

*This memoir is the author's effort to recapture the kaleidoscopic impressions of his childhood, his neighborhood, his school, family and friends, and the loss of each due to separation murder and suicide. The place: 1960s Tucson, Arizona.*

## **A Perfect Loss**

By Harry Clark

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The background of the book cover is a photograph of a desert landscape at sunset. In the foreground, a large saguaro cactus with several arms stands on the left. A paved road with a white line runs from the bottom right towards the horizon. The sky is filled with warm, orange and yellow clouds, and the sun is low on the horizon, creating a silhouette effect on the cacti and the road.

HARRY CLARK

# A Perfect Loss

Once known as  
TUCSON TALES AND TRANSMOGRIFICATION:

Recalculations, Recollections,  
Recriminations, Regrets, Reminiscences,  
Reveries, Riffs & (Reveals)

*The end is nothing; the road is all.*  
Willa Cather

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### 3. STRAVENUE (Recalculation)

It seems Tucson, located within Pima County, state of Arizona, is the sole place in the country with designated stravenues. A Google search confirms this, and according to the Pima County Code of Ordinances: *A stravenue's a street which runs diagonally between and intersects a street and an avenue.* But of course, it's not a street: It's a stravenue.

There seem to be a couple dozen such stravs strewn about town, bisecting true-blue streets running east/west, and avenues venturing north/south. Apparently, Roy Drachman (1906-2002), a city founding father and real estate developer, coined the term in one of his earliest developments, the 1948 Pueblo Gardens. Father Roy seemed to have had his fingers in muchos chimichangas including wooing both Hughes Aircraft and major league baseball spring training to the "Old Pueblo." As you might expect his shingle is attached to several edifices about town, plus the desultory artery, Drachman Street, which keen reader now knows runs east/west and never to be confused with its orderly north/south avenue nor its diagonal antagonist, oedipal stravenue. There seems to be not a single stravenue in conflict with Drachman Street, *schade*.

Julius Stravenue. A tucked away quarter mile or so stretch of asphalt, intersecting Lester & Linden Streets, then Van Buren Avenue, before merging into Waverly Street; Waverly soon to peter out encountering an impressive arroyo. You'd never know it is there, Julius Stravenue, but a modest home makes a handy landmark, a doctor's office at 1828 North Craycroft Road, (corner of Craycroft and Lester Street). Michael Bush, MD's *Advanced Hemorrhoid Care and Hormone Therapy* is said beacon. Dr. Bush's website extols his more than 10,000 successful non-surgical procedures: *Infrared Coagulation* (IRC) for mild to

moderately enlarged hemorrhoids, and *O'Regan Rubber Band Ligation* (RBL) for large prolapsing internal hemorrhoids. An internet search shows a pretty much everything you ever wanted to know website about *O'Regan Rubber Band Ligation* ([www.crhsystem.com](http://www.crhsystem.com)). As for the eponymous inventor of said procedure, *nada*. O' well, some things best left to the imagination.

For certain, there's no doctor's office to guide one to Julius Stravenue in 1952. Now a major mid-town artery, Craycroft Road was back then a far east, two-lane dirt trail. It never bothered him then, but strolling the entirety of Julius Stravenue now, ten to fifteen minutes tops, one of two questions the author asks is neatly solved. How is it that there are homes with addresses both for 1800 to 1900 block *North JS* and also 5000 block *East JS*? Simple, or simply stupid, as one imagines the mailman (postal carrier) must ponder each M-S delivery. JS begins life in a northeasterly direction from the corner of Craycroft and Lester, and then at Van Buren Avenue has a due east abrupt change of heart resulting in its 5000 block east last hurrah, this before life is snuffed out by the aforementioned arroyo.

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In other perfunctory searches on the web here is what pops up.

*Atlasobscura*: **Tucson, Arizona** is a city built on an orderly grid. Most of the North-South streets are named Avenues and the East-West ones are Streets. However, a quirky handful of outliers run diagonally and are called "Stravenues," shortened on signage simply as Strav. or Stra. Cherrybell **Stravenue**, the first of the lot.

*Wikipedia*: A stravenue (portmanteau of street and avenue) is a type of road particular to Tucson, Arizona. The United States Postal Service officially supports the abbreviation STRA for stravenues. However, in a few areas of Tucson,



primarily around the central part of the city, which is divided by railroad tracks running diagonally from southeast to northwest, builders created small subdivisions or roads and houses that are also laid out on a diagonal basis rather than the normal east-west or north-south.

Roy, he imagines, would get a charge out of “portmanteau” and for sure comment on how *Atlasobscura* capitalizes North, South, East, West, Street, whereas Wikipedia gets it right.

