

[this is Fast Red Road maybe a week after that first draft. no memory what it was called then, if anything. probably some typos &etc still in it. -sgj]

Bottleneck

Part I: The Goliards

He was the hairy handed gent in the back of the bus, watching her through a spyhole chewed in a square of styrofoam cup. She was pieces all coming together: slow slope of shoulder, Indian black hair, Delicious Red fingernail tracing a jaw. He made up names for her between drinks from his paper bag, finally settling on DK, initials for he Didn't Know what. But it was something beautiful, had to be, look at her, God. Divine Knowledge maybe. When the bus pretty much emptied into the neon stained event horizon of the Nevada state line, she was sitting the bench seat beside him for warmth and he told her the only line he knew: that it wasn't so much the carbon monoxide that killed his dad, but Marty Robbins. Her breath was hard as kerosene and she was strung out across days.

Wake me at Gallup, lover mine, she finally said, and nestled into his denim jacket like it had to be, hiding her face. It was righter than God: *Lover mine*. He drank them a mescalined toast and on the fat bus driver sang, a Deep Purple ballad refried slow and Latino. Gaylord moved his lips in the area just after the song, passed his bottle to the old man three rows up crying for the luggage below. Sixty four and a qaurter odd miles back the old man hadn't had the two fifty for his chili burger, and to get out of the cafe in one piece he'd had to promise the tattooed dishwasher he'd take care of the ratty airedale that lived behind the dumpster. They'd given him a large pipe and a small piece of time, and then when Gaylord stepped into the lee of the bus for a dip he'd found the old man's clothes and love letters unfolding with the wind, the old man caught wide eyed and guilty with a weak knee in the sleeping dog's side, trying to close the suitcase over it. The yellowed look in his eyes, cheating death one more time. Gaylord had helped without saying anything and palmed two of the valium tablets stuck to the dog's spit flecked lips. One of these he gave to the Indian girl when she came back to ask if he was afraid of casinos too. The other he pinched between his lip and gum to make it last.

He didn't wake her at either side of Gallup, and the bus driver sang them deeper into New Mexico. The old man peed in a mason jar and it rolled around the floor. He told Gaylord he didn't guess he'd ever get to sleep now,

not after,

and he meant the paisleyed suitcase. Gaylord's eyes were already dilated enough so that before too long the old man was standing outside the bus, whispering for him to step out for a word or two, he had to show him again just how it was back in 49 when he blew his knee out kicking a man who'd bitten the better part his ear off. But there was the girl, she was asleep. The old man smiled.

Not that I didn't deserve it, now.

He kissed the sleeping girl on the forehead and winked at Gaylord, ran his tongue over his wrinkled purple lips for a drawn out taste.

Holy hell, son.

Gaylord pulled her deeper into his jacket and between him and the old man's guilt the

bottle was dry by the second Vegas, this one at the foot of the Sangre de Christo mountains, a place sin black at night. The headlit front of the sign melted by and then the backside, washed tail light red. The old man couldn't say anything for a full two minutes. Gaylord passed him the lidless bottle and he peed absently into it then let it go out the window, his hand steaming in the cool air. He kept saying no to himself, and finally wobbled seat to seat up front to talk to the bus driver about driving around in goddamned circles, there was no time man.

When the bus driver never quit singing the old man finally had to resort to song himself. His Spanish was laced with Germanic from the Mennonites, but his voice was clean and attained heights known by only the balless few. Gaylord didn't know either language, so to him the operatic war at the front of the bus sounded like horses in love.

He tried to spit out the window, but his body didn't have enough water.

Instead he sucked the chili burger stain out of his shirt when he got hungry, and when it was gone her hair was in his mouth and it was good. In the segmented rearview mirror they couldn't see him. He sat in the back and closed his eyes to the passage, and in the miles of creosote between Las Vegas NM and Lubbock TX he had a life with her that went all the way from childhood friends to backseat lovers to wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase chock full of tools so as to help people on the side of the road, the one thing he knew for sure. He drove around all day just so he could say honey I'm home. That good black and white lucy feeing. The Spanish duelers at the front of the bus provided the buried conflict theme for their life, castrato and bass, fading out on cue for that night over scampi when he agreed with her only so far, arguing that

yes, yes I do still love you too, of course, but love isn't what gives me a hard on,

there were other things, leather things, things in her size with buckles, please understand.

She read the grease in the lines of his palms and told him he was soon to wander. There was a crude purple happy face under his thumbnail she wouldn't look at though, didn't believe it, him, that he might be. An empty smile, she said in her mother's voice, you don't even know where it came from, you're not happy. That night they slept each on an amoeba print couch in the living room, afraid to touch one another, barely breathing, the shag carpet swaying with the a/c, him trying to rub destiny away with the ball of his thumb. He left her asleep there in the marbled house, but still, God, there was her hair, her Indian black hair, all but a few strands longwise down his throat, tangled in his insides, binding them together, man and woman, an oily knot. He could hardly breathe and didn't care, he loved her, and he had a hardon now, look babe, no leather, no hands. It was Lubbock with dawn breaking quietly all around before they finally caught him, the old man and the bus driver.

