

Were you caught Screwing the Pooch? Committing the biggest mistake of your life. Usually we live through our mistakes and move on. In this eclectic collection of short stories you will find some who did and some who didn't.

Screwing the Pooch

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Screwing the Pooch

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Two

Ratty Double-Wide

Milton studied his facial expression in the tiny bathroom's medicine cabinet mirror. "I would be justified," his likeness said. He adjusted. A more emphatic look was needed. He addressed his image a second time. "Philip Tanner is a trailer park bully and he bullies me around school, too."

He watched for some sign of understanding from *Mirror Brother*. Mirror Brother nodded, the alter ego didn't like the knot on the bridge of Milton's nose and wasn't nuts about the yellowing bruise stains under his left eye. He sympathized. "*You have to take care of yourself. Philip Tanner is nine.*"

Milton smiled and nodded. He began to dress. "When he wants someone to play cars, I'm his buddy." He glanced up at the mirror. "When other kids are around, or I don't play right, he punches me in the nose. I've had more bloody noses than anybody alive. I'd bet on it any old time." Milton paused to glare at the mirror, daring disagreement.

"Who are you talking to, Milton?" Ava Sonntag's voice was a cigarette rasp sawing through the flimsy bathroom door.

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"There's loopy Momsy. Lucky there's no keyhole, she spies on everything," Mirror Brother said.

Milton tilted his head toward the door and made a circling motion with his index finger. He winked. "Nobody, Mom, I'm practicing for share time."

"Well, hurry up. You've been in the bathroom long enough. Breakfast is ready. You hear me, Milton?"

"Yeah, Mom, I'm coming. Be right there." Milton stared at the hollow core door.

"Remember when Momsy walked in the bathroom and you were in the tub? You happened to be scrubbing your balls? You remember?" Mirror Brother said.

Milton nodded and stared at his reflection. "I remember. She threw a first class fit. I still don't know what that was about, but boy Momsy's got one big busy-body problem."

Milton liked cleanliness. Momsy allowed one bath a week. She believed bathing more than once a week weakened the body and encouraged sickness. Momsy was strange. The bath thing was just one idiosyncrasy.

Am I destined to become a bumbler like Momsy says? He had to admit it looked that way. He was in another pickle with the bloody tee shirt story. How was he supposed to know crawling under a trailer was against park rules? How was he supposed to know he could have voided the rental agreement? He made up a story about chasing a ball under the mobile home. He told Momsy he bumped his nose on the trailer's frame. That little fib cost him a two week grounding.

Now, when he got home from school, he had to stay in. Momsy's orders were to clean and dust and no TV. Milton looked in the mirror. There was a twinkle of mischief in Mirror Brother's eyes. *"One a these days I'll*

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arrange an accident for dear old Mommy. Bullies and busy-bodies shouldn't be allowed on our planet." Mirror Brother looked serious. The words echoed in Milton's mind where Mommy couldn't eavesdrop.

Would things be different if dad...? He wondered. The mirror, with its spiderweb crack in the corner, stared back at him. Milton pulled a clean tee shirt over his head and buckled his pants. He brushed at his straight dark hair and leaned closer to the mirror. Predictable. When he was short on time, he couldn't find his part.

"Milton? Your breakfast is on the table. What are you doing in there?"

Milton opened the bathroom door. "I was combing my hair, Mom. Geez"

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Three

CoffeeCaker Coffee Shop

Voices raised over the din of the radio broke into Lincoln's daydream. A dish shattered and then another.

"Shamaz. Stop it. I'll take those out of your check." The tone Lincoln heard in Nancy's voice was new. She was over-the-top pissed.

"You take nothing, bitch. You fire me because blind guy say I'm a thief. I'm no thief. I'll sue you, bitch." Shamaz screamed the words.

Nancy screamed right back. "You put that down, you little shit. Put it down now or I'll beat your ass. Get out. Take your fucking money and get out of my kitchen."

Lincoln stood and shrugged out of the Maxwell. It dropped over the back of the counter stool.

"I'll go, damn bitch, but I don't forget. You remember. I don't forget." Shamaz's voice had a low, menacing edge. The tone of threat carried from the kitchen.

Lincoln didn't like what he heard. As he came around the counter he heard the back door slam, but he was moving fast. Only Nancy's sharp cry could have stopped him cold.

"Pascoe, stop. Stop. Don't move. Your boot's caught

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on the register cord." Nancy's hands gripped his arm.

"Are you alright?" His voice was tight. Fear was a bubble of ice in his throat.

Nancy ignored the question and turned him around. "What are you doing behind my counter? Blind guys aren't supposed to wander around. What the hell...? Sit."

"Listen. Nance. I don't want to mess in your business, but I didn't like the way the kitchen talk sounded. What's going on? You didn't fire Shamaz on my account, I hope? Are you okay?"

Nancy was quiet, but Lincoln knew she was close. The scent of her skin and hair was refreshing, like a barrel of clean rainwater. The faint odor of starch and freshly ironed cotton gifted his nostrils.

