HOW TO THROW AWAY A A HUNDRED DOLLAR BILL

BY PAULPEKIN

When you're a kid you're only a kid. That's exactly my way of looking at it. You don't even begin to grow up until you've learned certain things, things about friends, things about money. The rest--sex, health, life, death; that stuff generally takes care of itself.

One hundred dollars. That may not seem like a lot today, but it's enough that it should be respected. Imagine when the minimum wage was 50 cents an hour. Imagine someone earning that much throwing away 100 dollars.

Right after World War Two, things were far from normal. Given four years of shortages, rationing and all out effort, people were just getting back to driving their beloved automobiles. A kid today thinks of a car as part of his birthright. High school? You drive to it. And very often in a late model vehicle. After high school? You're on your way.

But in 1948, you could be a kid like Donnie Murphy who was almost twenty and had never even learned how to drive. Never.

This was a kid who didn't have much going for him. He was tall, but that was all. He stood almost a head over his friends, but even the shortest of them outweighed him, some by a lot. They called him bean-pole, or slats, or bones; they asked him how the weather was up there, and wondered if he could hide behind a dangling light cord.. He was as clumsy as he was tall. If there was something that could be tripped over, he'd trip over it. If there was something that should not be dropped, he would drop it. Basketball? A kid half his size could beat him to the rebound.

It follows that Donnie wasn't much with the girls. They stuck their noses up in the air and walked right on by. Sometimes he would call one up for a date. How about Saturday night? Um, um, I'm busy Saturday. Next Saturday? Busy then too. The Saturday after? Um, um, busy. Same for Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, you get the idea. And Donnie wasn't even asking the pretty girls, just the girls he knew darn well were sitting right next to their phones.

After he graduated high school, he tried to figure out what he was good for. He was working in a machine shop, a kind of an apprentice, came home every night with oil and grit on his hands. Meanwhile all his friends had gone off to college. This was not an option for Donnie; he'd screwed around all four years of high school figuring he'd be drafted after he graduated, drafted, sent to the Pacific and dead by time he was nineteen. None of which happened, thanks to Harry Truman and the atomic bomb. Now, the only way he could hope to get into college would be by paying every red cent of the tuition. Donnie's father believed a kid should work his way through college, the same as he hadn't.

In time the only friends Donnie had left, and we better use this word "friends" cautiously, were other losers like himself. Fat Frankie who was never to grow up, Vito who claimed he screwed his own sister, Barry Baldshneer who breathed through his mouth, and finally, Sailor Bob.

Sailor Bob was stationed at Great Lakes Naval Station, and how he got mixed up with Donnie's crowd is difficult to say. There are certain people who simply show up and become your friends and nobody ever remembers asking them to do it. First there were four boys who hung out at the pool room and went to the Friday dances at Eagles Hall where the girls pretty much turned them down en masse. Then there were five.

Sailor Bob had that Elvis Presley look; he was ahead of his time. He wore his dark hair as long as the navy would allow, his bell bottom trousers just a bit tighter, he chewed gum continually, and never had a dime of his own. He claimed he sent it all to his mother.

But he looked like a guy who could get the girls. And he acted like it. And the girls would dance with him and let him take them home and do stuff with them. As much as they would let anyone who didn't have a dime to call his own.

What it came down to was that Bob not only joined the group, he expected the group to pay his way. You wanted to shoot pool with him, you better be ready to pay for his game. You wanted to go to the Eagles Hall Dance with him, expect to buy his ticket. Sailor Bob was like one of these millionaires who never even carry a wallet.

Meanwhile Donnie was already taking care of Frankie, Vito, and Barry. It was almost as if he had to pay people to hang out with him. He was constantly reaching into his hip pocket, a guy who made forty, sometimes fifty dollars a week. Compared to what they had, it almost seemed a lot. But he was careful about money too. A dollar here, fifty cents there. He could say no.

Donnie never went into the service himself. When the Korean War started up in 1950, the recruiters simply took one look at his spindly frame and laughed. Heart murmur, they said. Of maybe they just figured it would be impossible to find a uniform to fit him. 6'7", 138 lbs. But they took fat Frankie who froze to death somewhere north of the 38th parallel. And they took that braggart Vito, and they took witless mouth breathing Barry Baldshneer, both of whom returned safely only to scorn Donnie for the rest of their lives.

