

# Slag

a novel excerpt

By Terence Hughes

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *An excerpt from a home brand stamped all over Made in America novel that explores the deep heartland of the American psyche and the bittersweet truths that define and shape our lives. The author has a penchant, shared by such luminaries as Cormac McCarthy and John Kennedy O'Toole, for the kilometer long sentence and while no author takes on this literary challenge lightly, Hughes manages to pull it off with authority comfortable enough to make us wonder why all sentences don't start in Toronto and end in LA. Compelling characters are recruited from the eccentric, the sad and the sane. The voice is next door down the street and the delicious use of language is served up regional style. Yep, we think we'd like to read Slag front to back. (Spacing, format, grammar and everything else is author's own.)*

**QUALITY QUOTABLE** *(for the love of language)...*

...a dark and smoky place called Byron's, on the outskirts of town where the home-made beer and liquor made the stained walls and shadows of the swaying and stumbling patrons looming long on the candle-lit ceiling, seem like the drapery and jewel lined interior of a king's palace and if there was a king on those evening's before his split from Kat, it was Mangy, one and all of his drinking buddies wondered how a man could leave such a beauty alone at home after a long day's work, left to fix a dinner that she would eat by herself and be conscientious enough to keep the larger share warm for her husband who would either toss it in the barrel or wipe out with the hunger of a wolf and then proceed to vomit it up in its barely digested entirety due to the stomach being full of cheap liquor...

An Excerpt From

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Terence Patrick Hughes

Mangy, Kat, and Joe-Joe started out on friendly enough terms, anchoring corners at the occasional house party, Mangy kind enough to shield Joe-Joe's stutter from strangers, by now those who knew him

either ignored it completely or excused themselves from the strained moments of chatter when Joe-Joe tried to make it through a couple of sentences over the loud din of music and contained mayhem, it would take minutes, far too long for the attention spans of the besotted, most of the revelers at these parties worked for the high school as teachers, cafetorium help, groundskeepers or coaches and after Joe-Joe had met everybody once he knew where he stood and most times that was behind Mangy and Kat, his new friends deflected any impatience with his speech by Mangy straight out shoving any interlocutor away and following that up with his famous taking-out-at-the-legs move, the parties often broke into a kerfuffle after all these were simply aging secondary school stereotypes, the athletes, the prom queens, the clowns, the burnouts, anyone who had not gone on to Advanced Learning gathered in a few rotating homes, politely leaving a good stretch of time for hosts to physically and mentally recover from the blow-outs before returning to reenact the libidinal massacres where collectively the group clung to the past by drinking, singing, carousing, and in all sense continuing the celebration they started as youngsters, a lifelong pageant of ecstatic moments spent in the midst yet away from the drudgery and dread of existence.

Joe-Joe returned his coaching compatriot's kindness in turn by helping to ward off any challengers to Mangy and Kat's happiness meaning he would nip in the bud any attempt at getting close to Kat whether it was an employee from school talking shop or just some stranger gawking lasciviously in the street as Kat walked by, each would get a staccato warning from Joe-Joe, and it's important to note that all Joe-Joe did was verbally step in, he was not a fighter which was strange in that he vigorously thrust himself into other people's business around town so often it became known that Joe-Joe was not only on the lookout for besmirchers of his friend's wife reputation but also that he gained warped satisfaction at rooting out any kind of human error, mishap, or his favorite, indiscretion, and then tattling about it until he was firmly labeled a spy, wholly mistrusted by elders and despised by the

entire student body of Bedlam High, although a few Slashers displayed mediocre respect for him but only because as a coach he held judgement over whether they would play in the next game or not but mainly Joe-Joe's was thought of as a grown-up snitch and a gleeful sadist, and all who had either been caught or nearly caught by him swore that his inability to conquer his stutter and the shame sunk deep down inside by this failing was the catalyst for him becoming a world class shit.

