

## A Toast to Skink

by Tom Sheehan

Four stout memories continue with me today of the year 1938, when I was ten years old, blond, looking for the next size boots, positive in my thinking: ---- the summer was warm and soft and languid most of the time (a riverbank laziness, bare hook in water, mouth of a breeze at my ear, grass like a spread comforter); I was hungry much of the time (a handful of salt was often more than a threat--- Roosevelt, the Okies, the dust bowl of America not far from my palate); September's grand, memorable and utterly terrifying hurricane slammed against the side of our three decker house as boisterous as an icebreaker working frozen Boston Harbor and I thought it would turn the building over on its side, leaving all of us huddled and exposed on the first flight of steps in the front hall (terror has a fearful endurance all its own like bloody fists, broken noses, lost friends); and, lastly, Skink Hanscombe, eternal imbiber, errant but harmless citizen, began his wispy glide around the edges of my life.

The hurricane, though, kicked itself off to the northwest, the hunger passed on via slabbed chunks of peanut butter on day-old bread stiffer than collars, summer passed into winter, but Skink Hanscombe did not go away for the longest time. When that did happen, when he did go away from me, is difficult to bring back, hazy and gray as things can be when growing up, the way special moments secrete themselves, play hide and seek with your mind, the game of life itself. Perhaps one day, the day and the hour declaring themselves openly, they will surface clearly from their hideaways.

In the beginning it was a mystery on what attracted me to Skink, town drunk, homeless and adrift save for an occasional gift of bed, a fact of tragedy from one fateful incident, who never raised a hand against anybody, or, for that matter, his voice. During my morning paper route, tossing Boston Globes and Travelers and Records and Posts onto a hundred or so porches and front steps through the center of town, I had seen him so many times being slipped out of the police station as if the duty sergeant had eased a shoe horn to his bottom and nudged him from official sight. Skink was one of those few people who could count on a warm night in the police station, his consignment any empty cell, a bare mattress, a bare pillow, at the back end of the station. Grudging or misplaced respect or consideration, one might have termed it. To enough eyes, though, he was the most harmless tenant of all. Skink was what one might call *an upright drunk*.

But other things came to my eyes and mind about Skink and it seems as if they've stayed with me forever, always there the way my grandfather had aged but whose aging I never noticed because I saw him every day. Skink, the man, was long and lanky, over six feet even at a glance, and not many spare parts to him at first note; gaunt much of the time if you want a better word, that Lincoln-esque quality I came to associate with old Abe and Raymond Massey and whoever else played the part. I'd heard my mother a number of times say that he was "rather consumptive looking." I took that to mean the mouthful of teeth that was no longer a mouthful. Enough of them were missing so that even a glance at the slightest grin or smile showed off the spaces like holes in a picket fence. His high cheekbones sat like the shiny halves of stickballs, the sunken cheeks saying he was always sucking on his gums. Then, a darkness dwelled in his eyes much of the time, as though Skink was still measuring all his options, all the chances he'd had and hadn't used. It hit me later on that that was the terror part of it all, the long look down a long trail, both ways, and the sudden stop at those places where he found himself, like realization setting in glacier-cold, the whole mass of reality. It was a long time after these initial glimpses and resolutions before I realized Skink had made a much deeper impression in my life than was apparent.

Because of the booze, I suppose, these impressions leaped out much clearer than his reddish complexion that seemed boasting of long hours in the sun. His dark hair shaggy was that of a lost pup, with a swirling tress falling boyishly over his forehead from under the soft felt hat he wore continually. His thin bony hands twirled constantly, automatically, as if a tool were missing from their grasp, as if what really belonged there wasn't there, or some part of his space not fully occupied. And two other points of interest came to light. One was the adopted and peculiar gait he had, a partially delayed and deliberate reach of his right foot as he walked, toe-first, groping, reaching, lightly treading for something he knew would not be there. Later on I found out about that delicate step. And the second was a fact my father pointed out, that Skink always carried a paperback book of one sort or another in the inside pocket of his ill-matched suit coat, the small bulge ever noticeable the way a holster might hang in place. I never was able to spot a spine's title, but could picture him stealing a moment now and then to read a page or two, perhaps from a book of poetry or "The Call of the Wild," "The Red Badge of Courage" or "Lord Jim," the selection dictated by the tastes that had come sweeping down the line to me in those early years.

