

A Year Never Ends

Until a Life is Over

They ride and glide around this neighborhood as though they have been here for years. One is from the southwest, the other is from Connecticut, someone else is from the northwest, someone else from Idaho and maybe one or two from Alaska. Yet, when they make it here in the middle of the dartboard, what the locals would call KC, they feel they have made it into a permanent home. While here, they do their damndest to make the best or most sense out of their situations. Likely, many of them go into the ride thinking they won't get into too much trouble or cause that much shit. But all of this is much too naïve for a town like this or, I should say, any medium to large sized town in this country.

About now it's getting late in the hood. Or, the city street off Broadway and Main. A guy riding his bike through the middle of the intersection in the middle of the night while I try to deal with deep cat scratches in my thigh. The thoughts just wouldn't come that evening. Took a walk, had another drink, threw a slinkie around, talked to the whale in a Pepsi jar, and nothing was worth penning down as a good line. A big old fat stinker and that's why I let the night win. Though, we're back to let you know that the day was actually the real thief.

Earlier that day, I called my friend and co-worker, Bill, to see if we were going to show for work the following day. It was Martin Luther King, Jr. day and we worked in the urban quarters of the other city called KC. Called his cell phone and immediately it went to his mail. So, I assumed he was working out some love with the lady and would hear from him later. Meanwhile, I was warming my chops up for a mouthful of roast, potatoes and vegetable at my folks place north of KC. Mopping up the last of a little bowl of sauce with chips, my page went off. It was Bill's number. I called him back and he said that our center, a Youth area, had been robbed and that he would meet me there in 20 minutes. Sure, sure, I told him, as I left the roast to see what else was cooked.

Took me no time to get over the connector bridge into the joke of this area – the other KC on the Kansas side. I parked on the street and walked in through the lower door below and said, "You try and try to give to this community and you get fucked. Over and over it has happened." The guy from upstairs, Rich, who runs the dorm area of the YMCA for mentally handicapped folk and drifters said that Bill said the same thing when he came through the door. I looked around and everything had some hands that were combed over the area. A TV, computer and two digital cameras were lifted. Gone as the Sunday was surely leaving our hands. Various other drawers, closets and doors had been ripped through in the hastened heist that happened during the afternoon of that day. A co-worker in the youth area called Bill and I to let us know what happened.

The cops were called and we waited around for them to show. Meanwhile, a group of folks kept arriving at the backdoor asking about a caravan of clothes what was being given away as charity to people in the community. The great irony. We give and they take. It was a promotion being carried through by a cell phone company to give away clothing to those that needed it the most and those that were either imposters or on the line kept arriving wanting the big payoff. The grand prize was already given away under our noses. So, as the sway of folks stopped coming by the back door, the front parking lot

was full of people looking for the cloth. We kept waiting around for the beat cop to stop by to take care of our report.

All of this robbery and Sunday incest seemed small compared to the man that would visit me the following week downstairs in the lab I run for youth. An at-risk area that has no rhyme or reason. Where the whores could be the saints and the pimps always remain the devil in disguise. So, I get a call one day from a bloke wanting to volunteer in the lab with the kids. He's itching to give back to the community.

It was a phone call I received on a random Tuesday. A phone call that I had received many times before. Since I run a computer lab and youth center in an urban YMCA, folks want to help. People from every crosscut of life want to throw their paws in the mix. So, I get the phone call from a man named Pat Dobin. His message is smooth as silk. He tells me that he recently relocated to Kansas City from the Silicon Valley, had over 18 years of experience in computers and wanted to give back to the community. I get the message, jot the junk down and plan on giving him a call. This was about 11 AM when I got his message and wrote it down on a random slip of paper.

Around 3 PM that afternoon I notice a tall fellow with all black on waiting by my door with a big smile. The man had perfect blond hair, a big grin, black sport coat – shoes – shirt – creased slacks – everything that would scream money and success to the outside world. I excuse myself from across the center with my partner and approach this man, 'Can I help you?' He nods, and says that he is looking for me. I ask who he is and he tells me the fellow from earlier on who is interested in the volunteering. At this, we shake hands and I tell him I was planning on calling him back. He chuckles some jovial laughs and I offer him a seat next to my desk.

After sitting, I ask him what his story is and what he wants to do. Pat begins telling me the story he has. As noted, he made a shit pot of money in the Silicon Valley as a computer guru and relocated to Kansas City, Kansas for a post in military intelligence with the Army Reserve. His position is one of three or four in the nation and he would be stationed out of Ft. Leavenworth. But in the meantime, he tells me that he is loaded financially and wants to go ahead and give back to the kids. So, I give him my business car and application from the get go for him to fill out and get back my way later. But in the meantime, I am interested in his story as a military intelligence man. And he is interested in laying his story out on the table.

