

Safe home. Hell, I was even early.

## 23.

### Keith, the Grifter

Ah, St. Francis Wood. The playground—scratch that—the *dying* ground of old-money San Francisco. You'd like to say it was a great place to raise kids, but let's face it, the only kids who come to St. Francis Wood are grandkids and freeloaders on Halloween.

No, in St. Francis Wood you buy the house you wanted when you were forty but couldn't afford until you were sixty. At sixty you saved some scratch from that lifetime of toil (or golden parachute), and then you and your aging spouse spend all the inheritance on a last ditch effort to *really feel rich* before the arteries harden and the neurons tangle.

Ah, St. Francis Wood. Looks like you made it. Then you die. Nice work.

So there I was on a house call at Mrs. Lazarus' eight-room neoclassical on Yerba Buena Avenue in St. Francis Wood. My shiny Thunderbird parked out front, it was a twenty-five yard scramble through a tangle of overgrowth that had taken over the stone path to the ornately carved front door. Well, it was once ornate. Now it was pocked and cracked, and it had a tarnished doorknob affixed to the center of the door, like they do in Europe. I clanked the ominous dragon-head knocker. An approaching click-clack of heels echoed in the foyer. Nurse Dolly answered the door.

"Mr. Haddock. Hello. Come right in," Dolly greeted professionally. Still in her nurse's uniform.

"Hi."

"I don't mean to be abrupt but I am in the middle of a procedure," she said. "Follow me." She about-faced with a twirl, heading back to her mistress.

The massive property was a Dickensian-style broken palace, something only Miss Havisham could conjure. I mean, it was a dump—not really a shambles, mind you, but in need of a serious remodel. The only thing *not* in need of a remodel was Mrs. Lazarus' nurse.

I closed the door behind me, calling after her down the echoey hall, "I, um,

brought with me the initial appraisal of Mrs. Lazarus' property, as well as—”

“Keep up.”

“—her reverse-mortgage papers. Is she...” I trailed off.

I double-stepped to catch up, and Dolly led me, hips a-shakin', down a cracked tile hallway and across a grand hall to a door. She stopped and looked at me without speaking, a faint smile on her face. She smelled of amber. It was intoxicating. I averted my gaze to the hallway itself. The place must've been something twenty years earlier. Truth be told, I knew exactly when the upkeep stopped: eleven years ago when her husband died. Mrs. Lazarus really was a kind of Havisham, and all effort towards a future life left her when her husband departed. Of course, I didn't know that then, but something like compassion still passed through me. That's when Dolly said, “We have about eight minutes before she passes out.”

I caught my reflection in the giant gold-flecked mirror against the wall. Leather blazer, pressed jeans and boots; I wore a jaunty porkpie hat atop my balding head. This was my casual-success costume. My gaze fell on Dolly looking at me.

“You look fine,” Dolly smirked. “Let's go.” She grabbed my hand (a gesture I thought was a little forward, but pleasing) and led me into an old-fashioned sunroom room where Mrs. Havisham—*sorry*—Mrs. Lazarus sat nodding on an expensive overstuffed chaise lounge. It actually might have been a period piece from the second empire. She sprawled listless like a heroin addict. The plastic oxygen line roped under her nose from the metallic cylinder that was her shackle.

Her gaze drifted toward us as we entered. Somehow through her prescription haze she remembered my name. “Mr. Haddock. Fish man. Dolly said you were coming by.” She smiled, then coughed, coughed again, followed by a series of awful hacks, terrible. She shoved the oxygen tube further up her nose. Dolly gave her some water through a sippy-cup with a straw. After a few gulps, she shrugged her nurse off and waved me forward. She gripped a silver ballpoint pen tightly in her claws.

“Come here, dear. You remind me of my son, Max, when he's not being a toad.”

I stepped up to her and laid down the papers on the tea table before her. Without looking at the papers, she gestured to Dolly to look them over for her. Dolly picked them up and began to scan them with confidence. She actually read

them.

