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The Velocity of Saul at the Time of his Conversion

Brant Kassel*

*Iowa State University

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The Velocity of Saul at the Time of his Conversion

Brant Kassel

Click.

Click.

Click. His bike always clicked. The noise was somehow soothing and neurotic at the same time, like the sound of your lover's snoring late at night. It was autumn or fall or the shitty point of the year where it was hot as hell in the daytime and freezing at night. The up and down of the season reminded him of his own mind, a constant rollercoaster left unattended by a drunk operator. He rode down a side street, letting the cool air rush into him, fill him with its coolness and then moving on to its next victim. He was shivering now, having been riding for 15 minutes. He had forgotten why he was riding. A long night of drinking the previous night made the day flow together. It reminded him how he had talked at 2am the night before.

He was a taller man, around six feet tall and lanky, something everyone commented on. *Gee, you're really skinny.* God, how he wanted to snap back each time that it was not his fault they were fat and they should learn to deal with it. He, of course, did not snap back, he was too quiet for that sort of thing. He was a shy, sullen character, and his life an emotional carnival ride. It wasn't always a roller coaster. Sometimes it was more like the tilt-a-whirl, fun most of the time, but it could go bad in a matter of seconds and lasted for hours. Or so it seemed. He was dressed in jeans he'd had since he was 14 and a green flannel jacket he got at goodwill that was likely as old as his father. He was 22, no college education and barely a high school diploma. He'd been stuck in this town for 18 years, a college town where his parents taught abstract topics to eager young minds. The problem was, his parents were too abstract, alienating their simple, workaholic son.

His red road bike was a sturdy bike, enduring the elements to drag his drunk-ass home at three in the morning. He loved that bike; its red paint was one of those standout, look-at-me reds, much like a movie star's lipstick. He found it used, paid twenty bucks, and had it fixed up to run again. The bike was his car, as he was too poor to afford one. His night job, his only job, was a cook at a fancy restaurant where those pompous college people ate. While they discussed politics and philosophy, he discussed in his mind if he had actually washed his hands after using the bath-

room. It was a job that offered little room to move, both literally and economically.

He rode by his favorite bar, The Lounge, a Dive bar with a capital D. He really wanted a bar named Broken Heart or Wretched Life, but most people liked the thin veneer on the exterior of those dens of debauchery. He wanted a drink bad, so bad he simply stopped and got one. Dan was there, but then again Dan owned the place, so it only seemed right he be there. Dan was a scrawny man, bones with the bare minimum of skin and muscle. It seemed as if some great creator had a quota he was close to breaking, so he had shorted Dan on his size. His hair was receding and his eyes were sagging. He was 43 years old but most waitresses at restaurants gave him a senior discount, partly because the town loved him, partly because he looked so damn old.

"Jeezus, its barely two-thirdy and yer in for a drink? I bet it's the same damn thing ya always get." He said, wiping down the bar and setting a square, white napkin in front of him

"Yeah, double 151 and Coke. I'm a creature of habit," hunching over on his favorite stool

"Seems 'dis habit ain't the best but hell, you got yer house, I got mine, so drink up!" He grabbed the bottle of rum and a glass from the shelf.

Dan held a Doctorate in Divinity he bought in some second-hand store in Nebraska, but if you ever heard him, you knew he was hardly a scholar. But somehow, he held The Lounge together for 17 years, making money most years. He got his drink and pulled out his cigarettes.

"Creatures of habit, ain't most of them like, um, opossums and shit? The ones my car hits on the roads?" He had a strange sense of curiosity in his voice.

"Maybe," he said, lighting a cigarette. The smoke lifted itself away from the cigarette, as if even it knew it was horrible. He inhaled, filled his lungs with a dark black color you can't see, and exhaled. "But its nice, ya know? Nothing to worry about. I like the repetition." He had taken off his flannel and set on the adjacent stool.

"Me too. Good fer business." Dan loved him like a son but had no idea what made him tick.

He raised his glass to his lips and started to drink. The warmth filled his lips, his mouth and slid down to his belly.

"Ya always make dat face. Like ya hate the shit. But I know better cuz your in here all the time."

"Yeah, beats me why it happens. Just does. Human beings, we're crazy creatures. 's-like my body knows its not good but my brain says fuck it." He held the glass just barely above the bar, staring at some distance point four miles away.

He took another drink, this one emptying over half the glass. He set the glass down and wiped his lip with his flannel jacket. The sleeves, especially now that it was colder, were always covered in various substances. Snot from his constantly running nose, booze, tears, sweat and anything else he chanced to get on his face. Dan had now moved to the opposite end of the bar and was now preoccupied with his book, something he likely found on clearance at Wal-Mart. It looked like a suspense novel, some cheap Stephen King knock-off. He looked around the bar, with its dingy interior. Even on a sunny day, you couldn't see anything well inside. It had one big window in front, a four-pane picture window to reality for most of the patrons. The bar was littered with ashes and the trays they longed to land in. A pool table was in back, ripped and torn from 16 years of use by drunks.

