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## *Rock, Paper, Scissors*

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*Rock, Paper, Scissors*

by

Josef Benson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: John Fleming, Ph.D.  
Rita Ciresi, M.F.A.  
Jay Hopler, Ph.D.

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*Rock, Paper, Scissors*

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ABSTRACT

*Rock, Paper, Scissors* has developed into a story about Wren, a young man fresh out of the Navy, trying to make a name for himself in the world. Wren finds himself in Tampa, Florida because his oldest pal, Allen, has moved there, even though his younger sister has been diagnosed with leukemia back home. The problem is that Allen somewhere along the way has lost his mind. Wren finds out that Allen has recently been fired from a job as a server in a restaurant called the Bolognese, the same restaurant that Allen promised Wren a job. Wren decides to go ahead and get a job at the Bolo and simply not mention that he knows Allen, even though Allen has sworn to, “kill every last one of those mother fuckers.” Wren further finds out that his old friend has developed a drug problem and has delusions of dealing and moving to Cuba. Wren has delusions of his own in his quest to make his mark on the world. Wren decides to be a doctor and drunkenly treks to an emergency room to interview one of the physicians. After meeting a scholarly street preacher he tries his hand at evangelism. Finally, he meets two crooked customers at the Bolo who claim to run a business in pharmaceutical sales. Little does Wren know that the business is crooked and the two conspirators are pedaling black-market pills. Even so, eager Wren buys into the program hook line and sinker and soon finds himself and his sister in harms way. Wren finally discovers that he is embroiled not only an illegal graft, but a mass murdering spree with his long time friend Allen.

## Introduction

Truman Capote once said, “Early on, I discovered the difference between good writing and bad writing and that was easy enough. Then, I made an even more remarkable discovery when I figured out the difference between good writing and art; the difference is subtle but savage.”

This is a key quote for me. I’m not claiming I’ve ever written anything good and I certainly don’t claim to have ever created a work of art. I’m simply saying I know the difference, and also that I’d rather not know the difference. I’d rather still be happily writing little stories that sound cool, showing my friends, and basking in my unsubstantiated genius.

Working on this novel has illuminated the difference between good writing and art. I wrote my first novel when I was in the Navy back in 1994. I carried around Mead notebooks, all different colors, all around 65 pages. After I filled one up, I’d go buy another and continue my novel about a group of sailors who stow away a Korean prostitute on board an aircraft carrier. I figured the main conflict or dilemma would take place within the heart of the main character who would have to decide whether he wanted to take part in the dehumanization of the woman or turn in his shipmates. Even now I don’t think it’s such a bad premise and perhaps I’ll return to it some day. The problem was I was putting everything into those notebooks--poems, random descriptions of the sea, drunken ramblings. I assumed the simple fact that I was writing was enough. Just

write anything and everything that comes into your head was my motto. Genius floats!

A couple of my shipmates and I used to drink bottles of Robitussin, carry our notebooks into downtown San Diego, and visit coffee shops. We'd go into the bathrooms and sit in the stalls and read our poetry right there on the pots because we liked the way our voices sounded within those walls--very sonorous and full. We also liked it when patrons would come into the restrooms to take a leak and hear us reading our poems. We liked to shock and be different.

Just about every letter I put into those seven notebooks didn't work. I typed up that novel for my undergraduate creative writing project at Missouri State and my director, the novelist Roland Sadowski, told me I might be able to salvage a few poems. I have yet to go back and mine those poems, but I plan to some sunny day when I'm hungover and feeling masochistic.

Earlier in my undergraduate studies, before I decided to revisit those old notebooks, I did make some rather large leaps that seemed to foreshadow some later strides. Initially, when I matriculated, I just wanted to write. I felt like the act was enough. Then I wanted to shock the hell out of anyone who dared set eyes on my prose. W.D. Blackmon, another creative writing professor at Missouri State, often would call my early short stories "sketches" and tell the class that I had yet to write a real short story. This was motivation enough for me. I wanted to not only be the best writer at Missouri State, but I wanted to be the best writer in the world. Finally, I realized I needed characters, a narrative, and dialogue. I needed something to happen. This was astounding. I thought my genius could withstand the lack of mundane staples such as characters. I wanted to blow a hole through the idea of rising action, climax, and

character.

The third story I turned in my junior year was a story about going to a funeral. A childhood buddy of mine shot himself and I had gone to his funeral. I felt like perhaps this might be fodder for a good short story. The first line went something like this: “I was so horny my stomach hurt, driving to Chris’s funeral in his blue Buick.” To this day I think it was probably the best first line I have ever written. I went on to write a bad short story, but it was the best of the material that I had written to that point. The story moved, had characters, and was about something; though at times I’d dial off into these abstract reveries which made no sense, but were fun to write. Dr. Blackmon crossed out all of these moments, I thought were the high points of the story. He wrote on the back page that he had never had a student make such a positive leap from one short story to the next. It was then I realized that good writing isn’t necessarily about the words. Really, the words, in fiction at least, should be like a lineman in football; if you don’t notice him throughout the game he’s probably doing his job. The words should tell the story and really nothing else. I used to think that when someone called my writing “highly stylized” it was a compliment. Now I know it was a euphemism for amateurish.

Once I realized that in order to write a short story things needed to happen, the next logical step was figuring out what should happen. It wasn’t until graduate school that I learned about plot. I feel like I should reiterate here that just because I’m able to understand these ideas doesn’t mean I’m able to execute them. It simply means I can usually tell when I’ve failed. I never know if anything I write is good. Perhaps that has something to do with the idea that God created our bodies so that it’s very difficult for us to pat ourselves on the back.



Four years after my undergraduate degree I began graduate school at the University of South Florida and began writing stories that weren't half bad. It seemed like I woke up with a jump shot. The problem was I was switching points of view, jumping all over the place, and not describing anything, probably because I'd seen too many movies where points of view switch all the time. In fiction writing, changing point of view is a bad idea for an inexperienced writer. One particular short story I wrote was about a character who masturbates for the first time. Just after I introduced this character I began writing about another character. A professor of mine at USF, the novelist John Fleming, recommended non-negotiably that I stay with the main character. I did, and that story won me my very first prize for fiction. The lesson I learned was that a writer should listen to his teachers, even if he doesn't agree, because a young writer almost always knows much less than he thinks he does.

I wanted to be avant-garde. I wanted to write something new and be different. I felt that I was unique, that no one understood me. That's a perilous place to be. Fact is, individuals are never quite as unique as they think they are. In my view, the whole point of writing fiction is to communicate. If a writer feels that no one understands him and that he is having experiences that no one has ever had, inevitably that writer will try to write as though he were different or unique. The result will most certainly be that the writer will fulfill his own prophesy and write in such a way that no one will understand him. One of the most valuable lessons I learned is that I am not unique. I'm pretty average, and much of what I think and feel, others have thought and felt. This actually is a great asset. Readers should undergo a shock of recognition when they read fiction. They should be blown away by the fact that a writer has articulated something that the

reader has felt and didn't know anyone else had ever experienced. If this happens, the writer has done his or her job.

Finally, I decided to try my hand at a novel which turned out to be the half of a novel that follows this introduction. The idea I had initially stemmed from something that happened when I was working at my first restaurant job. I was working for Ruby Tuesday in Springfield, Missouri. About two hours away at a Ruby Tuesday in Columbia, there was a shooting and robbery. Two desperate men stole into the restaurant very early one morning and shot a produce man, a manager, and a cook. I always wondered about the people who worked at the restaurant, the people who ate there regularly and I wanted to write a story about the restaurant business, and about these two killers.

Unfortunately, in that first draft I began breaking all of the rules I had learned in the course of my education. I began the story in first person and then switched to third limited through the point of view of one of the killers. I wrote the whole novel that way even though I had a sneaking suspicion that I was going to have to change it.

I soon realized that writing a novel is a long journey, perhaps the longest I have ever taken without physically moving anywhere. I workshopped what I had already written during a semester-long graduate workshop, eventually writing and workshopping the entire novel that semester. The feedback I received for the initial draft proved invaluable, though much of it has changed drastically. I thought the book was pretty close, but when I submitted the draft for my M.A. thesis, my professors told me that the different points of view were not working, proving my early fears correct.

This final draft is a snake that has shed its skin many times. The character Wren

is actually the embodiment of two different characters, and the point of view has settled to third-limited through the eyes of Wren. The novel is still about two characters who eventually rob and shoot several characters that work in a restaurant, but everything beyond that is different. I'm certain that subsequent drafts will look different than this draft, but it will take this draft, as it has taken all previous drafts, to hopefully make a work of art.

It's the fusion of all of these parts, point of view, plot and character that make a work of art. Everything has to unify toward some effect. There has to be a great conflict going on inside the main character. One problem with this draft that my professor Rita Ciresi pointed out is that the immediate conflict in Wren is unclear. There are plot strands inserted in this draft which have not been developed and in later drafts will have to be explored, such as Wren's sister having leukemia. This perhaps will wind up being the main conflict. Can Wren make something of himself before his sister dies? Everything on the page must be working toward some unifying effect, or it should not be on the page.

Another valuable lesson I've learned in writing fiction is what John Gardner comes back to time and time again in his creative writing pedagogy: a fiction writer must create a movie of the mind for the reader. The words on the page must create images for the reader and any time this dream is interrupted the narrative stalls. Stated another way, nearly every word in a work of art should be rooted in scene. One problem for inexperienced writers, myself included, is the execution of scene. Too much narration presents a problem because it calls attention to the fact that the writer is writing, thus destroying the illusion. The act of writing should in a sense be hidden, like when

someone watches a ball player rope a single to right. All the hard work that has gone into that swing, the hand-eye coordination, the practice, should be hidden from the reader. The reader wants to get swept up in a story, identify with the characters and the situation, undergo a shock of recognition, and realize that he or she is not alone in the world.

Perhaps the greatest effect of fiction is the establishment of a community of readers sharing an experience. It's not the job of the writer to moralize. The real challenge for the writer is to spin a good yarn. I know some writers who after every novel or book tell themselves that they will never do it again because they realize what it takes. The days when one feels like he or she has no real talent is absolute drudgery. So why do we do it? Why does a writer go through all of this to create something? I don't know. But what I do know is that I will continue to do it. I love it and I have no idea why. Perhaps it's that shock of recognition I feel when I read Raymond Carver, Thom Jones, Larry Brown or Richard Yates, that feeling that I'm not alone in the world, that it's okay to have no idea what's going on, and feeling scared all the time is a part of life. Perhaps my desire to connect with people is what drives me.

It's difficult for me to try and place myself in any sort of historical context because I feel like I have yet to find my voice or locate my style. A writer can't go searching for a voice; I know that at least, and given that I don't feel like I'm all that close to where I want to be in terms of how I want to write, it's hard to say where I fall historically. I have trouble thinking of myself as a writer at all. Jay Hopler, a poet and professor at USF, signed his book, *Green Squall*, for me one time. He wrote, "To Josef-- a real writer", and underlined "real writer". No doubt he knew that a writer thinking of himself of herself as a writer is a point of neurosis.

I remember one time in the Navy, after two days of waking up at four in the morning, shaving with cheap razors, bleeding all over the place, marching in the foggy dawn amongst other companies singing cadence, we were all sitting at this large community table in the barracks, and someone cracked a silly joke and we all laughed, we all gut-laughed, and it felt really good. I want to incite this sort of laughter.

I want to write about relationships and the human heart and tell the truth about how difficult life is and how beautiful it can be, often at the same time. Cormac McCarthy comes to mind. There are moments in his fiction when someone says something and they're not trying to be funny, but it is funny, and no one is laughing but the reader.

I know that I've come along way as a writer. I no longer read my prose sitting in toilets in coffee houses. I know that it takes more than just a bottle of whisky and a notebook to be a writer. I realize that a work of art should seem effortless, but perhaps is the hardest thing in the world to execute. I know that talent can only get one so far and that hard, really hard, sometimes masochistically hard, work is what it takes. I feel like what goes on in university workshops can and does make writers better writers. I know that I'm not finished with this novel, not by a long shot. Finally, I know that writing matters, and reading matters, and art matters, and the fact that I've even made it this far is something to gut-laugh about.

## Chapter One

Wren Jones sat Indian-style on a thread-worn, splotch-stained beige carpet in his new empty room. He looked out the window. The languid breeze and flickering lights of the city excited him. The remaining two soldiers of a doomed twelve-box sweated their fate next to him, their kin strewn about in various crumpled states of defeat. Wren thought about the last thing his mother said to him two days ago when armed with his DD214 he bid so long to the Navy and the lonely sea. “Fuck you,” were her exact words after he had explained his plan to move to Tampa for awhile and hang with his oldest friend Allen, who had been living in the Sunshine State for the last three months. Wren’s twenty-year-old sister Haley had been diagnosed with leukemia just six months prior, and Wren’s mother was shocked that he wasn’t coming home after having been gone for four years. “I’m sick and fucking tired of the bombs you drop on us,” she had said. “I suffered your decision to join the Navy but this is just too much.”

That night in Allen’s apartment Wren birthed the idea that he wanted to become a doctor. He felt like he needed to save Haley, save his family, be there when they needed him most, when he could really do something. None close to him had ever died, and yet the thought of any of his family members sick or dying haunted him. He flat-out made up his mind to become a doctor. He knew he could do anything he wanted. He was fresh out of the Navy and felt like the world had opened up for him. He called his two brothers and his mother. It was around three in the morning. “Hey listen,” he said to each in turn

on their answering machines. "I'm going to be a doctor so I can save Haley and anyone else who gets sick." He said this to all of them and felt good knowing they would be satisfied that he had come to this momentous decision. He knew they were worried about him. No one in Wren's family liked the fact that he was going to spend an indefinite amount of time with Allen in Tampa. It occurred to Wren that they would get the messages, know he was wasted, and think he was a loser, an alcoholic, on his way down, and perhaps that he should have stayed in the Navy, been a lifer. They would not see it was for them that he wanted to be a doctor. He was doing it for them, for Haley. He loved them, and he was sure they could not recognize this through his slurred speech. He wanted to show them he could make it on his own, and not just make it, but really be somebody and help people, help them if they needed it, especially Haley.

He recalled passing a hospital on his way into town--Memorial Hospital he thought it was called. He wanted to have a heart-to-heart with one of those yahoos over in the emergency ward, pick their brain, see if they could give him the straight dope on becoming an M.D. He'd show his family a thing or two about what kind of stuff a Navy man was made of, a four year navy man.

He stood up and swayed for a moment on the tan carpet that perhaps was once white and aimed himself toward the door. He descended the stairs two at a time and planted his face in the rocks and dirt at the bottom. He laid there for a moment without a thought and then pulled himself up off the ground. He stumbled towards the lights, always towards the lights, towards town. He fished inside his pockets for a butt and pulled one out. It hung awkwardly and bent from his lips. He dug for his lighter and sparked it, listening to the whoosh of small-hour cars angling towards ecstasy. He looked

to his left and across the street in the distance he saw a great blue neon sign, “Memorial Hospital.”

