

CASPER

**Suburban
Scumbag**



Abel T. Fletcher

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Gateway Drugs and Coming of Age

These tales begin where many accounts begin of such interest: with the corruption of young men through a cigarette. I was born of good parents. My father was honest and hardworking, and my mother was loving and attentive. I was the fourth of five and the oldest boy. This places me in a position of honor of the patriarch and simultaneously means absolutely horseshit in reality, which my older sisters were sure to remind me of. Each one of my parents' kids caused them all sorts of aggravations. My parents weren't perfect, but they strived to be and made a pretty damned good go of it. Whatever failings my siblings and I have are, in my opinion, on us and not our folks.

The date was April 1, 1988. I was nine years old and playing with a neighborhood friend who lived across the block from me in my hometown of Fresno, California. That suburban part of Fresno is blocked off into roughly half-mile squares. I lived in a block on one side of an avenue. Danny lived on the other side. We had free reign of travel in the "neighborhood," but what that neighborhood was wasn't really clearly defined. So, for us, it encompassed as far as we could ride our bikes in a reasonable amount of time. That is to say, we could ride anywhere as long as we got back before lunch or dinner and never ever after dark. That area was two miles squared. There were no adults around when we were biking. I mention that because the thought of nine-year-olds roaming about by themselves would have most

people clutching their pearls these days. Myself included. At the crossroads between Danny's house and my house was a park. We had been playing there on our bikes all morning. During a water break, Danny had suggested we go to the store at the other end of the block and check out the candy aisle.

This was a great idea. During this time of the eighties, it was fashionable to sport a buttbag. Commonly called a fanny pack, or hip pouch, or whatever you fucking preferred to call it. Danny and I both rocked one. Mine was loaded with a key for my bike lock, which I never used, and an assortment of Micro Machines. We headed down the street a half mile. There was a Thrifty drug store there that held the most coveted items a child could want.

As we were setting our bikes up on the racks, Danny turned to me.

"Do you have any money?"

"No."

Excitedly, Danny went over his simple plan, "Okay, I'll walk in first and head over to an aisle right in front of the clerk. You go and stuff as much candy and toys as you can fit in your buttbag. Then walk out, head straight for the bike, and head straight back to the park."

"Wait a minute. Why am I pocketing the candy alone? We can get twice as much if we do it together."

"Oh, yeah. No, duh!"

And that was that. There was no deep discussion on the moral ambiguity of ripping off a store or that taking what wasn't ours is stealing. The idea of it being wrong never even crossed my mind. I had learned in church that stealing was wrong. However, I never understood what stealing was, so I didn't even associate what I was doing with theft. Not at that age. I knew that I shouldn't, but I just wasn't there yet as to the depths of why it was wrong. A year later, I would make that connection. But at nine, there was no inner Casper telling me it wasn't okay. So, we both went into the store to plunder what we could.

As soon as we entered, I noticed a woman to our left sitting behind the register counter, waiting for customers to be rung up. The clerk sat on a large metal stool; her shoulders were slumped from boredom. Hunched over, she had a magazine on her lap that she looked up from every other

page. She seemed like an adult but was more likely a teenager, not much older than us. She paid little attention to Danny and me. From her seated position, she would not be able to see what we were up to in the aisle. A store manager would be walking around. To my young self, any adult we encountered was potential trouble. I was hyper-aware of everyone around us. The store did not have a lot of people in it. I remember prying eyes were scarce but potentially around every corner.

I grabbed a G.I. Joe off its hook. Realizing it was too big to fit in my pack with the packaging, I hastily tore into its packaging and crammed it in my butt bag. Hands still crammed in my pouch, I looked around for signs of anyone on to us. Nothing. The store was quiet, with only the soft sounds of Danny going to work beside me. I snatched up a pack of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups and a bag of Hershey Kisses.

Danny made off with a pack of Marlboros, a lighter, gum, and his own chocolates. You see, back then, the candy section was across from the toys, and next to them, both on the same aisle was the tobacco products. When I hear anti-smoking ads talking about tobacco companies targeting minors, I look back to this day as a reminder that they were and still are. Why the fuck would anybody put it by kids' stuff? Logically, if you are not selling them to kids, you put it by the booze. Smoking and drinking go together as well as ice cream and pie.

