



Tom Trainor
GENERATIONS

A SHORT STORY



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Handful of snapshots was what remained of a life, one black and white – young man, sturdy build with a buzzcut, square jaw, head cocked warily at the lens, no smile, dressed up for some occasion in an open collar white shirt and pleated light slacks, posed out front of a garage next to a slope-backed 1949 Plymouth two-door sedan, hands on his hips defiant.

A color Kodak, the names *Burt with Jesse 1964* scrawled on the back. Must be the same cuss, same square chin, the buzzcut, but older, bulkier, hands on his hips, dark shirt, oil stained pants, out front of the same garage, only this time there's a truck, a sawed-off flatbed with a drum winch, *Karjak's Towing and Salvage* stenciled on the door panel – and there's this kid's standing knee high next to him, sturdy kid, square jaw and buzzcut, eyes squinting into the sun.

Another, a smudged 4x6 glossy – *Corbin's first birthday, 1980* – young father arm over arm cradling a baby son, both uncomfortable.

“Will ya two least try a smile fa Chrissakes?”

“I got work ta do, no time fa this shit.”

“I promised Grampa Bu't a photo fa Co'bin's bu'thday.”

“Then take one a him, leave me the hell out'v it.”

“Show how he's growin.”

“Little po'ka'll eat us out'v the house fa he's lea'ned ta walk.”

A fourth photo, the young father, only leaner, popped waist high out of the turret of an Abrams – *Jesse, Fort Leonard Wood* – sure was, the buzzcut, the jaw, torso smeared over with grease and a tattoo, but grinning ear-to-ear.

Next a shot of a kid sixteen, seventeen, raw bone grown, standing atop a junkyard heap, holding these handlebars high over his head like some hunting trophy.

Lastly a fading Polaroid, no date, no name, the broad jaw again, but

bald, eyes pooled in dark sockets, deep furrows running from brow down along sunken cheeks to a scowl. Bruiser's grown old, sitting upright in a chair rammed against a cinder block wall with his arms folded across his chest, alone and bones and damn defiant.

"Time ta take ya med'cine, Mista Ka'jak."

Pthoot! Mista Ka'jak spits it out between what he's got left for teeth.

"Now that's no way ta be!" Nurse shouts it loud into an enlarged ear. "He'a, have anotha dose, an this time swallow!"

South Charworth's small town rural, cranberry bogs and on slightly higher ground vegetable fields flourishing in the rich black alluvial run-off from the Taunton River, which is wide and shallow at the bend, so no rapids, so never a mill town like New Bedford down stream and not picturesque enough to attract an urban sprawl. South Charworth's a pick-up community, the men folk and women alike. Main Street's less than a dozen blocks long with crackled clapboard houses either side, built near what was once the narrower post road, fenced in with fieldstone and spindly oaks, scrub pine and wild rose, a prickly thicket.

Further along there are two terraced Victorians, what the locals call mansions, one that's been Cordwood's Mortuary for as long as anyone can remember, and next door the South Charworth Free Library and Historical Society which was donated to the good citizens by Mildred Laybred, the spinster school librarian and last of a long line of successful truck farmers.

"Moa'nin."

"Moa'nin."

"Nice day, wouldn't ya say?"

"Could do with a little ma rain."

Neighbors passing on the sidewalk are civil.

The Mildred Laybred Middle and High School are combined in a single story red brick colonial, each with separate pillared entrance. Town Hall, the Fire, Police, District Court and First Church all face off across the town green, a Civil War memorial dead center – infantryman in uniform and cap with rifle at the ready stands guard next to a wife in a bonnet with infant son in hand, while an older daughter clings to her mother's long skirt, the four figures bronzed on a granite pedestal, tiny Union flags fluttering in the breeze at the base.

South Charworth's only police cruiser, Officer Tim Foxcroft, swings in behind anyone unfamiliar, checks out the vehicle registration. If they're driving too slow and gawking, he'll pull them over, offer directions to the

quickest route back to the highway. And if they're doing a lick over 20 through the flashing yellow school zone, he'll nail them, send them scurrying out of town with a hundred buck ticket.

"Quiet enough ta suit ya, Tim?"

"Ain't been a half bad summa, school out, kids wu'kin."

"Saw a bunch a them hangin out ova on the A&P lot Friday night way afta houas."

"What wa ya doin out so late yaself?"

Step Epton's dump truck's pulled alongside the police cruiser, windows rolled down, got traffic blocked both coming and going.

"Just gettin back with a load a manu'a from Taunton. Had a re'a ti'a blow just the otha side a the train trestle. Thought I'd neva get the damn thing off, lug nuts rusted on the'a tight as if they'd been welded."

"Should've called AA."

"Yah right."

Stillmore's Grocery has been converted to a Sumo Mart, two bright new green and yellow self-serve gas pumps out front. Keno and a slush machine attract young mothers and pre-teens to the town's sole community center. Older kids hang out on their dirt bikes or in their muscle cars nights on the abandoned A&P's asphalt lot, that's unless there's a bonfire and some kegs stashed out somewhere in the woods.

"Betta they stay local than havin them killed off by the ca'load."

"That's a fact."

"Come drivin back drunk from Providence."

"Lost the Rutland an the Aco'n boys that way when they veea'd off the exit ramp an slammed inta that retainin wall."

"Afta the prom a few yea's back."

"Been one o'a two ma since then, right? A kid out on Riva Road, Po'tugees kid."

"Yep. Got thrown through the windshield, head hit that tree."

"Don't need ta lose any ma'v oua own ta ca'lessness."

"My policy, don't botha the kids so long as they ain't causin nobody no ha'm."

"They wa talkin loud an ho'asin round outside the packy last Friday, stopped an waved when I passed by."

"Good kids in this town, by an la'ge."

"Jus growin up."

"Been a few complaints 'bout that Ka'jak punk."

"Figu'a'd we wa rid a him."

"Nope, he's back an whip full a spit."

“Good ha’d lickin’ld keep him in line.”

Vet Post is the only place in town where a guy can sit quietly and enjoy a few or sprawl back in a booth or fall face forward off a stool, that’s until two every night of the week except Sunday. Otherwise there’s the town packy tucked inconspicuously behind the Post inside a stockade fence – owned and operated by Ethan Foxcroft, Officer Tim Foxcroft’s uncle – place may not stock fine wines, but it does a brisk trade in two ounce nips and Bud by the twelve pack.

Willard Elmsford’s Feed and Grain thrives along with the John Deere dealership although Croaker’s Hardware is barely hanging on since a Homeboy Workshop opened up over on the Plymouth line a couple of years ago. Copperwaite’s bank, the red brick with the granite front, has been shuttered except for a drive through B-Bank machine. Stalton Drug handles the local business, as does E. B. Alecup & Son Insurance. E. B. parks a shiny new silver blue Buick out front. & Son’s got last year’s model next space over.

The U. S. local postal service has the edge on UPS in this vicinity – and up a steep staircase above the post office, the Rainbow Unisex Hair Salon that Connie Hodkins and her brother Carl run remains active.

Directly across the street the County Diner, which the DiSilvas recently took over from the Bridgefords, serves breakfast and lunch but no dinner. Paramount theater’s been closed for decades, Hobhart Plymouth/Datsun more recently. Doctor Chester L. Wallaston, Family Practitioner, keeps regular hours Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Samuel A. Lasherman’s law office and The South Charworth Journal have been gone since the late ’70s, but their names still linger on faded storefronts like it was yesterday. Way down at the end of Main, Karjak’s Towing and Salvage looks open, a wide gravel and weed drive with the sign of the flying red horse suspended by a single hook head down alongside two abandoned gas pumps. The diesel’s operable, even though most of that business heads out Route 24 to Shelps Home Heating Oil for a fill-up.

“Bout time ta ha’vest ya cranb’ry crop, Step?”

“Notha week. Waitin fa the Po’tugees ta finish up ova at young Coppa’waite’s.”

“They’a predictin an ea’ly frost this ye’a.”

“They’a’ways predictin somethin. Been dry pickin the uppa bog m’self.”

