

ME AND BILLY THE KID '91

1.

During the past week there have been constant winds blowing under the cold gray Missouri clouds. It looked as if the only 'spring' thing about spring break was going to be in name only. The high school will be closed for two days, so Billy and I had been making plans about this trip for the past couple of weeks. Originally there were going to be a group of us going, but everyone cancelled. Maybe they couldn't get the night off work. Or maybe they were scared off because of the weather. It's possible because even my mother had suggested that I should cancel my plan. But luckily I never listen to her. The sun has come out to meet me on this Thursday morning and the wind has taken the day off. It looks like it might be a nice day after all.

I play a Bob Dylan tape. It's one of his country-style albums which is good music to listen to if you're going fishing at Lake of the Ozarks with a guy like Billy. Plus, I play it so I can hear the song "New Morning." I figure this song would put me in a better mood as I try to wake up. But it only brings a contradictory setting. The song seems excited to get up and greet the new day, but I lie back down in bed and roll around for a while longer. I then finally get back up but I move around slowly with my head feeling cloudy. The shower helped a little –but only a little. Everything seems to move in slow motion.

Socks.

White socks.

Black socks.

Grey socks.

New socks.

Old socks.

Torn socks.

Socks with holes in them.

Dirty socks.

Clean socks,

Stinky socks.

Dress socks.

Preppy socks.

Athletic socks.

Tube socks.

Thermal socks.

All in my top drawer without matches.

I find a couple that match and put them on. Other people would not agree that they match. But I don't care because as far as I'm concerned this morning, they're a perfect match.

I'm always a slow mover in the morning. That's why I took a PE class even though seniors don't need any more PE credits. By having PE in first hour, I can hold off showering and getting ready for school until the locker room. So on school mornings, all I have to do is roll out of bed and put on the first clothes that I grab and that's it.

I slip on a pair of blue 501's and button up the fly. The jeans are tight and there's a large hole in the knee, but I don't care this morning. I put on a black *Rolling Stones 1989 Steel Wheels Tour* T-shirt with the tongue and lips on the front. The shirt is too small and so reveals my fuzzy naval anytime I lift my arms above my shoulders. But I still wear it a lot because it's too cool of a shirt to not wear. I put on a pair of high-top Reeboks which are torn beyond most acceptable use.

I don't even bother tying them anymore. I slip them on as easily as if they were sandals. I like it this way because it saves me time every morning by not having to spend all that time tying them.

The fishing rod and tackle box are already on the porch, so I don't have to worry about getting them. My duffel bag is already packed with tapes. I'm ready to go.

The phone rings. I run into the kitchen to grab it. It's him. He says, "Hey, bud, are you up?"

"Yeah, I'm up. This cowboy's ready to go."

He says, "I just woke up, so I'll be running behind. I'll be there in a few."

I say, "Alright" and hang up the phone. I'm not too surprised. He's always late.

I lie down on the bed to wait and look around at my walls. My wall is covered with wallpaper that was hung up dry and backwards. It stays up with the use of some kind of sticky gummy stuff and only the plain white back side shows. I did it this way so I can doodle on them. There are some colorful designs on it that I made with markers from nights when I just listened to music and scribbled on it. There's a couple of pictures drawn on it, including a picture of Batman that turned out pretty good if I do say so myself. There's a list of people's names and their phone numbers written on it. This way if I ever need to call someone, I don't have to look for their phone number; I can just bring the cordless phone into the bedroom, look on the wall, and there it is. There's also some stuff written on it from some friends who had been over; they signed it as if it were some kind of yearbook or something. BILLY '91 is written on it. In fact it's written on there twice. He seems to like writing BILLY '91 on anything he can get his hands on. I guess he just wants the world to know that he was in the world at this time.

Stuck up on my door is a magazine centerfold of a motorcycle. It's the limited edition Harley-Davidson Sturgis model –named after the town of Sturgis, South Dakota to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Sturgis Motor Rally. I stare at the picture and wish that I could ride it to Lake of the Ozarks today. There are only a certain number of them made and they're only selling them this year. When 1991 is over, nobody will be able to buy one anymore. I wish I had the money to buy one, but I can't make enough money for that by working at a fast food restaurant. But I'll be leaving for the Navy after high school. Maybe I can afford one then. My recruiter said I could find good deals on motorcycles overseas, including Harley-Davidsons. I can't wait until I go in the Navy so I can buy one. When I do, I can ride it to Sturgis. I have family there in the Black Hills so I've been wanting to go there anyway. I can't wait until I graduate. I'm sick of school. Maybe right after I graduate, I can take a trip up there before basic training.

Dylan sings from my stereo.

*I threw down my robe
Picked up my diploma
Grabbed ahold of my sweetheart
and away we did ride
Straight for the hills
the Black Hills of Dakota
Sure was glad to get out of there alive.*

What's that? Dylan wrote a song for me –just for me. That was nice of him. I mean, he had to have written that song just for me because why else would he say something like that? Whoa, that's kind of creepy really. I mean, how did he know about me all those years ago when he wrote that song? Did he look in the future somehow and see me and wrote down what he saw, like Nostradamus? Or maybe I actually wrote that song. Maybe I wrote that song and Dylan can travel through time and he came to the future and heard my song and so traveled back to the past where he claimed it was his. Boy, I'm tired. I just need to close my eyes for a while.

The sound of a car coming up the gravel road comes through my window. That must be him. I walk out of the mobile home and see Monty in the driveway. Monty is the name of Billy's Monte Carlo. It's long, brown, and stocked with all the gear the two of us will need for a two-day

fishing and camping trip. He sits behind the steering wheel wearing a thin black cowboy hat. It's tipped back on his head in a fashion where all that can be seen of it is the bottom of the rim when he turns to me to say, "Hey, bud." He wears a black T-shirt that boasts an American flag. Underneath the flag are white words that are both a statement and a challenge: TRY BURNING THIS ONE. There is no confusion on where Billy stands on the flag-burning issue.

Billy is old-fashionably patriotic. But in a way, his patriotism can be quite refreshing. It can be contagious too if you hang out with him. He's been signed up to go into the Navy for a while now and is quite proud of this move too. He said one time that he thought that everyone should serve in the military. I guess that especially meant me because he managed to convince me to sign up.

He says, "I still need to get gas."

So the two of us take off. What a pair we are. One of us is a cowboy and the other is a hippie. But yet both of us are sailors.

2.

As we ride down the sunny highway, Tom Petty is on the radio singing about running down a dream. That opening guitar riff wakes me up as if it's signaling that the day has officially begun. Billy is leaned back with a single hand on the steering wheel.

He says, "I wish Bobbie was with us."

I say, "You ain't gonna spend all day trippin' over her, are you?," while clinking through the tapes in my duffel bag.

He sees what I'm doing and asks, "You got the Kentucky Headhunters?"

"No."

"Yes you do."

"No I don't."

He says, "Play it."

"No, because you just wanna hear 'Oh Lonesome Me.' If you hear that song, you'll start trippin' over Bobbie."

"No I won't."

I say, "Yes you will. I remember you doing that once before. You'll hear that song and then spend the entire day wishing Bobbie was with us. C'mon, man, we're going to Lake of the freakin' Ozarks! So we're supposed to be having fun. Look, don't you think I wish Sheila had come too? But you ain't gonna see me trippin' over it."

He gives me a quick look. "Man, I can't believe you're dating Sheila."

". . . I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Ok, you're not . . . Tell Sheila I said hi for me sometime, will ya? I mean, since you're the one who's around her all the time. Yeah, you're the one who's around her all the time but you're not dating. Yeah, makes absolute sense to me."

Yes, there were supposed to be two more passengers this morning. That was the plan. But schedules that are printed on paper and hung up on walls will always overrule any plans that are spoken over pizza parlor tables. So both Bobbie and Sheila have to work tonight. It's ok though because the girls would have wanted to do other things; things that would cost money. They probably would have wanted to go to the outlet mall or look at everything on The Strip. They probably would have insisted on sleeping in a hotel room. But now the trip has changed to just being the two of us doing some fishing with plans to sleep under the stars tonight.

Since we had been planning this for awhile, the two of us managed to get both tonight and tomorrow night off. He cooks at the Golden Coral and I'm a cook at Hardees'. Having a job isn't too bad. It gives us enough money to keep us filled up on Ken's Pizza, gas from the Dix station, and tapes from Columbia House. But my manager bothers me sometimes. He's always telling me to get a haircut. My hair doesn't really hang down that long in the back, it's just thick. It sits on my head like a big pile of something. But I don't understand how I could have too much hair to work there because the girls that work there have more hair than I do. The girls don't even wear hats like the guys have to. They instead wear these things that are more like headbands. So not only do the girls have more hair, they have less of it covered.

The managers are also picky about how the sandwiches are packaged. Some sandwiches have to be wrapped and some sandwiches have to be placed in Styrofoam boxes. But I prefer to wrap them all instead of putting any in the boxes. I don't like Styrofoam. That stuff is really bad for the environment, so I try to make the world a better place by not ever using it. But none of the managers ever see my point of view. I don't see why it's such a big deal anyway since the sandwiches are only packaged long enough to be carried from the counter to the table; so they're only packaged for a few seconds anyway. Heck, where Billy works, they don't even package their burgers at all. The burgers are placed on a plate for the waitress to carry to the customers and are left out in the open the entire time.

But one good thing about my managers is that they make sure we throw away anything that's been dropped on the floor. That's more than I can say for Billy's managers. He once told me about a time when he dropped a frozen steak on the floor and was about to throw it away, but his manager told him that it was fine. I wonder how many other places do that. I mean, you never can tell what's going on in the back of any restaurant. I've heard a couple of stories about a couple of places. The worst story has to be the one about Kentucky Fried Chicken. I heard about this crazy guy that used to go to school with us that went into work drunk one night. This guy got mad at his manager or something like that and so he urinated in the cole slaw. I wonder if that story's true.

Another bad thing about my managers is that they're not music lovers. They tell me, "Turn that down that radio –and for God's sake, stop singing." But I'm just trying to keep the place lived up to its nickname: The Hardees' Rock Café. Well, that's what I call the place anyway. Everybody else calls it Hardon's. All the places in town have nicknames like that: WacDonald's, Pizza Slut, Old'n'Queer Cow, Dairy Queueze, Yucky Dried Chicken. Even the IGA grocery store is said to stand for 'I Gyp All.' Nobody seems to like where they work.

Billy and I seem to know at least one person at every restaurant in town. We even did an experiment one day to see if we could get a free soda from every restaurant. Our challenge was going quite well until we hit a brick wall by walking into Subway. Neither one of us knew anyone who worked at Subway. But what could you expect from a place that only has two people working in it at a time? Subway doesn't even have a nickname.

The only other place that doesn't have a nickname is Ken's Pizza. That's the place where we often hang out, so maybe it doesn't get a nickname because of some sort of respect for the place. We often gather there after school to put our pocket change together and come up with enough money to buy an order of cheesy breadsticks; we only order pizza on paydays and other special occasions. We don't have to worry about paying for sodas because they give you free refills if you bring in one of their Ken's Pizza plastic cups. So we always make sure we have a supply of those cups in our cars at all times. There are probably five or six of those cups rolling around in Monty right now. Of course none of us ever bother taking them into our houses to wash them, so their insides are always covered with the dried stickiness of leftover Coca-Cola or Dr. Pepper. But we bring the dirty cups inside the restaurant anyway because they often allow us to trade them in for new ones –especially if Becky is our waitress.

Becky would sometimes hang out with us last year when she was still in school. But her name isn't Becky anymore, instead she insists on being called Rebecca. We don't understand

why, but for some reason the name is important to her. We still call her Becky out of habit, but we're quick to correct ourselves because we know it bothers her. And we always remember to tell her Happy Birthday. In fact, we say Happy Birthday to her almost every time we see her there. It's not because she somehow has a birthday everyday, it's just something we do because . . . well, I don't know why we do that. It's just something we started doing for a reason nobody remembers. But this also bothers her. We don't understand this either because she should be thankful that we do that. If her other customers hear us say that then they will think that it really is her birthday and so they will leave a bigger tip. But Becky –I mean, Rebecca- just says to us, 'It's not my birthday! . . . and stop calling me Becky.' She's gotten grumpy ever since she graduated. I don't think Billy and I will become grumpy after we graduate; we're always going to be fun people.

