

# BLACKOUT

SIX SHORT FICTIONS

by  
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Chicago Blackout  
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# High Rise

Marlene looked over the crowd. Casting agents, producers, writers, hangers on. Actresses like herself, eager and naïve, played coy in loose-fitting dresses. They were all showing more cleavage; their giggles lingered longer. That was how you got into the high rise party; that's how you made it out of Chicago in nineteen-ninety-five.

"It looks like a surgeon cut out part of the city with a scalpel." Marlene pointed out the window, north on Chicago's grid, a swath of squares missing. She took a sip of her wine, balanced a plate of hors d'oeuvres. "Those ancient transformers couldn't handle the heat wave."

"Do you live in the blacked out part?" Alan was a casting agent. He had one blue eye and one so brown Marlene thought it was black. The music shifted, uptempo.

"Yeah, I guess we were the cancer." She set her glass down and took a bite of caviar. Cool, salty, nice.

"You escaped."

"For now."

"Thank God the power stayed on here," Alan said. "LA gets hot, but this heat is unbearable. I always think of Chicago as cold and snowy."

"It's tough all the time."

"You a dramatic actress?"

"Comedy, too," she said. "I like your eyes." Marlene cocked her head and looked at his forehead; she hated bi-colored eyes. She never knew which one was looking at her and they made her feel uneasy; she focused on the blue one.

The window was sweating at the edges. It was one-hundred degrees at eleven o'clock at night. Marlene thought of the nights she'd spent tossing and turning, hoping her box fan would reanimate and cool the room by a single degree. Her brow would be soaked in sweat, her chest sticky with humidity. Tonight, like last night, the fan would be dead; the radio would be silent. It would just be her and the heat.

Alan cupped her elbow with his hand and whispered into her ear. She wanted to escape. She giggled.

She saw lights on the street below. She saw her home, where there were no lights. Here was cold caviar, ice, air conditioning. Hamburger rotted in her freezer. The transformers will always work here, she thought, there will always be power and things will keep getting better.

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# Heat Island

Chicago is in the middle of a ferocious heat wave and I don't want to go outside in the daytime, or answer the telephone or walk across the room to pee. I can't even type. Typing causes more heat in my fingers which moves up my arms and finally all over my body so that I have created a whole new warm front from writing a bullet-point list. I need it cool so I can think enough to write my letter to Susan, my mea culpa. The city needs it to cool. Even Susan needs it to cool, though I loved her sweaty nape exposed by the ponytail-pull of her blond hair, stray hairs curled and wet with sweat. But I'm sure her new boyfriend has air conditioning; I bet he even has cable television.

I'm starting to feel like an ant under a magnifying glass, as though a single ray of sun were concentrated on me, right here in this apartment. I used to do that to ants; I would catch them beneath my lens, focusing a ray of sun onto their black or red bodies, watching them squirm and I'd chase them until I hit a shady spot and they would escape and I would forget about them until the next day's summer boredom. I called it science. I suppose I'm being paid back; the more I fidget, the hotter I get, the more the sweat pours. I have to get out of this apartment.

Meanwhile, people are dying, overheating right in their apartments. The old man from across the hall, my buddy Milo, was taken away by a gang of EMTs just yesterday. They put an oxygen mask on his face and told me to back off. I almost punched that guy until I realized he was twice my size. Someone on public radio says that back in the 30's there was a heat wave and

people slept out by the lakefront where it was cooler. I bet they had fun, bringing beer and playing softball in the lake breeze until the sun set. This was before we learned to distrust one another, before we found out that anyone was a potential thief, drug addict, or serial killer. I wonder if Milo remembers this, if he wonders what happened, why now, in the modern world of 1995, he couldn't just sleep under the stars on the beach without being roused, robbed, or merely thought a fool. He'd probably just go off about what an "air conditioned nightmare" America has become, then he'd punch me on the shoulder and we'd laugh.

I sit by the fan with a glass of water at hand, next to my warm can of beer. Elvis is insisting on a walk, whining and whimpering for relief. Earlier, I put ice in his bowl hoping that would shut him up, but he has to get out and pee, so we go out. I figure we can go to Goldblatt's and get an air conditioner. I'll turn my place into another air-conditioned nightmare, draw the shades and close out the whole world. Why not? It's for the sake of the dog, after all. Besides, walks always clear my head and dampen the chatter in my brain.

"Is that your dog?" a small boy asks me, as we wait for the light to change.

"Yup, his name's Elvis," I answer. "You want to pet him?"

"He ain't got no back legs."

"Nope, he lost them."

"He did?"

"The doctor took them because they were broken."

"Oh," he says. "How did he get wheels?"

"The dog doctor gave him the wheels," I say. "Elvis taught himself how to use them."

"Why?"

"Because he had to, kid."

The kid's mother is pretty and brown with long silky dark hair, wearing those fashionable sunglasses like the ones I found on the floor in that rathole bar in the Gold Coast a few weeks ago. 8-track Mike told me they might be worth some money, but I left them in the cab on the way home. She's talking with another woman about something very important; our alderman needs to do something about the heat and the people who are dying, or something like that. We leave them there.

At the next block, Elvis and I make a stop in the corner store for a pint of gin, grapefruit soda, and a lotto ticket. The blast of air conditioning chills the sweat on my brow, back and face.

"Nice day, eh Snake," I say to my friend, the clerk.

"Yeah, if you're a rhinoceros," Snake says, putting my supplies in a sack.

The boy is back at the crosswalk. He's got a sucker that doesn't quite fit in his mouth and it's left a wide red circle on his face like a sad, drunken clown. I can relate.

"Hey Elvis," the boy says, patting my dog.

"Hey, you caught up to us."

The boy pets Elvis with the same hand that holds the sucker and I think about how long it's been since Elvis had a good bath and brushing. Elvis is good with kids, most Labs are, so he just stands there with a doggie smile, either pleased or just patient, I can never tell which. The

boy strokes Elvis' back and gives him a hug.

"Nice dog," the mother says. "Lab?"

"Yeah, he's a Lab mix I think."

"What happened to his legs?"

"Rattlesnake got to him," I say. "Doc had to amputate."

"Oh, wow."

"Yeah, but we make do, don't we boy?" Elvis looks up at me, his tongue wagging. "That vet was something else, right, King?" Elvis barks when I call him King.

The light changes but Elvis won't budge. The boy and his mother walk ahead. I look at Elvis and he's staring down the street, his eyes calm and open.

"C'mon, then, what's the hold-up, pup?" I say.

Elvis looks up at me, then starts going. I'm focused on the woman ahead, she's giving me a nice view. Very lovely shape, I think, very lovely indeed.

A man steps out of a doorway and with one smooth movement he knocks the boy down and grabs the woman's purse. Elvis barks with a ferocity I've never heard before. I didn't know he had fangs like that; I damn near piss myself. The man heads towards us, screaming to scare us back. Being that I really have nowhere to be, I lunge at him, recalling a rugby move from years long past. I wrap him tight and he keeps going. Elvis is going mad with the barking, but a dog on wheels can do little more than make noise, I have to do the rest. I hold tight and manage to get my legs tangled with his, bringing him down. He punches me and I punch back.



As the cops sort out the mess and take the guy away, I melt two ice packs on my eye and Elvis has his picture made by both newspapers. The woman, Maria, approaches me.

"I appreciate what you did," she says. She does that thing with her hair where she flips it around, which catches me off guard.

"Anyone would have done the same," I say, wanting to run away. I can feel my three-day-old beard swimming in sweat and face grease.

Maria writes down her number on a red ticket-stub and asks me to call her. I put the number in my pocket and I tell her that I'll call, but I'm already trying to forget. I still need to speak with Susan just one more time; I need to be sure it's over.

I've had enough excitement for today and can't possibly go to the store for the air conditioner. Instead, I reward Elvis with a bath, propping his back-end on a little stool so he can stand in the tub. I rinse him with cool water and his tongue wags out of his mouth. I ask him if that feels good and he barks. I wrap him in a towel and dry him off and he licks my face when I get close enough.

The afternoon is going by slowly and it's not getting any cooler as the sun sets. I keep looking at the number, at the name she wrote there, Maria. Her handwriting, her kid. I take Elvis for a quick walk, just long enough for him to do his business. The heat is trapped everywhere and I just want to get back to the apartment. But the number is still there on the table, next to the telephone when I return. I figure I gotta get down to the bar, get out a bit so I can sort this whole thing through. Maybe someone knows where to get an air conditioner for cheap.

