

## THE CONNOISSEUR OF LOVE:

### The Posthumous Memoirs of Christian Leonard Hooker

Editor's Note:

This book is, much to my surprise, the third and final volume in what turned out to be a series. The author, Christian Leonard Hooker, wrote two novels earlier in the twenty-first century: *Houseboating in the Ozarks*, and *Begotten, Not Made*. The small group of readers who happened upon those books will recall that I reluctantly served as Chris's editor, and provided forewords and editorial notes to assist the reader in understanding Chris's unusual slant on things.

Chris disappeared from his home in Illinois at the conclusion of *Houseboat*, but resurfaced briefly in Costa Rica (only to vanish again) for the writing of *Begotten*. His long-suffering wife, Kazzie Sorenson Hooker, had every reason to believe that he was dead on each occasion.

He most certainly is dead now. I say this with some confidence, because a small Asian vase containing his ashes rests upon the mantle above my fireplace, five feet from where I now sit. Mrs. Hooker forwarded Chris's ashes to me after they had made their way to her from New Zealand, where Chris finally succumbed to the ravages of a "systemic melanoma" in a hospice high in the hills surrounding the capital city of Wellington.

The "Airborne Express" packet that contained Chris's ashes, in a clear plastic baggie, also held a handwritten manuscript appended to a typed note from Mrs. Hooker. In a word, Mrs. Hooker's note might be described as a sigh. Even in death, Chris was

exasperating her. His New Zealand manuscript described itself as his “memoirs,” Chris’s chosen final words for posterity. He knew he was dying. Mrs. Hooker quoted from a scribbled note, in Chris’s handwriting, at the bottom of the manuscript’s first page: “My dog Skeeter just wandered off to die alone when I was nine. I’m going to do the same. Please give my love to the kids.”

The New Zealand papers were Chris’s first attempt at non-fiction, so far as I knew - a death-rattle of candor at the end of a life of excess. Before turning to the manuscript, my guess was that Chris may have imparted his final thoughts on the meaning of his life; perhaps he had words of advice for friends and family about how to avoid certain pitfalls along their way. And indeed, there was some of that. But as I leafed through the pages, my attention was immediately drawn to a stylistic anomaly that distracted me from the text. On every second or third page appeared severe scrawls of black magic marker, redacting entirely whatever words Chris had written beneath these mutilations. Some of the marks covered virtually the breadth of a given page. Most of Chris’s final words and sentences survived this vandalism, but someone had obviously taken a profound dislike to certain of the author’s details.

I turned back to Mrs. Hooker’s note and discovered a lengthy post-script on the reverse side that I had overlooked:

P.S. Mr. Studge. You will note that I have deleted large swaths of my husband’s memoirs. There is good reason for those deletions. For purposes that I will never fathom, Chris decided to spend his dying weeks in New Zealand recounting, among other things, numerous sexual misadventures from his younger years.

Why would a person, facing imminent death, prepare to meet his Maker by including a litany of his sins of the flesh? What could have moved someone, anyone, to make a record of the

most shameful episodes of his life, just in time for the Grim Reaper?

I had always entertained the notion that my late husband had a death-wish. But this was something else, something other. This was practically a wish to be consigned to spiritual oblivion, a prayer for damnation.

Still, I couldn't bring myself to throw the whole manuscript away, even though some of this material was grossly pornographic. I kept wondering what the children would think, if they ever stumbled upon this filth - and yet I kept thinking it would be wrong to destroy Chris's last effort at communication.

So God help me, I decided on a compromise. I left the inoffensive passages and words as they were, but blotted out the rest. I figured that of all the people who might have come to understand Chris's mind, you might be the one best situated to salvage any value there may be in these memoirs. Certainly you've established yourself as a capable editor with Chris's fiction. I invite you to take what is good in these final words of Chris, and to add language of your own that is true to his intentions (as you perceive them), but expressed less graphically.

I am not a prude, and I stopped being jealous (where Chris was concerned) many years ago. Lord knows I believe in the potential for exquisite beauty in carnal passion between two loving people. But that transcendence can be captured in artful words, joyous words, without sliding into the gutter.

The trouble with Chris, always, was that he didn't know where or when to stop.

Good luck. You needn't bother to reply. Do what you wish with Chris's work. And thank you.

KSH

Well, I didn't know what to make of this. It seemed that Mrs. Hooker was under the delusion that I had some supernatural ability to manufacture words for Chris that would miraculously complete his final thoughts, without the rude edge that had so insulted his widow. And I confess that I did make a couple of initial attempts to fill in the blanks on a page or two of the manuscript, with wholly unsatisfactory results. My style

and Chris's were completely out-of-sync, and when push came to shove I really had no idea where he was heading with a particular recollection. The redactions were too severe, the remaining words too disjointed. It quickly became obvious that the prospect of finishing Chris's mutilated memoirs was out of the question.

