

Greenback Fly

by Dennis Mahagin

In those early days, Cory was animated, and so very *lithe*.

He liked to funnel excess energy by arranging strange terms for proposition bets. Could Cory ride a ten speed bicycle, like a skateboard? Could he stand tall, hanging ten upon the teardrop seat, letting gravity have its say, say on a middling-steep Lents neighborhood street?

You could always bet against it.

Once, he doubled me up, by way of escaping from the trunk of Kenneth Cooper's silver Bertone Volvo, Kenny's inheritance from granddaddy. Cory got himself up in a pair of skin-tight, honey bee Speedos, his neck and chest greased with Mentholatum, and Three In One oil. A post-adolescent Houdini in black face.

"Who wants some of this action?" Cory had said, jingling the trunk keys, and holding at arm's length an upturned shower cap, to cache the wagers. "Hell, you can sock me in the nuts first... hit the car alarm or whatever while I'm in there, might just shake the concentration."

After awhile, we all learned: To cut our losses, hardly anyone took him up.

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Cory had a shock of wavy JFK Junior hair, which in the sunshine would really light up, like a greenback fly, especially when he'd run his long fingers through the bangs.

When Cory said he was going to Afghanistan, a few of us tried to talk him out of it; but in the end, it was a fruitless task, and we gave it up.

"Cross your fangers," he told his friends and family who saw him off, at PDX airport during the Xmas holidays. Cory had taken to wearing a plum wool beret, like Curtis Sliwa. Like Pat Tillman. At the Delta gate, he pulled off this cap; in the middle of the final boarding call, Cory crossed his legs, and made a theatrical lamp post stance; then he waved that beret down low, like a dough boy. Like Marcel Marceau.

Precocious? Yes, Cory was all of that. And most especially limber.

Yet, sometimes he appeared as well, to those of us who loved him, like an animated flash frame from that famous *Aha!* video, circa 1984: "Take On Me." His nose had been broken nine times, he liked to talk with an affected Tennessee accent. "Just add a tad of gumption, and what you got?" Cory liked to say. Then he'd moonwalk, and do a fine robot, like Michael Jackson, only he'd make it happen on the blunt edge of a wrought iron railing, fifteen feet in the air.

Cory got half-lucky in the Arabian Peninsula, because he did not come home in a box, or with his arms and legs blown off; yet, he must have seen some awful things over there.

You could always imagine it.

And all the psych docs, what they like to call it, is Post Traumatic Stress.

Or is it Shock?

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One night, about a month after Cory's return to the neighborhood, we sat on our favorite stoop. 18th and Davis streets, across from Elias' Grocery, in Northwest Portland. Under a crescent moon, with a spent-firecracker stench in the air, Billy Coyle swigged his Jack Daniels whiskey, swishing it around like mouthwash before the

swallow. Before he laid out a scenario for Cory, like in the olden days:

"Say, howz about a handstand on the center line, Cor? A fin says you can't hold it till the next car comes."

Cory hawked something loose, from deep down in his lungs; then he spat it, at an upward forty five degree angle, as if to strafe the closest swan's neck streetlight.

"I don't think so Bill," Cory said.

"Nah?... Awww, c'mon!"

"How 'bout this?" said Phil Jasper. "Say, hypothetically they locked up an ignorant man, in a public library... for *six years*?"

"Yeah!" Billy C. echoed. "Feed him Marie Callendar, piping hot, from a trap door. Three squares daily, a pot to piss in, plus shiny blue steel bars on the window, where he throws it all out?"

"How about it, Cory? Whatcha say?" said Jasper.

"Fuck you, Phil," Cory said.

"No, really," Jasper said. "How do you suppose ignorant dude would come out?"

"Yeah, like... *Learned*?" said Coyle. "Or Schizo? Something in-between?"

"Or Same Same?" said Jasper.

Cory was staring at the stars.

He tipped his head all the way back, as if to roll it off his spine like a pinball, or Hotwheel, a lime green gumball through the infinite chute. And his cervical column kept making these awful popping sounds, like when you squeeze a snap dragon between thumb and forefinger, in an urban garden you know damn well you're not supposed to enter, but can't help yourself, all lathered in harvest moon glow, a live wire.

Cory sat up, and hugged his knees to his chest, in a way no one had seen before.

He would be dead of drowning, inside of forty eight days. He'd slip into the Willamette river at dawn, with a bad skin full, a terrible load and his Doc Marten boots on. It doesn't take a genius to figure how he sank, in the drink, like Jeff Buckley. Like a stone.

"Who says the man got to come out?" Cory said. "Maybe he likes it in that *liberry*, and wishes to stay put. Say he's soaked up all the knowledge, but ain't ready to share it yet. Maybe he craves quarter, licks he's thumb from page one. Starts over."

"Awwww, Cory..."

"WHAT LAW SAYS HE GOTTA COME OUT?" we heard Cory shout. "Maybe the man sits there. Six feet of precious space, far from... WHO SAYS HE SURRENDERS IN THE FIRST PLACE?"

"Hey, Cory... *take it easy, man.*"

"Yeah slow, bro... didn't mean anything..."

"Nothing at all, dude..."

"Don't mean nothing, Cor."

We watched then, in a kind of awe, as Cory stopped up a wracking sob, like it was indigestion, or a Tourettes tic, a horsefly to simply shoo away, with one definitive ponytail twitch. Cory shook and shook his amazing raven head.

