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## THIS MONTH'S STORY: "MY PAL LONNIE"

By Eddie Mulnix.....3



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## **“MY PAL LONNIE”**

I CAUGHT THEM down in the canyons. That was where we all played before we got too old to play anymore. The neighborhood was built on a slope and water ran downhill from all the different streets into the desert and carved big ditches into the pale orange dirt. The ditches deepened over time and were filled with brush and snakes and lizards and a thin muddy stream that dried out to nothing far out in the desert. Like I said, that’s where we played, where everyone played, so when I went looking for Eddie Humpbelt and Danny Newton I knew I’d find them there.

They’d got me into trouble for the thing that happened to Dusty Bilko, and I deserved to be in trouble for what I did to him, sure. But after a solid month of staring at the wall in my room, no TV, no radio, nothing—a month of blank white walls and thinking about things—I got more and more pissed off, and didn’t need a reason to take it out on them. Somebody had to pay. That’s all.

The thing with Dusty Bilko started one day when I left my skateboard on the front lawn and Dusty stole it. I went inside to get a Coke and when I came outside it was gone, just like that. I didn't need to think real hard about who did it. Dusty was the biggest klepto in the neighborhood, and I wasn't the only one who knew it.

So I spent the next week hiding behind bushes, looking around corners, spying on Dusty when he thought he was alone. Just to make sure. And then one day I climbed up on the stone wall in my backyard where I could watch the street below, the street where he played, and there he was: riding my skateboard down the sidewalk. I got so pissed off I almost jumped off the wall and ran down there and kicked his ass right then. But my mom was in the backyard, drunk, and whenever she got drunk she'd stick to me like white on rice, chewing my ear about her problems. I had to wait. So I waited.

The next day I found them playing touch football on the street. Dusty and Eddie Humpbelt and Danny Newton. Dusty got this look on his face when I asked him where my skateboard was, a little smile like he knew that I knew and was daring me to do something it about it.

So...I broke his arm.

I know how that sounds, but I swear to Christ I didn't mean to do it. I'd had my arm bent behind my back so many times by my dad that I knew it hurt, yeah, but I didn't know you could break it that way. I was just as surprised as Dusty when the thing snapped with a sound like a stick in a wet towel. He fell down screaming, his arm bent the wrong way with the elbow pointing out. It looked real strange. I couldn't stop looking at it.

I didn't mean to do it, but there it is.

I told them not to tell and they did. They told right away. When my dad found out he was so pissed off he beat the shit out of me and he beat my cat, too. He threw the cat against the living room wall and the poor guy bounced off the wall about six feet, I swear to god, and the cat ran out of the room and I never saw that cat again.

So when I got off of restriction a month later I was like a chained dog who just busted free. I was pissed off at them: Danny Newton with his Bermuda shorts and his bubble butt and his hair so blonde it was almost white. He was such a little faggot. He really burned me up. And Eddie Humpbelt I never liked. He was a real loudmouth punk, but if you threatened to hit him his lip started quivering and his eyes got all big and full of tears.

They were a couple of pussies.

I still hated Dusty, too, but when I thought about him I could hear the arm cracking with that wet sound, and when I remembered that sound I didn't want to think about Dusty anymore.

But those other two? *Fuck* them.

I looked down at them from up above the canyon. Danny stood over the stream, a foot on each bank. He was flipping over a big rotten chunk of wood. Eddie Humpbelt had his finger up in his nose. It was way up there. It was halfway to his brain. He looked at the finger, flicked whatever was on it away into the brush. When he heard my voice he jumped like a motherfucker.

"What d'you think you're doing down here?"

"I dunno," said Humpbelt.

“What do you mean you don’t know? You fucking know.”

“Why don’t you leave us alone,” said Danny.

“Shut your little faggot mouth,” I said.

He shut his little faggot mouth.

“This is a real romantic setup. You guys going out?”

“No,” said Humpbelt.

“He’s the girl, right? Or maybe you’re the girl. It’s hard for me to tell, since you both got that same bitch look to you.”

“No,” said Humpbelt.

“Is that all you can say? ‘No’?”

He didn’t want to say “No” again so he clammed up.

