

## Another Quentin Houlihan

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You get a million guys come home like that, all at once, and a million women waiting, and whattaya think will happen? It's hot times in the maternity wards, and up go your suburbs, and up go your freeways, and whoopdeedoo. There for the first ten, twelve years after the war, about all I ever did was swing a twenty-eight ounce framing hammer. This was out in Bremerton, Longview, out on the coast where I happened to be for no better reason than that's where I'd mustered out of the Navy. Your postwar economy was an awful sweet deal for a man who'd managed to avoid that matrimonial bliss, and I was driving a two-tone T-Bird, the Town and Country model. Built my own hi-fi out of parts I got through a mail order catalog.

We'd throw up one of those GI-financed crackerboxes, frame it at least, about every two or three weeks, and I was known as a guy who could sink a sixteen-penny nail, run a transit or whathaveyou, finish cement if it came to that, and so on it goes, and I'm building. Only time in my life I ever made more money than I could spend. Course, I had my diversions, too, couple of bad habits. Drank quite a bit, like everyone did back in those days. Tried golf for a while, if you can believe that. Like Ike. Mostly, though, it was work. Oh, every once in a while I'd get a wild hair and run my

Ford out into some desert or wheatfield somewhere, put my foot down and open up all four barrels, and, whoosh, cheap gasoline just pouring through that carburetor—man, how I loved that particular V-8, what a mill—and you watch the needle swing right up to one thirty-five, watch it hang there. You got the top down. I knew a few girls, too, and almost every one of 'em liked to cruise. That Philco was the best radio ever made, and here's a blond with a big, boozy grin, sitting right next to you, maybe a few bugs in her teeth. You get the picture. I had forearms on me like Popeye, had a little bit of a savings account and a brain no bigger than a walnut, and, all in all, I was doing okay.

Then one day Mrs. Schaeffer grabs me as I'm coming in from the green grocer's or whatever, and she directs my attention to that oak stand she had out in the hall where she'd leave the mail for her upstairs tenants—she knows I never get anything from the post office, not even bills, so she knows I'm not likely to look for it, and so she shows me something's come from Miss Moira Houlihan in Elisis, Montana. It's addressed in pencil, in letters so tiny they look like hieroglyphics; must've taken Moira about an hour to do this, and the end result is that you've got to squint real hard just to read it, and that's her signature, really, some strange shit like that. She knew where to get me cause I used to send her a check every Christmas and a note every time I moved, but it'd been at least a couple years since she'd

bothered to write back. I didn't mind. I rarely called her anymore—you'd call her and be tired for a week after. See, my sister was demented. I knew she couldn't help it, but she was goofy in ways that had started to kind of irritate me. Can't help it, and she can't help it, and she can't help it, and so forth—what good is that?

So, with Mrs. Schaeffer standing right there—she'd be long gone by now—I open this deal. And it's not a letter Moira's sent, in fact I don't get so much as a note to explain it; no, what I've got is a birth certificate, an original birth certificate, stamped and sealed; and what does it certify but the birth of another Quentin Houlihan on the seventeenth day of April, nineteen fifty-five? Mother: Moira Houlihan. Father: Unknown. They stamp the baby's foot print on those things. That's what got me first. That little footprint. Looked like a sea shell to me, the way it was turned in on itself, the way it was, you know, perfect.

So I went down to the pay phone on the corner and tried to call Moira and congratulate her. Maybe congratulations are in order, maybe not, but I better call. So I call over and over for about a week and never do get an answer, so then I think to call Potter Blixt, who I haven't seen or heard from since the day in forty-two when we shipped out in different directions, and I ask him if he knows what's going on with my sister. He tells me he thinks Moira's still in the old place, but he hasn't heard anything about a baby. So maybe his information

is not too current. Says he only sees her a couple times a year. They live in a town of five hundred people, and I remember Potter as a very sociable sort, too, so I'm wondering. I'm wondering, among other things 'What is the deal with this baby?' Pretty soon, her phone's not ringing at all.

I let that eat at me, and it's hard to even believe it now, for a good solid year before I finally decided to take a drive.

Back when we were growing up, back when the sawmill was still running, there were four saloons doing good business here in town. We had Doty's Grocery and Feed, and those four saloons, and the auto parts store. My folks owned the Aces. Somewhere along the line they'd got to be their own best customers, and a lot of times they'd sleep down at the bar. They'd come home to shower, Mom to pick up that week's issue of *Look*. As far as anybody raising Moira, I suppose that was me. Afraid I did a poor job of it, too, the way things turned out. We had a pretty good time, though—I think—when it was just the two of us in the house. We'd get ourselves up and off to school, fix our own breakfast, fix our own supper. I'd even read to her sometimes when she was still tiny. We didn't mind being so much on our own. Mind? We liked it. Moira was Suzy Sunshine in those days. Really. Sweetest person I ever knew. I think it was right around the time she got her first period, though, that she started getting

ringy—her whole problem might’ve been one of those female things, who knows?—and not too long after that I’m off in the service, and then I’m deployed out on the South China Sea when I get the news that Mom and Dad have passed, one right after the other, like they loved each other.

I think Moira must’ve been awful lonesome for an awful long time. And I don’t think she was made for it—course, who is? She was too screwed up to get out of town or to find somebody to treat her good, and so there she was, waitressing at the Stop N’ Eat for years. Worked there, I guess, until they finally closed the doors, and that place was a greasy spoon at best. Back when I first started calling her, I’d ask about boyfriends; she still had her wits about her enough then that you could talk to her and even tease her a little bit, but she never claimed to have any love life, and after a while I quit asking cause I didn’t want to embarrass her. Later I get the lowdown and find out she’d had all kinds of boyfriends. About half the males in Elisis have been her boyfriend for twenty minutes or so. She should’ve at least charged for it, but I guess all she wanted was the attention. By the time I got home she’d even run through that phase, and she was too used up to be a fallen woman anymore, or a harlot, or whatever you’d say.

