

# Bitter Sweet Ghosts of Childhood Past

as told by

*Alexander*

Written 14... 14... 4  
In Our Year of the Lord

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Fiction! Fiction! Fiction!

*It's all a pack of lies,  
except the part that's not,  
which is an even bigger lie.*

Any similarity between anything in here and anything out there is  
coincidental, unintended, and highly unlikely.

*Or in other words:*

*This story represents a lie of a lie,  
Regarding a lie that never has been,  
And in that lie,  
Lays the only truth to this tale there is.*

#####

*Brownies!*

!!!!!!!!!!!!

*“Brownies!” they whispered together, in the dark of the  
night. It would be the perfect crime!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!!!! !!!!!!!!!!! !! !!!!!!!*

###

So, right there!

We start in the middle of the action!

When it all began!

At the point of inception!

The perfect crime!

###

But perhaps you long for a little more clarity. Their names are Theodora and Eileen. They are identical twins, both girls, both Asian, both born in the East within seconds of each other, adopted by well-to-do Americans, and whisked away to their suburban home, never to see their homeland or biological parents again.

###

Never!

###

Let me say that again.

###

Never!

###

Theodora was named after her adopted grandfather (paternal) -- Theodore being the option if they had gotten a boy -- while Eileen was named after a favored aunt -- their mother's sister, in fact.

###

This is a matter of school board record.

###

But both Theodora and Eileen went by whatever they choose at the moment: Teddy & Elizabeth, Terry & Etta, or even Betty & Jane.

###

Of course, the list does not stop there. I only tire of the exercise. Kim & Kelly, Katherine & Kristina, Samantha & Chris: it gets boring...

###

In grade school, we nicknamed them *The Teddy Bears*. But after the movie came out, we took to calling them collectively as *ET* as in *ET: The Extra Terrestrials*.

###

They were alien.

###

They were weird.

###

They talked alone, huddled together, whispering silently -- jumping rope by themselves, one rope, alone. They held hands incessantly. They switched roles indiscriminately. They changed clothes compulsively -- ribbons in hair, necklaces, scarves, whatever markers the grown ups around them had given them to wear, to separate them, to divide them.

###

They would have none of it. There was the world. And then, there was the two of them. Not them against the world, but them in the world, and the distance between them and the rest, unfathomable.

###

Unfathomable.

###

Truly, unfathomable.

###

I remember going to their first grade (or was it kindergarten) birthday party. We were friends... sort of.

###

They had needed a friend. The two of them had agreed on this, talked it over. And so, we were their friends.

###

But our friendship did not last, riding their bike through the neighborhood alone, a tandem, the one in front steering, the other in back, eyes closed, calling out, directing the other, switching at random, little girls changing their clothes in the middle of the street -- I remember that... well; always outnumbered, always alone against the maddening crowd.

###

But they had each other.

###

And for the longest of times, that is all they had desired: forever alone, together with themselves.

###

They were ostracized.

###

They were weird.

###

They were good girls, straight A's, top of the class, ruining the curve, one always acing the exam, the other taking the fall, not a single answer right, smart-aleck quiz answers -- find X, it's right here -- indiscriminate, random, with gleeful abandon.

###

They died towards the end of their junior year -- our junior year in high school.

###

It's a true story: this one little fact if nothing else. This I know for sure. They died junior year. You can look it up.

###

A drunk driver hit them, head on, as they drove home from a school dance, heard the announcement Monday, over the speaker, sitting in class, never again to see them, it was more than a little surreal.

###

But even then, I'd known it would make a great story.

###

That was my reaction. This would make a great story, something to talk about, a tale to tell, and gossip with others in homeroom -- me sitting pretty with the inside story, we were almost neighbors, just down the street, I knew them about as well as anyone... else.

###

They had been each other's date, that night, at the dance. I don't think they ever danced with a boy, held hands, or even passed a note -- much less kissed.

###

It's a shame.

###

It didn't have to be that way... which means, it doesn't have to be that way.

###

This is fiction, after all -- reconstructive history -- so it doesn't have to be that way.

!!!

*And so, "Brownies!" they whispered together, in the dark of the night. It would be the perfect crime!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!!*

!!!

*And with its execution set in motion, the journey begins, set sail for a new past, a distant horizon.*

!!!

*Alone in their bed, huddling close, whispering in each other's ear, telling the secrets of the day, updating each other, letting the other know what they needed to know, so they would not grow apart or become the dreaded other, but always stay as one.*

!!!

*That was always the goal: to be together as one -- true love, the love of the self, them-self.*

!!!

*But they could feel it: the danger, the doom...*

!!!

*Or at least, with my guiding hand, they could feel it: the danger, the doom. But in that, with that, because of that, it could be, it should be, it would be different this time.*

!!!

*Yes, it would be different this time.*

!!!

*So once again, "Brownies!" they whispered together, in the dark of the night. It would be the perfect crime!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!!*

!!!

*They weren't supposed to make brownies, you know, alone, by themselves, no others about, the oven, the heat, they could burn*

*down the house; and of course, to keep it all hidden, they would have to secure the ingredients -- steal them, in point of fact, from those who trusted them. It would change who they were... and in that, it will change who they are.*

*!!!*

*It would keep them alive.*

*!!!*

*And yes, with any luck, it will keep me alive, as well.*

#####

Amitab'ha Be My Delight

!!!!!!!!!!!!

God made man in his own image.

###

God made man a creator.

###

I feel closest to God when I am writing... or programming. I am a creator. While I create, I am God.

###

When I was younger, I was scared of the dark. I was scared of a lot of things; but mostly, I was scared of the dark.

###

At some point, in my teenage years, I took to walking long distances in the dark to cure myself of this ill. At two, three in the morning, long past curfew, having checked in with my parents and then checked out again after they had fallen asleep, I would walk, two and three towns over... and then back, in the dawn's early light.

###

I hoped to find something... someone... a girl as lonely as I.

###

It was a fool's quest.

###

I hoped to walk through the fog -- the dream I was weaving  
as I marched along -- and emerge in another world.

###

I never did.

###

I know now that this was a fool's quest.

###

I got into physics, because I wanted to create a time machine.

###

It was a fool's quest.

###

I got into computing, because I wanted to create a living  
being, the Holy Grail, an AI, a god.

###

I got into writing, because for the moment, as I tap out the  
words, I am transported into another world, where I am loved and  
my friends still live...

###

Someday, I will make it real... or die trying.

###

It is a fool's quest.

###

I know this.

###

But I am a fool nonetheless.

#####

Introducing David the Daring Dago

!!!!!!!!!!!!

David was a dago. I'm not sure that I knew what a dago was  
before I met him, but within minutes he had told me. "Blah. Blah.  
I'm a dago. It means I'm an Italian. But only I can say that. If  
you do, I'm going to have to punch you."

###

There were lots of reasons why David might punch you... but disagreeing with him topped the list.

###

If he wanted your opinion, he'd ask for it. But mostly, he'd just tell you how it was.

###

“You got to do this.”

###

“You go to do that.”

###

By which he meant, this is the way a man -- a real man -- does things. And he was a real man.

###

In high school, he played hockey. He fancied himself the enforcer. If anyone from the opposing team played dirty, he took it upon himself to set them straight. He spent a lot of time in the penalty box. I spent a lot of time talking to him while he sat in the penalty box.

###

I was his friend.

###

“A friend should come and watch me play.”

###

It's just the way it was.

###

I was his friend. And he was my friend.

###

I don't know exactly when I stopped having play dates with the twins... but it probably coincided with kindergarten or first grade.

###

I did not like attention.

###

“Girl.”



“You have girl friends.”

“So, you’re a girl.”

“Sissy.”

###

They hadn’t graduated to ‘fag’.

###

I did not like the attention. I could not handle the attention.

###

I do not know if the twins abandoned me, I abandoned them, or if it was more mutual than that. It was a long time ago. I simply do not remember.

###

I must have played with a few other kids before I met David, before he met me. And then, here and there, we had our off spells. But for the most, from that day forward... What was it? Second grade? Maybe first? No, we wanted to have the same teacher together in second grade (we managed to be in the same class, always sitting next to each other, for the rest of our time in elementary school because of that), so it must have been first grade when we met. And after that, we were best friends for life.

###

“You’re my friend and that means,” I did things his way.

###

It was easy. I idolized him. Let me say that again. I idolized David. He walked on air. He knew no fear. He stood by my side and he had my back.

###

I was his friend, and that meant, “Alex’s on my team.”

