

Smoke Dreams

by

Michael C. Keith

When I was ten years old, I set fire to a hotel. That was back in 1956, and it was at one of the many fleabags my father and I occupied during the years I bummed around the country with him. On that particular occasion he was sleeping off another in an endless series of drunks while I restlessly awaited his return to consciousness by losing myself in my active fantasy world. It was a refuge from the bleak moments with an alcoholic parent, who had been on a downward spiral most of his adult life. During my infrequent stays with my mother and two younger sisters, my mother would attempt to enlighten me about his checkered past in the hope it would break the firm hold he had on me.

“I know you care for him, but he’s just so irresponsible, and his drinking ruins everything. Look what he’s done to this family. Why do you think I divorced him? I don’t understand the strong attraction he has for you. You’re drawn to him like a moth to a flame,” she would lament at every possible opportunity.

Despite her common sense pleadings, the allure of the freewheeling gypsy’s life with my father would inevitably win out. With him I would not have to endure the tedium and routine of school, church, and weekly baths, none of which held great appeal for me. With him everyday was an adventure, which despite the toll it would eventually exact from me, was what I wanted. I could not get enough of the open road. The hum and swoosh of the passing cars, as we stood with our thumbs outstretched, was the irresistible siren call that beckoned me, so I would take off with him. Just like that, I’d be gone. Vanished from the care of my mother. On the way to school or after school, I would meet up with my old man (after all he was over 50), and we would slip away undetected, leaving my mother to agonize over my whereabouts and well being.

“You don’t know how it would tear at my heart,” she would tell me years later when I was old enough to better appreciate her pain.

She would not call in the police to investigate my disappearance. She knew I was with my father and she knew it was my choice to go with him. That fact had long been established. Besides she had my two younger sisters to care for and did not need the added upheaval an investigation might cause, reasoning that it would jeopardize the tenuous domestic stability she had worked so hard to create.

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The most recent round of wandering the country with my father had run its course, and I was interested in spending another hiatus, a breather from the road, with my mother and sisters. We had no real plan or destination at that moment, having just returned from the West Coast two weeks earlier. As had been the case with our previous odysseys to places we imbued with grandiose significance, things had not turned out the way we imagined they would. Alas, I had not been discovered for a role in the movies, something I felt was my destiny, and my father’s hope of securing a bellhop job at the famous Beverly Hills Hotel had been dashed when he was informed that there had not been an opening there in years.

“They hold onto to those gigs because they make big tips from the famous actors who come to town,” was his gloomy assessment.

So things had reached another low ebb, and I was really down in the dumps--as low as an ant’s underpants, to quote my father. As I paced the drab room in the crumbling hotel in downtown Providence, Rhode Island, all I could think about was the hole in my life caused by the recent loss of my toy guns and rhinestone studded holster. Later when reunited with my mother she would accuse my father of pawning them. He would claim he had done no such thing, his thick eyebrow arching nearly to his thinning widow’s peak. He looked like the actor Robert Taylor when he did that, and he knew it.

“What the hell would they give me for a toy anyway, for chrissakes? They don’t buy that crap!”

He is wrongly accused and exhibits appropriate indignation, flicking the remains of his cigarette into the air causing a contrail of orange sparks. But the truth is my cherished pistol and holster set, which I have had since my last birthday, is lost. Not hocked, as my father makes dramatically clear, but gone just the same.

My wild-west six-shooters, with plastic pearl handles and gem-encrusted holster, were being withheld due to an unpaid locker fee at the Providence train depot. A dime is good for twenty-four hours.

How I longed for my authentic Colt replicas. How I mourned their absence. They were my prized possessions. When they hung from my narrow hips, I was everything I dreamed of being. Hopalong Cassidy astride Topper. Tall and invincible.

Shortly after we arrived back in Providence--the city we spent most of our time hating and escaping and inevitably returning to because it was our home base of sorts--due to its proximity to my mother and sisters--my father began boozing and we were booted from the dingy rooming house that had let us stay there without paying the customary rent in advance. My father decided we should not cart around our stuff, which was squeezed into a dilapidated brown canvas suitcase with hard cowhide handles, so he stored them in a railroad station locker. Our worldly belongings, including my shiny revolvers, were pushed into the dark boxy abyss.

"We'll pick them up when we get another place to stay," assured my father, patting the top of my head.