---

In Cory Taylor’s *Dying: A Memoir*\* third and final section, *Endings And Beginnings*, Taylor writes of her first moment of consciousness:

It’s not my earliest memory—an insignificant recollection of playing in mud—but the time I saw a kookaburra swoop down from a branch to spear a skink and gobble it down live. This is what dragged me out of unconsciousness. This is me here, I thought, and that is you there, and where there was a skink there is nothing....The skink’s disappearance was explicit. Things live until they die. Consciousness begins and then it ends.

Which house was it? His first moment of consciousness? A corner lot, big fenced-in backyard, this he recalls. There really is but one possibility: a home on the northwest side of the street, 1901 N. Julius Stravenue. There are still lizards skittering, never any kookaburra, and

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\* Cory Taylor’s *Dying: A Memoir*, Tin House Books, 2017.

Note: Author will return to what she, Cory Taylor, writes of and about, but if nothing else comes of this effort his desire is for her book to be read and shared.

though found world-wide the skink species, lizards of a sort numbering a thousand plus varieties, there are but five native to Arizona, all of mountainous climes. But his concern is neither Sonoran reptile, nor Aussie kingfisher, but a castor bean jungle and a watermelon patch, the jungle and patch in possession of the entire backyard. Gargantuan growths both, wondrously exotic to a four-year-old, and a peek over the fence now confirms the inevitable—no jungle, no patch, only patchy gravel, landscape de rigueur.

The jungle and patch of yore requiring little to no upkeep as well, ideal for a padre occupied with a new job. As for la madre, this her first sojourn west of Teaneck, New Jersey, the entire trek cross-country in an un-air-conditioned July to an alien land, a phantasm of flora and fauna, O! The unrelenting sun, all as outlandishly queer to her Bronx sensibilities as the movie *THEM!*, soon to be released in all its glory at the Apache Drive-In: “A horror horde of crawl-and-crush giants clawing out of the earth from mile-deep catacombs!!” Or as her former hometown daily, the *New York Times*, calmly explicates: “The stars of *THEM!* are, of course, the horrible hymenoptera. They are enough to make a man welcome the picnic-spoiling variety and give the atomic age back to the Warner Brothers.”

One might imagine the deathly castor bean to be his window to “the first moment of consciousness” but, no, it is the mass of lowly gourds, dozens upon dozens of them, the old fashioned type, monsters pregnant with seeds, and never in need of any Caesarian procedure for their sun-drenched, blood-gorged, flesh-pulp to announce their readiness—a delivery without whimper, the umbilical cord no match for even an asthmatic four-year old to disconnect the new-born from its life-giving vine. Oh sure, a struggle to haul-in each monster newbie, the seventy-odd feet from the northeast far corner backyard to the

backdoor, a single brick step and inside, the evaporative-cooled kitchen, the catch of the day square on the Formica kitchenette table, this its penultimate destination. Its final destiny, the tiny Kelvinator, a re-arranging of contents both padre y madre attend to: the analytical calculations of an electronics engineer father, the more practical eye of a recently unemployed bookkeeper mother, Miriam. *There, it fits there, Homer.*

You'd imagine a fecund backyard—watermelon rich—would be a terrific thing for a tyke, yes and no. New to this arid Babylon, not a friend in sight, no relatives to pawn such prolificacy off on just how many melons can a family of four gorge on per day, per week, per month? Four? A younger sis by a couple of years, Louise Beth, the a-asthmatic one. And so begins the daily ritual: heat's apex, cocktail hour for them, sister somewhere cool indoors, the gasping one in vigil, seated on the back-door step, guessing who was next—that ragged, wrenching burst of gut, sun-powered seppuku—death in the afternoon. They are alive, the shimmering six o'clock heat beating on their green-ridged rind. Who today will commit hari-kari? Witness and undertaker, our young lad(d). Each corpse (a record five one beastly hot day) all necessitating immediate interment in the alley garbage can.

*Ants!* God, how mother feared them, this before or in anticipation of *THEM!* They'd appear from nowhere, anywhere, everywhere, the biggish black ones ready to gorge on the carcass, and so it is his solemn assignment their immediate interment, with the absolute duty of the garbage lid to fit snug, to be dog, cat, javelina, *THEM!* proof. Each burial a grave obligation, and each death, though not nearly as dramatic as a skink's extinction, Cory Taylor's jolt from unconsciousness; these annihilations more a fist tight to the sternum, a lessening of what little breath he manages, a foreboding and a certain

knowledge a body may implode when conditions prevail, and nothing one might muster can counter such mortality. All this as the foursome, this nuclear unit in the first glow of the nuclear age, continues savoring pulpy flesh from their very own killing field. A desert dessert of 92 percent water, 6 percent sugar, and....what, 2 percent ebon pits?

