Carl Hayes

Loaded Stories (Excerpt)

The first story—the tabloid headline, page 5—is that my father was murdered, shot, before I had a chance to really meet him. Later I'd learn that Paul Allen Hayes was executed with a .38 pistol, a so-called Saturday Night Special, beside a remote Tennessee highway on my fourth birthday. Growing up, however, I only knew that he was shot to death in the South. And since Paul had left Mom and me well before those unsuspecting campers discovered his brutalized body in the Great Smoky Mountains, I had no direct recollections of my father. I only had this story, as translated by Mom via a small-town California sheriff. And the details weren't much more

than a “Bonanza” episode synopsis in an outdated issue of *TV Guide*, as written by a disillusioned copywriter.

Still, you don’t need much detail for this kind of story to open up a world of strange, thrilling opportunities. For example, it’s an excellent way to solicit affection and pity. It’s a sure-fire way to cultivate a budding sense of self-importance. Not that it starts out that way. I don’t have the best memory of those early years, but I certainly had no real comprehension of “shot” or “killed,” only the way in which others reacted to the story. And there was significant divergence between my fellow kids and the adults. With those my own age, there was the usual curiosity children have toward other children with different basic foundations than themselves. They thought it curious, like an unfamiliar TV show or movie or game. But it wasn’t overly dwelled upon. If anything they envied me: I only had one adult to boss me around. The reaction of adults, however, was an entirely different matter. They would magically transform. It was an instant sort of intimacy. They would stroke me with words of heartfelt consolation, and I would purr as I nuzzled in closer.

Mom, for her part, avoided the topic. She was deeply hurt when Paul left her. Aside from my existence, she’d considered their marriage a mistake. She, the Irish-Italian Catholic, was wooed by the cute white Southern hippie guy visiting his sister in working class Waterbury, Connecticut. I was born when Mom was just 19. After their marriage had failed—and Paul bailed—we moved to California for a fresh start, first to the beaches of L.A., then to the inland mountains. The weather would be better, anyhow, and less of those New England and Deep South

repressive cultural mores. Paul was to be left in the past, where he belonged. So when the news of his murder knocked on the front door (we had little money and didn't have a phone), she was shocked and saddened, but she didn't want to focus on it. That's not to say Mom forbade me from talking about Paul, she just discouraged it. That's why I usually had to wait until Mom was preoccupied with adult matters before I bounded onstage and told the story.

It typically opened with an adult asking me some mundane question about my father. I'd say something ambiguous, like I didn't know him, or he's not around. Their responses would naturally follow that they were sorry to hear that, you're a great kid, he's missing out, etc. I would wait for the next inevitable question, asking where he was now. "He's dead," I'd say matter-of-factly, sometimes even blithely, on occasion outright enthusiastically. People's friendly smiles would slacken. I was fascinated by the stunned silence, the power of it, this instantaneous heightened intensity. Look what I can do! I had power, and to wield this power I merely had to speak of Paul's murder. To be clear: if they didn't ask the questions, I would offer up each piece voluntarily, pausing to get the full impact. But it was immensely more satisfying if they asked of their own accord.

After revealing the basic information, people generally split off into two distinct categories, because some considered it improper to pry further, while others were less decorous. As to the former group, they tended to simply drop the subject, maybe going to Mom directly, assuming the information may be too traumatic for me to elaborate upon. Others, however, would bluntly ask what had happened. I liked blunt. Blunt became part of my

own repertoire of dramatic devices. I'd reply that he was killed, shot. I didn't know much more than that. Which was true. I didn't. As for the polite ones, who tried to change the subject, I told them anyway. It's too late to turn back now.

They love me! Sure, I was funny, lively, charming, but I was also a tragedy child. I mean, I was amazing, but *even more amazing* because I was suffering through the absence of a much-needed father. (I didn't really believe I needed a father, and I was something of a Mama's Boy, but I played along for the crowd). I took my bows, basking in the cheers and accolades. So strenuous were my acceptances I didn't notice that behind the pitying smiles and condolences, the kind words, there lurked fear and concern. It would take me years to really get it: what I perceived as a story that made me interesting and unique was in fact a story that contained a surreptitious menace. It was a bad omen, heavy-handed foreshadowing toward a sinister or tragic outcome. Will you become a threat to yourself, to others? Are you a chip off the old block? You think you're special, but, in truth, people look at you as abnormal. Inevitably, misgivings become manifest, like chatting on the bus with someone who has a knife scar across his or her face. You sense that people are looking for signs of violence. You even sense a broader suspicion—how did his father get himself in *that* situation? Maybe whatever happened isn't over. So you are damned twice: in the absence of a father's influence, and in the future man you may become. That's how the self-importance, once so thrilling, twists into a sometimes-debilitating self-pity. In time you learn to be careful about what you say, what details you reveal, and to whom.