"So Nat, what are ya gonna do?"

"I guess I'll just try to get an air conditioner tomorrow."

"No, numbnuts, about this hot broad?"

"Shit, Shelia, I don't know," I say, tipping my empty glass her way. "I've got too much going on right now."

"What? Backlogged on sex-chat lines? Is that hottie with the maracas waiting for your call?"

"Yeah," I say. "You wanna do shots?"

"What? Your girly drink again?"

"Hang it all, give me your diesel-dyke special."

Shelia heads down the bar to take care of some other customers and I lean back in my chair to feel cool air blow from the vent overhead. I can't believe more people aren't here seeking relief. I start to wonder where Sonny is tonight, but then, on cue, he comes walking through the door. He gets his usual warm greeting from the regular guys at the end of the bar who tell him that the Sox suck and that he should go back to the Southside to his mama. Sonny produces a handkerchief with a Cubs logo on it, turns around and wipes his butt with it amidst a shower of popcorn and peanut shells.

"Shelia, beer," Sonny says. "What's up, Nat?"

"Shot, too, Son?" Shelia says.

"Twist my arm," Sonny says. "Say, where's Elvis? And what happened to your eye,

man?"

"Roasting at home, wishing I would come back with an air conditioner," I say. "I'll tell ya about the eye in a minute."

"Well, whatever, but it looks like you've got the heat all over ya. "

"I went to the movies last night and it was like trying to cool off in a kiddie pool."

Shelia comes back with beers and shots for the three of us. Irish Whisky, as usual. I like when Shelia works, she keeps the baseball for the guys down at the end of the bar, but she'll also put on a movie or something non-sports just for the sake of variety. The Cubs are doing well this year, so I really don't care either way.

"Shelia, just because you have more chest hair than me doesn't mean you gotta serve up this whisky every single time."

"Just drink, you mama's boy."

We raise our glasses and gently bow to each other as we bump into a triangle, the whisky sloshing from glass to glass, on our hands and down to the bar top. "Salut" we say, tossing the drinks back.

I tell Sonny about my earlier incident with the robber and Maria. I try to not mention Susan; I know what he'll say. He'll tell me to forget her, that it's over. He's right, but yet he's not. There is always a chance. She said she'd always care about me. But Sonny will tell me that it's all in my mind, that I'm obsessed and jealous, that Susan's moved on for good.

"So, what about this Maria?" Sonny says. "She hot?"

"Yeah, she's hot, but there's this kid."

"Her son?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You guess? Did he call her 'mama'?"

"Well, no, I don't think so."

"So you don't have any idea, do you?" Sonny says. "You're making up the whole thing in your crazy head, man."

"Shelia's looking hot tonight."

"Yeah, you even try and Janice will kick your ass, buddy."

"Check the news, man," Sonny says. "Looks like they're finding more bodies."

"This is why I need an air conditioner," I say. "That old man could have hung with me if I'd had an air conditioner."

"You and that old man, the old man and the sea."

"Guy's been around, he's seen the world, did everything 'cept raise his own kids to take care of him at the end."

The television displays images of bank thermometers, the Mayor, and ambulances. A reporter is at the county hospital and there's a cut to a reporter down in the Loop, who is sweating. We watch, eat popcorn, and the juke box streams out another Bruce Springsteen song. The tiny little white Christmas lights wind around beneath the televisions, glowing into red-stained wood, casting a wash of light through the bar.

"Heat island," Shelia says.

"What?" I say.

"That's what they're saying, heat islands trap the heat, the city is a heat island, all the concrete and steel just holds heat."

"So?"

"Humidity makes it worse, too," Sonny says.

"Yeah, ever go to the South?" Shelia says. "Janice and I went to visit her brother in Atlanta and I thought I was going to melt."

"Heat island, eh?" I say

"Yeah, it never cools down," Shelia says, taking a bar rag to wipe up our mess, walking away to wipe down the rest of the bar.

"I think she might want me."

"Man, I'm telling you, Janice will kick your skinny white-boy ass."

"No, dipshit, the girl from earlier, she did the hair flip thing."

"As long as you're not talking about Susan I'm happy," Sonny says. "Hey, wanna play the golf machine?"

Elvis whimpers when I walk through the door; he's gotta go, so I grab a poop-bag and we go for a quick trip to the sidewalk. The air is still. Hot. Elvis takes his sweet-ass time, sniffing

around to see which of our neighbors has been doing their business in the strip of dirt between the sidewalk and the curb. A man approaches from the corner and I keep him in the corner of my eye. I sense him coming my way and I turn to look at him.

"Hey, Nat, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, right?" It's Randall, the building manager. He's dressed in short shorts and tennis shoes, like he's been out jogging or something. I always thought that guy was a bit strange. He's always a bit too happy. Now I think he must be using drugs, a speed freak.

"Yeah, 308, why?"

"Your neighbor, Milo, the old man, was asking about you at the hospital."

"Really? Well tell him I said hello if you get a chance."

"He's at Cook County for a few days, seems he has some other trouble and they're keeping him," Randall says. "You get a chance, you should go see him. He's asking for you."

"Sure, sure. That's a good idea."

"You never know when people will just disappear, or what will happen next." He pushes the heavy door into the building.

I wake and the weather report says that today will be even hotter than yesterday. I'm covered in a light film of sweat. I go to the bathroom to splash some water on my face. There's no water, just an airy gasp. It's the same in the tub. Goddamn kids. Goddamn kids playing with the fire hydrant. Elvis looks at me and tips his head because this situation is seriously screwed-up. At least he's got some water left in his bowl, to which I add a few ice cubes. I take another cube and put it in a washrag and wipe down with that.

I look at the number on the table, Maria's number. Elvis drags himself over to lie on the bathroom floor. Smart dog. I pick up the phone. I look at the number, the name. I want to lie naked on the bathroom floor, too, and drink beer from a straw. But I dial the number. A wrong number yields a screaming Chinese woman. Then the ring tone comes back.

"Maria?"

"Yes, this is Maria," Maria says in that semi-suspicious way.

"It's me, Nat, from yesterday."

"Oh, yeah, hey."

"Yeah, I was just hoping you and your kid were okay."

"Yeah, he's my nephew, but we're okay, thanks for asking."

"So, how's it going?"

"Good, I don't have much time to talk, but how are you," she says. "How's your eye?"

"Oh, that, yeah it's sore and nasty but I'll be okay," I say. "I just really want to go get an air conditioner."

"Did you see all those people who died?"

"Yeah, they took my neighbor away."

"I better call my Gram to make sure she uses that fan I bought her."

"You ever go see the Cubs play?"

"Say, Nat?"

"Yeah?"

"I gotta go," she says. "But here's the thing: I sorta got this boyfriend, but we're not doing so well, you know? He, well, it's not going well, but you can call me if you want."

"Uh, gee, I guess I gotta think about that."

"Well, he's here, we're going to get an air conditioner, he's got a car so he can help with that, at least."

"Oh, yeah, I need to do that myself."

"Call me," she says. "I think I'll have some time in a day or two. Call me later."

"Ok, ok, I will."

That went well, I think. Hell, maybe I will call her later. Beats calling Susan, who just insists that she wants to stay with that guy. Last time she said he was wanting to kick my ass if I ever went down her street again.

I try the tub again; I need relief. There's a deep gurgling from way down in the pipe, like there's something there that wants to come out but it just won't. Then the gurgling just stops and there's no sound but the white noise from the fan in the other room. I imagine a dying man at the bottom of the pipe down in the basement, releasing a last gasp for me to hear through the plumbing. He's rail thin and you can see his ribs through his undershirt. Shit, Milo. I gotta go.

"Elvis, you sit put, I'm going for supplies, boy." He raises his head and looks at me from the corner of his eye, then plops his head right back on the tile and sighs.



The wind is blowing up Broadway when I turn North. It's a full Chicago gust, and it's as refreshing as a hair dryer in a desert. Already I can't wait to just get to the store and cool off for a minute, walk around pretending to be interested in a new television or microwave before grabbing my prize. A blare of car horns interrupts my daydream. The city seems to have dropped the ball again, the traffic lights are out over here which again makes me glad I don't drive a car. I'll just grab a cab for the a/c and that'll be that for a while.