At other times I had seen him slide out of a cellar window at ground level at the rear of the Town Hall, marionette of a newborn colt, to climb bony and clumsily to his knees, to stand wobbly erect. Perhaps another time he'd look like a shadow right out of Washington Irving, all six feet two inches or so of him and then move off into the still-darkness, pointing on to his day, after absorbing all those free calories from the municipal furnace. I knew, as did the janitor, his head-turned host, interim landlord blind but to want, that the Board of Selectmen, the Town Manager, and the Town Accountant, jointly or separately, would frown on such hospitality, at least publicly.

But Skink was no ordinary drunk, and my ultimate attraction to him took me down into myself, into those partial secrets and shadows I held off from my own being, into the origins and routes of my genes, into testable memory, searching for what had granted him a warmth when he first came reeling into my life. That feeling had been immediate, comfortable, acceptable, but not without its mystery. It was more than the boyish lock of hair hanging over his forehead pennant-like, his haunting eye-search that was so visible to me, the Indian-face complexion, and the very acceptance by other people, all older than me, for someone who was nothing more than a drunk, a wasted tolerance, it seemed, of another's life. Measurements, in my young life, had become reality.

Very slowly, with the caution a ten-year-old can somehow call upon only when fiercely determined, I began to search the labyrinths of my short history. I looked for reasons. I measured.

In time, after poking and sifting odd lots, after turning over smallest stones of the way, it said that Skink was a replacement, a substitute put into my life to take the place of someone who had been called away. That transaction was not announced. There was no drum roll to it, no blare of trumpets. It just happened. One day it was there. Such needs come about from loneliness, from a void scooped out of the middle of your existence, from search, from an unknown desperation playing with your soul, and not ever sure what's eating at you. But the need nourishes itself and you don't always have control of it. Skink was not the first, nor would he be the last, in my lifetime, several of these dependencies arising at different times, filling different needs.

Skink was obviously one of the stark and joined similarities in my life.

A bit earlier for me there had been an old recluse and sot, face so full of character it made me shudder when close up, features hammered out so memorable they might have been

cut into stone, who had sprung out of nowhere to fill the void left by my paternal grandfather. It was a void demanding that a patriarchal image, spirited but not necessarily hard and fast, be attendant on my life. So had come to me in my need the Grand Drinker, the stolid neighbor, the rugged and highly individual old face and slow walker and broad-backed hooch-dreadnought, Jack Winters. He was a standoffish but firmly footed friend, a no-nonsense elder clinging to life in his most rigid manner. He became a magnet for me, a youngster at loss; I had barely known one grandfather and never seen the other. I had measured that loss even then.

Later, after a headlong crash of a small passenger plane into the frozen expanse of Lake Erie, taking my lone brother from me, his body never recovered, one close friend stepped into the breach to fill the void left by that sweet prince. For over forty years we never raised our voices in anger, never gave the other any advice, letting territories be what they were, factions and factotums at their appointed places. And a lost son will not be replaced, but sooner or later other young men will rise from my shadows, from the mists of my past, and I will love them and my daughters will beam through their full days. I'd willingly settle for such accounting. Substitutes have a way of counting.

The comparisons in Skink's case were eventually convincing. After the self-mining, after spading up my small garden of memories, I came at length to my Uncle Johnny and the last picture of a man whose indelicate warmth I had loved with abandon. Laid out icy and dirty and stiff on my mother's bed he'd been, an oil table cloth hastily spreading its blue pattern of tea pots and watering cans and desert canisters under him, the doctor hovering over him, my father cutting away the frozen laces on Johnny's boots so that they could be removed. His last breaths were noisy and significantly irregular, each of them countable and singular in that small room. It had tight walls high and thin, a bed slight in its expanse, a small chest of drawers standing like a delicate miniature, a narrow-slatted chair, a bare-bauble string of rosary beads hung on a brad over the head of the bed. Such were the final, thin veneers of a corruptible and simple life. Death, right down to the dreadful aroma, lurked about us heady and defiant, Hades and Limbo and the River Styx hanging by a thread of that defiance.

