



Printer's Devil Review

Edwin M. Steckevicz. *Second Team*.
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Second Team

LAST NIGHT I DROVE THROUGH A SNOWSTORM to play basketball with my son. It's thirty miles from my house to this weekly game at the university, and when I get there I use an alias. He doesn't know I'm his father. We shake hands, slap each other on the butt after a good play – nothing special. Before last night we'd never had a conversation.

Connor didn't make the school team, but he plays intramurals and is a good ball-handler. He's a sophomore now, twenty years old. It's amazing to me how much of his life I haven't been around for. His group practices in the small gym, and there is a pick-up game afterward that includes some townies and the members of the team who stick around. Connor always stays to play after practice. His work ethic is like my father's. Must be one of those things that skips a generation.

I wouldn't be surprised if Connor thinks I'm dead – well, if he thinks his father is dead. He knows I'm alive because we end up guarding each other every week. We're about the same height, but he's faster and a much better shot. Now that I'm not drinking, I keep myself in pretty good shape, but it's still a struggle to run with the younger guys. Last night he slapped my hand away when I put it on his back while he was trying to post me up. He stopped play and accused me of holding.

"I'm not holding," I said.

"Keep your hands off, then," he said. "You can't just push me out of the lane. It's a foul every time."

"All right. Your ball. Let's just play."

I hate to argue on the basketball court. It takes me out of the flow of the game, out of the zone I get into, running up and down and reacting instinctively to the play.

A few points later, Connor blocked my shot, but his body slammed into me and knocked me to the floor.

"Sorry, George," he said, leaning over me. "You all right?"

"Yeah," I said, and took the hand he offered. His team scored the winning basket on the next play, and the game was over.

After showering, I sat on a bench in the locker room and wondered if there were going to be any hard feelings. Connor walked past and clapped me on the shoulder.

"Later, man," he said.

"Later."

I'd wanted to get there early last night to talk with him before the game, but the snow storm made me late and I missed my chance. He went out the door – these young guys get showered and dressed in a hurry – while I was still pulling on my socks.

Joyce, my second wife, is having a baby in a few months, and all I can think about is Connor. Connor is going to have a half-brother or half-sister; Connor should understand that I'm not dead; he's my son and I want to know him. I've cleaned up my life – sober for six years – and I hope that means my days of stupid mistakes and bad decisions are over.



I had parked my Pontiac next to Connor's blue Toyota pickup truck. His engine was chugging, warming up as he scraped the windshield. It was noisy out there with the town's snowplows rumbling by – the massive blades scraping the roadway – and the beeping backup signals of the smaller trucks clearing the parking lot. Connor's down jacket already had a frosting of snow on the shoulders. He wasn't forward- or center-tall, but guard-tall like me, right around six feet. The brown hair that curled out from beneath his orange knit hat looked whitish and stiff. Our breath came out in clouds.

"Snow like meal, snow great deal," he said.

I squinted up into the dense, gray sky and unlocked the door.

"I think it's stopping," I said, then ducked in and started the car.

When I got out with the scraper and whisk broom, Connor called over to me.

"George, don't you listen to Petey Ledoux, the weather guru?"

"Naw," I called back. "I don't pay much attention to those guys. They're never right, and by the time you listen to their spiels you could have gone out and checked the sky yourself."

"You sound like my old man." His stepfather was a mystery to me, and I hoped he wouldn't be a kink in the works. "Petey Ledoux said not to be fooled. The storm is going to slow down and then come back with a vengeance. He's talking two feet. Got far to go?"

"Just up to Chesterfield." I looked at the sky again. It wasn't hard to read. Still, I hoped the weather guru was wrong. Connor came over and began brushing the snow off the rear window of my Pontiac.

"What's great about a pickup is not many windows to clear off," he said.

"I never thought of it that way."

He was being meticulous – wiping the taillights with his gloves.

"Did you grow up in New England?" he asked.

"Yeah, down around Nashua. Guess I'm just used to scraping. I don't mind it much."

"I grew up in Nashua," he said. "What's your last name anyway?"

"Lemay." I was sorry I used that name the second I said it. The Lemays lived upstairs from us when Connor was a baby. They'd call the cops when Beth and I got out of hand. Connor put out his hand for me to shake.

