

The OD & Hepatitis RR or Bust

by T.C. Boyle

The field high with brittle, yellow weed, flattened in bursts of wind, sprouting green below, the scent of the new season on the still-chill wind and in the warmth of the sun. The trees, in a crowd around the field, wave their tiny new fingers: flecked green with buds against the big black of the bark, like a palsied man and his shrunken limbs.

Mike bends, shirtless, to rip a board up from the rusted nails. The lats stand out like wings and the veins swell in the biceps. The board wrenches free and he falls back a few steps, then regains his balance, fills his chest with air and stands erect. He is not cold. He tosses the plank with the others in a jagged pile of grey and splinters. The wind whips his long hair back and out from his head as he bends for another. He looks like a diver, plying a wreck, the current heavy and deep. Then from the trees comes the crack of splintering wood; a tree splitting, whistling down, pummeling the earth-- he can feel the tremor in his feet. Half the tree still stands, the green pods swaying in the wind. The trunk on the ground has no buds: It is already decayed: the split wood reveals the tracks of insects bored into the limbs.

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The four stumble around in a slow-motion, stone-eyed parody of panic:

The Ice! Get the Ice!

Walk him around!

Slap him, slap the shit out of him!

Get him out of here! If he dies--

Shut up!

Put ice in the tub for christsake--throw him in the tub!

Get Him Out Of Here!

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The cats scratch and tear about on the rug, the music is too loud, the bushes outside are turning green and the alligators sleep in the sun through the open window. Outside, the sound of hammering: powerful and purposeful.

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Remember when he built that coop for the chicks and the baby ducks?

Oh, yeah, yeah. And he made a little pond for the ducks too, didn't he?

They were so cute and helpless: Chris says. She is remembering, her mouth a tight line.

And didn't he have a pet alligator?

Two of them.

I only saw one.

He bought another one after you left. He used to feed them by hand--fish that he raised himself. I think they were guppies. And hamburger... He was almost like a veterinarian, you know?

* * *

Mike looks at you. He squints, the eyelids flutter, close. They open suddenly and they're white! The eye balls are drowning.

I got one ambition, man... I wanna MAKE IT and then I can be high as I want. I'd buy a pound--a whole fucking beautiful pound--and uncut: pure dope. These bags you cop on the corner, they're all cut, you know? You get just one tiny grain of smack and the rest is powdered milk. Can you imagine that? You get so beautiful, so fucked up on two bags of that shit and all you're getting is two grains, two little grains! But a pound of pure dope!... Then it's all

right--it's not being a junkie--cause then you're a rich man and you can cop all the scag you want.

* * *

Mike nods in the corner. There is a shadow there, cast by the bushes soaking in the dying sun. His mouth is open and a spider spindle of saliva sticks first to his chin, then slides to his chest. In the floor, a tremor: full volume, the bass beats dully with his heart, swells his veins. He plays along in his mind, the fingers moving vaguely in his lap. Then the head snaps up, and the eyes, slit like a reptile's, focus in grey on a room shot in black and white. The eyes close, the head, on a puppet string, drops. And then startled by a frenetic guitar run, the eyes open again. The music comes from everywhere, comes from nowhere; the canvas over the speakers billows faintly with each insistent beat. Mike rises slowly and walks to the kitchen cubicle. He takes the bloody waxed paper from the refrigerator, unwraps the chopped meat. He is feeling the music, and he moves with it, and he feels good, towering: his eyes close and he stands for a long moment, his palm mashing the raw meat. He starts. And takes the meat back into the main room. The sun has gone and the room is nearly dark; the alligator lies quietly in the fetid water. Mike's hand intrudes and the small reptile is lifted, thrashing its tail as the big fingers force the meat down its throat. The alligator spits and then scratches at the hand with its rear legs, as if trying to rid itself of a collar. The feeding completed, Mike bends to carefully release it, snapping back his hand as the miniature dragon scrapes angrily around its glass enclosure. Mike pauses, his eyes closed. He feels the music, very loud, rushing up to him from primeval rock huts: and he feels good with it. Then he heads for the bathroom.

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But what he did to them, that was crazy!

Christine pulls her finger between her bare toes and laughs,
looking like a little girl.

I can't understand why he did it--

Neither can I.

After he spent so much time with them--hand feeding the
alligators and all. And hauling out those sacks of feed for the
chickens and ducks. To kill them like that was crazy.

Christine is silent. Her feet are on the floor, her hands in her lap.

* * *

A minute sound: tap, tap-tap, tap.

Ow! This fuckin thing is full of burrs. When we gonna get some
decent works? It feels like I'm drivin' a fuckin telephone pole in.

It burns in, lifts the flesh as you draw back; the blood, and then
you're hit. It's like the train wheels spin furiously, dig against the
rails, full steam--but somebody oiled the track and the train doesn't
move, just races faster and faster and you feel sweaty and faint your
legs are weak all the blood in a bag in your head, it's good dope this
time, real good.

Mike! (it's Christine, she's white, the skin is drawn tight over her
cheeks like in the films of Birkenau and there are black circles under
her eyes) Mike! Mike! It's Sunny, Sunny's OD-ing.

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We got this new group man--it's dynamite! I'm up front--no more
bass--just front man--and this cat Jack on lead and Stokes the
drummer and this outasight piano--he used to be with the Dead--
Etc.

