Oasis

by Nick Young (October 2024)

ATM– Richard Estes, 2018

The town was in for it, he knew. *Gonna be a big storm.* He could feel it, see it in the way the thunderheads were crowding the western skyline. *A helluva storm.*

He continued muttering to himself as he picked up his pace, causing the rhythmic squeak of the wheels on the small cart he pulled to quicken—*a*-wee-*ah-kah*…*a*-wee-*ah-kah*…*a*-wee-*ah-kah*….

Gotta get oil, 3-in-One—yes!

He left the alley at Cotler Way and cut west to Main across the street to Sandy's Diner—low-slung, neon-lit, big windows all around. Carefully, as he did each time he came, which was almost every day, he parked his cart in the same spot, a little patch of worn asphalt not far from the entrance, so he could keep a close eye on it while he was inside.

He was a fixture at the place, so none of the scattering of dinnertime customers who remained paid him any mind when he pushed through the revolving door and slid onto one of the red vinyl-covered swivel stools at the end of the counter.

"You're late, Connie," said LuAnn as she ambled toward him, wiping her hands on a small towel and depositing it under the counter. He had never much cared for the name "Connie." Too girlish, or so he had it in his mind. But it was better than his given name—Conrad. He really hated that.

"Yeah, I know. Couldn't be helped, Lu. No way to avoid," Connie went rattling away, his mumbled speech like bursts from a machine gun. "Went all the way out to Luten's, Lu," and then he laughed, showing a row of grey teeth beneath his thick walrus mustache. "That's funny, 'Luten's Lu,'" and chuckled again. He began rummaging around the threadbare Army fatigues he wore, one that still bore his name "Hellenmeir" embroidered in black on a strip of cloth sewn above the right breast pocket. Connie's spidery fingers extracted a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He burrowed into the foil and paper until he found a smoke and pulled it free. "Last one, Lu. Maybe I should break it in half. Save part of it for later, you know?" The waitress, at fifty—old enough to be Connie's sister—shook her head, leaning across the counter.

"No need," she said, hushed. "I'll take care of you." She raised a finger to her lips. "Our little secret." Connie gave her a clumsy wink in return, went back into the pocket for a battered Zippo, lit his cigarette and then appraised his lighter.

“Long time. I’ve had this a long time. Do you know how long I’ve had this, Lu?”

“You’ve told me.”

“Yeah?”

“Many times, Connie.”

“Since ‘nam.”

“I know.”

“Same day I got drafted.”

“Nineteen sixty-seven.”

“September.”

“September. Yeah, September. How’d you know that, Lu?”

“You told me.”

“I did?”

“Many times.”

“So, yeah. September, 1967. That’s a long time, Lu.”

“Almost thirty years.”

“Goddamn. Long time.” Connie drew deeply on his cigarette, the corners around his eyes crinkling. “You can’t tell me who was President then. Bet you can’t.” LuAnn pursed her lips and appeared to look far away in thought, the repetition of a game they’d played countless times.

“Let me see … 1967,” she said, tapping the pencil she held against her chin, finally announcing: “Nixon. Richard Nixon.” This brought a look of glee to Connie’s face, as he leaned his head backward, laughing.

“Noooo, Lu—not tricky-fucking-*Dick! Lyndon Baines Johnson!”*

“Oh, yes—why sure, you’re right, Connie,” LuAnn said with mock surprise, “It was LBJ.” Connie’s head bobbed up and down at his triumph.

“Yeah. Yeah. LBJ. Not the Trickster!” He took another drag on his cigarette. LuAnn could not help smiling at the man’s unadulterated joy.

“So,” she began, “what’ll it be for dinner tonight? The usual?” Connie’s mirth evaporated as he furrowed his brow for a moment.

“No. Not tonight, Lu. No mac-and-cheese tonight. No. I would like a Sandy Big Burger—yes! A Sandy Big Burger with the works—but no onion. The works but no onion. And crispy fries. Large order, crispy fries.”

“And what about something to drink? Coke?”

“Sure, yeah. Coke. Ice-cold Coca-Cola, Lu.”

“You got it.”

“And make it to go.”

“You’re not going to keep me company?”

