

*One Sunday Morning*

Little Mama is kneeling on the curb, near the corner of Xenia Street—the hilly south end, where beer cans rattle unimpeded onto the pavement of Wyoming Avenue. Her skirt is hiked up, exposing bare thigh and buttock, both hands buried inside the droopy boxer shorts hanging below this black dude’s enormous potbelly. Crawdad and I are stocking newspaper racks along the Central Avenue corridor; we had just turned the corner when we happen upon Little Mama and her customer. The brother is grasping the top of her head with one hand, as though squeezing a melon—a jug of red wine crammed to his lips with the other. The pinkie finger of his bottle hand curls in an effeminate manner, as though he is a maestro conducting a tumultuous orchestral riff. The wine bottle suddenly slips from his grasp—our headlights illuminate it tumbling just as he starts to spasm—chalk up another satisfied client of Little Mama’s skill-set. Kids residing in the barrio take great delight taunting me with their claims of having seen her working the streets, now I know they aren’t lying.

Crawdad stomps the brake pedal, cranks the steering wheel hard right, and leaps out; the pickup truck keeps rolling before jumping the curb and shuddering to a halt. That old man’s some kind of dangerous when he rages out of control behind the dashboard, like the vehicle’s supposed to rumble along on *his* timing chain, not its own. I don’t know how many news racks we’ve slaughtered during our predawn rounds. I hear him cursing my mother.

Little Mama birthed me when she was all of twelve years old. I have seen her only a handful of times during the past five years—beginning with the day she was straightjacketed into a mental health facility. It was when I began dealing with big trouble of my own.

Crawdad shoves his daughter to the gutter; ignoring the invectives she hurls his way—Little Mama always did have a mouth on her, too. Snorting like an enraged bull, he snags hold of her trick's rump and heaves him from the sidewalk, right on top of her. A garbage truck swerves over with its dumpster laden pinchers poised like mandibles. The mechanical beast rears up, then levers downward, squishing Mama and crushing the brother, splattering the two of them like so much unrendered waste. No one else seems to pay no never mind—there are groups of people out and about, likely too drunk or too tweaked to notice anything unusual. The driver loosens the truck's grip on the dumpster, rolls it off and keeps on keeping on. Folks here about operate that way, casual like, content to wobble along singing life's song if they happen to know a verse or two.

Eventually a pair of cops' shows up in a battered black and white, along with an ambulance and street sweeper, it doesn't take them long to clear the carnage. Crawdad is busy polishing off his second pint of the day. I'm wondering how we're gonna pay for a burial, let alone come up with enough money to replace the front tire that blew out when Grandpa's truck jumped the curb. One of the cops asks if I know either of the victims. I tell him the woman is, or was, my mother. The officer asks if I'll be all right, could he maybe call someone?

I let him know this is no different than a goldfish going belly up—you just flush it and go about your business.

The cop goes: "That's kind of cold, don't you think?"

I look him straight in the eye—I don't fear authority. "I'll tell you what cold is," I say. "Cold is lying in Juvie on a cement bunk for weeks on end without a pillow or blanket. Cold is staying out of dark corners so some pimply-faced delinquent doesn't bend you over and try to rape you. Cold is playing the game and having to deal with *your* rules."

"I thought I recognized you." The cop says. "You're that Manslayer kid. Command said you were back on the street—a word to the wise, we're all waiting for you to fuck-up again. The next time you're sent away, we'll make sure it's for good."

"Officer, what's your name and badge number?"

The cop shakes his head and stares intently at a homeless man pushing a Safeway cart full of garbage-bagged belongings.

"Dickhead," I go, "I was at risk when you and your buddies first failed me. I expected better treatment then and demand it now."

The cop mutters, as he begins stepping in the direction of the homeless person.

Meanwhile, my tormentor's partner has placed Crawdad in the backseat of their Crown Victoria, arresting him for public intoxication. I'm more worried about having to rack the remaining newspapers alone than I am about Crawdad's latest predicament. Being just shy of sixteen, I'm not old enough to drive—I know these cops would bust a nut for the chance to arrest me for getting behind the wheel—it's a good thing the pickup is disabled.

