
JAMES LEE BURKE

Why Buggy Siegel Was a Friend of Mine

IN 1947 NICK HAUSER AND I had only two loves in this world—baseball and Cheerio yo-yo contests. That’s how we met Benny, one spring night after a doubleheader out at Buffalo Stadium on the Galveston Freeway. His brand new Ford convertible, a gleaming maroon job with a starch-white top, whitewall tires, and blue-dot taillights, was stuck in a sodden field behind the bleachers. Benny was trying to lift the bumper while his girlfriend floored the accelerator, spinning the tires and blowing streams of muddy water and torn grass back in his face.

He wore a checkered sports coat, lavender shirt, hand-painted necktie, and two-tone shoes, all of it now whipsawed with mud. But it was his eyes, not his clothes, that you remembered. They were a radiant blue and literally sparkled.

“You punks want to earn two bucks each?” he said.

“Who you calling a punk?” Nick said.

Before Benny could answer, his girlfriend shifted into reverse, caught traction, and backed over his foot.

He hopped up and down, holding one shin, trying to bite down on his pain, his eyes lifted heavenward, his lips moving silently.

“Get in the fucking car before it sinks in this slop again!” his girlfriend yelled.

He limped to the passenger side. A moment later they fishtailed across the grass past us. Her hair was long, blowing out the window, the pinkish red of a flamingo. She thumbed a hot cigarette into the darkness.

“Boy, did you check out that babe’s bongos? Wow!” Nick said.

But our evening encounter with Benny and his girlfriend was not over. We were on the shoulder of the freeway, trying to hitch a ride downtown, flicking our Cheerios under a streetlamp, doing a whole range of upper-level yo-yo tricks—Round the World, Shoot the Moon, Rock the Cradle, and the Atomic Bomb—when the maroon convertible roared past us, blowing dust and newspaper in our faces.

Suddenly the convertible cut across two lanes of traffic, made a U-turn, then a

second U-turn, horns blowing all over the freeway, and braked to a stop abreast of us.

“You know who I am?” Benny said.

“No,” I replied.

“My name is Benjamin Siegel.”

“You’re a gangster,” Nick said.

“He’s got you, Benny,” the woman behind the wheel said.

“How you know that?” Benny said.

“We heard your name on *Gangbusters*. Nick and me listen every Saturday night,” I said.

“Can you do the Chinese Star?” he asked.

“We do Chinese Stars in our sleep,” Nick said.

“Get in,” Benny said, pulling back the leather seat.

“We got to get home,” I said.

“We’ll take you there. Get in,” he said.

We drove out South Main, past Rice University and parklike vistas dense with live oak trees, some of them hung with Spanish moss. To the south, heat lightning flickered over the Gulf of Mexico. Benny bought us fried chicken and ice cream at Bill Williams Drive-In, and while we ate, his girlfriend smoked cigarettes behind the wheel and listened to the radio, her thoughts known only to herself, her face so soft and lovely in the dash light I felt something drop inside me when I stole a look at it.

Benny popped open the glove box and removed a top-of-the-line chartreuse Cheerio yo-yo. Behind the yo-yo I could see the steel surfaces of a semiautomatic pistol. “Now show me the Chinese Star,” he said.

He stood with us in the middle of the drive-in parking lot, watching Nick and me demonstrate the intricate patterns of the most difficult of all the Cheerio competition tricks. Then he tried it himself. His yo-yo tilted sideways, its inner surfaces brushing against the string, then twisted on itself and went dead.

“The key is candle wax,” I said.

“Candle wax?” he said.

“Yeah, you wrap the string around a candle and saw it back and forth. That gives you the spin and the time you need to make the pattern for the star,” I said.

“I never thought of that,” he said.

“It’s a breeze,” Nick said.

“Benny, give it a rest,” his girlfriend said from inside the car.

Fifteen minutes later we dropped off Nick at his house on the dead-end street where I used to be his neighbor. It was a wonderful street, one of trees and flowers and old brick homes, and a horse pasture dotted with live oaks beyond the cane-brake that enclosed the cul-du-sac. But when my father died my mother and I were evicted, and we moved across Westheimer and took up residence in a neighborhood where every sunrise broke on the horizon like a testimony to personal failure.

