# Chapter 1 – Free Will and Foreign Steel

All of my first recollections involve throwing things. Throwing dirt at strange children who come around from the other side of the block, grinding cement with their Big Wheels and trespassing onto my five year old turf. Hiding in snow drifts and lobbing snowballs at police cars. Whipping stones picked off of gravel driveways at teenagers riding their bikes around the neighborhood while tripping on acid. Throwing rotting apples off of viaducts onto the expressway, throwing caution to sulfur smelling winds around my childhood home and eventually, throwing-up decomposing gelatin capsules floating in a solution of liquid black charcoal and stomach acid.

From birth, life has always felt like the trajectory of a launched catapult that has never stopped. I imagine myself born in the same way a baby kangaroo is born, shot from its mother womb while she squats on a small incline in the dirt. For me, however, I never had much of a roll in the dirt; I just keep shooting out into the horizon.

I don't remember anythin9ol.\g that passed immediately after my mother was relieved of her maternal duties by whatever state agency deemed her unfit to raise a child and placed me into the genius of foster care – anything except two specific, short-film images in super 8 quality memory: 9ol.\9ol.\

Memory image one: a suburban park where bright purple lilacs bloom all around. I'm being held in the arms of a cheery, matronly white woman with curly pepper-n-salt hair.

She looks like the painted-in-gouache illustration of a grandmother on a box of Grandma's Instant Pancakes. She's wearing heavy silver cat-eye glasses with a matching chain. She's talking to someone I can't see – someone off my baby-eye camera lens. I can feel the eyes of the other person looking at me warily but I can't see them. I sense this person is afraid to tickle me, touch me or distract me away from the lilacs I'm trying to grasp far below me.

The second short film in my mind involves the same old woman who walked off the pancake box, only this time, she's holding me in a rocking chair wearing a gingham dress, a white, purple and orange afghan draped over her bosom. While she rocks back and forth, a girl, maybe four years old, tries to poke at me, the way children do when they want to find out something about the mass and truth of an object. The girl has ochre-glazed sienna skin and obsidian black hair cut in a mixing-bowl shaped bob like all the Mexican kids in my grade school. She starts poking me over and over, too much, too fast. "Stop," the woman laughs as she grabs the girl's small curious hand firmly, clutching her fingers in a kind but firm denial.

Grandma's Instant Pancakes never existed and I'm not so sure this woman existed either, at least not in the way my private short reel films remember her. In any event, these segments without a story are my first moments of human consciousness I can recall.

By time I'm three years old, I am living with what was to be my adopted family and my new name becomes Jonah David DeJong even as the adoption lawyer is still working to

erase the last bit of namesake trace that bears evidence of the womb I came from. My middle name, David, is the only thing from my birth will stay intact for the rest of my life.

There are no other memories of my tiny in-between years in foster care, no more of the so-called formative months, and absolutely no mind movies of my biological mother. All I know is there was a feeling of her absence – neither bad nor good – simply a sense of a shadow I felt in my life, less because she was no longer there and more because of where I was at.

I don't know if all that lost time without a stable family actually fucked me up the way all the experts claim it does. I'm sure regularly listening to Black Sabbath's album "Paranoid" when I was nine years old did an equal amount of damage.

The introductory textbook for college genetics classes published by John Wiley and Sons – published in a era where we can now quantify the effect of our emotional world on the physical brain – estimates 63% of our intelligence is inherited. So with or without matching DNA between any of the characters in this story, the Jonah David DeJong story is not about raw smarts or chug-chugging gumption. The story here is about what happens during the imprinting, wrestling with everything between Original Sin and the corruption society wreaks upon a man or woman; everything that makes me and other orphans like me, the way we are. No Horatio Alger exists here and if it seems like it does, it is indeed something different than what that reader is perceiving.

Writing in the first person, as my high school creative writing teacher used to say, is for reformed drug addicts, former girlfriends of overrated writers and recently retired American presidents. All of these being people who find the account of their own lives far more interesting than people standing outside of their existence actually do.

Let me declare right now that I despise memoir as a written art form, especially memoirs from people under 40 and most specifically, memoirs by people who never really did anything besides writing a memoir. Memoir recalls the testimony-and-healing-type books people in Alcoholics Anonymous or born-again Christians read. For this reason, this account of Jonah DeJong's life is "a basically and largely true novel," not a story of triumph or healing. Most of the events have occurred, many in a different place. All the people exist or existed at one time but the sequence of existence has been heavily edited. I doubt that any other autobiography of dubious accomplishments is any different in forming its purported non-fictions.

And so lights dimmed and the first large reel begins.

When I turn the faucet of my memory on full blast, water doesn't flow freely from the recall spigot until right about the time my adopted parents begin sleeping in the Separate Beds and in the Separate Rooms. My mother in the master bedroom and my father in the room across from her with the fold-out couch and the 14" television. While this is happening, I am too young to really feel anything profound or tragic about my parents'

separation and eventual divorce. I do know it is becoming increasingly difficult to watch cartoons on Saturday morning with my father snoring away in the TV room. The experience of my adopted parents' divorce gets filtered, for me at least, through popular music and movies from the first big era of American divorce.

I construct the set for my re-enactment with thrift store furniture using photos cut out from decades old Better Homes and Gardens magazines found in the collage bin of a high school art room. My research for what the event meant is culled from polls printed in newsweeklies and renting films like *Kramer vs. Kramer*. My internal script on divorce gets rewritten throughout the years. First, by the 40-ish soft-spoken and overly-sensitive master's candidate in counseling who comes to talk to our third grade class about divorce then years later, by the Bible teacher at the Christian middle school I'm forced to attend against my will. I come out of these two events feeling like I should feel like a statistic with various singular-case side effects but I don't really own much of that story like the other kids who went through divorce. In fact, until the time of the Bible teacher, the divorce didn't really matter at all, it was just a dad to visit with a better apartment in a cooler part of the city or another state.

"My parents were never married," Katrina Mulder told the master's candidate during one of our special class sessions meant to build our self-esteem, "My mom said dad was just a son of a bitch."

"And?" the master's candidate offers in compassionate confusion, a voice dying for some real pathos. The master's candidate leans forward, waiting for Katrina's bomb. May some resulting grammar school promiscuity?

"We're all your friends Katrina. You can tell us more."

"Totally all," answers Katrina Mulder in a voice that tastes as bland as the ditto paper the kid seated next to her is chewing like gum. When the master's candidate leaves she rolls her eyes and says, "How gay was that? Everyone's parents are divorced."

A few years later at the Christian school, the Bible teacher tells the only three children in the class with divorced parents that, "Over supper this evening, you children should tell mom or dad that it's a sin to get remarried."

Then she shakes her head and says, "Of course, your mothers might not make supper for you anyway."

**The neighborhood**

How do you tell the difference between the North and South of Chicago? Basically, on the Northside streets carry names of European writers, classical composers and names of girls that catch rays of sunlight in their hair. On the Southside, streets are mostly numbers, like lives to be cataloged, filed away like case folders, or streets have names

like Buffalo Avenue. To understand how a person becomes a North or a South, a spic or a nigger, Irish or white trash, you need sociology, geography and the first smile from a girl who grew up someplace else other than the that-nobody-everybody-is-nobody neighborhood where you grew up.

How do you know that you're driving to that nobody? You know when it's night and heading away from Comiskey Park, you're kissed by the neon red lips of the Magikist sign glowing over the Dan Ryan Expressway. Then you know you're headed for the Southside . When you see a faded hand-painted sign of a skinny Black chef chasing a horrified, perspiring, panicked chicken across the top of the words "Harold's Chicken Shack #22" or "#45" or some other random number you know you're on the Southside. When you smell the sulfur of steel mills and drive under the rollercoaster-high Chicago Skyway, you know you're crossing from the bigger Southside to Southeast Chicago, forgotten Chicago. When you cross over the gaping mouth of the ports crossing the bridge at 92nd Street and Exchange, driving down Exchange as it turns into Avenue O, and other Sesame Street roads of J, N and O, finally arriving at a dead end in front of vast acres of brambles-and-broken-barbed wire asphalt lots and railroad tracks of Republic Steel, you're finally on our South Side. On a city map our territory is named South Chicago, in our minds it's all Hegwisch or more affectionately, Chicago's Lost Neighborhood, because it's the neighborhood equivalent of an off-the-radar country like Kazakhstan.

People in places like Hegwisch are anonymous even to urban sociologists and existence swims in an ether similar to the chalky taste of reconstituted powder milk. It gets sweetened from time to time by the juice dripping from summertime Mississippi watermelons sold off the back of a truck. Where I spend my time, between 130th and 115th, maybe even up to103rd if we've lied to our mothers about where we are riding our bikes to, every earned joy needs to be sucked slow like the last soft red candy coin from a small handful of penny candy. Yes, in Southeast Chicago we still have penny candy sold in corner stores next to 50 cent arcade games and old men with Jimmy Durante red bulbous noses manning the counters.

If you visit the South side, you refer to the place you're standing in at that moment as *on* the Southside. If you live there, grow up there, you're simply Southside and everything there is Southside. Nothing is on or in there – place or person – be she a short, vollyball player legged strawberry blonde Beverly Irish girl or lanky onyx South Shore black woman. No one annunciates "He is from the Southside," or "Our family is from the Southside." Everyone just states "She's Southside" because Southside operates socially like a function does in math – so much is implied. For instance, "She puts ice in her beer because she's Southside." Other things Southside need no explanation. There are only three types of cigarettes people smoke on the Southside and most smoke menthols. If you're black you smoke Kool, if you're white you smoke Newport. Anyone can smoke Mores which look long and skinny like Virginia Slims but they're chocolate brown. "Looks good next to a Martini," my neighbor Susie who smokes them always says. More cigarettes are one of the few untied social signifiers both Blacks and Whites share on the

South Side. I'm not sure what the Mexicans smoke because none of the Mexicans I know smoke at all besides former gang members who begin to dip into their heroin stash.

