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East 52 : A Multi-Genre Work Chronicling One Man's Final Journey

M. Joseph Jarrett

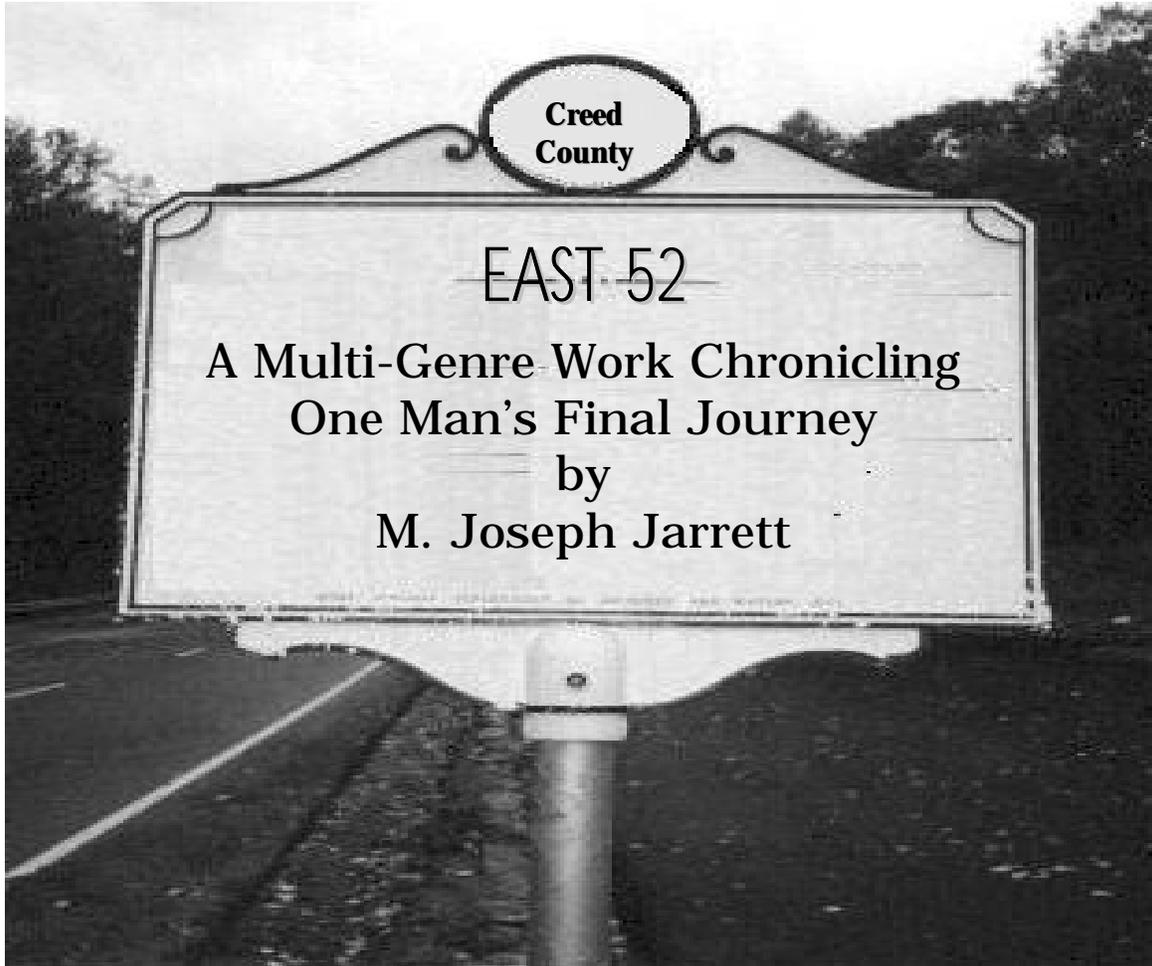
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Thesis

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ABSTRACT

East 52: A Multi-Genre Work Chronicling One Man's Final Journey

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Middle-aged Michael Coogan heads east on US Route 52 through the area known as "Creed County" (a combination of Mercer Co, WV and Bland Co, VA), returning home to "bury" his father, although the man has been in the ground for several months. After a near fatal accident, Michael sees historical markers often revealing two stories: the typical history and the "unknown" history—a description of a fateful event that occurred in or near the locale described. Upon learning of these second histories, he visualizes the events surrounding the unknown facts related to him on the "reverse" markers. These stories trigger memories of key events in his life. As he continues his trip down East 52 and Memory Lane (his and Creed County's) progresses, he begins to realize just how awfully irreconcilable life is—that is, until he meets Old John (his Hitchhiker)...and the little deaf-mute girl (his Hope).

This collection is for Shirley Shuman and Jim Walker, my mentors, who taught how to love to read and read to love, and for Joseph Jarrett and Sue Jarrett, my parents, who taught me nearly everything else.

This collection would not have been put together without the help of three people to whom I am greatly indebted: Dr. John Young, Dr. Mary Moore, and Mr. Art Stringer. Thank you for your willingness to oversee this project and your faith in me to complete it.

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Prologue

East Fifty-two. The old interstate highway cuts circuitously across the country, passing through hundreds—thousands—of villages, hamlets, burgs, towns, cities, and budding metropolises. Nearly two-thirds of the horizon-bound black top retains the archaic two-lane template divided by the nearly unending twin yellow guidelines. The remaining third is a conglomeration of four-lane freeway and gravel, dirt, and mud-rutted drives no wider than a single vehicle.

Once the highway hits the Ohio-West Virginia border, however, the pitted and potted black top loses its longed-for horizon amidst an endless passage carved by rolling foothills, low mountains, high-ceilinged forests (turned from multi-hued greens to high golds, oranges, and reds this time of year), rough rivers and hazardous streams, and, in more recent years, rock quarries, strip mines, and coal fields. For nearly one thousand miles the interstate bears the form of the lazy black snake (known in these parts as simply racer), meandering its serpentine way over, under, and through mountains and valleys, slicing tighter and tighter switchbacks as it goes; stretching itself out over short distances through back hollows and open fields of timothy and blue bonnet as if malaised for a moment; then picking up its land-over curvage passing through dark oak, birch, dogwood, and pine forests.

Eventually the old interstate bisects its way through Mercer County, West Virginia, and Bland County, Virginia. This area, particularly rich in ore—like most of Southern West Virginia—as well as lore, is still known to most of the inhabitants as Creed County, a name adopted commonly amongst the people well before the War Between the States. The name never stuck on paper, but it traveled down in the oral tradition all the way from the first inhabitants, the Scots-Irish Puritans, and finds itself as old as the high road that passes through it.

It is above this less traveled road that we find ourselves, ascending the updrafts, descending the downdrafts, rising and falling, circling lower, then higher, then lower again. Like the sparrow hawk

who screeches this clime as home, we watch below for slow-moving ground creatures which we may call prey. But unlike the hawk we do not seek to feast—to fill our starving bellies—nor do we seek to sport—to dig our talons in, to rip feather or fur from flesh. No, we are here only to observe. And, perhaps, take in and digest. Not to calm the fever in our stomach, however. We will do so to quench the hunger of our hearts and minds. Because, unlike the hawk, we are here not for what happens now and later, but for what has already happened. We are here for one purpose and one purpose only: we want to see/hear/feel/taste/smell a story.

Ah, there, just cresting that low mountain. The glint of old steel flashes in our collective eye, tempting us with its ability to fulfill our needs, wants, and desires. Yes, this is the prey we seek. It is our time to follow—to watch and learn, to learn and watch, circling above—but not too far above. We must allow ourselves to take in as much as possible, to be open to all the possibilities. We must acknowledge that the story we are about to engage has already been written and we can do nothing to change the way in which it is revealed.

As always, we will want to do something—to act in some fashion, to stop the acceleration of unknown passages, confusing situations, and irreconcilable experiences. Even if they look at us...oh, even then, even when they deserve to lose an eye or have ragged scars drawn down the sides of their faces. But, as we know already, we must constrain ourselves and only watch. This is our nature. To simply watch and wait. We've done so for many generations, and will continue to do so. Watch—from the air, from the rooftops, from the treetops, the cartops, the boxtops, the four tops—even from the crypt-tops, our favorite position from which to espy.

So, are you ready, my fellow watchers and waiters? Are you ready to position yourselves in quiet observation? Prepare yourselves, for now is the time we descend...

ENTERING CREED COUNTY

A bruised and rusted brown Ford Tempo followed the winding road down Foreman's Mount. The driver, applying and letting go the brakes before and after each sharp turn, appeared completely focused on his driving, even allowing for the systematic crossing of the double yellow line as prefix for each switchback. Yes, Michael Coogan appeared focused, but despite those appearances—the calibrated look in his coral-tinged eyes, the jut of chin, the flexed muscles of his wrists and hands—his thoughts ran to other things. A closer inspection of his face would show a web-work of worry lines, a teeth-grinding jaw movement, and a dilation of pupils signifying a concern with what was in his head, not what was in front of it. For these reasons—whatever the source of focus be—Mike found himself shocked back to reality when the first gust of wind and spray of water hit the side of his car.

He first felt the tires slip and the car rock to the centerline. Regaining control, Mike shook his head and glanced upward through the windshield. He had to check his watch before his brain could decipher the darkening gloom of the sky. 3:15. The middle of the afternoon. Mike looked up again, realizing he was in for something big. Instinctively, Mike's right foot moved from its steady position above the accelerator pad to nudge the brakes again. He glanced skyward again, noting the disturbing purple tint to the roiling cumulo-nimbus clouds, the stomach turning force in which they spread over each other, bumping, impaling, enveloping. Absconding with the ambered light of day until only a pallid umbra remained over the land.

He hummed a few bars, and then, realizing he himself was his only audience, he decided it was okay to sing. So he sang: *"I don't care if it rains or freezes 'long as I got my plastic*

Jesus sittin' on the dashboard of my car." He reached across the steering wheel and patted his blue plastic baby Jesus cradled in the arms of the snow-white plastic Madonna. He smiled and continued the verse, adjusting the car every now and then to the gusts of wind that grew increasingly forceful with each of their doldrums.

Mike looked to the right and saw a sign twenty-five yards up on the right; WELCOME TO MERCER COUNTY it said. Behind it stood one of those white historical markers, apparently for the county as well. But the light was pulling away and he did not have the vision he used to; for all he really knew, that sign described the last ride of Custer. He looked ahead and to the left, where the mountain range opened into a wide valley. A brilliant blinding stroke of lightning stabbed the earth with a powerful tearing sound, splitting a tree no more than three hundred feet away. Mike had time to wonder how close the next one would be, and then the clouds opened up above and distributed their deluge with aggravated force.

He felt the tires slip again, so he eased off the accelerator, preparing to brake if needed. That release was just enough; in the second the power cut off, the wheels stuttered in their revolutions. Mike felt the pull as the rubber lost contact with the blacktop. He dropped his foot back to the accelerator, but he was too late. The tires spun out of control. He switched to pump the brake as the car fishtailed left and right.

And time began to draw out for Mike. As in all near-deadly or near-injurious situations, the next few seconds felt like minutes. The minutes felt like hours. The hours felt like days. The adrenaline flew through his system as freely as the rain fell on the mountains, making him unaware of the passage of time altogether and blocking out all thoughts of everything else save righting his car.

He jerked the steering wheel right and left to compensate. It was hard to try and gauge what grip—if any—the tires could afford; it was equally hard to see where he needed to steer. His visibility was low. He could only see about five feet in front of the car, and what he saw

disturbed him even more. The rains were falling so hard and fast and with such volume that he could already see an inch or more of water on the road. That's when the fact his car (and he with it) was hydroplaning really hit him—when he realized he was gliding on an inch and a half of water.

He reached for the handbrake, and he overcompensated with the steering wheel. The car entered a clockwise flat spin, rendering the handbrake useless. Both hands on the wheel, Mike continued to try to right himself. All efforts were futile. The 45-degree spin reached 90 degrees; 90 degrees turned into 180 degrees; 180 into 270 into 360. He spun the steering wheel, overcompensating again. The spare tire shifted in the truck and the car entered a reverse spin. 45 degrees. 90 degrees...

Mike was running out of options. Fast. Miraculously, he noted, the rain had dropped off to a drizzle. *Great*, he thought. *Now I get to see my accident.* He saw the guardrail for the eastbound lane speeding towards him—or, at least, that's how he perceived it. In fact, the Tempo was actually righting itself for a full-on parallel sideswipe. Mike had time to think the whole passenger side of his car would be mush—maybe not even that; considering 80-odd percent of the composition was now rust, the passenger side would more than likely disintegrate on contact.

Out of options, Mike looked at the plastic statuette on the dash. "It's up to you now," he said with a calm he should not have in this situation. "Do it if your gonna."

His eyes fixed on the guardrail and waited. The seconds were minutes. The minutes hours. The hours—

The car stopped. No screech, no belated gripping, no pull of the tires as they finally reconnected with the ground. The car simply stopped, and Mike stopped with it.

He reached over the steering wheel and the statuette and wiped fog from the windshield. The temperature outside had dropped so much that his labored breathing had caused a fine

mist to cover the entire cab of the vehicle. What he saw first shocked him; what he saw second shocked him even more.

The first thing Mike noticed was that the guardrail was nearly the size of the driver's side door from this distance, if you measured from the foot well to the base of the window, that is. Mike blinked twice, shook his head back and forth, and looked out again. Yep, he'd stopped about seven inches from the rail; half a foot. The car stood in a perfect parallel to the rail, even though the rate of spin would have sent the side rear-end into the rail first. He shook his head again, said, "Holy sweet ker-ri—," and looked at the plastic statuette. He cut off the vain swear before it completely parted his lips. "Thanks," he muttered, kissing his fingertips and patting them on the baby Jesus's blue head. "I'm...I'm speechless. Really."

The second thing Mike noticed was the historical marker sign in rear view mirror. *My God*, he thought. *Over twenty-five yards?* But it wasn't the yardage of his spin that caught his attention. Although he had just entered Mercer County and this sign was the "Mercer County" marker, he distinctly read the words "Creed County." He quickly glanced over the rest of the sign, noted a strange buzzing in his head, and felt the adrenaline rush from his body. His eyelids drooped and he passed out.

Interlude

Mike Coogan opened his eyes. He shook his head again, then placed a hand against his tender temple to stave off the pounding. His head ached like it never had before. He fought to keep his eyes open through that pain—it would be so much easier to close his eyes and sleep. But he had shit to do, and no near-accident or headache would stop him.

He focused on the windshield and then let his eyes drift over the surroundings beyond. The sun shone brightly and sparkled off of the watery remains of the storm which had passed. There was not a cloud in the sky. Mike read the dial on his watch: six o'clock. He'd been out over two and a half hours. *Jeez, he thought. That was some skid!*

He turned the key in the ignition, listening to the sad crank work over and over again without catching. "Shit," he said aloud. Without consciously realizing he was doing so, he looked in the rear-view mirror. He saw the historical marker sign for "Mercer County" and read the little history given there. He muttered these words aloud as he read them and thought, *That ain't right. I could swear it said something else last time.* He shook his head and looked again. No, Mercer County. *Yep, that definitely was some skid.*

Mike closed his eyes and sent up a brief please-prayer over the steering wheel. He turned the key again and the car grunted to life, complete with a *chug chug chug* followed by the loud crack of backfire. Mike smiled. That's what he liked to hear. He dropped the shifter into DRIVE and dropped his foot on the accelerator.

"Here we go, baby," he said, patting the dashboard and rubbing it back and forth once, and pulled out on the interstate highway.

He drove about fifteen minutes, then pulled off onto the berm again. Exiting the highway of the westbound lane was a small one-lane road leading into the hollow of the mountain. A sign about ten feet down the road proclaimed GRIST FALLS 10 MI. Although he'd grown up in Mercer and Bland counties, Mike had never heard of Grist Falls. He thought about taking a side trip and checking out the place. But he thought better of it. His business here was pressing. He didn't like being back in the first place, but he still knew now what he did a week ago: he had to be here.

He'd planned on being in and out of the area, just a few hours. But the four-lane US 77 South was closed for construction and he found himself on this damned old highway. No, he had no time for field trips. He had a tombstone to visit and a plot of ground, and afterwards he'd be the hell out of this place that held bad memories.



I'll at least read the sign, see what it's about, he thought, easing the car forward until he was about five feet from the marker. The caption was typical, but telling:

Known as the Fort of Chamberlain during the War for Independence, it was here in the thaw of 1745 that Rochefort Chamberlain climbed up the bank of Laurel River (now Laurel Creek) and proclaimed, "Here I shall build a mill." A landmark for well over 100 years, Chamberlain's Grist Mill burned under the fires started by Finnegan's Militia during the third year of the Northern Aggression.

An interesting choice of words, "Northern Aggression," Mike thought, noting to himself he was still in Mercer County and therefore decidedly in a Northern State.

He put the car back in gear and checked the highway in his side-view mirror. A panel truck and two passenger cars were heading in his direction. He let them pass but crept along the berm just the same. He was about five feet on the other side of the marker when he

looked in the rearview mirror to check for more traffic. He caught a glimpse of the marker. He hit the brakes.

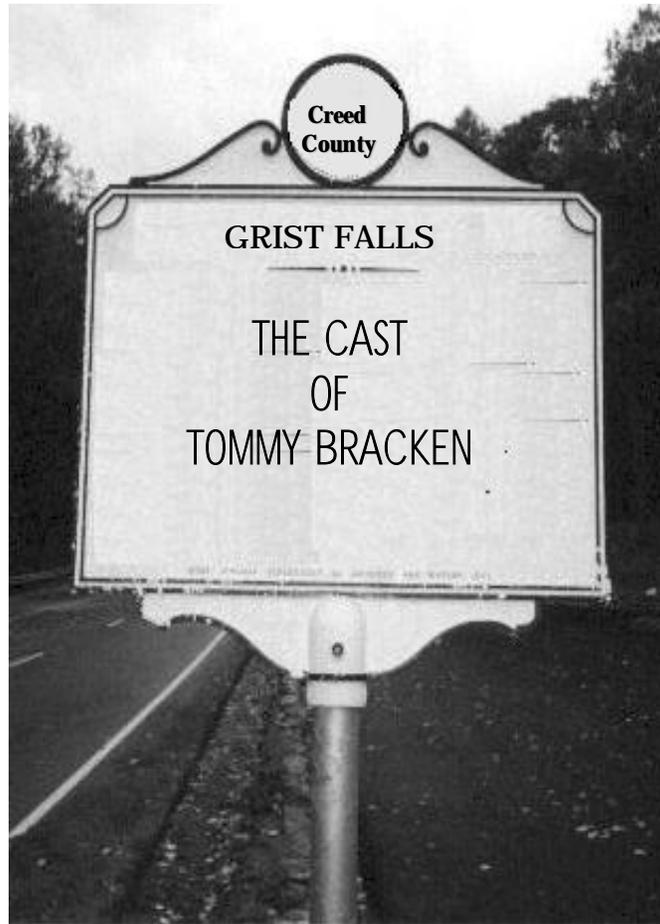
Something wasn't right. He squinted his eyes and that something became clear. Although he was looking in the rearview mirror, he could read left-to-right every word on the marker as easily as he had facing it. That shouldn't happen. All the letters should present themselves backwards in the mirror. But that was not the case here...and the words were different.

"What the hell?" Mike said aloud, and pivoted in his seat to get a better look at the sign. Glancing out the rear windshield, everything was set to rights. The sign, the caption—it was the same as it was from the other side, only this time he saw Foreman's Mount in the distance. "Hmmpf," he mused and returned to face the front. He checked the side mirror for traffic, noting the marker read backwards, and then looked in the rear-view mirror again. And there it was. He was able to read the caption again. He glanced quickly at the side-view (backward lettering), then the rear-view (forward lettering). He shook his head again and glared at the rear-view mirror. The new caption glared back at him. "Dammit," he said to no one in particular. "What the hell is going on?"

Finally, he decided to read the caption:

Known throughout the region as "the town that takes you in and never lets you go," Grist Falls was the home of Tommy Bracken until the summer of his ninth year. On July 25, 1945, he fell into Town Well and died, breaking his neck and legs. Forty years to the day, a fire burned down the home of his childhood friend, Benjamin Hoban, whose body was never recovered.

Mike wondered who in their right mind would write such a horrible caption, and then his head screamed in bright agonizing pain. He remembered this searing ache, the same he had felt three hours ago. Right before he...blacked...out....



County Corner: Grist Falls. Strange occurrences in this sleepy little woodland town today. The disappearance of one man has put this quiet village in quite an uproar. In the early hours before sunrise, a haunting scream was heard coming from the home of Benjamin Hoban, one of Grist Fall's councilmen. Winifred Mautigan, a ninety-three year old neighbor, called the local constabulary, which arrived on the scene minutes later. According to Chief William Perkins, who was very discreet with information, a small fire had started in the den where, apparently, a frayed air conditioner cord sparked a blaze on the draperies. Hoban was nowhere to be found. By dawn, after two hours of telephone

calls generating no information as to the councilman's whereabouts, a search party had been organized. At the time of this printing, Hoban has yet to be discovered. Mrs. Mautigan, a widow of twenty years, said that she was awakened by "what sounded like cries of mortal agony." She continued, "I have never heard such anguish; not even when little Tommy Bracken fell screaming into the old well in the Square thirty years ago." As the search continues...