\* \* \*

He had flown in from San Diego that afternoon, reuniting with Allen at the airport. In Allen’s fine black truck he could feel his heartbeat pick up like the beginning of a heavy metal number. His mind began to swim as he heard the roll and thunder of his old friend’s voice shimmy through the metallic cab. He looked out the window at Tampa and thought it looked yellow. The closer they pushed toward downtown by way of Dale Mabry the more yellow it got, as though they were heading straight into the sun. Wren always associated places with colors; San Francisco was orange, New York was a sort of orange-brown, Seattle was green, and no doubt about it Tampa was yellow, maybe on account of the Florida sun.

“No, but first I got one for you. Holy shit,” Allen said. “Listen. Ryan, you remember Ryan. You know his mom home-schools, right? Well, well, see, she has a colleague, or I mean a coworker, and anyway home-schools this fourteen-year-old chick, right, fourt-fuckin’-teen, and my God, this chick already has a year-old kid, and I mean she’s pregnant, right? Right? I mean, right? Well, see, and she’s at the hospital, right? I mean I guess she’s there you know, about to give birth, right? Listen, the next day she’s in the medical bed, on the bed, and her boyfriend, right, the day after she’s given birth the second time, right? He’s in there on the white bed fuckin’ this chick again. Oh my God, fuckin’ his chick again with no rubber. Trying to start an army, I guess. Isn’t that unreal?” The two men laughed, and Allen wiped a clump of meth from the corner of his nostril with the top of his left wrist.



“Tampa is beautiful,” Wren said, looking out the window. “It seems yellow, maybe on account of the only colors I’ve seen for the last four years is fuckin’ gray and blue.”

“I still can’t believe you joined the Navy, man.” Allen glanced at Wren and then back to the road.

“Well, I’m out now, man.” Wren’s eyes focused on the shifting landscape. “So where is this beat-to-shit place of yours? Is it really above a used bookstore? Fuck, I’m lagged.”

Allen swung his truck into a drive right off Kennedy and came to a stop. “There she is,” he said. The place was old and rickety with smudgy, cracked white paint and black borders around the windows. It was a sprawling two-story house, no doubt regal in its day, but now gutted and dressed into several apartments, a bungalow, and indeed, the bottom floor had a sign out front that read “Imperial Book Lodge.”

Allen’s living room boasted a black leather couch and a matching La-Z-Boy. He had a 40“ flat screen TV and a DVD player and a powerful stereo system. Wren was unfamiliar with all the gadgets. He felt as though he was out of touch with the world, as though the last four years in the Navy he had existed in a time warp, unaware of any progress the world had made.

The two had come down, but Allen was prepared, and gave his friend a Xanax and the two smoked a joint on the couch, passing it back and forth three times before Wren set it in the ashtray. Allen flipped on the tube and sat down. “Rock, paper, scissors to see who goes and grabs us a couple of cool ones?”

“I’m the guest,” Wren said.

Allen smiled and pushed himself up off the couch. “Not for long,” he said, making his way into the kitchen. “You *live* here now, brother.” Allen tossed Wren a beer and sat back down on the couch. Wren fought back a strange longing for his ship. He had for so many months fantasized about this trip that these thoughts of apprehension and regret confused him. “So tell me some more waiter stories,” Wren said.

“I can tell you one,” Allen said, his eyes on Wren’s eyes, searching. “I worked with this lady, a career waitress, an old bag, right? She’d get so nervous at times at the thought of being canned that she’d almost burst into tears. I mean what else could she do? Nothing. That’s the point. People get caught up in restaurants. Everyone knows this. The thing was she had bad, horrible breath, halitosis in the worst way. You could smell it when you came in if you knew what it smelled like. You could smell it without even seeing her. Anyway, she was a good waitress, and got good sections, and was nice enough. The place I worked back home, one of them at least, was nice. It was a nice Italian joint, a new place. Rich people ate there all the time, and there was this one guy, a millionaire I think, a hunter, outdoorsy type, and he came in one Saturday night, and Anne, the lady with the halitosis, waited on him. He had been hunting and was all decked out in camouflage and he had a bird caller that squawked, and whenever he and his buddies wanted another drink he’d squawk that thing, squaaaaawwk! After the meal, he lined eight one-hundred-dollar bills on the table and told her to fix her teeth because she had ‘just awful breath.’”

“No way.” Wren inched forward on the couch.

“Swear. Before that even, someone, maybe another waiter, and it wasn’t me. I don’t know who it was. I have a few guesses. But anyway, someone sent her a letter and

told her she had terrible breath, right? She came in the next day and was furious.

Wanted to know who it was wrote the letter, but no one fessed-up.”

“Did she get her teeth fixed?” Wren laughed, sinking back into the black leather.

“No. She didn’t have bad teeth. She had shit breath. You’re missing the point. I asked her what she did with the money, and she said she bought another easel. She was a painter and went to Vegas with her man. I didn’t even know she had a man. That’s the thing about waiting tables though. I always felt like there was going to be some guy or lady, like the hunter, who would give me like a million dollars in cash, or write me a check. Because it’s weird, the whole thing is built on the generosity of people. It’s like baseball. Conceivably, a baseball game could last forever, you know, if a team kept hitting. It never would, but it could. And with waiting tables someone could give you a million dollars. It’s within reason. There’s no cap to what they can give you, but also someone could make nothing if everyone just didn’t want to give you shit. You can get rich or not make a dime. It’s weird.”

“That is weird.” Wren said, and looked around the room. “Looks like you’re doing okay though.”

“This stuff is all from my dad,” Allen said.

“Is he still in the government?” Wren asked.

“I guess. I haven’t talked to him since I moved down here. He hooked me up with this shit.” Allen gestured around the room. “That’s the last time I talked to him, like three months ago.”

“Why Tampa anyway?” Wren noticed his friend had aged. The two of them looked like the same chess piece, one tan, one black, maybe bishops. Wren was lit from

the inside and exuded a straw-colored glow right up to the blades of his hair follicles.

Allen was darker, dog-eared one could say, and now four years later it seemed like some child had traced the lines of his skin and was in the process of coloring him in, going wildly outside the lines.

“I read an article that said the Bay area is the fastest growing job market in the country and thought fuck it,” Allen said.

“You’re waiting tables now, right?” Wren asked.

“I was. Got canned.”

“What happened?”

“That’s actually a funny story. These fucks over at the Bolognese, especially this bitch that owns it, capricious fuckin’ dowager with an itchy trigger finger, they didn’t like me. They wanted me out.”

“Why?”

“I almost fucked one of the managers. That might be one reason. The night they canned me one of the owners--there are two owners, old divorced couple, the lady though--was eating with all her South Tampon friends, bunch of rich bitches, gold-diggers. Anyway, they were eating and whoever was serving--I think it was Marge--was at the table with a tray with all their entrees. I walked by on my way out and flipped the tray and the shit all crashed to the ground. I walked right out the door. They ain’t seen the last of me; that’s for damn sure.”

Wren laughed. “What are you gonna do?”

“I’m gonna kill every last one of those mother-fuckers.”

“Ain’t that the restaurant you told me I could get a job at?” Wren asked.

“Oh, you got a job,” Allen said, “that’s all part of the plan. You got a gig and you can stay in my other bedroom as long as you want.” Wren looked at the TV; it was a car commercial. “I’m sorry to hear about Haley,” Allen said.

\* \* \*

After leering at passing cars for a block, Wren located the emergency entrance. He tried to wipe off the dirt caked to his jeans before he breached the threshold, but he kept moving his hands from his dirty face to his dirty jeans and soon looked as though he was purposefully wearing some sort of camouflage and trekking with a thousand yard stare to medical. He straightened the collar to his white short-sleeve pullover and entered. The waiting room was starch white with rows of orange cushioned chairs over black spines. Magazines lay on tables at either end of the rows. At the front of the room was a window with a sign above it that read “Please Check In.” Wren lumbered to the window and plopped down in the chair. A young black lady smiled at him and said, “Could you just fill this out, sir?” and slid a clipboard through the window.

“I ain’t here for medical reasons,” he said. “I was hoping I could interview one of the docs. I want to be a doctor and take care of my fam’. I have it all planned out. I just need a little straight dope.” The nurse looked up at him incredulously, then looked behind him. Wren turned around too and met eyes with an obese woman with short dark hair and a scowl of pain etched on her doughy face entering the emergency room. She wore a sort of brace on her leg and walked like an English soldier, straight legged. “Hold on sister,” Wren said to the woman. “Jus’ one sec. So you got anyone back there with the skinny? I ain’t fuckin’ around here, mam. This is serious business.” Wren absentmindedly fished out a smoke from his pocket and put it in his mouth. “I ain’t

askin' for no J-O-B here. I know I'm gonna need plenty of schoolin' and cut my teeth on some cadavers but cheese and rice can't ya give a brother a clue? Can't ya throw me a bone? Huh, can't ya?"

"You can't smoke in here, sir." Then she paused looked him up and down and said. "Potna, you got to be playin' with me. Am I gettin' punked here? Did Kemesha put you up to this?"

"Nah, soul sista, I want to save lives," Wren said. Just then a man came through one of the waiting room doors. He looked Indian, had glasses, was tall and thin, and sported a large bright pink birth mark on his cheek that resembled a pudgy star. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"Finally," Wren said, with the cigarette still in his mouth. He stood up and took three steps toward the doctor. "What's it take, doc? What's it take, man? Don't pull any punches. Does it fuck you up inside seein' all that gore and shit? You got to transfer all that shit, right? Ain't that what they call it, transfer? I can transfer the whole goddamn world if I need to."

"I'm calling the police," the doctor said.

"For what," Wren said, "you got a live one back there?" Wren looked at the door the doctor emerged from as though he could see through it.

"You must leave," the doctor said.

"I can't interview you?"

"No."

"That's bullshit," Wren said, heading for the door. He took one look at the obese lady now sitting down in a chair with her leg propped up. "Good fucking luck, mam."

Kumar ain't no humanitarian." Just before he leaned into the door he looked back at the doctor, the nurse, and the patient and said, "And another thing, just so you know, health care in America is really fucked up."

## Chapter Two

Wren had read somewhere that a large percentage of serial killers at some point in their lives worked in a restaurant. Ted Bundy was a bus boy. Hadden Clark worked at many restaurants in the Cape Cod area and would drink the blood that drained off the raw beef. He ate his female victims in hopes of becoming female himself. Joseph Bell was a restaurant owner. He chose his victims from his wait staff in Texas. He dismembered them and fed them to the alligators he kept behind the restaurant. Wren wasn't sure if any serial killers had ever worked at Bolognese, some may have, but he found out his third day that Harry Peddler had once killed a man. Word had it that it was when he was an amateur boxer, after his wife's dad canned him from the car lot. He beat this guy pretty bad. The guy died the following morning. The doctor said something had jarred loose in the man's brain, and he was as good as dead on the canvas. Said it was pure adrenaline kept him alive long as it did.

You wouldn't know this about Harry by looking at him. There's lots of stuff no one knows just by looking at someone, and this was particularly the case with Harry. He was big, so big in fact that a man kind of forgot just how big he was seconds after meeting him. He was like a mountain one gets used to. He looked like a gorilla or an ape. He had long arms that swayed back and forth when he walked, short blondish grayish hair styled straight up, and a barrel chest one never really got to see the extent of because Harry's posture was so lousy. Most times Harry had a smile on his face, which



was important in his profession; he was bar-manager/bartender at Bolognese. Also, Wren realized right off--even in his first week--Harry was bar-none the greatest ass-kisser he had ever seen. He was a pro. Maybe on account of his size he was so effective. Gives a man a hard on to order around someone big as Harry.

Wren's third day at the Bolo and first day on the floor, Harry's wife died. Everyone knew she was sick. She'd had cancer for years, but it'd gone into remission, and then came back. Wren never met her. She was in the hospital when he started. It occurred to him that he never knew Harry when he may have been happy, but again you'd never know it. It was amazing that Harry worked the day his wife died amidst all the hollering drunks; for certainly the bar regulars were unaware of Harry's loss. Wasn't a bartender's right to have such a loss. He had taken his two-week paid vacation. His wife died the day he came back to work.

Wren decided that trying to get a job at the Bolo through Allen was out. The morning after he had been to the hospital he realized he needed to start small and devise a plan. He'd go ahead and get a serving job and keep his eyes peeled for something better, maybe look at some colleges in Florida. He hadn't given up on becoming a doctor, but he knew he'd have to get a B.S. first then medical school. Maybe there was another way entirely. He had walked into the Bolo the afternoon after the incident at Memorial Hospital and was hired on the spot. Seems they had just recently canned someone.

Mickey Alhings, the manager of Bolo, told Wren on his third day, "Just so you know, Darla died today." Mickey was pretty in a no-nonsense way, slim, not a lot of makeup, and hair the color of Florida sand. Mickey was everything to everyone, an every-woman, perfect for a manager. For instance, to some of the other waiters like

Dylan she seemed like a mom, to Nad she was a fag-hag, to Wren she was just Mickey.

Wren feigned shock and said, “Harry’s here?”

“Yeah,” she said breathily, in agreement. Immediately Wren thought of his two daughters and understood. The man had two daughters and worked for tips. An unsalaried man can’t afford to take off work beyond his paid vacations, especially one with two girls both still in school. Mickey then looked Wren up and down. “I hope you work out here at the Bolo, Wren. We’ve had some bad luck lately.”

“Like what?” Wren asked.

“We hired this freak,” Mickey said, “kept leaving me notes with his check out. We had to can him. Remind me and I’ll tell you about it.” Wren wondered if she was talking about Allen. He hadn’t told Allen about his brush with the emergency room. In fact, he hadn’t seen much of Allen since that first night. All he was worried about for the time being was getting and keeping a job for a while and finding something worthwhile to do with his life.

Bolo wasn’t a big place, but where it lacked in size it made up in quality and location. The joint was situated a stone’s throw away from the bay, in the pseudo art district, slash burgeoning tourist trap, slash restaurant row, slash So Ho (South Howard) district Hyde Park, about two blocks from Wren’s new home which was solid cause he had no car and no plans to blow any dough on one. The food was good and consistent and the place was clean. There were only about twenty tables plus a small lounge, the bar, and a few bigger tables for big tops or parties. On any given night there was no need for more than four servers, but usually five were staffed. The wait-staff was billeted with usually around ten people give or take three, the door of the restaurant bizz always

revolving.

