

To Be Determined

by Kevin Feingold

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Tar.

The cul-de-sac is chockablock with black SUV's and red pickup trucks, but it stinks of tar. You wouldn't think an 8-foot by 10-foot patch of roadwork could fill the air with such putrid fumes. "Well," mutters Billy Ray, "fucked ag'in." A developer has bought a lot on Macon Court and erected a \$275,000 McMansion: prefab walls, pressed wood and shingle siding. The asking price is \$750,000. Almost half a mil difference between the investment and the sale price. The developer has also gotten the county to issue a variance that allowed him to tear up the road and install a larger water main for this one house. (Guess if money has changed hands under the table!) After all, the house does include a swimming pool in the backyard. The deed done, the developer's crew is repairing the damage to the macadam by pouring a fresh layer of bubbly black asphalt at 275° to 300°. Suddenly Billy Ray finds himself living adjacent to the La Brea Tar Pits.

Real estate! Trump's in real estate, it's the basis of his family's fortune.

With his red hair and pale blue eyes, even when he's not this angry, Billy Ray looks as wiry as any mountain man from Tennessee.

Are McMansions the future of the South, springing up like mushrooms? From 1908 to 1940, Sears Roebuck & Co. shipped more than 70,000 prefab houses by rail to buyers all across the country. Now, those houses are considered classics. There's no way today's McMansions, built on the cheap, can last that long.

"What's that god-awful smell, honey?" asks Billy Ray's wife Penny, joining him in the breakfast nook. While he is packing away pancakes in maple syrup, a tangerine, oatmeal with blackberries and coffee with cream, she clutches a single cup of black coffee and a vial of multi-vitamins. A girl has to watch her weight.

"It's a tar baby," growls Billy Ray succinctly. He has never claimed to be a morning person. *This is unreal*, he thinks. *There oughtta be a law.*

“What’s the word on that goddam school shooting?” asks Penny, yawning and stretching like a cat in heat. Since Billy Ray works in a TV newsroom, Penny likes to get the inside dirt, stuff that might not be available to the general public.

“Another goddam psycho kid,” he sighs, wishing the wind would shift. Everything he eats tastes of tar.

He’s suffering from “the shakes.” He walks outside under cloudy skies and stands in his driveway, waiting for them to pass. Inhaling tar fumes, he returns inside to gather his gear. He carries a challenge coin in his pocket for luck, but he isn’t sure if that makes him a better person. Or luckier.

“Well, they gotta do somethin’ about all this gun violence,” comments Penny, gazing blankly out the kitchen window. The TV is on, an inspirational program that claims it will bring her closer to God, but it doesn’t seem to be working. She has some coke in a cellophane baggie in a drawer upstairs. As soon as hubby leaves for work, she intends to roll a Ulysses S. Grant and take a snort. Not too much. Just enough to start her day.

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Ten years younger than her husband and cute as a pin, Penny Scott had idol-worshipped Billy Ray when he was a young buck fresh out of high school and she was naught but a schoolgirl. While Billy Ray left for a stint in the Marine Corps and lived in a couple of different places, young, blond, blue-eyed Penny became the terror of the neighborhood: Five foot two, a gaily laughing, nose-wrinkling flirt with an ass to die for, she waved it in the face of every man in town. No one got to touch her, but she kept a string of prospective beaux as long as a country mile. “Oooh,” she crooned to one and all, “I need to keep my vir-gin-i-ty ‘till I gits *mar-ried*.” Rubbing a pale, pearly hand down each boy’s face and giggling, she waltzed off to her next conquest. There were men—teachers, the vice principal—who hated her guts, but her daddy was rich and president of the Rotary, so what were you gonna do?

Then Billy Ray came home to see his folks. He was working on his daddy’s car in the driveway of the family house, the hood up, greasy hands and overalls, putting in a new generator, when there was a bustle in the bushes and Penny Scott emerged. Sashaying and pointing a finger at him, she chortled loudly, “Hiya, Billy Ray!” Wrinkling her nose, she marched up to him, a mad smirk on her face. “A little bird tol’ me you was back in town!”

“Yeah, your mom,” guessed Billy Ray, finally figuring out who this girl was. “Penny Scott?” he gawked. “Wow, girl, you sure grew up!”

“I’m a senior in high school,” she bragged in that braying voice of hers, making every statement sound like the Declaration of Independence.

“Yeah, well, good for you,” said Billy Ray, getting back to work.

“Well, fuck!” Penny declared forthrightly, extremely annoyed that he didn’t seem to be getting the message. She wasn’t accustomed to men who were oblivious to her charm. “Y’all oughtta take me to the senior prom or somethin’, Billy boy!”

He laughed. Throwing down his rag, he laughed. “Now why would I do that?” he asked, grinning. “What d’ya have in mind?”

“What’s on your mind?” she countered, batting her eyelashes provocatively.

“You ain’t even eighteen!” he scoffed.

“Am, too! Since las’ April! Ask me out, you asshole!”

“Boy, you got quite a mouth on you,” he marveled. “How’s your dad? How’s your mom?”

“Come by the house and see fo’ yerself,” she insisted, all but stamping her foot on the pavement. “I was always in love with you, Billy Ray. I ain’t now... *but I was!*” Sidling up to the car, she banged her little fist on the fender.

“Stop fuckin’ around with my dad’s car.”

“Good God! Yer so dense!” she complained. “Come by our house, ya idiot. I’ll put out for ya.”

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Making out with her on the swing on her family’s verandah, Billy Ray found Penny to be a hot, prickly mess. Her tongue deep in his mouth, his tongue deep in hers, she kept moaning “I love you! I love you! I love you!” in a small voice, her hands all over his body. Southern romance, a hundred cicadas chirped in the treetops. Penny’s daddy was rich, she was a hot number, and Billy Ray found himself turned on despite his best intentions. So what if she was a foul-mouthed bitch? She tasted good and she seemed to be madly in love with him. What did he want out of life? “I’ll talk to your daddy,” he

told her in between kisses. Pulling down his zipper, her claw-like hand engulfed his throbbing organ.

“He ain’t here,” she breathed sulkily, her scratchy blond hair in his face, jacking him off like mad.

“Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!” he exclaimed, pulling away and rising to his feet.

“You gay?” she asked flatly.

“Hell, no! Just don’t be in such a goddam hurry, already!”

When he proposed, Penny’s dad got Billy Ray a job in the news division of the local television station, producing the midday newscast.

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Penny rubs pink and purple blush into her cheeks. Then she outlines her baby blue eyes with eyeliner and meticulously applies mascara to her lashes. She makes a purple swath of highlighter at a 45-degree angle over each eyelid. Backing away from her vanity mirror, she peruses the effect at a distance. “Good!” she decides. “*In yer face, suckahs!*” Giggling, she creeps closer to the mirror and goes to work with a charcoal pencil, creating spider webs from eyelid to eyebrow. For the close-up. “*Yer dead-eyed gorgeous,*” she judges, batting her eyelashes in the mirror. Adorning her mouth with Shocking Peach lipstick, she follows it with an equally pink lip gloss. “This gal looks good,” she declares, powdering her nose to keep down the shine. Rising majestically, a demonic smile playing across her lips, she goes to her closet to select her wardrobe.

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The president has posthumously pardoned Alphonse Capone. “During his lifetime, Mr. Capone was treated very badly by the federal government,” the president tweeted this morning. “It is time to right this Terrible, Horrible, Really Bad Wrong. I know the American people agree with me on this.” Critics claim that this is the president’s way of signaling further pardons to anyone caught up in the Robert Mueller investigation.

– WhoNews

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While Penny and his in-laws drink mint juleps at the indoor enclosure of a sodden Kentucky Derby, Billy Ray sits at his workbench reloading rounds. Two cardinals flutter on the window sill, serenading him, the male a crimson red, the female brown with a tinge of red on her wings and tail. A month ago, Billy Ray showed up early at a gun show, specifically to purchase the kind of bolt-action rifle that snipers used in World War Two. Googling the assortment he found on display, Billy Ray decided on a Swedish 6.5 mm Mauser, affectionately called a "96 Gustav" by the Swedes, since the first such rifles came off the factory line in 1896. Markings indicate that this particular rifle left the factory in 1917. *Same year as the Russian Revolution!* he marvels. It's a classic. Falling in love with the look and the feel of the thing, solid in his hands, he is also pleasantly surprised to discover that he can buy 200 blanks with red wooden tips for only \$35, perfect for reloading.

After spending several weeks minutely detailing and refurbishing every part of the disassembled weapon, Billy Ray feels satisfied with his purchase. The brass armorer's disc on the right side of the buttstock indicates the rifle's mechanical condition when it last made its way through the inspection and maintenance procedures of a military armorer. The disc shows a fresh barrel, with flawless rifling, and that the sights have been adjusted for the aerodynamically efficient 140 grain 'spitzer' bullet. These drop much less on the rifle range than the original 160 grain round nose. Billy Ray has heard that the actual condition of the rifle can vary significantly from its last assessed condition. To his delight, this example appears as mechanically sound as the day the armorer affixed the disc. Sometimes you luck out. Big time. In a world of AR-15's equipped with bump stocks, Billy Ray intends to go in a different, more refined direction.

