

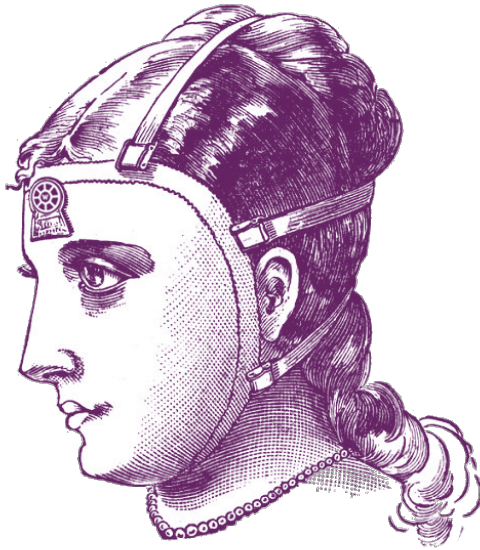
THE WAGON

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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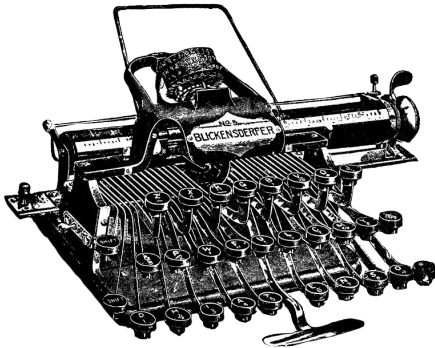
Highway 126, Part Two

(from Smog City Magazine #2)

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Water

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A Wagons of Sin Press Publication

“Highway 126”

Part Two

The dog had died whimpering and writhing in the dirt. Now it was a mass of meat and fur and blood, drying and stiffening in the late afternoon sun, one brown eye staring out sightlessly into the empty blue sky. Billy felt tired—very tired. He sat on the steps of the front porch as Freddie eyed the dog and shook his head and lit up another Camel.

~Ganley did this?

~ He’s coming out here tonight. With Luis.

~Guess he wants to show you he’s serious.

~ I got the idea, Freddie—crystal clear.

~That thing at the mall—that’s a lot of heat. Too much. Probably makes Ganley nervous as hell, eager to get them out of here. They’re going to take the shit and move it quick and run to Mexico. That’s what I would do. These dudes are squirrely, Billy. They could do anything.

~He didn't have to kill my dog.

~ No. But he made his point, though, didn't he?

~So what do we do.

Freddie sat there and looked out at the foothills, at the orange trees. He took a drag and let it out and took off his baseball cap and ran his hands through his hair with his eyes closed. Then he sat down on the porch next to Billy.

~We can't do nothing. We gotta give them what they want. Unless you wanna go to the cops.

~ Like that's a comment meant to be taken seriously.

~So we give them what we got. We're out of the business. I've had about enough of dealing with Ganley and his shit anyways.

~ And do what for a living? If it wasn't for you I'd be knee-deep in rotten oranges.

~Your dad didn't know nothing about oranges either, to be honest with you, but that don't matter if you got somebody to run it. It's a legitimate business, at least. Maybe not as glamorous as being the Cocaine King of Hollywood. Okay. But better than being dead.

~So that's it? We're just gonna let them rob us blind?

~ You wanna shoot it out with them? We can do that too. That can get ugly. And then you got Ganley to deal with, and all the pigs he knows.

~So we give them all of it. End of discussion.

Freddie stood up and slapped the dust off his jeans.

~Why don't you dig a hole for that dog. I'm gonna go check on Shane one more time. And send his girl home.

Freddie walked into the old frame house that he'd known for so many years—since the old days out on the porch drinking Schlitz with Bob Dolan, the two of them staring out into the day and not saying much, getting plastered on cheap headache beer and cogitating on grainy half-remembered scenes of their youth, looking out over the trees and the Mexicans in multicolored thrift store clothes, the people picking fruit under the noonday sun, the chirring heat of the day, Susan Dolan bringing them fresh beers every now and again...he felt a sentimental pang to think of those days. Now Bob was dead, and Susan was dead, and it was just Freddie and the boys and what had become of the business. And if it was cocaine instead of oranges all that meant was different times. Freddie had a nice two-story villa on a road off the highway; he drove a new truck; he owned Center Street Liquor.

