



Ponchartroula

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■ was twenty-one years old and taking freshman composition, because I'd gotten a late start in college. I probably wouldn't have gone to college at all if I hadn't lost my left arm in a car accident at the age of nineteen. I would have been either a guitarist in a death-metal band or a gunner in the marines. But the accident had changed all of that, and now I was playing catch-up, trying desperately to absorb all that I hadn't learned in high school, which was a lot.

One of the assignments for the composition class was to

read Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" and then write our own satirical essay. I wrote a political satire with David Duke as the central figure. For those who don't remember, Duke was a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan who held a seat in the Louisiana State Legislature. When I was in college in 1991, he was close to winning the state's gubernatorial race. I'd gone to hear him speak on campus, and it had reminded me of footage I'd seen in history class of a Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg. The crowd of Duke supporters numbered in the thousands. I drank too much cheap vodka and woke up later on the floor of my bedroom with a light blue David Duke sticker on my shirt.

My professor was so impressed with my essay that he recommended me for honors English, which surprised me. It was hard enough for me to get words down on the page, much less take on the responsibility of representing the best student writing the university had to offer.

One other student in class was also recommended for honors English: Norman, who, at twenty-four, was even older than I was. He and I got to talking, discussing the pros and cons of the honor we'd been given. Norman had large, disproportionate ears and long shit brown hair so thin it looked like it might fall out if he brushed it. There was a greasy look about him, as if he went long periods between baths. His eyes were small and black and set too wide apart. He reminded me of some large, ratlike creature, and I couldn't look straight at him without becoming embarrassed.

Norman was a weed-head and always worried about where he was going to get more weed and whether he had enough money to make a score. I've never understood some people's need for marijuana. To me it's a boring drug that makes me laugh out of context and eat far more than I should. That it's illegal, and even considered dangerous by some, is ridiculous. Outlawing weed is like outlawing Froot Loops or Big Macs.

On the last day of class Norman invited me to spend the weekend with him at his place in the country outside Ponchatoula. I didn't like to stay away from home, which is why I was living with my mother in the backwater of LaCombe and taking a shuttle to school four days a week instead of living on campus. But I said yes to Norman despite myself — out of curiosity, I suppose, or perhaps respect for his talent, seeing that he was as good an essayist as I was.

● On a Friday evening Norman picked me up in an early-seventies Oldsmobile that had been spray-painted several different colors. As soon as we pulled out of my mother's driveway, I felt my stomach tighten, and it was all I could do to keep from telling Norman to stop and let me out along the highway. I longed to stay home and go squirrel hunting with my little brother in the morning, like we did every Saturday during the fall and winter. I felt as if I was abandoning my brother to go spend time with "college people" — although Norman had none of the attributes of a typical college student.

Norman hadn't been lying when he'd said he lived in the woods. The gravel road to his house seemed to wind on and on, like some nightmare vision of a snake. Every hundred yards

or so I spotted a new species of roadkill: a deer, a dog, a hawk. Finally we pulled up to his miserable house trailer. It looked fifty years old, at least, and I almost said to him that I didn't know they'd made house trailers that far back. The steps to the door were black with rot. "Don't put all your weight on them," Norman said, "or they'll collapse." He said this without apology or shame or any hint that he was thinking of replacing them.

The cluttered den smelled of stale weed and diapers: Norman had a wife and a new baby. A huge, enameled bong dominated the coffee table, and long strings of colored beads hung in a doorway off the living room. Norman introduced me to his wife, Charlotte, who wasn't much better looking than he was: tall and gaunt, with long black hair and skin eaten up with acne. She seemed as if she'd once held herself in high esteem — before life had beaten all the dignity and social graces out of her. She had a sullen expression and a mean glint in her eyes, as if she couldn't wait to tell you, "No!" no matter what you might say to her.

"What's someone like you doing hanging out with Norman?" she asked.

I was taken aback and didn't know exactly what she was getting at. Was she trying to offend Norman, or me, or both of us? I ended up concluding that the "someone like you" referred to my being a one-armed cripple. I had been this way for only two years and was still sensitive about my handicap.

Norman wasted no time lighting the enormous bong. I took a hit, feeling I didn't have much choice but to kill as many brain cells as I could if I was going to be stranded in the woods with this hideous couple in their terrible house. My family didn't even know where I was, only that I was somewhere near Ponchatoula. And, of course, Charlotte and Norman had no phone. I was at their mercy.

The more we smoked and drank, the friendlier everyone became, although in my case it was a desperate attempt to ward off misery. At one point during the night, I began to have the uneasy feeling that Norman was going to offer to let me take his wife into the back room. Would I have accepted the offer? Before my accident, I wouldn't have been caught dead with a woman like Charlotte, but losing an arm does narrow your choice of lovers — or, at least, it did for me.

Instead of offering me his wife, Norman broke out a chessboard and began teaching me how to play. I'd never even known anyone who played chess. I quickly learned the rules but couldn't counter Norman's moves or plan very far ahead. I'd make a move, and as soon as I'd finished telling Norman how I liked to play defensively, he'd take my bishop or rook or knight and look up at me and say, "You don't play well, defensively or offensively." I was annoyed that Norman was beating me so easily with his sharp, chess-playing mind. To this day I won't play chess against anyone I think might have even the slightest chance of winning.

Tired of getting beaten by Norman, I thumbed through his extensive LP collection and picked out an album I'd never heard before but had read about in *Rolling Stone* magazine: Pink Floyd's *Animals*. We listened to it, and though I was

overwhelmed by the beauty and force of the music, I couldn't make sense of the lyrics. I asked Norman what it was all about, and he said, "What's the name of the album?"

"*Animals*."

"Well, that's exactly what it's about. Your problem is that you think too much."

How right he was. My mind unraveled as the night progressed. I wanted badly to be home with my little brother, my history books, and the morning squirrel hunt.

Finally I told Norman straight out, "I've got to get home; I just can't take being out here anymore."

Norman said, "This is good for you. You need to stay the rest of the night. You need to learn what can happen to you if you don't make the right decisions for yourself. Mistakes can be deadly!"

Norman and I stayed up the whole night drinking, smoking pot, and popping Xanax, which, instead of making me drowsy like I'd hoped it would, made me wild with anxiety. Around ten in the morning I had the acute sense that my mother was watching me and that my little brother was crying because his big brother was drinking and doing drugs and had abandoned the Saturday-morning squirrel hunt. Right in the middle of *Animals* — which we listened to no fewer than two dozen times — I stood up from the ripped sofa and said soberly, "I must go home. I want to go home now!"

"Why didn't you say so sooner?" Norman responded. "You sound scared. I thought cripples never got scared of anything. I also thought they were super smart, but you're just as dumb as everyone else."

Norman, his wife — who was carrying the sleeping baby — and I climbed into Norman's Oldsmobile and drove the long, curvy roads toward the main highway. I began to notice an incredible number of strawberry fields, which I hadn't seen on the way there in the dark. I remembered that Ponchatoula is supposed to be the strawberry capital of the world. Or maybe the strawberry capital of Louisiana. I'd never eaten a strawberry, because I didn't like the way they smell, and here I was surrounded by strawberries for miles and miles.

Charlotte wanted a daiquiri. I just wanted to sober up as much as possible before I got home and had to talk to my mother. But Norman turned off the main highway and drove into downtown Ponchatoula. Charlotte needed a daiquiri, and the baby needed its diaper changed — this baby that never made any sound. It was so quiet in its blankets I thought maybe they were lying to me about there being a baby at all. Or maybe it was dead.

(end of excerpt)