

SCOTT TUROW

THE LAWS OF

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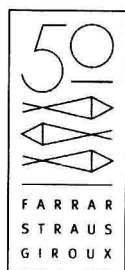
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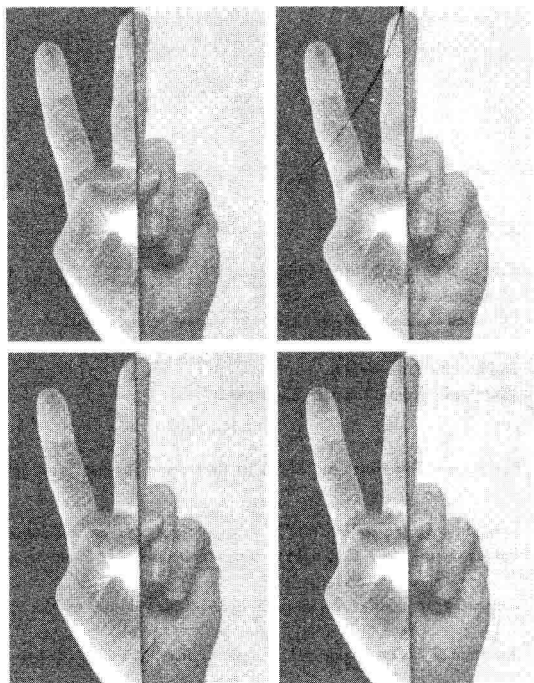
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THE LAWS OF  
OUR FATHERS



# OUR FATHERS

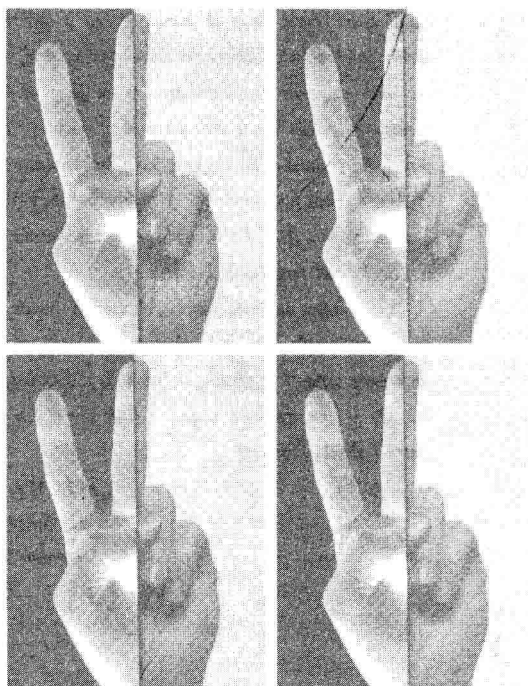
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FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX



NEW YORK

*For Rachel, Gabriel, and Eve*



*Part One*

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ACCUSATION



**T**HOSE OF US BORN IN THE YEARS OF BOUNTY after World War II knew we had a different outlook than earlier generations of Americans. Blinkered by need, they had come of age with narrower commitments—to the glory of God, the glee of acquisition, or the mean little business of survival. But we took seriously the promise of the Declaration of Independence that the birthright of America was not merely life or liberty, but the pursuit of happiness. Personally, as a child, I always assumed that was the point of growing up. So I'd feel better than I did then.

Which leaves us with the awful doomed inquiry of our middle years, the harpy's voice that whispers in dreams, at sunrise, at those unforeseen instants of drilling isolation: *Is this as happy as I will ever be? Do I have the right to just a little more? Or is there nothing better I should hope for?*

— MICHAEL FRAIN  
"The Survivor's Guide,"  
September 7, 1995

*September 7, 1995*

H A R D C O R E

Dawn. The air is brackish, although this place is miles from water. The four high-rise towers hulk amid a hardened landscape of brick, of tar and pavement broken by weeds, of crushed Coke cups and candy wrappers, of fly-about newspaper pages. A silvery bedding of broken glass, the remnants of smashed bottles, glitters prettily — one more false promise. It is a time of uncommon quiet. In the night, there are often sounds of life at the extreme: outcries and drunken yells, machines at volume. Sometimes gunfire. The day brings voices, children, the many stand-abouts, the species at large. Now the wind is up, whistling in the fence links and on the bricks. At the prospect of motion, the man walking this

way looks up abruptly, but there is only a dog huddled in a gap between the buildings who, out of some animal instinct, has determined, across the distance of a hundred yards, to have no truck with him. A single used tire sits, inexplicably, on the cracked blacktop of the play yard.

