

Don Kunz

Rehearsing For Vietnam

I never figured agent orange for a truth serum. But now I've got to tell somebody or the story dies with me. Looks like you're it.

Thirty three years ago I was a sophomore in high school, the youngest reporter for its newspaper, *The Frigate*, and I had been assigned to preview the spring talent show. When I stopped off on the way to auditions to get a notebook, I found an envelope stuffed into the crack of my locker door like something waiting to crawl out. It was stained with mud and motor oil, and as I walked down the empty hall, I tried to think how I could open it without getting my hands dirty. By the time I reached the auditorium I thought the hell with it. As I crossed the threshold and the big double doors banged shut behind me, I ripped one end off. There was a death threat inside. It made me sick. I couldn't know then that the threat was bogus; the fear was real. I see now everything that followed was a rehearsal for what happened to me in Vietnam.

The auditions were closed to the general student body. Mr. Cuddy, the Vice-Principal, would have turned me away if Miss Blocker hadn't remembered me from her speech class. With the death threat stuck in my throat, I stammered out something about a deadline. She gestured toward the right and said "well, have a seat down front, then, dear, but don't rattle your papers."

Miss Blocker was six feet tall, so she could look down on most of her students and many of her colleagues. During World War II she'd been a Captain in the Women's Army Corps, and she still had a commanding voice and a posture that made everyone around her seem to slouch. I was waiting for my growth spurt at fifteen. At just over five feet tall

and a hundred and fifteen pounds I think I brought out Miss Blocker's maternal instinct.

I sat in the first row, which put my eyes at stage level, folded the lap top desk over my legs and laid out my spiral notebook and pens. The auditorium felt empty. I could hear students milling around in the wings back stage and saw a delicate tracery of cigar smoke hanging in the air. Then Mr. Botwinik, the janitor, opened the red velvet curtain.

Being a reporter, I knew most everyone auditioning, but I searched their faces carefully. For the first time I was being forced to distinguish enemies from friendlies, something that never got easier even with practice. Janie Lang and Madeline Beamer seemed perky even without their cheerleader pompoms. Jimmy Perkins resembled a lethal Elvis with his oily hair raked back, a snarl on his lips, and a black guitar in his hands. Paul Sanjek smiled broadly as he practiced card tricks for Linda Ekberg. With her back toward me Linda's waist was so narrow and skirt so tight that her rear end flared out like a heart on a greeting card turned upside down. Cy Bertrand stood apart from the rest, not so much leaning against the back wall of the stage as appearing to be its principal means of support. Standing six foot three with a face riddled by acne, a nose curling into a hook, and forearms like Popeye—he might have made a good gargoye on a medieval cathedral. I don't know if his face had ever stopped a clock, but it had certainly stopped opposing linemen in the interscholastic league. What was his talent? Scaring people to death? My older sister Kris was up there, too, looking beautiful and shy and nervous. She rubbed her right shoulder where an arm should have been if she had been born with it then gave me a little left-handed wave like a person who is having a heart attack but too polite to make much of a fuss about it.

Never mind who I am. I've changed all the names anyway. I don't mind dying, but I don't want to get sued.

The auditions began when Janie Lang stuck her pixy face out and lip synched her way through "I Enjoy Being a Girl"—a routine she had performed in the fall senior play. Then Jimmy Perkins, strumming his Sears & Roebuck guitar, sang "You ain't Nothin' but a Hound Dog," with a sneer on his face and slow undulating hip movements. Miss Blocker and Mr. Cuddy twitched in their seats while the girls in the wings huddled and whispered. Finally Miss Blocker leaned down and spoke to Mr. Cuddy. A moment later he rose waving his arms, and Jimmy drawled out "you ain't no friend of mine" before grinding to a halt.

Mr. Cuddy straightened his tie. "I think we've seen enough Mr. Perkins. Remember that parents will be present as well as younger brothers and sisters. We want a good, clean show!"

As Jimmy collected himself to defend rock and roll against the guardians of public decency, the double doors at the rear of the auditorium blew open, and Frank Steiner swept in followed by his two understudies—Vance Wilson and Sal Mancini. With their hair greased back into ducktails, their t-shirt sleeves rolled up to display their tattoos, and their pegged levis tucked into black leather motorcycle boots, it was as if rock and roll had invented them.

While Mr. Cuddy stood paralyzed by what Jimmy Perkins had conjured up, Miss Blocker rose quickly. Striding brusquely down her row kicking seat bottoms up, she reached the center aisle where she turned to glare at Frances Willard High School's three thugs in residence. Her voice was about two decibels under the threshold of pain. "Mr. Steiner, you are disrupting the auditions. You and your friends will have to leave." She gestured toward the doors of the auditorium in what I recognized from a stained glass window in church as the posture God assumed when banishing Adam and Eve from paradise.

Frank stood his ground. He wasn't any bigger than I was, but he seemed to swell up with malevolent energy. He looked Miss Blocker up and down. It took some time, but she waited patiently and seemed happy to be measured. When Frank finally spoke, he moved his mouth broadly as if he expected everyone in authority was deaf and had to read lips. "But we have an act."

"You certainly do. But do you have talent?"

Frank hooked his thumbs in his front pockets and tried to look hurt, but a surly tone betrayed him. "Why don't we find out?"

"Just what do you plan to do, Mr. Steiner? Spray paint a graffiti mural on the proscenium arch or beat somebody up to a jazz score?"

I think Frank liked Miss Blocker. She was somebody worth fighting with. "Which one suits you?" he smirked.

