DRAGGING WYATT EARP
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When I was a boy growing up in western Kansas, my father and his older brother, Harold, owned an auto body salvage yard in the sand hills south of Dodge City. The place was called B & B Auto Parts, or, more simply, B & B. That was the name of the business when they bought it in 1966, and that’s the name it retains to this day, long after they sold it and my father returned to full-time farming and ranching. I remember, as a very small boy, asking my mother what the name stood for and why they never bothered to change it. “I don’t know,” she answered, continuing whatever chore she was doing at the time. “A, B, C—what does it matter? It’s just a junkyard.” Of course, she was right about that; my father himself would have agreed. And yet, to me, perhaps because of the age I was when I experienced it, the salvage yard was so much more than that. As Ishmael says of the whaling ships on which he grew to manhood, the salvage yard, with its forty-odd acres of mangled cars and trucks, was my Harvard and my Yale.

I was five or six years old when I started spending a lot of time at the salvage yard. I don’t know how or why this came to pass, but I have my suspicions. From my earliest days, I was a handful—a hyperactive motor mouth prone to accidents and mischief of a more or less mindless sort. From the moment I woke up until I dropped to sleep from exhaustion seventeen or eighteen hours later, I was constantly on the go, constantly “causing a racket” and “failing to listen,” constantly “into something.” Today, kids such as I was get a dose of Ritalin. But I was lucky. The only solution that offered itself in my case was to send me to work along with my father and older brothers.
Of course, I use the phrase *to work* in only the loosest of senses. While most of my older brothers were given jobs as apprentice welders or body men or were at least required to push a broom every once in a while, I was allowed to roam free across the entire expanse of the salvage yard so long as I didn’t maim myself or distract anyone else from his work. In this way, I came to know the different territories that made up the salvage yard, as well as the rogue’s gallery of men who ruled over them.

The nerve center of the place was the concrete-floored front office with its long counter littered with coffee cups, overflowing ashtrays, dog-eared lists of inventory. Here parts men took orders from the public and added their voices to a static-ridden frequency on which their colleagues from across the West and Midwest carried on a nonstop conversation. *Guys, this is Bob at Apex in Tulsa still looking for that bumper, hood, and grill for a 1972 Buick Skylark.* . . . The Front was the only part of the salvage yard that was air conditioned or heated in any conventional sense (the body and machine shops made do with jerry-rigged box fans and fifty-gallon drums converted into wood-burning stoves). It was where customers waited, gossipping and smoking, lounging about on bucket seats culled from wrecks. Most importantly to me, though, the Front was where the candy and pop machines were. How I loved to scavenge coins from under the seats of wrecked cars and then feed them, one by one, into the rows of globe-headed machines containing jelly beans, gumballs, salted cashews, Boston baked beans, Red Hots, regular and peanut M&M’s! This was my first real experience of the world of “getting and spending,” as Wordsworth had it, and how sweet it was!

Snack and drink in hand, I’d sit, legs dangling from one of the old car seats, and wait for something interesting to happen. It never took long. Someone was always arguing, telling an off-color joke, showing off a new gun or knife he’d just bought or otherwise “come into.” At first the parts guys, conscious of my presence, would nod toward me and quickly change the subject whenever someone ventured into R- or X-rated territory.
Gradually, however, they forgot about me and went on with their business uncensored. Many an old-time country song could be fashioned out of the words and deeds of the men who turned up at the salvage yard looking to coax a few more miles out of their battered Chevys and Fords. After a while, it began to seem to me that every story worth telling involved, as if by prescription, an angry woman, a bout of drinking, a fistfight, and a night spent in the city or county jail.

**PARTS MAN 1:** Bob! Ain’t seen you in a coon’s age. How the hell is it hanging?

**BOB** [*smoking, looking a little haggard and hangdog]*: Not so good. You heard the old lady threw me out on my ass, right?

**PM 1:** No! Why’d she go and do a thing like that?

**BOB:** Be damned if I know.

**PARTS MAN 2** [*chuckling, taking a long drag of his cigarette and letting the smoke escape his lungs along with the words]*: Didn’t have anything to do with you getting drunk and driving that Jeep of yours into that culvert off Comanche Street, did it?

**BOB** [*sheepishly]*: Well, yeah. But can you believe the bitch wouldn’t even bail me out? I had to ask her cousin to do it!

**PM 1** [*winking at PM 2*]: Which cousin would that be?

**BOB** [*smiling faintly, as if reliving it all over*]: I think you know the one I’m talking about. Young and long-legged . . .

**PM 2:** Well, now. I do believe this picture is starting to come into focus . . .

Like bartenders and other people who deal with the public all day, the parts men could be gregarious, gruff, sympathetic, or downright mean, depending on what the situation appeared to call for. For this reason, I didn’t like them very much. Parts men were a little too slick, a little too shifty and hard to read. I hated it when they would treat a customer nice—*We’ll be seeing you, Duane, take care now, you hear?*—and then start in laughing as soon as he was safely out the door. *That sumbitch gets any fatter he’s gonna need a goddamn mirror just to see his own pecker ha ha ha . . .*
The Front was the place I first encountered the words *fuck*, *cunt*, and *cocksucker*, to say nothing of such tame elocutions as *shit*, *goddamn*, and *sonofabitch*. I remember once, having just overheard a sustained streak of animated cussing, I wandered out to the gravel parking lot and began to reenact the scene in a loud voice.