Holy hell, son. I guess you've damn near ate her.

The bus driver was without song in the harsh light of day.

The old man cradled Gaylord's head and the bus driver lifted the girl away like a child being born. Her hair came out slow and it was wet for as long her forearm, the ends sticking together with thinned out Arizona chili. When Gaylord stood hollowed out he fell and they drug him up the aisle coughing. There on the windshield drops of last night's throat blood going obsidian in the sun, bug guts lending a soft intestinal haze. In the bathroom trying to clean him up the old man saw his smiling thumb and looked away. He asked twice and flatly was this his stop, and Gaylord nodded yes, yes, he still loved her, please.

The old man shook his head and laughed out his nose.

You don't even know your own damn name, son.

My name?

Say it then, show me wrong.

Gaylord. It's Gaylord.

The old man spit a stream of brown into the sink, then forced an index finger dry into Gaylord's mouth and puppeted his mouth, made him say goliard, the goliard, asked how could he love her when he didn't even know who he was, what he was,

tell me that.

Gaylord couldn't.

She just tasted good, son. You got any sense you'll come with us, St Louis, two after five.

Gaylord rubbed his bruised gums. Gaylord, goliard. He told the old man to go to hell, it didn't matter if the bus was empty it didn't matter who was driving, he had things to do.

They leaned on the stainless sink and listened to the bus driver in the stall with the half sleeping girl, her clothes giving way to gravity, pearly snaps on porcelain. The words scratched in the door were *love enema*, with a 1-900 number. Gaylord tried to remember horses in love, saw a skinny image of himself in the silverbacked mirror, swaying side to side with last night's crossing, with the bus driver's shuffling breath. Maybe going to blow away. Over a breakfast nobody payed for he confessed to the old man that here was home, he grew up just north of town in a trailer circled by for sale bomb shelters that

looked like pastel igloos, I swear, man,
he'd never forget them.

The old man said he didn't care, was there a yard, a fence, a man with food in his many pockets, that's what was the thing here. It was a matter of who owed who, who didn't call the law, who wasn't going to. Things were almost tense, but they were too tired for it. It was ten till nine. Gaylord said he thought he understood, maybe.

Halfway through eggs the bus driver sat down with them and wiped the sweat from his face with a napkin. He was nervous, watching the sloe eyed hombres at the breakfast bar. He almost smiled, and then didn't, instead told Gaylord in fast and rough Gringo about an animal he'd seen in a pickle jar once in Mexico City. They'd pulled it from some clearwater cistern high in the mountains, and before it died the scientists learned it could breathe through its skin, it was either the last or the first of its kind, no lungs. Relict was the word. It was three almost four feet long, heavy tail, mottled skin, staring wide eyes that didn't see the sky for what it was.

Atretochoana caecilian. The bus driver said it over and over like a prayer, and his rolling voice distilled a meter from the Latin and slowly made of the dead tongue something vague and lyrical. Dusty backed moths filled the room and blanketed the floor finger deep in places. Nobody saw. He was crying soft, the bus driver, maybe for the girl. Two hours later when Gaylord was walking north on Q with the paisleyed suitcase his boots fell into the even lope of the Latin name, and when no one was looking he closed his eyes against the sun and tried to open every pore on his body.

It took every last thing he had.

To even feel like he was doing it, he had to imagine the leopard skinned woman his dad used to dance with in the the technicolored light of the TV, all through Bonanza; he could see her from behind the safety glass of the El Dorado igloo, where he had been screwdrivered in for most of his twelfth year, safe from the chance of radiation, growing hair all over. The spots, her spots, opening like scores of hungry little mouths, wide and wider and so deep, so real,

you can do it,

try.

But no.

He came to half in traffic, on his knees looking for a breath. When a squad car drove by for a second look he ducked into a convenience store for a bottle of something, anything, but the clerk informed him flatly that he had no real ID, nothing to prove he was Gaylord Aughtman, either twenty six or twenty seven, balancing on the cusp of Libra, a one man high wire act. All he had was a cut out polaroid from the day he woke with three of his four front teeth deep in his fifth pocket. In the picture he was smiling just to be alive and still mostly under the influence, the background neatly removed. It could have been anywhere. Call it Utah. A year to the day after the polaroid he had gotten the pictogram from his Uncle Bird Finger saying that the Research Center had finally released his dad's anomalous body after twelve years worth of science, they'd gotten their five hundred dollars out of him one way or another, there was no cavity unviolated. The heart was back in the wrong side of his chest where it had always been. The Mirror Man. It was time to bury him at last. Gaylord had the folded pictogram in his pocket, a cadaver in number two pencil, pockmarked with generations of autopsy, an aged toe tag big as a sail the way Bird Finger drew it. When he got to the tracks Gaylord stopped on the town side to drink thunderbird for a while with a dreadlocked black man holding down a barrel. Indiscriminate blue pills floating seedlike in the wine. When the black man wasn't lying to him about his hotwiring abilities, how he'd damn near stole every car in town at least once, Gaylord watched him through a small hole in an even smaller piece of paper.

He was home.