Still, his friends liked him, particularly in that first golden stretch of time when he had returned to town as the injured sports hero and his stories of games in far off stadiums captivated those adults whose he was to soon betray by turning them in for petty crimes, or amplifying damaging rumors, and his main source of likeability was that he was always at the party, ever present hovering, constantly moving a tawdry tale on its journey to damnation, of course most clumsily elucidated so that each member of the mob, whenever the mob would gather to verbally accuse, try, or hang somebody, would frustratingly hang on each painful, drawn out syllable, to get the juiciest detail bit by bit, some even felt his stutter endeared him to the newly acquainted, before the sting of spite and cunning could be sensed and ironically this reptilian behavior played well into his coaching the offensive Slash squad as trickery was a strength and slicing apart and cutting away at the faults of the other team was a talent put to good use even if Joe-Joe's heroic reputation ended in disgrace at the exit gates of the stadium, he was Mangy's buddy and always found himself hip-to-hip with his good friend and Kat at parties and functions, the steady sidekick to Mangy's quiet seething confidence and Kat's super-sized personality.

No one knows who suggested that Kat would be the one to cure Joe-Joe of his stutter, maybe it was her early brush with decent living in the country that left a slight altruistic streak, others reason that it was her father's abandonment that left a needy, quiet space that Mangy was too cold or most often too

drunk to fill, or it could just be that Kat and Joe-Joe were simply debris left from previously exploded families that discovered their jagged edges fit together perfectly. Noone knows when it all started either, Mangy wouldn't specify when he included it in his epic tavern tales, and no one had the temerity to question Kat about the goings on, the tales left from her early, wild days seemed to disappear in the current scandal and reason dictates that an individual will choose the infamy from a single adult occurrence over the disgrace of many errors of youth, the main reason being that the older and more often told the tale, the dirtier the details become. Besides, these simple, haggard towns folks hardly ever blamed adultery harder than say, a stolen car, as most had sipped from the filthy cup at some time or another, after dark too many sources of temptation, bath-tub alcohol, and illicit freedom opened up in the tenements and housing projects to not expect any sane adult to attempt to subdue and roll around with another sane, or at least semi-sane, adult, but the interesting particulars that remain unknown are who made the first move, I was certain that it must have been Joe-Joe. And right I was.

One evening after Slash practice, Mangy went about the usual cleaning up of the grounds and field house after he angrily chased the last straggling players out to their goat-smelling homes, as he put it, and he then took his time pulling off his sweatpants and tee and placing back on the sweat-stained and funky clothes from his day's work on the grounds, he was a natural pest killer, particularly adept at catching and creatively exterminating the rats that invaded after Slash games, his patented solution was in picking up the pieces of popped corn one by one that the crowd had left behind and coating it with his own mixture of liquid poison, a rumor being that he did a shot of it himself after sealing the rat's doom which is why he would gnash at you if you asked about it just like one of the furry creatures after the tainted corn sizzled a hole in their belly the size of thumbnail, angry was never the word for Mangy for he would tip glasses with any townsmen until the morning's light seeped through the windows, it just seemed that getting close to folks was his problem, surly was more his character but in a way that

endeared him to those he hadn't yet crossed swords with for if you did cross swords, you mainly stayed far away from him for the rest of your days, and on this early evening after the players were soundly run, beaten up, cut, and released to their individual homes of squalor, Mangy was headed for his favorite watering hole, a dark and smoky place called Byron's, on the outskirts of town where the home-made beer and liquor made the stained walls and shadows of the swaying and stumbling patrons looming long on the candle-lit ceiling, seem like the drapery and jewel lined interior of a king's palace and if there was a king on those evening's before his split from Kat, it was Mangy, one and all of his drinking buddies wondered how a man could leave such a beauty alone at home after a long day's work, left to fix a dinner that she would eat by herself and be conscientious enough to keep the larger share warm for her husband who would either toss it in the barrel or wipe out with the hunger of a wolf and then proceed to vomit it up in its barely digested entirety due to the stomach being full of cheap liquor, appreciation was always given either way, Mangy would assure his wife that she was the best catch in the pond and that he would clean up after himself in the morning and either crawl to bed or drop to a heavy sleep in the midst of what he had promised to clean up, of course the dutiful Kat would each time scrub up the mess and discard the waste in the trash along with her choppy childhood dreams of a happy home. After carousing in and closing Byron's on this very night, Mangy stumbled home, smoking cigarettes and challenging any gang members that he ran into on the darkened streets but they all knew him, more importantly they knew Kat and just as he made his drinking buddies at the bar feel better about themselves by his very presence, away from the dark beauty, the model of feminine allure, choosing to drink with them was his way of legitimizing their existence as quality company, so too did the gangs feel when he rounded a corner clumsily, spitting profanity at them, flicking nearly smoked cigarettes their way, it was always followed with laughter, a bit of light sparring until Mangy would give them a final 'Fuck Off!' and stumble his way on to the next corner or if he was close enough, nearly collapsing up the steps and into his simple two-bedroom, clap-board home, one of many in a