Oh yes, there are three reference points that pretty much clinch this is *the* very place, *the* stravenue, *the* 1901 North Julius—*the* Tucson, Arizona, 85712. One, that single brick step to the back kitchen door, still there. Two, a three- or four-inch saguaro planted in that distant past in the far northwest corner, now a twelve-foot, middle-aged totem. And three, hymenoptera front yard, back yard, most especially the alley. Who knows how many thousand generations these particular creatures are removed from the good old days. Have stories been handed down of their elders mythic past amidst a castor bean jungle, an oasis of oft-times suicidal watermelons, of a sickly, asthmatic child fascinated and repelled by it all—all this to be found only here on one singular stravenue?

*Do you mind smoke?*

***Well...(This after he begins the ritual of preparing what was to be the first of three, perhaps four stogies.)***

*H. Upmann Magnum 54.*

***Um, champagne?***

*No, no, the cigar. Cuban. A gift from one of my drug clients.*

***Drug?....Clients?***

*Yeah, most of my work now is representing drug dealers.*

***Ever scared?***

*What, of the client?*

***Just that world. The whole drug scene, I guess.***

*Nah. Years ago I had an incident or two with murder trials.*

***Mitch?***

*Never Mitch, never the supposed murderer, but a family member, a wife, a brother, thought I wasn't doing my job. You care for one?*

***What, cigar? No, I never smoked.***

*Never?*

***No...I had asthma, sort of the last thing I wanted to do, screw up my lungs even more.***

*Sensible. (Setting ablaze the Magnum 54 with a gold lighter.)*

*Another gift from a regular. Two major differences between murderers and drug dealers.*

***What's that?***

*Drug dealers never stiff you. Cash on the barrel.*

***Mitch?***

*No, no, the state paid his bill.*

***And the other difference?***

*Drug dealers a steady source of income.*

***Till they get put away, I imagine.***

*Not too many of those, pretty good at getting them off.*

***The little guys who do time.***

Harry Clark

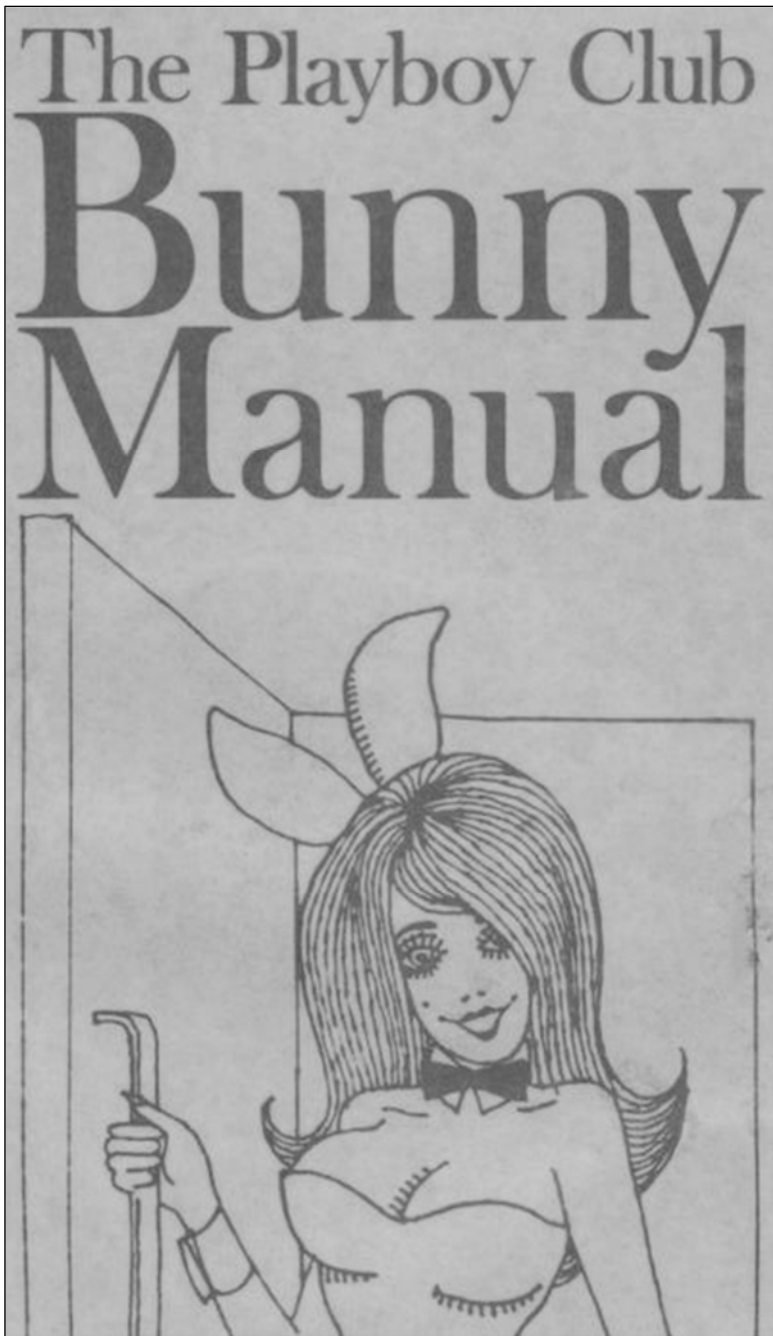
*Exact. I only take those who can and do pay.*