###

*“Oh, you’re going to write using your real name. About time you manned up.”*

###

It was me and David against the world. Only, I didn’t really have his back and he knew it. It’s not what I was there for. If I was supposed to have his back, he would have insisted (and failed,

mind you) that I played hockey. But he didn't want me to play hockey. He wanted me to cheer him along as he played hockey.

###

He ate up my idolatry. He literally ate it up.

###

He loved the attention. He loved my praise, my worship, my awe.

###

When we met, I would only play catch with soft rubber tennis balls, because I'd been hit in the face with a hard ball... and it hurt. Well, he would only play with a real baseball... and he didn't care if it hurt.

###

But more importantly, he didn't care if I let the ball drop and bounce off the ground before I'd run after it, pick it up, and throw it back to him.

###

He liked my cowardice. It made him feel tough.

###

We'd ride our bikes in the new development. It was pretty far away for kids, but we'd ride there anyway, and jump our bikes on these big dirt hills.

###

He was a demon.

###

He was a daredevil.

###

He did flips and jumps and things with his bike that didn't have names back then.

###

I think he liked that he didn't have to push himself when I was around. He always knew that he'd be tougher than me, so he didn't have to try.

###

With other kids, he had to try... sometimes too much.

###

It broke my heart years later to hear someone bad mouth him. I mean, I understood what they were saying. David was a macho jerk. They weren't lying. But all the same, it broke my heart.

###

I think David wet his bed.

###

*"What the fuck! Don't tell them that."*

###

*But if I'm going to use my real name, play myself, then I'm going to tell them that about the real you, too.*

###

David wet his bed... or, I mean, I think he wet his bed.

###

I didn't sleep over at his house much, but the one time I did, he made this big deal about the stains on his underwear, "That's from the last little drip. I don't pee in my pants. And if you say I do, we're not going to be able to be friends anymore and I'm going to have to punch you."

###

I didn't question it... not at the time... not till years later... and I wonder if the reason he didn't put on such a front was because he was insecure on account of, you know, of how he wet his bed.

###

I can see him standing beside me as I type, so at least that part of the magic is working.

###

And he's cracking his knuckles, waiting patiently, doing that thing with his neck. But when I'm done, he's going to punch me -- right in the gut -- and I'm going to cry, because he's not really there.

###

David is dead.

###

David joined the marines -- signed up, enlisted.

###

But he never made it to basic training.

###

By eighteen, David's dirt bike had turned into a motorcycle. And a few days before he was to go and play soldier, we all got drunk, one last bash, a big send off. And at the end of it all, when we were all going our separate ways, David rode off into the night, alone, saying he wanted to think.

###

At a hundred plus miles an hour he ran into a barbwire fence -- full on, missing the turn...

###

The wire tore off his face...

###

The wires ripped his body in half...

###

The funeral was closed casket...

###

It was a bloody mess...

###

And it took me years to realize he'd committed suicide.

###

It literally took me years...

###

I miss David.

###

He was my best friend.

###

He was my last friend.

###

Perhaps he was my only friend -- my only real friend.

###

And at eighteen, he died.

#####  
The Future Belongs to the Past  
!!!!!!!!!!!!

I went to college.  
###

I studied physics.  
###

Physics is pure. It is simple. It is the golden science.  
###

I am an arrogant son of a bitch... or at least, I was.  
###

I studied Physics because it was The Science, the underlying science, the one science that ruled them all, so that's the one I studied.  
###

Graduate school I got to work at a national lab. But mostly what I did there was write imaging programs for the particle detectors. Or if you want the self-important version, I was involved in the development of the technology that would be used to detect the decay paths (and therefore existence) of certain (heretofore undiscovered) subatomic particles.  
###

I did this by working with lasers.  
###

I did this by working with particle accelerators.  
###

I did this by working with computers that teased apart the decay trajectory of high-speed explosions.  
###

I did imaging work.  
###

I processed pictures.  
###

At a party, I met a girl.

###

She took an interest...

###

I liked Kate. I really did. I can even say I loved her. But it's *loved*. We grew apart... or you know, she was eventually attracted to another; and in turn, they grew together.

###

I got the house.

###

She got the condo.

###

The condo is in Hawaii.

###

I raised her daughter, well, helped pay, footed the bills, wrote the check for twelve years (3-15) for her daughter. I did the best that I could, spared no expense; when she asks, I'll pay for her college.

###

Karen never calls. But I have the money. And I will pay for her college when she asks.

###

She will ask.

###

I liked Kate. She was talkative. She talked to me first, broke the ice, smiled, laughed at my jokes. We dated. We flirted. She gave me my first blowjob.

###

Um, I like blowjobs. I really do.

###

I married the girl.

###

And from that very first moment, that very first night, right after the marriage, still on the honeymoon, we started growing apart.

###

I wanted more than she was willing to give...  
###  
And so did she.  
###  
Separate, but equal, naturally apposing forces, inevitably  
drawn apart.  
###  
I never cared about money.  
###  
And she wanted more.  
###  
She wanted the condo in Hawaii, by the beach, a surfer's  
paradise, for her surfer lover.  
###  
That's why we bought it.  
###  
She told me that... after.  
###  
So, I'd know.  
###  
Of course, their relationship will never last. He doesn't make  
nearly enough money... or, from what I can see, nearly any money.  
###  
I told her this.  
###  
This was one of those things that I told her when she was  
telling me about all the guys she'd fucked behind my back over the  
years.  
###  
She told me she was a skank.  
###  
I told her she was a whore.  
###  
But I don't think she heard me.  
###

I don't think she realizes why her sordid affair with Tom was doomed from the start.

###

It won't last...

###

I'm not being vindictive. Kate was good to me, good for me, while it lasted, that first week, that first month, that first year, took me to parties, girl on my arm, social interactive.

###

I'd come alive.

###

I was a made man.

###

But it didn't last.

###

I never should have married the girl... but I did...

!!!

*And now I sit alone in my condo, in Hawaii.*

!!!

*She got the house. I got the condo.*

!!!

*I work from my balcony, coding jobs, freelance, that hasn't changed.*

!!!

*The place overlooks Magic Sands, a surfing beach with a famous name -- the type of name you could pull out of the air, make up, or recall from deep in the past... a vacation, honeymoon... of the mind...*

!!!

*I set up a web cam of the beach, take pictures, film videos of the waves and the break, surfers riding, and the girls sunning themselves on the beach.*

!!!

*My neighbors, Kate, she's pretty hot, newly divorced, curvy, a bit vindictive, gripes a bit too much about wasting the best years of*



*her life and all that with her miserable ex, but that's not my problem; her daughter is cute, if I were a player... but I'm not, and her boyfriend, fiancée, husband to be... I like Tom, Tommy, "Just call me Tom." Off and on, he's helps me with the website, place the cameras, interpret the waves; sometimes he writes the morning report. "Surf's up, dude. Come check out the waves."*

*!!!*

*I like them. I drink with them -- a mai tai, here and there, barbeque pork, out on the balcony, binoculars in hand, watching the beauties, Kate getting jealous, Karen prancing about, hardly ever anything more than a string bikini, voluptuous top, setting her sights on an early marriage... or more than likely, teenage pregnancy. But I hope she doesn't. I really do. She cute. I'm sweet on the girl... but in a fatherly way, like the daughter I'd never had. I'd pay her way... to college and all that... or even to Europe for a year, give her time to get her head screwed on straight, lord knows she needs to try screwing something else for a change. But in the end, it's not my problem.*

*!!!*

*At night, over the ocean, a green flash, setting sun, like a vision, awaking me from the dream as the sun goes down, while the neighbors fuck like rabbits, screaming moans coming through the open windows from next door...*

*###*

*And in the morn', "Where's the coffee? Why didn't you get coffee?" a different mood, short and curt, full of pain, broken dreams, and the realities of the day.*

*!!!*

*Every once in a while I hear from my ex-wife, sounding concerned, wondering if I've found myself yet. But I'm just taking some time off, watching the waves... and the girls on the beach.*

*!!!*

*I should really get me one of those -- start dating one of those. When you get right down to it, I should really think about buying me one of those...*

!!!

*But the last time I did, it didn't work out that well.*

!!!

*Nope, the last time I did that, it did not work out that well.*

#####

*Ethan... I may have a little unresolved anger..*

!!!!!!!

Do not be deceived. I am not rich. I am not a dot com,  
internet, programming, software billionaire.

###

I have no need to be.

###

There will be no past tense, recursive:

*!!! refrain !!!*

###

I have enough.

###

Doctors are well paid.

Lawyers are well paid.

Programmers are well paid.

I have enough.

###

And now, without a wife to support, no ongoing outgoing,  
spending the money as fast as it comes in expense, I have even  
more.

!!!