Home. That’s me, calling it ‘home’ now. Jesus H. Christ. This is the last place I ever thought to be found,

and I remember rolling back into town—hadn’t laid eyes on it since Ensign Taylor took me to Butte for my physical—and you’re away from Elisis any amount of time, just any amount of time at all, and all you’ll see by way of change is what’s collapsed or caved-in since you left. Oh, I guess they’d built the new grade school by the time I came back, but that thing was ugly to begin with. There’s no improving Elisis, that’s what I thought—you might fix up cities that’ve been bombed to brick and ash overseas, but there is no fixing what weather and neglect do to this town; and we sure never got the relief they sent to Germany and Japan. You know, we’ve got forest for hundreds of miles on all sides of us here, but right here, right here in this valley it’s just high desert. Sage brush and cheat grass in clay. Lot of nothing, really. Even so, this is country you can develop a taste for. But not for Elisis. Elisis—god-all-Friday, this town is a firetrap. It’s an eyesore and has been forever.

So, in spite of my better judgment, I came back. Certainly hadn’t come to stay. And I drove up Aeneas Street to the Houlihan household, scene of my odd little youth, and I saw it was still wearing the same coat of paint Dad stole from the WPA, which I remember as gray, and the siding’s twisting, and cupping, and pulling away from the wall, and on the porch I find a box trap with a cat and a porcupine in it. They’re dead. They’re reeking. Immediately overhead of you, just under the

eave at the gable end, you got a wasp nest as big as a basketball. And it's busy, and I am ready to turn tail and run and not look back. But I don't. I knock at the door, I call in. I crack it open and call in again. Nothing.

Then the wasps drove me inside.

So I'm in. I step through the mud room and on into the house, and there's Moira, she's been sitting there in her recliner all along. I get around in front of her, and she's awake, seems happy enough to see me, and I wonder if she's gone deaf and that's why she wouldn't answer the door or the phone, why she let it get cut off that way. A couple words, though, and I can see she understands me. She just doesn't feel like saying anything yet. But she did want to hug me. She got up out of that chair, and when she did I saw where she'd left a little trench in the Naugahyde, it's an impression of her spine. Moira was bony, skin around her eyes looked like bad fruit. She wasn't thirty years old, and already every tooth in her head's been pulled, which I happen to notice cause she can't for the life of her keep the plates stuck to her gums even just to breathe quiet or try a smile. She does want to hug me, though. Wants to kiss me on my cheek. She always was sentimental.

But I was there to see about the kid, and he was nowhere in sight, and what I had seen so far was not real promising; so we don't get too much hugging done before I ask her about her boy. Is he here? 'Nap,' she says. It's the first word out of her mouth, but it's enough

to get her started, and then she's off on the subject of poison. There's poison in every innocent thing: potatoes, and rhubarb, and fish, and anything, critter, fruit, or grain, that was harvested after noon. She tells me there's poison in the municipal water supply. Few minutes of this and my brain is Jello, and we never did get around to 'hi-how-are-you-how've you been?—how's old so-and-so?' Just Moira and her theories on bad air. Wonder anybody's survived at all as far as she's concerned, and she goes on about it seems like forever, and the whole time I'm getting more and more wound up about this kid; I didn't think at that time it could be healthy for a child to be sleeping so much during the day. I didn't know about naps. Didn't know about children generally. Knew they were loud and I liked to avoid 'em. But I can also see my sister is way around the bend, and I can see that she must make for a very uphill mother.

So it's a relief, a big relief to me, when the little bugger finally swaggers out of the bedroom. All two feet of him. He falls down every other step—just, plop, on his butt—and it hardly even slows him up, and I didn't know that he'd be able to walk, or what he'd be able to do at that age, and I certainly didn't think he could be much of a person yet, but he makes straight for me—kid's already learned to mostly ignore his mother—and, he makes straight for me and he puts his fists on my knees. He's got fists like dough. And he looks me up and down as much as to say, 'Who the hell

are you, mister?’

This was an above-average baby. He sure had my number.

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I was once a hero, don't you know? Oh, yeah, they gave me the Bronze Star. For valor, no less—I'm twenty years old, about as useful as a blister, and I happened to wander on deck one morning to throw some garbage overboard, see we weren't stowing garbage at that time because the enemy already knew where we were, they knew exactly where we were and they didn't like it, and along comes a flight of Jap fighters and strafes Manley off the aft twenty millimeter guns; they smeared the poor guy against a bulkhead, and since we're in convoy we've got air support, and our boys get right after those fighters and run 'em off, but they're no sooner out of sight than we've got a pair of kamikaze coming at us from out of the sun. So there I am on Manley's gun, and I'm firing. They come at you from behind, you're sitting on a hundred and forty thousand barrels of aircraft fuel, you're north of Okinawa, steaming for the Imperial Palace as far as they know, and if they manage to get even close to the *Guadalupe* before they blow up, then up she goes, too, and it won't be down with the ship, it'll be up with the ship, and not a glob of grease left of her, or you, just flame and black smoke. Those

oilers ride low in the water when they're heavy. What a fat target we were.

So I'm firing, and my first burst takes one of 'em out, but the other one is all over the sky, and I just can't find him, and what I've been for the last cruise and a half is a messman down in the scullery, a greasemonkey in the hold, and this is my first firefight—I remember my old training a little, remember I'm to stay off the trigger til he's in my sights, I'm supposed to fire and let up, fire and let up, keep the barrels cool, keep the mechanism from jamming, but I can no more stay off that trigger than . . . and I'm firing; and he's all over the sky cause they don't give 'em any flight training to speak of, don't even teach those boys how to land, and I'm firing, and his propellor has that same oily shine to it as a dragonfly's wing, and the kid's got no ammunition, nothing but himself and that plywood airplane and the fuel in it, but he's coming, and I'm firing, and he's coming, and then he's spinning ass-over-teakettle across the ocean, and he sinks just short of us.

So the next day I'm at sick bay with what I think is the worst case of strep throat I've ever had, but the corpsman happens to know I've been in combat, and so he tells me my throat's just raw from the screaming and the smoke. Screaming? I wasn't screaming. Sure, he tells me, everybody does it. Corpsman asked me if I'd shit myself. Well, I did not shit myself. I did what I had to do when I had to do it, and I got promoted back

up to petty officer again, and I got that medal, which I still have somewhere, I think, and all of it together was pitiful little to show for being twenty-three months seasick. I was not much of a sailor, and I'm still not much of a patriot. But, there you have it. You do what you do. I got to Elisis, and Moira really gave me no choice in the matter. That boy left me no choice at all.

