

Where Cat Scratch and Happy Valley Meet

By Patrick Michael Finn

The first time I clocked the plan to rip off Happy Valley Liquor, I was stuck at the back of the goddamn line with a six pack of Mickey's Big Mouths, moving my weight from one leg to the other to stop the throbbing hurt up inside my feet from standing at the taco grill all day.

Every night I stood there waiting with all the twisted fuckheads from around Cat Scratch; drunks, rotting meth-mouths and dirtbag old whores. Lot of vagrants roaming through. Indians, wetbacks, insane freight train hoppers with beef jerky skin and names like Lester and Cheeks.

A while back, there was a family in Cat Scratch who lived in a station wagon. Mom, Dad, two little daughters, and a baby. They had all their shit packed up in that car and they hardly had room to move. Sometimes they got a motel. I saw them buying food at Happy Valley Liquor – crackers, Red Hots, cans of beans, baloney. One time when this family stayed in the motel over in Colton, the father found a rat in the bathroom cabinet under the sink and decided to trap it and keep it for a pet. Then they were back in the station wagon, but the father still had the rat in a shoebox and fed it crackers from his fingers. His wife wouldn't touch it and told him to get rid of it. But the children were happy and clapping, and the baby giggled whenever he took it out of the shoebox. When the rat snapped at her husband and took a chunk out of his knuckle, the wife screamed at him to get that damned rat out. He told her it was all right and put the rat away. One night when everyone was asleep, the rat chewed its way out, crawled up to the baby in his car seat, sleeping with a cracker, and that rat bit and gnawed the baby to death. That's the kind of place this was, and just living there alone was enough to make you sick and mean. In the middle of it all was Happy Valley Liquor. And that goddamn line killed my legs so bad after standing at the grill all day that my balls hurt. There was always only one woman, a big older lady who didn't mind taking her time, working behind the counter.

My head cleared and got cool and I saw and figured it out. One fat lady working the counter for a whole hour. One fat lady working with a line that wouldn't quit being long. The stock room was way down on the other side of the counter from where the register was. The stock room door was only cracked, and inside it was dark.

I went out like I was walking back to the bus stop and then I made a long walk around to the back of the liquor store, where there was an alley and a big fence for the San Bernardino switchyards. I found the stock room door and it was unlocked. I opened it and didn't even look inside.

The only problem was I didn't have a car, so the next night after work I called Filthy Phil Rick. I told him to pick me up and we'd go over to the cocktail lounge at the Thunderbird Lanes and have a drink. I had to explain things to him slowly, because he's kind of half retarded. I'm not sure how he got his license, but he had one. I made him show me.

“Oh?” he said. “Here in my billfold, Wayne.”

It was his picture. His puffy face and those big stupid glasses. He was on disability for bipolar disorder and lived with his mother. When I told him his share and

what we'd be taking, he got excited. I had to tell him to quiet the hell down. I could have punched him.

I wanted to get out of my job, bad. I had to do it for the San Bernardino County Welfare to Work plan. July and August it got up to 120 in that truck. And Rudy, the owner, my boss, always had the noisy radio on the Mexican station. Accordion, horns, little greasers whining. Rudy was all right though. I've worked for some straight-up cocksuckers, but Rudy never gave me any shit. He worked just as hard as me in that oven.

The only soap we had to wash with in the sink was dish soap. I had to wash my hands after I went out for a cigarette or took a leak, so I had to wash my hands a lot. Rudy'd gotten the dish soap at a cheap Mexican store, and that soap was raw. My hands got real white and dry. If I made a fist, a scab would crack and bleed. One morning I was wrapping up a chorizo and egg burrito for this Mexican dude. He was watching me do it, saw my ugly sores and walked away without his order.

"Hey, man!" I said, but he just put his hands in his pockets and left. He'd already paid, so there was nothing I could do, and he didn't ask for his money back. He didn't get his drink either, orange Jarritos. Still, I felt ashamed.

I qualified for free groceries from the San Bernardino Transitional Authority Food Bank. They sent a couple bags once a week, but I hated the shit that was in them. Spam, cheese, noodles, chicken broth, canned stew tomatoes. I usually ended up throwing most of it away. They even included a little recipe pamphlet with a picture on it of a happy black family cooking in the kitchen. I laughed at that. I didn't want their goddamn food. I mostly ate at work.

