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Fanfare for the Common Man

You are in India. No, you're in Indiana. You've never been here before and you don't know if you're actually scared to be here in the Midwest unknown or if you're glad to be here. You are sitting in the living room of a 108-year old farmhouse that hasn't changed since Roosevelt died. Farms, you discover, are nothing like in television or movies. You can't smell television, you don't itch at the movies. Nothing could prepare you for all the cows. You are sitting in a LaZBoy across from your old distant third cousin, Harvey. He is large and his head is covered with a fine grey fuzz. He wears eyeglasses and at first you hope him to be the educated gentleman farmer he appears. You immediately abandon this idea when he shifts his weight to one side and farts. "Ducks," he says, looking out the window into the night. He smiles, showing you a wide corn-eating mouth. You can't look at him anymore so you start looking around the sagging living room. There are photographs of cows on the walls adorned with ribbons that have faded to purple. His wife enters the room. She's the same old, ambiguous age as Harvey. She has been doing the dishes with her daughter Amy who is also quite large. You immediately determine that the American farmer is at least not starving. You get up to shake Amy's hand, you say you are very pleased to meet her. Her entire white face turns red. She leaves the room to go to her trailer out back that has been specially towed in to make a portable newlywed home for her and her fiancee Cliff. Harvey's wife brings you a coke. It's warm but it gives you something to do. Harvey reaches for his fly

swatter and proceeds to crush any of them that come within a four foot radius of him. He flicks his kill onto the beige carpet. You ask him where all the flies come from. He says, "Cows." Perfectly logical, you conclude. Harvey slaps the red plastic swatter on the arm of his chair. Another kill.

"We are awfully sorry to hear about your grandfather," he says. "We didn't know him all that well but we sure liked what we saw. Matter of fact my neighbor up the way met him the last time he visited us and he thought he was a real fine gent." He smiles. You nod your head. Your grandfather was an asshole. Your entire life of seventeen years has, as far as your grandfather was concerned, been a conflict between love and contempt. You've summarized that the only way you can be true to yourself and what you believe in and what you base your entire moral standing on, assures you that you should take his ashes back to the funeral home and seal them away in white granite and glass. But you think of your grandmother who you love dearly and would die for and who you promised that you would carry out your grandfather's (her husband's) final wishes and distribute him through the rolling green hills of Indiana, where he was raised as a boy.

Harvey has been talking but you haven't really been listening. Your eyes slowly rotate back towards him. He gets up out of the chairs twisting his body to the left and right until gravity finally gives way and releases him. He motions for you to follow him into the kitchen. He tells his wife to go fetch his photo album. You sit at the kitchen table where carefully placed in the middle are cookies and loaves of white bread and Ding Dongs and Doritos and Cheetos and Fritos and a chunk of butter that the flies have captured and are raping. All of these packages of food you recognize but you are not used to seeing them all together in the center of a century-old farm house surrounded by cows, surrounded by Indiana, wrapped in black sky, and they don't seem like food to you here, more like brightly colored torture devices.

His wife brings a big brown worn photo album. Harvey's lip curls as he opens the cover and he prepares to explain every photo to you with the expertise of your favorite bartender announcing last call. You think about your grandfather who was a flyer in the

Second World War. He killed Japs and reveled in it, the true warrior class. You remember when you were six and on Sundays he would snatch you from your parents and take you in his Chrysler out to La Guardia Airport. You would sit by the huge windows on the heater vents. You marveled, even at the age of six at how these multi-ton hulks of metal can lift themselves from the steel grey runways out over Manhattan. He knows everything about the airplanes. He explains how the take-off pattern is amazingly complex and how one screw up in the tower could cause a crash. He tells you why some of the jets have four engines, some six and some only two. He explains to you the physics of the jet engine and rotary steel blades. You press your skin up to the glass. You can feel the warm air rushing to your face, causing the glass to fog up until you can no longer see clearly outside. You write your name with your finger through the fog you have created on the huge windows. Your grandfather puts his hand on your shoulder, it's time to leave the airport.