Nowadays, I imagine, there'd be a pill for what was ailing Moira, but in the fifties you really didn't want to make a big thing of it if you thought somebody was a little off, cause they were taking out pieces of peoples' brains back then. Had a gizmo they'd run up through your nose, and—snip-snip—nobody's home. That, and they were shocking em damn near to death. You had some hard, mean psychiatrists around in those days. And I'd have to say, can't help but freely admit it—Moira was of no earthly use to anybody, but she was also harmless, so I couldn't see her as a ward of the state. You hear how Warm Springs is really pretty nice. A nice setting for it. Bullshit. There's wire over the windows, and I don't care how pretty the mountains are. Oh, but Moira had turned spooky, especially when you weren't used to her. Spooky, and that's putting it mildly, and I just knew if she was left on her own for very much longer then she'd fairly likely end up in the booby hatch. Or somewhere. And in the meantime she'd be that baby's whole world, that's what I couldn't hack—the thought of my sister talking to that boy all the time

about thalidomide and arsenic and nuclear winter and whathaveyou—Jesus wept—even I could see where he'd need some better stimulation than that. No kid should be so unlucky, I knew that much.

I went back to Washington where I could get a decent price for my car, and I sold it. Sold my truck, too, and bought a better one, a panel truck this time, and I rounded up all my tools and headed back. I had the idea I'd get things sorted out. The first thing I did, my first and worst mistake, was to buy that Zenith television, big old console model; we got the one channel off some crummy airwave, picture and the sound were both like something they poured through sand, all static, and that thing was on from the farm report in the morning til they played the national anthem at night. Then she'd be staring at that test-pattern Indian. So you'd switch it off, empty her tray, clear her mess away, and throw a blanket over her. She didn't ask for much; you could never call her demanding, but you damn near had to dust her. After that teevee came in, Moira was there and breathing, and that was about it.

So what I did was get us a paper route; that was me, a grown man with a paper route. Had my panel truck and the contract for delivering *Missoulians* from Dog Lake to Hog Heaven, rural delivery, and there wasn't much money in it, but it wasn't much work, either, except in bad weather, and we generally made our little bit every day of the year, that's how many

issues they printed. In those days people relied pretty heavy on their newspapers, and that's why we got no vacations, no vacations at all, but I never figured I needed any—the job had one big advantage—I could take Quent along. We rode right around a half million miles together in that panel truck, quite a bit of that at thirty miles an hour, and, but for the money, it was the best job I ever had. You're up in the timber, you're out in open country, you're all over the place every day, and in winter you got your tire chains going ching-ching-ching, and in summer you throw open the windows and smell the rain in the sagebrush. About as much as I ever wanted, and I believe Quent kind of thrived on it, too. We had the radio, of course, and he taught himself to sing, and sometimes he sounded like what I called him, 'Itty Bitty Conway Twitty.' Or that kid could sing like a couple English choir boys, he could make the sound of a French horn. That's the kind of traveling companion he made. Taught himself to yodel, too, which, if that'd been anybody else in there, that would've drove me crazy.

Thing I liked about him, one of the things, was that Quent was a real quick study. When we first started the route he was still in diapers, and so we had that godawful diaper bucket, and sometimes toward the end of the day when the diaper bucket's half full and the heater's going full blast and the windows are up, that'd get a little ripe in there, give you a headache.

Wasn't too long, though, before Quent could hold it better than I could, and those diapers were long gone, course Quent wasn't sucking coffee from that thermos like I was. Between coffee and gravel road, a man can piss up to twenty times a day. But the point is, I liked it. We got used to each other, and when you get to where you're easy in somebody else's company, always easy, that is a rare thing, and there you are, you're living the best couple years of your life, and you don't even know it yet, but you do know you're having a pretty good time. I remember him poking newspapers into those yellow *Missoulian* tubes when he was still so little his whole arm'd completely disappear up in there.

Then, before you know it, it's kindergarten, for Christ's sake.

Man, how I hated the day I had to turn him over to Mrs. Whatsername. What was her name? Anyway, the old girl led him away very gentle, she must've done that for the little ones many hundred times, and there's all the other children, lot of 'em scamps, running around in their socks, and Quent's looking back at me, and he's fine—I'm not, though, I am not at all fine; I know he'll show 'em what-for, I know he'll shine, but up to now he's been shining just for me, and I am every bit as jealous as a mother might be, and I've got no desire at all to share him. None. I like it best when he's mine-all-mine, and even though I know it's kind of ugly of me, I can't help myself. Mine-all-mine. That couldn't

go on but so long. Just as well, I guess. But I'll tell you this much, after he started in school and got among other people, Quent never sang another note that I ever heard.

So then it was the Christmas pageants and the plays and the concerts and the May Days and the two hundred other deals they liked to put on every year, keep everybody busy and distracted, and I'd talk to his teachers every so often, and I'd bake cookies and make fudge, and of course this routine really put the kibosh on that paper route, so I dropped that and put together the cabinet shop. I did cabinets and upholstery. Built the shop just behind the house, that way I could be covering a couch and have bread in the oven, too. Betty Crocker had nothing on me in those days. Also, I wanted to be handy when Quent came home from school. The business really took off then, maybe even more than I wanted, but it kept us afloat, and then I did good enough that I could knock down the folks' house—what a mausoleum that was, bat shit six inches deep in the attic—and then I built us a new windbreak on the old foundation. At least I put 'em in a decent house. Anyway, with Quent in school, I just went back to work. It's what I do. It's what I am, and some I know are proud to be this way. But I . . . you're kidding yourself if you think you're ever getting anything done.

Quent had quite the little motor in him, too. He'd be at one thing or another pretty hard all day. He

ate like a ditchdigger and burnt it all up. Kid could get himself around six of my big caramel rolls all at once, no sweat, and he's lean as a whippet. He never had much use for toys, never had many friends, not when he was a little guy. I bought him a bike, but he liked better to run, and he'd be up Skunk or I'd hear he'd been seen way-the-hell-and-gone up in Mill Pocket. That Quent. Had a range on him like an elk or something.

