I would visit with on my daily excursions and explorations throughout our little world in the projects; my coming home to 321 Basin St. all gleeful with this new *objet d’ art* in hand and Great Gram apparently equally enthralled by its rendering simplicity. She places it high on a kitchen shelf in a position of great prominence. Turning to me, she asks my overly-enlarged, smiling four-year-old head if I would like to sell it to her for ten cents. My heart begins beating faster at the slowly occurring recognition that somehow I *own* something.

I am not certain if I have ever *owned* anything in my life; my clothes, toys, pajamas and stuff were just *mine;* my pants all had openings in the front to pee from and were obviously of no use to my sister; my toys were stuffed dogs and Lincoln logs and erector sets I could never figure out how in hell do I put this together, it wasn’t exactly as if my big sister Maddie or any of my non-existent other brothers and sisters were lining up to have my stuff; so, this concept of *ownership* of something which wasn’t a personal necessity like all my other stuff was; it began to surface from within me producing a childlike version of the cold sweats. *Cold sweat!* Now that's an idea.

Let me see if I understand this. I come home with this really neat little clock toy – it works – it’s really cute, I *own* it and Great Gramma wants to *buy* it for ten cents – that’s the top half of the equation – and, underneath that, we have in Great Gram’s slender brown fingertips Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s raised smiling face on the front and a torch-carrying Hermes sprinting on the back of a shiny, new dime. If I go for this and take the dime, I still can play with the clock on the shelf whenever I want, right? I think I should ask and confirm this assumption with her. Nevertheless, I am impressing myself with my shrewd reasoning skills.

*Gram, if I take the dime, can I still play with the clock every day?* Yes, she nods. *You can play with the clock, but, it will be mine and it will stay here.* She appears very certain of this. She is informing me of the legal arts - possession will be 9/10ths of the Law. I practically live with Great Gramma Howell as it is now, so what’s the diff? Regis has not yet been invented so there are no lifelines available to me. The inside of my mouth begins sweating with sensuous anticipation at how scrumptious is the flavor of chocolate milk, chewy banana bikes and pink Bazooka bubble-gum, particularly if you eat them all at the same time; all of this and more is available for a dime – and, remember too, I tell myself, with every piece of gum comes a cartoon strip, and those young people in it are very nice, they are practically your friends, they are likely to say something funny, and you will also have your fortune divined; all of this is within your grasp. I feel like Satan on the hilltop of Gesemanthe trying to sell Los Angeles to Jesus.

*– OK!! I want the dime, Gram!* – and take it, I do. In a blur, I am stealing away, richer and perspiring because of it, down the stairs and out the front door to the corner market, running even quicker than I later would as a curious but frightened young white boy escaping from the fangs of a snarling German shepherd, protector of the all-black Zulu Parade. I was running fast for my future. *Were you running with me, Jesus?*

Later, ill-sated and alone on a side-stoop somewhere in the hidden vestibules of the projects, I will reflect on the fading satisfaction of my sugary engorgement; the bubble-gum comic strip I had already read, which, I am unfortunately learning, will occasionally happen; I am beyond full and there are still hours of loneliness to kill till late afternoon and Maddie's return from school. It is the afternoon of my discontent. I am sorry that I have made the sale. I want back the permanence of the clock. I want Hansel and Gretel to stay *my* friends and not be *owned* by Great Gramma Howell.

The enormity of my impulsiveness is crushing. I walk home, crying. A sniveling, pathetic sight, I breath-catch struggle to get out the words *I want the clock back!* Great Gram vacillates between laughter and stern reproach. I don't like her like this. *No, no, little Optimus, that’s mine, now. You took the dime. Yes, but I spent it! . . . It’s gone!! . . . YOU still have the clock!*

My underdeveloped rhetorical skills are making scant headway. It is apparent she is going to keep the clock. I could play with it if I would ask. *But I don’t want to play with it. I want to Own* *it!* Interminable minutes, a full ounce of tears and I am tired. I will leave this wicked old woman for another part of the house. I hate her. No, actually, I hate myself. I will not learn this lesson – prudence in the face of temptation – or as the daily heart-sob Ann Landers will bleat in my teen years, *Maturity is the ability to forsake immediate gratification for long-term satisfaction.* I will not learn this lesson for years to come. Decades. Until I truly master this most basic of rules in the lexicon of self-discipline, in this interior of my soul I am doomed to a rough and unsatisfying existence. Ulysses Agonistes, I retreat from the kitchen in search of comfort and solitude within my blanket and sleep. Like the Greeks say *It is a good day to die.*

**Ω**

Women, women, everywhere. Two nurses lifted Optimus up from his gurney onto an examining table. The smell of perfume filled his nostrils. His grandmother takes his hand in hers. She is herself again, even if she still looks like a shanty-woman. *Optimus. You'll be all right, boy. You'll be all right.* Optimus felt perfectly fine. He was happy. He knew his grandmother was there. That he was in a hospital. That people who loved him were paying him attention. Optimus loved attention. Almost as much as he liked to talk but not quite. Attention or not, Optimus felt safe so he dreamed and dreamed, further up the River Styxx than any boy had ever been. *Dream, boy, dream . . .*

**Ω**

Good-clothes, washed faces, cut and combed hair, dress-up Easter Sunday morning, the Mardi Gras parades of Fat Tuesday and meatless Lent but a distant memory; riding the two-penny streetcar with Mother and Maddie down St. Charles Ave. onto Canal and into the Quarter; past the last remnants of Saturday night revelers, the strip club barkers long gone but their memories still in my mind from other evening soirees; the stale smell of cigarette smoke, liquor and Dixie beer wafting from the dimly-lit neon interiors wherein the angle shafts of half-light old black men were sweeping up the debris of the previous evening’s partygoers; Mother dressed in a deep cobalt turquoise two-piece, stockings, heels, matching purse, strawberry blonde hair smartly coiffed in a French Vogue twist, her stunning, youthful beauty turning heads and holding stares, her inner-pride at two clean, handsome, well-dressed and well-behaved children; admiration was Mother's; respect, acknowledgement of doing a job well; past the neat and interesting shops including the stamp shop where Mother would indulge my international wanderlust, on to Jackson Square and the towering oaks; onto the moss-shaded figure of handsome Andrew cast fiercely but serenely in bronze, in perpetuity and stoically guarding and commanding us all onward, proponents of the South and the virtues embodied and embedded therein; the Café du Main, beignets dunked in *café au lait* served by a friendly, uniformed white woman. Aunt Flo if ever was one. Sitting at a gleaming long counter with shiny, sparkling red leatherette stools which you could spin on in delirious head-turning circles until Mother made you stop. *Because you will get sick OP-TI-MUS!*

The view from the café in sight of the Mississippi wharf and the ocean liners embarking their cargo; the four-story, red brick Dixie Beer warehouse looming quietly, Sunday morning neat and professional; the moist air still shade cool but with humidity and heat descending ever so surely and slowly; our little well-dressed threesome, walking through the Square towards St. Louis Cathedral’s mighty majesty; outside, its gray stone arches and spires a propitious signal beacon surrounded by the light and darkness of the Quarter; passing through the Cathedral's massive dark stained vault doors, I am overcome by the glorious human attempt of color, form, light, water, wood, incense, music, stained glass and marble statue to depict earthly sin and heavenly rewards; dabbing fingers in Holy Water blessed by the Pope in Rome; genuflecting beneath the sight of a crucified and thorned Bloody Jesus on the Cross, Body of Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us; a line of sinners, me included (Mother Muriel always passing) awaiting our confessional opportunity outside the brooding, dark-paneled confessional doors, somber priests secreted within; winking green and red lights atop, directing traffic away from Hell and upwards to His holy bosom; pointy-head pontiffs sermonizing the true way to God and Christ, our Holy Catholic Apostolic Father; these things *en toto* formed the basis of my early religious beliefs.

**Ω**

*Dang!* Optimus spoke to himself in dream. *How can the Virgin Mary be so sad and beautiful while yet our lives be so much fun? How? Women. It’s all because of women.* For three days Optimus slept. A coma. What is a coma, anyway? A chance for the body to heal itself? To dream a cure for all that ails? Mortals, we dream.

Optimus dreamt and dreamt of people and places he had lived. Optimus had a photographic memory for events and feelings and he knew it. He often thought he could remember incidents from when he was a one and two year-old but his mother assured him he could not. *I assure you I can* he thought. And it was true. Within his dreams memories surfaced, rolling like a gyrating movie reel. Optimus loved movies. Yet, he loved life even more. *Life is better than any movie!* Yes. He was sure of it.

Ω

On the morning of the fourth day, Optimus awoke. Grandfather and grandmother stood at his bedside. His grandmother held his hand, her other hand brushing his hair. She squeezed his hand hard. His grandfather wore a shirt with tie and straw hat. Optimus loved that hat. His grandfather leaned to *Ya'll right? Fine, Granddaddy. Been sleepin'.* That was all that they said. Easter was pretty much ruined and Optimus knew it, too. Still, he thought to himself *Well, I did ride the line . . . for a while . . . Didn't I?*

When Optimus came home, the doctors at Annapolis General had recommended he rest for several more weeks to allow his spleen to heel. Optimus and his Gram and Granddaddy drove the twenty-one miles home fairly much in quiet tone. Every time they passed a silent marker from Optimus' ill-fated trip, no one spoke. Past Lawson's Corner and the Mayo Beach sign; Swinburne's; Shadyside Market; the post office; the broken window little art studio - it was about there that Optimus had begun his great cycling challenge.

From the quiet of the backseat Optimus looked out the Mercury’s window. As they came up on the stretch of road leading to Hattie's, he looked over the bluff onto the Chesapeake. It was green and endless to the eye. The yellow line of the roadway ran straight and long. As they drove, Optimus followed it, tracking each quarter-mile or so, past Felicity Cove, on towards the final stretch leading out from Shadyside into Idlewilde. Visually surveying both left and right roadsides, his ribs still hurt but he said nothing. Looking right at the muddy ditch,he thought *How could I have misjudged the line so bad?* There were ditches along the roadsides and streets because there were no sewer lines yet. Septic tanks and the occasional outhouse were the norm. He did not point out the metal pipe fence where he had crashed. Both his Gram and Granddaddy knew where it was. Annette had taken Frances there so she knew. Swett was told and had simply nodded.

Slowly turning to his left, he could not turn quickly as he hurt too much, Optimus looked over at the house from where the old lady had come out to ask him where he was from, only to return to her home sniffing *I don't mess with Idlewilde folk.* Laying in the mud Optimus had been in shock that was only compounded by her strangeness. He had wanted to cry out - *What are you saying?* As she had turned away, Optimus began to woozily think he just might lie there and die. Few people passed those parts at mid-day. Only Annette’s starting her mother's pot roast had saved him. Optimus did not know the word for *dementia* but he knew *crazy*. It was a word and feeling away from which he kept his eyes.

At the house his grandmother had fresh sheets on his bed, the windows open, and his favorite pajamas laid out on the white cover. His slippers lay on the floor where last worn. It felt good to be back at home in one piece. He put on the pajamas without complaint even though it was eleven in the morning and the sun was shining brightly. They were baseball pajamas. *I'm getting too old to wear these* he thought but once again he said nothing. His grandmother brought him in a tray of grilled cheeses and tomato soup. It was her own little way to say she still loved him. *Thanks, Gram!*

Optimus never knew how much his hospital stay had cost his grandparents. Optimus knew little of money. He overheard his grandmother say something about *Five hundred dollars!* but he did not know if that was for a day or the week or what. Shame filled every core of his being, but for a word wonder, he had no words to express it. Swett was no talker and Frances was too upset. Optimus healed while suffering shame alone. He knew they were working folk and it hurt him bad that he had wasted family money *Granddaddy’s!* just so he could think himself a Wallenda. That night his flashlight stayed under pillow.

The next six weeks were uneventful and morose. Optimus returned to school, then home, sitting at the kitchen table late afternoons doing homework. He wasn’t allowed to ride his bicycle. He didn’t ask either. It was the longest period in his entire life Optimus had ever been *good*. It felt unnatural. It felt almost normal. Optimus knew that surely wasn't right. He knew he was not normal.

Barbara and Frank came for their visit on Memorial Day. *Memorial Day.* A time to remember fallen heroes. Swett thought of Johnny Rogers blown up on the rock next to him and the many others who had made the ultimate sacrifice. He also thought of the Cubans who had died in vain last October. Mary Frances called her brother in Nashville to wish him well. She was fiercely proud of her little brother, him with the Silver Star and a chest full of medals. *Arnold.* He didn't know he had a wily possum named after him.

With friends came peace. Frances and Barbara sat for hours at the kitchen table yacking about gosh knows what. *Girl-talk* Optimus thought. Swett and Uncle Frank undertook to replace the old Frigidaire with a sparkling new model that was touted to be *frost-free.* It was hard work getting the old one out but the two men were strong and made it look easy. On Sunday morning there was a great breakfast with all the neighbors dropping by. Lil and Carl. Noni and Pete. Sis and Frank from next door. Everyone inquiring about the little bright boy who was on the mend. Optimus did not like the attention one bit.

In the heat of the late afternoon, everyone had retired to the cool of the shade under the massive oak tree in the yard. It was where Optimus would swing while his grandmother would tend to her garden. It was a beautiful garden and required much work which Frances enjoyed doing. Feeling the effects of her gin n' tonics, ease began to return to her heart. Optimus noodled around the yard doing things that only a ten year-old knows of why they might be of interest. At the fence he petted Penny, Carl and Lil's boxer. At the gate he re-set the handles firmly into the ground. On the side of the house he read the gauge for the propane tank. *Half-full.* He tapped its side with his knuckle and listened closely to the galvanized echo. It rang in his ears. Then he watched Aunt Sis next door prime the red pump to draw up water from the well. Right was returning to the world.

**Ω**

Walking over to his Gram, he put his hand on her meaty shoulder. Mary Frances said *Optimus, when Dr. Smith pulled that box of Marlboros out of your underwear, if you hadn’t already nearly been dead, I would’ve killed you!* Laughter chased after the truth. Swett called Optimus over. With his large hand he pulled him close. Optimus leaned in. Swett fairly whispered. *Bring me a beer. Don't say nothin'. Go ride your bike.* That was that. Optimus ran to the kitchen and the new fridge. He popped the Rolling Rock top still liking the delicious sound it made. *Whoosh!* Shadyside was a very good place to live.

BOOK TWO

**Ω**

- THE MOUNTAINS OF THE GREAT WEST -

Optimus Maximussat cross-legged and muscular high in the dusty Sierra Madres. Counting out to himself the events that had led him to be a man, it was summer and at six-thousand feet the heat bore down like a magnifying glass singeing its subjects. Optimus had pitched camp at last. Nestled in a grove of sycamores overlooking a running brook at its bend, the shallow, fast-moving river fed off a small lake in the far distance. It had recently been stocked with speckled rainbow trout. From caveman to Bill Swett to Optimus, hope sprang eternal that many a meal awaited therein. Optimus looked around. Proud, his camp was all that he wanted it to be.

A good two-layered tent keeping out the dew and damp of the near-freezing night air. Down bedroll. Lamb's wool pillows. Lantern. Stuffed bear. Manly, still, Optimus liked his toys. Aft the tent and under the shade of a skinny birch, Optimus had set up his roll-up writing table. Next to it was a convertible lounge chair; a Lafuma, French made, inherently stylish as only the French can be. Optimus thought *Dang, at hunnerd n' sixty-dollars this thing better be* *the Concorde of fold-up chairs.* He could hear his Grandmother's voice *A hundred and sixty dollars?! Have you lost your mind? A camping chair?! What's wrong with the plaid fold-up in the shed?! Why!*

Optimus smirked, sorry his Gram was gone, glad she and Granddaddy were still both with him at all times to guide his way. Optimus was a Buddhist Shinto - he believed in, nay, he *lived* for Nature and the Ancestors. It was just the way Optimus was and that was that. Hunter green, the Lafuma included an adjustable neck rest; its breathable fabric was web-strung, lashed with grommets so it gave while you rested. He sat in it for a moment. Giggling aloud, no one to hear, he repeated a favorite rhyme. *Stuck in his thumb, pulled out a plum, said: What a good boy am I!*

In front of the sycamore, lying in neat order on the ground or nestled within the thin bottom branches were his tools and other toys. Same difference. Sword. Ax handle. Throwing knives. Bow and arrows. Fishing gear. Weights and numerous assorted other physical fitness equipment. A Marin BMX. First-Aid kit. A nylon canvas chair for seated exercises and leg support in sit-ups, et cetera. Below an adjacent birch tree resided his chuck wagon. *Chow-hall!* he thought. Bins were filled, brimming with dried and canned foodstuffs; jalapenos, miso soup, noodles, cooking items; there was a cooler with fresh fruits, vegetables, juices, eggs and the like; a water vat, a double burner cook stove - as a young man Optimus had trained as a French chef; not because he wanted to but because he had to and thus, Buddha saw to it that he could cook as quickly as four hands - further on, an eating table with two stools. Optimus remained a gentleman. Two stools. Maybe company. Maybe, sometime, a woman. Facing out from the site was a silver Accord Coupe, its cat-like face and fog light eyes keeping a watchful if not menacing stare to the road of entry. Optimus was a successful man. Kind of. Depends who's defining the word success. You, him, or his mother. Optimus was a happy man and for him, that counted the most.

His journey began in the great Sierra Madres, in the cattle ranch valley underlooking that most holy of mountains, Shasta. Fuji of California. A veritable Shinto shrine for those who are nature’s pilgrims. It had been awhile since Optimus had done any serious outdoor living; by serious that meant getting away from the peripatetic patter of the city’s pulse, wending himself slowly into the natural heart and soul of the earth, far away from most anybody else, and, once there, setting up a camp like a man ought to; then, just staying there for a spell, preferably a long spell. Not moving. Watching. Listening. Hearing. Smelling. Breathing. Exhaling. Tasting nature. Drinking in what the humanist philosopher Lewis Mumford had called *This Great Feast of Life*.

*Yes*. Optimus surveyed from his chair. His camp was all that he ever wanted it to be. He rose and moved to a large picnic table, gathering his bearings of this his new home. Sunset approaching, Optimus felt this spot on earth was an epicenter of beauty. For that moment, Optimus was master of his domain. As he gazed up at the mountain tops above, so close to him their ascent were like walls of a playground created by the gods, Optimus realized how he was but an infinite speck in the life force. *God is good.*

**Ω**

Earlier that afternoon while reconnoitering a surrounding few mile areas of his camp - a seasoned woodsman, Optimus knew that it added greatly to the sense of one's well being to know what the hell was around you, especially that first night - he crossed by way of fallen log a sweet little stream. Alighting briskly on the other side and dashing up its bank, he encountered in the brush at his knees what at first registry appeared to be *A shimmying trogolyte with a duckbill platypus protuberance gaping from its face!*

Quite the imagination had Optimus whenever he had to name things himself. To Optimus, the shimmying thing looked so real it was unreal. *A new discovery I’ve made here in the mountainous wilds of Nevada! At last my chance to ride with Stephen Gould and the gods of modern biology!* Truthfully though, at first, Optimus felt unbridled fear and phobic reflexive recoil. Fear is best kept at bay. Always. The thing was at his knees, swaying upwards into his direction. Lifting his right leg, he shifted his weight to his left foot and leaped high, clearing its head by a few inches. One step back, now two. Catch a breath. *Jesus, it is a wondrous thing!*

The thing. A creature unknown to Optimus. Optimus fast-tracked his memory files: No frame recalled. *Refocus on the face and the head!* Its tip *Is that a nose?* was spread about two inches apart. It was translucent, almost gummy. Running downward, it had a colorful, speckled skin on the length of its face that widened as it curved down to a throat. The throat is a blur. A gullet with a swollen face. A pockmarked diamond shape narrowing to a thick bulging neck that spread to nearly four inches. The neck was brown, flecked with gray. And the neck was slowly twisting. From the neck downwards, it is all writhing tail. Curling, flexing, twisting, arching, slinking, slithering, scaring. Optimus was spooked.

*I am a shivering paramecium, pump-jacked and juiced!* This was the way Optimus thought and he liked to think like that. The thing drew closer to Optimus. *Whoa!!* He jumped back again, onto a fence, up to the second rail, now staring down at it from on high. The thing held itself high in challenge. Just as quickly, it turned, slithering itself into the thatch, holding its colorful speckled head high, a proud bird searching, scanning, climbing above the wheat grass. For what? A better view? Of what? Optimus? Optimus was determined to not let this thing gain the upper hand in his mind. He let out a sharp war cry directed at the dancing demon. Now he was pumped.

For a moment, with his new vantage point, Optimus was unafraid. There was a safe distance between the thing and him. With a slow-motion recomposition, Optimus could now take a measure of the thing to more truly know what marvel it was. Briefly, he was affectionate of his find. *It is a bird without wings. A reptile anew.* Then, a newer moment, a newer recognition. Waiting. Knowledge downloaded: *This I know! This I have seen before! Once. This is life . . . and . . . this is death.* It all became clear. *This my friend is a water moccasin swallowing whole his prey! That damn fish is done!*

And indeed it was. A young rainbow trout engorged in his gullet, half-swallowed, head-first, tail fin flapping wildly, the snake’s jaws unhinged, flat and smooth, skin-tight to the fish’s meaty mid-section, a young snake himself, struggling to swallow this still-thrashing life while carefully protecting his capture from all comers. The snake and the fish slithered deeper into the wheat grass, his glassy eyes never leaving those of an amazed Optimus. Optimus shivered. *Wow. Better him than me! Give and get!!*

So now it was clear. As in his youth when Optimus witnessed a two-hour duel to the death of a gargantuan Louisiana bullfrog and an enormously thick Texas cottonmouth, so again did the cycle of life, struggle, survival and death continuously repeat itself. Optimus thought *It is a good thing to be alive. Thank you, God.* Back at his campsite later that night, under a glittery night sky Optimus tended his fire. *Yes. I am a man.*

**Ω**

In the cool chill of morning, refreshed and relaxed, happy in the heart like he had not been in a long, long time, Optimus wrote and wrote about his life, unknowing if anyone would ever read it, would ever care, he himself didn't really care; Optimus cared only about preparing to meet his father. It was why he was on his journey, a pilgrimage if you will. Not having seen his father since he was two, Optimus knew he had only one chance to get it right. Optimus wrote from his soul. It was all he knew to do.

**Ω**

**St. Scholastica**

To the well-intentioned nuns of St. Scholastica, I, Optimus Maximus, was a boy more comfortable in the complex terrain of naturalist stories than with the endearing simplicity of *See Spot Run*. I did not yet know of him, but my attraction ran to Hemingway-styled stories such as the one of a Portuguese fisherman unloading his nets on a sandy beach while an entranced young boy intently counts his catch. The boy is *astonished* at the fisherman’s bounty. That is the life I sought. Man. Boy. Nature. Success.

