

Skinner

By Joseph Winter

In the early evening in the middle of July, Eric Brewer pulled into the Dunkin Donuts parking lot on his Suzuki dirt bike. He had just finished working a 10-hour day on a roofing crew, hauling tar up ladders and pounding nails in 90 degree heat. He parked the bike along the side of the building and took off his helmet. He rotated first one arm in its socket, then the other, trying to work out the stiffness in his muscles. Then he pulled a bandana out of his back pocket and wiped the sweat from his eyes. A few of the teenagers loitering in the parking lot regarded him with neutral expressions. Eric recognized their faces and knew most of their names. He stuffed the rag back in his pocket and walked over to where Scott Harris lay sunning himself on the hood of his Cutlass Supreme.

Since it had replaced the ARCO station five years ago, the Dunkin Donuts at the intersection of High Street and Route 138 was a popular summer hangout spot with the local teenage crowd. Beginning in the late afternoon, they would congregate in the parking lot, smoke cigarettes and type text messages on their cell phones. Come 7 p.m., there were usually a dozen or more milling around, waiting for something to happen.

Scott Harris, thirty years old, was the group's senior-most member and its chief supplier of pot. On a strictly limited basis, he also dealt small quantities of coke and the occasional OxyContin. But Scott's primary business was buying and selling clams wholesale, which was very lucrative in the summer months when the tourists arrived. Eric hated digging clams, but every year he renewed his license, and on days when the price per pound was high enough, he'd go out to the mud flats and dig a few bushels. But only once did he ever sell his clams to Scott, and this because his usual buyer was getting married that day and his only other option was in jail on a DUI.

Sipping iced coffee and leaning back against the windshield of his Oldsmobile, Scott Harris saw Eric pull in on his Suzuki and said something to Brian Sullivan, called Sully, who leaned against the driver side door smoking a cigarette. Sully was twenty-two, the same age as Eric. He often served as the middleman on Scott's pot deals and certain other ventures. What he got in return for his services was unclear.

As Eric approached the Oldsmobile, Sully roused himself and stepped to the front of the car. Behind him, Scott closed his eyes and went back to resting his head on the windshield.

Eric Brewer is eating tuna fish sandwiches and Doritos over his friend Brian Sullivan's house. Eric is tall, over 5 feet, which is tall for his age, says his father, who is very tall, but the gift comes at a cost. Eric is uncoordinated, awkward, and is afraid when the older pitchers throw the ball at the plate where he stands holding the bat barely off his shoulder, frozen with a fear he knows even then is misplaced. But he can't do anything about it. Standing there, the only thing in the world is the ball. He dare not swing the bat. But Sully, he is not scared. He misses more than he hits, but he is not afraid of the ball or the older boys who throw it. He is a good four inches shorter than Eric, at least,

but he moves his body like he owns it, whereas Eric feels like his body belongs to someone else, that it was given to him by mistake and someday its rightful owner will come calling for it.

“You need something?” Sully said, but before Eric could answer two boys nearby started roughhousing, knocking the cigarettes out of each other’s mouths and throwing headlocks. Sully watched them as they laughed and grappled and drifted closer to Scott’s car.

“Hey faggots,” he said, his voice level but authoritative. “Suck each other off somewhere else.”

“Sorry Sully,” one said, his head wrenched sideways against the other’s chest.

Sully turned back to Eric. He gestured impatiently with his hands and shoulders. “Well? What do you want?”

“A quarter ounce,” Eric said. “Plus three Oxies, 40 milligrams...or two 80 milligrams, if you got them. That’s something you can do, right?”

Sully glanced over at Scott. “What do you think?”

Scott didn’t seem to be paying attention. He brought the straw of his iced coffee to his mouth. Thin droplets of condensation ran down the side of the plastic cup.

“Looks like you’re enjoying that,” Eric said.

Scott smiled. He sat up on the hood of his Oldsmobile, stretched out both his arms and yawned. “Shit,” he said, and laughed. “I’m getting too comfortable here.” He swung his legs over the side and arched his back.

“A quarter ounce plus three Oxies,” he repeated to himself. “40 milligrams...or 80, if I got them.” He looked down at his shoes and stroked his chin, taking time to weigh various factors and degrees of feasibility. Finally he nodded his head and slid down off the car.

“Yeah, alright. Meet Sully behind the bleachers at Memorial Field in one hour. Hundred seventy-five bucks.”

“One seventy-five?” Eric said. “How’s that?”

“That’s the price is how,” Sully said, quick off the mark.

Scott put a calming hand on Sully’s shoulder.

