

A NOVEL

RONNIE AND LENNIE

A NOVEL BY
HERB SCHULTZ



BORN
TOGETHER.
TIED
TOGETHER.
UNTIL THEY
BROKE APART.

RONNIE
AND
LENNIE

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Connie tallied the dinner bill for the two couples seated in the booth by the window facing the gravel parking lot and the lightly trafficked highway. The full amber moon rose over the Louisiana Army Ammunition Plant, three fingers at arm's length above the hills on the horizon beyond. She set the green and white slip of paper bearing the circled figure "\$9.58" in the center of the table face down. The men smoked Chesterfield Kings while their wives finished eating their sundaes – one hot fudge, the other butterscotch. No one reached for the bill.

"Can I get you anything else?" Connie asked in a soft, friendly accent cultivated as a young girl growing up in rural North Carolina.

The woman eating the butterscotch sundae replied, "Water, please."

"Yes, ma'am." Connie turned around, felt a contraction in her abdomen, and stood dumbfounded for a moment as a flood of amniotic fluid rushed down her legs onto the linoleum floor. The two women who were sitting by the outside edge of the booth pressed in against their husbands, recoiling from the splash of broken water. Another waitress ran over to Connie and helped her into a chair. The owner of the Dew Drop Inn Diner, Socrates Nicolopoulos looked up from his perch by the cash register where he had been listening to Eisenhower's 1954 State of the Union address, just as Ike declared "we take

into full account our great and growing number of nuclear weapons and the most effective means of using them against an aggressor if they are needed to preserve our freedom.”

Connie wasn't due for another month. For weeks the other waitresses at the diner had urged her to quit working and get off her feet lest she risk complications. Connie was carrying twins, a piece of information she acquired during the only prenatal examination she could afford. The doctor had reported hearing two beating hearts in her belly. A single girl living far from family, Connie was simultaneously excited and frightened by the prospect of having twins.

Within minutes of splashdown, Connie was lying in the back of Soc's Studebaker Land Cruiser, huffing and puffing as the old man hurried along Highway 163 to the home of a midwife Connie knew in Taylortown. The Land Cruiser, a brick of a vehicle, absorbed the jolts of the bumps in the road helping to keep the twins inside throughout the 30 minute ride – one that felt more like three hours to Connie. Soc pushed the Land Cruiser to its mechanical limits along Highway 163, jogging hard to the right onto Highway 527 through Koran and on into Taylortown.

The birthing process was not going well. Jennie-Belle, Connie's friend and a part-time midwife took a break from coaching to call Dr. Emile Brochard, a backwoods surgeon willing to attend to the types who couldn't or wouldn't seek care from the conventional medical community. Jennie-Belle urged Dr. Brochard in the strongest possible way – “Now!” – to make the trip from Shreveport. From what Jennie-Belle could surmise from reaching into Connie's womb with her tiny hand, something most unusual was going on there.

The first appearance of one of the twins was a left foot abruptly thrust out. Dr. Brochard coaxed out the right foot and began to extract the infant. Connie bore down and screamed an obscenity. The doctor reported, "One of them is a boy, my dear. Keep squeezing." Expecting the baby to slide out easily now that half his body was revealed, the doctor was shocked to see what appeared to be a third arm on the body. Brochard scrambled to assess the situation and over the next several hours struggled to maneuver the twins into a position to get them out safely, while trying to protect Connie. He was about to undertake a risky emergency Caesarean section when Connie grunted one last time with all her remaining energy, forcing the two boys out single file.

Upon witnessing their conjoined condition – what he thought to be a third arm was actually a band of flesh – Dr. Brochard suggested to the weary Connie the notion of letting the babies go. He mumbled some remarks about the life-long difficulties that would dog the twins, and their single mother, and insinuated that perhaps the best way forward would be to euthanize the boys, before attachments could be made, before anyone else could get involved. No one would cast blame. No one besides those now present in the midwife's home would ever know the particulars. Dr. Brochard confided that he often took care of situations like this for the poor, unwed women and young girls in this part of Louisiana.

Before Connie could absorb the concept and evaluate the offer, let alone answer, Jennie-Belle asked her if she had given any thought to names she might want to give her brand new twin boys. Connie replied in a monotone after a few seconds, "Yes, Jennie. Ronnie on the right, and Lennie on the left." She

chose a mnemonic to keep the boys' names straight. Connie gazed upon the two pinkish babies joined at the chest by a band of flesh, its shape and diameter about the same as one of their tiny arms. Joined at the chest but in every other way, apparently normal. Dr. Brochard cleaned up, folded his black leather bag, gave some perfunctory orders to Jennie-Belle and left the ramshackle house. It was a warm night for January 4.

Eight months earlier Connie was frantically packing a few possessions in preparation to leave Las Vegas for good. She would never return. Too much pain, too much danger.

Connie worked as a cocktail waitress at the brand new Sahara Hotel which had opened in October 1952 on the former site of the Club Bingo, once a fixture in Vegas since opening in the mid-Forties. Howard Hughes was spotted at the Club Bingo on more than one occasion, drinking and dancing into the late evening hours with one or another ingénue. Connie came to Las Vegas from her hometown of Statesberry, North Carolina to chase dreams and escape the grip of small town despair. Her dreams of wealth, fame, glamour and fabulous living were in large part inspired by her over-exposure to romance movies, glossy women's magazines, and those new TV programs. She was drawn to game shows like *Queen for a Day* where run-of-the-mill contestants could win fabulous prizes.

Connie lived with her Aunt Vera – her mother's sister – who was amused by Connie's infatuation with movie stars and celebrities, and although Vera tried to keep Connie's head from rising too far into the clouds, she indulged her aspirations. "Your father named you right, Constance," Vera would remark when young Connie begged for the hundredth time for ticket money to see the latest Hollywood romance or new John Wayne movie playing at the Orpheum. "You're a constant pain

in the ass.” Connie loved John Wayne and his cool authority, refusing to believe the actor’s real first name was the feminine “Marion.”

Besides a trip to New York City she took with her aunt when she was eight years old, Connie had never traveled more than 100 miles away from her hometown. She went to a Catholic elementary school – St. Peter’s and Paul’s, where the students were ridiculed as “The Mounds” by their public-school peers – through third grade, after which Vera could no longer afford to pay the tuition. Connie was not a good student. She struggled to get C’s in most subjects, except reading where exams placed her several grade-levels above her age. She dropped out of high-school in her junior year when she was told by a doctor, erroneously, that she was pregnant. Although her sexual activity was limited to giving a hand-job to a boyfriend in the senior class, Connie believed the diagnosis. In reality she suffered from an ovarian cyst that was successfully removed by a specialist in Charlotte.

Through the help of Vera’s friend who worked as a cook at the Chat-a-While Diner, Connie received a job waiting tables. Connie credited her advanced aptitude for reading for her ability to remember customers’ orders without writing down a thing, even when she waited on a table of six where each patron ordered a meal different from the others, and each order came with a special request – no onions, extra mayo, no ice, lots of ice. Furthermore, she remembered the favorite dishes of all the regular customers. In appreciation for this special treatment she might receive a ten percent tip instead of the standard six. Connie succeeded in her job and accepted her mundane life in Statesberry, but she was not content. She

entertained some boyfriends, mostly half-wits who patronized the diner after long nights of drinking, but Vera interfered whenever she thought her niece was behaving recklessly. Restlessness grew, but a sense of direction was slow to form.

One hot Saturday afternoon while getting a perm at Crisella's II Beauty Shop, Connie read a story in *Parade Magazine* about the explosive growth and unparalleled opportunity emerging in Las Vegas and decided right there, in the midst of the chemical reaction churning in her auburn hair, to quit downtrodden Statesberry for the chance to make it big in, as *Parade* called it, "Glitter Gulch." Two weeks later she got a ride out of Statesberry from one of her fellow waitresses at the Chat-a-While diner on Main Street to a bus stop near Interstate 40, leaving behind an invisibly distraught aunt. Connie would at last escape from rural North Carolina to a place where social status was not measured by how many head of hogs one owned.

After enduring a horrendous, three-day cross-country bus ride that cost her most of her savings, Connie approached Vegas feeling apprehensive, even a bit remorseful. Only now, with pockets nearly-empty did she begin to contemplate the risks. Spotting an amorphously-shaped sign bidding “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas,” Connie’s disposition improved. Within hours of arriving, she easily found an affordable small studio apartment, and moved in the next day, fortuitously the first of the month. After stowing her belongings into the closet and stocking the refrigerator with a few groceries, she walked down The Strip. Connie bought a copy of *Fabulous Las Vegas Magazine* and was excited to see an ad announcing the opening of the new Sahara Hotel. According to the ad, any person interested in working at the Sahara and possessing the appropriate qualifications was encouraged to make an appointment with the Personnel Manager. “Ask for extension 6800,” the ad directed. Connie had all the right qualifications for the position of Vegas cocktail waitress: long shapely legs, a good figure, a pretty face that could be made better with make-up, and the kind of boobs every gambling gentleman admires – sizable, yet in proper proportion to the rest of her body. And she had experience waiting tables, another plus. The matron who watched over the girls issued Connie a tight, glittery one-piece outfit and told her to show up on October 6 – the day before the grand opening. Crowds

exceeding the casino executives' most optimistic estimates descended upon the \$5.5 million Sahara Hotel and Casino – “The Jewel of the Desert” – to wager, drink, dance, cavort, and maybe spot a celebrity or two. That first month, the Sahara hired entertainer and former scarecrow Ray Bolger for a handsome \$22,500 a week. Connie wasn't compensated quite that lavishly, but the tips she earned in a single evening schlepping cocktails to “rounders” dwarfed the most she had ever earned during a long week serving omelets and hash for crotchety geezers and picky old bags at the Chat-a-While Diner back in Statesberry. Connie wrote letters to her friends back home contrasting the vitality and excitement of Vegas with the boredom and limitations of Statesberry, thinly disguising the arrogance of superiority for having had the nerve to get out.

Rounders were Vegas night-owls who adhered to upside-down schedules: drinking and gambling deep into the evening hours, eating dinner when normal people eat breakfast, and sleeping during day, aided by the extra-thick drapes designed to block the brilliant Vegas sunlight that the hotel thoughtfully installed in guest rooms facing east. As a new cocktail waitress working the graveyard hours Connie met a lot of rounders, and she discovered they tend to tip more generously than the midday gamblers, most of whom were inexperienced vacationers who took losses very hard. On a cold, wet Wednesday November evening well past midnight, Connie waited on a particular rounder named Lou who was playing several simultaneous hands of blackjack, and winning on a majority of them. Lou had a system for keeping track of the state of the cards in the shoe, and his chip stack seemed to bear out the viability of it. Part of his system required Lou to remain stone sober

while appearing to drink heavily and acting as though he were a bit out of control. Lou needed a cocktail waitress to substitute plain soda water and ice for the gin-and-tonics he ordered frequently. Connie didn't understand the ruse, but she complied anyway and was rewarded by Lou with generous tips. She watched Lou split hands and double-down, take hits and stay pat. Routinely, on eight of ten hands Lou was a winner; Connie was impressed.

Hours later, Connie arrived with yet another ersatz gin-and-tonic, and as she set down the drink Lou caressed her back and patted her partially exposed ass cheek. She froze for a moment, a combination of shock and excitement. Lou flipped a \$100 chip across the backs of his fingers, then held it up and said, "You're my lucky charm, babe. Keep 'em coming." Connie at first was unsure whether Lou was serious, but when he nodded his head toward the chip and gave her a wink that said "take it," she accepted it demurely and continued to fuel Lou with his phony drinks.

Other gamblers at the table marveled at Lou's good luck, and clapped heartily whenever he made blackjack or the dealer busted. Connie was standing directly behind him when all four hands he was playing held an ace and a face card. She nearly dropped the tray of drinks she was carrying when a noisy whoop of amazed applause erupted from his fellow players as well as the small crowd that had formed around the table. The pit boss trained his undivided attention at Lou. As Connie handed the soda water to Lou, he took hold of her wrist, pulled her toward him so her head was next to his, and whispered, "Meet me at the Timbuktu bar across the street when you get off work, doll – I gotta leave now." Then to the people standing around

the blackjack table, Lou loudly bellowed with a grin and a slur, “Why di’n’t youse people tell me iz past five – I gotta get ready fer work.”

Before moving to Las Vegas in the early Forties, Lou Vigorito grew up in a cold, dismal town located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, hating everything about the place. When he was just a year old, Lou's mother died after her car slid off the road into an embankment during a vicious snowstorm while returning home from her job as a beautician. Lou's father, who was in the early throes of another weekend-long bender failed to report his wife missing for two days. By the time the police found her vehicle upside-down in a culvert and hidden by a thick, fresh blanket of snow, Lou's mother was completely frozen, her flesh white as porcelain and solid as a Thanksgiving turkey. Poor little Lou accumulated two day's worth of shit in his diaper.

Beginning when Lou was about eight years old, his father beat him regularly and forced him to perform risky tasks like shoveling snow from the roof of their shabby two-story Cape Cod house and testing the strength of the ice on Au Train Lake. When the weather warmed in the spring, the old man would tie a rope around Lou's waist and instruct him to walk across the frozen surface of unknown thickness to a place where he wanted to do some ice fishing. Lou only fell through one time, but he despised his father for placing so little value on his well-being. Perhaps this feeling of ill-will explains how a beer bottle sitting on a shelf in the refrigerator came to contain twelve ounces of lye, and how Lou's father succumbed to the complications of a

burned-out esophagus. Authorities immediately suspected the adolescent Lou substituted the caustic poison for a refreshing beverage. While in police custody, sitting in terror at table in a brightly lit room accompanied by two detectives wearing shoulder holsters over their white dress shirts, he quickly confessed without the benefit of counsel present. Later, at trial Lou testified that it was his father who had poured the lye in the bottle, intending to use it later to clean the bottom of his fishing boat, and that he had mistakenly drunk the contents following a long night spent in the local bars. There was an element of truth to the claim – the man really had ingested the lye after coming home from a long night of drinking – that was corroborated by bartenders from three different establishments. Because the judge had disallowed the introduction of Lou's confession at trial, the prosecution was unable to convince a jury beyond a reasonable doubt without this evidence of his culpability.

Now an orphan, Lou was placed into custody with his father's half-brother Anthony, a quiet, religious old man who genuinely believed he could reform his recalcitrant nephew. He drove Lou to confession each Saturday and church each Sunday, and forced him to become an altar boy, convinced that immersion into Catholicism would mend the youngster's soul. Instead, Uncle Anthony was mortified to receive a telephone call from the pastor informing him that Lou was caught in the sacristy drinking holy wine and eating communion hosts by the handful. Found in his pocket, for he meant to steal it, was a set of shiny bells rung by altar boys at specific moments during the mass.

Despite his good fortune in the lye case, Lou spent the next

decade in six-month to two-year chunks in juvenile detention for lesser crimes like shoplifting, arson, drug-dealing, and simple assault. His longest incarceration was for threatening to set his uncle on fire after he discarded a dozen smutty booklets – sometimes referred to as “Tijuana Bibles,” eight page pulpy cartoons with titles such as “Skippy has a Dream,” “The Kid Sister,” and “Eclipse the Bellhop” – Lou had stashed under a pile of clothes in his closet. Uncle Anthony could not believe such filth existed, and when he paged through one booklet in which Sluggo is depicted having sex with Nancy, he pulled off his belt and tried to thrash Lou with it. Lou retaliated by splashing kerosene on the man’s trousers, and taunting him sadistically with a lighted match. Lou’s uncle pressed charges, and in court he testified emotionally against his nephew; some members of the jury could be seen crying in reaction to the old man’s sobs.

On his way out of jail at 22 years of age following incarceration for the sixth or seventh time, Lou was warned by the newly elected sheriff that if he didn’t reform his ways, his petty infractions would undoubtedly escalate to more severe crimes, and he could expect to spend the choicest years of his life behind bars. In counseling Lou, the sheriff refrained from preaching, condescension, and apocalyptic rhetoric, delivering instead a no-nonsense argument for pursuing a new course immediately. No one had ever spoken to Lou with such genuine conviction and stern compassion. Lou was truly moved, and in defiance of his natural inclination to ignore authority Lou asked for and received the sheriff’s agreement to advise him in the future. When the United States entered the Second World War several months later, the sheriff used his influence at Lou’s request

to secure a waiver from the Army to allow Lou, a repeated youthful offender, to join the ranks. Lou was stationed outside Las Vegas, at what would later come to be named Nellis Air Force Base, where he trained to become a mechanic, eventually working on a maintenance crew repairing vehicles. In his off-hours he learned the craft of poker, at first losing the equivalent of a semester's worth of college tuition before he acquired the skills of a shrewd gambler and won back all that he lost and many times more. After the war ended abruptly with the deployment of a secret weapon developed in the deserts of the American Southwest, Lou remained in Las Vegas to ply his hard-earned trade in the games of chance. He watched the city become an entertainment capital and vacation destination, and as Vegas grew so did Lou's gambling skills. He never had to resort to his back-up plan: working as a grease monkey doing ring-jobs and rebuilding carburetors. Lou had become masterful at counting cards, and he honed the acting skills that many criminals innately possess to appear to be nothing more than genuinely lucky. He even lost on purpose sometimes to obscure his overall winning strategy, drinking heavily and gambling like a fool. He played cards all over town to avoid being singled out as a regular burdened by unwanted scrutiny. After several years as a professional gambler, Lou earned enough to buy a nice house with a swimming pool and two-car garage where he parked his Cadillac 6267x convertible and a stylish Alfa Romeo 6C 2500 that he won from a rich Italian industrialist in a 16-hour marathon of faro. To the casual observer, Lou had come a long way since the days he stumbled around as a directionless teenager committing stupid crimes and wasting time in jail. In many ways, though, successful Las Vegas Lou

was just an older, wiser, more mature version of juvenile delinquent Yooper Lou. Las Vegas Lou blew tidy sums on material pleasures like custom-made shoes and clothing, booze and drugs, trips to Florida and the Caribbean, and talented whores. He put some of his money onto the street and caroused with mid-level members of organized crime. Lou was not above slapping women around and punishing debtors who failed to make timely payments on their usurious loans.

At 6 a.m. when her shift ended, Connie stripped out of her tight, uncomfortable waitress outfit, hung it in her locker, and put on a pair of black Capri pants and a black-and-white dotted shirt that she had left folded on the shelf, unworn since September when the weather turned chillier. She had come to work at the Sahara nine hours earlier dressed in heavy wool slacks and a roomy sweater, but decided to present a sexier image to this attractive gambling man she had just met, and would meet again soon. Walking into the moist, chilly morning air just as the sun rose above the horizon, Connie was reminded again of how upsetting it can be to one's perception of reality upon leaving a windowless casino, brightly lit and constantly noisy, and where time-of-day is a well-kept secret. It was like stepping out of a dark movie theater into the bright sunshine after watching a mid-afternoon matinee. Connie ran across the street to the Timbuktu, a superb example of the tiki bar genre: a Polynesian-themed establishment that served fruity drinks in tall glasses adorned with tiny umbrellas and plastic monkeys. She shook the drizzle out of her hair – longer and straighter now that she decided that the perms she used to get in Statesberry were unstylish – then scanned the dark bar for her mysterious gambler. Lou sat at the far end, drinking a banana daiquiri and chatting up the busty bartender. As Connie approached, Lou's attention was irresistibly drawn toward her nipples, stiff from the November

cold and protruding proudly from beneath her dotted blouse, defying onlookers not to stare.

Lou introduced himself, and when Connie extended her right hand Lou took it gently and kissed it. Connie noticed the sizable diamond ring on his pinky finger. Lou had a drink waiting for Connie from which she took a large swig to calm her nerves.

“You know,” Lou said, “I’ve never been dealt four hands of blackjack at the same time before – that had to happen because of you. What do you think about that? Do you think you’re my lucky charm?”

Connie turned her head shyly to the side and smiled. “I don’t know – maybe.”

“Maybe. But one thing’s for certain: you are beautiful. There’s no ‘maybe’ about that.”

Connie was blushing, partly over Lou’s smooth compliment and partly from the high concentration of rum that Lou had earlier directed the bartender to mix into Connie’s daiquiri. After finishing a second drink at Lou’s insistence, the couple left the Timbuktu for breakfast at a 24-hour restaurant on the corner. By 10 o’clock the cloud cover thinned down to almost nothing, and a bright sun warmed the morning air considerably. Lou paid the check for the big breakfast he and Connie consumed, and left a very handsome tip of a \$10 chip from the Golden Nugget – unusual anywhere else in America, but in Vegas gambling chips were common currency among the residents who worked on the periphery of the casinos.

“Let’s go for a ride, doll. How ‘bout it?”

Lou and Connie embarked on a long pleasure drive in his Alfa. She had never before heard of Alfa Romeo nor seen a car

like the six-cylinder 2500, with its long, sleek hood and rakish grille. Lou drove it as though he were racing in the 24 Heures du Mans, speeding across the long stretches of open road, and accelerating into curves, pulling more than one G and nearly squeezing breakfast back out of Connie's stomach.

"Would you believe I won this car playing faro? I don't even like the game. I had to do a bit of engine work on it though, but now it runs like a pantera. I'm pretty good with a wrench, believe it or not."

Connie nodded nervously, unfamiliar with faro and the meaning of the word "pantera," but also stressed by Lou's driving. Lou stopped at the Hoover Dam before crossing into Arizona. Connie was happy to step out and stand on terra firma for awhile. Lou casually wrapped his arm around Connie's waist. "Don't want you to fall over the edge, babe," chuckled Lou, pretending that his grasp was strictly for her safety. The couple walked out to the middle of the dam and once there Connie closed her eyes, made a wish and threw a \$1 chip 700 feet below into the waters of the Colorado River.

Lou said, "I hope you tossed in that \$100 chip I gave you. Your wish is worth at least that much."

"Are you kidding? It takes me all week to make \$100." Connie studied Lou's face to assess if he was serious. Lou moved behind Connie, placed his beefy mechanic's hands on her hips, and said over her shoulder with an impish grin, "To make a hundred dollars into a hundred and ten dollars – that's work. To make a hundred million into a hundred and ten million, that's inevitable. Think about it."

From the Hoover Dam they went on to visit weird places

like Chloride, Bullhead City and Needles, and then roared down the highway to Lake Havasu. Lou drove down a meandering side road toward the water into the driveway of a large Mediterranean-style house with a deck cantilevered out over the lake. After several minutes inside, Lou came out holding a key attached to what looked like a miniature red pillow but was actually a flotation device in case the key was dropped mistakenly into the lake. Lou told Connie that his friend who owned the lake house, a man who had made a fortune developing small engines for lawn mowers and chain saws, had offered the couple his pleasure boat for a spin. Connie noticed Lou's runny nose and tried not to look directly at it.

Lou treated Connie to a tour of Lake Havasu – actually the same Colorado River molded into standing water by the Parker Dam – racing the boat for long, straight stretches, and slowly exploring inlets and caves. The presence of a bucolic lake surrounded by the red, craggy mountains in the midst of a desert made for a surreal scene. Lou let Connie drive the boat for a bit while he sat next to her, sizing up her assets and smoking cigarettes like a Frenchman, exhaling smoke from his mouth and re-inhaling it through his nostrils. Lou would be the first to admit that he took pleasure in mentoring impressionable young women in the fine arts of eroticism, and he believed Connie would be an apt pupil.

Lou docked the boat and he and Connie returned to the road, speeding along Highway 95 back to Vegas. He drove Connie to her apartment and escorted her to the door, but made no attempt to press her for additional attention. Not at this time. Connie was tired, and Lou was patient. “Thank you so much for a fantastic day, Lou. I really enjoyed it.” She extended

her hand like she had done several hours earlier, expecting him to kiss it. Lou took Connie's hand and pulled her toward him, kissing her softly on the mouth and giving her a look that bordered on a leer. "Connie, my love, I'm so happy you had a good time. I did too. I hope to see you again. Ciao." Lou left no calling card or telephone number – he knew how to find Connie. Thirty minutes later, after a brief shower and bowl of Cheerios, Connie lay naked in bed recalling the details of the day, eventually falling into a deep sleep with the satisfaction of knowing she would be off work for the next two days.

Lou was a dozen years older than Connie by the measure of the calendar, but more than twice as many years beyond her in street savvy. Coming from a small town where her only window into the strange, wonderful, eccentric, complex world beyond the city limits was from the pages of *National Geographic*, Connie was largely oblivious. She was an easy mark for a smoothie like Lou. It took all of six weeks of schmoozing, cajoling and spending from Lou for Connie to move out of her studio apartment and into his house a mile from the Strip. Connie was more than flattered by Lou's advances. Like the stories of glamorous women she read about in her fantasy magazines, Connie believed she had snagged a trophy boyfriend – a rich, worldly, well-dressed, semi-handsome player – who also seemed to be infatuated with her. Naturally then, Connie submitted to his every demand. She maintained Lou's residence, vacuuming the rugs and stocking the cupboards, cleaning the refrigerator and washing windows – all of the standard domestic tasks – in addition to performing her job as a waitress on the night shift at the Sahara. Connie submitted to other types of demands as well. She allowed Lou to photograph her in the nude, and to tie her up and humiliate her, and even on occasion to introduce another man into their sexual relationship. She protested the intrusion by Lou's friend, Artie, a fellow card-player, but Lou ensured her the man only wanted to watch. Artie would sit quietly in the dark and rub himself while Lou made

love to Connie, but his presence brought on an anxiety that ruined the experience for her. The second time Artie came to visit, he left his perch in the dark corner of the bedroom and got down on all fours like a dog, surprising Connie by sucking her toes. Connie laughed nervously causing Lou to stop fornicating and scream in her face, “Shut up bitch!” spattering her face with spittle. From then on, Connie found it impossible to get aroused with Lou; the toe-sucking had transformed from a silly oddity into a symbol of Lou’s aggressiveness – a trait that Connie began to witness with greater frequency. Still, she knew she loved Lou and would do anything to make him happy. What she didn’t know was that when she was breaking her back at the Sahara, Lou was banging cocktail waitresses, coat-check girls, and young tarts in from small Midwestern towns trying to make it as showgirls.

Like many relationships between young, naive servile women and their older, promiscuous, pussy-addled men, the one between Connie and Lou hit the rocks eventually. In mid-May, Connie announced with a combination of reluctance and hopeful enthusiasm that she was pregnant, only to be assaulted by Lou who blackened her eye and berated her for being stupid. He bolted the house for a four-day bender of drinking, gambling and fucking. Sporting an ugly shiner, Connie was unable to wait tables. She sat around blankly watching TV, eating potato chips and ice cream, and dreading Lou’s return. On a night following a new moon, when a thin, bright edge first appears, Lou stumbled into the living room a rumpled wreck, startling Connie.

“Baby, I never meant to hurt you. You’re my lucky charm – I love you so much. I can see now how great you are. I hope you

can forgive me.” Still not completely sober, but sounding contrite, Lou spoke haltingly.

Not knowing what to expect, but fearing the worst, Connie was relieved to hear the emotional apology, and, truly moved, she responded, “Oh Lou, Lou, I love you. Please forgive me for not being more understanding.” She began to cry.

“You’re the best, lover. I’m gonna take you to the best show in town. I’m gonna spare no expense, Miss Connie. C’m’ere, baby.” Connie embraced Lou who smelled of bourbon and, faintly, of perfume. Or was it pussy? Connie chose not to think about it.

Lou slumped down in a leather club chair, one of a pair he bought for several hundred dollars from a hotel that was changing its lobby motif from Art Deco to Space-Age Modern, and lit a cigarette. “About your problem, Con, I got a plan. Tomorrow, we’ll drive out to a doctor I heard of in Pahrump who can do a procedure. Y’know, an abortion. I’ll pay for it, of course. Only take a day.” Lou smiled as though he had just proclaimed Connie the winner of a year’s supply of Eskimo Pies. Before Lou could continue describing the offer, Connie interrupted, stating she wouldn’t go through with it, imploring him to marry her instead and help raise their baby. Lou stood up abruptly and pushed her to the ground, calling her an ungrateful bitch and a white-trash whore, among other awful names. He tried to kick her in the abdomen, but Connie rolled over and took the blow in the back. Lou stumbled and fell to the floor. Connie ran into the bathroom and locked the door. A large, dark, ugly bruise had already started to form on her back.

Before heading out again into the blinding Nevada morning

sun, Lou screamed at Connie through the bathroom door to pack up and get out of the house by the end of the day. He also informed her that he would be speaking with his pals at the Sahara.

“Your days of waitressing there are over, babe. And that goes for the Flamingo, Desert Inn, the Thunderbird, the Slipper and the Sands.” Lou ticked off as many casinos he could think of in the midst of his angry, sarcastic tirade. “They all talk to each other, doll – about cheaters and lowlifes like you.” He stormed out the door, slamming it so hard he pulled a muscle in his arm.

Connie sat on the floor against the toilet bowl and started sobbing like a five-year-old who had just seen her father back the family car over her new puppy dog. She hadn’t been in Vegas long enough to make any good friendships. She had no marketable skills beyond carrying ten drinks on a platter while wearing high heels and an outfit that crawled up the crack of her ass no matter how often she adjusted it. At the same time, Connie could not bring herself to slink back to Statesberry after having puffed up her lifestyle in letters she sent to the girls back home at the Chat-a-While Diner. Connie knew there was only one thing lower than being a waitress at a diner – and that was to be a former waitress who left the diner for grander opportunities and upon failing miserably begged to come back to her old job. Fuck it, she thought. Even if the trail of stupid letters she wrote didn’t exist to embarrass her, she wouldn’t go back to North Carolina. Not after getting a taste of the fast life.

Connie decided to rent a studio at the apartment building where she lived after first arriving in town, and after that she

would try to land a job at another casino. And if Lou was telling the truth, and they all blackballed her, then she would settle for waiting on tables at one of the many restaurants serving \$1.99 shrimp and steak dinners. She resolved to survive somehow. Fishing around under the bed for her suitcase, she pulled out another one instead. Inside the brown leather valise had to be \$10,000 in cash and chips, and a silver pistol with a pearl handle. Connie froze for a moment. Then she began the process of reassessing the situation. Only ten minutes earlier, she had been girding herself to make a go of it in Vegas despite Lou's threats – illogically forgetting she was pregnant. Who was she kidding? Even if she landed another job, in six months she'd get the boot. Then she'd be a homeless, out-of-work single mother in a town where none of these characteristics was highly prized.

It only took Connie another sixty seconds of staring at the loot for her to change her mind completely. She would take the money, cash in the chips, stow the gun, and head off to some new, yet-unchosen destination. The money would ease the uncertainty. In the matter of a moment, Connie's fascination with the glamour of Vegas contracted significantly. She departed Lou's house, but not before turning on all the faucets, stopping up all the drains, unplugging the refrigerator, and dumping corn flakes into the toilets.

Dressed in a stylish a Christian Dior outfit Lou gave her for Christmas, Connie arrived by cab at the Flamingo, its huge cylindrical tower brightly lit in pink neon. She played a few hands at blackjack and lost on just about every one. She wondered how Lou won so often in contrast to the other gamblers at the table who seemed to make all the wrong decisions. After about an hour, convinced no one was suspicious of her, Connie went to the cage to redeem the \$500 in chips she scooped from Lou's valise. "Congratulations on your winnings, ma'am," said the polite young man behind the screen as he stacked her chips into equal piles and counted out the equivalent of \$500 in fives, tens and twenties. From the Flamingo, Connie proceeded to Fremont Street where she walked onto a used car lot. A slight man wearing a plaid jacket with very wide lapels strolled out from the brightly lit office and greeted Connie. Unlike most customers in the market for a used car, Connie appeared anxious to complete the transaction quickly, offering the list price of \$400 in cash for a 1939 LaSalle. She didn't even take it for a test drive. Connie was determined to leave Las Vegas without delay. So once she concluded the La Salle would be a satisfactory vehicle, she decided to buy it. When Connie did not hesitate or haggle, the salesman tried to sell her a more expensive, late model Cadillac. She politely declined his offer to take \$100 off the sticker price, partly because she could not justify the purchase even at the reduced

price, but also because she resented the way he glanced down her blouse whenever she bent over to inspect the La Salle. She noticed him doing it several times, and each time she flashed a confronting look at him, the salesman quickly averted his eyes and presented a face of innocence and pseudo-professionalism, confident he had escaped detection.

Connie drove off the lot and out of Las Vegas at 6 p.m. just as the rounders were awakening to the dual cravings of coffee and slot machines. Being a rounder herself, Connie had no trouble driving well into the night, finally calling it quits around 2 a.m. She pulled the La Salle into the parking lot of the Three Corners motor lodge in Shivwits, Utah. She had hoped to finish her first night away from Vegas in St. George, a slightly bigger town down the road, but she got a bit confused in Littlefield, Arizona and proceeded on an oblique north-bound angle. No matter. She would be on the road again in another eight hours or so, heading east. She had no hard plans, nothing firm in mind about a final destination, other than it would not be Statesberry. Vegas had given Connie a taste of big city living, but it was patently artificial. She could see it now. The entire economy was driven solely by gambling, and the shallow culture consisted of glitzy shows, garish entertainers, big bands and lounge singers. Literature, theater, music, classical thinking – all of these were absent from the fast-growing city. Las Vegas was dotted with dozens of casinos but hosted no institutions of higher education. Years would pass before the University of Nevada would finally establish a presence in Las Vegas. The soul of any city is its architecture, and for Las Vegas it consisted of a hodge-podge of styles, none of which existed in harmony with its desert surroundings. The buildings were

constructed of cheap materials, like the minarets of the Sahara which were fashioned from poured concrete and rebar, and looked like a structure from a miniature golf course blown up twenty times in size.

Connie imagined an urbane, progressive city like New York or Chicago with its populace of artists, musicians, actors, educators and literati to be the real cosmopolitan deal; a town where she could grow and prosper, gain experience, elevate her mind, meet a better class of people.

The desk clerk at the Three Corners Motor Lodge turned to a page in a large hard-bound ledger for Connie to sign after she agreed to pay the \$12 rate for a room for one night – a price she considered steep for the quality and location of the lodge. However, it was late and she was in possession of nearly ten grand, less the price of the LaSalle, a tankful of gas, and some pretty good chili in Mesquite. On the page dated May 19, 1953 she scribbled “Connie Smyth,” choosing a common surname for anonymity with an uncommon spelling to reduce suspicion that she might be seeking anonymity. Connie kept close the suitcase containing the money and the revolver that once belonged to Lou. As she walked to room 3 just a few paces from the office, the neon “No” preceding the illuminated “Vacancy” lit up and the front office went dark. Connie wondered if the desk clerk was one of those crazy Mormon polygamists living in Utah she had read about in *Parade Magazine*. Her first real relationship with a man had crumbled so quickly and so thoroughly that she could hardly imagine how a plural marriage could be sustained given all the elements of jealousy, suspicion, and rivalry.

As soon as her head pressed into the musty-smelling pillow,

Connie fell into a sweet, deep sleep, more satisfying than any she had had in the past several weeks living with the frenetic Lou.

She had a dream. Connie is taking a shower. The soft, warm water is delightful and arousing. She drops the bar of soap she was holding, a cake in the shape of a round disk, and despite her best efforts she cannot pick it up. The bar slips away with each attempted grasp. Soap bubbles run into her eyes. Connie is suddenly very thirsty. A man pulls aside the shower curtain demanding angrily to know where his tool box is. His head is enclosed in a cage. Connie's thirst intensifies. She resists turning over the toolbox which is now in the shower with her, water bouncing off the steel lid. The man reaches for the box, which opens and spills its contents: corn flakes. Connie and the man, now without the cage on his head, laugh.

Just then, Connie woke up to a bright flash that lit the sky for several seconds. She assumed it was lightning, although she remembered the forecast had called for clear weather for as far into the future as the meteorologist could reliably predict. Connie went to the bathroom and like a camel gulped water directly from the faucet. She returned to bed and immediately fell back to sleep, arising reluctantly at 8 a.m. to a glorious brightness. She threw up, took a shower, vaguely recalling the dream, and prepared to check out.

As she handed over the room key to the first-shift desk clerk, he noted out of the blue, "They shot off another test last night. At Yucca. I hope it didn't wake you up, ma'am. I heard on the radio that there might be some fallout for us downwinders."

Judging from the confused look on Connie's face, the desk clerk elaborated, "The A-bomb. The army tests 'em at Yucca

in Nevada. Sometimes the radioactive fallout blows this way. I heard on the radio that this one might be a big one. For fallout, that is.”

Connie was well-aware that the US Government conducted atomic bomb tests in the desert outskirts of Vegas, but she never really paid much attention to them. On at least three occasions she was assigned to work a private party on the roof of the Sahara, delivering cocktails and canapés to revelers waiting in anticipation to witness an atomic blast and its signature mushroom cloud. Always someone in the party would announce that the detonation, like the New Year was imminent. Connie and the others on the roof would look out to the east and stare in awe – speechless – at the bright flash of green-and-orange over the horizon. And then just as the crowd began to settle back into conversation, a loud roar like the sonic boom from hell shuddered over them, shaking glasses and bottles and the nerves of the first-time observers.

