

Preservation

Toward the end, Sherry became a stay at home mom. To support our meager lifestyle, she prepared frogs for dissection in high school and college biology classes. The most vivid images I have from those days are of her in the kitchen. She had the mystifying ability to chain smoke without using her hands to toggle the butt or tamp off the ashes, as she murdered the frogs in the wash tub atop the stove, bathed them in formaldehyde, then set them gingerly to rest in plastic bags she sealed with her clothes iron. On alternate days, she'd box the packages and address the parcels, readying them for their journeys in mail trucks to biology classes all over the state of Florida.

As a result of Sherry's home business, the kitchen table of our trailer in Fen View Mobile Home Park was never available for its intended purpose. We ate on TV trays in the living room, stabbing green beans from cans or scraping factory prepared

meals from tin trays she shook out of boxes and warmed in our three-legged oven. These meals involved cakey mashed potatoes in one compartment, peas with too much Oleo in another, and grey meat with brown gravy in the middle. The taste of aluminum lathered in butter gone bad was consistently accompanied by the smell of frog-tainted formaldehyde skulking in from the kitchen.

Before Sherry raised her own frogs, my little sister Tiffany and I were paid two-cents apiece for each frog we snared over four ounces. I was almost seven when this little business started, just after we'd moved to the park.

"Four ounces? How much is four ounces?" I was slipping on my rubber boots for our first frog foraging, trying to balance on one foot on the sloping entry hall floor. Our trailer was so out of level, we couldn't play a decent game of Pick Up Sticks. And forget about marbles.

"Needs to be as big as your hand, Stone," Sherry said, helping Tiffany on with the boots that had been mine the year before. I didn't find out until much later she'd named me after the man who fathered me, her husband of less than a year, a man by the name of Stone Ross.

He'd walked the tops of boxcars on the O and M from front to rear as they clattered down the tracks toward Orlando, a brakeman, until the day he knelt to tie a shoe and missed the feelers that would have tipped him off that the train was about

to pass under a bridge. He stood up just in time to catch the main steel girder in the back of the head. He lay brain dead for about two months, sucking up all of the consolation payment from the O and M, leaving Sherry pretty much penniless by the time they lowered him into the ground.

She took to working in the diner. Al, the owner, took pity on her and let me stay in a crib in the kitchen's back corner. Sherry says I was the quietest baby she'd ever known. Says I must have known we were living on the edge and one squawk from me would end us up on the street.

Tiff came along about a year later, daughter of Al and Sherry.

One afternoon about six months after that, Al's hair caught fire from a leaping grease flame at the grill. I've heard since that hair burns fast as part of a Darwinian notion that if it burned slow, it might catch your scalp on fire, a much more painful situation, one would imagine. But in Al's case it didn't much matter, as the grease fire proceeded to catch his shirt and apron on fire and in the following spasmodic dance he banged his temple into a rusty corner of the exhaust hood and, well, that was it for old Al.

Sherry claimed ownership of the diner, and no one questioned her. It burned down under suspect circumstances a

year later and she used the insurance money to buy us a mobile home in the swampiest, dankest corner of the county.

One day after our third year in the Park, a man showed up who looked vaguely familiar. A bullet-headed man. Tiff and I had just finished harvesting a couple dozen frogs from Sherry's fenced-in pond and were ambling onto the stoop where Sherry stood, her hips cocked, scratching a cheek. The stranger had a hand on the porch rail, the other in a back pocket.

"Sherry, we got these twenty frogs you wanted." I held the galvanized pail up for her to see. My skin pimpled for some reason I couldn't put my finger on. Tiff looked at the guy like he'd stumbled out of an episode of The Twilight Zone.

"Go put 'em in the sink and come back out here."

We did, but I couldn't take my eyes off him, dressed in clean clothes, face shaved, but somehow still having the air of a hobo. He had a smell I couldn't cipher out but now know all too well as the sickly-sweet combination of Four Roses whiskey and cherry chewing tobacco. Mixed in with another smell I did know at the time. Brylcreem.

Tiff and I returned to the stoop like we'd been told. A hot breeze swept up onto the deck, lifting Sherry's hair and scratching my nostrils with driveway grit.

"Stone, this here is your Daddy's brother, Mr. Hank Ross."

The man extended his hand and I took it the way I'd been taught. I winced at the overly zealous grip, and he must have noticed, as a smile came over his face, the sort of smile a boy might pose when he purposely stomps on the tail of a smaller boy's dog.

"Nice to meet you, son." He had a gravelly voice, like his throat was lined with newly sliced tin can lids, shredding each word as it came out.

"Nice to meet you too, sir."

I sensed Sherry blocking the door.

"Sir?" He choked out a chortle. "Call me Uncle Hank."