“Those pills aren’t as easy to get a hold of as they used to be,” he said. Then he moved in closer. “But I’ll tell you what, bring me a couple bushels this weekend and I’ll see what we can do in trade.”

“I’m not clamming this weekend,” Eric said. “I’m roofing.”

“Roofing, huh? Well, you better be careful up there boyo. Don’t go popping Oxies with your ass in the wind.” Scott brought his index finger up over his head and dropped it straight towards the ground while making a high pitched whistling sound.

“Break your fucking neck, you could!”

Eric ran his tongue across the back of his teeth and said nothing. Scott threw his iced coffee in the trash and walked towards the door of the Dunkin Donuts.

“Where you going?” Sully called after him.

“To take a shit,” Scott yelled back.

Scott Harris lives in a house down the street from Brian Sullivan. Scott is tall, too – almost as tall as Eric’s father, but Scott is sixteen years old and goes to high school and in high school kids get acne and grow to the size of adults. Sometimes on weekend afternoons, Brian’s parents and Scott’s parents get together, drink beer, and play cards for hours. Sometimes Brian goes with them and plays Nintendo in Scott’s room. Brian says Scott’s awesome at Mortal Combat.

Eric goes with Brian and his parents to Scott’s house. The adults sit around the kitchen table with their cans of Coors Light and play a card game that somehow involves moving little metal pegs around a perforated wooden board. Scott gets Eric and Brian a couple fudgsicles and asks them if they like fireworks. “I got M-80s,” he says confidentially. He takes them down into the cellar and the boys stand, sucking their fudgsicles while Scott kneels down in front of a refrigerator, snaps off the metal kick guard, and slides out the drain pan, in the middle of which is a plastic pencil box. Scott grabs a loose rag and dries it off. Then he snaps open the latches and reaches into the box. He turns to Eric and Brian and opens his hand, revealing three thumb-sized, red paper tubes with short green fuses. The two boys come closer and admire the M-80s. “You like this stuff, huh?” Scott says. “Well, check this out.” He reaches back into the box pulls out a rolled cellophane bag containing what Eric, at 8 years old, already knows two or three words for.

“What is that?” Brian asks.

“What the hell do you think it is?” Scott says.

Later in his bedroom, Scott leans his head out the window and exhales a cloud of smoke from the joint he’s holding. “What’d you guys think of my hiding spot?” he says. “That’s where I hide all my shit. I saw this TV show where this dude, an ex-burglar or something, said you should never hide your jewelry and money in obvious places, like in your bedroom or anywhere too close to where you live. He talked about this cool trick called *diversion*. That’s where you hide stuff in places where people don’t normally think to hide shit, like underneath a kitchen sink.” Scott takes another long drag from the joint. Holding in the smoke, he passes it to Sully, who takes it hesitantly between his thumb and index finger. Sully brings the joint to his mouth and takes a series of quick puffs and blows out the smoke. “No, no” Scott says. “Take a deep hit and hold it.” Sully tries to do as he’s told. He squints his eyes and sucks hard on the joint. The burning ember at the end crackles and glows bright orange. Then Sully’s eyes pop open, his face goes red, and he explodes in a fit of throat-searing coughs, almost dropping the joint. Scott laughs. “You’ll get the hang of it. Now pass it to your friend.”

Eric sat on the top row of the bleachers standing along the third base line of Memorial Field. He saw his himself 8 years old, standing at home plate dressed in the red little league uniform, the stretch polyester jersey barely reaching down to his waist. He saw himself gripping the aluminum bat, staring past the pitcher, never watching the ball, even as it sails past him, lands in the catcher’s mitt, and the umpire calls strike one,

strike two, strike three. The pitcher's mound seemed a hundred feet away back then. Now Eric saw that it couldn't be much more than forty feet.

Twenty minutes later, Sully drove up in his Chevy S-10. He got out of the truck and slammed the door. Eric heard the gravel crunch beneath his boots but he didn't turn around. He heard Sully's voice.

"What, are you asleep?"

"Not anymore," Eric said. He stepped down off the bleachers and faced Sully, who was gazing out at the field.

"Man," Sully said. "I remember playing here when I was a kid. It seemed a lot bigger then."

"Funny. I was thinking the same thing."

"Oh yeah? You think now you could manage to actually swing the fucking bat? You were such a chicken shit at the plate."

Eric breathed hard through his nose. "You got my shit?"

Sully laughed. "Take it easy, slugger. I'm just messing with you. Hold on a second."