The whole thing went down smoothly. We were out of there without anyone seeing us. It was so easy I would boost things from that store four more times that summer. It wasn't until my Mom caught me with a king-size Snickers bar that I stopped.

Danny and I made our way back to the bikes and rode back to the park at top speed to divvy up our bounty. Once there, Danny produced the pack of Marlboros. He gingerly opened the pack up and pulled out a cigarette. He asked if I wanted to try one.

Of course, I said yes, and for the next five minutes, between stuffing chocolates in my face, I learned how to inhale the smoke deeply to give me the craziest head buzz. Danny's parents smoked in their house. So, me coming home smelling of smoke wasn't that big of a red flag for my religious

parents. When I was done, I washed my hands in the drinking fountain because my fingers smelling like nicotine was a whole other story. No soap; straight water seemed good enough to me. I had to wash them in the fountain because the restroom doors were locked.

Just as I was finishing washing my hands and wiping them on my shirt, my family's brown Toyota van pulled up. It wasn't too uncommon for a car or a bicycle to pull up, and someone inform me that I needed to come home. After the cigarette though? I was suspicious of how much they knew. The van had crank windows, and the passenger side window was up. Instead of reaching over and rolling it down, Mom opened her door and stood up. Looking over the roof, she called out to me. She seemed rushed.

"Hey, you need to get home!" My mom hollered at me.

Panic started to rise in me, thinking my goose was cooked, "Okay. But why?"

"Your sister went into labor. Aunt Jeanie is going to watch you."

A wave of relief washed over me. Aunt Jeanie smoked as well. Which I felt would help cover up the crimes. Because of the excitement of my nephew's birth, no one questioned anything. I got home, got cleaned up, and it was all about the baby from that point on. I was able to fly under the radar.

Later that year, I would be caught at Eaton Elementary with a pack of Marlboro Reds and a tobacco pipe I had lifted from the same store. Although I was a cigarette smoker, I have always been drawn to pipes. A handcrafted wood pipe is very distinguishing. It was this fascination with pipes that led me to my first time smoking pot. Ahh, marijuana, ganja, reefer, the devil's weed, that evil gateway drug of the nineties. The one drug the D.A.R.E. program really fucked up on explaining. Did the government really think someone would overdose from taking a hit? I was taught, as many of us were, that smoking pot could kill you. That one hit, one fucking hit would ruin your life. It was this misinformation I would later use in my rationalization to take hard drugs. If they were so wrong about weed, what else were they wrong on? Shit, my fucking buddies all used drugs, and they were fine. So when Grant, who lived six houses down the street from me, offered to smoke me out before my paper route one morning, I accepted.

* * *

For all of my life, I have moved every couple of years, each house a different cut of suburban living on the sliding scale of middle-class income. When I was in seventh grade, my family had just moved back to Fresno from the foothills, where we lived for about a year. This would be the neighborhood where I met Grant. This would be the house I lived in the longest—a whole eight years. I attended my seventh-grade year across town at Ahwahnee. There I ran into my old friend Danny, whose family had moved into a home that was on the “wrong side” of the street. Danny wasn’t a bad guy. A bit wild but not mean or cruel. He did have one hell of a sense of humor that got him in a lot of trouble. No filter and no boundaries; that’s the type of kid that gets dumped on by the establishment. Marked as no good. He was my best friend in seventh and eighth grade.

One day, sitting around a table with another fellow named Jim, Danny proclaimed that we all needed nicknames. I didn’t really get what Danny meant by nicknames. When it was my turn to come up with a name, I thought of a local soccer player I had admired up in the foothills: Jasper. Danny heard Casper. He started laughing.

“Yeah, Casper. You’re fucking white enough, you fucking ghost-ass motherfucker.” The name stuck. I would go by Casper in everything that I did well into my thirties.

