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THE EVOLUTION OF DEXTER AND ME

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Ray Bond, III, B.B.A.

Denton, Texas

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Bond, Ray III. The Evolution of Dexter and Me.

Master of Arts (English), May, 1996, 71 pp., Works Cited, 5 titles.

The Evolution of Dexter and Me is a collection of one vignette and four short stories. All of the stories deal with young men figuring out and coping with their daily life and environment. The "Dexter stories" deal with a character I developed and evolved, Dexter, a sane young man trying to find the best way to cope in an insane system.

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THE EVOLUTION OF DEXTER AND ME

Dexter, my first and favorite character, is a sane young man trying to survive in an insane system. Whether he is on the job or at home, Dexter is always taking actions to preserve his own mental well being, if not to save his own skin. Dexter and I have been together a long time. While he has not aged chronologically, he has developed as a character as I have developed as a person and a writer. He came into being when I first began writing creatively for my own enjoyment. Dexter has been affected by the influences of my favorite authors and felt the impact of my experiments.

Later, as I began to undergo intense psychological scrutiny through therapy, Dexter was with me. He felt the same feelings as I, and worked along with me to build a sound psychological make up. His presence, while not constant, always seemed to emerge at points throughout my writing career, reflecting where I was as a person and a writer. Through my series of "Dexter stories" I show how he and I have developed together and illustrate influences that have been a part of that development.

Dexter began as a character shortly after I began as a

writer. At the age of nineteen, I took my first restaurant job at the original Chili's. Employees had weekly schedule requests we wrote on a legal pad that hung in the managers' office. I wrote funny requests about which the managers laughed and talked. Word got out to the other employees that my requests were funny and soon everyone who could read English was checking them out. As my notoriety grew, so did the outrageousness of what I wrote. All my fellow employees were telling me what a funny writer I was. I enjoyed all the attention I received from my writing and also realized I enjoyed the writing itself because the self-indulgence of it felt good.

I began writing outside of the restaurant. I would read about something in the paper or witness an act taking place and, if it struck me in a humorous way, I would write a satirical vignette about it. At the time, I had a demonic sense of humor, so my little sketches were biting and twisted.

One day at the restaurant, I had an altercation with a particularly difficult customer. He was impossible to make happy, and he seemed to want to share his displeasure with everyone who worked for Chili's that day. There was a set of stairs in the restaurant and I had visions of leading that man to the top of the stairs and then pushing him down.

It was from that thought that my first "Dexter story" was born. I went home that afternoon and wrote a story about a young man who was in charge of customer complaints at a restaurant. His method of dealing with complainers was to ask them to follow him upstairs to the "complaint department." Of course, they never got there, and were tumbling down the stairs before they knew it. The little story was simply titled "Dexter." From where I got the name of my character, I still don't know. Though I showed the story to many people and they loved it, Dexter went into hibernation for many years after that.

I left Chili's after about a year to attend college at Texas Tech. Feeling that I was in possession of something special, I set out to pursue and promote my funny writings through both conventional and non-conventional channels.

I wrote many letters to my girlfriend back home with rambling, flowery, descriptions of things fantastic. I made the more public aspects of the letters available for my roommate and friends to read. I continued to showcase my talents on the bulletin board of the dorm cafeteria, on cocktail napkins in bars, and on the walls of fraternity houses. I was uncensored. I put no fences around my imagination, and the words spewed forth. People laughed, loved my stories, and my notoriety grew.

During my first semester at Tech, I took a sophomore American literature class. I've always enjoyed reading, and I really took to the chance to be exposed to some great books. The last book we were assigned for the semester was God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater by Kurt Vonnegut. I loved it. Like my style of writing, the emphasis didn't seem to be so much on plot line or getting a narrative going as it was on the creativity and indulgence of it all.

In an article for The New Republic, reprinted in Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume Two, Charles Samuels says: "Vonnegut de-emphasizes plot and character while working for effects of emotional contradiction and intellectual ambiguity" (454). His satirical, dark humor appealed to me because I used so much of the same in my vignettes.

He had a way of making me laugh at sad and pathetic people and events. I would always ask myself why I was laughing at such terrible things. Vonnegut poked fun at sex, families, and our country, topics I previously viewed as sacred. He espoused liberal views, "The least a government could do, it seems to me, is divide things up fairly. Life is hard enough without people having to worry themselves sick about money" (88).

Words such as these would have been blasphemous growing up in my conservative father's household. I was amazed and elated a

book such as this was being taught. Vonnegut's style shocked me, but it also brought the realization there was another way of thinking than the one with which I'd grown up. Vonnegut was funny and unconventional and he wrote stories that made me want to take a look at a different view.

I wanted to emulate him. I set out to read every Kurt Vonnegut novel I could find. I talked about him whenever I discussed literature with anyone.

While home for Christmas break after my "Vonnegut semester," I sought out a good friend who was an avid reader. I was anxious to share my literary discovery. I was happily surprised to find that he had read many of Vonnegut's novels. He asked me if I had ever read Tom Robbins. I had never heard of Robbins and felt put out because I felt he was venturing there was an author greater than Vonnegut.

He brought out Robbins' first novel, Another Roadside Attraction, and told me to read the first sentence. "The magician's underwear has just been found in a cardboard suitcase floating in a stagnant pond on the outskirts of Miami" (3). I was instantly intrigued. It sounded like a lot of the zany, off-the-wall stuff that I liked to write. I tore into the novel and was amused and amazed at the outrageous plot with the climax being

where the main characters stole the mummified body of Jesus from a sealed basement in the Vatican. In the book, it seems Christ never rose from the dead. Vatican priests had secretly kept the corpse hidden for fear the lid would be blown off the Christian religion if the truth were known.

Robbins, like Vonnegut, attacked what I had thought, until then, was an untouchable subject: Christianity. This was something that hit home for a questioning twenty-year-old trying to find the answers to a lot of life's questions. Robbins also seemed to place heavy importance on the creativity and the indulgence of writing itself. It is evident all over his books with the many flowery, imaginative descriptions he uses. "It was one of those mellow October days that seemed concocted from a mixture of sage, polished brass, and peach brandy," (6) he says in Another Roadside Attraction.

Robbins penchant for creative indulgence is also nowhere more evident than in his use of the literary aside. At this, I think he is a master. When Tom Robbins uses an aside, it's not simply a character momentarily turning away from the action to comment to the audience. Robbins, as a writer, steps away from the story completely to give his thoughts on a subject barely related to the story. My favorite of his asides comes in Still Life With Woodpecker. In the book, the heroine is imprisoned.

While incarcerated, to alleviate her boredom and maintain a spiritual link with her jailed lover, she practices a twice-daily reading of a pack of Camel cigarettes.

For the reader's sake, Robbins provides a copy of what is written on a pack of Camels. He comments at how "simple and straightforward" (163) the words are, and how they don't "set her mind to whizzing, as could the literature on certain other packages. Cheerios for example" (163).

Again for the reader's benefit, Robbins repeats the message on the right-side panel of a box of Cheerios and he becomes perplexed over what is alluded to in the message as the performance of the Cheerios. He launches into a one and a half page discourse on the subject:

Could the Cheerios be in bad voice? Might they not handle well on curves? Do they ejaculate too quickly? Has age affected their timing or are they merely in a mid-season slump? Afflicted with nervous exhaustion or broken hearts, are Cheerios smiling bravely, insisting that the show must go on? (163)

He continues in such a manner or a full page before finishing:

...would Ed Sullivan have signed them, would Knute Rockne have recruited them, how well do these little motherfuckers perform?(164)

A direct quote attributed to Robbins shows the author's love for his all over style. "My goal is to write novels that are like a basket of cherry tomatoes---when you bite into a paragraph, you don't know which way the juice is going to squirt" (CLC 453). Also in an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory Robbins says:

What I want to do with my fiction is to create an experience peculiar to reading alone, an experience that could not be duplicated in any other medium. What this means, on the one hand, is devaluating plot to a certain extent, because if it's only a story you're after, how much easier it is to switch on TV or go to a film. Reading requires more from an audience than television or film; the audience has to participate more fully. Keeping plot secondary to 'bookness' helps to make it a reading experience, a literary experience, an experience that could only be derived from words on a page. What I've wanted to do was to break into the narrative and say, Look, this is a book. You're just reading a book. But it's nice isn't it? It's still entertaining isn't it?(CLC 376)

Robbins seems to be asking his readers to join with him and enjoy the fun of the words along with him. As a reader, I enjoyed the creativity, fun, and humor of both Kurt Vonnegut and Tom Robbins. When I began writing in earnest, their influences could be seen all over my work, and no more so than when Dexter resurfaced.

Dexter had been under wraps for years. I forgot about my writing while trying to find my niche in the business world. After several years and several failed business attempts, I took up writing again. I dived into my own ideas, turning out wacky stories. My readers found my wild descriptions funny, but a common complaint was that they really said nothing. I didn't see why the story had to say anything, and I didn't understand why they just couldn't enjoy the laughs provided. I stayed perplexed until Dexter came to the rescue.

