

# The Ride

## Excerpt from *Not The Kennedys* by John O'Hern

By the time Dad finished his rounds and returned to the car the nine of us had already begun to ferment like ripe fruit left out in the sun. Even Mom had joined in the symphony of sighs that punctuated our collective boredom. The two little ones in the back weren't crying yet but they'd been moaning on and off so long that we'd already started tuning it out. We hadn't left Albany yet and we'd already been through all the comics we had brought to keep our minds occupied for the duration of the trip and were now passing them around for a second read. Before putting the car in drive, Dad turned in his seat and asked if anyone had to go to the bathroom. It wasn't so much a question as it was a deftly delivered passive-aggressive threat. The subtext was clear. *"I'll be happy to frog march anyone who has to use the bathroom all the way back to the hospital, but you won't like it."* Even if you were about to wet your pants, your natural impulse was to say no. Charlie and Susan turned to Hugh, hoping he would raise his hand or speak up, but he didn't. We'd already given Hugh the heads up on the way we handled bathroom stops. We only stopped the car if one of the girls had to go. The boys were required to pee into a half gallon milk bottle we stashed in the back, and when it got near full, Dad would lower the electric rear window of the station wagon and have Tommy or Debbie pour it out the back as we cruised down the Mass Pike. The astonished expressions of the travelers directly behind us when a urine dumping occurred, was a Disney event, pure entertainment for the entire family.

Twenty minutes later we cheered out loud as we put our first milestone behind us, the bridge over the Hudson River, and headed towards Massachusetts. Cheering aside, Karen, Danny, Sue, Charlie and I were old enough to be under no illusions. We'd taken this ride often enough to know the road ahead was fraught with danger. Keeping peace in the car on a trip of



in our repertoire as well, but that exercise in monotony was only dragged out towards the end of the trip, when thoughts of suicide were much closer.

By the thirtieth rendition of the same verse Hugh turned to me, his wide laughing eyes begging the questions, "*Were these the only lyrics we knew...and, how long does this go on for?*" I offered no explanation, just shrugged as we started in again. I didn't have to ask him what he was laughing at, it was plain to see that it was just dawning on him that he had mistakenly run off with a small, dysfunctional traveling circus and he was trapped in the clown car.

Once we had wrung every note of joy that could be taken from that song, when enthusiasm waned and our voices wound down to a flat monotone, one by one we dropped out of the chorus until the car went silent. Dad waited for a cue, a bored drawn out yawn or a whine from the dog then punched a button on the radio and finger tapped his way down the highway to the champagne musical stylings of Lawrence Welk and his Lennon Sisters.

Conditions began to deteriorate. In an effort to create a little extra room for themselves, Debbie and Tommy, the two small ones in the back were incrementally shoving linens towards us in the middle seat to be molded against our heads. Folded wool blankets and sheets ended up draped over our shoulders or stuffed into the few inches between our bodies leaving us virtually no room to move. Any effort on our part to cram the items back to the rear earned a loud rebuke from Dad. "Put that down. I can't see out the back, damn it."

Now and then a foul odor would permeate the back seat and there wasn't much relief for that either. The windows were not allowed to be open more than an inch for the fear that something valuable, a pillow or a blanket, or even one of the toddlers might fall out. "Was that you Hugh?" Charlie asked with a smirk when a stink bomb went off.

“Not me,” Hugh laughed, turning his nose a little closer to my inch of open window.

“I don’t know Hugh,” Danny volunteered from the front seat, “it doesn’t have the trademark O’Hern signature.”

It was high hilarity as we all looked around, giggling, looking for a guilty face. The main offender it turned out was the dog.

Chubby was an animal that was kept outdoors at all times and never properly groomed so he had a potent feral smell about him. The dog lay at our feet and he pretty much owned the space below our knees. As the heat increased Chubby’s drooling became more dramatic. A fetid, viscous puddle was gathering on and around Karen and Susan’s sandaled feet until Sue, mumbling an oath under her breath, grabbed a beach towel from the back and laid it under Chubby’s chin. He was panting loudly; a throaty whimper accompanying each breath and every time the dog attempted to shift his position, I felt Hugh stiffen ever so slightly. The five of us in that middle seat wrestled with an extra layer of tension because none of us knew with any degree of certainty if Chubby had a breaking point, and if he had one, what happened then? All of us had witnessed Chubby in a dog fight at one time or another and knew that he was capable of terrifying ferocity. Chubby’s rear was planted on Hugh’s and my feet, just below our noses. As the trip wore on, we came to fear the dog’s temper less and his increasingly irritable bowels more. The black hole of Calcutta had nothing on us.