About the time he hit the third or fourth grade he started to look like what he'd be as a man, and that's when the daddy mystery got cleared up: he is the spitting image of Delbert Oslavsky, got exactly that same Quarterhorse build on him, same face, same hair—from the physical side, anyway, he's picked himself a good sire. I'm sure I wasn't the only one to see it, but no one ever said a word, at least not to me. Not to Quent, as far as I know. And I wonder if it was too obvious to need saying or if. . . . I just know that I myself never said a word.

You'd pass the guy in the street, run into him at a game or a rodeo or parade or somewhere, run into him all the time, and you're with his son, and the man doesn't even have the good grace to be embarrassed, or try and look away. Nope, Delbert knows he's got a catch colt, and he doesn't care one way or the other. I might've been afraid of him. Maybe I was afraid of getting carried away and getting my ass kicked. Oslavski wasn't much of a man until he was in a fight.

The thing to do was shoot him, really, but that would've been beside the point.

But, anyway, Quent was a restless boy. At times it sort of hurt to see it. He wasn't like one of these mutts who can't concentrate; you could slow him up with food, and now and then he'd stop to read, and once he got fascinated with rocks he'd stop anytime or anywhere to look at one, he probably knew the name of every rock in the ground. But when you think of him, the way he was as a boy, or always, I guess, in your mind's eye he's on the move.

Except I also remember how his mom would wave him over to her chair. She'd glom onto him, grab his hand and hold it, and then he'd stand there beside her, kinda have to lean in sideways the way she'd get him, and she's hanging off him, and she's got her mouth half open and she's glued to *Green Acres* or some happy horseshit. Quent'd stand there for as long as she wanted him to, never complained or even fidgeted. He'd just stand there, and, man, that broke my heart every time. Sometimes he'd brush her hair.

She had the prettiest, healthiest head of hair. Moira did at least keep herself clean, and for that I was very grateful. Imagine if I'd signed on for that chore, scrubbing her. No, but she kept herself clean, and even kept herself kind of nice for as much as she'd wasted away, and I have to give her high marks for grooming, I suppose. I always wanted to forgive her, but I couldn't.

There was nothing to forgive, so where does that leave you? Most of the time I think I must've treated her like a piece of expensive furniture, cause, you know, I just couldn't muster any more feeling for her than that, and I didn't want to give her an opening to get off onto fluoride or one of her other topics. She hated anything she considered chemical. But Quent's growing up; Quent's off running or at school or in his room, and pretty soon I'm Moira's company most of the time, and she's mine—I gotta say, there were some long, long Sunday afternoons with my sister. You wanna be kind or pay attention or something, but why? After a while, what's the point? She was just as happy to be ignored, and she took very little interest in me, I can tell you.

So I had my stack of *National Geographic*s, and I read every page of those many times. Guys with hoops in their noses, you know, fishing with blowguns—I had that. Had my magazines, my soldering gun, that stereo I built and built on and never did get it to play right—thin soup, pretty fucking thin. And poor Quent built himself a trestle bridge out of popsicle sticks, that thing eventually took up two whole walls of his room. One Christmas I found a locomotive, took me some finding, too, it was a very narrow gauge, and we put that up on top of the structure, damn near to the ceiling. He had his chin-up bar and his dumb bells in there. You'd look in on him, and there he is reading that *War and Peace*; he read that book all one winter, which, I tried it

and was snowed in thirty pages, completely flummoxed by those people's names. Names and titles, not for me. Anyway, unless you liked your television, and you liked it going full blast the way Moira did, you kinda kept to your room. Wasn't long before that arrangement made us strangers. I never especially intended it when I built 'em, but somehow I'd done a good job of soundproofing the walls in that house.

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I could go the track meets, and I could go basketball, but after a while I couldn't stand to watch him play football anymore. You'd see Quent rock up onto his toes, and you know he's about to fly. Out on that field he'd make those other boys look tired, make 'em look like they came to watch. He was so much faster, and shiftier. You just knew those little sonsabitches probably wanted to hurt him. The ball is in his hands every play, and I'd want to go down to the sideline and yell at his coach, 'Give him a break, would you? Don't you know he's just a kid?' Course, that wouldn't exactly do, so I stayed away instead. I was scared they'd hurt him or wear him out, but they never did, and I'm told I missed some real exhibitions; they tell me he never did take a solid lick. I was all right with reading about it in the newspaper the next day.

So now he's popular, but since he's every bit as

shy as he's ever been, all these new friends are no boon to him. If it isn't a girl on the phone it's a recruiter, and Quent'll be nice to em, he's pleasant enough, but he's never on for too long. What'd I call him, elusive? He was alone whenever he could be, and I saw less and less of him all the time, and here it is getting closer to graduation, and I've started to wonder, way too late in the game, I'm wondering a little bit, 'What have I got myself into?' I am not looking forward to the me and Moira show. I'm getting the preview—in many ways Quent was gone before he ever left.

You know, we stood two years there of visits from assistant coaches, and head coaches, and alumni, and a whole herd of people who probably never before or since set foot in a class C town. That was hell for all of us. There you'd be, trying to be polite with some poor guy at the kitchen table who's been sent to get himself an athlete, and the guy's eyes keep flipping over to that specimen in the living room, and some of 'em even try and sweet talk her. That must've been real strange duty; plenty lined up to do it, though. So it was a little odd, after all that, that Quent gets a scholarship at Berkeley, California, a full-ride scholarship, and just for a score he got on some test. For years they've been telling me at school that he tests out unlimited—unlimited potential, they say, if he ever breaks out of his shell. So he tells me he's decided to go down there and study Anthropology, which I've heard of in my *Geographics*, but I'm not real

sure what it is, and I'm still not sure after he explains it to me. They study human beings? The nature of human beings? Can that be right? Anyway, anthropologist was not everybody's idea of local-boy-makes-good. They all wanted to see him play ball somewhere. People around here were a little ticked off at him because of that—like it was any of their business what he did or didn't do.

