

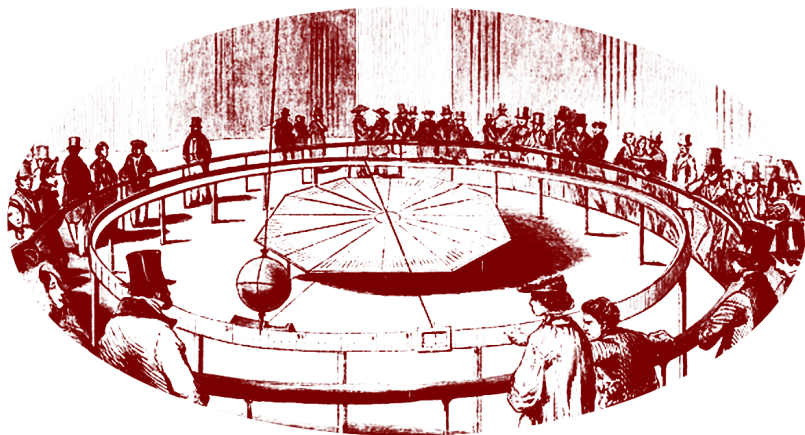
THE WAGON

ASTONISHING TALES OF THE EVERYDAY WORLD

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Containing works of fiction in serial form, the odd short story, and just about anything else we feel like throwing in. Eddie Mulnix: publisher and contributing author.

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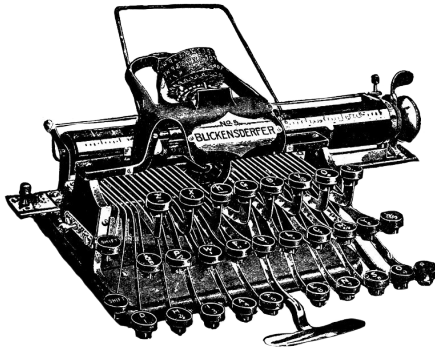
Highway 126, Part One

(from Smog City Magazine #2)

4

Techoca Mountain

39



A Wagons of Sin Press Publication

A Note to the Reader

Welcome to the first issue of *The Wagon*. I intend this to be the digital cousin of our flagship publication, *Smog City*—with stories reprinted from there to go along with new content. Since the format of *Smog City* doesn't lend itself to digital distribution, I figured this would be a better way to get my stuff out there into the hands of the “masses” (HA!). Eventually this may be a stand-alone publication— we'll see how it evolves.

Best,
Mulnix

“Highway 126”

The midnight-blue 1964 Chevy Impala pulled into the parking lot of the Oak Center Shopping Mall. The driver eased the car slowly over the yellow speed bumps—one hand curled around the steering wheel, one tattoo-covered arm draped over the driver side window. The other two passengers in the car glared out at the parking lot from behind wraparound shades. It was two days before Christmas, and Luis Huerta, otherwise known as “Sapo”—ex-con, drug kingpin of the Santa Clara Valley, and reviled member of the Mexican Mafia—needed to find a Tickle-Me-Elmo Doll.

Luis knew he didn’t belong at this mall, in this part of town—fucking *Thousand Oaks*. But it was his son’s birthday, and Luis had forgotten, and he made it a point never to forget things like that. It was part of the code he lived by, that even if the family at home came second to *la familia*, the one that had gotten him

through five years at Folsom, it was still more important than almost anything else. He thought of his father: orange electric cord tied around the wooden pockmarked puppet's arm, the gaunt face that was all eyes and mustache, the smell of heroin cooking up—a smell as familiar and haunting to Luis as the smell of his mother's cooking grease, a scent that came to him sometimes in his dreams. He could remember the day he'd found the old man—legs splayed out, eyes wide and glassy and surprised above the mustache, cartoons playing on the TV, works strewn out across the dirty green carpet like toys—and when Luis yelled at his son, made his son cry, he thought of the likelihood that he too would soon be dead, and what he felt was not guilt but the desire, somehow, to make things right in the ways he could. And so there were toys spread out all over the stairs and the living room floor, a kaleidoscopic day-glo plastic playland, a different living room for his son to grow up in, a living room without green carpets.