All of a sudden, the quiet of the approaching dawn is shattered by automatic weapon fire. I notice the officer pushing Crawdad down on the cop car's back seat and crawling on top of him as bullets stitch the vehicle's rear window. I hit the dirt and turn to see his partner, the one who

was speaking with me, squat with his service revolver grasped in an extended shooting position. He fires once and the homeless man shouldering an assault rifle goes down. In no time at all, the place is crawling with more cops.

The officer who arrested Crawdad walks over. “You all right?” He asks.

“What was *that* about?” I query.

“That—was a gang member who had a hard-on for me and my partner. We busted him a while back—apparently he’s out of prison.”

The other cop comes over. “My name’s Soto,” he goes, “Badge 666.”

“The Mark of the Beast,” I say.

The cop smiles, “That’d be about right. If you got a bone to pick son, go for it.” He’s patting his sidearm as he speaks.

“I’m good,” I say. “I’m outta here.”

“Whoa-whoa wait! You’re going to have to give a statement. I’ll tell you when you can leave.”

*Notorious*

When I was three years old I was afraid of barking dogs. When I turned four, I cringed every time loud shrieks escaped my mother's bedroom. When I reached the age of five, I cried whenever my uncle, Biggerstaff Manslayer, showed up at our house—invited or not. Until I was ten years old, Child Services had no idea who I was. That all changed when I fatally stuck Uncle Big in the sweet spot just below his ribcage with a stone ground blade stamped *Chicago Cutlery*. My intention was not to kill him—I just wanted him to stop hurting people. His body lay in a mortuary awaiting a casket the day I got sent away. That's after authorities, pondering my surname, labeled me incorrigible.

My name is Notorious Manslayer—a moniker any gangsta rapper would relish. Who in their right mind could hang a handle like this on a child? Law enforcement officials are convinced that I'll spend the remainder of my life living up to the name a city clerk hurriedly scribbled onto a birth certificate. What I was forced to do with the filet knife is testament to the fact that no one, cops included, had my back.

I've lived through a mess of trouble in my fifteen plus years of trying to figure out who I am. I've never felt I deserve to be labeled 'The Stone Ground Killer'—newspaper reporters though, beg to differ. If a person were to gaze upon my reflection—like the one glaring back at them from the mirrored glass of an interrogation room wall—the image projected isn't necessarily the real me. Folks in positions of authority refer to those of us with criminal history as low-life scum. They don't have the cojones to come right out and say it, but they're uncomfortable when we're around. They always seem to be angling for avenues of escape.

*Little Mama*

Little Mama was the closest relative I had to role model for me. We both knew that my grandpa, Crawdad, was way too criminal to take care of me. Li'l, as some people called my mother, couldn't be considered gilded by any means. She'd served county time and was a conflicted junkie fleeing federal warrants. There isn't a man in our trailer court that wouldn't relish the chance to spend an evening with her. Seldom would these jive-ass homeboys, who had their pick of neighborhood tricks, take a rain check if she happened to sashay by. Li'l was so self-taken that she never questioned whether their gifts of glittering bling were genuine. But what did I know? I was the damn kid—the one always underfoot. I was the reason she became a mother at the age of twelve—the mistake social workers later claimed she should have aborted.

Little Mama turned twenty-two on the day her brother bled out on the doublewide's floor. I distinctly remember Biggerstaff Manslayer's blood; fire engine red when it pumped like water from a hydrant, drying to a rusty brown hue that clashed with the florescent pink rug that it puddled on. I figured something was wrong with Big to begin with, that he was probably standing on death's threshold, anyhow. I mean, who bleeds blood that dries rusty like antique car chassis' strewn across the shifting sands of a desert mesa?