*

On the porch Bird Finger was doing a five stringed version of Long Tall Sally and eating a tuna fish and lithium sandwich. He liked them better in the afternoon. This was it though, he was weaning himself off the hard stuff, once and for all. He was dealing with life now, going to. Forty eight wasn't too late. Didn't want to end up like his brother, pickled in formaldehyde, naked to the world. Suicide ran in the blood, his dad had told him in a note, and every time Bird Finger bled he looked for it, for something.

Flung out like worshippers in front of the trailer were the last five bomb shelters, and as the day wore on the pre-paid hourly renters began crawling out: two drunk cowboys and a bowlegged waitress, a truckdriver and another waitress, a junior high kid with a magazine and a month's worth of allowance. It was a living. When they were gone the cats crept belly down into the shelters to scavenge what was left before the sun baked it inedible.

The kid was coming.

Bird Finger went inside and hid his series of drawings that detailed the machinations and the time that had been involved in getting the tape worm to come up his throat for the dab of raw meat balanced on the back of his tongue. Pliers and mirrors, bottle flies. Muscle relaxers for the gag reflex. Watching it kick legless in the driveway dirt, the cats unsure for once.

Now he was finally getting a belly, the one thing he'd always wanted, what would prove once and for all he was a man. He wore his shirts too short on purpose, often traced the calloused yellow line where his guitar rested, slanting above his bellybutton, skin piled in place from playing night after night down at Clandenstein's after it was closed, the only time they'd let him.

Since GE Allen had played three months back and done the sodomy thing on stage and then ate his own shit for an encore, gigs were hard to come by. The chamber of commerce issued statements proclaiming Buddy Holly had been the last respectable musician. Now all the stations played was him and the Crickets. They had their allegiances. When people talked to him Bird Finger would say it was a statement on the pie that had eaten America, but he never could follow it much further than that.

The one time he tried, he got to talking about agent orange and conspiracies and then his hands went clammy cold and he couldn't play for three days. It had been hell. Blue in the fingernails even. He had had to hide from the renters out in the cinderblock garage where it had happened, where the car still was. Three days. It felt like Easter all over when he finally emerged and hesitantly strummed what he called a long A flat, a note only reachable by the extension of his long namesake up the rosewood neck. It was a sound like rain coming. He played for near a week straight then, afraid of losing the feel, plundering his stash of ephedrine, burning holes in his retinas

But those days were over now.

The kid was coming.

Any minute now.

Listen to the cats fight.

She would have loved it.

*

The last time Gaylord had seen his uncle was the third day of his life as a nobody criminal. He was fourteen. Bird Finger had sprung him at seven in the morning, still red eyed and deaf from playing all night. His song then that even got airplay for a handful of weeks was You Look So Pretty When I'm Naked. It was because of it he had the two hundred odd dollars the officer behind the window said Gaylord wasn't worth. No license, no parents on record, no job, no nothing. Just a car that wasn't his, a lot of bad beer, and a book of blue diamond matches: he'd set fires at all four corners of town, one in the trash can of a gas station closed for the night. When it caught the underground tanks it had lit up half of Lubbock for about two hours, and the donut shop down the block had opened for business, to feed the hungry.

On the ride back he told Bird Finger he did it just because

the fourth of July is always so damn far away, I couldn't wait, man.

He was already an inch shy of six feet, all the height he'd ever get.

Bird Finger half understood.

I ain't no saint myself, kid.

He put his off hand on Gaylord's knee like he figured he was supposed to, like he'd promised her he would. In Gaylord's eyes there were firemen running frame to frame in a comic book world, little white bubbles of dialogue.

I say I ain't no saint, Gay.

Yeah, you're not my dad, either. And don't call me that.

The rest of the ride back to the trailer was the same, and by late afternoon Bird Finger was into a new bottle and wishing bad he had some grocery money for guitar strings. Gaylord was out front, standing with feet shoulder width apart, a pebble held straight out in each hand. He'd been there for three going on four hours, shaking bad, the inside kind, around the bones. Near five, when the cars were all going home, one of the pebbles twanged off the side of the trailer, and the next came right through the front window and out the back. Bird Finger stood still a full minute, breathing, then finally went out.

Gaylord was sitting on one of the bomb shelters, looking west, his weak arms wrapped around his knees. He said something about the sun going down in a ball of flame, like a wrecked or wrecking spaceship. His words hung just to the left of his head. He turned to see what his uncle thought of the poetry of it all.

All Bird Finger knew to say was

you're sitting like a little girl, Gay. I hope your daddy can't see you now.

Gaylord came off the shelter at him then like he'd been running downhill for miles, and Bird Finger almost smiled, because he remembered when his own dad had had to show him who was boss out in the yard too. But he wasn't a father, Bird Finger, just somebody who'd moved in when his brother died because the place was paid for. The thing was he hit too hard.

They connected and fell into the dirt of the driveway and pretty soon some of the cars driving by collected in a half moon to cheer them on. When Gaylord could finally stand he stood crying clean lines down his face, and he walked away for twelve years.

That night Bird Finger played his Naked song over and over to a full house. His skinned hands were shaking so bad they thought he was on drugs, and two rodeo cowboys beat him up in the parking lot. He had to follow them out for it though, call their women names, throw pennies stinging into their backs, yell and scream for justice.

