

In Memory Drive Slow

I'm gonna give it to you totally, nothing held back. I just want you to listen. I mean record it, whatever, but hear me all the way, because I'm going to tell you absolutely everything.

OK. Straight out, I deal. Totally small time—grams, eighths, sometimes a quarter O-Z. Strictly minor-league. None of that nine millimeter/bricks of flake shit. I sell a little blow, a little crank to Joe six-pack when he gets his paycheck and that's all. I pay my rent. Got a nice '65 'Stang, and bottom line, I'm just a working stiff.

So here's how I met the guy. First time I set eyes on him was that same night. I stopped at the Willowside for a brew 'n a bump. It was early, a few old farts at the back tables, and this guy was the only one sitting at the bar. One of those sloppy, half-tough guys. 'Niners jacket, Peterbilt cap, hair shaggy with a beard and 'stache which helped hide how his face was getting porky. He'd go, "Aw-right!" when one of the fighters on the tube landed one. When Lloyd picks up his empty and says it looks like he could use another one, he says, "No shit, Sherlock." Lloyd's half his size and could totally whip his ass. Classic chump, easy money from my point of view. I take a stool a couple down from him.

Lloyd shoots me a look, we read each other. I don't move action on his premises unless the situation's right, and I kick him back twenty on each hundred I make. You see I'm giving you total honesty here, right? So when I know the chump will catch it, I pretend to sneak a sniff off the crook of my thumb, and then act startled to see him catch me at it. Chump says, "Hey bro, why doncha share the wealth?"

I act trapped. I sign him to be quiet and scoot over next to him. I fake recognizing him from somewhere and ask Lloyd for two bumps and beer backs, so the chump thinks I'm covering so Lloyd won't catch on. He thinks this is cool—I can literally see the thought in his blurry chump's eyes. We knock back the bumps and I whisper, "Chill, dude—not inside here." We make phony talk and he plays along, feeling cagey. "I'm Jake," I tell him, and when we shake I give him a five-move hand jive J up on the spot. The spades are into a good thing with this hand-jive shit; when he can't follow the moves it humbles him, makes him feel like he's not in the know, right? Now the chump is definitely impressed with me, I know the secret handshake and all. His name, he tells me, is Leon. Pretty soon I lean close and say and hardly moving my lips: "You can taste if you're ready to buy—G-M's eighty."

Leon cocks me a nod—Mr. Cool, shooting careful looks at Lloyd, who's standing wiping glasses with his back to us and probably grinning like a fool. "Outside," I whisper to Leon. "Hang here five. Get another beer."

As I went out I palmed thirty bucks to Lloyd, a little joke, like a prediction I'd get a minimum three hundred from the chump. Lloyd winked at me.

In my 'Stang I put bindles and a flat pint of 100-octane Schnapps into my jacket pockets. I got out and looked up and waited over by someone else's ride. Leon came out and I watched him cross the lot toward me: this

bulky zero on the beer-gut side of thirty, walking this weird stiff walk, pretending he was muscle-bound. The guy was so simple I felt like I oughta just phone in the shakedown. Cut it short, just tell him, "Look, Dipstick, just give me all your money now. Save us both time!"

I told him we'd deal in his ride. On the off-chance shit happens in my wheels I don't get involved that way, and I know Lloyd will look out for it for me in case someone gets hurt. Leon's ride was exactly the one I'd thought it would be—a dirty, battered old Dodge one-ton with a bunch of crappy tools heaped in the bed. We climbed in and he gave me a scuffed-up CD case to chop lines on.

I pulled a bindle and my short Buck. I cut some very fat rails. This was what I called my coke, you understand: about half crank, some mannitol' and a dash of real blow for taste. People who've been drinking, why waste real blow on them? Crank pops their clutch and gets them rolling cheaper. Leon snorts. "Aww-riiiight!" he says. "That's some decent blow! I take his money and give him his bindle, then cut some more rails out of mine—the party's on friendly Jake, right? He started chopping out lines from his bogus bindle, and I kept putting the pint back in his hand, milking him right along. How? By listening! By acting impressed. For numb-nuts like him, substances are just a way to get some company. As long as they're chopping lines, people will sit there and listen to them!"

I heard about the unbelievable bitch he was married to until the divorce a couple years ago. She had the house and the brats, thank god. She couldn't get her claws on what he made under the table, but her faggot lawyer had his unemployment checks garnisheed right out from under him. On and on and on.