* * *

My new suburban kingdom was nestled between a canal, train tracks, and two major avenues. When we moved in, it was apparent that Grant was the cool kid on the block. Shit, in my twelve-year-old world, he was the coolest kid in the whole fucking city. Grant was a year and a half older than me. He was a skater, wore dope baggy-ass clothes, and was just all-around slicker than shit when talking to people, adults included. Despite how he looked, Grant had a job and attended church activities regularly. His family was Mormon as well. Which meant (at least to my parents) that he was the exact sort of kid I was supposed to be hanging around with . . . other Mormons. Grant often skated with Matthew, who lived across the street. Together they had stolen a three-foot parking block and laid it in front of Matthew’s house.

Matthew and Grant would be out all day skating that block over and over. I had rollerblades at the time.

As a young man growing up in a house full of teenage girls and a mom going through menopause, seeking out and finding male acceptance was important. Although I was allowed to hang around, Grant and Matthew ragged on me relentlessly to pick up a real ride like skateboarding. Money was tight. My dad told me that if I wanted a skateboard, I'd have to earn it. Passing this along to Grant, he helped me get my first job delivering newspapers. As magnanimous as this seemed, I would figure out years later that he had thus reduced how many houses he had to deliver.

Grant and I made up two of the four teenagers who delivered newspapers in that neighborhood block. Every morning, without fail, I would get up, fold one hundred and ten newspapers for my route (one hundred and twenty if it was a Sunday), pack them into the sack used to haul them around, strap on my rollerblades, and head out. On day one, Grant rolled up to me on his skateboard. I was surprised to see him balanced on the board with all his papers around his neck.

"It's easier than trying to use a bike," he told me. "What did you bring to protect yourself with?"

I looked at him, confused for what felt like minutes.

"A hammer? Knife? Nothing? You didn't bring anything?"

Meekly I said, "No."

"Take this."

Grant reached into the well-worn sack that he lugged his papers in and pulled out a twelve-inch crescent wrench.

"If anyone comes up to you and is in arm's reach, hit 'em with this and get the fuck out of there. Forget the papers. They're not worth it. Come straight home."

Obediently I took it. Though I never had a reason to use it, I carried that wrench with me every day I delivered papers.

Delivering newspapers brought a lot of firsts for me. First job. First paycheck. The first taste of freedom. After cashing that first paycheck, I took my earnings, hopped on a city bus, made a beeline over to the S.B.I. board

shop, and bought my first complete deck.

* * *

Skully Bros Industry, back then S.B.I., was located on the busiest cross streets in town. Three lanes wide, in all directions. It was choked with bookstores, a liquor/cigar store, credit unions, furniture stores, two optician's stores, and several home electronic appliances stores. S.B.I. was tucked between a men's big and tall clothing store and a Circuit City.

I don't remember it having a display window, but I remember the door. It was saturated with stickers blocking out any attempts at peering through to the magical world inside. Once through, I was shrouded by the thick jungle leaves of baggy clothes hanging on the racks. Music blared in my ears; foreign sounds of songs I wasn't allowed to hear. Punk and hip-hop were wailing over the shop speakers, an anthem to an endless summer. A continuous stream of skate videos played on a small tube TV in the corner. Every part of the building's structure looked industrial and incomplete. Like a treehouse, it was covered wall to wall with images of teenage rebellion manifested through the viewfinder of a fisheye lens.

A glass counter, separating me from my quest, was filled with the glistening steel of parts I hadn't yet learned the names of. I would later find that they were trucks, wheels, bushings, and bearings. Stickers were everywhere. Small cardboard boxes were filled with 'em, stacks on the counter covering parts of the glass, on the walls, even on the rails that hung the clothes. *Thrasher* and *Transworld* magazines were heaped on the countertop.

Walking in the store alone was one of the most intimidating things I had ever done. With the fire of determination, I pushed myself to talk to the "grown-ups." I was around thirteen, and the seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds who worked the shop looked like very mature giants to me. With three sisters, older meant being ridiculed and bullied. Fear of being mocked for not knowing enough about the culture, the people, or the sport crawled up my back. Three guys huddled behind the counter, laughing. I placed my hands on the glass counter that, like the door, was covered in stickers. Feeling awkward about doing so, I quickly pulled them back down to my sides. I stood there for a moment. The three dudes behind the counter, not

acknowledging my presence, continued the conversation. Swallowing hard, I went for it.

