

2005, 2010

James Beach

“Squatter’s Rights”

THE resort manager showed the male dormitory to Ace. With the job he and coworkers got minimum wage (no tips), free board, free room. The condemned-looking large narrow house on the edge of the land-locked resort property used a perilous stack of splintery skids that led up to a foundation propped on stilts; the basement was somewhat dug out beneath it. The dorm lacked running water, had a bucket for its toilet. Of all the live-in jobs Ace had worked, this one won for worst living quarters. The reason he was there: his near-classic sedan had a flat and a flat spare; this gig was his shot at funding a wheel.

Ace’s second-floor room, just off the low-ceilinged, tilted staircase, spanned the width of the house and looked out over the sagging mossy-shingled roof of the front porch at a rag-tag of weeds, a few downed pines, some stumpy moguls. Beyond that sat the stony parking lot behind the main lodge, through which male employees could access the resort “lobby,” through which they could access the pool, which had showers for the guests that moonlighted as the place for the male dorm crew to wash, after hours.

The doors to the rooms all had a padlock latch, a device that Ace employed from the get-go since who did he know there besides himself. Another way into his bedroom, he figured out a few days later, was to climb onto the porch roof and jimmy either of those two front windows.

A hipster calling himself Kid Keen stayed in the largest upstairs room, at the other end of the hall from Ace. His roommate was Jason Bosky, nicknamed “Buzzy” because he allegedly convinced several peers to try and electrocute themselves via inserting metal objects into sockets, succeeding in bringing about one death (for which he did several years as a lab-rat-type in a group facility for young delinquents being studied by graduate students for neighboring Bellingham University). Their room had dormers and the worst of the dryrot.

In the other upstairs room was Reese, the pacifist, sprigs of dreadlocks perpetually on his zitty forehead. Below lived two musclebound guys, Shredder and Beau, in the converted living room, sapping much of the house’s small supply of electricity with their gadgets. Plans for a rebuild, with a basement common area, standard amenities including satellite and Internet, plus a working kitchen, were presented to Ace upon hire; the plans had been drawn up for a decade.

Fridays required Ace to lug tubs of scrubbed round potatoes over the property’s many moguls to the weekly fish-boil where winds off the distant lake blew volumes of smoke off the fires and at the evening staff. He was scheduled and had a partner every Friday, this time Shredder, each man, in the required uniform of polo shirt with resort-logo and black shoes and slacks, muscles popping, to one end of a yoke-like plank strung with twenty-gallon pails of salted-water. They had to carry the water about the length of a football field, from the resort kitchen to the bonfire, where a cook (that night Reese) would boil the fresh fish bought from the local hatchery, at the same time boiling scrub potatoes and bulb onions, for the guests.

“Ooh, he looks mean,” chided a bundled-up octogenarian to her husband, snapping their photo with a phone camera. They wore cold-weather coats and hats, standing just free of the smoke from the bonfire.

Ace realized with consternation that the old lady was referring to him, not Shredder, as the “mean” one of the two. The expression set on his face was telling more than he knew? Was his cartooning too vicious, too without heart, to be ethical? Who knew and who cared about his art? — Those buckets were damn heavy! Meanwhile Shredder was popular among the guests, getting several “hey buddy”s and winks. After crossing the lawn they arranged the buckets to boil on the fire. On the opposite side Reese tended the “fish-’n’-filler” pots, a mournful look on his face (no doubt over the souls of the fish cooking) as he doled them out to curious or hungry guests.