Sully reached into his jeans and pulled out a sandwich bag half full of pot. Then he fished in his shirt pocket and pulled out a miniature Ziploc bag holding three white tablets. Eric saw right away they were the wrong color and the wrong shape. Sully extended both bags to Eric, one in each hand. Just then, Eric caught a slight whiff of some odor. *Shellfish*, his mind registered, almost unconsciously. Clams. The smell came from Sully, from the bags he was holding. Eric took the pot but he left Sully holding the pills.

"What the hell are those?" he said, pointing.

"Yeah. Sorry bro," Sully said. "It's a no go on those Oxies. But these will take care of you. They're practically the same."

"What are they, I asked you."

"Vikes," Sully said. "Vicodin."

Eric groaned. "Ahh, fuck."

"You don't want them? No problem." Sully made like he was about to put the baggie back in his shirt pocket.

"No," Eric said. "Give them to me." He reached for the twenties he had folded up in his own shirt pocket. "How much?"

"Same price," Sully said, grinning. "Twenty-five a pop."

"For Vicodin? Are you serious?"

"I'm serious," Sully said, dropping the grin.

"I'll give you forty," Eric said. He counted out seven twenties and held them out. "One forty for the lot. The weed and the pills."

Sully looked skeptically down at the money in Eric's hand. "I don't know, man. I'll have to run it by Scott."

"Then run it by him."

Sully pulled a cell phone out of the same pocket that had held the bag of weed. He punched in a number, held it to his ear, and waited for an answer on the other end. "Hey," he said. "What's that? Can't hear you..." He stuck a finger in his other ear. "Huh? Yeah. Now I can hear you. Right...I did. I'm there now... Listen, Eric ain't happy." Sully shot Eric a disappointed look. "Yeah. He says he'll go one forty, one

forty for everything... Huh? I know it. I told him... Yeah? OK.” Sully turned his back and walked a few steps away. He lowered his voice, but Eric could still hear what he said. “I’ve done it enough times. I know where to put it. I’ll go over there right after I’m done here... Where are you going to be? I’ll let myself in... Oh, yeah? How much you want me to bring? What time..?” Sully laughed, listened, then laughed again. “Those fucking bitches! Alright, man. See you then.”

Sully flipped his phone shut and slipped it back in his pocket. “Scott says he can go one sixty.”

Eric stared transfixed at the outline of the cell phone in Sully’s jeans and tightened his grip on the twenty dollar bills in his hand. Sully stood waiting for an answer. Then he looked down at his pants, trying to see whatever it was Eric kept staring at.

“What the matter with you?” he said, taking an uncertain half step back. “What’re you staring at?”

Eric released his grip on his money, raised his eyes and smiled. “Nothing,” he said. “Sorry. I was just spacing out for a second.”

“Well knock it off,” Sully said. “Don’t be looking at me like some kind of faggot.”

Eric added another twenty and to the money already in his hand.

“One sixty,” he said, handing Sully the cash. Sully counted the money and then handed Eric the mini Ziploc with the three white tablets.

Eric turned the baggie over in his fingers. “What you got going on tonight?” he asked, feigning nonchalance.

“What do you care?” Sully said.

“No reason. Forget it.”

“I’m heading over to the pub for some drinks. After that, who knows?”

Eric nodded as if this information confirmed something. Then he walked over to the chain link fence surrounding the ball field and pointed to home plate.

“You had a pretty good swing. I remember. Knocked a few out, didn’t you?” Although he wasn’t looking at Sully, Eric sensed his compliment was accepted.

“Yeah,” Sully said. “I did. Hit eight home runs my last year. Led the league.”

“You weren’t much good at Mortal Combat, though.”

Now Eric sensed something else. He waited, keeping watch on home plate.

“What did you say?” Sully asked, although the way he said it, it didn’t sound like a question.

Eric turned and looked him in the eye. “Mortal Combat. You know. The video game? At Scott’s house when we were kids? Don’t tell me you don’t remember.” Eric laughed and looked up, as if somewhere above the pitcher’s mound the memory was being reenacted. “You never could beat him, could you?”

“Shut up, Eric,” Sully said.

“Maybe, Brian. Maybe I’ll shut up.”

“Shut your mouth!” Sully shouted. He wheeled around and marched back to his truck.

Eric took the bandana out of his back pocket and wiped away the sweat that was starting to bead on his forehead. Sully climbed into his truck and slammed the door. He

backed out, threw it in drive, and gunned it, his rear wheels throwing up sprays of dirt and gravel.

Eric cupped his hands to his mouth. “You never beat him, Brian!” Sully tore through the parking lot and disappeared down the street.