I was suddenly filled with dread: a feeling not unlike...*what was it?* Oh, yes, a pang of *conscience*. My whole line of work was designed to take advantage of people like her. But Mrs. Lazarus knew this and didn't care. She was using me back, counting on my feckless mores so she could be done with everything and get generously paid to live extravagantly in her house until she died, leaving nothing for Max or anyone else. She'd go on a worldwide tour. She chose me to aid her in her endgame because she knew I was a worthless, opportunistic vulture.

She gave me a long hard look that seemed to affirm everything I'd just been thinking. The hard look broke into a grin. She tossed-off a weary smirk at Dolly which said she was conscious of everything that was happening.

Something about her was absolutely lovely.

"Hand that over, Dolly," she said impatiently. Dolly handed the papers to Mrs. Lazarus with a shrug and a nod.

Holding a silver ballpoint pen in her shaky claw, she scrawled her jagged signature on the papers, barely giving them a glance. "There you go, Mr. Fish. Come here."

I approached her and she abruptly grabbed my hand, pulled me toward her, and puckered her wrinkled lips. I lent her my cheek and she planted a kiss on it. "There! Just like Judas!"

"You flatter me, Mrs. Lazarus," I said, drolly.

"You're a smart ass." She paused as if to remember something, then raised a hand, shouting, "To bed, Dolly!" Mrs. Lazarus made a sudden and energetic attempt at climbing up from the chaise. I took her arm.

"If I was forty years younger," she flirted. "Hell, if I was ten years younger." Her smile sank as she took up her walker. "So tired," she admitted. We walked a few steps with me at her elbow before she commanded, "Carry me." Somehow this was also flirty. I loved her, but I hesitated. She turned her head and held my eyes softly, saying, "Earn your fee. Carry me to bed." Dolly, expressionless, nodded at me.

"Alright, Mrs. Lazarus," I agreed. I lifted her spindly, feather-light, willow-the-wisp body, and, careful not to pull the oxygen line from her face, carried her gingerly down the hall. She smiled at me as we progressed, her white Havisham hair draped over my arm. She rested her head on my chest. She smelled of rosy

toilet water and vapor rub. I could hear the oxygen tank rolling behind us.

“You’re actually very handsome.”

“Thank you.”

We walked in silence, then she said, “Something’s going to happen to you.” This was the weird prescient clarity of the almost-dead. We reached her ground-level bedroom, more of an Edwardian parlor room where I guess she stayed now that stairs were out of the question. Stopping in front of the bed, Dolly came around and pulled back the covers. I gently rested Mrs. Lazarus on the bed. “So tired,” she repeated. Dolly pulled the covers up to her neck.

I was about to make my exit when the old lady grabbed my hand.

“Kiss me, goodbye, fish man, and take whatever you want, you scoundrel... it’s alright. I just want one last vacation.” She laid a wrinkled and knowing smile on me, on the world. We were her puppets, not her grifters.

All of this was really fucked up.

Still, I bent to kiss her on the cheek and she turned her head at the last moment and kissed me full on the lips. Mrs. Lazarus was tricky. The kiss was real, an odd absolution for both of us. She had won something. Breaking off the kiss, she said, “Run along,” then rolled over and passed out.

I straightened up, gazed at her still form, a small lump under the covers. Dolly stared at us from the doorway, a sad look on her face. She nodded her head toward the door, gesturing to exit.

In the kitchen, Dolly was cavalier about the whole situation. She mixed us two manhattans from the giant wet bar without ever asking what I wanted. She said nothing until she asked, “Mind if I smoke?”

“Please.” She handed me a cocktail.

“That was really...” she started. Digging into an American Spirits pack, she lit up, shaking her head, thinking hard at the floor. “That was really sweet somehow.” Dolly checked her reflection in the kitchen window. “I can’t wait until I can ditch this costume.”

“What’s holding you back?”

“The question is, what’s holding you back?” She stepped toward me, close, then kissed me, a lingering, promising kiss.

*Oh, Dolly’s smell!* I can smell it now: amber, bourbon, cigarettes, and her own intoxicating pheromones. I remember being immediately in heat. We paused and

smiled at each other because we knew what we were going to do now.

She powered up a baby monitor on the counter. “That’s her room.” She put out her smoke and drew toward me again, undoing the top button of my shirt. She said, “The kitchen table should do nicely.”

