

IMAGINE MY SURPRISE!

a novel



K.S. HADDOCK

A DRUG DEALER NAMED KURT DIES UNDER SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES. *IMAGINE HIS SURPRISE* WHEN HE IS REINCARNATED FULLY CONSCIOUS INTO A NEWBORN BABY BOY NAMED KEENAN, HOSTAGE TO A CLUELESS MILLENNIAL COUPLE, WHO REMAIN BLISSFULLY UNAWARE OF THEIR INFANT'S ATTEMPTS TO TRACK DOWN THE MURDERERS OF HIS FORMER SELF.

"Imagine My Surprise! is a novel that will make you laugh, wonder, and break your heart. It's a kind of *Look Who's Talking* meets *Pulp Fiction* written with the finely-tuned style of a virtuoso novelist."

—**WES BROWN** author of *Breaking Kayfabe: A Novel*

"Imagine My Surprise! is hard to put down, and it entertainingly pushes the crime genre to new possibilities. Mr. Haddock has written an edgy morality tale, a surreal existential crime novel that fuses comedy and tragedy in a surprisingly delightful way."

—**JEFFREY WEISSMAN**—Writer/Actor/Director

K.S. HADDOCK is the author of the Gen-X noir novel *The Patricidal Bedside Companion* (St. Martin's Press, 1994). From 2010–2019, he played in the metal-grass band, The Gravel Spreaders. His musicals have been awarded the Best of the San Francisco Fringe Festival three times. He is an Art Director for Industrial Light and Magic / LucasFilm.

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K.S. HADDOCK

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For Claudia, Stella, and Sawnsee.



EDITOR'S NOTE

The following work is the edited transcription of audio recordings made by seven-year-old Keenan Harris in the early 2030s. The story of Keenan Harris is a celebrated case study in the field of Transmigration Science. Events herein have been corroborated and verified, though the names have been changed to protect the principal actors' privacy.

R. Adams, PhD



AUTHOR'S PREFACE

[TRANSCRIBED FROM RECORDING]

TIMESTAMP=2032-07-06T13:42:17-13:44:03Z

Is this thing on? Check-one-two. Hi. My name is Keenan. I'm seven-and-a-half years old. Well . . . at least on the *outside*.

If you are listening to this, you found my device! And you opened the package that said, "Please open and listen to my story." You discovered my digital recorder in the crawl space in the back of our attic—the very attic I'm sweating my balls off in right now. I'll hide it after every session because my parents would have me committed if they ever heard this. Not that they'd be all that surprised.

So, I'm about to tell you a long and crazy story. It'll sound like it's made up, but it's not. This shit really happened. You probably won't believe it anyway. You'll think that some grown-up put me up to it as a weird publicity stunt. But that's not what happened.

The reason I'm doing this now is because my memory of everything is slipping. My brain is glitching; I want to say, like a kaleidoscope. And I have to get this all off my chest so I can go live a normal kid's life, the one that's waiting for me.

One more thing—can you do me a favor and give the recording to a publishing company? I know it's not as easy as that, but if you find some cool, open-minded editor, I think they'll publish it. I'm even going to helpfully include formatting notes so you'll know how to lay it out. Remember this: I'm very fond of Garamond.

So, with all that being said, before I forget my story . . . here it goes.

Title the book: *Imagine My Surprise!*, with an exclamation point at the end. Chapter One! By that I mean, just put the number one and a period. And maybe a subtitle, like . . . “So, there I am, dying.”

PART 1 - KEENAN

TIMESTAMP=2032-07-06T13:42:17-14:59:02Z

1. So, There I Am, Dying

Imagine my surprise—I was dying!

I remember the lovely prick of the needle in my arm. It was a clear January night, and I was slouched on my black leather sofa watching the distant, twinkly lights of downtown San Francisco—watching them fade. Franks had come by with a birthday bag of really good heroin, and I fixed on my couch in front of those twinkly lights like I'd done so many times before. And *mmmm*, the Pavlov prick of the needle is exciting in its own right—you almost don't need what follows. Unfortunately, what *did* follow was an overdose. A *murder*-dose. I didn't see it coming.