He gulped down the last bit of the drink and motioned to Dan. He set down the novel, marking his page with those flimsy bar napkins that aren't worth a damn. He sauntered over to the other edge of the bar.

"'Nother one for ya?" Leaning heavily against the dark colored wood of the bar.

"Nope, work beckons. I need to pay." He started to grab his flannel and stand up but was startled back into his seat.

"Like hell ya do!" Dan snapped back. "Christ, you gave me fifty bucks last Tuesday for a twelve dolla tab. Your set for a while kid."

"No shit? Thanks Dan."

"No, thanks to you! You got me the moneys to pay for dat book." He pointed down the bar to his book, the dark, glossy cover shining from the low-grade fluorescent light. "Dat thing is a page turner. Its like *Law and Order*, but in a book." He had his usual grin on his face, a small smirk that let you know he was happy.

"Glad to see you exploring literature Dan. Take it easy."

"Will do, the same fer you." Dan moved back to his book, his signature smile on his face.

He went outside again, buttoning his flannel jacket as he stepped into the fall weather. The cold and clouds were still there. It was fall and they always seemed to be there, sans those glorious gridiron games on Saturdays. He walked towards his bike, adjusting his hat and gloves on the way. He stopped and looked at the large tree across the street. It was an immense tree, covering the area that a large, two-story house would occupy. Its branches seemed to reach heaven or whatever it was that controlled everything from the clouds. Its leaves had started to fall, with the north side of the tree losing the most. He looked towards the ground, once vibrant and green two months ago, was now brown and covered with dead leaves. The light north wind was brushing the leaves around, the rustling created that cliché sound that most writers reminisce about.

He lifted his leg over the bike and began to pedal.

Click. Click. Click.

He pedaled towards downtown, home to his apartment and a collection of shops, both quirky and quality. He should have been there last night, at home and asleep, but the call of a Mr. Jack Daniels and an old roommate left him inebriated and asleep on a bright green couch. That vinyl couch made sleep impossible, unless of course, you were blacked out from alcohol. He checked his watch, a fifteen-dollar Casio calculator watch, with buttons he never used. The time was 3:07 in the afternoon; work was in less than an hour. He pedaled faster, his breathe quickened and the wind bounced off him and his bike.

He headed down Main Street, a group of streets covered in bricks, from top to bottom. The buildings, sidewalks, and the trashcans were all laid with bricks. Except for the artsy signs that most of the small businesses displayed, the place reminded a person of a desolate war zone when all the stores were closed.

He arrived at the door to his apartment, a one bedroom coffin surrounded by brick on the outside and wood on the inside. He unlocked the door and walked up the stairs. The stairway was dark, with one 40-watt bulb at the bottom lighting the whole thing. He entered his apartment and flipped on the light. Within two seconds, Rilo was rubbing his legs, a deep vibration coming from the creature meandering around his ankles.

"Kitty, you hungry? I bet you were lonely without me."

He picked up Rilo and scratched her head, noticing her closed eyes, a sure sign she enjoyed it. She had that animal look

that told you she was smiling. He loved that look. He held her slick, silver and grey hair, watching as she struggled to free herself of her great master's grasp. She flopped on the floor and dashed off towards the kitchen sink. The food was under the sink and she knew from experience to sit there, no matter how long, and soon her gullible owner would arrive. He walked over to his small kitchenette that came with the apartment. He grabbed the yellow bag from underneath and found her bowl next to his stereo in the living room. He poured it into her blue bowl and returned the bag to its rightful home. He grabbed a bottle from the counter, reliable Captain Morgan, and went to his ugly yellow fridge and grabbed a can of generic cola. No need for nice stuff when you're drinking at 3:32 in the afternoon, he thought. He poured the drink, a 50-50 mix of rum and cola. His favorite ratio, since he was too much of a wimp to drink straight liquor.

Ring. Ring. Telephone.

"Hello?" He asked it as a question but he knew exactly who it was.

"Scooter, wanna cover a shift next Wednesday? And don't tell me you got stuff to do, I know you."

Scooter was his nickname, something his co-workers decided to call him. Scooter was the name they give you when you're stuck in a dead-end job like that for too long, or so his co-worker Dave thought.

"Look Dave, I'm tired of that shitty job, let me utilize my one full night off."

"Scooter, here's the deal. If I don't go see Nine Inch Nails on Wednesday, my life is over. I have been trying since junior year of high school to see them, but my fucking parents wouldn't let me. Assholes. Anyway, just take my damn shift."

"Fine, but you owe me fucker."

He hated being such a fucking pushover. His father was a pushover, so it was either genetic or learned. He didn't know nor did he care. The extra money wouldn't hurt, since his drinking had picked up since the leaves started falling. He twisted his wrist around to check the time, noticing how fast time seems to move when you need to be somewhere. He grabbed his glass, gulped down the whole drink, and put the glass in the sink. It burned a little on the way down, but a feeling is feeling, he thought to himself.