The car was Sailor Bob's idea. Poor Donnie, the older he got, and he kept going till he was over seventy, the more dreams he found himself having about that car. In these dreams it would always be parked behind his parents house on Wexford Street, an old green Buick that dated back to the running board era.. He would wake up wondering if his memory were true or false, if there ever had actually been such a car, of if he had imagined it all along. He couldn't remember driving it, or even being driven in it. He only knew he had brought home a crisp one hundred dollar bill from the bank and handed it over to Sailor Bob.

Just because we remember something poorly doesn't mean it didn't happen. There must be dozens of people alive today who attended those Eagle's Hall dances and remember them, each in his or her own way. For that matter, Eagle's Hall is still there, intact, if seldom used, but the Grand Ballroom (later turned into a basketball court until the neighbors began to complain of the "unsavory" elements it drew from surrounding areas–by which they meant black youths) has been pretty much abandoned and is visited only by an occasional rat.

To tell the truth, the place was seedy even in 1948, but it looked swell to the local teens. Every Friday night there would be crepe paper streamers and a three or

four piece band--accordion, drums, sax, and bass the usual combination--playing the latest songs from Your Hit Parade. Kids would do the toddle, the two step, and the old fashioned polka, and hope they would catch on with someone cute before the band played "Good Night Ladies" and the floor went dark.

Tall gangly Donnie Murphy had no hope of this. Girls who had not been asked to dance in weeks would flee at his approach. Sometimes a girl would dance with Vito, but then she would find out what he was like, and then the four boys would be left to stand along the sidelines hoping some new girls would show up.

Sailor Bob changed that. He cocked his cap on the side of his head and went straight up to any girl he pleased. Since girls always came to the dances in twos and threes, there would always be an extra girl or two for Bob's friends. In a way, he was almost worth the ticket Donnie had to buy for him.

One night there was a tall dark-haired Italian girl with a strong sharply-defined face. Sailor Bob liked his girls shorter and blonder, and immediately took up with her shorter blonder friend. Vito made a try but the tall girl dismissed him so quickly one would think she'd met him before. It took all the courage he had but Donnie finally asked her to dance, and they were lucky enough to get in one slow number before the band switched to something fast.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I guess I'm not much of a dancer."

"I can see that," she said. "Don't you have a sister to give you lessons?"

"Oh, yes I do," Donnie said, and then he realized he should have said, no. The tall girl began to laugh, and later on she allowed him to walk her to the bus stop. She lived in a neighboring town.

"Could I call you some time," Donnie said.

"You could call me," she said, "But I won't go out with you."

"Why not?"

"Because you don't have a car. I live in Franklin Park. How could we ever get to see each other?"

Donnie thought it could have been arranged, but the tall girl said, no, she wasn't going to get involved in something like that.
But, if he ever got a car, that would be different.

She was right. He understood that. And she was honest enough to come right out and say it.

So it was already in the back of his mind that a car might be a good idea. Money was a problem, but it wasn't the biggest problem. He had never driven a car except for two or three lessons with his father, and these had been such fiascos he now feared he would never learn. You had to shift those gears and coordinate them with the clutch or the car would go jerking up and down the street and rolling backwards on hills, and sometimes you would hit things while struggling to regain control and then whoever was with you (your father) would leap out of the passenger seat and say, enough, give me that wheel.

What Vito suggested one night in the pool hall almost made sense.. "We're going to get a car," Vito said. "Bob knows this guy. Only three hundred dollars. Bob's going to put in one hundred, me and Frankie and Barry can put in another hundred. We just need you for the rest."

Donnie thought about that dark haired Italian girl. He would be thinking about her

for the rest of his life, even though he forgot her name before the summer was over. He imagined himself taking that car out on Lincoln Highway early Sunday mornings when everyone else was in church or sleeping. He could practice by himself, without anyone yelling into his ear and making him nervous. Maybe Bob could help. Bob had a way of making you think everything was going to be all right.

Later on, Bob showed up at the pool hall. He was in his summer whites, his cap on the edge of his head, a dark curl of hair carefully pushed over his forehead. He took Donnie by the arm. "Look, I know I owe you money," he said. "I won't be able to square up till next month, but here's a five on the account." He pressed a worn looking five dollar bill into Donnie's hand. Then he insisted on treating for a game of rotation, laughing and joking whenever he slopped the wrong ball into a pocket. He bought Kayo for all, and told stories about making out with girls. The thing about Bob was that even if you forgot what he looked like years later, you always remembered how easy he was to like. Not only was he easy to like, you wanted him to like you.

