I DREAMED I WAS A VERY CLEAN TRAMP
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AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

RICHARD HELL

Gogo

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To Sheelagh and Ruby
I DREAMED I WAS A VERY CLEAN TRAMP
Like many in my time, when I was little I was a cowboy. I had chaps and a white straw cowboy hat and I tied my holsters to my thighs with rawhide. I’d step out onto the porch and all could see a cowboy had arrived.

This was in Lexington, Kentucky, when everybody was a kid. I looked for caves and birds and I ran away from home. My favorite thing to do was run away. The words “let’s run away” still sound magic to me.

My parents arrived in Lexington in 1948. They’d met two years before at Columbia University in New York, where they were graduate students in psychology, and had married a year after that. When my father, Ernest Meyers, who’d grown up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, got his Columbia PhD, he found a job teaching at the University of Kentucky. I was born in late 1949. My ma postponed a career to take care of the home.

Our family was just the four of us, including my sister, Babette, who was born a year and a half after me. We felt close to my father’s mother, Grandma Linda, who lived in New York, and we occasionally visited one of his brothers, Richard—a chemist for Texaco—and his wife and kids, at their home near Poughkeepsie, but beyond that there wasn’t
much awareness of family, or family history. I had no real understand­ing of what a Jew was, for instance, though I knew that my father’s family fit that description somehow. I thought Judaism was a religion, and we didn’t have any religion.

My mother, born Carolyn Hodgson, was an only child. Her mother, Dolly Carroll (born Dolly Griffin), whom we knew as Mama Doll, was a working-class Methodist lady from Alabama. She played bridge and liked a cocktail. She’d been married four times. We saw her for a few days once every three or four years. She and my mom’s father, Lester

Ernest Meyers, 1948.
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Hodgson, who’d owned a filling station in Birmingham until it went bust in the Depression, had divorced when my mother was a young child, and I only remember being in the same room with him two or three times.

We lived in the suburbs in America in the fifties. My roots are shallow. I’m a little jealous of people with strong ethnic and cultural roots. Lucky Martin Scorsese or Art Spiegelman or Dave Chappelle. I came from Hopalong Cassidy and Bugs Bunny and first grade at ordinary Maxwell Elementary.

I came from Hopalong Cassidy
In 1956, when I was six and we lived on Rose Street by the university, my father bought a cream and green 1953 Kaiser, which he drove to work every morning a mile down a street that ran between the big UK basketball arena and its football stadium. His campus workrooms were in an old tree-shaded red-brick building on the side of a hill. The classrooms, lab, and office there smelled of wood, chalk, wax, graphite, dust, fresh air, and armpits. The rooms were softly shadowed wood. Tree limbs swayed outside the windows. My father was an experimental psychologist; he didn’t treat patients but observed animal behavior in labs. Small hard-rubber rat mazes lay on the tabletops among big manual typewriters. There were wooden glass-front cabinets against the walls, and rows of chair-desks facing the blackboards. That type of plain old academic building, or the one that housed the local school for the blind, where he did research on Braille, still feels like home to me, like a humble paradise, as little as I could ever stand schooling.

In the center of town stood a classic rough-hewn Romanesque courthouse, with an equestrian statue of Confederate general John Hunt Morgan out front. A few blocks further along Main Street lay the train station waiting shed, and in that same stretch Main’s two cozy, plush movie houses, the Kentucky and the Strand, which were staffed with pimpled ushers and showed first-run double features and cartoons, including Saturday-morning all-cartoon programs. By the bus stop there was a Woolworth’s dime store and a bakery that sold glazed doughnuts warm from the oven.

The limestone, pillared public library was in the middle of a heavily wooded park a few blocks behind the courthouse, across the street from Transylvania College (“the first college west of the Allegheny Mountains”). Inside, the library was marble, with sunshine from the second-story skylight brightening the ground floor’s central informa-
tion desk; whispers, shuffling shoe steps, and shelves and shelves of musty-smelling, dimpled green or orange library-bound books free for the taking.

On the outskirts of town were drive-in movies and an amusement park. The family would take grocery bags full of homemade popcorn to the drive-in, and, on the way home, my sister and I fit lengthwise, head to feet, in the backseat, asleep. Every once in a while we’d get to visit Joyland, where there was a wooden roller coaster and a merry-go-round and a funhouse and a Tilt-a-Whirl in the midst of game booths and cotton candy and hot dog stands among huge shade trees with picnic tables below them and starlings under those.

