

– JUNKIE, INDIANA –

Steven Key Meyers

1.

BORN ON A SIDEWALK, I was right at home. Her father kneeled on the cement next to me, Cordelia across from us. Fewkes liked to be there Mondays, the babykillers' busy day, though it was a sacrifice, since Monday's a good day for scrapping, too—people drag junk out to the alleys over the weekend. Fewkes worked Sundays instead, trawled behind houses all day long, counting on God to know he meant no disrespect to His Sabbath. Anyway, Father Loomis called us stalwart witnesses. They always took me with them.

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Eight or ten of us were there one cool day early in April. Whenever a car nudged to the curb everybody sank to their knees, Fewkes groaning. Everybody but me: I sat in my wheelchair, poster boy for *happy-to-be-alive-with-all-his-problems*, poster boy for *better-that-his-mother-had-him*, poster boy for *a blessing*.

Most of those who braved the court-mandated corridor through us were blushing young women accompanied by older ones. Fewkes drilled them as they passed, holding out his hands in appeal, stubbled cheeks sunken against his jaw, reddish mustache overhanging the black Groucho. Since the court order, we don't shout about the pain inflicted on the unborn, but offer mute testimony instead, as symbolized by the electrical tape over our mouths (except mine – need all the breath I can get).

The tape made Hitlers out of Fewkes and the rest, but on Cordelia seemed just a stray daub. Angelic in her quilted jacket, arms bent at the elbows, hands

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cupped, eyes shut, alabaster face tilted back, curly hair vividly red, she looked younger than her sixteen. The women tended to veer towards her, but she had a way of opening her eyes in dismay and steeping her hands pleadingly that hurried them through the blacked-out doors. When they came out again, everybody dropped once more to their knees, hands over eyes, heads bent in grief.

Fewkes shook his head at me as two women fled indoors from Cord's appeal, and I knew he was thinking, *If they can walk past my baby to kill theirs, they're just devils.* She was all he had; his wife was dead, his son in prison. One day Father Loomis showed us an Annunciation and thumped Mary with his finger. "Cordelia's spittin' image," he said. "A motherly child: That's *Cord.*"

Her heart encompassed both babies unborn and a certain blond boy. She could ignore the city's restless energies, the cars and buses, the fire trucks booming

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past, even the slaughterhouse pigs screaming from down the street, to give secret voice to her heart: “*Jordan, Jordan, Jordan, I love you.*” Even as her knees ached, she was ecstatic in contemplating her beloved’s image: “*I love you, Jordan!*” Only Louisville’s municipal roadkill truck passing amidst a stench of shoveled-up dogs, cats, squirrels, raccoons and possums could threaten her concentration.

At 4 o’clock, a guard locked the doors and Fewkes scooped her to her feet.

“Time to go, babe.”

She blinked as though coming out of a trance. “OK, Daddy.”

“Help me with Paul.”

After pushing me to the Ranger and fireman-lifting me to the seat and folding my chair behind, Fewkes pumped up his bad tire, smoking while the compressor chugged. Then we loaded up at White Castle.

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Even sucking our Cokes, Cord was moody the whole way home. The truck wasn't up to the Interstate, so we took the cross-country route, striking across the Ohio and north through open country, past fields groomed by gigantic combs. Shady Acres Trailer Park, overlooking the chutes and rapids of the Whitewash River Gorge in Chuterville, Indiana, is an hour north.

On the way up into the hills we passed upright brick manses standing back from the road, ranch houses carving cornfields into suburban quarter-acres and clapboard farmhouses rising amidst barns and silos, and looped two or three stone courthouses.

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2.

THE NEXT MORNING Jordan stirred awake in the drizzly gloom when Adam's phone alarm barked its command *Niggaz Rize Up*. He freed an arm from beneath his cousin's weight, groped for the phone, silenced it and, scrubbing his shorts to untangle his crotch, got up to pee.

When he returned Adam was sitting up smoking, brooding. Each having been thrown out by his mother, they were staying at my Mom's trailer – their aunt Jasmine Stocker's – at Shady Acres, collapsing every night as late as they could manage on her faux leather pullout. I was already in the kitchen eating cereal.