They gave it to him.

*

Gaylord and Spook sat on the hood of the hotwired Cadillac, sharing a joint and watching the tail lights of a bus come together in the distance.

They wanted me to go, you know. All that Louis and Clark crap.

We can still catch em, dawg.

Spook patted the hood.

Shee-it, five hundred ponies all kicking like a bitch.

Gaylord tried to smile. The girls were in the backseat sleeping it off, had been happy just to ride in style, no matter the fare. He hadn't made it back to Bird Finger yet.

I tell you about her, man?

Spook shook his dreadlocks yes hell yes, the weak ember casting light on his shiny black face: no lines, just eyes, teeth, smoke. By now she had become a sculptor from somewhere south of LA, where the desert smelled of coyote breath, and her hands, God, her hands. She had sculpted for him a shelled pecan and baked it and it lasted all year. Danka, he said he said, over and over, her name.

Danka, I know, like the coffee, give it a rest already, c'mon.

She was beautiful.

Gaylord sat on the hood and when Spook finally passed out he had the bottle all to himself. Yellow pills this time, striped black like a bee's ass. Stingers the girls had called them. He didn't ask. Clouds moved in and snuffed out the stars like a blanket thrown slow in the air. No warmth though. The smell of rain, moisture in the air, a wet lung feel like the night he followed Marty Robbins to his blue lipped dad in the silver and maroon 442, his only pride, his last thing when the end of the world hadn't come like he'd prayed for it to.

That's what he had wanted to tell her, about that car, that damn car that could have outrun the end of the world, but there had been the old man, the dog curled up in the suitcase like a fetus, valium lipped, either dead or alive, alive or dead, somewhere in between maybe. It had been near two days already. All he had to do was look. His duty, he had promised. He pulled it from the trunk and carried it as far as he could walk away. He put his ear to it and heard nothing but paisley. The Cadillac so small against the poisoned black mesquite, two fins, a chrome outline, arrested motion, caught there in a moment of grace. But the dog. All he had to do was look and that would decide once and for all. He wanted it to be alive, didn't want to be its killer. He put his hand on the leftmost latch and waited and waited to know what to do, when, the perfect time. Forty minutes, killer or savior. It was just a dog, though. He said it over and over, and finally talked himself into having to pee.

When he stood he saw around the Cadillac pairs of green eyes, and figured back from them smiling black faces. Devils maybe, snorting like horses, pawing the ground. He stood there unzipped and they watched him and he couldn't pee and he couldn't pee, and then suddenly their eyes changed texture like a coin flipping off an old man's wooden thumbnail. He turned to where they looked to be looking: way to the north, where it was raining already, something, a light, yes, a single oval of off white caught in the belly of the clouds. It was too far away and too close, all at the same time. It was just there, wavering unsure, like a flashlight under the covers, already fading. He peed warm on his hand and didn't notice. He reached for the light with his warm hand and then slowly it was gone and the devils were standing heavy around the Cadillac, keeping him away.

After waiting too long for it to come back Gaylord laid belly down with his head on the suitcase and watched the devils move, hoped they'd forgotten about him, hated them for having seen it too. Once he almost screamed out of something like fear or anger or loyalty to Spook, but they were so silent themselves. They stayed with him too, when he finally went to sleep, dancing around the Cadillac, their absent mouths opened in slow coming words.

When the blonde girl shook him awake in the morning he didn't tell her about the horsehead devils, about the dog in limbo. She did get the UFO out of him though, slowly, when he wouldn't say anything and she told him she knew better, she had brothers.

It was probably a spotlight from Plainview or something. A car lot.

Did they take you up?

I said it wasn't a spaceship, it was better, I don't know.

Of course it was a UFO, stupid. They're everywhere, don't you know? They probably just erased that part of your memory. They've got the technology. The government, I mean.

Spook laughed and winked and said *he* believed him at least, his main man wouldn't lie about shit like that. Aliens selling cars, he might just scoot on up there for an out of this world deal. He clapped Gaylord on the leg and they made a lazy arc out of the pasture, the horse shit all around trailing columns of steam into the wind.

It was another dawn, pink with dirt.

In the passenger seat Gaylord watched the telephone poles melt into one. Sorghum country, poisoned birds in every row, the ants eating their eyes. He asked Spook if he knew where Frankford was, north Frankford, other side of the highway, just back of the tracks.

Shee-it, dawg.

They traded the Cadillac for a Ford truck in a parking lot and packed themselves in the cab, handled the dirty tools strewn across the dash like relics. The blonde girl had some donut money and they ate, the glaze sticking to their faces in clown white smiles. They coasted into the trailer's driveway with the engine off, and without power brakes Spook had to stand on the pedal. They barely missed everything. My daddy was a stunt man, he lied. The girls were laughing, asking if this place had a bathroom, it didn't look like much. Spook was out toeing the side of a shelter, nodding to himself, his chin in his hand. There was the cinderblock garage still there too, like it had to be, padlocked twice over and rusted shut.

