

Excerpt from *All Cars Run to Park Street* by Steve Carter

Red Hat bar

Grey steam rose from an wide aluminum pipe, settled over Bowdoin Street, turning gold in the slanting rays of the afternoon sun. Jim crossed the street, going around the broken pavement, orange road cones, and low yellow metal fence that surrounded the pipe. The steam settled over the red awning of the Red Hat bar.

Jim leaned against the bar's weathered oak frame. Above his head, in letters carved into the crossbeam and painted red, *Ole Scollay's REDHAT*, He took out his pocket notebook.

Old Scollay Square. *With rank vapours from its depths uprolled.* The devil, *Dis Pater*, underground, doing his laundry, steam cleaning. River of fire below ground, fountains of fire above. Breath of the underground. Beelzebub's belch. Blowing his stack at the fact that he can't hold me down there, can't come up after me. Will the ground open and swallow me up? Swallow me down. Rumbling in the gut of the city, heartburn, heart of the city burning. Trains rumbling under, Park Street to Bowdoin Station, crooked path. Earl's maps, railways under roadways.

Old Scollay, the skull of Boston. What skulduggery here? A skullcap, yarmulke. In one religion, the men must cover their heads in the temple; in the other, the women. But the Pope, Zucchetto, his little skull cap. One of the richest. Give up all and follow me -- or keep it and cash in on me. Right? Left? Either way, entrance to the mysteries. My introduction to the mysteries of the Boston music scene happened two streets over, up a flight of stairs, at the Odyssey Coffeehouse. Dave Wilson giving us our start, first gig in Boston, my first time on Beacon Hill. Backside of the hill, city's backside. Played Jimmy Reed's tune, "Big Boss Man." Heard John Lee Hooker there. Cheap guitar and amp, his sound we loved. Why Miz bought the Aria. Bought it at Zayres, cheap. Mother-of-pearl pick guard, headstock. Lining of an oyster shell. Did they name it that because it gives birth to a pearl? No, a grain of sand, irritant, oyster adds a coating to protect itself, ocean artist. Imitation: mother-of-toilet-seat. That guitar still not dirty enough for Miz, so he

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loaned it to me, went back to his Fender Mustang. Less than three years ago, that was. Seems like a lifetime. Old now. Old Howard Theater was near here. Kenny and the guys from The Cup skipping school, driving into Boston, sneaking in to the Old Howard to see the strippers. I didn't go. I heard about it later, though, too many times. Another right of passage that passed me by. Bagging rights: we saw *Sally the Shape*, *48 by the Tape*.

Pulling open the heavy oak door, Jim passed from the gathering darkness of Bowdoin street into the deeper darkness of the old Boston pub. To the right, stairs descended, adorned by a brass handrail beneath a Budweiser sign. Jim descended, sliding his right hand along the cold brass.

*Down to Avernus the descent is light,
The gate of Dis stands open day and night.*

Bar at the right -- balancing The Sevens, where it's on the left -- ancient oak, a few taps. Down the other side of the room rows of planks, rounded at the ends. Drinkers, seated like oarsmen on scullers.

At a shorter plank, first in line, Kenny sat, helmsman, pulling on a pale draft. "I snagged our favorite table," he said as Jim approached.

Jim nodded his head, walked over to the bar to order a beer. While he waited for the bartender, he gazed up at the vintage sign above the bar: Pepsi Cola 5 cents. That's what a Coke cost at The Cup, came in a paper cone stuck in a metal base, poured from the tap of a big red vat, Coca-Cola emblazoned in white on each side. By the time Kenny and I got to hanging out there, the price went up to a dime, and it was served in a Coke glass. Ice cream cones a quarter, but Dad used to take me to Burrell's in lower Jackson Square where they were a dime. Dimies. Kenny lived down near there.

The bartender interrupted Jim's reverie: "What'll it be, bud?" Jim ordered a Schlitz, carried it across the room and sat down across the narrow table from Kenny.

They talked for a while, the conversation turning, once again, to what they would do after they graduated.

Kenny said, "But you have your music. I wish I was a musician."

Jim couldn't think of anything to say. Kenny was certainly not musical. He'd walk around their apartment singing, mostly Dylan. He knew all the words, but never got even close to the melody.

