

Excerpt from *Acceleration Hours: Stories*

Jesse Goolsby

Acceleration Hours

"String of Pearls."

"I've Found Someone."

"Rainy Days and Mondays."

"If You Could Read My Mind."

The old people in Wishwell Retirement Home call out to the bearded, overweight, twenty-five-year-old man they've nicknamed Steinway, although his evening singing sessions take place on a cheap Casio keyboard the home's services director bought at Target for a hundred bucks. They want melody.

Steinway. The name doesn't faze Trevor Gatlin. In fact, even after several months of these gigs he still enjoys *becoming* Steinway, a more intense, mostly energetic, caring version of Trevor for these evening sessions, and why not? The pay is good (\$20/hr.), and the twelve octogenarians that show seem pretty damn happy as he rolls through his standard, no-longer-bizarre sampling of Beethoven, Glenn Miller, Gordon Lightfoot, Carpenters, Michael Jackson, and Cher.

In between songs Steinway enjoys a massive, evenly mixed gin and tonic he squeezes out of a plastic *Lassen Volcanic National Park* water bottle. He's learned over the months that being a bit buzzed by the end of the performance is a necessity ever since Mr. Nowak's family

began paying Steinway under the table to stick around after the singing and listen to a war story or two before bedtime.

Nowak likes to memory stroll across the gore of Guadalcanal: how his buddy's blown off foot landed in his arms, the one about shooting a Japanese soldier in the chest then giving the guy a cigarette just before he died in the dark sand, how Nowak almost had his dick bitten off by a small shark when swimming in the ocean after the battle was over, the time he finally got to use the flamethrower on the Japanese tunnels and ended up losing his left ear.

Steinway knows it will probably be one of these stories as he butchers the chorus of his final song of the evening, the oft-requested Jackson's "Man in the Mirror," but Steinway isn't concerned or hurried, it's not as if he has somewhere else to be by the 8:30 p.m. bedtime — he works the day shift at the Chevron gas station — and after all, the extra \$30 a night from Nowak's family helps pay for the occasional trip to Reno with Rashad or a steak and pitcher of Miller Light at the Ranch House, as well as the fact that Nowak has proven himself a kind, if opinionated soul — always asking Steinway if he's comfortable while he listens in the creaking rocking chair by Nowak's bed, offering Steinway an occasional sip of his chamomile tea, trashing President Obama — and there's something Steinway appreciates about Nowak's vitality. Unlike many others in the home, death's call doesn't appear imminent for the tan, clear-eyed Nowak. He walks without aid, knows which decade he's in, jokes about midnight escapes, and recently shouted out "Eminem" during one of Steinway's performances.

And sure, Nowak has his moments, nights when he rails against the overpowering Lysol smell of the home, feeling trapped with the "hanger-oners," a term he brings forth on weeks when there's been more than one Wishwell death, and more rare evenings when he prefers to listen to Steinway talk about his life, which, if buzzed enough, Steinway will grant, typically self-

censoring himself to his (Trevor's) love of music, beer, and a deteriorating desire to finish up at Lassen Community College. Off limits: vulnerability, elation, Steinway's boyfriend Rashad, and Steinway's recent, deep-seated fear that Rashad will soon end things.

But most nights there's Nowak's war stories, always delivered with a non-apologetic tenor which Steinway finds fascinating, welcoming, with none of the modern-day PTSD woe-is-me crap he loathes. If he had to choose a favorite narrative, Steinway would select the Japanese soldier-cigarette story. With some recent encouragement from Steinway, Nowak has mined deeper into the specifics, to the point that Steinway has noticed that Nowak switches the brand of the cigarette the soldier bums then smokes before he dies, a small, seemingly insignificant detail that portends memory loss or active imagination, either one a worthwhile if minor excitement in the bowels of Wishwell.

This Wednesday night Steinway has gone relatively easy on the gin and tonic and he accepts a sip of Nowak's tea after he sits down in the bedroom rocking chair with a grimace. It's 7:37 p.m. and Steinway feels the familiar aches run through his chest and right arm.

Nowak's room is decorated with photographs and drawings of whales, except for two small photos of Grace Kelly and Farrah Fawcett on his bedside table. Nowak is still in his day clothes — Eddie Bauer yellow polo shirt and khakis.

"I'm not tired," Nowak says. "Is this the night we break out?"

"Sure," Steinway says and taps his chest.