The other day that Tickle-Me-Elmo had come on the TV and his son's eyes had lit up. He hadn't forgotten that look. He knew at that moment that he'd get the boy that doll no matter what.

So here they were.

Luis got out of the car. Gabriel puffed on a Marlboro and posed. Luis loved Gabriel because he prized loyalty and fearlessness—and Gabriel had both. He was a funny motherfucker, too, always talking shit. And then there was Ruben, who was a different story altogether. Ruben was like a little brother to Luis and basically trustworthy, but the problem

was that he was unpredictable and strange. When he started twitching and moving his lips like he was talking to himself, Luis got annoyed and embarrassed and even a bit nervous. When you came right down to it Ruben was crazy, but not crazy in the way Luis needed him to be, not dangerous. He was straight-up fucking *weird*, and getting worse with time.

Luis closed the door to the car, locked it, and looked over at the other two.

~ *Incognito*.

~ *Orale*.

Gabriel finished his smoke and flicked it off into the darkness of the lot and the three of them walked towards the front entrance of the mall.

Incognito. That was the motto. Luis had served a total of eight years behind bars, and if you added up all the time he'd spent in the Lancaster Youth Authority before the age of eighteen you could go ahead and say he'd spent a full decade of his short life locked up. Ten years was enough. Too much. So now the idea was to move the cocaine and the heroin and the methamphetamines and the pills in a carefully circumscribed area: no contact with the outside world, no sudden moves. *Incognito*.

Which was why being in the mall made him uneasy. The three of them cleared a path through the Macy's crowd: Luis leading the way, every inch of his arms covered in tattoos of misshapen breasts and hypodermic needles and spiders and Mexican truisms in old English lettering—morgue blue, prison blue. Gabriel and Ruben hung back, Gabriel with his pants

sagging down below his knobby kneecaps, strutting, cracking his knuckles, nodding flirtatiously at the girls behind the makeup counter, Ruben with hands in pockets looking agitated. The three of them walked through Macy's and out into the scrum of the mall—the mothers and children, the teenagers, everyone happy and excited and white. All around were the bright lights and dull faux gold of Christmas. Luis watched the smiles freeze, the fear come into the eyes of the people around them. He liked their stares, relished their fear. He was everything they feared and more. They couldn't live in his world, couldn't even begin to *imagine* it.

They stopped on the edge of the food court. Luis looked around and up and said:

~ That's where we wanna go.

He pointed. High up above, on the uppermost tier of the mall, the letters stood out in glowing red: GAYBEE'S TOYS.

Gabriel shook his head.

~ We came all this way to go to a fuckin' *toy* store?

~ Chaco said he wants a Elmo doll.

~ We're here to get a doll? So you can get your kid a *doll*?

~ Shut the hell up and let's go.

They walked over to the escalator and got on. Luis looked back, knowing already what he would see. Ruben and escalators were a problem. Ruben stood there, timing his jump, his lips moving like he was saying a prayer. Luis wondered for the hundredth time why he kept watching out for the maniac. *You gotta cut this fool loose*, he told himself. *You gotta get rid of this*

motherfucker. Finally Ruben hopped on and grabbed the rail. Gabriel made a tsking sound and shook his head. Ruben looked at him and gave a sheepish half-grin and nodded as if to say *what's YOUR problem?*

The line at the toy store stretched from the register all the way outside the front entrance.

~ It's crowded here.

~ Don't care how crowded it is, man, I gotta get that doll. You don't like it, go sit in the car like a little *joto*.

~ I ain't no *joto*. Man I just don't wanna wait in no line.

~ Who said we waiting in line? Just chill out, *motherfucker*.

~ Shit, I'll chill out. I'll chill out over here and wait for you fools.