The radio now has The Black Crowes playing "Hard To Handle." It starts off with the drums and then the base line follows and then *Baby, here I am. I'm a man on the scene* . . . My hair sways all over the place as I sing along. Billy speeds Monty up to pass an elderly couple. As we pass them, they look to their left and see me dancing in the front seat. They both have a look on their faces as if they're thinking, 'What kind of drugs are those kids on?' But no, the strongest things that we've had is a breakfast of Mountain Dew and a bag of cheese flavored Ripplin's potato chips. This couple should not underestimate the natural energy that an eighteen-year-old boy can have when released from the prisons of greasy tin kitchens, classrooms of teachers who think that John Steinbeck is a prophet, and coaches who put up with kids who don't play sports merely because their day job says they have to.

In a small way, the look they give me upsets me and I wish that they knew what Billy and I did less than a half-hour ago. On our way to the gas station, there was an elderly woman who was on her way to the Texaco but her car ran out of gas before she could get there. So Billy and I pushed her car all the way to the pumps. I want the couple to know about this. I also want to yell at them, 'Do you know who we are? We're pre-veterans! We may even have to go to the Gulf. We're the ones who are going to be serving your country and protecting your freedom. So you should just allow us to enjoy our country and our freedom while we still can.' But of course I don't yell anything. The radio is playing Rush's "Tom Sawyer" so I just sing that instead.

3.

Billy finds a spot by the river that his dad said had some good catfishing. We had to find a gravel road that was almost completely hidden by the trees. The road made a downhill dive that Monty had to roll down with the brakes on. I suppose no one comes here anymore so maybe this will be a good spot.

We have three fishing rods that poke through the open backdoor window. Billy brought two. I pull mine out and grab two cans of Mountain Dew out of the cooler. I hand Billy his can and walk toward the water. I find a spot that has plenty of big rocks so that I'll be able to stick the pole's handle in between them to hold it in place. I stand for a second looking out at the river, watching the small whirlpools and the driftwood. When I was a kid, I used to think that driftwood looked like ships, sharks, or alligators. These days the driftwood looks like driftwood.

Billy casts his fist line out and sets the rod on a Y-shaped stick that he has driven into the moist soil. I give a baitless test cast. It seems fine. I reel it in. My fingers feel something odd. The reeler handle has come off and slipped through my fingers. The nut must have come loose. The two pieces are somewhere among these rocks. I doubt that I'll find the nut, but maybe I can find the reeler handle. I say a bad word and start looking.

Billy is facing the river prepared to cast out his second line. His hook and worm dangles behind his head. He swings the rod over his shoulder sending the hook and worm flying through the air. But there's something else flying too. It wiggles. It lands in the water with the tiniest of splashes. "What was that?," I ask.

"That was my rod," he answers calmly. Wordlessly, he reels his line back in while wondering why his rod has broken in half. Billy's a mellow person. It's not unusual at all for him to be that quiet about something that goes wrong. He doesn't even act upset about his fishing pole. I'm still upset about mine and I continue looking for my piece.

I'm startled by the sound of a splash. It comes from my left; from the spot where Billy is standing. "What was that?," I ask –actually I yell.

He's still calm, "That was my other rod."

That was my other rod? Indeed it must have been. Where his rod once was there is now only a Y-shaped stick lying on the ground as if it had been kicked over or pulled over by something. He lost his other rod! Not just a piece of it, but the entire rod! How could something like that happen?

I yell about what are we going to do now. We came all the way here to fish and in less than five minutes all three of our poles have either been broken or lost. This is not fair! I had been looking forward to this trip for a while now and everything so far has gone wrong. The weather's been bad, the girls had to cancel, and now we can't even fish. I still can't find my piece and I'm going to have to buy a new fishing pole and I've spilled my soda and I want to start crying.

Billy starts walking toward Monty with the broken pole in his hands. He says, "Let's go."

I'm confused. I say, "Go where?"

He says, "I don't know . . . let's just *go*."

Let's *go*? You can't *go* unless you have someplace to *go* to. But I don't say anything. I just get in the car and Billy drives it up that steep, skinny, uphill road.

4.

Monty rolls through the resort-like town that surrounds the lake. It's an interesting town where a miniature golf course lies beside the post office which sits beside an empty waterslide that towers over an insurance office that conducts business beside a shooting gallery which is located near a high school which sits beside a theatre that holds country music shows. It's all decorated with hillbilly themes. This area shows what Disneyland, Ventura Beach, and Las Vegas would all look like if the south had won the war.

I ask Billy, "What would it be like to live here? Do you think people here ever get bored?"

"No way. If we lived here, we'd never get bored."

The town is quite empty today. The attractions have all been opened up this early in the season in the hopes of catering to college students with last-minute plans or bankers taking early vacations. But both groups have probably been scared off by the preceding weather. However the sun is hot today. It beats down on my right arm and on the right side of my face. The sun puts me in a better mood.

Billy pulls into the parking lot of a miniature golf course. I guess he figures that we have to do *something*. After all, we can't *go* unless we have someplace *to go*. So the miniature golf course is where we go. We each pay our fees and get a ball and club. I say something about how I hope we have better luck here –that we don't break or lose our golf clubs. We walk onto the course which has an outside speaker which has Roxette singing about taking a joyride. We whistle along to the whistling part. The course is covered with carpeting. Most of it is green to represent grass of course and there are also spots of blue carpet to represent water.

Billy's played many times before so he goes first. His first hit is impressive. I've never played before but it looks simple enough. I put my orange ball down on the green carpet. I prepare for my first swing by saying, with my best Al Bundy impersonation, "Let's rock." I swing and the ball flies. It flies over the hole. Then it flies over the next hole. Then it continues to fly over the entire course. It disappears over a cliff at the edge. With my best Homer Simpson impersonation I say, "D-oh!"

We run over to see where the ball landed. We get to the edge of the course and see that we're standing on a four-foot-high concrete wall. Below us is a go-kart track. A banker and his family are happily speeding around it. They're oblivious to the little orange ball that they cause to roll around every time they pass it. I'm going to have to jump down there and get it. We had to pay a deposit on all the equipment. And besides that, we still have a game to finish. But by jumping down there, I run the risk of being hit by a speeding go-kart. Heck, I could even get hit by two or three of them. I study the situation, timing how long it takes the family to circle the track. It seems like I'll have time to do it, but I'll have to jump down at the very moment that the last go-kart passes the ball in order to give me the maximum amount of time.

When the moment comes, my Reeboks hit the track. The breeze of the last go-kart has sent the ball rolling. I chase it down and my fingers grasp it. I hear the motors get louder. I look up to see the wide-eyed surprised faces of go-kart drivers who did not expect to see a person in their way. They're like deer caught in a pair of headlights –except in a reverse situation. I've no place to go but up, so I do so with all my might. Billy's hands grab me and start helping me up. The banker and his family pass underneath my tennis shoes.

I crawl onto the green carpet with my heart pounding. I was almost go-kart track road kill. But I hold my hand up with the ball still firmly in it. My mission has been accomplished!

Billy just calmly says, "Don't hit it so hard next time."

His mellowness amazes me sometimes. I've seen him get angry before, but it's not too often. Actually I don't think it's so much that he never gets upset or excited about anything as much as he just doesn't express it as much. I think he does have a lot of emotion inside at times, but he only allows the people around him to see merely a hint of it. Even when he gets hurt, he just says the word 'ow.' And that's exactly how he says it. He actually pronounces the word. There's no cry, anger, whine, or surprise behind it; there's just a word: 'ow.'

We continue on with our game. For the next couple of holes, he plays well. I haven't been doing so great myself. As a matter of fact, I downright suck. I'm starting to get frustrated.

I miss my hole again, but instead of standing aside to allow Billy his turn, I quickly try again. I miss again. I quickly try again. But I miss again. And again. Billy gets impatient waiting for his turn so he cuts in front of me to try to hit my ball in for me. But he can't get it in either because I won't leave the ball alone. I am determined to hit this ball into that hole. But there's no way I can because Billy won't get out of my way. He's also determined to get my ball in the hole just so we can get this round over with.

Suddenly we begin playing a different kind of game. Without saying a word to each other, we have both realized that the rules have changed. This is now a game where we try to be the first person to get the ball into each hole. It's like a combination between miniature golf and hockey. We're the only two people here, so we take up the entire course doing this. However, we seem to be hitting each other in the legs more than we're actually hitting the ball. It hurts.

"...ah!..."

"...ow..."

"...ahh!..."

"...ow..."

"...ahh!..."

"...ow..."

We run all over the green and blue carpet doing this.

Near the end of the course, Billy stops the game for some reason. He says, "Hey look." He stoops down to lift a big piece of blue carpet that has come loose over the years to reveal the green underneath. What is he doing? "Look," he says, "I'm Moses." What? Moses? Oh, ok. Now I get it. I laugh. He takes advantage of my laughing to take a free shot and makes it.

I say, "You asshole."

We're at the entrance of a plastic tunnel made to look like a cave. In a way, it actually looks like a real cave. It curves causing us to be unable to see the last hole that's somewhere on the other side of it. Because this is the last hole, we decide to play by the real rules; especially since the game we've been playing might cause us to wind up tearing the artificial cave to pieces. He hits his first. The ball rolls into the tunnel, lightly bounces off the side, and rolls onward out of sight. He walks through to see where it stopped and so he disappears too.

It's my turn now. I figure that the ball won't go flying away if it's inside a tunnel, so I hit it hard. It shoots through the air, hits the side, hits the other side, hits the other side, and so on. It looks like a ping pong game being played by invisible players. It continues bouncing off the cave walls until it disappears around the corner. I hear Billy scream. Billy rarely screams. I'm scared. I don't even want to walk through the tunnel because I'm afraid of what I might see on the other side. Maybe I'll see him lying on the ground with his hands pressed over his face where he got hit with the ball. Maybe I'll see the ball rolling wildly down the street. Maybe I'll look out in the parking lot and see empty air where someone's windshield used to be and a golf ball sitting in the driver's seat.

Billy yells again, "You got a hole in one!"

I excitedly run through the tunnel. From the cave's exit I can see him staring downward at the hole. Indeed there is an orange ball inside of it. I smile.

On Monty's radio, Extreme is singing "More Than Words" as I've been looking around. This area isn't like what it used to be, like when I came here as a kid. Attractions that used to be covered in lights and surrounded by lines of people are now covered in rust and surrounded by overgrown weeds. I ask, "Man, what happened to this place?" Billy says he doesn't know.

Since The Strip is rather empty today, we have a good selection of parking places along the sidewalk. We get out of the car and walk past stores that sell T-shirts, basket weaving, sunglasses, and old-time photos. We stop in front of a candy store window to watch a machine make neon colored taffee. The machine spins slowly like a ferris wheel and stretches the bright candy into different shapes during the process. I say, "We should get one of those."

"For what?"

"Just to look at. You know, it'd be like one of those lava lamps. Except that when you're bored of watching it, you can eat it. Pot smokers would love something like that. They could trip out on all the shapes and colors and then eat it when they get the munchies."

He says, "I don't know about you sometimes" and walks into a leather shop. I follow him in. The store sells leather goods of all kinds: jackets, chaps, gloves, purses, wallets, and so on. I take a deep breath and follow with a couple more. I love the smell of leather. I look at an expensive black jacket with an American flag on the back. It brings to mind Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper riding down the highway on their motorcycles in *Easy Rider*. For a second, I have a dreamy vision of what it would be like if Billy and I had a couple of bikes and rode them to South Dakota this summer. If that ever happens, I'll remember to come back here and buy this jacket. I take another deep breath.

A salesgirl comes up to me and asks, "Can I help you?"

"No thanks. Just smelling."

We leave the leather shop and walk into a dusty store that sells antiques and old collectibles. They have a lot of western stuff in here as well as old military stuff from past wars. Billy looks through all of it with interest. He's really into that kind of stuff. He's the only guy I

know –at least the only guy close to my age- who likes history as much as he does. He even seems to like history more than any of my past history teachers do. There were times when I thought it would have been better if the teacher took a coffee break and let Billy teach the class instead. I bet he could have done it too. I would suggest that he become a teacher himself someday, but he's not the type that could be a school teacher. Besides that, he's got his own plans. He wants to be in the military, save some money, and then buy a ranch when he gets out. That's his plan and he doesn't seem interested in doing anything else. Sometimes I wonder if he's just watched too many war movies and westerns. When he was a kid, John Wayne was his hero- and he never grew out of it.

