

*Salvation*  
at  
Rio Fe

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outskirtspress  
DENVER, COLORADO

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Outskirts Press, Inc.  
<http://www.outskirtspress.com>

ISBN: 978-1-4787-5994-2

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*For Luke and Edie*



## *Chapter 1*

# **TOMMY GUNN**

**TOMMY GUNN WAS** a towheaded American boy born in the South by the grace of God in Kegg County near the town of Toxic Lick, Kentucky. An only child, he became the sole survivor of his family at the age of two when his parents were gunned down in Detroit. Choate and Diane Gunn had left Tommy in the care of Choate's father, Pop Gunn, so Choate and Diane could find employment on an auto assembly line in Michigan.

"At the time," as Pop told the story, "the job of takin' money from working people to give to people who wouldn't work lay mostly in the hands of the Government. That wasn't enough for some in Detroit, however, so a few fellers with a hankering for action were stealing wallets and handbags from people stuck in traffic jams. Well, one feller broke Choate's windows with a chain, and Choate decapitated him with his sawed-off twelve gauge. Shortly after that, Choate had eight bullets in him and Diane had four. They bled out before the traffic light turned green."

Pop always told the story the same matter-of-fact way to

hide how gravely the loss of Choate had wounded him. Pop lost his tolerance for confrontation after that, so he kept the truth from Tommy. Tommy turned eight still believing his parents had died making Ford Mustangs.

That wasn't Pop's first brush with misfortune. Several years before Choate's death, Pop's passions had migrated from his wife to whiskey. Pop's drinking had been Mrs. Gunn's main justification for running away, out of the blue, with an auctioneer from Louisiana.

"I woulda appreciated a heads-up that she was runnin' off with that fast-talking Coon-ass so I wouldna looked like such a fool driving around lookin' for her like she was a lost puppy," Pop said.

Some men drown their sorrows in booze, but Pop's sorrows were already well-marinated in shine and legal stuff, too. From the day of Mrs. Gunn's departure, moderation ruled Pop's drinking, eating, judgments, opinions, and sense of discipline. Usually.

"Moderation in all things," Pop used to say, "including moderation."

Pop was a gentle man. He never raised a hand against Tommy. On the other hand, he didn't make a show of public affection, either. The words *I love you* never passed Pop's lips. Pop sometimes regretted that he had never uttered those three intimate words to Choate. The closest he ever got was, *When it comes to lovin' your son, I reckon I do.* That's what Pop said at Choate's funeral when it was too late to do Choate any good. To make up for these failings, Pop doted on Tommy.

Tommy had spent the previous night with the Tolliver Family so Pop could prepare *the surprise* for his grandson's

eighth birthday. Early in the afternoon, the three Tollivers arrived at Pop's trailer with Tommy, blindfolded Iranian-hostage style.

"That's a fine looking pony," Mr. Tolliver dissembled. About thirty, he was sun-tanned from working in tobacco fields. He wore a cotton plaid shirt, overalls, beat-up boots, and a blue University of Kentucky baseball cap. He stood beside Pop's mobile home with a big grin on his face and a can of Budweiser in hand.

"Nothing as pleasing as a new lawn mower," Mrs. Tolliver said. She was dressed in culottes, a gingham blouse, and sandals. Her eyes were the same sky blue color as all the Tollivers and the Gunns. Blue was the default eye color in the hollows of Kegg County.

Eight-year-old Lori Tolliver, Tommy's best friend, said nothing. Her hair was as pale as corn silk. She was barefoot, and she wore cotton shorts and a blue tee shirt with white letters that read "KENTUCKY".

Pop Gunn was a spry man of fifty-four years. He was dressed in a white tee shirt, worn overalls, and brown boots. He used one hand to hold his Budweiser and the other to aim Tommy toward *the surprise*.

Dressed in a white tee shirt and a pair of cut-off jeans, Tommy sniffed to guess the origin of the tar smell.

When Pop lowered the bandanna from Tommy's eyes, the Birthday Boy's knees buckled, because *the surprise* exceeded all his expectations. A new backboard post was set into a freshly laid square of asphalt measuring thirty by thirty feet. The adjustable rim had been installed at eight feet above the surface of the court. Pop flipped a brand new

basketball to Tommy.

“Your future ain’t in them tobacco fields yonder,” Pop said. “This here’s your future.”

Tommy dribbled the ball on the court. He felt the heat of the freshly-laid asphalt on the soles of his bare feet. He launched a jump shot that went through the hoop and nested briefly in the tight new nylon net.

“I’ve done some calculating,” Pop said, “and if you shoot two hundred and seventy-four shots ever’ day, by the time you’re eighteen, you’ll have a million shots under your belt. Yes, sir, that there’s your future.”

Pop pressed the fingertips and palm of Tommy’s right hand onto the moist underside of the lid of a can of Wildcat Blue exterior paint. He got Tommy to jump as high as he could to leave a hand print on the post. Pop painted an “8” beside the fresh hand print.

Tommy was no genius, but he wasn’t a dunce, either. Pop’s permissive hand and liberal praise, however, had cultivated a sense of superiority in Tommy. Like his father Choate, Tommy thought he was smarter than everyone else, so he seldom sought advice and he shunned collaboration. When he got an idea, he ran with it.