He uses pliers to crush the soft wood bullets right where they meet the brass case, pulling out the wooden bullets with relative ease. He discards the 40-year-old gun powder since he knows absolutely nothing about its composition, its weight or reliability. (He will later dispose of it in a "controlled" burn.) The brass cases show some deformation from the pulling and prying, so Billy Ray straightens up the mouth of each casing with a hand tool. What is left is a corrected and primed cartridge case, ready for powder and a bullet. When he reaches 25, he stops and buffs off 40 years of dust and oxidation from the brass, leaving them looking as sleek as a baby's ass.

He leaves the Berdan primers in the shells. He has bought fresh primers, but he has yet to construct a hydraulic pressure nozzle to dislodge these primers from the casings. He has read online that military surplus primers are corrosive while new primers are not. Billy Ray always cleans his rifle after firing, so he's not going to let it bother him.

Before moving to the reloading press, Billy Ray arranges the casings in a tray, mouths up. He then sprays them with a light mist from a pump bottle, a mixture of alcohol, which will quickly evaporate, and lanolin, which acts as a natural lubricant to prevent the casings from sticking in the reloader. He places them, one at a time, onto the press, pulling the lever to drive the casing into the sizing die. This ensures that it meets the correct outside dimensions. It also serves to open the casing mouth enough to accept the bullet. Releasing the lever, the casing returns back to its starting point. Billy Ray rotates the small table holding the casing to move it into a secondary position. He places a fresh piece of brass in the press. A second pull of the lever sizes up the new brass, while the casing in the secondary position is lifted to a funnel that drops 39.5 grains of slow burning powder into the cartridge case.

It amazes Billy Ray that the gunpowder formulation he has chosen is 80 years old, a relic from the 1930's. Gently, he fits a boat-tail slug atop each shell before pulling the lever on the press to raise the cartridge into a seating die. This pushes the bullet to the proper depth in the brass and ensures it is properly seated. When he is finished, the pointy-headed bullets positively gleam. Not only do they cost him only 50¢ a round—less than half of the cost of the cheapest commercial ammunition in this caliber— Billy Ray also has the satisfaction of producing his own precision ammo. He is ready for Armageddon. Or whatever comes his way.

His phone goes off. Reluctantly, he wipes his hands and looks to see who's calling. It's a text message from Terry Sommers, a gunnery sergeant with a good heart. Another dude with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Terry is prone to major meltdowns. Combat does that to some people. They come home, but they are not who they were. "What R U doin?" texts Sommers.

"Slagging," Billy Ray texts back.

"No U ain't."

"Reloading rounds."

"What caliber?"

"6.5 mm Swedes."

"Well excuse me!" texts Sommers.

"Damn the torpedoes. Full speed ahead," replies Billy Ray.

"U remind me of the blind carpenter," Terry suggests. "The one who picked up his hammer and saw."

"#MAGA," texts Billy Ray.

“#GAGA.”

“#MAMA.”

The Marine Corps motto is *Semper Fidelis*, Latin for “always faithful.” Or as the Marines themselves say, “*Semper Fi*. Once a Marine, always a Marine.”

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The president has left Washington aboard Air Force One for a two-day visit and rally in American Samoa. Asked the purpose of the visit, the president declared, “The people of American Samoa are good people. We expect great things from American Samoa.” Critics claim that this is the president’s way of distancing himself from events currently unfolding in the Mueller investigation.

– WhoNews

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Because of her daddy’s position, Penny gets invited to the Saturday afternoon royal wedding party at the British ambassador’s residence in Washington, DC. Asking for pointers from the local Ladies Club, Penny is warned to “Tone it down a little and be on your best behavior.” They also make sure that her attire is appropriate: a sedate crème dress with a bateau neckline mirroring the bride’s, a string of off-white pearls, café au lait stockings, short heels and a “fascinator” hat made out of white lace.

“Just be yourself,” her mother assures her. “Everyone loves a southern belle.”

To her dismay and amusement, the women at the royal gathering far outnumber the men. The widescreen TV shows footage of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Sizing up the few people with Y chromosomes, Penny suggests to a young black waiter in a starched white jacket carrying a silver tray, “Hello there, sugar! Get me a whiskey and soda, and I’ll take you upstairs and whack you off!” Winking, she wrinkles her nose and laughs in his startled face.

“I’ll get you your drink,” he stammers, hurrying off.

Not knowing anyone and making a point of blending in, Penny stands, poised, a fascinated expression on her face. Being pretty, people keep looking at her. One well-dressed and barbered bureaucrat says to another, “The press has to stop harping on

the Trump administration being staffed by imbeciles! Sure they're imbeciles, but Mick Mulvaney, Jeff Sessions, Mike Pompeo and Ryan Zinke are all elected officials, for God's sake, plucked by Trump from Congress! Yes, Mitch McConnell, Paul Ryan, Trey Gowdy and Devin Nunes are all worthless, but they are also the *elected representatives* of the very people back home howling to 'drain the swamp.' These elected officials *are* the swamp. The people back home sent these a-holes to Washington. If they detest politics as usual so much, why do the American people elect so many shitholes?"

"I could tell you," replies the second gentleman, "but then I'd have to kill you." Turning his reply into a joke.

Poor Penny feels totally out of it. When they look at her, she does her thing.

"When a lady wrinkles her nose at you and laughs," the taller of the two tells her gallantly, "one knows one is in the presence of greatness."

Blushing madly, she thanks him for the compliment.

A gray-haired, elderly matron in a flower-patterned dress reclines on a divan with all the grace of a beached whale. "What's your name, dear?" she asks in the weary, lofty, upper-class tones of Belgravia.

"I'm Penny."

"Penny? That's very British," exclaims the *grande dame*. "But you're American?"

"Yes, ma'am," answers Penny politely, feeling like she is back in fifth grade. "I'm into chick lit. Have you read *Fifty Shades Darker*? I follow Stephenie Meyer on Twitter."

"It is easier to climb Mt. Everest, my dear," she tells Penny, "than it is to plumb the depths of men's souls." With deep furrows in her face and laugh lines around her eyes, the lady exudes the wisdom of hard-earned victories in places far away.

Penny stands in awe of her, hands down. "Yes, ma'am," she says. It is only later that she realizes the lady was specifically referring to Donald Trump.

When the waiters come by with flutes of champagne, Penny asks for a chardonnay.

Confronted by the British ambassador and his wife, she declares "Wow, I sure hope that wedding cake tastes good!" Her southern accent comes across as thick as molasses.

"I'm sure it does, my dear," replies the ambassador's wife. Flowers sculpted of sugar adorn the six-tiered white confection. "I'm sure it tastes lovely."

Disappointed with the staid and formal atmosphere, Penny snorts a line of coke in the ladies room and leaves early, taking a taxi straight to the airport.

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Billy Ray loves all things mechanical. A single squirt of WD-40 into the mechanism and the 50-year-old metal latch on the screen door to his parents' house functions smooth as silk.

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Eventually, it stops raining. Lying on a waterproof mat at the outdoor rifle range, Billy Ray loads the Mauser with five rounds, the maximum for which there is room in the chamber. Cocking the rifle, he eases off the safety. Using the open front and rear sights, he takes aim at a 10-inch by 10-inch steel plate downrange 250 yards. Sucking in and holding his breath, he nestles his trigger finger inside the guard and ever so gently squeezes off a shot.

Clang!

He hits the plate on the very first try... at 250 yards! *Rock me!* he rejoices. *Rock me slowly!* He experiences a visceral thrill from the melodic ping of bullet hitting steel. It's something of an achievement, using hand-loaded ammunition fired without modern optical sights at a range of a quarter mile. He spends the rest of the hour practicing grouping his shots in as tight a pattern as possible. The rifle does have a kick to it. And you never know when you might need a really tight pattern.

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Every night, he patrols the perimeter of their property before joining Penny in her sex games. Every night, he expects phantoms from his military career to arise out of the darkness and assail him. Mercifully, in their quiet cul-de-sac in suburbia, it never happens. It's not like he goes armed. Save grappling hand-to-hand with an assailant, he couldn't offer much resistance. But he walks the perimeter anyway, mostly examining mole holes. An assassin could kill him on the spot.

Later, stripped naked on the bed, his arms and legs tied to the bedposts with hemp, he watches Penny dance around the room in one of her pastel-colored negligees. Caressing him into enormous erections with the tips of her fingers, her wild laughter fills the bedroom, bouncing off the walls. “You know you want it, big boy!” she cackles dementedly, and yes, he knows he wants it. Helpless in her grasp, he wants it all.