"Neither. The talent show is for acting not acting up, Mr. Steiner. It does not suit your obvious gifts."

"We wanna audition. Why don't you give us a shot?"

"I would be happy to oblige you, Mr. Steiner. Unfortunately, when I resigned my commission, I had to turn in my service revolver."

Frank pretended to mop his brow. Even he could suck up to authority when it suited him. "Whew. If we got us a cease fire here, maybe you

and me can be friends, Miss Blocker.”

“That’s not my job, Mr. Steiner. However, if you really want to audition, you will have to go last.”

“Miss Blocker, I had to go last all my life.”

“Frank, you break my heart!”

Frank Steiner may have been small, but his gang’s reputation was enormous. As they disappeared through the stage door, students in the wings herded together toward the back wall and looked over their shoulders; then they saw Cy Bertrand and sidled back. Sitting alone with a death threat in my pocket, I found that fearful little group comforting. Finally, Linda Ekberg clomped out to center stage in her tap shoes and began to do shuffle ball changes and buffaloes to “Sweet Georgia Brown.”

Tap dancing has always seemed comic to me. I began to grin as Linda did a buck and wing with a frantic grace that showed off some nicely developed thigh muscles beneath her very short skirt. In the wings Frank had his arms extended and his feet shuffling in a spontaneous parody. I had to laugh in spite of myself until he turned his right hand into a gun and pretended to shoot me. Meanwhile, Linda kept shuffling and ball changing happily oblivious to what anyone thought, completely absorbed in her own rhythm. Later in college I read Yeats’ poem about not being able to tell the dancer from the dance, and thought of Linda that day and the way it looked as if she might dance right off the stage, pick up the books in her locker, shuffle down the front steps and do the ball change right up Euclid Avenue all the way home and buck and wing her way through dinner and buffalo her way past her civics homework. Then, perhaps she would dance through the rest of her life learning a few new steps every year and end up a limber old lady with great legs and a permanent smile which only faded when she danced across all the other graves in Forest Park Cemetery and laid herself to rest with one last dramatic ball change into her own coffin.

As Linda shuffled off her mortal coil stage right, Paul Sanjek emerged from the opposite wing sporting a long black cape and a shoe-polish mustache and began to do card tricks that nobody could see beyond the third row. He tried to lure Miss Blocker from the audience to participate, but she said “I’ll pass.” Then I heard her whisper to Mr. Cuddy “which is probably more than that poor boy will do.” And Mr. Cuddy looked like he might allow himself to laugh for the first time in about ten years.

Rising from his seat, Mr. Cuddy waved to get Paul’s attention and

asked: "Do you have any tricks that are a little bigger?"

"Bigger, Mr. Cuddy?" Paul's cape seemed to droop around his shoulders.

"Yes, Paul, tricks that might be seen in the last row of the auditorium."

Paul seemed to search some book on magic whose pages flitted just behind his eyelids. Then he drew his cape about him and swelled up like an enormous bat. Frank Steiner elbowed Vance Wilson in the stomach and pointed toward Paul. Paul's arms rose beneath the cape, and suddenly from its black folds two white doves exploded in a flutter and flash of wings. They swooped into the orchestra pit and up toward the ceiling where they chased one another among the chandeliers.

"Well, I'll be darned," Mr. Cuddy said. "That's a great trick, but how are you going to get them down?" Cy Bertrand came unstuck from the back wall; his eyes followed the flight of the doves like the creature in *Frankenstein*, getting his first glimpse of fire.

Frank swaggered onto the stage. "Hey, Mr. Cuddy. I've got a twelve gauge pump. How about Paul sets 'em loose, and I shoot 'em down?" He clapped his hands sharply three times. The doves darted frantically.

Paul glanced uneasily at Frank, then at Mr. Cuddy. "They usually come right back," he whined. "But they're afraid. I think I can get them down later when it's quiet."

Mr. Botwinik, waddled out from behind the curtain, drew heavily on his short wet cigar, removed it from his mouth, looked up and slowly blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. "I know two things," he rasped, holding up two pudgy fingers on his left hand. "One, I ain't goin' up there on no ladder for them birds. Two, anybody comes to this show better wear a hat." Then, he clamped his cigar between his teeth, jammed his hands in the front pockets of his bib overalls and retreated slowly behind the curtain with that graceful floating motion which gives dignity to obesity.

The rest of us stood mesmerized by the doves' airborne ballet. A mistake had become a show stopper. Then, Miss Blocker stood balancing a steno pad on top of her head like a mortar board. "Paul, get some bread crumbs from the cafeteria and a cookie sheet to scatter them on. We don't want to mess up Mr. Botwinik's nicely waxed linoleum floor. Now, what's the next act here? Let's see," she said lowering her steno pad and riffling its pages, "number five I think. Hurry. The buses will be here at four."

I watched Kris approach the microphone like the condemned ap-

proached the guillotine in *A Tale of Two Cities* which I was reading in Miss Shaw's tenth grade English class. It towered over her. There was no way she could adjust it with one hand. Mr. Cuddy was looking at Miss Blocker's list while she was eyeing Frank who had become interested in the ropes controlling the curtain. Before I could rescue Kris, Cy Bertrand wrapped his big hands around the microphone's silver throat and wrestled it into submission. She gave him a little smile and took a deep breath.