Flawed card players reveal the quality of their hand by a ‘tell’, a tick or some physical manifestation of the hand they are holding. My sister Karen’s bleak expression was the ‘tell’ of the car. One look at the misery planted on her face was all you needed to see. She was sixteen, in full teenage bloom, and in an era where beauty was canonized by tall buxom women with

glamorous bee-hive hair-do's displayed in Playboy Magazines and television shows like *I Dream of Genie*, Karen was the absolute antithesis of all that.

When facing her head on, her hair and ears jumped right out at you. The hair, a kind of auburn afro which might have been provocative if it was truly kinky and fluffed into a full fro, hung instead in thick orange lumps that sprang out at odd angles on her head. From a distance it looked like she might be wearing an orange hat, the kind I'd seen grown men wear during hunting season. The ears that shot out from under the hair were far too big for her head; she had them tucked with corrective surgery a week after graduating college. To complete the picture, her smile was graced with thick, stainless steel braces. Not the kind of braces that they have today, clear plastic and streamlined, some of which you can hardly see. Karen's braces looked like someone had beaten wire coat hangers into a crude mesh and soldered it together, creating what today would likely pass for an expensive piece of Folk Art, and then crammed it in her mouth. These were the braces Frankenstein would get. Even an unsympathetic brother like myself had to turn away when I caught her jabbing at the metal mesh with a toothbrush, a bottle of pepsodized charcoal next to her on the sink and black foam dripping from of her mouth. I gagged when I tried brushing my teeth with that stuff once on a lark and carried the gritty feel of the powder in my mouth for a whole day. The weakest link in her armor however, was her chest. She was not blessed with one and was just about as flat-chested as any of her brothers. In a few years a stick figure Twiggy would explode onto the scene with her androgynous Olive Oyl looks turning the tide on the voluptuous girls of our era, but at the time, my older brother Dan who lifted weights had swollen pectorals that offered far greater definition than Karen's. The fact that she insisted on wearing a bra was a family joke. I gave her a wife beater tee shirt wrapped in a lingerie box once for Christmas. The whole family laughed when she unwrapped it, but

underneath the “thank-you, you jerk,” and hollow grin that Karen flashed at me, lurked the unmistakable shadow of hurt.

What made her interesting was the dignity with which she carried her impediments. With all of that going against her she still pulled off an ambience of female. When I look through old high school yearbook pictures of her I see a young woman, neatly dressed with no make-up and a warm smile, fitting in nicely with her peers.

In the car on the way to the Cape however, any promise of the womanhood that lay ahead of her was stripped away almost from the moment she sat down. Her only job on the trip was to occasionally hold the napping, sodden diapered baby when Mom needed a break. The heat, the closeness, the smells, were not enough to break her self-esteem but Chubby, resting his mammoth head against her knee and drooling down her leg covering her ankle and foot with warm wet goo, along with Mom’s cigarette smoke drifting back in her face with an occasional fleck of ash was a situation she was unable to rise above. My big sister sat like a statue, vacant eyed, her head turned towards the passing scenery but her eyes were seeing none of it as her open inch of window sucked a hands worth of orange curls out the gap. The rise and fall of her chest was the only sign of life as she stared over the edge of some teenage abyss. By the time we left the parking lot of the V.A. hospital she had already checked out, gone to her safe place. Other than taking a break for lunch, Karen would stay there, wherever that was, until we crossed the Bourne Bridge over the Cape Cod Canal. Today she shares our ironic laughter about those rides with all of us but if you press her for details she’s the first to admit. “I don’t remember any of it.”

An hour and a half in, the fragile glue that was holding the societal structure of the traveling tribe together came undone. It wasn’t any one spark that set it off, but a combination of

things; the smell of the dog, the low level moaning of toddlers, my mother's smoke, the intermittent wail of the infant and then being closely confined in all of it. Underneath the polka music Dad had on the radio was a constant muffled bickering, whispered insults like, "God, your breath is awful, do you ever brush your teeth?" Or more urgent complaints, "Don't put your knee there...it's touching me." Terse requests to shift a body part were soon replaced by an angry shoulder shove or the jab of an elbow if you sagged or drooped into someone's space. Danny, sitting between Mom and Dad fiddled with the radio knob but Dad slapped his hand and growled. "If I want you to change the station I'll ask you to." All of it chipped away at everyone's mood like a dentist's drill, at first dancing around the edges of decay but sooner or later it was going to bite into a throbbing nerve.