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Once upon a time, Billy Ray actually lived in New York City, in Manhattan. For a year. One of the dudes he met in the Marines, Hassan, was Egyptian. When Billy Ray left the service, Hassan wrangled him a job as a chauffeur for the Egyptian delegation to the United Nations. Which had its perks, Mercedes limousines and parking all over the city. Only the Egyptians paid so poorly, Billy Ray was reduced to bootlegging duty free booze— available to the diplomatic community— in order to pay his rent. This was not Billy Ray’s idea of making a living. “Oh, but we are a very poor country and cannot pay higher salaries,” lamented Saïd, his boss, lounging behind his desk, chewing his lower lip nervously. Originally from Cairo, he sported a moustache like Anwar Sadat’s. Magnanimous, as long as it concerned other people’s money, Saïd seemed to think there was nothing unusual about Billy Ray making sacrifices to aid the Egyptian economy. The day came when Billy Ray quit. “No, no, you are not leaving! Think it over,” suggested Saïd, a signed photo of Sadat on the wall and a foxy look on his face. “You seem upset. It is never smart to make decisions in the heat of passion. Calm down and come back to work tomorrow. All is forgiven. I shall pretend that we never even had this discussion. Your salary shall remain unchanged.”

Billy Ray returned to the South instead.

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His TV news show is offered a “get” by the Russian consulate, a live feed by Vladivostok spokesperson Natasha Bukarova. She shall explain why it is logistically impossible for Russia to have hacked or otherwise influenced the 2016 American presidential election. The consulate emails Billy Ray her bio and a color photograph. A blond Viking, naturally Natasha is attractive and telegenic, otherwise she wouldn’t be a spokesperson. Billy Ray talks with her on the phone, their voices waxing and waning in time with the peculiarities of the Russian phone system. At least two intelligence

services are sure to be monitoring every syllable, theirs and ours, this is a given. Natasha's argument: Most of Russia's radio transmitters in Kamchatka have been decommissioned and of the ones that remain, none can successfully jam the continental United States. Possessing a soft voice and a reasonable mien, Natasha insists that "it simply isn't in Russia's interest to screw around with American politics," since everything is going to hell in a handbasket, anyway. "Karl Marx predicted this, by the way," she natters amicably. "That capitalist society is inherently unstable and you selfish, self-centered, evil capitalists invariably— sooner or later— will pounce upon and begin devouring one another. The Occupy Movement is the vanguard of this revolution."

"Um, the Occupy Movement was quite a few years ago," he points out.

"Pussy hats and #MeToo," she counters. "*Workers of the world, unite!*"

"In Vladivostok?" he asks.

What do they know in Vladivostok? he wonders. Try as they might, Russians always sound naïve.

Listening to her, amused by her arguments, Billy Ray is impressed by the quality of her English, but he still decides to give her a pass. Whatever grains of truth or entertainment might be sprinkled throughout her statement, there is little to be gained by stirring up a hornets' nest here at home.

"Perhaps we could meet privately to discuss this matter further," she coos from 7,000 miles away, at which point he hangs up on her. Forget the impracticality of distance, considering the carefree, careless and naïve way people in the Trump orbit have compromised themselves by meeting with Russians, anyone in Billy Ray's position would need to be a crazy idiot to make a similar mistake.

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Danny O'Brian awakes with a bump on his forehead as big and as round as a golf ball. Stumbling out of bed, he walks haltingly into the common room of his frat house on Fraternity Row. "Jesus Christ! *Wha' hopen?*" he groans.

"What happened?" answers his fraternity brother Paulie Lipscomb. Whose grandfather once worked for Richard Nixon. That Lipscomb. "I'll tell ya what happened! Boy O Boy! I'll tell ya!"

Already tired of Paulie’s babbling, Danny just manages to fall, crashing, on the communal sofa in the center of the room. They had all chipped in to buy it. Since then, each has contributed his share of spilled liquids, greasy hand prints, spittle, farts, assorted dents, tears and scratches. Danny feels like he is going to throw up.

“Don’cha remember at 3 a.m. this morning when Timothy found you lying on the floor in the bathroom in a pool of your own vomit?”

“Uhhhhhhh,” groans our hero. No, he doesn’t remember any of that. “I’ll take your word for it,” he tells Paulie quietly. Even the sound of his own voice is way too many decibels in his fragile state. Dozing on the sofa, he discovers Paulie leaning over him, offering a glass of fizzy liquid. “*What?*” he croaks.

“Alka Seltzer, man. To make you feel better,” offers Paulie.

“Yeah. Okay. Thanks,” Danny mumbles. Taking an endless series of tiny gulps, he plops the empty glass on the coffee table, before feeling his way unsteadily back to his bedroom and collapsing on his bed. “Remind me,” he murmurs to no one in particular, “to never drink, like, alcohol, like, ever again...”

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The president is hosting His Highness Prince Vlad Ţepeş of Wallachia at the White House today. The ruler and the president are expected to discuss illegal immigration, border security, sanctions, the Red Cross Bloodmobile and tariffs. – WhoNews

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“So I told him, ‘If you so much as say a word...’ ” floor manager Rick Vallenti explains to anyone who will listen.

Ignoring this office gossip, Billy Ray uses a gaffer hook to arrange three 650-watt Fresnel spots with corresponding gels to illuminate the anchor desk. In the control room, he views the desk in the monitor, before sending Rick Vallenti to sit in each stool in turn. It looks all right.

Hitting toggle switches on the control panel, he runs test patterns on all four video players.

“My point is,” insists Rick, coming uninvited into the control room, “he has a lot of damn nerve—”

As producer of the newscast, Billy Ray doesn’t want to hear it.

By air time, everyone is in position. Ronnie Hall, the glossy, oleaginous news anchor, reads smoothly off the teleprompter, leading with the latest bombshell out of Washington: “Good day at midday, everyone! More grid lock in the Nation’s Capital, as the Farm Bill goes down the tubes.”

“Cue video one,” commands Billy Ray.

“Our correspondent Judy McGuire has that story...” declares Ronnie.

“Cut to video one,” says Billy Ray.

Miguel, his assistant, punches a numbered button on the control panel. The face of Judy McGuire fills the on-air monitor.

After the commercial break, it is co-anchor Susie Spencer’s turn to deliver the second lead.

“Ready camera one,” instructs Billy Ray, coming out of the break. “And... Camera one!”

“The witch hunt continues,” declares Susie. A platinum blond Barbie doll, every hair perfectly in place, her make-up flawless, her eyes glitter with pent-up energy. Susie has several things going for her: (1) Every local newscast requires a blond, good-looking female co-anchor. (2) Her brother is Program Director of the station and hugger-mugger with the network. (3) Susie is nobody’s fool.

“Camera two, check focus,” Billy Ray requests.

“The justice department...” explains Susie.

“Cut to camera two,” commands Billy Ray.

“... has instructed the I. G.— the Inspector General— to examine if the FBI, in fact, used an informant to spy on the 2016 Trump presidential campaign. President Trump insists that the allegations are true and has christened this illegal activity by the government *Spygate*...”

On the minus side of the ledger, like Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Susie Spencer always seems to be talking with a mouth full of marbles.

In life, you can’t have everything. Nobody is perfect.

“Zoom in on Ronnie, camera one. And... cut to one.”

“The Trump administration continues to dismantle regulations put in place during the Obama administration...” mansplains Ronnie.

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Let me count the ways they hate Obama, thinks Billy Ray. He's black and we're white. He's rich and a lot of us are struggling just to make ends meet. He's a sassy intellectual from Harvard and many of us ain't even finished high school. He's a fuckin' libtard and we ain't even libs. He's tall... while some of us are vertically challenged. He's an arrogant prick and most of us have been humbled by the School of Hard Knocks.

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“This just in, folks,” reports Susie, looking both excited and brittle. “Ten members of the House Freedom Caucus, spearheaded by North Carolina’s Representative Frank Meadows, are demanding the appointment of a special prosecutor whose job it will be to investigate the alleged high crimes, misdemeanors and political skullduggery taking place at the FBI, at the Justice Department and at the Mueller probe into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. In other words, they are proposing a federal investigation by a special prosecutor of a federal investigation by a special prosecutor. *Cra-zy!* Back to you, Ronnie.”

It is at his point that Ronnie Hall utters the words for which he will become famous. In a news clip that goes viral, his is the utterance credited with defining a generation, the statement that makes Ronnie the Kanye West of news. “It isn’t often,” he declares forthrightly, staring into the camera, “that I wax long and philosophically on the events of the day. In fact, I am getting a signal from Rick, the floor manager, to wrap it up. We’ll be back after these messages.”

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Sometimes Billy Ray feels like trained monkeys could run the newscast. He doesn't say that, of course. They all like getting paid. No use handing management a cudgel when contracts come up for renewal. Still, once you've done it a few hundred times, running a newscast is pretty basic.

