

Elizabeth, New Jersey - February 1989

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I wanted to kill Glenn Gallee with my bare hands. A blunt instrument would do, or my bare hands. But snuffing the life out of Glenn was going to be difficult as long as I was sitting in the backseat of a police car. My only hope was that perhaps they'd put us in the same holding tank once we were officially arrested and thrown in the slammer.

The fact that I was in Elizabeth, New Jersey on a Saturday night about to be arrested was all Glenn's fault. Never mind that I was facing a DUI, leaving the scene of an accident and further abuse from Jersey's finest; but because of Glenn – the lives of myself and 3 others narrowly escaped serious injury and perhaps death.

It was February of 1989. I had recently parted ways with a long-time girlfriend and was anxious to re-join society again, to escape the stifling atmosphere of what was essentially a co-dependent relationship. It started out as an after work gathering between Bob E., Glenn, Shelly and myself. The four of us worked as deli-clerks in King's supermarket - Garwood, New Jersey. We had agreed to meet at Kings, split up into two cars, park and go bar-hopping through the streets of downtown Elizabeth. The plan was for Shelly to take her car home at the end of the night – as she resided in a nearby Elizabeth neighborhood – Bob and I would ride back to Kings parking lot with Glenn, who was happily zipping around in his brand new Mazda RX-7. As there would be drinking involved – and I was (incredibly) enough at that time of my life very much a non-drinker – my only stipulation of the evening was that I would not be getting behind the wheel at any point. I resided close enough to Kings to walk home from there. Bob felt the same. Shelly opted to take her chances after a night at the bar because she lived close-by – and Glenn – well Glenn was another story.

At 23 years of age – one is normally well-accustomed to the taste of alcohol. I had thus far avoided it for the most part – as it held no special charm to entice me into its clutches. Music was my vice and excessive drinking was not only a distraction from my creativity, but I observed that friends of mine who engaged in it acted foolishly to an extent that it became difficult to be around them. Indeed, the lead singer of the band I was in was always throwing back a few beers to 'loosen up,' and he often became drunkenly annoying towards the end of the night – whether it was a gig or rehearsal. His behavior made me look upon those who drank with such fervor in distaste.

However – my new found freedom and desire to seek out adventures soon led me to relax

my intolerance for drunken stupidity. Indeed, is there a better time to get drunk and act stupid as when one severs a long-term relationship? I think not.

It didn't take long to get to that point. In hindsight we started out stupid – then got drunk – which emboldened us into greater depths of stupidity later. Bob, Glenn, Shelly and I weren't sitting at a table 10 minutes before ordering a round of 'Dr.Peppers.' The variety of this particular concoction: a shot of amaretto dropped into a full mug of beer. Chug accordingly until glass is empty. (No sipping!) I imagine there is a chance that you'll knock a tooth out, but of you are lucky the shot glass sticks to the bottom of the mug and the two varieties of alcohol merge into fizzy brew not far removed from the aforementioned Coke product. Ah yes – right out of the gate we were on our way to intoxicated oblivion! The first few DP's went down so well we decided to have a few more before heading off to another bar across the street.

It is safe to say that I have no recollection whatsoever of how much time had actually passed between the first bar we hit to when the four of us were suddenly playing pool at another. It certainly felt like much later – though it could have been merely an hour or so. All I can gather through the fuzziness of an inebriated haze was that I was leaning heavily onto a pool stick for support while contemplating whether my team was solids or stripes. I snapped out of this lackadaisical contemplation when I realized that I couldn't feel the back of my neck.

It was alarming enough to me that I left the game without so much as a word and strode up to the bar using the pool stick to steady myself, all the while feeling the numbness spread throughout my arms and legs. As I broke out into a cold sweat I recall my vision taking on the effect of looking out a small melted oval of a frost-covered window. Everything was framed by an icy film of opaque glass. My leather jacket felt heavy and cumbersome – and as I took a seat the well-seasoned bartender was quick to notice the lack of a drink in my hand. She was a middle-aged blonde, with a tanning-bed complexion that oozed nicotine as though it pervaded directly from her pores.