It was, however, patently dangerous for a five year-old to sling around tri-syllabic words such as *astonished* amidst the company of cooing educators and a prejudiced, maternal accomplice. A fellow could easily get hurt. Running around saying things like *Sister Theresa, I am absolutely astonished!* may raise mirth in a Bride of Christ but, in a puny child of God, it disproportionately fed a sense of self. To boot, who knew that the happiest boy in the world was secretly the loneliest boy in the world?

Only in the expansive solitude of books or the compassion of animated conversation did I find the challenging intellectual architecture to satisfy my emotional desires. What did not perceptibly exist in the reality of my life I hoped to discover in the imagination of the mind. In the dense canals of my slowly self-admitting little psychology, books and words were lending me buoyant succor from the many new requests that locomotive life demanded from my personal, daily longing for my father. I sought the healing hand of the man. In absentia, I recognized I had a problem. I also recognized that at the bottom of my heart, I had no answers. *Still, carry on!*

As a young boy desperate for fatherly companionship how did I survive in a world not of my making? An excellent question and not one that *per se* I asked myself at the time. Surely though, its sensibility percolated upwards from youthful heart chambers. The best I can say is that I survived because of summer and its remembrances.

Summers provided opportunities to rejoice in paternalistic male companionship. For instance, in the summer between kindergarten and first grade, I survived by loving the smell of Aqua Velva shaving lotion. I lived on the stuff. Great Gramma Howell's son, Uncle Charlie, he got me a junior shaving kit. *Gosh! Mine?* Standing on a chair he let me play grown-up man. As we finished off our shaves he passed me a big splash of *The Juice.* I smelled good. I smelled like him. *Now we’re talking!*

I survived by spending summers in Maryland. Often sitting in my Granddaddy’s lap as he reclined in his big, green naugahyde chair. I survived by touching his old-fashioned sleeveless t-shirt and thereon basking in his manly body odors. I survived by squealing in laughter at the grizzled feel of his beard on my smooth skin while he rubbed my face and laughed back in turn. I survived by marveling at the wizened beauty of his strong fingers and hands. Hands that I knew set type at the Government Printing Office because he had taken Maddie and me there to see his work first-eye.

I survived because I knew he had built the house we lived in with those same two strong hands and with those of his friends. Friends whom I knew and adored. I survived because I was a young boy proud of my male blood, even if its origins were still unknown to me, and I deliriously desired to emulate so great a figure as this man. And then summer was over. Once again was life absent contact with a male bloodline. I survived because of summer and the remembrances it illuminated in my mind during the lonely months of boarding school.

It’s not that I didn’t love my mother, my sister, Great Gramma Howell, or my grandmother. *Gosh, no! I loved them like mad!* They were the best friends any boy could have. They loved me. They cared for me. They helped me with all that a woman could do for a boy. *But that’s just it! It’s that I am boy* I want man. I man. Boy-man with great energy. Woman and Man. Different.

To boy, women always say *Be still.* Man says *Let’s go!* Women say *Quiet!* Man says *Come!* Women say *Behave!* Man says *Walk!* Women say *Bedtime.* Man says *Fish!* Women say *Elbows!* Man says *Woods!* Women say *Comb hair.* Man says *Tree house!* Women say *Wash face.* Man says *Carry shovel.* Women say *Read book.* Man says *Build table!* Women say *Good boy!* Man says *Goddammit, Jughead!* I want man. I want be man. I am man. Right? Where my man? I no have man. I ‘fraid. I not ‘fraid. I man. *Oh, boy!* Asking children to bear the sins of our failings.

Ω

As I complete another full year gaily sauntering between The Learning Center and my first-grade classroom, on occasion I am whisked about to sit in and participate in classes of second and third graders. It is all quite fun and interesting even if it is rather mystifying to me as to why I am visiting these other rooms. Still, in my little short trousers, I go along to get along. Three foot, two, what can I do?

At the close of the school year, by mutual agreement of those parties over five feet tall, my future is determined. My benefactors and protectors have independently decided at this, the conclusion of my first grade, I am now ready to proceed directly to the fourth grade. *Thanks, Buddha.*

The skipping of the grades would not be an ultimate pedigree or undoing. Pedigree and undoing would be the doing of it without the familial support structure to see such an abrupt and rapid change through to its maturation. This had great and greatly distressing aspects. Not having a man to personally form my moral character by either example or lesson, when confronted with moral-less youth’s leadership, myself without lead male direction, fervently seeking other or older male confirmation and approval, I sometimes succumbed to behavior that would later leave me feeling all emptiness. *Play it like it lies.*

Fourth grade. Yes, St. Scholastica will soon be behind me now. I will say goodbye to those marvelous nuns and their silly way of dressing. With it I will say goodbye to the love and tenderness they provided. Like most boys, only much later in my life would I forever come to remember with fondness the affectionate nature they had showered upon me. Nonetheless, they appear excited to me, proud of my capabilities, and apparently they are assured that I am worthy of the Odyssean journey for which they are preparing me to endeavor. *If you say so.*

So what did it feel like in those first few summers when we came back from Maryland? It felt like this. Seven years old and I am moving up in the world! I am increasing my hemispherical sophistication. *Look! There is a great world around us!*  I delight in the peripatetic rapidity of my bi-pedular locomotion *Look! See how freely I move about!* Aware that my forty-two pounds are alive and growing *Look! Have you ever seen a muscle like this?!*  A dawning realization arises somehow within my brain. Things are happening. I am beginning to distinguish capable opportunity from dream. *Heck, understanding this stuff is harder than pedaling a bicycle uphill with brakes on!*

There are unspoken messages I am hearing from the decisions of adults. Seven, my assessment is immature. In any case, the unspoken formulation of thought I felt ran something like this. *You’re smarter than everybody else your age.* Tough to say, now. Still, I’m certain I felt some variant of that because I was always told some variant of it.

A child believing in that assumption, it was fairly easy to extrapolate from there that if I think I *am* smarter than everyone else and if I *am* extraordinarily rewarded for that smartness which I know comes *naturally* to me, then, it seemed rather obvious that I would not have to work as hard as everyone else to get ahead! Yes! *Right?* Doesn’t that seem like sound logic for a seven-year old? *Of course it does!* I am smart, right?! *Bueno! Let's party!*

If seven is still a little boy, then the message that I was given by the skipping of those two grades carried an unintended exaltedness and an emotional malignity which were both magnified by the absence of a generational blood male to suborn and hold in check my naturally surging masculinity. In retrospect, skipping those two grades was absolutely the best and worst thing that could have happened to a boy of my age and disposition. *But hey, the adults are happy!* Life is good! I’ve just seen the movie “Around The World in Eighty Days.” Anything is possible, isn’t it? *C’mon, let’s go!!*

The fools speaks. Yes, be off with you second and third graders. I have been tried in your classes and those cuddly *See Spot Run* drills. Even though I wish I had a dog like Spot, I don’t; and, anyway, you guys are no match for what my protectors and advisors believe is my preposterously advanced command of language. The fool can't and won't shut up. To me words are a living body, each new one amorously beheld and worshipfully nurtured*.* Words hold the secret mysteries of the universe. *That's true!*

There *were* smarter people than me. That I was sure of. They wrote the books that I could find on Mother’s coffee table and bookcases. Over the years they had titles like *The Essential Works of Sigmund Freud;* Simone de Beauvoir’s autobiography; multiple volumes by Edith Hamilton on classical Greece and Rome, *The Collected Works of Jean Genet.* Mean Mom speaks. No, you may *not* read that book! They had impossibly incomprehensible words in them like *pan-Hellenic*, *Philistine*, *ego* and *id.* Often, reconnaissance in the dictionary only added to my puzzlement. Incredible for me to believe *Some things are beyond my ability to comprehend!* I find this altogether amazing and quite frustrating. I piss off easily. But, I plot a silent revenge. Sneaky little bastard, I admit. I commit to learning and understanding what is in those books and what those words mean. There. You words will not defeat me. I will master you. Come hell or high water, I will aim for absolutely nothing less than to be the one and only *King of the Grandiloquent Universe! Master of Mellifluous Specifity! That's me!!* Secretly, I knew I was off in the head. I also knew that the cure for my ills lay in fielding endless ground balls from a loving father. *Fungoe, Dad? Sure, Son!*

Optimus let the thought wander. Soon, he would be meeting the invisible man. *Father.*

He thought about how it might take place, where it would be. How it would go down.

*How will it go down?*

*What will it be like to be in the same room with He Who Gave You Life?*

*Life.*

*I know one thing:*

*I will be ready.*

*This is my destiny.*

*If Father is not truthful or if he shows the slightest sign of disrespect, I pledge, I will kill him.*

Optimus breathed deep. The mountain air was relieving. He felt good about himself.

**Ω**

So Optimus wrote and told himself stories, alone in the Sierra Madres; further on, through the Rockies; across Denver to his friends G & H, extraordinary poets; southward to New Mexico, settling into the mountains above Taos. Here, Optimus began writing letters to his father. *Letters.* They were enough to make Optimus sick to his stomach or his heart. Yet, he was getting in such good physical condition - strenuous two-a-day workouts, bike rides of twenty-five to fifty miles - the endorphins flushing his bloodstream made it virtually impossible to feel anything other than elation or peace. Yes, peace is what Optimus felt. It was not often. When it came, it was good.

He wrote about the camp. The people and families he met; the squirrels he adopted who visited every morning; the rabbits; the fish he shot with bow and arrow in the narrow, icy streams; wading upstream so as to not be heard; when out of nowhere the arrow came splitting trout flesh, the fish was as surprised as Optimus. *Damn, I still got it!* he thought. As with his grandfather, the fish were tasty. The stars were plentiful. It was a good day to write.

Ω

- Let Us Now Praise Famous Men -

Today I will meet a family coming into the camp for the weekend. They are driving an older van that looks like the modern day equivalent of an Okayed dustbowl rig. I am departing for a late afternoon bike ride and encounter them on the roadway heading out of camp. The father is a Warren Oates protégé. A sincere, weather-beaten face. Dusty ball-cap, friendly, intelligent eyes, still with life flickering in them; broken and gapped brownish teeth displaying a backwoods, Ozark dentist’s smile. Friendly, as I said. We make our introductions brief as we are sure to see each other again.

That evening I will learn that he is a miner in the gold fields to the south. It is a big corporate mine and with his wife and three daughters they live in the Company town, shop in the Company store, enjoy Company insurance and their daughters attend the local Company-sponsored school. There is something in his eyes that rings of knowledge. He has had some education somewhere along the line. Around a campfire he will share that as a youth he went to private schools. You can sense in his eyes the early implanting of learned matter. Now, his body belies that previous intelligent training. A girth of surrender encircles his shirtless mid-section, his chest is beginning to mammalize its udders; they droop sorrowfully, of no use on a man. Curious blends of dirt and sweat ring-grime line the creases of his brow, neck and folds of his arms. I wonder if this is the dust from the deep shafts of the mine, forever embedded in the tender spots of his body.

Sitting by the early evening fire, he ingests a continual stream of Bud lights and Marlboros. Physiologically, it is easy to see this inhalous diet is making him soft, fat, and short-winded. He is thirty-nine, he says. If not arrested, it is obvious his habits will wreak upon him serious health problems, notwithstanding those brought about by conditions in the mine. *Pneu-mono-ultra-microscopic-silica-volcano-coneosis.* Indeed. An exquisitely simple but complex word learned as boy. In fact, it is the longest word in the dictionary, unseating *antidisestablishmentarianism* for the title. For me, Optimus Maximus, it is a delight to know the lexicographical champion of the world. It is a medical term for a deadly coal miner’s lung disease. Quietly, I begin to wonder *Is its 24-karat cousin stalking my fire-mate?*

The drinking is slurring both his speech and his thought process. He is proud to be a miner. Mistrustful of those who would say miners are destroying the country, he tells me that in three to five years when the mine is plumbed and sealed, the Company will gift engineer a lake into the vast, dry, desert reservoir it is now carving out of the Toiyiba mountain range.

I ask him if they are using toxic chemicals to leech out the gold. Cigarette smoke gushing from his nostrils, he snorts a friendly sneer, aimed not at me, but at what I would imagine to be the tree-hugging environmentalists he supposes are opposed to mining. I compose the thought that the environmentalists are not necessarily opposed to mining; in fact, many, if not all of them partake in the luxury jewels that gold affords. Rather, I think they are opposed to poisoning the earth in any form and are naturally suspicious of the many American corporations with their Orwellian-speak public relations departments; they who have genetically reverse-inbred with their various industry oversight regulators, concomitantly ensuring their judicial and legislative protection by contributing to financially-beholden political leaders; thereby culminating in the common rights of the people to sustain the country’s quality of life being run over roughshod by the amassers of capital.

Not wanting to spoil the camaraderie of the campfire, I think but do not say this response. *We do use cyanide in the leeching process;* however, he assures me the PVC pipe gauge is more than sufficient to prevent bleeding into the groundwater. Uneasily, I am assured. He says *In fact,* *do you know the . . . aw hell . . . What’s the name of that lake? I can’t remember, but anyway, it’s one of the most beautiful lakes in the world- you know what it was before it was a lake? (Guess!) A goldmine! That’s right!* I am now so much more assured.

His vermilion wife coddles a six-month-old baby girl hungrily teeting formula from a bottle. Bonnet-hatted, her fat cheeks and protruding tummy are cuddle cute, like little baby, Tater, who Pappy Yoakum’s wife tended to in the comic-strips of my boyhood. Mother is naturally blonde, as are her two older daughters, eleven and five. Her shoulder length hair is pretty. One side of her nose appears shorter than the other; profiled, the scar looks as if she’s suffered a vicious bite. I do not ask. A few more Budweisers and then she and her husband are proudly alluding to their respective body scars. He says *Bitten by a wolf-dog (ninety percent wolf/ten percent dog) let all loose by a crazy neighbor.* She says *We were both bit!* He pulls up his tank-top LBJ style, pointing to two purplish puncture wounds floating on dusty belly-fat. I want to ask if her scar badge is her nose, but, it could be imagination, maybe the angle of the light. Who cares? Anyway, it’s a nice fire. Soon, I must return to camp.

We talk on for a spell, patient, easy conversation between the tipsy and the straight. Schools, children, the Columbine massacre, bomb scares, pulling kids out for the day; cover-ups; principals; light snow packs this year; precious little water in the lake. To no response I drily  
 suggest *The effects of global warming?* Swimming with the girls; the older one trying to cross at the wide part and running out of steam; panic, mother yelling *Float on your back!* father hurriedly rushing in fully booted and clothed to save her. *It is* they say, *a frightful thing to nearly lose a daughter. A child’s life is just so precious* she says. Tears well and slowly cascade down her cheeks. I think of my son yet remain quiet, listening instead to the litany of this American working family.

The girls are doodling around the litter-strewn camp, chasing butterflies, hop-scotching over empty beer cans, dodging the drained Smirnoff vodka bottle leaning drunkenly against the base of the picnic table. Both girls are beautiful and sunburned, dirty as dustbowl babies and laughing at imaginary games in their heads.

We decide to partake of a humongous watermelon he has called for his girls to bring up from submersion in the icy creek waters. Struggling with their pregnant-like charge, their gait is an odd balance of hope and hilarity. Upon this wooden alter Father’s hands are Solomon-like, even if a bit unsteady. Falling forward onto the picnic table, his cutting knife shanks sharply to the right. A slender oblong slice of melon unevenly breaks apart. Unembarrassed, he continues, adopting a faintly ceremonial air to the task reminiscent of Bukowski at his finest hour. Pleased to find no unnecessary finger parts, we happily dig in to the red, juicy treasure. The sound of early evening crickets blends nicely with the slurps of voracious melon eaters. His eyes find mine and are brimming with a goofy triumphance. A shit-eating grin cracks his face. He licks his lips with a thick, red tongue. *Sweet, ain’t it?* I have to laugh and do. How sweet it is. Pure, simple, unadulterated white trash. Surely that’s what some would call this scene. Those whom I would call the uncharitables. The Brahmins. The *I’ve got mine and to hell with you* Jacks.

*The mining job is not so much* she says. *It keeps our family fed and together and a roof over our head.* He asks me how much money I make. *A hun’erd thou? Fifty?* I demure with my own scoff. *I’m no rich man, and even if I were, I’m from a working class family that learned as a boy the pleasures of the earth. I'm happy to just be here in this beautiful valley sleeping in my tent.* We all seem happy to share this bond which is good and is true.

I ask if they know where I could buy some vegetables in the area and they are pleased to instruct me that the Company supermarket some thirty-five or forty miles down the road will have everything I am looking for. I make plans to forgo writing the next day and head into town for a spell. I presume the camp will be active with visitors and it will be a good time to make a short exit stage right. They agree to watch over my camp while I’m gone. *Pick us up some eggs and ‘taters? Happy to oblige.*

The next morning finds me securing camp and heading down the mountain for the empty two-lane blacktop connecting nowhere with somewhere. It is dry and scorching on the sandy valley floor, even at 6,000 feet. I stop along the way to read the various state historical markers. Gold mining, wagon trains, pre-historic cave pictographs *et al*. The Aztecan shimmer of the excavated gold fields mirage onto the sandy desert floor. How can the people of our planet come to truly know the great native Indian mantra? *We do not own the earth - the earth owns us.*

*Ω*

*- Act III, Un Saison En Enfer -*

It was a difficult night. Awakened at one thirty, asleep for only three hours, I felt hot and dizzy. I took off the fleece vest jacket I had worn over my long johns. It didn’t seem as cold as the night before. Perhaps with June here it was warming up. The days were hot enough though. After about ten or eleven in the morning you have to seek the shade. There, it was still cool. Otherwise, you risked an easy burn. At this altitude the ultraviolet rays were much more powerful than at sea level. It could toast you in an hour or less. *How in the hell did the early settlers make it across these mountains like they did?* In fact, many of them had died.

Earlier in the day I had committed to “two-a-days,” the practice of working out twice a day in order to build endurance and muscle. Years of cigarette smoking have robbed me of the lung power I enjoyed in my youth. At this altitude every breath is a measured action. Deeper breaths will come easily only if I am in tip-top aerobic shape. I plan to do plenty of water sports next month in Hermosa Beach, southern California.

The preparation for this leg of the trip includes swimming and full-body weight training four or five days a week. *On a journey to meet my Father.* Time to notch it up. For the morning drill I do stretches, light calisthenics, and a mountain bike ride of three to four miles, mostly uphill, to the lake and back. Six thousand feet, right off the bat the first stretch of road is straight uphill and grueling. I make it there and back in just under forty minutes. I feel refreshed and invigorated.

Four o’clock in the afternoon, writing for six hours, I start the second work-out drill. This is to be a two-hour session. Hundred and twenty stretches, twists, and sit-ups. Thirty-five each, deep knee bends and toe-point calf lifts. Good warm-up. In my club, King's Boxing gym, Oakland, a great place for any man or boy, woman or girl to train, I would then ride a stationary bike for thirty minutes to an hour before proceeding to free weights. *Successful people are willing to do that which the unsuccessful will not.*

Yesterday, I noticed that because of the way the valley is situated the afternoon sunlight is earliest to leave my campsite. I switched the order of weights and biking. Shirtless but head-scarfed, I started an upper-body weight routine. Iron and steel. Forearms, biceps, shoulders, chest. *Pumped, humped, ready to stump the chump!* Ninety minutes later I am hot panting and ready for a cool swim. Talk to me, Jesus. *Did someone say cool swim?* There's a creek down below but the lake is so shallow today there will be no swim. Damn. *Pucker up, big daddy.* Time for the mountain bike.

I hydrate as much as I can stand. Watering my head, I set off. The hill is much tougher than in the morning. *O, just frickin' F you, Buddha, you joker.* I stop every few hundred feet to catch my breath and titty-suck the water bottle. I make it to the lake but not without some concern over my red-lining pulse rate, a way too-hot head, not enough water in my system and lungs; they, too scarred to suck in much oxygen at 8,500 feet. The temperature in the sunlight must be in the high nineties. How in the literal hell do those Kenyans do it? No wonder Ryan lost the mile in the ’64 Olympics. No way you can go from sea level to a mile, mile-and-a-half altitude and still expect to maintain the same functioning capability. Optimus Maximus or not. *Dang it all to hell!*

Pedaling back to camp I was fairly fried, even if the downhill return racing was exhilarating, the breeze drying the sheets of sweat, the memory of doing all this as a boy in the Maryland countryside is really making it seem quite fun. *Fun? Right.* Thirsty, I needed water. *Now!* I drank as much again as I could stand, cooled the head, seemingly recovered, I rigged up my new store-bought fishing pole kit. *Good boy. Time to hunt me some supper. Go get ‘em, Optimus.*

*Ω*

No sooner was I nearly done with my rig and preparing to walk out of camp and try the fish up by the common area bridge first, before coming back to fish in my own creek site - all the sites here have access to the creek - when directly behind me, coming from the back direction of the camp and the woods, I hear a chipper little voice boom out, *Hello! How’ya doin’?* Fishing pole in hand, I whip to my right, startled. Believing myself to be alone, adrenaline is now kicking through my heart walls. Fight or Flight? I am certainly not expecting anyone to be coming up from behind me.

*Jesus!* Seething, I whirl only to see a young boy and his grandfather carrying fishing poles and a line of freshly caught trout. *Hi there!* I croak. *Gosh! You sure scared me!* I had seen only one other person in two days and that was this same very old man who earlier in the morning had stopped by my site, backed up his truck and gotten out to ask me where the lake was; could he camp with his rig there; was the fishing any good.

I had shared with him what I knew, encouraging him to take his rig to the site where I had been exploring and found the new reptile species. I, too, wanted privacy. I assured him there was good fishing at the lake. Just in case he wanted to stake out for the night in one of the sites near mine, I let him know that the creek ran by all of them and that the fish looked good and plentiful in each and every one of them. *Why, thanks, friend.*

Armed, expecting I was alone, after having been so careful to help what I believed to be a single old man find a camp spot and fishing hole, I was literally shocked to find the two of them, even if unintentionally, sneaking up on me from behind at twilight. *In my own campsite no less!* In contrast to me, the old man and boy were happy.

*Yea!* The boy is proud. *I caught two big ‘uns! Grandpa, he got jus' the two little ones.* I tried to be as friendly as I could for my reaction was no fault of the boy’s. The pair reminded me of myself and my Granddaddy. I knew the boy was just doing what his grandpa told him. But to me, the old man was not like my Granddaddy at all. If anything, the Swetts were a careful people. I sensed this old man was trying too hard to impress the boy at any price. I wondered if they were blood. It didn't matter. I was angry mad and I thought the old man a kook. Like in nuts. The Greeks had taught me *Those whom the gods seek to destroy, first they make angry.* Anger was upon me.

How in the hell do you pass through another man’s campsite when you know he’s not there? I had told the old man where a good site was and that I be would riding my bike up there later and would look for him to see if he had found it. When we had spoken, in full display were swords, rifles, knives, axes and more. Knowing that the old man had tramped through my campsite and had done so with a young boy just so he could catch fish in a cove off another fellow’s little bit of heaven - even though he knew the damned creek ran fourteen miles long, had a beautiful lake, and there was creek access less than ten yards from where he had parked your truck.