“Noooooo. Can’t,” Connie declared. “Not tonight. Gotta boogie on, Lu. Big storm.” The waitress cocked her head and looked outside. It was getting on a quarter-to-nine. The evening was drawing down, growing darker because of the thick canopy of clouds moving in.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll get this ready for you chop-chop, and you can scoot on your way.” LuAnn bustled off to the kitchen, leaving Connie to nervously glance outside, first toward the gathering storm, then to make sure his cart was safely in its place. He drew on his cigarette in between inaudible

mutterings. From time to time his wandering eyes met those of one of the other diners scattered in booths along the main wall and they nodded and smiled or raised a hand in greeting. Everyone knew Connie. Everyone liked him, looking upon him with benevolence. He squinted as the smoke from the cigarette between his lips drifted into his eyesFlattening his hands, he laid them palms-down on the countertop and slid them slowly across and back relishing the smooth, cool feel of the Formica.

Long before that night, Conrad Hellenmeir had been well-known in his hometown of Holloway, Missouri. He began attracting some notoriety when he was just was a schoolboy. It wasn't a particularly unusual story; it was replicated in a thousand other small towns all over the country.

Connie, who grew up on a farm with a younger sister, was a born athlete. He first showed his prowess during softball and rag football games with the neighbor kids on a half-acre patch of grass his dad had left next to the bean field.

Once he was old enough, Connie started playing in organized baseball, where he stood out as a perennial all-star second baseman. On the basketball court, he was a pretty fair jump-shooting forward.

By the time he reached Holloway Regional High, Connie's was a regular name in the sports pages of the local weekly. And all the coaches were eager to sign him up for their teams. He didn't disappoint, either, lettering every year in three sports. As good as he was on the baseball diamond or handling himself in the low post, he was most gifted as a tight end and middle linebacker for the Holloway Yellowjackets.

"Never seen a young man with his kind of instincts," Ben Tomlinson, who coached the varsity, often marveled. "Offense … defense—he just *knows* where the ball's gonna be on every play. Somethin' special."

In his junior year, he was a unanimous all-state first-team pick in the Missouri coaches' poll. College scouts started sniffing around. The University of Missouri in Columbia, then rivalling Nebraska as the powerhouse football program in the Big Eight, even dangled the prospect of a full scholarship ride if he duplicated as a senior what he'd done the year before. And he was well on his way, picking up where he'd left off, catching five touchdown passes and making a dozen tackles in his first two games.

Then came the bicycle incident.

"Here you go, Connie," said LuAnn as she set a brown paper bag down on the counter. "One specially made Sandy Big Burger with the works—no onion … a large order of crispy fries and an ice-cold Coke. Oh, and I slipped in a slice of peach pie for you." She leaned in a bit closer and whispered, "On the house."

"Mmmmmm, peach pie—*yes!*" Conrad exclaimed. "My favorite, Lu." He relished the thought of the sweet fruit filling with the perfect melt-in-your-mouth crust for just a moment before his brow creased. "Money, Lu. You've got to have some money. How much? What do I owe you?" LuAn dutifully reviewed the check stapled to the top of the bag.

"Looks like four-fifty will cover it." This sent Connie thrusting his hand into the other breast pocket of his fatigues. He drew out a fistful of crumpled bills and loose coins and deposited them carefully on the countertop.

"You count it for me, okay?"

"Sure," LuAnn said as she began picking through the money.

"And don't forget to give yourself a niiiice tip, okay Lu?"

"I always do, Connie." All of this was part of the ritual, too. But LuAnn never took the full amount of the check—that was on orders from Sandy himself—and never a tip. Instead, she

made a great show of counting out the money, then taking a single dollar bill and putting it in her apron pocket. She folded the few bills left and stacked the spare change on top. “There you go. All square.”

“We’re square, Lu?”

“We’re square.”

“You sure?” He was insistent.

“Positive.”

“Well, okay, then,” Connie said, rising from the stool. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder out the window. “Gotta get a move on. Big storm, Lu.” As he put away his change and picked up the paper bag that held his dinner, LuAnn snapped her fingers.