"Well, George Lemay, I'm Connor Griggs. Good to meet you. We ought to play on the same team some night instead of always guarding each other."

"I'm all for that."

He'd had his mother's last name from the day he was born. Beth considered it a "slap to the face of the patriarchal system," and yet she would tell you that the reason she loved the name "Connor Griggs" was because it sounded manly. I thought she'd been reading too much. The patriarchal system? Give me a break.

It's possible that Beth had told Connor I was dead – she loved being dramatic. I hoped she hadn't, for his sake. I thought it would be harder

for him if I was suddenly not dead, instead of suddenly no longer a drunken bum who'd abandoned his family. Either way, it wasn't going to be easy.

We finished scraping my car.

"I knew some Lemays," he said. "They lived in our building. My mom told me that Tina Lemay was my babysitter."

"No relation," I said.

He got into his truck and rolled down the window. "My girlfriend's out of town and I'm going down to the pub for a beer. You interested? They'll have the Celtics on TV."

"I'm not a drinker." It's now my pat response. I hate saying I'm an alcoholic; I've been saying that and hearing it at meetings for years, and it still sounds pathetic – like you have no control.

"Well," Connor said, shifting into drive, "see you next week, then, eh? Safe trip."

He was old enough now to decide whether or not he wanted me to be in his life. I wanted to scream to Beth and to anyone that would listen, to Connor especially. "I'm not dead dammit, and I'm not drunk either!" It bothered me to watch him drive away – like I'd missed another chance. I followed him out of the parking lot.



People do funny things in their cars in bad weather; they take chances they wouldn't take on a smooth, dry road. For a couple miles I was behind a wrecker that was towing a red Ford Fiesta. It looked like the car Beth used to drive, only hers had a rear bumper and a windshield that wasn't shattered.

Beth had gotten pregnant at the end of our senior year of high school. She came over on a summer evening, driving her parents' car. The air smelled like the grass I'd just cut and the sky was pink and blue – hanging there above her head as she approached me. She didn't seem to mind that I wasn't wearing a shirt and was sweaty and smelly from doing chores.

"Congratulations, Dad," she said, and hugged me like she had when I was on top of her in the back seat of the car. She'd gone for the test and it had come back positive. I was more confused than anything else,

like when you're looking at something you've never seen before, some object you don't know the purpose of, and you can't tell if you're holding it right side up.

"I want the baby," she said.

I was nodding, trying to assimilate what until then had just been a sense that she'd had. She led me into the house and then into my room. She pulled the sleeveless dress over her head and lay back naked on my bed with her arms extended. Her long hair was pinned up and there were tiny beads of sweat on her forehead. She looked happy, vulnerable.

"Come on, Ted. We don't even have to be careful," she said. "As if we ever were."

The night of the wedding – a justice-of-the-peace affair that took ten minutes – we got drunk on champagne and made love in the hotel room. After a couple months, Beth's belly felt like a basketball between us, and she got worried that sex would hurt the baby. How you can have love with no sex is something neither of us ever figured out. Sex was the best thing we did, and when that was gone, we filled the time with bickering. We'd make out occasionally, but that was it. She said she felt ugly and lumpy. It set the tone. By the time the baby was a few months old we were pretty much a done deal.

Beth liked to drink. I liked to drink a lot. She said that I changed when I drank, that I became angry. I'm not sure how she knew that I changed, because we drank every day and I was angry most of the time anyway. We ended up fighting about the fact that I was angry. I must have heard, "Why are you so mad?" a thousand times. I could rattle off a string of reasons why I was mad – that the landscaping job sucked, that I wished the baby didn't cry so much, that we hadn't fucked in months, that the landlord was an asshole, whatever. She didn't hear it.

"But why are you so mad?"

Her frustration and my anger chased each other around the small apartment, careening off the walls and smashing into things. One Friday night, Beth and I really got into it, and Connor cried like he always did when we fought. He didn't just cry; it was that hiccupy thing, gasping for breath, high-pitched wailing. We weren't really paying attention to him; he simply provided a cranky, aggravating soundtrack to the business at hand.