But that moment—that *rush*. It's like . . . love ascending. Then after you're an addict, it's like a glancing moment of love quickly plummeting into spiritual disappointment. Like an entire relationship in one shot. Exhilaration and heartbreak. One second, you're on top of the world; the next second, bitter, inevitable loss. And then you need more.

So, there I am, dying, and my heart is breaking—literally—under the weight of a heavy overdose of some very fine Afghani white heroin . . . cut with fentanyl. First of all, that anyone would sully such a high-grade narcotic with crap like fentanyl was a crime unto itself. Second, this was my unfortunate introduction to fentanyl. I was unable to

move. Not twenty feet away in the kitchen drawer was a lifesaving dose of Narcan.

I remember the feeling of liquid on my chin, dripping down my gray goatee onto my chest, ruining my expensive Brunello Cucinelli button-down. I had vomited: *so* rookie, so preschool.

But if you're on your way out, overdosing on smack is probably not the worst. (I've heard drowning, just before the end, is quite pleasant.) All my anger had vanished, even my anger toward Franks for murdering me. Heroin being heroin, it was hard to give a shit why, hard to care that I was dying at all.

And so I slipped down a rabbit hole, and with me went reality, the world, and the aforementioned beautiful prickly lights of downtown San Francisco. I slid comfortably back into the womb of creation, its arms enfolding, drawing me back into the birth canal of existence, back to the atoms, to Adam, to the beginning, and I didn't care because I was full of careless heroin love. I was either going to wake up in the hospital or not wake up at all, and either seemed a perfect outcome.

Happy birthday to me. I was fifty.

!!!

Imagine my surprise—and my dismay—to find out I didn't exactly die. After a brief period of the most ravishing, rhapsodic blackness, the rabbit hole appeared again and was coming back toward me. I couldn't breathe. I was cramped and wet. I was sure I was regaining consciousness in a giant pool of my own vomit. And the smell! Hard to describe, like fish and feces and gut-stink, and it took my breath away. My lungs seemed filled with fluid. And there was a taste, a taste of bile and something else, something indescribable yet somehow familiar.

Also, I wasn't approaching the rabbit hole—I was being squeezed *out* of it. Slowly. I was losing patience, my careless heroin love vanishing. I

thought, *Whatever bad trip this is, I'm going to kill someone, someone like Franks, that halitotic Irish motherfucker.*

To make matters worse, I couldn't move. I was bound in a wet sleeve with no muscles. A kind of goo gummed my eyes; my hearing was a sluiced white noise. It would suck if the heroin had left me too brain damaged to personally kick the shit out of Franks.

The warm fuzzy of the heroin vanished. My senses were a disquieting swirl, like a really bad acid trip. Then—I was suddenly out of the hole and into the daylight. Yay!

Hold it. No—not *daylight*—it was *surgical* light! I'd made it to the hospital! It's just like I said, you either wake up dead or in the hospital.

I was freezing and everything was a blur, both sight and sound. Air filled my lungs, and I screamed like a baby. I was alive!

2. *The New Drug*

Imagine my surprise when I realized what the fuck was going on.

“Holy Christ!” I shouted. But what came out was more like a squawky rattling shriek. I couldn’t control my mouth and tongue, and I had no fucking teeth! I had *no fucking teeth!*

The world was a cold, blurry cacophony. I bawled like a—*yes*—baby. I was uncontrollably angry, having a tantrum. Something was tugging on my stomach. Latex fingers passed me around.

I was insane.

Somehow, I found a moment of focus. I obviously was not a screaming gore-covered nine-pound baby boy. I *was* a boy, right? What was probably happening was that back in the real world I was in my death throes on my leather couch, puke running down my face and ruining my expensive shirt. I was *not* being wiped clean of a thick coating of placental goo and being swaddled in a warm blanket like a full-body tourniquet. I was *not* being weighed and measured; I was *not* being nestled into someone’s warm, protective arms.

I was clearly in the throes of a full-blown drug psychosis.