***Murderers?***

*Murders are nearly always a one-off. In fact, the least recidivism of all crime is murder. No repeat business.*

***Dead end, you might say. (Why, oh why, do I insist on telling a guy who seems immune to jokes jokes.)***

-----



“A man’s work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the details of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.”

—Albert Camus

## 5. ALLEY

Alley.

Never back alley or alleyway. Not lane, path, pathway, passageway. Backstreet, huh?

Alley.

We own it, consume it. We? Kids. Guys. B Streeters.

It’s not because going places via the alley provides a shortcut, though it does sometimes, nor is it as my mother kvetches, “There no goddamn sidewalks going anywhere,” fifty years of sun incessant still unable to bleach out her Bronx DNA, or even that the alley is solely our domain, though this is a definite bennie. The alley is exotic, a foreign landscape of remotest terrain, and we are its indigenous peoples, shielded by backyard walls of cinder block plain and painted, brick, adobe, stucco, wood (always rotted), corrugated metal, chain link fence filled in with multi-colored diagonal or horizontal plastic strips a la Sol Lewitt, stone boulders cemented or mortared, and the rare but oh-so-green, ocotillo weave. A multifarious display.

Friends and foes cleave into two sects—those who amble the pavement and those who choose not to, a manageable duality from grade school through junior high, but no longer tenable once Avenida Vega’s fecund soil births Palo Verde High School (PVHS), unfurling its royal blue and gold insignia so luminous in its freshness and novelty that wannabe Titans and Titanesses come from afar: Davis Monthan



Air Force brats to the south, Catalina Mountain north richies, 22nd Street west past *The Lucky Wishbone* regulars, and far, far east cowboys/gals abutting Colossal Cave's inky abyss. Those faraway have no dilemma—driven, bused, personal sets of wheels—but the hoi polloi have multiple challenges—walk or bike, walk or bike on asphalt, walk or bike the alley. You can't walk and/or bike, asphalt and/or alley; this will get your screwed—screwed big time. You can't love Sandy Koufax and/or Whitey Ford, Kennedy and/or Nixon, Udall and/or Goldwater, Hazel and/or Have Gun Will Travel, hell no. Even if great tragedies beset you freshman year—Kennedy's assassination, CBS guns down Paladin (R.I.P.), friends die, parents of friends kill themselves or others, there's never an excuse for weakness, for compromise, *nikogda*.

It's still possible to walk by alley from 6334 B Street to 1302 S. Avenida Vega; I did it yesterday, back and forth, the same route as half a century and more ago, no sweat. Sure, momentarily, you must cross asphalt, but your journey is as much alley as a blue-blooded Venetian traveling via canal, and unlike the 1960s, this journey's now ever more pure with a pedestrian overpass avoiding the biggest patch of blacktop, 22nd Street. Of course, the city planners claim the overpass is to protect school kid's lives, but if you believe them then you believe that Lee Harvey Oswald worked solo, and that fluoridation was not a commie plot.

Much of the mile plus route is familiar. There's still the cornucopia of back walls ensuring privacy, no peering eyes, and only two homes sport the southwest-moderne plague—the three-foot high, see through, wrought-iron railed “pool” fencing. Yeah, yeah, unobstructed views, letting nature in, rah-rah-rah, save this faux fence for friggin' foothillers and their ten thousand square foot Motel Six monstrosities,

six car garages, tournament sized ping-pong walk-in closets and postage stamp backyards dwarfed by infinity pools and BBQ islands costing more than their Mercedes-Benz M-Class SUVs out front to haul their sweet darlin' to soccer practice.

There's an unfamiliarity, too. I've done the walk several times—morning, afternoon, dusk—nary a soul. Barren, virgin turf but for a garbage truck, radio blasting Spanish, a lone operator hoisting, emptying, setting down those monster, multi-family dumpsters. Sterile, neat, clean, efficient, *anónimo*.

World headquarters for garbage study? Tucson. University of Arizona.

Longtime director/founder of the *Garbage Project*, Bill Rathje, archaeologist, professor emeritus of anthropology. *Le Projet du Garbage*, Prof Rathje's students dub their study, the serious business of sorting and studying waste begun in 1973. The science and romance of this field, garbageology, results in Rathje's magnum opus twenty years out, *RUBBISH! The Archaeology of Garbage*, an illustrated 250 pages published by HarperCollins. In a learned review of *RUBBISH!* the *New York Times* Witold Rybczynski elucidates: The garbage project is based on an arresting promise: "That what people have owned—and thrown away—can speak more eloquently, informatively, and truthfully about the lives they lead than they themselves ever may." "Garbage doesn't lie," the takeaway line in the July 5, 1992, respectful *NYT*'s consideration.

