

The
& Night
Opus

*The Commoner's
Guide to Suicide*

matthew good

The Night Opus

Somewhere, someone is waiting for a reason. Perhaps a reason for being, or a reason for doing, or reasonable answers. This isn't a story about reasonability. This is a story about the decay of reason. There are those who would equate such decay with specific strains of mental engineering. I would have to disagree. Only the afflicted can appreciate such conditions, leaving those of us handy enough to express ourselves in want of some greater and altogether elusive quality of paranormal disarray. I would have to say that the decay of reason is nothing more than an inevitability. Human beings have always been destined to be their own undoing. I believe we're just getting to the good bits now. I was in love once. I loved a girl that I had watched love others. I spent years at her side, picking her up when she was too internally disconnected to power herself. Maybe it was this tragic state that drew me to her, I'm not quite sure. There were aspects of this woman that, to me, embodied everything that a woman should be. For some reason I refused to consider her faults when multiplying her numbers. Personal perception of perfection is like that. You see what you want to see. After a while you just see what you need to.

On occasion, for things to make sense, truths have to be bent to suit certain aspects. I am not going to say that this story isn't truthful, on the contrary, it is. But I'm also not going to say that some of it hasn't been tampered with. The reasons for this will remain with me. All you need to know is that I was truly in love with this girl. Years later I would come to the realization that love is nothing more than perspective. As time passes, it has little to do with romance or the heart. It has everything to do with status quo. One day you will wake up and realize that a good portion of your life has been used up. If you're lucky there might be someone lying beside you that will be able to tell you where it went. They, themselves, will appear to be the shadow of an individual you once knew. They

will not remember the real you either. Both of you, despite your youthful hopes, will have become lost in a wash of complacency. This is not the decay of reason. It is simply the unconscious deployment of internal countermeasures.

There are instances in every life that will be continuously reviewed as monumental errors in judgment. It is difficult for me to say that my love for this girl was an enormous miscalculation but it's what I'm driving at. I doubt that, no matter my cold aversion, I will ever fully admit that it was a mistake. No one can ever fully do such a thing. Justifying ourselves to ourselves is a talent that we terminal apes have mastered. We're so good at it, in fact, that human history has been profoundly affected time and time again simply because someone, somewhere, refused to face the truth of themselves. Instead they justified. Realizing that you're a fool is quite easy. Coming to terms with the realization that you will always be a fool is the difficult part. As a species, we have yet to admit that we are profoundly and prolifically foolish. Who in their right mind is going to admit to such a thing? You will spend your entire life trying to prove otherwise. When you get there take a look around at where it's gotten us.

Let me start by admitting that alcohol had a great deal to do with everything. And when I say alcohol I'm talking about liquor. Not beer or wine or any other such nonsense. I'm talking about good, old-fashioned, four-on-the-floor booze. I was one of those secretive alcoholics that no one ever suspects. Some of my closest friends had no idea that I was a drunk. Come to think of it, it eluded even me for longer than you could possibly imagine. My destructive twirl with the bottle peaked one evening when an old man had the misfortune of driving his car into the back of mine. It had snowed that day and the roads were covered with ice. This did not matter to me. I snapped. I got out of the car, took a rusted nine iron out of my trunk, and proceeded to pound the shit out of his hood and windshield. I would later be arrested for driving under the influence and assault. Thankfully

I had yet to use the horseshoes that had been residing up my ass since birth. As it turned out, the old man did not have a license, refused to press charges, and I had played baseball with the arresting officer's son for seven years. So he kept me locked up for a couple of hours and then let me go. That night, the girl that I loved was with another guy. My best friend, to be precise. I would waste my phone call leaving a message on her answering machine. Her mother, who would come to detest me in ways one can barely imagine, thought it best that the message be erased. I have no idea what I said, but I remember it being quite convincing. It would take me years to admit, but that night marked the beginning of my immaculate coercion of Jennifer Dawn Connors.

Hello. Nice to meet you.

Let's talk about Dick because Dick had a lot to do with this. Dick was Jenny's father. Richard Connors, failed architect and lowly car salesman. In the early to mid seventies Dick had his own firm, pulled in almost a hundred thousand dollars a year, and had affairs with younger women. In the early seventies a hundred grand was like a million dollars. It afforded luxuries such as in-ground swimming pools, three-car garages, and expensive vacations. It also meant that Dick could have his very own bar in the basement of his very own house. Dick would spend the better part of seven years in that basement slowly drinking himself into the waiting arms of a General Motors showroom.

For some unknown reason we tend to hold alcohol in the highest of regard. You can go to a bar and get loaded but you can't smoke in one. You can be in bed asleep when your girlfriend starts banging on your window covered in blood, having just been beaten with a lampstand by her drunken father, and no one seems to give a damn. Get caught smoking a joint at school and Jesus Christ himself can't save you. When it comes to alcohol abuse the silent majority tends to look the other way. In the end one of two things always happens:

someone dies or someone spends a good deal of their life wishing they were dead. Problems that are easily tackled are always the ones brought to the forefront. Smoking, for example, is such a problem. It's easy to tell people they can't smoke in various locations because the law says they're not allowed. It is not against the law to purchase alcohol. Nine times out of ten the law never finds out what that alcohol precipitates. So smoke up. That way you'll only have yourself to blame when your lungs fill up with blood. Not your father.

When Jenny was very young she used to lie in bed and listen to her father beat her mother. It would go on for hours. Over fifteen years of beatings the neighbours only ever called the police once. Jenny's uncle Ernie always used to tell her mother that he was going to kill Dick if he laid another finger on her. But he never did. Ernie was a big talker and that was about it. When things were good Ernie tended to come around. When things were bad he stayed away. All of them were like that. I used to call them the flying fucking Zelniks. It made Jenny very angry. Anna Zelnik, Jenny's grandmother, was a very quiet woman. She was so quiet that she used to whisper things to Jenny's mom who would, in turn, repeat it to everyone else. Anna's husband, Frank, had died of thyroid cancer several years before I had burst onto the scene. The Connors were another matter altogether. Grandma Connors was a victim of the loving backhand herself. Every time Dick's dad would raise his voice she would go rigid from head to toe. Jenny's mom did the same thing. Come to think of it, so did Jenny. Harvey Connors was one of those gruff types that likes to call Asians "chinks". He found that sort of thing hilarious. Besides Dick Connors I've never met a man I'd like to kill more than Harvey. He used to wander around the house in his underwear when they were down visiting. He was the walking definition of a disgruntled white male. His son was his sidekick.

In the beginning Mrs. Connors liked me, I guess. When I would come by to pick up Jenny I'd sit with her in the kitchen and talk while she knit-

ted. I was half-cut most of the time but to Mrs. Connors it was normal for men to have that hazy look in their eyes. For the most part I always thought she tolerated me because she figured I was a smart kid and Jenny could do with spending some time with a smart kid. I wasn't sleeping with her daughter then, which might be one reason why she was so nice. After Jenny and I started having sex things around the Connors house got tight. Like her daughter, Mrs. Connors eventually came to the realization that I was an idiot. And, on each occasion thereafter, she made it her mission in life to remind me that she'd figured me out.