* * *

Sunny! Hey Sunny, come around come around.
Slap him, man, Slap him!

Gimme the ice! Shake your ass Chris!

C'mon Sunny. Come on!

Sunny says: Kkk...KKkkkkkk...kkkkkkkkkkhh

Slap the shit out of him!

Slap. Slap-slap-slap. Sunny's mouth begins to bleed, just a trickle, and red the color of life. Sunny's eyes are open but filmed, like the eyes of old men.

Oh my God what're we gonna do, Mike! Mike! I can't stand it, let's get him out of here. Mike! Let's get him out of here! He belongs in the hospital, I'm telling you--Mike! What if he dies here? My God, my God...Mike!

Okay, okay! Shut up! Just be cool, he's not gonna die. Just take it easy. You know we can't take him to the hospital. C'mon Dickie, slap him man!

Sunny is in the bathtub. The water is very cold, there is ice in it. His friends are slapping him. Sometimes they take him out of the tub and walk him around the room, Sunny vaguely assenting, the skin on the bridges of his feet worn raw from dragging.

Sunny is saying: Kkkkkkkhh. And: kkkkkkkkkkhhhh.

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At a table in the back, where it's dark, Mike is talking to a friend.

Hey, I hear you had a hassle with Sunny the other night.

Yeah. I was scared shitless, man. That was some dope. I did as much as him, man, but he was dead--that mother was dead. I was shaking, man, you know? We took him to the hospital finally. We dumped him in a chair in the waiting room and then we ran. We couldn't take the chance of questions--we might of got busted.

Yeah, yeah. So he's all right?

Uh-huh. They brought him around and then they let him go. He was back late that night. I just hope nobody followed him.

Hey Mike?

Yeah?

You got any smack?

Sure, I'll do you some. How much bread you got?

* * *

And the blood comes up, swirled in the tube red like a chicken heart. You're sweaty and you've got a light forehead and you walk like a crippled duck. You can't stand up, you feel dizzy you feel like shit you feel like god and then you go into a nod. Like Sleepy, that seven dwarf cat, and you scratch your nose--just the inside, right at the tip and you scratch it good maybe it bleeds and then you nod and then you feel good and then you nod and look at your arm the veins like pregnant pythons strangling your arm and you feel like fucking Tarzan and then you nod, nod.

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You gotta hear this new song, man. I call it "The OD and Hepatitis Railroad or Bust." Dig the title? It's funny, huh? Now you tell me if the repeat chords get monotonous. I want them to be monotonous, you know--like flying, like drifting in a big circle. See, I'm after this effect--

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There is a black cloud sitting in a tree over the cottage. Strangely there is no music: a silence curls its legs up and goes to sleep. One becomes aware for the first time of the smaller sounds: crowcall a harsh w in the leaves, bees singing sewing machine songs, a nameless and furtive sound of digging. The soft earth is full of tunnels and burrows, moles and mice. Digging in the dark: tiny fingers scratching in the blood-soaked earth.

Mike steps out, the screen door swatting behind him. In his hands are alligators, their feet wild, flying in the air. They are set down, released. They run a few steps, stumble, their necks joggle, side to side, like a toy on a spring. They appraise the deep grass warily--slit

eyes and the contact lenses they wear underwater. Then the breast stroke through the grass, clumsy and wide-legged.

In his hand, darts. From the dart board inside. Heavy, sharp, satisfying. The fingers release one--and there it is: in the ground, buried to the shaft. Then another. The ground snatches it from his hand. The alligators scramble like babies learning to walk. The darts go to the ground, points injecting the earth and then suddenly a dart pierces the rippled leather of an alligator. It is pinned to the ground, snapping at the hot mystery in its back. And then Mike is rifling them and they shoot into the earth on either side, like knives thrown at the spinning woman in the circus. Then one pins the skull, severs the bulb of a brain: a spot of red appears. And then the other, still unaware, until it too is transfixed. For a long while Mike bends over them, dropping the wet red needles into the mashed bodies.

Then: Mike rattles through the low branches to the henhouse. There he catches a chicken, fixes its neck over his knee and with a deliberate, dull stroke, cuts off its head. The parts tremble; his pants absorb the warmth of the blood. Each chicken, each duck, is executed.

* * *

You know I'm a junkie, man. I mean I'm doing five bags a day. Before, I used to get strung out once in a while and then maybe I'd come down for a couple days, but now...I ripped off this gas station, you know, cause Chris and me we need the bread and we haven't played no dates lately. Chris got the guy's attention and I just walked in and took the money out of the box... But we're going on the road soon, did you know that? That's what this new agent we got says. He's big and he's gonna back us--new equipment, the works. He's got to, you know? It's all I got: I write songs and play...This is nowhere--everybody's OD-ing or going in with hepatitis or getting busted--that's all there is. But this new group is dynamite; we're gonna make it and then I'll have a mountain of scag... There's nothing else I want to do--just play, that's all. Play and be high.

Cause I look so good on stage, you know? And that feeling I get, the
Amp way up--it's like I'm floating.

* * *

Mike sits in the field against the channelled and rotted trunk. His
eyes are closed, his chin rests on his chest, his breathing is slow.
The mosquitos circle, whining in the pale light, looking for soft
tissue to wet their tiny syringes.

