

stephen collins

What It Means

So where am I? Beverly and Western, corner of. Like I'm always here man, like it's all I know and all I'll ever know, because it's where I'm at now. But that isn't the story, is it? No, not one bit of it that I'm going to relate to you, not in the least. But, to get on with this. I'm on Bev— and Western waiting for whatever, nothing really— but something I guess. I'm standing there droopy-armed, just finished sliding up and down the block money mooching the citizenry, all these people like chickens without heads—or heads without chickens as it were, or was. Most saying such stuff like, I works for my dough, Joe; some digging for pocket gold. I stand watching the stacks of motorized vehicles vomit in straight lines smog vapor; and so the light turns green and. . . they're off—cars steam-rolling on down purple streets, man, dark black purple and a brown haze and I'm standing.

Then of a sudden it's Ronny B. again coming into view. I see him now walking towards me. He has sad eyes, green serene genius eyes with red lines—he always has sad eyes. But my tenses are mixed up; he HAD sad eyes, which is the story. Or maybe it's just this story where cardboard house boxes plus live-in hobos with paper-wrapped Ripple watch the chickenheads rumble by, proceed past me, under a cleanly plain grey sky with just one, in the far off, a mean bubblish thunderhead cloud. I'm standing here and up came Ronny B., my partner you see, always talking in rapid fire rattles some such scared stuff like,

One day the sun will swell up and suck in the earth and all will die with their shades on, and how much of it is bullshit and how much of it is real and do it make a difference?

Always scratching his fuzz ball black head with both hands or folding his ginger-skin arms in front almost around to his back, Jack, cause he's about as thin as a phone poll, without the wires. And he stops here now with this thing in his hand like a gun. . . yes, it was a gun, most definitely: black mass of metal, huge like a cannon but smaller, you know. He is crying like a baby like he always does, but now it's different because it just is, because he has this gun with him.

Yes, I see it Ronny B.. Nice, but don't bring it near me because bad news, you know; it's bad news. At least that's what I heard on

the street last week from this TH bum, that's 'Thunderbird' bum if you don't know. He, a black bum like RB 'cept older with grey forest-face of curly grey skin, to me and Ronny last week said:

You don't know what the devil them thangs mean, man. Guns are bad news, he told me, cause they could blow a hole in ya, you know.

Yes sir, sure, says I.

But what DO it mean, says RB. What the devil does it mean if not one but several of the same thang?

War, says he. But that's with a hugh numbah son, just takes one still to kill. Why just last night some big Rooster blew up some gibble-gabbling harlot right there in front of the Colonel's place, then tossed the shooter in the sewer on his way out a town.

And now Ronny B. standing in front of me has this one, and he's crying.

You found it Ronny? It's OK man, OK? cause the fuzz don't know, you know? No, don't give the sucker to me, I don't want that, that thang. No way, José. Where—I mean, where did you find it, man?

In a bad can, by an evil yellow peel and some goopish sewer under a tree, says he. He is scared like the skinny buffalos must a been years ago when the white men, like me, came; but let's get on with this story, could we?

I'm under a spy glass, says Ron, a microscope, magnified to intensity and it's getting hot, mistah, hot. Will ya help me, will ya please?

I'm always helping you RB, always man, like it's a job or something.

It's getting real hot, mistah, and I can't let it go outa my hand, can't get the sucker outa my hand and I can't figure what it means.

Calm down Buffalo breath, says I. Just throw the thang away and pretend you never did find it. Why not? Why can't you do it? Never mind; it'll do what it does; if you don't want to listen then I don't give a fuck. I fold my arms and turn my back on the dude, and Ronny B. walks away, or he walked away, I guess, and I'm tired of all the bullshit so you know what I do? It's off to Ray's World Famous Chili Dog's And Burgers, which ain't so famous if you ask me, but who am I anyway? James Dean? Hardly.

Anyway, Ray is a cool dude cause he's never there anyway and I don't have to put up with him, you know; he's short and pudgy and lumpy with a grey 'stash under his nose chopped off at the edges like Hitler's; thinks he's some giant with a cause, the little munchkin. But today I bummed some money and I got the bread to buy some bread as it were, or at least a good dog with some of that tar-like black lumpy chili, like the greasiest thing you ever tasted

this side of the . . . well, of the 76 station across the street; and onions too, lots and lots of onions, always got to have them. So I walk into the place and Ray's not there cause he's being a cool dude today, and this bald headed white guy with no front teeth is chewing his gums behind the counter; and I say, Hey Joe, how 'bout a good one?

A good what, Mac? he says.

