Bright Shiny Morning

James Frey

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Extract

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On September 4, 1781, a group of forty-four men, women and children who call themselves the Pobladores establish a settlement on land that is near the center of contemporary Los Angeles. They name the settlement El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles de Porciuncula. Two-thirds of the settlers are either freed or escaped African slaves, or the direct descendants of freed or escaped African slaves. Most of the rest are Native American. Three are Mexican. One is European.

They can see the glow a hundred miles away it's night and they're on an empty desert highway. They've been driving for two days. They grew up in a small town in Ohio they have known each other their entire lives, they have always been together in some way, even when they were too young to know what it was or what it meant, they were together. They're nineteen now. They left when he came to pick her up for the movies, they went to the movies every Friday night. She liked romantic comedies and he liked action films, sometimes they saw cartoons. They started the weekly outing when they were fourteen.

Screaming, he could hear her screaming as he pulled into the driveway. He ran into the house her mother was dragging her along the floor by her hair. Clumps of it were missing. There were scratches on her face. There were bruises on her neck. He pulled her away and when her mother tried to stop him he hit her mother, she tried again he hit her mother harder. Mother stopped trying.

He picked her up and carried her to his truck, a reliable old American pickup with a mattress in the back and a camper shell over the bed. He set her in the passenger seat carefully set her and he covered her with his jacket. She was sobbing bleeding it wasn't the first time it would be the last. He got into the driver's seat, started the engine, pulled out as he pulled out Mother came to the door with a hammer and watched them drive away, didn't move, didn't say a word, just stood in the door holding a hammer, her daughter's blood beneath her fingernails, her daughter's hair still caught in her clothes and hands.

They lived in a small town in an eastern state it was nowhere anywhere everywhere, a small American town full of alcohol, abuse and religion. He worked in an auto-body shop and she worked as a clerk at a gas station and they were going to get married and buy a house and try to be better people than their parents. They had dreams but they called them dreams because they were unrelated to reality, they were a distant unknown, an impossibility, they would never come true.

He went back to his parents' house they were in a bar down the street. He locked the doors of the truck and kissed her and told her she would be fine and he walked into the house. He went to the bathroom and got aspirin and Band-Aids, he went into his room and pulled a video game case from out of the drawer. The case held every cent he had $2,100 he

had saved for their wedding. He took it out and put it in his pocket he grabbed some clothes and he walked out. He got in the truck she had stopped crying. She looked at him and she spoke.
What are we doing?
We're leaving.
Where we going?
California.
We can't just up and go to California.
Yes, we can.
We can't just walk away from our lives.
We don't have lives here. We're just stuck. We'll end up like everyone else, drunk and mean and miserable.
What'll we do?
Figure it out.
We're just gonna leave and go to California and figure it out?
Yeah, that's what we're gonna do.
She laughed, wiped away her tears.
This is crazy.
Staying's crazy. Leaving's smart. I don't want to waste our life.
Our?
Yeah.
She smiled.
He pulled out turned west and started driving towards the glow it was thousands of miles away, he started driving towards the glow.

Drawn by plentiful water, and the security of an established community, El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles de Porciuncula grew quickly, and by 1795, it was the largest settlement in Spanish California.

Old Man Joe's hair turned white when he was twenty-nine. He was drunk, it was raining, he was standing on the beach screaming at the sky, which was eternal, black and silent. Something, or someone, hit him in the back of the head. He woke just before dawn and he had aged forty years. His skin was thick and dry and it sagged. His joints ached and he couldn't make fists with his hands, it hurt to stand. His eyes were deep and hollow and his hair and his beard were white, they had been black when he was screaming and now they were white. He aged forty years in four hours. Forty years.

Joe lives in a bathroom. The bathroom is in an alley at the back of a taco stand on the boardwalk in Venice. The owner of the taco stand lets Joe stay there because he feels sorry for him. As long as Joe keeps the bathroom clean, and lets customers of the taco stand use it during the day, he is allowed to use it at night. He sleeps on the floor next to the toilet. He has a handheld television that hangs from the doorknob. He has a bag of clothes he uses for a pillow and a sleeping bag that he hides behind a dumpster during the day. He washes himself in the sink and he drinks from the sink. He eats leftovers that he finds in the trash.

