

## BEING JESUS STORIES

Corvin Thomas

*Plant*

I LIKED PLANT. I inherited his girlfriend, Joan. They were both junkies. I didn't know that the first time I saw them. She was beating him with her bicycle helmet outside the bar, my kind of woman. I found out later he was dumping her. Joan was stealing his shit. Plant was a drummer and drummers don't make a lot of dough, even though he was in a couple of bands. So when the beating was complete, I bought Joan a beer. She laid the helmet down and I was not afraid.

Plant's first peek of me was the satanic red glory of my hole. I heard shuffling, hard shoes on the hardwood floors of a building numbered 666, Joan's building. The number didn't bother me. The shuffling did. I was alone, naked and prone, hung over and conscious of new light. Morning hurt. The shuffling stopped, the sound of boxes dropped and the door made it's own noise, closing.

Someone had penciled the word *grieve* on the wall of Joan's kitchen. I stared at it when she bleach-cleaned the needles in the sink. It was usually the last thing I saw when the fix was in. I suspected Plant but I was never certain and never asked. I could tell Joan missed him. He had better connections.

Plant wasn't in good shape but we were casual friends before then, before the end. The circle was small and he had funny routines. Sometimes he sat at a table, alone, facing the bar traffic. "Welcome to Tower Records," he'd say.

Plant swept sidewalks for his dope fund and there was some romance in the pose, the pork pie hat and the old man clothes, the work shoes split down the back, all of it sweeping across cement, whispering dirty sighs of sickness. Some women wanted him, wanted to make him feel better. But he couldn't come clean. He couldn't even drum anymore.

His parents didn't know even though he moved back home.

"I watch people from my window," he told me, "and I just wish I could walk like they do. Just walk down the street like a normal person."

We were in my car on the way to a dealer. The word was to leave Plant alone, let him ride it out, one way

or the other. But I was bored. I said I'd pay his way if he scored. He told me to stop by the park, by the pay phone. The dealer was around the corner. Plant asked for the cash.

It was a nice night. I opened the kitchen window, the pots played like chimes. I didn't ask about *grieve*. Plant didn't ask about Joan. We both knew she moved to New York with Sickly Man. I kept the apartment.

The table separated our sit up slumber. I peeked at him like he peeked at me that asshole morning. I hated to say it but he had an angel's face, the face of an unborn child, a life aborted but smiling. I wasn't helping him walk by giving him wings. But guilt nods, too.

A month later, a Sunday night, a ménage was set: me, Plant, and Colson. Colson had his own problems. But we pooled cash for a bigger bag. The dealer by the park was out of commission. He rented a room to his wife's ex-husband. The ex-husband was in deep to the dealer-landlord. So the ex-husband killed them both in their sleep with a baseball bat. No more dope debt. No more dope.

Colson said he had his own guy. I didn't trust either one of them with money or stash but I had to work. I'd meet them at the bar, score, catch-up.

I was late. The bar was closed. So I drove to Colson's, ready for the rip-off and silhouettes of two sleepy shrugs in a gray glow of static, when a cop stopped me at the corner.

"Somebody's dead," he said.

I parked.

"You fuckers! You motherfuckers!" Cortez was on his knees, crying, pulling up grass, disappearing when the blue siren lights left him, reappearing when they came around. Colson was standing behind him, stoic, still, giving Cortez flashing reference in time and space. The cops moved a little, made way for the paramedics and kept the neighbors behind a taped yellow line to nowhere.

"You wouldn't leave him alone," Cortez said. "You fuckers had to fuck around!"

I was waiting for Colson to calm him down, shut him

up. Cortez used to run with Plant. They were tight, in the same bands, wore the same clothes, the same haircuts, spent time on the road. They lived together until Plant started ripping him off. Cortez never held it against him. He just wanted Plant to get better.

One of the cops looked at me.

"What's he yelling about?"

I told him I didn't know.

"I don't know any of these guys."

They put Colson in a cruiser and Cortez stood up.

"That's right," he said, "arrest his junkie ass!"

Colson told him to shut the fuck up, sotto voce.

"Tell them a story," Cortez cried. "Make something up to cover your stupid ass good."

I knew Colson would.

Cortez sat on the back of the ambulance. I'd never seen anyone I knew wear an oxygen mask. I guess he needed it. He looked bad, tufts of grass in his hair, his shirt dirty from rolling around.

