



# MID- AMERICAN REVIEW



*We Carry in Our Cupped Hands Something More Difficult Than (The Midwife)*  
by M.M. Dupay, 9.25 by 9.25 inches: collage (cut imagery and acrylic medium), 2021

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Zachary Tyler Vickers

## The Ilk of Their Shrewdness

*“Fee-Fi-Foyee-Fum! I smell the blood of a little bum!”*

—*The Giant*, Jack and the Beanstalk (1931)

*“The soybean was able to gain a foothold and, for some of its more ardent advocates, become a lifelong obsession: a magic bean that provided the path to a different world ... [The Great Depression] drastically reduced demand for corn ... Looking for an alternative ... [companies and farmers] experimented with ... soybeans...”*

—*Matthew Roth*, *Magic Bean: The Rise of Soy in America* (2018)

On Black Sunday, the soil swirled in from Nebraska. We read about the dust storms in our shoes, which Ma lined with newspaper if Dad scrounged one up and if the electric got paid. We scratched the walls, killing time like a toy: my two brothers missing the radio, me missing my brothers. We was only a year apart but I think that radio scrambled up their insides. Frank’s voice dropped a key, his nose got fat. Peter’s arms and legs longed to spindle-thin. That, and they started scratching their groins. So, I started scratching my groin. See, we wasn’t allowed out after dark and the blustering dust dragged Chicago into a daily night.

And so, the three of us wasn’t allowed out after *light* neither.

“If you got the dirt-lung,” Ma said, “I’d never forgive myself!”

Then there was Black Thursday. Our neighborhood got even darker when half the houses emptied out, including Uncle Rein’s. After Auntie Ada died and Rein’s foot rot flared up so he couldn’t cook no more, he lived in a corner of our kitchen while others on our block moved into the freight-crate jungles along the tracks with only a pot to piss in, if they was lucky. Or *unlucky*. A newspaper reported that a local milkman got his head crushed in by his own piss pot. “Must’ve been one heck of a nice piss pot,” Dad said, reading his shoe.



"Down is up," Ma said, making the sign of the cross. "Left is right."

"Some is the piss pot," Uncle Rein said, "some is the pisser. The rest of us is the piss."

Ma nodded at an empty kitchen corner. I couldn't even look over there. "Ada says," Ma said, "she didn't even get no pot to piss in, in her day. After O'Leary's cow burned Chicago, she slept in a crummy cottage the mayor built and her Pa stayed up each night with his knife to make sure nobody from another crummy cottage stole up their food or clothes until he fell asleep in the outhouse and died of a spider bite to the rear end. She says we don't know how lucky we is to get this apartment with its water closet and electricity."

The lights cut out.

"Some luck," Dad grumbled. Ma lit some candle nubs.

"O'Leary was a *pisser*," Rein said. "She fancied insurance. Ain't no cow start that fire."

Ma shrugged, "Ada says there ain't no way of knowing what is true and what is fear."

"The hell is that even supposed to mean?" Rein said, turning to the empty, drafty corner.

"Gosh, I miss my radio," Dad said, rubbing his face.

Debt was still due on a Philco Lowboy Dad already sold. He and Ma would dress in their church clothes and dance like hepcats to Earl Hines and his swing jazz band's live broadcasts, pretending the kitchen was the Grand Terrace Cafe, or they'd laugh at Amos 'n' Andy so hard one of them would have to hurry into the water closet. My brothers obsessed over *Death Valley Days*, nearly hugging the radio to feel its gunshot vibrations in their insides as The Old Ranger told some true story about the Old West's lawmen and lawless, plus a Twenty-Mule Team brought to them by the Pacific Coast Borax Company. Now, my brothers scratched the walls and their groins. Ma hawked sewn flour sack dolls. Dad knocked on doors in the snow and black wind for odd jobs until his fist locked shut, wishing he'd invented sliced bread. Uncle Rein slept in the corner, hunched and stink-footed, shaped like an anchor, not even able to stand in the breadlines, which tightened Dad's tight fist. See, Dad once lent Rein twenty bucks when Ada got measles and she went deaf in one ear because Rein blew half throwing dice.

One day, Dad missed a payment on the radio. He came home with a bloody lip and a fat left eye blacker than all the dirt, plus some turnip



seeds for patching a roof. He tossed the bag of seeds at Rein and said, "You're starting to pay me back."

