

Greenleaf: Story of a Man

By Allison Fine
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The car glided in silence down the street to the third ranch house from the corner, slid over the speed bump at the end of the driveway and into the garage. Greenleaf turned off the engine and sat listening for a moment as the hum of his life replaced the hum of the engine. This underlying internal sound was something he identified with; it informed his sense of self; gave him a bastion against illusion.

Denise was at the sink washing carrots while his two-year-old son Max played with pots and pans on the kitchen floor. Greenleaf threw his keys onto the counter, kissed the baby and tossed his jacket over the stool by the refrigerator.

“Where’s Mandy?”

“She’s upstairs.”

Greenleaf moved his awkward frame up the stairs two at a time. Mandy was peeking inside the birdcage, making noises at the bird.

“Let me see the bird,” he said.

Mandy pulled the bird out of the cage and handed it to her father who held the tiny thing tightly in his long slender fingers. He compressed the bird in his grasp until, without a sound, the small head went limp over the edge of his thumb.

“Lily is dead,” he said.

Memory fought with the present inside of Greenleaf’s mind. He recalled The Old Shit, his father, describing his work as penitentiary corrections officer on death row. The last meal, the walk down the long hallway, final words before strapping them into the chair, attaching the electrodes, pulling the black hood over their heads and watching them

fry behind the protective glass. The Old Shit had only seen a stay of execution once. Greenleaf went with his father when he was fourteen to watch the execution of Bobby Farley.

“Now just remember that this could be you if you don’t do right. Don’t fuck up, you hear?” The Old Shit had said and cuffed his ear.

Mandy’s demanding voice drew him back.

“Gimme’er, dad, I have to put her back in the cage.”

“I told you, she’s dead,” Greenleaf said and flopped the lifeless head back and forth over his thumb to illustrate.

“No, she’s not. I just fed her,” Mandy said with the logic of a seven year old.

“No, I am certain. She’s dead. Look.”

Greenleaf held the bird out for Mandy to touch. Lily’s head dangled from her neck, the undersized body still warm.

“Let me feel.”

Mandy took the bird.

“She’s not dead, she’s just sleeping.”

“Can you hear her heart beating?” Greenleaf asked.

Mandy held Lily up to her ear waiting, holding her breath to hear the sound of a heart. Then she moved her hands around the belly of the bird, feeling the feathers and waiting for the humming beat underneath her fingers.

“No.”

“The bird is dead. Go tell your mother.”

“But I didn’t kill her!” Mandy screamed. “I didn’t!”

“What’s the matter?” Denise’s voice called up from the kitchen.

Greenleaf placed the bird back into the cage, went into their bedroom and flopped onto the bed. He heard Mandy’s urgent footsteps tumbling down the stairs. Denise appeared in the bedroom moments later.

“Greenleaf. We have to bury the bird.”

“Fine.”

“How was work?”

“Same as usual.”

“Well—dinner will be ready soon. We can have the funeral in the backyard after dinner.”

“I have no idea how the bird died.”

“It happens. Captive birds die. That’s what they said in the pet store. Maybe Mandy overfed her or something.”

Denise left Greenleaf lying sprawled out on the bed.

At dinner Mandy refused to look at her father. Max was playing with applesauce on his highchair.

There grew a silence between Mandy and himself that did not abate. She eyed him with hesitation, maybe fear, anger, waiting for him to do something.

“*The dead don’t come back, son,*” The Old Shit had said after Bobby Farley’s body shook and trembled, convulsed and died. “*Just remember that.*”

Greenleaf knew nothing would bring the bird back.

Denise took Mandy out and made a tiny gravesite for Lily in the corner of the backyard, by the swing set. The next day after work Greenleaf visited the site. Mandy had put a Popsicle stick for a marker with Lily's name printed in red crayon.

Greenleaf stood over Lily's grave and felt a wave of nausea.

"Bobby—what did he do that was so bad?" Greenleaf had asked The Old Shit.

"Now, you just never you mind, boy. Shut up and look and let this be a lesson to you forevermore."

Greenleaf could not drown his troubles in work. He had been caged as a sales/display person at the same gift shop for years. It was located on a lifeless corner just off the main shopping area on the east side of town. It was once a Hearing Aid Center until Anne Foster bought it and converted it into a gift shop specializing in high-end collectibles. She had an original idea to make the shop lyrical but it had become stupid and cynical. She carried the usual trash and prints, lithographs, posters, kitchenware endeavoring to be interesting: (dancing ceramic jalapenos), paraphernalia she found on her travels, clothes from the Philippines, Tarot cards, Magic Games, incense and self help books about relationships and the lunar phases. The shop attracted all of Anne's lesbian friends and people with disposable income and leisure time looking for the eclectic gift for that special someone they didn't know or despised.

