

by. They were nice. Then they left.”

Lou narrowed her eyes at me, then Tabitha, then she sighed, her mood shifting back to drunk ebullience, announcing, “Okay. Whatever. Anyway, Drew won three prizes! He was like a beer superstar!”

I was actually really surprised: my loser dad had achieved something. I stood up on the couch and bounced. “Alright, Dad!”

Drew, who was still holding his trophies—two bronzed beer steins overflowing with stylized hops and barley—set them down on the table with a clatter and grabbed me.

“I did it, Monkey! They liked my beer!” And he planted a sloppy beer-smelling kiss.

“*Everyone* likes your beer, Dad. Put me down.” He gave me another kiss and tossed me onto the couch where I collapsed into the cushions.

“That’s great, Mr. Harris!” Tabitha said.

“Thanks.”

“You guys didn’t get into the beer, did you?” Lou asked.

“Mrs. Harris, I swear. We just smoked a little pot.”

“Don’t call me Mrs. Harris. It gives me the creeps. Alright.” She whipped out her wallet and handed Tabitha three twenties. “Keenan likes you too much to give you a hard time. Thanks, Tabby.”

“Sure, Mrs—um, er—

“Louisiana.”

“You’re welcome, Louisiana.” Tabitha turned and tousled my hair. “G’bye, you little punk. Be good.”

I winked at her. “Be good.”

51.

Keith Gets a Taste

Imagine my surprise when, for the first time in my adult life, I threw out my back.

It was the kickboxing. It was the age. It was the peculiar state of health I maintained: a pint or two of whiskey a day washed down with a steady flow of beer, two grams of coke, a pack of cigarettes complemented by what you might

call a very healthy diet of fruits, vegetables, and fish, vitamins and liver pills, as well as a daily kickboxing workout. In my increasingly delusional headspace, all this seemed to balance out, damage and repair, damnation and repentance.

Something had to give, and it happened to be a disc in my vertebrae.

I was temporarily confined to my place on Potrero Hill during the summer of my discontent (preceding my fall and winter of discontent). I'd made a sort of desk on a tray table in front of my sickbed, a plush vintage *chaise longue* situated on the veranda. I surrounded myself with pain pills, raw vegetables, a bloody mary, a wheatgrass shake, cigarettes, a poached egg, a 9mm pistol, cocaine, an Apple laptop and a *Men's Health* magazine. Dolly, in nothing but a loose silky robe, perfect breast poking skyward, sat across my thighs, rocking back and forth to LCD Soundsystem, kneading my flaccid penis as she offered me a drag off her joint. I waved her off. I was on the phone with Bart.

"Yeah, well thanks for the sympathy, Bart. And by the way...I blame you."

I lit a cigarette and sipped my wheat grass, chasing it with the bloody mary.

"Yeah," I explained to him, "You suck at holding the mitts and I overextended. Huh? Well, that's exactly what I'm saying: that's what you always do and, it finally ended up with me throwing my back out. *Dick.*"

Speaking of dick. You'd think with someone as hot as Dolly, she'd at least get a halfie out of me. She was rolling it, rubbing it, stretching it, squeezing it, pulling it—and she was far from through. I glanced at her subtlety undulating body as she simultaneously exhaled pot smoke, snorted blow off her fingernail, and fondled my lifeless cock. Now *that's* talent.

"So, yeah, I'm laid up on the veranda," I continued to Bart. "Dolly's doing her nurse thing. But even the Percocet isn't cutting it. I'm dying here." I spooned some coke into my right nostril. "What's that? Yeah, doing coke doesn't help either." I put the tiny spoon down. "But I'm bored as fuck. All you guys are running around making me money and I'm stranded here and can't move." The poached egg was cold, so I threw down a vitamin supplement, chasing it with the wheat grass shake. "How bad? Well, I can't walk. I can't even get a hard on. What? Fuck you, it's the pain meds." Dolly changed her strategy, diving in head first. "Oh, God. What? Nothing. Anyhow, I'm waiting for a call from Franks. He says he's got something better than Percocet...I don't know, but I'm a little afraid. I told him to surprise me. Yeah, he's been pretty good lately. Makes me suspicious.

Hold on.”

Dolly was making progress. Halfie achieved. She was good. She looked up at me, busy at her work. I nodded a smiling affirmation at her, lit another cigarette.

“Yeah, ever since the college kid incident our Irish brother has been faithfully towing the party line. I’m sure he’s up to something.” I glanced at Dolly. She seemed to be up to something, too, but at the present moment, it was hard to care. We were well above half-mast. First time in days. “I know you got my back, buddy boy. How’s biz with you?” Pause. “Great. Burning Man is one of our biggest paydays.” I let out a small groan. “Huh? Oh, nothing. My back. Anyhow...you coming by later? Cool. You know where I’ll be.” I ended the call and sat back. Full mast now.

“Hellooo, Dolly.”

But of course, the phone trilled again, breaking my concentration. Franks.

I let it ring, but my mast was going back toward half again. “Sorry, baby. Gotta get this.”

She looked at me and shrugged.

“Pain meds, huh?” Dolly suggested. She unstraddled me, disappearing upstairs. I answered the call.

“Franks. Great timing.”

Franks had a way of starting most conversations in mid-conversation, a conversation he had been having in his head without you.

“That’s what I’m talking about, man.”

“What?”

“Fuckin’ prescriptions. It’s just how they keep you down, man. If they satisfied you, you wouldn’t need them. If they totally killed your pain, you wouldn’t need more. I have news for you, my friend: they’ve already conquered pain.”

“Yeah, it’s called death.”

He laughed. “Funny man, Keith.”

“I think I know where you’re going with this, Franks, and I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Pause on the other end of the line. “Keith. Do me a favor and try to stand

up.”

“Franks.”

“Give it a shot, and let me know how you’re doing.”

“You’re a real fucker, you know that?”

“Go ahead, man, I’m waiting.”

“Hold on.” I put down the phone and started the process of standing up.