"You're still alive."

"You make a fatty sing and this is what you get." Steinway grabs his belly. "A few Tums and I'll live till a hundred." He's always joked through the embarrassment.

"They got new pills to help with that."

"Sure, you have an extra ten grand you want to give me?" Steinway says.

"Damn, Obama." Nowak smiles. "Why don't you put some water in that bottle of yours? That'll kick twenty, thirty pounds."

"It's mostly water," Steinway says, annoyed at the unsolicited weight-loss advice.

"Tonic."

"Water," Steinway says. "Tell me something new. I'm tired of the shark shit. I know it's not going to bite you. Although it gets *really* close." Steinway brings his hands to his cheeks. "Oh. My. It almost bit you. But. It. Didn't."

"I don't feel like talking. I feel like walking. Need some air. And you do too. They just cleaned the damn place. Lysol everywhere. Can you smell it?"

"Sure."

"No, you don't. You can't smell anything. There's such a thing as too clean. You can't clean outside."

"That's not true," Steinway says and stares down a painting of two humpback whales breaching the ocean. "Raking leaves from the lawn, trimming trees... "

"You're in a mood. Jesus, let's go."

"Fine," Steinway says, and rises with a grunt.

Outside on the large concrete patio Nowak leans against the building. They've been quiet for a few minutes, listening to the small town night sounds. The fresh air has helped them both.

"Tired of the shark story, huh?"

"That was mean," Steinway says. "But you still got your dick. The shark doesn't get you. When you know the ending there's only so many times... "

"You get your thirty bucks for listening."

"Don't get salty, old man," Steinway says, purposefully adding a subtle tone of endearment. He does value the extra thirty bucks, but tonight he's noticeably sluggish and wishes Nowak's bedtime would rush forward.

"After a while they brought dogs in for the caves. How about that, Steinway? You like dogs? You want a dog story?"

"Sure," Steinway says.

"How many guys you gonna lose before you try other means? The flamethrowers were running out of juice. Try resupplying in the middle of the Pacific. So we'd send the dogs in first. And they'd do fine. A couple got shot up, stabbed. Nobody cared. Our guys were dying in those tunnels. You can imagine."

"How do you get dogs to Guadalcanal?" Steinway says, genuinely interested. He's never considered dogs on ships or airplanes on the way to battle. None of his infrequent interactions with war films or books have included dogs. How do you keep them quiet? Do you need to?

"That's a stupid question," Nowak says. "Here's the right question. How do you get dogs to know the difference between Americans and Japs?"

"Well?" Steinway says.

"You don't. That's the key. You just train them to get angry at everything besides their handler. That's why you send them in the tunnels first. They'd just as soon attack one of ours. It happened more than once."

"How do you get them angry at everything?"

"Plus, it's dark as hell in the tunnels."

"But how do you get them angry?" Steinway says.

"Fight them against one another for starters. But not too much. Can't have them injured, but that's what the handlers told us. Stateside they fight them against one another before shipping them over."

"Michael Vick shit," Steinway says.

"Who?"

"Football player. Got caught fighting dogs."

"They do that in the south, you know."

"That was his defense," Steinway says, "how he was raised or something. Pit Bulls or Rots, I forget. Doesn't really matter. He was treated like a child murderer. Sent to jail. Kicked out of the league."

"Must not have been much going on in the world if people went nuts over dogfighting. Was there nothing else to get worked up about? A couple dogs fighting. Jesus."

"You tell me," Steinway says. "The Vick thing wasn't that long ago. There's always a lot to get worked up about. Take your pick."

"You interrupted my dog story."

"Does it get better than 'We sent them into the tunnels first'?"

Nowak shakes his head and fingers the lowest button on his polo.

"Not much gets your attention. You're a downer. Aren't you supposed to be keeping me alive?"

"I'm supposed to listen. That's what your loving family says."

"Loving family," Nowak repeats. "I need a cigarette. I don't care if they visit. I'm happy here. Everyone wants to feel sorry for me. Why?"

"I don't feel sorry for you," Steinway says.

"Good."

Steinway checks his watch: 7:48.

"Let's go to Chevron," Nowak says. "You're still working there?"