Influenced by a barrage of cold-war propaganda, she was satisfied that the government had things under control. Certainly officials wouldn’t test these bombs if doing so posed a risk to American citizens. Besides, she was old enough in 1945 to appreciate how the atomic bomb decisively ended the war with the much-reviled Nips, so if blowing up some bombs was necessary to protect and defend America from the looming threats posed by Red China, North Korea, Communist Russia, or any other country that tried to step out of line, so be it.

“What’s a downwinder?” she asked, pretty sure of the answer but compelled to ask anyway as a courtesy to the friendly clerk who seemed to be hungry for conversation.

“You know, people who live downwind of the fallout,” the

clerk responded brightly as he hung the room key on a hook labeled “3” on the wall behind him.

“Mm-hmm. Well, I slept really good last night. Shitwits is a real peaceable town.”

“Shivwits, ma’am.”

Connie folded the receipt and jammed it into her pocketbook. She carried the luggage to the La Salle, spurning assistance from the clerk, and drove east onto US 91. It would take her through St. George, her original destination the prior evening, then onto Route 9 where she would intersect with Route 89 in Mount Carmel Junction, and on to Denver. From there she would plot a course back toward the East Coast.

As she approached St. George city limits, Connie was stopped by a phalanx of men – she assumed they were men – each covered head to toe in some sort of white protective uniform, complete with a built-in gasmask. Their eyes were not visible behind the dark glass. Each carried a boxy device, and as she approached them in her car she could hear clicking sounds. One faceless uniformed figure indicated its desire for her to stop. It stepped up, waved what looked like a microphone over the La Salle, and said, “Ma’am, may I suggest you proceed to the parking lot ahead and have your car washed down. There’s no charge.”

“What’s going on?” asked Connie.

“Nothing to be worried about. No danger. We just want to eliminate any possible radioactive fallout from yesterday’s test. It’s really just a precaution. I mean a formality. Really, it’s a free car wash.”

Connie decided to take up the offer. The ride from Vegas had caused a thick coating of dust to gather on the old La Salle. And as she thought about it, there did seem to be even more dust that had accumulated on the hood overnight.

After the cursory wash-down, Connie pulled into a roadside diner and wolfed down a three-egg, bacon, onion and cheddar omelet, hash browns, rye toast, grape-fruit juice, and two cups of black coffee. Then a sweet roll and another cup of coffee. She ordered a BLT and slaw to go.

Connie continued onto Route 9 toward Zion National Park furrowing her brow imperceptibly after a sign for Virgin, Utah caught her attention. The switchbacks in Zion were so severe that Connie had to pull the La Salle over to the side of the road so she could vomit up the massive breakfast she had consumed only an hour earlier. The car-sickness induced by the La Salle with its soft, bouncy suspension continued for many more miles. Head spinning from nausea, Connie turned right at Mount Carmel Junction onto Route 89 heartened by the prospect that by the end of the day she would be in Denver, Colorado, the Mile High City.

Connie pressed on, driving past Bitter Springs, Cedar Ridge, The Gap. She spotted a sign pointing the way to Tuba City, then another sign: 50 miles to Flagstaff – as in Arizona. Connie had driven four hours in the wrong direction. But when she evaluated the situation, she was not that upset. After all, with the rush to cash in chips, and buy a car she hadn't really formulated a solid plan for moving east from Vegas. "Flagstaff, Arizona?" she wondered. "Why does that sound familiar? Flagstaff, Arizona, don't forget Winona. That's it." The Bobby Troup song popularized by Nat King Cole reminded Connie that Route 66 runs through Flagstaff, offering a superior passage from Chicago to L.A. "The highway that's the best."

Connie pulled into the next gas station and spent a few dollars on food, antacids, and a good quality Arizona/New Mexico roadmap, then bedded down in Flagstaff. She struggled to shove the song out of her head. "Get your kicks on Route 66" played over and over again, and the more she tried to ignore it, the more it ran around in her mind like a demon. She didn't fall asleep until 2 a.m.

A couple days later, Connie arrived in Amarillo taking eight hours to drive 200 miles through carwash-like rain. Exhausted, she checked into the Lone Star Inn, turned on the television to the Six O'clock News, and flung herself onto the bed. Weatherman Biff Nimbus forecast another 24 hours of torrential rain for the tri-state area. Connie decided to take tomorrow off from driving and watch TV in her air-conditioned room instead.

On the *Today Show* with host Dave Garroway, Estelle Parsons reported a puff piece on the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach which would be having its grand opening next year. The 11 story, 554-room hotel would showcase a 17,000 square foot lobby with a bow-tie marble floor and a two-story spiral staircase to nowhere. Garroway rolled his eyes at such extravagance, playing the straight man to Estelle's role as women's editor, a member of the cast also known as the "Today Girl" who covers fashion and lifestyle. She referred to Miami Beach as America's Riviera while footage rolled of Joey Bishop, Peter Lawford and Dean Martin playing touch football on the pure white sands, the rolling waves foaming up in the background.

Before Estelle finished reporting on the 250 cabanas surrounding the 6,500 square foot pool, and the La Ronde Supper Club with its hydraulically controlled dance floor, Connie decided right then Miami Beach would become her final destination. Thinking more about it, Connie rationalized that New York wasn't right for her. Surely, living in or near Manhattan would be expensive, and the winter weather would be cold and windy. She certainly hated cold weather. But more significantly, she harbored a fear of New York, a frightening sense that life moves too fast there, that in a place of millions the individual

is irrelevant and goes unnoticed. There seemed to be little compassion for the needy and helpless. A person could easily become forgotten in Manhattan.

Connie recalled the time Vera dragged her to Madison Square Garden as a child in 1940 to hear a speech by Wendell Willkie, the Republican presidential candidate running against Franklin Roosevelt who was pursuing a third term. Vera supported Willkie on the strength of his opposition to FDR's New Deal programs, in particular the Tennessee Valley Authority. Connie didn't care about politics and she didn't really know what the TVA was nor did she understand her aunt's obsessive opposition to it, but for the entire train ride to New York, Vera rambled on anyway. It was a cold November evening when they arrived in Pennsylvania Station. Connie had never felt a more vicious winter wind than that blowing in from New York harbor swirling up through the canyons of Manhattan's broad avenues. The day of the speech, Vera and Connie rode an elevator to the eighty-sixth floor of the Empire State Building and later had lunch at a Horn and Hardart's Automat on Broadway. Connie was fascinated by the rows of little glass doors behind which sandwiches and cakes waited patiently to be retrieved and devoured. After a brief rest back at their hotel where they enjoyed TV programs unavailable in North Carolina, Vera and Connie took a cab to the Garden.

Right in the middle of Willkie's speech, a man pulled a gun with the apparent intention of shooting the candidate. Panic ensued as men nearby wrestled the would-be assassin to the ground. Connie became separated from Vera for no more than a minute, but during that instant Connie experienced a sense of panic that haunted her into adulthood.

In her motel room in Amarillo, recalling the panic of being lost in Madison Square Garden in 1940, frozen amid screaming partisans, Connie became convinced that she should not settle in New York City. So the next day, she diverted from Route 66 and headed south toward Dallas, and beyond to Miami Beach.

Just as Connie crossed the Dallas city limits she was startled by a loud screech coming from the front right wheel and the cloud of acrid smoke that emanated shortly thereafter. She seriously thought the car might explode any second. She wrestled the car to the curb, and made a call from a payphone to the first auto shop listed in the Yellow Pages. The owner of the shop knew customers behaved in this manner, and cleverly named the establishment AAAAA Auto Repair. He dispatched a fat, sweaty mechanic in greasy overalls to tow Connie and her LaSalle with the frozen wheel. The man reeked of the pungent, somewhat nauseating smell of old, worn-out automobile fluids. Connie had no idea that was the source of the odor. She was compelled to breathe through her mouth the entire ride.

“Well, ma’am, this is how it is. Your brake seized up because the pad is all worn down to nothin’,” explained the owner, to whom Connie responded with a tentative nod. “No doubt, all your brakes is worn down, and that ain’t safe. I couldn’t let you drive away without fixin’ all four of ‘em.”

“I see.” Connie felt intimidated by the surroundings of the garage: a cacophony of banging and hissing and machine-gun sounds produced by air hammers, and the leering stares from the grease monkeys. “How much will that cost?”

“It’s not safe to drive on bad brakes. What if you was doin’ 60 on the highway and the wheel suddenly seizes up and stops

turnin'? Maybe it even flies off!" From the man's dramatic presentation, Connie knew the cost would be substantial.

"How long will it take?"

"Shouldn't take more than a couple hours. And I'll give you our special discount 'cause you're doin' all four. \$100, tax included."

Connie straightened up. "But I only paid \$400 for the whole car," she complained, immediately disliking the whininess of her voice. Before the shop owner could sling some more shit on her, she caved in. "Oh, never mind. Just go ahead, please."

"That's smart thinkin' ma'am. No sense takin' chances." After an awkward pause, the owner said with some excitement, "Y'know what? Since this is gonna take a couple a hours, how'd you like to see a movie while we fix you up? Free of charge, on me. I'll have one of the boys drive you to the theater. It's just down the street a few blocks. You can catch the matinee."

Connie's mood lifted. She had almost completed the rationalization process justifying her snap decision, satisfied that it was smart to get the La Salle into safe driving condition. Would she really suffer that much from spending \$100? Forget about it, she thought. In another couple weeks, she would be in Miami Beach with most of the \$10,000 still in her possession.

The same pungent man who earlier towed Connie and her LaSalle drove her to the Palladium Theater where to her pleasant surprise, a new John Wayne movie, *Trouble Along the Way*, was showing. Donna Reed co-starred. The poster in the glass showcase mounted on the building by the entrance exclaimed, "That all-man 'Quiet Man' has a new kind of dame to tame!" The movie was a departure for Wayne who portrayed a divorced football coach in a movie with no violence and more

than a bit of wry humor. Connie enjoyed the movie, keeping in mind some advice from Wayne's character, Steve Aloysius Williams: "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing."

The shop owner was waiting for Connie when she came out of the theater.

"How'd you like the picture, ma'am?"

"Very much. Different, funny. I'm a big John Wayne fan and this movie wasn't like his other ones."

"Glad you liked it. About your car – we're still workin' on it. The mechanic I put on the job never came back from lunch. Told one of the other guys he was quittin'. Just like that. Can you believe it? So I'm a bit behind, but don't you worry, you'll be on the road before dinner time."

Connie exhaled in exasperation. Then, "I'm in no hurry." Back at the shop, she took a seat on a hard, steel folding chair in the waiting room and paged through some decades-old issues of *Popular Mechanics*. Scanning an article, she wondered – would there really be flying cars in 1980?

At 5, the mechanic lowered the hydraulic lift and backed the LaSalle out of the garage. Connie paid the bill with five \$20 bills she kept hidden in her bra, and bade the owner farewell. She was anxious to get back on the road, to make up for lost time and narrow the distance between her and Miami Beach. She bought a sandwich to go and headed out on US 80, hoping to get as far as Shreveport before calling it a night.

Completing another long day of driving, Connie pulled into yet another roadside motor lodge, familiar for its low-slung profile and bank of closely spaced doors facing the highway. In front of each room was a molded plastic chair. After registering for a single night, Connie parked the LaSalle and opened the

trunk to find to her horror that the valise containing the stolen loot was gone. Blood rushed to her face and she felt faint as she moved aside her own piece of luggage and lifted the spare tire. Connie was so distraught that it took her a moment to begin the process of determining how the case came to be missing. Of course, that fucking, no-good mechanic who quit his job back in Dallas – he must have re-stolen the case. Or was that a ruse concocted by the friendly auto repair shop owner? Connie still had a couple hundred bucks stashed in her purse, and another couple hundred hidden in the bottom of her own suitcase. She immediately called the long distance number printed on the receipt from AAAAA Auto Repair. The operator indicated that no one was answering, and suggested Connie try again in the morning. After all, it was past midnight.

Connie didn't sleep for a minute, alternating between thoughts of how she would get her money back, and what she would do when she failed. Every few minutes she looked over at the alarm clock expecting to see that time had advanced by half an hour at least. The next morning she made contact with the owner who confirmed that the mechanic really did quit, and to the best of his knowledge, left town.

"Ma'am, I'm awfully, awfully sorry he stole your luggage. I hope nothin' too valuable was inside."

"Oh my God, you can't imagine. Don't you have some idea where he went? What's his name? Do you have his phone number? Anything, please?" Connie sounded every bit as desperate over the phone as she truly was.

"His name is Perry, uh Perry . . ." Connie could hear the shop owner cup his hand over the mouthpiece and yell to someone in the garage, "What the fuck was Perry's last name?"

Then back to Connie, “OK, Perry Leigh – L-E-I-G-H. But I don’t know where he lives, and I don’t think he even has a phone.”

Connie submitted to the reality that the money was gone. The rat bastard took it and probably found it to be a large enough fortune to quit town altogether. She had been careless, and now she had only enough cash left to last few weeks. Miami Beach was out for the time being. She would have to find some form of employment as soon as possible. Connie bought a pound of baloney, a loaf of Sunbeam bread, and the local morning paper. While eating a sandwich in her car she circled a few help-wanted ads, including one for a waitress at a diner in Doyline – a homey place called the Dew Drop Inn, run by a Greek man and his wife, Socrates and Aristothea Nicolopoulos. After a brief interview in which Connie detailed her experience working at the Chat-a-While back in North Carolina, she was offered the job and started working the following evening.

While suckling her twins, Connie could sense that Ronnie was stronger, more assertive than his brother Lennie. He ate with more vigor and fussed when he felt denied, whereas Lennie was more placid. Ronnie would push and slap his twin whenever he perceived Lennie encroaching on his eating space, and Lennie would simply accept the treatment, meekly backing off.

Connie wondered how such a freak of nature could have happened to her children, wincing at the horrible word “freak.” Had she done something wrong during pregnancy? Was it genetic – had there long ago been Siamese twins in her family? She thought about the future. Was it medically possible to separate the two boys and if so how would she pay for such an operation? Perhaps the Nicolopoulos’s would contribute something. They certainly had taken an interest in the boys.

Aristothea – known to all as Thea – offered to babysit while Connie worked the late shift, and eventually convinced Connie to move from the dumpy trailer she was renting down the road into an efficiency apartment on the second floor of Soc’s and Thea’s house located behind the diner.

As soon as the twins were able to sit up in a special highchair that Soc fabricated from two, he encouraged Connie to bring them to the diner for their meals. He even set up a playpen next to his perch by the cash register so Connie could be near

them – and so that customers might be lured to come in, eat and gawk. Gawk and spend.

Under the sign “Dew Drop Inn,” Soc placed a board on which he painted the words “. . . to see the famous double boys, Ronnie & Lennie.” To the menu he added such fare as the “Double Boy Burger, with twice the beef and cheese,” “Siamese Soda” (ginger ale and vanilla ice cream, topped with a lychee nut), and the most popular dish, “Two-vlaki.” Connie didn’t care much for the Nicolopoulos’s exploitation of her sons, mild as it was, but she appreciated the help they gave her, so she silently consented to it.

By the twin’s second birthday, Connie was in a funk of depression. Two pediatricians and a vascular surgeon all agreed that the risk of separation was too great to attempt on the young boys, at least at the present time. The doctors were fairly convinced the twins shared circulatory systems and probably some other organs as well. The consensus opinion was that the state-of-the-art medicine in 1956 was not sufficiently advanced to enable such an undertaking.

Meanwhile, Ronnie and Lennie were growing up to be little boys with individual, distinct personalities and learning how to live tethered to one another. They crawled together in a coordinated fashion, and often fed each other. Toilet training was a challenge – Ronnie and Lennie seemed to have bowel urges at the same time, so while one sat on the bowl, the other soiled his pants. Happily, Lennie eventually acquired the discipline to wait his turn.

The boys collaborated on constructing little houses and barns out of Lincoln Logs, and rendered fanciful buildings from Legos. They made up a game using stackable doughnut-shaped

rings that mimicked the ancient Tower of Hanoi problem. The adults who watched Ronnie and Lennie move the rings from one stack to another had no idea the boys understood that adding one ring to the game doubled the number of moves required to solve the problem.

Sometimes they would fight when one annoyed the other, like when Lennie would snap on a Lego brick of the wrong color, and Ronnie would almost always prevail. Mostly they coexisted quite comfortably. Connie looked at the twins in the playpen, and then at the diners taking Polaroids as they waited to pay their bills, and envisioned a future where Ronnie and Lennie were condemned to be a sideshow attraction.

One day in June, two uniformed men from nearby Barksdale Air Force Base came into the diner and sat at the counter where Connie was assigned. Barksdale Field opened in 1933 and became the headquarters and main base of the 3rd Attack Wing, and during World War II it was home to a massive training operation. The base was now part of the Strategic Air Command, set up after the war to concentrate on managing America's land-based bomber aircraft and strategic nuclear arsenal of ballistic missiles.

Connie handed each man a menu and asked what they'd like to drink. They both responded "coffee, black," glanced through the menu choices, chuckled, and ordered Two-vlaki with extra sauce. Connie narrowed her eyes into an imperceptible scowl, and turned away to fetch the coffees. She noticed, as the air force officers came through the door that Soc made sure the men took a quick peek at Ronnie and Lennie playing with toys in the playpen. The boys were just starting to figure

out how to stand together, and the officers remarked in amazement at Ronnie's and Lennie's collaborative dexterity.

Connie heard one of the officers mention St. George, Utah and something about nuclear fallout, and she attempted to eavesdrop on the rest of the conversation. The name "Harry" was mentioned. A term she first heard in Shivwits – "downwinder" – was also used in the conversation. From what she could tell, this man Harry had somehow caused high levels of radioactivity to be spread into St. George following an atomic test a couple of years ago. Precisely when Connie spent the night there. She brought the two plates of Two-vlaki and said to the officer who seemed to be doing most of the talking, "Pardon, sir, but I couldn't help overhearing you talking about an atomic bomb test a couple of years ago." He pursed his lips and looked askance, suggesting to Connie that he shouldn't have allowed himself to be overheard. Basics of test were not top-secret, but the officer didn't want to be taken for an Air Force spokesman on the subject. He responded to Connie, "Why does that interest you?"

"Well, sir, I was there. I was a downwinder. They told me there was nothing to worry about, but now I'm not so sure. Who is Harry?" Connie's delivery was shaky, tentative, almost pathetic.

Sensing dread in her voice and concerned that if he brushed her aside he might feel remorseful later, the officer looked around then replied quietly, "Harry isn't a person; it was the code name for an A-bomb test. And a big one at that. Quite a bit of fallout from that one." He looked at his partner who wagged his head, as if to say "no shit."

"I heard a lot of sheep in the area got sick and died. It's

good you got out of there, uh . . . Connie.” The officer hesitated until he could get a glimpse of her name tag.

Connie just turned away slowly, walking blankly past another customer at the diner who was holding up his empty cup of coffee for a refill, ignoring him completely. For the rest of her shift, Connie was distracted, forgetting to pick up orders, placing an order for table 3 in front of a customer at table 6. After a couple of people complained to Thea, she told Connie to take the rest of the day off.

The next day Connie rode a bus to the Shreveport Library – she had sold the LaSalle for \$100 when she was unable to pay for a major transmission overhaul – and persuaded the librarian to help her research the atomic test dubbed “Harry.” When Connie learned that the test conducted on May 19, 1953 – one of several in a series assigned the odd code name “Upshot-Knothole” – was later derisively labeled “Dirty Harry” for the phenomenal amount of radiation it produced, infecting southwest Utah the most, she was devastated. No conclusive proof existed to associate the radioactive fallout from “Dirty Harry” with the conjoined condition of Ronnie and Lennie, but Connie was sure the blast had fused her boys. And she hated the government for it. And eventually she began to hate a lot of things. Connie started planning a sea change in her life that would unfold within the month.

Thea was in a deep sleep on the couch in Connie's apartment, babysitting the twins, when Connie stumbled through the door around 2 in the morning, very drunk and leading a man by the hand. Her eyes were filmy and her auburn hair was a wild tangle. She had the nervous habit of twirling her hair when she engaged in conversation with strangers. Her blouse was unbuttoned to the mid-point, and her lacy bra was clearly visible.

Connie had never imbibed more Old Fashioneds than she had this evening, and the quantity of alcohol she consumed obliterated her sensibilities. She had completely forgotten about Thea, and babies, and of baby sitting, and decided to bring home a man from the bar to fill a hole that had been left empty since she bolted Las Vegas more than two years earlier.

Once inside the apartment, the man grabbed Connie and ran his hand under her skirt to discover she was not wearing panties. He flexed his fingers and Connie dropped her purse with a moan, awakening Thea. Within seconds, Thea hustled the man out of the apartment and tore into Connie with a severe tongue-lashing.

"What kind of mother are you, Connie?"

"Don't you remember the rules? No male visitors."

"How could you let yourself get into such a condition – you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

“If I had babies, I would never leave them to go and get drunk like some cheap whore.”

Thea let out a flurry of admonitions in Greek, repeating a word that sounded like “pornie.”

The babies stood up in their crib. Ronnie led off with a wail followed in kind one breath later by Lennie. Connie’s head hurt. Thea helped her to bed, and calmed down the twins. Connie spent the night feeling as though she was riding a perpetual Tilt-a-Whirl, leaning over the edge of the bed several times to puke into a bucket Thea had thoughtfully placed there.

Deep into the following day, when Connie was finally able to keep down a piece of banana and a soda cracker, she apologized to Thea, but also served notice that she would soon be leaving Doyline. She had made arrangements with her Aunt Vera in Statesberry to take care of the twins for awhile – a year at least. Connie would be going to Miami Beach. Thea shook her head at such talk as she dumped the bucket of vomit down the toilet.

“Thea, I’m not cut out to be the mother of Siamese twins. They’re growing up fast and pretty soon they’ll be running into all sorts of problems. How can they go to school? Who will play with them? Who will be their friend? I just can’t handle it. My Aunt Vera will do a much better job than I can.” Connie’s voice cracked, and she took a miniscule sip of water, fearful that a big gulp might resume the nausea.

“You can’t run away from your problems, Connie.” Connie expected a stock response like this, and girded herself for more of the same. And Thea delivered it. Thea then asked Connie to let Soc and her keep the children during her

absence, but Connie insisted she had already made up her mind the boys were going to stay with relatives back in North Carolina. Connie anticipated Thea might make such an offer, and planned around it. Soc and Thea were wonderful people who would certainly care properly for Ronnie and Lennie, but Connie did not trust the elderly couple to abstain from displaying the twins in ways they considered harmless, but to her could become exploitative.

In the end, Thea wished Connie the best of luck and left the apartment. Soc was saddened when he heard of Connie's plans, especially when he considered the impact to business from the loss of his sideshow attraction. He would have to change Twovlaki back to regular old Souvlaki.

Connie had saved enough money from tips and the occasional bonus from Soc to pay for Vera to make the round trip from Statesberry, and for a one-way bus ticket to Miami Beach for herself. She mailed Vera the ticket and a photo of Ronnie and Lennie wearing matching pajamas each with a small opening cut in the chest area. Connie chose a picture that both emphasized the twins' cuteness and obscured the connecting band of flesh.

A week later as agreed, Vera arrived in Shreveport on the 4:10 bus from Raleigh bearing some toys for her new charges and one piece of luggage secured by a piece of rope. Connie noticed that Vera was significantly grayer than the last time she had seen her, although her short, boyish hairstyle remained unchanged from when she was a teenager during the flapper era. Vera wore a print dress and clunky shoes like those of a nun. She refused makeup, believing correctly that she looked better, younger, without it. Similarly, Vera eschewed coloring

agents, instead allowing her gray hairs to coexist peacefully with their brown companions. In some ways, she looked like the migrant woman in Dorothea Lange's famous photograph – the face weathered and weary, but endowed with strong features.

Connie walked toward Vera to greet her, leading Ronnie and Lennie by the latter's hand. "Aunt Vera, how was your trip?" Vera ignored Connie's welcome and squatted down, arms spread wide to bestow a hug upon her nephews. "Ronnie, Lennie, I'm your Auntie Vera. Come give me a kiss." She embraced the boys as though she had been reunited with her own lost children. She made no remark, positive or otherwise, verbal or otherwise about the boys' condition. Ronnie and Lennie squirmed a bit, and just as they began bawling from being in the clutches of a strange woman, Vera produced a toy truck and a little cap gun. Ronnie reached first for the gun and with a big smile of picket-fence baby teeth, pointed it at his mother.

Soc, Thea, Vera, Connie, and Ronnie and Lennie rode back to Doyline in the Studebaker Land Cruiser. Soc drove conservatively ten miles per hour below the speed limit, enduring obscenities and uplifted middle fingers from drivers of passing vehicles. Vera, who sat in the back seat with the boys, never stopped talking the entire trip. Vera means "truth" in Latin, but Connie doubted it was possible for any human being to talk as much as her aunt without inserting a lie into the conversation now and then.

Soc had scrubbed all the Siamese twin references from the menu, concerned that Vera might be offended by his rank opportunism and judge him unfavorably. After Vera dropped off her luggage in Connie's apartment, she went to the diner with Connie and the boys, and ordered Souvlaki and a soda that

came with a strange-looking fruit atop the vanilla ice cream. Soc comped the meal. Later the entire extended family, which for some time now implicitly included the Nicolopoulos's, settled out back of the diner to sit by an empty in-ground pool under a tent adorned by plastic lanterns and listen to Greek folk tunes, drink Ouzo, and converse wistfully of the imminent departure of Connie and her special boys. The Ouzo helped Connie suppress her feelings of failure.

The next morning, Connie tried unsuccessfully to hold back tears as she kissed Ronnie and Lennie goodbye. "Mommy will come see you soon. It's just for a little while." Finally understanding the situation – that they would be leaving their mother to go away with this nice, but still strange woman – the boys began to wail. Vera was firm but soothing with the screaming twins, and soon calmed them down using techniques she honed so well as an adolescent.

As Vera stepped aboard the Greyhound Bus destined for Raleigh and cities beyond to the north and east, Soc handed her an envelope containing a \$100 US Savings bond for the children. An hour later, Connie's bus bound for Miami Beach left in a sooty black cloud of noxious diesel fumes. Soc and Thea drove back to Doyline and the Dew Drop Inn diner saying nothing to each other. The radio station played Polkas, this being Sunday.

Vera was born in 1907 in Gastonia, North Carolina, granddaughter of Lafayette Wilcox, a veteran of the Confederate Army and a lieutenant in Lane's Brigade who fought in the Battle of Chancellorsville. Vera's sister Virginia was born five years later on the same day the Titanic sunk, and six years after that both of Vera's and Virginia's parents died of influenza in the 1918 pandemic. The girls moved in with Grandpa Wilcox, who adamantly and often claimed to be the model for the profane lieutenant in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Grandpa indeed had a scar on his hand from a bullet wound, and he frequently prefaced his dissatisfaction with the state of things around the house by declaring, "There's too much chin music an' too little . . ." – completing the phrase with one of a variety of menial tasks: "dish washing," "toilet scrubbing," "porch sweeping," "boot shining." After his death, the sisters were transferred to a Catholic-operated orphanage in Charlotte where Vera quickly cultivated the skills and disposition required to take care of those younger and needier than herself. She was thirteen years old.

Orphanage rules required Vera to leave upon turning 18. She took on a variety of menial jobs, sometimes working at two or three at a time. She moved into a dark, unheated room in a house owned by an obese, slovenly tobacco farmer and his homely wife. The couple lived in squalor with their six ugly, stupid children. As neither adult was physically fit enough to

work a farm, the children, even the youngest at seven years old, were pressed into service. Sometimes Vera would work for slave wages if one of the children took sick or fell behind on chores, even though handling the oily, nicotine-laden tobacco leaves made her nauseous.

One day at dusk as she walked back to the house from the barn where tobacco leaves hung to cure, Vera spied the farmer in his bedroom through a gap in the curtains of his window donning a Ku Klux Klan robe. She decided then to accelerate the timetable on her goal to save enough money to move into a proper apartment where she would be able to support herself and Virginia who still lived in the orphanage.

Denying herself every non-essential purchase for six solid months, Vera accumulated \$120. With sufficient funds now in hand she planned to leave the farmhouse at the end of the month. While taking a shower after a grueling 12-hour day in the field Vera noticed a small hole in the moldy grout of the tiled wall. For a split second, light shone through the small opening. She put her right hand over the hole, struggled with her left hand to shut off the valve behind her, and bolted the shower stall. Vera moved out the next morning, forgoing three weeks of pre-paid rent.

Vera found a clean, affordable flat in Statesberry and arranged with the nuns at the orphanage for Virginia to move in with her. Virginia was as carefree and scattered as Vera was responsible and organized, but this vast difference in personalities was the cause of no friction between the sisters. Vera was content to run the affairs of the household and satisfied that her younger sister was happy. Vera had no time and little interest in romantic pursuits whereas Virginia brought a string

of boyfriends to the apartment – and Vera disapproved of them all. She figured these boys to be after just one thing, and she did her best to stifle relationships before they could get established.

Perhaps Vera had been too overbearing when it came to Virginia's love life because a few days after her eighteenth birthday Virginia made a surprise, and to Vera, a defiant announcement of her engagement to a man ten years her senior – an out-of-work textile factory worker named Floyd Herrmann. Only a few months earlier at a vaudeville show at the Orpheum Theater, before Virginia knew Floyd, she offered to move over one seat so that he and his friend Gunnar could sit together. For this act of thoughtfulness, Floyd reciprocated by offering Virginia a swig of moonshine from a flask he had hidden in his sock. Despite her desire to commit an act of rebellion and drink the booze, Virginia courteously declined. She noticed that Gunnar flashed a look to Floyd that seemed to indicate making a move on this prissy girl was a waste of time; so after the show, when Floyd extended a last-ditch invitation to have a milk-shake with him, Virginia accepted. At the diner, Floyd told jokes and funny stories that kept Virginia in stitches. He snuck shots of shine into his milk-shake, and when he grabbed Virginia's soda pop and threatened with mock-seriousness to do the same, she nodded in approval. Although Floyd sloshed just a small amount of shine into her glass, Virginia quickly became drunk. She slurred her words and giggled like a child when the waitress presented the bill. Floyd drove Virginia home while Gunnar leered at her from the back seat. Vera scolded her younger sister for accepting a ride from two strange men, unaware that her younger sister was smashed.

Floyd came by Vera's house a few days later to invite Virginia to accompany him to the Orpheum to see *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a movie he claimed had been reviewed positively for its realistic telling of The Great War. Standing awkwardly in the foyer, Floyd mentioned with forced modesty that he had been wounded as a soldier in the Army while stationed in England. What he chose not to mention was that he was still to this day legally married to a girl from Leeds whom he left behind after she inflicted a stab wound to his shoulder – the wound he suffered in the war. Nor did he recall the girl's motivation for committing such an act of violence: finding him in bed making love to her mother.

Fishing for a bit of acceptance from Vera, Floyd said with pride, "Even though my relatives came from Germany, I still fought for my country against the Hun." Catching a whiff of whiskey or bourbon after Floyd burped out the word "Hun," Vera simply scowled at him and walked away. Later, seated at the theater, Virginia reached for a handful of popcorn from the box on Floyd's lap and felt his erect penis surrounded by the popped kernels. She gasped audibly and Floyd cackled like a lunatic just as a soldier in the movie is buried under a collapsed wall.

Despite protests from Vera – she was convinced Floyd was a layabout and a drunkard – Virginia got married. Gunnar was the best man; Floyd's slutty half-sister agreed to be the maid of honor after Vera declined the offer, irritating her sister. Floyd on the other hand didn't seem to care one bit. Following a three-day honeymoon in Surf City by the Atlantic Ocean, Virginia moved into Floyd's dank, moss-covered cottage a mile from Vera's house.

Shortly after returning from her brief but relaxing honeymoon, Virginia hosted a picnic in her backyard for some friends – a combination house-warming party and belated wedding reception. She bought a few dozen hot dogs and several pounds of ground chuck for Floyd to burn on the grill. Vera offered to make a big tossed salad consisting of store-bought ingredients along with some radishes and tomatoes from Floyd's ill-tended garden that he planted in the perpetual shade of his cottage. Vera also mixed up a quart of salad dressing from vegetable oil, apple cider vinegar and some cheap herbs and spices that came in a paper packet.

The night before the party, Floyd stumbled home after a long evening of drinking and raided the icebox containing all the food for the picnic.

"Floyd, did you take out a quart jar from the icebox?" asked Vera as she and Virginia set the table the next morning and prepared for the arrival of the guests later in the afternoon.

Floyd responded cheerfully from the ratty sofa on the front porch, "Vera, did you make that? That was the best soup I ever ate." Vera winced, exchanged looks with Virginia, and shook her head in amazement and disgust. The big, dumb, drunken Kraut had heated the salad dressing in a pot on the stove, threw in some oyster crackers, and consumed every last drop.

The picnic was enjoyable, but the future was not bright. Seven months later, Virginia gave birth to a girl who Floyd insisted be named after his grandmother Constance. Barely able to make ends meet from the beginning of the marriage, the addition of another family member pushed Virginia and Floyd to the edge. Three long years had elapsed since Black Tuesday when the stock market crashed, the Great Depression

was in full bloom, more than a thousand banks had failed and millions lost work, and still the malaise had not bottomed out. Floyd, Virginia and little Connie barely scraped by. Virginia picked up sewing and housecleaning jobs, and for a time, manicured the hands of dead people awaiting presentation at the local funeral parlor. Floyd looked for scarce work in between long afternoons and evenings spent drinking copious amounts of liquor and beer. Vera read in the May 19, 1933 edition of the local newspaper that President Roosevelt had signed a bill creating something called the Tennessee Valley Authority and that a lot of work would become available right soon building dams to generate power for much-needed industry. Succumbing to extreme encouragement from both Vera and his wife, Floyd applied for and received a job far from home with a TVA crew charged with rigging up high-tension transmission wires to deliver the power that would eventually nurture commerce – power generated from hydro-electric dams across rivers near the border of Tennessee and North Carolina.

The second week on the job Floyd grabbed a live wire and was electrocuted. His entire arm was burned black and his eyeballs boiled. Some of his fellow crew members threw up at the dreadful smell wafting from his smoldering body. Such was the enormity of the tragedy that the foreman actually halted all work until the ambulance left with Floyd's corpse.

Virginia mourned the loss of her funny, lushy husband. Throughout the ordeal of the funeral, Floyd's friend Gunnar was extremely supportive of Virginia. Gunnar agreed immediately when she asked him to be a pall-bearer, and he escorted her wherever she went. He sat next to her in church, and with her in the car positioned ahead of the hearse. Vera disapproved

of Gunnar even more than she had of Floyd. One time while having her hair done at Crisella's Beauty Shop, Vera overheard one of the hairdressers mention Gunnar in a lascivious voice. She spoke with evident authority as she described the daunting size of Gunnar's penis, a tool she claimed was known to many women in Statesberry and neighboring communities as the "Big Gun." Vera was relieved to have the noisy dome hair dryer placed over her head before the giggling hairdresser could finish detailing the difficulty of walking after an encounter with Gunnar's outsized member.

Once again ignoring her older sister's guidance and displaying the same characteristic impulsiveness with which she married Floyd, Virginia abruptly left North Carolina with Gunnar for the West Coast. Gunnar had aspirations of working in Hollywood, deluded at his prospects of becoming a leading man in the movies. Indeed, more than one of Gunnar's paramours, in the throes of passion, marveled at his resemblance to Clark Gable. After Gable appeared in *Strange Interlude* wearing a moustache for the first time, Gunnar grew an exact replica. Virginia had left Connie in Vera's care, temporarily of course. Just until she and Gunnar were settled in California.

Vera received just one post card from Virginia postmarked Barstow. After that, she never heard from her sister again.

Vera thought about that postcard from Barstow the day she received a similarly brief letter from Connie. It arrived from Miami Beach two months to the day that Connie left Doyline and Vera returned to Statesberry with Ronnie and Lennie. Vera had just finished changing the twin's diapers and had to wash baby-shit off her hands before opening the letter to read that Connie was now working as a cocktail waitress at a new hotel called the Eden Roc. Connie wrote with excitement about seeing Lucy Ball and Desi Arnaz in the hotel lobby, and of observing a TV crew shoot some scenes for the *I Love Lucy* show. One time, Connie wrote, she was asked to run cocktails up to a secluded balcony where rich and famous people sunbathed in the nude. She couldn't be certain, but one such sunbather appeared to be Milton Berle. Enclosed in the envelope was a photo of the Eden Roc, its entrance adorned with more than a million hand-laid tiles in six colors ranging from dark green to aqua blue arrayed in a pattern to resemble ocean waves. On the back side of the photo: "Eden Roc, Miami Beach's Most Fabulous Hotel, designed by world-renowned architect, Morris Lapidus."

Connie finished by writing, "I hope to come up for a visit after the Christmas holiday. Next year I'll have enough money saved to bring Ronnie & Lennie down here to live with me. And you're welcome to come too, Vera. You'd love it. The ocean is

beautiful. As soon as I can afford a telephone, I'll call you. Promise. Give my little boys a kiss and a hug. Love, Connie."

