

Jim DeBono

Tammy's Toothpicks

Stanley Delaney is his name, but just be damn sure you call him Spike. This had nothing to do with his hair. What sat on top of his narrow face was a greasy tidal wave of a ducktail. Despite his 57 years, it was still the color of pistol steel. Anybody yanking his chain about Grecian formula would answer to Little Spike, the switchblade kept in the ass pocket of his Levis. This area had grown barely accessible and this morning he got up extra early to go over the drill. One quick thrust of the arm and out pops Little Spike with a "Hi, how are ya!" click. His stubby fingers rehearsed until his mint toothpick was a mushy pulp. He flicked it to the floor and went for the Marlboros in the sleeve of his T-shirt. Spike always kept matches and toothpicks wedged in with his smokes. All were courtesy of Tammy's Diner, his first stop today. He would tell Tammy his little secret. He considered taking her with him, but couldn't risk misjudging what was in those pretty brown eyes. This trip would be solo. That's what Jimmy would do. Poor Jimmy, he thought. One extra second would have saved him. One second is a very long time, never mind 40 years. Just before heading out the door, Spike gazed at the movie poster in the hall. He whispered "Don't worry Jimmy, I'll do the right thing."

Spike pulled the tarp off his 1949 Mercury. Her name was Judy, after Natalie Wood in *Rebel Without A Cause*. Rain or shine, Judy was always there. Jimmy knew the value of a good car. Spike always said, "Jimmy is wise beyond his years." Once in a while someone would correct him

by saying "was" and an argument would start, usually with Little Spike making an appearance.

The morning sun lavished Judy with sparkling kisses and her grill grinned in approval. Spike paused a moment and soaked in the view. His drinking buddies would smirk as he declared these moments "vehicular interludes." Spike glanced right and saw his neighbor, Tony, getting out the lawnmower. "Tony buddy, they're just like women: Only one thing is better than looking at 'em." Tony didn't nod or even look up. Spike shrugged and started her up. "Hound Dog" blared out of the radio. With a laugh and a howl, he peeled out of the driveway.

"More coffee, Ricky?" asked Tammy. "Why not?" he said, putting down his grilled cheese. Tammy poured a fresh cup and returned the smile that rested on his face like a party drunk that forgot to go home. He said "You know, I think I figured out how I can give up sugar in my coffee."

"How's that?"

"Have you stand there while I drink it!" Ricky was thrown a few laughs from his greasy spoon audience.

"You're a sweet man yourself, Ricky Hanson. Can I get you anything else?"

"Naw, I gotta get going. I only hung around because I heard Spike was gonna ask you something."

Tammy's smile dropped and she whisked away with Ricky's dishes a little faster than she intended. Fast or slow, the diners' male eyes followed Tammy back and forth behind the counter like a lecherous Wimbledon crowd. Forever the beauty of the town, she preserved like a fine wine. She was the brunette equivalent of Ann Margaret. Even the high school boys appreciated her. Tammy Clark heard the whispers over the years. Why is she still in Cholame? How come some Prince Charming never swept her away? No one seemed to notice how the lone waitress of a certified dive became the owner of a renovated '50s style diner that was a hit with the town and tourists. Nor did they notice the volunteer work at the hospital, bake sale donations to the church or the little league sponsorship. Beauty may be only skin deep, but it throws off one hell of a glare.

Tammy didn't want to see Spike today. He had worn thin on her patience over the years. She dated him back in '54 when every girl wanted a bad boy. She dragged him to see *East of Eden* and Spike was fascinated by Jimmy Dean. On a cool, late September dusk in '55, James Dean approached their very town. His Porsche Spyder 550, named "Little Bastard," swerved at 100 mph to miss a Ford Tudor that inched over the centre line. Everyone went to see. The girls cried and the boys looked down a lot. Tammy and Spike took it hard. Not long after the crash, *Rebel Without a Cause* was released and it was like an ulcer to Spike's soul. Tammy saw him cling to the walk and talk of the rebel and realized he would not grow as a young man should. She tried to explain to him that the character Jim Stark and James Dean were loved not only because they were rebels but also because they were honestly searching for something. Her words effected him like he had been stabbed with his own switchblade.