He still hadn't seen me. I moved to the other side of the street to keep it that way.

Plant's face still looked like an angel's face but it was upside down, inverted, the smile turned upside down. He was leaning out of a car, half in, half out, like he was going to the store but forgot something. It didn't look unnatural. The door was open. Time stopped but the dome light still shined. He was blue, bluer than the siren lights that made his open eyes sparkle with every revolution. The left arm touched the asphalt. The other was on the wheel.

I wondered whose car it was and where Plant thought he was going without a license.

The paramedics put him on a gurney.

"That's the kid with the broom," one of the detectives said. "From the pizza joint."

I didn't like that. It meant they were hip to his using, pre-OD. Maybe mine, too. I slipped back and waited for the clear out.

Cortez walked home. They let Colson go. I followed him to his bungalow, dump, whatever. He collected hats, all kinds of hats. He hung them on the walls. He wasn't wearing one when he asked me if I wanted a shot.

"Still got your share," he said, straight proud. "Half of it, anyway."

He locked the door and grabbed his gear for the requiem.

"We waited," he said, "but you never showed." He laughed and lit a match. "You know that part." He cooked the spoon. "We shot the shit here. It's good, by the way. Then we drove up to the bar."

Colson concentrated, stopped talking until he finished.

"I figured Plant was still packing," he said. He thumped for a vein. "Because he disappeared. He walked back here, I guess. The bar was boring. So he walked."

Colson said one of the neighbors found Plant in

their car. Colson got there before the cops did, pulled the needle out of Plant's arm, checked his pockets for any more dope.

"And that's where I found this," he said, still smiling proud. "I guess he figured you'd understand."

I did, the ethics.

"Fucking Cortez almost blew it with all that fucking blubbering."

Colson's eyes narrowed.

"Little bitch."

Colson struck blue, nodded off. I dumped his works in the garbage on the way out, tossed mine when I got home.

I didn't know what to expect at work the next day, detectives on a tip asking questions, something. I checked for unmarked cars in the lot, the little Taurus jobs they drive, nothing. I was afraid Cortez might drop a dime but everything looked the same. No one looked strange. No messages to call anyone. I asked one of the assignment editors about an overdose on the south side. He said the overnight guy heard it on the scanner.

"Thought we had a killing," he said, "but they called it off before we got there. Just an overdose."

"Yeah."

"Friend of yours?" he asked, kidding, unfolding the sports section.

"Naw," I said. "Just some guy."

A cock crowed thrice somewhere in the city. I sat at my desk of hypocrisy, hypnotized by the guilt and denial, praying no one else would be crucified in the name of greed. No one I shared my dope with, anyway.

I didn't go to Plant's funeral.

Television reporters weren't allowed to grieve.

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*Dope*

**I COULDN'T STAY** awake but I couldn't stop puking, one good and the other bad. I walked, stopped, dropped. Every corner trashcan had my name on it, every block. The rats didn't run. They just got out of the way. The gutters glistened with my little river of bile. It was peaceful there, the street sound turned way down, the nightlights rolling red roses. This wasn't like booze. It was heavier, like a stack of warm flapjacks on my shoulders. I could taste the butterballs dripping through each nostril, dropping on each cement syrup shoe. There wasn't much to say. I couldn't say much anyway, just nod. People passing understood. They didn't stop. If they did, I didn't notice, dead man walking.

I love New York.

My buddy turned me on to it, thought it would calm me down. I always made an ass out of myself when I visited, got too drunk, danced around. And I always hurt myself. One night I kicked a cone in a crosswalk at Lafayette and Houston. I fell in the manhole it covered. Gravel embedded my lips and my right leg limped with deep red abrasions. My balls went unscathed but a man in a deli sprayed me down with his vegetable hose, tossed on a bottle of iodine and only charged half price for the bagel.

The smack settled that until the near overdose. We didn't shoot. We snorted. I dealt mine like blow, a line or two too many. And it's too late to find out which line's the killer when you're out on the floor in seconds flat. My friend's ex found us, slapped the blue out of us and dropped me on a barstool.

I wasn't dancing anymore. But I had a new partner when I got back to Atlanta.