“Oh … I almost forgot,” she said, reaching into the big pocket of her pink apron. She drew out a pack of cigarettes and pushed it over the countertop. Conrad’s face broke into a big smile.

“Heyyyyy, Lu—*thank you!* My brand, too. Camels! How did you know?” LuAnn smiled. She had long before taken it upon herself to buy him cigarettes or flints and fluid for his lighter.

“A lucky guess,” she answered. Conrad tucked the smokes into the pocket of his fatigues.

“Thanks again, Lu. Can’t stay, though. Gotta keep truckin’. Big storm.”

“Stay dry, Connie,” the waitress said as he pushed open the diner door. Conrad bobbed his head in reply, stepping quickly outside and tucked the bag of food inside the worn khaki canvas knapsack lashed to his cart with a bungee cord. Then, with another nervous glance at the sky, he hurried off—a—wee-*ah-kah…a*-wee-*ah-kah…a*-wee-*ah-kah….*

How often does it prove so that the trajectory of a life can be altered irrevocably by a happenstance that seems inconsequential at the time?

Such was the case of the bicycle accident.

It was in late September, 1966. A Saturday. A beautiful fall afternoon. The gold and crimson maples were beginning to shed in earnest, and a few people around Holloway were taking advantage of the nearly windless day to get ahead of the game by raking the leaves into curbside heaps and burning them, infusing the air with their smoky, seasonal perfume. Conrad and his best friend Ray Dunbar, the Yellowjackets' quarterback, were walking along Eaglin Street over by the high school on their way to meet their girlfriends at The In Spot when, like a bolt out of the blue, Eddie McCorkle, the town's eight-year-old answer to Dennis the Menace, laughing and looking back over his shoulder, not paying a damn bit of attention to where he was going, came rocketing down his driveway just as the two boys approached. Connie wasn't aware, but it caught Ray's eye and he cried out:

"*Eddie!*"

Eddie's head whipped around and, when he saw what was imminent, slammed on his brakes and swerved. At the same moment, Connie, startled by his friend's shout, turned in the direction of the onrushing bicycle and instinctively pivoted to his left. Eddie's move and Connie's reaction avoided an all-out collision, but the young boy's bike did strike a glancing blow off Connie's right knee. He winced and let out a grunt while Ray yelled:

"Eddie, you want to kill somebody? Watch where the hell you're going!"

"Geez, I'm really sorry," Eddie said, abashed. "You hurt bad?" Connie flexed his leg.

“Nah. Just a bump. I’ll live.” He walked up and down a few paces, limping slightly. Ray glared, still furious.

“You do that again, kid, and I’ll personally drag your ass into the house and let your old man take care of you.”

“It won’t happen again,” said the young boy, now seriously chastised. “Promise.”

And so Ray and Conrad moved on, Connie rather more gingerly, though he didn’t complain. Nor did he make much of his injury later when his dad noticed his son favoring the leg.

“Nothing. Only a bump,” Connie had said. “Just need to walk it off.” But that had not worked, and the ice pack he applied that night had had little effect. The next morning there was stiffness and some swelling. On Monday, after examining his star player’s knee, coach Tomlinson instructed Connie not to practice during the week in the hope there would be sufficient healing for that Friday’s big conference homecoming game against West Bensonville.

And the knee did come around with plenty of ice and rest. By Thursday, the swelling had disappeared and Connie was able to run with no pain.

When game time arrived, he was ready, eager for action.

But as we live betrayal is never far off; it lurks, ever opportunistic. On the second play of the game, a simple slant pass over the middle, Connie sensed a twinge, nothing more, when he made his cut; but in that instant the supreme athletic confidence of his body failed him, short-circuited by a shadow of doubt, infinitesimal, but enough, and the ball slipped past his fingers by a whisper.

In the stands there was a groan from the Holloway faithful, but no one placed any great importance on the moment. Although it looked like a sure thing for a score, it was just one play,

early in the game; and besides, you couldn't expect even Connie Hellenmeir to make *every* catch.

If it had been only that moment, only the one dropped pass, it would have been erased from memory. But that's not how it ended. As the game went on, there were more signs that something was not the same with Connie. It wasn't so much his play on defense. He made his fair share of tackles. No, it was when Holloway had the ball, and the team was leaning on him to make the big plays the way he always had. For the shadow of doubt was growing and would soon come to suffocate his self-confidence, in that game and the rest that followed.