Although my brother Dan and sister Susan had adult novels, high school assignments to be read by the end of the summer, *Flowers for Algernon*, *Fahrenheit 451* and the like, the rest of us flipped through our meager collection of dog eared comic books. A few of the comics were more recent issues that some of us had purchased with spare dimes we'd begged from Mom over the winter months, but most were from the summer before. They had been read and reread. The pages were stained and stuck together with peanut butter or jelly, the cover jackets, if they existed at all, were torn and tattered, the gloss on the dramatic graphic art long gone. They would be tossed the moment we arrived at the Cape and replaced with new adventures, but for now, desperate for any distraction, every copy was gold. They were passed around to each other round-robin fashion and when we were done with one, we became frantic waiting for the person next to us to finish theirs.

There was plenty of *Superman*, *Batman*, *Thor*, *Captain America* to go around but they didn't hold your attention so well on the third or fourth read. Classic Comics had the great

stories; *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or *Julius Caesar*, *Frankenstein* or *A Tale of Two Cities*, condensed into twenty pages of imagination tingling pictures and were coveted above all others. Graphic depictions of a bloody guillotine blade poised over some innocent's neck, stark gray-metal bolts holding the monster's head in place and Caesar's awful grimace as the knives went in, kept our imaginations spinning, keeping the depth of our own misery at bay. Behind us, Tommy and Debbie who were just learning to read, would occasionally reach across the back seat and tap one of us eleven-year-olds on the shoulder. "What does this word say?" they'd ask, holding out a decrepit copy of *Casper the Friendly Ghost* or *Popeye*. When we kids in the middle seat had gone through all we had, we stooped to thumbing those comics too.

"God," Charlie sighed, passing a comic to Hugh, "Casper is so lame."

"It's for little kids, Charlie," Hugh laughed, "Casper can't be an axe murderer."

"Still," Charlie replied, "he's such a wuss."

"Please Charlie," I sighed. "If Casper came out of our bedroom closet, even in the middle of the day you'd shit your pants."

"I would not."

"Really?" I said, turning to Charlie and giving Hugh a conspiratorial elbow to the ribs, "when the winged monkeys come on the TV in the *The Wizard of Oz*, you run out of the room like a little girl every single year."

"I do not," Charlie seethed at me as if I had divulged a dark family secret, "you lie."

Susan, sitting like a statue next to Charlie, her nose buried in a book, lifted her head. Other than the occasional breathy sigh, we hadn't heard from her the whole trip, but brought to the surface by the shrill defensive whine in Charlie's response, she felt compelled to speak.



“Actually Charlie,” she said, her droll delivery leaving no room for argument, “that’s exactly what you do.”

“I’m not saying you wouldn’t get used to Casper, Charlie, you probably would,” I continued, trying to keep the gag alive, “you’d become good friends, I’m sure of it. But the first time he popped out of the closet....you’d definitely shit your pants.”

Charlie was tougher than Hugh and I put together, in a basketball game or touch football in the front yard he could flatten me at his leisure, but he posed no threat in the close confines of the car with Dad nearby, so Hugh winked at me and piled on. “So, you’re afraid of the winged monkeys, Charlie, I did not know that.” Behind the back seat, below Dad’s field of vision, Charlie flipped his middle finger at Hugh.

Ten minutes later, when Charlie had finished a comic version of Disney’s *The Jungle Book* and passed it to Hugh, he turned over his shoulder towards Tommy who was nodding his head towards a nap and slowly disappearing into a stack of quilts in the rear.

“Are you finished with that?” he pointed to the comic Tommy was flipping through. “Are you even reading it?”

Tommy was half asleep but when Charlie spoke up he jerked his comic out of Charlie’s reach. “I’m not done yet,” he said.

“Well hurry up would you? You’re still on the same page you were an hour ago.”

“Shut up,” Tommy bristled.

From the front seat came the low rumblings of an angry God, “Don’t you start, damn it,” Dad barked, his eyes roaming the back seat from the rear view.