*Or as I like to tell my cat -- a stray I found walking the  
beach, The Haz Mat Kitty -- we are not going to run out of cat food  
anytime soon... nor burgers or sausages or greats slabs of lamb,  
filet mignon, and other expensive meats.*

###

I have enough.

###

But enough about me, I was going to tell you about Ethan.

###

Of course, to do that, I must first tell you about another experience of mine.

###

I was hired to sort photos on the web for a social media giant, good gig, but no billion-dollar stock option gig, just solid pay. And before I could work, tap out the code, I needed (they needed me) to do some training, corporate stuff, instructions on coding style, how we do things here, and the standard ethics on privacy and their policy. It was a seminar, fifty guys in the room, all new hires, up and coming franchise, media outlet, was going to control the world, own the future, and this guy sitting next me in class, in the room, during the training, slide show over, during the question and answer, open discussion, debate, who when the question of ethical behavior came up (or in this particular case unethical behavior came up), he said, "Oh, I could never do that." He could not think it, conceive it, the thought had never crossed his mind. Stealing? No, it was something he had never done, never considered, could not do, would not do. It would be a sin against God."

###

Novel concept.

###

What a *novel* concept.

###

The man was claiming to have never (not ever) to have been tempted by fate -- to have been so lucky in life so as to never have the need to be tempted by fate, or to find himself in such straights that stealing another man's bread might make some kind of sense.

###

Perhaps he was lying.

###

Perhaps he was only fooling himself.

###

But I felt like hitting the arrogant ignorant bastard, shoving my fist, right down, smashing his face.

###

David felt like hitting him, too...

###

*“What are you talking about? I’m only a ghost -- the Spirit of Friendships Past. You’re the one who has to hit him if you want him punched; and trust me, he needs to be have some sense beat into him. So, just walk right up behind him and slug him in the back of the neck. Sure, he probably turn around and rip your head off; but then, he’ll know. He’s an asshole just like the rest.”*

###

Ethan was an asshole.

###

Ethan was a jerk.

###

Ethan was my friend -- there was a time when he was my friend -- but he was always that kind of friend.

###

Ethan was a competitive asshole. He was a jerk. I’m sure he grew up to be a hardcore republican bastard -- true blue, the type who honestly believe the game isn’t stacked, that there can (and is, it is!) a level playing field.

###

I hated Ethan for years -- his memory, his betrayal.

###

But I’m over that now.

###

Ethan was a Boy Scout.

###

But Ethan was the type of Boy Scout who would make sure that he collected more stacks of paper than anyone else during the annual paper drive. He would go house to house, ask people to save, carry it back home, stack it, arrange it, and he would collect the most paper and win.

###

He never helped anyone else collect.

###

He never showed anyone else how to work his particular brand of magic.

###

If he had, the troop would have collected a whole slew more. I think my family put aside a weeks worth of paper. And I managed to coerce a like amount from two or three more. Ethan had stacks in the garage, piles to the side, been collecting for weeks, months. If he had organized the troop, we would have collected so much more... so much more.

###

But he wasn't much of a Boy Scout. He didn't care about the paper, the charity. He cared about the badge, winning... having more.

###

Ethan lived close by. We played games together. I liked the mental stimulation. I admit it. I liked to win. I was playing to win. And so was Ethan. He liked beating me. He would buy a new game; read all the rules; and when I came over, he would say, let's play this; and so, we did. And when I asked him to explain a rule again, he always would, but it was always too late.

###

Ethan always won the first game of whatever we played.

###

We hardly ever played a second.

###

"It wasn't that interesting, wasn't that fun. Besides, I've got this new one I want to try out..."

###

David would come over and play with us occasionally, but he didn't care if he won. He'd be the buffer, the third person. These were complicated games, rulebooks thirty pages long, with room enough for a dozen half-interested bystanders, but that could

always be split up into two apposing teams: 2-4 players, 7 ideal, but 2 could wing if they were willing to carry the slack.

###

Both Ethan and I would play these games alone if we had to, setting up the pieces on a rainy days alone in our rooms, trying to decide strategy, how best to move, but so many choices, one could never be sure...

###

David made it easy.

###

He didn't care.

###

An hour into the game, David would say, "I'll be back in a while." But he never would return. We never expected him to.

###

"It's just you and me, now," Ethan and I, and the gloves would come off.

###

Ethan did not die... maybe he could have, maybe he should have, maybe he will...

###

Yes, if the gods will grant me my wish, heed my prayers, and let me trade his life for the rest, maybe, he will...

###

Maybe, he most definitely, will...

###

But in truth, in the past, Ethan did not die.

###

David died. I went off to college. My parents moved away. And there was no reason for me to ever go home... not ever again, so I didn't.

###

You can never go home again... never again, so why try?

###

But long before that, Ethan and I had stopped being friends.

!!!

*Freshman year, beginning of high school, David and I were exploring pharmaceuticals and the rest -- getting high, kissing girls, I did a fair bit of stealing, walking into stores with a drink in my hand, walking out with whatever I wanted inside the cup -- diet pills, candy, gum. The inside of your coat, pressed up against the back, pulled nice and tight was a good place to carry a few records out the store, and it's amazing what fits in a back pocket -- cough syrup, liquor...*

!!!

*It was scandalous behavior.*

###

It was just the sort of behavior Ethan would not tolerate. I guess no good -- God Fearing -- boy ever would.

!!!

*But things progressed slowly. One does not start with a stack of records or even by breaking into a neighbor's house, watching TV, and drinking their booze while they are gone away on vacation. Rather, it is a slippery slope -- juvenile delinquency, it always is. The slope is just steeper for some than the rest, especially when one hangs around David the Daring, the type of guy who needs to push a little further and be a little more adventuresome than the rest...*

###

So, no. When it comes to the fall-out with Ethan our trespass was more banal than that -- small and inconsequential, the type of thing that should have blown over, but it didn't...

###

Don't ask me why it didn't...

###

Our crime?

###

Ethan's parents were going out of town and they agreed to let him throw a party, have a few friends over, play *Slaughter Quest*<sup>™</sup>, and take over the house while they were gone. It would

be an epic battle all over the house, with thousands of miniatures lead figures, painted pewter, and plastic...

###

Back in the day, on the last page of those cheap comics, they'd have these ads for a thousand civil war army men, a complete WWII regiment, complete with cannons and horses, flagmen and infantry, and so on and so forth for the unbelievably low price of \$1.89 +S&H.

###

And these sets were just total pieces of crap, worth every penny, half an inch high, crappy molding, looking like shit, the figures all mish-mashed, bent this way and that, not a single straight figure in the lot, but Ethan would love them, straighten them, ease them into shape, and paint them (he had an incredible touch); and finally, glue them to Popsicle sticks. He had thousands upon thousands upon thousands of these figures just ready to go. Probably every set they ever offered in the back of those comics... or at the hobby shop, they sold them down the way... one set a week, for years.

###

And in arranging this party, this last gaming stand, Ethan had a purpose, he had a dream: Ethan was aching for a fight; but not just any fight; no, he wanted one last glorious battle to rule them all, no holds barred, Big Jim vs. GI Joe vs. Custard's Last Stand vs. the Indians, Lone Rangers scouting alone, Cowboys and Indians vs. Medieval Knights, Green Army Men vs. Red Army Men, and monsters and goblins and orcs and dragons and... and... and... and the kitchen sink, too, the Great Waterfall, the Eternal Abyss, sofa a mountain range, walls parallel dimensions, parents bed an island, hallways dead end canyons, stairs leading to the basement of doom and the dark dungeons of ever after and *Greymore*<sup>TM</sup>.

###

It was to be the greatest battle ever!

###

EVER!



###

Even better than that sleepover in the sixth grade when we'd linked all his board games together (Monopoly, Risk, King Oil, Invention, and all the rest), massive game of Everything using bizarre impromptu rules to link one board to the next, money interchanging, a turn here, a turn there, Life, Millionaire Acres, take the money from that game and use it to buy a country in Risk, whose armies could be used to quell a strike or force an alliance between Reading Railroad and B&O... and of course, there was a game that was just about trains...

###

I don't remember the rules...

###

There weren't really any rules...

###

But for this big battle to come, Ethan had the rules printed out and ready to go. And we were going to go over after school, Friday night, and play straight through dusk 'til dawn as long as we could; and then, start up again all weekend long.

###

Only, David thought a person should party a little if they were throwing a party, so he suggested we, "Get some beer."

###

Which meant, I should get some beer. Oddly, he didn't bring any.

###

So, I nabbed a few inches of my fathers vodka or gin -- I don't remember which, something clear and white, that much I can recall -- and poured it into a plastic bottle (almost things of wonder, they were -- new at the time) and packed it in with my things.