"And how do I see about that?" Rein said. "I got a lame fricking foot."

"Crawl, handstand, I don't give two shoots," Dad said. "Think *off* your fricking feet."

So, he did.

Each day, while Ma hawked dolls and Dad knocked on doors and stood in the breadline, Rein pulled a tooth out of his face. "It's better to ask forgiveness," Rein told us three, "than it is permission. But it's *best* not to get caught." He stuffed the turnip seeds he was supposed to hawk into a floor knot as the three of us climbed into a bowl-cutted totem pole (Frank the head because of his big nose and voice; Peter the long torso and arms; me the legs with baby fat I couldn't shed). We dressed up in Rein's coat and Frank wore the burlap bandanna Ma sewed Rein to protect him from the dirt-lung, promising Ada she'd keep him safe, too. There we stood, stacked—it kind of felt like Halloween when, costumed, we tricked, egging houses and soaping storefronts for jelly bean treats. But this time, the trick was on Ma and Dad. We trudged through the black blizzard, past neighbors snoring in their sidewalk snow-dirt angels, to Rein's North Side dentist. Peter put the tooth through the door's keyhole and eight cents always ejected out. Rein gave our parents two cents and he gifted us the last penny to buy a jelly bean treat.

"Ada says you ought to brush," Ma said, when Rein became more gums than teeth.

"The dirt-air cleans them just fine," Rein said. "Maybe a dentist will buy the others."

Rein winked at us. The three of us blinked back, teary, peeling that night's onions.

Dad wrenched a spoon into his locked fist and tried to pry it open.

"Why would a dentist ever want a bunch of used teeth?" Ma said.

"They make falsies for rich folks these days," Rein said, "set in molds of old tire rubber."

Dad pounded his spoon-fist.

"Darn Ford!" he said. "Selling off the old stock so he don't got to pay me to make new!"



"Well, it ain't right," Ma said. "You with no teeth so some rich fellow got extra."

"Well, right is left and down is up," Rein said, his words whistling through tooth gaps.

"Ada says," Ma said, "back in her day? People froze and starved and sometimes even ate each other, just trying to get out west. She says we don't know how good we got it with this one lump of coal and these onion suppers with peanut butter."

"Helen!" Dad said. "There ain't nothing fricking there!"

"I just like to respect my fricking elders!" Ma hollered.

"Ada's day ain't the West of that radio program," Rein said. My brothers slumped as they peeled onions. I slumped because they slumped. "Ours is the *Midwest*. You lose a thumb here for a different reason." (In a shoe, we read about a boy who got his thumbs ripped off in a factory. I got nightmares about that boy trying to suck a puckered fist.) "Besides," Rein said, "only thing Ada ever starved of was an impossible heap of attention."

"You're lucky, Rein," Ma said, tapping her ear, "that you're sitting on her bad side."

"Oh, so she's a *deaf ghost*, too," Dad said.

"Don't you speak about my dead wife's deafness like you know it!" Rein said.

"*I do know it!*" Dad said. "I got *twenty darn reasons* why the heck I know it!"

"You only got nineteen and eighty cents reasons now!" Uncle Rein barked.

"Stop it, you two!" Ma said. "We don't got much as it is but we at least got each other!"

Dad grumbled and wrenched the spoon in his fist until its handle broke.

"Horsefeathers!" Dad said. "It's like trying to shuck a fricking oyster!" Ma frowned, "Except, never no pearl."

Dad pushed a coal pebble into his tight fist with another spoon and set it over the stove.

"He's lost his fricking marbles," Rein said.

"I lost my fricking *patience*," Dad said. "I'm sick of paying for a radio I don't even got."

Uncle Rein snorted.



"Gosh, wouldn't it be nice if we paid off that loan *and* got us a nifty telephone?" Ma said.

"*And* a Cadillac," Dad said, kissing his fist. "I invent us a diamond, I'm getting a Caddy."

"We could see John Wayne *talk* in *The Big Trail!*" Frank said.

"We could go to Wrigley and watch Stan Hack and the Cubbies!" Peter said.

"I would like to buy that boy new thumbs," I said.

Everybody looked at me like they forgot I was there.

Then Dad smiled and set his spoon-fist on my shoulder, "*And* we'll get that boy thumbs."