And that’s how it started with Dolly.

## 24.

### **Keenan at Fifteen Months**

It took me a few months to muster up the courage to nightwalk back to the 7-Eleven. The long sneak was fraught with risk, which of course was why it was enticing. There I was again, one clear late spring night, scurrying through the gated community. Cake. This time, I found my hiding place in a different olive tree, one with a slightly better view of the 7-Eleven’s front door. I searched the darkness for the homeless figure known as Stoli, but if he lurked there, he was hidden.

I’d brought a little plastic sippy cup with me this time, filled with apple juice. I spied the scene from my dark perch, eyeline just above the wall. The after-hours human detritus passed through: drunkards and fornicators, weary security guards and exhausted waitresses, tardy teenagers and early commuters. A young man and an old woman worked inside, and they would periodically come out to sweep, empty trash cans, break down boxes, smoke or vape.

A compact electric Ford of some stripe swerved into the convenience store parking lot. A young blonde girl, early twenties, all aglitter and aglow on who-knows-what, staggered from the car. She laughed at herself as she slammed the door. She reached the doors at the front of the store, and they slid open abruptly, catching her by surprise. She giggled at herself again and disappeared inside.

A patrol car pulled into the lot. This would be interesting. The cops got out talking, all a-clank in their cop accoutrement.

Short one: “...that’s what she said.”

They laughed.

Tall one: “No, I really said that.” Pause. “In my head.”

They laughed again and went inside.

I waited. The blonde girl staggered out, chomping on a piece of beef jerky.

She stopped for a second looking for her car, which was right in front of her. The cops exited and were about to walk back to their car when the short cop eyed the girl and elbowed the other one.

He said, "Miss? You drive here...?"

And that was it for her. She failed the straight-line test and became unraveled. Denial, tears. They took her phone as she tried to make a call. I watched them duck her head into the back seat, watched the tow truck take her car away. Poor girl.

Afterwards, the Babushka Lady, as I liked to call her, came out and swept the cement clear of the bad-vibes after they departed. All that took about thirty minutes.

These little vignettes of real life saved me. I had such a greater appreciation now that I had died and come back; the scenes that played out before me were no longer mere comedies or tragedies. Tragedy ain't so tragic and comedy ain't so funny. These street scenes were beautiful allegories rolling out in real time, forming the fabric of society's narrative, the warp and woof of reality. Yeah, that sounds lofty, but it's a very disorienting thing to know there's life after death; the gravity of your actions shifts and it's comforting to know kids are still getting busted at 7-Eleven.

Where was I?

Oh. After the cops left, when the parking lot was empty, a bookish-looking long-hair stepped out front to smoke a cigarette. He was the *other* employee.

He cursed the night, "Goddamn."

I could smell the cigarette smoke. How I longed for one. I broke out the little sippy cup I'd brought with me. If only it was bourbon.

The long-haired guy ashed his cigarette in the stand-up tray near the door, looked down, decided the tray was full, picked it up and toted it around the garbage bin.

"Stoli?" the guy beckoned. There was a shambling sound.

"Stan," the gravelly voice replied.

"You have *one* job."

"I don't *have* a job."

"That, my friend, is quite clear," Stan said, annoyed. "The deal was, I get you

after-hours beers if you empty the front trash and the ashtray. Look at this.”

From this angle, it looked like this so-called Stan was talking to a phantom.

“I was going to get to it,” the phantom grumbled. There was a shallow clang as Stan set the ashtray on the ground. Stoli emerged from the shadows. This was the first time I got a real look at him. He had a bushy viva-la-revolución-style brown and gray beard, cargo pants, army field jacket, and military boots. He was a white guy, Irish-Anglo mutt. He stomped from his enclosure and picked up the tray.

He turned his head my direction, and I swear he looked right at me. Then he continued, Stan looking on, and he dumped the ashtray, handing it back to Stan.

“There.”

“Good. I’ll bring you out a little sumpin around five.”

“When’s five?”

“Ten minutes.”

“I’m grateful.”