From the outset, he tells me that he's wired differently than the other intelligence officials out there in the military world. He's more open and willing to talk. Not so stuffed up on his own shit – he can flop down and really let it go with a civilian or two. And according to him, I was up at the plate. He begins telling me that the military was currently working on a new 'anti-terror' tactic that would be released to the general population that would forever change the landscape of how Americans would interact with one another. He could cite specifics, but he was damn sure that there was going to be a bonafide way that folks would interact that would put the government and other people at ease.

Then, he starts telling me how much shit can be garnered from the strip on the back of our driver's license. He says that once a cop swipes the card through their machines, they can garner anything from one's favorite color, FBI records, past records, musical preferences and other hokey shit. He is deadpan and laying out a miraculous case for all to be more reserved about how they carry out their daily functions. These were the highlights of his intelligence spiel. With all the prompts aside, I told him over the course of the talk that I had a huge fear in relationship to the military – wrongful accusation. I have always had a thing with both law enforcement and the military with being wrongfully accused of anything. Pat nodded and soaked all this information straight up into his well groomed skull cap.

Following our talk, I made sure that he had his application and my information to get back with me. He was enthusiastic about working with the kids and devoting about 10-20 hours a week in the lab. I was more than willing to accept this cat with open arms into the lab. We have always been short staffed, so to have a cat with his caliber was going to be a welcome beacon at the center. We shook hands, and he assured me that he would run all the information by me with several days.

A week went by and I tried the Pat's cell phone number. There was an answer. It wasn't Pat. So, I tried the number again thinking it was the wrong one. Same number and the guy on the other end didn't sound like Pat or have any knowledge of this Pat character. I was confused at this point. So, I listened to my voice mail again and jotted his name down. He did say that he had a membership at our facility. So, I got his name down and went upstairs to the database and ran his name. Nothing came up. I ran a slew of different spellings and derivatives of such. No return. This guy was shooting craps all over the place. I began feeling like I was a victim of a Tom Clancy novel that was only going to get deeper and creepier. Following this, I went downstairs and called Pat's supposed number again and laid my claim to the guy on the cell phone. He laughed and said OK. It was the end of the call and I had no other paper trail to lead back to this Pat guy.

My last ditch attempt to find out about this phantom Pat was courtesy some colleagues. Anyone that knew me well enough at work knew I was skeptical of the government or our political system. As such, we have this thing at work called 'secret shoppers'. It's a way by which supervisors can test the validity of someone when giving a tour of a YMCA or talking to customers. So, random 'actors' are hired to call or visit the YMCA.

Shortly after this Pat run in, I noticed my name on a spread sheet for having a secret shopper visiting me. I got high marks and leaped to the conclusion that this was it. I was duped by a secret shopper and it was no surprise that this Pat guy didn't have a past or a string to grab onto. So, ran this guy past a host of higher ups and bosses. No one knew what I was talking about. I threw out a laugh and said good one – an officer of military intelligence in the Army – good one. No one knew what I was talking about. They all looked at me with a grave verity that backed up their ignorance. In fact, I think I scared several away from me.

Months have gone by and I have no idea what happened that day or who this Pat guy is. Not one clue. And I still have my identity and everything else intact. Nothing has been switched or tampered with that could be attributed to wire tapping or otherwise. So, I wonder who this 'Pat' figure was and why I was targeted. Was my anti-war stance in the lead in to the US-Iraq War II much too evident? Was someone fucking with me and I never pegged them? Is and was the government still on my ass? All of my answers remain questions and that's where it stands on the better end of 6 months later and gone.

So, I was ready to live with my legacy of being fucked with these military heads and their Pat guy. Then, I get a call from the local recruiting office by a man named Sergeant Hilton. He asks me if I'm interested in joining the military or Army – to be specific – on a random afternoon at work. Immediately, I ask him if he knows this Pat guy or sent him over. He plays dumb. Has no idea what I am talking about. So, I ask him how come he is calling me up to see if I want to be in the military. I had to refute my dad my entire life on not wanting to join the Air Force. So, now as a 30 year old man why would I want to join the military?

He tells me that he fetched my name off their central database of folks who requested information from their web site. Now it was all clear. I did request information, a VHS tape and a T-Shirt for the kids in our youth program. Oh yea. But, he kept pushing the issue with me a bit and I told him it wasn't going to work. So, he dropped it and said that he would stop by some day with more information and to talk to some of our kids that may be interested in joining the military. I said 'OK' and wondered if he was related to this Pat guy. And if he was, would he tell me? The mystery of Pat lingered and Sergeant Hilton was possibly my link to the mystery. But that proverbial mystery light remains out.