Greenleaf described his job as selling disposable items for despicable people.

His actual duties were to receive shipments, catalogue items and arrange displays. Anne was particular about moving and changing displays every week so that the shop did not look "stale" as she put it.

“Keep ’em on their toes, Greenleaf, you know,” Anne said smoking her recessed filtered Benson and Hedges. “People come in and if everything is as it was last week, they come to expect no change and they get bored. Boredom is death.”

“You pay attention to me boy.” The Old Shit was mad about something. He lunged toward Greenleaf, but Greenleaf was skinny and fast and got out of the way. The Old Shit was huffing with his fat stomach hanging over his tight belt, puffing after the skinny, gangly kid. Greenleaf fell as he ran and the Old Shit pulled him up by the hair and smacked him hard on the side of the head.

“Don’t you fucking run from me again, you little shit!”

“Yes, boredom, **is** death,” Greenleaf agreed while dusting the glass shelf of collectible elephant totems from Surinam.

Two nights after the bird died he arrived home after a much needed detour through another part of town, the part that some called the North Side. The Old Shit was born and raised there. Some Sundays they’d take a ride out to that part of town and the Old Shit would be his tour guide to the hell of his childhood.

“You know, when I was your age I had to sell newspapers and ice cream on the corner, and help my mother take in laundry. I didn’t have a bike. We couldn’t afford it, you little spoiled shit!” Then he’d smack him across the face for emphasis. Greenleaf cried out, and the Old Shit told him to shut up, that he was lucky he had a nice house and a nice bike and a good father that loved him.

Once the Jews lived there, then African-Americans took over, after that Vietnamese and Hispanic—now it was where the mentally ill derelicts hung out drinking, staring into space and sleeping. Certain gangs gathered there to discuss their urgent

business. Greenleaf parked his car around by the old railway house and watched the nasty side of humanity move around.

Trains went by. They never stopped here. Freight trains mostly. Greenleaf was hypnotized by the trains, the cars labeled Erie, Chicago, Burlington, Union Pacific, Santa Fe, Norfolk, Minneapolis; all those other places. He could watch the trains and the gangs and the homeless people for hours. It gave him a sense of peace.

Denise called him on the cell phone but he did not answer. When he arrived home they were all sitting at the table eating. Mandy and his wife cast him identical stares meant to induce guilt.

“Where have you been, John?” Denise asked, shoveling string beans into her mouth.

“Yes, where have you been, John?” Mandy spoke in exactly the same tone.

Everyone should die at seven, thought Greenleaf, before they become too pragmatic.

“Had some last minute shipments come in.”

Mandy cast the accusing stare she had perfected since Lily died. Greenleaf ignored it and kissed Max in his highchair.

“Greenleaf, I need to tell you something.”

“What is it?” he put a large glob of mashed potatoes on his plate, hoping it would not be about the bird.

“I’m pregnant again.”

There was silence.

“Can I get another bird?” Mandy asked.

“Mandy,” Denise said, “just eat.”

“Well, that’s just great. Maybe I can ask for a raise. Let’s see. I’m up to ten dollars an hour—think I can get nine?”

“Funny, John, funny. But it isn’t like you don’t have--can’t you do something else?”

“What else is there? I thought retail was the pinnacle of achievement.”

There was a moment of stillness filled with the sounds of everyone’s eating and Max banging the tray of his highchair.

“We can ask for your father’s money.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“We never have and we never will.”

“He thinks I’m a loser and he doesn’t want me to have it, right?”

“What’s the big deal, Greenleaf? Is that all you can think about—the money?”

“Don’t you think I’m good enough Denise?”

“I don’t see what that has to do with it.”

“I have spent eight years auditioning for your father’s blessing.”

“Well, who cares what he thinks?” She sliced some cheese bits and fed them to the baby one at a time.

Greenleaf shook his head and shoved his plate away. His whole body shook.

“Max is only two.”

“He’s just out of diapers now. It’s time.”

“Time for what?”

“Nesting...I don’t know. Look, I didn’t do this alone, you know.”

“Your mother is having a goddamn baby and I am going to fucking kill her,” the Old Shit said one day. Greenleaf was ten; his sister Debbie was six. “Or have the damn thing taken out of her.”

“What do mean taken out?” Greenleaf asked.

“Never mind. Just shut your fucking mouth.”