It was a mystifying turn that those around Connie—his coach, the team, his parents, the whole town—simply couldn't explain. For Connie himself it was an incomprehensible loss of mojo, and the harder he tried to recapture it, the more it eluded him. In the remaining games that season, he caught only three passes, not one of them for a score.

It was over.

The college scouts stopped coming around. Mizzou let it be known that, with regret, there would be no offer of a scholarship.

Yes, there was basketball in the winter and track in the spring, but his play was desultory; and he collected his sports letters at the end-of-the-year awards assembly with no great fanfare. People had taken to looking the other way. His name rarely appeared in the newspaper again and then only in the small print, never the headlines.

Without an offer of an athletic ride, college disappeared from Connie's horizon. The reality was that he had little interest in the scholarly life and less aptitude for it. He spent the summer after graduation dividing his time between helping his dad around the farm and bagging groceries at the Kroger in Delmark, twenty minutes south of Holloway.

With the war heating up, a few guys Connie's age decided to enlist. Ray Dunbar signed on for a hitch in the Navy. He tried to interest his friend in doing the same, but Connie said shipboard life wasn't for him; he would stick it out as long as he could.

He didn't have much of a wait. Connie's letter from Uncle Sam arrived in late September. By the end of October, he was doing basic at Fort Polk. Six months later, he was on the other side of the world, a fresh-faced grunt in a place called Tay Ninh.

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As Connie hurried south through the town, the darkening clouds grew increasingly menacing. There were the first growls of thunder and brief strobes of lightning. When he reached Oak Street, he paused before crossing to the opposite side of Main. As he did, a Holloway police car rolled to a stop by the curb and the passenger side window glided open.

"Hey, Mr. Hellenmeir." Tim Binter was one of the town's four police officers. "You okay? Everything cool?"

"Yeah, man. I'm cool. Very cool, but—" his eyes shot toward the sky—"gotta keep movin'. Big storm, Tim."

"Well, okay. You find a place to get out of the rain."

"Dry—*yes!* You got it, Tim. You got it." And with that, the patrol car rolled away. Connie swiveled his head, looking carefully from side to side for traffic and crossed the street.

Two blocks away, he ducked into the entryway of a nondescript three-story brick building flanked on one side by several ancient, towering trees and on the other by a small parking lot. The sign that ran along the front of the building announced it as the Jasper County Housing Authority, where Connie had lived in a tiny studio apartment on the top floor

for more than ten years. Without any income except from the now-and-again odd jobs he was given around town, Connie needed all the help he could get from the government to keep a roof over his head. Still, he spent as little time as possible there, choosing instead to walk the streets compulsively during daylight and find shelter where he could at night. He never spelled out his aversion to his friends, his sister or his parents. The only explanation he offered was to his social worker. He told her the confines of his room reminded him of "a bad, *bad* place."

On this night, despite the impending blow, Connie wouldn't be staying, but he made time to stop by the apartment long enough to pick up a couple of crumpled tee shirts, a dirty pair of jeans and a Ziploc bag containing several dollars' worth of quarters. Then he left the building and moved through the lowering gloom as quickly as he could, his cart at arm's length behind him.

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When he was in country, Connie never felt safe. Nobody did. How could you? Vietnam was a thin wire stretched at maximum tension across a chasm of horror. At any moment it might snap. By the summer of '68, the shitstorm of the Tet offensive early in the year had died down, only to surge and ebb in the spring and then flare again over the summer. Northwest of Saigon, the generals had ordered forward firebases set up to cover infantry operations against North Vietnamese regulars and VC moving down from the Cambodian border.

Three klicks north of Tay Ninh, two platoons had been dispatched to probe along enemy lines; and on July 28, the day before his nineteenth birthday, Conrad Hellenmeir and his squad of eight others moved with all the stealth they could through deep jungle, unsure how far ahead they might encounter Charley. It was a nighttime patrol in the season of the monsoon, which brought along with drenching rain, humidity

that would rival a sauna, magnifying the other miseries of the bush that the grunts had to endure.