While Billy is busy looking through some old war medals, I spot a bunch of boxes filled with comic books inside their plastic bags. I used to collect comics when I was younger and so I finger through them. I pull up a few Batman comics and look at their covers. Batman was one of my favorites. I remember how excited I was about the Batman movie. I had read about it in the comic editorial pages for nearly two years. When it finally came out, I spent my only five dollar bill to go see the matinee. I absolutely hated it. I told everybody for weeks, 'That's not the real Batman. That's not at all what Batman is really like.' People would then look at me and ask, 'You believe in Batman?'

Well, no, of course I didn't believe in Batman. But actually some of those Batman stories were somewhat believable. Or at least they were believable when compared to other comics. But then again, I guess that all superheroes were believable at some age. I guess that's why I stopped reading them. I couldn't believe in them anymore. I began to compare them to reality and couldn't make any connections. But it was mostly just the superheroes who were unbelievable. The villains were often quite believable, almost too believable. The heroes would fight terrorists, serial killers, evil dictators, muggers, and gangsters that were all very much like the same people you heard about in the news. That's a frustrating difference between comic books and reality: the heroes could never exist but the villains could. It seems unfair to have to live in a world that has one and not the other.

I find an issue of a Daredevil comic that I have a copy of at home. It was an interesting story and it showed what an interesting character Daredevil is. He hated crime so he fought it both day and night. During the day, he was a lawyer and he tried to fight crime peacefully in the courtroom. However sometimes that didn't work. Sometimes the courts would allow bad guys to go free. So at night he would get in his costume and fight crime a different way. If he couldn't prosecute the bad guys, he would just beat the crap out of them instead. The fear of being beat up by Daredevil could cause some bad guys to go straight. This made the city a safer place to live in. But there were risks and sacrifices that had to be made by doing things this way. He risked getting seriously hurt or even killed. Plus, living a double life put a strain on having a romantic relationship. So one would think that people would be thankful for what he did. But they weren't. Especially in this issue, he was criticized by the media. They thought of him as being too aggressive and violent. They even considered him to be the one who was the villain. I could only imagine how this made him feel. He probably wondered whether or not his mission was worth it. That is, I mean, if Daredevil actually existed.

But then again, maybe this is similar to what has happened in the Persian Gulf. Some people consider that what America did in the Gulf was a bad thing. They thought it was terrible the way we went into war against Iraq. They actually had the gall to think of the American military as the bad guys and Iraq as some kind of victim. That is so wrong. Saddam Hussein was the real villain in this whole manner. In fact, he even reminds me of a villain that I've seen in a couple of *Justice League* comics. America tried to settle things peacefully; just like how Daredevil tried to seek justice in the courtroom. But it didn't work. Hussein chose to stay in Kuwait and kept threatening Saudi Arabia. So we had to try a different approach. Just like Daredevil, we had to take off our suits and ties to put on our fighting uniforms. Sometimes you have to stop being the nice guy and start being the good guy.

Billy's ready to leave, so we walk out onto the sidewalk again. Nearby we find a large arcade. The building looks and feels more like a warehouse than it does a game room. There must be a hundred video games in here. Some of them, you don't even see anymore. They have *Centipede*, *Donkey Kong Jr.*, *Asteroids*, *Dig Dug*, *Frogger*, *Defender*, *Tron*, *Ms. Pac-Man*, and *Pole Position* among many others. These are games from a time when all the grocery stores, pizza parlors, and Wal-Marts had them. I had wondered where they all disappeared to. This must be the place. This must be like some kind of retirement home for video games.

We turn some dollars into quarters and kill some time.

Billy notices something along a wall that excites him. He says, "Oh, man!" and walks toward an old life-size statue of a gunfighter. It's one of those quick-draw games that you never see anymore; one that you have to fire a wired pistol toward before it can raise its arm to shoot you. Near the game is a bored old man who eyes us from behind the counter as we walk to it. His elbow is on the counter and his jaw rests in his hand. He watches Billy with sudden interest. As far as I can guess, this man probably runs this place. He's probably happy about seeing the two of us in here, both to give him some business and to break his boredom.

Billy fixes his hat as if he were an actor preparing to film a scene for a western movie. He looks at me and asks, "Hey, what's your name?"

I answer in a funny voice, "Alias."

"Alias what?"

"Alias . . . Alias."

"Well hell, I'll just call you Alias then."

I say, still in the funny voice, "Hell, that's what I'd do."

At this, the old man gives us a weird confused look. It's ok though because we usually get weird looks from people when we have that dialogue. That old man obviously doesn't remember a movie from the early 70's called *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. We watched that movie one afternoon because we liked the two *Young Guns* movies. It's a scene between Billy the Kid played by Kris Kristofferson and a character called Alias who was played by —of all people— Bob Dylan. I don't know if Dylan meant to be funny or not, but he sure cracked us up.

Billy stands beside his holster and stares at his unmoving enemy. There he is: Billy the Kid in all his glory. He switches from the dialogue of the old movie to the newer movie. He tells the statue, "I'll make you famous." He deposits a quarter. The game speaks with an electronic voice, *Draw!* Billy quickly pulls the pistol out of the holster as the statue raises its arm to shoot. *Bang!* The game laughs, *Ha-ha-ha*. Billy says, "Dangit." The old man chuckles.

I say dramatically, "You are not a god." It's another scene from a *Young Guns* film.

He says, "Why don't you pull the trigger and find out." He puts another quarter in.

Draw!

Bang!

Ha-ha-ha.

"Dangit."

The old man chuckles.

Billy quotes another line from the movie, "I'm beginning to like these odds." He puts in another quarter.

Draw!

Bang!

Ha-ha-ha.

"Dangit."

The old man chuckles.

The man steps out from behind the counter saying, "Let me show you city slickers how this is done." He puts in a quarter.

Draw!

Bang!

Ha-ha-ha.

“Hey, now wait a . . .”

The man has a funny look on his face. Billy and I both want to laugh at his failed attempt to show him up, but we just look at each other and keep it to ourselves. The man keeps the gun out instead of putting it down. He’s going to make sure that he shoots before the statue can. He puts in another quarter.

Draw! Bang! Ha-ha-ha.

“Now, what the . . . why . . . why, it’s broken.” He goes back behind the counter to write something on a piece of paper. He then tapes the paper onto the game: OUT OF ORDER. He goes back behind the counter without any offer of apology or refund.

As we walk away Billy quietly says, “What a butthole.” He says it as if it were more of an observation than an insult.

But we quickly forget about it when we see what’s in the back of the building. Bumpercars! There are bumpercars in here! There’s nobody on them and there probably won’t be anybody else on them anytime soon. So if only the two of us are on them, we can go wild and be as rough as we want. We can really knock the crap out of each other. This is going to be fun – even better than our golf-hockey game.

Two bored attendants are there waiting for things to pick up. They look like two college boys except that they don’t look like they’re actually in college. They perk up as they see us walking toward them. But our excitement dwindles as we notice the giant sign on the wall above it. In large letters, it lists a dozen or so things that you’re not allowed to do. I had never before realized that there are so many things that a person shouldn’t do on bumpercars. I read the long list of rules: NO . . . NO . . . NO . . . NO . . . Well, this sucks. This isn’t going to be as much fun after all.

We pay one of the attendants and he says, “It’s not very fun with only two people.” I attempt to tell him that we don’t care because we don’t have anything better to do, but the attendant wasn’t finished talking. He continues, “So we’ll ride it with you.”

What? But with them riding with us, we’ll have to follow all of those rules perfectly. This is really going to suck.

One of them turns on the power and I hear it humming to life. The four of us each pick a car. It starts out slow but things quickly get wild. It becomes a team competition of the two of them against the two of us. And in this competition, we are getting creamed. These guys are experts at driving bumpercars. I didn’t know that there was such thing as an expert bumpercar driver, but that’s exactly what these guys are. And those posted rules don’t mean a thing to them. Not at this time anyway. Under the words on the wall that say NO STANDING IN THE CARS, they stand in their cars. They stand quickly and lean forward right before hitting us, causing their bumps to be extra hard. They hit us so hard sometimes that it nearly knocks us out of our cars.

I have one of the guys right where I want him. I’m about to hit him when he suddenly jumps out of his car and runs to another one. My attack is wasted on an empty car. Then that same guy bumps me from behind with his newly chosen car. His attack pushes me into the wall, right under the sign that says NO GETTING OUT OF THE CARS. He gets out of that car and hops into another one and hits me again. Then he quickly leaps out of that car and runs to get another one. He drives it away so that he and his partner can double-team Billy. I can’t help Billy because I am trapped along the wall by two unmanned bumpercars.

When I finally get loose, I get bumped by somebody on my right side. I didn’t even see it coming. Then I get bumped by somebody on my left side. It all happens so fast that it takes me a second to realize that I didn’t get bumped by two people in two bumpercars, but by only one guy who was able to switch cars that fast. I then feel something bump me from behind and I turn around to look. Behind me is another empty bumpercar. I’m so freaked out by all of this that I don’t notice what’s coming in front of me. *Bump!* This is embarrassing. The two guys are double-

teaming Billy again, but I can't help because I am stuck in the middle of the floor trapped by four empty bumpercars. There is no way to keep my dignity in this situation. I give up trying to get loose and instead choose to abandon my car to get in another car.

Yes, obviously those rules on the wall don't mean a thing to them. They've managed to break them all so far. They've broken so many rules that they now have to break rules that aren't even posted. There is no rule written anywhere that says NO RIDING IN MORE THAN ONE CAR AT A TIME. I wouldn't have thought that such a rule would be necessary because nobody could do that anyway. But that's exactly what one of them is doing right now. He is coming toward me with two bumpercars. He powers one car with one foot and steers with that same hand, and he drives another car with his other foot and hand. He looks like a man wearing a pair of rollerskates that are 500 sizes too large. He does this so gracefully that I know that I'm going to get creamed by him. I brace myself.

We've been doing this for quite a while now. One of the attendants turns off the power and says, "Ok, that's long enough." I'm not sure if he means that we've been riding much longer than the time that we paid for or if he means that Billy and I have had enough abuse. Either way, it's been fun. We're laughing as we say our goodbyes and give our thanks. Those guys were a blast. We should come back and see them again sometime.

5.

We're riding in Monty and talking about getting something to eat. The radio plays Great White's "Once Bitten Twice Shy" and I play the piano part on the dashboard. We just left someplace called The Haunted Hotel. We hoped it was going to be scary, but it was just a waste of money. There wasn't much difference between walking through that place and walking down the Halloween aisle at a K-Mart. The main difference is that K-Mart leaves all their lights on.

We see a Taco Bell sign and agree to eat there. We've already passed it so Billy makes a u-turn. We're supposed to be getting a Taco Bell in our town this summer and I can't wait. Billy says, "Man, when Taco Bell finally opens up, I'm going to eat there everyday." I wonder how many people we know will wind up working there. They'll probably all call it Taco Hell.

In the parking lot is a yellow school bus with the name of some small town church on the side. Through the glass of the restaurant we can see the long line of a youth group inside. I can only imagine the stress that must be occurring in the kitchen right now. Buses are the worst part about working fast food. Some nights, everything is going fine until you hear that dreaded yell of 'Bu-u-u-s!' Then everybody's heart beats faster and we all have to kick it in gear.

Game nights can be especially bad for Hardees' because we're located close to the football field. Some nights we can get the visiting team, the cheerleaders, the band, and the pep bus all at the same time. I remember one game night when I was in the sink area and heard somebody yelling that we had a bus. I dashed to the kitchen area to help the other two guys. We put lots of quarter-pounder patties and 1/10 pounder patties on the grill. We dropped French fries, chicken patties, and fish patties into the deep fryers. We glanced out the window to see how big of a crowd we would be feeding. The bus door opened and the bus driver stepped out. Nobody followed him. We looked down at all the food we had started preparing. One of the guys said, 'I sure hope he's hungry.'

I remember another night when things were slow and I was feeling bored. So I yelled out, 'Bus!' I watched everybody's facial expressions change and laughed at everybody scampering to their places and getting into their 'bus mode.' I then yelled 'Not!' and laughed some more. Nobody but me thought that was very funny. I had never been called so many bad names so much in my life.

Billy looks at the line inside the Taco Bell and says, "Forget that. Let's go through the drive-thru and we can stop to eat someplace." I like the sound of this; a picnic sounds like a good idea. He steers around the corner of the building where the drive-thru menu is. Two guys, maybe about the same age as us or maybe a year younger, are standing in front of the menu. They're jumping up and down on the concrete. They stop jumping when they see us and they walk away with an embarrassed look. They probably think that we're wondering what the heck they're doing. But we know exactly what they're doing. They were from the youth group and they didn't want to wait in line either. But they didn't have a car and so they were trying to turn on the menu with their body weight.

