



DETROIT

AN AMERICAN AUTOPSY

CHARLIE LEDUFF

US Guys
Work and Other Sins

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

For Amy and Claudette

*Detroit turned out to be heaven,
but it also turned out to be hell.*

—MARVIN GAYE

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Corn does not grow alone. And books do not write themselves. I'd like to give thanks to the people of Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A.—especially those who shared their stories here. You are a proud nation.

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Every teacher who helps and every honest politician who serves.

Claudette: remember where you come from, girl. Sometime in her life a bird needs to circle home.

PROLOGUE

I REACHED DOWN the pant cuff with the eraser end of my pencil and poked it. Frozen solid. But definitely human.

“Goddamn.”

I took a deep breath through my cigarette. I didn’t want to use my nose. It was late January, the air scorching cold. The snow was falling sideways as it usually did in Detroit this time of year. The dead man was encased in at least four feet of ice at the bottom of a defunct elevator shaft in an abandoned building. But still, there was no telling what the stink might be like.

I couldn’t make out his face. The only things protruding above the ice were the feet, dressed in some white sweat socks and a pair of black gym shoes. I could see the hem of his jacket below the surface. The rest of him tapered off into the void.

In most cities, a death scene like this would be considered remarkable, mind-blowing, horrifying. But not here. Something had happened in Detroit while I was away.

* * *

I had left the city two decades earlier to try to make a life for myself that didn’t involve a slow death working in a chemical factory or a liquor store. Any place but those places.

But where? I wandered for years, working my way across Asia, Europe, the Arctic edge working as a cannery hand, a carpenter, a drifter. And then I settled into the most natural thing for a man with no real talents.

Journalism.

It required no expertise, no family connections and no social graces. Furthermore, it seemed to be the only job that paid you to travel, excluding a door-to-door Bible salesman. Nearly thirty years old, I went back to school to study the inverted pyramid of writing. I landed my first newspaper job with the *Alaska Fisherman’s Journal*, where I wrote dispatches in longhand on legal pads and mailed them back to headquarters in Seattle.

So I went out into the Last Frontier with my notepad and a tent and wrote what I saw: stuff about struggling fishermen, a mountain woman who drank too much and dried her panties on a line stretched across the bow of her boat, Mexican laborers forced to live in the swamps, a prince who lived under a bridge, a gay piano man on a fancy cruise liner. People managing somehow. My kind of people. The job suited me.

Working off that, I tried to land a real job but couldn’t find one. The *Detroit Free Press* didn’t want me. Not the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Not the *Oakland Tribune*. I was thinking about returning to the Alaskan fishing boats until a little Podunk paper called me with an offer of a summer internship—the *New York Times*.

Luck counts too.

I ended up working at the *Gray Lady* for a decade, sketching the lives of hustlers and working stiff and firemen at Ground Zero. It was a good run. But wanderlust is like a pretty girl—you wake up one morning, find she’s grown old and decide that either you’re going to commit your life or you’re going to walk away. I walked away, and as it happens in life, I circled home, taking a job with the *Detroit News*. My colleagues in New York laughed. The paper was on death watch. And so was the

city.

It is important to note that, growing up in Detroit and its suburbs, I can honestly say it was never that good in the first place. People of older generations like to tell me about the swell old days of soda fountains and shopping stores and lazy Saturday night drives. But the fact is Detroit was dying forty years ago when the Japanese began to figure out how to make a better car. The whole country knew the city and the region was on the skids, and the whole country laughed at us. A bunch of lazy, uneducated blue-collar incompetents. The Rust Belt. The Rust Bowl. Forget about it. Florida was calling.

No one cared much about Detroit until the Dow collapsed in 2008, the economy melted down and the chief executives of the Big Three went to Washington, D.C., to grovel. Suddenly the eyes of the nation turned back upon this postindustrial sarcophagus, where crime and corruption and mismanagement and mayhem played themselves out in the corridors of power and on the powerless streets. Detroit became epic, historic, symbolic, hip even. I began to get calls from reporters around the world wondering what the city was like, what was happening here. They wondered if the Rust Belt cancer had metastasized and was creeping toward Los Angeles and London and Barcelona. Was Detroit an outlier or an epicenter? Was Detroit a symbol of the greater decay? Is the Motor City the future of America? Are we living through a cycle or an epoch? Suddenly they weren't laughing out there anymore.

Journalists parachuted into town. The subjects in my *Detroit News* stories started appearing in *Rolling Stone* and the *Wall Street Journal*, on NPR and PBS and CNN, but under someone else's byline. The reporters rarely, if ever, offered nuanced appraisals of the city and its place in the American landscape. They simply took a tour of the ruins, ripped off the local headlines, pronounced it awful here and left.

And it is awful here, there is no other way to say it. But I believe that Detroit is America's city. It was the vanguard of our way up, just as it is the vanguard of our way down. And one hopes the vanguard of our way up again. Detroit is Pax Americana. The birthplace of mass production, the automobile, the cement road, the refrigerator, frozen peas, high-paid blue-collar jobs, home ownership and credit on a mass scale. America's way of life was built here.