At the same time, he wonders how much longer he can stand doing this. Another bum trip, after three years on the job, Billy Ray definitely has the creeping sensation in his bones that whatever he is seeking, this sure as hell ain't it.

Penny doesn't know it, but he is up at night, unable to sleep, prowling the neighborhood. Rabbits and foxes are his closest companions. Online at 4 a.m., no hacker, he considers himself computer literate on social media, at best. He joins pro-gun groups on Facebook, but otherwise keeps his list of friends to a minimum. As Groucho Marx once said, "I don't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member."

When Sun Moon's Unification Church splits into two armed camps, making a fetish of the AR-15 assault rifle, toting them into church, blessing them, Billy Ray tweets "Git a life, suckahs. K-pop rules!" In New York, he dated a Korean girl who was music crazy.

Still, he's in no position to question other people's religious convictions. He stood one Sunday morning in Afghanistan and watched while a chaplain christened in the name of Jesus a Humvee that had an M240 machine gun mounted in its gun turret. You can't get much more profane than that.

Screw Facebook, Marines have websites of their own.

Finding 4chan and 8chan to be mostly cranky trolls, Billy Ray cruises the dark web, scrolling through posts written by cultural outliers. According to them, Jews, Marxists and Martians control the world. He also communicates regularly on Snapchat with Quentin R., by all accounts a Midwestern farmer. Squat and misogynistic, brown hair like a rag mop and a perpetual squint, Quentin is brusque to the point of rudeness.

Q R: Cant harvest crops cause I aint got no farmworkers. Dont tell me no different, U asshole.

B R: Well whose fault is that? Git some.

Q R: Cant as theyre all afraid the ICE gonna raid my farm. Nobody watches out for the farmer.

B R: I am here. U R there. What do I know, bro? Drive down to Walmart and hire day laborers.

Q R: Taint none.

B R: Fucked agin.

The world is thoroughly fucked up. Things are not getting better. Bad news out of Washington collides with bad news from the rest of the country. Systemic failures abound: The Harvard elites get hired by Wall Street and rape the country economically, leading to income inequality where the top 1% own 40% of the wealth. The Dow goes through the roof while Main Street dies.

Talk radio has become a cesspool of angry rightwing vilification and the Federal Communication Commission, assigned to ride herd on such vile behavior, has done nothing— *nothing!*— since about the time Ronnie Reagan privatized the White House. On the opposite side of this same coin, late night television is populated by lily-livered liberal snowflakes who make rude, crude jokes, disrespecting the President of the United States *all the time*. Nobody ever chastises *them* for being Politically Incorrect. Guess if any of those comedians has served in the Armed Forces. Fat chance!

Billionaire rightwing media mogul Rupert Murdoch, an Australian, bought 20th Century Fox and let Roger Ailes create Fox News as a nest of rightwing rhetoric. Reality television, espousing values on the level of *The Bachelor* and *Jersey Shore*, enthalls the nation.

“It all depends on what your definition of ‘is’ is” Bill Clinton declared, forever bending the American psyche totally out of shape. Then snake oil salesman Obama, a child, played Americans for fools. In reaction, a blowhard liar like Donald Trump could spring an Elmer Gantry tent revival on the American people and— with the help of Russian hackers— defeat Hillary Clinton, a woman candidate about as real as a three dollar bill.

America sucks, big time.

Our founding fathers— Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton— were landed gentry. Afraid of the Irish rabble in the cities taking over the country in free and democratic elections, these stalwart stewards of American independence constructed an “electoral college” where three of their rural votes equal one city vote. What they couldn’t envision was a dystopian future where the educated elites live in the cities and a host of backward morons wedded to guns and bibles lives in the countryside. *Surprise!* No wonder Americans elect either egomaniacs or dolts to be president. As Donald Trump complains, the system is rigged, but not like he thinks.

Maybe I should apply for TV work in North Korea, thinks Billy Ray. That or the far side of the moon.

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

Susie stops him as he is entering his cubicle. "Breaking news," she confides. "Weinstein may turn himself in."

Weinstein? Which Weinstein? Who Weinstein?

"Yes, but turn himself into what?" asks Billy Ray.

With a single, sour laugh, Susie makes a face and leaves. Not happy.

"Let's do a segment entitled 'Welcome to the Funny Farm'," suggests Rick Vallenti, eyes alight, sliding into Billy Ray's cubicle as soon as Susie departs.

"Don't be a wise ass. It's a *news* show," Billy Ray reminds him.

"You know, political sketches," Rick enthuses, smiling from ear to ear, kind of rubbing his hands together in glee.

"It's a half hour news show."

"Our take on the news. Political satire. Pick up where John Stewart and 'The Daily Show' left off."

"Everybody always wants to replicate the success of 'The Daily Show'," sighs Billy Ray. "You're bored as floor manager? You want additional responsibilities? I know a florist who could use an assistant."

"I could produce it!" insists Rick, not even blushing. "I'm trained. What's not to like?"

"Our viewers won't like it if we start dabbling in satire, that's what," replies Billy Ray, appalled. "This is not Comedy Central. Stick to floor managing, which you're good at. Talk to HR about openings on other shows."

"Yeah, but you only produce this one show," bleats Rick, looking a little lost.

"Talk with other producers," Billy Ray counsels. "I don't want to take on any more responsibility, but you can branch out. I'm satisfied with what I've got."

"You're not helping," sulks Rick.

"Well, I'm sorry," Billy Ray tells him, shrugging. "I ain't takin' on any more shows."

Everybody's a comedian. Everyone has their own agenda.

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He takes Southern Parkway to Riverview Drive, turns right at the light and heads up the hill to the overlook. Getting out of the truck to stretch, he inhales deeply the swampy odor of the river, so different from downtown. He notes that he's alone, the only other vehicle a blue Boxer with a crackle finish. Custom paint job. Then two kids come out of the woods, a boy and a girl, jumping in surprise when they see him.

"Whassup?" he asks.

"Yeah, hey," mutters the boy. Stringy chestnut brown hair, a scruffy beard, dressed in jeans, a dirty white t-shirt and sandals, he looks guilty as sin.

"You a cop?" whines the girl, squinting at him in the afternoon sunlight. With her unkempt blond hair, *Metallica* t-shirt and skimpy brown shorts, she would be cute if she ever unscrunched that face of hers.

"Me? Hell, no."

"Whadya doin' up here, mister?" asks the boy, hands on hips, getting ornery.

"Fuck you," replies Billy Ray, chuckling good-naturedly. "I come up here to get away from these kind of hassles."

And just like that, the boy whips out a gun. He reaches in back with his right hand and pulls a silver-colored .38 from a holster in the waistband of his jeans.

The three of them stand in the parking area, the gurgling of the river echoing in the background. The vibe is not good.

"I'm a combat vet," Billy Ray calmly reasons with the young man, getting more and more annoyed. "Point yer weapon to one side, please." He feels himself trembling. The last thing he wants is a case of "the shakes" when someone is waving a gun at him.

"Ya shouldn't disrespect people," lectures the boy. Is he stoned? His eyes look pretty wild.

"Disrespect who? Disrespect you?" scoffs Billy Ray incredulously. *Jesus!* Who is in charge here?

"He's cool, Jimmy," says the girl.

Giving Billy Ray a long, brooding look, the boy returns the gun to its holster.

If Billy Ray smoked, he'd want a cig right about now.

Going to their car, the youngsters pluck a blanket out of the trunk and wander back into the woods, leaving Billy Ray to fantasize over the range of illegal activity in which they can be involved. Obviously, sex. Rape, if molesting squirrels counts as rape. Possible drug use. Trespassing... if there's anything in the woods worth trespassing upon. Illegal discharge of a weapon? Espionage? Secretly depositing microfilm at a dead drop? Spying on the river, yes, but what's on the river? Soggy tree trunks. Terrorism: planting IED's, pouring LSD in the water supply.

Vaping?!

Thank God I'm not young anymore, he sighs, driving home. *The young waste so much energy on feeling insecure.*

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

An afternoon thunderstorm is tearing across the region. As the sky grows dark, Billy Ray hustles down to the basement in bare feet and positions himself in the doorway to the backyard. Over the storm drain. As the heavens are split wide open by a bolt of lightning and a thunderclap, sheets of rain come pouring down the concrete steps. Billy Ray plucks leaves, twigs and grass as they collect in the swirling vortex over the drain. Two inches of rain fall in as many minutes. There is no way for the drain to handle such a deluge. Unamused, Billy Ray keeps brushing debris from the drain, even as a massive puddle jumps the doorsill and inexorably pools around his feet. Cursing volubly, he gets a broom. Feeling like Hercules, he fruitlessly brushes water back out the door.

"Imagine if I hadn't been home to handle this shit," he muses. Having experienced his share of flooded basements, he wonders if Jay-Z and Beyoncé have to deal with these things. "All very nice to struggle in a recording studio," he chants to himself, "but when it's time to clean gunk out of the drain, where are all you famous people at?"

