



CHRIS ELLINGER

Troubled Youth

POE BALLANTINE

— for George Ledbetter

In early May of 1994 I borrowed a car, threw my meager belongings in the back, and headed west from Ames, Iowa. That “time to go” voice had been coming more frequently. I figured I would go all the way. The farther you travel west, the higher the suicide rate gets, and I thought perhaps this move would give me the momentum I needed.

I was thirty-eight years old and five thousand dollars in debt from a student loan that I’d wasted by dropping out of school. All the sacrifices I’d made in an attempt to become a novelist had amounted to nothing. To top it off I had just had a dizzying romantic flop with a Spanish professor I’d had no business being with in the first place. Before this latest stab at higher education I had been drifting for some time, continually starting over fresh in a new town — fifteen states in ten years — also without any measurable results. The road had long since lost its savor. I was not in the best state of mind. It was no coincidence that I was thousands of miles from the people I loved.

I made it as far as Chadron, Nebraska, a bucolic, hard-scrabble, sandblasted prairie town of five thousand in the northwest corner of the state, elevation 3,400 feet. A quaint, forested, friendly, snow-still-on-the-ground-in-May town, Chadron had a water tower, a few grain elevators, a tanning salon, a video-rental store, a stoplight, and a curling yellow sign in the pet-store window that read, “Hamsters and Tarantulas Featured Today.” There were abandoned houses everywhere. The town was dying but still politely hanging on. I felt a certain kinship. I thought, You know, we can’t all win the game. So why not just shut up for a change and be satisfied with what you have? Why not just be a good neighbor and live an honorable life and take out the trash? Why keep torturing yourself about fame and art? Why not relent, marry a reformed hooker, buy some old furniture and a ping-pong table, open a dusty bottle of Kentucky straight, and enjoy the brief time you have left on this planet of sorrow?

I rented a room for sixteen dollars a night at the Roundup Motel out on the highway, across from the Chuck Wagon restaurant. The place was clean and homey: doilies, a hand-quilted counterpane, pine wainscoting. The local phone book was about the size of a *Reader’s Digest* and covered the small-town residents and businesses of four states. In the weekly paper, the *Chadron Record*, amid the softball scores, the courthouse news, the sermon of the week, the ads for supercheap houses, and the sparse job listings, I found a textual antidepressant called “Police Beat,” a log of the week’s calls to the Chadron Police Department:

5:24 P.M. Caller from the 400 block of Chapin Street stated that the dog across the street is not supposed to be outside because it is so small. She stated that the dog should be inside and if the owners didn’t want it she would buy it from them. Officer told caller that he could not require the owner to sell the dog. Officer then inspected the dog and it was not lacking anything. Officer informed caller that just because the dog is not played with does not make it abused.

7:09 P.M. Caller from the 100 block of Main Street requested an officer at the above location. Caller advised there was a man who seemed to speak only Spanish and was making some girls uncomfortable, and no one could get him to stop.

9:03 P.M. Caller from North Main Street advised she thought she needed to go to the loony bin.

In the *Chadron Record* I also found a rental for \$150 a month in the alley off Mears Street, not far from the Native American Center and one block south of the railroad tracks. My new home was two rooms, furnished, bathtub and toilet, two tall Siberian elms in the yard, a bit “rough,” as the agent

described it, with a small refrigerator that froze all my vegetables, giving new meaning to the word *crisper*. In the bedroom was Betsy Ross's original mattress, whose broken springs stuck up through the fabric like the welded tails of pigs. But I could arrange my body on it the way a river arranges itself through a forest, and it was better any day than a hard chair in a bus terminal or the front seat of a borrowed car at a rest stop.