It must have been slow night – because she parked herself in front of me and lit a cigarette as though she had time to file her fake fingernails. There was no hurry to order – but I felt a need at this point to quickly introduce something into my system to offset the effects I was feeling. I opted for another Coke product – this time I settled for a plain old undiluted 7-Up on the rocks. Ah. It seemed to do the trick. It wasn't long before I was in a convoluted conversation with the smoky barkeep that I don't remember much of – except that she was admiring the length of my own blond locks so much so that she ran her fingers through it. I

was sufficiently blasted enough to let her continue even after she creepily crooned in my ear that her son's hair was the same color but not nearly as soft and silky as mine.

This uncomfortable moment was mercifully cut short by the abrupt appearance of Shelly who huskily demanded to know why I left the game. She yanked the pool stick out of my hand so fast that she nearly pulled me and the barstool over. I started to mutter a response though it was clear she was not interested in the answer, but in leaving immediately. Born and raised in the heart of Elizabeth and the outskirts of Newark, Shelly was not blessed with societal niceties. Her disposition was similar to the surroundings she grew up in; dark, foreboding, hardened and frequently dangerous. All of which contributed to her being especially fun to hang around – as long as she considered you a friend and ally, though that alliance could waver at a moment's notice.

Shelly tossed the stick aside, grabbed my hand and we headed towards the door, Glenn and Bob close behind. "I'll punch that bitch right in the cunt," she blithely muttered as we exited. Though there was clearly no reason for this venomous outburst, she had brandished an odd sort of possessiveness over me ever since the alcohol kicked in. I was bemused by it – even in my drunken state of mind. She was flirting with me, Elizabeth-style.

I had assumed that we were all headed to another local bar that we could walk to – but we had somehow ended up in the parking lot – Bob and Glenn getting into the Mazda as Shelly and I stood next to her mid-seventies powder-blue Buick. I immediately protested the idea that we were all getting behind the wheel – but Shelly assured me that the bar we were headed to was 'just down the street.' Unsatisfied with this response, I turned to Glenn and Bob for support, but they were already ducking into the Mazda. When I turned around Shelly firmly planted the keys to her car in my hands and strode over to the passenger side of her vehicle. "You're not as fucked up as I am," she stated. And so – reluctantly I got into the Buick, adjusted the mirrors and prepared for the ride of my life.

Though it was my first time drunk – and about to be my first time driving drunk – I admit to a sort of giddiness at the risky prospect of being behind the wheel and out on the open road in this condition. I was perceptive enough to recognize that it was going to be challenging – and therefore began taking steps to ensure my attention was on the task at hand. As we drove through the center of Elizabeth all seemed to be perfectly in order with regards to my duty to keep the car between the lines. There were a number of stoplights and because the traffic was slow in general, there were no difficulties encountered, though I came to the conclusion relatively quickly that Shelly was full of shit. This bar was not simply 'down the

street' but on the other side of town. I realized this as we turned onto a busy stretch of highway. To add to this night of 'firsts' was the fact that I was not at all familiar with the direction we were heading. Navigating the roads in this part of the world is difficult enough even when you know your surroundings – I was helplessly naïve to these busy streets. There was no point in arguing about it now – both hands were on the wheel and bent on getting us to our destination in one piece. I don't believe I spoke even one word – such was the level of my concentration. And I don't even remember Shelly giving me directions – though she must have – and I was relieved when we turned off the highway and proceeded down a few deserted side streets. I felt our destination must be close – and at any rate the traffic had diminished to just us; the Buick followed closely by Glenn's Mazda. No other vehicles were in the vicinity.

It was at this point I looked into the rear-view mirror and noticed the Mazda's headlights suddenly dash out of sight. This was followed by the strained roar of high RPM's approaching loudly from the passing lane. In a moment of bravado, Glenn had decided to impress us all with the kind of daredevil street-racing antics that usually end up with vehicles wrapped around telephone poles. I was perfectly fine with this – only because I was determined to play no part in it. I retained my moderate speed and even crept over slightly to the right to give him plenty of room to pass.