Gaylord was the last to get out. He brought the suitcase because he didn't want it out there for the cats to torture.

He skirted the garage and followed the girls inside. The radio was on like Bird Finger always left it when he was out, pretty pretty pretty Peggy Sue. Bird Finger, God. He turned it off, then when it was too quiet turned it back on. Buddy Holly was better than nothing. On top of the refrigerator he found the rough drafts of the pictogram still in his pocket: his dad in

various stages of decomposition, Bird Finger's fluid ideas about what a skeleton looked like, one long chain of white. Hollow eyes though, he got that right. In the background of some of the pictures was the occasional outline of a woman's head of hair, in one a full backshot of a woman, all hair and twin calves, sandals, walking away.

On the front of the refrigerator, stuck on with a thumbtack because the door had never taken to a magnet, was the release form from the Research Center—Masonic Association of Doctors, with their creed underneath, *Medicine Ex Nihilo*—which included the 1972 receipt for five hundred dollars, the cost of a body donated early, money which had bought the leopard woman a turquoise necklace. Gaylord pocketed it. It was his dad, after all.

He looked around then, at all that hadn't changed for twelve years: the two motel TV's, one for sound, one for picture; the flock velvet hummingbird, forty eight inches wingtip to wingtip, a giant miniature; the shotgun just inside the door, loaded with table salt. When it sounded like the girls were asleep in the back part of the trailer, Gaylord carefully lifted off the living room floor vent and reached his arm in up to the shoulder. It was still there, the shoebox, the pictures and the bottlecaps and the crunchy rubbers and the old bag of pot and the four letters from his mom and one of his dad's pamphlets talking about the end of the world, a newspaper clipping showing him passing them out on the sidewalk. Gaylord remembered putting them on cars until his hands bled from paper cuts, and then his dad smiling because,

that there blood'll add something, kid, make em think,

his voice deeper than bone.

The end of the world.

Gaylord slid the suitcase under the arm of the couch and sat with the shoebox in his lap. He smiled because that's what they did in the soaps when they knew something sick: the thing was he could tell his whole life was already about wanting to open things but being afraid to just the same. Well, except bottles, And cans. He was thinking about a cold beer for lunch when he heard the clanging outside.

It was Spook. He was using the tools from the truck on the garage door, prybar and hammer. The bottom corner was folding back like a piece of paper. Gaylord ran. He grabbed the hammer on its backswing and it pulled him headfirst into the door. Spook dropped the tools. He held his hands palm out at shoulder level, saying how

daddy needs a new car.

Not that one.

Spook smiled.

It's not for you.

Shee-it. I got a reputation, dawg.

Gaylord told him no again, and meant it.

Spook played big chested then finally said it'd wait, there's a time and a place for most everything, and right then it was time for lunch, his dawg was lucky. He went into the trailer looking for food. Gaylord hammered the corner of the tin door back down and when it got hot laid down in one of the shelters. The sun through the fiberglass weave, the dirt cold on his bare back, the crazy poems in other languages magic markered in loose spirals everywhere. Maybe a story there. He wouldn't let himself go to sleep though, wished he'd brought the shotgun in with him. They left in the truck by noon, him and Spook, the girls sleeping one in the bath one in the bedroom. A gift between kinfolk, Spook said, and they were talking again. The letter Gaylord had left tacked to the refrigerator had Spook's aunt's phone number on it: the picture for Birdfinger was square numbers arranged like phone keys, with lots of arrows. The other picture

he had dictated to Spook, who could draw: it was some about the funeral, when was it, where, do you need anything, and some about how's the music, sorry I left, be by sometime, don't wait up. It went across nine pieces of paper and was supposed to cover twelve years.

Should I tell him about the aliens?

Gaylord shook his head and drained his beer. On a scrap of paper he drew what the light had looked like to him, in number two pencil. He left it on the couch because they were out of tacks and out of room.

By five that afternoon they were in jail.

It happened downtown, when they were cruising slow with the lunch crowd acting like they were part of it all, slurring words to each other about fake business deals, transactions made through miles of telegraph wire. And then. There she was, there she had been, an Indian haired girl in a primed El Camino. *The Indian girl, her black hair against the grey car, like ink spilled or spilling or about to spill.* He was driving by then, Gaylord, and clipped two cars making his turn, leaving a trail of headlight glass. Going slow beside them in the wrong lane he got her to turn empty eyes towards him, and he was telling Spook over and over that

it's her, man, it's her,

but then the driving man pulled her into his tattooed self and made his face into a growl. Already Gaylord was making her into pieces: the hands in her lap, her hands, the right making a hollow fist, the thumb of the left plumbing it nervously. Delicious Red polish. And then before he could get any further the El Camino was down an alley and Spook was yelling about mounted police, the old west, shit shit shit.

Before they even came to a stop he was out and running, Spook, gone, a black streak in the daytime, cutting the lunch hour neatly in two. The cop's horse reared up, sloughing the heavy cop off. It gave chase, blue sparks flying from its hooves, the skin pulled back from its red eyes. Spook screaming, not even words anymore, just a primal noise doppling into traffic. While the cop was trying to negotiate the growing crowd, a man in a business suit leaned in and said pennies'll beat the breathalyzer every time, something about the copper and saliva, the patina of that kind of breath, trust him. Gaylord's hand came back from the ashtray with nearly a dollar's worth, and when the cop started in his with nightstick and his riding boots Gaylord swallowed 64 cents, 49 of them bitter pennies.