“And then I told that *cocksucker* that if he didn’t stop *fucking* with me I was gonna rip his *motherfucking* head off and take a *shit* down his neck . . .”

Even as I said the words, I could hear the door to the Front swing open behind me, and who did I see when I turned around but my father in his blue uniform, black eyes boring into me.

“What did you just say?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I answered.

“It didn’t sound like nothing.”

I hung my head a little, afraid to lie.

“What would your mother think if she heard you talking like that?”

“She wouldn’t like it,” I said.

“Have you ever heard *me* talk like that?”

“No.”

“Well, all right then. I better not hear you. Understand?”

And with that he walked away, shaking his head in that exasperated way he had, as if to comment on how amazingly stupid the world had become sometime while he wasn’t paying attention to it.

After the Front, my favorite part of the salvage yard was a long corridor that ran between the engine and body shops—a massive, Willy Wonka–like space filled with nothing but row upon row of chrome hubcaps. Hung on huge racks and lit up by columns of fluorescent lights, these hubcaps gleamed for me like the very gold of Cibola. Ford, Chevrolet, Pontiac, Buick, Oldsmobile, Chrysler . . . every American make and model was represented. I loved to sit against the wall opposite
the hubcaps and cast my eyes over them until one in particular
drew my attention, at which point I would rise, climb the racks,
and bring the hubcap down to inspect it. My favorites were the
vintage chrome hubcaps favored by Chevrolet in the 1950s and
’60s. How sleek and perfect they were! Sitting on the ground,
hubcap in my lap, my reflection bouncing mirror-like back to
me, I could easily imagine the cap was. . . . a flying saucer . . . a
cymbal on a drum set . . . a discus I was about to hurl in a bid
to win the Olympics . . .

One day, as I lay on the floor amid a pile of caps, playing
some game that existed only in my head, one of the parts men
walked by and dropped a red shop rag in my lap.

“If you’re gonna drag those sumbitches down, you might
as well shine them up,” he said.

I fell to this work without complaint or expectation of pay.
Soon I created a special row on the racks just for the caps I
had polished to an especially high luster. This was my hoard of
gold, my kingdom of chrome.

Then one day I returned to my stash and found that my
favorite hubcap of all was gone. I stood there, staring at the
place on the rack it had occupied only the day before. Then, as
the reality of the situation sank in, I rushed into the Front and
demanded an explanation.

“That dog dish Chevy cap?” one of the parts men, a gruff,
bear-like man named Kenny or Doug, said absently. “Sold it
yesterday.”

“You sold my hubcap?” I asked, astonished and appalled.

“Well, what did you think we did around here?” Kenny
asked, laughing. “Play with ourselves?”

Only when he noticed the tears running down my cheeks
did the man stop teasing me. “Hey, I’ll tell you what,” he said,
reaching into the front pocket of his jeans. “How about I buy
the cap from you for a nickel?”

“To hell with your nickel!” I spat, turning and running
away from there until my lungs burned and my legs ached.
After that, I would have nothing at all to do with Kenny. He and
I were enemies, even if he, in his gruff bearness, was oblivious to the fact.

Beyond the corridor where the hubcaps were stored was a large warehouse lined with heavy racks built to store engines, rear ends, transmissions, and large body parts like fenders and hoods. Hanging from each part was a tag with the wreck’s year, make, and model scrawled in bright yellow paint—“1969 GTO,” “1972 Gran Torino,” “1974 Nova.” As a young boy, I was fascinated by the names of these cars. I loved to say them out loud, feel the sound of them rolling off my tongue as I wandered the dimly lit rows of the warehouse, dodging the forklift that always seemed to appear out of nowhere, bearing down on me like some evil robot in a science fiction tale.

The parts themselves I found to be eerie and disturbing. Maybe it was the way they hung from their hooks like executed criminals. Or the way each figured as an orphan of sorts, separated by some terrible and tragic accident from all that had made it whole. As with most children who grow up in large families, I had a fascination with orphans and would often imagine what it would be like to be orphaned myself. Sometimes I would dream that a flood or a tornado would come and tear me away from my sprawling family, casting me out into the larger world like the main character in the TV show Kung Fu. What would I do if that happened? Where would I go? How would I survive? The prospect was terrifying, yet alluring, too.