"But you're an artist, Kenny," Jim countered.

"I'm not an artist."

"Well, you took that art class at Suffolk, and you did well in it."

"That doesn't make me an artist. What art did I ever create?"

"There was that kinetic piece you did for your class."

Kenny had come into the apartment one day in high spirits after his art class. He told Jim he'd gotten an A on his art project. The assignment had been to create a kinetic work. When Kenny got to class, the other students asked him where his project was. Kenny, calmly chewing gum, told them not to worry, he had his project. When his turn came to present his project, he grabbed two chairs, placing them back to back a few feet apart, took the gum out of mouth, stuck it to the back of one chair, then stretched it and attached the other end to the back of the other chair. The thin strand of gum sagged in the middle and gradually drooped to the floor. The teacher declared his kinetic art project a success. The other students were not so sure.

"That doesn't make me an artist."

"Well, then there's the bull's eye."

When they'd first moved into their apartment at 32 Grove Street on Beacon Hill, Kenny had an inspiration. He drove a nail into the wall in the living room. He tied one end of a string to the nail and knotted the string, part way along its length, around a pencil. Stretching the string taut, he drew a circle on the wall. He untied the pencil and retied it further from the nail, and drew a larger circle. He repeated this process until he had four concentric circles. He left the inner circle white and

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painted two of the bands blue, creating a bull's eye that covered the wall from ceiling to baseboard. The bull's eye became a minor legend among their friends on The Hill. The apartment was situated such that from the top of Grove Street passersby could look in the bay window of their third-floor apartment and see the bull's eye. It was not unusual to get a knock on the door from friends -- or even strangers -- asking to see the famous bull's eye.

"That doesn't make me an artist."

"But you love art."

One of the first things Kenny had done after they'd moved from Weymouth to Beacon Hill was to take Jim to the Museum of Fine Arts. Kenny sat for long periods staring at the Renoirs, the Monets, the Matisses. Jim had less patience and wandered about the museum, eventually finding the Egyptian exhibit. Walking into that exhibit, he remembered the diorama he'd seen in the Museum of Science as a kid: thousands of thousands of tiny brown bodies building the pyramids. That had piqued his curiosity and after that he'd spent many hours in the Weymouth Landing library looking at the books on ancient Egyptian history, fascinated by their elaborate funeral rites. In the MFA for the first time he saw actual mummy caskets.

Kenny had also taken Jim to the Open Studio Sundays on Newbury Street, where Kenny's eyes had devoured the contemporary art works.

"That doesn't make me an artist," Kenny said, sliding off his chair and heading for the men's room.

Jim pulled out his notebook.

My notebook, my mind. If I can reach in my pocket, make a note, good; if not, a note in my mind now, in my notebook later. Here now.

I only recently learned what makes an artist: long hours of diligent work, preparing the ground for the seed of inspiration. I always had a knack for the bass, could listen to a rock or blues tune once and figure out a good bass line for it. Never liked copying the bass line on the record, rather come up with something of my own, suitable, worthy. But since I started studying jazz, I've learned that long

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hours of practice and study are a necessary part of learning to create the simplest jazz bass line, more hours to be able to improvise the line on the spot, and yet more hours to arrive at moments of artistic intoxication. Denise Levertov: The poem is given; the poet's job is to be ready when the poem arrives. John Neves saying the same thing about music, though not in those words. Al, at the Webster House, playing so hard he knocked his cymbals over at the end of the last tune, leaving the stage, saying, "The music played the shit out of us tonight, didn't it!" Some nights it did. Jane wants to hear more stories about those nights. Just ask her to meet me for a beer, and stories. Why is that so hard?

Jim went to the bar and ordered two more beers.

Bartender, sweating last night's Budweiser into his apron, makes more in tips than I make for playing my instrument. Does he get up Saturday morning and practice prying off beer caps while I practice my scales?

Kenny had come out of the mens room and was chatting with someone at the far end of the bar. Jim caught a few words -- Kenny was telling the Hemorrhoids story.