Adam's stocky and not very tall, his body hairy, but at 23 (Jordan's 19) his angular head balding,

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merely tufted with dark hair. Makes up for it with a billy-goat beard. Five years ago, Chuterville's young men's fashion was to gauge the ears, spread the lobes with colored disks, and Adam followed it. Fashion moving on, no one wears disks now, save for apologetic clear or flesh-colored ones meant to go unnoticed. Adam scorns those, as well as the surgical repairs others are resorting to; his earlobes dangle, empty loops.

"Time?" Jordan suggested, pulling on yesterday's clothes. "Adam?"

"All right, all right."

Adam peed, found clothes on the floor, slapped on rectangular glasses. He had the use of babymama #3's old purple Honda on condition he pick her up without fail at her parents' for her shift at Walgreens; take her there and later bring her home.

As we trailed outdoors—they fireman-carried me to the backseat, not bothering with my chair—

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Cordelia was watching from across the way through screens spun on the outside with spider webs that made the scene look weepy. Morose as Adam was, Jordan snuffled with the laughter of a good-humored youth. Got me in, and capered to the other side in soiled white jeans, something rolling at the crotch, and a beater that showed off biceps like handgrips. *Jordan*, Cord was sighing, making the spider webs shimmer, *I love you, I love you.*

Adam said, “God, do I want to get high.”

Jordan snuffled a laugh and, to the rockslide sound of tires on gravel, off we went to get the babymama to Walgreens.



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3.

NOT A GREAT IDEA to be born on a sidewalk, but it wasn't mine. This was 25 years ago. What happened was my mother, Jasmine Stocker, 17 years old, nine months pregnant, and *desperate* to get high, waddled down the sidewalk to see what might turn up. Which was an old guy working on his backyard fence.

"Hey, mister," said Jasmine Stocker. "This might sound funny, but I don't know where I am. Where *am* I?"

Big as a balloon as she was, naturally she expected to be taken indoors, solicitously sat down, given a glass of water, and she'd see what developed when she took out her knife. Maybe cry "*Rape!*" to his wife in hopes of reaching an immediate settlement.

But this guy was an asshole. Looked her over, lips

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compressed, went back to his pickets as he told her, “You’re in Chuterville, Indiana.”

“Chuterville, *Indiana*? Where the hell’s *that*?”

“Missy, left at the corner and second right? Police station’s not a quarter mile away. They’ll help you out.”

“I don’t feel so good, mister. Don’t need the police station, I need—”

“You want, I can call them for you.”

There’s a reason why Indiana’s official state motto is *Get off my lawn!* (Just kidding.) But his rudeness, the shock of it, started me coming. Jasmine Stocker sank to the concrete and found she was bleeding, raised a bloody hand to that old man.

Know what that jerk did? Went indoors and called 911. Didn’t care that I was stuck in the birth canal gasping for air where there wasn’t any.

That’s why I can’t walk, can’t talk and have cravings every moment of the day—came into this

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world addicted to heroin, mine the honor of being the first child born an addict in Chuterville County. Rise above it, though. I'm smart and a bookworm, and thanks to SSI the household breadwinner, too.

Though I can use my arms and hands somewhat, it's easier for me to let the computer voice read. Right now I'm on Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe or the History of a Young Lady*. The way the computer flattens those rounded 18th-century periods takes some getting used to:

There are people who love not your brother, because of his natural imperiousness and fierce and uncontrollable temper. They say, that Mr. Lovelace could not avoid drawing his sword: and that either your brother's unskillfulness or passion left him from the very first pass entirely in his power.

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4.

ALL MY LIFE, Aunt Bunny (Adam's mother), Aunt Kitty (Jordan's) and their sister Jasmine Stocker – *Mom* – have beguiled and terrorized the men of Chuterville in pursuits that keep life interesting, their husbands on the ball and themselves high, though they also, even as time and drugs erode their personal charms, go to prison in regular rotation. Their great-great-great-grandmother, daughter of honored Early Settlers, was the first white child born in the county, so it's fitting the sisters were themselves pioneers of opiate addiction.

At the moment, Bunny was finishing a sentence at Rockville Prison for kiting checks, but the State of Florida had given notice of its intent to extradite her to serve the four years for muling drugs it sentenced

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her to *in absentia*. Our relatives talked gaudily of chain gangs.

Meanwhile, Kitty at long last was having some luck. . .

## *Junkie, Indiana*

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