

SEAN CASEY

The Contents of This Shoe Box Are of Greater Worth Than Your Life

THE HAIR THAT COVERS the lower regions of man does not cover my own. What covers my own private region are the feathers of a raven.

The first feather grew from my flesh in the seventh grade. By the end of eighth grade, I was fully feathered about the crotch. On examination in later years, I found new patches on my shoulder and lower back. With such growth, I have wondered if I might be destined to become a raven. I certainly do share some behaviors with ravens. I enjoy snacking on roadkill, for instance. When I'm driving and spot a fresh carcass, I pull over and pounce on it. I jump up and down on it. I bat my arms at my sides.

I mention vulnerabilities to disarm you — to show you, in case you have forgotten, and some of you certainly have forgotten, that I, too, am subject to misfortune. That I, too, am only human (— with the exception, of course, of that avian business about the crotch).

I'd like to put the matter of my feathering aside for a moment, and speak some words in my own defense. I have not lived without my country's criticism. Everywhere I go, it is as loyal and relentless as a shadow. If only I could shine light on this shadow and make it vanish! It lives by my side with the intimacy of a family member — a wife I've never loved, for instance, or a daughter I wish I didn't have.

At points during the past few years, my advisors urged me to take measures to improve my public approval. I did. I hunkered down at my favorite place, the undisclosed location. But I was criticized for my silence, and for hiding out in the undisclosed location. I had no choice but to return to my previous, public existence.

Mostly I'm criticized for being callous. I have never bristled at this. It's fair — I don't care about anything. And by this I mean absolutely nothing elicits a sympathetic response from me. It first dawned on me that I might be callous as the first life left the first toddler I strangled forty-one years ago. In ensuing years, with hundreds more tykes asphyxiated, my condition became clear. I am emotionally embalmed. I am an undead corpse through

whose veins formaldehyde courses. I am drained, not of vital fluids, but of human sympathy. And that fits the definition of calloused about as snug as could be — like a plastic sandwich baggy around the head of a wide-eyed and curious toddler, you might even say.

Only one criticism has the ability to move me. I hear it with frequency. “He started a war,” they whine. “But he makes others do the killing.”

Boy, does that one get me steamed. I’m so steamed right now, for instance, in relaying those words to you, that these words I now type come interspersed with expletives in all caps which I will have to edit out at a later time.

Yes, I have labored tirelessly to send American teens to war. And I am especially proud a disproportionate amount of our American poor and brown die for this great nation. I even applaud President Clinton for including queers. I have on countless occasion encouraged my own daughter to join the Marines, even so recently as forty-five minutes ago. I wrote her an e-mail. I wrote, “JOIN THE MARINES. LOVE, DAD.”

But to say I have not killed! I’d wager I’ve killed more by my own hands than I’ve ever ordered killed. How many politicians can say that? Do you think Senator Reid has choked anything to death, aside from his own emaciated Mormon chicken?

No, sir — I’ve killed plenty. I mentioned toddlers. They may be small and weak, but they count. Killing a tyke is like stealing candy from a baby, which I’ve also done. Even if you luck out and get a live one, a “little toughie” with a dose of fight, he can’t manage much resistance.

Only once I did encounter an anomalous toddler. It was autumn. My wife and I had just left a dinner when, on the next block, I spotted pint-sized prey. I said, “Wife, hold tight. I leave to speak to someone about a horse.” She sighed but, knowing what was good for her, obeyed without objection.

At a trot, I took off after him. A curious little gentleman, this toddler. Dressed in adult garb, a neatly pressed black suit, he swung a shortened shillelagh ahead of his step. This toddler was no stranger to leisure, and I had caught him on an evening stroll! But with the gorgeous, metallic taste of blood on my tongue, I dwelled little on his eccentricities. On cat’s feet I made my final approach and, as he turned down an unlit, unpeopled side street, pounced. I got my hands around his neck. I tightened grip, and lifted this toddler aloft.

Something was amiss. This neck I squeezed was of unusual thickness; this toddler was of uncanny strength and density. He gave me a strong bicycle kick to the throat, and almost fed me my own adam’s apple.

But that was all he got on me: I dropped him, took hold of his ankles, swung around like a discus thrower, and finished him off against the dumpster of what I believe was an Applebee's. His life finally freed from his small, terrifying body, I gingerly laid him down in a gutter puddle to pay my respects. I was thinking to myself, "Man, I totally owned that toddler," when the unlikely bulge of a Death Boner asserted itself in his black trousers. I thought to myself, "Toddlers can't do that, can they?"

It was then I realized this wasn't a toddler at all.