*Happy Meals*

When I eventually make my way home from stocking newspaper racks—all done on foot employing a borrowed Walgreen’s cart—I’m surprised to run into Crawdad. He’s acting all proud of the fact that he’s put another one over on the cops. It seems that a judge threw out his latest public drunkenness arrest due to a technical glitch—the police officer didn’t Mirandize him. Crawdad, quite the jailhouse lawyer, argued his case eloquently, or so he says. So now he tries to direct familial advice my way like an intellectual, caring, guardian. He’s sitting on a footstool working on crusty fingernails with a pearl-handled switchblade. Dear Abby he ain’t. I’m distracted by the weapon but hear him say, “If you fuck up like Little Mama; you’ll end up a swirl in the cesspool of life—no arms, no legs, just a smear of feces covered tissue twirling along with the remnants of other *Happy Meals*. Crap like this runs in families; look at your mother and your perverted uncle—those two are a pair for the ages.”

He leaves me wondering who names his offspring and if that person is responsible for giving me my name. He usually gets this talkative only after plowing through more vodka than a normal person should be able to slug down without tipping over. When he kills the jug he’s been working on, he whoops and chants: “Up your nose with a rubber hose,” after which he throws his knife at the front door embedding its blade dead center. He leaves it there quivering as though it were a punctuation mark. It occurs to me that Crawdad doesn’t need to use knives to penetrate. His voice is a blunt object, which he effectively uses to club home whatever point he is trying to make.

*Mistake*

I know something that Crawdad doesn't know that I know; I might be his mistake, too. Biggerstaff alluded to this hisself, during those terrible last moments he lay bleeding out from the kitchen knife I jabbed beneath his ribs. It happened those final moments I found him humped up on Little Mama; her screeching muffled by a fat hand clamped over her face and him huffing away with a mouthful of drool. Talk about shit running in a family. I was this sassy-assed kid attending fifth grade at Saint Anne's and I'll be goddamned if I didn't have more grace than those two put together.

"Boy," Big says with his dying breaths curdling white spittle, "if I were you, I'd pull this pig sticker out of my gut and slit my own damn throat before I'd plunge into the troubles that Crawdad and Little Mama have draped all over themselves." He grimaces and continues, "This here trailer court don't deserve a fresh whelping of half-breed bastards running loose. Little Mama never got herself fixed, Crawdad should've, and now you're the next sum' bitch to carry on these fucked-up family traditions." His mouth no more than spews this vile heaping of advice before he rolls off Little Mama, who's kicked it up a notch in the shrieking department, and flops a turn or two around the bedroom floor before succumbing like a catfish getting his last shakes in while trying to spit the hook.

I remember looking at the sky, the sun sneaking from behind a cloud, celebrating life like it were a sheer blaze of glory. Funny thing though, the shades were drawn and the room weren't completely dark as pitch—it just had this warm glow, lighted like embers from a dying flame. How can I claim to remember seeing the sun?

Here's what happens next: Little Mama's jacketed straight into a mental health facility. I get cuffed, stuffed, and run in front of a judge who slaps a high five with authorities and sent to the Boy's Ranch—a euphemism for juvenile prison. The counselors there say they'll cut me loose before I turn eighteen if and when I start minding my p's and q's and show proper remorse for the actions leading to my confinement. Five years later I get my own self in perfect working order, I'm now deemed a mere minor menace to public safety and probated to reside with Crawdad. I am on probation until I turn eighteen or get myself arrested for breaking the law again. I'm betting welfare payments are a big reason that Crawdad took me in.

*Galled*

A week after I'm released from the Boy's Ranch, Crawdad takes me along on another of his moneymaking schemes. Beside his newspaper gig, Crawdad's into the bear killing enterprise. He uses bait with snares, leg-hold traps as big around as the tops of oil drums, and guns with barrels so huge you can wiggle your thumb in their gullets. For added sport, he occasionally turns hounds loose. The old fool harvests everything from a bear but its grunt. He brags about shysters in Seoul paying big bucks for gall bladder; claiming it helps rickety men stay rigid when they're lying supine with their concubines. Tokyo shoguns fancy the fangs and claws as, he says, their women are way too docile. Candlestick makers render tallow and wholesale tapers trademarked *Bear Essentials*. "How clever is this?" he sobs, his tears mixing with viscous Smirnoff drool, "I should've developed that market myself." What the mongrel pack of bear hounds refuse to gnaw on turns into hog slop. Those porcine creatures, in turn, are used as bait to snare more bears.