Rein took his spotted foot out of his boot. We ran to our rooms, coughing and retching.

"I got to air it out!" Rein hollered.

In our room, we scratched our groins and ate the last of that day's secret jelly bean stash.

"Jeez, Ada!" we heard Ma yell. "*You* tell him to talc his dadgummed foot!"

"How the heck am I affording talc?" Rein shouted. "Plus, the dirt-air cleans it just fine!"

It was all decent enough until Uncle Rein ran out of teeth.

That, and Dad came home early to find Rein *standing*, shooting dice with one of his cook buddies, betting his hoarded nickels. Dad dragged Rein out as he flailed, flapping his gums with apologies: "*I pomiff I wuf gonna pay oo back!*" Out the window, we only saw black air as Rein's coughs faded, staggering off. Dad told Ma when she got home.

"He's going to catch the dirt-lung if he don't freeze," Ma sniffled, dusting herself off.

"Ain't no such thing as dirt-lung," Dad said. "I been talking to some of the other folks out there? Turns out, Hoover invented some invented air sickness, dumping soil from balloons so we can't picket him or his cronies like Ford! It's union busting, is what it is."

"But Ada says Rein is going to die out there," Ma said.

"Rein can't die," Dad said, holding a small cube. "He's only got one *die* to his name."

"I promised her, Earl!" Ma said, head in her hands. "I promised to keep him safe, too!"



"Promises is only good until you can't keep them no more," Dad said, wrenching a new spoon into his fist. "And you didn't. You invented an auntie when you should've invented sliced bread so I don't got to sell my own fricking teeth to pay that loan."

It was then that we realized it.

No more teeth meant no more jelly beans.

But Peter got an idea.

"If that dentist pays for used teeth, imagine what he pays for *new* teeth," he said.



Ma kept our baby teeth in a jar under her pillow. Motherhood is a religion. It performs the same mental trick: Righteousness ain't selfish. She wanted to steal up all our secrets. She'd make mummies of our toenail clippings if Dad let her. Heck, she even bronzed the basket I used to sleep in as a baby, set on the stoop of the Church of the Holy Family. Sometimes, she fell asleep hugging that photo album like that milkman hugged his piss pot. Maybe it was because of Frank's new nose and voice, or Peter's gangly limbs. Maybe because she noticed us pawing at our groins like a shrewdness of nervous zoo chimps, our unevolved brains twitching something curious, eyes shifting toward *escape*. She flipped through the album or jingled the tooth jar like a beggar, saying, "Look how little you once was!" She pinched my baby-fatted legs, telling me how happy I made her trying to stay little. I wasn't. I dangled from our Murphy bed's footboard to stretch myself. I just didn't want to get left behind.

We swapped our baby teeth in the jar with the white ends of Ma's extra sewing pins. We totomed inside Dad's evening coat and Peter flipped up the collar over Frank's face. Invented air sickness or not, dirt was dirt and coughing was no fun. I walked us to the North Side dentist and Peter poured our sixty teeth into the keyhole. A moment later, through a gap in the buttoned coat flaps, I saw an eyeball appear in the keyhole, blinking and bulging.

"What's all this?" the eye said.

"We figured new teeth are better than used ones," Frank said.

The eye narrowed, "And who in the *fuck* is *we*?"

If we used outdoor language Ma made us bite bitter rendered soap, and it held our teeth marks until we washed enough times to erode them. So I felt a little behind when Frank replied, "*Fucking me—Frank—and fucking Uncle Rein* is who the *fuck* we is."

A thrill shivered down Frank into Peter then into me, locking us into one agreeable spine.

"Well, where the fuck is this Uncle Rein?" the eye said.

"He got busted for faking his *fucking* foot rots and shooting his *fucking* dice," Frank said.

"That's *Tootsie*," another voice whispered from inside.

The door opened. A large, hairy dentist yanked us into the office. He held a big hammer. A balding guy with the bulging keyhole-eye knelt and swept our teeth into a pile. A third man sat on a big burlap sack, smoking. The dentist's office looked like any house, just empty, and it smelled queer, like Listerine mouthwash in an engine. A fourth man came upstairs carrying a bottle half-full of a dark liquid. "Who's the beanpole, Al?" the man said from the bathroom as he topped off that bottle under the tub faucet. The liquid lightened to caramel.

"Tootsie Schwimmer's nephew," Al said, lighting another cigarette from the burlap sack.