Perhaps it was some new designer drug with a name like *Womb* or

Rebirth, and it made you feel like you'd died and been reborn into a little bitty baby. That *had* to be it.

Suddenly, it was quiet. I'd stopped bawling.

I couldn't see worth a damn. It was like being drunk with Vaseline in your eyes. Except without the drunk. My hearing was all a-jangle. My skin felt bathed in Novocain: vague, fuzzy. Sight, sound, and touch happened in shapes without definition.

And, oh—the smell! Never had my olfactory sense been so acute. Thirty years of smoking had taken its toll on the ol' sniffer. That, and, well, let's face it—the kilos of coke I'd snorted. But now I could smell with canine acuity: Pine-Sol, floral hand cleanser, sweat on a woman's skin, the smell of . . . what? *Aftershave*. Two aftershaves. There was cheap jasmine perfume. Coffee—with cream and sugar. I could smell blood. Blood and urine. A hint of shit. I smelled three types of bad breath, and the minty fresh breath of someone chewing gum. I could even smell the cigarette somebody had smoked. A cigarette! I would've killed for it. *Killed*, I say! I smelled the liquor from somebody's pores after a night's hard drinking. A man's sour drunk-sweat. Probably the sweat of my new father in this increasingly vivid hallucination. And there was a curious sweet smell, directly below me.

I tried prying open my weak eyelids. Why couldn't I do it? As I wedged them open more, images were a white burst of overexposed film. Colorless shapes bobbed before me; I realized the shapes were people looking down at me. I wanted to fend them off but I couldn't lift my tiny flaccid arms, leaden encumbrances without purpose. Minutes ago, before I injected myself with this new designer drug that I'm calling *Womb*, I was a tallish, brawny, white male who could break somebody in half with one well-placed roundhouse. Now I was tiny and helpless, and I was pretty sure I was about to piss and shit myself.

What a fucking nightmare. I *hated* this drug.

I began crying again. I was lifted, passed around. Then I was back

in my warm swaddled arm-crook. I liked it there, so I stopped crying. I managed to open my eyes a little more; the blur sharpened. But I was seeing in black and white.

Sound was also blurry, voices distorted. It sounded something like this:

Male-sounding voice 1: *Hhheehehee rhrrhllloookss llrriike
mheheheeee.*

Male-sounding voice 2: *Rheee jdduuuzzz rorrlook rrhrrichhe
ywhooooo.*

Female-like voice coming from behind my head: *Djddoodgggedd uhhh
bbbbhuulleeeett.
Whheeeheewww!*

There was a crash of noise that I'm pretty sure was laughter. Everyone sounded drunk.

Female-like voice 1: *Hhhhhgggheeeeezzz ppprrrrbbaabbleee
zhuuunggrreee.*

Male-sounding voice 1: *Gggccchiive ghhhiiim tthshshhhhuahhh
tiiiitt.*

They sounded drunk, but it was *me* who was *hearing* drunk. All those little pieces of the ear? Cochlea, vestibule, the stapes, and the something-or-other along with a host of auditory nerves going to and coming from my baby brain. All that shit wasn't strong yet so I had the ears of a drunk, which was apropos since I had the life of a drunk—albeit a highly functional drunk.

The sardonic female voice coming from under me was my new mom, which made that pervasive sweet smell her breast milk. *My* breast milk. It hit me then that the growing pain in my stomach was hunger. I was famished. But I couldn't turn my head. There were no fucking muscles in my neck. My body was a flopping paroxysm. So instead, I squirmed. My head, like my arms, was a useless leaden appendage. In my brain I was making the words, *Please, someone, I'm so hungry!* But in reality, I was croaking like a dying asthmatic cat.

Somebody said something and there was laughter. Weird echoey laughter. They all knew what I wanted, it seemed. Mom turned me over. That smell was overpowering, sweet. If the idea of love had a smell, this was it: mother's milk. It *was* love. It was everything I ever wanted. It was my new heroin. That's what it was like! I had found my new heroin and it was my mother's own milk. How convenient!