A soft snuffle escaped as she cleared her throat. "Don't get worked up, Pascoe. You're no blind superhero. You're more like a blind bullshitter," she hiccupped.

The catch in her voice sent a stab of anger through Pascoe's chest. "Okay, Nance. I'm blind, but I ain't the local tackling dummy. Why the tears? Did that little prick hurt you?"

The rustle of her clothing told Lincoln she was putting distance between them. When next she spoke he could tell she moved behind the counter.

"Fuck off, Pascoe," she said her voice weak. Shamaz couldn't hurt me on his best day. I'm.... I'm not used to big, blind, bums trying to save my ass that's all."

The scuff of paper napkins was loud in the empty coffee shop. Nancy blew her nose. "Talk about hating this shit? I'm closing my doors. How's that for summer vacation bankruptcy? The Syrian had to go. I owe back rent. The bank called this morning. They declined my loan application, thank you very much. I guess its back to what

I do best.”

Pascoe fumbled, searching for words, for something to do with his hands. “Okay. I’m not thrilled you’re closing up, but you got another line of work, right? I hope it’s something you enjoy.”

Lincoln felt foolish. He was hurt, but not for himself. The sound of desolation in Nancy’s voice squeezed his heart with icy fingers. *Lame, he thought, you are so lame. She’s losing her dream. Just like you lost yours. Jesus, you’re smooth, Pascoe.*

He straddled a stool and dropped into the seat. Lincoln wiped a hand through his beard. “What did you do before you opened *The CoffeeCaker*, Nance?”

The catch was back in her voice. “You don’t want to know what I did. I don’t want to know. The problem is we all got to eat, right? Watch the register, I’ll be right back.”

Lincoln heard the kitchen’s café door swish and thump. *She’s hurting. She’s going to cry it out in the bathroom. That supposition fired a new kind of anger in him.*

His mind pulled him back to the night of his first encounter with Alyssa. He had the same ache in his chest. Lincoln Pascoe was doing what he said he wouldn’t do, but a warm rush suffused his face. He was falling in love.

Frustration smoldered in his brain, “Goddamnit, I’ve got no right. I can’t take care of myself,” he murmured.

The sound of defeat in his voice, the helplessness that overwhelmed him, quickly turned to rage. Fingers curled into fists and he was ready to fight, but he couldn’t see the enemy. There were no men to pound into dust. In the darkness, Lincoln heard the quiet voice of Coach Dom: *When you’ve run out of options, don’t fight*

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phantoms. Stop. Take a breath. Think.

He turned on the stool, listening to the emptiness around him. He knew he was alone.

The CoffeeCaker occupied half the ground floor of a four storied office building. Three blocks away Lincoln's building and penthouse apartment offered him an ocean's panorama he couldn't see.

Thirty months, give or take a day, he fumbled his way from home to this little piece of lunch counter. He spent hundreds of quiet morning hours with Nancy. From the beginning, he knew they had one thing in common, they were both alone. Later he sensed they shared something more significant...they each mourned the loss of a dream.

Lincoln tripped over curbs and cracks in the sidewalk. He fell many times. More than he cared to count. He cut and bruised himself from knees to nose, but his bullheadedness paid dividends. His mind compensated for the lack of sight. Feel, smell, auditory stimulus, all the gifts he took for granted increased, some in dramatic fashion.

Lincoln Pascoe learned the intimate nuances of the neighborhood he chose to call home. Over the last year-and-a-half he began to view Nancy as a trusted friend. She cut him no slack. With the exception of his counter space and stool, she gave him no ground.

He wanted this relationship to take on a special meaning. The Mortar Man took pride in the trust Nancy invested in him. Would she allow him to be more than just her watchdog?

"Listen to yourself," he mumbled. "You're one selfish bastard." He heard the kitchen's door swish and thump. Lincoln shook his head, grumbling. "Two years I've banged myself up and now she's closing down. Where am

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I supposed to get my bearclaw and coffee?”

He heard Nancy choke and draw a shuddering breath. She was trying to stifle the sounds of her tears and their refusal to stop. She didn't want him to know and that knowledge gave Lincoln hope that Nancy cared. At the same time it made him feel like shit. Lincoln would follow Coach Dom's advice...he would step back...stop...and think.

He stood and pulled on his overcoat. “That you, Nance? Still raining?” He made his voice light, pretending to misinterpret the sounds she made. “You coming down with a cold? Don't breathe my way, please.”

Nancy cleared her throat. “I've got two weeks. Don't be a stranger, okay? I like your company, and besides, you'll need a haircut and trim. Now get the hell out of here. I'm busy.”

Lincoln Pascoe ducked into the misting rain and headed in the direction of his building. A smile exploded on his face before he took two steps along the sidewalk. She said she liked his company. His smile grew bigger. It felt as if his head might split in half.

He lifted his face into the misting rain. “I need to get serious,” he said chuckling.

Lincoln jammed his hands in the pockets of the Maxwell. Nancy worked her ass off and now her dream had turned to shit. Not again. Not another last hope wasting itself on real life, he thought.