At one point, I sat at the table and Beth stood over me screaming about what a lousy father I was, what a shit, what a loser. I pushed her away from me and watched her fly across the room, a look of horror and surprise on her face. I wanted it back instantly. It sounds pathetic to say it now, but I didn't want to hurt Beth. I didn't want to ever see that look on her face. I especially didn't want to be the one who put it there. She tripped backward over the leg of a chair, bashed her head against the door casing and landed on her left wrist, crushing the bones. I knelt in front of her, apologizing, shocked by the impossible angle of her twisted hand. She pushed me away with her feet. Her face was distorted with pain and the good hand cradled the other arm as though she was having trouble believing that it was part of her.

"Get away from me," she said. "You've really done it now, man, you've really done it now." She had an operation to repair the wrist. I'm not sure how long she wore the cast because after she figured out how to do things without my help, which was only a matter of days, she told me to leave. We kept in touch long enough to divorce, and when that was finalized she suggested I go far away and never come back, never be in touch. Connor would never have to know anything about me. She'd think of something to tell him. It seemed like a good idea at the time, as good as any I had. So what kind of a father agrees to something like that? A confused one, young and drunk and irresponsible, happy to get off the hook. Yours truly, Dad.



I moved to northern New Hampshire and kept to myself. I worked rolling logs at a sawmill and then as a gopher in a lumberyard. No one knew me or cared where I came from, and that was the way I liked it. I thought of Connor on birthdays, his and mine and Beth's. I suppose I thought it would be best for him if I just stayed out of his life. Pretty good willpower for a lush.

Right around the time Connor entered high school, I started going to AA meetings. I got a subscription to the *Nashua Telegraph* and had it delivered to my apartment. I cut out all the photos and box scores from his days on the freshman team to his successes as the captain of

the varsity, which he led to the state tournament. The clippings are in a manila envelope in the top drawer of the bureau. The more time I have sober, the more I want to know my boy as something other than a collection of newsprint.

As I steered into town, I could have been an advertisement for my store – almost everything I was wearing came from there: the blue, baseball-style Thinsulate hat with the earflaps; the mittens with the pouch that folds back and transforms them into fingerless gloves; the light, mid-length black parka made of a space-age material that resists wind and cold. Yes folks, here's the estranged dad about to tell his son a long-held family secret, looking dapper and keeping warm in his *Work 'n Wear* outfit. The ad wouldn't be able to show how my stomach was churning, and how, for the thousandth time, I was doubting myself about what I planned to do. Should I just leave the kid alone? I was hoping he would hug me and want to know his father, but I wouldn't blame him if his impulse was to smack me and walk away. Damn. I took a deep breath and plowed onward.

Durham is one of those towns that's dominated and defined by a college. The center is two blocks long – two blocks of bookstores, markets, cafes, laundromats and bars. It seemed as though most of the establishments were still open, their lights glowing yellow in the winter night. I thought of the few houses I'd seen on the drive in, some of them miles from the next one, the same yellow light emanating from their warm interiors. In my mind, they each had a family inside, a fireplace, and a dog.

I parked a block away from Connor. In his pickup, he had no trouble making it over the mound of snow that the plow had left in a line next to the already parked cars. My Pontiac was a different story. I tried to parallel park and ended up rocking back and forth several times before the right rear tire uncovered a patch of ice and spun without getting a purchase. I was halfway out into the street. Connor must have heard the revving engine and the spinning tires because suddenly he was in front of me yelling, "Reverse, George, reverse!" I put it in reverse and he pushed. The car slid easily into the space.

"Glad you changed your mind," he said, as I got out and locked the door. I was glad, too. The kid was friendly and polite and easygoing,

which either meant that he was well-adjusted and could handle what I wanted to tell him, or his balance would be thrown off and it would screw him up forever. He wasn't like me, I knew that. I was an angry wise-ass at his age, and college hadn't been an option, money-wise or brains-wise. The only way I would have made it was through basketball, but being a star on a team from a tiny high school doesn't usually translate into a scholarship. It was something that Connor had learned too. You might get a good look, an invitation to a tryout, but you still had to come up with the cash. Plus Beth and I had been dealing with the little matter of a child – this one, the one who was walking next to me.

The storm didn't seem to be hurting business in town. The bookstore was open, and the bell above the door jingled each time someone came in or out, a faint chime in the blowing snow. The tables near the large window of the pizza parlor were surrounded by students, barely visible behind the fogged-over glass. A guy and a girl on cross-country skis and wearing silvery outfits and earmuffs, pushed and stabbed their way down the snow-covered sidewalk. The wind blew cold.