"Fuck, I need to go, kitty." He grabbed her, kissed her wet,

cold noise and threw her on the couch. She landed on all fours, as always, and proceeded to simply fall asleep on a big green pillow nestled in the crevice of the couch.

"Lazy bastard. I want a nap too, so just rub it in." The cat stretched its front legs out and curled them into her chest, with her eyes closed the whole time. He thought she was likely dreaming of chasing a rabbit somewhere, though in reality she was probably just sleeping. She was a cat, after all.

He plopped down the stairs, each one seeming to take longer than the previous and made his way outside again. Still cloudy, still cold. He saddled his bike and started pedaling, an eight-hour shift ahead of him. Even with two stiff drinks in his belly, he felt no effects of the alcohol, save for a slight warmth in his cheeks and stomach. Perfect for the cold, he thought.

He pedaled to the café he worked at, La Bistro, a quaint little café that sold coffee, espresso and served up fancy food for too much money. Every time someone ordered food, he always wanted to take it out, and upon arriving at the table, explain to the customer how they were being ripped off.

"Hello sir, here's your goat cheese and spinach baguette. It costs us \$1.54 to make but we charged you \$6.95. What you should do next time is stay at home with your family and buy this shit at a grocery store and spend time with them, not with your fucking laptop doing you're important "shit." And hey, enjoy your soup we poured out a frozen bag and warmed up. Sure we could make the same stuff for a 1/3 of the cost, but why? I only get paid \$6.50 an hour. Plus you think its fancy. A quick FYI, it is not. Have a great day and please tip well."

He arrived at the café, locking his bike to a parking meter. Sweet, sweet irony, he thought to himself. He entered through the back door, seeing as riff-raff like himself shouldn't be seen by those fancy folks up front. He entered the kitchen; the servers greeted him with their bright, sorority smiles, the kind that could blind a person if they are not prepared. He just kept walking though. Fucking servers, he thought to himself, they get all the credit with hardly any work. He grabbed a chef's coat and washed his hands, preparing for the long night. John, the other cook, was there and he was ready to leave.

"Get the hell out of here John, I'm tired of your face."

John smirked back, a friendly jab he had come to expect when they transferred shifts. "Piss off, Scooter. Hey, your lady

friend is working tonight. She'll be here at 4:30. Have fun." John was a stocky man, not fat, but the kind that probably played football at one point. He was short, no more than 5'6", and walked like a rooster, chest puffed out and his arms never touching his sides. The lady friend John spoke of was Anna, a beautiful girl with a crooked front tooth and dreadlocks. How she got a job with dreadlocks at a fancy café was beyond him, but hey, they've hired worse. The worst was Linda, the perky bitch that wrote "LOL" on her application and wrote every ticket with cute hearts and smiley faces.

Anna had worked for three months and was a good server. She treated him with respect and actually seemed sincere about it. Most of the other servers would ask how he was doing and when he replied with something they didn't want to hear, they simply smiled and left. She would at least ask and of course, being a male, he didn't answer. Guys don't have feelings. He grabbed the prep list; a legal pad with scribbles and doodles about all the food he had to prepare for the next day. Tonight, it was only about 10 items long, which would allow him to leave early and head to the bars. The kitchen was about the size of two bedrooms, filled with utensils, an electric range, a crepe maker, dishwashing station, and a table to make food. He went about his job, filling the orders that the servers brought in and working quickly to get them out of his face.

An order for a crepe came in, it being the lone bright spot of the job. It was a skill he had mastered in his tenure there. The odor of the berry filling was strong, covering every inch his lungs with something other than tar and nicotine. He loved how on the menu it was described as 'fresh fruit' when in reality it came frozen in generic boxes from a large distributor. Finishing the crepe, he set in the window and called for the server.

"Jane, order up!"

She walked to the window, which in reality was shelving, a separation the cooks appreciated. It kept the goody-goodyies away from the riff-raff. On the top shelf were all the porcelain plates, stacked in neat, tall rows of 20 or 30. His gut felt a bit queasy and he knew it was going to happen.

"Hey, could you get me another plate? They want to split this crepe."

He knew it. It was the third time someone had asked this month if they could have him get another plate. The shelf was

shared and she wasn't even that short. He usually made a smart-ass remark about how the plates were there and they should just not ask, but today he had had enough.

"Who the fuck are you? They're right above your goddamn head! Just grab one and leave me the fuck alone. Jesus, I should throw it at your damn face."

She was instantly quiet and white, faster a chemical reaction gone bad. She sheepishly grabbed the plate and the crepe.

"I'm sorry."

"Damn right you're sorry. Get the hell out of here."

She left with her crepe and second plate and walked out to the front of the store. The customer better enjoy that damn plate, he thought, all the shit he went through just to get them that damn plate.

"SCOOTER!"

"Fuck off." He blurted it out without even thinking, his emotions taking full control of his body, namely his vulgar mouth.

"Holy crap, sorry. Rough day?" It was Anna and now he felt like an idiot. Not just a regular idiot, but more like Jane must have just felt. Interesting, he thought, I am an asshole.