“Shit,” he said. His mind focused, as it did when he geared up to deal with any business decision. “There must be something.”

The Mortar Man shuffled through one idea and then another. Scenario's played through his mind like movie previews. Every solution he considered failed in the face

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of one fact, Nancy would not take charity.

Independent came to mind when Lincoln thought of her. He smiled, thinking how she viewed her cash register watchdog. She treated him with respect and trust, but imagined him living in doorways and cardboard boxes. Refusing to act in the face of stubborn independence was not acceptable. There had to be a way. Under his wild, tangled beard a slow grin twitched and grew. "I'll make a few phone calls." He laughed and a passing pedestrian said, "What?"

Lincoln Pascoe dropped his head, mumbled and ranted just loud enough to be heard. The tactic worked wonders.

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Two

Compton, California

Nineteen-forty-nine. Looking back it was my banner year. In that magic year I had bigger dirt clods to harvest and bitching throwing rocks to gather. I needed friends and playmates. I was looking for kids who could share kid secrets. I ventured outside that first day looking for someone my own age. Maybe I would find some guys who liked to play guns or catch. Hide and seek and kick the can would be good. Capture the flag would do just fine. I had high hopes.

It was overcast that first day in the new neighborhood, hot and muggy. Right off the bat a kid came out of the house next door. Wonder of wonders he was about my age.

We sniffed around each other. We nodded. We kicked the dirt with our bare feet. We yeped and noed. We did the dance and then got around to names. The kid stuck his finger in his ear and said, "name's Quentin Kingman...." His voice trailed off and then he finished with, "I'm ten."

I didn't offer my hand, I was afraid I would come away with ear wax. "Jim," I said. "I'm eleven. Man, that's the weirdest name I ever heard."

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“Yeah it is,” Quentin said, “I hate it, but what the heck.” That was it. We were friends.

A huge sycamore tree stood on the corner across the street. Thick branches, full of broad leaves, spread a blanket of shade at its base. In the shelter of the shade a little guy crouched in the dust. He looked up a couple of times, but ignored us for the most part. The kid was making mounds out of the thin, powdered dirt at the base of the tree.

“Who’s the shrimp? What’s he doing?” I jerked my thumb in the direction of the little kid.

Quentin shrugged. “Come on.”

We tiptoed through the rocks and weeds in the street’s meridian watching for cockleburs. We crossed without incident and surrounded the shrimp, who went on scooping up little mounds of dirt. It looked like he wanted to make mountains, but instead ended up with a few mole hills. Quentin nudged the shirtless little guy with his toe. “What’re you doing, Larry?”

Larry looked up and smiled. He was missing three front teeth on his lower jaw. “Nothing. Making piles,” he said.

Quentin looked at me and pointed. “This is Larry Schmidt. You ought’a see the little shit run. He’s greased lightning, boy.”

I stuck my hands in my pockets. The shrimp looked like skin and bone to me. I wondered if he was goofy or slow in the head or something. “How come you’re making dirt piles?”

“Nothing better to do.” Larry grinned and looked up with a crafty squint. “Wanna race for a nickel?”

“I ain’t got a nickel, kid. Besides, if you won, I’d have to kick your butt.” I was smirking when someone up the

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street yelled, "Hey Quentin, what're you doing?"

I looked up. Several houses away a kid stood in his front yard, hand shading his eyes. Quentin hollered back. "Hey, Donny. Come here a minute. This is Jim. He lives in the new, pink house."

Donny waved. Sort of. He sauntered back to his front porch and bent to fiddle with the shoelace on his tennis shoe. I ignored him. When I glanced up again Donny looked like he made up his mind and was ambling our way.

I smiled. Strange kids and strange neighborhoods, here we go again. Quentin's voice interrupted my reverie, "Where you from, Jim?"

I shrugged and hoped I looked as cool as I felt. "Ah, we lived in Downey for a while. Before that we traveled around the country a lot and then my grandma died and we lived in Guttenberg, Iowa."

Quentin had his finger in his ear again. "What's a Guttenberg? Never heard of nothing like that."

"It ain't a something, dummy, it's a town named for the guy that printed the first bible. Ain't you ever heard of the Gutenberg bible?"

Quentin shook his head. "We got a bible, but it ain't named Guttenberg or Gutenberg or whatever you said."

"Never mind," I said, and gave Quentin my tired glare. "It ain't important anyways. Guttenberg's a farming town on the Mississippi river. You've heard of that ain't you?"

Quentin stared at me. "Course I've heard of the Mississippi. M-i-s-s-i-s-s-i-p-p-i." He looked smug, but then his eyes got big. "Have you really seen it? Honest, Jim?"

I looked down the street, making Quentin wait for my answer. The kid named Donny saw me watching him and

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stopped in the middle of the street. He looked back in the direction of his house as if someone called him. I laughed when he looked back at us. I thought he might be the type that would think I was laughing at him. For some reason that made me feel good.

Quentin said, "Jim?"

I clapped Quentin on the shoulder. "Listen buddy. For three years we lived two blocks from the river. My dad used to take me down there twice a week just to swim. Other times we took our fishing poles, caught sunfish for dinner."

