

The first time that I saw Princess Leia was outside of Bert Finches Bookstore at the edge of town.

I say the edge of town; in fact everything back then was on the edge of town. There was little anywhere closer to where the town supposedly started to define it as anything else. The supermarket; opticians; dentist; theatre; everything and anything of interest or of use lay on the outskirts of town. It was testament to the crazy founders of the town who had laid their claim on the land, almost sixty three years before.

I was browsing the fiction section, as I had in just the same way more than a dozen times in that month. I was in search of new reading material cheap enough to coincide with the amount of change in my pocket. I was low on money; that summer I'd been unable to find any work at all. Usually, there were people with maybe a lawn that needed cutting, or a fence that needed painting, who might be willing to part with at least a dollar for my efforts.

But that summer break there'd been nothing at all up for grabs, and I was stuck with a two dollar allowance which my father gave me in maintenance at the end of every week.

But that didn't leave a lot of room for buying books, *and* seeing movies, *and* ordering items from the numerous magazines that I read back in those days, and all of the other every day expenses that make up the financial predicament of every teenager.

But that day I'd decided to dip into the funds and get a book. I was going to have a little splurge, spend a chunk of my money, and to hell with it.

Books have never been cheap, and that fact has never changed; unless of course you buy second hand. But that's simply no good if you want new stuff and a lot of the time that's what I want.

Something new.

"This one looks good." I'd gone with my friend Tod Baker, who lived across the street from me. We'd ridden out to the bookstore together.

Tod was, and always has been, the foremost opinion on literature. Even as I've grown older, I've still found myself calling his house out in Philadelphia and asking his opinion on a book I've been thinking of buying. It's always been the nature of our friendship. Every thanksgiving he drives over to my house and his family stay with us where we live near the coast. We have a great time every year.

He was kneeling on the floor of the store, rooting about on the lower shelf. He held up a regular sized paperback without even looking up. He did so with his left hand; his right was still busy fleeting its tips across the spine of every book on every shelf, as if tactile contact would make their presence more accessible. The way that he browses for books reminds me of music enthusiasts in a record shop; the way that they flick through albums so fast, that you have to wonder how many of them work as filing clerks.

I wouldn't be surprised if many of them do, either.

I took the book, and his left hand went to accompany his right, and I saw that he was in his element.

I turned it over.

He stopped momentarily, sensing perhaps that I had turned it over to see the title. He popped his glasses back up his nose where they had been slipping, as he looked up at me.

“The Short Timers?” I asked, throwing him a glance and then peering down at the front of the thing. It had a picture of a contorted helmet with some sort of mutilated human form painted on to it. It was only small, about one hundred and eighty pages. I couldn’t pronounce the name. Tod rolled his eyes, and took the book back, peering at its back cover as if into the eyes of an old friend.

“Gus – tav, Has – ford. Dummy.” He said, giving it back, and he went back to scouring the shelves for something new and exciting.

I flipped it open and read the first few lines of the opening chapter.

The Marines are looking for a few good men...

The recruit says that his name is Leonard Pratt.

Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim takes one look at the skinny red-neck and immediately dubs him “Gomer Pyle.”

We think that maybe he’s trying to be funny. Nobody laughs.

It seemed okay. And it was under a dollar, which was fine by me.

I said, “Is it any good then?”

“Yes.” He said.

“What’s it about?” I was reading the back, but it wasn’t as clear as I would have liked.

“Read it and see.” He picked up a book, threw it a cursory glance, and then tucked it back in amongst the others.

“So it’s good?” I asked.

I caught the trail end of what was probably a sigh of exasperation, and I saw him pause.

“Yes. Buy it.” he said, strained.

I held it, and watched him choose a book from the shelf. He delicately peeled back the first pages, and read the first lines. His eyes danced slowly across the opening text, and he appeared solemn there on the floor of the only bookstore in town.

I studied his face.

“Is it a good one?” I don’t think he’d even noticed me standing there still; as if he’d just lost himself in what he’d been reading; as if his mind and his intellect had floated free, if only for the briefest of moments.