Steinway sees the wonder in Nowak's face. This isn't a throwaway request. And while Steinway isn't ashamed about his employment, he has never been quick to volunteer the Chevron information to people he meets. Even the kindhearted, like his boyfriend Rashad, initially give the head-tilt, pity smirk he despises. But there's enough dignity in him to speak clearly when he eventually says "Chevron." He could be collecting unemployment checks like a few of the uninjured losers he knows.

"You know I am," Steinway says. "What about it?"

"Let's go."

"You got forty minutes until bedtime, Nowak. It'd take ten to sign you out."

"I'll give you an extra twenty bucks."

"A hundred," Steinway says.

Nowak pulls out a fat leather wallet from his front pocket and fishes out two twenties and hands them over.

"Congrats, now you can afford Tanqueray," Nowak says.

By the time they hit Main Street Steinway senses a chill although it's still in the sixties. The shiver might be the nerves that open up inside him. If caught, there will be insignificant consequences, perhaps a throwaway lecture from Wishwell's manager, and Steinway tries to laugh off the imagined scene, but he's unsuccessful. The pain in his chest hasn't subsided, which isn't all that unusual. Still, he's not interested in prolonging this experience. The effects of the gin and tonic have long retreated, and the acuity of the night excursion doesn't bring him anything

but responsibility, something he didn't anticipate and desire when he finished his set earlier that night.

The county has recently put in sidewalks, an improvement the lumber mill town greeted with ambivalence, but Nowak is giddy, saying the names of the stores they pass: "Holiday Market," "Antlers Motel," "Kopper Kettle."

It's only a quarter mile to the Chevron, but seems much longer to Steinway at their slow pace.

"Knotbumper. Bank of America."

"You're not in prison, Nowak." Steinway says. "You never get out?"

"I gave you forty bucks for a stroll. What do you think? I'm not paying to hold your hand."

Steinway attempts a breath before his reply but his body revolts into a coughing fit.

"You okay?"

"Fine," Steinway says, recovering.

"We're not going back."

"I'm fine," Steinway says, and he believes it. He's lived with his body long enough.

"You're not sweating are you?"

"I'm not dying, if that's what you mean," Steinway says. "No CPR tonight, Nowak. Don't get your hopes up."

"You can read my mind. How did you know? Nothing more I want than to pump on that chest."

"You'll go before me," Steinway says. "Count on it."

"You're a bunch of fun, you know that? You should be paying me."

The Chevron station is empty, save for Sheryl, who works the register. She's a little older than Steinway and wears two dreamcatcher earrings that almost touch her shoulders. She chews Skoal Longcut, the same as Steinway. They are friendly at shift change and Steinway remains in her debt for introducing him to his boyfriend Rashad. Still, Steinway often senses some ill-defined skepticism whenever she looks directly at him.

"Can't get enough?" she says to Steinway as the men enter the mini-mart.

Steinway nods at her.

"Go crazy, Nowak," Steinway says. "You got five minutes."

"I got all night. Still got free will, buddy."

Nowak starts down the aisle of jerky and candy. A country radio station is at commercial: used cars over in Susanville.

Steinway leans on the checkout counter and Sheryl nods at Nowak.

"Dude from Wishwell," Steinway says. "Ex-Marine needed a walk."

"Of all places to go."

"His choice," Steinway says and puts his hand out. "Save me." Sheryl opens the can of Skoal and he takes a pinch, the smell familiar and glorious. He slides the dip in with a practiced touch. Steinway started chewing at fifteen and continued even after being forced to look at multiple photographs of cancerous inner lips in the high school nurse's office — infected white and cavernous. The images haunt him occasionally, but whenever he flips his lip over in his bathroom he only sees the pink hue of health.

Near the back of the store Nowak inspects a massive, four dollar bag of Swedish Fish.

"He's missing an ear," Sheryl says. "That's not great to look at."

"Flamethrower accident from the war," Steinway says. "That's what he claims."

"But it's so... clean."

"It's been seventy years or whatever," Steinway says.

"What war?"

"World War II."

Sheryl raises her eyebrows, but doesn't speak.

"What?" Steinway says.

"Nothing."

"Anything exciting?" Steinway says.

"Meth head almost got hit on his bike a few minutes ago. That got my attention. I just heard the tires."

"Too bad the guy missed," Steinway says.

"It was a F-150. Would have been over quick. Meth head barely even noticed. He was on some pink BMX bike. I've never seen him, but I'm sure he'll be in here sooner than later.

Hopefully your shift."