Monty stops in front of the menu; its weight clicks the menu on. Billy calls the guys over and tells them to go ahead and order. They thank us and place their orders through the speaker. They then begin to walk around the corner of the building to where the pick-up window is. Monty makes a u-turn to click the menu on again. Billy orders us a random number of tacos off the top of his head. The girl's voice from the menu gives us our total and tells us to pull through. He then rolls around the corner and we can see the two guys standing car-less waiting to pick up their order. Through the glass, the girl with the plastic bag looks confused as she sees them. Maybe she's wondering how they managed to lose their car from here to there. She looks out at us as if we could give her an explanation from our car. But we play dumb and shrug out shoulders.

When we get our tacos and pull out, the boys give us a wave of thanks.

We find a place along the lake near the dam to eat our lunch. We sit among the rocks and look out at the water. Billy eats his tacos by shoving them into the left side of his mouth. That's how he always eats. He never uses the middle of his mouth or the right side, he always shoves his food as far left as he can. This habit has something to do with some dental work he had done when he was a kid. Whatever dental work he had done, I'm sure it would be safe to use the rest of his teeth by now. But I guess some habits are hard to break.

Five geese have been paddling toward the shore, as if they were heading directly to us. Maybe they want a bite of our tacos. Maybe when they fly south for the winter, they've acquired a taste for Mexican food. We make a game out of the situation by sitting as quietly as we can to see how close they'll come to us. "They're attack geese," Billy jokes in a whisper. They get about two feet to the shore and then suddenly take off in flight, splattering us with their wet wings.

The tacos are all gone so we walk along the water. We spot a nest of eggs and Billy says they're goose eggs. I don't know how he can tell, but Billy does know a lot of things so I take for granted he's right. He says, "You do know that you're never supposed to touch eggs, right?" No, I didn't know that. But then again, I never thought about it before either because I've never had any reason to touch any eggs. I mean, except for chicken eggs of course. He says, "If you touch them, it will mess up how they smell. Then the mother will abandon them."

I say, "Either that or the mother will smell me afterward and think that I'm one of her babies."

We walk along a few yards more. We hear a sudden splash in the water. We turn to see what it is and Billy says, "Dang, look at the size of that snake." Indeed it is a big snake. Since it's so big, we can clearly see where it swims. It swims away from where we are, gets some distance, heads back to the shore, and disappears from our view.

I say, "What kind of snake is that? Did somebody lose their pet python?"

He says, "I think it was a water moccasin." I don't know how he can tell, but Billy does know a lot of things. Goosebumps form all over my body. I'm scared of snakes- especially water moccasins.

He says, "It went right to where that nest is." He picks up a large stick and starts walking toward where it looked like the snake went.

"Billy, what are you doing? . . . What are you doing?" He doesn't answer. But it's obvious what he's doing. He's going to fight off that snake to keep it away from those eggs. As

he takes his steps, I think about how much heart he's showing himself to have right now. He's also showing himself to have a lot of guts. However, he's not showing himself to have a lot of brains. I can't believe he's going to confront a large water moccasin. I ask again, "What are you doing?"

He ignores me and keeps walking. He's getting close to where we saw the nest. A sudden head pops up from behind the rocks. *Hhhsssss!* Oh my God! That snake isn't a water moccasin! It's not a python either! It's a cobra! A large cobra! I can't believe it! Somebody lost their pet cobra and it's living here in Lake of the Ozarks! Billy stands frozen. He's staring eye to eye with a very angry goose. Goose? Indeed it is. The mother goose had returned to her nest and doesn't like Billy approaching it. But its body is hidden by the rocks so all we can see is its long neck and hissing head. I don't know how Billy feels, but my heart is still pounding.

I'm amazed that neither one of us has to change our underwear. If not from having the crap scared out of us, then at least from the long and heavy laughter that follows which nearly causes us to pee our pants.

"Where are you from anyway?" I ask Billy as we ride in Monty. Alice Cooper sings "Poison" on the radio. "I thought you were from Missouri. But that's impossible. All Missouri boys know that you're not supposed to pick fights with water moccasins. Not with a stick anyway. Now matter how big of a stick you have."

"I just thought I'd try to keep it away from the nest."

"Yeah, I know what you were doing. But you were lucky that it was only a goose."

"I don't know about that," he says. "Geese can be pretty mean. Dad got attacked by a goose once. It chased him around. They'll strike you with their bills and actually leave bruises on your legs. They can be pretty mean sometimes."

"Still, I'd rather face a goose than a water moccasin. Did I ever tell you about the snakes?"

"What snakes?"

"The snakes. Last year when I skipped school with Sheila and Robbie and them."

"When did you skip school?," he asks. "You never skipped school with me."

"Well, I wasn't exactly skipping school . . ."

"I don't care if you skip school. I do it all the time."

"Well, it was the last day of school. Do you remember when they let the juniors leave school to go to that baseball game? We signed out to go to the game, we just never actually went to the game. So we really didn't skip school, we just skipped the game."

"Oh yeah, I remember that," he says. "Yeah, I did that myself."

That last day of school was a pretty warm day. A small group of us were cruising around the countryside in Robbie's new truck. Sheila and two other girls were with us. We pulled to the side of the road near a small bridge to walk around the shallow creek there. Further away from the road, on the other side of the bend that was in the creek, there was a spot where a bunch of little snakes were swimming around. The sight was kind of freaky so we stood there for a while and watched them. As we walked back toward the road, past the bend, the girls were saying something about how they wanted to go swimming. It sounded like a good idea so I took my shirt off and found a nice spot to go wading in. It wasn't deep enough to actually swim in, but it was nice to just lie back and splash around.

Robbie and the girls thought I was crazy for doing that, with there being snakes in the water. But I wasn't worried. I wasn't scared of snakes. I had spent too much time walking around the woods to be scared of snakes; I even used to go snake hunting when I was younger. Those snakes in the creek weren't even that close to me and it wasn't like they would actually come swimming in my direction. On the contrary, if they moved at all they would have moved away from me because my presence in the water would have scared them away. Boy, was I wrong.

A snake began swimming toward me. It was a spooky sight but I didn't panic. I couldn't allow myself to panic after all that I had said about not being scared of snakes. Besides that, the girls were watching me. I thought maybe the snake didn't see me or it was too young to know that it was supposed to be scared of me. So I splashed around some more figuring this would scare the snake away. But it kept coming. I then splashed water toward it to ward it away. But it kept coming. Then I noticed that it wasn't just one snake that was swimming toward me. There were a couple more right behind it. The snakes were actually swimming toward me.

Sheila yelled at me, "Get out of the water!" I stood up and ran out of the creek so fast that the bottoms of my feet barely touched the water. It doesn't matter how many girls are there watching you, there is no way to look cool when there are snakes swimming after you. Not even Sean Connery could do that.

Afterward, we all went to Sheila's house. We told her mother what had happened. She told us that I was lucky because she knew of another boy who had went swimming in a lake one day a few years ago. The boy was attacked by a nest of water moccasins. He did not survive the experience. That interrupted my sleep that night. I could have died that day. I've been scared of snakes ever since.

Billy says, "Well, maybe the Haunted Hotel should have just put some rubber snakes in a bath tub. Then you would have thought it was scary."

I say, "Yeah, well, maybe they should have just put a goose in there and *you* would have thought it was scary."

6.

Guns n' Roses is playing "Civil War" on the radio. This gets us talking about their concert this summer. They'll be playing at a brand new amphitheater in St. Louis so it should be pretty cool. I say, "Do you think they'll ask me to stand in and play a few songs with them?"

He says, "They might. Maybe Slash'll need a cigarette break or something."

"Nah, he always smokes while he's playing. With that cigarette smoke always coming up into his face and all that hair over his face, I don't see how he can see anything. And then he sometimes puts that hat all the way down over his eyes. I don't think he ever sees anything . . . so, yeah, I'll jump up and play with them. He won't mind because he won't even know I'm up there. He'll just think I'm Izzy."

He says, "Yeah, but Axyl will probably say 'Get the hell off my stage' and throw you off."

"Yeah and then I'll go off on him like the Ultimate Warrior."

He says, "Yeah, that'd be cool. I'd buy a ticket just to see that."

We pull into the parking lot of some state park. I didn't know where we were going, but I guess Billy did. We get out and I see the sign that says the place is called Ha Ha Tonka. I ask, "What kind of name is that? Fake laughter and a toy tractor?"

He looks at me and says, "Hey, that rhymed."

"Cool. I'm a poet and didn't even . . . realize it."

He tells me that 'Ha Ha Tonka' is an Indian term meaning 'laughing water.' There's a creek that runs through the park and when the water flows over the rocks, the Indians thought that it sounded like laughter. I guess that explains why 'ha ha' is used to mean the sound of laughter. Now that I think about it, there had to be some kind of reason for it. I mean, I've never actually heard anyone make a 'ha ha' sound while laughing. But then again, I am with someone who actually uses the word 'ow' when he gets hurt.

We walk past trees until we come to a clearing that has something strange. There are ruins of some kind of building made out of stone. It looks like it could have been a small castle at some point. The roof is all gone but some portions of the walls remain standing. This is strange because it doesn't look like something you would expect to see in the Ozark area. It instead looks like something you would see in Europe –something in Europe that would be centuries old. But America itself isn't even that old.

Billy says, "Years ago some rich guy who had too much money built a big castle here. Y'know, because he liked the view here." Indeed the view is nice here. We're high up and can look out at the lake and the tree-filled hills. "But it burned down." I didn't know stone buildings could burn down, but I don't say anything because I don't want to show my ignorance. He continues, "But instead of rebuilding it or tearing it down completely, they just turned it into a tourist attraction."

There's another stone structure in the near distance that sticks up from out of the trees. It's tall and thin. It looks even more out of place than the castle ruins. It looks like something that could be called a watchtower, but what would a person be watching out for out here? I say, "Hey what's that? Let's go check it out." A trail leads toward it. As we walk in its direction Billy explains that it's a watertower of sorts. It could be used to draw water from the lake to provide water for the home that was once here.

When we get to it, it has a doorway that allows us to walk inside. It's completely hollow. It's as if it's just a large shell made to hold nothing but air. This would have been a cool place to play *Dungeon and Dragons* in -back when we used to play it.

Obviously some people have thought of it as a good place to hang out in. Some idiot or idiots spray painted graffiti on the inside walls. There's a large upside down five-pointed star –a devil symbol. There's also a poorly drawn picture that looks like it's supposed to be a demon's head. Above the demon's head, '666' is painted in bright red. This all gives me the creeps, so we get out.

I say, "Why do people have to ruin things all the time?"

He says, "Because people are stupid, that's why."

As we continue walking on the long trail, being surrounded by trees overlooking the lake, Billy becomes quiet. He seems to be deep in thought or something. He does this sometimes. I stay quiet myself and allow him to have his meditation or whatever he's doing.

After a while, he speaks. "Do you know what's wrong with America today? Do you know what's wrong with the *world* today? There's no place that man hasn't been yet. Do you know what I wish? I wish that I was alive years ago when America was still new. I wish that I could have seen something for the first time –something that no other man had seen before. I wish America was like it was a hundred years ago, before people ruined it. Think about what people do. They stole land from the Indians. They killed hundreds of Indians for their land. And then what did they do with it? They destroy the land. They destroy the land and use it to build something that people don't really need in the first place.

"Look at the Strip back in town for instance. They build something, make some money off of it, and then when they don't make enough money from it anymore, they leave it. They leave it to rust away. It's a waste."

I say, "Yeah, I know what you mean. I think they should make a new law. I think that they should make a new law that says that if you abandon a building, you should have to tear it down if you can't sell it after so many months. Like that big building back home where the grocery store used to be. The owner should have to tear down the building, tear up the parking lot, and allow the grass and trees to grow back. But what they do instead is they just leave it sitting there while they go someplace else to tear up more grass and trees to put in a new building and a new parking lot."

He says, "That's another thing I don't understand. How can all these people claim to own land? Look at what they do. They take it and put fences up and signs up and say that no one else can be there. How is it that man can take some land . . . call it theirs . . . say they own it . . . when it was all already there in the first place before those people were even born?"

He thinks for a second. "If I could do anything, do you know what I would do? I'd travel back in time. And then I'd explore America and see stuff that had never been seen before. I wish I was one of those explorers that the government sent out to scout the country. I'd get paid to see the country. Like Lewis and Clark or somebody like that. But then do you know what I'd do? I'd go back east and I would tell them that there's nothing there. I would go back and tell them that Napoleon ripped us off and that there's nothing out west worth having. That way nobody would want to move out here. Everybody would leave the Indians alone and then nobody would come out here to ruin the land."