Then, and I don't think it was even two weeks after we got news of that scholarship, Moira died. Just died for no particular reason. I came out one morning and there she was cold in her recliner, and she must've had about the gentlest death there ever was, but she was still dead. We took her out to Lonepine and planted her next to Mom and Dad; we took the recliner and the Zenith, which was still going strong after all those years, we took those out to the dump, and that was that. Came home to a big hole in the living room. That living room was still Moira's territory for as long as I lived there, but, let's face it, I wasn't exactly overwhelmed with grief. Don't know how Quent felt about it; he never said, and that's not the kind of thing you ask somebody, but I knew the next time I had to let him go, he'd be long gone. I wouldn't have had it any other way.

That last spring he spent with me he was running track for the pure hell of it, and he was far and away the fastest schoolboy in the state. He was running the hundred yard dash in under ten seconds, seemed like he took about ten yards a stride. You watch those

sprinters, when you watch 'em from up close, you see how their faces quake every time they hit the ground, they hit so hard, and most of 'em look quite grim, like it really costs 'em something to go so fast. But Quent would smile. Might be a little harder to spot it when he was really hauling, but he always smiled when he ran. Smile and pull away, and it was the greatest thing I ever saw. Course I also had the walking pneumonia that spring, and those track meets did not do good things for it. I was sick that spring, sick all that summer while Quent was off fighting fire, sick when he went down to school. I stayed sick for about a year there, miserable and puny, and just barely able to work. Geeze, I felt like a plowhorse:

And I'd got into some trouble with the IRS.

Many years earlier I'd made a mistake in my book keeping, an honest mistake, and I'd underpaid my taxes, but not by much. Never mind that it was an honest mistake, and never mind that it was a small one and they took their own sweet time finding it—with penalties and interest, it turned out to be a very substantial sum, and then I made it much worse, much, much worse, when I got my back up and hired a lawyer, a guy who told me from the start there was nothing he could do about it, but I made him waste his time and my money trying, and meanwhile that interest is compounding, or whatever it does to make it get so far outta hand, and before I was through, I

owed 'em everything. Bless their hearts, they agreed to settle for everything I had. I managed to hang onto the house until that next summer when Quent came home for a bit.

He looked like a gypsy. He's grown himself quite the hank of hair, and it's tied up in a silk rag, and he's relaxed in some new way. I think maybe he'd found out down there that being smart wasn't exactly a character flaw—and he's got some girl with him wouldn't dream of wearing a bra or, you know, disappointing him in any way. He tells me that now he's gonna travel. It's independent study, he says. He's with a traveling collective for independent study and community development—which is to say a bunch of footloose hippies, and one of 'em hasn't got his scholarship anymore.

He stayed—they stayed—about a week, and then they went south, and I have to admit I was so embarrassed about losing the house, and about not having any way to help him out down there at school, it wasn't all that bad for me when he became a college dropout. That's when I should've got out of Elisis, too, that was probably my best chance, but at the time I told myself I didn't have the oomphta or the cash to go anywhere, which was really pretty true, and I got set up in my little trailer out by the highway, one of those things like a guy might take up hunting, about as big as a two-seater outhouse, and it rocks every time a semi

goes by. Was I feeling sorry for myself? Yes. But I did have the same post office box, and I had phone service with the old phone number, and at least I was where Quent could get in touch if he needed.

Eighty-eight-oh-one. One Houlihan or another has had this same number here ever since the Elisis Telephone Company was formed. Big deal. All it shows is a lack of imagination. I think that's what kept me in town, I could never come up with a clear idea of anything better. But, little by little I put myself back together. For quite a while there I lived on macaroni and postcards that took months to get here. He's in Honduras, he's in the Yucatan. At first he'd just tell me where he was at, and how the food was, and once in a great while I'd get a picture, but it was never a picture of him. After he'd been down there a while he started to throw in little bits about imperialism, and this-that-or-the-otherism, and I am just praying I don't catch a whiff of Moira in this stuff. Police states, he says. He don't like 'em. Who does? So why would you go so far outta your way to go be in 'em?

At least I'm getting my postcards.

He'd call every Christmas, but that was like shouting at each other from either end of a tunnel. I didn't ask what he was doing, and he never offered to tell me. I hoped he was doing nothing. Nothing, I think, that's his best option down there. I'd get mail from him, but I never sent him any back, never tried to,

cause whenever I'd hear from him it was understood—wherever he was, he wouldn't be there long. After a while there was no politics in his letters, and he was back to telling me about the birds and the plantain and the way they made their local dishes, sometimes the fish in the sea, and these are some wonderful letters, but you can see where somebody's opened 'em already, they didn't even try to hide it, they'd just rip that envelope open and then, very half-assed, tape it closed again. So I'm wondering how he's getting by down there, and here I am rooting for him to be as shiftless as possible, hoping he's a drifter, and maybe that's all he's up to, but I don't think so, cause he's got a serious side, that damn-near saintly side to him, I've seen it a few times, and who knows what kind of Latin bullshit could happen to him on account of that? I read the news. I know how they are. Those bastards got a lotta jungle where they can hide their dirty work. So I had my heart in my mouth, a little bit, the whole time he was down there.

It was around in then that I got myself involved in a minor shack-up with Phyllis Comes Last. I was in the house on Pine by then, had a place to keep her. Phyllis was a Blackfeet gal, and she'd drank for many years on her looks; by the time I got to her she was drinking on her pretty laugh. She had a talent for convincing you not to take things so serious, and people liked to be around her. She'd walk out of the house with a nickel in her jeans, come back two weeks

later and she's been drunk the whole time, even if she hasn't ate, and she's been to parties in three states. I never got in her way, so she liked me. We were actually a pretty sociable couple, considering I was half of it, and we'd go over to somebody's house for dinner and wind up sleeping their floor. My liver didn't handle that too good. Phyllis, I liked. The freight that came with Phyllis, I just couldn't pay. She was in Elisis purely by accident, and once I gave up on her she had no reason to stay. Eventually she was up in Canada—she was a Blood or a Piegan, I don't remember, but a part of the tribe that was eligible for their health care system up there. Last call I got from her, she said she was all worn out inside. She didn't seem to be too shook up about it, though.