*Old man, are you crazy, ornery, or both?* What if I had been holding my Kendo sword instead of baiting a fishing pole? You just jeopardized your grandson and yourself, unnecessarily. I am a man of peace but, nevertheless, one who is prepared to protect himself from the forces of evil or misintention. What you did was stupid.

Thinking of my Granddaddy, I bade them sincere good luck and walked on ahead of them; inside, too angry to stay in their presence. It wouldn’t be until the next day that I realized why I was so angry. *Why had he put his boy in such harm’s way?* I would never enter another man’s site while he was gone. If I did and came upon him downwind on my return, you can be damned sure I would make my presence known long before I was within his striking distance. Flustered, both hot and cold, I trundled off, confident a meal of fresh fish would bolster my body and spirits. I was wrong.

*Ω*

*No luck with the damn fish.* Either I was making too much noise or they didn’t like my smell on top of the smelly fish bait. *Whatever.* Passing from spot to spot, I was catching nothing, getting no bites, and, worse, in the crystal clear waters I could see the damned fish running away from my baited hook! No investigation. No interest. No nothing but *No, thank-you!* Now my pride is also hurt.

The boy and the old man who had alighted from my fishing hole had caught a nice dinner for themselves. I, fearless, feckle, Samurai warrior had jack-shit for dinner - Oh, I’ve got plenty of grub but no fresh fish and *Dammit I’ve bought a license and rod and boasted to myself all morning that the fish will be mine tonight!* Now, a full hour has passed since my return from the grueling bike ride. The empty stomach churns. Athletes should eat within thirty minutes after a workout. I am faint and dizzy.

Stumbling back to camp I make right away for the chow-hall. Noodle soup, hot water; that’s it, broccoli, tomatoes, ham slices, corn, broth, *What’s this? Jalapenos from my little Shanghai beauty Kuo Ying? Open ‘em, let ‘er rip!* I love these babies; besides, I’m starting to cool, nearly chill in the shaded evening air of the campsite.

It is as if I cannot get the food into me fast enough. I am not sitting neatly at a corner of the table, as is my custom. I am on a stool shoving the hot food into my mouth so fast it is scalding my lips and tongue. *Way to go, pig.* In a minute, maybe two, it is gone, devoured, including six jalapenos. Usually I eat them with steak or fried chicken, often with side dishes like mashed potatoes and coleslaw to brunt the burn. There was little in the soup to absorb the peppers. Blood sugar rises. I am trying to make peace with the angry memory of the old man’s foolishness Let it go. Do not carry that into this gentle night. You are a man preparing to meet his Father. *This is a sacred place.*

Slowly I clean up, build a fire, drying my wet sox and feet, a casualty of the fishing. I had slipped off the bank and into the creek. *I hope I scared those fish shitless.* Truth. Fish, one. Optimus, nothing. I prepare myself for bed. It won’t be dark till after nine. Keith Jarret plays softly on the car stereo. It is quiet now and so very alone.

I make my way to the tent. A piece from the lantern is missing. I have only flashlight. How have I lost part of the lantern? Again, anger begins to rear its ugly head. *Optimus!* Anger is a bad thing. It burns from the inside like an acid clouding the clear mind. *Haven't you learned anything?* Anger serves only to make reasonable men ugly.

How does one balance a fire in the belly with peace of mind? I worry this is an omen, even if as a rationalist I do not believe in them. *Keep it together* I remind myself. Go out there by flashlight and find the missing lantern piece. Set up this tent right. Prepare for night. *Now git!*

The valley is dark; the stars glitter jubilantly. I am trying to make peace with myself. *I have hated my father for the longest of times.* I find the lantern. Reassemble its parts. By its light I tamp down the fire and close up camp for the night. Within the tent I arrange my stuffed bear and a few personal belongings in anticipation of a cold night. A thought. *Optimus, why leave that extra utility blanket outside? Why not bring it in? Let's line the bottom of the tent so the cold doesn’t seep in through the ground cover.* Good idea.

With the combination of mild heat stroke, dehydration and exhaustion - to say nothing of the old man who sneaked up on me from the backside of my private grounds and with his grandson both blurting out big cheery hellos! *How dare they!* Holdin' up a mess of fresh mountain trout. Disgusting. I know it. Buddha knows it too. *I am not thinking all too clearly.*

It is good to get into bed, yet the mummy bedroll is claustrophobic and constricting. *I shouldn’t have chosen this particular sleeping bag. I like to sleep on my side and toss and turn like a kid having dreams*. Good dreams, almost always. Still, I need my room. This bag feels like a death trap.

Ω

It is a difficult night. I awaken at one-thirty, asleep for only three hours. I feel hot. Dizzy. Perspiring profusely, I take off the now damp fleece vest-jacket absentmindedly worn as cold protection over long johns while searching for the missing lantern part. The inside of the tent doesn’t seem as cold as last night. The underbottom blanket is working well. I, however, am not. Sickness grows in my stomach. Pain surfaces in my left hand. *Isn’t that the hand Superman’s Earth Dad clutched when he had a stroke?* My chest is tightening. Even sitting up I am spinning. I am revolting against myself.

In medicine I have read it is a combination of factors, usually not one, that conspire to do in a person. My uneven mind whirls out catalogue factors of intellect and fear. Being alone intensifies the effect. Too much sun, lack of water, heatstroke, thin air, pushing too hard, empty belly jalapeno fires, skipping pulse. *Way to go, Optimus.*

A crying need to cool my head. Fade to blackout. Stroke? Hospital. Eighty miles. Fear. Courage. Loneliness. Pussy-whipped. Panic. End of the road? No insurance. Health or life. *Too goddamned busy to buy either before embarking on the trip. Anyway, who needs doctors when you’re as fit as I am? Is this my legacy, to die right here in the woods? Oh, Optimus, you wanted to be alone, you stupid old bastard! Now, pick up the phone and call for an ambulance you dumb-ass! What's that? Cell phones don't work in the mountains at seventy-five hundred feet?! Well, la-dee-da! Aren't you the loving but not so tough sonofabitch! Gosh,Optimus, you know, what? I’m not feeling so well. Hold me, Earth God. Please?* Four-thirty, darkness of the mind.

Ω

Morning. Better. In this mountain valley, as always, it is glorious. By eight the sun limns over the eastern peaks bathing the western rock formations in a cascade of light. Descending from its apex, minute by minute it gaily dances down tree and rock lines. Twenty minutes more and the valley floor sparkles alive with new light and warmth.

In company of birdsong and monarch butterflies flitting to and fro, a cottontail rabbit poses with Edward Steichen solemnity. A new sound. *Rivet! Rivet!* A frog belches loudly in the pond-stream. I am happy to be alive. Faint, somewhat weak but feeling recovery. *Use good sense. Serenity is within your grasp.*

Taking tea, I resolve to protect myself better from the ravages of the sun. Above all, keep cool. I am glad to have not died. It is still early in this special journey. Post a will. Order affairs.Take advantage of the moment. I write these words on the page knowing *Today is a good day to die.*

Ω

BOOK THREE

*- Act I, Some Enchanted Evening -*

Optimus was not happy. He had left Gramma Howell and all things good in New Orleans and the French Quarter; he had been forced to say goodbye to his mother and his room, his magical place; he had opened his big mouth and showed everyone that at only four years of age he could read a newspaper as easy as drinking a glass of water. Well, now he would have to pay for it.

Optimus had spent nearly every day with his Great Gramma Howell. They had shopped together, entered into enlightening if not painful capitalist agreements that had taught him a great deal of property rights and money transfers; he had many good days with her as security guard; as confidante; angel of affection; a gullible tyke with blonde hair and a smile wider than his head; he was hard not to like; even when he wore self-amused precociousness on his face like a cherry on an ice cream cone.

Uncle Charlie had taught him how to shave and to box - they would watch the fights together every Friday night, not *some* Friday nights but *every* Friday night, and Charlie would show him how the boxers stood, held their hands, how they circled, dipped back away from the sway of a blow; how and why they took a hit and still kept coming; what the purpose of it all was, stuff like that. Good guy stuff. That was Optimus' ‘forte.*'* Listening to learn. Ever the big talker, people often didn't realize how closely Optimus listened to every word that was said. He may not have agreed with it. He may have even thought the speaker full of doo-doo. Smart or dull, Optimus listened well.

If you were like Charlie, no child, no wife, dedicated to your Mother as one of seven children, an honorable man, one who was by action not words teaching Optimus about family loyalty and such; well, when you got together *every* Friday night with a kid full of spunk, why, it was only natural to take the chance to teach to one who was so interested to learn. And Optimus loved to learn.

Charlie did not know, does not know now, and may never that the boxing lessons he gave Optimus became ingrained in the physiology of his psychology. In other words, even without Optimus really knowing it, in only a few years Optimus would be in an all-boys school, *St. Stanislaus* in Bay St. Louis, southern Mississippi.A school where because of Optimus' reading ability and facility with ideas and language, he entered two years younger than his peers.

To say nothing of still being a slender, boyish little shrimp, there amongst all the good Catholic Brothers and young men, a nine or ten-year-old boy and seven-year-old Optimus got into some kind of tussle that was broken up, if only momentarily. Both boys were hustled by the group down to the large wooden gymnasium. Fitted with large red gloves, hoisted up into a ring, to Optimus' fearful amazement they were told *Have at it!* They did, too.

Little cocks wailing and flailing unable to much hurt or harm the other, merely exhausting their pent up energies. As Optimus gave a few but reciprocally received many a glancing blow, *Give and get!* a thought occurred to him. *I've done this!* He hadn't done it, actually, but he had actually watched boxing *every* Friday night, and Charlie had taught him how to stand, to hold his hands, to circle, dip and sway from a blow, to take a hit and move forward and such; and as Optimus said this to himself his heart blood shot up. As it choked off the last of the fear fading from being hit, Optimus did something from learned memory and it felt as natural as pie. Optimus threw a jab that caught the other older boy smack on his jaw. *Bam!*

The boy's head popped back on his neck and surprise surfaced on his face as if to ask *Where'd that come from?* Optimus did not answer with words. Instead, as the bigger boy charged forward in anger, Optimus let him come. At the last instant Optimus turned his body and delivered a right hook to the boy's mid-section that caught him flush on the kidney. The boy's air whooshed out of him like a pin-prick, his head flashing upwards to the lights in the ceiling.

The other boys cheered at the surprising bravura of the shrimp, all of them surprised, none of them more so than Optimus himself. Optimus watched the pained expression on the other boy's face and, for a moment, in all the noise and hullabaloo amidst the crowd of young men and Brothers, he thought of going in for more. He did not. He was not heartless, even though he was pumped up more than he had ever been in his young life. He danced on his toes just like the boxers on Friday night. Then he stopped.

Optimus stood and stared at the boy who was having a hard time standing up straight, an unanswered quiz all over his face. A chance for properly settling a score, not an opportunity for bloodlust, one of the Brothers entered the ring and grabbed both boys by an arm and made them lift it high into the air. Then he made them shake hands, if one can do so with boxing gloves on, and then, that was that.

Optimus had been getting his little butt whipped until he had calmed inside and then said to himself *I can do this.* He did, too; he was never to have a fight again in that school of bigger boys. He had made a point. *Little, I can take care of myself.* No matter age or place, that was aheck of thing for any boy or man to able to say. It was all because of the love that Uncle Charlie had shared with a four year-old. Remember that next time when some little bastard bothers you. *Take a chance on them* Optimus thought.

But that was all to be in the future. Right now, Optimus was still four and he had been separated from all whom and that he loved; sent away to an all-girls *All girls!* Catholic school; all because he could read so damn good that his big mouth got him into trouble. One summer when he was eight or so, he would stand in the nifty bar built by Uncle Carl and Aunt Lil, Gram and Granddaddy's next door neighbors, and he would see a little plaque of a big fish being snagged; the caption underneath said *Fish wouldn't of been caught if he had learned to keep his damn mouth shut!*

That was Optimus at four. At eight when he read it he smirked, laughing to himself *Don't I know it!* Still, at four, none of that offered Optimus any solace. He was sitting alone in the courtyard of St. Scholastica waiting in vain for his mother to come from New Orleans for a visit. Four. He was not happy.

Ω

Optimus' mother, *Muriel Constance Clements,* she was often called *Connie* by her girlfriends, was a beautiful, sensuous woman, mature beyond her years, talented in the arts and letters even if still only in late beginning of acquiring a classical education, she was a spectacular woman nonetheless; one who lived by her guile and her beauty, brandishing them both whenever her children Maddie and Optimus ever needed them.

Connie had come to New Orleans with Al. Al was her man. Friend. Boyfriend. Lover. Husband. Father of Optimus and his big sister, Maddie. Connie and Al had met in Washington, DC, when Connie was fifteen. Al was in the Navy then. Twenty or so, not a sea sailor, Al played trumpet in the Navy Band. They had met at an open-air concert on the lawn of the Washington Monument. Connie's mother, Mary Frances, had taken her there for a Sunday afternoon passing, a chance to improve her exposure to the better things of life. When Connie saw Al and Al saw Connie, each thought *Well now! There's a better thing!* So it was to be. Feminine teenager and young buck doing in secret, away from Optimus' grandmother's eyes, all of the things that young lovers do and must to keep the race moving forward. They didn't think of it like that. *Kiss-Kissy.* That's what they thought.

Those things Optimus would write about when he was grown, long after he had time to contemplate the truths of other people's words and remembrance of things past. Connie and Al began a life and it took them to New Orleans with two infant children. It was all so rich and interesting and so full of life, as is every life; if you but just take a moment and put your ear to the breast of the universal heartbeat, you will hear it, too.

Optimus listened to his mother's stories from the time he was a small, fascinated child in love with life and his Mother, like no boy ever was, happy to be alive in this *Great Feast of Life* and he listened to her stories ever fascinated about her and Al; Gram and Grandaddy; Momma as a small child; the way she had a very pronounced stutter; how hard Gram was on her; and how, yes, another child could have a hard life and still grow up to seem happy and vivacious as Optimus' mother often seemed to be. These little things gave Optimus hope and vision that he too could do this.

Now though, his mother, the woman he so admired, the woman who would sing *You're in the Army now! You're not behind the plow! You'll never get rich to dig in the ditch! You're in the Army now!* she was not there for five-year-old Optimus that afternoon and he was not happy about it. Now a man, sitting cross-legged in the mountains above Taos, in the fading glimmer of dusk, he wrote.

Ω

Waiting one Saturday, the agony of nearly an entire morning and afternoon for Mother to come for a visit from New Orleans. Sitting patiently under a Spanish Oak, crying my eyes out after lunch, I realized she wasn’t coming. At this point I truly felt like an abandoned, orphaned child; alone, unloved, or not loved nearly enough; a youth left alone to fend for self. After the sadness ebbed, anger begin to fill my heart. Meanness was not too damned far on the horizon. *A pox on Mom! A pox on Dad!*

But in the mountains Optimus did not want to write any more about that day. Grown, confident, thinking himself a man in every sense of the word; foibled, fearless, friendly; every frickin' *F* word you could think of; Optimus no longer wanted to revisit that morning so long ago. He knew that if he were to be a success when he met his father, that certain things he would just have to let go, like a popsicle boat floating down a stream; all things must pass and Optimus knew that that memory of what felt like betrayal from a parent who was also your best friend, that he would have to let that go. Standing up in the now chilly air, he thought it a very good time to build a fire. So he did. The fire was warm. The stars were aburst.

Happy again, he wrote.

Ω

Father,

This letter is from your first son, Optimus Maximus. My sister Madelin, at my request, provided me with your address and phone number. Even though Maddie, through a combination of both her and my efforts, established contact with you some time ago, neither you nor I have since taken the opportunity to acknowledge or otherwise introduce ourselves to the other.

Father, over the years I have thought of you many, many times. Now, a quiet inner voice leads me to make first contact. I feel it important that we both take steps towards acknowledging and, hopefully, understanding who is one’s Father and who is one’s Son. I left my San Francisco home in late May. I have spent the summer traveling leisurely across America, taking the time to write and reflect on my life thus far. In part, I believe I have also been preparing myself for what I hope will result in a personal meeting between us. My plans are to visit New Orleans during September's first week.

Following this introduction, Father, you will receive a series of letters from me. I wrote them just recently while living alone in the mountains of New Mexico. They speak to you from me, Son to Father, in matters of the heart. I trust you will receive them with the same genuine spirit in which they were written.

It has been a long time. I will call you on the evening of the first of September.

Very truly yours,

Your son,

Optimus Maximus

*- Act II, Go Tell The Spartans -*

Optimus Maximus was fighting a battle and he knew it was one he was going to lose. True, Buddha was going to take from him everything that was precious to him in his life not once, not twice, but three times; yet at eight years of age, Optimus already began to know that the battle he was fighting within was Sisyphean - Sisyphus - Optimus knew that legend from the Hamilton classics on mythology; yet, to Optimus, the struggle he was encountering within and without, it was no myth.

Smart enough to realize that he was at severe loggerheads with the Father issue; smart enough to know that there was no solution in sight; what could he do at eight - force his mother to marry Floyd? Conti? - he knew he could not. *What then?* He was not yet living with grandparents. By then, he would already be too far down the road of conflict and diffidence to hope for any reprieve. No, Optimus knew that his battle was his feelings within pitted wrongly against the world at large, and, instinctively, Optimus knew the world was going to win. World, One. Optimus, Zero. *Ouch.*

Optimus' battle could be pretty much summed up like this: He didn't know his father. He had no man in his daily life. Without a father to lead and show him the way as to how to develop his masculine side in concord and temperament with the image of what made a great boy or man comfortable and successful in the world around him, then he knew that he was no better than a rebel without a cause. *A rebel without a cause*

That was the crux of Optimus' issue and even if he did not know the infamy of that rebel phrase, he knew he was heading down the wrong emotional track. *Damn.* Who could he talk to? No one. Not his mother. Not his sister. Not his grandparents in summer. Not Gramma Howell. *Zilch.* What could he say? *I'm tired of being an academic boy wonder. I want to play baseball every day. I want to run until I drop. I want to do push-ups and see my muscles grow. I want - I need! - someone to teach me the ways of the warrior lest I not be able to navigate in and defend myself against the unfamiliar waters upon which you adults - you women! - have cast me.*

Optimus did not say those things. Even if he had, he would not have said them with malice. He was only speaking from the heart of a boy who knew that just like every single human being on the face of the earth, that he was special, and, because of that, he knew that his own particular type of specialness was worth developing. Optimus often thought of himself as a young lion or a young colt. He was fierce for the fight of life and frisky for the fun it offered. *If only I had a man to share it with* he thought.

There were many things on Optimus' mind as a child besides his silent fixation with his absent father. Yes, there was the issue of his having skipped two grades and, consequently, being ahead academically of all the other boys and girls while at the same time, owing to his slender frame, he was much smaller than they as well. That posed its own set of continual problems. *Who the hell do you think you are?* is what the other boys often thought and said. What adults giveth, peers can easily take away. Yet, it was adults that controlled the game, and, from adults, children garner praise and the keeping of their liberty. Optimus loved both praise and liberty. Sometimes, too much.

Besides the daily in-your-face academic age conundrum - one that made his mother proud and Optimus mostly nervous - there was the issue of the body itself. Optimus was blessed with a fine young body. He was strong and supple, muscular if thin, fleet of foot, and reflexes to make a ballplayer first-string. Without a coach and competition to bring out the best in the natural Spartan athlete that Optimus knew burned for release inside of him, he sensed he was doomed. Even if he didn't know the words - and granted, Optimus knew a *lot* of words for a boy - he didn't know the words to express the fear he felt about the battle he felt he was losing day by day. He thought *This is my only childhood! The only time I, a boy, will be able to grow up with a dad!*

When he was grown and more able to objectively reason and review what was happening during those years, he would come to better understand it, those times, and himself a bit more. Then, though, he was a preternaturally happy boy whose psyche was dying a slow death by a thousand paper cuts. He didn't like it one bit.

The first time he really experienced the animus of his fate was at St. Stanislaus. Optimus was seven, excited to be away from all those *crazy girls!* at St. Scholastica,hoping he would be safe and prosperous amidst the phalanx of young men at his new all boys school. Like the adage says *Hope makes a good breakfast but a poor supper.*

It began one afternoon after classes. Boys everywhere. Wanting to belong was probably one of the greatest drivers of Optimus' being. A fellow can be quite different, such as Optimus was by his grade skipping, but that fact does not ameliorate the desire to be like one’s peers and to be liked by them for emulating them. Optimus wanted to fit in. What smart boy doesn't?

One day after classes, a large group of boys were out on the playground engaged in all the various sporting activities that freedom on concrete can provide. Handball. Basketball. Tetherball. Optimus was pretty good at all of them.

Looking down at his feet, Optimus realized he was attempting to play these games while wearing his leather-soled school shoes. The other boys had changed into black sneakers, all of the same look. Besides looking pretty cool and snazzy to Optimus, the other boys were able to run faster, surer, and turn more quickly. Optimus wanted shoes like theirs. He asked one of the older boys *Where did ya'll get those shoes*? The older boy looked down, surprised. *At the Commissary. They sell tennis shoes? Um-hmm.*

Optimus thought this very interesting. He was going to have figure this all out, quickly. First off, besides his seventy-five cents allowance, he had no money. He reached into his pocket and looked into his little rubber coin purse squeezing its vulva. *Thirteen cents and still three days to Saturday.* Optimus had no idea how these types of transactions were handled. *How does the school keep track of all this?* He wondered if by possibly being extra nice that might help his efforts. *To the Commissary!*

There were all kinds of things in this vast and ancient brick warehouse. The execution of business and the sale and transfer of merchandise though were far beyond Optimus' ken. He was mystified how anyone could possibly keep track of it all. Optimus peered through the caged door, his eye-level barely able to see over the Dutch door shelf. He could see Brother Claudius was folding shirts on a table. Optimus called out to him in his friendliest voice:

“Hello, Brother Claudius!”

“Why, hello, Optimus. How are you today, little fellow?”

Optimus loved it when they liked him.

“Fine. I am fine. Brother Claudius, I am playing out in the schoolyard with all the other boys and they are all wearing black tennis shoes. I do not have any tennis shoes. Would you please tell me how I could get some tennis shoes like they have?”

“Well, that was a very nice way you said that, Optimus. Let’s see what we can do.”

Brother Claudius walked off to another table and from a shelf returned with a large, oversized book bearing a burgundy and green canvas style cover. Holding it aloft in his hands, as he flipped through it pages Optimus could see that on its face in bold letters it said LEDGER. Optimus wondered what was a *Ledger,* but he did not wish to upset Brother Claudius' concentration. *I am going to get those shoes* he thought.

“Hmmm. Your mother hasn’t authorized tennis shoes on your commissary list, Optimus. Underwear, sox, laces, soap, toothpaste . . . ”

Brother Claudius kept reading down the list. Optimus felt as if he were going to vomit.

“No, Optimus. No tennis shoes on the list.”

Now it was time to get serious. Pull out all the stops. Optimus reminded himself *I want those tennis shoes!* He looked up at Brother Claudius with the most sincere and friendly look that any American youth could muster. Just underneath lay a tinge of sadness.