Tammy broke off the relationship and Spike was content as the lone wolf. Occasionally he would reappear and try to court her. Once, he brought her a small velvet box to the movie theatre. Her friends giggled so he convinced her to walk around the corner. Inside she found a beautiful gold ring with an odd clear stone. He said that they were touring Jimmy Dean's wreck at a county fair and Spike broke off a piece of the mangled windshield in the middle of the night. He rushed to a jeweller and had the ring made. The inscription read "Your Rebel." She began to explain as gently as she could but his face frightened her. She ran back to her friends and the tail lights of his Mercury vanished. Spike wasn't seen or heard from for days. When he finally came back, he acted as if nothing happened. Time sent Spike to the lumber yard and Tammy to the diner. She was always nice to him, even on his "Your Rebel" days. He always twisted conversations toward Jimmy. Tammy was tired of his ways. What did Ricky say? Spike wanted to ask her something.

"Maybe just one more cup, Ricky?"

"I don't know," he replied, going for his wallet.

"Even if I watch you drink it?"

"You got a deal!" he said, and sat back down.

"A WOMP BOMPA LOO BOMP-LOO WOMP BAM BOOM" flew out of the Mercury's AM radio and Spike jumped right in, even catching

it on the first "WOMP." He had a pleased but glazed look on his face. The look of an Olympic athlete hearing his national anthem echo in a packed stadium. As he passed Burt's Sporting Goods, two teenage boys shouted "IT'S THE FONZ—AYYYYY!" Spike shot them a nasty look but kept moving. He grumbled to himself "Fonzie? That was in the goddamn '70s! Get with it, you punks." He went over the list in his head one more time, glancing at the duffle bag on the passenger side. His eyes darted from the road to the bag. He honked and gave the finger to the lumber yard where he worked. Spike tried to make his own toothpicks once. Nobody had toothpicks like Tammy. He slid the wrapper off one and rolled his tongue over it. The taste of mint put his boot to the gas. Ricky said "Hide the toothpicks sweetheart, I can hear . . ."

". . . the Mercury" she sighed.

He gently rolled to the curb. The etched glass words "TAMMY'S DINER" floated toward him. The door glided and the overhead bell jingled. Noticing he had an audience, Spike strutted his way to the counter. He gave the stool a big spin and flopped down, stopping it with his butt. "Hellloooo Mizz Tammy. I'm lookin' for that famous coffee of yours," he said, reaching for the toothpick dish. Ricky Hanson passed it over saying, "Oh please, allow me, Mr. Delaney." Missing the sarcasm, Spike thanked him and grabbed a fistful. Tammy brought over a black coffee. Spike took a deep breath, savoring her fragrance mixed with the freshly ground Columbian beans. His mouth stretched into a reptile grin. He took a sip and spoke.

"Hey Tam, do you remember this?" He produced a black velvet box. Tammy stared at it a moment.

"Remember? It's the . . ."

"I know what it is Spike. All these years and you still . . ."

"Yup. Not exactly something you toss in the trash, you know."

"No, no I didn't mean that. It's just that it must be close to 40 years!"

"40 years this very evening, old Jimmy found his reward. Jimmy once said about cars: "What better way to die? It's fast and clean and you go out in a blaze of glory."

"That was very prophetic, Spike."

"Yeah, pretty weird, too. There's gonna be a meeting of his fan club at the accident site about 5:30. Candles and the whole bit. I was going to ask you to ride with me and Judy . . ."

"I'm sorry, Spike. I have plans," she said softly. He shrugged. "Naw, that's o.k. I didn't think you would wanna. I just wanted you to take the ring." Tammy sighed and said "I don't think that's a good idea either."

"Would you relax? Geez. I just want you to hang on to it until the fan club leaves town. A lot of people know I have it and I need a good hiding spot. I thought you could hide it in the register."

"Oh. Um, I guess I could lock it up until tomorrow."

"Gee, that would be great. I'm really looking forward to that tribute. Jimmy is such a big part of our lives."

"Or *was*," Ricky added.