“I coulda sworn I saw you two kissing down here.”

They looked at each other.

“That’s disgusting,” said Danny.

I stared hard at them. They couldn’t look at me.

I jumped down into the canyon. It was nice and cool down there. I walked up to Humpbelt and shoved him hard in the chest.

“Kiss him.”

“What?”

“Kiss your girlfriend. Kiss your little blonde-haired girlfriend.”

They half-turned towards each other. They didn’t look like they wanted to do it. Humpbelt turned towards me and he started to say something and I slapped him in the face. He went down to the ground like I’d punched him and somehow

that made me even more pissed off—that he couldn't take a slap. He was a girl; he was worse than a girl.

“Get up.”

He got up with his legs shaking. It made me laugh. I spun him around on his heels and shoved him toward Danny.

“Kiss him,” I said.

They just stood there. I grabbed the back of Humpbelt's head and the back of Danny's head and I shoved their faces together. Danny tucked his chin down, trying to get his lips away, and the back of his head cracked Humpbelt in the forehead and I mean GOOD. Humpbelt went down again, laying in the mud holding his face. That made me laugh. I was having myself a real good time.

I nudged Humpbelt with my foot.

“Get up,” I said again.

He got up. Now he was crying. I grabbed the back of his head by the hair and shoved him toward Danny again. He stumbled forward like a drunk, his legs not working quite right.

“Give him some fuckin' tongue,” I said.

I knew right away that something was wrong.

Danny's eyes got real wide and he was looking somewhere behind me and then I turned around to see a shadow against the blue sky, a big dark shape jumping down on top of me.

I couldn't feel the right side of my face; I reached up to touch it and it was like when your foot falls all the way asleep and becomes like somebody else's foot. And then there was this blur, a stick coming down on me, and I tried to get up and the stick caught me in the middle of my back

and I went down face-first into the stream and I got up and the stick came down on me again and again and I crashed through the brush in the canyon trying to get away, until finally I got away and stood there wet and shaking and turned around and the guy with the stick was standing there looking back at me with the two jerkoffs a little farther up in the canyon: Danny Newton with a big wet patch on the front of his Bermuda shorts, Eddie Humpbelt looking like he was going to turn tail and run at any second. They stared at me, the three of them, and I stared back—waiting for the next thing to happen.

The guy with the stick looked like he meant business.

“I ever catch you fucking with my cousin again, get ready for a real problem. You understand me?”

Cousin? He sure didn't look like either one of those two guys. His skin was burned dark, his face sort of Indian looking, with hard flat squinty eyes and shaggy, dirty-looking brown hair and a wide smooth face like brown clay shaped into a rectangle. He looked like a hesher, a stoner—with his long shaggy hair and reddish-orange tank top.

“You ever got a problem with this guy again, come see me,” he said. “Lonnie. I just moved in right up the street. Come on, I'll show you where I live.”

I stood there and watched the three of them walked away, out of the canyon and up the street into the neighborhood, Lonnie walking real slow and tough with his stick, the two jerks following him.

I stood there in the canyon like an idiot, feeling coming back into the side of my face, a broken and sunburned feeling. Now I had to worry about going home. There would



be questions about my face. I wondered what it looked like. I crawled up out of the canyon real slow, my body starting to stiffen up where Lonnie'd hit me with the stick.

ONE DAY I saw my cat. I was sitting in my front yard and I noticed him crouched underneath a neighbor's car across the street. He sat underneath the car and stared at the front door of the house. He just stared and stared. I walked over to him, calling his name, but when I got too close he ran away.

An hour later he was back underneath that car, staring at me, resentful, like I was the one who'd hit him.

I was like that cat with Lonnie. I saw him around the neighborhood, hanging around his house, talking to people. I watched him and kept my distance and stared. I didn't know if we would fight again and if we did what would happen.

IT WAS a day in late spring, one of those strange days in Borax Hill where the wind kicks up unexpectedly from the foothills and freezes your ass. I was walking past the backyards of all the little duplex houses in the neighborhood with the dogs barking at me and the wind coming down hard and rattling the chain link fences. I decided to go to the Grove. The trees in the Grove made a nice windbreak and maybe someone would be there worth talking to, or maybe

not, which was okay too. The grove was always better than being at home, anyway you looked at it.