In "Of Course You can Honey, but Mommy dislikes Boys that Skin Family Pets," Dexter's wildly dysfunctional family is introduced. In the story, Dexter is trying to stake his own identity amidst his family's chaos. Dexter is trying to break into "alternative taxidermy" against his mother's wishes. She is trying to discourage it because she blames the taxidermy for sending Dexter's grandfather over the edge. His father and brother offer

no support and Dexter is left to decide for himself if he will take care of himself or give in to his mother's disordered desires. The story had everything I was trying to accomplish and it had a message amidst all my frivolity. My friends received it well, and it even got published. The success of that story was a breakthrough for me.

In "Sucking up the Burning Mopheads," Dexter is on the job, but still trying to survive in a crazy system. He's working graveyard shift in the laundry of an airline. The biggest challenge of his mundane job is to keep from falling asleep. He has a redneck tyrant of a boss who is looking for an excuse to fire him. While performing the only task of his job he enjoys, an accident occurs that could have grave consequences. He could lose his job and more, if he does not bravely handle the situation. He does and escapes trouble, but the real fun of the story is "Keystone Cop" like atmosphere that pervades as he is literally scrambling for life.

My final Dexter story is more of a reflection of myself than any of the other stories. In "The Upward Tug against Entropy and Socks," Dexter's neuroses are most obvious, and it is obvious that his family is the reason why. Dexter is again trying to forge his own identity as he was in "Pets," but this time it's different because he is trying to break out of the Boozler family household

and mold. His family, on the other hand, is trying to hold him down, to keep him with them. In The Road Less Traveled, author M. Scott Peck, recites the second law of thermodynamics, "which states that energy naturally flows from a state of greater organization to a state of lesser organization, from a state of higher differentiation to a state of lower differentiation" (264). He then goes on to define entropy as "this state of total disorganization and undifferentiation. The natural downhill flow of energy toward the state of entropy might be termed the force of entropy" (264).

The depressed, chaotic state of the Boozler family household could be seen as a state of entropy. It takes energy to reverse the downward pull of the force of entropy and no one in the family, save for Dexter and Bo, his little brother, was willing to exert that energy. Dexter was working hard at school to give himself the opportunity to better himself and get out of his crazy family situation. But his family acted as a force of entropy against him, trying to get him to do their bidding, not supporting his school career. They were so used to Dexter doing all those things for them, they couldn't, and didn't want to change their habits. As Peck says: "Each of us has his or her own urge to grow and each of us, in exercising that urge, must single-handedly

fight against his or her own resistance" (266). Part of Dexter's fight was taking flight. To have a chance, he had to break away from his family. He took Bo with him because he wanted Bo to have the same chance he was giving himself. Dexter knew Bo would never have that chance if he stayed at home.

This has been a tough story for me to write because it came at a time when I was undergoing therapy to understand what has been holding me back in my life. As I was identifying the force of entropy that was holding me down, I could see how closely it paralleled Dexter's situation in the story. It was a long emotional process to figure that out for myself, but I'm now at a point where I feel I am breaking free. As with Dexter taking flight and soaring off, I feel I'm on an upward trajectory to the highest of heights.

I've also included a fifth story that is not "Dexter related." From time to time, I will write a story about a young man fishing. I like to fish, and I've always enjoyed stories that were set in the wilderness, with the characters involved in some type of outdoor activity. Part of the genius of Ernest Hemingway, in my opinion, is the way he details wilderness experiences. I love the trout fishing scene in The Sun Also Rises, and The Old Man and The Sea is my favorite lazy afternoon escape. My fishing stories are still centered around a young man, who is trying to

figure out something about life. Though he's not enmeshed in a chaotic system, as is Dexter, I want it to be as if the serenity of his surroundings is talking to him, trying to tell him something. In "The Final Hunt," I'm trying to show how my character decides that something doesn't have to be taken from nature simply as a show of man's superiority over the lesser-developed creatures. One of the reasons I like fishing is because fishing, inherently, provides that choice.

I realize this story needs some changes. The reader needs to know more about the main character and what kind of person he is. The story also needs to move faster. I'm going to rewrite this story, in third person, using a girlfriend or fiancé instead of just a fishing buddy. That way my character can be seen as someone other than just a fisherman. It would be easy to create some tension in the story using two mates. I plan on cutting out some of the pure fishing talk in my rewrite as well.

So, despite the crazy things happening around him, Dexter has found a way to survive. He's come and gone, but he always manages to surface at vital points in my history. He's been patient with me as I have gone through changes, and he spent time as my literary lab rat as I've researched to see what kind of effects my influences would have on him. It is my goal, with this

preface and series of "Dexter stories," to show how we have grown together and are both ready to

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DEXTER

Dexter works in a restaurant. He doesn't cook food, or wash dishes. He doesn't wait on, or buss tables. He doesn't tend bar, and he does not greet people at the door. He isn't even a manager. Dexter is in charge of customer complaints.

Whenever a customer complains, the employees say,
"Go see Dexter."

Dexter greets the customer with a big smile.

"Follow me upstairs to the complaint department," he will cheerfully invite them.

When Dexter gets to the top, he quickly turns and pushes the complainer down the stairs.

OF COURSE YOU CAN HONEY, BUT MOMMY
DOESN'T LIKE LITTLE BOYS THAT
SKIN FAMILY PETS

Dexter entered the house through the kitchen door dragging a huge, dead wharf rat by the tail.

"Oh, there you are, honey," his mother said through the smoke of her cheap cigar while trying to stuff some tentacled, clawed creature into the microwave. She succeeded in forcing the mutant-crustacean in and getting the door closed before she noticed the big rodent.

"Oh Dexter, honey, not another one," she whined with disappointment.

"It's just a little mouse, Ma," Dexter answered. "It's no big deal."

"That's just what your grandfather said, and you know what he's doing now."

"That won't happen to me, Ma. Grandpa had a few of his bulbs dimmed in the war. That's why it happened, remember?"

"Oh you men are impossible!" She said, waving him off with both hands. "Go tell the other boys supper is just about ready."

She bent down to press the buttons on the microwave,

and somehow the cherry from her cigar fell and landed on her poly-nylon housecoat. She was instantly engulfed in flames. Dexter dropped the rat, quickly grabbed the ever-ready fire extinguisher from its case, and doused the flames. Broken glass littered the floor of the Boozler kitchen.

"Oh, pshaw!" Mrs. Boozler was a pair of eyes peering from within a mountain of white powder. "Another hole in my housecoat."

Dexter picked up the rat and walked into the living room. He knew he was nearing his father's easy chair by the rattling beer cans through which he was wading. Dexter twice slapped his snoozing, drooling, underwear-clad dad. The man's bulk startled. The half-empty beer can atop his stomach tumbled and spilled from the turbulence.

"Hey, Pop! Time to come to. Mom says supper's about ready."

The man grumbled and belched an indecipherable reply. Dexter continued through the messy living room. He paused to pick his laundry up from the floor and turned into the stairwell.

Upstairs, his brother Wheezer was alternately taking hits off his bong and squeezing zits.

"Dinner's ready, ya pothead," Dexter announced.

Wheezer looked at Dexter through two little red slits that Dexter assumed were his brother's eyes. Wheezer exhaled, and the

smoked puffed out his words like Indian smoke signals. "Cool! I'm so hungry I could eat dog shit, man."

"Don't say that, Wheez--with Mom's cooking you never know."

"Oh wow," Wheezer said when he saw the rat. "I bet Mom's pissed."

"She acted disappointed and said something about Grandpa, but she didn't do anything," Dexter answered without turning around as he walked away from Wheezer and into his room.

Dexter's room was a taxidermist's paradise. The south end of several northbound animals were mounted on the walls. In one corner, three cats were gathered, intently staring at the ground. One had its right front leg raised, with a pair of dice in its paw, poised to throw. A serious feline crap shoot was in progress. Bats hung upside-down from the ceiling. Each pair of wings held a harmonica to a mouth. All were wailing away in a silent bat cave blues jam.

Dexter threw the big rat up on a slab. He picked up his big filet knife, and peered down its edge, inspecting it for cleanliness. He rubbed his thumb across the blade to test its sharpness. He place it to the rat's throat. The tip of the blade had just begun to depress the dead animal's skin when he stopped. He put the knife down. He walked over to the edge of his bed, sat down, and started to think. Should he start skinning the rat now,

after supper, or at all? Why did he continue against his mother's wishes? His mother never made any effort to stop him, but she had a way of making him feel guilty for what he was doing. There was once a time when roadkill taxidermy seemed like a good way to make a living. It was an old family tradition, that had been forgotten in his parents' generation, but Dexter dreamed of continuing the legacy. He would follow in his grandfather's footsteps, and find a way out of this hellhole called home. Then, there was that fateful night, while in the frenzy of a Guadalcanal nightmare, Grandpa went over the edge and skinned, stuffed, and mounted Grandma while she slept. His mother had strongly disapproved of any kind of taxidermy ever since.