I can't seem to get into the building. I check door after door and they are all locked. As I pull on one door, I happen to look inside and I see all the clerks and cashiers sitting on the check out counters. Young kids, city kids working jobs to help their families pay rent or maybe some like me who worked to get money for pot and car insurance. They're swinging their legs, looking at me and laughing and high-fiving one another. Snotty teenagers. Well, I'd probably pull the same sort of stunt if I were still their age, lock the doors when the boss was away, break out some dice and have a little party; I'd laugh at me, too, some sucker trying to use the store when clearly the inmates are running the asylum. If I weren't so hot, I'd find it funnier. My thick brain finally registers that its dark in there. It's dark all over the neighborhood, no electricity I mean.

"Hey buddy, what's going on?" I ask a guy on the street. "Why are the traffic lights out?"

"I think the power went out or something."

"The power?"

"Yeah man, I paid the bill and everything!" He walks away with his hands in the air. I guess his check bounced.

I look back into the Goldblatt's and the guys are playing cards on the floor while the girls chat and do one another's hair. One of the girls, her dark-chocolate skin setting her bright eyes shining, smiles and waves at me while her legs swing out and back. I am struck by her plain friendliness and I wave my hand in return, though my arm hardly remembers to gesture in kindness. The sun is beating and the hot wind is whipping through my clothes so I head back for home.

"Nat, this is Gary, just looking for a check-in on those documents, you still got a few days, but we're looking for a status buddy, gimme a call, alright pal? thanks." My client, he's always wanting something. I hate my answering machine. At least I have power. And a few ice cubes.

"Nat, Sonny. Listen man, I just remembered I got this a/c in my basement. I think it still works. I put in central air when I bought the place, so, the thing's just been sitting there for a few years. Gimme a call and come get it, man, you can have your elderly boyfriend over for tea now." Hot damn! Sonny came through!

"Yes!" I say to Elvis. Elvis barks in return, seeing my excitement. I check the third and final message.

"Nat, this is Randall, Milo was asking about you again today so I thought I'd give you a call. He'll be in Cook County for a few more days. Just ask for him at the main entrance, I put you on the visitor list. Oh, his last name is Larsen, Milo Larsen." Damn.

Why me? I liked talking to the old man about history and stuff; he told me about his wife who died and his nephew who seemed like his son, or who is at least someone look in on him. So now he wants me to hang out with him in the hospital? It's too hot to stay here, I won't get any work done so why not go visit the old man, see how he is. I really have nothing better to do.

I take three non-air conditioned buses to the hospital and on the second one, the longest one, some bastard puked in the back and then spilled his beer while he was getting off. But I think I hate hospitals even worse than that bus ride. The smell. The white outfits people wear, those scrubs, and the morgue, I always end up walking past the morgue. But at least it's air conditioned here.

When I walk in I immediately take a seat in the waiting room to cool off a bit. I take a breath of cool air and the sweat cools on my brow. I can wipe it off and it doesn't come back. I go into the bathroom and wash my face and, when no one is looking, I splash some water down my pants - a guy gets really hot down there. I drink about a gallon of water from the sink then I go back and sit in the waiting room where I fall asleep immediately, my body collapsing into a cooled-down state of relaxation.

"Sir, sir?"

"Yes," I say, finding my legs sprawled into the aisle.

"Sir, are you waiting on someone?"

"Um, well I really came here to see my friend Milo."

I spot Maria across the room, at the information desk. She's with a guy, a tall guy, and her

arm is around him and her head rests on his shoulder. The little boy swings his arms as he rotates back and forth. He spies me and scowls and points a toy pistol at me, then he laughs his butt off as Maria and the dude lead him away down the hall. I guess her grandmother wasn't alright after all.

"Sir, look, there's no Milo in here, sir."

"I know, I was just hot and wanted to sit for a bit."

"Sir, if you're not waiting to be treated or waiting for someone who is you'll have to move, sir; we are very busy and we need your seat, sir."

"Of course, I'll move on."

I feel a stab in my gut. Why me? Jesus Christ. She could have left me alone, kept her hair flip to herself, kept her number to herself. Now I see her and I want her but I have to sit at a distance while we wait for the next time we can talk or meet or whatever will happen. I'm not sure about the kid, either. Is he really a nephew? I never spent that much time with an aunt in my whole life. So, I gotta wait.

They've got Milo up on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor so that's where I head. Cancer ward. I use deep breaths get me there, the forced-air breezing through my nose, chilling my lungs. Milo is in the cancer ward. How in the world did that happen? Why didn't that weirdo Randall tell me he had freaking cancer?

The nurse tells me that Milo has lung cancer which they were lucky to catch; he hadn't been to a doctor in over ten years when he bought some life insurance. The nurse says that I'm the second person to come visit, that Milo has called a relative but they have been unavailable at the number he had for them; she says she likes him and that's why she wanted me to know and now I need to keep my mouth shut about where I learned about his condition. She looks up at me and gives me a pitying look, a look that I read to say "he's abandoned, lost, old and sick; it's up to you to take over and to make things okay, to make him comfortable." I start to get heart palpitations. I can't deal with this.

I mean, c'mon, I just happened to live near the guy and said hello that day, offered to help him carry that box up the stairs. I did what any normal person would do, help an old man carry a heavy-ass box up three flights of stairs. He could have had a heart attack or something. Hell, I nearly had a heart attack.

We liked talking about the Cubs, the history of Chicago, the difficulties of religion, and Jazz music. Shit, no one else in that building would give either of us the time of day, except for Randall and it's his job to know us. So, we had to be the neighbors, the only two guys who'd say hello to each other in the hall and visit every now and then, watch a game on the tv or go for a sandwich. Now, I gotta hang with him while he dies?

"I don't know about this, I mean I barely know the guy."

"You're Nat? The one he's been asking for, right?"

"Yeah."

"He's just down the way, I think he's awake," she says. "He has surgery in the morning, serious stuff. He's not a young man anymore." She just stares at me, then motions down the hall. I hate guilt trips.

I walk into his room and he's sitting up in his bed, under white sheets and one of those blankets which just barely keep a guy warm. I'm starting to think the a/c in this place is a bit much. Milo looks so pale in this light, sickly. Goddamnit, I feel a welling up in my chest and my vision blurs with tears. It hurts to see the old guy there, helpless and alone in a hospital bed with no one to talk to except for these cold nurses whose dreams only go as far as some goddamn catalog.

"Hey, Milo, you awake man?" He lies there silent. "Milo, man, you alright?" I give him a nudge on the shoulder.

"Huh? Oh, Nathaniel!"

"Hey man, how are ya doing?"

"Well, one minute I'm calling the 911 because I didn't feel so well in the heat, and the next thing they're hiding my clothes and keeping me here for observation."

"Yeah, I heard."

"Now, they're going to cut me open, Nat," he says. "Those S.OB.'s are going to cut me open!"

"Well, I guess they have a good reason, don't they?"

"Goddamn right they do, that's all they got is their little 'reasons' and 'orders' and

bullshit," he says. "It's cancer, plain and simple. I don't see why we can't just leave it be, let it run its course, see where it goes. I can take morphine for chrissakes. Besides, it's cold as hell in here, goddamn fake climate control bullshit."

"Serious shit, Milo," I say. "But you're tough man, those pencil-necked docs can't get you. Besides, they gotta know something after all that schooling they've been through."

"You're a good kid, Nat," he says. "You drink too much and you can't get past Coltrane, but you're a good kid. You look out for people, and for that crazy dog of yours. I'm glad you could come down here today."

"Well, I'm glad I did, too, man."

"I got a big day tomorrow and I'd hate if the last visit I got was from that douchebag Randall," he said. "I think that kid's got nothing better to do than come down here and bother me, kinda sad, really."

"Yeah," I say, holding back hysterical laughter and tears. "Randall's a piece of work, ain't he?"

"Listen kid, I named you in my insurance and a few other things besides. I snuck your social security number when you were passed out in the hall that time," he says. "I had to get your name for the ambulance."

"Milo?"

"I gotta hedge my bets kid, they're giving me long odds on surviving this thing tomorrow. I think the doc's taking the under."

"You don't have to."

"Shut up kid, it's either you or Randall or my nephew, the yuppie son of a bitch."

"Well, if you put it that way."

"I'm getting tired, buddy, but you take care," he says. "Nathaniel, the best shepherd who never had any sheep. Ha! Goddamn right!"