Her soprano was a rising wind saying nothing in particular, just an instrument in perfect pitch. I had heard her sing in the church choir accompanied by an organ, but this was the first time I had heard her solo a cappella on "Amazing Grace." Mr. Cuddy took his glasses off and closed his eyes. Miss Blocker steepled her fingers together and stared out the window where new gold-green leaves on a willow tree swayed above the asphalt parking lot. Jimmy Perkins lifted his guitar and quietly ran his fingers over the frets trying to follow every note she hit. Linda Ekberg kept her feet perfectly still on the gray and green linoleum squares of the auditorium. Janie Lang seemed to be contemplating the value of the word perky. And Paul Sanjek stood in the back of the auditorium with a cookie sheet full of bread crumbs like some part-time deacon in a small-town church ready to celebrate communion. Even the doves had settled on a window sill and begun to coo pleasantly.

Kris' voice was rich and resonant. When she paused for breath, silence hung in the air like light. It was her control over silence that made the air so full. She wasn't afraid of silence. Her life had been so full of it, so little chit chat, so few phone calls, so little attention from boys who had no use for a shy, slender girl with no right arm. And on the second chorus as Kris hit a high note on "wretch like me" and varied the rhythm, not holding the note but dropping it suddenly like a curtain, Frank Steiner's voice rang out in counterpoint. What all of us heard as clearly as Sal Mancini for whom it was intended was "Fuck the crippled cooze!" Then there was a heavier silence, dead air time, as we wondered what next? Frank Steiner grinned at having sabotaged an audition with so little effort. Acknowledging his own importance, he did a little half bow at the waist, which was why he didn't know what hit him. As Kris sang "I once was lost," Cy Bertrand straightened Frank out. His left hand pulled Frank's head up by the hair. His right hand sunk into Frank's crotch. Pivoting quickly he lifted him over his head, and while

Frank's arms windmilled like broken wings, Cy took three quick steps and deposited him head first into the metal trash can to rest with the dust bunnies, the orange peels, and Mr. Botwinik's smelly cigar butts beside the stage back door. Then Cy exited the stage door as Frank's understudies rehearsed their parts. Sal Mancini, mistiming his pursuit, broke his nose on the slamming door and turned back toward his audience blood gushing between his fingers. Vance Wilson, rushing to extricate Frank from the trash, took a boot in the solar plexus. He fell hard and leaned over to vomit near Mr. Botwinik's heavy black work shoes. The rest of us sat stunned. Even Miss Blocker was speechless. Wednesday afternoon auditions were over.

For the next two days Frank and his gang were absent. This was not unusual. But now it seemed ominous—like the smell of sulfur dioxide from the chemistry laboratory. We expected an explosion any minute. Paul Sanjek said Frank had bought a 45 caliber derringer to conceal in his boot and kill Cy some night when he emerged tired and groggy from football practice. Jimmy Perkins said he knew for a fact that Frank was using money he earned selling marijuana to hire professionals from back east to break Cy's legs with baseball bats. None of this seemed to trouble Cy Bertrand in the least. I watched him most of Thursday. He chewed thoughtfully on the inside of his cheek as he worked quadratic equations in eight o'clock algebra, plowed through his chop suey while looking out the window during first lunch, and walked slowly and steadily down the hallway toward his two o'clock civics lesson. It almost took my mind off my own problems. After all I had received the death threat, and it was in writing. That morning before my first class I worked up the nerve to show it to the principal.

Mr. Albright's watery old blue eyes looked down through his gold rimmed glasses at the crudely printed note, then back up at me. He smiled sadly. "He misspelled *ignoramus*. It says, 'you write any more lies about me you little egoramis, and your dead.' And your should not be possessive case. It should be the contraction for you are, you're. See?" Mr. Albright leaned forward to show me plainly where the writer had erred.

"Yes, I see that. I write for *The Frigate*, sir."

"Well, there it is!" He slumped back into his swivel chair and waved the letter above his head.

I crept forward on my seat. "I'm afraid," I whispered.

"You understand," he insisted, "you have nothing to fear from such a

person. Anyone who writes like this lacks the discipline to carry out such a threat.”

“Well, I don’t know, sir.”

“Of course you know,” he shot back. “You write for the school paper. Writing something is not the same as doing it. You are going to be just as safe as . . . as anyone can be at Frances Willard High School.” Mr. Albright seemed to be looking over my head at a large wall calendar. Perhaps he was counting the days until his retirement. As I turned to go, an orange and brown picture of the Grand Canyon beckoned above the month of April. It made me a little dizzy to look into the abyss.

That night after dinner Kris followed me when I took out the garbage. She wanted to know what a cooze was. So I pushed the leftover scraps into the galvanized can beside the garage, and I lied. I said it was a nickname for Bob Cousy who played guard for the Boston Celtics. “It’s a name for short people,” I said.

Kris bit her lower lip thoughtfully. “Well, I don’t see what’s so bad about that. I’m not really short. Not for a girl. And the word fudge. I don’t think Frank even knows how to swear. It’s not much of an insult, if you ask me!”

“Maybe Frank had an off day. It’s hard work being evil all the time. He was probably taking it easy.”

“Why did Cy get so upset, then? He’s never even spoken to me before. Then, he helps me with the microphone, and he humiliates the biggest thug in the whole school.” She twirled the ends of her long black hair and looked up to where a few stars were beginning to sprinkle themselves across the sky.

“Frank did call you crippled.”

“I think Cy has a crush on me. In fact, I’m sure of it. I’m going to write him a thank you note . . . on perfumed stationary . . . a pretty pastel . . . maybe with my monogram on it.