Dexter thought some more. He decisively slapped his thighs with both his hands, got up, and walked over to the slab.

"I gotta be me." He said as he picked up his knife and pierced the rat's gut.

SUCKING UP THE BURNING MOP HEADS

The trumpet player put the horn to his lips and blew, forcing a continuous reverberation from his horn. Jesus Christ, thought Dexter. Okay, so you got lung power, play some other notes. The drone became excruciating. Dexter covered his ears and shook his head trying to escape the noise. His violent head movement made him lose his balance and he began sliding down a plastic mountain with increasing momentum. He crashed to the foot of the mountain and found himself in the laundry room, once again. His mountain had been nothing more than the jumbo plastic bag of mop heads he had laid down upon before he drifted off to sleep.

Finally realizing he was back in the real world, he jumped up and dove across the little room to hit the button on the dryer and end the ear-drum crushing hum. There, he rested his long upper body across the warm metal top of the machine. He felt himself dozing off again, so he shook his head and stood. Blinking his eyes several times to adjust to the light, Dexter finally could see his watch. Not quite four. Damn. Still well over three hours before he got off work.

He stretched and rubbed his eyes before focusing on his surroundings. The laundry room had an obscene brightness. He

was sure it was designed that way to keep poor, unlucky stiff's like himself awake during the eleven-to-seven shift. Such a horrible punishment for a guy just because he overslept one morning and showed up a couple of hours late. Sun West Airlines, being a union shop, couldn't fire him, but they could make his life miserable.

Footsteps, someone was coming. Dexter hurried over to the big commercial dryer, opened it, reached in, and cleaned out the lint trap. He popped the door shut with his fist and straightened up in time to see Roy Traylor, his supervisor, giving him the hairy eyeball. Roy was every inch a red-neck. The buttons on his white uniform shirt looked like they were about to pop from the protrusion of his belly rolling over his rodeo belt buckle. He kept a pack of Marlboro Reds rolled up in his shirt sleeve, and fidgeted with them like some small town cop brandishing a pistol. The hair on top of Roy's pudgy, red-faced head was slicked back with an overkill amount of Bryll Cream.

"Damn, boy. You gonna let that dryer holler all night?"

"Uh, sorry, Roy," Dexter answered, "I was in the back of the store room straightening up. I had a lot of stuff scattered around and it took me a little while to get out here."

Roy had a way of intimidating Dexter, cigarette pack or no. Roy stared at Dexter through squinted eyes, not saying anything.

The silence stretched, making Dexter nervous. He transferred the lint back and forth between his hands, and looked down. The lint, which had started pure white, was now damp and gray from his sweaty palms. Finally Roy grumbled something, turned and walked off, scraping his boot heels along the floor. Roy spun around after a few steps and glared again. Dexter was lucky. He'd was just about to shoot the finger when Roy turned. He stood still, thanking God that he hadn't.

"Asshole." Dexter said, barely audible, as he gave Roy the finger after he was sure Roy was really gone.

Roy was out to get Dexter and wanted to see him fired in the worst way. Dexter never could relax at work because Roy was always lurking around, trying to catch Dexter doing something wrong. Dexter thought he was temporarily off the hook when he was exiled to the graveyard shift, but Roy had his own schedule switched so he could continue his vigil.

Roy had busted Dexter once before, bad. Dexter had fallen asleep and woke up to a buzz, but that time it wasn't that of the dryer, but the noise of the smoke alarm set off by flames raging from the dryer. Dexter had not cleaned out the lint trap and heat from the dryer caught the lint on fire. Roy entered the room as Dexter was wrestling with the fire extinguisher, trying to douse the flames.

That time, Roy filed a complaint and sent Dexter up before the union board of inquiry. At the hearing, Roy presented a lot of trumped up charges and flimsy evidence, one piece being the fabricated story that fires in the laundry room were a regular occurrence since Dexter took over the laundry. Roy claimed that Dexter was a hazard to his fellow employees' safety and, therefore, should be terminated.

Roy gave it a good try, but the Union Steward did a better job, and Dexter was let off with six months probation and a warning. After the inquiry, while Dexter was outside the hearing room getting a drink of water from the fountain, he was bumped from behind and pinned against the fountain. He knew who it was right away. He could almost see Roy's tobacco-stained teeth, gritted with anger. Dexter braced himself. He expected his face to be smashed into the water fountain. Instead, he heard Roy's gruff voice.

"Don't rest yet, punk. I'm going to get you."

To add to Roy's frustration, Dexter knew that Roy suspected him of exposing the extra-marital affair Roy was having with one of the terminal maids. It was true that Dexter had coined the name "Miss Piggy" for Roy's girlfriend. Dexter was having lunch in the cafeteria one day when she and Roy walked by, arm in arm.

"There goes Casanova with his babe," Dexter's friend Stephen said while chewing on a mouthful of sandwich. "I wish I were a stud like him and could fuck around on my wife with a woman like her."

"It's got to be all that grease in his hair that turns her on," said Martin, another of Dexter's buddies.

"Either that or he uses it for lubrication," Dexter cracked. They all laughed, casing Roy to look over at them as he was pulling out her chair for her.

"I wonder if the slicked back look would work for me?" Dexter said, pulling back his curly red hair to straighten it. "What do you guys think?"

"I don't think it would do the same for you, Dex," Stephen said.

The three continued their lunch all the while making observations about Roy and his girlfriend. They watched with a mix of amusement and disgust as Roy fed her Fritos out of his own hand. After each chip she would take his hand and lick his fingers clean.

"God, they make me sick, she's so ugly." Dexter noted her upturned nose that looked as if it had been mashed against her flat, round face. Her stringy hair was parted down the middle and pressed to the sides of her head.

"She looks like Miss Piggy," Dexter announced. Laughter erupted from the table. Roy shot another glare over his shoulder at them. That afternoon on the ramp Martin and Stephen spread the word about Miss Piggy. They gave Dexter all the credit. He was proud to be the witty one held in such esteem, but that day marked the first of many days of hell he would catch from Roy.

The dryer clicked to signal the end of its cycle, the tumbler rolling to a halt, lazily flopping the mop heads over one last time before letting them plop to the bottom. The batch from the daytime was complete, and it was time for the only part of the shift Dexter enjoyed.

He bagged up the last load of mop heads and carted them all outside to a waiting tug trailer on which he would transport them across the airport to exchange them for a load of dirty ones. It was Dexter's one and only chance to get out of his exile in the laundry room and away from Roy. He relished the chance to speed along on the tug in the cool night air. The breeze he created as he cruised along made him feel liberated.

Dexter pulled out of the ramp area, where he had to adhere to the five mile per hour speed limit. Then, he turned on to the taxiway and floored it, opening the little tug up to its top speed. Dexter loved runways at night. All the lights, the blue

bordering lights at the edge of the runway, the red warning lights atop the towers--he marveled at the colorful dots they made on the night.

Dexter's taxiway T'd into another that ran parallel with the runway. He stopped his tug and looked down the runway, seeing just what he wanted, a big jet preparing for takeoff. Even at night Dexter could tell what kind of plane it was, a 737. Those big engines hanging below the wings left no doubt. Dexter prided himself on his aircraft identification skills.

"Gentlemen, start your engines," he said in a mock PA announcer's voice, his hands cupped around his mouth. Then, he punched the accelerator and the race was on.

The weighted-down tug streaked down the taxiway. He was cutting so much wind he turned his cap around backwards to keep it from blowing off his head. The wind whistled by his ears, adding excitement to the race. Dexter looked over his left shoulder. The plane was gaining on him, but because of his head start, he had a pretty good chance of beating it to the end of the runway. He leaned forward to cut down on the wind resistance, thinking it would make him go a little faster. He looked over his shoulder again. The big iron bird was getting still closer. This one was going to be tight.

"Faster, you piece of shit, faster!" Dexter yelled at the tug.

He was about to raise his fist in a celebration of triumph when he was hit from the right side by a megaton blast of heat. The front end of the tug lifted up with a jerk, and the steering wheel struck him in the chin, hard. Dexter had been so enthralled with his race with the 737 that he failed to see another preparing for its approach on the other side of his taxiway.

Dexter hit the brakes and skidded to a stop. He was lucky he hadn't flipped. He had seen full tugs turn over from jet engine blasts. When he touched the bottom of chin, his fingers came away red. Blood. A drop hit his white shirt. Dexter watched while the spot grew in diameter as it soaked into his shirt. It was soon accompanied by a second drop, then a third, and a fourth.

He turned around to see the big jet tearing down the runway. The flaps weren't down yet, but he could tell it would soon be ready to lift. The landing gear extended, yet still seemed so fragile underneath the big mass. Amazing it could support all that weight. Dexter was just about to concede defeat due to his injury when his stomach collapsed at the sight of one of the plastic bags that must have blown off the flat bed trailer when hit by the engine thrust. Mop heads were scattered all over the runway and in front of the plane, that was racing toward them.