"Nah," he said. "I think you're pulling my leg."

"You come on over if you don't believe me. Ask my Mom, she'll tell you I ain't lying. After that, you'd better not call me a liar again or I'll sock you in the nose, pal."

I glanced up the street. Donny was fiddling with the limb on a little tree that looked half dead. A woman's voice cut the silence.

"What are you doing to our tree? Get away from there, you little delinquent. Go home and ruin your own trees."

Donny jumped, but recovered and raised a middle finger in the direction of a house to his left. He continued down the sidewalk in our direction and I thought maybe he wasn't such a bad guy after all. I felt a pat on my arm. I looked at Quentin. "What?"

Quentin had his face scrunched up. "Come on, Jim. Don't be mad, okay? I ain't calling you a liar, honest," he said.

"Ah, forget it, okay?" I said.

"Did you go to school in Gutterburk?" Larry squinted up at me.

I looked down at the shrimp. He cupped his hands around his eyes. "It's Guttenberg and course we went to

school. What do you think?"

He stared, a grimace on his face like he caught his toe in a slammed door. "Did you have summer vacation like we do?"

"Geez," I said. "Sure we had summer vacation. What's with you? Don't you know nothing?"

The little shrimp looked like he was about to bust out crying. "I'm sorry. I ain't never been no place besides here and El Segundo," he said.

"Ah, don't get excited," I said. "It's okay. We traveled all over. I guess I figure.... And it's Guttenberg. Remember that, okay? What's your name again? Larry? Yeah, forget it, Larry. Okay?" I felt sorry for the little guy, but I didn't want to appear soft either.

The shrimp smiled up at me. "What did you do in the summer, Jim? Did you swim in that river all the time and catch fish?"

"Nah," I said, watching Donny approach the corner. I knew he was within earshot so I added, "I got two uncles back there. They got big old farms with lots of cows and horses and pigs and chickens and stuff. My uncle Bill gave me a horse. His name's Pal and he's mine. When ever we go back there I get to ride him as much as I want."

Larry jumped up, but Quentin crowded closer. "You got your own horse? Honest to God?"

Larry's hand was beating a tattoo on my forearm. "What's he look like? Is he big? What color is he?"

"Whoa. Whoa. Hold it a minute. Pal is a big horse. He's a white Palomino and he likes crabapples. When we lived in Guttenberg I used to stay with my uncles on their farms for the summer. I got to do all kinds of farm stuff. We got up real early in the morning and worked all day."

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I stepped around Larry and leaned back against the trunk of the sycamore. “My Uncle Bill said I worked so hard he was going to give me Pal. He said Pal could stay on the farm where he could run free and be with the other horses, but Pal’s mine. That’s what he said.”

A loud voice filled with cigarette phlegm made us all jump. “Larry? I see you. Get over here. I need milk and eggs. Hurry up.”

A scrawny looking woman with a blue kerchief tied around her head leaned from the doorway of a weathered, ramshackle house. Her face was pulled down in a terrible squint. I remember thinking she looked like a witch. She waved her hand once and then again, an impatient gesture, before ducking back into the house. The screen door slapped the doorframe, cracking in the muggy still air like breaking glass.

Larry looked at us and said, “Shit.” Then he smiled, waved and took off running down the sidewalk.

He was headed for the old house sagging at the back of the large corner lot where we stood. The front of the property was fenced. Picket boards, once white, were now cracked and faded. Like the house, the elements had cooked and peeled the paint away.

The Donny guy finally made his baby step way to the corner. I ignored him and touched Quentin’s shoulder. I nodded my head in the direction of the saggy wood frame building. “That Larry’s house?”

Quentin kicked at the shrimp’s piles of dirt. “Yeah. He’s got a bunch of brothers and sisters. They live on welfare. Ain’t got no dad.”

I looked at him. “Welfare? What the heck is that?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Quentin said. “I heard my dad say they get a check once a month from the county. All’s

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they got to do is live there, I guess.”

“Wow,” I said. “That’s a pretty bitching way to live.”

Donny was giving me the once over and I returned the favor. He was my age, a little shorter than me, but well built. His Levis were worn white and threadbare at the knees and he had on a dirty white tee shirt. My instincts said: *This guy thinks he’s the Kingfish around here.* My inflated self image said: *We’ll see about that.*

Donny looked me up and down once more and stuck out his hand. “Hi,” he said.

Our handshake was straight out of a Dead-end Kids movie, Mugs McGinnis giving the new kid the old squeezola.

I knew it was coming. I’d been this route before. We stood, braced, squeezing and grinning until Larry came charging back down the sidewalk. The diversion gave us both a valid excuse to back off.

“Hey, guys. What are you going to do? Wait for me, okay? I’ll be back in no time, okay?” Larry took off like his pants were on fire.

Donny said, “So you got a horse, huh.”

I just nodded and stared at him. He heard most of the story. I knew it and he knew it. That day we decided to ignore each other, but I was sure, one day soon, Donny and I would square off.