It took less than half an hour. He asked me if I'd take a ride to his cash machine with him and he'd buy another bindle. "That's a big ten-four, good buddy!" I told him.

We took Occidental east. The Willowside's the only tavern for miles—it's all dark fields and trees and big lonely houses out there. Leon's loving it, gonna gut his account to buy bindles to bribe me to listen to him some more. The fields are spinning past on either side and Leon's driving way too fast, shouting me the story of his own dramatic life. Now he's edging up to something he thinks is a big deal ... and here it comes: Leon mentions his "manslaughter beef a couple years back."

He looks to see if I'm impressed. I say, "Whoa! Heavy duty!"

What he wanted to talk about was his dramatic battle in court, but there was no way he could go on about these things without describing what the manslaughter actually was. What it came down to was, he yvas driving home from work DUI one afternoon, speeding down a residential street, and he killed a ten-year-old on a bike. Pathetic, and what else would it be with this guy? Hardly said ten words about the accident anyway—talked about his hard time in the joint.

You have to remember this was just a year or two before they made hard-ass vehicular manslaughter laws. His mouth was in such high gear he actually gave me the details: what his bit shook down to was about six months in county, and he ended up with a year's work furlough and five Years' summary. His whole time in county he celled with a ninety-pound cross dresser.

It was hard work for me to keep acting impressed with this, but we were already entering the residential streets on the west edge of Santa Marta. He was driving too fast, drifting across the center line on the curves. I was just deciding I would grab a cab back to my ride from chump's cash machine, when something catches Leon's eye and he stops right in the middle of the street, staring. There's no other traffic--everyone's indoors watching TV—and I look where he's staring.

There's a homemade wooden sign wired to the pole of a street lamp by the curb. The letters were spray-painted through stencils, a little crooked, but big and clear:

In Memory
Kevin Cray
10 Years Old
Drive Slow

Well, I realized that I'd seen this sign before—one of those pathetic kind of things that stays in your mind, right? It'd been up there a long time, a year or two, maybe. One of those things that catches your eye, and then you look for it now and then to see if it's still there.

The streetlight put a kind of glow on the sign. I saw Leon looking at it, and something clicked. I realized I was sitting beside the reason for that sign. This Kevin Cray was Leon's Manslaughter Beef.

Maybe that was the point where things started to go so truly strange that night: the way I suddenly understood this chump so completely. Leon was definitely not a Noticer of what was around him. I somehow knew he'd driven this road a dozen times since that killing, but this was the first time he'd seen the sign—tonight, boozed and wired again, losing it on the same curve again, he finally recognizes this spot only because there's this sign staring him in the face. You wanted to laugh. You almost felt sorry for a fool this total.

But what happened next was *definitely* where the strangeness started, where something began tampering with my mind. Here's where it began, and you can hook me to a lie detector right now, whatever you want. Leon realizes we're at a dead stop, he guns the truck, we're hauling ass outta there, and as I sat there gazing at his big scared profile I suddenly got this picture in my mind—like it was a slide and my head was a projector and someone had just stuck it in there.

It was this little blond kid with a bike. His face was so clear to me! He had light, light freckles near his nose, his teeth were perfect and looked a little too big for him the way they do for kids that age, nine or ten. He had on these red baggies with yellow lightning bolts on them, was wearing a tanktop hanging off his skinny little arms, he had a little scab on his left knee, and a Bart Simpson button on his shorts that said "Don't have a cow, Man." And this whole image had an aura about it, an emotion like . . . sorrow.

It was all so sharp in my mind I was disoriented, and I blurted out: "Hey! Kevin Cray! Was that the kid you killed?"

I was instantly pissed at myself. Bad, *bad* technique! I had to be milking this chump. Talking about his manslaughter beef, fine! But "*that kid you killed*"? No way! Far too raw! Look at him—his fat cheeks were pop-

ping sweat right above his beard-line.

He notices we're dead-stopped mid-street, and he jerks us back into gear. As we lurch on down the road his eyes are wild and he keeps opening and closing his mouth. I realize he is shaping a Thought. His voice comes out rusty. "You know what? You know what the problem really is?" His eyes are growing shiny with pity for himself and his hard life. "I'll *tell* you. The problem is really those MADD bitches! Dyke Bitch Mothers Against -Men Having One Fucking Little Beer! And those same bitches are the ones that send their spoiled brats out to play in the street! Go where you want, Sweetums! You own the street! Those kids are just plain death traps!"