Dexter's mind flew back to his training classes when he first hired on at Sun West. He remembered seeing films, and hearing his instructor tell horror stories about plane crashes caused by foreign objects sucked into the jet engines.

"Engines can pull in anything within twenty feet of them," he remembered his instructor saying.

The engines on a Boeing 737 are underneath the wing, just a few feet off the ground. If the plane went over the litter of mop heads while even beginning to lift off, they would easily come within twenty feet of the engine.

Dexter panicked. A chaotic scene of the engine sucking up all the mop heads, catching fire, and crashing played through his head. People would die, and superimposed over it all was Roy Traylor's big red face laughing as Dexter was carted off to prison.

He tried to turn the tug around, but it was moving too slowly. Dexter leaped out of the tug and sprinted for the mop heads. The race was now between Dexter and the plane to see who could reach the mop heads and gather them up first. Dexter got to the first mop head, bent down, and scooped it up on the run. He moved like a roach being chased by a giant foot around the runway, gathering up arm loads of mop heads, running over to the bag and stuffing them in. He tried to tell himself not to look up at the

approaching plane, but he couldn't help it. I was bearing down on him like a giant, roaring Tyrannosaurus. He could see the faces of the pilots in the cockpit. He wondered if they could see him, but the thought soon left him. He had the last arm load now, and was running for the bag. He dropped one, bent over to pick it up, and dropped another. He looked up. The big metal creature was almost on top of him. The air, full of exhaust fumes, swirled around him, blowing dust in his eyes, stinging them.

In desperation, Dexter kicked the uncooperative mop head off the runway. He stuffed the last load into the bag, picked it up, and ran for his life, job, and freedom to the green belt between the runway and the taxiway. He dove for the grass, burying his head in the bag as he hit the ground, the plane thundering by, lifting into the air. The loose ends of the plastic bag flapped in his ears. He felt as if he were being toasted by the engine exhaust.

Dexter looked up when he thought it was safe. The jet was high in the air, growing smaller and smaller as it carried its passengers and cargo away. It was all in one piece, and amazingly, Dexter thought, so was he. The rage the plane had seemed to possess, just a few seconds ago, had calmed. Now, Dexter had another rage to consider, that of Roy. He was sure to hear of this escapade.

Dexter dropped off his load of mop heads, picked up another, and checked into the infirmary. His chin required fourteen stitches. It was nearly quitting time when he made it back to the laundry room. He was hoping he could sneak in and finish his shift without encountering Roy, but no such luck. Roy was waiting for him at the door.

"Damn, boy. What the hell happened to you?" Roy asked upon seeing Dexter, his chin, and his bloody shirt.

Dexter felt the only thing to do was tell Roy the truth, to a point. He told Roy about the unexpected engine thrust causing the tug to jump, and the steering wheel to hit his chin. But he didn't tell him about the mop head episode. Roy listened to Dexter's story all the while giving Dexter his squinting stare. Dexter finished, and Roy said nothing. Dexter stood in the excruciating silence, waiting to bear the brunt of Roy's wrath. When Roy finally spoke, instead of screaming, he shook his head and whispered.

"Damn, boy, you can find trouble anywhere."

Then he walked away. Dexter couldn't believe it. He made it past the initial encounter with Roy, but what about later? Certainly the pilots or somebody would report the incident.

To Dexter' relief and amazement, no one did.

* * * * *

Dexter felt the tugs on the silk thread as the stitches were stretched and snipped by the doctor, but he didn't feel any pain. He only felt euphoria. No one would know it, but Dexter was a hero. He saved many lives by courageously running out in front of that 737 to pick up those mop heads. He deserved a commendation.

But best of all, he had foiled Roy again. Had the mop heads got sucked into an engine, and had a terrible accident occurred as a result, Roy wouldn't have cared about the lost lives. He would only have taken pleasure in knowing Dexter was at fault and would be fired. You missed your chance again Roy, Dexter thought.

"Don't smile now," the doctor cautioned as he peered underneath Dexter's chin and snipped away. "You might tear the stitches."

THE UPWARD TUG AGAINST ENTROPY AND SOCKS

Dexter walked through the back gate to have his red hair blown back by the sight of his little brother Bo sitting butt naked in his play box spooning sand into a grimy old tube sock. The incredible sight made Dexter pause for a moment. Dexter adjusted his backpack, which was full of thick books and star charts, then shook his head as if trying to clear a hallucination. He closed the gate and proceeded into the backyard being careful to step over Booger, the family's pet jackal, who was sprawled out in Dexter's path gnawing on a piece of indistinguishable roadkill.

"Hey, squirt," Dexter called out to Bo. "What are you doing?"

Bo looked up and smiled at his big brother with much admiration.

"Putting sand in this sock to make it bigger," he said through the river of snot that was running out of his nose and into the sand creating a considerable mud puddle. "See?"

Bo stood and tried to lift the sock for Dexter to observe. As he pulled, the elastic and cotton of the upper part of the sock stretched, but the dead weight of the sand in the bottom didn't budge. Bo grunted and heaved until Dexter put his hand on Bo's

head and tossed Bo's curly red mop, which was much like Dexter's own.

"That's cool, champ, I can see it," Dexter assured him.

"Do you want to stay out here and play with me?" Bo asked.

"I'm having fun."

"Sorry little guy," Dexter said, reaching around to pat his backpack. "I got some fun of my own to have."

"Okay," Bo said, happily returning to his spooning. Dexter smiled. He felt uplifted at the sight of his baby brother deriving such happiness at doing solely what he wanted, and nothing else. Dexter knew it had to be possible for himself. Bo's actions were weird to be sure, but the contentment and security he derived made them among the more healthy of the Boozler household. Dexter always felt the craziness of the rest of the family's activities flying toward him, much like the gelatinous, prune-filled blob that smacked the wall beside him just as he walked through the backdoor into the kitchen. Expecting continued fire, Dexter dove to the cracked linoleum floor and covered his head. When he determined it was safe, he raised his head with caution, and identified the unintentional bushwhacker. It was his mother, battling with an oversized eggbeater and mixing bowl. She was wearing safety goggles that looked like a truck windshield after a cross country road trip. Pieces of goo were flying from the bowl at various trajectory

levels. When she finally noticed him, she smiled and turned off the mixer.

"Oh hi, Honey," she said. "Goodness what a mess."

As she swung her head around to survey the damage, the pink foam curlers in her hair swung with her, restrained only by a nearly invisible hair net. The acrid smoke of her ever present, non-filter cigarette curled into Dexter's nostrils causing his nose to wrinkle.

"Yeah, I think you'd better cut down on the G-force of that thing, Ma. Stuff's flying everywhere." The dirty walls, and lime green counter top that matched the floor, were splattered with pieces of tonight's dinner, that had landed on and around remnants of last night's, last week's, and last month's meals. On the floor, some of it cemented large cockroaches in their tracks. Dexter noticed a piece stuck to the bare skin of his arm from his time on the floor. He shuddered, and picked it off as if it were a leech.

"Yes I'd better," Mrs. Boozler said, then laughed. "If I don't, there might not be enough left for dinner."

Dexter could only hope. The thought of having to digest what was in the mixing bowl forced a heave to well up in Dexter's stomach. He readied his gag reflex.

"Anyway," Mrs. Boozler continued, "I'm so glad you're home. I have some things I need for you to do."

Those words, the same ones he had heard thousands of times before, quelled his nausea but replaced it with the knowledge that he was about to be put in one of those horribly familiar no-win situations. His mother was going to ask him to perform some household chore that he had no desire to do because he would rather be doing his studies he so enjoyed. Yet he knew he would wind up doing whatever it was because, if not, he would get the same age-old manipulative treatment from his mother he always got: that he was obliged to do what his parents asked because they so unselfishly did so much for him. Dexter's upbeat mood was gone, and, in its place, was a feeling of immense pressure that made his face sag, his shoulders droop, and his feet feel like lead.

She reached over to the refrigerator and pulled some sheets of paper from behind a magnet that also held one of Bo's day care paintings of a rat caught in a trap. Dexter often wondered if Bo thought of him as the model for the painting. She handed the ream to Dexter. When he took them in his hand, pages of computer paper unfolded to the floor. Dexter brushed hair off his face, so his eyes could follow the list to the bottom.

He then looked up at his mother. "Aw come on Ma," he said, giving his backpack a jostle for emphasis, "I got a lot of stuff to take care of, studying and homework."

"Honey," she cut him off, "we're all very busy. Now, we told you when we decided to let you go to school..." She assumed a

lecturing posture, wagging a wooden spoon at him, her cigarette levering up and down between her lips with every word she spoke. Dexter's only choice was to go into a state of self-hypnosis, where he tuned her out, nodding politely, and uttering a quiet "mm hmm" now and again while she yammered on, ticking off the list of chores, and describing each's urgency. Mrs. Boozler felt, because her husband was so busy supporting the family, and since Dexter was the oldest, it was his obligation to perform the household maintenance duties. Dexter knew the only thing that kept his father busy was his preoccupation with finding his next beer, and the real reason his mother didn't want to burden her husband was fear that he would leave as he had done twice before because of her "nagging." Consequently, Dexter was forced to grow up too early and take on the responsibilities of an adult while he was still a child.

