

Chapter 1 The Old Marty

The bell signaling the end of P.E. rang. While others walked off the soccer field, I sprinted for the locker room. If I hurried, maybe I could get a shower before anyone saw me.

“Look at Krieg, he’s hurrying so we won’t see his little baby wienie,” yelled Church.

Damn, I thought to myself. Busted. Very carefully, I slowed down.

By the time I got to be a senior, the rule, “All boys must take a shower after P.E.,” was obnoxiously enforced by my peers. If I wrapped a towel around myself as I walked to or from the showers, a wisecracker would always point out that I was hiding my lack of body hair.

I tried different strategies. For a few weeks, I just got my hair wet with my comb and splashed water on my face to make it look like I had complied with the appropriate code of conduct. But when Mastro complained to one of the coaches about my scheme, everyone began to keep a close eye on me whenever I was near a sink. I tried walking to the shower stalls with my street pants on. If I stayed very close to the overlooking window of the coaches’ office, no one inside could see that I was still partly dressed. Once I made it to the showers, I stalled. I acted like I had left something behind, then headed back to my locker. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn’t.

I couldn’t seem to escape the persecution caused by my classmates’ fascination with hair—or the lack of it. I was only five feet, two inches and weighed a slight 108 pounds. I was insecure

enough as it was. Having the body hair of a newborn baby didn't help my confidence one bit.

I began to lie awake wondering when God would grant me passage into manhood. I was eighteen years old and a senior, after all. It was 1971 and I would graduate from Moreau High School, an all-boys Catholic school in my hometown of Hayward, California, that spring. I wanted to grow tall, acquire a deep voice, and have lots of body hair. Running out of ways to disguise my physical immaturity, I refined the science of proper towel-holding. I developed a strict set of rules—Krieg's Humiliation-Avoidance Techniques.

One, always dress or undress facing your locker. Two, don't, for any reason, turn sideways. Three, don't be caught off guard by anyone trying to get your attention. Four, use a shower nozzle against a corner. (If a nozzle that satisfies this criteria is not available, stall until one is.) Five, walk (don't run) to or from the showers, always keeping a wall about a foot away. This method keeps advancing onlookers from overtaking you on the exposed side. Six, on your exposed side, drape your towel over your clutched hand and hold it near your hip, six to eight inches in front of your body as you walk. Try to play cool—don't make it look like you're holding a bullfighter's cape. And seven, if a head-on encounter threatens, quickly shift both your towel and body to the appropriate side.

To lower my odds of being seen, I always waited until the last moment to take a shower. I watched the clock. I rearranged my locker. I tied my shoes. I combed my hair. Very slowly. All the while, I kept my peers distracted from the fact that I was not undressing by following another set of rules—Krieg's Keep-Them-Off-Guard Stall. One, crack jokes about Father Near's history class. Two, loudly debate which team would have won if the bell hadn't ended class. Three, tell stories about your wild bicycle

camping trips. And four, make opinionated comments about the Oakland Raiders' latest draft selections.

Then, when almost everyone had filtered out of the smelly locker room, I would express alarm that I hadn't taken a shower yet. Quickly disrobing, I would make a quick dash to the showers, carefully holding my towel the correct way both coming and going.

Somehow I sensed that my persecution was preparing me for far greater challenges. I did not, however, make it any easier on myself by being the only bicycle commuter at my high school.

"And what are these things?" Keyes, an underclassman, asked the next morning in front of the school cafeteria. We all went by last names at Moreau.

"They're quick-release levers for taking off the wheels."

"What, you just pull on 'em and the wheel comes off?" Keyes looked away to the steady procession of cars that rumbled through the alleyway. As doors opened and closed, and engines stopped and started, kids carrying textbooks scampered in a hundred different directions.

"Yeah. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Not bad, Krieg." Keyes was impressed.

"Hi, Marty," John Hartin's mom called out as she stopped to let off her twin boys, John and Jim, for school. "Did you get a new bike?"