I hit Happy Valley Liquor for the first time on a Wednesday night, a Super Lotto night. I told Filthy Phil, "Just drive like you're going home from getting Burger King." I propped the stockroom door with a cinderblock and told Filthy Phil to stand by the car and watch. I moved about ten boxes. Then I got a box packed with cartons of cigarettes.

I lived where Cat Scratch and Happy Valley meet, up in a room in a big complex subsidized by San Bernardino County called Palm Vistas. I had Filthy Phil pull the Buick around and park behind the basketball courts where there were lights because I wanted to open the trunk and take a look at what I'd gotten.

"Holy shit," I said. "Seagrams, Early Times, Jim Beam, Kentucky Tavern, Cutty Sark, Bacardi." I moved some of the boxes out onto the pavement. "Heaven Hill, Gordon's, Captain Morgan, Cruzan, Juarez Gold, Presidente, Pepe Lopez, and Rio Grande."

There were twenty cartons of cigarettes, only they were bottom-shelf brands like L&M's, Raleighs, Viceroy's, Dorals, Magnums, Larks, Old Golds, and Kents. I thought I could probably move them. Hell, I'd smoke them if I had to. I opened a carton of Old Golds and stuck two packs in my pocket.

"Hey, let me have some cigarettes!" Filthy Phil said. The way he said it sounded like "sea-grits." He was born in Oklahoma, and even though he'd been in California nearly all his life, sometimes he still talked like a hick. I tossed him a pack.

We hauled all the boxes up to my room.

“Let’s have a drink!” he said.

“Only one,” I told him.

But we ended up getting trashed on a bottle of Early Times. I blacked out and woke up sick and late for work and Phil was passed out on the floor with a black eye and there was puke all over my hot plate and dripping down some of the boxes. The room stank like hell. I woke Phil up and he cowered when he saw me.

“What the hell’s the matter?” I asked.

“You punched me out!” he said. It was when he’d thrown up, he told me. I knocked him around and then I wouldn’t let him leave. He was too drunk to drive and I didn’t want him to get busted because I needed his Buick.

“Sorry,” I said. “I was drunk.”

Rudy was pissed that I was late to work, but I’d never been late before, so he didn’t fire me. I wouldn’t have cared if he did. I pretty much figured I wasn’t going to be there much longer.

Because when I got off work Friday night, I had Filthy Phil pick me up. It was still early. The sun was hot and red in our faces when we parked around behind Palm Vistas and opened the trunk. A pair of Mexican dudes splattered with white paint walked by. I’d seen them get off the bus.

“Hey, amigos,” I said. “Check this out, hombres.”

The Mexican guys liked what we had and they bought two bottles of Gordon’s vodka and two packs of Raleighs. Then a few minutes later a leathery dude in a Raiders cap came by and bought a bottle of Cruzan. Men coming out of the building just to get some shit out of their cars walked by and bought bottles of Gordon’s, Bacardi, Seagrams, Beam, Captain Morgan, Rio Grande. Pretty soon we had a line. I put Filthy Phil to work. I took the cash and yelled orders over my shoulder and he dug around in the trunk. Hours went by and parties were raging all up and down the building.

By two, the trunk was nothing but a bunch of empty boxes, not one bottle or single smoke left besides the half-empty pack of Old Golds in my pocket. I’d made three thousand bucks in nine hours.

Back up in my room, I gave Filthy Phil five hundred. He thought that was some kind of jackpot, and he punched the air with his fist and barked. I couldn’t blame him. I actually laughed.

“Come on, let’s go get a drink,” he growled. Jesus, into Filthy Phil Rick sure was a piece of work. He could sit there like a chunk of dogshit and not say a word for eight hours straight, then something would get him wild and he’d jabber you into next month. Sometimes I’d get so sick of listening to all his bullshit that I’d start feeling like I was bipolar in my own head, and I’d sit there grinding my teeth and think about cutting his head off with a shovel. I didn’t like feeling so mean. It burned in my brain with anger, anger, anger. I’d tell Filthy Phil to get the fuck out and I’d crash and lay there on my bed feeling like a piece of garbage.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s roll.”

But when we got downstairs, we realized it was almost three. All the bars were closed and none of the gas stations sold beer after two. Both of us sort of sank.

“Aw, goddamnit,” Filthy Phil said. “Goddamnit just all to hell,” he said, and sagged forward and let his arms hang.