“How much for a skateboard?”

An employee turned around. He had shaggy dark hair and a thin black goatee. He stood relaxed, kinda hunched over, hands plunged deep into his front pockets of jeans that were three sizes too big. He wore an olive drab green T-shirt that was two sizes too big and a blue knitted beanie that rode low over his forehead, pushing scruffy bangs over his eyes.

“That depends on what you’re looking for, little dude.”

“I’m not really sure. I have about a hundred bucks.”

A big smile slowly came to the man behind the counter. A look of approval flashed across his eyes, and he began to beam as bright as a pregnant woman glows.

“Oh, man. If you’re just getting started, it won’t cost you that much. Here, I got something to show you.”

He led me over to a wall on the other side of the store. The wall was layered, row after row, rack after rack with boards. It was a kaleidoscope of cartoons and graphics. Things I didn’t even know of yet. A sexy devil woman was holding a skateboard. Alluring anime girls, one on each board in different provocative poses and outfits. Smoke billowing out of a “cigar,” spelling out a name. I would later realize as I got older that the cigar was actually a joint. Goofy-looking monkeys. Names on boards looking like graffiti. Wildstylez for riders; I had no idea who they were.

The shop employee pointed to the wall of glory as my eyes scanned, unable to focus on one spot.

“A complete goes for around eighty bucks after taxes. You pick the board, and we’ll put it all together for you.”

And like that, I was in. No secret handshake. No code words. Just, “You want to skate? Cool. Here’s what you need.” I had played sports since kindergarten. The usual stuff: soccer, Little League, flag football. I had no genuine interest in any of them because of how hostile they all were. I was 10 when I played Little League. From the get-go, it was overly aggressive about who can pitch the fastest, hit the hardest, and throw the farthest. It

was never fun. I wasn't last picked. I wasn't first picked. I was always around the middle. I like fun and playing games, but I have never understood the hype of it all. The perpetual pissing contest just seemed exhausting. Dudes who you thought were your friends immediately were your enemies, and grudges rolled over to the hallways in the elementary schools. Mainstream sports were never accepting of outsiders. If you didn't know the right teams and players, you weren't welcome to the club. Every game was a wall of hate vomiting from the mouths of parents who needed little Johnny to win to feel like they were good parents. But skaters seemed different. Skateboarding was just coming back into popularity around this time, and it felt very welcoming.

There was camaraderie to the competitiveness. It was, "I can do this. What can you do?" Young men one-upping each other trying to outride the next dude but being encouraged by that same dude to do it. Going extreme was *radical*. It hadn't been marketed yet. It was raw, underground. No parents. No wall of hate was screamed at you while you attempted and failed a kickflip off three stairs for the umpteenth time. It wasn't new, but it was reborn and rising like a phoenix. I walked out with my first skateboard and the sense I had changed. I was Luke being handed a light saber by Obi-Wan. No longer a kid. I was a skater.

* * *

The board was an Alien Workshop: Missing Link model. It was equipped with the store's basic trucks and whatever their cheapest wheels and bearings were. I should mention the hardware was very reasonable in price but was still quality. The graphic on the board was of cartoon profiles of a chimp, a gray alien, and a human. They were linked together by gold chains behind their profiles. You can still google it. I also bought a belt with the extra money that I had leftover. If I was going to skate, I was going to dress the part. It was a simple black belt with a steel latched buckle. Nothing special about it other than the fact that I had bought it at S.B.I. Some thirty years later, I still wear that belt daily.

I didn't ride the bus home. I skated the whole four miles. I picked my board up when I got to the cracks that were too big to roll over. Setting

down the board and remounting was goofy. I fell, I got back up, I fell again. The long trek home was a stutter of motion that culminated in me finally finding my feet the last two blocks. Any birthing process is always a struggle. The miles from the skate shop were a test I had to endure alone. I rolled smoothly down my street, chest puffed out like a conquering hero.