We switch gears now to insurance. I spent much of my early 20's mired in bad insurance rates, speeding tickets and accidents. Shit that was purely my fault and I was deserving of the miserable rates and record that was following me around. So, this new bout with insurance debacles and hit and runs were all going to be a visit from my car past. It was a monumental three weeks. I have been involved in two hit and run accidents. For me, it was enough to make my insurance rep raise an eye brow and wait for the punch line. Usually I was the one doing the hitting or causing the shit. Not this time around. My mid-20's were gone and I was playing the safe route. Being a good kid.

The first accident took place on the way to work. Over the bridge, up Minnesota avenue and off 8th Street in downtown Kansas City, Kansas. About 5 minutes from my location on the Missouri side of Kansas City and a familiar route day in and out. So, on this brightly lit cold day in December I approached a big maintenance vehicle. It had on of those flashing arrows in the back of the truck that was flashing the caution arrows. Two arrows – one on the right and one on the left were flashing. I picked the right side of his truck and didn't think of much when the light changed over to green and the truck started moving left in the motion of a U-turn. As he did this, a small trailer he was hauling smashes into the front corner panel of my car. I knew he jacked me pretty hard because my Paseo wobbled hard as the truck started cutting into its full U-turn in the road.

As he was facing me from across the way, I honked, waved my hands, but to no avail. He couldn't see or hear shit. I yelled shit and quickly looked at my front corner panel to see the damage. He smashed me up good. Chips of paint and a huge dent. I was ready for action. So, I whipped the little sports car into high gear and tailed this guy. I was honking, but he obviously wasn't hearing shit. So, I got on his tail and decided to follow him until he stopped or I had the chance to stop. But, he immediately got on the highway and I followed suit. Already late for work as it was, my pager was going off as I chased this state employee who had no idea he was in the middle of a hit and run with an angry guy on his tail.

The truck goes over the bridge and takes the 12th Street exit downtown. Only to get immediately in the turning lane to head back onto the highway and back south. I was livid – honking my horn and waving at this guy. As I was readying to get out of my car, the light turned green and I was bound to be in the chase again. We climbed back on the highway – bridge and were heading back towards the Kansas side of town when he takes a detour off Minnesota towards the Washington side. I follow suit. And finally I get a break in the lane action and whip my car off to the left and get beside him. He still can't see me or hear me as he dumps his truck off 4th Street and I follow suit. I pull up, as he is doing another U-turn to get back out onto Washington, and stop my car in front of him. I hop out of my car, he gets out of his truck and I ask him if he is aware of hitting my car. He has no idea.

I'm hot at this point and tell him I was following him for over 5 minutes after the hit and run. He's a calm older fellow that is genuinely sorry. So, I calm down and he calls the cops on the scene. He works for the Kansas Department of Transportation. So, the insurance is going to go through seamlessly and everything is going to work out. Shortly after the stop and initial explanation, I talk to this cat and his crew that have to stop to wait for their partner. They're all in this job together on that day. They are painting the roads and need two vehicles to complete the task. So, we sit out there like a group of salty fuckers and talk the talk. About painting the roads, the man's driving record and how long it takes a cop of average to arrive on the scene of an accident.

My second hit and run was three weeks later. This time, it was about 5 blocks away from my house on a cold December night. I was on my way over to the girlfriend's house to pick out a Christmas tree with her and her son. I was already running a bit behind and was trying to bide my time to catch us some. So, I hopped in the Paseo with the crunched front panel and was to aim like a bullet about 3 minutes away to my girl's place. Once I was dumped out on Main St., I started flying. Once past 42nd St., the traffic got a bit thick. Now, this is how it worked. I was in the center of three lanes, while there was a big over the road bus in the right lane and a turning car in the left lane. As the moment approached, a car was turning in the left lane, when the car behind it flew over into my lane like a bullet, which made me fly my car in a skid in the far right lane. I skidded 20 feet or so a hit flat into the back of a huge tour bus. My bumper was lodged a bit under the bumper. It all sounded worse than it looked.

I saw about the last 15 years of my life flash before my eyes. Genuinely spooked, I hopped out of my car to get a good look at the car that threw me into the back of the bus. I couldn't get a license plate number, make, model or much. The fucker was on his horses and gone up the street before I had the chance to do anything more. I was stranded as big man approached me from the sidewalk asking me if I was OK. I told him that I was just in a hit and run – asking him if he saw anything. He nodded a 'No' – he had no idea what the fuck happened. As it turned out, he was in the warm confines of his bus when the hydraulics in his seat bounced due to the force of my car. He came out and there I was talking and waving my arms.

