

**The First Two Pages of “Something Bad Happened to a Clown”
by William Boyle**

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An Essay by William Boyle

Sometimes a story starts in a dream. Sometimes it starts in a garage.

A few years back, I was in my grandparents’ garage in southern Brooklyn looking at rusty tangles of wires and broken bicycles and retired lawnmowers, listening to Warren Zevon’s *Mutineer*. I can’t remember what I was looking for. Probably something that had been long ago taken to the dump. There isn’t a beautiful old car in that garage, but I started to imagine that there was a ’62 Chevy Impala and that I was drunk (I wasn’t) and that I’d borrow that car and go confront my old man, who I’d been estranged from for more than half my life.

I was guided, as I often seemed to be, by Zevon’s melancholy screwball noir sensibilities. When “Something Bad Happened to a Clown” came on, I felt the tone I was after. That happens a lot for me with his songs. Like the director Alan Rudolph, I’m always on Zevon’s wavelength, the way he balances humor and darkness, longing and rage.

I knew I didn’t want to write a story based on the events of the song. I also knew I wanted to write a personal story but one that wasn’t true at all. An

imagining of the way things might've been. I'm not the character Joey, but I could've been him with a few moves in different directions along the way. I would never want to see my old man again—not to confront him, not to forgive him—and that's one of many ways we're different.

I don't often write in first person. I never have in my novels, and I've only done it a handful of times in stories, but it felt right for this one. The first two pages consist of Joey in the garage, getting in his grandfather's Impala, thinking about all the ways they're different and thinking about using the car to go find his old man in Lowell, Massachusetts and kill him. In this section, there's a reverence for his grandfather, who has some sense of purpose in life. Joey feels separated from that way of being, lost, untethered, lacking that same knowledge of who he is or who he'll ever be. He believes that getting revenge on his old man for abandoning him will cure his problems.

Again, there's no attempt to fill out the story in Zevon's lyrics. A large part of what makes the song such a masterpiece to me is that so much of it exists under the surface. Instead, I wanted to ride that tone somewhere else. This is the beginning of where that took me. Zevon's one of my favorites for a million reasons, and I wear his influence on my sleeve as a writer of melancholy screwball noir fiction. His voice is so desperate and ravaged and whisper-sweet on this song—I hope those same things come through in my story. Every father a clown.

Every son a clown. All of us searching, wandering. Dead ends. Bad roads.

Moments of hope and moments of doom and moments of dark laughter.

The First Two Pages of “Something Bad Happened to a Clown”

I’m in my grandfather’s garage, sitting on a rusted metal folding chair with plastic slats, staring at his 1962 Chevy Impala. It’s crayon black and in close-to-mint condition. Brand new-looking Esso maps rest on the dashboard. Rosary beads hang from the rearview mirror. Forty years later, and it still feels like the past in here. A manual lawnmower is propped on bricks in the corner. Old saws hang from the nails on the walls. TV tubes and oilcans line the shelves on the makeshift storage rack. A framed picture of Thurman Munson catching a pop-up behind home plate leans against a cardboard box stuffed full of rags.

My grandfather, Giuseppe, was a Golden Gloves boxer in his late teens and later he sparred with Rocky Marciano and Jake LaMotta. He worked as a mechanic for Chevy in Coney Island for years before quitting to repair TVs out of his basement. He’s had seventy-five operations. Pisses into a bag. Takes a bowl of pills—blood pressure, cholesterol, whatever else—every morning. Has a pacemaker that they’ve had to open him up for and fix two times. He still walks up to Eighty-Sixth Street every day and plays cards with Carmine Gasso and Frank the Musk. A punk kid from up the block turned over his garbage can a few weeks ago and he swung at him with a baseball bat he keeps hidden under the porch.

I’m named after him, but most people call me Joey. Nobody likes those old school Italian names anymore. My grandfather still calls me Giuseppe, though. He thinks Joey sounds wrong. He also doesn’t like me being in the garage. I’m twenty-four, but he treats me like I’m twelve. I don’t come in here often, except sometimes I get a short dog of wine, sneak in at night, get behind the wheel and pretend.

Today I’m not drunk and I’m not pretending. I’m thinking about my father. I’ve had word on him for the first time in years. I don’t have much money saved up from my concessions job at Shea Stadium, but I hired a private investigator a few months ago, and the guy’s finally turned something up. My father lives in Lowell,

Massachusetts. I don't know how he wound up there, but I know he lives on the third floor of a three-family house and works nights at some kind of club.

Here's the thing about my father: I'd like to kill him. I probably don't have the guts, but that's what I'd like to do. I want to see him to tell him that I'd like to kill him, at least. I don't think I'll forgive him. I don't think I'll break down and cry when I finally see him. But I really don't know how I'll react. I've never had a chance with him. He left when I was three. Packed a bag after a fight with my mom and was gone. My mom's always said there was another woman, some puttana from Jersey. I've seen pictures of my father from when I was born. We look exactly alike except in the pictures he has a beard. That makes me angry. I hate to feel like he's a part of me. I'd like to get married and have a kid someday, and I hate to feel like I'd be capable of skipping out on them. I need to understand how he could do it. I want him to explain it to me.

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