I sat up on my elbows and a tinge of pain shot into my fingers. There was some weird nerve damage going on here. With a groan, I sat upright. I could hear Franks make a comment, his tiny voice disparaging inside the phone. Ignoring him, I braced myself on the carved wooden frame of the chaise and slowly eased myself up. My jaw was clenched, my hands claw-like on the chaise. Suddenly I was standing and it wasn’t really that bad. I let out the breath I’d been holding.

It was when I smugly reached for the phone to tell Franks “no problem” that a bolt of lightning shot through my asshole and into my head, neck, and arms. I screamed and fell backward onto the chaise lounge. When I was done panting, when my vision returned, when I saw Dolly standing over me, naked but for panties, I realized I could hear Franks shouting at me through the phone that still lay on the card table.

Dolly was all a-panic. “Jesus Christ, Keith! What the fuck? Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said through clenched teeth. “Can you please hand me my phone.”

She saw the phone laying face up with Franks’ face on the screen. Scooping it up, she angrily growled into the phone, “Franks, what the hell are you doing to Keith?!”

“Give me the phone, Dolly,” I said.

She handed me the phone, and I told him: “You win, asshole. Send in the

clowns. I'll be right here."

"Excellent. I'll be there in half an hour. I'll have my cousin Sean with me."

"Wonderful."

Ending the call, I let the phone fall to the floor. Dolly shook her head at me.

"Whiskey," I said.

"I have a bad feeling about this, Keith."

"Me, too," I agreed, repeating, "Whiskey."

~*~*~

Admittedly, the Percocet probably would've worked if I hadn't countered it every step of the way with cocaine. The pain pills were being canceled out by the mad torque of my addiction. But I was too far gone to *subtract* from the arithmetic of substances I was putting in my body. I sought a quick fix.

This was pretext to my final chapter.

So I sat on my chaise lounge in the pleasant summer sun, my tray table of contradictions strewn before me. The pain was a blinding knot in my lumbar. In my hand I held the Sig Sauer, the sun glinting off the shiny metal and polymer construction. I hefted it, then dropped the magazine into my hand with a push of a button, checked the clip, checked the chamber. I slid the magazine back in and pulled back the slide, chambering a round. I pointed it at the Schiele print on the wall in the dining room. *Bang*. *Bang* goes Schiele. Alas, *his* fate was the merciful 1918 flu pandemic. He pursued his art until death, forever freezing his brilliant legacy by the hand of chance. He never turned *his* back. Maybe success is not living long enough to betray it.

I swung the gun toward the backyard garden, and that simple move sent a molten agony through my pinched spinal cord, forcing a screech of pain that echoed throughout the house.

The scream itself hurt my head. My buzzing head. Percocet, vodka, caffeine, nicotine, cocaine. This was not a smart recipe for the healing process. But I wasn't smart anymore.

Panicked footfalls upstairs, then a stop at the landing.

"Honey? You okay?" Dolly called down.

I cleared my throat, barely seeing through watery pain-fogged eyes. "I'm

okay! Nothing to worry about.” But I barely had my breath.

“Okay...,” she replied helplessly. Light footfalls back toward the bedroom.

I realized the gun was still in my hands, target style: right hand on the trigger, left hand supporting the grip. I exhaled. The gun’s sights were set on the side of the hill, up the wood-stepped terracing of my backyard, pointed at the bench under the tree. Pointed at the ashy resting place of my dead parents buried under that grave marker. Hob’s ninety-two grand was buried there. I remember at the time how weird and wondrous and freeing a secret cache of cash was. I knew it was for something else, knew from the moment I buried it. I think I hoped it was for a future getaway; a thing buried as insurance against worst-case scenarios, a romantic treasure out of a dime novel.

This would, of course, turn out to be true, but in no way that I could or would have comprehended at the time.

But the gun was really pointed at the folks buried atop the money:

Fuck you, Mom and Dad. Fuck you for being such huge failures. How I loathed you for your mediocrity and your ignorance. You died and will barely be remembered. Your small dreams and your impoverished culture. Sleepwalked a lie, died with a lie, raised me with that lie on your lips. You were unfathomably common. Yet somehow, you begot me. Well, fuck you. Out of that mediocrity came me. You made me me. And now you have the free ride of an inconsequential death while I sit here in pain and am left with the excruciating responsibility of carrying on your false white-trash pride.

So there I was pointing the Sig Sauer at the grave, my pulse beating in my ears, frozen by what I realize now was my lifelong existential torment but was at that moment the fear of merely turning my torso back to a resting position. I breathed in, then exhaled, and slowly turned.

Pain.

Pain. But I made it back. It wasn’t my arms or neck; those I could move with only small darts of annoyance. It was the torso and legs—you know, stuff that makes you a man: thrust, kick, grind, balance and swagger.

I turned the gun around. The hammer was still cocked. The metal tip of the gun scraped the roof of my mouth.

So easy. It would just be a blinding flash. A painful second and I wouldn’t care anyway. A total absence of responsibility. Everything erased. Pain. Consequence.

Regret. Sorrow. Sadness. Disappointment. Anger.

I tasted blood from the roof of my mouth.

Sex. Happiness. Wonder. Awe. Irony. Laughter. Love. My sister.

Sawnsee. My only living relative.

I took the gun out of my mouth.

Fresh cut grass. Sunlight on my eyelids. Top down on the car. A guitar riff under my fingers. The final notes of a song. Applause. A sentence well written. A kiss. The promise of love. Cumming.

The cocktail of drugs and existential bullshit was fucking with me and finally I exhaled, uncocking the gun and setting it on the tray table. I lit a cigarette. The doorbell rang.

It didn't compute until I heard Dolly yell from upstairs, "Are you going to get that?"

"Am I going to fucking *get* that? *What?!*"

That's when I realized, so very late, that I had lost Dolly, had maybe lost her for quite awhile. This house was where she lived, and that was about it. She forgot her roommate, *me*, was crippled, and I heard her fly down the stairs.

"Sorry!" she shouted. "I don't know what I was thinking."