It was a slow night for the most part, or at least began that way, when a large man with the beginnings of a mullet came up to Wren. He was 6' 4" easy and sleeved in colorful ink, but when he opened his mouth, out came a voice that would have been better suited for a character on the cartoon network. He had that thing people call a gay lisp, that way of talking that not all gay men have, but *only* gay men have.

"Have you ever waited on Mr. Salem?" he asked Wren. Wren looked around to see whom he was referring to and told him that he hadn't. "Well, he's blind, and his table is a clock. He wants his salad at six, his meat at two, his veggies at eight" . . . He kept going, but Wren knew he wasn't going to be able to keep track of the man's table clock. The man was going on very seriously as though he was surprised Wren didn't know who Mr. Salem was, as though he was some dignitary that he *should* know. "He's having dinner with some associates. I'll get the check," the man said. Wren glanced at the many other tables and felt self-conscious that he was talking so seriously to this man.

"You won't be joining them?" Wren asked.

"No. I'll be sitting over there." He pointed to a table out of Wren's section. Then Wren saw what he took to be Mr. Salem following what looked like a married couple, but probably wasn't. They were both dressed in dark suits, and the lady looked a little too severe to be from Tampa with her thin, pursed lips and brown rouge. The fella had dry looking, aerodynamic hair full of gel. Salem, carrying up the caboose, was dressed in a finely starched yellow button down and khakis. Had his assistant not told him, Wren wouldn't have known the man was blind. The lights had dimmed in the restaurant and the constant hum of the diners caused Wren to feel as though he was

floating in some sort of vacuum.

Salem reached his seat with a barely perceptible hand from the other two. His glasses were slightly tinted. He seemed to look his dinner guests in the eye, or at least gave the impression of doing so.

It was then Wren started to feel his hangover go into the achy stage. His lower back felt like it was in a vice and the back of his head hurt. Lately he had been accosted by these weird moments of paranoia, as though his nervous system was plumb deciding to fuck the whole program and duck-out the closest orifice. Boozing every night was not helping, and right then he thought maybe he'd quit the sauce. He got the okay from Dylan and waited on the tatted man. He introduced himself as he was supposed to. "Hello, I'm Wren, and I'll be taking care of you tonight."

The tatted man introduced himself as, "Reginald or Reggie." Wren guessed he told him his name because they'd talked moments before, but it was still strange. Wren didn't care what his name was.

Wren waited on both tables, and Reggie never took his eyes off Salem's table, and more than that never really took his eyes off Mr. Salem. Was he his assistant, bodyguard, lover? Wren was unsure, but one thing was for certain, Reggie looked lonely by himself at the other table peering at Salem. Why couldn't Salem have just allowed Reggie to eat at his table?

Wren kept asking around if anyone had ever waited on Salem as he had so adamantly been asked, but no one had seemed to. When Harry sent over a round of drinks, Wren figured they might have been old-school Bolo customers, because Harry had been there for years.

Wren asked Nad if he'd ever waited on Salem and Nad told him to, "Zip it," and Dylan hadn't ever seen him or met him either. Wren didn't want to ask Harry and risk him thinking he was getting into his business.

Wren hoisted the entrees to Salem's table trying to remember what Reggie had told him about the clock. He set the tray on a tray-jack and looked at the diners. Salem wasn't aware that Wren was at the table. He lifted up one hand and looked at the couple in front of him or at least tried to. He said, "We'll rename it love potion number nine. When the patent is up, who cares?" Salem revealed a toothy grin. "I mean if the only side effect is a four-hour-boner, then I say bombs away." The other two remained silent and looked unimpressed. Wren set a small plate of steamed broccoli at eight. He remembered that much and then it all fell apart. He couldn't remember Salem's clock. He looked over at Reggie who stared at him blankly as though he would kill him if he fucked it up. He had the look of a killer, cold blooded, no expression. Wren winged it, and Salem didn't miss a beat. Maybe he could smell where his food was. The meal went off without a hitch. The little bit of conversation Wren picked up on had something to do prescription drugs or pharmaceutical sales. He tried not to listen.

Towards the end of the meal, Wren presented the check to Reggie. He hated standing there while people fished for their money. "You new here?" Reggie asked.

"Yeah, just started. I just got out of the Navy." Wren was standing over Reggie with the makings of another panic attack afoot.

"Yeah, what ship?"

"Kitty Hawk, CV-63. It's a carrier."

"Shut the fuck up; that was my ship. Wha'd you do?"

“Gunners Mate.”

“Look, man, you want to make some real money?” Reggie flattened out one of the napkins. “Give me that pen.” Wren handed him one of his pens. “We have this thing going, pharmaceuticals, we’re pharmaceutical salesman. I want you to come work for us.”

“Are you serious?”

Reggie wrote down a number with Wren’s pen. “Call this number and we’ll set up an interview. It’d be nice to have a Navy man around, especially a gunners mate.” Reggie looked into the distance as though picturing it.

“Thanks,” Wren said.

\* \* \*

Wren thought Salem and Reggie certainly gave off the air of folks who had lots of money which didn’t exactly mean they had any, and sometimes meant they for sure didn’t, but they exuded that air. Reggie was his lackey or so it seemed. Maybe this could be an opportunity to show his family he could make it outside of the navy in a big city like Tampa. Maybe Mr. Salem and Reggie could put him onto something. Maybe pharmaceutical sales was his in to the medical game. Maybe he could find a way to help Haley. Wren was excited to have made their acquaintance and buried those seeds in his pocket for later. He’d call for sure.

He walked home after his shift thinking about Harry and about the fact that his wife had just died and that perhaps Harry had lived so long with pain that it no longer showed on his face. He thought about poor Reggie; he seemed sympathetic enough to Wren, sitting at that table all by himself, staring over at Salem who perhaps could feel the

tattooed man's comforting, fawning eyes on his own blank ones.

Three houses down from the Book Lodge there was a house that used bowling balls and bowling pins in their landscape. The flower beds and walkways were all lined with balls and pins painted red, orange, blue, and green. The paint was starting to chip. Wren knew then he was no longer in Poplar Bluff, Missouri. or the middle of the Atlantic. Anyone who used bowling in its landscape in the Bluff would get their ass kicked.

### Chapter Three

Wren awoke the next morning and stared deeply into little beads of rain that pattered the window. He had bought a blow-up mattress and a comforter that he really didn't need because of the heat. The mattress was very nearly deflated every morning by the time he woke up. He couldn't see the sky because of the wine-colored drapes in his room, but he could see the rain, and guess at the sky's grayness. He was one of those fortunate boozers who continually had hangovers. Didn't the hangovers stop eventually? Isn't that how one knows if one's a true alcoholic? Wren's hangovers were nasty. His body ached all over, and at times he wondered if being hung-over was what old age felt like. Then he read somewhere that hangovers are like starving to death. So he was starving to death.

Wren's oldest brother, C, told him when he was younger that one thing he needed to remember to do was to take care of his teeth. He told him this out of the blue, life advice. Wren heeded that advice and was a freak about his teeth. He brushed them as soon as he got up.

Allen once again was nowhere to be found. Wren had no idea if he'd landed another job or what.

Wren thought he'd go down to the bookstore and see what Jaycee, the proprietor of the store, was up to. He had to work that night at the Bolo, so not much was on the agenda for the day. Nights Wren worked he never did anything much during the day. He



needed to conserve his energy. He wanted to call Reggie about the job but he didn't want to call hung-over, so he decided to wait until the following day.

The rain felt good on his burning forehead as he made his way to the front of the bookstore and through the gate. The bookstore offered a friendly brick porch with pillar-like beams carved in ornate designs where one could usually find a "street person," as Jaycee referred to the bookstore regulars, sitting on one of the chairs smoking or staring at and drinking a Big Gulp like it was a beautiful woman. Wren had met Jaycee only a couple of times before but each time they had talked for a couple of hours.

Jaycee was inside. Wren saw his signs propped up against the wall. One said, "How Many Must Die," and then there was a number next to it on a piece of paper that had been taped over other lesser numbers. The growing number was in the thousands already. Jaycee picketed the war in Iraq. He didn't talk about it all that much unless someone brought it up, and then one could tell by his terse, straight answers that he was simply shocked by what was going on and couldn't believe that others weren't shocked as well.

Jaycee was tall, about 6' 2" and lanky. He played college basketball one year for Louisiana State. He didn't start, but he was on the team. He earned an M.A. in theology from Harvard and was the most spiritual man Wren had ever met. He never went to church though, and never really talked God, unless he was out street preaching, which he did sometimes. Here was a man that when you talked listened, not in that half-ass way people do when they look into the near distance preparing what they're going to say next. He listened, and it almost shocked you to see a man really listen. "Hey," he said when he saw Wren. He sat on a stool with his giant bass.

“Rough one last night,” Wren said.

Jaycee laughed. He propped his bass against the wall and sat back down on the stool. Wren took a seat on a metal fold-out chair. “So I was downtown with my sign, and a cop came up to me and told me I couldn’t have my sign on public property. Said the sign could not touch the ground on public property. So I told him I’d hold it up.”

“You held it up?” Wren said, straightening his back, excited that he was talking with Jaycee.

“I held it up. I could be on public property holding a sign as long as it wasn’t touching the ground.”

Wren laughed disgustedly. “Did you tell him to go shake down a Seven Eleven for a two-day-old doughnut?” He laughed. Jaycee was always getting hassled for his signs. Another sign said, “Where Are All The Christians?” “I waited on this blind guy last night,” Wren said.

“Yeah. How was that?”

“It was no big deal, but there was this other guy, his bodyguard or his assistant or something, who sat at another table and watched the blind guy the whole time like he was worried the guy was going to be assassinated. The assistant dude was big and bulky and all inked, and I think he might have been gay too, but I’m not sure about that. It was weird. He came up to me and told me Mr. Salem’s plate was a clock, and it freaked me out. He wants me to call him about a job.”

Jaycee laughed, and Wren stared at the hard wood floor for a moment. He had a little jazz on in the backroom, and Wren could hear it playing softly. Jaycee played upright bass, and was once in a band that regularly played at a nice restaurant somewhere

in Ybor City before he opened the bookstore. Also, before the bookstore he refurbished antique furniture. He opened the Imperial Book Lodge on Christmas day 02. “You gonna call?” Jaycee asked.

“I think so,” Wren said. “I think it has something to do with pharmaceutical sales.”

“You’re going to be a drug dealer?” Wren looked at the floor. “I’m kidding. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You’re right though. Maybe I won’t call.”

“You should call.”

Along with the street people that milled about the bookstore was a parade of young girls that found their way to the IBL and to Jaycee. He was a handsome fella, but more than that, girls seemed to be as enamored with his ability to “really listen” as Wren was. There were always girls about.

One such young girl loped into the store, and she and Jaycee talked about going for a walk on the beach. She had a felt, purple hat pulled way down, almost over her eyes, and was wearing the unmistakable outfit of a waitress, all black. Perhaps she’d just left work or was between a double. They invited Wren to go, but he declined. Wren took this as his signal to go back up to his apartment. “Don’t forget about the testimony,” Jaycee said to Wren as Wren was about to walk out the door. “You are going to speak aren’t you?”

“I may,” Wren said, and then a pang of nervousness shot through him as he thought about the fact that he had told Jaycee that some years ago he had found the Lord, which in a way was true, but he had also at times felt like there wasn’t shit out there but

VD and guilt. “I may,” Wren repeated and then left.

Wren saw Big Country riding his bike across Kennedy. He waved, and Wren waved back. Jaycee told Wren Big Country was a homeless guy who once knocked off thirty saloons in Texas in the seventies for half a million in take. Wren asked Big Country about it once when he was loaded, and Country just looked at Wren and changed the subject. Later Jaycee said he’d be lucky if Country didn’t shoot him for talking. “I was drunk,” Wren had told him.

Wren roached the rest of the day in the apartment on the couch, desultorily sleeping. When he finally walked to work he felt wet and slimy, as if the alcohol was meandering out of every pore of his body. His face stung where the drunk-sweat mingled with the sensitive, newly shaved skin. He felt ravaged by life and thought that he deserved a few days off the sauce to rest up.

Once at the Bolo he found new blood. It was always an occasion when a new server was hired. Wren likened it to a new student in grade school, exciting because you just knew you were really going to get to know this person, especially if it was a girl and she was interesting looking. The new student at the Bolo was Carmen Perez. Wren came around the corner into the dining room, and she was up front with one of the hostesses apparently going over the floor plan. She had short, charcoal black hair and was thin like a ballerina. Even within the unflattering folds of the black, boyish uniform required at the Bolo, one could detect very feminine curves. Wren was interested immediately. She walked with terrific posture, as though she had a book atop her head, and her very life depended on carrying that book. She had a dignity to her he found very sexy, a severity of purpose Wren had not seen in a woman for quite some time. In short, she looked like

a woman to be reckoned with, and this turned him on. Upon further inspection Wren noticed something else about her. She had a lachrymose quality to her. She laughed at jokes that weren't funny and carried on in that ingratiating way expected of newbies. Wren could tell it was contrived, begrudgingly, and was also seconds from slipping away to reveal what was really going on, which wasn't so obsequious at all. Wren wanted to run up to her, even before introducing himself, and ask her what was wrong and commiserate, maybe share his pain, gather hers in his arms and carry it away with her in tow. But when it was his turn to introduce himself he just said "Hi" and walked away leaving her standing there. That was his trick. Girls he was interested in he ignored.

Wren's first table was a couple of sharply dressed business boys about his own age. They looked up at him, and Wren detected wry condescending thoughts roving through their brains ready to spill upon his departure. He pictured himself grabbing a fork off the table and plunging it into the throat of the better-looking bloke, but he didn't. He simply fetched their house Merlots from the bar and perfunctorily took their order. He wanted to tell them so many things: that this was only a temporary gig, that maybe they could use a guy like him, someone who knew the score. He wanted to tell them he'd been in the navy, seen the world, and could hook them up with perspective.

Dylan, another waiter, told Wren on his first day that a guy's wife once offered him a fifty-dollar bill if Dylan would call her husband by his name when he approached the table. That way, the other guys at the table the guy and his wife were schmoozing would think the guy was a big shot. Dylan did it and made the fifty. People love to feel like hot-shit in a public place, especially a restaurant or a bar. A guy gets a chubby if a bartender knows his drink. All a guy wants to hear is, "Hey, the usual, mack?"

Soon he just wanted to kill the two blokes, spit in their pasta. One guy shooed him when Wren asked him if he wanted a box for his leftovers, as if to say, “I’m too rich for leftovers, silly,” and again he thought of a fork tearing through sinew, neck, and bone.

The whole time Wren kept an eye on Carmen. She was now picking up her own tables, a rarity at the Bolo with newbies. Typically, one had to train for a few days. Wren had to. Wren guessed someone figured she had the hang of it. They met at the soda machine. “You’re already picking up tables?” he asked her.