As a Marine, Billy Ray isn't oblivious to the irony that he, a Southern boy, feels envious of black performers. "Well," he figures, "Billy Ray Cyrus and Britney Spears have already had their fair share of flooded basements, too. That's the South."

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

Danny O'Brian makes himself a late brunch in the kitchen of the frat house and readies his books for class. He can't understand how people can drink coffee and insist it perks them up, when everybody knows it takes six to eight hours for your body to digest your food. He sees on Facebook that the Catholic fellowship to which he belongs is having an organizational meeting to nail down the summer schedule. He notes the date and time using the calendar app on his phone. Also on Facebook, Danny finds himself reading "The Indemnified Rules of Modern Baseball. First Draft. Revised." Plowing through descriptions of equipment and players, he arrives at

<< *Rule 53: Bean Ball* – A batter hit in the head by a pitch shall be deemed a "bean ball" and immediately proceed to first base. A ball passing within an inch of a batter's head but making no contact with the batting helmet shall be judged a "no-brainer." In which case, play will continue uninterrupted. >>

Turning on the TV in the common room, Danny becomes engrossed in a re-run of *Survivor*. He whiles away the afternoon channel-surfing.

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

Lobsters.

The local grocery store has a 55-gallon lobster tank. An aquarium really, the glass is a quarter inch thick, the edges sealed in black rubber. A white plastic pump recycles the water through two bubbly plastic tubes, keeping the lobsters alive and healthy until someone comes and selects one for dinner. Like everyone else, Billy Ray taps the side of the tank with his fingers, trying to attract the attention of the denizens within. These are Maine lobsters, their claws enormous, held shut with colored rubber bands. This is to keep the lobsters from fighting.

Most lobsters are like toddlers, focusing on whatever is within their grasp and that's about all. They aren't preoccupied with the world at large.

Looking into the tank, the light refracted by the thickness of the glass, it is hard to say how we, the outside world, appear to them, the lobsters. They can see us, that's for sure, but the rest is conjecture.

Today the grocery has gotten in about a dozen lobsters. Too many for the tank, the monsters are crawling over each other. Some are orange, some mottled almost black. A few have bits of seaweed adhering to their shells, but these are the biggest and oldest, true leviathans of the deep. So maybe Billy Ray should have passed them by, not bent

over the side of the tank and peered within. A lobster stares back on the other side of the glass, its black beady eyes on stalks, with a discernible attitude of “What do *you* want?” Careful not to read anything into that stare, not to anthropomorphize his antagonist, Billy Ray is never-the-less thoroughly unnerved by the confrontation, communicating with a creature from another realm, another ecosystem. Hopefully the lobster is too near-sighted to make him out, but that’s not what the lobster implies. It has Billy Ray’s number and it isn’t forgiving Billy Ray or any of the rest of us for catching it in a trap, rubber-banding its claws, shipping it to the grocery and dumping it in a tank. This lobster had once been free to roam the coast. Even with limited intelligence, it knows the difference between freedom and confinement.

“Can I help you, sir?” asks the Asian girl who works behind the seafood counter.

“You realize, of course, that this is death row,” he points out.

“Sir?” she asks. “These are lobsters. I can get my scoop.” How old is this girl? Twenty? In her white apron and hairnet, she resembles a cardboard cutout. A round face, she queries him with those brown eyes of hers. Another creature from another world.

“None of these lobsters are ever going to get a reprieve. None of them will ever get to wander free again in the ocean. This is the last stop. Every one of them is here until the end. All they have to look forward to is getting steamed to death.”

“How many would you like?” asks the girl. It’s not even certain how much English she speaks, the way her sentences come out in short bursts.

“I’m not going to tip over the tank and liberate the lobsters as we’re nowhere near the ocean,” Billy Ray remarks in a friendly fashion. “Who knows, I may come back, buy them all and drive them back up to Maine.”

“We cook them right on the premises,” offers the clerk, smiling helpfully.

Billy Ray knows that smile. It’s the smile which the Chinese give you when they are embarrassed by “a big nose,” an uncouth westerner. It’s the apologetic smile which the Japanese present when confronting the grossness of a *gaijin*, a foreigner. It’s the smile which the Vietnamese use to express pity over your inability to do things in the correct—that is, Vietnamese— fashion.

“Let me get my manager,” offers the clerk, smiling that smile. She hurries away.

Thoroughly versed in this scenario, Billy Ray murmurs a heartfelt goodbye to the lobster and leaves before the store manager has time to call the police.

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President Trump's latest team of lawyers now predicts an early end to the Mueller investigation. "The Department of Justice serves the president at his discretion," insisted legal counsel Manny Fold at an afternoon press briefing. "The president cannot be charged in a criminal investigation, he cannot be indicted, only impeached. The president cannot be charged with obstruction of justice, as he can disband a federal investigation whenever he feels like it and for any reason. The whole of this investigation is based on a fake news story and never should have been begun in the first place. It's all lies and unsubstantiated innuendo. There is no there there. I never saw any Russians during the campaign, ergo, there were no Russians! We are sure our client, the president, will be vindicated and the parties responsible for this horrendous miscarriage of justice will be held to account."

– WhoNews

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

Smoke.

By the side of the parkway, great billowing white clouds of smoke rise toward the heavens.

Caught in the resultant traffic jam, Billy Ray's first reaction is annoyance. "I pay my taxes," he growls to himself, "why can't they keep traffic moving?" A 40- or 50-car lineup, he realizes nobody's going anywhere. So, grabbing a JVC HD video camera off the seat— there for exactly these kind of situations— Billy Ray gets out of his truck to investigate. Seeing him, others follow.

It's a burning car, roaring, in flames, a police car parked well away on each side, lights flashing. The acrid white smoke smells like death. Billy Ray hasn't seen a burning automobile since Iraq.

He video-films the wreck. Looking for witnesses, he approaches a cop. "Channel 8, Eyewitness News," he explains.

"So what?" asks the cop, hands on hips, monitoring the calamity in a perfunctory manner.

"Anybody hurt?"

"Does it matter?" asks the policeman.

“It matters to me.”

“Okay, it’s a rental car and no one was hurt,” admits the officer, pointing to a forlorn-looking man and woman pacing back and forth by the side of the road. “Rented to Indians. We think they might have left the emergency brake on and it overheated.”

“Indians? You mean, like, Native Americans?”

“I mean... Indians from Calcutta,” mutters the cop, making a face.

“Mind if I talk with them?”

“It’s a free country. I can’t very well stop you,” replies the cop with a shrug. “It’s a non-starter. Big deal, their luggage is gone. Insurance oughtta cover the rest. Wasn’t even a very expensive make of car.”

“What make of car was it?”

“Who cares? What difference does it make?” insists the cop, looking at Billy Ray like he’s five kinds of moron.

Trotting back to his truck, Billy Ray grabs a tripod from under the seat.

“Is that your car burning?” he asks the couple. “If so, what happened?” He’s got the camera mounted on the tripod, aimed right at the flaming wreck. He’s positioned himself and the Indians in the foreground, checked his focus and made sure the Rec light is on.

“This is a very bad calamity,” explains the man, wringing his hands. “We did not expect this.”

“No, of course not. Was the car acting up?”

“You know, back home in Calcutta, cars catch fire quite often.” He pronounces “often” like it’s two words, “off-ten.” Holding up his hands helplessly, he looks at his wife, quietly suffering by the side of the road. “Now the police claim we destroyed this car.”

“Well... That’s not what the police told me,” Billy Ray argues. “You might have accidentally left the brake on— ”

“If they claim we intentionally destroyed the car, the insurance company won’t pay and we will be ruined economically.”

“Well, it might have been an accident,” Billy Ray suggests soothingly. “It’s America. Accidents happen all the time.”

“Yes, but not if you are an Indian immigrant,” insists the fellow doggedly.

Who am I to tell him he's wrong? thinks Billy Ray. *Maybe he has reason to worry. I'm not an insurance investigator. What do I know? Are they legals? Illegals? Maybe their Green Cards aren't in order.*

Thanking the couple, Billy Ray moves the camera to one side to get a slightly different angle. Then he does a stand-up: "I'm on Southern Parkway facing town," he explains, "the scene of a horrendous accident. A burning automobile has stopped traffic in both directions, as billowing white smoke threatens visibility and fouls the atmosphere. The Indian couple who rented the car seem most concerned about culpability. In the meantime, there will be one less automobile contributing to rush hour congestion and global warming in our neighborhood."

Dismantling his equipment, he takes out his phone, shoots some video and posts it to Sommers, Rudziak and the other members of his Marine Corps network. "Smells like team spirit," he texts. Some things you just gotta share. Yet, afterwards, Billy Ray feels strangely empty.