The isolated neighborhoods of Southeast Chicago, hidden behind the international grain elevators and the shipyards along I-94, stuck between 127th and 138th streets, are the perfect place to grow up. Perfect not as in we have the best schools, the nicest neighbors and good property values sense of perfect but perfect if you consider a mix between a boxing club and a playground designed by Futurist painters to be idyllic. Bungalow neighborhoods bordered by oxidized castles of industry.

For boys in our neighborhood, the shells of these closed factories form a post-industrial amusement park, not the temples of yesteryear American-flag, kill the Ayatollah, fuck Japanese steel prosperity, forever bringing on sorrowful, fighting bar times and bitterness talk of better days. Muddy, deserted service roads cutting into prairie grasses that have reclaimed the land behind these oxidized ghosts become safari trails. There are miles of railroad tracks to explore. There are orphaned, rusting steel mills to play hide and seek in. And there are manmade lakes, ten-foot deep clay crater puddles created in the upheaval of building the Skyway; lakes where you catch tiny all-bones bluegill, backbreaking-heavy, stinky, Leviathan-looking carp, and the occasional, eventful, small mouth bass. Even Southside boys who don't play sports or can't throw the kind of hook that can dislocate a jaw of an enemy during a fight, even those boys learn how to fish. Not just hook and worm fishing, but everyone knows how to pop a hula popper so it mimics a real frog and make a lure spin so it shimmers like a minnow. And in these lakes, for boys,

sunfish and bluegill are all keepers for the frying pan. We all learn to gut and skin a fish before we learn algebra, (or don't learn algebra). Tommy Pulaski's teenage brother once advised, "If America is ever taken over by another country, and you have to survive, like in 'Mad Max', knowing the difference between a bullhead and a proper catfish will become essential survival knowledge. Then the northsiders will be up shits creek."

Southsiders are territorial like lobsters, pissing in the air stream of their own breath to send out pheromones marking their turf. Your ultimate success and possible fame right in the neighborhood is determined by how well you can fight bare knuckles under streetlamps and with neurons clenched hard enough to give you the bravery to cross bridges over the Calumet River or viaducts under the Skyway to find that something different: a neighborhood with girls who walk a little tougher, swing a little looser on dates and hang out around a Tastee-Freez with more flavors – enough flavors of twist cone ice cream worth risking a beating. By thirteen, if you lose too many fights, it's time to plan a destiny and identity for yourself far beyond the steel mills. A self outside the unions, and forgetting about wet, too-young sex with frosted, fake-blonde sassy Newport-smoking girls with last names like Marino, Lopez or Petrowski. Those memories will be for the failed and famous men who dared to box beyond Golden Gloves.

Later in life, the men who are formed from the boys who end up with black eyes early and leave the Southsides of the world, blended-in men with neighborhood accents muted down by ambition, these men spend their nights alone in high-thread count sheets, turning up their erotic thermostat by fantasizing about the Newport smoking inhabiting

their past life. Lying in the dark, these men are aroused by nostalgia for the girls' brassy manners; remembering how sweet their breath tasted in a I'm-gonna-fuck-you-tonight-maybe French-kiss laced with Little Kings Ale and menthol-flavored nicotine.

For every man or woman whose core identity can be broken down into either some one who left or someone who remained, childhood always looms like the sound of rumbling semi-trucks shaking the steel and concrete of a highway overpass. And in that childhood, filled with both sublime survival and a suffering that stinks – again it stinks – like the sulfur smell from the mills, these longings to passionately kiss tobacco breath and tug at hair lacquered with Aqua Net hairspray start forming within the fermentation of heavily revised recollections filled with more kissing and less bruising.

Lives as they are defined by the phrase "in our neighborhood" are bounded by 115th Street to the north and by 138th Street to the south. One side of 138th Street is the beginning of the suburbs and the other edge of the city but neither side looks much different. Our neighborhood village – a place where the air is thick with a pride made by 16 inch softball brawn and backbreaking work – is rows of one-story square brick bungalows with a few pre-city farmhouses in-between them. Its cartography is not unlike a drawn-out Monopoly game right before bed-time where a cluster of houses and hotels are plopped on top of Baltic Avenue by a desperate player who lost his all hope for Park Place. Men in the neighborhood have hands and tools, not family names, so they build in odd ways on top of whatever was already there before. We are a strange chunk of properties on the map of Chicago, an industrial Amazon forest settlement, so zoning laws

in our Forgotten Chicago mean as much as laws that curb street fighting or drag racing on the access roads running alongside the Calumet Expressway.

Cross the city line on 138th Street into the first South suburb, Burnham, then ride your bike two or three miles south, past the River Oaks shopping mall, past the creepiness of the pee-yellow smiley-face water tower of Calumet City, ride up to where you can see the painting of Dürer's hands folded in prayer on water tower to mark the town of South Holland, (the first 'nice place to live' down here), then pass the end of South Holland and there's nothing but farmers fields and pebble-speckled sandlots about to become subdivisions. No aluminum siding or in-ground pools out here yet around the landscape of highway clover leafs and interchanges, just ponds and prairie grass that has been there since the Indians – sorry, Native Americans, (our school principal always corrects us). Here in the new nowhere, beyond the bungalows built for a generation of war heroes, things are so undiscovered that if a small boy scours the ground with his eyes, he can find a forgotten arrowhead from 100 years ago. In this place, toads lay eggs in the puddles carved out by bulldozers and little black tadpoles abound, sprinting in water like the undefeated ambitions of grade school boys. In this frontier, heavy machinery has formed manmade dunes that come wintertime, will prove perfect for sledding if an older brother or babysitter breaking the rules will drive you out here. "You guys are trespassing after all," is usually the excuse not to help you out in the sledding department.

As aspiring child explorers set out to find one edge the rim of the world, we regularly ride bikes past that 138th Street line into this new suburban wilderness without our parents

knowing how far away we have journeyed. We ride BMX bikes with expensive parts put together piecemeal, chrome plating done by a brother in a neighbor's garage, braving the wicked whizzing winds of semi-trucks that nearly suck us off the narrow, litter-strewn shoulder of the road. We're exploring places far beyond our world, where things are so brand new, parents say, if you install a push button phone you won't have to wait through that clicking noise of the old rotary line.

Sometimes we return from this nowhere with pet tadpoles swimming at the bottom of a 32 oz. plastic Burger King cup. Other times, we return from these safaris just carrying exotic tales. One August evening, all the while cicadas singing a soundtrack to the humidity, Tommy Pulaski and Ryan O'Malley return from a bike expedition swearing that, riding towards the woods well past 186th street where there were no more street signs, they had seen the fur from some orange brown road kill that Tommy emphatically says, "I fucking swear on my St. Christopher medallion and my grandmother's grave was a dead bobcat."

"Yous'd shoulda have picked the bobcat up and brought it back," Jeff Greenfield says in a voice expressing more disappointment than disbelief.

"You can't touch that dead thing, you'll get a disease," Tommy Pulaski sounds back, condescending as usual.

"My Uncle Jerry, man," Jeff boasts, "Uncle Jerry said he ate road kill in Vietnam to survive."

"Where did he find a road for kill in the middle of the jungle, dumbass?" Ryan asks Jeff, forever refusing to accept any story trumping his own.

In the back of our minds, my guys and me thinking together, a bobcat is possible because summer before, a couple tadpoles we captured grew into stout toads and after all, didn't we hear from the morning disc jockeys that there were alligators in the sewers of New York?

Boys who grow up together in forgotten pockets of cities, deeply psychic neighborhoods like the one we live in, are more than friends; they are mythical allies, like the compatriots of heroes in Greek tragedies. We are the army without that Jason or an Alexander; without a central hero. Bonds form because on the South Side– like so many other places where pores sweat molten steel and other skin secretes black smoke substances – even just crossing blocks can mean battles to the death. Literally, in the rougher areas on our part of the Southside, like a version of West Side story with swearing and teen sex, gangs still use switchblades.

We have no Athens to keep the peace. They have that kind of thing on the North Side.

At this point, many of you may have said to yourself, "I thought I was picking up a novel but instead I seem to have a sociological essay in my hands." Well, bear with the writer my reader, for this is the foundation for the story. The writer is simply using the angle of a study to guide the audience to that particular point where the story really begins. The writer is setting the stage for the time that happens, the time between the launch of the trajectory and when the trajectory finally lands. Plop.

My immediate sociology, my neighborhood group, is made up of best friend Jeff and Tony Greenfield, two brothers from the other side of the block, then Tommy Pulaski, who is more a friend of Tony's, because he is older, Ryan O'Malley, and finally Juan Cortez or Big Juan, who only goes to school with us at McArthur Elementary for half the year. He spends the other half in Texas, working aside his migrant worker parents. At the outset of our puberty, Juan replaces Ryan as a year round member as Ryan O' Malley's parents move out of the neighborhood and more Mexican families start moving in. Mexicans like Juan were always there since the time I met Tommy Pulaski on his big wheel but not year round. When more of what old timers call 'them' move in permanently, Juan's parents open up Las Altas de Michoacan, a small grocery store that always smells a certain way from the thigh-high tubs of masa stacked in first aisle.