In the suburbs the houses were unlocked. There was no “air-conditioning” but fans. A big warehouse in a weathered industrial neighborhood towards town stocked fresh-cut blocks of ice yanked at a loading dock by giant tongs into newspapered car trunks to power iceboxes—though most people did own an electric refrigerator by then—or to fill coolers for picnics. You’d stab the slick crystal with picks till it cracked.

Once, as a teenager in Lexington, on a hot, clear summer day, I was in a stone hut in an open field with some friends. More friends clustered in the landscape outside like some Fragonard or Watteau painting—Fragonard crossed with Larry Clark—playing and talking. A guy’s attention got caught by the sky. He stood in the high grass staring up, pointing and calling. We all craned our necks. There were specks in the sky floating down; chairs made of snow and snow couches touched down all around us. We were laughing and crying.

That happened in a dream a few years after I’d arrived in still-lonesome New York. I woke up ecstatic and grateful, my throat constricted and eyes overflowing.
In the winter of 1956, when I was in first grade, the family moved from the cottage on Rose Street to a new suburb, Gardenside, on the edge of town.

Nearly every lot in the tract was the same small size and there were only a few house designs, mostly two-bedroom. Each house had saplings in the same two spots on either side of the walk leading up to the front door and the same type of evergreen shrubbery under the living room picture windows facing the street. Our house was just like the classic child's drawing of a home, a red-brick box under a steep shingled roof that had a chimney on one end of it.

At the bottom of the street ran a creek. Lawns descended to border both sides of it, but along its banks uncut foliage grew thick and high. The most interesting thing about it was that it wasn't man-made. The idea that you could follow its path rather than the patterns imposed by people on everything else in sight was exciting. I remember first realizing that the creek might start and end anywhere, far off, that it didn't just exist in the area I knew. The thought was a glowing little diorama hidden inside my brain, kind of like Duchamp's Étant donnés (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas).

Gardenside had farmland at its borders—tobacco and corn and livestock—and woods.

Our house was one of the first in the suburb to be completed, and the ongoing construction all around us for blocks was our playground.

One late afternoon that first year, there were only two of us left still messing around outside. We were trying to topple a big iron barrel that was filled to the brim with water. Finally we figured out a way of using wood scraps as levers and pushed it over.
The street was empty. Roy Baker and I went and sat down in the rubble by the partly built house to talk things over. The building was just fresh four-by-tens across a cinder-block foundation with a few two-by-fours poking up where walls would go. The street was barren but littered with heaps and bristling, and smelled of fresh sawn wood, wet concrete, dirt, and burnt tar paper.

The men who were working here had seen us goofing around before they’d left for the day. By the time they’d gone, we were the only kids left. Tomorrow morning, they would realize it had been us who’d knocked over the barrel. Kids our age shouldn’t be strong enough to
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turn over something as heavy as that. I explained this to Roy Baker, who was a few months younger than me. “They’re going to think we’re superhumanly strong. They’ll want to put us in the circus. Think of how that will be, when we come out into the ring under the big top, the crowd waiting, and then we can’t lift up the barbells! There is only one thing to do. We have to run away.”

We walked and walked, further than we’d ever been, and stole some pennies from the dashboard of a parked car and bought candy. As it started getting dark and we were lost and tired, we knocked on a door and got some adults to help us get home.

We played army in the dirt piles. Scouting over a hill for enemies, I had the first scientific insight I can remember. I realized that in order to see anyone, I had to expose enough of my own head that I’d be visible too. You had to come out of hiding in order to see anything.

Cowboys and Indians, though, was the main game. I loved my cap-gun six-shooters and holsters and neckerchief and cowboy hat. The caps came in matte red rolls, with little disks of black powder set in them. You’d thread the roll inside your metal pistol. When you pulled the trigger, the strip advanced, and the hammer hit the next cap with a bang, and smoke rose. I would like to smell the smacked burnt snap of a detonated cap like that again right now.