But I don't let on that I know what he means and he gets pissed and says shove off if you ain't got no green; and I says to him, fuck you, you ugly greasy-headed white guy. No, it's a lie, I didn't say that, but I wanted to. I just pulled out my wad and said something like, hold it honey, I got money, and he said,

Suit yourself, and started to make a good one with grease and onions, a lot of them onions.

I sat down on a round stool putting my sleeveless elbows on the counter while he made it up and I thought about how good them onions was gonna taste. Just like them old onions I use to eat when I was a wee boy about 18 in high school at lunch-time with the rest of us like it was a party or something. We all sat there, the whole BB team, that's Baseball if you don't know, we sat and had our lunch party—I was quite good at the sport back then if I don't say so myself, pretty good anyway, but not as good as at that grading stuff; like, I got a lot of A's I think is what they called it when you done or did good, and I was pretty, well really actually, good at the math stuff like what was it? Trig something and Abriaga or something and they said I would make a fine engineer in that stuff or physics stuff; but that was two or three decades ago, I think, before the old thoughts didn't seem to click like they always done or did, and I kept talking more and more funny like there was no tomorrow, you know. Then it was off to the Pine Street Center, this place with whitish walls and tall halls with a smell tasting like pennies that they'd lock you in if you had the dough or so you'd not harm community at large, they said. My mommy had some green like this here bald guy asked for, and she gave it to the Pine place, I think it was. And I kept asking these pebble-eyed white jackets with scribbling pens if they ever got the urge to chuck a glass across a crowded room, or punch a nice old lady in the stomach, just to knock the props from under everyone, unjoint noses, just cause all's too perfect, all's too happy, and like old RB would say, what did it all mean anyway? They said I, for one, was not to worry cause all I had to do was try.

Which I did, really; I tried really good. They all said as I was walking out of the place cause my mommy had no more green, and I didn't certainly, you know. That was just like Ronny B. I guess, only years later, or at least that's what the bumble-head told

me when I asked.

One day I went for a visit, just to look at the outside of the place cause I use to live there, and I saw this scrawny black kid pounding on the door with his fuzz ball head saying let me in till a couple youth-type white-jackets come out and throw him in the street and then go back inside giggling nicely. I pick him up and take him home to my cardboard box for a meal and lived with him for a year till one day, just recently in fact, I said,

RB, I couldn't help but notice you came over for dinner and stayed for the duration; and he laughed. Then he said:

I'd like to go back to the Pine Place; and I said:

No way, sugar, not me; and he said:

Not you, I mean, I want to go back.

Why? was my reply.

Cause, just cause, it's where I'm supposed to be, like the birds are supposed to be in the air all the time and never land.

But they do; I've seen them. RB said, Help me, and I said, no way, Jay, help yourself, that's what the Lord said. But he kept on asking me, so I kept on saying No, cause I didn't want him to go, until finally i said, Sure, why the hell not.

We went places, really we did, and I tried like I'm accustomed to doing but to know avail or some such. Downtown by the Greyhounds, we found out the right building to go to and all from some Cat trap named Sally; rode elevators up and down like a couple of Space Shuttles with bells when we'd land, trying to figure out why everyone there was so fat and we just slimmish twigs. Hallways smelled like hot paper and had thin green carpets we staided our feet with. We giggled good and a lot, and had fun for once. Why, even RB didn't cry for about five minutes, till some black lumpish cop or dude of some kind, security pro'bly, gun strapped to side, and full tooth scowl, gave us a one-eyed stare. We straightened up fast-like and found the right office.

Plopped behind a long desk, this chunky octopus-like chick, blue polyesters wrapped around cottage cheese, glasses on her pug-nose (tip of it), phone stuck between this watermelon shoulder and her ear, gabbing and typing away; she, barely looking up at us two, says, Sit down boys or some such, and wait, as is the custom. And so we wait till what seems like next week watching a fern by the door droop, turn brown and die, then blow away; we said nothing, just sat on a hard red couch stiffly staring at her straight on, till finally chunky chubbet snapping her Juicy Fruit said with her nose—It's time.

We at long last got to talk to this beffy fella with a striped suit, a pin one, you know, saying he was a lawyer and he would try to get old Ronny B. back into the place Piny if he could prove he was

violent or could beat really good. Well, old Ronny was no beat-up kind of guy; I know cause I'd knowed him. Then the pinstripe said:

Well, Jesus Christ son, don't you want to be free?

Like the birds, I blurted in.