I ride shotgun with him driving to his mountain hunting ground. "If we get stopped by the authorities, just say that we're exercising the hounds," he says, "back me up when I say they get stove-up if they sit too long on a chain." We're roading his best dogs in front of the pickup along a rutted fire lane. One side of the two-track is forested with mature conifer trees; the other drops into a steep canyon. Suddenly the lead dog, Grit, sets to treeing. The remaining five stretch out on the bark of a massive pine, baying skyward. A mama bear is halfway up the tree and two cubs are scrabbling for traction above her. Crawdad slams the vehicle into park and rummages under the seat before coming up with a large-caliber revolver.

We climb out of the truck. “Not,” he goes “leash the dogs and move them away from the tree, I’m gonna kill this sow.” He’s taking aim at the bear when I thwack his gun hand with a dog lead. The surprising discharge wipes out the truck’s windshield. The dog leash causes him to lose his grip and the magnum handgun falls to the ground. I pick it up and heave it into the canyon. Meanwhile the mama bear slides down the tree trunk, leaving her cubs safely behind, and sets off through the forest with the pack of hounds in noisy pursuit.

“What the fuck did you do that for?”

“It ain’t season, besides it looks like a game warden’s coming down the road.”

Crawdad is issued a ticket for poaching—being that I’m a minor and don’t own any of the dogs; I get a scolding and nothing more. Grandpa wanted me to go to court and lie about what we were really up to. I refused. He escaped justice after convincing the judge that his dogs were running coyotes, which are considered vermin and face extermination on a year ‘round basis. He never again demanded that I accompany him on his hunts—although he still bemoans the loss of his weapon. It was mere coincidence that the warden showed up. I would have never let that old man kill the bear. Truth be told, I’m pissed that he put me in a position to be arrested—besides that, I’m still galled that he never once bothered to pay me a visit at the Boy’s Ranch.

*School Dazed*

School resumes after Labor Day and officials face a dilemma they have never been called upon to deal with in the past—they don't know what to do with me. Eventually I'm slid into a classroom set up like a wooden soda crate with compartmentalized slots filled with rheumy-eyed children searching for answers to individual plights. The overwhelming problem lies in the fact that all twenty four of us, fragile as gossamer threads of DNA, believe that we might know a thing or two, while school officials label our whole lot little more than a case of empties; not eligible for a return from the school district's collective of special education instructors. The law of averages tells me that not everyone in this classroom is a dummy and should we demand a recount of IQ test scores, some of us will climb above the weak benchmark of 80 points. I mean there's absolutely no need to force all of us to sit eight hours a day creating snowflakes with blunt scissors and bits of scrap paper.

It becomes apparent to me that my classmates lack a leader so I captain up, take over the helm, run up the spinnaker so to speak, and hope a little seamanship will lead us from this Dead Sea. I speak in nautical terms because the first action that I initiate is to flood the boys and girls restrooms. The rest of the morning our teacher makes us boys go outside and pee behind a tree. The girls get to use the principal's personal toilet. After noon recess I raise my hand and tell the teacher that I have to go real bad and a tree isn't going to be useful if she catches my drift. I'm allowed to use the same washroom that the girls have appropriated. I sit on the throne and read through a recent edition of a local rag I find lying on a vanity.

The publication, *The Excuse*, is a counter-culture journal that is distributed free and funded primarily by strip-joint advertising and scurrilous personal ads. Magic marker surrounds one of the personals. It reads:

Voluptuous Hispanic hottie seeks white sugar daddy

Reply to Box 5445. No saccharin substitute considered.