He reaches up and puts his hand on my cheek. "I'll miss ya buddy."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Milo," I say. "I'll talk to the nurse ratchet out there to see when you'll be available. Cubs are playing the Reds tomorrow, too, I think we'll take 'em."

"Goddamn right we'll take 'em."

I can't help myself; I lean over and give the old guy a hug. His bony arms lope over my back and he pats me with hands that have been all over the world, that have shaken the hands of celebrities and politicians, that have loved women, and that have even petted my fleabag dog Elvis. I hear the rasp in his chest, where fifty years of cigarettes and diesel fumes, sea air, city air, farm-dust air, and everything in between has left a mark, the air as the instrument of his disease. His eyes are gone to pale blue and watery as I pull back to leave him. I feel like a too-full glass of water, any slight movement or utterance and I'll spill out all over the room so I move slowly backwards and raise a hand in farewell to my old friend.

I decide to splurge on a cab home, the only cab in Chicago that doesn't have air conditioning, or shocks, so I sit and roast as I'm slammed over every pothole in town. We hit a shady spot and the air feels fresher somehow, and I wonder if the heat wave is starting to break,



if relief is on the way; though maybe the humidity has simply let up a bit. I still pour sweat as we pull back into the sun and I think back to Milo lying there in that bed waiting for strangers to cut him open, alone; finally my eyes stream hot tears, my lips seem to swell and saliva bubbles from my mouth.

I sit and shake and cry. My sweat and my tears drip and mingle on the floor, pooling at my feet. The cabbie is playing some Indian music, a raga endlessly repeating the same theme over and over again. Everybody dies, I remember, a fundamental fact I forget every day. At any moment it could all be gone, then all come back again. Still, at every stop sign there is a tree and there is shade.

###

# Cooler by the Lake

Our newborn was quiet for the whole bus ride; he lay on my breast, sighing half-sleep. Your face glistened, your stubble swam in sweat. My back was drenched.

You said it would be cooler by the lake; it wasn't. At least there was no tar roof to radiate heat, no fan spinning futility.

Chicago was burning; I swear it was a hundred and twenty. Half the city sought relief at the lakefront, but the air was just as still as in Lincoln Square. There were no waves, a breeze eluded us. Some call 1995 the Summer of Death.

We found a spot by the sea wall, near a small grove of trees. You cast a line for fish which I swore I'd never eat. If anything lived in that dead water, I didn't want it.

The baby suckled me. His mouth drew life-milk in stagnant heat. I remember how he smelled; I kept some of the pictures and I look at them when you are gone.

The shade didn't help. His body against mine, more sweat and suffering. His heart beat strong. His diaper stank; I changed him. You threw your line as far as your body could launch it; your hook came back stripped of its worm.

The sun went down. The air didn't move, the temperature stayed constant. The trash cans were overfull and diapers floated in the water, ours ripened in the camp.

All the lights around us went out. The night became pitch-black and for once we could see stars in the sky; the transformers had blown, blacking out much of Uptown and the lakefront. In moonlight, you pointed out the Big Dipper, the hunter Orion, and the North Star, a beacon

leading us to coolness and comfort. I pointed out that when you looked South, the lights were still on in the Gold Coast.

I didn't sleep that night, but our son did, you did. I watched over us in moonlight and decided his name, Sol. The night dragged, his breath was soft; three vagrants shuffled by. Around midnight, I heard a single fish flop in the water. My breasts still ache and yearn thinking about it.

###

# The Last Man to Ever Let You Down

Jefferson pulled the lever and the back-hoe creaked and bucked, fighting soil hard-baked by months of record heat. These Yankees liked the holes six feet deep by ten feet wide, just like in Georgia, but today the hole was one-hundred and sixty feet long. He filled the bucket and then dumped the dry earth to the side.

Jefferson's rag sopped sweat from his brow. He looked down from his perch and saw two priests and a small crowd of official-looking types. No one was in mourning clothes; no one was crying. He was digging the hole on account of those who died in that terrible 1995 summer. He looked at the line of pine boxes. Old folks who'd died in their apartments listening to the weather on transistor radios, afraid to turn on a fan for the expense on their bill, fearful to open a door or window in neighborhoods rife with crime. They were Chicagoans, accustomed to deep cold, but not to hundred and twenty degree heat. No names marked their grave, nor even why they died. They were all as one, buried side-by-side in solidarity; they lived alone and apart in life, now trench-mates for eternity.

"Hot enough for ya, Georgia?" Ryłowicz said. He was the boss over the county's graveyards. He had a nickname for everyone, a different one every week.

"Name's Jefferson, or Jeff."

"Yeah, sure. It gets hot here in Illinois, too," Ryłowicz said. "Got that cracker?"

"Yes sir."

"So, go get your drink of water and get back to digging that trench. These muckety-mucks all think these bodies are important," Rylowicz said. "Bunch a bums getting a free hole, if you ask me."

"Yes sir."

"I want boxes in the ground in two hours, you got that, Georgia?" Rylowicz said. "It's too friggin' hot for this crap."

All the boxes were lined up and unmarked. The wood of some had split, some were warped, or else nailed wrong. Jefferson was sure no body was dressed in funeral best; there were no open caskets today. No family here no way, Jefferson noticed. He made extra sure to scrape the edges of the trench, and to square the corners just right. He could do that much for the departed. Someone should do as much for him when his time came. After digging all these holes, he was damn sure due a nice one of his own.

In Atlanta, he'd been restless and wanted a change, so he hopped a bus in the middle of the day after cashing his final paycheck from Oakland Cemetery. He had no wife, no dog, nothing to keep him hanging around. Jefferson thought he could escape his past, and his mistakes. He'd close the door on all of it. A fresh change might help him get his family back, or at least they'd be farther away so it'd hurt less without them. All Chicago offered so far was flatland, smart-alecks, and more heat. At least he arrived after the most brutal weather had passed.

Several day-laborers were on hand to help him out, Mexicans who didn't speak much

English. They all agreed in a common language of nod and gesture to place the bodies in the ground with care. Ropes and spare lumber eased the caskets to rest.

A reporter showed up with a pad of paper and asked questions. She asked Jefferson the dimensions of the hole, she adjusted her glasses and spoke with efficiency. Jefferson noted her new clothes, her heels wobbling in the loose dirt. He answered her, then returned to work. He didn't want to talk too much, he knew these people were just like him. To the reporter, they were novelty, newsworthy, fodder for a fish wrapper. Jefferson knew they were as close to family as he had in that moment. The reporter was an alien in this world.

Jefferson and the helpers picked up the pace and each of the six-hundred bodies was placed in the hole on that day. Jefferson waited in his rig while the Reverends recited the Lord's Prayer and sprinkled holy water. Then, after the priests, officials, and the reporter had left, Jefferson covered the dead, using the back of the scoop to tamp the dirt with care.

"We got 'em all in the ground, boss," Jefferson said.

"What's with this 'boss' crap?" Rylowicz said.

"Just something to say, I reckon," Jefferson said.

"Yeah, well, I guess you want to go home or something like that."

"Not unless there's more work to do," Jefferson said.

"Get out. Be back tomorrow at six a.m. in the morning," Rylowicz said. "There's about five regular holes to dig and I think some yard work, too."

Jefferson stopped by the mass grave on his way to the bus stop. He pressed the dirt down

under his boot and spit. His head hung a bit and the world took a step back from him. He wandered to the bus, dazed, lost in thoughts, detached. He paid the fare, collected his transfer, yet was surprised to find himself several stops down the road. He was in a bubble, removed, bouncing down pot-hole avenues, a million miles from the thugs, drunks, and prostitutes who were with him on the bus. All six hundred lost and alone, he thought. No family, no friends, no money for a proper burial and a headstone to show that they lived, that they mattered on this earth. He felt a chill and wanted to think about something else.

He didn't feel right and couldn't sit still. Jefferson wanted to be numb, he wasn't even sure why, but he didn't want to feel. The thought back over the hole, examining each move of the shovel in the eye of his memory. He smelled wine from the seat behind him. It stung his nose; it smelled sweet. His mouth watered a little. The aroma crawled through his mind, through memories of smooth afternoons and riotous evenings. Jefferson sat and watched an elderly woman as she rolled a fully loaded cart of wilting groceries down the steps of the bus, one at a time. Thump, step-step; thump, step-step; thump, step-step...