It began when he was two years old. A scared, tearful toddler, his mother swatted him with the same wooden spoon she was wagging at him today, until he wriggled his trembling little hand into the dank, slimy, kitchen sink drain to dislodge Mrs. Boosler's wig, that had fallen off her head, and into the garbage disposal, causing it to stick. All because she didn't want to rouse her husband out of his alcoholic slumber and face his wrath at having to perform the task. From then on, anything that needed attending in the Boosler's double-wide trailer home, was Dexter's

job. The forced responsibility continued through his adolescence and was still going on now--a freshman in college with great interest in astro-spiritual psychology and professors who felt he showed enough potential to merit a scholarship to a prestigious university, he still had to feed the dust bunnies that had collected and multiplied under the soiled sleeper sofa.

Dexter's mother kept talking, but he didn't really hear her. Her voice melded into the background of everyday life, her head seeming to separate from the rest of her body, floating before a psychedelic swirl, as her jaw moved mechanically up and down, the cigarette tottering on the edge of her lower lip, ready to fall.

Her head dropped back on to her neck with a magnetic jerk when she scooped out a large spoonful of the glop she stirred and let it schplut back into the bowl to emphasize her point. The sound of the oozy goop landing in the bowl, much like the sound of cow shit landing on a flat rock, jerked Dexter back to reality as she was finishing her spiel.

"In order for our family to function smoothly, we all must do our part. Now, excuse me, my part is to get dinner on the table." She resumed her mixing, signaling the end of the one-sided discussion. Dexter was relieved, but not satisfied. Once again he would acquiesce to keep peace at the expense of his own needs. He slinked out of the kitchen, despondent because it had always been like this, and doubting any hope that it would change.

Dexter moved on through the living room, and accidentally kicked over a half-empty beer can. The can puked forth its contents, which included a cigarette butt.

"Damn," he whispered. He bent over to pick up the can, but drew up, repulsed by the combined stench of the stale beer and the butt.

Just then, the front door flew open and the direct light from the setting sun poured inside. In walked a huge silhouetted man-form, its features, save for its ample height and girth, indistinguishable. The form ripped a belch, causing the bare forty-watt bulb hanging above the card table, which doubled as a dinner table, to shatter. Dexter recognized his father immediately.

With his free hand, Mr. Boozler reached around and swung the door closed. The flood of light disappeared and Dexter could see the shaggy beard that surrounded the semi-toothed smile like a moat around a broken castle. Dexter's father was holding a can of Coors Light, which he upturned and drained. Foam rolled forth from the edges of the can and clung to his thicket of a beard. When the can was empty, Mr. Boozler spiked it on the floor. After a couple of tinny sounding flip-flops, the can found its side and rolled until it came to a rest against a pile of other beer cans, above which flies buzzed.

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"Hey, son, how ya doin'?" His dad said with beer-buzzed enthusiasm in a deep gruff voice before he lumbered toward Dexter. Dexter knew what was coming next. It was another one of his dad's suffocating bear hugs. Dexter hated them, but dared not resist. The one time he did, his dad grew angry, slapping Dexter in the arm and on his face, trying to goad him into a fight.

"What's the matter?" His dad said, then smacked his arm. "You don't want to give your old man a hug?" Mr. Boozler slapped Dexter on the side of the head. "You think you're too good to hug your old man?" Another slap. "Well if you think you're better than me why don't you put 'em up and show me."

Dexter had been able to escape by running away up the stairs to his room. To his relief, his dad didn't follow him, but the drunken, belittling laughter that did, continued to echo in Dexter's ears today.

The big man embraced Dexter, lifting him off the ground. Dexter turned his head away and grimaced from the smell of his

Dad's beer breath. Mr. Boozler released his grip and Dexter fell to the floor with a heavy thud. Mr. Boozler took great delight in Dexter's misfortune, unleashing the hated laugh that simultaneously angered and disparaged Dexter. Mr. Boozler reached into the pocket of his overalls and produced another beer, which he popped, and put to his mouth. After taking a long draw, he wiped his mouth with his enormous bare forearm.

"So," Mr. Boozler said, "have you got the heads torn off them lizards yet?"

"Uh, no dad, but they're upstairs in my room, and I was going to get to them tonight, but..."

"Son," his dad cut him off, "you know I have a fishing tournament this weekend." He said with condescension.

"Yes sir," Dexter said meekly, feeling as if he were shrinking beneath his giant of a father.

"An' I told you basses goes crazy over them wounded lizards."

"Uh, salamanders Dad."

"Whatever the hell they are!" Mr. Boozler yelled, throwing up his arms and causing Dexter to flinch. "That ain't the point. The point is, I'm current champion of the 'Swamp Rat' bass tourney, and if I'm going to be champion this year, I've got to have an edge. An' if wounded sollymongers is my edge, then I've got to have it."

He quieted, crouched over Dexter, who was still on the floor. Dexter scooted backward to maintain some space between he and his dad, but bumped into the sleeper sofa, and could go no further. His dad got right in his face, the beer breath now like a pair of hands covering his nose and mouth, so he couldn't breathe.

"An' I would hate to think that my own son let me down and kept me from being the champion again." He whispered menacingly. "You don't really want to let me down, do you son?"

"No dad, of course not."

"Good," Mr. Boozler said and stood. "I'm glad that's settled. Now, I need another beer. Irma!" Mr. Boozler stomped off toward the kitchen, bellowing his wife's name.

Dexter scrambled to his feet, and darted into the stairwell in fear his dad might change his mind and have something else to say. He didn't, and Dexter let out a big sigh that was like a steam valve being released on the chamber of his anxiety. Dexter knew why the man was the way he was. The man had no personal power anywhere else in his life--his boss was always hassling him and bill collectors were always on his ass. So, the only way to exercise any power of his own, was to take it out on Dexter, the one he had always been able to manipulate. The thought made Dexter's anger rise again, but the anger became mixed with, and then taken over, by despair at the hopelessness of the situation.

As he rose the stairs, the blasting, dueling chain saw sound of thrash metal rock increased with each step he ascended. When he got to the top, the sheer volume of music coming from his brother's room blew Dexter's hair back as if he were standing in gale force winds. Leaning down against the force of the sound, Dexter made it to the doorway of the room to see his brother Wheezer, lying on the bed, squirming about, playing air guitar.

"Wheezer!" Dexter screamed, but it looked like a pantomime yell as his voice was drowned by the noise.

"Wheezer, turn that shit down!" Dexter tried again, with no acknowledgment from his brother until Wheezer's gyrations became so energetic he flopped on to the floor. The crash landing brought Wheezer out of his state of heavy metal euphoria, where he noticed his brother screaming wordlessly at him. Wheezer looked puzzled for a moment.

"Dex, dude, what's wrong?" Then he realized. "Oh," he said, feeling sheepish. "Let me turn off the music." Wheezer's skinny frame, clothed in faded baggy jeans and a Guns 'n' Roses T-shirt, shuffled over to the control panel on his monstrous stereo receiver. Somehow, through the long stringy hair that fell in front of his face, Wheezer located a small button. With one push, everything calmed. All the raucous, thundering, noise was silent. Before he could say an audible word to Wheezer, Dexter was

assailed by his over-enthusiastic brother wielding a cassette tape in one hand, and a video tape in the other.

"Dude, you've got to do me a favor," Wheezer said, short of breath. "Scab loaned me these awesome bootleg tapes of the Pus Yellow Jaundice Babies. He said I could record them, but I've got to give them back tomorrow because he's going to jam the local CNN signal and pirate broadcast it tomorrow night, so could you record them tonight for me, please?"

Once again, as always, this was a life or death matter for Wheezer. He always had a desperate problem to be solved, or an urgent challenge to be met, and none of it could be done without the help and guidance of his older brother Dexter. And Dexter, out of the goodness of his brotherly heart, would do it. When Wheezer screwed up and let Booger get picked up by the pound, it was Dexter who masterminded the three A. M. jailbreak. Yes, whatever the crisis, no matter what the odds, Dexter, the do-no-wrong brother and chosen son, would handle it, and please, don't anyone consider the inconvenience.

The look of urgency on Wheezer's face told Dexter that this was, once again, one of those problems that only Dexter could solve. Dexter felt he had no choice but to say yes. Otherwise, Wheezer would annoy him all night with his sniveling, groveling, and whining until Dexter relented.

"Okay," Dexter said. "It's not like I don't have enough of my own shit to do." He was trying in a passive aggressive fashion, to let Wheezer know that it would be putting him out, but it didn't register with Wheezer.

"Oh thanks, dude," Wheezer said, scurrying around Dexter as he walked into his room. "It's important that you start the audio and video tapes at the same time and monitor them all the way through so they'll be totally in sync. That way, when I play it, it will be like, you know, simulcast."