"If it hit him square he'd be dead." The voice is Nowak's, who Steinway had briefly forgotten. Nowak holds an open can of Bud Light.

"What are you doing?" Steinway says.

"I'll drink it outside."

Nowak puts a five dollar bill on the counter.

"You can't drink it outside," Steinway says. "Where do you think you are?"

"This is interesting," Sheryl says. "Let him stay. Who cares? No one's around."

"Sheryl," Steinway says.

"You Mr. Rules now?" Sheryl says. "I do inventory on the lottery tickets."

"Jesus," Steinway says. "Don't do that." Stunned, he brings his hands to his chest. "What? Sheryl." His vision blurs on the periphery, but his eyes lock on the plastic case that houses the various lottery tickets. It's been a year since he started lifting one 7-7-7 scratcher a week, and he's grown comfortable with the trifling thievery. He once won \$500, which he cashed down in Chico.

"And you're a Marine, right?" Sheryl says to Nowak.

"Guadalcanal," Nowak says and points to where his left ear should be. "Lost it over there." He takes a few gulps of the beer.

"Sheryl," Steinway says, ready to plead.

"Forget it," Sheryl says without a glance his way. To Nowak: "My grandpa was on Iwo Jima. It's funny. You always hear about these greatest generation guys coming home who wouldn't talk about it. Some quiet hero crap or something. But my grandfather told war stories all the time. Couldn't get him to shut up about how rough it was."

"This guy, he's a talker, a lot, too," Steinway says, stumbling back into the conversation, but still shaken from Sheryl's lottery ticket comment and subsequent "Forget it." Steinway looks at her and she appears calm, like nothing has happened — no accusation at all — but Steinway can't slow his heart, and the shooting pain in his arm returns.

"We've got to go," Steinway says.

"Where?" Nowak says.

"Damn it," Steinway says. "It's time."

"You got a good story for me?" Sheryl says. "Nowak, is it?"

"Yes."

"You can see we're not expecting a big crowd tonight."

"Seriously, we have to go," Steinway says. He's impatient and he's dying, only slowly and unaware. The final heart attack won't arrive until the following night when he sits alone on the shore of Lake Almanor.

"Sure," Nowak says then finishes his beer. He walks to the back of the store and grabs another, opens it, drinks, and comes back to the counter. "I gave you five bucks, right?"

"You're fine," Sheryl says. "Tell me about the ear. Flamethrower, right?"

"Steinway tell you that?"

"You mean Trevor?" she says. "Sure."

"He's been listening to me although he pretends not to," Nowak says.

"Nowak, you're on your own," Steinway says. He hands Nowak back the two twenties. "I got nothing to do with you. You hear me? You walked away on your own."

"Relax," Sheryl says. "I've never seen you this pissed."

"I'm fine, for the thousandth time," Steinway says. "I don't..." He catches his breath.

"Want nothing to do with this guy. Too much."

"It's just Wishwell, Trevor," Sheryl says. "They don't care."

Steinway can't will his body to leave the Chevron. He considers calling Rashad, but he decides to wait until the pain subsides.

"So, these flamethrowers," Nowak says. "First, you'd have to rub on this protection cream before you went out. All over your face. You knew it was only a matter of time before you got burned a little. You're shooting the damn thing in these caves. Not a lot of places for the fire to go. And it's liquid fire, not just a flame. Not a lot of people know that. We'd get excited as hell. Nothing like it. We get all pumped up. We got 'em cornered and we're scared, but mainly

excited. It's hard to explain. You're so damn tired, but ready to go. Hyper. Everything's going so fast and slow at the same time."

"Acceleration seconds," Sheryl says. "That what my grandpa called it. You get so excited and crazy that time speeds up instead of slowing down. But you stay in control somehow."

"Hell, I'm talking about acceleration *hours*," Nowak says in between drinks. "You think people die quick in the caves? Hell, no. You got to keep your wits. It takes time to die. You got to speed things up to get through the day."

"And your ear? Short version," Sheryl says. "Trevor isn't crazy. You need to get back."

"So the Japs are in the caves, and they won't come out. Captain gives the order to fire up the cave, so I do, and I get 'em. But the screams. It's a hell of a thing, even when you want to kill."

Steinway escapes from the pain long enough to text Rashad.

Trevor: Come pick me up at the Chevron. Explain later

Rashad: You ok? Why at Chevron?

Trevor: Just come get me. Messed up

Rashad: On way.