He could picture the label on the wine. He'd woken up next to it enough times, the smell was stronger in his memory than his own mama's biscuits. It had caused him so much pain and sickness, that was what he needed to remember; the loss. The wino made a joke to the woman next to him and it was funny. Jefferson felt a little easy, he found himself laughing, and the man's laughter wafted a haze of wine-breath. He felt his back loosen as he chuckled; he felt better already.

"Whaddya want?" The bartender was Chicago-quick and to the point.

"I want me a Darth Vader tattoo just like that," Jefferson said.

"Only me and one other guy got one," the bartender said. "Lemme tell ya what - he ain't you, pal."

"Beer and a shot of whisky," Jefferson said. "Tall beer, short whisky. Haha."

"Never seen you here, bud," the bartender said. "You new to the neighborhood?"

"Been here a few weeks."

"Well, welcome, pal," the bartender said. He picked a white chit from under the bartop. The name of the bar, Diggers Pub, was printed around the outside of the thin disc. "You use that whenever you need it, it's good for one drink only."

Jefferson laughed and pulled a bronze coin from his pocket. IX was engraved on the medallion, along with AA slogans and symbols. "I tell ya what, I'll trade you even."

The bartender took the coin and held it at a distance, then grabbed his reading glasses to inspect it. Jefferson eyed the coin in the other man's hands and it looked insignificant, a cheap piece of brass with words printed on it. Not worth a damn.

"Tell ya what, and you think about this," the bartender said. "You wanna leave those drinks on the bar, we switch coins and I don't charge ya."

"Or?"

"Or, you drink what you have and I continue to serve you all night," he said. "You can



only leave that stool to piss or play pool until I clean up after closing. Only then can you leave.

But, you have to put down everything I pour for you. Still, no charge."

The bartender crossed his arms. "Your choice."

"I only wanted one drink."

"Why did you already order two?"

"Fuck it," Jefferson said. "I can put down whatever you set up, man."

Jefferson looked hard into the bartender's eyes, picked up the shot glass and took the first drink. The whisky burned all the way down and Jefferson felt his eyes water; his head buzzed a bit. He felt familiar to himself, free from care. The beer was cold and soothed the burn. He pulled a cigarette from a fresh pack and lit it. He coughed.

"How long since you quit smoking?"

"What's your name, anyways?"

"Harold, you?"

"Jefferson."

"Where did you get that cute Southern accent?"

Francie's perfume was strong enough to cut the cigarette fog, and it helped Jefferson keep his concentration. He hadn't had a drink in almost ten years and his low tolerance was showing. But he still wanted more and Harold obliged. Her lips were shiny and red. She was talking about her boss or her ex-husband. Jefferson wasn't quite sure.

"I'm from Georgia," he said. "North Georgia."

"Oh, it's nice down there, warm," she said. "I been to Florida, to visit my sister and her kids. Orlando."

"Hot enough up here to kill damn near six-hundred people." Jefferson adjusted himself on the stool. Harold poured two shots of vodka.

"Oh, them," she said. "Them people just didn't know enough to turn on a fan or nothing."

Jefferson offered her the extra drink and she gladly took it. "Nobody even came to their funerals. Just some goddamn priests and a reporter."

They clinked their glasses and drank, a slice of lemon crusted with sugar chased the liquor. Jefferson didn't recall bars doing fancy tricks like that back in Georgia.

"Yeah, well," Francie said. "Why did ya come up here to this hellhole? You know it snows like a bastard."

"What do they say, Harry? Two seasons in Chicago? Winter and construction! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Why not? I wanted to see something different," Jefferson said. "Besides, I thought it wouldn't be so damn hot up here."

"Don't nobody miss ya back there?" Francie said, "Kids? Wife?"

"Not no more, I don't reckon," Jefferson said. "No dog, neither, but I'm looking for a dog."

Jefferson woke up on the floor of his hotel room at ten o'clock the next morning; he lay in a puddle of dry vomit. His brain pounded, he had a black eye, and his shoulder was blazing with a fire. He couldn't recall how he'd gotten back home, nor could he recall much after leaving work. But he knew he'd been drinking, that almost ten years of patience and hard work was lost in one single evening. He figured that if no one important knew, then maybe it didn't really happen at all. There really was no one, anyways, he figured. He was free. Fuck it, he thought. Fuck it all to hell.

Someone pounded on the door, so he opened it.

"Yeah?"

"Mr. Williams, you gotta go," Mr. Novak, the hotel manager, was standing there with his arms crossed. Novak was backed by a larger, taller man who also held his arms crossed, accentuating superhuman chest muscles and the neck of an oak tree. "We heard about last night, goddamn Mikey's gonna lose some of his teeth. I don't care who started it, either. You gotta go."

"I can explain."

"If you can do it while you pack, then fine."

Jefferson packed his clothes into his duffel bag. He'd just begun to use the dresser which came with the room and he took the neatly folded and stacked clothes and shoved them into his old army sack. On top, he placed his two books, a Bible and his first and only copy of, Alcoholics Anonymous. He'd carried that book with him ever since a man gave it to him at the shelter back in Atlanta. Every page was marked with notes, definitions and guides for helping

others to understand the book and find redemption. It just wasn't right to throw it away. Not yet.

He had one framed photograph of his children which their mother had sent to him once he'd found a halfway house. He'd begged her for it in between shouting matches. The note that came with the photo used the word "disappointment" five different times. He counted the important words in her letter just like he'd counted words in his Big Book. Each one meant more than the last.

"Hey, if you need to call someone," Novak said. "Like you need a ride or something, you can make some local calls in the office."

Jefferson showed him the photograph, "None of 'em would answer, even if they was local."

Jefferson walked down filthy streets, aimless, patches of broken glass dotted the sidewalk like little welcome mats to hell, Jefferson thought. The sun burned on his balding pate. There were young kids scattered up and down the sidewalk on either side and Jefferson recognized the set-up for an open-air drug market. Whispered offers slithered from shaded mouths.

"Straight or looking?"

"Lookin' for work?"

"Got the rocks, got the rocks..."

Jefferson shuffled past the muffled, shadowy questions. He wasn't looking to get high, yet. He wanted to vomit from the heat. His eyes felt like they were hanging in wet sacks, floating

around his head. He turned down an alley to piss.

He hid himself behind a dumpster to relieve himself. He must not have pissed the whole night before, from the feel of things. He heard a rustle in the dumpster, possibly a rat. The pee kept flowing. Another rustle and a noise, but not a rat noise. He lifted the lid, too curious to wait for his bladder. He pissed on his shoe. He craned his neck to see into the bin and he saw a man's hand. When it jerked, he pissed on his foot again.

His body emptied and he stood on a brick to peer over into the garbage. A man rolled around, bewildered. Jefferson extended his hand and the man grabbed at it, but missed. Jefferson leaned in, grabbed the man by the coat, and pulled him out of the dumpster.

"What you doing in the garbage, mister?"

"Don't know," the man said. "Kids must've done it."

The man smelled of urine, feces, body odor, and garbage. Jefferson pretended no to notice and swallowed hard. The man's face, once white, was blackened, ashen. His eyes swam in bloody, bloodshot goo.

Jefferson knew this man, or thousands like him, thousands now dead or who would be better off dead. He'd seen them take their first showers and rejoice to the preachers, then return to the streets and live like rats. One out of them could come back to life and learn to comb his hair, dress himself proper, hold a job. Jefferson was one man who no longer needed to wake up in filth and squalor. Maybe there could be two.

"You live out here, huh?"

"You got a dollar?"

Jefferson had a dollar and gave the man a dollar. The man turned, shuffled away, hobbled. Jefferson watched him, felt the lame leg, knew the search for survival.

"Hey, buddy, your leg okay? You need help?"

The man waved him off, dropped his head a bit more and continued down the alley, checking the other dumpsters for food scraps, soda cans with a sip, or shiny objects to hold. Jefferson offered help once, no, twice more. The man kept moving away. Jefferson turned around and walked back out to the sun-scorched sidewalk.

"Mr. Rylowicz?"

"Who's this," Rylowicz said. "This goddamn Georgia?"

"Yes sir."

"Where the hell are ya?" Rylowicz said. "You was supposed to be here at 6 a.m. in the goddamn morning."

"I'm sorry sir, I, I got sick."

"Drunk, you sound like you got drunk."

"That is the truth, sir."

"You be back here tomorrow?"

"Yes sir."

"Sober?"

"Forever, sir."

"Last chance, jagoff," Rylowicz said. "You're lucky you dig a good hole, else I'd drop you like a bad habit."