On payday after fish-boil the occupants of the dorm, all in their twenties, a bit younger than Ace, who was thirty, liked to party. On this, his first Friday, Ace was not receiving a check; he scraped pot pipe resins and smoked them, alone in his decrepit room, studying the comic strips he'd done over the week. The one of lean, mean Kid Keen was a soldier doll in trendy striped pajamas. With a thin marker Ace added Keen's mantra, "skin-on-skin is the only way to go in," and turned the page. Red-head roommate "Buzzy", with the deeply-etched abs, was easier to craft, a dummy's survivalist guidebook under one arm and reading glasses underfoot, a half-shirt and bicyclist tights-under (depicted here under a translucent peasant skirt), an electric volt shaved into his crewcut at the temples. Ace's rendition of the overbuilt Shredder turned out too — his stacked upper body, involuntary muscle pose; his typically hanging open mouth (drooling); a slogan on his tank-top: Who Said Sucking Sucks?

Smirking at the proofs of his talent, Ace smoked a hit and deliberated doing one of Reese, or that other bodybuilder downstairs, Beau. He couldn't yet see either of them well enough yet. (Many intelligent people were translucent on sight, to him, while new sorts, of any I.Q., often puzzled and eluded his artistic sense; rather than judge his subjects he was obsessed with accurate representation imbued with a rich satirical flair, which was quite often misunderstood by muses and comics-readers; he felt compelled to keep trying...) As he was mellowing and envisioning the hairy vegan Reese, umber crayon poised, the subject of his maybe-emerging cartoon knocked at his door.

"The food here is synthetic gunk and always over-salted and so this makes me wonder if you're hungry, if you want some granola."

Stuffed full from the buffet leftovers, Ace said, "No, thanks, though."

"Also, beware of... trouble, in this house."

"Trouble?"

Reese had a simper as he rerolled the baggie of oats and dates, then dug an orange from the pocket of his nubby cardigan. "Organic," he said, turning the fruit.

Ace said okay, accepted the orange, then the granola; the pacifist bowed and left. Ace closed the door. What a stranger, he thought — what a neighbor — that simpering face! The visual artist in Ace backed

down while his emotive side stepped up — pangs of pity; attached to that, and whatever else lurked below the surface of his usual buffering, was guilt over the state of the nation, the world; guilt over not wanting the prep cook job but needing to take it so as to fix the tire and leave the resort region; guilt over the pacifist's guilt. He stashed the goods on the shelf in the closet and ventured downstairs, toward the heavy bass loops reverberating up through the floor.

A staff party! Same small-talk, same people, as everyday every day, yet now with drink. A few female resort staff, from the newer A-frame dorm, mingled with Ace's drunk, hyper-animated dormmates in the kitchen with no water and so no sink but a working fridge and hotplate, utensils. The bath (as described) had a thirty-pound bucket for a toilet. The vibe at the party echoed that of a roller rink "snowball" in junior high — boys lined up on one side, girls on the other. To ease fidgetiness and lubricate a festive air: a jug of vodka in the middle.

Instead of jumping into a partyer personae, Ace clung for a moment to the sidelines, a wallflower. He slicked back humidity-wavy hair with his palms; a storm brewing always curled his hair.

Between flirts with the females Shredder offered Ace a few vodka shots; giving in, Ace relaxed, became friendly; they'd lugged water to the fish boil seven times, had now a dull rapport, about that. Slick talk got him a petite French kiss from each blond maid in quick succession, which was flattering although he got stuck in the sensation that they had shallow minds and hearts, to be so easy... More comic-strip fodder! Warm mouths of the vapid, however aesthetically or sensually alluring, did a lot of nothing else for him. He let go their waists and noticed Kid Keen glaring, shock playing round his dopey brown eyes. On Kid Keen's elbow clung Shredder, a camcorder with a blinking green light held in front of his face.

"Hey bro," Kid Keen said, shaking Shredder off his arm before stepping forward. A phony joviality spread across his features. "You all right, turtle? You look a little whacked."

"Just partyin' bro," Ace said, mocking Keen.

Kid Keen slung his arm round his shoulders, leaned in close, and whispered, "You ever get the feeling that people are turning into cartoons, turtle?"