When the downpour eased, with a dull crescent of moon overhead, the sergeant signaled for two men, Connie and Roland Jackson, to angle left and make their way down through a shallow ravine. Jackson moved out first as Connie lagged back, fumbling to free his rifle which had become snagged on his poncho. By the time Connie had taken care of the problem, Jackson was crouching low, moving quickly through a small clearing in the ravine about ten yards ahead. That distance saved Connie's life, for in the next instant, as Roland Jackson stepped over a fallen log, his right boot touched a tripwire and triggered the Russian-made mine that had been hidden in the undergrowth. The explosion—a sickening *ka-whump!*—blew Jackson apart. Connie, shielded from the full force of the blast, was raked by small bits of shrapnel. He would have survived those with little more than a lifetime of scars along the left side of his torso. But it wasn't just the shrapnel. It was the piece of the barrel of his buddy's M16 that struck under the lip of his helmet, just above the left temple.

Connie never knew what hit him, not until long after he'd been choppered away, his life snatched back by a MASH unit surgical team and flown to a U.S. hospital in the Philippines to recover. It would be many weeks before Connie was able to comprehend the full story of that night. He had been the only one in his squad to survive. A miracle, he was told, given his wounds and the ferocity of the firefight.

All of it was lost to Connie. His last memory of the night was that of a nocturnal creature snuffling and grunting somewhere near him. What came next in his consciousness was the red-orange flare behind his closed eyes and the persistent screaming in his left ear, like the noise of an F4 idling on a flight deck.

It took seven weeks and two more operations before Connie was well enough to be put on a plane back to the States. The whine in his ear subsided over time. The noise in his brain and the recurring dreams—haunted nightscapes, full of shadows and dread—never did. And while Connie regained most of his normal speech, his damaged cognition would never be repaired.

Holloway made a big fuss over his return. The high school band played at a ceremony outside city hall. The mayor spoke, calling Connie "our hometown hero," and pinned a medal that hung from a short strip of red, white and blue crepe cloth onto his uniform. Over the years, the color in the cloth faded and the gold plating on the medal mostly rubbed off, but Connie was extremely proud of it, even though he sometimes struggled to make sense of its significance. Nevertheless, he made sure he wore it every Veteran's Day, along with his Purple Heart. And he never failed to wear it on Memorial Day in honor of Ray Dunbar, his best friend. He was killed in a freak accident aboard the *USS Enterprise* when a bomb he and two crewmates were loading onto a Phantom exploded. Ray never got a parade, never heard inspiring words from the mayor, never had a ribbon pinned to his chest. His reward was his allotted share of the family plot in the shade of small elm tree at Rolling Hills Cemetery. So the medals held great importance for Connie, and he kept them both carefully tucked inside his knapsack.

After all the hoopla died down, Connie settled into a routine. During the first year or so, he lived on the farm. A couple of times a week, his sister drove him fifty miles to a VA hospital near Jefferson City for rehab sessions to try to restore his normal speech and unscramble his cognitive functions. The therapists were patient, and over time, Connie made some improvement.

His personal life was a different story. His girlfriend from high school was long gone, living in a hippie commune in Oregon. There would be no other women in his life. At home, as

understanding as his parents tried to be, there were inevitable tensions. Connie's injuries had left a brittle edge to his personality that could easily lapse into a childish stubbornness. The flashbacks he suffered that too-often rent the night with anguish, alarmed his parents. And they were deeply sorrowful, filled with guilt that they were powerless to make life the way it had been. Connie's taste for alcohol—and his father's—often led to jagged standoffs and bitter recriminations. So, after months of deterioration, rather than see their relationship permanently scarred, the decision was made to have Connie move out and into his own place.

In the beginning, Connie liked his Housing Authority apartment, or he seemed to. But as the years passed, it increasingly became a waystation and little more. In Connie's world there was another place he had found and adopted as his frequent refuge, especially on a night like this when the lightning and thunder breaking over the town triggered fearful memories of the terror that had gripped him many times while hunkered down in the bush.