He snapped to and closed the book shut, almost ashamed to have been caught and observed taking a private moment with what would now become his new book I think.

Obviously the opening lines had moved him. We’d been friends since we were both five, and I could tell when he was happy or not.

I couldn’t tell which at that time though; but I imagined it to be a mixture of both.

We approached the counter together and he still hadn’t answered.

He was ashamed that I’d watched him.

“What one did you get?” I asked again, getting behind him to pay for mine. Old Bert Finch was coming up from the back room to take our money. We were regular customers. In fact I’d never seen anyone else ever in there. We might have been his *only* customers.

Boy, it must have been a knock to him when I didn’t get any summer work.

Tod threw me a glimpse of the front cover as an answer of some sort. It was *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley.

I couldn’t begin to understand why he was moved, and I have never asked him why or how he gets affected in that way by such a thing as a book. But I know that he takes his reading seriously.

I wondered whether to ask if I could borrow it when he was done.

It was better to wait, I decided within one eighth of a second.

He fished in his back pocket for a dollar as Finch tucked it into a small brown paper bag and keyed up the transaction on his till which seemed about a hundred years old.

“Look’s like a good one.” I said.

“Yeah, well...” I knew that his slight depression at being caught in a moment of spiritual intimacy would pass. As it always did. I can’t say that any of our little crowd those days, myself included, were open with their feelings.

He paid old Finch and took the bag. He waited for me.

I put mine up on the counter.

I paid for it, took my own little brown parcel, and on my way out of the store called back “See you later Mr. Finch” at the old man behind the counter who waved goodbye with a grin that showed two missing teeth.

The door swung back behind me as I walked out, and a small bell above it rang to signal my exit.

Outside, we crossed the street, tucked our brown parcels down our jumpers, and then mounted our bikes.

Ted started to speak.

It was then that I saw her.

Star Wars wouldn’t come out for another four days then, you understand. So to me she was just some... apparition. A ghost or something. I didn’t fully understand what I was seeing, but it certainly registered.

She looked odd with her hairdo which looked like two Danish buns stuck either side of her head, but I don’t know. She was cute; cute but foxy.

Stepping out from the back of Finches Bookstore, she instantly stuck out like a sore thumb. I sat, half perched on, and half perched off of my bike, staring.

She rounded the corner coming towards me. Her eyes locked on to my own.

She stopped on the edge of the sidewalk, and blew me a kiss.

It floated toward me, that impression in the air of a warm and glowing fondness.

Drifting and swaying, floating forward for me.

I almost felt it land on my cheek *Pluck* and I raised my hand there on that spot to touch it. When I did that, she had gone.

Tod was staring at me. I was staring off into space, a dazed by quirky smile on my face, my hand touching my cheek making me look like an old woman who's seen a mother pushing her new born in a pram and wants to say hello.

I blushed and put my hands on the handle bars of my bike where, for a second, the knuckles went white.

“What was that?” he asked, moving his bike with his feet on the ground, so that he was beside mine.

“What?” I put one foot on to one my peddles.

“You were staring over there for about twenty or thirty seconds. I *was* trying to tell you something.” He started cycling away down the road casually, going slowly enough to give me a chance to start up beside him so that we could talk on our ride home.

I cycled beside him.

“Sorry.” Now I knew how he had felt when I'd been looking at him in a moment of complete daze. “What were you saying? I didn't hear any of it I swear. What were you saying?”

He touched the rectangular bump under his jumper which stuck out like mine, and then picked up speed.

“Doesn’t matter.” He said.

And we rode in silence.

I looked over my shoulder only once to see if I could spot her again.

But she was nowhere to be seen.

Before I got home, I said goodbye to Tod and went to the store on the corner to buy a cold bottle of Pepsi out of what change I had left. I had enough to get my mum a bar of chocolate. She only ate it when I brought it for her, and I knew that she enjoyed it for it being a random treat that I got her, and not a regular thing.