“How can we support this family on what I earn and your part time job?

Something has to give.”

Greenleaf left the table wishing there was another bird to strangle.

Upstairs in the bedroom he stood at the window, staring down at the street. Down below his next-door neighbor Pete, the dutiful father, played ball with his kids.

All right. So birds die. The Old Shit would have laughed about something as trivial as a dead bird.

Memories fought with the present and mixed with the sights and sounds of the neighborhood from Greenleaf’s bedroom window.

“Daddy.” Mandy came guardedly into the bedroom. Greenleaf turned.

“What?”

“Don’t you want mommy’s baby?”

He looked down at his daughter, brushing the sandy curls from her forehead.

“Are you upset?”

“No,” she said.

“I will love the baby the same way I love you.”

Greenleaf picked up his daughter and held her close. He could feel her little heart beating next to his ear, fluttering.

An owl woke him early the next morning. The owl lived somewhere in the woods behind the subdivision. The lamenting cry pushed Greenleaf out of bed and into the bathroom to shave. Denise shuffled up behind him, placing her slender arms about his chest.

“I love you,” she said.

He smiled into the mirror at her.

“It’s so damn early, Denise, could you make some coffee?”

“Yes.”

At the shop things were in chaos.

“Come into the stock room Greenleaf.”

Anne motioned him as soon as he walked toward the cash register. He was hoping for an easy day.

They walked to the stock room which was just a small area behind the store with a backdoor out to the parking lot. Anne opened the door and lit a cigarette.

“Can’t smoke on the floor; damn. Hoist by my own rules.”

She laughed. He did not.

Her “office” was a messy pile of papers on an end table in a corner of the back room.

“Look at this shit. I am up to ears in that crap and taxes are due. Too bad you don’t have office skills.”

“Well, I originally intended to study design.”

“Design? What kind of design?”

“Oh furniture, architecture, fabric...” Greenleaf trailed off into the fantasy of his imagined personae.

Anne stood with her hip slung at his groin, cigarette dangling from purplish lips.

“You know, John---John, we’re missing one of the Elephant totems. Are you aware of it?”

“No, I’m not,” Greenleaf watched the smoke curl out of her nose into his eyes.

“Are you happy here, Greenleaf? Well, happy is a relative term, I guess,” she answered her own question. “But, you know what I mean.”

“I like it here,” he told her, hoping his reply was the right one.

“What does that mean?”

“Well, I enjoy—enjoy what I do, I guess.”

“Don’t sound too sure.” She stubbed the cigarette out on the floor and lit another.

“I don’t know. I guess you’re right. I’ve never been happy much, until now.”

Just then as if on cue, Natalie, Anne’s skinny twenty-two year old lover came into the backroom and slithered her post-modern drippy little body up next to Anne’s overflowing breasts.

“Customers,” Natalie spoke in a stage whisper.

Anne raised a dictatorial hand to the ceiling.

“I’m in a meeting.”

Natalie made a crisp turn, casting a tidy glance at Greenleaf as she left.

“You hate her, don’t you?”

“Not exactly.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Greenleaf, I can see right through you. You’re not such a nice guy. Anyway, why the hell does everybody call you Greenleaf?”

“Don’t know. Childhood name.”

“Didn’t they like you?”

His father had been John Sr. and Greenleaf never wanted his father’s name. He was not about to share this with Anne. As they stood in the tiny backroom, Anne smoking cigarette after cigarette, a fresh spring breeze coming in the open door, Greenleaf imagined Anne’s head twisted sideways on her neck until it flopped down on her shoulders, snapped like a twig.

“What do they do with the bodies after the men die, daddy?” Greenleaf was only four when he asked this.

“They bury them, what do you think? If they don’t have family that claims ’em, then they get buried out back in the prison cemetery.”

“I’m sorry about the elephant. I have no idea what happened to it. I always check off everything on the packing slip when I unpack the boxes.”

“I know you do, Greenleaf, I know you do.”

Anne coughed and took another deep drag.

“I’m probably going to die soon and Natalie will have the store.”

The thought of Natalie as his boss gave Greenleaf a flicker of queasiness.

“Oh, come on, you’re the type—you’ll probably live forever.”

“I smoke four packs a day.”

“Well, maybe you should cut down.”

“Fuck that, I like to live dangerously. How about you?” She did not wait for the answer. “Anyway, what’s so great about life? I want to die soon. Life sucks.”

“I thought you were happy.”

“I am. Life still sucks.”

“Well, maybe now would be a good time to mention-- or not—I don’t know—“

“Oh, spit it out, Greenleaf.”