There were the fan clubs, or the brotherhoods, of the heroes of the Saturday-morning TV shows. Flash Gordon, who lived in the future and rocketed through outer space. I joined his club. You found out how to join them from the backs of cereal boxes and sent in for a membership card and an ID ring. Sky King, who was a modern-day rancher who flew a little private airplane. Spin and Marty, modern kids at a western boys’ camp as presented by The Mickey Mouse Club. Zorro and
the Cisco Kid and the Lone Ranger. There was often a wandering hero and his devoted sidekick, who provided comic relief. That happened over and over in Howard Hawks and John Ford westerns too. (Whenever I could, I'd take the bus into town on Saturdays to go to a double feature. Often they were John Ford and Howard Hawks movies, by which I was contaminated with the Code of the West.) There were also buddy teams in which the members were equal and were complementary in other ways than as hero and faithful clown. Tonto wasn't a clown with the Lone Ranger, nor was Dean Martin with John Wayne in Rio Bravo (Walter Brennan was the clown on that team). The Three Musketeers.

I grew up thinking men worked best in wandering small teams, usually two-man. You needed someone to conspire with, someone to help you maintain the nerve to carry out your ideas. Someone to know what you were thinking (otherwise your thinking didn't really exist). Someone who had qualities you wanted, maybe, too, and that you could acquire to some degree by association.

I remember two things about Pat Thompson, my first best friend. One of those includes the other buddy we would plan a runaway with. At recess in the schoolyard Pat put his arms around our shoulders for a conference and then banged our heads together and laughed. I was shocked he did that. The other is that when Pat moved away the following year, in third grade, we exchanged mementos of each other and what I took was the heel of his shoe. I can still see it in my mind. It's dry and concave with bent little skinny nails poking up from it and his signature on the other side in felt-tipped pen.

In the spring of 1957 Gardenside was still making do with a nineteenth-century one-room schoolhouse for the small children. It stood at the top
of an overgrown hill and had been converted to three classrooms, one for each of the first three grades. Down the side of the hill gaping a wide-mouthed shallow cave, where we were to meet at midnight.

All afternoon that day I secretly gathered supplies—crackers and peanut butter and apples—from around the house and smuggled them back to hide under my pillow in the bedroom I shared with my sister. That night I was going to wrap it all in a cloth and tie it to the end of a stick to carry over my shoulder.
When bedtime came, and my sister and I had to brush our teeth and get into our pajamas, I couldn’t find my damn pajamas. They should have been in the bureau drawer. Then the whole household was helping me look, and just as I realized what I had done my father called out that he had found them along with everything else under my pillow.

It was late but all the lights stayed on. My pretty little sister was awed. And now here is the strange part: my father’s reaction. My father told me that at midnight he would drive me to the cave and that if my friends were there I could go with them. I was amazed then and still am now.

Just before midnight we got in the big old Kaiser and rolled the five minutes to the distant rendezvous site. My father was friendly and concerned. My confidence was a little reduced by his careful kindness, but I imagined the triumph of being left with my friends to figure out our next move. They’d think what a great dad I had. We waited in the car with the lights turned off, and nothing happened. No one came. We waited until I couldn’t complain that we’d left too soon and then we drove home.

I don’t remember anything else about what happened and the only one who remembers it at all is me. My mother doesn’t remember that any of it happened; neither does my sister. My father died suddenly of a heart attack some weeks after the runaway plan. The fact that I am the only person from the original night who even remembers that it took place seems poignant, not to mention disturbing, considering its significance to me. My wife teased me about it.

Then I found an old box of papers containing a hand-drawn booklet I’d made for school that year entitled “Runaway Boy,” dated November, 1957, a few months after the getaway try. It reads:
I DREAMED I WAS A VERY CLEAN TRAMP

This story is true
names have
Been changed

chapter one
My first plans

Well I planed to run away with two school mates named Jack and Clem. We were going to meet at front of school. To live at a place that was next to the school it was a cave. Oh and my name is Jim. One of us was going to bring a blanket one some food one some matches and a candle. We were going to run away because our mother’s spanked us to much. I was geting food this is how I did it: I told my mother I wanted a few apples to take out to my friends but I didn’t I put it in a hakerchief to keep it together I had a play sword to keep it together. And we were going to meet at 12 o’clock on the dot. I hid the hankercheif under my pillow. Then I went out and played until supper and went to sleep.