Vera rubbed her earlobe between her thumb and index finger and looked out the window at Ronnie and Lennie ambling up and down the front steps almost as if they were dancing together like Fred and Ginger. She put her niece's letter in the top drawer of the walnut secretary that had once belonged to Grandpa Wilcox. Vera had never heard of "world-renowned architect, Morris Lapidus" but had she known he once remarked, "If you like ice cream, why stop at one scoop? Have two, have three. Too much is never enough," she would have thought he was talking about Connie.

Christmas came and went without a visit or a word from Connie. Vera began to fear an unsettling similarity in behavior between Connie and Virginia. Vera called the Eden Roc and when she was informed by a dispassionate manager that Connie was no longer employed there, her mouth went dry and a wave of anxiety rose up and crashed across her bow. The boys sat on the floor near the scrawny pine tree decorated with glass balls and lead tinsel. They were occupied intently with their new Christmas presents. Vera dropped down into the deep wing-back chair, another piece of furniture bequeathed to her by Grandpa Wilcox. She looked small and childlike, swallowed up by the arms and wings and distressed springs of the chair, the telephone resting on her lap. She observed the boys playing with the new Lionel train set, setting up buildings, trees and little people around the miniature site, placing the cars back on the track after a high-speed derailment, sharing the conductor's whistle. Even after half a year of caring for Ronnie and

Lennie, Vera still marveled at how well the boys coordinated their movements and cooperated to accomplish tasks, both simple and involved. They clearly demonstrated an aptitude for getting along together, yet Vera worried that they would never really be able to take care of themselves. And Vera knew deep down that Connie would very likely never return for her sons. It would be up to her to raise Ronnie and Lennie, two adorable, smart, peaceful boys, conjoined twins, freaks.

When Ronnie and Lennie turned six, Vera enrolled them in the local grade school over the objections of several parents and at least one teacher. Conjoined twins, they said, no matter how well-behaved and studious, would be an ongoing distraction to the rest of the class. Vera didn't care about the feelings of the rest of the class, but when the boys came home repeatedly with their clothing torn, books stolen, and skin marred by ball-point ink, she reconsidered. During Thanksgiving break, when most children are excited about the holiday and happy to be out of school for a few days, Ronnie and Lennie appeared sullen. Neither wanted to return on Monday; both complained of headaches and stomach pains.

On a mid-December Sunday following a rare snowstorm that hobbled travel by motor vehicle in most of North Carolina, the next door neighbor paid a visit to Vera, and while there asked the boys what they wanted Santa to bring them for Christmas. Ronnie responded quite resolutely that he wanted a gun to kill Bobby.

"Wh-What? Who's Bobby?" Vera exclaimed, glancing furtively at her neighbor hoping to conceal her alarm that Ronnie might actually be serious.

Lennie responded, “Bobby Dolan. He pulls our pants down in the boy’s room.”

“And he takes our lunch bag and throws it on the ground,” added Ronnie. “I want to kill him.”

Vera took the boys out of public school the following week. She sued the school district to help pay for a private tutor, and during the seven months it took her lawyer, working pro bono, to prevail, Vera brought Ronnie and Lennie to the public library every day where they became voracious readers. By the time they were only nine years old, the boys favored adventures and stories of intrigue: *Tom Sawyer*, *Treasure Island*, *Moby Dick* and *Kon Tiki* of course, but also *Seven Years in Tibet*, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, *In the Land of White Death*, and *Out of Africa*. Lennie also developed a fondness for Zane Grey, Louis L’Amour and Jack Schaefer. Noting Lennie’s interest in Westerns, Vera informed the boys that their mother was – is – a big fan of John Wayne movies.

“Your Grandpa Floyd, may he rest in peace, took your mother and me to see *The Three Musketeers* when she was just a little girl.”

Lennie responded brightly, “I know that story! It’s by Alexander Dumbass.”

“Doo-mah, Lennie. Doo-mah is how you say his name. Anyway, in those days the movie theaters sometimes showed one chapter of a movie at a time, kind of like the way TV shows are today. After your mother watched the first chapter of *The Three Musketeers* she was hooked. She just loved John Wayne for some reason. She bugged your Grandpa all week to take her to the see the next chapter of the movie. And as soon as that chapter was done, she started bugging him all over again

for another week. Unfortunately, he died before all the chapters came out. She was very young of course, but sometimes I think she was more upset about not getting to see the rest of *The Three Musketeers* than she was about her father dying.” Vera stared at the floor for a few uncomfortable moments.

Ronnie didn’t share a passion for Westerns with his brother, so when Vera offered to take the boys to see a John Wayne movie – *McLintock!* – showing at the Sunset drive-in theater, Ronnie protested, requesting they go instead to the nearby Skyway where a triple feature was playing: *I Married a Monster from Outer Space*, *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, and *Dementia 13*. Vera decided in favor of Lennie, partly because she couldn’t stand horror movies, but mostly because she knew Ronnie had a tendency to dominate Lennie and that he would have plenty of opportunities for the rest of their conjoined lives to get his way.

Vera, Ronnie and Lennie all disliked *McLintock!* equally, expecting a serious shoot-em-up Western, not a comedy based on *The Taming of the Shrew*. Ronnie complained during the whole movie, so Vera left without seeing the second film, a picture called *Yojimbo*. “Why can’t we watch ‘Yo! Jimbo’?” whined Lennie. “I’m tired, Lennie,” came the bland, unemotional response from Vera. On the drive home, with the boys moping in the front seat next to Vera, the uncomfortable seatbelts jammed under the cushion out of the way, Vera mentioned that the teenage boy at the concession stand selling over-priced, over-buttered popcorn told her John Wayne has lung cancer, and that doctors removed one of his lungs. “That’s why you shouldn’t smoke cigarettes, boys. They stunt your growth and cause cancer too, even for John Wayne.”

“Oh, screw John Wayne,” Ronnie retorted, disgusted by the lameness of *McLintock!*, but also angered by Connie’s unexplained absence, an anger that was reinforced by the sight of John Wayne. Defaming John Wayne and his craft was one way for Ronnie to express that anger. “What’s the big deal with him anyway?” Lennie looked wide-eyed at his brother, aghast at his use of the epithet “screw” in front of Aunt Vera, and of his disdain for an object of their mother’s affection. He knew Vera would reprimand Ronnie for his outburst, and that the punishment would necessarily affect him to the same degree as his brother. No TV for a month, shut up in the bedroom without supper, no trips to the library for a week – deny Ronnie, and Lennie would suffer as well. Vera, taken aback by Ronnie’s defiant tone – a ten year old blurts out profanity? Not on my watch! – decided that Ronnie would endure a sanction of washing dishes after each meal for a week. Lennie was exempt, but seeing that he would have to stand beside Ronnie anyway while his brother acquired dishpan hands, he dried.

While on KP duty, Ronnie led a series of debates about Connie. Ronnie posed the questions, and supplied the answers, decidedly unfavorable toward their mother and her aberrant behavior. Lennie nodded dutifully as he towed the dishes, frequently pointing out sauces and bits of food that Ronnie failed to expunge.

“Why did she leave us with Vera? Huh? What was so great about Florida?” Ronnie demanded to know. “Where do you think she is now?” Before Lennie could offer an hypothesis, Ronnie answered angrily and with a hint of pain, “She probably couldn’t stand to be around us, y’know, a couple of freaks.”

“Maybe she’s saving up money to come back, Ronnie.”

“Oh screw that,” Ronnie blurted. He immediately lowered his head and looked around, fearful that Vera may have heard him utter the offending word that put his brother and him in their current predicament. “Y’know, Lennie, you’re an idiot. Our mother isn’t coming back. She probably got married and had other kids that she loves more than us. Normal kids.”

Lennie pointed to a circle of yellow on a plate Ronnie had just passed to him. “You missed this mustard stain.”

“How come she never writes or calls? Huh? I hate her.” It never occurred to Ronnie that something terrible might have befallen his mother, rendering her incapable of communication.

I n 1966 several new books appealing to the twin's interests in adventure and sci-fi arrived at the Statesberry Public Library – Asimov's *Fantastic Voyage*, Bradbury's *S is for Space*, and Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. Some other books also showed up in the "New Releases" section of the library that captured Ronnie's and Lennie's maturing tastes in literature: Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, and Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* a smutty novel that the twins snuck off the shelf and hid behind a copy of the World Atlas whenever the librarian walked past them on her way to the ladies' room. The twins devoured all these titles, and other less impressive literary attempts. One book in the "New Releases" stack that caught Ronnie's and Lennie's attention was a thin 126 pager by Kay Hunter released in 1964 called *Duet for a Lifetime*. Kay Hunter was a direct descendent of Robert Hunter, the Scottish merchant who was the first Westerner to encounter the most famous of all Siamese twins, Eng and Chang, who later in life took the surname "Bunker." Of course, Ronnie and Lennie were aware of Eng and Chang and the picaresque lives they led. Indeed, the original Siamese Twins were buried in a graveyard a mere 60 miles north of Statesberry in a cemetery off Old Hwy 601 in White Plains, NC. One boring day, the twin's tutor Mrs. Carlin cut short the math and geography lessons and drove the boys to White Plains to visit the Bunker grave, giving them a synopsis of the Eng and Chang biography along the way. The point of the "field trip" as she called it was to instill in Ronnie and Lennie an understanding that even conjoined people can live normal lives, and in some cases, accrue fortune and enjoy happiness and fame. She hoped they might acquire some sense of personal

normality from learning that other boys, later men, like them, had lived full lives and prospered. What she didn't realize was the twins at the time did not look upon themselves, not yet anyway, as disadvantaged or destined to live pitiful lives. That would come later.

When Mrs. Carlin returned the twins to their home, Vera gave her a ration of shit for taking the boys away without her knowledge or consent, especially to a morbid graveyard. But she didn't threaten her with dismissal, as no other tutor in the area would agree to teach or even associate with the freaks and monsters of Statesberry, North Carolina.

Whatever the twins knew of Eng and Chang was grounded in the improbability of it all: how they avoided being put to death as infants by an ignorant, spooked tribal leader in Siam who believed they were evil spirits; how they came to the attention of King Mongkut who saw their artistic potential and inoculated them from harm and who later became the title subject of 1951's Broadway hit *The King and I*; and how they came to America and starred as the showcase act in PT Barnum's "Greatest Show on Earth." Most improbable of all, most fascinating and lurid to Ronnie and Lennie was that both Eng and Chang, conjoined for all their lives, somehow managed to get married (to sisters no less) and father 22 children between the two of them. How was that possible? How could such a marital arrangement take place in the backwardness of the Nineteenth century, in a conservative rural enclave of North Carolina?

Ronnie cracked *Duet for a Lifetime* and he and Lennie were confronted right away by this passage within the liner notes: "There comes to every man, at some stage of his life, the desire to be alone. He may need solitude in which to laugh, to weep,

to think constructively, or to indulge himself in blank idleness. For Chang and Eng this luxury, which we all take for granted, was denied – for a whole lifetime.” Blank Idleness? Solitude . . . denied? For a whole lifetime? In the few minutes it took to read and re-read the words on the inside cover, both Ronnie and Lennie felt their foundation quiver slightly, not a tectonic shift but a nascent concern that being conjoined might essentially be a prison sentence perhaps, and eventually a death sentence for either brother who had the misfortune to watch the other go before him.

The twin’s walked somberly out of the library with a half-dozen books between them and a refined outlook on life. The Kay Hunter book didn’t reveal to the twins anything dramatically new about the lives and times of Eng and Chang, but it was sobering to learn that permanent physical connection to another human being could be a major impediment to personal fulfillment.

In subsequent visits to the Statesberry Library, Ronnie and Lennie diverted their attention away from adventure novels and scandalous books toward staid medical tracts to understand better the lives of conjoined twins. *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* was one such clinical treatise published in 1896, a time before compassion and social acceptance became part of the narrative of the maladies of the infirm. The comprehensive book described a fellow dubbed Turtle Man, “an individual with deformed extremities, who might be classified as a phocomelus, or seal-like monster,” and Elephant Man, John Merrick, who suffered from the rare afflictions of “pachydermatocoele and papilloma of the skin.” The illustrations of his massive head, bent torso and – who’d have guessed it – completely

normal genitals, were clinical and disgusting. Also making an appearance in the gruesome book were Dog-Boy, Alligator-Boy, Bird-Boy, and the Leopard Family. How odd and cruel that the medical professionals of the time tended to label deformed humans after the animals they resembled. Lennie wondered if there ever was an example of a deformed animal that was named after a human. Frenchman-swine, for example.

The book of *Anomalies* offered a description of a 35 year old man from Fiji who over the course of six years developed elephantiasis of the scrotum. Happily, the poor bastard found relief following the surgical removal of the six foot, six inch, 124 pound mass hanging between his legs. The twins could only gawk, jaws slack in disbelief at the grainy photo of the afflicted subject, appearing surprisingly serene under the circumstances, leaning against the edge of a table, his balls brushing the floor.

Ronnie and Lennie stared guiltily at some truly hideous freaks of nature. There were the people who suffered from having a partial-body growing out of their midsections, an incompletely formed twin, a parasite. An Indian man named Laloo had such an appendage which was mostly just legs and feet and possessed a penis but no testicles, and an “imperforate anus.” When performing in the freak show, Laloo dressed his parasite in colorful pants and tiny shoes.

The boys recoiled at text describing women who menstruate through their skin, and they sympathized with the child who had a face as hairy as a dog’s. There was the man with a devilish horn growing down from his forehead, the tip of it reaching to his chin; the woman who suffered from a 149 pound ovarian cyst; the baby born with a supernumerary head; the girl with

four tits; and the thing possessing both a vagina and a penis. “Why did God create people this way? What the hell is wrong with Him?” demanded Ronnie.

Having reached their fill of the grotesque, Ronnie and Lennie turned their attention to the subject they originally intended to research, conjoined twins, filed under the section “Major Terata.” The book documented numerous cases similar to that of Ronnie and Lennie, specifically two fully-formed individual human beings connected to one another by some band of flesh, and usually sharing circulatory systems and organs. It is this sharing of crucial components that makes separation risky, if not impossible. *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* seemed to validate this opinion as it discussed the hopelessness of such cases as the Orissa Sisters, the Hindoo Sisters, and of course, the most famous, Eng and Chang after whom the term “Siamese Twins” became the generic name of the affliction, although they were in fact Chinese. Others who were born connected at the forehead, pelvis, and buttocks had even lower chances of surviving a separation operation. Then there were monsters of a type such as the Tocci Brothers of Turin, Giovanni and Giacomo, and Ritta-Christina, also born in Italy – individuals to a point around the sixth rib, below which they shared a single pelvis and one pair of legs. The parents of Ritta-Christina, burdened by abject poverty, sought to display for monetary gain their malformed children in a freak show in Paris, but were denied permission by the authorities who feared their exhibition may cause “the production of monsters by maternal impressions in pregnant women.” Lennie wondered whether such a thing could be true – that his own mother might have glimpsed, however briefly, two conjoined

children, and in doing so perpetrated the same misfortune upon her own sons.

At this point in their research, resigned to the permanency of their condition and amazed at the ignorance and superstition associated with major terata, Ronnie and Lennie closed the book slowly and returned it to the shelf. Nothing the boys encountered in their research indicated a hopeful outcome for conjoined twins; nothing in the medical journals suggested recovery and redemption were possible for the wretched victims of Nature's pranks.

Following some introspection, Vera came to regret making a scene over the boys' unauthorized field trip to the Bunker grave in White Plains. In a gesture of reconciliation, she bought the boys a swell, battery-operated transistor radio that could receive both AM and FM stations. What a gift! Ronnie and Lennie would spend hours in their bed at night, long after Vera believed they were asleep, listening to rock and roll music broadcast from stations in Atlanta, Chapel Hill, Charlotte, and on some nights when the weather conditions permitted, Philadelphia and New York City. WYNX, WCHL, and WNEW-FM from New York were the twin's favorites. The year they received the transistor radio, the number one song in the country was "The Ballad of the Green Berets" by Sgt. Barry Sadler, but the boys preferred the music of the *Rolling Stones*, *The Yardbirds*, *The Moody Blues*, *The Animals* and *The Kinks*.

Every Sunday evening in bed, the boys listened to the weekly countdown on the radio, making a list of the best and fastest rising songs. They read about their favorite artists in "Billboard" on the rare occasion the magazine appeared in the Statesberry Library. Ronnie's and Lennie's interest in rock and roll quickly moved beyond mere passive enjoyment, growing into a strong desire to perform. They bought a used Fender Esquire guitar and small amp after driving Vera crazy to redeem the \$100 bond given to them by Soc. Soc believed the bond, if left untouched, would pay for a four-year college education

– that’s how powerful the TV ads marketing US Savings Bonds were in the 1950s.

Applying to music the same fervor with which they devoured books, the young boys quickly became passable rock and roll guitar players. They memorized dozens, then hundreds of chords, and learned guitar tablature. In less than a year, Ronnie and Lennie were able to mimic the guitar riffs and rhythmic chordal accompaniments of many songs on the radio. Each boy played guitar with competence equal to his brother. And with a lot of practice and relying on their innate intuition of each other’s thoughts and movements, the two learned to play collaboratively on a single guitar, Ronnie strumming and picking strings while Lennie worked the frets. When they were able to keep up with “Friday on My Mind” by the *Easy Beats*, the twins decided they were ready for public exposure.

Once or twice a month, Vera would consent to driving Ronnie and Lennie to the Record Bar in Winston-Salem where the owner sold the newest Top 40 singles and made an extra-special effort to stock the bins with material unavailable from the Woolworths store in Statesberry – artists like *The Electric Prunes*, *The Thirteenth Floor Elevators*, *The Chocolate Watchband*, and *The Nazz*. On one trip to the Record Bar in search of *The Music Machine*’s single “Talk Talk,” Ronnie and Lennie met two albino Negro brothers from Horneytown, Jackie and Roosevelt Washington, who played drums and bass respectively, and were there to buy a bunch of albums by black artists: Aaron Neville, Wilson Pickett, Booker T. and the MGs, Marvin Gaye.

The Siamese Twins looked upon the albino Negroes with their milky skin, pinkish eyes and white afros, and counted themselves lucky; and the Washington brothers felt similarly

fortunate as they sized up the two boys joined at the chest by a tubular length of flesh that was shaped somewhat like the shaft of a giant penis. Both sets of boys realized they shared a common affliction of oddity, and on the strength of this they struck up a conversation.

Ronnie explained with a dash of arrogance that he and his brother were fairly accomplished rock guitarists looking for a drummer and bassist to make up a quartet to play Top 40 tunes at first, with the intention to write and perform original music later on. Jackie and Rosie expressed interest. Rosie asked, "So whatchoo boys like to listen to?" Lennie quickly responded with the first song that came to his mind, something by *Procol Harum* he had just heard on the AM/FM radio: "A Whiter Shade of Pale." Ronnie rolled his eyes. Jackie and Rosie laughed loudly at what they perceived, incorrectly, to be Lennie's fleet-of-foot wit.

The four resolved to get together, exchanging telephone numbers. They formed a band called *Closed for Private Party*, a nihilistic name Lennie proposed which was meant to convey the sentiment that "we're misfits, we're shunned, but we'll do whatever the hell we want to, and you're not invited." Lennie noted, "Kinda like 'It's My Party,' but not exactly." Ronnie had other names in mind – *The Happy Scabs*, for example – but he felt he should defer to his brother to keep the enterprise civil. Many decisions regarding the band would have to be made in the future, and Ronnie calculated that he could prevail on most of them by letting Lennie name the band. Jackie and Rosie were just happy to be part of a rock band and made no protest against the cryptic name Lennie proposed. Within weeks the quartet was practicing several hours every day.

1968 – a year of turmoil. The My Lai Massacre would be directed by an unassuming 5'4" man from Miami named Calley; Martin Luther King, Jr. would be assassinated in April, RFK in June. Some bitch would shoot Andy Warhol. Nixon would beat Humphrey; Saddam Hussein would become Vice Chairman of the Revolutionary Council in Iraq. Clovis Roblain would be the first person in Europe to receive a heart transplant, a news item that caught the attention of the conjoined twins of Statesberry who had become semi-obsessed about medical breakthroughs.

In March, during a period of intense practice with the Washington brothers, Ronnie and Lennie would be forced by their Aunt Vera to go to Charlotte to attend a presidential rally for a well-known bigot from Alabama named George Wallace. The twins cared nothing for politics, even less for a crazy bastard like Wallace. Wallace harbored no illusions of becoming president. He hoped to gain enough electoral votes to throw the presidential process into turmoil, forcing the House of Representatives, to decide the election. Such a result would give Wallace an enormous amount of clout in a turbulent time to reinforce Southern values of segregation and subjugation.

Wallace's running mate was Curtis "Bombs Away" LeMay, the retired four-star general who architected the fire-bombing of Tokyo during WWII and later challenged the pampered and untested JFK over his decision to exercise diplomacy instead of

ordering a nuclear strike during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Vera remembered LeMay for his execution of the highly successful Berlin Airlift. She also read about his role in the development of the Strategic Air Command which was keeping America safe from Communist threats assembling around the world. LeMay's hypothesis that "you've got to kill people, and when you've killed enough they stop fighting" appealed to Vera. She agreed with him on how to approach the Viet Cong: "My solution to the problem would be to tell them frankly that they've got to draw in their horns and stop their aggression or we're going to bomb them into the Stone Age." Who knows whether Vera's opinion of the General might have changed had she been familiar with another one of his quotes: "Killing Japanese didn't bother me very much at that time. I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal."

Ronnie whined, "Vera, do we really have to go see that Neanderthal LeMay today? Jackie and Rosie were going to drive over for band practice this afternoon."

"It's 'Aunt Vera,' Ronnie, and yes, we have to listen to General LeMay. We live in a democracy, Ronnie, and the General and Governor Wallace have a strong message you should hear. You'll be able to vote in the next election and this is an opportunity to get familiar with the process. This country is going down the drain fast, what with all the black power stuff and people yammering on about civil rights. If we don't get back to the way things used to be around here, it'll be a sad time for certain."

Lennie asked, "What's wrong with civil rights? Jackie and Rosie say it's just about giving black people the same things that white people get in America."

“Well, I don’t know why they would be so quick to complain. They should be glad they at least look white. They’d be better off if they clipped down those nappy hairdos, though, and stopped protesting against our country.”

Before Ronnie could launch into a diatribe over Vera’s racism, Lennie interjected, “Aunt Vera, how long will it take to get to Charlotte and back home?”

Curtis LeMay gave a fiery speech tailored to the target audience, mostly covering the threats from Communists, anti-US agitators, and other troublesome factions – fags, liberals, intellectuals, elitists, those who would seek to integrate schools. LeMay was a conflicted personality. His ruthless bombing techniques had probably shortened the war with Japan, but in the late-60s his ideas seemed reckless in the face of nuclear-armed adversaries. LeMay prosecuted his case vigorously to the stacked jury, and was awarded with knowing applause when he lamented, “I think there are many times when it would be most efficient to use nuclear weapons. However, the public opinion in this country and throughout the world throw up their hands in horror when you mention nuclear weapons, just because of the propaganda that’s been fed to them.” As Vera listened to LeMay she was mildly disappointed that her nephews would be ineligible to fight with glory and honor against the Red Menace in Southeast Asia due to their inevitable 4F classification.

Ronnie mostly tuned out, contemplating instead the possible inclusion in a rock song of such difficult minor guitar chords as Dmadd9/F and Am6add9. After the speech broke up, and the rabid cheering of the current and future members of the KKK subsided, Vera packed the boys into the car and hunted for a grocery store to buy some provisions to carry

them through the trip back to Statesberry. She pulled into the parking lot of the Park-N-Stop on Wilkinson Boulevard, owned by a man named Charles Reid. Vera picked up some apples, peaches, peanut butter (creamy, not crunchy), bread, and mayonnaise. Ronnie and Lennie loved peanut butter and mayonnaise sandwiches, a favorite that had invited a good deal of ridicule from Bobby Dolan, the grade-school bully.

Vera and the twins got into the only open check-out line where two female employees who were obviously sisters stood unusually close to each other. One sister who looked to be about 60 ran the cash register, tallying up the cost of goods purchased and collecting payment. The other carefully and methodically packed the purchased contents into thick, brown paper bags. The groceries fit compactly into one bag with minimal spacing between the items, like a reassembled three-dimensional puzzle.

When the two women spotted Ronnie and Lennie in their line, they let it be known they too were conjoined twins; conjoined at the hip for the past sixty years – four times longer than the boys had existed on this Earth. The sisters shuffled from behind the register to prove the point. Several customers of the Park-N-Stop, annoyed that the twin cashiers were slinging bullshit instead of enabling commerce, grumbled to each other about how there never are enough check-out lines open. Unfazed, the women introduced themselves as Daisy and Violet Hilton – “those are two of my favorite flowers,” exclaimed Vera – and recalled for Ronnie and Lennie the celebrity they enjoyed years earlier as famous Siamese twins, appearing in the movies, owning a restaurant in Miami, and even performing with Bob Hope. Any enthusiasm the boys had for the Hilton

sisters' stories of fame was counterbalanced by the obvious decline of the women's fortunes as exemplified by their current employment in a dingy grocery store in North Carolina. Had they known the movie in which the Hilton sisters acquired their greatest notoriety was titled *Freaks*, Ronnie and Lennie might have held the women in even lower esteem.

On the drive back to Statesberry, as Vera crowed about Curtis LeMay and "those wonderful Hilton sisters," Ronnie and Lennie were each forced to confront again their conjoined fates. Meeting Daisy and Violet Hilton, who would die in less than a year, on Ronnie's and Lennie's fifteenth birthday, combined with their memories of Kay Hunter's depressing *Duet for a Lifetime*, caused the boys to become decidedly pessimistic about their futures.

At precisely 9 p.m. on a cold Friday evening in mid-January, *Closed for Private Party* kicked into the very first song of their very first gig in a dank bar in Horneytown whose owner Rosie tortured for a month by phone and in person for an opportunity to play a couple of sets. No pay, just tips.

Jackie had the smoothest voice of the four boys but was not chosen to be the lead singer. Ronnie believed that in a real rock band the guitar player and not the bassist should sing lead. Although Jackie's vocal skills were head and shoulders above the others, he sang just a few numbers, those soulful tunes that the Washington brothers insisted on covering. From behind his small drum kit, Rosie struck his sticks together as he counted out 1-2-1-2-3 and after a couple of introductory bars, Ronnie crooned:

“In the cool of the evening,
When ev'rything is gettin' kind of groovy,
I call you up and ask you
If you'd like to go with me and see a movie.
First you say, 'No,' you've got some plans for the night,
And then you stop, and say, 'All right.'
Love is kinda crazy with a spooky little girl like you.”

The three people in attendance yelled out a hoot when the

band finished their pretty faithful rendition of “Spooky” by *The Classics IV*. Ronnie played lead guitar in place of the saxophone break on the original recording. Having lived their entire lives together, Ronnie and Lennie moved in tandem about the small stage, each playing a guitar and stepping with amazing dexterity around cords spread about the stage. The audience also bestowed applause for “Jumpin’ Jack Flash,” “Summertime Blues,” and “Dirty Water.” Someone in the audience requested “Cool Jerk,” which, thanks to Jackie’s and Rosie’s insistence that the band learn some blackish music, they were able to oblige. When it came time for a break, Ronnie announced they would be back in 15 minutes, and made a comment about how he had expected a bigger crowd for a Friday night. A middle-aged lush who had been drinking at the bar since noontime, yelled back, “The sign outside says the bar is closed for a private party, but I guess they cancelled it and didn’t tell no one.”

Ronnie glared at Lennie with contempt and spit out “Fuck!” an expletive Lennie had never before heard his brother utter in front of others. The bartender looked over at the stage with a scowl although salty, profane language was the lingua franca of the patrons. Jackie and Rosie seconded Ronnie’s assessment, giving Lennie a load of shit for his ill-conceived name for the band. As they argued on stage, a scrawny girl with long, ironed-straight black hair wearing a double helping of mascara approached and announced her admiration for their performance. Ronnie had previously noticed her near stage right, dancing as if in a trance.

“‘Spooky’ is one of my favorite songs. That’s what my friends call me – Spooky. You guys are great. Where’re you from?”

Ronnie moved forward in a lurch to block out a possible

response from the Washington brothers, and in the process yanked Lennie by the shared band of flesh, causing each a hot twinge of pain in the solar plexus. “Hi, I’m Ronnie. That’s cool that your name is Spooky. That’s my favorite song too. You remind me of a Spooky – I mean, you remind me of the girl in the song.” Noticing that as he spoke to her Spooky was glancing repeatedly at the boy attached to his chest, Ronnie reported, “Uh. This is my brother Lennie.”

Since turning 13, Ronnie’s sexual urges had blossomed into a full court mess. Ronnie sometimes masturbated more than three times a day, much to the consternation of Lennie who occasionally beat off as well, but always in bed when he thought his brother was asleep. And always into a sock, not all over the place like Ronnie. And never more than three times a week. Young Ronnie seemed to have a permanent hard-on, and assumed this was commonplace for a male upon reaching a certain age. One time while waiting to receive a nasty asymmetrical haircut from an incompetent barber ill-equipped to deal with the styling demands of young men following the US invasion by *The Beatles* and *The Rolling Stones*, Ronnie read with surprise an article in *True* magazine about a once-virile army sergeant who suffered from impotence after leaving the service. Ronnie assumed a major pharmaceutical firm, whose hopeful ads purporting cures for the basest of maladies ran in all the major magazines resting in a pile in the barber shop, would one day to develop a pill to help aging, frustrated men achieve the enduring erections they once experienced as young emulators of Priapus. Hell, if Roche, according to its magazine ad, could help an unmarried girl suffering from low self-esteem – 35,

single and psychoneurotic – with a drug they called Valium, “a useful adjunct in the therapy of the tense, over anxious patient who has a neurotic sense of failure, guilt or loss,” then some drug company should be able to develop a medicine to induce boners for those with even the flimsiest of equipment.

Ronnie assumed that being conjoined to another human being might be an insurmountable barrier to getting laid, but like all horny adolescents he was an optimist, imagining sexual encounters in a variety of contrived circumstances with all sorts of females. Spooky was the first girl to approach the twins in the way that a member of one sex approaches a member of the opposite sex. And she didn’t recoil even slightly when it was quite clear they were attached to one another.

At the end of the break the band started the second set with *The Who’s* “I Can See for Miles,” a song that took them almost a month to learn. Even now as Ronnie and Rosie sang the title phrase over and over, they were uncertain they were executing it in the proper key. *Closed for Private Party* played “Hang on Sloopy,” “You Really Got Me,” “96 Tears,” and “I Saw Her Standing There.” By the middle of the set some people started coming in to the bar; Ronnie had gone outside during the break and pulled down the flyer advertising “Closed for Private Party.” The band agreed to wrap up the set with a favorite of Ronnie’s and Lennie’s, “Satisfaction,” and if they were called upon to do an encore, they would play a favorite of Jackie’s and Rosie’s “Sittin’ On the Dock of the Bay,” an Otis Redding hit that reached number one after he died in a plane crash, and a song that Jackie could perform with astonishing fidelity. What the band had not anticipated was a call for a second and third encore. They performed songs from the first set, confident that

no one sitting in the audience now had already heard them. In a bit of calculated subterfuge, Ronnie insisted they finish by playing “Spooky” again. His ploy worked because Spooky invited Ronnie, and by extension Lennie, to come back to her apartment for some drinks after the show.

Ronnie and Lennie had only recently turned 15 – young, but in 1969, with the Vietnam War raging on, the definition of “young” had been revised. Eighteen seemed to be the new 25. Vera tried to balance her concerns about the two conjoined teenagers playing rock music in tough bars against a recurring nightmare that by constraining her nephews she would only push them farther away and into unimaginable danger. On the subject of the band, to be renamed later *The Streamlined Babies* after a book by Tom Wolfe that Ronnie enjoyed, Vera reluctantly accepted their musical enterprise. She had to admit they sounded pretty good practicing in the garage. Vera relented after much nagging from the boys, granting them permission to go with the Washingtons to practices and gigs – but solely under the condition that they return straight home afterward.

Now, after the gig at the bar had wrapped, the Washington boys were driving back home alone leaving Ronnie and Lennie in the company of a nineteen year-old airhead named Spooky –exactly the predicament Vera feared. Ronnie had made no plan for getting home either as he was too consumed with excitement about the treats that might be bestowed upon him in the night ahead.

Spooky drove a 1962 Ford Galaxie 500 with a 406 cubic inch engine and triple-carbureted six-barrel. The car was wide enough so that Spooky and her two conjoined passengers

could comfortably sit in the front seat. As she traveled at high speeds down Highway 311 en route to her apartment in Trinity, Lennie noted how many of the cars on the road pulled aside to let Spooky pass. “Most of these Galaxies are used by the fuzz,” Spooky explained.

“What’s the fuzz?” Lennie asked childishly. Ronnie punched him hard in the arm as Spooky laughed heartily, snorting intermittently like a donkey. Ronnie glared a look at Lennie that the latter understood to mean “shut up, you feeble asshole.”

Spooky’s apartment was decorated in a style that might be termed “scavenger-moderne.” The front door led into an efficiency kitchen that smelled and looked greasy, like shiny fried chicken. Dishes left over from at least five meals were stacked up in the sink. Flies buzzed around the mess, lighting upon food hardened onto the plates and utensils. Ronnie and Lennie followed Spooky into the living room, passing through strands of beads hanging in the arched doorway. A few stuffed chairs and a beat sofa were positioned in front of a big, clunky faux-woodgrained Magnavox console TV. None of the seating options matched another, but they did share one common feature: the fabric on each had been shredded by the four cats now slumbering around the room. The fetid scent of their litterbox intermingled with the sweet remnants of clove cigarettes and weed. The coffee table was almost completely covered by ashtrays and empty beer cans. The several side tables strewn about were actually large wooden spools that had at one time been wrapped with hundreds of yards of copper wire, and were now flipped on their sides and adorned with well-tended house plants.

“Sit anywhere you’d like guys. I’ll get us some beers.” The boys looked at each other with uncertainty in their eyes. Neither Ronnie nor Lennie had ever taken an alcoholic drink – not counting the time Lennie, as a toddler, drank most of Vera’s Harvey Wallbanger believing it to be orange juice. Both he and Ronnie, cursed with sharing a liver, suffered from a hangover for a whole day, vomiting several times, even after their tiny stomachs had been evacuated, unable to keep down even a dry piece of soda cracker.

They took up a spot on the sofa, sinking deep into the broken-down cushion, and tried to behave like rock musicians. Spooky passed through the beaded gauntlet holding in one hand three cans of Lowenbrau by the plastic six-pack ring, and in the other, a tightly wrapped joint. She sang with a giggle, “Here’s to good friends, Tonight is kind of special” as she plopped the half-a-six-pack on the coffee table. “Hand me the lighter, will ya Ron?”

Ronnie passed the big round table lighter, the kind with the flint and fluid, to Lennie who handed it to Spooky, who lit the joint and took a deep drag, holding her breath for at least 20 seconds before exhaling a long stream of smoke. She handed the joint to Lennie who just pointed to his brother. “Don’t ya smoke Len? Well have a beer at least. Ron, I *know* you smoke, right?”

The way Spooky emphasized her certainty in the matter, Ronnie felt he had no choice but to partake of his first illegal substance, all the while fearing he wouldn’t do it correctly. Sure enough, he took a small puff and started coughing uncontrollably – almost to the point of puking all over the table. With each of Ronnie’s hacks Lennie suffered an uncomfortable yank.

Spooky responded with a snort-filled laugh, and turned on the TV. “Y’know, Ron, you didn’t ask me if I’d like to go with you and see a movie.” Ronnie gave Spooky a confused look in between hacks. “You sang it for me tonight, twice. Did you forget? Is the weed gettin’ to you already?” She slapped Lennie on the shoulder, “Remind him, Len.” Turning her attention to the television set, Spooky reported excitedly, “Hey, look, the late show is a John Wayne movie.” Lennie rolled his eyes, and Ronnie would have rolled his as well if they weren’t practically bleeding from his reaction to the hot marijuana smoke. Following a string of unprofessionally produced commercials for a local hair salon, a head shop, a used car dealership, and a public service announcement claiming “every litter bit hurts,” the credits rolled on a 1956 opus called *The Conqueror*, in which John Wayne plays Temujin, better known as Genghis Khan, the leader of the Mongols. John Wayne donned a chinky mustache and recited such dialog as “There are moments for action; then I listen to my blood. I feel this Tartar woman is for me, and my blood says, ‘take her’” and “While I live, while my blood burns hot, your daughter is not safe in her tent.” Spooky had a good laugh at that one.

The movie was directed by former film noir actor Dick Powell who had once portrayed detective Philip Marlowe. Powell was also co-producer along with billionaire Howard Hughes. Susan Hayward, Agnes Moorehead, John Hoyt and Pedro Armendariz co-starred.