He was doing all right.

Freddie and Bob Dolan had returned from Vietnam with plenty of rage and bad chemicals and bad juju; the war had skewed their youthful priorities and morals in much the way a tree's roots will hit a sheet of solid rock and shoot off at an odd angle. They picked up where they'd left off: Bob was the scion of an orange grove that went back to the days of the Rancheros, and Freddie worked the soil. But they'd gotten to see the other side of life, and things weren't quite the same. Now it was marijuana, pills, and connections: vets like them who were all fucked up in one way or another, who needed to numb out: a wasteland of young people looking to get high, kids with money, burnout hippie cocksuckers who Freddie wouldn't piss on if they were on fire: a ready-made market for someone with a touch of ambition and a few connections.

So Bob Dolan hooked up with a guy he knew in L. A. and got a bale of marijuana and started a little side business selling generous baggies of green to anybody, everybody.

The venture was never a big money-maker, and Susan Dolan wasn't crazy about it, but it kept the family in clover whenever there was an early freeze in the valley and the oranges died on the branches.

Years passed. Bob had sons and when they got old enough they started selling too, but by then things had changed and the money had changed and Freddie was running operations on the side, moving methamphetamines and cocaine and eventually even heroin. And Bob Dolan might have known it or might not have, but then he died of cancer, making it all a moot point.

Of course, before he died he told Freddie about Shane, and about the death of Susan Dolan.

That is, what *really* happened.

Freddie opened the door to the basement and walked down into the darkness.

The bed was set up in a corner of the basement. The room was bare—concrete walls and concrete floors. There had once been a window but it had been filled in with concrete a decade earlier. A single light fixture dangled from the ceiling. The room was dank and cool and dim. Debbie was holding Shane's hand and smoothing his hair and Freddie stood there and watched her as she spoke without looking up.

~He's getting worse.

~ He'll be all right. He just needs time. Time will take care of this.

~ You say that, but I still don't know why we don't take him to a hospital when he looks this bad.

~I don't need to tell you to keep this to yourself, right? You don't bring nobody else into our business.

~I know that, Freddie.

~ You're a part of this family now, so you gotta treat us the way we treat you. I known you since you was a kid, so don't tell me you can't trust that I know what's right for Shane.

~I don't tell anyone anything. I don't even talk to anyone but Shane.

Freddie walked over and touched her on her shoulder. He looked at his watch.

~We gotta leave him alone now.

Debbie pulled the sheet up to Shane's chin. He didn't move. He looked like a body in the morgue. Freddie could smell the stink of the kid's sweat; the sheets were damp with it.

They walked up the creaking wooden stairs to the hallway and Freddie shut the door behind them.

~There are deadbolts on the outside of the door. Why are there deadbolts on the *outside* of the door?

Freddie shot both of the deadbolts closed.

~No one opens this door until I say so. No matter what you hear, no matter what Shane says. You leave this door locked until I tell you to open it. Understand?

~But why?

Freddie walked past her and she followed him into the small and

brightly lit kitchen where Freddie imagined he could still see Susan Dolan, washing dishes and looking out the window over the orange grove. And what had happened to Susan...well, he didn't want to think about that anymore.

He walked to the refrigerator, got out a Schlitz, cracked it, took a long swallow, and belched.

~Shane's sick, and he's gotta stay in that room until he gets better. That's all you need to know.

Ganley sat on the toilet and took the little cotton ball and used it to soak up the liquid in the spoon. Then he drew the liquid up through the cotton into the rig, his stomach hot and queasy with excitement. He liked the ritual a *lot*. It was like knowing you were about to get laid, but better—than anything and everything.