The trail is leading downward as he continues to talk. "You know, if I could go back in time, I wouldn't even bring anything with me. We've had all this technology, but what good has it really done us? Sure, there's been some good things that have come out of it. But most of it isn't that useful. Most of it's actually bad . . . TV . . . I could live without TV. The only thing I like to watch on TV is westerns. The only thing I like to watch is stuff that I'd be doing if I could go back in time anyway. So I wouldn't need a TV because I would actually be living a western. I would homestead myself a ranch and ride around on the open range. That's when America started going downhill –when they figured out that they could make a profit off of land and when they started putting up barbed wire."

I think about how strange it is that the two of us are living in the beginning of the 1990's, yet both of us seem fascinated by some other era. He is obviously obsessed with the 1800's and I'm fascinated by the late 60's and early 70's. I never thought about this before but hippies and cowboys do have a lot in common. The way Billy talks about the ranch he's going to own someday sounds quite similar to the way hippies would dream of building their own commune. And his ideas of riding around on a horse in 'open range' sounds quite similar to what Fonda and Hopper must have been thinking about when they rode their motorcycles cross-country in *Easy Rider*.

I say, "If I could take anything back in time with me, I'd take back a motorcycle. Or at least a car."

He says, "No. I hate cars."

This shocks me. I thought he liked cars. He loves Monty. Or he seems to anyway. I mean, we have spent hours and hours of our lives doing nothing but cruising around and listening to the radio; and we do this on purpose because we call it fun. So how can he say that he hates cars?

He says, "I'd rather ride a horse. I wish everybody rode a horse. Cars are what brought this country to crap. We tear down more wilderness just to make more highways and parking lots to fit all our cars in. And people are constantly wanting to get rid of their old cars so they can have a new one –just for the sake of saying that they have a new car. But you don't do that to a horse. You actually care about your horse. People love their horses just as much as they love their dogs. So you wouldn't get rid of your horse just because you feel like you should be riding a new horse. And what do people do with their old cars? You can't bury them like you would a good horse. No, they just leave cars to sit around in their yard and rust away."

The trail is still leading downward. Billy says, "And now everybody moves around all the time. There's no family values anymore. It used to be that a man and a woman got married and they stayed married. They stayed married because there wasn't anyone else around to cheat on their spouses with. They'd hook up their wagon and ride into town once a week to get some supplies that they needed and then ride straight back home. They needed to keep their horses at home to get some work done in the fields or with the livestock. Now people have cars that sit in their driveway. And since cars don't do anything but sit in their driveway, people think 'Hey, I have a car. That means that I can go someplace.' And so people use them to drive around and

leave their families behind and then meet someone to cheat on their spouses with and then get divorced over it and then . . . Besides that, I hate having to pay all that money for insurance anyway.”

Maybe Billy’s on to something. Maybe cars are bad for relationships. I remember how our friends used to always spend time together as a group. We did everything together. We had to because only a few of us had cars. There were some nights when a bunch of us would pile ourselves into whatever car was available for that night. Somehow, no matter how many of us there were, we could make room for everyone. We were like those circus clowns who would fit a dozen or so of themselves into a tiny car. And sometimes we would ride around all evening that way without anyone complaining about being uncomfortable. As long as we were together, that’s all that mattered.

We don’t do that anymore. One afternoon this year, I heard one of the guys ask another for a ride after school. The guy with the car apologized saying that his car was already full. This was a concept that we wouldn’t have understood before. Things changed over time as more people began to get their licenses and cars of their own. So as more of us began driving, there was less reason to hang out together. And as people got jobs so that they could afford to drive their cars, they didn’t have as much time to hang out anyway. I mean, look at us now. If we had made this trip just a year ago, there probably would have been a small group of us here. But today it’s just me and Billy.

I don’t have a car myself. So since I don’t have to make any car payments, I always have gas money for Monty. Billy rarely has gas money for Monty because he has to pay for the car itself. He has the car and I have the money to keep it going –maybe that’s been the basis of our friendship.

He says, “Sunglasses.”

“What?”

“Sunglasses. I would miss sunglasses. I would take sunglasses back with me.”

As we’ve been walking downward, we see that there’s a cave down here. We step on the rocks so as not to get our shoes wet in the shallow stream. Billy spends a few minutes looking around the rocks. “I wonder if this would be a good spot to find arrowheads in.” He gives up after a while and says, “No. So many people come here that there probably aren’t any.”

We walk into the shade of the cave. It’s a small cave and enough sunlight comes in allowing us to look around. There’s a large rock in here, large enough for a person to sit on. I gaze at it. An eagle. That’s what the rock looks like. The rock looks like the head of an eagle. The only thing that looks more like the head of an eagle is the head of an eagle. “Billy. Billy, look at that! What does that rock look like?”

He looks at it for a second and says, “Oh man, it sure does. It looks just like a giant turd.”

7.

We’re riding down a rural highway. I’m not sure where we’re going, but maybe Billy knows. But it’s also possible that Billy doesn’t know either. So maybe we’re just cruising. He had said something earlier about needing to find a place to camp, so maybe we’re supposed to be looking for a campground. The radio is playing Tesla’s “Signs” and we sing along. “Signs! Signs! Everywhere a sign . . .”

It feels appropriate. If it weren’t for signs, we wouldn’t need to find a campground. We could just pull over anywhere we wanted. That’s what all the cowboys and gunslingers from Billy’s fantasies did. That’s also what they did in *Easy Rider*. This must be what Woody Guthrie

was singing about in “This Land Is Your Land.” But the old west is over, the 60’s are over, and the hobo days of Woody Guthrie are over. It’s the onset of the 90’s and we’re close to the beginning of a new millennium. And in these days, there isn’t anything that isn’t privately owned by somebody. This land is no longer your land and it’s no longer my land. This land belongs to some guys who don’t know me and don’t want to know me either.

That’s the way America is today. But I think that there’s something in America that still exists which says that it shouldn’t be that way. It’s like a dream or a hope that America can someday be cool again. Maybe it’s this dream that makes Billy so patriotic and maybe it’s the same dream that makes me feel the same.

Since our sing-along to “Signs” was so much fun, I pull a Great White tape out of my bag and slip it into the tape deck. I rewind it to “Wasted Rock Ranger.” We sing along loudly and happily. Well, except for one line. When that line comes, we just look at each other to see if one of us has figured out the words to it yet. Neither of us have. So we just mumble it and then go back to singing loud again. After two years of listening to this song, and after all the people that have sang this song with me, one would think that I would have figured out the words to that one line by now. But I haven’t. It almost sounds like they’re singing, “Auto coolants’ll prob’ly get me by.” But what are auto coolants and why would they get you by?

When the song is over, I rewind it and play it again. It’s a good song to listen to repeatedly since it’s so short. But it’s also fun to play it repeatedly because there’s another version we can sing. I once wrote my own version of it and Billy even knows the words to it.

I’m a wasted teenager
My problem is major
Always getting drunk, high, or stoned
I don’t need no education
All I need is a vacation
so I can light up when my folks ain’t home.

I think that it’s really cool
to get stoned before school
A little something in the parking lot
After school, cruise around
looking at our dead hometown
while taking some more hits from joints of pot

I could’ve made the honor roll
Could be in my class Stu-Co
Get good grades and make my parents proud
But I like being with the gang
As we drink and headbang
while our heavy metal plays real loud

You’re a wasted teenager
Your problem is major
Sing this song and follow it to the end
And if you get that straight A
you can stay stoned all day
and then hang out with Billy and his friends.

Of course Billy’s not actually a stoner, I just threw his name in there for fun. Billy will occasionally drink a couple of beers if there’s a party going on but that’s about it. I like to go to

those parties myself even though I never drink at any of them. I can't understand why a person would want to risk their health for something that tastes that awful. And I also can't understand why a person will get sick enough to puke their guts out and then, instead of avoiding it next time, they do it all over again. Being sober around drunk people has made me want to avoid drinking. And I definitely couldn't get into drugs. Drugs may even be the reason why the 60's failed. All those people back then had the opportunity to work together and change the world. But they decided that it would be more fun to get high and trip out instead- leaving more work for future generations to do.

The radio is playing John Mellencamp's "Pink Houses." When it's over, I notice that Billy has been speeding Monty at about 70 miles per hour on a highway where the speed limit is only 55. I also notice that I'm hungry. I ask Billy if he's also hungry and ask him what we should eat. At this moment a billboard appears claiming that Rosie's Café serves the World's Greatest Pies in the upcoming town of Mack's Creek. Billy says something about pecan pie and slows Monty down so he won't pass up the café.

The highway curves and drops simultaneously to reveal the tiny town of Mack's Creek which was hidden from view just a few yards back. It also reveals the town's sole bored cop who sits in his car watching the highway. The police car sits in the parking lot of the café. Actually it's not just the parking lot of the café, but the parking lot of Mack's Creek –the entire town. Instead of having a main street, this town has a parking lot. Rosie's Café, a barber shop, a general store, and the police station all sit side by side in a shopping center fashion. The policeman eyes us as we pull in and park.

I say, "Man, you are so lucky that I got hungry when I did. If I hadn't been hungry, you would have gotten yourself a souvenir speeding ticket."

Billy looks at the police station and says, "Boy, he doesn't have far to go when he has to go back to his office, does he?"

"Maybe he doesn't like to be too far away from the bathroom."

"I wonder if that's all he does everyday, just sit in that car all day watching the traffic."

I look around at the town and say, "Sure. What else is he going to do?"

As we walk toward the restaurant, I get the strange feeling that the two of us are western outlaws who have just rode into town on our horses. We've ridden into town to eat and then afterward we'll have some beer and whiskey at the saloon. We're walking to the door with our spurs making that chinking sound. The reason why the sheriff of the town is looking at us is because he's trying to recognize us. He swears he's seen our faces before but can't remember from where. He doesn't realize that he's seen our faces on the wanted posters that are hung up in his very own office. He doesn't realize that we're the infamous Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid. Or maybe he does actually recognize us, but he's too scared to take us on by himself.

Inside the café, we're the only two customers there. We're served by an elderly couple. Billy and I decide that the woman must be Rosie and the man must be Mack. We eat cheeseburgers, fries, and the World's Greatest Pies. We don't know who to tip since we were served by both Rosie and Mack. So we decide that he'll tip Rosie and I'll tip Mack. We walk out to the car and drive off with the bored cop still eyeing us.

The sun will be going down soon and Monty is rolling down a highway with trees passing us on both sides. Bryan Adams sings “Summer of 69” on the radio and perhaps this is why Billy talks about the great summer we’re going to have. Since he’ll be leaving for basic training early in the summer and I’ll be leaving a few weeks later, we want to make sure that we have some fun before we go. He suggests that we should take Bobbie and Sheila to Six Flags. This sounds like fun so I agree with him. He also talks about Oklahoma. He has family there he would like to see. While he’s there he also wants to check out the ranches because maybe he’ll move to Oklahoma to work on one after getting out of the Navy.

I say, “Let’s go to South Dakota.”

“Ok . . . When?”

“Right after graduation.”

“Ok . . . Why?”

“I have family up there I’d like to see. I haven’t seen them since they visited Missouri a couple of years ago. Me and my cousin have been pen pals ever since. I haven’t been up there since I was a kid. I love it there so I’ve been wanting to go back.”

“Are there any ranches up there?”

“Oh yeah,” I say. “There’s a lot of them. My dad used to work on one up there when he was younger. I have a lot of family in Sturgis. Have you ever heard of Sturgis?”

“No.”

“It’s probably the most famous small town in America. They have a large motorcycle rally up there. A lot of people go. I think that this year is the fiftieth anniversary, so it’ll be really big this year.”

He asks, “How close is it to Deadwood?”

“Oh man! It’s really close to Deadwood. Yeah, you’ll like Deadwood. It’s also close to Mount Rushmore. It’s all up in the Black Hills area. It’s beautiful up there. You’ll love it.”

“Oh, I know I will. Yeah, we can do that. We’ll grab Bobbie and Sheila and go to South Dakota and Oklahoma this summer.”

I say, “Maybe we can buy a couple of motorcycles to take. Yeah, we’ll buy fishing poles first and then we’ll buy some motorcycles.”

“Ok. Cool.”