neighborhood of identical structures that school workers rent at a federal discount, where a hot meal awaits for whatever fate his stomach held in store, but on this night there was a unique addition to the simple veggies and mash and sleepy wife that met his arrival, crashing through the door with clumsiness and announcing his arrival in slurry tones, the call in response froze his dirty booted feet in the kitchen, leaving him uncustomarily speechless for her words had not been familiar and fatigued or slightly frustrated due to his chronic nights out and messy homecomings, but flowery, alive, and one could also add perfumed as the scent of impression and thoughtfulness was in the air, she had obviously put on some fragrance for whoever else it was that was in his goddamn house.

“We’re in here”, she gave a bouncy call from the sitting room, sending all sorts of images of pestering friends and annoying acquaintances that she had invited for tea and chat at this late hour.

“Kat, I ain’t in no mood for...”

His words that had just earlier been flowing as free as the kegs of cheap cellar-beer that soaked his senses and had only become more loquacious and frighteningly colorful on the stumble home, fell away into mute, you could say shocked, stillness at the sight of Kat and Joe-Joe on the couch in the sitting room, not too close but sharing some time and what appeared to be a children’s book lying open on the oak coffee table, a rickety piece of near-junk that Mangy had found on the corner and repaired to use like most of the furniture in the room, as well, like the confines of Byron’s, candles cast a bright glow near the two, blending their shadows together on the paneled wall, making Mangy think of angels for a brief, disgusted moment, as he continued to stand still and silent on the fringe of light and darkness. Joe-Joe was smiling and Mangy didn’t like it, he didn’t like any of the situation, expecting to arrive to a warm meal and dutiful wife and instead finding his friend keeping her company by the candlelight did

not set him off into an instant rage and Mangy himself wasn't sure as to why, it could be his endearment to his wife, he did love her in a mangled, never-ever going to be affectionate outside of the regular intimate dalliances of a healthy husband and wife, physically that is, emotionally they were as torn and tattered as anyone else you ran into in the course of the day, and it was likely the agreement to go on through life together that was the most special thing Kat and Mangy held onto, and that was what kept him silent and at the same time held him back from delivering an epic beating, the feeling that he was about to lose something big, something that he had let sink into him was about to get pulled out, and he wasn't ready for it.

“Well...sit down.”

While Joe-Joe went on smiling, Kat was treating it as if Mangy had just walked into the break room at the school where he would often find them sitting together, hardly touching the bad coffee, while she went on about anything at all, her energy and attention being sponged up by Joe-Joe as if he was a calf on its mum's spout, drinking in her energy, he would either chalk it up to Joe-Joe's lack of social graces or Kat's pitying spirit but that was in the middle of the school building in the middle of the day, this was in his home in the very dead middle of the night, he never imagined Joe-Joe having the guts to brave the streets after dark, he knew the kid could fight but also that he lacked serious back-bone and was far more comfortable snitching on people rather than squaring up on them, which Mangy figured the poor sap would wind up doing before he could escape this situation, he'd send him on home with his face hanging off of his skull, he thought, but then he also instantly realized that he didn't even know where Joe-Joe lived and as he looked at him and his wife in the candle's waxy glow for an instant he felt like he lived here with them and that was what set off his first flare of anger.

“What the fuck’s going on here?” he liked that Joe-Joe sat straight up at the sound of his voice.

“Oh, stop it and sit down, already.” Kat admonished, her eyes meeting Mangy’s directly.