For sure garbage doesn't lie, my alley compadres, precursory preceptors of Rathje and Co., possess this truth long before *Le Projet du Garbage*. *Le Six*—Samy S, Dicky L, Roy, Mikey, Curt T, *moi*—rulers of refuse, ruelle rubbish revelators, trash talk experts. *Les Six* had no use for Brontosaurus-size dumpsters, nor Waste Management

mafiosed bins, unfearing of herculean tosses by real garbage men—real alley men. No Rubbermaids back when, no-no; our garbage cans genetically engineered to dent, to rust, to ooze. Unwrinkled in youth, all shiny metal-faced, oblivious of their final scene—sans lids, sans handles, sans bottoms, sans, sans, sans... garbage themselves, *mort, fine*.

Most houses sport the standard issue two cans. Mormons, Catholics, and out-and-out slobs raise the stakes—three, four, even five cans. There's a place with seven cans, Samy S's home, slob Catholic. Dicky L is also Catholic but his detritus is meticulously sanitized, two cans only, bricks atop lids. Occasionally, Dicky L and a herd of Samy S's brothers and sisters together drive to confession. The priest hears Dicky L out and then implores: "Jesus Lord, please beg Samy S and family to bath...soap, hot water, mother of God."

The confessional and the alley, places of private communications, revelations, implorations, singular smells. The cans divulge all: The fulltime drunks from the binge drunks; the Mormon's breaking bad with TaB, Folgers, and Pabst Blue Ribbon. all evidentiary detritus; Saturday morning Catholic deposits of chicken bones or BBQ ribs in lieu of fish stick Friday piety; the neatniks and slobniks; the pet owners—Friskie Bits, Puss'n Boots, soiled newspaper with canary crap and shelled-seed; moms who do cook and those perpetual pot-piers; the unusual—dumps of still wearable clothing signifying weight loss, gain, or imminent divorce.

Our greatest unearthing? Curt T's inestimable find, six years of *Playboy*, 1959–65, complete, hermetically-sealed, including a seventy-third offering, the *Playboy Bunny Manual*, twenty-six explanatory pink pages of notes and diagrams including *Bunny*

*Bennies*: full accident, health and life insurance, paid vacations and paid leaves of absence, plus advanced copies of *Playboy* a full two weeks prior to newsstand perusal. There's *The Good Service Contest* with merit points for highest drink average for Cocktail Bunnies, a hundred merits worth twenty-five bucks, and demerits for everything from bikini pants revealed or not worn (each five demerits), to necessitating a meeting with ones Bunny Mother, sixty demerits. *Bunny Musts*: keep audit sheets and receipts of any expenses claimed for income tax returns; always address male supervisory personnel as Mister \_\_\_\_\_; accept instructions in a cheerful, cooperative manner. The section we ponder (salivate) over most, *Bunny Costume*: matching ears, collar and cuffs, bow tie, Bunny cuff links, Bunny tail, nameplate rosette, flashlight, Playboy lighter, regulation hose, bikini panties, and shoes (dyed to match each costume). Final Summation: "Your costume is the world-famous symbol of the glamorous Playboy Bunny...wear it proudly and prettily."

A month or two after Curt T's momentous discovery, the house attached to the sacred texts goes up for sale and for weeks we debate ferociously the *why* of the *Playboy* cache. There's never reconciliation. Roy's theory, always the conspiratorialist, is that the *Playboys* do not belong to that house but are secreted by a nearby neighbor fearful of them being discovered in-house. Whatever.

As I do the mile plus jaunt, B Street to the now Palo Verde Magnet High School [PVMHS], I count four Neighborhood Watch signs, dos en Español. Hardly anyone's at home during the day, madres o padres, and this pretty much defeats the notion of watch or neighborhood, asphalt or alley.

B Street's but a single block, twenty-six or so homes worth, and as I hang about in the morning not a soul confronts me as I observe a dozen or so kids headed to school—Kellond Elementary, Fickett Junior High, PVMHS, and some, I imagine, off to private, parochial, or other magnetized schools, institutions unknown to this observer in his youth. No matter the schooling options, none of America's future takes to the alley.

They also don't talk, shout, push, trip, razz, punch—a noiseless, well-mannered, earbudded, iPhoned, droided, texted, thumbs need only apply processional. A solemn gathering. Rightfully so, perhaps, for nowadays inquiring twiddly thumbs tramping to school can summon up more of the world, Kamchatka to Kama Sutra, than all previous open and hidden sourced materials: *National Geographics*, *Playboys*, *Mad Magazines*, *Scientific Americans*, and the gold-standard *Encyclopedia Britannica*—The Sum of All Human Knowledge.