I expected to see his car shoot past us like a rocket – taillights aglow in a streaking blur of horsepower. But that did not happen and the second that I felt a twinge of anxiety about it was the moment that Glenn's Mazda slammed into the rear quarter-panel of the Buick. Apparently Glenn had decided that perhaps it was not the smartest play on his part to demonstrate high-speed shenanigans when utterly inebriated. Unfortunately his decision to fall in line behind us was foiled as he found the ass end of the Buick was between him and the right lane. The speed of the Mazda sent the Buick into a tail spin – we literally jackknifed 90 degrees to the left and found ourselves skidding sideways down the center of street – the nose of the Mazda locked in the wheel-well. In that split-second I remember thinking how upset I was that Glenn was ruining the careful display of drunk driving I had performed up to this point.

People often describe the sound of metal collapsing when they talk about car crashes they've experienced. I think the most prevalent sound I remember was the nauseating moan of the tires skipping and scraping horizontally across the concrete in a direction that they were never created to traverse. The steering wheel was useless at this point, revolving violently, the laws of physics now prevailing over my feeble death grip upon it. Time

however, had gone into slow-motion – and as I waited helplessly for inertia to bring the car to a stop I noticed lines of neon in the dark of night far below us. We had spun out of control on an access bridge high over the New Jersey Turnpike, hundreds of cars and trucks speedily passing under it, just over the railing 100 or so feet down. This gave new life towards my efforts to gain control over the steering wheel.

Glenn's Mazda finally discharged itself from the rear of the Buick but the laws of motion were not through with us just yet. Fortunately the bridge was designed to handle the possibility of there being idiot drunk drivers hurtling out of control high above the nation's busiest freeway. The car ramped up a large curb, crossed the sidewalk and struck the guard rail fencing - deflecting off of it like a pinball. The safety rail effectively, albeit violently changed our direction – spitting us back out into the roadway. It was perhaps karma that the same set of principles were at play on the other side of the road as we met Glenn's Mazda head on – his vehicle having ricocheted off the opposite guard rail as well.

Upon meeting the nose of the Buick, the hood of the Mazda folded up like foil. I could see Glenn's panicked face, mouth open in disbelief as he stared through the windshield at the sheen of crumpled remains – the Buick's hood ornament a fitting exclamation point – unaltered and towering victoriously over the hissing mass of twisted metal before it. The thrill ride had finally come to an end and it was awaking from a hazy dream as time shifted back to full speed. Leaning into the car door to get out I realized that I was no longer sitting in the seat – my rear end had shifted onto the center counsel – literally butting up to the stick shift so hard that it had cut a hole into the side my jeans.

I heard Bob ask calmly if everyone was all right – as each of us simultaneously circled the two vehicles, trying to take in the spectacle and digest the scene. Indeed, even with no seat belts on - we were all intact and unharmed all the violent jousting aside. The two cars ceremoniously sat each facing the other on opposite sides of the center line - pools of radiator fluid comingled and ran like rivulets across the asphalt and down the street.

Glenn took up a position at the apex of the scene and spread his arms out – palms skyward and looked at me quizzically. “What happened?” I ignored him. He had the audacity to repeat the question again, a puzzled glare in his eyes as he turned to survey the damage. In my mind there wasn't a single thread of credibility to anything that could possibly come out of his mouth other than his complete declaration of responsibility for this accident. Because of his inability to come to terms with this, Glenn's words, his reaction – none of it meant anything to me or stirred in me any impulse to respond. Instead – I decided to get back into

the car and get the hell out of there.

The Buick did not look the worse for wear all things considered. As I turned the key in the ignition the radio blared to life and I wondered how I had heard any sound outside of its shrill timbre – if that were the volume Shelly had set it to. I didn't even remember the radio being on, but then again I didn't recall hearing the sound of Shelly's voice at any time while we were in the car either – the dream was getting foggier by the minute. The starter of the Buick turned over a few times but despite its relatively intact body – the collision had severed enough of the engine's main arteries as to render it dead. Bob appeared at the car door and implored me to get out — we were after all, in the middle of an active roadway. I reluctantly obeyed and strolled over to the safety of the sidewalk.