###

And later that night, "Time for a break, time for a toast," didn't they always drink whiskey in those war movies -- it would set the tone.

###

But David felt betrayed. “You can’t do that. You’ll get me in trouble.”

###

The momma’s boy.

###

And that was the beginning of the end...

###

Or to be more exact, that was the end.

###

We drifted apart from there, Ethan and I. Didn’t talk much, didn’t play together as often. Gaming is a hard habit to break. It wasn’t cold turkey. But the turn had been made. He got his fill in chess club, debate, likely played with other kids, started a new game, a new campaign, playing in the band, church choir...

###

Who knows? We didn’t talk much after that.

###

Stopped sitting next to each other at lunch, first a few seats away, then farther and farther, and by beginning of next year, we were sitting at different tables, no need to wonder or even care where the other had gone...

!!!

*And then, of course, after graduation, he moved away, and I never saw him again. I never bothered to look him up. And I guess, he never bothered to look back. So, I’m only guessing he had places to go, things to do, and new friends to do them with...*

!!!

*Or maybe, he would up doing them alone...*

!!!

*But that night, that party, instead of an end, it could have been a new beginning for us all -- a rebirth into adolescence.*

!!!

*I'm sure David and I could have used Ethan's tempering influence... and Ethan could have used our knowledge, our insight into the ways of the world, our worldly ways.*

*!!!*

*And if he had?*

*!!!*

*Well, maybe then he wouldn't have gotten fragged by his own troops in 'nam...*

*!!!*

*OK. Too early, wrong date. And even if it was just a one off, RPG Shooter Campaign in college, a throw together in the dorms, it's bad sign, omen of things to come, when members of you own party decide to kill you off, for it to be decided en'mass that the group would be better off without you around... without you alive...*

*!!!*

*Too bad...*

*!!!*

*I mean, it really is...*

*!!!*

*Because it didn't have to be that way...*

*#####*

*Playing Chicken... with myself*

*!!!!!!!!!!!!*

I saw my first music video in college. No cable TV for me as a kid. I grew up in the era of wavy line porn, broadcast on the UHF, late at night...

*###*

“Can't you do something about that?” You're the genius. You're the pro. David sitting there, pounding on the TV, fiddling with the controls, asking, begging, pleading.

*!!!*

*So, sure, why not. Years later I learned it was a simple RC filter, fifty cents in gear, five seconds to make, a transistor, a capacitor, and an inductor coil -- I don't work with them much these days, I forget what they're called... solenoid, wire, whatever --- hook it all up in a parallel circuit and connect it inline with the antenna feed and you're good to go.*

!!!

*Who would have thought it would have been that simple?*

!!!

*Not us.*

!!!

*I can tell you that.*

!!!

*Not us.*

!!!

*But then, that was then; this is now...*

###

*“That's better. Huzzah! Look at them tits!”*

###

*I think David might have been a fag... in like total denial, over compensating.*

###

*I mean, I don't know. The thought has crossed my mind.*

!!!

*He joined the marines, 'Huzzah!' Did his six years; but when it came time to reenlist, they didn't want him. So, he blew his brains out...*

!!!

*Or I mean, I don't know. It's not like I've read the report -- secret mission, clandestine... easy to say someone put a bullet in their head... maybe it was the enemy, South America...*

!!!

*But conspiracy theories aside, I wonder. I mean, he knew how to be macho... until he didn't.*

###

*“Those are nice tits. You like those, Alex? Shit, don’t wimp out and change it. Use your real name. This is you and me, walking down the street. And this gorgeous housewife has just gone jogging by, letting it all hang out, bouncing hither and yon,” David’s ghost, setting the scene.*

###

Only, you know, David was looking at me, looking at her. I may have wanted a few things from him -- validation, courage... a friend.

###

And he might have wanted a few things from me... like how a guy was supposed to respond...

###

Or maybe he thought I was a fag.

###

I think my dad thought I was a fag.

###

Yeah, and fag is the word I use. It’s the word I think in. Take it as an insult. Or just take it for truth. In the world in which I grew up, the word homosexual barely existed, didn’t even know what a lesbian was, but fag, every schoolboy knew what a fag was...

###

A fag talked weird, walked weird, didn’t know how to throw a ball, was scared of balls for Christ’s sake, wasn’t interested in girls, veered away from girls...

###

I didn’t date much... like at all... lucky to have a date for the prom.

###

No wonder my dad thought I was a fag. Never said it. But when we had that talk, he perhaps felt the need to emphasis that girls were, you know, different from guys.

###

Fuck, maybe he was a bit of a fag himself. Don't know why he didn't come right out and say it. "Go get yourself a girl, fag boy."

###

I often think my life would have been better if my grandfather had taken me to a whorehouse and bought me a hooker on my thirteenth my birthday. "There! We call that a blowjob. And that's why you want money. Girls won't do it as often as you want for free. Life's as simple as that."

###

But that never happened and I was raised more by my mother: she had more romantic notions when it came to sex, more along the lines of caring and love and emotion support and connectedness... which led to a denial of the instinct, feeling it was dirty and wrong, and an inability to talk to a girl, due in large part to the shame on my part for the thoughts going through my head and the things I wanted to do. I couldn't even say...

!!!

*"Those are some nice tits."*

!!!

*"You said it, man."*

!!!

*So, I mean, there is like no way David could have been a homosexual. Seriously, if anyone in our group was gay, it would have been Ethan.*

###

That's right, I'm passing it on like a curse.

!!!

*Explains a lot, now that I think about it. He always was a bit of a momma's boy. But I'm sort of proud of the fact that we stayed friends, ate lunch together...*

!!!

*Fuck, no wonder Ethan went to those all those dances stag... gives a whole new meaning to the word.*

###

But Ethan was my friend...

###

And I was going to tell you about a music video, do a music video. See, the songs play on the radio and I see the drama unfold in my mind's eye.

###

And *Rooster* by Alice in Chains is one of my favorites.

###

I think the song is supposed to be about a guy returning from Vietnam, but I see it as a cross between a war drama and my friends and I playing army... we're lined up, doing inspection, heading out to the creek, the front, at the chorus, the tree line explodes from the napalm fighter jet flyover, and we're blowing off fire crackers, when they 'spit on me in my homeland' plays, a neighbor turns from watering his garden to spraying us with the garden hose, 'pills against mosquito death' are a PEZ dispenser, 'buddy breathing his dying breath', *FUCK!!! ETHAN!!!*, gaping chest wound, fucker died in South America, serves him right (*but no !!!*, so don't take it too seriously, it's just a song), and then where are we, tracking through the creek, mud on our shoes, Vietnam vets in the jungle, scared out of their minds, 'bullets come from nowhere', I always get this line wrong, I think the lyrics in the song go, 'bullets come from somewhere', but nowhere just makes more sense to me, and we're face down in the water, getting dirty, loving it, Ethan perhaps a little too close, suggesting David go ahead, scout it out (no wonder Ethan's own troops fragged him), slime and mud seeping into our boots, soaking our clothes, and by this time, we're covered in dirt, the chorus is over, the song almost over, and the lyrics go, 'picture of my boy,' which is a Hank Aaron baseball card strapped to my toy helmet, we had real helmets, plastic real, but sticks for guns, never bats or hockey sticks or even plastic things, always tree sticks, probably safer that way, not getting shot by mistake, lighting fireworks off in the creek, an M-80 makes a wonderful sound, thing of beauty when it goes off underwater, and then we're in the main park, the only real

park in town, the one in our neighborhood, a big water holding pond in front, always dry or half wet, pure swampland, it's turned to rice paddies, 'They've come to get the Rooster, but he's not gonna die. No!' Boom! Drum refrain! 'No!' Boom! Drum refrain. 'You know he's not going to die!' as the park explodes in artillery gunfire, families having a picnic caught up in the escapades of a young man's fantasy, rice paddy farmers dying left and right, and as the song dies down, and we pull back to the reality of a rag tag bunch of boys playing army, carrying sticks, setting off fireworks on the Fourth of July, and *ET* coming over, the pair, as one, to kick me in the knees, their doll all blown to bits from the works, as David, Ethan, and I are leaning over a police cruiser, hands in back (yeah, I know that feeling, been there, done that), and the cop is only laughing, pulling back his sleeve, revealing a rooster tattoo, telling of his time in the 'Nam, mesmerizing the boys... and the video, cuts out...

###

The song plays on the radio...

!!!