“I was thinking of asking for a raise. Denise is pregnant.”

Anne let out a hard laugh that morphed into a cough.

“Yeah, she’s a god damn baby factory.” Anne was silent for a moment. All that could be heard was her labored, smoker’s breathing. Greenleaf watched the rise and fall of her chest and her repulsive breasts.

“Natalie wants to take over display and ordering and she’s got a degree in marketing. Did you ever go to college?”

“Junior College.” Greenleaf felt the hum; that familiar subtext he had grown used to become a cacophonous chorus of tuneless sounds.

“So, I am afraid I’m going to have to let you go, Greenleaf. Sorry. I’ll give you two weeks to find something else.”

“I’ve been here four years.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll give you a glowing letter of recommendation.”

“That’s generous.”

He thought a moment.

“I’ve been here four years.”

“So you’ve said, Greenleaf,” her voice insistent and not patient, “but it’s not a time thing, dear, it’s a—well you know, it’s just a business decision. Nothing personal. And if you find that elephant, will you put it on my desk?”

She coughed and pointed to the messy pile on the end table.

“Sure.”

He looked around the tiny space. Anne appeared larger than she actually was. He felt her dwarf the space and take all the available air. He had a sudden sensation he was unable to breathe.

“Are you all right?”

“I need—“

“Why don’t you step outside?”

Greenleaf stepped outside and tried to breath the air for a moment. He’d better remember to bring the Tide home so Denise could do the laundry.

“Greenleaf! We need you on the floor!”

Natalie’s voice ripped through his reverie.

Moving at slow motion, as if he were a visitor inside his own life, Greenleaf walked out onto the floor of the shop and finished the day.

The house was chaos when he got home. Dirty laundry trailed from the kitchen through the dining area to the living room where the baby sat cooing to himself in his playpen and eating crackers. Denise shoved Greenleaf aside with her arms full of more laundry.

“Did you get the Tide?”

“Shit—I forgot. I’ll get it now.”

“Jesus, Greenleaf—I don’t know what goes on in that head of ours, but—“

“I’ll get it now!” his voice rang out into the air and stopped everything dead. The baby shut up and Mandy stood at the doorway to the kitchen holding her breath.

“Here.” Denise handed Greenleaf the car keys. “Why don’t you pick up a pizza or something?”

Greenleaf stood with his hand on the door. Max held up a toy truck dripping wet.

“Daddy truck,” he said and smiled.

“Denise! Max dropped his truck in the toilet!”

“No, he didn’t,” Mandy stated, derision in her small voice, “it’s wet from his bottle.”

“Oh.”

He held his hands up to the ceiling as if in supplication to God. He prayed for an intervention.

“I’m going!” he shouted, pushing Mandy aside.

In the car Greenleaf’s hands gripped the steering wheel. A sense of purpose came over him. The energy pushed against his head with such force that it was all he could do to keep driving straight on the road. It felt like popcorn popping inside his brain. It was how he felt when Bobby Farley shook and danced in the chair, then grew silent.

I am insane, he thought, but so what? The whole world is crazy.

He had a desire for death; it haunted him, he wanted it so bad it made him salivate with anticipation. The popcorn rammed around his conscious mind careening back and forth until his eyes hurt.

On Capitol and First Greenleaf had to go around a delivery truck and ended up on a side street by Wilcox's Frontier Gun Shop. It was an accident of fate but Greenleaf wondered about it. Accidents don't happen, he thought, they are invented.

Jack Wilcox and Greenleaf had gone to High School together. Jack had been on the football team and went with Valerie Spurlock, the homecoming queen. Greenleaf had always been jealous of Jack until he got Valerie pregnant her senior year and they had to get married. Greenleaf reflected on the intersection of fate and misery.

The Frontier Gun Shop was a hodge-podge of discarded things: televisions, cameras, guns, stereos, lawn furniture, computers, dead and unusable, guitars, old amplifiers, ugly statues made of plastic painted to look like wood.

"Hey, Greenleaf, let you out of prison?"

Greenleaf looked down at the collection of rifles in the display case.

"Yeah."

"Going hunting?"

Greenleaf looked up in disgust.

"No. Looking for something small."

"Hand gun?"

"Okay." Greenleaf hadn't thought this out. Great moments in life are spontaneous, he reckoned.

Greg unlocked the case behind him and pulled out a pearl-handled pistol.

Greenleaf did not want to touch it.

"I don't know. It's kind of—"

"Okay, sissy pistol." Greg pulled out another handgun.