One afternoon a wreck arrived at the salvage yard that seemed to encapsulate this notion of tragic and thrilling orphanhood perfectly. I vividly recall the moment the flatbed truck hauling the car pulled up before the Front, the way all of the parts men and mechanics and body men poured out as one to see it. The car on the flatbed was a bright orange Porsche 911—or rather half a Porsche 911.* The other half of the car

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*My brother Alan claims the car was a Spyder 550. My father remembers it, vaguely, as a Triumph Spitfire. In my mind, however, the car will always be a Porsche 911.
had been chopped off (so Kenny the parts man claimed) when the “drunkass fool” who was driving it “flooded the engine on some railroad tracks north of Oklahoma City.” Ordinarily, a car hit in the front and dragged for miles by a freight train would be worthless, but as my brother David quickly explained, Porsche 911s had their engines in the rear, and so, miraculously, this particular car was still worth quite a lot (“a mint,” was how my brother put it), provided, of course, that a usable front end could be found for it.

For years after this, the wrecked Porsche sat under a tarp on the back lot of the salvage yard, a lonely import amid a sea of automobiles made in Detroit, while my father and everyone else who worked at the salvage yard listened to the radio for the words we so longed to hear: Boys, listen up, we just come into some front end parts for a Porsche 911 . . . Whenever I caught a glimpse of the orange car beneath its bright blue tarpaulin, my mind would begin to race, imagining all of the 911s out there in the world, each of them perfect in its own way, and yet at least one of them destined to be involved in some terrible accident, its front end cut away and shipped over vast distances to become one with our 911. When, in college, I was assigned to write a paper on the Thomas Hardy poem “The Convergence of the Twain,” with its famous lines describing the building of the Titanic and the simultaneous growth of the iceberg that would sink it (“Alien they seemed to be; / No mortal eye could see / The intimate welding of their later history”), I could not help but think of the orange Porsche and the terrible desire and disappointment that engulfed it.

“When do you think we’ll find it?” I would ask my father at least once a week.

“Find what?” he’d ask absently.

“The other half of the 911.”

“Who knows?” he’d answer, shrugging. “It’s an import. Parts for those don’t come along every day of the week.”

“Maybe someone else will get stalled on a railroad track,” I speculated. “Only this time, he’ll get almost the whole way
across, and when the train comes, it will smack the car in the rear, not the front.”

“Maybe,” my father said. “I wouldn’t hold my breath, though.”

Stretching off a quarter of a mile behind the main buildings was the Yard proper with its row upon row of wrecked Buicks, Cadillacs, Chevys, Chryslers, Dodges, Fords, Oldsmobiles, Plymouths, Pontiacs, and so on, some of the cars stacked one atop the other like layers in a wedding cake, each of them guarded by roving bands of junkyard dogs, chiefly German shepherds and Doberman pinschers, with a few angry mutts thrown in for good measure. Often the hoods, trunks, and front or back doors of these cars stood open, creating a bizarre, stopped-in-time, Pompeii-like atmosphere. Everywhere was the evidence of Fate in the form of head-on collisions, rollovers, fire, and flood. The Yard itself was littered with more signs of the apocalypse, everything from shattered window glass to twisted sheet metal to headless dolls and solitary shoes and other debris that had come into the place along with the wrecks. In this sense, the Yard more than earned its traditional moniker of “automobile graveyard.”

Looting this graveyard was my fondest occupation. Whenever a fresh wreck was dropped at the gate, I’d be the first to go through it, ransacking the glove compartment and truck for hidden treasure. I was rarely disappointed. On top of the usual horde of loose change, road maps, jumper cables, and tire tools, I found marbles, bats and baseballs, old paperbacks (Louis L’Amour was especially popular), secret stashes of Hustler and Penthouse magazines, costume jewelry of varying degrees of gaudiness, playing cards, pocket knives, Zippo lighters, sleeping bags, beach chairs, cigar boxes full of old photographs and diaries, fireworks, spent and unspent ammo. Unless it was deemed to be particularly valuable or dangerous, I was allowed to keep everything I found.
Some of the more mangled wrecks had bloodstains on the upholstery or even bits of human hair jutting from cracks in the windshield. At first, such sights gave me the creeps, but after a while they lost their power to scare me, and I treated them with the same air of professional detachment with which a forensic pathologist might view a fresh corpse. Only rarely did a new find make me feel the nearness of death. I remember one such instance with chilling clarity. For years, I had wanted a catcher’s glove of a particular make and model (a Rawlings K3-H, let’s call it), but since baseball was not one of my better sports and the rag-tag team I played on had an older glove I could use, I could never convince my parents to buy me one. Then one day I crawled into the back of a wrecked Corvair and there, wedged under the front passenger seat, was an almost brand new K3-H. Not believing my luck, I slipped the glove on my hand and held it out before me as though catching a pitch. It fit perfectly. Indeed, the mitt felt as if it had been made for my hand and no other. But then I noticed something that caused me to shake the glove off my hand as quickly as if I had felt a spider lurking in one of the finger holes. There, written in black permanent marker across the web of the glove, was the name ROBBY—my name, exactly as I spelled it. That the handwriting looked nothing like my own or my mother’s did not abate my alarm. Somewhere out there in the world beyond the salvage yard, a second me, a ghastly twin or doppelganger, waited to do me harm—of this I was thoroughly convinced.