So maybe I should tell you what the Grove was. In the desert behind the houses there was a grove of fir trees that didn't seem to have any reason for being there. All the kids in the neighborhood hung out there at one time or another. There was a clearing in the middle of the trees where the ground was covered in old dry fir needles. Somebody'd dragged in an old green couch and underneath the couch were porno mags with half the pages all stuck together and there was a coffee can ashtray filled with old cigarette butts and you could smoke there and chill out. I could spend hours there doing nothing.

So this one cold and windy day I went there and I was alone and I was thumbing through an old copy of *Oui* when Lonnie walked into the clearing. I tensed up right away, but he nodded at me like we'd never had a problem. He sat down on the couch, pulled out a pack of Marlboro Reds, and offered me one.

He struck a match and lit it in one cupped hand and tossed the book of matches to me. I tried to strike a match. It went out. I turned my back to the wind and tried it again and again. Finally I cupped it in my hand the way Lonnie did it. It lit.

I took a good drag and felt the effect settle into my brain.

"Shit yeah," I said.

We smoked and sat there. Then Lonnie started talking, like we were in the middle of a conversation.

"I just moved here from Phoenix, but before that I went to a couple of different schools. You know, always in trouble

and shit, right... And there this one guy that gave me a problem. This guy named Alex. Every time I walked out to the corner store he'd be there, him and a couple of friends, and they'd kick my ass. It got to where I couldn't even leave the house, I was so scared of him.

"Then school started, and you know the funny thing? I thought Alex was the biggest baddest motherfucker around, but in school he was a nobody. He was a loser. Guys picked on him, made fun of him. But in his neighborhood he was king. He could shit on everybody like he got shit on at school."

He took a drag on the smoke and butted it out on the arm of the couch. The light shined between the needles on the fir trees and made interesting shapes on the ground. I was a little high from the cigarette.

"I thought about how I came at you with that stick and I felt bad about it. I saw you picking on them little kids and I felt like they were like me when I got picked on, but maybe I was wrong. I started thinking maybe I'm like the guy who thinks he's hot shit in his neighborhood, you know? So I never want to be that dude. You get me?"

"Yeah," I said.

I didn't know what he was getting at, actually, but I sat there and nodded, the wind blowing smoke into my eyes. I put the cigarette out in the dirt.

"So what are you into?" said Lonnie.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what do you like? Cars...sports...pussy..."

Pussy?

“I don’t know.”

“You like comic books?”

“I guess so. I don’t really know.”

“You don’t know if you like comic books? You never read Superman, Spiderman...”

“I don’t read anything except what they make me read in school.”

“What about Conan? You never heard of him?”

“WHO?”

“Conan the Barbarian. He lived thousands of years ago. He was this great warrior who eventually became king of Mongolia, but that was after he’d done his share of killing and fucking and wandering around the land. There are all these stories about the dude.”

“This was a real guy?”

“Hell yes he was real. I mean, the stories might be fake, ‘cause there’s all sorts of bullshit in them about wizards and stuff. But Conan was definitely a real dude. As real as Jesus.”

I wasn’t sure Jesus was real either, but didn’t say so.

“Sounds better than Superman,” I said. “I never liked Superman much...”

“Me neither. Superman’s a fag.”

Lonnie stood up.

“I gotta show you my Conan collection. And maybe my sister will have some food for us to eat.”

“All right.”

WE SAT at the dining room table. Along one wall was an old fashioned wooden hutch with mirrors and all kinds of fancy wine glasses on display and long wooden drawers along the bottom. Lonnie opened one of the drawers and took out a stack of magazines.

The covers were great: Conan stabbing a panther through the throat, black blood running down his forearm. Conan taking on a full tribe of blacks, all of them scared shitless, one guy on the ground with his head split open and his brains spilling out. Conan with his hands all over a chick with giant breasts. She was digging Conan in a big way. He had a sort of disgusted look on his face, and his hand was moving towards the left tit like it was no big thing. Conan was about to score. You got the impression that getting laid wasn't a problem for Conan.

"Wow," I said. "Your mom lets you keep these around?"