And so I was snapped back to myself, and I heard her greet Franks and his cousin, Sean.



Sean Flaherty, nineteen years—handsome, red-haired buck. Sean leaned back on my kitchen counter as his cousin, Franks, buttered me up for the inevitable. Young Cousin Sean wore what I liked to call The Uniform: black boots, black t-shirt, jeans, leather coat: the zero position of cool. You can never lose with that combination, no matter what race, class, or social stratification. Boots, jeans, t-shirt, leather jacket. It was true at the birth of Cool and it's true now.

So there leaned Sean Flaherty, Franks' cousin and heroin connection. Sean looked on, expressionless, as Franks stood over me, selling me to the Life.

It all makes so much sense to me now. The entire arc. This moment of my vulnerability was the break Franks' was looking for—the power grab. I didn't know what I was getting into, but Franks certainly did—like he'd always had this

inevitability over me.

Another truth hit me: I was just a tourist to the criminal life. These sociopaths way outclassed me in their lack of moral center, and they did it with ease. Technically, yes, of course I was a criminal—and *then some*—but at the heart of it, I was just a sad, misguided play-actor trying to kill himself via the seductive pull of criminality and danger. I was a criminal tourist who got by on talk, fantasy, perversion, and a death-wish. To the likes of Franks, I was just a mark; I was part of a long and difficult con. Sure, I had a plan and follow-through; I had money and heart. Sure I was big and I was a bully, but...*I was a fake*. Franks knew it...or at least sensed it. He had made me the target of a long grift and this was the last step to getting me out of the way.

But back to the action.

Cousin Sean leaned back sipping a Negro Modelo and Dolly, now clad in tight jeans and a Kiss t-shirt, sat across the room on a bar stool, all happy-go-lucky, idly swirling a margarita on the rocks. It was a summer afternoon, I was in pain, and Franks fussed over me, about to fix everything.

“Keith! Fuck, man,” Franks said “You look all sorts of fucked up.” He leaned over and kissed the top of my bald, stubbly head, almost brotherly. His greasy blond hair fell over his face, a black and orange Giants’ t-shirt hung threadbare on his skinny frame.

“Where’s Bart?” I finally managed, jaw tight. Radiohead’s *Kid A* played on the speakers. For some reason, focusing on the gun lying on the tray table next to me distracted me from the pain.

“He’s on a run for me,” Franks said. He cleared his throat. “Don’t you mind about him, Keith, I have just the thing for you.”

I nodded toward Sean. “Who’s that?”

“That’s my American cousin, Sean.”

“Hey, Keith,” Sean said. “Sorry you’re all messed up, man.”

They all looked at me like I was mentally handicapped, which in a way I was: feeble-minded with pain.

Franks knelt down in front of the chaise. “So this is the deal. All we could get was some...*shit*. Some H. Some heroin, brother. You don’t have to do it. Or you can. But I can tell you this: it’ll definitely make the pain go away. You can snort it or smoke it or shoot it. What do you want to do?”

Sean gazed at me with what looked like legitimate concern. Dolly, smoke

curling around her head, glanced at each of us, then just shrugged at me.

I heard myself say, “Let’s shoot it. It’ll be faster.”

Franks and Sean were immediately in motion. Sean cooked it up in a spoon. Dolly left her stool and closed in to watch, fascinated. Franks did his best to assuage me, rubbing my arm. He actually caressed my forehead.

Mind you, this was early on a summer afternoon. Birds chirped manically outside, and the white noise of Interstate 80 was like breaking waves in the distance. It might’ve been a kind of urban bucolic, if it weren’t for the back-pain and the junkies.

Joplin padded in nonchalantly, glancing at everyone, twitching her fluffy tail, recognizing most of them; she jumped up onto the end of the chaise. Like Dolly, the cat calmly watched with interest as Franks helped Sean tie me off. She watched this man plunge the syringe into my arm. I watched her watch him doing this horrible thing to me. And that was it.

So fucking beautiful. It was. The pain was gone instantly. Or rather, I didn’t care instantly. I didn’t care about anything. But different than that: we think that caring is a part of love, but it’s not. Heroin is the feeling of love without all the caring. It’s perfect love. Love without consequences.

Weirder than all of that, it fixed my back.

52.

Keenan at Four Years

A few days after Tabatha’s party and being visited by Sean, the Ghost of Junkie-Past, I was in my room at my little desk searching online for Sean, using the phone number Tabitha had given me to track down his address. By now, my kiddie tablet just wasn’t cutting it. Even with all the parental filters turned off, the simple operating system and infantile browser just weren’t up to tasks a normal computer would accomplish instantly. Sure, it would play videos and bring up web pages, but it was slow as molasses. On top of that, its native word processor only showed characters in big cartoonish fonts with limited formatting options. We would have to fix this somehow. Sneaking onto my dad’s computer just was

not an option anymore.

My mom tapped on my door and stepped in.

“Hi, Keen. Dinner in an hour.”

“Alright. What are we having?”

“Your dad’s beer brats, sauerkraut, potatoes and corn.”

“Whoa...what’s the occasion?”

“We are having a guest over for dinner. This man we met at the brewing awards wants to talk to Drew about opening a brewpub—” Lou hesitated.

“I know what a brewpub is, Mom.”

“Of course you do. My four-year-old.” She shook her head. “Anyway, it’s pretty exciting.”

“Great.”

“Whatcha doin’?”

“Nothing.” I paused. “Mom, can I get a new tablet?”

She snorted. “Right after I get a new computer. And a new phone. And a microwave that is faster than the freaking toaster oven.”

“Forget about it.”

“I’ll call you when dinner’s ready.”



When supper was announced, I trotted out to the dining room to the heady aroma of Drew’s porter-soaked bratwurst and artisanal sauerkraut. *Ah, Drew, putting the brau in low-brow.* I climbed up on my booster seat as Lou brought in the steaming brats. Drew and his guest came in from the garage-brewery. By now, the garage was used solely for the purpose of making beer. There was always a batch being mashed, sparged, boiled, cooled or fermented. You get used to the smell. Not only was Drew producing cases of beer, he’d been paid to keg his brews for friends’ parties. I believe if Drew hadn’t had won awards at the competition, Lou would’ve blown a gasket by this time. He’d really gone beer crazy.