“Well, all right, Optimus. Let’s see what we can do.”

*Whoopee! It worked! Brother Claudius is on my side now! I can’t believe it! I am going to get my tennis shoes! I am going to be just like the other guys! Fast! Sure! Quick!*

“Optimus, what size shoe do you wear?”

Optimus quickly thought to himself *Yes, shoes come in sizes. But I am not yet in charge of my shoe size.* For Optimus this was terra incognita. *Well, mine must be the seven-year-old size.*

This is what Optimus told him. Brother Claudius thought this was very funny. Optimus thought to himself *I do not think this is funny.*

“Let me see your shoe.” Brother Claudius asked. Optimus quickly unlaced it and handed it up to him. He pulled open the interior and read from the right calf.

“Size four. I’ll be right back”

And with that Brother Claudius returned to Optimus his leather shoe and disappeared into the bowels of the commissary. *He is off to fetch me my new shoes! Oh, I am excited! Oh, I am the happy boy, now!* Optimus sat down on the ground and untied his other shoe in anticipation of the brand new tennis shoes that would shortly be on his little feet. *Life is so good to those who are good, isn’t it?* he asked himself. Optimus heard a voice from above.

“Optimus.”

It was the voice of Brother Claudius. Optimus looked up. His shoes were not in Brother Claudius' hands.

“The smallest size we have is a seven. You are a four. I’m sorry.”

Optimus had no intention of leaving without new shoes. *I don’t even have to think about it.*

“Oh, that’s ok, Brother Claudius. I’ll just take the size sevens. They’ll do fine.”

Brother Claudius laughed again. *What the heck is he laughing about? This is serious.*

“No. No, Optimus. Size sevens won’t fit you. Sevens are the size for most of the boys in your class. We just don’t have shoes small enough to fit you.”

*Not only does Brother Claudius not have my shoes, he is going to insult me on top of it. Well, if I am seven years old with a size four shoe and somehow therefore unable to be equal to my peers, I will be shamed. I will be the only boy on the playground in leather shoes. I cannot have this. I must have those shoes!*

Not by calculation of design but rather by reaction to despair did Optimus turn his back to Brother Claudius and the whole empty-handedness of life. Optimus began a slow, plaintive wail. A shoeless boy, clutching the sox on his feet, the sighs and sobs of pathos shook the spirits within him. Indeed, for a little bugger, Optimus seemed greatly distraught. Brother Claudius had left him. Time seemed to pass ever so slowly.

Behind him, he suddenly heard the metal clang of the commissary’s Dutch door. Brother Claudius towered above him in his black robes, a cross of Jesus around his neck. In his hands was a pair of black tennis shoes. Optimus thought *I love this man!*

“Let’s try these on.”

With that Brother Claudius joined Optimus on the pavement. Optimus did his best to wipe the tears from his face. Brother Claudius gently took Optimus' stockinged feet into his hands and one by one slid them into the tennis shoes. *Oh, how I do love him.*

“Stand up, now,” Brother Claudius commanded.

Optimus quickly obeyed. Brother Claudius pulled the toe of the shoes towards him and the heel of Optimus' foot away. Then with his thumb he pressed down on the front of the shoes. There was an enormous gap between the big toe and the front of the shoe.

“Now you see, Optimus. If you run around in these shoes you might very well fall down and hurt yourself. They are a size seven. They just don’t fit you.”

Optimus was perfectly willing to live with that dangerous decision but he could see Brother Claudius was not going to let him leave with those shoes. Optimus no longer loved him as much as he did a few moments ago. But he did respect him. He had tried. Brother Claudius took back the snazzy black tennis shoes and helped Optimus re-tie his leather shoes. He looked Optimus in the eye and promised to ask the “supplier” for a smaller size in the next few weeks. *Might as well be a few centuries* thought Optimus.

Optimus quietly ambled back to the playground. He realized then, there is no justice in life. He would have to accept those things he could not change. *I vow to play on in leather shoes! I will not be defeated! I will win in my leather shoes!*

Years later, when Optimus was grown and had big time cash in his pocket, Michael Jordan Air Nikes descended upon the hungry psyches of America’s youth. At some insanely expensive price-per-pop, lust limned Optimus' sensuous, athletic impulse. They have his size ten. He will be the first amongst his peers to buy a pair.

Hipster, Optimus thought *Mars Blackmon or Julian Sorel, the red and the black drive my opponents back!*

“Down the lane! A pass! He shoots! He scores!”

What could Optimus say*?* Spartan through and through, Optimus knew in his bones: *A quitter never wins and a winner never quits. It was the shoes, man. It’s the shoes.*

*Ω*

Thus did Optimus Maximus struggle to reach parity with his peers that as a child was never to be forthcoming. Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, Optimus struggled to even out an imbalanced world not of his making. Shame came. It stayed. Congruently - who could blame him - with it, came its sister. Anger.

Not that Optimus couldn't be defensively imaginative in dealing with the cards that were dealt to him. He could and he did, often. Not long after the incident with the shoes, Optimus stood on the same playground hoping he might have a chance to play in a game of pick-up basketball. What boy doesn't like a good game of basketball? Optimus loved basketball. And handball. And tetherball. And *any* kind of ball. It was, however, Optimus' complete lack of relative size that necessarily stirred him to call upon his courage and guile to once and for all level the playing field. Oh, that Optimus was a smart boy, indeed. Smart, however, would not be enough. *Optimus! Be brave!*

*Ω*

It happened like this. A scrum of boys of all ages were having a shoot-around of sorts on the concrete jungle known as the playground. Big boys. Tall boys. Fast boys. Just the kind of guys Optimus liked to hang with. *Yes, sir. Show me what you got!*

In order for Optimus to show him what he had in him as an athlete, he would at least have to be able to get his hands on the basketball. Easier said than done, though. The boys were playing shoot-a-round. Ball. Shoot. Rebound by whomever was fastest, tallest or luckiest to find the ball headed their way. With that, it was ball, shoot, rebound. Open game.

After what seemed an interminable period of not touching the ball, hardly ever even getting close to it, Optimus had had enough. He had already been in his now famous boxing match in the school gymnasium so he was not especially worried that if he took matters into his own hands, the entire group might rain down upon him. Inside, Optimus knew *If I'm not willing to do SOMETHING, then I will NEVER get to play.*

Optimus wanted to play a game of basketball. What Optimus wanted, he often got. Of course he did not always like what he got, but, adhering to his steadfast principle that reward usually required risk and that the riskier proposition was almost invariably the more interesting, Optimus opted most frequently for risk. He had once heard a grown-up athlete say *No pain - no gain.* Optimus liked the way winners and heroes spoke.

Buddha did not always work against this young boy. Buddha never works against any of us. Buddha gives us opportunities. Those who are prepared, we call them *lucky.* A lucky bounce of the ball and, sure enough, it came right in Optimus' direction. *Now!!* Optimus grabbed the ball and clutched it securely to his mid-section, both of his thin arms holding it tightly. He took a deep breath and held his ground. One by one the other boys looked at him standing with the ball. Optimus moved not in the slightest. *Shoot!* Optimus shook his head back and forth indicating *No. I'm not going to shoot.* Quizzically, heads began to turn. *Shoot! C'mon, man! Shoot!* One of the boys stepped forward. Optimus could see that he aimed to take the ball from him. Optimus took a step back. *It's now or never* he thought to himself. His eyes darted across the scene.

*Listen up!* Optimus did his best impression of an older boy. *Tommy! You and Max are going to be Captains.* Tommy and Max were the two largest boys in the scrum. Twelve or thirteen, they easily towered over the other boys. Tommy was friendly to Optimus so he was not worried, too much. *Tommy! You on the left. Max. The right. Now, you two pick teams! Everybody else, over here with me!*

As the words rang from his tongue, Optimus could only think *Gosh, this is fun! I think I am going to get away with this!* Tommy and Max started laughing and ribbing each other as young boys do when a shrimp amongst them attempts to impose his will upon the larger group. For the fun of it, they each moved as Optimus had directed. Heart beating loudly in his chest, Optimus still clutched the ball tightly. He was not about to let go of the only asset, besides his courage, that would allow him to play ball. And Optimus wanted very much to play ball. *Okay, guys . . . Pick teams! Tommy, first!*

Optimus' prescience, and presence of mind and body, quickly paid off. It seemed that the other boys, all shorter or smaller than Tommy and Max - still, bigger and taller than Optimus - began noodling over Optimus' way. Standing on the foul line, Optimus used head movements to line them up in picking order. Tommy and Max, instantly elevated to the status of Captains were amused. Tommy turned to Max and smirked *This is funny.*

Tommy quickly chose the tallest of the line-up. *Robert!* Robert nodded and walked over to Tommy's side standing slightly behind him. Max matched Tommy's bid. *Jason!* And so on and so forth. Each captain picking the Darwinian advantage as best as he could decipher. Optimus could see quite clearly what was happening. He still had the ball, that was obvious; it was, however, equally obvious that no one was going to pick him to play. Brave or not, Optimus was a little shrimp and no captain in his right mind would want him on their team. That deterred Optimus not in the slightest.

Optimus had earlier counted the total number of boys. *Eleven.* When he had held the ball for so long, disgusted, one boy had walked away. *Good for him* thought Optimus. Tommy and Max were nearly finished their picking. *Michael!* called out Tommy. Max laughed loudly. *C'mon Optimus. Le'ss play ball.* The game was a thrill of a lifetime.

From that moment forward the little Spartan Optimus Maximus knew what was required to lead men, albeit boys, when faced with adversity. Stare it down. Immediately. Take the situation by the lead. Bull by the horns. Lead it or perish. That was all one could do. Optimus inbounded to Max. After all, he had the ball.

*Ω*

- A MORNING FOR HEROES –

It was a warm Maryland morning. Optimus opened his eyes and looked directly out his bedroom window. The summer sky was still pink with sleep. Blue kissed the earth’s curve. Optimus lay still, listening through the thin bedroom wall to his grandfather’s deep, peaceful snore. *Breathe-Exhale-Snicker.* Sure. Steady. In his own chest, Optimus’ heart beat regular and paced, as a boy’s heart should. *Boom-Boom-Boom.* Forty-six beats per minute. *It’s ‘cuz all the runnin’ I do.*

Optimus enjoyed the study of the human body. His mother had gifted him a beautiful book on the anatomical physiology of the human body. Revelatory and astonishing to the naturally curious Optimus, it was the coolest visual book he had ever seen. *Gosh, this is neat!* Clear overlays detailed the arterial and venous blood supply coursing over and through his muscular skelature. Optimus felt his heart push his blood outward from the center of his chest to every cell and fiber of his taut, slender frame. He liked thinking of the power of his heart. He listened quietly. *Boom-Boom-Boom.* Nearly a full minute passed. Optimus did not move. He lay still, listening for what he might hear next.

On the low mantle of Optimus’ bedroom dresser, a wind-up Big Ben clock ticked, ticked, and ticked. Optimus loved his clock. It was his Grandfather’s. It had a manly face. Strong arms and smart numerals. Held under a light before darkening the room, the hands glowed a phosphorous Martian green. Radium.

*Radium!* thought Optimus. *Tha’ss a chemical element!* He knew that, too. Books. Plus, his science kit. Optimus owned a Handy-Andy microscope set. It came with a chart of the elements and Optimus had memorized nearly all of its abbreviated symbols. *Radium! Glows in the dark! How cool is that?* Big Ben read 5:32. *Tick-Tick-Tick.*

Optimus cocked his ear, the one up from the soft, goose-down pillow his head rested upon. He thought it was neat that his Gram gave him a pillow that had come from a goose. In his mind he snickered, thinking how ornery that goose must have been when some woman had got hold of him and started pulling out his feathers one by one. *Gosh, I bet that little goose raised hell!* thought Optimus.

Optimus knew all about geese. Once, his grandfather had come home with three wild geese in a galvanized bucket. They were the mortal reward of his grandfather’s steady eye and hand – and luck – that had felled them in the air on a hunting trip. 12-gauge shotgun – *Ka-boom!!* One by one the bucket filled with bounty. Geese. *May I touch them, Granddaddy? Of course you can.* Optimus reached into the metal bucket and took out the prettiest of the three – they were all good-looking, healthy specimens. One was mostly green; a second had lots of grey. Optimus took out the one with deep, red burgundy feathers. With the green and white of its breast, Optimus thought it one of the most beautiful birds he had ever seen. It was marvelous to be so close to something so beautiful that only a few hours ago had been darting in the sky. *Bill Swett. My Granddaddy. He shot you. He is one heck of a man . . .*

Optimus clutched up the red, wild goose with both his small hands. It was dead. Optimus trembled with awe. He had never held a large, wild bird in his hands before. Oh, he had held robins, sparrows, blue jays, even a gorgeous Maryland Oriole – but they were ones he had found in the garden or the woods, victims of nature or just bad luck. This was the first time that he’d held a large, hunted quarry. He took a deep breath. *Whew . . . Isn’t it beautiful?*

The neck was broken. The beak, yellow. The head, eyes, black. A smile to it. The bird felt firm and strong. *He’s a hitter* thought Optimus. While his grandfather watched silently, Optimus cradled the goose in his arms. He wished it could be alive. *But then he’d fly away!* is what he soon realized. *Le’ss dress ‘em* his grandfather said. *Dress them? Wha’ss that mean, Granddaddy? Get ‘em ready t’ eat. Cook ‘em.* Optimus’ heart shot up. *We gonna eat ‘em? S’our Thanksgivin’.* Bill Swett felt close to this young boy. *Le’ss go.* They gathered the limp birds and moved to the outdoor work bench. The animal ritual slaughter temple. Eel. Fish. Snake. Worms. Crabs. Squirrel. Now, geese.

*Ω*

Optimus whirled up from his bed, tossing off his white blanket. It was his grandmother’s and Optimus treasured it. White. Soft. Gram kept it smelling fresh and clean like sun and wind. Optimus urged his toes to stretch just a bit more and reach the floor. *Ye-aa-nnk! Ooo-nch!* Like all boys, Optimus had a secret set of sound effects for anything, anywhere, anytime he might need them. *Toes-schmos-goes-n-grows! Wiggle-iggle-jiggle-miggle!* His toes still did not touch the linoleum floor. The floor was as clean as clean could be. In fact, for a boy who lived with his windows open almost all year round, his room was as clean as a dreamy advertisement in the Saturday Evening Post. *Gosh, my room is clean. That’s Gram for you.*

His grandmother Mary Frances had made a trade with him. *You empty the trash in your room, me and granddaddy’s room, the can next to his recliner, the bathroom and the kitchen; take out and bring in the big cans on Tuesday and Fridays – and you help me bring in the wash from the clothesline – then I’ll keep your room tidy. Okay?* She was already keeping his room clean and he had emptied the trash since forever, so Optimus felt that he was only agreeing to being himself, a self which he decidedly enjoyed. *Sure, Gram!* Sitting on the side of the bed he marveled – Optimus loved to marvel as there was much in the world for which to marvel – there wasn’t a speck of dust anywhere. *Man, she sure is good* he thought. Then his ears heard what he was hoping for. They heard nothing. *There’s no wind* he thought. *The bay must be clear as glass. Crabs!! Le’ss go!*

Optimus jumped up onto his feet and with a little shimmy wiggled down from his narrow hips his size eight Fruit-of-the-Loom underwear. They lay at his ankles. With his toes he spread them apart and while standing he closely examined the tag. *Still size eight. I wish they were BVDs. Tha’ss the kind Granddaddy wears!* But they were not. Always urging him on with impossibly gallant goals, his grandmother had smugly told him *BVDs are for men!* Optimus had thought *Yea . . . and if I vomit on the floor, what’s that for?* but he didn’t say it because he didn’t have a dad to protect him and he just knew somehow that she was a woman, just like his mom, his sister, Great-Gramma Howell, Aunt Sis, Aunt Margaret, Aunt Lil, Aunt Noni – even all his mother’s pretty girlfriends – they were all women and they would never understand – ever – *I want BVDs! I’m’a boy-man! I am a matador!*

It occurred to Optimus to try a trick. Optimus loved tricks – what boy-man does not? – and with his toe he fished the waistband of his underwear and began spinning them in a little circle. *I am Houdini!* he announced to himself. *And for my next trick, I will make these underwear disappear!!* Optimus had one eye on the underwear spinning on his toe; his other eye calculated the distance to the empty clothes hamper sitting on the bottom of his open closet. *I can do this!* he thought. Standing on one foot, his other spinning the Fruit-of-the-Looms in a small circle, it was then that he heard footsteps on the other side of his bedroom. *That has to be Gram! Granddaddy’s still snoring!*

Even a boy as silly as Optimus knew this could be trouble. He quickly looked down at himself. As his toe spun the undies in a circle, his little pee-pee was also swinging in the same little concentric circle. *Dang! I’m naked as a jay-bird!* he thought. *Please don’t come in here, Gram! If you do, I’m a goner!* Optimus was part Indian – at least he had convinced himself he was – so he shut his eyes and spread his arms wide like an eagle. Tightly, and on one foot, he balanced himself while waiting for the execution sure to happen if his grandmother were to walk through his door. Time stood still. So did Optimus.

In the morning quiet he heard the sound of the toilet flushing. *Dang! She must’a pooped!* he thought. *She don’t flush if she pees. We got a septic tank. Tha’ss why she’s always sayin’ – Go out in the yard to pee! –* which he always did, under the colossal oak tree next to his magnificent swing. *I’m’a make you grow tall, Mr. Oak Tree!* Years later, it was still Optimus’ habit to pee on trees, buildings, sidewalks, bushes, alleyways, wherever and anywhere a man could relieve himself. And that was fine with Optimus even if the beautiful women he would one day date would roll their eyes and turn up their noses. Once, a gorgeous Chinese girl-woman had said *How come man like you wear such nice clothes but piss like dog?* Optimus thought that funny and worth a good answer. As he shook himself and zipped up the two hundred dollar slacks she had just bought him, he looked her in the eye and smiled, thinking of his boyhood in Shadyside and the Maryland country. *Jus’ lucky, I guess!.*

Eyes still closed, Optimus heard his grandmother’s footsteps coming towards the door. He breathed deep. Her bedroom door closed. He sighed and opened his eyes. *And now, again, Ladies and Gentlemen! For my next trick . . .* The underwear spun from his toe and sailed high in the air. Optimus followed its arc. The arc was perfect, the thrust was not. Halfway to the target the flying underwear stalled and like a popped hot-air balloon came sailing down to earth landing soft and cockeyed on his dresser lampshade. *Is that a face? Oh, well! They look pretty good there, too! Gosh! What am I thinking?! I’ve got to go! Go-go-go-go-go-go-go-go-go! Crabs! Le’ss go!*

Optimus quickly grabbed his yellow swimming trunks from the corner of the bed frame. *Don’t you hang wet swim trunks from the corner of that bed!* his grandmother always yelled – and Optimus always yelled back *I won’t, Gram!* but he did anyway because yellow was a pretty color and he hated to have hide them in his drawer. The trunks were dry from yesterday’s swim in the bay. He wriggled into them like a worm and tied them tightly. *This is gonna be fun!*

Optimus tip-toed out of his room, past the credenza where he winked at the little corn whiskey jug, down the step onto the kitchen landing, past his grandfather’s boots near the door next to where he sat at his end of the kitchen table, and with his left hand he grabbed a peach from the near full basket sitting atop the long, deep freezer. It hummed like a sleeping bear. With his right hand he quietly lifted the screen door latch – Gram did not always shut the big kitchen door in summertime because, after all, this was Shadyside – and taking care so that the pump on the screen door did not squeak, he stuck the peach between his teeth like a dog with a tennis ball. Quietly, he turned round again and took a barefoot step onto the dewy grass. *Ah-h-h-h . . .* The cool moisture bathed his toes like a giggle. He dug his toes into the living greenery. Optimus honored all things of nature. Fresh peach firm in mouth, he breathed through his nose. *Gosh, I love being me.* The house was quiet. Optimus had perfected his escape.

For Optimus, loving being himself was not a vain conceit. *I should be happy, shouldn’t I? Everyone should be happy being themselves, shouldn’t they?* Then he thought like he thought a county person would say they were happy with themselves. *I’m’a good, am I ain’t?* Even if Optimus did not know all the words for his feelings or the comparisons, contrasts, or extrapolations that one might make between his young life in Shadyside and all the rich kids he went to school with, he knew a peach in the mouth and grass in the toes, no wind, rising sun, birds in the garden, flowers on the bushes, inner-tube in the shed, tennies on the nail, nets on the shed wall and excitement quickening the beat of his heart – he knew – *This is it! I’m’a get me some crabs! I’m’a go; I’m’a catch a lot; I’m’a gonna be a hero! I am, I am, I am!*

*Ω*

In the yard, right in front of his grandfather’s work bench, Optimus began assembling the tools necessary for his morning glory. He knew exactly what he was doing. *I’m’a Swett. I’m’a jus’ like Granddaddy.* Optimus took the inflated black inner-tube off its hanging hook. Next to it was an empty, bushel fruit basket. He nestled it deep into the center of the inner-tube and then rested the bottom of the basket on the grass, the black inner-tube now a foot off the ground encircling the basket like a flying doughnut. On the workbench, from a spindle of binder’s twine, he strung out a long section, pretty near six or seven feet, and with the hunting knife that stood sticking in the greyed dry oak, he cut the twine and went to work. Expertly, without doubt or hesitation, Optimus proceeded to smartly lash the basket and tube together. He had left a couple of feet on each end. Carefully, he picked up the dangling end-lines and fitted it onto his back, the smooth tire against his bare shoulders, the basket bottom protuding outwards like a sea turtle’s carapace. Across his chest he lashed the loose line tightly. He felt like a warrior.

On the shed wall, hanging on a nail next to the Rolling Rock temperature gauge – it was seventy-four degrees – Optimus lifted off his black, high-top tennies. The end laces were tied together. Again carefully, he draped the laces behind his head, around his neck, allowing the tennies to hang one on each side of his chest. *Good.* His hands now free, he took another bite of the peach and a few deep breaths. He filled his nostrils with the cool morning air and promptly stuck the peach back into his mouth. *Gr-r-r-r.* The crab nets lay against the side of the shed. Optimus leaned over and grabbed the longer one’s handle. He then used it to reach the shorter net. *No sense steppin’ on my worm farm.* Now he was set. *If only I knew where my ball cap was.* But he did not. As he tip-toed under the carport, past the yellow Mercury, under his grandparent’s open bedroom window, he spied his ball cap hanging off the handlebars of his red Schwinn bicycle. *Yes!* Silently, he moved the short net from one hand to the other and with his free hand screwed the cap snug to his head. He whispered *Washington Senators! Thank-you, Gram!* It was scrubbed and clean and looked almost new. *Now I’m ready!* Quietly out the gate, onto the tarred gravel of Frederick Ave., six in the morning, Optimus Maximus made for quite a sight. He thought to himself again *I’m’a good, am I ain’t?* And he answered himself, too. *I is,’ n’ I be!* Goofy, that Optimus was.