This is going to rock. All we have to do is to make it through these last weeks of school. Then we’re going to have the best summer ever. We’ll go to Six Flags, the Guns n’ Roses concert, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. I’m especially excited about South Dakota. It’ll be just like that Dylan song. Dylan must be some sort of prophet –my own Nostradamus of rhyme.

It’s probably unusual for someone my age to like Dylan. I still remember a couple of years ago when I was watching *Friday Night Videos* waiting for the new Guns n’ Roses video to play and they played a video by a bunch of old guys calling themselves the Traveling Wilburys. I wondered who these old men were that Tom Petty was hanging out with. But I actually liked that song and I became curious about these old men. I was especially curious about the short ugly guy who couldn’t sing. What was the big deal about him anyway? Some of my teachers liked him and the parents on *Family Ties* liked him a lot. And what was so special about him that he was allowed to have such a big solo on “We Are The World” and was allowed to be the final act at Live Aid? My curiosity caused me to check out some of his old vinyl albums from the public library. I’ve been hooked on him ever since.

After getting into Dylan, I also began listening to a lot of other older music from the 60’s and 70’s: the classic rock, the singer-songwriters, and even the folk-rock. It all sounds so much better than a lot of the stuff people listen to these days. Sometimes I listen to my music and wonder if I could ever make songs that sound like that. I’ve been spending time writing my own songs and have been trying to teach myself to play the guitar. Who knows? Maybe someday I will actually be able to record my songs and become a star.

There are times when I wish I was like Bob Dylan. There are times when I wish I was like Neil Young. There are times when I wish I could be like Tom Petty or Jackson Browne. There are times when I wish I could be in a band like the Rolling Stones or the Who or Boston or Led Zeppelin. But no matter what that girl I work with says, I am not jealous of the New Kids On The Block.

It's dark and Monty's headlights are searching for a place among the trees to camp. We don't know where we are, but a sign said that there were camping areas somewhere down this road.

To our right, we pass what looks to be one of the camping spots. But there are already people there. In fact, it looks like there's quite a few people gathered there in that one spot. They must be having a party. It's hard to tell what they're doing though because it's so dark that we may not have even noticed them if it weren't for the large log that they're burning. Actually the log looks more like a tree that had fallen down or had been chopped down. The fallen tree has glowing sheets of orange and yellow that wave, blink, and slide all over it.

I say, "Man, that looked spooky."

Billy says, "Yeah it did. What are they doing? Having some kind of devil worshipping ceremony?"

"I hope not. I don't want to camp near no devil worshippers. They'd probably try to sacrifice us in our sleep."

We keep rolling down the road. We haven't seen any campground and we haven't even seen any more signs advertising it. We must have driven too far and somehow missed it. When Billy finds a road to pull into, he turns Monty around and we ride back.

We pass the people with the burning log again. I say, "Uh, Billy. Maybe you should speed up. He doesn't know what I'm talking about because he didn't see what I saw. He didn't see the figures explode into movement. He didn't look back to see all of them hopping into a car and into the back of a pick-up truck. He doesn't know what I'm talking about until the truck is right on our tail with its brights on. The truck is so close that we could probably see the face of the driver if we looked behind us- that is, if we weren't blinded by its high-beam lights. I move the rearview mirror so the reflection doesn't totally blind Billy. He does his best to concentrate on the road while we're being chased chased chased.

What kind of madness is this? Who are these people? *Chase chase chase*. What do they want? Why are they after us? *Chase chase chase*. Was Billy right about these people being devil worshippers? Were they doing something that we weren't supposed to see? Were they doing a ritual that is so sacred that only certain human eyes are allowed to witness it? *Chase chase chase*. But we didn't see anything. But of course they don't know how much we saw. *Chase chase chase*.

We come to the end of the road where we can get back on the highway. Taking a right turn takes us to a gas station. It's well lit and well attended. Billy doesn't slow down when he turns. Either he's afraid that slowing down would cause us to be rear-ended by the truck or he doesn't want them to know that we're turning. So it's a wild turn into the parking lot. The tires squeal. The truck and the car behind us don't slow down or turn but keep speeding straight.

A couple of people walking into the gas station look at us like we're crazy. He parks the car and we sit for a second letting our hearts pound.

"What the hell was that all about?," I ask- actually I yell.

He says, "I don't know" as he reaches into the backseat to grab a knife from his tackle box. I do the same just in case those people have turned around and are coming back here. If they do come back, there's going to be one heck of a fight. There are many of them and only two of us. That means that we're going to have to do anything we can, including using these knives. We sit for a while, letting our hearts calm down and trying to collect our thoughts.

Devil worshippers. They're everywhere. I'm sick of them.

We have some back home too. Two Halloweens ago, some of them wanted to conduct a human sacrifice for their ceremony. They wanted someone with blonde hair and blue eyes. And these are traits that Billy's little sister has. She received flowers a few days before Halloween. They were roses -but the roses were all black. There was no card with the flowers, but we all knew where they came from. We all knew what the black roses meant. But that stupid girl didn't take it seriously at all. In those days before Halloween, she still kept going places. We tried to convince her to stay home with some friends, but she wouldn't listen to us. Freshmen girls can be so stupid sometimes.

A bunch of us decided that we had to do something. We formed ourselves a posse. We gathered as many guys as we could and armed ourselves with knives in our pockets and baseball bats in our cars. Billy even packed a gun in the car, just in case. We drove around town looking out for anything suspicious. We kept an especially close eye on vans because we heard that the devil worshippers drove around in a van looking for a victim to kidnap. We also spent a lot of time driving around the backroads and making stops at places where they could be holding a ceremony. We never did find anything though. Halloween passed and nothing happened. We wondered if they had heard that we were after them and maybe that's what scared them off.

For a while everyone was really freaking out about devil worshippers. We didn't know who they were, but we knew they were out there somewhere. So fingers began pointing here and there. Sometimes those fingers were even pointing at me. Me! Why me? Did I wear the wrong t-shirt? Did I have the wrong thing written or drawn on my notebook? Was I seen reading the wrong book? I wasn't a devil worshipper! But so many people swore that I was that if this were the old west, I would have been hanged by now.

I think of something that Neil Young sang about in "Rockin' In The Free World":

I don't feel like Satan

But I am to them.

So I try to forget it any way I can

Yeah, Neil gives good advice. That was a long time ago, so just forget about it and keep on rockin' in the free world. Those group of freaks haven't come back looking for us, so we should just forget about them. Keep on rockin' in the free world.

We can see the town's lights on the horizon so we drive toward it.

9.

The strip and the lake look beautiful tonight. The water is filled with the reflections of all the lights from the buildings and boats. The reflections stretch into colorful long lines on the surface of the lake. These sights are mixed with the sound of Van Halen playing "Panama" on the radio. The sights and the sound make a good combination. It puts me in a good mood as we cruise along. We cruise because we don't know where else to go and what else to do. But it's fine with me.

We pass a gas station where some man who looks like he's a hard worker during the day is filling up his truck. I wave at him. He waves back. Monty passes him up leaving him to wonder, "Who the heck was that?"

10.

Monty rolls down the steep gravel road to the riverside. We're back in the spot where we attempted to fish earlier. Billy suggests camping here. I say, "Yeah, why didn't we think of this before?"

We have realized that, even if we found a campground, we couldn't afford it. We wound up spending too much money today: miniature golf, video games, the Haunted Hotel –it all added up after a while. We also used more gas than we planned on. Between the two of us, we probably only have enough cash to buy gas to get us home tomorrow.

We walk through the weeds and trees looking for sticks and large chunks of dead wood to build a fire with. This is a great place to camp. We're surrounded by the lights of civilization, yet here we are in the darkness hidden from that civilization. Nobody would even know that we're here.

What a day it's been. I'm glad we came here today. And to think that we almost surrendered into canceling this trip when the weather wouldn't warm up and when the girls couldn't come. But maybe this trip was something that Billy and I *had* to do. And it worked out too. We had fun without the girls and the weather even warmed up for us. It's funny that we came here to fish today, yet we wound up doing everything but fish. It's strange the way things turn out sometimes. Not a bad strange, but a good strange. I mean, look at all we wound up doing. We played the most exciting game of miniature golf ever, had the wildest time on bumpercars, had a face-off with a cobra that turned out to be a goose, had my empty stomach save us from getting a speeding ticket, and –to top it all off- nearly got murdered by devil worshippers.

As we begin to build the fire, I get that feeling again that we're western outlaws. Here we are: Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid hiding out from the law. Hmmm. It sounds cool, but maybe that's not such a good name for us after all. I mean, considering what happened between the two of them. So maybe my name should be Alias. Maybe my name is Pat Garrett alias Alias. I say in a funny voice, "Do you know my name?"

He says, "No, what's your name?"

"Alias."

"Alias what?"

"Alias . . . Alias."

"Well hell, I'll just call you Alias then."

"That's what I'd do."

We're breaking a fallen tree limb into smaller sticks. I say, "Y'know, I don't really like Bon Jovi that much, but 'Blaze of Glory' is a good song."

"I know. That's my favorite song."

"But do you know what's weird?," I continue. "*Young Guns II* came out at about the same time that Guns n' Roses came out with 'Knockin' On Heaven's Door.' But they put that song on *Days of Thunder*."

He says, "So?" as he snaps a stick with his knee.

"That song's about Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid."

"How do you figure?"

"It was on the first movie, remember? Dylan sang it. So if *Young Guns II* is a remake of *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, then the remake of 'Knockin' On Heaven's Door' should have been on that movie instead." For some reason, this is important to me.

He says, "So that's what that song's about? Cool. Yeah, we're definitely going to Guns n' Roses this summer. That's going to be a blast. Do you know what concert I'd like to go to? The Eagles."

I find an empty soda bottle on the ground. "It'll never happen. The Eagles will never get back together. But then again, The Who got back together. I wonder if The Who will ever tour again. I also wonder if the Stones will ever tour again. That's what concert I'd like to go to."

I walk to the car to grab a pencil and paper from my duffel bag. When Billy sees me writing, he asks, "What are you doing?"

"I'm sending a message in a bottle. I hope somebody gets this and reads it." I show him the paper.

*Dear Fishermen,
We've caught on to your hook trick. We're not falling for it anymore. You might
as well give up and go home.*

*Signed,
The Fish*

He laughs. He has an unusual laugh. It's just a quick series of exhalations from his nose. People who don't know him better probably couldn't even tell that he was laughing because he doesn't make much noise when he does this. I may be the only person who knows how much he actually laughs.

I roll the paper up and put it into the clear plastic bottle. I screw the white cap on and prepare to throw it out into the river. He says, "You know that bottle's not going to go very far. If you want to throw it farther, you better put something else in it. Like a small rock or something."

I say, "But then it'll sink."

He says, "Not if it's not too big of a rock."

I find a good one to put in. Then I throw it out. I can't see far how it's gone because the air over the river is dark. I say, "I really hope some fisherman gets that and reads it. I hope he's really drunk when he gets it too."

With the fire built, we've decided that we may as well do some fishing since that's what we came here to do. Sure, the rods are broken; but not beyond total use. Billy swung his line around in the air and then tossed it out as if he were tossing a lasso. We use a flashlight to check our bobbers from time to time. I actually hope that I don't catch anything. With my reeler being broken, I'll have to pull the line in hand over hand. And a fish trying to get away will cause the line to dig into my bare hands. That could hurt.

The night has turned cool but we keep warm by kicking back beside the fire. It's a perfect night for camping. I look up at the stars in the hopes of seeing a shooting star. We have a radio out here, but we don't play it. The quiet is too good to interrupt. Besides that, we're making our own sounds anyway by talking about our future. The sound of the river is our music and our dreams are our lyrics. Our futures are going to be good. Tonight is good. This might have been the most romantic night of my life if only Billy was a girl.

As we talk, it seems definite that we'll leave Missouri. He'll probably marry Bobbie and the two of them will live on the Oklahoma ranch that he's going to own someday. Or maybe the ranch will be in Montana or Wyoming instead. He says that he's heard that Montana and Wyoming still have homesteader laws. "Man, that would be nice," he says. "Drive a stick into the ground and call it yours." That's his American dream: to own his own land someday. "Land is what it's all about," he says. There are only so many square miles of land in the United States and so owning a portion of it must be the ultimate success in life.