County Corner: Grist Falls. There have been no further developments in the disappearance of Benjamin Hoban, one of the seven town councilmen. Search parties have been disbanded and federal authorities have been notified. A missing persons report has been filed with most law enforcement agencies in the greater Tri-State area. The town's people are still shouting foul play, but the truth is, no one knows what has happened in this once quiet community. Rumors abound but no facts. The only witness, ninety-three year old Winifred Mautigan, has now been silenced by a near-fatal stroke. She is recovering in Creed County Hospital. The talk around the Square Pharmacy, which serves as the local gossip factory, suggests that Hoban may have been seeing a psychiatrist somewhere upstate. However, there has been no way to verify this information since Hoban never talked about personal matters. Also, it appears that an unspecified amount of money is missing from the town's petty cash supply...

Excerpts from *The Old Creed Telegraph*, Grosset's Mill, WV, May 1985

Three months earlier...

“Ben, I’ve been seeing you for nearly six months already and we still haven’t pinpointed what’s eating you.”

Dr. McRoary gazed across the coffee table at Benjamin Hoban, who was looking worse than ever. His once raven black hair hung in fine graying threads in front of his bowed head. His clothes stank of cheap wine and even cheaper cigarettes. He held one of his Tournay 100s between the thumb and index finger of his left hand, momentarily forgotten. He looked like shit, and more than likely felt like it. *That’s the case with most of these types*, thought McRoary, *these hick councilmen better-than-you-but-not-really types. Then again, it’s these same types that think theirs smells sweeter than lilacs in bloom.*

Hoban had been sitting like that once a week for two hours for three weeks now. McRoary knew that the monkey riding his back couldn’t be given such uncomplicated names as alcoholism or what some of his colleagues referred to now as “nicolism” and “nicatiction,” their fancy way of saying nicotine addiction. Whatever it was—be it the booze or cancer sticks or whatever else—it wasn’t just hanging on anymore; now it had a manic grip on his livelihood, his manhood, his balls.

“If you’re not gonna smoke it, Ben, could you at least tap it in the tray,” McRoary said. Ben raised his head and looked at his smoke. The cherry was down to the filter and the length of ash dangled precariously. Without a word, a grunt, any recognition at all, he crushed the butt in the tray and reached for the pack in his shirt pocket.

“For chrissake, Ben. You look like shit and smell like a walking hangover. You’re wearing last week’s clothes and my guess is you haven’t changed them since. What the hell is going on?” McRoary pleaded.

Ben lifted his eyes to the headshrinker. In the hazy remnants of his mind, a thought that he could grasp hold of passed through. *This dink will never understand what’s happening. No one ever did. Except Tommy. But Tommy’s dead, as I’ll be soon. I feel it. Might as well talk;*

what's he gonna do, think I'm crazy? That's his job, anyway. And since the town's paying for his time...

"What's with the smile, Ben? Did I say something humorous?" McRoary used his good doctor tone, but pretty soon he wouldn't be able to keep to himself. These types always antagonized him—all it took was for them to start talking.

His patient leaned back, picked up his legs, and slid into a reclining position on the couch. The smile widened. And Ben spoke: "This is the way you want me, isn't it? If I'm gonna talk?"

"Whatever makes you feel most comfortable," said McRoary, feeling he was finally getting somewhere.

"All right, doc, here we go..."

We was just kids, man. Just a couple of wet-behind-the-ears kids. We never got into any trouble at school—hardly ever at home either. Well, there was that time me and Tommy stuck those cattails in the fan. We caught hell for that one.

My dad was at work, and Tommy said he heard from some of the older guys that if you stuck cattails in an exhaust fan they'd shred apart and scatter their bits across the yard like snow. It sounded cool—snow in July and all. So we went down to the old swamp where the high school now stands and collected some tails. When we got back to my place, we went up to my parent's room and shut the door. We were laughing and grab-assing around like kids do. We didn't know the difference between an exhaust fan and the ones that blow in—the kind that was in the window. Like I said, we was kids. We just cranked the er up to HI and thrust the tails in it. Only they didn't do what the big kids said. One second we was standin there holding the tails to the grill casing of the fan in my parents' immaculate room, and the next we was hidin under the bed amidst a blizzard of cattail bits.

Jesus. Tommy Bracken. I've been thinking about him a lot lately. Not that I ever stopped I guess. Anyway, doc, Tommy was my best buddy back then. Would've still been today—if he hadn't of died, that is. But I'm jumpin ahead of myself here.

It all started that day we went to the grand opening of the new magic shop in Honeydew Hollow. "Salieri's Shoppe of Wax and Prestidigitation." Can you imagine what that sounded like to a couple of twelve year olds? I couldn't hardly say that word then (it's hard to enunciate even now), and Tommy—shit, Tommy—he couldn't say it at all. He had the worst damn stutter I heard in my life. Then and now.

That place was like a combination of something out of Bradbury and that Vincent Price movie. You know, House of Wax. It was dark, for one thing. There weren't no lights except for a few antique lamps scattered throughout the place. The walls were black and there were these big curtains, like tapestries, but all crimson colored. I'm saying the setting was completely spooky—kinda evil-like. And the weirdest thing was that the waxworks was intermixed with the stuff on sale. Like, there was this dummy hung upside down from the ceiling with chains and manacles wrapped around it. A sign on its chest read AUTHENTIC—HOUDINI'S OWN>>SPECIAL PRICE \$35.

Pretty friggin' weird, huh? But the weirdest shit—I mean weirdest—was the man himself, Salieri. He looked like Bela ing Lugosi. I kid you not. Creepy as hell. He snuck up on us that first time. Scared the bejesus outta us. We were lookin' at this replica of the scene from House of Wax where Price was gonna pour the wax on that dame. It was this big wooden bin, just like in the movie. And this dummy was in there with a sheet pulled up a little higher than the nipples. I said that dummy was naked, and Tommy was reachin' to pull back the sheet when Salieri stood up out of nowhere on the other side of the set. He smiled, and by Christ and all the saints did he not have the biggest incisors I've ever seen.

We screamed like the gates of hell had been loosed before our eyes and ran like a couple headless chickens. First we dashed against each other, then scrambled for the door. As we ran into the street, Salieri called to us, "Come again, boys, when you grow some hair on your balls."

Needless to say, we went back. But it took us a week to muster up enough courage to take the ten mile hike along the C & O tracks up to the Hollow again.

That second time we went was when Tommy bought the dummy head. No, that's not what it was, but it's hard to describe. It was like a head cast of wax, neck and all, attached to some kind of square used to hang it on the wall. Didn't really have any features, you know? It reminded me of a bald-headed baby—the kind you can't tell if it's boy or girl. It's like that stuff the kids get in the gimmick stores these days, those glow-in-the-dark contortions that look like the crazy son of a bitch in that "Scream" painting. Only this was wax, and it looked so real.

Salieri told us as Tommy forked over the cash—the last of his saved two-month's worth allowance—that he had made it ten years before and was glad to sell it. He followed us to the door, Tommy with his purchase hooked under his arm, and Salieri said, "The mold for that one tried to rob me. I wanted something to remember him by, so I cut off his head and cast it in the wax."

"Yeah, right," I said. "Whatever you say, Mr. Salieri." He lit his pipe and smiled. I saw those teeth again, and nudged Tommy out the door. I started to turn, but Salieri grabbed my arm.

"Just a small reminder, boys," he said. "Idle hands are the devil's tools." His other hand shot into the heavy curtain beside the door, and in an instant he had thrust something into my face. A severed hand dangled before my eyes. To this day I'll swear it wasn't wax. The thumb was cut off at the knuckle.

He let go my arm, and we ran. We ran until the wind raked our lungs raw. Weary, we decided to hitch back along Gypsum Road. A couple of older kids picked us up.

When we got back to Tommy's, I said, "Jeezum Crow, did you see that? Now that was some friggin' waxwork." (I guess back home in Grist Falls, our childhood fears not only were miles away, but seemed quite distant indeed: the stuff of Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew mysteries and fantasy-shit like Twilight Zone—or that old radio show Suspense.)

"Yeah," Tommy said. "That was something. But this is better. I got an idea." Tommy took the dummy head into his bedroom. I followed behind, thinking about the cool new shoppe in Friar's Court. Tommy was putting his bedside lamp into the neck of the waxwork. He said, "Hit the lights and shut the door, will ya?"

I did, and then he turned on the lamp. I tell you, doc, it was the scariest shit I'd ever seen. The head glowed. Not like the green stuff the kids got these days. It glowed in all its flesh-toned glory. It looked more real than ever. The eyes seemed to stare right into mine and they looked so...so afraid. Like the dummy had just seen the most horrid sight. And then there was the mouth. It was open, in a silent screaming O. The wax cast went down inside itself, like it had poured into the mold's throat.

"God, Tommy," I said. "You don't think..." And that was all I could get out.

"Hell no, you wet end," Tommy said. "You sure act like a pussy sometimes. But...uh—go ahead and turn on the lights will ya?"

"I ain't the only one," I replied and turned on the lights. Once they were on, everything seemed okay again.

"Listen, Ben. Why don't you stay over tonight? We can check this thing out after dark, and then find out who's the man and who's the little girl."

"All right, you're on," I shot back. "You can start wearin your sister's dresses tomorrow."

That night, we waited til everyone else in the house was asleep. Then we set up the dummy the way we had earlier and I cut the lights. I sat down on the edge of Tommy's bed beside him, and we stared at the head. We watched that piece of wax for nearly an hour...and then something happened. It changed. I don't know how, but it changed. One minute it was just that open-mouthed, screaming guy, and then it...

It started to contort. The cheeks sort of got taut, the skin tightened. Then the eye sockets moved further apart and the nose grew bigger, and sharper. Eyebrows popped out on top of the wax and hair came out the top of the head and a hairline mustache spread across the lip. The O of the mouth closed up, and the lips curled into a sneer.

And then it was gone. Back to the original dummy.

I know what you're thinking, doc: Kids see shit that isn't there. But I swear to God A'mighty it happened. I looked at Tommy, and he looked at me. His face looked like what mine felt like, and it was a reflection of the scared look of the dummy. That's when Tommy screamed and I took off like a bat out of hell.

I ran all the way home and hopped into my own bed. I pulled the covers up over my face and turned on my flashlight, shakin all over and thinking, oh god oh god oh jesus-god it was Salieri Salieri was in Tommy's house its all true oh jesus-mary-n-joseph oh please. I was like that all night. I couldn't sleep. My mother came in my room at sunrise and asked why I had come home during the night. I couldn't tell her. I was still too scared to talk. The hairs all over my body still stood at attention, the electricity firing them off still in my system from the night before. Now that I think about it, and it's kind of ironic, that's when I noticed, or felt rather, hair on my balls for the first time.

My mother came over to the bed, and I spewed macaroni and cheese all over her. From last night's supper at Tommy's. She felt my forehead, said I was raging with fever, and made me stay in bed all day. I didn't mind. I felt safer in my bed than anywhere else.

Thank God she kept me in that day. I really was safe...but Tommy wasn't. That night my father came in and told me they had found Tommy in the old Puritan well at Town Square. He said Tommy was still in his pajamas. He said it had looked like maybe he had been sleep-walking (Tommy did have a history of that) and stumbled into the well. He had tried to grab on for purchase. In his efforts, Tommy had hyperextended and thus broken back his thumbs at the knuckles. That's when I passed out.

When I woke up, it was five days later. My mother said that after I fainted, Doc Mautigan had come over and said the fever had put me under. There was no fever now, and soon I would be able to go out and play again. But I didn't want to play. My best buddy was dead, for chrissake. And I sure as hell didn't want to go out. I was safe where I was and I was stayin right there.

That afternoon, Mr. Bracken came over—Tommy's dad. He said he was sorry I missed the funeral but was glad I was doing better. And that Tommy's death wasn't nearly such a tragedy, knowing that I was still alive. It was bullshit, of course. That's all that was. I mean, come on. His kid's dead, you know? Why would he care one whip for another kid? But it made me feel a little better.

Then he went out into the hall and came back with a big box in his arms. He said that he thought Tommy would want me to have what was in the box, since it was the both of us who picked it out.

I must have thought it was something else, because when he pulled out that damned dummy head, I started screaming and throwing a fit and near seizing. I mean, shit, I was so bad I could've cast sympathy in the eyes of a grand mal ep'lectic. "Get it out of here," I'd screamed. "I don't want it. I never wanted it in the first place." I must've hurt Mr. Bracken's feelings but good; he never called on me again after that. And when I saw him on the street after I got better, he turned his head down and walked away.

I guess I assumed my father had thrown it away. I never saw it again. Until a year ago. That was when my mother died. Father had gone the year before. For him it was lung cancer; he had sucked down the Chesterfields like a mad man. My mother just died of a saddened heart. Anyway, I was cleaning out my father's house when I found the dummy head in the root cellar.

At first, I didn't know what it was. I had blocked that memory of my childhood long ago, and forgotten I had even done that. Still having some of the fantastical feelings in me that I had as a kid, I pulled it out, dusted it off, and took it home.

I've been staring at that piece of wax-cast shit every night since then. It's on the floor beside the bureau, so when I lay in bed with my head on the pillow, it stares at me. I even rigged the bastard with a lamp.

It still changes too. I've seen more faces in it than I care to remember. My father, my mother, Salieri, a whole helluva lot of folk I don't even know. And then six months ago, Tommy.

The night it turned into Tommy—oh God. God. It was awful. I had been lying there since I got home from work, watching. Around eleven, it started to change. It changed into Salieri; it always changes into him first. Then I saw my neighbor's face, old widow Mautigan. And then...then...Jesus, doc, it was me! I swear to Christ, I was looking at myself. It wasn't no likeness either. It was me. The same five o'clock shadow on my jaw, the side of the face where the pillow rested on mine was pressed flat on it, and when I put my hand on my mouth....

A hand came out of the bureau and...and...c-covered the mouth. Then the hand came away. A big smile curled the lips up and I saw those teeth—like Salieri's. Only it was Tommy. Tommy with the fangs and a hand reaching out towards me with a b-br-broken thumb.

Then another hand, crept out of the lowest drawer, and Tommy started pulling himself up. Oh, God, doc....

"Ben, Ben, calm down." McRoary was up on his feet and leaning over his patient in a second. Ben had been breathing heavily the past few minutes and now his chest was heaving like a giant air compressor. He was sweating so many buckets that when McRoary placed his hand above Ben's collar bone—ready to give a quick shake—it slid right off. A thought flashed through his mind: as a child, he had gone fishing with his father on the Greenbrier River; he had caught a rock trout and his father had pulled it from the line, handing it to him. It had slipped right through his hands and landed on the ground, flopping about and searching for comfort.

Now Ben was doing a terrible rendition of that rock trout, his body convulsing, arms and legs flapping. McRoary did the only thing he thought he could do. He drew his arm and lashed out at Ben with a full-bodied backhand. Ben went slack instantly. He gazed up at McRoary and tried to grin.

"You think I'm crazy, doc?" he said.

McRoary stepped back and stared in apparent shock at his patient. He wanted to say "By Father God and Sonny Jesus, you are completely, solidly, one hundred percent ed in the head!" Then his lips stopped moving, and he realized he had said it.

Ben grabbed his coat off the couch's armrest and said, "That's what I thought." He turned around and walked to the front of the room. "Oh, yeah," he said, opening the door. "You're fired." And he walked out.

10 June 1985

It's been two weeks since Benjamin Hoban's disappearance. I have no clue what happened down there in Grist Falls, and I don't want to know. I've washed my hands of him. His records have been destroyed. No one knew he was here. Screw those damn gossipmongers and piss-ant journalists. I'm through with it. Wait, the door bell...

Later. Maybe I'm not through yet. I just got a box in the mail from Grist Falls. I opened it and found a mask inside. It appears to be a wax cast of Hoban's face. What a sick motherer he was. Suicide, no less. Almost had me convinced. Almost. That's what these types are like anyway. They try to convince you any way they can ... even take the time to make some cheap-ass props...

Excerpts from Charles McRoary's personal journal

Interlude

The first conscious thought to manifest itself on a live wave from the sleep area of his brain to the wakeful area was *Whoa, that was one bastard of a trip*. The second thought to run the current was *I haven't seen shit like that since I ate mushrooms my sophomore year at school*. On the heels of that, a third thought: *That friggin' skid did more to me than I thought it did; either that or something happened the first time I blacked out*. Blacking out was something he hadn't done since college either. He realized that this was not turning out to be his day.

Mike massaged his temples and waited with his eyes closed until the pain subsided. It didn't take long for the roar to drop to a low rumble. When he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was the historical marker in his rear-view mirror. Somehow this frightened him, and he started in his seat. His hand flew up and smacked the rear-view mirror, knocking it aslant on its fulcrum device. At the same time he jerked forward, his seatbelt cinching him tight as if anticipating an accident. *Where were you earlier?*, Mike drilled his thoughts at the seatbelt. *Where were you when I must've bumped my head on something?*

He carefully closed his hand around the rear-view and shifted it back into place, recapturing the marker. He tried to read it but he couldn't. He let his eyes relax and tried to read it backward. There it was. If he read slowly, backwards, he found himself reading about the Grist Mill and the Fort of Chamberlain again. He spun round in his seat, rolled down the driver's window, and leaned out. He viewed the sign with nothing between them but air. Flawless. A typical historical marker and caption. That's all he needed to know.

He pulled his head back in, rolled up the window, and slammed the car into DRIVE. Without looking for oncoming traffic, he jettied onto the blacktop and regained the 55 miles per hour speed limit in no time.

A sign on the right up ahead said FORREST JUNCTION NEXT RIGHT. Mike took the next right. Although he had no reason to go to Grist Falls (and now he's glad he didn't; that was one freaky dream), he had a very good one for visiting the Junction. That's where he spent his formative years. In a large house on the corner of Mason and Adams Streets. He'd always liked that house. To an elementary school kid, it was a mansion. It had thirteen rooms and lots of places to hide. He remembered doing a lot of the latter, especially after his mother left.

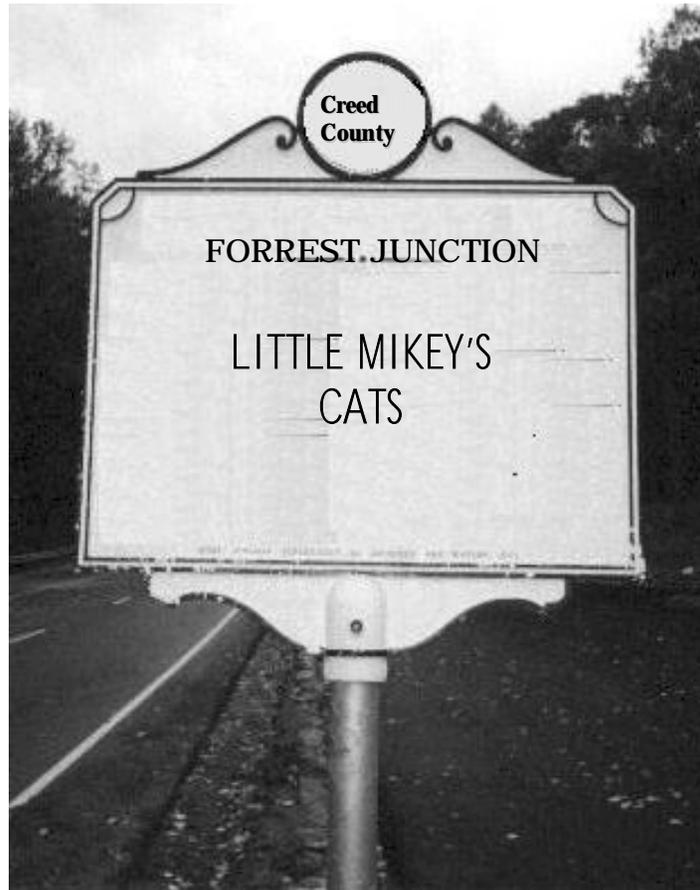
He found the intersection a few minutes later.

The sight of the house made him shiver. The paint peeled from everything, the windows were broken out (or broken in, rather, for Mike could see no exterior sign of glass pieces), and the house itself leaned drunkenly to the left on its weakened, aged foundation. It did not look like the place to raise a child. But it had been.

Mike owned the house now, but he couldn't even bring himself to sell it—there were too many bad memories. Too many bad dreams. He didn't want to inflict those on any other children. But other than that, he had no idea what to do with the place. He debated whether or not to get out of his car, and he looked for his answer in the backyard. The answer came back a crying, mewling "No." Suddenly, tears came to his eyes. And he remembered.

He remembered the cats.





He was eight when he first noticed his father spending more and more time behind the wood shed with a Ball canning jar full (but only briefly so) of the clear liquid that looked like water but smelled like death. Sometimes his father would swagger out from the shed—always placing his left hand on top of the pile of twelve inch stove-length cuts rising from the ground on the north side, always grasping the one log that would totter on the edge and fall, always following it bodily to ground, catching himself at the last moment with his free hand (his fingers tenting and flexing in the sawdusty grass) as his knees smarted against the hard ground and clutching the Ball jar tightly in his other hand as the liquid leapt from the rim and cascaded in rivulets along the coarse cracks of his raised knuckles before seeping into the deep lines between his strong fingers, always, *always* managing to right himself, standing in

sway as his tongue flicked out from between his smiling lips to sop the errant fluid from his hand—and zig-zag his way over to the kid, tousling his hair and saying, “Gotta watch out for the lightin’, kiddo; it’ll strike ya down if ya give it ha’f a chance.”

• • •

He was nine when he began to notice the dark spots around his mother’s eyes that sleep had little or nothing to do with—nine when he lay awake at night, listening to his father’s raised voice, the muffled sound of quick hands striking a pillow to softness (later realizing the pillow was his mother’s face, arms, back, and stomach), the shudders and racks of breath and tears mixed together as his mother curled into a ball in the corner of the bathroom, then the rush of water she let run too late in the porcelain basin so her children would not hear her cries (and, later that year, the strange murmurings of conversations she had with herself).