We were speeding again, and on these residential streets sure to get popped. The image of that kid that had thrown me so hard was gone just like that. I realized that my chump here was a lot more emotional than I took him for, and I had to get a grip on him. There's a liquor store ahead, and I shout:

"Pull in here! This one's on me!"

I got a flat of Beam. We sat in the dark corner of the parking lot and took the top half off it. I chopped out some chubbies from my fifty percent stock and got those up his snout right quick. I could see right away that Leon felt this was much more like it. I got back to work, piping him some gee-wow rap about the heavy action he'd seen, smoothing his feather Told him studies had shown little boys were suicidal, that it was an instinct in them, Nature's way to control population.

"I'll tell you the long and short of it," Leon says. "He came barreling straight at me outta nowhere! He hit me head-on!"

Well, suddenly the weirdness happens again. Suddenly there's the kid in my mind, and he's so detailed it's unreal. He's like coasting toward me on his bike, and I can see the blond fuzz on his earlobes, can see how his left tennis shoe is just starting to come untied. I see him coasting toward me then his eyes go wide and stark like he suddenly sees me, and it terrifies him. It rattles me. I fight it, but I've got to say something, got to check it out. I ask Leon, "That Cray kid, was he blond? Was he wearing a tanktop and a Bart Simpson button when you hit him?"

What the fuck was I doing here, saying what I just said? Leon looks like I just punched his face. "How do I know? I told ya, he came at me so fast you would'na believed it!"

I tried to pretend I was making a joke—I mean, *all* little kids wear tanktops and baggies, right? I chop jumbo lines and give both our noses and throats the freeze that refreshes. I pumped him more strokes, tell him he's a dude that's truly seen the hard-ass side of life exsettera.

Here's Leon's Bank. We coast up to his ATM. But he's acting dispirited. He's slow pushing the buttons, hits the wrong keys, and curses. I realize I've got to change the mood fast or my chump's going to deflate on me. It was that goddamn sign that had queered the whole mood.

Right there, Inspiration spreads its wings in me. It lifts me up, and I know that the situation is saved and the rest of Leon's cash is mine.

"You know what really pisses me off? It's that fucking *sign*," I growl to him. "You know what we should do, man? We should steal that fuckin' thing, take it out in the fields, and *burn* it."

Touché! This really nails my chump's G-spot. The deed is just his league. He would be too chickenshit to do it—even to think of it—alone. With me he's up to it, an actual adventure, and it means he'll have company that much longer. He keys his ATM like a maestro and gives me cash for the rest of my doctored stash then and there.

We do more blow—he does a lot more, I fake it—then we slam more hootch and cruise back to the scene of his killing, and the site of its plywood marker. Now that I have his money, I would dearly love to get right back to my ride and be done with him, but the deed at least can be quickly done. I saw a pair of parrot-beaks in his truckbed that could snip the sign's wiring.

And so they do, though of course Leon does it like a numbnut. Standing on the roof of the truck, he snips through the upper wiring first, so that the plywood topples forward, and bruises and bloodies his forehead. Seeing that happen gave me the strangest feeling of . . . delight! Like he was the fighter I wasn't rooting for in some bout I was watching. *Ha! Gotcha!* was exactly the feeling it gave me. This feeling was so sharp it bothered me. I mean, I had what I wanted from him, the cash. He was easy money to me, nothing more. Why was I giving a shit?

We got the sign in the bed. I was getting this strange vibe of isolation—I mean out *here* in the middle of this huge suburb. Window lights were glowing out to the horizon, TVs murmuring within, but the silence was so total. Somehow I realized it was the signboard in the truckbed that was creeping me—as if it was a tombstone. No! As if it was a corpse itself. Those miles of people in their living rooms all around us seemed like . . . on another planet.

We started driving back out of town. Leon one-handed more powder in his snout and booze down his throat as he drove, a fierce humor in his glittery eyes, a gaze that got more fixed and more fierce as we wound through the ex-urbs and out into the open fields.

I was lulled somehow by the ride. The dark countryside seemed right streaming past, isolated houses, farms, hedgerows in moonlight, the big sign bouncing softly on the junk and tools in back . . . until all at once the landscape seemed alien. Definitely not the way we'd come in.

"Leon," I say, "where we goin' here?" I'm trying to keep it humorous, but I'm really pissed. There's only a few roads *out* there in that country stretch west of town, and this road didn't look like any of them.

"There's gotta be a crossroad up here—I'll hook a left." We were both feeling pretty disoriented. I grew up around here, knew every yard of pavement in the county, but not this road.