"Sure did, Mrs. Hartin," I said, "I'm showing it to Jeff right now."

“Gonna use it on your paper route?” John asked as he and Jim quickly joined the other students hanging around in front of the cafeteria. I nodded.

Small, freckle-faced redheads, the twins stayed as far away from my bike as possible. Even though they were my friends, they did not want to face any unneeded embarrassment by being associated with me when my bike was around. I usually locked it to a tree in the backyard of the church rectory, just across the parking lot from the breezeway where a lot of kids collected before school.

“Well, you be careful,” Mrs. Hartin said as she pulled out of the driveway to let other cars through.

“Look at little Krieg, he’s showing off his new car,” called Schindler from across the driveway where John and Jim now stood. He was a large loudmouth, one of the worst.

“Did little Marty get a new bicycle?” another voice teased.

The small group that had assembled to taunt me broke out in laughter. Keyes slid into the background.

They towered over me on the sidewalk. I stood all alone. Their deep, manly voices intimidated me.

“At least it’s good for the environment,” I said in my little boy’s voice.

“At least it’s good for the environment,” Schindler mocked.
“What’s that? Krieg, you’re weird. Why don’t you go read in the library like you always do?” More laughter.

“Krieg, why don’t you admit that you’re just too short to see over a car dashboard,” Avo chimed in. His real name was too long, so it had been shortened to Avo. The laughter increased.

“No, I’m not, I can...”

“You know what he’s got that rack on the back for?” Silva interrupted. “He’s gonna pack his date for the senior ball on it.”

“No, that’s only if he finds a girl shorter than him,” Morris cracked. The rest of the crowd was in hysterics at these witticisms.

I couldn’t remember a day more humiliating—and school hadn’t even started. I wanted to cry.

Did it really require a car to be accepted, I wondered? Would that make up for my lack of pubic hair or size? Prior to high school, getting good grades had made me a big shot. That was before my peers began owning their four-wheeled status symbols.

But my financial priorities had not changed since junior high school. While my contemporaries were buying mag wheels and four-barrel carburetors, I was still purchasing baseball cards, comic books, and bicycle accessories.

But that would change.

By the time I got to be a junior at Cal State Hayward, I gave in to the pressure. I bought a motorcycle with my paper route money. And the hecklers in high school were right. Though I wasn’t much taller, 5’6" by this time, girls suddenly began to respond to me, though I still had almost no body hair. There were some girls, however, who didn’t like motorcycles, so I took a part-time job so that I could also buy a used sports car, a ’66 Triumph Spitfire. I

made sure to buy one that ran but needed work, so that my friends could see me working on my wheels.

Soon, however, I spent more time working on my car than I spent with my friends or the girls it was intended to attract.

“Hey, Marty,” Bobby, the kid next door, called one morning. “Are those your legs under there?”

“What’s up, Bobby?”

“I was wondering if you knew anything about Gitanes. I’m thinking about getting one.”

“That’s what that Interclub is that’s hanging in the garage,” I said as I slid out from under the car, making sure to collect as much grease as I could. We both looked over at the bicycle that I used to spend many hours on.

“Don’t you ride it any more? All I ever see you doing is working on your car.” Bobby always wore a white T-shirt. His large stomach always made it look too small for him. Inside I smiled. I wanted to be seen doing a man’s job. Little boys don’t work on cars, men do.

“You really oughta be riding your bike,” Bobby continued. “Everyone’s getting into it. My dad’s even thinking about getting a bike and we wanted to ask you what you thought.”

The gas crises of the early seventies had hit. Bicycles had arrived. And here I was stuck trying to prove my manhood with a car.

“Man, I gotta get my car running right so I can get to work. I don’t have time for bicycles anymore,” I said.

How ironic, I thought. I only worked two jobs so that I could support my car and motorcycle.

“Wanna sell it?” Bobby asked.

“I still get out once in a while.”

“I never see you on it.”