The man, Ordell, is almost thirty-six years old. He still maintains some of his penitentiary build, buffed up, he'd say, although he's been out again four years now. He is dressed simply, black shirt and trousers. No gold. 'Don't wear you no gold when you workin,' he often advises the Unborns, the eight- and nine- and ten-year-old wannabes who trail after him, complimenting his appearance and offering to do him favors, when he arrives here most afternoons. 'Hardcore,' they always goin, 'get you Co-Cola by Ko-rea?' like he don't know they aimin to keep the change.

This morning, Ordell Trent, gang name Hardcore, is alone. The building he approaches, the tallest of the four which comprise the Grace Street Projects, has come over the years to be called by everyone 'the I.V. Tower,' due supposedly to the Roman numerals, but most suspect the label originated with the familiar mockery of the residents practiced by the police, who refer to the building among themselves as the Ivory Tower. The open structures—windows, porches, connecting walkways—are caged in mesh of heavy gauge. Formerly, from the gangways and balconies refuse was sometimes thrown, bricks were tossed down on enemies as in the Middle Ages, drunks and dopeheads stumbled to their death, and several persons were pushed. Around three or four windows you can see the ragged blackening marks of bygone fires and at street level, on the bricks, in rounded letters, the initials of Ordell's gang have been inscribed in phosphorescent colors etched in black: "BSD." Black Saints Disciples. His set—the branch of the gang which Ordell heads—the T-4 Rollers, is often celebrated, too, and some daring members of Gangster Outlaws, a rival organization, have also put their marks here, wallbanging, as it is known. Occasional messages of personal affirmation, quickly sprayed, appear now and then as well. "D'Ron Is Cool." "Lucifer!"

Inside, Ordell nods to security, Chuck, he named, chump rent-a-cop from Kindle County Housing Authority, huddled in a concrete shelter with a small window of bulletproof glass. Chuck gettin half-a-one—fifty dollars—every month from Ordell, and Chuck, he like to love Hardcore, man, see him, Chuck damn well salute. In the entry, the sole illumination is from a Pepsi machine, with a heavy padlock. Every electrical fixture is gone, stolen to sell, or put out by some Saint who prefers to

do business in the dark. Bare wires in twisted bunches snake from the walls. The atmosphere is sodden with the bitter reek of hallway filth and broken plumbing. The paint is old; the pipes, exposed overhead, have grown rust stains and mold. The impression is of a bunker—something built to survive the bomb. The floor is concrete, the walls are cinder block. Everything—everything—is marked with gang signs: the Saints' halo, the capped '4' which represents the T-4 Rollers, and names—"D-town," "Mike-o-Mite," "Baby Face," "Priest"—written in school markers or, more often, smoked into the plasterboard or paint with a cigarette lighter.

The elevator, one of them, is working again today and Hardcore rides to 17. The first five floors of this building are more or less deserted now, given up by folks who found even \$38.50 a month too high a price for a life where beds had to be placed on the floors to avoid the gunfire, where the safest sleeping was in the bathtub. When he lets himself in, Hardcore hears the old woman's husky breath, clotted by the deteriorations of living, emerging from one of the two back rooms he lets her have.