I slept late and got up Saturday afternoon. I was glad I hadn't gotten trashed the night before. I wanted to enjoy my money, and I did. I went and got a haircut and a shave.

I told the barber, “Put some of that extra bay rum on my neck!”

“Yes, sir,” he said. I tipped him five bucks and went out and waited at the bus stop, smoking a cigarette. I'd never had so much cash in my whole goddamn life, and while I wasn't stupid with the money, I'd been broke long enough and for once I finally had a chance to stretch out and live.

I took the bus to the Fontana Swap Meet at the Skylight drive-in and bought a few new pairs of Wrangler jeans and some Wrangler shirts with pearly metal snaps. Then I blew a hundred on some pointed Mexican snakeskin boots. I got a Boker gravity knife with horn handles, the kind you just flip your wrist and the stiletto blade flashes out and locks in place. I saw it shining there on a display table and said, I've got to have that shit.

Saturday night I looked good over at the Thunderbird Lanes cocktail lounge, knocking back the Jack and Cokes. I sat at my own table so I could get served, and I played George Jones on the jukebox and kicked back with my feet up so the waitresses could see my new boots.

I expected the stockroom to be double-locked with new bolts the next Wednesday night when Filthy Phil and I hit Happy Valley Liquor. But it was open again and loaded with twice as much booze. I packed the Buick's trunk and the backseat with twenty cases of liquor and forty cartons of smokes, and that weekend we worked the lot behind the Palm Vistas both Friday and Saturday night until damn near four in the morning. I made six grand, and I gave Filthy Phil seven hundred along with a carton of Larks and two bottles of Kentucky Tavern. “Shitting pissfire,” he hissed.

Then Sunday night I was back at the Thunderbird Lanes buying rounds for whole league teams of strangers who shook my hand and offered me smokes. I called a black guy I knew from Happy Valley, Stylish Price. He drove over and sold me an eight ball in the parking lot. Then I took two of the lane waitresses over to a motel and snorted blow and drank tequila with them all night and fucked the pink off of them both.

I was still wired and drunk when I went into work Monday afternoon to tell Rudy I was through. “Where the hell you been?” he yelled over the counter. I'd never seen him that furious. There was a line of five and he was alone. “Get your ass in here!”

“Oh, man,” I said. “I'm sorry, Rudy. You've been a good boss and all, but I'm quitting now.”

He smashed the door open and ran out and got in my face right there on the sidewalk. “You're supposed to give two weeks,” he said, and shoved me. “You're supposed to give two weeks notice,” he said, and shoved me again. The guys in line spread out, staring, and I put up my hands and tried to tell Rudy to back off. I just

wanted to leave, but he kept pushing me, pushing me. I don't know if it was because I was sort of messed up and geeked out or what, but I flashed behind my eyes and grabbed a fistful of Rudy's apron and lifted him so fast that his face turned white and his mouth got wide and he sucked in wind like a kid on a carnival ride. I marched him across the sidewalk and pounded his whole body against the side of the truck, again and again and again. It sounded like someone slamming a sledgehammer against an empty dumpster, and the truck jolted in place with each pound. Then I dropped him on the curb and he landed on his side by the tire. I was surprised I didn't knock him out. When I looked back about a half block away, the dudes who'd been waiting in line were helping Rudy up, holding his arms, and he was touching the back of his head.

Filthy Phil and I stole liquor and cigarettes for weeks. We started working the parking lot on Thursdays, even Sunday afternoons. It was late August and we were both always wired and trashed. And Cat Scratch was just as fucked up as we were. A lady upstairs passed out from the liquor we sold her. She had a cigarette going, and her bed caught fire. She burned to death and two other apartments got completely gutted. Another night, a drunk husband threw his pregnant wife out the window ten flights down, broken glass and all, and her spine cracked. She died and so did the baby. Someone found a dead whore in a dumpster behind the Grocery Outlet. She'd been slashed across the tits, gagged, strangled, and she had a broken broomstick shoved up her ass.

I know I shouldn't have let Filthy Phil booze and snort as much as he did. It made him more bugged-out nuts than I'd ever seen him. His eyes were red and wild behind his big stupid glasses. Some days I'd see him running down Foothill in the hundred-degree heat, smiling big, completely soaked with sweat. He'd shake and run and the sweat would spray all over. But other times he'd just move down the street with his arms folded over his head, moaning.