Harvey gives you a friendly swat on the arm. He points at one particular black and white photo on the page. Underneath it written in script is the name "Tepa Tora Island 1944". Harvey is young here, his body not as fat. He is wearing his T-shirt wrapped around his head like a Sikh holy man. He is standing next to a native who is naked, much shorter than Harvey, but in possession of perhaps the largest testicles you have ever seen. There is a picture next to this one with three natives standing, their testicles vary in size but are all amazingly large, they hang at least down to their knees. Harvey stares intently at the photo. "Now these colored fellas here had the largest balls we'd ever seen. I believe it's called Elephantitis, you know, things grow real big on the body." Harvey's wife leaves the kitchen with a bag of trash to be burned. Her bleached hair is clumped and erratic, a huge slab of it bounces with each step she takes. The screen door slams behind her.

"This was in the Pacific," Harvey says. He tells you how he used to be an engineer in the Army, building quonset huts and setting up mess halls. Best time he ever had in the world, he tells you. You look back again at the natives with the big nuts. For some reason this amazes you, the logistics are confusing, but you are

amazed. He turns the page.

His wife comes back into the kitchen followed by their two sons, Dee and Dwight. They are dressed in overalls, wearing yellow Caterpillar caps. They immediately go for the refrigerator and pull food from it. Dee sits at the table with us and opens a fresh Ding Dong. Harvey introduces you to them, first Dee and then Dwight. Dwight ambles over from the refrigerator and puts his hand out. You look at his face and notice that he is missing an eye. You say hello and hope you're not staring at his vacant socket for an unusually long time. Dee is your age, Dwight is slightly older, but exactly how much older is not revealed. It seems that Indiana chronology is based on what is here recently, anything before that is just older. Harvey explains to you that most of the ribbons you might have noticed in the living room were won by Dwight at the County Fair when he was in grade school. Harvey goes on to say how Dwight knows every cow out there personally and has names for most of them. Your mind reels with the connotations. Dee finishes his Ding Dong and reaches for another one. Dwight carefully spreads butter on a piece of bread. Harvey explains to the boys how you are a third cousin twice removed and your grandfather who died recently had been out to the farm before. He goes on to say how you brought your grandfather's ashes in an urn all the way from New York City and it is your intent to carry out your gandfather's last dying wish and sprinkle his ashes right here at the Teeple farm. The boys nod cohesively.

Dee is curious. He asks you how many people live in New York City. You tell him around ten million. Dwight's one eye goes wide and he whistles through his teeth. Dee says, "Biggest town I ever been's Fort Wayne. They got eight story buildings there." Harvey seems pleased that the conversation is going well, he puts his photo album under his armpit and announces that he's going to bed. He tells you where your room is at and that fresh towels have been laid out. Dee asks you if you like music. The question seems vague and safe so you answer yes. You follow him up to his room to look at his new stereo set he picked up in Fort Wayne. His room, the first one to the right of the stairs, is very dark. You see at the top of the stairs, three pairs of high rubber boots caked in mud and cow shit.

Hanging above them are faded yellow raincoats and hats. The hooks are black iron. You go into Dee's room and he puts a record on the turntable. He turns it up real loud while he changes his shirt. Dee says, "You know, there's a band playing at Stinky Jack's tonight. Supposed to be a lot of girls there. You wanna go?" You ask him if there is anything else to do. He doesn't quite understand what you mean because he tells you that all the chores for the day have been completed. You agree to go to Stinky Jack's with Dee.

You are flying along a two lane highway sitting next to Dee in his pick-up. Fifty gallon aluminum milk tanks are sliding around in the back, crashing into each other like madman pulling the bells in the church. You ask Dee if it might be a good idea to slow down a little, the speed and the milk bottles are making you a little nervous. He laughs, says something about him driving since he was four years old, and you ask yourself why you are in Indiana doing this. Is it because you have respect for your grandfather and grandmother? You think that the least you could do after all they have done for you is to be a man and handle the funeral. All you have to do is sprinkle the ashes first thing in the morning. Just open the urn, tip it over and let the old man's remains filter into the cold wind blowing down from Canada. You haven't planned to say anything as you perform this ceremony. This could be a problem, you think to yourself. Aren't you supposed to say something?

