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Crucifixion on the Corner of State and Bruening

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Crucifixion on the Corner of State and Bruening

As I was saying, mid-afternoon brought us, a horde of bitching, fighting, swearing parochial school students, to the bus stop across the street from Padua High. As we approached traffic-drenched State Road, we broke ranks. The bold and the smart-assed like yours truly marched across the street like gods. The more timid clung to the curb and waited for a sizable opening to appear before crossing. The stupid stopped in the center of the street hypnotized by the whining wheels and the blaring horns of their driving peer's automobiles. They eyed the passing cars with envy and flashed the finger at the bastards who tried to run them down. A Junior named Jason walked behind the rest. Head down. His black leather loafers scraped against the asphalt. One way or another, we traveled to the bus stop.

The stop was actually a shelter built on the corner of State and Bruening. Most of the brown metal frame had rusted and the R.T.A., or Rita as we all called her; well, the orange, red, and white bands on the Rita sign had faded under the sun and now ran together. The interior was not much to speak of. Three panels of glass. One had an unidentifiable white substance streaking across it. Another panel had "O.G. '92" carved into it. The third panel was the prize. The third panel had a genuine "Mondale/Ferraro in '84" bumper sticker covering a crack. The bench that lined the back panel was a record of all the fine people whose asses had graced its plastic-coated surface. They left such clever epithets as "Danny Goodman fucked Kate Dolhouse," "John Wayne is a fag," and other things that a good Catholic boy like me would never say. Or only occasionally.

To this sanctuary bathed in the midday sun, we flocked and so began an afternoon ritual. First, bags were tossed aside or thrown under the bench. Ties were removed. Shirt tails tumbled out of pants. The girls loosened their blouses and pulled up their plaid or solid brown skirts. Then, like part of a parade, concealed lighters were ceremoniously unveiled and lit. Almost everyone smoked. The dense, gray swirls hid the ugliness of the Rita shelter. The kids sitting on the bench smoked in a line. Others smoked in clusters. And they weren't just cigarettes. One kid sang "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" every day. Oh, the colors man. I smoked to blend into the carcinogenic cloud. Like the term *carcinogenic*? I do. Half of the doped-up bastards would respond with a "Huh?" That's truly sad. I never gave a fuck about dying. Menthols crystallize your lungs? Bull! Second-hand smoke is worse anyway.

"Hey, Sean, can I bum a smoke off you?" inquired someone.

"Sure," I said removing two.

I puffed away trying to rid my mind of the horror of an impossible calc. test. Occasionally, I clutched my pants because I had to pee, and the bus, as always, was late in arriving. It's funny to note what a guy sees when attempting to ignore the urge to urinate. I saw Jason.

Jason had a face streaked with acne. He had the physique of Abe Lincoln- all flesh and bone. Jason was the kid no one knew, but everyone knew of. The fag who was the subject of many a lame doodle or a joke told in the lav. He was the guy the girls dared one another to ask to a dance. I talked to him from time to time in Latin. I never had any problems with him.

Jason stood among the smokers. No one spoke to him so he remained rooted in one place. Just standing there, oblivious to the world around him. Usually, Jason would wait silently, looking up for a sight of the nearing bus. He was staring straight across the street. You could see a lot of red around his cheeks. The tremble of his lower, badly-shaved lip. His fists were clenched and shaking. I didn't watch his hands because his eyes, rimmed with choked-back tears, were so, so....God Damn! They were so weird! They had that look

of gazing at nothing while seeing everything. The look where the eyes are glazed and distant yet unbelievably attractive. I 'd seen that look before.

Eddie Gorman died a couple of months ago, I remembered. He was the center on our basketball team, a large, lumbering ape who scraped his books across the floor. One night after a game, where he was called for a couple of technicals, Ed went into his bathroom and took one pill too many. He slept forever. No one knew his reason for doing it. There were plenty of rumors. Girl problems. College problems. The usual stuff, you know. He lingered in a vegetative state for a couple of days. Finally, his lungs gave out.

Padua was a mess. The school had been struck in a tender spot. What to do, wondered the administration. First, Gorman's basketball pictures were removed from the yearbook. A tiny, black cross was placed by the right corner of his Senior photo. That was his sole memorial. Second, a team of psychologists were called in to deal with the issue in the proper after-school special manner. Third, all students were excused absence in order to attend Gorman's funeral. Throngs of casual acquaintances and complete strangers signed pink slips, jumped into their cars, and drove off to spend the afternoon at Denny's.

A week later, Gorman's girlfriend Mandy did the same. More shrinks flocked to the green and pink classrooms of Padua. Group sessions were conducted to allow students to purge adolescent angst. Principal Goodwin came over the p.a. and led the school in prayer. Everyone was protected. Everything was protected.

Mandy survived. Shortly before her accident (that is what it was called. Gorman's suicide was a "tragedy"), Mandy passed me in the hall. She had the same distant, attractive look in her eyes. I can't say if Gorman had that look in his eyes when he mixed prescription pills with a bottle of No Doze. I don't know.

Another puff. I watched the cherry break free, smolder, and croak on the cement. I reached for another cigarette, but stopped, as I caught sight of the nearing bus. Jason stood there alone. All around the kids threw aside their cigarette butts, some grinding them under a heel. They picked up their bags and rushed to the edge of the curb. No one said a word to Jason. No one said a word even if they saw the eyes, the hands, or the lip. They turned their backs and mobbed the opening bus door, brandishing yellow tickets and dollar bills.

"Hey, Sean, are you getting on?" asked the "Lucy" guy as he swayed from side to side.

"Sure." I tucked my lighter into my pants pocket as thoughts returned to my aching bladder. "You coming, Jason?" sprang from my lips as I boarded the bus.

Jason was confused and stammered before releasing the first word. "That's all right. I'll just wait for the second bus," he replied, still looking across the street.

He'd be dead by morning.

—Paul Genesisus Durica