"Not my mom, my sister. She don't care what I do."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. No parents to fuck everything up? What kind of a paradise was this?

Then his sister walked into the room. She had ratty brown hair and a t-shirt tucked into jeans. She was kind of pretty even though she had a bit of a gap between her teeth and her skin wasn't so good. I mean, she might have been real pretty once.

She picked up one of the Conan magazines.

"Still reading these?"

"Of course I'm still reading them. Ain't nothing else around here to read."

"How about a textbook?"

“Did my homework already. And by the way, your boyfriend is the one who lent me these magazines. Tell him I want my Quiet Riot album back. You like Quiet Riot, Billy?”

“They’re okay,” I said.

“The first side of that album is good, and then it gets mellow. It’s still good, but it’s mellow. Joan, you tell your boyfriend to stop stealing my shit.”

Lonnie’s sister went into the kitchen and came back with a big pot of spaghetti. She put the pot of spaghetti in the middle of the table and then brought out a plate of garlic bread, a 2-liter bottle of Pepsi, and tall frosted glasses filled with ice. Finally she sat down. I watched the two of them and waited for them to start eating. I really wanted to get at that food, but I waited. In my house I always had to wait until everyone else started eating and if I didn’t I got popped. It was a habit now.

“You wanna say grace?” said Joan.

“All right,” said Lonnie.

Lonnie took the Conan magazines and put them back in the drawer along the bottom of the hutch and pulled his chair in closer to the table and bowed his head to his hands.

“Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed. Amen.”

“Uh, Amen,” I said.

“Amen,” said Joan.

We dug into the spaghetti. Lonnie could really eat. He put his face right down near the plate and shoveled it in, went for the garlic bread, shoveled in some more spaghetti, took

a slug of Pepsi, and belched. Joan ate real slow. In between bites she watched Lonnie eat. She was one of those. At least she wasn't watching me. It was always hard to eat with someone watching me.

"How much did you smoke today?"

Lonnie slurped up a long strand of noodles and leaned back in his chair.

"I dunno... three, maybe four cigarettes..."

"That's not true. There were six packs left in the cupboard this morning. Now there are four. So?"

"So I don't know what you're talking about. You must have counted wrong."

"I don't think so."

"Three cigarettes," said Lonnie. He raised his hand. "God's honest truth."

"Hmmm. I don't know about that."

"Ask your boyfriend. He's probably smoking those cigarettes right now, while he listens to my Quiet Riot record. He's such a prick, Joan. You should really lose that guy."

Joan laughed. I was starting to get the idea that you couldn't be mad at Lonnie for long. He was a charming guy. I'd almost forgotten the beating he gave me.

WE HUNG OUT all the rest of that summer. I guess I looked up to Lonnie like a big brother. I tried to walk like him, hold my cigarette the same way he held his. I wore tank tops and I imagined my arms looked strong and tanned like Lonnie's,

when really they were freckly and thin and sort of pale. It didn't matter, though. If I got the walk right and held the cigarette right I felt good. I felt strong. All I needed was a tan and some weight training. Even Conan had to start somewhere.

Still, though, I started to feel differently about Lonnie the more I got to know him.

It must have started that one day at the aqueduct.

Lonnie was a talker and I was not a talker. Sometimes we would take long walks and I would listen to Lonnie's stories. I knew most of them were lies but I didn't care. One time we walked all the way up to the aqueduct and hung around underneath the bridge that ran over it. Underneath the bridge it was nice and cool and the smell of the water came up and hung in the dry desert air like something you could touch. I noticed there were these big clumps of dirt stuck on the concrete all along the underside of the bridge, right above the water. We stood there and looked at the clumps and wondered how they got there.

Lonnie started throwing rocks, trying to hit the dirt clumps. Finally he smashed one dead center and it exploded and something fell out of it and we ran over to see the thing that fell out.

It was a baby bird. It lay there in the dirt and opened and closed its mouth but no sound came out. It didn't have any feathers or anything. It just lay there—gasping, dying.

We didn't know what to do. Finally Lonnie took off his cloth painter's cap and walked over to the aqueduct and soaked the cap in water and put the bird in the cap and set the cap in the shade underneath the aqueduct and we walked off. We didn't say anything and I didn't want to look



at Lonnie because I'd noticed he was crying and it made me feel a little sick, a little embarrassed.