“Cy’s expecting a death threat, and you send him a love letter. It may give him a heart attack.

“It’s not a love letter . . . not exactly. Of course, you’ll deliver it for me. I don’t want seem too eager.

“I’d like to keep my distance. It can’t be healthy getting close to Cy right now. Like say gunfire were to break out suddenly. Besides, you don’t really want to become the Bride of Frankenstein do you?”

“Why, I’m surprised at you. Cy’s not a monster. Of course, he’s huge. That’s not what I mean. But he’s gentle and kind. A woman likes to be

able to look up to a man," she said staring down at me.

"Let's compromise," I said. "I'll buy the stamp."

But I'd used up my allowance, so I spent Friday stalking Cy Bertrand through the halls of Frances Willard High School. In one pocket I had my sister's elegantly calligraphed love letter on blush pink stationary that smelled of White Shoulders perfume, and in the other I had someone's badly misspelled death threat childishly scrawled in black crayola on newsprint. And although the author of neither, as a budding writer, I seemed prepared for any extreme.

What I wasn't prepared for was Cy Bertrand. The closer I got, the bigger and uglier he looked. I was beginning to feel mighty small tracking a monster while trailing the signature of my sister's perfume. After taking role in my ten o'clock physical education class, Coach Gauling had delivered a spontaneous lecture on the feminizing influence of colognes, all the while glaring at me. Afterward he tried to restore my manhood by singling me out to climb the huge rope to the top of the gym. No sweat. I could scramble like a monkey. Back then you couldn't give me enough rope for me to hang myself. And when I came in third on the wind sprints, coach eased up. But after lunch as we stood in front of our lockers, my friend Roger Mackie sniffed my shirt and pretended to faint with delight. And by two o'clock, just before the last class of the day, I almost was convinced that a love letter could be as dangerous as a death threat.

I was in the southwest corridor trailing Cy and thinking what I was going to say when I whipped around a corner and bounced off his chest like a slap shot off a goalie's mask. His enormous hands caught me in a loose embrace on the ricochet. "Okay, Dickhead," Cy rumbled. "Why are you following me?"

Luckily I had my speech prepared. I swallowed once, took a deep breath, held out the note and said, "here."

His arms gripped me like steel bands, but he unlocked them to accept the letter and held it up gracefully to the light. He breathed deeply. I could see the fragrance working on him like a drug. There was a softening around his eyes which were gray as weathered tombstones. Wedging his left index finger under a corner of the envelope flap, he carefully tore it open and began to read. A blush about the color of the note itself suffused his face and dampened the fiery glow of his acne. Embarrassment made him handsome. "Okay," he croaked. "Who are you, Dickhead?"

"No need to be so formal. Most people just call me Dick. I'm her

brother, and I was wondering if you would do me a favor?"

"To tell you the truth," he sighed, turning his back into the wall and speaking down to me over his shoulder, "I'd like to ask you for one. Look, Dick," he said fumbling his notebook open and beginning to write, "I'd like you to take her this."

"My name's not really Dick. That was a joke."

"You're a funny little guy, aren't you, Dick? Tell me, does dwarfism run in your family?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't want to break his concentration as he printed neat block letters all square and sturdy like the foundation of a house. It was quite a contrast to those loopy swirls that I had traced through the outside of Kris' envelope—dark shadows through the pink blush.

"I see you're trying to read my message. Don't. I haven't got an envelope, but I'm gonna fold it over twice. And, Dick, if I find out you read it, I'll put your nuts in the woodshop vice and crack 'em. Understood?"

"I won't peek. I got my own letter to worry about." I handed him the death threat which was much creased and smudged by now. I had studied it a lot.

Cy shook it open roughly like a grocery bag. "This guy can't spell for shit, and he's got poor eye hand coordination. Any idea who it is?"

"Well I write for *The Frigate*, so . . . I guess . . ."

He nodded. "Yeah. It could be anybody."

"I suppose we could find out who failed English."

"That's not going to narrow it down much." Cy folded the letter and tapped one edge against his front teeth.

"Don't eat the note. If I get killed, they could get a handwriting expert to look at it."

Cy lolled his head lazily around on his neck, loosening up his muscles in that casual way athletes have. "If it'll make you feel better, we'll trade places. I'll follow you around for a little while."

"Cy, you read my mind."

"Dick, it wasn't much work. You got a face like a topo map."

That afternoon on the way home from school I got beat up. After making up an algebra test, I left about four and walked down Garfield Avenue past the football field where Frances Willard was scheduled to hold a spring scrimmage against Westport that night. I had been assigned to do the write up for *The Frigate*, so when I passed the fifty yard line, I turned my back to the street, set my books down, put my fingers

through the chain link fence, and stood examining the field. The new mown grass was thick and lush. White chalk stripes crisply outlined the boundaries and yard markers. Behind the equipment shed Forsythia blossoms glistened like gold coins from a wrecked frigate. Purple iris perfumed the air. I took a long slow breath of spring and watched a crumpled examination paper all torn and dusty skitter along the track that ringed the field. The low rumble of a glass pack exhaust and slamming car doors turned my head.

Frank seemed happy to see me, like an older brother getting ready to teach his younger sibling a lesson in how to act. Sal and Vance were just supporting players; they probably had rehearsed frowning in front of a mirror, Sal peering cross eyed over his nose splint. Frank was the real talent, a natural. The south entrance to the school was about 150 yards away. I could see Mr. Albright and Mr. Cuddy strolling toward the faculty parking lot. Then they disappeared around the corner of the building. Frank's hands were dirty and scraped like he had just changed the oil in his car. He balanced on his toes like a boxer. "You're the brother of that crippled cooze sings religious crap. You're the little egoramis writes for *The Frigate*."