“Well, yeah, once in a while I throw it in the back of my car and drive out to Pleasanton where there ain’t no cars and I just do sprints out there on the farm roads.”

“Why, you afraid of cars? We always used to see your head going in and out of traffic.”

“I’m not afraid of cars, I’ve just been riding so long, I need a little variety, that’s all.” I didn’t want to admit that I would rather be cycling. I just didn’t want to be part of the latest fad. So here I was trapped under the symbol of my manhood’s hood.

“Tell you what. You wanna ride with me on my motorcycle down to Foreign Auto? I’ve got to pick up some parts they ordered for me.”

“No way, Marty, you’re too crazy. I saw you scaring the shit out of Danny’s sister the other day.”

“Aw, she just likes to scream.”

“Can you blame her?”

“Whattaya mean?”

“You got her sitting on the back while you’re standing on the seat going forty miles an hour.”

“Twenty miles an hour.”

“Whatever. You know if you crash at just five miles an hour, someone’s gonna get hurt. Oh yeah—my mom says she’s gonna call the police if she sees you riding a wheelie when Michael or any of the other little kids are out here playing, just so you know.”

“Huh.” Mission accomplished! People call the police on men that do dangerous things on motorcycles. And they call them crazy. Yet on a bicycle no one ever notices you, and if they do they just think you’re a harmless little fairy.

As Bobby walked away, a shiny-new gold Camaro turned the corner and stopped at the edge of my driveway.

“Hey, Krieg,” Bob Beaudry called from the window as he revved the motor. “Wanna go water-skiing tomorrow?”

Bob’s identity was so tied in to his car that he got out of it only when absolutely necessary. Only his muscled arm, rolled-up T-shirted shoulder, and head, dominated by incredibly long sideburns, stuck out of the window. Bob was a stud.

“Any chicks going?” I tried not to sound too excited.

Once Bob had told me that girls didn’t care about how much hair boys have on their legs. So, as long as I kept my underarms and genitals from view, I could go to the rivers and lakes with Bob; neither he nor the girls we brought along would have to know about my problem. Almost out of college and still almost hairless.

“You know I never have any luck. I thought I’d see if you could put that together. See if Joan and her sister want to go.”

“Who, Ussery? I ain’t gonna ask her, she gave me shit at Blackmare’s party last night.”

“Come on, you can find a couple of girls for us. I’ll call you tonight,” Bob said as he backed his car up.

“What if they say they can’t camp up there with us?”

“Talk ’em into it. Come on, Krieg, you’re good at that. I gotta go.”

Somehow, in a few years’ time, my reputation was changing from a bicycle nerd to a ladies’ man. I liked that. And 324 Ambrose Court where I lived was getting to be known as the cool place to visit. My new friends knew that they could work on their cars in my driveway and that they could use my tools. And all it took was a car.

A short while after Bob left, a tremendous explosion of automotive horsepower erupted a few blocks away. Engine thunder shattered the silence of our quiet neighborhood cul-de-sac. Tires screamed against asphalt, and a cloud of smoke enveloped the rear end of the approaching car.

Finally the driver let off the gas. It was Jeff Limbeck, in his souped-up 1964 Ford Fairlane. The Hyper 289 engine calmed to a low roar. Jeff coasted the rest of the way to my grease-stained driveway. He was laughing as he stopped and climbed from his car.

“Hey, Krieg, how’d you like that? I think your neighbor there in that brown house was yelling at me.”

I looked to where he was pointing, then shook my head.

“You’re crazy, Limbeck.”

Even standing still, Jeff’s Fairlane looked fast—and dangerous. So that he could run wider tires, he’d cut out the fenders with a hacksaw. Instead of then making the job look clean by filling the damaged area with Bondo, he simply spray-painted the jagged edges with flat black paint. He cut a gaping hole in the hood where the carburetor rose out of it. The passenger compartment teetered high above the chassis, exposing headers, exhaust pipes, and show-quality chromed wheel covers, nuts, bolts, and springs.