“Who’s helpin ya with the baggin, ya daughta Kitty?”

“Nope, she’s been feelin poo’ly lately. Got ta stop pickin an bag’em m’self.”

“Slow goin.”

“Might have ta hi’a that Ka’jak kid ta help me cull an crate.”

“Wouldn’t trust Jesse’s basta’d ta pick his own nose.”

“He’a ya, but fresh is payin six bucks ma than wet right now.”

“What’ve they been off’rin pa ba’rel?”

“Good twenty fou’a fa my da’k ruby red.”

“Twenty fou’a! That’s ha’dly wo’th the effo’t.”

“Make what ya can make in this bis’ness. B’sides I’d have ta pay fa disposal.”

“Mo’a a that gova’ment intafea’rence, that’s what that is.”

“Bog’s a bog, I say, let whateva’s left ov’a rot.”

Helen Alecup pulls up slowly behind the police cruiser in her Saturn, rolls down the window. “Yu boys a blockin the road!”

“Betta get on – catch ya lata, Step.”

She pulls up alongside Step herself. “Yu two a wo’se than women.”

“How ya doin, Helen, just catchin up on all the local gossip.”

“Plenty a’tat these days – how’s Sally been doin, haven’t seen ha around town at’all.”

“Doin fine. Keepin busy.”

“An that pretty little Kitty, she doin any betta?”

“Fine. Gettin back ta ha no’mal self.”

“Well, tell’em both I said hi. On my way out ta the cemet’ry, put up some fresh flowa’s on my folk’s grave.”

“Nice seein ya, I’ll tell ev’rybody hi.”

Saturn and manure truck part amicably.

The majority of the town’s registered voters live out along windy roads on family farmsteads, though a string of newer bungalows built in the postwar boom of the ’50s stretch along Copperwaite Road toward the graveyard where South Charworth’s families have been dutifully buried over the centuries. The few Portuguese live along River Road or down Adams Path. The Karjaks live on three acres behind the garage, the yard littered with mounds of junk cars, some dating back to the ’40s.

“Co’bin? Co’bin!”

“Wha’d ya want?”

“Step Epton called ta see if ya’d cull cranb’ries fa a few days. Says he’s payin two dolla’s ova minimum.”

“Cheap peckahead. Wha’d ya tell him?”

“Ya’ve been busy helpin Grampa Bu’t in the garage since ya got back, but ya’d least give him a call.”

“Call him back, Gramma, an tell him ta get that fat bitch he’s got fa a daughta out the’a cullin.”

One must endure could be the town’s credo – for the nearly fourteen generations since settlement – which is what these good people have done when forced to ward off intruders, first the renegade Massachusett, followed by dissenters, some stragglers during the Depression, few more after the war and recently the Portuguese who while admired as hard workers are still not addressed by name. A grunt good day clears the throat and gets straight to business. The Karjaks however – Burt, Jesse and little Corbin – are a different breed altogether and called upon only in case of emergency – towing. Truck stuck out on a bog or parked wrong along Main Street during the cranberry festival early Octobers when South Charworth is overrun with strangers.

“Step Epton called back ta offa ten bucks a hou’a.”

“Ten bucks! Peckahead’s gettin desp’rate.”

“Ya gonna call him? We could use the cash.”

“Shit yes. Get ta watch that fat bitch besides. Hell, Kitty’ll bend way ova fa ten bucks a hou’a.”

Burt was the first Karjak to arrive, spring of ’62. Obviously a drifter, it was rumored he had rode in slung underneath a freight car when the New Haven & New Bedford slowed to a stop at the Main Street crossing. Whatever his origins Burt was soon pumping gas at Rutland’s garage. His wife, if indeed they were married, showed up nine months later from wherever he was from, courtesy of the Ambrosia Bus Lines. Roger Stalton distinctly remembers watching as she climbed off in front of his drugstore with a little girl in tow and another on the way, so burdened with motherhood he thought she’d burst right there on his sidewalk. Her age and ethnicity were indeterminate, she was wiry, had leathery skin with thin brown hair that blew about a prune shaped disapproving face. She wore a dress that almost reached her ankles, seemed to wear the same dress for decades, same style anyway, big knuckled hands stuck out long sleeves.

After the woman’s arrival Burt went from solid to fleshy, his eyes shrank to slits, his face round and redder and redder, high blood pressure with a temper to match – flash fire up in your face in an instant. Probably what sparked the explosion at the pumps that left Earl Rutland maimed for life and out of the gas business permanently. Burt Karjak reportedly

paid him off over time until he finally assumed control of the garage. Place thrived for two, three years until the feds started pouring money into interstate highway construction. Put South Charworth further off the map than it was already.

“Ya can’t keep switchin plates from ca ta ca, Bu’t, ya got ta regista ev’ry one a’them sep’rately.”

“Costs money.”

E. B. Alecup’s attempting to explain the vagaries of auto insurance to the elder Karjak. “Insu’ance goes with the ca, not with the plate.”

“Hobha’t switches his all the time.”

“That’s dif’rent. Hobhat’s a deala.”

“Then so am I.”

“He’s got a license, resella’s license.”

“Get me one a’those.”

“Yah, but ’til ya do, ya got ta keep the same plates on the same ca.”

Korinna Karjak had already had her baby boy by then. Named him Jesse, root of the earth. Couple of years later she enrolled her daughter Easter in the first grade. Had to present the girl’s birth certificate. Then’s when everyone in town learned the Karjaks were originally from Pawtucket, least that was the previous stop before they blew sporadically downwind into South Charworth.

Transplanted or home grown, everyone in South Charworth reproduced early. Jesse was no exception. Dropped out of school at fourteen, kid was fascinated with anything female or combustible – bobcats, go-carts, a rouser dirt bike with a young lovely aboard that he’d spin round the school yard, disrupting classes until Officer Foxcroft or Mister Spritch, the assistant principal, would come chasing after him.

“If ya ain’t regista’d, ya ain’t allowed on school propa’ty – ya got that through ya thick skull?”

“That’s right. Next time ya come crusin round he’a, I’ll lock ya up.”

Out of school with nothin much else to do, Jesse spent his time rebuilding an old ’48 Indian Chief V-twin flathead he found in the motorcycle heap back of the garage. Damn thing started up first crank, and what wasn’t rotted with rust could be replaced from plenty of other junk bikes, fancy Chief fenders and all. Pretty soon he was out learning the back roads all on his own, thank you. Boy graduated at sixteen to a Mustang he customized from the same rich source surrounding. Roadster

could do a hundred and forty no sweat around the worst curves in the county. Another project, a jacked up jeep, rolled over in a river bed. But evenings late he still preferred his Indian Chief for scouring the countryside – brought back a girl named Shelly mounted on the handlebars one night, from a location unknown, along with her baby – Corbin.

Jesse, the girlfriend Shelly and newborn Corbin moved in with Korinna and Burt.

“Ain’t much else we can do Bu’t, can’t abandon young folks out on the road.”

“Go pitch a tent in the woods fa all I ca’a.”

“That’s no way ta talk. He’s ya own flesh an blood, root a the ea’th.”

“Root a the ea’th shit, out the’a ruttin in the da’k with whateva’s got a fu’ry hole.”

“Bu’t!”

“Truth. Su’prised he ain’t brought home half a dozen brats a’ready.”

Korinna’s daughter Easter moved off to Fall River within the month, wasn’t the baby and the crying so much as she was a few months along herself, needed space for a family of her own. The father turned out to be a fisherman who was gone weeks at a time but made decent money and drove a brand new Ram Charger. Course trucks at the Karjak’s were in plentiful supply, pick of the lot. Family garage is proof that almost anything mechanical can be welded together and kept running, and a man handy with a screwdriver is all a woman needs to get her life jump started.

“I’m goin ta miss ya Easta baby”

“Now don’t go blubba’rin on about it mama.”

“Ain’t ev’ryday ya only daughta goes headin off on ya.”

“Ya’a’ways welcome ta come visit, come help with the baby.”

“Goin ta have my hands full a baby right he’a.”

“Spect ya will, way he bawls.”