He wants me to come live with him and Bobbie. He wants me to work on the ranch and even be the guy who supervises everything. It does sound tempting, but I have plans of my own. But I do plan on visiting them a lot. I'll be able to because I'll be traveling a lot. I'll either be a rock star or a truck driver. I might ride around America on a motorcycle with a guitar case strapped to the seat; and I'll make a living playing at coffeehouses all over the country. And then I'll get myself discovered by some record company guy and then I'll get myself a band and ride around the country on a tour bus. If I don't do that, it's ok because my dad knows a guy who runs a trucking school. I can use my GI Bill money to go to trucking school and become a truck driver. So no matter what happens, I'll be able to visit Billy and Bobbie whether their ranch is in Oklahoma, Missouri, Montana, Wyoming, or South Dakota.

Maybe I'll stay in Missouri and marry Sheila. Sheila and I could have a house in the country with a big gravel driveway where I can park my rig. When I come home, she'll be happy

to see me. She'll have a home-cooked meal prepared for me and then we'll sit on our front porch drinking iced tea while I tell her how Billy and Bobbie are doing. Ah, the simple life is the good life. Yeah, I could marry Sheila. She is my girlfriend after all. Billy knows she is. I know she is. She just doesn't know it yet. She should probably be made aware of this. Maybe I'll tell her next week. I should tell her soon if we're going to be taking all these trips together this summer. I should definitely tell her sometime if we're going to wind up being married someday.

The flashlight shines on the bobbers. Both are still there.

I ask, "Man, where are all the fish tonight?"

"I don't know. It's late. They're probably sleeping."

"Yeah, maybe you're right," I say. ". . . Hey, wait a minute. Do fish sleep? How do they sleep? *Do* they sleep?"

"They'd have to, wouldn't they?"

"But how? They can't float or go to the bottom to lie down. So they'd have to stay right where they're at . . . letting the current take them wherever."

He says, "No, then they'd be sitting ducks for any predator that comes along. They'd be as defenseless as a passed out blonde at a frat house."

"But they don't close their eyes because they don't have eyelids. I don't think they have eyelids anyway. Do they have eyelids?"

"No."

I say, "So if fish sleep with their eyes open, can they still see while they're sleeping? Maybe that's how they defend themselves –if something comes along, then the sudden sight will wake them up so they can get away. Y'know, like how a sudden sound can wake us up because our ears still work while we're sleeping."

He says, "I don't know. Ask the fish. Write them a message in a bottle and maybe they'll write back."

"Man, I sure am glad that I'm not a fish. What would it be like living your life out in the open all the time, having to swim around with all the other fish that swim around, all the while knowing that at anytime a larger fish could come along and swallow you up? I'm glad that I'm not a fish. I'm glad that we don't have to live life out on a large open field where I would always be worrying about some fat man sneaking up behind me and eating me."

"What are you talking about? That's exactly the way life is for humans." He checks the bobbers. They're still there.

I say, "So anyway . . . fish sleep, huh?"

"Of course they do. Everything sleeps."

"So if they sleep with their eyes open, would that give them weird dreams? . . . *Do* fish dream?"

He says, "Yeah. They have wet dreams."

"But what could they possibly dream about? The only thing they know about is what they already see in the first place. So the only thing they can dream about is swimming around the water with a bunch of other fish. But that's what they see all the time already when they're awake. So that's the only thing they can dream about. *If* they dream. *If* they even sleep."

"Yes, fish sleep. Their tails keep moving which is why they have a high heart rate; which is why they don't live very long."

I say, "Right. Ok. Their tails keep moving because they can't lie down. But fish actually do sleep, huh? So if they did lie down, would they lie down in a waterbed?"

Billy doesn't laugh or give me a weird look. He instead thinks for a second. He says, "What if somebody made a waterbed –a clear waterbed that you can see through. And it has an aquarium in it?"

"Hey, that's a good idea! Yeah-yeah-and they say that aquariums are supposed to be relaxing anyway. So it'd be perfect!"

This is good. Maybe this is how we'll get rich. Maybe this is how he'll be able to afford his ranch and I can buy that Harley-Davidson Sturgis and my own rig. I hope this works out. I look up at the sky for a shooting star to wish on.

Suddenly the thought hits me. All these plans that we've been talking about, all this stuff that we're going to do in the future, can only happen after we get out of the Navy. So we've got a long and hard wait to go through first. Plus, I'll soon have to live life without Billy. I can't imagine life without him. But we may not see each other again for a long time. I want to reach out and hug him. I want to cry. I want to tell him that I'll miss him and that I'll never forget him and that I love him. But I don't. That's something that guys just don't do. So I laugh instead. I laugh hard.

He looks at me. "What are you laughing about?"

"Do you remember that time on *America's Funniest Home Videos* when that fat man tried to dive into a swimming pool but he wound up breaking the diving board and falling in?"

"Oh yeah." He laughs too.

Both bobbers are still floating.

I ask, "Man, what do you think happened to your other fishing rod?"

"A fish took it."

"A fish? A fish pulled that stick over and took off with your pole? That quick?"

He says, "Yes, there's huge catfish in here."

"Not that huge."

"Yes there is. They get huge here. The fish on the other side of the dam get sucked into it where they're chopped up and sent over on this side. That gives the fish on this side of the dam a lot to eat. People have seen them. A few years ago some divers had to go down and do some repairs on the dam. They came back up and said that they weren't going back down. They saw catfish down there that were big enough to eat a man."

"What?" I exclaim. "Nunh-unh."

"It was in all the newspapers. You can ask my dad."

"How come I don't remember none of this?"

"I don't know."

I stare out at the river. Catfish big enough to eat a man? I hope they don't come up and eat us while we're sleeping.

"Hey, Billy. What's the scariest thing you've ever seen?"

He thinks for a second. Then he says something about a big bird.

"Big bird? Like a bird that's really big?"

"No. Big Bird on *Sesame Street*."

I say, "What are you talking about?"

He puts a stick in the fire and says calmly, "It was a dream I had when I was a kid and living with mom. We used to live in this trailer. And in the dream everybody was in the living room and I had gone to bed and I heard this big ol' commotion. So I run out there and can't find anybody and I'm all by myself and I'm crying. So I go over and hide in the closet . . ."

"This is all a dream, right?"

"Right. And so in the closet, I found that there's a passageway. It goes underneath the trailer, into the ground, and there's a bunch of caverns under there. So I start searching around and I hear footsteps and . . . and . . ." He searches for the right words. ". . . monster sounds and stuff. I'm looking for everybody. I found relatives that were all chewed up and -y'know, terrible stuff like that. And then I hear this noise and I feel something breathing behind me. So I turn around, I look, and it's Big Bird. But Big Bird had these really sharp fangs, blood dripping from his teeth, and big claws and stuff. So I run away from him -trying to get away. And he's about to catch me when I see the light to get back up in the trailer. And I see my mom up there -up in the

trailer. And my mom's hollering for me and she reaches down and I grab her hand. She pulls me up but Big Bird jumps up and takes a bite at me and gets my shoe. Then I wake up"

I laugh.

He says, "That was a *recurring* dream." I laugh harder.

"So what was the scariest dream you've ever had?"

I'm still laughing as I think. I stop laughing when I realize the answer. "Oh man. For years I had a recurring dream about . . . well . . . the dream always has something normal happening. I'm with whoever and doing whatever, y'know. Like a normal day. But then after a while, a big mushroom cloud explodes in the distance. I used to have a lot of dreams like that."

He says, "Do you know what's weird? Remember that book you read years ago –that Nostradamus book? And you were telling everybody about it?"

"Yeah, I remember that now. Everyone thought I was crazy."

"I remember you talking about how the United States and the Soviet Union were going to become allies and fight a war in the Middle East together for a short time. But then right after that war was over, they were going to become enemies again and actually fight against each other and that's when World War III was going to begin."

"Oh yeah," I say. "I forgot all about that."

"I didn't. I was thinking about that a while back. I mean, that's exactly what happened. The United States and Russia did become allies and for a while they were going to fight alongside each other in the Persian Gulf. So you were right. So do you think that we'll fight a war against Russia soon?"

"Oh my God," I say. "You're right. That *is* what happened. I don't know, man."

The wind suddenly picks up. It makes the fire dance. It's a cold wind. It's starting to blow harder, seemingly threatening to blow the fire completely out. I'm still looking at the sky. I finally see a shooting star, but I ignore it figuring that the wind must have blown it down.

11.

It's too cold and windy for us to sleep outside tonight and we didn't even bring a tent. So we did our best to get comfortable in Monty. I took the front seat and Billy took the back. We had to run the car for a while to blast the heater to warm it up. Eventually I did fall asleep.

The explosion wakes me up. Someone has bombed Lake of the Ozarks. The light that the mushroom cloud produces is blinding as it shines through the car window. It's so bright that it forces me to open my eyes while at the same time I need to close my eyes to protect my eyes from it. No, on second thought, it's not an explosion. It's a flashlight. Someone is outside shining a flashlight through the car. Oh my God, the devil worshippers have found us! I shake Billy awake wishing he still had that gun in the car. No, it's not devil worshippers. It's a cop. The law has found our hideout. They managed to find Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid –or Billy the Kid and Alias –or whoever we're supposed to be.

It's a state trooper. He asks us to get out of the car. We do and the night is cold. He asks for our driver licenses and we hand them over. He walks over to his car and gets in leaving us to drowsily shiver. We wonder what's going on. Maybe the policeman in Mack's Creek reported us. But no, that's impossible because they wouldn't have known to search here. Maybe we're not allowed to camp here. So maybe we're trespassing or camping without a permit. But we didn't see any signs that said we couldn't. But then again, we didn't see any signs that said we could. He'll surely make us wait outside while he searches the car for drugs or alcohol. It'll be a long wait too because we don't have any. But he'll probably be convinced that we do have some hidden somewhere.

The officer walks back to us and hands us our licenses back saying, “Ok.” He’s a younger cop who’s polite and friendly with us. Maybe he hasn’t been a patrolman long enough to know that young guys who are sleeping in a car by the riverside must be guilty of something. We ask him what’s going on. He tells us that a man escaped from a prison in a nearby town. He says that the escapee probably hasn’t come this far, but he has to check around just to make sure. We tell him that we haven’t seen anyone.

Billy asks, “So is it ok if we sleep here?”

He says, “Yeah, that’s fine. Just keep the doors locked.”

“Yes, sir. We will.”

As soon as he leaves, we quickly get back in the car. That whole scene surprised me. That cop didn’t seem to care what we were doing here. He just told us to keep our doors locked as if he were more concerned with our safety than whether or not we were doing anything bad. I guess not all cops are so bad.

I’m having a hard time falling back asleep. I think the sudden shock from the flashlight woke me up too much. As I lie here, I begin to think about some stories that I’ve heard –stories about escaped murderers who find teenage couples who are parked somewhere in their cars. I shiver at the thought.

Billy seems to be asleep, so I’m quiet as I open the door. The wind has died down, but it’s still cold out here. I want to warm up by the fire and listen to the radio for a while. I add some new sticks into the fire and turn the embers back into flames. From the radio, Don Henley is singing “The End of the Innocence” accompanied by a piano.

*Remember when the days were long
And rolled beneath a deep blue sky
Didn’t have a care in the world
With mommy and daddy standin’ by . . .*

As I listen, I’m wondering whether I’m really that cold or if I’m instead feeling scared. I think I might be scared of something. I must be scared of that escaped killer coming around here and killing me just like in all those stories. But those killers always killed guys who were with girls. So maybe I’ll be ok since I’m with Billy. Besides, the state trooper only said that some guy escaped from prison, he never said anything about the escapee being a murderer.

So maybe I’m not scared of escaped convicts. Maybe I’m scared of those devil worshippers finding us. But what are the chances of that happening? So I don’t think that’s it either. Maybe I’m scared of the giant catfish coming up and eating me. No, that’s ridiculous. Maybe I’m scared of there being snakes around here. Maybe I’m scared of Big Bird. No, Big Bird is definitely not it. Maybe I’m scared of mushroom clouds. Maybe I’m scared of the Russians. Maybe I’m scared of World War III. Yeah, that’s much closer. But I don’t think that’s fully it.

Tom Petty is on the radio singing about learning to fly. *Well, I started out down a dirty road . . .* It makes me think. Maybe that’s it. Maybe I’m scared of leaving home. Maybe I’m scared of growing up. Maybe I’m scared of the future in general. Maybe I’m scared of having to learn how to fly. Maybe I’m scared of the end of the innocence. Yeah, maybe that’s it.

Most of my friends have no idea what they’ll do after high school. They talk about finding jobs or maybe going to college. They talk about things that they’ll do ‘someday.’ But that’s not me. I know exactly what I’ll be doing after high school. I’m going to have to become an adult soon. I won’t have that time working at a part-time job or going to school to hold off growing up. I actually have an exact date in which I’ll grow up –August 6, 1991. That’s the date that I’ll start boot camp. My friends can look at their future and see vague images, but I see a clear object.