I was four years old then, and had sneaked up the stairs when they carried Uncle Johnny in, nearly frozen to death, planked but discrepant, beard white as starch, tears frozen round as pearls on his cheeks, his mouth slowly filling with a subtle blackness, as if France and the Great war, in their broad and timeless sweeping, in their endless reach, had finally claimed him.

They had found him on the railroad tracks, close to the Malden City dump, where he must have been headed. At the dump was the dump master's little shed with its huge and hospitable cast iron stove where as many as six or seven drunks and homeless dregs would be able to put their frosted feet up on a thick cast iron rim and fight the night away, any night of the week, any night of the year.

Uncle Johnny drank, a whole lot for sure, but had been kind to me and my brother and sisters and my mother, his sister. She said he had never been right since his return from France and the infantry in 1918, just the bones and clatter of the fine young man he had once been, nothing much else left of him but his innate kindness and thoughtfulness. "The gas, you know," she had said, tipping her head in a knowledgeable way. Johnny tipped his cap to old ladies and obvious mothers, to funeral corteges, to any member of the ministry, to any legless or armless man who might have been his comrade in "The Great Stink" as he called World War I. He didn't work, not a day that I remember, but drank, easing his life down that corruptible and inevitable trail to the railroad tracks and dread siding that final

night. I had, without reserve, loved that romantic and pitiful soul the way a child loves a warm mystery. I was never sure of which questions to ask, so I asked none.

Somehow, for undeclared reasons early in the strange acquaintanceship with Skink, I had been irretrievably drawn to him. I found him warm, friendly, and trustworthy. He became, slowly but surely in place, Uncle Johnny's substitute, filling a void in my life that demanded to be filled. He was so much like the gentle and pained veteran who too carried measurement in his eyes, who was the host of small kindness and innate politeness. There were the boyish locks, those dark eyes at query, the innocent warmth that accompanied him, and the constant and observable bulge of his inner coat pocket. "Oh, I said to myself so many times, "The Red Badge Of Courage" hidden away, or "Lord Jim" lade in deep cargo, or Walt Whitman, at song, in noble and endless transport, America on the robust wing. The small parts of my life selected his meager library.

Never once in all the time I delivered papers, and made my collections, many of them loose or in envelopes inside storm doors, dropped in mail boxes or cast like dice under mats, had any of that minor coin ever been taken. And Skink had seen me time and time again extracting my few coppers from their appointed hideaways. I began to think of him as one of my morning companions who moved slowly and surely alongside me. There was the milkman and the bakery driver, and the foot patrolman who eased through the grayness of early light the way I thought the Holy Spirit moved, floating, footless, near soundless, whispering of identity and dignity and all's well with the world; and the uncle whom I had seen draw his last breath on my mother's bed. If ever I was to be attacked, to be robbed of my pittance (it was just two cents per copy then, long before the huge tracts of forests were thought of as endangered, before biosphere and ecosystem became proper words), to be harmed in any way, I knew all of them, including Skink, would have come quickly to my side. Never a doubt of it, not for a moment, the edge of one fictional knife having slit each of our right index fingers in silent ritual, all our bloods becoming one, all that sworn redness around me in the darkness. All of them had my implicit trust, all of them occupied significant space in my mind, all of them glided at the very edges of my life, dreamy creatures, costumed, almost touchable, and worthy.

Skink was then part apparition and part character of life, a source of measurement for me. I bet I had seen him a hundred times, in the grayness of evening or dawn's false light, the way one might see an animal, like a raccoon on tiptoes at a hedge, shadowy but as company, moving at the edges of my small journeys. He was countable, even though shadows moved on him, or he moved on shadows. Once I had heard him talking to a patrolman on the night beat who had told him to head off someplace to get his sleep. "Sleep only comes when you're trying to get away from something," Skink had said. I can hear his voice now, soft, low, wet, tooth-defined, the words spilling out in the evening, saying something it took me almost forever to decode.

In high school Skink had been a remarkable scholar and athlete, top of his class, strong-armed long-armed pitcher in baseball and a sure-handed and speedy receiver on the football team. Dartmouth had beckoned and he was set to make the quick journey north, the third of our graduates in four years so selected. Tall, thin, dark-haired, handsome in a traditional way, he spent the summer driving an ice truck, hustling up stairs huge cakes of ice stolen in January and February from Lily Pond, for a short term housed under tracts of orange sawdust in Fiske's icehouse waiting on Spring, June, July, August.