"Still think it's gonna stop?" Connor spoke through his scarf as we headed down an alley formed by two large brick buildings covered with graffiti.

"Hope so. I've got a drive ahead of me."

The entrance to Poor Richard's Pub was at the end of the alley. Two large windows framed the thick, ornately carved door. The glass was cluttered with green construction-paper Christmas trees, each with someone's name and a dollar amount written in. The wind gusted behind us and swirled in a miniature freezing tornado. In my head I was rehearsing a small speech: "I'm your father, let's go someplace quiet and talk about it." It would be casual, like I was telling him about finding a wallet on the sidewalk, and the wallet was bulging, but I was carrying it around in my back pocket and hadn't looked inside it yet. He'd already opened the door and was holding it for me.

Poor Richard's was busy and loud. People raised their voices above a blaring jukebox, and it smelled a little like chicken wings, a little like puke. I took off my hat and shook it, then followed Connor to the end of the bar. He took a left and waved to two guys at a table in the corner. One of them got up and reached for Connor's hands.

"Aw, honey, your paws are frozen. Let me help."

He rubbed Connor's hands and exhaled on them like you would if you were going to polish your glasses. His hair was short, yellow like the yellow on a parakeet, and brushed straight forward, ending in a tight curl on his forehead. He had a stud in his nose and was wearing mascara and gray eye-shadow. When he saw me standing there, he extended a hand and we shook.

"I'm Casey," he said, "like the engineer, not the Sunshine Band."

Connor said, "Casey, that is so old." Then to me, "He's been using that line since last year when we were roommates. I've heard it a thousand times."

"Now Con-man," Casey said, "I've told you a million times not to exaggerate. You know why I say that about my name. I don't want people to think I go by initials. That is *so* affected." He drew out the word "so" while his upper body swung forward and back in an "S" shape. His head looked supported by springs.

The other guy's name was David and he didn't get up. When I shook his hand it felt colder than mine. He was pale, way too pale.

"I'm George," I said, "like Foreman, not like Boy." It just came out. I hadn't meant it as an insult and they didn't take it that way.

"Well, hello, Mr. Foreman, please don't hurt us," Casey said, cowering in jest.

Connor smiled. David eased himself out of his chair, stopped for a moment as if getting up had thrown off his balance, then shuffled over to the jukebox. The three of us sat down. Connor had mentioned a girlfriend when he invited me to join him, so I wasn't jumping to conclusions. Considering how pleasant he seemed, it didn't surprise me that he had a variety of friends. There are a few gay guys at my AA meeting. They always seem to tell the saddest stories, but they always seem to get a laugh out of us too.

"George plays basketball with us," Connor said. He took off his coat and hung it behind him on the chair. I did the same. "He comes from Nashua."

"You mean Nausea?" Casey said.

"I'm actually from Ludlow," I said, "but I lived in Nausea once. What are you guys drinking?"

I took their orders, then went over to David at the jukebox. He was maybe five-foot-five if he stood up straight, which didn't appear to be his habit, and his head was shaved on the side I was facing. When he felt me next to him, he looked in my general direction with one sleepy eye, the other one covered up by straight brown hair that lay on his cheek.

"Got a buck?" he asked.

"Sure." I handed him one.

He took it and fed the machine.

"What are you drinking?"

"Jack," he said, without looking up from the catalog of songs.

I got the drinks, two beers and the Jack, and delivered them to the table. Then I went back for my coffee, dodging a couple dancers along the way. The dancers were as old as me, and they were jitterbugging to "Dock of the Bay," however that's possible. It wasn't pretty. I'm not crazy about being in bars, smelling the smells and thirsting for the alcohol. I still want it, that'll probably always be true, and it would be easy to backslide. But I actually craved coffee, and it smelled good and tasted like it was only a few hours old.

"You live around here, now?" Casey asked me.

"In Chesterfield."

"Oh, Chesterfield. Remember those cigarettes? I always loved that label. Those were good smokes. They still make those? I don't know. Ooh, can I have one?"

I gave Casey one of my Winstons and lit it for him. I don't smoke all that much any more – just in bars and at meetings. Joyce and I are working on quitting together, so the new baby won't think the house is an ashtray.