Joe wakes every morning just before dawn. He walks down to the beach and he lies down in the sand and he waits for an answer. He watches the sun rise, watches the sky turn gray, silver, white, he watches the sky turn pink and yellow, he watches the sky turn blue, the sky is almost always blue in Los Angeles. He watches the day arrive. Another day. He waits for an answer.

In 1797, Father Fermin Lasuén establishes the Mission San Fernando Rey de España on the northern desert edge of the San Fernando Valley.

Traffic starts in San Bernardino, an agriculture and trucking city in the desert just beyond the eastern edge of Los Angeles County. They're on a sixteen-lane highway, the sun is up, they're both tired and excited and scared. She's drinking coffee and staring at a map she speaks.

Where we gonna go?

Anything look particularly good?

This place is huge. There's too much to even look at.

Los Angeles County is the most heavily populated county in America.

How do you know?

I know shit, woman, I paid attention in school. You should know that by now.

School, my ass. You saw it on *Jeopardy!*

Maybe.

Maybe nothing. You did.

Who cares. All that matters is I know shit. I'm Mr. Know-Shit.

She laughs.

Okay, Mr. Know-Shit, if you know so much, tell me where we're going?

West.

She laughs again.

No shit.

We're going west and when we get where we're supposed to be, we'll know it.

We're just gonna stop?

Yeah.

And see what happens?

Yeah.

And we'll know it when we know it.

That's how life works. You know it when you know it.

They're nineteen and in love. Alone except for each other. Jobless and homeless, looking for something, somewhere, anywhere here.

They're on a sixteen-lane highway.

Driving west.

In 1821, the Treaty of Córdoba establishes Mexico's independence from Spain. Mexico assumes control of California.

Putt Putt Bonanza. It sounds good, doesn't it. Putt Putt Bonanza. Just rolls off the tongue. Putt Putt Bonanza. Looks great on a sign, great in an ad. Putt Putt Bonanza, Putt Putt Bonanza.

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Seventy-two holes of championship caliber miniature golf (the US Mini-Open has been held here four times). A go-kart track built to mimic three of the turns in Monaco. A bumper boat pool with crystal blue water. A video and pinball arcade the size of a football field, a clubhouse with ice cream, pizza, burgers and fries, the cleanest and safest bathrooms of any attraction in Los Angeles County. It's like a dream, spread across four acres of land in the inappropriately named City of Industry, which is primarily '70s-style ranch houses and mini-malls. It's like a dream.

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Wayne's official title is Head Groundskeeper, though all he really does is pick garbage out of the holes and the water traps and the sand traps. At thirty-seven years old, Wayne is absolutely ambitionless. He likes to smoke weed, drink cream soda and watch porn. He has an office behind the clubhouse, it's a four-by-six room with a chair and television. He keeps a stack of magazines and a digital camera with a high-powered zoom lens hidden behind the television, he uses the camera to shoot pictures of hot moms who are at the Bonanza with their kids. He can only do it when the boss isn't around, and he always tries to frame the kids out of the shots, at the moment he has 2,345 of them. Wayne lives in a broken-down house in a broken-down neighborhood in the broken-down port town of San Pedro, which is twenty minutes away. He lives there with his mom, who is seventy-three years old. He doesn't believe in God, but every night before he goes to bed, unless he's hammered and forgets, he prays to God to take his mom away.

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TJ has big dreams. At twenty-four, he has played in the US Mini-Open three times. The first year he finished 110th out of 113 competitors. The

next year he finished 76th. The third year he finished 12th. TJ wants to win this year, win every year after, and ultimately become known as the greatest mini-golfer in the history of the game. TJ grew up in the City of Industry. His earliest memories are of the Putt Putt Bonanza sign, which is bright blue, yellow and white, and sits on two poles 75 feet in the air. When he was five he traded rooms with his younger brother so he could see the sign from his window. When he was twelve he took a job as Wayne's unpaid intern so he could play for free. When he was fourteen he won the Junior Nationals, and he won three of the next four, the last on a seemingly impossible shot through a windmill, across a bridge, and along a rail that ran over a waterfall. TJ plays mini-golf for six hours a day. He works nights as a security guard at a car lot. He's hoping to join the mini Pro Tour next year, which supports about ten full-time players. He knows if he finishes in the top five he'll be able to join the tour. Top five isn't good enough. TJ has big dreams. He is chasing history.