It's where installment purchasing on a large scale was invented in 1919 by General Motors to sell their cars. It was called the Arsenal of Democracy in the 1940s, the place where the war machines were made to stop the march of fascism.

So important was the Detroit way of doing things that its automobile executives in the fifties and sixties went to Washington and imprinted the military with their management style and structure. Robert McNamara was the father of the Ford Falcon and the architect of the Vietnam War. Charlie Wilson was the president of General Motors and Eisenhower's man at the Pentagon, who famously said he thought that "what was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa."

If what Wilson said is true, then so too must be its opposite.

Today, the boomtown is bust. It is an eerie and angry place of deserted factories and homes and forgotten people. Detroit, which once led the nation in home ownership, is now a foreclosure capital. Its downtown is a museum of ghost skyscrapers. Trees and switchgrass and wild animals have come back to reclaim their rightful places. Coyotes are here. The pigeons have left in droves. A city the size of San Francisco and Manhattan could neatly fit into Detroit's vacant lots, I am told.

Once the nation's richest big city, Detroit is now its poorest. It is the country's illiteracy and dropout capital, where children must leave their books at school and bring toilet paper from home. It is the unemployment capital, where half the adult population does not work at a consistent job. There are firemen with no boots, cops with no cars, teachers with no pencils, city council members with telephones tapped by the FBI, and too many grandmothers with no tears left to give.

But Detroit can no longer be ignored, because what happened here is happening out there.

Neighborhoods from Phoenix to Los Angeles to Miami are blighted with empty houses and people with idle hands. Americans are swimming in debt, and the prospects of servicing the debt grow slimmer by the day as good-paying jobs continue to evaporate or relocate to foreign lands. Economists talk about the inevitable turnaround. But standing here in Michigan, it seems to me that the fundamentals are no longer there to make the good life.

Go ahead and laugh at Detroit. Because you are laughing at yourself.

In cities and towns across the country, whole factories are auctioned off. Men with trucks haul away tool-and-die machines, aluminum siding, hoists, drinking fountains. It is the ripping out of the country's mechanical heart right before our eyes.

A newly hired autoworker will earn \$14 an hour. This, adjusted for inflation, is three cents *less* than what Henry Ford was paying in 1914 when he announced the \$5 day. And, of course, Ford isn't hiring.

Come to Detroit. Drive the empty, shattered boulevards, and the decrepitude of the place all rolls out in a numb, continuous fact. After enough hours staring into it, it starts to appear normal. Average. Everyday.

And then you come across something like a man frozen in ice and the skeleton of the anatomy of the place reveals itself to you.

The neck bone is connected to the billionaire who owns the crumbling building where the man died. The rib bones are connected to the countless minions shuffling through the frostbitten streets burning fires in empty warehouses to stay warm—and get high. The hip bone is connected to a demoralized police force who couldn't give a shit about digging a dead mope out of an elevator shaft. The thigh bone is connected to the white suburbanites who turn their heads away from the calamity of Detroit, carrying on as though the human suffering were somebody else's problem. And the foot bones—well, they're sticking out of a block of dirty frozen water, belonging to an unknown man nobody seemed to give a rip about.

We are not alone on this account. Across the country, the dead go unclaimed in the municipal morgues because people are too poor to bury their loved ones: Los Angeles, New York, Chicago. It's the same. Grandpa is on layaway while his family tries to scratch together a box and a plot.

This is not a book about geopolitics or macroeconomics or global finance. And it is not a feel-good story with a happy ending. It is a book of reportage. A memoir of a reporter returning home—only he cannot find the home he once knew. This is a book about living people getting on with the business of surviving in a place that has little use for anyone anymore except those left here. It is about waking up one morning and being told you are obsolete and not wanting to believe it but knowing it's true. It is a book about a rough town and a tough people during arguably some of the most historic and cataclysmic years in the American experience. It is a book about family and cops and criminals and factory workers. It is about corrupt politicians and a collapsing newspaper. It is about angry people fighting and crying and snatching hold of one another trying to stay alive.

It is about the future of America and our desperate efforts to save ourselves from it.

At the end of the day, the Detroiter may be the most important American there is because no one knows better than he that we're all standing at the edge of the shaft.

ONE
FIRE

GRA-SHIT

I PULLED INTO the station, the needle riding on “E.”

It was a mistake. In Detroit, if possible, you don’t get your gas on the east side, not even at high noon. Because the east side of Motown is Dodge City—semilawless and crazy. Many times citizens don’t bother phoning the cops. And as if to return the favor, many times cops don’t bother to come.

It was gray and moist on Gratiot Avenue—pronounced *Gra-shit*—a main artery running from the center of the city into the eastern suburbs and up farther still into the countryside. Six lanes wide and not a soul. Not a car. Not a bus. Just steam clouds billowing from the sewer caps. I went inside the gas station, paid \$10 to the Arab behind the bulletproof glass and went outside to pump my gas.