My legs and arms felt heavy. Only my lips and tongue could move, and they betrayed me before they knew what they were doing. "You write lousy fan mail. You can't spell for shit. And you have no taste in music."

Frank smiled at Vance. "Smart mouthed little bastard ain't he?" He shook his head sadly. "Well, maybe that's true. But guess what? I don't give a rat's ass!" Vance and Sal looked down in unison and scuffed the grass with the toes of their boots—a bit of choreography they had been required to master for membership in the union of thugs. "Sure, I got arrested for assault. But it wasn't like you wrote. We was dancin' an' she fell down. Ask Vance."

Vance smiled. "That's right. Plus, she was black."

"Right. See no big deal. She deserved it. Black an' she can't dance for shit. Just another dumb cooze. Know what I mean?"

"Frank, I report what happens. I don't make the news."

"I can change that," he said and hit me in the mouth. Then Sal kneed me in the stomach and my breath rushed out over my ruined lip and broken front tooth. As I doubled over, a fist cracked against my right ear, and I was on the ground not hearing much but a roaring sound and feeling their boots thud against my back and chest as their anger rose

and crashed down on me. Then someone was pulling on my right arm and someone else splayed my fingers out, and then a boot heel slowly ground them through the grass and into the dirt, and the hand got very hot and very big and I blacked out.

Coach Gauling found me sprawled in the weeds next to the fence when he came out to pull the yard markers from the equipment shed around 4:30. The school nurse had gone home, so he helped me into the trainer's room where he cleaned the dirt from the cuts, felt my ribs and fingers for broken bones, and iced down my lip and hand. Of course, coach wanted to know what had happened. Unable to speak or write, I couldn't do much to enlighten him. He had his own suspicion anyway. It had something to do with wearing cologne.

My mom cried, and my dad wanted to call the police, and my sister wanted to meet Cy after the Westport scrimmage and ask him to beat up Frank and his gang. Of course, none of what anybody wanted happened exactly that way. But Kris did go to the scrimmage with Linda Ekberg; they were even talking about becoming a song and dance act after graduation. Great, I thought, gospel tap. After my mother made an appointment with Dr. Harriman for me for the next morning, she sent me to bed early.

I may have been in bed by 7:30, but I was out the window and onto the porch roof by 7:45. When I jumped to the ground, it was softer than I had imagined, and I left some big footprints in the flower bed next to the drain pipe. I had expected to feel sick and scared like when I had first opened the greasy envelope and thought about getting killed. But actually being beaten up had changed all that. Now I wanted to kill somebody. I was going to need help.

Five minutes before kickoff I was standing in the shadows beneath the grandstand, which is a good place for a reporter. I listened to the band play a medley of fight songs as the teams did calisthenics in opposite end zones. I could smell hot dogs and popcorn. My stomach rumbled. I hadn't been able to get much dinner down. My upper lip hurt like hell. It stuck out so far I thought I could probably pull it back over the top of my head and go trick or treating. And my right hand throbbed steadily beneath the gauze; I kept trying to hide it my pocket where it didn't fit. Finally, I thought, the hell with it; let it stick out. The pain dulled. The anger sharpened.

I had always gone to church; I had thought of myself as a Christian; I had been taught to be long suffering. And as I stood in the shadows

that night beneath the grandstand where the spectators sat watching, as I stood outside the field where the players prepared to compete following a set of rules, I knew I didn't belong anymore. I knew I was not what I had thought and that I would never be that way again. I knew in my heart that I wanted to kill Frank Steiner and Vance Wilson and Sal Mancini if I could. And so I waited in the dark and thought about my chances.

During the opening coin toss I heard the rumble of the glass pack exhaust on Frank's '49 Mercury. His car entered the parking lot as I stepped into the darker shadows of the equipment shed. A few minutes later just as the kickoff was beginning and a cheer went up in the stands, Frank and Vance and Sal strolled into the stadium entrance carrying gym bags like players arriving too late to get into the game. Vance paused, darted his hand into the gym bag, pulled out a can, and spray painted a red swastika on the door of the equipment shed as casually as a dog pissing on a tree. Sal had not been able to get his bag closed; the handle of a baseball bat protruded around the zipper. They passed within ten feet of me and headed up the concrete ramp to the stands. They never saw me. I had become part of the darkness where I stood. Halfway up the ramp Frank met Paul Sanjek on his way to the snack bar and relieved him of the five dollar bill in his hand, saying "thanks for the donation; don't forget it's tax deductible." Then they disappeared into the crowd.

I turned and walked out into the parking lot. It was an old pasture that had been bulldozed and scattered with gravel to keep the dust down. It was deeply rutted and chunks of stone stuck up like bone fragments in a bombed out cemetery I later saw near a relocation hamlet in Songmy. The gravel crunched under my sneakers. I didn't try to be quiet. I had tiptoed around for too long. I had as much right as anybody else to walk there. The lot was full of parents' Ford Fairlanes and Plymouth Bellaires, students' Nash Ramblers with reclining seats and some customized street rods. Frank's '49 Mercury was in the last row backed up against the fence. I could barely make it out. The car was perfect for a young gangster. Stripped of all chrome and covered in dull black primer, it first appeared as part of the darkness itself, a gap in the row of respectable family transportation. But up close with the front lowered and rear raised, it looked like a shark bearing down on me.