Moreover, a common denominator for Chris's two works of fiction, *Houseboating* and *Begotten*, was a prevailing sense of innocence. Sure, a lot of disgraceful activity had taken place off-stage, but the strength of Chris's novels was a charming vulnerability, a surprising capacity on the part of his main characters (and particularly the protagonist) to roll with the punches and to carry no grudges. If Kazzie Sorenson Hooker was right, Chris had stepped totally out of that narrative structure to pursue a series of tell-all tales of shameless debauchery, in total disregard of the feelings of people whose secrets he was revealing so recklessly.

I was left with two options: either throw the whole thing into the fireplace that now underlies his silent ashes, or type Chris's words (or what was left of them) onto my computer. I decided on the latter. I couldn't bear to be the final destroyer of Chris's ultimate attempt at communicating his understanding of the incarnate world.

Thus, what you are reading is a bowdlerized modification of the posthumous memoirs of Christian Leonard Hooker. I suppose an advantage of distributing these pages in this manner, redactions and all, is that the reader can decide for himself or herself what Chris might have written. If you look at this as a challenging game, the result could be a literary "connect-the-dots," and you might even have a little fun supplying the salacious details for yourself, in your own words, drawn from your own experiences.

May I take this opportunity to thank those of you who have been with me from the start of this trilogy. Now that it's over, I'm feeling a little sad, much to my surprise. My sorrow is not so much at the demise of Chris, which was inevitable. He'd softened that blow by providing us with several trial runs at coping with his death. Rather, my sadness was, and is, prompted by the memory of a life unfulfilled, a potential unrealized, a final attempt at communication shattered and broken. Still, these surviving words of Christian Leonard Hooker are all I have left to offer to you.

Best wishes, one and all.

Finbar Studge.

## CHAPTER ONE

It was a different era. The sixties. I was young and slender – not particularly good-looking, but filled with manic energy, a zest for life.

Each night in central Georgetown, the Guyanese capital, I'd stroll from my room in the Park Hotel to an unnamed bar, so often that I came to be regarded as a regular. I didn't drink much, maybe a rum and coke, perhaps a shandy half-mixed with warm Banks beer.

A string of plain light-bulbs jutted across the ceiling over the bar's serving counter. I'd sit there and nurse my drink, tapping my foot to the latest calypso from the Mighty Sparrow. Behind me was an open lounge with porous walls of slim bamboo. That area was dark and deep. It beckoned me.

One of the women was named Shirley, but everyone called her Sheila. She was copper-skinned, and wore her hair straight back from her face, a silky black hairpiece high on the crown of her head. I can't remember the first time we met, but soon we became a Georgetown item. My first memory of her is not in that darkened area of the bar, but rather at a local screening of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. We walked hand-in-hand through the streets to the cinema's ticket office, ignoring the wolf-whistles of the young boys who knew of her profession.

But this first chapter of these memoirs is not about Sheila. It is about Petal, another woman from the darkness. I met her at around the same time, and whenever Sheila wasn't at the bar, I would spend my time with Petal. Her complexion was so dark that I had trouble seeing her in the bamboo room. Each night, she would reach over to me and [REDACTED] with my Swiss army knife, angling her torso [REDACTED]. Her [REDACTED] were massive, not unlike the [REDACTED] on my grandmother's salt-and-pepper shaker. We'd sit together on the couch listening to the music, [REDACTED] undulating [REDACTED] throbbing. Then, without a word, we'd [REDACTED] mad embrace, in total disregard of the bartender and the other customers. [REDACTED] bamboo [REDACTED]. "Yes! Yes!"

After each encounter, Petal would reach across me to the coffee table for a cigarette, which I would light for her with my pocket Zippo as she cupped her delicate hands around mine. "[REDACTED], big boy," she'd coo. She really cooed.

Nobody had ever cooed at me before. I tried cooing back, but succeeded only in [REDACTED], with my tongue in the ash tray.

This was a time when I was experimenting with transcendental meditation, there in the environs of the Park Hotel. It had occurred to me, in my youthful musings, that conventional notions about reincarnation were flawed by their adherence to linear time. Thus, the general idea seemed to be that a person could come back, after this life, as a cat or a frog or another human, and that the station of the succeeding life was determined by the moral quality of the life just ended. But my idea, having evolved in a series of meditative states in Georgetown's botanical gardens, was that all these lives, every one of them, were unfolding simultaneously, right this second, in what was sometimes mischaracterized as the "Eternal Now." I was Petal and she was me, right now, indulging in a perpetual and timeless game of hide-and-seek, where we could occasionally glimpse our universal oneness, but where it was impossible for a sentient being to maintain that knowledge if he or she were to have any chance at all of going about the daily chores of life. I came to believe that the proper metaphors for time were neither lines nor circles, but rather jokes, illusions, veils to be pierced. On very rare occasions, I'd catch one of these jokes and chuckle softly to myself - but mostly I'd just let life roll along.