*I have an extensive record collection. Don't ask me why. It's such a waste of money. But I suppose, the ones I cherish the most are the ones from my youth, the ones I got the hard way, that I earned...*

###

I hear tell one of the companies that sells 'Street Clothing' has let it be known that they will reimburse stores for any items that go 'missing' from their displays. It turns out the trend setters in the 'Street Clothing' demographic don't pay for their threads and if they can't steal the duds, well, they just wear something else.

###

Where was I?

###

Oh, right.

###

### This is where I am. ###



!!!

*I guess the song pulls at me and rings true on account of David -- career military, Green Berets, medal of honor, his ghost standing at attention by my side as I write this, looking over, smiling, making sure I get it right, one of those clandestine things, goats, snipers, behind enemy lines in Desert Storm, somebody had to die...*

!!!

*I really wish he was here.*

!!!

*This one's for you David.*

!!!

*Maybe I should give Ethan a call. I sort of lost track after he moved to San Francisco. I'm sort of afraid, though. I mean, I think I'd rather not know. So many people died of AIDS... and, well, with Ethan being Ethan... and so many good people dying of AIDS... I think I'd rather not know.*

#####

Q & A

!!!!!!!!!!!!

If you were going to kill Ethan, you would:

A: Do it real slow and painful like...

B: Maybe give him a slow, withering, fatal disease...

C: Cancer...

D: AIDs...

E: Hemorrhaging Catastrophic Tooth Decay...

F: Hey, it could happen...

G: Or one can hope...

H: Or then again, not really...

*I: You see, Ethan is my friend, one of my best friends, we go way back, but I guess he gets under my skin at times, we play chess via email, it's that competitive thing, I guess I'm a bad sport, have*

*to work on my soul, hate to lose, but I'd miss him if he was gone, I've already lost too many friends...*

J: Seriously, why would I want to kill Ethan? I've already lost too many friends...

#####  
Cosplay... 'cause I play with myself  
!!!!!!!!!!!!

I don't consider myself an alcoholic.

###

I don't have an extensive history of substance abuse.

!!!

*I'm not in denial.*

!!!

*I have no vested interest in lying about such things.*

###

But I have been lonely in my life... very lonely.

###

They have support groups for such things.

###

These groups tend to meet at the same place as does AA (Alcoholics Anonymous), NA (Narcotics Anonymous), and CA (Codependents Anonymous).

###

This last -- CA -- if you're lonely, feeling sorry for yourself, intrinsically worthless, like all hope is lost, if that's the case, then Codependents Anonymous is a good one to go to.

###

And once you've gone to the one, you might as well go to the rest just to see what they're like...

###

It sounds a little something out of *Fight Club*...

###

But this I know, fiction is so often based on fact.

###

Anyhow, AA, I don't consider myself one, an alcoholic. NA, the same, I'm not an addict. But I've sat in on a meeting or two, introduced myself, said my name, and tossed a buck in the bucket when it comes around, just like an old hand. And in there, at the meetings, there is one thing I've learned, for some people, sometimes, when they take that first hit, well, finally they've found it, that drug that knows their name...

###

Mine was fantasy literature.

###

No lie.

###

*No !!!*

###

My drug was Science Fiction fantasy escapist literature. I read like a... well, like a fan boy, that what I was, a giant, adolescent fan boy, devouring artists entire life works in a few days, a week, or a month...

###

In third grade, I did not know that this branch of literature existed.

###

My parent's house was full of books, but precious few pieces of fiction. I was one of those kids who read the encyclopedia from beginning to end.

###

*"You, too?" I can hear the twins chorus as one.*

###

Yes, me too. And books on biology, chemistry, physics, real stuff, hard stuff, scientific journals my dad had lying around, social change, feminist stuff, my mother had lying around, psychology, sociology, New Guinean studies...

###

No Hardy Boys for me...

###

I've always found Jules Verne to be sort of boring...

###

But then in fourth grade, in the textbook, weekly reader, some thing, I got it in school, Lloyd Alexander's *The Book of Three* came out in one of the episodes.

###

I borrowed every last one of those readers in advance from the teacher -- don't know her name. I think she was ecstatic, overjoyed, that someone was showing an interest...

###

Or maybe it was that I was showing an interest...

###

But after the tenth or twentieth or thirtieth issue, she'd had enough. "You know, they have this book in the library."

###

"They have this book in the library?"

###

I had never considered it, the possibility. The realization changed my life. A whole section of books in the library devoted to fantastical stories of other places, other words.

###

Yes, there was a drug that called my name.

###

I admit, heroin sounded good. LSD too...

!!!

*The five of us dropped on the Fourth of July that first year, made it a tradition after that...*

###

But before that...

###

Before this...

###

Fantasy literature was my addiction.

###

It didn't hurt that all of the covers featured scantily clad bronze skinned women...

###

It's probably one of the reasons why I prefer scantily clad bronze skinned women...

###

One day, I brought a different sort of game home from Thee Olde Game Shop. It was called... *Slaughter Quest*<sup>TM</sup>!!!. Perhaps, you have heard of it. If not the first edition -- that coveted first run, 1000 units, unopened worth thousands of dollars on the market today...

!!!

*Ethan was one of the first...*

###

Truth, fact, who cares?

###

After all these years, who knows...

###

But Ethan was one of the first...

###

So cutting edge, the books, they were, the rules were a joke. Read them, they were, they are, one giant joke. They make no sense. That first edition set of *Slaughter Quest*<sup>TM</sup> is completely unplayable.

###

But it was fantasy and it was gaming and it added that allure of the collective experience -- one gets renown (levels up) the longer one plays.

###

It wasn't the weird dice that made *Slaughter Quest*<sup>TM</sup> unique. It was the leveling-up experience-point system that made it unique. The better gamer would win, because the better gamer had put in more time...

###

Victory through perseverance...

###

And trust me on this, Ethan and I put in the time.

###

David tagged along. He always played a *Holy Warrior*. We'd let him cheat on his rolls a little for this, otherwise he wouldn't play. Also, dragons tended to like him, because, well, he had an affinity for the name.

###

It was a weak argument, but we wanted him to play.

###

And play we did, Ethan and I, for two years, at least, seventh and eighth grade, leveling up, rolling the dice...

###

Man, it was boring...

###

Tedious...

###

Dull.

###

I remember walking the two minutes home, feeling like the back of my brain was missing, like I'd been hit by a brick...

###

Ethan's family had put up a fence. They were like the only family for miles that had put of up a fence...

!!!

*Luckily, there weren't any fences anywhere in my neighborhood, so I could cut through from back of Ethan's yard, right through the twins...*

###

"Hi, Alex," they'd say as one.

###

They were always friendly whenever I'd meet them. I mean, I never felt like we were friends, but at least we weren't enemies. But they were a bit weird.

###

“Why don’t you use the road?”

###

“Do you like walking in my yard?”

###

“Dad doesn’t like you leaving tracks in the snow.”

!!!

*“Oh, I almost forgot, thanks for the music box.”*

###

So, that’s what I got them, so long ago, as a birthday gift...

###

“It’s our favorite song,” *Green Sleeves*.

###

Anyhow, this went on for years. David and my friendship took a sort of back seat. “What? You guys are playing Slaughter Quest™, again? No. I’m going to ride my bike. Let me know when you want to get a life.”

###

But don’t get me wrong, David and I still hung out for other reasons. Ethan wasn’t that big on taking the hike to the next town over to watch a movie or simply go to the store for a coke...

###

But I was telling you about Slaughter Quest™.

###

Slaughter Quest™ as almost every -- and I mean, EVERY -- kid I’ve ever had the privilege of watching (or pain of playing with) plays the game in the most inane way ever. It’s just so stupid. The details aren’t important. Take my word on it, it’s akin to playing Monopoly against the bank, where two or more players team up against the world, and the goal has somehow morphed into winding one’s way around the board as often as possible to collect that \$200.

###

I admit it.

###

My name is Alexander and I'm a Slaughter Quest™ addict. I wasted two, three, four or more years of my life leveling a character from 1<sup>st</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup>...

###

Did I say 23<sup>rd</sup>?

!!!

*I meant, I was a 36<sup>th</sup> Level Dark Necromancer with an Elvin Lass on retainer.*

###

Trust me, every 36<sup>th</sup> Level Dark Necromancer has a sultry Elvin Lass on retainer.

###

Years later, I finally found out how to play Slaughter Quest™ the right way... make it more like a book... a personal story... with all the wrongs turned to rights. Who needs a magical spell when their's the -- *!!!italics function!!!* -- sitting right there, inches away, right at your fingertips...

###

Hell, maybe everybody else in the world played the game with style and grace. All I know is we played it for shit.

!!!

