

Glenn Dwiggins

SIGN DOWN

Part One—A Sudden Flush of Nostalgia

When the billboard that said, "Gil's Bar and Billiards-Open Sunday" fell, there was only one there to see it. He was riding his bicycle. The wind is what knocked it down. The boy had watched the way the wind pushed and pulled at the sign so that it tipped forwards and backwards, creaking on its supports, until finally it broke free from the ground, like a tree pulling its roots up from the soil, and fell flat forwards, blocking one half of Edge of Town Road, the incoming half, the half that passes through New Regensburg on the way to Las Vegas. It was at the moment when the sign had pulled free that the boy felt some type of fear, for the sign had made kind of an attempt at freedom, to walk away, like a monster might, but it was only a sign, and this was only a windy day in New Regensburg. But the boy was nine, so for a moment, a long few seconds, the sign had walked, but it, the monster, now lay dead. Reginald walked out to it to make sure. He studied it carefully, kicking it gently here and there. It made some shuddering moves, but he was sure that, at least this time, it was only the wind, the same wind that made his bike fall over clattering just now, so now it was dead, too, one wheel still spinning reflexively, like dead fish he had seen.

He remembered how his father would gut dead rainbow trout with a large knife, and he would have to hold them down to keep them from jumping around when he cut into them, even though they

were already dead. Sometimes his father would show him a head, and Reginald would be scared when the mouth would still move, and his father would pretend to talk to Mr. Fish, and say, "Nice day Mister Fish, isn't it?", and the fish would say, "I'm just a head," but that was just his father talking for it. He was an expert in throwing his voice. He would laugh like crazy at this. Reginald would just be scared.

Now Reginald, a little older and braver, said, "Nice day Mister Sign, isn't it?", and the sign answered, "I'm just a billboard," but it was only Reginald, the skinny blond boy, me, throwing my voice, the best I could.

There wasn't much in the way of traffic on Edge of Town Road, since the airshow was over and the strangers had left, but I felt obligated to stay by the sign and guide traffic around it, as I had seen done on trips with my father along the highway, watching the workers allow first ten northbound cars to pass through, and then ten southbound cars. So I stood there, in the windy sunlight, waiting for my first time, keeping the sand from my eyes by squinting. But I knew I couldn't stay there forever.

When a child enters a bar, it becomes suddenly louder and lighter, and the air becomes somewhat thinner. I know this, not because that child that entered the bar those years ago was me. I wasn't aware then of what I was doing or the consequences of my appearance, and even if I was, I wouldn't have given it a second thought, as I was driven by purpose. I do know this happens because it's happening now.

People are paying attention to this boy coming in now as they must have paid attention to me, half-secretly trying to hide in the vanishing privacy of the smoky darkness, but really tying their attentions to the anticipated words of the foreigner, whose face is set with that seriousness planted in the small gap between his eyes that says, "Listen to me," before even one word has been spoken. I saw myself, how I was, in that hard space, just under that smooth forehead of his. What's he going to say? To whom is he going to reveal his secret, the driving force that sent him into this cavern of curiosity and fear? Why hasn't the father said anything yet, or even

called to the boy?

I think about myself, how I felt in that moment. I was out of breath after riding against the wind the whole way here, from where the sign lay rocking as if in a sleep near the end of Edge of Town Road, fighting sand blown in my face, squinting as I rode along the streets, and almost running straight into the always cold and grey Hegel Family statue standing in the main intersection of town. Duty had blinded me from road hazards I was accustomed to avoiding reflexively, but I finally reached my destination.

Entering the bar was a conflict between purpose and confusion. It was dark and sober inside, and I was still too young to handle such a jolt from the bright drama outside. I almost willingly forgot what I had come in here for, but I didn't. Now that I think of it, I probably handled that part of it better then than I do now. The dark came upon me like a monster then, breathing sweaty smoke, and I concentrated on my purpose. I advanced on it like a knight advancing on the enemy, and I could see no one, so it was just me and the huge darkness. When someone chuckled, it resonated low and deep inside my head, like a beastly growl, a menacing part of the darkness, and my face hardened as I continued on bravely, prepared to face whatever came my way.