I needed it. I had a brainless zombie desire that controlled my rubbery, boneless body. I groped with my mouth and pried with useless fingers, and for the first time in living memory I suckled a breast for the primary reason breasts exist: sustenance.

When the milk passed through my gums, I heard radio waves. Almost deafening—an aurally synesthetic response to the mother's milk. And it was Beethoven.

All I could hear, shutting out the world (save for this warm nectar slurping past my gums), was the chorus to *Ode an die Freude*.

Ode to Joy.

3. *The New K.S.*

I was born. Again.

So there I was, at a midwifery center, a wriggling newborn.

A couple days limped by, and I alternately sucked, shat, and pissed with little or no control whatsoever. I cried some—not the wail of a newborn, but the confused weeping of someone dumbfounded by his predicament. At least that’s how it sounded in my small head.

Soon enough, through all the cooing and handling and suckling, through all the shitting, pissing, and vomiting, through all the passing around to different relatives and complete strangers—my senses grew stronger. Smell and taste were off the charts. My past life held no memory of such richness. My new vision, not so much; I couldn’t get my eyes to focus. I could make out my fingers, stuff right in front of my face, but that was about it. As my baby-hearing became less drunk, I heard a phrase oft repeated: “Introducing Keenan Solomon Harris. Nine pounds, three ounces. Over eighteen inches! Big as a salmon!” This charmer was my new father.

Big as a salmon. He must’ve said that every day for two weeks.

The invariable response to this was, “Keenan Solomon? Sounds like a black name.”

This was the first hint of the culture awaiting me.

Dad, from what I could gather, was a skinny, tall, white blur with red hair. He held me in his arms like I was made of eggshells. I felt impossibly small; I remember what a trip it was. I still believed I would wake up.

Giant, garish faces were thrust at me, making *ga-ga* nonsense words and smelling of perfume, liquor, cigarettes, coffee, and bad breath. These were primarily Dad, Gramma and Pop-pop (Mom's side), and Uncle Joe and Aunt Shelly (Dad's side). Mom didn't have any siblings, and Dad's remaining parent, his father, Edward, was hobbled by dementia back in Boston. I was handed off to and prodded by strangers, doctors, visitors—all manner of human flotsam to whom parents willingly hand over their little babies. I'd been reborn in Hell, a Sartrean character stuck in a room ripe with the stench of provinciality, quotidian aspirations, and junior college degrees, unable to run away, unable to form words, unable to escape at all, straitjacket-swaddled in a baby blanket. Holy shit.

The only person who didn't baby-talk or change her vocal register to me was my new mother. After a day or so, I started to understand a bit of what I was hearing. But sound was rattled and tinny, like a stereo EQ with the treble jacked and the bass missing. A bad cassette recording. One of the first things I noticed was that my new mom—Louisiana, as everyone called her—had something of a Southern drawl, gravelly, and filtered through a California accent. My new dad sounded like he might've originally come from Boston. They called him Drew.

All these things I quickly registered within my short stay at the midwifery.

I had a sort of rolling consciousness that I chalked up to my developing brain. My old self might've been reborn inside this new shell, but it was still at the mercy of human biology.

About that—human biology—of course I realized, even then at the hospital, that I shouldn't have been able to think the thoughts I was thinking. A newborn human brain is like a third the size of an adult's and it should not be capable of complex thought (thank you, psych degree).

Its cerebral cortex is vastly undeveloped at that point. But the mysteries of the brain are numberless, and reincarnation wasn't supposed to be scientifically possible. But here I was. I strained to remember my World Religions class. Reincarnation was what, Buddhist? Hindu? Both? Where was the Internet when I needed it? Hold it, had I even been reborn in the time of the Internet? *Fuck!*

On the first morning of my rebirth, I woke to my mother handing me off to a blur that I identified as Dad, and some other guy whose seriousness suggested he was a doctor. They wheeled me away in a plastic crib into another room. A flurry of faces floated above me in surgical masks. *Curious*, I thought.

Dad said, "It's okay. You won't feel a thing."