Nothing's ever so cool for long.

A four-year old youngster had fallen under one of his rear wheels. Skink's foot slipped repeatedly off the rubberless brake pedal, panic becoming the log forever lodged in his chest, the incurable mill dam at origin, his foot from that second forevermore reaching for the elusive and slippery pedal. Existence and being at two levels went their awful and sundry ways. Neither of the two victims salvaged a moment of their prior lives. Skink's life, thus and forever, spilled itself in beer, rye, bourbon, whiskey, scotch, vodka, white lightning, wines from most continents and nearly every conceivable valley on earth, after-shave lotion whether icy blue in color or musky as an armpit in aroma and which didn't matter, more than once an almost final bout with automobile alcohol. He learned how to strain potent liquids through sand taken from children's play boxes or unsliced loaves of bread, dread chemist at laboratory work, as if the laborious seeping cleansed microbes, germs and death out of the dread fluids. His body and his mind had begun their long torturous descent, getting drunk, keeping warm, falling still further away from what had been, coming eventually as he did, gray, neutral, convent-like, gliding at the edges of my life, a yard stick trying to lay things out for me.

Once, in the bowels of an old foundation of random fieldstones and patched-up red mickeys stiff in clay and pink geometry, well behind our one theater and smack in a cluster of alders, I had come upon Skink and a companion at illicit laboratory. He wore what he practically wore all the time, this time a suit coat whose sleeves were too short, a pencil-striped dark blue coat with one pocket torn and hanging, heavy salty-like stains on the shoulders. His pants were black with a red thin stripe, what the Salvation Army specialized in, thin, washed out, but still black at a distance. The gray soft felt hat he wore, the kind my father and every other man wore in those days, and probably a thousand years old from the looks of it, perched sort of jauntily on his head, tipped to the sun riding high above us. Made me think of one of Emily's poems he did. The lock of hair hung below the wide brim, still boyish, still in trouble or at trouble, it seemed to say. His hands moved automatically as always, a flurry of nervous energy in them; his eyes dark as dead stars in his face, his long frame throwing the smallest of shadows. The harmless warmth of him hung in the air about me, touched at my shoulders, at the back of my neck. Though I spied on him, I felt no sense of distrust, of disloyalty.

His companion's dress was nearly duplicated, but a smaller version of Skink. Just as nervous in his movements he was, but there was no warmth about him, no acceptance on my part. No substitute, I might have argued if I'd have been lucid at the moment.

Through a crack in the old wall I saw them and their assemblage of anomalous gear, chemists to the end, reprobates for sure, but chemists to the bitter end. Arranged about them were odd bottles, at least half a dozen, full of pale liquid, a wide-mouthed piece of pipe of the kind used for lally columns, and a loaf of bread that might have been straight from a mother's oven, or her windowsill.

At first I thought they were going to make sandwiches, but Skink cut off one heel of the loaf with the ugliest of knives, tore it in half, and handed a piece to his compatriot. He laughed a guttural and naughty laugh, a back room laugh I thought, one coming from the celebration of a dirty joke. "Chow down!" he yelled. They were Romulus and Remus at chewing, the seedy pair of them, the copy and the copied, in their continuity tearing and gnawing as wolves at each portion, their few teeth prominent as bars of a broken grille, gumming a goodly part of the bread, and slobbering words through spaces where teeth had been lost.

"Where'cha cop the pipe, Skink? From Fogarty's, I'm bettin', 'Im the slimy bastard 'e is! Makes ya puke, 'e does. Wouldn't stand you a drink on Christ day, our Plumber's Delight." His words also wet in their coming, he tossed his head in condemnation, rolled his eyeballs

so that his dark eyebrows also moved. Down to the torn pocket his jacket almost matched Skink's pants, black with a faint red stripe, as though they had changed clothes like boys at a boarding school, hiding their meagerness, disguising the home pocketbook. A felt hat he also wore, brimmed, feathered, heavy with stains on the brim, a dark blue shirt buttoned tightly at the neck. His fingers kept moving of themselves, itchy little movements, nervous twittering the way the telegrapher at the Clifftondale railroad station worked at the eternal signals.