Insulting whispers raged back and forth while Charlie jabbed a finger at Tommy’s comic. “It’s *Donald Duck* you moron. You can read that in two minutes.”

Dad's eyes shifted their focus directly on Charlie. "Did you hear me?"

Charlie kept his glare on Tommy while he answered. "Dad, he's taking too long! God almighty, he can't even read."

"I'm looking at the pictures," Tommy shouted. We could all hear his voice becoming tight, not quite on the brink of tears, but definitely approaching the taking off place.

"If I have to raise my voice again you're not going to like it, either of you!"

Charlie turned back and nodded at Tommy with the silent glare, letting him know they still had business between them. Over the next few minutes Charlie dogged his little brother, making a point of watching to see if he was actually turning the pages. The hit summer movie the year before was *The Great Escape*, a Nazi prison camp film, and for the past year we'd all been riding our bikes around the neighborhood making long skid marks in the gravel trying to imitate Steve McQueen's daring motorcycle antics, and trying out cheesy German accents. When Charlie's patience wore thin he leaned into Tommy and whispered in his ear.

"Schnell!" he hissed and started snapping his fingers in Tommy's face.

To his credit, Tommy chose a bold tactic. He postured his face to that of a serious student, chin high, his mouth slightly agape, posing like a scholar, he studied the page before him intensely. He wouldn't be hurried now; he was reading scripture.

"Come on," Charlie snarled. "You're reading slow on purpose." He reached over the seat and made a grab for the comic but Tommy was just quick enough to keep Charlie from snatching the comic outright. A struggle ensued, Charlie latching on to one half, Tommy the other and they began to tug and wrestle for it.

Hugh had never been in our house when Dad went berserk so he wasn't anticipating violence but Danny had already turned around to watch the fracas while Susan and I shared a

look and sank lower into our seats. Sensing a serious shift in the mood, Hugh offered up the comic he was reading. "Here, Charlie, you can have mine."

Charlie didn't bother to look. "I've read that stupid thing a hundred times," he said, the tension rising in his voice until his self control snapped like a twig. "God damn it, Tommy, give...it...to...me." They struggled again until there came a loud tearing sound.

"Why you little asshole, you ripped it." Charlie said then tossed his useless half of the comic in Tommy's face. Tommy's mouth opened in a silent howl. His little fists clenched on the destroyed halves of comic while the tears started streaming. When he caught his breath he shattered the peace with an ear splitting siren of a wail.

Thunder exploded from the front seat in a tremendous clap. "What did I say? What did I say?"

Shirley, startled by the outburst, jerked herself out of a mild doze and in the process banged her chin on the top of baby Kevin's head in her lap who started in with a wail of his own. Everyone started yelling like a Greek chorus and pointing fingers. "Look what you did," Tommy wailed. "It's not my fault," Charlie screamed back. "Get off me," Susan shouted when Charlie tried to distance himself from Dad's roar, "I mean it, get off me." Karen instinctively drew her knees, slick with dog drool, up to her chest and went totally fetal against the door.

Even Chubby knew the drill and attempted to shove his head under the back of the front seat while emitting a nervous blast of potent gas.

Dad dropped one hand from the wheel and began an all too familiar series of contortions in the front seat. Even under the pandemonium that had broken out to his rear and the droning accordion music from the radio we heard the clink of his belt buckle coming undone. I could see Dad's eyes dancing in their sockets in the rear view, and I knew Hugh could see it too. Dad

turned his ripe tomato face to the rear, taking his eyes off the road and glancing back at us and taking measure. “Watch out,” I said to Hugh and employing a technique we’d all learned in grade school—how to protect yourself in a nuclear blast—with two hands I slapped my comic behind my neck and tucked my head between my knees.

The belt shot like a whip back towards us from over the front seat and the volume reached a whole new pitch, as if an electric current had passed through the car. Charlie tried to protect himself by turning to Susan and inserting himself behind her back, and in turn, Susan did the same to Karen. The first blow landed on the seat between Hugh and Charlie with a crisp snap. My father was usually far more effective with the belt but his accuracy was hampered by his tight confinement and trying to watch the road at the same time. He slowed down a notch, trying not to swerve while he corrected his aim. Whack! Hugh caught the belt across his right shoulder and neck. In an instant his head ducked down to my level. His eyes went wide with pain and terror.

