



Poems and Stories from
*The Blue Collar Book
of the Dead*

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This book is for my parents (and all red white & blue collard folks like 'em) and for a bad girl named Beth.

Army

It began with a full floored drive
in a stolen Oldsmobile
down a Connecticut street
hilly enough to imitate
Steve McQueen's San Francisco
car chase scene that ended
before a judge who let you choose
between jail or serving
your country and six months after
swearing to defend the U.S.A.
you were away without leave
in the town where your old man girl
friend and half of the hoodlums you
grand theft-ed life with guilt-tripped you
back to the barracks and like
your arms —get your soul
patriotically tattooed

And six months later
when you fragmented half
your head off from a government
issued rifle most of us were glad
to see you still got
an honorable veteran's burial

—but just like John Lennon
said of Elvis the day after
he died

you who once stole a car
that you meant to drive
to Oklahoma to see
and maybe even race
against one of them tornadoes

—you died the day
you went into the army

Flag

Blue Collar Boy Scout eyes
always checking
that Old Glory
was still flying on the lawn
of the tenement where you
delivered newspapers
during the decade
when college students
were burning the Stars & Stripes
or wearing it like a blanket

You swore always
to protect Old Glory
from any of those Communists
at Woodstock

But when you started
to grow your hair like theirs
and could no longer stand
such fraud on your
front lawn

—but as you pulled
at the flag
that an Uncle and some
neighbors earlier died for

—its silk fabric
felt like flesh
that had never bled more

than in the present
you wanted
so much
to become
a part of

Menthols

Bubble gum & air conditioning
—your mother's mentholated
cigarettes had a taste
only acquired
by a woman

one of several perfuming
the kitchen during a card
game that always required
a freshly lit Kool or Salem

—bringing nicotine
relief after hearing
about so and so's son
in jail or a husband who
left his wife for some
trailer trash go-go dancer

—because after all
they were *women*

but not like the suffering
saintly (and God Bless
her soul) Mary

who only had one child
(and he was Jesus)

which is why the Virgin
never needed a night with just
the ladies to play gin
rummy drink
anisette and smoke
the cigarettes
that two-timing husbands
and ungrateful children
(like you!) would never
acquire a taste for

T-shirt

Vest for an ape
graced
with a thumb-size
gold crucifix

Cotton breast plate
for the tribe
that bowled
boxed
and bullshitted
before tiny
espresso cupped
tables
in front of
Members-Only
social clubs

Stickball armor
whose nickname
could send shudders—
“Wifebeater; it’s called
a *wifebeater* – you got
a friggin’ problem wit’ dat?”

And the older
and more beer-
bellied that guys like
Salvatore or Guido got

the harder
to muscle into
a man’s world
every summer

School Girl

Even her smoke rings
had sass and snarl
especially when she was
blowing them from
the pew
at the back of the church
when we were skipping
school

And if St. Mary's
was where you went
to confession

—why shouldn't it be
where you went
to commit
your sins

but for you not carnally
—sharing only a Marlboro
and the confidence
of an onyx-finger nailed
and Cleopatra-eyed
co-ed

that half the adults
in this auto-innards-making
town tried to punish
but could never break

beginning
with detention

and ending
with a boy's room wall
reputation

Which is why she liked coming
to this church the only place
where somebody did not write
her name for something
she refused to regret

And because she did not

she spent more time
in God's house than
any church-confirmed
so-called "virgin"

And because you were there
with her as—a saint
trying to become
a sinner

you got to share
getting kicked out
of paradise
with the girl
who would define
how she would become

a woman

giving you the courage

to define
how you would become
a man

Waitress

So tough was Marie
that she could
serve while singeing
any sass from the drunks
in a switchblade steel
diner whose jukebox
anthologized
trucker-twanged-
heartbreak that
never seemed more
broke than in men
at three a.m
first asking for marriage
then a date and finally
forgiveness from a young
woman who did not want
to know what these
drunks did when they
were bad boys to
women and the more cold
and cruel the more she made
in tips and by mid August
before leaving for college
Marie found herself
forgiving men after
seeing what they were truly
like at 3 a.m.
—before a woman
—because it is only
to women
—that men can confess

Drunk

Beer to chase the bourbon
and bourbon to chase
the women but if only
they would run
from young men
that they tortured
& teased
like little boys
they got tired
of babysitting

And only when
these young men
absent without leave
from everything
except a bar with
a Frank Sinatra-filled
juke box and a fanatical
religious devotion
to the Boston Red Sox
promised to act like gentlemen

will the ladies
go with them
in lipstick-colored
cars that grin like
sharks
to a hilltop cemetery
and toast with warm beer
a dawning day
where nobody
will be sober enough
to work but will still need
to do something
more illegal or outrageous
before everybody
can truly become
drunk

Pugilists

Like a big leather cigar
or what we sometimes called
the 500 pound Tootsie Roll:
the punching bag in the basement
of an ex-pugilist grandfather
was the soft but impressionable
cenotaph where we tried
to leave angry adolescent
but untrained hands more dangerous
to the would be fighter
who may have been Polish
or Italian but who pretended
he was Ali
or Frazier in the decade
when White was flying
out of boxing the same way
it was from our clapboard
porch fronted tenements

and besides our gloves being
naked olive or pale ivory
they were also sometimes
female and because we teased
how girls could never
hit is why we never saw
Angela or Stephanie's fists
when they attacked
this faded cherry pillar
which may not have taught
us how to box but did
let us discover how heroes
could come in other
colors and how toughness
was not always a matter
of the equipment
you were born with

Therapy

Throwing your old man's
cop revolver bullets
to see if they would explode
like firecrackers sentenced you
to group therapy for delinquents
only hanging until
they could hot wire
a way out of this cinder block
& barbed wire galaxy
where everything from the car wash
to the pool hall looked like a prison
or a fallout shelter

But before these boys became atomic

There were still memory-snaps
that the female shrink
helped us to surface and yours
of a kitchen filled with
women that you were still too small
to be a threat in
but old enough
to sense how their language
fortressed but also
fed them
unlike the words
that you would soon
muscle into
alone
but as a man

Window

No more thirty second
bells
that drill clanged loud
enough
to shatter any
thought
pornographic or subversive
which were the only thoughts
you would have
at fourteen and upon graduating
from Nathan Hale Junior High
School in those last days
of June it was like a country
without a leader and
what few students that still showed up
like yourself
could finally hall pass-
free roam-fully wander and
pause before a tall arched
window in a classroom
that for you and twenty others
was a prison
for most of this year until
this atomic age of blue collar
delinquents got Miss Terwilliger
to retire

—the goal of every punk
and hoodlum she taught
since The Great Depression

And now...

the windows that she never let
anybody open

—until your class rebellion

opened them last week

And if a small New England
mill town grime and furnace-flavored
pollution was finally able
to dust-settle in

it was into a room empty
except for a few student
desks shoved in a corner
and a few pictures of long side-
burned presidents above the blackboard

and then the sound
you never expected to hear

—the squeaking of a window
that you never thought
you would close
and on something
that for a moment
you thought
you could stop

Converse

Three months to live
from the way you stepped on
exploding firecrackers or ran over
church window stained glass that
you just broke—

—there was just little rubber
and canvas left to the ankle high
sneakers that started out
toothpaste white shiny
and tightly stitched cardboard
stiff canvas black

But within such brief hoodlum heeled life
that never learned how to hide
from beneath Levis that were widely
cuffed up

—you leaped down flights
of junior high stairway
after pulling fire alarms
during anti-drug school assemblies

and also Kodak a dangerous
delinquent style with one foot
toe heeled up across the arch
of the other

while the rest of your lithe
adolescent menace

arched back against the door
of the chrome rimmed phone booth just
daring the world to call 911
while you squint-eyed it with
an unfiltered Camel cigarette
dangling from your mouth

—oh but it was not all pose
because

Three months for the shoes
meant to be worn
on the basketball court
that was never for you
lacking coordination
—but not a varsity quick
athletic sense of delinquency
and vandalism

And would this be the summer
to tattoo you with a bad reputation

no different that what you ask
and hope for yourself
before you write today:
“Will this be the poem?”