Why do I kill? Because killing vivifies me. When I have a human by the throat who lives his final moments, the world, sensing the imminent glory of the kill, pours forth in fluorescence. The world takes a flash photograph of itself and pulsates in a rainbow strobe. All matter turns its respective, fluorescent hue. All animals escape their hiding spaces and wave. Hot pink rats, lime green squirrels, incandescent pigeons. Even animals not traditionally associated with cities — coydogs, deer, moose — come visit. (I bet you've never seen a fluorescent brown moose before. Your Vice President has.) When all animals are together, they sing me my praises. The special song they sing is not made of notes but of color — warm, sensuous sheets and washes of tropical pigment. The sublimity of their song is such that eyeballs are born into nonsentient objects which never before have had eyes — like trash cans, like trees — so that these objects, together with the animals, can bear witness to my majestic performance. I stand, illuminated by the world, a hero playing myself in a Saturday morning cartoon.

I stopped hunting toddler over a decade ago. They were fun, they were a pest of sufficient quantity, but they were so easy.

Without my little friends and our short-lived friendships, I suffered severe bouts of kill withdrawal. I was prescribed antidepressants which I took each morning with warm cups of blood I siphoned from homeless, handicapped, Vietnam vet losers. But the medication did no good. Afternoons became an insufferable, unconquerable expanse without corpses inserted as punctuation. Oh, how I longed for my little friends, for some substitute for my little kills!

When suffering reached its nadir, I took action. I began early morning drives around the city. When I saw a person I did not like the looks of, I rose up through the sun roof and hurled lawn darts at him. If my target attempted evasion, I ordered Winston, my driver, to make pursuit. We pursued as long as it took. Sometimes, with more fit targets, the hunting excursion lasted well into daylight hours. But I never chose a target I did not end up finishing. As soon as I picked one, his remaining time was cut to a pitiable duration. When

I have my heart set on something, that something dies.

It wasn't long after the lawn darts that the old longing to roll up my sleeves returned. I modified my hunting. Instead of underhanded lawn darts, I instructed Winston to idle. I dashed from the car, grabbed the culprit by his throat, and stayed there squeezing for approximately one hour. As these were adults, the kill demanded from me more finesse and rigor — as well as a fair share of ice and gauze afterward — but the task of my target remained the same: to die.

The hour-long stranglehold was a real bitch in terms of muscular endurance. Also, it was much longer than it took to kill a person. But I thrilled in watching my prey's face pale to a beautiful porcelain, and loved to be there when a death grin stretched across it. The individual turned from man to marble monument of the man he once was and would never again be.

Invariably, the body settled into a posture for its final rest and, like a restless body getting comfortable in bed, there was some fidgeting. But unlike a body getting comfortable in bed, this body was suspended in the air, and deceased. While I found it cute that, postmortem, a corpse continued to putz about, part of me was enraged by my kill's hubris. When I said stop, I meant stop, goddammit!

Of course, all this came before the shoe box.



In 2000, I made a New Year's resolution to give back to my country. While I considered my previous kills a form of community service — a pulling of tiny weeds from the concrete garden of our country's capital, if you will — it was service with an edge. Tough love, and so tough it killed. In 2000, I resolved to cease hunting humans of any age. Instead, I would donate priceless artifacts of Americana to underprivileged youth.

Each week an impoverished neighborhood was chosen—a neighborhood where in years past I had hunted. In preparation, my aides alerted all elementary and middle schools in this neighborhood, instructing principals to direct students to a designated parking lot when I arrived.

Each Thursday morning, one of the neighborhood's underprivileged children, singled out by teachers and community leaders for character and potential, received a five a.m. wake-up call from yours truly. After several loud screeches to ensure an awake audience, I informed him of his selection to receive the sacred shoe box, and that what he felt at that moment could be justly termed ecstasy. I provided a quick definition of ecstasy in case the child didn't know the word. I also told the youngster to purloin from his mother's wardrobe an article of delicate clothing, preferably something silken.

I was moved to serve the community in the afternoon. When the urge to serve made itself known, I summoned Winston and my aides, and rode out. Schools were called while I was en route so that all children would be assembled by my arrival. Timing was of the essence. When it came to the shoe box, I was one impatient community servant. And when I get impatient, I get cranky. And when I get cranky, a lot of folks end up dying—and, as I mentioned, I had quit hunting.

At the assigned spot, the children did what came naturally—they circled me and began singing me my many praises. They left a single aisle open for the entry of the honored child, who, when summoned, stepped forward, smiling, draped in an article of his mother's clothing. I bestowed the sacred shoe box upon the child, who held it reverently in both hands.

