*Pumped Up Kicks*

*Part 1*

My name is Owen, and on October 3rd, my life changed forever. People seemed to think what happened was due to mental illness. Wrong, there’s more to it, a lot more.

The real story began five years ago when my Dad left. I knew things had been pretty rocky. He lost his job a year before, and the three of us were trying to manage on what my Mom brought home from her waitressing job. Dad was depressed; a kid can tell. He’d go out at night, and sometimes forgets to come home. The night he left, was the last time I heard from him. From that point on, Mom and I only had each other.

We lived in a simple two bedroom, bathroom and kitchen apartment in Gaston Park. If you’re not familiar with Memphis, let’s just say it’s not one of the classier areas. The two bedrooms had typical off-white walls, and carpets that were mid brown, except where the stains made them look darker. The kitchen had barfy yellow walls as if to say, “If you don’t like the food, just puke it here.”

Things changed a couple of years ago. Mom met Bill at a local bar. The dates turned into overnight stays. Next thing I knew we were all sharing the washroom. Bill must have been nearing 50, but the torn jeans along with the blonde ponytail suggested a vain attempt to look younger. I felt like he was trying to be a father figure, making rules for me to live by. He worked as a driver for some big shot downtown, but when I asked him too many questions, he would just tell me to do my homework. Sure, Bill so I can grow up to be a driver just like you.

My grade nine principal spoke to Mom last year and said I was devolving. It’s a clinical term for not giving a shit. He recommended professional counselling, which was financially out of the question. The most we could afford was a complimentary consultation through a government sponsored program. The dude asked me all kinds of, “None of your business” type questions, before he issued his prognosis. This is not to be confused with a diagnosis. His prognosis, kind of like the Amazing Fucking Kreskin, was I was going to end up at the morgue, or in some institution. As for his diagnosis, I guess I wasn’t mature enough to handle it, but I later learned it was schizoaffective disorder. I googled it. It’s a chemical imbalance, often triggered by drug abuse. The key symptoms are mood swings, paranoia, delusions, and disregard for personal appearance. The article went on to say it was becoming an epidemic with young teens. His prescription was a bunch of pills we couldn’t afford, and the suggestion that I join a therapy group.

Bill strongly suggested we move away from Gaston Park to a small town 20 miles away. Apparently, the neighbourhood kids here are a bad influence. He was constantly rhyming off crime statistics; pulling them out of his ass. No one ever asked for my opinion. So now, they say I have no choice about moving to some chicken shit town in the middle of nowhere.

On October 3rd, I woke like I normally do, tunes blasting from my clock radio, and the sound of Bill banging on my bedroom door. “Alright, alright, I’m up!”

I crossed the hall into the washroom and went for a piss. I caught my reflection in the mirror. My black hair fell to my shoulders in a tangle. The bags under my eyes had acquired their bags. A few hairs sprouted from my chin like mushrooms on a weedy lawn.

As I lay back down on the bed, I imagined what they were whispering about me in the kitchen. My thoughts were interrupted by the Slayer ringtone on my cell, identifying my buddy Kevin.

“What’s good Owen?”

“Same shit.”

“Your Mom and her boyfriend still going on about moving?”

“Yeah, I’m lying on my bed listening to them yammer on about it in the kitchen.”

“Oh man, that sucks. You can’t let that happen; we have something fan-fucking-tastic good going on!”

“I already told them I the whole thing bummed me out.”

“Did you say you wouldn’t go?”

“I would kill to say that, just to get away from Bill, but I don’t want to sleep in the park. I’m pretty much locked onto Wankertown.”

“There are a lot of people around here you can crash with.”

“I might do that, but I don’t like the idea of leaving my Mom alone with him.”

At the sound of footsteps coming down the hall, I said, “I need to get back to you.” Hanging up, there’s a soft knock on the door, followed by the rattle of the doorknob. Seriously? What’s the point of knocking, if you were just going to come in anyway?

“Owen, please don’t lock the door,” I heard my mom’s voice.

I ignored her, hoping she’d get the message. She didn’t.

“Owen, open up. I need to speak to you.”

I got up unlocked the door. Mom came in and sat on the corner of my bed. Sometimes I worried about her. You know the expression “she wouldn’t hurt a fly?” Well, the fly population must be up, because of her. She sped past the age of 40 a few years ago, and her face was starting to show the mileage. Her gray streaked hair was cut short now, just the way “Bill” liked it. She’d already changed into her uniform, the low cut uniform she called her tip generator.

“Owen, about the new apartment, we’re really excited about getting a fresh start.”

 I groaned, flopping back on the bed, “Do YOU want to do this Mom? What about your job?”