Like Bob’s, Jeff’s car was an extension of both his personality and his looks. While black electrical tape held Jeff’s glasses together, paint-stained cutoffs revealed tan, muscular legs. Jeff’s powerful shoulders and arms dwarfed the faded black T-shirt he wore. Brown, tightly curled hair that was long and parted at the side added to his incongruous looks.

“So. Where’s the parties at tonight, Krieg? Rothschie says he saw you at Grand Auto and you told him about two up on Hillcrest.”

“Well, there’s those two. Krantz came by and told me about one up on Center that sounds pretty good.”

“What time we gonna meet here?”

“I don’t know, we’re probably gonna take off around nine or ten. And my brother will be here with his goofy friends.” Chris was a year younger than me but several inches taller. It bothered me.

“Chris’s friends aren’t that goofy. Why don’t we just party here?”

“There ain’t gonna be any girls.”

“Well, how 'bout your sisters? You got three of 'em. Hell, Krieg, you're so tight, you never let them come around so we can talk to them.”

“Gimme a break, Lim. Karen's only nine, and besides, they're my sisters. What fun is that?”

“Hey, your little sister's gonna grow up some day, and I want to be on good terms with her just in case. But I'm talking about Kathy and Nancy. They're both foxes, in case you hadn't noticed. All the guys are talking about 'em.”

I ignored him. “Come back at eight. And don't forget to bring some beer.” I paused. Jeff never had any money, and he was a year younger than me, which meant he would have to prove he was old enough to buy. “You've got ID, don't you?”

He grinned. “Krieg, you think I need ID? Just because they card you everywhere you go doesn't mean they're gonna card me. Especially if I don't go with you.”

I understood. Embarrassed, I changed the subject. “Hey, let's do goobers tonight. Here's two bucks. Get the ones that are salted in the shell.”

“Wanna see another power stand?”

“No way, Limskie. I gotta live here. Just come back at eight with some beer.”

“Just cause your little Spitfire can't burn rubber.”

“How long can you go on a tank of gas? You can just about make it to the gas station, right?”

“Who cares, you worried about thirty or forty cents a gallon?”

“Hey, I don’t believe in spending my life in gas lines or polluting the air. Besides, I’ll bet more chicks would rather ride in my car than in yours.”

“Wimpy cars get wimpy chicks. I like power cars and power chicks,” Jeff yelled as he drove away.

Jeff’s harmless comment saw right through my attempts to prove my manhood. I secretly hoped that my future career as an accountant would not be exposed in the same way. Instead of taking a major that was fun, I studied about boring balance sheets and profit-and-loss statements, because those who manage money command a respect that transcends physical limitations. Even with all my insecurities I could see that.

I could not, however, escape the downward spiral of four years of weekend carousing and partying once I actually took the job for which college had trained me. Even after I had worked a year as an accountant, my friends kept the pressure on.

“You gonna come out with me and Lim tonight, Krieg, or are you too good for us now?” Bob said one summer afternoon in 1977. “Dale says he saw you driving down Jackson with a tie on.” That reduced Bob to cackling.

He and Jeff had stopped by the house that my brother and I shared—incidentally, the house where we had grown up. My parents and sisters had moved out and we had moved back in.

I wanted to distance myself from my old life, but I didn’t want to hurt my two best friends from college.

“I’ll rock and roll with you guys, but if we’re gonna go over to Sunset tomorrow to play basketball, I’ve got to get in before midnight. I gotta help set up for inventory for a few hours tomorrow morning.”

“Inventory! You trying to be a big shot on us, Krieg?” Bob never stopped teasing, but his teasing just didn’t have the power it once had. Though he hadn’t graduated from college yet, he worked forty hours a week at the local airport and had a pilot’s license. He flew regularly. He imagined himself as a pilot for a large airline and never stopped telling us how pilots did and didn’t act.

“Gee, Bob, do you even know what inventory means?”