Except the flash itself, of course.

He had one of his son's leather belts. It was just the right size. He tied off at the elbow and put the needle to the vein and shot it in. *The flash—oh fuck, the flash—SO FUCKING GOOD...just hold it a little bit longer...* He eased the plunger down, letting a little bit more in, a little bit more....

Finally the needle was empty. He sat there and leaned back on the toilet, sat there in the dark and shuddered as euphoria roared through his body.

After a while Ganley got up and walked out on to the back patio and lit a Marlboro. He felt enormous, expansive. He could move mountains, do anything. Then, after a couple of minutes, the bad feelings started to come back, crawling like spiders all around

the edges. He immediately wanted another shot, but told himself no. Postponing that next shot was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. He used it as a benchmark of his discipline, much more so than any workout goal he'd ever reached. If you could resist that next shot of coke for more than an hour, you could do ANYTHING.

He looked at his watch: almost time to leave. He threw the cigarette into the yard and walked back inside and into the kitchen.

By the time he got to the kitchen the elevator had plummeted all the way back down and feelings of paranoia were scurrying up through the shaft like rats escaping from a fire. Ugliness. His wife: just looking at her got on his nerves. The lines on her face, the mousy hair. She hadn't been any real looker to begin with, but if you sort of squinted your eyes in a dark room you could pretend she was a short-haired exotic French woman, and not the dowdy hausfrau she'd turned out to be. Still and all he felt like he'd got a raw deal. Two kids had spread her hips, turned her hair frizzy, left her breasts sagging like a couple of half-filled water balloons. It pissed him off, when he thought about it—about all the time he'd spent in the gym, trying to look good, and now his wife looked the way he remembered his *mother* looking. And don't even ask about the kids: the three-year old girl sleeping in the other room, a screeching little thing that lived only to eat and shit and cry; and the effeminate thing that apparently was his son, sitting at the table, making silly sounds and faces, pushing a green bean around in a pool of marinara with the edge of his fork. They wanted to do him in, they wanted to suck him dry, they'd ruined his *life*—

~You need to stop staring at that food and start eating it.

~I don't wanna eat it.

~I don't give two shits what you *wanna* do. In this house you do what I *tell* you to do.

The kid said nothing, just grimaced and stared into the marinara with a sullen and petulant look on his face. Ganley had seen thousands of times—it stared back at him from the mirror every morning. He noticed again how good-looking the boy was, how soft and white the skin of his face, how blue the eyes. Something about that bothered Ganley, shook him, made the cocaine paranoia and rage that much worse.

~You think you're just gonna get it one day? You think you're just gonna wake up?

The wife got up and took her plate and Ganley's plate and put them in the sink. She looked out the window into the darkness of the night beyond, the quiet street. She plugged the sink and turned on the faucet and squirted radioactive green Palmolive into the tepid grayish water, then picked up the bottle of wine on the counter and poured a couple of inches into a jelly glass.

~I asked you a question. You think you're just gonna wake up one day?

~Yes.

~The answer is no.

~No.

~Life is not a matter of *waking up*. Life is working and striving and getting it every minute of every day. You understand?

~Yes.

~Now eat your food, dummy.

Ganley was shaky. The effects of the shot were now completely gone. He could feel himself trembling. He held up his fingers,

though, and they were steady. *Handle it*, he said to himself. *Fucking handle it.*

He looked back at the boy. The boy wasn't pushing the green bean around anymore. He looked into the plate, his bottom lip quivering. He slowly pushed the tines of the fork into the green bean, looked at it distastefully, then brought it to his lips. He hesitated, and when he did, Ganley slapped him hard enough to nearly knock him out of his chair. He stayed up, though, and he didn't start crying, not out loud, anyway: Ganley had to give him that. That showed at least a little toughness. He had to give the kid that. The kid put the green bean into his mouth and chewed, tears running down his face, swallowing each bite with much effort, hair mussed on the side where he'd been slapped.

