

if what you've become was truly the result of existential heartbreak, that would be an almost charming plot twist. But really, Keith, Chris' untimely death was just the excuse you'd been waiting for to *quit*. To give up hope and not feel guilty about it. You get to finally be weak. Congratulations. It must be such a relief."

"Fuck you."

"You can relax now and be weak like everyone else. You've finally come down to our level."

*Fuck!*

She had my ticket. Righter than right. She was the only one who knew my convoluted bullshit. I tried to distract her by throwing money at her, but she probably thought I'd tire of the life and come back into the fold. She could now see I wasn't coming back and this was *The Talk*. I was scared. Being a tragic criminal asshole was easier than being a hopeful creative artist. And yet I felt like I'd secretly been waiting for this, for someone to notice.

But she waited too long. I was too jaded by now, too drugged up to remember that I was just an actor in search of an audience. I'd once told Sawnee that each person lived in a terrible and beautiful novel that nobody bothered to write down.

"What are you going to do, Keith?"

I said, "I don't know. How do I follow this?"

We arrived at the cemetery.

Suddenly we both got the comedy of it and let escape grim smiles. Nineties rock played on the radio and Chris' cemetery was in front of me. The day was overcast.

She said, "I've got the flowers and the whiskey. Are you going to get out of the car this time?"

I opened the car door.

## 37.

### Keenan at Two Years

Imagine my surprise when I was actually assigned a jailor.

As it would happen, my uncle, Joseph Patrick Harris, suddenly needed a place to stay.

Seems Uncle Joe had a serious gambling addiction and had spent his family's

meager savings covering the bets he'd lost. Actually, *not* quite covering the bets he'd lost. So with the encouragement of his very pissed off (but devoted) wife, as well as a mob-connected bookie, Joe flew out to stay with us for a while. Joe was to be my night watchman and sometime au pair.

Uncle Joe hadn't seen me since my first birthday. When he and Drew got home that afternoon, Mom was sunbathing in the backyard and I was on the couch watching an endangered species documentary. Uncle Joe, short dark hair, squat and fit, set down a big battered suitcase next to the door and spotted me.

"There's my favorite nephew! My God, you're huge!"

He rushed toward me—

Being a miniature human for over two years had prepared me for the unbridled joy that adults—*especially relatives*—often exhibit when seeing their infant relations. And because this was my Uncle Joe, I threw him a bone and smiled and giggled as he swept me off the couch and into the air. To tell you the truth, if you were expecting it, being handled like basketball was kind of fun.

"Hey, Keenan, buddy! Wow! You look just like a Harris but better!" I giggled again for good measure and he planted a rough whiskery kiss on my cheek, nestling me in the scoop of his brawny arm. He beamed at his older brother. "Dee! Great work!"

Drew nodded with a smile. "He's something else, alright."

He tousled my hair and poked a finger in my belly. I squirmed and grabbed his finger.

"Wow! And what a grip, too!" I held it as he slowly drew his finger upward. My little hand could barely fit around his thick forefinger. "Hi, Keenan!" he said, wagging his face at mine.

"Hi, Uncle Joe," I replied, studying his response.

He did a double-take at me, then at Drew. "Fuckin'-aye, Dee! He's talkin' and everything! How does he know who I am?"

"We've been talking about you all week."

"Wow." He tilted his head at me. "You know who I am, huh?"

"That's right, Uncle Joe. Now, you can put me down."

"Um...sure, Keenan." He set me gently on the ground and tousled my hair. I headed back to the couch and resumed watching my show. "And he's watching a documentary to boot. Get a load o' that."

"Yeah, I sometimes think that he's smarter than us. It's a little unnerving.

Where's your mother, Keen?"

"Backyard," I said without looking at them.

They both gazed at me in awe until Drew punched his little brother in the shoulder. "Now let's get down to what's important: beer."

"Fuckin'-aye right, bro."

They headed off to the garage and all I could think was, *This is going to be very entertaining.*



Louisiana, however, wasn't going to board her obnoxious Southie brother-in-law without exacting a few conditions in the bargain. That night at dinner, Lou set the guidelines.

By the time dinner was ready (more succinctly, delivered by a pizza dude), the boys were well into their fourth pitcher of homebrew.

"A toast!" Joe said, raising his glass of beer.

"Oh, lord," Lou groaned. But she was into her second glass of beer herself and in a good mood.

"To the best brewer in..."

"*Campbell*," Drew finished. They all laughed.

"*That's* a tall order," Lou said sarcastically.

"To the *best* brewer in Campbell."

Drew drained his glass. "Today Campbell, tomorrow the world."

"Good. Can I quit my job then?"

"Of course, my dear," Drew said, leaning over and kissing Lou's cheek. "And I'll buy you furs and houses and cars and—"

"Let's just focus on making rent for now."

They ate their pizza. I was on my booster seat forking baby-size cuts of pizza into my mouth. Joe, fascinated, watched me out of the side of his eye. "So," he asked them, "What's the big ta-do with sporto, here? He tried to escape from this prison hellhole?"

"Well, not exactly," Drew explained, "but he went for a walk around the

neighborhood. Didn't come back for a couple hours."

"Where'd you go, buddy?"

I shrugged and kept eating.

"We put on keypad locks, but I don't think that's going to work."

Lou snorted. "Are you kidding? That'll never hold him. We need thumbprint scanners or something."

"You could put one of those electric dog collars on him, you know that electrocutes 'em when they go off the property."

"Joe!" Lou gasped. But then they all laughed, only stopping when they saw my scowl.

"You don't find that funny, Keen?" Drew asked.

A beat. "It's a riot," I replied, gazing at them ruefully. This, of course, caused them to roar with more laughter.

Drew straightened up. "In all seriousness, though, if Keenan makes another break for it, Lydia will be forced to intervene."

Joe stopped with a slice of pizza on the way to his mouth. "Lydia?"

"Our case worker."

"Your case worker?"

Drew poured all of them more beer. I rearranged my food with my little fork.

"She's a Parent Cop."

They thought about this.

"So Joe," Lou said, "You'll be sleeping in Keenan's room so the little brat doesn't go running off. Drew put an air mattress in there."

Joe nodded, stuffing a pepperoni slice in his mouth.

I broke in, "I'm not going to run off."

Lou ignored me. "And Drew is going to start job interviewing, so you'll have to watch Keenan during the day sometimes."

"Mmmphhm,"

"This also means you can't drink Drew's brews all day long."

Drew, mid-gulp, perked up. "Drew's Brews. That's fucking brilliant, Lou!"

"Great. And that also means that Drew and I are going to finally have a date

night.”

Drew stayed perky. “That’s brilliant, too!”

“Fucking brilliant.” Joe said. “Keenan’s in good hands.”

“So,” Drew asked his little brother, “what are your plans?”

“I’m going to chill. Get on the phone, call in some favors.”

I thought, *What could possibly go wrong? Fucking brilliant.*



I soon found out the mettle of the man, Uncle Joe.