Dexter stopped in his tracks. Wheezer was famous for letting out information in increments to see how much he could get of what he wanted.

"Wheezer can't you do this yourself?" He motioned into Wheezer's room. "You've got a better stereo than mine."

"No way dude," Wheezer said, looking at his watch. "Mom's going to be calling us for supper soon, and I plan to be out of here when that happens. Besides," Wheezer said smiling, while backing away from Dexter's reach, "I know you have to be here because Mom and Dad have shit for you to do." He turned and ran laughing into his room, where he closed the door and cranked on his stereo to jet-propulsion volume.

Dexter stood, feeling like Caesar after Brutus just drove the knife home. But he conceded defeat and did nothing other than shuffle into his room like a drug rehab patient in a Thorazine

because Mom and Dad have shit for you to do." He turned and ran laughing into his room, where he closed the door and cranked on his stereo to jet-propulsion volume.

Dexter stood, feeling like Caesar after Brutus just drove the knife home. But he conceded defeat and did nothing other than shuffle into his room like a drug rehab patient in a Thorazine haze. Once inside, he set all his stuff down. He unzipped his backpack and took out his textbooks, notes, and star charts. He was about to set them on top of his desk, when he noticed the bag of plastic salamanders there in the middle and had to put his stuff to the side. He picked up the bag of salamanders. I better get the heads pulled off these damn lizards, I mean salamanders, or Dad will be pissed, he thought. He was opening the bag when he remembered his mother's list. Maybe I should look over her list to see if there's anything I could get going first. No, I'll get Wheezer's tapes recording first.

Dexter put the tapes in their appropriate slots in his stereo and VCR and got them recording. While the Jaundice Babies were blasting out "I Don't wanna Take my Parent's Shit," before a frenzied live audience, Dexter returned to the bag of salamanders. He took one of the oily, rubbery amphibian reproductions out of the bag. Thinking scissors would be the best way to sever the head from the body, he reached in his desk drawer and pulled out a pair. Dexter placed the neck of the salamander in the jaws of the

scissors, but the fake creature wouldn't allow itself to be cut. As he closed the scissors, the salamander slid along the edge of the blade until it fell to the floor.

"Shit," Dexter said. He picked it up and tried again, this time slower. The next time faster, but the pliability of the plastic would not yield to the blades. "You Can't Disfigure Me" was the next song blaring from the stereo while Dexter was gritting his teeth in an attempt to saw the head off with the salamander pinned to the desk top and the scissors open, still nothing doing.

"Damn it." He stopped and inspected the blades. The edges were chipped and gnarled. "Fuckin' Wheezer must have used these to clip his thick, old, funky toenails again." He tossed the scissors aside. "I'll just yank the head off the bastard."

Dexter pulled, and the salamander stretched. The sliminess of the synthetic material made Dexter feel his grip slide, but he grunted and pulled harder, his face turning red, his anger growing. He relaxed for a moment, then gave it a sharp jerk of a pull when his hand slipped off the salamander. Dexter's right eye filled with stars before going white. Pain surged through his optic nerve and into his brain, gaining in intensity the farther it went.

"Shit, shit, shit!" was all Dexter could say. He held his right hand over his eye, hoping for a healing touch to ease the

pain. When he realized the salamander was still in his other hand, he hurled it against the wall, where the oil made it adhere for a moment before it peeled off, and fell.

Still holding his face where he hit himself, Dexter sat down on his bed. The Pus Yellow Jaundice Babies had toned down quite a bit from their first two songs and were now playing a slow and sad ballad called "You're Pulling me Down."

"You're pulling me down,"

"I can't get off the ground."

"Like the force of entropy,"

"You keep adding weight to me"

"To put me in the chaotic state"

"Where you yourself decay."

"You're pulling me down."

Dexter hadn't been paying any attention to the frenzied beat of the music until now, but the words from this song floated with a purpose out of the speakers and into his auditory canal. There, they got the ear drum to bonging, causing everything else to rattle around and fire up the auditory nerves. Some of the impulses registered in Dexter's brain, others forked off and hit that big nerve that runs between the mind and heart, the one that often swells up right around the throat. Tears of defeat bulged out of his ducts, over his lids, and down his cheeks.

He didn't notice the dirty, round face of his little brother Bo peer around the corner and into the room. Bo never saw his big brother cry before, and it puzzled him. To him, Dexter was the greater than the mighty Oz, capable of going much farther than Kansas.

"Dexter," Bo said, afraid his little presence might be interrupting, happy to come back tomorrow if need be, but still mustering the courage to ask, "You okay?"

Dexter looked up to see Bo, now clothed, creeping through the doorway. Dexter, embarrassed that his baby brother witnessed him crying, wiped away his tears and snorted back in a snot build up of his own. He got the corners of his mouth pointed upward in an effort to show Bo he was fine.

"Yeah, I'm all right, squirt, come here." He said, and held out his arms to Bo.

The smudges on Bo's face changed to happy clown make up with his smile. The knobby sticks he had for legs churned into a sprint that ended in Dexter's arms. Dexter noticed the now empty sock clutched in Bo's fist flailing behind him in his rush toward Dexter. He caught Bo and propelled the little boy into enough laughter for a sitcom track with a whirl of rib tickling.

"So, I see you brought your sock with you," Dexter said after he ceased the tickle torture.

"Yeah," Bo said, catching his breath, then holding the sock aloft. "See, I can pick it up now. It's lighter without all the stuff to hold it down."

No stuff to hold it down. Dexter's eyes widened. He stopped Bo's matter-of-fact statement just after it registered, rewound it, and played it again. This time the words resonated with more impact. He played them again. They came through even stronger, this time backed up by a tympany chorus. He thought about how well they paralleled with the words of Jaundice Babies' song that made him so sad a moment ago. But unlike the song, Bo's words offered hope and a solution. From deep beneath the surface of Dexter' pent up spirit, an undercurrent welled up, and created a wave of a revelation, that burst through and over the dam that was holding him back.

"I can pick it up if I get rid of the stuff!" Dexter said like a scientist that just discovered chewing pine cones could cure cancer.

"What?" Bo asked, his little brow furrowed at his brother's enigmatic declaration.

"Come on Bo," Dexter said, taking the child's hand. "We're going to get out of here and lighten ourselves." Together they walked to the stairs.

"We're leaving?" Bo asked, as the two descended the

stairs.

"Yeah. "Good, maybe if Mama sees me with you I won't have to eat supper."

They got to the bottom of the stairs and turned into the living room when Dexter stopped short and grabbed Bo by the shoulder, halting him.

"Wait," he told Bo.

"What is it?" Bo asked.

Dexter lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Mom and Dad are in the kitchen. They won't want us to go outside, so let's go out the front door and they won't know."

Bo replied with a nod and a sly grin. He loved it when he and Dexter played their secret games. They were tip-toeing to the front door when they heard Mrs. Boozler. "Dexter, honey, is that you?"

Dexter froze momentarily and winced. He didn't want anymore parental encounters, especially now, while he was trying to escape.

"Dexter?" She called again.

He slowly turned and saw his mother standing across the living room from him just past the kitchen doorway. Her blue, rodeo-embroidered housecoat was covered with the remnants of no telling how many meals in the preparation stage from the past

He slowly turned and saw his mother standing across the living room from him just past the kitchen doorway. Her blue, rodeo-embroidered housecoat was covered with the remnants of not telling how many meals in the preparation stage from the past week. She was still holding the wooden spoon, oblivious to the goop dripping off of it, and on to her shoes.

"Where are you boys going?"

Her lower lip was trembling just enough to knock the dangling ash off her cigarette. Dexter knew she was fearing a confrontation between she and him that might upset his father, who was in the kitchen digging around in the fridge amidst the recycled butter tubs, all holding moldy contents. He was looking for another beer. Dexter looked toward the ground and shuffled his feet. He wanted to get out unnoticed, but he met with this uneasy encounter. Bo eased his way behind Dexter's legs and peered out from between them.

"Uh, we were just going outside for, uh, a little bit," Dexter stammered.

"No you don't!" She stamped her foot on the ground. She was trembling more now. She wanted so much to keep the peace, but it was crumbling around her.

"I'm just about to put supper on the table, and I won't have you two running off and making the rest of the family wait."

Dexter fidgeted, and Bo clung to his leg. He was just about to tell his mother he would be right outside the door, when his dad burst through kitchen doorway, shoving his mother aside.

"Are you giving your mother trouble?!" The man demanded to know. "Come here, we need to talk about this."

Dexter saw the rage blazing out of the man's bloodshot eyes. He knew that this talk would be like so many they had in the past when his dad was in this condition--one-sided, loud, demeaning, and would leave bruises.

"I'm sorry, Dad, but I really don't feel like talking right now," he said with a pained face. He hooked his thumb toward the door as if he were flagging down a ride to speed him out of there. "We're just going outside for a minute. We won't..."