High from the resins, Ace worried Kid Keen had the sixth sense; his thoughts split, he gravitated toward the concept of ESP to explain the cartoon remark, rather than the more logical criminal theory, with Keen and or Bosky entering his padlocked room through the windows, searching his closet, finding his notebooks and finding his creative efforts, maybe getting amused and offended all at once, going so far as to pull a prank, rub his toothbrush in the armpits or take a piss on his mattress... “Yes,” he answered, thinking on how to clear up the matter ESP v. THC.

At the sound of a car crunching into the lot, its headlights panning the kitchen windows, energy shifted. Keen and Shredder approached the blonds, who had been joined by their huge-chested frizzy-haired hostess friend, to interview them about the kiss with Ace; they demanded a star-rating, say, one or two stars out of four. (Threes.) To show off, or to get booted or to ball, Keen told the trio that each set of breasts was unique and sexy, that seeing them all together at once was like a Picasso painting. One blond took the remark as a compliment, the other got huffy and demanded a vodka shot, which was backed by the brunette.

Bosky and Beau entered, arms full with beer and liquor bottles. Keen obliged the maids with vodka, meanwhile Bosky juggled a king-can then opened the beer all over the trio’s shirts, with Shredder catching the episode on digital tape for his “documentary” on working a three-star resort.

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BEFORE long Ace found himself up in his room snorting Psilert with Gyx, the lanky teenage son of the resort manager. With a sketchy goatee and a large stash of the drug intended to reduce hyperactivity but often taken to stimulate, Gyx seemed as much the rebel pariah as he himself did — Kid Keen and his cohorts allowed the boy to hang round their parties, and gave him grins and pats on the back, but no kinship. Conversely, Ace admired the boy, drew sanctuary, glommed on to his steady, youthful charisma.

The high from the powder was good anyhow, and Ace threw U2’s classic “Zooropa” onto his beatbox to drown out the distortion from downstairs, their bass-heavy trip-hop. While the disc spun into play mode he could hear Gyx cracking its jewel case while making more lines of the stimulant.

“I heard from Shredder that these mattresses came from cabin suites that had bats in them! Your dad’s putting us at risk for ringworm of the scalp, or worse,” said Ace, to gain the teen’s favor.

Gyx shoved the jewel case across the floor, handed Ace the short straw they'd been snorting through.
"Dude, this place is a deathtrap," said the teen.

"I know! What the f. My plan is to... Between you and me, I might cash my next check, buy that tire and put it on and peel on out."

"Going back home?"

"I dunno."

"Where you from again?"

"Mars. No, really, Iowa. Iowa City."

After each line they conferred anew, touching on music and films; futures and no-pasts and psychoanalysis; sisters, mothers, brothers; summer drugs and end-of-summer cliques; of simultaneously needing and fantasizing over and forgetting the to-be-found soul to which everyone gravitates, the one your mate needs to emulate so as to create monogamy bliss, the jelly for your peanut-butter, your pig and the Swiss...

"I'm out of here in two years."

"Enlisting?"

"I'm gonna go to Bell U."

"Bell U.? Why the f. there?"

“The parties, the women! My cousie, Trenton, he goes. Showed me around one night. We all took E. Man, the females there would knock you out. Smart, beautiful... loose...”

“Oh yeah? What grade you in again?”

“Now, tenth.”

“Getting good grades?”

“Where’d you go to college?”

“Bellingham. That was a long time ago! I took a leave of absence. Maybe true love is for lazy people.”

Outside the creaking house, wind and rain increased. The foundation began to sway. Yet Ace and Gyx rode the storm out easy, like sailors. They converged spiritually and moved as one, one’s mind spewing out the other’s mouth while their fingers danced, images and ideas nearly perfect in shape, in sync, crystalline in clarity, in presentation: complete philosophies whisked through nerve, muscle and bone, on journey through those incredible brain machine(s) that occasionally translate abstract genius into everyday throwaway language...

“What’s with your name, anyways.”