"Tootsie?" the bathtub guy said. "That fucking beat crumb owes me ten fucking bucks!"

"Owes me ten fucking bucks, too, Adam," Al said.

"He owes everybody ten fucking bucks, boys," the balding guy said.

It was true. Everybody but the balding guy was boys not much older than my brothers.

"I could dent him a bunch, Jimmy?" the dent-ist said, hitting his hammer into his palm.

"Denny, you already dented him," balding Jimmy said. "You loosed his teeth, yeah?"

"Oh," Denny the dent-ist said, shrugging. "I dent a lot."

My brothers' chimp brains agreed: They wanted to fit in and impress this shrewdness.

And I wanted to impress my brothers. I wanted to fit in.

"Well, he owes Dad *twenty* fucking bucks," Frank said.

The older boys suddenly gawked at each other, then to Jimmy.

"Even Tootsie ain't fool enough to borrow off Willie Potatoes, is he?"

Al said.

Adam shrugged, "Ain't nobody left for Tootsie to borrow from but Daddano."

"But when Dad corners a fool," Jimmy said, "the fool becomes nothing but a damn *rat*."



"Uncle Rein was in a corner," Frank said. "Until Dad dragged him off for shooting dice."

"Well, fuck," Adam said. "You think Tootsie cheesed on *the thing*?"

"What else he got to cheese on?" Al said. "That cheese alone is twenty bucks plus juice."

The three of us was starting to jibe as one. Peter scratched the front of the coat where our single groin would be, which was just my face. I could think a question and it went up the spine to Peter's brain, then to Frank's brain. "What's *the thing*?" Frank asked.

"The thing is," Jimmy said, "we can't tell you nothing until Denny smells your blood."

Denny turned his hammer's claws to us. I blinked and gulped because my brothers did.

"Your blood has got to smell good. Like our blood," Al said, lifting a scarred fingertip.

"That means," Adam said, showing us his scarred fingertip, "absolutely *zero Guinea*."

"See, debt passes to next of kin," Jimmy said. "Tootsie owes us so now you owe us."

Denny stepped forward. Our heart palms slapped the puddles of piss in our bellies. My head throbbed, where our singular piss puddle would be. But my brothers didn't want these boys to think they was scared, and I didn't want my brothers to think I was scared neither. We wanted to fit in with this shrewdness. So Frank pulled Peter's hair inside the coat and Peter lifted his arm so Denny could nick his fingertip with the hammer's claw. Denny sniffed the red droplet, then nodded at Jimmy, and Jimmy patted Frank's shoulder. Peter stuck his fingertip under the flipped-up collar into Frank's mouth to make him suck away the sting.

"So, the thing is," Jimmy said, "we're in the business of *beans*."

"Thing is," Al said, kicking the big burlap sack, "we got us a certain kind of agreement."

"With a certain someone," Adam said, "who lets sacks of beans fall off a certain truck."

"For a certain price," Al said, "which is certainly better than the price certain others pay."

"Certain others who are also in this certain kind of business," Jimmy said.

"On the other side of Kinzie," Adam said.



Ma's voice echoed in Frank's brain, then it passed to his next of kin, Peter, then to me.

"But we're not supposed to cross Kinzie," Frank said.

Jimmy shrugged and poured the caramel liquid into glasses. "Well, we ain't the ones who crossed it first, is we? And Tootsie owes us, so you owe us." He handed Peter a glass and nodded at our teeth on the floor. "Plus, this outfit could use a goon like you."

Adam leaned to Al, nodding at the teeth on the floor, "Are those?"

"Thought new teeth paid better than used," Al said, taking a glass.

"Hell," Adam said, taking a glass, too. "Down is up. Left is right."

Peter scratched the coat/my face. I saw Peter's browned blood on his glass. It, too, had aged in a hurry. It, too, smelled different. Frank and Peter's hair was brown. Mine was blond. Ma said I got it from her grandpap. She said she was glad I wasn't browning, glad I was staying little, which I wasn't. The others drank the caramel liquid. But not Frank. He gargled it, then spat it back into the glass and coughed. The others laughed.

"That cough ain't swell," Jimmy said, winking. "We need to get you a prescription, too."

"I got the pharyngitis," Adam said, winking. "Plus, a weak digestion."