—and if it is not
at least let it have
a little snarl
and let all of them
be honest

The War

“Okay tough guys”
the two shrinks challenged
the posse of punks
they were supposed
to civilize

“Let’s continue group therapy
in the game room”

—where there were
plastic guns that shot
rubber octopus-tipped darts

And in this war of all against all
—doctors of psychiatry
and delinquents fatally free falling
towards the Marine Corps
engaged in a battle
that made no sense
except to make you laugh

—a pointless fight
unless to show
how everybody got targeted
in a war

—a war with no victors or losers
just laughter at all the chaos
and absurdity

And finally a peace
where we saw
how we could still be men
after we put down our guns

Stained Glass Window

When the Sunday morning
sun struck the dozens
of red petals
representing blood
or perhaps tears

a fragile image
blazed
with a substance
too strong
for its glass

—just like the sins
for most of the folks
in this parish

who always seemed
ready to break
from the obligations
of a faith
that seemed too enormous
for blue collar
Cat'lick New England
lives

that were always
being lived

on the edge of broken

The Day Frank Sinatra Soothed The Savage Beasts.

Father Paul was our priest, but Sebby was our bartender. When you're 18, on academic probation at the local community college, and just can't get laid, (no matter how hard you pray) then you need a bartender.

Fortunately for us, it was 1976. Everybody had an awful hairstyle (which we would not discover until much later). But it was legal to drink at 18 in a burned out engine block of a town in Connecticut.

At 18, we still went to St. Ann's...well, Christmas, Easter...but on slow Sunday afternoons, we went to The Roma Bar & Restaurant, permitted by Sebby Carpino, who took a shine to my two friends and me.

"You know those monkeys? See no evil, hear no evil? Well, for Vito, Johnny, and Nick, it's common sense that you don't got."

Here we go; every time we sat at the mahogany counter, ordered Heineken, and got served Schaffer, Sebby had to give us the spiel.

"Eighteen, and you get arrested for shooting out street lights! You can't join the police force and get *paid* for shooting guns?"

Vito Antonucci just like weapons. Sling shots, brass knuckles, bowie knives, nunchucks...not that he ever used them on any living thing.

"I'm a collector," Vito shyly said. "Besides, I get faints at the sight of blood!"

"Hey Sebby, when ya gonna serve Heineken? This is the modern age. People drink foreign beers. For that matter, guys don't wear pants with suspenders and ties about as short and fat as a slice a pizza!"

Sebby shot a sidelong glance to Johnny. "A man with a future! Johnny Benedetti! Instead of apprenticing with his Uncle in the plumbing business, his life's going into the toilet."

"Just like you never heard a Heineken, you never heard a word like *entrepreneur!*" Johnny said.

"Yeah. Entrepreneur. Selling firecrackers to 12-year olds," Sebby shrugged. "And here we have the scholar."

Which must be me, Nick DiFazio.

"Sebby, the Dean personally spoke with me the other day," I boasted.

"Yeah, to personally tell him he was on probation!" Johnny said.

"Like I was saying," Sebby said, "see no intelligence, speak no intelligence...but sooner or later guys..."

"Sebby, spare us the stuff that Father Paul used to tell us. We'll drink the Schaffer."

“You’ll drink nothing until you put a quarter in the jukebox.” Sebby wiped the counter before he smacked a quarter down on the bar and slid it over to me.

“You’re not going to serve us...until we play you a song?” I said.

“You’re catching on,” Sebby said.

“Oh-kayyy...” I said. “Any particular request?”

“Led Zeppelin!” Vito snickered.

“Naw, not for a guy who never heard a Heineken! Some Country and Western shit!” Johnny said.

But when I got to the jukebox I saw that all the songs had been changed to Frank Sinatra.

“There must be at least thirty of his songs in here. And all of them from Sinatra.”

“Enough to teach you guys a little *class*, instead of always acting like a bunch of clowns.”

“Hey *bartender!* I read *books*; not Mickey Spillane, but *books!* Nietzsche, Camus, Sart—“ I started to say.

“I bet you ain’t even *danced* with a girl!” Sebby said. “None of you! But maybe you will...once you learn about those things...and the best person to learn those things from...well, you going to play a song kid? Or are you still going to stay a kid?”

This was crazy. Some old singer was going to get me laid; well, teach me to dance, maybe just sing some hokey song. And the brass intro to “Come Fly With Me” was hokey enough for me, Vito, and Johnny to laugh. But after a few seconds...when Frank started singing about drinking exotic booze in some bar in Bombay or...wherever it was, it wasn’t The Roma Bar & Restaurant in New Britain, Connecticut. And Frank wasn’t drinking by himself, but with some woman whom he was holding—excuse me, *gliding* with. Best of all, was the ending, where Frank says as if he is winking: “And don’t tell your Mama.”

After about thirty seconds, it was clear that we weren’t going to say anything. Sebby finally asked; like a first time teacher, who all along was afraid of his students despite the tough act he used to teach his lesson: “Well...?”

“You got another quarter, Sebby?” Johnny asked.

And for the rest of that summer, it would be a lot of quarters; it would be songs like “That’s Life,” “Luck Be A Lady,” “A Summer Wind”. Eventually we began to request more selections from Sebby, and he would try to oblige; not being able to get all of Frank’s music into that box. Didn’t matter, what he couldn’t get, we got on our own, first in LP, then 8-track, then cassette, and just when I thought CD was the last form you could hear the Chairman of the Board on, there’s—why mention it. That technology will be old by the time you finish reading this story. But Frank Sinatra’s music? When I get a chance, I play some for my freshman college students today, some of whom groan, smirk, or snicker the same way me and two other friends once did before our bartender. Because when you’re 18, on academic probation at the local community college, and just can’t get laid, (no matter how hard you pray) then you need a man like Sebby Carpino.

And music from Frank Sinatra,

Requiem for a Velvet Gladiator

When I was a young punk weighing about 98-pounds with 500-pounds of attitude, I had a chip on my shoulder the size of the egg most likely thrown by me at your pretty picture window. And when I got my driver's license, I thought I was one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. So when one day a car behind me honks because I was doing something important like digging out some wax from my ear while idling at a green traffic light, I naturally responded by flipping the bird to whoever were the fools behind me.

Three bikers in a car who *were* three of the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse.

They chased me for about a half hour before finally cutting me off. "Not so tough now, are ya punk?" No, but luckily the locked doors of my old man's Ford Fairlane were. If they weren't able to rip them open, they were able to rip off the side view mirror. Luckily, the driver's side window did not smash when one of Satan's little helpers smashed the softball-size hunk of metal against it. After spitting on the window a few times and kicking at my door, they left me, but not without the warning: "We'll get you next time, punk!" And as soon as they peeled off, I, well, instead of flipping them the bird, I drove home to get my father's police service revolver.

Like I was going to find these guys, even in this unhitched boxcar-size town that was New Britain, Connecticut. Even if I did, what was I going to do with a Smith & Wesson .38 Special with no bullets? (Should have checked before taking the old man's gun.) Should have also expected that my old man would expect that gun before holstering up for work. Ohhhh, man...and when he didn't give me the usual ass-kicking, I knew I was in for probably the biggest beating of my life. And when my old man sent me to speak with an old friend of his; some "character" he met from his early days as a beat cop; unfortunately for me, now a "friend"; someone who would knock some sense into me, a retired boxer named Tommy "The Gun" Mangifico, then I should probably get good again with God, before I could kiss goodbye my life, yeah, right.

Already because of my 500-pound attitude, my folks sent me to a social worker. His name was Ted Poe, and I'm not kidding ya, Edgar Allan Poe was his ancestor. (But a great writer like that with such a boring descendant?) Edgar's great-great-great grand-mutant or whatever was not having much success with me. So why would an ex-boxer, that no one ever heard of?

"Oh wait, I did hear about you; your nickname in the ring, was 'The Canvas Kisser' right?"

"Boy, if the rest of you was as smart as your mouth, you'd be a genius. Siddown and shutup."

Better do that at least; sit down, because even though he must be nearing seventy, Tommy “The Gun” was not a guy that took being spoken to with a mouth that was wise like a smart ass.

You heard of boxers getting cauliflower ears? Well, Tommy “The Gun” Mangifico had a cauliflower face. Still, his slightly oversized visage blazed with a couple of advanced degrees from The School of Hard Knocks that he probably began studying at before he tied his heart up into a boxing glove: a mouth that seemed permanently drooped into a slight lopsided sneer; cheeks that shared a similar lopsided profile, (but the right cheek was higher than the left; vice-versa to the droop in his sneer), and the crooked tomahawk of a rock-hard nose that looked like it had been banged off of a Classical Roman statue and then ineptly glued back on its face. The perpetual cinder-sparkle of his eyes belied the heavy, almost friendly-looking droopy eye lids, and the surprisingly rich, steel gray pompadour of his crown gleamed and sparkled from a gel that looked thick enough to lube a car engine. His body was not as well preserved; what might have once been shoulders and a torso trained to take punishment, was a small landslide ending at a size 45 or 46 waist; his 18-inch or so shirt collar neck, was now like a wrinkled sagging elephant trunk. His wrinkled leather arms began to drip with flab, but his hands hung at the end of them like the splayed open paws of a bear; hands that still looked like they could knock one cheekbone higher than the other. Thus my lack of razor-sharp comment over his ivory, wide-lapelled polyester shirt, bronze polyester pants, and white leather loafers with gold buckles. Just the same, at some point I was going to have to ask: what 1970s couch did you shoot, and are there are any more of your kind planning to leave the bowling alley soon?