Ruben walked over to the railing outside of the toy store and leaned against it, looking down at the swarm of people far below. They were like maggots he'd once seen oozing out of a dead cat, spilling out of the hollows where its eyes had once been, out of its burst stomach. In the plaza four floors down there was a Carousel. It rotated slowly, almost in time with the nausea turning in his stomach, the top of the thing covered with awful Christmas lights and painted scenes of horses galloping in some faraway and long ago place as alien to Ruben as the surface of the moon. The mall made him nervous, made him want to count. He hated to count but he couldn't always help himself. He tapped the back of his right hand: ten taps, then five, then

two because two times five is ten. He tapped the back of his hand and watched the people swarming below. He hated to count but he couldn't always help himself, especially not in a place like this. *It's okay just this one time*, he told himself.

Luis ran his finger down the side of the box, reading, while Gabriel stood around. Gabriel always looked like he'd like to be someplace warmer—with his sleeves hanging low over his hands and his scrawny knees. He hated to wait around just about anywhere. Luis took forever reading the box—because slow and methodical was his nature, and because he wasn't gonna come all this way to buy the wrong goddamned doll.

~ Chaco says he wants the one you tickle. You know which one you tickle?

~ Huh? Fuck should I know?

~ Tickle it, man.

~ Tickle my nuts, bitch.

~ Ahh, come on, man. Tickle the doll.

Gabriel made a face and tapped the doll like it might bite him. The doll came alive, giggling and twitching in the box like a living thing. Then it screeched tinnily: *I LOOOOOOVE YOUUUUUUU!*

Gabriel laughed and covered his mouth with one hand.

~ What the fuck.

~ Yeah, this is the one. Gloria's gonna hate it, but that's just too bad. Maybe it'll keep her awake

when she's sitting on the couch watching her stories.

They walked over and stood there for a moment looking up and down the length of the line at all the people waiting to make their purchases. Then Luis walked to the front of the line and put the toys down on the counter in front of the cashier. She looked around uncertainly and took the box and rang it up and put it in a bag. Luis looked back at the people in the line.

~ I got a old war injury. Can't stand around too long. You gotta support your veterans, right?

No one said anything. One lady tittered nervously. Luis turned around and smiled at the cashier and leaned on the counter.

Nick Haraway was pissed off. Regina was pregnant and the baby was due in a couple of months and they weren't sure what the gender would be but as usual Regina was real impatient about everything so they'd driven in all the way from Encino and bought an assortment of stuff, hundreds of dollars worth of clothes in both pink and blue, toys both masculine and feminine, half the goddamned mall it felt like to Nick. He wouldn't be surprised if the edge of his credit card was glowing from all the swiping he'd done with it the past couple of hours. And with things at work uncertain, with the music industry in the shitter and him hanging on to his job by a thread, he felt like today was just the latest day in a long line of bad days, another day where people seemed like they were lining up to smear excrement on

his face. And Regina, she wanted him to *smile* through it all.

When the big Mexican and his buddy cut in the front of line he hit his bullshit limit. Regina didn't seem to notice or care. She was stoic in crowds of people, accepting of the long wait, the assholes. Accepting of everything. Hell, Nick was halfway sure she *enjoyed* situations like this, squeezing in with half the shits in the world to fight over a couple of Chinese-made hunks of garbage. And now standing in line behind all of them, everyone afraid because a guy has a couple of scary tattoos? Please. Who doesn't have tattoos? Nick even had one on his back, a big one of an eagle. He'd had his fair share of fistfights in college, he hadn't winced at all under the stinging stab of the tattoo needle, he'd come from a modest-to-bad neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley and worked his ass off and made something of himself and he liked most Mexicans, the good ones, the hard-working ones—but this guy wasn't one of the good ones. This guy was a thug, plunked down into the world Nick had made for himself. It was like Nick was back again at North Hollywood High, a scared skinny white boy in a long white t-shirt trying to affect a limp. Something in Nick was bitter and unsettled to think you couldn't ever really get away from them, even if you buried yourself in the safety and sanity of the toniest shopping mall in town...