• • •

He was ten and it was summer when it all came to some pivotal head. In May, his mother fell down the stairs and broke three ribs all the way through, splintered her tailbone, and fractured her wrist—all, of course, after his father (whom he had come to know as the Scary Lighting Man from time to time) had beaten her firm face into a doughy slack-jawed mask and she had wobbled her way to the landing and missed placing her shaky fingers on the banister because both her eyes had swollen to slits. His mother had gone to the hospital and never returned; two months she lay in traction, talking to the other patients who shared her room (although there were no other patients there), and then, because his father was a vet, she had gotten a full ride to the VA Institute for the Mentally Unstable in Powelltonville. Soon after, he and his father were making frequent trips to see Uncle Lew and his family. He thought maybe this was some attempt by his father to make up for the loss of mothering—he did end up spending most of his time there with Aunt Evvie. But by September his ten-year-old’s brain began putting it together. On the Labor Day weekend they showed up at Uncle

Lew's to find Aunt Evvie and Cousin Susie had gone to visit with Aunt Evvie's sisters in Richmond. He overheard his father and Uncle Lew discussing the reasons later on when they thought he was out playing in the woods behind the house—something about how Aunt Evvie was concerned his father spent too much time with Susie, that the place for a budding girl of thirteen was not in her uncle's lap after dinner every night for the duration of an hour-long radio-show or in the double-wide hammock napping above his strong arm on hot afternoons or in the woods for a long walk, leaving with her hand in his and returning "reverse-piggy-back" with his hands firmly gripping her short-legged Osh-Kosh overalls near her hips—then something about how Aunt Evvie was on "the rag" and didn't know what she was saying and something about how nobody cared anyway because it was a boys' weekend. It was the last boys' weekend and the last trip to Uncle Lew's. This was about the time his father began bringing the lady (who he insisted his sons placate and call Aunt Sally or "there'd be hell to pay") around. She stayed one night for dinner and never left. By the end of the month, she'd convinced his father to make his older brother Sam join the Army (and Sam did, just to get the hell out of the house) and begun asking to be referred to as Ma (which he did, until she was out of earshot and changed "Ma" to "the Bitch"—a title he prided himself on making up although it caught on real fast).



It was on his eleventh birthday when Ma first hit him. He and his father and the Bitch were sitting in the dark around a fat white cake at the small kitchen table, the one large candle glowing in all their faces. He blew out the candle, and wax splattered three blue dots onto the cake's surface. His father got up to turn on the lights. When the switch turned over, the Bitch was already standing, pointing at the cake and glowering at the birthday boy. "Look at this! Look at this!" she screamed. Before he saw her hand come up or swing down, his face erupted in such red pain that he felt he had been burned by fire. "You ruined my cake, you

little bastard!" she yelled. As the tears welled in his eyes, he saw the hand go up again. He was so shocked he could do nothing. So he watched the hand come down again, felt the searing pain on his other cheek. And watched the hand slide back up. He watched and felt three more times before his father grabbed her arm and said, "Enough, Bitch; lay off my boy or I'll lay into you," before turning to his son and saying, "Why'd you go and ruin her cake? Why'd you have to wreck her good day."

• • •

He father never laid a hand on him, ever, but the beatings came more frequently as the year progressed.

• • •

And even though he had suffered four years of hell no boy should suffer, little Mikey Coogan found that being twelve was even worse. At twelve, boys had to learn how to mow the lawn.

• • •

On the second Saturday in June, Mikey's father decided he needed to instruct his son in the fine art of lawn-mowing.

Some time around three, Mikey came back from a bike ride around the neighborhood. He first stopped at the edge of the driveway and bent over to pat one of the many stray cats which had made their home in the woods outside of Forrest Junction and came into the neighborhood to feed on scraps and the occasional bowl of milk.

"Hey, buddy," he said to the orange tabby as he stroked its back from head to tail. "How are you today?" Mikey glanced around, his eyes and ears scanning the block; somewhere, in a house one or two up the right, a scratchy transistor sent the craggy vocals of Mick Jagger on "Gimme Shelter." The cat followed his gaze with uncertain intelligence and even seemed to cock an ear towards the music. Mikey looked down at the tabby after a moment and their

eyes held on to each other. "Where's your friends, little guy? You didn't bring them with you today?" There were four or five cats that generally frequented Mikey's backyard, and this one was the ring leader. The cat purred under his soft touch, and Mikey smiled. He thought the cat winked at him. "Well, go find them, fella. I'll save some dinner for you."

He clapped his hands and drove the cat away. Then he pulled into the garage, dropped his kickstand, climbed off the old Schwinn which had belonged to his brother before him, and walked back out onto the gravel driveway. This was when he first noticed his father and "mother" sitting on the screened-in back deck of the house.

"Come up here, boy," the Bitch said, gesturing with her left hand while drinking from the glass (undoubtedly holding a watered-down gin ricky) in her right. Mikey slowly made his way up the three steps, opened the screen door, and entered the porch proper.

• • •

The smell hit him first. His nostrils flared and burned with the acrid mix of cigarette smoke, alcohol, English Leather, some unknown but wholly nauseating perfume, and soiled clothing and skin, a smell that unnaturally stayed in the room without seeping through its screens. He assured himself he would not let his eyes water; that would more than likely lead to another beating—an event that had occurred nearly every day for the last nine months but one which he had avoided like a plague for several weeks. "I don't raise no pussies," his father had a mind to say from time to time, and the Bitch generally chimed in with the backhand.

The sight of the two of them hit him second. Mikey had gotten used to watching the liquor-stained couple deteriorate in health and composure, but he always got a shock when he wasn't thinking about it. His father, looking really no worse for wear than he had in months, sat sunkenly in a faux leather chair that spilled its white cotton stuffing from the seams and from several holes made by bottle openers and carelessly placed cigarettes. He

dressed in wrinkled Dickie trousers—one leg of which pulled up to reveal the tattered, toeless remains of a woven black sock on a pale white shin—replete with coffee, food, and semen stains—and a stretched A-shirt (*wife beater*, Mikey's friends called it, a term that Mikey himself found foul on his tongue) that clung tightly to his ever-growing gut. The Bitch simply lounged in a pair of yellowed granny panties, a spaghetti-strap tank top (also yellowed), which, Mikey noted, always appeared two sizes too small and revealed more of her abundant cleavage than it covered, and a thin leopard print house robe.

Trying to appear unaffected by what he observe, Mikey walked over between the two of them. He turned to address his father, but the Bitch grabbed his hand and turned him toward her. Although she smiled sweetly enough, Mikey knew that could change in an instant.

"Well, hello, young man," the Bitch slurred. Her calloused left hand came up and roughly caressed his cheek, her right clutched the sweating glass to her chest and there let the bottom slide up and down across the dirty flesh above the swell of her breast. "Have we got a little chore for you."

"Wha-what's that?" Mikey asked, watching the Bitch glide the gin ricky down her stomach to rest on a stark white inner thigh as she spread her legs slightly. Much like all boys aged twelve, he felt disgusted by this stink-smelling alky; but much like any other twelve-year-old he noticed the tightening in his own groin and a quasi-Oedipal lust in the pit of his stomach. The latter disgusted him even more because he knew he could do nothing about it; my God, he *was* twelve and he *was* a boy and there *was* a half-naked woman less than one foot in front of him, rubbing her index finger along the line of his jaw.

"Ah," she said, tracing her finger down the vein pulsing in his neck and tamping it in the well of his collar bone. "I think you should ask your father about that." She then gave a little titter, her eyes twinkling and her gap-toothed mouth opening in a wicked smile just enough to stick her finger (the one she'd been toying him with) into the maw in a semi-sultry way.

Mikey turned away to face his father and felt his buttocks quickly warmed as the Bitch slapped his backside.

• • •

His father looked at him through glazed over eyes, the pupils dilated enough to hide almost all evidence of the blue irises. A strange smile came to his lips, seeming to stretch all the way to his ears.

Mikey didn't like that grin. He is too little to have come into contact with the word sadistic (much less Oedipal, however much he feels its pull), and if he had, he wouldn't have known what it meant. But if he'd heard someone describe that smirk on his father's face as sadistic, he would have agreed right then and there.

Mikey watched as his father's eyes attempted to focus, watched as the gap between his father's lips widened and as the smile, which should in no way have been capable of growing, grew in brilliance.

"Boy," his father slurred. "It's time you learned how to do a man's job."

• • •

"No!" Mikey screamed. His father's fingers had gone white with the pressure he was putting on Mikey's hands, but not as white as Mikey himself had gone. Except for the high red on his cheekbones, caused mostly by his screaming and straining under his father's strength, Mikey was as pale as a dying virgin. "No," he cried again, his voice faltering. He'd been crying and fighting for nearly five minutes and had lost nearly all his will.

"Dammit, boy," his father snarled. "You will mow the lawn or I will let the Bitch at you. And you know you don't want that." He stood behind Mikey, bracing his youngest boychild in between himself and the thrumming gas-powered lawn mower. "Put yer hand on the lever, boy."

Mikey felt his father squeeze his fingers deep into the grooves of his own. He pulled with the force of a hawk grasping its prey. Mikey watched as his own hand moved against his own will, caught in the vise-grip of his fathers gnarled hand. He watched his father's hand, encircling his, grab hold of the power lever and start to pull back.

"Release the choke, son. The sooner the better. Just release the choke and we'll be on our way."

"No," Mikey whined, but whining was all he had left in him. Tears coursed down his cheeks as his ears picked up the difference in the awful sputtering this death machine was now letting out. The *put-put-put-put* had changed to *putputputputputterrrrrrr to RRRRAWWWWWWW*. It sounded like the angry lion on the *Wizard of Oz*. No, it sounded worse. Mikey knew this man-made machine with just as powerful claws was much more capable of killing than that cowardly lion. With this machine there was no going back. No slaps from that Dorothy chick who turned out to be as much of a drunk as his old man, as much a—

"All right, son," his father said, and Mikey could feel that smile growing again, heating the back of his neck. "Start walking. Left, right, left."

• • •

Mikey had thought it would be fun to learn how to mow the lawn. At least something would be taken care of around here, something on this property that would look *decent*. He had thought ahead in time, maybe a week, maybe a year, and found that at the very least he would have one whole hour more out of the day where he wouldn't have to worry about anything but himself and his lawn (he was already starting to think of it as his): no school, no homework, no drunk father, and most importantly, no Bitch and her beatings.

That's what he'd thought, until his father had said, "I've already prepared the dirty little buggers for you."

"What?" he'd asked. "What do you mean?" *Dirty little bugger*, his father'd said. Mikey had begun thinking this may be a very bad idea, learning how to mow with your father on a rip. But his father was never off the rip, not these days, and that was beside the point. The point was he'd said *dirty little buggers*. There was only one thing his father had ever referred to with those words, and it wasn't the lawn mower. It was—

Cats. Three of them. There were three of them, Mikey had counted. When his father had grabbed his hand and said, "Come on," and pulled him around the corner of the house, he'd seen the heads of three cats sticking out of the ground in what looked like random locations in the yard. Around each head was some loose dirt, and Mikey had realized these were not just cat heads. Besides, cat heads would not be mewling. These were three cats buried to their necks in the yard.

"Figured out a way to kill two with one stone, boy," his father had said through a sneer. "Mow the lawn and remove this filthy gutter trash at the same time. Damned dirty little buggers." Mikey had looked up at his father and his father had looked at the cats. His eyes had not appeared focused on anything, but Mikey knew all he was seeing was the cats. Mikey had looked back at the cats (one a calico, another a tabby, and the other a mix), realizing on some strange deep level not too many children reach that this would be what his brother called a "crossroads" in life.

He'd looked up at his father again and watched the drool ooze from the corner of his father's lip. Suddenly, the older Coogan had jerked his head, smiling copiously at his son. The drool had struck Mikey's arm with a wet splat. That's when he'd broken. He'd closed his eyes, opened his mouth to the sky, and screamed like no child on earth since Isaac had screamed.

The grip on his wrist had tightened. "Let's get a move on, boy," his father, the Scary Lightning Man, had cackled hoarsely, pulling Mikey after him kicking like a mule. "Daylight's wastin'."

• • •

The first one was the worst.

Fifteen feet away from the first victim, his father had aligned them on a straight course that would lead them right over the calico. Although the sound of the mower's engine drowned out everything else, Mikey could still hear the sad chorus of bewildered cat cries in his head. He could feel the short, rapid breaths of the Scary Lightning Man on his neck and imagined his father a bull, huffing and puffing and stamping his feet.

And then he no longer needed to imagine. His father pushed, the mower took off. Trapped between the rolling machine and the charging bull (as his hands were clamped, the kid could do nothing but walk or be trampled under his father's uncaring feet), little Mikey Coogan let himself go. He kept thinking, *this isn't happening, this isn't happening*, and closed his eyes. Behind his lids, he watched a teleplay his mind had set up for him: that cat moving closer and closer.

• • •

He felt it rather than heard it. A hard but yielding bump, a splintering like that of the dried rotted log he had tried walking across in the ravine behind Collie Wilson's house and put his foot through, a wet wave of something chunky splattering his Keds and lower legs, a grinding shaking in the mower as the blade's rotor attempted to maintain speed, a pushing and pulling as his father pressed down on the handle (and his hands) to lift the front end of mower off the ground and bring it back a little, a forward thrust as his father ran over the remains again, and then, then, the wet slickness on the grass beneath the soles of his shoes and his near loss of balance.

He did not notice the change until he squinted his eyes and braced his himself against the feel of it, urged his stomach not to leap up his throat (as it hinted it very well might), and focused on hearing once again. The chorus of wailing cats had become a duet.

• • •

He let his father do his thing and he never opened his eyes. He could no longer hear "Gimme Shelter," but he tried to find it nonetheless.

After that first one, it was easy. The blade sliced through each head without falter.

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Soon, there was only the strident voice of the soloist. Soon after, there was nothing but the sound of the mower's engine.

• • •

After he had gone to bed had come the haunting sound of the mewling choir. He lay awake deep into the night. At some point, the light from the hallway dimmed. Mikey looked at his doorway and saw it taken up by the shadowy skeleton of his father.

"Good job, son," he said. "You done great today. No more fighting your new job." He half turned in the doorway. "Thanks," he said, and walked away.

And only after that, only after all that, came the moaning and the sobbing and the retching. Only after that did Mikey realize Saturday was just another week away.

Interlude

Mike Coogan was driving his beat-up Ford Tempo on US 52 again, heading east. He'd put about fifteen miles between himself and Forrest Junction and prepared to put in more. The farther he got away from that place and the memories it held the better. All he needed now was to put that many and more miles between himself and this godforsaken area.

He'd only come back here to bury his old man. Scratch that. He'd come back here to bury his ties to his old man; that son of a bitch had already been in the ground for six weeks. If he hadn't decided to do that—and he still was unsure why he had—none of this crazy shit would be happening. Mike wouldn't have nearly totaled his car; he wouldn't have screwed up his head; he wouldn't've been blacking out and he wouldn't be having these bastard headaches and thinking about his horrible childhood.

"Son of a bitch!" Mike yelled, slamming the palm of his hand on the steering wheel. He needed a break, he needed a reprieve. He switched on the radio and cranked up the volume as The Who sang of their fabled magic bus. The miles blew by as he climbed up the hills and coasted down the dales. As he climbed the largest mount since Foreman's, he recollected where he was and knew he would have his reprieve only moments before he saw the next historical marker.

He flipped on his turn signal, although no other vehicles were on the road now (force of habit here; doesn't everybody who makes constant use of their turn signal use it even when traveling a lonesome road?), and pulled off on the right into a small paved parking lot. He brought the junker he sometimes called a car to a stop, switched off the ignition, and opened the door. He walked round to the large, oldish roadside placard and read it: PINNACLE ROCK STATE PARK.

Yes, Pinnacle Rock. He remembered this place. Before his father

(Scary Lightning Man)

had gotten heavy into the bottle, before he had pushed his mother over the edge of sanity in the act of pushing her down the stairs (if not directly then indirectly), the four of them (yes, his old brother Sam actually did come along on trips back then) spent many a Sunday afternoon here at the park. They'd always climb the fifty or sixty stone steps to the base of the rock, then climb onto the rock formation itself, always seeking the highest parapet where little Mikey and little (but not *so* little) Sammy would roar and yell and thump their little chests like Tarzan.

This was the respite he sought. No one else was visiting after six P.M., so he had the park to himself. Even better. He climbed his way up the stone steps (*fifty-six*, he thought, returning to his youth; he realized he'd been counting each step as he progressed, something he had not done since he was a child) and then stopped at the top of them. For a moment he was disoriented. An observation deck stretched out before him over the lower base of the formation. That hadn't been there when he was a kid. Maybe people were more prone to accidents these days; either that or those same damned lawyers who made the parks (state and city) get rid of all the merry-go-rounds also made them install this observation deck with its wooden rails (one at chest level and one at knee level) and CAUTION signs in three languages. *The modern world and its liabilities*, Mike thought, disgusted.

Somebody had ruined this true to life historical marker—one of the greatest natural aboveground formations in the state. What made it worse was that the deck came equipped with one quarter-deposit binocular device for tourists who did not bring their own and offered its own historical marker, set high up in the middle of the view. Even worse than that was the fact that the marker was an exact duplicate of the one below on the road. *Isn't one enough*, Mike thought. He read the English language CAUTION sign: DO NOT CLIMB ROCK BEYOND OBSRVATION

DECK - VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED. *Persecuted*, Mike amended and snorted his disgust again.

Then he climbed over the far rail and hiked up the side of the rock formation.

He didn't make it to the top. The fifteen years since his last visit had been filled with many storms and high winds and other natural erosive elements. The wide pathway of rock that had circled the formation as it climbed around its edges—really nothing more than a low jutting rim—had all but disappeared. What remained was surely impassable, especially with the light of day dwindling fast and with the moisture on



the rock (that freak storm had hit here, too, judging by the slippery damp look and feel of the rock and the thousands of water drops that lined the leaves of the low shrubs).

Pissed off and more miserable than ever (the low throbbing in his head had returned), Mike set off back down the side of the mountain. He got in his car and retook to the highway without another glance at the Pinnacle. Why should he look on it again anyway? It had become just one more broken memory, broken place, broken image of his childhood.

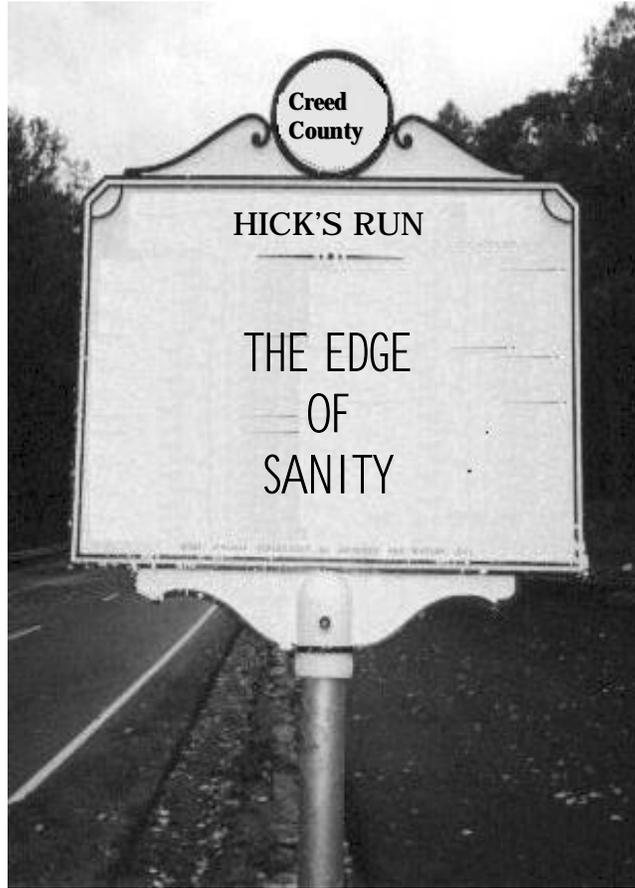
He finished the last quarter mile of high-grade road and passed through the cleft at the top of Pinnacle Mount. As he began his descent, his head began to throb even harder. As one hand went to squeeze the bridge of his nose, he instinctively pumped the brake pedal, slowing his forward motion. His hand came away from his nose cupping fresh blood. *Aw Christ*, he said. *What a friggin' day this is!*

He did the only thing he could think of. He brought his knees up and rested them solidly on the underside of the steering wheel. Then he reached his free hand into the back seat and came up with an old white T-shirt he kept around in case he pit-stained a decent shirt and

didn't want to wear it out in public. Without further thought, he brought the tee to his nose and switched hands, tilting his head back slightly to catch the runoff but not too far to see where he was going. His clean hand found the wheel again.

He glanced around to find a large enough area to pull over. It was a hard job. Visibility was not only dimmed by the fact he had to tilt his head and look down his nose but also because the sun had completely dropped below the mountains and he had not had a chance to turn on the headlights. Realizing he could knock out at least one of these concerns, he realigned his knees and used his free hand to pull the headlights knob. The road in front of him lit up in soft yellow cones. About ten feet ahead was a pull-off, just past another of those historical markers. As he drove slowly past it, he squinted to read the words printed there. The title of the caption was HICK'S RUN and CABIN. There was something about a guy named Jebediah and his family...settlers...and then Mike was pulling off past the sign.