I checked Lou’s watch dangling from a string around my neck. Shit, it was getting late.

“How are you holding up?” Stan asked.

“Fair to middling.”

“You want a hot dog? I’m gonna throw them out.”

“Bring it on, my brother.”

“Please remember to piss in the bushes.”

“Of course, my liege.”

Stan snorted and walked back into the store. Stoli stood solitary, staring at the closed gate. He glanced toward the front of the store, then he turned slowly around toward me.

“Whatchu lookin’ at, you fuckin’ faerie?”

The words hung in the air between us.

My recently descended balls shriveled with fear.

Stoli stepped vaguely in my direction.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” He waited for a response. “I remember you, Elf. I don’t forget anything.” He turned and shuffled back over toward his dark nook. “You been watching for an hour, I heard you. You’re noisy as a raccoon. It’s okay. I know you’re a friendly.” I heard him sit on something creaky. A long minute went

by. "I'm a friendly, too, in case you're wondering."

A full minute. "I'm Stoli." I saw a flame, then the cherry glow of a cigarette dancing in the velvet blackness. "Not that I drink vodka anymore. Used to." Pause. "In case you were wondering, I know you were sent to me." Long pause, then, "What's your name, Elf?"

I began my descent, rattling the branches a bit.

"Fine, then. Leave."

I don't know why, but as I reached the ground, I heard my tiny child's voice say, "My name is Keith."

I scurried off through the gated community. I heard shouted behind me, "Ha! Farewell, Elf. Til next time."

## 25.

### Keenan at Seven Years

By and large, kids love slopping around looking for critters, both girls and boys. Creek, pond, river, swamp, what have you. Yesterday, Ralphy, George Taylor and I went out to The Creek to gather whatever riparian creatures might happen our way. It's a primeval pull that I believe explains why perfectly domesticated city dwellers feel inclined to dirty themselves up fishing, hunting and hiking. We're all little adventurers from when we start. It's genetic, unfailing.

Ralphy led, as always, followed by George and I. George carried a plastic bucket for whatever we found, and I had a backpack with sandwiches, two jars, a wire strainer, a clear plastic measuring cup, and a wad of plastic sandwich bags.

"I've got point," Ralphy said in what I'd come to know as his heroic movie voice. "Sergeant Harris, you got our back?"

"Right-O, Captain Ralph!" I pronounced it Rafe, like the British. Ralphy stopped and turned, casting me a sidelong glance.

"What?"

I smiled. "I called you Rafe...that's how they pronounce it in the British war movies."

He worked his jaw skeptically, squinting his eyes. He turned. "Come on."

We trudged through an empty overgrown car lot and wedged through a chain-link fence. Our uniforms were shorts, t-shirts and baseball caps. Some of us

wore sneakers, some of us waterproof boots. All of us were committed to making our mothers moan with displeasure at the mess we would make ourselves.

The Creek was a restored natural creek that had, over many years previous, been used as drainage, become polluted, then shored up, then saved by a conservancy, restored to what they estimated was the original river bed, with the native plants, even the original soil pH. And it looked great. It again bore the frogs, the birds, the lizards, the crawdads, the snakes, the bugs, the oaks, the reeds, the cattails, the lilies, the slightly musty and rigid smell of gurgling crick and rotting nature. It was my youth repeated. In fact, all that had happened between the times I was seven then and seven now.

Ralph paused at the top of the low rise that was the edge of The Creek.

“Now, who’s going to go renaissance?” Ralph said importantly.

George looked at Ralph. “What’s a rennaysauce?”

“It’s a—”

“He means *reconnaissance*,” I cut in. “It means he wants one of us to go look ahead to see what our primary targets are.”

Ralph shot me The Look again. I was not making his day.

“Sergeant Harris, why don’t you check the *permatex* down next to The River?”

“You mean the....” *Creek? Perimeter?* Ah, hell, why mess with Ralph’s narrative. “I’ll go check down by The *River*, Captain *Rafe*.” Gotta love the kids. Actually, I did. I loved this. It was the culmination of an almost eight year acting role. My greatest work!

