

Long September
by Kenneth Lowe

part one
in Rosamond when I close my eyes

II – Eddie's Saturday | grasshopper

It begins here for me, on this road. How the whole mess happened I don't know, but I know it couldn't happen again in a million years. Maybe I could've stopped it early, but once the trouble was on its way, I was just going with it. Mostly I remember the girl. I can't explain it – a sad chick like that. Something changed in me. She got to me. That's later, anyway. This is where it begins for me. Right on this road.

—Johnny, *The Wild One*

1

When Eddie Concordia came out of the double-wide trailer onto the front porch in the first hours of morning, it was finally cold enough to warrant wearing the leather jacket he'd made into a fashion statement that year. It was why he paused when he looked over to see his mother on the swing, rocking listlessly, wearing only her nightgown and not wrapped in any blanket. Her toes were blue. The only thing about her that moved was the tendril of smoke that drifted up from the cigarette between her middle and ring fingers, held in place only by entropy.

Her voice, at these times, always came from a faraway place.

“Oh, are you up?” she asked.

She'd been crying again, god damn it all. It filled Eddie with a kind of irritation that he knew wasn't helpful or fair, but you went with such things, he thought. You felt them for a reason. Didn't you?

“Nope, still asleep,” he said. “You need some breakfast?”

“Uh—”

Her eyes scanned the fields out in front of the house. The drive, which Eddie had sealed himself the previous summer, ran a short two hundred paces up to the two-lane county road. Despite their lack of neighbors – the nearest two miles one way, one mile the other – Mrs. Concordia mandated strict adherence to the property lines in how Eddie maintained the yard. Out beyond the mowed grass lay the road, beyond that the fields of corn, a lone pumpjack bobbing eternally, a bored sentinel.

“—No.”

“Why don't you go on inside? It's cold.”

She got up, sighing.

“I don't mind. I'm fine, really.”

She looked down at the cigarette in her hand and pitched it into the small brass spittoon that sat at the head of the three stairs that elevated the porch from the driveway.

“Mom knows she shouldn't smoke,” she said.

She couldn't have failed to notice the odor on Eddie's jacket and in his once-worn clothes, but neither of them had yet acknowledged that this realization had occurred. Both had discovered this method for avoiding conflict, and had a silent understanding.

Eddie ushered her back inside. She immediately had a seat at the stool beneath the fume hood of the kitchen range. Set atop the dormant electric coils was a wooden tabletop that once had legs screwed into it. The legs were gone now – Eddie had spray-painted two of them red and shoved them into opposing ends of a flashlight in order to create a Darth Maul Halloween costume – his last – but where the other two ended up, he did not know. Atop the not-a-tabletop sat a thousand-piece puzzle which would one day resolve itself into the black and white image of Marlon Brando in his role as Johnny in *The Wild One*.

Eddie's mother began matching the pieces up again. She had said many times that she didn't solve puzzles so much as she just helped them solve themselves through repetitive and mindless piece-matching. She would stay that way for three to four hours, oftentimes with the morning soaps turned on, unless she became so engaged in the puzzle, so beholden to it, that she didn't bother to get up and flip on the TV.

After that (not that Eddie had ever been around for it), she would cook something for lunch – always far more immaculate and involved than the occasion called for – before eating about a third of it and then boxing the rest to join the other bacteria cultures in the refrigerator, or else throw it out. On Fridays, Nyssa cleaned out the fridge.

If Mrs. Concordia's cooking required the kitchen range and its electric coils, she would gather her strength to move the wooden not-a-tabletop that held her labors to the couch, which nobody ever sat on. None of the trailer's three inhabitants ever had anybody over. Eddie didn't realize it himself, but the entire interior of the trailer, while neat and orderly, looked like somebody's childhood room – close and personal and piercingly revealing of the mind or minds responsible for it. There were trophies from school achievements, movie posters Nyssa and Eddie had stolen from the store or which had been thrown out. There were band posters, childhood drawings, one or two knickknacks Nyssa had found in the road and couldn't bear to part with and so nailed to the wood-paneled wall: A mix CD she'd never played, a beaten up old baseball cap she had washed, a discarded U-lock for a bike.

There were no family heirlooms or photographs of any kind.

After lunch, Mrs. Concordia would sit out on the porch and smoke, unless it was either the fifteenth or the thirtieth, in which case she'd go first to the unemployment office, then shopping. Circumstances dictated that she go to the office in Litchfield and stand in line for about an hour or so. The gas for the red pickup's hour-and-a-half round trip to that place, combined with the bi-monthly grocery bill, were the largest expenditure the Concordia family ever made, with the exception of the lease on the double-wide. Eddie and Nyssa were paid under the table at Spotlight Video and Whit's End. To report their earnings would've meant they didn't qualify for aid, and without it they were, as Eddie put it, fucking screwed.