“You know your old man coulda lost his job?” he said.

Until now, I never thought about that.

“All somebody had to do was find out about it, and your old man—good street cop; fair; would have been in the shits forever ‘cause of a punk like you.”

He shook his head, and bear pawed fists or not, you don’t get a second chance to call me a punk.

He shook his head at me and then said:

“You stay here. This is my place, got it? Don’t even blink. When I get back, we’re going to have a talk.”

He wobbled into the kitchen of this third floor tenement apartment. His living room—or was it part of the lounge where he shot the couch? Was decked out in equal polyester and plastic taste ripped off from the refreshment center at the bowling alley. Surprisingly, there was only one boxing picture of him; when he must have been at his prime, which must have been a million years ago from the way the glass framing his signed photo had jaundiced. Naturally, there's going to be a pewter crucifix the size and weight of a Colt .45 on the wall, and what the hell? Everything else in this room—on the walls, the TV dinner table before his spot on the Lawrence Welk-dinner jacketed sofa, on the doily topped end and coffee-tables (Doilies? Tough guy like that?) had either a puzzle-in-progress on it or a finished, glued-together puzzle hung like it was a museum picture. This “Fine Art” seemed familiar; famous “Italian” stuff; same with the ash trays and knick knacks; I recognized one of them, though I didn't know what it was called, but Mary holding a dead Jesus, yeah, I had seen that before. And I definitely knew that the glued together puzzle above the sofa was “The Last Supper.” Damn, even bowling would be a better hobby than this.

The Gun then came into the room with a fizzy-iced drink and a plate of—mmm—Italian cookies.

“I like the ones with the cherry jelly in the middle,” I said as I reached over to snatch—

“AHHH!”

“You don't take what belongs to you,” is what I think he said. As I reached out for a cookie, the S.O.B. whipped my hand with the back of his; hard enough to leave a hot pink welt too.

“What the hell...!” I said as I looked up at him, while holding my hand that still throbbed with the sensation of a dozen bee stings.

But he had already moved on to the next topic.

“I didn't have a choice,” he said as he mashed down on what looked like two or three cookies at the same time. “My parents came from It-ly, but they didn't know It-ly, and back then, you only had to go to the *eight* grade, especially if you were a kid who spoke his folks' language better than his teachers. Teachers didn't like that. Neither did my old man like the idea of me being in school. Told me enough school for you. Time you go to work. So at 14, I'm sweeping in a factory. So barely making a living a couple of years later in the ring, was a hell of a lot better than sweeping the foreman's cigars and the workers unfiltered Luckies. I didn't have a choice. But you—you! Ya selfish snot of a punk!”

Without opening my teeth, I warned:

“Don't call me that! That's the second time!”

“You got opportunities! A good home! An old man—and because he didn't kill ya for what he did, shows how much he loves ya!”

“Hey, those guys in that car shouldn’t have messed with me!”

“I betcha you messed with them!”

Damn him.

“And ya know what else? I betcha you been looking for that fight a long time!”

“I guess you won the bet,” I mumbled.

“I used to think so too, but fighting’s for losers. I found that out late. Ain’t I pretty? Like Muhammad Ali?”

In spite of the toughness I had to maintain with this gorilla, a giggle still escaped me.

“But not like you, at least I learned to appreciate who we are.”

“Um—sorry, but I don’t go *bowling*.”

“You see these pictures here?”

“You mean these *puzzles*?”

“You see these small statues?”

“You mean, these *ashtrays*?”

“That’s It-ly!”

“You mean *Italy*?”

“Our culture! A great culture! So’s everyone else’s. Thank God, I lost my prejudice before my first fight—the great white hope? What a bunch of horse shit dreamed up by newspapers! When it’s just you and another guy in the ring—but what am I doing? That’s what you want to hear, right?”

“It’s better than hearing about puzzles.”

“Well these puzzles—this puzzle here, is a famous Italian painter called Raphael. And that puzzle there, Del Sarto. And behind me—”

“Yeah, I know, Da Vinci,” I sneered.

“And didja know that he was also a scientist, an inventor? That he designed a parachute; they even say he came up with the idea for the submarine, the tank!”

“Yes sir, our culture. I just didn’t think the Coliseum was a jigsaw puzzle, and let me guess—the Gladiator must be velvet.”

For the first time since I stepped inside this velvet painting gallery, Tommy “The Gun” dipped his face to hide a blush of embarrassment.

“It’s what I can do—to learn,” he mumbled. “I’m not that good at reading, but since it takes me a long time to do the puzzles, I can also take my time reading the small booklet that comes with them—explaining the history of what I’m gluing together. Look. I wish I could have seen all this stuff; wish I could have gone to It-ly...now, I’m lucky to do the puzzles.”

“Well, I guess it’s better than going bowling. But I’d get rid of the puzzle still in the box—”

I smirked, and then said:

“The one showing those two limp-wristed fruits about to touch each other.”

“What the hell is wrong with you. That’s from Michaelangelo! That’s God who just gave life to Adam! That’s probably the world’s greatest painting, and it’s painted on the ceiling of a famous chapel!”

“Yeah, well, they still look like two limp-wristed fruits.”

“You snot-nosed little punk!”

“I said don’t call ME A PUNK!”

And then POW! As I kicked over the TV dinner table with the puzzle he had been working on.

It was like a gun shot had gone off in the room. Neither of us could do anything for the next ten or twenty seconds...but as those seconds began to dissolve, I began to cry while I softly prayed; Oh God, please let me take it back, please, please, please don’t let him hit me. I promise, I promise, I promise I won’t have ever be a punk again but as I was promising, Thomas Mangifico was struggling to insert two pieces of the puzzle I had just kicked over; his eyes were wide now and also wet. And his hands that I had feared, could barely steady themselves to connect two pieces of cardboard. No wonder it took him so long to put together one puzzle.

“I-I’m—sorry, I’m—”

“This is not your house, and you are no longer welcome here. Go. Go.”

He could have killed me for what I did, and I don’t think my old man would have been that mad about it. Mr. Mangifico should have at least smacked me; that is what everybody else would have done, but he didn’t. He just told me to get out of his house. No one ever told me that before. Worse, I felt like I left something behind in his apartment, and there was no way I could get it now. Whatever it was, I felt about a hundred pounds lighter than I already was. I never felt more weak.

I checked my pockets. Ever since the old man took the car away, I didn’t even have a set of keys. Yet getting thrown out of Mr. Mangifico’s apartment made me feel embarrassed, even ashamed—something I never felt for stealing my old man’s gun. And when I raised two fisted arms to swear at the world, I knew what it was that I had lost, and for what seemed like the first time ever, I felt what it was like just to have shoulders, and nothing else.

But for the first time ever, I was no longer wearing the body of a child.

The old man never asked me about my visit to Mr. Mangifico. He assumed I had screwed up once again. I don't think Mr. Mangifico said anything to him about our visit. I also knew there was nothing more my father could do for me. Maybe that's why he no longer yelled at me. Threaten to bring me to the police station. Let me sit in the cell for a bit. See how it feels. This time there was none of the high-pitched melodrama. The next time I got in trouble, my father wasn't going to bail me out of it.

So with no more car to drive and no eggs or rocks or even chips on my shoulder to throw at the world, I discovered of all places, the library. That was the only place where I could read about Da Vinci, Raphael, Del Sarto, Michaelangelo. As for the latter; that great painter and sculptor who carved masterpieces like *La Peta*, he was also a bit of a punk himself. Somebody broke his nose for being a wiseass. He still had his hands though, and what hands they were to carve and paint the things he did, especially the ceiling of the Sistine chapel. Especially what was at the center of it: the hand of God giving life to the hand of Adam—or was God letting Adam go? For better or worse, Adam was now going to have to be on his own.

After about a month, I finally coughed up the courage to ask my old man about Mr. Mangifico. “Oh, you're friend?” my father said. There was a pause before he tried to shrug off as no big deal: “Oh, he's in the hospital.”

I didn't ask his permission to go. Before I went, I stopped at the local hobby store. Where I used to buy cap guns and plastic army men. There was one puzzle left of the Sistine Chapel.