I met Jeff Greenfield (Jeff), Tony Greenfield (Greenfield), Tommy Pulaski (Tommy Pulaski) and Ryan O' Malley (O' Malley) at the end of summer before first grade. I began throwing dirtballs at them every time they passed in front of my house riding their Big Wheels. Remember how friendships are forged by lines others may never cross? On

our first meeting, they were crossing the border into my recently founded state of New Vermont – the state border simply defined by a line of purple chalk and a poster board sign stuck in the far corner of our small front yard – without my permission. As a five-year-old living near the Indiana/Illinois border, I had decided that all it took to add a new state to this Union we call the United States was a simple sign marking where your state began and the other state ended. I also read in the World Book encyclopedia, that borders between countries had guards. This group of booger-faced assholes was colonizing my newly declared territory on their Big Wheels and Tommy, on a Green Machine.

For accuracy, just Tommy Pulaski's face was filled with dried snot. Until he was ten years old, Tommy walked around unaware of the tattooed yellowish dried nose sap stuck to his upper lip.

When I told the other boys from around the block not to cross my border, Tommy Pulaski wiped off the dirt that had coagulated on the goo around his nose and declared, simply, that I wasn't being very nice. This was the only time I would ever see Tommy address any form of conflict with polite assertiveness and not just kick the crap out of his advesary with his short but massively wide frame. Everyone knew Tommy Pulaski was going to end up being one of those kids big enough to play Mt. Carmel football. If he played for St. Rita in our neighborhood and was just as good as a Mount Carmel player, he would've found problems. "That ain't nice, man. We're just trying to ride by," Jeff said, backing Tommy up.

I explained that I had created a new state called New Vermont and that they were trespassing. "Where do *you* live?" I ask.

"Around the block. If you let us pass, you can be our friend," Jeff says to me.
"Yeah, ain't nuthin' but old people on this side of the block," adds Tony. "We ride in their lawn and they swear at us."

That afternoon, I discovered their side of the block and they had joined my revolution to emancipate children on both sides of the cement oval from adult-delimited borders.

The first thing we did was to set up a system of taxation, extorting the shivering, shirking church kids who lived across the street from the Greenfield's house. We charged them cookies and cans of soda stolen from their mother's kitchen as tariffs. This was the first time I saw the brutal force of Tommy Pulaski. "Steal the Wildwood pop, jerk!" he said punching his skinny victim in the arm, "Your mom will notice if you take Pepsi. And Tab is for women. Don't you ever take pop without permission, asshole?"

Tommy Pulaski taught us the power of swearing before puberty. Tommy Pulaski and Tony Greenfield were in second grade (Tony should have been in third), so they not only knew division and multiplication to keep consistent books – "You still owe us two cans of orange soda from last week," Tommy would say as the enforcer – they had mastered the equation of force times fear.

After a week, the World Government of Parents United revoked our sovereignty but our friendship was solidified through discovering the awesome power of exploiting the sissified and stupid, (not just meek because that would be wrong) and a shared taste of rebellion.

"I like you," Tommy exclaims to me after our first project together. "And I never met a nigger before."

"I'm not a nigger," I tell him. "I'm Puerto Rican."

"Same difference my dad says. But you're our friend. That's all that matters."

My parents' friends never used the word nigger but I knew everyone else around the neighborhood did. Even some of the Mexicans used it so I didn't take it personally.

Before you're six and old enough to cross the street or clever enough to begin breaking the rules, one square block is your entire universe. It's sacred turf to be protected at all costs and your friends you grew up with, an eternal band of blood brothers. Best men at Southside weddings are always first grade friends.

Jeff Greenfield and Tony Greenfield, although they are brothers, don't even look like they're from the same neighborhood much less the same family. Tony Greenfield has inherited his mother's side. That crook of an Italian nose, curly black hair, skin that tans

within the first hot weeks of late April. He is gangly and eternally apprehensive. His big brown eyes are always squinting, as if his suspicion of the world is a blinding sun above him. He is quieter than Jeff and speedier to grow angry. Jeff has dirty blonde hair and is always the shortest of us, but one of the strongest. He also tans in the spring and is amicable like nothing bothers him for most of his life, especially as a kid. Tommy is stocky, glowering, like all boys who go onto play catholic high school football. Like Jeff, his hair has been long, down to his shoulders, since we first all came together. Ryan is a tall Irish kid, jovial, strong, freckles and dimples. But Ryan rarely shows those features because he has buckteeth. He rarely smiles, except when something is funny or after Jeff has successfully shoplifted candy from the A&P.

In Southeast Chicago, buildings sit so close to each other that, by time a boy's body reaches eleven, he can touch two houses with the tips of his fingers by stretching his arms. Because of this proximity and the local rumor mill, you feel like everyone on the block is extended family, even if you never talk to them or you hate their guts. All the families with kids on the Greenfield's side of the block hate the old people on my side of the block.

Next door to me lives Susie. She is forever watering her small patch of front yard in white stretch pants and tank top. She's a chain smoking, raspy voiced woman in her forties, pickled not so much with age but by the gin and soda she drank all day long and whose moods seemed to depend on whether she was going to or had just returned from Las Vegas. From my bedroom, I could hear her television and the barrage of curses she

hurled – alongside half-melted iced cubes – at her husband Bill to get him to 'fix the goddamn reception on th' TV' and 'Bill, when are you gonna call the fuckin' alderman so we can get cable in this part of town! That's why I wanted to move to Florida, Bill! Goddamn cable!' On the Southside, yelling is a process aimed at getting things done, not an emotional aberration. Different types of yelling are meant for different ends. I will explain and the reader will understand this as the story goes on.

Susie and her husband are the richest people on the block by far. He is a supervisor at the Ford Plant and part-time pilot for small planes. Their above ground pool in the backyard is a testimony to their wealth even more than the yellow Cadillac with the CB antenna in the driveway.

No one here puts up fences that can't easily be scaled by a nimble six-year-old or a teenage drug addict breaking into a neighbor's house. Instead, backyards are usually guarded from these two types of trespassers by a vicious German Shepard on a long chain. Susie's yard only has a cross -eyed cocker spaniel who curiously smells like Gilbey's gin from time-to-time.

By the time I am advanced into Kindergarten a year earlier, Susie and Bill have added a huge white satellite dish sitting less than 10 feet from the pool. My mother asks if someone could get electrocuted. Susie replies, "At night you can get WOR from New York." Susie spent half of her life in Rego Park, Queens, which explained her accent, a

mix of Southside truncated 'dis,' 'for this,', 'yous'd guys' and long nasal vowels that got drawn out into even longer vowels after afternoons of gin.

Southsiders said 'dem' in place of them not 'deese' in place of 'these' like New Yorkers. 'Deese kids Big Wheels in my front yard' was always a reminder to me of her Rego Park past.

Jeff's mom says 'Susie is something from Valley of the Dolls.' I don't get that because Sussie calls people 'doll' all the time but she is old and ugly.

On the other side of our house lives a tall miserable skinny Dutch man named Pete Voss. Whenever Tommy Pulaski and I cut through his yard, Pete always complains loudly through the screen door about the "little nigger and the Pollack that ain't got no respect like Pollacks n' niggers do." A religious man, Pete, is careful never to use foul language or take the Lord's name in vain in the moments he's expressing frustrations about our changing neighborhood. "Goshdarnit, its changin', you know," he says, adjusting his green mesh Waste Management cap. Pete has worked for Waste Management since it started and along with telling you how the neighborhood has changed he can tell you how his company has changed, "and it ain't for the better."

"Maybe we should change the name of the neighborhood from Hegwish to It's Changin'," Jeff and Tony's mom quipped the only time she talked to Pete.

"Good idea!" Pete replies. "So people *know* what they're dealin' with." Sarcasm is something that is completely lost on the Southside Dutch.

Dutch Pete is an exception in Hegwish and South Chicago. As a Dutch or Wooden Shoe as they are often called unaffectionately by the Polish, Pete's sentiments about changin' are not exceptional to his ethnicity or to the neighborhood in general. Most of the parents who share his views about things changing during basement den football party conversations are Polish, Serbian, Bosnian, Italian, Irish and later Mexican.

With the exception of the Bosnians and the Serbians, the nationality of someone invited to a barbecue or behind their back is usually signified by words like Dago, Mick, Polack, Mexican. Mexican parents are never invited to barbeques but the kids showed up and sometimes, the older sisters on the arm of an older brother. Therefore Mexican kids and Puerto Rican niggers like myself need to learn the ever-shifting lexicon of Southside geopolitics.

Bosnians and Serbs mostly quipped about each and in growling conspiratorial tones, trying to convince a Pollack, a Mick, a nigger, a spick or Dago that it's really the Bosnians or the Serbs the world needed to worry about, not someone else you mistrusted. Greeks? They take the side of the Serbs if they have your confidence.

Jeff and Tony's Uncle Jerry says, "You could put those Serb and Bosnians in the middle of Dee-troit riot, houses ablaz and they'd be on the goddamn Channel 7 news blaming

each other and their history for what's happening behind them." I always like Uncle Jerry's take on these things.

Most families in the neighborhood are only first or second generation born in the U.S.. So like Susie's yard, filled with magnolias, tulips and the satellite dish, our neighborhood bristled with the brilliant clutter of new entitlement. Lawn ornaments and murals on garage doors are a declaration that these folks had made the American dream work for them. Their sense of entitlement is given witness by endowing children with anything and everything they wanted – stereos, expensive bikes, cars, all by time they make 15. I don't think that intentionally means enough allowance money to buy drugs but that's part of the package anyway.