So there's the pathology. Personally, I had no excuse for my behaviour. And since then I've never tried to offer one up. Jenny, on the other hand, had plenty of excuses. And for all the years she endured her father she never felt the need to use any of them to her advantage. Her time would come. And in her mind there were only two acceptable outcomes: either he would kill her, or he wouldn't.

When I was a young man I used to spend a great deal of time reading. I would read anything I could get my hands on that interested me. My father, to his credit, kept a rather large, though eclectic, collection of books in our basement. So from time to time I'd sneak down there in the middle of the night, grab a book, go back to my room, and start reading. I must have read everything from *Inside The Third Reich* to *Catch-22* before I was fifteen. It was marvellous, but it had its downsides. I was never all that good at making friends. Instead of putting forth any sort of effort in this area I would just sit in my room and redraw maps from atlases. I've drawn the entire planet four times over in my life. From every river to every remote village worthy of being included on a national map. Any idea where Vidz'yuyar is? Didn't think so. I may be the only North American-born person who does.

As it turned out, the key to unlocking my social skills was liquor. In junior high a couple of acquaintances introduced me to gin. My father, it just so

happened, was a lover of gin. So these guys would come over after school and we'd raid the old man's liquor closet. By five thirty, around the time my mother got home, I was three sheets to the wind. However, I always had enough sense to drink half a glass of Scope and spend some time convincing myself that I was in control. Most of the time it worked. The rest of the time my mother just thought we were being fourteen, I suppose. Either way, it started snowballing quite dramatically after that. By my sixteenth birthday I was putting away three quarters of a bottle a day. By my seventeenth birthday I had gone beyond the point of no return. As any alcohol abuser will tell you, that's the point where you drink just to feel normal. You're not drunk at all. You're even-up.

That's not to say that drinking made me Mr. Personality or anything. I was still somewhat of an introvert, it's just that I found it easier to deal with strangers than I had in the past. I met Jenny at a house party when I was sixteen. We were both drunk. She came up to me and asked me what my problem was. I said that I didn't have a problem. She said that I did. I said that she was my problem. She kissed me and nodded. It would be the last time that I would touch her until we were almost twenty.

In the weeks that followed Jenny and I became fast friends. We were the kind of friends that rarely spent much time in large groups. Instead, we'd drive somewhere and dissect the world. I had but one thought on my mind; all the while she just wanted to make sure we didn't screw things up by entertaining that thought. As it turned out, Jenny's problems were much too immense for me to handle alone. By the time we were twenty they had crushed me to death and turned me into someone that I no longer recognized.

As an aside, when you're supporting a hefty drinking habit it's always best to have alternatives. One cannot always afford passable liquor, so you end up being creative. We did this by inventing a drink that, to this day, has yet to be surpassed—except, possibly, by a handful of true West

Virginians. We called it paint thinner, and for good reason. The drink consisted of the following

- one half bottle of vodka
- one half bottle of J. Walker Red Label
- mix vigorously in large Tupperware container and consume

You might be wondering why vodka and JW's Red Label were the liquids of choice. As funny as it might sound they were the two most common types of liquor found in the discount bins. I needn't say more. On occasion the discount liquor would be changed around, so you might have to put up with rye or whatever they needed to get rid of that week. But vodka was always the constant. There was always vodka. And if you made friends with vodka, it never let you down.

When I graduated from high school I started working full time and suddenly realized that I could afford Jack Daniel's on a daily basis. So that's what I stuck with. Jack Daniel's is made in Lynchburg, Tennessee, by the way. Lynchburg is in a dry county. You have to drive to the next county if you want a drink. America is a strange place.

Besides drinking there was little else to do. Go to school, go to work, go home. Rinse and repeat. Sometimes I would wake up in the morning and decide that the best thing I could possibly do with my day was to conceive of an extremely mysterious method of doing away with myself. It was a good idea for all of about thirty seconds. Thirty-one seconds after the fact I came to the realization that death would hamper my ability to listen to the Police's *Synchronicity*. And that just wouldn't do. I possessed a thirty-second limit of self pity. After that I figured there were better things to do with my time. Like sit around, for example.

If ever one could have a good reason to drink then Jenny certainly did. She got the shit kicked out of her on a regular basis. You'd think she would take solace in the fact that she had alcohol to wash away

the uglier side of her existence. Nevertheless, she had a rather bizarre saying that accompanied her flights of boozy fancy. She'd say "Like father, like daughter" with a broken grin on her broken face. She always found it rather ironic that, at the age of seventeen, she drank almost as much as her father did. She also thought it made her a hypocrite. Back then I wasn't much for waxing philosophical so the best thing I could come up with was *you could never be like him*. How thoughtful of me.

The annoying thing about the past is that it remains steadfast in your head, unwilling to capitulate when you decide the time has come to alter it to your advantage. The human brain is a thing of absolute mechanical wonderment. Best to make it sound breathtakingly complicated than admit it causes more grief than good. For I have been of the mind for quite some time that without memory, life would be filled with nothing more than a series of ridiculously happy accidents. There would be no other way to define the past, you see. It would be nothing more than an ensemble of all the days prior to your current state of euphoric ignorance. If only it were that simple. If only we hadn't so many shameful instances of great importance to remember in hopes of deterring sequels. What useless meat we truly are.

I am a cynic. I am a cynic because, like God with his gardening puppets, Jenny fashioned me in her own self-image. You may find it hard to believe but there was a time when I was a care free sort of fellow who could be easily shaken from his bad temperaments by the nonsensical invasions of others. Unfortunately, having spent my impressionable years both intoxicated and in the company of professional degeneration, the boy that I was would not re-emerge on the other side. Only this body, this fool-head, would be left. But I can't rightly blame her for any of it. Try as one might there are only two things in this world that influence decisions, despite what most folks think. The first only affects males of the species. The other, unless you've been in a coma since 1952, is yourself. I realize that you might have been expecting some soci-

ologically long-lived, magical scapegoat to materialize and save what little dignity you thought you had left—but no dice. There's no turning back, I'm afraid. You're stuck with your past selves.

When I think of Jenny now, I try to think of her as she was before everything went horribly wrong with us. After all these years I still try to fixate on one specific image of her, one of which I often think. It is an image of her descending a flight of stairs in a cheap, Italian restaurant. It was the first real date I ever took her on. It was all that I could afford. She left the table, went to the wash-room, and as she returned I watched her walk down the stairs. And, in that very brief moment, my mind took a picture. A picture of her smiling at me as she never had before. It was as if, for that one split second, everything in the world stopped. Armies put down their weapons and decided to make war an affair of timed kite flying, the worst teams in every sporting league on earth won by enormous margins, those that had nothing gained everything and I was standing in an openness so vast and spectacular that I was reduced to nothing more than a pickling jar filled with air saved from the beginning of time. It was, in a word, rapture. You may think it sounds unlike me or silly of me to say, but I hope that in your life you will know what I'm getting at.

Besides that, Jenny was short. She was short and round. At the time she was maybe five foot three and weighed about 125 lbs. She always had shoulder length brown hair, blue eyes and crooked teeth. She had worn braces for many years, to no avail. When she smiled she pressed her lips together so that you couldn't see them. She only listened to music when she was alone or driving in a car. When she went swimming she always wore shorts and a T-shirt, never a bathing suit. She liked mushroom soup, those sweet peaches that come in a can with juice and corn chips. Her favourite movie was *A Passage to India*, her favourite band was New Order and her favourite colour was green. She liked dogs not cats, hated eating fish and despised the fact that I used to smoke. The rest is just for me,

I'm afraid.