He knew better than to start crying. He knew he'd better start eating or it would get a lot worse. Ganley felt a wave of anger and affection and pity wash over him. He felt sick with something that went beyond the cocaine sickness, something rooted deeper than his jangling, screaming nerves.

~You could've eaten it the first time I told you.

The kid had something. He'd be something someday, and not a faggot soap opera actor, either. The kid didn't know half of what it meant to be raised hard. He hadn't seen the bad side of life. If he did, someday, these little swats would serve him well. *I am a man raising a man, an unformed thing, a human being shot straight down into the gray dissolute nothing humiliation of a taskmaster world shaved eyebrows and sweat be damned, for these things I put the dishes into the sink and swallow my feelings of pity, for him and for myself fuck fuck fuck I need a shot I need another hit the flash the*

fucking flash...

He got up and put his plate on the counter.

~Gotta go take care of something. A little thing. I'll be back before too late.

The wife said nothing and picked up the glass of Rossi and took a big hit of it and washed the dishes and looked out into the dark and then at the reflection of her son sitting at the kitchen table, pushing the green bean around again in the pool of marinara. A minute later she heard the car door slam and then watched the familiar glow of the headlamps flare up in the driveway and drop away into the night—like a bathyscaphe descending into the deepest reaches of the ocean.

He tooted the SUV at top speed up Highway 126, an admixture of greed and excitement and nervousness settling between his genitals and stomach, that electric anticipation again, but enhanced by knowing he was about to do crime. He wondered sometimes why he'd gotten into law enforcement at all, when ripping people off was such a pleasure. Then again, he had the best of both worlds: Respectability and security and electric kicks to stave off suicide—the saving grace of violence screaming through his blood, making him one with the night and the things he'd seen. He had the flash and when he had the flash everything was *his*—the dark purple mountains above Piru, the empty and forlorn canyons. All his.

And then he thought uneasily about the product.

Luis was going to take it and run.

All of it.

Ganley felt a panicked flutter in his belly as he suddenly realized that he was going to have to save some for himself. No way would he shoot up with street-corner, evidence-room shit—he couldn't do that. Not only was it risky, but he'd grown used to shooting up with the good stuff, the uncut pharmaceutical grade stuff, and it wasn't just that the high was better, was it? Somehow, using the pure powder made Ganley feel he was still somehow a cut above the trailer-trash addicts and strung-out losers he dealt with on a daily basis.

He thought again about a shot.

Discipline dropped away from his hunger like an old whore shedding a dirty nightgown.

He pulled off onto a side road and cut the engine and lights and sat there for a moment in the moonlit dark. Then he pulled the works out from underneath the passenger seat, looking around to make sure he was alone. He drew up the liquid and tied off and shot it into the vein. The night was ablaze, the light from the moon illuminating the purple foothills, the silver fields. Magic. Power. Everything screamed, everything was alive.

He sat and waited and before long Luis Huerta's Impala pulled up behind him. Headlights flashed twice. Ganley started the SUV and pulled around back onto Highway 126, Huerta following close behind, and they drove to the Dolan grove.

Freddie stood on the front porch, watching them walk up to the fence, pump-action 12-gauge shotgun in his hands.

~We don't want trouble. We got the shit. But we want a fair price for it at least.

~Fair price? For what, something that ain't yours?

~ We put up plenty of money for it.

Luis leaned back on the hood of the Impala and smiled and looked over at Ganley.

~What you think is a fair price, *jefe*?

Ganley shrugged.

~Shit, how about zero dollars and zero cents?

~ That sounds about right, *jefe*.

~ I was hoping we could come here and pick the stuff up with no hassle. I'm not in a mood for bullshit Freddie.

No one said anything. Then Freddie shook his head and shrugged.

~I guess there ain't no percentage in us trying to play games. Go get it for him, Billy.

Billy frowned, hesitated. Then he walked into the house and came out with a large, heavy suitcase. He half-walked, half-drag it down the steps and out into the dirt where Luis and Ganley stood.