The air was thickened in the phone booth, Jefferson could hardly breathe and he couldn't turn around. He looked out across the street where a liquor store stood with the door wide open. A shopping cart loaded with cans sat outside on the sidewalk.

"Yes boss, I won't let ya down."

###

# It's Next Door

The old lady from next door had been really quiet for the last few days. She was hardly ever noticeable, but I was starting to wonder. Chicago had been deadly hot and a lot of old folks had died already.

"You think I should check on our neighbor?"

"Did you find out if we're getting our electricity back?" Marla said. "Maybe you should check on that."

Marla was cleaning out our refrigerator, filling a bag with rancid chicken, wilted frozen French fries, and soupy popsicles.

"You know, they'll fix that when they're good and goddamn ready," I said. "They've known about those transformers for how long?"

"Food's spoiled," she said. "Wanna go to the West Side, find some decent Mexican, and air conditioning?"

"And a movie theater?"

"Here, take this out, it stinks already."

The dumpster in the alley was filling up with rotten food from refrigerators whose power had failed them. It smelled of curdled milk and diapers.

"I want a shower," I said. "I feel like that smell."

"Kids emptied it out with their damn hydrant hijinks." Marla said, using the dwindling daylight to file her nails.



"I dunno, I smell something, though."

"Let's go, I'm hungry."

We found a restaurant which had air conditioning and fresh food. We saw a movie and came straight home. The whole building was dark and quiet. My flashlight cut the dark. Our perpetually-fornicating neighbors were stilled in the heat.

"That smell is stronger. I should check on that lady."

"I don't smell anything," Marla said. "Just try not to move, you're creating heat with all of your worry."

I took a few extra steps, turned left down the hall instead of right. I had the flashlight, I was in control. I listened and knocked at her door. Nothing. I knocked again.

"C'mon, let's go," Marla said. "If she can sleep in this heat, then don't wake her."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

We undressed in the dark. I threw the extra blankets and sheets towards the closet. We lay still, not touching, not creating any more heat. A fly buzzed and careened around the room. I heard it hit the wall.

"That's not a normal fly, it's too damn big."

"It's feeding on the rotten food," she said. "Just sleep, it's not here for you."

###

# Shagging Flies

Frank bent at the waist, brushed his long, bushy black hair forward to arc over his face then dunked his head into the bucket of hydrogen peroxide. For the fifth time that week, he had brushed the peroxide down to his scalp and over every stray bit of hair. This was the ritual, the yearly rebirth from winter's dark days of hockey, football, and too much booze. He burned out the black in the chemical bath, turned his hair yellow like the sun; by June or so his black hair would be returning, but he wouldn't touch it. If the Cubs were knocked out of contention for the World Series, Frank would shave the rest of his hair off, back to Marine standard, back to zero and again he would wait for the season to begin. He was a ball-chaser, a fly-ball shagger who made it his business to take a place on Waveland Avenue all summer and to catch the balls which came over the wall, the out-of-the-park homers of summer dreams.

The focus of his life was catching fly balls as they soared out of Wrigley Field. He centered everything around the game; his life's cycle was complete. All winter he drank and watched for baseball news. Fellow barflies would travel to Arizona for Spring Training and he expected full scouting reports every year. He considered going himself, but he could never get sober enough or get past his fears of having an "incident" on the plane.

Frank lived on disability checks from the VA. He had post-traumatic stress from the first Gulf war. For more money, he was involved with a ghost payroll scheme set up by his brother-in-law. He had a fake job with the State which paid him thirty-five thousand dollars a year. All he had to do was collect the checks from a post office box he maintained down the street. The

combined income could support a middle-class life in the suburbs, yet Frank preferred his studio apartment in a shabby neighborhood where yuppie investors speculated on condos and obese prostitutes wore ratty Bears jackets.

He took a hit of whisky, opened another tall-boy beer, and watched the haze-muted sun rise over the city while the peroxide worked on his hair. Sitting down, feeling the panic mount, it came back, the same old electrical charge passed through his skin, electrifying his eyeballs and stimulating the interior depths of his consciousness, if not his physical brain itself. Just then, the buildings, trains, streets, and cars all seemed to blow away under the muted morning sun and the city looked like the Iraqi desert, barren and lifeless. He could see the burning oil fields, the sky turning to black smoke, and the shimmer of desert heat. Bullets blazed through the air and the lieutenant was frantic. Frank could feel the desert heat, the sweat-sand grime. The enemy was over a dune, past seeing, out of reach. He pulled the trigger on his weapon, it jammed, useless. Helpless in the desert, he fired his imagined sidearm and screamed until the bullets ran out.

Frank chugged the whisky and the panic subsided in dim stages as his body processed the depressant. When he was drinking, the visions were intense and burst out all at once and at random intervals. During baseball season, his dry season, the Lithium kept him at a low-level of unease which could abate for weeks or turn into intense discomfort and pain at a moment's notice. But the drug never let him go over the edge and he respected that. Booze could moderate the psychotic episodes, but only so much.

"Last drinks for a while, eh, Gato?" Frank said to his cat, who licked his fur on the bed.

"Dry all season, gotta stay sharp and follow doctor's orders."

Frank watched the sun through a cover of cloud and smog, bringing cold Spring light to Frank's small studio apartment. His walls were full of shelves packed with baseballs, baseball cards, and baseball books. He had three shelves for the three full years he'd been shagging flies at the ballpark; he'd been free of the Army and their hospitals for that long. It only took one year to figure out this routine, to prioritize the season, to please the doctors by medicating through baseball season, and then be free for the rest of the time. Despite his recent bender, he had prepared a new shelf for 1995. His bed filled a good quarter of the room and his kitchen, which was built into the wall, was at its foot. On the floor, Frank had a stereo, the same one he'd purchased with money from his first job as a dishwasher in high school. The radio announcer was in a bar, the same one he'd broadcast from for as far back as Frank could remember, talking to fans about the upcoming game with Montreal. The Cubs had already won two against Cincinnati, so the fans were optimistic. Just like every year, the fans interviewed in the bar were proclaiming this to be the year the Cubs took it all the way to the World Series.

"Damn straight, huh, Gato?" Frank said, "This is our year, all the way!"

Frank lit a cigarette and swallowed more beer. His eyelids were getting heavy, he'd been drinking for over twelve hours and his brain was getting fuzzy, sleep insisting on taking over his body. He nodded awake and knocked his ash, missing the ashtray on the floor. He put the cigarette out in the ashtray and collapsed onto the bed.

He woke to Gato scratching at his shoulder, meowing, hungry. The sun was still up and

the radio played the game. It was the 4<sup>th</sup> inning.

"Oh shit, kitty, I'm gonna miss the game."

Shaking from detox, he fed the cat, grabbed a jacket and his baseball mitt then headed out to the ball park. It was April, but the chill braced Frank, focusing him in his blurry state. He pounded his fist into the mitt to try and stay warm, but then he wanted a cigarette which he could barely light from the shaking in his hands. His legs also shook, and he could feel tremors through his body. He thought of stopping in to the corner bar for a quick shot, but Al, the sonofabitch who'd ejected him a few weeks ago was sitting in the window. Al gave Frank the hairy eyeball. Frank went to the corner store for a bottle to carry.

"Opening day, huh, Snake?"

"Yeah man, we're going all the way this year."

"Gimme a half-pint of vodka."

"Half?"

"Yeah, half is all I'll need for a while."

"Oh yeah, your baseball dry-out."

"Who told you?"

"You did," Snake said. "You were plastered, man, muy borracho, standing right there you swore off booze for the season. Besides, you did this last year, too."

"Well, I just need this to get me through today," Frank said. "Absolutely no booze until the season ends. That's my program."

"Hey, you don't gotta tell me nothing, man."

Frank took a few hits from the bottle as he walked down the street then wrapped it tightly in the brown bag and stuffed in his back pocket. His nerves began to steady a bit. He popped his fist into the glove and caught a glimpse of the stadium between barren trees. Baseball brings the leaves back, Frank thought, baseball brings back life.