"Yes, sir. I mean Uncle Hank, sir." I could no longer make eye contact with him. I was sick on my stomach what with all of us crowded onto the stoop like that. What with the new smells and all.

Perhaps Sherry sensed it because she spoke up, a little too loudly. "This here is my daughter Tiffany. Shake the man's hand, Tiffany."

"Why do I have to shake his hand? Ain't no kin of mine."

I'd never heard her talk like that, but it would increasingly be the tone she'd take on over the next few years, the few remaining ones before I lost touch with her. After we were sent to separate foster homes.

Sherry tapped her lightly on the back of the head and after a brief sneer, Tiffany shook the man's hand.

"Now go on in and turn on the oven. TV dinners tonight." At that news, our demeanor picked up and she ushered us in but remained in the doorway. "I'd have you in to eat, Hank, but I only got the three TV dinners. And only three TV trays. You can see the problem, right?"

"Hell, I don't need dinner, Sherry. I'll just grab the bottle out of my truck and come on in. I'd like to get to know you a bit better. And that sassy little gal of yours, too," he said, tasting his own words with a cheery smack.

My arms and chest broke out then, as if ants were crawling toward my heart.

She raised a flat hand about an inch away from his chest. "I'm sorry as sin, Hank, really am, but won't work out tonight. The kids got homework, and I got to batch up some frogs for morning mail."

Then came a long moment as if time were being drawn out like a fat rubber band that might snap into your nose at any second. I was mostly confident at moments like this that Sherry would win out, but on that late afternoon, I sensed a danger I never had before.

Hank considered the sky, parsing hard on the matter, as the crickets played their saws.

Then the band did snap. He growled some curse word I never heard before, smacked the side of a fist on the railing and pitched down the steps. There was a short laugh, both hollow and triumphant, a bark really, as he slammed his truck door shut, the shivering of the rusty metal reverberating through the dusk. The engine choked itself alive and the truck skidded across the gravel and disappeared down the long uncaring highway.

The last rags of cloud faded in the twilight.

I slept uneasy that night—the quiet terror of being awake when everyone else is asleep—and awoke to a commotion at the front door and some shushing.

Then Sherry. “Oh, damn you. For one minute only. Use the toilet and be on your way. And keep your voice down.” There was some shuffling. “That’s not the bathroom. That’s the kids’ bedroom. Get on.”

Then the voices and noises got all jumbled up and I knew things were going wrong. I sprang off my bedroll and lurched into the hall just as Hank was pulling Sherry through the front door by her hair. She flailed at him with closed fists.

I stumbled through the living room. “Sherry,” I screamed.

“Lock that door and get the hell back in your bedroom,” she yelled.

There was a fear in her voice I’d never heard before, but I did recognize the commanding part, not to be mussed with. I

closed the front door, locked it, and went to our room, locking me and Tiff in with a chair under the knob. To this day I hold myself responsible for all the ill that followed. For not running out that door and killing that son of a bitch. I'll take that to the grave.

I stumbled through the living room the next morning, the formaldehyde odor stronger than ever, almost as if the thread-bare carpet was saturated in it. Sherry was at the stove whipping up some oatmeal, something that normally only happened on Sunday. She whistled, in a breathy way, a tune I recognized as "The Ants Go Marching," but which I have since learned has more ominous origins. The usual cigarette burning in the countertop ashtray was missing. I didn't know it at the time, but I would never again see Sherry smoke.

We slogged off to school that morning as if nothing unusual had happened the night before, even though all of us knew it was not so, and we all knew we all knew.

When we returned that afternoon, Sherry was in the dried muck we called a front yard, talking to Mr. Wilson, who owned the Esso service station in town. They carried on for a few minutes then she waved her arm a bit, like shooin' gnats. Mr. Wilson hauled the old Indian motorcycle up a plank and onto the back of his pickup.

"You're not selling the Indian, are you, Sherry?"

She turned her stare to me, running her open hand through her red curls. "Don't suppose you're ever going to start calling me Mom."

Wasn't until a couple months later I realized how often she changed the subject with no rhyme or reason.

"You said I could have it when I got older."

"Not selling it. Getting it in running order. Going to get out of this stink hole."

A suspicion—the image of her abandoning Tiff and me to parentless lives choring in frog embalming—shuffled around in a dark corner of my mind.

A week or two later she tried her luck with the newly rebuilt Indian on the cratered dirt roads of Fen View. When I got home from school the first day, her legs and arms looked like someone had beat her with chains and she had a lump on her forehead the size of a puffball. But she got better with a couple days practice. By Friday she had the old saddle bags packed and they and Tiff straddled the Indian, which gleamed, strutted up on its stand. Sherry, fussing with the headlight, wore bib overalls and a beat-up leather jacket I guessed to be my dad's. She had a blue and white kerchief wound around her head, holding her red mop back off her face, and had dredged up some mud-streaked lace-up boots from somewhere.