He slammed the stick into PARK and cut the engine. Delicately, he sabbed his nose and sopped up the blood as it continued to flow freely. Several minutes past and finally the blood ebbed to a trickle. He lowered his head in order to get a hand on the back of his neck to help the clotting, and he caught a glimpse of the historical marker in his rearview mirror. He closed his eyes tight, trying to stop the secret messages they sent to his brain before it could translate them. But it didn't work. In his mind's eye he saw what was written on that marker. It said nothing about Jebediah and his family and settlers. No, this sign told him something quite different, something about a kid named Winthrop and his friends...and murder. He opened his eyes and read the entire sign twice, and then, without even realizing it was coming, he blacked out again.



Genre Notes: EXT=exterior, INT=interior, CU=close up, ECU= extreme close up, POV=point of view.

FADE IN.

EXT. BELLINGHAM HOSPITAL. It's a run down building circa 1920s. Mostly tarnished brick with several facades and dormers on the third floor. Bars line the windows of that floor—heavy black iron bars that scream “you are not getting out of here.” A vortex picks up some autumn leaves to the left of the main doors on the ground level, which are flanked by scrub pines.

VOICEOVER DUBS IN.

GUIDE

And here is the isolation ward. Twenty rooms with padded walls and door. Only the slide panel for food and sight remains. Only our most self-destructive patients stay in this area. Sometimes...

DOCTOR

Can we see one?

GUIDE

...a man can...what? Excuse, Doctor. Did you say?

INT. THIRD FLOOR WING. The CAMERA runs down the length of the hall and stops about fifteen feet from a group of ten persons of varying stature, yet all wearing the same general "uniform" designed to their own liking: uncuffed trousers, buttoned-down shirts, neckties, v-neck sweaters, tweed jackets replete with elbow pads. Most are clean-shaven, but several sport thinly-crafted mustaches. The one standing in the front of the group (a younger man, perhaps an intern or untenured professional, dressed in a dirty smock and hospital scrubs) is looking expectantly at one of the men in front of the entourage.

DOCTOR

Yes, I did. May we see one?

GUIDE

Well, it's not planned on the tour, but—

DOCTOR

Oh, come, come, young man. What would it hurt? We are all doctors, you know. Some of us are even headshrinkers, so you might as well show us so we might find out your staff's strategies, eh?

GUIDE

Strategies, yes, well, I...

DOCTOR TWO

Yes, lad. I'm quite sure it's all right with the warden, er—I mean, head doctor.

The doctors share a little bit of laughter at the wit of DOCTOR TWO. It seems they all may have been called such at one point in their lives. The GUIDE, however, is either unimpressed or did not catch the joke.

GUIDE

All right. If you insist, doctors.

Several doctors say "Yes, we do" in unison as others grumble and snort their assent.

DOCTOR THREE

Indeed, we do insist. What say you?

The GUIDE reaches towards the latch of the sliding panel with one hand and a light switch affixed to the wall with the other. As he does so, he begins.

GUIDE

This here is Winthrop Eddings. He's 22, been with us four years, he has.

The GUIDE fully opens the panel and the group jostles to see the patient. CU of the backs of many heads, most still wearing fedoras, having forgotten to remove them earlier.

INT. PADDED ROOM. POV slide panel. We see into the room. It's a five-by-eight job with a ceiling height of around 10 feet by the looks of it. The 30-watt bulb in the light fixture—the kind with a concave aluminum dish about it—casts some light in the center of the cell, but the far corners are covered in shadow.

CAMERA moves out of the panel and turns to face GUIDE (obviously it is the eyes of our DOCTOR). Out of its periphery, we still see the padded room.

DOCTOR

Where is he? What's he in here for?

GUIDE

Oh, probably in the far corner. He likes it over there. Been sitting there the whole time he's been here. Was sent here by the State, he was. I don't know the whole story, but I know they found him covered in blood. They say he seemed all right at first, then when Dr. Mike had him in the exam room he went nuts during his session.

DOCTOR TWO

What happened?

GUIDE

I don't know the whole story. They found him out in the forest, covered in blood, brain, tissue, his own feces and urine. He was foamin at the mouth. He was drugged up completely when they brung him here. In-ca-pass-ee-tay-ted. We set him down in that exam room and Dr. Mike tried to talk to him. He just drooled on and on. No response. So Dr. Mike tries doing the word-association with him and all of a sudden he flips out on a word. Launches himself at—

DOCTOR

What word was that, son?

GUIDE

Paranormal.

As soon as he says it, the GUIDE puts a hand to his mouth in an "oh I can't believe I just said that gesture." We hear a low growl coming from the CAMERA's periphery. It turns (still DOCTOR's POV) towards the cell as WINTHROP rushes the door. He is clad in white pajama pants and a straight jacket. WINTHROP collides with the door and sends spittle spraying through the panel opening.

WINTHROP

[*screaming*]

The blood. It's all blood here. Blood and death.
Blood. You'll die too. Blooooood.

The panel is slammed home, hiding the face and muffling the screams. A hand sets the latch.

POV switches to the CAMERA set fifteen feet away from the party again. The DOCTOR is still leaning forward, but all he can see is the hand receding from the closed panel. He stands upright and faces the GUIDE again.

DOCTOR

Dear, dear. Poor old boy, eh?

DOCTOR TWO

See, that's why I told you, Jennings: you can't use those kinds of words when employing the word-association technique. You know, the "big words." Keep it simple, stupid—like the old lady says.

DOCTOR

You are right, Edgecombe. I see now what you mean. We couldn't deal with this at our facility.

DOCTOR TWO

True. You couldn't. But at Hanson State we probably could. We don't use those words, anyway. Homicide, misanthropic, heliocentric, coruscuspense. I would never use *paranormal*.

SOUND from beyond the door: *screaming*. Apparently, WINTHROP has heard the word used again. The DOCTORS look at each other and shake their heads concurrently. They begin to CHATTER but we cannot hear them.

INT. PADDED ROOM. CAMERA appears to be right inside the door, just about in the same place as the slide panel. WINTHROP is bouncing off the walls, pacing the room. He then sits in the middle of the floor, cross-legged, and begins rocking backwards and forwards as if on some acute pendulum. From the dark left corner a MAN steps out. He looks like one of the doctors. Pin striped suit, fedora, no spats. He has a pipe in one hand, however. This MAN looks a bit like Rod Serling, and quite rightly so. He is our NARRATOR. He advances on WINTHROP and stands behind him, looking into the camera.

NARRATOR

Meet young master Winthrop Eddings. A poor old boy, indeed. He has experienced what few men have, and he lives. But not to tell the tale. He will never be able to do that. But we can look into his mind. We can see what really happened.

We can see why one word, paranormal--strange
 as it might sound--would render a man incompetent.
 Make a man crazy. For we can see beyond...
 THE EDGE OF SANITY...

DISSOLVE to WHITESCREEN. SOUND—THEME MUSIC BEGINS. It starts with a drum beating, an ancient animal-hide drum; followed by the sound of a tribal chant, singular voice then cacophony; followed by deep pipe organ swells, a cymbals crash, and racing violin glides (at a *lunatic's* pace); followed by a cosmic-sounding *thrash* of synthesizers; followed by orchestral theme tune; and ended, finally, with multiple cymbal clashes. SCENES flash by as the MUSIC plays seemingly at random: a rec-room at an insane asylum with a number of the insane roaming about; *flash*; a shadowed ax coming down on an unsuspecting head; *flash*; a woman walks down a darkly-lit passage, a man's figure following her in shadows; *flash*; a group of native American hunters being edged toward a cliff by several different animals, which seem to be working together (bear, hawks, snake, badger, wildcat); *flash*; on the deck of a warship, troopers attempt to load a huge shell into the barrel of a large gun-cannon, but the shell disappears from their hands; *flash*; a cheap-looking hoax-like flying saucer emits a beam that runs down a backwoods town's main street, blowing up cars, causing water to erupt from hydrants and various in-street covers (sewer, water, gas) to fly up in the air, sending the citizenry dodging and running; *flash*; an American president stands up inside Air Force One, looks in the mirror, adjusts his tie, and tips a salute to the American Flag as he exits—walking down to the tarmac he sees the flag flying upside-down and his soldiers dressed like Third Reich-men, the most shocked look on his face; and *flash* finally the famous black-and-white glossy of Charles Manson with his lunatic eyes. The CAMERA draws into the eyes and begins to shake violently. During this theme time the TITLES for "THE EDGE OF SANITY" roll UP (stars, producers, directors, etc.) As the final CAMERA-SHAKE ends the following flashes onto screen: "EPISODE ONE: THE NIGHT AND THE CABAL." Immediate switch to—

EXT. HICK'S CABIN HOLLOW. Surrounded by mountains on all sides, the narrowly cut valley widens into a bowl at its northerly end. It is in this bowl that we find Hick's Cabin, a dilapidated two story house in the middle of nowhere. The house is definitely falling apart--its window cuts and doorway are gaping black holes and several wooden slats are missing on the visible front and side. This is all we can tell; it is night, and although a full moon brightens up the entire valley, the house is a rusty-black void. We can see that a path winds its way through the valley up to the cabin, cut only once by a meandering brook. This cut is roughly ten yards from the doorway proper. The ground is grassed with timothy and heather, and this glistens in the moonlight. A very light fog hangs one foot off the ground and we note it has rained recently. The sound of the brook and the night insects (crickets and cicadas mostly) is soft in this light. We can also see three young men standing just outside the door. One smokes a cigarette and we see his face somewhat through the flare of the cherry end. The two others stand on opposite sides of him. All we know of them is that they wear light shirts and dark jeans. Their features are otherwise obscured. The guy in the middle, we see in a second flaring of the cigarette via ECU is Winthrop Eddings. He is speaking and using his hands descriptively. CAMERA pulls back from Eddings and captures him and the boy to his left, JOE.

WINTHROP

...So when the townsfolk walked into the hollow
 here, they were not prepared for what they saw.
 One of the men entered the house and found the

body of Mrs. Hicks decomposing on the floor.
There were blood stains on the wall, as well. Up
the stairs in bed, they found the children, mutilated.

WINTHROP pauses and takes another puff from his smoke. JOE looks eager to hear the rest. The CAMERA pulls back and we see the third boy as well. He is BRYAN, and he looks on with a slightly mischievous countenance, partially obscured by the shadows.

WINTHROP

However, they could not find old Jebediah Hicks himself. Then it got very quiet. I would imagine that it was about as quiet as it is right now. Then the posse heard a dull clinking sound. They followed their ears about fifty paces, and there was old Jebediah. He was hanging about ten feet off the ground by a chain wrapped tight around his neck.

WINTHROP stops, looks at his cigarette which is down to the nub end, and flicks the butt away.

WINTHROP

Since it had been three months since the family was last seen, no one ever found out what exactly happened. Had Jebediah caught cabin fever and killed his family *then* committed suicide? Had some lonely traveler requested boarding and been refused, and this was his payback? Who knows?

CAMERA passes over and catches the watchful glances of JOE and BRYAN before settling again on WINTHROP. He looks solemnly into the black void of the open doorway and raps his knuckles on the side of the house. CAMERA ECU of WINTHROP's mouth.

WINTHROP

Sometimes, they say, one can hear the chains clinking against that tree. Sometimes, blood runs out of the walls.

The boys remain silent for a moment as the CAMERA draws back, taking them and the house in once again. They are framed by the valley hollow. Suddenly a SOUND—*crack*—erupts from the house. It is like thunder echoing through the valley. The CAMERA zooms in for a CU of JOE, whose body racks for two seconds as if electrocuted. CUT TO ECU of WINTHROP's face, his eyes searching. CUT TO ECU of BRYAN's face, his eyes returning the search, a rueful smile on his lips. CUT TO CU of the three boys. WINTHROP begins laughing like there is no tomorrow. JOE looks at him as if he is crazy. Perhaps in that moment, he is. WINTHROP acknowledges that look and slowly quits his laughter, drawing and hitching breath as he does so.

WINTHROP

[*motions to BRYAN*]

Sake-a-Pete, Joe. He threw a stone.

JOE takes in the answer and a series of emotions cross his face. ECU to see satisfaction, fury and relief.

JOE

Christ on a pogo stick. You scared me with that one.

CAMERA draws back again to take in all three boys.

BRYAN

And that's just what we're gonna do when that camp group gets here. Ain't that right, Winny?

WINTHROP

Yeah, they should be heading this way any time now.

JOE

So tell me about this camp thing again, wilya?

WINTHROP

[motions to JOE with thumb of left hand, to BRYAN]
New guy. Always got to get the whole story. Can't just take it like a man, can he? Got to know the info, he does. Waaayyy before the show starts.

JOE

C'mon guys.

BRYAN

All right, m'man. Here's the sitch. Every year this summer camp takes a night hike out this way and sees the Cabin. The counselors tell them the story to scare them all to death so's they ain't got any trouble from them the rest of the night. Then the counselors watch them fall asleep and get to make out here.

JOE

How d'you know all this?

WINTHROP puts an arm across JOE's shoulders and locks his elbow around his neck, pulling him closer.

WINTHROP

Cause he used to be one, dough brain. He quit being one type of loser to be another kind.

JOE gives WINTHROP a curious glance: *What?* is in that look.

BRYAN

Us, dummy. Losers. Coupla j.d. punks and a wet end.

WINTHROP

Yeah, but not tonight. They're the losers tonight.

JOE

Yeah, gonna lose their water right down their legs. Sogging up their drawers, they'll be.

WINTHROP removes his hand from JOE's neck, releasing him. BRYAN harshly claps JOE on the back twice.

BRYAN

Right, buddy. Ya got it now.

TIME passes. CAMERA focuses on the clearing sky and the moon which sits at two-thirds of its arc. DISSOLVE into the moon at its height. Constellations are now very clear and only a few stratus clouds trail along. CAMERA returns to the three boys. WINTHROP is pulling a cigarette from his pack of Camels.

WINTHROP

You guys wanna have a look inside. We gotta figure out hiding spots anyway.

BRYAN and JOE nod their assent and the boys follow WINTHROP into the cabin. The CAMERA follows.

INT. HICK'S CABIN. It's pitch black in here until WINTHROP switches on his flashlight—a twelve-inch ribbed aluminum job circa 1950s. The light cast on the dirt floor is so small in the surroundings that everything above shin-level appears as if lit by candle. The light picks out the one room through a haze of dust just kicked up by the boys. As the boys appear to grow more accustomed to the light, LIGHTS COME UP slowly and gently from outside (as the MOON brightens) to give just enough light for detailed shots.

JOE

No chairs, no tables. No nothing.

WINTHROP

Scavengers. This place's been cleaned out longer'n I can remember.

BRYAN is focusing on the rotten stair-ladder leading to the second floor.

BRYAN

Gimme your light, Win. I'm going up.

WINTHROP

Shoulda brought yer own, shoudn't y've?

BRYAN

Ya' tole us not to. Be easier to scare them kids if we had only one light to worry about, you said. [Pauses.] You gonna give it to me or not, ya jackass?

WINTHROP tosses the device to BRYAN.

WINTHROP

Careful, man. Just on the steps, right? That floor's no good. Rotted.

BRYAN flashes his smile, tips the light into the darkness upstairs, and begins his ascent. As he goes, the light goes with him. WINTHROP has lit his cigarette and the eerie glow of its embers plays havoc in the receded light. Now the light is nearly ethereal, as half of it now comes as a low glow some place above. Downstairs, in the main room, the rest of the light—given from outside (resembling the moon's light)—leaves the scene with less clarity. More DARKNESS. The cigarette begins dancing around the room and we see that WINTHROP is walking and pointing.

WINTHROP

Here's where they found the missus. They say her stomach and chest were covered with slash marks and deep cuts. And here's where the blood flows from the wall.

WINTHROP looks up towards the stairs. CAMERA takes his POV: BRYAN's upper body is above the line of sight. All we see is his legs and feet on the steps.

WINTHROP

Find any bodies up there, Bry? Or maybe some lengths of chain?

Several seconds pass without BRYAN's reply. He had gone up another step as well.

WINTHROP

I said not all the way up—

WINTHROP is cut off by a loud SOUND—*thud*. CU of BRYAN's dangling lower body. He is completely off the stairs. CUT TO CU of JOE as he lets out a low grunting wheeze. CAMERA draws back to take in all the room as BRYAN drops to the floor. He shakes the flashlight around, grinning. The light dances off the walls and ceiling of the first floor.

BRYAN

Ohh—weee—oooo. Oooo—whoooo.

WINTHROP

Let's just go outside, okay. Before you get Joe seeing things.

BRYAN

What, like this?

BRYAN brings up his hand and lets fly some object. The flashlight catches it at odd angles, hints of refraction but lackluster. JOE instinctively raises his own hand and catches the object with a SOUND—*chink-chink*. JOE holds the object up in the light so WINTHROP (and audience) can see it. His hand above, he grips the three links of chain by the top tip, letting it dangle slightly.

JOE

Nice touch there, BRY. I don't "see things," though. Except some chain links you brought with you. But, uh, let's go stand out there anyway.

The boys walk out the door. JOE tosses the chain links over his head. WINTHROP catches them, looks at them a moment, shakes his head, and tosses them back over his head. BRYAN is the last. He catches the chain. As his feet hit the threshold, he turns around and shakes the flashlight around again, repeating his eerie noise. He smiles again, shuts off the light, turns, throws the chain up and catches it (SOUND—*chink*), deposits it in his left front pocket, and exits.

BRYAN

I found this, really. Up there. C'mon, y'guys.

EXT. HICK'S CABIN HOLLOW. As the boys enter the night, we see that they all shiver quite noticeably.

JOE

[*with teeth chattering*]
Jeez did it get chilly out here.

WINTHROP

Yeah, really. That was sure quick.

BRYAN

Uh, Win? Something's going on here.

WINTHROP

Yes, it's getting chilly out here, man. Tain't nothing.

BRYAN

No, no. I mean. Listen.

JOE

Well, damn. I don't hear anything.

BRYAN

Yeah, I know. Nothing. There's nothing to hear.

And he's right. The CAMERA pulls out very far until the boys are only small sketches in the hollow. All SOUND is muted, except for the boys' breathing. CUT TO CU of the creek. The water is speeding along as usual, but there is no sound of water. CUT TO CU of high grasses where bugs are hopping and flitting about. We see fireflies, moths, crickets, but hear nothing.

CUT TO the pulled back view with the boys in center screen. WINTHROP is simply standing in the middle. At his sides, BRYAN is turning in a circle in place and JOE is backing up in a slow acute arc, also turning. Immediately the CAMERA ZOOMS in and the awkward-looking boys fill the screen.

JOE

This is weird, sincerely.

CAMERA switch to WINTHROP's POV. At the lower left edge of frame a shadow passes over a moonbeam. The view turns in that direction and nothing is there. CAMERA switches back to capturing all three boys. WINTHROP is fumbling for another cigarette. The pack is rolled up in his shirt half-sleeve and will not pull free. CAMERE CU on his arm as he fumbles and we note that gooseflesh has pimpled his skin. CAMERA switch to WINTHROP's POV again. He/we look at JOE in ECU and see his ears tighten up and his face contort. In the lower left periphery, BRYAN's head jerks towards north. On the heels of that comes SOUND—*crack-snap shuffle-shuffle*. The CAMERA pulls back again as we see JOE and WINTHROP look at each other.

WINTHROP

Campers. Get ready boys.

JOE

[*raspy*]

That's not the path, Win.

JOE shivers all over and all three boys come back into view. JOE eyes them both.

JOE

This is too much. I'm all tight and tingly. Cold.

WINTHROP's POV again. The moonlight catches off of the hairs on the nape of JOE's neck. They all stand on end. CUT TO JOE's POV and he sees the same effect on WINTHROP. The CAMERA shifts as JOE presumably turns his head. He is looking at BRYAN now, who is currently scanning to the north of the cabin where the forest takes over the hollow again.

BRYAN

I could swear I saw something.

JOE

[*scared*]

Doan say that.

CAMERA shifts again, taking in all the boys.

WINTHROP

I did too.

JOE

Swear?

WINTHROP

Shit you not.

BRYAN

[*pointing*]

Up there, where that white is...is where I saw it.

CAMERA follows BRYAN's finger to view the north quadrant of the hollow. Then the SOUND again—*shuffle-shuffle*—followed by a series of low snorts. Immediate CUT TO the boys huddled close together.

BRYAN-WINTHROP-JOE

[*scream*]

JESUS!

The boys break and run toward the cabin, then stop still when they see where they are running. They look at each other then turn and run towards the path and the creek. BRYAN is in the lead and as his Army boots hit the water, the SOUND of the valley comes back with a vengeance. The noise affects BRYAN more than the other two boys, and he loses his footing. He falls to the bed of the creek. The creek responds with a SOUND like a galloping herd of buffalo, and the crickets and cicadas sound like they might be giant insects from outer space. Then the SOUND—*snort-snort*. JOE runs on past BRYAN and WINTHROP is on his heels. CAMERA follows them in a low arc as they recede into the dark then returns to the creek. BRYAN scrabbles in the creek on loose pebbles. In the process of righting himself, he loses the flashlight. CAMERA zooms in on the aluminum tube, which *clatters* over some pebbles, spins in the water, and lays still. CAMERA returns to BRYAN, who is up and running, unaware he has lost the flashlight; it follows him in the same arc it gave the other boys as he disappears into the dark.

EXT. THE TRAIL. TRACK CAMERA runs along beside the boys. As they head deeper into the wooded valley, the light from the moon raises and dims at odd intervals, slipping in and out of the trees. Then JOE stops. WINTHROP nearly runs him over and stops to his right. BRYAN is still going full-tilt-boogie in an effort to catch up and collides with them both. They remain standing, but with much luck.

JOE

Now I'm seeing things. Look.