**I WASN'T A JUNKIE** but I had junkie friends. They taught me the needle, introduced the plunge and pull and explained bleach safety. They thought it was funny, turning on the late news, seeing me sell murder or numbskull politics. It seemed subversive. They thought so. So I waved a hand a certain way, pulled an ear, signaled the drug club.

Work was a bore. It was as empty as my heart. I

abused and disrespected it. I was getting paid to pantomime objectivity under the guise of selling soap, cars, crap. At least that was my excuse. I knew I was biting the hand that fed me whenever I scored. But it worked if I paced and spaced the services with Jesus' son. I was the invisible crucified, the little heroin hack to a pack of lowlifes who laughed around a television set because I was one of them. Only I had a job to lose, making me the dumbest shit of them all.

Everyone has something to hide. Not everyone has to hide it from a television audience. I guess reporters are like the priesthood in that respect. They don't want to get caught with their robes down. So they hide their secrets on the absolving side of the confessional box and pray no one peaks through the screen of hypocrisy. Yeah.

One long timer I know stumbled into television after a shot at teaching. He enjoyed his drink. He went to a costume party in full cowboy gear, woke up in a gutter and rushed to class. The kids laughed and pointed. He was still wearing the chaps and spurs. His kerchief and red-checked shirt were still puke sodden. One of the kids told him he smelled of alcohol. He walked out, hit the first bar and figured reporting might be a safer subterfuge for the booze.

It's just an example. There's more.

A reporter with two kids and one on the way was humping an editor when his wife went into labor.

A reporter told his wife he was going on a weeklong shoot. The wife didn't believe him, catching the reporter and his producer in flagrant delicto.

A reporter did his research in gay bars, in drag.

A reporter's wife left him to pursue lesbian interests.

A reporter's husband went on a crack rage and beat her black and blue.

All of this is true.

A boss hired reporters for sex.

A reporter was three times in the nut house.

An anchor had a cocaine problem, playing off his absenteeism as chronic asthma.

And I liked to do a little heroin to supplement my

dipsomania.

There's more. But the point is we're all scumbags or we used to be. And no one cares.

The watcher, the television viewer, gets a reflection, a subliminal mirror of their own secrets, their own lies, applying denial with their dose of evening news. They don't want to know about the messenger's messy maneuvers. They've run their own crappy course, committed their own sins. The watchers want the confession, clean and simple, straight catharsis. That's the conspiracy of the cathode rays. The image doesn't matter. It's prestidigitation, slight of sight, forgiven as long as someone's saying something juicy about someone else.

Combed, caked with cosmetics, the talking head talks and plots a producer's flow of emotion. Outrage precedes endearing before endearing segues to weather. The reporter's a puppet, spineless. One looks slightly different from the next. But they're all saying the same thing, mouthing what the boss ventriloquist wants them to mouth. Some dummies are put together better, less cracks in the paint. But they're all made of wood, stiff with a hand in the back. No one cares what they do when they're in their private box, how they deteriorate. As long as they're on stage for their two-minute bit, ready with a punch line.

So I got high.

That was the off screen insider's joke. I liked to poke, skin pop and drop, a headlining mainliner at the backroom parties. I was on the secret nod, the land of oz where fake dreams are a dime a bag. Nobody knew but the monkeys who flew. And I was flying in the eye of the twister, waking with a fever but well enough to work, minus courage, brain and heart.

Watching me was like watching an old play, fuzzy but predictable. My buddies knew I wouldn't blow it. But there was the shot of a turn, a twist in the plot that could land me in jail. Or dead. So I studied my lines before the lines studied me, before the reporter became the report and cracked the medium's mirror. I performed as though I had nothing to hide, as though my stomach wasn't sick with the desire for more lies. And my guilt was no greater than the rest of the supporting cast whose past played just as bad. It's a repertory ruse, suppressing surprise endings with a big smile and a little gossip about anyone else but themselves.

I didn't hide behind the hypocrisy. I wore it like a long sleeved shirt. It covered my tracks with style, duplicitously.

I woke up in a pool of drool one night, surrounded by cue balls. It was a keg party when I passed out. The skinheads took over sometime after that. It was the eve of Rodney King, round two. The skins weren't celebrating. They were plotting a negative reprise. The brothers bashed and crashed when the cops walked the year before. Now the feds were acquiescing, reversing, sending the cops to jail and the skins didn't

like it. They wanted to break things. I just happened to be within boot range of the morning's verdict.