She didn't even give me time to scratch my head. She strapped on her helmet, adjusted her Guatemalan cross-shoulder bag, and kicked the stand out from under the bike. "Get on up behind your sister."

I did.

Sherry stood high on the starter pedal and let her full body weight—which wasn't much—onto it. She half turned around and shouted over the blurberings of the engine. "Tiff you take hold of my ribs. Stone, grab my overalls with both hands and keep your elbows tight into your sister."

We weren't down the road but five minutes, going full pelt, when the blaring of a siren drowned out the bike's engine.

It was Sheriff Doug Seegar, our county's lone police presence. Stories had it Sherriff Doug was sweet on Sherry when they were kids. But she only had eyes for Stone Ross. Plus, if Sheriff Doug looked anything as a kid like he did as an adult, he sure as hell was not the juciest topic in the girls' locker room.

When he pulled his black Ford Fairlane alongside us, Sherry held up her fist with one finger extended, no easy trick on a motorcycle with a stick shift. He forced us off the road by angling in front of us.

The Ford door creaked open and Sheriff Doug, using both hands under each thigh, picked up one leg at a time and hoisted

his feet onto the pavement. Then with an effort so immense I have never since witnessed the likes of it, he placed his thick ham hands atop his basketball size knees to lever the top of his body off the torn front seat. He ambled over to us and tipped his flat-brimmed hat up on his forehead. "Sherry, what the hell you think you're doing?"

"Taking my kids for a ride. What's it to you?"

"For openers, you can't have three on a motorcycle."

"Where's it say that?"

"It's the law."

"Horse feathers."

"And that ain't no motorcycle helmet you're wearing."

Sheriff Doug was right on that count. Sherry had on her roller derby helmet from an earlier life. She and Bobbie Mateer had both been greats, skating for the Chicago Windy City Rollers. Bobbie was the pivot and Sherry one of the jammers. They were written up all over the country, and in Florida Sherry was a local hero. But two years into it, she decided she missed Florida and Stone Ross too much and gave up the skates and the fist fights.

Sheriff Doug took a half step back and spread his feet another foot or so. "You meet us back at your trailer. These kids are going to have to ride with me."

"Over my dead body."

"Don't make this difficult, Sherry. I know you've had a hard time of late, but I can't let you put these kids at risk." Huffing twice in preparation, he lifted Tiffany off the seat and set her on the ground. "Come on, son, get off the bike."

Before I could move, Sherry sprang off the motorcycle and had a finger in Doug's chest.

"You touch one of my kids again and I'll rip you out a new nostril."

Things went bad pretty fast. Sherry ended up in handcuffs, and Sheriff Doug ferried the three of us to the county jail in the back seat of his cruiser.

Next morning Sheriff Doug let us out of the cell. He had a couple guys with him, one I recognized from the grocery store and some other big guy. Back-up, I guessed.

"Sherry, I'm going to let you out of here, and I want you to move nice and slow. No funny business. We're gonna let you go with a warning this time."

She didn't say a word.

He creaked open the cell door. Sherry eyed me and jerked her head sideways toward the hall. I sensed she was boiling over. I'd never seen her that pent up before and never would again for those last two years of her shortened life. I crept out feeling somehow it was me had got us into this mess.

Sherry had to sign papers at the desk, and they gave her back her shoulder bag.

"I already strapped the saddle bags back onto the Indian," Sheriff Doug said.

She remained silent, thinning her lips, and slung the bag strap over her head and onto her shoulder. Sheriff opened the door for us. The Indian stood up on its stand, glinting and proud in the yellow morning sun. On the far side of it sat a lump I couldn't quite make out. Sherry strode over to the bike then around it, and we followed, hunkered down like.

It was a sidecar, though I did not know at the time that's what it was called.

Sherry cracked what passed for a grin for her in those days and looked into Sheriff Doug's face, squinting against the slanting sunlight. Her eyes might have gone misty.

"Who's payin' for that?" she said after clearing her throat.

"No sense going all sentimental, Sherry. Not costing you a cent."

She shuffled around in the dirt, kicked up a few pebbles then looked back at him. "Yeah, well you thank whoever it was."

Sheriff Doug helped Tiff and me into the side car and Sherry got up on the starter. I had no idea at the time this would be the beginning of a two-year Great American Road Trip.

And I don't think Sherry did either. I figured we were running from that son of a bitch, Hank Ross. Sherry likely figured her escape would be neither great nor quite so long.

Her escape.

A search I would do of the local newspapers about twenty years later indicated Hank Ross's body was lying under our mobile home at that very moment, not to be discovered until three months later, thanks to all the formaldehyde she'd pumped into him.

Before she let her weight down to kick start the bike she looked to us in the sidecar. "All good, Stone?"

"All good." I might have had sand in my eyes. "All good, Mom."