Young Jesse’s mechanical ingenuity was the wonder of South Charworth, despite their many misgivings. Whatever broke down he could fix – engines with parts that had been out of production for decades he could fabricate, transmissions, drive trains, anything on wheels the townsfolk could push rusted out of an old shed was miraculously restored to running condition. Karjak’s Towing and Salvage thrived as it had never thrived before.

“Easta honey, it’s so mighty nice a’ya ta come up an join me an Shelly fa Co’bin’s fu’st bu’thday pa’ty...”

“Know it means a lot ta ya, mama.”

“...you an the baby – she’s su’a lookin sweet.”

“Crystal’ll be ’leven months week from Sunday.”

“They both done grown so big.”

“Specially Co’bin. He’s huge.”

Shelly’s holding Corbin tight on her lap, not saying much and staring. Bruiser’s squirming, wants to get down crawl around. Easter has her Crystal stashed on her lap and is staring back, this sort of sister-in-law face-off across the kitchen table.

“Whe’a’s Jesse anyway?”

“He’s out cuttin up a ca fa a customa.” Shelly bounces Corbin on her knee.

“Wo’ks day an night, that Jesse, like a madman.” Korinna explains.

“Somebody’s got ta wo’k round he’a.” A little spite spat at the wife.

“What’s that s’posed ta mean?”

“Means what it means. Least one of ya’s wo’kin.”

“I wo’k, I bring up my kid, don’go pawnin him off on some day ca’e centa full’a child molestas.”

“Women t’day wo’k, they don’ go spendin all day raisin no kid.”

“Yu don’t wo’k neitha.”

“My man’s out wo’kin the boat fishin, gone weeks at a time.”

“He’s out gettin high with his buddies, that’s what he’s doin.”

“My Clyde’s clean, been that way fa ova a ye’a now.”

“Now don’t you two go gettin inta no cat fight. We’a he’a ta celebrate Co’bin’s bu’thday, like a fam’ly’s ’sposed ta.”

“Some fam’ly. Grampa B’ut’s passed out on the sofa drunk with his zippa down an no money fa a cake o’a nothin.”

“Ain’t no money cause ya too busy sittin on ya fat ass ta get out an look fa a job.”

“Ya ass’s fatta than mine, bitch, look at them waddles hangin ova that chai’a.”

“Nough, you two. Ya both mighty goddamn trim fa just havin babies – an findin fault neva makes nothin no betta.”

Besides, Corbin starts in wailing. Big boy’s hungry, food on the table and nobody eating, as Jesse comes banging through the door.

“Well what’s all this, Easta ov’a with the baby an ev’rybody sittin round the table...”

“How ya doin, Jesse?”

“...lookin like they’ a’bout ta bite inta one anotha.”

“We wa jus talkin, honey, bout how ya wo’k day an night ta pravide fa ya fam’ly.”

“Do what I have ta do. What’s Clyde been up ta?”

“Wo’kin, fishin.”

“Shootin dope?”

“Clyde ain’t no addict!” Easter fires her face right across the table, gets little Crystal upset.

Gets Corbin upset.

“What the fuck’s all the noise!”

Wakes Grampa Burt up.

“Nothin, ain’t nothin. Go back ta sleep!”

Which he does.

Korinna’s up walking around the table, hands busy. “Thought this was Co’bin’s bu’thday pa’ty, Easta ov’a fa the day.”

“I’ll go wash up, get ready fa suppa.”

“While ya washin up, Jesse, I’ll wa’m up the scalloped patatas Easta brought.”

“Ya brought scalloped patatas?”

“Good thing I did, don’t look like thea’s much else in the fridge ta eat.”

“Will be now, jus made me a hundred an fifty bucks.”

“Hundred an fifty bucks!”

“Damn right. Guy took a bumpa, a doo’a an a set a Kenwood speakas off that old Saab we just hauled in, handed ova cash, no questions.”

“Can we get a cake?”

“Cake, ice cream, some KC chicken.”

“Damn. Cob’in’s goin ta have himself a real fu’st bu’thday pa’ty.”

“Don’t go makin no fuss.”

“He’a, hold ontta the baby fa a second.”

“Wha-...?” Man’s all arms trying to get a solid grasp on the porker. Snapshot. Jesse with baby Corbin on his first birthday.

Auto repair can make a man a good living, especially with the economy stalled and folks trying to squeeze another 10,000 miles out of their clunkers. Jesse’s been hauling it in, and his a cash accrual sort of business. There was even an offer made on one of the post-war bungalows out along Copperwaite Road, a measure of the town’s begrudged acceptance – for utility like the high intensity lines that deliver it can over time become tolerable – except all was not blissful at home.

“Jesse! Wake up!”

“Wha-wha?”

“Go shut that goddamn baby up!”

“Why me? Yu a’ready awake?”

“I’m not feelin so good.”

“Damn!”

“It’s ya’s as much as mine.”

“Ya’r its motha, not me!”

“Then let the little shit cry itself blue!”

“A’right by me. I can sleep through anythin.”

Which he could, which both he and Shelly could, but not Korinna, she had this mothering instinct and ended up adopting the baby Corbin as her own, had to, one day when Jesse woke up Shelly had left, rode out of town on another set of handlebars.

“What a ya goin ta do with that son a yus?”

Korinna was talking to Burt not Jesse, Jesse was out hauling around the countryside evenings until dawn on the old Indian Chief, hungry for more punta.

“Nothin I can do. He takes afta ya side a the family.”

Doors that were once open a crack to a Karjak were now barred, terrified daughters of fine old families watching out windows for any sign of the young gear raging avenger.

“My side! He looks an acts like the same so’t a wa’thogs yu Ka’jaks wa raised with!”

Jesse was actually the best looking of their lineage, and some of those terrified daughters would topple out a window nights late to go for a ride bareback. Wasn’t so much that Jesse was irresistible as much as he was readily available and offered door-to-door service.

“It’s disgustin. Whole town’s talkin bout nothin else, Bu’t.”

“Whole town’s got nothin else ta talk about but.”

“Ya got ta knock some sense inta that kid’s head befo’a he goes an does somethin ta shame us.”

“Ya the talka, ya talk ta him. It’s been ya fault from the beginnin, way ya wa a’ways babyin him growin up.”

“Wasn’t me who neva said nothin passed out on the sofa o’a soba.”

Course Jesse would dump the town beauties back on their doorsteps soon as he was through. Once roared off hooting while Mindy Stillmore was shouting out something rude about his character, loud enough so the neighbors could hear.

“I’d a shipped him off ta the a’m’y if I’d’a had my druthas.”

“Then do!”

“They’d neva take him. He’s too bellig’rent.”

Only they did. Draft was out, war was in, U. S. Army needed enlistments. Jesse was assigned to an infantry armored battalion. He was a natural with tanks, thick skin shell repellent model, never glance side to side, just keep firing back.

Snapshot. Fort Leonard Wood.

Dutifully sent home checks. Mother can’t ask for much more than that, male by mail’s better than some dab of cash you’ve got to feed three times a day.

“Miss him.” She confided tearfully to Easter over the phone.

“What fa, he was neva nothin but trouble.”

“Fu’st bo’n son, ya’ll unda’stand when ya have one a ya own.”

“How ’bout daughtas, they just mud pies on a platta?”

“They’a sweet – Lo’d love an protect them ev’ry one – but a son, he’s the beat deep in ya haa’t.”

Anyway that’s how Korinna got stuck raising her grandson.

Corbin was Co’b from grade one...

“Co’b! Co’b! Crawl on all fou’as an sno’at like a hog!”

...but Co’b grew bigger than the biggest kids in school, stayed bigger, and he beat the shit out of those who taunted him, mercilessly, pinned them down, sat on them and pounded on them with fists until Officer Foxcroft or Mister Spritch, the assistant principal, heard screams and came running. Mothers wanted him lynched, but they’d have to bide their time because the bully excelled at football, kick-ass linebacker – butted heads with any bugger the surrounding towns could throw against him. There was even talk of a Vet’s Post scholarship, but after three tries at eighth grade Co’b was cut off completely from any future in sport.