Uh-oh. I felt a sharp something down below. I couldn't lift my head to see what the hell the doctor was doing down there. There was this tugging feeling. I suddenly thought, *HOLY SHIT!* And by the time I realized I was being circumcised—it was over. I didn't even have time to cry or protest, and the aftermath was not much more painful than, say, fucking yourself raw. With none of the pleasure of getting there.

Later that day, as I lay in my mom's arms, a man on the TV delivered the top of the news. It was my biggest revelation yet.

"Good evening, on this Monday, January 27, 2025 . . ."

I began to cry.

Lou kissed my head. "What is it, honey?"

Five years had lapsed. I struggled to turn my head toward the television but, as mentioned, my neck could not support my head. Had I heard correctly? Was that right? January 27? I was born yesterday. That meant I died and was reborn on my *old* birthday. Exactly five years earlier, alone in my house on Potrero Hill, I had died, a junkie loser.

My new name was Keenan Solomon Harris. K.S.H. Being reincarnated into my own former initials and on my former birthday—January 26—was proof of a higher . . . *something*. This was a cruel cosmic prank

played on a lifelong atheist and denier of all things supernatural. If I had only known in my old life that death wasn't the end, I could've done away with a shitload of existential dread.

Why five years?

I had been reborn on my birthday in the middling Northern California suburb of Campbell—in Santa Clara County, the Silicon Valley. I'd been reincarnated forty miles south of where I'd died.

!!!

On the third day, they drove me home from the “birthing center” in what I could only discern was a Japanese car owned by a chain-smoker. See, my new mom was a smoker, and she could barely wait to be wheeled from the facility before lighting up. As they released her on the steps of the midwifery, she handed me off to Pops and searched for a pack of cigarettes. Actually, the pack of cigarettes was in the form of a bow-wrapped gift from Dad's sister-in-law, Aunt Shelly. Uncle Joe pulled up in the car, a faded red Toyota Corolla. Meanwhile, Mom savagely ripped the gift wrapping from the cigarettes, a pack of Winston Reds. She gazed at them tearfully, long-lost friends. Then she tore into the pack and, with shaky hands, guided a cigarette between her chapped hospital lips. She searched for a lighter in her voluminous purse, cursing. But she found it and lit up, drawing deeply, with pleasure.

Pops carried me away from her toward the idling Toyota.

“Honey,” Pops said, “Joe's here. Let's go.”

Louisiana gazed at him with slow-burn defiance, plucked the lit cigarette from her lips.

“I haven't had a fucking cigarette in nine fucking months and if I don't smoke this fucking cigarette, I'm going to rip both your and Joe's fucking heads off and shove them up your own motherfucking asses.

Capisce?”

My dad nodded his head obsequiously and knelt, opening the rear passenger door with one hand while holding me in the other; he slid into the back. They didn't have a baby seat yet so he belted up and held me tight. *Genius*. Pops noticed Uncle Joe was also smoking.

"Um, Joe . . . snub the butt. A newborn child is in the vehicle," Pops said.

"Oh, shit, Drew, sorry." Uncle Joe, a short, taut man with a shock of black hair, quickly flicked the cigarette out his window to the asphalt. Joe had a considerably stronger Boston accent. He looked back and smiled at me, sticking a stubby finger in my face. *Hell, yes! Nicotine!* I could smell it, and I grabbed his giant finger with my little hands and suckled on it greedily. Uncle Joe grinned.

"What's taking Lou so long?" Joe asked, adjusting his head to see his sister-in-law through the car window.

Pops sighed. "Well, I guess the best way to put it is that she's having her first *fucking* cigarette in nine *motherfucking* months. To paraphrase."

Uncle Joe nodded appreciatively. "Ah . . . that's gotta taste good."

I gurgled in agreement.

!!!

Biology erased all misgivings I might've had about breastfeeding. *For a while*. The Milk was hardwired into my brain like a heroin mainline. This evolutionary instinct to attain milk was impossible to override.

And what a delicious, intoxicating drug the milk of Louisiana Harris was!