Now, you may be wondering why I keep referring to her as if she were dead. The truth of the matter is that I'm not rightly sure where she is. I have no idea if she's alive, dead, married, a mother, in a cult, or an astronaut. I haven't spoken to her in some years. (I was having a problem with tenses just then. It bothers me to no end when things of that nature seem like they're intentionally working against you. It is the main reason that I gave up on my dreams of one day writing a series of novels about a time-travelling stripper and her arch enemy, Chip Butler.)

As I mentioned earlier, on our first proper date I took Jenny to a cheap Italian restaurant. It was called Alberto's. It was the kind of place that looked like it might be expensive but was actually very cheap. It was a restaurant owned by middle-class people who catered to those who were hanging on to the bottom rung of middle-class status. It was a split-level place with a small balcony. It also had thousands of bottles of cheap wine stuck inside of those red, clay octagon things that Italian contractors (and their clients) find so appealing. Back then it was a big deal for both of us. We even went so far as to dress up for the occasion. This meant that Jenny wore her usual black sweater with a skirt. I wore a white shirt and a tie under my Bones Brigade jacket. Ah, how I loved that coat.

You must remember, by that point in time Jenny and I had been good friends for the better part of three and a half years. We were nineteen when we went out that night, having spent two years discussing whether or not it would be a good idea. After dinner we went to a movie. We saw *Joe vs. the Volcano*. Following that we walked back up the hill, a journey of some two hours, and stopped off at the park and sat on the swings. It was there that we kissed for the second time in our lives. I remember it quite clearly. It was one of those tense sort of unions that ends with one person looking away afterwards and the other laughing. Jenny, who always did have a flare for the dramatic, turned her face away from mine and looked down the road,

playing at one of her commonly overused personas. So I laughed—and she hit me with her handbag. (Totally uncalled for.)

That night on the swing set marked the beginning of the end for Jenny and me. After everything that we'd been through the strain of having to put up with each other on a romantic level was just too much to bear. Some months following that night we would make the horrible mistake of moving in together. After that it was all just a matter of time.

Now all of this might have led you to believe that the two of us were somewhat off-kilter. This was not true. Despite the fact that most of the time we looked like we had no clue what was going on, we were actually extremely organized, if not altogether ritualistic. For example, we would only drink at specific times and in specific places on weekdays. Never earlier than our first free block and never if we had to drive somewhere later in the day (which, as you might have guessed, only ever applied to me and never her). Jenny would get very angry if I had started drinking before we met up in free block. To her it was one of the constants in her life, something that never changed. Even if I was sick she would walk down to my house and sit in my room with me. For two years, minus summers, it went like clockwork.

Another thing that was comparable to preordaining time was the ever changing state of Jenny's upper extremities. There were times when even I was surprised that she hadn't been hospitalized because of her wounds. Dick once hit her with a pipe, if you can believe it. He did it right before he left for work one morning. It was lying in the carport and he had tripped on it. He got angry, called her out to the carport, made her pick it up and hand it to him, and then hit her in the forehead with it. The night before I had left it there by accident while we were rooting through some old boxes looking for one of those bicycle tire air pumps.

In our first year of high school, Jenny's coun-

seller dared to inquire as to why Jenny's face was often bruised. Sarcastically, as if she thought someone with a Cracker Jacks-box psychology degree should know better, Jenny told her that she was a zealous sportsman. As time passed, everyone knew that Jenny's stories and excuses were horse shit but they also realized that she was not the kind of girl that you could lecture. During those years I spent a couple of hours each week talking with Jenny's counsellor, Mrs. Hopkins, about what went on at the Connors house. Mrs. Hopkins believed that I was one of the few things that Jenny had that mattered to her. I would often nod in agreement, wondering secretly to myself if we were talking about the same person. Because if her theory was accurate, then Jenny had a funny way of showing it. Like sleeping with most everyone that I knew, for example.

The night that I was arrested for attacking that old guy's car was a typical example of her behaviour. If I had a nickel for every time I discovered her with some guy—in a bedroom at a party, in a parked car, closet, bathtub, whatever—let me tell you, I'd have a shit load of nickels. You might think that I was a wee bit obsessive about it, busting in on her like that all the time, but that wasn't the case. I was simply making sure that she was alright. On occasion, some of her fuck buddies got a little carried away. Jenny did not fight back. Jenny had learned to take it. I, on the other hand, was frequently on edge when it came to her safety. There might not have been anything I could have done about her father but I wasn't about to let some fucking hump bash her around. I am not a violent man usually. But let me just say that there are some things that I do not stand for. And when such circumstances arise I am not one to play at punches. Just baseball bats and such.

But you see that was the frighteningly weird thing about it. Ninety-nine percent of the time I would simply find her with some guy, make sure everything was okay, and then I'd wait outside until she was finished. I would sit on couches, stairs, the floor, and wait. In a way it almost became my iden-

tity. On more than one occasion the guy that she was with would pop his head out the door and tell me that she wanted to go home. This was my cue to either go start the car, call a cab, or figure out which mode of public transportation we would be taking. She would then appear and we'd leave. Most of the time not two words passed between us on the journey home. It was almost as if she knew it hurt me but couldn't bring herself to admit that it was that exact aspect of our relationship that she liked. Some things are better said with the lights out it seems. Just not to me.

So that's the way things went for us. She walked a thin line between physical abuse and causing herself enough emotional harm to ensure that she didn't have to deal with it, and I just kept my mouth shut and did what I thought she wanted me to do. As it turns out, all she ever wanted me to do was take her away from all of it. But you see, when you're young, and not that bright when it comes to girls, you aren't exactly knowledgeable in the ways of double meanings and the behavioral complexities of women. Come to think of it, what man ever is? I'm going somewhere with all of this of course. It would be pointless for me to continue wallowing in such pathetic description. In the future remind me to make sure that I simplify things somewhat. Like this, for example:

Girl - me - booze - bad dad - love - rip off - slut - not her fault - car - kill - accident - haven't seen her since. See. Much better.

So here's the meat of it then. Following a brief courtship the two of us decided to move in together. We had talked about it for almost a year, so it wasn't as if we hadn't worked out the details. These were the details.

1. I would quit college and get a full time job.
2. Jenny would get a full time job.
3. We would buy old second hand furniture and fix up an older apartment that was inexpensive.
4. We would save up some money so Jenny could go

back to school.