That whole outer realm of the salvage yard was ruled over by a strange and fascinating creature known to denizens of the salvage yard as “Yard Man.” Unlike his more sophisticated cousins in the Front or the body shop, Yard Man worked outside the whole day through and in all kinds of weather—rain, sleet, snow, burning sun. To the parts guys, many of whom had finished high school and maybe even some college, Yard Man was a clumsy, unsophisticated brute. A vandal at heart,
his stock-in-trade was force and speed, not precision. Ask a mechanic to pull a motor from a car, and he’d roll it into a bay in his shop and begin a careful disassembly process that included draining the radiator, unhooking the battery, loosening a dozen different clamps, belts, hoses, and mounts. Ask Yard Man to perform the same task, and he’d throw a chain around the motor, winch it up, and then cut everything holding the motor to the car with a blowtorch. Within minutes, the motor would lurch free and Yard Man would haul it, swinging on its chain like a pendulum, to the wash bay, where a grease-covered underling (often one of my teenaged brothers) would steam it off with a high-powered hose.

All day long, Yard Man roared up and down the narrow sand roads of the salvage yard atop a strange, homemade vehicle called a “goose.” A goose was usually a retired army truck with the cab torn off, a roll cage welded into its place, and a crane-like winch mounted on the front. Other tools of Yard Man’s trade—acetylene torch, sledgehammer, straight and angled crowbars—were mounted catch-as-catch-can along the sides and back. Whenever Yard Man took a coffee or bathroom break, I would climb into the high, still-warm seat of his abandoned goose and imagine myself rampaging through the world like a tank commander in a war movie. Pow! Boom! Ka-Bam! I would free all of the prisoners! Rain missiles on the enemy! Young women and girls would run alongside me in the rubble-strewn streets, blowing me kisses! Then, when Yard Man emerged from his break to reclaim his goose, I’d imagine that an enemy grenade had been lobbed into the tank and my only hope of survival was a daring leap to safety.

Five or six different Yard Men worked for my father during the years he owned the salvage yard, but the one I remember best was a baldheaded, pit bull–like man named Billy Dan. Billy Dan had a deep crease in the top of his forehead and an upper lip the size of a lemon, both of these abnormalities the result of an accident involving a truck bumper that swung back from the goose winch and caught Billy Dan full
in the face. As far as I could tell, the man was mute. He communicated through grunts, high-pitched squeals, and terrible dark-eyed looks. Although I admired Billy Dan as a fellow man-of-action, I was also deeply terrified of him. All he had to do was look at me and I would run the other way as fast as my sneaker-clad feet would carry me. Part of this fear had to do with the fact that my older brothers used to tease me, saying, “Mom and Dad have finally decided what to do with you. They’re going to give you to Billy Dan. At first he wanted to buy you, but Dad wouldn’t hear of that . . .” Somehow I had got it into my head that Billy Dan was a veteran of the Vietnam War, and in my mind, Vietnam vets were addle-minded psychopaths never more than one “flashback” away from murdering everyone around them. Who was to say that Billy Dan hadn’t been tortured beyond limits in some faraway rice paddy and lived now only to exact his revenge on the innocent?

Even watching him smoke or eat was a scary thing. He always seemed to have a cigar jutting out beneath his lemon lip, and when he struck a match to relight the cigar, an action he performed hundreds of times a day, all of the terrible contours of his face would be illuminated. His favorite meal, which he took daily in a little break room just off the wash bay, was pickled eggs and pigs’ feet with a side of saltine crackers. The eggs he covered in salt and pepper before consuming them in a single bite. When these were gone he moved on to the pigs’ feet, sucking the meat from bone and tendon before spitting the white knuckles onto the floor before him, a terrible sight to behold. Once, when I was sitting in the break room with him, Billy Dan attempted to share his lunch with me, his hand jutting out into the space between us to reveal a pig’s foot resting atop a clean paper towel.

“No thanks,” I said.

But this only caused him to shake the tidbit before me, his terrible green eyes urging me to try it.

“Ohkay,” I said, afraid to give any other answer. But when I put the pig’s foot in my mouth, and felt the cold, rubbery flesh
on my tongue, I immediately gagged, spitting the unclean thing out at Billy Dan’s feet.

He squealed with delight, holding his head back to reveal a single upper tooth, just to the right of his nose. Seeing that lonely tooth shook me even more than seeing the white pigs’ knuckles arrayed on the floor.

As terrified as I was of Billy, his mere presence in the Yard often made me feel safer and less alone. One day, he even saved my life—or at least I believed he did. I was lying on my back beneath a junker Impala, pretending to change the oil, when suddenly I heard a rattling sound just to the left of my ear. Slowly I rolled my eyes in that direction, and coiled next to me, just inside the car’s front tire, was a rattlesnake. I froze, my mouth going dry, heart beating wildly within my chest. I knew it was the end. Any second and the snake would bite me in the face or neck, and I’d be filled with poison and die. But then, just when I was about to give up the ghost, I heard the roar of Billy Dan’s goose coming down the sand road at my feet. Eyes still closed, I focused on that sound as it grew louder and louder. Finally Billy Dan’s goose shot past in a cloud of diesel smoke, and as the sound of it died away, I opened my eyes to see that the snake was gone, as vanished from this earth as if St. Patrick himself had appeared to banish it.