Past experience taught me a few lessons. Being the new kid, it was important to establish a couple of things. First: I had to prove I was a regular guy, but no candy-ass. Second: I needed to show everybody I would take no shit. In my brief eleven years I always found a way to impress those points of order on new friends.

I caught a glimpse of an old broom in the gutter earlier. A brilliant idea came to me. I would show these kids,

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especially Kingfish, I was a daring and resourceful tough guy. (Eleven-year-old logic, don't ask).

I wandered over and picked up the broom. The bristle end was nothing but a ragged stub worn down to the stitching. I hefted the thing like a lance. "Hey, guys. I got an idea. Watch this." I laid it on thick adding a big grin of mystery.

I stuck the old broom through my belt at the small of my back, and using hand and footholds on the trunk of the sycamore, I climbed. Three smaller trunks branched off at the crotch. I was at least ten feet off the ground. It sure didn't look that high from the sidewalk.

The trunk was about four feet in diameter. Where the tree divided itself the offshoots were smaller. I considered climbing higher to impress my audience. Trunk stems soared another twenty feet in the air. Big branches grew every which way. I decided my audience was thrilled enough.

I pulled the broom from my belt and struck a match from the pack in my pocket. I yelled. "Hey guys, you ready?" Sure of my audience's attention, I set the stubs of straw on fire.

Donny and Quentin watched from below. I imagined they were watching me in awe. My intrepid, inventive bravery, probably struck them speechless. In reality, they no doubt thought I was a little brain damaged.

The straw broom was just starting to flame when a commanding voice yelled, "Hey you. What the hell you doing? Put that out before you catch the tree on fire."

I looked down and saw a kid with brilliant red hair scowling up at me. The redhead was bigger than us and he looked pretty tough. I knew he was older, but I was stuck. I couldn't back down. With cockiness I didn't feel I

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said, "Okay, I'll put it out."

I let out a shout; a yelp I thought sounded like a fierce war cry, and tried to throw the broom like a spear. All the weight was on the burning end. The broom dropped, flaming end first, heading straight for my new friends.

Everybody ducked and jumped back. The broom hit the gutter and exploded in a shower of embers. A few inches to the side and I would have beamed Quentin, Donny and the redhead. Quentin and Donny took off running for their homes. The redhead yelled, "Get your ass down here, you dumb shit. Put this fire out."

My audience was gone, but I was compelled to continue my bluster. I hollered down, "You want the fire out? Okay, I'll put it out." I unbuttoned my Levis and tried to pee on the burning broom.

The redhead yelled, "I'm going to get a bucket of water. If you know what's good for you, you'll run and hide, you little ass."

As soon as he left for the water I shinnied down the tree and ran home. I stayed in the house the rest of the day. Not long after the burning broom debacle, I met the redhead. Over the next three years we became good friends. Don, Big Red, Morrison and I learned we had a lot in common. For the past fifty-nine years we've maintained that close friendship.

There's a macabre twist to this tale of boyish foolishness. Had I not choked back my fear of a meeting with Big Red? Had we not experienced an immediate feeling of simpatico? If those had not's, had not come to pass, I would not have gained the wherewithal to commit murder.

Don Morrison is ignorant of his contribution to the act that stalks my dreams. It is right that he is unaware. He

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only provided the tool. Fifty-five years ago, I, with free will and brash bravado, welcomed a piece of hell into my soul. It huddles there, flickering bright and dim.

It is the cursed lamp lighting my nightmare kinescope. It casts maddening images of the torturous death I inflicted on another living creature. The images of that atrocity torture me with hellish dreamscapes I cannot escape.

One

**Alameda County Jail, Oakland, California
June 8, 1982
1:36 a.m.**

Ray Martelli sat on a cold metal bench and stared between his thighs at the stained cement floor. They took his tie and belt. They would have taken his shoelaces, but he slipped his feet into loafers that morning. Lucky me, ran through his mind. A hangover's headache is good for something, I guess.

"Hey. What you looking for? What you in here for, man?"

Ray looked up. A tall stick of a kid stared at him, eyebrows raised waiting for an answer. Rage consumed him. He felt his self control slipping away. I'm under arrest for drunk driving, you moron. What do you think? he almost answered.

He had a buzz on, no doubt about it, but drunk? He wasn't going to start any jail fights, drunk or sober. Ray ignored the dorky kid and brooded about his mistakes of the past few hours.

After the booking crap, he made his call. When Cheryl answered the phone he told her what happened. As the last of his justifications drooled from his lips he listened for

his wife's response.

Her silence lingered until he tapped on the mouthpiece with his fingernail, "Cheryl?" His voice sounded whiney and that pushed him deeper into his hole of self pity.

Cheryl said, "Good-bye, Ray."

Her failure to anger scared him. In the past his wife's recriminations would start with the phone call from jail. After a week of cold silence, broken only by her invective, he would chide her for nagging. It was bad luck, he'd say.

He knew, however, if a lawyer failed to get this DUI knocked down to reckless driving, her nagging would be good advice ignored. Ray Martelli would be out of luck and no doubt out of a job.