When he realized he was himself again, a 30-year-old man with a mortgage and a family and a college degree and a tattoo of a screaming eagle on his back, he walked up to the front of the line without thinking twice about it, ready to throw down.

~ Excuse me.

Luis looked up at Nick.

~ Don't you think you should get in line with the rest of us?

Gabriel laughed and said to Luis without taking his eyes off of Nick:

~ *Chinga te*, holmes. You gotta get back in line.

Luis leaned toward the cashier.

~ You got a lot of faggots shop here?

She looked up and around the room at everyone but Luis, then back at the blue numbers on the cash register screen.

~ That's \$34.70, sir.

Nick stood at an angle to both of them, watching, thinking maybe he could take the skinny one, knowing he couldn't take both, not giving a shit either way. He had that feeling of no return that comes when anger goes too far, the excited terrified feeling you get in your gut when violence is about to happen, the closest thing to an orgasm you can have without doing the deed. It was time to deal with some stuff. Time to vent. Time to *go*.

~ I'm *talking* to you, motherfucker!

Nick stepped toward Luis and shoved him hard with both hands and was rearing back to take a punch when Ruben's fist came out of nowhere, a straight right shot that caught Nick on the side of his jaw and knocked him against the counter and to the floor.

They fell on him without hesitation, without mercy. People stood in line, frozen to the spot. It had all happened in the space

of two or three seconds. Regina Haraway had not even noticed her husband walk to the front of the line and for a moment, watching him being beaten, she couldn't understand what she was seeing. Then one of his ribs snapped under a hard kick and he screamed and it broke her paralysis and she started for the front of the store as they hit her husband in the face again and again.

~Oh my God what are you doing—

Blood ran down the side of Nick's face and splattered the front of the nice Izod shirt he'd gotten for Father's Day. There were white flecks of teeth on his lips and chin. He didn't think of himself as 'Nick', was no longer "Nick". He was an animal, a wounded animal being torn apart, his eyes stunned and glazed with shock. Hadn't he been standing there just a second ago with all the pieces of his world fitting together in a way that made sense? *I'm not dreaming, my God I'm not dreaming* he thought to himself as Luis picked him up from behind, hefting him up by his shoulders.

~Get his fuckin' feet—

Gabriel wrapped his skinny arms around Nick and they lifted him up and as they carried him out through the front entrance he realized what was happening and his wife realized what was happening and everyone realized what was happening and that's when the screams started, Nick's voice the loudest of them, pleading.

~*No no no no no no no no*

They stutter-stepped with him through the swarm of

pedestrians, Abercrombie and Macy's bags flying, boxes of cologne and candies and men's ties and countless other sundry items spraying out over the floor, an old woman crying out as she fell hard to the floor and broke her arm in three places.

Luis and Gabriel carried Nick toward the railing and paused. He tried to squirm out of their grasp, tried to kick his legs free, and there was a moment, just a moment, when the whole thing could have been left as it was, a long moment when they could have left Nick Haraway with his beating and run out of the place. Then Ruben ran over and grabbed one of Nick's thighs and nodded towards the railing and something about the way he did it, the urgency, the craziness in his eyes, decided the thing. They hefted Nick up over the rail like a sack of garbage and let him drop.

His body hung in space, hung there in the mellow golden wash of the holiday lights, tumbling end over end in a way that was slow and dreamlike and seemed to last a very long time. Then his head caught the railing two stories down and sent him spinning and pirouetting wildly all the way to the bottom, arms swiveling and reaching for purchase, something to grab on to, but there was nothing and nothing and nothing.