He points farther up the path. Once again, the CAMERA follows the finger and we see in the distance two, then three, then two small circles of light.

JOE

Ya see it?

WINTHROP

Sure enough. You thinking what I'm thinking.

BRYAN

It's them damned campers.

WINTHROP

Right.

Now we hear another SOUND—*mingled voices* far off. It sounds like low chatter from where the boys stand. Then from behind, a returning SOUND—*shuffle-shuffle*. And the boys take off, running towards the two—three—two circles of light. The CAMERA is back on the TRACK again, running alongside. CUT TO the lights grow bigger. They can only be flashlights. The SOUND of voices is louder. CUT TO the boys TRACK again.

JOE

Hey, up there. Help.

WINTHROP

Yeah, hey you. Help us.

The boys keep running, BRYAN in the lead this time. But then he starts slowing down. So do the other two.

BRYAN

[*out of breath*]

Hold up a minute fellas.

The boys all hunch over for a moment, hands their knees, refilling their lungs. BRYAN straightens up and massages a stitch out of his side.

BRYAN

Shouldn't we've come up on 'em by now?

JOE

The lights are gone.

WINTHROP

No way.

The boys looking the direction they were running. CAMERA takes their POV. Sure enough, nary a light or spoken word or soul in sight. Just shades of gray and black, tree and shadow.

WINTHROP

Oh, jeez.

WINTHROP straightens up as well. He puts his hands on his head, his fingers interlaced. He has the strangest look of disbelief on his face.

WINTHROP

So what do we...I saw...where did they go?

WINTHROP begins pacing in a wide circle. He starts using his hands in wild gestures as if talking to himself. JOE and BRYAN exchange a strange, discomfited look.

WINTHROP

What are we gonn—

He is cut off by a SOUND like no other they have heard tonight—a *soft crunch*. BRYAN and JOE are still looking at WINTHROP, eyes measuring him up and down as he just stands still.

WINTHROP

I just stepped on something. I don't like the feel of it, either.

JOE slowly and deliberately squats to the ground as WINTHROP picks up his foot. Underneath, pressed into the soft ground, is a pale white object. It looks like bone. JOE reaches down and lifts it up.

JOE

Oh, now what is tha—

JOE is now cut off as BRYAN grabs the object from his hand and holds it up in the light of the moon, twisting his wrist back and forth so he can see all of it. BRYAN's POV gives an ECU of a deer skull. We notice the sizable, serrated hole in the left cranium, and the boys stare at it for a long moment.

JOE

What could cause that?

A SOUND suddenly returns to them that they thought they left behind—*shuffle-shuffle snort snort*. CAMERA shifts to hover on WINTHROP's shoulder. A strange look is in his eyes and then his head starts to turn toward the CAMERA. We see his features in profile and then his shoulders begin to move as well. He is turning around to look behind him. As he does, the CAMERA moves off his shoulder and hovers before his face, now giving a CU. WINTHROP's face contorts, his mouth opens wide and silently screams. Breath hitches in his lungs and the air comes out finally. He screams high and is abruptly cut off by a SOUND—*thud*. As this *thud* occurs, his head does an odd shake like he was hit on his crown, and then his eyes close and he falls to the ground. The CAMERA looks straight down on him and spins around twice. Then the screen goes BLACK. We hear two more SOUNDS—a *scream* which is a duet and the indefatigable *snort-snort*. There is SILENCE, then JOE's voice repeating "What could cause that?" several times.

FADE IN to daytime.

EXT. TRAIL. WINTHROP is lying face down on the path. He shakes his head and begins to rise. We hear a SOUND—a deep resonant buzzing. WINTHROP stands and looks around. The CAMERA takes on his POV as he does so. There is no sign of BRYAN or JOE. But just out of sight over the rise in the path comes that buzzing. CAMERA reverts back to normal view. WINTHROP stands up and rubs his hands on the back of his jeans. He does not notice that he has rubbed something on them, but the CAMERA does. ECU of his behind and dark black smudges, then

immediate CAMERA revert. WINTHROP walks to the top of the rise and then stops. The CAMERA rushes up behind him and follows his gaze, entering his POV. Below him, about three feet away, is a large black thing. It is moving in a way he does not understand. He walks over to the black thing and kicks out at it. ECU of foot striking the black thing. The blackness raises and appears as a huge cloud rising. Then it breaks apart into a myriad of flies. The CAMERA draws back and catches WINTHROP raising an arm to his nose—something SMELLS, obviously. He sees the backside of his lower arm in this light and notes the same smudges there that are on his pants. The CAMERA circles in a large, fast arc and takes on his POV again. The rotting remains of a deer are below him, now unhidden by the flies. Blood is everywhere. WINTHROP's foot comes into view and taps into the carcass. The dark fur with patches of white here and there emits a nauseous gas. When the gas rises and spreads out, it is revealed to us that the carcass is not a deer. BRYAN's body and JOE's head snuggle close together. Immediate CUT TO ECU of WINTHROP's face. He brings hands up to rub it and as he runs them through his hair, we see blood high on his cheeks and forehead.

WINTHROP

Mary-n-Joseph.

WINTHROP keeps repeating this as a lunatic's drool starts dripping down his chin. He begins to foam at the mouth and lets out a SOUND—*low guttural cry*. He drops to his knees and looks to the sky for help. None comes.

WINTHROP

No. No! No-no-no-no-no.

CAMERA switch to AERIAL shot looking down. WINTHROP falls forward on the bodies and we hear a SOUND—a *metallic rattle*. He reaches into a carcass and pulls out a chain. He is now reduced to *muttering* as he wraps the chain around his neck. Then he collapses completely on the bloody carcass. CAMERA ECU of BRYAN's face. It looks caved in. CAMERA STROBE EFFECT as it switches to JOE's face, a deer's face, a deer's skull, and back to BRYAN's face.

CAMERA FADE TO BLACK and one more SOUND—*snap-snap snort-snort shuffle-shuffle*.

INT. BELLINGHAM HOSPITAL. CAMERA is focused on the door to WINTHROP EDDING's cell. The door opens and our NARRATOR steps out. He closes the door, looks down the hall. The CAMERA follows his glance and we see the TOUR GROUP walking in the opposite direction to the far end of the hall. VIEW shifts back to the NARRATOR. He removes the pipe from his coat pocket, looks at it, and tosses it to the side. He removes the coat, and we now see that he is wearing coveralls (as if he has changed clothes during his time off-set). He draws a Camel from nowhere and lights up. He takes a cool drag, holds in the smoke, and lets it out slowly. The smoke completely envelops him like a thick white fog. COLOR seeps into the fog, and as the smoke clears, we see a NARRATOR who appears to have aged ten or fifteen years.

NARRATOR

[*older, ragged voice*]

They will never know what really happened to poor Winthrop Eddings. Nor will we for that matter. Did the young man savagely murder his friends in the night to act out with an amnesiac's impunity? Did some supernatural

or physical embodiment of Jebediah Hicks manifest itself, materializing, *merging* into our reality to rid its territory of trespassers? If so, why was Winthrop Eddings left to live? Or did some wayward traveler, much like the one who really did pass by the Hick's family cabin nearly a century ago, decide to horribly mutilate a couple of young boys? No one ever knows what truths people hold, do they? But with some special insight some of us can peer into the mind, that mystical quagmire of what is real and what is not. For your safety, however, we dare only take you to THE EDGE OF SANITY.

NARRATOR turns and grabs a mop from where it leans on the wall. He begins to amble after the TOUR GROUP, letting the mop drag a wet trail on the floor behind him. The CAMERA follows after a moment. CUE UP SOUND—*theme music*—and roll credits. NARRATOR turns one last time to the CAMERA. He is an old man now, with the face of a grandfather or great uncle. Someone you trust with your entire being, but someone who you are also afraid of in some ways unknown to you. CU as the NARRATOR winks at the CAMERA.

FADE TO BLACK.

Interlude

Mike opened his eyes and daylight stabbed a million pinpricks in his irises. He looked at his wristwatch and saw it was eight A.M. *Jeez*, he thought. *Was I out that long?* The bright sun beating its heat into the cab of the old Ford told him it was true. He looked over himself and found himself in good order. He noted his headache was gone and his nose was not swollen or bleeding at all, and that was good order, too. Only one last thing to check before he left.

His eyes darted to the rearview mirror. Nothing amazing there—just a backwards historical marker reading (after he adjusted for the reverse order of lettering) HICK'S RUN CABIN and briefly describing the family's initial settlement of the area. Mike decided his experience yesterday could be chalked up to a bump in the head and the result of shock following his near-fatal accident. Come on, anybody that comes that close to death is bound to have some kind of negative turnaround response, right? Blackouts and strange dreams were just par for the course.

The only person to convince was himself...and that was pretty easy. He turned the key and the starter kicked over. The familiar *chug chug chug* was followed by the well-known blast of backfire, and Mike was off again, heading due east on a path that would take him to his destiny.

He drove along until he reached another familiar quarter—that in-between region they used to call "The Midlands" between Bluefield and Princeton. There was a cemetery here; he could not remember the name though. But that's where his mother had been buried after she

died in the state hospital's loony ward. He'd have to go up Route 19 to get there. He didn't mind. He'd much rather visit his mother's grave than his son of a bitch father's, anyway. He hadn't even been to hers yet—not since she died five years ago. He knew that sounded awful, but he also knew he had no excuse and therefore chose to push those thoughts from his mind.

The crossroads with 19 was up ahead and Mike took it. Followed it for about three miles until he came upon Mountainview Cemetery. *This has got to be it*, he thought, pausing briefly to test his luck on the historical marker located at the front gates. He figured if yesterday had been some mild delusion, then the information would be fine. Besides, the test would be worth it.

So he read about how the cemetery had started as a series of family plots and spread from there and how it contained a lot of non-native names because it was also a miner's cemetery. The information was interesting enough, and his headache had not returned. The test had been passed.

He went through the gates and began the search for his mother's grave. Needless to say, he found it, and the brief private moment he shared with her was immensely troubling and yet fulfilling. Before he walked away, he dropped a white rose on the headstone. "Good bye, Mom," he said and got back in his car.

As he passed through the gates once more, he felt the resolve suddenly leave him. A strange timidity filled him. He was cold and mildly frightened. Nothing hovered there to chill him, nothing to scare him, but he still had this creepy sensation—like someone was watching him. He flicked his eyes to the rearview and he instantly knew why the feeling had come over him. Several black birds perched on the Mountainview historical marker; the sight was a bit ominous, but it wasn't what had gotten to him.

Once again, the sign had changed. Now he read about the original caretakers of the cemetery and their long-running mortuary enterprise....



I.

5:10 A.M. A worn key turns and a bronzed deadbolt slides away as Pete Jenkins opens the front door. Snow billows in through the widening fissure, and two small vortices leap past the young man's feet and into the dark entryway. Pausing on the threshold, Pete cups his key fob with three fingers and thumb; an extended index flips three switches on a five-switch panel just at chest level.

Floods flicker to life, illuminating Pete from behind, casting him in shadow. He cranes his neck towards the light, and his face appears in profile. A nearly imperceptible scar—the only remnant of the mugging that took his father's life when he was three—traces his cheek from

the crevice of an eye (still crusted with sleep's sands) to the hinge of his jaw. Sometimes his boss calls him Rochefort; he does not know why. The four floods light up the white single-paneled signboard which imparts a gentle message in peeling black stencils: SERENITY, INTEGRITY, PATIENCE - ROMERO'S HOME OF ETERNAL REST - YIORGE ROMERO, PROP. As his neck swivels round again, Pete first realizes the vestibule and foyer ("separate but equally important rooms here at Romero's" Yiorge explains with a broad smile to relatives of the deceased from time to time) bulbs did not catch the spark. He flips the two of the three closest switches repeatedly until the old chandeliers burn.

Entering the vestibule proper, he half turns to close the door to cut off the wandering snow which melts upon contact with the deep red carpet. He takes a firm grip on his lapels and shakes his gray overcoat violently, knocking even more snow to the warmed floor. Satisfied by this quick setting-to-rights, Pete grunts as he pulls patent leather gloves from his hands, carefully folds them on an invisible median that has manifested itself in a deeply cracked crease, and places them thus folded in their respective pockets.

It is that moment he removes his hands when the fire alarm on the smoke detector mounted centrally on the foyer's high ceiling begins to sound:

Wahhhwahhhwahhhwahhhwahhhwahhhhhhhh.

II.

5:12 A.M. Pete stamped his boots, raked them on the small rectangular doormat, and looked up at the fire alarm. He smelled no smoke and saw no blazing infernos and heard none of the other alarms screeching. He and Rocky Romero (Yiorge's son and assistant director) had installed it less than a week ago; it seemed too soon for it to be malfunctioning. Removing his coat and placing it in the nook of an elbow, Pete advanced through the vestibule and into the foyer. He reached up with his other hand to reset the alarm; all he had to do was perform a

little jump (in Boy Scouts he always won the vertical leap contest with a four-five average) and push in on the small red circle. But the alarm cut out as abruptly as it had cut in.

Pete stopped, remaining two feet and a vertical leap away from the alarm. The little green LED blipped on and off, just as it was supposed to when operating at peak condition. He did not give it another thought and began to walk down the long hallway which led to the viewing parlors, the guest rest rooms, the kitchenette, and the garage beyond. He only made it eight steps when

wahhhwahhhwahhhwahhh the alarm kicked on again. Pete paused, turned round, and fixed his eyes on the malfunctioning unit. He half tossed, half dropped his overcoat on the nearest of three antique wooden benches lining the hall. Then he approached the smoke detector, eyeing the red push button. This time, the alarm kicked off when he was three feet away, again flashing the "all clear" green LED.

Pete did not believe it was "all clear." Something was out of whack. He wasn't sure just what yet, but he knew he couldn't blame the fault on sketchy wiring—he'd done the wiring himself, done a damned good job of it, too. He returned to his coat, trying to pinpoint the problem, grabbed a handful of collar, and proceeded down the hallway, flipping on various light switches as he went: Viewing Room A lighting circuits one and two, Gentlemen's Latrine overhead lamp and fan, Women's same, and Viewing Room B lighting circuit one. His finger slid from the panel before setting circuit two, so he brought it back up to flip the switch and

wahhhwahhhwahhhwahhhwahhh failed to strike it a second time.

Walking into Room B, pacing slowly through the small corridor between the two interconnected viewing rooms, he circled his route and edged toward the alarm from another angle. This time it waited until he stood squarely below it before silencing itself. Five minutes passed with Pete only blinking quizzically at the persnickety device. Finally, he dropped his gaze to his feet and shook his head in disgust. He raised one boot on its heel,

pivoted back toward Room A. In that moment he noticed (for the first time) he had let go his coat in the corridor; it lay there immutable in a mountainous charcoal heap. He

wahhhwahhhwahhhwahhhwahhh jumped up and pressed the button with his finger. The drone continued. He jumped and pressed again and again, but the damned thing wouldn't let up. Coming back down from his sixth and nearly final leap, he recoiled even tighter. This time he shot up with both hands upraised, grasped the alarmed detector, and ripped in from its hinge points. Its face and several feet of power cord followed Pete down. With malice aforethought, he tore the line from its receptacle. For another second or two, the possessed device (and that's just how he saw it now—possessed) warbled a final cry

wahhhwahhhhhwahhhhhhhwuttwerrrrrrrr and ceased to speak entirely.

III.

5:15 A.M. At forty thousand feet above sea level, the rising sun appears as a fireball roughly half the size of Georgia below. In the cockpit of Seles Cargo Flight # 6230, Captain Jonny "Pearls" Freeman and his co-pilot, Ron "Buck" Rodgers, face the bright orange circle through three layers of shaded glass: the window's double-thick time-tinting plexis and their personal large-lensed aviator sun-shades. Buck finishes his story about the "stew—er, flight attendant" who copped his joint last night, and Pearls attempts to comment when the nearly all of the hundreds of lights on the console start twinkling like Christmas: reds, blues, greens, yellows. The myriad winks out an indecipherable Morse code and then blanks altogether.

"What the hell was that," Buck says, more in declarative awe than inquiry. He's never seen that phenomenon before. Apparently, Pearls hasn't either; he shrugs his shoulders and taps the board furtively. A single green light flashes to life again. Pearls taps again, but the bulb captioned "CHP" continues pulsing an imperative beat.

"Looks like we got a pressure problem in the cargo hold, partner," Pearls confirms.

Buck says, "I'll check her out," as he removes his headset and pushes himself out of his seat. Pearls gives him the five-by signal and begins checking knobs in preparation for an altitude adjustment: if the pressure's low, he'll have to drop down a few thousand feet to establish a realignment.

As Buck opens the cockpit door leading to the corridor between their location and the holding cells, he nearly loses his grip. A strong backdraft pulls to suck the door from his hand as he tightens his grip, and instantly subsides. "Yeah, check on that presh-loss," he calls over his shoulder. "Looks like the carg-door let out a whiff and then sealed itself again." He walks down the small corridor and looks at the six-inch monitor sitting on a short arm attached to the wall above his head. "Shit, Pearls," he shouts. The color which has drained from his face is evident in his voice. "We've got a live one."

* * *

What is going on here? Where's my Harry? Harry!? HARRY? Why won't he answer me? It's so dark in here and...omigod, I'm...I'm. Harry, why am I turned over like this? Why can't I move? Quit playing your games. Untie me and take this dern blindfold off my eye this instant. We are too old for these games, Harry. Harry? Where is that whippersnapper? Always playing games. When he tied me to the bedposts last month I told him no more. Sixty's too old for S & M. I ain't no budding flower anymore and Harry...Harry can't even get it up these days, even with that pill. But he's horny as ever. Dern it, Harry, come in here and let me up! It's so cold in here, but it's soft. Harry, did you get a new comforter? Oh...oh...oh...ow...ow...ow. Harry, turn those magic fingers off right now! Not up, you silly old man—OFF! Harry? Wha—Where in tarnation are you? For the love of god, Harry. HAR-RY!!

9:25 A.M. Pete Jenkins reached down to set the water carafe on the refreshments trolley and nearly dropped the half-filled container when he heard his name called. The ornate hand-blown glass from Vlenko's local factory and the shiny golden-leafed mirrored tin of the trolley's upper deck (a gift from Vlenko's Metal Works facility, also local but under different management) clacked together loud enough to set Pete's teeth on edge. Yiorge would've put him in a coffin if he'd broken another carafe. Pete could never figure out why he was so intent on breaking the pitchers, and neither could Yiorge. The last time it happened, Vlenko the former said this sixth was the limit; apparently, there weren't enough blowers or materials in the glassworks factory to make any more donations.

"Petey, c'mere," called the voice again. He couldn't tell if it was Yiorge or Byron, Rocky's eccentric younger brother. Despite the thirty-seven year age difference, they sounded like the same person after their voices floated through the meandering rooms and corridors of the home. He checked the carafe and tray again, and then followed the sound of his name. "Petey, Petey, Petey. C'm'n have a lookey." Now that was definitely Byron, struggling as much as his namesake for a pithy rhyme. Only the son of the boss (not the boss himself) would speak so childishly. Resigned to "have a lookey," Pete proceeded down the doglegging south wing to the Arrivals Room, or "holding pen" as the younger staff referred to it.

He found Byron closing the lid to a casket with what appeared to be a touch of reverence. Then the man turned to face Peter, stretching his arms the length of the lid while offering a wary expression. The actions conveyed two things to Pete, as Byron surely intended: a watchful protection to keep the casket covered and an ever-growing eagerness to share its contents. Pete found the falsity in the protection obvious; he found the anxiety to confide obvious, as well.

"Petey, my friend, your mentor has something new to show you." Pete had put in enough time at Romero's to know two more things: Byron would always have something new and

exciting to show him, and he would never be Pete's mentor. Supervisor, yes; mentor, no; that was Yiorge's job. So he said it.

"By—," Pete said (he always called him By; it was a bit of a joke really; By for bisexual: hetero and necro), "You'll never have the chance to be my mentor. Your popi will never see the day. Besides, you're daddy's little go-boy—you can't be a mentor, all you do is fetch." Pete received a scolding look for this comment but knew that's all he would get. Byron was a bit slow, but because he *was* popi's go-boy, he knew how to take his punches.

As far as he knew, Pete and the others just liked ribbing him for pleasure; he would never know that they meant what they said. Nor that it was true.

"Whaddya got here?" Pete asked, placing a hand on the casket.

"No," Byron said, removing Pete's hand then grazing his hands over the surface of the lid as if it were made of cloth and needed smoothing. "I found 'er; / get to show *you*." He gracefully (his only gracefulness came in moments such as these) moved his hands under the lip and pushed his fingertips into the lid. The top of the casket arced on its hinges; the shadow of its underside followed its path. Pete bent over the side to get a better look. Byron peered over his shoulder. "Well? Whaddya think?"

"No way," Pete said after a moment, exhausting a burst of air around the words, unaware that he had been holding his breath.

"Yes way," Byron returned. "Turbulence flipped her over." He was right, of course. What else could have happened to the little old lady in the casket? She lay on her stomach, chest, and face, the hem of her long purple evening gown bunched up at her knees and a gathering of frilly stuff hiked up her ass. "See that—that's her trim. Runs around her every six inches of her dress."

"What happened—that's a lot of damn turbulence. Where's the—"

"Good call, buddy. But it ain't here. Bastards forgot to pack her in Styrofoam on the other end."

"And I'm sure that's what sent her dress up her crack, too."

"Quit in-sin-ew-whatsit," Byron chirped, adjusting the corpse's gown. "Y'know I don't do that anymore. They fixed me up there by Podus City-way. You gonna help me flip 'er or what?"

