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Opening extract from  
**Grasshopper Jungle**

Written by  
**Andrew Smith**

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*For Michael Bourret,  
who would not allow me to quit.*

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## EGMONT

Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street. He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.



**I READ SOMEWHERE** that human beings are genetically predisposed to record history.

We believe it will prevent us from doing stupid things in the future.

But even though we dutifully archived elaborate records of everything we've ever done, we also managed to keep on doing dumber and dumber shit.

This is my history.

There are things in here: babies with two heads, insects as big as refrigerators, God, the devil, limbless warriors, rocket ships, sex, diving bells, theft, wars, monsters, internal combustion engines, love, cigarettes, joy, bomb shelters, pizza, and cruelty.

Just like it's always been.

## ***KIMBER DRIVE***

**ROBBY BREES AND I** made the road the Ealing Mall is built on.

Before we outgrew our devotion to BMX bicycles, the constant back-and-forth ruts we cut through the field we named *Grasshopper*

*Jungle* became the natural sweep of Kimber Drive, as though the dirt graders and street engineers who paved it couldn't help but follow the tracks Robby and I had laid.

Robby and I were the gods of concrete rivers, and history does prove to us that wherever boys ride bicycles, paved roadways ribbon along afterward like intestinal tapeworms.

So the mall went up—built like a row of happy lower teeth—grinned for a while, and then about a year ago some of the shops there began shutting down, blackening out like cavities when people left our town for other, better places.

BMX riding was for middle-school kids.

We still had our bikes, and I believe that there were times Robby and I thought about digging them out from the cobwebbed corners of our families' garages. But now that we were in high school—or at least in high school *classes*, because we'd attended Curtis Crane Lutheran Academy since kindergarten—we rode skateboards, and also managed to sneak away in Robby's old car.

We were in tenth grade, and Robby could drive, which was very convenient for me and my girlfriend, Shann Collins.

We could always depend on Robby. And I counted on the hope—the erotic plan I fantasized over—that one night he'd drive us out along the needle-straight roads cutting through the seas of cornfields surrounding Ealing, and Robby wouldn't say anything at all as I climbed on top of Shann and had sex with her right there on the piles of Robby's laundry that always seemed to lie scattered and unwashed in the dirty old Ford Explorer his dad left behind.

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## FIXING FEET

**ON THE FRIDAY** that ended our painfully slow first week after spring break, Robby and I took our boards and skated through the filthy back alley of Grasshopper Jungle.

Nobody cared about skaters anymore.

Well, at least nobody cared among the four remaining businesses that managed to stay open in the Ealing Mall after the McKeon plant closed down: The laundromat Robby never quite made it to, *The Pancake House*, and the liquor and thrift stores owned by Shann's stepdad.

So we could skate there, and did pretty much whatever we wanted to do.

Judging from the empty beer cans, the mysterious floral sleeper sofa we were certain was infested with pubic lice, and the pungent smell of piss in the alley, it was clear everyone else in Ealing was similarly okay with the no-limits code of conduct in Grasshopper Jungle, too.

And that proved to be an unfortunate fact for me and Robby on that Friday.

We had built ramps from sagging flaps of plywood that we laid across a flight of concrete steps behind a vacant unit that used to be a foot doctor's office.

"Bad business plan," Robby said.

"What?"

"Fixing people's feet in a town everyone's dying to run away from."

Robby was so smart it hurt my head to think about how sad he could be sometimes.

"We should go into business," I said.

"Want to have a fag?"

Robby liked calling cigarettes *fags*.

“Okay.”

There was no way we’d ever sit down on that couch. We upended blue plastic milk crates and sat with forearms resting across our knees while we propped our feet on our boards and rocked them back and forth like we floated over invisible and soothing waves.

Robby was a better smoker. He could inhale thick, deep clouds of cigarette smoke and blow life-sized ghost models of both of us when he’d casually lean back and exhale.

I liked cigarettes, but I’d never smoke if Robby didn’t.

“What kind of business?” Robby said.

“I don’t know. I could write stuff. Maybe comic books.”

“And you could draw me.” Robby took a big drag from his cigarette. “I’d be like your spokesmodel or something.”

I have to explain.

I have that obsession with history, too.

In one corner of my closet, stacked from the floor to the middle of my thigh, sits a pile of notebooks and composition binders filled with all the dumb shit I’ve ever done. My hope was that, one day, my dumb history would serve as the source for countless fictional accounts of, well, shit.

And I drew, too. There were thousands of sketches of me, of Shann and Robby, in those books.

I consider it my job to tell the truth.

“What, exactly, does a *spokesmodel* do?”

“We speak. And look good at the same time. It’s a tough job, so I’d expect to make decent money.”

“Multitasking.”

“The *shit out of it*, Porcupine.”

Robby called me *Porcupine* because of how I wore my hair. I didn’t mind. Everyone else called me Austin.

Austin Szerba.

It is Polish.

Sometimes, in wonder, I can marvel at the connections that spiderweb through time and place; how a dying bull in Tsarist Russia may have been responsible for the end of the world in Ealing, Iowa.

It is the truth.

When he was a young man, Andrzej Szczerba, who was my great-great-great-grandfather, was exiled from his home in a small farming village called Kowale. Andrzej Szczerba had been involved in a radical movement to resist the imposition of Russian language and culture on Poles. Andrzej, like many Polish boys, hoped that one day his country, which had been treated like a sausage between the dog jaws of selfish neighboring empires, would be able to stand on its own.

It was a good idea, but it was not going to happen in Andrzej's lifetime.

So Andrzej was forced to leave Kowale—and travel to Siberia.

He did not get very far.