A man crept up from the grayness. I didn’t make him until he was standing at my front bumper. Another mistake. You always keep your back to the gas pump, eyes on the horizons.

The dude’s eyes were dead, cold, flat-black like a skillet’s underside. His hair was nappy. He was thin like a stray and his coat was dirty.

“My man,” he said too cheerfully. “You got a smoke?”

I pulled a pack from my jacket pocket and gave him one, hoping he’d beat it.

He put the cigarette behind his ear, lingering, offering no thanks.

“You’re welcome,” I said, hoping to put a period on the meeting and that he’d just walk away.

Another mistake. Charity can be dangerous. He’d made a mark.

“My man,” he said, in a tone not so friendly this time. “Got some spare change?”

“Spare change?” I said. “This is America, bro. There is no such thing anymore as spare change.”

“HE SAID MONEY MOTHERFUCKER!”

The command came from the rear bumper, where a second man had stalked up without me noticing. He was bigger, darker, more wild-eyed than the first. He had two gold-framed incisors. Cheap work, I thought, like the Mexicans get.

“I spent my last ten on gas, dog,” I said, trying to recuperate some of the shattered cool. “Lemme check in there.” I pointed toward the glove box.

I bent into the car, reaching for the glove box latch. There was a 9 mm inside. Not mine. It belonged to a reporter who had forgotten to store it in his desk on his way to a press conference. He had asked me in the parking lot to hold on to it and I laughed about a journalist carrying a concealed weapon. Correspondents don’t do that even in war zones, I told him.

“Well, how many of those war reporters do you know who’ve been to Detroit?” he asked me.

I couldn’t name him one.

Now here I was on the grubby east side—a war zone in its own right. A place of Used-to-Haves. And a Used-to-Have is an infinitely more dangerous type of man than the habitual Have-Not. This type of man is waging his own war. Not against the power but against his own, a fight much easier to find at the gas pump than on Wall Street.

I emerged from the car and pointed the barrel square toward the man’s face.

I said nothing. No Dirty Harry line. No crime novel metaphor. I didn’t even know where the safety was or if there was a safety or ammunition in it. I pissed myself a little.

“Okay now,” Goldie-mouth said, backing his way into the mist. The other ran like a jackrabbit. The Arab behind the Plexiglas came to the front door after they were long gone.

“You all right, bro?” he shouted.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I don’t mean to sound funny, bro,” he said, giving my vest and tie the once-over. “But what’s a white boy doing getting gas on *Gra-shit*?”

NEWSROOM

THE MOVERS WERE packing my house in Los Angeles when the news broke from Detroit. Someone had slipped the *Free Press* a cache of text messages showing that the city's mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, was a criminal and a pimp.

Kilpatrick had denied in a court of law that he had fired the police department's chief of internal affairs because he was getting too close to an alleged sex party at the mayor's mansion—where rumors had it that a stripper named "Strawberry" was beaten silly with a high heel by the mayor's wife.

Strawberry—real name Tamara Greene—later turned up murdered.

Kilpatrick had also denied in court that he had had an adulterous affair with his chief of staff, an old girlfriend from high school. The text messages, however, confirmed that not only was Kilpatrick carrying on with his chief of staff, he was a crook who was looting the city and a leech who bagged more tail than a deer hunter.

Worse still, the texts revealed that Kilpatrick secretly spent \$10 million of the people of Detroit's money to make the internal affairs whistleblower go away.

It was a huge scoop that cemented the *News*' lowly, stepbrother standing to the rival *Free Press*. My stomach dropped. I called the paper's deputy managing editor back in Detroit.

"What the hell happened?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said.

"This is bad."

"It isn't good," he said. "But don't worry about it. We chased it and got something up on the Web."

Don't worry about it? Chased it? Got something up on the Web? What the hell had I done?

* * *

My career with the *New York Times* died in the mountains of Vermont. I was on a story and did not receive the prior evening's voice mail until early in the morning when I arrived at the Burlington airport.

The message was hysterical.

"Charlie. Amy's in the hospital. She went into early labor. Where are you?"

I didn't want to be that guy, the self-absorbed man who was never around for his children. I didn't want to be my father or my first stepfather. It didn't matter that I was working on assignment for the paper. A workaholic is the same as an alcoholic when you get down to it.

"I'm sorry, sir, but your flight is for *next* Sunday," the counter attendant said. "There is nothing available today."

I vomited.

A Latino came and cleaned up my mess. The frantic attendant typed through the computer and found an emergency seat for me out of Burlington to Los Angeles with a change in Chicago.

My baby girl came in at four pounds and I got there to cut the umbilical cord. She was small but strong, and after the second night we were able to go home.