"What was that?" Spike glared at him. Ricky continued: "Hey, the guy was great, our hero. But you gotta move on, man. Get a life."

"What the hell is going on in your head, Ricky Hanson?" Spike was clenching his jaw. "Look who's talking," Ricky replied. Tammy stepped in: "Take it easy, boys."

"It's all right Tammy. Spike and I just don't see eye to eye on this."

"Keep yappin' and you won't see out of either eye," Spike said as he slowly got off his stool.

"Spike, taking you down probably won't teach you a damn thing. However, embarrassing you in front of Tammy and the loyal patrons here might keep you out of our hair for a while. That's good enough for me." Ricky rose up off his seat.

"Ready when you are," Spike said. He loaded up a fresh toothpick, adjusted his pants and raised his fists. Ricky shook his head. "Don't think so, Spike. Let's take it outside." Ricky and Spike marched out. One lengthy, hard stare later Spike smirked and said, "Not too late to chicken out, Ricky." Hanson mocked a macho squint and said it: "Let's go, *STANLEY!*"

Spike's eyes widened and he actually snarled. His neck tensed and the reflex of his daily drill kicked in. He swung his hand back, jabbed his fingers past the denim seams and found Little Spike. He whipped his hand back around just in time to block Ricky's fist with his nose. A metallic "zing" sound shot to his ears. The sound of singing power lines. His eyes teared involuntarily and uncontrollably. He took a breath and blood puffed out his nostril in a thick syrup. Ricky hit him again. Spike swayed and fell, striking the right side of his face on the pavement. Ricky

picked up the knife from Spike's limp hand and stuck it the front tire of the Mercury.

"Damn you, Stanley! Good old time rumble and you pull this knife crap. You would have carved me, wouldn't you? Answer me, you bastard!" He kicked Spike in his side. Spike got up to his knees. He growled, "You don't know the half of it, Ricky boy," and lunged for the open passenger window. He made a grab for the duffle bag but another solid punch from Hanson sent him reeling back to the sidewalk. Ricky picked up the bag and opened the zipper. He looked down at Spike.

"Maybe you have a gun now, Stanley? Let's have a little peek." He looked inside and almost gasped. "Dammit, Tammy! Tammy you get the cops over here right now. Jesus, Stanley." Ricky went over to kick him again but changed his mind.

Tammy reached for the coffee pot and Ricky shook his head right away.

"Coffee is the last thing I want right now, Tam."

"Ricky, why on earth don't they get it out of here?"

"They're just small town cops. The proper boys need to handle this, just in case." When the trooper arrived Ricky showed him the bag with the four sticks of dynamite and the box with the switch. A careful examination of the car revealed cans of gas in the back seat. Also seen in the bag were a mickey of bourbon, a red jacket similar to the one Dean wore when he crashed, a pack of Marlboros and a photo of James Dean. The picture had an actual quote from the actor, but written by Spike. It read: "The gratification comes in the doing, not in the results." Ricky gulped the two beers Tammy set out for him and the trooper walked in the diner.

"Tammy, Rick, the bomb squad is here and they want everyone out of the area. Need any help locking up?"

"No, that's all right. Any word on Spike?"

"Jailhouse or nuthouse, he'll be put away for a long stretch. I sent a man up to his place. He had it all planned out. Even had a map. Hundred miles an hour. There's likely more TNT in the trunk. We found this on his bedroom wall." He handed Ricky a scrap of paper. It was another Dean quote, from an interview:

Reporter: What is the thing you respect above all else?

Dean: That's easy. Death. It's the inevitable, undeniable truth. Everyone else can be questioned. But death is truth. In it lies the only nobility for man, and beyond it, the only hope.

Ricky looked at Tammy and said "So that was our rebel?"

"The years have not been kind to that poor soul. I hope he gets better."

"Hope is a good breakfast, but a bad supper, my dear."

"Not another quote. Who said that?"

"Sir Francis Bacon." Ricky said with a smirk. Tammy laughed. "You are impossible, Ricky Hanson."

"I'm serious! Honestly!" he said, but couldn't keep a straight face. Tammy unwrapped a toothpick and said "Are these things good or what?"