While he was being prettied up for the mug shot with a lady cop's makeup, the joke was that he was finally worth something.

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It was the Blues Marathon down at Clandenstein's, and waiting for the kid Bird Finger had damn near forgot about the whole shindig: all the old men mainlining whatever they could find and playing for hours on end. Last year the winner had been a black preacher called Pops, who'd played for nearly two days straight, all one song about a dog stealing his trash. It was a record. They'd found three of the judges dead in the bathroom when it was all said and done. They were sad, the coroner said, shit I would be too, listening to this depressing shit all damn day. But he'd got free beer, nobody was complaining, everyone left that night wearing bracelets that said they were officially dead. Bird Finger still had his, and wore it on special occasions like this.

Maybe the kid wouldn't get here till tomorrow. He told this to Beauty Offal, and for her to listen he had to keep a cigarette lit in her hand at all times. She said that

you're not a very good uncle, Bird. You don't know when he's coming in.

Well, by Friday at least. That's the funeral.
You better hope so.

She breathed smoke and batted it away with her horsehair eyelashes, her best trick, but it made her dizzy. She grabbed onto Bird Finger's forearm so as not to reel off the stool. He pulled her close and one of the judges finally stood and declared that the young black man up on stage laying crosswise across his guitar wasn't just doing the lacuna thing, he was asleep, he'd flat out lost, just didn't have the stamina. Big Truck Robbins, the Bill Walton lookalike, shouldered the sleeping rag of a bluesman and disposed of him out back.

All the old men shook their heads and said kids, kids, then smiled into their hands when the fat white salesman limped onto stage. Bird Finger clapped and when they all looked back at him with dinnerplate eyes Beauty muffled his hands.

I got to work here, Bird.

The salesman's song started slow, which said to those seated he was pacing himself, which was strange for a white man, a pretender. Just a low end two chord line, feeling out the acoustics of Clandenstein's cinderblock walls. By the end of the hour a few people were swaying and didn't know they were, and one of the judges was crying and not hiding his mirrored lines of speed. The salesman knew the place by then, it was full of sound but not loud at all. He was looking more and more like a veteran. Halfway into the second hour he mumbled into the microphone that this here was the Gout Blues, gentleman and ladies. A few people clapped, mostly old men. And then the lyrics, his song, the highway words that were shaped like a foot tent made out of motel blankets and a pair of crossed screwdrivers, flathead, because they had a better fabric grip. How still you had to lay so as not to collapse it and wake screaming, how sleep wasn't sleep, shoes weren't protection, the accelerator was a medieval hand me down. The rate of drink increased, even a couple of throaty amen brothers. But no foot tapping: it was a thing of respect. He was baring his soul up there on stage, and they all knew it, knew he was the real thing, that the doctor was in the house.

By nightfall Bird Finger already had too big a beer tab to pay, and Beauty's mascara was melting into her glitter jacket, because

my dad, Bird, he's talking about my dad, I never knew,

which got Bird Finger thinking about his dead brother, and the kid, maybe sitting there alone on the couch of the trailer that should by all rights be his. And the funeral too, so close already after twelve years. He pictured Beauty's red hair against the pitch black feel of mourning, a raven on fire. He asked her if she'd go with him and she asked back if she was the love of his life.

Bird Finger looked at the salesman and thought of another her and finally shook his head no. She held his hand and said she'd go then, be his funereal date, because she didn't want to be anybody's life love,

it's too late.

When the sun was almost up she was asleep against his chest and the breakfast people were trickling in to hear about these Gout Blues. Blood on the guitar strings, and still he played. They left, Bird Finger and Beauty Offal, him half carrying her. One of the scrambled egg men said when they walked by, easy date, eh bub? and Bird Finger smiled his way past, in his head beating the man with a tire iron until his teeth fell out like dried spit.

The image kept him awake for the ten minute drive home, where he found the two girls sitting on the porch making kitten eyes into their compacts, one blonde one not. He carried Beauty by and laid her on the couch, stood in front of the refrigerator and read the message,

damned himself, damned Clandenstein's, damned the Gout Blues, but took the last one back. He had nothing against the salesman. He was peeking out the window at the two strange porch girls when the phone rang. He didn't let it ring again.

It was the kid, collect call.

Bird Finger didn't say anything, then, finally,
yes, I accept.

Hey.

Hey.

Guess I'm up here in the tank.

Yeah.

Seventy two hours, they say. If they can find any ID numbers on me.

The kid's voice was shaky, weak. He wasn't fourteen anymore.

You get my note?

Thanks, yeah.

We ate some food, you know.

Good.

Bird Finger held the phone to his neck, thick grey whiskers in speaker holes, then held it again to his mouth.

I don't have any money, Gay. I would man, I'd come get you like that.

I know.

The funeral's tomorrow.

The kid laughed and it wasn't funny thing.