That was the plan. And that's what we went about doing. For the better part of nine months after graduation the two of us worked our asses off. Besides money for liquor, which was becoming less of a priority in our lives by then, we saved every dollar we made. Neither of us bought new clothes or shoes during that time. We didn't rent movies, go to movies, go to clubs, none of it. We stuck to the plan. And one fateful spring day, the plan paid off. For the first time in our lives we left home. It was a big deal for her. But as I would discover, getting hammered by your dad for most of your life doesn't simply disappear just because you're no longer within striking distance. No matter what, you're always within striking distance of your own mind. For the first couple of weeks everything was what you'd expect it to be. The basics of everyday life accompanied by copious amounts of intercourse. There's just nothing like the first time you find yourself in an environment that is completely void of parental authority. We had so much sex that it was literally a struggle to get out of bed the next morning. It wasn't that it was overly strenuous or anything, it's just that we often did it in intervals, 11:03 pm-1:29 am-3:44 am-and so forth. Not exactly the brightest thing to do when you've got to be at work at 5:30 the next morning. There are a handful of jobs in this world that do not require a great deal of alertness. Let me assure you, unloading shipping containers with a forklift is not one of them. But as time passed we both began to realize that living on our own wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. Besides working impossible hours for slave wages (for that is what newly graduated teenagers get paid when they're limited to a specific job pool), we were forced to spend our weekends doing things like laundry, grocery shopping, botching the simplest of home improvements, while attempting to come to terms with the fact that the birthplace of the world's cockroach population was located somewhere beneath our floorboards. This left absolutely no time for things such as going out,

getting loaded and generally having a good time.

Now the one truly remarkable thing about this particular time in our lives was that we were so distracted by the ever-pressing need to keep our financial heads above water that we somehow forgot to be complete drunkards. I'm not saying that we didn't drink, just not every other hour of every day. It was bizarre. I remember waking up one morning and realizing that I hadn't drunk anything in close to a week. But even though our lack of consumption seems like a positive now, back then it was horrible. You see, for the first time in her adult life Jenny was forced to deal with her abusive past as a sober individual. And let me tell you, despite the fact that I loved her, I would have rather been in fucking Antarctica. Either there—or two miles below the surface of the earth in a steel bunker in the middle of a lake of fire guarded by viciously evil manticores. It was gradual at first. She'd do things like toss violently in her sleep and wake up screaming. This led to other things, such as discovering her cowering in the bathtub in the middle of the night. Attempting to approach or talk to her when she was like that was pointless. She would often throw things at me like soap and shampoo bottles. She once gave me seven stitches after hitting me in the head with one of those sharp plastic foot scrubber deals. Those nights were unbearable. She was unbearable. And I was just too young and too panicked to deal with it properly. My only other experiences with her like that were when she'd show up at my house after Dick had done her in. I was used to consoling her after her ordeals. But when it came to being viewed as the enemy I became resentful. I realize now that it was a terrible thing to do of course. It would have been better just to stay close and make sure she didn't do anything stupid. But I never seemed to have enough time to rationalize anything. In the heat of battle, as it were, I just wanted it all to stop. Most of the time it happened in the middle of the night and I was literally semi-conscious. So I did the only thing that I knew would work. I'd get her drunk.

You know, when I was younger my father often

left me with a specific phrase after he had finished reprimanding me for some wrongdoing. He would say, “Duffy, I hope one day, when you grow up, you have kids that are just like you. And you’ll realize then how little you know now.” God damn right, Bob. God damn right.

The night that it happened was just like any other night. I went to bed around eleven, slept for a couple hours and awoke to the familiar sound of running water. So I rolled out of bed with a groan and walked across the hall, all the while looking for indications of how bad a state she was in (as she had an odd habit of scattering clothes all over the place when she was particularly freaked out). So there I was, standing quietly with my hand on the doorknob and my forehead resting against the door, pausing in an attempt to collect my thoughts and come up with a plan.

From what I could tell she wasn’t scrubbing herself because she always made whimpering noises when she did that. You see, from time to time I would discover her in the shower rubbing her arms and legs with one of those green scrub pads. You’d be surprised just how much skin they can rub off given the chance. But luckily that wasn’t the case. I opened the door to discover her stretched out in the tub, feet resting on either side, a can of Orange Crush resting on her stomach. At first glance I thought she was asleep. So I started to lean over to grab the can when I discovered that she was merely fucking with me. She let out a yelp and started flopping her limbs all over the place, obviously making fun of the fact that I expected her to be freaking out. She laughed a little, flipped the wet hair out of her face, and said “hey there sailor”. I responded to this by sliding into the tub, ripping the Orange Crush from her hands and dumping it over her head. So we laughed a while, talked some, and then decided to go back to bed. At that point I thought I was out of the woods. I thought maybe she’s taking a turn for the better. We even went so far as to engage in some of the unspeakable con-

tact, which we hadn't done in some weeks. So, after all was said and done, she went into the kitchen to make some tea and I fell into one of those dreamy sleeps that one always hopes will consume them.

When I got up the next morning Jenny was nowhere to be found. Usually this would have concerned me to no end, being that I had turned into a very controlling and possessive asshole by that point who often chose not to believe anything that she told me. You see, she was the one who threw fits in the middle of the night and was on the brink of losing her mind. I was the one in control. For some unexplainable reason I felt that it gave me the right to act as if I were her lord and master. I can admit that now. At the time I figured I was just providing stability and acting accordingly considering that she was prone to a variety of perplexing behavior. But on that particular morning I wasn't at all concerned that she was missing. I knew full well that her friend Alison was over from Courtney and that she had most likely gone over to spend the day. So I spent the morning in blissful ignorance. Then the phone rang and it started raining shit bricks the size of basketballs. I have come to the conclusion that there are six different types of phone calls.

1. Those that are bad and you know they are before you pick up the phone.
2. Those that are bad and you answer the phone like an idiot because you think it's a friend calling you back.
3. Tele-marketing.
4. The kind of call that makes the hair on your arms stand on end because you know it's your mother in law.
5. Normal phone calls.
6. The kind where you don't say anything.

When the phone rang I was sitting in the living room reading the last page of Roald Dahl's *Switch Bitch*. If you have yet to read it, the book is comprised of four short stories, the last of which is sim-

ply entitled "Bitch". To this day I can still remember the line that I was reading when the phone rang. It was the following, "A moment later the two of us were millions of miles up in outer space."

Exactly.

Directing your attention to the chart provided in this section, know then that I endured a number 6 phone call with subtle undercurrents of number 4 for good measure. For you see, it was a policeman who rang. And, from somewhere within five hundred feet of his position, I could hear Mrs. Connors wailing in the background. I have been sitting here for fifteen minutes trying to find a way to put this to you, but I can't seem to figure it. So I'll just say this: I dropped the phone.

On July 23rd, 1991, Jennifer Dawn Connors killed her father. She did this by releasing the parking break in her Volkswagen Beetle while parked on a sloping driveway. She steered the ghosting car down the driveway and pinned Dick Connors to the back wall of the carport as he was taking out the trash. The force of the impact was so great that Dick's legs were almost removed at the knees. He died some four hours later at the hospital from a combination of internal complications and blood loss.

When the police and ambulance arrived at the Connors' house Jenny was still in the car. Her mother was banging on the window trying to get Jenny to start the engine and pull away. Jenny just sat there. Some ten minutes after crushing her father Jenny was removed from the car by police. She was not handcuffed. She was taken to the hospital as was the body of her nearly dead father. Mrs. Connors spent the following four hours demanding that her daughter be imprisoned forever. Having lied to the authorities about her vantage point, Mrs. Connors initially told police that Jenny had maliciously driven the car into her father and that the engine was running at the time. Jenny was formally charged later that afternoon. I was contacted just after 11:30 am. I immediately went to the hos-

pital.