"I got high blood pressure," Al said, winking. "And a deficient vigor."

"I got a bad heart," Jimmy said.

Al pointed at Peter's hand scratching the coat/my face, "How about a script for the clap?"

Peter clapped his hands and the others laughed again.

Even before the Black Days, we wasn't permitted to cross Kinzie. Ma and Dad said so. But Ma fancied some insurance, like Mrs. O'Leary. So, one bedtime, she scared the bejesus out of us: On the other side of Kinzie lived a giant with a face raked with fleshy scars, who breathed fire and brained little boys with his knotty wooden club. Except Frank's nose and voice wasn't little no more. Neither was Peter's limbs. And I was working on it, hanging from the Murphy bed's footboard. Giants was as real as the fairy tales they stew in. As real as Hoover's dirt-lung. As real as Ma's dead auntie in the corner. As real as the *dadgummits* and *hecks* and *fricks*. So, as Denny drove us all across Kinzie in a laundry truck, we three agreed: We figured on forgiveness, calling Ma's hogwash a wash, in terms of what's true and what's fear.



Denny parked and waited in the truck. Jimmy handed out empty laundry bags. The duster howled in the alley as we followed the others up a fire escape, Dad's coat like a sail, catching the black gusts, teetering, tottering us. Peter's long arms gripped the railings.

On the fourth floor, Al peeked inside a window with gilded lettering: *Drivers Local 573*. He popped the window open with a knife and we climbed into an office of bookcases and filing cabinets that smelled of a thick, musty stink like Uncle Rein's foot rot. Jimmy opened a drawer and found the culprit: loose corn kernels. Al and Adam opened bookcases and found bottles of caramel liquid, and they gulped from those bottles before pouring them over the kernels. That's when the three of us realized what we was doing here: It was a trick.

Which meant we was after a treat—these boys was in the business of *jelly beans*.

So Peter grabbed a bottle from a bookcase and we started tricking, too.

Honest, it was the most fun we had together since the Golden Days—that is, before the Black Days, when we played stickball pretending to be Stan Hack, stealing bases (back when it was harder to steal and not everybody was doing it). Before Dad bought the Philco Lowboy on credit and Mr. Ford stopped paying him to make new rubber. Before Dad sold the radio and quit laughing and dancing with Ma, her dress no longer whipping up like white electricity. Before the radio scrambled my brothers' insides and changed their outsides, when I was Stan Hack and they was Stan Hack and we couldn't think of nothing better than being Stan Hack—and even all the Dads was Stan Hack at block parties, and the Mas let us stay out after dark to light firecrackers, and everything felt forever. Before that boy lost his thumbs.

"Here," Adam said. We all met him at another filing cabinet and there we found our treat.

Beans.

Thousands of loose, fat, yellow, plain old, foot-stinking *beans*.

My brothers' shoulders slumped, so I slumped mine.

Still, we wanted to fit in, so Peter filled his laundry bag with beans by the handful, like the others. Except Peter's arms had grown long, not wide—he couldn't fill his bag as much. So, before they noticed, we took our half-empty bag down the fire escape and, on the next landing below, a gust caught the coat and pushed us into the window—*thud!*—and Peter dropped the bag and all the beans fell through the fire escape grate,



blown in the black wind. The other chimps would not be pleased, or worse: make fun of us. Or worse: think we was not up to snuff, not the ilk of their shrewdness. Or worse: look at us like Ma did.

The window's lettering read: *M. Spragg & Daughter: Antiquities.*

Then that window opened and a voice said, "Hurry on in here, sir."

So, we clambered in to hide and there stood Daughter. Her cheeks and lips was caked with makeup. Drawn eyebrows held surprise under somewhat crossed eyes. She smelled like an auntie and looked like the Charlie McCarthy dummy from the Edgar Bergen program that Dad used to listen to. "I spent every darn dollar getting out of Omaha," she said, shutting the window. "I sure as heck ain't letting it follow me in here."

The stuffy office displayed antiquities: a faded Oriental rug, a bed, a mirror, a chest of drawers, a chaise beside a table with a lamp and ashtray and a glass with a few yellow bubbles, plus a standing birdcage that contained a squat, grumpy-looking frog.

That frog seemed to look right at me through the coat. I couldn't even look over there.

Beneath us was voices, muffled laughter, some jazz.