Benny's girlfriend pulled to a stop in front of my house. Benny looked at the broken porch and orange rust on the screens. "This is where you live?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, my eyes leaving his.

He nodded. "You need to study hard, make something of yourself. Go out to California, maybe. It's the place to be," he said.

Our next-door neighbors were the Dunlops. They had skin like pig hide and heads with the knobbed ridges of coconuts. The oldest of the five boys was executed in Huntsville Pen; one did time on Sugarland Farm. The patriarch of the family was a security guard at the Southern Pacific train yards. He covered all the exterior surfaces of his house, garage, and tool shed with the yellow paint he stole from his employer. The Dunlops even painted their car with it. Then, through a fluke no one could have anticipated, they became rich.

One of the girls had married a morphine addict who came from an oil family in River Oaks. The girl and her husband drove their Austin Healey head on into a bus outside San Antonio, and the Dunlops inherited two hundred thousand dollars and a huge chunk of rental property in their own neighborhood. It was like giving a tribe of pygmies a nuclear weapon.

I thought the Dunlops would move out of their dilapidated two-story frame house, with its piles of dog shit all over the backyard, but instead they bought a used Cadillac from a mortuary, covered their front porch with glitter-encrusted chalk animals and icons from an amusement park, and continued each morning to piss out the attic window onto my mother's car, which looked like it had contracted scabies.

As newly empowered landlords, the Dunlops cut no one any slack, did no repairs on their properties, and evicted a Mexican family who had lived in the neighborhood since the middle of the Depression. Mr. Dunlop also seized upon an opportunity to repay the parochial school Nick and I attended for expelling two of his sons.

Maybe it was due to the emotional deprivation and the severity of the strictures imposed upon them, or the black habits they wore in ninety-degree humidity, but a significant number of the nuns at school were inept and cruel. Sister Felicie, however, was not one of these. She was tall, and wore steel-rimmed glasses and small black shoes that didn't seem adequate to support her height. When I spent almost a year in bed with rheumatic fever, she came every other day to the house with my lessons, walking a mile, sometimes in the hottest of weather, her habit powdered with ash from a burned field she had to cross.

But things went south for Sister Felicie. We heard that her father, a senior army officer, was killed on Okinawa. Some said the soldier was not her father but the fiancé she had given up when she entered the convent. Regardless, at the close of the war a great sadness seemed to descend upon her.

In the spring of '47 she would take her science class on walks through the neighborhood, identifying trees, plants, and flowers along the way. Then, just before 3 P.M., we would end up at Costen's Drug Store, and she would let everyone take a rest break on the benches under the awning. It was a grand way to end the school day because on some afternoons the Cheerio yo-yo man would arrive at exactly 3:05 and hold competitions on the corner.

But one day, just after the dismissal bell had rung across the street, I saw Sister Felicie walk into the alleyway between the drug store and Cobb's Liquors and give money to a black man who had an empty eye socket. A few minutes later I saw her upend a small bottle of fortified wine, what hobos used to call short-dogs, then drop it surreptitiously into a trash can.

She turned and realized I had been watching her. She walked toward me, between the old brick walls of the buildings, her small shoes clicking on pieces of gravel and bottle caps and broken glass, her face stippled with color inside her wimple. "Why aren't you waxing your string for the Cheerio contest?" she said.

"It hasn't started yet, Sister," I replied, avoiding her look, trying to smile.

"Better run on now," she said.

"Are you all right, Sister?" I said, then wanted to bite off my tongue.

"Of course I'm all right. Why do you ask?"

"No reason. None. I just don't think too good sometimes, Sister. You know me. I was just—"

But she wasn't listening now. She walked past me toward the red light at the corner, her habit and beads swishing against my arm. She smelled like camphor and booze and the lichen in the alley she had bruised under her small shoes.

Two days later the same ritual repeated itself. Except this time Sister Felicie didn't empty just one short-dog and head for the convent. I saw her send the black man back to Cobb's for two more bottles, then she sat down on a rusted metal chair at the back of the alley, a book spread on her knees as though she were reading, the bottles on the ground barely hidden by the hem of her habit.