“Do I know this kid? He looks familiar.”

Even though Mr. Mangifico was kidding, there was also a slight sharp edge to his tone.

“I just came by to bring you something for what I did at your, um, uh,” I mumbled.

“Siddown, you're starting to shake like Jell-o!”

Even though I was invited to sit, I kept the hospital chair a couple of feet from his bed. What happened to Tommy “The Gun” Mangifico? His neck and arms had about a thousand more wrinkles in them, and his cotton hospital gown looked two or three sizes bigger than him. His cheeks were finally even, but only because his face seemed to have shrunk as the rest of him lost weight. A lot of weight. His nostril had a plastic tube clipped at the end of it, and he still had enough energy to try and sculpt what remained of his hair into a thinned out wave crested with a little gel.

“I see ya finally got some culture...!” he said.

Now that he had welcomed me, he gave up the tough guy tone. It must have been hard for him with the way he now wheezed. Also, after each time he spoke, he briefly closed his eyes, as if each sentence cost him a great deal of physical effort.

“Actually I bought this puzzle for you Mr. Mangifico.”

He weakly laughed, and then said, as if speaking to himself:

“When the hell did I become a Mister...just don’t put it on my grave.”

And then to me:

“Well, go ‘head. Open it up. Wish I could help ya, but...and you can use my food table over there...”

As I dumped the puzzle onto his food tray table, I began to explain:

“But I did read up on the artists you told me about. Some of ‘em...were kind of crazy.”

Mr. Mangifico smiled.

“Just like some boxers....” he said. “Say, did Ali fight Frazier yet? In Manila...from where I would march out of...and for the next few years...didn’t know if I would see the next morning...”

His eyes did not open after the usual few seconds pause. His reflection of—well, I was reading a lot more than about Art. So Mr. Mangifico must have been one of the few to march—more like hobble away from Bataan or Corrigador after the Japanese invaded the Philippines right after Pearl Harbor. Still, I didn’t want to leave without putting together some of the puzzle. I knew he wouldn’t be able to do it, and I knew he would appreciate seeing at least the famous pair of hands, and when they were just the hands, why, they never looked more vulnerable, but also human. Well, at least he would see that part of the famous masterpiece when he woke up. The part I found it easy to put together in less than 10 minutes. Maybe his nurse or someone else—well, maybe, his nurse could help him put the rest of it together.

The first time you see a reproduction of a famous picture in a book, you can’t wait to see the masterpiece itself. You just can’t help but feel, well, that the original painting or sculpture is going to be 10-times bigger than it actually is, and will glow like the first day of earth after God created it. Or whoever you believed created it. A great work of Art—it just had that sense of first-time ever creation about it, and by my late twenties and early thirties, I would begin to see some of that great Art.

Shakespeare's portrait in The National Gallery in London. The artist who painted it wasn't as famous as the artist who painted La Gioconda. Didn't matter. Shakespeare's face was like—well, close to being like the face of God for a post graduate under-or-unemployed English major like me. I'm not talking about the woodcut-like portrait where Will looks more like a caricature. I'm talking about the realistic blazing stare from a half bald, somewhat long, shaggy-haired bearded guy with a gold hoop earring. Never the author you imagined while you were being tortured back in high school reading *Romeo and Juliet*. And eventually the author like no other for writing plays like *As You Like It*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*. But it's only when you see his portrait that you see more than just the world's greatest author.

You also see that he was a real badass.

La Gioconda? Oh, hell, that name just makes her seem more pretentious. Nevertheless, I never expected Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* to be anti-climatic. You couldn't get a bigger build up when your museum is The Louvre, either. She even had her own room, and the day I visited her, that room was filled with more people it seemed built to corral. I still got a glimpse of the lady with the bemused smile; it was tougher to see the extra-terrestrial, or pre-historic like rocky landscape behind her—in my opinion, the more mysterious and beautiful part of the painting. Probably one of the greatest paintings in the world was not all anti-climax, as my slightly impish nature soon discovered. With all the Japanese, American, Western European and other tourists snapping their cameras at her (while some even tried to get their pictures taken close to her), the *Mona Lisa* had created a performance piece or temporary human sculpture called Middle Class Cultural Appreciation, which I happily took more than a dozen photos of.

The Sistine Chapel. For the longest time, it just seemed like a big line, and then once I got inside, I was just exhausted. I was just happy to take in a few of the images above me. At future dinner parties, I, like my hosts, would all be able to say we had visited the Sistine Chapel, and what a great experience it was.

And it was. Though maybe not in the way my highly educated and richly cultured hosts would never know about; folks who may have seen all of the world's great works of art, but who probably never put together one jigsaw puzzle. Folks who might not understand, that the one riveting image for me of that great work of Art, was not in God giving Life to Adam, but in a son reluctantly pulling away from his father.

A father hesitantly letting go of his son.

A young man and an old man, knowing that however brief between them, there will always be antagonism.

But also love.

A Flower for a Bad Girl

I'm still not sure when you became my first girlfriend. But I do know that when you beat me up, that was our first date.

I was eight when my folks got divorced. During the week I lived with my mother and her folks in a suburb outside of Hartford. On weekends, I stayed with my father and his folks in the Italian section of Hartford. It was where my mother as well as father grew up. It was also where I met Sophia DiRobertis, the girl who beat me up on our first date.

The Southend, or the “Italian” section of Hartford reminded me of an old cranky pit bull. The suburb next door where I lived—Wethersfield, was more like a young and still awkward Labrador retriever. Many of the people in my town were Italian transplants from Hartford. Thus the predominance of plaster statues of the Virgin Mary on the front lawn. The Southend had similar statues on lawns a quarter of the size in my neighborhood. And the houses were two or three stories high and lined with porches. Stores were a sling shot pellet away on nearby Franklin Avenue. These stores were not like the ones in the strip mall in my town. In what was supposed to be a market, (also called a “Pork store”) elephant leg-thick cheeses hung from the ceiling. There was something called a “Five & Dime” which was like a little department store, but sold stuff that no department store in the suburbs sold, such as semi-legal fireworks like sparklers, cheap 25-cent toys like balsa wood gliders, and penny candies like fireballs.

And then there were places that were sort of like stores, but didn't sell anything; storefronts with an Italian name followed by the word “club” and three or four oak-tree size guys in sleeveless T-shirts too small for them sitting before small tables in front of their club, which you knew enough not to go near.

I pretty much “amused” myself in the backyard of my grandparents' two story house. (The second floor was where my father lived.) If I was lucky, I would fly a glider three or four times before it broke or got stuck in the tree in the next yard. (Which I was forbidden to go to. “Looney-ticks!” is how my grandmother described them.) Then I might look through some of my father's old baseball cards I found in the cellar. (Who the heck wants a card with Mickey Mantle or Joe DiMaggio.) Then I would do something I love—read. And because I loved reading so much, I'd quickly finish the boiled-down “Young Adult” version of famous battles like The Alamo or Custer's Last Stand. After that, there wasn't much else. Stay away from Grandpa's tomato garden, which he seemed to love more than Nonna. (The only reason he probably stayed married was to get her old stockings which he used to tie his tomato plants). I could always go back inside and watch television with Nonna...re-runs of TV shows

that should have never been made in the first place like *Mr. Ed* or *My Mother The Car*. Inevitably, I would succumb to watching at least one show about a talking horse or a talking car. Before that, however, I fell into what I would later recognize as an absurdist, philosophical act. I would take the handle of my old Radio Flyer wagon, and just pull it behind me in a circle. Over and over and over my grandfather's well tended to backyard lawn. If a hoodlum named Sophia DiRoberis did not steal my wagon, I would have left a permanent, circular rut in the backyard of a house in the Italian Southend. Similar to the wagon trail ruts out West. Only this tiny circle was made by a pre-adolescent with no idea how he had a touch of Sisyphus and maybe some Asperger's Syndrome. Luckily a bad angel by the name of Sophia DiRoberis came into my life.

I had already seen her a few times. She watched me from a tall limb in the tree in her backyard. At first I thought she was a boy from the way she was wearing a baseball cap, overalls, and with the legs rolled up to reveal a pair of black beat up Converse High Tops. Looney-tick.

And then one day she spoke.

"Hey kid? Can I tell ya something?"

"Yeah..." I mumbled, not wanting to hear it.

"You're really weird, ya know that?"

"Yeah..." I agreed. Unlike you though, I was going to leave something behind. Even if it was a circular rut in a backyard.

"You don't have many friends, do ya."

"I got tons of them," I said. "You just don't see them."

"Just like they don't see you. Tell ya what. Bring your wagon over to my house. We'll hang out. We'll find something."