I mean, I know all the types, and I zeroed in on him the moment he was left alone with me. First of all, he was the worst jailor ever. He slept like an unconscious zombie (if that isn’t redundant), and I could’ve snuck past him at any moment. But I was trying to be good, for my parents’ sake. Additionally, he was one of those guys who was all pats-on-the-back, with only a desire to jockey for position. He was on his best behavior (and by that I mean that he agreed to everything to their faces) but the moment Drew left for his first interview (in a blue thrift store suit freshly pressed), Joe was on the phone and off on a very David Mamet-style tear.

I was in my usual position on the floor with the newspaper in front of me, TV tuned into a renewable resources documentary. I even had NPR streaming from the kiddy tablet. I couldn’t get enough. What’s great about all of this is that any normal adult would’ve been amazed at my jones for information, but like my own parents, Uncle Joe was blind to the rare intellectual proclivities of a supposed prodigy child. He was on the phone to his bookie in Boston as soon as Drew was gone.

“Yo, Bass. It’s Joey,” he started. He walked around the house bare-chested wearing acid-washed jeans drinking beer out of a pitcher while smoking a Marlboro. Barefoot. “Yeah, I fuckin’ know, man. I just came out to the West Coast to see if I could wrangle up some money to pay you back. Gotta few things going on out here that might pay off real fuckin’ big.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Well, I could believe it, but it was disappointing and a little harrowing. How do I communicate this information to my parents?

“Bass, Bass, Bass—eight grand. Chump change.” There was some shouting

on the other end; Uncle Joe held the phone away from his ear. “I know, I know, Bass!” There was a pause. “What do I got goin’ on? Well, a couple things. Well... well, I know a guy out here who’s got a shop and flips misplaced cars. Yeah, *misplaced*. So I’m gonna help him find some misplaced cars, get it? And I know a guy at a track here who can get me all the medical histories of all the horses and jockeys.” He paused as he finished his first pitcher of beer. He glanced over at me and winked, exiting into the garage to get a refill.

I don’t think he realized how strong Drew’s ale was. This wasn’t the cheap piss he was probably used to drinking in Boston. He was going to be lit up like a Southie Christmas tree before noon.

He re-emerged with a full pitcher, still on the phone. “Look, I’m going to try to get down to the track, um...” He looked at me and actually cheersed me, slopping pitcher in his fist. “I’m going to try to get down there tomorrow and suss out the situation. You *know* I can fucking play the ponies. Can I not play the fucking ponies?” He was peppered with a fresh shower of vitriol from the other side of the phone. “Look, one bad horse and you think I’m full of shit. I am *not* full of shit, Bass. I had a two year winning streak—what? No, I’m sorry, but I feel it is against my better judgment to impart information about my current whereabouts.” He flinched under a barrage of more shouting. “Yeah, that’s right. I’m being smart, Bass. Look, I’ll have your eight grand in a couple weeks, alright.” He took a sip of beer. “Alright. Ten grand. I’m going to hang up now. Bye... okay...bye!”

He ended the call and looked at me looking at him. “Some guys have short memories, Keenan.” He circled the room in a state of slightly inebriated worry, talking himself out of being afraid. “I ran numbers for that motherfucker for five years and this is the thanks I get.” He took a giant gulp of ale. “A few bad bets that weren’t even my fault. It’s tips, tits, or shits in this game, Keenan. And Bass is a shit.” He paused and looked at me again. “Stop staring at me, kid, you’re giving me the willies.” I looked away. “Right. Well, we’re going to the track, first chance we get. I just gotta hustle up me a ride. Just gotta make a few calls, is all.” He looked through the address book on his phone, then pressed a number. “Hey,

Bollita, it's your buddy Joey from Boston. Whassup, my friend?"

## 38.

### Keith and Franks

As mentioned, one of Franks' early side-jobs was that he was a part-time taxi driver. This was highly convenient for everyone involved: me, him, our crew, our clients. I was about a year into my final career when Franks began to express a growing streak of individualism.

By now I was well settled into the Potrero Hill house. It was probably the only fully legal mortgage I'd ever brokered (short term, fixed). It is now in the hands of my sister.

Dolly was my So-Called Girlfriend. She didn't really like the term, and I didn't really like the feeling that she was always doing something behind the scenes. She had become something like my gangster moll, and like all gangster molls, she politicked within her position of power. On this particular evening, when Franks interrupted us, Dolly and I had been on a marathon fuck, taking breaks only to drink more whiskey and snort more coke. Then Franks came over, all fired up.

Seven Hills Brokerage was no more. Having such a public address for the dissemination of illegal product wasn't advisable. It was getting difficult to fully vet the foot traffic and run the cover business at the same time. A mix of legitimate brokerage customers and profligate pleasure seekers would show up at the office at the same time, at an office rife with vice, loud music, pot smoke, an ever-hissing nitrous tank, liquor, and internet porn. Not that some of the legit customers wouldn't turn to the dark side once on the premises, but it was getting too risky so I closed the doors of my firm and took the drug business incognito.

I had my personal hours and professional hours. My professional hours were 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. No exceptions. I wasn't the sort of dealer you could call up at 3 a.m and beg for an audience. If you did that, you were out. As far as Franks and the gang went, they had leeway, but you had better have an excuse. And they always did. This was something I got from Hobson—he stayed free from police entanglements with this protocol, for his entire career, so I

figured it was a good practice.

On this particular evening, Franks showed up at midnight, obviously hopped-up and ready to lay out what he thought was another grand business opportunity. Outraged that I'd been disturbed, I wrapped a tattered couch throw around my waist and answered the door, still glistening from the sweat of screwing my so-called girlfriend. I wrenched the door open with surly impatience and glowered at him. He wore a black leather blazer and had aviator glasses tucked back on his head over that greasy mop of dirty blond hair. His forehead was beaded with sweat but it was 60 degrees and breezy.

"Goddamn it, Franks. What?" I growled as I swung open the door, half-blocking the view into the foyer. Dolly was just around the corner on the couch (the same couch where I died), freshly fucked and smoking a cigarette. I looked him up and down and rolled my eyes. "Oh, Jesus."

"Hey, man," he said. "Can I speak with you a second 'bout somethin', Keith." He tried to look past me; I blocked him with my body.

I glowered some more. "It's fucking midnight and you already re-upped." I narrowed my eyes at him. "Don't tell me you already sold out."

Franks paused for a second. His brogue was a bit choked by all the gear he was on. "Actually, I'm nearly through with it, yeah. I have these frat guys who hit me up every week. It gave me an idea. Can I come in?"

I looked over my shoulder at Dolly lying wantonly on the couch, legs still glistening. Her silky brown-black hair fell about her breasts. My cat, Joplin, who had perversely always enjoyed watching me have sex, huddled next to the gas fireplace, eyes half-lidded. "Hey, Doll, cover up. Franks is here."

She scowled and hissed, "What? What the fuck? It's like after twelve." I sighed and shrugged at her. "Goddamn it." She snorted the line on the mirror, swept up all the accoutrements and disappeared into the other room.

I looked back at Franks. "Alright, jackass. Five minutes." I walked away and into the living room. The couch leather was still dewy with sex-sweat. I picked up the cigarette left in the ashtray and quickly tossed her panties behind the couch. The door closed behind Franks.

"Where's Dolly?"