Just as Petal was reaching [REDACTED] [REDACTED], and experimenting with the tuning fork, rolling her eyes back [REDACTED] bliss, I'd whisper to her, "I am you, you know," and she would lift her head away from mine to look deeply into my eyes with the most devilish expression. After, we'd remain locked [REDACTED] for a few

precious minutes, too weary to speak, too mindless to think, sensing the ineffable, emptied at the very ineptness of words.

I never took Petal to the movies. The closest we came to stepping out was to walk from the bar, on occasion, to a room in a house where Petal obviously had an ongoing financial arrangement with the owner. In that room, we had even more latitude to be uninhibited. A popular music album of the time was by the group headed by Carlos Santana and bearing his surname. The album was called “Black Magic Woman,” and the cover featured a spectacularly nude African woman lying arrogantly in a bed of flowers. Her [REDACTED] were full, her [REDACTED] inviting but intimidating, her [REDACTED] lanky and languorous. But her most striking feature was the simple blackness of her skin against those colorful flowers. [REDACTED] tufts of [REDACTED]. This is how Petal would appear to me, flowerless, in that rented room.

I’d sit in a chair beside [REDACTED], fully-clothed and marveling, as she [REDACTED]. Then [REDACTED] surveying [REDACTED] [REDACTED], timeless, open. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] with a golden yo-yo, playing “walk the dog,” [REDACTED] four buckets full, [REDACTED] [REDACTED].

And in the spirit of my meditative insights (above) that time was and is illusory (in the grandest of ways), I suddenly feel compelled – right now - to leap ahead in these

memoirs by approximately forty years. Bear with me. Readers of my fiction will know that I disappeared after the writing of my first novel, *Houseboating in the Ozarks*, never to return to Illinois again. What my friend (and erstwhile editor) Finbar Studge has never told you, in his forewords and editorial notes that accompany my two novels, is that prior to my disappearance he saw fit to include a long poem of mine (an excerpt from my second novel, *Begotten, Not Made*) in a highly-regarded anthology of creative writing that he edited in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Fin had some literary heavy-hitters in his lineup, very famous types, so it was a great honor for my poem to be selected - especially given that it consisted of sixteen pages of doggerel verse in the voice of a mutant Brer Rabbit.

And even more gracious than Fin's inclusion of this poem was his arrangement of a poetry-reading (for me!) at a prestigious Orlando, Florida, bookshop known as Urban Think. A reading! For Christian Leonard Hooker!

This was an opportunity for a great awakening. I was not yet a published author. The well-published and widely-admired Fin would read first, reciting from his most recent book of poetry - heartbreaking verse about loss, death; tender yearnings for redemption; in the end, acceptance of the inevitability of fate.

I noticed while he was reading that a majority of our audience was comprised of middle-aged women, and that not a few tears were being surreptitiously wiped away as Fin spoke in that full voice that rose from deep in his chest, his own eyes dry but flamboyantly long-suffering.

I'd had a few too many glasses of red wine, in an effort to counter the anxiety I was feeling about my own reading. As Fin completed each of his poignant poems, I

clapped a little too loudly from the sidelines, exuberantly high-fived a few startled folks within my wingspan, and occasionally whistled my approval, much to Fin's chagrin. Still, he was a master, much-loved in this literary community of Orlando, and he could handle anything. I loved him so.

Then it was my turn. Thankfully, I'd come with my Martin guitar and Hohner harmonica, and without introduction rushed into an enthusiastic cover of Neil Young's "Heart of Gold," winking at any friendly face each time I came to the line: "And I'm a-gettin' old." But soon I was out of such party tricks, and had to read my Brer Rabbit stuff. I'd highlighted a six-page excerpt for the presentation, about ten minutes' worth of minstrel show, shamelessly name-dropping the likes of Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault, Anton Chekov and Frieda Kahlo, in the hopes of distracting the audience from the banality of the content. And to my surprise, some of them *did* appear to be uncertain whether I might be more than a complete idiot. Derrida, in particular, had out-foxed them.

As I read, Fin paced nervously alongside the makeshift stage. After all, these were his people, this was his crowd, and he was doing me a great favor just having me here. Surely I wouldn't continue to abuse the platform I had been provided.

But about half-way through my allotted ten minutes of fame, it occurred to me (with such force that I had to stop speaking for a full two or three minutes, right in the middle!) that I was making eye contact only with the women in the audience. The men had become all but invisible. I was looking deeply into the women who were close enough, and they were looking right back! And for the most part they were laughing

uproariously, or at least giggling. But some of them, remarkably, appeared to be taking me seriously! [REDACTED]!

During that embarrassing interval of silence, as Fin was reeling with anxiety, I found myself wondering why this was so - why was I ignoring the eyes of men? Was it obvious that I was doing so? Was my selective gaze outrageously offensive to anyone other than poor Fin?

Anyway, I had to finish my reading, and I did. There was polite applause, perhaps a bit of relief. Casual mingling followed, glasses of wine, animated circles of conversation. A few kind souls even took the trouble to approach me, as I stood alone, to say they'd enjoyed the reading. "What an interesting concept!" said one elderly woman, decked in jewels. "Derrida and Brer Rabbit!" "Yes, yes," I replied. "Ha ha.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. Ha ha ha."