But now that I am older, and come here regularly, I just pretend it's not there, and I am sure I have the look of insecurity just the same, without the shield of purpose to counter it. I think about these things now, as the boy, whose eyes must have adjusted to the light by now, marches straight over to a booth near the pool tables, his face stern, where a dark form of a man sits, staring hard into a large mug, half-full of beer. Or he might be half asleep, the way his head is hanging, his shoulders and neck making a silhouette like a mountain. When the boy came in, it seemed his head sank further, so he is surely awake. The men at the other tables continue to watch this boy, and when he passes by close to their tables, sometimes bumping into them, they recoil and look the other way. It's that distinctive little-boy smell. That's definitely not what these men come to this bar for. Some of them are married and get enough of that at home. Maybe seeing him makes them feel guilty, like they should be home, too, with their families. Maybe they are thinking,

after this one, what next, mine? If my boy came in here, I'd...
Maybe it's that.

The boy isn't aware of this; that's for sure. When I came in, looking for Gil, whose sign it was that had fallen down, I wasn't aware what they were thinking, but I figure that, if there was a time between when I stepped into the bar, my small body making a silhouette in the sunlit doorway, and when my father recognized me as his, that he—my own father, who had shown me how to clean fish and who would later bring me here on my twenty-first birthday and buy me my first legal beer and not be happy until I was drunk and throwing up behind the building, and who was always trying to get me to notice the girls on the street, and who would offer to make the trip to the drugstore for me anytime I wanted (but only when I was eighteen)—*my father*—would in that moment quickly deny that he knew whom that form belonged to, and would even pray, which he hardly ever did, that it wasn't me there. *Lord, let that kid not be mine*, he might, must have thought. But it was his pessimistic nature that probably told him the truth before he could even make out my face clearly, because he turned away and faced the wall with all the colorful bottles, and then stared down deep into his beer before I could make out his face, but I recognized his shirt anyway, and Gil was looking at him in a way that I only later recognized as an expression of sympathy, for *he* did recognize me, and understood, which was his job.

That was before they heard what I had to say, of course. Who would care what a boy of nine had to say, except, of course, the father? What did it matter to us? Why did he have to come in here to bother the rest of us, to disturb our peace? Didn't the father raise his own kid right? My father was probably thinking these same things before he finally decided that it was me, and no matter how long he looked at the shelves behind Gil, the identity of the approaching child would be as likely to change as the labels on the bottles, or their contents.

The bottles are still there, although mostly because they have been replaced as they have been emptied, but Gil shows me a clear, half-full bottle that's been around since my first visit, some fifteen years ago. I think he is showing this to me to distract me from the

scene at the table, where the father and son are talking. This is obviously a private matter, because they are talking quietly, although the father doesn't seem to want to talk at all. "It's from Greece. It's called Ouzo," Gil is telling me.

I am confused, distracted. "What?"

"The drink. People around here don't seem to go for it much. They've always pretty much been the beer and gin crowd."

I tell him I was noticing the pair at the table. The father's voice is still mostly steady, and his eyes are lit up, but the boy's insistence is unflagging. What could he want from his father? That he should leave the bar, to join his family for a change? That mom says he drinks too much, spending all his time and money in this bar, and when is he going to take him and his sister to the zoo? I wonder where his mother is, and if she is the center of this discussion. Maybe she is waiting outside, not daring to go inside a place where she might get stared at in such ways as women get stared at in places like this. She may have simply said, "Go in and get your father," or maybe something not as simple or as nice as that.

Gil is pouring the Ouzo into shot glasses. He says, "This is on the house." It smells of licorice. He says, "I tried years ago to add a touch of ...what's that word? Oh, yeah, cosmopolitan...to this place, but all the people want is beer or gin, as if that's all there is in the world." He has been waiting for all these years to tell me this, I guess. I wonder if he feels a special bond formed between us because when I came into his bar back then, I came, not to speak to my father, but to him, to tell him about the falling of his sign. The appearance of this child today must have given him such a sudden flush of nostalgia, as his face has turned red and he raises one of the glasses in a toast, smiling, almost laughing.