"Sure." But Pete wasn't so sure. By had come back after a six-month in P.C.—a six-month full of electro-shock and nut-jackets supposedly—as disturbed as ever. It was only a matter of time before he began hobnobbing around again.

V.

11:45 A.M. Pete looks at his wristwatch and notes it's almost time for lunch. He's just finished scrubbing out the O.R. (Rocky, who'd always craved to be a *real* doctor, favored this moniker for the Embalming Room so everyone used it to appease him) and can think of nothing better than Ma's own special tuna salad: with pickles, celery, and peppers come right out the back yard, Hellman's mayonnaise (the only *real* mayonnaise), imported albacore from the headlands, and triangular slices of Wonderbread with the crusts cut off. He'd learned early on that to work in this business, you had to have a solid stomach. What better way to prove it than to eat Ma's own special tuna three days out of the week. Besides, the stink of the albacore and its feces—it'd always amazed Pete that the headlanders didn't de-shit their tuna like Charlie and the Chicken of the Sea did—always covered up the less-than-aromatic perfumes (or odors) of the home's patients. The thought of Ma's lunch (tucked away in the back of the cooler Shed Three) brings saliva bursting into his mouth.

Pete swings the door of the O.R. shut. He looks ahead down the long hall between himself and the main "visiting" area of the home. He glances to the right, at the small door (more

squarish than rectangular and fit for those of dwarfish stature) leading to the garage and Shed Three beyond. Again, he tugs at his shirtsleeve to reveal his wristwatch. *Fifteen minutes, schmifteen minutes*, he thinks. *It's tuna-time!* He turns to face the diminutive portal and grasps the doorknob of the O.R. again, checking to see if he'd pulled it to. He instantly let go and put his hand in the mouth. "Ahh," he cries to no one in particular. "Cold."

He takes his hand from his mouth and unfolds it. The fingers and thumb are bright pink on the underside; the rest of his hand pales in comparison: a splotchy ivory at best. Pete then feels a sudden throbbing there between the webbing of his fingers and cries out again as the tingly sensation he directly associates with gloveless snowball battles reaches from the tips of his fingers to his lower forearm. He shoves his hand in his mouth one more time before he starts flagging it in the air, attempting to revive circulation. As feeling does crawl back, he cautiously touches his other index finger to the doorknob. Room temperature. He grasps it, notes its steadfastness, and heads to the garage door.

Pete puts his hand out to push open the miniature door, already hunkering down, when a sudden temblor scurries its way through his body, firing off every synapse along the way. Now he feels the tingling all over. He looks down at himself and watches as his body double-bucks violently. He throws out his arms to catch himself as he begins to tumble, but they are as jelly as the rest of him. His head goes out for a second; when he opens his eyes, he finds himself sitting cross-legged on the floor. The rubbery sensation is gone, but the cold shock of the pins and needles remains. "Ju-DAS!" Pete says, attempting to figure out why he feels like he's slept out in his tent all night in thirty-below weather.

Ping!

11:50 A.M. That sound had come from the O.R. To the untrained ear, it would have sounded like a pin drop—just a little heavier. To Pete, it signaled that some instrument had hit the steel-plated floor of the O.R. But he had just cleaned the room up after Rocky had finished doctoring another patient. Everything should have been in its place: on a cabinet shelf encased by glass or on a tray in a drawer below the counter. *Must've been my ears*, he thought. *Nothing else is working around here—specially nothing of mine—might as well be my ears ringing from the fall, whatever that was.* That sounded right to Pete. He pulled himself up with his elbows digging into the walls, shook his head, gave it a good knock, and decided to go for that tuna.

Ping. Ling. Gling-gling-glingling.

Pete knew this sound hadn't been in his head. Besides, nobody's ears rang like that. The sound he'd just heard could've only been one thing: an oblong instrument falling end over end from some height, then hitting the floor and bouncing back and forth on its ends until it settled. He'd heard it a thousand times in the O.R., followed immediately by Rocky's disgusted voice: "Dammit, Peter. Pick that cutter off the floor, drop it in the sani, and get me another one." He *had* put everything away, although he guessed he could've forgotten a scalpel after all.

He decided to have a look. He tapped the doorknob several times before grasping it again, although somehow he knew it would no longer hold its cold. He was right; it was barely even cool to the touch as he turned it. As soon as he dislodged the bolt from its chute and pushed in on the door, he felt the cool fingers of antiseptic air slide around the top of his hand and up his arm. Cool was all right, though; it was cold he could stand no more of today. He reached his other arm around the door frame and flipped on the light. Bare metal, covering every inch of the room, reflected the bright halogen cells—and so did the scalpel lying directly in the swinging door's wake. "Hmm."

Pete bent over and picked up the stainless steel instrument, studying it. "Where'd you come from, little fella," he said. He held the blade up at eye level, running it between his fingers; the refracted light bounced across his face with every turnover. "Let's get you back in bed, shall we." He walked over to the sanitizer well and chucked the scalpel into the yellow liquid. He pulled tongs from their wall-mounted holster and used them to remove the other instrument. With his other hand, he smacked the button on the blow dryer mounted alongside the holster and waited for the scalpel and tongs to dry. Then he went back to the operating table and dropped the scalpel into the carving drawer.

He looked at his watch: noon; now it really was time for lunch. He re-entered the hall and pulled the O.R. door shut behind him. He looked at the garage panel for the fifth time in fifteen minutes, and

Ping! Ping! Ping! Ping! Ping-ping! Pingpingpingping-linglingling-gling-gla-glinggling.

He immediately turned round and threw open the O.R. door again. His hand stung with another freeze burn from the knob, and his eyes cried out in pain as a myriad of lights danced in them. He let out a strangled gasp. A thousand or more scalpels gleamed up at him from a mountainous heap just beyond the opened doorway. The door itself—he had let go of it and shoved his fingers into his mouth—bounced off the pile again and again, attempting to complete its swing open. Pete rubbed his eyes with his free hand.

When he removed it, the cold barren steel floor glared at him. The scalpels had disappeared.

VII.

12:00 P.M. Across town in another operating room, a doctor and several nurses attempt to engage a dying man. The doctor has his hands in the man's chest cavity, working vigorously on one organ or another. One nurse checks the vitals, another stands by the doctor accepting

handfuls of dead or dying tissues every moment or two, and the third runs back and forth between the instrument panel and the doctor's right hand. The doctor keeps yelling orders: "Clamps...no, the big ones." "Scalpel." "Take this...damn, we're losing him."

"Doctor," calls the nurse on vitals.

"Quickly, Margaret. Tell me."

"Pulse dropping off fast. I don't—"

Ping-ping-ping-ping-pingpingping.

"He's spiking, sir." Just as Nurse Margaret says this, the man on the table bucks twice and lays still.

"Get off that and cover me over here, Margaret. I'm starting to pump the heart." The doctor drops a handful of tissue and the scalpel. They both hit the floor—*squach* and *ping-gling*—to join two commingled mounds of waste material and discarded instrumenta. Margaret makes for the doctor's side and loses her balance, sending blood and tissue into the air as she lands on a turned ankle. She cries out in pain and falls silent as her head smacks the wet floor. "Judas Preist! Beatrice, call for assistance."

The nurse to whom the doctor just spoke runs out of the room and shouts down the corridor. The doctor continues to pump for another five minutes and finally gives up.

"He's gone," says the doctor, snapping off his gloves and wiping sweat from his brow. "Get her off the floor. And get someone in here to clean up this mess, will you?"

* * *

God, it's cold. Nurse! Nurse! Could've at least gave me a blanket or something...Hold on, where's my johnny? They took my johnny. Here I am lying on this cold metal table, my balls so tight they've crawled back up in me, and the staff doesn't have the decency to cover me up. Nurse! Where are you? Where's anybody? How can a routine stint job turn into this? All they had to—what the hell? Oh...jesus-god, that's...that's a...a scalpel sticking out of my

chest! For Pete's sake. Hey, nurse. Lady, get in here! What the hell are you trying to do to me? Get this dern thing out of my chest. Nurse!...Hey, why don't anyone answer me? Did y'all go to lunch? This ain't no time for tea! Lady.

VIII.

12:27 P.M. Pete was just licking the remaining crumbs of his sandwich from his lips and listening to the final bars of Wrathchild America's version of "London After Midnight" when the intercom crackled to life. "Pete," it chided. "Get your butt off of that crate and come back here to the O.R." Pete looked at his watch. He had three more minutes to savor, and he had no intention of entering the O.R. until he got this morning's incident out of his system. "Now," crackled the intercom. Pete hopped off the crate and made for the shed door.

As he crawled through the small portal leading from the garage to the rear corridor, Rocky grabbed his arm and pulled him through. "I need your help, kid."

"What's going on, Rock?" Pete asked, and he meant it. Yiorge's eldest had never called him "kid" before, much less *needed* his help.

"I've got something here I think you need to take a look at," Rocky replied. Still holding Pete's arm, he dragged him into the O.R. and spoke as if he was guiding a tour. "You don't see this very much these days. Back when I was a kid, when Pop did all the work himself, he used to show me the weirdest shit. But I've never seen this before."

"What?" Pete asked again, looking around the O.R., then fixing his eyes on the bulky black body bag lying on the table. Something was different about this one. Obviously, the inhabitant was overweight—by at least 75 pounds, judging from the bulging mound. But the angles just didn't seem to fit what he knew of bagged bodies. Something troubled this situation, though, and Pete figured *why worry about it* because Rocky was about to show him.

So he simply watched Rocky's fingers approach the zipper, deftly pincers it, and gently pull it down the length of the bag.

Like always, the bag emitted the tasteless smell of death, which followed close behind the widening grin of the zipper's teeth. Pete noticed the odor was less its noxious self today, figuring Rocky had already had the bag open. Rocky now took two handfuls of one row of teeth lying on a great naked stomach and pelvis—the bags were stenciled PROPERTY OF ROMERO'S and designed with a higher quality than city bags, opening down the body's side instead of at the chest meridian—and threw the canvas flap towards the far wall. "*Viola*, Pete."

Pete went to the body and bent over it. "Oh, come on, Rocky," he said. "This I simply can't believe. If this is the type of 'shit' your father used to show you...well, I'd say you are as gullible as gullible can get." He paused for a moment, taking a breath and moving his eyes slowly from Rocky to the body to Rocky. "Jeez, man. I'm not that stupid. You and your brother, always wanting to stick something in these things." Rocky looked at him as if to say *A different kind of sticking altogether, mind you* as Pete reached toward the body. His hand worked, his arm jerking back and forth. A squishy, fluid-filled sound filled the room, followed by metallic snapping. Pete raised his arm in the air, the halogen bulbs catching on the broken haft of a blood-run scalpel. "*Viola*, yourself," Pete said, slapping the unusable instrument into Rocky's palm and walking out of the O.R.

He left Rocky standing behind the naked body of a man who had no right to be naked, alive or dead. Aside from the obvious human characteristics, he could have been a bear or gorilla in life, what with all the extra pounds and mangy, matted hair covering nearly every inch of his body. Except his chest area, which had been shaved down, leaving a cross-sectioned post-surgical stitch and the tip of a scalpel as its only inhabitants.

Rocky raised his hands in supplication and said, "Ah, come on, Petey. I didn't stick that in there."

IX.

4:58 P.M. Standing in the back of Viewing Room A, Pete scans the grieving parties. At 3:00 he had placed forty-nine folding chairs in seven rows of seven, facing the mock altar and dais centered in the front anteroom. As he looks now, he notes all but three chairs are occupied. The widow is up front, of course, surrounded by her entourage of children—six in all. She wears a tight black dress which might've looked a little better at a cocktail party, but Pete doesn't mind. *Let her wear what she wants*, he thinks. *She only gets this day once in her life.* As soon as he's thought it, he wishes it back. He finds himself glad he did not speak aloud. He generally is not this callous, but it has been a long day. The words of the priest only reflect that length; the one difference—Pete's day hasn't been as tedious as the drawling wag of tongue produced by Father Henry.

"When I heard that Wilson had left this plane of life, I wanted everything to stop. I'd been out of town, and his son Dennie had called on my car phone. I wanted to stop right there in the middle of highway 52. I wanted the traffic to stop. I wanted my engine to cut out. I wanted every car to pull over to the break down lane. I wanted all the trees to stop creaking under the heavy pressure of snow. I wanted the radio to cut out, the music to stop. I wanted to stop. Everything. Everything needed to stop for a moment and consider what Wilson..."

"Peter," whispers a voice from behind. Pete turns around and does not see anyone there. He knows Byron and Rocky are running around somewhere, hiding out so they don't have to come to the service and offering yet another example of why he held them in such low regard. For the last six months, Pete had attended every service, whether it be here at the

home or at some local church. He knew then and knows now how to show respect. He turns back around to watch the rest of the service.

“He was a man who lived life to the fullest—he knew what life was. So why didn’t life offer him a moment of silence? Why didn’t life stop when Wilson did? Because life goes on...”

“Pe-terrrr,” the voice calls again, trilling the r and tickling his ear. Pete flinches and flicks violently at nothing on his shoulder, as if he has been attacked by no-see-ums. “Here, Peter.” The voice, coming out of Room B, seems too feminine to be Rocky. Obviously, By has decided to play a little trick on Pete. But Pete decides he will not play along. Instead of standing there and enduring it, he backs into Room B and pulls the sliding curtains closed in front of him.

“So embrace life as God embraces Wilson’s soul. As he embraces your souls...”

Pivoting on one heel, Pete spins around and faces a room empty of everything save a coffin and about twenty flower arrangements. He circles the room anyway, checking the various entries and exits to see where Byron might be hiding. “Come out, man,” he whispers forcefully between clenched teeth. “Don’t do this during the service.”

As he trods past the coffin a chill air surrounds him as a feminine voice wafts up from under the lid. “Peter,” it whispers back. “Please let me out.” A cold, invisible finger traces down from the nape of his neck, descending slowly over each vertebra and completing its descent at his coccyx.

Pete leans over the coffin and places his ear to the lid. “Help me,” the voice cries. He stands up stiffly, his arms and legs locked into place. That same cold finger presses against his lip and traces symmetrically down the front of his body, this time completing its descent along the impression of his frenulum. For the second time today, his body spasms. This time he does feel the completely solid, tangibly cold hand light upon his neck.

X.

5:05 P.M. Pete grunted out “Eunh!” as he forcefully shook himself from the dream. From somewhere over his shoulder he heard, “Ah, Peter. I wondered when you would join us again.” Pete realized he was stretched out and knew he had fallen asleep on the sofa in Yiorge’s office. As he sat up, he wiped drool from his lip, noticing the gentle rainbow which caught light as it arced from his chin to the semi-damp puddle above his sports coat’s left breast pocket. He began blinking his eyes, rubbing them now with one hand and spreading the warm wet spot below his shoulder with the other.

His eyes slowly came into focus, and he found himself staring into the eastern corner of the large office, where two giant bookshelves—each of them were hand-wrought from a heavy, dark-stained wood, running five feet across and ten feet high and containing seven shelves apiece—angled toward each other into the crook. Pete thought for a moment about all those books (there must have been a thousand of them) and what significance they might have in “the real world.”

None of them could have been called “leisure reading” by a long-shot...or a pot-shot for that matter. The only leisure reading in the whole Romero complex was in the small office shared by Rocky, Byron, and Pete—which, by the way, Yiorge’s office belittled in size and structure to the point that its smaller counterpart could only properly be referred to as “cubicle-just-inside-the-main-building-back-by-the-garage”—and that consisted of one tattered copy of *War and Peace*, several decaying *Archie and Jughead* comics, the well-guarded and coveted monthly edition of *Playboy* (of which, according to Rocky, only the pictures could be read and re-read in-depth), and Byron’s more guarded and definitely much less coveted issues of *Juggs*, *Cavalier*, and *Graveyard Shift*, the latter of which only ran in circulation numbers less than one thousand and depicted acts only a sycophant like Byron Romero would ever find magnificence in. (This Pete knows only from Rocky, who finds his

brother's eccentricities disgusting at times and quite interesting indeed at others, but Pete would rather have not known at all.)

No, the books on Yiorge's shelves were all technical books—manuals, journals and guidelines of medicine in general and mortuation specifically. Most of them had traveled from the old country with Yiorge many decades ago and were printed in their original Latin, French, Russian, German, and Italian, some dating back to the seventeenth century. This collection was so "complete," for lack of a better word, that Pete considered it the most stupendous repository of unnecessary texts that no one had read in two, two and a half, centuries he had ever seen, besides, that is, the famous Duffman Library a bit down the road at Bellingham College. For example, there on the second shelf from the bottom of number two stood a complete set of the eighteenth century *Dictionary of Medical Sciences*, the French illustrated edition, above which one book was missing.

"Peter, turn around here a minute. There's some things we need to discuss."

Pete stood up and smoothed out his sports coat and trousers and sat back down facing Yiorge's desk. He glanced at the bookshelf one more time, thinking, *I bet I could name that missing tome...just give me five more seconds and....* Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a quick movement from behind Yiorge's desk, turned to see a great, white, expanding cloud unfolding in his direction, and felt the coarse cotton of the crisp white cloth as it first hit then spread over his face. "Clean yourself up as I start to talk, kid. This'll go a lot faster that way."

Removing the cloth from his face, Pete began lightly scrubbing at his saliva spot and said, "What're we talking about, sir?" Then he noticed Yiorge was turned around in his swivel chair, facing the other way, balancing his elbows on the thin mahogany armrests that allowed his hands to come together and fingers to tent ten inches above his waist. The single light illuminating the room from its central location above the great desk of bookshelf-matching

design and color—upon which, coincidentally, sat the relocated text that Pete had just named *Materna Medica*—cast the old man’s shadow onto the wall behind him, leaving Yiorge’s anterior the only object in darkness.

“Well, son,” Yiorge spoke to the wall and Pete, together as one. “It’s time for your three month evaluation. The last time we did this, I said that before you could move on from a probationary position, you would have to work on three things.” He raised one over-large liver-spotted hand (Yiorge had the worst case of elephantiasis in his extremities) and extended one elongated index finger: “Rapport.” He raised one middle finger to stand much taller than it should have beside the index: “Camaraderie.” He raised one ring finger bereft of a ring: “Teamwork.” Yiorge dropped his hand and realigned the fingers with the other half of their tent. “I’ve watched you a good deal this three-month and thought long and hard about my decision. You’ll never make it here.”

Pete, startled out of his deep stare into the uncut pages of the open-faced Latin text sitting atop Yiorge’s desk, began to sputter. “B-but, Yiorge—M-mister Romero. I don’t....” The old man raised his other hand (just as over-large and just as liver-spotted) in a silencing and cautioning wave. Pete responded immediately.

“Here’s the main problems. First of all, I don’t think you know the meaning of those three words. Rapport. Camaraderie. Teamwork. You are always nay-saying, making disgruntled comments and actions under your breath to yourself or to Rocky, and calling my Byron by unjustified, demeaning names. I myself hardly hear a peep out of you at all. Second, you eat that damned tuna that stinks up my home. Third, this also means you cannot live the motto—the maxim—of Romero’s: live and work in serenity and with integrity, showing, above all, patience.”

Pete was still stuck on “that damned tuna,” thinking what a crazy reason to fire somebody, but Yiorge had moved on.

"Fourth—and this is the one I just don't get—you nearly destroyed a perfectly good fire alarm this morning. What, pray tell, came over you, I wonder." Without turning to face Pete, Yiorge reached backwards into a desk drawer and removed the alarm device Pete had ripped from the ceiling roughly twelve hours ago. He tossed the device at Pete, who caught it and turned it over in his hands. "As you can see, it is in fine working condition." Pete then heard a faint snapping sound and looked up to see a brilliant flare come alive in Yiorge's lap. A moment later, a kitchen match came arcing over Yiorge's head; Pete caught this tightly in his hand, extinguishing the flame as it scorched his palm. Smoke rose up to replace the flame and the alarm began its impious wale again. Pete swept his hand back and forth in the air with vigor until the smoke was eliminated. Even with the dispersement, however, the alarm continued to resound. "See, perfect working order."

Pete set the device on the edge of the desk, boring unseen holes into the back of Yiorge's head with eyes full of unknown anger. "This damn thing...."

"Necro," Yiorge said, and Pete felt compelled to shut up again. *Necro?* "Necro." Yiorge de-tented his fingers and wrapped them round the armrests. "Why would you concern yourself to refer to son as a necromaniac?"

"Because he is, man," Pete said. "He's a hobnobbing whack-job. And I'm beginning to think you are, too—you, Byron, Rocky, this goddam house, even." Pete stood up and advanced to the desk, placing his hands palms-down on its well-sanded and varnished surface. He pulled his chest up and leaned in, ready to give Yiorge some more of his mind and show the old man that even with his John Merrick hands and feet, Romero was still a bit smaller than Pete Jenkins.

Without turning, Yiorge raised his hand once more and extended that same index finger. "First of all, young man: to coin a phrase, you should not knock something until you've tried

it. And second...." Yiorge's feet pattered on the floor mat beneath his desk and his chair began to swivel round toward Pete. "It's technically not *necro*."

"Sweet Jesus in a purple patch of peaberries!" cried Pete, throwing himself back into the sofa. He covered his face. He closed his eyes. He never wanted to look into that horrid visage again.

Yiorge had decided to finally reveal himself, to show Pete just how old he really was, to prove to him that no, it wasn't necrophilia, and yes, he had purchased every single one of those books on his shelf the moment they had entered publication. When he had turned on Pete, his face had been peeling off in some places, as if he had seen nuclear winter several years back. His lips took on the appearance of sandpaper, his craggly voice changed to death, his words so disturbing, so damningly cold. In those areas where holes had not erupted to show yellowed bone beneath, the rot had grown outwardly: rows of fever blisters, open sores, and pitted pox ringed his mouth, blasting craters on his high cheekbones, constellating his forehead. His hair, once held fast and groomed to perfection, raged like puckerbrush in some places and fell to the desk in clumps from others.