I dodged the Doc Marten mambo and tapped the keg. It was Colson's house, Colson's party. He was hoping for chicks. He got meatheads instead. I came to score but never made it out the door. Colson fixed that. An hour later, I'm a neo-nazi cause celebre, the knuckleheads saluting my honor, my guilt by association. Racism was never so mistaken. I was high, a smack jack. But the baldies consigned status just for my being there. They didn't care. I couldn't move. They lifted me up, up onto their shoulders, my back in their hands. And they chanted, chanted and cheered my name, sang nursery rhymes that ended in dark and dirty death beneath swinging trees.

And I never said a word. They saw what they wanted to see. Just like the watchers of TV. And it's just as wrong.

The skins put me down. I puked before crawling to my corner of conceit.

"Nice party," I mumbled to Colson.

Colson shrugged and lit the spoon.

I was still high when I faced the politician at the next morning's press conference for peace. I met his son at a dealer's shack a year back, both of us on the buy. We said hello and blew. I wondered if his daddy knew.

A man walked by with a sign.

"Don't believe the hype."

I never did.

And don't you.

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*Last Night*

**PLANT WAS IN** the ground. He wasn't the last but he was mine, my victim. The others killed themselves. I killed Plant because I couldn't kill myself. He died for me. He became my drug Christ, my addiction crucifix. Plant died for my smack so that I might live to learn his suffering. I never did. But I drank a lot trying. I even tried to get fired. But that didn't work either.

**I WAS HIRED** with reservations. The boss knew I was a drinker. It's how I lost my last job. There were too many public displays to ignore, too many stories. I liked the reputation. I fostered it, played the working drunk, bought a lot of rounds. Until I was an unemployed drunk, which still didn't stop me. I just moved.

Not long after running through the poppy fields with Plant, I was dancing with mister termination again.

"You want to explain yourself," Mac asked. He sat with the other Mac. Two Macs, little boss, big boss, good guys compared to the peacock, my old boss. Big Mac knew the peacock, hated him and hired me to spite the bird, I gathered. Little Mac, or Supermac, was the brain, a recovering boozehound with a Memphis past. He knew computers and bad behavior, hated Elvis.

They didn't look stupid looking at me, just a couple of middle-aged men competing in hair loss and bellies who wanted to know what the fuck.

Of course, I couldn't tell them.

There was nothing innocent about showing your ass to someone who cuts you off, refuses to serve you another drop. There was nothing innocent about wrestling with the refusing man. There was nothing innocent about the threatening phone calls made from somewhere you can't remember.

Colson called the morning after.

"Charlie's pretty pissed," he said.

I was drenched before the next line.

"And he's going to call your boss."

For ten years I'd been a reporter, most of them drunk. I lived in little towns with big tolerance for the fall downs, the pass outs, the pissing in corners. I'd

been locked up for public drunkenness, run over in parking lots, smacked in the face with pancakes. I'd been thrown out for throwing up, bounced for breaking bottles, eighty-sixed for doing dirty things in the toilet. They cut me off but they never cut me down. No one ever called my boss and I always paid by tab.

"I don't think I've ever seen Charlie this mad, man," Colson absolved himself by calling in the tip and dipping. It was his fault, this guilt, if guilt had a mother on crack.

**THE BAR OPENED** at noon and we were on our way. I remembered that much. It was my day off. Colson and a couple of his knuckleheads were throwing back, bitching about dishwashing, laughing about the shit sandwich Treble left on my doorstep the day before. He'd actually pooped on two slices of white bread, placed a pickle by the open face steamer and laid it out nice in a Styrofoam box.

Happy hour was a blur, people, places, faces and faces unboxed. There was talk, talk about getting more drugs, talk about guns, talk about a suicide that was made to look like a suicide but wasn't. Colson said it was the only thing interesting that happened at the party and everyone laughed. Even though he was serious. And that's when I laughed.

The car, the car shook. Colson was tug-of-warring with someone on the other side of his door, trying to rip him off. He showed his little gun.

"I got one of them, too, motherfucker!" the black guy backed off holding his underwear.