“Try this.”

Jack slapped the gun onto Greenleaf’s palm. It fit gloriously. He liked the feeling of cold metal.

“Yeah.”

Wilcox took the gun from Greenleaf’s hand, spun the barrel and showed him the hammer and lock.

“Colt King Cobra 357.”

“How much?”

“Four seventy-five.”

Greenleaf’s look sent Wilcox back to the case.

“Here.” Greenleaf took the gun into his left hand.

“Taurus 83 Revolver 38SP. Two hundred out the door.”

“How about the noise?”

“It’s a quiet gun with a powerful thrust. Want a silencer?”

“Yes.”

Jack pulled a silencer from a drawer and fit it neatly onto the muzzle.

“Quiet as a mouse. Want the case?”

It was an easy transaction. Greenleaf put it on Denise’s credit card. He stuck the gun inside his pocket and threw the case into the backseat.

On his way home Greenleaf heard the humming of his life loud and plain. He planned how he would hide the gun. Several places came to mind and mulling over them kept him occupied all the way.

The kitchen was warm.

“Where’s the Tide?”

“Oh, God—I don’t know-- what—I forgot—“

“What the hell were you doing out there, Greenleaf?”

Mandy marched into the kitchen, hands on her little hips.

“Yeah, what the hell were you doing out there, Greenleaf?”

Denise laughed. Greenleaf looked down at this little imitation of her mother. The only comfort was the gun nestling against his thigh inside his pants pocket.

“Go wash for dinner, I’ll get it tomorrow when I go shopping.”

Greenleaf obeyed. Thoughts were liquid inside his mind; he welcomed the vacation from feeling. Liquid oozed all over his brain like jelly; he was freeing himself up to become the intervention in his own life.

The night was long but the kids went to sleep, finally, after a story. Greenleaf read Mandy “Goodnight Moon” and Max listened too. He kissed each of them, Max in his crib and Mandy in her bed.

He wanted to get on Mandy’s good side. It had been several days since Lily died.

“Look what I got,” he told her and reached into his pocket.

She took the ivory elephant, turning it over and over in her hands. It was smooth marble, opaque, not very childlike or interesting.

“An elephant. What’s it for?”

“I don’t know—some kind of prayer thing or something. It’s a totem.”

What’s a totem?”

“Something you use to make you forget everything else.”

Greenleaf knew the definition was wrong.

“Thank you Daddy.”

She placed the elephant on the nightstand next to the lamp.

“What did you get Max?”

“Nothing. Tomorrow. I’ll get him something tomorrow.”

Greenleaf went downstairs to help Denise finish the dishes. After they cleaned up the house she kissed him and went upstairs. An hour later Greenleaf found her asleep on top of the covers. He lifted her inside the bed and tucked the down comforter around her face and arms to keep her warm.

Once the house was asleep Greenleaf felt his task was effortless. He took the small handgun from inside his pocket and walked carefully into the children’s room. Mandy’s curls covered her face. Sliding the pillow out from under her head Greenleaf gently placed it over her and put a bullet into the back of her skull. There was no noise. Just a gentle, popping sound and silence. Max was on his stomach. Greenleaf turned him over onto his back and put a bullet into his forehead, just above the eyes. A small dribble of blood trickled onto the sheet. Greenleaf watched the blood for a moment and went into his bedroom. Denise was lying on her side, leg up. He placed the gun at the nape of her neck, she stirred; he pulled the trigger. She was not dead. He put a pillow over her head and placed the gun inside her ear, pulling the trigger. She made a grunting sound and her head flopped over his arm. He lifted the head and placed it carefully back onto the pillow.

Greenleaf sat in the living room chair for some time before he was sure no one would come. The gun was still in his hand. He put on his spring jacket and walked out the

door, leaving it unlatched. He walked until he was outside the subdivision and on the main road. He kept the gun inside his pocket and continued walking.

There may be other lives at stake, he thought.

He was sure some part of him had intervened in the hum of his life.

He may have walked for half an hour when an 89' Chevy Impala with Canadian license plates slowed up ahead.

A young girl leaned out the window.

“Want a lift?”

Greenleaf stood silent in the road.

“Hey—you want a ride somewhere?”

There was blood on his pants and on his shirt. It was dark.

“I don't know.”

“Come on,” the young man next to her said with impatience.

“We're from Canada,” she added cheerfully.

“All right.”

Greenleaf walked toward the car and got into the backseat. The Old Shit was dead now, so who cared? The passing lights of cars flickered by his vision as he stared out the open window.