Pete probably would have stayed there, partially rolled up into a ball on the sofa cushion with his hands in his face and his knees to his chin, if a sickening green hand had not taken a strong hold on his arm. The voice which followed it said, "Hey, Petey, it's all right." He didn't know how or why he thought that voice didn't sound *as dead* as Yiorge's, but he thought it just the same. "Ker-RIST," he said, jerking free of the steeled grip which had no doubt been hardened by the black ichor of living death (he may not be familiar with Alex Dumas, but he sure as hell recognizes Bram Stoker when he sees him).

He forced himself up off the couch and into the book corner. There he took in the entire room: the desk, the still open, still uncut *Materna Medica*, the single hot white light cascading down from the ceiling, the two zombies that resembled his former boss and eldest

son as much as they resembled nothing in this world. The Rocky creature lurched behind the desk and stood hunching over his father. In a sense, the strange family portrait neared completion; the likeness became even greater as the son draped his left arm around his father's shoulders and let his hand rest upon his father's breast. Only one thing was missing from this picture...

"Pe-tey?" called a lilting, blithe, but undeniably lifeless voice from the hall. "Where's my good buddy?"

Coming right for you, Pete thought and dashed through the open doorway. In his attempt to break from the madness in the office, he collided head-on with "Byron," who clutched Pete tightly to his body. The embrace filled with noxious odors, and Pete felt and heard the creature's old bones and sinews creak and snap under the vise. "Who's the necro now?"

Pete let go a cry, called upon the Lord again, and struggled free of the sickish embrace. He edged backwards away from the third Romero, then from all three as the father and eldest son entered the hall, completing that weird portrait. He continued in that fashion until his heels creaked on air and he tumbled down the stairs. His eyes closed, and he knew no more.

* * *

Oh-sweet-Jesus! Ah, my head. Son of a bitch, that hurts. Am I going nuts or what? God, it had to be a dream. Didn't it? Of course it was. They're odd, I'll give them that. But zombies? No way...what's this? Why's it so dark in here? Why can't I move?...Judas Priest, they put me in a coffin....Hey, Byron, what are you doing? Get me out of here, will you? Enough of your silly jokes, all right? I get the point! Get over here and open up....Damn, what did you use to bind my hands and feet? I...I can't feel them....ROCKY! Did you drug me, you bastard? You father isn't going to like this. Not at all....HEY! Let me OUT!...I hear you out there. I hear you. You got your rocks off, so let me out....There.

XI.

6:15 P.M. Pete listens closely. He hears the latch unclasp and notes the pressure inside the coffin release. A faint crack of light appears, then two sets of fingers. Slowly the lid begins to rise, and the light grows ever brighter. In fact, it's too bright. He must have been lying in here for a while—at least long enough for his eyes to adjust. He attempts to close his eyelids and finds he does not have the strength. They feel like lead weights.

A mound of darkness forms in front of the light. Pete's eyes take a moment to focus. He recognizes the outlined figure of Byron Romero before the man's features completely materialize. Pete notes he is no monster from beyond, just a regular, alive pervert. "There's my pally," he hears Byron say, watching his jaw move up and down as his lips form the words. Then Byron turns and walks out of sight, and the light is brilliant and blinding once again. *Why can't I close my eyes*, Pete thinks.

Another mound moves in, this one obviously belonging to Rocky. "Ah, jeez, Pop," says Rocky. "He did it again. Byron, how many times have I told you—" A third figure moves into view, an old, haggard man with many years left in him. He pushes Rocky out of the way and leans into the coffin.

"Dammit, Byron," Yiorge says. "Can't you think of someone other than yourself for a change? What would his mother say if she were here right now? You're lucky we checked on him before we rang her up."

"She wouldn't have noticed," Byron replies, moving into the frame of Pete's vision. As he does so, Yiorge looks at him. "Besides, she'll be so screwed up after we tell her what happened to him." But even as he says this, Byron apparently knows better because he reaches down below Pete's waist. Pete feels the pull and hears the sound of his fly zipper being run up.

“Hold your tongue.” Yiorge leans in to have one last look. His face flashes grotesque once more, and he addresses Pete: “You should’ve followed my advice, kid.” Then to Byron: “Never leave their eyes open.”

In the final moment, Pete watches, horrified, as Yiorge reaches in with a withered hand, places it on his brow. The arc of sight becomes smaller and smaller as his eyelids eclipse his corneas and he sees no more. Even more horrifying is the sound of the coffin’s close and the reverberation of the latch driving home one last time.

Interlude

He passed through Bluefield, West Virginia, and entered Bland County, Virginia without incident. After the blackout at the cemetery, he decided to drive straight on his course without taking his eyes from the road itself. He vowed to read no road signs or search for oncoming traffic. He would be an offensive driver if he had to. That's how he felt, anyway. But he left out the simple fact that something was bound to catch his eye. Something did, but it was only one something.



The only thing of interest in that border town he saw before he crossed over was the Colonial—the old theater where he watched a few movies during his high school days. Once a historical location itself, the Colonial was now nothing but a wreck of its former elegance. The windows were smashed out and boarded up. The front swing-door was pulled off its hinges and lay about three feet in the entryway; a chain fence had replaced it where it once stood to block any trespassers. It was sad to see that such a place could be cast aside so easily.

It was equally hard to pass by his old high school once he entered Bland County. The sight there was much worse. Here he felt compelled to get out of the car and walk around inside the dying—the dead—building. Virginia creeper climbed the walls and arced across the ceilings. Pigeons cooed in the rafters. The floor had disintegrated in several places, leaving gaping holes. Mike was unsure he should cross over. But he did just the same.

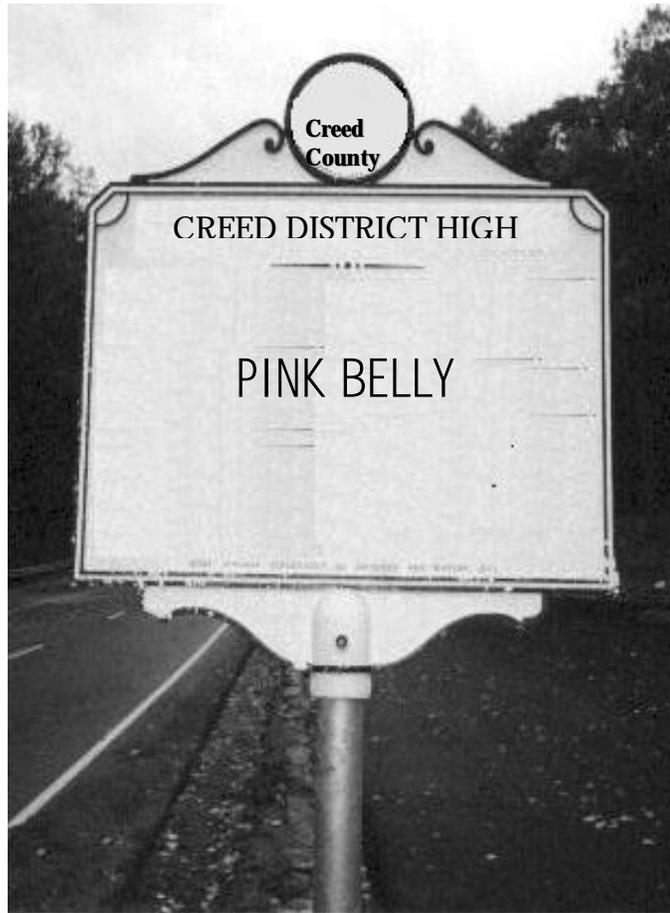
Here, in the middle of nowhere, they had erected this school building, probably seventy years ago. That must have been some job back then, in the Depression. Hard labor, probably some generic products. No wonder they'd replaced it. Hell, Mike had graduated in a class of fifty—a school of two-fifty. And that was in the eighties. He wondered how many kids would be in this high school today, or even several years ago. He thought about those hundreds of paired feet breaking down the stability of the floors as the years went on.



Then he decided the school board must've also decided to go county instead of district when they erected a new school, which would inevitably be located near the heart of the county.

He walked around some more, every step taken a bit more precious and audible than the last as the dry-rotted boards creaked and crumbled. He walked past the old restroom and felt a sudden strong urge to urinate. He turned around and entered the room. The conditions in here were just as bad: the stalls were gone, the toilets uprooted, the sinks either broken into pieces or nonexistent, the urinals resting on the ground instead of hanging from the wall. Mike walked over to one of the urinals and unzipped his fly. He relieved himself, then packed it away. There was one thing he didn't see in here. The electric hand dryer. *What had ever happened to that old thing?*

And then he remembered exactly what had happened to it. He himself had taken the hand dryer out of commission. He hadn't planned on doing it, he remembered that. But it happened anyway. And it had started with washing his hands....



Mike rinsed the soap out of his hands under the steaming water. He heard the door beyond the far wall open quietly, then watched in the mirror as Buddy Ryan came around the corner and into the bathroom and walked toward the stalls. Mike quickly dropped his eyes to the sink before Buddy could see him watching; he had only come in to wash his hands, not to get into any shit. Today was not the day for that. Or so Mike thought.

Buddy Ryan was the meanest j.d. in Creed District High; some said the reason why he hadn't progressed passed the tenth grade in three years was partly due to his grammar, but everyone knew the real reason was the severe beating of Mr. Kolowski, the janitor. According to the gossipmongers, Mr K found Buddy whacking off in the back of autoshop and Buddy had

put him in traction for three months. Buddy had also been sent to juvy hall; not for the first time, but the seventh. For his type of petty crime—they couldn't throw him into the youth offender category, because the backwoods hick-sticks Creed area court system was still in the dark ages—there was no repeat offense status; thus only one label could be afforded: juvenile delinquent. Only one label for grownups to give him, that is.

In those days, whacking off in a public place, even if it was the autoshop, could get a guy labeled queer by his fellow classmates. Jerking your joint at all did that. Don't even try to figure that one out. Semantics and cheesecake aside; in the minds of hormone-ridden high school students, the thought of pulling pud to this month's pinup sweetheart never changed the time-tested rule of the masturbating fairy. The whole autoshop scenario was even worse: why would a guy whip it out and start thrashing away in a room where only guys hung out? See, there's two kinds of kids in high school. Those that are gay and those that are homophobe. There's no in-between. Most times.

Funny thing was, Mike couldn't remember anyone ever calling Buddy Ryan queer. You'd have to be one helluva dumbass to rank that guy. And since Buddy randomly picked one kid a week to work over with his fists, well...that's why no one messed with the dude. He'd shit on your heels and make you eat it, that guy. Make you suck it through a straw, most likely. And you know what? He'd probably get hard up just watching, thinking about that yank of the crank in autoshop. Sincerely.

Mike tried not to think about such things and wondered why he'd he started to anyway. For one, it was a great day, and he was *not* getting into any shit with Buddy Ryan. He had strongly avoided the bigger boy his whole life. Not that Mike was afraid of the guy. Far from it. After living with his older brother Sam, a trained Army boxer who spent his weekends cracking skulls open at Finnegan's Roadhouse on Route 60 and suffering from many a drunken fistfight, Mike knew how to take care of himself. No, he wasn't afraid of Buddy, he just knew that

having anything to do with Buddy Ryan was a bad move. For two, thinking about that dirty son of a bitch spanking his monkey in the engine room was just plain friggin sick, and he was not, no-way, no-how, absolutely, most sincerely, 100 percent you damn tootin, *not* getting into any shit with the guy.

From the far stall came the sound of a Zippo flipping open. A second later, a small white cloud of smoke puffed up to the ceiling. Mike turned off the water and reached for the paper towels. It was time to leave before that j.d. SOB got him in to trouble.

Buddy's head popped out of the stall. "Mike Coogan, why don't you turn that water back on and watch the door, eh? Mr. Feinstein's monitoring this hall today and he's a friggin screw."

Mike turned, drying his hands, and looked at Buddy, who smiled wide around his Marlboro Red. He was just about to tell Buddy to screw off when the door flew open and Bradley Witherspoon came running round the corner to stop right between them. He was breathing heavily with hands on his knees and his head hung over between his legs. Well, not between his legs, but it's the thought that counts. Brad was the fattest kid in the school and he did his best to bend over far enough for his head to pass below his tits.

"You lardass piece of shit," Buddy said. In the commotion, he had flicked his smoke into the toilet. "I just tossed a perfectly good cigarette away."

At that moment, the door flew open again and Billy and Jack Crothers, two of Buddy's cronies, joined the group. They weren't panting like Fattie Withers, but they looked short on breath. Billy began to advance on the bigger, sniveling boy. Jack stood still and eyed Mike, doing that little jerk all juvies seem to have in common, his head twitching on his neck like a clucking mother hen.

Cluck-a-doodley-doo, Mike thought. A smile crossed his lips and was gone in an instant. The plot had thickened; now he had to avoid shit from this sped-from-the-short-bus and his numbnuts brother as well. Deep down, though, Mike knew he was in for shit today.

"Whachoo smilin at, chicken legs?" Jack Crothers said, pushing into the envelope of free space between him and Mike.

Chicken legs. He had to say chicken legs. Was he a mind reader now? Mike couldn't help himself. He smiled again, letting this one linger a moment longer.

"Th'hell?" Jack spit. He didn't mean to spit. It wasn't like he was forcing saliva out his mouth to try to make himself look bigger, angrier. No, the spittle flew on its own accord, and Mike's smile widened. Sometimes Jack Crothers just looked like a silly ass.

Mike Coogan returned the glare one of the Crothers Brothers (*just keeps getting funnier*, he thought) was currently giving him. The twitching hen routine continued. All Mike wanted to do was rip the guy's head right off. Then, of course, what? Jack Crothers's body would just walk around and twitch twitch twitch like a chicken minus her head always does. No matter. There were bigger fish to fry. Jack's big brother and Buddy Ryan himself. All he had to do was walk out the door, but he knew Fattie Withers would get a righteous beating. And since the day had already turned sour—only just recently, mind—he couldn't just walk out on the kid. He had to do something. *But not yet.*

The whole time Jack was getting into his face, Mike kept his surroundings in check peripherally. Billy Crothers must have thought his brother had that Mike Coogan under control (he was right, for the time being; let them think that), because he not so much as turned around. His eyes bore holes in Brad Witherspoon's shirt as he advanced slowly.

Mike had seen Buddy Ryan smiling, half hanging out of his stall, dangling by his outstretched hand which gripped the support beam above the stall door. But now Buddy was frowning, and that wasn't good. He dropped his arm and began advancing on Fattie Withers,

who has backing slowly away from Billy Crothers. Mike guessed he hadn't even seen Buddy, which made it all seem worse, somehow.

So now as Mike Coogan and Jack Crothers were playing a non-friendly game of stones, Buddy's hands clamped down on Brad Witherspoon's meaty upper arms. Mike saw the big blob at the far end of his peripheral jump dramatically and heard Fattie's high pitched warble.

"Let him be, Jacky-boy," said Buddy, looking down at the fat head of his capture, a smile returning to his face. This one was different from the last; it lit up his face like a dark Halloween pumpkin. The smile reached his eyes and flints gleamed at the center of his dark orbs. Mike could only imagine what was imprinted in those retinal flares—a screaming fat kid, perhaps; a bloody screaming fat kid more likely. He was glad Fattie Withers couldn't see them. Combined with that smile, they glistened of insanity. And they meant business. It wasn't until then that Mike Coogan realized that he hadn't seen or heard of Buddy getting in his weekly beating of a lesser.

"You remember the name of that flat-chested whore you boned last week, Buddy?" Billy asked his ringleader, stopping two feet in front of young master Bradley. The freshman looked at him with eyes as big as the O on the McDonald's sign downtown. Another time, it would have been comical; it seemed somehow in that moment all of Brad Witherspoon was in equal proportion for the first time in his life. But it wasn't comical; it was down right horrific.

Billy lunged at Fattie Withers and twisted his left nipple, bearing down as hard as possible. "Titticaca!" he cried. Then he was at Brad's side, a bunch of Fattie's jowl clutched between the thumb and index finger of hand. He began to work that heavy load of flesh up and down (*must weigh a pound*, Mike thought, and pushed the thought out of his head); this caused the freshman's bovine body to jiggle throughout.

Buddy Ryan laughed his evil maniac's laugh, then jerked his head towards Mike and Jack. The smile was gone now, but his eyes still danced. "I said, let him be. He was lookin out for

me." As Jack Crothers backed off, Mike turned his gaze to Buddy. "Good lookin out, Mike Coogan," Buddy said. Then, "You can go now."

Mike held his gaze for a moment longer, then his eyes traveled to his blubbering classmate. Jack had moved to Fattie Withers's other side. They could've been four brothers posing for a family portrait in the Methodist Church directory, but the water cascading down Brad Witherspoon's cheeks and puddling on his broad chest (*tits*, Mike thought. *Tits Witherspoon. We used to call him that.*) tossed out that idea. Fattie's eyes pleaded with Mike's own, but it wasn't his problem. *It's not*, his mind told him. But it also said *It sure as hell is. Who else's would it be?* He couldn't argue with that.

"Come on, guys. Let the fat tub go. For Chrissakes, ya gave him his scare."

The two cronies looked at each other, then looked at Mike, then at their boss. Buddy lifted his head again (he had been looking at the just-referenced fat tub) and scowled in Mike's general direction. The cronies took the cue and did as their "buddy" did. Now Mike had four sets of eyes on him: two eyes cried *help me*, two growled *the hell you just say*, and four attempted *let's hurt the sumbitch* only to arrive at *try to look mean*.

"Go now, Mikey," Buddy said, his tone requesting, as if he didn't want to have to beat up another kid today, especially a kid who had just been watching out for him. But Mike and Buddy both knew that wasn't true. Buddy Ryan never had a quota; he only had kicks. "Just. Go. Now."

Mike stood his ground, legs slightly apart, arms at his side. The only sounds he heard were the muted sniveling of a fat boy at the wrong place in the wrong time and his own knuckles as his hands clenched and unclenched into fists. "Can't we call it a day an—"

"Coogan, I'm tellin—" Buddy began.

"I" Mike tried to say but only came out with the beginning of an "ah." Buddy Ryan had simply raised one arm with an index finger extended in Mike's direction. Buddy to Jack: "Get him the out of here."

"Yeah," said Jack. He began advancing on Mike, eyes hard on him, mashing and crackling knuckled fists in clenched palms. "Time for the wussy to go." Then: "Right? Wussy." The latter wasn't a question. Mike gauged that look and knew what Jack was thinking. He was thinking he knew how wussy—how wimpy and pussy—Mike Coogan was; he just hadn't had a chance to prove it since second grade. That had been row. Mike had spilled milk on him during snack break, and even then Jackie Crothers didn't take crap from no milk-spilling wussies. He had taken little Mikey at the playground on the corner of Stealey and Park; this was back when wussies didn't know that you didn't fight with your thumbs inside your fists, and Mikey's humble flailings couldn't compare to Jackie Crothers tiny fists of fury. Oh, yes—that had been row. Boss even, those eyes told Mike. And now was Jack's chance to remind everyone how wussy Mike Coogan still was.

Jack pulled his punch back taut, ready to let her fly.

"Don't hit him," Buddy called after him. "Just move him on out. We got some business to take care of." He looked at Mike then whipped Brad Witherspoon's face around toward him. "Right, Tits?"

Mike locked eyes with Fattie Withers once more before Jack Crothers placed hands on him. At the same time, Buddy released his capture and clipped him on the back of legs the size of Mike's torso. The beefcake went down hard on his knees. Billy pushed and turned him in the same movement, instantly capsizing the floundering freshman. Now on his back, Brad Witherspoon couldn't even snivel; he did good just to breathe. The pressure on his lungs looked unbearable. Mike wondered how the poor bastard even breathed at all.

Jack spun Mike without stopping, propelling him forward. One icy hand clamped down on Mike's left bicep, which flexed and twitched under the unwanted vise. The other hand bunched up Mike's collar. Jack pushed and Mike went with it, around the corner to the entryway. Jack gave him one final push, which sent him into the door. Mike purposely banged his head—not too hard, but hard enough to clear his mind and make Jack think he was hurt.

From around the corner came Billy's voice: "Hello-o, Piggly-wiggles. Hey, fat ass." Mike heard ripping sounds. "Lets see how pink this piggy can get. What say, Tits?" Then came what could only be the first slap. Jack came forward with his hands to grab Mike again. But Mike threw his arms into the air and waved Jack off.

"Get off me, sped. I can go myself." Mike's left hand slowly ringed the door handle and he pulled. His movements were lethargic. He wanted it that way. His right hand came up to pull the door more fully open, and leaning on it, stumbled through the lentil. He heard Jack turn around and call "Pink belly, pink belly." Then Mike Coogan sent his foot hard onto the door.

Jack Crothers felt the door slam into his back. The door retreated instantly and, turning, Jack had enough time to scrunch his face up into a wholly dumbstruck look that queried *Th'?* when the door came flying at him again, as if on its own accord. He was thrust against the wall and was flattened there by the door, which did not retreat this time. It did not retreat, but pulled back about two inches. Just enough for Jack to slide down the wall and end up sitting cross-legged and feeling limp all over. He shook his head and deliriously looked up. Two hands came around the edge of the door very slowly. Time slowed down for Jack, giving the hands this eerie, creepy effect like a boogey's hands in some slo-mo B horror flick.