I paid for it and then tucked it down my jumper along with my book to surprise her. I held my bottle of Pepsi in one hand, and steered with the other.

I rode back up the street to my house, and locked my bike up in the garage before walking through the front door.

“Mum, I’m home.” I called through the hallway as I took off my sneakers.

“In here.” she called back, and I could hear the television keeping her company whilst I’d been out. I walked into the living room, and stood in the doorway of the living room; leaning against the frame like a hardened gunslinger in a rough bar, sizing up the local bar marauders but somehow acting cool at the same time.

Yeah, I’d seen too many westerns.

She turned around to look up at me from where she sat with her legs curled up on the sofa.

“Hi.” She said with a smile. I beamed back and then brought out the chocolate.

“Here,” I handed it to her, and she took it slowly, her bright green eyes catching the lettering on the wrapper.

“You shouldn’t waste your money, Hask.” She put it on the coffee table. “But then...”

I sat down opposite her.

I was born Haskell Smith. But Haskell just seems too much of a thing for people to say every time they need me or want to talk to me. So I’m just known as Hask.

Always have been.

“It’s *not* a waste,” I said.

“Thanks. I’ll have it after dinner.” she said, and then turned back to the television.

I sipped at my Pepsi as we watched *Starsky And Hutch*, and then held the empty bottle as we listened to the news and to what was going down in the big wide world, which wasn’t much.

The weather watch followed, and we were told to expect a storm and maybe a hurricane. Then she got up and switched it off, and slapped my leg lightly with her hand on her way out to the kitchen.

“Come on, you can help me do the dinner by peeling the potatoes.” She said.

I hesitated getting up, reaching inside my jumper where my book still sat in its brown paper wrapping. I reached inside my jumper and got it out, sitting it on the arm of the armchair, and then I took a moment to look around the living room.

Father hadn’t taken hardly anything at all when he’d left us. The house was still as it had been the day that he left.

Well, when they’d split from each other with what, as far as I have been led to believe, was mutual agreement that the relationship was dead.

There was still much of him in the house, like a roaming spirit that caught you unawares and reminded you at the most unexpected moments of what had been.

Before the shadow of change had thrown its long shadow across your lawn.

I sighed.

The shiny glass of the television reflected the strong light pouring in from the window.

Dust swam in the air creating a sort of haze.

I heard the chopping board being pulled out from the cupboard and I got to my feet.

Then I heard all movement stop. When I walked into the kitchen, she was crying over the board and the un-cut vegetables, as if at the same time we had both felt the same feeling of emptiness. And had been affected in the same way.

I knew better than to disturb her, so I made my way past her to the sink where I began to peel the potatoes for our dinner.

I started peeling away at their skin with the peeler. I ran it across their bumpy and knobbled surface, seeing how long I could make the piece of peel before it dropped clean from the potato and into the sink.

“So what are you doing with these potatoes, Mum?” I asked without looking up from my work.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught her lifting her hands to her eyes to wipe them clear of tears, and then I heard the knife picked up and a vegetable placed on the chopping board for the sacrifice of our daily meal.

“I’m not sure.” She answered, starting to chop away with deep and heavy cuts that I heard thump into the wood of the chopping board.

“Fine by me,” I said, continuing to peel.

It seemed to clear the air a little, and we got on with dinner in silence. Eventually she switched on the radio and we listened to some Marvin Gaye playing softly and almost inaudible in the background as the general hum of the kitchen gradually grew with the

noise of the tap running, the pans boiling, and some of the vegetables frying in sunflower oil.

I stared out at the hills on the horizon behind which the sun was now hiding.

Something had hit a nerve that day; every now and then we both felt low. But it passed, and we accepted it.

It isn't easy, coping with a cavity in your life that you can never imagine being filled again, but mum and I were doing the best that we could in coping with it.

And the best is all that we, and anyone, can do.

I stood by the window with my face lit by the dying light of the afternoon, and I thought of all that was missing.