Besides Pete, my adopted parents - or for the sake of the narrative at this point, parents - are one of the few Dutch families in the neighborhood besides the black sheep sons of the affluent Dutch garbage hauling families and their shameful daughters who married outside of the Reformed or Christian Reformed Church. When a dyed-in-the-wool Dutch person said "she's become Lutheran now," even though Lutheran is sort of the accepted third team of Calvinism, Lutheran still meant lapsed. Most DeJongs, Stiensmas, and DeVrieses live in South Holland, a place where, as the Dutch liked to remind other Southsiders, there were no rental units. No rental units, with the exception of the Cherry Lane Motel, renting rooms by the hour. Hence, according to brochures about the village, it had "an established legacy of family and faith." In other words, in South Holland, there was none of the typical South Side rif-raf and by my parents choosing to live among the

riff-raff, they were consorting with the devil or even worse, spics and skinny white guys who drank Hamms Beer, wore black heavy metal T-shirts, and talked loudly about "pussy" in public places like the grocery store.

Dutch people are famous for prudence, abstinence and parsimony – the last of the three really only being true of paying their employees. These are not virtues I have any interest in identifying with even at six or seven years old. It is readily apparent which household, religious or secular, has more GI Joe figures and R rated movies. At that early age, I decide children of riff-raff are more exciting and overall, more genuine people than the peppy girls from South Holland who actually enjoyed going to vacation Bible school. I've only shared my reservations about church life with Uncle Jerry He tells me, "What's the use of a Protestant work ethic if you can't enjoy the fruits of the labor?"

Pete's unrelenting crabass-ness is a clear product of this miserable life. "I never drink," he declares when Susie is around. "I ne-ver drink. *Humph*. Never. *Humph*," waving his hand sideways in front of his nose as if her breath is filled with diesel fumes. Susie on the other hand, wore vivid pink pants suits, like Carol Channing and the lady-stars of Hollywood Squares, and she couldn't stop pinching my cheeks after she had a few Martinis. Pete talked about his new preacher and his tiny lawn. Susie talks about her trips to Vegas, to Rome and all the new clothes she saw in New York she thought my mother should be wearing. She gives me strawberry soda while Pete tells me not to color on his sidewalk. Now you decide what a child is supposed to think about Calvinism against weekends in Las Vegas.

Pete moves out by time I'm in the third grade. His pastor, from a church in neighboring Riverdale, has moved out to California and started a TV ministry. Pete and his wife followed like pilgrims. "No Mexicans or niggers in California either," Pete tells Susie and my mother.

"No Mexicans. He's in for a big fucking surprise," Susie says to my mother after he leaves his special version of the farewell conversation in a huff.

To this day, when Robert Schuler's hour of power comes on TV, any Dutch person over 50 who lived in that South Chicago or South Suburban solar system will remind you that before his Crystal Cathedral, Robert Schuler had a church in nearby Riverdale, the part of the city hidden by steel mills, CSX railroads and water treatment facilities.

By time first grade is ending, people who were once familiar faces with both bad and good intentions have started moving away in a collective huff to places like Arizona, or California or to the new subdivisions being built beyond River Oaks Mall, near the expressway in South Holland. "Live next to a real working farm!" the sign said. Did the people moving from the neighborhood know the farm would eventually go away too and they would be living next to a real house?

South Holland, a former community of onion farmers, is becoming the promised land for a certain type of Southside family who had finally arrived. Conversely, it was the dreaded

destination of their children who had just discovered the joys of smoking pot under railroad trestles, cruising up and down Commercial Avenue, listening to boom boxes in the park, getting hand jobs on the see saw and fingering under the monkey bars.

Three types of families stay in our neighborhood. Those who simply can't afford to move to the new houses, (mostly single parents), those who weren't going to let Mexicans 'take over the neighborhood,' and people like Tommy Pulaski's father, truck drivers and union guys with a paid off house and a nose for investment elsewhere. "Why do I need to move to some stuck-up suburb where I can't have a beer in my front yard?" Tommy's dad exclaims to the world on the first warm spring night, drinking a Coors driven all the way back from a Colorado ski trip in his front yard and conducting the violin section in Neil Diamond's "Cracklin' Rose" with his Winston cigarette.

All my friends from the Big Wheel incident stay and grow up in our neighborhood – Tommy Pulaski, Jeff and Tony Greenfield – all except Ryan O' Malley who moves to a new South Holland home with an in-ground pool. When he moves, we aren't losing Ryan, we're gaining an in-ground pool.

Lots of other things besides the neighborhood start to change after first grade. Jeff and Tony's father left their mother because she doesn't want to join his new church, Hammond Baptist, where people get dunked underwater every Sunday. He has a new family a year later. "A woman I met in the Church," he tells us proudly. Our regular fishing trips to Wolf Lake, which sits on the border of Chicago and Hammond, Indiana,

also serve as visitation time for Tony and Jeff's father. Their mother had a warrant out for Mr. Greenfield's arrest in Illinois so we meet him on the Indiana side.

When we meet Mr. Greenfield on the part of the lake that sits across State Line Road, Mr. Greenfield would come to bring us night crawlers, give us fishing tips, talk about school and remind us the Hammond Baptist pastor told him God did not want him to pay child support because his ex-wife, Ms. Greenfield, would not attend to Hammond Baptist. I would like to add, just for spice, that this thing I am telling you here, things said by Mr. Greenfield on this fishing trip, are the absolute, historical truth. Ms. Greenfield's brother, Uncle Jerry, a Vietnam veteran who claims to have met Bigfoot in Florida and lives in Jeff and Tony's basement, told us "I have a .22 gauge waiting in the trunk for that former brother-in-law, ready to collect his checkbook."

As children fishing or riding bicycles, these Awful Truths don't affect us. These bigger struggles against big people with big hypocrisies is the stuff for teenagers to deal with, teenagers weeping after drinking too many green, barrel-shaped bottles of Little Kings Ale.

Like me, Jeff is labeled as being a prodigy early on in life. To a Southside mother, especially one like Jeff's mom, Ms. Greenfield, finding out your son is some sort of prodigy – even if your son is really just a Horatio Alger of the standardized bubble test – is a statement that your offspring is automatically exempt from becoming a car mechanic. It also, in small ways, says something about what might have been throughout time with

your entire genealogy if certain misfortunes or early pregnancies not befallen ancestors and kin.

As prodigies, we are driven a half hour every day to a Montessori school in a far-away, off the radar suburb, Flossmoor, where, by four years of age, we're reading, doing addition in the hundreds and we've taught ourselves the geography of the world by making maps out of construction paper. I was in the morning classes and Jeff came to Montessori in the afternoon, so we had never met before riding around the block. But we both have the ability to name every country on every continent, (I know the difference between Uruguay and Paraguay before I can tell my left shoe from my right), something hard even for Tommy Pulaski's older brother, the smartest older brother in the neighborhood. But in our supposed virtuoso, we are still boys. Both Jeff and I find it more hysterical than the word 'poop' that a country in Africa would be named Chad because Jeff's cousin Chad still wet the bed at seven-years-old.

I never credit genetics to being a fast learner. At three years old, I am simply lonely with no next-door neighbors my own age. There's just Uno games with Susie Gin Blossom, as my dad calls her. I'm the only little boy, much-less little brown boy with the giant shock of soft curls and pug-dog nose, getting yelled at by the old people on my street. Every once in a while a teenager will ride by on his bike and yell "Hey man! That's Rodney Allen Urphy from the Jack-in-the-Box commercials! Hey Rodney!"

Rodney Allen Urphy is before my time and the boarded up Jack and the Box near our house is now hangout for drug addicts. Someone has spray painted "Fuck the Clown," on the building so I don't know if the teenager yelling "Rodney Allen Urphy!" is screaming something scary or giving me a thumbs up. So after I get bored outside drawing with chalk or get sick of Uno with Susie, I spend the greater part of my day inside with my World Book encyclopedia set, sculpting my long-term plans to produce a dramatic series for PBS about the history of America's fifty states, an episode for each state. "You're like my oldest," Tommy Pulaski's father tells me all the time. "When he was you'sd guys age he'd sit next to the TV when Eyewitness News would come on and pound his fist saying, 'The president will not resign!'"

"He takes a puff of his Winston and stares in the sky at the flight pattern of jets for a moment. "And lo and behold, that greasy motherfucker resigned!"

"I mean the president resigned, Nixon resigned, not my son. My son's gonna go to a prep boarding school on a scholarship. Pretty good, huh Jonah?"

I nod my head. I do not know what a boarding school is but it sounds like a place where they might serve a lot of ice cream for free. For some reason, every place out of the neighborhood that adults talk about with reverence, like a college or a neighborhood with more expensive houses, to me is a place where they serve a lot of ice cream. And I'm always sure people who are able to take advantage of it are never charged a cent.

Part of the reason my mother and the Greenfield's mother stayed in our neighborhood as we enter elementary school is because the local public school has a gifted program. So like the small classes at Montessori, Jeff and I take classes in the library with only five other kids -- the kids who would become the valedictorian, salutorian and the number three ranked graduate in my high school class. Genius Number Five ends up dropping out of high school, doing lots of LSD and inheriting his father's flooring tile business. If you think that's sad or unusual then consider this: Genius Number Five once tries to wrap powdered Cherry Kool Aid in a rolling paper and smoke it to get high on a Boy Scout camping trip.

His demise is tragic because from third grade all the way up to seventh, his popularity rides on the fact his father's tile store had laid the traction tile for the mall scene in the first "Blues Brothers" film and since then, his father maintains a close interior decorating relationship with Dan Akroyd. "Whenever he gets his home remodeled, Akroyd and my Dad go out to dinner."

"You should call him Uncle Akroyd," Jeff replies in mockery. Jeff and I like the idea of mockery because it seems to happen a lot in medieval stories about knights and in the Greek Myths.

Most other kids have a little league trophy or a picture in the local classified paper from a school play. Genius Number Five wore a stained yellow T-shirt with profiles of a young John Belushi and thin Dan Akroyd. The relic was so worn and tight by time fifth grade

hit, it revealed his outie belly button. Also, we had all seen the Blues Brothers, but it was something the teenagers in the neighborhood remembered. The amphetamine dealer on Jeff's side of the block had stories about selling to John Belushi.