The train carrying the exiled Andrzej derailed when it struck a dying bull that had collapsed on the tracks. It was a terrible accident. Andrzej was left, presumed dead, abandoned in the middle of a snowy field.

Andrzej Szczerba wore a silver medallion with an image of Saint Casimir, who was the patron saint of Poland, on a chain around his neck. He believed Saint Casimir had saved his life in the train wreck, and every day for the rest of his life, Andrzej would kiss the medal and say a prayer, thanking Saint Casimir.

It was a fortunate thing for me that Andrzej Szczerba did not die in that snowy field. Wounded, he walked for two days until he came to the town of Hrodna, where he hid from the Russians and ultimately married a Polish girl named Aniela Masulka, who was my great-great-great-grandmother.

Andrzej's healthy Polish semen made four Catholic children with Aniela—two boys and two girls.

Only one of them, his youngest son, Krzys, would ever end up near Ealing, Iowa.

This is my history.

## LOUIS ASKS A RHETORICAL QUESTION

**WE LEANED OUR** backs against the cinder-block wall, smoking in the cut of shade from a green rolling dumpster, and at just about the same time I talked Robby into taking his car to drive us over to Shann Collin's new old house, I looked up and noticed the population of Grasshopper Jungle had increased uncomfortably.

Four boys from Herbert Hoover High, the public school, had been watching us while they leaned against the galvanized steel railing along the edge of the stairway we had been using for a ramp.

“Candy Cane faggots, getting ready to make out with each other in Piss Alley.”

The *Candy Cane* thing—that was what Hoover Boys enjoyed calling boys from Curtis Crane Lutheran Academy. Not just because it kind of rhymed. We had to wear ties to school. Whoever invented the uniform could have planned better to avoid the striped red-and-white design of them. Because when we'd wear our ties, white shirts, and blue sweaters with the little embroidered crosses inside bloodred hearts, you couldn't help but think we looked like, well, patriotic, Christian-boy candy canes.

But Robby and I weren't big enough losers to still be wearing our uniforms while skating.

Well, we weren't so much skating as smoking cigarettes, actually.

Robby wore a Hormel Spam T-shirt and baggy jeans with holes in them he sagged so low you could see half his citrus-motif boxers. They had oranges and lemons on them.

Citrus does not grow in Iowa.

I wore yellow-and-green basketball shorts and a black Orwells tee. So we didn't *look* like candy cane boys.

The Orwells are a punk band from Illinois.

The other part—the *faggot* part—well, let's just say Robby got picked on.

A lot.

I only knew one of the boys: Grant Wallace. It's hard not to know pretty much every kid in a town the size of Ealing, even if you didn't pay too much attention to people as a rule.

However, I did know this: Grant and his friends were there for no other reason than to start crap.

It was bound to be historic, too.

And two 140-pound *Candy Cane faggot* sophomores with cigarettes and skateboards were not likely to stop anything four bored and corn-fed twelfth-graders from Hoover had in mind.

Robby just sat back casually against the wall, puffing away on his cigarette.

I couldn't help but think he looked like a guy in one of those old black-and-white movies about firing squads and blindfolds and the Foreign Legion and shit like that.

One of Grant's friends, a pudgy guy with a face full of whiteheads and only one eyebrow, took his cell phone out from his pocket and began recording video of us.

Consult history: Nothing good ever happens when cell phones are used to record video.

And I guess that was as good as Grant's directorial cue to begin.

“Let me and Tyler borrow you guys’ skateboards for a few minutes. We’ll bring them back.”

Tyler must have been the mule-faced kid on Grant’s right, because he nodded, all excited, an encouragement for us to be cooperative *Candy Cane faggots*.

But Robby said no before the question was entirely out of Grant’s mouth.

The truth is—and history will back me up on this, too—that when kids like Grant ask kids like me and Robby if they can borrow stuff like skateboards, the boards are either going to get stolen, or the kids like me and Robby are going to be beaten up and *then* the boards are going to get stolen.

The way kids like me and Robby get beaten up first is when one of them says no.

History class is over for today.

We got beaten up by Grant Wallace, Tyler, and some other kid who smelled like he had barf on his sleeves, while the fourth kid filmed it with his cell phone.

Oh, and extra credit in history: You should never wear loose mesh basketball shorts and boxer underwear if you’re going to get kned in the balls. Just so you know for the future.

I don’t even think either one of us made it all the way to his feet before the kicks and punches started. Robby got a bloody nose.

Grant took our boards and chucked them up onto the roof of *The Pancake House*.

Then the four Hoover Boys took our shoes off and threw them on the roof, too.

And if the boards didn’t make such a racket when they landed, Grant and his friends would have taken Robby’s and my pants and sent them up to shoe-and-skateboard heaven, too. But the Chinese guy

named Louis who worked in the kitchen of *The Pancake House* stuck his face out the back door, and asked, politely, what we thought we were doing.

I do not know what I thought I was doing.

But that question, in itself, when asked by a Chinese pancake chef named Louis, was enough to make Grant and his friends call an end to their diversion.

I was curled up on my side, cupping my nuts, while the sleeve of my black Orwells T-shirt adhered to some gooey piss stain on Grasshopper Jungle's asphalt.

Grant and the Hoover Boys left, and Louis, apparently satisfied with the lack of an answer to his rhetorical question about what we boys thought we were doing, shut the door.

For a moment, I found myself wondering, too, why guys like Grant Wallace, who called guys like me and Robby Brees *faggots*, always seemed to take pleasure in removing the trousers of littler guys.

That would be a good question for the books, I thought.

## ***THERE'S BLOOD ON YOUR SPAM***

**"ARE YOU HURT?"**

"Balls. Knee. Boxers."

"Oh. Um."

"There's blood on your Spam."

"Shit."

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