Then came the after-reading party. Fin and his lovely partner, Shannon (also an accomplished poet in her own right), had arranged a gathering at their bungalow in Winter Park – drinks, cheese, fingerfood, the usual stuff. A tall woman named Linda, in her fifties, strikingly elegant, small-[REDACTED], [REDACTED] and apparently unaccompanied, approached me to discuss literary theory, not one of my strong points. Before too long, we made our way out to Fin's patio, and then to the dimly lit area of the back yard that was quickly designated by the party-goers as "the woodshed." ("Chris and Linda have slipped away to the woodshed," I heard more than once.)

Linda and I sat on the grass in the moon-shadow of a palm tree, [REDACTED], as the muffled conversations, the clinking of glasses, the sophisticated laughter, echoed from the back porch of Fin's house. In a moment that neither of us had fully anticipated, Linda and I [REDACTED], my knee [REDACTED].

"[REDACTED] with a basketball?" she asked.

"That's a new one on me," I said. "Jesus." [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]!!

Just as we finished this ritual, I arched my head towards the house and was most surprised to see Fin pacing in our direction, marching really, armed with a photographic cell phone and a powerful flashlight. Without saying a word, he shone the light directly upon our [REDACTED] and snapped a few photos, for posterity I guess, or blackmail, or maybe for a future scrapbook of this glorious Orlando evening. Just as abruptly, he turned on his heels and goose-stepped back to his patio.

Slowly, I made my way back to the house, arm and arm with Linda, [REDACTED]. Soon I was invited by a few of the guests to play another song on my Martin. There in Fin's living room, I sang "Tangled Up in Blue" with considerable passion, sadly missing many of the bar chords in my inebriated condition, but it didn't seem to matter to anyone, least of all to me.. Soon I had a small circle of women, and a couple of men, singing along with the words and becoming increasingly raucous each time we came to the refrain: "Tangled up in blue!" they'd shout at the top

of their lungs. Once or twice I [REDACTED], and broke up the lengthy lyrics with harmonica breaks, which were well-received.

As I was returning my Martin to its case, one of the women who'd been singing had the temerity to [REDACTED] her keys, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. "Blast off," [REDACTED] thumping [REDACTED]. She was enormously overweight, but [REDACTED] and hugely fun, and surprisingly thoughtful. She and I [REDACTED] on the fridge, [REDACTED], right in public, much to Fin's manifest disgust. He'd reached the boiling point. "[REDACTED], right up [REDACTED], you son of a bitch!" he whispered in a menacing voice. The party didn't last long after that, and I returned by taxi to my hotel room, alone again.

Why was it, I wondered, that I was so focused on conversations and interactions with women? During one particularly fierce encounter near the end of the party, I recalled, Fin had put his face just inches from mine and shouted that I was a "bigot!" I didn't know quite what he meant at first, because I regarded myself as singularly unbigoted in matters of race, national origin, gender equality, sexual orientation, disability, and the other usual suspects. I asked Fin, calmly, to explain. He pulled his head back from mine, and suggested in a more somber voice that I was "*bigoted against men.*"

I had to admit that, for the most part, I didn't enjoy the company of men and didn't talk with them, and there in my lonesome Orlando hotel room I began to reflect on why this was so. Was it just American white men? After all, I'd made male friendships

in other countries, long-standing ones, with men of many nationalities, races, and orientations. And I'd had at least one successful friendship with an American man, Art Freyfogle, unobstructed by the conflicts that tarred my relationship with Fin. But Art was most unusual – a Chicago poet who had learned to navigate the outer limits of American letters in his verse, fuelled by his in-depth studies of Western philosophy and the rhythms of be-bop, a man who had been distinguished physically from early childhood by a fire that left him heavily-scarred with the visage of a mischievous Phantom of the Opera.

Did my reticence with males have something to do with authority figures from my youth, or from my own troubled relationship with my heavy-handed father Leonard? (Once, when I was about twelve, he became so annoyed at my girly ways that he grabbed me by my little shoulders, forced me to look up into his eyes, and offered three words of advice in a low staccato: "Be a man.")

Or was it simply that I wasn't interested in the things that men talked about most of the time? As I drifted off to sleep, I made a mental note to think more about this.

Fin was a study in contrast. He enjoyed the company of men, wrote about men, related to women in a manly way. He confided, in an unguarded moment, that he tended to take the side of men in matters of male-female warfare, and that his literary works reflected that predisposition. Finbar Studge stood up for men. He was, in fact, a man.

I wasn't sure I was a man at all. At least, manhood wasn't what I thought about when I thought about me. It wasn't high up on my definitions of self. [REDACTED], nothing overpowering. The things that were mannish about me were the things that made me most uncomfortable, the things that had caused me the most trouble. I felt best when I wasn't being a man at all, when I had

no feeling of gender. For example, my [REDACTED].  
And for much of my waking life, I felt gender-free.