He'd wandered away somewhere the afternoon I get beat up and robbed. It was one of those days at the end of August when the smog is so thick you can't see the mountains or the sun, and the world looks like it's sitting on the edge of smoke and fire. I was mostly blacked out, and these two little lowriders clocked me upside the head and got away with about five cases of booze, the last of what I had in the trunk. They took a few hundred bucks off me too. I got up when they left and staggered around and bumped the empty Buick, yelling about how I was going to skin them. Two San Bernardino Counties pulled up, and I guess I was lucky I'd gotten ripped off. They busted me for public intoxication, and that's all they could get me for. Still, I was kicking the windows and seats in the cruiser all the way to the station, and when we got there, the cops whacked the shit out of me with lead-loaded flat leather saps.

I got out the next night and stayed in bed for about a week. I didn't answer the door when Filthy Phil knocked. He came by two, three times a day. He'd stand in the hallway and yell, "Hey, Wayne! Where the fuck are you, man? I got to talk to you!"

He caught up with me at the Thunderbird Lanes cocktail lounge. Right in front of everybody, he pushed right on up to me and said, "You and me need to talk." He said, "You and me need to talk about M-O-N-E-E, sir. "M-O-N-E-E."

I pulled him over to a space in the dark next to the jukebox and said, "You better keep your goddamn mouth shut, Phil. You're going to get our dicks busted right into Chino." I hadn't let go of his arm. "I could've used your help the other day when I got the shit kicked out of me, but I haven't come looking for you."

"M-O-N-E-E," he said.

So I eased up and got him a drink, a beer, and I said, "All right, Phil. What do you and I have to talk about, man?"

"I need more money," he said. "I need more money right now."

"I figured as much, but I have to ask you what you need the money for."

"Oh, I can't tell you," he said.

"You have to."

"My mother kicked me out of the house," he groaned. "I'm living in my car, and I've gotta help Cheyenne."

"Who in the hell's Cheyenne?"

"My girlfriend."

"What goddamn girlfriend?"

She was a stripper, of course. She wasn't anybody's girlfriend, but she knew how to gouge a lonely idiot like Filthy Phil out of everything he had by shaking her tits in his face and smiling whenever he held up a twenty. "And she needs more money so she can get her own place."

"Does she know about the money?"

"Yes, that's how she knew I could get more."

"Aw, Phil, goddamnit."

I told him to come by the next afternoon, but I knew I wasn't going to give that sonofabitch a dime.

I thought it was Filthy Phil banging away on the door the next morning at about eleven-thirty. I'd been up wired all night and I'd decided to just hit him over the head with a pair of batteries I'd tied into a sock and take his Buick down to Mexico with the last three thousand I had left.

But it wasn't Filthy Phil standing in the hallway when I opened the door. It was one of the two waitresses from the Thunderbird Lanes I'd nailed. She was a lot bigger than I remembered.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"You knocked me up," she said. "And you better be ready to pay when the baby comes."

"Aw, bullshit," I said. "How you even know it's mine?"

She had a doctor's form she pulled out of her purse and she stood there in the hallway waving it around and yelling at me about how she already had three kids, but one of the fathers was locked up in Ironwood, the second one was dead, and the third had been deported back to Mexico.

"And I don't get no child support and now you're gonna pay up, else I'm gonna get the cops up your ass so bad you're gonna shit blood."

“All right, quiet down, come in,” I said. She wouldn’t budge. “I don’t have the money right now.”

“Bullshit! You blow hundreds at the Thunderbird bar every night. You’re gonna pay up,” she said.

There was no use trying to talk to her. She wasn’t after the money really. She wanted to be right, to win for once. And she wanted to hang being right and winning on a man, any man. Men had fucked her over her whole life, and she was ready to fuck one of them back. Her hollering was echoing all the way up and down the hallway so that a baby started screaming and people were opening their doors.

“Well hell, look,” I said. “I don’t know if that baby’s mine or not, and you probably fuck fifteen different guys a week.”

She jumped at me with her nails and clawed a gash right under my eye, and we both fell inside and somehow the door got kicked shut. At first I just tried to hold her hands off by squeezing her wrists and pulling her to the floor, but she was big and wild and she wanted to scrape my face off, and she was kicking, and so the only thing I could do was grab her head and slam it onto the concrete floor until I heard her skull crack and blood squirted out of her eyes.