I arrived at the hospital only to discover that everyone had left. Having been looked over by a doctor and briefly examined by someone from psychiatrics, Jenny was taken to a police station to be interviewed. I spent close to an hour trying to figure out which station they took her to. The nurses, not having any insight into the years of abuse that Jenny had endured at the hands of her father, refused to help me when I told them that I was the “concerned boyfriend”. So I did the next best thing. I called every metropolitan police station in the white pages.

Despite the fact that she had yet to speak to a lawyer or anyone from child welfare she decided to tell the police everything. She told them that she left our apartment at around 4 am, drove over to her parents, parked in the driveway, and sat there. Her mother, having been questioned at the hospital, told police that Jenny had been drinking. This, of course, was a lie. Jenny had not been drinking. She was sober. Unless, that is, someone had unknowingly tampered with the ingredients of that Orange Crush while it was sitting—unopened—in our refrigerator. Beyond that Jenny knew exactly what she was doing. So they charged her with first degree murder. That’s murder of the premeditated variety for those of you who are wondering what the difference is. So that’s how it happened. Rather unglamorously, I’m afraid.

As the weeks rolled by everything to me seemed a wash of hours spent useless. For all intents and purposes Jenny had gotten away with it. You see, she knew that she would, perhaps even long before she went about doing it. For no one in their right mind is going to send a twenty-year-old girl to prison for killing a man who had beaten and sexually abused her since the age of seven. And that was the shocking part for me. I had no idea that Dick had done anything beyond the clinically violent. I had no idea there was more to the whole affair, altogether vile. When it came to light that there were multi-

ple levels to Dick's abuse, any desire on the Crown's part to pursue a conviction fizzled. Jenny's mental instability at the time could be easily justified. Enough was enough. To make her relive her past in court would most likely have driven her to suicide. So nothing was done.

When she came home she seemed embarrassed about the fact that everything had been revealed and would often leave the house when I tried to get her to talk to me. Sometimes I would yell. I wish now that I hadn't. We spent a couple of months pretending that things between us would go back to the way they were, but her heart just wasn't in it. It was during that time that I came to realize that I had pushed her to love me. As difficult as it was there was nothing left for me to do but admit that she would never look at me the same way again. Maybe, in a way, I was nothing more than a twenty-four-hour reminder of a past that she wanted to forget. But instead of being civil about it I found myself suddenly pride-stricken. You see, I had paid my dues, I had put in my time. All I wanted was a little acknowledgement for the years I spent being the faithful lap dog. Despite the fact that I had, in a way, contributed to her destruction, I was convinced my influence was one of the catalysts that had invited the finality that she had found. But as I've said, I became nothing more to her than a reminder of hell instead of someone who only ever wanted to save her from it.

In the late fall of that year Jenny decided that it would be best if she went to live with her Aunt Rachel on Vancouver Island. I was against it, of course, but there was nothing I could do to stop her. And it was then that I realized that our time together had come to an end. We spent two weeks together before she left, sleeping in different beds, changing clothes behind locked doors. And during that time we came to hate each other in ways that neither of us knew was possible. Everything, all contained within a single perfect sphere in my mind, where had it gone? Good question. Sometimes that's the reality of love and wonderment. It stays with you for a brief time so that you

might have something not wholly tarnished to keep you lifted up during the darker trials of your future. And, in some strange way, maybe it's best that such things are typically fleeting. That way they remain the secret of perfection within us, held there as a reserve power source. I will always be reflected in perfection when I think of myself back then. Because even now, after all that I have supposedly gained, I would trade it all for just ten minutes in a lousy Italian restaurant.

The two of us talked on the phone some during the months that followed, but after a while our lives started to get hectic and we lost touch. My current mood of nostalgic recollection aside, I would be lying to you if I said that it ended well because it didn't. It ended badly. It ended with the kinds of words, accusations and untrustworthy thoughts that can never be fully amended or retracted. But that was just us, you see. Being us at our finest.

You know, I have often wondered about her. Sometimes, when I see or hear something that reminds me of the past, images lightning-strike my head and I'm brought to my knees by it all. Like the smell of wet pavement reminds me of the simplicity of childhood. My waking self shows no trace of that which I once was. I am now someone else. I am a grown man and still, though eager for the future's cast, hopeful of nothing to change that which I have known prior. So if death is defeat, or a passage as some see fit, then this will have been my victory. And if that is the only truth I know of myself in this life, then fine by me.

Night kid

The Commoner's Guide To Suicide

And that place which gave you your bearings will always reside within you complete. And of those places and circumstances, only those that offered resistance to one's being will ever produce individuals worth their words.

—Harper Grey

Step One: Life is like bread. It's great at first, but as time passes it gets harder.

Eli was very quiet. And by quiet I'm saying that he never spoke, not that he was soft spoken. In fact Eli didn't utter a word to another living thing until he was almost seven years old. And he did so only to get the attention of a dog so that it did not get hit by an oncoming car. There are events in every life that shape individuality. If that dog had heard Eli in time, it probably would have moved out of the road. But as it happened, the dog did not hear him. And Eli would not speak again until he was seventeen. What was the point?

Eli Lemski was the sort who went undetected by social radar. Raised by his father, an obsessive-compulsive aeronautical engineer, Eli spent most of his childhood sitting in various rooms starrng at them. By the time he was twenty-one there wasn't one millimetre of those rooms that he hadn't spent fourteen hours looking at without moving. This, of course, made him one of the most observant people of all time. And though Eli would spend most of his life searching for his one true worldly gift, it always escaped him that his power of observation was it. The downside, of course, is that amazing powers of observation only pay if you decide to count cards at Blackjack tables. Eli's alternative, as it turned out, was much worse.

Due to the fact that Mr. Lemski worked primarily on military contracts, Eli and his father spent a great deal of time moving from one place to another. And as Eli's speech problem worsened it didn't make sense to Mr. Lemski that Eli should attend regular schools. Being the egoist that he

was, he assumed that his son had inherited his intellect and wouldn't need to waste his time in the company of troglodytes. So Eli took to getting an education through the mail. It was soon apparent that Eli was not the prodigy his father thought him to be. Eli squeaked through his scholastic career and received his high school diploma in a large manila envelope. And although the water damage to that envelope had turned most of the diploma into an incoherent mess, Eli was still able to make out the two most important words on it. And those were Eli Lemski.