Time seemed to pass extremely slowly. Ronnie had managed to choke down a few puffs off the joint before Spooky offered to give him a shotgun. Lennie was about to ask what a shotgun is, but fearing another blow in the arm from Ronnie,

demurred. Instead, Ronnie asked “What’s a shotgun?” To the boys’ surprise, Spooky placed the lit end into her mouth, bit down on the midpoint of the joint, positioned her mouth up close to Ronnie’s as if she was about to give him a French kiss, and blew a load of smoke down his windpipe. By the time she was done, Ronnie was bleary. Lennie was in rough shape as well, having drunk two Lowenbraus and taken a few pulls on a bottle of Southern Comfort that Spooky produced after the beers ran out.

Following commercial breaks in the movie, the local TV announcer provided bits of trivia about the evening’s feature. He noted that Wayne insisted on playing the lead role of Temujin, even though Powell was planning to shitcan the whole script, and that the movie had been ranked as one of the worst of the 1950s. For Ronnie, that piece of information bolstered his long-running disdain for Wayne movies. During a break midway through the presentation, the announcer reported that *The Conqueror* was filmed in southwestern Utah a couple of years after a nuclear test had dumped a load of radioactive fallout on the area. Lennie wondered why that story sounded familiar. After the movie ended – at 2 a.m. – the local TV announcer wrapped up by reporting that Dick Powell and Pedro Armendariz had both died of cancer, and that even John Wayne himself had a cancerous lung removed in 1964 but that the Duke had “licked the big C.” What the announcer could not have known was that Agnes Moorehead (uterine), Susan Hayward (brain) and John Hoyt (lung) would also succumb years later to cancer. As would Duke Wayne in 1979. And by the 1980s, 91 of the 220 people who worked on location on

The Conqueror would contract cancer, and 46 of them would die from it.

Ronnie nor Lennie rarely stayed up past midnight and they had no prior experience with drink and drugs. By the time *The Conqueror* ended and a test pattern displaying a cross, and oddly, the head of an Indian wearing full-feathered headgear, both boys were barely conscious. Spooky too was beat. It had been a long night.

At six in the morning two imposing police officers pounded for the better part of 20 minutes on Spooky's flimsy kitchen door and rapped on her filmy living room windows, eventually awakening the twins. It had taken Vera all night to find out where her boys ended up after the gig. She had contacted the Washington brothers who gave her the name of the bar which she called just before the owner closed for the evening, and who told her he thought the boys might have left with a regular barfly nicknamed Spooky. "Good Lord!" exclaimed Vera. The owner made some complimentary remarks about the band's performance to Vera, but he ridiculed their insipid name. "The lads cost me some business for sure."

The police drove Ronnie and Lennie back to Statesberry, but not before Ronnie gave Spooky a huge, slobbery kiss and in return received her telephone number. Ronnie's breath stunk, but Spooky responded with a broad smile and said, "Wherever you play again, I'll be there Ron. Just call me. You too Len."

No charges were leveled against anyone involved, not even Lennie who threw up twice in the back of the cruiser on the way home. But the boys suffered a shit-storm of pain cast down upon them by their justifiably angry aunt. She confiscated their musical equipment and barred them from leaving the house or talking on the telephone. Vera accused them of gross negligence and of partaking of illegal substances, a charge both boys denied, knowing their souls were blackened each time they proffered the lie. Jackie and Rosie called often mostly out of concern that their investment in learning to play a bunch of honky songs might go down the drain if their bandmates were forced into very early retirement. In fact, they called so frequently that Vera eventually came to enjoy her conversations with them, inquiring about their high school grades and the health and well-being of their half-blind grandmother with whom they lived in a cramped Fleetwood mobile home manufactured right after the war.

Ronnie and Lennie chose to behave perfectly rather than complain about the punishments, figuring that ongoing protest would only prolong exile to their personal penal colony. Ronnie thought often about Spooky, worrying that she would forget about him, or take up with another boy, but without access to a telephone he had no choice but to wait out the quarantine. It never occurred to him that he knew next to

nothing about Spooky, or to consider the possibility that she might already have one or more better-established boyfriends.

Often in these quiet times Ronnie imagined himself alone, disconnected from his twin hanger-on, together with Spooky, enjoying intimate and quiet moments with her. He started to have a recurring dream in which he and Lennie are sleeping side-by-side as usual, but as his brother slumbers, Ronnie rises from the bed leaving him to go outside into the garden and rendezvous with Spooky. He makes passionate love to her amid the gladioli while Lennie saws logs in bed. One morning after awakening from yet another one of his rendezvous dreams, Ronnie described the vivid details to Lennie and reluctantly expressed his growing desire to be free to live his life as an individual.

"You're a dickhead sometimes, Lennie, but you're my twin brother and I love you. But I worry that we'll end up like those old bags at the grocery store. Still stuck together when we're 90 years old. Don't you ever wish you could be alone? Huh? I know I do . . . once in awhile, anyway . . . y'know what I mean?"

Lennie replied, "Sometimes I feel the same way. But from the moment we started to crawl, when the leg of the table got between us, and we couldn't pass, we knew."

"Yes, I remember . . ." Ronnie's voice trailed off, and as he rolled over in bed as far from Lennie as the band of flesh would allow, he added bitterly, "I guess we're chained for life."

Vera's regimen of punishment went on undiminished for a solid month, but like most trials in life the grief dissipated with time, as did the memory of the details about why it had been inflicted in the first place. Soon enough, Rosie and Jackie were driving to Statesberry every day from Horneytown for band

practice in Vera's garage. And shortly after that *The Streamlined Babies* were playing in public again. Eventually Vera stopped sitting in on practices and escorting the band to gigs. That's when Ronnie called up Spooky to gleefully announce the band's return to the music circuit.

A dozen years plus had passed since Connie sent her one and only communication from Miami Beach to her Aunt Vera and two sons. Shortly after taking the cocktail waitress job at the Eden Roc Connie got into some trouble thanks to a pool cleaner named Raul. Connie was living in Opa-Locka, in an apartment near the intersection of Harem and Sultan Avenues thirty miles from Miami Beach. Opa-Locka was established in the 1920s around an Arabian Nights theme, which explained why many of the thoroughfares had Middle Eastern names: Aladdin Street, Sesame Street, Sharazad Boulevard, Baghdad Avenue, Sabur Lane. Each workday Connie rode a city bus to and from the Eden Roc. She would have dearly preferred to live closer to the hotel but she was financially unable.

Connie was one of several shapely cocktail waitresses dressed in colorful one-piece swimsuits and white high-heels serving the poolside clientele. Tips were generous, more than enough to compensate for the several miles each girl would walk during a shift – back and forth hundreds of times between the bar and the poolside lounges and cabanas. By the end of her first month at the Eden Roc, Connie had earned praise from management, and seemed comfortably set. She opened an account at a nearby savings and loan outfit, planning to put at least ten percent of her earnings aside each week.

One Friday, Connie arrived at the hotel a couple hours

before her shift started to lie out on the beach; the previous day the bar manager suggested she even out her tan around the edges of her swimsuit. Connie and Raul noticed each other as she walked from the beach past the pump-house on her way to the employees' entrance. Raul called to Connie and soon the two were engaged in a friendly conversation.

The hotel hired Raul to maintain the pool: testing water samples, mixing chemicals, cleaning filters, and skimming bugs off the water's surface. Raul's job also entailed showing off his tanned, lithe body for the enjoyment of the middle-aged women (and some of the men, too), a task he performed gracefully as he vacuumed the bottom of the pool, perspiration glistening on his slim, muscular torso.

In passing, Raul asked Connie if she had ever sampled some of the flora of the tropics for which Miami was a major port of entry. He was referring to plants like *Cannabis sativa*, *Erythroxylum coca*, *Papaver somniferum*, but spoke instead of common items – grass, snow, blow, weed, poppies – and of a woman named “Dama Blanca.” Connie shrugged, and when Raul asked, somewhat provocatively, “You not tried anything?” Connie replied defensively, twirling her hair between her fingers, “Well, I’m new here, but I’m open-minded, y’know.” Raul offered and Connie accepted a marijuana cigarette right before she punched in for her shift attending to the poolside crowd. She took but two or three puffs, then left to change into her work outfit.

Inexperienced with the drug and its effects, Connie spilled a number a drinks, made incorrect change, giggled at inappropriate times, and generally disappointed her manager, a squat cretin named Mr. Semena. She blamed her pitiful performance

on an allergy to something in the air peculiar to Miami. When Semena arched his right eyebrow, Connie said that perhaps she had gotten too much sun lying on the beach. The manager was sympathetic – in the brief time she had worked at the Eden Roc, Connie had demonstrated punctuality, capable tray-carrying skills, and pleasantness toward her big-spending charges relaxing by the pool. Mr. Semena was also impressed with Connie's great ass. And he intended to fuck her sooner or later. She was permitted to return to work the next day.

It wouldn't last long however. Before she could complete eight months with the famous beachside hotel, Connie would be fired for the accumulation of a variety of offenses. She began a habit of punching in late and calling in sick, sometimes at the last minute. She once delivered a cocktail with a dead fly perched atop crushed ice to Ann-Margret, and complimented Harry Belafonte on his nice tan, a comment Connie made with utmost sincerity unaware that Belafonte was a light-skinned Negro who also happened to be a famous singer and actor who had recently released the million-selling album *Calypso*, and starred in the film *Carmen Jones*. Belafonte returned an uneasy smile, but his publicist made a stink to Semena who reassigned Connie to waitress at the counter of a casual dining area inside the hotel. The move reduced her take-home pay by 50 percent.

During this period of decline, Connie had begun to spend more and more time hanging around Raul and his doper friends. She gave up her apartment in Opa-Locka and moved in with Raul in Overtown. The arrangement shortened her commute to work, and helped her stretch her diminishing salary. Overtown was populated largely by blacks – in fact the

community had once been referred to as “Colored Town” for the railroad workers of African descent who had been segregated away from Miami proper before the turn of the century – and in the 1930s played host to such entertainers as Billie Holiday, Josephine Baker, Cab Calloway and Ella Fitzgerald. But in the late 1950s it had become downtrodden after the middle-class blacks moved north leaving behind the seeds of crime that would soon grow like kudzu.

Despite the dismal conditions in Raul’s neighborhood, Connie liked that she could walk to Little Havana where the food was spicy and cheap, the drinks were rich and exotic, and the air was filled with the sound of saucy Afro-Cuban music and the aroma of fine hand-rolled cigars. Connie discovered plantains and habaneros, ropa vieja and mojitos. With Raul’s help and encouragement she also discovered a capacity within herself to ingest copious amounts of illicit drugs. Initially repulsed by the hot smoke of Raul’s low quality weed and the bitter chemical taste of cocaine dripping down her throat, Connie now found it all of it hard to resist. Glitzy and manic nightlife in and around Miami added to the temptation. As if she were living a cliché, Connie went from being a wholesome rural girl who survived a nasty experience in sinful Las Vegas to becoming a sick, beaten-down addict in a dirty, depressing town, far from home and family.

Over time, Connie began arriving at work looking haggard, tangles in her unwashed hair, bags under her eyes and bruises on her arms from falling down. Her tips suffered. Diners would refuse to sit at the counter when Connie worked there, afraid she might be contagious with a communicable tropical illness. More than once, asserting she was not sufficiently presentable

to stand behind the counter, Connie's fellow waitresses straightened out her uniform and helped clean up her appearance.

Patience ran out though after Connie attempted to deliver two blue-plate specials to a man and his wife from Meadville, Pennsylvania, and instead began screaming in terror at the sight of the multi-stirrer milkshake maker she believed was threatening to kill her. She had placed a steel cup of chocolate milk and ice cream under one of the stirrers, and in her impaired state witnessed what she perceived to be a violent reaction from the angry machine that swelled up in rage at Connie's intrusion into its personal space. The poor girl crumpled to the floor in terror, sobbing inconsolably until she vomited all over herself and on the trousers of the man from Meadville who rushed behind the counter to assist her. An ambulance crew transported Connie to the hospital emergency room where the attending physician concluded she had suffered a reaction to some sort of hallucinogen. At first Connie denied it, but eventually she admitted she had eaten some kind of mushroom that was supposed to make her feel happier, to help her feel better about herself.

Connie had listened to Raul tout the mind-expanding effects of psilocybin mushrooms which had been recently taken up by the drug subculture on the East Coast but for millennia were ingested by the Indians of the Southwest. Raul was passionate about the benefits of the fungus but he failed to warn her of the powerful reaction that usually followed consumption of the mushroom.

"Are you feeling happier now, Miss?" asked the physician flatly. Connie was unsure whether the doctor was being sarcastic until he added, "Do you feel better about yourself?" After a few

hours of reclining on a gurney connected to an intravenous bag of syrupy-looking liquid dripping into a needle submerged in her arm, Connie was discharged. As a nurse escorted her to the exit, Connie spotted her manager from the Eden Roc waiting by the payment window.

He greeted her brightly, "Connie, it's good to see you up and walking. From what I hear, you gave the people back at the restaurant quite a scare."

"Thank you, Mr. Semena. I'm really sorry. I must have . . ."

"The Eden Roc will pay for the hospital visit, Connie. That's why I'm here. I also have your paycheck with me. There's an extra 50 bucks in it. Good luck with your career, whatever you decide to do."

Connie's mouth opened slightly and her eyebrows lowered a bit, indicating confusion with a pinch of disbelief thrown in.

"You're fired Connie. You're probably a lousy fuck anyway. Don't come back."

After being discharged from the emergency room, Connie rode the bus to Overtown and confronted Raul over the mushroom incident. Connie initiated a huge argument that expanded in scope to cover how Raul had conned her into entering a morass of drugs and decadence. The argument elicited a nasty display of unchivalrous conduct by Raul and ended with the departure of Connie and her two blackened eyes. Raul stayed behind in a pile of anger, snorting a couple of wide lines and wincing from the burning pain of four deep fingernail gouges in his face. Connie wandered around the neighborhood before going to “Son Cubanos,” a favored club in Little Havana where she hoped to run into one friend or another who might buy her dinner and offer a place to stay until she could recover. The place was packed but Connie encountered no one she recognized. She sat at tiny octagonal table coincidentally the exact size of a stop sign, and ordered a Cuba Libre and big bowl of ropa vieja. As Connie sat by herself picking at her spicy food she recalled the smorgasbord of the day’s grief, and contemplated what to do next. Just then a beautiful Hispanic woman approached Connie and asked her if she may sit down. The table was barely large enough for a single diner, but the club had it set up as a two-top, so Connie shrugged her shoulders and nodded affirmatively to the woman.

She could not see it, nor would she have believed it if told,

but in her state of distress with the two black eyes – big shiners that telegraphed “spirit” – Connie exuded an animal sexuality that is for a certain type of person irresistible. One such person was Pilar, the beautiful Hispanic woman who was now seated across from Connie, ordering an Old Fashioned mixed with orange marmalade.

Pilar was a back-up vocalist for *Machito and his Afro-Cubans*; the big band was booked to play the Fontainebleau for an extended billing. Pilar traveled with Machito all over the US, Caribbean, and South America. She could relate stories about partying in New York with Xavier Cugat, and riding in a golf cart along with Jackie Gleason, Bing Crosby, and two wealthy Florida land developers, one of whom spoke secretively of a potential purchase of a lot of land around Kissimmee in central Florida by an unnamed Hollywood mogul. Pilar subsequently bought a small parcel near the land in play and received an offer a year later for ten times what she paid, but she’s holding out for even more.

Pilar could also talk all night about José Martí, the Cuban writer, poet and painter who agitated for Cuban independence from Spain and against annexation by the United States, and who died in battle with Spanish troops at the Battle of Dos Ríos. She was also passionate when discussing the escapades of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.

If drunk enough, Pilar would contend that she was Hemingway’s inspiration for the wife of the guerilla leader in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* – also named Pilar; nevermind that Hemingway wrote the novel the year Pilar was born. In the story Hemingway’s heroine represents a departure from most of his other female characters in that she is not submissive to

the men around her, taking charge of the guerillas when her husband is poised to subvert their mission.

Occasionally, the real-life Pilar would offer to read a man's palm, and if he challenged her skills or the validity of it all, she would respond flawlessly with a quote from *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: "One who is deaf cannot hear music. Neither can he hear the radio. So he might say, never having heard them, that such things do not exist." Spoken with deep conviction, Pilar could convince even the most skeptical man with an outstretched palm that she possessed extra-sensory powers.

It was true. Pilar could tell riveting stories and talk all night and quote Hemingway, but tonight she didn't do any of these things. She was determined to pick up Connie and to do that she decided a better strategy was to listen rather than talk. Connie poured her heart out to Pilar, and Pilar made sure the bartender poured his bottle out to Connie. Pilar denounced men and encouraged Connie to embrace the logic of rejecting them altogether. Like most people in a drunken state, Connie was inclined to agree. Pilar maneuvered her chair closer to Connie and casually placed her hand on Connie's thigh. At first she kept her hand in place, then she slowly began caressing Connie's goose-fleshed thigh; with each pass, Pilar moved her fingers closer to and then under the hem of Connie's short skirt.

In a clean, quiet hotel room near the Fontainebleau where Pilar was living while *Machito and the Afro-Cubans* were in town, Connie laid back naked on the bed, head spinning, nipples painfully hard, and body quivering with excitement and expectation. Pilar rubbed some cocaine onto Connie's vagina with her tongue and worked it into her moist flesh, and the

remainder of the night was lost in a cloud of ecstasy for both women. Connie realized then that she had experienced her first orgasm.

Pilar could have quoted her namesake from *For Whom the Bell Tolls* that she was “no tortillera but a woman made for men,” but that would have been a lie too big to tell, even for her.

Pilar and Connie spent a fortnight together and just as Connie concluded she was in love, Pilar announced she would be leaving town with the band. Connie was devastated. Pilar tried to console Connie, telling her that the band would soon return to Miami, but in truth Machito was headed to Europe and then to the Far East. Easily a year would pass before the two lovers might be able to reunite. Connie slowly came to accept the notion that she and Pilar would never see each other again; Pilar was too much a creature of adventure in constant pursuit of variety. Very soon she would forget about Connie and find another lover who would be bowled over by Pilar’s worldliness, intellect and uncanny ability to coax forth one and then another and then another intense, enduring orgasm.

Determined to right herself, Connie applied for jobs at tony establishments in Miami Beach, but was rejected by all. The few run-of-the-mill tourist hotels and restaurants that did hire her quickly fired her after witnessing the inevitable drug- or liquor-induced on-the-job failures. She wound up back in Overtown working intermittently at a diner until she dropped out of regular society completely, turning tricks to support a newly acquired heroin habit. Within this grim milieu, Connie was most content when a John would come in and pay to sit

quietly in a dark corner and masturbate while watching her go down on another girl. Several years went by like this, each resembling its predecessor. The only material change to the city was made by two grandiose highway projects that bisected Overtown – an east to west slice by Interstate 95, and a north to south offense by Interstate 395 – tearing the heart out of the struggling neighborhood.

Now 36 years old, but looking more like 46, Connie was the possession of a heartless pimp named Speedo who sold her out at discount rates to the cheesiest bastards who wandered in from tool-and-die conventions hosted in downtown Miami. She called herself “Midnight St. George.” She no longer possessed the great ass that had helped her win cocktail waitress jobs at top spots in Vegas and Miami Beach.

Connie made no attempt to hide her disgust with men. During intercourse she would file her nails or read a magazine, casually ignoring the blob of flesh bouncing and grunting on top of her. Invariably, some ugly fat-fuck would struggle unsuccessfully to get an erection and complain afterward to Speedo, blaming Midnight for his shitty experience, usually referring to her as something akin to “that skank.” One particular fat-fuck came to Speedo’s place on the day before Christmas Eve. He was in Miami from Detroit for the winter, spending some time deep-sea fishing and making day trips to the Bahamas to partake of some friendly gambling, blackjack mostly. From the looks of the man, skin grayish and clothing ratty, one might infer that time and bad habits had taken a toll on him and his quality of life. Speedo figured the unshaven man in the worn suit for a low-roller and directed him to Midnight after the man expressed disinterest in Chrissy and her bony ass.

After that encounter with the man from Detroit, Connie never again worked for Speedo, nor for anyone else. She never again stopped at the diner near her slummy flat in Overtown for the 79 cent bacon, eggs, coffee & grits special. She wasn't around to meet once again with Pilar who had made special arrangements to perform in Miami with her own salsa band, hoping to reunite at least for a few days with her old lover. Connie was dead – raped and strangled in a despicable fashion by a fat-fuck from Detroit. Snuffed by a man from whom she once stole a gun and \$10,000. Fucking Lou. After killing Connie he walked calmly out of the decrepit building, chuckling mordantly, head down, handing a tip of a sweaty \$100 bill to the middle-aged Madame with the sagging tits. As Lou stepped into a cab outside the tenement building he could hear screams coming from the second story window.

Vera was feeling exasperated when she picked up the mail from the dented aluminum box perched on a four-by-four wooden post at the end of the driveway, a foul ball damaged in a game of mailbox baseball. It resembled a Quonset hut struck by a small meteor. Walking down to the wounded receptacle gave Vera a moment of peace away from her annoying if not persistent nephews. She had argued for ten days straight against Ronnie's and Lennie's request to attend some sort of hippie music festival 750 miles away in New York State in a town called Woodstock, or was it Woodcock? Winestock, perhaps? Not only was the festival far from home and the boys were young, having only just recently turned 15, but Vera was convinced that that fruity slut Spooky was behind the plan, filling their heads with crazy ideas. Vera forbade Ronnie and Lennie from associating with Spooky, but that had become hard to enforce as long as she allowed them to play in the band.

When his aunt put her foot down on the twin's request to borrow her car to drive to Woodstock, Ronnie shrewdly capitulated, having already convinced himself that Lennie would be unable to drive safely such a long distance on busy interstate highways; in their conjoined condition, Lennie would have to be the driver. Although Lennie received his learner's permit on the second attempt, Ronnie did not feel safe with his brother at the wheel. In fact, Ronnie suspected the policeman

who conducted the on-road examination passed Lennie more out of sympathy than from any demonstration of competence. Honestly, Lennie's performance on the second test was markedly inferior to his failed first during which he toppled several red cones on the serpentine course.

Ronnie figured that backing off on the one point he didn't care about anyway might strengthen his position on the greater issue: gaining Vera's permission to attend the concert. He had already made a plan to hitch a ride to the festival with Spooky who would be traveling to the Hudson Valley in her Galaxie with some of her stoner friends – exactly the scenario Vera feared. Spooky assumed Ronnie and Lennie were coming along given Ronnie's absolute assurance that they would accompany her.

The Streamlined Babies learned some of the simpler songs by bands promoted in ads for Woodstock (3 Days of Peace and Music): *Jefferson Airplane*, *Janis Joplin*, *The Jeff Beck Band*, and *The Jimi Hendrix Experience*. Jackie Washington with his choir-boy voice sang lead on such songs as "Piece of My Heart" and "Don't You Want Somebody to Love." By now, Spooky had become a committed groupie for the band, attending nearly every gig they managed to line up. Sometimes she would be the only person paying attention when they played dive bars for no money. The old drunks with the broken livers and stone-studded kidneys would look from their barstools at Spooky – dancing like a dervish to the pulsating beat produced by the quartet of misfits – and wonder whether they were witnessing the collapse of Western civilization.

The moment Vera stepped back onto the porch, sweat dripping after making the short roundtrip stroll along the gravel driveway in the hot June sun of North Carolina, Ronnie started

in again with a dose of whining. “Aunt Vera, why can’t we go to Woodstock on the Greyhound? They go straight to the festival, and it’s not expensive. Lennie and me have the money saved.” Normally, Vera would offer some sort of immediate and firm response, but her attention was drawn to the postmark of a letter mixed in with some bills and a Sears summer catalog which promoted outfits in double-knit polyester. The wrinkled letter which had no return address was postmarked Miami, Florida. Experienced with disappointment and gifted with an impeccable sense of doom, Vera shooed the boys off the porch as she stared down at the letter in her trembling hand. “Go and practice your music,” she said without glancing up from the letter. Ronnie and Lennie ceased protesting for the time being; they sensed a deep distraction in their aunt’s voice that suggested further whining would be futile and risked narrowing the chances of securing her permission.

Vera slit open the letter with the nail on her pinky finger, the only one not broken and stubby from washing dishes and pulling weeds, and withdrew the folded sheet of paper.

Dear Mrs. Wilcox,

I don’t know how to begin. I hope you are the right person to be getting this letter. It took me a long time to find someone who could be a relative. I knew your niece. She called herself Midnight St. George, but she told her real name was Connie, and that she was from North Carolina. Connie was a good friend to me. I knew her for 5 years since I first moved from Atlanta and we

started working together. She told me how she worked in Las Vegas and then at the Eden Roc Hotel here. Classy, always classy, Mrs. Wilcox. Like I said, Connie was a good friend.

I'm sorry to write to you to tell you that Connie is dead. She was murdered by a stranger right before Christmas in 1967. It was totally senseless. I was down the hall from her when it happened and I was the first one to come to her aid, but it was no use. The police here arrested a suspect, but he got off. They say there wasn't enough evidence, but I think he did it. I really do.

Connie was cremated right after the first of the year. We spread her ashes on the beach like she asked us to in case something ever happened to her. Everyone who knew Connie was real sad about her passing. I know she hasn't spoke to you in a long time, but she talked a lot about you. She told me how you were a great mother to her after her real mother died. I guess Connie had children too, but she only talked about them once, so I never learned much about them. I know it will be tough for you to tell them about their mom.

I sure hope you're Connie's aunt. You're the only Vera Wilcox in North Carolina, so I took a chance. If this letter was sent to you by mistake, please accept my apology and throw it away.

Sincerely,

Chrissy Cocoplum

PS: I enclosed a clipping from the local newspaper about the murder investigation. I really think this guy in the article (Lou Vigorito) did it.

Chrissy signed the letter with a childish flourish, dotting the “i” with a sketch of a fruit that was presumably a plum, and drawing the tail of the “y” back under the letters preceding it in her first name. Both capital “C’s” looked like cent-signs.

Vera returned the letter and the clipping carefully to the envelope, deciding to read the newspaper’s account of Connie’s murder later, perhaps after awakening from a sleep she intended to induce presently with a few little blue pills. Ronnie and Lennie, perplexed about their aunt’s early retreat to her bedroom were left to make dinner for themselves – some peanut butter and mayonnaise sandwiches and a bag of Fritos.

Vera made an abrupt about-face over her opposition to the Woodstock trip, catching the boys' off guard. They had expected to fight her for at least another month, and placed their chances of success well below fifty percent. The quickness with which Vera caved was received by Ronnie and Lennie with surprise, great joy and relief, although they felt a modicum of guilt for having achieved their goal so easily in the end. Obviously, something drove Vera to change her mind, but she didn't reveal it. Lennie assumed she tired of the arguing; Ronnie sensed some larger issue might be involved.

Vera did not inform the twins that their mother was no longer alive. Shortly after being transferred into Vera's care as toddlers, Ronnie and Lennie had forgotten all about their mother. And in the several years since Connie moved away then vanished completely, the boys rarely asked about her. There was a brief period of time when Ronnie appeared disturbed by Connie's absence; Vera sensed selfish anger in him for being abandoned rather than sadness over the disappearance of his mother. For the most part the boys exhibited a lack of curiosity. At first this bothered Vera but later she came to understand and accept it. For all their fifteen years Ronnie and Lennie had led isolated lives, interacting within a tight circle of acquaintances: their tutor, the librarian, a handful of pediatricians. Only recently had they developed their friendship with the Washington brothers. Vera could think of no good reason

to tell them Connie was dead, and certainly not that she had been murdered.

Vera easily read through the lines of the letter from Chrissy Cocoplum – what kind of person has such a name? – that Connie had been prostituting herself in Miami, and that saddened Vera tremendously. Vera recalled Connie as a child, left behind by her own mother who quietly disappeared forever, and that saddened her some more. And as is often the case with sadness, the feeling once stoked tends to run rampant. Vera became sad now over how much strain her nephews had endured since the day they were born shackled together like prisoners on a chain gang. It was impossible for her to comprehend the kind of lives Siamese twins must lead. Vera was sobbing uncontrollably now. She blamed herself and resolved to do what she could to remedy that which was in her power to affect. Permission for Ronnie and Lennie to go to that Woodcock concert in New York State had just become much easier for her to grant.

On August 13, Vera drove the boys to Winston-Salem arriving at the bus station at the last minute. They kissed their aunt on both cheeks and then boarded a sleek Greyhound bus bound for points north. Each boy carried a backpack containing a sleeping bag, some peanut butter and mayonnaise sandwiches, and extra clothes; Vera had sewn a \$50 bill into the waistband of each boy's pants for emergency expenses. Conjoined twins each saddled with a backpack do not tend to maneuver smoothly, and it took several minutes for Ronnie and Lennie to get settled into their seats, infuriating some of

the less-patient passengers who had been aboard since the bus first left Houston.

Each boy paid \$18 for a ticket to the concert but Vera put up the funds for the roundtrip bus fare, insisting that her nephews save their hard-earned money for something more important in the years to come. Accepting their aunt's generosity impressed a sense of guilt upon the boys when they stepped off the bus with their belongings at the first stop in Greensboro. From the beginning Ronnie and Lennie had never intended to ride the bus all the way to Woodstock. Spooky was waiting in the parking lot for them in her Galaxie, accompanied by Sunny and Jupe, two friends who were dressed like medieval peasants. Sunny wore a mid-length printed skirt pinched at the waist by a wide leather belt. On her dirty feet she wore leather sandals with straps wrapped around her calves. Her long, curly black hair spilled out from underneath a paisley bandana. Ronnie noticed right away she wasn't wearing a bra. Jupe – short for “Jupiter” the boys learned later – wore a flowery vest over a pink cotton tie-dyed shirt, elephant bell-bottom pants, and a string tied around his head which kept his greasy hair out of his eyes. He had long, bushy sideburns and a mustache that grew well below the corners of his mouth, and wore a small gold earring through his left earlobe. In contrast, Ronnie and Lennie, members of a rock and roll band, dressed more like Jehovah's Witnesses than rock stars. They were victims of an aunt who admired Lawrence Welk and by extension the fashion disasters exhibited on his TV program. It took some serious complaining from Ronnie to convince Vera to buy him and Lennie blue jeans for the Woodstock concert, albeit cheap

versions from K-Mart that looked to have been manufactured from canvas instead of denim.

Ronnie and Lennie threw their backpacks into the Galaxie's spacious trunk, roomy enough to sneak four people into a drive-in movie. Spooky invited them to sit in front where they would be more comfortable. Sunny and Jupe lit two well-rolled joints and the trip was underway.

"Ron, your job is to keep the music going," Spooky instructed, "There's a bunch of 8-tracks in that box by your feet. Sunny, pass that joint up here." Not counting several stops to piss and buy chips, beer and gas, Spooky planned to make it all the way from North Carolina to Woodstock in a single uninterrupted trip.

Spooky took a long drag and passed the joint to Lennie who took a modest, obligatory puff, then passed it to his brother just as Ronnie received the second joint from Jupe who passed it up front in the opposite direction. As the group crossed the state line into Virginia on their way up Interstate 95 toward Richmond, Lennie was very high, a state induced less by Lennie's own smoking than by Ronnie's exuberant intake. Ronnie was busy pulling 8-tracks from the box. His sense of time distorted, it seemed to Ronnie as though each album lasted about five minutes. By the time Spooky noted a sign indicating "Washington, DC – 35 miles," Ronnie had already inserted and removed fifteen cartridges, including *Beggar's Banquet*, *Electric Ladyland*, *Cheap Thrills*, *Traffic*, *Wheels of Fire*. He played an album by a band called *The Velvet Underground* that sounded distinctly different from the rest of the material. And the ethereal music recorded on an album called *A Saucerful of Secrets* combined with the aroma of fragrant hashish smoldering in a

short, odd-looking pipe induced a feeling in Ronnie of bodily detachment and euphoria.

Spooky blurted out, "Hey, look – Washington is coming up." The reference led her to add, "How're Jackie and Rosie doing?"

Before Ronnie or Lennie could reply, Sunny responded, "Shit, can you believe Jackie Kennedy married that old Greek fossil? The president must be rolling over in his grave."

"What's so hard to believe? The guy's worth about \$50 million," said Jupe with a chortle. "And the fucker's name ain't Rosie; it's something like a philosopher's name –Socrates, maybe." Jupe took another toke on the hash pipe. "No, wait – Aristotle. Yeah, Aristotle O'Neal."

Spooky was laughing hysterically now, snorting between haws. "I'm talking about the other guys in Ronnie's band. Jackie and Rosie Washington. They play the bass and drums. Y'know, the white Negroes I told you about. You should see 'em."

Jupe cracked, "Does that make 'em whiggers?" Laughing all around except from Ronnie who was offended by Jupe's remark. Lennie snickered but he didn't appreciate Spooky's reference to "Ronnie's band."

Spooky drove the Galaxie into a service station just past the New Jersey state line. The man in the white uniform and jaunty cap pumped in 22 gallons of gas and added a quart of oil, bringing the total bill to \$8.50. Spooky asked the attendant to go back inside and bring her one of those free roadmaps of New York. Jaunty cap replied snappily, "Yes Sir, Ma'am," and ran back to the office. "Look at that jerk run," cracked Jupe. "What a douche bag."

Ronnie offered Spooky money for the gas but she wouldn't take it. "Ron, you play beautiful music for me. I'm not gonna let you pay for gas. You're my guest. You too, Len." With that, she floored the Galaxie and took off out of the service station leaving behind the unpaid debt and several feet of rubber on the concrete. With a look of dejection on his face, for he had been burnt like this before, the gas station attendant stepped out of the garage, thoughtfully carrying maps of both New York State and New York City as his valued customer had been ambiguous about her preference.

Spooky left Interstate 95 for the Garden State Parkway which led to Interstate 87 in New York State. Moments later she pulled into the first rest stop and asked Lennie to drive for awhile. "We gotta get off at Exit 19 in Kingston. That's only about 75 miles. Can you do it Len?" asked Spooky.

Lennie hesitated. Ronnie gave Lennie a look of panic followed by a scowl of displeasure.

"Listen," she said, "I'm tired and those two in the back aren't in any shape to drive." The boys looked over their shoulders simultaneously. Sunny was asleep, her head tilted backward, mouth wide open, and Jupe was leaning against the door holding an open can of beer in his left hand. His eyelids were parted just enough to expose blood-red eyeballs. A smoldering cigarette stuck to his dried-out lips.

Lennie took the wheel and proceeded north toward Albany and Montreal. About five miles from exit 19, Lennie noticed several cars parked along the side of the road and in the median strip. The jumbled collection of vehicles looked as though they had been rendered inoperable by the power of Klaatu from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and summarily abandoned.

After waiting in a line for nearly an hour to exit the thruway at Kingston, Lennie drove into the toll booth and presented the ticket along with a handful of coins. The toll operator asked Lennie for his destination.

“Woodstock,” he replied. Despite his effort to speak coherently, the answer came out “W’shtock.”

Blandly, “The town or the concert?”

Lennie looked blankly for a second and then he turned toward Spooky who had her head on Ronnie’s lap. Ronnie shrugged.

“The town or the concert?” Long pause and some agitated honking from travelers behind. “It looks like you want the concert. That’s not in Woodstock. You have to drive down Route 209 and follow the signs toward Monticello.”

A couple more beats, then Lennie proceeded slowly through the tollbooth and pulled over to the right-hand berm. He poked Ronnie. With a hint of panic in his voice, he said, “We’re lost.” Ronnie looked down just as Spooky lifted her head off of his lap. A painful, stiff erection bulged in his K-Mart jeans and he wondered a bit sheepishly if Spooky had noticed it, and if so, what would be her appraisal of his package?

After several minutes of confused banter, the group concluded that the Woodstock Festival was not going to take place in the town of Woodstock, and that they would have to travel another hour along secondary roads to a farm in Sullivan County. Spooky resumed driving and after encountering the worst traffic jam in her life, she decided like so many others to ditch the car and walk the last few miles into Bethel.

The five from North Carolina staked a claim in a flat spot about 200 yards from the main stage on Max Yasgur’s farm

and pitched two tents. Ronnie and Lennie, unfamiliar with the rigors of camping arrived without a tent of their own. Spooky insisted they stay inside with her even though she brought a tiny two-man tent and the weather was perfect that night for sleeping out under the stars. Just after 5 p.m. on Friday Richie Havens started into an eight-song set, followed by a string of folk musicians that did not appeal much to Ronnie and Lennie. The evening's performances ended with a pregnant Joan Baez telling some lame story about her husband and singing protest ballads. After Baez finished singing "Sweet Sunny South," Jupe found it profoundly amusing to ask Sunny repeated variants of the question "Is Sunny's south sweet?" Ronnie became increasingly convinced that Jupe was just a garden variety asshole who despite his outward appearance of being a hip dude probably grew up slopping swine on one of the thousands of hog farms in central Carolina.

Before retiring for the night in Spooky's tiny tent, Ronnie and Lennie had to endure the embarrassment of standing in line, side-by-side, then entering the fetid Port-o-Let together. Both boys decided that constipation would be preferable to maneuvering inside the polypropylene gas chamber for a clear shot into the gaping hole.

