

Long September
by Kenneth Lowe

part one
in Rosamond when I close my eyes

I – Ian's Saturday (being 1 Sept. 2001) | *Sic semper insaggiariatus*

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ROSAMOND, Ill. — Summer lingered still, and though it was grey out, the boy knew he would have no need of a jacket. In two days there would be school, and this was the last solitude he would have before then. It meant the buses and the taunts, fumbling about in the locker room to undress and get into his too-short uniform as quickly as possible while avoiding the gazes of those boys who had hit maturity faster than he had – *you must not look* – and wondering why why why everybody and the world seemed to have it in for him.

It had never occurred to Ian Flinders, 12 years old as he was, that the spite might not be deserved, and rather than brush it off or simply ignore it with a smile and a shake of the head, he instead absorbed every guffaw and casual slap to the back of the head in passing.

This was before dreams in darkness, and the voices of the lost, and an ocean of red eyes that do not blink, but that's getting ahead...

For these reasons, he mounted his 15-speed bike and took to the cracked pavement that headed south off of Illinois 16. His knees cramped up a bit, the seat already too short to allow him a full range of motion, though he was too lost in himself to notice it.

He never noticed becoming taller, and would have been surprised to realize that he dwarfed those tormentors of his that lived in Pana.

All around him were the fields of farms, unseen in their flatness. Above, it was all choked and tinted the color of a smoker's cough, the clouds barely visible beneath the sickly milkiness of the sky, the wind coming slowly across the plains to rustle the leaves of what trees there were. There was no sign of a car anywhere.

There was really only one place to pedal in Rosamond, if it really was in Rosamond at all.

The wrought iron gateway that opened off the road had large letters set within the archway overhead.

ROSEMOND CEMETERY

It was not only there that the town's name was rendered as it is intended to be spoken aloud. Frequently children would get nearly to adulthood before realizing it was spelled with an "A," and the worst of it was, Ian thought, that nobody had an explanation for it.

The path leading through that gateway was brick, but this soon gave way to dirt, as if those who had laid the path knew it was pointless to keep going on. Up ahead was the hill, towering over everything in the flat Illinois countryside, crowned with trees and the gravestones of nearly 200 years of Rosamond – or Rosemond – residents, since the days before Illinois was even a state.

Ian had heard old folks call it the pride of the town, and he knew that it was.

It was a hard sprint to the top, but once he was there, he was in among the graves, along the dirt path that wended all the way around the crown of the hill.

At the spoke of the wheel (as the elders called it), hidden by trees, where it rests even to this day, was Abe. Abe, Ian reflected, could pop up anywhere. If you had a pocket full of change, Abe was on the pennies.

Here he stood atop a seven-foot-tall slab that bore the last line of the Gettysburg Address, 11 feet tall

himself, with a hand extended up to the heavens. He was smiling. Ian wondered what Abe had to smile about.

Ian threw his right leg over the seat and coasted on the bike a few more yards, standing on the pedal, before hopping off and coming to a stop aside the small artillery cannon that eternally protected the president.

He had once discovered a used condom inside the cannon, just inside the barrel, and left that offering where it lay.

Why? Ian's gaze seemed to ask, as he stared into those bronze eyes, gone verdigris. God alone knew how long ago, and why in the hell did anybody ever use something that would turn an ugly green in a few years, anyway? *Can't I just get a break?*

As ever, Abe did not answer. Ian thought that might have been cheating, if he had answered.

He hadn't come for that, anyway. He reached into the backpack he'd slung over his shoulder and pulled at the wooden handle that protruded from it.

The wooden sword was curved in the manner of a katana, without a guard or hilt or any decoration but Ian's name, burned into the wood above the grip, which was wrapped in a white cloth with gold stitching. It was about as thick as a toddler's wrist, a little shorter than half his height, blunt, and coated in a dark finish. His father had shopped it in their garage, sewing and all.

The weight had always been satisfying. Ian took the grip in both hands and swung hard enough that the air before him whistled. Pirouette, spin, slash.

He charged the cannon and swung again. All the tension in his lungs, in his gut, seemed to channel up the blade and go roaring out as it came down on the head of an imaginary enemy. Vertical, horizontal, diagonal, butterfly stroke, forward thrust, backward thrust, a spinning strike that brought him around to face the way he'd come and—

The worst part about Tommy Flinch was that he was diminutive. It would've been something else entirely if he was six feet tall, or if he was musclebound or otherwise physically intimidating. Instead, he was a head shorter than Ian, scrawny, and completely obnoxious. He had stringy yellow hair and a sharp, pointed nose, with perfectly round blue eyes that always looked like they were wide with disbelief.

He was a cackling hyena, at the head of a pack of them.

There was no way to tell how long he'd been watching, but with him were Randy Unger and Rick Horne to make the little tableau complete. In Flinch's hand was the BB gun that might have looked like an actual Winchester if it weren't for the fact a section of the stock, which was made of wiffle bat material, had been battered away to reveal the hollow cross-section.

Unger laughed and clapped. Ian found he couldn't move.

"Hey, look!" Flinch said. "Ian Flinders actually outside. I thought you had to be at home boiling fries."

You don't boil fries, fuckwit, you fry them.

"Clearly not," was all Ian came up with as a rejoinder.

"Clearly not," Horne parroted.

Flinch worked the lever on his fake weapon and pointed it straight at Ian's face. Ian didn't have time to fight the impulse to shy away, and jerked reflexively when the hiss of the gun hit his ears. The shot went wide.

"Get out of here, all right?" Ian said.

Flinch cupped a hand to his ear.

"What was that? Speak up!"

Ian tried to bring his voice under control, to get the quaver out of it.

"Go find your own place," Ian said. "Seriously."

"What, you and your sex toy need some privacy?"