More terrifying than snakes and ogres were the junkyard dogs my father kept on the place to guard the parts from thieves. He always had a soft spot in his heart, a special love, for these terrible brutes, and they returned this love twentyfold. My father was the only person at the salvage yard who could go into their kennel near the racks of hubcaps to feed them, just as he was the only person who could fit their mouths with the leather muzzles they wore during the day so they wouldn’t bite customers. Theirs was a jealous, protective love. Woe be unto the customer who argued with or raised his voice around my father, for he would soon find a growling, low-slung German
shepherd poised next to him, as if awaiting the command to kill. My father never bought, bred, or went out of his way to acquire any of these dogs. People brought them to him. A station wagon or pickup would roll to a stop in front of the office, a harried-looking man would get out and ask for my father, and the two of them would stand talking and looking through the windows of the car at the beast jailed within.

“He’s been biting people,” the man would begin. “I promised the neighbors I’d have him put down. But then a guy told me you sometimes take on dogs like this.”

“Does he bite you?” my father would ask.

And the man would answer with a yes or no, and the dog would be brought out of the car on a chain or leash, and my father would look it over, and if the vibe was good and he liked the dog, soon he would be scratching behind its ears and talking to it in a low voice. “Been biting people, huh, Shep? That’s no good. No good at all . . .”

A little longer and the dog would be licking his hand or burying its head in his lap.

“What do you think?” the man would ask.

“I can’t promise you I’ll keep him,” my father would say with a shrug. “But we can certainly give him a try.”

In this way, my father acquired a half dozen or more junkyard dogs, all of them troubled in some way, unmanageable by anyone but him. Almost without exception, they were “one person” dogs, saving all of their affection and trust for my father. Everyone else—including women, children, the elderly and infirm—they looked upon with distrust and hatred.

I first came into contact with these dogs when I was four or five years old, and from the beginning I was deeply afraid of them. Although my father kept the dogs muzzled during the day, that didn’t stop them from chasing me and knocking me down. I’d be playing in some remote part of the Yard, and out of nowhere the dogs would appear, their presence announced by a low growl from somewhere deep inside their throats. Once, I was playing twenty yards or so from their kennel when two of
the dogs cornered me. I stood up, terrified, careful not to look the dogs in the eye. *I’m done for,* I thought. *They’re gonna kill me for sure.*

But then my father appeared and called the dogs off. “What were you doing to annoy them?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Well, I wouldn’t let them see you playing with those,” he said, nodding at the hubcaps scattered across the concrete floor. “They eat their dinner in those. They probably thought you were going to steal their food.”

Although I was happy to be rescued, I still held a special grudge against the dogs—and, in a way, against my father—that did not abate until the day I happened to see them in action.

It was a Sunday morning. We had been at Mass in town and still wore our church clothes when my father and I drove out to the salvage yard to give the dogs their breakfast. My father unlocked the door to the front and switched on lights one by one as we walked down the long corridor past the hubcaps to the closet where the dog food was kept. Having filled a couple of hubcaps with kibble, we carried them outside to the wash bay, where my father whistled for the dogs to come get their breakfast. Usually when he did this, the dogs came bounding from two or three different parts of the Yard at once. On that day, however, none of the dogs came. All we got was a bark or two from some distant part of the Yard.

“Where are they?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” my father said. “You stay here and I’ll go and see.”

“No,” I answered, afraid. “I’m not staying here. What if they come back?”

He thought about this a moment, then said, “All right, you can come. But stay right by me, and if I tell you to stay back, you stay back. Got it?”

“Yes.” I took his hand in mine and held it tight. We began to zigzag across the Yard in the direction from which we had heard the barks.
The ground rose slightly in that direction, and wrecked cars were stacked high on either side of us. As a result, we couldn’t see more than a dozen yards ahead of us at any time. However, the closer we got, the louder the dogs barked. Finally we turned a corner, and there, high atop a wrecked van, sat a couple of long-haired men in dirty jeans and ripped T-shirts. Beneath them on all sides of the van were five or six drooling, howling yard dogs.

“What’s going on?” my father asked the men in an even voice.

“Not much,” one of the men offered sheepishly.

“Where did you come in?”

“Around back,” the other man said, pointing his chin in that direction.

“Did you cut the fence?”

“No. Climbed over.”

“What happened to your arm?” my father asked. Only then did I notice that one of the men was holding his arm a little funny, as if he had injured it.

“Dog bit it.”

“I see,” my father said, nodding his head. “Tell me this. If I let you boys down, are you coming over that fence again?”

“No, boss,” the first man said. “You can count on that.”