She looked at him out of the corner of her watery eye and said, “This is my second day.”

“Usually they make people train at least two days.”

“I don’t know,” Carmen said, and then left with a tray of three waters each with lemon. He didn’t know it then, what was going on that day in her mind, but he found out later. She was pregnant and planning to have an abortion. Every tip she made that first day working at the Bolognese was going toward that end, and so with every table and every dollar she earned she was closer to amputating what was growing inside of her, which explains the way she looked, deep beneath her expression. Wren wanted to tell her that he might get into pharmaceutical sales even though what Jaycee had said had turned him off. He wanted to tell her he was going places.

Wren’s next table was a table full of women, South Tampa women, a little too much jewelry, all of them sporting rocks, indicating their husbands not with them, probably out at another bar, rings off, making eyes at whatever hole walks by. The lot of these chicks are cunts. It seems as though they’re rich in a handout sort of way. So that’s covered, but they aren’t happy, and for the life of them they can’t figure out why. It’s as

though they want to cry out that no one told them this part of a gold digger's deal. This part was not shared. Some flirt, like this one with sizable breasts. Since *Desperate Housewives* aired on TV and shows like *Sex And The City*, it's fashionable for these middle age chicks to slum with waiters and hairdressers and the like.

Often Wren absorbed looks that penetrated through the smoky perfumes of his hangovers. Most were just rude though, dying for a drink, and he would involuntarily picture himself getting serviced by any one of them or all of them at the same time as he stood there about to take their order. Their eyes and mouths looking up in his direction, he would envision himself whipping out his cock and plunging it into the mouth of the one ordering. It wasn't something he was proud of and he didn't get off on it or anything. It just always popped into his head as a defense mechanism against his growing anxiety and bitterness and resentment in response to their obvious condescension.

They all ordered Gray Goose martinis of one sort or another, and instead of Wren's volcano of hang-ups and neuroses exploding onto these women, he found myself more and more interested in Carmen. He watched her from a distance adroitly apply her trade. He wanted to know more about her.

Amidst the peripatetic grind he found out that she had a degree in literature. He told her that he had read *Catcher In the Rye*. She laughed at his exuberance, and perhaps knew right off that he was indeed interested, but discarded it as the whim of a reckless man.

All bets were off when the owner, Naomi O'Neil, came in through the front door with her boyfriend, Ennis, a large man who had been in the Olympics as a handball player. Her ex-husband Phil Shoemaker, the other owner, came in solo through the back

door. Things tightened up when the owners rolled in. Everyone knew they watched the staff like hawks. Naomi was in her sixties, but looked like she was in her late forties. She'd recently had breast implants and was plump, but not exactly overweight. She had blonde hair, obviously colored, and often wore bright colors with pendants. Also, she wore, more often than not, a sort of insane scowl on her face as her eyes roamed her restaurant. Phil, on the other hand, looked his age with his snow-white hair and one marble-blue glass eye that looked at nothing. He too watched. Phil was the moneyman of the outfit, and Naomi was the chef. Word had it that Naomi had cheated on Phil with her personal trainer. Apparently, she was doinking this dude in between stints on the Stair Master. The story went that this guy was ugly as sin. He had a nice body and all but he had muscles in his nose that flared out and no hair on his perfectly round dome. Phil found out, and one day Naomi and the trainer were in the Bolo having lunch. Phil came in--this was in the first decade of the Bolo's existence--having found out through the grape vine. By the time he approached the table where Naomi and the ugly trainer were having lunch, he was on a dead sprint. The trainer saw Phil out of the corner of his eye and raised the fork he was holding to protect himself and it plunged into Phil's eyeball. Phil had to get the eyeball replaced with a glass, blue one, and the two got a divorce, or so the story went.

During that first shift of Carmen's, Wren started to notice a certain levity come over her when she looked at him. Maybe whatever it was that was bothering her found respite in his worn-out, forlorn face. Or maybe she simply figured, now here is a guy worse off than me, and that gave her solace.

When the shift was nearly over Wren said to Carmen that they should go out and



have a drink. She told him she was going home, but that she would have a glass of wine and that he could join her. As luck would have it, Wren had just about the craziest mother-fucker in South Tampa for his last table, a one top. This guy ordered champagne, a split, and talked to himself. If his shit wasn't in front of him promptly, he'd get out of his booth and shrug his shoulders as if to say, "Where the fuck is my grub?" He was crazy though, so Wren could get a few over on him; like the fact that he picked out the most rock-hard piece of bread he could find in the steamer, knowing that the guy was too stone crazy to say anything. Wren tried to pass the table off, but couldn't. Nobody wanted this clown. So he waited on him, and the guy was actually rather calm, except that Wren noticed the guy's lips were always moving, talking to no one, and the fact that the poor guy was trying with all his might to break the bread apart, and nearly fell out of his chair.

Jaycee told Wren that the reason homeless people or otherwise seemingly crazy people so often talk to themselves is because they are lonely; they are bleeding from the mouth, he said. That is what they're doing when they talk to themselves, bleeding out of the mouth from loneliness.

Finally, Wren was done, and had a few minutes as Carmen's wine sifted through her hand. She seemed upset when Wren sat down. She had her money out on the table as though she had been doing calculations. "Enough for your cell phone bill?" he asked.

She just smiled. "Not my cell phone," she said, and then it was as though she was about to tell him something, because she looked at him as if for the first time, and then she simply polished off the last of her wine. She ordered another and they talked. Wren found out that she was a single mother, and that she was in the process of applying to

grad school for literature. Wren found out she was Cuban, and in fact had studied ballet most of her life. She had lived two years in the Big Apple, which he found exciting and alluring. He told her everything he wanted to be, but was not, and told her nothing of what he was.

Ever since grade school Wren picked out girls he barely knew and made a decision to pursue them. Maybe he liked the way they looked. Maybe after only seconds of talking he felt love for them, real love. There is no greater love than the love a third grader feels for a classmate. He had never been unsuccessful, and Carmen Perez was his latest project. He was determined to make her love him.

## Chapter Four

Allen had lived with his grandmother and her invalid second husband, Dick, until he was rear-ended by a traveling shoe salesman at 17 and received a settlement of twenty thousand big ones. They were way too old to handle Allen anyway. One time, both Allen and Wren, who had been friends since Wren moved to Poplar Bluff in the fourth grade, had been eating mushrooms the whole previous night. They had fallen asleep around six in the morning and didn't wake up until four. Allen's grandparents had taken the car in for a tune-up for their 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend trip to Kansas City and were back home waiting for the car to be fixed, silently eating a late snack. Allen had looked into the driveway and not finding his grandparents' car confidently walked out of his room and into the living room letting out a big belch and hollering, "I'm scatterbrained," as loud as he could only to look over his left shoulder at his grandmother and Dick spooning fruit into their mouths. "Oh sorry," he had said. They continued on without even trying to understand the boy, who they already knew was well beyond their control.

It was the 4th and the two were juniors in high school. Allen and Wren had planned on tripping acid and having a huge fireworks war. Allen knew his grandparents were going out of town and figured he'd invite everyone over as a meeting place for the war which would spread out all over the small town.

By seven o'clock there were around ten people, all dudes, at Allen's place. Everyone began getting wasted, drinking straight whiskey from big 1.75 gallon jugs of

Jim Beam and bottles of beer and letting off explosives right in Allen's house. Bottle-rockets, screamers, tanks, firecrackers, and M80s exploded and flew through the rooms. There was no time for teams to be devised and Allen yelled out, "The war is on," and walked up to one of the guys who had let off a bottle-rocket in his house and stuck a pipe to the back of his head, lit the wick, and tapped the guy on the shoulder. The pipe was a mechanism designed as a launching system for the bottle rockets. The screamer stuck in the guy's eye while the wick sparked as it burned. The guy reacted slowly and before he could flail the rocket out of his eye it exploded, sending his eyeball three feet across the room right into an ashtray full of butts. Wren called an ambulance and the guy was from then on blind as a cavefish.

But the war waged on throughout the night with no one else getting hurt except for a few minor injuries due to fireworks exploding near the skin. No one ratted on Allen including the guy whose eye had been blown out. He was quoted as saying, "I had it comin'. We all had it comin'. All's fair in love and war."

There was a certain loyalty that went on in the group and like with any group ratting was not allowed; and so Allen got off on that one and it was ultimately called an accident.

That night Wren and Allen were on the same team. Everyone sort of grouped with the people they were closest to. Neither Wren nor Allen would think to shoot a bottle-rocket at the other one. They were both in the town park and out of ammo. They were on the run. Allen had plenty more back at the house but he was unsure how he was going to get back there without running into the others armed to the teeth. Wren's gums were pulsating. He had already peaked from the acid but every now and then he would

see a streak of fire in the night arching like a rainbow, or he would hear a screamer that sounded like a woman in pain reminding him that he was tripping. The two were sitting on the ground behind a picnic table. Wren felt safe with Allen, safer than he'd ever felt with anyone. He was bursting with love for his friend, and when Allen turned his face and kissed Wren for the first time, Wren didn't flinch.

Later that year--that was two years before Wren joined the Navy--all the same friends were over at another friend's house drinking and playing cards for shots and smoking dope. Seems Allen had it in his head that he wanted one of those new digital scales that were all over the science labs at school. He was interested in the scales for measuring out the dope and mushrooms he had begun to peddle. The house they were partying at happened to be a few blocks away from the school. Allen had said he was "going to get me one of those scales," and left the party. The group of dudes, and maybe a few girls, were pretty sauced. About an hour and a half later Allen showed up with one of the scales wrapped in a towel. Another towel was wrapped around his hand soaked with blood. "Hey, someone has to take me to the hospital."

"Jesus, Allen, what did you do?" was all he got from the sedated crowd

"I got the scale, but when I hit the glass with the bat my hands followed through. The glass was easier to break than I thought; it cut me right on the fat part of the hand below my thumb." No one was moving very quickly and no one wanted to drive the poor bastard to the emergency room. It wasn't because anyone felt like they'd be any sort of accomplice or anything. No one figured he'd get caught. They just didn't want to leave the party for the hospital. "C mon," he yelled once more.

Finally, Wren drove him after finding out what was going on--he had been in one

of the bedrooms smoking a joint with a guy who had already graduated but still hung out at the high school parties, and the following week at school--it had been a weekend--word got around about the scale. Of course everyone knew it was Allen. He was the only guy at school with a big-ass bandage on his hand. Surely there must have been blood at the scene, but Allen wore long sleeves pulled way down to cover his hand, and no one ever suspected him and no one ever ratted him out. Poplar Bluff, Missouri investigation practices weren't the best in the nation. Allen did say one of the janitors eyed him pretty suspiciously, but his paranoia was probably about ready to burst at that point. It wasn't long after that Allen was arrested for walking around town tripping in the nude.

\* \* \*

The day after Wren met Carmen he slowly entered Allen's living room from Allen's bedroom, his hair a mess and his shirt off. He clutched the overhanging doorway with his hands. "What the fuck are you doing, dude?"

Allen sat on the edge of his couch, his knees just above the coffee table, the television off, nothing on, his eyes big and cold like two moons. "Plannin' my next move," he said, looking into the deep, dark reflection of his face in the velvety gray, blank TV screen. He had a pile of crystal on the glass coffee table next to a razor blade and his ID. He bent down and through what looked like a dollar bill, maybe it was a twenty, he Montana-ed a bar.

"Are you hooked on that shit?" Wren asked, collapsing into the La-Z-Boy.

"Nah," Allen said, raising his face up, looking at the ceiling, draining. "I'm fixin' to start slingin' this shit. Just want to know what I'm slingin'."

“I feel like I’m back in Poplar Bluff,” Wren said.

“You make a good distinction there, home boy. I thought we could sell us a batch and hightail it to Cuba for a while. I heard it’s fuckin’ beautiful down there.”

“Isn’t that like a communist country?”

“Yeah, but so what. They want tourists down there, especially Americans. And anyway, Castro is fittin’ to kick the bucket, and then they’re going to open it. They’re already preparing to open it. I fuckin’ say we go, man.”

Wren thought about Cuba. He looked at his buddy and pictured the two of them in Havana or some city like that. He wanted to feel safe like he used to looking at his friend, but he didn’t. “You still read a lot?” Wren asked. “I don’t see too many books around.”

“Not really,” Allen said, a little patch of white under his nose. “That shit wasn’t getting me anywhere.”

“I’m not going down there with you all fucked up on that shit,” Wren said.

“Oh aren’t you sweet,” Allen said, then got up and went over to Wren, bent down and kissed him on the lips.

Wren’s parents divorced when he was six. At first he had a tough time. He constantly dreamed that his mother came to his bedroom door, but when he tried to call out to her he could never get the words right. It was like when you wake up screaming and you find yourself sort of humming or moaning because you can’t move your lips. Those nights he woke up screaming with his mouth closed he would go into his father’s room and sleep with him. His father always had the radio on tuned to a country music station that perpetually played the top hundred country songs over and over in descending

order. Wren would snuggle up next to him and listen to the top hundred until he fell asleep. Lying in bed with Allen was like that. There was a security to it, like listening to those songs in order. He loved it. They had never had any type of sex. It wasn't like that, and they both knew it. They never talked about it, and to Wren at least, it wasn't a matter of whether he was homosexual or not. This sort of distinction never entered into it. It was just like those songs, as natural as lying next to his father listening to all those songs.

\* \* \*

“So what is your next move?” Wren asked Allen after he showered standing in the doorway, a white towel wrapped around his waist and draped over his thighs.

Allen, looked out his front window, “I think I want to go hunting. Remember how we used to take our BB guns out and shoot birds and squirrels and shit. Let's do that.”

“Sweet,” Wren said then rushed into Allen's room. As Wren was shimmying into his jeans he had a thought and yelled, “No drugs, man. You imagine what it's going to look like if we're out in the neighborhood with BB guns and meth.”

“Cool,” he heard Allen yell. “We'll just get loaded.” Wren then ambled back into the living room after he had dressed only to see Allen suck down three Montanas right in a row, then violently lift his head up to the ceiling. “Hoo-wee, Jed,” Allen screamed out and grinned.

The two mixed a batch of margaritas and poured them into two Big-Gulp-sized cups. Allen had two guns from when they were kids growing up and the two loaded them with BBs and pumped the rifles about fifteen times each, looking at one another and



grinning, then went outside into the perfect Florida day. “I know a place,” Allen said. They threw the guns into the bed of the truck then got inside. Allen drove them to a shopping mall a short ways away and drove around back where there was a line of trees and a creek.

“This is perfect,” Wren said as the two walked down toward the trees. “So you almost fucked one of the mangers? Tell me about that.”

“Oh, so this bitch was giving me the red-eye, right? Mickey. I’m sure you’ve met her. I could tell she wanted to get freaky, so one day I wrote her a little note with my check out.”