I came all this way, you know.

I'm sorry, shit man.

Thanks for the food, though, anyways.

The sound of someone cussing in the cell background, something about JJ.

Listen, I got to go.

Gay?

Yeah.

What you want me to tell your dad?

I don't know. Bye? Tell him bye for me.

After Birdfinger hung up the phone he stood for a while tracing the linoleum with his hand held about waist level, finger following the lines. Anything. He was tired, and the kid. In the living room he sat on the couch under Beauty's heavy spandex legs. He licked his finger and picked up the scrap of paper with the oval light pencilled in. He turned it face down and then it registered. The kid, God, he'd seen it too, but he couldn't have. There was no way. But there, on the paper, there it was.

Because he was suddenly afraid to sleep, he went out and talked to the porch girls about his brother the Mirror Man, how everything inside him was reversed, and in turn they fed him pills that looked like ladybugs and tasted like ladybugs.

It went on until the day was over and they were all asleep.

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In the truck going to the funeral it was Bird Finger driving, wearing his week old black hat, Beauty Offal beside him, and the two girls riding shotgun. He was going to drop them off afterwards, somewhere over by campus they said, close, don't worry, thanks. In the back of the truck were three of the regular renters, who'd got the shelter last night for free if they came and

mourned in style. Bird Finger was afraid of being there alone, afraid maybe she would be there, to see him off again.

But she wasn't.

It was just the free preacher, a woman in a long coat and her man with a camera, a group of nervous doctor men that Bird Finger remembered from the Research Center, and then his truck group, a smallish band of people who had drank hard the night before so their bodies would be too dry to cry. They stood in the wind and shook like leaves. It was a closed casket. The MADMEN had told Bird Finger he wouldn't want to see, and he didn't, not really. The camera man caught everything on film, strobing the bible verse hanging over the wound in the earth, freezing in time forever the one renter who tore his flowered shirt and screamed and collapsed in a loose pile.

And then like that it was over. Twelve years and then this, so quick, the shutter opening and closing in a final click. Bird Finger remembered and whispered bye for the kid where nobody but the dead could hear, and then moved his fingers in a wave from himself. It was his brother there in the box, and he probably still smelled rich like rocket car exhaust, could probably still attract love bugs to his grave, in spite of the formaldehyde, the MADMEN, the twelve years. One of them strolled over, his legs stiff and a dummied up smile on his face. He wore latex gloves and had deep red goggles lines.

We're all sorry, Mr Finger, Bird, sir.

The men on the other side of the grave nodded either agreement or approval.

But science must go on, you understand. We were wondering if maybe you would be interested in having yourself X-rayed. For posterity, say. We suspect cases like your brother's, ahem, run in the family.

Bird Finger tried to feel his inside organs, his heart, if it was in the right place, but couldn't tell. He shook his head no and couldn't think of a good reason aside from that his brother had had to have a closed casket. But he didn't tell them that. Instead he told them that he was

allergic to doctors, you see. Makes me get the runs and all, and at my age, you know.

Yes. Well. We don't mean to extend your grieving processees, howsoever they may go. We'll be in touch.

With that he was back to the hive and they were in their white suburban, off maybe looking for other tabloid specimens. The brown headed porch girl was sitting on an old headstone, showing some leg for the camera man. The woman shook her head.

I'm paying for that film. The Star, I mean.

The camera man shied away, getting a better angle up the girl's skirt.

The woman lit a cigarette and shook Beauty's hand importantly.

Were you related ma'am?

Beauty couldn't talk until she had one of those cigarettes, and then she chose to just shake her head no, look to Bird Finger. The woman turned to him.

Yes, of course, the brother. I owe your . . . the Mirror Man, I cut my teeth on him, as they say. I just wanted to tell you thanks. This is the final story, The Last Rites of. Color photos. I'll send you a copy.

For free?

Of course. I owe him my career, as I said.

Bird Finger nodded okay, and then the blonde girl asked if she did UFO's too, the Star, if they were worth anything.

They all turned to her, even the camera man looked away from the half naked brunette.
The blonde girl half stuttered about
a guy I know kind of, the other night, he saw one. That's all.

Ten minutes later the backhoe arrived and began shoveling in dirt, the wetback singing in a tambourine voice, his hard hat decorated with crude drawings of Selena. The mourners scattered, the girls in the Starvan, Bird Finger and Beauty in the truck. The renters were already gone.

On the ride back Beauty sat close and told him he wasn't that bad of an uncle, and Bird Finger shook his head. He said he should have had the bail money for him when he called, he just should have. It all came down to money. She put her hand on his.

That night when Clandenstein's was closed and the aftertaste of the Gout Blues was still heavy and sad in the air, Bird Finger didn't do his usual Marty Robbins stuff for Beauty. He was thinking of the kid, how he could have seen it, how he couldn't have, the light. Maybe these were his grieving processees, there was no way to really tell. He just sat on the sweat stained stool under the hot light while the dishwashers washed and the moppers mopped, and he tuned his five strings carefully. He'd left a candle lit for Beauty, so she'd listen. It flickered with her eyelashes. His voice was hard at first with nothing soft to drink, but it got better, and he sang for her the song he had to sing. It went something like

Canyon Texas, nearly a year before Gaylord was born.
But that wasn't a good way to start.