"I don't know," I said. "My grandmother doesn't want me leaving the yard."

"She didn't want your grandfather or your father leaving either, that's why they're always at the bar or The Knights of Columbus running up a tab. My mother told me all about it. Come on, I'll meet you in my driveway."

Dang. I knew my Dad frequently went to The Vesuvius Lounge and Banquet Hall, but I thought the Knights of Columbus was a Catholic organization. I didn't know it had a bar—no wonder Grandpa was always making a big deal about going to church and the K of C!

When I got to her driveway, Sophia was already there waiting for me.

"My name's Sophia. My mother named me after Sophia Loren. You got to be kidding!"

"My name's Frankie," I said.

"Like hell. It's Francis."

"It is not!" It was, but—even if I knew that was Frank Sinatra's first name, I still didn't want to go around and say, "Hi, my name is Francis."

“This your wagon?” she said, as she reached for it.

“Y-yeah,” I said.

“Not anymore,” she said, as she grabbed the handle from me. “Sucker!”

“Hey, you give that back!” I said.

She was already expecting me to run after her, and she already had a punch waiting for me when I got there. POW! Right in the nose! Not only was my face full of blood, and my nose throbbing like it had a mega-migraine headache, but I was also crying loud enough for my grandmother to hear it—and now start screaming my name.

“Hey, you better go home. Your grandmother’s calling you, Francis.”

“She’s right! You are a bunch of lunatics!”

“Yeah? And whose wagon did I just take!”

“Who cares! I got a better one at home! And I bet you don’t even have an old bicycle!”

From the way her sneer now crumbled, she probably didn’t even have a lump of coal to play with.

Next weekend at my grandparents, there was a brand new Stingray bike waiting for me. They felt I was spending too much time in the backyard. They felt I should get out more in the neighborhood. Not too far. So long as you see lawns with the statue of the Virgin on them, you are safe.

About five minutes after riding down the street, I heard a familiar voice yell, “Halt!” Before I turned around, I knew who it was. I just didn’t expect her to have a BB gun rifle pointed at me.

“Go ahead,” I said, as I got off my bike. I was more disgusted than afraid. “Here, it’s yours.” I flicked down the kick stand so that the bike could stand on it.

“Hey where ya going!” she said.

“You can have the bike, alright?”

“You leave and I will shoot you! And I oughtta shoot you for being such a pussy. Giving away your bike.”

“Well you have a gun pointed at me, don’t ya?”

“You could have tried riding away.”

“And then you probably would have shot me.”

Her giggle was her answer. Much as I hated to, I could not help but smile.

“Come on!” she said.

I was walking my bike with her to her house. Um- and hopefully, nobody would notice her gun.

Once we were in the back of her yard, I saw my old red wagon. It was leaned up against the fence. Inside the wagon was an empty Coca Cola bottle. Littering the ground before it were shattered glass petals from previous bottles.

“Recognize it?” she said.

“Cool,” I said.

“Watch,” she said. And then she raised the rifle, aimed it for a moment, and hit the bottle below its neck. The glass made a loud spit-like sound as it was hit.

“Now you try,” she said, handing me the rifle.

Maybe she should have given me some lessons. I not only shot over the target. I hit my house, just below an upstairs window.

“You idiot!” she hissed.

We briefly ran for cover. My grandparents already warned me about these looney-ticks. Now that one of them was shooting at them? They would be out of the neighborhood for sure, and I would lose a cool friend.

Reluctantly, she let me shoot again. This time she helped me aim the rifle. Well, at least I hit the back of the metal wagon. That’s what it was there for, right? That’s why she took it from me, right? After a few more shots, I hit the bottle, and after she took the gun from me, she shattered what was left of it. That was when we discovered we were out of bottles.

“Come on, I know where to get another one,” she said. Which turned out to be her house. Which also explained why Sophia was a couple of crimes away from Reform School (and good luck with a “student” like her.)

Like my grandparent’s house, Sophia’s house was a three family. We went into the kitchen on the first floor. That was where she, her mother, and her grandmother lived—

“YAP! YAP! YAP!”

—and a small tan poodle that just wouldn’t shut up!

“Rocky! Shaddup!”

It did after Sophia’s mother told it to be quiet or else. As for this being Sophia’s Mom—had to. Sophia was a chip off the larger chip that was on this middle aged woman’s shoulder. Though Mom was from another era. Her multi-frosted bee-hive shot back like the hair on the Bride of Frankenstein, and she had enough red lipstick, blue mascara, and make up to make her face look more like an ancient Roman wall fresco. Her knit, black pullover-jersey was chain-mailed with about a hundred plastic black tidily wink things. Since she was involved in a card game, every time she smacked down a card, half of her glossy black spangles rattled. And should Sophia’s mom fall into a river or ocean for whatever reason, forget about it. Whether real or not, her fingers had enough diamonds to prevent her hands from swimming to the surface.

If Sophia's Mom was a peeling Roman fresco, Grandma in her pale white bathrobe was more like a plaster-covered figure from Pompeii after the eruption of its volcano. If we had entered a little later, I might see how Grandma would have the same bee-hive as her daughter. (Her hair was presently wrapped around rollers the size of small sewer pipes.) At one time Grandma may have been pretty, but now she had a thin, severe face that looked a bit like Uncle Sam (without the beard of course) telling how he wants YOU to do something that's not going to seem so glorious later on. Grandma was also more old fashioned judging from the crucifix the size of a snub-nose pistol hanging around her neck. Grandma could also chain-smoke like her daughter. Both ladies had overflowing ashtrays next to them with at least one and possibly two burning and still smoke-able cigarettes inside of them. There was also a half filled-bottle of anisette on the table, and both of their glasses would soon need a refill from that bottle. I don't know what card game they were playing; there was just a row of cards before them and every other minute one of them would smack down a card.

Judging from her mother and grandmother, I could see where Sophia got her pugilistic charm. Maybe that's why there was a deliberate effort to "feminize" the kitchen; that, and maybe because these three gals who could have been a roller derby team had a soft spot for a toy poodle named Rocky, because the kitchen (and I fear the rest of the apartment) was Poodle Heaven. There were velvet paintings of poodles, ceramic lamps with the bases shaped like poodles, cookie jars and piggy banks shaped like poodles, calendars, refrigerator magnets, cups, plates, and even the handle of cooking spoons, either pictured or shaped like poodles. Meanwhile, the poodle himself sat on his own velvet pillowed-bed never letting his two onyx eyes off of me, as if just waiting for an excuse to go after me like he was a pit bull.

"Mom, Nanni, this is Francis," Sophia said.

"They gave you a bum name, too, ha kid?" said Sophia's mother. "I'm Lorraine."

"Nanni" shriveled her mouth in response; it seemed as if she was reminded of that fact more than a few times.

"Sounds like someone who styles hair without a license—which is what I do. Ha ha! But when I named my daughter after the most beautiful actress in the world, what does she do? She looks like more of a boy than you!"

SMACK! From a card she just smacked down on the table.

"Mom...!" Sophia whined. It was a plea that was registered half in anger, half in embarrassment.

"I give my three daughters all American names," Nanni explained. "But with the way they marry this guy, divorce that guy, get arrested for smacking around another guy, I might as well call them Jezebel One, Jezebel Two, Jezebel Three."

SMACK!

“Nanni...!” Sophia whined in the same angry, embarrassed plaintive tone. Also, grandma should have been “Nonna”, but this “family” was a creature all to itself, just like its Italian.

“So you gonna offer your friend a glass of soda or what?” Lorraine said.

“We were just—wondering—if you had any empty bottles,” Sophia mumbled.

“You and that damn BB gun!” Lorraine said.

SMACK!

“I told ya to knock it off before you get in trouble!” she concluded.

“An’ whose fault is that?” from Nanni. “Your latest prince of a boyfriend gave it to her. Soon as she saw a rifle rack in the back of his truck, she gotta have a gun. Can’t find a nice Italian man like her father!”

SMACK!

“What nice Italian man! They’re all babies!”

SMACK!

“Honey, what man isn’t. “

SMACK!

And instead of responding, Lorraine just smacked down another card on the table, which her mother almost instantly matched with a card that she just SMACKED down, and within less than a nanosecond it was SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! Or as Sophia now explained:

“And this is how World War Three begins in my house. Let’s go.”

YAP! YAP! YAP!

“Shaddup!”

Once outside, I felt like I had been kicked in the gut. I was in a mood for blood! Well, bottles, but we didn’t have any.

“You got your bike, right?” Sophia said.

Oh-oh.

“Uh, yeah,” I uneasily said.