At the corner where Frederick Ave. met Bay Drive, next to the mailboxes and the newspaper tubes – *Washington Post – Baltimore Sun –* across from Flaherty’s on the right, Margaret Brett, Irish’s wife and the Swetts best friends, stood at her open kitchen window smoking an unfiltered Herbert Tarryton cigarette while enjoying her first cup of coffee. Seeing Optimus hurrying down the street in this strange get-up, a contraption harnessed to his back, a net in each hand, tennis shoes hanging around his neck, a Senators baseball cap pulled so tightly on his head you couldn’t see his face; a half-eaten peach filling his mouth; with every step his bare feet took, one after the other, he kept jerking them up with each step, as if they were on fire. More strangely, he was singing a cadence at double-time to his pace. It went:

*Ooucha! - ooucha! - ooucha! - ooucha! - ooucha! - oouch!* Then again, *ooucha! - ooucha! - ooucha! - ooucha! - ooucha! - oouch!* Margaret watched, fascinated. Optimus kept it up. *Ooucha! - ooucha! - ooucha! - ooucha! - ooucha! - oouch!* He was playing like every step was killing him but it was not. His feet were as tough as any Indian’s on the trail. Goofball.

Margaret wanted to laugh out loud but her mouth was filled with warm coffee so she held it and let it dribble out slowly from her lips, down her chin, into the sink. She felt silly, but not near as silly as Optimus looked. *God, I love that boy.* Optimus’ grandmother was her best friend. *Still, I wonder what it must be like to have him under foot every day.* She could not. As Optimus strode from eyesight, a lapsed Catholic, she blessed herself. *Watch over him, God.* God did, too.

*Ω*

At the end of Frederick Ave. was a bulwark. If you were either off in the head or exceptionally athletic, it was difficult but not necessarily too dangerous to climb down its stanchions and pilings onto its mammoth rocks and into the waters of the bay. Lacing his tennis shoes, securing his load, Optimus climbed down the angled embankment. *I am an Indian.* The bay waters were still, clean, warm, and salty. *Indian.* Geared up, Optimus felt invincible. Wading easily within the water, at waist level behind him the inner-tube driftily floated. Optimus caught sight of his quarry. *Look at that! A doubler!*

*Right there! My gosh! There’s another just right up there, too! Is that a big single right past him? Oh, my God!*

Optimus had been catching crabs since he was five. Each year, which is to say each summer, he got better and better and better. If you were a crab nestled under or amid the jetty rocks, for the moment, you were Optimus’ little friend. Optimus did not know then that his cunning use of both the long and short-handled nets was closely akin to the attack and defend sword motions of the Samurai, but it was, almost exactly. Years later, when he began to intensively study *Kendo –* the Japanese way of the sword – he would look back at times like these and realize how the honest pursuit of life and its offering opportunities had vigorously prepared him for gleaning Kendo’s foundations. *Got’cha, doubler!* Optimus dropped the first two into the floating bushel basket. *Long net. Short net. Tease. Push. Trap! Got’cha!* It was a big male, its point-to-point claw spread almost ten inches. *Dang, you’re big. Into the basket you go, laddie!* The next three or four hours were like an intensely satisfying dream.

Slowly, carefully, methodically, joyously – this was the finest catch of crabs Optimus would ever encounter in his life then or ever – in ten to twenty years the ugly, rapacious side of man would nearly choke off the crustaceous bounty of this fine summer morning – as every few yards he worked his way southward along the bay’s coastline, the sun grew hotter and the crabs more plentiful. As he worked, Optimus thought of many things. It is the nature of humans to do so. Work. Think. Dream. Optimus thought of the early Pilgrims and how bountiful were the coastal waters upon their arrival from Europe.

The pleasure of the work and the reflective intensity of the sun on the glass waters made his breathing deeper and labored. He was getting thirsty and wanted to drink. He thought for a moment about “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner.” *Water, water, everywhere / Not a drop to drink* and he wanted to sing out like a morning work song, like an old Southern slave song; Optimus knew Southern slave songs; he was a devout Southerner; he liked to sing *Big John Henry was a steel drivin’ man –* but Optimus was totally into the moment, his focus as complete as his opportunity so he kept quiet, stealthily so, wading waist high, sometimes nearly up to his neck, sometimes as shallow as his ankletops. Forward he went.

*A dozen! Sixteen! Seventeen! Another doubler! A soft-shell!!* He had made the bay turn at the long jetty jutting out next to Woody ‘n’ Detty’s. That’s when, from under the pier, in the cool of the shade, he heard the beginning of a call. What he heard was *O-p-t-i - . . . !* He didn’t pause, he didn’t blink, he did nothing except at the first sound of his grandmother’s call he dropped his two nets at once and as if struck in the back by an arrow, he rushed his hands up to his ears, covering them as hard as he could, tightly to the point where it hurt. He could not hear anything. Then, when he realized *My God! I forgot about church!* he let his body go limp and sank into the water. Underwater he could hear nothing. He opened his eyes. Through the slots of the bushel basket he could make out the angry army of crabs frantically swimming, bumping, and fighting for premium jail space. *I know just how you feel* he thought.

Optimus started counting at ten – *Eleven blue moon – Twelve blue moon – Thirteen –* and so on, but though he could usually hold his breath for nearly two minutes, now, his crab work had him breathing heavy so he stopped at *Seventy-two –* and stuck his nose and lips out from the water. Not his ears. He did not want to hear. A deep, deep breath and under the water he sank again. *Boy, am I in trouble. Gosh, darn it. What I’m’a do now? I ain’t goin’ home. I like it here. I’m havin’ fun.* He blew an air bubble and watched it float to the surface. *I got nearly twenty crabs. I ain’t stoppin’ now. I’ma’a finish. But I sure am in trouble. I wonder if these crabs will be enough to save me?* When he could hold his breath no longer – kids have it all over adults when it comes to holding their breaths – Optimus surfaced. All was quiet. He looked at the sun’s angle on the eastern shore horizon. He remembered the month and date; those affected its time degree. He figured it must be about 9 to 9:15.

Not finding Optimus, Mary Frances had walked the two minutes home with steam blowing out her ears which only she could see. Next-door neighbors Carl and Lil were in their new Bonneville Pontiac convertible – white with red leather interior – top down, and they were church dressed. Nice. Frances walked up to her friends, snorting in a very uncheery disgust. *I can’t find that boy, Lil. You all go on. I know what to do when I do find him, though!* Lil held out her hand touching Frances’. Carl and Lil were childless and like many people in Idlewilde, Shadyside, Maryland, Optimus Maximus was “their boy” too. Lil, *Aunt Lil* to Optimus, calmly soothed Frances by eye and hand.

*He’s just out somewhere, Fran. He’ll be back. Still pick you up some pecan rolls after church?* Frances nodded. Carl lifted the sleeve of his sports coat to check the time. 9:17. *We better go now* he said to the empty road ahead. Carl was a true Maryland Southerner. A printer like Bill Swett – they had once been partners years ago – Carl had also been raised in the woods of the Bay and the Potomac River. He had a surplus WWII Jeep; a boxer dog; a pretty wife; and, like Optimus, fond memories of his own youth. Many a day he and Optimus had tramped on dog walks through the local woods and he was just glad that Optimus, the nice boy he had known since he was three or four; a boy who always cheerily sang out *Hi, Uncle Carl!;* a boy who was now big enough to cut the grass every two weeks for five dollars – that this young boy was finally getting to play hooky from church. But Carl was too smart to let on. *No sense gettin’ the women upset* he thought. He merely waved a friendly toodles to Frances and said *S’all right, Frances. He be back ‘fore you know it.* But he wasn’t. Optimus had returned to the hunt.

*Twenty-one! Twenty-two!* And up towards thirty the crab count was headed. *Gosh, I’m havin’ fun. Jus’ not as much fun as I was havin’ before. Well . . . Don’t think about that now.* He swallowed hard. *It’ll take care of itself. Keep your mind on the crabs, tha’ss all.* And for a while, he did. But it was hard. Mary Frances Swett had a strong temper. Optimus knew it too well; sometimes more than a boy should have had to face. Unchecked, she could be a cyclone. Optimus dreaded any part of that. He was getting too old for it. Too old to be yelled at, at the same time over and over for the same things.

Optimus was more than book smart. He was heart smart and he knew that when his Gram was yellin’ at him for somethin’ that was hardly criminal – not like, say, the time he accidentally burnt down part of a neighbor’s porch – *Now THAT was worth bein’ yelled at!* he thought. No, his instincts told him what his mother was privately telling him. Gram having lost her mother at such an early age took its toll on her emotions. Optimus’ mother had told him many times how hard his Gram, her mother, had been on her when she was a child. It was a picture of mind decidedly uncomfortable to imagine. Optimus preferred to think of the Gram who had played him Candyland, Life, Yahtzee, Scrabble, playing cards, whatever he wanted to play and for hours upon end. He knew he was in trouble but he still liked his Gram. He crabbed on.

Optimus figured it was nearly ten o’clock. The crabs were about fished out. So was Optimus. The more he thought about his Gram, the less fun he was having in the water. Pretty now near disgusted – *How in the heck can I be a hero if I’m in trouble? –* he pulled himself out of the water up near the Idlewilde pier. *Gosh, this crab basket is heavy out of the water! Being a hero is hard work!* He wondered if for a moment he should just head over to the local family-owned hotel, Danes on the Bay, Woody and Detty’s place. He’d heard that they’d pay up to twenty dollars a bushel for good crabs. *Twenty dollars! Man that would be great! I could buy almost anything in the world! Airplanes! Cars! Cheeseburgers! Fries! I’d have money comin’ out my ears!*

Ω

On their way for an afternoon swim a few years earlier, Optimus had asked Uncle Irish *What could I buy if I had a million dollars, Uncle Irish?* Irish laughed. *Pretty much whatever you wanted, Optimus.* Optimus looked up and cocked his head. *A swimming pool? Yes. A house? Yes. A car? Yes. I mean a really fast car! Yes. A plane? A small one. A trip anywhere I wanted to go in the world? Yes. Gee, Uncle Irish, a million dollars is a lot of money, isn’t it? Yes, that it is, Optimus.* They were nearly at the water’s edge. *Do you have a million dollars, Uncle Irish?* He began to laugh at his naïve little swimming partner. *No, Optimus, I don’t. But if I did, I would be glad to spend it on us. Then we could both see what we could get for a cool mil. A “mil’s” a million? That’s right, Slick. Ready to swim? Sure, Uncle Irish, but say . . . I’ll bet you a million dollars I get wet before you!* With this life inspiring lesson in economics, Optimus leaped from the pier into the bay. *Cool Mil . . . !!*

Now, sitting under the oak tree near the Idlewilde Community Pier, he looked in at his treasure of crabs. Out of the water, they were furiously foaming at the mouth. *Why do they do that?* he wondered. He did not know, but he knew it had something to do with their breathing water, not air. He vowed to find out. Optimus loved learning almost as much as he loved his freedom – not quite as much, but almost. He knew that his freedom was in real jeopardy if he didn’t soon figure out a good way to smooth out his own way as a returning hero. *Missed church! Well, I can’t go home NOW. Granddaddy might not be awake yet. Gram’s mad, I bet. She’ll twist her face up even more if Granddaddy’s not there.*

David Plumber, an older kid down the street that Optimus hardly liked but tolerated since friends were sometimes scarce, pedaled up and his eyes immediately went to the crab basket. *Jesus, Optimus! You caught all them?* Optimus liked this kind of attention. *Yep. Ya’ gonna sell ‘em? N’ah. I’m’a take ‘em home for Gram and Granddaddy. She’ll cook ‘em up. Man, are you sure? If you go over to Dane’s -* David pointed his head towards the hotel just across the open field where they played baseball – *Woody’s up; I can see his truck right there; he’ll give you twenty, maybe, twenty-five dollars for that bushel. Man, those are some nice crabs. You sure you got ‘em by yourself?* Optimus nodded. *Started at six. Early boy gets the crabs.* He snickered.

David Plumber was a bit of a weasel. At least that’s the way Optimus saw him. Always looking for opportunities to exploit situations to his own advantage. The kind of fellow that had just a bit of sickly green tinge to his teeth from lack of brushing but who would laugh it off saying he’d just eaten spinach or something, then he’d make a muscle and maybe try to slap you upside the head. He half-liked Optimus and Optimus half-liked him, each for different reasons. David repeated his urgings, this time adding a little twist.

It was typical Plumber. *Optimus, if you sell those crabs now n’ lend me five bucks, I’ll pay you back ten. Promise.* Dollar signs flashed in Optimus’ mind. He liked the idea of possibly having thirty dollars. Never having had more than ten dollars at any one time in his life, the thought of thirty dollars was intoxicating to his little brain. Such are kids. And quite a few adults.

*Thirty dollars! I’d be rich! Rich people can be heroes too, aren’t they? But, gosh! I don’t want to sell the crabs. I want Gram and Granddaddy to have them. I’ll share them with everybody! But I so want that money! I’d love that!! All the older guys have money! I want some!* But there was a problem.

Optimus didn’t particularly trust David.. Older than him, not really liked by much anybody, Optimus’ attraction for David was his relentless energy, his physical bravado, his seeming willingness to try anything, once. Capitol Hill police officers, the Plumber family was a physically assertive one. Like Optimus, David was one of the few boys in Shadyside daring enough to ride his bike full-speed down Woody ‘n’ Detty’s pier, straight off the end, up into the air, flying high out over the water, pulling a crazy 360° mid-air turn, insanely crashing into the bay like a mad banshee. *It’s only water!* thought Optimus. And only David would do it with him. *Well, he ain’t all bad . . .*

Still, Optimus did not trust him. David had proven more than once he could beat Optimus in a fight and he kept that proof handy always at the ready. Optimus reminded himself *I not only don’t like this guy, I don’t trust him.* When he asked his grandfather the best way to handle friendship with David, his grandfather had simply replied *Let ‘em go his own way. Tha’ss all.* Looking down at the crabs now breathing heavy, more than ready to get home and face either the music or cheers, Optimus looked over at David with relief. He’d made his decision. *Thanks, David. I’m taking them home.* And with that, the imaginary leverage that David Plumber held over Optimus was broken. Never again would he be able to coerce Optimus.

Optimus gathered himself up and began dragging the crab basket and his nets across the gravel entry of the Idlewilde Pier, onto the smooth black tar-top of Bayside Drive. Amazed that he was unable to get Optimus to do his bidding, Plumber called out *Optimus! Optimus! Thirty Dollars!* But Optimus paid him no mind. The sound of the bushel basket scraping along the ground reminded him of warriors dragging home booty. If happiness is achievement realized, then that Sunday morning Optimus Maximus was one happy boy.

At the bay house on Frederick Avenue, Bill Swett sat in his pajamas listening to Frances prattle about the veritable end of the world now that Optmus had played hooky from church. Swett listened politely while his wife described her earlier embarrassment with Lil and Carl and the missing churchgoer. A woman of sharp contrasts, she unloaded her distresses while fiddling tenderly with Swett’s coffee cup. *That boy!*  *What will we do with him! Always running off by himself . . . What’s wrong with him, Bill? SOMETHING’s wrong with him!* She wanted her husband to agree with her. He was silent. Like the Lincoln that he was, Swett gazed off into the distance, careful to listen, quietly careful to keep France’s eye on the prize: helping Optimus be the best boy he could be. Summer, the windows were open, drawing in late morning light and breeze. Shadyside often felt like a magical place.

Ω

At the corner of Bayside and Frederick Ave., Margaret and Irish Brett were lounging in metal lawn chairs casually reading the Sunday paper. From their vantage point they had a clear view of Bayside Drive. The sounds and sight of Optimus dragging his bounty was impossible to ignore. *Look, Irish. Here he comes.* Irish set down his paper. *Well I’ll be damned . . .* On his awakening Margaret had told her husband about Optimus’ dawn departure. Now, four hours later he was coming back, apparently with the goods. Irish rose from his chair, intent on inspecting the catch of his budding young millionaire. The son of poor Irish immigrants, Irish, sixty-two, had fashioned a good life for himself, Margaret, their two children and grandchildren. Head bartender at the Carriage House in D.C., best friends with Bill Swett for forty years, he was a generously-spirited man who still spoke his English with a light Irish lilt.

Optimus enjoyed boyish, natural exaggeration. If there were a way to wring even an extra ounce of fun or meaning into almost any situation, Optimus would look for it. Bent forward at the waist, his overflow catch of inner-tube and bushel basket harnessed to him just like he was an ox, leaning as far forward as he could, crab net in each hand, pushing off with his thin legs, he was heaving as if carrying a mighty yoke. Naturally, he was enjoying himself. *Well, it IS a big bushel of crabs!* His face was pinkening, almost red from nearly four hours of the sun’s reflection off the bay waters. Irish and Margaret rose to greet him. Irish whispered *This’ll be good, now won’t it, Margaret? It sure will be, Irish. It damn sure will be . . .*  Lovers, they giggled.

*Well, look at you! If it isn’t the conquering hero!* Optimus was immediately pleased to hear Irish refer to him so grandly. *Hero!* he thought to himself. *I love the sound of that!* Margaret and Irish were fussing over Optimus’ catch, inspecting the basket as if it carried gold. Well, for a nine- year-old boy, it did.

Hearing their voices, Frances stood up from her chair next to Swett’s to look out the window. Optimus was grinning ear to ear. It looked as if Margaret and Irish were somehow pleased with her grandson. Mary Frances could not help herself. She leaned out the window and barked *Optimus! Optimus! Optimus, you come home right now!* Irish leaned over to Optimus. *Better you get home. Good job! Thanks, Uncle Irish!* At the sound of his grandmother’s call, Optimus’ heart sank. He was feeling all pins and needles, hoping his grandfather would be awake. That would keep things on an even keel. But it was not so easy to get home. First, Millard came running out of his front door, hurrying. *Optimus! What are you doing?! Come look, Millard!* Across the street, Aunt Sis, Millard’s grandmother, was cutting a purple hydrangea for her kitchen table. She too turned round. There were *oohs* and *ahs* at the recognition Optimus was heading home with a full bushel of Chesapeake blue points. *Good lord, Optimus!* Optimus gladly stopped so that Millard and Aunt Sis could get a full look at his load. *Your grandmother is going to be so proud of you!* Optimus loved the sound of that. So close to his house, he could see his Gram at the window; he knew, just *knew* that she must be able to hear Sis. *Maybe this might work out after all!* he thought. Mary Frances could not believe it. Neighbors fussing over her truant grandson. *Optimus! Get in here!*

Optimus wanted to go straight home, he really did. Then again, if people are passing out medals like it’s a reviewing stand . . . *Optimus!* Swett stood up. Seeing Optimus, seeing the neighbors, it was easy to tell what was going on. *Looks like he’s been crabbin’* He was pleased. He turned to Frances. Her hands were locked in a tugging clench against themselves. Swett said *Frances.* That’s all he said. With Swett, unless he was telling a story, a few words were usually enough. Mary Frances wanted to call out Optimus’ name again, beckoning him to get in the house. She still wanted to have her word with him. Behind Optimus’ little street crowd, Mary Frances could see Carl and Lil’s white convertible rounding the corner onto Frederick Ave. *Pecan rolls!*  She knew she would have to just let it go. Swett was right. *Bill, I tell you . . . That boy could fall in horse manure and he’d still come out smelling like a rose . . .*  Right then she didn’t know if that was a good or a bad thing. Probably both, she sighed. *I better start the crab pot. Think we’ll need two!!*

With that forgiving admission, Mary Frances headed off to the kitchen. Not sure if she wanted to flummox or lift her chest with pride, a woman of sharp contrasts, Optimus’ grandmother did a girlish bit of both. She could see Lil in the side yard heading to the kitchen so she went out to meet her. *Come on in, Lil! Come in!* Lil handed Frances a white paper bag of freshly made egg bread and pecan rolls. Owens Bakery. She and Carl stopped there almost every Sunday after taking Optimus to church. Tradition. The women exchanged a little hug. *Oh, thanks so much, Lil. The money’s right there on the counter.* *I’m just going to get the crab pots out. Seems Optimus was lucky this morning. I’m sorry we kept you waiting. That little bastard!* She laughed. Lil laughed too. *Aunt Lil* to Optimus. Effervescent, smiling, a happy woman, Lil radiated a blonde cheeriness. *C’mon, Frances! Come out and look at the crabs! Goodness! What a catch! You’ll be so proud, Frances!* Frances nodded. *Look! He’s bringing them round now.* Childless, Lil loved. *Frances, don’t be mad . . .*

Ω

Swett was in their bedroom changing into his work clothes, glad that he had been able to protect Optimus from Frances’ unreasonable expectations. *Optimus is a boy, tha’ss all*. Frances had her ways though and he knew them. He also knew that Optimus was a handful. Working five to six evening shifts a week as a Top Secret GPO printer, Swett was rarely home afternoons or evenings. He let the thought pass quietly. In a few moments he and Optimus would prepare the crabs for what he hoped would be a sociable, Sunday feast. He liked the thought of that. Optimus had done good. Real good. Meanwhile, Carl had parked their car and joined the chorus of Optimus’ crab admirers. Smart boy, Optimus knew, however, that the group’s praise wasn’t all altruism. He was a little mind reader. *They’re all thinkin’ that if things work out right, maybe later today they’ll be pickin’ some steamed crabs!* They were right. Giddy, Optimus was beside himself. *Well, I am sorry I forgot about church. But I sure liked catching all these crabs! Gosh, it feels good to be a hero! Yes!* In Shadyside and everywhere, for boys and girls simply trying to do their best, it was quite the fine morning for heroes. Indeed, it was . . .

Ω

- DON’T CALL ME NIGGER, WHITE BOY -

Optimus Maximus had spent a great deal of time in his life studying the seminal ideas of humankind. When he was a boy, it was still as is said today, but was not then, *politically correct* to call these ideas the study of Man. Now, for Optimus and everyone else, the world had once again changed. In order to facilitate the progress of the human race, the *women’s movement* -a socio-political phenomenon which Optimus had participated in many times - had deemed that the word *history* – which, in fact, originally meant *His story* – was discriminatorily insufficient to describe the study of man. *His-story* naturally raised the issue of feminine omission. What about *Her* story? In other words, how could one be committed to the equality of gender if one used ancient terms – terms once faithfully honored by both genders of our ancestors – but nonetheless, terms that failed to honor the socio-political progress of the present? It was a good question and Optimus knew it. *Women!*

Sitting alone in his room, he asked aloud *Dang! How can I, a fellow faithfully raised to be a good man by a family of nearly all women, how, of all people, can I not honor the works and efforts of the great women of my family and those before them if I fail to acknowledge their gender contributions?* Optimus knew that he could not truly honor women – all women of the earth - unless he also included their gender in the wording of history. *Fair’s fair.* he quietly thought. *So be it* he told himself. *Even if sometimes I inadvertently revert to saying* The Study of Mankind, *I will do my best to honor those women who gave all people life. I will do this by studying and referring to the great ideas of Humankind*. *That’s the spirit! And to hell with those fake macho guys and pointy-headed, old-school intellectuals who think it preposterous and silly to get hung up on what they consider small stuff.* He rightly thought to himself *How can it be small stuff if the women are so upset? Surely I am not less a man just because I want to make sure women get their fair due, am I?* He was not. History would bear him out. He was learning other things, too.