*I mean, the way Ethan did it was a thing of beauty, organized, throughout, detailed, thought out wandering monsters, and story arcs you could really get behind, dungeons that made sense, beautiful riddles...*

###

I loved that game.

###

And Ethan had decided he wanted to do this high school thing right, so first year, not even a month into it, when his parents were out of town, he invited us over for an epic battle...

###

Dark Necromancer this...

###

Skull Castle that...



###

And a sultry Elvin Lass in need of rescuing...

###

Yeah, playing right into David's sense of heroism...

###

And my budding eroticism...

!!!

*Sure, Ethan would play the role of the Dark Necromancer, controlling the evil warlord's troops, but he had worked it out, so he would count his winnings in how long he lasted, he knew the deck was stacked against him, he had stacked the deck against himself, and so defeat was a foregone conclusion, it was only a matter of where, when, and how...*

!!!

*Besides, looking back, I'm pretty sure Ethan fancied himself a wayward Elvin Lass that had been beguiled by the forces of evil and was in definite need of rescuing...*

!!!

*I don't know. After Desert Storm, David wasn't the same, lost a leg, came back, took to drinking, and then there was this distance between... him... Ethan... everyone... like he'd already died...*

!!!

*I guess it was a relief when the bullet finally came....*

###

I probably should be careful with that last, talking of bullets to the head. I learned this writing first person thing, revisionist history style, at a friend's knee, *name's best unsaid*, and look where that got him...

###

Bullet to the back of the head, in case the reference is unclear... *after all the back-cleansing.*

###

For those who might read too much into the last, I am not the suicide type.

###

I am the hookers and heroin in a Thai Bar Sex Junket type, the only gun that would ever be involved, that of a hypodermic syringe, hastily loaded, plunged home without thought, in quivering delight...

###

But please, let me go through my money first. It should last at least a few weeks in a House of Delight...

###

If I play my cards right, maybe string it out for the rest of my life...

#####

Rainbow Power

!!!!!!!!!!!!

Do you feel like another music video?

###

I know, I feel like another music video.

###

Rodney James DIO's *Rainbow in the Dark* was one of my favorite songs. It's dark. You're a rainbow. There will be light and wonder on the other side after the dawn. One of the lines is something along the lines 'Do your demons let you go... is it someone that you know?' I see Ethan's face riding up in a tornado storm during at this part of the song.

###

David and I never formed a band, nor with Ethan... or *ET*.

###

David would have been the burly, psychotic drummer, Ethan on bass. I'll take lead guitar and vocals thank you very much... not that I can play a lick...

!!!

*My instrument of choice is the flute, but I only dabble...*

###

While the twins get to be the back up singers...

###

In the '80s, they were just starting to do the music video thing, American Bandstand was all high tech with a mobile camera stepping through the dance floor, and two-tone pictures, half screens, and mirror flips were all the rage.

###

The twins come rapidly to mind whenever I see a mirror flip -- an image split in half reflecting back on itself like a book (maybe this one) held up against a reflective surface -- double the pleasure, double the fun, two twins in one...

!!!

*I have a picture of the twins... cut it out of the yearbook...*

!!!

*I have a picture of the twins... senior class year...*

!!!

*I have a picture of the twins, the one we took before we went to the prom...*

###

I have a picture of the twins...

###

A career in imaging, a career in photography...

!!!

*Tom, my neighbor, is a dentist, retired, limited clientele, made enough in the stock market. And I'd mentioned that I'd...*

!!!

*That we'd...*

!!!

*That I had looked at some raw land before I'd bought the condo, Pu'ako, surfer beach, Crazy Eights, Diamond Head, Waikiki... North Shore overlooking the break...*

!!!

*Wrong side of the road of course, I could only afford it two blocks in. But on a lark we went out to the place, for sale, you*

*know the rest, Ethan fell in love with the place, bought it on the spot, low ball offer, overpaid, got into a bidding war for a piece of primo beach front property overlooking a massive break... waves... beach bums... TV events... surfer chicks...*

###

It's a big place...

!!!

*Ethan bought the place, ex-wife, open relationship, more than enough room...*

!!!

*Tom's the ex-husband...*

!!!

*I've never been married...*

###

Why not?

###

Make amends.

###

Why leave it to the last page?

###

Do it now.

###

Do it here.

###

*There's a girl down the way, at the snack shop, plate lunch, behind the counter, too young, but she's a beauty...*

###

*She reminds me of the twins, the way she talks to her friends...*

###

*The twins wanted a photograph, so I did it for them, dress up, smiling, I still have the picture, carry it with me, hung on the wall, we were going to make it, in a band, no talent, singing covers, Rodney James Dio, Ethan in the twister, always the bad guy...*

###

Sitting around the pool, drinking mai tai's, Ethan reminiscing, old chums, calling up the past, "Remember when we used to game, play Slaughter Quest™?"

###

"Of course, you do..."

###

He played the bad guy so well, almost convincing, but just a role, a put on, in the video, the one that we did, he becomes like this swirling maelstrom, as the tornado hits...

!!!

*Special effects, I did them...*

###

I...

###

We...

###

We grew up in tornado alley...

###

And we played in the rain.

###

Seriously, no shit! We played in the rain!

###

Thunder and lightning, six inches of water would pour down in an afternoon, an hour, two, or three, and we go down to the creek, lightning flashing, playing our games, David was the first to go through the drain pipe, like a water slide, it looked dangerous, it was dangerous, a kid could drown...

!!!

*I never knew anyone who died...*

!!!

*Not close...*

!!!

*Not personal...*

!!!

*I mean, folks got weird. The twins went off and did this crazy cult thing, I don't know, S&M like, bondage fetish, the things that I heard...*

###

You had to know them. You had to watch them. Finishing each other's sentences, the twins were weird. I mean, real weird, freakishly weird... and sexy... and hot... the type of duo one is not soon to forget... and they could get into each other's mind, they were in each other's mind...

###

They lived in each other's minds...

###

They were each other...

###

Each other, themselves...

!!!

*And at, what was it, thirteen, fourteen, twelve, eleven, I don't know when puberty hit...*

!!!

*They started to look outward.*

!!!

*I'm just glad I was there at ground zero and when they were looking for someone, they found me.*

###

I got lucky.

###

'Is it someone that you know?' Ethan without a doubt.

###

'Rainbow in the Dark.' Oh, the twins, so dark, so alone, the song spoke to them, they needed to get out...

###

David, "Hey, it's metal, I'm in. We're going to grow our hair long, right?"

###

We never did?

###

Of course we never made it. I lipped synced the entire thing. Don't even know the words now, but it was one of those projects, weekend things, you do with your friends, before everyone goes their separate ways...

###

And when you meet up or talk on the phone in years past its what you think back on most...

!!!

*“David gets out of the hospital next week, Tripler, he'll come and, stay here.” That's Ethan talking.*

!!!

*I think both he and Ethan are looking forward to the, um, company...*

!!!

*I think Kate's gotten used to, you know, the fact that Ethan swings more than one way...*

#####

Brownies! The perfect Crime

!!!!!!!!!!!!

It wasn't like them, the twins...

###

I mean, it was everything like them...

###

But up to that point, it wasn't like them...

###

I suppose, there's a first time for everything.

###

The twins did babysitting, got good rates, often they'd show up as a pair... or separate, alone... the other...

###

There was no other...

###

Doing a different job down the street...

###

“Which one are you?”

“I’m the other one... Yeah, I know how you feel. It bums me out, too. I wish I were her.”

###

They liked to play. They liked to tease. They did group sits, two families, film parties, popcorn, the works. They were good at their job.

###

They made shit wages, of course.

!!!

*Sometimes, I’d visit them while they were on duty, tease them, join in the fun, “So, which one are you again? Fuck!”*

*“Don’t swear.”*

*“He said a naughty word.”*

*“Sorry, it’s just, little Suzy, I suddenly realized, we’ve got it all wrong. They’re really triplets!!!”*

###

But no, just messing with you, them, whoever, the little kid, twins were enough.

###

God I loved them.

###

Maybe it’s sacrilege... or perhaps just a prayer.

###

God I loved them.

###

But there was that blank space, for five, six, seven, or eight years when we didn’t speak much, because they were so into themselves...

###

And then, I think puberty hit...

###



And, “Brownies!”

###

And stealing the ingredients, taking them from the houses where they worked as a tip, as a show of defiance, as proof that they could do what they wanted...

!!!

*I broke into houses with them...*

###

It’s a trip, being in someone else’s house, drinking their booze, making a sandwich...

!!!

*I suppose it started with the Witch, the Old Hag... I couldn’t tell you her real name...*

!!!

*Not now...*

!!!