That's when Mr. Dunlop and his son Vernon showed up. Vernon was seventeen and by law could not be made to attend school. That fact was a gift from God to the educational system of southwest Houston. Vernon had half-moon scars on his knuckles, biceps the size of small muskmelons, and deep-set simian eyes that focused on other kids with the moral sympathies of an electric drill.

Mr. Dunlop was thoroughly enjoying himself. First, he announced to everyone within earshot he was the owner of the entire corner, including the drug store. He told the Cheerio yo-yo man to beat it and not come back, then told the kids to either buy something inside the store or get off the benches they were loitering on.

His face lit like a jack-o'-lantern's when he saw Sister Felicie emerge from the alley. She was trying to stand straight, and not doing a very good job of it, one hand touching the brick wall of the drug store, a drop of sweat running from the top edge of her wimple down the side of her nose.

"Looks like you got a little bit of the grog in you, Sister," Mr. Dunlop said.

"What were you saying to the children?" she asked.

"Oh, her ladyship wants to know that, does she? Why don't we have a conference with the pastor and hash it out?" Mr. Dunlop said.

"Do as you wish," Sister replied, then walked to the red light with the cautious steps of someone aboard a pitching ship.

Mr. Dunlop dropped a buffalo nickel into a pay phone, an unlit cigarette in the corner of his mouth. His head was shaved bald, his brow knurled, one eye recessed and glistening with pleasure when someone picked up on the other end. "Father?" Mr. Dunlop said.

His son Vernon squeezed his scrotum and shot us the bone.

The Cheerio yo-yo man did not come back to the corner and Sister Felicie disappeared from school for a week. Then one Monday morning she was back in class, looking joyless and glazed, as though she had just walked out of an ice storm.

That afternoon Benny and his girlfriend pulled into my driveway while I was picking up the trash Vernon and his brothers had thrown out of their attic

window into the yard. "I can't get the Atomic Bomb right. Get in the car. We'll pick up your friend on the way out," he said.

"Way where?" I said.

"The Shamrock. You want to go swimming and have some eats, don't you?" he said.

"I'll leave my mom a note," I said.

"Tell her to come out and join us."

That definitely will not flush, I thought, but did not say it.

Benny had said he couldn't pull off the yo-yo trick called the Atomic Bomb. The truth was he couldn't even master Walk the Dog. In fact, I couldn't figure why a man with his wealth and criminal reputation would involve himself so intensely with children's games. After Nick and I went swimming, we sat on the balcony of Benny's suite, high above the clover-shaped pool of the Shamrock Hotel, and tried to show him the configurations of the Atomic Bomb. It was a disaster. He would spread the string between his fingers, then drop the yo-yo through the wrong spaces, knotting the string, rendering it useless. He danced up and down on the balls of his feet in frustration.

"There's something wrong with this yo-yo. I'm gonna go back to the guy who sold it to me and stuff it down his throat," he said.

"He's full of shit, kids," his girlfriend said through the open bathroom door.

"Don't listen to that. You're looking at the guy who almost blew up Mussolini," he said to us. Then he yelled through the French doors into the suite, "Tell me I'm full of shit one more time."

"You're full of shit," she yelled back.

"That's what you got to put up with," he said to us. "Now, teach me the Atomic Bomb."

Blue black clouds were piled from the horizon all the way to the top of the sky, blooming with trees of lightning that made no sound. Across the street we could see oil rigs pumping in an emerald green pasture and a half dozen horses starting to spook at the weather. Benny's girlfriend came out of the bathroom, dressed in new jeans and a black and maroon cowboy shirt with a silver stallion on the pocket. She drank from a vodka collins, and her mouth looked cold and hard and beautiful when she lowered the glass.

"Anybody hungry?" she said.

I felt myself swallow. Then, for reasons I didn't understand, I told her and Benny what Mr. Dunlop had done to Sister Felicie. Benny listened attentively,

his handsome face clouding, his fingers splaying his knotted yo-yo string in different directions. “Say all that again? This guy Dunlop ran off the Cheerio man?” he said.