There was no action that opening day. Frank arrived on Waveland for the bottom of the ninth. Only a few ball-shaggers turned out for the opening day of the park, the real hard core. There was Tony, the mailman who would show for maybe half of the games. With a catcher's mitt, there was Patrick, a bartender who was good to Frank in the off season. Finally there was Stevie, the printer who was often barehanded, dropping by the park when he got off work. Other days were different, but those were Frank's core group. Though they were all in competition, they shared the desire to catch a ball hit out of the park, to capture a bit of summer glory and a tidbit of history in the making. To them, a home-run ball was something rare and valuable, like a diamond or a first kiss. Hitting a baseball was hard enough, the hardest thing to do in all of sports, but to launch the ball all the way onto the Avenue was nearly superhuman, it was an arcing dream shot clear into the real world and catching it was a miracle, too.

"I miss anything?"

"Naw," Stevie said. "Good to see ya back, Frankie."

It's easy to sit in the park with a glove and watch one come to you, Frank always thought. But here, on the outside of the park, the balls came flying at random times and from varying

trajectories, with little or no warning or planning. You took what you could get, and may the best man win. Each catch was celebrated by all, though. But bitterness could set in during a period of dearth, when the pitchers were walking Sosa, or the bats were just plain cold. The previous year, 1994, Frank caught all the balls during the month of July and in early August, Stevie nearly punched him for saying "good luck" at the top of the ninth against the Braves - instead he yelled "fuck you Frank" and didn't talk to him until the last home game of the season, when he bought Frank his first shot-and-beer of the off-season. Frank always told himself that he'd be a good sport if someone else was catching all the balls, that he'd not get all bent out of shape like Stevie.

The season moved on and the Cubs were doing well. Frank's meds kicked in, making his VA doctor happy, but the world was desaturated to a dull sameness which could only be eased by a good day at the park.

Spirits were high in the city and Frank spent game days at the Park. When the Cubs were out of town, he'd listen to games on the radio, smoke cigarettes, and wait it out. Sometimes he went down to the corner store to listen to the games with Snake, his best friend in the neighborhood. Together, they would comment on the pitching, the announcers, and the customers who came through the shop. They smoked cigarettes, played dice, and ordered to-go food from Big Tommy's: big baskets of beef ribs and extra large french fries which they'd wash down with cheap, sweet Mexican sodas from the cooler.

"Hey, look, here comes that guy with the freaky dog on wheels."

"I seen that guy before," Frank said. "I think he stays in my building - on one of the

higher floors maybe."

"Ok, my roll, I'm upping the bet."

Snake's dice rattled on the counter. The door chimed as Al from The Blue and Gold Tavern came into the store. Now that the weather was warming, Al was in a tight black t-shirt, showing off his steroid physique, gold-cross necklace, and White Sox medallion. Al was an obnoxious White Sox fan who hated the Cubs and Cubs fans, yet who took nice Winter vacations on the tips of Cub fans. As he walked in he flashed a mouthful of ice-white teeth. Frank felt cornered. Al never came in Snake's store, Frank'd never even seen him outside of the bar. Al didn't even live around that neighborhood, he lived somewhere out on the West Side, Humbolt Park maybe.

"What's up, Snake? Frank," Al nodded at Frank.

"Que pasa, Al?" Snake said.

"Cubs suck, that's what's up," Al said.

Frank ignored Al with a blank look, rolled, and his dice came up zero - nothing he could use. His breathing became shallow and his eyes darted around looking for something, anything, to focus on. He took his two remaining turns and came up with nothing. Snake cleaned his clock with one lucky roll and Frank noticed his money was migrating to Snake's pile more than normal. At this rate, Frank might have to resort to using the cash machine. He could usually live for weeks on money he took from playing dice.

Frank could neither forget nor truly remember what happened, how Al had treated him



and what Al had said that night he booted Frank out. He was only looking to have a few more beers and be left alone in peace. But Al had agitated him, asked him too many questions, accused him of being too drunk. Or that's what Frank remembers, the facts were fuzzy. He does remember Al calling him a bum and a leech and good-for-nothing. That was uncalled for. He wondered if Al knew about his situation, the payroll scam. Maybe he'd been too drunk one night and spilled the beans about his secret income source, like how he told Snake about not drinking during the season. The more he thought about it the more he worried over these uncertainties and the harder his heart pumped in his chest.

"Snake, what you boys say about I sit in for a round?" Al said, appearing from the back of the store with a bag of chips and a muscle magazine. "I win, you guys buy me a pack of smokes. I lose, I buy you both a pack of smokes."

"Here are the dice my friend."

Al bent his elbow, showing off his goose-egg biceps, then blew on the dice and rolled. The game was Ship, Capitan, Crew, a five-die game giving a player three rolls to qualify with a six (ship), five (capitan), and four (crew) then to add the remaining dice. Al rolled a six and four on his first roll.

"That's my ship and crew, gentlemen," Al said. "Tell ya what boys, I don't have much time, double the bet and I'll qualify on this roll and get over eight on the other two die."

"Do it," Snake said, smacking his hand on the counter. Frank shuffled his feet and cleared his throat. He didn't like Al, didn't like being vulnerable to defeat from a guy who always had the

upper hand.

"Here goes guys," Al said. "You know I like Newports, Snake, so you may as well get two packs ready."

"Just roll, jackass," Frank said.

"Ooo, lippy, huh Frank?" Al said, "Here goes, boys, prepare to lose just like the your dear, sweet Cubbies."

Al rolled and up came a five, his capitan die to qualify, and double sixes - more than enough to win the bet. Snake got his smokes and Al paid for his other items.

"Frankie, you coming in the bar anymore?"

"Naw, not so much," Frank said.

He felt his chest tightening and his heart thumped with the old panic, a fear that something would come from behind the snack aisle and attack him or unmask him and show him for a fraud. Hadn't he remembered his medication? Could he have possibly forgotten in his rush to meet up with Snake? The fear shifted from moment to moment, now it was mixed with anger and a desire to punch Al for beating him at his best game, and it shifted again against Snake, pissed that he'd made the bet. Then he wondered if Snake and Frank were working together against him, Snake betraying his friendship and leaving him twisting in the wind. He wanted to get pissed and make a scene, but he couldn't; the Lithium had him straightjacketed and unable to say a word.

"Well, you come in? Your first drink's on me," Al said. "You're always welcome, Frank

even with that yellow shit in your hair. If it's slow, I'll give you a chance to win your smokes back. Same goes for you Snake."

Frank nodded to Al, tongue-tied and pissed that he was turning into a nice guy all of a sudden and forgiving him like a patronizing prick. He couldn't even stay pissed at Al, couldn't even get Snake on his side, not if Al wasn't going to return the ire. He couldn't rely on dice or his best friend, and he still didn't have a single ball from this year's season. Nothing was working out. Frank thought he felt a twinge in his liver.

"Here ya go, Snake, here's cash for my part of that stupid-assed bet you made," Frank said. "I gotta go and clear my head, maybe walk out by the lake."

The heat came, Frank and the other three million people in Chicago began to bake in the second week of July, 1995. Frank rued his long hair, his crappy fan, the lack of air conditioning, and feeling like a squirming bug day and night. It never cooled off; there never was relief enough to sleep or think or do much of anything. He dripped sweat in his apartment and the Cubs were on a road trip. His schedule of Lithium dosings was all he had in that time. Since the Lithium pills were basically salt tablets, he struggled to remember to drink enough fluid.

"This sucks, huh, Gato?"

His 1995 shelf remained empty and wanting. Stevie was shagging all the balls this year. Frank told himself that that was okay and had congratulated Stevie through ever-gritted teeth. Frank couldn't stop thinking about Stevie's gloating, dancing around after catching each ball. He

was too happy, Frank thought, and too lucky. What did Stevie know? How did he know to stand in the right spot at each game? Frank paced around his room, petting the cat to complete each circuit, scratching his nuts to allow a hope of cool breeze down there. He needed to catch a ball, he needed to talk to Snake about Al, he needed to talk to his brother-in-law about their arrangement. The Tribune had a story about ghost payrolls and state investigations which Frank had cut out and studied over and over again until the paper became worn and brittle. He needed to know if the jig was up, if he should run or what.

It was in the upper 90's that night, possibly higher in Frank's apartment. His window overlooked a tar roof whose trapped heat rose up in to Frank's room. He kept the lights to a minimum and listened to Jazz on the public radio station. The walls were getting too close together then too far apart. Frank needed to breathe and he also needed to drink water. He wiped sweat from his eyes. He had finished a coffee mug of water hours ago when he took the Lithium, which robbed his body of fluid. His mouth was dry.