He detected the aftermath of something in the room. "Dolly? What makes you think it was Dolly?" The smell of sport sex permeated. A breakbeat still issued from the stereo; I turned the volume down with my phone. Franks sat down



casually next to me and shook out a cigarette. He also plopped a wad of bills on the coffee table. I looked at it. Not bad.

“Check this out, man. I usually don’t make that much until about three in the morning.” He paused for effect, billowing Camel smoke. “The dorm gauntlet is really kicking.”

Joplin crept up on Franks and put a scratchy but friendly paw on his pant leg. *Traitor*. Franks, who was acquainted with The Jops (as I’d liked to call her) pulled on her ears and smiled. “Ah, Joplin, ya fuckin’ minx ya.”

“Franks!” I barked, bringing him back to the conversation. “What the fuck is the *dorm gauntlet*?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk about. I think we have an opportunity.”

What he didn’t know is that I was about to tear him a new asshole, but I thought I’d try to be prudent and listen to him on the off-hand chance that a marginally intelligent idea might issue from his mealy lips. I said magnanimously, “Continue.”

“See, I been working this college gauntlet: Hastings Law School, USE, and SF State. They fucking love our product and have been spreading the news. Every week it’s been growing.” He stood up importantly, crossed toward the fireplace, and turned to look at me, to see if I was excited. I feigned interest. He was in full salesman mode. “For the last month, the buys have been growing. I dealt about an ounce three weeks ago and by tonight, this weekend, I sold over two ounces in just the last two days. But see, these’re all momma’s boys ’n’ girls getting checks from their folks so their money runs out for a wee time... *until they get their next check*.” He was getting worked up even though he was mostly acting, and he stopped dramatically, crushed his cigarette methodically and lit another. He threw his jacket on the floor and again waited for me to react. This was his idea of oration.

“Continue.”

“So, see, they’re going to be out of money next week, as I see it, and they will want more—hell, they said so.” He sat down next to me. “The taxi business is going great, man. Sweet cover, like. You can order up a taxi directly, not like Uber. They call me, I come by. I figure if we up the ante and spot ’em credit sometimes, we’ll really dig them in. And I drive it to ’em like a fucking service, man.”

“And...?”

“I just said! A fucking taxi service with credit, and we can expand a little and

deliver to more than just the frat boys and sorority girls. They already do it with pot. We can expand and make some real fuckin' dough, man. Maybe get in with another driver. I know a DJ who works for Yellow who'd be in for a little extra business."

"So let me get this straight: you're dealing en masse to a bunch of college students and you're delivering on call for all your clients. So you're using Paypal or Square or something?"

Franks was wide-eyed. "That's a *great* fucking idea, man! Maybe we should make an app! I mean, like a secure one, you know." He put his dirty sneakers on my glass coffee table.

I put on a smile, stood up and grabbed the wad of drug money from the table, weighing it in my hand, nodding in appreciation. Then I threw it at him, hard, in the face. He recoiled with a yelp. Joplin darted off out of the room.

I said, "Here...you might need this to post bail."

"What?"

"What the *fuck* are you thinking, you dumb fuck? Don't you know that college students are the biggest possible risk you can take in this business?"

"What?" He was blind-sided.

My words were articulated with controlled anger. "College students are stupid as fuck. And reckless. And undependable. They're always scared, and they'll drop dime on you without a second thought."

"Keith—"

I stepped forward and kicked his feet from my coffee table.

"Don't fucking 'Keith' me, Franks. And keep your fucking feet off my fucking table. You're riding around in your cab giving out your phone number to anyone with a cell phone, a c-note and a straw. Do you *want* to get busted? Do you want *me* to get busted?!"

"No, I—"

"The first customers that get popped in this business are college students, and they'll rat on anyone so their parents won't find out—so their *school* won't find out. And now your cell number has probably been texted to a hundred phones with the slogan, 'Call City Cab for Killer Coke.' And what happens at dispatch when your fare miles don't match up to how much money you're handing in? You think you're the first Mick asshole driving a cab to think that dealing curbside is a *grand* idea?!" By now my voice had risen 40 decibels. Dolly suddenly appeared

in a green silk kimono.

She said, "What did you do now, Frankie?"

Franks looked up and turned red. "Shut it, Dolce."

*Dolce?!!!!*

I rushed him and kicked his legs. "No, *you* shut it, Franks," I hissed. "Now, take your fucking cash roll and finish the rest of your shift and get a new fucking cell number tomorrow. *Tomorrow*, you dumb dirty-cuff fucking tinker. Cool it on your fucking co-eds and stick to our regular clients, you know, the rich ones who aren't beholden to anybody and give us most of our money."

Dolly wheezed out a sigh. "Shit." She turned on her heels and left the room.

There was a long silence. Franks stood up somberly. "Sorry, Keith, I thought it *was* a *grand* idea."

"Leave the thinking to me, Franks, and just run product. I don't want to be talking to any lawyers or bail bondsmen anytime soon. *Shit*." I couldn't look at him anymore.

He made toward the door, then stopped. "Keith...hate to ask, but I still need to re-up."

I sat down and lit a cigarette. "Goddamnit."

## 39.

### Keenan at Seven Years

I can feel the slip stronger these days. Not so much a cognition thing, but a response thing. A couple days ago, I found myself running through the grassy field next to the lake with a kite in my hand laughing my head off, Ralphy and Tina trailing, trying to catch me. And I realized as the kite shot into the sky that I hadn't been a fifty-something man stuck in a seven-year-old's body for nearly ten or fifteen minutes. It's hard to explain, like I'd forgotten everything, in brain and body; the weariness of my brain-age, my story, all gone, replaced by a lighthearted grace that I can only describe as being seven and happy and carefree.

Yes, I'm describing bliss. And it's scary because it's also a description of death, the death of the ego, the I, the me: K.S. Haddock. It's all so confusing this time through because I feel comforted knowing I'll be a happy little boy, happy like the

little boy I was fifty years ago. I remember. I was happy and sweet and unjaded.

That said, who knows if once I slip away from this strange but semi-pleasant prison of Keenan Solomon Harris that I won't be relocated into another struggling body? Maybe I'll experience the blackness of what I thought was death; or maybe I'll be a baby in Athens or a mule in Arbil or a dung beetle in Nairobi. I have to say it's a little less dark knowing that anything can happen rather than my former certainty that oblivion awaited me, a hard stop.

Anyhow, I'm going to continue with this narrative as long as I can, hopefully getting to the end, because there's such a lovely climax. I could cheat, but what kind of storyteller would I be if I skipped to the end?

Now, where was I?

## 40.

### **Keenan at Two Years**

A couple days after I overheard Uncle Joe make that fateful phone call to his East Coast mob boss, Drew got a morning off. My dad had actually secured a third interview with a phone sales job and there was some reason to relax, perhaps even to celebrate. Lou was satisfied with the progress enough to allow Drew and his brother to have a day of fun, provided they still looked after me.

That said, the day before this, Joe had waited until Drew left before he was right back on the phone. About an hour later, Uncle Joe announced to me that we were going on a field trip, and we took the light rail to the intersection of Curtner and Meridian in neighboring San Jose. We sat on the bus bench across the street from a parking lot.