“Wha’d it say?”

“Wanna fuck?” Wren laughed. “She didn’t say no; that’s for damn sure. She laughed when she saw me next. She was a flirt, one of those flirts where you don’t *really* know if they want to fuck.”

“That’s the definition of a flirt.”

“No homeboy, that’s a tease, but I don’t think she’s a tease. She’s a mud-shark. Ain’t no mud-shark I ever met was a tease. Anyway, so one day I gave her a ride home cause her car was in the shop and I just said fuck it and whipped out my cock in the middle of the road.”

“You were driving?”

“Yep. Just whipped it out and she looked at it and told me to put that thing up, so I did. Two days later I was canned. They said it was because a customer said I didn’t bring them a To Go box but I know it was cause I whipped my cock out. That was the night I flipped that old dowager bitch’s tray.”

“I think you’re probably right. I doubt it was the To Go box,” Wren said and laughed. Just then Wren heard some rustling up in one of the trees, a hirsute oak that had long flowing beards from nearly every limb. He put down his margarita Big Gulp and pumped the gun once for good measure and aimed up into the tree. He fired, and nothing.

“You missed him,” Allen said, taking a drink.

“Squirrel,” Wren said. The two walked on for a moment and then heard a thud behind them. Wren looked back and saw a large squirrel lifeless on the ground.

“You got him,” Allen said. “Let’s get him and go.”

“You want to cook him?” Wren said jokingly.

“No. I got another idea,” Allen picked up the squirrel by its tail. “Let’s get out of here. I don’t think Johnny Law would think too kindly of us poaching squirrels.”

“This was your idea.”

“I know, and it worked. Let’s go.”

Allen threw the dead squirrel into the bed of the truck and the two hopped in.

“I’m almost afraid to ask you what you’re going to do with it.”

“Chill,” Allen said.

The rest of the drive Wren didn’t make a peep. He just thought about Allen and drank his margarita. He didn’t think his buddy was too far-gone. What he did feel and what gave him anxiety, was that he thought Allen was capable of anything and worse than that, had plans, had been measuring something out for some time. Wren was sure of this. He knew his buddy had a calculating mind; he could read him that much. Allen was single-minded in almost everything he did.

They pulled into a parking lot across from the Bolognese. Allen looked over at Wren and smiled. “Rock, paper, scissors to see who throws it on Naomi’s ride.”

“Fuck that,” Wren said. “I work here now.”

Allen hopped out of the truck, grabbed the squirrel by the tail and as nonchalant as a man jogging, trotted over to a baby blue Jaguar and threw the squirrel onto the windshield. Wren could see the squirrel’s legs splayed out as though it had dove onto the windshield and died. Allen trotted back to the truck and fired it up.

“What the fuck?” Wren said.

“A sign,” Allen said, “like the mafia does it, like a fish, only a squirrel.”

“A sign for what?” Wren asked.

“I already told you.”

## Chapter Five

Wren began calling Dan “Nad” not long after he was hired at the Bolo. Nad was that self-possessed, finicky, old world, butlerish thing, a career waiter. It intrigued Wren how one who was literally a server by trade could be snobbish, but that was the case with Nad. He appeared to be too good for anything, even while he was serving people with his signature jerky deftness. He was thin, in his forties, with an ever-present red face. He slicked what hair he had left, over the top and back of his scalp, limp hair that was always wet with sweat or Vaseline or some kind of sticky unguent. He was fond of responding to anything anyone said with “Zip it.” Also, he smelled. He smelled horrible. He smelled like people do who have had a lot to drink, like rotten fruit or old beer. A sweet, acrid stench emanated off him always.

“Dude,” Dylan would often say, “you smell like a bottle of Early Times been let out all night.”

“Zip it,” he’d respond. “Just zip it.” He loved being called Nad too. Told Wren he told his roommate about his nickname. Most waiters it seemed either had dreamy futures or haunted pasts or both, and Nad certainly seemed to have a haunted past. Wren worried about him. What was this guy going to do? He had no discernible talent or skills save serving. Was he going to stay at Bolo? What about after that? He had no retirement, no family that Wren knew of. What was Nad going to do?

Nad had a sort of confessional quality peculiar to those who take to the sauce. He

once told Wren, and a few others in the service area, that he used to dance naked in a cage in Key West. “It was when I was young, dumb and full of cum,” he said, and gave a winning, breathy smile as though he was saying those words in just that phraseology for the first time and was quite pleased, even a bit taken aback, by his own genius. Wren at times, had too strong of an imagination and pictured Nad down there in the Keys in that cage with some sort of choker around his neck, his rib cage stark, a pinwheel of lights flipping in and out of both cages.

“What kinds of songs did you dance to?” Wren asked him only hours after meeting him.

“‘Dancing Queen’ by Abba was popular at the time,” he said.

“So you got paid?”

“Tips,” he said casually, “but they couldn’t touch you.” He said this quite seriously as though it was the one thing that could not be challenged. “They couldn’t touch me.” Out of the blue in the restaurant, he also said once that he was not a virgin in any orifice of his body.

Dylan heard this, and not to be taken aback himself said, “What about your ear?”

Nad shook his head up and down. “My ears too,” he said. “It was a time when I was hanging out with an old rich guy and I was young, dumb and full of cum.” He said it again, for effect and it made Wren nauseous.

Nad was off. Nothing was quite right about that guy.

\* \* \*

This was the setting for the missing bitters. The day after Allen gave his warning to Naomi O’Neil, Wren came into work and for some reason Harry had chosen him to

ask about several bottles of missing bitters. Bitters is a liquor--tastes like shit and goes in old fashioned. It's 40 proof and some say it's a hangover cure, but Wren thought it as much a hangover cure as another beer. Wren was getting comfortable at the Bolo and had nearly forgotten about Reggie's offer.

Bottles of bitters were being gone through like bottles of bar vodka, at a clip of three a week, when one should last a month. Wren didn't know why Harry chose to ask him. Did he think he was drinking it? He couldn't say, but he asked him fairly point blank. All this info about bitters Wren didn't even know except the part about a hangover cure. Someone had suggested it to him before, but he had declined.

"Who the hell would drink bitters?" Wren asked Harry as Harry loomed above him.

"It's liquor, Jones, 40 proof."

"I didn't even know it was that strong. Come to think of it, I don't know if I knew it was even liquor."

"Someone knows," Harry said, "and we have a pretty good idea who it might be. I just thought I'd ask you because you seem to know a lot about what goes on around here."

"I don't know anything," Wren said, which he then thought was a silly, guilty thing to say.

"We think it's Dan."

"Nad? No kidding. He does reek like booze. No doubt about that."

"He's been seen behind the bar in the mornings," Harry said.

Years and years of hardcore boozing had turned Nad's hands red, Wren thought.

“We have an idea about how we’re going to catch him too,” Harry said. It was here that Wren started to feel that Harry was confiding in him. It seemed as though somewhere along the way he had been accepted. Maybe they simply pitied him, maybe not. Whatever the case, he felt loyal to the Bolo if for nothing else than the fact that they gave him a job.

Harry and the managers planned to put red dye in one of the bottles so that the culprit who took a slug from the bottle would be caught red-mouthed. There were many holes to the plan. What if the guy or girl poured it into a cup first, or mixed it, would they not see it and then not drink it? What if no one was around when it happened? What if it was one of the guys in the night cleaning crew who had essentially no supervision?

Word got around that Nad was thought to be the bitters bandit and Dylan let him have it.

“So, Nad, you been housin’ the bitters?”

“What? Please, as if. You’re crazy. Just zip it.”

“That’s the good word on the streets, homey,” Dylan said. “It’s what I heard.”

People made jokes about the bitters whenever Nad was around, yet he seemed as if he had no idea what anyone was talking about, the sure sign of a guilty man. Maybe he just needed a drink in the mornings.

Wren began straightening some tables before the evening rush and saw Nad messing around in the bar area. There’s really no reason for anyone to be behind the bar as a server. It was then Wren was convinced Nad was guilty. Wren didn’t tell anyone he’d seen him behind the bar. He wasn’t much of a snitch. Then he thought about how

Harry had confided in him. He liked that he trusted him enough to ask him about the bitters, liked it so much that for a moment he changed his mind and thought he'd go ahead and rat Nad out, deliver the bitters bandit. He looked at Nad giving his section a once over. He was doing a little conductor bit to the muzak, waving his hands around to an old eighties number, "We Built This City On Rock and Roll". Wren felt bad for him, and a little self-conscious that perhaps he was becoming a company man. He went into the back. He was just going to tell Mickey that he'd seen Nad behind the bar. That was all he was going to say. It was probably all it would take. Nad'd be canned. Wren poked his head into the kitchen and found one of the dish dogs staring at him. He was a skinny kid with a buzz cut, and he had red shit all around his mouth like he'd been putting red lipstick on, or had just drank a big glass of cherry Kool-Aid.

Wren found Mickey in the office and told her, "Hey, some dude in the back has red shit all over his face. It may or may not be the bitters bandit."

Mickey turned from the computer screen and gave Wren a sober look. She got up from her chair and rushed passed him. Wren stood outside the office door and watched her walk back into the kitchen. She had a sort of singular gait pointing straight ahead at a sixty-degree angle, her body lean and purposeful. The dish dog heard it from her. What she said was muffled and so Wren couldn't hear it very well, but he, the bitters bandit, shuffled past him toward the back exit at a slow pace. He didn't even bother clocking off. It seemed as though the bitters bandit was used to defeat.

Wren didn't want to stick around and talk with Mickey about it. When she was fired up there was no one more anti-social than Mickey Alhings. Wren ambled back into the dining room to finish straightening the tables. Nad was still conducting "We Built



This City On Rock and Roll”. Nad finished straightening his tables and was walking toward Wren. Wren panicked for a moment realizing how close he was to fingering the man for something he hadn’t done. He felt shame. Nad said, “Good morning,” and brushed right past him.

Wren said, “Hey, Nad,” but by the time he got the words out he was already gone.

\* \* \*

Another thing Wren figured out was the rampant notion that there is a lot of tampering with food by waiters is bullshit. There aren’t a bunch of waiters spitting in everyone’s food. Wren never did and never saw it done. He liked the idea that it was out there though, because he saw it as a cautionary device for customers who tend to give their waiters or waitresses hell. Maybe if they think someone’s going to mess with their food they won’t be so quick to be rude. So Wren reluctantly had to admit that it didn’t happen, at least at the Bolo.

The only time he could say that he’d even heard about it happening was from Dylan. A guy was giving him a bunch of shuck so he took a ramekin of au jus that went with a guy’s French dip and peed in it. He also told Wren how he’d rub his balls and handle a guys meat if he didn’t act right. He would only do this to the worst of customers. Of course, he decided who deserved it and who didn’t.

Really, though, it’s not the waiters one has to worry about. It killed Wren when some guy got all hung up about some meticulously clean waiter touching his food when there were dirty cooks, stoned to the bejesus, unwashed, fairly rubbing the food in their arm pits. Think those dudes are clean? Forget about it. Think a guy on the line with fifteen steaks, seven chicken breasts, and four racks of ribs on the grill who has to take a

dump is going to bother washing his hands? Why waste the time? Fuck it. Take it out on the server. Fuck it.

Wren didn't know much about Dylan after working with him for a few days except that he was from the Midwest. He'd gone to school out there and was in a frat and hadn't graduated. A story he told was about a time when he was with some of his frat brothers. He pulled into a McDonalds drive through, stripped naked in the car, climbed through the drive-through window, jumped over the counter to the dismay of the employees, went out the exit door and got back into the car, on a simple dare. Wren believed he did it. No doubt in his mind.

The evening shift after Wren had nearly fingered Nad, Dylan was going on and on about a film he had seen. "You seen *Fight Club*, Jonesy?" Dylan asked, as they strolled around the restaurant.

"Yeah, I've seen it," he told him.

"Dude, we should start a fight club. Wouldn't that be killer?"

"Start a fight club?"

"Yeah, get some people together and duke it out. I believe all that shit--that men are becoming pussies--emasculated they said. Don't you, Jones?"

"Yeah," Wren said. "I believe it, though I don't know if kicking the shit out of each other is the way to solve it. Plus, that movie fucked up. It could have been an excellent film if they'd stuck to the fight club. The part about the split personality was lame. Stick to the story, I say." Wren was talking out the side of his mouth as he paced around the Bolo looking for hot girls sitting at the tables.

"Me too, but the fight club itself, that's where it's at. That's the best idea ever.

So what do you think?"

"How about I judge the fights?"

"You can't be part of the club if you don't fight, Jones."

"Count me out then."

"So you wanna go on being a pussy then?"

"Enough," Wren said. He stopped and looked into one of the mirrors.

\* \* \*

The night wore on and Dylan talked Wren into having a few at his place after work. It was slow. Dylan had a killer apartment on Cleveland not far from Bolognese. It was right near restaurant row and not far from Allen's place.

Wren had had about four beers sitting on Dylan's tan leather couch when he started thinking about what Dylan had said about the fight club. "It's not just the emasculation," he said, taking a gulp. "There really is very little of the American dream left for us. I mean the gen x'ers, which is just a lousy distinction and really means that we have yet to define ourselves. I guess it's there, the American dream, but it's less than it was for our parents, because there are just so many of them. There isn't much left for us. True success is less likely, and even success on a smaller scale like owning your own home, job security, leaving something for your kids."

"You don't have kids, Wren."

"But if I did. There's lots of people with kids. My brother has triplets. The thing is our generation probably has per capita more huge dreamers because it was what we were promised. You can do whatever you want, they always said. They were idealists: the sixties, civil rights, free love, the hippy thing. Even if they weren't hippies they were

a part of that atmosphere and it made them idealists, and now closet idealists. Now they're in the closet because they know it was all bullshit." Right here he lit a cig. "So this emasculation stems from impotence really. That's what I think. We've been duped. I mean fuck, it's getting hard just to live. I don't hardly know anyone under forty who doesn't get help from their parents or someone, usually much older than they are. That's not the American dream, is it? It's not even fame that people want that I know. They just want to live, and work at a job where they don't feel like a loser. Now that's the American dream, but even smaller. Fuck a house. I just want to have food and a place to stay and a place to work where I don't get made fun of and treated like shit. But even saying that makes me feel guilty. It's guilt too. Guilt will kill your ass. We're the promised generation. We had promise. We were promised. We're the promise generation. Personally, I blame it on the boomers. We just sit here and do nothing while they take our jobs because everyone's living and working till they're ninety. Yeah, they left something for their kids alright. Paid for their idleness, or left them with a bunch of hyped dreams. Our retirement is fucked, social security is fucked, everyone knows that, and they're taking our women, too, with Viagra, and we don't do shit. Well, I say die already. I want my piece of the pie."

"Hey, Wren, let's kick each other's asses."