That was when I started to wonder about Lonnie.

The other thing was when he told me why he moved in with his sister. We were sitting out in the grass in his back yard as everything turned from gray to blue and the crickets got worked up over it. I lay back in the grass and felt ants crawling on my forearms and Lonnie told me about it while we smoked. When you asked Lonnie a question he thought about it for a second and waited until he was ready to exhale and then he talked while the smoke poured out and tapped the end of his cigarette with one finger and kept talking with his hands on his knees. I remember just how he looked, sitting there as it got dark, and how I started to hate the way he looked sitting there.

"You don't know how lucky you are to live here with your sister," I said.

"I haven't been out here that long, you know, and I don't know how long I'll stay, but so far so good. It's better than Phoenix."

"She lets you do what you want. You don't have to worry about parents being up your ass all the time."

"Sometimes it's good to have a parent to tell you what to do."

"If you say so. "

"Well maybe you think your parents are bad. I will tell you, they are most likely better than you think. Better than mine, anyways."

"What's wrong with your parents?"

“Nothing’s wrong with them. They just don’t exist any more.”

“I don’t get you.”

“When I was in Junior High,” he said, “I was in this after-school program for bad kids. Like detention but worse. The teacher, Mr. Prentice, was a drunk. One day he passed out in his chair, right there at his desk, so me and my friend Rory cut out early.

“Rory went one way and I went the other. I knew a shortcut that cut across an empty construction site and I took it. It was getting dark, about how it is now. I could see the lights of my neighborhood far off across the desert. Then I saw the white car, parked out there on the dirt road a few yards out from the construction site.

“Anyway, so this car is sitting there. A guy gets out, a big blonde guy. Leans there on the fender, looking at me. I remember the guy had this dirty-looking blonde hair, real curly and long, and these thick coke-bottle glasses. He holds up a pack of smokes and asks me if I’ve got a light. I go up to him and I’m digging for the matches.

“The next thing I know he’s got me pinned on the hood and he’s got a board with nails in it and he’s pushing the nails into the side of my face. He tells me if I don’t do what he tells me to do he’s going to shove the nail into my eye. I mean, the nail was right there, right in front of my eye. He pushes me down on the ground and holds the nails up to the side of my head and makes me, you know...do stuff to him.

“I don’t remember it all. It’s like a nightmare, the way you remember mostly being afraid. And I remember walking home and spitting and throwing up every once in awhile.

“I didn’t want to tell anybody about it. I don’t even like to talk about it now. But my brother knew right away something was wrong with me. I told him what happened and he told my parents and you know what? They said I was making it up. They said I lied about everything else, so why not this? But my brother believed me. He always did.”

“One day about a year later me and my brother were hanging out at the county fair. I saw him, I saw the guy who held the board to my head. He was working there, running the Tilt-a-Whirl. I got real scared. My brother figured out what was going on and he took me home and then I guess he got a couple of his friends and they went there and found the guy.

“They took him out to the desert and they did some things to the guy, you know... bad things. Worse than what the guy did to me. The next day the cops came and took my brother away. He went to prison for that and then the first month in prison he was stabbed to death. My parents took it real hard. They were already drunks but after my brother died they got into other drugs. And after awhile I had no home anymore.”

I looked at him and thought he might start crying again, like he did over the bird, but he didn’t. He spit and smoked his cigarette and that was it. The spitting made me think of his story. I tried not to think about it anymore. It made me feel sick. And it made me feel differently about Lonnie. Like I was stupid for looking up to him. Like what happened to him was something he’d wanted to happen, or something he’d let happen, or both. A part of me knew that was all wrong but it didn’t matter because Lonnie wasn’t the person I thought he was. There was something weak inside of him-

something crippled. And something else that bothered me. The feeling that he was exactly what his parents said he was: a goddamned liar.

FINALLY there was the night with the heshier girls. A couple of girls Lonnie knew. They lived in a beat up yellow duplex with a dirt and weed-filled yard and a big tree stump sticking out of the dirt and big brown oil stains in the driveway. Whoever lived there had given up on making things look nice, or they were just moving through, or maybe they were simply white trash. Probably all of the above.