Ganley bent down on one knee and unzipped the suitcase and lifted the lid and there they were, dozens of glassine plastic bags full of white powder. Luis and Ganley looked at each other and Ganley shook his head.

~This is a lot, sure. But I know what kind of business they've been running. The scope of it. There's more in the house.

~You're wrong. That's everything we got.

Luis nodded at Freddie.

~We're gonna take a look around the place and just make sure. So go easy with them *cuestas*.

~You gonna do what you gonna do. We keep our guns, you go through the house. Then you leave and we don't do business no more. Done.

Luis whistled. From the shadows of the orange grove came Ruben with a Glock fixed on Freddie. Luis whistled again and then, from the other side of the house, Gabriel emerged holding an Uzi. Freddie laughed.

~An Uzi, huh? You seen too many bad 80s movies, *Sapo*.

~We don't get nothing out of killing you, so don't shit your pants over this. I just wanna make sure you ain't holding nothing back.

Freddie raised his eyebrows and looked at Billy and nodded and held out his hand for Billy's revolver.

Ganley zipped up the suitcase and picked it up and walked over to the SUV. He opened the cargo door and hefted the suitcase up into the back, watching the others as they walked into the house. He was sweating now. He wanted it bad, so bad, but he'd have to wait.

Luis would take all of it, every last gram of it. Split town. Leave Ganley high and dry. Well, forget that. No way he was going to let that happen.

Ganley opened the passenger side door and pulled a roll of duct tape out of the glove compartment. Then he walked quickly to the rear of the SUV and, keeping one eye on the house, on the shadows moving gauzily behind the living room curtains, he took off his patrolman's jacket off and pulled his shirt out and unbuttoned the

bottom five or six buttons. He was thin and the packets of powder were nearly flat. He took four of them and duct taped them to his stomach and tucked the shirt back in and put his jacket back on. It took all of a minute. There was no sign he was carrying anything at all.

As Ganley walked back towards the house, he sighed with relief: there was enough to last him weeks, last him until he could somehow scare up another connection.

Freddie watched them tear the place apart. First they went through the upstairs rooms, through the dark and musty bedroom where Bob and Susan Dolan had slept for so many years. Ruben and Gabriel pulled old moth-eaten clothes out of drawers and closets and threw them in a pile on the dusty wooden floor and found nothing. As the night wore on they tore through the rest of the house with waning interest—a few desultory pokes underneath beds and into bare kitchen cupboards.

Luis was about to call off the search when they found the door in the hallway.

~So what's down there, Freddie?

~A basement.

~A basement. Since when do you put deadbolts on the *outside* of a basement door?

~Shane's down there. He's sick.

Luis and Ganley looked at each other.

~What do you mean, he's *sick*?

Ganley walked slowly down the stairs, taking them one at a time, stopping every once in awhile to listen. Nothing from down below. Behind him were the sounds of Luis breathing and the creaking steps of Gabriel bringing up the rear. He kept walking, keeping the beam of his maglight on the steps. He stopped abruptly and realized he'd run out of steps, was standing on concrete. The air here was cooler, moister. He followed the wall to his right, training the maglight's beam along the spatters of drywall crumbling away from the sheet metal below. The sound of his footsteps on the grit of the concrete floor was oddly flat, two-dimensional. The basement was larger than he'd thought it would be.

~They said Shane was down here. I don't see Shane.

~What's that smell? You smell that shit, Ganley?

He *did* smell it. It was a rank smell, an animal smell. Some part of him had noticed it the second they'd started down the stairs, and now the smell was stronger.

And then he could hear something breathing. Something crouched in the corner.

~It can't be the dog. I *killed* the fucking dog.

~What do you mean, you killed the dog? What dog?

Ganley was about to reply when the door at the top of the stairs slammed shut.

And the deadbolts closed.

Ruben sat on the couch and he was counting like crazy—and with good reason. He was in big trouble. He'd been standing there, keeping them both in front of him. They'd stared at him and he'd mad-dogged them back and he'd been ready to

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