Ordell has the two front rooms. Where he watches. From up here, he can see the entire operation. Sometimes the po-lice—"Tic-Tac," as the Saints call the Kindle County Municipal Police Force Tactical Unit—the ones who won't accept Hardcore's money and a few who do, sit down there and watch. They're wondering, he knows. How come this nigger so cool, how come it freeze *up* whenever they on the scene? Because Ordell sees. From here. He got all them tiny gangsters—the youngest gang members—'peepers,' as they're called, rovin, scopin. Any po-lice, any rent-a-cop, any limp DEA, any them mothers truck into them towers, Hardcore gone know. On the street that cuts a perpendicular, there are two three-flats and some tiny gangsters down there on the steps each day, servicing the cars that pull up. They got rock, bottles, crank, sometime pills. Some Top Rank Gangsters, veterans in BSD, they-all slang a couple zones—sell a couple ounces—to they homies every week, be tight, all they need. Not Ordell. He got him houses and ladies, he got a Blazer and a slick BMW 755, shit, he got his gold, but what be fat and all is this thang, what he got goin here—'DJs,' so called, to mix the stuff, and 'scramblers,' who get paid in drugs to make the connections, 'mules' to carry it and move it two times every day from the garages and apartments where it's stored, and his 'artillery,' Honcho, Gorgo, and them, armed motherfuckers so nobody think they can move up on Ordell. Seventy-five people, sometime a hundred, and Hardcore

watchin over: Go here, mother, go there, don't get beat by no snitch, don't deal with no narc, don't mess with no rings or gold, see cash, man, do it! *That's* what he wants, somethin happenin, man, every day.

Now, slightly past 6:00, his beeper alerts, vibrating at his hip. Hardcore curses aloud when he inspects the readout: Nile. More whining. "Too late for that shit," he notes to himself. At his voice, the old woman's rasping breath briefly ceases. Perhaps she is awake now, listening, pressing at her grey hair, snuffing and clearing her throat in hopes he'll leave. Here in the front room, there is nothing. Two chairs. Old newspapers. The concrete floor holds the sallow glimmer of the early light. The rug was stolen long ago.

This was her apartment, raised her children here, the boy in Rudyard, two boys, Ordell thinks, and some bitch, a silly pipehead selling what she can out on the street. In the pen, the boys come to Jesus and busted out, quit BSD. So Ordell's set moved in here. The old woman was tough. 'You-all go on, shoot and kill me, do whatever you-all like, I ain movin out, this here's my house, I ain givin my house to no bunch of silly-ass hoodlums.'

T-Roc, one of BSD's two heads, Vice-Lord he called—T-Roc told Hardcore straight up, 'Do just like she say, man, fade her.' Hardcore, he put in work for his, done whatever for BSD, be a bar-none Saint and all, but he don't fall to cappin no old lady. He decided leave her stay.

'And I ain gone have no dope-peddlin or whorin or any other gang-banger whatnot in here neither,' she'd said to Ordell.

'We ain doin nothin,' he told her.

'Hmm,' she said.

Now she sleeps. Just then, 6:15 like they been sayin, he sees the ride, some shitbox Chevy a hundred years old, bend the corner on the street far below. Now, Ordell thinks, now we gone tear some shit *up*. He has field glasses but he can see well enough. Bug, just folding the flip-phone back into her jacket, approaches the car. Then she retreats a distance, as she's supposed to do. The cell phone in his pocket makes a throaty sound.

"Yo," he answers. "T's up, cuz?"

"Ten-two," Lovinia says. They use radio code, mix it up, make them Tic-Tacs crazy. "Ten-two." Means trouble. Need help. "You hear?" she adds. That Lovinia. Don't never have no respect.

"Stall out, bitch, I hear. And I don't see no damn 10-2." On the broad avenue, on Grace Street, there is nothing, cars, white folks driving by

fast. Not even foot trade. "I ain't seed nothin. You standin still, bitch, and you best be hittin the wall, man."

"Ain to see, not from where you is, and I ain talkin on this punk-ass telephone neither. Ten. Two." She's gone with that.

Setup, he thinks, as he often thinks. Bug—as Lovinia is known—damn Bug be settin him up. Kan-el, T-Roc, one them, maybe them Goobers—as the Saints call the Gangster Outlaws—one them switched her somehow. He ponders Kan-el and T-Roc, Commandant and Vice-Lord of BSD. They on top, man, but they all the time trippin and shit, worryin is Hardcore on this power thang, man, he gone bust his whole set right out the gang or what? And him running eight zones into the jail every week, so BSD down for theirs, catch his black booty he be gone for-ever. Set him up. "Mmm." He grunts aloud at the thought of it.