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Renee works at the sundae bar in the clubhouse. She fucking hates it. She's seventeen and all she wants to do is get away. Get away from Putt Putt Bonanza, away from the City of Industry, away from her father, who works at a missile plant during the day and gets drunk in front of the TV every night. Her mother died when she was six. She was in a car wreck on the 110 near Long Beach. Her father never recovered from it. Sometimes, when he thinks he's alone, Renee hears him crying. Renee doesn't remember much about her mother, but she never got over it either. She doesn't cry, she just wants to get away, as far as she can as fast as she can, get away, away.

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His given name is Emeka Ladejobi-Ukwu. Emeka means "great deeds" in the Igbo language of southern Nigeria. His parents immigrated in 1946, when he was four. They came to California because his father loved fruit, and he heard that the best fruit in America was in Los Angeles. The family lived in Hollywood and his father worked as a

janitor at a department store. He had four other brothers, Emeka was the youngest. When he was six, his father started calling him Barry, and changed the family name to Robinson in honor of Jackie Robinson, who had broken baseball's color barrier the year before. All four boys were raised believing that anything is possible in America, that it truly is the land of opportunity, that they could become whatever they wanted to become. One became a teacher, another a police officer, the third owned a convenience store. Emeka, now Barry, had a different dream: he wanted to bring joy and fun to the middle class at affordable prices. He was eleven the first time he told his father of his dream. The entire family was having Sunday dinner. Barry stood, said he had an announcement to make, and asked for silence. When silence arrived, he said Family, I have discovered my dream, I want to bring joy and fun to the middle class at affordable prices. There was a moment of dense quiet before the room exploded with laughter. Barry remained standing and waited for the laughter to end. It took several minutes. When it did, he said I will not waver, I will make my dream a reality.

Barry struggled in school. He got one A over the course of his entire academic career, which came in eighth-grade gym. When he graduated from high school, he took a job on a construction crew. Unlike many of the men on the crew, he did not specialize in one particular field. He learned carpentry, roofing, painting, electrical, plumbing. He learned how to lay carpet, how to pour cement. He saved his money. He drove a beat-up twenty-year-old Chevy, he lived in a one-room apartment in Watts the bathroom was down the hall. Every night before he went to sleep he lay in bed and dreamed, lay in bed and dreamed.

In 1972 he found the land. It was located on a major street equidistant from the 10 (the San Bernardino Freeway) the 605 (the San Gabriel River Freeway) and the 60 (the Pomona Freeway). City of Industry was a solid middle-class community surrounded by other solid middle-class communities: Whittier, West Covina, Diamond Bar, El Monte, Montebello. The land was flat and clear. The owner was going to build a mini-mall, but decided there was too much competition.

He designed all four courses himself. He wanted them to be entertaining for adults, challenging for children. All seventy-two holes

would be different, there would be absolutely no repeats. He made doglegs in every direction. He made ramps and hills, traps of every conceivable kind. One of the courses had a zoo theme and life-sized animals were an integral part of every hole. Another course was based on the famous holes of real golf courses. The third was based on famous films, the fourth was called The Spectacular!!! and involved all of his wildest ideas. He laid them out himself. He poured the concrete with friends from work. He laid the Astroturf, did the painting. He made sure everything was perfect, built to his exact specifications. Every spare minute away from his job was spent working on the courses. It took him two years to finish them.

He opened for business on a Thursday. There was no clubhouse, no arcade, there were no go-karts, no boats, no parking lot. There was no sign. Just a card table and cashbox at the entrance, with Barry sitting in a folding chair smiling and shaking everyone's hand. He got nine customers. He made thirteen dollars and fifty cents. He was thrilled. He sat there day after day. More and more people came. He saved every cent he made and planned for the future. After three months he had enough to build a small shack that replaced the card table. After eight months he put in a parking lot. He lived in the same place, drove the same car. He wore a collared shirt that said Putt Putt Bonanza on the back and had his name on the front.