Optimus had studied the great ideas of *humankind* from the time he could begin to read – which is to say about three years of age, for out of jealousy of his sister Maddie’s right to go to kindergarten and first grade, he wanted to prove that he too could do anything that she could – even if he couldn’t – so the easiest way to do that was to simply pick up the newspaper at his Great Gramma Howell’s house and proceed to read its front page with the greatest of ease. As the French would say, *Et voila’!* which is fancy talk for otherwise saying *Presto!* or *How about them apples, homeboy?* In any case, Optimus could read and understand what he was reading – actually, he was enthralled by what he was reading but at three or four he did not yet know the word for *enthralled –*buthe knew word feelings inside of him. Plus, he was fascinated by the people and the ideas of what he encountered in his wonderful words. *Words, words, words! It’s all just beautiful words! From the morning to the night, all the stars shining bright, it’s a Maximus galaxy of words! Yes!* Optimus. Words. Ideas. Ecstatically happy with life, he could not get enough.

Yes, it wasn’t at all enough for Optimus Maximus to simply read and learn. His *ideaphoria* – the love of ideas and that they stood alone in-of-themselves and that this love of ideas could be a fantastic way to spend one’s life in thought – oh, this intrigued Optimus from the time he was very little. Others might say he was a dreamer – he knew better – *Of course I am a dreamer!* As the years went by, so too did concepts of intellectual validity grow within him that substantiated the notion that ideas were worthy of having, finding, treasuring, hoarding, baking, slicing, dicing and just about whatever else pleased one’s little self. *Ideas are great!* thought Optimus. And they are.

Optimus also quickly learned that ideas can be dangerous. Oh, yes. *Danger!* Raised by women, Optimus was nonetheless a young Alpha male. That is, he was all boy preparing to be all man. As it does for everyone, when danger reared its pointy head, inherently, Optimus was hardly ever afraid. Oh, sometimes he was *scared.* Who isn’t? But he liked and learned from reading William Faulkner’s *The Reivers,* a magnificent story of a boy’s coming of age, *It’s all right to be scared. Scared’s a reaction to things that come from without. Afraid – fear – that’s somethin’ comes from within.* Like all of us, Optimus was sometimes scared. Seldom though did he allow fear to overcome him. *Think!* Thinking on the danger of ideas, he’d learned something really cool about danger – *I mean really cool* he thought. It was the Chinese word for *crisis.*

In China, the word for *crisis* is composed of two smaller word symbols. One symbol was *Danger.* The other symbol was *Opportunity. Gosh that’s an exciting idea!* In other words, Optimus realized exactly what the venerated Chinese lexicographers were attempting to transmit. When things start going wrong and one finds oneself in a crisis, it is important to always remember - in facing danger there is opportunity to evolve. Optimus, a self-envisioned change agent of society – *As such are all leaders!* *Yes!!* Optimus believed evolution was essential to furthering the human race and its ideals. Lover of ideas, he believed in keeping his cool even when he knew the idea might be interpreted as dangerous. Optimus asked himself *How did Hemingway say it? Courage is grace under pressure.* Yes, he really liked the idea of grace under pressure. *In danger it’s fair all right to be scared – that’s normal. Don’t be afraid, however.* Politically incorrect or not, Optimus was never afraid to thoughtfully reason out and express for himself even the most complexly dangerous ideas. That included ideas on race, religion, gender, people, money, and power. Since the time he was a small boy, Optimus was fascinated by all things philosophical. Especially how ideas paralleled.

For example, Optimus, a white boy, was raised in the antebellum South amongst a fairly well-to-do spectrum of Southern genteel society. At that time, collectively, Optimus sensed that many whites considered themselves to be of the highest order, naturally ordained by God – *God -* whatever *that* meant - as intrinsically *better* than other races. *Oh, Lordy!* Optimus snorted to himself when he thought of that. He was trying to perfect a good smirk but his face was so boyish, even practicing in the mirror it was hard to do. He wanted a smirk as good as his grandfather’s. *Now HE’s got a good smirk! “White people are BETTER than other people!” Good thing we ain’t in China! We white folk wouldn’t be so high n’ mighty, then. We’d be lackeys for them Chinamen!* Smirk.

Optimus knew a lot about geography and cultures from all around the world. Not just because he read constantly – which he did - but because his mother had a pervasively annoying habit of insistently dragging him around to fine museums and exhibitions, wherever she might find them. And she was always looking. Muriel, too, was fascinated by all things of the world, an artist herself, and, consequently, a lot of times against Optimus’ will – *I’don’wannago to no museum, Mom. They’re all dead people anyway! I wanna stay and play with my baseball cards. Please! Please! Please! –* but Optimus’ mother was smarter than him by a mile. *Quit talking like you’re some hick! If you continue to speak like that Optimus, people will think you’re a country bumpkin.* That, however, would’ve suited Optimus just fine. When she would say it, he would mimic pulling on a pair of imaginary suspenders, the kind his grandfather wore. Proudly announcing *But Ma, I AM a hick! I’sa hick! You’re a hick! Hickey-hickey, too! BE QUIET!* was his earned rewardAnd so it was, against his will, and forever to his betterment, Optimus would dress in his little Frank Sinatra clothes and valiantly accompany his lovely mother to the art gallery at Tulane University; the arboretum on upper St. Charles; the . . . ; the . . . ; *ad infinitum* to all the countless and unending places of mindful interest and beauty that attracted his mother, pleasing her sophisticated palette. *This is so unfair!* thought Optimus. *I’m learning things against my will!*  At that point he would once again try his smirk but mostly to his self. *You can only push Mother so far! Push her too far . . . Now THAT’S a bad idea!*

In any case, while Optimus proudly thought of himself as *working class*, he was fairly well-raised amidst the very highest echelon of Southern society, high enough that even Rolls-Royces were not an unheard of mode of transport. Optimus marveled at the beauty and refined workmanship of the cars whenever he had a chance to see one up close or was lucky enough to ride in their seats of balmy leather. He was in heaven. *Tha’ss rich enough for me!* he thought. Born white, except for Negro servants and workers, he was raised almost exclusively amongst the white race in New Orleans of the 1950s –  *Le’ss take it back to the Founding Fathers! –* from a very early age Optimus clearly understood the problems inherent with trafficking in the capture, sale and slavery of human beings. Even if in southern America slavery had then evolved to staunchly rabid racial segregation - in any society, regardless of geography or chronology – Optimus knew that slavery and racial segregation were as old as humankind itself. He had read the great oral expositions by Henry Clay in the US Senate wherein the 1850s Clay delivered masterful orations on slavery’s history and preternaturalisms. Pompous by modern standards, nevertheless brilliant, it was just how Optimus aspired to talk.

No matter, even as a white boy in the 1950s - *Dang! Tha’ss a hundred years! -* Optimus knew in his heart of hearts that slavery was wrong in the past and that the inequitable segregation he knew of firsthand was still wrong in the present. Optimus’ intuition also told him that problems between the races due to these exploitations would sour America’s democratic social tongue. He was right. The remembered taste of slavery, the swallow of its enforced segregation, it was enough to make a fellow sick. Slavery and segregation made Optimus sick.

Optimus’ exposure to race came amidst intensely fiery times. Optimus’ mother Muriel was a very intelligent woman. By virtue of personal drive, she continued her academic education as she matured in her twenties – the time when Optimus was still a learning child. Muriel was also a shrewd woman - being Optimus’ mother required a great deal of shrewdness – and she knew quite well how to have her cake and eat it too. Such is to be expected of a Grace Kelly. Her methods of operation were as subtle as her beauty

*Optimus? Yes, Mom? Bring in the paper, please. Yes, ma’am.* This he would do. *Look, the Times-Picayune has a digest there on the lower left corner of the front page. Yes, ma’am. Now, read me the list of stories featured in the digest. Glad to, Mother.* And so Optimus would, any day that she beckoned him. Which is to say, almost every day that he was home. *She’s a trickster!* he thought. *She knows I love to read! Dang!*

The interesting thing about his mother was that even though not a degreed intellectual, his mother was the protégé of many finely educated men and women. From film distributors to oil barons, to captains of ocean liners to race track bosses; from world famous painters to cultured English professors, his mother was fortunate to learn from some of the finest minds of her era. Subsequently, able to intelligently discourse on many topical varities,(?) Muriel subtly utilized Optimus to keep her apprised of the issues burning that day. Indeed, race and its relations qualified as just such an issue. Optimus read to his mother the daily digest and, invariably, if there were a major story on race that day - this was the 1950s and early 1960s so race was indeed hypnotizing Southern and American affairs - by so reading to his mother Optimus learned in detail names, histories and events of America’s ongoing evolution from segregation’s horrid past. Heroes and villains. Rosa Parks. Medgar Evers. James Meredith. Martin Luther King. Governors George Wallace and Orville Fabus. Little Rock, Arkansas. President Eisenhower. President Jack Kennedy and his brother, Bobby. The University of Mississippi. Freedom Riders. Church bombings. Lynchings. *Et al.* You name it. They were all there on the front page of *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*. From this climactic era history came rolling into Optimus’ day like a *Big Easy* steamboat.

Optimus knew that this uplifting, cathartic unveiling of a new historic era was *his* people’s history too – like it or not. Often Optimus did not like what he read, but, he respected that it was happening. Silently, proud or shameful, he vowed to learn from his front row history seat; to do as much as he could to inculcate himself with the necessary knowledge to help him one day overcome the briny taste racism’s residue left in his youthful palate. *Can’t do nothin’ now, but I will one day!* That one day would not be far off.

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It was October. Optimus’ mother walked him outside and down the stairs of their spacious Garden District apartment. Without being slavery itself, the New Orleans of Optimus’ ten-year youth was as segregated as segregated could be. Standing at the bottom of their neatly trimmed brick staircase his mother pointed down the block to the bus stop. There were two separate lines, Negroes and whites. Arm on his shoulder, she directed Optimus to look closely at the two distinct groups. She spoke seriously. *Optimus. It won’t be this way when you are grown. Times are changing. There are no lesser people.* Optimus understood exactly what it was she meant. Her intellectualism and inherent sense of social fairness resonated within him. *If Mom says it’s true, it only makes what I feel all the more true.* Even if Optimus’ mother was a beautiful artist, slightly lit, she was the coolest person Optimus had ever met, even cooler than Floyd, her one-eyed, bad-ass boyfriend, skipper of a teakwood powerboat and owner of a long, black Fleetwood Cadillac. Optimus’ momma was that cool. Her leading words would soon come to offer Optimus both sense and sensibility. It might even have helped to save his life. By no means was Optimus perfect. He was as flawed as every human being. An unforeseen racial event soon tested his mettle and maturity.

*Nigger!* It was a dangerous word in both Optimus’ youth as well as today.Optimus and another young boy were standing on the bank of one of New Orleans’ innumerable levies. The other boy was a school-mate of Optimus’ from Kern Academy, the all-white, well-to-do private school that Optimus attended in Pass Christian, Mississippi. The boys were happily home for the Thanksgiving holiday. The older boy, we’ll call him John, had invited Optimus over to his house and by trolley and bus he had found his way there. It was a clear, beautiful day, rich in blue sky, fall winds cooling to the skin. Tramping around John’s local neighborhood, randomly exploring whatever the city might offer, they had trekked far from John’s house. Exploring was one of Optimus’ true loves. *This is fun! I love the world!*

The farther they roamed from John’s nice home, the more the neighborhoods changed. Lovely houses eclipsed, the city morphed into pockets of poverty. Late afternoon, standing on one side of a levee, across the far distance John had spotted a group of young Negro boys. They were doing the same thing as they were. Funning, passing the time. Even if they were in the same grade at school, John was older than Optimus by two plus years. Skipping two grades, blessing and curse, Optimus’ peers were older males. *Look, Optimus! Look at that bunch’a niggers over there!* John pointed across the levee towards the young boys.

Interested in what their side of the levee was teaching them, the Negro boys were paying them no mind. Modern children of land-working ancestors - as Optimus’ grandfather Bill Swett’s family had been - one lineage enslaved to whites; the Swetts, sharecroppers. Shared histories. Not gangster children, just young boys at Thanksgiving having a good time. Why shouldn’t they? Let’s find out.

*Nigger! Nigger! Get the hell out of here, niggers!* Optimus was scared angry amazed at what John yelled out. Common in those times for people of all races, black and white, to call dark-skinned people *Negros*, sometimes even the word was pronounced *Nigras,* Optimus knew that amongst wholesome white people *Nigger* was a bad word, a word filled with contempt and fraught with danger. Why danger? Well, just because one harbored the illusion of superiority by virtue of skin color, that didn’t mean the belittled person was going to necessarily lie down and accept ignorant personal attacks. John slapped Optimus on the arm, garnering his full attention. Like a young centaur, John bellowed again across the deep expanse of the concrete levee *Niggers! Get the hell out of here, Niggers!* Ancestoral hate. *Niggers!*

Optimus had heard that word since forever. He didn’t remember the first time he’d heard it, but he could remember many times when that word spilled from the lips of both white and black people, each tongue forging a meaning unique to its bearer. In his family the word was forbidden to be spoken. If as a young child Optimus were to ever say it, he would be immediately scolded and set straight. *Do not use that word. Say Negro.* Sometimes Optimus’ grandmother Mary Frances would say the word but only if she was hurriedly angry about some mystifying thing of which Optimus the child did not understand. He could tell, though, by the accompanying pained expression on her face that it was a word the very pronunciation of which caused her otherwise humanist compassion a great deal of angstful distress. That was enough of a learning cue for Optimus to recognize that even if said purposefully or almost against one’s better will, no matter how or why it was said, *Nigger* was a wrongful word. He knew it too. *Nigger! Nigger! Get the hell out of here, niggers!* The words shot out in the fall air, carrying themselves in a murderous echo wave across the diameter of the concrete levee. *Niggers!*

When Optimus was seven and attending St. Stanislaus in Bay St. Louis, one of his local friends, Bobby – not one of the boys in his Catholic school but a true local boy he had met, a good boy, almost an older brother to Optimus; an eleven or twelve-year-old boy who looked out for him many times in good, good ways – one day Bobby had invited Optimus to attend a high school basketball game that evening with another local area team. Seven or eight, Optimus did not know how he wangled permission to go to the game on his own – Optimus was always getting things and opportunities that he did not realize were escaping others – but he was at the game with Bobby and he was having the time of his life so that’s all that really mattered to him. He was happy. *This is how real people act! Yes!* It was all such great fun rooting for the boys in red and grey – *The Rebels,* they were called. Optimus loved that the stands were filled with families: fathers, mothers, children, uncles, aunts, friends and buddies. There were nifty cheerleaders, handsome and athletic boys and girls brimming with the vitality of youth and shouting out to anyone who would listen how exciting was the moment and how wonderful was their team. *Gosh, this is fun!* Yes, it was a grand old time in Dixie.

At half-time an announcer came down from the crowded bleachers and let all the folks know that there was a fish-fry that Saturday night and that he hoped everyone would be able to attend, especially since it was a special benefit supper for the school’s athletic department. That drew a big cheer and a hearty round of applause from nearly everyone. Optimus could tell that the announcer was a natural, that he’d done this job before and was quite comfortable in front of a crowd. When he had them good and worked up about how great were their kids and how noble was their common purpose, he paused and surveyed his audience with a tone now more serious than fun. His manly accent carried a sonorous lilt ingrained from centuries of Southern culture.

*Folks, I think you all know, we all know, there are a lot’a certain changes goin’ on. Things seem to be tryin’ to be different in ways they probably ought not to be. I’m sure you know what I’m talkin’ about.* As one, everyone in the stands seemed to nod their heads in agreement. *Well, there’s somethin’ we can do about all that. But, we can only do that somethin’ if we stick together, ya’ understan’?* Behind him a lone young cheerleader was softly waiving a large rebel flag. The Confederate flag. A flag filled with more emotion than could be put into any one sentence by anyone who might try. The people in the audience were sympathetic. Himself, Optimus was mesmerized. *Gosh! This guy is good! He’s got ‘em eatin’ out’a the palm of his hand!* The speaker continued on with the confident certainty that comes from knowing that your audience understands exactly what it is you are saying, both directly and between the lines. The speaker began nodding his head. *We got a way a’ life that’s gone on for a long time – a good life, a worthy life, a life worth protectin’ ‘n’ defendin’ – and the time is comin’ nigh that it’s gonna be up to us to see to it that our children n’ their children too will be able to live just as our mommas n’ daddies did.* The people clapped their approval.

Optimus did not know exactly to what the speaker was referring to, but he suspected it pretty much had somethin’ to do with what a fine way of life was the Southern experience. Visions of farms and earth, plantations and fruitful bounty, cotton and peanuts, sandy Gulf coast and silvery bayou moss, these were the visions that danced in Optimus’ head as this fine, handsome, well-mannered and obviously upstanding man, this leader of the community was indeed referring to. Optimus, a young Odysseus since the age of four, was deeply happy to be part of something so socially poignant and meaningful as these people and this moment. His chest swelled just a bit.

Then it happened. Like a practiced conductor of an orchestra, the speaker began to lead the crowd in a great, civil cheer. *I love this!* thought Optimus. *This is so exciting! To be part of something that makes you feel as One!* Wayfaring Odysseus longing to belong, in an instant Optimus had joined in the budding fervor of the rally, the cheer, the call to arms of good people and good causes. He was aroused and determined to be as much a part of this good moment as any moment he had ever lived in the woods of Shadyside. *Yes!* The speaker boomed out his cadenced call and like churchgoers without need of hymnal, the people signified their consent. And the call went like this:

Two! Four! Six! Eight!

We don’t want ta integrate!

Two! Four! Six! Eight!

Who do we really hate?

*NIGGERS! NIGGERS! NIGGERS!*

The sound and the fury grew like a band of Nazis shouting praises to a Fuhrer. *Strange* thought Optimus. A moment in the present that harkened back to the grainy movie newsreels he had seen in darkened theatres, it felt like the face of evil that the American and Allied forces had fought and defeated in Europe. And now, a similar evil stomped its feet in a thunderous unison, its pitch and roll growing with every beat.

Two! Four! Six! Eight!

We don’t want ta integrate!

Two! Four! Six! Eight!

Who do we really hate?

*NIGGERS! NIGGERS! NIGGERS!*

To Optimus, it was all like a dream. Proudly caught up in the elixir of the moment, at one with what he knew to be good people, people who loved their kith and kin as much and as well as anyone and any people in the world past or present, the words rang out in a unifying togetherness filling the audience with a cavalier coalescence. As he at last understood the mean-spirited meaningfulness of the cheer’s final words, Optimus’ head felt like a poison arrow had pierced his temple, sliding through his brain parts, crashing through bone, exiting out the other side of his head. He was sick. Dizzy. Betrayed. The crowd was not.

The crowd was in a revelous frenzy, a joy, a high, a swooning altitude of indescribable glee, a perverse, socially acceptable mania that lent credence to their cause, purpose to their lives, and pride to the fabric of their culture. *This is weird.* Again, the leader led them in a final call to arms.

Two! Four! Six! Eight!

We don’t want ta integrate!

Two! Four! Six! Eight!

Who do we really hate?

*NIGGERS! NIGGERS! NIGGERS!!*

*NIGGERS! NIGGERS! NIGGERS!!*

*\**

Now, on a simple and innocent Thanksgiving holiday jaunt, Optimus stood with his friend John on the bank of a New Orleans, Mississippi levee and listened in amazement as John proudly bellowed across the bank to the unsuspecting young Negro boys. *Niggers! Niggers! Get the hell out of here, niggers!* The first thing Optimus thought was *Man, you must be out of your mind! There are four or more of them and only two of us. I’m only half-as-big as a shrimp and skinny as a straw so I’ll be little help if they catch us. Don’t you see that those boys are all in their young teens? Are you mad?*

But John was not mad. He was a young boy inculcated with the spirit of the times and the learning of words and ideas handed down to him from *his* ancestors. Bigger and stronger than Optimus, and stupider, too, he once again called out *Niggers!* Optimus was dumbfounded. Across the way, the young Negro boys had heard clearly what the cool fall air had brought them. At first pass they had not heard it in their conscious minds, for they were not listening nor expecting an unprovoked fusillade. When it came round again in all of its earthy nastiness, they heard it clearly. They were not amused. They were enraged. In no more than a split second the oldest of the boys threw up his head as if hit by an upper-cut. Stunned, he recovered from the blow, jerking his head right to left, seeing and securing his group to order. Fury blew through his nostrils. Like the physically gorgeous man-child that he was, this muscular and lithe fourteen-year-old boy reared on his heels, threw forward his head, and at once he leapt into a sprinting dash that called for his friends allegiance. Loyal they were.

Within a moment it was clear to both Optimus and John that danger was approaching. And fast, too. A train was coming. A wagon train of irate young Negro boys, now in full gallop, young sienna steeds bent on crossing the levee to seek out their tormentors. *Holy Shit!* thought Optimus. *What the hell am I gonna do now?* John slapped Optimus on the shoulder to attention. *C’mon, Optimus! Le’ss go!* With that, the older boy John; taller boy John; the longer-legged boy John; the stupid idiot John; the John who had caused this impending inferno to blaze across a field to the opening of the walkway bridging the two sides of the vast levee; that John, that guy, he was the first to run. And run he did. Fast, furious, and without either a look back or a speck of concern for Optimus Maximus. *Damn! This is not good at all!* thought Optimus. He was right, too. It was bad and fixing to get worse. Indeed, you might say it was a crisis.

Optimus had turned to see John darting across their side of the field, quickly disappearing into the maze of wooden homes set back from the levee’s spill water reach. In a flash, John was gone. Zippo. Nada. No John. Optimus turned back and saw how fast and determined were the young Negro boys now crossing the levee walk bridge at a full running speed. Optimus rarely repeated himself, as to him, words carried value the first time they were spoken. This time was different. He repeated himself, only this time, trepidation and fear crept into his spirit. *Holy Shit!! What am I gonna do now?!* Scared and afraid *are* different. The first few seconds Optimus was scared. The next few seconds after that, as Optimus could clearly begin to discern the grimaced features of the sprinting Negro boys, he then began to feel fear. From within.

Well, Optimus Maximus was many things, not all of them good by any standard, but a coward he was not. *I’m Bill Swett’s boy. I ain’t gonna run. I’dn’t do nothin’. That damn idiot John did, though. This sure don’t look good. Well, I’m’a stay ‘n’ face the music as they say.* It didn’t look good. More than halfway across the levee bridge, the young Negro boys were closing fast. Optimus figured he had maybe ten seconds to decide. *Can’t run. Don’t know where I’m at. They’re bigger, faster. They catch me n’ how will that look? Look like I’m guilty as hell, that’s what. Ain’t doin’ that. C’mon Optimus! Use your head! Think!* His heart beat fast in his chest. He thought what it could be like to get a group beating. *Four boys! If this don’t beat all hell!*

*Gosh dammit! I am not going to run!!* The Negro boys were nearing the distance. Optimus figured three or four more seconds. They could see him holding his ground. *I can do this! I know I can! I AM going to do this!* Then they were there. Panting, angry-faced, circularly enclosing Optimus in their midst. Optimus was crazy scared. He believed in himself, family, the goodness of life. *O Lord!* He dropped to his knees. Hands in the air, suppliant, Optimus quickly locked in on the biggest of the boys. *God he’s muscular. Look at him!* His face was a picture of anger, confusion and sweat.