Above us, the footsteps of Al and Adam and Jimmy creaked and thudded.

Daughter sprawled on the chaise and pressed a button on the wall. She shook dirt off her tasseled robe—curtains all but drawn. Skin winked and we was like moths to the white light of it. Our neck hairs rose. Our three brains sparked, built fires. Our teeth sharpened. Our hearts felt like shale cleaving free of itself into tools and weapons.

"You sure must be a fancy one," Daughter said. "Or a famous one," she added. "To not come in through the front door and instead knock on my window like that?" She sniffed. "You sure smell funny, too," she added. "Like different funny."

"That's the beans," Frank said. "I just spilled them."

"So, you's a *fin*k," she said. "There's a lot of dirt out there to cheese on, ain't there?"

*Ribbit.*

The frog blinked.

"Why's that frog in a cage?" Frank asked.

"That ain't a cage," Daughter said, mouth serious-shaped. "*We're the ones in the cage.*"

*Ribbit.*



"*Ribbit*, yes," Daughter said, rolling her somewhat crossed eyes. "Ribbit, ribbit, ribbit." Then she smiled and our insides turned to hot soup. "I'll make you a deal, mister," she said. "I'll trade you this frog for some of that dirt you got."

We turned to the window where the black wind swirled and flexed the pane, then back to Daughter. Peter patted the long, dusty coat. Caramel liquid began to drip onto the bed from a big crack in the ceiling. "Frogs is for children," Frank said.

"That ain't no frog," she said. "That is a *poet* from P.T. Barnum's traveling museum."

"You invented an invented talking frog," Frank said. Boy, was he ever starting to sound like Dad.

"I didn't invent nothing," Daughter said. "Snorky told me so."

"Who's Snorky?" Frank said.

"*The Big Fellow*," Daughter whispered. "*He's the one who built the cage.*"

Our three brains turned over Ma's story and looked at the underside of it.

The wall buzzed. Daughter jumped, clutching her robe. I jumped and Peter clutched the coat. From the dumbwaiter, she pulled two glasses full of yellow bubbles with a white foam top. She handed a glass to Peter and Peter lowered the coat collar from Frank's face. She drank and Frank drank. She belched and Frank belched. She wore a white foam mustache and Frank wore a white foam mustache. She giggled and Frank giggled. *We* giggled. And we realized Daughter wasn't old like an auntie, she was maybe Al and Adam's age—and we wanted to impress her, too. "See?" she said, leaning back. "It ain't so bad, this life. Better than Omaha." She laughed, wiping a sudden tear from a somewhat-crossed eye. "Yes, it *is* a good life," she said, admiring her drink. "Why, could you imagine anything funner than this?"

I could.

But Frank imagined other things: talkies and dominoes and radios and the Cubbies ...

"I can imagine something funner than all that," Daughter said and slipped off the robe.

There, sprawled before us, was her body: white and round and bruised on the shins and knees and elbows. Her bare feet was dirty and the nails was yellow. She looked like street snow. She looked and didn't,



and we looked and didn't. Her chest blushed and our chests blushed. Her nipples hardened and our nipples hardened. Between her legs tufted a scour of dark, curly hair, and she scratched it. We understood enough what it meant.

"We shouldn't be here," Frank said.

"*I know*," she said, teary. "*Please*. Please tell me a secret. Tell me some dirt I can use."

"This is a secret," Frank said, and Peter pointed at himself, the torso, and me, the legs.

She nodded, frowning, wiping her cheek, "Let's see the secret you're keeping in there."

Then she touched us. She grabbed my nose.

"I want to go home!" Frank suddenly cried.

"Mommy!" Peter sobbed.

Daughter's somewhat crossed eyes widened. She pulled open the coat's flaps.

"Hello," I said.

Daughter screamed. But her long-drawn eyebrows was never not surprised.

Suddenly, above: *POP! POP! POP!*

The ceiling creaked and thudded wildly, like the stampedes on *Death Valley Days*.

Al and Adam and Jimmy now ran past the window, down the fire escape. Daughter screamed again and we looked back to see the bed was burning. Liquid fire continued to drip from the ceiling crack and leaped off it in bright blazes.

And the three of us thought in unison: THE BIG FELLOW!

*POP! POP! POP!*

Daughter fled the room. We fled to the window, and that's when I heard it:

*Listen, my children, and you shall hear ...*

My legs stopped.

*Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere ...*

"Come on!" Frank cried. "Move it!"

*On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-Five:*

*Hardly a man is now alive*

*Who remembers that famous day and year ...*

I turned.



The room was empty, on fire. The frog sat in its cage, looking at me. Something in its eyes. I realized that frogs don't got thumbs neither. *Ribbit.*

"Did you hear that?" I said, pointing at the frog.

"There ain't nothing fricking there!" Peter said. He sounded a lot like Dad, too.

Fire spilled across the Oriental rug. I stepped around it to the frog. Frank climbed off Peter, then Peter off me, tripping over the coat as he ran to the window. I opened the cage and took the frog. Outside, the duster howled cold and black. Frank squinted and coughed. Peter squinted and coughed. I squinted and coughed. The *pop-pop-popping* came from the window above that flickered and glowed orange in the black air. Something else swirled around us and stuck to the coat and in the grates of the fire escape.

Snowflakes.

No.

Popping corn.

Through the wind, we heard the laundry truck come close—*crash!* The fire escape jolted. We dropped to our knees. I held the frog to my chest. Then the truck squealed and drove off and the two fire escapes beneath us groaned and tore away. We heard the stairs scrape and clang until all that was left was the *pop-pop-popping* and the wind baying.

All the windows was on fire and there was nothing but bottomless black under us.

And my brothers really started to cry then. They coughed and cried and the popping corn stuck to their wet cheeks. Frank's voice cracked higher and Peter's limbs shortened, curling up, hugging himself. The wind stung my eyes. I barely saw them.

But I didn't cry. Because I felt there was something inside me—something my brothers didn't got, or didn't got yet. It was mine. I put the frog in one of the coat's pockets and climbed over the edge of the fire escape and I just dangled, like I did from the Murphy bed's footboard. I instructed Frank to climb down me and hang from my ankles.

"You don't know if it'll work," he cried and coughed.

"*I do know it!*" I said and coughed. But I didn't sound as much like Dad as I expected.

Still, Frank climbed down me and hung from my ankles. Then Peter climbed down and hung from Frank's ankles—his long limbs was close



to the ground. He let go. Then Frank let go and dropped onto Peter's shoulders. Then I let go and landed on Frank.

Now, I was the head.

We shrouded ourselves in the coat again and I flipped the collar up over my face.

In the air, we heard sirens and shouting, maybe Daughter's crying. It was too close.

So, Peter ran. He ran and ran until we three found Kinzie again, and we crossed it.

We got home before our parents. Still, Ma knew we'd gone outside. She found a secret: the dirt in our ears. Then another: Peter's fingertip scab. Then another: the frog ribbiting in my shoe. Ma pulled her hair and looked like a shipwreck. She told Frank to run a bath and Peter to get a bandage, and stuck my shoe out of the window. "But that frog talks!" I whined.

"Frogs can't talk, Jack," she said and turned the shoe upside down.

Dad checked us for fevers and made us cough into his one open palm, looking for blood. "The dirt-lung is *real*, boys!" he said, pointing at the newspaper he'd scrounged up. "But all this dirt is coming from the Germans. They're putting chemicals in it!"

He seemed scared, telling us the truth. I never knew him being wrong was in the mix.

"We're sorry we went outside," Peter said.

"Can you forgive us?" Frank asked.

"I'll give you fricking forgiveness!" Dad said, sliding a wooden spoon into his tight fist. He whooped on us so much we stood to peel the onions. My brothers didn't scratch the walls, so I didn't. They didn't scratch their groins neither. But I did. When it was my turn to take a bath, I noticed, under the brown water, a stiff, curly blond hair.

A couple days later, Ma screamed.

In the kitchen, she slapped at Dad with a shoe, saying darn him. And Dad just sat there, hunched at the stove, holding his spoon-fist, *praying*, saying, oh heck, oh jeez. We'd never seen them like that. It scared the bejesus out of us. We hid in our room and watched from the keyhole and the gap under the door. "Does she forgive me?" Dad asked.

"How can she?" Ma said. "She's *dead*! She ain't here!"



"You don't mean that," Dad said.

"I don't know what I mean no more," Ma said.

"*We don't got much as it is but we at least got each other,*" Dad said. "You meant that."