They were at home on Saturday night with no parents around. I was nervous about girls and I felt like an asshole sitting there on the couch next to Lonnie, me and him and a girl named Melody watching a guy on MTV with long bleached hair and a snake around his neck dancing and making kissing faces at the camera.

“This song is mellow,” said Lonnie, “but I like it.”

“These guys are unbelievably great,” said Melody. “So, so, so fucking great.”

“They’re not bad... I heard this song and that other one they play all the time, what was that one?”

“Oh yeah, ‘Caress the Night’. That song is fucking WICKED!”

She fell back in the cushions and made the devil sign with both hands. She was an idiot. I wondered what the hell her problem was. I watched the band prance around. I didn’t see how anyone could get worked up over them.

I looked around. The place was kind of dumpy. The sofa we were sitting on was a dirty pink and on the coffee table in front of us was a pizza box with one dried-up slice of pizza sitting in the middle of it and a bunch of Pepsi cans and a heaping ashtray and coins scattered all over the surface of the table, nickels and pennies mostly. I sat back in the couch cushions.

“I need a drink like you wouldn’t believe,” said Lonnie.

He poked Melody’s knee.

“You got any beers?”

“Of course we’ve got beers, we’ve always got beers.”

We followed Melody into the kitchen. As we walked past the hallway I looked back and could see another room where a girl lay on a bed talking on the phone. The room was even messier than the living room. The walls in the room were bare and the floor was covered in dirty clothes and dishes and compact disc cases. The girl on the bed wore a faded black t-shirt and ripped jeans. She lay there on the bed with her arm over her face listening to the person on the other end of the line. She looked about sixteen. I could smell her perfume. It was real strong and looking at her I felt something tug at me.

I walked into the kitchen. Lonnie was sitting up on the counter drinking a beer and smoking.

“Give me one of those, Lonnie,” said Melody.

He held the pack out. Melody took one. She was blond and pale and you could see acne through all the makeup on her face. Her hair was stringy and bleached and she’d tried to tease up the bangs with hairspray but they were drooping down over the zits on her forehead. She wore a sweater and

jeans and knee-high boots and she was the thinnest girl I'd ever seen. I stood there and put my hand in my pocket and tried to look cool.

"Have a cartridge, Bill," said Lonnie.

He handed me a Budweiser. I cracked it open and took a sip. It was awful.

"I don't know how you drink this shit," I said.

"Don't take a pussy sip, man...DRINK it. Look...at the count of three we're gonna tip our cans all the way up, all right?"

He counted. We tipped our cans. The beer ran down my neck and burned my throat. It took a long time for me to finish but I did it. I felt like I was going to puke. Lonnie belched and I belched and then Lonnie opened the refrigerator. He handed me another can.

"Okay, let's do it again."

The burps came out of me one after the other. I even burped up some beery foam into my mouth and swallowed it back down. I was determined not to puke. Something was happening in my head, though, something I liked. I took the can from him and cracked it open and we drank again.

"So you're only 12, Bill? Lonnie's right, you do look older."

"I turned 13 a week ago," I said.

"I didn't know it was your birthday," said Lonnie. "13 years old, huh? I'll bet you got hair on your balls and everything."

Melody slapped Lonnie on the arm and made a face.

"Lots of hair on my balls," I said. "Hairiest balls in Borax Hill."

Lonnie doubled over with laughter.

“All right, Bill. From that last belch I can see you cleared out some room. So let’s do another. Ready? GO!”

We tipped the cans back again. It went down easier this time but when I lowered the can for the second time I gagged. My head seemed to be floating off of my body. It was not unpleasant. Lonnie opened another can and handed it to me.

“I don’t know how you can drink this shit,” I said again. Didn’t I say that three times already? I couldn’t remember.

“It’s a required taste,” said Lonnie.

“You mean acquired taste,” said Melody.

“No, I mean REQUIRED taste. I REQUIRE this beer to go on living in this world of facade and half-truths...this world of never-ending boredom! ‘The more I see of what you call civilization, the more highly I think of what you call savagery!’”