"You can't walk around with those on, Mikey, even if they are fake," he explained, adding that we had to make a good impression if we expected anybody to extend us credit until he got a job.

He winked at me in complicity. I was his little partner, he said in a secretive voice, a smirk on his unshaven face. It made me feel good when he said that. Sometimes not so good, especially when I thought of my mother enumerating his legion defects.

"He's a drunkard! A sad example of a human being. Burns everything he touches," she begins each vitriolic rant.

Days later when he was sleeping off the effects of a tankard of cheap wine, I knelt next to our bed in yet another roach infested rooming house and observed a spasm in his woolly chin and lower lip and a drop of murky liquid form and creep from the corner of

his clenched and quivering right eye to the bridge of his ample nose. He mumbled something that sounded like, “Please . . . please don’t. I will . . . honest” while I removed the locker key from his pants pocket. That accomplished, I ran like a gazelle through the bustling intersection’s of Providence’s congested center, past the Outlet and Shepherd’s department stores, where my father claimed he had tried to get sales jobs, to the train station at the summit of a small bedraggled downtown park mostly occupied by other drunks and lost souls.

My heart pounded not from physical exertion—I could run for miles without the slightest sign of fatigue—but from the anticipation of a reunion with something very dear. When I caught sight of the brick edifice of the depot, I accelerated my pace and narrowly escaped the fender of a delivery truck. In the glass of the station’s large swinging doors, I could see the truck stopped in the middle of the street and the driver shaking his fist at my back.

A few feet away from the wall of gray lockers, I applied the breaks and slid across the slick marble floor to number 16, the vault containing my treasure and joy.

As I dug into my pocket for the key, I noticed a black seal covering the lock. I pulled at it, but it did not budge. Next I looked around to make certain there was no other locker numbered 16. There was not, and I began to panic. How could that be? Had my pistols been stolen? I speculated as my sense of dread deepened.

When I explained my predicament to a matchstick thin and leathery skinned black man in a red cap and dark uniform, reminiscent of the ones worn by theater ushers, he observed that when the time runs out on the lockers, the contents are removed and held for additional payment. With a nonchalance that stood in dramatic counterpoint to my mounting hysteria, he added that every day it costs more to get stuff back.

“If ya ain’t got no dough, sonny, ya cain’t get da goods,” he explained, with a slack-jawed smile that revealed two brilliant gold caps separated by a discolored front tooth.

Stunned by this information and unwilling to accept the terrible implication of it, I tried opening several adjacent lockers, although their numbers did not match those on my key. To compound my frustration, the key fit into every lock but then could not be turned. So close but yet so far, my father would say.

I wanted to rip the door off of every locker, which had now become tiny impenetrable crypts to me. Make a scene. Fall to me knees and cry . . . scream. Maybe that would have inspired the sympathetic attention of the person holding my guns for ransom. I ran a brief scenario in my head to ease my anguish. But I remained unarmed and unconsolated and left the station utterly defeated. As I wandered back to the seedy rooming house, I dragged the tops of my shoes against the pavement until the scuffmarks appeared on the verge of becoming holes.

My father said not to worry. That he would get our things, and my toys, as soon as he got something to do to pick up a few bucks. I don't like the way he referred so dismissively to my priceless treasures. They are so much more than toys to me.

As the days passed it became painfully obvious to me that I would never see my gun set again. It would cost a bundle to get the stuff out, observed my father, who concluded it would be easier to just replace everything. Actually cheaper in the long run, he surmised.

"Your old lady couldn't have paid much for those dumb toys anyway. She got them at a yard sale," he revealed, and that surprised me because they were so neatly boxed and wrapped on my birthday.

After I visited the train station several more times in the hope that my guns and holster would magically reappear, I dropped the locker key through the grate of a sidewalk ventilation shaft on my way back to our present shelter.

When my father returned after a day of washing dishes and busing tables at a nearby diner—or 'hash house,' as he smugly called it--I shot him repeatedly with my index finger and thumb.

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When he got his first paycheck we snuck out of the rooming house to avoid paying the back rent we owed. My father felt like a mogul with the two ten dollar bills in his pocket, and I knew a drink was on his mind. He deposited me at the Strand Theater, where a double feature was playing that I had been bugging him to see. He had no interest in cowboy pictures, he remarked as he coughed up the 35 cents it cost to get me in.