We drove away, no score. I didn't care. I didn't care about any of it. I'd be back in the same neighborhood doing a story on the same guy lying dead on the same spot, shot in the head by somebody else. I'd have the inside on the twin sins of empathy and apathy. I never tried to rise above. I never tried to be better. We were all in it together, all victims, buying and selling, surviving. I hated sounding like a hippy. I hated the condescending dead pusher jokes even more, unless they came from a pusher.

I wish I could blame my boozing on the imbalance,

the idiots who report on the lives of the idiot savants, the upwardly mobile climbing the crooked spine of misfortune and loss and the guilt that comes with playing reporter, my guilt, anyway.

Selling out works up a thirst, though. And I sold out a long time ago.

"Television man," the knuckleheads greeted me back in the bar, dropping smiles when they saw the empty hands. The nickname was obvious. I didn't like it but it's what I did for a living. I was a man on television. I could just as easily have been "knock-on-the-door-of-a-mother-whose-little-girl-was-just-raped-and-mutilated-man" or "warning-people-about-bad-weather-man." It was all the same thing. I just happened to go to a cheap school, followed the breadcrumbs and learned how to put words with moving pictures. A drunk could do it. And I did. My friends just happened to chase other career opportunities with other nicknames.

Chicken boy and dishwasher Dave worked for Charlie. Charlie owned a burrito joint, simple work with simple pay for the simple minded and lazy. It was popular with the girls because the boys from their favorite bands rolled their tortillas. The boys liked it because of the free beer, the endless after hours tap that primed practice.

Chicken boy looked like a chicken and worked over the poultry vat. Dishwasher Dave was a chronic booze abuser who drank dishwasher to prove it. But the restaurant made money. And Charlie was opening another, pasta.

Without drugs, we smoked weed, drank more, swallowed worms. Funds were fading with the sun and the bar stopped taking credit after too many nights like this. Someone said something and we were driving, rolling in Treble's truck, spitting at the sky until we were inside somewhere unfamiliar.

Noise, loud noise, there was a lot of noise.

"Hell, no!" It was a mantra.

Steam, faces in steam, mouths dripping noodles in a moving fun room, it was too bright, too many glasses breaking.

"Hell, no!" sounded like hello but no one was serving.

Pushing, pushing us back, pushing my back, someone had hands on me so I did the song and dance routine. Trays rattled, plates broke, bodies backed away from falling chairs, I was swinging at air, trying to fix my focus on a face.

"I am the television man," I wobbled arms akimbo. "And the television man wants drinks for his friends."

Cheers and chants, "television man, television man," I could hear them. It was a joke. I knew it was a joke. But I didn't know where we were performing, who was throwing us out.

"I don't give a fuck who you are," somebody said, a smear, a flash of face. "Get his ass out of here!"

"Your dick," I said, "in my ass."

Dropping my drawers, I simulated the receiving end of anal intercourse, the old butt fuck pantomime.

"Oh! Ouch, ouch!" I had my hands on a wall. "Not so hard."

I could feel the laughter inside and the rush of hands carrying me up and away.

Someone's room, Colson's place, everyone was wearing hats when I came to. Colson was talking on the phone with an Asian accent, hanging up, redialing. Bottles, there were always too many empty bottles on the tables and floors when the night fades to black and there is no more, no more.

**WHAT I COULDN'T** recall, Colson filled in. Charlie made his call and it didn't look good. I needed the job. I needed to show it a little more respect. It was easy money and I abused it like a sobered up wife beater, hung over with sorry. It didn't demand much. And despite a moral conduct clause in the contract, a reporter's private life was given the benefit of the doubt as long as no one blew the whistle. I'd been lucky. I was pushing it. I knew it. I knew I needed to back off. I knew I probably wouldn't.

"This man said we have a serious public relations problem," Mac said. He knew the score. I wasn't busted for soliciting blowjobs in the park. I wasn't caught with my hands down a kid's shorts. I was a drunk. Mac knew that. He just needed to hear a story, something that soft-soaped the situation so he could call off the dogs of damage control and get back to worrying about his own job.

"Just a few boys getting too loud," I told him, revising the black out with a story about friends on the town who got a little too rowdy with one of their employers.

"It was all in fun," I said.

I tossed off the asshole pantomime as an exaggeration, a misinterpretation. His word against mine, it was a gamble.

The Macs huddled. I waited. They bought it.

"Three days suspension," Mac ruled, "without pay."

Supermac wasn't smiling but he wanted to. He knew bullshit when he smelled it.