He carried a pitcher in each hand as he led our visitor to the table.

“Ah, look. It’s my little monkey. Keenan, this is Mr. Galvin.”

“Hi, Mr. Galvin.”

He glanced at Drew, then back at me with a twinkle in his eye. “Hi, Keenan. You can call me John. No need to be so formal.” He held out his hand and I shook

it. He held it for a little longer than necessary and winked at me.

Creepy.

He took his seat at the table with a “So what have we here?”

Drew poured beer as he replied, “Porter-soaked bratwurst, my favorite sauerkraut, au gratin potatoes and local-grown sweet corn from up the street.”

“A feast!”

Lou joined us with the potatoes and corn. “Very posh. And most of the food groups,” she said drolly, sitting down. “Dig in.”

John Galvin looked to be about fifty. But he had the cracked cheeks of someone who’d spent a lot of time in the sun, like a fisherman or farmer: rosy Irish cheeks beset with lively hazel eyes. His gray hair was neatly trimmed, almost military, and he sported a close-cut salt-and-pepper beard. He was dressed for business in a light blue button-down and gray tie. A matching suit jacket hung on the back of his chair. There was a gold service ring on his finger. He caught me looking at it.

“You know what this is, Keenan? That’s an Army Ranger ring,” he said instructively. “75th Regiment. I was in the Army. You know, like the Army men you play with.” He piled a dollop of kraut on his brats. Annoyed, I glanced at Lou, then at Drew. Our guest caught the look. “Did I say something wrong?” he asked, grin faltering.

Drew chuckled. “No.”

“Knowing Keenan, he probably *knew* it was a service ring,” Lou said. “Hell, he can probably tell you the history of the Rangers.”

Galvin was amazed. “What? No...*really?*”

“He’s funny that way.”

Drew nodded, shook his head, shrugged. “Ask him a question.”

“How old his he? How old are you?” Galvin asked, somewhere between amused and disturbed.

“Four.”

“Four?”

“And four months.”

“Well, well.” Then he asked, “Do you know anything about the Army

Rangers, Keenan.”

I shrugged. “Not much. They used to fight Indians.”

Galvin whistled, impressed.

“*Native Americans*, Keenan,” Drew corrected.

“They were like scouts.” I wanted to say they were the first of what would become the special forces and that they had a long and storied history in American warfare.

Galvin laughed heartily. “My goodness! Sorry I talked down to you, son! I didn’t know you were so...*advanced*.” Then he said out of the side of his mouth to Drew, “Is he like some sort of kid genius?”

“Um...I guess you could say that. But he’s still a kid.”

It was about this time that I smelled something fishy about this John Galvin character. He seemed a little...*disingenuous*? Maybe that’s not it. Too *earnest*? I watched him as he forked many sausages into his face. The grown-ups continued to make small talk until Galvin set his fork down and pushed back from the table. “Well, Louisiana, you make a savory meal! And this beer—what can I say, that’s why I’m here.” He drained his glass and smacked his lips. Drew emptied the rest of the pitcher into their glasses. “And with that, maybe we should talk a little about this brew pub idea I’m dreaming up in San Francisco.”

Ah! So *that* was it! He was being ingratiating to woo Drew. Lou rose, collecting the dishes, suppressing a hopeful smile. Drew stood as well, empty pitcher in hand. “I have just the new ale for the occasion. Maybe we should take it to the other room. Keenan, you can go...,” Drew hesitated with some embarrassment, “...play, or read—or whatever you do—if you want.” Thus, Lou and Drew disappeared, leaving Galvin behind in the kitchen with me. Feeling awkward, I climbed down from my booster chair.

Galvin was suddenly at my side, whispering excitedly “Keenan! It’s *me!*”

It didn’t register at first, but the tone of his voice made me stop.

“It’s me—*Stoli!*” he whispered.

Lou rushed back in to do the dishes. “You guys making friends?” She was not ten feet from us. “John, don’t get Keenan started. He’ll talk your ear off.”

“That’s alright,” he told her, ushering me just outside the doorway. Drew was in the garage.

He knelt down and continued, voice low. “It’s *Stoli!* The dude from behind

the 7-Eleven! I found your buried cash! I made good.”

I was dumbfounded.

“Holy shit,” I exhaled.

“I came back for you!”

My throat was knotted closed. My eyes darted over John Galvin anew. He was markedly different, but...*it was him*. Who else could it be?

The nightwalks. Stoli. Buried cash. The abandoned plan.

I jumped at Lou’s voice. “Is he pestering you, John?” She stood in the kitchen doorway, hands working a dishtowel.

Stoli didn’t miss a beat. “Just asking Keenan if he knew where he was going to college.”

Lou laughed. “Funny...I’ve never even thought to ask.”

“Ask what?” Drew returned with a large foamy pitcher of brown ale.

Stoli held my gaze, smiling. “Where Keenan’s going to college.”

“Ha!” Drew set down the beer and winked at me. “Well, all I gotta say is that he better get a scholarship or something. We’ll be lucky to afford *community* college.”

Lou shook her head. “One thing at a time. Let’s at least let him reach puberty.”

Drew nodded toward the other room. “Shall we retire to the living room?”

Stoli rose. “Excellent idea.”

I watched them leave and realized Lou had stopped to look at me. “Well?”

“What?”

“Are you expecting dessert or something?” she asked. “What are you doing?”

In my state of perplexedness, I remained standing in the kitchen doorway. “I don’t know.”

“You can join us, if you want.”

“Okay.”

She said in a half-whisper, “I think John is going to offer your dad a job.”

“Making beer?” I whispered back.

“I guess. Maybe we can reclaim the garage.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

She smiled and tapped my nose with her finger. “You’re a weird kid, kid.”

“You made me.”