After the men were gone back over the fence and the dogs were greedily choking down their kibble, I asked my father who these men were, expecting him to answer with some generic term like “burglars” or “parts thieves.” Instead, he shrugged and rattled off their first and last names. “They’re brothers,” he added. “Their father and uncles used to come over that same fence twenty years ago. It’s kind of a family tradition, I guess you’d say.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. In my mind, he should have had the men thrown into jail. What was the point of catching them if you were only going to let them go? As for the dogs, although I had gained a newfound respect for the work they did at the salvage yard, I still didn’t trust or like them. I just knew
that if they ever caught me in the Yard when my father wasn’t around, they’d tear me to pieces with the same jealous ferocity they used on thieves.

Of the dozen or so men who worked at the salvage yard at any one time, among them Yard Men, body men, engine specialists, and front office help, one of the most fascinating was a half-crippled mechanic named Speck. Of course, Speck wasn’t his real name, but it was the name sewn on the pocket of his light blue mechanic’s uniform. Speck talked with a slight lisp and walked with a limp, the result of a motorcycle accident that should have earned him a handsome settlement, had he not been cheated out of it by insurance company lawyers—so he claimed, at any rate, heaping terrible insults upon the heads of lawyers everywhere. In addition to his uniform, he wore ugly boots with thick, oil-resistant soles. His glasses were black and held together in the middle with electrical tape, the lenses thick and pitted with debris from the grinder and sandblaster.

Speck was an opinionated slanderer of everyone of a different race, color, or creed than himself, as well as anyone deemed by him to be “stupid.” His natural mode of discourse was the incoherent rant, the terribleness of which was compounded by his lisp and the fact that his mouth was always full of Redman chewing tobacco. To most people, all of this would have made Speck insufferable, but I thought he was the most interesting person I had ever met. Unlike everyone else in my life, Speck showed no sign of even realizing I was a child. He cussed freely before me, belched and farted, made dubious pronouncements about the world and the people in it. Taking out his tobacco for a chew, he would ask if I wanted some. When I said I didn’t, he just shrugged, as if to say, “Your loss.”

Speck’s specialty as a mechanic was the “stretching” of trucks. My father and Uncle Harold would fly down to the used truck auction in Oklahoma City and bring back ten or twelve Cain’s Coffee trucks. One by one, Speck would cut the
trucks in half and lengthen their frames by seven or eight feet, so they could be fitted with hoists and resold as wheat trucks. Hanging out in Speck’s shop one summer, I came to know the stretching process inside out, and before long I was elevated to the status of gofer, running after whatever tool Speck might need at the time.

“Get me that hammer and punch,” Speck might say over his shoulder. When I brought them to him, he would snort his thanks and offer up some tidbit of Speck wisdom. “You know, don’t you, that you and your whole tribe are gonna roast in the fires of hell?”

“What tribe is that, Speck?” I’d ask, thrilled by such talk.

“Papists.”

“But I’m not a part of that tribe, Speck—or any, that I know of.”

“Sure you are. You’re Catholic, ain’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Baptized as a baby?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, there you go. You weren’t immersed. But that’s only the beginning of why you’re going to hell . . .”

And off he’d go on some new angle I thrilled to hear. I didn’t always understand, much less believe, the things Speck talked about. It was the free-flowing nature of his discourse I loved, the way he could just turn it on the way you might turn on a spigot, and here everything came spilling out in a gush. In another life, he might have been a shock jock, or maybe a radio preacher. I’m sure he could have thrilled a certain kind of audience with his impromptu rants.

Then one day, toward the end of the summer I spent hanging around his shop, something happened that caused me to revise my estimation of Speck. We had just installed a new radiator in one of the Cain’s trucks and were hunting around the shop for the red five-gallon can Speck kept water in. “Where the hell is it?” he raved. “The sumbitches! Don’t those Yard Men know to keep their filthy hands off my stuff?”
When we finally located the can, on a slab of greasy cement where the Yard Men parked their gooses, it was only to discover that someone had used it as a catch can for an oil change. “Fools! Idiots! I’ll kill them all—the worthless sumbitches!” Speck yelled, emptying the can into a sticker patch before limping angrily back into his shop.

It took ten minutes of scrubbing with soap and water to get the can back to its original condition. That done, we dried the top and sides with a shop rag, and Speck took some yellow paint we used to label parts and began to carefully mark the can in big block letters. W O T . . . Here he paused a moment, glancing over his shoulder at me as if he had just realized I was there. Then, shaking his head and muttering something under his breath, he finished by carefully painting the letter R followed by an exclamation mark.

I stood there, paralyzed by confusion. Why had Speck written W O T R ! when he clearly meant W A T E R !? Was this some kind of industry-wide alternative spelling? If so, why adopt it, when the result was a savings of only one letter? Then it hit me. He can’t spell.

Some part of the change sweeping over me must have communicated itself to Speck, because when I looked up, he was frowning at me.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said, unwilling to share my discovery with the man most affected by it.