"To childhood," he says.

Part Two—*The Easter Parade*

The boy Reginald had come, and now they had to do something about the sign. They couldn't just leave it there, lying over the road. It might cause an accident, or worse, it might get broken. The billboard meant something to the town. It, more than the green signs placed there by the state that said, "New Regensburg, so-and-

so miles," said something about the place people would be entering. It said, come in, have a drink, relax. It told of the friendliness of the area, that strangers were welcome. It was their persona, their front door. It showed, in the way it said in small lettering at the bottom that the bar was less than three minutes down the road, how the people there think in terms of time, not distance. It was them talking to the stranger before they even met.

But now it says nothing. It is down, and the only one to have seen it that way so far is the small boy Reginald, and he has gone and told Gil, and Gil has told the men in the bar that if anyone were to help him that drinks were on the house for the rest of the evening, and closing time would be an hour late tonight. He didn't need to make this offer, really, and he knew this, but he did anyway because of the way he was. He loved to celebrate, and he figured the resurrection of the sign would be a special occasion, something sort of like Easter.

It is, after all, Sunday, he thinks.

So here they come, the men, pouring out of the bar, approaching anyone on the street in jeans, with Reginald leading them along on his bicycle, circling around and back in front of the pack, as they walk, mostly sober, if not somewhat dazed at first by the brightness outside, and the wind.

They are excited. "Come on, Gil's sign is down," they yell at neighbors they meet on the street. "We're gonna set 'er back up again. Get a rope, find a shovel, bring a six-pack." Some are singing, some are laughing, telling jokes, mostly ones they had heard before in the bar, but they are funny all over again in this new environment. The butcher next door to Gil's closes up shop early and joins the group with an armful of sandwiches.

Schmidt is running to catch up with the group with a wheelbarrow and sacks of cement. He is thinking, we might as well do it right this time. He was there when the sign was put up the first time. He remembers. He told Gil, "You gotta do it right the first time. Dig 'er deep, and put 'er in cement."

But Gil wouldn't listen to reason. "I can't hardly afford the spot she's gonna be standing on," he said, "much less cement. I haven't even opened shop yet, so maybe she shouldn't be permanent

anyway.” Gil didn’t believe this part, that the sign shouldn’t be permanent. He was sure that his bar would work. It was just what the town needed, and this crowd today, marching to the edge of town with only one goal, the raising of the sign, is proof enough for anyone, he thinks. He marches along, and gets a strange, lifting feeling inside when he sees all the others around him, the numbers growing, mostly men, but now there are some women, although not so many. Among them he recognizes the Thursday Afternoon Pool Cues. He smiles when he thinks of them in his bar, making the men uncomfortable with their high voices and their ability to beat any of them at the billiard table, even when they are drunk.

Right now they are marching along with the crowd, the wind blowing their hair around, and Gil realizes that this is the only time he has seen them on a day other than a Thursday. It is also the first time he has seen most of these people in broad daylight. They look different out here, he thinks, definitely paler, but all the same more complete. It is out here that they do more than sit and drink and talk or play pool. Out here is the rest of them, the rest of their lives, their homes, their families, where they work. It is all out here, and his bar is inside the dark building that is disappearing off down the street and around the corner as the group, Gil’s Easter Parade, moves down Edge of Town Road as one, towards the end of town where the houses are low and sparse, and where his sign lies waiting for them, felled by the wind that now is blowing against them and whistling in Gil’s large ears. Gil, looking back, sees Schmidt and the cement and thinks, today is my day.

Gil and Schmidt talk as they walk on the side of Edge of Town Road. Gil, still in his big white bartending apron, is mostly listening to Schmidt, who is wearing blue denim overalls covered with mud and paint and grease stains. He is pushing his wheelbarrow, talking about water-to-cement ratios, hardening times. “Got to make the feet shaped so that they’ll stay in, too,” he says.

“Like a ‘T’, maybe?” Gill suggests.