"He can't do it while we're watching," Horne again.

Unger was close now. His hands darted out and he yanked the sword right out of Ian's hands, as if wresting it from a baby.

"Lemme see that," Unger said. "So what, did you sit around in your basement and make this yourself? That's nice."

Flinch cycled the gun again, aiming this time at Ian's bike. The boy managed to stand still as a BB pinged off the bike's frame. Flinch cocked the gun, but Ian, in a fit of wild abandon, pushed Unger back. Flinch hesitated, then laughed.

"That's cute. You're pushing people around like you want to get shot."

With what, you dickless moron, a goddamn BB gun? A fucking toy? Scrawny, stupid, rat-faced FAGGOT.

Flinch and Ian recoiled in the same moment, both their eyes locked, both their jaws open in surprise. Ian saw Flinch's grip on the BB gun tighten, heard the frame of the toy gun creak against the plastic veneer. Horne and Unger were still swaggering as if they hadn't heard. And why should they have? Ian hadn't said anything.

But all the same, he could see that Flinch had heard it.

"What... what did you call me?" Flinch's question was just above a whisper.

"Yeah, what'd you say?" Horne said, playing along with what he assumed was more torment. "I didn't hear you."

Flinch raised the gun again, this time aiming at Ian for real. Ian felt his heart race, his fists clench, the feeling go out of his feet. There was going to be pain, and he had to take it. He couldn't give them the satisfaction, couldn't let them laugh...

The roar of the motorcycle had been a crescendo in the background, dispersed across the distance by the acoustic trickery of the wide, open area. When the bike bounded over the edge of the hill, Unger and Horne swore and stepped back. Flinch tried to dodge, but the rider was aiming for him. A gloved hand darted out as the bike shot past, and Flinch felt the toy rifle wrenched from his grip.

Not even the shriek of brakes made Ian move. The suddenness had shocked him completely into paralysis. The bike went into a slide, stopping not five feet to Ian's right, the rider's left hand still clutching the rifle by the barrel.

Astride the bike, a look of exhilaration and amusement on his face, was Eddie Concordia. As ever, he was clad in a tight, black leather biker jacket, camo pants and black leather boots. The bike was a red cruiser, the pipes spewing a racket people could hear back in town even as he sat on the farthest point away from where anybody lived. The rest of him seemed put together to arouse suspicion in authority figures – greyish-blond hair unkempt, bad teenage stubble dominating his face, hazel eyes alight with a look that suggested he was in on some great joke the rest of the world had yet to discover when they weren't (as then) hidden behind shades.

Eddie's gaze met Ian's for a moment, and there was that absolutely carefree smile he had that Ian wondered at. Then the rider turned to his younger friend's tormentors and put on a disappointed frown.

"You guys are just worthless sacks of fuck, aren't you?"

Flinch made a short dash at the bike, stopping in a moment of fear and hesitation as Eddie revved loud enough to make Ian cringe.

"Give me that!" Flinch shouted.

"Give you what?"

"Fucking *give it back.*"

Flinch took a step forward, but Eddie's left hand came up from his belt and the switchblade flashed up. Flinch stopped short.

"So you can do what, give a squirrel a rash?" Eddie laughed. Though the other boys did not notice,

Ian saw that Eddie's knife was working on the gun, doing something to the lever. "Hey, Ian, is there a word like 'illiterate' except for not being able to shoot guns?"

Ian shrugged.

"We'd have to make one up."

"Would that be a Latin root or a Greek root?"

"'Illiterate' is Latin, but it probably doesn't matter," Ian said. "Neither of them had guns. Maybe arrows? Insaggitariate?"

"You're fucking gay, kid," Unger said.

"At least he's not insaggitariate, you worthless, insaggitariate sack of fuck," Eddie said. "You'd better start acting nicer, or I'm not going to give your butt-buddy here his little toy gun back. You'll have to answer to him when he doesn't have anything to shove up his mom's ass tonight."

Flinch's face had turned a bright, beet red, and his voice actually went up an octave and squeaked in one of the few instances Ian had ever heard an adolescent's voice cracking.

"Give me the fucking gun back!"

"You know when your mom says 'Please' before you shove things up her ass? I'm looking for that same magic word."

"I'll fucking kill you!"

Eddie shrugged – how do you deal with such immature people?

"Shit, fine! Don't get bent out of shape."

Eddie tossed the gun to the ground in between himself and Flinch. The boy scrambled to get it off the ground as Eddie motioned Ian to mount up on the bike. Ian got on, looking back to Flinch to find him shouting.

"What the fuck did you do to it?!"

"Oh, right. I guess you'll want the rest of it," Eddie said, and held up the rifle's lever, which he'd detached. Without ceremony or relish, he hurled it down the hill, where it disappeared into the unkempt grass.

Eddie's left hand pulled in the clutch, and Ian felt the transmission lock into place as Eddie shifted into first. Flinch tried to run after them as Eddie let out the clutch and they took off. Ian caught a look at the back of Abe's head as they disappeared over the edge of the hill, fighting the sinking roller coaster feeling in his stomach as they took the plunge.

"Fags," Eddie shouted so Ian could hear.

"What about my bike?" Ian shouted back. He didn't have the desire to mention the sword – not even Eddie knew of it.

Behind them, Flinch and his people were shouting and scrambling, running down the hill after them. By the time Eddie and his passenger reached the road, their shouts couldn't even be heard. In another moment, the graveyard was out of sight and they were blazing eastward along Illinois 16, bound for town.

"I'll give you a lift back later, kid. If I'm not mistaken, we've got to work in an hour."

Ian left it alone. Of course he would've started back for home in a little while, but it was too late now, anyway. Would his bike be there when he got back, or would they remember it and go back to destroy or steal it?

I guess it's better than getting beaten up...