

RONNIE PERKINS

Let's say the two of you are
sitting next to each other on
bar stools at Rightmier's Tap,
drinking frozen schooners.
Go ahead: mention to him
the bona fide fact that you cleared
six feet in high school track.
"Yeah," he'll say, "I did 6-3."
Go ahead (even if you know it's
a bona fide fact that he was never
on the school track team):
ask him if he used the Fosbury
Flop for his jumping style.
He'll look you right in the eye,
squint a little to reinforce his
credibility, and say something like:
"You know, now that you
mention it, I don't remember . . .
Hell, I just jumped."

HERB DENTON

For this guy, nothing seems to work—
drug rehab, AA, his wife Mary's
shrieking threats of divorce.
Everybody in town knows he
owes his nights to
Louie's Bar and Lounge.

And yet every wide-eyed
weekday morning at seven sharp
(going on 39 years) count on it:
he's in his truck and on the move,
the tattered bill of his Cross-Country
Delivery cap aiming straight down
Interstate 29 for Omaha.

JOEL KNIGHT

A little too heavy and bald
for 41, he just happened to
luck out on a few stocks
and marry Cindy— 20, thin,
sexy, and very ambitious
in her marketing job at
the Magic Star casino.

You might think he wouldn't
need to work anymore—
that he could just stay home
all day and watch his stock
numbers doing their lofty
Alpine climb to the top of
his computer screen.

But he knows enough to
keep active: health club at least
three days a week; golf;
martini parties. After all,
everybody knows Cindy's got
a habit of straying.

So far, he can reel her in
whenever she gets a little too far out:
a new car every two years seems
to help; or a Black Hills gold
necklace; or, at least once a year,
a week in the Bahamas.

So far, so good.

BOB (“THE JUNKMAN”) GETZ

Here he comes up the alley
on his three-wheel bike—
a bright orange flag flapping
from each rusted-out back fender—
scrounging through dumpsters for
things the rest of us throw away:
empty picture frames, old
prescription glasses, exploded
umbrellas, battered flashlights,
a warped leaf for a dining room table.

“Is he okay with his life?” somebody asks.
As if he sees the question coming
a block away, he smiles, jingles
his little bell, and keeps on
pumping.

EDDIE CARDWELL

Say you and Eddie are in the
5th grade and one day after
school lets out, you catch him in
the alley and take him down with
a head lock on his scruffy head,
get a scissor hold on his
guts and squeeze real hard.
Then you ask him, “You give?”
expecting a logical answer.

“Never,” he says, and the harder
you squeeze the louder his *never* gets.

Unfortunately for you,
Eddie’s like the hedgehog,
who knows one thing
very well—except that he knows
two things very well:
First: a winner never quits,
and second: you may have his
head and guts in a vice grip
right now,
but eventually you’ll have to
eat and sleep.

JAMES DARLWIMPLE

For 425 dollars
and even if you *haven't* lost
your sense of the deep masculine,
he says you should come to his
retreat in the woods for
a mythopoetic weekend.

Each night in the male wilderness,
he says, you'll be able to sit with
other men around a camp fire,
and actualize your self by
discovering the animal within.
If you feel like a crow,
you can go *Caw, Caw* as loud
as you want, and flap your arms.
If you feel like a ram, you can
get down on all fours and
butt the ass of the guy
in front of you.
If a few lines from a favorite
poem happen to occur to you,
you can recite them to
your fellow animals.

All this wild spontaneity,
which is part of who you are,
he says, will allow you to
feel the power—
the mythopoetic power.

AL COLLINS

After the swan dive,
12 feet down,

he remembers

the basket girl who took his
Fruit of the Loom underwear,

the nipples of the one this dive was for,

29 drowned birthdays,

and his hands,
that were once closed wings
on his thighs.

HANK FREEMONT

When it comes to pissing,
he was already a master at 12.
He can piss a rope straight up;
or—with the wind at his back—
six or seven feet out over a bank into
a swirling bend in the Missouri,
or blast a grasshopper off
a swaying blade of bluestem.
He can lift a shower curtain
two inches off his bathroom floor.

One cold-tipped winter afternoon
near the railroad tracks,
he wrote a nice, loopy, cursive
and steamy *Hank* in the snow,
even got all the way to the *m* in *Freemont*;
zipped up, and walked calmly home.

DR. GEORGE HIGBIE

Professor of Biology
for 32 years, he's got his
own definition of altruism
which (according to his
colleagues and students),
he practices fervently:
"You scratch my back,
I'll kick you in the balls."

JERRY ALBRIGHT

You know the old joke about
the 800-pound gorilla who can
drive a golf ball 500 yards
straight down the fairway,
but can't chip or putt?

Well—you may think all you had
to do was give the football to
that speedy freshman
paragon of the apes from
Chicago and watch him go.

But wait: if you can imagine
a gorilla-sized wet noodle in cleats
tiptoeing like a ballerina through
the 6 hole, you get the picture.
All you had to do was stick out
a hand or look him right in
the eye through his face guard,
and he'd fumble, or go down,
or both.

So about half way through the season,
when he finally got the hint from
the coach, Jerry stuffed all of his
things from his side of
his dorm room in a back pack
and two suitcases,
and took the bus, gladly, home.

The last we heard of him,
20 years later, was when he got
promoted to President of
the National Bank of Peoria.

ADRIAN BENTLEY

He never did smoke or do drugs,
but almost every night after work
and on weekends he'd watch TV
and devour a super-sized bag of
Frito Lay Ripple potato chips
and one or two light beers.