"I've always loved Acuras, Keeny," he said, exhaling his cigarette. "The Japanese have always had an eye for reliability. And style. Of course they got it from the Europeans. I mean, they want to be German so bad. Probably ever since doubleya-doubleya two. They were in league, you know." He laughed and smacked me jovially on my little knee.

I was a little sick of his patter by now. It really reminded me of Franks and the crew and it made me a little nauseous.

"That said, always buy American, little buddy. Anything else is unpatriotic. We have style, too, afterall." He was trying to convince me. "We've always had

more style than all those fuckers. Take the Corvette, for instance. The Cadillac. The Camaro. The fucking T-Bird.”

*Hallelujah.*

“They don’t make ’em like that anymore.” He paused to chain smoke another cigarette. “Well, they tried, but they pretty much sucked. Now it’s all electronics, hybrid shit. Total pussy bullshit.”

He stood up.

“Look. You listening to me?”

This guy was crazy talking like this to a kid of only two years. But, then again, I could understand him, so I nodded. I noticed he had a lime green metal tool in his hand that he swung around on a cord.

“So, check it out: buy American, but jack Japanese. I’m going to go get my new car across the street and come pick you up. When I open the door, hop in, alright?”

I was past incredulity so I nodded again.

“Good. Stay here.”

Two years and a month old and I’m sitting by myself on a bus bench on the corner of Curtner and Meridian. I watched him go to the corner and actually wait for the crosswalk. Ah, such paradoxes—a car thief waiting for the crosswalk. The day was cool and partly cloudy, and hardly anybody was on the street at eleven on a weekday morning at one of the seedier intersections of San Jose. I looked both ways down the sidewalk and there was no one, no bus coming. But cars were passing by, and it wouldn’t be long before someone stopped to either save this two-year-old—or kidnap me.

I watched Uncle Joe stroll up between a black Acura and a blue Ford Focus. He pretended to drop his keys. Then he knelt and slipped a slim jim into the window. Seriously, in the day and age of car alarms and electric locks, he was trying a goddamned slim jim. He got nothing for his efforts before the car alarm went off. But he was experienced, apparently, and didn’t panic. He stood, waved at a mom in the parking lot and pretended to work the lock. Then he looked both ways and quickly broke the driver-side window with the lime green metal tool he’d shown me. I shit you not. Joe quickly reached in, and after fiddling under the dash for a second, the alarm ceased. In another second, I watched him pull out

of the space.

“Hello, little man.”

I jumped. An elderly black man in a yellow suit leaned over me. I looked up at him as innocently as I could...which is pretty easy when you're two.

“Where are your parents, little fella?” the guy asked.

I looked up at the man blankly. The stolen Acura screeched up next to us, door popping open.

“Keenan! Let's go!” shouted Uncle Joe.

I smiled at the kindly black man, hopped down from the bench, and climbed inside the car. Instead of waiting for me to struggle with the heavy car door, Joe just took off, the force of which slammed the door shut.

After a moment, he made sure to uselessly buckle me up in the oversize bucket seat.

“The Japanese, Keeny. Great cars, stupid easy to...to drive away in. If you get my drift. Oh, boy, is Bass going to love this.” He kept looking over his shoulder and in the rearview mirror as he shot down Meridian Avenue.

I couldn't help myself when I noted, “Will he love the broken window?”

Uncle Joe gave me a double-take, trying to decide if it was worse that his nephew could articulate the situation or that he was critical of his work.

“What?” He shook his head. “Hey, a hundred dollar window is nothing against a fifty thousand dollar Acura. Jesus, you sound like...what the fuck? You're two years old. I'm your uncle. Why am I even listening to you? Fuck.” He pressed the accelerator, simultaneously searching for a suitable radio station. “You're going to your room when we get home. No lunch.” Then he nodded to himself as though he'd made a properly avuncular decision.

It's hard even now to understand my jubilation. My sudden happiness. My love of humans. *Oh, Uncle Joe—what a train wreck!*



Uncle Joe didn't tell his brother Drew about the stolen car parked down the street from the house. Fortunately for him, Drew had by now got the call about his third job interview and all was hopeful in the Harris household. Lou envisioned her future as a bookkeeper coming to an end, Joe saw his payoff for the Acura, and Drew, I'm pretty sure, just saw himself getting clear of Lou's discontent. I loved

the kid—*my dad*—but what a chump!

So it passed, that night over dinner, that Lou magnanimously decided that Drew and Joe could have their own free day of fraternal bliss.

Yet another random folly for the Harris household.

Just before dawn the next morning, I awakened to the sound of Uncle Joe coming home from somewhere. This was odd since I'd never seen him get up before nine. In my tiny twin bed, my face half-covered by a cartoon blanket, I watched him take some cash out of an envelope and stick it in his wallet, tucking the rest inside his battered suitcase. He glanced at me to make sure I was asleep, then stripped to his boxers and climbed back onto the inflatable mattress we'd provided for him. I noticed as we drove away later that morning that the stolen black Acura was gone. One thing had actually gone right for Uncle Joe, even if that one thing was grand theft auto.

After Louisiana left for work that morning, the men of the family were left to conspire their day.

Her parting words were, "Don't get into too much trouble."

"No!"

"Not us!"

"Right. I'm not bailing you guys out of jail." She looked at me and shook her head. "Keep an eye on them, Keenan, alright?" I shrugged. "Great." And Lou was gone.

At the table, Uncle Joe closely scrutinized a magazine as Drew read the paper. Finally, Drew looked up.

"So...what do you want to do with the day? Maybe drive to Santa Cruz? Hit the Big Dipper on the Boardwalk?" Pause. "Maybe we should go up to the City?" Drew looked at me. "Whaddaya think, Monkey?"

I shrugged. I already knew what we were doing; I was just waiting for Uncle Joe to talk his brother into it, which I knew he would. Uncle Joe looked up at Drew, at me, then back at his brother. "We got a great early presser running in the fifth. Young, but he's got heart. Whaddaya think?"

Drew drew a blank. "What?"

Uncle Joe shook his head and sipped his coffee. "Sheesh." He held up his racing form. "The *track*, brother-of-mine! The *track*. I've got this all handicapped... and better than that, I got the skinny from a buddy of mine that this horse is on

the rise. We can make some real dough.”

“Oh, Joey. You never change. You know I don’t have any money to bet. I mean, you don’t even have money to bet.”

“I got money.” He took out his wallet and flashed his roll. Drew perked up.

“Where the heck did you get that?” Uncle Joe shrugged. “How much is there?”

“I’ve been holding back. I have money.”

Drew finished his coffee and narrowed his eyes at his brother. “What are you up to, Joey?”

“I’m not up to nothin’, Dee. I just got some money to bet and a way to bet it. Trust me on this: I know the ponies better than *anybody*. Not only that, I have a vet tech buddy out here who knows all the horses on the track. So let’s go up to Golden Gate Fields and have some fun. Shit, you don’t even have to bet. Just watch your little brother win, have a few brewskis and relax. It’ll be a cultural experience.”