“Goddamn teachas, wha’da they know bout nothin?”

Not much. Nothingness not being much more penetrable than the mysteries of algebra. But a desk tossed out a window with the kid boggle-eyed and clinging to it, that was something concrete to consider, or running down halls shouting out the worst of the seven obscenities, long before some wise-ass psychologist identified such behavior as a syndrome – come on! – or when Co’b took a swing at Mister Headwedge, the English teacher who’d F’d his essay on variously flavored fruit farts and the intricacies of their manufacture.

“But ya promised me, ya promised me.”

Arms up protecting his face and head.

“Didn’t promise shit!”

“When I tu’ned thu’tteen.”

“Ya ain’t goin ta get no du’t bike, no nothin ta ride on, not til ya quit beatin up on ev’rybody younga then you at school!” Grampa Bu’t was slappin Cob about the head, hard, his ears ringing, his lip bloody. “Last time the likes a’Jesse’s basta’d’s goin ta ruin a good fam’ly name!”

Last time he was going to let Grampa Bu’t wail on him too, unexpected left hook with a young hard muscle to the old coot’s jaw and Grampa Bu’t was shittin denture bits for weeks – but hey, Co’b’s attention was starting to turn anyway, why beat on the boys when he could bust the buds off their younger sisters.

“Kid hunts fa trouble.” Mister Headwedge explains to Officer Foxcroft. “Can’t read no’a spell, won’t pay attention ta nobody. Ha’dly speaks a wo’d in o’a out’v class.”

But actions speak louder than words, go screaming wild down vaulted halls, banging on lockers, punching out walls. Time after time coach would intervene, he needed muscle on the varsity team – up until the day Co’b trashed the cafeteria during first lunch over an assumed slight to his intelligence – not a table nor chair left standing, a dislocated jaw, half dozen bloody noses, kids scattering every which way, slipping on a baloney, mustard and peanut butter slick with an overlay of Coca-Cola – and later the same day breaking out of Mister Spritch’s office and setting fire to the rare books display case under the very nose of the horrified librarian! Town’s first bible reduced to ash! Enough! Boy was seventeen before he came wandering back down Main Street on foot fresh from the county reformatory. Had he been discharged or did the sheriff simply leave the cell door ajar – long before community release became official policy under some smug liberal at the State House up in Boston.

Isn’t back home more than an hour and Co’b is out scrounging in the yard, heaps of salvage here and there, sort of in order. Hubcaps up against the fence close to the front gate, hundreds of them, next to whatever would sell for a quick ten bucks – rims, tires, batteries – a few CD players on display in a lean-to, that favorite last cut still stuck inside, with the week’s special, scrap catalytic converters for forty five apiece. The rusted entrails worth as much as the sawed off bodies stacked two, three high, most rear-ended or side-swiped, though some had rolled, muscle cars, roofs flattened out like convertibles, windows shattered, all missing doors,

hoods, fenders, with this clamp jawed crane brooding high overhead, ready to scoop down and lift out any sweet morsel the occasional customer might desire. And off by themselves in a specially marked section the head-on collisions, engines crumpled into bucket seats, unmarked lives lost in mayhem or madness, three acres of Fords, Chevys, all makes and models, genuine factory parts at steeply discounted prices. Though none of this carnage interests Co'b as he digs through the cycle pile, burrowing underneath the sissy red and yellow bullet bikes, for it is leaner game he is after, and no Harley neither, no, somewhere buried in the tangled mass is the banged-up chassis of that '48 Indian Chief his dad had had, and needed for the same purpose, to race over back county roads full bore 'til she bursts.

Grampa Bu't might be wary, but Korinna's happy to have Co'b back, the excitement of young blood pumping through family veins. She has one last shot on the Kodak and catches him standing tall top of the cycle heap, gritted with grime, the handlebars it took half a day to dig out held high over his shoulders like the horns off some prehistoric beast.

Co'b sets to work early next morning with a torch.

"Looks like ya might have ya pa's knack fa weldin," sparks shooting up in a flaming arc, Grampa Bu't stepping back, "cept ya got ta take it slow, don't want ta sco'ch the shit out'v that fenda ya wo'kin on the'a."

Co'b is oblivious, arms pitted with burns and no pansy-ass face mask neither. "Ain' got time fa all these funky fendas. Got ta strip this sucka down fa action." Boy has been in a hurry since the day he was born, talks so fast when he bothers that nobody can understand him, high idle, smokes one Slug Rite after another and never looks you in the eye.

"Bike's goin ta get ya in trouble, lots a trouble. Jus' like yu dad."

Co'b glances over at Grampa Bu't, smiles, slick knife slit exposing a sharpened canine.

Day comes when Co'b rolls the Indian Chief out, night black camouflage, no chrome, no fenders, bare machine with thick tread tires that can take him cross-country if need be. Cranks it. Blast of crap and *FUME! FUME! FUME! FUME!* – proves that even working by starts and fits man can get something done he wants badly enough. Next day after some fine tuning, he's off down Main Street and gone, wrench in his back pocket. Returns late the following evening hungry.

"Ain't no controls these days, ev'rythin's up fa grabs." Roger Stalton opines over morning coffee with the rotary regulars around the counter of the County Diner. "Was way dif'rent in my day."

“Back then we obeyed, we had respect fa autho’ity.” Is how Old Gordon Copperwaite, town’s banker and Chairman of the Board of Selectmen, remembers it.

“Wa. A’my. Ev’rybody had ta su’ve. An nobody ran off ta Canada neitha.”

“Draft dodgas, they wa the fu’st. They ruined this country with thei’a protests an thei’a ma’chas.”

“Pack a Commies is what they wa.”

“Democrats ain’t much betta. Give oua tax dollas away ta whateva crybabies yowl the loudest.” Old Copperwaite’s been a delegate to the Republican National Convention since Dewey.

“Taday it’s the grabbiest who a makin it in this wo’ld, no respect fa nobody else’s traditions, jus take ya money an run.” Then too, Stalton Drug is one of the last in the county not to be claimed by a chain.

“Nothin’s like it used ta be.”

“Got ta fend troublemakas off, protect what’s rightfully ouas.”

“Got my thu’ty ought six loaded an ready fa any ema’gency.” E. B. Alecup’s great-great-great-grandfather was colonel of the town militia.

“Got ma fi’powa than that sto’ed in the cabinet in the den when we need it.” & Son collects guns too, a few fully automatic with spare clips in a packed ammo box.

“Don’t need a militia E. B., not with Tim Foxcroft standin watch.”

Everyone around the counter spits and sputters, Officer Foxcroft’s stool conspicuously vacant this morning.

“Whea’s he been anyway?”

“Woa’kin late, patrollin.” Carl Hodkins seems to know.

But whatever their take on the issues of the day, fact is Co’b is back. Co’b is on the loose.

“Can’t lock oua daughtas up twenty-fou’a hou’as a day.”

Nor is Co’b the favorite of South Charworth’s matrons. “Big bully,” is how Edna Copperwaite describes him, “came cha’gin out’v the slida doo’a at the Cou’t House the otha moa’nin. If I hadn’t’av stepped back, he’d’av knocked me ov’a, no a’scuse me o’a nothin.” Edna’s ninety three and can barely hobble with the help of her cane. “Way he pushes his weight around, ain’t half civil.”

Civility’s the standard in a rural farming community where it’s the wives who hold sway. There are their daughters and granddaughters to consider, nieces, nice neighbors, dependable babysitters, the sweet young girl who cashiered at Stalton Drug and had to leave town under a cloud because of what that Corbin Karjak had done – each of these women

woven into a fine web of familial relations threading back generations. Young and older they gather late mornings at the Sumo Mart to compare notes over Dippin Donuts and coffee. No need for a newspaper, nor even the telephone, these ladies have tongues.

“He’s been seen out ridin on his motabike with one a the Ta’bell gu’ls.”

“Which one? Callie, the old’a one, o’a hu younga sista Lo’ray?”

“Callie – Lo’ray’s ba’eely twelve!”

“That’s why I’m askin.”