I didn't have a plan. I wasn't even thinking. I was alone in the dark, but I was finding my way. And this is what I had come to. I realized I

was off balance. One foot was resting on a stone. I stepped back and reached down with my left hand. The rock was flat and jagged and about the size of Cy Bertrand's fist only heavier. One of Frank's tires must have dislodged it from the dirt. I knelt beside the left front wheel, feeling the gravel bite into my knees. I didn't mind the pain I was inflicting on myself. Oddly pleasurable, it made what I was doing real to me. I was on dark, rough ground beyond the artificial daylight that showed the rest where the sharp white boundaries were that divided us from them. I was rehearsing for Vietnam.

The stone lay across my left palm anchored by its own weight. I reached behind the tire and touched it once to where the brake line entered the wheel. Then, I drew my arm back in a wide arc in front of the tie rod and swung it forward smashing the stone against the fitting. I did that again and again until I felt the line break and heard the soft drip of brake fluid as it bled out. The stain I left did not show in the dark.

I set the stone back in place, stood up, and brushed the gravel from my knees. All Frank had to do was act like Frank, and he would kill himself and his understudies. It didn't occur to me at the time that he might kill someone else in the process. I threaded my way back through parked cars listening to their cooling engines tick in the gloom, moving on a zigzag course toward the warm glow of the lights. It took a long time. Somewhere along the way I noticed that a crescent moon had popped above the trees like the blade of a scythe.

I hadn't missed much. It was still the first quarter and no one had scored. I paused on the concrete apron of the west ramp where it spilled out into the stands by the visitor's end zone. Our Pirates were at their Tigers' twenty yardline. Absorbed in the game, nobody paid any attention to a short, skinny kid with a fat lip and a gauzy fielder's mitt for a right hand coming in late. I sat down by Roger Mackie and listened to his profane summary of the game's first seven minutes. Then he looked at me.

"Jesus Christ, what happened to your face? And your hand is all fucked up, too."

"I feh dowb," I managed as a thin string of drool ran from the corner of my mouth and fell between my knees to puddle on the concrete. I noticed some blood was leaking through the knees of my chinos.

"You what?"

"I feh dowb."

That's what I thought you said. What the hell. You bite your tongue or what?"

Jimmy Perkins turned from the row in front to interpret. "He says he fell down, stupid!"

"Well, shit. You break your fall with your lip or something?"

I shrugged and raised my right hand.

"He tripped over a gasoline can, fell on his face, scraped his knees, set off a spark and set his hand on fire," Jimmy explained.

Roger stared at Jimmy. "I don't believe that shit for a minute."

"Why not? It makes perfect sense. He's full of clues. Can't you see the guy's a walking booby trap?"

"Loob, I god a doob a ride ub on du gabe." I pretended to scribble on an imaginary notepad then waved one hand toward the field where Lance Hartley trotted out to the twelve yard line and prepared to kick a field goal by swinging his right leg high above his head.

"Crap," Roger said. "Those pussies don't have the guts to try for the TD."

Jimmy pinched Roger's knee. "He wants you to write his sports column for him, Roger."

"No shit? Can I say anything I want to? Can I tell the truth?"

"Yeb." I leaned over and spit carefully. It came out pink and frothy.

"I can say any shit I want to, and I get to sign your name?" The snap from center sailed high over the holder's outstretched hands, bounced once at Lance Hartley's feet, hit him in the chest, and ricocheted into his hands. The crowd sat stunned. Lance began running to the right along the twenty yard line. Just before he ran out of bounds, he stopped, looked up, and lofted a pass to the left side of the end zone where Cy Bertrand stood waiting alone. "My pleasure," Roger said slapping me on the back.

The rest of the game was poor entertainment. After our broken play scored, it became a defensive contest. Coach Gauling paced and gestured on the sideline. At the beginning of the fourth quarter he kicked over the ice bucket. Then with 2:07 left in the game we got down to the Westport 36 yard line. With fourth down and five yards to go, he sent in Hartley to set up for a field goal. But everybody knew it was a fake. Hartley was out of his range. So was coach; imagination was not his strong suit. He wanted to recreate a happy accident. Westport blitzed and Hartley was thrown for a ten yard loss. Then Westport went into their two minute drill, going long on every play, and got just past midfield

when the clock ran out on them.

As the teams left the field, I saw Kris rise from behind our bench and wave to Cy Bertrand. His cleats sent up a shower of sparks on the concrete runway leading to the tunnel beneath the grandstand. He pulled his helmet off and tossed his head back. A ring of wet dark curls framed his face and neck where the tendons stood out like mooring lines tethering him to the earth. He made a graceful little pivot toward her, pulled his mouthpiece out flicking the saliva off neatly in the same motion, gave her a big gap toothed smile, and disappeared beneath the stands. As far as I was concerned, Cy Bertrand was a troll returning to the underworld, but Kris stared after him with a look of pure yearning that would have inflated the ego of a Greek god. I thought her faith was misplaced. Where had he been while I was getting beat up?

The crowd slowly emptied the grandstand. I wanted to get out to the parking lot where I thought sure I would get to witness a terrible accident, but I got held up. Roger did an extemporaneous oral sports column that must have lasted ten minutes. He wasn't a bad ghost writer. If I deleted the profanity and melodrama, it would run about one column. On her way out Miss Blocker saw my puffed lip and wanted to know what had happened. She listened to Jimmy Perkins' preposterous explanation with great restraint. Saying nothing, she gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze that was enough to take my mind off pain anywhere else in my body. If I could have spoken clearly, I would have asked her to be my bodyguard. By the time I had freed myself of these pleasantries, Kris and Linda were very nearly the only others in the stands.