Oddly enough, although it’s an object that I have created for myself, it’s not an object that I actually want. I’m not so sure that I could do so well in the military. I have a hard enough time with parents, teachers, and managers. If I have a hard time with these people, what makes me think I can handle being in the military? Everyone has asked me why I joined and I’ve given

them a number of reasons. But the reasons were not real reasons, they were just things I said because they sounded good.

Months ago, there was a day that I was really tired. Luckily I had the night off, so I went home after school and lied down. I fell asleep and was sleeping soundly when my mother woke me up to tell me that Billy was there. I couldn't believe that I had slept all evening, all through the night, and even overslept through the morning. I must have been even more tired than I realized and figured it must have been from spending too many nights closing the restaurant. I got out of bed, put on a clean t-shirt, and then walked into the driveway. I got into Billy's car too groggy to talk. Slowly but surely, I began to wake up and reality began to sink in. Billy was not there to take me to school. It wasn't even morning. It was still evening and Billy was taking me with him to his monthly meeting at the recruiter's office. He wanted me to talk to his recruiter because he was determined to get me to join the Navy.

The recruiter's office held a small gathering of future Navy guys that Billy seemed quite comfortable with. To me, it looked like a gathering of country singers –or country singer wannabe's. While they all hung out talking about Navy stuff, I amused myself by deciding which country singer each of them looked like. There was a Clint Black there, a George Strait, a Garth Brooks, and even a Dwight Yoakum. Then I came around to me. But there wasn't any country singer that I looked like. That is, until I decided that I looked like one of the Kentucky Headhunters. The truth is that I felt out of place there. Those guys probably all had Confederate flags hanging up on their walls at home, they drove pick-up trucks to work, and they told black jokes. But I had a British flag drawn on my wall at home, I didn't own any vehicle, and I wore a t-shirt that showed my support for South Africa.

That t-shirt had the red, green, and yellow colors on it in the shape of a peace symbol. I signed the paperwork with a peace symbol on my t-shirt.

I'm not even sure if I was awake enough yet to know what I was doing. So while I've given reasons for joining the service, the real reason is that I got out of bed one night because I had mistakenly thought that Billy was picking me up to start another typical school day.

Who knows? Maybe it's for the best. Maybe the Navy will be good for me. Maybe God is able to see my future and knows what's best for me and that's why He made me do that. But for what reasons? Maybe there's a war coming up that God wants me to help win. After all, Armageddon could occur at any time and God's going to need men on His side. Maybe there isn't any war and God just wants to make sure that I'm not poor my entire life. I mean, as it is now, there's no way I could afford to go to college even if I wanted to. And what would happen if I get sick or injured? I don't have any money to pay any medical bills. But being in the military means that I won't have to pay any medical bills, they'll take care of me.

Maybe my own plans that I made for myself are all wrong. Maybe it's best if I just go with the flow of things. I'm watching the river flow. I remember something that Billy's dad said once. He said that if you're on a boat in the river, and it tips over, that you shouldn't try to swim. He said that people often drown because they try too hard to swim in a flowing river. He said that you should just worry about keeping your head above the water and just float. Just float. He said with the way a river naturally flows that it will eventually lead your floating body to the shore. I hope he's right, because I feel like that's what I'm doing with my life right now. Some people think that their futures can be read in these stars that are shining above. But maybe it's more truthful that my future can be read in the way this river flows.

I feel like the driftwood in the river. I can't see the driftwood right now, but I know they're there. Some of those pieces could be taken all the way to the ocean. That's where I'm headed: the ocean. I'll be on a ship in the middle of the ocean. But if Billy's dad is right, I'll finally be sent to dry land some day. Maybe the river will send me to be washed up on a good piece of land someday –the land that I'm supposed to be on. But before reaching that land, I'll have to just do my best to keep my head up and flow along on the river's currents for a while.

I still can't sleep so I remain sitting by the fire and look at the stars and at the river. Styx is playing "Show Me The Way." *Every night I say a prayer in the hopes that there's a Heaven . . .*

Months ago, the radio used to play "Show Me The Way" with news broadcasts about the Gulf War between the verses.

Through all that time, news from the mid-east was being played in the Midwest. I paid attention to it because of the realization that the war could last for a while- long enough for me to be sent over there to participate in it. Everyone had their strong opinions about the war, whether it was right or wrong. I tried to make my own opinions about it, but by the time I would, someone would say something to change my mind. One moment I was hearing Hank Williams Jr. sing "Don't Give Us A Reason" and then the next moment I would see someone wearing a button that said "No Blood For Oil."

I guess I'm just glad that it's all over now. Though of course there are those who say that it isn't all over yet; that things with Iraq could erupt again at any time. I hope that I don't have to be involved in any wars. The thought of having to fight and possibly having to kill people bothers me. I think that I'm less worried about dying for my country than I am about killing for my country. What happens if I do have to serve in a war? Will I be able to fight it? What if I don't understand why we're supposed to be fighting the war? Or even worse, what if I do understand the reasons for it and don't agree with those reasons? Will I wind up fighting anyway? I mean, I wouldn't have much choice, would I? It would be a situation of either you fire at them or you allow them to kill you.

I can still remember when war was supposed to be fun. There was a time when war was like a game to be played; either with toy guns, toy soldiers, video games, or board games. A group of us used to spend hours around the kitchen table drinking cans of Pepsi, listening to Metallica, and playing long games of *Axis and Allies*. It was a board game played on a map of the world based on World War II. We would use play money to buy equipment and then take turns moving our equipment to different places in order to attack. The results of each battle were decided by the roll of the dice. I remember how it was such a short move to have Germany attack the United Kingdom. However, the player who had Germany always had to be patient with this move because it was very risky. The UK could use their planes and especially their anti-aircraft guns to cause Germany to lose a lot of planes. This situation made me think about the real German pilots who attacked the real UK.

What happens to a man's mind during war? What drives him? I'm not talking about the men who fight in defense. When the UK was being attacked, British pilots would get in their planes and fight off the invading planes. These British pilots were risking their life and I'm sure they understood this risk. But they felt a sense of duty to protect their families and their homes. I can understand that. I would probably feel the same way if the US were ever invaded. But what kind of duty did the German pilots feel? What was their motivation? Their mission was a dangerous one. They had to leave their home territory, fly across the water, face British planes, risk getting hit by anti-aircraft guns, and then try to make it back across the water. For what reason would they do this? Their families would be safe and fine whether Hitler had control of the UK or not.

That's what I don't understand. What were the German pilots and soldiers fighting for? Was this all for Hitler? Why should they have cared what Hitler wanted? Hitler was only one man. I can understand that one man can have the kind of selfish thoughts that Hitler had. But look at all that one man accomplished. That means that thousands of people went along with that one man's plans, as if they all whole heartedly agreed with him. I mean, how many people did it take to run just one concentration camp? It's easy to think of men like Hitler or Tojo or Hussein -or the countless other leaders that date back for centuries -as being monsters or to think of them as

being evil. But really, what did these leaders actually do? They really didn't do much if you think about it. They usually sat back in cushy chairs while other men did all the dirty work.

So considering the large number of people that it takes to activate evil plans, surely a few of them would have stopped at some point and said, 'Wait a minute, guys. This is plain sick and wrong.' The excuse that some Nazis gave about how they were 'just following orders' isn't good enough for me. A soldier charging up a hill is a man who is 'just following orders'; but it's a totally different level for a German man to stick someone in an oven or for an Iraqi soldier to torture a Kuwaiti for information. Americans have burned their draft cards and ran to Canada for so much less than that.

So what went through the minds of all those German pilots? And what went through the minds of all those Iraqi soldiers that invaded Kuwait? What went through the minds of all those Iraqi soldiers who kept fighting the war while so many of their fellow soldiers were smart enough to surrender? Were all of those soldiers evil? They couldn't have been –not that many. So maybe they were brainwashed. I remember a comic book story where a super-villain was able to control people's minds. A team of superheroes went after the villain to stop him from doing whatever evil plan he was trying to carry out. The villain then controlled the minds of a large number of people and had those people attack the heroes. This put the heroes in a weird situation because they would have to defend themselves to survive, yet they yelled to their teammates to 'Try not to hurt them! These people are innocent! They don't know what they're doing!' Maybe that's what it must have been like in Desert Storm. The Iraqis were brainwashed but the Americans had to shoot them in order to protect themselves, their American teammates, and the Kuwaiti victims.

I hope I don't have to be involved in any war. I really would hate having to kill people.

Besides that, I don't want to be killed either.

Why am I going into the military? Why me? Why not other guys instead? It always bothered me when guys were talking about the war and saying things like, 'We're going to kick butt.' They always talked about the war in terms of we, us, and our. I always wanted to say to them, 'What do you mean *we*, college boy?' Those guys talked about war as if they were the ones who would fight. But they weren't fighting and they won't be doing any fighting either. If another war comes, it will be me who gets sent over there. Meanwhile those guys will still be saying 'we.' But they'll actually be living a life of chasing cheerleaders, changing channels, and choking chickens. They may care enough about the war to watch the news for a little while, but they'll soon grow bored of it and switch the channel to *Married With Children*. If I grow weary of the war, there's not a remote control powerful enough to change it for me.

I guess there is a need for the military and there is a need to do the things that the military does. But why me? I'm not the tough or macho type. I'm not like the guys who brag about whose butts they can kick. I'm not like those guys who are always ready to get into a fight. I was never like those guys who think they're tough because they played football or wrestled or hunted or were in a gang or lifted weights or picked on guys in the locker room or got into fights at parties or drove a big truck. I'm not anything like any of those guys. Those are the guys who should be joining the service, not me. But yet I'm the one who will be going through boot camp. And I'm the one who will be serving in any upcoming war. Suddenly all those guys don't seem so tough anymore.

Besides, I'm not sure if Americans should have been in the Gulf in the first place – rescuing Kuwaitis and protecting Saudi Arabians. I've heard about how rich those two countries are. The countries are so rich that the people there go to college for free and they all have good jobs. The people also get free medical care. But we don't have that in America. In America, people have to pay a lot of money for medical care and for college; that's why a lot of people do without. So some people join the military so that they can get college assistance and medical care and maybe so that they can have a good retirement. But then what happens is that these people have to leave their homes and families in order to put their butts on the line for Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. But those two countries are rich enough that they should have been able to defend

themselves. But instead of putting their money towards defending themselves, they used their money to pamper themselves and then expect free help from poor American boys.

There are actually some guys who join, not for money, but because they believe that they should serve their country. I think Billy's a lot like that and I'll occasionally believe that myself. However what could happen is that we won't be serving our country, we'll be serving other people's countries instead.

I don't have to join. It's not too late to change my mind. When I showed doubts about signing the final paperwork after my physical examination, my recruiter told me that I wasn't legally obligated to go in until after my official swearing-in. So I'm wondering if I should actually do this or not. I've joked about backing out before to Billy, and he always threatened to kick my butt if I did. But although I always talked about it like it was a joke, I've actually been having secret thoughts about backing out. I'm not sure what I should do.

Yes, Lord, please show me the way.

I'm too tired to think about it anymore. I should get back in the car and try to sleep. *Every night I say a prayer in the hopes that there's a Heaven . . .*

12.

Billy and I wake up freezing, so we quickly start up Monty to warm us up.

The morning is gray and cold. We put as much gas in as we can afford and drive back home. We get nervous during the drive because the gas gauge tilts dangerously close to 'E'. We finally breathe a sigh of relief as we get close to his grandmother's house.

We graduate high school on Bob Dylan's fiftieth birthday. The coincidence fascinates me. Perhaps it's because of that song he wrote about my graduation and how I'll leave for South Dakota immediately afterward. But we don't go to South Dakota. We don't go to Oklahoma either. The four of us spend a day at Six Flags like we planned, but it's a terrible day; everyone is arguing with each other. Billy and Bobbie eventually break up; and Sheila will have nothing to do with me.

I get fired from Hardees' for working without a hat on.

The Guns n'Roses concert is cut short when Axl Rose jumps into the audience to get into a fight with some guy. When he gets back on stage, he throws his microphone down, leaves, and refuses to come back out. Hundreds of people in the audience react by rioting and tearing up the new amphitheatre.

Ken's Pizza closes down.

The rock station turns into an alternative station.

Billy leaves for boot camp.

I attend my swearing-in ceremony and I go through with it.

* * *