Dee snaps you out of your trance. He tells you how him and his buddy Charlie were out in the field shooting ducks and throwing cowpies at each other. Dee noticed some mushrooms growing underneath the cow shit. It was summertime and the rains had just passed. They ate them, hesitantly at first. They figured it wouldn't kill them though so they kept right on chewing. Later they broke their rifles and carried them over their arms, discarding their unused shells. He said that he had never looked at his father's farm in the same way since that day. He never loved cows again as much as he loved them that day. The way they would stupidly sway left and right, fat with milk and meat, noses drooling mucous, hip bones sharp. Sometimes, though, cows just annoyed the hell out of him. At night, while they stood about to slumber, he and Charlie would get a running start and throw their bodies into the sides of the cows,

causing them to tip over before their brains would wake them up. That was always good for a laugh. Dee fills his lip with chopped tobacco and tosses the cannister onto the dashboard. You light a cigarette as the pick-up pulls into the parking lot of Stinky Jack's.

Everybody knows everybody. You, of course, know no one. You're on the outside again, but you don't sense hostility. Dee becomes a celebrity; you meet people, you laugh with people, your preoccupation with leaving the state forthwith hides itself somewhere. There are plenty of girls in Stinky Jack's, some of them rather good looking for some reason. You notice, however, that all of the girls have huge butts as they dance with each other tentatively. You ask Dee what's with the big asses. He laughs and says, "A diet high in calcium, I guess." You grab another mug of local beer, which tastes a little nuttier than most beer, almost like Irish ale.

You're seventeen but can pass easily for twenty-three. Your grandfather once took you to McSorley's, the oldest bar in North America. The Supreme Court, after years of litigation, had finally passed down the order to force McSorley's to accept women as clientele. This doesn't seem like such a bad idea to you but this bar is not from your time. You drink three quarts of dark ale with your grandfather, who is cursing at a large photograph of Kennedy on the wall. He curses Communists and Japs and welfare and sex on television. You've never seen your grandfather drunk and it frightens you. You can't imagine him out of control. You leave the bar; it's Sunday afternoon and Manhattan's financial district is void of people. Across the street from McSorley's is a very old graveyard. Your grandfather studies a subway map while you climb the wall that contains the raised graveyard. The tombstones are tipped with black soot, some are bent and broken. The largest one you see is James Madison's. You see other names you recognize from drawn-out history classes. Your grandfather yells out that we have to take the "A" train, get off at 86th Street or we'll wind up in goddamn Harlem, then onto the "F" back to Queens and off at 28th Avenue. You climb down from the graveyard, your grandfather folds his map and is now looking for the light of the subway station.

One girl, with obvious nudges from her friends, approaches and sits next to you at the bar. You buy her a drink. She seems very honest and sincere and asks you questions about where you're from and what you do for a living. You make up something about being a motion picture director from California and she buys this so easily that you suddenly wish you had told her the truth. Although she has a big butt, six beers and the fact that she is so nice and smiling with amazingly clear eyes, you overlook and perhaps get turned on by her large hips. She moves closer to you, touching your arm, leaning into you. While she is looking away you glance over at her friends who are giggling to each other and looking at you. With everyone involved you feel like a kid forced into a meeting that maybe you wanted to be forced into all along. She tells you she wants to go outside and play or something like that and before you know it you are on your back, horizontally planting seed into the open arms of the dairy belt.

Suddenly you are very tired and you pass out, feeling short cut fingers tracing your scalp and your nose; your feet are hanging out the window. In your sleep you are on a beautifully pleasant Southeast Asian holiday. You're driving along in your Land Rover like Marlin Perkins bouncing up and down, the thin dirt road that you can see ends at a vertical bluff overlooking a blue Pacific, a blue that you have never quite seen before. You never knew blue could be so damn blue. Natives clad in sarongs wave to you, smiling, happy. Children run along beside your Rover, shouting and whistling. As you make a left turn you realize that a cow has wandered into your immediate path. You brake hard and swerve to try and avoid hitting it, but to no avail. You knock the cow over and run it down, its bony black body becoming entangled beneath your Rover. You immediately remember that on this particular island cows are held in the highest religious regard, saints or something. You panic, shifting the Rover into reverse, then forward, trying desperately to flee from the scene of the massacre. The tires grind over the body of the cow and you hear the sickening sound of bones breaking and flesh ripping. Suddenly, natives rush the Land Rover, smashing the windows and body with lava stones. Their faces are filled with rage and contempt. Someone burns an effigy of you.