I guess we all know people like Sailor Bob. Strangers who suddenly pop into our dull lives and brighten them, and just as suddenly disappear, leaving us feeling foolish and filled with shame. Donnie had a few more Bobs after this one, but he was all through with them by the time he was thirty. By then he had learned a few things--how to drive a car, how to please a woman, how to earn good money in a machine shop. He'd also learned how to be private and suspicious and keep even his best friends at arms length. If you wanted to go fishing with him and you showed up five minutes late, Donnie would go on without you. If you wanted to borrow money from him he would make you put something up as collateral, something he would take and hold personally until he got his money back. His own sons told me that even they were required to sign notes although, oddly enough, there were never allowed them to pay back what they had borrowed. It was as if he simply wanted people to know he was no sucker.

A one hundred dollar bill. When Donnie drew the money out of the bank, the cashier asked him how he wanted it. Tens? Twenties? Why not a one hundred dollar bill? A C-note as they used to say in the gangster movies. Donnie had never even seen one before, and when he held it in his hand, a simple bit of paper that represented more than eighty hours grit and oil and machine shop grind, he marveled that so much could be compressed into so little, and disposed of so easily. The bill disappeared into Sailor Bob's back pocket and was never seen again, and the car, which did appear, never ran once, just sat there on Wexford Street in need of some part that was no longer manufactured. Worst of all was the gradual and ever growing conviction that no one other than himself had ever contributed a dime to its purchase, if in fact it had even been purchased at all. It's no wonder that he forced the whole thing from his mind so throughly he could not remember, in later years, how the whole thing came to an end. Eventually the car must have been towed away, perhaps by the city, perhaps by its real owner. All that was left was an empty parking place and those odd recurring dreams.

In a certain sense, all memory is a dream. Yes, it is. Somewhere in this world there is a tall once-dark-haired woman of Italian descent who remembers dancing with a boy a whole head taller than herself. Somewhere a clever sailor boy grown old is still sidling up to strangers, flashing his crafty smile, and looking for one more sucker, one more easy mark. Somewhere, I cannot doubt, there is man named Vito who remembers himself as a hero in Korea, and not as the boy who boasted of having sex with his little sister. It is even possible that Barry Baldshneer, still breathing through his open mouth, may now believe he has grown wise.

In his last months on this earth Donnie Murphy lived in a haze and was often confused. Sometimes he recognized his sons, who visited him often, and sometimes he did not. If he felt pain he did not declare it. He had led an upright

life, all agreed, and done well as a machinist, held office in the union, and attended mass about as often and regularly as was right for any decent Catholic. He owned a good home, and always bought sensible cars, the last of which his wife of over forty years used to drive him to the doctors, and later to the hospital. Toward the end, she was constantly with him, and he talked to her. When he was not asleep, he talked incessantly, to her, to the nurses, to the walls, to the priest (whom he did not trust, he managed to make that clear), and to people who were not even there. He often talked about money. He wanted to know how much his room would cost, and was his wife sure the insurance would cover. In short, there is nothing remarkable to be said about his last days.

It would be nice to say that after the funeral, when all those white envelopes that were sent in lieu of flowers were opened, one of them contained a crisp one hundred dollar bill. And if fact, several did, but we must not read what we want to read into that. No, that one hundred dollar bill has gone to where all wasted money goes, and it shall never be heard of again.

What we can say about the funeral was that it was well attended. No one took a head count but Donnie's wife and sons found themselves constantly speaking to strangers who claimed to friends of the deceased. There were men who had worked with him, and men who had been union officers with him, and men who had been in the Knights of Columbus with him, men, and women too, who surfaced out of some mysterious past, "Oh, your father," they would say of this man who had once paid other boys to keep him company. "They don't make them like that anymore.

"He was the kind of man you wanted for a friend."

Paul Pekin's work has appeared in *Best American Sports Writing of l991*, *The Chicago Tribune Magazine*, the *Chicago Reader*, a bunch of "men's" magazines with names like *Cavalier, Swank, Dude* and a long list of literary publications including *Sou'wester, Other Voices, Sideshow, The MacGuffin,* and *The South Dakota Review*. He has been writing so long he has outlived some of these publications. Over the years, He has had his share of day jobs (and a few night shifts as well), printer, teacher, police officer. That's all behind him now. He lives in Chicago with his wife and a bunch of cats. If you like "fabulist and new wave fabulist" fiction, you might try looking him up in *ParaSpheres*, the new Omnidawn anthology, where he has a long story currently in print..