“Like a cu’clin hawk preyin on the young an helpless, swoops down when ya least suspect it.” Helen Alecup, E. B.’s wife, has little use for the upstart.

“Fu’st yu’s then mine.” Another of the ladies enjoins.

“None’v us is safe.” On that they all can agree. “Not while he’s out roamin round loose.”

Town’s clearly spooked – besides Co’b has failed to inherit his father’s mechanical abilities. Seems his mind is restless if not outright tormented, best he can do is tinker on that odd model motorbike he’s dug out of the mound.

“Don’t do ya no good bein by yusef hou’a afta hou’a.”

“Leave me alone, Gramma.”

“Ya got ta have friends. Ev’ry no’mal youngsta’s got least one friend.”

“Yu an Grampa Bu’t ain’t got no friends.”

“We don’t need friends, we got each otha.”

Former school mates won’t wave as they drive by. Eligible girlfriends turn and run at his approach. So why Kitty Epton hooked up with Co’b is open to endless speculation.

“Ya’d think a good looka like hu could have the pick a the pack.”

“She’s from fine solid stock.”

“Prob’ly wants that garage back in the fam’ly.” Old Gordon Copperwaite has Kathy Rutland mixed up with Kitty Epton, who is Co’b’s current lay.

“She’s as dumb as Co’b, that’s why.” According to E. B. Alecup.

“Nah papa, dumba.” & Son takes a pot shot.

“Maybe she sees somethin in him we don’t.” Everyone pauses, looks over their coffees, but then Carl Hodkins is a hairdresser not a barber.

Kitty has actually done well in school, very well, and she is a looker. Every guy in town can attest to that fact for they’ve all had at least one go. & Son fondly reminisces for the benefit of his elders. Chilly night after practice she’d sprawled out on the hood of a car and let the varsity team

have at it a minute and a half each, Morley Fester the quarterback first and on down the line, Co'b Ka'nak lumbering up last and longer. Was probably the only way he could have gotten to her, or she to him. He would never have called her up for a proper date – then too the school slut's got her motives.

Besides, Co'b is something of a romantic. "How 'bout ya squattin down on me this time, wo'k it fa me til I say stop." Which Kitty does, the practiced cheerleader she is, screaming her lungs out, boobs bobbing up and down, mouth open wild-eyed, his too, the sight of all the excitement gets him so tongue tied he nearly gags on his own spit.

Packs her on the back of the Indian Chief and tours the county roads, down Copperwaite Road, which weaves along the course of the Scracapssett River. "Wanta see what this fucka can do?" Before she can answer yes, no or what, he's accelerating out of a reverse curve way across the double yellow line, face-in-face at an oncoming driver as he laughs and swerves away just in time. Driver lays twenty feet of rubber before bounding onto a guard rail.

"That was old man Stalton."

"Who?"

"Old man Stalton from the drug sto'a."

"Bet he choked up his lunch."

On another of their outings, Cob comes up fast behind Helen Alecup, E. B.'s wife, rides close alongside, then cuts her off as she's about to turn left into the cemetery. Woman goes sliding into the weeds as he whips past and down the maintenance road back towards the abandoned generating station on the bank of the river. He leans the bike up against a tree and motions Kitty inside. Roof timbers have caved in, windows have blown out, but the stone walls are still standing. Machinery's frozen in place, man high flywheels and a room size turbine that once churned out enough power to light twenty five watt bulbs all over town.

"Creepy."

Dark, dank, secluded, and home to creatures that scurry.

"Got me a nice dry co'na ova he'a." A blanket in a crate, half bottle of whiskey, couple of dirty magazines and a pack of rolling papers. "Come he'a when I need ta." Motions her to sit down.

"Floo'a's all du'ty an cove'd with grease."

Night gets cool and an owl hoots in the very next room while Co'b crawls all over her, face up, face down, he lifts her slightly and fits it in, tight, first one hole then the other – "Wu'k with me! Wu'k with me!" – as

she squirms from side to side to avoid the stench, crusty old blanket, his leathery thick skin, oil oozing out every pore – “YAH! YAH!” – he twists her around and slowly upward while he slides underneath – “Don’t lose me! Hold on ta me!” – boring in deeper, deeper – “YAH! YAH! YAH! YAH! YAH! YAH!” – piston pumping her furiously until she, he, they both combust! “Ain’t nobody in this town can fuck ya like I can fuck ya, bitch!” He boasts to the beetles and bats. “Nobody!”

Must be because she rides out there with him almost every night even if she has to sneak out her second story window and shimmy down the drain spout.

“Ya insatiable.”

“I’m what?”

“Ya can’t get enough.”

“Betta believe it. I’m stud.”

“Wea’ me out an then come at me fa mo’a.”

“Fill ya up.”

“With nothin ma comfo’table than a goddamn blanket on a greasy cement floo’a.”

“Fit fa wallowin round like a coupla wa’t hogs.”

Though sometimes the mechanic runs out of spark, has to lay back on the cement and listen to creatures stalking after one another in the woods surrounding.

“Ya got ta love me some?”

“Don’t go talkin shit.”

“Ev’rybody in town’s talkin bout the two’v us.”

“Folks talkin don’t mean ya got ta listen.”

“They’a sayin we’a’n item...”

“Jesus!”

“...that we’ll prob’ly be gettin ma’ried end a’the summa o’a at least movin in ta oua own place tagetha.”

“Wha’the fuck fa? I like whe’a I’m livin jus fine.”

“So we can spend all oua time tagetha, maybe have a fam’ly.”

“Don’t need no goddamn fam’ly.”

“I’d even consida movin in with ya fam’ly if that means we could be tagetha.”

“How’bout me movin in with yu fam’ly?”

“Hunh?”

“How’bout me movin in with yu fam’ly?”

“My dad wouldn’t stand fa that.”

“Jus why we’a betta off livin the way we a, an seein each otha when we

need ta.”

Funny how talk can kill a romance, cold douse of reason on an overheated engine.

“Ya su’a ya don’t love me a little?”

“Cou’se I do. Love ta love ya a lot.”

“Jus like ta he’a ya say it.”

“Well I said it. Now leave me be.”

“Don’t want ta think all we do is fuck.”

“Ain’t nothin wrong with fuckin.”

“That why ya wa out fuckin with Christy Eskins?”

“Who said I was out fuckin with Christy Eskins?”

“She did. Told ev’rybody at the Sumo Ma’t.”

“Why’d she go an tell ev’rybody?”

“See. Ya did.”

“Didn’t do nothin.”

“Must’ve done somethin.”

“Just messed around some.”

“See!”

“Didn’t do huh o’a nothin, she was all ragged out.”

“That’s not the point. Ya cheated on me with Christy Eskins.”

“So why’d she go an tell ev’rybody?”

“Cause she wanted ta make me feel bad.”

True. Christy Eskins and Kitty Epton had always been rivals. Sat one behind the other every class since first grade. Had a contest to see who could screw the hottest guys in school, and when they’d picked through the choice lot, juniors and seniors, all that was left was down and dirty and an occasional awkward sophomore. After they graduated any guy up to forty five who chanced a glance would do. Reputation wasn’t the issue, they’d already earned that, and Kitty was valedictorian of her class. Ahead, a future of waitressing at the Vets Post and scant prospects of being led cleansed in veiled white to the altar by a father who perforce must hand her over to her spoiler. Nor will Kitty leave for Fall River or Providence for the full term like any other self-respecting townie who has fallen victim to public lust. For in South Charworth divorce is unknown and adultery strictly hidden. Fornication is officially frowned upon though well practiced at fifteen, sixteen and such in back seats, in tool sheds as well as in abandoned powerhouses so kids can learn who is who and what works and won’t end up like Carl Hodkins in business with his sister.

“What the hell ya goin ta do with the baby?”

“Don’ know yet.”

“Leave po’a Kitty alone, Step, she’s pregnant.”

“Whole town can plainly see that!”

“She ain’t the fu’st an she won’t be the last.”

“Might be in ya family, not in mine!”

The missus is an original Copperwaite by birth.

“What about ya sista Millie. She had two befa she wanda’d ba’foot back home.”

“Rumas nobody could prove!”