“Bill thinks we’ll all be happier moving there. There are lots of waitressing jobs I can apply for.” I’ve always been protective of my mom. She was easy to manipulate.

“What exactly is going to make Bill...? I mean “us” happier in Creepsville?”

“A fresh start will be good. New friends, new surroundings”...she trailed off.

“It feels like we’re running away. There’s something Bill isn’t telling you.”

I’ve been wondering about Bill’s job lately. The past few weeks he’s kept odd hours, and if anybody asked him, he got irritable. Two weeks ago, I was searching their bedroom for some cash, when I found a gun, hidden at the back of his closet. There it was in a Florsheim shoebox on the top shelf. I took the sleek revolver out of the box, fascinated by the smooth black steel. It felt heavier than I imagined. I aimed at my reflection in the mirror. The lyrics of a Foster the People song came into my head. You better run, outrun my gun. I was about to pull the trigger, when it occurred to me; the gun might be loaded. It was. I didn’t know what to make of the gun. For a moment, I thought about taking it. The problem is he’d know it was me.

“Trust me, Owen. You’re paranoid,” Mom said, bringing me back to reality. “You’ll see; it’ll only take a couple of weeks, and you’ll find yourself at home in the new place. I think a new circle of friends would be good for you.”

“I like my friends here just fine; I don’t need to go to Bumblefuck.”

At this point, Bill barrelled into the room and barked, “We’re packing up this weekend, and you had better get on board.” My lack of enthusiasm must have been painted across my face because Bill’s face went red like a stop sign. His fists balled up as he approached the bed. “We’ll be out of this town this weekend, whether you like it or not.” I knew enough to shut my mouth.

I had to suffer through the homeroom teacher’s eye roll as I walked into class 15 minutes late. The class dragged; meanwhile I was about to jump out of my skin. The only thing more annoying than the teacher is some of the perfect little shits in the class. I bet their mummies still tell them what to wear. They sit there competing with each other to somebody’s idea of what to think, what to believe, what to wear.

 I met up with Kevin, and we decided the day would be improved by blasting a joint. There was a creek, just off the school property, where the cool kids hung out. I told Kevin about the latest sermon from the homeroom teacher. The old fart said, “I never pay attention in class and only hear what I want to hear.” In response I said, “Sure, I’ll have a beer,” hilarious.

Getting to the creek, we rolled a couple of fatties. Kevin’s been my best friend for as long as I can remember. A couple of years older than me, he was tall and athletic. Kevin was clean shaven with hair styled and cut short. He was the kind of guy who always had an angle. He could find a way to get through exams without studying, and find people to do his essays and projects. Yes, Kevin had his shit together. Between drags, he asked what was already on my mind. “Do you have a plan on what to do about the big move?”

 “I‘m thinking, if I can expose Bill for the douche bag I know he is, then maybe my Mom would wise up and tell him to take a hike.”

“Expose him doing what?”

“I don’t know. How about I call him up, find out what he’s doing today, and then we can tell him?”

“That dude is as big as a house, what if he sees us?”

“I’m past the point of caring what he thinks of me, but if he clues in then we bail.” I pulled my cell phone from my bag and dialled. I expected to hear my Mom’s voice, so Bill’s surprised me.

“Hi Bill.”

“Why are you not in class?” he said in an accusing tone.

“Just in between classes. Thought I’d let Mom know, I’m going to the library after school.”

“Really?” he replied, shifting from accusing to disbelief. “I’ll pass it on to her.”

 “What’s up with you Bill, day off?”

After a pause, “I’ll be heading out soon.”

Before I get a chance to say goodbye, he told me to mind my own fucking business and hung up.

 “What a dick.” I said to Kevin

We decided to take Kevin’s blue Mustang. Not exactly the ideal surveillance car, but it would have to do. Kevin always seemed to be flush with cash, and he spent plenty on his car. The black leather seat enveloped me as I got in the passenger side. It took us a few minutes to get to the apartment. As we arrived, we saw Bill leave in his black Monte Carlo. I slumped down in the seat, telling Kevin to follow him at a distance.

We tailed him to a park on the south side of town. He parked the car and started to walk into the park. The fall weather had stripped the trees of color, giving us a clear view. It looked like he was waiting for someone, checking his watch every few minutes. “Dude is totally familiar,” said Kevin.

“You probably saw him on America’s Most Wanted. I think he’s a serious moose fucker.”

Changing the topic, Kevin looked over at me and said, “I have some stuff I want you to move for me. There’s a party tonight. I can’t make it, so I want you to be there.” He handed me a bag of weed.

“Can do.” I was grateful Kevin gave me a chance to be Mr. popular at the party, not to mention earning a few bucks.