Shelly was wringing her hands and stupidly smiling in drunken disbelief – for once at a loss to provide any colorful commentary. Bob – in his black leather jacket and slightly greased back hair coolly lit a cigarette and French inhaled it as though he were readying himself for the next Stray Cats album cover shoot. Glenn remained in the road just off the curb of the sidewalk, arms now akimbo and knees bowed out in an almost comical pose. I filed the image to my memory for later amusement – and glared at him. He was speaking again but since I had no inclination to listen his voice was just a drone that seemed to be repeating the same thing over and over again. I was also concerned that if I heard what he was saying that it may inspire me to smash him in the face – and I was already in enough trouble. It turned out that I wasn't far off the mark – when I finally tuned him in I heard his nasal plea to pitch a fictional story of the events that led to the crash. “What are we going to tell them when they get here? We have to have a story ready! Let's say that you saw something in the road and hit your brakes.”

Admittedly my mind struggled to grasp the incredulousness of this statement. The individual responsible for the accident was attempting to put the blame squarely on someone else besides them. They say that in times of stress people will do or say anything – and since I don't talk to Glenn anymore I can't really say if this statement was brought on by fear, alcohol, stupidity, anxiety, or a mixture of all four. Worse, was this just an existing element that resided within Glenn's personality; to deflect obvious wrongdoing on his part to anyone but himself? We were all guilty of bad judgment – putting at risk the lives of innocent bystanders out for a walk, other drivers and their passengers. There are any number of possible scenarios that could have rendered this scene an absolute catastrophe – we were extremely fortunate that there were only our own damaged vehicles – and that none of us sustained any serious injury. And yet Glenn was still attempting to squirm out of his

role as the catalyst to the wreck. Notwithstanding my own stupidity of agreeing to drive in my condition, it seemed unfair that I should suffer the same consequences as someone who was not only willfully driving drunk but taking risks behind the wheel that would be considered dangerous even if one were sober. This seemed to trigger a self-preservation mode of my own. That is to say, no one was injured, no one even needed attended to – what remained could all be taken care of tomorrow, when I was no longer drunk.

Indeed, I had heard of this type of evasive action long before when my Grandfather's Oldsmobile was side-swiped as it sat parked on the street outside his home. The driver responsible for the damage simply continued on his way – only stopping by the next afternoon to square things up and exchange insurance information. His story was that it was too late to bother with waking my Grandfather up at 2am when the incident occurred. My Grandfather concluded he was likely on his way home from the bar and drunk at that. But since the man's sobriety the night before was merely speculation– the only action that remained was to let the insurance companies take over and fight it out. Credit was due, after all the guilty party had returned to the scene to take responsibility. That he was at fault was a given – but the ensuing penalty would be a pittance compared to what it would have been had he stopped or been stopped at the scene and it was determined that he was under the influence. Never did this story resonate more with me than it did at that moment. It was just a matter of getting away. In an instant my mind was made up. There wasn't much time to spare. Amazingly to this point no police or other cars had yet reached the scene. The location of the accident was just remote enough that there were no witnesses or spectators gathering. It was time to run.

Traveling by foot in Elizabeth at night was a dangerous proposition – even more so to not have any idea where one was or where they were going. The bridge we had crashed on led to an industrial area of town – all warehouses with loading docks and barbed-wire chain-link fencing to keep out the riff-raff. On the opposite side, the florescent glow of a gas station lit up the fringe of a residential neighborhood just beyond it. Without saying a word, I began a brisk walk towards the station. Everyone else could go to hell – if I had to duck into backyards and down side-streets to avoid the cops so be it. My goal was to get home and get sober. Minus a conviction of driving under the influence, I would willingly return the next day to accept responsibility for my part in the accident. I was keenly aware leaving the scene of an accident was a very serious crime in itself – but in my mind this carried far less weight than the penalty of being convicted of a DUI. The ramifications of the latter in this case seemed far worse – since no one at the scene was in immediate danger or in need

of assistance.

I had not gone very far when Bob ran up alongside of me – struggling to keep up with my rapid pace. There was some distance to go yet – and no time to lose. It was all I could do to not break into a downright sprint but my pride would not allow this. I was also somewhat restricted in that my heavily studded and chained leather jacket would have made running difficult if not extremely awkward. I didn't care that Bob was there, he was welcome to join me – if the rest of them had any sense they would scatter too. Bob's first nearly out of breath words were to assure me that none of this was my fault. Bob, after all, had been Glenn's passenger – so he was firsthand witness to the idiocy that overtook Glenn behind the wheel just moments before. "He was dicking around! He said 'Watch this' and the next thing I knew he had slammed into you."