The bus driver was a gay man from Topeka by the name of Mike Cox. Appropriate name. But, he was a friendly sort of fellow. He told me that he was a trainer for the Federal Highway Administration and had a spotless driving record. Nothing wrong with it at all and was genuinely spooked at the prospects of being involved in an accident report. I was pissed that I was wrapped up in yet another hit and run. So, this driver called his boss and she asked him to call the cops, which he did. Now, I told him I would exchange all the information and wait for about 10 minutes for the cops to come. I told him we were in midtown on a busy intersection on a Friday night for a friendly bumper hit – no cops would come. He wasn't a city boy and didn't know what I was talking about.

We sat in the bus and talked about shit. Pondering the random chance we all have of meeting and running into each other. One minute I'm flying to get a Christmas tree and the next I'm in a bus waiting for the cops to arrive. He was a friendly chap and opened up quite a bit as we lost track of time and I got a page from my girl. I told him that we could do a walk-in report and that I had to move on. I didn't want to worry the girl that much. So, I left him all the information and went over to the girl's place. I showed her the car and we decided to take hers to pick up the Christmas tree. It was the least she could have done for me at that time.

I ended up not doing a walk-in report. I dropped it and figured this guy was too. Also, I didn't contact or think about insurance. If anything was going to transpire, the other party going to have to play that game. I wasn't going to have anything to do with it. So, this all went down in early December and I didn't hear anything until around February. I got a call from my insurance rep, Caleb, and he asks what happened. I tell him and he tells me that they are going to go for the full \$1,500 from my insurance to replace their bumper. I call complete bullshit on this little juggernaut. I explain the hit and run nature of it and my rep says that there were no witnesses. Therefore, I am inextricably fucked. No where to turn – run – or hide. I am liable. And at this point, I just acquiesce and tell Caleb that it's the biggest flop of shit I have ever heard. Furthermore, this will mar my insurance records for the next 3 years. My rates will go up like 20 bucks a month because of this.

In response to this turd, I ask Caleb to give me this bus company's number so that I can give them a piece of my mind. He says it won't work and I don't give a shit at this point. I get the number, call and talk to Mike Cox's boss about the claim. She acts dumb on the call and I lean into her. I tell her that she needs to go to bed that night with the thought in her mind that she will fuck a man's insurance up for the next three years to replace a

bumper that I merely scaved. They said that I busted it up pretty good and I didn't at all. It was a scuff – or major scuff at most. The other side of the bumper had an identical scuff. Nothing to sweat or that would influence their bus company. At the time I hit Mike, he was parked on the side of the road with a Baptist convention of rich folks on the Plaza shopping their balls and cunts loose. So, I told this woman my story and that I wasn't happy with the repercussions that were taking place. She listened, said good-bye and I decided to find a new company with better rates. And that I did.

After going through a friend of mine for insurance, I was getting a better rate and the skies were looking a helluva lot clearer. Then, I got a call on the horn from Caleb one afternoon about a month later. Or, it's his secretary asking for me to write them a \$1,500 check for the bumper. For whatever reason, Caleb didn't pay the bumper off through my insurance and it was defaulting. Which meant that they were riding me to pay the fine. I was in the 'what the fuck' mode and started to call Caleb. He told me that indeed he spaced off the claim and that it was going to come out of his pocket. Thus, I wasn't going to have a record and everything was OK. This ding dong brained shit was the reason why I dropped Caleb in the first place. And his famous last words were to come through true and abdicate such a claim. And at this point it was all a win situation.

While I went through the cold of winter, I just got a new cat from my girlfriend's mother. It is a majestic fucking cat. A big pile of Egyptian or Bob Cat looking pride with fat gray balls. It hadn't been fixed and it was spraying some nasty smelling piss around the place and meowing like a motherfucker. Both in heat and missing the farm it grew up on, it wasn't digging up on my confined apartment in the city. So, it hissed, pissed and clawed about my place until I took care of the problem. Eventually, I got his nuts snipped and we started falling into the pea pod mode. The cat acted as a willful decoy from a deteriorating relationship and basket case of a girlfriend.

This is the same relationship I had been in for just over 2 years. We had climbed the walls of hell – or she did personally and I was pegged along for the ride. I was hitting the breaking point and we were discussing the mincing of our relations when I heard from an old friend that just got married. His name is Gannon and I told him that I had a dream months before that he got married. Something about it or him made it clear to me that he was on the marriage track. So, he got married and I was on the phone with him talking about my current relationship and the decisions that we were making and the shit that we were working through. There was some heady shit and minor issues that needed some ironing. He said it all sounded healthy and that a lot of married couples don't even tackle those issues. He said it sounded like a sound union.