Before my mum caught sight of it, I wiped away with the sleeve of my jumper a single rogue tear that had seeped from the starry corner of my eye, and started on its way down the curve of my cheek.

Then I set out our plates.

Dreamer,

You know you are a Dreamer,

But can you put your hands in your head?

Oh no.

The Christmas before Star Wars came out I was fourteen, and my mum had brought me a Javer record player; you no doubt know the one.

She'd saved for months to buy me it, and I have to say that it was my pride and joy. I had it on a stand, with the speakers by the sides on the floor, along with a small stack of records.

The sound was fantastic. It was my first music system.

Outside, the sky was deep blue, almost black, with just a hint of moody purple here and there in blotches that disappeared if you looked too hard.

Sort of like looking for something that, if you put too much effort into the searching of, will never be found.

I had the blinds up, and one of my windows wide open.

The cool evening air swam about my room like cold bath water.

I lay on my bed, on my back in just a pair of shorts. I was listening to a track called *Dreamer* by *Supertramp*. I'd seen their album *Crime Of The Century* whilst out with Tod and a few others from our little group, and had decided to save my money and buy it. It was the first piece of music that I ever spent money on, and I have it till this day somewhere. It's one of those mementos of a childhood long gone that you always keep and never seem to lose. I've found that that sort of thing's always there.

My light was off so that the room was perfectly dark, and I lay with my hands folded behind my head staring up at the lights playing on my ceiling from the street outside. My door was closed, and I had the volume quite a way up. Mum didn't mind. She never did.

Two cardboard aeroplanes that I had assembled as a small kid and never had the heart to get rid of, swung from their fixings on the ceiling moving rhythmically to every breath of air that entered my room.

It made my bare chest and stomach tingle.

I watched them move; my hands behind my head, my legs outstretched with my two feet touching the bottom corners of the bed. I felt safe and calm like a baby in a cot.

I breathed slowly.

My thoughts moved to my brother Marty, and to my father.

The two were related in more ways than simply being father and son; my father had been responsible for Marty going out in the first place, on the night that he was killed, and my brother Marty...

Well, his death was certainly one of the major factors in my parents splitting from each other.

In a marriage where my fathers relationship with my mother was growing all the more fractured, Marty's death had been the final push for him to leave. He walked out of that door in 1975, and he never came back.

It seems that the stress had simply been too much for the both of them. My father had blamed himself over everyone. *He* was the one who had started the argument that had caused Marty to walk out; *he* was the one who had let Marty storm out of the house never to return and never bothered to stop him; *he* was the one who took his death the worst.

He'd told me that bearing that pain inside, and then seeing it every day on my Mum's face, was like a thick finger pressing into an open wound.

So he'd left. He sent money at the end of every week. He phoned at Christmas but never on Birthdays.

And he stayed away. I think that it was for the best really.

When you think of people getting killed by drunk drivers, you think that it's just one of those accidents that happens to other people. But never to you. No, never will that sort of thing hit you in the face, you tell yourself.

Never.

Marty had been knocked down by a drunk driver, hit and run. It *had* happened.

The roads had been shiny with a cold, wintry rain that hadn't stopped for hours.

The WALK/DON'T WALK signs shone on the black tarmac; glimmers of green and red. Sparsely plotted streetlamps provided cones of dull orange illumination across the darkened shop fronts and over the mail boxes.

At ten that night Marty had been riding home on his bike, moving through the outskirts of the town, inward to where we live. He passed only one shop that was lit and open to customers. It had **PAWNBROKERS** stamped across its glass in bold red ink.

Even in *our* small town, with its population of only a few thousand or more, a pawnbroker is open all hours. From what I've been told, it's been going for years.

The owner smiled and waved, and Marty rang his bell.

Dreamer...

My brother turned the corner at the end of the street and met a slippery carpet of fallen leaves; dull green and amber brown. He started to slide on them.

Up ahead of him a dark blue Buick screeched across the intersection, which was dead, and headed straight for him. Marty, by the time that he had registered that the Buick was headed straight for him and begun to realise that he had to get out of the way, was already dead. He tried. By god, he tried.