“You sons of bitches,” Dad screamed from the front. The belt was coming closer and closer to Charlie as Dad measured his distance but each time the belt arced towards its intended target it came up short and hooked closer to me or Hugh instead.

Hugh turned to me, the scene so ludicrous he started to laugh, but then he caught a crisp leather snap on his arm and winced instead. He shot me a look of terror mixed with betrayal, the very same expression Caesar offered Brutus in the comic as the knives found their mark. My friend had not signed on for a month of anything like this. There came the slightest pause between blows and Hugh made a rookie mistake. He looked up to see if the assault had finished and took a clean whistling snap to the top of his head.

“Holy shit,” he yelped.

His eyes shot wide again, this time with real alarm. I knew for a fact that Hugh had taken blows from his own father, he came to school now and then with the welts to prove it but now, someone else's father had just hit him in anger. From under the protective shield of my *Superman* comic I lifted my own head a few cautious inches.

“Dad, Dad, wait, you're hitting Hugh!”

Being hit in the car was a rite of passage for us. We'd all been through this many times and were intimately familiar with the arc of it; tiny resentments slowly building to a roaring fire under a vat of bad blood until the inevitable explosion, then the denouement, where like roused chickens in a hen house we licked our wounds, smoothed our feathers and settled back into our routines. It was the price of doing business with Dad and as terrifying as it was, we all knew that no one had ever been seriously hurt. But even on our most primitive, savage level, we all understood there was something dangerously wrong with Dad hitting an outsider. Dad froze, everyone did after my cry of warning, the meaning of my words breaking through the pandemonium like a pistol shot, creating a sudden silence that was almost as unnerving as the screams. All the color had gone out of Hugh's face. I'd known him since the first grade, and that was the only time I'd ever seen him show genuine fear. His mask of astonishment was so vivid I almost laughed looking at him. Then, his expression changed as a dreadful realization closed in on him. Hugh turned and squinted at me.

“You had me sit here on purpose, didn't you?”

When I didn't respond right away he lifted his head, and said it again this time directing his accusation at my brothers and sisters as well.

“Oh my god, you had me sit here on purpose.”

“Come on Hugh,” I whispered trying to get Hugh to keep his voice down, “he could have hit anybody.” At some point Dad had turned the radio off and although we continued to speak in hushed, panicky tones, everyone could hear us.

“You all saved this seat for *me*, didn’t you? Didn’t you?” The level of betrayal was so complete and unexpected that Hugh started to laugh at the horror of it. His macabre sense of humor was one of the things I liked best about him.

“I’m sorry Hugh.” Dad said, aiming an accusatory glance at the rest of us from the rearview. “You see what they make me do?”

Hugh was still holding his arms in front of him, as if a blow could come at any second while he continued to stare at me in astonishment.

“You should see your face,” I sputtered.

Susan reached over Charlie’s head and patted Hugh’s shoulder. “You’re okay Hugh. You’re not bleeding.”

From the back, little sister Debbie was not quite getting it. “Did Hugh do something bad?” she asked

“Yeah,” Danny said from the front seat without turning around. “He trusted John. Ha, ha, ha!”

Charlie sat up straight and began an imitation of me seducing Hugh to take the seat behind Dad’s right shoulder. “Sit right here Hugh. There’s the spot for you, Hugh, where you’ll be safe. I want you to sit here Hugh because I love you.”

Now Danny turned back from his slot in the front and glared at me. “Jesus, John, I can’t believe you put him in the kill seat.”

Mom lifted a knowing eyebrow in my direction then lit a cigarette, took a puff and blew a cloud out her window. There was no further comforting of Hugh nor did anyone offer a substantial apology. He was left to make of it what he could.

“Well, “Hugh asked, touching a red mark that had blossomed behind his ear, “is it over?”

Mom laughed at that. The tension released, we all started to settle back into our seats. Even Dad laughed. “I’m really sorry Hugh,” he said, his hand reaching towards us and fluttering back and forth until he found Hugh’s knee and gave it a pat, “I owe you one.”

Mom tossed her butt then fished a sucking candy from her purse, “John,” she eyeballed me over her shoulder, “after lunch why don’t you give Hugh a chance in the window seat?” She popped the candy in her mouth and held the wrapper out the window until the wind tore it loose.