*I simply don’t remember...*

###

We cut grass, did lawns, shoveled snow, raked leaves, but cutting grass...

!!!

*Or selling grass...*

###

Was where the real money was at...

###

But I digress..

###

I mean, where we lived, we were wealthy. I grew up rich, top half of the top half, perhaps even more. I had money. I had toys. And we lived in this subdivision where every house was custom -- no suburban tract housing, didn’t even know what it meant -- there was a country club, golf, private dances, train to the city, *Mad Men*, the show, I think they just looked at my youth and dialed it back a few years, based it on that, on our parents...

!!!

*Our parents were rich.*

###

It is no surprise we did pretty well ourselves. The head start we had was amazing.

###!

And of course, being the children of doctors, lawyers, engineers, and...

!!!

*Tycoons...*

!!!

*They valued our labor...*

!!!

*They realized that it would be stupid for us to spend half the day, Saturday morning, cutting the lawn.*

###

We were destined for better things. We were taught... or at least, I was taught, to despise physical labor...

###

“You can do better than that.”

!!!

*And so, it would have been absurd, stupid, obscene to only equip us with push mowers, hand rakes, and a few plastic bags when the lots sizes were measured in quarter of acres...*

!!!

*Just stupid...*

!!!

*And it was so easy...*

###

And who couldn't use a few bucks?

###

So, we did our neighbors lawns as well...

###

Cash...

###

Or booze...

###

The Witch, the Hag, yes, I do believe there was more than one, paid us in booze... the tip... the lure... the hook, line, and sinker...

###

A sort of open-ended arrangement, “Just take what you want...”

###

“Drink it here.”

###

You see, that was the catch, drink it here, they wanted the company. But what’s a guy to do...

###

David was a man of honor.

###

OK. Sure, he had a weird sense of honor that included fighting and punching someone in the arm as hard as he could for the slightest infraction, but it was honor that drove him...

###

“We can’t just steal her beer. We have to drink it here.”

###

Besides, it was safe, she had a TV, she went to sleep early, snored something awful, but it was a pretty good deal, back from a late night, walk, home, all alone, and if you felt like tossing one back, get a stiff drink, maybe she’d be awake... or suddenly awake in her chair, “Fill mine when you’re up.”

###

And a person got used to being in another’s house.

###

“You do this?”

###

In a word, yes.

###

It became quite the thing.

###

Some got sloppy...

###

Some got arrested...

###

But for a drink, for a sandwich, somewhere to crash on a cold winter's night, I mean, you knew they were out of town, they'd paid you to look after the place, and, well, a guy's got to start somewhere...

###

A guy's got to start somewhere...

###

And the twins started by gathering the ingredients for those brownies.

###

"It so stupid," angry, talking it over, together, all at once, and as one. "Everywhere else..."

"We're the adults."

###

It was time to take a stand. It was time to make brownies at home.

#####

ETC...

#####

David liked to play dragons, when we gamed. He liked to imagine himself as a dragon, swooping down, part of a pack, perhaps he imagined riding a motorcycle in his mind...

###

The twins were eating brownies... we were in the midst of a campaign, taking a break, out back, where the houses meet, where they put all the sewer infrastructure, electrical junction boxes, often under great big willow trees, sweeping branches, cleared spaces, where kids love to congregate and adults never go...

###

We tried our hands at cigarettes back then, in the bushes,  
back there.

!!!

*They weren't worth it.*

###

But alcohol, weed, taking a break from the game, out back,  
talking strategy, no dice, no rolls, just sort of mulling it over, late at  
night, window lit up, light streaming out, at *ET's*, the twins...

###

“I wonder what they're up to...”

###

And the same right back...

###

No, not quite....

###

The twins were having a slumber party, unto themselves,  
brownies in bed, with ice cream and syrup, they'd wash the sheets  
in the morning before anyone got back, making a mess, but no  
worries, how many times had they cleaned up for others...

###

“No, Sarah was perfect.”

!!!

*“No, no. She didn't wet her bed.”*

###

Sarah can thank me later...

###

She never will know...

###

The *ET's* alone in their room, candles lit, playing Merry  
Weather...

###

“Merry Weather...”

“Mary Whether...”

“Marry Whether...”

###

And if you looked in the glass, the girl in the eyes, you swapped places...

!!!

*If you were lucky, into the body of your sister.*

!!!

*You know, what the fuck...*

###

I mean, they started a cult, free love, whatever... I don't know the details. I mean, you grow up with someone, next to someone, think you sort of know them, but you don't...

!!!

*Only years later on a fluke on a lark...*

!!!

*"Ethan has a house here!!!"*

###

OMG! OMG! OMG! Two...

!!!

*Maybe three...*

###

No only two, I remember the two, on the beach, random encounter, dressed in bikinis, the top of the one matching the bottom of the other, still up to their old tricks, as hot as ever, going over old times, laughing recalling...

###

"What?"

"No..."

"I mean..."

"Yeah."

"So, yeah."

"Yeah," they agree looking at each other, smiling, kissing Alex -- that would be me -- on the cheeks, just like before, a promise of things to come...

###

Just like before...

###

“Well...”

“We didn’t...”

###

And flooding it out, brownies, ice cream, mess on the floor, down to the kitchen, laughing, food fight, what are mops for anyhow, they’d get it tomorrow, lighting a fire, it wasn’t that cold, but forbidden, on the couch, what else do you do at a slumber party.

###

“Truth or Dare!”

“Truth or Dare!”

###

Only, they knew all their truths, every last one, two as one, one as two, who would you like to kiss, hold hands, you know, except for the other...

###

Fireside chat, a first kiss, each on the lips...

###

“This isn’t going to work, is it?”

The other agreeing, “We need a boy.”

###

And a look out the window...

###

In WWI, they’d only light two cigarettes off of one match, because the snipers could get a fix on the third and blast off their head...

!!!

*David, laughing, sipping a beer, mai tai in hand, “Thanks, Ethan,” one guys hand on the other’s thigh, Kate pretending, looking away, he’d been a good father to her daughter, Karen giggling, “So, like, they’re lovers?”*

###

And all’s fair in love and war. And I do believe David is next line...

###

But he's shaking his head...

!!!

*No, David doesn't care. "This is nothing like war. Man, we had it so wrong, back when we were kids, taking down Dark Necromancers. That's what we were doing that night, when we all first..."*

###

*ET smiling, laughing, working the grill, sun dresses, nearly naked, something to see through...*

###

"I don't know about you three and your kinky games..."

"But I was playing..."

"Truth or Dare..."

"And it seemed like..."

"High time for a dare..."

###

"I needed a boy..."

###

"Sure enough, I needed a boy," telling the story for the other... which other... as they both agree as one... no separation, no self...

###

I mean, I mean, what do I mean...

###

I was high, floating, balls to the wall, trees bending, elves come to life, back there in those trees, back alley, back in the day, and David and Ethan are talking all weird, slapping, pushing, David wanted to shove, you could tell, but...

!!!

*David never hit me...*

###

We were friends and friends don't hit friends...

###

David never-ever-ever hit me...



###

Wasted a guy in seventh grade, came from the wrong side of the tracks, got in my face, called me a fag, and David just destroyed him, out for two weeks, kicked, and punched, and laid waste to the kid... a powerful enforcer.

###

You did not fuck with that kid.

###

So, like, if he wanted to call me a fag... he could.

###

And, in truth, today, after all these years, if he wants to be a fag... he can.

###

But back in the day, I didn't have not a clue, wresting, joking, smoking...

###

That smoking thing, sparking a lighter, is a cherry bomb explosion that lights up the night, I could see it, you could see it, the twins could see it...

###

“Boys!”

###

Putting on coats, scrambling outside, we were cold, late in the night, hands in pockets, shivering, sharing booze, roaches, and pipes, such innuendo, same mouth on the pipe, probably half of the allure, and *ET* taking her choice, what choice did she have...

###

“Alex!”

###

Hey, that's me!

###

And a kiss on the cheek.

###

“She dared me!”

“She dared me!”

###

And another for good luck

###

And then noticing the smoke, a real kiss, taste on the lips...

###

“What’s that?”

“What is that?”

###

So, you guys decided to break the rules tonight, too.

###

“Fate.”

“Fate.”

“Fate.”

###

What? I mean, a guy can see an opportunity for what it is, once in a lifetime, limited chance, so yeah, I agreed and said, “Fate.”

###

And then I pulled *E* close and kissed *T* on the lips. But I never could tell which was which, so I switched them around, and did them the same thing once again, to the other...

###

There was no other...

###

“I was pretty wasted...”

!!!