“Weird comes from your dad’s side.”

So I went and grabbed my lousy tablet from my room, laid on the floor with

a pillow, and pretended to be lost in my own little world as they had their adult time. I had to hand it to Stoli—he'd really thought this out. He spun quite a yarn, a history partially fabricated about himself, about how he came into a little money, turned that little money into a lot of money, and decided to pursue his dream of opening a brew pub. He described this found money as an inheritance, sinking it into a friend's personal fitness invention—a series of webbing straps that, when combined with a particular workout regimen, made it possible to stay in shape in a confined area—a patent that was purchased for millions of dollars by the U.S. Army. That was about a year ago. Now he'd diversified, made even more money, and was ready to settle down with a business that would engage him and make him happy into his retirement: a brew pub. But while he had grown-up in a restauranting family, he knew nothing about brewing. Then came the Silicon Valley Brewing Competition. When he tasted Drew's microbrews and heard the passion in Drew's brief acceptance speech, John 'Stoli' Galvin knew he had his future brewmeister.

The real story, I found out later, was a bit different. The part about investing in his friend's company, then reinvesting and making a mint is true. But what happened on the way to the money, and on the way to Drew, was different:

When Stoli met an invisible elf by the name of Keenan Solomon Harris on the other side of the fence from his 7-Eleven garbage area hangout, he thought he'd seriously lost it, that he'd had a breakdown. *But it seemed so real.* Either way, he was in some bad shape. So he went to his caseworker and told her he wanted to clean up, to get his head straight and swim out of the debilitating undertow of his PTSD and substance abuse. Thus he began his final foray into rehab. He told no one about the reincarnated man-child he had met through the fence behind a Campbell convenience store. He looked up Keith Stanford Haddock and found out that the troubled writer-musician had died of a drug overdose some years earlier. Still, this did not convince him that he wasn't looney toons. After thirty cleansing days, he borrowed a car and went up to San Francisco to verify or discredit the address given to him by said dead writer-elf-phantom hallucination.

Finding that the address—1836 20th Street—actually existed nearly sent him back to rehab. He parked the car inconspicuously behind a contractor's truck about 50 yards down the street from the large Victorian that used to be my home. There was a shiny black Land Rover in the cobbled brick driveway. Stoli waited.

And waited.

About ninety minutes later, a robust-looking middle-aged blond lady in a pale green business suit came out of the house, got into the Range Rover and drove away. That lady was my sister...well, Keith Haddock's sister. After a few minutes, Stoli (who I have to keep reminding myself was clean shaven, sober, and dressed business casual) got out of the car, crossed the street, walked up to 1836 and rang the doorbell. Nobody stirred within. He knocked persistently. Nothing. And no dogs. This was good. He looked around and went to the side of the house, and without hesitation, climbed over the fence.

He told me the yard wasn't kept up very well, but he could see that it was once very nice. He saw the hot tub, the deck, the overgrown wooden steps leading up the hill to the bench and the tree. He hopped these steps two at a time until he stood at the top. There was nobody in the neighbor's yard and he had a slight view down 20th Street, the direction my sister had driven away. He studied the windows at the back of the house. He saw movement and froze. A fluffy white Himalayan cat sunned itself in the window. He thought it might be watching him.

Joplin, still breathing well into her teens.

He read the brass plate on the back of the weathered bench: "Rest in Peace – Athel Dillon Haddock - Faith Ann Kienel". He grunted in acknowledgement and hefted the weathered bench aside. He took a hand spade out of his pocket and, yanking handfuls of grass out of the soil, he quickly dug down about two feet before he hit a green marble box wrapped in tattered plastic and sealed with wax. He was about to crack the seal when he stopped, weighed it with his hands and glanced at the brass plate on the bench. "Athel and Faith. Pardon. Not what I'm here for." He set the box aside and sunk the hand spade down another foot or so before it hit the top of a plastic detergent canister wrapped in garbage bags and duct tape. It took him a few minutes to unbury it. Pulling out his pocket knife, Stoli quickly cut through the disintegrating plastic garbage bag and the duct tape, and ripped off the top of the canister. He was in a sort of frenzy now, sweating, filthy. He dumped the contents of the plastic tub out: a taped plastic brick, something triangular wrapped in a white garbage bag and a silver flask with "Keith" printed on it. He went straight for what could only be the money. He cut open the brick and held a stack of hundreds in his shaking hand. *Unbelievable*. He looked around. Nobody, no neighbors, paid Stoli any mind except Joplin, almost at eye-level in the second-story bedroom window of the house. He tossed the

money back in the bucket, then ripped open the white plastic bag, which was the red vinyl gun case. He unzipped the case far enough to peek inside to confirm his suspicion, then threw it in the tub, followed by the flask.

It was all real. A reincarnated criminal stuck in the body of a child had told him where to find buried treasure. He found the treasure. *Hold it—reincarnation is real? The universe isn't really a nihilistic void without meaning?* Even as he was bulldozing the dirt back into the hole with his arms, he felt the urge to vomit—so he let himself do so and covered it over. He replaced the rectangular green marble urn into the hole and buried it, and dragged the old weathered bench. He felt time was running out now. With the tub under his arm, he scrambled madly down the hill, skidding, slipping and almost falling on the crumbling wooden-steps.

When he got to the side yard gate he was panting. Muddy rivulets of sweat and tears ran down his red face. His button-down was in ruins, his khakis soiled, his head abuzz with a swarm of questions that now had answers. Deep from somewhere, he found the presence of mind to shut the panic off, like an actor subduing his butterflies, about to go on stage. He took a breath. He knew that anybody could be on the other side of the fence: the big blond lady could suddenly pull into the driveway; a neighbor could be out in their yard; the police could be pulling up. The best exit was going to be to walk quietly through the gate and make a relaxed beeline to the car like nothing was amiss. So, wiping his eyes with his sleeve, he nestled the plastic detergent container of money under his arm, took a breath, unlatched the gate and ... strode through.

No car in the driveway, no one approaching. He walked calmly with the bucket, put it in the trunk, got in the car and drove away.