“Good,” she said. “you ride while I get on the back of your bike. I’ll tell you where to go. Forget shooting at bottles. There’s a lot better stuff to shoot at than bottles!”

“But—“ is all I could say. Too late, because she was already on the back of my bike. And while holding her BB gun. While I was going to pedal through streets with people I went to church with on Sunday morning, or folks who sometimes had coffee and cookies with my grandparents, Sophia would be on the bike, and knowing her, wildly waiving a Winchester repeating rifle that a lot of folks would think was the real gun that won the West.

Cool.

“Okay, “ I said as I started to pedal away. The bike wobbled for a bit until I was used to having a gunman—excuse me, gunwoman on back.

“Sure, no problem,” she said. I could already sense the barrel sticking above my shoulder.

Too late to kick her off now. Not that I wanted to either.

“Okay then, just promise no shooting at any of the Virgin Mary statues,” I said.

“What the hell, you think I’m some kind of Communist?” she said. “A gangster, maybe, but I ain’t no Communist.”

Two gangsters. Or two cowboys. Or two bikers—or two gangster cowboy bikers (on a Stingray, not a Harley) or something like that. We only knew that it was damn fun! Riding through Hartford with both of us whooping it up while one of us wildly waived a gun, and once in awhile aimed it at some frightened, flabbergasted faces. To her credit, Sophia did not shoot one BB at anybody or anything. Heck, just waiving that gun and yelling like Attila the Hun was fun enough. Fun that would soon end once we left our neighborhood and came to the swampy outskirts of Hartford; swamp, that was also bordered by a bank of clay hard enough to sustain a railroad track. When the track made a curve around the swamp, Sophia told me to stop. Any train coming to this bend would have to slow down. If we were lucky, a train would be coming along any minute.

But shoot a train?

“Are you afraid?” she asked.

“No,” I said, because as I now realized: “It’s like shooting a tank, and shooting a tank with a BB gun!”

“Then here ya go,” she said, throwing me the rifle.

And just as I caught it:

“And whattiya know. Here comes your train.”

“Dang, there is a God,” I said. “And good thing you didn’t shoot at the Virgin Mary—even if she was a lawn statue.”

“Okay! Your train’s coming! And I want to shoot too!”

Ping! Ping! Ping! The BBs harmlessly bounced off of the approaching locomotive. When Sophia took the rifle, the BBs did the same as she shot at the box cars in tow, though neither of us expected some of the tiny steel pellets to ricochet back. Something like that would have made me quit right then and there, but no, I grabbed the rifle from her and shot a few box cars myself, after which she took the gun from me and did the same. Not only were we lucky to have a slow moving train, we had a *long* slow moving train, which was eventually going to end with:

“I’ve got the caboose!” I said.

“Like hell! It’s my gun and my idea!”

I think I might have actually wrestled the gun away from her. I’ll never know. As we tried to wrestle it away from each other, a police siren made a short sharp, wail behind us. Two police sirens as it turned out, and with another cruiser pulling in behind us, what did the Hartford cops think? They had Bonnie and Clyde? I mean, where were we going to run? Past a slow moving freight train and into a swamp? That’s exactly what Sophia did. And before the police put me in the back seat of the cruiser, I already gave her name up.

Unfortunately, I did not get arrested. It was worse than that. I didn’t go to my grandparents for a few weeks, which upset them. My mother blamed my father for not being around in my life, which upset him. My grandparents finally stuck up for their son and accused my mother of not raising me right. That upset her. Add them all together and you get everybody UPSET with me.

Well, it’s not like my family never had moments when everybody felt like killing everybody in the family; I just had not been part of it before, but now I was. Welcome to my family. (And believe it or not, I still think I turned out alright.)

But this incident gave my grandparents the push to do what a lot of old Italians in Hartford were already doing: move to Florida to get away from their no-good disgraceful children. By now I knew about families like mine. By now I knew that I would be spending a lot of time in Florida, and I was right. I just didn’t think it would be spent in a retirement village called King Arthur’s Way.

Well, it was sad to help my grandparents pack up the old house. I just wouldn’t be losing a place where I spent much of my childhood. I would also be losing a slightly exotic neighborhood. In the suburbs, I would never find a “Pork Store” and in front of it, barrels filled with olives you could almost smell from a block away.

I didn’t realize I was leaving my grandparents house forever until I stood in the backyard. For what would be the last time. The backyard, where I used to throw up my gliders. The backyard, where I would pull a wagon round and round like some Philosopher of the Absurd, (and I hope, not as someone with asperger’s syndrome). The backyard where I once met a girl named Sophia DiRobertis. Who was now looking at me from the back porch of her house. This would probably be the last time I would see her. She probably knew that as well. So how could I not waive goodbye to her?

She just gave me the middle finger and then went back into her house.

“Oh yeah?” I said. And even if she was no longer there, I gave her back the middle finger.

Girls. By the time you entered high school, your soul was restlessly dreaming about them. Girls. Especially in a Catholic high school, where they wore required plaid skirts (which they always illegally hiked up). Legs that gleamed beyond the innocence of their white knee socks. No different for their white blouses, and many of them open to gold First Communion crucifixes (forgive me Jesus).

Nerds. Oh God, why did I have to become one of them in high school? Well, at South Catholic High School, I might have been spared some of the hazing that nerds got at Whethersfield High. South Catholic was also an affordable and easy to get to prep school for families in the suburbs surrounding Hartford. For many of those families like mine, South Catholic was, well, *Catholic*, which meant we would also get some form of moral guidance. Also, South Catholic was in the old Italian Southend neighborhood of Hartford.

No matter where you go to high school, there is always one girl that every boy lusts after. At South Catholic, this girl was Gina Santopietro. Besides being the pretty girl that ran for and won every pointless student political office, she talked to everybody, even nerds like me.

“I’m really in *love* with that book you lent me.”

—which was followed by a playful squeeze on the shoulder. (Did she just touch me? Yes!)

“I may only understand half of what is going on, but it sure is keeping me up at night! Do you mind if I hang on to *The Prophet*? It’s *soooo* deep.”

“Sure. Keep it. I’ve got more books. Any book of mine you want—it’s yours!”

“Thanks Francis. I’ll see you later in World Civ.”

One of my books that I lent her—was keeping Gina Santopietro up at night. Oh Gina, what might you be wearing late at night while reading Kahil Gibran?

SMACK! Whoever had just walloped the side of my head, it was hard enough to briefly rattle it. Well, even South Catholic had its share of jocks who treated nerds like old sports equipment. But when I turned around to see what third rate football player smacked me, I saw someone I would expect to see in Hell. But not in a place that was trying to be Heaven.

“Sophia?”

“You didn’t think I forgot about that time you gave me the finger, ha?”

Yup. It was her. She would not forget something like that. I was still shocked to see after all these years—in a school like this. Hell, in a skirt! Despite being a little on the short side, having calves that were a little on the chubby side, (but a rack that was more ample than most of the other girls in school) she was not that bad.

“You like what you see?”

“Ha?” I cleared my throat. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. And what are you doing here?”

“I broke out of reform school.”

“Really?”

“No, because this is reform school, and if I don’t get to class before the bell rings, this will be the third time I got detention this week. I’ll see you later. We’re in the same Study. Not that you noticed. Oh, and say hi to *Gina* for me. ‘Oh my gosh! This book—like—had big words! It must be deep!’”

Deep. About a minute after you graduate high school, it seems anything but that. At that time though, you take stupid silly things like the Snowball Dance, seriously.

The Snowball Dance was like a prom but without all the formalities. What also made the dance popular, was that it was held in late February, when half of Hartford is buried by snow. (Honestly, the whole city should be buried by it). And by late February, even good Catholic teen boys and girls were getting cabin fever; so who wouldn’t want to go to such a dance?

“What? You want to go?”

If I was in shock, it was because—

“I didn’t say that; I just asked if you were going!” said Sophia, followed by: “...jerk!”

“Well, of course I’m going!”

—even if it would be with the group of guys who would be dateless; I would still be going. And there would also be a similar group of dateless girls, though not the girls we wanted to ask to the dance. We may have been dorks, geeks, nerds and all that, but when it came to girls, we were no different than the jocks and popular guys who always got the good looking girls: shallow.

“Well, *good* for you!” Sophia said.

What the hell? It sounded like...

“You want to go to the Snowball Dance?”

“Duhhh!”

“Wow,” I said, and laughed. Then:

“Well, I’ll probably see you there.”

That’s when she punched me in the arm.

“Ow! What the heck was that for!”

“Whattiya think!”

What could I think? That someone like Sophia would care about a stupid dance? Like she was “one of us”? Well, maybe we just never let her be one of us. Maybe...