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The man who would later become my dad didn't like me bragging about my father's gunshot murder at all—emotional manipulation was really his bailiwick anyhow, and he was much better at it than I'll ever be—but he did like guns, and he had some safety protocols. *Never* point a gun at a person unless you were willing to shoot and potentially kill said person; check that your safety is on whenever you're not shooting; and *always* check to see if your gun is loaded. Even if you checked the chamber a minute ago before setting it down to take a leak, check again. I don't know if these rules came from some NRA pamphlet, a sagacious biker friend, or because I was a complete klutz growing up. When Dad wasn't calling me "Killer," he was calling me "Grace." Yes, Dad was a dedicated and skilled practitioner of the ironical nickname—well, before illness got the better of him. He was also a smart-ass, loved a good joke, and telling tall tales in the Old West getting-drunk-by-fireside tradition.

Billy, who would become Dad, had hitchhiked from Westchester County, New York to Southern California right out of high school. He had that enthusiasm for West-ness characterized by those who are lured here by the resilient mythologies of adventure, freedom, and good times. Mom and I met Billy right after we landed in California ourselves, in his south Santa Monica, Venice Beach and Topanga Canyon stomping grounds, but it wasn't until about four years later, now living in the San Bernardino Mountains, that he joined back up with us. I was six or seven. We were living in Big Bear Lake, the town where I mostly grew up, a small resort area (skiing,

lake sports, biker parties) surrounding a man-made lake about 90 miles east of the Hollywood sign.

In those early days after Billy joined up with Mom and me, we often drove down the backside of the mountain to the high desert, where he liked to target practice while observing the above-mentioned protocols. He would instruct me to make myself useful and set pull-top Bud cans and torpedo-shaped Michelob bottles on rusty old abandoned cars. (Prohibition from handling a gun while drinking or getting high were not among Billy's safety measures, which perhaps further explains his insistence about repeatedly checking on whether or not the guns were loaded.) Sometimes Billy would let me help shoot, though I don't recall really *wanting* to shoot. I would tentatively place my hands on the stock as Billy leaned over me—at 6'5", he was a tall and imposing man—and held and fired the weapon. There was the force of the explosion going through my body right down to my toes, the concussion and echo splitting across the desert, and the smell of his Old Spice. On those trips, Mom didn't care much for shooting, but she liked exploring for relics of the Old West: antique glass bottles, oddly shaped and in various colors; silverware that was still fairly intact; the metal corner of an old wooden suitcase, perhaps from someone's unsuccessful late 1800s overland journey. She also liked to collect odd and colorful rocks, and we panned for gold whenever the creeks were flowing. Sometimes, if the weather and location made sense, Billy would even take me with him to search for rattlesnakes. Now *that* was fun.

Still, we didn't have to go to the desert to shoot. We lived at the edge of a mountain meadow at Cedar Lake Camp (another, much smaller, man-made lake,

and site of numerous Hollywood Westerns), owned by a Christian church down in Los Angeles. Mom worked as a maid and Billy did maintenance and odd jobs. Since we already basically lived in the woods, Billy could squeeze off a few rounds while drinking a Bud on our little trailer's front porch. Not too many, and certainly only off-season, when the camp was quiet, but a few .22 shots wouldn't disturb anyone. Except for those squirrels bouncing around the tall pine trees—bang! Then their claws wildly scratching along the bark before landing with a sad quiet thump on the dusty ground. He found it funny, that I thought the guts looked like spaghetti. I mean, shooting Jaws or a mountain lion or the Abominable Snowman made sense. Otherwise, it just seemed sad. And I liked spaghetti.

I never took a shine to shooting animals, but I did like searching for rattlesnakes, which was strange and suspenseful. Besides, he wasn't going to kill the rattlers, only capture them—well, not *necessarily* kill them, since it didn't take much for a potentially captured rattlesnake to become a "perhaps you didn't understand what that rattling sound meant" attacking rattlesnake. Back in Topanga, squatting on someone's densely wooded land and living the 1970s Life of Excess, where all mind, mood, and consciousness-altering substances were to be consumed in superhuman quantities, Billy used to augment his salaries from bouncing at local roadhouse bars by routing out rattlesnake infestations for horseowners and the newly rich moving into the area. Back then, he did have to kill them, but that was just a job—work that paid twice since he could sell the venom to UCLA for use in the creation of anti-venom serum. But during those later desert trips he did it just for fun, and he'd caught at least one alive

(we had a very depressed rattlesnake living in a modified fish aquarium in our trailer at Cedar Lake, something that would've freaked out the Christian retreaters had they known).