Then Leon goes, "What's *with* this bitch! I've got her *flooded!*"

And I realize we're definitely driving slower. It's not just the truck. Leon's *voice* sounds slower too, slower and a little deeper. Then I go, "What the hell was that!" and I realize my *own voice* is deeper and slower too but I hardly notice it because I've just felt something move--something weighty definitely move back behind us in the truckbed, and Leon is gaping at me and I know he's felt it too.

"Stop, for chrissake!" I tell him.

We get out of the truck. There's not a headlight in any direction, nor a house—just trees and fields stretched out under moonlight so strong it throws shadows. We look back in the bed, keeping our distance from it. And I swear to you, swear to you, out of nowhere, there's no wooden sign in the truckbed lying on the heap of tools. There's a naked body lying there! A small body, a young boy's, and it's all smeared slick with blood that looks jet black in the moonlight. I swear to you here and now, a naked kid with his head half crushed.

I'm like hypnotized, watching the blood leak real slow down through the hair of one of his sideburns, thinking *Christ this kid's still bleeding*. Then I nearly wet myself because the kid *moves!*

Then Leon is shouting *Help me!* And I realize Leon is climbing into the bed, which is what makes the body move. *Help* this chump? I hold my hands up and step back. His eyes are wild. His face is like a pig's that's being slaughtered. He picks up the corpse, staggers to the edge of the bed, and pitches the kid onto the shoulder. It lands with a grisly smack and a knocking of the skull and joints like a quick little drum-riff.

"For Chrissake let's get outta here!" I shout, but it comes out slow and echoey and not like a shout at all. We jump back into the cab but it's not like jumping, the air we move through's like molasses. I pull the door shut and it's so heavy-slow to close. "Floor it, asshole!" I shout in my rubbery voice.

We start forward, but the field doesn't stream past us the way it should. The trees are going by one, two, three, four. I turn to shout again at Leon—it takes a long time to aim my face at him. I see his lips are hanging loose and spitty. His gasping blows the spit out into a bubble from one corner of his mouth. The bubble pops and I see all these glittery pieces of spit flying slow slow motion through the air.

I turn my head to look back through my window at the corpse, turning and turning my head like it's taking forever, and I see the corpse on the shoulder not two truck-lengths behind us yet—see the corpse *moving*, getting onto its feet, and starting to come after us!

One of its thigh-bones is broken and its end pokes out through the meat of the leg—pokes out and in, out and in with each stride of its run—but it's moving near normal speed, you see, while our truck and us in it are inching through molasses.

I start to turn my head to shout at Leon, but my head moves so incredibly slow I decide I'm going to just open my door and jump out of this fucking truck altogether.

But I'm still just turning, turning, only now getting my hands on the door, when the truck shudders. Something has jumped into the bed behind us.

Leon's gripping the wheel for dear life. His mouth starts opening, strings of spit growing longer, longer between his lips, and there's a rattle of something heavy being pulled from the tools in the bed—all these sounds happening at real speed, you understand.

WHAP-CRUNCH—the rear window sprays safety glass in like buckshot. My face is all cuts, but the blood has just barely started to slide out of them when a big pair of parrot-beaks pokes into the cab between Leon

and me.

Nothing slow about those parrot-beaks! Two quick bites—*CLACK-CLACK*---and they bite clean through both his wrists. So swift that lopping! But so slowly, slowly do Leon's two wrist-stumps come away from the two hands still gripping the wheel, and so slowly, slowly do two fat mushrooms of blood sprout out of those stumps! So slow his blood, it has not sprouted two, three inches high from his stumps before two much smaller hands shoot into the cab, seize Leon by the hair, and haul his whole big body backwards out the window-frame.

I'm sitting still trapped in slow-time, watching the big fat blobs of blood still hanging on the air, gradually stretching out as they started to fall, watching Leon's fingers come loose on the wheel and his hands tumble onto the seat, fingers twitching like dying crabs, while meanwhile, back in the truck bed, things are happening in real time, to judge by the sounds. The sounds come thick and fast, ugly sounds, sounds of metal and meat, clicking and clacking and hacking and chopping.

Believe me, I jumped out and started to run—still in slo-mo, but actually getting two, three strides from the truck, when *wham*, I'm knocked flat on my face.

cold-cocked me? I don't *know*! It *couldn'ta* been Leon, not with what was happening to him! It *had* to be that kid! Crazy as it sounds, it had to be!

I don't *know* where he went! I don't *know* from fingerprints! I was in the goddam truck, that's all. . . !