He crashed through the wooden roof of the carousel, his spine snapping over an elaborately carved wooden horse with a sound like a cue-ball hit dead center. He lay over the animals of the carousel like a broken marionette, arms and legs twitching, eyes staring up through the torn hole of the carousel's wooden roof, the screams and cries of the children all around him dying

out to a faint and insistent roar. His eyes stared sightlessly up and up at the cold emerald-green glass of the mall ceiling and the plastic plants and all the wan faces of the people looking down at him. And at 3:54 P.M., not even five minutes after he'd been standing at the back of the line, Nick Haraway was dead.

Sheriff Joe Ganley drove the patrol cycle up Highway 126, slowed, and pulled right at the gap in barbed wire that marked the beginning of the Dolan grove. He drove up the road, a long dusty lane flanked and shaded by rows of orange trees. At the end of the road the old yellow farmhouse peeked out from behind a copse of ancient oaks like an old woman grown wary of the world. It was a near-perfect day, the hazy purple-brown mountains just visible over the tops of the trees. As a child Ganley thought of the mountains as solemn sentinels, men covered in rocks and scrub brush that could not speak but watched over him. Now they were just mountains, and his mind wasn't taken with childish fancies. He was focused: on the next shot of cocaine, and on how much he hated the Dolan brothers—especially Billy Dolan.

Ganley had lived in the valley all 38 years of his life, and the Dolans had been a thorn in his side since the ninth grade. They'd all gone to Santa Paula High School in the late 1980s.

Back then Joe Ganley was a slack-jawed skinny geek who was bullied by everyone, especially his father, who sat him down in the bathroom one day and shaved his head and eyebrows for no apparent reason at all. Like most kids who grew up around in the Santa Clara Valley, Ganley was raised on a farm, and when he worked that summer baling hay the sweat ran down his fuzzy bald head and into his eyes and stung like a bastard. He'd reached up to rub at his eyes and felt the slick skin where his eyebrows used to be and it was a constant rejoinder that couldn't be argued with: he was nothing, a beast of burden at his father's mercy. When he thought of his youth he remembered only the farm and sweat and blurry years of unalloyed misery, of humiliation, of anger.

And then there were the Dolan brothers. In high school they had been a real big deal. The younger brother was Shane, a redheaded little loudmouth with big chipped teeth and a nasty attitude. The older brother was Billy: a smooth, affable, good-looking ladies man and well-known weed dealer. Joe watched Billy and envied Billy and the fact that Billy never knew who he was made Joe unaccountably miserable.

One day in gym class he tried to strike up a conversation with Billy and Billy didn't say anything at first, just kept on with his stretching exercises. Then he said without looking up: "Man, what the fuck happened to your *eyebrows*?" Joe sat staring at the little cracks in the asphalt, head numb with humiliation.

For whatever reason, with all that had happened to him in his life, Ganley remembered that day and that comment. It ate

at him every day for the next twenty years.

Not long after he graduated from high school Ganley had one last argument with his father and took one last beating. The next morning he packed up his stuff and left. He'd wanted to fight back but he couldn't, not yet. He wasn't yet ready.

He got a job at a gas station and rented a storage unit in a run-down part of Santa Paula. You weren't supposed to live in the storage units but he made friends with the night watchman and got the old guy drunk every once in awhile and he was left alone. The room wasn't much—a light, a mattress, a cracked red radio that only received AM stations, a hotplate. And, in one corner of the room, weightlifting equipment he'd picked up at a garage sale for twenty bucks.

He worked out two, sometimes three hours a day. He ate protein bars and thousands of hard boiled eggs. His focus was intense, maniacal. At night he lay on the mattress and listened to news radio as he seethed with hatred and sadness. He was motivated by...what? He didn't know. It was a feeling that followed him around like his ass. He was vastly and incurably depressed.

People started to notice all the muscle he was putting on. A couple of years after he left home he decided it was time to go back. When he saw his father again he shook his hand and squeezed it so hard he could see tears well up in the old man's frightened little weasel eyes. The thought that he'd come from this man's sack made him sick. He left and never went back.

After a couple of years he started working out at a gymrat

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