I wonder who circled the ad. I consider confronting the principal, it's his bathroom, but figure I'd be better off not pushing the matter. After I finish my business I tear out the ad and lay it on the counter of the vanity. The remainder of the newsprint is flushed down the commode and results in this restroom becoming flooded as well. My class is sent home from school a couple hours early.

*A Danger to Society*

I get busted for my bathroom shenanigans. I figure that I'll be put in a different school or at least suspended indefinitely from my classroom but it doesn't work out that way. My teacher, along with a pair of janitors, escorts me to the school district's psychologist. The shrink is seated at his desk fingering a letter opener that looks like a deadly replica of a World War II bayonet, while I'm briskly deposited on a folding chair. He places the opener next to a box of tissues that is perched on his desktop and introduces himself as *Mister Thompson*. I struggle with my combination backpack-book bag before I finally wriggle free from its straps.

My newest tormentor dismisses the custodians with a quick word and a curt nod. He stands and informs my teacher that they'll meet later in the week. He's rumped looking fat and swathed in a pale pink shirt accented by a crappy-looking bowtie that's half-hidden beneath his flabby jowls. The fluorescent lighting gives his upper body an unattractive Day-Glo sheen contributing to his pasty skin's ghost-like appearance. Mazes of creepy blue veins wander about his face playing 'connect-the-dot' with various pockmarks. His hair is combed into a fifties jellyroll with the requisite ducktail waddling down the nape of his neck ending in a pigtail tied off with a rubber band. I'm not sure why psychologists take on the persona of aging hippies—the haired-out members of the Boy's Ranch staff employed the same look.

He eases back into his chair and consults a sheaf of papers lying atop his desk. Looking up, he raises an eyebrow, and begins speaking in an annoying nasal twang, "You must be Notorious Manslayer. Tell me, how do you prefer to be addressed? You do have an unusual name."

"Not Manslayer."

“That’s interesting. Does this imply that you’re a nonentity?”

“No, it means that I’m Not Manslayer.”

“Where did your people ever come up with a first name like that?”

“It’s in the dictionary under N.”

“Look, son, I’m not going to beat around the bush. Your file indicates that you are the result of familial incest. That possibly makes you a danger to society.”

*A-mer-i-ka*

“You appear to be somewhat normal”—A school physiologist is speaking at me—“but I’m afraid if you produce offspring you’ll pass along recessive genes which, we all know, is damaging to society as a whole.”

“You mean if I ever have sex with a woman, right? And she has a kid, right? And you people think I’m not right, right? I’m not even sixteen for Christ sakes. You’re so full of it!”

“Young man, you are fifteen going on fifty. You have been involved in more shenanigans than your peers will experience in a lifetime. Notorious, do you practice self-abuse?”

“How can you practice something like jerking off? Either you do it or you don’t. A fellow as ugly as you should know this.”

“We don’t need to let our conversation get personal. I am only trying to make a point.”

“Come on! I’m to the point of feeling abused just listening to the superior attitude that you’re copping to. You’re the shrink. Tell me how to get away from all of the ‘Special Ed’s’ and ‘Extra Special Wendy’s’ and into a regular classroom.”

“That is not going to happen. We will not mainstream and tempt you with members of the opposite sex. Parents will lynch us if you hook up with their daughters.” He taps a finger on my binder of papers and continues, “Knowing what we do about your situation, we will—and now I am talking about myself and the school district—be held liable for any and all baby Not Manslayers’ crawling about.”

“Dude,” I go, “there’re girls in my classroom now.”

“They are all fixed, that is to say none of them are able to reproduce; therefore, it is safe to expose them to a fellow like you.

“What the hell? Am I living in A-mer-i-ka? Are you a Nazi? Does the name Josef Mengele ring a bell?”

“Bravo! I’m impressed! You’ve been watching the History Channel. Remember, I don’t make the rules I merely invoke them.”

“Horseshit!”

“Listen kid, you are starting to piss me off! We can go round and round, but you will not prevail! If your family consents to your undergoing a sterilization procedure I will have you placed in a regular classroom. Bring a parent or whoever is considered to be your legal guardian by to sign the papers. Remember, we can always get a court order to protect the public safety.”