Jeff and I are not like the other geniuses, so we form our gifted world-within-a-world around using three syllable adult words like" 'inference' and 'archetype' at inappropriate times to make people mad, random facts about the globe after the Ottoman Empire, our delight in saying 'fuck' around elderly people at the bus stop and a shared fascination with horror films. We never think about our mother's being single or any of the other things we're told to think about by after-school specials on ABC.

Talk show sociologists paint a tragic picture of latchkey kids. My sympathy goes out to those who come home from school into the arms of control freak mothers who have noting to do all day but make a mind full of fuss about their child. Being raised by single mothers as the outcasts of the genius Great Books program we're in, we each imagine ourselves as Rousseau's wolf boy raising himself in the woods, untainted by petit bourgeoisie civilization. Yes, in third grade we can already use the phrase, 'petit bourgeoisie' although not entirely correctly.

Truth be told, any bourgeoisie mores of ours are obliterated by the adults around us. Our earliest sense of socialized civilization outside the home is quickly formed by older brothers and sisters, Mexican grandparents, uncles living in the basement, potheads who hang out in the park and then the bikers who hang around Sugar Magnolia, the bar by the

Hegwish train station. We ride our bikes to Perillo's, the small white brick grocery sitting behind Sugar's, and peek over the fence in hopes of catching a fight between drunken Hell's Angels or two angry pool players brawling over a bet. We learn lessons in civility from the older brothers. They are revered long-haired, bell-bottomed elders in the church of post-sixties, classic rock America who proudly show us the bongs and one hitters they make in shop class. They explain to us why the members of Led Zeppelin were not devil worshipers but Zoroastrian mystics, 'like the American Indians were.' When they are finally sent off to military school, they pass on Black Sabbath and Rush albums with Hustler Magazines hidden in the white inner sleeves with an empty paper package for Job rolling papers.

Later on, the older sisters would teach us about menstruation and how to position your hand while fingering your date in the movies so you don't get caught but still make the girl feel good. They teach us how to dance to new wave music.

As a supreme mentor, Jeff and Tony Greenfield have Uncle Jerry.

**Uncle Jerry**

Uncle Jerry is the brother to Jeff and Tony Greenfield's mother. He collects disability while making money under the table doing odd construction jobs and repairing typewriters. For a time, he worked at a pool hall on 103rd until, as Tony Greenfield tells it; he beat a drunk biker from Hammond, Indiana unconscious with cue ball. Most of Uncle Jerry's time is spent in the basement, where parts of old typewriters are strewn about on top of his white faux fur rug. Sometimes, we heard him yell and groan through the floor. "That means he's practicing karate," Jeff is how explains the strange noises.

Karate, we learn a little later, means he's having sex with one of his strange absent-of-feeling girlfriends. Women who, when they pass us in the driveway say nothing – wave goodbye to Uncle Jerry as he fastens his pants in the door way – and leave a breeze that smells of stale beer, cigarettes and Lysol as they pass.

Extended family like Uncle Jerry take care of seven and eight-year-olds who come home a few hours before their mothers who work at the bank or Our Lady of Mercy Hospital or the social worker building or even downtown, like Ms. Greenfield did. "Remember, Mzzzzzz Greenfield. No r, no miss with s like hiss, just, Mzzzzzzz," I remember her saying when we visit her office. Jeff's mom, Ms. Greenfield, never knew about Uncle Jerry's lady visitors. In her mind, Uncle Jerry is a good example to Jeff and Tony because he is always reading books on American history and reciting the content back to us at the dinner table. During high school, I would find out from Tony that when his mom finally

kicked Uncle Jerry out, it was for giving Jeff a copy of Bertrand Russell's "Why I Am Not a Christian," not because of his karate exercises with lady friends.

Now where the story really begins, we're in the first month of school. Jeff, Tony and me come home sweaty and dirty from August into September heat, the way boys get during late summer. Uncle Jerry is in the Greenfield's side driveway when we arrive, standing by his newly waxed Oldsmobile 98 wearing what look like earmuffs for air traffic controllers. Low afternoon sun strikes the silver glitter in the paint. To us, Jerry looks like a prince next to his royal chariot. A prince historian thinking about noble things and smoking long, brown thin Benson and Hedges 100s.

"Come here boys, I got some girls I want you to meet," he says motioning. We walk to the back of the car and as he opens the wide trunk, we can see he didn't mean his afternoon friends. He pulls out two black rifles. Not BB's guns, the real things.

"What do you think?" He asks us as we stand awestruck and agape, saying nothing with our 'guns are only in movies' faces.

"I understand. Not to be age inappropriate but seeing a real gun for the first time is like when your first real naked women is standing there five inches in front of your face. Remember this feeling for later in life. Both events need to be revered like your most valued baseball card," he tells the star-struck.

"Believe it or not, I'm gonna teach you boys how to shoot today," he announces "Actually, just teaching Tony. You two, Jeff, Jonah, you're too young to touch this girl but you can learn the right way, the respectful way to shoot by watching us."

Uncle Jerry collected all kinds of vintage weapons but especially rifles. We've seen his bayonets, his swords, and collection of rare drawings depicting never realized military inventions from what he called "throughout antiquity." He did not like handguns and when I asked him why, he would mumble something about "conspiracy," and "George Wallace" and "Nazi" and "Genocide of Black People on their own streets."

"Plus, your rifle is a much more astute weapon," he would say, "Do you want to fill your enemy – or a deer – with one hole or a bunch of them? You do the mathematics."

Uncle Jerry's guns are not allowed in Tony and Jeff's house so he keeps them with friends. Mostly, the type of friends who probably shouldn't have guns lying around. This is the first time he has introduced us personally to his rifles which he always calls "girls," or "dames" or with a giant grin, "founding father sticks."

Jerry's rifles are the main characters in so many of his stories because it was in the end, never about him but the amazing things the gun – which includes everything short of oratory at the moment of truth -- did to get him out of a jam. Fighting off a band of threatening Klansmen with his Black Vietnam buddy Louie from Mississippi when Louie's truck broke down at 1:30 a.m. in backwoods Alabama. Killing grizzly bears in

the Northwoods of Minnesota (or was it Colorado?). Beating down a pack of rabid wild dogs that attacked him on a construction site. And of course, his legendary encounter with Bigfoot in the Florida everglades. Jerry's stories had made him the playground Daniel Boone at McArthur Elementary School where we went.

We would learn, years later, when we were old enough to go to Sugar Magnolia and shoot pool on a weeknight, that the KKK story was true. Jerry who was living upstairs and bartending downstairs, shows us a murky photo of a sweat soaked smiling Louie holding a bloodied white sheet in one hand and an American flag in the other. A circular patch with a red and white cross gave away it's authenticity.

When I saw the photo, I understood why Uncle Jerry would always be the only white guy in the neighborhood drinking with the Cortez or Ortega uncles while working on their cars and why he never muttered a racial slur while slurs came like fountains from the mouths of other adults.

But for Jeff and me, as third graders and Tony, who is in fifth, Bigfoot is far more frightening than being on a dirt road facing the KKK and it's the Bigfoot story that commands our reverence for these mighty 'gunpowder constitution savers.'

"Touch the barrel, they ain't loaded. Touch it," Uncle Jerry says picking up the rifle that looked less like a machine gun than the other. "1979 Weatherby Orion, already a classic

two years out the door," he spoke with the reverence of a sportscaster talking about a recently deceased baseball great.

It is black metal, a little clammy, smooth, silent with a wood-finish pump. It speaks of things that adults rarely talk about around children. Not death exactly but maybe reasons death is sometimes rational. It has much more psychological weight to it than any guns we saw brandished on Saturday morning movie cowboys or reruns of cops and robbers shows.

"That boys, is how we won our motherfucking freedom in this country. Nothing to be taken lightly like our buddy Nixon did," Jerry said. "I wish you could feel the freedom of the Armalite AR-18 but it would be irresponsible to put that kind of power in the hands of a first time shooter, much less, a fist time child shooter."

Whenever Jerry talks about the tiny and titan failures of adults in the world, his analogies always reference an American president:

"Fucked up the barbecue like Nixon."

"Ruined a good white shirt like Johnson fucking things up, turnin' shit red."

"Sorry, I'm late. The cashier had a fucking Carter gas crisis line goin' out the door."

"Cheatin' me like goddamn Ronald Reagan cheats a steelworker."

He shuts the trunk. “Boys, I'm gonna make minutemen outta ya. These ladies, puppies, whatever, these companions are really gonna make sure you don’t starve and more than anything, make sure you ain’t gotta eat canned meat.”

He rolls up the shot guns in an old army blanket, puts four boxes of bullets usually used for deer hunting in a large fishing tackle box, shuts the trunk and gives us a man-to-man look that we try to copy among ourselves but can’t.

We are slack jawed speechless, pissing our pants nervous, filled with a combined dread of anticipating getting our heads accidentally blown off and also sense of honor that we are being ushered into the world of the gun. So dazed and frightened getting in the car, we completely miss Uncle Jerry’s story about the his buddy Pancho’s dad, who during the Cuban revolution, crawled in the fields on his belly, all the way from his house to a pasture full of cows just to get a squirt of milk for his coffee. “And that’s what this is about. Walking on your own to liberated feet to get milk from the cow when the powers that be want you to drink your coffee cold and black,” Uncle Jerry exclaims at the end of the story. Most things we do with Uncle Jerry have a big, broad lesson attached to them and a purpose. If we had missed the story of Pancho’s dad and weren’t able to repeat it after the outing, we might not be able to go shooting rifles again because we had missed the whole point of the excursion, a guy getting milk for his coffee directly from a cow’s udder during the Cuban Revolution.