Shrugging it off, “What kind of name’s Ace?”

The smooth, loose precision, the power and talent balance fresh and teasing; a collective mental labyrinth the citadel about them. Metaphysical skyscrapers of thought and notion thrust up rapidly, binding wrist to ankle, chin and torso, eyelash and eyebrow; all laced within a system of interconnecting corridors. Bay windows, bungee cords, burgundy table wine, roof golf, intercoms and tour guides.

Sudden balconies, swimming pools, tether balls and lightning rods. Like an all-night toy model-building fest; like solid and intricate clock innards; like a tightly-expanded helium balloon; like matchbox cars snug in their plastic carry-case carports, their citadel was ordered and bright. The fantastic city, a play-fantasy-alive in all its psych-drug-induced manifestation, kept ascending...

“Did you ever ‘snowball,’ as a kid?”

“Like, at the roller rink? Girls on one side, boys on the other...?”

“No. Like, um, the one without girls.”

“Explain.”

“The guys line up, and... pass, you know, the first guy’s ___” — and here a grimace rather than a word — “to the next guy, in the mouth...?”

“Wha?”

“A snowball, with just guys.”

At a fever pitch mentally Ace told Gyx: “Going to take a leak,” wondering about the snowball, aware of the details of the game now yet somehow unable to grasp them. A glance at the mildewed shell of a bathroom, where someone had taken a crap on empty beer and vodka bottles in the bucket. Ace pushed outdoors. An anemone-like rain dampened his horizontal planes; the shifting wind blew rain all over his back. While pissing, a strong gust blasted his exposed crotch with wet, made him feel alive, sexually, itchy; pissing gave way to a monster of a masturbatory session, culminating in sporadic bursts of lighting vying for dominance over thunder smashing like cymbals.

By the time he pulled up and reziped, the rain was wet enough to make his clothes and hair cling. The next Ace knew, he was lurching up narrow steps in pitch dark; another blackout - - - - . The low ceiling,

when it hit, made cartoon stars dance in his skull, and when he reached his room, where Gyx had lit a drippy candle, he could feel the new welt leaking blood.

Skinny in a tight tee-shirt and unbuttoned boxer briefs, Gyx was lying casually on a sleeping bag unrolled over the bat-crappy mattress, propped on an elbow. “What did you do to your head? You’re bleeding.”

“This dorm is a deathtrap,” Ace reiterated, dismayed that their marvelous city, quickly erected and lavish — built on credit and assumption — built without blueprints, without pain — had aged in his absence. Barely there, the figurative citadel was a fading ghost-bond, a mirage. Fractures took hold, toppled facades and turrets. Green goop attacked, spread across balconies to peely patio furniture, crept onto flattened mattresses, slid down tetherball rope. Rust and corrosion reigned. Glass splintered and fell away and the relentlessly mounting metronome of time buried the remains.

Gyx was whispering. “You know that girl with the mongo tits?”

“The blond with the round face or the other blond,” said Ace, half-blotting his forehead with a sock found on the floor of the closet. The cut sliced up into his hairline.

“No, the frizzy-haired one, kind of looks like a snowball on legs,” clarified the resort manager’s son. “She dates guys with weird bodies. Her latest looks like a pumpkin — you’ve seen him, doing maintenance, on the property.”

“Oh, sure.”

“Bosky says he wants to carve ’im up, for Hallow’een!”

Ace surveyed the red mass absorbed into his scrunched sock and wondered why the injury hurt less that it could. Being oddly-shaped himself, somewhat apish, or according to Kid Keen, turtlish, he supposed he could have a date with her too, get some action from the last resort frizzy-haired brunette freak-dater. Ace thought again of his crayoned caricatures. He wanted Gyx, now; the only one with a fighting chance, in the real world. He saw the girls as slight, vapid, bad mothers. Plus most everyone there was either

average-looking or homely! So the average folks were fascinating to paint, to poke fun at... Maybe his urge to draw them originated out of a vibe permeating from the resort land, out of a hick locus-inspired desire to reduce everything to its basest, most trivial, comical, inhuman? Too many people at the resort seemed preoccupied, classifying humans as animal, vegetable or mineral.