And not a single bike rider in the lot! Is it because they hate the idea of wearing a stupid helmet, or fear being mowed down by a distracted driver late to somewhere? Or is there some protocol, some eleventh DO NOT commandment these kids observe, or is it simply they recognize the muddled mess, the moronic meddling by “adults” in every sphere of their digitized lives. Take the state legislature, for instance, in its profound sagacity recently voting down, nine to twenty, any stricture on texting while driving. One senator crowing: “We've banned drinking and driving and people still do it.”

Well, whether these kids ever walk the alley or not they will never make Curt T's amazing find, *Playboy* an all on-line affair now. You simply can't call a centerfold a centerfold, if it is even called that anymore, if one can no longer fondle the glossy paper, that anticipatory

rush, the tactility, the rite, you understand, or you don't. What we didn't know of the wider world with but a thumb-spasm on a piece of plasticized chip we made up for in procedure, practice, and a peculiar but seemingly satisfactory set of protocols.

As for ambulation to and fro school, this ritual went this way.

Grade School:

Mandatory bike ride to school even if you live across the street.

Alley optional.

Junior High (7th and 8th):

Requisite bike and only alley travels.

High School:

9th grade: Walking is introduced. If you walk you must go by asphalt. If you bike you must go by alley.

10th grade: Alley walking. If you are forced to bike (e.g. your progenitors insist for some god-awful reason) you go the alley and once out of parental view you wheel the bike the rest of the way or ditch it at a friend's house en route. You may wheel your bike, the ratio one walker per bike wheeler: two wheeled bikes and one walker verboten.

11th grade: No bikes, no alleys, ever.

Not even in the summer.

12th grade: Anarchy

V

I thought the alley, if I thought of it all, as but a chore to be done—the garbage put out and a heavy stone atop each lid to keep the dogs and the javelinas from making an even more disgusting mess of it all. This, and the other alley chore of keeping the weeds in check, particularly during the summer. No one then called the summer rains monsoons. When the wet does come the desert blooms overnight, weeds foremost.

No Eden for me, the alley. No traipsing about it, no peering into backyards or foreign garbage cans, zero adventure. Solitary kid and always working, saving money for nice clothes (and shoes), a fancy watch, a set of wheels, a way out as quickly as possible. Never an allowance. I didn't want it. Wouldn't have taken it. The garbage run, the weed hoeing and pulling (no weed-whackers then), the myriad other chores done efficiently and timely so that I might be left alone on my own after and owe no one.

I doubt that they ever wandered up my alley. Possible they did, but it would have been an alley or two afar from their usual route to Palo Verde, to Samy's, to get out in the real desert of no alleys and no asphalt. Impossible to do now, everything's cemented for miles in all directions, another reason I have zero desire to frequent this part of town.

Would I have enjoyed being part of this feral pack? Perhaps. *Danyet.*





*No, didn't know Mitch then. Don't think he hung out with anyone in the neighborhood.*

***So, you only got to know him during the trial?***

*More or less, yeah. Kind of a ghostly presence back then, wasn't he? Yeah, he'd not show up for weeks and then be all over you the next. For some reason, don't really know why, he kind of liked me, so it seemed.*

*Interesting.*

*Yeah, not like we ever spent more than a few minutes together but the once, never played sports, never was in his house, and sure as hell my mother wouldn't permit him in ours, but I was never fearful of him, never feared he'd do anything too awful to me. He told me a bit of shit about his family life. Not a pretty picture, his old man, some other stuff.*

***But there were other families not so great, right?***

*I'm not saying he was the way he was solely because of his old man, or if got beat too much or not enough, or, or, or, just that he possessed a very strange way of thinking about other people. He couldn't tolerate two-facedness in any fashion.*

***Hypocrites are never exactly fun, right?***

*Yeah, but when you turn thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, you know the world is full of bluffers and con artists and we all are duplicitous every once in a while—can't be helped. Not a character fault, just the way people need to deal with some things now and again; reality is just too fucking hurtful.*

***Why some folks take drugs, maybe?***

*Sometimes, yeah. I had my share.*

***You did?***

*Tell me you didn't read about it on the internet, huh.*

***I didn't, really. I read you defended Mitch in the trial and that there was some "black mark" against you somewhere in the past.***

*Black mark, nice. Look, I snorted and shot up and drank myself to oblivion for a bunch of years and used every excuse known to convince myself that I needed the fix and that it wasn't affecting my family, my livelihood. Now, just cigars, caffeine, diet Dr. Pepper, and cash clients...and...a daughter who practices with me and handles divorce and human concerns. Tell you what. I'm cancelling my other appointments for the afternoon. Let's keep going, huh? Like Mexican food?*

***Yeah, sure.***

*El Charro's just around the block. I'm a regular. They'll bring whatever's best to the office. Good by you?*

***Yeah, great.***

*Inventor of the Chimchanga, El Charro's.*

***Right, that and stravenue, Tucson's two gifts to the world.***

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“People have a great difficulty paying attention  
to what they do not understand.”