The weather turned sour on Saturday, but the music was better, although numerous technical difficulties plagued some of the performances. Ronnie and Lennie watched in rapt admiration for *Mountain*, *Janis Joplin*, *Credence Clearwater Revival* and *Jefferson Airplane*. *The Who* played a bit too long, and members of *The Grateful Dead* were nearly electrocuted. During *Credence's* rendition of "I Put a Spell on You," Spooky and Sunny stripped to the waist and danced topless with Jupe who took off his shirt

in solidarity with his female friends. The boys tried not to gawk too much. Sunny had the better body, but Ronnie preferred Spooky, his first love, even though her tits suffered the gravitational effects of going braless for an extended period of time.

Sunday was a long drawn-out affair involving significant drug and alcohol ingestion accompanied by music by *The Band*, *Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young*, *Ten Years After*, and finally *Jimi Hendrix*. Jupe, to commemorate the final day of Woodstock, produced some small squares of paper he purchased upon which a substance called “acid” was impregnated. Sounding addled and somewhat pompous, Jupe slurred, “This has been the most enlighteningest experience of my life. I love y’all. Peace be upon you.” With that, Jupe and his Carolina compatriots each took a hit of acid, placing the blotter paper on their tongues, anticipating the wonderful experience that would completely overtake them.

Most of the half-million who stomped onto Yasgur’s farm across broken-down fences had already left, no doubt eager to get out of the mud and into a hot shower. Only 40,000 people remained to witness the closing acts of the three-day event. Following Hendrix’s inspired version of “The Star Spangled Banner,” and his popular “Purple Haze,” Spooky and Sunny and Jupe and Ronnie and Lennie trudged back to their tents.

Ronnie and Lennie lay down in the grimy tent, exhausted, heads spinning. Never before had they felt so detached from reality, and oddly from each other. Ronnie felt like he was living his recurring dream in which he is no longer physically conjoined to his twin brother. Spooky followed the boys into the tent and promptly, if clumsily, removed all her clothes. Ronnie had ever seen a real live totally naked woman. The sneak peaks into Playboy magazine, placed upon the highest shelf at the drug store in Statesberry had been of marginal instructional value. The photographers coyly obstructed the female pubic area with strategically-placed potted plants or large books. Spooky nuzzled up next to Ronnie. She gave off a musky smell of perspiration from not bathing for four days and the scent of sexual desire. She ran her hand slowly under Ronnie's damp tee shirt. She instinctively recoiled when she touched the band of flesh connecting him to Lennie. Ronnie caressed Spooky's breasts and felt his penis swell. Thinking he was disconnected from his brother, Ronnie tried to roll on top of Spooky, and the sudden movement stretched the connecting cartilage, rousting Lennie temporarily from his state of semi-unconsciousness. Recognizing the limitation, Spooky sat up, pulled off Ronnie's muddy jeans, climbed atop him like a cowgirl and started to grind his cock. Spooky was so wet that Ronnie was at first not completely sure he was inside her, thinking perhaps he had simply penetrated a fold of flesh.

Since puberty, Ronnie wondered how he might react if and when he ever had an opportunity for intercourse. Mostly, he imagined himself performing admirably, locked in a permanent state of arousal. How easily and often he would get an erection even under the most innocuous of circumstances: reading a boring story, watching TV, taking a bath with Lennie, going to the bathroom. Now, with Spooky rocking rhythmically back and forth, moaning gently with each forward thrust, Ronnie's confidence was vindicated: his cock was so hard, it hurt. He closed his heavy eyelids and caressed Spooky's thighs. Spooky reversed her position and imposed her pussy on Ronnie's face as she took his cock into her mouth. The smooth maneuver so surprised Ronnie that at first he froze, not sure how to proceed. Spooky said in a deep husky voice, "Eat me."

Ronnie had only a passing familiarity with the concept of oral sex so he was consigned to learn on the job, struggling against the effects of acid to concentrate on kissing and licking whatever part of Spooky's posterior region he could reach with his lips and tongue. In fact, Ronnie concentrated so intently to eat pussy properly, as focused as a man learning to tie a double sheet bend knot, that he didn't notice Spooky stroking and sucking Lennie's cock. In his state of inebriation Lennie could not be certain that the sensation he was feeling was real, believing instead that he was in the midst of a very realistic dream.

Ronnie glanced away from Spooky's pussy briefly toward his brother's face which he found to be uncomfortably close to his. Lennie's expression suggested the approach of ecstasy: a serene smile which changed into a grimace, eyes shut tight as though he were lifting a heavy toolbox.

Spooky worked both boys' cocks with vigor. Ronnie shot his load first, planting a glob of cum onto her chin. Lennie followed immediately after, delivering three or four substantial streams onto her face, with a portion of the first stream landing in her hair. Spooky rubbed the cum on her face and tits, happy that she had coaxed the twins to near-simultaneous climax, and decamped from Ronnie's dampened face to lie next to her young lover. Only then, looking at his brother with his stinky pants around his knees and a stupid expression on his face did Ronnie understand that he had just been an unwitting participant in a decidedly creepy ménage à trois.

With a mischievous smile, Spooky announced, "Damn, that was good, but I want more." She lit a joint and passed it to Lennie who took it reflexively. "Take a little rest guys, 'cause you're gonna need your strength. I want one of you to fuck my pussy and the other to fuck me in the ass. It'll take some figuring out, but I think we can do it." Ronnie turned his head away, pursing his mouth and clenching his teeth. "C'mon Ron, you wanna be on the bottom or the top?"

Instantly, Ronnie felt contempt for Spooky. And for Lennie, too. Inside his adolescent mind, where logic and nuance were still under development, and where a simple-minded emotion like jealousy occupied outsized space, Ronnie believed he owned Spooky, and that she should be faithful to him alone. That Spooky had never actually dedicated herself to Ronnie or sought a commitment from him was irrelevant; he felt betrayed. Ronnie absolutely wanted to fuck Spooky in any orifice she desired, but not with his dumbass brother looking on, and certainly not with him as a participant in the carnal engagement. When Lennie tried to move toward Spooky, his

penis erect again, Ronnie pushed him back toward the floor of the grimy tent, causing himself to fall backward as well. "Quit it, Lennie! Pull your pants up; we're leaving."

Ronnie concluded his twin brother Lennie was a rat, an untrustworthy partner, a feeble parasite just like the sickos described in *Medical Curiosities* who through their own weaknesses visit grief and despair upon their conjoined siblings.

The big goofy party known as "Woodstock" was officially over. Ronnie insisted that he and Lennie take the Greyhound back to Winston-Salem, opting out of a long, uncomfortable ride back in the Galaxie with Spooky and her whacked buddies. During the return trip, Ronnie and Lennie spoke not a single word to one another. When Ronnie wanted to go to the restroom, he simply stood up, pulling Lennie along with him. Lennie reciprocated with obnoxious behavior of his own. Each boy had plenty of time during the sixteen hour trip to nurture their disregard for one another, and to fantasize longingly about a day in the future when they might escape the bond of flesh.

Vera met the boys at the bus station expecting to find them tired but excited and talkative about their first big trip away from home. Instead her two dirty, foul-smelling nephews quietly stashed their backpacks in the trunk and climbed into the car without saying anything more than "Hi."

Ronnie fell into a depression over the next six months and lost interest in playing guitar. Exposed constantly to his brother's funk, Lennie followed Ronnie into the abyss. *The Streamlined Babies* stopped practicing and performing, and eventually the Washington brothers joined some other black musicians playing Motown hits. Spooky made a few attempts to contact the boys, but Vera always boxed her out. The lack of communication cemented Ronnie's resentment and perversely increased his desire to see her again.

Ronnie and Lennie lost interest in academic pursuits as well. Lennie's once-strong desire to stay current with new fiction waned. Soon the boys stopped visiting the library, a place where a year prior they had spent several hours almost every day. Between September and December, Vera hired three different tutors because Ronnie and Lennie were doing so poorly, finally calling back Mrs. Carlin who demanded a significant increase in compensation. When Ronnie and Lennie scored 14 and 13 respectively on a practice ACT test, Vera had trouble holding back tears. For as long as she had had custody of the boys, she was confident that their intelligence, passion for learning, and shared disability would translate into a full scholarship at a quality college, perhaps Duke or UNC in nearby Raleigh-Durham, or maybe even at an Ivy League school. Now with such bottom-basement test scores, they would be lucky to gain acceptance to community college.

The boys acquired some bad habits while enveloped by the funk of their depression. Ronnie masturbated all the time, and Lennie started drinking, beer at first then white lightning procured from a local moonshiner who hid mason jars full of the high-proof beverage for his under-aged customer in a cluster of rocks in the corner of a park. Lennie getting intoxicated on shine affected Ronnie who tried intermittently and unsuccessfully to convince his twin to regulate his intake. Lennie's recalcitrance only spurred Ronnie to retaliate by experimenting with other home-made substances concocted from such sundries as cough syrup, rat poison, and powdered baby formula. Separately and together, the two boys consumed large quantities of narcotics, alcohol, pornography, tar and nicotine.

As their sixteenth birthday approached, Vera decided to take action to jumpstart her nephews out of their malaise, eschewing the option of professional psychiatric examination and care. Her own amateur assessment of their mental health condition was that Ronnie and Lennie were experiencing nothing more than teenage angst and growing pains, and that giving them something to divert their attention would form the basis for their cure. She was totally unaware of their recent acquisition of some base habits and vices.

On January 4, Vera summoned her nephews from their dark room where Lennie was listening to "Heroin" by *The Velvet Underground* through coconut sized headphones, trying to ignore Ronnie who had just finished jerking off to some graphic porn he found in a dumpster outside one of the dive bars they used to play. *Playboy* and *Penthouse* published nothing like this stuff.

Vera called through the locked bedroom door, "C'mon boys,

get up. I've got something to show you out front." Ronnie wiped off his dick, pulled up his pants, shoved under the mattress the creased copy of *Farmer's Slutty Daughter*, its pages stained with tomato sauce and cum, and knocked the headphones off Lennie's head. "Hey asshole," he said in a monotone, "get your ass off the bed – Vera's calling."

The two stepped onto the porch and into the subdued light of a winter afternoon, Vera walking one step anxiously behind them. In the driveway sat a 1967 Pontiac LeMans purchased on time by Vera for her sullen boys. She struggled to make a decent down payment, and would struggle for the next 48 months making steep monthly payments, but she was convinced that psychiatric care would cost even more. When Ronnie and Lennie cracked the biggest smiles she had seen since putting them on the Greyhound bus in August, Vera knew she had made a good move.

"Happy birthday Ronnie, happy birthday Lennie. I love you both so much. I hope you like it," she said with excitement that was balanced by just enough blasé to protect her in case they didn't like the car. Even a teenager practiced in the art of sullen mood swings and carefully crafted ennui lets his guard down now and again, and Ronnie and Lennie were no exception. True, they had augured themselves into a deep hole following the sexual debacle of Woodstock and its aftermath, events that would seem pitifully small later in life, but the gift of a hot vehicle like the '67 LeMans changed everything. Both boys saw the vehicle as an escape from house arrest, a means to procure the illicit goods for which each had acquired a taste, an opportunity to normalize their lives in a small but meaningful way. Ronnie's and Lennie's first destination: the Orpheum Theater

where Connie once enjoyed the finest of Hollywood, and where X-rated movies now played all day long.

Vera concocted a bountiful birthday dinner for Ronnie and Lennie that included Carolina Pork Twirl (bacon and pork tenderloin rolled into spirals and grilled), Chicken Bog (a low-country chicken, sausage and rice stew), and Apple Stack Cake bearing 33 candles – 16 for each boy plus one more for no particular reason. After the feast, the three retired to the living room where the boys had spent very little time since the previous summer, to watch television together. Normally an argument between the boys might have erupted over the choice of program. Lennie preferred shows like *Gomer Pyle* and *Green Acres* for their ridiculous portrayal of southern nitwits; Ronnie insisted on *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched* for the tits and ass. Today being a Sunday, the three lined up on the raggedy sofa, chomping on Space Food Sticks left over from the celebration of the Apollo 11 moon landing, to observe Marlon Perkins on *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* narrate a confrontation between a 3,000 pound rhinoceros and Marlon's hunky sidekick Jim Fowler. Later in the evening Ronnie, Lennie and Vera suffered through a sappy episode of *Bonanza* titled "It's a Small World" in which Ben Cartwright tries to help a widowed circus dwarf adjust to a new life in Virginia City. TV shows involving physical misfits always made Vera uneasy when in the presence of Ronnie and Lennie, and her uneasiness induced a reciprocal reaction from her nephews.

After *Bonanza* wrapped up, Vera informed Ronnie and Lennie that she had arranged an opportunity with Otis Weiss for them to work part-time at Weiss's Plumbing & Hardware store – only if they really wanted to, naturally – stocking shelves

and doing odd jobs. She shoehorned the proposal into the conversation quite nonchalantly. “You’re going to need some money to buy gas now that you have that nice car, y’know,” said Vera, hoping to coax a positive reaction. She believed a steady job would provide needed therapy to correct the boys’ morose attitudes. The hardware store seemed ideal. She had decided against pursuing a job for them at the local grocery store, mindful of how the Hilton Sisters had ended up as anonymous cashiers at the Park-n-Stop, a depressing dénouement to their lives as modestly famous celebrities, and she sought not to draw parallels with her nephews.

Ronnie and Lennie looked at each other and shrugged shoulders of indifference. Each could read the other’s mind: Vera’s right – we surely will need money to buy gas to fuel the car so we can drive it to places where we can gratify our various bad habits and satiate our wicked desires. Ronnie replied without emotion, “Sounds good Aunt Vera. When do we start?”

tis Weiss was a 65 year old widower and owner of the biggest hardware store in Statesberry, founded by his grandfather William during Reconstruction. In 1889, Lafayette Wilcox moved from Gastonia to Statesberry down the road from William Weiss. Years later, their grandchildren Vera and Otis would skip stones together in the shallow stagnant creek at the edge of the Weiss's property, and play hide-n-seek in the field amidst the tall August corn. Sometimes they would play hospital. The time Nurse Vera rubbed cod-liver oil on patient Otie's swollen penis causing the poor invalid to squirt semen all over the stunned nurse's hand, Otie was certain he would someday marry Vera. That didn't happen, but this initial sexual encounter was forever seared into Otie's memory, and over 50 years later he could recall it in more vivid detail than any carnal episode that he had experienced since.

Otis kept in touch with Vera off and on, although years would go by sometimes without any contact from him. After his wife died of emphysema, however, Otis stepped up the overtures hoping to generate the spark that existed when the two were barely teenagers. Vera enjoyed his company, and he treated her kindly on their dates, always paying for dinner and never protesting her requests for cheap Chianti in a wicker-wrapped bottle or her choices of lame movies.

On rare occasions, after drinking too much wine at dinner perhaps, Otis and Vera would have sex at Otis's place on a

pull-out couch equipped with a thin mattress atop a skeleton of steel bars. The widower was uncomfortable making love in the bed where his wife drew her last wheezy breath. Otis's performance in the sack left much to be desired – he never ate pussy, he always insisted on being on top, and he never lasted more than 45 seconds – but Vera tolerated it, thoughtfully faking an orgasm each time. After returning home she masturbated for an hour in candlelight with a two-pronged battery-operated dildo that she hid in her sewing basket.

Vera believed after a year of dating Otis Weiss that she was entitled to ask him for the favor of hiring her conjoined nephews, and Otis agreed. Ronnie and Lennie arrived at Weiss's Plumbing & Hardware at noon as directed. Otis Weiss informed them that he would be paying each of them three-fourths of the normal starting wage on account of their condition which surely would impede their productivity. Neither boy complained. Lacking extensive experience in the world, it never really occurred to them to protest, or to tell the man outright to shove it. Instead they accepted the valuation that the two of them equaled one-and-a-half regular boys. Ronnie and Lennie worked about 20 hours a week refilling bins of nails and screws, mixing paint, pulling weeds and sweeping floors. Weiss kept the twins away from close contact with customers.

The boys made enough money to keep the tank of the LeMans full and buy booze, cigarettes, comic books, porno magazines and weed. Perhaps because she was carrying on a discrete affair with their boss, Vera did not pry into Ronnie's and Lennie's comings and goings. She was content just to see them leave the house for work and return safely the same day, even when they came back late looking a bit bleary-eyed. Vera

was heartened whenever Otis would remark about how diligent her nephews were. In fact, Ronnie and Lennie often showed up late for work and usually accomplished very little. But as long as they did not steal tools or annoy customers, Otis continued to employ them, wisely recognizing that uninterrupted employment of the twins was directly correlated to his access to Vera's carnal assets.

Saturday at Weiss's Plumbing & Hardware was the busiest day of the week, patronized by home-owners working on weekend projects. March 7, 1970 was one such Saturday. Although the store was packed with people anxious to extricate themselves from winter, Otis asked some of his employees, the ones not working directly with customers or at the check-out counter, if they would like to take an hour off to watch a total eclipse of the sun that would be visible up and down the East Coast and was to pass over North Carolina around 1 p.m. Ronnie and Lennie, although less well-read than they were as children, still harbored fascination for scientific phenomena. The opportunity to witness such a rare event excited both boys. Otis handed out pieces of dark welder's glass to a half dozen employees assembled in the rear parking lot through which they could safely observe the eclipse. Shortly after noon, it was possible to make out a small nibble in the sun, and by 2:30 more than 99 percent of the sun was obscured. A strange darkness fell upon Statesberry. Ronnie exclaimed with an awed smile, "Wow, that's freaky. What do you think, Len?" Ronnie looked over at his brother who was staring upwards at the eclipse, the welder's glass held by his side. Before Lennie could respond, Ronnie exclaimed, "You stupid ass! You can't look at an eclipse with

the naked eye!” Lennie shrugged in a gesture that seemed to indicate “Oops.”

“What the hell is wrong with you? You want to go blind? How long were you looking without the glass?”

“Not long, maybe five minutes.”

Ronnie experienced a number of reactions simultaneously: amazement at Lennie’s stupidity, disgust with his indifference, fear of being attached to a blind person.

“Let’s go back inside. There’s 200 pounds of ten-pennies that arrived this morning,” said Ronnie with resignation in his voice.

Lennie didn’t go blind, but his retinas were damaged to an extent that his night vision was hampered. The ophthalmologist scolded Lennie about his carelessness in not using proper eye protection, and when he warned of possible further deterioration of vision later in life due to neuronal apoptosis, Vera let out a slightly audible whimper. Ronnie just sat there with a scowl smoldering on his face.

Vera didn't recognize at first the voice on the other end of the line. "Mizz Vera – is Ronnie be there?" When she hesitated, the caller added, "It's me Mizz Vera, Rosie. Rosie Washington. How you been doin'?"

Vera expressed her delight in hearing from Rosie and spent 20 minutes talking to him about how Ronnie and Lennie went through some tough times after the "Woodcock Festival," but informed him that they were doing better, working a steady job. "I got them a nice car for their birthday," she added. After a pause while she waited vainly for a conversation to commence about what a great aunt she is, Vera said, "I'll get the boys for you."

Rosie explained that the new Motown-style band he and Jackie joined, *Slappin' Sammy and the Four Skins* would be playing at a July Fourth concert in Horneytown. "C'mon over. I know you boys like rock better'n soul, but we been practicin' and we sound good. We havin' a party afterward – lots a beer and food." Ronnie and Lennie knew that if they stayed home on the Fourth they would probably be forced by their aunt to accompany her to watch fireworks from behind the high school. She would want to arrive early to ensure a prime spot on the school lawn. The three of them would have to sit on a moldy-smelling blanket retrieved from the cellar for four hours awaiting the first salvo, unable the whole time to smoke a cigarette or a have a swig of shine. The fireworks would last all of 15 minutes,

and after that they would have to endure an hour-long wait to get out of the parking lot. During that five hour extravaganza countless teenagers running around the school grounds would point and smirk at the conjoined boys from across town. Ronnie asked Rosie the only logical question, "What time does the concert start?"

Just after a lunch of peanut butter and mayo sandwiches, Fritos, watermelon and Kool-Aid, Ronnie and Lennie walked onto the front porch. Before they could step off toward the LeMans on route to their destination in Horneytown, Vera called out, "When are you boys coming back tonight?" She posed the question partially out of concern for her nephews' safety and security but also to decide whether to invite Otis to her house before the fireworks display at the high school. She really had grown tired of getting bruised in the lower back from having sex atop the steel bars of Otis's shitty pull-out couch.

"Before midnight for sure," replied Lennie.

Vera accepted that to mean no earlier than 1:00 in the morning, which would afford her the time to try to introduce a new position with Otis tonight. "OK, boys, be careful and have fun. Say 'hi' to Rosie and Jackie for me. I love you."

Lennie drove the LeMans to the gas station for a fill up, then onto Interstate 40 for the hour-long drive to Horneytown. Along the way, Ronnie reached into his shirt pocket for a smoke and finding it empty said, "shit, no cigarettes." Lennie informed his brother that there might be a pack stuffed under the seat. Ronnie reached between his legs and pulled out a pack of Newports containing 10 cigarettes and two joints. He also produced from beneath the seat an 8-track tape of *Disraeli Gears* with its psychedelic cover of pinks and oranges and yellows.

After the blow-up in Woodstock and the subsequent depression that beset the two of them, the twins lost interest in music and hadn't practiced for nearly a year. But once Ronnie snapped the classic *Cream* album into the slot of the after-market tape player and the first notes of "Strange Brew" blasted from the speakers, his and Lennie's long-moribund passion for rock and roll rose from the dead like the brine shrimp of California and Utah that lay dormant for years in desert sands awaiting a torrential rain to revive them. Neither boy could resist thinking fondly of Spooky when Clapton sang, "She's a witch of trouble in electric blue . . . She's some kind of demon messing in the glue."

To avoid the expected July Fourth party traffic bloom, Rosie instructed the boys to park their car behind the bar where *Closed for Private Party* played their first gig. As Lennie tentatively backed the LeMans near the big green dumpster, a bulky woman wearing too much makeup appeared in the back doorway and began to scold them. "Get the hell out of here, y'goddam punks! This is private property!" Her body took up much of the doorway. Lennie was about to floor it, having no stomach to explain to this Amazon the circumstances that led him to believe he could park there, when a short, grizzled man squeezed his way past the woman, his wife. "It's OK Peg, these lads are with Rosie. Their band played here before." Peg brushed past her husband and stomped back into the bar. "Shut the car off and come in for a drink lads," said the old man.

Ronnie and Lennie were still a couple of years shy of being old enough to drink legally, but since the previous summer they had stopped shaving and getting haircuts, and now appeared

to be at least 18. And most bartenders were too distracted by their fascination with serving actual Siamese twins to conduct age verification. The old man, who the boys vaguely recalled from their previous visits to the bar, introduced himself as Pat Caffney, a sometime employer of Jackie and Rosie and their band. The way Pat spoke of them seemed to suggest he was unaware the Albino brothers were not Caucasians. "They got them deep nigger voices, even though their grandparents came from Sweden." Ronnie grinned at the image of Rosie telling tales to besotted Pat about Stockholm and his beloved Gamla Stan. Pat set up a round of shots of Irish whiskey for the boys and himself. He repeated this three more times and would have continued but Ronnie informed Pat that he and Lennie had to meet Rosie at the town square for the concert. The look of utter dejection that spread across Pat's face would have broken anyone's heart, but Pat's crooked smile returned almost immediately upon sighting the patrons at the other end of the bar who had been perched upon stools since the bar opened at 8:00 in the morning and remained ready to drink with him.

Ronnie and Lennie arrived at the square just as a barber-shop quartet finished "My Wild Irish Rose" and a jug-band prepared to take the stage. After the jug-band, a rock band called *The Sour Krauts* consisting solely of a drummer, bass player and guitar player, each dressed in ripped jeans and tee shirts tore into some loud three-chord songs of their own authorship. Most songs lasted less than two minutes and had to do with being pissed off at something – school, dumb girlfriends, the boss. Half-way through the 30 minute set, the guitar player ripped off his shirt exposing a tattoo of a swastika

over his heart, and launched into “TV Eye,” a song he credited to Iggy Stooze. As the guitar player took a moment to adjust a string, a concert organizer in red pants, white shirt and blue suspenders strode onto stage to announce the premature end of the *Sour Kraut* set. Had another similarly-dressed organizer not pulled the plug on the microphones, the festival attendees would have heard a string of nasty swear words spew forth from the band’s frontman. After they vacated the stage, kicking over amplifiers along the way, the organizer apologized to the audience, claiming he thought *The Sour Krauts* were going to play German folk tunes.

Although the *Krauts* played for less than 20 minutes, Ronnie and Lennie were stunned by the energy of the music. “That was pretty damn good if you ask me,” remarked Ronnie. Rosie, who with Jackie happened to walk up behind Ronnie just as he uttered the comment, responded, “Sure, if you ain’t got no talent. How’s it going brothers?”

“Rosie! Jackie! How long’ve you been standing there?”

Ronnie and Lennie and Rosie and Jackie shared the highlights of the events that transpired in their lives over the previous twelve months – the post-Woodstock depression, the hardware store, the death of Rosie’s and Jackie’s grandmother, Lennie’s eclipse fuck-up, Rosie’s beating by some KKK boys at a gig in South Carolina. At 6, Rosie, Jackie and three other much darker black men ascended the stage dressed in matching outfits. The shortest among them removed the microphone from its stand and in a silky voice announced, “Ladies and Gentlemen, Happy Fourth of July. I’m Slappin’ Sammy Jordan and these are *The Four Skins*. And this is “Dancin’ in the Street.” He turned toward the organist who played the introduction,

and then Sammy sang “Callin’ out around the world, are you ready for a brand new beat? Summer’s here and the time is right, for dancin’ in the streets. They’re dancin’ in Chicago, Here in Horneytown . . .” The crowd applauded heartily at the substitution of their own little village for New Orleans. Dozens of people were dancing as the *Four Skins* worked their way into “I Second that Emotion.” The set was supposed to wrap up at 6:45 but in response to audience demands for an encore the red-white-and-blue organizer gave the *Four Skins* the time unused by the *Sour Krauts*. Rosie anticipated such a situation and had pre-arranged the encore scenario with Sammy. So when the audience applauded and ignited lighters indicating their demand for more, Sammy called Ronnie and Lennie to the stage to perform “Cool Jerk.” Ronnie had a momentary panic attack, but Lennie in a more advanced stage of inebriation bolted immediately to the stage, dragging his twin along. Like they had never stopped playing, Ronnie and Lennie performed almost flawlessly; to be sure, the intensity of their previous practice habits paid off. The audience wanted another song, but the organizer insisted that the next act, a 15 man kazoo band had to take the stage immediately to keep the program on schedule.

Back on the lawn, neither brother mentioned it to the other that while on stage he had seen Spooky under a willow dancing intensely like she had when *The Streamlined Babies* performed. Ronnie and Lennie retrieved their car, doors and fenders wet with urine – never park a vehicle behind an alchie bar – and joined Rosie, Jackie and friends for the post-concert Fourth of July party. Rosie and Jackie had moved out of their grandmother’s Fleetwood mobile home and into an apartment at

the start of the year, and this would be their first big party. Ronnie drew himself a beer from the sweaty keg, Lennie poured a glass of Southern Comfort and lit one of the joints stashed in the Newport pack. The sweet smell of burning weed wafted through the kitchen and out onto the small courtyard behind the Washington's apartment where the sun had just sunk below the horizon in an instantaneous flash of green, leaving a soothing pink aura behind. Somebody put a *Jefferson Airplane* album on the stereo. Time somehow moved fast and slow, simultaneously.

“Can I get you to give me a shotgun?” The request came from a dark corner of the kitchen. Both Ronnie and Lennie knew from the voice and its cadence that it was Spooky asking. Obviously stoned, she shuffled up to the boys, wrinkled her nose like she was mad at them before wrapping her arms around both boys and planting a gooey wet kiss on each one’s lips. Ronnie and Lennie were now 10 inches taller than Spooky, when at Woodstock they were about the same height.

“You’ve been naughty boys. Very naughty. But I’m a forgiving person and I’m gonna let you make it up to me. Both of you.”

Spooky took Lennie’s left hand and Ronnie’s right and escorted them, walking backwards, toward a guest room. The boys were either too loaded or too horny to object. She locked the door.

“Never, ever leave me again. I mean it.” Spooky said with a pleading sadness in her voice. “I missed you so much.” She pulled a vial from her jeans and tapped out a small pile of white powder onto the top of the small dresser next to the bed. With a barrette that she removed from her hair she arranged the powder into six even lines. She snorted two through a rolled-up dollar bill. Ronnie and Lennie did likewise. The coke was exceptionally pure and within seconds the twins were buzzing profoundly. Spooky stripped off her clothes then helped the twins do the same.

“I want it from both of you, right now.”

This time, unlike the awkward situation in that dank tent back in Upstate New York, the twins were eager to oblige, although each recognized the difficulty of the physical challenge that awaited them. Ronnie laid down on the bed, rolling a bit to his right. Spooky climbed atop his cock, letting out a long moan, then pressed her breasts against Ronnie’s chest, squeezing in close to him. Lennie pivoted, straining against the band of flesh connecting him to Ronnie, knowing that Ronnie was experiencing the same pain at that moment, albeit dulled by the alcohol, marijuana and coke. After some additional twisting and maneuvering, Lennie was able to insert his cock into Spooky’s ass, thus performing an act more deserving of PT Barnum’s attention than that lavished upon General Tom Thumb. Spooky alternated between moans and screams, experiencing a couple of “sore-gasms.” Shortly after completing the contortion act, Spooky teased each boy into another erection and jerked them off simultaneously, swallowing a load from both. Not content to call it a night, she then alternated 69 with her young lovers, grinding a prolonged orgasm onto each boy’s unshaven faces.

As the three lay close together upon the twin bed, each smoking a Newport, Lennie said to Ronnie, laughing, “Remember that leg of the table that got between us, and we couldn’t pass?” Ronnie responded with a laugh of his own, “Chained for life, bro, chained for life.” Spooky laughed too. “What’s it mean? Huh? Tell me what it means?”

At 4 a.m., Lennie woke up and squinted at his Timex, a gift from Vera for his tenth birthday. He groaned, “Ron, get up, wake the fuck up. We gotta get going. Vera’s gonna kill us.”

Spooky was passed out on the floor, spread eagle, and Lennie thought for a second about fucking her again. “Ron, get up.”

The two stumbled quietly out of the spare bedroom, stepping over a half-dozen bodies passed out on the floor, and into the crisp, morning air under a dark, cloudy sky. Ronnie paused to throw up in the hedges. Seeing his brother vomit up a gruesome stream of chunky brown slurry, Lennie did the same. Flopping into the LeMans, Lennie and Ronnie took off for Statesberry where they would likely accept an ass-reaming from Vera for coming home at daybreak. Ronnie fell asleep right away leaving his brother to negotiate the roads back home. Lennie’s eyelids felt like ten-pound barbells. More than once he drove while unconscious.

No one would know for sure whether a large animal had been standing still in the middle of Interstate 40, or whether Lennie’s piss-poor night vision had confused him, but there was no doubt that the LeMans had been traveling faster than 70 mph when it left the highway and struck a solidly-anchored light pole. The first people to come upon the crash site arrived fifteen minutes after the accident. An elderly gentleman stayed to comfort the mangled passengers while his wife drove to the next exit to notify the authorities. Eventually, the North Carolina State Police, the Clemmons Fire Department, and three ambulances from nearby medical facilities arrived. Each person who arrived said the same thing: “I can’t believe they survived.” The LeMans resembled a piece of balled up aluminum foil. It took the firemen 90 minutes to extract the bloodied, unconscious passengers, and another 30 minutes to transport them to a hos-

pital in Winston-Salem capable of dealing with such traumatic head and chest injuries.

Vera got the call at 8 a.m. She hustled Otis out of the house and rushed to Winston-Salem, harshly scolding herself the entire trip for taking a liberal approach to the problems of her fragile nephews, and for allowing that approach to become a rationalization for the pursuit of her own venal desires. If Ronnie and Lennie died, then along with Virginia and Connie, Vera would have presided over three generations of tragedy and loss. Several times while driving on I40, she mentally catalogued the most effective and efficient ways to commit suicide.

Lennie was in worse shape than Ronnie. He had plowed the left-front portion of the LeMans into the pole causing the vehicle to torque around it. Lennie's chest slammed into the steering column and his face impacted the windshield, pressing a concave bubble into the glass. Long strands of Lennie's hair coated in blood remained jammed in the cracks of the shatterproof glass. His legs were pinned below the dashboard by the contents of the engine compartment forced by the collision into the cabin. Ronnie also suffered leg injuries, and was knocked unconscious by the sudden impact, but unlike Lennie, he had buckled a seatbelt around his waist when they turned onto the interstate.

The boys were taken to the operating room unconscious and in critical condition. Lennie was suffering from internal bleeding, broken bones in his chest, legs and face, and injuries to his eyes. Ronnie had a broken leg, head and neck injuries, and some internal bruising caused by the seatbelt. The physicians had already commenced operating by the time Vera arrived; an orderly struggled to restrain her from rushing into the O.R. Several hours passed and no status was provided during that time. Otis met Vera in the waiting room trying futilely to comfort her, repeating his simple-minded assurance that everything would turn out all right.

Late in the afternoon the lead physician emerged from the O.R. to report that Ronnie and Lennie would survive although

they remained unconscious and in critical condition. They were being transferred to the ICU and would not be able to receive visitors now; Vera could return the following day, and would receive limited access. Otis convinced Vera to let him drive her home – she was planning to sleep in the waiting room – and he promised to drive her back the next morning so she could be there the exact minute visiting hours commenced.

That evening Vera called Rosie Washington to inform him of the accident and to inquire about her nephews' activities the previous day. She wanted to know why they were driving so late at night, and whether they had been drinking at the concert. Vera tried not to be judgmental and Rosie tried not to become defensive. Rosie assured her Ronnie and Lennie had had a great time at the concert, listening to the music, watching the fireworks, and later, visiting Rosie's and Jackie's apartment to talk and watch TV. He relayed the story of how he invited the boys on stage to play with the band, and how well their performance was received by the audience. In the end, Rosie convinced Vera, at least for the time being, that nothing sinister had occurred prior to the accident, and that Lennie probably swerved to avoid an animal in the road.

Wrung out, but full of nervous energy and unable to sleep, Vera tried to get the number for Socrates Nicolopoulos in Louisiana, but having no idea of the proper spelling, asked the operator instead for the number of the Dew Drop Inn Diner in Doyline. Thea answered the phone and within seconds was sobbing along with Vera over the news of the accident. Thea's emotional outburst was stoked by her recollection of the twins as cute toddlers in the playpen next to the cash register, and by the many years that seemed to fly by so quickly. Soc offered to

help pay for the hospital bills that would surely accrue to fantastic, perhaps insurmountable sums. Vera thanked him. She would consider his generous gesture, but for now she hoped to be able to manage by herself. Vera promised to come to Doyline with her nephews for a visit when they recovered and were strong enough to travel. Then she hung up the phone and stared blankly into the kitchen from the cavernous wingback chair in the dark living room at the blue pilot light burning on the stove top. She stared for twenty minutes before finally falling asleep from sheer exhaustion.

For two solid months Vera kept a vigil in the ICU, sometimes accompanied by Otis but mostly alone. Rosie and Jackie made a single visit, but decided against coming in again after Vera angrily confronted them on the circumstances leading up to the accident. Rosie stuck to his original tale, and Vera despised him for it as she already knew from the lab results that both boys were seriously intoxicated at the time of the accident. Mrs. Carlin came by on occasion to check on her former students and to bring Vera coffee, sandwiches, magazines and the *Charlotte Observer*.

As the more seriously injured of the two, Lennie remained unconscious and had to be fed through a tube, although his condition had improved sufficiently that the doctor could remove the ventilator. His condition was upgraded to “serious” and his bruised face began to lose its greenish pallor, but Vera feared he may never awake from his comatose state. She refused to think about how the demise of Lennie’s might affect Ronnie.

On a sultry afternoon in September, as Vera half-watched a report about the sudden death of Jimi Hendrix on the Six O’clock News, she was summoned by the ICU duty nurse who poked her head into the waiting room. Vera felt the blood rush from her head and at first thought she might faint but girded herself for what she feared to be tragic news. Instead, she saw Lennie in bed propped up against a stack of pillows, groggy,

glassy eyes ajar and throat cleared of tubes. Upon seeing Vera, he summoned a weak smile; and when Ronnie walked in with a slight limp a few seconds after his aunt – delayed by the Hendrix news – Lennie’s jaw slacked open in a moment of utter confusion and absolute amazement. As Vera kissed Lennie on the forehead he could not aver his eyes from his twin brother. How fascinating to face Ronnie straight on after 16 years of having to crane his neck to the right to look at him. Through teary eyes, Ronnie simply said, “Welcome back Len, I love you.”