But he's on his way. He has a 9-millimeter pistol stored behind the iron grating of the air return and he tucks it in his belt and lets his black silk shirt hang out of his trousers. In the elevator he continues rumbling with his angry thoughts, speaking to himself and wondering if he should have shouted out for Honcho, some of them. Scared, he thinks, scared is what he is and old enough to know it. All them youngsters always puttin down that shit, 'Cain't no nigger fade me,' shit like that, make him laugh. You always scared. Get used to it is all. Gotta be is gotta be.

He has three sons. Dormane—Hardball he called—got two kids of his own, he inside, doing fifteen no-parole on some fool buy-bust, and Rakleed is on these streets, too, and the little one, Del, still too young to know too much of nothing. They mommas, each of them, behind Ordell's back, told those boys the same. 'Don't you be no dope peddler now, don't you be slangin and hangin and bangin, I'll be whompin you backside, you ain never gone be too big for me do you like that.' That's what they sayin. In his own time, Ordell gave each of these boys his answer: 'You got to be somebody. They's bad shit here. With them bad coppers—bad motherfuckers everywhere here. But, man,' he said, 'man, this here what you-all's—you with the people here, you giving them what these poor niggers need, some nickel's worth of happiness white folks and all don't want them havin.'

Walking from the IV Tower, the first stirrings of the day, music and voices, from some windows, wondering is he really gone get himself gauged, Hardcore thinks, as he often does, about his sons. He walks past

one of the newer buildings, where the concrete corner has parted, revealing a cheap core of pink foam. In a nearby play area, only one seesaw remains, and on that both seats were long ago shattered by some teen in a random outbreak of destructive will. A milky-eyed drunk is teetering down the block, slept it off somewhere and now looking for home. He has a tatty overcoat and his hat askew, a face of white whiskers, and when he sees Hardcore, he wants to move, get *out* the way, man, and his legs can't let him. Funny. Hardcore calls him "Man" as he passes by. They got they needs, he thinks, wishing he'd told his boys that, too. 'Everybody on these streets, man, these motherfuckers out here is just completely crazy with what they need. This gal she need her check, and this momma be needin to hold her baby, and that old cat need his fix.' Needing. He sometimes thinks he doesn't walk on pavement—he is just moving on top of what everybody needs.

He crosses the boulevard, Grace Street, and starts down Lawrence, a block of ruined three-story apartment buildings, stout as battlements, with flat tarred roofs and limestone blocks placed decoratively amid the dark bricks and as a border above the doorways and at the cornices. The windows are gone in some, boarded up. A raised garden area of railroad ties sits under the windows of 338, the dirt desert dry, even the weeds struggling to survive.

"Yo," Lovinia calls, emerging like a cat from one of her hiding places. This Lovinia, he thinks. God, look-it here at this scrawny bitch, motherfucker are you gone believe it? With this fuzzbball stocking cap dragged down over her whole damn head and this grey coat and twill pants. Don't want nobody comin up on her to know she a bitch is what it is, figure they'll shoot her ass or molest her ass or somethin. They better not try neither, she ain't strapped—armed—she know better than that for when Tic-Tac come by, but you bet she got it near here, under the mailbox, or in a hole in one them trees, you mess with her, she gone smoke you ass. Word up. T-Roc, he think Hardcore stone crazy using Bug, but she sharp. She strut up to the cars, she change her whole routine now, she sort of swingin it a lot. 'What you like, man?' Make them say. Anybody she take for Tic-Tac, narco, when they say 'Dope,' she just go, 'Oh, man, I ain sellin *dope*, man, I got somethin sweeter 'n that, man,' like she thinkin they was here to bone.

Now she points to the white Nova at the curb, a hundred feet away. "I done told her, 'Lady, you in the wrong place.'"

"Lady? What kind of motherfuckin lady?"

"Tol' you now, 10-2. He ain come. She come. She be lookin for Or

Dell." Bug smiles then, toward the walk. Lovinia, just a kid and all—fifteen—she love to play.

"Lady," Hardcore repeats a few more times. Damn. He advances on the car. "Lady, this the wrong place for you." Leaning into the darkness of the car, he catches some of her soapy smell and the humid sour scent of his own overheated breath. "You best get out here fast."