—John Cage

## 17. AMBIGUITY OF THE ACCORDION ABSURD

A rare argument with Mikey, my inseparable. The squabble is particularly galling for Mikey sides with brother Roy, this before DNA consanguinity confirmation. The two of them pummel me with “fact”—the purple people eater is color purple, this a near quarter century before Ms. Walker has her say and her Pulitzer to back it up. I have my prize, second place, but quite late trying to get a job in a rock-and-roll band for the *Purple People Eater* is already classic literature going on three years, but late to the gig or not I study the PPE *urtext* with diligence and there’s not an iota of proof that *he’s* purple. *He* proof: *He* came down to earth and *he* lit in a tree. We agree on the *he* but Mikey’s off on a tangent over the lines *We wear short shorts & I like short shorts* and Roy snorts this is all a McGuffin. Roy always the big word, the big scrim, and though I have no clue as to what’s a mig-muffin, probably some part of a girl’s anatomy, short shorts and all, I’m damn sure not giving him the pleasure of my ignorance. And I continue arguing till I’m purple in the face that Mr. Purple Eater *might* be pigmentarily purple, but he says straight out when asked, *What’s your line?* Mr. Purple Eater answers, *Eatin’ purple people and it sure is fine.* He eats purple people, sure is fine, period. Just the facts, ma’am, you two dumbro shits.

Mikey then comes up with more purply pabulum: Mr. PPE is a cannibal, and he must eat purple people to maintain his own purplishness. Roy retorts, *It’s the PPE’s ‘purplish’ in life.* Not bad, Roy the Rat, and my half-smile tees Mikey off bigtime. *Fuck you both, the PPE’s purple,*

*that's that*, and he storms off towards home though he's on that rarest of runs, shutting us out in H.O.R.S.E, that Cliff Hagan hook-shot killing us both. I shout out, *Mikey, your problem is that you can't stand ambiguity. The PPE can be read either way.* Mikey flips us unambiguous double birds as Roy taunts, *Aren't you going to run after him, poor Mikey, your inseparable.* I want to (screw you Roy) but I've never been inside his (your) house, not once, and something tells me now's not the time, if ever. We watch Mikey disappear around the bend, and when I turn to Roy's he's cradling the ball with a look rare to never witnessed by his never to be inseparable. Confused? Unsure? Concerned?

*You know, Mikey has enough ambiguity in his life, he doesn't need any more purple puke from you.*

*So, I'm supposed to give in, tell him that the Virgin Mary told me that the PPE is purple, like that?*

*Just like that, douche.*

*Forget, 'Trust, but verify.'*

*Exact.*

*Even though it's your favorite saying.*

*Even though.*

*Forget, 'but verify.'*

*Right.*

*Only 'trust.'*

*Only.*

*Trust.*

*Yeah.*

*Funny coming from you.*

*Ain't it.*

*I guess the verify—*

*Shut-up. Since your big win, that stupid little piece-of-crap transistor radio with that more than little stupid picture in the newspaper, you're a total betty.*

(Betty, the ugliest girl at Fickett, all of Tucson, perhaps all of America.)

Betty-ized, Roy hurls the ball over the roof into the back-yard pingpongatarium and departs before the 6334 B Street betty infector does fatal damage. Of the dreaded “Three Bs”: Betty-ism, Bubon-ism, Botulism—everyone agrees that the first B is the grisliest demise.

It's an irrational love, my ivory Sony TR-610 with built-in kickstand. I'm not a gizmo guy and have no desire for a pocket transistor radio before it's foisted on me. Foisted, no, fobbed on me. The sad story: Chicago Music Store, there was but the one downtown then, has two music contests going on: twelve and younger, thirteen through eighteen. It's my last shot at the junior division and I make a tape of the first movement of the Goltermann Concerto #4 in G, not to be confused with George G's seven other perfectly adequate pedagogic efforts. All tapes are to be submitted without performer ID attached, fair-square. Without equivocation, the contest rules state: 1. the age requirements; 2. all tapes are to be judged by three Tucson music professionals; 3. the contest is solely for standard orchestral instrumentation; and 4. First prize \$100, second prize a pocket transistor radio, third prize a \$15 in-house gift certificate; same prizes in each age group. Clear, concise, clean—as are the three B Street Bisms.