Three drunken driving arrests were no joke and he knew the score. It would be the DUI course, all over again. The old circle jerk deal, sitting around slobbering about inner demons.

"What incredible bullshit." He smirked and his thick fingered hands curled into fists. "I'm in the shithouse for sure after this fiasco."

Ray blinked his blurry eyes. The sound of finality in Cheryl's voice was scary. It was a stake in his chest. What if she left me? He cringed inside. I couldn't live with that failure. She'd take the kids. Might as well cut my heart out.

He stared at the dirty cement floor. I have to fix this with Cheryl, the idea clamored for his attention. There was no one to blame for this stupidity but himself. "I'll beg Cheryl for mercy and forgiveness. I'll go into treatment. I'll join AA," he murmured.

Eyes burning from cigarette smoke and lack of sleep, Ray searched the dirty cement floor for other ideas, other plausible arguments for clemency.

A hard nailed finger tapped at the top of his head. "Say

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what? What you say, man?"

Ray blinked new tears away and focused on the figure standing in front of him. It was the streetwise kid again. The rage boiled up from his chest a second time. *What's with this fucking asshole, tapping at my head?* He pulled in a deep breath. *Easy, easy.*

Ray was born big and reached his adult height of six-four at sixteen. In high school he played football and fought in Golden Glove competitions. His years spent working in sales rewarded him with a good living for his family, but threw in a paunch for a bonus.

Ray's belly and body support structure lived in the two-fifty neighborhood. Only his early participation in athletics sustained his underlying musculature. This despite the last few years he had dedicated to debauchery.

Ray and his family celebrated his forty-second birthday two months past, but he could still cause liver damage with his left hook. He could still make a smartass piss blood for a month.

Ray looked up at the kid with his streetwise voice and sucked his teeth. *Jail ain't the place to lose your temper, pal.* Ray felt a tendon pop in his jaw.

The mouthy kid wore baggies and held them up with his left hand, elbow akimbo. A black Oakland Raiders jersey hung from narrow shoulders.

The jersey's color matched the tone of the kid's skin and his shaved head glistened in the harsh fluorescent light. A cigarette dangled at the corner of his mouth. The trailing smoke pulled his face into a squint giving him the look of a stroke victim.

Ray wrinkled his brow. "What did you say?"

"What you mean, what you say? Do I sound like I talk funny to you, boy?" The kid smiled and looked around.

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Ray shrugged. "I'm not in the mood for conversation."

"I not in the mood for conversation," the kid mimicked in a loud voice. "What you? Some kind a big shot? You look more like a fairy to me. What's you wearing? That one a them seersucker suits? That fit you, seersucka'. You look like you make a good punk. I gots a friend over in the other cellblock needs a new punk. What you think, boy?"

Ray straightened from his hunched position and stood. He had looked like an easy mark, with his hangdog posture, but now the street tough took a step back. Martelli followed his retreat.

"I think if your friend needs a little punk ass, you fit the bill pretty good. Why don't you go over there and get your hemorrhoids fixed? Leave me be, okay?"

The cigarette dropped from the kid's mouth. He waved his free hand and continued to back away. His eyes searched the tank, but the other inmates were paying no attention. "Be cool, man. Be cool. I just jiving you. You cool. You got any smokes, man?"

Ray felt a surge of pity. The kid's trying to keep the animals at bay, he realized. He glanced around. At least a dozen inmates sat on bunks. Late arrestees used the floor, knees drawn up and hard eyes glaring. At two in the morning Ray was the only suit in Alameda County jail.

He blew out a breath and flopped down on the bench. "I don't smoke, man. If I did you'd be welcome to them."

They turned him loose at six-thirty. Ray slipped his tie under the collar of his shirt and used a glass showcase in the lobby of the jail as a makeshift mirror. His reflected

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image was clouded and dissected by smudges and dust on the glass.

He leaned forward and the mottled likeness cleared for a moment. In that instant, Ray saw the confidence and promise of his youth shinning back at him. The vision was like a Mike Tyson left jab, hard and hot under the heart.

He took a step back, eyes burning, head pumping up like a helium balloon. A long wooden bench was bolted to the wall and Ray flopped down. After a moment the nausea passed and he looked up. In the corner by the door several pay phones stood in a line.

Thirty minutes later he was in a cab heading for Orinda and a Safeway parking lot. The CHP officers who arrested him last night had taken pity and parked the company's car. That courtesy saved him an expensive tow and storage charge.

Ray saw the cab driver's eyes in the rearview mirror. He couldn't blame the guy for worrying about his fare. He was worried, too. All he had left was forty bucks.

The house looked dark when he climbed from the company car. Ray glanced at his watch. Eight-ten. The kids should be slamming out the door on their way to school. The kitchen lights should be on. The angry call of a blue jay and hasty flutter of sparrow wings emphasized the silence.

"What the hell's going on," he muttered.

Ray stepped through the front door and a spike of fear nailed his bowels to his backbone. The house, and its cold, empty atmosphere, kicked him in the balls.

"Cheryl?" He cringed at the querulous sound of his

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voice.