Billy took me along on these rattlesnakes adventures partly because I could be useful as rattlesnake-sunbathing-on-rock spotter. Also, he explained, it was best to go rattlesnake hunting with someone nearby in case you got bit. After all, who was going to cut open the pierced skin and suck out the deadly venom? Sure, Billy wore steel-toe biker boots, but a rattlesnake's fangs could still pierce his denim jeans, and generally you were more likely to get bit in locations where it was impossible to self-administer the venom-sucking procedure. While I never actually had do this—Billy was bitten several times before I was around, and when he was off on his own, including times where the venom was not sucked out, and he claimed to have developed a quasi-immunity, the venom essentially giving him a peyote-like experience—the idea of cutting open Dad's flesh and sucking out the venom nonetheless flourished in my dreams over the years, and not always to delightful effect.

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In high school, before another story came along, this one more loaded than the first, I had a weakness for daydreams wherein I inflicted some serious hurt upon villainous boys or men who had it coming. Shoot them? Sometimes, assuming they had guns and I was outnumbered as I rescued the class beauty from deranged terrorists. There was the bloody tarmac shoot-out, which usually involved me taking at least one non-life or love-threatening bullet, all this

playing out on national television, live. The more common fantasy, though, involved beating. How can you experience real victory and triumph—righteous retribution—without taking someone down with your bare hands? For example, maybe an exotic flatlander would need me to pummel a bull-brained brute who was trying to forcibly untie her bikini-top on a late-night pontoon boat ride? Only to be followed by sweet lakeside kisses as she iced heroic contusions suffered in battle. In my daydreams and fantasies, I was quite the blood-bespattered victor.

In real life, however, I was a bit of schizoid, swinging from John Cusack-style clowning around in class to melancholic introversion to punching trees and cutting symbols into my chest. In general, all felt like anarchy (yes, that was one of the symbols). Aside from the free-for-all hormonal brain-shocks of puberty, Mom had left Dad, and she was now dating a cocky tree-cutter who thought marinated steak on the BBQ was pretty much the greatest thing in the world, something you worked on for days to get just right. And Dad, indulging in self-pity and self-destruction, reverted to his worst Topanga habits: he started living in a tent in someone's trash-strewn back yard, drinking and using heroin again, making grim threats to "blow my fucking brains out." Anyhow, Dad often spoke of suicide, so it wasn't exactly fresh material, though he usually did it with more verve and in the context of joking around. Starting back up with the feel-good substances, however, was more suicidal in action because the years of heavy boozing and drug taking (and rattlesnake venom injections?) had given him life-threatening bouts of acute pancreatitis, which had left him a "brittle" diabetic, and could still cause inflammations that would kill him.

I was glad that Mom and Dad had separated and were no longer making life look like a series of bitter arguments, whose increasing nastiness was only disrupted by work, TV shows, use of the bathroom, and sleep. My relationship with both was troubled in most of the typical teenager ways, but with Dad I felt guilty because he was taking the split-up much harder. For a while, he was simply a broken man. It's hard when the man you look up to is down low. And the guilt was especially virile because in the last couple of years before their split, I had moments where I truly hated Dad, feared him, wished he go away like the others had gone away. During the intervening years between the high desert wanderings and their split-up, Dad had transformed from the fun, wacky, weird storytelling giant to an oftentimes hostile presence with a tendency toward manipulation and intimidation. Especially after his pancreatitis meant that he wasn't free to carelessly self medicate anymore (he was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder), he got meaner, angrier. His mood shifts were earthquakes, unpredictable in location, occurrence, and duration.

This, of course, fueled my own anger, something that had been growing worse. Ever since my sister was born and he had intractably became an official family man (he often spoke about how he never expected to get past 30, *Logan's Run* by virtue of the seductive Live Fast Die Young Motherfucker life path), Dad was always trying to toughen me up. After all, he didn't want his son to be a pussy. This included hefty doses of rough teasing, belittling, chronic disappointment as to my mounting failings and shortcomings as a human being. A miniature egomaniac and Mama's Boy I was no more. Many

boys experience this. Problem is, the implicit idea that I would ever be capable of really standing up to him was comically implausible. I would never be a big man—height-wise, I topped out a good nine inches shorter than he was.

And other boys didn't have the early fatherless years. Corollary to the toughening up, Dad would also try to interest me in more manly pursuits—an wondrous fascination with guns, for example (of course, his loaded guns only added to the intimidation factor). Sometimes it stuck, sometimes it didn't. Or, sometimes, like when I started playing football, I outdid even him. Dad was a not a team player, and he didn't like team sports at all. It wasn't as severe as joining a government youth brigade, or a church group, but it was up there. In any event, Dad intentionally stoked my anger. When people criticized him for it, he shrugged it off: it was for my own good. He ignored his increasing harshness, which was in direct proportion to his own unhappiness. This tapered off after their separation, but by then my gas tank was plenty full for the so very long road ahead.