“Rumas with mouths shoutin out mommy!”

New generation, unlike the older, is opting to move their young brood in with the parents, hunker down if need be until the storm blows over, but hold onto the baby, hold onto future generations. Other taboos have disappeared too, like flunking out of high school, early fatherhood, the year or two detention that has replaced the draft as the mandatory rite of passage. None of which is about to slow young Corbin down – though seventeen and no future can be hard on a guy. Not that there’s anything Burt Karjak can do nor will. Corbin is the spitting image of Jesse at that age, of himself at that age, of any of the Karjaks at any age. Man’s got to stand behind his own spit, that’s Burt’s opinion, can’t wipe spent phlegm off a dusty floor, no more than you can take criticism from some fuck who plainly despises you. No. You wait and you creep up behind the sucker in the shadows and you stick it to him.

“Could resto’a those old ca’s in the lot, sell’em ta Hollywood fa gangsta movies.”

“Damn lot a’fenda bangin, an ya’d have ta drive them all the way out the’a.”

“Betta than runnin that crotch rocket ya’v got all ova the countryside.”

“Got to get my butt out’v he’a, that’s what I’ve got ta do.”

“Not with anotha yea’s probation hangin ova ya head, ya won’t.”

Then too, October is towing season, cranberries and the festival, even Step Epton has to stand aside and let the spoiler pull him out.

“How’d ya eva get it stuck in the bog that deep, Step?”

“By wo’kin fa a livin.”

Seven months into it Kitty decides if she and Co’b moved in together, she’d at least have a chance at respectability. Which means she has to phone him.

“Kitty Epton called this afta’noon.”

In hopes that by talking to the grandmother she could gain an ally in the family.

“What’s she afta?”

“Said she jus wanted ta say hello, see how ya wa doin?”

“Can’t prove that kid’s mine.”

“How about DNA?”

“Mine ain’t no dif’rent from nobody else’s.”

“Could be anybody’s the way I he’a it ova at the Sumo Ma’t.”

“Prob’ly mine. I stuck it to hu last.”

“Still don’t mean ya have ta own upta it.”

“That’s right, Gramma. Did ya hang up on the bitch?”

“Damn ne’a, let hu dangle on the line fa a few minutes longa.”

Co’b had probably been drinking or was outright drunk when he towed E. B. Alecup’s brand new Buick from in front of the Court House after sunset, banged the shit out of it in the process, car parked illegally in the handicap zone and Karjak’s Towing with the exclusive town contract. Nothing the magistrate could do. Three grand in damages, and being the persnickety insurance agent he is, E. B. doesn’t want to jeopardize his 8% good driver discount by reporting it. But then find a garage that won’t report it. Karjak’s. Co’b himself bangs out the dents, best he can, which isn’t all that good, plus he’s no bondo expert either. Paint doesn’t quite match, and he’d have to use a set of heat lamps to get the sheen right. So what’s some filings on spray enamel anyway? Twelve feet off nobody’ll notice.

“I’ll get that Ka’jak kid back if it’s the last thing on ea’th I eva do.”

Local gentry is assembled for breakfast at the County Diner, same agenda, how to deal with the town’s rowdy outsider.

“Basta’d did my ca in on pu’pose.” E. B.’s bitter.

“Clea the whole lot a them out’v he’a.” & Son adds.

“Ain’t been nothin but trouble in town since Bu’t showed up fo’ty ye’as ago.” Roger Stalton remembers as if it were yesterday.

“So what a we goin ta do about it, I wanta know?” E. B. Alecup’s insistent.

Carl Hodkins is characteristically quiet.

“Not much ya can do, less they cross the law.” Officer Foxcroft’s back, seems he’s been logging extra hours, keeping watch on Co’b’s every move.

“Betta back in the days when they’d stone adulta’as.”

“An hang hoa’sethiefs.”

“Rule a law prevails today.”

“What rules? That family don’t follow none.”

“Natch’ral law. Do unta othas befa they do unta yu.”

“I abide by that.” Old Copperwaite’s ancestors had founded the First Church.

“Rest assua’ed, I’ll be watchin like I a’ways do.”

“Ya betta be wu’kin lots ma ovatime, Tim, if ya want ta catch up with that punk. He’s quick on that bike a’his.”

“Been watchin him, watchin like a owl. Ain’t much a nothin slips by me nights.”

A few things have been slipping by Officer Foxcroft nights, while he’s been dozing in his cruiser, like when Co’b crept up and shook his back bumper, interrupted his slumber. Officer Foxcroft jumped out of his seat, forty five drawn, ready to fire into the dark. And who was it shined the light in while Leassie Rawlins and Morley Fester were making it in the back seat under the dark trees at the cemetery? Nobody saw him, but everyone knew that was Co’b’s doin – though tying Old Copperwaite’s cat’s tail to a tree until the poor creature had to tear it half off to get free, that was merely attributed. Corbin Karjak had nothing against animals, it was people he didn’t much care for. Yet incident upon incident with regular updates being reported at the Sumo Mart.

“Basta’d ran me off the road few weeks back ne’a the cemetery, went speedin by on that mota scoota he rides so close I had to vee’a off into the weeds. Been a nu’vous wreck eva since.” E. B. Alecup’s wife, Helen, tells of her outrage. Course no mention she was going twenty, twenty five at best and had had a couple of those vodka sea breezes she needs when she gets to feeling sentimental.

“And loud, rude!”

“Got no mannas a’tall, not from what I’ve seen.” Edna Copperwaite might be nearly immobile, but she keeps right up with the news.

“Tried datin my little Amy,” Marcie Thatchery admits, “but she told him no.”

“Amy’s sma’t, but some a the gu’ls today’ve got no common sense.”

“Not when a sweaty young skunk comes sprayin the ya’d.”

“Takes a young gu’l a few yea’s ta figu’a out a kid like him, sometimes too late.”

“Like po’a Kitty Epton.” Carol Oakland is the Eptons’ next door neighbor. “She’s ba’ely a child huself.”

“Disgraceful.”

“They should run him straight back ta the refo’mat’ry fa that.”

“Prison!” Edna Copperwaite pounds on her cane. “Walpole! An throw away the key!”

And on and on, the stories these wives could tell. Though do they realize that Korinna Karjak is packed in the snack aisle alongside the chips and salsa, overhearing every word? More than likely, because these ladies have extra eyes, see things before they have a chance of happening.

And hear. Course Co'b's bike's got no muffler – *FUMES! FUMES! FUMES!*

Charges are mounting, serious ones that might violate his probation. It is alleged, for instance, that Carl Hodkins groped at Co'b's crotch one night when Co'b was nea'ly passed out on the bench near the Civil War Memorial in the green. Maybe he didn't, but heeling Carl in the groin was going too far even in first church South Charworth. Not that the victim is about to press charges, Carl Hodkins will forswear defending his particular proclivities in open court or anywhere public.

And who else would have painted HOA in two foot bold letters across the side of Kitty Epton's house with a clear Main Street view, and misspelled it?

“Co'bin, ya got ta get up. Grampa Bu't's been sick all night with the grip, an he can't finish weldin that railin fa Ed Scocum.”

“Then tell Ed Scocum he can wait.”

“Can't. He pays cash an we need the money fa groc'ries.”

“I'm ti'ed out, prob'ly got the grip muself.”

“If ya wan't racin round nights, ya wouldn't be sleepin in til noon.”

“Leave me be, ya old witch!”

“Ya haul that lazy ass a'yus out a'bed, o'a I'm comin on in the'a with my broom!”

“Yu an what tiny a'my?”

“Stayin out, causin trouble, town's goin ta bring ya up on cha'ges.”

“What cha'ges? They can't pin none a that shit on me.”

“That's not what I've been hea'rin down at the Sumo Ma't. They'a sayin they'a su'a it was you who painted ho'a on the side a Kitty Epton's house last week.”

“Nobody saw me doin nothin.”

“Claimed they hear'd ya drivin by on ya bike.”

“Sounds don't prove nothin, they need eye-witnesses.”

