

## *Education*

During the fall of ninth grade Seth's brother bought us our first beers. We sat on the back porch in the sinking sunlight with the evening chill creeping up our arms and spreading across our shoulders. Sam was the epitome of manliness; a tall mechanic with jet-black hair and grease smudges on his hands and face. Dirt and grime folded into each crease of his hands and face. Around him was a cloying halo of oil-stink.

We drank our beers in the backyard of the blue-gray rental they lived in with their mom. At the far end of the warped and rotting deck was their ancient mutt, Buster. I thought that the warm beer tasted of banana, Sam laughed and Seth hit me in the arm hard enough to leave a bruise. Sam shook his head and lit a hand-rolled cigarette. Seth and I spent hours trying to copy Sam's mannerisms, like the way he leaned back against the side of the house and stared up at some impossibly distant spot in the darkening sky.

Before their folks divorced they'd lived on an endless list of military bases. They'd lived a lot of different places. Seth was telling me that there had been some fallout over an affair. They hadn't seen their dad in six or seven months, and it didn't much bother them. Sam said that their dad was bucket full of dicks as he reached into his pocket and fished out the cardboard packet of rolling papers. He peeled one out and opened the big plastic bag of Drum.

"Show us how," Seth said.

"You'll fuck it up."

"We won't fuck it up," Seth said.

“It’s how you learn.”

Sam folded his legs up so he was sitting cross-legged and began sprinkling shredded tobacco into the paper, gingerly rubbing the tobacco between thumb and forefinger. Sam pinched and squeezed the paper and tobacco until it finally resembled a cigarette. We studied his technique, the way he started at the center and worked his way out towards the ends of the paper.

“Ease the shreds so they’re even.”

Sam licked the edge of the paper, barely extending his tongue from his mouth and moving the paper along his tongue instead of the other way around. When he was done he picked stray tobacco from the end and wiped his hands on his pants. He lit the cigarette with a wooden match and flicked it out across the yard, where it arched like a shooting star, flickering out as it disappeared into the crab grass.

“You’ll fuck up the first few,” he said.

The paper was flimsy. I was nervously trying to keep the little envelope of tobacco even so that nothing spilled. Sam opened another beer and sat there watching us roll. When I was done with my first attempt it looked like a little white turd, scrunched and squished and uneven. Seth hadn’t fared much better, but Sam didn’t care that we were destroying a half-dozen rolling papers in the process, losing several cigarettes worth of tobacco through the gaps in the deck.

By the third attempt we had passable cigarettes. Sam smiled and struck a match, lighting mine, Seth’s, and then his own. It was the first time I’d smoked a hand-rolled cigarette. The shreds weren’t packed tight enough so I had to really pull with my lungs to get any smoke. The earthy flakes coated my tongue.

On the other side of the fence I could hear the neighbor's sprinkler kick on. There was a ratatata as the water hit the boards, and Buster looked up briefly and yawned. The sun went down as we started in on our second beers. Sam said we could have as many as we wanted as long as we pitched in our five bucks. The lights spidered out in front of my eyes..

"You should teach us," Seth said, "how to pick up girls."

"You wouldn't know what to do if you got one," I said.

"I know how to fuck," Seth said.

"In theory, I know how to fly a plane," Sam said.

Sam pushed himself up against the side of the house, effortlessly and mechanically. Cigarette burns pock-marked the deck in black craters. Seth and I had gouged curse words into the surface of the wood with our pocket knives. Their mother either didn't care or didn't know about the cursing and drinking and smoking. My guess was that she didn't care anymore than my folks did, as long as we didn't get in legal trouble.

Since both Sam and Seth's mom were working that September, Seth had dinner with us a lot. It wasn't a big deal, since it was usually Cheesy Mac from the box that we had to make ourselves. Sometimes we'd throw some hotdogs in the oven with French fries, canned chili, and cheese. A dish we called White Trash Nachos, but I can't remember exactly where we came up with the idea.

As long as we minded our own business and stayed out of my step-dad's way we could get away with just about anything. We spent most of our time in the unfinished basement playing video games and pawing through my step-dad's porno

magazines. If knew, he didn't care. The magazines were in a box near the garage marked "school books" in boxy black letters. Seth and I used to talk about what we'd do to those imaginary girls if we got the chance. We memorized the lists of things that they did for fun, fantasizing that if, somehow, we met them, we would be able to have suave, sophisticated conversations.

In the evenings we'd make our way to Seth's house and shoot empty beer cans with his BB gun. The action was a little loose, and as you ratcheted back the lever it was easy until the split second before the click. Sam had handed the rifle down to Seth a few years back, saying he'd outgrown it.

While we were standing in the backyard plinking at cans we were both, unspokenly, waiting for Sam. We could hear that car, a '72 Shelby Mustang, coming blocks away. Buster would perk up from his spot at the end of the deck, heaving himself up and plodding to the screen door, where he would whimper expectantly. The engine growl and glasspacks cut through middle class boredom, echoing off of the chipped paint siding of cinderblock houses. That car, dents and all, was his pride and joy. Sam spent his days off positioned beneath the car, an old scrap of beige carpet beneath him, as we kicked at the damp leaves clinging to the cratered driveway.

"Could teach you about cars," he said.

"We're not old enough to drive," Seth said.

Sam craned his neck out from under the side panel and looked up at us. I felt strangely small in his presence, but I was hoping proximity was enough for his essence to soak into me. I longed to be grime smeared like Sam; to be sinewy; to

have the same sleepy, half-closed eyes he had. Scooching out from underneath the car, Sam hauled himself up, leaned against the side of his car and began rolling a cigarette.

There was a night in October that Sam's girlfriend, Brianna, intruded on our rituals. Sam and I shared a lust/hate relationship over her. That night Brianna sat on the deck with us. She was scratching Buster's ears and drinking beer and rolling cigarettes in a practiced way that made it seem as though she'd been doing it her whole life. The air was cool and crisp and the mulch smell of fall was so thick it nearly overpowered everything else: sweat, grime, beer, and nicotine. That swirl of smoke cast shadows on our faces. The rain began, shy at first, but then plucking up its courage. Cold air was a close second, brushing up against us from what felt like every direction.

It wasn't long before it was coming straight down in bullets. Brianna was huddled in Sam's faded Carhartt jacket, looking small and girlish. The four of us crowded under the overhang of the house and sat smoking and laughing. But that night was the last of it all. Maybe Sam felt like he'd taught us all he could.

He disappeared into that relationship.

And then the Marines.

And Afghanistan.

And Death.