If the constraints of professional life required me to pretend to be manly from time to time, I could do it. I could rear my shoulders back, make good eye contact with authoritative figures, shake male hands with a semi-firm grip, say reassuring manly things about staying “on task” and being “accountable.” But it was just a game, a putting-on of costumes, a brief performance. As soon as one of these episodes was over, I abandoned maleness as quickly as possible, and sought out female companionship for conversation, goodwill, and relaxation. In a particularly vicious attempt at insult, Fin sneered that [REDACTED]. “[REDACTED] lesbian [REDACTED] man’s body,” he laughed.

Admittedly, my behavior at Fin’s and Shannon’s party had included a good deal of shameless, over-the-top flirting. This is what outraged Fin most of all. “A sex-addicted slimeball,” he called me. But I had no sex with anyone in Orlando, [REDACTED] Malaysian cab driver [REDACTED]. And sex wasn’t the point of the many conversations with women, no matter what poor Fin may have perceived. I wasn’t trying to get into anybody’s [REDACTED]. No way.

Ah well. Back to Petal and Sheila. Those were my formative years, my [REDACTED] awakening, there in the sad streets of Guyana. At some point, I stopped seeing Petal altogether, although I continue to think about her to this day. I wonder if she’s still alive? If so, I doubt that she would be a pretty sight. But goodness, in her youth . . . [REDACTED] bonanza. My time with her didn’t end

because of any sudden event or reflective conversation. One day, I simply stopped seeing her, and more days followed, and soon she was no longer a part of my day-to-day life.

Sheila was another story. The ending of our relationship was quite dramatic. I had taken her out to dinner the night before, at the Pegasus, the closest thing Georgetown had to an up-market establishment at the time. We enjoyed a pleasant evening, Indian food, white wine, a calypso dance or two on the Pegasus dance floor, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] high heels. We'd taken a taxi back to our bar, and after dropping her off I made my way to my room in the Park Hotel.

The next day, on a whim, I decided to visit her home in a tawdry Georgetown suburb. I'd never been there before, but she'd given me general directions, not by way of invitation but just to share with a kindred spirit some understanding of her circumstances. I rode my bicycle through the dangerous outer-Georgetown streets, and after reaching the designated community, I asked around for Sheila. "Shirley, maybe," I said. "Sheila or Shirley." I provided a general description in flattering terms - Sheila was a strikingly beautiful woman. In another lifetime (or indeed in this one according to my peculiar formulations of reincarnation) she could have carried herself regally, adorned in African fineries with her head held high, looking straight ahead as people spoke her name.

To get to her home, a wooden shack really, I had to tip-toe my way over raw sewage and other collective filth. There was no vegetation in the area, just mud and trash. Once or twice, I noticed a curtain being hastily drawn as I passed by a dusty window.

Sheila's back door was open, dangling at a slight angle from a broken hinge. I poked my head in and called her name, both her names. No one seemed to be home, so

after a few minutes I started to retrace my steps to my bicycle, when I heard a shuffle from one of the interior rooms. “Sheila?” I cried.

Two beautiful black children, hand-in-hand, a boy and a girl, walked shyly from a front room to the back door and stared up at me. I got down on my haunches and cupped their heads in my hands. No words were spoken. Their stares were unflinching, innocent, heartbreaking. As I turned to go, I saw that the toilet in the back porch was clogged with feces and newspaper, and had been for some time.

The next evening, I walked over to the bar as usual, and asked the bartender if he’d seen Sheila. He’d never been unfriendly before, but this time he turned his head and wouldn’t speak. A woman approached from behind the bamboo and said, “Shirley’s in the hospital, white man. You should go and see her.”

She had a room to herself. Her arm was in a cast, and various bottles of liquid were connected to one part of her body or another. Her face was a mess of cuts and bruises. She had dark circles around her eyes. I took her unbroken hand, and a big tear fell from my right eye onto the white linen that covered her breasts.

“Just stay out of it, Chris,” she said. “Just go away.” I never saw her again.

## CHAPTER TWO

more than once, clothes hanger, tai chi, Rimbaud and Verlaine, still too close for comfort. “, my God!” She red-hot, yet and what could I do? I grabbed the soy sauce and ! It was all too much for me.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED].

I first met Finbar Daniel Studge in Okaw City, Illinois, when we were eleven years old. He was a very pretty boy, with those brilliant light-blue eyes that had flitted their way through his ancestral gene pool like a Hapsburg chin. He wore his hair longer than any other boy in the school, in the style of Cary Grant, when the rest of us were sporting butch-wax flat tops. I cannot truthfully say that Fin and I fell in love at first sight, but clearly something unusual happened, and we proceeded to carry this ambiguous friendship through the half-century that followed.