Within twenty minutes of cleaning the blue paint from his hand, Tommy dragged his mini-trampoline onto the court in front of the rim. He gave a lot of thought to the takeoff but almost none to the landing. He got a running start, bounced on the trampoline, soared into the air, slam-dunked his new basketball, and fell to the asphalt, breaking both ankles. Tommy had taken off with twenty-six bones in each foot, but, after landing, he had more than that. You

could hear bones cracking all the way to the picnic table in the front lawn where the Tollivers sat chatting with Pop. Lori screamed bloody murder and ran to comfort the grounded high-flyer.

“What the hell’s that young’un gone and done now?” Pop asked.

Tommy writhed in pain on the asphalt and wished he had tested his theory before implementing it.

Many people might have chosen a new pastime, but not Tommy. While he was still on crutches, both feet immobilized in plaster, he was out shooting baskets on his new court. He rehabilitated quickly, often shooting hoops with Lori for hours at a time. As soon as the casts came off his feet, Tommy constructed a home-made leg press machine using wood scraps, hay-baling twine, a three-inch iron pipe, and cinderblocks. A decade of leg presses and shooting jump shots gave Tommy the legs of a kangaroo. As the annual hand prints on the goal post recorded, Tommy jumped higher every year. By the time he took his one-millionth jump shot, he was eighteen years old, six feet tall, and the apex of his hand print reached almost to twelve feet. His *vertical* measured fifty-inches. Even a person who didn’t know a *vertical* from a *ventricle* understood that fifty inches was a lot of *vertical*.

“That boy’s got hang time like a space shot,” Pop told the men down at the general store.

Tommy and Lori became star shooting guards on the Toxic Lick high school boys’ and girls’ basketball teams. After graduation, the only college that offered them both full basketball scholarships was Kentucky Barber College,

a small Methodist school located in downtown Toxic Lick.

KBC's name was as deceiving as Stetson, Rice, and Colgate. Students didn't attend Stetson University to make hats or Rice University to become farmers or Colgate University to make toothpaste, and students didn't go to Kentucky Barber to learn how to cut hair. KBC had been founded as a school for boys by the Reverend Jedediah Barber in 1822, two years after he had established a boutique sect of Methodists called Barberians.

The Barberians' signature doctrine was based on Genesis 17:14. "Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people." The Barberians became known as *Cutters*. Methodists on the other side of the theological divide cited Romans 2:29, "Circumcision is circumcision of the heart," and First Corinthians 7:18, "Circumcision is nothing". The rift was so irreparable that the Barberians broke away from Methodism, and Reverend Barber donated everything he owned to found a college where the critical need for penis modification could be taught into perpetuity.

So, KBC and the Barberians had nothing to do with cutting hair and everything to do with flaying foreskins. As an example of the power of sectarianism in modern times, however, girls now attended KBC, people assumed KBC was a school for hair stylists, the school mascot was a Barber Pole, and varsity sports teams followed a firmly-entrenched tradition of getting haircuts before every game. Revisionist poppycock had taken root.

When the mayor of Toxic Lick made inflammatory remarks on the subject, Pop wrote a letter to the editor of the

*Kegg County Independent.*

“Things change over time. Harvard University was started by Puritans, but look at ‘em now; they’re a gaggle of godless Yankee socialist pinheads.” Pop had never met anyone from Harvard, but he had reliable sources.

Pop wrote lots of letters to the editor, and the editor printed a few after a rigorous cleansing of syntax. Pop’s most recent essay was a celebration of Kentucky Barber College’s inclusion in the NCAA Tournament field.

“The fifteenth state to join the Union, Kentucky has always been the pick of the litter. We’re famous for our thoroughbred horses, our tobacco, our whiskey — and — most of all — our basketball. The University of Kentucky has won the NCAA basketball title eight times, and the University of Louisville has won it three times. Now Kentucky Barber College has a shot. I thank the Lord for being born in Kentucky and for living to see this day.”



During her four years as a Lady Cutter, Lori made an average of 56.3% of the field goals she attempted. Tommy’s average was 52.7%. “In the words of Helen Reddy,” Lori said, “I am woman, hear me roar.” More than fourteen years had passed since their birthday-cake-eating, ankle-smashing introduction to basketball. During those years, they had transitioned from friends, to going steady, to secret lovers.

Lori’s senior season with the Lady Cutters was too mediocre to earn a post-season tournament spot, but Tommy’s

Cutters team had a remarkable year, advancing to the NCAA tournament for the first time in school history as a sixteen seed. The Cutters traveled by bus to Saint Louis for the opening round of the Midwest Regional where they were expected to get whipped and sent home by the number one seed from Columbia, Missouri, the Tigers of the University of Missouri.

Then, something unprecedented happened: the sixteenth-seeded Cutters moved through the tournament bracket like a runaway pair of hair clippers. The Cutters upset the University of Missouri and then went on to sneak by Arizona, Texas, Kentucky, and Kansas. This most talked-about subject on sports radio and TV was causing financial devastation among bookies from Connecticut to Las Vegas. Probabilities were out of whack. The Pendulum had swung in one direction too long. Something had to give when KBC played the Brut University Hyenas for the championship on the coming Monday night, the climax of March Madness.