Kris was dancing around behind the iron railing that separated the stands from the playing field. I thought she might be drunk. "I'm going out with Cy after he showers," she squeaked. "We're meeting by the snack bar!"

"Goob for oo," I enthused trying to talk with one hand behind my back.

Linda reached out to touch my lip gently. Her nails were long and gleamed with bright red polish. "Oh your poor face." I felt a little tingling that began in my cheek and ran to my toes. She looked even prettier from the front. Just over her shoulder I saw a miniature Frank Steiner emerge from the ramp on the other side of the field then turn and descend from sight.

As we meandered slowly toward the snack bar, Kris bubbled along in praise of Cy Bertrand, Hero of the Westport game, Defender of the

Weak, Prince Charming of the Decade. Linda joined in, noting how broad and manly his shoulders were and how big he was, probably real big all over. I thought I might be sick. But as we entered the tunnel beneath the stands, Linda slid her arm around my waist, and I began to feel a little better. Ahead of us the snack bar gleamed with light. Mr. Botwinik had the register open and was counting his cash. As I looked over my shoulder, I saw three guys jump onto the cinder track that circled the football field, cross it, and drift our way across the thirty yard line. One was swinging a baseball bat, decapitating dandelion heads that the mower had missed. The other two carried gym bags.

Mr. Botwinik looked up from counting and squinted against the cigar smoke wreathing his swarthy, stubbled face. "You kids want one a these soft pretzels? Take 'em. They don't keep. They go hard overnight, and the salt drops off." Linda slid her arm from around my waist and leaned way over the counter to snag two pretzels while giving Mr. Botwinik an eyeful through the open collar of her blouse. He gave a long pull on his cigar and winked at me. "Ain't life full of surprises, kid?" he rasped. Then, he paused and looked at my face. "Wha'd you do, try to kiss yourself to death?" I'd never thought of that. It sounded like a good idea.

Kris and Linda chewed thoughtfully on their pretzels. Mr. Botwinik stuffed dollar bills into one white bag and dropped coins into another. I leaned my back against the wall and expected trouble. Stepping from behind the counter Mr. Botwinik set the money bags on the concrete floor. Then he reached up, pulled the metal grate down across the counter, and locked it with a grunt of relief. "I'd like to hang around and talk, but I got to turn them lights out now, kids."

"But we're meeting someone here," Kris said. "Can't you wait just a few minutes?" Three shadowy figures emerged from the gloom of the tunnel. They were wearing Halloween masks. One was tapping a baseball bat rhythmically against the wall. When he got closer, I could see it was a Louisville slugger. It looked used.

Mr. Botwinik turned at the sound. "Well, I'll be damned. Meeting someone, huh?"

"Oh, not them," Kris said. "It's not Halloween."

The masks were works of art. The guy with the bat had the face of withered crone, all moles and wrinkles and wens with a hooked nose and jutting chin. The one hanging back in the darkness was dressed entirely in black except for a white skeleton's face that reflected the light from

the snack bar. The shortest wore an alien mask with funny little antennas that stuck out where eyebrows should be and stepped right into the light as if he were the featured player in the show. He reached into his front pocket, pulled out a switch blade knife, and flicked it open. Masks are not always disguises. I recognized them in turn as Sal, Vance, and Frank.

Kris gasped and slipped behind Mr. Botwinik. Linda let out a little squeal and quickly wormed between me and the wall. Behind every good man, there was a good woman. I was hoping that behind every thug there was a hero waiting to mete out justice, but from where I was standing, I could see only darkness, and it looked empty. The alien and the crone inched closer. When I saw how slowly they took their pleasure, I realized simple robbery was not going to be enough entertainment. They were eager to see how we would react and what chance that might offer for displaying their talent.

The crone stood just to my left where she rested her bat on the wall above my head. The skull hung back in the tunnel. The alien stood to Mr. Botwinik's right; he raised the knife and placed it above the middle button of Mr. Botwinik's damp white shirt. He slid the blade downward half an inch. The button fell to the floor and bounced. Mr. Botwinik wheezed, "take the money, boys."

"We aren't boys," the alien sneered. He cut another button off with great deliberation as if it were something he had studied in school. He probably had.

"What's that behind him?" the crone said. "He looks like he's got three arms or something."

The alien stretched his neck to one side. "Yeah, you got something hidin' behind that ugly fat body besides money?" He glared at Kris. "It's that uppity one-arm cooze."

Let's take that, too," the crone said. "Teach her some new songs."

The alien's antennae fluttered and danced. "Maybe we'll take the little rat with the fat lip, too. Let him watch."

I felt Linda stir behind me. "What about me?" she said indignantly.

"Maybe we'll double date. Ever been out with an alien? It'll loosen you right up."

Back in the tunnel the skull hung silently in the darkness like some spirit of the evening. Then behind that death mask I saw the massive head and shoulders of Cy Bertrand at the entrance to the tunnel. For a moment I was amazed at how much he looked like the crone beside me.

He could have been her brother. “Frank,” I said, “the only thing you know how to loosen up is teeth.” Only it came out “Frab, un ody feng youb o ow loo ub i eef.” This prompted the crone to grab the bat at either end, place it across my throat, and push me up against the wall. I felt Linda slip away, then, under my left arm and heard her running toward the parking lot. Double dating had not appealed to her.