Eric dropped his hands and watched the dust cloud kicked up from the S-10 drift across the parking lot.

“Come on,” Scott says. “I want to show you guys something.” Scott leads them quietly into his parent’s bedroom and over to a bureau standing in a corner. He pulls open the top drawer, reaches underneath a pile of men’s underwear and pulls out a stack of Polaroids. He waves Sully and Eric to come over. “Check these out,” he says and holds the Polaroids out in front of him like they’re a winning hand of cards. Most of the photos show Scott’s mom either holding a cock in her hand or in her mouth. One picture is an overhead shot of a cock penetrating a woman from behind, her ass nearly filling the frame. “Pretty crazy, huh?” Scott says.

Eric drove his Suzuki through the woods along the bike trail that skirted the edge of Pinehill Road. The night was cloudless, and with the full moon overhead he barely needed the beam of his headlight to see the trail. When he reached the turnout, he braked and shut off the engine. He pushed his bike into some bushes, and took a Maglite and a can of mace from his backpack. Then he headed off through the trees, shining the light in front of him.

After about 500 yards, he clicked off the light and stopped, listening and peering into the darkness. He knew he was close even though he could not see any lights or hear anything other than the night calls of crickets and bullfrogs. He advanced a few more steps and saw a faint yellow light shining through the branches.

Scott lived on a secluded acre of land in a dilapidated, single-story cabin with a detached garage. His property was enclosed by a six foot high chain link fence and guarded by his 75-pound pit bull mix, Buzzer, which he kept outdoors tied to a nylon rope. Scott ran his wholesale clam operation out of the garage – weighing, rinsing, and buying the clams that he bought from local diggers and in turn sold to fish markets and restaurants.

Eric crept closer to the perimeter fence. The porch light above the door illuminated the front of the cabin, but everything else was silhouetted in bluish-grey moonlight. The driveway was empty and nothing stirred inside the cabin. Rows of rusting lobster traps were stacked against the side of the garage. There was no sign of Buzzer. Eric checked his digital wristwatch and did nothing for the next ten minutes but breathe and wait and watch. He did not move. Somewhere, the crickets and bullfrogs continued their nocturnal mating calls, but Eric did not hear them. When his wristwatch displayed the time he waited for, Eric closed his eyes and breathed the night air deep into his lungs. He did this three times. On the third exhale he opened his eyes and walked over to the fence.

Dozing in a shallow dirt hole behind the lobster traps, Buzzer snapped awake and tore across the yard in a barking frenzy to confront the intruder. Ten feet from the fence he played out the length of rope and was yanked violently backwards off his feet. But in a flash he was back up, growling and straining against his leash.

Eric waited to see if Buzzer had alerted anyone in the cabin, but he did not wait long.

“Hey there, Buzzie,” he said.

He grasped the top of the fence and pulled himself up, swinging one leg up and over. Outraged by this provocation, Buzzer wheeled up on his hind legs and barked even more furiously. Eric straddled the fence. Looking down at the snarling dog, he felt a fear instinct flutter through his body, trying to freeze his limbs. He focused again on his breathing and waited for his body to relax. Then he lifted his other leg over the fence and dropped to the ground. He stood up and took out the bottle of mace.

He bent over and aimed the nozzle three feet from Buzzer’s rage-filled face.

“Quiet down Buzz,” Eric said, and shot two mace streams into each one of Buzzer’s eyes.

The effect was both immediate and satisfying. Buzzer dropped and rolled on the ground, pawing at the chemical fire burning his eyes, his barks given way to yowls of pain.

Eric circled wide around the stricken dog. Once clear, he hurried past the lobster traps and over to the garage.

The wooden double doors were chained together and padlocked, but their hinges were exposed on the outside and weakened with rust. Eric took a screwdriver and hammer out of his pack and knocked the pins out of the hinges on the first door. The last hinge on the bottom though, put up a fight. The pin would not budge. “Fuck this,” Eric growled. He wedged the claw end of the hammer beneath the screws that fastened the hinge to the garage and pulled up on the handle with both hands. The screws screamed as they were extracted from the wood, but they finally gave way and the door swung free.

The first thing Eric saw when he entered the garage was the refrigerated truck Scott used to deliver clams. He walked around the truck and scanned the rest of the garage. Lined up along the side of the opposite wall were the pieces of equipment Scott relied on to conduct his clamming business: the beam-type platform scale he used to weigh the clams he bought from diggers, the tank he sometimes used to rinse the sand out of clams he sold to the higher end restaurants (at an extra 20 cents a pound), and standing upright between these two items, a large capacity refrigerator. Eric recognized it as the same refrigerator that fifteen years earlier had stood in the cellar of Scott’s parent’s house. “You cheap prick,” he muttered, and training the beam of the Maglite, he saw fresh spill marks and boot prints on the dirty concrete floor directly in front of the refrigerator.