"Alright," he said. "I'll give you your fight club." They hopped up off Dylan's couch and went downstairs and out into the parking lot. "How does this work anyway?" Wren asked. But by then Dylan was already bobbing and weaving, and Wren was just kind of standing there. Wren set down his beer on the black pavement and put up his dukes. He was about to talk some shit when he saw Dylan cock his fist, almost putting it

behind his back. Then he saw it come around like a boomerang and felt it crash into the side of his face. He fell like a sack of charcoal onto the blacktop, clutching his ear.

Dylan was standing over him. “Holy shit, dude. I knocked the fuck out of you. I can’t believe you didn’t duck that. That was from my shoe tops. Damn, you’re slow as molasses.”

“Fight club is over,” Wren said meekly.

Dylan didn’t break his jaw as he first thought. He hit him just under his left ear. Wren couldn’t hear very well but everything felt like it was still intact. He was sorry, Wren could tell, and was going on about how he thought Wren was much quicker than that.

“You know,” Wren said, lying spread eagle on the blacktop and looking up at the stars. “You do realize that it isn’t the fight club you love so much. It’s the film. Why don’t you go to Hollywood and become an actor?”

“You think? And leave the Bolo?”

“Yeah, I know. It’s hard to fathom.”

“I don’t know. You think I can act?”

“Yeah, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I could do it, but don’t you have to go to school?” Wren’s face hurt and began to pound.

“Pitt didn’t. Matt Dillon didn’t. A bunch didn’t. They just said fuck it and went out to Hollywood.”

“Something to think about, huh,” he said. “Boy, I must have really rattled your cage.”

He had rattled Wren's cage. It was at that very point that Wren decided the following day he was going to call Reggie about the sales job. Waiting tables was going to get him killed or a warm spot in hell.

## Chapter Six

Wren opened his eyes and felt his ear. Dylan had jacked him up pretty good and he felt like an asshole for agreeing to take part in the man's fight club. The crumpled white napkin with Reggie's number on it rested next to his deflated mattress. Wren picked it up unfolded it, located his cell phone tangled in the sheets, and dialed the number. The phone rang three times.

"Big R here," a man said gruffly.

"This is Wren Jones from the Bolo. May I speak with Reginald, please?"

"Yeah, hey, hold on. Fuck that shit," Reggie yelled at someone. "Fuck that fuckin' shit. We need the printouts pronto or Salem is going to blow his stack. Yeah, Wren, what the fuck took you so long to call? Your ass is behind. Get in here."

"You want me to come in now? Today?"

"You want the job? Or I should say, you want a chance at the job?"

"Yes."

"Then get your little ass in here." Reggie gave Wren directions and Wren wrote them down on the napkin. He'd have to get ready and call a cab.

On his way to the office Wren looked out at Tampa and felt alone. The cabbie was the silent type, perhaps Indian, though he had his radio tuned to a country station. The streets and buildings on Kennedy shone starchy and vibrant as though the sun had bleached everything crystalline. Wren thought he ought to get some shades. He saw old

men walking down the street with long stringy beards and skinny chipped away women talking to themselves and thought if he didn't get his act together he was going to wind up like them, defeated, bleeding from the mouth.

The cab dropped him off at an office building downtown on Twiggs. Wren paid the cabbie and half jogged to the front of the building. He opened the ten foot tall wooden doors and walked into a spacious lobby furnished with pink and purple lush chairs and couches with lamps and cherry-wood end-tables nestled on a greenish, puke-colored carpet. There was no one in the lobby, but above him was another floor and he looked up and noticed three or four men leaning over a thick railing looking at him. The men were young, early twenties, and they looked tired. "Hey fellas, I'm looking for Reggie." The middle man cocked his thumb and without an expression pointed it behind him like an umpire calling someone out at the plate.

"Stairs are over there," another boy said, and pointed to the east corner of the lobby. Wren wore a yellow button down with swampy green slacks and a brown and green tie. His hair stuck straight up and for a minute he wondered if he should have parted it. He made his way up the stairs and found at least ten young men milling about all dressed in suits or ties. He wandered into a room off a corridor, where the boys were leaning, into a wide open empty room with plaques on the walls and pictures of distinguished men receiving awards. There was a big sign on one of the walls that said, "TODAY IS THE DAY." Wren heard Reggie's bouncy rough voice reverberating from one of the back offices. There was no sign of Salem and Wren thought for a moment that he probably wouldn't be seeing much of Salem even if he took the job. He walked into what he took to be Reggie's office and the man was sitting at his desk brow beating a



couple of young kids who were sitting in brown cushioned chairs in front of him. Reggie took one look at Wren, winked, and told the kids to beat it.

Reggie was silent for a moment, eyeballing Wren. “So you decided to join us, huh? Sit, sit.”

Wren walked in front of one of the chairs and sat down. “Hey, I never asked you” he said, “what did you do in the nav’?”

“I was a Bos’n,” Reggie said.

Wren perked up even more, giggled and said, “I was doing unrep one time and shot the projo backwards, twice. A Bos’n came up to me and said, ‘hey dip-shit you have the projectile in wrong.’ I put it in correctly and made the shot.”

Reggie laughed. “Those were the days,” he said. “Got any sales experience?”

“I’m gonna shoot you straight, Reg. The only job I’ve ever had was the navy, except for an usher job at a movie theater, and of course the Bolo.”

“That don’t matter. Think you can sell?” Reggie’s eyes never left Wren’s, never blinked.

“Sell what?”

“Sell shit to a monkey. Don’t matter what. Think you can sell?”

“I can sell,” Wren said. “What do you guys sell?”

Reggie paused for a moment. He had on a tight black shirt and seemed to flex before he spoke. “This is a testing ground for pharmaceutical sales. If you can prove you can sell, we train you to become a salesman. Simple as that. We have organic chemists who make the drugs and basically if we think you guys have the stuff, we train you to sell it, mostly antidepressants. We have lists of mostly cancer patients who have been

diagnosed with depression and we try and get them to buy our product. I mean eventually you guys would sell them to doctors, but these patients we're dealing with, most of them are already on some form of antidepressant and we offer them an alternative for less money and hope they go to their doctors and get them to write prescriptions for our product. If you guys can get the customer to change their mind, give our product a chance, then we'll give you the opportunity to sell our other exciting products directly to the doctors and make some real coin."

"I have to tell you Reggie, my sister was just diagnosed with leukemia and this is just the thing I've been looking for. I don't care about the money. I'd really like to help these people, and maybe eventually help my sister." Wren was serious and the thought of really helping Haley made his heart quicken.

"If you're not interested in the money we don't want you."

"Don't get me wrong, Reggie. I'm interested in the money as much as the next guy. I'm just saying I'd be in it for other reasons too." Wren noticed just above Reggie's head, on the wall was a picture of him and Mr. Salem and a hot blonde with huge tits.

"Sounds good, Wren. Sounds good. What's going to happen is we're going to put you in the field today and see how you handle it. I'll put you with one of our best guys and see how you do and then we'll see. I have a good feeling about you." Reggie then winked at Wren.

Reggie's chair screamed as he stood up. Wren stood up when Reggie did and the two men shook hands. Reggie silently left the office, and Wren was left there, unsure of what to do. He didn't know whether to follow Reggie or just sit tight.

Soon a tall skinny guy came into Reggie's office. "You Wren?" the guy asked

and stuck out his hand. “I’m Paul. I’ll be taking you into the field today along with another new guy.” Paul had gray hair but he didn’t look that old, maybe in his early thirties and he sported a charcoal gray suit. For a moment Wren felt self-conscious. He didn’t own any suits and Paul was dressed far nicer than he was, dressed to the nines, where Wren was tippin’ sixes. “Today I’m just going to see how you guys sell,” Paul said.

“I don’t know anything about anti-depressants,” Wren said as the two descended the stairs and made their way out into the balmy Florida sun. Wren barely noticed a skinny kid with an awkward gait tailing behind them.

“Don’t matter. You ain’t selling pills today. You may never sell pills. You ever had your oil changed?”

“Sure,” Wren said.

“Today you’re selling oil changes. C’mon, Remo,” Paul said, looking behind him and slowing his pace so Remo could catch up.

“I’m here?” Remo said, almost out of breath. Remo had on a collared shirt with a zip up neck and pants that looked a bit like jeans and crazy curly hair that was already pasted to his head from the heat.

“Oil changes?” Wren said and laughed.

“Oil changes,” Remo repeated.

Once the three men were in the car Wren was silent. Remo sat shotgun and listened to Paul. “See,” Paul said, “the beauty of this business is that even during a recession we’ll thrive. Businesses such as Tire Land,” and here he tapped a stack of large poster cards with his finger, “need people to come in and get their oil changed and maybe

when their brakes go out the same people will come in and get their brakes fixed. When business is down ours is up.” Paul smiled wide. “These coupon books are for free oil changes and half off oil changes.” He gave Wren one of the cards. It was a large well made poster with perforated coupons. “You just have to get these people to say they get oil changes and then try and show them the money they will save. Make them feel stupid for not saving money. It’s a three-hundred-dollar value. People want to spend their money; they just don’t want to be sold anything; remember that.”

“How long do we have to sell coupon books?” Remo asked.

“One month. I already told you yesterday. Then we’ll see. Next month I’m going to Philly for training, pharmaceutical sales training.”

“Congratulations,” Wren said. Nothing was ever easy Wren thought and this seemed like a good deal. Beat the shit out of waiting tables, though it looked like he wasn’t going to be able to quit the Bolo any time soon. The three men were driving over the Gandy Bridge and Wren noted how beautiful the sunlight looked over the blue water. He was still a little in awe that he was actually in Tampa, out of the Navy. The water no longer represented the Navy; now it was just the water. Wren thought about Haley and that he should call her and see how she was doing.

“You probably want to know how you’re going to get paid, right?” Paul said into the windshield.

“It did cross my mind,” Wren said.

“You get 11 dollars for every coupon you sell. Reggie gets six and the folks who make the cards get three.”

“And businesses really go for these?” Wren asked.

“Businesses? This is door to door, baby.”

“Door to door?” Wren asked. Remo was looking out the window. “What does all this have to do with pharmaceutical sales?”

“It’s all part of Salem inc. Listen, just remember, every no is one no closer to a yes.”

\* \* \*

By noon that day, walkin’ the track, poundin’ the pavement, Wren’s feet hurt so bad he forgot about the pain. He was as hot and sweaty as he had ever been not playing sports or having sex. Remo, perhaps for an hour, had quit speaking, but Paul, Paul was rip-rarin’ to go. The three salesmen had been asked by one obviously retired man with a fishing hat on, “Can’t you boys find better jobs than this?” Paul had answered no. One lady told Paul she wouldn’t take the damn thing if he paid her, and countless others either didn’t answer the door or shut it just as soon as they opened it. But some, some bought it. Paul’s spiel was pretty much, “Hi there, I’m Paul from Salem inc. You guys have a car? If you do, how often do you get oil changes? Well then, this is what we’re doing.” Put the card in the hand of the potential buyer. “For twenty bucks you could save three hundred over a years time. What? You don’t want to save money? Ok.” Or, “Sure, checks would be fine. Oh, you want three for your husband and kids, splendid.”

Just when Wren thought he couldn’t take anymore he and Remo followed Paul as he cut through a lawn and headed up to a door with a sign that read “No Solicitors.”

“That one says no solicitors,” Remo said weakly.

“Those are the best ones,” Paul said. “I’ve closed on more no soliciting signs than I can even count.” Paul knocked on the door and a dog roared and snarled inside.

Wren jumped back. “I hate dogs.”

“That’s not a good sign,” Paul said and laughed. After no one answered the door Paul said, “Lets go have lunch, gentlemen.” They had covered nearly three miles of an affluent neighborhood. Only about one third of houses answered the door and only three had bought a coupon. Paul was good. Wren wondered if he had the stuff to be a salesman. They had parked a few blocks down and had to walk to the car. Wren’s feet throbbed but he said nothing. It occurred to Wren that affluent neighborhoods in Florida looked pretty much the same as they did in the Midwest, leafy, quiet, secluded, and brown.

The three men drove to a gas station and Paul filled up and went in and bought a sandwich and a bag of chips. Wren wondered if the harshness of the first day was only to weed out the meek. Wren wasn’t hungry and opted to stand inside the gas station and cool off. Remo on the other hand bought a sleeve of powdered doughnuts and a big gulp of orange soda.

“I don’t know how wise that is in this heat,” Paul said as the three lingered just inside the door. Remo was gulping his orange soda through a straw. “You should be drinking water,” Paul said.

After Paul wolfed his sandwich, Wren and Remo followed him back to the car. Once inside, Paul turned on the AC full blast and turned the radio up. The Devil Rays were playing the Orioles and Wren decided right then and there that he was not going to take the job. He’d finish out the day, mainly because he didn’t know where the hell he was, but there was no way he was going to be able to sell coupons door to door.

About a half hour later the three men were back on the track. Paul carried a piece

of white typing paper with squares on it and house numbers written below the squares. Some squares were filled in and some were still blank. “The deal is we go around three times to catch the morning people, the afternoon people, and those just getting home from work.” The hot sun was beating now, beating unmercifully. “Remo, since this is your second day, I want you to try and just get the coupon into someone’s hands; that’s all I want you to do. Just get the damn thing into someone’s paws. Just get them to look at it.”

The three men stood on the sidewalk in front of a house. Remo’s hands rested on his knees and he was staring at the ground. “I don’t feel so well,” he said. He looked up and indeed looked very pale. “It’s not the orange drink,” he said meekly.

“You have to buck up, son,” Paul said. “Do you want this job?”

“Yes I do,” Remo said and took the coupon with renewed vigor and stomped up to the door. When he reached the door he knocked, doubled over, stuck his ass out at Wren and Paul, and unmistakably shit his pants. His upper torso flinched and folded and slowly collapsed onto the concrete.

“Oh shit,” Wren said “must have been that orange crush.”

“God dammit,” Paul yelled into the languid breeze. He kept an eye on the door and for perhaps the first time that day, the first time since he’d been selling door to door, he didn’t want anyone to answer. Paul and Wren kept their distance from the fallen salesman. It was clear what happened to the man. “You ain’t getting in my car like that, man,” Paul said and walked around to the side of the house. “You’re going to have to strip and hose off.”

Remo didn’t protest. He pushed himself up off the ground and lumbered to the

side of the house. Wren started walking toward the street. He was embarrassed for Remo and had no interest in seeing the man hosing his own shit off himself. Also, the car was still several blocks away. The man was going to have to walk practically in the nude no matter what. Wren heard the hose flicker on and soon saw Paul walking toward him. “I have half a mind to cut him loose right now,” Paul said.

“We can’t just leave him here,” Wren said.