It was almost Easter and at school that meant the Stations of the Cross and a daily catechism reminder about the nature of disloyalty and human failure. When he needed them most, Christ’s men bagged it down the road and let him take the weight on his own. I came to appreciate the meaning of betrayal a little better that spring.

I thought my account of Mr. Dunlop’s abuse of Sister Felicie and the Cheerio man had made Benny our ally. He’d said he would come by my house the next night and straighten out Mr. Dunlop and anyone else who was pushing around kids and nuns and yo-yo instructors. He said these kinds of guys were Nazis and should be boiled into lard and poured into soap molds. He said, “Don’t worry, kid. I owe you guys. You taught me the Atomic Bomb and the Chinese Star.”

The next day, after school, when I was raking leaves in the yard, Vernon used his slingshot to shoot me in the back with a marble. I felt the pain go into the bone like a cold chisel.

“Got a crick?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, mindlessly, squeezing my shoulders back, my eyes shut.

“How about some hair of the dog that bit you?” he said, fishing another marble out of his shirt pocket.

“You screwed with Benny Siegel, Vernon. He’s going to stuff you in a toilet bowl,” I said.

“Yeah? Who is Benny Sea Gull?”

“Ask your old man. Oh, I forgot. He can’t read, either.”

Vernon’s fist came out of the sky and knocked me to the ground. I felt the breath go out of my chest as though it were being sucked into a giant vacuum cleaner. Through the kitchen window, I could see my mother washing dishes, her face bent down toward the sink. Vernon unbuckled my belt, worked the top button loose on my jeans, and pulled them off my legs, dragging me through the dust. The clouds, trees, garage, alleyway, even the dog dumps, spun in circles around me. Vernon pulled one of my pants legs inside out and used it to blow his nose.

Benny and his girlfriend did not show up at my house that night. I called the Shamrock Hotel and asked for his room.

“There’s no one registered here by that name,” the clerk said.

“Has he checked out?”

There was a pause. “We have no record of a guest with that name. I’m sorry. Thank you for calling the Shamrock,” the clerk said, and hung up.

The next day at recess I saw Sister Felicie sitting on a stone bench under a live oak in a garden behind the church. Her black habit was spangled with sunlight, and her beads lay across her open palm as though the wind had robbed her of her concentration. Her face looked like ceramic, polished, faintly pink, not quite real. She smelled of soap or perhaps shampoo in her close-cropped hair, which was covered with a skull cap and veil that must have been unbearable in the summer months.

“You’re supposed to be on the playground, Charlie,” she said.

“I told Benny Siegel what Mr. Dunlop did to you. He promised to help. But he didn’t show up last night,” I said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Benny is a gangster. Nick and I have been teaching him yo-yo tricks. He built a casino in Nevada.”

“I’m convinced you’ll be a great writer one day,” she said, and for the first time in weeks she smiled. “You’re a good boy, Charlie. I may not see you again, at least for a while. But you’ll be in my prayers.”

“Not see you?”

“Run along now. Don’t hang out with too many gangsters.”

She patted me on top of the head, then touched my cheek.

Benny had shown Nick and me color photographs of the resort hotel and gambling casino he had built in the desert. He also showed us a picture of him and his girlfriend building a snowman in front of a log cabin in west Montana. In the photograph she was smiling and looked much younger, somehow innocent among evergreens that rang with winter light. She wore a fluffy pink sweater and knee-length boots stitched with Christmas designs.

I kept wanting to believe Benny would call or come by, but he didn’t. I dreamed about a building in a desert, its exterior scrolled with neon, a grassy pond on one side of it where flamingos stood in the water, arching their necks, pecking at the insects in their feathers.

I put away my Cheerio yo-yo and no longer listened to ballgames at Buffalo

Stadium. I refused to eat, without understanding why, threw my lunch in a garbage can on the way to school, and fantasized about hurting Vernon Dunlop.

“We’ll set fire to his house,” Nick said.

“Serious?” I said, looking up from the box of shoes we were shining in his garage.

“It’s a thought,” he replied.

“What if somebody gets killed?”