He doesn't tell the Indians, but the combination of their finicky, boring interview and the billowing smoke looks hilariously mismatched. It's like something straight out of *Seinfeld*. Big catastrophe, little worries.

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

"Penny?" asks her mother brightly from the foot of the dinner table. "A prayer, please, dear."

Billy Ray tunes out his wife, staring up at the moose head mounted on the white-painted wall. *Don't hardly seem fair*, he surmises. *Rather you than me, bro*.

Penny meanwhile is reciting in a schoolgirl cadence: "Dear Lord, forgive us our daily bread and those who trespass against us. For thine is the power and the glory and the kingdom, forever and ever. Amen."

"Amen!" chime in her parents distractedly.

Dinner with his in-laws is always a cultural experience. Walter Scott, a country club Republican and Rotarian, isn't so much crabby as critical. The old man *always* steers the conversation to politics. *Always*. Dressed in chinos, loafers and a white shirt, Billy Ray has come to expect a lot of griping. Venting over crooked pols is the old man's hobbyhorse. "Paul Rand is an ass-hole," his father-in-law announces, passing a tureen

of loaded potatoes. “Big government, small government, who gives a shit as long as they get the job done? Which they never do!”

“Now, Walter...” says his wife, rolling her eyes and tut-tutting.

“*Them as has, gits!* Tha’s what we said when I was young,” insists the old man, raising his glass in a miniature toast. “*Them as has, gits!* You know what the Hollywood moguls did in the 1930’s? They rubbed their hands with pumice stones, so they’d have calluses and could pass as ordinary working stiffs when and if a revolution overtook the country.”

“Now, Walter...”

“Hawaii has plenty of pumice stone, what with the eruption— ” suggests Billy Ray. Working in the news division, there are things he could tell them about the situation in Hawaii. Since the Scotts have an old-fashioned lava lamp in their den, he could tell them that hot lava hitting seawater can generate steam clouds of deadly hydrochloric acid. Since everything the Scotts touch eventually turns to ashes, Billy Ray could inform them that volcanic ash is composed of tiny shards of glass less than two millimeters in length. He could tell them that in any given year, all the world’s volcanos spew as much CO₂ into the atmosphere as the state of Ohio. Either Ohio is a profligate polluter or volcanic damage to the atmosphere over thousands of years ain’t been that much.

But the Scotts march to their own rhythm. Getting blank looks, Billy Ray lets his myriad thoughts die on the vine.

“Daddy, there ain’t no revolution overtaking America,” Penny lisps coquettishly, batting her eyelashes. Dressed for the evening as Marie Antoinette, in lace, every word out of her mouth sounds like an anachronism. “Maybe a bar fight or two, sweet’ums, but... revolution?... I... don’t... think... so! And you know why?” she says, having a sudden brainstorm.

“No, why, honey?” asks her mom.

Billy Ray stifles a groan. Just barely.

“ ‘Cause everybody’s at home watchin’ TV!”

Working in television, he can’t very well complain about his wife’s opinion. Add the fact that her father now owns the TV station. A recent purchase, Walter stepped in and bought it when the previous owner made some bad investments and found his portfolio sinking in a quagmire of red ink. Since theirs is a small town, it was an amicable takeover. Editorially, it made no difference whatsoever.

“Guess who’s coming to dinner?” Penny bursts out, a wolfish grin on her face. There’s a moment of confusion before she divulges her discovery: “Ants!” The others stare stonily

while she crushes an uninvited scout right on the white linen tablecloth with a single well-manicured finger of her left hand.

“Penny!” scolds her mother. “Decorum, dear.”

“Billy Ray, m’boy,” says his father-in-law, downing a slug of bourbon on the rocks. After a couple hundred of these confrontations, Billy Ray no longer tenses up, merely awaiting the next outrageous remark. “Y’ never regale us with any of your war stories, boy! Why is that?”

“Huh?” grunts Billy Ray, thinking to himself, *Holy shit!* Making a stab at being a good Christian, he is trying to avoid uttering profanities at the dinner table. “What would you like to know?” he asks. “I fought in Helmand province in Afghanistan, humping 40 pounds of equipment and a high-tech rifle, killing people. It were a total waste of time. When I finished that chicken khaki, I ended up in Iraq, fighting alongside the *Peshmerga*. Ag’in, humpin’ equipment and killin’ people.”

“Ah-h-h, honey,” Penny chastises him. “Tha’s hardly the right attitude.”

Billy Ray loves the Marine Corps, but he doesn’t think it defines him. When he was ready to leave, he left. He has also learned to never mention being in touch with members of his old unit. Were he to admit that, it inevitably leads to Penny asking *exactly who else* he corresponds with. Like many great beauties, Penny is insanely jealous.

“Now, now!” interjects her father. “Boy’s got a point. Some of that military hardware came from my company. I don’t have any sons...” As he clears his throat and stares into his nearly empty glass of bourbon, his wife Patricia titters, embarrassed. “But if I had, I am not so damn sure— *not so damn sure*— I would send them off to war.”

“Well, the military— ” begins Billy Ray, but the old man isn’t done with his thought, apparently. He talks right over Billy Ray.

“Oh, I could have had a passel of children, by gum! But my wife...” He tips his empty glass toward Patricia, who is blushing crimson. “She has an extremely *delicate* constitution.”

“Oh, daddy!” giggles Penny.

Billy Ray isn’t ready to have kids, and Penny refuses to share her life with a third party. He realizes that this leaves them with a somewhat brittle marriage, but he figures there’s still time. They are young. Or youngish.

As for Walter’s wife Patricia, she is a breast cancer survivor who has walked the Susan G. Komen 5K *Race for the Cure*. Billy Ray is glad that Patricia had a mastectomy and

that her cancer has gone into remission. *Bravo!* Well done. Who can be opposed to eradicating breast cancer? *Nobody!* And he understands that everyone needs a support group. But he's not sure how grateful they are supposed to be to the Susan G. Komen Foundation. The world's largest nonprofit source of money for the fight against breast cancer, they have spent more than 2.6 billion dollars on cancer programs in 30 countries, while over 1 million women have walked or run in their events in the last 24 years. *So where's the cure?* Billy Ray wants to know. *You buys your ticket, you expects a ride.* He has done 20-mile ruck marches with a 40-pound pack on his back and nobody paid him a dime. To him, Susan G. Komen seems like just another cash cow.

"You know, Penny, when your mother and I were young," explains Walter Scott expansively, "we used to drive up to Lookout Point, over the river, on Saturday nights and watch the submarine races."

"Oh, that," exclaims Patricia, laughing.

"I don't know why we called our lovemaking 'watching the submarine races,' but our parents called it that, so we did, too."

Billy Ray likes his father-in-law best when his softer side comes through. "You must have been quite the swordsman," he suggests appreciatively.

"Oh, I held up my end of the bargain," the old man smiles, lost in memories.

About to excuse himself and leave the table, Billy Ray gets pulled up short by the old man's next salvo: "We elected Donald Trump to take back the country from Obama, Hillary and the libs. So far the guy's a dud, I grant you, but his presidency is only a year old. It's way too early to tell."

Fuck!

"I'm sure you're right," Billy Ray murmurs diplomatically, looking down at his plate.

"Don't pander me, boy!" thunders the old man, a sign he's had enough liquor for one evening. "Don't grovel!"

"Wouldn't think of it, sir," sighs Billy Ray, a stubborn look on his face. Under the table, he's balled his hands into fists, but there's no reason to let them see that. "Trump likes the pageantry of big events, international conferences and military parades, not the wonkish study of details or nailing down policy. His style is pompous unpredictability and broad strokes," suggest Billy Ray, no longer giving a damn.

Dinner at his in-laws always makes Billy Ray feel like re-enlisting in the Marine Corps.

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

President Trump has nominated Humpty Dumpty to guard the border with Mexico. “Mr. Dumpty has Great Experience with Walls,” the president tweeted this morning. “We expect Great Things from this appointment.” – WhoNews

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

Danny O’Brian and his frat brothers storm into Betty’s Bar at 8 p.m. and chase away the fresh meat sitting at their fave table. Two of the young girls in that group look ready to argue, but when Mitch the Bitch lunges for their breasts, squawking like a demented chicken, they are only too happy to find another table... or maybe a whole ’nother establishment.

“Beer pong!” shouts Danny. Taking command, he sends Franklin and David to the bar to get the pitchers of beer. A waitress comes by with a tray of glasses and puts them and napkins on the table. “Hey, bitch, what are ya doin’ later tonight?” drawls Danny, leaning back in his chair knowingly.

“Nothing you can handle,” growls the waitress. Cocking one hip and smiling sourly, she sashays away.

Danny and his gang are well-known at Betty’s.

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

Billy Ray’s neighbor Alvin Hunter stands in his backyard, armed with an aerosol can. Alarmed, Billy Ray goes over to join him. “Whatcha got there, Al?” he asks.

“Bee-killer,” Alvin replies. “My annual war against those big, black carpenter bees.”