“Donnie? Samantha? Little Ray? Panic exacerbated the whiney sound of his voice. “Answer me. Daddy’s home.”

He found a note on the refrigerator’s door:

Ray,

Don’t bother trying to contact me or the kids. I’m filing for divorce. I’ve had enough of your late nights and drunk driving phone calls. I told you the last time, IT WOULD BE THE LAST TIME. I’ll be sending for the rest of my things and the kids extra clothes and toys. If you have any feeling for me or the kids you won’t fight this, you know you’re wrong. I want to sell the house. I’m willing to split the equity evenly. A Realtor will call you with the papers. When you clean yourself up I’ll drop the restraining order and allow you to see the kids. Until then, I’ll see you in court. My attorney will be in touch. Cheryl.

He crumpled the paper and threw it across the kitchen. Pushing shaky fingers into his eye sockets, he wished for a gun, something big to take his head off...end it quick.

He sobbed, opened the cupboard under the sink and jerked the paper towels off the holder. The roll bounced across the floor unraveling as it went.

Wadding the few left in his hand, he soaked them in water and swabbed at his face. Ray stared through the kitchen window and slammed his fists into the countertop in helpless rage.

He stumbled through the service porch into the garage. A half gallon of Petrovitch vodka awaited his pleasure, hidden in a brown paper bag behind his toolbox.

There would be no reason to hide the booze any longer. He stripped the bag, threw it in the corner and turned the bottle, staring at the gold and blue label. Jumbled thoughts pushed their way through his head...I

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have to get them back...get them back. I'll join AA...I swear. I'll quit. I promise...Cheryl?

Ray reentered the kitchen with the vodka bottle cradled in his arms. His eyes were blurred with hot tears that tickled his cheeks. "Please, God. I'll stop. I promise. I just can't do it today," he muttered.

Four

Henry's Café Bells Grove, Florida October 31, 2000

Bob Givens set a Coke down in front of Joe Tabler and slid into the booth. The smell of frying potatoes and grilling hamburger meat filled his nostrils and he made a face. "What time is it?"

"Same time it was five minutes ago. When are you going to break down and take a watch? Jesus Christ. Take a Timex if you're so chicken-shit...it's nine-thirty."

Joe took the wrapper from his straw. "Why so jumpy? She told us to get lost. Haven't you figured it out yet? Leslie knows what she's doing. Don't sweat it, dude."

Bob pointed a finger. "Fuck you. Just...fuck you. This isn't your responsibility. I'm older. I'm supposed to be in charge. What do you care? I was the one who lost her. Remember?"

Joe slumped down in the booth. The volume of a kid's CD player drowned out Henry's old timey jukebox. The heavy thump of drum and unintelligible Hip-Hop street jive rattled the windows of the café. Several girls burst out laughing and started talking at once.

Joe leaned forward. "There you go again. We're only a

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few minutes apart. WE lost her. Why's it always your fault? I was there, too. We trick or treated the Bells mansion. We BOTH teased Leslie. She chased BOTH of us through the hedgerows. One second she was behind us and the next she was gone. How is that YOUR fault? It was OUR fault, okay?"

Bob ignored his brother and looked around the crowded cafe. No one paid them any attention. Bob couldn't remember if they were plugged in. He brushed the sweating glass of cola with his fingertips. They didn't pass through the glass. Givens sat up straight and turned away from the throng of kids crowding Henry's. Bob pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose and motioned Joe closer. "We're plugged in. Keep your voice down."

"Okay. Okay," Joe said. "You just really piss me off sometimes. Older brother, bullshit. By the way. Nice job on those ten-year-old bodies. Where'd you dig them up on such short notice?"

Bob's mouth was a tight line. His eyes glittered like hard green emeralds. "Finding those bodies is just one of the reasons I'm in charge. I'm not going to argue with you or Leslie. At ten o'clock we'll go back to the Bells mansion. I swear, if that fucker hurts her, I'll make him wish he could die."

Joe laughed. "Jesus, Bob. You act like we have real bodies or something. There's no way he's going to hurt Leslie. Speaking of bodies, brother Mosher, where'd you get that piece of shit you're wearing? Your breath smells like hot, rotten meat."

Bob Mosher drummed his fist on the tabletop. His face reflected a fury his twin had never seen.

"You're a smart guy, Joe. Smarter than me, but

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sometimes.... Forget it. I'm glad you're my brother, even though you think you're a comic. Problem is, sometimes you're too much the comedian and not smart enough," he said.

Joe Mosher slumped. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The noise level was increasing. Henry's Café rocked, going full blast on Halloween night. Bob motioned his brother closer.

"The Pollazo transfer screwed up my planning. I woke you too early, didn't figure on your special talent being that special. The job you did on the electronics and software at the Colby plant was a little too well done. Leslie had to make do with Ann Whilly's body and it was in bad shape. I took the one that was in the ground too long and gave you the new one. I had to reconstruct the heads for all of us and take care of the high school records. It's a miracle we've made it this far."