"And now we got one less *each other!*" Ma said, and threw the shoe. Dad ducked and it struck our door. Ma fell to the floor crying and Dad held her. Peter opened the door and took the shoe and we looked inside it at the new newspaper lining.

And we read a name: *Reinhardt H. Schwimmer*.

We looked in our other shoes and read he'd been in a garage, north of Kinzie, known for dice games. He and six others got lined up against a wall and shot. It didn't say if Uncle Rein asked for forgiveness. But he got caught. Another shoe said that the seven of them all got burned, too. It said the police could only identify the bodies by their teeth.

In a shoe, we read the names: *Jimmy Clark*, "*Gorilla Al*" *Weinshark*, and *Adam Heyer*.

In another shoe, we read the other names: *Frank* and *Peter Gusenberg*, and *John May*.

"Who the heck is John May?" Frank said.

"Jack?" Peter said to me. "Where are you?"

I blinked. I knew what happened. Ma never read past her uncle's name. If she had, she'd have seen, in black and white, a truth she feared. Seeing myself there. I was dead and not. I was here and not. I realized the teeth in my head was old ones. I thought of the bronzed basket, like a piss pot. What it made me. I thought I might peel off the earth.

I couldn't sleep. My brain kept buzzing about my new and old teeth.

In the kitchen, the wind clinked against the window. I sat in Auntie Ada's corner in the dark and whispered to her that if a frog could talk then it was a miracle, and if there was miracles then there must be a Jesus, and if there was a Jesus then there must be a Noah and a Moses and all those others, and so there must be a Heaven. But if there was a Heaven then there must be a Hell, and maybe I was going there, being what I was. Being left behind. But Moses was left behind, too. We was both babies in baskets. Who was my next of kin and what kind of debt was I? Ada was and wasn't my auntie. It made my guts sick, thinking about. I was a part of another shrewdness and also not. And why not? My chimp brain hurt. I didn't know down from up, left from right, the piss from the pisser from the piss pot. I asked for forgiveness, but I



didn't know what I was sorry for. I didn't know what else to do. I wanted to be grateful but I also wanted to know. That seemed fair enough. To know what I was made of, inside and outside. I didn't want to be greedy, I just wanted to know how I fit in. Or didn't. Or couldn't. Or could. Or didn't want to. "Please," I whispered to Ada, "can you tell me how good I really got it?"

Suddenly, a door swung open somewhere in the darkness. I heard them laughing.

The kitchen light blinked on and Ma and Dad were dancing again, Ma twirling in her nightgown. They danced right over a floor knot where I saw a turnip seedling was sprouting. My brothers came out, barefoot, rubbing their eyes. Dad danced to me and set me on the table. "Look at this," he said, showing me his locked fist. "Open it." I did.

On his charcoal-stained palm sat a diamond.

The lights cut out.

"We can get us a nifty telephone!" Ma said in the dark, searching for candle nubs.

"And a slick Cadillac!" Dad said.

"What about a radio?" Frank said.

"A Philco *Highboy* this time!" Dad said. "Heck, we'll get two!"

"And the Cubbies?" Peter said.

"Season tickets behind the dugout!" Dad said.

"Nice stones for Ada and Rein," Ma said. "Plus, a new refrigerator. And a feathered hat?"

"You'll get a hat *and* pearls *and* we'll go to the jazz clubs!" Dad said. "We'll celebrate!"

"What about the boy?" I asked.

The dark room quieted.

"What boy?" Dad finally said.

"The boy with no thumbs," I said. "You said we could buy him some thumbs."

The dark room quieted again—except for the dirt knocking against the window.

"Oh, Jack," Ma said finally, "I'm sure somebody has already bought him thumbs."

"Plus, where am I supposed to get thumbs?" Dad said.

"It ain't right," Ma said. "Somebody else with no thumbs just so some boy got extra."



“He ought to have looked after his first thumbs better,” Dad said. “It’s his own fault.”

“But you said,” I said.

“I’ll look into it, how about that?” Dad said.

“Looking into it is a good idea, Earl,” Ma said. “I think looking into it is the right thing.”

I heard them but I couldn’t sense them in the blackness. I wondered if they could see me at all. I couldn’t tell if it was the dark that I was afraid of. But there was a glimmer of light: the diamond sitting on Dad’s hand that smelled like dirt.

“The world is *our* fucking oyster,” Dad said. “Things will be different now. I promise.”