As my girls took a nap, I shaved my whiskers and washed away the smell of puke and cigarettes. Then I filed my story about the Green Party candidate for governor of Vermont, who pranced around

town dressed as Ethan Allen, the eighteenth-century American patriot. His platform was a unique one I thought. It tapped into a smoldering populist anger: screw the federal government and the state police and the big banks. Vermont should secede from the United States.

Looking back on it now, in light of the Tea Party phenomenon, General Allen was ahead of his time. The guy made me laugh anyway, posing for my video camera with a horse he couldn't ride, getting dragged through the mud and dung of the paddock. I smiled at the thought of him and hit "send."

The next day I got an e-mail response from my editor in Manhattan.

"This guy is a loser," she wrote. "He doesn't say anything. What happened to the professor you were going to write about? We have to talk."

I was now writing and producing a video column called "American Album." The conceit was simple. Go across the country and find regular Americans and make stories and videos about them using their language and point of view and post it on the Internet. The work was popular with readers but not with the editor. And at the *Times*, it is not the reader who matters so much.

The editor called the farmers and hunters and drive-through attendants and factory workers I wrote about losers. Say the word slowly enough and it sounds like you're spitting.

Losers.

Losers. That was 80 percent of the country, and the new globalized economic structure was cranking out more. I could see it in my travels. I could see it when I went home to Detroit for the holidays. Hell, I could see it in the box stores on Sunset Boulevard and the FOR SALE signs in the Los Angeles foothills. Walmart was crowded and factories were empty. This was 2007 and people were scared. It felt like the warm mundane bliss of house-rich America was slowly unraveling. I could see it like an oncoming storm. In New York City you could see it too if you bothered to venture above Ninety-sixth Street. We were crumbling under the weight of our own abundance.

I grew bored with the intellectual mud wrestling and the oblique putdowns. Losers. I quit the *Times*.

I also grew bored with Los Angeles. I no longer belonged since I was no longer a writer. I had become a stay-at-home dad, isolated in my Hollywood bungalow with a howling baby and dirty diapers.

I realized how cut-off and disconnected we were. We had to cross two major boulevards just to find a park. We had no family out there. We barely knew the neighbors.

Los Angeles may have the weather, but we were isolated in the rush-hour traffic that seemed to run from dawn till dawn. I had no desire to raise an only child in the City of Angels. I was convinced she would grow into a self-centered little devil, walking the sidewalks of Melrose Avenue at too early an age, wearing too much blue mascara and a halter top, showing off her undeveloped breasts.

I wrote about it for a glamour magazine. Big Shot Quits the Big Time, Sits Home with a Baby and Feels Sorry for Himself.

The governor won't call anymore. Neither will the old colleagues. There will be no more Hollywood parties. No expense account. No action. It will be just you and the kid. And the kid will have no idea how good you were. And worse, in the mania of your empty house . . . when the afternoon sun is bright and debilitating and that old deadline time, that hour of adrenaline, is upon you, right about then you will wonder whether you were really any good at all. You will find yourself staring into a dirty diaper as though it were tea leaves, trying to augur some story about the failings of the last immigration bill.

None of the old colleagues did call. But a letter arrived at my door in mid-November, a few weeks after the story ran. It was from Governor Schwarzenegger, whom I'd met on the campaign trail, the postage paid by the taxpayers of the Golden State, who were drowning in a sea of red ink.

He had read the lines for what they were: a rambling confession of self-doubt. And if there was one thing Schwarzenegger did not possess, it was self-doubt.

"I know you got all kinds of advice from friends, from Oprah-like wisdom to complete ignorance so I don't have anything to add to that," he wrote. "Just know that what you're doing will be more fulfilling than any of your wild adventures—in fact, it might be your wildest yet—and any father would die to have the life you have."

He told me in essence to follow my gut, do what I thought was right for myself and my family and go snatch life by the throat.

He closed with this: "If you ever start to feel unimportant, you're wrong. But you can always relive the glory days, tell people about your buddy who can lift you up with a finger and runs the biggest state in the world, or give me a call. I'd love to hear about your new assignment."

Far be it from me to take life advice from a guy who starred in *Kindergarten Cop*, but Schwarzenegger only confirmed what I had already known. It was time to go home.

Part of it was for my daughter. Back in Detroit, there were grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins. There was a culture. A family.

Part of it was for me. I felt like wood sitting there at four o'clock in the Los Angeles afternoon, with nothing to do and no one to talk with but the Armenian next door who could barely speak English.

In the meantime, the wheels were starting to fall off the American party bus, even in Los Angeles. When I first arrived, the average house would sell in less than a week. Now it was six months if it was a day.

Circling back to Detroit was instinct, like a salmon needing to swim upstream because he is genetically encoded to do so. Detroit might be the epicenter, a funhouse mirror and future projection of America. An incredibly depressed city in its death swoon.

But it also could be a Candy Land from a reporter's perspective. Decay. Mile after mile of rotten buildings, murder, leftover people. One fucking depressing, dysfunctional big glowing ball of color. One unbelievable story after another.