"Don't spill any." His voice faded in and out as he spoke, the sounds split by his few teeth, the words continually wet leaving his mouth, atomized, and, I could have sworn, accompanied by particles due for ingestion. They were an ugly lot, but warming in their own special way.

Skink pushed the decapitated loaf of bread down inside the pipe, gently nudging it deeper into the iron, much of his fist disappearing. "Fogarty's not the worst of the lot," he said. "Fact is I think he saw me take it, and if not, didn't want to see me take it. He's like that. Knows that I know he talked to Sergeant Farrell about accommodations at the station." The look on his face was at first sad as he continued, "But he's Fogarty. Wants me to know, fact is. I'm going to name him in my will, Dexter, and that's for sure."

He propped the pipe between two stones, arranged a third in support, set an empty bottle under the lower end, uncapped one of the full bottles and slowly poured its contents into the pipe, onto the open heel of the loaf of bread, onto the lap of the Great Plains grassland.

"What'cha goin' to name him, Skink?" the titter and laugh almost simultaneously escaping his broad mouth, his few teeth. An announcement, an acceptance, both a-twitter in him. He shook devilishly.

"Probably Asshole of All Assholes, maybe Ireland's Biggest Bung Hole since Peter plugged the dike." Skink's laugh was silent, it seemed, as if he were alone in that dreary foundation, a laugh kept within himself for his own enjoyment, like food particles at the gum line, savory if only token. At the crack in the wall, my knees hard against a suddenly not-smooth stone, and suddenly seeing old man Fogarty somehow and somewhere getting the scoop on Skink's will and final testament, I near burst a gut. A marvel he was, I thought, this swaying, braying, graying drunk of all drunks, this language master, this grand comic of the gutter. I figured, on the very spot, then and there, that I loved him. I figured I owed him. I figured he had a due in life. I figured Uncle Johnny was somewhere looking at me and his counterpart. There'd be a smile on his face. "One for the books," he'd probably have said. "Perhaps yet again," continued Skink, "we'll dub him The Continually Parted Anal Rose of the Outhouse Arboretum."

Dexter shook all over, *petit mal* of seizures, wheezing deep in his throat, eyes rolling in ecstasy of the odd lot, and two teeth, still white, in the company of bread, capping his joy. He slapped his knee the way the burlesque guys did those summer weekends on Clifftondale's outdoor stage, great leg-breaking slaps, joints snapping, the grandest of revelry. I expected his hat to fall off, the gray, squeezed-to-death, worn-out, bandless, pin-decorated hat. I expected him to fall down in that stone remnant of a house. I expected to remember it forever, the contrived and expected and libelous humor of the pair of them. Then, as if at one end of a telescope, the subject end, or under microscope, I felt Skink's eyes pierce the slot of my peeking and pass clean through me. He must have seen me, must have seen my eyes, must have recognized me, as it turned out, for in the following days he began to call me Sneaky Pete. It was not distastefully applied, that sobriquet, for it would come lightly and offhandedly across a field, from a bunch of alders or maples whose

purpose from the point of creation had been to contain childhood's secrets, from behind a dark house set back from the traffic of the Center. It would waft on the slightest breeze, as if Skink were playing games with me, as if we were at recess and he was It. I was sharing, whatever it was, and Uncle Johnny was probably a lot closer than I thought.

I didn't realize, until much later of course, that one of Skink's survival mechanisms was the knowledge he had acquired in his slow and laborious travels, in the variety of his bed and board, and how he used that knowledge. Subtly, of course. Summer nights sprawled out behind a tombstone in Riverside Cemetery provided him the identities of three women who wrestled, each on their own time, in the front seat of the patrol car with Sergeant Farrell, long after midnight, long after the town went idly to sleep. They said that Skink had seen Lonnie Brown making love to both Curtingham sisters, twins at that, in the grove beside Rapid Tucker's Pond, all four eventually coming face to face, one fully dressed and three not. From one customer to another I heard that a big banker in town had confided to his girlfriend, in her little unrepossessed house tightly set against the tracks, that the only person in town he feared finding out about their covert business was Skink. Skink wouldn't tell, but Skink would use. I could believe that. Anything for a bed as night closed down. Now and again, but not often, he would whisper to me, from a culvert or behind a bush or having set himself down behind a rock on my route, "Sneaky Pete, do you have a dime I might use for a time?" He'd wink at me, chuckling at meter and rhyme. Uncle Johnny would be all over his face, the eyes, the chin, the taut cheekbones as if being pinched from the inside, a sadness spilling from his eyes the way girls can poke it up at melodrama and pain, the need for a drink flushing royally on his face. I would shake my head in amazement and reach into a pocket.