When her two children returned in the late afternoon on a regular day, they would find her smoking out on the porch or already starting an elaborate dinner, cookbooks open in front of her, ingredients scattered about in nothing resembling the order in which they needed to go into the pan, the faulty oven already preheated far beyond the proscribed temperature, so that the entire trailer was in a bloom of heat. They would right all of this, largely without her noticing: She was too busy chattering about something shameful on TV or asking them what they had done that day.

There was no bedtime in the Concordia household, only the inevitability of slumber. Sleep was for Sundays – during the rest of the week Eddie and Nyssa generally passed out on their beds by two in the morning or midnight if they hadn't worked and were exhausted. They were up for school by six the following morning, and in summer they didn't rise until about noon.

This was before repossession, before the breach through which could be seen only darkness, and many things besides, but these things are all getting ahead...

That Saturday morning, Mrs. Concordia wasn't entirely animated yet, and Eddie bore with it. He wanted to leave, to hop on his bike and ride and never stop, to sneer at some totem of authority and make the world watch and lament it. What he didn't want to do, for another day, another week, another school year, was watch his mother slowly waste away into an empty shell of a woman.

"Are you working today?" she asked. This was one of her autopilot questions.

"With Ian," Eddie said.

"Mm."

Her hands hovered for a moment over the incomplete puzzle. She'd pieced together what she did not recognize but what Eddie did as the trophy on the top of Marlon Brando's bike and part of the headlight it rested upon. She picked up that conglomeration of pieces and, without method of any kind, began pairing it with every other mass of two or three connecting pieces she'd acquired. Eddie looked away – not wanting to stay, not having it in him to leave just yet.

"Do you need me to get anything from the store on the way home?" he asked.

"Will they be open?"

She seemed genuinely concerned.

"The Amoco will be," he said, the slightest edge of impatience creeping into his tone at having to remind her of this every time he offered to get something for her after work.

He watched her hesitate for the moment when she considered saying "a pack of smokes," and then she shrugged, still not looking at him.

"No. I think I'm fine."

"I'm headed out, then," Eddie said.

"You don't start work until three."

"I'm headed out. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Before she could say anything else, he was out the door, taking hold of his leather jacket with one hand as he opened the door with the other. The screen door shut behind him with a clatter, and he did not see, though he knew, that his mother hadn't even looked up at his egress.

5

Eddie felt like a cigarette, but knew he'd already been caught speeding. Inviting more flak just seemed like a very bad idea, so he held off. He had to bring his mind back to the riddle again. The clock on a bank billboard said it was getting to be half past nine. He had until three or he failed and had the solution told to him. He couldn't stand that, because it was always so obvious once somebody told it to you that you felt stupid for not having figured it out yourself.

The mounting frustration suddenly evaporated as he was passing the Wal-Mart and hit his brakes, veering into the parking lot as the car behind him honked in rage. He stood up on the pegs so he could see over the cars, confirming what he'd thought: There, parked inside the triangular don't-park-here-but-bikers-still-do area at the end of a row of angled parking spaces, was the grasshopper.

Eddie parked right next to it and dismounted.

The possibilities here, Eddie thought, were endless. Leave something on the seat, key the tank, loosen one of the screws on the kickstand so it would come off when next manipulated, steal the license plate...

Why every impulse toward the thing was suddenly destructive, Eddie wouldn't have been able to tell you and would, in fact, have been surprised to learn it was true, as if he'd given it absolutely no thought. Fortunately for the grasshopper's owner, there were no opportunities for mayhem here in broad daylight, and with police in the area already advised to be wary of him. Eddie decided if he

couldn't grief the bike any, he might as well see if he could find the girl.

On the edge of his consciousness, Eddie knew that the reason he wanted to find her again was because, for once, he'd been the one caught off guard. He usually made the biggest impression in a room, and this was, in some petty way, an affront to his dominance in that regard, and couldn't be tolerated. At the very least, he would need to pull one over on her, or else be obsessed with doing so. Any other feelings were purely incidental, of course.

Lacking the ability to work any of his usual magic, he turned toward the entrance of the store and headed inside. It wouldn't, he thought, be very difficult to find her at all.

"Forget it, Edward."

Eddie turned, raising an eyebrow and pulling his shades off as he found himself looking upon the thin, vested form of Lance Richter. The two held the gaze for a moment as Eddie grinned from ear to ear.

"Forget what, my fine droog?"

"She is absolutely, unequivocally and one hundred percent off limits," Lance said. His freckles seemed to stand out even more under the sickening fluorescent light.

"I don't know who or what you're talking about, you perfect human being, you," Eddie said. "Such a kidder."

Lance shook his head.

"What's it like to go through life ignoring all advice?"