I skidded down the loose dirt embankment into the moist, doughy soil bordered by cattails and mallow. The reeds made a slithery sound in the light breeze, and their cattail tops clacked. A startled red-winged blackbird chirped and flapped out and away. I heard Ralph order Private George to patrol the fence for “intraloppers”.

Down at the creekside, in a break in the cattails, Sergeant Harris discovered a large rock that jutted out just above the water. It was connected to the far shore (seven feet distant) via a wobbly wooden plank. I tested the board with my rubber-toed boot. Seemed fine. Stepping into the middle of the board, I looked down into the gurgling trickle. I could see tadpoles and minnows, billowing algae and flowing detritus. Small frogs jumped on the muddy bank opposite.

I squinted up at my patrol, deciding how a seven-year-old on a scouting

mission would phrase this.

“Bogeys at two o’clock! Captain! Our quarry is within sight!” I shouted.

Behind him, I could hear George say, “It’s not two o’clock yet.”

“Coming, Sergeant Harris!” Ralphy shouted back seriously. “Fall in, Private George! The enemy is within sight!”

I soon heard them scramble down the slope behind me, dirt flying.

“Over here, sir.”

“Follow me,” he commanded.

They reached this big granite chunk and saw me on the plank-bridge.

“Wow!” Ralphy shouted. A teal dragonfly hovered near his head for a second before rocketing away.

Ralphy gazed warily at the board. Finally, he told George, “Private, two o’clock is a...a direction. It means something is right in front of you but a little to the right.”

“Oh,” George replied.

*Not bad, Ralphy.*

Ralphy peered off the edge of the rock into the shallow stream. The drop was maybe three feet. The current flourished with wispy pond grass; it was a slow, clear current, darted with small minnows and assorted insects skimming the surface. The gravel spread across the bottom was decorated with polished river rocks and chunks of time-smoothed concrete.

I teetered down the board to the muddy shore on the other side. My olive-green boot sank ankle-deep into the mud. “Whoa!” I pulled it suckingly from the muck. “Careful guys, the mud’s a little deep here.” My free foot found a more solid purchase, and I pulled out the other with a wet farting sound. George giggled. Then I headed toward a giant half-submerged wooden cable spool rotting in the water fifteen yards down the bank.

And George—love him—fearlessly trod out onto the rickety plank bridge.

“Careful, Private,” Ralphy warned. The timbre of his voice told me he was afraid of this teetering bridge. And, well, I knew Ralphy—he was the sweetest kid in the world but was all bravado and no yoke. His parental units had pampered him. I wanted to tell him to just jump in and get it over with already; we’d all be soaked and goopy within the hour. George, in the bowed center of the plank-bridge, knelt over the water and suddenly lunged with the bucket, sweeping it out

of the creek with a giant splash.

“Aah!” Ralphy exclaimed, as the dreaded creek water sprayed onto him. He quickly rolled backward on the rock. “George, you lame-o!” But George wasn’t paying attention; he was looking into the bucket.

“Whoa! I got something.” George looked at me expectantly. Ralphy kept his distance on the rock. I trudged toward them to identify the catch. George stepped lightly down the board toward my side of the crick. We met on the shore, leaving Captain Ralph stranded. George put down the bucket in front of me and I looked in.

“Ah...you got two minnows, some...tadpoles...some—I don’t know what that is...and *that*, my friend, is a waterbug.”

“A waterbug!” George repeated in a combination of revulsion and excitement.

“A waterbug?” Ralphy asked from the other shore. Working with Ralphy was so much more delicate and difficult than any relationship I’d ever been in. He had the raw ego of an actor. You had to think about your every word. That’s right: I’m suggesting that adult actors have the egos of eight year-old boys.

Ralphy wanted to see the critters, and he needed to prove to us and himself that he could walk the plank (as it were) to the other side of the creek and give our discovery his stamp of approval.

“Ralphy, cross the bridge,” I said. It was hard to fathom the fear he’d built around this seemingly small task.

“Permission to—”

“Come aboard!” I shouted, knocking my small knuckles on the wooden slat.

He edged out and stopped in the middle, terrified.

I said, “Don’t look down, buddy. Just cross.”