Not long after, I switched my admiration to another salvage yard personality—Challo, the body man. While the other men who worked for my father all wore the same uniform of dark blue trousers along with a light blue shirt with a name tag—“Larry,” “Bill”—and an oval patch bearing the words “B & B Auto Parts” on each pocket (indeed, my father himself wore this uniform religiously), Challo could not be bothered. At best, he regarded the dress code as optional. If he wore the pants, it would be with an old football jersey or a black Harley-Davidson T-shirt. On days when he deigned to wear the uniform shirt, it would
be with jeans or shorts, the shirt unbuttoned, its tail flopping
behind him. Challo was a dark man with nearly black eyes and
long black hair he covered with a bandana or a polka-dot beanie
of the kind favored by welders. When he bothered to shave, he
got in for long sideburns and a Fu Manchu mustache. Indeed,
he claimed to have created the style himself. “Broadway Joe
ain’t got nothing on me,” he would declare, smiling to show a
gold cap on one of his front teeth.

It was this style of Challo’s that appealed so strongly to
me—that and his sense of freedom. I remember asking my father
how it was that Challo seemed to operate under a different code
and different rules than the other men who worked for him at the
salvage yard. He just shrugged the matter off the way a philoso-
pher might shrug off a famous conundrum. “He’s a body man,”
he explained. “They’re just a different breed, that’s all.”

When I asked what that meant, he went on to explain that
an experienced body man was more like an independent con-
tractor than a regular employee. “They’re like hairdressers,”
he said, offering a comparison that stunned me to my core.
“When they get tired of working in one shop, or don’t like the
rules there, or have a falling-out with the boss, they just move
down the street to the next shop, and then the next. Most of
the body men in this town have worked at pretty much every
shop in town, some of them more than once.”

When I pressed further, amazed that he would rehire some-
one who had quit on him months or years before, he made an
even more startling comparison. “Body work isn’t something
just anybody can do,” he said. “It takes a certain touch. An art-
ist’s touch.”

Once the comparison had been made, I could see that it
was so. The body shop itself, with its floodlights and pervasive
odor of paint and bizarre tools for pounding dents out of sheet
metal, was like nothing so much as an artist’s studio. An air of
bohemian cool pervaded the place, surrounding all of the men
who worked there. The act of smoothing out body putty or lay-
ing down a coat of lacquer with the paint gun required poise
and precision. There was nothing of the grease monkey in it, no gasoline fumes or black dirt beneath the fingernails. The job was not to repair so much as to transform.

When I say Challo was an artist, I mean he was a man of ideas with the means to make those ideas a reality. Once he sent me to get him a cheeseburger and fries from his favorite burger joint down the road from the salvage yard. Because the place was more than a mile away, and I had to walk there and back, by the time I returned the food was lukewarm.

“What took you so long?” Challo asked, pulling a soggy fry from the bag and inspecting it with a grimace. “This shit is cold, man.”

“It’s a long walk,” I said.

“Well, take your bike next time.”

“I don’t have one,” I lied.

“Really?” Challo asked, raising his black eyebrows in a way that showed he was already entertaining some outlandish new idea.

Not long after this, he showed up at the salvage yard with an old Schwinn with rusted fenders and rims and an ugly faux leopard-skin banana seat. The bike looked suspiciously as if it had been lifted from a school playground or someone’s backyard, but I didn’t ask about that. For the next couple of days, while other projects he should have been working on sat waiting, Challo lavished his full attention on the Schwinn. First he stripped the bike down to its frame and sanded off all of the old yellow paint. Then he hung the frame on a wire and hit it with a coat of brown primer and two or three coats of candy apple red. The next morning, after the paint had dried, he replaced the bike’s original handlebars with a pair of chrome bars he took off a wrecked motorcycle. Then he cut the bike’s chrome sissy bar down so that the back of the banana seat rested, fender-like, an inch above the back tire. The seat itself he covered in some black leather upholstery cut out of the backseat of a wrecked Cadillac. By now, other guys at the salvage yard had taken an interest in the project as well, and they brought in new tires, wheels, and
pedals. Finished, the red Schwinn gleamed in the sun like some extravagantly restored vehicle in a classic car show.

“Well, what do you think?” Challo asked.

“It’s great,” I said, fumbling for a way to express my gratitude.

“Shit, man, that bike ain’t great,” he returned. “That bike is bad-ass, you know what I’m saying? BAD-ASS!”

“Bad-ass,” I repeated.

“Now you’re talking.”

Reaching into his paint-splattered Levis, the body man pulled out a five-dollar bill and waved it in front of his nose. “Cheeseburger with extra mustard and onions, man. And this time, that shit better not be cold.”

The idea of the artist as renegade and rebel, as someone who marched to the beat of his own drum, a professional in every sense but bound to no man, answerable only to his art and his own internal agenda—the salvage yard was where that intoxicating idea first blossomed into life for me.

I was at school the morning Kenny and the other parts men finally located the other half of the wrecked Porsche 911 that had sat for such a long time beneath a tarp at the back of the salvage yard. Throughout the week or so it took for the car to be picked up in Georgia or California and hauled all the way back to Dodge City, I remained in a state of suspended animation, imagining over and over again the semimagical process by which the two cars would be fused into one. In my mind, the two wrecks were mirror images of one another—both the same color of orange with the same chocolate brown interior, the only real difference being the fact that one had been hit in the front, the other in the rear. My mother dropped me at the salvage yard after basketball practice the day the car arrived, and I ran through the Front and past the long corridor to a spot outside of Speck’s shop where both cars had been dragged. Sitting there next to the orange Porsche was not the clone I had imagined but rather a
powder blue 911 that looked as if it had been put through the car crusher. I had never seen a car so destroyed. It had no windows or wheels, and the car’s roof was so crushed that it rested on the tops of the ruined bucket seats. I had heard from my father that the car had been “rolled,” but I didn’t expect it to look like this—as though someone had driven it off a cliff.