Mangy felt his feet moving but held the stare with the only woman on earth who could tell him what to do, the lower half of him dutifully taking a seat in the rocking chair, there was room on the couch and a better man might have joined his friend, propriety would dictate that he would occupy the spot even between the two, but Mangy never desired to better his manhood or become anything near proper, if it ain’t broke don’t fix it was the saying, while at the same time his upper torso was stiff, arms taut with tension, jaw tight and the eyes, a harsh, cold stare as if he were attempting to extract a soundless confession, a look that the other two were not amiss at picking up.

“Y...y...y...y...y...y...” Joe-Joe went on in a futile attempt to chip away at the ice.

Kat put a finger up to Joe-Joe, near his face, not touching his lips which some motions of silence carry through to a gentle press to the mouth, a couple’s intimate signal of hush, this didn’t happen, her finger stopped an inch or two away, just barely enough to keep Mangy in the rocker, he even sat back and gave it a rock or two in a false appearance of calm although with each sway back he considered how quickly he could spring from the chair on a lurch forward and have his hands around either of their necks. Mangy had strangled a man once, not to death but fairly close to it, back when he trying to go pro with Slash and they had a dozen or so athletes sharing cramped rental quarters near the field in who-knows-what part of the country and there had been a mistake as to whose bed was whose on the first night when a drunken teammate tried to climb into bed only to find a snake named Mangy there, it had actually turned out to be Mangy’s mistake as he had only moments earlier drunkenly gone to bed

himself and choose the wrong bunk, but as soon as the teammate pulled the blankets up Mangy was on him and squeezing his neck in his fairly small but strong and wrenching grip, before some other teammates could pull him off, the body was limp and the head sunk over Mangy's hands until he finally let go, the teammate recovered and some more drinking occurred, just another wild night in the scrubs but what came out of it was Mangy's awareness that he could take a man's life with his bare hands, you just have to hold on a little longer.

"You need to hear this," Kat said to Mangy, scooping up the book from the table and turning to Joe-Joe, "Go ahead...nice and slow."

Joe-Joe looked at Mangy, whose eyes fell from the dead-cold stare at his wife and now looked upon someone he had previously considered a friend, wondering just how long he'd have to hold on to Joe-Joe's neck to finish the job, not an easy task, he thought to himself, expecting that Kat would be clawing at his face the entire time, Joe-Joe thought that Mangy's eyes looked mad as hell and also hurt at the same time which is why he left no pause before he looked to the nodding Kat, inhaled deeply, and spoke.

"Hi...there....Mangy...how...are you?"

Mangy stopped rocking and adjusted his feet on the floor but otherwise he was still, the anger fell from his face instantly as he suddenly felt lost, like he'd had taken a wrong turn in the woods and was following a new path that he sensed was leading further and further away from where he wanted to go, still, at no time in his short friendship with Joe-Joe had he ever heard him speak a complete sentence without a good deal of stuttering and it hit him like the fly that had somewhere been buzzing in the dark

of night gone suddenly quiet, dead or gone, leaving the stillness to grip and subdue you, he was subdued in a way, to the point that he didn't know what to say so Kat did the talking.

"We've been practicing...to surprise you," she went on as she placed the book down and stood from the couch, moving past the rocker on her way to the table, brushing her dress across Mangy's knees, the slightest familiar closeness that made him drop his guard even more, "It was Joe-Joe's idea."

At the table she began to pour three glasses with liquor, Mangy noticed it was the good stuff usually taken out on the most festive of occasions, holidays or the death of an enemy, and made her way back to the couch, handing glasses to the men and setting in to polish off her own moments after sitting down, Mangy noticed that she sat in the exact spot as before, not closer or further away from Joe-Joe, so this time he did get up and placed himself on the couch right in the middle of the tutor and her student.

"That's better," he exhaled as Joe-Joe inched away and Kat tugged at the part of her skirt that was stuck under Mangy's leg, "Why don't you roll that one back out to us again, Joe-Joe, old boy?"