“That’s the breaks when you’re white trash,” Nick said. He grinned, his face full of play. He had a burr haircut and the overhead light reflected on his scalp. Nick was a good boxer, swallowed his blood in a fight, and never let anyone know when he was hurt. Secretly I always wished I was as tough as he was.

He and I had a shoe-shine route. We collected shoes from all over the neighborhood and shined them for ten cents a pair, using only one color polish—brown; home delivery was free. Nick peeled open a Milky Way and bit into it. He chewed thoughtfully, then offered the candy bar to me. I shook my head.

“You got to eat,” he said.

“Who says?” I replied.

“You make me sad, Charlie,” he said.

My father was an old-time pipeline man whose best friend was killed by his side on the last day of World War I. He read classical literature, refused to mow the lawn under any circumstances, spent more days than he should have in the beer joint, attended church irregularly, and contended there were only two facts you had to remember about the nature of God: that He had a sense of humor and, as a gentleman, He never broke His word.

The last part always stuck with me.

Benny had proved himself a liar and a bum. My sense of having been used by him seemed to grow daily. My mother could not make me eat, even when my hunger was eating its way through my insides like a starving organism that had to consume its host in order to survive. I had bed spins when I woke in the morning and vertigo when I rode my bike to school, wobbling between automobiles while the sky, trees, and buildings around me dissolved into a vortex of atomic particles.

My mother tried to tempt me from my abstinence with a cake she baked and the following day with a codfish dinner she brought from the cafeteria, wrapped in foil, butter oozing from an Irish potato that was still hot from the oven.

I rushed from the house and pedaled my bike to Nick's. We sat inside the canebrake at the end of our old street, while the day cooled and the evening star twinkled in the west. There was a bitter taste in my mouth, like the taste of zinc pennies.

"You miss your dad?" Nick asked.

"I don't think about it much anymore. It was an accident. Why go around feeling bad about an accident?" I replied, turning my face from his, looking at the turquoise rim along the bottom of the sky.

"My old man always says your dad was stand-up."

"Benny Siegel treated us like jerks, Nick," I said.

"Who cares about Benny Siegel?"

I didn't have an answer for him, nor could I explain why I felt the way I did.

I rode my bike home in the dusk, then found a heavy rock in the alley and threw it against the side of the Dunlops' house. It struck the wood so hard the glass in the windows rattled. Vernon came out on the back porch, eating a piece of fried chicken, his body silhouetted in the kitchen light. He wore a strap undershirt and his belt was unbuckled, hanging loosely over his fly.

"You're lucky, dick wipe. I got a date tonight. But wait till tomorrow," he said. He shook his chicken bone at me.

I couldn't sleep that night. I had terrible dreams about facing Vernon in the morning. How could I have been so foolish as to actually assault his house? I wished I had taken the pounding right then, when I was in hot blood and not trembling with fear. I woke at 2 A.M. and threw up in the toilet, then went into the dry heaves. I lay in bed, my head under the pillow. I prayed an asteroid would crash into our neighborhood so I wouldn't have to see the sunrise.

At around five o'clock I fell asleep. Later I heard wind rattle the roof, then a loud knocking sound like a door slamming repeatedly on a doorjamb. When I looked out my window screen I could see fog on the street and a maroon convertible with whitewall tires parked in front of the Dunlops' house. An olive-skinned man with patent leather hair parted down the middle, wearing a clip-on bow tie and crinkling white shirt, sat in the passenger seat. I rubbed my eyes. It was the Cheerio man Mr. Dunlop had run off from the parking lot in front of Costen's Drug Store. Then I heard Benny's voice on the Dunlops' porch.

"See, you can't treat people like that. This is the United States, not Mussolini-

ville. So we need to walk out here and apologize to this guy and invite him back to the corner by the school. You're good with that, aren't you?"

There was a gap in the monologue. Then Benny's voice resumed. "You're not? You're gonna deny kids the right to enter Cheerio yo-yo contests? You think all those soldiers died in the war for nothing? That's what you're saying? You some kind of Nazi pushing around little people? Look at me when I'm talking, here."