Next day I made a sneak tellaphone call to Clem to talk about the runaway and to tell him I might be a little late becuas I live very far away from school. In my hankerchief I had some pajama’s you know food I had some old clothes shirt pants shoes. I just couldn’t wait for that night but I felt a little unlucky. I went out to play for a little while then came back for supper. I watched t.v. for a little while then I wanted to go to bed I went to get my pajama’s but they weren’t there you know I told everybody I lost them. Everybody looked I play like I looked to but I didn’t. I told them my mother
father and sister not to look under my pillow just a little bit late. My father looked and there was the hankerchief

Chapter two
A surprise!

I was ashamed that I wanted to runaway. But I still wanted to. I wanted to run away with Clem and Jack they were my best friends. But my father said I could runaway! He told me he would at exactly 12 o’clock he would start the car and away we would go.

But if Clem and Jack weren’t there we would come right back home. I couldn’t wait till midnight but it got here. And away we went to school. When we got there I told dad to wait a while because they weren’t there!

But they never got there so we went and went to sleep I dreamed I was a very clean tramp!

THE End

I like how my name in the story, Jim, is a combination of the names of my two best friends, Jack and Clem.

Kentucky is riddled with caves, and my friends and I would go hunting for them. We found a few little tunnels tucked away in the surrounding farmland—openings into the ground that were wet and dark and slick, where salamanders lived and into which you could squeeze and sit and then crawl deeper. Their entrances were often signaled in the fields by clumps of trees that had been left to grow because they filled a dip
in the land that couldn’t be plowed. We’d poke around in a crater like that and sometimes in the rubble and undergrowth there would be an entrance. Inside, you’d find that good feeling again that’s rare in adulthood, except maybe in drugs and sex, of dreaming and conspiring in a hideout, beyond the pale.

In memories, as in dreams, you often see yourself from outside, as if it were a movie. That’s how I remember the morning after my father died, in the summer of 1957.

My sister, Babette, and I slept in beds against opposite walls of our room, which was next to our parents’ bedroom, at the back of the house. I see the scene from an angle near, but above, my mother’s head, everything dim and out of focus, as she sits on my sister’s narrow bed, the one closest to the door, looking down at me beside her. Six-year-old Babette sits on the edge of the bed too, on the other side of me, listening as our mother explains that our father has died during the night. We don’t understand the situation very well, though we realize that being dead is supposed to mean he doesn’t exist anymore, he is completely gone.

Later in the year, I was embarrassed that the kids in school knew my father had died. I was more conscious of being upset by that than by his actual death, which was just an absence (there wasn’t even a funeral).

For a while when I was eight or nine my best friend was a kid named Rusty Roe who lived a few houses down the block. He was a year or two younger than me. I was probably still insecure from my father dying. Rusty’s nice father, Chet, who must have been in his late twenties, was an outdoorsman, a hunter and fisherman who subscribed to gun and rod magazines and did taxidermy as a hobby, and who took Rusty and me bass fishing sometimes in a rowboat on a lake.
There were a couple of years there where I got interested in birds. (According to my ma, the very first word I ever spoke was “bird.”) I loved walking in the countryside, out past the streets, looking for birds, and I could identify them by song and flight pattern and nest as well as shape and markings. Rusty would go with me, and he knew a lot about them too. We’d carry Peterson’s field guides. I collected abandoned nests. I carved birds out of balsa wood and painted them. I bought plastic model kits of birds to glue together and paint.

One early evening, Rusty and I were playing in his backyard when it got time for me to head home, and he misunderstood my leaving as a rejection. He pleaded with me not to go, and started crying, apologizing and begging, and I realized that there was a part of me that liked that he was crying. Something in me was glad to make my friend cry. I hadn’t wanted to hurt him, but his tears showed how much he valued me and that I was not the vulnerable one. I got some kind of satisfaction, too, in becoming harder as he got servile. The sudden gulf between us made me want to be alone. It was dusk as I left my friend standing in his storm-fenced back lawn, with its little concrete goldfish pond dug by his father.