Drew vacillated. I watched him. He was sold, he just didn’t know it yet. I finished my applesauce and climbed down from my high seat. Drew watched me. I had noticed recently that adults familiar with me would check in. My parents sometimes asked my opinion on daily decisions. Things like, “Keeney, do you think these jeans are too retro?” “Keen, do I smell like beer?” “What’s my password?” While they didn’t consciously register me as of equal intelligence (being less than three feet tall with maybe a dozen teeth in my mouth), they had an unconscious instinct—recognition—that I understood everything that was



going on.

Drew asked, "What do you think, Keenan?"

I got up from the table.

"Where are you going?"

"Coat," I said. "We are going to the track."

"See," Uncle Joey said. "Even Keenan is keen for the ponies."

## 41.

### Keith the Alpha Dog

Imagine my surprise when I made it to age forty-nine.

I decided to throw myself what would turn out to be the last real party I'd ever throw. With the chaos I had created for myself, I had retreated from the veritable gang of friends I'd formerly been a part of. I needed to reconnect.

One way to reconnect with friends is to become their drug dealer. Of course, you're never sure if they really like you for you, but if you're high enough, it feels like the same thing. However, the dealer-user relationship is fraught with emotional and logistical obstacles. Once a friend becomes a dealer—more importantly, a *coke* dealer—the power dynamic of the friendship is changed; things are now conditional, and there are suddenly rules where formerly there had been few. Feelings get hurt, suspicion foment. *Do I get the 'friend deal'? Can I owe you? I know it's two in the morning, but can I drop by?* But it doesn't stop there. When out and about and socializing—say going to one of your friends' parties—you're always expected to be holding, or worse, always expected to share...*for free*. Instead of genuine appreciation, friends greet you with a greedy expectation, and it's not because they want your company, the pleasure of your wit—they want your coke. These impositions plant kernels of distrust in everyone involved. Nothing is ever the same.

But there I was, throwing my last birthday party, and all the old friends were there.

In the past, my buddy Brian and I, birthdays a week apart, threw a massive yearly event. It was a no-holds-barred sensory-overload extravaganza with a lineup of live music, A-level DJs, a cornucopia of drugs, open bar, and late-night wickedness that porn movies are made of. It went til dawn and attendees would

smartly plan the following work-week around their recovery.

But that was before middle age took its toll. Gone now was the live entertainment. Gone was the naive and unconscious thrill of being young and stupid—the youngest of us was over forty, the oldest over fifty. What many an aging hedonist painfully discovers is that being a party animal stops being cute after forty; it starts looking like you're a used up wastoid in a state of suspended adolescence. Now in their forties, most of my old friends got their shit together, mellowed out, got married (if they hadn't already), bought a house, had kids, secured a career. Either that, or they were left in the dust as an aging loser who didn't jump on the Act Your Age bandwagon. I had been very close to achieving reasonable adult status right before the Month of Darkness threw me an existential curveball. It jaded me beyond all repair. Now I would never be an adult.

So that was the preamble to this uncomfortable birthday party: old world meets new.

I had a new crew: Dolly, Bart, Franks, and Franks' new guy, Poindexter. Poindexter was a former gangbanger from Visitacion Valley; he was compact, multiracial, and had a serious, opaque disposition. He was almost completely humorless, which made him an odd fit both as Franks' partner and a member of our wisecracking crew. But, by this time, there was a nascent power struggle brewing between Franks and I, and the addition of a dangerous-looking stony-faced sideman allowed Franks some breathing room. Franks had great (if not misguided) ambitions. It would literally be the death of me.

Right from the beginning of the party I could feel the tension between the colliding worlds: fun-loving, intelligent artist-types versus suspicious, on-the-take criminals. In my experience, criminals were often wary of people who were happy, smart, and didn't need them. My old-world friends at the party had a sense of ownership—I was *their* Friend with a capital F, and all this drug dealing was just a (convenient) blip on the radar. Of course my new-world friends felt they were entitled, too, because...well, because they spent all their time with me, *worked* for me, and they believed this was *their* turf.

The politics of all this was what I was thinking about as I sat on the backyard hill on my parents' memorial bench, atop Hobson's buried treasure. It was unseasonably warm and clear for late January, and the City lights of downtown twinkled in the distance. It was getting toward the end of the party, and down below on the patio and in the house, the remaining twenty or so of my old

and new world friends mixed with various degrees of success. Thinking about friendship politics made me tired, despite the shitload of coke I'd already snorted. It was about one in the morning.

I smoked a cigarette puzzling over this confounding situation when Brian, accompanied by another long-time friend, Rob, reached the top of the hill and greeted me. They were both nearly out of breath with a smoke in one hand and a drink in the other.

"Haddock!" Rob said, in a somewhat accusing tone. Everyone used that tone.

"Haddock!"

"Gentlemen."

They stood before me catching their breaths, sipping strong drinks from plastic cups. Brian was handsome, thin, with a full head of dark hair going gray. Rob was compact, bald with a ruddy face. They took a look around.

"Your parents' bench, huh?" Rob asked.

Brian gazed at me, then sat down next to me. "You alright?"

"Pretty good," I replied. "Strange party."

"Not like the old days," Rob admitted. "I haven't seen one topless girl."

"The night is young," Brian said. He let a long moment go by before he said, "Yeah. It's different."

I grimaced. "My new crew doesn't really work with our old crew, do they?"

"Not really," he answered quickly. "That's kind of why I came up here to find you. Your man, Fred—"

"Franks."

Rob cut in: "I'm going to let you guys talk. My buzz is low."

"Okay. Take care of that, pronto."

"See you soon." He paused and gave us a level stare. "Let me know if you need my assistance." Rob was solid.

"Gotcha," I said. He and Brian must've discussed things before venturing up.

Brian waited until Rob was halfway down the hill before he continued. "Franks...alright, Franks—he's sitting on all the gear that you said was communal and got kinda hostile when I pulled...*rank*."

"You pulled rank?"

Brian looked at me, slightly annoyed. "Yeah, *rank*—like I've-known-Keith-for-thirty-years-and-I'm-his-best-friend-so-stop-being-a-fucking-dick-and-break-

out-the-gear kind of rank.”

“Oh.” I gritted my teeth and sighed. “Yeah, he doesn’t respond well to shit like that. Sorry.” I stood up and put out my cigarette. “I bet he’s drunk and talking shit, right?”

“Bingo. If he wasn’t Irish, I’d’ve smacked him down by now.”

“Please don’t. I mean, I’m glad you didn’t do anything rash. In his own way, Franks thinks he’s minding the store. He just doesn’t know you, and he has delusions of grandeur. I’ll take care of it. This weird vibe is killing me.”

“Me, too, to tell you the truth, Keith.”

Brian followed me down the steps cut into the hillside. As we approached the house, I could hear Dolly’s voice in the hot tub in the side yard. We swung that direction to find Dolly and Liana, Brian’s wife, both naked with glasses of wine, sharing a joint. And we wonder why the rest of the world makes fun of San Franciscans. I had to laugh.

“Oh, shit. I guess you got into the molly,” I said.

“Lordy,” Brian added. “Here are the tits Rob was looking for.”