"Mr. Trent? I'm June Eddgar." She extends her hand, and then laboriously leaves the car to stand in the bluish morning light. Old. She be fat, too, big and fat. Some kind of hippie or farmer or some such, and her thighs all mashed together in her jeans. She have a plain face and some long lightish brown kinda hair going to grey, kind of lopsided and knit together like it ain't really combed. "I thought we could talk a minute."

"Lady, they ain nothin for you and me to talk about."

"Well, I thought— I'm Nile's mother."

"Told him get hisself here. Didn't tell him send nobody's momma."

"I thought it was better if I came."

"You better go. Thass all. They's some powerful shit may go down here. Word, now. Go on." He steps away, flitting his hand.

"Look, I know them both. I think there's a misunderstanding."

"Only misunderstandin is you stayin here stead of leavin out when I say go. Thass the only misunderstanding we got."

"I really think—"

"Lady, you gone get fucked up bad, you hear? Now jump in you rusty-ass ride." He throws a hand again in disgust and walks away. Lovinia has stepped toward the street, waving.

"Gorgo," she calls, signaling overhead.

"Aw, fuck me, motherfuck," Hardcore says. From the alley across the way, Gorgo has emerged, tearing out on a sturdy black-framed mountain bike. He has a mask on, a blue handkerchief across his face like he some cowboy motherfucker, but looks otherwise like he just goin home to momma, blue pack fixed on his back, red satin jacket, hat turned behind his ear, just a kid, if you don't notice the gat—the gun—held low by his side. A 9. Got his Tec-9. The semiautomatic weapon, from its sheer weight, seems to drag behind as Gorgo rides. Bug keeps on waving, calling out as Gorgo rushes on, but he doesn't see her. He never will, Hardcore knows. You can see Gorgo's eyes at sixty feet now, popped out like some pipehead's, only with him all it is is panic. I gotta do this, Gorgo's thinking, got to do this, man. Hardcore knows. His whole self is shrunken down to a little pea of violent will, so there's no room for



anything to tell him no. The gun is up, straight this way, and for one second Ordell sees nothing of it but the small silver o and the frightening black space within it, at the end of the muzzle.

“Gorgo!” she calls again, and Hardcore, who has already dropped to the pavement, catches the hem of her coat and drags at it.

“Get yo fool self down,” he says, and she comes to him, easy as a leaf falling from a tree, just as the first shots bolt the air. Damn guns always be louder than you expect. The reports come at once, five or six volleys, a rampage of sound. Just that quick. Afterwards, it is the same as always, a moment of awful, cowering stillness—the birds gone from the trees, radios knocked silent, folks in the adjoining buildings stretched out flat along the cold floors, desperate not to stir. Caught up, the pointed scent of gunpowder embitters a sudden breath of wind. A block off, in some silly act of jubilation and relief, Gorgo cries out shrilly and his voice trails down the distance like a ribbon.

Breathe, Ordell thinks, breathe now, nigger. He’s amped: his heart is hard with panic. You okay. He talks to himself. You not hurt, stay cool, stay movin. Then he sees the blood spread darkly on the sidewalk.

He has been shot twice before, once when he was sixteen, that was some serious shit, sort of giving face to some dude, and the mother pulled out a .38 and boom, just like it was but a little more downtalk. Now he cool. He’s checked his body twice, felt everything. He damn well knowed he was gone get hisself popped and he didn’t. But Lovinia has hold of her knee, and she is moaning.

“Happenin, Bug?”

She’s crying. Tears well across her smooth face and curl in silvery traces about her mouth.

“It hurt, Hardcore. Man, it hurt *real* bad.”

“We gone help you, girlfriend.” He crawls closer to her. She is lying on her side, with her knee drawn up halfway. Her hands are covered with blood and it has turned most of the right leg of her twills brown; this close, he can detect the strange animal smell of it. He isn’t going to get her to move, he can see that. How’d she go get shot in the damn leg of all places? Ricochet, or some such. Dudes shot in the leg died, too. He’d seen that. Severed femoral artery. Leg might be broke. There was no use shoutin out for any of his people, tiny gangsters or them. Soon as the guns rang out, they sprung.

“That Gorgo. I’m gone fuck that motherfucker up bad.” Gorgo is long gone—between the buildings, up an alley, down one more gang-