He looked up the creek, then at me; then he just...*did* it. He reached the shore. His nightmare was over: rubber shoes on the ground with his soldiers, his troops waiting before him for bucket inspection. He literally did the clearing of the throat, the regathering, stepping toward us.

“Ahem—let’s see what we have,” he said officiously. A beat. “Awesome! That’s like...a fish! And...a thing with back legs.”

“Tadpole.”

He nodded. “Yes. Can you bag that, Sergeant Harris?”

I smiled. This is where the music would swell. I was in love with the world.

Again.

“Yessir!”

I scooped my mom’s pasta strainer into the bucket and took as many living things as I could. Sorry, Mom. I put the stuff in a large plastic Zip-Loc, followed by a measuring cup of creek water. We had three minnows, three tadpoles (some with nascent back legs), some stray algae, and a roundish and darting brown waterbug. I held it up to them, a clear plastic scientific sample glancing in the afternoon sunlight.

They were mesmerized by the achievement. I thought it was pretty cool, too. I stowed it in my little Spiderman backpack. I would find a way to put it all back in the creek later.

There was a pause: now what? Victory was so quick! What to do...

“We need to catch some frogs,” I said.

“You are exactly right, Sergeant Harris,” Ralphy said, squinting up and down The Creek.

Silence, but for the twitter of a blackbird. Then cars on the distant boulevard. A plane somewhere above. Far off, the bark of a dog, echoey in the humidity of deep South Bay summer.

“If I may, sir,” I asked Ralphy. He nodded nobly. “Let’s walk the far bank and find frogs and toads to bring back to...base camp. Perhaps, sir, we’ll find a lizard.”

Ralph and George gazed at me in hesitation. I said, “Lizards are safe. They are a little weird; their tails fall off if you don’t catch ’em right. Don’t worry about them biting. They can’t even pierce your skin. But maybe we just stick to frogs.” George looked game for any action, but Ralphy was unsure. I regretted the part about the tails falling off and the biting.

“Captain Ralph—your orders?”

He looked down The Creek.

“Alright, troops. Sergeant, you’re on point. Watch for lizards.”

I marched on down The Creek, past the wooden cable spool, into a flattened expanse of cattails and mud and reclaimed wetland. A mallard couple quacked at us warily and paddled to safety.

I said, “Maybe we should...*break for rations.*”

This excited Ralphy, who knew about rations. He sometimes watched the

news with his dad. He said, “Break out the MRAs!”

“What’s MRAs?” George asked.

“*MREs*,” I said. “Meals-Ready-to-Eat.”

“That’s what I said,” Ralphie corrected. “Halt. At ease. Um...grub...down.”

We sat contentedly on the muddy bank in the reeds. I pulled out three ham and cheese sandwiches: white bread, processed ham, Kraft cheese—*classic*. We ate them kneeling and sitting on the slope of the bank, muddy shoes, splashes of filth on our clothes. Blackbirds and starlings darted above us. Crickets cricked. If you were listening, you could hear the far-away sounds of civilization. These little boys didn’t care. We looked over at a shuffle in the brush; could’ve been a pheasant, a ground squirrel. Then we were done. Plastic wrappers away. I stood up.

“Time?” Ralphie asked.

“We...I think we have an hour,” George said.

“I’ve got point,” I said.

We moved on.

It wasn’t long before The Creek fanned out into a sizable flat stretch of marsh. Mind you, it was a bit manufactured and there were Yuppies walking their dogs in the distance, but to us it was unexplored wilderness.

“Frogs!” I shouted. Tiny frogs jumped all over the mud flat.

“Whoa!” they said in unison. And we scrambled, buckets in hand, into the ankle-deep mud. George set his bucket creek-side and scampered after the amphibians, whooping and laughing as he caught them and fed them into the bucket. I watched them, amused, as I stepped slowly up the shore on the spongy soil.

Damn, I felt like lighting a cigarette.

As I entertained this random thought, a brown and yellow gopher snake dashed past me across the dirt clearing, emerging from a clutch of wild mustard, fleeing the manic human children.

Childish impulse fought my adult restraint.