I always wanted to believe that it was a sound union. It was the optimist in me. If it wasn't where it needed to be, we could work on it. Get the issues out on the table, spend more time together, have better sex or work it flat out. And that was the track we were on. Both of us genuinely wanted to ensure that we were happy. Not only with each other, but with our lives overall. This apparently wasn't the case. Both of us knew it, but at this particular time in this storied chronicle were we ready to solve the problem at hand. The problem at hand was the destructive union of two opposite minded and needing people.

We needed to get away from each other and instead we clung to each other tighter. Both out of fear and our advancing years – we wanted to believe, but we didn't believe in each other to believe in anything.

Along with my cat, Pepper, I had my job and the kids I worked with the break up the monotony of my life and flailing relationship. And at this time I wasn't fully facing the dysfunction of the relationship I had nitched out with this girl. So, the kids I worked with had some stories. One such girl who we'll call Balika had some issues. She was an attractive African-American girl at about 14-years old and had a shit pot of stories already in her young life. She had already had an illustrious career as a stripper and semi-prostitute. Now, Balika was a smart girl. Beyond smart. I always like sitting down and having a talk with her. She enjoyed the same.

On this one day in particular I had some questions for her. I wanted to get around some things and find out what her core was like. Over the course of the talk, she told me that she had caught an STD already – gonorrhea. And she said it with the nonchalance of an old street whore that had seen so much action that it just didn't matter that much to her. Then, she busted into a story of how fucking weird the kids were at her school. She said that at one point during the current school year she was impaled in the leg by some kid on the steps. She had to go to the nurse and get her badly bloodied leg bandaged and looked after. Apparently, the way the staircases work – there are blind spots and kids stab other kids with knives and shit in the ankles and run. They evaporate into the crowd and no one catches up with them. It's all a big high school game. Shit, we never had violence or shit like that. The worst we had was spit wods or spit in a teacher's cup.

Then we have the violence in the hood. This hood happens to be in my neighborhood. One night recently, I was hanging with a good friend and his wife in my apartment when I hear gun shots ringing out. I didn't immediately think they were gun shots, but my friend's wife said she saw the reverb from a balcony across the street. And, there they were and another couple of shots rang out again as we slinked away from the window at to not get hit. Once some minutes left, I talked to my neighbor who was looking out at this local neighbor puke. He's a punk. Well known in the neighborhood for being such. My landlord wants to kill him and his car is always trashed by his favorite fans. So, we got around the window after the coast was clear and looked in on his apartment. Obviously cranked up on some speed of sorts, he was pacing with another fellow. Back and forth, arms waving – shouting. Another urban menagerie fall all pass-bys to enjoy.

And another Sunday arrived. My girl and her son had stayed the night. It was a cold morning, but the heat was cranking the place up as I was getting some coffee cooked. The girl was smoking and checking her home messages as I kept my eye on her son in the other room. He was playing with some Bionicle legos and watching the cartoons. The cat was slinking about and it was the most comfortable I had been with domestication ever in my young life. It was a good morning. As many of these such mornings had been good mornings. So, I heard the gal talking to her mom on the phone. A muttering of 'Oh my God' kept coming out of her mouth. So, I knew that I was in for a big story once she got off the phone.

As she clicked the phone off, she told me the story. At an old bar and grill she worked at, some cat she knew killed a guy the night before. It was all over the news and she knew this guy well. He went by the name of John and had a drinking problem. I saw him all the time drunk in this place she used to work in and that we both drank plenty in. The only other shit I knew about him was from others. Well, there was one time he told me when I started dating my girl that he would hurt me if I ever hurt her. I just laughed and went on my way. I also heard that he took the front entrance off a bar down the street one night while drinking and driving. Now, when I say a drinking problem, I mean a serious fucking drinking problem with no punches pulled. Also, I used to hear about how he would piss and puke on a regular basis from his bar stool after marathon bouts with liquor. The clientele in this bar and grill were some fucking liquor consuming motherfuckers.

As it happened, this John guy killed an occasional roommate that was a gay druggie in the neighborhood. After a night of liquor and drugs, John killed this man in cold blood by beating him to death with a hammer. Then, he went to a pay phone down the street and called the cops in on himself. It was all bizarre the details were sketchy. Folks on the inner circle believe that the other guy made a drunken or drug induced move on John and the beating began. But the only one that knows the story is John. And he claims that he passed out afterwards and didn't call the cops until days later. Sure, he went to work and played it off until either the guilt or stench grabbed him about the consciousness. And my girl cooed how bad she felt for this man. It all sounded like a sick fucking thing. All the way around. From the death of a man to fucking drug abuse – it was all horribly sad.