The severity of the internal injuries sustained by the twins in the wee morning hours of July fifth gave the physicians no choice but to execute a risky separation. In the OR that day the lead physician decided to save Ronnie by cutting him free from the presumably doomed Lennie. Having no experience with such a procedure, the surgical team struggled to reroute arteries and ducts, and managed to leave each boy with a piece of their formerly-shared liver. Ronnie recovered quickly, and spent countless hours by his brother’s side, talking to him as though he were awake and lucid. As the summer became autumn, Lennie and Ronnie defied the odds, surviving the accident and the operation, and thanks to that devastating collision with an unyielding light pole, the boys received the reward of freedom that previously had been deemed untenable.

During the two hours each day riding to and from the hospital and the interminable hours of boredom sitting with Vera in the hospital waiting for Lennie to recover or die, Ronnie studied for the ACT test. The near-death experience in the LeMans caused him to re-evaluate the trajectory his life was taking. He (and Lennie, too, if he made it) would be turning 17 in half a year. Ronnie reflected on the passion he once had for knowledge, noting the time he spent attached to Lennie reading practically every important piece of literature available in the Statesberry Library. He chuckled to himself recalling how Lennie and he had crawled through the gruesome *Medical Curiosities* book hoping to uncover a story of recovery and redemption only to confront the truth that Mother Nature has a truly broken soul.

Ronnie took the ACT in November and scored a respectable 28, placing him in the top decile. After going through an exhaustive process with the help of Mrs. Carlin to prove he had really completed the equivalent of high school, he applied to a number of decent schools, settling on Wake Forest University. It was pretty close to Statesberry and Ronnie qualified for a substantial scholarship. He would start in the fall of 1971. Meanwhile he went back to work at Weiss's Plumbing & Hardware, and Lennie would follow a few months later when he was strong enough to walk without assistance. Ronnie and Lennie treated Otis with a good deal more respect after

learning how he had supported Vera through the dark hours. They showed up for work on time and became more skilled in the various parts of the business. Otis reciprocated by increasing their salaries and judging them trustworthy enough to handle customers' money.

Ronnie left for college, and after his first semester, during which he spent an inordinate time on buses and in cars commuting, he concluded that he would be better off living on campus. Vera helped subsidize the increased expense, and so did Soc, anonymously, who belatedly came to understand he exploited little Ronnie and Lennie, not egregiously but in an unsavory manner nevertheless, and that offering some financial assistance might scrub the rust from his soul before he had to face God. At the same time, Lennie's seniority at the hardware store increased, and his knowledge of plumbing fixtures, welding techniques, electrical codes and small engines grew as well. Otis entrusted him to open and close the store on certain lightly-trafficked weekdays.

Lennie moved into a small apartment but helped Vera on occasion by preparing meals and taking care of her property. He arranged a big party for Vera's sixty-fifth birthday at the Maennerchor Club in Gastonia, spending all of his meager savings to ensure the event would be memorable. Lennie hired a band and paid for an open bar. Several people whom Vera had not seen in years came to celebrate. Ronnie, staring down an imminent deadline on a major report for biology class, couldn't make it. Back in Statesberry late that evening, Vera, a bit tipsy from the champagne toasts confided to Lennie was he was her favorite nephew.

Ronnie and Lennie grew further and further apart as each pursued his own direction. As Ronnie sat at a quiet table in the Wake Forest library half-way through the final year of his PhD and conducting research for his dissertation, he was drawn to revisit the eight years that had passed since the big accident and thought about how infrequently he had seen Lennie since moving to Winston-Salem. He figured it out: he and Lennie spent 5,945 consecutive days in each other's constant company, a statistic inconceivable by normal, non-conjoined people – certainly more astounding than Yul Brynner's 4,626 performances as King Mongkut of Siam in *The King and I*.

Over those eight years, Ronnie had visited with his brother no more than a dozen times. In fact he had met up with Lennie but once in the past two years – the day after Vera fell and broke her hip, tripping over a hose while retrieving the mail from the baseball-battered mailbox. Ronnie smiled as he recalled Lennie complaining about how he had just replaced it the previous day after some goddamn punks jammed it full of dogshit.

Back in his apartment Ronnie answered the phone, somewhat disturbed at receiving a call after midnight, but finding it a pleasant coincidence to hear Lennie's voice after having thought at length about his brother in the library that afternoon. Lennie was brief: "Vera died today."

Performing the role of pallbearer was the first joint activity that Ronnie and Lennie undertook in more than a year. After the lightly-attended funeral, Ronnie and Lennie organized a small get-together back at Vera's house where they arranged a slim spread of deli meats, greasy hors-d'oeuvres and bottom-

shelf booze for her few friends and relatives. Ronnie and Lennie had never met most of the guests, and those they did know had not come around in years. One old woman, a distant cousin of Vera's, asked Lennie, "What ever happened to those creepy children that used to live with Vera – the ones that was connected to each other?" Another stranger in a cheap suit offered Ronnie a business card that indicated he ran an estate liquidation service. Ronnie yelled loudly, capturing the simultaneous attention of everyone in the living room, "Get the fuck out of here, you fucking leech. This is a private event." Lennie rushed over before Ronnie could get physical with the man, who was now bolting for the front door. Ronnie settled for throwing a slimy piece of cotto salami at the man that stuck to his double-knit jacket like a remora to a shark. The session broke up shortly thereafter, leaving the twins with a vacant feeling commensurate with the emptiness of Vera's house. The death of Vera forced Ronnie and Lennie to confront their unhappiness with their mother's abandonment and the frustration of never knowing their father.

"Remember that time I told Vera to 'screw John Wayne'?" Ronnie recalled, standing in front of a sinkful of plates and silverware. "And she made me wash dishes for a week, and you got stuck drying. Sorry about that." Lennie took a wet plate from Ronnie, toweled it, rubbed off a piece of melted cheese that Ronnie missed, and stacked it along with other companion pieces of Vera's old china.

"Y'know being stuck to you drying dishes was nothing compared to being stuck to you while you jerked off every night. You should apologize for that."

“You’re right. I’ll apologize – right after you admit to horning in on my girlfriend in that smelly tent.”

“Girlfriend? She was probably blowing every other guy at the concert. You’re lucky you didn’t catch gonorrhea.”

“So are you, Mr. Backdoor Man.”

Lennie laughed loudly, “Freakin’ John Wayne. Y’know I read that he died recently after catching cancer shooting a movie in the desert . . .”

“. . . how do you catch cancer?”

“. . . getting cancer, getting it from radiation. Did you know Howard Hughes produced the movie and he had, like, twelve tons of radioactive dirt shipped back to a Hollywood studio to use for retakes?”

“Why would he ship radioactive dirt?”

“He didn’t know it was radioactive, asshole, no one did. I guess a bunch of people with the movie caught – excuse me – got cancer.”

Ronnie shook his head the way people do when they hear an unbelievable story but don’t feel like debating its veracity.

After drying the last dish, stashing the folding card tables in the basement, and polishing off the remaining half-bottle of Smirnoff – his first significant intake of alcohol since the accident – Lennie went to bed in the guest room, leaving Ronnie alone to poke around in Vera’s belongings. From the top drawer of a beautiful antique walnut secretary he removed a pile of photographs, most in black and white, some with wavy-cut borders, a few mounted on stiff board. The color photos consisted of soft ochers, browns and greens, transformed from the reds, blues and oranges that captured the original vitality of the moment, but like the subjects in the pictures, faded long ago.

Ronnie flipped through photos of Lafayette Wilcox; Vera and Virginia as schoolgirls; Virginia and Floyd Herrmann with Vera and a man who looked like Clark Gable at Virginia's wedding; Vera and Connie at an amusement park when Connie was four or five years old; a professional-looking portrait of Connie as a cocktail waitress. Ronnie shuffled that picture to the bottom, ashamed at his semi-arousal. He smiled at the handful of pictures of himself and Lennie as babies in the playpen at the Dew Drop Inn Diner, some with Soc and Thea. He actually recalled being there despite the fact he was only a couple years old. Clipped to one of the photos was a discolored newspaper article from the *Shreveport Times* reporting on Soc's enterprise sporting the headline "Owner Claims 'Freaks No Trouble' as Diners See Double." Ronnie resisted the urge to crumple the article, deciding the quote was a harmless fabrication of an insensitive staffer at the paper.

As he reached farther back in the drawer for another pile of photos, Ronnie spotted an envelope upon which was affixed a bi-colored six cent stamp offering tribute to W. C. Handy, "father of the blues" according to the inscription. The stamp featured a red trumpet player against a purple background. Ronnie seemed to remember reading that Handy had gone blind from a fall. His mind started to wander into a stream about Lennie's own poor vision, and the solar eclipse of 1970, and the hardware store, and the accident – was Lennie's eyesight to blame? And then he opened the envelope and began to read the semi-literate letter from Christy Cocoplum: "Dear Mrs. Wilcox – I don't know how to begin."

The next day, Ronnie bade Lennie farewell. He had offered to hang around and help administer the estate, such as it was, but Lennie insisted his brother return to college to wrap up his big degree. Lennie kissed his brother on the cheek, patted him on the stub where the band of flesh used to be and said, “Don’t be a stranger. Come by anytime. The hardware store could use a good quantum chemist in the paint department.” Ronnie climbed into the awaiting cab and directed the driver to take him straight to the Raleigh-Durham airport where he boarded Eastern Airlines flight 401 to Miami, while his luggage took off for Muncie, Indiana appropriately tagged “MIA.” The weather in Miami was unstable and the humidity sky-high as a vicious thunderstorm approached from the southeast. The first thing Ronnie did after checking in to the Royal Palm Hotel in South Beach was take a long shower to remove the sheen of sweat and airplane grit that tends to circulate about the cabin. On the brief flight to Miami he thought about how easily a pathogen similar to the 1918 Spanish flu could be moved about the globe through the very system that was pouring cool air upon his face.

Ronnie was pissed over the absence of his luggage and skeptical of Eastern’s assurances that it would show up unmo-
lested within 12 hours. He was reminded of Eastern Airlines’ CEO Frank Borman and his famous “cockroach letter,” and seethed over the general incompetence of the airline industry

in America. Ronnie felt a lot better after taking a long, hot shower, and when he stepped from out into the steamy confines of his ornately tiled bathroom he congratulated himself for not scrimping on the hotel accommodations like he had with the flight from Raleigh. Ronnie sat in the last row of the plane in a seat that could not recline and offered a view from the window of the engine cowling. Sitting uncomfortably just an arm's length from the lavatory in which a passenger had recently taken a virulent shit, Ronnie picked at a yellow and red glob that was supposed to be lasagna but looked more like a giant blood clot. In contrast, the Royal Palm offered comfort and serenity. The hotel with its round windows, snazzy club chairs, and curvaceous lines was one of South Beach's luxurious Art Deco originals located right on the ocean.

Ronnie didn't care that the costs would clean out his bank account. He contended after a lifetime of physical and emotional challenges that he deserved the pleasures of staying in a top-rated hotel. In addition, he figured that in a place like the Royal Palm, undistracted by the annoyances of lesser-quality accommodations, a man would be more inspired to develop the best ironclad murder plot possible.

As he thought about how best to kill Lou Vigorito, Ronnie committed that the enterprise would be governed by professionalism and dedication to detail. It would be brief and compact. He would seek out Lou's whereabouts, fine tune a murder plan, execute the deed, and return to school. At no time would he engage in any sort of diversion that might remotely compromise the integrity of his mission.

Ronnie had been interested as a teenager in serial killers, reading with disgust and fascination about such characters as

Ed Gein, Manson, the Zodiac Killer, Joseph Vacher who was the French version of Jack the Ripper, and Martha Beck and Ray Fernandez, the infamous “Lonely Hearts Killers” who murdered a dozen women in the 1940s. The most prolific among serial killers could credit their successes to the anonymity that comes from a lack of motive beyond a basic fondness for killing. Almost all murder victims are said to have known the identity of their killers – a husband, a boyfriend, a co-worker, a neighbor. Serial killers chose victims differently, perhaps not completely at random, but in a way that would stymie investigators for decades, if not forever.

Ronnie chose to avenge his mother by murdering Lou as a serial killer would – with apparent randomness, as though he had no affiliation with his target. Virtually no one knew Connie was Ronnie’s mother, Ronnie and Lou Vigorito had never met, and Lou knew nothing about Ronnie. Improving Ronnie’s chances, Lou had cultivated enough enemies over the years to occupy the authorities for years. Ronnie repeated his mantra often: “At no time will I engage in a diversion that might compromise the integrity of my mission.” He even wrote those words on the back of a dollar bill that he kept in his wallet, in case his memory or will faltered. But although his mantra was sound, Ronnie could not resist being distracted by Miami, a big, luxurious city full of just the sort of diversions that can compromise missions and dare the conservative planner to throw caution to the wind.

Ronnie spent his first evening in Miami alone relaxing quietly with a cold beer by the blue-tiled pool, diligently making cryptic notes about the murder plan on index cards. The enterprise was developing well, so well in fact that he felt he

could afford to take a break from planning. The following night Ronnie went to the Candomblé Bar where he met a beautiful, tall blonde girl named Renata from Recife, Brazil wearing a smooth dark tan, blood-red lipstick and jet-black eyebrows sculpted into provocative arches. Ronnie was flabbergasted that a beauty like Renata would approach him, and in a role-reversal offer to buy him a drink – something called a Caipirinha, the national drink of Brazil, concocted from limes, sugar and Cachaça. She spoke English with a thick accent, and frequently uttered questions and comments to Ronnie in Portuguese.

“Que tipo de música você gosta de ouvir? Você gosta da música brasileira? You like Brazilian music, Rownee?” He loved the way she mispronounced his name. Ronnie nodded in the affirmative, his response all evening to any question Renata posed. She took Ronnie to a club around the corner where couples danced to mellifluous samba music and bossa novas, and where the syrupy Cachaça flowed liberally. Ronnie was marginally familiar with the challenging melodies of bossa nova, having listened to albums by João Gilberto and Stan Getz, but he had no experience with the dance moves. In fact, Ronnie really had no acumen for dancing at all; being tethered to Lennie ruined his coordination. Renata led Ronnie around on some basic steps, and through the miracle of Cachaça he began to get the hang of the tempo: making three steps to the 2/4 time of the music.

Ronnie surveyed the floor as he danced to “Desafinado” and noticed that, like Renata, most of the women were as tall or taller than their male partners, and many wore their long blonde hair combed straight back between their well-defined

scapulae. The next song was a Lambada, a dance that encourages partners to make seductive movements in close contact with one another. Ronnie watched others on the dance floor grind their pelvises together to the rhythm of the Lambada. Ronnie was reluctant to try it, concerned that he might spring an embarrassing erection, but Renata insisted. And as expected, he developed an obvious bulge in his pants, although he could not be certain whether Renata failed to notice or simply treated it as a common occurrence. With no rest between songs, the band began playing “Falei e Disse,” and as Renata began swaying to the beat Ronnie cut her off, indicating a need to rest. “No mas,” he said, forgetting that Spanish is not the native language of Brazil.

Renata stamped a foot and pouted, imitating a spoiled child. “Não me deixe agora!” Then turning her pout into a dazzling smile, she followed him back to a semi-circular booth located in a dark section of the dance club, holding his hand tightly. The couple drank several more sweet Caipirinhas while the music pulsed. Renata placed her hand on Ronnie’s thigh close to his genitals and kissed him hard on the mouth. She whispered with a rasp in his ear, “Qualquer coisa pode acontecer nas próximas horas.” Ronnie nodded with a drunken smile, knowing not a bit of what Renata had just spoken. Equipped with a partial liver that struggled to metabolize alcohol, he became a bit sloppy and wrapped his arm around Renata’s shoulder in a gambit to slide his hand down her blouse. She pulled away slightly, just enough to put her tits out of Ronnie’s reach, but not because she wanted to distance herself from him. On the contrary, Renata intended to fuck Ronnie until he begged for mercy.

“No, Rownee, no more kiss here. I live nearby. Why don’t you come tonight with me?”

“Really? Y’mean it?” slurred Ronnie. “Cause if y’do, I’d be honored to accumpamy . . . uh . . . accunpamy you.” Ronnie thought to himself, “get your shit together before you blow it.”

Renata laughed as she pulled Ronnie by the arm from the cushioned booth, practically dislocating his shoulder in the process. “You are so cute, Rownee.” On the walk to Renata’s home, Ronnie tried to imagine how much *joie de vivre* he had been missing all the years living in the backwater town of Statesberry. Two days in Miami had produced more excitement and opportunity for love and romance than North Carolina had in the past ten years.

At her small, wildly decorated efficiency apartment three blocks from the club, Renata invited Ronnie to relax on the sofa with a leopard-skin pattern while she prepared two tall rum and cokes. Ronnie noted that none of the funky furniture matched – kind of like Spooky’s apartment, but with significantly more panache. He was pretty sure one of the chairs was a Harry Bertoia because it resembled the wire-frame chairs given to the Statesberry library by a local antique collector who made sure his donation was duly noted in a plaque on the wall. A high-contrast print by Warhol of Liza Minelli wearing bright red lipstick hung on the wall above a boomerang-shaped side table. On the opposite wall hung a framed poster of the word “Love” in red letters, “LO” resting atop “VE,” the letter “O” skewed clockwise 45 degrees. The lampshades were adorned with shapes that resembled paramecia.

Ronnie gulped down the rum and coke, and Renata began

to kiss him passionately. This time, she allowed Ronnie to put his hand under her blouse and fondle her breasts. Renata got down on her knees before Ronnie who was splayed out on the sofa. She removed her blouse and bra, unzipped his trousers and began fellating him quite vigorously. As she sucked his cock and rubbed his goose-fleshed thighs with her professionally manicured hands, Ronnie tried to fill his mind with innocuous thoughts – tomorrow’s weather outlook for South Florida, where he might rent a car, even the grim conditions on his flight to Miami, anything to avoid premature ejaculation. He stared at the ceiling, counting in hexadecimal, fearing that if he glimpsed Renata’s head bobbing up and down on his cock he would lose it immediately.

When Renata diverted her mouth away from Ronnie’s shaft and began sucking his balls, he took the opportunity to reach down and gently cradle her face, drawing it toward his own, kissing her neck and shoulders. Renata turned away and opened a small hinged box on the coffee table in front of the sofa, scooped a small amount of cocaine with a tiny spoon, and ingested the powder in one quick snort. She scooped some for Ronnie who did likewise.

Renata undressed down to her panties, and laid back on the sofa, her lithe body and small breasts lit by a beam of tropical moonlight shining through the Venetian blinds. By the seductively languid look upon Renata’s face Ronnie knew he would be expected to perform reciprocal oral sex before he could attempt intercourse.

“Faça o seu melhor, e as coisas boas virão a seguir, Rownee,” said Renata with a sly smile, “das pequenas coisas vêm as grandes.” Ronnie smiled and nodded. As he pulled off her

panties and bent forward toward the nether region, he hesitantly recalled the fetid tent at Woodstock where he engaged in cunnilingus for the first and only time in his life, and hoped Renata would not be disappointed with his beginner's skills. Ronnie's concerns about his ability to perform well were quickly rendered moot. As he positioned his head between Renata's legs, she thrust her pelvis upward and slapped Ronnie's chin with a semi-engorged, seven-inch cock that had been expertly folded inside her – his? – underwear.

He recoiled and blurted out, "Wh . . . What the fuck? Shit! What are you?" He felt the oxygen leaving the room.

"Don't be mad, Rownee. I like you very much." Renata sat up and asked plaintively, "Vamos conversar a respeito?"

In no mood to discuss anything, Ronnie yanked up his pants and rushed out the door into a pelting rain, belt unbuckled and zipper down. In shock and disbelief at what he had just encountered, Ronnie shielded himself from the sting of the rain. As he went from being merely wet to thoroughly soaked, he might have mumbled something like "Era bom demais pra ser verdade!" had he been fluent in Portuguese.

 n the same night that Ronnie discovered the existence of shemales in Miami, Lennie paid Denise, a college co-ed moonlighting as a stripper at the Blue Horizon Gentlemen's Club for the blowjob he just received in a dark utility room in the back of the building. Denise crammed the moist \$20 bill into her bikini bottom.

Like all men who patronize strip clubs on a regular basis, Lennie was deluded into thinking that strippers actually care about him and that the compliments they bestow – “you have beautiful eyes; you must have a lot of girlfriends” – are certifiably sincere. This evening, Lennie spent the bulk of his paycheck from Weiss's Plumbing & Hardware on lap dances, tips slid slowly and lovingly under the elastic of g-strings, and on large quantities of absurdly expensive alcohol. Following the auto accident, the surgeons decided to allocate more of the twin's shared liver to Lennie under the assumption that he would need it more should he survive. As a pretty big drinker now, Lennie validated the wisdom of that decision.

Denise wiped her mouth with a dish towel, pressed her large, silicone tits against Lennie's body, wrapped her arms around his neck, kissed him softly, and gave him a look that he correctly interpreted as a call for another tip. Lennie squeezed her ass and withdrew from his wallet the last piece of green paper in his possession, a \$5 note that he himself had received as a tip that morning from an old man who requested help

loading a few dozen 60-pound bags of concrete into his broken down pickup. Lennie smirked as he watched the geezer drive out of the parking lot, tires smoking from the friction of rubbing against the wheel wells.

Suffering from a severe case of hiccups, Lennie left the strip club and staggered to his car. It was 4 in the morning and the thought of opening Weiss's in three hours transformed Lennie's face from a look of retardation to a hard grimace. Lennie fumbled for then dropped the keys to the clunky Studebaker Land Cruiser, a 25 year old antique bequeathed to the twins by the recently defunct Socrates Nicolopolous. Thea had paid more than the car was worth to have it driven from Louisiana to North Carolina.

Lennie nearly fell to the ground as he bent to pick up the keys. After a struggle to unlock the door and insert the key in the ignition, Lennie drove erratically along a remote three mile course back to Vera's house where he now lived, having sold most of her antiques including the family heirloom walnut secretary to pay down his personal debts. Lennie had memorized every turn and rise in the road so that under the influence he could still perform a passable transit. About a hundred yards from his driveway, Lennie noticed the reflection of red lights pulsating in the chromed frame of the rearview mirror. He had no idea how long he had been driving with the police car in pursuit – he had slumped so far down into the seat that he no longer had a view from the mirror of the road behind him.

“Wha'seems to be the pro'lem, ossifer?” The very question annoys law enforcement agents as it insinuates they are either stupid or have an active imagination. “Was I goin' too fast? Uh, too slow?”

“Step out of the car, sir.”

“Izzat necessary? Tha’s my house right over there, sir”

“Step out of the car. Now.” Even though the policeman shone a 10 megawatt flashlight in his eyes, Lennie could make out the officer reaching toward the holster on his belt. Terrified and sensing doom, Lennie complied. Expecting to be put through a battery of sobriety tests, Lennie was instead unpleasantly surprised when two additional cruisers arrived on the scene, flashing more lights than a UFO dropping off a shipment of extraterrestrial slot machines. Afraid to ask a question, Lennie simply presented a perplexed look to the officer.

“Turn around and put your hands on the hood of the vehicle.” He pronounced it “vee-HICK-el.”

“Wha’s going on? Wha’d I do?” The heat of the engine warmed Lennie’s cold hands.

“A man was struck by a car down the road a piece. Your vehicle bears damage consistent with a collision with a pedestrian. And you’re intoxicated.”

Other policemen emerged from their cruisers, looking ominously like horror-show zombies silhouetted by the spotlights. Hearing the officer repeat the words “you have the right to” distressed Lennie and he vomited all over his shirt. He started to cry. He had no recollection of someone walking along the road, nor did he remember striking something with his car. Then again, in addition to having piss-poor night vision, Lennie couldn’t recall much of anything he did after picking up his car keys from the gravel parking lot at the strip club, including driving from there to his current location.

The pedestrian died from the collision and his broken body

suffered additional mutilation from being flung into a roadside chain-link fence topped with razor band. Lennie was charged and convicted of felony manslaughter and driving while intoxicated. The presiding judge remembered Lennie from a time when the twins were sixteen years old, on a day that Lennie had been drinking moonshine in the middle of the afternoon while Ronnie jerked off to the youth lingerie section of the Sears catalog. Vera, unaware of Lennie's impaired condition, sent him to the market on an errand to buy eggs and maxi-pads. Lennie was arrested for running a red light on the way home, and was found to have a blood-alcohol level perilously close to the legal limit. Although Lennie was an underage drinker who had committed a dangerous traffic infraction, the judge decided to go easy on him for the sake of his innocent, conjoined twin. Unlike Vera who had once indiscriminately meted out dishwashing punishment to guilty Ronnie and innocent Lennie, the judge issued no more than a stern warning to Lennie, sparing him incarceration. To do otherwise would unfairly punish his innocent brother. The judge paraphrased from Mark Twain's *Those Extraordinary Twins*, "I cannot convict both, for only one is guilty. I cannot acquit both, for only one is innocent. My verdict is that justice has been defeated by the dispensation of God, so Ronnie and Lennie, you are free to go."

Now, years later, this same judge, facing no such moral dilemma imposed a sentence of seven years in prison. The victim's family would later sue Lennie for actual and punitive damages, forcing him to disgorge sums that would essentially wipe him out.

Sitting alone in the quiet of the Miami-Dade Public Library conducting research on Lou Vigorito and his alleged crime, Ronnie felt content, reminded of the happier times he spent at a similar long wooden table with Lennie back in Statesberry, reading classics of American fiction and completing homework assignments for Mrs. Carlin. Still stunned by his encounter with the well-hung Renata and eager to put it out of his mind, Ronnie redirected his energy on the primary purpose for being in Florida. He sought out details from publicly available police records. He pored through back issues of the Miami Herald now stored on microfiche, reading accounts of Connie's murder and the subsequent investigation. The articles consistently referred to the deceased as "Midnight St. George," a prostitute and a drug addict, noting that the victim's unusual name was an undoubtedly an alias. The stories quoted the matronly Madame who picked Lou from a line-up: "How could I forget a guy who leaves a \$100 tip?" The reporter assigned to the story seemed to relish including inane comments attributed to Speedo the pimp, stuff like, "She mighta be a bit skanky, but she didn't be deservin' to die that way" and "I'se just a simple bidness man, and this whole thing be hurtin' my bidness." The more research Ronnie conducted the more he looked forward to confronting Lou and stealing his life from him.

Ronnie stiffened his resolve and went to the area where

Connie plied her trade. The building where the murder took place had been razed, but the neighborhood retained its subterranean seediness. The visit intensified his sadness, anger and frustration. More than ever Ronnie hungered for justice. And then he hungered for lunch. Ronnie entered a greasy dive that had been constructed, rather faithfully, to resemble an old-time New England chrome diner. He took a swivel stool at the counter, and perused the menu, considering the “Happy Waitress Special” – grilled cheese and tomato with fries and gravy – settling instead on ordering the familiar meal of peanut butter and mayonnaise sandwich and Fritos. The bony waitress dressed in a June Cleaver dress cocked her beehive head as though she had heard the order incorrectly. “Not too much mayo, please,” Ronnie added. He noticed the name on the tag pinned to her uniform: Chrissy.

The sweetness of the sticky peanut butter combined in perfect harmony with the tang of the slippery mayonnaise always comforted Ronnie. Lennie, too. Ronnie continued to make notes on his index cards as he savored the lunch of his childhood in the faux diner.

The waitress asked Ronnie if he wanted anything else, presuming he did not because when he said “no thanks,” she promptly plopped the bill face down on the counter. Drawn in pen on the back of the bill was a smiley face along with the words: “Thanks, Come again. Chrissy!” The name “Chrissy” was signed with a vaguely familiar flourish. The “i” was dotted with a simple drawing of a plum, and the “y” extended extravagantly beneath the letters of her name. The “C” looked a bit like a cent sign.

Ronnie packed up his things and walked to the checkout

counter where Chrissy was standing. As he reached for his wallet, he asked her, "Where're you from, hon?" Chrissy, with her well-trussed beehive practically begged to be called "hon."

"I live nearby."

"I mean, did you always live here? Were you born in Miami?"

"Oh, no. I was born and raised in Atlanta." She added perkily, "I'm a Georgia Peach." She looked aside as if recalling a different time. Ronnie responded casually, "You sure you're not a Cocoplum? Chrissy Cocoplum, perhaps?" He pulled a \$20 bill from his wallet without taking his eyes off the waitress who stared back with a look of suspicion.

"Who are you? Why do you want to know my name?"

"Just tell me, please. Is that you?"

After a long hesitation, "Yes, once."

Ronnie produced the letter from Chrissy he found in Vera's secretary.

"Oh my god. Did you know Connie? . . . Are you her son?"

"I'm trying to find Lou Vigorito. Yes, I'm Connie's son. Can you help me? Please? I need to find him. No questions asked." Ronnie sensed camaraderie with Chrissy, who insisted she long ago retired the surname "Cocoplum." Although concerned about revealing his interest in Lou to an outsider, contrary to the mantra inscribed on his dollar bill, Ronnie was thrilled to have made a living human contact. The two walked to the rear of the restaurant and sat next to each other in a secluded booth.

As Chrissy described how she met Connie, a generous, beautiful, vivacious girl, Ronnie's eyes welled up. He needed to hear something positive about his mother after reading so

many depressing articles, police reports, witness statements and depositions. As for Lou Vigorito, Connie explained why she had been convinced of his guilt all along. Speedo – “that bastard spook” – had initially directed Lou to Chrissy, but Lou didn’t like the way she looked. “He made some snide remark about my shape, or maybe it was my hairdo. Whatever. He tells Speedo he wants another girl. So Speedo brings him to Midnight, I mean, y’know, Connie.” It pained Ronnie to hear his mother spoken of in this fashion, and when Chrissy called her “Midnight” he couldn’t help wincing.

Chrissy pressed on. She explained how Lou was the only possible culprit, but that the detective in charge conducted nothing more than a cursory investigation. Connie’s murder was but one of a dozen committed in the neighborhood that year. Chrissy suspected that Lou had escaped scrutiny by virtue of his ties to Miami underworld figures and dirty law enforcement agents. She recalled watching a local TV news program around the time the investigation was essentially shelved on which it was reported that Lou Vigorito, now no longer a suspect, had moved to Venice.

Ronnie sat up, dropping some index cards on the floor. “Venice? He moved to Italy? Are you sure?”

“Not Italy, hon. Florida. Right on the Gulf Coast. I remember thinking that that wop bastard was living free and clear just across the state.”

Ronnie kissed Chrissy on the cheek and pressed a \$20 dollar tip into her hand. She resisted weakly for a moment – “No, no; well, OK” – before stuffing the bill into her pocket. Ronnie looked softly into her eyes. “Thank you so much, Chrissy.

You've helped me tremendously. Uh, please don't tell anyone about me or our conversation, OK?"

Chrissy smirked, "On one condition, hon – what the hell is with the peanut butter and mayonnaise?"

Back in his hotel room that afternoon, Ronnie consulted the Venice telephone directory and easily confirmed the recollection of Chrissy Newton, formerly Cocoplum. Lou Vigorito lives in Venice. The murdering, subhuman Lou Vigorito lives in Venice. The fucker lives in Venice. For Ronnie, at that moment in his room at the Royal Palm soaking serenely in a tub of near-scalding water, a damp, white washcloth neatly folded and spread across his forehead and eyes, it was a discovery no less exciting than Avogadro's number.

That night Ronnie went to a sports bar to drink basic beer, avoid exotic love, and plot murder. He encountered no distractions. All the televisions in the place were tuned to the Dolphins-Lions game underway in Detroit. Although he wasn't paying particular attention to the game, Ronnie heard the announcer repeat the word "greasy." "Greasy to Moore!" "Greasy to Cefalo!" Eventually, out of curiosity Ronnie suspended his planning and watched some of the game, discovering that Miami's quarterback's name was "Bob Griese." He also figured out another odd word he had heard the announcer speak: "sonka."

To the delight of the bar patrons, Miami dominated the Lions, scoring two touchdowns in the first quarter, and allowing Detroit no more than a single field goal until the final quarter. By the time the game ended 28 to 10, Ronnie had completed the outline of his plan. In a couple of days, he would board one

of the several buses out of Miami at dawn for the four-hour ride to Venice. Unsure of Lou's living arrangements, Ronnie would conduct some minimally invasive surveillance outside the condominium complex to observe his movements and determine who, if anyone, lived with or cared for him. Ronnie figured Lou to be at least as old as his mother would have been, late-forties at least, but possibly much older. Chrissy had thought Lou looked to be in his forties when she encountered him more than a decade earlier. Perhaps Lou was a feeble old man by now which would simplify his task.

Ronnie had plotted on his index cards a few alternatives depending on whether Lou lived alone, if he was robust or in poor health, if he left his apartment or was a shut-in. In any case, after Ronnie completed his mission he would take a bus back to North Carolina and resume his studies at Wake Forest, content in the knowledge that the murder of his mother had been avenged in the most appropriate manner.

Ronnie was confident he would soon experience a satisfying sense of closure, but right now he was anything but relaxed. As he boarded the bus on a particularly chilly morning, even for Miami in December, he was bothered – so much so that he could smell his own nervous odor wafting about him. The trip to Venice seemed to last forever. Ronnie was reminded of his twelfth birthday when Vera took Lennie and him to a flooded quarry that had been converted into a popular public swimming hole. Ronnie and Lennie decided to do as the other children and jump off a ledge about 30 feet above the water. From the shallow section enclosed by floating ropes, the ledge above did not appear fearfully high. The twins noted that the

entire trip from the ledge to the water lasted less than two seconds. Of course, once poised on the edge looking down from the equivalent of three stories, the twins lost all nerve and had to suffer the embarrassment of retreating past other kids, some younger, hiking up the dirt path for a second or third jump. What had seemed like a simple stunt from the safety of the shallow section proved impossible to execute when it mattered.

Ronnie had spent dozens of hours plotting strategies to locate and kill Lou, and in doing so had built confidence in himself that he would perform flawlessly. Now, as the bus barreled around the Everglades along Interstate 75, Ronnie felt much the same as he had on his twelfth birthday, looking down from the ledge of the quarry, confidence dissipating rapidly. In this conflicted state Ronnie relied on medication to get through the next couple of days; locked inside the tiny bathroom in the back of the bus, toilet water sloshing with every bump and change of lane, Ronnie snorted a hefty volume of cocaine.

Ronnie's first day in Venice proved quite productive. After a lunch of *ropa vieja* and four Coca-Colas, Ronnie easily located Lou's condominium, a ground-floor apartment in a tidy complex populated exclusively by senior citizens. The apartment reminded Ronnie of Hyman Roth's place in *The Godfather II*. From a lush park across the street, Ronnie was able to maintain inconspicuous surveillance, and around 2 p.m. he set eyes upon his mark for the first time. Lou emerged to collect his mail, walking tentatively as though he may have once broken his hip or suffered perhaps from the gout. The scumbag was dressed in loose dark pants, the seat of which hung several

inches below his ass, and a bulky flowered shirt shrouding a belly that spilled over his belt. His thin greasy hair was mostly grey and fashioned into a painfully obvious comb-over. Ronnie assessed Lou's physical condition to be poor-to-satisfactory. His spirits lifted. On the strength of this initial observation, Ronnie believed this time he would have the nerve to jump off the quarry ledge into the waters below.

The day before Christmas Eve, Ronnie put on a white short-sleeved shirt, a red striped tie, and navy blue polyester slacks – all purchased at the Salvation Army – and left his room in the dismal Holiday Inn with the moldy-smelling hallways, malfunctioning ice-maker, and lame Muzak version of “White Christmas” playing repeatedly over the intercom. He bought a twenty pound frozen turkey at Publix and headed to Lou Vigorito's apartment carrying the unlikely weapon of solidified bird in a paper sack under his arm.

The doorbell rang just as Denver's Craig Morton was about to cap an 80 yard drive to take the lead against the Oilers. Miami was off until next Sunday. Lou pulled himself from the La-Z-Boy and ambled to the screen door. “Waddya want?” he growled.

“I'm from the Venice Senior Citizen Support League. In keeping with the holiday spirit, we're delivering you a free turkey. Merry Christmas, sir.”

“Jesus Christ, I just got another turkey the other day. Why can't you people bring me something I can use, like a case of Jack Daniels, or maybe some teenage pussy?”

Ronnie actually welcomed Lou's crudeness and allowed it to permeate his viscera. The elevated degree to which Ronnie

despised the old man would no doubt embolden the attack that would come soon.

Lou continued, "What's your name, sonny?"

"Italo Cappabianca, sir."

"No shit? You don't look Italian. Are you Sicilian?"

"No, I'm Calabrese."

Lou's eyes widened. "We're practically paisan, do me this favor – put that fucking thing in the freezer and come talk to me awhile. No one ever comes to visit anymore."

Ronnie's heart was pounding so hard and so fast that he feared his delicate organ might go into arrhythmia. He could hear the blood rushing through his head. It sounded like the whoosh of the ocean waves produced by placing a conch next to his ear. The moment of truth was approaching fast; Ronnie needed medication. As Lou slumped back into his La-Z-Boy recliner, Ronnie walked calmly but stiffly into the kitchen and quietly sniffed some white powder he tapped out of a vial into an indentation formed on his wrist by spreading his thumb and forefinger. The cocaine-laced mucus ran down Ronnie's throat and he soon felt empowered and invigorated. He wished he'd felt this way back in grade school when Bobby Dolan tormented Lennie and him; he would have beaten Bobby's brains in with a croquet mallet on the playground.