I got to work. I shook out my arms and legs to prevent muscle pulls and did a few quick deep knee bends. I put on my executive branch head- and wristbands. I unbuckled and dropped my drawers. I stooped, and, with one hand on the child's head, hummed my own jazzed-up rendition of "Taps," and passed the day's mighty stool.

Some might doubt the power of my action. For those, let me add that during my stool's passage, the world again turned fluorescent, and the animals came out and danced and waved and sang songs not of sound but of color—all that transcendent beauty was born again into this world, just as it had a decade ago when life left my strangled tykes. But this time, the only strangling I did was with my sphincter. I cut the stool to a desirable length and let her fall.

My earth-enhancing bowel movement confronted the shoe box child with life's big questions. Would he wait until the stool dropped to barehand it into the shoe box? Or, if intrepid, would he hold the shoe box underneath his Vice President and catch the feces on the fly? And, following this crucial matter, which techniques would the child employ in honoring, surveying, and then ministering to my anus?

In studying my soiled terrain, paying it obeisance, hatching and then executing a cleansing strategy, each child was on his own—much as the aboriginal youth is left in a wilderness to fend for himself before entering adulthood, except here the wilderness was the pale, barren landscape of my backside and its fearsome sinkhole.

It is fortunate, then, that all of the city's underprivileged children received guidance with regards to my rectum. In addition to preparation for standardized exams, each student in the city's public school system assiduously studied my executive egress daily. Models of my anus were made (and boy were they fun to make) and installed in each classroom in the city directly above the

American flag. Each morning all students venerated, assessed, and cleansed the models. In their daily ministrations, students did not simply memorize a set of uniform techniques as they might in mathematics class, but developed individualized styles. In some schools, this interdisciplinary butt stuff usurped entire departments of art and physical education, and rightly so: what is more important for disadvantaged inner-city youth than maintaining the cleanliness of my asshole? And what endeavor is more artful and demanding of physical rigor than its cleansing?

When I was ready to receive my ablu­tion, I bent at the knees and raised my arms to an angle 45° with the ground. I was like Superman about to take flight, but with my drawers at my ankles. In truth, this was a yoga posture I saw my wife doing in front of the television.

The shoe box child began his veneration. This was a cleansing, a spiritual cleanse, which students approached with utmost reverence. If done poorly, I would feel spiritually filthy afterward. The child lit incense, deposited it in a censer, and swung the censer about my bottom: right, left, over, under — right, left, over, under. His comrades serenaded him with baroque playground rhymes that employed the local, broken vernacular. When the rhymes reached a crescendo of folksiness, the child fell under its spell, convulsed, and then gave, in perfect, textbook English, a lively recitation of my virtues.

With a good cuffing from a school administrator, the child calmed and proceeded to the next step: a surveying of my terrain — the true American territory of my anus. My anus is, in fact, so American a piece of real estate, I have long petitioned that its wrinkled real estate be made, if not a new state, at least an official district of this great nation. In reviewing my intimidating topography, kids were encouraged to relax and take the time needed to get their footing, so to speak. Advanced students read the cryptic script across this darkened epidermis with the openness those of religious orders employed in *Lectio Divina*. Such students developed their own personal relationship with my hole. For them, nothing was more precious; nothing, not even death, would get between them and my rear. Other students opted to close their eyes and simply intuit what potent *chi* emanated from my hole and the exquisite furrows issuing therefrom. The more scientific minded took a different tack, bringing magnifying glass, surveyor's level, calculator, and protractor to the task.

The goal of all students remained the same: to locate portions of exceptional filth and potentially sensitive irregularities — polyps, hemorrhoids, abrasions, executive branch eczema, rashing, and redness — and, in so doing, ensure a cleaning both effective and pleasurable.

Next came my favorite procedure: the physical cleanse. For this task, most

children opted to microcleanse. A quiet, deliberate method favored by aesthetes, contemplatives, and pragmatists, microcleansing combined loving appreciation with due attention to each nook. The microcleansing child put his mother's clothing to careful use, dampening it with water and rubbing alcohol and gently removing all excrement around and up to two full inches within. Of course, I allowed only the softest fabrics access to my executive exit. I once regrettably disemboweled a child for attempting to attend to my butt with burlap.

A small but stubborn minority of students opted for the maligned macrocleaning approach. This method utilized forceful buffing, hygiene punches, and impact sanitation. Beefy and otherwise insufferable macrocleansers developed "The Juggernaut," a cleanse in which the mother's clothing was tied tightly about the head with barely space to see, and the cleansing child sprinted from a distance of twenty yards directly into my buttocks.