Then Benny and Mr. Dunlop walked out to the convertible and talked to the Cheerio man. A moment later Benny got behind the wheel and the convertible disappeared in the fog.

I fell sound asleep in the deep blue coolness of the room, with a sense of confidence in the world I had not felt since the day the war ended and Kate Smith's voice sang "God Bless America" from every radio in the neighborhood.

When I woke, it was hot and bright outside, the wind touched with dust and the stench of melted tar. I told my mother of Benny Siegel's visit to the Dunlops.

"You must have had a dream, Charlie. I was up early. I would have heard," she said.

"No, it was Benny. His girlfriend wasn't with him, but the Cheerio man was."

She smiled wanly, her eyes full of pity. "You've starved yourself and you break my heart. Nobody was out there, Charlie. *Nobody*," she said.

I went out to the curb. No one ever parked in front of the Dunlops' house, and because the sewer drain was clogged, a patina of mud always dried along the edge of the gutter after each rain. I walked out in the street so I wouldn't be on the Dunlops' property, my eyes searching along the seam between the asphalt and the gutter. But I could see no tire imprint in the gray film left over from the last rain. I knelt down and touched the dust with my fingers.

Vernon opened his front door and held it back on the spring. He was bare chested, a pair of sweat pants hanging below his navel. "Losing your marbles, frump?" he asked.

By noon my skin was crawling with anxiety and fear. Worse, I felt an abiding shame that once again I had been betrayed by my own vanity and foolish trust in others. I didn't care anymore whether Vernon beat me up or not. In fact, I wanted to see myself injured. Through the kitchen window I could see him pounding dust out of a rug on the clothesline with a broken tennis racquet. I walked down the back steps and crossed into his yard. "Vernon?" I said.

“Your butt-kicking appointment is after lunch. I’m busy right now. In the meantime, entertain yourself by giving a blowjob to a doorknob,” he replied.

“This won’t take long,” I said.

He turned around, exasperated. I hit him, hard, on the corner of the mouth, with a right cross that Nick Hauser would have been proud of. It broke Vernon’s lip against his teeth, whipping his face sideways, causing him to drop the racquet. He stared at me in disbelief, a string of spittle and blood on his cheek. Before he could raise his hands, I hit him again, this time square on the nose. I felt it flatten and blood fly under my knuckles, then I caught him in the eye and throat. I took one in the side of the head and felt another slide off my shoulder, but I was under his reach now and I got him again in the mouth, this time hurting him more than he was willing to live with.

He stepped back from me, blood draining from his split lip, his teeth red, his face twitching with shock. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his father appear on the back porch.

“Get in here, boy, before I whup your ass worse than it already is,” Mr. Dunlop said.

That afternoon Nick Hauser and I went to a baseball game at Buffalo Stadium. When I came home my mother told me I had received a long-distance telephone call. This was in an era when people only called long-distance to inform family members that a loved one had died. I called the operator and was soon connected to Sister Felicie. She told me she was back at Our Lady of the Lake, the college in San Antonio where she had trained to become a teacher.

“I appreciate what your friend has tried to do, but would you tell him everything is fine now, that he doesn’t need to act on my behalf anymore?” she said.

“Which friend?” I asked.

“Mr. Siegel. He’s called the archdiocese twice.” I heard her laugh, then clear her throat. “Can you do that for me, Charlie?”

But I never saw Benny or his girlfriend again. In late June I read in the newspaper that Benny had been at her cottage in Beverly Hills, reading the *L. A. Times*, when someone outside propped an M-1 carbine across the fork of a tree and fired directly into Benny’s face, blowing one eye fifteen feet from his head.

Years later I would read a news story about his girlfriend, whose nickname was the Flamingo, and how she died by suicide in a snowbank in Austria. I sometimes

wondered if in those last moments of her life she tried to return to that winter-time photograph of her and Benny building a snowman in west Montana.

Vernon Dunlop never bothered me again. In fact, I came to have a sad kind of respect for the type of life that had been imposed upon him. Vernon was killed at the Battle of Inchon during the Korean War. Nick Hauser and I became school-teachers. The era in which we grew up was a poem and Bugsy Siegel was a friend of mine.