"I said come here!" His dad was coming toward him now. Dexter felt his feet buried beneath the floor on which he stood. He was frozen by his dad's anger. He wanted to run, but couldn't. He knew he ought to do as he was told, but didn't. The only feeling certain to him was Bo's tightening clinch around his leg. The tension in the room was thicker than any, ever, at the OK corral when Wheezer came bounding down the stairs.

"Dex, dude, where are you going? You weren't watching the tapes, and they got all out of sync."

Wheezer's sudden entrance into the room caught everyone by surprise. All heads turned toward him. After breaking his stare

from Wheezer, Dexter looked at his father and noticed he had stopped approaching him to look at Wheezer. Wheezer was now the one walking toward Dexter.

"Dexter, you told me you would do this tonight. I've got to have it back by tomorrow."

Wheezer hardly finished his sentence when Dexter spun around, and decked him with one punch.

"Dexter!" Mrs. Boozler screamed.

The whole family stood paralyzed over the spectacle they witnessed. Wheezer stirred and rolled over. He touched his fingers to his mouth and looked at the blood he brought from his split lip. He then looked up at Dexter.

"Man, Dexter, what was that for?"

Dexter, more surprised than anyone that he lashed out in anger, could only whisper, "Sorry Wheezer."

"Damn right you're sorry!" Dexter's father renewed his approach toward him with an increased pace.

A coffee table that was covered with beer cans, dirty ashtrays, and chip wrappers was all that stood between Dexter and his drunken, charging bull of a father. Dexter picked up one end of it and flipped it over.

"Come on Bo, run!" Dexter said as the coffee table, and its messy contents, were crashing and spilling in front of their dad.

The big brother-little brother pair dashed out the front door, slamming it behind them.

"Let's get to the shed," Dexter ordered.

The two ran down the front walk, taking care not to trip over the tires, pink flamingos, and still more beer cans that littered the tall grass in the front yard. Once at the shed, Dexter threw open the door and backed out his motorcycle. Bo, seeing what was going down, climbed on behind Dexter without being told. Dexter was relieved to hear the engine rev on the first kick. He looked in the direction from which he and Bo just came and saw his father, mother, and brother chasing after them like some kind of white trash version of the Keystone Cops. Dexter opened the throttle and headed straight for the back gate, which was closed.

"Hold on, Bo."

Bo squeezed his little arms around his brother's midsection. Using Bo's sand pile as a ramp, Dexter sped the motorbike over it and lifted into the air. They cleared the fence and continued to rise. Dexter looked down and saw his family running about like scattered ants, all shouting and waving their arms at him.

"Where are we going Dexter?" Bo asked as they ascended. "As high as we want Bo, as high as we want."

THE FINAL HUNT

The pleasant fuzz of my daydream was slapped away when I felt a sharp jerk against my line. My newly rebuilt Zebco 404 reel complained with a string of stressed "z's" as my brain zeroed into focus and I realized I had hooked the first fish of the morning.

"Whoa!" I said when the aquatic creature forced a strong surge against me. I took a half-step forward to maintain my balance. "I got a fighter here."

Darby looked at me. His dark eyebrows raised, widening his eyes with excitement, hoping that this was the beginning of a lot of action in the muddy gray creek.

"A fish?" Darby asked. Normally I would have considered his query stupid, but since all we pulled out of the water so far were weeds, sticks, and other bottom debris, this time it was a legitimate question.

"Yeah," I answered as I heaved back and reeled, heaved and reeled. After a couple of minutes of pulling against the fish, my effort paid off for I caught my first glimpse of it at the surface. A silvery flash, bright as the shiny side of a new piece of aluminum foil, irradiated from the water, then disappeared briefly in a last attempt to dive against my pull. It did him no

good for soon he was out of the water rising, as if levitating, toward the end of my pole where I was standing at the top of the steep bank.

"He looks a bit small," I called over to Darby, while reaching for the fish.

He was thrashing about, flipping his tail left and right, making his whole body convulse. I secured my rod under my left arm, and took hold of the line just above the fish's mouth. That constricted the fish's movement enough so I could grab him with my left hand. The hook wasn't buried too deep, just under his lower lip. It hurts me when I have to wrench a hook all around, to dislodge one that penetrates far into an eye socket. I extracted the hook without much effort and held it up to observe when Darby approached. We both looked at the fish in silence, then looked at one another.

"Looks like a youngster," Darby said, giving his assessment.

"Yeah," I agreed, "he's a little under the limit for white bass. I'll toss him back in and hope he's got some hungry big brothers."

I walked to the edge of the bank and gave the fish a little underhanded toss. He flipped and twisted through the air, like an out of control trapeze artist, twelve or so feet until he hit the water and disappeared. I stood staring at the spot where the fish

hit the water, watching the ripples in the water stretch, like they were marching to the banks on either side of the creek. I heard the crunch of footsteps on the ground, and looked to my left to see Darby standing next to me. Without saying anything, we both looked into the water. I thought about the fish, how while just performing an instinctive function, it was taken from its home and literally yanked into a strange world, one which it had possibly seen but, had never ventured, nor could comprehend. Surely afraid, its primitive, undeveloped brain not able to determine what was going on, it was mercifully returned, still not understanding, to its water world. The young fish, although quite stunned, can continue its simple life.

"You know," I said, "that's the biggest reason I like to fish but don't like to hunt."

"What do you mean?" Darby asked.

"In fishing, if it's not what you want, you can throw it back. In hunting, if you shoot the wrong thing, it's dead."

"Yeah, hunting's kind of final."

Final. The word echoed in my brain. To me when an animal was shot and killed in a hunt, it's life was over. Final.

We continued to fish through the morning. The sun, which was just inching over the horizon when we arrived, was now higher in the sky, though it was still quite early. We moved along the

creek, trying different baits and lures, but having no luck. We couldn't seem to find the elusive combination of where the fish were and for what they were hungry. Darby, always desiring results, grew anxious, talking to the fish, as if he were putting a sales pitch on them, trying to convince the fish that this particular white plastic four-inch swirl tail grub worm would be the most delicious thing they ever put in their mouths. But it was only available to qualified buyers, those over the ten inch limit. For me, the fishing became something to do while my brain wandered around with the notion of hunting being final.

My dad bought me my first B. B. gun when I was nine years old. It was a cock-action Daisy modeled after the famous Winchester that the Rifleman Chuck Connors used to kill bad guys every week. I wanted one for so long because I heard from all my friends, the stories about hunting, especially the birds they had shot. When I finally got a B. B. gun, I felt big and important. I now measured up to all my buddies. I too, was qualified to shoot birds.

My pulse quickened when I felt a strong tug on the line, but my excitement disappeared when I soon realized it was a dead resistance. I snagged the bottom. I gyrated, first left, then

right, pulling my pole in each direction with me to try to dislodge the hook, but it wouldn't come free. Darby noticed my movement and looked over as he was reeling his lure out of the water.

"Got something?" He asked, hoping I had found a school of hungry spawners.

"Yeah, the bottom," I said, giving a grunt to go along with an extra strong jerk, "I can't get it to come free."

"Just cut it," Darby advised as he watched a new yellow grub worm fly through the air from his cast.

I took Darby's suggestion and dug my knife out of my pocket. I opened the blade with my teeth, reached out, and cut the line. It was stretched taut, so the pieces sprang away from each other when the blade snapped them in two. I sorted through the tackle that was in the plastic grocery bag tied to my belt loop, and settled on a chartreuse colored grub. Being careful not to stick my self, I ran a jig-hook through the oily plastic lure, then tied the line through the tiny eye-hole at one end of the jig weight. The operation complete, I reeled it to the tip of my rod and let it fly.

I saw the flight of the first B. B. I fired from my new rifle. It penetrated the paper target some fifteen feet away

before it was caught in the slack piece of old bedsheet that was built into the box target Dad and I made to save B. B.'s. When we got home from the sporting goods store, I was eager to look for some birds.

"You want to go hunting with me Dad? I think I'm gonna go for some crow."

"Well Ren, you got a new gun. Let's look at the instructions to learn how to fire it."

"But I already know," I whined, "I've shot Ricky's B. B. gun a lot of times."

"But you have your own gun now, and you should learn to take care of it, so let's go inside and take a look at the manual."

He picked up his pace to the front door, letting me know that the discussion was over. I had to corral my impatience. Dad did a good job of distracting by getting me involved in the building of the box target with him. As we were working on it, he made a simple statement.

"I don't want you shooting any birds, son. You're just learning to use a gun, and you have no need to kill anything. If you do, I'm afraid I'll have to take the gun away for awhile until I think you are ready to have it again. There's plenty of time to hunt when you are older."

I wanted to raise objections, but I could tell by the

somber look on his soft face that it would do me no good.

"Okay," was all I could answer in an attempt to hide the tears I felt welling up in me from the disappointment. My discouragement soon left me, for we had fun spending the rest of the afternoon, until supper time, firing one tiny brass sphere after another at paper targets. When the gun was empty, Dad showed me how I could gather all the B. B.'s we shot, snagged by the sheet, and reload my gun with them.