As this story's narrator (and participant), I always find it strange that a man like Leo Lemski (PhD), would have the gall to think his son as brilliant as himself and yet allow him to get an education by correspondence. When I first met Mr. Lemski I realized immediately that this was the kind of man who couldn't care less whether or not Eli did anything at all with his life. He was so entirely self-absorbed that he rarely spoke to his son, let alone give a damn whether or not he excelled at anything. But he used to love using Eli's mediocrity as an excuse to blow off steam. And due to the fact that Eli never raised his voice in his own defense, it just made it all the easier. Neither Leo or Eli were big men. They were slight, gangly creatures with sunken eyes and hands that seemed too large for their arms. But unlike his father, Eli was not an awkward person. He was graceful and moved as though he was trying to elude some unseen force that constantly stalked him. That was the thing I noticed about him when we first met. That and the fact that he could shoot a pistol like no one I had ever seen. And that's where I come into it. I was the one who took Eli to the shooting range that afternoon when we were both twenty-one. My father, unlike Leo Lemski, was not an engineering genius. My father was a test pilot and then later an air force liaison. Before he died he worked with Leo on a couple of projects. That's how I came to meet Eli. One morning my father asked me if I would take Eli with me to the shooting range as a favour to Leo. I was staying with him

during spring break and was due back at college a couple of days later. So, since the base was just as boring as every other airbase in the world, I figured it couldn't hurt. My dad warned me that Eli didn't talk much but I wasn't prepared for what I found when I met him. Of all the people in this world and out of it, Eli Lemski only chose to talk to two of them: myself and his mother, Irene. The difference was that I was alive at the time whereas Irene hadn't been for almost nineteen years. Beats me why.

I should clear something up before you start to get the wrong impression. Even though I was taking Eli to a shooting range it does not mean that I am, or was, a proponent of firearms. Truth be told I'd have them all melted down and turned into candleholders given the chance. During my four years at Stanford an ex-girlfriend of mine was killed by a guy at a house party. He thought the handgun that he found in a dresser drawer wasn't loaded. In a haze of cocaine and tequila he squeezed the trigger and sent two bullets through the bedroom wall and into the living room, killing my friend and injuring another. He would serve nine months of an involuntary manslaughter plea. Sometimes having influential parents and lawyers can get you out of most anything. The dead are rarely afforded the luxury of afterthought in such circumstances. The court saw no reason to ruin the boy's life over what they deemed an accident. Had it been their daughter, I'm sure they would have felt different. So let's just say that I'm not fond of guns. Even before that I could never stand them. But growing up in a military family you have little choice as a boy. If your father wants you to learn to shoot, then you shut the hell up and you do it. Because sometimes the fear you have of disappointing your father is stronger than your convictions. So I did what I always did. I went and shot off some rounds at the range so the good o' boys down there could tell my dad that they'd seen me. And on that particular occasion I just so happened to bring along a treat for them. Eli Lemski.

There are certain things in this world that when the right people do them they just seem nat-

ural, like driving or cooking or sex. Eli Lemski was a natural marksman. He could hit anything at any range as long as the weapon could perform the task. The day that I picked him up I was initially a little peeved at my father for making me take him. Of course I pictured him as being just another air force brat. But I would understand what my father was talking about the moment that he came out of his front door. He was dressed in a white button-down short-sleeve shirt, dark brown pants, and brown leather shoes. His hair was parted on the side, pasted to his head with pomade, and he wore large-rimmed glasses that were far too big for his face. In all the years I knew him, Eli always wore exactly the same thing, which he owned in triplicate (or at least I hoped he did). But put a gun in that boy's hands and it was like watching God creating and recreating the world. When we got to the range he stood with his hands pressed over his ears as I shot my father's .45. The noise bothered him so much that he went and stood in the parking lot and still would not take his hands away from his ears. But after a while he inched his way back inside and got close enough that I eventually offered him the gun. He meagerly pointed it at the target and looked as if the weight of it would topple him. And then he shot off five rounds right on top of each other without so much as blinking. His body didn't even seem to move. The flurry of reports brought over some of the regulars and we just stood there and watched him fire clip after clip. All afternoon he hit nothing but chests and heads. It was one of the most bizarre things that I have ever witnessed.

That was my first encounter with Eli Lemski. After I finished the semester at Stanford I returned to Texas in the summer of 1982 and spent a great deal of time with Eli. I even got him to talk to me a little. But that summer was the last time that I would see him for almost five years. The next time we'd run into each other would be in a Manhattan alleyway. I was puking and Eli, well, Eli was working.

Step Two: Cancelling yourself because you've been stolen.

After I graduated from Stanford I spent some time working in the Bay area before I realized that I was getting nowhere and didn't like myself much. So I did what every good American kid does. I fucked off. I travelled the country in search of that thing that America is supposed to be. You never find it of course, but at least it made me realize that the "thing" everyone's always talking about never really existed. It's just *Saturday Evening Post* memorabilia bullshit. How in the hell do we have a country where the cradle of our government and historical fortitude exists in a vacuum with the highest crime rate in the union? Figure me that one. The First World is a farce. It's a comedy about a comedy where perfection re-enacts day-to-day life and then feeds itself to the populace and convinces it that it's a reflection of continental reality. Everything's okay. Everything is always okay. I'm sure there will come a time when our greatness resembles that great snake which feasts upon its own tail because there is nothing left for it to eat. We will consume ourselves through consumption. That's what I learned in the two years that I travelled America. That it's kidding itself. That and the fact that I should have just stayed in San Francisco and stopped complaining.

But that's how I ended up in New York. A friend of mine from college was in advertising out there and I looked him up. At the time I was a broke, backpacking, hippie. I explained to him what I'd been up to and it didn't seem to bother him much. You can never tell how people from your past are going to react when you show up penniless on their doorstep and they're well off. He was one of the many who fell victim to the success equals happiness equation. He and his wife had matching Mercedes with signature plates. One was "Jack B" and the other was "Tara B". And despite my disdain at the time for such nonsense I wasn't about to mention it. His sofa was the most comfortable thing I'd slept on in months. Of course he'd changed since school, as most people tend to.

There was no point telling them that at the time, mind you, but it's the truth of things. So enjoy your youth while you have it. Because despite your unwavering opinions and views you will change into something later in life that will not understand why music has to be so damn loud.

So there I was. Showered, shaved and ready to hit the town. Jack had made reservations at an upscale place near the park and it conveniently worked out to be Tara's bridge night so it was just he and I. We had dinner and then got drunk at a nearby bar. That's when I began to realize that everything in Jack's life wasn't as perfect as he would have liked it to seem. There were affairs with younger women, borderline alcoholism, flirtations with financial disaster. Tara knew nothing about any of it of course. Wives in situations like that rarely do. They just keep doing whatever it is that they do and don't stop to consider much. Because there's always another Jack out there. And like most, Jack was good for ten years of ignorant bliss. But that's how I ran into Eli again. Puking my guts out in the alley next to the bar.

It's to be expected that people you knew in your youth will become something in their later life that will change your opinion of them. Take Jack. I would have never thought that he'd move to New York and spend his days driving between Manhattan and Jersey, hopelessly grasping for the illusory gold ring. In school he was the sort that spent the majority of his time drinking beer and sleeping. Most things are rarely what they seem. And as for the future, well, it never is. So there I was, puking my guts out in an alley when I caught a glimpse of someone clambering down a fire escape. Now the fact that I was in New York sobered me somewhat. When figures jump from fire escapes in alleyways you tend to get a little wary. It wasn't until I heard my name that I calmed down enough to turn around and see who it was. And of course, it was Eli. He was standing there with a strange grin on his face, and I say strange only because I had never seen him smile or make any other facial gestures of any kind. He was wear-

ing what he usually wore accompanied by a beige trench coat, tied tightly at the waist. At first I thought there was a design on the coat. And then I realized that it was blood. A great deal of blood. So I did what anyone in my position would have done. I puked some more.