As if Linda’s escape were a signal, the skull jumped forward and hurled itself into the side wall of the tunnel. This sounded like a butcher’s cleaver smashing bone. Cy had eliminated any threat Vance posed. And Kris, who never had any doubt about being rescued, screamed her savior’s name like an answered prayer. As the alien turned toward the sound of bone shattering, Mr. Botwinik reached down, grasped the bag full of coins in both hands, and swung it against the side of his attacker’s head. The alien staggered, and his knife went skittering down the tunnel. I decided I had taken about enough from an old crone, and being deprived of all other forms of self expression, I kneed her in the groin. Sal groaned, doubled over and dropped the Louisville Slugger just as Mr. Botwinik turned out the lights.

Suddenly it seemed like everyone was running for the parking lot. But they weren’t. In the tunnel Vance lay unconscious. And beside the snack bar Cy shielded Kris with his massive bulk. I heard about that later. I think that’s when I started to like him. But that night it was all a broken puzzle; we had to piece it together in the morning.

The alien overtook Linda just where the stands emptied into the parking lot. As he ran past, she stopped suddenly, and the old crone, who was bent over and scabbling like a crab, knocked her flat. Having no desire to spend any more time in the company of thugs, I had hung back. But, then, curious about the outcome, I ran after them and tripped over Linda in the dark. I just lay there. It was the most comfortable position I had been in for three days. Linda latched onto me and we clung together like a couple of orphans at sea while Mr. Botwinik bore down on us like a poorly lighted cruise ship. He listed to port with the weight of the bag full of coins in his left hand and the bag full of bills in his right. Getting hit in the head and buried in singles and fives in the dark while lying with a woman who was happy to see me was not the worst experience I had in high school. Mr. Botwinik charged on, and with his load somewhat lightened, reached the parking lot in time to see the grand finale which I had a hand in arranging earlier.

All I got to see was the glowing tip of his cigar. But according to what

Mr. Botwinik told everyone afterward, Frank ripped off the alien mask as he ran through the parking lot. Pursued by the old crone doubled over holding her crotch, Frank jerked open the door to his Mercury, slid behind the wheel, and started up. Just as he shifted into gear and hit the gas, the crone slipped and went down. Frank's car fishtailed to the left, its right front wheel lurching over the crone's legs. She screamed and jerked upright just in time to be slapped in the face by the rear fender. Unmasked, Sal's face was just a red grimace in the glare of Frank's tail lights.

Frank gunned it toward the south entrance, spewing gravel like broken teeth. He shifted into second gear and wound that up to about forty by the time he got to the gate. There his brakes failed as he tried to turn west on Euclid, and his ride slammed straight into an elm tree. By the time Mr. Botwinik had waddled the 100 yards to the street, Frank's car had burst into flames sure as hell.

We all told our stories to the police. Mine must have been unintelligible as I mumbled and drooled through my ruined mouth. But it didn't make any difference in the end. The police heard what they wanted, and that's the way I wrote it up for the school paper. Finally all the authorities could do was identify Frank from his dental records because the rest of him was ashes and small bone fragments. Still, there was plenty to go by. For such a tough guy he had very bad teeth.

Back in school on Monday Mr. Albright and some of the teachers tried to pretend Frank's death was a great loss to the school. They wore long faces all morning, especially while being interviewed by reporters. But when asked about the armed robbery and the other two students in the hospital, they declined comment on advice of counsel. We all observed a moment of silence during the opening-of-school announcements over the public address system. However, by the time third lunch period was over, so was the charade. The air began to feel as light and warm as the week before summer vacation.

Thursday a lot of people went to Frank's funeral out of curiosity. Not me. I went to shovel dirt onto his ashes. The only relative in attendance was an uncle on his mother's side. A short man with a pock-marked face, he chewed tobacco and looked like his biggest worry was finding somewhere to spit. He was on probation having served two years for attempted rape. Probably Frank's role model. The truth is nobody mourned the death of Frank Steiner except maybe his dentist.

If you go to church regularly like I used to, you'll learn that every life

is sacred and every human being has good in him, and we should forgive one another and mourn the loss of any life for it diminishes us all. I stopped believing that when I was fifteen. And what I saw in Vietnam later was like losing my religion all over again. I was only there writing for *The Stars and Stripes* so I got to watch while everybody else was winning hearts and minds, and I have to tell you the scale and persistence of the slaughter convinced me that there never was any light at the end of the tunnel, only shades of gloom. The masthead under which I reported the sanitized version of our war in Vietnam eventually seemed less like a reference to Old Glory than a description of some instrument of torture forged in the name of a self destructive crusade during the dark ages.

I found out early there are a lot of evil people in the world whose whole happiness consists of doing some meanness. And if you let them, they'll take something from you—your money, your family, your self respect. They aren't going to back off, and most of those supposed to be in charge are too civilized to be any help. About the best you can hope for is to catch the devil off balance. A really evil person will create such an aura of destruction around him that he gets caught up in it. The devil stands on the edge of darkness, and when he loses his footing, it won't take much for you to push him over. But you've got to stand real close.

In Vietnam we discovered that we couldn't follow the rules of warfare we brought in country without losing. So, some of us abandoned them and realized too late that it had been just another way of losing. Anyone who crossed the line that had been drawn stepped into the twilight and got a long, painful look into a mirror. The fact is some of us became what we went there to destroy. It was easier for me. I had rehearsed.

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