In the meantime, I just went out and busted ass, an old man working like a young one. At some point your back gets to be a whole different deal, and it takes you about a day just to get over a day of doing rough carpentry. But that's okay. I built the Sherwoods their pole barn, remodeled a couple places that should've been torched. After Phyllis, I had few expenses, and I'm back at it, and, as I say, little-by-little I got well. Man, I sure appreciated eating good again; had a standing deal with Garney Fronapel to keep my freezer filled with grass-fed steak. Around in then was when I first started doing my carvings, too, and when they got decent enough that I could stand to look at 'em, I'd go

to the craft fairs and sell 'em. I was doing a lot of bears' heads at first, and then I got on to my rowboats with the miniature oars; those were very popular. Sold those first few things for five, ten bucks apiece, and I thought I was making out like a bandit, to get paid anything for goofing off, sure, I'll take that. So, anyway, you'd have a lot of hippies at those events cause they've all got the same basic idea as I do, try and sell some kinda trinket, some harmless thing, and every so often I'd catch some kid outta the corner of my eye, some kid with a certain way of walking, kid with a mop like they wore back then, and that'd bring me up short. I don't know why. I had my eye out for him even when I knew he couldn't be there.

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Eventually he worked his way north again. He was a longshoreman in New Orleans until he turned somebody in for cockfighting on the docks; he sawed logs down around Medford, and for a good while he worked a fishing boat out of Sitka. And if he still never stayed put for very long in any one place, at least I usually had a good address for him, usually he'd even have a phone—and you don't want to intrude, but you write, you call, you kinda wait to hear about what he saw down there in the tropics that makes him sound so old sometimes, but he doesn't talk about that,

doesn't talk about much, really, if it has to do with him. I'd slip him a few bucks from time to time, and he always sent it back. Said he was probably making more than I was, which might've been true, but I'd been living so close to the bone for so long I had no need for any extra.

He used to come to see me in Elisis . . . well, I guess he came twice. Once he came with another one of those hippy girls, and the next time he's got a dog he picked up on the road. Crippled dog. He came to ask me how I'm doing, and, to tell you the truth, that gave me a little case of the yips. How'm I doing? How am I supposed to know? You want a bear head? You want a little boat, got some toothpick oars in it? Really, I'm just itching to ask him . . . what? I don't know. He is in some ways his mother's son, and you get the impression that for all his smarts and his big heart and everything, he could just up and drift away on you some day, and without ever leaving the room. I guess I wanna ask him, 'What's eating you?' Strikes me he might be inclined to check out like Moira did.

So that's why I started to think maybe it's up to me, maybe I better do something. I didn't have the slightest idea what it might be, but one day I threw a war bag in the truck and drove out to see him. He was in Seattle, or close to it. Had a maintenance job at a hospital. Had an apartment. And what I didn't know til I got there—he had a new girlfriend. Rebecca.

She's a doctor's daughter, and kinda full of herself, you know the type, and that whole apartment is just filled with clown shit—clown dolls, clown posters, got some clown shoes on the end table. Again I say, to each his own, but there's limits to that. Harlequins, she called em. Creepy. But she doesn't seem to be doing Quent any harm that I can see, she's even kind of a hand on the tiller for him. Doesn't matter if I like her or not. So we have dinner a couple times, and she calls us cowboys. We're both just mortified, but we don't say anything. I've stepped in heifer dust about twice in my whole life. She wants to know what he was like growing up. 'Busy,' I tell her. I'm not gonna tell her, 'Sweet.' Who knows how she'd take that? Who knows what she'd make of it?

She says they are very happy together, that they understand each other so well. She understands him? Well, bully for her. I'm thinking she might better understand how he tends to take off. Quent tells me he's saving money to go study computers, and that's practical, that's more of a plan than I've heard from him in quite a spell, and I should be pleased to hear it. He'll have all the work he wants, I suppose, and never dirty his hands. But I remember when he mentioned that computer thing I felt like I'd been kicked in the belly, and I remember when he said a couple months later he was off it, I felt good about that, too. But then he got a job fixing coffee machines. What in the hell? Seemed

like kind of a step down for him. And *then* he tells me he's marrying Rebecca, and I wonder, 'Does she know about this?', cause she doesn't seem to me like the kind of girl to settle for any kind of mechanic, much less a guy fixing coffee machines. It's *es-presso*, he keeps telling me. I'm not too impressed.

But here he is on the phone, and he says they're getting married. I could hear some kinda silly-ass chimes in the background—and he tells me he's asked her father for her hand. Her dad said okay. They're getting married. Well, whattaya do with that information? Got in the truck and drove on out to Seattle again. Rented a tuxedo, even had to rent the shoes, which, to my mind, that's about the same as wearing somebody else's underwear. Who knows who's been in them rented shoes? But I bought some black socks, and I went ahead and wore 'em. And at this wedding you got the groom's side of the aisle, which is me and the crew off a cod boat and some little dark gal who doesn't have a word of English, turns out she's a net mender, comes from Portugal—and on the other side you got Rebecca's people. A lot of 'em. These are people what we would've called swells in the old days, and the presents they brought . . . it was ridiculous. There was a lot of those envelopes tied up in silver twine, you knew what was in 'em.

They got married, and her dad, Dr. Merton Detwiler, gave 'em a cottage sitting on five acres of

Vashon Island, piece of ground that looked out over Puget Sound. I gave 'em a toaster oven and went on home.

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You get old, and you look back on your life, and you see where there's big chunks of it you can't hardly remember cause they weren't worth remembering. You're fifty, sixty, seventy, and so on, and you been stuffing your face and sleeping. And what else? Meanwhile, you got the rheumatiz, got your arthritis, and there's more hair growing outta your nose than grows on top of your head. You get ugly, is what you do. Real ugly.