The next day I got up and drove to Iowa to return my friend's car. I took a shuttle back. (Greyhound doesn't come to the panhandle of Nebraska, one reason I chose the area.) My fellow passengers — half a dozen troubled youths being shipped to Job Corps, a vocational camp in the pine woods twelve miles south — laughed when I told the driver I didn't know where I lived. I'd been there only once and couldn't remember the address, and it was dark. Finally I just told the driver to drop me off out on the highway. The youths were still laughing as I walked away across the fields with my ripped suitcase and a hamburger I had bought in Valentine still uneaten in its styrofoam box.

All my belongings were piled on the floor just as I'd left them. Exhausted, I fell into my unmade bed, troubled-youth laughter echoing in my head. In the morning I ate the hamburger cold and then went shopping and bought a gallon of red wine and three packs of Old Golds and some lamb chops. My life was now settled: one cup, one plate, one fork, one knife, one spoon, Bible, fingernail clippers, radio, scissors, toothpaste, notebooks, grease-stained raiment, pots and pans and pens all in their proper places. A few cool days of spring left with snow still on the ground. How many times had I done this: vowed to end my days, started over, lied to myself about settling down, and believed that something essential in me had changed when nothing of the kind had happened? And how long would it be before I was packing up all my crap and running off again?

Chadron is a Sioux word for "city of barking dogs." Each resident was required to tie his or her dog up in the yard until it barked itself cross-eyed, presumably to frighten off coyotes. Even so, there were times when the peace of the town, the quiet of inaction, was so thick that I had to get up and check out the window to see if the world hadn't come to an end. Time there was as big as the sky, especially when you didn't know anyone. I would take long walks past the abandoned homes, the rows of trailers and prefabs, the original nineteenth-century log cabins, the classic Puritan boxes, the Dutch bungalows, the Georgian mansionettes with their wide, columned verandas and weeping birch trees out front.

1:20 P.M. Caller from the 200 block of Morehead Street advised a man was in front of their shop yelling and yodeling. Subject was told to stop yodeling until Oktoberfest.

4:28 P.M. Caller from the 500 block of King Street ad-

vised it appears someone broke into the above location through a window. Caller was unsure if anyone took anything but it appears unknown subjects used the coffeepot.

1:26 A.M. Caller from the 300 block of Lake Street advised he just got home from the bar and his truck had been wrecked. Caller stated he didn't drive tonight because he knew he'd be drunk.

When I'd quit school midsemester the year before, the professor who taught *Beowulf* had insisted I see him in his office. I called him from a pay phone instead. He urged me to stay in school and said that I had much to offer. My grades were good enough to make me eligible for many privileges, including an assistant-teaching position and possibly a handsome fellowship and admission (because I was a "nontraditional" student — i.e., old) into an Ivy League school. He wondered what I would do if I quit without getting a degree. I told him I did not know, but I wanted more to show for my life's work than a bench named after me or a memorial tree. I didn't want to sit comfortably in the cafeteria with the vents blowing Alzheimer's spores as I dozed in my chair with an unopened volume of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in my lap.

"Do you remember where the glory in *Beowulf* is?" I asked him. "It is out amid peril in strange lands, pitting one's wits against monsters and the mothers of monsters. It isn't in the warm mead hall with roasted meats and the comfort of jesters and wenches."

Sometimes you can hear a nod on the other end of the line. I don't think he'd ever dreamed that *Beowulf* would have this effect on a student. He let me go after that, and even wished me luck.

In spite of the fact that I'd already laboriously composed fourteen complete novels that were unfit to print, the recollection of this well-told but adolescent dragon tale — and the fact that I had nothing else of any consequence to do — had stirred within me the desire to start another. If the horse throws you off, get back on. Even if it kicks you in the head and you suffer irreversible brain damage, who's going to notice? Wasn't Thomas Pynchon kicked by a horse?

My trusty IBM 286 had burned up in the Iowa heat the year before, and I didn't have the cash to replace it, but I had never been able to write anything worthwhile on a word processor anyway. In truth I had never written anything worthwhile under any circumstances, but that was, I believed, because I had never reached down with both hands into the luscious golden muck of my own miserable soul.

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