Once I had my own skateboard, I was invited more and more by Grant to hang out. He showed me all the great skate spots nearby. At home, I was free to come and go as I pleased to my older sisters' disbelief. All I had to say was, "Going skating!"

* * *

Grant and I had become pretty good friends. One morning that summer, before I started my paper route, he skated up. I had long since ditched the rollerblades for my board. Grant caught me before I started on my way. He pulled out and showed me a wood tobacco pipe. He had been scrolling and etching designs all over the bowl: titties, a skull, a puffy cloud.

"You want to get stoned later?"

I weighed my options for the day. I didn't think anybody would be home. I had no idea how it was going to affect me. By this point, I was years away from the D.A.R.E. programs they had in elementary school for which I harbored a growing suspicion that D.A.R.E. was grown-up paranoia. Grant had his shit together. He wasn't unraveling at the seams. TV and movies portrayed potheads as lovable goofballs, so . . .

Excited but still playing it cool, "Sure."

"Cool. Meet up here after your route, and we'll go skate before it gets too hot."

I was contemplative throughout the delivery. Did I really want to get high? What would it be like? Would I get in trouble? I pushed these thoughts out of my head. I quickly worked through my route. Excited to go skating.

Now, when it comes to skateboarding, I never got much farther than ollieing. To ollie is to bring all four wheels completely off the ground, land again, and roll away. It is the core of all street tricks. Preferably achieved as gracefully as possible, which is the ultimate goal for the hoard of ragamuffins known as skaters. And back then, at that young age, ollieing was all that I

worked on. My fundamental goal was to be able to ollie over cracks. When I skated down the street and came to an uneven sidewalk, I popped over it with a weird little manual thing I did. A manual is a wheelie on a skateboard. You pop your front up and roll on just your two back wheels for as long as you can. You don't drag your tail when performing a proper manual. To get over cracks, I would manual up until my nose was over the crack, bring the nose down, and do a nose manual, which is the inverse of a manual. It wasn't graceful, it didn't look cool, and if the rise of the crack was high enough, it didn't work. I ate many a shits misgauging the height of some cracks.

* * *

Grant and I were skating behind a block of retail stores about a mile from our neighborhood. The blacktop pavement was clean there. Along the wall of the stores were small dolly truck-size loading ramps that were skateable. We launched off the ramps as fast as we dared to go and tried to land tricks. Grant was working on landing kickflips, and I was working on landing. This went on for an hour or so until the Fresno heat started beating down on us. It was time to cool it for a while. We headed home to my house.

Back then the house I was living in had a pool—one of the few pools on the block that was accessible to the other kids. Pool parties were somewhat of a daily occurrence during the summer months. Grant had to stop by his house to pick up his trunks and came over with his backpack. Surprisingly nobody was home. By this time, I had forgotten about the pot. I was a little curious about what was up when he waved me over to the side of the house. That is until I saw the pipe in his hand.

The side of the house was a narrow path between the house and the fence that broke up the neighborhood plots. My father kept ours clean of weeds and well rocked. It is where the electrical panel for the house is located. Many people tend to forget this side of the house and let it get overgrown with weeds until a breaker trips. Then they're cussing up a storm tromping through the vegetation, looking for a panel. Mine was clean, if not a little sunbaked. My home's stucco was painted white with dark forest-green trim. The sun had climbed into the noonday position, bathing us in its full force. The intense heat was reflecting off the rocks, the house, and the fucking air.

“Fuck, it’s hot,” I said as I shifted from barefoot to barefoot on the hot rocks.

“I know. I’ll do this quick so we can swim.”

Huddled at the far end of the side of the house, the only way to escape if someone were to spot us was over the fence. Without shoes, I wasn’t sure I could make it.