Why not admit it? I am a reporter. A leech. A merchant of misery. Bad things are good for us reporters. We are body collectors of sorts. To tell the truth, it is amusing to be a correspondent, the guy who drops in with his parachute, proclaims to know everything, makes outrageous proclamations, types it up, gets drunk in the hotel lounge, folds up his parachute, packs up his hangover and heads to the next spot of human misery.

I'd been everywhere in my decade for the *Times*, looking for the weird. I'm in the weird business. In Detroit, I guessed, I wouldn't have to go looking hard for weird. Weird would find me. I'd treat it like the parachute correspondent, get my nails dirty for a year or two, let my mother hug the kid and then move on.

In the weeks and months that followed, I pitched all the big media outlets from my home in L.A. How about Detroit, I asked? Detroit is a good story. *The story*. A train wreck.

No thanks, they told me. Detroit was nothing. Besides, the newspaper and magazine businesses were crumbling and the last thing any executive editor was willing to do was spend the money to open a boutique bureau in Dead City.

Finally, I swallowed my big-shot pride and called the *Detroit News*. A paper so broke, it didn't even put out a Sunday edition anymore. Surprisingly, they had an opening. Come do what you do, they told me. Chronicle the decline of the Great Industrial American City.

I accepted the offer. And I made myself a promise. I'd build a castle of words so high on the bank of the Detroit River that they couldn't help but see it from Times Square.

* * *

The day I began work at the *News* in March 2008, half the lights in the newsroom were off. I was told half jokingly that it was an effort to save on the electricity bill. I was shown to my desk, where I was greeted by a broken chair, a broken phone and a large stain on the carpet that reminded me of one of those old chalk outlines at a homicide scene. The computer would not boot up. The four cubicles that surrounded mine were empty, the papers and pens from the last occupants still there. Like the *Times*' newsroom, the place was as quiet as a meat locker, but there was no doubt, this place was in a lower ring of hell.

A loop of the thirty-eight-year-old Kilpatrick—who fancied himself something of a player and preferred white homburgs and diamond earrings—was playing over and over on a row of television sets embedded in the wall above the editors' desks. Speculation was rampant that the prosecutor was going to file charges against the mayor any day now for his alleged perjury, among other things.

The television images of Kilpatrick were dark and murky since the sets were failing from continual use and the company was too broke to replace them. The screens were doing to the mayor what *Time* magazine editors did to O. J. Simpson—making him appear darker and more sinister.

I got the feeling then that those TVs were bellwethers, canaries in a coal mine. Once they went black, the final grains of sand in the 135-year-old *Detroit News* would run out.

The television reports intimated that the mayor ordered the killing of the stripper Strawberry because of what she knew about the party and the powerful men who attended.

And Kilpatrick was crumbling under the pressure. During his State of the City speech the evening before, he had taken a bizarre detour from his script, ripping the president of the city council as a “step ‘n’ fetchit” and liberally dropping the “N” bomb, saying he was getting threats and hate mail—ostensibly from the crackers out in the suburbs.

In the best of times, the out-of-town news coverage of Detroit is never very good. There was once a story about a murderer who had to go to Toledo to turn himself in because the Detroit cops wouldn't pay attention to him. *Forbes* had recently named the Motor City the most miserable town in America. But this guy Kilpatrick was taking it to a whole new level. Strippers? Murders? It was a reporter's dream. Suddenly I didn't mind the busted chair so much.

Did the mayor really kill a call girl? I asked the reporters around me. I was told the rumor was five years old but had taken on new life as the central plot in the text-message scandal of the incredible shrinking mayor.

I needed a home run. A calling card. A sizzler that announced: CHARLIE IS HERE.

A murdered stripper on an ordered hit from city hall would fit the bill!

I called a detective I knew.

THIS AIN'T HOLLYWOOD

MIKE CARLISLE WAS considered one of the finest homicide detectives in a place perpetually battling for the title of Murder Capital USA.

He solved well over half his cases in a city with more than eleven thousand unsolved homicides dating back to 1960. Carlisle prided himself on earning his money, even though generally nobody gives a shit about dead prostitutes and dope dealers.

I'd met him a few years earlier while I was in Detroit on assignment for the *Times*. He appealed to me right away: his perpetual cigarette and his cotton-field vocabulary, his workingman suits and the white mustache. He looked and thought like a murder dick should, it seemed to me. He kept an odd collection of photographs in his top desk drawer. A mix of wedding pictures, vacation shots and crime-scene snaps of naked hookers laid out starfish style.

Carlisle answered the phone.

"How's it going, Mike?" I said.

"How's it going? This department is a fucked-up shit hole, Charlie. Nine months to retirement and I'm outta here."

"Nothing's changed, huh?"

"Not a goddamned thing."

I asked if he knew anything about this Strawberry Greene case.

"Yeah, I know something about it," he said. "They've reopened her investigation since numb-nut got caught texting with his cock, and I'm the asshole whose desk it landed on. It's three binders thick."