“Had enough of that western crap for a while,” he remarked clearly alluding to our long and arduous journey across the rugged and desolate landscape of the southwestern desert, where we almost succumbed to the blazing sun after standing for days on Route 66 trying to hitch a ride.

“You go enjoy them, Mikey. I’ll pick you up after the flicks.”

“Don’t drink,” I beseeched him, as I entered the air-conditioned movie house.

When I emerged three hours later he was nowhere to be found. A half an hour passed before I spotted him approaching from a block away. He was weaving from the obvious affects of alcohol and my heart sank.

“How you doin’, sonny boy,” he slurred, and I cursed him. “Hey, watch your mouth,” he snapped grabbing my hand and tugging me away from the theater entrance.

He dragged me to a nearby gin joint (one of the many terms he had for bars) until he was so blotto he could hardly stand, but to our saving grace he had rented a room at a hotel after dropping me off at the show earlier. On occasion he would actually take steps to secure us housing before launching his binge and that had been one of those times. Back in our room he dozed while I considered my next move. My plan was to get to my mother’s in Westerly, some thirty or forty miles away. These intentions I had made clear to my father, who still was not keen on the idea, even though I had been pitching it to him since our return east.

“Hold off for a few days until I get us back on our feet again. I don’t want your mother seeing you this way. I got to buy you some new things to wear first. That shirt you got on is pretty ragged and those dungarees have seen better days.”

Those were his words earlier in the day as we made our escape from the rooming house where, as so many times before, we owed back rent. He had promised to find us a better place to lay our heads while I took in the double feature. As he sprawled out on the bed in an alcoholic stupor my resentment for him peaked. He was the “drunken bum” my mother called him, and he would never be anything else. Sure, we had our fun on the road, but things always turned out badly because of his addiction, what my mother once called his dipsomania.

It was at that moment in the shadowy gloom of the hotel room that the idea of setting the place on fire came to me. Where it originated, I cannot say. I’m sure it had its

roots in my frustration and sense of hopelessness. Maybe I saw it as a way to attract attention to my dilemma, or maybe it was the first impulse of a future arsonist. Who knew for sure? Whatever it was and wherever it came from it had an overpowering affect on me and within seconds I had taken my father's tattered Zippo lighter from his jacket that hung over a chair and slipped into the bathroom. There I sat on the commode flicking the lighter's metal top back and forth while surveying my surroundings for something to ignite. My first thought was to put the lighter's flame to the towel draped over the side of the sink, but then I caught sight of a better target—toilet paper. It would catch fire faster, I figured, as I reached for it, unraveled some, and tore it from its roll. I then dangled it from my outstretched hand as I moved the lighter to its end. Without hesitation or a second thought, I ignited it and flames instantly shot up the paper column toward my hand. As the fire illuminated the bathroom, I was suddenly accosted by the horrifying realization that I was about to perpetrate a heinous crime, one that might not only take my father's life and mine but very likely the lives of many other people, who had nothing to do with the sad trajectory of my existence.

The heat of the flames registered sharp and hot on my fingertips as I heaved the ball of fire into the tub and turned on the faucet. The inferno was doused as quickly as it had been kindled, filling the bathroom with swirling shafts of gray putrid smoke. I watched as the remnants of burned toilet paper became wet ash and slithered down the drain. My fingers tingled from the burns, and for several minutes I held them under the stream of cold water that had thankfully dispatched the evidence of my would-be crime. *That's what you get for trying to kill your ole dad*, I could hear my father saying in my imagination, and then I became overcome by guilt and remorse for the murders I nearly committed.

When my father awoke a few hours later, he had the dry heaves. Between his pathetic retching sounds, he managed what seemed like a heartfelt apology, and my affection for him was revived.

“Sorry, Mikey. We'll get you to your mother's for a while. That would be better for you right now. Hey, how would you like to go to Florida in a month or two? We've never been there. It's great. Lotsa' beaches and palm trees. I can get a job at a hotel down there. I'll get some dough together, and we'll go, okay? What do you think?”

“Sure,” I replied, keeping my hands in my pockets to hide my scorched fingers, which had become blistered.

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The next day, I was transferred to the care of my mother, and during the three months I spent with her and my sisters, my imagination burned with the prospect of hitting the road again with my father to places I would come to learn only existed in the realm of our misbegotten dreams.

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