“Town's got plenty a those, besides they'll lie an say whateva they have ta, ya wait an see. Judge Palsey ain't goin ta listen ta the likes a yu. Ya got that reco'd.”

“They come at me, an I'll bu'n the whole goddamn town down!”

“That’s just what they’a’fraid’v. An ya’d be dumb enough ta try it.”

“Don’t go callin me dumb, ya shriveled up old bitch!” And Co’b comes storming out the door buck naked just to prove his point.

But Korinna doesn’t back off, not the width of an inch. “Cause dumb is what ya a, stubbun dumb like ya pa, ya granpa an all a those stubbun dumb Ka’jaks befa him!”

“Bash ya in the fuckin mouth if ya don’t shut up!”

“Go ahead, do it. Prove ta ev’rybody how dumb a Ka’jak ya a!”

He turns round and slams the door behind him.

“They’a goin ta gang up, I’m wa’nin ya, they’ll gang up an run ya naked butt down Main Street an out’v this town fa good!” Korinna was worried, weary, and with no new Karjaks to mother, she had nothing else to do but.

Kitty finally corners Co’b in the Sumo Mart buying a pack of Slug Rites. Lots of eyes are watching that morning so their veracity is incontestable. She says hi, he says hi, and she uncovers the face of the bundle she’s carrying.

“Looks jus like ya.”

“No it don’t.”

“Su’a he does. Look at his eyes an his squa’a chin.”

Tiny slits and a sawed off two-by-four jutting up.

“Babies all look the same.”

“He’s a Ka’jak, I can tell.”

“Pity the sucka.”

“Ya want ta hold him?”

“Hell no.” Co’b backs his way out the double door, hops that bike and tears out of there, screaming as he rips through the gears.

Ladies in the store simply shake their heads.

“Unfa’givable. Downright unfa’givable, man denyin his own pata’nity.”

Kitty is more forgiving. “Jus takes time, that’s all, fa a man as restless as Co’b Ka’jak ta settle in.”

Restless. Co’b races around all fall, like a demon is riding on his shoulder. First snowfall he calms some, must become reflective because he spends the winter hours painstakingly recording the biography of the townsfolk – names, dates and the intimate details – in indelible soft tip magic marker on the walls of the restroom at Karjak’s Towing and Salvage. Not that the garage does much business, but when a farmer in dirty coveralls has to relieve himself he’s not always so choosy.

Carilin Scocum. Naild hr May 14 on the scholyrd jungl jim.

Kity Epton. Lost cownt wi that cun.

Christy Eskins. Finly did hr ass las summr.

Got young Copperwits 13 year odd doter ta giv me head Ford a July. Slid down in the tow truk btween ma nees.

Mis Bridgfrd binds ovr fr D'silva aftr lunch evry Friday. Chck it out fr yrselfvs if ya dont belev me.

Wachd Carl Hodkins suk officr Foxcrrft off in hs ptrol car Septimbr 28 aftr the Cranbry firworks wer over like Iv seen them doin fr yers.

Ham Rutland an Chris Aco'n war doin crack the nite they hit that retainin wall.

It was & Son that pored sand inta Headweges gas tank not me. But I got blamed.

Nor was it merely the sins of the flesh that Bu't chronicled on the men's room walls, no, the very economic underpinnings of the township were at stake.

Any kid can by beer out the back dor of Foxcrrfts packy aftr leven. Jist got ta nock twice an pay cash.

Roga Copawait sprays weed killa on that head bangin dope he sells.

Oakland dumps the sewage he pumps outa cesspools inta the rivr behind the graveyard by the old generatr station. Doesnt haul none of it away.

Hobhart uses old pats in ya ca but chages yu fa new.

Step Epton stole the cranberrys off that Lake Wave truck, not the Pinyero boys who got sent up.

And on and on in elaborate detail, family after family, dating back to when Co'b was eleven and twelve, touring the countryside on his bicycle in the dark and watching through windows, lying in wait for hours in the cemetery, back of the football field grandstand, behind Ethan Foxcroft's package store, sneaking up the stairs to peer in the door of the Rainbow Unisex Hair Salon, getting caught and for five bucks having to stand there and let Carl Hodkins diddle a little.

"Can't take much ma'v that Ka'jak kid."

Town's officialdom is speaking out on the sidewalk what they have been whispering in the confines of the County Diner for years.

"Gets drunk an the'a's no controllin him." Roger Stalton's had about enough, although his slate is clean, so far.

"Drunk nothin. Kid was bo'n bellig'rent."

"Just like his fatha an his fatha befa him."

Even Judge Palsey can't escape notice. Seems he's been doing Helen

Alecup off and on over the years, E. B.'s wife. It's even possible & Son could be the Judge's.

Lots of shit the whole town probably knew already, but nobody would dare mention aloud, not even in the heat of gossip at the Sumo Mart – because everybody's got private parts they don't ever want exposed. Sort of a small town rule, your hands off mine, my hands off yours, because once somebody tugs on somebody else's zipper, then nobody's safe. Fingers pointing, tongues lapping, it's suddenly public property with people traipsing across the front lawn and gawking.

“Big mistake mentionin the judge.”

Regulars agree as Ernie DiSilva crams a fresh pot in the JavaMeister.

“Judge denies it a cou'se, ev'ry wo'd.” Old Copperwaite intones.

“Plus Palsey's a Mason.”

“Don't want them afta ya. They've got friends ev'rywhe'a impo'tant, state troopa ba'racks, legislatu'a – Judge went ta Hava'd with Senata Cotta.”

“Don't really want nobody afta ya in this life.”

“Ca'tainly not the whole town.”

“Fi'a is safe when it's contained, open the stove doo'a an it'll bu'n the town down.”

Everyone agrees with Old Copperwaite's assessment.

“So? What a we goin ta do?” E. B. Alecup's insistent.

“Wait.” Officer Foxcroft purses his lips, blows lightly across his cup.

“Wait patiently til we can catch him red-handed.”

FUME! FU-FU-FU-FUUUME!

Co'b's out front of the garage come early spring, tuning the Indian Chief flathead. About everybody in town's come by to take a crap and read the latest edition off the walls. An upraised eyebrow after they've wiped? Co'b just shrugs his shoulders.

FUME! FUME!

“Ya gettin ready ta run?”

“Run? Run from what, Gramma?”

“Hea'r tell they'a gunnin fa ya.”

“Who's they?”

“Alecup an Epton in pa'tic'la, long with Offica Foxcroft.”

“Ain't 'fraid a the likes a them.”

“Epton is ma'ried ta one a Old Coppawaite's daughtas, Sally.”

“Ain't 'fraid a him neitha.”

“Old Coppawaite's the Chai'man a the Boa'd a Selectmen, an that was

his fav'rute granddaughta ya wrote all that nasty stuff about."

"Don't make no dif'rence."

"Hea'r the po'a gu'l's so ashamed she quit school."

"Truth's the truth."

"They'a sayin the judge's seethin, denies ev'ry wu'd bout him an Helen Alecup."

"Self-righteous old prick gets what he gets fa stickin it ta a dried up twig."

"An Offica Foxcroft, he's swo'an out a vendetta against ya."

"It's a free country, ya can say whateva ya want so long as it's the truth."

"Not when the truth pisses ev'rybody off."

Afraid or not afraid, Co'b hops aboard the Indian Chief, saddle packs strapped behind the seat, and – *FUUUUUME!* – heads out of town for the summer, straight up Main Street, his middle finger jabbing up and down as he roars past Officer Foxcroft parked in front of the school in his cruiser.

Tim Foxcroft doesn't bother to pursue.

That night Helen Alecup's Saturn gets pushed into the stocked fish pond behind Judge Palsey's place. Proves a point, but she left her pet Pekinese locked inside and when they fished the Saturn out – had to call in Karjak's Towing, Burt himself answering – dog had drowned while scratching against the door panel in a futile attempt to escape.

"Basta'd desa'ves whateva he gets."

That was to be Burt Karjak's final comment on the matter.

"He's ya own son..."

That was to be Burt Karjak's final comment on the matter.

"...ya grandson, ya own flesh an blood fa Chrissakes!"