In the same neighborhood as this bar and grill is at where the killing by John took place, I am picking up a to-go order of Chinese food. I notice the bookstore across the way with all the hipsters wanting to recreate the glory of Beat days of Kerouac and with the Merry Pranksters of Kesey's group. I look out in the cold and know you can never revive an era or a carcass. All we can all do is take pieces – hunks of such. And these folks are aiming their guns at all the cliché eras of rebellion, recreation drugs and disdain with everything structured. The little Chinese woman tells me that my order is about ready. I switch to looking at steam rising from the streets. Hunks of hot vapor up and up, while the moon looms large over the land. Sure, soon I will have hot food, a girl, her son with a laugh and my life is right in front of me. I am a TV – I am the morning paper – I am a consumer soon to be piled with food cooked for anyone – but it just happened to be me. I was the lucky eater of the moment and I am paying for another meal. The card goes swipe and we move to the next transaction.

This is also the winter of our content disquiet. Already at war in Afghanistan against a regime that we surely built – the Taliban. This was courtesy of Russian fears in the 80's. Now, as the War on Terror continues to roll forth – we consider the next enemy and the bombing campaign that will ensue. Bush is looking to rid his family's nemesis, Sadaam Hussein. And he is buttering the balls of the nation, UN and fellow countries to do such. Sure, he says they have the weapons, aided Sept. 11 terrorists and the. So, there is the build-up. The tension is in the air. Our cold air is addled with questions and I spend a lot

of time with my politically ignorant girlfriend to describe to her how all this shit is crumbling. Why we are what we are in and what the fuck they won't let us know. And as I feel closer and closer to the brink of my relationship – my metaphor is the military build-up and willing strikes we are getting ready to throw at Sadaam and his boys. And everyday I leave the girl's house with questions of what, where, when and why I notice protestors on the street corner. One woman in particular has a sign that reads 'GOD BLESS IRAQ' and I get a laugh every time.

On a plot to rid another Arab enemy, I have a DJ friend that has a dream to teach the kids. He's a local cat with a solid demeanor. Bad drug and drink problem, but a smart kid with a good heart. His name is James and I know him through my girlfriend. He has fucked her at some point in the past and gives her the eye here and there as though he would like to fuck her again. I stand to the side knowing it won't happen. Not because I have to say anything, I know how my girl feels about me and other boys. So, I give James a shot one night over some liquor. I was liquored up. He was liquored up. And it was on. I told him the day and time to meet me at the center.

For whatever reason, he arrived on the day and time I suggested. I was surprised. It was all more of a test than anything else. On the day he came in, he was sweating profusely. Must have been working out the cocaine in his system or tweaking away from the liquor that wasn't coursing through his bones. So, there we were talking about his dream to teach the kids how to DJ through seminars. James is black man, who can connect with these kids in our urban program. It seemed to be a magic ingredient and the plans were set. I was hopeful. But with a druggie or alcoholic, you never know when they are going to fade or if they will just disappear. I wanted to see what James was going to do. It was clear that he wasn't going to follow through. I waited to see what he was made out of.

As weeks wore on, James kept his promise to do the DJ programs. He was getting local sponsorships, giving kids surveys and making solid dates. I was surprised at his tenacity and genuine follow-through. But, all of it was bound to fade. As time went along, he didn't show up for several meetings. Then, we never saw him again. Gone. Then, he called on day to apologize and get arranged for another meeting and to get shit rolling. I never called him back. In fact, we don't even talk when I run into him about town. Usually we are in the bars. I am either a bit liquored or he is drugged to his gills and not even a look is exchanged. The joke is in the joker and the joker resides in all of us. James' hasn't yet found his joker and may never be so fortunate.

I spend my days teaching these kids some things about their world and trying to veer them away from danger. And on the side, I am making my own plans. My neighbor and friend asked me if I would like to break into the bottom floor of the house we live in. I agree. It was my idea and he really took to the whole thing. We had the lights, screwdrivers and other tricks of the trade to pull off the gig. Now, the lower portion of this large white house on the corner of a historic housing district is abandoned. Nothing but us two upstairs in piecemeal apartments. So, we wanted to see what is in the basement and lower floor. In particular, we want to see what the heater looks like

downstairs. We hear it. A gurgling mass of tubes and metal and we want to see this monstrosity in motion.

The night comes. Chad, my neighbor, has a clip of drink in his bones and I'm feeling the adventure through my veins as well. The full moon is glaring outside and we initially head out back to bust in through the hatch doors that lead to the basement. Once back there, we hear some rustling in a yard behind us and know that someone is onto us. With this in mind, we escape below the hatch doors and try to pry open the lock, but it won't budge. As we arrive from the doors together defeated at our first attempt, a voice booms – "WHAT THE FUCK'S GOING ON OVER THERE?" We return a benign thing about how we live there and everything is cool. So, we veer around to the front of the building and notice a host of cops and ambulance lights twirling at the house across the street.