From my chair, I could see the TV. Boston was losing to the Miami Heat in the last quarter. Connor was watching too, and we small-talked about Big Baby's poor shot selection and the grace and style of Dwyane Wade, who was single-handedly destroying the Celtics. David returned as Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing" started playing.

"Dance with me," David said to Casey. "I played this for us."

"Sure, honey, if you don't fall asleep on the dance floor."

Casey and David started double-clutching over near the jukebox. David looked like he could barely stay upright, his head on Casey's shoulder.

Like he was reading my mind, Connor said, "David's been sick. He seems better now, believe it or not. At least he gets out occasionally."

David was caressing Casey's backside, a hand on each cheek. I turned back to the game. A blur rushed past on my left, and Marvin Gaye got jarred and stopped singing.

"Take that shit somewhere else!" It was a white guy with a hairstyle that looked an awful lot like Casey's. He was twice the size of Connor's friends. Casey was fretting over David, who was bent double and holding his back where it had slammed into the jukebox.

"You hurt him, you fuck," Casey screamed. He took two steps forward and slapped the attacker's face. The guy pushed him, and Casey came crashing into Connor, knocking him off his chair. Connor got up, righted his chair calmly, then walked toward the bully in the Polo shirt.

"These are my friends, pal, and if you don't like them, maybe it's you who oughta take your shit somewhere else."

He was so cool, facing up to someone who outweighed him by fifty pounds. In my younger days I would have been all over that guy, flailing and scratching, doing whatever I could to gain an advantage. I don't remember ever trying to settle something by talking it over.

"This isn't your fight," the guy said to Connor. "Stay out of it, pansy-ass."

"You're wrong there, moron," Connor said. Now we were getting somewhere.

"Who you calling, moron, faggot?"

They pushed each other and Connor ducked under a sweeping left hook. I couldn't believe the guy was actually throwing punches. When the goon righted himself after missing wildly, I was standing in front of him. I kicked sharply at the side of his knee and it buckled beneath him. He went down screaming and holding his leg. It was a trick I'd read about in a detective novel, only the guy in the book used a baseball bat instead of a foot. It still worked though, and it was a fine thing to see that ape writhing around in the peanut shells that littered the floor. Campus security arrived shortly afterward, and they led him, limping and swearing vengeance, over to a neutral corner. The bartender yelled to him that after he recovered enough to leave, he was banned for life.

The guy called over his shoulder, "Right on, fucker, I don't go to gay bars anyway."

"Bitch," Casey said. He spat on the floor.

It took a few minutes for things to settle down. After the security cops were done questioning the big guy, two of his cohorts supported their limping friend, and led him to the exit. He'd put on his hooded sweatshirt with the school's mascot on the back – a tiger – and was still growling when the door opened and the cold blew in. The whooshing wind obscured most of his final statement – something about pansies and lesbos. Connor was over by the bar, talking to the cops. David was groaning while Casey held a baggie full of ice against his back. Casey was livid.

"Lucky for King Kong I didn't have my gun," he said.

"You have a gun?" I asked.

"Oh yes, exclamation point. I'm a Pink Pistol, daddy. We can't all just sit around waiting to get bashed. Next time, he gets it, I swear. I've got a bullet with his name on it."

Casey was as dramatic as those guys in AA, but I believed him. He looked at me intently and his face relaxed. It reminded me of that trick you do with kids, the one where you move your hand up and down in front of your face, and each time you do, your expression goes from a frown to a smile and back again.

"You and Connor are a good team," he said.

A security cop approached us with a memo pad and a drawn pen. It looked like this incident was going to be handled without the aid of the town police.

"Are you George?"

"Yessir," I said, and got up to face him. It was Joyce – "Miss Never-Met-A-Cop-Who-Wasn't-On-A-Power-Trip" – who'd suggested I be a little less hostile while talking to police and authority figures in general. I did my best.

"Last name?"

"Lemay." He wrote it in the book.

"So you were involved in the altercation?"

"Just the end of it."

"Why don't you tell me what happened." His uniform jacket didn't look warm enough for the weather we were having. He still had it zipped up under his chin, and the fake fur collar came around his neck to meet the ends of his sparse mustache. I was wondering if his boss knew that *Work 'n Wear* gave discounts to service people.