The laundromat sat near the edge of Holloway, where West Providence Street ran out and County Route Twenty began. Built in the Seventies, "The Sudsery" had changed hardly at all. Its cinderblock walls remained a psychedelic swirl of puce and avocado green, now faded with age, yet still god-awful. A trio of hazy windows looked out at a small parking lot that was veined with cracks and buckled in several places. The "laundrymat," as some of the locals called it, had seen better days, but to Connie there was no place in town more beautiful. He relished the garishness, the fluorescent glare. Most of all he found comfort in the steady rhythm of its machines.

He hurried up to the door just as as gust of west wind rose and the first fat drops of rain began falling. Inside, it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the harsh light. No one else was there, and Connie knew there was little likelihood

there would be through the night because of the weather. He liked that, having the place all to himself.

“Gonna be a good night,” he said, with a touch of deep satisfaction. He ran a hand through the thick spray of curly gray hair on his head, as his eyes swept the familiar space. The building’s exterior color scheme became an equally grating combination of tangerine and canary yellow on the inside walls, inset with eight front-load washing machines on one side, eight dryers on the other. Down the middle of the room sat a row of top-loading washers, and two vending machines—one for sodas, the other for packets of soaps and softeners. At the far end, there was a sink, small folding table, bathroom and supply closet.

Connie’s first order of business was rummaging inside his knapsack and removing the wad that was his jeans and black tee shirts. He put them in one of the washing machines, bought small box of detergent and dumped it in before slipping two quarters into the slots on the washer and starting the cycle.

Hot wash … cold rinse—*yes!*

Beneath the windows at the laundromat’s front ran a plain wooden bench for sorting and folding. As the washing machine hummed behind him, Connie reached into his knapsack and withdrew a rectangle of cream-colored linen cloth and unfolded it on the table, taking pains to smooth away any wrinkles. The first wave of rain rattled in staccato sheets off the window glass, while Connie carefully laid out his meal and began eating, always following the same pattern—a bite of his burger, two fries, a drink of Coke, saving enough of the soda to enjoy with the slice of peach pie LuAnn had given him.

Dee-licious!

Once he’d finished and cleared away the trash, he refolded the linen cloth with great attention to make sure the edges lined up perfectly and put it back into his knapsack.

It was time to take inventory.

Without fail, Connie's visits to the laundromat included making the rounds of all the machines, methodically checking each one for change that hadn't been collected. Most nights the cupboards were bare, but once in a while he'd score a quarter, maybe two. He always checked.

You never know!

That done, he next went to the row of washers that sat atop worn white linoleum tiles in middle of the room. He bent down in a gap between two of the machines and reached behind. His hand felt around on the floor for a moment before his fingers wrapped around the top of a ziplock bag, and he pulled it free.

"This is gonna be a real good night—*yes!*" he exclaimed, eyeing the contents of the baggie. There was a cluster of quarters, probaby three bucks' worth, Connie thought. But the big prize, nestled among the coins, was a pint of bourbon. Smiling broadly so that his mustache flared, Connie slid the bottle from the bag, unscrewed the cap and tipped the pint to his lips, letting the liquor flow down his throat, quickly warming him in the way nothing else could. And it soothed him as well, taking the edge off his anxiety over the gusty tumult outside.

It had been this way every night he'd come to the laundromat for the better part of ten years. Someone had taken to watching over him. Always, the baggie contained quarters for the machines, sometimes cigarettes or travel-size toiletries. And, once every week or so, there was an appearance by his old friend Jim Beam. Connie had no idea who his good samaritan was, and though grateful in his way, he had long since ceased to care.

When the washing machine shut off, Connie put his laundry in one of the big dryers and dropped four quarters into the slot, good for a solid hour. Now came the favorite part of his

nocturnal visits. From his knapsack he retrieved a book, picked up a small green aluminum ashtray and his bottle of whiskey from the sorting table, squatted and pushed himself underneath the countertop until his back was up against the corner where the row of dryers met the front wall.

Safe. Good.