Mangy kicked his boots off, a customary move for any man coming home from a long day's work and a busy night of drinking, but it had been relatively warm that day and the odor that he was counting on hit the air even more swiftly when he placed his feet up on the coffee table, a toe poking its yellowing nail through a thin pair of blue socks. Kat let out a disgusted breath and Joe-Joe kept his eyes to the ground, both men were used to the smell, fatal reminders of life's decay were ever-present in the locker room and husband and wife ignore certain foul characteristics of their mate in the name of making a marriage

work, although whenever it got too bad Kat made him wash his feet and burn the offending pair of socks in the pellet stove.

“Make yourself at home,” Kat muttered.

“That’s what I’m doing,” Mangy snapped and turned to Joe-Joe, “That ain’t what you was doing, was it?”

“N...n...n...n...n...n...n...n...n,” Joe-Joe had lost his brief command of words.

“All right, all right,” Mangy cooed after letting Joe-Joe struggle for a moment and at the same time placing a hand on his wife’s knee, which trembled slightly at his touch, “Go on back to that part you was rehearsing...I liked it....go on...”

Joe-Joe looked to Kat who neither affirmed nor denied the request and then took the same deep breath as he held his hands together like a choir boy about to let out the first of many hymns.

“H-h-h-h-h...” his grinding on the first syllable made Kat lean over and turn the book back to the page they had been studying, following her perfect finger across the words he saw that Joe-Joe had inserted Mangy’s name on the page’s blank space that invited the learner to personalize the lesson, it struck Mangy as if he were actually a blank void himself right now being filled in by the efforts of Joe-Joe, if he had not been there when he arrived home his life would have followed its usual course, warm meal, unhappy wife, blackout, but instead a warped entertainment had awaited him and the usual simple wretchedness had disappeared into a vastly altered state.

“Hi...th...there” Joe-Joe worked with sharp concentration on Kat’s fingers caressing the letters  
“...Mangy...how...are...y-you.”

“Not bad,” Mangy said loudly and then stretched his arms wide and yawned, “Oh boy...I’m  
wiped, better get the fuck out of here, Joe-Joe.”

He then stood, scooped up the book from the table, and left the room, his feet landing heavily as they ascended the stairs and then a short shuffle before the weight of his body hitting the bed above their heads made the two on the couch jerk in their seats. That was the first night that Mangy walked home to find Kat waging the slow, painful war against Joe-Joe’s stutter, it was on a fairly set schedule, same day each week barring emergencies and severe weather, and ended similarly each night, Mangy stumbling home to find the pair in the living room, on the couch, with papers and pencils scattered on the table, Mangy had sent the book he had confiscated to the same slow burning fate as his funky socks so the speech master had taken to writing sentences on paper which Joe-Joe sat reading over and over as if it were the script and he the actor preparing for the biggest part of his life. Mangy would burst in as usual, gobble some of his warmed dinner and then immediately take up all of the papers from the table and out of Joe-Joe’s hands, and tear them to shreds, finishing off with the same yawn, stretch, and warning for Joe-Joe to get the fuck out of there before either crawling or stumbling up the steps, depending on the severity of drinking, followed by the thump onto the bed, which came to serve as the actor’s cue each night to take leave of his director and Mangy was hellbent sure not to drop off to sleep until he heard the mumbled goodbyes, the door shut and locked, and Kat cleaning up whatever mess awaited before she could retire.

The weird practice continued for a good while, known yet not discussed often amongst the town-folk who made it their business to know and discuss these things, as it appeared on the surface to be an authentic act of altruism on Kat's part and some felt that it was kind and generous of Mangy to allow his friend the time and place to lose the affliction of the tongue that had plagued him his whole life, admirable was often used to describe Mangy's actions, while there was a slew of other folks who couldn't help imagining what other type of education might be going on in that house before Mangy made his well past midnight arrival, yet no one had the courage or interest in stirring the pot of rumor for fear of ending up in a confrontation with a beastly tough groundskeeper/coach with a chip on his shoulder. But finally, the strained admiration and whispered doubts all came to an end and the fates of Mangy, Kat, and Joe-Joe were decided by a poorly cooked piece of fish.