“Conan quotes again? Lonnie the Philosopher,” said Melody.

“Goddamn right I’m a philophoser.”

He jumped off the counter and backed Melody against the kitchen wall. He leaned forward and squashed her against the wall and they started kissing. I walked into the living room with my beer.

The girl from the room sat on the couch watching television. She had on a lot of eyeliner and she was sort of fat. She seemed like the sweaty type. Her forehead reflected the white light from the TV like a greasy beige mirror.

I sat down on the far end of the couch. I mean- I was

standing and then all of a sudden I was sitting, like I was in a movie and someone had cut out the middle part, the sitting-down part. My body felt real heavy all of a sudden. I watched the TV and so did the girl. We didn't say anything to each other.

More guys with big hair danced around on stage. I sat there and tried to make myself like the music, the dancing. There must be something to it if everyone likes it, I thought. I sipped my beer, bigger sips now, and nodded my head up and down like it was the greatest thing I'd ever heard. Maybe it wasn't so bad.

After a second I looked at the girl. She was still sitting in the same place with the same look on her face. Then she lifted one leg, draped it over her knee, leaned back into the pillows on the couch, and let out a big sigh. We sat there a while longer and then she said without looking at me:

“You're Lonnie's friend?”

“I guess so.”

“Good for you. I'll bet he's your buddy, huh? Your best friend?”

“He's okay.”

“He's got a lot of best friends, and they all hate him.”

“I don't know any of his other friends.”

“I've known him my whole life and I can't remember ever liking him too much. ”

“You're from Arizona too?”

“Arizona. What do you mean, Arizona? I've lived in Borax Hill my whole life.”



“But Lonnie said he just moved her from Phoenix a few months ago...”

The girl rolled her eyes and made a *pfft* sound and shook her head.

“You can’t believe anything Lonnie tells you. He’s been living here his whole life too. He moved in with his sister ‘cause he was busted for shoplifting for about the fifteenth time and his mom and dad kicked him out. You know the next neighborhood over?”

“The one with the older houses? The nice neighborhood?”

“Yeah. That’s where Lonnie’s lived since we were kids. His dad’s a lawyer, his brother went to USC. He’s just a spoiled-ass punk.”

“You mean he never lived in Phoenix?”

“I mean he’s never lived anywhere but this town. He’s a liar. A thief and a liar, and that’s about the extent of it.”

“Don’t listen to anything she says, Bill,” said Lonnie from the kitchen. I could hear Melody whispering and giggling. “Don’t listen to a word of...whatever she’s saying...”

The girl on the couch rolled her eyes.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” she said. “You’ll find out about Lonnie the Liar. We’ve been calling him that since elementary school.”

Lonnie and Melody walked out of the kitchen. She had herself wrapped around his leg and he was dragging her down the hallway while trying to finish the rest of his beer.

“Don’t listen to that bitch, Bill. She’s not to be trusted,” he said.

“Fuck you, Lonnie,” said the girl. “Fuck you right in your ass.”

Lonnie didn't seem to hear her. He fell back against the wall and leaned there talking to himself with his eyes closed. He was drunk. Melody stood up and Lonnie opened his eyes and pushed her down the hallway inch by inch. They had their lips and tongues all over each other. They disappeared somewhere to the right. A door opened and closed and I could hear the voices laughing and talking from the other room.

“You'll see soon enough what a shit Lonnie really is,” said the girl. “Just saying.”

We watched MTV. It went on and on and on. They played the same videos over and over. It felt like I'd been there for hours. I looked over and saw that the girl was sleeping and I felt alone even though her company wasn't much.

Then I started thinking about what the girl had said. So Lonnie was a liar. Or was he? I didn't know what to think. Why should I trust what she had to say? But I knew. I knew she was telling the truth. That everything about Lonnie was bullshit. I'd suspected that all along, hadn't I? That he wasn't who I thought he was.

I stood up and walked into the kitchen. The cardboard case of Budweiser was there on the counter. I walked over and looked in: one can left. I cracked it open and it foamed up a little and spilled onto the floor. I didn't care. Everything was just fine.