My relationship with Mom was also strained, though this was more about conventional class resentments. Aside from now being required to babysit my sister often (we couldn't afford a regular babysitter), I began to realize that the world was not, in fact, a giant inexpensive supermarket open to every liberty loving citizen, but instead a video game with levels: the higher you went up, or the higher you wanted to go up, the more difficult it became, and that difficulty had a lot to do with CASH. Mom had chosen the simple life in the mountains, free from the materialistic rat race pursuits she'd left behind. I, on

the other hand, was not so disillusioned with being a productive and involved member of society. I wanted nice clothes, a car, a bright future not involving global thermonuclear war. To this end, I pushed her to move closer to town, even though I'd have to share a room with my sister, not the best idea for a teenage boy. (Before the move we lived far from town, in the poorest area, on an uneven dirt road riddled with rocks, exposed tree roots, and mysterious pits.) And it didn't help that Mom and my sister seemed to find nothing that they couldn't disagree about. They argued with each other like it was essential to their existence. That, in fact, they were in a contest for world domination via argumentation supremacy.

It was around this time when I began to imagine scenarios related to Paul. Couldn't there be more? Sure, I more fantasized about gallant acts of rescue and revenge, grateful damsels who appreciated a good unicorn drawing (seriously, I drew a picture of a unicorn and gave it to a very attractive, though puzzled, classmate), but the gaps in my knowledge about my biological father started to wield great power over my imagination. These fantasies almost always involved conspiracies and/or lies, so they weren't necessarily the healthiest creative explorations. First off, the most fertile core premise was that my father was still alive—*obviously*—and he would return at some point to take up his rightful place and connect the lineage that had been broken, a sign of difference you begin to resent as you grow into a young man. Certainly a stepfather is important, but lineage is something more serious, the stuff of history and how you support a larger sense of place and belonging. The only proof of his death I had was a laminated memorial card sent to us by hisrelatives years before. This wasn't *proof*. How hard could it be

to just fabricate such a thing? Easy! While I had a hard time imaging that Mom would willingly engage in such devious subterfuge—I couldn't rule it out completely—I could easily imagine that she did so to protect me. But I didn't need to be protected any longer. I was nearly a man and ready for the raw truth.

This idea then splinters into two basic fantasies: positive transformation or violent revenge. The first is hopeful. Someday he'll show up at my doorstep. He'll be wealthy and my life will change. I will meet rad relatives and be brought into a whole new world, far from my narrow small town existence in Big Bear. There will be opportunities I can barely imagine. He'll buy me a cool car! Or, even better, I'll be whisked away into exciting Indiana Jones-like adventures, becoming a man in a world with consequences more serious than whether or not someone's ski boots have been sufficiently dried. And then there's the flip side. He won't find me because he doesn't give a shit about me, whether I'm alive or dead. He turns out to be some mobster or crime boss; or worse, a plumber. So I find him. I patiently track him down. Maybe I don't even tell him who I am, just allow him to think I'm somebody who wants to work for him. Then, when he starts to trust me, I reveal my identity. I beat him for what he did. He begs for forgiveness and I tell him there is no such thing as forgiveness for a man who abandons his child. (Yes, I feel very self-righteous during this one.)

The other main narrative was that Paul wasn't my father at all. Maybe he was just some patsy, a fall guy for a much more amazing fact, something that had to be hidden for good but unknown reasons, or hidden until the time was right for the truth to be revealed. I

mean, where was Elvis during Christmas in 1970? Maybe Mom moved to L.A. before I was born and my father is really some Hollywood star! (Mom had many male admirers when I was a kid, and abortion was still illegal when I was conceived, so it was plausible). Or maybe it was something to do with the government: he was CIA, or an FBI informant. Or worse, a serial killer or Public Enemy #1, a real world Dark Lord of the Sith. (Like most boys of my generation I became obsessed with Star Wars at a young age. And for me it had a real-life resonance. Like Luke, I didn't know my father. I can still vividly remember exiting the theater after *The Empire Strikes Back*, dazed: "I'm your father, Luke.") Maybe that's why Mom was so secretive. At one point I looked up Manson's trial year to see if that was a possibility. Nope, I wasn't some kind of Manson spawn. Back before the Internet, our imagination could be fed by false premises for more time that it took to Google it on your laser-phone. Then there were the simpler fantasies: there'd been some big inheritance left to me that was recently discovered; I'd meet my aunts and uncles and they would be famous or fabulously wealthy and all would change; giant boxes of mysterious or revealing clues about my father's fate would arrive. These outcomes were more mundane, though practically feasible. I seriously half-expected, half-hoped that on my 18th birthday some lawyer with a Southern accent would seek me out and hand me a thick envelope that would change life.

Instead, I would just get more loaded guns.