I scrambled after the slithering reptile, all four feet of me. Snakes aren’t that fast but I wasn’t that tall. The slight grade and the loose-scramble dirt caused me to slip. My lads were in the distance, oblivious. I kept glancing back to see if they saw me cross-slipping down that incline.

“Heeeeyyyyy, you guys!” I screamed.

The gopher snake, probably about five feet long, headed toward the mouth

of a ground squirrel burrow.

Before it made it all the way down the hole I lunged and grabbed its tail—*really got it*—jerking it free of the hole with a spray of clods. I rolled down the dirt incline, the terrified snake coiling around my fist.

Just as a sort of caveat, I have to say that this wasn't my first snake rodeo; I'd been an avid reptile wrangler as a kid before, and I knew what could and could not hurt me.

I rolled down the incline laughing and shouting, with a pissed-off five-foot gopher snake in my hand. I was utterly gleeful. At the bottom, I landed in solid mud, not quite sinking, but still smeared and soaking. Gopher snakes' survival tactic is to emulate rattlesnakes when threatened; they will vibrate their tails and even strike, but they have small teeth and no venom. This snake lashed out, mouth agape, sinking its small ineffectual teeth into my forearm, then lunged away. I snatched it by the neck with my free hand and it balled around my wrist, constrictor-like. I sat on my butt, watching the panicked snake writhe, noticing the little dots of blood standing out on my arm where it had struck. Someone was giggling—it was me.

"Hey, guys!" I shouted.

They ran toward me, Captain Ralph and Private George ran down the bank, shouting. They stopped, wide-eyed, minds blown. They had stopped breathing.

"What's wrong, you guys?" The snake was fighting to escape, entwining me. "It's just a gopher snake."

They were frozen. I had to snap them out of it.

"Private! Look alive! What time is it?"

This snapped George out of it. "Uh...two o'clock...S-sergeant."

Ralph couldn't speak. The buckets were forgotten in the mud down the creek. The snake was panicked in my hand, mouth partially open.

"This, my friends, is a gopher snake," I said. The snake convulsed again.

It dawned on me that I'd gone too far.

Ralph finally spoke: "Keenan, you should let it go. We are going to get in trouble."

"Trouble?"

"Can I touch it?" George asked.

"Sure."

George ran his index finger on one of the smooth brown and yellow-

patterned coils. Like most kids our age, we'd already been treated to snakes in the classroom, so holding or touching a snake wasn't completely foreign. But a wild snake was different. It jerked in my hand again and George jumped back.

"Alright, you scaredy cats." I stepped toward the reedy water's edge, sinking in the mud about an inch, and knelt down. I pried the tightly wrapped tail of the snake, stiffly uncoiling it from my arm. In a sort of tossing motion, I threw the snake into the creekside foliage of cattails and mallow.

"See! No big deal." The boys didn't move, but Ralphy let out a big breath. The snake lost no time cutting through the foliage, entering the creek, slicing across its surface and disappearing down stream.

"Bye," George said solemnly.

I trotted up to them, knocking the mud off my heels. They turned to throw me hurt gazes, as though the whole experience was more punishment than adventure.

"What?" I asked.

A long moment thunked by. Finally, Ralphy said, "Fall out. Back to camp."

We walked back toward the fence. Now Ralphy took point without looking back. George elbowed me and said, "That was cool."

## 26.

### **Keenan at Eighteen Months**

At eighteen months, I was still under the radar. My parents were shockingly ignorant of what constituted a normal baby. Some parents would have had me CAT-scanned, offered up to science, perhaps entered into contests. My folks? Naw. They put a stop to Dr. Claveria's meddling and didn't send me to any more prodigy exams. I mean, I'd told them, in my way, that I didn't want to go, and I think they loved the small secret that they were the parents of a kid who, at least in their minds, was a little genius. And hell, raising me was probably a lot easier than raising a normal child.

On top of this, Lou and Drew could hardly be bothered to disturb their respective solipsistic journeys. Drew couldn't grow the fuck up, and Lou couldn't overcome her bitterness about what life had served her. I wanted to advise both of them—after all, I had about 20 years on them. I'd tell Drew to take his path a