After about 10 minutes, a couple of guys in their mid-20s entered the park. Kevin suddenly slapped his hand on the dash startling me, “Now I know where I’ve seen him, he’s meeting with Angelo Vitale and one of his guys. Vitale is high up the food chain man!!” We watched in silence as Bill and the newcomers talked. “I think this answers the question of what he does for a living,” Kevin said. “He’s tied up with the mob.” As he said this, the irony of the situation struck me. Here I was getting railroaded out of town because of my dope smoking, by some shit- for-brains gangster who probably supplied my dope. The meeting came to an end, and Bill started to walk back to his car.

“So what are you going to do now?” asked Kevin

“Just what I planned to do, confront him in front of my mom and show him up for the slithering fucker he is.”

“Just be careful, he doesn’t look like the kind of guy you can mess with. He might just punch your ticket when he finds out you’ve been following him.”

“Don’t worry, I promise everything will work,” I said as I looked at Bill drive away.

Later that evening I was pacing my bedroom, anticipating the confrontation I knew was coming. The Who was blasting “My Generation” on the stereo. My heart was beating like a Keith Moon solo. I played out the upcoming conversation, what I might say, what he might say in return. “Don’t be a wimp!” a voice inside my head said. At six, there was a knock on the door, signalling the call to supper. Showtime.

I walked into the kitchen and took my normal seat at the end of the table. Mom had fixed meat loaf and served us. “I heard you were putting extra time in at the library” she said. I disregarded the comment, taking a bite of meatloaf. I looked over at Bill at the other end of the table, and we made eye contact. We ate in silence before I summoned up the courage, “Bill, why don’t you tell us about your day?”

 “Same as always... eat your food.”

“So do you have meetings in the park with known drug dealers every day?”

Bill stared at me for a moment, taking it in. He caught me by surprise when he abruptly shoved the table in my direction, knocking me to the floor. “What the fuck have you been up to? Spying on me, you little shit?”

Looking up at him from the floor, I rubbed the back of my head for blood, “Why don’t you tell us what you really do for a living?”

Mom cried out for us to stop. Bill approached in a fury; his boulder-sized fists ready.

“What I do is none of your business kid. I bring home money to buy food, and provide a home for you and your mother,” He stood over me, daring me to get up. My mother stepped in between us, putting a hand on Bill’s chest. Bill pushed her out of the way. His aggression with my Mom triggered something in me, and I got up off the floor. I pushed him back, cocking my fists ready to defend my mother. Bill slapped me violently, which drove me back against the stove. I tried to punch him, but he slapped me again. Holding on to the stove, my spirit of self-preservation kicked in, and I reached behind me for the frying pan. I surprised Bill with a wild swing, which he partially blocked with his arm.

“You’re nothing but a fucking drug dealer!” I yelled.

 “I guess you would know; I’m going to have to teach you a real lesson kid.”

Once again, my mother cried out. “Please stop, before someone gets hurt.” I looked over at her, wondering if she noticed the blood dripping from my nose.

Still holding the frying pan I yelled at Bill, “I dare you. Come closer fuckface.” There was meatloaf on Bill’s shirt. For some reason, this made me proud.

“Owen there is something you don’t know. You’re not supposed to know,” said Mom, her eyes pleading with me to put the pan down. “Shut the fuck up,” Bill turned to glare at mom.

“Don’t talk to my mother like that you douche bag.”

“Bill works undercover for the police, and he’s trying to do something about the drug trade in this city. He knows there’s going to be a bust, and he doesn’t want you to get involved with these people.”

“Yeah, kid, I know who you hang with. These guys are not cool. Do yourself a favour and start over somewhere else and get clean. Otherwise, I can’t help you. You and your little punk friends are going down.”

“You’re a lying scum sucker!”

Bill went to the bureau, returning; he threw his ID on the table. “I didn’t tell you. Junkies are bad at keeping secrets.”

The stress had drained me. I didn’t know what to make of everything. I think Bill was disappointed. He would have preferred to teach me a “real lesson.” I allowed Mom to convince me to sit down and “discuss” the situation. Over the next thirty minutes, they described the evils of drugs; the dangers of drinking; the poor friends I had chosen; the missed opportunity of getting a good education; how drugs had changed me; and how they wanted so much more for me. Their arguments bounced off me like hail off the pavement. Then came … the wonderful life in Bumblefuck.

I explained I needed to use the can. Closing the door, I sat on the john, by veins popping. I couldn’t believe how easily my Mom had been duped by that asshole. I’d made promises to Kevin. I knew what needed to be done. I left the washroom, then their bedroom, and entered the kitchen. Bill looked up, and saw me; I raised both my arms holding his gun, just like they do in the movies. I didn’t give him time to move.

“No,” screamed Mom, just as the blast deafened.