Ronnie looked around the unstylish kitchen and at the ceramic rooster and the Black Mammy on the toaster. He considered exchanging his frozen turkey for a butcher knife, but decided to stick with Plan A.

Ronnie walked slowly back into the living room.

"I told you to put that fucking turkey in the freezer, son? Don't you hear too good?"

Ronnie stood awkwardly in front of the old man, hesitating. Finally mustering courage, he spit out words in the style of Dirty Harry: “Do you remember Connie? Well, do you, cocksucker?”

“The fuck you say?” Lou started to rise up from the recliner, only to be shoved back hard into his seat by Ronnie.

“The woman you raped and murdered in Miami. That was my mother. You might a thought you got away with it, Lou, paying off the cops and all, but I’m here to make sure you don’t have a Merry Christmas this year.”

Lou gave Ronnie a brief sincere look of confusion which changed quickly into a sneer upon remembering the reference to Connie. He responded snidely, “I never killed her. I might a fucked her good, ‘cause that was her job, but I never killed her. Honest.”

Ronnie punched Lou hard in the mouth, the first time in his life he had ever truly struck another person in anger, and it felt nothing like he expected. Lou moaned with his eyes closed, “you little fucker . . . you little fucking piece of shit,” while Ronnie dispassionately, robotically observed the blood dripping from his knuckles, torn on Lou’s incisors, but feeling no pain. He knew that would come later.

Sounding desperate now, Lou said, “That cunt stole my money!”

Ronnie swung again at Lou, but this time he just brushed the old man’s comb-over, inflicting no damage to Lou or his Florida-Gulf-Coast-In-the-Winter-Senior-Citizen-Early-Bird-Special-All-You-Can-Eat-Biscuit-and-Gravy-Dinner hairdo. Ronnie’s rage increased, stoked further by the cocaine coursing through his veins. Any reservations he might have had about committing

murder evaporated. Ronnie prepared to smash the frozen turkey down upon Lou's cranium.

Lou asked, "Your mother, you say? When were you born?" Ronnie narrowed his eyes, not expecting this line of conversation. "Let me guess," Lou said with a discernible level of arrogance as he tested the looseness of his tooth with his thumb, "nineteen hundred and fifty four. Am I right? You're gonna be 26 next month, or is it February?"

All Ronnie could say was "um . . . unh . . . ah . . ."

"Listen, Italo," Lou said, suggesting he knew the alias was bullshit all along. "Listen carefully. Calm down. No more hitting. Please. I knew Connie when she was living back in Vegas in the 50s. I let her stay with me while she was working as a cocktail waitress. Did you know she was a cocktail waitress?"

Ronnie momentarily acquired the look of the mildly retarded. He thought of that sexy photo of his mother he found in Vera's secretary.

"When she wanted to get an abortion, I talked her out of it, even though we weren't married. Y'know, basically I saved your life, if you understand my meaning. I tried to take care of her, but instead she ripped me off for all the money I had in the world and left me with nothing in Las Vegas."

This was not part of Plan A. Nor plans B and C. Ronnie faced Lou but he looked through him, past him as he tried to process the information. Could it be true that Lou was his father? Good God! So what if he is? He's still Connie's unpunished, unrepentant murderer. Or is he? He has to be! He just let slip a motive – she stole his money. "What the fuck is going on?"

Lou could tell his tale had shaken Ronnie's balance. He

started to speak again, but Ronnie cut him off, shouting, “Shut the fuck up! Don’t talk, don’t say anything.” Ronnie’s brain was beginning to converge on a decision to abandon the enterprise and leave Lou to rot in solitude instead. Then the telephone rang – it was loud and abrupt, a solid brass bell struck by a real brass clapper. Because of his deteriorated hearing Lou had set the ringer to its maximum volume.

Ronnie glanced toward the phone and away from Lou, and in that moment the old man jumped from the La-Z-Boy and made a move toward a table next to the sofa. Ronnie pushed him hard to the floor where upon impact Lou’s colostomy bag detached and spilled a treacly brew of runny shit and digestive juices across the linoleum floor. The sight, sound and smell of the bag disgorging its vile contents momentarily distracted Ronnie. He wheeled around and tried to slam Lou’s head with the frozen turkey but slipped in the liquid and struck a glancing blow to Lou’s shoulder instead. Having been tethered to Lennie for so long, Ronnie was not expertly coordinated, and his recent ingestion of cocaine only decreased his motor skills. Unlike the man Ronnie spied waddling tentatively to the mailbox the previous day, Lou scrambled quite nimbly to a side table and produced from the bottom drawer a silver pistol with a pearl handle – the companion of the revolver Connie stole along with Lou’s money. Ronnie kicked Lou in his stoma just as the old man squeezed off a round that lodged in Ronnie’s calf. Ronnie fell screaming to the floor, his arms and back smeared with Lou’s shit.

None of Ronnie’s several murder plans included an exit strategy in case something went terribly wrong, placing him in the company of some of the world’s foremost failed leaders. As

Lou rolled onto all fours in preparation to stand and deliver more bullets, Ronnie stumbled out the front door of the condo, pain shooting with each step of his bleeding, wounded leg. To his relief, he spotted a small medical center a few blocks from the condominium which catered to the aging population nearby. Ronnie tried to stroll calmly into the ER. He explained how he had accidentally shot himself in the leg while cleaning his gun – how stupid he was not to empty the chambers and all that. He babbled about how he was going to try to extract the bullet himself but his wife insisted he get professional attention, and how sorry he was for bothering the ER staff over such a minor accident. He made no attempt to explain why he smelled like shit. While the attending physician cleaned the wound and prepared to extract the slug, Ronnie contemplated his next move. Clearly, the plot to murder Lou would have to be abandoned, at least for a few years, and probably forever. Ronnie rationalized that the punishment he meted out to Lou would slake his thirst for revenge. Hell, he scared the old fucker shitless – literally – and probably ruined the man's sense of security for the rest of his golden years. Yes, Ronnie concluded that he had tortured Lou Vigorito enough and he allowed himself the pleasure of believing he had avenged his mother's murder. With his eyes closed and leg numbed, and an imperceptible grin on his face as he recalled the humiliating colostomy bag falling to the floor, Ronnie heard the metallic thunk of the lead round dropping into a stainless steel bowl.

"Are you almost done, doc?" asked Ronnie, eyes still closed.

"I'm not the doctor. My name is Officer Gleason of the

Venice Police Department. Can you tell me how you got that gunshot wound?"

Ronnie was charged with felony attempted murder but pled down to aggravated assault and was sentenced to seven years in the Florida State Penitentiary in Raiford. During the deposition, Lou Vigorito magnificently played the role of a feeble old man who had been attacked randomly and without cause by a vicious animal. And whenever any question pertaining to Connie was posed, Lou did his best Alzheimer's impression.

Ronnie's lawyer suggested doing a paternity test on Lou, but Ronnie vigorously protested, unwilling to take a chance on learning an ugly truth. He preferred to keep the identity of his father a secret rather than discover Lou Vigorito had sowed the seed.

In the end, Ronnie never stood a chance. He appeared to be nothing more than a common thug perpetrating a random act of violence against an upstanding senior citizen, the most revered species in Florida.

Everything and nothing happened while Ronnie and Lennie served out their prison sentences. Otis Weiss died and the hardware store was taken over by his nephew Clarence who as a teenager worked with Ronnie and Lennie in the lawn care section. Vera's grave, untended after Otis passed, became overgrown and nearly impossible to locate without the aid of a cemetery map. The bank foreclosed on her house; the realtor assigned to sell it complained regularly about having to replace the busted mailbox. The Skyway drive-in was plowed under to make room for a residential community of hastily-constructed single-family homes, each built from the same set of blueprints, and the owners of the rival Sunset changed their format to X-rated movies.

Spooky moved to North Truro and tried to sell her insipid landscape paintings of watercolor, gouache and charcoal featuring lighthouses and simple houses flanked by grassy dunes. While setting up her easel on the beach one early, gray morning, she met Carl, a wealthy, widowed CEO of a mid-sized Ohio insurance company who flew to Cape Cod to vacation and purchase local art. Spooky offered to paint Carl's likeness into a half-finished seascape, and when she completed the piece, for which the man paid \$500, she invited him back to her studio for a drink. With characteristic aplomb, Spooky worked her way into bed with Carl, treating him to pleasures he never received from his late wife. After their second date, Carl

inquired with conspicuous embarrassment whether her use of Ben-Wa balls on him was legal in Massachusetts. By the end of his vacation, the CEO from Ohio offered to become Spooky's patron, endowing her with the funding that freed her to produce the art she truly aspired to create, but could not sell to tight-assed, risk-averse Cape Cod tourists: bizarre sculptures of monochromatic featureless human pairs joined to one another. To Spooky's critics the sculptures resembled childish attempts to mimic George Segal. Undeterred, Carl backed his new wife to the hilt, even lobbying for a small exhibition of her best work at the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center. After Carl made a significant personal contribution to the museum, but before Spooky's collection of plaster twins could be installed, a phalanx of conservative religious groups, outraged at a single piece depicting two men joined at the penis, forced the museum's curator to scuttle the exhibition.

The Washington brothers left North Carolina for Philadelphia, seduced by the Philly Sound, but within months of arriving joined MOVE and changed their names to Jackie and Rosie Africa. They lived collectively in squalor in the Powelton Village section of West Philadelphia with dozens, maybe hundreds of other blacks who adopted the surname "Africa." Their fellow MOVE activists considered the Washington boys' albinism a cruel hoax played upon them by nature and embraced them into the cult, even though from afar they resembled the very crackers that MOVE despised. Jackie and Rosie were pressured into applying dark makeup to their faces whenever they left the MOVE complex. Shortly before Ronnie and Lennie were released from prison, the Washington brothers died in a firestorm instigated in May 1985 by an impatient Philadelphia

Police Department that ordered incendiary devices dropped onto the roof of the row house occupied by MOVE after they refused to vacate the premises. The Mayor at the time, Wilson Goode pronounced the operation “perfect, except for the fire.”

Jupe, Spooky’s friend who accompanied Sunny, Ronnie and Lennie to Woodstock gave up his foolish nickname, reverting back to being Harold Bunshaft, and applied for employment as a stock clerk at Lowes, a home improvement center founded in North Carolina 50 years after Otis Weiss’s grandfather opened his hardware store. In a rude turnabout, the Lowes chain now threatened the existence of such family-owned enterprises as Weiss’s. Harold reinvented himself as a square-looking clean-cut company man, sporting a slick haircut like that of Darrin Stevens, Dick York version. He wore long sleeved Van Heusen shirts, even in the hottest Carolina summers, to cover poorly executed tattoos of a skull, the ace of hearts, and the name “Sunny” superimposed on a yellow disk orbited by another disk that vaguely resembled Jupiter, complete with its curious red spot. After several years working as a clerk – “sales associate” in corporate parlance – in virtually every section of the Lowes store, Harold was chosen to participate in a management training program where his skills as a one-time drug dealer helped him cheat his way into the top 10 percent of the class. Lowes promoted Harold to store manager then regional manager, responsible for the territory of North Carolina west of Raleigh and all of South Carolina.

Lennie got out of jail first, serving from 1979 to the fall of 1985. The time he spent locked up making restitution to society took little toll on Lennie physically. He looked much the same coming out as going in. The jailers considered Lennie a model inmate and rewarded him with broad privileges including oversight of the prison library. Lennie was allowed to give guitar lessons and lead a weekly book reading circle in which he introduced semi-illiterate country boys to Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Hammett and Steinbeck. In exchange for booze smuggled in by one of the guards, Lennie wrote essays and term papers for the man's three children. Once, when Lennie's efforts earned an A+ for each of the mediocre high-school students, the guard rewarded him with a case of Chivas Regal, some of which Lennie bartered for cigarettes, porno, and protection.

As the day approached for Lennie to be released, his anxiety grew over the notion of resuming a life outside of the comforting regimen imposed by prison. He feared that freedom would be more constrictive than incarceration. Lennie possessed no assets, not even the house left to him by Vera, which was lost in a skirmish involving the bank holding the second mortgage and lawyers looking to recover the civil judgment brought against Lennie by the family of the hit-and-run victim, along with their fees.

Lennie spent his first months out of prison in a group home

where he encountered a collection of benign old men who recognized they had essentially squandered their lives and were content to kill time, younger guys like himself who still harbored some hope of achieving a better life, and a few dead-end miscreants who would soon be back in prison, inevitably violating conditions of parole by committing an act typical of a recidivist like assaulting a fellow group member over changing the TV channel or smuggling in contraband drugs and crude weapons.

Over breakfast one day, Lennie mentioned to the coordinator of the group home about how he once worked at Weiss's Plumbing & Hardware prior to his drunken driving incident. The coordinator arranged a meeting with the new owner of Weiss's, Otis's nephew and Lennie's former co-worker, Clarence. Benevolent like Otis, Clarence didn't hesitate a moment to offer Lennie an entry position back at the store. Six years in the can cleansed Lennie of his most anti-social habits. After completing the six-month probation period instituted by Clarence without a single incident of tardiness, inappropriate behavior or incompetence, Lennie was elevated to a position of greater authority and compensation. The group home counselor located a landlord willing to rent to an ex-con who was now gainfully employed and, to the naked eye, rehabilitated. Lennie settled into a safe, secure routine of working, sleeping, eating, collecting a paycheck, and paying bills. He had little energy to engage in literary and musical arts, and no disposable income to pursue romance. Although not regretful, Lennie sometimes questioned whether his life of freedom was any better, and perhaps worse, than his life behind bars. On the first anniversary of his release from prison, and around the same time the State

of Florida released Ronnie from its clutches, Lennie fell asleep in his bed, an open bag of Doritos spilling its dusty orange contents onto the mattress. The television was tuned to an episode of the new hit show “MacGyver,” the volume turned down to the lowest level so as to avoid the wrath of the retired teacher living in the adjacent apartment. The old bitch was separated from Lennie by a thin wall constructed of low-quality two-by-fours from Lowes sheathed in half-inch sheetrock erected to divide a real room into two rental units.

Ronnie's experience in state prison while serving a sentence for a crime one notch below manslaughter was considerably different from that of his twin brother who was treated practically like a visiting professor receiving complimentary food and lodging in return for teaching the basics of the Great American Novel to illiterates. Ronnie was both admired and reviled by factions of the inmate population caged along with him in the hard cell block in Raiford. There were a few inmates who treated Ronnie with respect for trying to avenge his mother's murder. Mostly casualties of Catholic upbringing, these otherwise despicable criminals revered the mother figure for her stabilizing role in the often-broken family. Other inmates sought to punish Ronnie for his attack on Lou Vigorito, an associate of organized crime, hoping to curry favor with influential mobsters in the joint. In the mess hall, Ronnie's enemies would confiscate his food or render it inedible. They would smear his back and hair with their own feces vouchsafed from their cells in rolled-up pages torn from library books. In the shower one morning, Ronnie took a severe beating from an olive-skinned bastard that put him in the infirmary for a week where he pissed dark orange urine, tinted by the blood collected in his kidneys.

Every Thanksgiving week in recognition of Ronnie's choice of a frozen turkey as a murder weapon the prison guards would supply a relentless barrage of verbal abuse.

“Hey boy, we got a big-ass nigger in X-Block who wants to come over and stuff your holiday bird. Whaddya say?”

“What you like better, boy, white meat or dark meat? Or don’t you care? You take your meat either way, just as long as it’s hard as a rock, right? You want some rock hard meat, boy?”

On a particularly bleak Thanksgiving Day the prison mess hall offered a facsimile of a traditional turkey dinner. Ronnie bit into a used tampon hidden in his gooey herbed stuffing, its color remarkably similar to the glob of cranberry sauce staring at him from the segmented plastic plate.

Countless times during his early years in prison Ronnie was forced to suffer sodomy inflicted by large, sweaty Latinos and Negroes – criminals who had been rounded up by the hundreds in the suburbs and exurbs of Florida’s big cities and saddled with lengthy sentences, the targets of society’s rush to thwart the growing scourge of crack cocaine.

Ronnie stopped attending the prison’s movie nights after a particularly nasty encounter during a Friday evening screening of *True Grit*, the only film for which John Wayne won the Oscar for best actor. Ronnie had seen it with Lennie and Vera when it first came out in 1969, and promptly dubbed it “True Shit” – in his opinion, another in a long line of stinkers featuring John Wayne. Adding to Ronnie’s disgust with “True Shit” was his discovery years after first watching it that Wayne, the beneficiary of craven Academy politics, had beaten out the far-superior Dustin Hoffman and John Voigt, both nominated for their roles in the gritty, seminal film *Midnight Cowboy*. Ronnie decided to watch *True Grit* on movie night anyway, and every other awful Friday night movie presented by the prison staff, because the

alternative was to languish inside his cell, staring at the ceiling and contemplating suicide.

He sat in the second-last row of folding chairs, half-paying attention to the stilted dialog, laughing occasionally at Glen Campbell's wooden acting. He also found Kim Darby to be an annoying, prissy sort, playing a young girl looking to avenge her father's murder. The audience heckled the screen every time her character, Mattie Ross spoke a lame line.

"If I smelled as bad as you I wouldn't live near people," snipped Mattie, and with that the audience of prison inmates responded with a cacophony of "Eat me bitch! – Fuck you cunt! – Show your tits!" With all the noise, Ronnie hadn't noticed that a trio of Mexicans took up seats directly behind him until after John Wayne referred to Kim Darby a few times as "Baby Sister." The Mexicans began to poke at Ronnie, calling him "Baby Sister" and taunting him over his boyish physique, comparing him to the adolescent Mattie. When Wayne said to Darby, "Baby sister, I was born game, and I mean to go out that way," one of the Mexicans cackled at Ronnie, "You hear that Baby Sister – he was born gay. Were you? Huh, maricón – you like a fat man's dick in your ass?"

"Fuck you, wetback."

Ronnie was thwarted in his attempt to stand and leave. By the time the guards pulled the Mexicans away from Ronnie his face was swollen and blood trickled from his ears. His prison-issued trousers were pulled to his ankles, and the toe of his left shoe had been shoved into his anus. Recovering in the hospital, Ronnie swore never to watch a John Wayne movie again.

The warden directed that Ronnie be assigned to work in the prison library in charge of selecting books and periodicals for

the inmates, where he finally escaped the wrath of the crack-heads. He was assisted there by a slight young man named Paco from Ecuador who was serving time for armed robbery. Paco was quiet and feminine in his mannerisms. At 23 he looked to be no more than 16 years old, and his full red lips appeared to be embellished with lipstick. He walked like the Hawaiian barmaid in *From Here to Eternity*. Armed robbery would have been among the last choices of someone challenged to guess the crime for which he was incarcerated. He had been a victim of poor luck, caught shoplifting black leather pants from a Nordstrom's store in Tampa just as his partner produced a loaded sidearm in response to a challenge by store security.

When Paco was a boy growing up in Ecuador, his "Tio" Tito allowed pedophiles from Quito and places abroad to have sex with his young nephew, charging exorbitant sums to videotape the encounters for the enjoyment of the perverted customers. One particularly slick, well-dressed pedophile bought Paco from Tio Tito for \$15,000 and smuggled him into the United States, imprisoning the young boy in his compound in Tarpon Springs, Florida. A year of abuse transpired before Paco summoned the nerve to simply walk away from the compound late one evening and hitchhike to Tampa where he mixed in with a subculture of runaways, most of them teenaged, drug-addicted homosexuals and lesbians from New York, Hartford, Philadelphia, Baltimore and other cruel cities of the Northeast. Paco became a huge fan of Glam Rock: *T-Rex*, *Silverhead*, *Mott the Hoople*, and of course David Bowie. Paco had a crush on Mick Ronson, Bowie's guitarist on *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. He imagined himself as the muscular Ronson, the onstage object of Bowie's attention,

launching the power chords of “Moonage Daydream” for the swooning teenaged boys in the audience. On the cover of his second solo album, *Play Don’t Worry*, Ronson struck a pose suggesting sexual ecstasy, his Gibson guitar positioned upward like an erect phallus. It was the tight-fitting leather outfit Ronson wore on the cover that inspired Paco to shoplift the leather pants that in turn cost him his freedom.

Ronnie arranged to receive blowjobs from Paco in a dead-end aisle in the library out of sight of the lazy guard, formed by the intersection of the History and Psychology sections. As Paco sucked, Ronnie tried to imagine Spooky’s mouth around his cock. He squeezed his eyes tight and concentrated on an ever-fading image of Spooky’s smooth abdomen, toned from a time when she practiced dressage as an adolescent, and on the wispy hair that traced a thin, nearly invisible line from her bushy mons veneris to her navel. With his hips pressed against a library ladder leaning against a shelf containing works on the Peloponnesian War, and his trousers bunched around his ankles and leg muscles taut, Ronnie pulled on Paco’s head. If a random thought intruded during the sex act, breaking his concentration, Ronnie would turn away from Paco and take measures into his own right hand.

After his first sexual encounter with Paco, which happened also to be his first consensual homosexual encounter, Ronnie became stopped up with guilt. He resolved to become celibate for the remainder of his prison term, but within days, Ronnie would succumb to relentless sexual desire and return to Paco.

Paco introduced Ronnie to amyl nitrate, contraband that a guard smuggled in to the prison; he secreted the small glass vials – poppers – inside hollowed out Twinkies packed

in his lunchbox along with a meatloaf sandwich and a pear. Paco bartered for the stimulant with expertly delivered hand-jobs. Inhaling amyl nitrate had a manic effect on Ronnie that enhanced his orgasms and disoriented his sense of time and place.

Ronnie tried to convince himself that his rendezvous with Paco were borne out of necessity, forcing him to pursue a temporary substitute in an environment lacking female companionship. But as the meetings in the dead-end aisle became more frequent, and after Ronnie agreed, reluctantly at first then enthusiastically later to Paco's requests to receive anal sex, he began to question his own orientation. Ronnie quit fantasizing about Spooky when he masturbated in his cell, recalling instead Renata in Miami. In his imagination, Ronnie would revise the details of their encounter so that he remains with his shemale lover rather than running out like a frightened schoolboy. Such thoughts only reinforced doubts about himself. Ronnie repeatedly harkened back to his brief time with Renata, cherishing it for its perversity and power to excite him. And after each time he jerked off to the mental image of Renata's deep tan, rosy nipples, shapely tits and stiff penis, Ronnie would swear that he had had enough, and promise once and for all to summon the willpower to abandon the debauchery. Then Paco would sashay into the library the next afternoon with a pushcart full of books and magazines, and the sight of those girlish lips and the promise of the poppers in his pocket would vanquish whatever willpower Ronnie thought he had summoned the previous evening.

After completing a financial review of the library's budget

and the circulation statistics, the Florida Department of Corrections mandated a reduction in the number of periodicals to which it subscribed. Social conservatives insisted that skin mags like *Playboy*, *Penthouse* and *Oui* be scrubbed from the list of periodicals offered to the inmates. Subscriptions to other titles were allowed to lapse after it was determined that no one in the prison had ever requested them: *IEEE Spectrum*, *Arizona Highways*, *International Journal of Adhesion and Adhesives*. Ronnie shook his head at that one – who the hell would want to read or write for a technical journal dedicated to glue and all its applications? He cleared the stacks of the library's collection of *Family Circle*, *Yorkshire Terrier Magazine*, *Progressive Grocer*, and a dozen other titles that had shown up faithfully each month for decades only to be consigned immediately to a fate of collecting dust. The last of the periodicals to be purged was the prison's large collection of *The Lancet*, a journal devoted to medicine that first appeared in 1823. The prison began subscribing in the early 1960s around the time an episode of the popular TV show *The Fugitive* featured the Raiford facility. Someone in charge of the library at the time ordered a subscription to *The Lancet* because the dogged protagonist in the TV show was a doctor. Published weekly, *The Lancet* grew like a cancer in the prison library, and it took Ronnie the better part of an hour to toss the collection in an oversized trash bin headed for the incinerator. When he got to the last copy, the one delivered just that morning, Ronnie handled it with mock reverence, planning to ritually dispose of it as though it were a deceased royal cat belonging to Amenhotep. That is until he glanced at the cover and was taken aback by the title of one of the articles: "Amyl Nitrite may alter T lymphocytes in homosexual men."

By the time he completed reading the article twice, he was gripped with a fear unlike any other he had experienced – the fear of dying a slow, hideous death from something referred to in the article as Kaposi’s Sarcoma.

Ronnie spent the free hours away from his cell in the library conducting research on Kaposi’s Sarcoma, following the branches of detail leading from the trunk of generalities, much the way he and Lennie as children marched through subjects that intrigued and repelled them. Ronnie learned about a newly identified disease called Gay-Related Immunodeficiency Disease – GRID – and later relabeled AIDS when it was found to infect people outside the gay community. The symptoms he read about were truly disturbing; AIDS appeared to be on a par with the bubonic plague. Ronnie believed dying from an insidious infectious disease had to be much worse than dying, say, from a bullet to the brain fired by an old man struggling against an attack by an intruder with a frozen turkey. “Damn!” Now more than ever, Ronnie wished he had gone mano-a-mano with Lou, win or lose, a duel to the death, instead of limping out like a coward straight into the arms of the police.

The number of men with whom Ronnie had engaged in unprotected sex, willingly and otherwise, since entering the joint suggested statistics were not in his favor. Paco’s asshole alone had probably entertained 75 percent of the most rancid dicks in Ronnie’s cellblock. Never again did Ronnie intersect with Paco. That kind of sex was out for good. Unfortunately for Ronnie, his attempts at self-gratification often ended unproductively. He was the victim of intractable limpness caused by the overbearing worry that he had contracted AIDS, even fearing that to masturbate could exacerbate the illness. After

the prison infirmary declared him negative for a new AIDS test that the prison infirmary administered in response to the major epidemic exploding within its walls, Ronnie dropped the heavy bag of anxiety he had been carrying since reading that *Lancet* article, and he experienced a sense of relief even more profound than when his brother Lennie opened his eyes for the first time after the auto accident. Ronnie cut off all ties with Paco even though his Ecuadorean boy-toy also tested negative. Paco was too promiscuous to remain negative forever, Ronnie figured. Besides, the AIDS test was newly developed, and Ronnie refused to gamble that it would always report reliably accurate results.

Ronnie continued to work in the library, allowed by the authorities to expand his role to lead some classes for selected inmates, teaching guitar lessons and running reading seminars, in much the same way that Lennie had done during his incarceration. On May 19, 1986 the State of Florida gave Ronnie's sentence a haircut in recognition of his good behavior and contributions to the library, and at dawn, in fair-to-good health, he walked out of Raiford into the muggy gloaming common for that time of year.

Ronnie's first instinct was to go to a place far from Statesberry, and try to reestablish himself where he could effectively hide from his past. Completion of his degree at Wake Forest was not among his options. He had drifted too far away from the habits needed to handle the rigors of advanced studies, and it was unlikely the department would readmit an ex-convict like him. In any case he lacked funds and a way to get them. The degree would have to wait, Ronnie mused, knowing in his heart that he would never earn it – not after losing several years in prison when the closest he came to studying chemistry was the time, out of boredom, that he looked up the chemical composition of amyl nitrate.

The thought of integrating back into his small, inwardly-looking hometown simply depressed him. For most of their lives growing up attached to each other, Ronnie and Lennie had been sheltered from all but a small circle of people – their private tutor, the Statesberry librarian. Even during the period in which they worked at Weiss's Plumbing & Hardware the boys spent the bulk of their free time cloistered at home. By all measures, Ronnie was a Statesberry outsider, and still he feared the dynamics of the small town. He was sure his criminal past had become common knowledge, casting pariah status upon him, limiting his opportunities, dogging him wherever he tried to find employment, friendship, romance. And then there was the problem of Lennie.

Ronnie had not spoken to Lennie since shortly after being charged with the attack on Lou, when he sought his brother's financial help and moral support. It took the public defender assigned to Ronnie's case several days to locate Lennie in the county jail where he had recently been remanded following his fatal drunk driving incident. Learning of Lennie's own legal predicament, Ronnie became angry and disappointed, scolding his brother for failing to measure up, even though his own behavior had fallen well-below accepted social standards. Ronnie often assumed Lennie would fuck up his life, probably by abusing one substance or another, and now he had proven it. The conversation, carried over a telephone line connecting two centers of detention, lasted no more than five minutes. Lennie wished Ronnie the best of luck and stated his desire to see him again soon; Ronnie responded by hanging up without saying goodbye.

Now, as Ronnie stood by the side of the road, fare in hand, outside the Raiford facility awaiting a bus that would take him to temporary lodging arranged for him by the Department of Corrections, he experienced a wave of guilt followed by oppressive sadness over his years-long separation from Lennie. He figured Lennie had been released from jail, but had he been sentenced once again for some new crime? If he was free, where did he live and what he was doing? Ronnie wondered if Lennie and Spooky had become a couple, unaware that she had moved to Ohio with her rich benefactor husband. Ronnie retained high confidence, despite a total lack of evidence, that his brother Lennie was still alive and doing well. He figured that had Lennie died or become severely disabled, someone would have dispatched news of his demise. Or would they?

What would-be bearer of bad news knew Ronnie's whereabouts, or even cared for that matter? Perhaps, he feared, Lennie died in prison of liver damage or some other latent malady churned up by the abrupt separation from Ronnie and the aftermath of the surgical truncation and repositioning of his organs. Or maybe he succumbed anonymously in an ignominious fashion, his corpse warehoused in some faraway morgue. Perhaps his twin was now buried in an unmarked grave in Queens or Quito. Ronnie closed his eyes and massaged his forehead, and tried to regain the hopefulness he had felt moments earlier for Lennie's well-being.

The sun had risen above the horizon and was searing Ronnie's eyes. Sweat began to trickle down his forehead, mixing with tears before continuing down his face through a network of wrinkles and creases that had not been as deep or pronounced when Ronnie first entered prison. A bus covered in artistic yet obscene graffiti rumbled to a stop, and it seemed a harbinger of a grim existence that awaited Ronnie. Every one of the lower-class passengers, each dressed in drab, second-hand clothing stared at Ronnie as he boarded the bus; obviously they knew Ronnie was an ex-convict just released from prison. Ronnie wondered what else was obvious to these people that he himself didn't recognize, but would soon learn: that he would fail to find a job; that his health would deteriorate from the strains of poverty; that he would soon violate terms of his release and be back inside within a month?

After two months of living in the gloomy temporary apartment infested by Palmetto bugs and slithering millipedes, and identifying precisely zero employment opportunities, Ronnie revised his plans, such as they were, and departed Florida for

Statesberry, North Carolina after all, hoping to reconnect with his brother and cultivate a new life.

Ronnie rode the Greyhound to Charlotte. That was as far as he could get with the funds available to him. Once there he had to waste a day panhandling for more money to buy another bus ticket to complete his journey to Statesberry. Ronnie ate a lunch of partially-eaten meals discarded in a dumpster behind a restaurant next to the bus station. He was happy to find half a grilled cheese sandwich with no bite marks. The humiliation of eating other people's garbage and asking strangers for a handout hurt, and it was particularly painful to receive a nickel from a pretty young woman who, after Ronnie thanked her, sneered "get a job, you lazy bastard."

After arriving in Statesberry, Ronnie walked the three miles from the terminal to Vera's house where affixed to the dented mailbox at the end of the driveway was a metal sign that read "The Junkers." The front porch had been completely rebuilt and the roof sported new shingles. For a split second, Ronnie contemplated ringing the doorbell, but for what purpose? To make smalltalk with the new owner of the house, complimenting him on how well he had eradicated any evidence that he and Lennie had grown up there? Ronnie stood there by the mailbox, looking like a child on Halloween, milling around uncertain where to go next. At last he decided to hitchhike back to town to some of the places where people may know of Lennie's whereabouts. As he ambled along and thought more about it, he became increasingly concerned over the possibility that Lennie may not be in Statesberry after all, and he chided himself for making such an unfounded assumption in the first

place. Had he traveled all the way from Florida on nothing more than a hunch to risk embarrassment and disappointment?

Walking into town – not a single driver was moved to respond helpfully to Ronnie’s outstretched thumb – he passed an older man coming the other direction. “Hiya, Lennie,” said the man who nodded and spread a smile that revealed astonishingly straight white teeth. Ronnie stopped and turned toward the man who continued down the sidewalk, unaware that he had mistaken Ronnie for his identical twin. Ronnie walked faster, encouraged by the old man’s mistaken identification. He strode up to the entrance of Weiss’s Plumbing & Hardware store, relieved to see the building’s façade had not been altered. Other than the higher prices advertised on the window, nothing apparently had changed since Otis had run the show. The familiarity of his old work place helped ameliorate the disorienting effect Vera’s house, transformed, had had on Ronnie. Ronnie entered the store. Immediately to his right was a gardening section fully stocked for the spring season, offering seeds and fertilizers, rakes and stakes, sprinklers and hoses – each packaged in bright greens and yellows, the picture of a smiling face of a happy gardener greeting the customer. Ronnie felt lightheaded as he contemplated all the seasons he missed while in prison. He proceeded to the checkout counter located in the middle of the store. “Ronnie? Is that you?” Clarence, Otis’s nephew and the new owner of the store approached Ronnie from a door leading to the cellar. “Jesus Christ – it is you! How are you? What are you doing here? I mean here in Statesberry?”

Ronnie explained that he had been away for a long time, completing his degree in chemistry, and had moved to Florida

to work at the Scripps Research Institute on some confidential contract with the government. And how he had lost track of Lennie, and wanted to reunite with him. He sensed he was blathering; for when Clarence looked incredulous at the mention of Scripps, Ronnie became a bit flustered and delivered a string of sentence fragments.

“Lennie’s working here now, Ron, has been for about a year. Doin’ really well, too. You just missed him. I think he said he was goin’ to the library.”

“Really? Well, he always liked to read.” Ronnie shuffled a bit and looked down at his shoes as he spoke. “I think I’ll try to catch him there. Good to see you, Clarence.” He turned for the door.

“Ron . . .”

“Yeah?”

“If the secret research business in Florida gets too boring for you, stop by. I got a slot opening up in July.”

Ronnie returned a half-smile, certain now that Clarence and every employee in the store had more than a passing knowledge of the circumstances of his recent past.

Lennie now rarely drank to excess and only smoked pot infrequently. His sole vice – a pack of Newports a day. He found solace as he had so often done as a boy, seated at the far end of a long oak table in the library immersed in a book amid a peaceful silence interrupted occasionally by the whirrs and clacks of the Xerox copier. He enjoyed novels, biographies, travelogues, mysteries, books of maps, poetry, criticism and erotica. This afternoon, Lennie was deeply engaged in *Paco's Story*, the winner of the National Book Award for Fiction about a crippled Vietnam. He glanced up from the pages at a man coming toward him from the front door of the library. The late day sun, low in the sky shone brightly from behind the approaching man, rendering him a silhouette. Lennie squinted until the man was close enough so that the corona around him disappeared, and at that moment, Lennie saw himself. A nanosecond later, he saw Ronnie. "Oh, my God." He jumped from the table, reached for his brother with outstretched arms, and the twins embraced for a very long time. Lennie turned his head to wipe the tears running down his face, and sat down at the library table. Ronnie sat to Lennie's right as he had always done.

Ronnie and Lennie settled the answers to several fundamental questions – How have you been? When did you get out? When did you get here? What have you been doing? Why didn't you call? The two jawboned until the librarian flashed the lights

indicating the approach of closing time. Each told the other his story of crime and punishment, avoiding specifics of abject degradation yet elaborating on selected grim elements in an attempt to surpass the other's worst tales of woe.

"Do you have a place to stay, Ron?"

"Not really. I was gonna get a room at the Travel Lodge. You know, the one with the sleepwalking bear on the sign."

"Shit. Forget that. They should post a sleepwalking cockroach on the sign instead. I have room – not a lot, but enough for two of us. For awhile, anyway."

Ronnie looked down in a moment of embarrassment then happily accepted. Lennie wrapped his arm around him, and nudged his head against his brother's. Just then, the librarian came to the table and firmly asked the two men sitting awfully close to one another to leave. Lennie told her he would be taking *Paco's Story* home with him along with a trashy 1970s novel by Gore Vidal called *Myra Breckinridge* that was added to the Statesberry Library stacks only recently along with a few other subversive books following a year of confrontation between conservative patrons and the ACLU. The ACLU argued successfully in court that a library that offered *Mein Kampf* and *The Protocols of Zion* should not be allowed to deny access to a satirical piece proffered by the other side.

Ronnie did a doubletake of the cover of *Paco's Story*. Was it be possible somehow that Ronnie's butt-boy from prison could have written a sleazy tell-all memoir, naming Ronnie among his many homo lovers, describing their library trysts in sweaty, gooey detail? Lennie responded to Ronnie's apparent interest, "It's a pretty good story about this Vietnam vet who's the sole survivor of an enemy attack and has trouble fitting in when he

comes back to America.” Lennie made some additional comments about the book revealing his empathy for the soldier, but as soon as Ronnie heard the words “Vietnam vet” he tuned out, relieved.