She was now pulling books from her locker; more like trying to find a dignified way to exit. I’ve never seen Sophia more vulnerable; no, hurt. No, a 15-year old just as confused, geeky, and afraid like me. Well, not this time.

“Sophia DiRobertis,” I said, “I’d like to ask you—“

Nope.

“Would you please—“

That was better, but why’d you freeze?

“There’s no one else I want to go to that dance with...”

And?

“But you...”

She just pulled a book out of her locker.

I turned around. I would still go to the dance. But I would never look down on “dateless girls” again, or even put girls in that category. Before I was about to go, Sophia put her hand on my shoulder and gently held me there.

“And I don’t want to go with anybody else but you,” she said. “That’s why I already turned down two other guys.”

“Two other guys—“

“And I hope I was not stupid turning them down,” she said.

Stupidity. Why do we associate that word with “lack of intelligence”? That might be one meaning for the word, though I think it’s a poor and insignificant definition. You can be truly smart but also stupid; in the sense that you don’t know when to be insincere, to shut up, to smile at someone you truly want to kill. That’s another form of stupidity, and unfortunately, Sophia had that stupidity. Religion class was an easy A. All you had to do was sit there and occasionally nod. Heck, Mrs. Halloran—who was also our Social Studies teacher—didn’t take the class that seriously. Half the time the class was about “moral issues”—which meant we could talk about anything that was an issue: drugs, sex, marriage, divorce, death—religion class was not that ba—

“What about Jesus.”

A topic Sophia brought up. Wait. We never talked about Jesus in Religion class before!

“Well, with many of you about to make your confirmation, your religious advisor will talk to you more about what it means to be confirmed,” Mrs. Halloran explained. The way you talk to someone who was *slow* but also a bit unpredictable.

“But what’s that got to do with Jesus!” she said.

“Well, that’s something you can take up with your religious advisor...!”

“Well, I can’t, because my *religious advisor!*”

And because she said in the tone of some Country Club hostess, it got a few giggles.

“Like you, and everybody else in this school, *infantizes* Jesus.”

Ha? Was our collective gaping confusion.

“You make him into a baby—just like us!”

“Sophia—that’s en—“

“Well Jesus wasn’t a baby! He disobeyed authority! He broke the law! He was a DELINQUENT!”

What is one way to describe a gun shot in a space you would never expect to hear one? Well, calling Jesus Christ a juvenile delinquent in religion class—heck, calling Jesus a *delinquent* period—Sophia! Even from someone like you—that was going too far! Dang if she didn’t zero in on my uneasy grimace, and nobody else’s! Well I don’t care! Fellow philosophers of the absurd or not! Even if it meant abandoning you...

...and once she saw that I was going to abandon her again, she left the class before Mrs. Halloran could tell her to go to the principal. Principal? She was now beyond any Principal.

But she was still a 15 year-old girl looking forward to going to her first high school dance. And as punishment, the principal would not allow her to attend the Snow Ball festival.

Something like that shouldn’t matter to someone who called Jesus a delinquent. Well, she stopped showing up for school. The rumor was that was kicked out, was transferring to a public school, or was already in reform school. (I didn’t think Gina Santopietro could be such...a witch.) Sophia didn’t help things any by telling me to go to hell before hanging up on me. (What am I supposed to do? Get kicked out of school with you? Just because I read some cool books and listened to some cool records that nobody else but the two of us listen to and read?) Worse, I still had to go to the Snow Ball dance. Didn’t matter if my date was on the lam. I got dragged into the group that Billy Ahern’s Mom was chaperoning. (I think my Mom even called her up to take me along. Thanks Mom.) Because that’s how I found myself in a station wagon with three other 15-year old boys who could not stop fidgeting in their cardboard stiff polyester pants and blazers and two year 15-old girls giggling at the boys who knew they would all have to take turns dancing with them. And getting their picture taken. And being told how cute they are. And not just by Mrs. Ahern, but by all the parents, teachers, and even the principal. They would all be there at the Snow Ball Dance, our first rehearsal for adulthood.

Sophia was right. We were being *infantized*.

“Excuse me—Mrs. Ahern?” I said. “I need to go—I need to get out.”

“Francis? Is something wrong?”

“Ow! Mom—tell him to quit stepping on my feet!”

“Francis, are you sick?”

“No, I’m not sick and will you please stop the car!”

“I can’t stop car and Francis I am responsible for you!”

“You’re not responsible for me! I’m responsible for myself! And my name’s not Francis! It’s FRANKIE! God damn it!”

“Ow! Mom! He stepped on my foot again!”

But at least it he moved the hell out of the way when we were at a traffic light. I wasn’t that far from Sophia’s house either. We could still make the opening of the Snow Ball Dance—especially if I ran. Of course, my new shoes and my polyester clothes would be mucked up (but more comfortable). I still wasn’t sure if Sophia would want to come to the dance. The hell with her. After the way I practically jumped out of a speeding car? (And the way Mrs. Ahern was going to tell my mother about it—probably tonight!) Sophia was coming with me to that dance. Because,

“Rebels don’t run!”

“That sounds really stupid!”

There was a “crack” in her voice; the crack of someone who had been crying on and off for quite awhile; probably since she was told she could not attend the dance. Something I did not think would bother her.

“I don’t care!” I declared. “I’m tired of being Infantized!”

She giggled and then said:

“That’s not even a word, you know that?”

“Well, it is now.”

“Okay, well, I made it up.”

“Okay, well, I’m the second person who used it!”

“But it’s going to take me forever to get dressed!”

“You’re already dressed.”

“I’m wearing Converse for one thing!”

“Cool. Come on.”

“I can’t!”

You can, and she did. And soon, we did. I don’t know when we started running to the school, but not long after we did, we held hands. It must have been thirty five or so degrees out, but neither of us felt it. I could only think about the time when we were both riding on my Stingray bicycle. How free we felt! Like nothing or nobody could touch us! Well, the BB gun might have helped.

We had no such weapon now. I’m glad too. It made our flight through these obese, slate gray tenement-streets more alive and free. We didn’t need any weapons to protect us from this world peeking at us like some old lady from behind a curtain (and just enough to confirm that the kids today are up to no good!)

So she could call the police. So what? What were the cops going to do? I quickly looked down at my shoes. They were a muddy, wet mess! So were my stiff, pressed, polyester pants! My blazer as well! As for my tie? I ripped it off and threw it behind me! That was when I also realized how I was part of somebody else. “Take it easy,” Sophia said. I squeezed her hand to let her know I understood. We both giggled. We might have felt like escaped fugitives, but we must have looked more like two kids in kindergarten from the way we slowly ran while holding each other’s hand. I just felt like I could have kept on running like this. The dance was no longer that important. The two of us running like this together, was better than any dance.

And why the heck did you need one—no two cop cars out in front? Not for a dance at South Catholic. What were all these people doing outside for that matter? It seemed like half the dance was outside, and half of those people seemed to be parents, and all of them looking or pointing at us.

“What the heck...”

We both stopped running at the same time and looked at each other, like—maybe we should go back. Too late. The crowd and the cops swarmed around us. I tightly grabbed Sophia’s hand. The cops were going to have to arrest us together! Damn if they didn’t get called quick! Damn if—

“FRANCIS!”

Mrs. Ahern or one of the chaperones must have called my Mom! As for the cops—they were there for—

“Sophia!” I cried out. They practically had her in the car when I noticed her. “But she didn’t do anything!” I tried to explain. “I’m the one who dragged her out! She didn’t do anything!”

“What did you do to your shoes!” my mother said. “They were brand new, Mister! And you even lost your tie!”

Which I manage to “lose” after briefly wearing one. The last time I wore a tie was when I interviewed for an adjunct teaching position at a community college in Hartford. I was between “lives”. I had just been laid off from my New York one, where I went after getting a master’s degree in literature.

I had a job proofing and later editing copy for a medical trade journal focused on dermatology. Most of my copy was about cosmetic surgery. Once in awhile I’d get something exciting to proof or edit, like an article on leprosy.

I lived on several couches and futons belonging to friends, friends of friends, and people who needed a friend to help them with their rent. My last futon was in a loft above a drag queen club, The Pyramid Club, in the East Village. Apparently, the singer Nico from the band The Velvet Underground once lived there, and mostly everyone who passed through that loft claimed to have known her. (They were lying.) Also, mostly everyone had a drug or alcohol problem, which they were always denying. I knew I needed to leave when I was at the bar one night, and ran into—

“Hi! Long time no see!”—followed by two pecks on my cheek, and then: “Isn’t this place just crazy?” Not anymore; not when it meant meeting an old South Catholic classmate named Gina Santopietro.