“Who cares about that, Kid Keen’s an ass,” said Ace at last, kneeling to take a hit of resins (which Gyx declined) since the Psilert on the Zooropa jewel case was only dust.

After mulling resins and re-sins, then wondering if any sane person could consider smoking pot a sin, Ace decided he was too wired, thinking about nothing. He doused the candle, took off his jersey and jeans, and spooned with Gyx, who was lying to one side of the mattress. He felt like a young uncle, the teen’s guardian, something. They clasped hands as the thunder rumbled. Thoughts of coming again, indoors, right there with him, sweetened a new vision of skin on skin, best way to go in. Ace fell asleep.

;)

WHEN the Norway Pine struck dawn was being obscured by the furled clouds of last night’s storm, and for a moment he believed the cacophony of thunder and splintering wood and shattering glass to come from a dream. A hush descended, and achieving full consciousness proved a lengthy task. A falsetto wail for help caused Ace’s core to lunge into his throat and Gyx to tense up beside him.

“What is that?” Gyx asked in a whisper.

Shrugging off the eerie vibe— of the wail itself as much as of the way Gyx was rattled — Ace figured Shredder was scoring with one or both of the blonds. Yet the shrieking was for sure emanating not from below but from the largest upstairs room, belonging to the nocturnally quiet Kid Keen and Bosky.

Now near-fully alert Ace lost his five a.m. hard-on. Before he could make a move on the teen leapt out of bed and into his boots and opened the door, disappearing into the hall. Ace stepped into his jeans and loafers, and got struck by blackened rainwater dripping from the lintel of his room’s door.

Pale orange sunlight along the horizon filtered through his gauzy-curtained windows and made the hall just bright enough to see the door to Kid Keen and Jason Bosky's room hung ajar. Outside it, more pale light and a moist breeze blew out at Ace. A sobby Reese appeared at his side, looked fearfully into his eyes but said nothing. As Ace slid through the doorway a roosting bat flapped by in the drizzly sky overhead.

The downed pine, in its majesty, looked oddly picaresque on Bosky's plaid bedding. A rubbery-looking arm drooped from beneath branches fringed with desiccated needles, a rivulet of blood streaking Bosky's ring finger.

Beside Gyx, near the closet, Kid Keen was moaning. Compared with the crunched gape of the dormer where the Norway had fallen in, Keen in his hushed hysteria was an extraneous sound-effect. In the rubble surrounding the mattress Ace stumbled over a survivalist's guide, and steadied himself by grabbing a dangling roof beam.

"Don't you touch him," warned Kid Keen. "Don't you touch Buzzy."

Crouching, Ace could see Bosky's chest and throat pierced by long-dead pine limbs. The red-head's face, unrecognizable now, was gored too, as were his intestines, groin and left thigh.

Ace looked away, toward Gyx, who ran to him across the rubble and held his arm at the elbow, in shock. "Go get your dad," Ace told him.

That remark led Ace into and through the day, with an ambulance, squad cars and an undersized fire-engine ambling up the narrow road past the pond and into the parking lot. Paramedics chainsawed through the trunk of the Norway to remove the body. City personnel taped off the condemned house and attacked the owner of the resort, causing a panic among many of the guests, who would be put up in a nearby hotel or motel (courtesy of the county elite who would write the deed off as a "cause").

Kid Keen found solace in the bawling blonds, and soon disappeared with the two of them into their A-frame. The pacifist got onto his moped and drove off, dreads and tears flying. Beau and Shredder piled as much gear as they could into a beat-up old truck and drove off to set up camp. After asking round,

Ace found out Gyx went to stay with relatives down the road while his dad, after shoving a city official and then an officer, got handcuffed and taken to county courthouse.