Joe took his brother's arm. "We made it this far because of you, Bob. We've been looking a long time. You think we got the right guy this time?"

Bob shook his head. "Vincent Pollazo isn't the right guy even if Leslie said she felt the rhythms. She's said that before, right? Hell, I don't know. Maybe this time she's right. If he's a blood descendant of the guy who.... If he's a blood descendant we can take him and be free of the curse."

Joe leaned across the table putting his face close to his brother's ear. "You really think she's right, Bob? I think she's right. That Pollazo bitch, his mom, she sensed something. She caught on to my, shall we say, unhealthy coloring? I think Leslie's right. Please say she's right, okay?"

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Bob saw Joe's hand on his arm. Saw Joe's fingers disappear into the cloth of his shirt sleeve. "Watch what you're doing," he nodded his head toward the tabletop.

"Fingers, Joe. Stay focused."

Joe pulled his hand away and dropped it in his lap. "Sorry," he looked around, "nobody's looking at us, okay?"

Bob Mosher felt discomfort and that was making him irritable. He knew Joe must be feeling it, too, although Joe had the best body, the freshest one. The feeling was something akin to wearing a tight shoe. The hot, sweaty, pinching feeling permeated his entire spiritual being.

They had to find a meat cooler, break in and unplug. Without a meat locker the dead flesh they animated would continue to rot, attracting dogs, wild varmints and worst of all, humans.

"We've got to get out of here and find a supermarket or meat storage company," Bob whispered.

Joe beat the tabletop like a bongo drum. "You it. You the man, my brother. Let's do it."

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One

August 17, 2000

Winchester Hospital
Dr. Daniel J. Celinski-da Vinci Robotic Surgical Wing
41 Highland Avenue
Winchester, MA 01890

Dear Daniel,
I hope this letter finds you settled and you are comfortable in your new surroundings. I've heard there's no cold weather like New England's cold weather, have you found that true?

I hope you have all the warm clothing you'll need for the chilly months ahead. I guess I sound like your mother. Well, I can't help but worry about you, so far away from home. I hope you'll send me your new address by return mail. After reading what follows you may decide you would rather not communicate with me any longer. I wouldn't blame you if that was your decision.

How do I begin to tell you the truth about your old man? It's not easy. I've kept my secrets for too long. I suppose the best way is to begin and so I will.

I was thirteen when I met Lamont Johnstone in junior high school. He and a few others initiated me into a club

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they called the Blood Angels.

By the time I turned eighteen I paid my dues and was backing off the gang life. Then one summer night, I made several stupid choices and the end results were disastrous. In a panic I took a cowards way out, I asked for a favor.

I paid dearly for that decision. My payback included ten years of my life and I served that time in a dangerous world. I was part of a group who enforced the laws of that dangerous world.

Our actions would be considered crimes in straight society. I have to admit I have suffered no guilt for the acts I committed. The people I dealt with were inhabitants of my world and they knew the rules.

Then I met your mother and she changed my life. We raised you together and we were so proud when you graduated medical school. Now, you're safe in your new career, far away from me and what is about to happen.

Since your mother's passing I've thought long and hard about the path I have chosen to take. She died far too young, but in a perverse way it is a blessing for she will not be here to witness the carnage.

I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me, son. I know it won't be an easy task for I have yet to forgive myself.

Sometimes I think my greatest sin was in not taking responsibility for my actions at the time, but then I realize there is no greater crime than that for which I am guilty.

That night in August, 1956, haunts my memory. It is an open wound. I pray it will begin to heal with my actions of the next few days. The following is my confession, Daniel. I relate it now to cushion the blows that may follow.

Two

Long Beach, California 1992

That was six years ago. I'm sixty-seven now and have trouble remembering things at times. It's gotten worse since Joanie let the breast cancer kill her. That sounds cold and brutal, but I mean it in a loving way. Don't get me wrong, she fought hard. In the end, however, she fought for a bunch of delusional hopes we lapped up like hungry puppies.

Late one night, when the pain was bearable and she was in one of her lucid periods, we talked things over. I promised I would be all right and learn to do for myself. She squeezed my hand and said I had to loosen up, stop worrying, have fun, and find a new honey.

When I nodded, she went all quiet and her eyes fastened on mine. She walked up inside my head and showed me how courage and love should look. After a long silence, she smiled that smile, the one that breaks my heart to remember.

She gave my hand a few pats and turned her head on the pillow. Not a minute passed before she slipped into a coma. A few hours later she let go and died. I sat there and died with her, but for some reason my heart keeps

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beating. I keep on existing.

I have trouble remembering things at times, but I remember that kind of shit. I remember I lied with every promise I made to Joanie.

Those reassuring lies, made with the best intentions, still bother me at times. Then I remember that scary Saturday night not long passed. A burglar violated my dead wife's home. I remember how bad I wanted to kill the son-of-a-bitch and I'm at peace for a while.

Were you caught Screwing the Pooch? Committing the biggest mistake of your life. Usually we live through our mistakes and move on. In this eclectic collection of short stories you will find some who did and some who didn't.

Screwing the Pooch

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