Nobody hears much about Co'b that summer, nobody forgets about him either. Kitty Epton parades the baby around everywhere the good townfolk gather. Sunday after church. At Leassie Rawlins and Morley Fester's long-anticipated wedding. Their twins' christening a month later. Some distant Rutland cousin's burial out near the abandoned power plant along the river. Fourth of July picnic on the green which by all accounts is a dull event without one of Co'b's manic antics – like last summer rewiring the fireworks display circuit so everything flew off at the same time. Talk about the dawn's early light!

Doesn't help much when Burt Karjak paints over the restroom walls. Then one coat of cheap paint won't whitewash the town's sins away either. Magic marker has seeped through to remind the visiting public that what

they'd hope was firmly behind them still remains stained in the porcelain.

"Ya figu'a he's gone fa good? Just had ta prove a point about the judge befa leavin?"

Officer Foxcroft glares into the steam off his cup. "He's got nowhe'a else ta go."

"My great grandmotha used ta tell us when we wa kids, 'Trouble neva leaves ya alone.'" Seems Old Copperwaite's sage ancestor had even crocheted the proverb into a sampler that has remained framed on the wall of his office to this day.

"Exactly."

Come late September and the full round orange harvest moon, the Portuguese out along River Road claim they've heard a motorcycle go screeching by – *FUME! FUME! FUME! FUUUUUME!* – but then that's a common occurrence, only teenage male in South Charworth who doesn't own a bike is Stoke Steven's little toad-eyed kid with the thick glasses.

"So ya figu'a it's him the Po'tugees a hea'rin nights?"

Officer Foxcroft nods. "Time's about ripe."

"But whe'a's he stayin? Way Ka'jak an the wife look these days, they'd neva let him back into the garage."

"They'a most likely sca'ed a him too."

"Unda'standable. Wouldn't want that welp piddlin in my house neitha."

"The'a's plenty a places fa him ta hide out among the bogs, Tim."

"That's right, an he knows ev'ry squa'a inch a that countryside, should, he's been sneakin round pryin into folks' business since he was old enough ta ride a two-wheela."

"It's him. I know it's him. Feel it like'n Octoba chill."

"So? What a we goin ta do?" E. B. Alecup's insistent.

"Wait. Just wait."

"Wait?"

"What, like chickens stuck in a coop?"

Talk prods Officer Foxcroft into staking out the Epton's place. He figures Co'b might get in touch with Kitty, not so much to see his kid, but for an easy lay.

FUME! FUME!

Portuguese are still reporting soundings out along the back county roads.

"Don't know bout this waitin strategy a ya's, Tim, folks a gettin nu'vous."

So Officer Foxcroft and a couple of hastily deputized buddies pull off a

dawn raid at the abandoned Boys Club campground down Adams Path, but no sign of Co'b. Kids have been in there recently, drinking beer and smoking pot, but nobody's been staying there.

Waiting is getting to everyone in town – anticipation always more painful than a direct hit. Nerves eat on you, scratch at your skin. Even Judge Palsey, he phones Old Copperwaite, complains that more incidents like those of the past winter would be hard on the commonweal. Old Copperwaite has to agree and so he summons Officer Foxcroft to the big office top of the stairs at Town Hall.

“We got ta take action, Tim.”

“Can't swat at a mosquito in the da'k.”

“Kid's gettin on ev'rybody's nu'ves...”

“Without doin one damn thing wrong but drivin around.”

“...specially folks whose reputations've been sullied.”

“That's most ev'rybody in town.”

“We got ta make a concu'ted effu't, take action.”

“Any idea what?”

“That's ya depa'tment.” Old Copperwaite stands.

End of discussion.

That very night is the fire, first fire – young Copperwaite's barn crammed full with crates of fresh cranberries.

Fire brigade in South Charworth is a volunteer affair. By the time the volunteers get the call and make it out to the bog, start pumping water, the damage is done. Young Copperwaite's entire crop is gone along with a lapsed insurance policy – he blames E. B. Alecup for not sending him reminders while E. B. claims he has, plenty, digs his heels in on this one, though E. B. does try to convince the underwriter that he had a binder, that it had been unfortunately misfiled. Underwriter doesn't buy into it. Young Copperwaite's crop has to be written off as a total loss. October Cranberry Festival is put into jeopardy too since it was young Copperwaite's turn to supply the fresh pickings. All the other growers have already sold theirs to the cooperative, all except Step Epton, his harvest late as usual.

That's why the regulars over coffee agree Step Epton's barn will be next. While nobody in town accuses Co'b of bein sma't, they know he can be cunning. So they spell one another in Epton's bog, in sets of two, slog out there in hip boots night after night, hide in the duck blinds with their shotguns between their knees, young Copperwaite next to young Alecup, Step Epton next to some equally outraged father. They may have to wait a

long time before they can get Co'b into their sites, but they can hear him getting closer – *FUME-FUUUME-FUUUUUME!* – taunting as he roars right up on them, then away he goes, careening across back county roads.

Korinna's up nights, listening. Grampa Bu't too.

“We ough'ta jus pack up oua stuff an move out'v he'a.”

“How fa ya goin ta haul three aca's a junk?”

“Leave it ta rust.”

“Ya run, ya neva get nowhe'a.”

“Ya stay an they bury ya.”

With less than a week before the Cranberry Festival, Officer Foxcroft goes duck hunting on his own, logs seventy two hours straight with no sleep, an occasional coffee break upstairs at the Rainbow Unisex Hair Salon.

“Goin ta get that basta'd yet.”

Carl Hodkins's eyes pace the floor.

“Ka'naks, one only wu'se than the otha.”

Carl Hodkins remembers Co'b's father Jesse, fondly.

“Whole brood ought ta be run out a town on a rail – just got ta find whe'a he's hidin.”

At the old powerhouse far side of the cemetery along the river bank is where, as Kitty Epton well knows, a blanket on a greasy slab floor. But then Kitty pretty much keeps mum. Something about the bond between renegades or having a father like Step who's always barging into her room nights unannounced or tugging at the shower curtain – “Whoops, so'ry,” he'll say while grabbing an eyeful.

Anyway. Diligence is what law enforcement is all about although Officer Foxcroft can't be everywhere at once, and the night watch is fast becoming fatigued. Blinds empty. Pitch dark. No moon. Come a roar. The distinctive *FUME-FUUUME* of the Indian Chief flathead – and *FLASH!* – fire at Step Epton's bog, barn in flames, crop's goin ta be a total loss with the all-volunteer fire brigade taking forever.

Come morning, nothing remains except a smoldering ruin and a ways away the wreck of an Indian Chief. Hung from his heels from a rafter, the charred body of a nineteen year old adult male, hulky, presumed that of one Corbin Karjak, last known address lower Main Street in South Charworth, his balls stuffed down his throat and a rake handle crammed up his ass.

It is Officer Foxcroft's duty to investigate. Doc Wallaston does the

autopsy. Cordwood Mortuary incinerates what remains. Judge Palsey rules the incident an apparent suicide, slow death by asphyxiation, without even glancing at the report. Clerk misfiles the case. Sam Lasherman and The South Charworth Journal have been gone since the '70s. And no one from the county prosecutor's office or the state bureau is going to suggest a further inquiry.

Staff Sergeant Jesse Karjak stands rigidly at attention as his son's ground bones are scattered near the old stone generating station along the river back of the cemetery. Korinna Karjak departs that very afternoon on the Ambrosia Bus Lines in front of Stalton Drug, bound downstream toward Fall River so she can help her daughter Easter with her newest, a rambunctious grandson. Leaves Grampa Bu't alone in the garage, leaning up against the cinder block wall in a straight back chair. Visiting nurse checks in on him once a week, brings along a few groceries, suggests a bath, pats his hands, spoons him some med'cine, then continues on her rounds. *Pthoot!* Snapshot. Fuck'll sit the'a 'til he rots, goddamn it!

Course Kitty Epton walks her baby in the green, round and round the Civil War Memorial. Kid's already sturdy on his feet, though he barely speaks and never smiles, just a gummed nearly toothless grimace for the camera.