Okaw City was a small community, population around 3,000, in the farming flatlands of central Illinois. I was the new boy in town. As thinly fictionalized in my first novel, *Houseboating in the Ozarks*, my father Leonard had lost his job as the sports coach of the Quincy College Hawks, and our poor family began its steady decline into mediocrity and poverty of the spirit. Fin was the local doctor's son. His mother, Rosa Studge, was as close as Okaw City came to glamour, a regal woman who sat with perfect posture at her grand piano, playing Mozart and Brahms, clearly meant for something finer than this. Fin had one younger sister, Sinead, a fetching beauty whose DNA was obviously better-configured than my own. The Studge family was Okaw City royalty.

And with royalty came the usual whisperings and wisps of scandal. As Fin would later chronicle in his own fiction and poetry, Dr. Harry Chalmers Studge had a drinking

problem that left a hanging doubt over his otherwise deft and delicate surgeon's fingers. No one in town ever actually *saw* Dr. Studge reeling from drink, except his own family. He could certainly handle his liquor. But drink he did, to Fin's embarrassment and consternation.

One day young Fin, aged about twelve, waited for his father to drive off to the local hospital for a consultation, and thereupon snuck into the two-car garage with a b-b gun. Wearing combat fatigues, Fin (according to his later telling) lined up thirty-six bottles of beer and a dozen Jack Daniels along the interior wall of the garage, positioned himself chest-down on the concrete floor in combat position, and proceeded to blast away successfully at well over one hundred dollars of booze. When Dr. Studge returned from the hospital, he saw what Fin had done. True to his royal nature, he did not lose his temper. Rather, he called young Fin into the garage, sat down with him on a pair of folding metal chairs, and said five words that Fin never forgot: "I'm not perfect, you know."

Later that very day, I borrowed Fin's b-b gun and carried it to the grass of the Studge family's front yard. I lay on my back and fired b-b's straight above, aiming at nothing at all, just the huge expanse of the sky itself. I pulled the trigger about thirty times – pling, pling, pling, pling. After the final shot, I continue to stare at the imagined path of that last b-b, and after a few seconds a beautiful golden orb appeared high in the blue summer sky. It didn't occur to me that this might be the b-b. In my youthful bent for the dramatic, I thought it was a UFO or a mysterious new planet. It started to inflate, and became more radiant as it grew. I had no sense that it was moving in any direction – simply that it was hovering above me and expanding. At the last second, for reasons that

were never clear, I turned my head sharply to the right, and heard a small “plunk” in the soft ground beneath where my left eye had been. I dug with my fingers into the earth, and soon found that last b-b, buried about an inch beneath the grass.

These pre-pubescent years in Okaw City were a time of sexual discovery for both Fin and me, albeit according to slightly different timetables. There were magazines, of course, with [REDACTED] in spurs, [REDACTED] jodhpurs, [REDACTED], and other curiosities, but they were much tamer than the explicit materials that became available to succeeding generations of curious Illinois boys.

One summer afternoon, after a Little League baseball game, Fin and I gathered in the kitchen of the Hooker home, on the poor side of the Okaw City railroad tracks. We were alone. After a lively discussion on the intricacies of baseball’s infield fly rule, and hitting the cut-off man on a throw from the outfield, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] in the sink, of all places, followed by [REDACTED] jack-hammer [REDACTED]. “Gosh,” I said, impressed. “I didn’t know *that!*” Fin had the considerable advantage of being a doctor’s son, with access to helpful medical texts, and he [REDACTED] before we’d even *heard* of menstruation. [REDACTED]. It really wasn’t fair.

We became fast friends after that, although our relationship came to be predominantly cerebral. We devised elaborate methods for communicating telepathically. Fin would gather a group of boys around him at one end of the school gym, and I would gather a separate group at the other end. A member of one group would draw a simple geometric design on a sheet of paper, anything at all, and the idea was that by staring at the design the sender, either Fin or I, could sear the image into his

brain, and the receiver would pick up the brain-waves and draw the same thing at the other end. Amazingly, we were able to pull it off with unexpected success, and our reputations as mind-readers grew out of all proportion.

We also collaborated on short verse, under the impression that our efforts were uncommonly witty. Here are a couple of examples:

*Furrowed Fields*

By Fin Studge & Chris Hooker

I'm a gangster, yessirree,  
And everybody shoots at me.  
Bang, bang, bang,  
Here comes a gang.  
Of cops.

Or,

*The Maple's Lament*

By Fin Studge & Chris Hooker

Run, dog, stop.  
Stop, dog, run.  
Good dog.

We thought these efforts were uproariously funny, and laughed hysterically at our collective genius. Great things were in store for us, or so we thought.

But soon we became distracted by teenage girls. By the time we were in high school, some of our female classmates were developing [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], and our telepathic minds began to wander. A cheerleader named Annabelle Chapin sat in the desk next to me in algebra class, and I couldn't help but [REDACTED] toothpick [REDACTED]

reasonable facsimile [REDACTED] across broken glass. She was a mess, all right, but smiling.