Dolly put an arm around Liana. “I love your wife, Brian. Can I keep her?”

“You can put her on layaway.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Why don’t you guys come in and join us?” Liana flirted.

“Get in the tub with two hot naked broads?” Brian said. “I don’t know.”

I cut in, “We’ll be back . . . we have a Franks situation.”

Dolly shook her head. “Uh-oh.”

“Yeah.”

As we mounted the deck on the way inside, I had an idea. Asked Brian, “So what exactly is Franks doing?”

“He’s sitting on the couch in the living room with a giant Ziploc in his lap. His weird gangbanger buddy is next to him and they’re talking up Rose and a couple other chicks.”

“Dude with the coke gets the stroke.”

“That’s what they say.”

“Well, go in and tell him that I told him to open up all the blow to anybody who wants it. I’m going to come up through the garage.”

“Alright.” Brian grinned. “This is going to be interesting.”

“Or pathetic . . . perhaps both simultaneously. Give a nod to Rob on the way

in.”

I took the side door into the garage. My old red Thunderbird collected dust under a cloth. How I miss that car. I stood there in the darkness listening to the dull thud of the music upstairs, the muffled titter of laughter. Stealing a beer from the downstairs fridge, I quietly took the stairs, emerging in the laundry room. I silently drifted into the living room behind the leather couch. Brian spoke with the Callahans; they followed him over to Franks and Poindexter, who chattered nonstop to each other and the girls that flanked them. That Irish bastard, dressed in the bright red jersey of his home soccer club, St. Patrick’s Athletic FC, was holding court in *my* house. Joplin was curled in his lap, and she lazily tilted her head a bit and slitted her eye at me, sensing me in the room. Motherfucking Franks was even petting my cat.

Brian caught my eye as he knelt in front of the big mirror set on the coffee table. “Hey, Franks, how about cutting a few for me and the Callahans here?”

Franks gazed at Garvey, looked up at the Callahans. “Yeah, man...in a minute, I’m in the middle of a conversation.”

“Look, why don’t you just put a bunch out so I won’t have to keep asking you?”

“Easy, man. Why don’t you just hold your horses, pardner...you’re getting a little...*pushy*.”

“Keith wants you to just put it all out for everyone.”

That was a hard stop to the conversation. It was then that I noticed Rob leaning against the counter at the back of the kitchen, nodding at me.

Franks flashed angry at Brian. “Fucksake, man, Did you go *tell on me* or something? Nice one.” Franks spilled some coke on the giant, coke-dusted mirror and unceremoniously snorted the entire thing. “Oh, look, it got all snorted! Why don’t you just have Keith come out from wherever he’s sulking and ask me hisself. I can’t be doling this shit out to just anyone.”

Brian nodded, smiled and looked past Franks in a deliberate way that made Franks look over his shoulder. He saw me, looked back at Brian, then bowed his head.

“Oh, look: it’s *Keith*,” Brian said, deadpan.

Franks was caught, and the look on his face proved it. His new accomplice, Poindexter, tawny and muscular under a slight layer of fat, also looked over at me. There was a smudgy *Sureño 13* tattoo on Poindexter’s neck. The room went

quiet—except for the Nirvana droning in the background. What broke the silence was a slow humorous groan—the ‘your busted’ groan. And Rose capped it with an “Oh, shit.”

And thus, I circled around the couch, breathing out an “Oh, Franks.” Joplin looked up at me calmly from Franks’ lap. I gestured to all. “By the way—*hi, everyone!* Thanks for coming to the party and sticking around. I hope my *employee*, Franks here, is treating you right.” I sipped my beer and plopped down next to Franks, relieving him of the bag of coke, assessing it.

I said, “For the record, my drug-addled, Irish friend,” dumping the rest of the bag, probably an ounce, onto the mirror. I handed the mirror to Brian and gestured for him to share the wealth. “For the record, Mr. Garvey here isn’t just anyone. He’s my best friend of over thirty years. Likewise Rob there.” Rose and another friend of mine, Erica, smirked at me. “In fact, I’ve known Erica here for over fifteen years. Rose for longer. In fact, I’ve known everybody in this room for over a decade.” Dramatic pause. “Except for you, *Poindexter*, and Bart.”

Everyone looked at Franks and Pains, now so small, in context. But they still didn’t get the hint, so I said, “If you don’t mind...” and made a gesture with my hand. “Move the fuck along.”

The tense hush continued until Franks broke it. He stood, trying on a look of contrition. Joplin flopped on the floor and ran away. “Hey, man, I was just minding the store. No need to get all...”

He couldn’t find the right word that wouldn’t would piss me off.

“Agro?” I offered. “Territorial?”

Poindexter started to say something, but I cut him off sharply. “Hey! I don’t even *know* you.” He looked nervously at Franks, then at the other partiers, who were speechless but pleased that I’d taken the party back from the interlopers.

Then Franks made a very political gesture that stunned me just then, but it told me everything. He stood up. “Keith, man...sorry. I didn’t mean any offense.” He gestured to the rest of the room. “I’m sorry if I was being a dick. Too much gin, I guess. I thought I was...was *helping* or something. Cheers. Any friend of Keith’s is a friend of mine. Apologies. Sorry, Brian.” He stepped away from the couch. Poindexter looked up at him and Franks nodded him to follow, as though to say, *C’mon, ya lunkhead. We’ve lost this battle, let’s regroup.*

Turning away from them, I breathed out a sigh. “So...then...sorry for that. Oh my god, look at all this Charlie!! Let’s finish my birthday in style. Bart, can

you turn up the music?”

The party resumed with refreshed vigor. Garvey and Franks sort of made up, but Poindexter remained guarded, hanging near the front door. It’s funny: back then I had this confidence that I could take on anybody in the room physically, mentally or verbally. But now, me being the only one dead out of all of them, I see how laughable that confidence was. A sham. Total bullshit.

Things were different after that with the Old School. It was clear that I had some sort of a crew going and that that crew was composed of criminals. That I too was a criminal. And they were right. They didn’t need that kind of Mickey Mouse bullshit anymore. Testing the law wasn’t exciting or edgy or fun or illuminating anymore to them—it was pathetic, tired, and desperate. They were, for the most part, done with me.

## 42.

### Keenan and the Ponies

Golden Gate Fields was an hour north of Campbell, in Berkeley. Uncle Joe drank cheap canned beer the entire way, Drew complaining about both open containers and the beer quality.

“You know what they put in that stuff?”

“The least of my worries, bro.”

“Where did you get money, Joey? You were supposedly broke.”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head.”

I was strapped into the kiddie seat. The seat was one of the last of my infant indignities that I couldn’t slough off just yet. I didn’t want my pops to get a ticket.

“Joey, you came here with like two hundred bucks.”

“Um...I *lied*.”

*No shit*, I thought to myself. *About everything*.

“You lied.”

“Yes, older and supposedly wiser brother. Look, I’ve got five grand.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“You said you were broke.”

“That *is* broke.”

“You only owe your man like ten or something. Isn’t five grand at least a

down payment?”

“What do you think?”

Pause. “Alright. Well, when were you going to tell me?”