Grant pulled out a sandwich bag that held a little over an eighth of compressed flat, over-dried, dark green Mexican diesel weed. It was known back then as *shake* or *swag*. This was the pre-chronic days of the nineties, and swag was the most common. Now, you walk into a dispensary, and vials and vials of fluffy, fruity, sticky-icky that tastes as good as it looks line the counter. It’s grown at farms by farm artisans and fertilized with love.

On the contrary, Mexican diesel weed was packed in a semi’s fuel tank and smuggled over the border—diesel fuel seeping through its packaging. I know a few old-timers who prefer swag to modern cannabis. Occasionally I miss it, as the flavor had its own qualities of potency. Harsh, but weed. You could smoke a whole joint of swag and paint a house with a really nice head buzz. You could take a hit of chronic and be sprawled out on the floor, counting clouds through the ceiling. Grant began to break up the swag to pack the bowl.

“What are you doing?” I was curious to know everything. I wanted to be able to repeat the process if I were so inclined.

“It has seeds. You have to find them and pull them out, or they’ll explode in your face when hitting it.”

Even though it was a new and exciting phrase, I didn’t question the term “hitting it” in this statement. Because I was utterly stuck trying to figure how serious Grant was about the weed exploding in my face.

In my mind, there were three degrees of an explosion of this type. 1. Comical à la Looney Tunes, black soot covering my face like a gag cigar/firecracker/pop gun. 2. A sound that would alert others to what we were doing. 3. Misfire. (I had taken a course to get my hunting license when I was twelve. During the training, the other attendees and I were shown a rifle with the wrong size caliber bullet in it when it was fired. The catastrophic

failure of the twisted metal told a grizzly tale of disfigurement.)

Grant started placing the weed into his pipe.

“Now, I’m packing the bowl. Not too tight so that there’s airflow.” He finished packing the bowl, then meticulously closed the Ziploc baggy and rolled it before securing it in his backpack.

I watched, religiously, as he brought the pipe to his lips and, with a BIC lighter, inhaled, dragging the flickering flame into the crown of the bowl. He exhaled a small cloud of strange-smelling smoke. I had assumed it would smell like tobacco. I also believed that it would give me a buzz like tobacco. The smell caught me slightly off guard. Grant inhaled some more than locked eyes with me. Still clenching the BIC, he pointed his index finger up, giving the universal signal to hold, pay attention; this was important. With the tittie-covered pipe now removed from his lips. Grant purposefully inhaled fresh air into his lungs and held it.

I immediately understood what he was suggesting. *Make sure you draw it into your lungs.*

“Earrrrr.” He grunted through grappling to keep it all in, a small wisp escaping his lips. Handing me the pipe.

I wiped the mouthpiece off with my fingers before bringing it up to my own lips. A moment’s pause as I tried to figure which hand to hold what in. Figuring quickly, I needed to control the BIC more than the pipe. I opted to grasp the pipe in my left. Biting down on the bit, I wrapped my lips around the pipe’s stem. Sparked the lighter and went to town.

The first drag tasted harsh and stale. I had already been smoking tobacco here and there for four years. I knew what to expect when I had drawn it in. A big part of me was determined not to cough. I pulled the pipe away and inhaled, like Grant, to set the smoke to its task. Grant was coughing at this point and blasting spit-infused puffs into his clenched hand. I exhaled smoothly, feeling very proud of that fact. I didn’t cough. Grant looked at me through a repressed gage of coughing fits.

“Huh. You didn’t cough?”

“Nope,” I said with a massive grin on my face.

“Too bad. Coughing gets you higher.”

We passed the pipe back and forth, working to clear the bowl. I tried to cough on purpose. Honestly, though, trying to cough on purpose is a learned behavior, as it is not what your body wants to do—until it does. But I wanted to get “higher,” not really knowing what “higher” was other than the goal.

By the time we finished and Grant packed everything up, I was light-headed like a motherfucker. We both were pouring sweat from the side of the house, and all I wanted to do was get in the pool. I walked right out and dove straight into the most excellent, cleanest, most refreshing water I had ever experienced.

The two of us splashed and played for hours dunking each other or trying to do bigger and bigger flips off the diving board.