As all that may be, I took the whole foundation scene away with me. I never stayed for the last pour, never knew what they called their final solution, what it was, what it did for them. I could only guess that in its original state it might have poured white and hot and illicitly from the bottom of a Chevie or Ford radiator (or a Reo or Graham or Hupmobile or Hudson or Packard or De Soto, all gone with the times before I knew it---my time also moving on), or been scooped under cover of darkness from a cabinet at the Hood's Milk Company horse barn, a liniment or antiseptic lotion not toxic but heavy in its aroma, to be passed through wheat and flour and yeast and brown crust thus becoming something else. Eventually, only Fogarty remained of the ashes, the embers of his names, the laughter silent but real. As it was, Skink, through this and other incidents, made me a keen observer of all that went on about me. Not that it was to be traded for cot or bedding, but that it all could be put away for some other use, perhaps to be related as fiction. Or some part of truth.

Teddy Quinlan's father was a night patrolman and he told my father one morning at the paper store that Skink had had a bad night at the station, had cried a good deal of the night away. Had called out the dead boy's name a number of times. No one needed to explain *who the boy was*, now living on at the rear of the police station, crowding Skink Hanscombe, inevitably, to the end.

It was that way for a long time, his life in an endless circle. After a time his territory shrunk, his abodes becoming more formalized. Hedda Halsey tolerated him for a short run in her house near the theater, and then a sister eventually brought him in to the back room of her house, a battle won or lost. His looks never changed while he was there with her, always wanting it seemed, the message running clear across his face, locked into his fingers loose as old gum wrappers the wind played with. Skink stayed put with her most of the time, just breaking out every once in a while, knocking down a few with old friends of the main as he might have called them, stout hearts, long livers who fought the importunate odds, tittering Dexter and like-consumptive looking Ike Wiggins and toothless Tony Pomfret and a few

others, whispering through old haunts, talking to friends, who could not leave Riverside, when nobody else would listen to them. And he called me Sneaky Pete every chance he could, for I had dropped my morning paper route and gone big-time for Sunday's knockout punch of heavier cash, and then that too fell by the wayside.

At length I got new classmates in high school who became teammates who squatted down on the scrimmage line with me and held on for each other's souls. We spent our time and energy in concert and demanded much of each other. Little was left over.

And Uncle Johnny and Skink, caught in such bind, faded slowly on the horizon, over which one worldly and imperious day came my summons to Korea. Quickly, as if redrawn and re-endowed, new zones and new comrades circled the grid about me. Life went spinning away not many feet from me on too many occasions. Thunder was closer than ever before. Earthquakes were common every day. Nights at times were spent in recall on this side or that side of the 38th Parallel, pulling back pieces of our lives, telling tales when we were bunkered down, coming close at times to bombast and misrepresentation, setting what we thought was yesterday in place one more time. And we shared the ration of beer one warm night at the Puk Han River where Skink Hanscombe was given a host of new friends. We toasted him with raised cans lifted from the cool waters of the bloody river. "A toast to a great name--to Skink Hanscombe and Duquesne!" We toasted his longevity, his long-time passion that was our short-time vocation at the river's edge where bodies floated in the darkness. His unknown library we almost had a pool on, the tip of his cap we never let idle, saluting each other, raising drinks overhead. There was mother, apple pie, a Ford or Chevie pick-up, America, all sitting square in the same aura with Skink Hanscombe, town drunk, tipper of caps, inveterate reader. Next day we forgot him in the most horrid firefight imaginable. There were no hangovers left over for us. None at all. But Skink Hanscombe had been a quick companion to a squad of infantry who had never met him. Some of them might have taken him off with them, into the long, long day. And into the longer night. He might have been, that gentle tippler, the last name spoken or the last thought provoked for some of them. Like Emily's little man leaning against the sun.