This was almost three years ago and it had changed his life. He was now afraid of nothing except perhaps the infinite possibility of existence. The PTSD was gone and he hadn't been on medication for years. He could safely drink alcohol again without the soul-sucking thirst to erase consciousness. Loud noises didn't juice his adrenaline. He could sit at a restaurant without his back against the wall. He was, in a sense, born again—born again via the *fact* of a hereafter, not faith of a false heaven. All these things he later told me.

But let's go back to our living room, day one.

That first night when Stoli/John met us in Campbell, he worked Drew and Lou very convincingly with his (pretty viable) business pitch. By the time he left,

Drew had agreed to meet Stoli/John up in San Francisco that next Saturday to check out the commercial space he'd just put a deposit on.

"Hell, bring the whole family and we'll make a day of it up in the City," he said, eyeing me. "Would you like to see San Francisco, Keenan?"

I was nearly breathless at the thought. "Yessir!"

My mom chuckled at my enthusiasm. "Look who wants to see the big city."

I let Drew lift me into his arms as Lou opened the door for Stoli, who was in the process of putting on his jacket. Stoli reached into his inside-pocket and pulled out a business card. "So, I'll email you the address and you guys can meet me up there...say...noon?"

Drew and Lou paused. A feeling of "this is really happening" made them both dumbstruck. Stoli stood in the doorway, understanding.

He said, "Look, I know all this is weird and happening so fast. I mean, you don't know who the hell I am. Look me up on the internet. But what I do know is—" He nodded at Drew. "—is *talent* when I see it. Someone is going to snap you up, Drew, if I don't, and the microbrew business is cutthroat in the Bay Area. So, I'm just asking you all to consider my ideas, and meet me at this space I'm gonna rent. Worst that could happen is you get a free lunch and Keenan can see the big city."

Drew pursed his lips and looked at Lou. "I'm in. How about you?"

"Why not?"

"You have my card?" He held it up to Drew, and I grabbed it.

"Yeah, I already have it."

"Looks like Keenan's already got it anyway."

"For his rolodex," Lou said.

"Ha! Rolodex. I forgot about those," Drew admitted. "Keenan will never know a world with rolodexes."

Stoli tousled my hair and winked at me. "Yep. Never again." He shook Drew's hand and gave Lou a slight hug. "Well, until Saturday. I'll send you the address. Look over the contract. We can sort out any details then. Drew, I'd really like to work with you. I think we can build a great brewery."

"I feel good about it. I hope I'm up to the task."

"You'll be fine. Bye now."

"Bye," the parents said.

They closed the door behind him and gazed at each other excitedly, then

embraced, sandwiching me between them.

Drew was elated. “Can you believe it?”

Lou was pleased but wary. “It sounds almost too good to be true. I hope he’s not a crackpot.”

“He does seem a little wacky, but I like him. I looked him up online and his story checks out. What do you think, Keen?”

“He’s okay,” I replied. I felt rescued. His business card was safely in my pocket.

53.

Keenan at Seven Years

Lately, I’m getting the sort of death-panic I used to get back in life number one: a sadness for the things that I won’t get to find out. This is the sort of thing that was the root of my existential torment, as well as the anticipation of the death moment. Even now that I know that things continue, instead of dreading that moment when you admit *I’m about to die*, I’ll be forgetting all about Keith and thinking, *Who taught me this A-minor chord?*

I feared the run-up, not the death. It was egotistical. I wasn’t even fearing the pain—pain proves you’re still alive. But what I know, and all Buddhists, is that when you love the world it makes it hard to leave.

This is nothing for a seven-and-a-half-year-old to fret about. And perhaps it’s good and right that I’m losing my Keith-ness to an ever-encroaching Keenan-ness so that I don’t have to go on with silly adult concerns.

These are the things I think about as I construct for you Keith Haddock’s pitiful fall, sitting here next to the open window welcoming the puffs of breeze that give occasional respite. The parentals are gone. They trust that I can be left alone at this point, and they’re right to feel that way. Drew’s at work in San Francisco; Lou’s at the doctor’s for a prenatal check-up for my future sister, Sabine Faith. They let me choose her middle name. It’s my mother’s name—*Keith’s* mother. It fulfills the romantic need for me to leave bits of Keith behind. Like this audio recording, like my story. Lou and Drew thought Faith was an odd name choice, but honored it anyway. We all like its old-fashioned flavor.

You might ask why I’ve been stressing about death when I’m the living

answer to the eternal question. But wouldn't you know it, answer one question, you ask another.

Where will I end up next?

That's the rub. When the final forgetting happens, will it be like death or does Keith's consciousness relocate again? Am I going to wake up in another body one night after I fall asleep? Will I doze off as Keenan Solomon Harris and wake up as some baby in the Russian Steppe? Perhaps I'll return as an adult woman just coming out of a coma after a tragic bus accident. I could be reincarnated as an alien creature on another planet! I could not wake up at all. The doubts and fears of the unknown aftermath of life have returned because I can now attest that *anything* is possible, and I might lose both Keith and Keenan and all their friends and family. The human race and all their triumphs and foibles. *Goddammit.*

Like before, I fear I won't get to see how this crazy, horrible, beautiful, brilliant, stupid race of apes is going to turn out. It makes me so, *so* sad.

What's great is that *you* will. You who are listening to this, possibly transcribing this. You get to see. I hope it's cool. Hope it's hopeful.

For now, I must continue the sad story of Keith Haddock, heroin addict. Cheers.

54.

Keith Increases Market Share

Imagine my surprise when I found myself heading up my first gang meeting!

You would think it would've happened by now. Before this meeting of the drug minds, the strategy of making-things-up-as-I-went-along gave me the moral cover to pretend that I just *happened into* this business, that being a drug dealer was an *accident*—or better yet—a *phase* I was going through. I've spent a lot of time examining each moment of my first life—all that I can remember anyway—dissecting the motivations of all those involved, parsing the back-story of each players' circumstance, focusing on my own regrettable final years. I've had a lot of time to think about it, especially in those first nightmarish months of my infant immobility, a plague of regret and confusion, toothless and trapped, no musculature, no bowel control, each day trying to convince myself that nothing was real, that I was in a coma-dream, or indeed in Hell. Hell seemed a more

realistic scenario than being reincarnated as a newborn in Campbell, California.