Unfortunately Eli wasn't in the mood to stand around while I did. By the time I realized what was happening I was being shoved into the back seat of a car half a block away. Jack was nowhere to be seen; though I would later learn that he had met a young accounting intern and had spent the night wallowing in her arms. Coincidentally, Tara had been doing the same thing back in Jersey. Turns out that she had been sleeping with some famous attorney from Philadelphia for years. But that comes later. At the time I was concerned that Jack wouldn't let me stay with him if I was rude enough to skip out on him. I was lying in the back seat of what I thought was Eli's car when we came to a stop and Eli motioned for me to stay put. Chancing a quick peek out the front windshield, I realized that we were somewhere near the water, but where I couldn't be sure. Some time passed before Eli returned and pulled me from the backseat only to shove me into another car. He then proceeded to pour gasoline in his car and set fire to it. And that's all I remember about that night. When I woke up the next morning I was lying on a sofa in a small apartment somewhere in the Bronx. Eli was sitting at a small table drinking a cup of what I guessed to be coffee and cleaning a variety of handguns.

Oh God. What had I done.

Step Three: Strange things happen to ordinary people and vice versa.

If he had become a cop or a soldier I could have stomached it a little easier. But there was no way that I could ever come to terms with the fact that he actually killed people for money. This was the same guy who hadn't uttered a word in decade in succession. But that's exactly what he did. He killed people for money. He had convinced himself that he'd found his one true worldly gift. And to Eli

that was all that mattered. The ridiculous thing about it was that he didn't much like what he did. He didn't enjoy his work and didn't really have the mentality required to forgo the anxieties that came with it. But he had convinced himself that there was nothing else in the world that he could do as well. And, like so many others, he just accepted it. It might sound strange to you but it really isn't all that abnormal. People spend decades doing the nine-to-five thing and hate every second of it. But they never do anything about it because they convince themselves that there isn't anything better within their reach. So they're comfortable with the fact that they know their job and can do it well enough to remain somewhat unconscious day in and day out. The problem with that kind of thinking is that it always ends up creeping into every other aspect of your life. Now I'm not saying that there aren't exceptions. In lower class situations you do what you have to do. Most of the time you just don't have any choice in the matter. That may be difficult for some of you to swallow but it's the truth. Industrialists, social leftists, whomever, can go on about this and that but it matters little. Anyone who can afford the luxury of waxing intellectual on the subject simply isn't in that position. There is no dishonor in spending a life providing for your family. There is no dishonour in doing work that others might consider beneath them or trivial. There are hundreds of millions that do those jobs and are happy that they have them. That's the stoic simplicity of the blue-collar existence. Making the world go round was never that easy. But someone's got to do it.

Everyone gets a turn at bat. Hit anything.

So that's how I found Eli. Trapped in a line of work that he didn't particularly like but was good at. Beside that he hadn't changed much. When work came in someone would give him a call. Sometimes, if he was lucky, there was a reason. But Eli didn't much care about reasons. As far as he was concerned he had found his one true gift and that was good enough for him. But as I sat there I couldn't quite put all the pieces together. How does

the introverted son of an egomaniacal engineer go from a life of quite redundancy to one of a hit man? For the life of me I couldn't figure it. So I decided to be blunt and just asked Eli to tell me. Which he did.

It all started the year my father died. Eli was still living with his dad and was working part time at the shooting range. From what I could gather he took the job so that he could shoot after work for free. Later that year Leo Lemski suffered a stroke and Eli was forced to put him in a home. It never ceases to amaze me how things always come around. I'm sure that if Leo had given a damn about his son, then maybe Eli would have taken care of him. But Eli had no reservations about dumping his dad off in some home. As far as he was concerned he was just some stranger that yelled at him. Eli ended up getting a job stocking shelves at a supermarket in Houston and got a small place of his own. At the end of that year he had saved up enough money to buy a used car and decided to give up his apartment in favour of living in the car. He said he did it primarily to save money but I would venture to guess that it was either the apartment or the car. So Eli was working at the supermarket and living in his car. Ain't it just like fate to make that decision seem poignant when it was nothing more than a fluke. One night Eli left work late and was searching for a place to pull over for the night and sleep. He was driving around at about 2 am when he came to a hard stop at a red light. This caused a great deal of crap to come flying up from the backseat and fill the passenger side of the car. So Eli started to throw stuff into the backseat. And that's when it happened. Parked on the other side of the street there was a van. And in the van there was a big guy sitting in the driver's seat. The rear doors of the van were open and just as Eli's eyes came upon them he saw another man hit a woman and then throw her into the back of the van.

Eli's first reaction was to say something. But remembering the whole dog incident from his youth he decided not to bother. Maybe the girl

would be alright if he kept his mouth shut. He was good at keeping his mouth shut. Unfortunately, the large guy sitting in the driver's seat of the van noticed that Eli had seen what was going on. So he decided to get out of the van and walk over to the passenger side window of Eli's car. Now, any normal person would have hit the gas and gotten out of there. But Eli just froze. The guy started banging on the window and kept yelling "you didn't see nothin' you little shit!" Now if Eli had simply nodded, his head it might have ended there. But Eli didn't. He just sat there looking from the guy pounding on the window to the other guy standing at the back of the van. And that's when the big guy decided to smash Eli's window. The rest happened so fast that Eli couldn't really go into much detail. All that he could recall was that he went for his gun in the glove box, chambered a round and fired through the broken window. The big guy fell to the ground and the guy behind the van went for something. What that turned out to be was a semi-automatic riffle.

Eli didn't know that of course. He was lost in some strange mental time warp that had taken control of his body, superseding the authority of his rationale. His primary reaction to the man's movement was to get out of the driver's side door and stay crouched behind his car. Luckily it was the right decision. After producing the rifle, the guy emptied and entire clip into Eli's car. But seeing as the guy couldn't shoot for shit, he didn't hit the gas tank. He just took out all the windows and put some holes in the quarter panels. Eli was hit in the leg by a bullet that ricocheted off the pavement under the car and caught him in the thigh. Eli's reaction was to come straight up and return fire through the blown out backseat windows. And like I've said throughout this story, Eli was the best shot that I have ever seen. He took him with two shots to the side of the head and that was that. The light turned green, sirens popped up in the distance and Eli realized that there was a hole in his leg, prompting him to do the decent thing. Pass out.

It doesn't end there, mind you. As it turned out, the girl that had been thrown into the back of the van was the runaway daughter of a New Orleans gangster. It seems that daughter and father had had an argument several months earlier and she had left New Orleans for Houston with some biker. Broke, and accustomed to feeding a hefty drug habit, she soon turned to prostitution and wound up working for the two guys that Eli had shot dead. When the police showed up they questioned the girl, who went to great lengths to make Eli appear her savior. The whole thing was chalked up to self-defense since the cops were familiar with the two dead pimps and didn't really give a damn either way. Eli's gun was conveniently misplaced by an officer and the girl, after being identified, was sent back to New Orleans. So now you've got this gangster who's been reunited with his only child after several months of worrying and wondering where she was, and on top of it all, he learns that some complete stranger saved her life. The fact that she left out the part about being a prostitute had little to do with the fact that the man felt indebted to Eli. So he decided to do something about it. And you know gangsters. When they set their minds to something, well...