**THERE WAS A DAY** game at the ballpark. I bought a ticket and sat alone. The beer man was a very handsome man. And the sun was bright for the first few innings.

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*Jungle Jim*

**NANCY ALWAYS KEPT** in touch, Hawaii, San Francisco, Las Vegas. She moved a lot. It was better that way, better than living in the same town. She drank hard. I couldn't keep up. Which is why she moved. And I needed to get back to work. But we saw each other now and then. She'd pass through town. We'd have a few new laughs. She was working in a New York joint when we agreed to meet at the airport and fly to Florida. I always wanted to meet her dad, an old school boozier named Jungle Jim. He wore it on his cap.

Jungle Jim was a practical jokester. Nancy's family lived on a lake in Michigan. Her dad owned a boat. One day he told a neighborhood kid to tell his wife there had been a terrible accident, that Jungle Jim was dead, lost at sea. The family fell into mourning. An hour later, Jungle Jim walked in, laughing like a drunken Lazarus. Nancy's mom took the girls and moved to Arizona, end of joke.

Practical jokes are like that. They can go too far. Nancy and I went to a wedding reception one night. I didn't know the couple, two bartenders. The booze was free. There was a band, a microphone stand. Half in the bag, I turned to Nancy.

"If they can do it, why can't we?"

Nancy smiled.

"Will you marry me?"

It was good theater, I thought, and downed a shot. But someone heard it, passed it on, announced it. The crowd turned to us, toasted. Hands slapped my back. It was a funny little secret until the next morning when Nancy asked if she should call her folks. I told her to hold off. And then I told her it was only a joke. That's when she told me I was a lot like her dad.

**JIM PICKED US UP** in his jeep. It looked like a safari rental, washed out with a cover that fluttered at the corners. He was proud of it, proud of his Jungle Jim cap. It sat loose on his head. He was a little man, thin from the booze but wiry. He didn't look like his daughter. But they had the same certain smugness that some drunks have.

It was a half hour to his house. So we hit an Elks

Club. Jungle Jim had memberships across the state. He wasn't civic minded. He wasn't a veteran. But he drank like one, solid. I held on for three rounds in the empty bar, sat up straight but felt the spine sag. Jim asked me no questions and I told him no lies. But he knew I was soft. And I was softening by the drink.

"**DAD'S ALWAYS READY,**" Nancy yelled into the wind.

Jungle Jim looked proud, nodding at the can of beans on the floorboard, smiling. I liked his face. It was a melon with a cap. I pulled the tin lid back, inhaled.

"Go ahead," Jim said. "There's more."

I ate with fingers and sucked syrup from my wrist. Jim started a story, harmonizing with the engine's hum, the rubber's whine. I wanted to make a good impression. But my eyes would not cooperate with the beauty.

**JUNGLE JIM'S PAD** was a retiree's dream if the retiree enjoyed his drink. Beer signs, three unmade beds, a trumpet on the floor and a lot of bottles. His claim to fame was the V and V, vodka and Vernor's. We had a few by the man-made lake out back, our feet dangling in the oily water.

"To V," Nancy held up two fingers forming the letter.

"And V," Jungle Jim did the same.

I lost count of the cocktails. But we weren't finished. Jungle Jim's schedule was fluid. And we flowed to the Blue Bird, another joint with a vague affiliation. We sat with our drinks and more stories were told. I couldn't follow the stories. I didn't know what I was drinking. I had one. I had another. It was automatic. I counted the hours. I'd been drinking since the night before. I drank until I couldn't drink anymore. And I was ashamed. I wanted Jungle Jim to think I was a man, a stand up drinker like his daughter. But I wasn't. I was a fake, a bad punch line.

"Another round?" Jim asked.

"Yes," I answered.

And Nancy's cat eyes smiled.

I downed it fast like the others. But I couldn't take the talk. I got up, made for the bathroom but hit the door. I looked around, found a car fender. The asphalt heaved, rolled and settled. I looked into the blue gray day and thought about lying down. There was a patch of grass on the shoulder of the road. I kicked through it for grass. It was soft and green and cool on my back and I let it drift me into black traffic.

**I FELT A LOT** better when I opened my eyes to the color of dusk. I didn't think about time. I just felt better, thirstier, like a blue bird.

"Where the fuck were you?"