When Filthy Phil came by a couple hours later, I pulled out a wad of singles. His face lit up and he stuck the wad in his pants after looking at it a second in his big, soft hand. I’d decided I needed his help.

The dead waitress’s body was in the bathroom on some garbage bags. But that’s not what I said. I said, “Listen, Phil. You and me might need to head down to Mexico for a while.”

I could tell he was already upset.

“It’s all right, Phil.”

He didn’t react one way or another to the dead woman on my bathroom floor. He stood there and looked at her and nodded. “She dead?”

“Yeah, she’s dead.”

“Don’t she work at the Thunderbird Lanes?”

“Yes.”

“We taking her to Mexico?”

About thirty miles out of Cat Scratch, on Interstate 15 just south of Corona, Filthy Phil started sweating at the wheel. He winced and kept squinting into the rearview. Then he pressed the gas until we were doing about ninety. I heard the body bump in the trunk. We’d wrapped her in the sheet Filthy Phil had been using since he’d been sleeping in his car.

“Hey, slow it down,” I said.

“Wayne, I’ve got to go home.”

“Slow down, Phil.”

“I’ve got to go home now. Cheyenne’s waiting.”

He pulled off onto the shoulder and stopped.

“You can’t turn around here,” I told him.

“I have to get home,” he growled.

“If I get caught, then you sure as hell get caught too. And you’re looking at some long, hard prison time. You want all them buck faggots making you suck them off?”

He got out of the car because he’d started to cry, and he leaned against the hood with his arms folded over his head. I got out and tried to talk him back inside. I had to chase him off the road, down a ditch, then behind a cluster of boulders and brush that hid us from the roadway.

I grabbed his shirt and he stumbled. “Let’s get back in the car, Phil.”

The dumb fucker tried to push past me, and the only reason I flipped the gravity knife was to scare him. I held it and slashed at the air in between us, and when I slashed it again, he lurched forward, straight at me, and I ended up plunging that blade right into his neck. The blood sprayed me in the face.

He didn’t die right away. He was still spurting when I crushed his skull with the rock.

Maybe you don’t ever spend time in places like Cat Scratch or Happy Valley. If you’re lucky, you don’t have any reason to. You’d hardly believe it was America. In a lot of ways, it isn’t. There’s no freedom for a stretch of half-retarded drug addicts who don’t have the sense it takes to think about the future. The future is only the sunset, and all the twisted fuckheads from around Cat Scratch stumble around toward the sunset until their skin looks like it’s been burned by acid. Then they turn into street animals and tear each other up with broken wine bottles. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about all that, how it’s no surprise where I ended up.

They have me on all sorts of medications and I’m usually pretty clear-headed and a little tired. Two lawyers, young gals from UC Berkeley, came by to tell me how much they wanted to help me get off death row.

“You want to help get me off?” I asked. “One of you can lick my asshole while the other sucks on my balls.” I laughed and they left and never came back.

I have to see a behavioral health specialist every week. It seems like a big waste of time, seeing as how they’re going to inject me dead in two years. 2010. I’ll be like the number of the year. Twenty minus ten is ten, and ten minus ten is zero, which is what I will be.

The doctor asked me if I believed in God.

“Do you?” I asked.

“Yes,” he nodded, “I believe that I do.”

“Well that’s about the dumbest thing I’ve heard in my whole life,” I told him. I crossed my arms and leaned back and shook my head and laughed. “You’re an educated man. An expert. And you really think there’s a God who gives a hot shot of piss whether you’re hurting or happy?” I had to laugh and shake my head again. “If there was a God,” I said, “he’d march on down here and fuck us all and cut us up and set us on fire.”

Patrick Michael Finn is the author of the novella A Martyr for Suzy Kosasovich (Cleveland State University Poetry Center), winner of the 2006 Ruthanne Wiley Memorial Novella Competition. His second book, From the Darkness Right Under Our feet: Stories, won the 2009 Hudson Prize and is forthcoming from Black Lawrence Press (an imprint of Dzanc Books), in early 2011. His fiction has appeared in Ploughshares, TriQuarterly, Third Coast, Quarterly West, Clackamas Literary Review, Punk Planet, The Yalobusha Review, and The Best American Mystery Stories 2004. His work has also received Distinguished Story Citations in The Pushcart Prize and The Best American Short Stories 2008. He lives in Arizona and directs the Creative Writing Program (which he founded in 2007) at Chandler-Gilbert Community College.