The world of crime works in a very specific way. If you've got enough pull you can find out just about anything you need to. A phone call is made from New Orleans to Dallas, from Dallas to an individual on the Houston PD, the chain is then reversed. And, after the delivery of a sound beating to a daughter, a member of the New Orleans mob sends a couple of guys to Houston to pay Eli a visit. It's as simple as that. When Eli was released from the hospital a week later he was met by two men who ushered him into the back of a car. At first Eli was a little concerned that the men were affiliated with the two guys that he had shot and it was curtains. But after one of the men explained the whole thing to him he found it considerably easier to relax. Eli had no thoughts either way about organized crime. During the time that I spent with him it seemed to me that he always gave people the

benefit of the doubt, no matter their position in life. So he wasn't all that against the fact that he was being flown to New Orleans mere hours after being wheeled out of a hospital door. After all, we're talking about a guy who stocked shelves at a supermarket and lived in his car. So Eli got on the plane, flew to Louisiana and met the gangster. And that's where his life took a turn for the worse as the gangster's idea of repaying Eli was to give him a job. And because it paid better than stocking shelves, Eli wasted no time in accepting it.

At first Eli did menial things like the opening of car doors, transporting goods, what have you. It wasn't until the summer of the next year that he was invited along to "go see about a guy". It was in Baton Rouge on a rainy night that Eli Lemski took part in his first professional killing. He was only the driver but that's all it would take to get him started. Once his knowledge of guns became apparent to his co-workers he started seeing about more guys. By the winter of that same year Eli was seeing about a lot of people.

As mentioned earlier, the world of crime has specific ways of doing things. There were those in New Orleans that didn't like the fact that an outsider had moved from errand-boy to the guy who saw about people in a little over a year. They were concerned that their superior had become too attached to a kid who, it has to be said, was an outsider. So after the boss was tipped off that someone was going to try and get rid of Eli, he decided to do the decent thing. After all, Eli had saved his daughter's life and that meant more to him than it did to those around him. So he sent Eli to Chicago and set him free.

It was in the Windy City that Eli became an independent, or contract-killer. Because of his affiliation with the mob in New Orleans he got enough work to build up a decent sized clientele. And like any business, that's how the cream rises to the top. Eli was efficient and extremely thorough. And because he tended to keep his mouth shut most of the time those who employed him got the impression that he had been doing this sort of

thing for much longer than he had been. Eli's lack of verbalization gave him that whole no-nonsense hit man kind of quality. It made him seem dangerous and unpredictable. Not that anyone in their right mind would ever consider Eli dangerous if they saw a picture of him. But if you knew what he did for a living and met him, you'd understand. His business flourished as word spread, and like some hip new bistro, Eli became the go-to-guy for all the jobs that no one else would touch. And he pulled them off, as if born to it.

So that's how he ended up in New York. After he got too large for Chicago, so much so that the police were watching his apartment, he decided to pack it in and move to New York. And that's where he was when I met up with him. Standing quietly in the middle of a shit storm.

Step Four: There's always something better out there. It's in here that's the problem.

I spent the better part of two weeks with Eli after heading back to Jack's to get my things. He really didn't notice that I was leaving since he and Tara had both decided to simultaneously confess to their affairs. Jack's life went into the shitter and I took a cab to the Bronx to stay with Eli. And it was during those weeks that I found myself for the first time. In a small, lonely apartment in the middle of a mass of humanity. It was there I realized that I, myself, would be the only one accountable for my own happiness. Everything and everyone else just didn't matter somehow. And through that I discovered that eventually I would have to make sure that they did.

Eli spent most of his time just sitting in the kitchen looking out the window. I found it sad that he had lived a life inside himself and surfaced only to find a hideous reality in which he found little comfort. Of all the people I've known in my life Eli deserved the greatest amount of happiness. Simply because he never asked for anything. Simply because nothing was ever asked. There was a time when I used to dream that Eli had settled down and got married. He'd bring his kids over to my

place and we'd sit around and talk about sports and politics and life. But I always awoke to the realization that Eli killed people for a living and would never know the simple pleasures of such activities. And you know, somewhere in there I realized that there isn't anything premeditated about us, even though we do our best to convince ourselves otherwise. There's just a long fly ball to center field and the sun's in your eyes. So maybe you come up with the ball, maybe you don't. The only thing that separates us as human beings is the specifics of the play. Everyone's got their concerns. Maybe you're going back for that ball and there are runners in scoring position and your team's down a run. Maybe the bases are empty and it's only the second. It doesn't really matter in the end. It's whether you catch the ball or not that matters. Because that's just you, singularly, tested by both the ball and yourself. The sun's just in your head. So let it go.

For those two weeks I spent a great deal of time trying to figure out what to do next. Eli's situation, though giving me ample excuses to wax poetic on life and its mysteries, was nonetheless making me uncomfortable. So at the end of those two weeks I decided that my great American adventure had come to an end. I rationalized this by telling myself I had uncovered everything that I had set out to find. It was a lie of course, but then again what isn't these days. I came to the conclusion that I'd head back to San Francisco and give writing a serious go, even though I had a degree in biology and didn't know the first thing about publishing and the rest of it. So I left Eli standing at the door to his apartment block and got in a cab. He waved a slight wave and quickly walked back inside. I continued on to Newark and then home to Austin for a while before returning to the coast. My mother had been kind enough to spring for my flights, so I couldn't refuse a quick stopover at home to appease her never-ending complaints that I rarely endeavour, to visit or call. And that was the last I saw of Eli Lemski. We never crossed paths again.

Step Five: Guts enough to swallow hard and just do what you have to.

As I sit here years later I am comforted by the fact that I took the time to explain myself. My wife often asks me whether or not I'm contented with the fact that I write children's books for a living and I always reply, "it's better than stocking shelves in a Houston supermarket". Of course, she has no idea what I mean when I say that, and I've never told her the whole truth about Eli and what he did. A few years ago I published my first work of adult fiction entitled *Street Oracle*. During my research for that book I decided to look up Eli, as one of the characters was loosely based on him. To my dismay I came across his name in the archives of a New Jersey newspaper. His body had been discovered in a dumpster next to a high school. He had been shot in the head. It's something I try not to visualize but often do. I wonder whether his eyes were open or closed. Because it makes me depressed to think that, even in death, he was robbed of his one true worldly gift. The power of observation. And it seems strange to me that for someone who was so observant he could never see that it was always right in front of him the whole time. Maybe if I hadn't taken him to the shooting range that day he'd still be alive. Blaming myself always seems easier than looking for another reason, even if it's just a blind alley. That way a part of him remains in me and I remember everything. Because remembering is important. Maybe of the utmost importance. The thing that burns me the most is that for someone like Eli there are never any easy roads or happy endings. Life just happens like it's paint by numbers and you only have one colour. So now I write books for kids and my biggest critics are my two daughters. And you know, that ain't so bad. So this one's for Eli Lemski. And maybe a little for me as well.

Once there lived a boy who loved to look outside of his window. And on the other side of that window was a world filled with secrets that only he knew of. He stayed inside his house so that he could watch all the other people stumble over and around all of his secrets. And it made him smile. Because only he could see them.

Rest easy people.

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