“Do you think I’d agree to be neutered like an abandoned mongrel?” The man reaches across his desk and attempts to touch my shoulder, I slap his hand away.

“If you don’t agree to the procedure I have no choice but to recommend that your probation be cancelled—you will be sent back to Juvenile to finish serving your original sentence.”

*Déjà-vu!*

“Fuck you dude!” I leap out of the chair that I’m sitting on knocking it askew. The school district’s shrink gathers his legs and stands, effectively blocking my exit—he’s just threatened to revoke my probation and my reaction startles me. I kick at a wire mesh wastebasket and the damn thing goes airborne, bounces off the ceiling, and smashes him full in the face. He staggers toward his desk, presumably to arm himself with his letter opener—a knockoff bayonet—before tripping and hitting his head on the corner of a metal file cabinet. I’m ready to book out the door but am hesitant to step across the man lying face down on the floor . . . I can’t do it. My mind flashes to the chaplain who latched onto me when I arrived at the Boy’s Ranch. During that first year he repeatedly instructed, in a monotonous monotone that, thou shalt not kill—I grew to understand this admonishment was far too late to apply to my current situation and that violence would never be a viable option for me in the future. His other edict—something about honoring thy Father—is far easier for those individuals wearing a priest’s vestment to acknowledge. At least they know who their Father is.

I reach for Mr. Thompson’s wrist and check for a pulse, I’ve never done this before but I find the right spot—he’s still alive. I struggle to roll him over; he’s bleeding. I grab for the box of Kleenex and the letter opener clatters to the floor. For some strange reason I pick it up and fling it at the opposite wall, it sticks point first dead center, why do I notice the handle vibrating? I work furiously to stench the flow spewing from a jagged hairline wound to no avail. This man is out cold. I grab the telephone off of his desk and dial 911. I convince the dispatcher that an ambulance is needed. I don’t know the address here but explain that I am in the school psychologist’s office.

I'm pretty shaky when I hang up and kneel next to the unconscious man to once again press Kleenex against his free-flowing wound. The glare from his horrid pink shirt is giving me a headache. I notice that the shrink's bow tie is the same color as dried blood. Déjà-vu! Those awful colors didn't compliment one- another five years ago and they don't now.

*The Right Thing*

A horrifying vision of my naked uncle lying upon ruffled bed covers comes crawling through the ragged linen of my subconscious. The visage is real and Biggerstaff looms larger than life. I scream but his hand mashes against my mouth. And no one hears me—no one ever did. The room tilts crazily and dims, not darker than midnight, more like the violent gray that precedes murderous weather. Rafts of bile purchase unsteady moorage in my belly. I'm unsure whether my hoarse pleadings for Biggerstaff to leave me alone are audible—the pounding in my chest is scaring me. Stark zigzags of lightning manifest as major irritants while I lay curled, eyes closed, amid a scrum of blood-soaked tissue. My fingers are draped haphazardly over my face—why am I hiding? If I move my hands and the sun doesn't break through, what then? Am I forever doomed to darkness?

I hear the whoop-whoop of sirens drawing near—I may be the first member of my family to welcome that sound. A vicious surge of vitriol overwhelms what little is left of my psyche. The room spins faster. Several teams of emergency medical technicians swarm through the doorway. The unconscious shrink groans softly. I struggle to rise and am caught in the red-flushed vortex of vertigo—this is what I remember when I awaken, strapped to a hospital gurney parked to the side of a brightly lighted hallway filled with white-clad orderlies and scurrying nurses. The Beast, badge 666—is seated on the edge of another gurney. It's obvious that he is tasked with watching over me. Officer Soto stands when he notices me conscious and hitches up his gun belt while exhaling with a basso grunt. “Kid, I figured a punk like you would run from trouble. Thanks to you keeping your wits and doing the right thing for once, Thompson's going to come out of this with stitches and a headache—oh, and his side of the story to tell.”