By sundown much of the resort property was deserted. He ventured from his lookout in the woods, with an empty duffel bag for looting.

He found the rear kitchen door to the main lodge chained, and panicked. Of course, management did that — no showers necessary now that everyone from the house had been sent away. He had no money at all now and had already quit the job, in his mind, so as to obtain his check first thing Monday, buy a used tire; pick up Gyx; and head out. Til then he needed to improvise, fend for himself. Would he be forced to beg food from the females? He recalled the pacifist's gift of the fruit and cereal, stashed in his closet.

The house was belted with yellow POLICE LINE! DO NOT CROSS! tape. On the plank the splintery skids shimmied and shook so Ace headed round back to find another route inside. He noticed a hydraulic jack, under the foundation nearest where the Norway had struck the roof and crashed through the joists above the second-floor window, the stressed corner reinforced with concrete blocks. There was no other way inside except to risk smashing a window. The house looked ready to collapse.

Ace climbed the sturdiest overhanging tree and leapt onto the porch roof, which rocked the entire house; one of his bedroom windows had been jimmed. He went in.

...quiet and dark enough for Ace to raise cautionary palms as feelers against any obstacles, especially on the stairs, where his still-throbbing forehead caused sympathetic stars to re-shine...

He put the food gift from the pacifist in his duffel, risked a step into the hall. Adrenaline churned beneath his calm rationale. In the pacifist's room (door hanging open) moon and stars assisted as he scouted for granola and oranges, whatever he could find. The heavy curtains were open to the moonlight. Figs, dates, pears, dried kelp!

Then, a scrabbling of something in the next room...

The pacifist (duh) kept no weapons; and Ace's army knife sat stashed away, beneath that white birch where he'd peeled more bark away to carve

ACE

into, right above

4EVER

HM + TAO

(whoever they were) in a heart.

"What's the hold up?" came a whisper.

"Can't locate the video," came the reply.

Ace held his breath on the other side of the pacifist's door, recognizing the voices of Shredder and his bodybuilder roommate, Beau. They'd apparently crept in and gotten to Bosky's room without him seeing from his post outside.

"Why'd you give it to him anyways?"

"He wanted to watch that turtle whacking off... How come you stupidly left our slurpy, slurpy? What if the cops took it?"

"What would they want with a camcorder," Shredder said.

"Where's that other flashlight."

Needing to breathe, Ace did so slowly, in ragged exhalation. That they filmed him masturbating (squatting on that fallen oak!) mattered less now than their clandestine 69ing — Shredder resembled an amateur pro wrestler. Smaller, more built, Beau could severely injure him with his mighty grip. Together

the two could kill him despite self-defense lessons and an army knife, if they discovered he knew their secret passion, the both of them now immortal on film, the lot of them in a slip-slidingly stark ménage a trios...

“I say we stick here, wait for daylight. Much easier to look, see? We’ll meet up with them later when we find it.”

“Find it fast! This place is falling down, get it?”

“Sure, boss.”

“Is that it? Oh, no.”

Their clomping and rooting gave Ace an opportunity to slip through the pacifist’s door and steal into the hall. Silently something occurred: a pendulum swing? He hesitated, aware of a tremendous tension, before the hydraulic snapped loose from the dormitory.

Shredded scolded, “You’re such a—”

Mechanical hee-hawing from the other end of the house heralded a shifting and more stress, thousands of nails and screws being tested, torn free. Plaster was cracking off the ceiling and walls. Across slowly tilting (funhouse) floorboards Ace ran, in command of his sack and knife as he sprinted through his room and ducked out onto the porch roof. As he rode it down he thought of Gyx and his whereabouts, rolling free enough of the resort debris, so he could nab him before heading to the lake.

2012 Wood Coin: Already Okay with Little Brother and Big Brother Watching Issue: Beach, "Squatter's Rights"