“Sure, wise guy, but since when do you work on Saturday mornings?”

“It’s just part of my job. I have to go in on weekends once in a while or weeknights if they need me. I’m on salary now.”

“Just don’t forget who your friends are, Krieg, and who got you into water-skiing. And who took you for airplane rides.”

Jeff laughed. “I remember when I took Krieg to his first party. Man, he was so nervous.”

“Yeah, Krieg, and how many times did Lim protect you from fights?” Bob volunteered.

“All right, already. I guess I can stay out later,” I relented. I wondered if I would ever be able to abandon the dual life I had been leading for the last year. When would I relinquish my college buddies and their lives of parties, cars, and girls for a more mature existence? Part of me wanted to. But part of me couldn’t—or wouldn’t—resist that carefree existence.

A phone call later that evening would help me find out.

I was studying my boss's notes on the next day's inventory when the phone rang. It was Jeff.

“Did you hear what happened to Mark?” Jeff's voice sounded urgent. “His company car blew up on him, and he's hurt pretty bad. We're all gonna meet at Dale's house tomorrow and then go over to the hospital to see him.”

Mark Ramirez and I were a lot alike. Both of us were small and wiry, and we both tried to offset our lack of size—and what we translated that to mean, a lack of virility—by being the life of every party. We weren't close friends, but I liked him.

“What do you mean, blew up?”

“The gas tank exploded on him. He was driving his company car, the one that runs on propane, and the thing blew up on him at the gas station.”

“So what happened to him?”

“His brother was saying that he got burned over eighty percent of his body. They gotta scrub him every few hours to keep it all clean. He's conscious and all, but I wouldn't want to take that pain. But he's been handling it pretty well.”

“I can't make it tomorrow, I'm going out to dinner with a couple of my college buddies. Then Sunday I'm supposed to pick up that BMW I'm buying... What hospital is he in? I'll go see him Monday when I get off.”

“He’s in this special burn hospital in Berkeley called Alta Bates, but you gotta be a family member to get in. You look like him— just say you’re his brother. That’s what we’re gonna do, something like that.” He paused. “Krieg, don’t forget to see him. He needs all the support he can get. He’s a man.”

I wondered what had changed Jeff’s opinion about Mark. Before the accident he would get on Mark’s case even worse than mine. I found out Monday.

I drove out to Berkeley after work. A nurse ushered me into the small room where Mark lay watching TV. His disfigured face and blackened arms were a shock, but his voice was cheerful.

“What a surprise.” His puffy lips muffled the words.

“Man... from what I heard I thought you wouldn’t be coherent, what with all the drugs,” I blurted out.

“Aw, you know how people are. They like to make things sound worse than they are.”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. Fun-loving Mark was now encased in black, puss-filled flesh. It was almost too much to look at. But we talked for a while about his accident and how he was getting along. Then another nurse came in.

“Excuse us, sir, but we have to clean Mark’s wounds,” she said.

Mark smiled, or tried to. “More torture... Marty, say hello to everyone for me. Tell them I’ll be out in a few weeks, okay?” He looked at the nurse as she helped him into a wheelchair, as if seeking corroboration.

“If he can keep his good attitude so we can keep his burns clean, he’ll be out pretty soon,” she said.

“Bye, Mark.”

“See you soon, Marty.”

As the weeks passed, reports kept circulating about Mark’s successful rehabilitation. No observation failed to mention how tough the little guy was, how he was “taking it like a man.” I was almost envious of Mark. He had been given an opportunity to show what he was made of, what a man he was. He had triumphed over his lack of height.

A few months later I got my own chance.

I arranged a trip down the “River of No Return,” the famous Salmon River in Idaho, and persuaded my brother Chris to go with me. Neither of us had ever gone down a river before, but I had seen an ad in the local paper for an organized river-rafting group. It seemed both dangerous and controlled at the same time. It would be my first paid vacation as an accountant.

Dad sensed that something was up. He took us out to dinner the night before we left to find out about the logistics of our trip.