Not all macrocleansers were without subtlety, however. Finesse macrocleansers brought precision towel flagellations and a boxer's speedbag jab to my bottom. Its detractors in the liberal media notwithstanding, macrocleansing did its job as well as microcleansing and, what's more, the reverberations it sent through my body *in no small way* massaged my prostate.

Of course, not all children were of equal ability. Some children were simply stronger than others at spiritual and physical hygiene practices. To safeguard against residual filth, after the child exhausted his own techniques, one of my aides went in deep with a warm White House squeegee.

Next came a close examination of the contents of the shoe box.

My trousers were hoisted, zippered, and buttoned by elderly community leaders. My aides set up the travel throne. Seated, I beckoned the child of honor. Holding the sacred shoe box as he might a newborn, the child approached. In front of his assembled peers, I tutored the honored one on the cosmic import of my ordure. Using small words to ensure comprehension (and the local pidgin wherever possible, as garnish), I explicated its contours, its clefts and protuberances, its turns and straightaways. I interpreted all its varied geography, and explained how each divot would significantly impact world events for centuries.

In finishing, I explained to the youth the monetary and spiritual value of the contents of the shoe box. I laid my hand on the youth's shoulder and said: "Son, the contents of this shoe box are of greater worth than your life, and the lives of your entire extended family — past, present, and future — from your great-great-great-grandmother now soil beneath our nation's surface, to your great-great-great-grandchildren, not yet close to being incarnate. Congratulations."



Only once did I perform an anomalous act of community service.

On one Tuesday morning in the autumn of 2001, I had dropped my trousers and crouched down to grunt one out. The chosen one held the shoe box at the ready, his mother's scarf tied about his head. His peers watched. I opened the day's *Wall Street Journal* and was reading a really interesting article extolling the virtues of the unfettered free market when I felt something weird in the anus department. Instead of the standard, pleasurable turd working its way out, I felt a grand presence of unprecedented, historical import. Its slow trajectory through my innards combined pleasure with the sublime fringes of patriotism and pain. Standing in place, I performed the most grueling of anaerobic workouts for my nation. I dug deep, I pushed, I wept and whinnied. My navel popped in hernial bliss. I ran wind sprints in place. My eyebrows began to smoulder.

With pints of sweat lost, victory was almost in the grips of my sphincter. It was then I felt a small, sneaky digit poke its way about that rubbery flesh. Whatever it was, it had a will of its own.

"The turd moves!" I thought. "These kids are in for a treat."

The detritus made headway and breached the hole. I turned to the kids.

"Hey, mind taking a peek back there, and let me know what's shakin'?"

In the ensuing stampede, more than a few children were trampled. I'm assuming they died, but I didn't bother to check. Luckily, several unscathed survivors reached my backside and got a good look.

"Mr. Vice President, it looks as if you are about to pass not a stool, but a bird!"

"And a black bird at that, sir!"

While I did not believe the children, their reporting caused all joy to exit my body. It struck me how joy leaves one: curiously, by way of no orifice whatsoever. The world went from an exotic rainbow of fluorescence to one of grayscale, black and white. I shivered in fear at this sharp contrast, and shivered again when whatever I passed began to call out.

"Ca-caw! Ca-caw!"

"Ca-caw!"

The kids were right, damn them — I was passing a raven!

A full-grown blackbird dropped from me. In quick succession, two additional male ravens joined it. How did I know these ravens were male? Because I'm a raven specialist? No. Because hanging from their thin raven legs — and, in fact, resting uncomfortably on the pavement — were generous *human male genitals*. And what's more, these ravens' genitals were cloaked not in feather but the most rich of human pubic hair. Oh, how I envied these

ravens their lengthy genitals, their luxuriant hair!

The three ravens didn't seem to be at all bothered by their births and bodies. They looked, in fact, like veteran ravens. Ravens that had been around this world for many lifetimes. They looked at me knowingly.

Of a sudden, one raven took flight. It flew west. The other two ravens took flight northward.

It was breathtaking, and not only because these ravens sprung from my butt, but because of the grace with which they flew with such heavy human penises hanging beneath them. They flew with an urgency that did not lack dignity. It was a sight so breathtaking it took all the breath away from several of the children witness to its majesty, causing them to perish by a truly pure suffocation — a suffocation that did not require any strangulation whatsoever.

I later learned the first raven flew to the Pentagon, the latter two to New York City. All three ravens dove to their deaths in the wreckage of that day. But that day, that morning, I did not need confirmation. My pants still dropped, I sat down on the curb. The children, in silence, surrounded me. I knew that, soon, I would have to go to my undisclosed location.

I buried my head in the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. For the first time in my life, I wept.

Everything started to make sense.

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