“Man, that car isn’t anything like the other one,” I said. “It’s destroyed.”

“Nah, man,” Challo said, smiling. “We’ll fix it up nice. You’ll see.”

I remained doubtful. As much time as I had spent around the salvage yard, as many project cars as I’d seen the guys take on, including two different late-model stock cars my brother Alan raced on a local dirt track, I had never witnessed a project this daunting. A Porsche 911 was in a different league entirely than the Cain’s Coffee trucks and run-of-the-mill Chevys and Fords the guys at the salvage yard were used to working on. And didn’t Speck live in a house one of my brothers described as a “cracker box”? Hadn’t Challo gone on a bender so huge that money had to be wired to El Paso, Texas, just so he could catch a Greyhound back to Dodge City?

So it was with skepticism that I looked on as the powder blue 911 was dragged into Speck’s shop and stripped down to its frame, which he and my brother Alan went to work straightening. When that was done, and more time was found, the wheels and engine from the orange 911 were mounted on the frame, and body parts from both cars were brought to Challo for re-conditioning. Here I thought the whole process would speed up, but once again I was wrong. “You can’t rush a job like this,” Challo declared, as slowly, over five or six weeks, he worked his way through each of the body components, straightening it, pounding the dents out, laying down thin layers of body putty, and then sanding these down until they were smooth and ready to receive a coat of gray primer. Only when all of this work was done, and the body parts began to be fitted onto the straightened frame of the car, did I begin to see the possibilities. By then
there was no blue 911 or orange 911. In their place was an entirely new car, one that had not existed before and that did not belong, so far as I could tell, to anyone—not my father or the parts men or Speck and Challo or, least of all, me. “This motherfucker’s gonna fly, just you watch,” Challo would say, winking. And yet, still I would not let myself believe—not entirely.

Finally, after six months of work done piecemeal, as time allowed, the 911 was finished enough that it could be taken out for a test drive. By then, the mechanics had gone over the engine with a fine-toothed comb, and the thing purred like the exotic and powerful beast it was. By ones and twos, all of the guys who worked at the salvage yard got a chance to take the car on a run down Minneola Road, a long ribbon of asphalt stretching off into the horizon in the direction of Oklahoma. Each time the car roared off on yet another maiden voyage, I would stand in the gravel lot before the Front, listening as the sound of the engine faded off into the distance. In the silence that followed, my heart would sink and sink, and I would begin to believe that both the car and the man driving it were gone forever, and I would never see either one again. But then my turn came. My brother Tom, who was maybe seventeen at the time, was tossed the keys. He turned to me as he climbed behind the wheel, and said, “Get in, fool. It’s time to roll.”

I climbed into the passenger’s seat, and we took off down Minneola Road, my brother shifting up through the ladder of gears with a strange smile animating his face. At eighty-five or ninety, he turned and yelled into the wind, “Third gear! I’m in fucking third gear!” Hearing this, I laid my head back against the seat the way the characters on Star Trek did when the Enterprise was about to enter warp speed. Challo was right. The motherfucker did fly, no question about it.

Not a week after this, I showed up at the salvage yard early on a Saturday morning and straightaway went looking for the 911, which I had heard had been painted the same shade of candy apple red as my bike. However, when I got to the spot in Challo’s shop where the car had sat awaiting its final coat of
paint not two days before, I found that the car was gone. Not finding Challo there either, I ran into Speck’s shop next door and asked breathlessly, “Where’s Challo? Where’s the 911?”

“Challo?” Speck said. “You think Challo comes in this early? He’s probably still in bed, sleeping one off.”

“And the 911?”

“Your dad sold it,” Speck said, shrugging. “Guy flew in from Atlanta last night to pick it up.”

I stood there, shaking my head and remembering what Kenny the parts man had told me the time I had cried about his selling my favorite hubcap. Well, what did you think we did around here? Play with ourselves? I still didn’t get it.

A couple of years after this, my father and uncle sold the salvage yard, and my father used the money to buy a farm, where I would later be put to work much as my older brothers had been at B & B. It was the end of one era and the beginning of another. Unable to imagine my father without his blue uniform, I asked my mother what he would wear to work now that he was giving up the salvage business.

“Oh, he’ll wear khaki pants or jeans, maybe a nice plaid shirt,” she replied.

I couldn’t picture it. To me, my father would always wear the dark blue pants and light blue shirt with the red-outlined breast patches reading “Bill” and “B & B Auto.” The future, full of yearnings and mistakes and the responsibilities of manhood, loomed like some yawning void, filled with uncertainty.
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