The boy looked down at Optimus. *He’s a kid!*  *What the hell??* It was all too fast. The other boys were following his lead. *Wait!* screamed Optimus. Hands in the air, he pleaded. *Wait! It wasn’t me! I didn’t say those things! Honest! It was that other guy! He said those things! I mean it! I didn’t say nothin’! I swear I didn’t!*  Nervous, Optimus had every right to be. The young boys were clearly angry. The intensity of their looks and the swagger of their body language spoke of a fight. *I swear it!* Optimus reached further, for the truth. *I ain’t got nothin’ against Negroes . . . Nothin!*

Hearing his voice, seeing him holding his ground, somehow they were holding back. Optimus felt less afraid. The truth was steeling him. Truth has the ring of truth to it. With masculine domination, the biggest boy moved in closer over Optimus. The other boys moved in closer, too. Revenge reach. Now that he felt like reason was possible, Optimus was more determined than ever to not get himself beat up. He lifted his head, blue eyes meeting brown. *Ya’ un’erstan? I didn’t say those things! Didn’t say nothin’.* The older boy ached to meet out a sting equal to what had been sent, yet he was sure it wasn’t this white boy who had yelled at them. Leader, he wanted to do the right thing. He cocked his arm close to his face looking as if he were preparing to strike a blow. In parallax view, time moves both fast and slow. *Hit ‘em!!* Towering, any of the boys could have taken an easy vengeance. Just let an arm go. *Smack!* *Smack!* It’d feel good.

Breath slowing, the leader’s brain caught up to him. He was neither a mean nor a bad boy. He thought himself good. He was just a proud young boy taunted on holiday because of his skin color. *Nigger!* No one spoke. Hand raised in anger. Thick saliva. His words rolled out soft, bereft of animosity. *G’wan, get out’a here . . . white boy.*

The older boys words trickled into Optimus’ ears relaxing his adrenaline filled body. Optimus believed and didn’t believe what he was hearing. *Yes!* rushed all over him. *God! I didn’t want an ass-whippin’ for somethin’ I didn’t do! I think I’m free!*  One of the other boysbarked *Man, you ought’a hit that little mother-fu . .* *white boy!* *Hit ‘em!!* But the leader did not. Looking down at Optimus – he hated to have to endure this whole damn thing. Like Optimus before, now it was his time to repeat himself. Only now, fast-flashing on what it was he was doing – letting Optimus go even though his own rage was real and present - now he hurled his words like an angry recrimination directed as much to Optimus as to every racist white person who had ever made him stand in separate lines at the bus stop; drink at separate Colored Only lines at water fountains; sit in different places at the movie theatre, if he was allowed in at all; attend different schools; on and on and on and on if you were black, and he was black, and he was proud of it, just like he imagined Optimus was in being white.

*G’WAN, WHITE BOY! Go!! . . . Get out’a here!! . . . Now!!!*

*‘N’ NEVER CALL ME NIGGER, WHITE BOY!!*

It was a taunt of both animus and pain. Neither of these two boys had created the segregated world they had been born into, but, maybe, given time and understanding, he and this white boy might change the world they would one day come to co-inhabit. Slowly, oxygen crept back into Optimus’ brain. *I can’t believe it. I’m free to go*. Optimus lowered his arms. Lifting a leg, one foot grounded, then the other, now up, eyes met face to face. Blue. Brown. No blink. A nod. Optimus bolted, breaking through the ring of young boys, past them, across, the grass, into the maze of houses where John had taken off only minutes before. He did not look back.

*RUN, WHITE BOY!!*

Into the maze he ran as fast as he could. Finding a clearing on the side of a shed, Optimus collapsed in a heap, proud white Southern boy spared a beating for a crime he did not commit. He could only think *You done good, Optimus. Saved your skin at least.*

But his thoughts were confused. *Should I have run? Should I have fought? Was it wrong for me, a white boy, to ask those Negro boys to let me go? I only did what I thought Granddaddy would do. Tha’ss all. I hate this whole damn race thing to death!* He started crying in both relief and rage. John turned the alley corner running to Optimus, all big deal, like he was saving him. But he had not saved him and Optimus knew it. He’d shot off his mouth, endangering them, then fleeing like a coward. Optimus hated that. John was excited. *I saw you Optimus! I was watchin’ you the whole time! Wha’d ya’ do, Optimus? Hunh?! Whad’ya say to those niggers, Optimus?* Optimus wanted to choke him.

*Wha’d I do? Wha’d I do?!! You fool! Ya’ could’a got us killed! ME?!! You’re the one who stayed there, Dumbo! I told ya’ to run! What the hell did ya’ say to them that they let you go? Hunh, Optimus? What?! Tell me!* It was no use. Optimus didn’t want to talk. Getting up, he wiped his face with the back of his hand and started walking down the deserted alleyway. John called out to him *Wait! C’mon, Optimus. Let’s go back to my house. Optimus! We’ll play the record player! You like that, don’cha, Optimus?!*  Optimus walked on in quiet.

Shaken, forcibly confronting conflicted views and feelings about his race and race in general, knowing that his ideas on race were radically different from many others of his group, he ran by the thought *Even racist white people, aren’t they still my people?! Can’t you be a racist and still be a good person? Didn’t Jesus say that all people are my people?* Optimus wanted good even when it was bad. He so wanted to understand. It was all too much to figure out. *Let it go its own way.* Right then, he didn’t like much of anything. Yet, now that his heart was slowing, now that his breath came easier, he wanted to think. He wanted to find some truth in that moment. He was free. Unhurt. Somehow, forgiven. He’d confronted a crisis and advantaged the opportunity.

*That black kid who let me go, I kind’a liked him*. *Yea*, *that 8 ??was pretty cool, wad’n’t he? Life’s funny, id’n’t it? Imagine what that Negro boy was going through! He could’a killed me. Didn’t. Wonder why?* He thought on that for a moment. Wanting to put it behind him, still, something was nagging at Optimus. *They were callin’ me “White Boy!” Sayin’ it like it was some kind’a bad word. White Boy ain’t no bad word. Depends how ya’ say it. I’m’a white boy. I like bein’ white, too. I’m proud to be white. My whole family’s white. White people are good! I’m’a good, am I ain’t?* Optimus snickered a bit. *I is n’ I be! Guess it all matters how you say things, huh . . . white boy? ”White Boy.” That I is.*

The encounter that fall afternoon was the first racially-charged one Optimus had ever had. It wouldn’t be his last. No, being life, there would be more. Exhausted, putting the world of race out of mind, Optimus walked on in silence. *Step . . . Step . . . Step . . .* It was a good day to die, and, a good day to live. Somehow, he felt good about himself.

Ω

- FIVE HUNDRED MILES OF LOVE -

The first night was special. First nights always are. Cold of January, frost in the piney east Texas air; gravel laid a ground cover. Optimus didn’t care about anything except that he was there, it was all fresh, and he knew it could be good. Optimus liked good. Good gave oneself a sense of renewal. He looked around. Three boy-men in a hand-built bunkhouse, canvas walls and roof, pot-bellied stove lying quiet in chilled silence awaiting its morning call; the curvature of the walls eclipsed an angle sweeping upwards and over itself in semi-barrel vault, a nifty if unknowing homage to Frank Lloyd Wright and the architecture of a prairie cabin. Optimus knew Wright. He knew of and had seen photographs of his magnificent Guggenheim museum in New York City – even more so, his famed \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ house over rocks and running water. Optimus liked him. He liked the cock of his hat, his vision and, more importantly, his leathery face full of courage daunting his critics in not wavering from that vision. It was a similar vision that had built this open air bunkhouse that he now found himself in and he beheld it with a sense of awe. *Granddaddy would like this! I know I do. Gosh, it’s neat . . .*

The other two boy-men do not observe Optimus’ sense of wonder. Their sleeping faces do not ask *Why is he so amazed? What is it that he knows that we do not know?* Optimus thought he knew plenty. Lying in his metal bunk looking up through the canvas interstices at a jubilant night full of universal stars, the air from his breath blew little smoke clouds. He loved anything that spoke of nature and its loveliness. Optimus knew that for him, at this moment, it was about as good as it could get. *Sure beats that psycho-ward (even if they were all amazingly interesting people!), that’s for dang sure. Now, if I can just get to sleep so morning will come. Then we can start to having fun!*

Optimus gave a soft giggle. He wondered why the air blowing from his nostrils did not turn into vapor. He wondered what his mother was doing at home in Dallas. If his sister Maddie was up doing homework for her sophomore year at Highland Park. *She likes that school. How can she get along so well there? I tried. Those little fresh-scrubbed, well-dressed snobs, why they just didn’t like me. I tried to be like them. I really did. I tried to honor their traditions. I was proud to be a “Scot”. But no-o-o-o-o*

*.I didn’t know them in third grade! Mother didn’t buy me the EXACT surfer shirts they wore. I wasn’t quite as All-American looking as some of the boys. Hey! My dad drove a beautiful new Cadillac with those elegant tail fins, now didn’t he? I thought for sure that would get me in! I even bought a Madras sports coat for* *cryin’ out loud! There’s no pleasin’ some people.* As he rolled over for the first time in his new bed, Optimus thought *Well, at least I’m’a sleepin’ out in the woods in a tent and they’re not and that’s good.* Then as was his custom, in less than a minute he fell asleep. It was all good. Very good.

*Ω*

First light and Optimus rolled over in his bunk. One of the other boys was already out of bed, crouching near Optimus’ feet, huddling in close to the pot-bellied stove; his fingers and arms were working crisply inside the stove belly. *My God!* thought Optimus. *That son-of-a-gun’s building a fire!* And he was, too. That was Tommy B. A slender white boy like Optimus, his confident actions evinced the practice and skills of someone who had done this many times before. Optimus sat up in his bed, the cold air rushing around his legs. *Dang! Must be in the twenties!*

Tommy B. was a kind boy, about twelve or thirteen, like Optimus, but, unlike Optimus, he didn’t ask himself what and why he was doing what he did. Showing off his stuff – without showing anyone up – he proceeded to announce to no one in particular the steps he was undertaking to start the morning fire. *Pocket-knife.* It was a brown handled, wood relief, four-inch King knife. *Cedar.* Tommy handled the knife expertly. He quickly cut into the dry middle of the stick, each smooth long stroke shaving one curl, then another, and another, until soon, before on the gravel floor a small heap of fire starter accumulated. Tommy then broke apart the thin, dry branches of an oak cutting. *Snap! Snap! Snap!* He placed the cedar curls within the center of the stove’s belly, puffing them up so that air might easily pass through them. Scooping up the handful of twigs, he arranged them over the cedar shavings in a neat little tee-pee style.

Watching Tommy B. over the corner of his shoulder, Optimus could tell that he had done this many times before. *Kindling.* Tommy reached into a covered canvas bag next to the stove and withdrew three or four nice pieces of pine, each about a half-inch thick. He laid these over and around the tee-pee, careful to balance them so that they would fall inward as they caught, burning onto the twigs. *One log.* Tommy reached past the kindling bag to a small stack of one to two-inch dried pine pieces, skin on. He carefully balanced the log atop the crown of the tee-pee. *Now he showing off!* thought Optimus. He was, too. *Match. One match.* He struck it on the box side, the sulfur blowing a pretty blue and yellow. *Light’er up.* He stuck the wooden kitchen match into the bottom of the shavings. *Curl . . . Curl . . . Curl . . . Fire!*

The flames quickly jumped up from the shavings, circling the twigs, which popped and twisted, licking the kindling. Soon, all the tee-pee was alight. Tommy stuck his face ever so close to the stove belly and with a good, long slow breath, he blew onto the base of the burning tee-pee. The kindling’s fire increased by an order of two. Flames shot out wider and higher. The pine log started sinking into the handsome blaze. It popped and shot a sparkler, just missing Tommy’s face. Ignited, it sank into its new resting place, the firing belly of the now warming stove. *Two logs. Two logs. Two log fire.* Tommy reached to the outside rear of the stove and brought out another pine log. Into the fire’s main he made an X with the second log. The fire’s heat seeped outward into the crisp air. Optimus threw back his covers so that he might better feel the heat. Optimus was mesmerized. *Gosh, this guy is good.*

Tommy circled his head around the opening of the stove, verifying that the X would soon be ablaze. Satisfied that it would, he closed the stove’s door, proudly. Turning to Optimus, his face clearly but wordlessly shone in the stove’s now red glow. *Not bad, huh?* is what his face said but his lips did not. Returning the quiet question, Optimus blinked his eyes once and long, a silent signal he learned from his grandfather that acknowledged what he was seeing. Tommy B. lifted his head upwards like a young colt. He then looked away from Optimus towards the second bunk above him. There was a lump of boy not moving. Tommy thwacked the side of the mattress with a closed fist. *Jaime!* The lump moaned.

His name was Jaime, pronounced in Spanish as Hi-Me. Tommy wasn’t going to say a J like an H for anyone, so for him, the chubby Mexican boy was Jay-Me. *Jay-me! Get up! Huh? Get up. Fire’s on. Yea . . . yea.* Tommy thwacked Jaime’s mattress one more time for good measure. He turned back to Optimus who by then was huddled at the end of the bed basking in the significant and radiating heat of the now fiery, pot-bellied stove. *Let’s get dressed* he near whispered. *What d’ya say your name was? Optimus. Optimus Maximus. Yea . . . well I’m Tommy. Tommy B.* They faced each other awkwardly for a moment, unsure of whether to engage in a mature, masculine handshake. Optimus looked over Tommy who had done the entire fire starting operation clad only in his sox and underwear. An infamous sox and underwear man himself, Optimus could not let the moment pass unremarked.

*Hey. Pretty good with that fire.* Now it was Tommy’s turn to survey Optimus. He drop-clicked his head assenting to the compliment. Optimus stretched out his hand, glad on his first morning to meet someone as competent and self-reliant as Tommy B. Handshake returned, for a moment they stood quietly. Boys, words and emotions were sometimes hard to find or express. Each liked the other, that much was evident. Both in their underwear, the half near the fire, warm, the half not, cold, they snickered at the silliness of the moment. The fire growled. New friends. That they were. *Give to get* thought Optimus.

*Ω*

The path from the Beavers’ campsite to the chuck-wagon was no more than a few miles. Worn, graceful, easily navigated in single file, the trail was built and maintained by the boys themselves, as was everything in the entire greater camp, occasionally with the guidance and compassion of the two Chiefs who led each group. Boys taught boys the secret and not-so-secret codes of life. Beavers, Tejas, Tawakonis, Fireflys, Boulders; there were five groups in all, each tribe carrying about ten young bucks. There were no girls. *Good* thought Optimus. *How in the heck ya’ gonna build somethin’ with girls around? Girls., Nobody pays attention when girls are around!* Except for his grandfather and the occasional quarter allowance from his Uncle Charlie, Optimus had been raised by all women and as a thirteen year old, he was more than happy to be without women for a while. Optimus was in Beavers. The fresh thirteen year-olds. Oh, some were twelve, a few already fourteen; for the most part, they were all young boys still not yet quite aware that Nature was starting to dump gobs of reproductive DNA into their bloodstreams. Manliness was surfacing. Optimus liked it too. *I’m* *a teenager!*. *I’m a Beaver boy now . . .* Snicker-snicker.

The boys were carrying sheet sacks of laundry. Hoisted on young, lithe shoulders strung fore ‘n’ aft by long pine poles shared by two boys as they hiked, the group made a merry band as they headed first to a crossover stop to drop off laundry for washing. Sheets, jeans, shirts, sox and underwear, that was it. Other than your jacket and boots, what else do you need in the woods? Walking this beautiful trail, yes it was beautiful even in the grey sky of January, Optimus, who loved nature more than anything, was happy thinking of how good was the morning, how clean was the air, how cooperative was the group, and, for the moment, most importantly, how hungry he was. Hungry. Food. Breakfast. Sausage. Eggs. Oatmeal. Toast. Juice. Milk. Food. Good. Food. I want food. Optimus was a tad past five and half feet tall and his aim was to grow another half foot in the next year or so – he wanted to top out at six feet – and he figured here, out in the woods with lots of fresh air and manly young work, he would do it, too. *Food!*

Jaime was struggling with his end of a sacked sheet although you wouldn’t think so as he was much bigger by way of girth and fat than the other boys. *Slow down, Tommy! Slow down!* He was stumbling awkwardly as if his boot laces were tied together making his stride ungainly. But they were not. It was his secret that was gnawing at him, pushing up against him, ruining his morning; that is why he could not walk straight on the trail. His secret was ruining his morning. Tommy B. would have none it. *Shut your trap, Jay-Me.* Jaime kept moving forward; he had no choice. It was either drop the laundry sack or keep up. He did not want to hold up the group. He was hungry, too. But, the secret kept flying around his face and being and he wanted none of it.

Ahead of them in his vision, Optimus could see that Tommy B. was setting the pace and that Jaime was bouncing along from left to right, every other step trying to change shoulders of the long pole. It was as if he did not want the sack sheet anywhere near him, and yet, it was his charge, too. He was the follow man and if he did not keep pace with the lead front, his rear end of the pole would fall. It might not bother him, but it would bother the hell out of Tommy B. when the unsupported weight of the pole came crashing down on his shoulder. And that’s just what happened. Standing it no more, wishing to be rid of his secret but unable to find the words, Jaime used his considerable strength and threw the pole off to the side into the brush. The blindside force swung Tommy B. around as the pole slapped the side of his face and cut into neck and shoulder dropping him to his knees. *Damn you, Jay-Me!*

Path blocked, Optimus stopped cold. The follow boy behind him pulled up short. He and Optimus worked well as a team. Optimus always worked well as a team. Optimus could see that Tommy was spittin’ mad. He flung the pole off his shoulder and in one turn-around stormed for Jaime. *Dang, that fella’s mad.*

Mad he was. Tommy snarled as he fast approached. *Look here, you big baby! Carry your own damn end of the load! You knew that’d hurt if you dropped it, you jackass! Why’n you say something, wet-back!* Jaime drew back, sure that Tommy was fixing to slug him. And Tommy B. was.

Bigger by thirty pounds, Jaime was no fighter, and anyway, Tommy was all sinewy Southern country boy fearless with his fists. They say that it is the wounded who are first to lash out and wound others. Karmic. Optimus saw Tommy’s charge and was sure that Jaime was getting ready to get a face full of fists. So fast it was a blur, Chief Melvin dashed from his rearward position and in an instant slid himself between charging Tommy and cowering Jaime.

*Settle down, now.* Chief Melvin was a little over six feet and near two hundred pounds. A warm, beautiful man, formerly a Brother in the Catholic Church, he had met a nun, Sister Mary. Humans, they fell in love. Uncertain of church dogma, certain of the power of love, they requited their feelings by leaving their orders and marrying each other. Now serving these boys as leader, Chief Melvin radiated a beatific oneness even if he still smoked cigarettes and drank lots of coffee. So the Buddha was human. *What’s wrong here?*

Tommy stood his ground like a geyser interrupted, a boxer held back by an intelligent, no-nonsense referee. Sputtering, his shoulder hurt from the torque of the pole tearing into his neck muscles. *That jackass dropped his load! Idiot! Damn near cut my head off!* Chief Melvin turned to Jaime to hear his words.

*He called me a wet-back! I did not! Yes, you did! Did not!* Chief Melvin was nonplussed. He surveyed the group making eye contact with his co-leader in the front, Chief Gary. Second Chief. Head Chief. The two chiefs nodded. Melvin spoke. *Le’ss sit down, boys. Sit down?* thought Optimus. *Sit down? What about breakfast? I’m’a hungry.* It was nearly eight a.m.

Chief Gary cleared a bit of brush. All the boys followed his lead while Chief Melvin stood squarely between the antagonists ensuring that no fisticuffs would ensue. What followed for the next six hours was a strange and unique lesson in either the negotiating of the subtle intimacies of emotional diplomacy or innately idiotic kow-towing to a spoiled brat momma’s boy. While it would take him several decades to figure it all out, what Optimus was learning but did not exactly know he was learning were the subtleties of the ongoing tensions between the individual and the group in human society. Twelve-year-old social philosopher, whichever it was, Optimus watched on, fascinated. *I’m’a hungry, but I can see I is getting’ nothin’ to eat now! Dang!*

My, my. In that there is no sense in spending six hours describing in blathering, uninteresting detail the particulars of who did what and why and who called or did not call someone else a name, perhaps we can shed with forcing such cruel indignities upon you, our friend, and simply say that as each hour passed, as each boy tepidly stepped in and about conversational circles; as each Chief did their spiritual best to guide young charges to an equitable, comprehensible understanding; much as this sentence could go on and on and on; in effect becoming a *de facto* sentence for you, our observant friends; no, let us suffice to say that every single imaginable angle, view, perspective, reality, unreality; all and everything were weaving around, through, and from the lips and mouths of these young boys on every subject of personal emotional dynamic that could be imagined or invented. Conversing wounds.

After the first hour, maybe it was the second, Optimus had had his fill; but it was not of food. *Shee-ssh!* thought Optimus. *I got it the first hour! These guys are plum loco! What the hell are we doin’ stoppin’ to talk about all this personal stuff. Let those two fellas fight it out! Winner, be magnanimous; loser, contrite. Shake hands. Put it behind you. Then, what say, go eat! Yes!* That all sounded like a fine idea to Optimus except Optimus was not in charge. Chief Melvin was. A charismatic man, he was taking this opportunity, unknowing it would be six hours, to teach these young boy-men lessons they would never forget; lessons, too, that they might, Optimus did, carry around with them for the rest of their lives. Glory resides in the examined life.

The lesson was: The Group is warm and soft. The Individual is hard and cool. The Group cannot exist without the Individual; the Individual cannot exist without the Group. Ensuring evolution, each must honor and respect the other. If not, they will perish. If so, they will prosper. Such is the way of DNA.