Because the warmed dinner at home was customarily not gobbled until well after midnight, Mangy liked to have a small meal at Byron's and the chalkboard hanging next to the bar with neatly printed letters reading FRESH FISH caught his eye as soon as he walked in after a truly tiring day at work, toilets backed up in the field house, no explanation as to why but juvenile delinquency was not ruled out, and it had rained right before practice turning the dirt into a steaming, slippery bowl of muck, so he wiped his feet as he stepped into the dim surroundings yet paid no mind to the mud caked to his pant legs as he took his familiar stool, slapped the bar hard with the palm of one hand and in moments was tossing down the first of many shots of cheap liquor provided dutifully by the young, burly bartender, who turned and smiled when Mangy spoke up.

"Give me a plate of that fish...it's got to be the only thing fresh in this place."

He didn't even bother to extinguish his cigarette as the plate arrived from the small kitchen in back and the bartender set it down along with another full shot glass, Mangy inhaled the meal, drink, and the rest of the cigarette in seconds, and then set back to arguing about the dangers of the world with another patron, that is until he felt the first rumble, he could tell it was abnormal because he'd felt sick to his stomach plenty of times but never that early in the night, so he stopped shouting his point at the group who then set into asking if he was all right, patting him on the back, squeezing his shoulder and he assured them that everything was fine, boasting of his iron stomach, and then throwing up everything that had just eaten plus what appeared to be a smallish yet whole green apple, fouling the bar-top, and somewhat the bartender, in a rancid, hurling splash. Normally, Mangy would troop right on into the night, gargling with beer and then drinking the nausea into submission, but the fish had done a job on him and the liquor that they set before him after a hurried clean-up sat untouched as he held onto his severely sour stomach for a half-hour, an epic gastrointestinal battle with cold sweats and dry heaves until he reluctantly gave up the fight.

"I'm goin' home," he announced after one dangerously liquid belch.

Most everyone that tells this story without a doubt or fault of their own misses or adds details here and there but no one ever skips the part about how Mangy stood there for a full five minutes staring at that shot of liquor on the bar, some say it was so long that his drinking buddies were wagering whether he'd shoot it down or not and he almost did, raising it to his lips but as soon as the smell hit him it must have all just come together like a sour wind of rotting fish because he turned that glass right over and spilled a good shot away that most anyone in the place would have gladly made disappear for him, and then he hustled out in an uncustomary hurry, everyone agreed old Mangy was not his self that evening,

His cheeks had gone ghostly white and his stare was on the ground as he moved through the cold streets, hardly being seen at that hour outside of the tavern, he was greeted with many a 'hi, Mangy' or 'hey, you OK, pal?' as he kept a brisk pace, bumping past bodies when needed and never stopping to acknowledge the kind words for fear that the shortest of chats would end badly, very badly. He even passed a few of the gang members that he normally would heckle and they were all surprised at how swift he was moving, his usual pie-eyed stumble exchanged for the brisk walk, so they let him go like they always do but not without a 'hey, you OK, old dude?' And then he was home. Now, all Mangy wanted to do was get inside, hit the toilet for one last heave, and slump onto his bed for a long sleep, let the belly woes work their stabbing way without his brain for stretch, yet somewhere in the midst of his prime directive was a savoring of the opportunity to cut the elocution lesson short, he could likely tear up a page or two without the fishy nausea getting the best of him, so he hurried through the kitchen and burst into the living room which was familiarly candlelit, papers stacked in a neat pile on the coffee table but strikingly different in it being entirely devoid of life.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *'Slag' is a novel steeped in my hometown of Lawrence, Massachusetts, where as a youth I roamed the streets in shadows of ancient factories that produced only bittersweet memories. Human desperation and inhumanity to one another are themes that influence all of my work which I temper to the best of my ability with a comedic dose of hope. 'Slag' is a deeply American tale with gratitude and apologies to William Faulkner, Willa Cather, John Updike, and John Cheever.*

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** Terence Patrick Hughes writes plays that have been produced around the country and internationally. The New York Times noted that his work "...explores heavy subject matter with humorous dialogue and strong characters". 'Slag' is his first novel. Perhaps the Times would like to say something kind about it, too. Born in Lawrence, MA, Hughes, his wife, and two children live in Woodstock, NY.