So what do you do at the age of 51
when you realize you've had it
with your potato chip habit?

Adrian woke up one morning,
faced his fat cheeks in the bathroom
mirror, and decided right then and
there to jump on the potato chip wagon.

And now he can proudly say that
he hasn't had a single chip in
14 years. Not even with his—
count them—six nightly cans
of Natural Lite.

JESSE TOBIN

The first day you meet him,
he tells you about the time,
as a kid in Alabama, he gunny-
sacked 70 or 80 poisonous
water snakes just walking right
down the middle of a creek.

A few days later he tells you
he ran the 100-yard dash
in 9.3 in high school. First,
(as with the snake story)
there's an incredulous silence,
inside of which you remember
another guy named Jesse,
whose last name was
Owens, who also did
the hundred in 9.3, which was
a world record that stood for
over 25 years,
but you don't tell him that.

After about six months,
you notice his numbers have
started to loosen up.
Come on now, you say to him
one night over a few beers
at Hogan's Tap—
70 or 80 snakes?
Well, he says, maybe not that many,
but no shit, at least a dozen.

Close to closing time and
on your final beer, you bring
up the 100-yard dash.
Did I say 9.3, he says?
Man, I must've been drunk.

I meant to say 10 flat.
All right, you say to him,
raising your glass:
Ten flat?—that's fast!
Let's drink to your speed.
You clink your glasses
together, and take the last,
long swig of the night.

JOHN HUNGERFORD

Like all the other guys working
the 3-to-11 clean-up shift at
Armour's, he's in the know on
a big packinghouse secret:
if you like to see the results of
your labor, clean-up's the job
for you. Besides stainless steel
vats, tables, Oleo machinery and
cement floors—there's nothing
that can't be made spick and
span new with a blow hose.
And then too, you can't knock
the company-issue, tall, shiny,
black rubber boots, and the hunk
of Canadian Bacon you can always
grab in your little detour through
the Smoke House on the way
back from the bathroom.

Let's say you're the other clean-up
guy in Oleo—the college kid who
studies his text books during
breaks while Hungerford's having
his nightly cup of coffee and shooting
the shit with the guys in the Beef Cut,
right down the hall.

You know he could care less
for you and your books, but
you've got your own grievances
with him too, like those two or
three long, brutal hairs protruding from
his nose, the hairy-ape arms,
the frayed, red and blue plaid shirt
(missing two buttons) he wears

night after night, and that slow,
steady, old-man pace. You keep
to your own side of the floor,
and he keeps to his.

At least until exactly 10:15—
when the two of you must
meet at the separator.
Hungerford stands there holding
his acid spray gun, while you're

an arm's length away, lifting,
carefully, each plate, so he can
spray it, carefully, thoroughly.
It's a 15-minute job that's got to be
done the same exact way every single
night, at the same, slow, serious pace
to avoid getting acid in the eyes.
(Whatever else Hungerford is, you've
often thought to yourself at the time,
he's a hell of a good sprayer.)

At 10:30 you separate once more,
it's time to wind down, and a half
hour later the two of you punch out
and leave the way you came—
Hungerford down the freight
elevator, you down the back
steps, lugging your clunky
text book, without a *good night*,
a *see you later*, or a look.

LLOYD (“DUTCH”) VANDENBERG

Both of you are seniors at Central High,
and one Sunday night you get a call
from him and he says in a cocky,
heavy-duty voice that he heard you
told somebody you could kick his ass,
and so how about meeting him
after school tomorrow to see who
can kick whose ass?

He’s six-four, well over 200
pounds, but even though you’re
only 5’ 10 you’ve had good luck
with big guys in the past—
the latest one a one-punch job at
the roller rink in Akron, Iowa.

Now it’s your turn to say something
into the phone. Then a quote from
Julius Caesar, from sophomore English,
pops into your head: “The valiant
never taste of death but once.”

You may be valiant, you’re thinking,
but there’s a limit. “I don’t think so,
Dutch,” you say in a high, diffident
voice, and then hang up.

ZEKE FULTON

You can read it in his
eyes and hear it
in his words—
each one complete with
carapace and antennae:
He distrusts everybody,
including himself.

Best to avoid him.

BARRY EDWARDS

Three times a week he comes home
from his racquetball match at the club,

gets out his notebook and records a
W either in the *Me* column on the left

(hundreds of geese winging down the page
in single file) or in the *Opp* column (opponent)

on the right (a few lone geese) along with the
opp's initials. Always, before any party he's

invited to (especially if he thinks an opp or
two will be there) he studies his notebook

like a scholar. Then at the party, he waits
for someone to ask if he plays so and so at

the club, and if so, who wins? Even if the
question is rare (especially if so and so is in

the room), he needs to be ready with an
honest answer, as when (helping himself to

some chip dip or another beer) an opp's
ball comes off the back wall for an easy back-

hand setup, he can simply step into it and
kill it, cleanly, low in the left corner.

DONALD DUGAN

In his final semester before retirement, even though he often forgets where he parks his car in the Math building parking lot, it's not a problem. When he steps out the door into the lot after his last class of the day, he simply hits the trunk button on his key device and listens for the sound of the trunk popping open like a hippo's mouth. Unless a car honks at exactly the same time, he almost always hears it, and it's not a problem if he doesn't; all he needs to do is walk or look around a bit until he sees the sprung trunk—a handy algorithm for an aging Math prof, not to mention the impeccable sense of hearing.