You know you are a Dreamer...

The Buick's bonnet hit the front wheel of his bike as he tried to turn out of the way, and spun him up into the air where his bare head (*who wore a helmet anyway?*) impacted on the windscreen causing the glass to crack and shatter.

He fell off the side of the bonnet and did further damage to his head when his skull split upon hitting the tarmac. The Buick sat still, the front up on the sidewalk, and the back on the street, a shallow dent to its front and a windscreen that sparkled.

But can you put your hands in your head?

The driver woke.

Out of a drunken haze, he had been thrown forward in his seat when he'd hit the kid on the bike, and the seatbelt had slapped tight and slung back into his seat.

How many had he had that night? Only a few jars... how many? Ten? Twelve?

He looked around. The windscreen was obscured somehow. He looked out of his rear view mirror and saw nothing; only an empty intersection.

He glanced into his side view mirror and saw the boy lying limp on the sidewalk a few metres behind.

A pang of panic and understanding hit his heart.

But he couldn't move. He couldn't get up.

His hands were gripped tight around the steering wheel but he had not put them there.

The gears were thrown in reverse, but it was not him.

He was rolling the Buick back a little, concentrating so hard to keep her straight, yet not really sure what and why he was doing so.

He stopped beside the body on the pavement. He sat watching. Whoever the kid was, or had been, he wasn't moving. The driver spotted the steady pool of blood filling out on the sidewalk like a pool of black oil, and that was all that it took.

He put the gears forward and started off, steering out into an empty street with his wheels screeching and spinning on the tarmac.

Oh no...

Marty died, on the sidewalk with not a soul around to help him.

He died.

On wet leaves, in the middle of the night, with his broken bike some way away from him, with glass littering the street like an erratic spill of diamonds, he died.

The driver must have been someone from out of town, because the Police never found or identified the dented vehicle, or its driver.

The man behind the counter of the Pawnbrokers gave his statement, the only person in the entire town able to do so, and then a week later came to visit us.

He had a gold watch and some jewellery in a small velvet bag that he was giving us to dress Marty's body with.

Every Christmas Eve he comes around for dinner. In a way he's our last link with my brother.

The day that we buried Marty, is still just a blur.

But one image remains in my mind, as if it has been etched into my brain with heart-burn acid. I see that memory every now and again.

When funeral attendants lowered his coffin into the freshly dug earth, it started, at that very moment, to rain. Nobody moved. As far as I believe, I was the only person present who actually realised that it was raining.

The rain came down so slowly that it was almost as if in a dream. The sun was hitting it, and I remember it appearing golden like droplets of syrup. Some landed on my upper lip and I reached out to it delicately with my tongue.

The taste was sweet; but the after effect was sour, sort of like the pain everyone felt that day. That feeling, like swallowing a magic sugar that turns to salt once it touches the walls of your stomach, has always stuck with me.

When I think of Marty's death, I see him dying alone on the wet sidewalk.

I see that driver of the Buick, and he is always grotesque.

I taste the rain that fell when they dug his casket into the Earth like a poppy seed that would never grow or show life.

An agriculture of death and lost hope.

The record ended.

The arm jumped, hitting the end of the last track. I left it going like that.

I couldn't move.

I always regret thinking it, but I am glad that he died in the street, rather than wasting away in some hospital bed. Regret and gladness go together, hand in hand, but their union is ugly.

In a way, *I* am.

From what we were told, the head trauma alone would have rendered him a vegetable and I don't know if I could have handled seeing him like that.

Just a shell.

He wouldn't have been alive.

Listening to the speakers clucking as the needle bounced off of the end track again
and again in its own repeating chorus, I stayed on my bed.

Lying now on my stomach, I wept bitterly into my duvet and I tasted the sweet and
sour of that golden rain.

I said Dreamer,

You're nothin' but a Dreamer,

But can you put your hands in your head?

Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no.

Oh no.