I walked real slow back into the living room. The bitch was still asleep. I thought about waking her up. I wanted to have sex with her. I also wanted to tell her she was wrong

about Lonnie. Even if what she said was true she was wrong about Lonnie. It didn't always matter what was true and what wasn't. Some of the parts might have been true and how do you know those weren't the important parts? The parts that mattered? I wanted to kick her or fuck her, one of the two, and I walked over determined to do something about it but instead I half-sat, half-fell back down on the couch. I sat there for a while, head spinning, and then I got hungry. I looked at the piece of pizza in the box. The mushrooms looked like little dead mice. I didn't care. I couldn't remember ever being so hungry in my life. I flipped the lid on the pizza box all the way back and picked up the slice and took a bite and washed it down with some more beer. I watched the guys with the big hair prance around on TV and I ate the pizza and I drank the beer...

I WOKE UP burping. They came out of me one after the other, little ones that got bigger and bigger. I felt scared and alone. The room was dark, the TV turned off. The girl on the couch was gone.

Another burp came up, a big one. Before I knew it puke was pouring silently out of my mouth and onto the front of my shirt and pants. It just kept coming. I stood up and headed for the front door. I got there. My head was still spinning. The doorknob wouldn't stay in one place. Finally I opened the door and stepped out into the night and sat down hard on the gray dirt and weeds in the front yard and threw up again. Then I lay there in the dirt and weeds and waited to see what would happen next.

I heard voices talking. I listened. I looked up and saw I was laying underneath the window of the bedroom where Lonnie and Melody had gone to fuck or whatever it was they were doing.

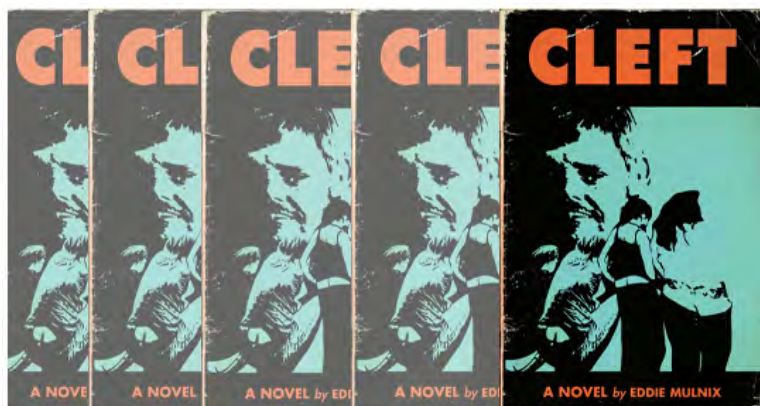
I listened. I couldn't make out what the voices were saying. Then I heard crying. The person was talking and crying. The talking would go on for awhile and then break down into more crying.

It was Lonnie. I sat there and listened to the crying, waiting for it to stop. The crying made me want to puke again. I looked up at the few hazy stars shivering and waving up there in the sky. I wondered if the wind made the stars look that way, if you could see the air move. I'd never known a place without wind. I'd never been out of Borax Hill.

And neither had Lonnie.

I could see them in my head—you know, people. People's mouths running at full speed with words I could never understand, lips moving in a speeded-up movie reel of gibberish. I could see myself laying there in the weeds while they prodded me, stuck sharp objects into me, the lips never stopping, the talking going on forever and ever and I knew I'd live my life trying to make sense of them, knowing I never could.

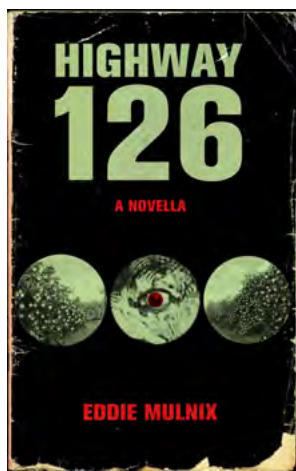
I heard sounds from behind the door. Voices in the hallway. I stood up, a little unsteady on my feet. The door opened and Lonnie walked out and I swung a wide looping right and caught him in the face and the last thing I remember about that night was the look of surprise, the look of surprise in Lonnie's wet eyes as my fist connected with his cheekbone and he fell sideways, screaming, against the crumbling yellow stucco.



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