“Something like that...,” says Schmidt. Inside he is feeling good, like the one in charge, the expert, the Chief Engineer. Today his word is gospel. Gil is listening to him now, to everything he says, paying close attention to every syllable that would help raise

the sign and make it stay up. "...though not exactly," he says.

The wind is blowing, making fierce noises and when the band reaches the spot where the sign is, it is causing the dust to whirl around in the air, making fast moving clouds and some small funnels around what looks like the body of a large, injured flat beast that flaps and bounces around, fighting death. The people stop and stare at it for a moment, shuffling around. Reginald notices that it has moved a bit from where it originally fell, and for a second is afraid. But only for a second.

Schmidt starts staring at the holes where the sign was once planted and at the broken remains of the legs, both in the holes, and on the frame of the billboard, and then all of the others are looking at him, waiting for him to say something, to tell them how to begin. His face wrinkled from fighting the wind or from figuring things out, he takes a tape measure from one of the many greasy pockets in his overalls and starts.

Some people start digging. "We want 'em real deep and wide. We ain't plantin' Begonias, you know," says Schmidt. Others start to cut and reshape the feet of the sign and pieces of two-by-four. Schmidt says, "Now follow my markings exactly. Don't get creative." The cement is mixed with water from a nearby fire hydrant, and Schmidt is yelling, "Not too much water, or we'll have soup. We can always add more water, but that's all the cement we have." Reginald stands on the road, ready to guide traffic. Schmidt gives him a red flag and an orange sign that says SLOW. He holds them, one in each hand like weapons, looking both ways. Schmidt says, "Good job, son. Just keep a lookout."

There is hammering. More nails are bent than are actually used and the nurse in the crowd has almost run out of bandages and aspirin. He calls himself the nurse because he is the only one who was prepared in case anyone got hurt. The people know him to be a hypochondriac, but they are glad that he is here just the same.

The sign eventually will be set up. Deeper holes will be dug, cement will fill the holes, and the reconstructed roots of the billboard will be set into the cement as the crowd pulls from both sides on ropes attached to the top, balancing the large, shuddering

board against the wind, and many of these people will pretend to be pirates, tugging at the sail's sheets, holding off the collapse of the ship against a storm. The winds will blow this way and that, and they will shout words like "Ahoy!". For the most part, they have never been on a sailboat, or else they might have known that in such a storm one lets the sails down, lest a strong wind blows the boat over, drowning most of them. When the cement hardens around the feet, they will bury it and pack the dirt hard around the legs, and they will be inspired to repaint the sign. They will go for sparkling-white paint. Schmidt will pretend not to be satisfied. "We'll be lucky if she holds for six months," he will say. Reginald will have guided nine cars safely around the work area. He will think, nine cars, nine years old. This must be my lucky day.

There will be a huge party around the sign. Kegs and bottles will be brought around to the spot, and people will bring paint, brushes and musical instruments. Most of the people will still be dressed in their digging or hammering clothes, dirty, but won't care. They will sing and drink and think, look. Look what we have done. They will have taken pictures of everything from one of Schmidt looking into the first hole, one hand on the small of his back, the other on his mouth, in which they can almost hear the picture say, "hmmm," to one of the last brush stroke on the billboard, made by Marcy of the Pool Cues, who has a half-full bottle of beer in her other hand, and an expression on her face that makes her look like she's painting for the Louvre, her friends will tell her.

The party will go on until dark. There will be a slightly drunken argument. Gil will insist on paying Schmidt for the cement.

"Ain't no way you're giving me one red cent," Schmidt will say.

Gil will answer back, "You tried to sell it to me two years ago, and now I can afford it, so I'm paying you for it."

"I told you I ain't taking your money."

They will settle it. Gil will give Schmidt his only bottle of Ouzo, and they will shake hands. The next day Schmidt will taste it and return it in exchange for a bottle of gin. This will not surprise Gil.

In this way the Easter Parade will break up, and the only sign that something took place there that night is discovered in the flash of a car's headlights on the green sign at the border of town, which originally said something about how many people lived there. Now instead it says, in glittering white letters, "NOW ENTERING NEW REGENSBURG POP. GOES THE WEASEL."