"I'll let you know when it's over. So they've got you greeting now? Did you make somebody angry?"

Lance shrugged.

"There's just a lot of violence inherent in the system these days," he said.¹⁰

¹⁰ On the advice of Jack the Dipper, they had watched *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* for the first time while thoroughly stoned. Davis Darius Damien Dark's father lived in the double-wide furthest from the guard station, but had left, Eddie assumed, to ram his member inside Carol Yoder, who had graduated Pana High School when Davis was a freshman. The deep toke Eddie took, exhaled in a barking laugh at the Swedish subtitles, was not itself a celebration or a sacrament, but a fuck-you to an adult that was aggressively stupid in the way only a Baby Boomer could ever pull off. If D4 wanted to tear shit up at his father's expense, who the fuck was Eddie to deny him? By the end of the film they were repeating all of the lines and the baggie of weed – that also stolen from D4's father – was quite gone, and so it was time to start in on the dirty thirty of Old Style.

"I am going to fucking show him some day," D4 was saying, hunched forward over the garbage can they had purloined from the bathroom, one hand on his knee and the other shakily clutching the aluminum can, crinkling it in his grip as he ranted. "Stupid old fat rat fuck. People fucking tell ME I need to grow up."

Lance slid the garbage can into the path of D4's torrent of vomit. There followed weighty silence in the wake of the act, and Eddie felt the sudden concern that Dark was going to start crying. Jason Dickson saved the day with his next proclamation.

"Now we see the violence inherent in the system!"

Dark laughed so hard he threw up again.

"I thought you guys were my friends," he gurgled afterward, and the rest of the evening, to Eddie's recollection, was a blur of drink and laughter, of farts and vomit and criminal destruction of property with an estimated value in excess of \$300. As a contribution to the mayhem, Eddie absconded with a framed picture of Mr. Dark and his barely legal girlfriend, burying it in the grass behind the double-wide after Davis put his boot to it.

They had planned, of course, to be ready for their 7 a.m. shift the next morning, bringing with them changes of clothes, bottled water, and lots of aspirin. Eddie didn't awaken so much as drift out of oblivion to find himself naked, sitting on a stool in the Darks' shower as Messrs. Dickson and Dark scrubbed his hair with generic watermelon-scented shampoo, and Richter stood before the mirror, shaving. Eddie thought that the motions Lance was going through were so exact as

"I see," Eddie frowned. "You know, there's always..."

"No means no, Concordia."

"So I've been told, but nobody's ever produced conclusive evidence. When you off?"

"As if you care."

"Come on!" Eddie said, jabbing the visibly annoyed Lance. "Though we have strained we must not break the bonds of fellowship. Lemme know who rides the grasshopper and I'll spot you a cheeseburger and a malt. You can't resist it."

"I swear to god, Eddie, if you fucking make trouble today."

"Lance, after all the times I've saved your life."

"Fuck," Lance said. "Off."

to not be natural, and that he was not shaving but rather pretending to shave. This bizarre notion was reinforced by the fact Eddie could only see the lather in the mirror, but had he his full faculties, he might have reasoned he couldn't see the lather on Lance's face outside the mirror because Lance was turned away from him.

Then it dawned on him that he was being washed, against his will, by Messrs. Dickson and Dark.

"Fags," he slurred.

"You wish," D4 said, and then, seemingly without preamble, Eddie was fully clothed and in the back of the Z28, scrunched up with his knees pressed to his chest and unbuckled as the tires squealed over the asphalt and Richter kept slapping him.

"Oh my fucking Christ of fuck knock it *off*," Eddie tried to shout, but it only came out as a plaintive groan. He couldn't move, couldn't open his eyes. He realized, with some incredulity, that he was still high. The thought got him going again, his laughs turning into labored cackles as his compatriots kept trying to silence him.

Just as suddenly, Eddie was standing in a long row of others dressed in Wal-Mart finery. They were doing the cheer employees always do when the store opens. Eddie kept insisting that somebody give him a squiggly, even though nobody could tell him what one was. The hilarious thing was, Eddie thought, for once he *wanted* a goddamn squiggly, and he would not be denied it.

Clocking in seemed, at the time, to be a multi-layered experience fraught both with uncertainty and existential emptiness. When, precisely, did the travails of work begin and end? And why did he keep punching his code in after he was clocked in to clock out again, convinced that his previous action had inadvertently clocked him out and so thinking (in error) that he needed, again, to clock in?

"Eddie, what are you doing?" Mr. Plotz demanded.

Eddie looked at the keypad as if it held some sort of answer. Suddenly, the perfect rejoinder came to him.

"Oh, just a bit of the old in-out in-out," Eddie said.

I must not laugh at my own joke, I must not laugh at my own joke...

"I'm sending you home, Eddie," Plotz said.