I described for him what was an obvious case of gay-bashing, right up to the moment when I tripped the guy with the bad attitude and he fell on his knee.

"You tripped him?" The cop looked up from his book. "That's not what he said."

"That's what I said. I tripped him."

"Well, the guy you tripped happens to be Walter Kissell, who plays for the football team. You might have read about him in the paper."

"I don't follow football."

"He's the starting right guard, here on a full scholarship, and he says you kicked him and he felt something pop."

"Right Guard?" Casey said, "sure didn't smell like it."

I laughed, but the cop remained serious.

"I tripped him," I said, "that's all. They give full boats to idiots who start fights with people who are minding their own business?"

He looked at me for a few seconds before he answered.

"You know, I haven't seen you around here before. Mind if I see some kind of identification?"

"Sure," I said. "Hey, will you come over here for a minute?" I led him to a spot near the jukebox. "My name is Ted Shepard, and I only come around once a week or so. I use a different name because I met a woman here and don't want my wife to find out." He smirked and nodded, then copied down the information from my driver's license.

"Well," he said, "your secret is probably safe. We won't need you anymore, unless, of course, Mr. Kissell presses charges. We'll let you know."

Connor walked toward us as I shook the cop's hand. The cop was my friend now that he thought I was cheating on my wife. Connor raised his eyebrows and shook his head as we started back to the table.

"Oh, Mr. Shepard," the cop said, "that's your current address, right?"

"Yup."

The cop walked off scribbling.

"Mr. Shepard?" Connor said.

"Yeah." I looked at him to see if he recognized the name. I didn't think Beth would have ever mentioned it. Funny, I came here to tell him something, and now I was worried he was going to figure it out for himself.

"So, who's Lemay?"

"Oh, he's a spy." I knew it was lame, but that's what came out. "I'll tell you about it some other time." I looked around at our table. "Who wants another drink? I think you all deserve one. I gotta go, but I'll be glad to treat before I shoot out of here." No takers.

David was shivering and holding on to his back. The bartender straightened some chairs, shoved the jukebox back into its original location, and fed it some quarters. He announced that the next round was on the house and a cheer went up. Michael Jackson's "Beat It" started playing. Casey put on his coat and then helped David with his. I thought of a flight attendant giving instructions, "Put your oxygen mask on first and then assist your child with theirs." David's head was down and Casey held him as they said goodbye and left. David was going to be black and blue in the morning. I used the men's room, then returned to the table and put on my coat.

Connor and I went outside together. I had a brief moment of pretending we were going home to the house we shared. Usually when kids go off to college is when the parents start losing them. In our case, I was hoping to get him back. The snow was steady and accumulating. It looked as though the weather guru had been right. Connor once again helped me brush off the windows of the Pontiac.

"So, who are you really?" he asked, like it was a riddle he wanted to solve.

I looked at him. It just wasn't the right time.

"Ted Shepard is who I am, really, but no one has to know that." I was thinking about his mother and how pissed she'd be if she thought I was butting in. Of course, every time I think of Beth, she's pissed. It's not fair to remember someone from twenty years ago and still see them as they were then. I hoped she had the same feeling about me. The name Shepard didn't seem to mean anything to Connor.

"You in trouble?" he asked.

"Nope, I don't think so. Not unless a certain football player presses charges."

"Then how come you use a different name?"

"Personal reasons." Man, how stupid I must have sounded. "Really, I'll tell you about it. Can we sit down next week over coffee or something?"

"Sure," he said. "There's no practice next week so we could meet before the game."

"All right then, let's do that. How about I meet you at the pizza place around six?"

"Sounds good," he said.

After I got in the car, I rolled down the window and Connor leaned his arms against the door.

"Thanks for your help, George, or Ted, or whoever you are. I don't think I could have taken that guy alone. I was just kinda reacting without thinking about how big he was."

"My pleasure, son." I said it with a John Wayne accent, but it didn't sound funny. "Gotta go."

"Good night. Safe trip." He tapped on the roof and then moved away behind me. He waited there, and I know it was to make sure I got out without getting stuck. Thoughtful guy, my son. I looked at him in the rearview mirror, standing there by himself, and I felt like we were connected now by something more than blood, more than those things you have no control over. 