Free, he said, because you're an American. Pine Street locks you up like a criminal, which you're not, son. Liberty to all, even to the psychotic ones of us, and it was our right to be free to choose and live where we pleased, which was the streets for us, not cause we pleased it, cause we lived it. I thought, well that sounds just fine to me being I'm an American and I tried like all hell to get the dude back in. Not that I would ever want that, I mean, Hells Bells, it's just three hots and a cot, you know. And anyhow, Ronny, he don't need no lock-up joint cause a jailbird-type, crooked felon he's not, not in the least, no way, Jay. Seems like a lot to put up with for three hot meals that ain't actually really hot at tall, more like luke warm, and cardboard's just as good as that cot-like bed stuff, softer even; and anyway, what about yours truly, huh?

But old Ronny B. kept saying, No sir, no sir, mumbling some such like that; he don't or didn't want to be in this world, he said, where there are librarians who hate books and vegetarians who are butchers and teachers that don't learn, who die in space, get AIDS, give grades, hiding in dark classrooms. . . and someone's been stealing his girl friends, and what does it all mean?, cause he didn't know, you know. And then he cried like he always does dripping his eyeballs onto his grey shirt that stunk like all hell if you ask me.

It's been real, I squealed to pinstripe and chubbet, and then I said, come on you old stink butt, pointing to RB, Lets go on home which wasn't far and he dripped his eyes all the way, damn him. We walked fast and straight-armed on the purple-edged gutter, not the white sidewalk cause it's filled with chicken-headed getto-blasters purched on shoulders, or so crate-like, pulled on wheels, filling up the grey air with anthemish squeal-type vocalizations. Trees began to bend and blow as a different thunderhead wasn't in the so far off, but rain and sun, a flower has to have these or it won't grow very well, not at TALL really. We got back before it dampened us, and the first thing we done was to knock on old Ray's door and then go in and say some such thing like, could we PLEASE have maybe a piece of bread or something cause we're hungry and ain't got a dime or a penny even.

And it's like the depression now-a-days, you know, at least that's what it seems from the history books saying this in Hschool. But that son of a bitch old Ray was there and he told the toothless pink gummy bald guy with the greasy head to shoo us away cause they didn't much like freeloaders. On the way out, I said:

But how 'bout at least some of them old yella onions which I am, or was about to eat now. He yelled,

NO, that old bald son of a gun did, or done or some such and threw a paper cup at us which hit Ronny B. good in the head; like wow, if looks could kill, wow!! Ronny was so hurt, not bleeding of course, but inside, that he was crying again and we left and we didn't even get the onions. But that was days ago, or maybe hours, and now with me sitting here sleeveless elbows and all, bald head say:

Hey mac, here's that dog with the Xtra onions, which I proceeded to munch on without any Coca-cola mind you. The place got dark suddenwise, grey actually, cause clouds thick and bubbling covered the sky outside and a wind wipped up and shook like all hell the little greenish sprigs they called trees out front.

Looks like rain, mac, said the bald head, out the window peering he does or did.

That's swell, cause I'm thirsty, said I, and he chuckled wildly. Then he says I wouldn't be such a bad guy if I ever combed my hair or brushed my teeth.

At least I got teeth, says I, and he sputtered his wheezy coughing laugh again like he's about to spit up a turkey. Then he regained himself, slicked the top of his head with a dirty palm and told me he didn't much like being mean to people, throwing them out, hitting them with paper cups and such like that, but old Ray would fire the sucker if he didn't. And I said:

You mean that lumpy ugly stubby grey haired first cousin to Hitler? Boy that did it all cause he was laughing so hard he was druling all over his chin trying to wipe it off with his sleeve with unsuccessfulness of course, and I thought he was just about like me being that I had ketchup dripping on my lips and cheeks and even some on my ear lob—That old white bald guy wasn't such a bad dude, I was thinking when Ronny B. walks in with his eyeballs all over his shirt with a big black mass in his hand, and I said:

Hey RB! Man, what's the haps? And the bald dude said:
Get that fucking gun out a this place.

Where as Ronny B. pulled up the gun and blasted it hard into the chest of the old geezer. Red and Dark blood it was that come out good and fast as he lay sprawled on the floor behind the counter. His head bent crooked-like towards his shoulder with puddles of purplish Red on his gummy mouth, grey apron and the window behind him, and I stood there just watching the sucker bleed. And then I said:

RB, what the hell did you do that for? And he said:

Cause I wanna go back, man. Cause I wanna go back. He says this then drops the gun on his foot and begins to drip his eyes

once again. Them salt and pepper black and whites drove up with their cherry tops whirling and they took old RB away with hand cuffs tight on his back-butt; and I saw his green serenes well up with dewsome more and I can remember him saying some such to the cops like:

What does it all mean, he said, what the devil do it all mean?

I'll tell you what it means, man; I'll tell you. It means I don't got no more damn partner no more. I don't got nothing.