"Hey, you don't need to stare at me like that," Eddie said, swaying where he stood.

"You can use the phone if you need a ride. We'll discuss whether or not we need you back here again on Friday."

There was something else about being understanding of youthful exuberance and not wanting to take away his chance to make good or something, but it was just so boring...

As Eddie sat out on the bench, feeling the cannabis' mischief losing its hold on him, Lance walked by with a long, rattling row of carts. The two friends locked gazes.

The mounting desperation in Lance's eyes suddenly told Eddie everything he needed to know.

"Oh, damn it," Eddie said. "How long?"

Lance sighed. It was a tired sigh. Lance was the sort of guy, Eddie knew, who felt the whole world shift whenever he sat down and stayed still long enough. He had once declined to help Eddie build a union-labor-circumventing fence over the summer, not for the fear of being chopped into little pieces and buried in a field by the local chapter, but because he wasn't sure, philosophically, if he wanted to contribute to the number of walls already separating people in the world.

"Since I saw her, how the hell long do you think? You rat bastard," Lance said.

"Now, now," Eddie said. "I'll tell you what, old sport..."

"I give up, anyway. She already rejected me. You can have her."

"Just like that? What did you do?"

"I just said you know, maybe she'd like to hang out some time."

"You really are an idiot, Richter."

"I was even going to keep her secret from you, there was a party and shit and everything and now I'm not going because I'm nervous about being around her, god *damn* it."

"Lance, aren't you still mooning over Christina?" Eddie remembered suddenly.

"That's a no go and you know it!" Lance groaned. "How am I supposed to score with any of the chicks in this town, they already know I suck!"

"God damn it, Richter. We are talking about this later. Where is she?"

Lance hung his head defeated, and pointed toward the photo department.

"You are a perfect human being, have I ever told you that? And tonight, we will see what we can do, all right? Come get that burger I promised you," Eddie said.

The Wal-Mart in Pana was one of Eddie's favorite challenges. Depending on the schedule, there could be any number of people working who either hated him from when he'd used to work there or were actively trying to find a reason to call the police on him. Despite his persistently bad behavior, he didn't consider himself Chaotic Evil enough to actually steal, so they never had anything on him. It was an easy walk to the photo lab that day despite his accumulated record.

And there she was. She was behind the counter, waiting with tapping foot while negatives fed slowly out of the ass-end of a large, grey, smelly machine. Eddie doubted, privately, if the rollers inside the developer had been rinsed since his egress. She might have known to do it, had she been told, but she looked new and she looked as if such a thing couldn't concern her less.

She had shed the unacceptable parts of her attire in favor of more conservative garb – a warm, long-sleeved top with a flower pattern that still had some green in it, more understated pants. There was nothing to be done about the piercing of course, but now that the contacts were out he saw that the eyes were actually blue.

He observed her for what seemed like a very long time to him. The negatives snaked out into her waiting hand, and with the pair of scissors she held at the ready she made a single snip that separated them from the leader card and carried them over to the light box. His eyes randomly caught the sticker with the little number on it in the blocky, sans-serif typeface: 9901.

In went the first strip of negatives, and he saw the light from the little window play across her face. The intent look on her face as she made sure to line the frame up properly fascinated him the way people's behavior while they don't know they are being watched always fascinates. Her lips curled up in a smile as subtle as it was candid.

"I'm fucked, I guess," Eddie said.

Lance's answer would become a mantra of the younger employees working at Wal-Mart #[Look it up].

"Now we see the violence inherent in the system."

“Well, hi, Mark,” she said to the negative, or the image upon it.

“That what you do for fun around here?” he asked.

She rounded on him with a start, and that's when he noticed the name tag that read CELESTE.

“What the shit, Awkward Biker Kid?! How long have you been standing there?”

Eddie ignored the slight. If he could have seen himself, he would have discovered he was wearing a leering grin.

“Where's all that green gear?”

Celeste rolled her eyes and looked away, not answering. Eddie sensed he was mortifying her just by seeing her out of her idealized get-up, and it amused him.

“You look so respectable now,” he went on. “Almost like a lady.”

The glare she fixed him with didn't have the slightest shred of irony. It was a testament to how many dread gazes he'd already stared down that he didn't wither immediately.

“I know there's nothing much to do in this little town,” she said, “but I'm at work so—” she made a dismissive little gesture with one hand.

“How did you trick a hard-ass like Plotz into letting you get away with that Ecto Cooler lip piercing?”

Her flinty expression softened just enough.

“Wow. Ecto Cooler.”

He raised an eyebrow as she fought to keep a straight face.

“Eh? Eh?”

Her laugh was silent, but whole-body.

“I'm Celeste,” she said.

“I'm Edward Concordia *the second*, not 'junior,’” he said. “But you can call me Eddie.”