Nancy ran at me from the end of the parking lot, near tears.

"I took a rest," I said.

"We've been looking for you for almost two hours!"

Nancy was frantic, balling her fists.

"Fucking asshole!"

"I was tired," I said. "I was right over there."

I pointed to the bed of grass.

"Here he is," Nancy yelled to a couple of regulars.

"He was fucking sleeping."

I shrugged. They shrugged.

"Here he is, dad."

Jungle Jim walked out with a drink.

"Sorry, Jim."

"Don't tell me," he said. "Tell her."

"I'm sorry."

"God damn it," Nancy said, wiping her glasses.

"Some men enjoy the drink before them," Jungle Jim said, "and some men only think about the drink ahead."

**WE WERE GOING** to stay on the beach. But Nancy wouldn't let up and I finally blew. I didn't know I was wearing a hat until she threw it out the window. We pulled up to an intersection. I opened the door, got out and chased the hat. Nancy pulled away and I was alone with a hang over. I called a cab, hit the airport bar, got vague.

The stewardess told me to fasten my seat belt.

"You know," I said "I'm going to remember this."

But I didn't.

**I WENT STRAIGHT** to the bar, walked straight in and ordered a drink, straight, same as any other night. Only I flew to Florida and back to get there. I called work. I don't know why. But I found out Robert Miller died. He was a friend, a photographer. He was doing something in his bathroom when he dropped like a soup bone. And he was only two years older than me.

I hung up and searched for remorse in the bottom of a half dozen glasses. But I couldn't find it. So I danced a little dance in the clearing by the front table where Bill sat with a few faces. They smiled until I slapped him. Ray didn't like it, jumped up, pushed me.

"Knock that shit off," he said.

I kept dancing. Bill put his hat back on. No one smiled. Ray waited but I danced out the door. And seven backs turned to the glass.

Big Mike was working downstairs at the other bar. The dealers had come and gone. Big Mike mixed a cocktail but told me that was it.

"You've had enough."

I drank the drink through a straw and tossed the cup in the trash.

"Finally," I said.

"Finally what?" Big Mike asked.

"I can finally get some rest."

Big Mike handed me water. I sipped it on a stool by the jukebox. I didn't think about the day. I didn't think about Florida, about Robert dying. I didn't think about alcoholism. I didn't think about anything until I remembered one thing.

I never found out why Jungle Jim called himself Jungle Jim.

Big Mike said no charge.

And I walked home because I had nowhere else to go.

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*Black Out*

I REMEMBER TAKING my shirt off. I was in front of the bar. I remember waving it over my head. I remember what the man said.

"You're a bum. And you'll always be a bum!"

And he used my name. He knew me.

I remember the daylight. I remember waking up on the sidewalk in front of my house. I remember watching the landlord painting the porch.

"I know what you're up to," I said.

The landlord stopped painting.

I remember all that. But the rest is dark, another Saturday blackout before sundown.

Nancy, my girlfriend at the time, snored into morning. But paranoia slept right beside her. And I woke up to another sweaty ménage on the Sabbath, beads of guilt soaking the sheets, the pillow screaming fool, pounding my crown of thorns deeper, deeper.

I'd been drinking at that bar for years. The first drink was the drink of an unemployed man, another bellied up boozier. But they liked my act, the way I kissed the floor, letting my dirty mouth run after hours.

"Ireland is Europe's Alabama," I goaded Dara the Irish bartender.

But she laughed. Everyone laughed. I was a funny guy in my cups. But no one could understand how I got the television job.

"I seen your face in a plate of hot cheese," A.R. said. "And now you're on the news?"

I tried to explain. But they still didn't get it.

"But you're a drunk," Eric said shaking his head. "I remember . . ."

He told a story. They all had stories. Some of them were even true.

My celebrity grew like a softball star. I represented the bar, the losers and boozers and bar backs, my friends and sponsors. They'd turn down the music and turn up the television.

"He looks thirsty!" somebody yelled.

"Is he wearing pants?" somebody else yelled.

I sat at the bar and took the glad slaps with a smile. It was embarrassing. But I liked it, too. I liked the head

nod and back of hand whispers on the weekends, the faint recognition.

"He's drunk!"

And I was, dressed with the inverted pride of a bum.