From nowhere, Frank was startled and struck stiff by a police radio squawking outside his door; he heard grunts and shuffling. He froze still to not make any noise, the blood ran from his face, and he felt the sweat of fear and anxiety bubbling up on his brow. He moved his feet, shuffling a piece of paper on the floor which amplified in his mind. Gato slept quietly in a basket of laundry, unaware. Frank leaned down and gently kissed the cat on the head. Gato stirred for a moment then returned to sleep. He knew they'd finally come for him, his goose was cooked, so he figured he'd go peacefully.

He walked out of his apartment to find a policeman working with paramedics, maneuvering an elderly man on a stretcher down the stairs. His door faced right into the stairwell and all of them seemed to stop still and stare when Frank stepped into the scene. Frank's eyes widened like saucers when he looked into the old man's face which was ashen and with eyes closed.

"Dead, dead," Frank said.

"You okay, buddy?" The cop said, approaching Frank.

"Uhhh..." Frank said, the room spinning as he collapsed to the floor.

Frank came to in the Cook County Hospital emergency room. The blinding lights and commotion of a busy evening were a shock. He looked over to the bed next to him and saw the old man from the building talking to a nurse. They spoke in hushed tones and Frank could not make out what they were saying and he picked up his own chart. Dehydration, heat exhaustion. He tried to roll over and found an IV in his arm and also glass of water at his side which he drank down in a gulp.

"Bastards," the old man said.

"Huh?"

"Hey, you're that guy from the building," the old man said. "I saw you when you moved in a few years ago, what the hell did you do to your hair?"

"Oh, I bleach it out for baseball season."

"The hell for?"

"It's a long story."

"You're one of those complicated fellas, huh?"

"I'm Frank."

"Milo, nice to meet ya."

They each lay in their beds waiting to be served by the attending doctor. Frank was told he needed to stay overnight to rehydrate and Milo was told the same, but they needed some tests. Something showed up on an x-ray.

"No way in hell!" Milo said. "I called you guys about the heat and I can let myself go if I like."

"Hey, yeah, me and the old man are outta here," Frank said. "Screw this noise."

The doctor and a nurse quickly grabbed the men's clothing and passed it to an orderly like a pair of NFL quarterbacks handing off to their fullback. Frank soon realized that he was basically naked under his gown and that without shoes, keys, or a wallet getting home wouldn't be much fun. Frank was pissed at having to stay in the hospital, but he was enjoying the air conditioned air and the round bottom of the nurse across the room. He called one of the nurses over.

"Hey, if we gotta stay here, can me and my neighbor there sit closer so we can play cards or something?"

The nurse was accommodating and brought the men a deck of cards and a few

magazines. The hospital was extra busy with heat victims, so Frank was sure to be extra appreciative. Frank shuffled the cards.

"They say there was something funny on my lung," Milo said.

"Like a tumor or something?"

"You didn't do to well in charm school, did ya Frank?"

"Life is hard."

"You're tellin' me, buddy."

"I got a system, though," Frank said. "I got it figured to a pattern. I got it all under control."

"Like fun you do," Milo said. "If you were so goddamn smart, you wouldn't be in this hospital looking like a goddamned bleached-blond freak."

"That's for baseball season."

"How's that working for ya, sonny?"

Frank tossed the cards down. He was beat. The old man was right. He was a failure, a fugitive whose anxiety was running through the roof. He'd served his country, or so he was told, but now he was a shell and a leech defrauding the state in which he lived and he couldn't even catch a ball. He even knew better than to feel sorry for himself, but he did it anyway. It was all he had left.

"Fine, you're right," Frank said. "I'm tired of fighting."

"Don't get all bent outta shape, Frank," Milo said, his face grimacing as he coughed and

wheezed. "Hell, I was just yanking your chain."

"But you're really right," Frank said. "Shit, man, you might be dying."

"Screw that, they know I've got good insurance and that Doc just wants a new boat to show off in Lake Michigan," Milo said. "I'll be just fine. Never a sick day in my life."

Frank watched Milo and he didn't believe the old man's words. He'd seen death on his face back in the hallway of the building. It was a fevered hallucination, but he knew he saw that for some reason, it was a sign of what was in store. Death was inevitable even for a good guy like Milo. There was no escaping it. There was no point.

The next morning, a nurse watched as Frank devoured his powdered eggs and drank his concentrated orange juice, then he checked Frank's vitals one more time and said he was free to go. As Frank pulled on his clothes, he felt a buzzing start in the back of his head, like when he would hit beehives with rocks as a kid. He was past due for his meds, the hospital had been too busy with all the heat victims to check on his history with the VA and Frank had forgotten, but he wasn't sure he was going to take them. What was the point?

He kept an eye on Milo sitting up in his bed, quiet and waiting. The old man was perfectly still, Frank noticed, his eyes soft and gazing across the room in perfect patience. Frank wondered if he would ever be able to feel something like that. Stillness. Quiet. He was always chasing something, fly balls or the return of baseball season, the enemy in the desert or the peace he thought he would find at home. Sitting in peace was something he missed, if he had ever had it. He couldn't remember.



"Hey, Milo, I gotta go, man."

"Yes, go on then."

"You be alright?"

"You?"

"I got it all figured out, remember?" Frank said, "Besides, this is the year the Cubbies take it all."

"Kid," Milo said, then turned his head and waved Frank away. "Good luck, kid."

Frank walked away as a nurse and some orderlies came over to take Milo for his tests. From afar, Frank watched them wheel the old man into the elevator and he could see the old man's still face, eyes closed, as the attendants pushed the button and the doors closed. Frank imagined the elevator free falling while the Milo and the hospital staff remained stoic until the final crash miles below the crust of the earth, on the floor of the basement at the bottom of all existence. Frank felt himself falling with them, his stomach rising up into his chest, squeezing for room against his heart which was now in a full drum roll.

He could feel. He was out of his straightjacket, the Lithium had run out of his body. He could run around like a madman if he wanted to. He could drink or fight or tell someone to piss up a rope and the chemicals weren't there to dampen his impulse. The buzz started.

Riding the bus home, the buzzing in his head increased like a drill to the middle of his brain. He watched the city roll by from the window and he yearned, for a bit of relief from the heat, hoping for cool in the shady spots, but finding very little. The bus was old and rattled over

every pothole, jarring his teeth and rattling his insides like a cup of dice; the drill in his brain revved its motor.

The Cubs were in town, he remembered, but he didn't give a rat's ass, and he knew that he'd find Stevie out there, catching all the balls and laughing in his face. The Cubs would never make the World Series anyway. Everything was becoming clearer now that he was liberated from his medications. His income was in jeopardy, his very reason for life was crumbling, his friends were all betraying him, and all he had to do was wait for the inevitable, when some doctor would give him a death sentence.

"Frank, good to see you back," Al said, extending his arms, smiling and laughing. "Hey, your puppies or cubbies or whatever are still playing at Wrigley, what you doing here? You finally see the light?"

"Just set me up, Al, you know what I like."

"Shot of Irish and a cold can of Old Style, comin' right up," Al said. "first round is on the house, just like I promised. Hell, second round'll be on me too, just to celebrate your return to reality."

Frank sat alone as the sunlight slowly streamed down into the afternoon bar; he watched himself drink in the mirror, his new black hair was growing back in to contrast the yellow frizz. He took another pull on his beer and asked Al for another shot of whisky. Al stopped cutting limes and turned to get the drink and Frank grabbed an extra knife from Al's board.

Frank slipped off the barstool and palmed the knife as he walked to the bathroom. Then, there in the mirror, he took Al's knife with gritted-teeth determination and stared himself down in the mirror, eye-to-eye with laser-beam intensity. His jaw clenched yet he could still feel a waver in his chin. In a moment directed by some other source, an automatic, predetermined motion arose in his arm and he grabbed a handful of black and yellow hair and hacked away. He looked into the handful of bi-colored hair, now disembodied and alien. The knife was sharp and neatly sawed through the mass, fistfuls of hair fell off into the trash and the toilet; Frank choked back a lump in his throat, clenched his teeth, and made sure he got it all. He was left with a choppy mess of black on his head, though a few strands of blonde still hung off the back

"Hey, what did ya do, man?" Al said, laughing "I seen a lot of things in my time, but that tops all."

"Here's your knife back," Frank said, offering the handle to Al. "I just wanna drink, so let's keep 'em coming."

"Sure, Frank," Al said, pouring himself a drink to share with Frank. "Looks like your bums lost to the stinkin' Mets."

"Salut!"

###END###

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