It'll take Rashad ten minutes to arrive.

"Your ear," Sheryl says. "Tell me about your ear."

"I got too close to the flame," Nowak says. "That's the short version."

Sheryl looks at Steinway.

"Nothing to do with him," Steinway says. "He knows the way back."

"I know the way back," Nowak says. "Bedtime for war hero. Yes?" He straightens up, leaves the half-drunk can on the counter, and turns to go. "Thanks, Steinway. Maybe mix the songs up a bit tomorrow night."

"Fuck you," Steinway says.

Nowak walks through the doors, then looks back and points at Steinway and winks.

"That guy is full of shit," Sheryl says after Nowak disappears into the darkness past gas pump #4.

"What?"

"He was never in World War II. Are you kidding me?"

"He's too young. What's he, sixty, sixty-five?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know?" Steinway says.

"You're the one bringing him in here. And there weren't any flamethrowers, Trevor. The guy is screwing with you."

Steinway goes silent trying to piece together everything. On the radio, George Strait's "Ocean Front Property," and Sheryl starts to hum along. Steinway sees the self-important know-it-all pride she radiates.

"Don't worry about the lottery tickets," Sheryl says. "I don't know why I said that."

"Sure," Steinway says. "Okay." He's relieved, but only slightly. Her accusation arrived so quickly, so out of the blue.

"I've been fighting with Bill," Sheryl says.

Steinway hears her, but doesn't reply. He lifts his recovering arm, shakes it out, and finishes with a small wave goodbye.

Steinway walks down Willow Way and turns south on First Avenue, guessing Rashad is driving the back way to Chevron, but Steinway is wrong, which will earn him an extra five minutes of solitude and Rashad's fleeting scorn.

Finally alone, Steinway gives into the solitude of the moment and attempts to corral his thoughts. Rashad will find him soon and demand an apology then immediate optimism, a reoccurring sequence from Rashad at the conclusion of every one of their arguments. Steinway simultaneously loves and loathes it.

The night has cooled and Steinway wonders if Nowak found his way back, although it's an absurd notion that anyone could get lost in this town. Nowak is probably crawling into bed or already asleep, Grace and Farrah smiling nearby. He'll probably live forever, no matter if he's sixty or eighty years old, an earless wonder, damn him.

Steinway is scheduled to perform the following night at Wishwell, but he decides right then to skip the performance and head out to the West Shore of Lake Almanor tomorrow. He could use a break from the Lysol, Nowak, and Cher. They'll forgive him immediately when he shows up on Friday night. He knows that.

Soon, the low beams of Rashad's Honda Accord blind Steinway and he hears Rashad's voice through the open window before he's come to a stop.

"You told me Chevron, goddammit. What's wrong with you? Why aren't you at Wishwell? Sheryl says you were with some crazy dude. Trevor, are you listening to me?"

The car smells like marijuana and Rashad drives under the speed limit, which means he's stressed. After a sincere apology and a quick rundown of the evening's events, Steinway reaches over and holds Rashad's hand, and Rashad squeezes. Rashad wears the gold Rolex Steinway bought him after cashing the winning scratcher ticket.

"I'm here," Rashad says. "That's what matters. We're here together."

Rashad's voice has always calmed Steinway, and it works its magic again tonight — his beautiful reassurance, the enchantment of "together." Steinway closes his eyes and leans his head back onto the headrest. No pain. No responsibility. It's these moments of peace he'd love to slow down to a crawl, just let them flow over him and back again, but he finds it's always the opposite of his wish: the speed at which they'll soon be home (hopefully Rashad stays the night), the blink of an eye until morning, and with it, the Chevron cash register. But it's fine. He's fine. Yes, he'll skip Wishwell tomorrow. The West Shore will be deserted this time of year. He can go out there and throw rocks into the lake and watch the sun go down behind Mount Lassen.

"Bubl ," Rashad says, and turns up "Haven't Met You Yet" on the car's stereo. "Ah, Michael, sing to me."

Rashad's one-person-I'd-run-away-with crush, Michael Bubl , croons his hit, and Steinway's hands reach out in front of him and begin to play the imaginary piano keys positioned there.

"You can play this song?" Rashad says. "Amazing. You can play the shit out of it, can't you? You know how rare that is? You know that? Say you're amazing. Say it. Open your eyes and look at me. You hear me? Say you're amazing."

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