“Oh yes we can, but I’m not going to.” About ten minutes later Remo appeared from the side of the house trotting toward Paul and Wren. He had nothing on but a long wife-beater that he was holding down, stretching over his privates as far as it would go, just over his ass. Paul and Wren continued walking in silence toward the car. Only one car passed but it was a souped-up metallic blue muscle roadster. Some asshole stuck his head out and whistled.

“I hope you got it all,” Paul said as the three climbed into his car; this time Wren sat shotgun.

\* \* \*

Wren sat outside Reggie’s office. None of the other kids were around. Wren figured Remo had been informed that he didn’t make the cut. Wren had the feeling that he’d never see Remo again. He hadn’t told Paul that he wasn’t interested in the job yet. Paul really never gave him an opportunity. Wren heard a door shut and stood up. “Hey, boss wants to see you,” Paul said, and walked toward the stairs not saying anything else.

“Come on in, Wren,” Reggie yelled from his office.

Wren walked into the office and sat down. He was feeling confident about not taking the job. Once again he noticed the attractive woman in the picture above Reggie’s



dome.

“You’re not going to take it, are you?” Reggie said, grinning wide.

“It’s really not my cup of tea,” Wren said.

“Paul said you guys had a shitty day,” Reggie guffawed. “I’m sorry I put you out there with Remo. He had no business even being out in the field. This company was built on those coupons.”

“It wasn’t Remo,” Wren said. “I’m just not cut out for door-to-door sales.”

“Who is?” Reggie said. “It’s a brutal racket. I understand, which is why I’m going to give you another opportunity. Look, I already told you our company also deals in pharmaceuticals. We have orders that need to be delivered. Can you handle that?”

“I can handle that,” Wren said and smiled.

“I thought so. I just don’t want any dead weight in my company,” Reggie said. “The coupons are a good business, but I see if I want to hold on to you I have to do a little something different. Fair enough? Basically, part of our business is run from the internet. Folks place orders and we deliver the orders to them. Every Sunday I’ll give you the orders and your job will be to deliver them over the week. I don’t care if you deliver them all Monday or Friday, as long as they get there by the end of the week. And we need them to be signed for, so you may have to call first.”

“I can do that,” Reggie. Wren thought the only problem was that he didn’t have car, but he figured he could get Allen to help him out.

“Well, stick around here and fill out some of this paperwork,” Reggie said.

## Chapter Seven

The day after he accepted the job at Salem Inc., Wren walked through the front door of the Imperial Book Lodge around four o' clock and noticed Jaycee already had around thirty chairs set up in the front room. The focal point was the back bookcase, which stretched up nearly to the ceiling. A dormant fireplace sat to the immediate right. The whole front room was covered in books and just in front of the back bookcase was a makeshift lectern made out of a stool and four thick books; next to that stood a microphone and stand. Big Country came out of one of the back rooms and headed for the porch. Wren followed him out to the porch to smoke. A few crates of fruit sat on the porch: mangoes, oranges, and watermelons. "Want some fruit?" he asked Wren roughly.

"Nah, Country. I'm good," Wren said. Country was the bookstore's resident peacekeeper. He was the eyes and the ears of the streets. He was a "street person," but he was loyal to Jaycee. That was for sure. Country had been in and out of hospitals and jails most of his life. He was in the paper once. One day several years ago the headlines read, "Superman Catches Bullet and Spits It Out." Apparently, or so the story went, Big Country, as the black fellas called him on the streets, had a run in with his sometimes girl, Wanda Pots, about some pot she suspected him of smoking. When he denied it, she shot him in the face with a little .22. Thing was, the bullet lodged in his dentures. After he was shot in the mouth, he took the bullet out and threw it at his girl, and the papers caught wind of it.

Country was probably in his sixties, but he was cut like a swimmer in his twenties. He talked rough, and had a look of a man from the old west, and probably would have been better suited to have grown-up then anyway. He was loud and obnoxious and had a wisp of hair on his head that blew around all the time. He rode a bicycle all over Tampa and sometimes wore a metal hat with two horns sticking out of it like a Viking.

Jaycee said one time a green rocking chair came up missing from the porch of the IBL, and Country vowed to find out who it was stole it.

A few days later he brought the chair back. The green chair had been half-painted black. Country said he found some Mexicans who had the chair, and had to “one punch” one of them to get the chair back. According to Country, the Mexicans said it was sitting out on the curb like trash, “but I knew they was lyin’ though. I boxed one of their ears pretty good,” he said. Country knew all the hookers and drug dealers on the streets, and nights could be found in the back alley behind the Shell station hot boxin’ a joint or getting a blow job.

Jaycee walked out onto the porch and smiled at Wren. “You going to say a few words tonight,” Jaycee asked.

Wren remembered that he had told Jaycee that he would. “I guess, but I don’t really know what to say. I totally forgot you were having the thing tonight.”

“Just tell them the story you told me. I think it’ll be powerful.” Jaycee lit up a cigarette and a car door slammed. The day was bright yellow and sky-blue and the heat began to cause everything to droop.

Jaycee, Wren, and Country looked in the direction of the car door and soon saw

Carmen ambling around the corner, her head held high, holding the hand of what Wren presumed was her little girl Sam. Sam had long, curly hair and looked like a miniature version of Carmen. Her body was shaped exactly like Carmen's and she held herself just as erect, as though both had books on top of their heads they were putting off reading for the moment. Carmen said her hellos and acknowledged Wren with a slow, smiling nod. Wren was nervous, having for the first time seen her kid. It occurred to Wren right away how vital it was that Sam and he got along. Seeing them march across the bookstore lawn, it dawned on Wren that Carmen had this little person who was as important to her as anyone, more important than anyone, certainly more important than Wren would ever be. It became crucial all of a sudden that in some way Wren showed Carmen that he could handle being around a kid. Wren came from a split family so it didn't bother him. He was cocky about it, thought he knew the score, all the angles.

Sam began playing with a pink ball out in the yard. She kicked the ball and then chased after it. She came across a flower and pulled it out of the ground. Cars whooshed by behind her little body as she hopped, skipped, and jumped around. Wren sat down in the green and black chair. Carmen walked over and stood before him. "I guess you know Jaycee," Wren said, looking up at her.

"What are you doing here?" Carmen asked, sitting down in a chair beside him.

"I live upstairs."

Carmen laughed. "I had no idea. Jaycee and I have been friends for years."

Wren looked at Carmen out of the corner of his eye, really looked at her, and he couldn't be sure if she saw him, and really, he didn't care. He took in her eyes, the mole on her chin, the way her jeans covered her thighs. His stomach turned in a good way and right

then he wanted to tell her he loved her. “I love you, I love you, I love you,” he wanted to say. But he couldn’t. He couldn’t tell her. Why couldn’t he have just told her right then? Why don’t we say it? Why don’t we just tell people when it perhaps is all they want to hear at any given moment? Something prevents us from doing so. Perhaps she won’t feel the same way. Perhaps she doesn’t feel the same way. Wren was merely a waiter and drank too much. If he thought so highly of her would he really have advised her to love a guy like him? This is why he didn’t say anything.

Soon the place was filled with revelers of all ages. Enclaves of adults and college age kids and even older folks gravitated toward the bookstore, drawn from the streets it seemed. Jaycee knew a lot of people, and they had come. Wren found a bottle of wine in the kitchen, a cheap red, and a hard-water smudged wine glass from the cupboard and poured himself a knock.

Jaycee called everyone in and began to speak. He thanked everyone for coming and told everyone to “feel free to buy a book if one catches your eye.” He was sort of gangly and unsure of himself, holding the microphone. Nearly all the gray metal chairs lined in rows were filled and Wren wondered how an event like this could draw so many people. Wren rubber-necked toward the porch and noticed folks standing, smoking on the porch; among them was Big Country talking just out of reach.

Wren was excited and the wine was good. Next to the door was a metal urn that said “Donations” on it. Jaycee never charged for these things even when he had bands that he’d pay. He’d just take donations and said once that he usually broke even.

Wren was getting nervous, real nervous, and started to really get after the wine. He kept noticing Carmen drinking her wine as well. As far as he could tell she was about

two glasses up. She and Sam were sitting a row in front of him but closer to the fire place. Wren was bummed he wasn't sitting next to Carmen and Sam.

The first to saunter up to the microphone was an old man with white hair and a short-sleeve shirt and tie holding a large, silver, metallic triangle similar to the ones you see people play as an instrument, but larger. He had several gold balls cradled in one arm and for at least five minutes he played the triangle with a little metal stick and sang a song and juggled the balls through the triangle. Everyone looked on and Wren didn't know whether to laugh or to act as if what the old man was doing was terribly profound. Wren never knew how to act at readings or talent shows or performances of any kind. Sometimes he'd picture himself standing up in the middle of a reading and shouting "Ahh bullshit!" At these readings he felt far away from his Midwest upbringings and as he drank more and more of the wine he began to feel far away from everything. Everyone clapped when the old man was done and the man absorbed the clapping out of breath looking at the floor.

The next to go on was a young girl who Jaycee knew, and Wren had seen around the bookstore. It was up in the air as to whether she was going to play her guitar. Apparently, Jaycee had taken her out to dinner hoping he could convince her to play. She made her way up to the front, her shoulders shrugged, and her face curled in a wry smile. She had short, dyed black hair and was bony. She sat down in the chair and looked at the crowd. The backdrop of all the books jacketed in an array of bright colors lent the scene a feeling of romance.

She sang a couple of numbers, one she said she'd written that day. She said she had played it almost one hundred times that day, and she belted it out in a sort of

melancholic way, befitting someone who perhaps felt a little too much the weight of the world.

She was a true beauty up there, and Wren saw it. Wren knew he was about to be called up next and his heart began to race. After she was done, Carmen got up clutching her bottle of wine and cheered. She was drunk. She was hammered. The bottom dregs of her wine sloshed around as she waved the bottle around.

Sam was up front, crawling on the floor in front of her chair. At one point she was maybe going to do a little dance for the audience.

Jaycee called Wren's name, and even though the wine created a sort of field around him like he was floating in a bubble blown through a little plastic stick with a circle on the stem, he was terrified. His steps were heavy and his face contorted somewhere between a smile and a look of terror.

As he turned around to face the crowd he saw Carmen and Sam. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Jaycee who had a measured, serious look to him as if he knew he was about to want to concentrate on what was being said. The myriad of eyes that made up the rest of the room blended together, and Wren began to speak. "I'm not real sure what I'm supposed to say up here, but Jaycee talked me into telling a little story about myself that I told him not long after we first met. You guys now how disarming Jaycee can be." The crowd giggled knowingly, and Wren noticed a police car drive by on Kennedy and then noted that the day had begun to dim. "Basically it has to with the fact that for years I was an atheist, which I don't mean to sound so melodramatic, but that was the case. I didn't believe in God though I was raised Catholic." As Wren spoke he became myopic as though he could not see beyond the microphone or hear anything

beyond his own voice. “One day I was walking to work. I was driving on a suspended license and so I had to park at this church and then walk across a busy street to get to work at this movie theater. I think I was kind of hung-over and it had just rained and I began to look at everything, the branches, the fields, the leaves. This was in Missouri and everything seemed to be thicker for some reason. There was a certain depth to the physical world that I hadn’t ever noticed before. Then I started to think that this depth really was endless and that I had only just noticed it. Then I began to think that this depth was really God’s touch or imprint on the world and I began to think how cool it was to think that this depth in all things was real. Cool is really the word I thought of. It just seemed a whole lot cooler to believe in the capacity of things. It just seemed a whole lot cooler to believe in God.”

Wren paused for a moment and realized he had nothing more to say. He then looked up and stared at the faces in the crowd. Jaycee began to clap and the rest of the room began to clap, and Wren said thanks and walked out onto the porch and lit a cigarette.

Jaycee came out after him. “That was really great, man,” he said and shook Wren’s hand. Wren was elated.

Carmen then came outside as well still clutching her wine bottle. “I think I’m in love with you,” she said.

“That makes two of us,” Wren said.

“You’re in love with yourself too?” Carmen said and laughed.

“That’s not what I meant.”

Carmen then looked back inside. “I need to get my child,” she said. “I need to



take her home.”

“You can’t leave,” Jaycee said to Carmen, “there’s like six more acts plus a band.”

“I’ll be back,” she said.

\* \* \*

Wren saw Carmen pull into the parking lot from his upstairs platform and a sense of dread came over him. He had stayed for a few more of the acts, but then became bored and decided to see if Allen was home. It was a Tuesday and so he had until Sunday to talk Allen into helping him deliver the scripts. He didn’t think it would be too difficult to get Allen to help him out. He just hadn’t seen the man lately and this worried him.

Wren descended the stairs two at a time and walked up to Carmen’s car, his head bent at an angle to see her through the window. She smiled, pulled the face off her CD player, grabbed two bottles of wine from the passenger seat and said, “I’m going to get drunk.”

“Damn,” he said. “I didn’t know you were such a lush.”

“There’s lots you don’t know about me,” she said.

“Ditto,” he said. One thing Wren didn’t know, was that she’d go ahead and get wasted and drive with her child in the car. “Where’d you take, Sam?”

She didn’t answer or didn’t hear him, and he didn’t want to ask again and risk her thinking he was really interested or thought bad of her. The light of day had turned into darkness pierced only by the sharp reds and yellows and blues of the city. Wren was excited. They ascended the stairs, and when Wren opened the door a rush of stagnation

met his nostrils and for a second he realized just how solitary his existence had become. He hadn't had a woman up in his room since he'd been in Florida. Allen still wasn't home. He hurried into the kitchen and uncorked the wine, poured two glasses, and then turned the radio on low. He rushed back into the living room and set the two glasses down on the coffee table, poured the wine, and sat next to Carmen on the couch.

"I have to watch Harry's kids tomorrow," she said. She had nearly finished off her wine by the time Wren had taken a sip; then she did finish it and poured herself a fresh one. Carmen looked away, and suddenly Wren realized she was shit-faced. She had that look about her, that in-between look where you can tell she was thinking something and then bam it's like she caught a left hook and was looking at nothing, reacting to the blow. The only light in the apartment was two candles Wren had lit and the moonlight coming through the windows. A tear streaked down Carmen's cheek. "I lost my child," she said.

"What?" Wren asked. He thought of Sam.

"I had a miscarriage." Wren was stunned. He leaned into her, wrapped his arms around her. "You remember that first night at the Bolo when I was counting my money? That was for an abortion. Turns out I didn't need it."

"I'm sorry," Wren said. Wren wondered who the father was, but didn't think it appropriate to ask.

\* \* \*

A couple of hours later the two were on the floor and pretty sauced. "There's a few things I should tell you before we start dating," Wren said.

"Whoa!" she said. "Who says we're going to start dating?"

“Of course we are,” he said, and then dove in for a smooch.