After she left the birthing center, she started smoking again, and thus my craving for nicotine—which had followed me into this new life—was sated.

She was never going to win Mother of the Year.

Her magic milk likewise satisfied the ghostly pull of my former

heroin habit. I mean, at this point, my opiate addiction (likewise nicotine) was only a psychological habit, with me in a body so fresh from the womb. But my urge to get opiated on schedule still existed. Louisiana's milk was a fix, a cigarette, and a nutritious meal all wrapped in one. My milk-sense could smell her enter a room. On top of this, when she had her afternoon vodka martini, I'd get a taste of that, too. She was my walking, talking, foulmouthed corner bar happy hour on two legs.

Stop. I know what you're wondering, you depraved listener of the future: did my time on the tit arouse me sexually? First of all, you're sick for even thinking that. But truly, the growing conflict between breastfeeding and what used to be a sexual act became an unbearable dissonance. It was just too weird. Baby food was the answer to this: a sad methadone.

But as long as we are on the subject of the earthly desires of my previous life, I came from the womb with them fully intact. I had so much time to think, lying around helpless, that every pleasure that I'd previously enjoyed taunted me: the booze, the sex, the drugs, the endless creative projects. Yes, I could someday regain my vices, but for now, how was I going to get a smoke and a glass of bourbon?

Of course, as the years lurched by, chances to experiment presented themselves. The first time a cigarette or highball was left unattended, I quickly had a taste. The effects were catastrophic. At my body size, one cigarette puff made me sick for a day; one sip of Lou's martini and I was hammered . . . and sick for a day. It took death to straighten me out. A new motto: *Reincarnation—Better than AA.*

!!!

Listen—don't think I had forgotten the betrayal of my henchmen. Well, henchman—Franks. Like I said, being a completely helpless newborn, I had nothing but time to examine every granule of my previous life.

But my memory of that last day was tricky. The morning of my fiftieth birthday, I woke up alone. Maybe my cat, Joplin, was there, I forget. My head was in the reverse fugue of the recently sober: I'd just emerged from the three-week cycle of kicking heroin. Being sober was just as disorienting as being intoxicated.

The day previous, I'd taken back control of the business, demoting everyone back to their old positions as my minions. They had minded the shop while I went through the intense hell of withdrawal, and they were not overly keen to hand it back. I reassured them I was fine to handle it.

It was a cheap (and calculated) move for Franks to come over that afternoon with a full bag of high-priced works, saying he'd bought it for me as a Christmas present before I decided to kick. He didn't use the stuff himself, and he asked me what I thought he should do with it.

I magnanimously told him I'd get rid of it for him. He knew I couldn't handle it.

That story seems cut and dried, but there was a lot of doubt. Something from that day was missing, and I couldn't tell if it was my drug-scrambled brain playing tricks on me or if indeed there was more mystery to unravel.

In any case, I had a few years of growing up before I could feasibly take revenge. Meanwhile, I had to find a way to survive suburbia. Again.

4. *Logistics of Helplessness*

Ma and Pa Harris took me home to a shitty little three-bedroom house in Campbell. It was an old seventies tract home flanked by poorly groomed oleander bushes and a yellowing crabgrass-choked lawn. They rented it month to month from an unseen landlord who never maintained the property but was quick to make a phone call if the rent was late.

These things were of minor importance to me at the time, as I was squirming, helpless, confused, and pissed off.

While it was near impossible to accept this current version of my reality, I knew if I was going to survive, I had to push my disbelief aside, which was the same as accepting insanity as fact. So, I began to work on a game plan. First order of business was that I needed to become mobile, but as a newborn, I had physiological and instinctual hurdles to contend with. For instance, I was wracked with random body pains—literal *growing* pains, and digestive pains. My sleep patterns were practically narcoleptic. I'd be sitting there, helpless in my auto-rocking super-pram, ruminating over my predicament when I'd suddenly conk out and wake up hours later in my crib. On top of this, I shat a river of sweet-scented poop, I had no control over my tiny ever-spouting penis, and I often vomited. I was a miniature quadriplegic junkie.