“I’m telling you now! Shit, you sound like a fucking chick. Just trust in my brilliance.”

“It’s gotten you really far.”

“Oh, ye of little faith. Look, I gotta *in*. I got the inside on all medical reports of all the horses. The front runner is gonna eat it.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means we place all our money on the next best three horses for win, place, or show in the fifth race and win a bunch of money.”

Drew was silent again. “I don’t have more than fifty dollars that I can afford to blow. And I can’t even afford that. Lou will have my head.”

Uncle Joe finished a beer and crunched it in his stubby, calloused hand, opening another. “Shit. Well, A: you can’t let your woman run your life. Or B: you’re passing up a huge opportunity, or, whatever, C: fuck you, I know what I’m doing.”

“You haven’t known what you were doing since you taught me how to beat off.”

They looked at each other and started laughing. And laughing. They looked back at me, and I shrugged, and Drew cranked hair metal on the car stereo. As problematic as they were, they were perfect to me just then.

Thirty minutes later we were in the stands at Golden Gate field. The first race had yet to start and Uncle Joe couldn’t shut up, as he was in his element.

“I’d bet on these races but I don’t got the scoop and don’t know these horses. But if I was handicapping I’d say ‘Silliman’ will win or place. He’s a wicked closer.”

I was letting all this flow over me because unbeknownst to them, I had a plan. I’d done a little online investigating of my own, web surfing on my tablet while they were getting drunk the night before. There was this thing called ‘stooping’, which was apparently frowned upon and illegal. It involved combing the ground for winning tickets that people had accidentally tossed away. I was the perfect size for this sort of activity, as I didn’t have to stoop—I looked completely innocent rummaging around on the ground, just a two-year-old playing amongst the seats. My only worry was that if I wandered off and they lost me, they’d call security. So I just sat on the folding seat as they stood and watched the first race. I tugged on



Drew's leg, and he looked down at me.

"Hey, Keen...need a soda?"

He put me on his knee.

"Can I get the pretty tickets?" I'd probably never spoken such a complete sentence to him in my short life.

"What? What tickets?" He looked around.

"People throw their tickets down."

The horses galloped across the finish line. There was a roar.

Joe shouted: "What did I motherfucking say?! I should've bet!" Then he turned and saw me in my dad's arms. "Sorry."

Drew shushed his brother with an upheld hand. "What, Keenan? The tickets?"

People pitched their yellow and white tickets all around us. "I want the tickets. It's fun."

He looked around. "I guess. Stay close." He put me on the ground. "What are you up to?"

"I like the tickets."

Drew said, "Stay close."

I gave him my most innocent smile. "Okay, Papa!" I began right away, looking on the ground to see the different gambles, the horses and numbers. They sort of looked like state lottery tickets, digital fonts and smeared ink. I found nothing in our vicinity, of course. I looked back at Drew watching me. I knelt, searching. Joe shouted at his brother over the din of the crowd. Drew became distracted and I roamed further. The horses that came in were, in order of win, place and show: Maxfactor, The Reverend, and Quiddler. Tickets were everywhere like a ticker tape snow. I'd look and ... nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Then I found a winning \$10 ticket for The Reverend to show. I'm not sure what that translated to, but I was just going to hand the tickets to Drew or Joe later anyway. They could deal with it.

Somebody rubbed me on my wispy blond head. "Hey, little man! Lose your parents?"

I looked up and a skinny Asian man stood above me, cheeks red with liquor.

"No." I pointed at my Dad, not ten yards away.

"Okay. Don't get lost!"

I moved on to the end of the row. On the stairs, a flood of people crushed

each other going to or coming from the bar. The bar! Drunk people dumping their winning tickets at the bar! I looked back at Drew and realized if I tried to make a run for it to collect tickets now, it would be mayhem with security... which is what I expected later anyway. But it was too soon. I put the ticket I found in my little jacket pocket and jockeyed between legs until I was back with Drew and Uncle Joe. Patrons patted my head as I squirmed past them. I tugged on Drew's pant leg.

"Ah! How were the...tickets?"

"Fine. Up."

He put me on the seat and turned to watch the second race.

I did the same thing after that race and found nothing. After the third race, I asked Drew if I could go to the bathroom. He was clearly drunk by this time and having a great time. "Sure, little buddy. Plus we need more drinks and it's time for me to bet something. Joe! Keen needs to pee."

"Awesome. We need to refuel anyway." Uncle Joe crushed his plastic beer cup and threw it to the ground.

On the way to the head, I noticed there were other people searching the ground for tickets. Also, a lot of security. At the bathroom line I squirmed and had Drew put me down again. "Why are you twitchy, Keen?" I didn't answer him and brushed through the yellow and white ticket flotsam on the ground near the garbage cans. I found another winning \$5 ticket there. I put it in my pocket.

I heard Uncle Joe ask, "What's up with Keenan?"

"He likes the tickets."

And he actually said as he looked down at me: "Ah, he's a little *stooper*. I wouldn't be surprised, little fucking genius."

"Language."

"He don't know."

"I'm pretty sure he does."

"If he knows, he doesn't care."

*Got that right.*

Next we were in the crowded bar and I went through the routine again. This time, Drew followed me around as I pretended to 'play' with the tickets. As I suspected, the bar proved to be more fruitful. I found two more tickets, one for \$25 for the third race, which had run while we were in line. I didn't know what the odds were, but I shoved it in my pocket with the others. I caught a security

guard looking at Drew and I.

“Up!” I said. And my dad picked me up. Joe joined us with an armload of drinks.

“Alright. Let’s hit the windows and do this.”

Back at the seats, me on Drew’s lap, tickets in hand, we watched the fourth race. The brothers had placed small bets on this one under the guidance of Uncle Joe’s supposed handicapping prowess. Dad had bet \$20 on a horse called Velvet Rose to place; Uncle Joe had spread \$20 bets on a variety of horses, only one of them the front runner.

“That’s my safety. Pussy bet, but you gotta cover the angles.”

“Was it Velvet Rose?” Drew asked.

“That little trollop? It’s supposed to show at two-to-one. Fuck no.”

“I liked the name.” Drew smiled, smiled at me. Joe turned sharply and showed his teeth.

“You ‘liked the name’? What the fuck is that? I told you to bet on Diamond Dave. Yours is a fucking pussy wannabe stalker. Not a chance.” Uncle Joe lit a smoke.

“You can’t smoke here,” said a woman standing in the seats in the row below.

Joe tilted his head at her. “Live with it.” He winked at Drew. “Really, Velvet Rose?”

Then Drew, my biological father, said something more astute than I’d ever heard issue from his lips. He said, “*Really*, Joey? If you really knew what you were doing, you wouldn’t be sleeping in the kid’s room at my house running from the Mob.”

Uncle Joe’s mouth opened but nothing came out. The rough hewn cogs behind his glazed eyes tried to register this bizarro-world remark just as the 4<sup>th</sup> race bell rang.

“Whatever,” he sighed bitterly as the horses took off and the crowd roared. The woman who complained about the cigarette waved Uncle Joe’s smoke away.

Horses ran.