At first, she seemed to enjoy my attentions, but she soon tired of them and reported me to the homeroom teacher, Mr. Baird, who took an unusual interest in his role as Annabelle's protector and my disciplinarian. [REDACTED] with a pencil sharpener, then [REDACTED] without even opening the window! I was horrified. Fin witnessed this whole thing, and suggested that I report it to the police, but I was too embarrassed. I started to leave Annabelle alone, even averting my eyes as I passed her in the hallway, but this seemed to have the opposite of the desired effect. She [REDACTED] twice [REDACTED], and even suggested that Fin and I [REDACTED] with the overhead projector! Both of us at once!

We went only as far as running her net stockings [REDACTED] with the help of the mimeograph machine a couple of times, as Annabelle made the strangest noises we had ever heard. Clearly she was way ahead of either of us. Still, the whole experience gave me food for thought, and I became an inveterate [REDACTED], shamelessly practicing my newly-discovered art by masticating carefully in the belief that I had a coming-of-age duty to fulfill with every chew. What an idiot.

Within a year, I was in my first meaningful relationship, with a small gymnast named Winnie Ford. Fin and I drifted apart for a time, as his interests were taken up with Sarah Peterson, the first female president of the local chapter of the Future Farmers of America. Very occasionally we would double-date, [REDACTED] in the rear [REDACTED], as Fin parked the Studge family Oldsmobile in a moonlit oasis,

surrounded by cornfields, beneath a tall maple known as “the hanging tree.” █  
█ as the car shook.. “No,” I  
said firmly, but I was scared. Fin and Sarah █, “Ahhhh!”  
“Ahhhh!” And little *Winnie* was capable of contortions I had never imagined. When she  
took off her glasses, █ rapid-fire, with a rat-a-tat-  
tat. █, and didn’t even know what tumescence *meant*, let  
alone █ Fin’s garage door-  
opener.

But all the while, as we played our teen-age games in the innocent certainty that  
life like this would never end, the Creator of the Universe was devising a horrid plan that  
would snap both Fin and me from our collective reverie. In Miss Claasen’s English class,  
we’d been studying Thomas Hardy’s dark musings about the infamous iceberg loitering  
in the north sea, waiting patiently for the unsuspecting *Titanic*. The same thing was  
about to happen to us.

One summer afternoon, Fin’s Okaw City royalty came to a crashing end in the  
middle of a blacktop road surrounded by an Illinois cornfield. For no reason at all, a  
twenty-year-old farmer – growing, maturing, bursting from youth into Illinois manhood  
(as all the while Dr. Studge was carrying himself with the quiet dignity of a man on death  
row) - drove his Chevy pick-up through a railroad warning signal and hit, broadside, the  
luxury Oldsmobile of Dr. Harry Chalmers Studge. Both Dr. Studge and his ancient  
father-in-law, poor old Philip McCabe, were killed almost instantly. I have fictionalized  
much of the aftermath of that fateful day in each of my first two novels, *Houseboating in  
the Ozarks* and *Begotten, Not Made*. Nothing would ever be the same.

### CHAPTER THREE

I am writing these memoirs from a private hospice in the wealthy Wellington suburb of Roseneath. I have a lot of ill-gotten money with me, held in miscellaneous foreign currency accounts, but I'm told that I have only a few months to live. So be it.

A couple of years ago, following a daring escape from Costa Rica into Panama and beyond, I found myself standing in the shower of an apartment in the Bolivian mountains of Sacre Villazon. As the luke-warm water flowed over my back, my fingers fumbled onto a walnut-sized lump under my left shoulder blade. A Bolivian oncologist, Hector Tejada, diagnosed the lump as the secondary site of a cancer that would kill me. He excised the walnut and gave me eight weeks of radiotherapy. He was never able to find the cancer's primary site.

At first I was morose and sullen that this could have happened to me. But a few months passed, and I started feeling pretty good. Maybe it was a false alarm. I joined a fencing club in Bolivia, specializing in the saber, and soon became a minor local legend known only as "El Gringo," easily recognizable behind my mask for my dreadlocks and my swashbuckling style.

My teacher, a former Olympian from Colombia who had taken the professional name of Esmeralda Chavez, often complimented me on my lunge and my parries. "You are a natural, senior," she beamed in Spanish, as I went through my foot-drills. "Such aggression. Such stamina." I soon had the opportunity to [REDACTED] after hours, with the tip of my saber. Had we been fencing for real, I'm ashamed to say

that Esmeralda would have died a thousand deaths, but as it was [REDACTED]  
the fingers of my glove in her [REDACTED], “Si! Si!” [REDACTED]  
relish [REDACTED] so deep.

But all the while, Costa Rica was pursuing extradition with a vengeance (the underlying details of my Central American crimes have been thinly fictionalized in Finbar Studge’s foreword to my second novel, *Begotten, Not Made*), and I had to move fast, cancer and all. Following one last [REDACTED] thrust [REDACTED] [REDACTED] as the hummingbirds [REDACTED] with Esmeralda, I hitched a succession of rides in ramshackle produce trucks that somehow carried me over and through the Andes to the Chilean port of Antofagasta. A few days later, I stowed away on a Portuguese cargo ship to venture into the South Pacific. I had no idea where the ship was heading, but after several days I found myself walking freely in the streets of Wellington, New Zealand, a completely anonymous man in a poncho.