But, quick as the passage of the old days and Aggie Jenkins' wink from her front door after her old man had gone off for the day, and all of us on the way to school of one sort or another, I was on a ship on the Pacific on a train on the rails across America on a bus into the heart of my town and walking the last two miles to our house with my duffel bag shouldered light as a pillow. Chevrons were matching the new wrinkles in my face.

It was dark. The house erupted. Sisters leaped out of their blankets and dreams. My mother gave back more than a year of prayers in a moment of silence in her room. My father and I shared our first beers ever together. Sleep called. I sank onto the couch in the front room. My father began to watch late-night snow on the television, which was but months old, and too soon into sleep came the crash at the back door of the kitchen as if a battering ram had smashed its way through.

I leaped from the couch, the wide Sam Browne belt, its broad brassy buckle long a learned weapon to be contended with, finding its responsive way from my Class A uniform pants to appointment about my fist. There was noise in the den as my father mobilized his own armory, a belt similar to mine stripped from his guard uniform. We crunched against each other at the door to the kitchen, unable to get through at the same time, shoulders banging together in concert and at target for the very first time in our lives. And there in front of us was the dreg of all dregs, soiled, rotten, almost cadaverous, dripping wet from a sudden rain, shaking to the last splinter of bone, eyes ablaze in fear, Skink Hanscombe, my homecoming present, still scattering from his long convulsive frame shards and slivers of



glass glittering to the floor, screams rising from his throat as if he were being crushed by some malevolent monster---Uncle Johnny come back from the dead. The icy pearls of his cheeks come back in their shine. The air was full of a horrid odor, thick and ripe, expansive, leaving room for all of imagination and memory. I brought gangrene back from the war, the smell of it, finding Chinese bodies where latrines were dug, no flesh but bones hanging onto odors, then a black and white movie of a soldier's toe being removed with a pair of pliers, breakfast being spilled all over the place in Yokohama's Camp Drake too early in the morning for a stomach to contend with.

Skink stunk to the high heavens. He cried and then he screamed and then he begged for help. "Jayzus!! Jayzus!! They're after me!! Jayzus was right!! They come in the night!! They come after me!! The rotten little bastards of them, they're after me, they're being after me!! " And then directly to my father, a moment of lucid light crossing that most pained face, a bare pause at recognition, an eye flicker's worth of intensity, "Ah, Jayzus, Jim, is that you? Is that you, Jim? I never hurt you, Jim. I never hurt your boy, and the bastards are after me!"

And my father, tippler, fair wine merchant in his own right, Marine out of Nicaragua and Guatemala, first hand knowledgeable of the DT's the Tropics can bring down on a man, shoved me aside. "You've earned your sleep." That's all he said. He pointed me back to my bed.

Skink drank black coffee. My father walked him back and forth from our house to the mill a half mile away, and back again and again through the late night. Skink leaned on my father who remembered horned bull frogs at the end of his bunk on a ship coming out of Nicaragua with the Marine Legation aboard, the bows and arrows and booze put away in a final salute, a party to end all parties. Skink, finally, lay his head on a pillow on a spare mattress earlier tossed into our cellar, all at my father's recommendation and urging, his Marine DI's voice reconstructed, re-armed. Skink slept. I tossed just above him in my own pass at sleep, thinking again about Fogarty and Dexter and Farrell's women hiking their dresses at least up to their hips in the cemetery, white thighs running off to forever, and people who didn't like to pay the pittance for paper delivery.

My thirty-day leave went as quickly as vacation. The last day my mother said she had heard a funny noise in the cellar. I checked it out. A card table was set up, four chairs in place, four odd mattresses lined the fieldstone walls, at least six cases of empty beer bottles sat like concrete blocks waiting for a stone mason to set them in place. On the air I could smell Edgar Allen Poe's Amontillado, and the bricks and the lime and the cement.

She yelled down the stairs. "Is everything all right?" I could picture one hand pressed to her cheek, one hand on the door, ready to help if needed, how her head would be cocked alertly waiting for an answer. Everything was observable and memorable to me, all the times and all the considerations, all the characters that had filtered in and through my life, Uncle Johnny, old Jack Winters, the ghost that accompanied me on my paper rounds, my guardian of the spirits.

"It's okay, Mom. Everything's okay."

Skink Hanscombe, as always, wherever his hat hung, had been at home, Skink Hanscombe and company.