*Good friends, beach front, Ethan made a shit load of money, me not so much, David never cared, he got the honor and the glory and a slight limp from the pins in his leg, but I mean, fuck it all, if you’re going to take up hang gliding and BASE jumping and dropping out of planes, you’re going to have to expect a few broken bones...*

###

But then, I think Ethan gets off on the scars...

###

How does that saying go?

###

Wounds heal, pain is fleeting, but scars last forever...

###

“No, dude. It’s glory.”

###

“Scars.”

“It’s scars.”

“Chicks dig scars, Alex.”

“That’s what they say.”

“Anyhow, that’s what I say.”

“Show me your scars.”

“You must have scars.”

“You’re a writer.”

“Well, *‘He writes.’*”

“That means he’s a writer.”

“What do you write about, Alex?”

“Tell me.”

“I’ll tell you my secrets...”

“If you tell me yours.”

###

So, what’s to tell, Hawaiian sunset, end of my life, trailing years, uneventful...

###

Loved a few, lost a few, then found them again...

###

Not particularly rich...

###

But miles from poor...

###

But most of all I am fortunate enough to be able to write what I want without a care in the world...

###

And when it comes to that last line, you can believe what you want, truth or fiction, fantasy or fact.

###

But one thing is undeniable.

###

If nowhere else, in my own mind, it has all happened.

!!!

*And that, my dear friends, is a statement of fact.*

!!!

**Bitter Sweet**  
**Ghosts of Childhood Past**

as told by

*Alexander*

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*Some of the voices in my head are quite litigious, so let me remind them, you, Ethan, whoever, that this story is pure unadulterated fiction -- and no coincidence is in point of fact, fact. In fact, if truth is to be told, more often than not, I find truth to be stranger than fiction. And since I like to keep both feet on the ground, I write fiction -- pure fiction. But as to me writing fiction, well, that last bit is pure fact.*

*Yeah, put that in your pipe and smoke it.*

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## Story Notes

*I find it sort of telling, what Alexander needed to write down in order to remember what he needed to remember, I suppose...*

*And so, said notes are included herein with whatever other information I am able to scrape together for the purposes of clarity and completion.*

Alex

Kate, wife (*important information like that one does not want to want to forget*)

Karen, daughter (*after all, it would be highly embarrassing if ole Alex were to talk about his sexual honeymoon dysfunction as it related to his relationship with Karen*)

Ethan

Vietnam - Fragged by his Own Troops

Desert Storm - stepped on a land mine

Beat Cop - routine Traffic stop

Beat Cop - Domestic Dispute

Hit by drunk drivers (stupid bitch)

Seventh Grade - Moved away, fought last day, little shit

*(Note the progression...)*

Ethan

Epic Miniatures Battle - Smoking Back Yard - ends

Wallets -- for Next Group (*part of the story not told, Ethan didn't mind so much that he was selling magazine subscriptions to fund the trip the Glee Club would be taking to Washington... whenever they raised enough money... 10-20-30 years from even now, into the future.*)

David

Motorcycle Mountain Road

Hang Gliding  
Dancing with a Train  
Swimming Across a Lagoon (*I think this one hit the news, always helpful to use news stories as stepping stones whilst jumping across realities*)  
Duel with a Amazonian Witch Doctor  
Bottle of scotch, sleeping pills  
Think he got married, 2 kids,  
Special Forces, when he reenlisted, I died a little inside  
(*Notice the same sort of progression thing happening, here...*)

David

Fight in Gym class defending Ethan  
House Break In  
Vandalism -- wanted to get caught  
Hockey - yellow, underwear, piss... probably wet bed  
(*because, you know, its an important story detail, illuminates the nature of the character*)  
Safety Pin through ear -- Ethan does this for him (*so, sort of like a male bonding ritual, yeah, that's what they call that...*)

Kim & Kelly (*I know too many Kim's & Kelly's, so I changed their base names*)

Drunk Driving Car crash  
Cult leaders, drank their own water  
Kindergarten, moved away, never got to first (*whatever that's supposed to mean...*)

Recruited for Super Secret Government Project... stress too much (*obviously, this refers to the CIDC or other psychically funded government agency that deals in capes, robes, and latex costumed super heroes...*)

Suicide Murder (*though how one person can accomplish both on themselves -- first I will kill myself, then I will murder myself, and then it's off to bed and a bottle of sleeping pills for me...*)

## Twins

Truth or Dare with Each other  
Alternate Test... class attendance...  
Alternate date...

*Alex (so, originally Alex was going to separate himself out as a separate character; good thing he didn't for obvious reasons -- dead men tell no tales, and all that...)*

Childhood Leukemia

*Paralyzed waist down -- visit him... (perhaps a reference to impotence, but what do I know...)*

*Got Aids... from a blood transfusion (yep, blood transfusion, that's how it's usually done... oh, yeah, right, but I forget, hypodermics, sort of makes you wonder how David ever got into the marines in the first place with all those tracks, but perhaps, that was in a different world...)*

*Cold... pneumonia... death (Happens, a co-worker once died that way, over the weekend no less, death strikes quickly in some cases...)*

*Cocaine, once = stroke (yes, just once, Alex, we believe you...)*

Notre Dame... all state... coaches little league, gym coach

## Alex

*Around the world... (you can't touch the floor, there was a recent Community TV show episode about this game, they called it Lava, Hot Lava, Lava Floor, Floor on Fire, or something like that.)*

*Asleep under bed... (don't want to get found or left alone, it's a good place for a nap, apparently, everyone thought he'd gone missing, kidnapped, or whatever, hacked to bits by some maniac in the stream bed, maybe some vindictive author from the future who'd come back in time to wreak havoc on his so-called friends... but, whatever.)*

## MUSIC VIDEOS

Rainbow in the Dark (*did this*)

Welcome to the Jungle (*guitar solo near the end and one is transported to an Aztec temple, 'you're going to die', 'it's going to bring you down', it's a bad trip, 'huh!!!'*)

Rooster (*cock-a-doodle-doo, did this one too*)

Jeremy (*got me, but it does sort of seem like it would lend itself to some sort of psycho school chemistry experiment thing... ah, in my day, if we filled out a test form with a #3 pencil, we thought we were being bad boys...*)

Crazy Train (*'paper wounds still bleeding' is an obvious reference to roll playing games, and the action takes place on a model railroad yard as one by one the player's character's (got to get those 's, right) and as they do, the players sitting around this gargantuan model railroad set (Ethan's father had one, apparently, big old thing, great for miniatures battles, or so I am told) and as they died in game, the players disappeared into a puff of smoke, turned to paper, that wafted down onto the table... game over*)

## POP QUIZZES - SUBJECTS

(*'A quiz! Today! I didn't know there would be a quiz! And apparently, Alex wasn't prepared for this either... or preferring to wing it).*)

## TRUTH OR DARE SUBJECTS

Dick Crushed or... David (*Truth or Dare, Truth, OK, would you rather have your dick mangled or lose your eyesight, dick cut off or lose your hand, dick this, or dick that... in the end, there is only one way to play Truth or Dare and it's called Dare...*)

## Holiday Activities

Trick or treating (Who knew, freak that Alex, costume wearing freak)



Dirt Clod Fights (Sticks and Stones... dirt clods, oh, now you're asking for it)

Riding Bikes (*these were two wheeled contraptions that allowed the local hoodlums to ride in packs and increase their range of terror...*)

Halloween (*I know somebody who didn't proofread their notes. Lax, Alex. Lax. So, maybe he had something to say with this one, but I am sorry, not enough in the remainder to extract even the smallest of glimmers. Me, I liked getting peanut butter cups the best.*)

Christmas (*is a special time of year, I wonder if the teacher is giving partial credit, this is my only hope for this one*)

4th July -- Gunpowder (*you know those big honking fireworks that go KA-BLAM!!! Well, sometimes they don't go KA-BLAM!!! They just drop from the sky, land on the ground, and are duds. Those ones are full gunpowder, about the size of a stick of dynamite, and quite capable of blowing up your tree-house, just saying...*)

*And they call it fiction,*

*Fiction*

*Fiction.*

*Why?*

*Because nothing, nothing, nothing is true.*

*Flipper will back me up on this*

*Just ask him,*

## **Bitter Sweet Ghosts of Childhood Past**

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So, that's where more pieces like this may be found. Also, if you find this document hosted on any other site, you can rest assured that particular site is run by a bunch of thieving idiots who now owe me at least \$250,000 for copyright infringement. Thieves, because they don't have the right to host this document. Idiots because, well, exactly how hard is it to scrap off a few words at the end of a document (or even read it before you post it)? And \$250,000 because theft comes at a price... a hefty price if I have anything to say about it.

## **Bitter Sweet**

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