With this distraction, we slink around to the entryway of the house and decide to bust in through the lower doors. There are three of them. One door goes to the right part of the house. The other two doors go to the other side and the basement. First, we scave the sparse right side and find some shit. A collection of bowling balls, lamp shades, clown wigs and other assorted items. We lay them in the hallway as a score. The landlords will never know. Our landlords live around the corner from us and we are trying our damndest to not give ourselves away. The landlady is a hard working woman that does all the maintenance to the place. On the other hand, the landlord man sits in his throne drunk and sucking down the smokes with voracity. He's in bad shape physically and is drinking himself to death. Also, he is as straightforward, red-necked and racist as they come for this part of the city. They have lived in their house for years and have seen the crack whores disappear and things change. Yet, they aren't changing. This is their Kansas City neighborhood and fuck everyone if they can't accept that.

After collecting the goods on the right side of the house, we make our way over to the more spacious left side. After taking the screws around the lock out, we go inside. The cop lights across the way are confusing us, and we are OK with that. In other words, there is already a neighborhood distraction that is keeping our cover a true cover. The cops are over there for some disturbance with a midtown coke head that likely lost her cool. My friend Chad fucked around with her several times. She's a kook in her 40's and has a serious speed addiction and propensity to fuck and cavort the evil folks. Also, she has a host of suicidal tendencies and taking in a lot of crazies. Looks like that's what had transpired that night and back-up was needed.

The left side of the house was a complete score. There were bags full of new shit. Like power cords, compact disks, computer equipment, pens, paper and such. Also, there were CD burners, DVD players, a TV and other electronic goods. It was a treasure trove of shit the landlady was stockpiling for the holidays, charities or from her husband. It was hard to say. But, we poked around there for 30 minutes or so as the cop lights roared from the front window and we marveled at what all the new shit meant. But, we decided not to take any of the shit. Just leave it be. That would be too obvious if we decided to take any new shit from the lower quarters.

After this, we made our way over to the kitchen and towards the basement of this house. That was the original conception of our plan and we were on our way. Once on the stairs down, the majesty opened up. Our furnace was an enormous gurgling network of odd shapen lopes, tubes and a network of second hand engineering. It was a feat and we both marveled at the architecture in silence. Then, we broke off with our flashlights and respectively searched over the house. From one end to the other, we scaved and two things stood out in my mind.

After admiring the furnace piece, my light immediately flashed on a bottle of bleach and small naked doll leaned up against it. The frazzle of hair and Christ like eyes stunned me. I pointed it out to Chad and went off before the creeps set in this place. The other thing that got me was a little photo album of the woman that used to inhabit this house. I took it and looked it over. There were vacation photos and one of the old woman on the front porch. I understood by her picture on the porch and by her demeanor that there were good vibes that went through this house for a reason. She left behind some good spirits.

In the same month I finally put the numbers together on a resident that lived at the YMCA I worked at. Now, our facility is the only one in the area that offers low cost housing to men who need it. One of those residents was a guy by the name of Russell Smallwood. And I always thought I knew him, but couldn't place it till one day.

I was going over to the dorm side of the building when I ran into the old black woman that was running the desk at the dorms. She was hot. Something about Russell making his Friday afternoon call to the ambulance. He thought yet again that he was having a heart attack or major health issue. All of this was spurned by panic due to a bad crack problem. He was a nice enough fellow in the face, but he had a raging drug problem. So, when I was over there Esther, the front desk lady, was complaining up a storm. I nod and notice a newspaper next to her that has Russell on the front page. I point to it and she says that he's useless. I pick up the issue and notice that it's all about Russell as a painter and the show he is gearing up for at the local library up the street.

It then hits me where I know him from. I had a bin down at the River Market during Sundays some years back trying to sell my paintings. One day, he was next to my bin and we got along like gangbusters. He did water color paintings on large pieces of old wood and such. Russell gave me some photocopied pieces of his stuff and I kept them over the years. So, I finally confronted Russell the following week and he remembered me and my work. He liked my stuff quite a bit and we had a pleasant talk about how shit was going. It was apparent that he was trying to clean himself up and was on the way back. Before he left the building, I found out that Russell go a hold of some bad shit in Lawrence, while on a full art scholarship at the University of Kansas. The drugs fucked him up so much that he never fully recovered.