"You got that case? No shit?"

"No shit. What are you doing back in town?"

I explained it. He laughed. "That's the dumbest decision I've heard in quite some while. Welcome home, I guess."

"Don't rub it in," I said, staring at the coffee stain at my feet.

I asked if I could see the files.

* * *

He brought them the next morning to a diner on Woodward, the main thoroughfare from the city out to the suburbs. We met just north of the city limits, where I had recently bought a house. The fact was, I couldn't afford to live in the ghetto. I loved Detroit, but now that I had a daughter, I wasn't going to live there. Not with the corruption and high taxes and lack of ambulances. So I cast my lot about a mile outside the city proper.

Carlisle sat in a corner, near the front, in a cloud of smoke. You could still smoke in the restaurants in Michigan. He was drinking black coffee.

We made small talk and then ordered. He got oatmeal. Fucking oatmeal and cigarettes. How precious.

"This case ain't shit," Carlisle whispered, looking at the whelp of a waiter who was trying to steal in on the conversation. "It's a dope beef gone wrong. A working girl caught in the middle."

"Is that right?"

“Yeah, but on the other hand, you’re fucking with some bad people here. From the mayor on down. This whole town is just a worm-infested shit pile, Charlie. I mean, there are good people, but they get lost in the incompetence. It’s a dead city. And anybody says any different doesn’t know what the fuck he’s talking about.”

He was smoking like wet wool. “You know, I took this job because I thought I could make a difference. Because I really thought I could be some help.” He pushed the files toward me. “Here, you’ve got forty minutes.”

I began scribbling in my notebook.

He was silent for a few minutes before launching into a monologue about his grandson’s new Easter suit. I played along for as long as I could, absently nodding my head while trying to decipher the police reports.

“Mike,” I finally said, looking up from the case file. “I’ve got forty fucking minutes here. Please.” Carlisle stuffed a cigarette in it.

* * *

The murder of Tamara “Strawberry” Greene had become the stuff of Detroit legend, a whodunit of sex and politics and power. The most incredible plot was a simple one: she is said to have danced at a party at the mayor’s mansion and was executed on the orders of Kilpatrick because she knew the names and proclivities of the powerful attendees.

She died in a hail of bullets in a drive-by shooting nearly a year later, the story went: slumped over her steering wheel, her eyeglasses broken, the car still in drive, creeping down the street. Her boyfriend—a dope dealer—survived.

* * *

It was just another murder in a city with too many of them, until the original homicide detective filed a lawsuit after being removed from the case. He claimed that it was Detroit police officers who killed her at the behest of city hall.

But nothing in the case files suggested anything like that. She was not shot eighteen times in a drive-by as that detective claimed; she was struck three times.

The medical examiner’s report revealed she died with two black eyes—giving credence to statements given by another stripper that Strawberry was beaten at a party two weeks before her death—the object of affection between two feuding dope dealers.

Then there was the recollection of a drug kingpin doing time in federal prison. Being a kingpin, a dope-related hits on the city’s east side had to be cleared through him. So a few weeks after Strawberry’s murder, one of the dope dealers came to explain that he was actually trying to shoot her boyfriend.

“Old girl just got in the way,” the dope dealer told the kingpin, according to the reports.

* * *

Looking at the case file was like looking at the high school yearbook of my sister, Nicole. A beautiful woman tied up in an ugly life. Strawberry oozed sex. And she used it. She teased dangerous men, manipulated them and stole from them. And in the end she paid with her life. A Good Time Girl Who Met a Bad End in the Streets of Detroit.

Strawberry.

Nicole.

A simple book. Made in Detroit.

“How many girls like this die in the city?” I said, looking up at Carlisle.

“Too many,” he said, through a cloud of smoke.

“My sister died like this,” I told him. “In Detroit.”

“Oh, man. I’m sorry.”

“She wasn’t garbage, you know?”

“She was somebody’s daughter,” he said sympathetically.

“Yeah, nobody cared at all. Except one cop. A guy named Snarski. I’ll never forget his name.

Snarski. He understood that everybody’s somebody to someone. He got the guy.”

“I’ll never forget his name either,” Carlisle said. “He’s the guy who trained me.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

That was Detroit. Smallest big town in the world, 140 square miles and five inches deep.

* * *

Combing through Carlisle’s notes, there was absolutely nothing I could see that placed Strawberry at the mansion, which is not to say there wasn’t a party. But nothing suggested a cop killed her beyond the first detective’s spectacular leap of logic that it had to have been a cop who murdered her since she was killed with a .40 caliber pistol, the same caliber weapon issued to Detroit police.

It was a theory that launched a thousand bar-stool conspiracies. And Detroit loves a good conspiracy. Strawberry’s murder had become the city’s grassy knoll.

I said good-bye to Carlisle and went back to the newsroom. I called that first investigator and confronted him with the facts.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and he sounded creaky and unstable, as though he’d been beaten silly with a feather pillow. He couldn’t explain the factual discrepancies but offered me this: “To be perfectly honest, it’s like an octopus’s tentacles that spread all over. In Detroit, once you see it once you connect the dots, it’s obvious.”

The only thing obvious to me was the people of Detroit had been duped by a loon. The mayor was a liar and a cheater, but he wasn’t a murderer—at least not in the case of Strawberry it seemed to me.

I was convinced that I had the answer to the mystery of the murdered stripper. And it had nothing to do with the mayor. And that’s the way I wrote it.

The story ran on the front page of the *News*. I came into the office at nine. The place was empty except for a receptionist. The light on my phone was blinking, letting me know I had a message. Maybe several. Maybe a dozen, I figured.

I threw my coat on a vacant desk next to mine, got myself a cup of coffee and sat down with a notepad to listen to them all.

There was only one. A single two-word assessment of my worldview.

“Nigger lover.”

JOY ROAD

THE TELEPHONE RANG. I didn't recognize the number on the screen. I picked it up.

It was my niece, Ashley.

"Hi, Uncle Char," she said in a gooey voice. She was stoned, I could tell. Her baby-girl tone gave away. So did the slurring. She called me Uncle Shar.

Fuck, I said to myself.

"Hey girl," I said to her. "What's going on?"

"You know how it is with me," she said pathetically. "Not much."

"Yours is a common problem."

"Yeah, that's true, but it's worse when you're a fuckup like me."

This was the place where she expected me to provide her the opening; the place where I was to as with real sympathy and concern: "What's wrong?"

Then, according to the script, she would bombard me with her self-pity. That would give way to her self-loathing, which would end with her hitting me.

I didn't bite. I let the effort strangle in silence.

"I haven't been to your new house yet," she said finally, her voice crackling honeycomb. "I haven't even talked to you. You've been home a month now."

"Yeah, well . . . Sorry about that. Unpacking boxes and trying to get some stories in the newspaper. I don't have much time for anything else, I guess."

"How about if I come over and help you? I could watch the baby."

I ran it through my mind: If I let her over, she would stay for a week. She would watch TV, smoke all my cigarettes. Eventually, sick of looking at her and the kid howling with a diaper full of shit, I would bawl her out, giving her the pat lecture about making something of her life.

Then she would make off with my car and my liquor cabinet.

Life in Detroit had gotten tough.

Everyone was broke and if they weren't out of work, they were half out of work. One of my brothers pulled his tooth out with a pair of pliers because he had no dental insurance and was too proud to ask for the loan.

And then there was my niece. I loved her—I loved her hard—but I didn't trust her. Everybody in America has young people like that.

"We'll work out a day and then you can come over."

"You'll have to pick me up. My boyfriend totaled my car." She laughed. "He was wasted. What a loser."

Her casual, spiritless laughter worried me. Just like her mother.

* * *

My sister, my three brothers and I grew up on Joy Road, the dividing line between Livonia and Westland—two working-class suburbs about three miles west of the Detroit city limits. Our house was an equal distance from the shopping mall and the Ford plant, somewhere between the Jeffries Freeway and the dead Rouge River.

The north side of Livonia—on the other side of the freeway—was well-to-do and WASPy. Our

side was populated by working-class Italians, Scots-Irish, Arabs, a few blacks and a sprinkling of Vietnamese. The sort of place where people drive American cars, not German.

It was not a ghetto by any means. Those are just the gradations of middle-class America unknown and unseen by a kid growing in its belly. Ours was a good home. A mother who wrapped her arms around us at night. Dinner on the table at six. We were taught the difference between the salad and dinner forks. We had a wall of books and some good friends. The schools, funded by the taxes from the auto plant, were some of the very best public schools in the state of Michigan. That's why my mother and stepfather chose to move here from Gary, Indiana.

But Joy Road wasn't always so joyful. Sometimes, even with all the love and the best intentions in the world, things get balled up. What happened in the 1970s and early '80s had never happened before in American life. Drugs were a scourge. You couldn't sit on the school bus without a mullet-topped greaser trying to push a bag of PCP on you. And this was seventh grade.

Divorce was another thing. Men like my stepfather were packing their bags, walking out the door and never looking back. The kids were left to fend for themselves as Mom—God bless the old girl—went off to earn the bread. Suddenly, the six o'clock dinners with Cronkite stopped.

As a consequence, I knew a lot of children who caved in to the greaser on the school bus. My siblings were among them. So were the other kids who hung around our house and ditched school while our mother was working in the flower shop on Detroit's east side. I remember a runaway name Doc who lived in his car outside our house, sleeping on Joy Road and waiting for crumbs from our table—and there were always crumbs at my mother's table. My sister's friend Carrie came to live with us for a while. It was fine with her mother, one less mouth to feed. It was fine with my mother too. And it was fine with me. She was gorgeous. And then one day, she simply evaporated. Gone. I wouldn't see her for decades. Not until my sister's funeral.

Nobody bothered to get educated. My sister and brothers and Carrie and Doc and too many others dropped out of high school, yet nobody went to work in the automobile plants. You suspected the work was too hard and the union made the work too hard to get. Two of our neighbors' fathers worked at the leviathan Ford River Rouge complex in Dearborn, on the western city limits of Detroit. It must have been terrible in there. They both killed themselves with a rope. Who knows?

Still, we had all gotten a taste of it, summer jobs sweeping the floor or working the press. It was horrible. The yellow lights, the stink of grease and oil and acid. The unblinking time clock. You walked in the door and the first thing you're trying to figure out is how to get out. If you don't know that about factory work, you don't know anything.

What our generation failed to learn was the nobility of work. An honest day's labor. The worthiness of the man in the white socks who would pull out a picture of his grandkids from his wallet. For us, the factory would never do. And turning away from our birthright—our grandfather in the white socks—is the thing that ruined us.

But even so, a high school dropout could count on the factory or the tool-and-die shops or the gas stations if he needed them. The assembly line would live forever, we thought. But like Doc sleeping out on Joy—named after Henry Joy, the president of the now-defunct Packard Motors—we thought we could live off the crumbs. Instead of working, we figured we could be hustlers and salesmen and gamblers and partiers. Work was for suckers. If anybody had told us such a thing existed, we probably would have tried to become New York bankers and stockbrokers. And I have no doubt we would have been good at it too.

Work versus The Hustle. That was the internal conflict on Joy Road, USA. My mother gave us the work ethic. My stepfather taught us that the best dollar was an easy dollar.

Predictably, the marriage didn't hold up. How could it, with the wife grinding out an honest living while the mackdaddy husband cavorted around in a green Lincoln Continental with a loaded .22 in the

glove box, playing poker until all hours of the morning?

~~I loved the man and I hated him. He read voraciously and he gave me an affection for books.~~ Without that, who can tell? But he also bred in me an antipathy to authority. He possessed a volcanic temper. The marriage ended when I was about fourteen, after he opened my head with a large oak spool my mother used as a candle holder. I ran and hid in the weeds on the other side of the street, blood dried on my face, looking at the house on Joy Road, hating the place. Hating it so bad I wanted to go away forever. I remember sitting there in that weedy lot thinking if I ever made \$50,000 I'd be a rich man. I'd be a rich man and I could take my mother and brothers and sister away and we'd never have to come back here again.

But my sister, she ran away young. First at fourteen and permanently by seventeen. While she turned to the streets, I turned toward the classroom and the sporting field and my friends. I owed my mother that much.

Our mother, an elegant woman, militantly loyal and rabidly Catholic, worked hard in her flower shop on the city's east side—she wore herself down to such a nub. But she was still there at the sporting events, standing on the thirty-yard line in her raccoon coat teaching a young angry man the meaning of family.

When her children got lost, she went looking for them.

My brother Jimmy got lost in the blizzard of the eighties crack cocaine epidemic. He was sixteen and working and living in a crack den in Brightmoor—a notoriously rough section in northwestern Detroit. His boss was a black dude named Death Cat, the son of a successful dry cleaner. Jimmy's job was to branch out the business to the white suburban clientele, where the real money was.

My mother got wind of where he was working and drove over there. She knocked on the side door of the crack house. It was early evening and business was at full pace. She stood at the door shouting that she wanted her boy returned and if she didn't get him, she was going to call the cops.

"Yo, get that crazy bitch outta here," Death Cat ordered my brother.

My brother came to the door.

"Ma, what are you doing here?" he said, stepping out.

"Jimmy, your sister's lost out here somewhere and I'm not going to lose you both."

"Ma, are you fucking crazy? These guys'll kill you."

"Jimmy," she said with streaming eyes. "I work too damn hard to lose you kids to this city. I want you home with me now."

Wild-eyed crack heads continued to file in and out, with this little Rockwell scene playing out near the screen door.

"Okay, okay, Ma. Just go. I'll call you in a day or two," my brother remembered saying.

A week later, someone made the call for him, when rival drug boys strafed his Buick with semiautomatic gunfire. One bullet entered into the windshield at chest level and by the divinity of physics ricocheted downward and lodged in the dashboard.

That's when Jimmy, thankfully, came home.

Nicole didn't, except occasionally to steal furniture or clean herself up. And that was always a curious thing. No matter what outrage she committed, my sister was always welcomed in my mother's home on Joy Road. It was her daughter's home too, and always would be. That's what love is.

When she was clean, my sister's career consisted mostly of serving men eggs and bacon. And when she was sober, Nicky was one of the most magnetic women you could find. Handsomely built with an oval face, she had no trouble finding wholesome company.

But my sister could never make it stick. In 1986, she became a mother. Incapable of nursing both a child and a drug habit, she abandoned her daughter, Ashley, to my mother and my mother's new husband before the baby could even crawl.

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