A few weeks pass and I dream nightly of adding a dozen Duncan Imperials to my collection plus the *Angel* Casals/Szell Dvorak Concerto LP, though I have several times checked out the Dvorak from

the downtown library, there being no yo-yo lending institution equivalency. Yeah, I win second prize, no Duncans, no Dvorak (I survive), but then all six winners are summoned to the Chicago Music Store for a group shot grotesquerie—clarinet, trumpet, cello, trombone, violin and....Lawrence f-ing Welk?! I lose to a polka-playing monstrosity, and I'll be god-damned if I'm going to have my picture taken next to its proprietor, I'd sooner be betty-photoed. Doesn't anyone understand? The accordion's not a standard anything. It's an abomination, and I am not, not going to be seated next to it—*click-click, click-click*, shit happens.

I trade the cellophane pristine TR-610 to Samy S for a complete set of 1957 Milwaukee Braves cards. I possess three sets but lack the Felix Mantilla misprint. Samy S's mom, Mrs S, nixes the deal thinking her smelly son pulled a fast one on me and so one night late, bored, having little to read and past the time permitted to listen to my record collection, maybe ten all told, I plug in the earpiece, futz with the dial, and find Jesus—an anti-commie, anti-socialist, anti-welfare, anti-Russkie, anti-Yellow Peril, anti-fornicatin' Jesus. Billy James Hargis's Christian Crusade's Jesus. This Jesus's message soon to be released on a million hydrogen balloons wafting over Russia, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia to "succor the spiritually starved captives of communism." Billy James Hargis's Jesus, an anti-ambiguous Jesus if there ever is one, and from this calming portal I dial next into a godless, Satanic broadcast where people sing, sing in code: *purple people walla walla bing bang witch doctor itsy bitsy yellow polka dot hey babe I'm your handyman*. I'm hooked on this purple porn, an addict, and one late night ear-plugged in and in the last moments of Reverend Haggis's daily sureties there's a gunshot. A shot up the alley, coming from near Mitch B's house, but a bit more distant. I unplug. Listening, listening, as the Rev exhorts, faintly now, for brick-and-mortar dollars, monies

for his American Christian College, an institution of higher Jesus to be constructed a stone's throw from Oral Robert's U, ensuring Tulsa, OK as America's Christ magnet.

Not another sound, as if everyone within earshot has turned down Ed and Johnny, quieted their fav Okie preacher, paused their purple porn. I can't sleep, the Rev's said his nightly piece, and so pick up a book I haven't any idea where it comes from and why it's in my room. Books levitate at times, as do canaries. I'm tired, the contents really tough, I'm reading and still listening. Nothing.

Next morning I wake thinking: *One must imagine Sisyphus happy.*

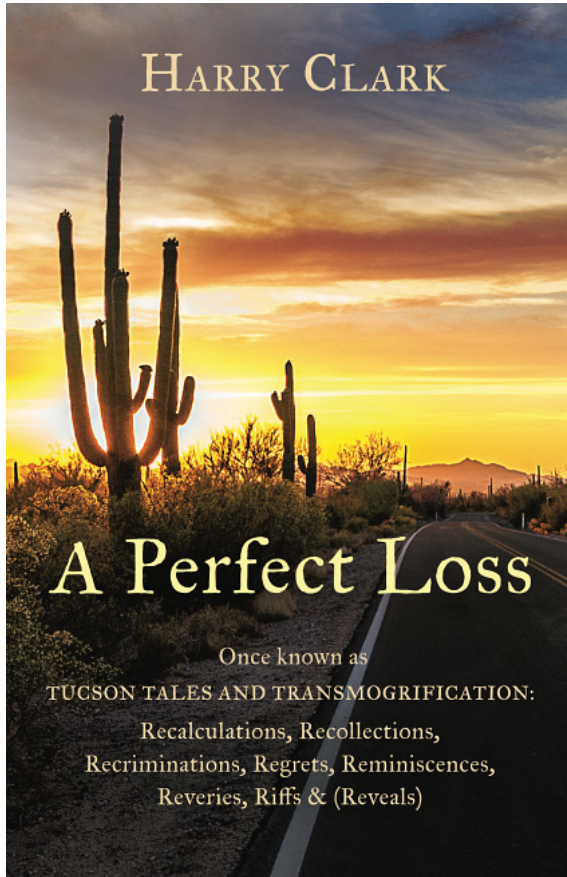
Returning from school my mom tells me: Mr. A took his life.

That night, not messing with the radio, I read all of *Sisyphus*.

Understanding little.

Understanding less why Mr. A, David (Nervous) A's dad, does what he does.

*This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said.*



*This memoir is the author's effort to recapture the kaleidoscopic impressions of his childhood, his neighborhood, his school, family and friends, and the loss of each due to separation murder and suicide. The place: 1960s Tucson, Arizona.*

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