“Now what I want to know is, how many days are you boys planning to get up to Idaho?” Dad seemed more serious than he usually was.

Chris looked at me. “We’ll be there Saturday morning. It’s only a day away,” he answered.

“A day away if you’re driving like maniacs. It’s at least thirteen or fourteen hours. Aren’t you two going to stop and rest anywhere?”

“Aw, come on, Dad. We’re tough. We’re young, we don’t need rest like you. We’ll trade places if one of us gets tired,” I said.

Dad shook his head. He held his fork up to his eyes with his thick, work-hardened hands. He’d been a plumber for more than twenty years. Looking at the fork, he said, “I’m only going to say this once. Be careful. I don’t like you kids taking this trip so nonchalantly. I also don’t know why if this river trip doesn’t start till Monday you have to be up there Saturday.”

Chris put on his most mature face. “I know what you’re worried about, Dad. Marty’s got this thing about the River of No Return that he’s been telling everybody about. I just tell people we’re going rafting on the Salmon River. It’s no big deal. We’ll be okay.”

“Whose car are you taking up there?”

“Marty’s too cheap to take his.”

“Hey, I’m paying for gas, what’s the big deal?” I shot back.

Dad looked at me. “What’s the big deal? Marty, you’ve got this fancy BMW parked in the driveway and you’re gonna make your brother, who doesn’t make half of what you make, take his bucket of bolts up there?”

“It’s not a bucket of bolts,” Chris said.

“You certainly don’t think your Mustang is going to make it all the way up to Idaho without breaking down, do you? It bothers me just to see you hot-rodding around town in it,” Dad said.

“Come on, Dad. I just put new tires on it and this last week I changed all the belts and spark plug cables. It’s ready.”

“I still don’t know what the hell is wrong with Marty’s car.”

I thought quickly. “I haven’t had time to get it all checked out,” I said. “Besides, me and Chris never go anywhere in his car.” What I really wanted was adventure, and Chris’s red ’66 Ford Fastback was fast, fun, and unpredictable.

Dad said softly, “Well, maybe it’s good that you don’t. Chris likes to hot-rod and neither of you needs to be egging the other on. I know how you two can get when you’re together. I wish you’d spend more time with Janice, Marty. She seems pretty nice.”

Janice and I had been going off and on for a couple of years. But she was now going to Chico State, a couple hours north, and living on campus. We didn’t really spend much time together anymore, and in truth we were just about broken up. I changed the subject as quickly as I could.

We talked about other things, then we went home and got a good night’s sleep. After all, we’d be on the road for at least fourteen hours.

We left the next morning, about eight. The date was August 20, 1977.

Fourteen hours later we were lost.

We’d made good time, but we’d been on the road all day, not counting food and gas and rest breaks. But a few hours back we’d decided to take a short cut that I’d seen on the map. Somehow we’d wandered onto an Indian reservation, and we’d been trying to get off it for a couple hours, driving down an unlit dirt road that

never seemed to end. We knew we couldn't be far from Boise, though. Chris had been driving for a while. He'd been ragging on me for the better part of an hour. "We just had to take a shortcut, Mr. Cornball."

"Don't blame me," I said. I had temporarily given up trying to find us on the map. "You thought it was a good idea, too, at the time. I wasn't the only one that..."

"Yeah, but you're the navigator. It's your job to figure out where we are and what the best route is... Wait a second. What's that up ahead?"

"I don't know... looks like an intersection. Maybe it's a real road."

"It's about time."

We were approaching the new road at an angle. We were moving pretty fast and almost there. "C'mon, Chris, slow down—is that a stop sign?"

"Yeah, but it's not for us. Don't worry, it's clear."

We bounced onto the new road at full speed. Out of nowhere there were lights and a blaring horn and screaming tires. And that was it. After that, nothing.

Seven weeks later, I slowly began to awaken from a coma. I was a two-year-old again, and might be one for the rest of my life.