Throughout the carnage you hear the bovine beneath your vehicle "moo" its last breaths. It's a frightening, haunting "moo" that grows louder and louder until you cover your ears and begin to sob as you can no longer stand to hear it. You wake up.

You are in the downstairs bedroom of the Teeple farmhouse. You grab for the covers, clutching them to your wet body. There is safety in the bed. You hear it again, a deep throaty "moo." In panic, you wheel around to your right where you see a black and white cow's head sticking through the open window. It looks at you and moos again. You remember that cows can't climb through windows and seldom open doors so you throw a shoe at it and shut the window.

You go out into the kitchen, there is no one there. It is morning, only eight o'clock but the sagging old house is deserted. You look out the window and it is a good morning. The sun is shining through fleeing rain clouds, things are dewy outside. In the morning light you can see the green fields bordered by white gates rolling on forever. Last night storms back into memory. You look into the mirror at your clumped hair and neck lesioned with hickeys. You smooth your hair back as Harvey enters the room. In the light of day he seems much pinker, his eyeglasses covered in mist. He takes them off and wipes them on his overalls. He says he heard you had quite a night. You nod, there's not much else you can do. You sit at the table filled with dirty dishes. Harvey's wife shuffles in and begins to clear them away, smiling at you and scraping food into the sink. She asks you if you would like her to fix you something to eat. You barely hear her as last night's chest of drawers is opened up. She brings you a large glass of orange juice anyway and it occurs to you that today is funeral day.

After showering and putting on fresh clothes you go out to your Hertz rent-a-car, open the trunk, move a suitcase out of the way and retrieve your grandfather's ashes. Dee pulls up in his truck and asks you how you're feeling. You don't know. He tells you to get in his truck, he'll take you to a place where you can drop the ashes. You reach back into the trunk and pull out an old edition of *Life* magazine, dated 1948. Tucking it under your arm you get into the passenger side one-handed, holding the urn in the other carefully.

You and Dee drive for about ten minutes, up over a hill and into a short valley. He pulls off the dirt road and into a meadow and drives until you can no longer see the road. "This looks pretty good," you say. He stops the truck and you both get out, leaving the doors open. Dee goes back into the truck and turns the key that powers a cassette deck in the cab. He pops a tape in and turns it up full blast. It is classical music. By the time he reaches you the music comes up, filling the air. You look behind you to where the truck is in the middle of kneehigh grass, behind it a rolling bluff. A breeze blowing over it cools the back of your neck. You're glad there is a breeze. You suddenly recognize the classical music playing. It is Aaron Copeland's "Fanfare for the Common Man." Dee tells you how it was his grandfather's favorite. You half smile at him and open the *Life* magazine, turning to the page you have marked. It's an article run years ago titled "A Father's Prayer for His Son," by General Douglas MacArthur. It is really the only thing "possibly fitting" that you could think of. You begin reading as Dee carefully examines the down side of a nearby cowpie.

"Build me a son O Lord, who will be strong enough to know when he is weak, and brave enough to face himself when he is afraid; one who will be proud and unbending in honest defeat and humble and gentle in victory. Build me a son whose wishes will not take the place of deeds; a son who will know Thee and know that to know himself is the foundation stone of knowledge. Lead him, I pray, not in the path of ease and comfort, but under the stress and spur of difficulties and challenge. Here let him learn to stand up in the storm; here let him learn compassion for those who fail."

You set the old magazine down and pick up the urn. You clear your throat and your eyes well up and it feels as if some beast is tugging at your esophagus. You don't know why. You don't know anything. You hold your breath and open the urn. Holding it away from your body you slowly tip it over. The fine ash falls and is caught by the confused wind. You keep your mouth closed and your eyes tight as the ash swirls around you. You don't breathe, not wanting to let any of him in until the breeze picks up and the last of the ash is gone and through your clamped eyes you can no longer see it.