Here: Her. They'd been married now for all of eight days. His brother and her. They'd seen Fredericksberg they'd drank warm beer in Luchenbach and now they were almost home. They'd run from the cops over the dam at Buchanan and thrown three hundred dollars' worth of good stuff into the slow water where the big cats swam deep and waited.

That night in Canyon where Bird Finger met them because they were out of money.
Dancy, the Mirror Man but nobody knew then. And her, always her.

Bird Finger, all of nineteen, dishonorable discharge. Listening to his big brother's rolling voice about two things: the Buick sized cats stoned on his stash, how he was going to get them someday, have a fish fry that would get all of this republic called Tejas legendarily stoned; and about the bus they'd seen rolling out of Amarillo. She said it was true, a bus painted midnight black. The lights were on all inside it, and it was wall to wall people standing smoking drinking, guitars passed overhead, a fat Mexican driving, the headlights of coming cars glistening off his sweated face.

It had been beautiful.
It had been Them.

She got a chill when she said it and the ash of her cigarette tumbled off in a slow grey rain.

Bird Finger asked about the law. They smiled.
What about em?

Nothing.
They won't find us. They can't.

She smiled one side of her mouth and did her lipstick in the shined up part of a napkin holder. Bird Finger looked away and in the bathroom asked Dancy about the rest of everybody. Dancy laughed and spit into the urinal trough.

Shit heads, that's what about them. They got their dumb asses caught, folded like towels

or cards or something.

So it's just you and her now?

It was. They were the last of the old group.

And tonight. Canyon Texas, the real WWI.

And her sitting out at the booth, smoking and tracing lines scratched in the formica table top. So damn beautiful, God. Don't look.

From their booth they could see the Texaco where the black bus stopped, and around the back corner came a shadow. When it stood it was all arms and legs, nothing else, like a basketball player. And something in its hand. Later they knew it was a valve core extractor. But then it was just the bus losing inches to the red star sign, the longhaired outlaws and their leathery slick women stumbling around the gas pumps, the half light showing an occasional face, pasty white.

Four hours later it began, what lasted for three days, what pulled everyone from a hundred miles around to a field just south of town. Two raggedy men on stage, guitars slung low, fingers fumbling across the strings, people in truck beds for acres around. Dancy and her and Bird Finger in the cab with needles in their arms. Bird Finger stumbling out into the music, no shirt, belt hanging from his arm. The unmarked Impala, belly to the ground, inching its way towards Dancy's prized Gentleman Jim. All so fast.

Bird Finger screamed but there was no sound. He finally threw a bottle into the glass and that brought their heads above the dash, her shirt unsnapped and the skin. He'd almost forgot. The way the windshield spiderwebbed away from her face, that moment when her eyes registered Impala, the truck's left tire spinning for hours before it got enough purchase to turn them around.

Bird Finger ran behind. Nighttime and Dancy insane Dancy with his foot in it, no headlights, tearing through the crowd of trucks. The Impala in it's wake, fighting thrown tire tools, hi-lift jacks, voices. Finally it bogged down and the two men emerged to a circle of drunk people and their last fight began.

Bird Finger helped bury them the next day, and nobody ever knew.

But now. The Gentleman Jim at the edge of the sea of trucks, left tire still going like a cartoon, ass end fishtailing. Barbed wire trailing from the nose, the remaining headlight winking on for cattle.

Three and a half miles they went.

Bird Finger was slow to walk up to the truck when he finally found them, the Gentleman laying on his side, the battery still pushing everything it could. A deep voice rolling across the dry grass, tears for little sister.

The door handle didn't work the same way upside down, but there they were, naked, tangled up with each other, a little blood but not much. Her. He pulled her out and carried her like in a movie as far away as he could walk, and then laid her down in his jacket, tried not to look at her or feel her under his hands. He laid there with her until he woke to Dancy beating on something. She was breathing ragged, her breath like galvanized aluminum. He stood as small as he could and didn't wave. But it was flat out there. Dancy cried when he saw she was alive.

Bird Finger helped them push the Gentleman back on his feet. In the cab Dancy patted the outside of the driver's door.

He never lets me down.

Yeah.

Bird Finger said no when they offered to carry him home, couldn't begin to imagine it.

He stayed until the the black bus limped out just ahead of the law and he knew he was a part of history then, he'd seen the lanky tall man that started WWI. He'd looked into his mouth and licked his teeth clean. He'd rested his head on her chest, whispered things to her, love, maybe.

On the roof of an I-10 motel three days later with a shaved bald girl, he opened his eyes to see glaze eyed catfish hanging heavy in the sky above him, giants, filtering the stars with their mottled skin, and he knew the earth was turning somewhere far below, where he couldn't really feel it.

*

John Jacob made him tell it again and again. He was a big man, black with gold teeth, and Gaylord didn't mind the talk. They were the only two in the cell, since the ugly toed transvestite had went into seizures. John Jacob sat on the stainless steel toilet.

Gaylord closed his eyes and made her into words: