

'SHELTER'

By Jim Reyland

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Cast of Characters

Jimmy Gray:

Bunhead's best friend, blind and homeless his thirty-three years, he's clever in the ways of the streets and quick with plenty of back talk. His friends include Jack Daniels. He is immensely loyal and kind of heart.

Scott Carter:

Skipper Carter's little brother, a late twenties Vanderbilt medical student, self-absorbed from a wealthy background, interested in many things with definite ideas about others.

Bunhead (David):

A mid forties black man, former Pro football player who gave up and became homeless when his wife and children were killed by a drunk driver; he is quiet and wise and not easily excited. His character is good and true but when pushed he's explosive.

Skipper Carter:

Scott's older brother in his thirties, uncomfortable with his physical self, a big boy who has trouble with basic motor skills and simple things like sitting still. His ticks are apparent and broad, a bad boy looking for peace.

Heather Spain:

Heather is Skipper's early twenties wife, beautiful with the full understanding of how that can benefit her. She is a girl addicted to dangerous men, like a moth to a flame.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE:

It's Christmas time outside the St. Albert Hall Shelter in Nashville, Tennessee.

AT RISING:

BUNHEAD, JIMMY and GIMPY are sitting on the stoop. It's cold; they are wrapped up and huddled together.

JIMMY

It's colder than a well digger's ass!

GIMPY

(Excited)

Bunhead, if you only had three minutes for a shower and you smelled as bad as you could ever smell but you also had to go real bad, what would you do first?

BUNHEAD

Take a shower, and do my business in the shower.

GIMPY

Jimmy. If somebody gave you money or a job to make some money, but you could only have one, which one would you take?

JIMMY

(Standing)

Whichever one gets me out of this cold Gimpy! How come we're still outside? How come we aren't inside where it's warm?

BUNHEAD

The shelter is locked.

JIMMY

How long are we going to wait?

BUNHEAD

Till Santa Claus gets here with the key.

JIMMY

Being late is disrespectful, even for Santa Claus.

BUNHEAD

You go where I go and I'm staying here for the man to come and open the door.

JIMMY sits and softens his tone.

GIMPY

It's all right; we've been colder.

JIMMY

I'm damn tired now but I've been dog-tired before.

BUNHEAD

I could eat but I'm not starving.

JIMMY

When I was a younger man, I'd stand all night in the freezing rain. I'd get so tired I started seeing things.

(Pause)

Stood by a locked door close to nine hours once, and just as the morning was coming up, the door opened.

BUNHEAD

It must have been time for church.

GIMPY

(Smiling)

It was time for church!

JIMMY

And there he was; it was a miracle.

GIMPY

What did he look like?

JIMMY

Who?

GIMPY

Jesus?

JIMMY

How should I know? Short and fat not a hair on his head, he said, "What are you doing here?"

GIMPY

What did you say?

JIMMY

I said, "I'm cold and tired and I'm hungry."

GIMPY

Then what did Jesus say?

JIMMY

Well I don't know, but the man at the door said come inside.

GIMPY

I knew it; I knew he'd say that. When you got inside did you get warm first or eat something or go right to sleep?

BUNHEAD

After nine hours I'd sleep, then eat, get warm along the way.

GIMPY

I'd eat, then hold my food real tight so nobody could get it and when I woke up I'd take another bite, then I'd go back to sleep. What did you do first Jimmy?

JIMMY

First I told him how much I appreciated him opening that door. Then he gave me a sleeping bag and I lay on the floor, used the bottom of the stairs for a pillow, and slept for an hour. When I woke up there was hot coffee and a bag of food by my head.

BUNHEAD

I love that free continental breakfast.

GIMPY

What else did Jesus do?

JIMMY

That was enough. Then somebody came and told me I'd have to

get up and go back outside. They didn't want me to scare the church people.

BUNHEAD

Oh yeah, they shouldn't have to see that. But they'll give you a whole backpack full of clothes at the drop of a hat.

GIMPY

And hand you a Christmas pile of food too.

BUNHEAD

So much food you have to throw away some of your new clothes just to carry it all.

JIMMY

I stood at that door many times before that, but this was the first time that it ever opened. I was grateful.

JIMMY stands leaning on his cane.

JIMMY

Bunhead, how we doing with opening this door? I'd be mighty grateful if someone would come and open this door.

BUNHEAD

Jesus ain't here yet.

JIMMY

Well you tell him I'm sorry I missed him but I'm really cold now and if he's going to be much longer I'm going downtown.

BUNHEAD

You can't go down there.

JIMMY

Watch me!

BUNHEAD

You look like shit. You're not dressed to go downtown.

(Pause)

Didn't your momma ever tell you that you have to get dressed up if you want to go downtown?

JIMMY

I just want out of this cold man. I'm not going dancing.

GIMPY

I want to go dancing.

BUNHEAD

Little girl, you're the only one of us got any beauty left.

GIMPY

That's because I didn't take my medicine.

JIMMY

Hey, it was my idea to go dancing.

BUNHEAD

Shut up.

GIMPY gets up and turns on a small radio, then grabs JIMMY to dance.

GIMPY

I'll lead Jimmy you follow.

JIMMY

Gimpy you got a mean smell on you baby.

GIMPY

Come on Bun, you dance too. I bet you're a good dancer.

GIMPY reaches for BUNHEAD who is reticent but gets up and wraps them with his big arms and sways.

Come on. That's it. See there.

(Pause)

We'll be safe and warm, if we stay together.

JIMMY, BUNHEAD and GIMPY hold each other and shuffle their feet as music plays. Skipper enters with a beer.

SKIPPER

Well, what do we have here?

BUNHEAD, JIMMY and GIMPY all stop, GIMPY turns toward SKIPPER.

GIMPY

Would you like to dance with us Mr.?

SKIPPER

Hell no! You keep that ugly shit over there.

GIMPY

It's all right; you'll stay warm till the door opens.

SKIPPER

The door's locked? Scott, you're late my brother!

(To Gimpy)

What, you think I'm one of you?

SKIPPER charges GIMPY.

Get your hideous shit away from me!

JIMMY covers up. BUNHEAD steps in front of GIMPY lunging at SKIPPER who steps aside.

You don't know what you're fucking with man.

BUNHEAD hits the ground, injuring his hand.

I ain't looking at you no more. You're messing with my vista! And take a damn bath! Go on move!

BUNHEAD, JIMMY and GIMPY exit right, SKIPPER tosses his beer can at them then he exits left. GIMPY re-enters to retrieve her radio; she looks disoriented and exits left. Scott enters wearing a Santa hat, unlocks the front door and lights come up on a multi-purpose room; a table is center with chairs and a basketball hoop. Scott drops his books on the desk and begins to study. A knock at the door breaks his concentration. SCOTT answers the door.

SCOTT

Mrs. Ebilhar, yes this is where we keep the homeless people. No they can't get out. Bran muffins, thank you.

Excuse me but there are only six here? Good idea Mrs. Ebilhar, I'll use them as prizes.

SCOTT sits back down and begins to study when his cell phone rings. SCOTT answers it.

I'd be better if the other innkeeper wasn't faking it. Yeah you're sick. Boner I need those notes, the final is tomorrow. Why did you do that? What did he want?

JIMMY enters wearing a Princeton sweatshirt. BUNHEAD enters behind him and sits. BUNHEAD'S hand is rapped in a handkerchief; he hangs his head. JIMMY bangs around the room then extends his hand to no one.

JIMMY

Gimpy, Bunhead, what's in the room?

(Pause to listen)

This is a shelter isn't it? We didn't wander into no Klan rally or nothing? My name is Jimmy Gray. Nice to meet you, wherever you are.

SCOTT

I'm Scott Carter. Here let me help you.

SCOTT helps JIMMY to the bed.

JIMMY

A blind man goes where you lead him; that's a big responsibility.

SCOTT

I bet you're hungry from working all day?

JIMMY

Work or not a man's got to eat; it's the law.

(Pause)

Something does smell mighty good.

SCOTT

I don't think it's you.

JIMMY

A sense of humor is nice but big hairy rats, they're not!
You got rats in here?

SCOTT

What's wrong with your pal there?

JIMMY

Which one?

SCOTT

The big quiet one...

JIMMY

That's Bunhead; I don't think he likes you.

SCOTT

How do you know?

JIMMY

If he liked you, he'd tell you.

SCOTT

Do you think he'd mind if I took a look at his hand?

JIMMY

Are you a doctor?

SCOTT

I'm a medical student.

SCOTT looks at BUNHEAD'S hand.

I won't hurt you. I messed up my hand once too, fighting
with my older brother.

BUNHEAD

Ahhhhhh!

SCOTT

It's OK. Do you have any family? Well they're not all they're
cracked up to be. He doesn't say much does he?

JIMMY

Like I said, he'll tell you.

SCOTT

How did you get here tonight Mr. Gray?

JIMMY

Gimpy and Bunhead brought me. How did you get here?

SCOTT

I walked.

JIMMY

Why?

SCOTT

Well, because volunteers and college students staff this shelter for extra credit.

JIMMY

Which one are you?

SCOTT

I'm extra credit. Vanderbilt requires a certain number of service hours before you can graduate.

JIMMY fixes himself and stands proudly.

JIMMY

Vanderbilt, no kidding, I'm a Princeton man myself!

SCOTT re-raps BUNHEAD'S hand.

SCOTT

He's got a pretty bad laceration; maybe a broken bone, I can't tell without an x-ray. So what happened to your friend?

JIMMY

He doesn't like it when you talk bout him like he's not here.

(Pause)

Out on the street when we run into the bad shit, I can curl up into a little ball; the bad kind won't mess with a blind man. But then I hear the crying and the cussing flying over my head like a storm and I know somebody's got hurt. And I'm wondering if Bunhead, he's not Bundehead. But then as quick as it starts here comes a hand down on my shoulder right below that bone that's soft and strong. It's Bun, and everything is all right. Only sometimes he's not, you understand that?

SCOTT

(To Bunhead)

These will help with the pain but you should see a real doctor, get an x-ray, OK?

JIMMY

You hear that Gimpy, Bun's going to get his picture taken. Gimpy! Say something girl.

SCOTT

There's nobody else here, just you and me and Bunhead.

JIMMY

Gimpy!

SCOTT

No Gimpy.

JIMMY

What time is it?

SCOTT

It's after eight.

JIMMY

Gimpy if you're hiding, I'll kick your stinky ass!

SCOTT

Listen, I'm not trying to remove myself from your life situation but I have a final exam tomorrow that I really need to study for. So when everybody gets here, if we can start.

JIMMY

(Interrupts)

Maybe nobody else is coming.

SCOTT

Excuse me?

JIMMY

Maybe they all got dressed up and went downtown to the mission; they got a tuna casserole tonight. Homeless people love that shit. You got a casserole?

SCOTT

Chicken fingers . . .

JIMMY

I feel sorry for you man.

SCOTT

It says, "Expect thirty men." You mean I came all the way down here the night before a final for a blind man, a mute and a maybe?

JIMMY

In a perfect world there'd be nothing to do. Maybe they got too many of these shelters?

SCOTT

That makes no sense.

JIMMY

At Princeton we call that "Home Economics." Maybe you should advertise, "We're the best for your rest and we won't make you pray." Some of these places make you church before you can eat or shower or piss. I love the Lord but when I got to piss, I know he understands.

SCOTT

(To Bunhead)

Would you like something to eat? I've got chicken and some muffins. Maybe something else in the back, I could look if you want? It might help you feel better.

BUNHEAD ignores SCOTT who steps up and reads his speech.

Good evening, I'm Scott and I'll be your Innkeeper tonight.

JIMMY

We got a great program lined up for you.

SCOTT

Dinner will be served at the dining table.

JIMMY

And you'll be responsible for your own mess, yada, yada, yada.

SCOTT

If you have any questions ask Mr. Gray.

JIMMY

Thank you and enjoy your stay here at St. Albert's Hall.

SCOTT

I need a volunteer to say grace.

JIMMY raises a hand like a school kid.

Jimmy.

JIMMY

Thank you. Take off your damn hats! Lord, this is Jimmy. Please watch over the folks that come to this shelter tonight, we aren't many but we are thankful. And whatever you got for us tomorrow I know it will be just fine. Amen.

SCOTT

Here, have a bran muffin. Go ahead; take two.

JIMMY

I appreciate you. Gooooood, you make this at your house?

SCOTT

No.

JIMMY

You got a house?

SCOTT

Yes.

JIMMY

You got a bathtub in that house? Where did you say you lived again?

SCOTT

I live, really far from here.

JIMMY

Tip me up some more water; thank you brother. So you ever been to a homeless shelter before?

SCOTT

Yeah.

JIMMY

It's nice isn't it?

SCOTT

I guess that depends on your point of view. When I was ten my mom and my older brother, we lived in a shelter for a while after my dad left.

JIMMY

The last stop fore the bottom; how long you live there?

SCOTT

Six months, eventually they found my mom a job at an aluminum processing plant.

JIMMY

Things were looking up.

SCOTT

Yeah, my mother married the boss. We took a limo from Boudreaux to Belle Meade.

JIMMY

You went from the downtrodden to the rose garden, from the shit house to the big house just like that?

SCOTT

Just like that.

JIMMY

From a soup line to prime time, from the back of the bus to an unlimited trust.

SCOTT

Are you done?

JIMMY

Don't one of us make it to the big time everyday!

SCOTT

I'm sorry but I'm not one of you.

JIMMY

Would you like to be?

SCOTT

No. Excuse me. Cardiac conductions, circulation of blood, kidney function, and filtration in the glomeruli, loop of Henle.

JIMMY

Loop a what?

SCOTT

Loop of Henle; you wouldn't understand. Look, I've got a big test tomorrow so I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't understand quietly.

JIMMY

You're a white man aren't you?

SCOTT

Why do you say that?

JIMMY

You don't sound nothing like Bunhead and me with all that Henle shit.

SCOTT

But you're not African American.

JIMMY

Africa, America, East LA it don't matter, black is black! Bunhead and me are soul brothers; any damn fool can see that. You think you know me? Because you don't know me, you don't understand me. I have defeated all a hard, never seeing shit; never having shit life did rain down on upon me! And I stand here today a huge, proud, black man!

SCOTT

I suppose there's nobody more colorblind than a blind man.

JIMMY

Did you say a colored blind man is a colorblind man? Is that what you said? Shit, you done pushed the cripple too far! Bunhead give me the piece. I said give me the goddamn piece!

BUNHEAD gives JIMMY a harmonica. JIMMY plays an awful tune.

If I'm not black then how come I can play these here blues on this here harmonica? I'm sweating coal dust baby. You can't play what you ain't been. I'm as sad as Piano Red or Blind Boy Fuller, Sonny Terry they all got the blues.

SCOTT

How about Junior Wells, Buddy Guy or maybe James Cotton?

JIMMY

Now he's pretending to know. Quick, who's the greatest harmonica player of all time?

SCOTT

That would be Little Walter.

JIMMY

Shit, Little Walter Jacobs was the greatest harmonica player of all time. What the hell is wrong with you?

SCOTT

Readers are leaders, brother.

JIMMY

What about Robert Johnson?

SCOTT

He played the blues like the devil was holding his hand.

JIMMY

That devil put fire in his fingers and brimstone in his throat and if you touched him you could feel all that talent running through him like heat. Robert Johnson rode the long black train.

SCOTT

"Blues falling down like hail".

JIMMY

"Hell hound on my trail". What about Hound Dog Taylor?

SCOTT

Legend has it he had six fingers on his fretting hand.

SCOTT bounces a basketball JIMMY stops.

JIMMY

Now that isn't fair. Give me the ball man. Everybody knows black people are good at basketball.

SCOTT

(To Bunhead)

Your friend likes to put people in little boxes. He doesn't feel it from the outside in does he brother?

JIMMY

Jews are tight, Catholic girls are easy and all them fatties eat too much. Point me at the basket man. Old people smell too.

JIMMY shoots and misses the backboard.

SCOTT

Nice shot.

JIMMY

I told you I could play man. Go get it.

SCOTT

You could rap like me, run like you and throw up enough bricks to build a house and still be black.

JIMMY

Blondes have more fun and doctors have a God complex.

SCOTT

You could discover the cure for cancer, be President of the United States and be black, and a woman.

JIMMY

There you go brainiac, pushing us minorities around with your education.

SCOTT

Just because you're a minority doesn't mean you don't have an education and that you can't defend yourself with it.

JIMMY

I'm smart enough to stay alive. I got my own corner, a cardboard sign with writing on both sides. One day I got HIV. The next day I got Agent Orange. I get up in the morning and go to work.

SCOTT

I bet blind works real well?

JIMMY

Homeless don't mean hopeless. Some of us try, some can't and some won't.

BUNHEAD rubs his arms with a liquid.

SCOTT

But you all look the same inside that little box.

JIMMY

That's because you don't know what you're looking at.

SCOTT

I don't trust what I'm looking at.

JIMMY

You got a problem with me man?

SCOTT

Here's my problem. I was up in New York a few weeks ago and I met a woman on the street.

JIMMY

We all got needs.

SCOTT

She had three kids with her and she wants me to call her landlord from the pay phone and convince him to let her back into her apartment. So I end up talking to this guy with an accent you could cut with a knife and he says no. After investing twenty minutes in this woman and her family, late for my plane I reach into my pocket for all the cash I had, thirty-six bucks. I sat on the subway thinking if I went back to that same corner the next day would that lady be there; the same pay phone; same kids?

JIMMY

Naw, she'd have a whole new set of kids by then. You smell that? Bunhead is taking a bath, no bathtub in sight...

BUNHEAD enters the bathroom.

The rubbing alcohol evaporates the stink. Bunhead cares about other people, always has, even when he was a famous athletic superstar.

SCOTT

Is that true?

JIMMY

Only bathtub we got is the river and Bun don't like the river.

SCOTT

No, the Bunhead was a famous athlete thing?

JIMMY,

Yeah, he'd sign autographs, take pictures; hit a grand slam in the Super Bowl too.

SCOTT

He just looks mad all the time; is he pissed about his name?

JIMMY

That isn't it.

SCOTT

At first I thought he was into phrenology?

JIMMY

Is it Bunhead?

SCOTT

Phrenology is the study of human characteristics based on the shape of the skull. For example, if he had a sloped forehead a Phrenologist would determine he were a more sensitive person than someone say with a flat forehead.

JIMMY

Some people stay mad for a long time; some people just have a Bunhead. Isn't that right Bun man?

SCOTT

He went into the bathroom five minutes ago.

JIMMY

Bunhead are you mad at me? You ugly looking Bun shit head, my friend. David, that's his real name, he's quiet because he's thinking, thinking about giving up.

SCOTT

I thought he had given up. Haven't you all given up?

JIMMY

Naw, the dumb ass with a beautiful wife and kid who hangs him self in his million dollar bathroom; now that fuckers given up, but when you see somebody curled up in a doorway or asking you for a dime and you take a minute to wonder how they got there, consider they all got a story and none of them are good, but they're not swinging either.

SCOTT grabs a book and exits.

SCOTT

Excuse me; I have a date with a book.

JIMMY

I hear Miss January has some mighty fine titties!

SCOTT exits. BUNHEAD enters.

BUNHEAD

Where's that little baby doctor?

JIMMY

Damn man, it's about time you said something. I'm out here entertaining a man who doesn't know half as much as I do and you haven't said shit.

BUNHEAD

How come you're talking about me?

JIMMY

I'm not talking about you; you're not that interesting.

JIMMY tries to escape.

BUNHEAD

I'll take you down to the projects and leave you there if you don't shut up. Come here before you fall on your ass? Where's Gimpy?

JIMMY

You know how she gets going when she doesn't take her pill.

BUNHEAD

I know.

JIMMY

But she's never been this late.

BUNHEAD

I'll be back after while. I'm going down to the river to look for her.

JIMMY

I want to go too.

BUNHEAD

I don't need a blind man helping me. The river's a little bit of water that's all.

JIMMY

You'll fight a man twice your size but you're scared of a little water?

BUNHEAD

Everybody's afraid of something; I know what you're afraid of.

JIMMY

It isn't you!

SCOTT enters and follows BUNHEAD.

SCOTT

Where are you going? You can't leave. I'm the innkeeper; I'm supposed to keep you in. As your doctor I'm advising you to...

SCOTT re-enters.

It's not good when they put you in charge of two homeless guys and you lose one of them.

JIMMY

What are they going to do, fire you?

SCOTT

Can they do that?

JIMMY

Better to look for Gimpy tonight than find her dead in a box tomorrow.

SCOTT

Is that true?

JIMMY

Naw, they aren't going to waste no perfectly good box on Gimpy.

There's a knock at the door. SCOTT exits. Moments later SKIPPER enters.

Gimpy, she's always getting lost. When she was twelve her momma was dead and her daddy was so stupid he never went looking for her at the Circus they were at. So when the Circus left town, instead of becoming a Shriner, Gimpy joined up, got her a job the first day cleaning elephant cages. Then when an elephant stepped wrong and mangled her foot, Gimpy picked up the nickname and the smell she'd carry the rest of her life.

SCOTT

What are you doing here Skip?

SKIPPER

Wow, look at this place, all the comforts of home for the homeless. Makes you want to be good for nothing just for the benefits.

SCOTT

We should buy it; I hear there's big money in desperation.

JIMMY

Gimpy tried riding in one of those toy circus cars but she's a proud lady; who's there?

SKIPPER

I went by the apartment; Boner said you were over here at the last place on earth, just like old times huh Bro?

SKIPPER hands SCOTT some papers
and SCOTT reads them.

He said to give you these.

SCOTT

Jimmy this is my big brother Skipper.

JIMMY

Hello Skipper, where's Gilligan?

SKIPPER

Gilligan's dead. Don't I know you?

SCOTT

Is that why you came down here, to see an old friend?

SKIPPER

That's right, and to see my little brother about a loan.

SCOTT

What for?

SKIPPER

I'm thirsty. I'll pay you back tomorrow.

SCOTT

Another DUI and you lose your license.

SKIPPER

So I'll walk to the liquor store.

JIMMY

I have to take a leak. Will you help me Skipper?

SKIPPER

Negro please!

JIMMY

See, I told you I was black.

SKIPPER

Come on, you're earning potential is virtually unlimited Dr. Big Boy. Besides, you know where to find me.

SCOTT

Drunk in some trash can somewhere?

SKIPPER

I'm trying man. I come all the way down here to bring you your homework; don't make me beg. Come on, I'll wrestle you for it.

SCOTT is reticent; JIMMY makes chicken noises. The guys arm wrestle.

SCOTT

It's not that I don't want to help you.

SKIPPER

You don't want to help me?

SCOTT

You're not getting any better.

SKIPPER

You owe me.

SCOTT

I feel like you're slipping further away.

SKIPPER

Well how do you feel about my fist in your ear?

Angry, SKIPPER wins and gets into SCOTT'S face.

If you don't want to see the back of the better side of my nature you best get the beer money now!

SCOTT

There he is. I knew you were in there somewhere.

SKIPPER

You provoked me man!

JIMMY

Is anybody listening to the blind man?

SCOTT

It's never your fault.

SKIPPER

What does that have to do with you giving me money?

SCOTT

I don't have any.

SKIPPER

More Bullshit! I know you keep it in your books.

SKIPPER rummages through SCOTT'S books.

SCOTT

They're back at my room.

SKIPPER

I was just there! Call dick head and tell him I'm coming back.

SCOTT

Boner won't open the door for you.

SKIPPER

Why not?

SCOTT

You're an asshole when you're drunk.

SKIPPER

Ah, but I'm not drunk yet.

SCOTT

You're a sober asshole too.

JIMMY

I got to take a leak!

SCOTT

You treat people like shit. You treated Mrs. Cupper like shit.

JIMMY

Who?

SCOTT moves JIMMY to the bathroom.

SKIPPER

What do you know about that? Fuck her man!

(Just to JIMMY)

Her old man used to call me into the pantry and show me his dick. Playing grab ass with a twelve-old boy, he's going to hell.

JIMMY

Who's going to hell?

SKIPPER

Whenever I tried talking to that bitch; she just turned and walked away from me. I put the rat in her bed.

SCOTT

That was you?

JIMMY

I don't like rats.

SKIPPER

She starts screaming, running around waving her arms, it was funny; I hated her!

SCOTT

Mrs. Cupper was deaf Skip.

JIMMY

But I can hear you.

SKIPPER

That is not true.

SCOTT

The Cuppers lived with us in the shelter.

SCOTT pushes JIMMY into the bathroom.

SKIPPER

They were butt pies.

SCOTT

How old are you?

SKIPPER

Old enough to kick your ass! Now call your roommate I want the hell out of here.

SCOTT

He's not there; tonight's his library night.

SKIPPER

I don't care if he's fucking the librarian! Call him and tell him I won't hurt him.

SCOTT calls on his cell phone.

SCOTT

There's no answer.

SKIPPER

Try it again!

SCOTT

I told you he's at the library.

SKIPPER

All right, I can wait!

SCOTT

What, to waste another night in your pathetic wasted life?

SKIPPER

You're a big Momma's boy you know that?

SCOTT

There were two sons in the Carter family; you had as much chance to be one as I did.

SKIPPER

But there was only one golden boy. Mom loved you more.

SCOTT

Oh Please.

SKIPPER

She never once said, "I love you" in my whole pathetic wasted life.

SCOTT

That was Mom.

SKIPPER

And now this is me! This is me! This is me.

SCOTT

I know a lot of bad thing happened in that place but you're safe now. Remember how excited Mom got about the Sisters they had there? If they had Nun trading cards she would have had them all.

SKIPPER

"I'll give you three Sister Christians and a Margaret Mary for your Mother Teresa rookie card".

SCOTT

She loved you Skip. But nobody ever showed her, so she couldn't show you.

JIMMY exits the bathroom and
SKIPPER crosses to retrieve JIMMY.

SKIPPER

I hate weakness! Where are you going? You can't leave. Jimmy right? Jimmy I don't feel we've gotten to know each other bro. I got an idea, why don't we go to a party?

JIMMY

What kind of party?

SKIPPER

It's a get drunk and piss on yourself, do shit you can't remember party. Come on man you want to go?

JIMMY

Will Jack be there?

SKIPPER

He's the guest of honor. Tell you what; if you've got some money, we'll go get him right now.

JIMMY

I could write a check?

SCOTT

Why don't you just sit here and have some coffee?

SKIPPER

Jimmy Gray wants to party man.

SCOTT

Jimmy Gray wants some coffee. What are you doing? Its bad enough you've screwed up your own life without dragging him down too. He's the only one I got left. If I don't watch him I don't graduate. Now we're going to sit down and play cards or I swear to God Skip, I'll call Mom.

SKIPPER

How about some Gin, Jimmy Gray?

JIMMY

Now you're talking.

SCOTT

How about some Gin Rummy? And if anybody asks, you tell them how much fun you had.

SKIPPER deals the cards.

JIMMY

Hit me! Bunhead is a good Gin player, better than you.

SKIPPER

There is no a player better than me. Where's he at?

SCOTT

He's at the library with Boner.

SKIPPER

Boner and Bunhead are at the library?

SCOTT

That's right.

SKIPPER

Why is everybody at the library but me?

JIMMY

Boner's a poor college student and Bunhead's a homeless guy and together they're cops on "Boner & Bunhead" Thursdays at nine on CBS. Hit me!

SKIPPER

One more time and I take your head off!

SCOTT

Jimmy, this is Gin; there's no hitting in Gin.

SKIPPER

We're about to have a rule change.

SKIPPER knocks over the soda can.
JIMMY finds and holds the tin can.

SCOTT

Skipper! You're going to spill the . . . aw shit.

JIMMY

What's that? What did I do?

SCOTT

It's just a soda can; I'll clean it up.

JIMMY

Here you are. I got you now. This here is homeless legal tender. Nice and round and easy to hold, like a woman.

SKIPPER

What do you know about women?

JIMMY

Plenty, I just don't know where they are.

SKIPPER

Or what they look like.

SCOTT

Hey guys, here's a fun fact. A hundred billion aluminum cans are produced in America every year? From the time a can is made till it's recycled and made into a new can takes sixty days. Our stepfather owned an aluminum processing plant; I worked there summers picking up useless information.

SKIPPER

All I remember picking up was useless garbage! Course ole' Scottie wore a fancy tie and hung out with the college boys, sipping coffee and jerking words.

JIMMY

If you want to eat steak instead of macaroni you need an education. Cause protein cost more money than starch and polyester isn't a wool coat.

SKIPPER

Shut up!

JIMMY

Being poor is like liquor; you don't know how bad it tastes because you get used to it.

SKIPPER

Hey talking Barbie, shut the hell up!

JIMMY

Just because the world is round like a can; don't mean it's smooth like one too.

SKIPPER throws the can, dumps the cards.

SKIPPER

I hate fucking cans! Try calling Boner again; he's got to be done with that librarian by now.

SCOTT

Let's play one more hand.

SKIPPER

Do it!

JIMMY

Call your damn roommate before your brother explodes and we got asshole all over the walls.

SCOTT

This is the last time I'm helping you.

SKIPPER

You can't help it pussy.

SCOTT dials and Boner answers.

SCOTT

Hey, he's coming back over.

SKIPPER

I wish I could say it's been fun but I know fun and this ain't it.

JIMMY

You two must have been switched at birth.

SKIPPER

I'll pay you back bro! I'll pay everybody back you'll see.

SKIPPER exits.

JIMMY

Your real brother must be living with the Manson family.

SCOTT

The laws of natural selection will get him eventually. What about you? You want to spend the rest of your life eating stale food and showering with rubbing alcohol?

JIMMY

Maybe I should have married the bosses' daughter? We'd be living in your neighborhood, over on easy street.

SCOTT

Having a nice house and taking a bath is worth protecting.

JIMMY

Your brother has that but for some strange reason he'd rather be like me.

(Pause)

Hey, can you spare a dollar? I got six kids at my house looking for something to eat.

SCOTT

Go stand over there; you're making me nervous.

JIMMY

How about 50 cents then?

SCOTT

What, so you can give it to Jack?

JIMMY

You think we're all drunks and drug addicts don't you?

SCOTT

Well, yeah.

JIMMY

Well you're wrong; some of us are crazy! There's a lot of history that comes before the stink. We didn't just grow up on the sidewalk like crab grass. We may live down below the grate but we're people just like you and we deserve respect.

JIMMY gets up and tries to walk. SCOTT helps JIMMY to a chair. JIMMY shakes SCOTT off and stands tall and proud.

JIMMY

Just one time after standing outside in the freezing rain, just one time when some Land Rover asshole starts looking down on me like shit wearing a shirt, I'd say man "Maybe you didn't recognize me, my name is Mr. James Gray, president of the Biggest Damn Bank you've ever seen and for being that way you ain't getting your fucking car loan! You treated me like shit and you don't know me! I just don't look too good right now. I'm cold and wet and I need a bath. Then he'd feel bad and say, "I'm real sorry Mr. Gray, I didn't recognize you with that dirt on your face and those ragged ass clothes. Let me buy you lunch and since you're such a fine fellow why don't you call my daughter and ask her out on a date?" Then I'd give them that car loan but not before I got some respect!

SCOTT

I'll take a dollars worth.

SCOTT puts a dollar into JIMMY'S hand.

JIMMY

I'll pay you back a hundred when I get a job. I'll pay everybody back. What's that over there?

SCOTT

It's coffee. You want some?

JIMMY

Half a cup; too much gives me gas.

SCOTT brings JIMMY some coffee.

SCOTT

I need to work on my cell variances.

SCOTT collects his books from across the room; JIMMY takes an airline bottle of Jack from his sock and pours it into his cup.

JIMMY

That's good we need that. Gimpy must have run away when she saw Bunhead coming. She'd like this coffee too.

SCOTT

What's that smell?

JIMMY

Ben Gay, a whole lot of Ben Gay. I got an arthritic ass.

(Silence)

You being a doctor should appreciate that.

(Silence)

Maybe you could check it out for me sometime?

(Silence)

You want me to stop talking?

(Silence)

The man wants me to stop talking.

(Silence)

What am I going to do then?

SCOTT catches JIMMY drinking.

SCOTT

It's a free skate.

JIMMY

Have met my oldest friend Jack? Only I'm mad at him right now because he won't pay me the money he's been taking from me since we were twelve, and for making me do crazy shit.

SCOTT

Like that friend you had in high school that made you run naked through the awards assembly and kiss the geometry teacher Mrs. Barren-garden on the lips?

JIMMY

Yeah, like that.

SCOTT

Or when you slept with the most heinous girl in school?

JIMMY

Well that didn't happen.

SCOTT

As far as you know. Now put that away.

SCOTT crosses back to his desk.

JIMMY

You ever been to Disneyland?

SCOTT

A few times, what do you want from me?

JIMMY

When?

SCOTT

Right now!

JIMMY

When were you at Disneyland?

SCOTT

I don't remember.

JIMMY

Did you know the man inside the Goofy suit down there is a homeless man? He lives under the bridge over the Magic Moat. I've never been to Disneyland. Lots of things I haven't done. Lots of things you can't do living on the street.

SCOTT

Like what?

JIMMY

Like banking, you can't do banking without an address?

SCOTT

Or money...

JIMMY

Hey, how bout we make a list?

SCOTT

You can't read it. Then you'll let me study?

JIMMY

"Things you can't do when you're homeless" by Jimmy Gray. You damn sure can't go to the movies. There aren't any street people at the outlet mall, the Swan Ball or the YMCA.

SCOTT

No movies, no malls, no balls, no YMCA is that it?

JIMMY

No golfing.

SCOTT

No Belle Meade County Club.

JIMMY

There are no homeless City Council or State House of Representatives. And when it comes to doctors and hospitals, we can't get them because we're indecent.

SCOTT

I think you mean indigent.

JIMMY

Same thing! What if I needed an operation? What if they wanted to take the pancreas out of my ass? What the hell do I do then?

SCOTT

That's not how they get your pancreas out.

JIMMY

I guess that depends on your point of view.

SCOTT

There are medical facilities willing to treat you regardless of your ability to pay. It may not be fast, it might not always be good but it's your right.

JIMMY

It's my right?

SCOTT

Yeah, even you've got rights.

JIMMY

What about the hug situation? Or calling a brother on his birthday or baking a cake, singing that song; what about Christmas trees, presents and Sunday dinner at mommas or a hug from momma, better write that down.

SCOTT puts the list in JIMMIES hand.

SCOTT

Life doesn't guarantee hugs to anybody.

JIMMY

I'd look good in that Goofy suit man. Bunhead, where are you?

SCOTT

He's not back yet.

JIMMY holds his bag. SCOTT helps him.

You're holding that bag pretty tight.

JIMMY

Yeah, I got my whole life in here and all I got in here is nothing. If that's all you got then there's nothing to worry about, nothing to fight over, no reason to cry about nothing. It's peaceful.

SCOTT

Here's to nothing. Good night Mr. Gray.

SCOTT turns down the light.

JIMMY

You ever have a dream about having sex with your old girlfriend while you're lying in bed next to your wife?

SCOTT

I'm not married. You can't drink in here.

JIMMY

I can't help it, I'm a product of my circumstances and I won't change unless they do.

SCOTT

What's wrong with you?

JIMMY

I got the devil chasing me; I'm slow.

SCOTT

Then you'll die, in a lonely pile on a deserted street.

JIMMY

Don't you ever feel the fire pulling?

SCOTT

Yeah but you don't have to let it burn you alive; you can push back.

JIMMY

That's easy for you to say with your egghead geek thing going on, studying all the time, probably got a flat-chested girl friend.

SCOTT

I didn't say I had a girl friend.

JIMMY

You got a girlfriend?

SCOTT

Never mind.

JIMMY

What's her name?

SCOTT

None of your business it's over. Heather. Her name is Heather.

JIMMY

Well now!

SCOTT

It's nothing believe me.

JIMMY

How long you know this girl?

SCOTT

Since we were kids; when Skipper and I arrived at our new life she was waiting for us in our front yard.

JIMMY

You and Skipper...

SCOTT

Mom changed my brother's name to Skipper because she thought it would help him blend into his new neighborhood.

JIMMY

Forget your ugly ass, hairy-legged brother; tell me about the girl?

SCOTT

Heather was Cleopatra on a golf cart, dark wavy hair and almond eyes, disarmingly beautiful. The first time I saw her I was a goner. She had this way of holding you and making you feel like she'd never let go, but she did. In high school she'd like Skipper for a while then me then Skipper again. But I was always a gentleman. She and Skipper just hung out in the tree house. Heather was a bit ahead of her time. Anyway quit changing the subject. If they catch you drinking in here they won't let you come back.

JIMMY

I'm not coming back. I'll get Gimpy and we'll go to church.

SCOTT

The church can't save you from Jack.

JIMMY

It's peaceful in church.

SCOTT

Having nothing is peaceful, blind is peaceful, Jack is peaceful; how do you find peace in so much shit?

JIMMY

One man's shit is all another man's got. God knows that for sure.

SCOTT

It's hard to believe in God anymore.

JIMMY

Try finding comfort in that next time your heart is broken. You'd look good in church too, on a warm Sunday morning; the air wrapping you like a blanket, the heavenly light is shining into your soul. Close your eyes see yourself, your heart filled with actual kindness. When suddenly out of the corner of your righteous eye she's coming, a mighty cloud of stinky girl and pig blanket rolled into one, cruising up the aisle like pain looking for peace. You look away; you cast your eyes to the floor. You turn to a perfect stranger like they were family. Marlene? Is that you? How have you been? How's your momma, any room over there with you? Please! Too late you turn around and as sure as the post season to Atlanta, she's coming. The foulest stickiest homeless woman still drawing a breath, a regular aromatic Armageddon coming up the aisle and when it's time to take a seat, it's the seat next to you. Getting the picture? The

last time you looked there were a hundred empty seats but the good Lord has called this ripe soul to your rare spot? Keep those eyes closed! Here she comes; her clothes are soaked through with her hard life, hair all ragged and stiff like worn shag carpet. A club foot that rolls out of her tennis shoe and a right shoulder that rises five inches higher than her left as she crunches down inside your personal space! It's just you and the sister stinky elbow to tail bone. Glory! Soon your eyes start to water, you begin to sweat and your nose stops breathing, handing off to your mouth but your mouth is busy singing so the only air you can muster is in between verses of "How Great Thou Art". You start to black out. By now you're sure you're going blind. Your heart is pounding and the folks around you have tears in their eyes at your misfortune. Pig Pens Auntie Hog has taken the seat beside you and completely melted your sensibilities! All Ten Commandments flash through your mind as you look for a loophole. No Good!

(Slower)

What to do? If you get up and move, everyone in that church will know you for the fraud you really are. But if you stay, you die! And nobody wants to die but I don't mind, I go to church with Gimpy Johnson. I'll just go to sleep now. You'll let me know when Bunhead gets back.

SCOTT

Good night Jimmy Gray.

JIMMY

I sure hope so.

LIGHTS

ACT TWO:

It's the same Shelter four hours later.

AT RISING:

There's a loud pounding at the back door. The lights come up on SCOTT sleeping at his desk. SCOTT struggles to his feet and stumbles across in his scrubs to the door.

SKIPPER

Dammit bro, open up! It's Skipper! I got a surprise for you!

SKIPPER and HEATHER are drunk, they enter behind SCOTT.

SCOTT

This sucks Skip; I gave you all the money I had.

SKIPPER

I don't want your money.

HEATHER

It's freezing; a girl could catch ammonia or something.

HEATHER removes her hood and shakes out her hair. She turns to SCOTT.

SKIPPER

I got something you can't buy.

SCOTT

Heather? Is that you?

HEATHER

Hello lover.

SKIPPER

You got any beer? I need a beer man.

HEATHER

I need a beer man too. Do you think he'd bring me a light beer?

SCOTT

Heather, why are you here?

HEATHER

I've been asking your brother about you, but he wouldn't tell me so I'm here to see for myself. How you doing?

SCOTT

I'm fine, busy with school. I have a huge final, stuff.

HEATHER

Are you disappointed in me?

SCOTT

Do I have reason to be?

HEATHER

Maybe, don't be mad; I've been busy too.

SKIPPER

Heather's been teaching aerobics, show him some moves baby.

SCOTT

Tell me again, why are you here Skip!

SKIPPER

Heather wanted to see a real homeless guy. I told her you had some here. Isn't that right babe?

HEATHER

I've never seen one up close.

SKIPPER

And Mom threw me out of the house because I was drunk.

SCOTT

And?

SKIPPER

And I was sleeping.

SCOTT

And?

SKIPPER

And I was sleeping with Heather! You know how Mom starts that "not in my house!" crap. It's my house too. It's your house and it's OK with you isn't it? It's OK with you isn't it?

(Silence)

I'm sorry; I didn't know you two still had a thing.

SCOTT

We don't have a thing!

HEATHER

I remember a little thing.

SCOTT

Well you won't have to remember it anymore!

(Pause)

Look, this is like God's safety net. It's not a place to hang out with my ex girlfriend and get drunk.

SKIPPER

That's right she don't want you, she wants a real man.
Heather, the Vine Street Volcano there she blows?

SCOTT

I think I'm going to be sick.

SKIPPER has a revelation.

SKIPPER

Hey! I just thought of something. We got thrown out on the street; we got nowhere to go that makes us homeless!

SKIPPER pulls HEATHER to a long kiss.

SCOTT

Get a room, another room!

SKIPPER

I'm your brother bro I'm family. When something happens to one of us, the other one of us steps up and takes care of the other one of us.

HEATHER

What are you trying to say baby?

SCOTT

It'd be easier to let you die than to put you on your feet one more time.

HEATHER

We got love Skipper honey. We can sleep anywhere if we got love.

SKIPPER

Shut up! Maybe we're not the ones leaving? Maybe Scott's the one leaving. This is America right? We vote on shit in America! Well I say we let the vagrants vote on who stays him or us.

SKIPPER throws a beer can, a moment later JIMMY enters holding the can.

See, I told you they had some in here.

HEATHER

Wow, look at that?

SKIPPER

Come on, the rest of you out here now! Get out here and cast your vote for Skipper, a homeless candidate!

SCOTT points at JIMMY.

SCOTT

That's it. I had two but I lost one.

(Under his breath)

They're having a casserole at the mission tonight.

SKIPPER

What did you say?

SCOTT

(Louder)

I said they're having a casserole at the mission tonight! And all I got is chicken fingers, all right! Get off my back!

JIMMY makes a beeline for HEATHER.

JIMMY

Gimpy where are you brother? Bunhead is that you?

SKIPPER

Hey!

HEATHER

I'm Heather. Are you a real homeless man?

JIMMY

I'm whatever you want me to be baby.

HEATHER

What's that smell?

SKIPPER

I'm going to kick your ass into a hat!

JIMMY

Well then, if it isn't Skipper, Mr. Howell's bitch! Sorry but I'm voting for Scott Carter, he got me a girl.

SCOTT

I didn't get you a girl.

SKIPPER

(Amused)

He got you a midget with a high voice.

JIMMY

Funny, but I'm not falling for that twice.

SCOTT

It's a girl all right. Now she and her boyfriend are leaving.

SKIPPER

The hell I am!

HEATHER pulls SCOTT away from SKIPPER.
SCOTT is not happy with HEATHER.

HEATHER

Scotty, looking cute in your doctor jammies, whatever happened to us lover?

SCOTT

What do you think?

(Angry)

After you break up with someone, you're supposed to wait at least a week before you sleep with his brother.

SKIPPER stares, HEATHER talks louder.

HEATHER

Why are you always like, what would Jesus do? You think you're Jesus or something?

SCOTT

Is that all you have to say to me?

HEATHER

But Skipper told me not to tell anybody.

SCOTT

Tell anybody what?

HEATHER

I'm not really sure.

(Louder)

Whatever, nobody cares if we stay in your little shelter.

SCOTT grabs HEATHER by the shoulders.

SCOTT

Tell anybody what?

HEATHER

Whatever Skipper did, he didn't hurt her or anything.

SCOTT

Who didn't he hurt?

HEATHER

That little homeless girl; if anyone comes around asking about what happened you tell em you don't know.

SCOTT

That's easy, because I don't!

HEATHER

Well I can't tell you.

SCOTT

(Frustrated)

Skipper, what did you do?

HEATHER

Oh shit!

HEATHER runs and hides.

SKIPPER

I gave this little girl a drink. She was thirsty.

SCOTT

(To Heather)

You got real problems you know that?

SCOTT grabs the basketball.

SKIPPER

So what's it gonna be? It's your last chance little brother.

SCOTT

It's your last save big brother. I want you out before morning.

SKIPPER

I always win.

SKIPPER pulls HEATHER to the exit.

HEATHER

Nice to meet you sir, I'm sorry about....

JIMMY turns his head as HEATHER exit.

JIMMY

How did an idiot like your brother end up with such a fine looking girl?

SCOTT

It's not hard to end up with Heather. Girls like that always go for the jocks or the jerks.

(Pause)

It's a natural law of the universe.

SCOTT throws the basketball to JIMMY who instinctively catches it. JIMMY, realizing his mistake drops the ball.

Like gravity...

JIMMY

Why do you suppose a man walks the streets people thinking one thing about him while the other is true?

SCOTT

We've all got our reasons for that. So what's it like being black?

JIMMY

Our housekeeper used to say, "When you're black, people smile at you one-way, look at you another."

SCOTT

The Chinese, they do that.

JIMMY

We had like six houses, and we didn't live in any of them.

SCOTT

Poor baby...

JIMMY

I was by myself all the time; me and Jack, and then I met Gimpy and Bunhead they were damaged too.

SCOTT

Ever heard of Montgomery Bell Academy? There was a kid four or five grades ahead of me there named Jim Grayson. He was

about your height and he loved basketball. Knock off a few years and a few layers of dirt and you two could be twins.

JIMMY

I'm an only child.

SCOTT

He got an Ivy League scholarship but I heard he dropped out.

JIMMY

You can't educate the privileged past the first year of college, after that it loses its entertainment value.

SCOTT

Then when nobody heard anything else; he was gone. It's too bad he never made it back.

JIMMY

That would have required courage on his part.

SCOTT

Of course why would anyone ever want to climb out of a hole when the whole world keeps throwing meat down there?

JIMMY

Don't forget some bread, a nice potato too, Mon Ami.

(Pause)

Are you mad at me?

SCOTT

Why would I be mad?

JIMMY

Some people have that reaction.

SCOTT

You tell me. Is everything I was afraid to believe true? All the things I'd never say out loud for fear people would think I was a monster. Are you the monster?

JIMMY

A lot of us pretend to be what we're not because it's too hard to face what we've become.

SCOTT

That's a textbook PR, bullshit answer.

JIMMY

When the fire is pushing and pulling at the same time.

SCOTT

Oh for crying out loud!

JIMMY

You'll make up all reasons of shit to hide behind?

SCOTT

Come on, you can do better than that.

JIMMY

You come on! The world's full of people who wear ties and suits and smile while they're fucking you, and you enjoy it because they smell nice?

SCOTT

At least they're not preying on our sense of charity.

JIMMY

It's not about charity. It's about fear. You help the poor lost soul and the upside is heaven. But ignore them, and you're afraid of what might happen. The whole cosmic reward system requires you feed the meter.

JIMMY holds out his hand.

SCOTT

I'm not interested in any more platitudes from your homeless handbook. Just tell me the truth.

JIMMY

I'm a raging alcoholic, an addict! I've failed in every attempt to save myself or be saved. I can barely function man. I have no family, no hope!

(Pause)

Now if I walked up to you on the street and told you that would you hold my hand?

SCOTT

No.

JIMMY

Can I get help? Probably. Is it hard? Hell yes it's hard!

(Pause)

The truth is I've been claimed by the imp; and I'm just getting by, till its time to die.

SCOTT

I don't want you to die. I'll help you live.

JIMMY

No you won't. You can't. You don't know how.

SCOTT

Yes I will, I promise.

JIMMY

What are you going to do?

SCOTT

I don't know yet. All I know is, you can live your life like nothing's a miracle or you can live it like everything's a miracle.

JIMMY

That's real smart Einstein. Why don't you try helping your self first? The only difference between you and me is you've got the resources to function inside your fucked-up-ness, for now.

SCOTT

That's not even a word.

JIMMY

If I didn't look so pathetic, you wouldn't care. If I were just a lonely alcoholic swinging from the shower rod of my million-dollar bathroom we wouldn't be having this conversation. You'd just read about it in the paper and say, "boy that's a shame. I wonder what's going to happen to that nice family. I wonder what'll happen to their only son, the one who's away at Princeton."

SCOTT

You're not alone. A lot of people want to help you.

JIMMY

Good for them.

(Laugh)

It's not too late for you. You're a young man; you got time to destroy your demons.

SCOTT

Poison my rats?

JIMMY

I hate rats you know that.

SCOTT

Checking you out from dark corners and crawl spaces, Mr. Cupper he...

JIMMY

Fuck him man!

SCOTT

He kept trying to get me into that pantry. I wouldn't go.

JIMMY

You're a smart boy, smarter than your brother.

SCOTT

No, when the other boys would curse my mom and push us down Skipper protected us. Then old man Cupper started making him little presents and calling him Skippy and punching him in the arm. Mr. Cupper would wink at Skip and then the older boys would stop pushing us. Right before my mom married the tin man and we moved to OZ, the old man died. But the rats still ate his oatmeal, running along the top of air ducts, crazy from the poison, committing suicide where the vents turned up into the floor. Bam!

JIMMY

Bam! Everybody's got a Mr. Cupper!

SCOTT

He just didn't wake up. You know the irony of that place? It saved us and it destroyed us at the same time.

JIMMY

Smiling at you one-way, looking at you another.

BUNHEAD enters cold and soaking wet.

SCOTT

Jesus, what happened to you?

JIMMY

Bunhead is that you? Where are you son?

SCOTT

You're freezing; treat hypothermia with heating blankets, heated bath and warm IV fluids. ABC: Airway, Breathing and Circulation. Oh man, enzymes and chemical processes stop working at low temps - brain seizures, damage; the heart has abnormal rhythm and may require defibrillation. Shock; are you in shock?

BUNHEAD

No!

JIMMY

Did you look under the picnic table?

BUNHEAD

I couldn't smell under there.

JIMMY

You can't smell shit!

BUNHEAD

You can't smell what ain't there!

SCOTT

How did you get like this?

JIMMY

That river, it's just a little bit of water that's all.

BUNHEAD

It was quiet there, quiet as God. And there was hate. The kind of hate you can't get rid of.

JIMMY

God and hate in the same place. That's how it is down by the river.

BUNHEAD

People try to get rid of it but it's too strong.

SCOTT

Then why did you go down there?

BUNHEAD

I was looking for my friend.

JIMMY

We couldn't leave our friend.

SCOTT

(Giving up)

Are you allergic? It doesn't matter.

SCOTT yells into the back room.

Heather!

JIMMY

Gimpy isn't coming back is she?

BUNHEAD

I did what I could do.

HEATHER appears at the door.

SCOTT

Heather!

HEATHER

What?

SCOTT

Will you help Jimmy please? See if you can find him a quiet place in the back.

HEATHER

I guess, he's kind a cute.

SCOTT

Please, think about somebody beside your self for once.

HEATHER and JIMMY exit to the back.

HEATHER

I said I would. You don't know what I'm thinking about. Pick it up grandpa. If you want my help then you better help yourself.

SCOTT

(To Bunhead)

Would you like another blanket?

(Silence)

Want to tell me what happened tonight?

(Silence)

Look, your friend, he won't stop talking but you, how do I get through to you?

SCOTT, frustrated walks away.

You know what; maybe I'm not right for this. You guys are both a mess. I want to help you but I don't where to start.

BUNHEAD

Who told you, you had to fix anybody?

SCOTT

Nobody, nobody told me that.

BUNHEAD

Because you can't, you don't know how.

SCOTT

That's what I hear.

(Silence)

I'm one of those people who think we're a product of our choosing and that some of us may be too lazy to help ourselves.

(Silence)

But I'm willing to change my mind. Give me a reason to change my mind.

BUNHEAD

My son would have been about your age.

SCOTT

Would have been? Oh my God I'm sorry.

BUNHEAD

It's all right.

JIMMY

(Off stage)

Put me down!

BUNHEAD

I still got a baby to carry around. Jimmy, he's not really blind you know.

SCOTT

Yeah I got that.

BUNHEAD

He's not black either. I know it and he knows I know it but he still acts the fool.

(Pause)

I think he puts on faces because he's hiding from something.

SCOTT

What are you hiding from?

(Silence)

What brought you to this place?

BUNHEAD

Someone I lost; someone that took my breath away.

SCOTT

You mean your son?

BUNHEAD

My whole family...

SCOTT

Jesus.

BUNHEAD

Him too...

(Pause)

I'm in here pretty deep. It's no wonder nobody can find me.

SCOTT

Do you have medication?

BUNHEAD

I used to. But it's hard to hold yourself up for too long, most of the time you just sink back. We don't get many second chances.

SCOTT

Like Jimmy, just waiting around to die?

BUNHEAD

A lot of people doing that, that's John too...

SCOTT

Who's John?

BUNHEAD

Gimpy's friend who begs at the church, getting money for his crack habit, alcohol, HIV and being illiterate, meaning he can't read.

SCOTT

I know what illiterate means.

BUNHEAD

All he knows is cold and hot and jail, getting high and low, and everybody who walks by who sees him and prays for him curled up outside that church, they're all wondering the same thing.

SCOTT

What's that?

BUNHEAD

How come John doesn't just go ahead and die? Hurry up and get where you're going. There ain't nothing for you here and I'm tired of looking at you; all that shit hanging on you, you're making me feel bad. That's what they say about John. That's what they're thinking about me too.

SCOTT

Where does your friend stay?

BUNHEAD

I told you he's Gimpy's friend. He lives behind a meat garage over on Broadway.

SCOTT

You mean behind a restaurant?

BUNHEAD

You know that little building where they keep the meat?

SCOTT

Yeah.

BUNHEAD

John stays behind it, on a grate.

(Pause)

What do you think is more important, John or the meat?

SCOTT

Listen, I don't want you to worry about anything, I'll help you OK?

BUNHEAD

No you won't. You can't. You don't know how.

SCOTT

Yes I will, I promise.

BUNHEAD

What are you going to do?

SCOTT

I don't know yet.

HEATHER appears at the doorway.

HEATHER

Scott, the blind man wants his doctor.

SCOTT

Will you stay here with him?

HEATHER

Sure baby, we're working pretty well together. Do you feel it?

SCOTT exits, HEATHER enters and walks up to BUNHEAD.

My name is Heather.

BUNHEAD

Bun - head.

HEATHER

Is that like first name Bun, last name Head or is it all one name like Cher, Bunhead?

BUNHEAD

Call me David.

HEATHER

You're all wet David, mind if I sit down? Do you want to talk? Are you married? Do you have a big house? That would be no.

BUNHEAD

Used to, but one day there wasn't anybody in it so I stopped going there.

HEATHER moves to BUNHEAD and starts to ring the water out of his shirt. From there she puts her hands on BUNHEAD'S shoulders and begins to rub.

HEATHER

If you ring the water out of your clothes they'll dry faster. Water makes you cold, especially cold water. So you're homeless too. I'd live on the street if my parents would let me. They think I have an unhealthy attraction to the unhealthy.

BUNHEAD

You should do a better job of picking your friends.

HEATHER

But you're my friend.

BUNHEAD

You don't know that, I might be the enemy.

HEATHER

No, Skipper's the enemy.

(Pause)

You have stress in your shoulders; they're tight. You must have a lot on your mind. How's that?

BUNHEAD

You best stop doing that.

HEATHER

I'm thinking about something. I'll give you a dollar if you can guess what it is. You could use a dollar right?

BUNHEAD

Miss, if you don't mind please.

BUNHEAD moves HEATHERS hands, she backs off.

HEATHER

I'm sorry I have trouble with boundaries.

(Pause)

I saw you tonight, down at the river. That full moon was beautiful. I was cold but I could see it from the car. What were you doing there?

BUNHEAD

I was looking for my friend.

HEATHER

How'd that go?

BUNHEAD

If you don't mind me saying so miss, you sure do have some almond eyes, just like my daughter.

HEATHER

But I'm not your daughter am I?

BUNHEAD

No.

HEATHER

How come there's nobody in your house?

BUNHEAD

Because they're all gone.

HEATHER

Where did they go? You do something with them?

BUNHEAD

Yeah, I took em on a trip to Atlanta. And a Georgia State trooper pulled us over said I had a broken taillight. I got out of the car but I didn't have a broken light. But while we were standing there in the dark and the rain this drunk driver comes by and he clips the back of my car and sends it rolling down the hill into some water, twenty feet deep and moving fast. I tried to save them but I couldn't. My wife Sarah, the most beautiful woman in the world, my

daughter, her name was Hope and she was mine, and my son Michael my pride, they were all gone.

HEATHER

Does that suck? How do you deal with that? After something like that, would anything ever feel good?

BUNHEAD

That's too many questions. I'm tired now; we'll figure it out tomorrow.

HEATHER

Wait; figure what out?

BUNHEAD

Whatever it is we don't know.

HEATHER

But Skipper told me about the girl. So if anybody asked, you didn't hear it from me. Besides, she's better off.

BUNHEAD

How could that be?

HEATHER

Well because her personal hygiene situation was shit.

BUNHEAD

Who?

HEATHER

Your friend under the picnic table, she needed a bath. Frankly I'm surprised he did it; Skip doesn't care much for homeless people, especially the smelly ones. It comes from his terrible childhood with men in closets showing him body parts and then dying. It's not his fault. Skipper can't help how he is; he's caught in a trap, like Elvis.

BUNHEAD

If you were in the car how you know what went on?

HEATHER

I told you, Skipper told me. He just gave her a bath, she needed it and the river was there. Think of him as Skipper the Baptist.

BUNHEAD

If a man gave me a bath, he'd be a dead man!

HEATHER

You're dangerous Mr. Bunhead. I like you.

(Pause)

I am sorry about your family; maybe you'll get a new one. And your friend, she'll show up later and we'll all have a beer. You really should trust attractive young girls who are just trying to figure out who they want to be. Girls whose only sin is that they were born with way too many natural resources? I feel bad for us minorities. We should be more like the majorities. What do you think David?

SKIPPER enters HEATHER jumps.

SKIPPER

Are you teaching midnight aerobics again?

HEATHER

You scared the shit out of me! Skip honey, I was thirsty.

SKIPPER

I know what you're thirsty for.

HEATHER

Fuck you!

SKIPPER

OK but you're going to have to do all the work because I'm still a little drunk.

HEATHER

Remember, we'll all have a beer. Goodnight David.

SKIPPER

I saw you looking at my wife. She's hot isn't she? You want her? Go ahead; wait a minute.

HEATHER exits. SKIPPER circles BUNHEAD and discovers a sticker on his beer can.

SKIPPER

Hey, the sticker says, "This tin can could be worth one million dollars." I'll take a hundred for it right now!

Feeling lucky? Fifty? Ten? Fuck you I'm keeping it! And after I win a million dollars I'll buy a million more cans and win another million. Shhhhh! I won't end up like my stepfather dropping dead in a tin can factory. He never got high or ripped off the cover in his whole pathetic aluminum life.

SKIPPER puts a beer by BUNHEAD'S head.

You got a visitor. You going to fucking say something or what?

BUNHEAD

What?

SKIPPER

You see that fly? I could kill it or I could let it live. Know what that makes me? Powerful!

BUNHEAD

If I drink this beer that makes me thirsty, get the hell away from me.

SKIPPER

Oh I get it, you can drink my beer but you're too good to talk to me? Flies aren't easy to kill bitch! They don't just sit around waiting for you to crush em. There's a million years of evolution telling em when the hand of the man is about to come down on em. Flies aren't worth a shit but they're smart.

BUNHEAD

They got eyes in the back of their head.

SKIPPER

That would be cool.

BUNHEAD

They can see everything going on.

SKIPPER kills the fly with the can!
SKIPPER checks the sticker.

SKIPPER

And they still can't save themselves. Shit. I'm a loser. The world won't miss you fly! Why were you here?

BUNHEAD

How long've you been so powerful?

SKIPPER

Ever since I was a kid.

BUNHEAD

Everybody knows children got no power.

SKIPPER

Well I did.

BUNHEAD

Kids are all the time chasing things they can't catch; like you out in your front yard. Momma calling you from the porch, "Come on and get your supper, come on now". But you only got one thing on your mind, to catch some of them fireflies. Little sparkles floating in the twilight, running around with your pickle jar, holes punched in the top. You out there chasing them little suckers for an hour and just when you're about to get tired, going to give up... right there comes the moment, the one you'll always remember. With your momma calling and the fullest dark of that summer night falling on your front yard, you take one last mighty swipe of your little hand at that tiny speck of light floating at your nose and just like that, it's gone.

SKIPPER

Where did it go? I said where did it go?

BUNHEAD

You open your eyes and open your hand and that fiery little fly is twitching in your palm. Scared to move or right at home, you don't know you don't care because that moment is the first time in your small, insignificant life that you have ever experienced power over anything. And once you feel that rush, you can never go back. You spend the rest of your life trying to feel it again.

SKIPPER

Some of us are flies; some of us hold the can!

BUNHEAD

Then you go tell your momma you're sorry you're late for supper.

SKIPPER

I'm sorry. We got off to a bad start.

BUNHEAD

David.

SKIPPER

We're not so different, David. What's to eat around here?

SKIPPER grabs food and sits, pulling Gimpy's small radio out of his pocket, turning it on and placing it in front of BUNHEAD.

SKIPPER

How about some music? You like music right? Some jazz, some rap; some jazz rapping?

BUNHEAD turns off the radio and puts it on his side of the table.

Say man. So where do you live when you're not a shelter rat, the bridge, the railroad tracks, the river?

BUNHEAD

I used to have a yard so big somebody else had to cut it with a tractor. Had kids and a wife, a nice wife?

BUNHEAD takes a picture from his wallet.

SKIPPER

Your wife is hot man.

SKIPPER kisses the picture.

What happen to them?

BUNHEAD

They're dead.

SKIPPER spits on the floor.

SKIPPER

No shit? Did you kill em?

BUNHEAD

What the hell's wrong with you?

SKIPPER

You can tell me, I'll take it to my grave. You'd do the same for me right? I need somebody who won't judge me; there are a lot of judges out there. You know that.

(Pause)

So what happened to em?

BUNHEAD

It was a drunk driver.

SKIPPER

Ah man I'm sorry; it's better not to have a family than to lose em like that.

BUNHEAD

It's better to fight every second of your life not to lose em at all.

SKIPPER

I bet you can fight, but not good enough to save em.

BUNHEAD

I must have treated someone bad, hated too much, not given enough!

SKIPPER

It doesn't work like that. If it did my momma would be dead, my brother, all of my cousins.

BUNHEAD

I get lonely without em; I get scared.

SKIPPER

Me too man. It's only a matter of time before things get really fucked up. It's coming! I fight with my insides. I battle my nature. When I look in the mirror I don't like what I see but it's not my fault, it's the voice saying mean shit like hurt them! You suck! They're all around me.

BUNHEAD

I say don't listen to em.

SKIPPER

They wouldn't like that. They might stop talking to me. I'd be lonely without my friends.

BUNHEAD

Maybe there's somebody in there ain't such a bad ass could be your friend?

BUNHEAD picks up some cards and begins to shuffle.

SKIPPER

They used to be there but I can't hear them anymore. All my life I've battled my demons but lately I . . . I think I'm losing. I've done some really bad shit. Look at you; I know you've done some bad shit!

(Excited)

Tell me one, one hateful one. Come on!

BUNHEAD

I ain't telling you nothing man.

SKIPPER

Confession's good for the soul if you didn't kill anybody.

BUNHEAD grabs SKIPPER across the table.

BUNHEAD

I told you, I don't do that!

BUNHEAD sits back down and continues to shuffle the cards.

SKIPPER

Easy killer, how long you gonna shuffle those cards?

BUNHEAD

Till they get warm. It takes longer when they got pictures of flowers and cats and shit on em. You play? Cause we can play some cards. We can wager too, if you want to.

SKIPPER

A bet; you wanna bet?

SKIPPER throws his watch on the table.

I got my daddy's watch. What do you got?

BUNHEAD

If you win I'll tell you.

SKIPPER

Fuck that man! I ain't playing less I know what I'm playing for!

BUNHEAD

I'll tell you the worst thing I've ever done.

SKIPPER

And all you get is my watch?

BUNHEAD

I don't want your watch. You tell me your worst thing.

(Pause)

One hand a Gin Rummy?

SKIPPER

Winner tells all.

(Intense)

Better look and see what you're stepping in, you smelling me?

SKIPPER and BUNHEAD play an intense game.

BUNHEAD

You want that card or not? It's awful quiet over there.

SKIPPER

He's messing with me; playing with me?

BUNHEAD

I didn't mean to help you.

SKIPPER

The blind boy told me you were good.

BUNHEAD

Then how come you're still here?

SKIPPER

I ain't afraid of you.

BUNHEAD

You gonna take that card or not?

SKIPPER

I will if I want to.

BUNHEAD

I'm having a damn birthday over here man.

SKIPPER

I'm thinking.

BUNHEAD

You can stand over there all night but sooner or later you got to finish the game.

SKIPPER

This girl I dated, she moved here from Dallas, a real pretty girl. She thought she was better than me till she broke her

face in three places. Do you know how hot the fire is in hell my friend?

BUNHEAD

Why don't you tell me?

SKIPPER

Every time you think you've reached the bottom of the fucked-up meter somebody lowers the bar and you go spiraling into a new hole.

BUNHEAD

A deeper darker hole...

SKIPPER

Hell isn't just a bad dream; it's all around us. It stays with you and you do its shit and the shit gets worse until you scare yourself. Or maybe you don't.

(Pause)

I'm so tired; I don't want to play anymore.

BUNHEAD

You got to finish the game.

SKIPPER sits back down and plays cards.

Why don't you tell that voice to fuck off?

SKIPPER

If I keep running till I'm dead, it can't get me anymore.

BUNHEAD

When it does get you, you will be dead.

SKIPPER

I'm scared of dying.

BUNHEAD

So was Gimpy.

SKIPPER

Who the hell is that? Fuck you man!

BUNHEAD

OK but you're gonna have to do all the work, cause I got Gin!

BUNHEAD lays down his cards; SKIPPER throws his cards across the room.

SKIPPER

We went drinking at the river. I buried a cow up to its neck. I put sugar in gas tanks. Cheated on my taxes, stole my father's change, I don't know! I have to think back man!

BUNHEAD

You should have made a list.

SKIPPER

I didn't make a list!

BUNHEAD

The shit you could tell with a list.

SKIPPER

The whole river was shining from a massive full moon hanging there like a spotlight. Heather was in the car and I'm sitting on top of a picnic table, enjoying my beer.

SKIPPER

Then I picked up this scent. This girl is lying under the table with a disgusting blue blanket all torn and full of mud and shit. I'm in her face yelling, "Hey, you've really let yourself go." I didn't want her there; she was screwing with my rest and relaxation. Oh man you can't believe how bad she smelled!

HEATHER appears in the wings.

All I said was that he should go home and take a bath. Maybe kick back and watch TV but she wouldn't listen, she didn't move. She just lay there like he was dead.

BUNHEAD

Like she was dead?

SKIPPER

But she wasn't dead; her blanket was moving so I get up under there and pull her out. The stench was unbelievable. It was like picking up a pile of horseshit with your bare hand and you're standing there looking at it and you suddenly realize what it is and you gotta get rid of it! Oh man! I couldn't stand it anymore so I dragged her rancid ass over to the bridge and I dropped her in the river.

(Quietly)

It was a low bridge, a little bit of water.

BUNHEAD

I thought you said you never killed anybody?

SKIPPER

I didn't kill her.

BUNHEAD

You dropped her in the river!

SKIPPER

Maybe I did, but she swam to the other side.

BUNHEAD

Gimpy can't swim.

SKIPPER

Well she must have joined the YMCA because I saw her swim.

JIMMY enters.

JIMMY

Homeless people can't go to the YMCA.

SKIPPER

Forget it! I wasn't anywhere near the river. We went to the railroad tracks; we threw bottles at the train.

HEATHER enters.

HEATHER

He saw us there.

SKIPPER

Shut up!

HEATHER

When you told me what you did for that homeless girl I was so proud of you.

SKIPPER

It really is time for you to shut up!

HEATHER

I loved you from a distance my whole life, now look what you've done to me.

SKIPPER

You loved me at close range too baby.

HEATHER lunges at SKIPPER.

HEATHER

You forgot to tell me you were going to kill somebody!

SKIPPER

You crazy bitch, nobody is dead!

JIMMY picks up the radio.

JIMMY

Her name was Gimpy Johnson and this radio belongs to her.

SKIPPER

Gimpy was alive when we left. If she croaked after that it's not our fault. I'm pretty sure that's a law.

SCOTT enters.

SCOTT

What's going on out here?

HEATHER

Surprise, surprise, Skipper killed Gimpy.

SKIPPER

Scotty I'm glad you're here; your pals are writing a fiction novel and painting me as the bad guy. You know these homeless guys, they're so miserable they can't stand it when somebody else has fun. I'm your brother bro I'm family.

JIMMY

Skipper's been having some midnight Olympics.

BUNHEAD

The ten-meter Gimpy toss . . .

SCOTT

Jesus, Skip what did you do?

SKIPPER

These people are everywhere, wanting change! I was trying to help her, something went wrong and she goes over that's all.

SCOTT

She goes over what?

SKIPPER

A bridge, it was a low bridge into a little river. She's all right; I could see her flapping around out there.

BUNHEAD

That was me in the water. I was looking for my friend. You're the reason Gimpy was in that icy water praying she wouldn't die. You're the reason she stopped moving.

SCOTT

When the bodies' temperature drops below 95 degrees the lungs fill with fluid. There's confusion, then unconsciousness. Your breathing stops, then the heart, then you die.

The group goes cold and circles SKIPPER.

SKIPPER

It was an accident.

HEATHER

I know baby.

SKIPPER hears a voice in his head.

SKIPPER

Wait a minute! My friend makes a good point. Maybe it wasn't Gimpy on that bridge? Maybe it was somebody else, somebody with water wings?

SCOTT

This is serious Skip!

SKIPPER

Don't you think I know that! I'm the one running from fucking Satan here!

SKIPPER breaks down and puts his hands over his ears.

The dark one thinks we should do a background check on this Gimpy; see if she had suicidal tendencies. It's sad but these transients are all alcoholics, they don't have jobs and most of them have criminal records.

JIMMY

Congratulations, you just described yourself.

SKIPPER

Tell me one person that counts who gave a shit about her? She was no better than a dead fly, a tin can. The world won't miss you for a second Gimpy Johnson.

(Pause)

Why were you here?

BUNHEAD

What do you say you and me we go look for my friend?

SKIPPER

Scott!

SCOTT

Skipper, sometimes you can recover from bad choices if you tell the truth.

JIMMY

But this choice is so big and so bad.

BUNHEAD

He's gonna need to pay for it!

SCOTT

David, put him down please?

HEATHER

You heard him! That's enough dancing, if you want to dance with him put on some music.

SKIPPER pulls away in rage.

SKIPPER

What the hell is wrong with you!

The entire group stops.

BUNHEAD

A traumatic emotional injury...

HEATHER

Me too...

SCOTT

Same...

JIMMY

Jack.

SKIPPER

You're all damaged merchandise.

BUNHEAD and JIMMY both grab SKIPPER.

BUNHEAD

Why don't you try throwing us in the river?

SKIPPER

Tell them the truth Scott!

JIMMY

Yeah Scott, tell us the truth.

SKIPPER

Tell them you did it. You threw Gimpy off that bridge.
That's what happened right?

SCOTT

No.

SKIPPER

Oh man, I'm your brother bro; you're supposed to protect me.

SCOTT

I did. I poisoned Mr. Cupper.

SKIPPER

Holy shit! That was you?

SCOTT

I put rat poison on his oatmeal.

SKIPPER

Jesus Christ, we are the Manson Family.

SCOTT

I wanted him to get sick so he'd leave you alone.

HEATHER

Are you all right baby?

SCOTT

Everybody knew what he was doing. I just wanted him to stop; I didn't want him to die.

HEATHER

Oh Scott, it must have been terrible.

SKIPPER

Oh Scotty was it terrible? So now you're America's dumbest criminal? Suddenly you're a better murderer than me?

HEATHER

Skipper I was only trying...

SKIPPER

Don't forget I'm the original bad boy!

SCOTT

How can we? The devil in you is the evil in all of us. Heather, how many people have you slept with since the tree house? And you guys, if you kill Skipper for what he did to your friend, you'll all be dead. You didn't even know Mr. Cupper but he'll have touched you just as violently as he touched my brother. He's touched us all. The abused become the abusers and on and on we go till somebody breaks the cycle.

HEATHER

What about you? You could break the cycle Scott.

SCOTT

Maybe I will.

BUNHEAD

No you won't.

JIMMY

You can't.

BUNHEAD

You don't know how.

SCOTT

Yes I will, I promise.

JIMMY

What are you going to do?

SCOTT

I'll be your friend.

HEATHER

How about you Skip, maybe you could break it?

SKIPPER

Break it yourself I'm busy.

GIMPY enters wet, picks up the radio from the table, turns it on playing the same song as the open.

GIMPY

Folks used to see us together, wanting to know if I was OK? I told em Jimmy and David are my best friends, they take care of me. I have a momma and a daddy who love me; I went to school; even had a boy friend, he was fine. There's a picture of me at my parents house standing by a birthday cake, got my hand up, four years old daddy.

(Pause)

I got medicine but I don't take it most days and I eat; hell I don't eat hardly at all. Shape I'm in, there's no place else for me but here. Cut me and I'll bleed, kill me and I'll die but ignore me and I promise you I will not go away!

(Pause)

The first night I was alone on the street it was hard.

(Pause)

When I hit that water it was cold like it don't want you there but there I was, not knowing which way was up, trying to save myself but all I was doing was getting in deeper. I was looking for something to hold on to, getting tired and wanting to give up. And then comes this hand down on my shoulder right below that bone that's soft and strong and I knew everything would be all right, even if I wasn't.

LIGHTS

The End

Shelter

By Jim Reyland

Equal the world (9)