My house had an old satellite dish next to it, with a three-inch thick pipe and a fifteen-foot dish at the top. Ugly beast it was. Grant showed me how to get on top of the roof using the satellite pole. You had to wrap your arms around the burning black steel and push your legs against the house, slowly walking up the wall to the eave of the house. Finally, kicking a leg onto the roof, you pushed off the pole crawling on the roof. You had to move quickly. By this time, just afternoon, everything was lava-hot to the touch.

The patio of the house had been converted into a bedroom. The roof for the add-on butted up against the pool. There was only a three-foot gap between the house and said pool.

We took turns climbing the satellite pole and jumping off the roof, higher than a kite, into the pool. Cannonballs, jackknives, and the occasional belly flop. This went on for maybe an hour or two. We had worked ourselves up to one mega munchie session.

Anyone who spends any time around a teenage boy will tell you that their appetites are monstrous. Mine, in particular, were legendary. I had always been underweight for my age. However, I ate with such gusto that the only explanation was that I had a hole in my stomach that led to another dimension. I would wonder if somewhere out in deep space, bite-size pieces of hamburgers, pizzas, pies, and an endless stream of French fries slathered in ketchup floated aimlessly. During these formative years, I had entered into and won three food-eating contests. A watermelon-eating contest focused

on speed, a pie-eating contest that focused on quantity, and a pizza-eating contest that focused on speed and quantity. The pizza contest was risky because if you and the two other dudes you were with couldn't finish the massive 33-inch pie, you had to pay for it. I ate two-thirds of that bastard.

My father had to put rules in place so I would not become a blight at family gatherings. As more and more of my friends would come over, he expanded on these rules. Rule number one was that I had to wait until after everyone else filled their plate before I could fill mine. I had a habit of being first in line, only to have my mom or dad come over and pull me out so that others, mostly the elderly, could go first. When I was finally allowed to go. I would eat as I filled my plate. Slowly going down the line, piling higher and higher a mound of macaroni salad, rice pilaf, mashed potatoes, fruit salad, and thinly sliced tri-tip. Sit. Devour the plate. Then back up for seconds before most guests were done with their first. All this, and I looked as if I were always ten pounds underweight. Rule two was I was not allowed to eat at friends' houses unless their parents talked to my parents. I think that was my parents hoping to give the other families a heads up about what they were getting themselves into. The final rule was that I could not feed the neighbor kids any more than a single serving of a snack pack. I would say it is a safe wager that two to three teenage boys could wipe out two hundred dollars of groceries in under an hour if given the option.

That being said, you can imagine just how hungry I was with a severe case of the munchies. No one was home, and after skating, getting stoned, and swimming all day, Grant and I had a killer hunger. Grant had been around enough to know and understand the rules. He bounced back to his house to feed. What happened next I would hold as a badge of honor for the rest of my life. The bread was a fresh loaf of Rainbo Thin Sliced White Bread. The peanut butter was creamy Skippy. The jelly was my favorite Smucker's boysenberry jam. I made and consumed the entire loaf of bread in PB&J sandwiches. One right after the other.

Later that day, my father came home from driving buses for the school district. He had spent the day chartering summer school kids to and fro. I would eventually grow to be a foot taller than my dad. At this time, he was

about a foot taller than me and was heavy set. Years of carrying the extra weight had bowed his legs. Causing him to walk like a cowboy who had just dismounted his horse. Tiny strands of gray had formed around his temples, but his hair was still very dark, very thick, and neatly oiled with a sharp part on the left. He wore a style that was not quite a pompadour but not slicked back either. It was some where in between. I could hear his cowboy boots' heels click against the faux wood floor from the living room. Dad made his way to the bread box. Then the pantry. Only to come to the living room.

“Who ate all the bread?”

I choked out a lazy, “What? I was hungry.”

“Dammit. It was a new loaf of bread.” Half amazed, half upset. Dad kept looking at me, waiting for a response.

“I’m sorry, but I was hungry.”

Dad let out a long exhale as he ran one hand through his hair and the other out to the heavens. He shook his head as he turned back to the kitchen.

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