I was also, occasionally, barred. Sometimes they'd just had enough, too many pratfalls, too much yelling at the walls.

"You're scaring some of the customers."

Don said it slowly. He owned the bar.

That was the night I woke up in the back of somebody's truck.

But there were never any hard feelings. I didn't fight. I was just too loud. And Saturdays were the worst. I was always hung over and starting early. I loved drinking by daylight, watching the shadows disappear. A regular with regular status, I was, just another asshole.

But the thin line grew thinner. There were things I couldn't recall, mysterious bruises on both biceps. A pile of wet clothes in the hall confused me. I'd piece it together with stories retold, how the bartenders pinned my arms to the wall, how I pissed myself. It was always told with a laugh, a head scratch. And I'd shrug like it was someone else.

"How do you get away with this shit at work," A.R. asked wiping a glass. "Don't they know?"

But I did get away with it. And they didn't know. I had the booze rep with the boss. I'd been suspended before. But I learned from it, tried to tone it down, limiting my act to one bar and a set of bartenders who were used to it, let me slide without dropping a dime. It worked for years. That's why I lived around the corner.

That's also why I wasn't worried when I showed up for my usual Saturday afternoon shift.

I asked Eric about the sign, the advertisement. He said it was new tequila.

"It's called Tarantula," he said.

"I can see that," I said.

Eric poured. I swallowed. And I was heading for the floor with numbers seven, eight and nine.

And there was something said that I didn't like. And there was more poured. And there was mustard. And there was the beauty salon and the bright street and people passing on the sidewalk and the injustice of singing a song I couldn't remember. They were looking at me from the other side of the window, from inside the bar, watching the show, my unqualified agony. I bared my chest to the tarantula sky, waving my shirt over head, daring it, calling to it. But Nancy came instead.

"Take him home," someone said.

"But I'm just getting started," I said.

And the sidewalk came up, grabbed me, smacked me and went away. The two feet below me were mine. But they were mush, mud and chasing drops of blood.

"You're bleeding."

Female voice.

"Let me help."

Another female voice, couldn't tell whose, three sets of feet under me

"Television man," an older voice, a man's voice. "What a joke."

"Hey," I said, nothing else. I couldn't. My feelings were hurt but I knew the voice had it right. I stopped and dropped.

"Leave him there," someone said. "He'll get up when he's ready."

And I did.

Sometimes people laugh after the fact, friends who understand the romance of a drunk. Some don't. Mike was behind the bar the next day. And he wasn't laughing.

"I don't know if you want to be here right now," he said in a whisper.

"Why not," I whispered back.

"Eddie's here."

"Who the fuck is Eddie?"

"The guy you dumped the mustard on yesterday?"

"What?"

"Yeah," Mike said. "A whole bottle. Don wanted to black ball your ass when he heard about that."

"Oh, shit."

"I'd buy Eddie a beer if I was you."

"I'll pay his fucking tab," I said. "Where is he?"

Mike pointed to the booth by the kitchen. A skinny little man sat nursing a long neck, enjoying the quiet condiments of the corner. Eddie was half bald, timid. He flinched when I walked up.

"I'm very sorry," I said. "But I don't remember."

"That's alright," Eddie said.

He spoke with an English accent that melted my heart.

"I've been there myself."

"I've got your tab."

"Cheers," Eddie said and I almost cried.

"What the fuck happened yesterday," Mike asked. "I heard you went off."

I pointed to the sign.

"Don't sell any more of that new stuff."

The front table was full. A couple of guys waved. They cut hair at the salon across the street. They worked for Melanie, the ex-stripper. I knew Melanie.

"Very funny," Rex said from the table.

"What's that?"

Rex said I walked into the salon, sat down, slapped a credit card on the sink and offered to pay Melanie a thousand bucks to cut my hair in the nude.

The table laughed. My stomach hurt, gut nausea.

"Oh."

Eddie walked by on his way out, my new mustard colored friend.

"Cheers," he said again.

I waved, sick, watching the door for more stories from the dark side of the dick.

"Ever consider A.A.," Mike asked.

I vowed to lighten up, hold it down. But a few months later it happened again, raving and rambling, sitting on someone's motorcycle out front, screaming. "Look at me everyone! I'm a big motorcycle man!"

At least that's what someone told me.

They wouldn't let me in after that.

And then I stopped drinking.

I remember that most of all.