The joke is that one of these bees is, even as they speak, bobbing into and out of Alvin’s garden shed.

“I’m waiting for the wind to shift. You’re supposed to stand upwind of this stuff,” explains Alvin. “It says on the label we should avoid inhaling the contents of the can.”

No shit! thinks Billy Ray.

There are campaigns afloat nationally to save the honeybee from extinction, yet here is Alvin— and Billy Ray’s other neighbors— wielding nerve gas in a desperate struggle to save their homes and sheds. By killing off carpenter bees. Tired of killing, Billy Ray objects on principle, but how can he criticize? Those big, black, bumbling bees do real damage. They honeycomb the wood, giving it the consistency of a sponge, leading to structural collapse.

Man versus nature. The eternal battle between *homo sapiens* and the insect kingdom, rodents, wolves, mountain lions, disease, hurricanes, windstorms, floods, economic depression and anything else that gets in our way. Man as conquering hero, aerosol can at the ready.

Billy Ray can feel the shittiness of modern life closing in.

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At the TV station’s mandatory monthly meeting, it would seem that Wally, the station manager, once again has overshot the mark. This month’s guest speaker is the Reverend Joshua Donets and the topic is “Cyber Security in the Age of Sodom.” Half the attendees are surreptitiously checking messages on their smartphones. Social media wins again.

“Where was God when Home Depot was hacked?” demands the reverend indignantly. Dressed in black and a fine white collar, he bobs and weaves behind the lectern like a kite in a windstorm. “It is time to take computers out of the hands of geeky security freaks and place our faith once again in the hands of Christians. Amen.”

“What are we talking here?” a heckler shouts from somewhere in the back row. “The Holy Roman Empire?”

“Um, wait a sec— ” Wally intercedes, rising from his folding chair, looking more than ever like a frightened squirrel. But there’s no stopping the clergyman.

“Twenty years ago,” he assures them sternly, frowning, “we knew all too well Satan’s face: Bill Clinton’s, suspiciously like our own. Today, not so much. *Animals!* That’s what we have become. Animals!”

“Who are the animals?” demands Wally plaintively, hoping to defuse a disaster in the making. “Can you be more specific?”

There's a lot of scraping of chairs as people rise to leave.

"Why, the young radicals!" insists the clergyman. "The godless young people supporting sodomy—"

"He means gay rights," Ronnie Hall points out.

"— free love, abortion, anti-gun legislation," thunders the reverend, shifting suddenly into high gear, "and other foolishness that will leave us at the mercy of the Muslim hordes, that will empower our enemies and that shall embolden those who trespass against us! We—"

"THANK YOU, PADRE!" shouts Billy Ray, jumping to his feet and rushing to the front of the room to ostentatiously shake the good reverend's hand. "Marvelous speech, sir! Truly marvelous," he insists, while his coworkers take the opportunity to make their getaway *en masse*.

"I wasn't finished. I want to talk about North Korea—"

"Take my word for it, you were finished," Billy Ray assures him. "Wally, pay the reverend and get him out of here."

Sheepishly, uttering meaningless pleasantries, Wally forcibly escorts the reverend back to his office. "I see the hand of God in every sunset," he assures the visitor, prattling away. "Don't you find it to be true? Of course, some days are more God-like than others. Red sunsets are caused by sulfur dioxide in the upper atmosphere. Have you ever been to Barbados? Some of the world's most beautiful sunsets are on display in Barbados."

Bemused, Billy Ray goes to the lounge and grabs a cup of joe.

"What did the Reverend Donut say when Wally threw him out of the building?" asks Susie Spencer, busy gorging on a candy bar from the vending machine.

"Wally threatened to call security and the reverend complained '*But that was the topic of my talk!*' I kind of stopped listening after that," Billy Ray admits.

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

He can't even turn on the radio in his truck without hearing Little Marco and the Rubes performing their rap update of Leslie Gore's *It's My Party*:

“It’s my party, the Repub Party. I’ll cry if’n I wants, I could *die* if’n I wants. Y’all would spill a thousand tears if it done happen 2 U. Like, you would cry a bucket. Say what? U would cry 2, if it happen 2 U.”

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

At what point does one’s cup runneth over? If you live long enough, you experience everything. Throwing darts at the wall calendar in the kitchen. One thing is certain, Billy Ray can’t live here anymore. This isn’t the America he grew up in. A bipolar nation, the dichotomy is killing him. Each side hates the other. It’s civil war, red state against blue state, hinterland against the coasts. Donald Trump is the beneficiary of wounds that have festered for years.

Oh sure, Billy Ray can go talk with his folks, but his mom, an elementary school teacher, and his dad, working in heavy construction, are even more bitter than Billy Ray about the State of the Union.

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

In high school, they read Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and George Orwell’s *1984*, the alpha and omega of social dystopias. It amazed Billy Ray that neither the teacher nor his classmates focused on the actual premise of *1984*: That revolution would never come by way of the uneducated proletariat, obviously stuck in their rut, groveling in the mud. No, as the Confederacy and the French Revolution showed, lasting rebellion requires a basic level of learning. The true revolt will be among the worker bees, the drones, of America’s heartland. Trump’s supporters, Nixon’s “silent majority,” red-staters, “The Forgotten Man” in all his multitudes.

Winston Smith’s complaint in *1984* is that he is a party member living miserably from hand to mouth while his access to universal health care and a 401K are virtually nonexistent. Winston burns with envy over the luxuries afforded members of the Inner Party, but he lacks their talent, their mastery of the system and their ability to overachieve.

Wash, rinse, repeat. *Where am I?* wonders Billy Ray. Never as rich as Elon Musk, not as capable as Warren Buffett nor as talented as Michael Jackson, Billy Ray can identify with Winston Smith’s frustration. He can identify with that. In spades. Thanks to the

Internet, so fast and ubiquitous, every waking minute is a constant achy breaky reminder that *other people* are far outpacing him. They are getting ahead while he is making do. When is he going to get his 15 minutes of fame? When comes his moment in the sun? Billy Ray thought that he had some control over his life, but he finds that even here in America, the greatest nation on Earth, being a square peg in a round hole is extremely confining.

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“How do we handle this? How do we fuckin’ handle this?” bellows Wally, sagging against a wall in the hallway. His clothes a mess, he clutches his phone in one hand and literally tears at his scalp with the other.

“Calm down, Wally,” Billy Ray suggests. Grabbing him by the shoulder, he pulls his hand away from his head. “You’re Big Kahuna, but I’ll handle the news.”

“I’ve been on the phone with Judy in Washington. She wants to throw the book at President Trump.”

“Wally, with Donald Trump, the rules don’t apply— ”

“She’s screaming angry. She thinks Trump has brought on World War Three!”

“Jesus, Wally, put a cork in it,” pleads Billy Ray. “I’ll handle the newscast. Your job is to pay the electric bill and see that there are paper towels in the men’s room.”

Billy Ray is impressed by the confident sound of his own voice, but inside, he is trembling. President Trump pulling out of the nuclear summit with Kim Jong Un is not the smoothest card in the deck. He feels like he’s standing at the side of the parkway again, watching still another automobile burn to the ground. Why does this keep happening? Why are human beings so weak and stupid?

By the time they go on air, there’s at least a semblance of order. Fair and balanced, they present the unraveling as a smorgasbord of possibilities, some good, some bad. Ronnie plucks out the few hopeful things Trump says in his letter to Kim Jong Un. While they flash on the screen the image of the commemorative challenge coin issued by the White House, Susie, while neither warm nor fuzzy, plays the emotional angle, claiming the North Koreans are soulless ideologues who never can be trusted. “Life for them is a poker game,” she insists, parroting President Trump’s description of Chinese President Xi Jinping as an exceptional poker player.

Judy in Washington lays the blame for the fiasco totally at the feet of John Bolton and Mike Pence. “The loudmouth boys,” she calls them, “full of bellicose bull and lacking even rudimentary skill at international diplomacy.”

Red meat, a smiling Ronnie asks her to develop that thought.

“Ronnie,” explains Judy shrilly, “you don’t insult your negotiating partner before you even sit down at the table. You don’t prosecute your case in public. The whole purpose of negotiations is to reach an accord in a staid and deliberate manner. If you go into the meeting kicking and screaming, the other side folds their tent and goes home.”

“But the North Koreans never let us reach the table!”

“Ronnie, ‘face’ means everything in Asia. Public opinion. This administration was well on its way to a triumphant summit, but the boys couldn’t keep their mouths shut. Examine the chronology. Every time we Americans made a stupid, insulting, saber-rattling pronouncement, the North Koreans pulled that much farther away.”

“But they didn’t even come to the planning session in Singapore!”

“We had already started calling them names by then. We had already started making demands. Bolton was talking about ‘the Libya model’ while Trump bragged about what we Americans would do to the North Koreans at the negotiating table. Our bellicose rhetoric scotched the deal. They may be North Koreans, but they have their pride. Why should they participate in a negotiation when America acts like we are in charge?”