In mid-July Ronnie accepted the position promised to him by Clarence at Weiss’s Plumbing & Hardware, where he began collecting a steady paycheck and settled into a routine similar to that of his brother. He resolved to shape up and rehabilitate his reputation. Only a small portion of Ronnie’s working hours overlapped with Lennie’s, as Clarence believed it better not to have them scheduled together too often lest their mutual ex-con sensibilities, allowed to reinforce and multiply, compel them to hatch a plan to rob the store or rape a customer. Clarence was benevolent but he was also a businessman and the steward of a long-held family enterprise that he refused to put at risk.

When both Ronnie and Lennie were not working they spent their free time together – reading at the library, playing guitar, watching movies and game shows on TV. *Jeopardy!* was a favorite that the twins rarely missed, a fast-paced game hosted by Alex Trebek who replaced Art Fleming when the show was revived while the boys were in prison. Ronnie was convinced Trebek was gay, and compared his cerebral, clinical delivery unfavorably to the easy-going style of Fleming. Ronnie and Lennie competed fiercely to supply correct questions to the answers posed by Trebek, and even went so far as to write on a slip of paper his own question to the Final Jeopardy answer, such was their devotion to playing the game with integrity. If one brother questioned correctly, and the other didn’t, the loser

would reward the winner by washing and drying the dinner dishes.

One time Ronnie disputed the Final Jeopardy question – “Who was Methuselah?” – in reference to the oldest man in the Bible; he claimed the correct question should be “Who was Enoch?”

Lennie responded immediately, expecting Ronnie to try to skip out of dish duty, “No way was the oldest guy in the bible a eunuch.”

“Not eunuch, you dimwit, Enoch, the father of Methuselah. He never died, so he has to be the oldest person.”

“What d’you mean, ‘he never died?’”

“He was assumed into heaven, translated into heaven.” Sensing confusion in Lennie’s face, Ronnie clarified, “God dragged his ass to heaven before he could croak naturally. Get it? I’m gonna write a letter to the Jeopardy producers.”

“You’re out of your fucking mind. Even if that did happen, it doesn’t make Eunuch the oldest man in the bible.”

“Enoch, asshole, Enoch. And I’m not washing the fucking dishes either.”

After several months of living in Lennie’s cramped apartment, bending over backwards to lead a nondescript, chaste life-style, Ronnie gradually expressed a desire to meet a nice girl and begin a new chapter. Lennie felt likewise but he made it clear to his brother that he was opposed to plying the bars and strip clubs in a futile attempt at finding real love. Lennie argued they would have to pursue a different, more mundane course. Ronnie accepted the concept, but recoiled at Lennie’s suggestion they join a church group or volunteer their services

at the hospital. “What hope do we have of finding Miss Right in the hospital? Huh? Are you gonna ask out a coma patient?” demanded Ronnie.

“What about the nurses?”

“Listen, the only place where nurses put out is in porno movies. Have you ever heard of a real nurse jerking off a patient? She’d probably get disbarred, or whatever – especially if the bastard wound up having a heart attack while she stroked him.” Lennie could only shake his head, realizing that when it came to women and love Ronnie still did most of his thinking with his little head.

After a week of nagging, Ronnie convinced Lennie to accompany him to Maggie O’Gillicuddy’s, a phony Irish pub occupying a corner spot in the mall next to J. C. Penney’s. The menu consisted of factory-made corned-beef sandwiches, salads scooped from a 55 gallon polyethylene bag, and potatoes from the Museum of Potatoes. The decor was dictated from headquarters in Arkansas. The walls of every O’Gillicuddy’s across the nation were adorned with rusty farm implements, sepia-toned photographs of stern-looking men with monstrous moustaches, and signs that advertised five cent haircuts. Food and atmosphere aside, O’Gillicuddy’s was one of the area’s better locations for picking up women. Most came in after work for the two-for-one drinks on Tuesdays – Ladies’ Night.

Sitting like an amphibian on a toadstool, Lennie drank too many Bushmills and stared at the silent TV hanging from the ceiling. His more industrious brother Ronnie almost received a blowjob out back by the loading dock from a homely woman twice his age who worked in the mall at a kiosk selling super-salty pretzels dipped in chocolate. Ronnie was denied sexual

gratification at the last moment when a dumpy mall cop wandered by. With his cock poking defiantly from his trousers, Ronnie vaulted into a dumpster to avoid detection, instantly feeling disgusted with himself as he had when he ran out of Lou Vigorito's place like a coward. He felt liquid flowing into his shoes while he waited for the coast to clear.

After an expensive cab ride, for they didn't own a car, the boys stumbled into their apartment and flopped into their simple beds. Lennie threw up a mixture of whiskey and blood into a bucket he kept by the side of the bed, and Ronnie beat the meat, still horny from his unfinished encounter on the loading dock.

"Good night, Ron."

"Fuck it."

Holes in their happiness grew and multiplied. The twins experienced a waning of the elation that initially came with release from prison, acquisition of a steady jobs, and their reunion after years apart. Like a child on December 26 or a bride of two months, Ronnie and Lennie were suffering a post-elation letdown and without the promise of some new development in their lives became increasingly, viscerally depressed. Something in their lives was missing, backfilled by a multiplicity of stressors, each building upon another. The death of Vera, several years of incarceration, financial difficulty, even surviving the automobile accident – all of these experiences had layered upon the twins. And the accumulation of these events began after Ronnie and Lennie became separated from one another. All of it made for a classic case of chronic adjustment disorder. And the twins would come to know it, and to know how to deal

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with it for they would conduct the research, obsessively, side-by-side in the library.

Long after the sun rose the following day – the day that followed Ladies’ Night – Ronnie and Lennie scraped themselves from their beds, hungover and longing for a quiet redoubt from their dismal apartment which had taken on a funky smell with the doubling of male occupants. The dreariness of the place and the shameful condition in which each man found himself that day served to clarify the extent to which Ronnie and Lennie had fallen into a pitiable state. Unable to eat, unmotivated to shave or shower, the twins shuffled to the library.

Lennie pulled from the stacks some books and a few periodicals to learn more about sex reassignment surgery, a plot element of *Myra Breckinridge*. It was the kind of bizarre topic that had always intrigued Ronnie and him. Just like the times the boys mined the pages of *Medical Curiosities* for nuggets of human deformity and evidence of nature’s malfeasance, they were now intrigued by men who undergo radical, unlicensed surgery to become women, and vice-versa. The literature indicated that the vast majority of those seeking sex reassignment were male, and described surgical procedures that simultaneously fascinated and repelled: slice the penis, invert scrotal skin, reroute the urethra. Seated side-by-side as they read the gory details, the twins repeatedly and subconsciously crossed and recrossed their legs. Psychologists sought to explain the motivations for changing gender, almost unanimously concluding

that an early childhood experience or observation formed the seed of a disorder that would manifest itself after puberty, although there was some debate about whether the desire to change one's body necessarily constituted a pathology. As an example, many women have facelifts to correct perceived bodily imperfections, yet undergoing elective plastic surgery to change and enhance their physical appearance was not considered a psychological disorder. Why then consider sex reassignment as such?

Further investigation along these lines led Ronnie and Lennie to studies reporting a most bizarre and repulsive concept – the desire to have one or more limbs amputated. One scientific paper described two people who wanted to become amputees because they found it to be sexually arousing, a condition dubbed apotemnophilia. Other papers documented people who wanted a limb removed to resolve what they believed to be a physical imperfection. To these sufferers, possessing two arms and two legs rendered them imperfect; in their minds, removal of a limb would make them more able-bodied and complete. The notion completely baffled Ronnie and Lennie, and yet they recognized that surgical removal of a vestigial appendage, such as a sixth finger was not uncommon, and considered an appropriate procedure. Perhaps the desire to amputate a limb was merely an extreme version of the myriad ways in which desperate people deal with their perceptions of bodily imperfection, and come to achieve harmony of mind and body.

Ronnie and Lennie learned that most people suffering from apotemnophilia never act on the urge to lose a limb, living instead in an emotionally debilitated state, pretending

perhaps to be an amputee by using a wheelchair and sitting atop a folded leg. Some desperate souls would take action to injure a limb so thoroughly as to require its amputation, such as one woman who positioned her leg on a rail so that it could be mutilated by a train. Ronnie shivered at the thought. But what the twins found most curious was the fact that a few apotemnophiliacs resolved their issues by identifying doctors who would agree to perform an elective amputation, just as there are doctors who will turn a man's scrotum inside out to give him a vagina.

The subject of body identity disorders and their resolution through elective surgery began to obsess Ronnie and Lennie. They discovered how surgical modification of the physical body could sometimes vanquish the haunting, punishing emotional depression that demonizes sufferers, and wondered whether the community of modern medicine would ever allow radical elective procedures entry into the mainstream. Weeks of researching the available literature turned into months. Side-by-side, Ronnie and Lennie plumbed the depths, unsatisfied until they consumed it all, driven as they had been as children under the tutelage of Mrs. Carlin. And then they bought a car.

Ronnie stared like a zombie at the digital clock on the dashboard for the entire minute it read 4:37 until it flipped to 4:38, and during that time, he crossed the center line of the desolate highway several times, back and forth. Fortunately during that minute of distraction no one else was traveling the highway in the opposite direction. When Ronnie looked away from the clock and back to the road, he was squarely back in the lane as if his erratic driving had never placed him in danger of colliding with oncoming traffic. He saw a sign ahead. "Wake up, Lennie, we're almost there. See, 50 kilometers to Culiacán. Wake up jizzbag, Culiacán's straight ahead. I can see the city lights." Traveling the 700 miles from Tucson, Arizona to Culiacán in the Mexican state of Sinaloa had been more grueling on Ronnie and Lennie than the previous 2,200 they covered starting from Statesberry twelve days earlier. When the air conditioning of their 1983 burgundy and faux-wood Chrysler LeBaron Town and Country Wagon stopped working in El Paso, the twins decided to conduct all further driving after sunset. Whenever one brother challenged the wisdom of visiting Culiacán in August when normal midday temperatures exceed 110 degrees, the other brother would remind him that finding a resolution to their many mutually-shared emotional issues was too important to be delayed by the oppressive Mexican summer heat. The drive south out of Tucson on Interstate 19 took the twins to Nogales, then as if

passing through a mirror, they entered Mexico at another town called Nogales and continued on a another highway numbered 19. In Imuris, Highway 19 becomes Highway 15 which goes all the way to Culiacán, passing first through Hermosillo and Guaymas, where the route then hugs the coast of the Gulf of California on through Ciudad Obregón, Navojoa, Los Mochis and Guamuchil. Between these cities and towns no traveler could be faulted for believing he had been transported by an alien race to the surface of Mars. Traveling at night exposed an other-worldliness of the terrain, and the full moon and constellations undiluted by light pollution cast weird shadows that distracted Ronnie. More than once, he weaved onto the shoulder as abstract shapes diverted his attention, sometimes frightening him. Shadows across boulders turned them into grotesque faces. Dips in the road gave the illusion of large animals standing in defiance. Saguaro cacti morphed into desert sentries, arms raised to signal an order to halt – proceed no farther!

Lennie, with his poor night vision was ineligible to drive once the decision had been made in El Paso to travel on third shift. Instead he took charge of finding music on the shitty radio common to all Chrysler K-Cars. Not counting the hours of static received all across the spectrum, Cumbias dominated the airwaves.

The twins were on this lengthy trek to keep an appointment with Dr. Sepúlveda, no first name, who practiced a specialty not offered elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere. Lennie had read about a narco-criminal nicknamed “El Rey de los Cielos” – King of the Skies, for his dominance of Mexico-to-USA drug trafficking via a fleet of privately owned aircraft – who, in an

attempt to escape arrest (and certain lifelong incarceration) by a gathering contingent of Federales, underwent radical surgery in Culiacán to rearrange his facial features to render him unrecognizable. Instead he died on the operating table. The authorities never concluded whether the death was from natural causes, from negligence on the part of the anesthesiologist, or from the intentional suffocation administered by soldiers of rival drug lords who burst into the operating room in mid-tuck. The Sky King had chosen Culiacán because it hosted a small but dedicated community of doctors willing to perform at the right price for the appropriately desperate sort any number of elective surgeries: facial alterations, sex reassignments, subdermal implants, amputations, anything.

After six months of investigation which involved a good deal of research and hundreds of dollars in long-distance and international phone calls, Lennie identified a Dr. Sepúlveda who practiced in Culiacán. It was only after another six months of correspondence in which Ronnie and Lennie explained their situation multiple times, provided evidence of their sincerity and ability to pay, and cajoled the good doctor to give them priority over his many clients, that Dr. Sepúlveda agreed to consider their case in person. Ronnie and Lennie maintained high hopes that the doctor would consent to their request and in doing so, help restore the sense of completeness that had been missing – the lack of completeness that had become the source of their emotional distress.

The twins wanted to stay in the Hotel Lucerna in Culiacán, but tapped out from buying the LeBaron and incurring expenses from living on the road for almost three weeks, settled for the much less glamorous Culebra Furtiva Motel on the

outskirts of town. The motel was located near a maquiladora where wood, steel and springs sent from the United States were assembled into mousetraps to be returned to wholesalers back in the US. Across the avenida from the motel sat a small bar, the first stop for the twins after checking in to the small, dark room – 4A – with the cracked toilet and filthy bathroom window that looked out past rail tracks onto a vast expanse of rocks and dirt. Since their release from prison, both Ronnie and Lennie had tried to reduce their intake of alcohol, but tonight, the night before meeting Dr. Sepúlveda, they agreed to calm their nerves with some modest drinking. The bar, “El Panzón,” was housed in a Quonset hut that reminded Lennie of Vera’s mailbox. The bartender was a slight, bent-over man with a head of thick grey hair and moustache dyed the color of Kiwi Cordovan. He spoke no English, or at least that’s how it seemed.

While in prison in Florida in the company of a large number of Latinos, Ronnie had acquired a working knowledge of Spanish.

“Hola, Señor, me llamo Ronnie. Este es mi hermano, Lennie. Queremos dos tequilas, por favor. Y dos aguas, también. ¿Cual es su apellido?” asked Ronnie in a manner that could have been perceived to be too friendly. The old man stared directly in his Ronnie’s eyes for a few uncomfortable seconds in silence and Ronnie began to suspect that non-locals were unwelcome in the bar.

“Son Yanquis, ¿verdad?”

“Si, Señor.”

“Trente pesos, ahora, ¿comprende? Turthy pesos, ¿si?”

Ronnie got the message: pre-payment was required for all

drinks, at least for gringos. As he dug some lightweight coins from his pocket he calculated the price to be equivalent to 95 cents in the United States. At these prices, Ronnie was willing to endure the lack of hospitality. Neither Ronnie nor Lennie was familiar with the brand of tequila they were about to be served. The bartender grabbed a bottle with a pen-and-ink drawing of a grub and illegible block lettering on the label, and poured out a generous amount of tequila into two smudgy, short glasses. He set the drinks and waters down on the bar along with a plate of orange slices and some wrinkled chili peppers.

Raising his glass in a parody of magnanimity, Ronnie exclaimed, "Well, my brother, here's to a successful and prosperous vacation." Lennie clinked his glass with Ronnie's and the two gulped down the tequila in a single, coordinated movement. "Fuck, that's awful!" blurted Lennie, slamming the glass on the gouged, wooden bartop. Ronnie would have echoed that sentiment had he not been struggling to swallow the second half of the shot after failing to get the drink down all at once.

The bartender looked up from wiping silverware and cast a sly smile that suggested, "asshole Americans."

"Yo, fuckhead, otra vez. Dos tequilas mas," demanded Ronnie, sounding fortified. He plunked down enough money to pay for ten more shots. The bartender complied, and after an hour during which Ronnie and Lennie finished their pre-paid allotment of tequilas as well as a respectable portion of the chilis and fruit, the twins were undeniably shitfaced. As they contemplated whether to go back to dismal room 4A or stay for more drinks that would punish them the next morning,

the twins were approached by a little boy about eight years old carrying a shoe-shine kit.

“Shine your boots misters? Dos pesos, solamente. Cheap for you. I give you good shine, best ever, for you.”

Ronnie looked down at his boots, an inexpensive pair purchased in San Antonio, and although they were not scuffed or otherwise unpresentable, he decided to take up the boy on his proposal. Nothing in America could be bought for as little as the equivalent of two pesos. Lennie, wearing beat up sneakers, turned away and tapped his empty glass on the bar signaling an order for another tequila.

“Mister, better to come outside. No let me shine in here,” squeaked the little boy.

Ronnie stepped off the barstool for the first time since he began slamming down tequilas in “El Panzón,” and wobbled for a moment before regaining his balance. He followed the little boy outside, then around the corner of the Quonset hut. The boy pointed to a wooden crate and Ronnie sat down. After wiping Ronnie’s boots with a wet towel, the boy applied some polish of a hue that didn’t quite match. “I work good, give you best shine ever, mister.” He brushed the boots vigorously, his skinny arms moving in a blur – at least it appeared that way to the inebriated Ronnie. The boy reached into his kit and produced a tiny ampule of clear liquid. As he splashed some of the liquid on Ronnie’s boots, Ronnie heard him say something like, “Best ever shine, special wax, dos cientos pesos,” then his arms started flailing as he stropped the boots with a rag.

“Whoa, boy, hold on, dejar de sacar brillo. I didn’t ask for . . .” Before Ronnie could complete his protestation over the additional charge of 200 pesos, he spotted a broad shouldered,

bulky Mexican walking toward him from out of a shadow cast by a dumpster near the rear of the building. Recognizing the set-up, and the associated danger, Ronnie spoke softly to the little boy, "I . . . uh . . . no mas shine, por favor." The Mexican from the shadows, the boy's accomplice, looked to be about Ronnie's age and stood a head shorter, but never for a second did Ronnie consider any other option but to pay the boy the exorbitant price.

"Dos cientos pesos, please, por cada bota. Special wax, best ever." Ronnie muttered an obscenity under his breath and as the boy's imposing partner stood, arms crossed, blocking the path to the avenida, Ronnie handed over the equivalent of \$12.

Back in the bar, with some drool hanging from the corner of his mouth, Lennie talked to a young girl with a pretty flower in her hair. Ronnie rushed in and grabbed his besotted brother by the arm. "Time to go, Len."

"But Consuelo here was just telling me about a party she's having with some friends upstairs." Lennie leaned forward with a stupid grin on his face and whispered to his brother, "We might be able to get laid." Ronnie pulled Lennie off the barstool. He collapsed in a heap on the floor, banging his chin on the wooden seat as he fell.

"What the fuck, Ron? You nearly broke my neck."

"Let's go. I'll tell you about it later." And with that, Lennie stood up, wobbled, head swirling, and promptly puked all over Ronnie's boots.

Fortunately, the meeting with Dr. Sepúlveda was scheduled for 3 p.m., giving Ronnie and Lennie sufficient time to recover from the harrowing self-inflicted abuse of the previous evening. After splitting the remaining dozen aspirins between them, the twins drove the dust-covered LeBaron to the Hotel Lucerna for a safe, decent meal and, more importantly, the opportunity to lounge around in the air-conditioned lobby for a few hours as their hangovers stubbornly subsided. Ronnie consulted a map and determined that Dr. Sepúlveda's office was within walking distance of the Lucerna. They left the pleasant lobby around 2:30 and stepped into a pizza oven. The initial blast of heat brought on a wave of nausea for Ronnie, and he almost decided to cancel the meeting. Lennie insisted otherwise, reminding his brother that missing the appointment might disqualify them from any future engagement with the good doctor.

The two pressed on into the oppressive summer heat through tree-shaded avenidas, past upscale shops, and eventually into an ugly, down-trodden section of Culiacán to the address provided to Lennie by Dr. Sepúlveda himself. The apparent destination was a corrugated metal building with no windows or markings, situated next to an auto salvage company. It didn't seem likely the place could be the office of a surgeon. Ronnie walked toward a grease-covered man standing by an open garage bay of the auto salvage company, but as soon as the man realized

he was being approached he bolted inside behind mountains of rusted car parts. Meanwhile, Lennie pushed on the door and found it to be open. He entered an anteroom lit from above by a buzzing fluorescent light the shape of a halo, then walked up to another door, this one clearly locked with a chain looped through a hole by the latch. He rapped on the door and a moment later, a small slot like those used by Prohibition Era speakeasies slid open.

“Contraseña” said a woman through the narrow opening.

“We’re here for an appointment with Dr. Sepúlveda,” replied Lennie.

“Contraseña.”

Lennie stepped back outside. “Ronnie, get your ass over here. I don’t know what she’s saying.”

Ronnie, who was sitting and sweating in the shade at the base of the only tree on the block, rose slowly and followed Lennie back into the metal building. The slot in the locked secondary door was closed now. Lennie rapped again, and again the woman opened the slot and said blandly, “Contraseña.”

“That means ‘password.’ What the hell, Len? We have to give a password to get in?”

Lennie furrowed his brow for a second, then snapped his fingers, “Oh yeah, I forgot. Sepúlveda told me to say . . .” Lennie paused as he pulled a piece of paper from his wallet, unfolded it, turned it around, “. . . ‘Eustache Dauger’.” To the woman behind the slot, Lennie repeated, “Eustache Dauger. The doctor told me to say ‘Eustache Dauger’.”

“Who the fuck is Eustache Dauger?” asked Ronnie.

“Supposedly, he was the Man in the Iron Mask, who knows.” Noting the perplexed look on his brother’s face, Lennie

continued, “you know, the Alexandre Dumas story about Louis XIV and his twin brother?” He pronounced Dumas “dumbass” in keeping with the irreverence with which the boys had treated the names of other literary figures: Whorehouse Greeley, Sinclair Blew-us, Thomas Hard-on, e.e. cumstain.

The chain through the door jangled as the woman fought with the padlock on the other side. When the door opened, the woman, dressed in an old-fashioned nurse’s uniform complete with a starched white fabric that looked like a sail in her hair directed Ronnie and Lennie into a pleasant-looking waiting room. On one wall next to a crucifix was a reproduction of Michaelangelo’s “The Creation of Eve” in which Eve seems to step out of a slumbering Adam’s torso. The original fresco appears on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the panel next to the far more famous depiction of God touching Adam’s finger with His own, imparting upon His creation the spark of life.

On the opposite wall of the waiting room hung a framed bible quotation, Matthew 5:30, presented first in Latin, then in Spanish, and finally in English.

Et si dextera manus tua scandalizat te abscide eam et
proice abs te expedit tibi ut pereat unum membrorum
tuorum quam totum corpus tuum eat in gehennam

Y si tu mano derecha te es ocasión de pecar, córtala y
écha la de ti; porque te es mejor que se pierda uno de tus
miembros, y no que todo tu cuerpo vaya al infierno

If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from
thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members

should perish, and not that thy whole body should be
cast into hell

Ronnie and Lennie waited for over three hours, well past the time of their scheduled appointment. Since entering the American Southwest and then Mexico, the twins learned to accept the fluidity and imprecision of commitments made, and harbored no ill-feelings toward those who seemed slothful, inconsiderate, or incapable of punctuality. Just after 6 p.m., the woman in the nurse's uniform entered the waiting room and signaled for the twins to follow her to Dr. Sepúlveda's office, a space ten-times larger than the waiting room. The office was outfitted with sky-lights, several muted televisions tuned to different channels, a grand piano, an ornate book case of leather-bound volumes, a reproduction of the ancient Greek sculpture "Kritian Boy," and a well-stocked bar. The place was large enough to be a nightclub. Ronnie noted the erotic artwork on the walls and the several chaise longues and loveseats strewn about the room and wondered if the doctor might on occasion play host to an orgy.

The doctor welcomed Ronnie and Lennie with a strong handshake to each. "I am Dr. Sepúlveda, and I can only assume one of you is Lennie, but I certainly cannot tell one of you from the other. Identify yourselves to me please."

Lennie raised his hand like he had done as a child when Mrs. Carlin asked who knew the capital of Ceylon. "I'm Lennie, and this is my twin brother, Ronnie. We're honored to meet you doctor, aren't we Ron?" Ronnie nodded reluctantly, still absorbing his surroundings, "Yes sir, we hope you can help us."

"I am confident I can help you and your brother, Señor Ron. I have helped others with challenges requiring more of my skill than what you have asked me to do. Still, your request is new to me. I am humbled that you would choose my services, and travel such a long distance. That you agreed to pay my substantial fee also tells me you are serious, and for that I am appreciative as well." Sepúlveda paused for a moment, making eye contact back and forth, assessing the twins' demeanor. "Si, Señores Ron y Len, I am confident you will leave here happy." When Sepúlveda called his fee "substantial," both Ronnie and Lennie experienced a twinge of remorse for spending all the money left to them by the recently deceased Mrs. Carlin, their tutor and a life-long spinster.

Sepúlveda continued, "You brothers, you look like you would enjoy a drink. May I pour you both a tequila? Made not far from here, in Mazatlán, a place called La Vinata, the oldest destilería in Sinaloa."

Only recently recovered from the hangovers from the previous night's abuse of tequila, Ronnie and Lennie chuckled nervously at the offer to ingest more cactus poison. Ronnie stuttered, "Uh, no thank you doctor, uh, maybe just a beer, uh, cerveza." Lennie added with a pained expression, "We drank a bit too much tequila last night, didn't we Ron."

Dr. Sepúlveda responded cryptically, "Ah, that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains! I will draw two Pacificos, then, for you amigos," referring to another product of Mazatlán. "For me, I will take tequila. Please sit down." He motioned toward a large U-shaped sofa-complex positioned around a coffee table that looked to be a solid rectangular block of sandstone. Had to weigh 4000 pounds. His bar

was equipped with a professional draft beer system from which he drew two large glasses of Pacifico. Into each, out of the sight of the twins, he poured a small amount of amber liquid from a vial he retrieved from the pocket of his natty jacket.

Dr. Sepúlveda delivered the drinks on a silver tray inlaid with turquoise which he set on the sandstone block in front of Ronnie and Lennie. As always, they sat next to each other, Ronnie on the right and Lennie on the left.

“How did you get here?” asked Sepúlveda, “Did you come by taxi? I did not see your auto outside.”

Lennie replied, “We walked over from the Lucerna Hotel, Doctor.”

“Ah. The Lucerna. It is beautiful, yes? When did you arrive there?”

“Oh no. We can’t afford to stay there. We drove to the Lucerna from the Culebra Furtiva. Do you know it? That’s where Ronnie and I are staying while we visit Culiacán.”

Sepúlveda laughed long and hard, and said, after catching his breath, “That’s a very nice place,” adding with apparent sincerity, “Es un agujero de mierda – feo y apestoso.” Lennie laughed along obliviously with Sepúlveda. Ronnie laughed as well, not because he was particularly amused, but rather to conceal that he understood the doctor’s insulting remarks.

Sepúlveda inquired with genuine interest about the details of the twin’s cross-continental roadtrip, trying to solicit compliments along the way for Mexico and Sinaloa in particular. He gushed about the beauty of Culiacán and the Rivers Tamazula and Humaya that flow from the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range and merge in the center of the city to become the Culiacán River. He delivered a summary of the history of the

arrival of the Spaniards, concentrating on the conquistador Francisco de Coronado who in the 1530s set out from Culiacán to explore what is now the American Southwest. Ronnie and Lennie bobbed their heads politely to signal a keen interest in the doctor's stories and recollections.

"You know, Ron y Len, I love my Culiacán. Mi madre brought me to this place in 1955 after my father died. I was just completing seven years old. I had much fun growing up here, but my city, it is now become a dangerous place because of so much narcotics. After your government started their drug war in Columbia, life – it got bad for us. The drug lords as you call them, the kingpins – yes? – they come to Culiacán to rule their narcotics empire. They are ruthless men."

Ronnie fought a violent urge to fart, worried that he would be unable to let his gas seep slowly and steadily, resulting in an embarrassing audible vibration against the soft leather cushion. For several seconds, he grimaced from the stabbing pain in his lower abdomen. Sepúlveda swallowed another tequila and continued, "I cannot complain too much, however. I have become rich performing surgery to alter the faces of many drug lords, and the people afraid of the drug lords. Always someone gets into trouble with the policia, or with drug lords, and they all pay mucho to look different, to change appearance. Mucho. To change appearance and escape trouble."

Just as the twins simultaneously set down their empty beer glasses, Sepúlveda scooped them up and headed toward the bar to refill them. As he ambled to the tap, he said over his shoulder, "Did you know Culiacán means 'the place of snakes'?"

Ronnie and Lennie had come to the corrugated metal building this stifling hot August afternoon to consult with Dr.

Sepúlveda, understand the risks and rewards of the procedure, and return to their feo and apestoso room back at the Culebra Furtiva to consider the options and make some decisions. So they were more than taken aback when Sepúlveda said he would be conducting the operation that evening – right then and there. “It is for the best, hermanos, that we do not delay. I have seen it many times. People delay for weeks and months only to proceed in the end after all. It wastes much time.”

Ronnie stood up to complain only to fall back into the leather sofa, dizzy and semi-incoherent, blasting the fart he had held so valiantly in abeyance. Lennie didn’t even try to stand as the beer-plus had thoroughly disrupted his faculties. Both men were fundamentally incapacitated. Sepúlveda pressed a button located under the bar hailing the nurse who entered the room through a side door accompanied by a large, slant-eyed Eastern European orderly pulling two gurneys. Ronnie glanced over at Lennie who was now unconscious, then in what seemed like extreme slow-motion, he faced Sepúlveda from the sofa and tried to protest, “what the fuck is going on?” only to mutter “whuhfugwan?” to which the doctor replied, “We’ll talk tomorrow Señor Ron.”

Lennie was the first to awaken following the surgery. For twenty minutes he lay flat and motionless in the bed staring up at the mottled ceiling, struggling to dredge up some clue where he might be. Was he conscious or experiencing a dream? He couldn't be certain. Some recollection of the previous night's events began to develop – drinking beers with Ronnie and listening to Sepúlveda tell stories; a powerful sense of dystopia; a large, lumpy man hoisting Lennie onto a gurney; rolling into a brightly lit room that smelled of disinfectant and urine; the taste of onion on his palate, the final sensation he remembered before losing consciousness. “Did Sepúlveda actually go through with it?” thought Lennie, concluding that he must have. He remembered the doctor drinking several tequilas the previous night and hoped his faculties had not been impaired.

A ray of bright sunshine leaking through a shuttered window inched slowly across the bed and eventually onto Lennie's face. He averted his eyes from the assault of lumens. Turning his head to his left, he saw Ronnie lying closely next to him, also motionless and staring up at the ceiling.

Lennie summoned the energy to whisper, “Ron, can you hear me? Are you awake?” He coughed dryly.

Without looking at his brother, Ronnie replied, “Yeah. I think so. Are you OK?”

Before Lennie could assess the situation to provide an

appropriate answer, Dr. Sepúlveda entered the room with the nurse and the Eastern European orderly, and greeted the twins. “Gentlemen, how do you feel this morning?” Without waiting for an answer or physical sign of recognition, he continued, “Let me report immediately that everything turned out successfully last night, and you will be able to leave my facilities in a matter of two short days. How does that sound?”

Neither brother could raise his head so it wasn’t until Sepúlveda stood directly over them to check the bandages on their chests that they could exchange eye-contact with him. “Yes, mi amigos, you will heal quickly. You are both strong young men. This is your most powerful asset.” Ronnie turned his head toward Lennie and smiled, although he wasn’t feeling very strong at the moment.

Sepúlveda continued, “Later today, the nurse will help you rise out of bed, and explain to you how to change bandages and care for the sutures. Hermanos, this is the first time I do this type of surgery and I am very excited with the results.” Sepúlveda nodded toward his nurse. She pulled back the sheet to reveal a large quantity of white gauze wrapped around Ronnie’s and Lennie’s torsos and taped tightly so that the two were pressed against each other. Spots of brown, dried blood showed through in places. With the orderly’s help, the nurse propped the twins up with a few pillows. They both winced when the nurse stressed the newly sewn incisions. Raised to the upright position, both brothers felt dizzy and nauseous.

“I hope you do not mind,” continued the doctor, “I had my assistant film the operation. I am proud of my work, and I want a record in case another such operation is requested of me.” Ronnie and Lennie both widened their eyes at that piece of

news, but in their weakened condition made no attempt to protest.

“Now I must leave, Señor Ron, Señor Len. The nurse will take good care of you. I am meeting a very nice man from America – San Francisco, I believe – who wants me to transform him into a beautiful woman.” Sepúlveda shook Lennie’s hand and walked briskly toward the door. Over his shoulder he bade the twins, “¡Buena suerte!”

Recovery from the operation was more difficult than Dr. Sepúlveda implied. The incisions made during surgery were sore and weepy, and the twins, stiff from the operation, had trouble sitting up and moving about the small, bleak recovery room. The nurse pressed Ronnie and Lennie to be more assertive in regaining their strength and flexibility, and to take over more of their own personal care. Despite the difficulties encountered by the twins, and over their objections, the nurse reiterated Sepúlveda's declaration that they would be well enough to be discharged in two days. And as promised, after the twins compressed ten days of recovery into 48 hours, the orderly wheeled Ronnie and Lennie into the blazing heat of late-morning Culiacán and into an awaiting taxicab – a vintage VW Beetle from which the passenger side front seat had been removed – that took them back to the Culebra Furtiva Motel. A gracious host, Sepúlveda had arranged for the twin's LeBaron to be towed back from The Lucerna.

The twins struggled at first. Going to the bathroom, which had once been easily manageable when they were children was once again awkward, now that they were newly re-conjoined by the surgical prowess of Dr. Sepúlveda. But after a few days of convalescence in and around their tiny motel room, the twins' sutures healed nicely and the expert coordination they once had as Siamese twins started to return. They cut slits into their

shirts to accommodate the new band of flesh connecting them around their fifth ribs.

On the seventh day, Ronnie and Lennie felt well enough to stroll across the street to “El Panzón” bar and order some drinks, this time from a comely, dark-eyed, brown-skinned señorita named Selena who spoke English well-enough and engaged the twins in lively conversation. When the subject of literature came up, and Selena admitted a secret admiration for the erotica of Anaïs Nin, Ronnie and Lennie each knew in their hearts they were on the road to recovery. Both brothers instantly harkened back to the time they had accomplished the tricky ménage a trois with Spooky, and each now fantasized, independently, about repeating that contortion act with the muy bonita Selena. After downing a dozen Pacificos between them, the twins bade Selena farewell and retreated to room 4A to prepare for the long drive back to North Carolina.

As they packed their few belongings, Lennie said with a chuckle, “I can’t wait to see the look on Clarence’s face when he sees us like this.”

“Shit,” Ronnie replied, “if the Hilton Sisters could work at a grocery store, we can handle plumbing and electric supplies.”

The twins climbed into the two single beds they pushed together, shut off the lights and retired for the evening.

“Good night, Ron. I love you.”

“Me too, Len.”

Thirty minutes later, Lennie was awoken by a violent shaking. “Ron, what the fuck are you doing?” Ronnie, who was masturbating vigorously, whispered in a hoarse voice with his eyes closed tightly, “Don’t interrupt me – I’m just about to cum all over Selena’s face.”

The alarm clock rang at 3 a.m., set at this early time so the twins could hit the road well before the baking Sinaloan sun made it all but impossible to travel without AC in the LeBaron. They checked out of the Culebra Furtiva, settling the bill with the sleepy nightclerk and climbed into the LeBaron which, to their pleasant surprise, was filled with gas, presumably a going-away present from Dr. Sepúlveda. Now, it was Ronnie on the left and Lennie on the right; Sepúlveda had honored the twins request to reattach them opposite to the way they had been for half their lives. A long time ago Lennie stared at a total eclipse, and lost his driving priveleges in the process. He would be the passenger on the long drive back to Statesberry. And for the rest of their days, Lennie and Ronnie would never again miss a moment together.



Ronnie and Lennie, the central characters of Herb Schultz's first novel, are identical twins fused in the womb who join a world that is unprepared to separate them. The reason for their plight is vague and debatable, but one possibility wends its way throughout the narrative. Seemingly chained for life in a rural backwater of North Carolina, Ronnie and Lennie unexpectedly break free, but life apart is not all it's cracked up to be. Serious trouble descends upon our heroes, and they find themselves prisoners of another kind. A case of chronic adjustment disorder compels the twins to drastic action.

Throughout the story we are introduced to a broad array of characters that influence the direction and speed Ronnie and Lennie take through life—a rudderless mother, a crazy groupie, an evil gambler, an unconventional doctor, to name just a few. *RonnieandLennie* is a funny, sad, vulgar story that spans decades and visits numerous venues as it chronicles the lives of twins conjoined at the chest by a rogue band of flesh.



Author, Herb Schultz

Herb Schultz is a graduate of Gannon University and Syracuse University, and has spent over 30 years in the technology industry specializing in supercomputing. He lives in Saugerties, New York. *RonnieandLennie* is his first novel.

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