And it becomes harder and harder in the relations of now as the snow falls gentle to smile at the comments that come my way. The talk and clamoring of everything. From my repeating, insane girlfriend's mouth to her miraculous son's voice. A piercing voice that could attest and arrest anything around. And it all falls with the snow and the cold's vice.

I know it will all change when it becomes warmer outside. Everything comes back to life, the evil die and the world becomes something more than we ever knew it could become. The immaculate cycle of life before our eyes and no one is around to blame but the rain. Oh rain, we all wait for you to come back around.

All the changes take place around me. Like a graft, the rainbow melting away, the girl and our miserable existence together, the log in the fire, the fury in a child's laugh, the next rising, and the fall of Rome here in our country. All of it pulsates through my mind. Non-stop and when I try to resist, it rears up and gets worse. This is when my job comes to save my soul. There was one comment that got me one day. It was the quote of the day, month, year and our lifetimes. A big funny black kid with a grin smashed all over his face told me that he just wanted to live his life smiling and laughing. In fact, he said that he wanted to die in the comedy house, if lucky enough. I thought I would like to join him and admired his honesty. The spirit of a champ – the fucking laughter.

As the winter moves along, I realize that I am smoking way too many cigarettes. One after the other. Right and left. It is non-stop. Sure, I am smoking rolled smokes without additives, but I am tackling them like there is something else in my life that I can't quite tame or temper. I resist and immediately give in. Every cigarette is a memorial because I know that I will rid the nasty habit when the time is right. But, this winter and at this time it isn't right. Whether it's the idle time with my girl and her son or the nervousness I have in life, there is no escaping. I feel like I have no escape latch. My love of life is diminishing as I trip and crawl along with my girlfriend. Something has to give and the cigarettes are a clear sign. The sign of my times. A puff in the moment and where I will go when I get to be re-born away from my mess of a girl.

These days I am making all girls cry. From my girlfriend to any other female around me. Or, maybe it's just my girl and I am projecting this onto all the other girls that are passing, hanging or just by me. It is stinging. My girlfriend, Sarah, has cried so many tears over this winter that I could go without seeing a girl cry for the rest of my life and be completely content. Even if they were tears of joy, I wouldn't want any part of them. This Sarah kid cried like a vandal. Over her torn life, the tomato soup that went cold or any other half crooked idea in her mind. All the girls crying. And the only girl in all the girls is Sarah and I am going insane. Have gone insane and it's starting to make me want to cry also.

In between making the girls cry and enduring the relations of my relationship, there were breaks in the action. On one cold Saturday, I helped a friend of Sarah's get an old BMW fixed and ready to transport down to Columbia, MO. As the day worn on, I smoked a lot and drank a shit pot of cigarettes. I helped change a couple of cords, a tire and battery, but there was one lingering problem. Something about a valve head or other and there was a local guy that knew all about it. He specialized in BMW's and loved this girl who bought the car from him. So, he came by and was the most fucked up looking cat going. A mop mat of head hair that was gray, blond and yellow. He had on a pair of jeans and a thick sweater that was all gunked with grease. He was a soft talker and had a style about him.

This guy took about 45 minutes to fix the car. When it was all said and done a cat with us by the name of Tony went to offer him some cash. He wouldn't take it. Just refused. But, he did have his eye on one thing. A scarf that Sarah had hanging in her house. She gave it to him. He threw it around his neck and left like a superhero. Gone with his exposed truck hood and piecemeal vehicle on down the road to the next adventure.

The winter comes down to this. Perhaps my 15 minutes of fame realized. I was filmed in a YMCA commercial. It was a bit piece for some winter promotional thing. In the commercial, targeted at the younger populations, I was dancing to the YMCA song and getting toured through the facility. It was all quick, but I was being noticed. Kids in the program were telling me about it and laughing at my dance moves. My nieces were seeing it constantly. My folks were telling me about the spots. The girl was giving me shit for being in the commercial period. Strangers and friends were calling me and running into me with their take on it. I didn't want to talk about it. Now, I didn't regret filming the piece, I just didn't know it would blanket the area like it did. So, that was it. My fifteen minutes in that winter were solidified. I had lived the American ideal, supposedly.

This is where we end up. My fifteen minutes of fame are gone. I want out of the relationship with the girl. A military intelligence imposter is on my tail. There was murder. We all seek redemption and winter remains cold. But, the forecasters are forecasting spring in the next season and that's enough for me. Here on this chilled hill on a Kansas City bluff. It was the first winter that I looked at my watch and didn't quite believe what it was telling me. The proverbial hands moving in and out – up and down. I have been perpetually looking as though it's going to lie or it did lie. But there was nothing about this winter stretch that lied – it just didn't warn me. From now on I'll do fine without the warnings.

Now, you have been warned. Go out there and make me some more stories.