“I’m not buying it, Judy. The heartland isn’t buying it. The North Koreans are not dependable negotiating partners,” insists Ronnie. Trying to maintain a serious demeanor, his glee keeps peeking through that guilty smile of his.

“We pissed it all away, Ronnie. This one is gone. Thank Donald Trump. For nothing. North Korea and South Korea can settle their differences, using China as an honest broker. This makes America look weak and childish, while the North Koreans come away looking like the adults in the room. Afraid of failure, Little Donnie picked up his bag of marbles and went home. This is Judith McGuire reporting from the nation’s capital.”

Her sign-off is so abrupt, for a split second, everyone stands in the studio looking like deer caught in the headlights.

“Go to break!” shouts Billy Ray, sweating in the control room. Miguel toggles to recorded advertisements.

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

¿*Qué pasa?* Standing in the parking lot, one hand on the overheated door handle of the pickup truck, Billy Ray feels right confused. Unsure. He puts on his sunglasses. Maybe he has “Gillette syndrome,” named after a dead-end town in Wyoming, a constant unease over the total lack of solutions to America’s problems.

If the country is irreconcilably split down the middle, he muses, where does that leave me?

Split. Down the middle.

He feels as if there’s a mushroom cloud hanging over his head. How many missiles hath Minot, North Dakota? Can there really be 150 long-range nuclear missiles in hardened silos? Billy Ray has Memorial Day creep, it’s the one day of the year when he doesn’t feel proud about his service. The dead call out to him, consolingly. It is the living who are the problem.

He could do like the farmer who drove his tractor in protest into a fountain in Washington, DC. Or the mailman who piloted a gyrocopter onto the front lawn of the U. S. Capitol to protest the corruption of money in politics. Or the rifle-toting dude who shot a padlock off a cupboard in the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in downtown Washington, convinced by conspiracy theorists on the Internet that Hillary Clinton and John Podesta were running a child-sex ring out of the building’s nonexistent basement. Or he could shoot up the likes of Gabrielle Giffords at a campaign event. As a way of saying, “*Here I am, the Forgotten Man! Welcome to reality, you pond scum!*”

But it’s already been done.

Lee Harvey Oswald and John F. Kennedy. James Earl Ray and Martin Luther King. Sirhan Sirhan and Bobby Kennedy. John Hinckley Jr. and Ronald Reagan.

You can’t even shoot up a Congressional baseball game. Somebody has already been there and done that. There’s nothing new under heaven.

Like Theodore J. Kaczynski, the Unabomber, Billy Ray wants to swoop down like an avenging angel, strike, and then disappear into the heat haze of short attention span America.

Where to begin?

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

Presto, change-o! Koreagate is back on again. The president's summit with Kim Jong Un will take place on June 12 in Singapore. Or not. At least everyone has learned to correctly spell the marshal's name: Kim Jong Un. The summit is on. Or it's not on. = Koreagate.

– WhoNews

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

“You always hurt the one you love.” What song? What artist?

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

Cradling the Mauser, he finds her in the living room, doing God knows what. All dolled up, pretty as a picture. Hair, makeup, clothes, jewelry, everything about her screams “Fifth Avenue! Money!”

“Hello,” she whines. “Where have you been hiding?”

“Yeah, where haven't I been?” he sighs, contemplating how in the world he ever got involved in the first place with this incredible minx. Here he is, holding a rifle, and she doesn't bat an eyelid. That takes guts. Usually, he admires guts.

“Fuck my brains out, Billy boy” she suggests, giving him a look and giggling knowingly. Penny's solution to every crisis.

“Fuck yer own brains out,” he replies, a kaleidoscope of emotions churning inside of him. He feels like chucking up lunch. He may pass out. If he waits any longer, he's going to sit down on the carpet and do absolutely nothing the entire rest of the day. Doesn't she see that he's armed and ready to blow her brains out? *Hello-o!* What does she think the rifle is for? “Death cleaning,” he announces, unsure if the Swedes would appreciate his variation on their trendy philosophy.

“That's new,” she remarks, sidling up to him, her fingertips caressing the polished brown wooden stock of the Mauser. Bright red painted nails on wood, cobwebs drawn on her eyelids, white teeth and a cackling laugh. Transported, he's helpless once again in her gaze.

Impulsively, he squeezes the trigger on his "96 Gustav"... *Bang!* The rifle jumps in his hands with a single loud retort.

He watches as plaster flies off the wall.

"*Shit!*" screams his wife. "*Are you out of yer fuckin' mind?*" Furious, hands on hips, spittle flying, she launches into a litany of complaint: Why don't they have any friends? Why doesn't he get a better job at a higher salary? Why is he always mooning around in a blue funk? Why does she have to do all the work in the bedroom? When is he going to grow up and stop groveling at her feet? When is he going to tell off her parents...

Cradling the rifle, he waits, letting the torrent of bitter words roll over him. *Who is this person she is talking about?* he wonders, amazed and amused in spite of everything. It sure doesn't sound like him.

Kachung! He works the bolt action on the rifle, ejecting the empty shell and driving a fresh round into the chamber.

Red-faced, seething, Penny glares at him. "I'm gonna tell my daddy!" she announces, pretty nose in the air. Getting no reply, she walks out on him, one, two three, purse in hand, cellphone, car keys. He stands as if stunned. Leaving the front door open, Penny sashays out to her Lexus.

He could pursue her, but what would be the point? He's surprised to find that he is actually glad to see her go. Another weight off his shoulders. *Jesus! Who knew? Win some, lose some.*

Overtaken by a murderous rage, stupefied by it, he walks into his workshop. "Blame it on the culture," he yammers, surprised at the sound of his own voice and realizing that he is sounding crazier by the second. "Blame it on MAGA, blame it on guns or the NRA, blame it on the Second Amendment, global warming, pussy hats, libtards and, of course, Obama. Blame ever'thing on Obama." He doesn't know what he is going to do, but he is going to do something.

He fills a satchel with a wooden box of reloads, cleans up some rags and peers into his gun safe. Locking the door, he pockets the key. *No reason to take an AR-15 to a knife fight*, he reasons. Letting himself out of the house, satchel and rifle in one hand, he carefully locks the door and, with a swinging motion, drops the key under the rubber welcome mat. *Plop!* goes the black rubber mat, falling back into place.

Billy Ray gets into his red pickup truck.

"Hey there, Billy Ray," calls out his neighbor Alvin, approaching pleasantly, a clipboard, a pen and a wad of fliers in his hands. "Y'all got a minute?"

“No, I’m kinda booked,” insists Billy Ray, starting the engine.

“I’d like to tell you about Gretchen Holleback who is running for the Board of Supervisors,” Alvin explains with a smile. Soft sell.

“Maybe later. Maybe never,” chants Billy Ray, putting the pickup truck in gear and pulling out of the driveway.

“At least sign the petition! So she can get on the ballot!” Alvin calls out pleadingly.

Fuck!

Putting the truck in neutral, Billy Ray gently eases the safety on the Mauser to the firing position. He feels clumsy climbing out of the truck with such a long-barreled device. He gets his feet on the ground before hauling it out.

“Wow!” says Alvin admiringly. “That’s quite a piece you got there.” Walking up, he strokes the barrel.

Completely disarming Billy Ray. “Here, hold this,” he says, handing Alvin the rifle. “Where do I sign?”

This exchange will make Mr. Alvin Hunter something of a local celebrity when Billy Ray becomes an underground phenomenon. Of course, Alvin also gets to chat interminably with the police, the FBI, the CIA and the state attorney general regarding Billy Ray’s alleged high crimes and misdemeanors. “I didn’t know he had it in him,” pleads Alvin at the beginning and the end of most conversations regarding his one-time neighbor. A political activist, Alvin stays on message. It’s what he does.

Gretchen Holleback also wins a seat on the Board of Supervisors.

“So it’s not all a total loss,” as Billy Ray would say.

*****TBD*****TBD*****TBD*****

The clock is ticking.

An icon of social media, an avatar of Second Amendment rights and a ghost, Billy Ray has left a trail of IP addresses all across the country, seemingly in several sanctuary cities on both coasts simultaneously. Since he and a hundred like him are still out there and they are driving the authorities crazy, I feel it is appropriate to tell his tale.

They are not all Marines, but they are all tough customers. A little bloodthirsty, definitely southern, learning by doing, “where there’s a will, there’s a way,” they are demonstrating that Donald Trump isn’t the only one in charge. Obviously libertarians, even if it’s an extreme form of libertarianism, they stand one step beyond the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, but one step short of the Bundy Ranch standoff. They are searching for meaning among the oil derricks, which sure beats shooting up high schools. They want to take back their country from the racists, the liars and the blowhard in the White House.

Hold high the torch, brother, the octopi are approaching land.

God bless America.

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