It was good to hear that I had assessed Glenn's actions leading up to the crash accurately – he was showing off. But the comfort of knowing whose fault it was would not matter when we were all in jail – which we were most assuredly going to be if we didn't get the hell out of here. If Bob's motivation was to get me to turn around and return to the scene, he seemed un-phased that it had not worked. The gas station and the neighborhoods beyond were not far off – and Bob stayed right by my side. As we came down off of the overpass and began to cross the street adjoining it, a police car passed in front of us. The car did not hesitate – nor did it seem in any hurry to get to a particular location – it was simply patrolling. Without breaking our stride we continued onward towards our goal – away from the scene of the mayhem. Surely the cops would happen upon the wrecked vehicles in the distance behind us – but hopefully by then Bob and I would be ducking through the maze of back yards and alleyways that make up Elizabeth's residential townships. I held no reservation that evading the police at this point was going to be imminently more challenging if not impossible. I didn't have enough of a head start – and to be sure, I wasn't convinced Bob was going ultimately going to go along with my plan. At last we stepped off the sidewalk into the asphalt parking lot of the gas station. Only 50 feet more and we'd be in the alleyway. I didn't have the nerve to look back, too afraid of what I might see. Were the cops now at the scene and surveying the wreckage? What crazy story were Glenn and Shelly going to tell the police? Were they in pursuit of me? It turned out that I would have plenty of time to talk to them myself – they were indeed in hot pursuit of two white males in black-leather jackets – fleeing the scene of an accident.

Bob and I were halfway across the open lot of pumps when we heard the dull thump of a car bottom out – bouncing from the street across up into parking lot of the gas station a little too

fast. A police car roared to a sliding stop in front of us. I let out a surrendering sigh of resignation as two cops jumped out –furiously shouting at us to halt; nightsticks blazing overhead. My gambit was up – there was no point in resisting from here on out. It was time to face the music. The police naturally suspected that since Bob and I were already on the run - perhaps we might continue our flight even when approached - and they were ready to beat us down to the ground before they let that happen. In fact – they were likely looking forward to it.

I saw a nightstick silhouetted against florescent lights anxious to come down on my head – but I made it clear that I wasn't going anywhere so the stick stayed at the ready. My hands were at my sides as I stood ready to accept the pummeling I thought for certain was coming. The dark-haired cop in front of me advanced – fiercely reciting a string of obscenities. “Where the fuck do you think you're going?” he said. I think I may have meekly muttered something about a looking for a payphone – an obvious lie. “You fucking walked right by us back there! You saw us, you could have flagged us down!” I could not argue with the logic. My true intentions could not have been more transparent – I deserved to be struck down for the weak excuse.

Looking back – I don't blame the cops for their violent response. We were a couple of punks high-tailing it from the scene of a two demolished vehicles. They could not have known that we were all friends, or that Bob was in one car and I the other. Bob and I seemed to be brothers in arms – both of us sporting long hair and matching leather jackets. From their perspective – we were likely the impetus of the accident, maybe even with the intent to do harm to Shelly and Glenn – both of whom dutifully stayed back at the crash site. The police may have suspected one of the cars was stolen, and we were running because of that, possibly in possession of drugs or guns or both. Perhaps this was all the result of a deal gone bad, or maybe we were wanted by the law already, or had long and illustrious rap sheets. This was, after all, Elizabeth, New Jersey – and any number of sordid scenarios took place on any given night or day of the week. Every cop in the precinct would have suspected the very worst case when happening upon a situation like the one we were in.

‘What the fuck is this?’ the cop shouted. With his free hand and a quick flick of his wrist the cop reached forward, yanked out my black coral earring and tossed it over his shoulder. He lowered the nightstick to rest under my chin and pinned me against the patrol car. “Got anything in your pockets...a knife? What am I going to find in here?” His hand sought out the inside pocket of my jacket and found 3 condoms, a pack of Doublemint gum and a can of Binaca. Replacing these, he spun me around and pressed me flat against the vehicle – in

the classic ‘spread ‘em position; palms out, legs wide. I felt the nightstick against the inside of each knee as he indicated he wasn’t satisfied with the distance between them. I noticed Bob was getting similar, possibly rougher treatment on the opposite side of the same vehicle; his face held fast to the roof of the car as though the cop was looking to make an imprint of his head. Poor Bob was just a passenger – a witness guilty of no wrongdoing whatsoever and even so was paying the price of being treated like a renegade by virtue of being associated with me. I felt worse for him at that moment than I did for myself.