Eric got down on one knee, holding the Maglite in his mouth. He ripped the kick guard off the bottom of the fridge, and slid out the drain pan. Laying in two neatly stacked rows were Ziploc freezer bags. Brownish water from the refrigerator’s drain pipe formed a shallow puddle at the bottom of the pan, but the bags all appeared to be carefully sealed and waterproofed. The only issue was maybe the smell. Like his father before him, Scott used the refrigerator exclusively to store clams, and over the years the

odor of shellfish had permeated the internal workings of the appliance and became concentrated in a bilge-like runoff that collected in the bottom of the unit's drain pan. Eric upended the pan and dumped the freezer bags on the floor by his feet. There were a total of six bags. Four bags were full with what Eric knew right away was weed, maybe a pound or more in each bag. The other two bags were double-wrapped and their contents varied in size and weight. Eric could not see through the plastic and tell what they contained. He grabbed a towel hanging over the side of the tank and wiped the clam-smelling moisture off each bag and then stuffed them inside his backpack, along with his hammer and screwdriver. He slung the pack over his shoulders, and holding the Maglite in one hand and the mace in the other, he retraced his steps around the truck. He stopped just the inside the garage doors and looked out into the yard. One end of Buzzer's leash was tied to the trunk of a tree and from there it ran across the yard and disappeared behind the stack of lobster traps. Eric called, whistled, and waited. He whistled and waited some more. There was no response. Buzzer had retreated to his dirt hole where he lay quivering in a ball, pink mucus dripping from his stinging eyes. The man that had thrown the fire in his face could go where ever he wanted.

Sitting side by side on pillows in front of the TV, Scott holds the Nintendo controller in his left hand and slips his right hand into Brian Sullivan's shorts. Brian keeps both his hands on his controller. But even with this advantage, Scott is still beating him. His Liu Kang back flips over Brian's Sub-Zero and nails him with a round house kick to the head. Scott looks over his shoulder at Eric. "You play winner," he says.

Eric stood in his studio apartment with the six freezer bags spread out on the table in front of him. Earlier, he had opened one of the four bags containing the weed and realized they probably contained closer to two pounds each. The fifth bag contained over \$11,000 in cash, mostly in twenty dollar bills, plus two bottles of pills, 27 Vicodins in one, 15 OxyContin in the other. The sixth bag contained three computer CDs in plastic jewel cases and four M-80s. When Eric saw the miniature explosives he clenched his jaw and muttered a curse under his breath.

Each CD was labeled in black Sharpie with a first name and last initial: Steve P., Josh S., Mike S. Eric turned the CDs over in his hand, frowning at the correspondences the names suggested in his mind. The polycarbonate surface of the disks refracted the overhead light into prismatic waves of color. Eric selected the Steve P. CD and went over to his computer, an old Dell he picked up second hand three years ago. He rarely used it anymore since he stopped paying for an internet connection, but sometimes he still used it to play Flight Simulator, sometimes Quake.

In the photos stored on the CD, Eric recognized the face of Steve Pulawski, one of the teenage losers that hung out in front of Dunkin Donuts. Steve was naked in each photo. In some he was masturbating, either by himself or with Brian Sullivan. In others he was sucking the cock of the person holding the camera.

Eric is tall for his age but not as tall as Scott. Eric tries to control the movements of Johnny Cage but the controller feels heavy and unwieldy in his hands. He can't block kicks and he can't time his punches. Scott's Liu Kang locks him up in an iron grip and flips him on his back. Liu Kang leaps high into the air and comes down fist first into Johnny Cage's chest. Johnny's health meter blinks red: *Warning, Warning, Warning*. But Eric can't do anything about it.

Eric drove to the pub on his Suzuki and parked it between the Cutlass Supreme and the S-10. Inside crowds of people stood around the bar holding pints of beer and eating onion rings, laughing, shouting. The late innings of a baseball game was being broadcast on the TV above the bar. Eric took off his helmet and jumped on to the hood of the Oldsmobile. He stood facing the window, but no one inside the pub noticed him. Not yet. He took an M-80 and a lighter out of his pocket and lit the fuse. The gunpowder coating the cotton twine sparkled in his hand. Eric threw the firecracker at the door of the pub where it exploded in a deafening report. He smiled at the faces and reached for another M-80.

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