Personally, though, I've been an artist, and I've got no room to bitch. An artist. Me. Just tickles me pink. I went ahead and put a lot of windows in my kitchen, tore those appliances out and put 'em in the basement where they belonged, and I sat down and started whittling pretty serious. Out come snakes and snowflakes. In time I'm doing hummingbirds and geese and about anything I want. My little discovery, I guess you could call it—there's this species of spruce up in the Thompson River country, and I can buy it a thousand board feet at a time, buy it as cheap as pine because I buy it raw. If I cure it right, cut off short cants and kiln cure 'em, I can do almost anything with it; it's got a very forgiving grain;

and then when you're finished, then a piece always colors up somehow and it takes on a life of its own. There's been a surprise in everything I've ever carved. So here I've sat, whittling, and you look down at your hands, and they're like your pals, the guys who actually know what you're talking about, and you can get just as lost in that as anybody ever got lost in liquor. I'll take it, though, believe me. I'll take my addiction over most others I can think of. Before I know it, my stuff's in the shops in Missoula and Kalispell and Bigfork, I mean the nice shops, and even in a few little museums, places where they really know how to light it so you look like a genius. And they give me good money to do this—who would've ever thought? Hell yes. I've just sat here, and sat here, and whittled away, and I've called no man boss—unless it was the tax man. I don't see where I can complain too much.

And Quent's done fine, too, I guess. Better than fine.

There was a time there where I just kind of let him alone while he was making a success of himself. Took quite a while, I have to say, before I figured out that's what he was doing. I didn't expect the thing with Rebecca to work out, and maybe that was wishful thinking, but you got a fart in a whirlwind and a rich girl—who would've been optimistic about the chances for that. I was wrong, though. They both proved me wrong. He started out fixing those machines all day every day, and this is a lot more complicated

equipment than I ever thought it could be, and fixing 'em is top money; then he's got his own company, and he's training other people to fix 'em; then he's selling 'em; and then he's selling the damn things all over the world. He goes to Switzerland all the time. After a while I've got quite the collection of business cards on my corkboard, got some from Rebecca, too—card from when she had her dress shop, a flyer from when she ran for city council. They're busy people, so I leave 'em alone, and he's always saying to come out and see 'em, to come on out. But I don't.

After they had their kids, I started getting a steady stream of pictures, too, which is all right cause those kids are gorgeous, and I'd send the little ones their checks on their birthdays, fifty bucks a whack, which may be kind of a joke to them, or it will be soon, but I keep track of their birthdays, Christmas and Easter, and that's about as much of the year as I pay any attention to. 'Come out,' he says all the time, and I know he's proud of what he's got, what he's done for himself out there—and you can tell he's real proud of those babies—but I still never go. I got a camper and everything, and I go everyplace else, drove all the way up the AICan and back, twice, but for a real long time I never got out to see Quent and company. It was silly, and I'm not too sure why I stayed away, but I have noticed that when you live by yourself it doesn't take too long at all before you're weird, and I was kind of

an odd duck to begin with, and I really can't imagine anybody should have to put up with me. So he says 'come,' and I say I'll be out when I've got the garden put up, when I'm finished canning, which, to tell you the truth, I rarely do that. He says 'come,' and I tell him I'll come when I'm done fishing. I'm sure he knows it's always fishing season somewhere.

So there's a lotta phone calls back and forth, but, one thing led to another, and I never saw him for nine years. Finally he just sent me a plane ticket and a note to say he was sorry he hadn't thought of it sooner. That forced my hand, of course, and a good thing, too. I'm a little ashamed of the way I get. One way or the other, it's always been Quent who grabs me by the scruff of the neck and shakes me out of it. So there he was at the airport, waiting for me, and he's got a hundred-dollar haircut and all, but he's still got those same eyes he inherited from poor old Mrs. Oslavski; kind eyes, I'd call em. I won't even try and say how good it was to see him.

But then we get to Merton. He's brought his little boy with him, and the kid's a Hoolihan through and through, except he's better looking than the usual run of us, and I guess I'm supposed to get that family feeling for him, or something, but I don't, cause in the flesh this kid is very hard to like. He's an asshole, this Merton, and that's about all I remember from the airport. I count on my fingers and figure up that he's seven years old. I don't remember anything at all like

this from when Quent was seven. So we get in the car and I give Merton this chain I'd carved out of a single piece of stock—the thing's two feet long, twelve links, and these are all independent, free-moving links, and it's been a week's work for me to carve it. That chain hits the floorboard about as quick as Merton can pitch it down there, and then the kid's jazzing his little electric pinball machine, some little deal he can hold it in the palm of his hands, but it's loud enough you can barely hear yourself think in there. Quent asked him a couple times to turn it off or to turn it down, but the kid says no and keeps right on with what he's doing. He's a nightmare, if you ask me. Quent seems okay with it, though, and there I am, riding along with 'em, trying not to look disgusted.

We got on the ferry out to Vashon, and Merton wanted to stay in the car. He wants to sit there and goose his thingus til the batteries wear out, or until I kill him. Quent, of course, has to sit there with him. But I didn't have to, so I got out and went on up to the upper deck, as far away from Merton Hoolihan as I could get on that boat, and I'm standing there, catching rain in my mouth. I can see where if that brat was mine, I'm not too sure we'd make many ferry rides before there was a little splash some night. I hadn't been missing a goddamn thing on the Merton score.

So then we get to the ferry landing and the kid's gone to sleep. I count my blessings. We do the

ride to Quent's place without saying much. I make a few brilliant observations—it's pretty, it's green, and so forth. Whatta they call 'em now? Communications skills. I never had any. I just sit there hoping he's not mad at me cause I can't stand his kid.

Now, this property of theirs didn't look a thing like I remembered from way-back-when, when the doctor bought it for 'em. Quent tells me him and Rebecca unwind on the weekends by doing their own landscaping, and there's not an inch of their ground that hasn't been planted and pruned and prettied up. It's a little fussy for my taste, and a lot more yard work than I'd ever do, but you'd have to say it was nice. And that house. Somewhere under there was the cottage they started with, but it's been remodeled into a castle. Must be four or five thousand feet wrapped in cedar board and cedar shakes, and it's gussied up in some kind of copper trim that was new to me. I'd never seen anything like it before. Inside, you got your parquet floors and marble countertops and about an acre of windows looking out over the water. That one wall's like a great big movie screen, there's barges and whales and schooners and all kinda traffic in those windows.

Then Rebecca comes downstairs with little Daisy on her hip. The females of this family are something else, I tell you. I gave Daisy her angel, cause it was what I'd carved for her, and that angel's head goes straight in her mouth, and as soon as Rebecca's convinced there's

not been any shellac on it or anything, that's where it stays. Drool running down her chin, snot running down her lip, and that little girl was still cute as a button. You couldn't hardly stand it. When her mom sets her down, she's off like a shot. Quent's been telling me this one might be the apple of my eye. He might be right.