I rented a room at the Quest hotel on the corner of Willis and Ghuznee, and quickly became a fixture in Cuba Street’s coffee shops. I’d café-hop all day long, laptop in tow, sitting alone for hours with a bottle of water, a loaf of bread, and a bowl of soup, typing notes and sketches for the New Zealand novel I hoped to write. Day after day would pass without a single conversation with anyone. I sampled Wellington’s Courtnay Place nightlife a couple of times, especially Molly Malone’s for the Irish music, but I felt like a ghost, standing alone with a Corona in one hand, gazing at the stage until my legs buckled beneath me. Once or twice I [REDACTED] with [REDACTED] [REDACTED], navigating my way to their quarters on the public transport system, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] on Lambton Quay!

██████████ even a meaningless tryst ██████████  
straddling ██████████ in Wellington's only cable car, but I had nothing to sell. Nothing at all. I was the anonymous man.

A few months after I arrived in Wellington, I started suffering from night sweats and other minor discomforts, but put that down to my unusual circumstances as a virtual refugee in a new country, where I knew no one and no one knew me. Then I developed an unsightly skin condition that prompted me to see a local Wellington doctor, Hermione MacLellan.

"Your skin doesn't worry me," she said. "It will clear up. But there is something wrong with your liver." Dr. MacLellan arranged for an ultrasound, and as the results appeared, she sighed. "You have a large mass growing on your spleen," she said matter-of-factly. "We can get rid of *that*, but what really worries me, with your history, is this flecking on your liver." She pointed to some spots on the screen, but it all looked like a Jackson Pollack to me.

As I write, I am without a spleen, and I've had chemotherapy that has been largely successful, and my pain is controlled with morphine. But my strength is gone. Shortly before I moved from the Quest into the Roseneath hospice, Dr. MacLellan told me that if there was anything I wanted to do in my remaining time, I should do it now. I rested my head on her shoulder and wept softly. All I could think to do was to write my own story, or at least parts of it. I had no imaginative energy left for another novel.

As I began these memoirs, I had no agenda. I cared nothing for chronological order, nothing for comprehensiveness, nothing for conventional sensitivities. I made only

one vow to myself: that every word I wrote would be true, to the best of my ability to make it so.

On a daily basis, I reshuffled the papers that had poured from my printer. The episodes with Sheila and Petal, for example, came very late in the writing, but now appear in the first chapter of the memoirs. I can't explain it. I just wrote and shuffled, wrote and shuffled.

Needless to say, I had no remaining energy for [REDACTED], and no inclination. I had other fish to fry.

I tried writing about my love for my children, and for my soon-to-be widow, but each time I re-read what I had written it seemed false, and I was disgusted with myself. It was not the love that was false; it was the words. I loved my family. More than anything. What more was there to say? That I had made a terrible mess of everything? That was obvious. I was more aware of my failings than anyone. No one would ever understand why I disappeared to Costa Rica, or why I spent my dying days alone in New Zealand. Every attempt I made at explaining these things just sounded like pious self-justification, when my true feeling was the deepest remorse that I was not up to the challenge of life's contradictions. I was a failure. I had let down the people I loved most.

[Editor's Note: At this point in the manuscript, Chris's widow had scrawled the words "Ho ho" and "what an asshole" in the right margin. What appeared to be a tear-stain blotted the "hole" part of the last word.]

Anyway, on with the show. Unlike Fin in his middle years, I was never one to [REDACTED] with my friends' wives. I had some scruples. And after I reached the age of 45, I was never again interested in women under 30. I often slept with

younger women, but in my case “slept with” meant exactly that. The most they would get from me was a friendly cuddle. I wasn’t interested in their [REDACTED]. Often [REDACTED] (yikes!), but it wouldn’t get them anywhere. I had a particular interest in women in their 40s or 50s, when that beautiful sadness at life’s broken promises appeared in their eyes, after they had taken [REDACTED] by the dozen, if not by the hundreds, and [REDACTED] to beat the band.

Shortly before I disappeared from Illinois, I developed an insight that never seemed to fail. “There are four words that every woman wants to hear,” I would say. “No matter what the situation, no matter what the circumstances.” Invariably, the woman I was talking with would bite. She had to know what the magical four words were, or what I thought they were. I’d pause for effect, to make it seem like I was a wise person instead of a wise guy, and I’d draw close and whisper the four words that every man should have at the tip of his tongue: “What would you like?”

The words had to be said not in a lascivious way, but in all sincerity, whether the subject matter was household chores or vacation spots or significant purchases or [REDACTED]. It wasn’t a matter of linguistic cunning; it was a matter of honesty. “What would you like?” And you had to be ready to deliver, even if delivering meant disappearing. [REDACTED] [REDACTED], not a lap-dog.

Not everyone agreed, of course, but the broad consensus was that those four words weren’t bad. They turned me from a theoretician into: a connoisseur of love.

## CHAPTER FOUR