From the house we quickly leave main streets and drive down side roads hidden by Indian grass and jungles of sumac trees, traveling along the industrial corridor of Lake Michigan to East Chicago, Indiana. On the radio, Steve Dahl, the afternoon DJ just about everyone listens to except my dad, plays one of his local hits, a parody song about the Ayatollah Khomeni set to the tune of My Sharonna by the Knack. "Ay-ay-ayatollah!" Tony sings along with gusto. He's sitting the front next to Uncle Jerry driving. Jeff and I sit on flattened cardboard boxes in the back seat. Jerry doesn't want our dirty Indian summer sweat on his new back seat appoulstary. Tony is sticking his head out the window, his brown curly hair blowing, his Roman nose jutting like a wolfhound into the wind. We are all showing summer in our skin. I am darkest but everyone is brown. "Look at this," Uncle Jerry is grinning. He takes his hands from the wheel and exclaims, "Five foot high grass, middle of nowhere with three Dagos and a Dutch Afro. I feel like I'm in the Godfather. Not gonna get shot up at the tollbooth are ya Tony?" None of us have seen the film yet, we aren't allowed to watch it on Tommy Pulaski's VCR so we have no idea what Uncle Jerry is talking about.

After twenty minutes, we pull up in front of an unlocked, rusted-out gate guarding several abandoned corrugated steel buildings. About a half-mile ahead, a dormant steel refinery stands on the horizon. Jerry gets out and opens the gate. As we drive into the empty parking lot towards the hulking shells, Jerry's tires spun and sputtered on the sand that has drifted over the unused gravel road. He floors the car in reverse, then jolts it forward, fishtailing as we move past the steelworks to another group of corrugated steel buildings.

“Uncle Jerry, think these places are haunted?” Jeff asks.

“Too sad to be haunted. Too sorrowful for ghosts even.”

Suddenly the car gets stuck in a sand drift. Jerry lurches the car forwards-backwards, forwards-stuck-backwards-stuck-stuck-jump forward.

“That’s like a dune! Gonna scratch the paint job,” Tony comments.

“No way little buddy,” he replies. “That's two coats of enamel out there.”

Uncle Jerry always makes you feel safe, even shooting off guns for no reason.

It seems like we drove for another mile before pulling up behind a row of barn like structures, covered with graffiti, to hide the car. Uncle Jerry points to stacking bars that ran from the center of the building to the wall on either side, separated by a corridor in between. “These used to store steel rods here before that Carter and that Reagan gave it all away to foreign steel and investment bankers.”

As Jerry unloaded the guns he makes remarks to the inside of the car trunk motioning with one hand to the abandoned factories around us, “You know, those French or

Germans don't give their shit away like we do to the highest bidder. It's like selling your sister's pussy to make a car payment that's what this is."

Since our history lessons come from Scholastic readers, McGraw Hill textbooks and PBS documentaries, not the strange and voluminous books Jerry read, we can't always appreciate his political commentary. On his bookshelf I've seen books of 1000 pages or more that he buys at bookstores around the University of Chicago, some of them aren't even out of the bag. He also collects paperbacks with words like "Cover-up" and "Secret" printed on stark black spines, and the pages have type that looks like it was written on the same typewriter the General Douglas McArthur Elementary schoolteachers used. Some even look like they might have been copied on the McArthur Elementary mimeograph machine teachers use when the photocopier breaks down. Jeff and I had partially read through some of Uncle Jerry's Gore Vidal books but retain the sex parts more than the history parts.

Jerry explains again that only Tony was going to fire the gun this time because Jeff and I, at our size, would be knocked over by the recoil. I'm actually relieved because all I can picture is me shooting my own head off.

Uncle Jerry takes a stick and drew a line in the dirt. "Here. You two don't cross here." He then takes Tony by the shoulder and points towards the closest building, instructing him to walk 'the length of two grown men' away from the line. Tony counts out sixteen wide paces. He steps so far apart that he almost trips on a beer bottle embedded in the dirt as

his worn sneaker heel hits the smooth glass surface. As Tony walks into the late afternoon sun, Jerry, through his bullet-proof-glass thick lenses, squints and smiles with the grin of a proud parent.

"Good. Good." Jerry says, motioning Tony to stop.

The side of the building we face has been filled up with the spaghetti squiggles of graffiti, the calligraphy of burners, the scrawl of obscenities and the bold scribbles of teenage love and hate. Over build up of the yellow and red and blue swirly zig-zag, some one has recently declared, “Jim Willis ate out Lisa Cortez here” with the date of the event posted below. “Point at that crap,” Jerry announces, drawing a rectangle around the pornographic announcement.

Jerry first shows Tony how to aim and hold the gun. “Against the shoulder,” he instructs, “Can’t hold it in your hand like they do on TV. Gotta aim with care.” Aiming with care lessons go on for about fifteen minutes.

Then Uncle Jerry takes the gun from Tony and positions himself to take the first shot. In our eagerness to see what real bullets can do, we not only plug our ears but hold in anxious air in the area between our lungs and stomach.

A loud boom and a ricocheting ching-shing-ching-ing echo fills the sky then disappears into the small sand dunes beyond as Jerry blows a six inch hole through Jim Willis'

testimony. He reloads. Another boom and another hole in the side of the building. I'm realizing now where the scatter shot dents and holes on other abandoned buildings come from, each ring of holes a testimony to a different caliber and different casing.

After near emptying a box of long orange plastic bullets, Jerry helps Tony position the rifle on his own shoulder and shoot for the first time. Anticipating the sudden boom and force of the gun going off, Tony arcs the barrel a little towards the sky as the pink casing launches his shot into a sky humid air going cool.

"Shit, smaller than I thought you were kid," Uncle Jerry says in a loud, startled mutter. "Can't be shootin' in the air to rain buck shot on us all. Your mother's wouldn't be happy about that."

I don't think our mothers would be happy about anything that was going on right now.

Uncle Jerry goes to the trunk of his car and from it, passes around cans of a grapefruit flavored soda called 50/50. They're warm but they still chase away the hot dust I'm feeling in the back of my throat. Jerry rests on the bumper for a minute, winded from the importance of the afternoon, then turns around and from the trunk he takes out a small mahogany ledge that looked like a yoke for cattle. He brings it to Tony. "This is to steady yourself. You shoot with your belly on the ground," he explains, "Sharpshooters use this for training. It's safer but you two younger boys still gotta stay back. I could tell you some really out-there stories about careless shooting with a rifle. The shit don't go

through your skin like a clean handgun shot. It's pretty unpretty stuff. Human being ain't got the hide of animal for skin, just his soul thick like that."

Jeff and I look at each other and roll our eyes at Uncle Jerry's ascent.

As he proceeds to tell us and the car trunk one of his stories involving a black guy 'he didn't know' robbing a liquor store owned by one of his black friends, Jerry pulls out a stack of four foot high, yellowing targets with a picture of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini. The bull's-eye is centered between his eyes. "Ron had these left over. Stacks of 'em unsold in his warehouse. The stupidest idea I ever saw when I first saw 'em. They should have one with the Shah too," Jerry held one in the air, smirking. "But they'll help you keep on target, son."

"What's a Shah?" Tony asked.

Uncle Jerry switched from his Benson and Hedges and pulled out a hand-rolled cigarette from a Drum tobacco pouch where, at all times he kept five pre-rolled cigarettes, and began cleaning the rifle. "A Shah? A son-of-a-bitch that got us into that hostage mess a few years ago. Christ I thought this was gonna be another 'Nam. A presidential buttfuck buddy *that's* what a Shah is."

I've seen pictures of Iran's Shah in old copies of Time magazine sitting in the art room "scrap for collages" basket at school. He dressed like a combination king general and

hotel doorman or something like that. I thought it to be a distinct dress as far as rulers of the earth go. In any event, Jeff, Tony and I all knew by now that when Uncle Jerry answered a question about history, that answer would never be useful on future tests.

As he moves from the car back to the firing line with Tony, I could hardly hear what Jerry was saying. My ears were droning with Emergency Broadcasting System noise caused by the gun going off.

Tony waits patiently while his uncle covers Lisa Cortez' large blue name with a picture of the white bearded leader of Iran. It takes him four tries before the adhesive from the silver electrical tape stick over the rusty spots.

“Now see Tony, you can shoot up and this thing takes away some of the recoil. Just aim for the target.”

The ringing deafness of my ears intensifies my sense of sight. Above me, an endless blue cerulean sky and in front of me, an umber and industrial yellow steel graveyard filled with fat robot-like cranes and cubist spaceships. On the ground, an abstract brown and green glass mosaic telling of teenage bacchanal. Butter crème butterflies flit from the top of one white Queen Anne's lace flower cluster to another. I feel like those butterflies only made of the steel sitting in that marvelously vast and lonely place. Strong, sure, able to transform my life and landscape with the sheer will of my skinny arms flapping wildly.

Poowwwww-wow-wow-wow. The pitch of my aural buzz crescendos with every next shot. It rings up to the heavens. As the butterfly, I would flap so fast I could hydroplane across Lake Michigan, across the other Great Lakes through the Lawrence Seaway to the ocean. From the edge of the horizon at the end of America, I would take full flight. I think about the Greek myths we've been learning at school and feel if Prometheus were there, he would not have been punished for stealing fire because Uncle Jerry would allow us to defy the gods and even if he wasn't there, the abandoned cranes and other objects would rise like Titans and slam down Zeus from the heavens, burying him in Garbage Mountain. And as I imagine this, I can hear Uncle Jerry blasting Boston's "More Than a Feeling" from the car radio through the droning tone in my head.