Now, at the advanced age of seven, my regrets are few. All events, bad and good, past and present, are necessary to the moment. I see my criminal life as sad, sordid and cinematic, like a sort of Tarantino film produced by inept film students: enjoyable in a way, but embarrassing.

So on a certain Wednesday afternoon in May some eight years ago, I called an all-hands meeting to the house on Potrero Hill. As I said before, heroin had relaxed the muscles in my back enough to let the tissue actually heal. I had no pain, even when I was sober. Why I didn't see a doctor after I hurt my back still eludes me. Oddly enough, heroin also helped cure me of my daily cocaine habit. Blow was now relegated as a pick-me-up or social drug: to clear the head or break the ice with houseguests. Looking back, I think there was a collective sigh of relief when my drug of choice became heroin. I wasn't such an asshole anymore—wasn't tense, and the paranoia and quick temper all but disappeared.

Oh, heroin. H. Horse, junk, chiva, smack. Our favorite was simply *H*. The nicknames were endless—Henry, Jones, Kabayo, Helen, hero—*witch hazel*? We made fun of anybody who had a clever name for it. After the first month of being on H, I found my sea legs and learned to become functional. Like all druggies.

The first New Drug Gang Meeting was called for three in the afternoon—first thing in the morning to the likes of us.

My chafed penis strained against my shorts as I dragged myself around the dining room in a fluffy white terry bathrobe. It's not exactly true what they say about hard-ons and heroin. It's a sensual drug, and while it may take some work to get an erection, once you get it, it lasts forever. Sex becomes not about orgasm (orgasm has nothing on a heroin high) but about connection and enjoying the high together, close up. Nobody ever climaxes, but marathon sex is a fantastic way to exist between fixes. The heroin rekindled my and Dolly's sex life—at first, anyway. It cured my back, then our sex life—H was a wonder drug.

Again, I digress. Becoming seven is like senility in reverse.

So Dolly was upstairs recovering from the long tumble, and I was downstairs making a very unfocused attempt at taking our drug meeting seriously, padding lingeringly from room to room, returning to the dining room to arrange and rearrange things on the big antique oak table. *Exile on Main Street* played in the kitchen.

Chairs in place. Plastic bottles of water. Electronic drug scale. Drug testing

kit. Box of dope, box of cash. Crystal decanter of expensive bourbon. Glasses. Ice bucket. Napkins? Sure. What else, what else? Foggy mind was forgetting something. This looked like a job for cocaine.

I heard the sound of the shower upstairs.

What was this scene missing? A pistol tucked in the planter near the sliding glass door. Why? Because I was a drug dealer. What else? The brain started to ramp up after the inhalation of a giant rail of coke. Snacks? Where were my manners? Where was my sense of hospitality? Chips! Salsa! Maybe some of those little frozen quiches! Pop 'em in the oven!

Then I went upstairs to jump in the shower with Dolly.

When I was all cleaned up, I threw on some clothes and let Franks, Poindexter and Sean into the house. Bart joined us shortly thereafter.

I said, "We're in the dining room, gentlemen."

I was now barefoot in slacks and a white linen button down. I put on Clapton. Clapton was perfect for not paying attention to anything. The curtains were drawn but light streamed through the thin white fabric cracks onto the neatly set table. Seated around it were Dolly, Bart, Franks, Poindexter and Sean. I made sure everybody had a drink. A tray of warm mini-quiches and a bowl of tortilla chips sat next to a bowl of salsa. Standing at the head of the table, I topped off my bourbon as Dolly passed around a mirror cut with neat white lines.

"I love the light in here," I said, smiling. I stood. "A toast!"

Glasses raised.

"What are we toasting?" Bart asked.

"We are expanding our enterprise."

"Oh, shit."

"Only a matter of time," Dolly said.

Poindexter raised his tattooed hand. "What's that noise?"

I cocked my head. "Clapton?—Oh, the staticky sound?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"White noise generator. Throws off the listening devices."

Bart snorted. "Who's listening?"

"Exactly."

Dolly rolled her eyes. "Keith read it somewhere."

"Better safe than sorry, I guess," Bart admitted.

"Anyway, now that I'm back in commission—thanks to the miracle of

heroin—I feel re-energized about business matters.”

“It’s about fuckin’ time, man,” Franks said, raising his glass. “Slainte!”

Everybody chorused, “Slainte!”

I gestured to Sean.

“And we’re welcoming a few new folks to our crew.”

Bart looked at me askance, then sideways at Sean. He boldly said, “Alright... um, I guess I’m on a need-to-know basis now?”

“Sorry I didn’t forward you the annual report.”

“Whatever.” Bart clucked his tongue. “I mean I get Sean, but...who else?”

“Well...there’s Dolly.”

“I thought she was part of the crew already.”

“Not officially, no. After much soul searching—”

Dolly snorted.

“Quiet.” I continued, “I’ve decided to make Dolly my proxy. She gets the combo to the safe and will be my voice if I’m, uh...”

“Nodding off,” Bart cut in.

“That’s very indelicate.”

Franks chuckled in spite of himself and it pissed me off.

“What the fuck are *you* laughing at, McFuckface?” He continued to laugh until I too cracked a grin. This was the *new* me. The *heroin* me. Whereas before I might’ve blustered into a general dressing down of my crew, now I merely joined in the laughter. “Fair enough,” I said.

Bart wasn’t smiling. “So...what? Who else? Don’t tell me—Dexter?”

Poindexter gave him a small salute.

Franks slapped Bart on the back. “You have a problem with that, Bart-o?”

“Franks,” I warned.