So then we had a drink, or in my case a couple. Some kinda real pricey bourbon. Tasted so good and hit me so hard, I had to excuse myself before supper was ready, and I can see where they were making a production out of supper. I smell salmon on a grill somewhere, but even with my mouth watering, I'm not near as hungry as I am tired. So Rebecca shows me to my room, and she's got a funny little grin, and I'm thinking it's cause I can't hold my liquor and I'm acting like a tourist in their house, but she lets me in that room, and I get in there and see where it's been all set up for me. Everything they think I might like is in there, including a set of very fancy Japanese carving knives, and some pieces of cherry wood and walnut. There's a card on my pillow. Rebecca wrote it. This room's mine, she says. It's here whenever I want to use it, for as long as I want to use it. I got a lump in my throat so big I damn near puked. That was a fine note to pass out on.

That next morning I rode into work with Quent, and he apologizes that we have to take the ferry again. Hell, it's something he has to do every day, why should I mind? His business takes up the best part of a three-

story building smack in the middle of downtown Seattle. You got your showroom on the ground floor, repair and fabricating over that, and on the top floor there's offices. We breeze through the whole deal, and it's, Mr. Hoolihan this, and Mr. Hoolihan that, and everybody's just delighted to meet me, like I'm just the most wonderful geezer they ever saw, and every place we go Quent solves some little problem for somebody, just fixes it on the fly. You can tell he's been good to these people. You can also tell he's in charge, which is a little different face than I've ever seen on him before. When the tour's finished and all the introductions are over, he takes me to his office and makes me the best cup of coffee I ever drank. No, he says, it's *espresso*. Well, by now I should get this straight, I suppose. All I know is, I may have to start using that machine he sent me. No wonder he can work so damn hard. The stuff's like some kinda tasty rocket fuel.

Then he settles in to make phone calls all day. He apologizes about that, too. No problem. I take a little walk around Seattle. Got in the wrong part of it, of course, and some wino mugged me, and he damn near conks me over the head with a pipe before I can convince him, no, I don't have a credit card. Guess I'm the last guy on earth without a credit card.

Then it's back out to the island and another nice dinner. I get the impression they do this every night—you got pasta and a big old salad and a slab of pig in

sweet and sour sauce, and the kids are set up with their own separate meal. There's a sound system that pipes that sticky dead-guy music to every corner of the house, which is not so tough on the ears after you get used to it. Rebecca opens up a forty-dollar bottle of wine like it was so much Kool-Aid, but I figure I better lay off the booze. Drunk or sober, I still don't have a thing to say for myself. They're trying so hard. I'm just wishing I had one interesting thing to say. Next day I stay home with Rebecca and the kids, and we're out in the yard, and I fix a gate for her, and then I get to playing hide n' seek with Merton, and I find out I can stand him after all. He's still a house ape, mind you, but you get him outside and playing around, and he's a kid like any other kid. Then that night Quent comes home late and takes us out to a restaurant. They treated me like royalty the whole time I was there. I was wishing I'd done a little something to deserve that.

That was my last night there, and while Rebecca's off giving the kids their baths, me and Quent step out on the deck. The stars are out, kind of unusual in that part of the world. So I take the opportunity to tell him how proud I am of him. It's hard to explain, but here he is, he's made enough money to retire already if he wants to, and he's been all over the world and ate things I've never even heard of, and he's almost got his head down about it. This is what I remember about him—right from the beginning, nobody ever had a lower opinion

of Quent than Quent did. He was always so terrible easy to embarrass, and I remember that was one of the things that made me so awful tender about him. He's kind of a heartbreak, and neither one of us really knows why. So I tell him I'm proud of him. Tell him I've never been anything but proud. He tells me he wants me to come and live with 'em. We both know what the answer to that'll be, but I am kind of weak in the knees to get the offer.

After that I started visiting every so often. Watched those kids grow up a little bit at a time, and that was good fun. Merton turned out to be a whizbang lacrosse player, and I caught a couple of his games before he graduated. Daisy just kept living up to her name. Meanwhile Quent's getting richer and richer and not a year passes when I'm not a little fonder of Rebecca. That whole bunch out there, they're the reason the sun sets in the West as far as I'm concerned.

But also . . . I don't know. I'm on the phone more and more with Quent the older he gets, and more and more he wants to talk about old times. Then one day he calls and asks me to meet him out at the Elisis airport cause he needs to get in some twin-engine time. He's been flying a few years now, and he's just moved up to this Beechcraft. That's a damn short runway, I tell him, and it's just dirt, but he says he'll be fine. Sure enough, two, three hours later there he is, coming in over Baldy. He makes his approach and sets 'er down on the apron,

and his brakes are locked up and smoking, but he finally gets stopped with about ten yards to spare before he's through the barb wire and out into somebody's pasture. Quite the little landing. And he gets out, and he comes over to the hangar, and he tells me he's got a confession to make, he really didn't need the hours that bad. He just wanted to see me. What's wrong? Nothing, he says. Nothing's wrong. Not exactly. Fine, then, I tell him, lunch is on me. But he wants to know if I could do him a favor. Wants to know if we could go out and drive some of the old paper route. Well, sure. One thing I've got a lot of is time.

This country has changed a good deal since he was young in it, or some of it has. Sprinkler systems. They managed to put water on dry ground up at my end of the valley, and there might be fewer people here than there used to be, but those who stayed make a half decent living. They're not so godawful poor as people

around here used to be. There's a lot more cows on this ground, I'll tell you that. So we swung by the graveyard to visit Moira's grave, and then I thought I'd head up toward Niarada, cause that's about the same as it always was—except Niarada itself is gone. You got the same old gravel, same old sage brush, but no place to even stop and buy a Coke if you want it. It's empty out that way, which is why I kind of like it. And we're riding along, and it's just us and the coyotes, the way it used to be, and I look over, and there's something about the way his head sits on his shoulders, or something, I don't know. He's the same. He's that boy who knew every tune, and I'll bet he knows 'em to this day. But he's also the man who don't sing 'em.

Yeah, we rode out in the loneliest country we could find. Rode out, drove around a while, and then we went home.