"You're a good shot Ren," Dad said as we walked to the house for supper. I believed him, knowing, but not telling, that I was ready for big game.

The next morning, even though it was summer and I didn't have school, I was up early and eager.

"Goodness, whose blond head is this I see up so early?" Mom asked when she entered the kitchen and saw me pouring Cap'n Crunch into a bowl. "You're not trying to start good habits for school in another month, are you?" She tossed my hair and I squirmed out from under her.

"No Mom, I just want to get in some early target practice."

"Oh I see," she said.

I was anxious while eating, wishing Dad would hurry up with the morning paper and his breakfast, so he would leave for work. I was so excited, I couldn't concentrate on the funny papers.

When he finally did leave, I stood at the window, watching him pull out of the driveway, then ran for my Daisy as soon as he was out of sight.

Outside, the sun was still not too high in the eastern sky, so the heat had not set in yet. Even at nine years old, I felt full of sports man's savvy, up early to find those birds out to get the worms. My eyes scanned the trees for any flutter of ornithological activity, while my ears were tuned to detect the slightest cheep. My ears were the first to score. As I stalked toward a big hackberry tree in the field behind my house, I heard the high-pitched, chaotic squeaks of baby birds. They were soon answered by the harsh, grating squawk of an adult blue jay. I looked over and up from the tree and there it was, flying in about two o'clock, my quarry. Staying low, I scooted closer to the tree before the bird landed, so I could get a better shot. The sun was directly behind the tree in my line of sight, so the brightness made me able to distinguish only silhouettes. But that was all I needed. To justify my impending action, I told myself that blue jays, and in particular this blue jay, were noisy, obnoxious birds that needed to die. Resolved with the new resentment I sold myself, I raised my gun and fired into the tree toward the bird forms. Something must have happened because louder cries erupted from the baby birds. Adrenaline surged through my body. I cocked

my gun and fired another shot. A thrashing of wings followed my second. I was close to a kill. My actions took on a calculated air. I cocked my gun in a mechanical manner, took a calm aim at the confused mass of feathers, and squeezed the trigger. The morning sun was shining bright in my eyes, but it didn't obscure the profile of a bird that dropped, head first, out of the tree. The puff of the bird's body landing in the tall grass sounded like a knell of doom.

A hum was the next sound to fill my ears. Scared, still not able to comprehend what I just did, I tiptoed over to the crater in the grass caused by the bird's landing. I stopped about three feet away and craned my body forward until I could see the bird. It lay on its side. A messy red dot at the base of its skull marred the otherwise perfect, downy, blue plumage. The feathers of its crest, like those of its stretched wings, were spasmodically spreading, its brain sending the last signals through the bird's nerves, Maydays for oxygen no doubt, until it spent its own supply, and the body went limp.

The bird was dead. Final.

The realization struck me. I killed something. The hum in my ears was replaced by the shriek of the baby birds, growing louder and louder, cursing, condemning, and threatening to kill me

for taking their mother from them. Their angry screams followed as I ran to the house, fueled with horror.

"I got another one!" Darby exclaimed. He was wrestling with his bent-double pole and straining to crank his reel. He had found a honey hole and pulled out his third keeper in fifteen minutes. He pulled this one in, a crappie. I reeled my line in fast and went over to check out his fish. He held his fish. Darby was on a roll, and his face showed it. His eyes were wide and he was all smiles.

"He'll definitely go on the stringer. Man, he had some spirit in him. One thing about crappie, they don't get as big as bass, but man, they fight harder." Darby was excited and jabbering away.

"Yeah," I said, "they're like a perch on steroids. What're you using now?"

"That same yellow grub."

"Really? Shit, pull that sucker off and let me have it," I said. "I've been changing lures all morning, and save for that little fish bowl case, all I've caught is the bottom."

"No way, and get away from me. I don't need any of your bad luck over here."

"I don't have bad luck," I said, walking away, "I have no luck."

I picked up my pole and stared at the grub on the end of the line. I reached into the plastic bag and pulled out my antique Jitterbug.

"I'm going to get crazy," I called out, "I'm going to go with a topwater."

"What are you going to use?"

I held up the lure, "my old Jitterbug."

"Don't use that," Darby cautioned. "Its a collector's item. There's too much trash in the water. You'll snag it on something and lose it for sure."

He was right. The lure was valuable, and with all the trees near the water's edge, their branches lying low and gnarled roots jutting into the water, there was a risk of losing it, but I had a hunch.

"What the hell," I answered him. "It doesn't catch fish if I don't get it wet."

"Besides," he continued, "the fish are down deep to spawn. They're not going to come up to feed now."

"What? You catch three fish and all of a sudden you're Mr. expert angler? I'll catch my own fish, thank you."

Ignoring Darby, I took out my knife and cut the line. I flipped the worthless grub into the water.

"That'll probably start a feeding frenzy," I said to myself."

With the Jitterbug now on the line, I looked for a good spot to cast. The area was thick with trees, so I moved upstream away from Darby to a more open spot along the bank. I decided to cast downstream so I would get more action from the lure when I reeled it back. I held the pole up to where the reel was about even with my ear, and gave my wrist a lazy snap as I hit the release. The lure glided away from the end of the pole and flew parallel to the near shore, then lost altitude and plopped into the water next to the edge like a bloop single landing just inside the left field foul line.

The lure landed near the base of an old Bald Cypress, its roots as big around as a man's arm, plunging down into the water. I smiled when it hit the surface, just where I aimed. I reeled in, and the lure slithered along in the water with a jerky, side-to-side motion. Jitterbug was the perfect name for one of these.

The lure was about half way back to me when it was slammed. My heart jumped at the splash, and I instinctively jerked up on the pole to set the hook.

"Shit," I said in surprise, almost losing my balance. The reel complained, making strained noises as the fish battled against me and the drag. I pulled in and reeled, pulled in and reeled, in a game of tug of war with this child of Neptune. God this fish was strong! The way it struck the lure, coming down on top of it, made me think it was probably a black bass. I'd caught some big blacks before, but they were all in lakes because they usually prefer the open water. But could this possibly be the biggest? In this narrow little tributary running off of Lake Lavon? This couldn't be a black in here, they don't spawn until much later in the spring. All these thoughts ran through my head as I pulled against the fish. The surface water boiled with the fish's struggle. I saw him for the first time when it breached. It was even bigger than I originally thought. I continued my pulling and reeling. The fish was tiring, the resistance to my pulls weakening. I got him in close and got a good look at him when he neared the surface. I could tell for sure now that it was a black bass. He made one last, desperate thrash as he was hoisted out of the water, but that was it. The poor creature was exhausted. I reeled him within my reach and got a good hold of the bony lower lip of the big mouthed monster. Grabbing the lower jaw of a black bass temporarily paralyzes them, making them easy to handle. I took the lure out of his mouth and held the dark

green gleaming fish aloft to admire. It was beautiful, and massive, easily the biggest bass of any kind I ever caught. My guess was seven or eight pounds.

There is a certain excitement in catching a fish. It's not unmatched, but it is like no other. I thought of Darby. I dropped my pole and ran toward him, lugging the lunker with me.

"Darby! Darby man, I caught Jaws."

"God damn," was all he could manage, "God damn, he's huge. You caught him with your Jitterbug?"

"Yeah."

"Let me use that thing. I want one of those."

"Hell no," I said remembering his paranoid advice. "You'll just snag it on something and lose it."

We both laughed. Darby reached for his stringer and picked it up, pulling his three out of the water.

"He's definitely a keeper. Here hand him to me and I'll put him on the stringer for you."

Darby put out his hand, but I didn't turn the fish over right away. I held on to it, not sure what I wanted to do with him. The fish had a fat belly. He would make for nice sized filets, sure, but I felt black bass had the flavor of a muddy lake bottom. Darby seemed puzzled at my hesitation.

"You do want to keep him don't you?"

"I don't know," I said, still struggling for a decision, "blacks don't taste too good."

"Hell no, you don't want to eat him," Darby said before I could barely finish my sentence. "He's the type you want mounted on the wall above your fireplace."

I looked at the fish and noticed its gills pumping for unobtainable oxygen. It suddenly became very alive and feeling to me. I knew then I didn't want him to join his companions at the end of Darby's stringer. If he was going to no better ends than a bad decoration in my home, then he belonged back in his.

"I'm just going to let him go," I said.

"Why?" Darby was dumbfounded. "Don't you want everyone to know you caught this monster?"

"Fishing's not final, remember? And besides, you'll vouch for me, won't you?"

Without waiting for his answer, I turned and headed back to the spot where I caught him. It wasn't as far from the water as most of the places along the creek and would be easier on him, after the shock of being out of the water so long, than a smack on the water after a long fall. I arrived at the shore's edge, squatted down, and eased the fish into the water. He hovered just below the surface, feathery pectoral fins waving, gills pumping in the oxygen they strained so hard for, but couldn't find earlier.

I watched for awhile, then smacked the top of the water with my hand, and he vanished.