By the second box of bullets, Tony has improved his aim enough to shoot what looks like – when the fully assassinated Ayatollah is removed – a small escape hole in the side of the empty building. We all stand for a second. My ears are still ringing but somehow, I can hear the lap of waves in the distance.

"No more ammo," Uncle Jerry declares, "Time to surrender to time." As he takes off his ear mufflers and starts packing up the car, we turn to watch the sky in the east. Beyond the ghosts of manufacturing, steel tapered off into sand dune, above the monuments, a celestial ocean of humid September air started turning crimson, an synthetic aurora borealis of light brought on by a mixture of hot iron being poured in Michigan City smelters, the last smoke of the day from other factories and the weary purple haze of the setting sun.

We got back in the car, ears still ringing and stomachs still churning from the force and noise.

Jerry turns off the radio as we take off. We can only hear the din of the expressway as it mixes with the aftershock.

Tony asks Uncle Jerry if he would ever shoot anybody. “Like, as in real life. Shoot ‘em. Maybe not even dead. But shoot ‘em, would you Uncle Jerry.”

"I'm a pacifist ever since the war," he tells the nephew without turning his eyes from the road. Then he smiles. “But I woulda shot Bigfoot if that pine tree gorilla came any closer.”

We sit there driving back home, three boys, heads filled with the echo of exploding shells as the smell of smelting steel fills the hot evening air. Jeff asks me what the word pacifist means. I tell Jeff ‘something like Gandhi.’ He asks me ‘what's Ghandi?’ and I tell him that I’ll show him in the World Book Encyclopedia tomorrow. Then no one talks for the rest of the ride. At that moment, my mind is boggled by what we might do, if in fact, we came face to face with Bigfoot right now and we were out of ammo.

**Chapter 2 - Mom**

When Uncle Jerry drops me off, he says the same thing he always does when he sees my mother's orange Mazda Rx7 in the driveway. “Can't believe that god damn rotary motor is still running.”

Jeff has fallen asleep and barely stirs when I loudly say “GOODB-YE-YE!” and purposefully slam the door to startle him awake.

My mother usually scolds me when I arrive home after she has. She was raising me, as Jeff and Tony's mother would say, with ‘one arm stirring the saucepot, the other on the keyboard.’

Mom works 45 minutes away, as a teacher’s aide for the handicapped. When she was married to my father, she finished her degree in education but never received her state teaching certification, so she’s resigned to working as an aide for $7 an hour plus benefits. She always emphasizes the benefits for some reason. Instead of being her usual freaked out self she’s jovial when I walk in the door. She’s leaning against the narrow kitchen counter, drinking cheap white Greek wine and laughing at the dry wit of her current boyfriend, Basil.

"And where has the little master been this evening?" Basil turns and asks me, raising his glass to my small, sweaty, smudgy presence. In the two years since my father has moved out, I've seen an interesting parade of fellows pass through our door. Mom's a woman who never imagined a life outside or after marriage. I know that because when I'm the only kid between her and a group of other grown-ups, she talks about 'things working out between people' and marriage as some thing that's 'always better in the end.' Since separating, she's further away than ever from the conservative, constantly constipated Dutch community she grew up in. When she was with my dad, some of those people would come over. I don't remember who, they were just a certain type of person I never met around the neighborhood. At one time, as one of my mother's brothers tells me, 'she was the belle of the ball down there." Down there meaning the Dutch community. I like her new group of friends better. They're spillovers from my father's friends, people she's met at her jobs and other mothers of McArthur Elementary students. They swore, drank beer, and didn't go to church twice on Sunday like the few Dutch Reformed families I've known through my mom. Basil doesn't go to church either but he's a little too weird for me.

Basil's a swarthy Greek, a man with a strong nose – stronger than Tony's – strong mouth and chin muzzle for a face. He had the hairiest arms I've seen (besides Rosalinda Lopez) and a poorly controlled comb-over that, from seeing him in the pool, looks exactly like the hair on his back. He's the kind of man who seems to populate movies from the seventies I see on TV. He reminds me of the Judd Hirsch character on Taxi only more

sure of himself, more muscular and like Tommy Pulaski's mother said, "better lookin' than Judd Hirsch for sure. Closer to Tony Danza…but Greek."

"Hairy chest. Way a man's chest should be," is Mrs. Pulaski's favorite man comment, "You boys should pray to get chest hair like that. Says you're a take-charge kinda guy."

Basil is a philosophy professor at the local community college, but he talks more like a tenured tweed coat from the Seven Sisters schools or a small Midwestern Ivy wanna be. Always wearing loud print polyester shirts, flared pants, and Iberian Peninsula sized sideburns, he looks more swinger than Socratic.

Basil usually announces that he's coming over with one of his six rust bucket vehicles you can hear coming off the expressway miles away. Actually, you can only hear them two blocks away.

I could have entered said hello like a normal person but I'm so shocked to see him I blurt out, my mouth filled with a plumb I've grabbed from the kitchen counter. "Hey, did you walk here? Where's your car?" Mom boyfriends are weird because they change all the time so I need the car as a cue.

My mother explains, as far as the car, that next-door neighbor Pete threatened to have Basil's car towed next time if he didn't park it in our narrow driveway that could only fit one car anyway.

"This neighborhood's getting bad enough without some junk heap in front of my house bringing down property values," Basil mimics, imitating Pete's constant scowl.

He leaned over to whisper another impression of Pete in my mom's ear, one he doesn't want me to hear. "Junk cars are worse than niggers for property values," is what he says. When she almost drops her glass from laughter, I asked what he said. "Nothing. Nothing. For adults, little master." I overheard and it didn't shock me. Pete's words were typical statements in the neighborhood, a place where in certain homes, Air Jordan's were known as "nigger shoes." It always gave me certain satisfaction to hear adults mock other adults whose draw a connecting line between anything bad, like junky cars, and blacks and Mexicans. I want the validation that I'm legitimate not the protection from their comments.

Basil, despite having made a considerable amount of money off a series of crib texts for the college core curriculum, including, most famously, a popular cheat chap for Plato's Republic, Basil drives decidedly downwardly mobile vehicles. He is the junky car man to my friends. My mom dates the junky car man. "He drives cars that made you wish you had a bus pass," Uncle Jerry would say. I ask my mom why he drives 'junkers' and she really can't tell me why.

Growing up in a neighborhood where people value cars like some people value degrees from the Ivy League, riding in a rusted out Rambler with painfully roaring noise belching

from the exhaust pipes was the equivalent of having a mail order GED at a Harvard cocktail party. Most of the time I am out with my mom and Basil I say to myself, “My mom is with the junky car man.”

As an adult, I came across a book vendor in New York's West Village selling yellow paged, clear taped copies of Basil's book, "Plato’s Republic for the Here and Now." It posed questions like how the issues like Vietnam War and women's rights would fit into the frame of the Republic. It used the word “frame” a lot and ever time I came across the word, I thought of Basil and imagined all the abstract paintings in Basil's Indiana home, sitting in their Rocco-cum-woodsman frames.

Like so many other Sears sofa intellectual/politicos of his generation, and men in general in that time, Basil sees women's liberation as the road to panty liberation, so he was gung ho about it. That wasn’t hard to figure out, even for children. He walks a fine line between pedantic and party animal, a personality that sucks women into his orbit.

In her younger years, my mother, Marilyn DeJong, maiden name Seitsma, had been a Goldblat's model. I had to admit as her son, adopted or not, she still carried her classic movie star looks that Basil would refer to as "great proportion, man. Like the figures in Athens. The early ones, not the gorged Roman ones that Ruben copied." When he said this, I would first think of my mother with no arms and then, think of my mother's picture painted on the wall of Athens Gyros and Subs on 115th Street.

"So how about pizza tonight, young man? You better be ready to join us or stay content with a poor man's feast peanut butter and jelly," Basil said, toasting the thought of – what I don't know – peanut butter and jelly? Basil raised his glass to everything and most of the time, he spoke like someone from one of the Charles Dickens stories our teacher would read aloud to us. "My mom is dating the junky car man who sounds like some one from Dickens." I would say to myself at the pizza parlor tonight.

"We'll take *my* car," added mom, mistaking the blank tired look on my face for one of the many facial objections I made when forced to ride in one of Basil's 'junkers.'

The best thing about going to pizza with Basil is not the pizza, but the two dollars he always gives me to play the jukebox. Too young to actually have money to buy records, I'm resigned to taping the radio or borrowing records from the library. Local librarians think nothing of children like me checking out an Ohio Players record. Unlike Ryan O'Malley, I actually liked their music, I didn't just want to look at the naked woman on the album cover.

Early September night is falling, those nights where chill starts to rapidly overtake humidity but you still can't bring yourself to wear a jacket. A northeasterly wind carries the faint smell of the garbage dumps along with the low engine hum of the cars running on the Skyway Racetrack that sits on 130$^{th}$ Street.

Basil is doing most of the talking as we drive, making my mother laugh with stories of students stoned in class and secretaries who have to be told over and over not to wear cutoff jean shorts to work and ask him 'What Plato's last name?'

When we stop at stoplight my mother looks at me from the rearview mirror and asks me what the white powder is covering my jeans and dusting my horizontal striped shirt. "Dunno, stuff from gravel," I say with a shrug.

"Stuff from the mysterious life of boys," Basil says turning around and winking at me.

After we have arrived at the lowly lit, dark mahogany pizzeria bar, while my mother is in the bathroom 'fixing up,' Basil leans over the table to tell me that he knows the powdery residue is coking smelt, disposed of improperly outside the closed steel plants. "I'm telling you that I know, and as a friendly warning, be careful playing in the abandoned mills." He says winking and patting my head. "I won't say anything to your mother as she confuses malicious mischievousness with what is clearly exploration."