While I might be a little nostalgic for the innocence, the grace, that existed before my behavior became consciously calculated, my life was full of pain and fear then, and it wasn’t even really innocent either. My nice third-grade teacher, Mrs. Monk, corrected me once because I was acting modest. She advised me not to “fish for compliments.” At first I didn’t get what she meant, but then I was amazed to realize that it was possible to misunderstand my own behavior, to believe I was doing something for the exact opposite reason I was really doing it.
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My flat, vacant, smudged ten-or-eleven-year-old face. There’s a panorama or montage of local vistas, the empty suburban hills, shifting slowly behind it, all silent and soft and cold, with visible grain, as I glide around the quiet newly built streets on my bicycle, alone, with no one else in sight. Or I’m sitting in my backyard, suddenly self-aware, or aware that this moment is going to happen again someday, portraying my condition and environment (this sentence on this page in this book).

I probably peaked as a human in the sixth grade. I was golden without conceit. My teacher that year, Mrs. Vicars, made a private special arrangement allowing me to write stories instead of doing the regular homework assignments.

In seventh grade I fell, though, and it would take me years to climb back. The postwar baby boom had caught up with the Lexington school system and it became so overcrowded that a big old wooden jumble downtown was annexed for the exclusive use of hundreds and hundreds of seventh graders from all over the city. As one boy in a large school of unknown kids my age from all over the city, I lost any history and prestige I’d had. I was nobody, and as I wasn’t assertive, it was impossible to catch up. All I remember of school that year is my anxiety and unhappiness, mixed with pained envy of the thriving redneck hard-asses: commanding, mature Gary Leach, with his short sleeves folded up his biceps, pegged jeans nonchalantly clinging, short hair waxed in precise furrows, as he murmured consolingly, behind me on the school bus, to the lovely weeping Susan Atkinson beside him, “You can cry on my shoulder”; tough, dashing, chipped-front-toothed Jimmy Gill, Jerry Lee Lewis look-alike; muscular, confident farm boy Hargus Montgomery.
There was one last-minute redeeming experience. Because I was traumatized and couldn’t make myself do any homework, my grades had plummeted from effortless excellence to C’s and D’s and F’s. I hadn’t attached much importance to grades, but it was mortifying suddenly to be lacking that way. But when the student body was given standardized “achievement tests” at the end of the year I got the highest scores in the whole school. They wouldn’t have revealed that to me, but the administration thought I should be talked to, considering my grades. I noticed that teachers all of a sudden acted differently towards me. I was glamorous. They’d stop and look at me as I walked by.

All those years of junior high school—seventh through ninth grade—were awful. Because of the overcrowding I attended a different school each year, with my classmates always changing and unknown. I couldn’t bring myself to do homework. I had insomnia too, because I was anxious about being unprepared and being such a failure and disliking everything. I would put off the homework, even the most important, until the night before it was due, and then stay up in misery, sweating in my new attic bed among any texts I might paraphrase to patch together and pad a fake paper. The insomnia was like being paralyzed in a spotlight, like being trapped. I knew it was my anxiety about doing badly and about losing status that kept me awake, but I still couldn’t force myself to do the stupid homework or truly figure out what was going on, and all this would amplify itself, like feedback in my head, but it was duller than that. More like crawling skin. Like there was some drug I needed that I didn’t have.

I hated the raw oppression of being a kid once I became self-aware. I don’t like “alpha” people as a rule, and in the random enclosed societ-
ies of schools, you have to deal with them. I didn’t like being stuck with strangers, period, either. I also didn’t like being told what to do, and of course school and childhood itself is about the authority of all grown-ups. I knew as well as any of them what was worthwhile, but because I was a kid and they were bigger and had more power than me, I was cheated.

I remember making some promises to my adult self when I was still a kid—or extracting some promises from my adult self. I promised not to forget how arbitrary and unfair adult rules are. I promised to remain true to the principles I grasped that adults sometimes pretended to know but hardly ever behaved in accordance with.

I wanted to have a life of adventure. I didn’t want anybody telling me what to do. I knew this was the most important thing and that all would be lost if I pretended otherwise like grown-ups did.

Those monstrous, boxlike, snouted, yolk-colored school buses, with their rotten black lettering, symbolized loneliness and humiliation. The weather they rolled through was gray and rainy and I gazed out the window hoping not to be noticed, except by a particular girl.