“C’mon Jackson Pollock,” he muttered. When he saw no reaction from us (I have to say ‘us’ now because he always looked at both of us, as though he knew I knew what was going on) he continued, “By the way, I put two c-notes on him for win and place.”

When Velvet Rose came in for a win and Jackson Pollock second, Uncle

Joe threw his tickets in the air, then grabbed at them when he remembered he'd actually placed a winning bet.

"Fuck!" he cursed.

Drew jumped up and down with glee. "What are you talking about?! I just won a hundred bucks!"

"Great. So did I. Except I bet *two hundred*."

"At least you won."

"Fuck you."

I squirmed for Drew to put me down.

As I bottom-fed for tickets, I heard Drew say, "Better than nothing."

This time I climbed under the seat and squeezed up into the next row. I was free. A pasty teenaged boy looked at me quizzically, then looked at the back at Drew's head. He nodded me on, like we had a secret. So I stooped tickets again up and down the row, under and around the adults who grumbled and guffawed, losers and winners. I stuffed a winning \$20 ticket in my coat at the opposite end of the row before I heard Drew shouting my name. I turned back.

"There you are!" He picked me up and glanced around, hugging me. "What are you up to, little man?"

I kissed his cheek and said "Daddy!" really loud just to throw him off.

"Nice try, you sly little fox," he said holding me away from his body and giving me a look.

"I'm gonna hit the bar," Uncle Joe announced, shoving his beer-reeking face between us. "Does little Keeney wanna come?" Drew handed me off to Joe, narrowing his eyes. "Watch our seats," Joe told him.

I was highly amused, and happy to be with crazy Joe. I remember thinking that it was the best time I'd had since I was born into this new life. Uncle Joe flew with me in his arms down to the bar.

"Alright, buddy, we're gonna go down and place another bet to cover our spread. I gotta good feeling about this. I should've done it before."

In the bar, he found a table and set me in a chair.

"Alright, little man. You stay here while I get the drinks. *Don't go anywhere!*"

I nodded. As soon as Uncle Joe was out of sight, I scrambled down and made for the corner garbage can where the tickets had eddied like dead leaves. After a few minutes, I laid my hand on a winner from the third race that looked like it

might actually be some money.

“Hey! Keenan! What the hell are you doing?!” Uncle Joe yelled. I snapped my head up and saw him with four beers on a tray at our table. I stuffed the ticket in my pocket and trotted off toward him. He scowled.

“You’re gonna give me a heart attack, buddy,” he said, looking around. “You want child protective services to take you away?”

I put on my cutest face and shrugged. “Sorry, Uncle Joe.”

He softened. “It’s alright. What were you doing, collecting tickets again? Why are you so fascinated with the freakin’ tickets?”

I shrugged.

“Come here.”

He scooped me up, balanced the tray of beer in his other hand and exited the bar. He was freakishly strong.

When we returned, Drew complained, “The race is about to start. You took forever!” He took the tray of beer. “I felt like I was almost starting to sober up.”

“Forgetaboutit.” Uncle Joe set me down on the seat. “My crazy little nephew here almost gave me a heart attack running off looking for the pretty fuckin’ tickets.”

The announcer’s voice echoed through the stands.

Drew looked at me disapprovingly. “Keen—stop running off! Your mother would kill us if we lost you.”

I couldn’t help myself. “She’d kill you both if she knew you brought me to the track.”

This stopped them dead, and they looked at me, at each other.

“Jesus, Drew. Your kid.” Uncle Joe ruffled my hair. “You really freak me out, little man.”

“Repeat after me, Keenan...Dad and your Uncle Joe took you to Santa Cruz to ride on the rides.”

“Okay, Dad.”

“Good boy.”

“Atta boy.”

The bell sounded and the horses launched from the gate.

A horse called Donner’s Pass shot into the lead. “That’s our boy, Dee,” Joe

said.

“I thought Rambo’s Gift was the front runner on this race.”

“Have you been fucking listening to me at all this entire fucking time, Drew?”

“What?”

“He’s got elevated muscle enzymes. He’s been stiff for a week according to my guy. That’s why I put a thousand on Weekend Lush to win and a thousand on The Finker to win, place or show.”

“What? Are you crazy?!” He quickly looked at his racing form. Rambo’s Gift was steadily making his way to the front. “The Finker isn’t even supposed to show according to this form.”

“You can’t trust the track’s handicappers, Drew. Finker won two times in the last month. He’s an up-and-comer. Besides, if he even shows, I’ll quadruple my money.”

“Did you put anything on Rambo?”

“Two hundred, so I still have enough to fly home.”

“You’re out of your mind.”

When the horses came in exactly how the racing form predicted, Uncle Joe vomited into the aisle, sending everybody in the vicinity scrambling. Drew looked on, shaking his head. He looked at his ticket, picked me up.

“Seven-five odds, Keenan...I think I just made \$20.”

A few minutes later in the cashier line, Uncle Joe, looking ashen, stared straight ahead next to his brother.

Drew mustered, “Well, look on the bright side—”

“Fuck you!”

Drew said nothing. The crowd was a mixture of anger, agitation, glee and drunkenness. A man in a tattered blazer comforted a sobbing mascara-streaked woman. Security lined the queues. When Drew was about three people from the cashier, I pulled out my wad of tickets, seven in all.

“Here, Daddy. I think these are winners.”

“Cute, Keen.” He took them from me and smiled, then he studied them more closely. He took out his racing form.

“Oh, my God,” Drew said.

“You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me,” Uncle Joe added. “You better fucking split that with me, goddamnit. You wouldn’t even be here if I hadn’t talked you into it.”

“Get your own sneaky genius son, Joey.” He put all his tickets on the counter

in front of the cashier and said, "I think these are winners. I'm new at this."

The old Asian cashier fed them into a machine one at a time with a blank face. She pursed her lips and nodded in appreciation. "Not bad, sir. One thousand and thirty nine dollars. How would you like that?"

"Fuck!" Joe cursed.

"Yay!" I cheered. Drew just smiled and kissed my cheek. "Fifties, please."

You'd think that Joe Harris' luck couldn't get any worse.



We got home early, further abetting the trajectory of this fraternal fiasco. When boys like this get home at four in the afternoon after a drunk day, a winning and losing day, they will continue to drink. When the female head of the household gets home at five, one should count their blessings (and curses) and sober up. It's a hard thing to have the life experience of an existentially road-weary fifty-year-old and watch millennial men ignorant of the rules of the game show their cards to the queen bee.

Lou got home to two drunk guys and a kid splayed out in front of the TV. They watched the Red Sox lose in a stupor as I web-surfed news on the tablet. Drew, congenitally unable to lie, gushed out the day's events, and not even the thousand bucks in winnings did anything to assuage Louisiana's maternal rancor.

Uncle Joe was sent packing the next day, bookie problems be damned. He accepted it all with an 'ah, women!' sort of indifference and went to stay with a friend in nearby San Francisco. He went back to Boston, eventually, but Drew still gave him \$400.

## 43.

### Keith Finds Cracks

Where were we? Oh, I was a drug dealer. My notes say I should talk a bit about Los Angeles.

At that time, there were only two reasons I would go to L.A: dick sucking