Jim knew the Hemorrhoids story only too well. It had begun one night when Kenny and Jim were in the kitchen of their Grove Street apartment, making what they loosely referred to as dinner. After school they'd meet at the grocery store next to Phillips Drug and buy a 10-pound bag of potatoes for half a buck and a gallon of red wine for a buck, lug them up Cambridge Street, up Grove Street, and up the two flights to their apartment.

On nights when they were flush, they feasted on Campbell's Scotch Broth Soup -- Jim had built a bookcase out of empty Scotch Broth cans and planks Kenny had rummaged from local construction sites -- but most nights they were not flush, and settled for mashed potatoes and wine.

Jim took the pot of boiled potatoes off the stove, while Kenny opened the gallon of red wine and poured wine into two water glasses.

"Mashed potatoes and wine, my favorite dinner," Jim said sardonically as

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he poured most of the water out of the pot and began attacking the potatoes with a fork, creating a gray lumpy mass. He divided the lump between two cracked dinner plates, and topped each with a dollop of precious butter left over from the most recent Care Package from Kenny's Jewish grandmother.

Jim put the plates next to the two glasses of wine Kenny had placed on the kitchen table.

"Clyde, Clyde, oh, Clyde. If I only had a duck!" Kenny said in the sing-song, high pitched voice he used when he was going into one of his "bits." It was only during these bits that he called Jim Clyde. "If I only had a duck, I'd be so happy. I'd be so happy, Clyde, if I had a duck of my own, of my very own. Oh, Clyde, if I had a duck of my very own..."

"Kenny, what are you talking about?" Jim asked.

"My very own duck, Clyde. I'd love it and I'd name it Hemorrhoids. I'd name it Hemorrhoids, Clyde, and I'd just love it so much, Clyde, I'd love that duck so much, that duck would be the happiest duck in the world, Clyde. My very own Hemorrhoids the duck! "

"Kenny, we live in a one-bedroom apartment on Beacon Hill. There's not enough room in this apartment for you and me and a fart. Where the hell would we put a duck?"

"Oh, Clyde, I'd just love that duck so much! I'd love that old Hemorrhoids the duck so much, Clyde."

"Oh, Christ, Kenny. You're nuts. I'm going to eat in the living room. You and your Hemorrhoids have a good time."

Jim took his plate of gray potatoes, grabbed his glass of wine and headed down the hall, but Kenny followed him, toting his plate and wine glass, whining, "Clyde, Clyde, oh, Clyde, I'd just love that duck so much!"

One day a few weeks after that Jim and Kenny came home and found a duck paddling around in the bath tub. Taped to the bathroom door was a hand-written note: "Well, Kenny, now you have your very own duck. Take good care of

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Hemorrhoids. Love, B."

Seeing the note, Jim remembered that one night at the Webster House Kenny had entertained his girlfriend with the duck bit, and she apparently had taken it seriously.

Jim and Kenny stood there looking at the duck paddling around in the tub, surrounded by floating feathers and duck turds. After they got over the initial shock, Jim turned to Kenny and said, "What the fuck are we going to do with a duck?"

"We'll build him a cage! "

"Where are we going to put a cage?"

"On the roof! "

The roof of their apartment building was flat, as they'd discovered one day after climbing the staircase that was behind a mysterious door on the fifth floor. They'd gone up on the roof a few times to sip wine and look out over the neighborhood and out to the Charles River. They'd even taken blankets up there one hot night and tried sleeping under the stars, but the fact that there was nothing at the edge of the roof to prevent them from rolling off spooked them and they gave up on that idea.

The day after Hemorrhoids arrived, Kenny borrowed a friend's car and they drove to a building supply store to buy chicken wire and boards. They built a cage on the flat roof of 32 Grove Street and moved Hemorrhoids into his new pad. Each day Kenny carried water and bread crumbs up to the roof for the duck. Then one morning he went up and came back down quickly. Re-entering the apartment he said solemnly, "He's flown the coop."

Jim's theory was that someone on the hill had a fine duck dinner that night, but he had kept that theory to himself.

The laughter at the far end of the bar subsided. Kenny slid back into his seat next to Jim.

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Jim slid a beer over to Kenny. "I'm thinking of leaving the band," he said.
"No, man!" Kenny said. "You're the bass. The *base*, man! The foundation!"