“It’s alright, Keith,” Bart said. “No offense, Dexter, but... well, you haven’t really worked for *us* this whole time—you’ve worked for *Franks*.”

I watched Sean. He was taking this all in with a certain amount of salt, a fair measure of humor. He was definitely sizing things up. Impressive for his age. While I recognize Sean as being instrumental in my downfall, I always thought he was pretty bright and held onto a code of ethics. He wore a kind of Mona Lisa smile on his face as he leaned back in his chair sipping bourbon.

“That’s exactly why he’s being let into the crew. Better have him working with

all of us than having his talents hogged by Franks.”

“Talents?” Bart said skeptically.

“Well, I don’t want to get ahead of ourselves, but he knows what’s going on with the gangs and neighborhoods of The City.”

“And I fuckin’ don’t?”

Poindexter cleared his throat. “Chill, holmes. You got Nortenos and Surenos covered?”

“Whatever. You got Hunters Point Boys and Sunnydale Mob?”

“In my back pocket, man. And MS13 and Big Block and Page St.”

“MS13,” Bart scoffed, reaching for a quiche and popping it into his mouth. Dolly smoked a cigarette and idly played with the cocaine on the mirror.

“More importantly, he’s got Potrero Hill Gang and Hill Girlz,” I added.

“Why does that shit even matter? We got clientele in spades.”

“Because we’re adding to our product line.” I nodded to Sean. “Sean?”

Without a word, Sean stood, brought up a silver aluminum briefcase, rolled the combination lock and cracked it open on the table. He pulled out a Fed-Ex box.

“When it positively absolutely has to be there on time,” Dolly cracked. She passed the mirror around again. I was starting to feel the slight nag of needing another fix.

“Just camouflage,” Sean said, pulling out a yellowish plastic-wrapped brick heroin and plopping it on the table.

There was a sucking in of air, an appreciative whistle, and Bart saying, “Holy shit.”

All to the steady hiss of the white noise machine and the slow hand of Clapton.

I stood and walked around the table picking up the kilo, weighing it in my hand.

“Thanks, Sean.” I stood behind him with the brick. “One kilo of ninety-nine percent pure Afghani heroin. An eighty-thousand-dollar investment that should triple itself.”

Poindexter and Franks high-fived. Dolly looked on greedily, salivating. And Bart was...*blank*. He was unimpressed, silent. I continued to walk around the table.

“Which leads us to Mr. Poindexter. We have our coke niche, but we don’t

have a heroin niche, and if we suddenly show up with all this thunder and no introduction we will fall victim to the wrath of the various operations around town.”

“Can I see?” Bart asked. I tossed it to him. He smelled the plastic. There was swirly Arabic-looking writing printed on it. “So...if you don’t mind me asking... where do you get it from, Sean? You seem a little...well...*young*.”

Sean looked at Franks and Franks nodded. “Let’s just say I’ll be covering the Inner Sunset.”

“Ah. So...Afghanistan by way of...what?” Bart paused, thinking, then said, “The *old* country” in a very bad Irish brogue, adding, “IRA?”

Franks scoffed. “Doncha know the Troubles are over, Bart.”

“But—”

“Moving on...,” I prompted. Bart meanwhile poured himself some more booze and lit a cigarette. I said, “I detect a little resistance, Bart.”

“Well...what if I don’t want to peddle junk? I don’t know shit about it. I tried it once, like ten years ago. I know maybe three people who fix and I wouldn’t sell to one of ’em.” He put the brick on the table.

There was a silence. All eyes were on me, then Bart, then back on me. This was unexpected. I hadn’t figured a nay-sayer into my plan, especially Bart.

Strangely, it was Poindexter who broke the silence. “Hey, man, it’s easy. It’s just like selling anything else. In fact, it’s easier than selling yayo. Once you got the customers, it sells itself.”

“That may be true, but I don’t think so. I’ll stick with blow. I know it. I’m solid. You guys can peddle the H.”

Franks was getting a bit hot. He said, “Man, I don’t do the shit either. It’s called what—*diversifying*, right? If it gets slow with the blow, you got the other.”

“Blow is never slow for me.”

“Jesus. You’re always a fucking buzz-kill.”

“Well, motherfucker, I’m a buzz-kill with two strikes, alright? Blow is within my comfort zone.”

“Your loss, *team player*,” Franks said acidly.

I had to laugh, and did. “Alright, you guys. Calm down. If Bart doesn’t want in on this part of the business, it’s more for you all, right? I’ll parse the math. I’ve been to college.”

“I don’t even have an opinion,” Sean said. “I mean, who cares? S’all good,

Bart.” He lifted his glass to Bart.

Poindexter shrugged but Franks was still miffed. “Yeah, well, it means we may have to find somebody to cover Bart’s territory.”

“What territory? I don’t have a territory, I have clients. I know who they are. Dude, like Keith said—more for you. Enjoy.”

By now the coke, the tension, and the huge bag of H was taunting me. “Well, good. We’re all settled then,” I said, “I’m pretty itchy to check this shit out.” I reached over and picked up the kilo and handed it to Dolly. “Hey, honey, let’s weigh out ounces to those...*who are participating*...then relax with a nice little fix.” Bart looked sullen. “Bart, we’ll talk about it later, but your concerns are noted.” He didn’t look up.

“Okay,” Dolly said. She turned the brick over in her hand. “How do I, uh... *open* this thing?”

“Knife.”

Bart, always slick, produced a switchblade and, clicking it open, presented me the handle-end. I carefully cut a slit into the end of the brick and slowly wedged it open until powdery white heroin sifted down onto the table. Dolly scooted the scale toward her and turned it on with a beep, donning a surgical mask and pulling surgical gloves on with a snap.

I downed the last of my whiskey and said, “This concludes the business portion of our meeting. Everybody make themselves at home.”

55.

Keenan at Seven Years

Alright, so this is weird. I woke up this morning thinking it was Thursday, July 29th. Well, it’s Friday, July 30th. The reason is alarming and it underscores the immediacy of getting my story down.

It started after I woke up and was eating breakfast. My parents stared at me