So I applied for a PhD program, for which the University of Nebraska-Lincoln gave me a great offer. (What? Everybody’s got to go to Yale? Hey, my future school’s football team can kick any Ivy League football team’s ass any day). I would not matriculate until the fall semester, so I went back home and luckily got two classes in composition at Mark Twain Community College in Hartford. I discovered how much I liked teaching. I looked forward to having a teaching assistantship in Nebraska. I also discovered I would miss teaching at Mark Twain, where I made some good friends among the faculty. For my last week there, one of the full time professors asked me to teach his class while he was at a conference. It was in his class that I discovered that one of the students was Sophia DiRobertis’ mother—Lorraine?

“Yeah! How ya doing! Francis, right?”

“Um—Frank.”

Like a lot of adults in this community college, Lorraine was enrolled in its certified nursing program. It was one of the few steady jobs in this area. Growing old and helpless was a big business in and just outside of Hartford. Unfortunately, growing old is not something that many people in Hartford could count on. Every other day there was a story on the news about some kid shooting another kid, or some cop shooting a kid, or some delivery man or school kid shot in the crossfire between a cop and a kid. When Lorraine told me that Sophia had cancer, I was initially shocked: somebody was in peril from a natural disease, and not from the decay of civilization. Sophia, Lorraine, and her mother (she must be about a hundred!) were still living in Hartford; renting a third floor apartment in a porch-fronted clapboard tenement, housing which now struck me as being from another *age*. Why dontcha swing by and say hi? Sophia and Nanni would love to see ya.

However old Nanni was, her orange-red hair was now a thing of artificial permanence like the polyester she wore. She was still smacking cards down on the table with her daughter across from her; between them was one of Lorraine's nursing text books covered with cigarette ashes and empty, cracked peanut shells. Hope I never get sick on your shift. Rocky the dog was long gone (that would have been a mutant toy poodle if it wasn't.) There still had to be a dog in this family, and this time it was an overweight brown dachshund who yapped at me while I was in the kitchen. Also, this room was decorated in various forms of kitsch relating to dachshunds, including a paper towel holder shaped like one, to a ceramic piggy bank where both ends were shaped in the head of this droopy eared canine. Scary as this kitchen was, I was afraid to leave it for the room to the left of it. It had been over 10 years since I had seen Sophia. I had not seen her after that disastrous night in the school parking lot. After that, she was kicked out of South Catholic for good, and then went to public school, reform school? Well, actually, it turned out to be a couple of semesters at the nearby state college, where she majored in Art, and the room I had just entered was her studio. Her water colors and drawings were taped throughout the room. If she only barely glanced at me when I entered, it was because she was engaged in finishing a "visual thought" on the drawing she was presently working on.

"You don't like my art work, do you..."

She said it without any animosity. She sensed my uneasiness, disappointment. I just didn't expect all these forests, brooks, farm houses, pastoral stuff.

"It's the closet I'll ever get to having my own home," she said.

"Don't say that," I uneasily said.

She just giggled. I finally saw the large multi-colored knit beret covering her head (but failing to completely cover her loss of hair). I also noticed how thin her legs and arms were from beneath a kimono decorated like the spray painted graffiti and symbols of a subway car.

"So how was my mother as a student," she asked. She rested the large drawing pad across her knees.

"She said she'd have all her papers for the semester next week," I said.

"That's when school's done, isn't it?"

"Well, um, she can take an incomplete," I said.

"She probably will," she sighed. "But I hear you're back in school. For your PhD?"

"Oh, I guess...I always do...go back to school, I mean. And then, and then...fuck!"

"Don't swear," she said.

"I'm s-sorry," I said, as I stopped crying. "I'm sorry."

"You lived in New York for awhile, ha?"

“And you’ll never guess who I saw...Gina Santopietro...and in a drag queen bar.”

“I always figured that’s where she got her style from.”

“But once I got to date girls like that...they were so...boring, you know?”

“Then why do you keep dating them?”

“Because, well, they look good, you know?”

“You always were a jerk.”

“I know...”

“Come here. Next to me.”

And after I sat next to her on the couch, I tried to joke:

“Okay, but I feel like the cops or somebody like that is going to come along and break us up.”

“Do you want anyone to?” she asked.

“No,” I said, and then I took her hand. “No.”

And then I gently slid my palm against hers; she did the same to mine. My fingers traced up and down and across her wrist; her fingers soon reflecting a similar gesture of the love our hands were now making. No one could tell us otherwise. I never thought that two people could make love with just their hands, but ours did. Our hands undressed, explored, caressed, unashamed, and when our hands finally became one, we had finally made love to each other. It’s what we had to make love with, and out of all my previous sexual experiences—okay, all two of them. So what.

But this was the first time I made love with a woman.

“Thought you kids might like some iced tea.”

With the timing only a suspicious mother could make, Lorraine had entered with two glasses of iced tea.

“There’s always somebody coming along, ha” I tried to joke with Sophia.

“And this time worse than the cops,” Sophia said.

“Oh, where the hell’s my brains! I keep thinking you two are kids, but you’re not! So let me come back with real drinks! Whattiya drinking there Frankie? Scotch? Gin and tonic?”

“Actually, iced tea, but—I’ve got to go. I’ve got a stack of papers to correct, and—”

“Are you saying I’m not going to hand in my papers?”

“No, not at—”

“Mom...!”

“And not only am I going to have all your papers, this girl is also going to be back in school. She’s going to be back.”

“I know she will,” I said.

But Sophia had looked away from both me and her mother, who was soon sat down and joined the conversation—or rather, took over the conversation. Neither did I mind how it was initially about sausage-shaped dogs, and then the Off Track Betting Parlor. (It did not bother Lorraine one bit that she was the only woman in a space filled with twenty or so men who were like her first husbands and last few boyfriends: Losers—and just to emphasize that point, she even spelled it out for me: l-o-o-s-e-r-s.)

I don't know when Nanni came in, but that's when I learned that Marciano was the best fighter of all time and that it's a shame he never got to fight Ali. By the time my head was swimming with boxers, Dachshunds, great race horses, I had been talking for almost one—maybe one hour and a half? However long it was, it was long enough to briefly forget that Sophia was sick until I felt her mother's tears on my cheek when she kissed me goodbye.

My mother saved the obituary while I was away at school. Lorraine got her daughter a plot and a stone at a local cemetery; the only permanent place Sophia would ever get.

Before going to the cemetery, I went back to the old Southend neighborhood where I met Sophia. It's where I also lived on weekends with my grandparents. My grandparents? They are doing fine at King Arthur's Way, in south Florida. When am I going to come out and visit? I will; despite the way "retirement village" makes being old sound like a fast-food type of franchise.

My grandparents' house was still kept up. I don't know who lived there now. Most of the Italians in the neighborhood were gone. Many of the new homeowners were from Bosnia or Kosovo. It seems like whoever is the latest group to immigrate to the U.S., they put down some roots in Hartford.

As for the house where Sophia lived...the fence was gone, and so was the tree from where she spied on me. There was nothing familiar about her house except...for a rusted, red wagon in the backyard. The people who now lived there, used the wagon as a small garden. Filled up with dirt, it was able to sustain four—no, five geraniums...no, four...Oh, damn it...of all the things to get arrested for. Even if it doesn't look like anybody's around. I couldn't look more out of place by digging out a geranium from an old wagon that used to belong to me—well, before a girl named Sophia DiRobertis took it from me...so even if I did get caught, these flowers were by rights, Sophia's. Though I only needed one.

"And guess where I got it from? You remember our wagon? It's still there; in your old backyard. But it's now filled with soil and flowers; like a miniature garden. So simple, but so solid."

Her grave was a simple flat stone. It listed her name, the date of her birth, the date of her death, along with a rose engraved on each side.

“I hope Mr. Gregory Derek Kloter whoever he is, doesn’t mind.”

It was from his grave I stole the empty plant holder from. (Hey, even for a rebel and punk like you, Sophie, I wasn’t going to leave your flower in the empty Dunkin Donuts cup I brought it in.)

“See what a bad influence you’ve been on me?” I said, as I put the plant above her grave. And then as I patted her grave:

“Goodbye—“

and after an uncertain pause had passed: “—my love.”

Maybe it was because of the radiance from a late summer afternoon, that all the stones in this cemetery had a sparkle and glimmer.

And if one grave stood out more than any of the others, it was because of a flower that one recent visitor was finally able to bring from his past.

Poems and Stories from *The Blue Collar Book of the Dead*

Kenneth DiMaggio

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