Optimus couldn’t say it like that, then. He can now, because he is grown. Then, all he could think was *This is disgustingly interesting. These guys are drilling down to the nitty-gritty. Talking ideas and ideals. Not in high-falutin’ vocabulary (which, I wish they would, thank-you!) instead, they speak in common, regular sense words. I kind’a like that! Listen: Tommy B. is all pissed off (oh, that’s funny!) that Jaime keeps wetting the bed and has to change his sheets all the time, and Jaime’s all mad that Tommy B. doesn’t respect him and then Tommy B. is sayin’ that he can’t muster up no respect for some lard-ass (Stop the name calling sez’ Chief Melvin) for some chubby lying on the top bunk above him worryin’ that he’s gonna wet the bed and piss’ll come all dribblin’ down upon him, and then Jaime starts to cry and then another boy gets all mad and sez that Tommy B. is such and such and on and on it went, stomachs growlin’, tempers flarin’, reason raising its head from time to time, then, provided no support, ducking for cover.*

Optimus could take no more. Interesting conflicts are just that, interesting. For Optimus, a boy-man to whom words and therefore the articulacy of feeling came as natural to him as adding jelly to peanut butter sandwiches atop of white bread, why this was all enough to make him wonder *How in the hell did I get here? Why is it that with all the books I have read, the politeness of manners I have learned, the love of life which I so dearly exhibit, why is it that I am having to sit here hungry and listen to this? Reflective, he let his mind wander into the breaking blue-grey east Texas sky. As was his way, he started to put his feelings into words. One day, finished, they read like this:*

FOMENT YOUR OWN RACE RIOT

*I was thinkin',*

*Foment your own race-riot.*

*Yea . . . That's the ticket.*

*Fresh Thirteen.*

*Readin’;*

*Listenin' closely.*

*Pretty good ears.*

*That's it.*

*Think!*

*Martin. How was it?*

*\**

11 / 23 / '63

Crisis casts a pall.

JFK, slain. Dallas, pain.

By the baleful, Shame.

Words fail.

Damn. We hate ourselves.

*Down goes Achilles!!*

"N' it's really very easy t' see /

Tho' the Masters make the Rules /

For The Wise Men & The Fools /

I've got nothin' Ma' to live up to . . . "

Summer comes.

Breezy, warm winds.

Lucky-Boy.

Teenager.

Good smile.

Thick hair.

Lots of acne.

*Did I mention my good smile?*

S' ‘n 'lectric-eclectic avenue;

Privilege-to-walk-out-the-door.

Somethin' excitin' gonna happen today;

Fortune blowin' my way for sure.

Cool clothes,

Fine specs,

Rubber-Soul Blacktops;

Buddha says it best.

Buddha, you say?

You're a boy.

Was. Am.

Playin' with toys;

Physical ‘n' Meta.

Likin' it,

Mo' n' Mo' Betta.

*Junior's got a brand-new-bag . . .*

James Brown. Bobby D.

Bi-cultural ebony.

Honest ‘n' naked, ivory.

Provin' one's worth,

Suspender Men, all belt ‘n' girth;

Fools can't take off their pants.

*My pants are on fire!*

Hot-blood-for-hire.

That's me.

Let's ride.

Nothin' off-the-shelf.

*Cowabunga* made it myself!

Roller-skates ‘n' curved flat-board;

Underbelly, hand-lettered Hawaiian odes.

Push ‘n' roll; now glide-to-the-corner;

Check me out, *Little Jack Horner*.

Smile after mile.

Maple Ave. bus.

Hustle, no fuss.

Twenty-five in the till.

*Take me downtown!*

Get my fill.

*Say, got any new poets to read?*

Do the next right thing,

Don't matter; jus' sing.

Life feels good. Act.

No filter.

No conscious of the particula';

Not watchin' my reflection or nothin';

Jus' sure right is right,

Won't wait for the night.

Somethin' else is bound to happen;

I suspect . . . somethin' good.

Early afternoon,

Gotta get downtown.

Here's my stop.

*"Main & Lamar."*

Put on your crown.

Doors swing wide,

Openin' t' my very own French circus.

I ain't even never been to France;

That's how good it is.

Old bearded drunk preachin' from John:

*Souls repent! The day is not long!*

Right, he is.

Across the street,

Black Panthers. *Time Magazine!*

Walgreens, bustling alfresco.

Excitedly, I make my move.

Cross the light, breathe in tight,

Dude's got a '*fro*!

C'mon. Let's go.

Relaxing consciousness,

Invisible, I saunter.

Head-nod. Panther's eye, a weary slit.

Examining the slender skinniness

That is my extended white arm,

A paper is placed.

A peace sign is shaped.

*Power to the People.*

I am now part of The New Stand.

Traffic lights cannot contain

This great sea-of-humanity

From pulsing its veins

Over the concrete medallions

Of downtown Dallas.

*Dallas. My home town.*

Secreted within wood-paneled offices,

High across the street,

A tony, princely lair.

Rich, a handsome Jew

Basks in the plush thread count

Of his finely-tailored suit.

I imagine one day, choosing again,

To wear strong-fitting clothes

Mother calls *Nail-Head* weave.

*.*

Long hair cutting-to-the-shoulder,

Over a surfer's shirt

N' high-top Chuck Conners,

*Cool-I-feel-it-a-comin'*.

Marcus is a good man.

Christians secretly rail a'gin'

His liberal, loving posture.

I want to rise into the moment:

Accomplished Rich-Fuck;

Heart in the right place.

Proper of mind and station,

Right-living conservatives

Would'a hosed away

*Los vox populi* *detritus*

Lining his store-front sidewalks.

Not this man.

Special.

Quietly better than the rest.

An Immortal.

Like under Pilate,

Jews’ voices scarcely allowed;

Modern moral man is different.

I hope so much he might be like me.

I, like him.

Proud of the pride;

Great old lion.

Stanley Marcus,

My kind of man.

Were he my father . . .

The Tribe t'is of thee.

Amidst the throng, I enter.

*Ecce Homo . . .*

Neiman-Marcus.

Grab a frickin' eyeful of this!

Secret Saturday mission.

Incognito.

*Sin mi Bella Madre*

N' her well-coiffed *Kelly-do*;

I will not be exposed as myself.

Young GQ,

Entering with grace at Fortnight,

A porcelain doll *geisha*

Expertly buffs my fingernails into a gleaming heat.

Mother snickers, ever so politely.

Illuminated, I ache to be older.

Envisioning opportunity,

Lips caressing soft, white Asian skin;

Eyes rolling,

Down and up backwards;

Heaven entices me.

Years later,

Kuo Ying,

Original sin.

O, yea.

Giggling at my skinny ankles,

*Gitsu* marvels at my chest.

Entwined alien swans,

Tender is our night.

Affection. Pathos.

*Domo aregato.*

*Lancome* counter-offers a red-head

Of such voluptuous scent

I am unable to meet her eyes.

More a marvel than me;

We both know it.

*20'*

*20s she-fox amusedly eyeing a rabbit:*

I cannot breathe

‘N' look at her at the same time.

I pretend to mark time in place,

Imagining a crowd encircling us.

She takes my hand in hers.

*Yes!*

Deep breathing look away.

*Vulpina's* smile curves into my ear.

Streaking my inner wrist,

She sprays me with rocket fuel.

My pants pull me forward;

Optimus: Dare not look back.

Too much boy, too little man;

*Irma La Douce*, my heart is quick-sand.

Saving face, I quickly cut a deal.

*It's not my fault.*

I am only thirteen, almost fourteen.

Irma is a siren of Delphi . . .

Break free.

Exhale. Pledge.

One day, return.

Onward, to the mink-coats.

\*

Capitalism.

Success and spectacle.

Elegantly, languor bathes money.

Perfect postures; perfect posturing.

Servants to Princesses;

Matriarchs ‘n' their Queens.

Behind a rack of erminestoles,

Stealthily, I scope the proceedin's.

Awe ‘n' fascination

Allow renegade uniform

Momentary free pass.

*Optimus Maximus!*

Row, boy, row!

\*

The men are balding eunuchs.

Starched white-shirts and comely ties;

Lively smiles.

Lizard loafers;

Crease-smooth, roomy Italian slacks.

Now it's my turn to snicker.

*You go, guys!*

*Serve those women!*

Plainclothes security guard;

Havin' more fun than appropriate,

Authority's footsteps approach.

Menace.

Quickly, "Kid Nureyev"

*To the elevator!*

Marble floors beckon a pathway.

Escape leads to Fate's beckoning embrace.

In the belly of the beast

One often finds not what they want,

Rather, what Buddha says you need.

*Not gonna like this one bit.*

*Fixin'-to-learn, like it or not.*

Closing doors emit a silent hum.

Maturity feasts on its youth.

Wingtips; three-piece suits;

Navy blue ‘n' black polish.

Regimental ties;

Thick, meaty shoulders.

Hands growing hair.

I feel uncomfortable as they stare.

Ben Franklin blue tints

Bridge my nose.

Wet-fingered,

*Cowabunga* is slippery*.*

Air silently *whooshing*,

Gravity pulls on my sneakers.

The elevator races upward.

Head smashin' now hard to a wall;

Full-tilt-boogie,

Heed the clear call:

Attack! Attack! Attack!

*Bastards!*

*En guarde!*

*I've had fencing lessons!*

Six-two, squared,

Times-a-couple-hundred-pounds each;

My ferocious buck-seven crinkles

Like a slender pick-up stick.

Elephants snouting a lion cub,

Glasses slow-motion arc to the floor;

Red Rorsach spots splay

My beloved soft-yellow,

Three-button surfer shirt.

A finely-awled wingtip circularly grinds

Cool shattered lenses into brown floor.

Throat, a perfect fit for an open fist.

Strangling voice,

Hoping to teach it respect;

Ten-quick-seconds,

‘S’ all over as quickly as it started.

Female automaton eerily chimes:

*Fourth floor. Men's Department.*

Vanished;

They are.

Vanquished;

I am.

This ain't right.

This is wrong.

Thinkin' clearly in the present song;

Fear's smell is loathsome.

Them of me, ‘n' all for which we stand.

Freedom lovers.

*Freedom-riders*.

Urge upon me their sins!

Carry me forward, Jesus;

I wish to live again.

Forgiving them,

You ‘n' I know;

They know, ‘n' know-not,

What it is they do . . .

\*

Properly shocked,

A well-dressed woman surveys me.

Man-to-be,

I will neither listen to

Nor let her words comfort me.

*Head-toss*.

Smooth, purple-veined hand

Lays subtle fingers-upon-a-cheek.

No one, especially a woman

Whose compassion I admire,

Will see me like *this*.

Whirling, I bolt for the staircase;

Skateboard a shield,

I dare any comer to close-in.

Youthful wreck,

On a waffle-print metal stair

I sit under a red extinguisher

Wishing I had the *cojones*

To break its glass and retrieve

The sharpened axe and pride.

I do not.

Fresh thirteen;

Breathe deep;

Don't look back.

*The first one now will later be last*.

I do not know it then,

One day, and soon I will;

Buddha is teaching to be your own friend.

When the race-riot comes,

‘N' it will - I'll be there;

Cool as a watermelon slice

On a humid, August afternoon.

You bet’cha, yea.

I will not fail you, Martin.

I will not fail you.

The ride home

Is not so much.

Wet and wrinkled,

I stare out the open bus window

Into the rain.

Green lights ‘n' traffic jams,

Slowly, I begin to understand.

To accept myself,

I must be the man I am.

Boy-man, deep inside, I know that.

Woodlawn is a nice place.

Full of love and care,

Long green leaves of grass.

One misty night

I will lie down on it with Stephanie

‘N' her youthful, perspiry

Feminine vigor.

Blouse, a bit hungrily unbuttoned;

Swollen peach breasts

Spill from her white bra.

*I am lit*.

Cradling her fifteen-year-old lust

Tightly in my arms,

I will not kiss her deeper

Than my fast-beating heart can navigate.

Besides,

I want her to be a blonde.

I am stupid,

But I am young.

Chance will visit me once again.

In a few short weeks

I will make amends,

Atoning errors of youthful pride.

\*

Brunette,

Wendy,

Full-breasted Mt. St. Helenas

Exploding into eager lips

‘N' nimble fingers.

I do better, then.

I remember Wendy,

‘N' that moment,

For the rest of my life;

Even now as I write,

Wishing she could appear

So that we might embrace,

Closing the loop

On our unrequited love.

A man, Buddha knows his limitations.

Getting off the bus,

I head into Woodlawn,

The psychiatric hospital

Presently serving as my Hotel.

Ted Church, *es un maestro ultimo;*

Big Brothers of America.

More a man

Than any prisoner he ever wardened,

Head of Michigan's cell-blocks;

Black of night ‘n' rape of the quiet,

Must have given Ted his fill.

His Fate. My Luck.

\*

Things are not so good at home.

Mother's temper

Constantly out-races her beauty.

Water spots in a sink - silly things;

Composure contorts into rage.

Grace disappears.

Harold is a big-talker.

$300 Saville Row suits,

Gold RAF pinky-ring

Which he did not exactly earn;

Nonetheless, after his death,

I will wear it with Great Pride

For twenty-five years;

Saving it for the rainy day

I might melt it in marriage vow.

When hard times intervene,

I tell myself, Buddha says,

*Sell it*.

Reluctantly, I do.

History whispers:

*Harold would have sold it,*

*Quicker n' for more;*

*Striding the streets*

*In haberdasher’s splendor,*

*London accent trailing*

*All- The-Pretty-Girls .*

Him and mom fight a lot.

Ted Church welcomes me.

Oak Lawn Big Brother offices.

Stroll in,

Confident ease;

Know what I want;

Lookin' for,

The right place to find it.

*Big Brother, please.*

Adulthood offers a seat.

Uneven Equals,

Friendliness morphs to Respect.

My Church exudes incomparable Faith.

Time clicks.

Ted hooks me up.

Big Brother or two.

First, a fraud; the other, 72.

Neither is so much that I am reformed.

Gentle Grandfather Joe

Sells gas pumps.

Loves me ‘n' takes me bowling.

Protects me like a son or grandson.

Don't seem to mind

If we sit in his car in the rain

While I turn up the radio real loud

‘N' sing along at the top of my lungs,

*Who wants to buy this diamond ring?*

Christmas comes;

Turquoise alpaca sweater,

Pubescent Troy Donahue I am.

But I’m fakin’ this thing called Life.

Sittin' by a log fire,

Ariel, Joe's lovely perfumed daughter,

A blonde too old for me;

None of it don't mean nothin'.

Night cometh, I still ache inside;

Tears amidst the tempest,

Wishing for what I want.

*Father?*

*Wherefore art thou?*

I forge a check.

The family treasury

Is quickly depleted.

Sweet ‘n' down low,

The New Orleans night train rails me;

An armed FBI agent,

‘N' his angry, shackled prisoner

Surreptitiously winking at me.

The Agent asks snoopy questions.

*How is it that you're such a Free Bird?*

Pawing at Art's youthful vocabulary,

Unblinking to Power, I casually remark:

*I have won a scholarship.*

*I am headed to New Orleans*

*To begin my studies at Tulane.*

Somethin' like that. But I can tell

Purvis' mid-Western accent ain't buyin'.

Round midnight in Alexandria,

I pull the French Connection switcheroo;

Middle-finger waving to Agent Righteous,

One-more-black-man-in-chains

Pumps a hand-cuffed-wrist *G'bye*.

Fellow fugitives, mind-readers;

One day we'll walk a rail-road tie.

New Orleans is a fleeting sight.

Apprehended ‘n' air-mailed home,

Harold's British fists

Come a rainin’ ‘n’ I’m alone.

Gold pinky ring

Makes that awful sound,

Breakin' skin ‘n' pride.

Listen to me, Jesus.

I tried, I really tried.

\*

In the front seat, Momma screams;

You'd think the car would crash,

65 miles-an-hour,

Beating-a-ticket-to-ride;

Later, bruised but breathing,

My savior, Ted Church, confides:

*Optimus, I got an idea.*

*Let's check you in*

*T’ this Woodlawn place.*

*Give you some time*

*T' escape the rat-race.*

*What say?*

*Good for the game?*

*Land you a seat?*

*Salesmanship Club Boys Camp?*

*A return to the woods,*

*You’ll never be the same.*

*Optimus,*

*Let it make you better.*

Terminally enthusiastic, I agree.

A most excellent adventure.

*Ted, please, write for me that letter?*

Now,

Walking up Woodlawn's granite steps,

Soggy back pocket *Black Panther*,

Inside, receptionist Kathy cheers.

Pretending not to notice

The blood on my shirt,

The muss of wet hair,

Kind-of-sexy Kathy,

Friendly she purrs.

*Young rising poet,*

*Glad you’re here.*

Yes!

On to the ward, into my room.

Change of clothes.

Hundred sit-ups.

Patient Joseph drops by,

Soothing voice assures,

His cure lies in my semen

Resting in his stomach.

*Sick.*

What’s a fella’ to do?

The big, black orderly, Joshua,

Raps knuckles hard at the door.

Quietly spies my drying black panther

Likes me a little bit more.

*Bro. Got a phone call.*

*Don’t know who.*

Ted Church on the line.

Urgent in voice;

Everything’s got a first time.

*Optimus?*

*Listen to me.*

*They're gonna cut you loose.*

*Can only keep you ten days,*

*Here's what I want ya’ to do.*

*They’re right.*

*There’s nothin' wrong with you.*

*But I want you to show 'em different.*

*See what I’m tryin’ to do?*

*Whatever it takes, young man.*

*Keep your seat in the zoo.*

*Act on your dreams.*

*Glad to help this chance.*

*I’ll work my best*

*For the Salesman's dance.*

*Optimus,*

*Show 'em you belong.*

*It’s time for you to sing your song.*

*You can do it, son.*

*Sing for them your own song.*

*\*.*

Sing for them your own song!

*\**

*Do you have your own song?*

*To help you through the night?*

*Do you have your own song*

*To carry you through the day?*

*Do you have your own song*

*To help you find your way?*

*The Buddha he did tell us,*

*Everything will be done,*

*If we accept our destiny,*

*Each of us is the one.*

*Never forget,*

*Have your own song.*

*Do you have your own song?*

*To help you through the night?*

*Do you have your own song*

*To carry you through the day?*

*Do you have your own song*

*To help you find your way?*

*\*.*

Martin Luther King

Is a giant of a man.

I know so.

I read his biography

In the dreamy quiet of my room.

Soul brothers,

Him, older than me.

A white man writer says he says,

*The truth will set you free:*

*Letters From A Birmingham Jail.*

Martin's words ‘n' thoughts

Powerfully impress

My oh-so-young,

Eager-to-please mind.

\*

Without being slavery itself,

The New Orleans of my ten-year youth,

Was as segregated as segregated could be.

Momma takes me outside,

Points to the two line bus-stop:

Negros n' white folks.

Momma says:

*It won't be this way when you are grown.*

*There are no lesser people.*

*In evil these seeds were sown.*

Even if slightly lit,

She is the coolest person

I have ever met.

Even cooler than Floyd,

Her one-eyed ‘n' smooth

Bad-ass boyfriend,

Skipper of a Teakwood power-boat,

‘N' a long, black, Fleetwood Cadillac.

Momma was that cool.

I have long held vast dreams

Of grandeur, people ‘n' race

Close to my proud heart

Here in the *antebellum* bosom

That is my South. Dixie!

The heart knows what's right,

Even when demon hate

Eclipses reason for fright.

I see what's going on.

Blacks, whites,

Down, up.

Historical inequity

From the Romans to the cusp,

Bleedin' cuts in our Modern Times.

Martin, I will not fail you.

Even if they jail me.

Instinct hatches a plot.

\*

Alone.

Shivering.

White underwear Teen Lear.

Padded walls.

Muscles twisted.

Joshua's great arms

Mangled my courage

Into a single, safe form.

*Flail, flail, flail, you blessed child!!*

Over brawny shoulder he threw me,

Love in his heart;

Knew from the start,

No matter the Pride in his head,

America led

Him and The Others

Up-from-a-God-awful-bondage

Into a $252-a-week, take-home.

*Flail, flail, flail, sweet child of mine!!*

*Tell those truths!*

*Signify every word right back at you!*

*Tell it like it is!*

*Look at you there!*

*Up on the table!*

*Now the Town Square!*

*Sing it, Optimus!*

Sing I did.

*Revolt!*

*Masses arise!*

*Tongues to be cut!*

*Words salve lies!*

*Truth to Power!*

*Impotent medicines doin' ya' no good?*

*Our way or the highway!*

*Live life like we should!*

*Onward, soldiers!*

*Fight the good fight!*

*Brothers n' sisters!*

*Here on this night!*

*Black!*

*White!*

*Behold this sight!*

*You know we are right!*

Joshua! Hold me tight!!

. . .

*Real generosity to the future*

*Lies in giving everything to the present.*

- Albert Camus.

One night,

I did.

‘N' it felt right,

Exercising might

Of Reason over Passion.

O, Passion was a'plenty.

Solitary Sunday.

Defeated Cowboys.

Dallas in Sadness.

Penance for Badness.

Fried eggs ‘n' tomato soup.

Foggy eyes on the ward, they say,

*He led the Group.*

I did, too.

For one, brief shining moment.

Monday comes.

Clothed ‘n' dressed;

New witch-doctor.

*You've passed the test.*

*Tell me about it.*

I do.

From the bottom of my heart.

He don't say it,

But I can see, he likes my smile.

*Did I tell you I have a nice smile?*

Looks like I’ll be stayin’ awhile!

Six months later,

East Texas' winter woods

Are piney and quiet.

Sniffing out a young heart,

Unperturbed, up looks a deer.

My peace.

New group.

Boys who are Boys.

Men who are Men.

Salesmanship Club Boys Camp.

Compassion to-and-from-them.

Martin.

Serving you,

I serve myself.

*“Foment your own race riot.”*

I suspected

Somethin' good was gonna happen.

The night I sang my own song,

It did.

\*

Optimus was sure that as every hour passed on that cold but clearing January morning the truths of life – that he was an Individual part of a Group and that the Group so much needed him as an Individual – for the first time in his young life he knew that where there was will, his will, he would find his way. At two o’clock that afternoon, sick, disgusted, way past hungry, the aura of peace found its way into the hearts of these young boy-men. Bonds strained were healed; new understandings of the lonely existential condition of humankind were not above affecting nature’s children, including them; and, if they worked together with respect, patience, and forgiveness, even that which seemed difficult if not nigh impossible was, in fact, attainable. Eating bologna sandwiches out of the back door of the chuck-wagon, the boys giggled, teased and slapped happy with each other. Even Optimus got over his big self.

Next morning, Chief Melvin asked the Beavers: *What ya boys think ‘bout maybe taking a canoe trip down the Sabine River? What say maybe five hundred miles from this campsite down to the Gulf of Mexico? Any takers?*

Five hundred miles of love began with a single, gurgling drip-drip of nature’s water bubbling up from within the Beavers’ campsite, winking and nodding its way, first a few feet of trickle, then a bit more; wending down the slope into Beaver creek, splashing a bit further to Lake Fork, mouth-water to the Sabine. Five hundred miles of love from a single drop. Go forth, Optimus. Go forth. It was a good day to live.

Ω

- MEETING WITH MY FATHER -

It was September and the early afternoon New Orleans sunlight was warming even as the humidity still kissed at the neck. It was beautiful and Optimus was happy to be strolling in the French Quarter. *La Vieux Carre'. What a place.* It was Optimus' earliest memory of a neighborhood. *Great Gramma Howell. I walk in thy footsteps in homage of your tender leadership.*

The bells of St. Louis Cathedral rang on the quarter-hour. Optimus imagined himself as three again, sitting on the parquet floor of Gramma Howell's, listening to the bells chime from their living room on Basin Street. *Gosh! Where had the time gone? Now. Here. A meeting with my father . .* .

Ω

To be continued . . .