After a few more rough pats up and down my legs the cop assigned to me was satisfied that there was nothing of a dubious nature in my possession. He noticed the hole in my jeans the gearshift had torn through and almost tenderly pointed out that I was bleeding. The back doors of the patrol car then opened and Bob and I slumped in, defeated. They drove us back to the scene but did not let us out of the car. I noticed Glenn and Shelly were also in the back of a separate patrol car. Our licenses were handed over, and the interrogation began. “What happened here? Were you racing? You were racing weren’t you?” Drunk as I still was, I told the story exactly as it happened – slurring I’m sure, and then repeated it verbatim at their request. The cops got out of the car and were gone several minutes. I gave myself a few shots of Binaca – thinking it may help disguise the smell of alcohol – or at least throw off the Breathalyzer test that was sure to come any moment. Bob pointed out that Binaca actually contained trace amounts of alcohol. All I could think about was killing Glenn and in clenching my fists together while imagining the possible scenarios – I realized that the cops hadn’t bothered to handcuff us.

When they returned the same cop asked me to tell them what happened again and so I repeated the same story word for word. I didn’t immediately realize that they were comparing my story to Glenn’s. This happened one more time until finally they were satisfied. “God, you guys stink,” said the dark-haired cop. Clearly the Binaca had done nothing to diminish the smell of alcohol. We sat in the vehicle for what seemed like an hour – but it was probably not more than 30 minutes. A tow-truck arrived with flashing orange lights and began to hook up the mangled vehicles straddling the center-line.

By this time, a number of other patrol cars had arrived at the scene and there seemed to be several police officers standing in the street conversing. Our fate was soon to be decided upon. I waited with a heavy heart, Bob giving me tips on how to throw off the Breathalyzer. “Put a penny under your tongue, I hear that works! The copper does something,” was one of his suggestions. But I had no penny – just condoms, gum, and minty, alcohol-infused breath freshener. All seemed hopeless.

When my door opened and I was told to get out, I had prepared for things to get worse – but they did not. Bob and I were directed toward an officer who seemed to be higher-ranking – simply by the way he carried himself. Authority emanated from him. As we approached, he held out our licenses and wryly smiled. Bob had not been behind the wheel of either car – so for him to retain his license was no surprise – but as I held my license between my fingers I felt a rush of exhilaration and amazement. “I have a couple of punk sons just like you guys,” he said proudly. “You’ll learn.” I paused – I’m sure my mouth was open in disbelief. He waved his arm, dismissing us. “Now get the hell out of here – you’re going to have to find your own way home.”

I was stunned into numb inner-delight clasping my driver’s license tight as we slowly walked towards the sidewalk where Glenn and Shelly met us. We all headed back towards the gas station and that payphone I had lied about looking for earlier. I still wasn’t talking to Glenn, but he scarcely mattered to me anymore – disaster had been averted on all fronts. No one was hurt, no one was arrested, and no one lost their licenses. I can only surmise that the police were able to piece together the facts – and once they realized we were all friends and that the damages were limited to our vehicles – they decided to let it go. Were their shifts at an end? Were there other, more pressing matters to attend to? To this day it intrigues me that they found reasons amongst themselves to simply let it be. And I would have thought the last thing that would get me out of trouble would be one officer’s association of myself and Bob having some resemblance to his sons.

At the gas station, Shelly called a friend to give us all a ride. Though I looked for it on my hands and knees, I never did retrieve that coral earring. That was probably for the best.

A consummate storyteller, I couldn’t wait to recite this particular tale of adventure to a captive audience. At the time I was between apartments – living with my Mother, so naturally she was the first person I confided in. As I wove the tale in front of her the next day – she shook her head in dismay. When I finished – she said flatly: “There are some stories that children should never share with their Mother. That was one of them.”