Word spread amongst the population of the local communities. People loved the courses and loved Barry and knew good, affordable entertainment when they saw it. Eighteen months after opening, he put in the track, which was followed by the arcade and the bumper boats. In 1978, he built the clubhouse, which was as nice as many of the clubhouses of local country clubs. He considered it his crowning achievement.

The '80s were the "Boom Years." Putt Putt Bonanza was packed seven days a week, 365 days a year. Video games became a cultural phenomenon, led by Space Invaders, Pac-Man and Donkey Kong. Putt Putt Bonanza was featured as one of the primary settings in one of the most popular films of the decade, *The Kung Fu Kid*, which led to an explosion of popularity in mini-golf and the park itself. Barry held races

at the track, had family discount days, established a special section of the clubhouse for birthday parties. The money coming in often went to upgrading or maintaining the facilities, though he was able to build a decent-sized nest egg. For Barry, the '80s were a dream come true, a time when his vision became a complete reality, and when it was celebrated by the throngs of middle-class customers that flocked to his attractions.

When the '90s arrived, it was like someone flipped a switch. People stopped coming as often, and those that did come seemed unhappy. Kids wore black T-shirts and scowls, they openly spit, swore and smoked cigarettes. Parents seemed depressed, and they kept their wallets in their pockets. Wrecks, usually intentional, became much more common on the track, little kids started getting in fights at the boatpond, most of the new video games involved guns and death. Barry figured it was a cycle, and that good times would return.

The Bonanza made enough money to stay open, but maintaining Barry's high standards required that he dip into his savings. As the decade dragged on, and things didn't seem to change, his savings ran dry. In 1984 he had moved from his one-room apartment to a small rancher a couple miles from Putt Putt Bonanza. He took a second mortgage on the rancher to maintain the course. There was a brief return to glory with the boom of the Internet, but it was fleeting. And the kids, they just kept getting worse and worse, louder, ruder, more unruly. Occasionally he would catch some of them drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana, occasionally he'd find a couple of teenagers fooling around in one of the clubhouse bathrooms.

Barry still goes to work every day, still takes great pride in Putt Putt Bonanza. He knows, however, that his dream is almost dead. He's closing the go-kart track and the bumper-boat pond at the end of the year because they've become too expensive to insure, and he knows a lawsuit would ruin him. He can't bear to go into the arcade because it's all weapons and death, explosions and noise. His staff takes no pride in their jobs, the turnover is so high that sometimes he can't open the clubhouse. Some of the concrete in the holes of the courses is cracking, he can't keep up with the weeds, he finds urine in the water traps at least twice a week.

His savings are gone so he can't do renovations. He can stay open, but that is all.

A developer came to Barry and offered to buy Putt Putt Bonanza. The developer wants to level it and build a mini-mall. The money would allow Barry to pay off his house and retire in relative comfort. Barry's brothers tell him to do it, his accountant tells him to do it, his sense of reason and his brain tell him to do it. His heart says no. Whenever he allows himself to hear it, his heart says no, no, no. All day long, every day, his heart screams no.

Before he goes to bed every night, Barry sits in bed and looks through an album he keeps on his nightstand. It's a pictorial history of his life at Putt Putt Bonanza. It starts with a picture of him shaking hands with the seller of the land the moment they closed on the sale. It follows him through the planning, most of which took place at a table in his parents' house, the building of the course, which he did with many of his old friends. There is a shot of him on opening day, sitting and smiling at his card table, there are pictures of him during each of the expansion phases, pictures of him with smiling happy customers, laughing children, satisfied parents. About halfway through the album, there is a picture of him with the stars of *The Kung Fu Kid*: an old Chinese man, a young Italian-American teenager, and a blond ingénue who would go on to win an Academy Award. They are standing at the entrance of the park, the Putt Putt Bonanza sign glows behind them. Barry was forty-two years old when the photo was taken, at the height of his career, his dreams had come true and he was happy. When he gets to the photo, he stops and stares at it. He smiles, even though he knows it will never be like that again, even though he knows the world no longer wants what he has, what he loves, what he has devoted his life to building and maintaining. He lies in bed and stares at the photo and smiles. His brain says let it go, sell it. His heart says no.

His heart says no.