Mom's prolonged return meant she's doing her hair in the bathroom. I hate when her vanity forces me to interact with her dates. I flip through an issue of the New Yorker he's brought with him into the restaurant. He liked to show my mother the cartoons and if he thought I understood one too, he'd show it me as well.

“So how's school this year?" Basil asks. “Reading. You must be getting into some more advanced reading.” I know that’s his way of fishing for a way to talk about something related to his area of studies.

"Yeah, we're into mythology. Greek mythology." Oops. I let my guard down and say exactly what I don't want to say – mention something that Basil has interest in. As I guessed, Basil animatedly unraveled and began pontificating to me about things I couldn't possibly understand or really don’t want to understand at this time of the evening. I’m waiting for jukebox money and my ears are still ringing.

My mother returns from the bathroom, the hairpins now completely rearranged in the copper red topiary of her hair. As she sits down Basil has reached the end of a lecture which ends with something he calls anima and animus. He looks up, praises my mother’s beauty and tells her proudly, as if I was his own son, that “Jonah’s reading Greek mythology in school! Can you believe that? I was just about to ask him if they're reading the Odyssey this year when you came back.”

“He's in *third grade* honey. I think they're sticking to the gods and monster stuff. You know how it is.”

Our waitress arriving for our order saved me from any further discomfort. After we order a pizza with more vegetables than meat – my mother being a health food devote years

before it was de rigueur and Basil being one of those vegetable-inclined types – I get my jukebox dollars.

After 'Promises in the Dark' by Pat Benatar, a double dose of the Kinks with 'Lola' and the B-side 'Celluloid Heroes,' into the second pitcher of beer my mother and Basil are enjoying, Pink Floyd's "The Wall Part II" overwhelms the restaurant sound system with a scream and the chant of "We don't need no education/ we don't need no thought control…"

I ask Basil and my mother if it was bad not to want an education and "what's dark sarcasm?" Basil, always trying to encourage the fact that I've been branded as gifted, always uses whatever immediate thing I'm asking questions about to prod my prodigy in ways that have no operable context for me at the time. "It's not education that the song is railing against per se, but the rote pedagogy of the British school system, the tracking of the working class into technical fields and the oppressive antiquity of the University system that no longer holds any relevance to the lives of a people in a participatory democracy where the leaders still cling to the illusion of a long disappeared colonial empire and think of themselves as being good men leading a Republic, away from everyday people."

I tried to piece together all these words through association. Speeches like this from adults and the words they contain are easy to remember because they stick out like plaid pants.

I know working class from reading about unions in the 1920's. I know from overhearing Emily Baer's father talking to Bernie Cohen's mother at a school outing to a White Sox game that like the Southeast side, in Manchester, England, steel plants were closing and Thatcher's policies were like Reagan's. I know something about empire and colonialism from reading about the Dutch East India Company and President Teddy Roosevelt and from things a former missionary from Africa - a friend of my father's - told me about his work there and why he quit being a missionary.

Most of the father's of kids at my school were truck drivers, steel workers, mechanics, lathe operators, I have never heard people on the Southeast side refer to themselves as working class people. I've read the word in the newspaper and heard it a few times from my dad. But when Basil uses it, it's filled with what Mrs. Greenfield calls "Jabberwocky-talky…people trying to impress but no substance to act on."

"One day soon, through your own experience as a young academic, you'll understand what they're taking about in the song," Basil assures me.

As the pizza arrives, the bartender comes from behind his station to turn down the jukebox a notch after Boston's 'More Than a Feeling' comes on. I didn't really like the song before this afternoon but it reminds me of good times with Jeff and Tony's Uncle Jerry now.

With the music turned down, I'm able to drift away from the conversation my mother and Basil are having and radar in on the booth behind us. I even peek around to see who was sitting there. Catalogs are spread atop their table. A fortyish man is telling a younger woman he evidently works with (from what I can gather from eavesdropping) about great opportunities to make money that involve buying toilet paper in large quantities and selling it back to other people. He calls it network marketing.

Meanwhile Basil and my mother are talking about the movie 'On Golden Pond' and the Fonda family. My mother stops in mid-sentence to tell me sternly to 'refrain' from being nosy about what was going on behind me. She switches back to their Fonda conversation and asks Basil "what ever happened to Peter Fonda?"

In the days before my mother became a Jesus freak or as she says, "renewed in the River Jordan" she seemed to view the world, as Basil would say, "from a more complex frame," and was interested in talking about normal stuff like movies and Jane Fonda instead of the Bible non-stop.

After finishing half of a large pizza in the company of two adults lost in big-people conversation, it doesn't take me long to start slumbering off in the restaurant. "Almost time for the evening news!" Basil announces when he notices my head is resting on the table. "Time for the evening news!" was my father's way of saying it was bedtime when he lived with us. Mom adopts the phrase and then it gets passed on to what ever guy she is with at the time, if he happens to like children.

When we exit, it's already dark. Cool autumn air, cooler than it's been, is successfully pushing out the last frolics of summer. "Time for Demeter to return her daughter, right Jonah?"

I mumble "I guess" not wanting to encourage one of Basil's animated conversations at 10 o' clock.

"Time for big little boys to go home and crawl in bed!" mom says.

By time we get home and I'm tucked into bed, the ringing in my ears has gone down to an even whine. I drift in and out of sleep. I wake once to hear my mother giggles drift out of the open living room screens, into the gangway, and back through my bedroom window where they mingled with the muted sounds of the Tonight show crowd roaring at Johnny Carson's on Susie's TV across the gangway. A couple times Susie laughs so hard she loses her breath and her violent chain-smoke-hacking echoes into my bedroom.

I know my mother hears her because through the strumming of Andres Segovia guitar, I heard her say something to Basil about, 'lungs like that' and he says "Remember that old 'Laugh In' joke about a husband with a better life insurance policy for his wife?"

Because Susie's living room window is less than 12 feet away from the head of my bed, I often let WLS play all night to drown the quick turns in possibilities from her cocktail-

soaked moods. The worst night was when her teenage son Bobby went to drug rehab and her husband was away on business. She would sob loudly on the phone with someone then get off and ask her cocker spaniel to pray for Bobby.

These distant after-bedtime conversations through screens were how I came to know my mother in my younger years. She is distant laughter in the living room. Intimacy for her is expressed through occasional touches and kisses not familiarity with my world of Encyclopedias, monster movies and Legos. I also know a little more than I should about our money situation thanks to open windows not only from our living room but from Susie's more sober conversations with Bill. "Thank fuckin' God that Goddamn kid is smart!" She'd say.

"Don't curse and say 'God' at the same time, honey," Bill would reply.

During lunchtime talks, the principal at McArthur reminds us, usually when we hear about another divorce that, "we only pine for smiling photos of Florida holidays and picnics when we know that these things actually exist."

"Ain't that right," replies the art teacher who smokes near the open window of the classroom when she shouldn't.

Family was never that central in my life anyway. Adults were all adults. Everyone scolds, everyone spanks, only Tommy Pulaski's dad let's us take a drag of his cigarettes in hopes

that “we’ll never develop the same disgusting habit he has.” Half of my father and mother's family didn't talk to either of them since they had adopted a Puerto Rican papoose with black blood. ‘I didn’t need parents,’ I would think. I had the twinkling lights of distant smokestacks and a view of the skyline to kindle my dreams.

At McArthur School, like me, other boys father's only showed up for monthly Cub Scout meetings or like the Greenfield’s dad, not at all. I don’t think about my dad not being around because I’m learning to speed read, and during grammar class, the phonetic character I’ve created to pass the time, the evil schwa – the upside down e which I had given vicious teeth and a devils tail – could devour the normal old boring vowels in grammar lessons. During last period, we can disappear into Ms. Bea's vivid serialized readings of Great Expectations, we can catch rides home on the back of a chrome plated Harley, driven by Gina Torricelli’s father. I always wish he wouldn’t go so slow as my small hands try to stay interlocked around his belly bulging in a leather vest that carries the mixed smell of cigars, grease, cowhide, mink oil, sweat and Halston cologne.

"All a man needs son, is his bare hands, a good book and his motorcycle grippin' the road to understand freedom. Freedom of mind body and spirit," Mr. Torricelli tells me once while I’m at his kitchen table working on a project with his daughter. I think about this at night, my dreams in the smokestacks, Susie screaming next door, my mother listening to Spanish guitar with a boyfriend in the living room.

September would die into October in a week but the orchestra of crickets still played as midnight danced towards sunrise. Their staccato bowing grows louder as Susie's television gets turned off, most likely, by her husband as she passes out in her Lay-Z-Boy chair.

From around the corner of Susie's house, I hear the sickly terminal mechanical-illness-howl of Basil's car starting up. It's more hellish than any motorbike I had every heard rip out of the Sugar Magnolia. I focus count the seconds he let's it idle – 98, 99…103 before he drives off. Nothing more to be curious about, I finally drift into sleep.

In the back of my mind, I know things around me don't have a good relationship with the idea "supposed to." That didn't matter. My world is living dreamscape of passion and persistence. I flew as Icarus with wings of steel and veins pulsed with ichor. Ichor, that's one of vocabulary words I picked out last week. The teacher says it's pretty 'inoperable' but so what. Not only has Tommy Pulaski's older brother clued me in on that Ozzy's Osbourne's "Flying High Again" is about Icarus, in this living diorama, I'm not an anomaly.

Between that time and the eventual exile of my will from my body, I learn that the first death we all die is when we begin to lose our belief in immortality and become Adam, forever reliving his own tragic expulsion from the garden and never telling our own story beyond that shameful event.