Reaching into the pocket of his fatigues, he took out the Camels LuAnn had given him. He slowly removed the cellophane from the top of the pack, peeled off enough of the inner foil to expose the cigarettes and shook one free. He lit up, allowing his lungs to fill with the strong tobacco smoke. He closed his eyes and held it a long moment before exhaling. Next, he uncapped the pint bottle and took a small sip, not wanting to rush. He ducked his head enough to see the big starburst clock high up on the back wall. Nearly eleven.

Outside, the worst of the thunder and lightning was easing, but the rain continued to fall in sheets, buffeted by the wind. Connie settled back, listening to the dryer's thrum, feeling the vibration of the machine through his back. He let his legs stretch, crossed, on the floor in front of him and gently took up his book.

It was the only book he owned, the only one he ever read now, over and over again. *Treasure Island,* given him as a Christmas present by his sister ("To Connie from Sally, 1955,") read the inscription inside, the letters jaggedly rendered in ballpoint blue ink. He was seven that Christmas; Sally was just five, so she could not possibly have known the import of her gift, what it meant to him as a youth, what it had come to mean to him as a damaged man thrust back into boyhood.

The book, with its brightly colored cover illustration of young Jim, Long John Silver and his pirate cohorts coming ashore on the novel's eponymous island, was fragile. The pasteboard cover, which had separated front and back along the

edges of the spine, had been lashed together many years before with cellophane tape. Now old and brittle, it was barely up to the task. But Connie handled the book with great care. It crackled arthritically as he opened it, turning the browning pages until he reached the beginning—Chapter One—*The Old Sea Dog.*

Connie read in fits and starts, his mouth moving silently as he formed the words. He sipped the Beam and smoked from time to time until he began to nod with drowsiness, lulled by the rhythmic hum of the dryer that so calmed him. At length, he slept. And dreamed.

He was seventeen again and strong, playing in his final football game for Holloway, the one that mattered most, the one for the state championship. Banks of dazzling lights bathed the big stadium field, etching the chalk yard markers sharply against the deep green of the turf. In the stands, ten thousand voices roared as one. The game had come down to one last play with the clock ready to run out. Holloway trailed by a field goal. The only path to victory was a touchdown, with the end zone forty yards away.

As Connie coiled tensely into his stance, he was conscious of the din from the spectators, rising like a massive ocean wave, washing over the players. The ball was snapped, and time slowed by half as he sprinted, slanting, toward the goalpost. When he had run twenty-five yards he turned to see Ray Dunbar launch a high, arcing pass in his direction. He knew he must find within himself a final burst of speed if he was to make the catch. Time slowed yet again as he lunged, arms shooting out full, hands turning palms-up. The ball curved over his head, just in front of him—*it was there for the taking!* His fingers flared open…

In his sleep, Connie’s curled hands, resting in his lap on the pages of his open book, twitched once, and he awoke. A half-mile to the north, the klaxon on the 5:10 freight out of St.

Joe, bearing coal and propane, sounded its long, loud warning as the train lumbered through the Holloway station. Connie's eyes fluttered. He rubbed life into them with a thumb and forefinger.

When the fog gave way in his head, Connie slowly unpacked himself from beneath the bench and got to his feet. The storm had passed through to the northeast, and the laundromat was quiet except for the low hum from the flourescent lights. Connie retrieved his clothes, carefully folding and packing them away with his book and what was left of the bourbon inside his knapsack.

Pushing his way through the door, he stepped outside with his cart and stood for a moment before reaching into the pocket of his fatigues for a cigarette. He lit it, dragging deeply, savoring the first nicotine rush of the day. The train was way east now, its horn a faint echo off the distant hills. Connie looked in its direction, noting the scarlet smear where the rising sun met the last scraps of the night's storm clouds. The air had cooled; the streets bore a clean sheen and a fresh breeze murmured through the maple leaves overhead.

Conrad Hellenmeir jabbed the cigarette between his lips, turned west and began walking in rhythm with his cart—*ah*-wee-*ah-kah…ah*-wee-*ah-kah…ah*-wee-*ah-kah….*

Gotta get oil, 3-in-One—yes!

Table of Contents

Nick Young is a retired award-winning CBS News Correspondent. His writing has appeared in more than thirty publications including the *Pennsylvania Literary Journal, The Garland Lake Review, The Remington Review, The San Antonio Review, The Best*

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