“Hold on,” she said, “after this song.” Wren laughed. That was why he loved her at that moment. Instead of kissing, she wanted to hear the rest of a *Modest Mouse* number.

After the song was over she said, “So what do you have to tell me?”

“There’s a bomb I think I need to drop.”

“What bomb?”

“After the Navy I thought I wanted to be a whaler. I thought the sea life was the life for me. I wanted to whale. Then I found out whaling was illegal.” She didn’t say anything more. Wren started to undress. He felt naked anyway and he took his shirt off, then he took his shoes off, then he took his pants and underwear off and was naked on the couch with the woman he thought he loved.

## Chapter Eight

Wren woke up in the raw, nude as the day his folks first laid eyes on him. The previous night pummeled him in waves of fogged memory and emotional left hooks. He wondered why he was naked. Had Carmen and he done it? He vaguely remembered getting naked, just stripping as though he couldn't decipher at what point in the seducing process he was at and jumped the gun. He didn't remember doing much. He thought perhaps they'd kissed.

"Rough one last night, brother?" Allen yelled from the kitchen. "You have some chicky up here last night?"

"Where've you been, man?" Wren yelled from the couch, his voice horse.

"Around," Allen said and emerged from the kitchen. He looked excited. His black hair was a mess and his eyes were wide and he was chewing on his lip like he was zooted.

"I need to talk to you at some point," Wren said. "I have a business proposition, but let me wake up first. Where the hell have you been anyway?"

"Man, you don't ever listen do you? I'm planning my killing spree," he said and laughed. Wren just shut his eyes. "I have to bail," Allen said. "Let's talk tomorrow. I have some shit to tell you too." Allen was carrying a duffle bag and went out the door.

Wren went out to the porch after slipping on some boxers that were soaked with

wine from a glass he'd knocked over. He often went outside when he woke up hung-over to make sure the world was still there.

Wren had the day off and the next day and vaguely remembered Carmen inviting him to Harry's place to watch his kids. He had to work the weekend at the Bolo and then was supposed to pick up the prescriptions on Sunday. He needed to get a hold of Reggie at some point.

He was half-certain the invite to Harry's was retracted. He walked back into the apartment and laid back on the couch. He then heard a knock at the door and froze. "Wren, it's Jaycee. Open up." He lumbered to the door and opened it. Jaycee was standing there smiling. "Caught ya," he said.

"Good God, I got fucked up last night," Wren said.

"Carmen called and said she left her make-up here last night. She's on her way over here to get it."

"You've got to be joking," Wren said.

"Nope. Look." Wren looked down into the parking lot and saw her black Mirage pull up. She got out and looked amazing; she had cute, tan shorts on and a bright yellow tank top. How on earth did she clean herself up so quickly? Wren ran into his room and put on a pair of sweats and a t-shirt and slipped into his sandals. He donned his Cubs hat and sat down on the couch, his head ringing terribly. He saw her make-up bag on the coffee table and whisked away a bunch of ashes that had collected on top of it. His door was wide open and she came through it. Jaycee had disappeared.

"I'm supposed to be at Harry's at seven. Pick you up at six thirty?"

"Sure," he said looking at her, trying to read her face.

“You’re a wreck,” she said, and casually walked over to the coffee table and picked up her make-up bag.

“What happened?”

“You are coming, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he said.

\* \* \*

Wren fell back asleep on the couch and didn’t wake up until four-thirty. He quickly showered and dressed for Harry’s. He laid on the couch and watched the Cubs until Carmen showed up.

He awoke on the couch from a knock at the door. Carmen walked in and looked great. Her perfume cut through the dank, sweet, winy, smoke-filled room.

Wren hopped up onto his feet, a buzzing noise in his ear and WGN news on the tube. He couldn’t smoke when he was hung-over, but he wanted to do something with his hands.

“Get a little nap in?” Carmen asked.

“Yes,” he said, throwing a hat on for the second time that day. He was feeling slightly better.

\* \* \*

Harry’s pad was nicer than Wren thought it’d be. Apparently, Naomi and Phil took care of him pretty well. It was a nice, solid, peach number a few blocks from the bay. With the growing real-estate market in Tampa, he figured the house had probably doubled in value just in the last two years. It wasn’t huge or anything, just nice and solid with a porch. The body stretched far into the back and the front looked like a person

looking at you with a little Robin Hood hat on, two windows for eyes, and a door for a mouth. A humongous oak taller than the house and dressed in loose Spanish moss lorded over the lawn. There was a sporty looking royal blue truck in the driveway, and Wren wondered if perhaps Harry was still home.

“Is Harry still home?” he asked Carmen as they pulled into the driveway.

“No, he lets his oldest take the car when she wants.”

“The oldest is how old?”

“She’s sixteen, but she’s a senior in high school. She’s about to graduate. The other one is seven, I think.”

“Why can’t the older one watch the younger one? Shit, my brother was watching us when he was like nine, I think.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a baby sitter,” Carmen said.

The two spilled out of the car and ambled to the door and rang the doorbell. The oldest girl answered but she looked like she was about eleven.

“Hey,” she said, and stuck out her hand. “I’m Cynthia. You must be Carmen, and Wren.”

“That’s right. You’re a smart girl,” Carmen said. Behind Cynthia peaked an even younger girl. “And you must be Adrian,” Carmen said, and smiled.

“Uh huh,” she said. The little one looked like Harry all the way up to how her long hair on top was kind of messed up and was sort of sticking up like Harry’s. Wren wanted to say, “You look just like your dad,” but he didn’t want to offend anyone.

The older girl, it was Wren’s guess, looked like Harry’s late wife. Both girls were beautiful, though very small and petite. It didn’t make sense to Wren. Harry was so big.

Once inside Wren noticed all over the walls and on the shelves pictures of the family, of a more perfect time. He saw Harry's late wife, Darla. She was very pretty, sexy even, with a little petite figure and brown hair. She did look like the oldest. The four of them stood in the front living room sort of twisting around looking at the walls.

"Your mother is very beautiful," Wren said.

"Was," Cynthia said. Carmen shot Wren a scowl. "Yes, she was," Cynthia said. "She looked like me. Aid looks like Dad."

"Are you going out tonight?" Carmen asked Cynthia. It seemed as though Adrian was particularly interested in her sister's answer because she stared at her, awaiting her reply. It looked to Wren like the younger one was going to be trouble.

"I have to work on my speech. Dad says if I deliver a good speech he'll buy me a car."

"Speech for what?" Wren asked.

"Valedictorian," she said.

"Wow," Carmen said. "Where do you think you might go to college?"

"Dad wants me to stay in Florida, so maybe UF or FSU. I'm not sure. I'm already taking college courses now. I want to finish in three and a half years if I can, or three years even."

"What do you want to study?" Wren asked.

"Medicine," she said. "I want to find a cure for cancer."

The Peddler home was comfy. A wrap-around blue couch dominated the front room facing a huge entertainment center flanked by cabinets and an antique case filled with china. Paintings of mostly beach scenes decked the walls along with the portraits of



the family taken before Darla died. There was a separate dining room with a great oak table under a chandelier and the kitchen, Wren could only partially see, was packed tightly with appliances and a small breakfast table. Wren thought there was still a woman's touch that perhaps was slowly eroding.

Harry had left some money for food and noted that the girls had plenty to eat and that their dinners were wrapped up in the fridge and that they knew how to use the microwave, so there was no reason for Carmen or Wren to have to cook for anyone. Also, it said, "Wren, there's some nice scotch in the cabinet, single malt, good stuff, Carmen too."

"I guess Harry knows I'm here."

"I told him," Carmen said.

Wren found the cabinet next to the entertainment center and found the scotch. "Don't mind if I do," Wren said to Carmen, and poured himself three fingers of the liquid gold.

Carmen was looking at the pictures, the ones with the two girls, sisters, best of friends it looked like to Wren, and maybe he was imagining this, but it seemed to him she was looking at those pictures with longing and with doubt. He remembered her telling him about the miscarriage. Things like that he remembered, black out or no black out, and he still wanted to know who the father was. Wren wasn't sure if she knew that he remembered or even knew that she had told him, but it had been his experience that people know; they may not remember everything that went on during a bender, but bet your ass, everyone remembers the important stuff, stuff that was divulged, secrets.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “It’s just that I never had a sister and they look so happy and yet they seem so different.” Carmen and Wren sat down on the blue wrap-around couch.

Just then Adrian came into the living room carrying a card. She had it folded. It was made out of blue construction paper. She handed it to Carmen. It said, “*Carmen and Wren, welcome to our home. Adrian and Cynthia.*”

“I love it,” Carmen said, and hugged the little girl.

“Want to see my room?” Adrian asked.

“I would love to see your room,” Carmen said, and off they went.

Wren watched the news on the couch for a while and had three more fingers of Harry’s scotch. He began poking around the house a little bit. He went into the bathroom and opened the cabinets. There were about ten bottles of pills all stacked to one side. Wren read the label. It was a Xanax substitute and on the bottle it also read, “Salem inc.,” so that was how Harry knew Salem and Reggie, Wren thought.

## Chapter Nine

“I’ll tell you one thing. I never thought I’d say this, but I miss my rack,” Wren said on the couch next to Allen, the early moonlight squirting through the drawn shades, a pile of meth on the table in front of them.

“Wren, are you fucking kidding me? This is what we’ve been waiting for, for two years.” The TV was on but muted.

Wren let that comment slide because he felt the brittle tension in the air that was mounting between him and his friend. He felt brittle himself from all the meth. He felt sick. He’d never felt sicker in his life. They had been partying all day and into the night.

“Let’s do another bump,” Wren said.

“We have to conserve, man. We’re almost out. But I do want to teach you how.”

“You mean how to make that shit?”

“Yes. That’s our ticket, brother. It’s easy.”

“I don’t want to get addicted.”

“We won’t do it all. We can sell it. That’s what I’m saying, just for a while, until we get our feet on the ground. Plenty of mother-fuckers here in Florida, plenty of buyers. Superb market down here. I like that you’re getting the experience with the Xanax. It will help us in the long run.” The two looked like they were sitting in the front seat of a race car going one hundred and eighty miles an hour.

“What’s the plan exactly?” Wren asked.

“Don’t ask me what the plan is, man. You’re really getting on my nerves. Live in the moment. Fuck the plan. I have a plan, but don’t worry about it. I’ve been making the fucking plan for two years. Just enjoy the moment. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Live in the moment. I need to get laid,” Allen said. “That’s all I know. I need some pussy, pronto.”

“I feel you on that. I pulled it enough in the Nav’. You haven’t even met Carmen.”

“That’s that chick you had over the other night? Don’t worry about her. We’ll get some beaver. Don’t you worry about that, but let’s wait. We don’t have a lot of cash, or at least I don’t, to be blowing it on dames.”

“To me that’s not a luxury. That’s a necessity,” Wren said. But even his own voice sounded distant to him and unreal.

“Wait till Cuba, brother: the women, the beach, the bud, the drink. We’re going to have it made down there. Maybe we’ll go to Key West, then Cuba. Whatever we want is ours for the taking.”

Wren was aware of what his body was going through. He liked what was happening. The feeling of addiction was a liberating feeling. To want something so singularly felt good. Allen, apparently feeling the same lovely sensation of desire, bent down over the table and rifled a big one. He handed Wren the one-dollar bill and Wren’s heart leapt.

“Something about the nighttime gets me going,” Allen said.

“It’s morning,” Wren said. Wren wasted no time and snorted as hard as he could. Allen got up and popped in a *Flaming Lips* CD.

Allen turned down the stereo after the initial beat sounded. “This is where it’s at, brother, you and me and America. This is where it’s at.”

“Yes,” Wren said, momentarily pacified by the ferocious beating of his frail heart. His heart felt like a homemade boxcar engine with a rubber band and a washer, the whole thing about to come unglued and spring at the walls of his brittle rib cage. But, he felt love in his tired chest, an emotional upheaval toward his friend who he was realizing over and over was his friend for life, perhaps even his soul mate. Allen did another bump, and Wren again wasted no time.

“Let’s get out of here, man. Let’s go for a ride and jam some tunes,” Allen said.

\* \* \*

The two careened onto the highway blasting *The Flaming Lips*. Wren felt best when Allen was behind the wheel. He felt safe with his buddy behind the wheel, as though he was in bed with him or his father listening to those country tunes, the singers wailing about something they’d lost.

“By the way, I’ll help you with the pills. Don’t worry about that. We need to stock-pile some dough anyway,” Allen said.

“I’m going to send a bunch to my sister,” Wren said.

Allen slowed the car to a stop. He opened up the glove box, a place Wren had not stuck his fingers in for fear Allen would think he was trying to steal something. The glove box was deep, and looked at a glance to be nearly filled to the rim. Wren looked up and saw a man sort of stumbling along the road. He was wearing knee high red tube socks and a sky-blue tank-top. He looked to be somewhere in his forties. His thin, wispy hair danced in the breeze. The man glanced back and nearly fell over, his hand covering

his eyes from the high powered beams of Allen's truck. The man was about to turn onto a gravel road it looked like, one of those old, sleepy gravel roads off the highway. He was having a hard time of it, steering his body. He looked like he was going to fall. A few miles down the highway Wren could see lights, maybe from a bar. The fella looked like he was drunk, leering about. Wren's heart pounded faster than ever. It nearly stopped when in the moonlight he saw Allen snatch out of the glove box a large Rambo knife that gleamed and glinted in the sharp, dancing light. Allen smiled, and was out the door in seconds. Wren saw him overtake the man. Allen grabbed the man's arm and shoulder and pushed him to the ground, the knife in his hand. Allen crouched over the man in the headlight beams as though he was digging into the ground with a pick or a hand shovel, careful not to get any dirt on his pants.

Wren couldn't believe what he saw. He wanted to laugh or talk or say something. Allen hurried back to the truck. For a moment Wren thought Allen knew the guy, maybe settling an old score, but then he thought there was no way he knew the guy. "Fuck," Allen said as he wiped the knife with a dirty rag he grabbed from the bed of his truck. He slung the cloth on the road. "I got blood all over me." He grabbed a small, green duffle bag from behind his seat and stripped and changed into a clean pair of jeans and a t-shirt right there on the road. No cars came. He threw the bloody clothes into the bag and stuffed it behind the seat. He leaped into the driver's side, started the car, and began yelping in a mad, jubilant way. "Yeah. Yeah." Then he banged the roof of the cab.

Soon his exuberance infected Wren and Wren began hooting and banging the roof of the cab as well. Allen stopped the car, slid over to his friend, grabbed Wren by the face, and kissed him roughly. The two swirled tongues and held each other.

Wren held Allen tight. He held onto him for dear life. He knew if he let go he would fall, or Allen would fall, or they both would fall, so he held on.

“I want to keep on holding you forever,” Wren said.