The hands were followed by Mike Coogan's head. He looked at Jack and his face did something weird: Jack saw the jaw twitching and watched as the eyebrows bunched and the mouth bared glistening teeth. Mike's eyes seemed to flash twice, and then they were dead. Coogan came all the way into the entryway now and let the door shut surreptitiously on its

hydraulic pump. And that's when time sped up once again for Jack Crothers—when the door came slamming into him again.

Jack closed his eyes. His mouth twisted over, revealing to anyone who was looking (and nobody was) that he was in much pain. Any person in that situation would think if the eyes closed, the pain would disappear. That, however, always proved incorrect. Thus more pain exploded in his head as two hands clamped around his neck and pulled him up. His feet were limp; really, his whole body was limp. The only things holding him up were the two hands which were busy throttling him. Still he would not open his eyes.

Even though the bright pain made the swiftness of this assault nearly true, the whole incident from the time Mike Coogan walked out the door seemed to take an eternity. A guy like Jack's idea of eternity was about 45 seconds. To the rest of the world—which now just included his beater Mike Coogan and his brother Billy and hero Buddy, who were too occupied spanking a fat kid's belly and getting off on it to notice what had happened—only five seconds had passed. Not nearly the eternity for guys like Jack; but then again, Mike didn't believe in eternity and idiots like Billy and Buddy couldn't even spell eternity, so the concept was out of the picture anyway.

More than likely, all those two idiots knew was that seven slaps divided equally between them had brought a wonderful glow to Bradley Witherspoon's over-abundant gut. What made it better was the amount of lint *poofing* out of his belly-hole in great acrobatic pikes and turns. If it wasn't for that aerial display, they both wouldn't have been looking up when Jack came flying from around the corner and cracked his skull on the famous coin-repositing condom machine. They also would not have seen a severely pissed Mike Coogan stride in and grab Jack's neck before his mug had a chance to slide a half-inch down the face of the "Prophylactics for the Prevention of Pregnancy and STDs" placard.

Buddy and Billy both exhibited looks that mirrored concern for that strange unreal slow motion which always affects participants in extraordinary events, time stretches like the ones those special effects guys give to Steve Austin when he runs on *The Six Million Dollar Man*. The word for it wasn't *unreal*, but it was the closest any speds could collectively come to *surreal*, which like eternity was beyond comprehension. It's strange sometimes how two total retards could have the same semi-cognitive thought at the same moment in time—almost surreal, in fact. But then Jack was flying again. Superman skill's lacking, his flight was guided by arms which were wrapped about his head. Apparently, limpness had left Jack Crothers's upper extremities at the moment of truth. He came in friends' direction, but on a diagonal flight pattern that rent him sidelong into the bank of mirrors lining the wall above the washbasins. Jack's flight lesson over, he dropped straight down onto the sinks, busting his head once again on the porcelain. His journey ended seconds later when gravity overcame his precarious balance and his unconscious body thudded to the floor.

Buddy gaped in astonishment and what appeared to be mild horror that could have gone for rage, his mouth mirroring the Os of Brad Witherspoon's eyes. The latter was gone in an instant, but the pink-lined wide maw remained. If Mr. Kolowski had been able to see that, he would have been frightfully reminded of the image that kept him awake so many nights before and after his hospitalization: the smell of dirty oil-stained towels and freshly spilt semen; the sight of Billy Crothers reclining on an unfinished, reconstructed cherry-red Firebird with his mouth cocked fully wide as Buddy Ryan—Creed District High's meanest j.d. and known queer-basher—doused him in giz from his own half-deflated prick; the taste of his gorge rising as he watched Buddy turn to him with come still dripping from his member, walk towards him while unconsciously squooging every last drop from a rapidly decreasing tool, and plant a fist laced with the icky goo on the side of his face—all before he woke up screaming, covered in sticky, pungent sweat, a funk so familiar and so unnerving. Yes, Mr. K would have

most likely shit his janitor's coveralls and run for cover; but Mr. K wasn't there and didn't even know what was going on. Thank God for small favors.

Bradley Witherspoon was not on God's list of favor grants today, it seemed. Breathing had nearly become a thing of the past for that poor 350-pounder. His great big gasps for a wisp of air had now completely halted. In his state—the fear and shock immobility response to the two meanest bastards in his world slapping his fat gut so hard that galaxies of red were building splotches where billions of clogged capillaries burst under his skin—another shock could put the guy in la-la land for the rest of his natural life. That additional shock came with the third meanest bastard's double thump on the floor.

Bradley's head was pulled back because he had craned his neck to see the violence exploding around him (actually, he had pulled his head back and tried to focus on something—who'd've thought it was that same controversial condom dispenser—to try and draw his mind away from the physical ranking immediately taking place). Jack Crothers's bounce had left his head in a similar position as Brad's, only Mr. Knocked-the-Out was lying on his stomach instead and the craning of his neck was not a voluntary action. So now Bradley Witherspoon was staring directly into the deadened eyes of Jack Crothers, which somehow remained open even in Jack's state of unconsciousness and made the kid was dead.

This did not tender Bradley a ticket on the fastest stage to lunacy, but what Buddy Ryan did next came exceptionally close—and thus sealed both their fates forever. Although already struggling for air, Brad Witherspoon now involuntarily began wheezing it all out in an attempt to scream. This brought Buddy out of the land of bionics and back to the real world.

"Shut the hell up, you lardass sack of shit," Buddy said in his normal, pseudo-complacent tone, and drove home a powerful open-hand chop to the large boy's chest. Bradley Witherspoon's obese body screamed in protest for one final time. In the next eternal second, a red blanket covered his eyes followed by a slow close of his eyelids. Good thing for him, some

would say, since his body was now dancing like a death row inmate strapped to Old Sparky. In other words, Bradley Witherspoon was having a seizure.

Too bad Buddy and Billy didn't have a clue what a seizure looked like, although Billy would become plagued with epilepsy five years down the road (and even then he wouldn't know). It looked like the fat bastard's body had revolted from its owner and was unconsciously struggling against him. Buddy actually whispered "Holy crow, he's fightin himself now." Billy just stared in awe as the biggest son of bitch in school tried to dry hump his buddy's foot. Mike couldn't tell if he was pissed because Brad Witherspoon had the gall to buck and grind on the leader of the Skaghoonks Gang or because Brad Witherspoon had decided to move into territories only Mr. Kolowski had dared cross—mostly cause he didn't know about the latter—either way, though, Billy Crothers resembled one pissed off homophobe.

Now Mike Coogan—that badass was just standing at the other end of the bathroom, staring avidly as this all played out. The flash in his eyes had returned, pulsing a *stacatto* for the world to see. But the world wasn't watching. In fact, no one was watching—until Buddy Ryan looked up at him. As they locked eyes, Mike noticed the crazy fire had left Buddy's eyes, and Buddy acknowledged a new flare in Mike's. That was enough to set the meanest j.d. at Fallows High in motion. Not only had Mike Coogan over-stepped his permitted bounds, the asshole had taken something more that belonged to Buddy: bloodlust.

"What the hell have you done, Mike Coogan?" Buddy called as he rose up above Brad Witherspoon and Billy Crothers. Billy noticed that the goober fat kid was trying to hump Buddy's leg now, so he grabbed the kid's meaty wrists and tried to force him to stop. He had to practically lie on him to do so. Then he realized how friggin homo that would look to Buddy and the Coogan kid, and he released him, returning to his kneeling position.

"What the hell have I done, Ryan?" Mike Coogan asked, accentuating each syllable with mocking inflections. He advanced two steps and stopped beside the hot air blower—the one

that read "Dry Hand" in black blocked lettering and "-job" in red permanent marker. "It's what you've done that's the issue here."

"The hell you say," Buddy shot back. If he had taken his eyes off Mike for only a second and looked in the mirror at his right, he would have seen the fire had returned to his eyes. He would have realized that Mike hadn't stolen his bloodlust after all, and maybe even concluded that Mike Coogan had his own holed up deep down. But he didn't look in the mirror, and Buddy Ryan wasn't known to be a mothering Sherlock either. None of that mattered, though. Only one thing mattered: it was time to get it on.

"I won't repeat myself, Buddy" Mike said. "But I will—." Before Mike could finish he watched as Billy Crothers began slapping the poor seizing bastard in the face. Buddy turned to look as well, and one of his best nutcase smiles graced his lips. He began to laugh. Billy heard him and stopped slapping Bradley. He pulled his fist back much like his brother and began seeking for an "in" to ram it home in the pudgy face below.

"DON'T DO IT!" Mike roared. He placed his hand on the side of the blow dryer farthest from them all. Billy looked up, shook his head to stop his eyes from darting back and forth in rhythm with Fattie Withers's head, and gave Mike a smile reminiscent of Buddy's. Mike knew what it meant. "DON'T YOU IN' DO IT, YOU GAY ASS MOTHERFUCKER."

That stopped him. Billy dropped his fist loosely, seemed to think for a minute. Perhaps he knew the cat was out of the bag on that one. But still, being called queer was just plain wrong. "Am not," he cried.

"Y'are too, ya in' moron." Mike Coogan looked like he was just standing his ground. What the bullies couldn't see was that hand behind the dryer checking how loose the housing was. As a frequenter of this very restroom, Mike had noticed many times before that the hot air machine wasn't fastened solidly to the wall. Hell, every time someone hit the button it

rocked a little bit. Nobody ever tried to fix it. The students just assumed no other janitor dared enter on of Buddy Ryan's frequent *habitués*. Yes, the dryer was just loose enough.

"I ain't, you cooze," Billy screamed.

"I am what I eat. What are you, dicklick?" Mike drew his hand back slowly from the hand-drying unit. "Oh, I know. You're a—"

"Shut up!"

"—butt-ugly camel jockey, shit-sniffing anal Viking, rim-licking numb-ing dickless hopeless gutless giz-eating COME GOBBLER!"

"God damn you, Mike Coogan," Billy Crothers said. He brought his fist back up to the cocked position, flipped it over and extended his middle finger. "Damn you and damn this fat...piece...of shit!" He quickly returned the finger to his fist, turned it over, and pulled his arm back one more notch.

Right before he let go what would be to Bradley Witherspoon a fatal blow, Mike yelled, "NO!" and slammed his own hand into the blow dryer. The unit flew off the wall and cartwheeled through the air. It connected squarely on the side of Billy's head, knocking the boy back into the stall Buddy was smoking in only minutes ago.

Buddy looked down at his silent partners, at the Walkin'-talkin' Tits (who was currently doing neither of those activities; Tits wasn't humping him anymore, either), at that crazy son of bitch Mike Coogan. He reached into his back pocket and produced an onyx-plated stiletto. A push of the button revealed a six-inch double-sided blade, perfect for slicing into a crazy freak like the one standing before him. Then Buddy was squinting and flexing his ears in a manner that suggested he couldn't believe what he'd heard anymore than what he was seeing; written all over his face was the question "Did the crazy freak just say 'Bring it on, shitheap,' or am I dreaming?" God knew he probably wanted it to be a dream, but apparently Buddy Ryan wasn't in His favor today, either. No one was.

"Come again?" Buddy asked.

"Two of your favorite words, eh," said Mike. "Now, bring it on, shitheap."

"I'm gonna cut you like a—"

"You're not cutting anything, son." That voice came from behind Mike. Both of the boys stopped for a second, just breathing and eyeing each other. Then Buddy leaned to the side to look beyond Mike. Standing there like a turnkey at juvy hall was the old screw himself, Mr. Feinstein. The skinny, bespectacled Physics instructor walked over to stand by Mike's side and survey the room. He saw the two Crothers Brothers lying on the floor and, if Mike was reading the hint of smile on his lips correctly, somewhere deep inside a dark corner of the teacher's heart Mr Feinstein was pleased that for once in their wholly unremarkable lives they had been quieted. Then he saw Bradley Witherspoon. The poor kid lay still like the others. "Good God, Ryan," he said. "What in God's name have you done?"

Buddy stood his ground and said not a word. "All right, Mr. Ryan, have it your way," Mr. Feinstein said. "Put that damn thing away and step aside. I've got to check them out." The teacher advanced on Buddy and Brad, side-stepping the brothers without so much as a glance in their direction.

"What about them," Buddy sneered, "and what about him?" Buddy pointed the stiletto at Mike.

"*They* are already coming round, Mr. Ryan," Feinstein said, and it was true. Buddy and Mike looked down and saw the Crotherses rousing slowly. "And Mr. Coogan," Feinstein continued as he stopped walking and turned to look at Mike. "I think I can piece together what happened here. Michael, why don't you wait for me in my office." It wasn't a question.

As Mike turned around to leave, the teacher turned once again to look at Buddy. "And I told you to put that damn thing away, and I meant it, Mr. Ryan. I will not see to that boy with you standing above me with a blade in your hand. And I *will* see to that boy. Step back

to the wall, Mr. Ryan. I will not ask again." Feinstein advanced, and Buddy backed away, dropping the stiletto to the side of his leg in the process. "I want to hear that snap," Feinstein said in his most authoritative voice. "Now, sir." Buddy pushed the button on the hilt and a *snap* slipped the blade into hiding.

Feinstein reached Bradley Witherspoon and bent to one knee. He reached forward and checked the boy's pulse at his neck. Over his back he spoke, "You're lucky, Mr. Ryan. He's still alive."

"Yeah, I guess," Buddy said. Mr. Feinstein began to examine the fat kid. And before he turned to leave, Mike saw some insane kind of inspiration strike Buddy. The knife in his hand *snapped* back to life, and Fallows High's meanest j.d. drove his blade deep into the eternal screw's neck.

Mike Coogan heard the physics professor's gasp for air that would not grace his lungs—his windpipe had been completely run through and the once involuntary act of breathing was essentially deprived. Mike turned back around and looked at Buddy Ryan, the kid who had ultimately made the decision that Mike Coogan's life would forever be changed this day. The asshole was staring in wonder at his own foul work. He had let go the knife in his final act of defiance—left it protruding at an odd angle from the side of the teacher's carotid, its tip gleaming off the fluorescents from the jugular region.

Mike also made a decision. It was time for him to leave this place; but first he had to take care of Ryan. It wasn't a wish. It wasn't even a comparable thought. It was God's final ultimatum, and Mike knew—he just knew—his feet moving in Buddy's direction was beyond his control. So was his arm as it slung out from his body in a wide arc. So was his hand as it enclosed into the tightest fist he had ever formed. So was the impact on Buddy's jaw—so powerful that he (Mike Coogan) would learn later that it took three cranial-dental surgeries and two pins for that jaw to be returned to where it belonged—which sent the real crazy

freak tumbling lackadaisically to the floor. And so was the adrenaline left in him that made him grab a hunk of hair belonging to a 350-pound unconscious kid in one hand (the one that he used to render Buddy Ryan completely ing out of it, which would turn out to be sore and purplish-blue for six weeks coming) and seize a handful of sports coat neckline belonging to a semi-conscious bleeding teacher...and drag them out in the hall.

Where, and by all means it was about ing time (at least, that's how he saw it), Mikchal Coogan felt was a good place to collapse, call for back-up, and silently faint dead away until someone decided to rouse him—hopefully that someone being of some authority who would let him be for several million hours.

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Mike walked through the derelict school, a curious mix of emotions passing through him and crossing his face. He kicked open a sagging door and entered the old nurse's station. Where the sickbed used to stand rested a rotted mattress with its stuffing pooling out. Mike recalled Brad Witherspoon's belly lint and attempted to latch on to another thought. He remembered the immediate aftermath of the bathroom incident. He'd been lying in the sickbed right here in this very room when Vice Principal Gorrell gave him a speech. Mike frowned as the words came back to him suddenly; he frowned because he seemed to recall being a bit out of it, slipping in and out of consciousness. Bit the words came back just the same:

"Mr. Coogan, I cannot even begin to understand what has happened today, but I intend to find out. Just so you know—the Crotherses and Ryan have been placed in custody and sent to Brighton Hall where they will ultimately receive medical attention; Bradley Witherspoon has been transported by ambulance to St. Paul's Hospital; and Mr. Feinstein, who is in critical condition, has been life-flighted to Duquesne University Open-Wound Center." Vice Principal Gorrell had finally took a breath. And had finally stopped pacing the nurse's room.

Mike had tried to focus on him but he still saw in triplicate. Lying in the sick bed in this small closet behind the admin office hadn't help either: the angle was all wrong and made Gorrell look ten feet tall.

Now Mike did smile a little, because what Gorrell had done and said next was amusing. "Again, Mr. Coogan, when you are ready, I would like to know just exactly what," and then the VP had leaned over him and had spoken softly into the side of his head, making sure he was out of Nurse Brannigan's earshot, "the *hell* went on in there."

"Shit, sir," Mike had croaked in response (and many years later he chuckled, testing the word again on his lips as he imagined Gorrell standing over him in this broken-down school building that really did look like shit). That's what it had been all right. Exactly what he had been trying to avoid all that day long.

"Excuse me, son," Gorrell had said. "I didn't quite get that."

"I said, 'shit,' sir. Shit happened."

Interlude

Back on the highway, Mike pushed away the thoughts of his high school experience and concentrated on the road ahead. He had about thirty more miles to cover before he could kiss this county and its goddam historical markers behind. Once he got to Bland, he'd run out to old family homestead, bare his ass to his father's tombstone, and then get the hell out of here.

Mike laughed. He hadn't laughed in a while, but the thought of baring his ass to his father's headstone was too much. He laughed so hard he was afraid his nose would bleed again. No, he wasn't going to bare his ass. He'd done a lot of growing up since he left here—since he left his father and that Bitch behind—but he still didn't think he had the balls to bare his ass. I mean, shit, the old man was meaner than Hell. He'd probably reach right up out of the ground, grab hold of Mike's scrotum (if Mike's buttocks were exposed, his scrote would be too), and jerk it hard enough to rip it off or drag Mike back down into the bowels of Hell with him. No, Mike did not have the balls for that.

Up ahead he saw someone who might, however. An old man in blue coveralls stood on the side of the road with his thumb sticking out. A hitchhiker. Michael couldn't fathom what that old coot was thinking. These days, it didn't matter if he was in the city or the country. One place or the other, an old fart hitchhiking was bound to get his ass kicked, robbed, or raped. Mike didn't even know the guy (although he looked somewhat familiar), but he knew he

didn't want that on his head if he passed the old man by. Instead, Mike engaged the turn signal and pulled over on the berm.

He sidled up next to the old man, struck the gearshift to PARK, and said, "Hop in, old timer." He watched as the old man opened the door, tossed his small brown bag over the seat into the back passenger foot well, sat down on the bench, and closed the door.

"I'm John," said the old man after Mike put the car in DRIVE and pulled onto the highway. Mike gave him a dubious look, then said, "Mike." The passenger extended his hand, and Mike accepted it.

"Good," said John. "We are well met." John paused a moment, shifted his position—hunkering forward and inclining his back so his elbows rested on his knees, hands dangling before him. "So, what's my end of this?"

"Whaddya mean, 'your end'?" Mike asked. He gave the old man another curious look. Gauging the look on his face, Mike laughed. So did John. "I get it. You wanna know what's the going fare?"

"Yes, you got it, kid," John said. "I'm just thumbin' until I get to Bellingham—you know, the college. I'm night custodian at the library."

"What's the distance?"

"Oh, about fifteen miles. Forty minutes, give or take. We got some hills and some switchbacks up ahead."

"Rough road, eh?" Mike said, cocking an eyebrow at the old man.

"Yessir. A couple of spills and washouts, too. A couple of places we might just have to get out and get a better perspective. A couple required stops."

"That's gonna cost a little extra."

"Ayuh, I figured as much." Old John shifted in his seat again, but not uncomfortably.

" 'Ayuh?' You ain't from around here, old timer, is you?"

"I am," he said. "I've just spent a lot of years up North and haven't lost my sense of it."

"I see."

"So, my end?"

"Well," said Mike, sporting a grin, "the way I see it, I'm going this way anyway. It's not gonna cost me one red cent more to have a skinny old-timer such as yourself join me for a ways. So..." He paused, giving the old man a once over. "Your end is to keep me entertained for the next forty minutes, give or take."

"Oh. I know what you want. You want to hear a story. Okay; that's fine. But first thing's first. Pull over."

"What?" Now Mike's eyebrow furrowed, his eyes screwed up, and a frown covered his face. "What's to pull over for?"

John slid across his seat and put his back against the passenger door, allowing plenty of space between himself and his driver. He put his hands out in front of him, saying, "Nah, kid. None of that stuff. Look at me; I'm from another generation. We don't do thatshit."

"Fine, but I repeat: what's to pull over for?" Mike had slowed down noticeably. No other travelers were on this stretch of road. He turned his head and gave the passenger his full attention.

John gathered Mike in his gaze: "If we're going to hold palaver, you've got to hear some things first. I've got a serious story to tell you. You need to hear this."

Mike coasted the car to a halt on the berm. He said, "All right," and closed his right fist over the gearshift. He started to ram it home to PARK, then changed his mind. Leaning forward so his arms rested on the steering wheel, he turned again to face the old man. "But I'm leaving it in drive. Just in case—."

"In case nothing," John said, looking particularly gruff. "Put the damned thing in park, son, or I get out here. You don't get your story." He paused. "And you want to get this story."

Mike hesitated, his hand hovering over the gearshift. "Why? Why do I want to get this story?"

"Haven't you seen the signs today?"

Mike started. In a soft voice, he spoke: "*How do you know about the signs?*"

"Put it in park, son. That's all I ask. Then I'll tell you. The whole awful story."

Mike shifted, feeling as if he was running on automatic pilot. He had not wanted to shift into PARK; he'd wanted to kick the old man in the chest and out the passenger door, peel away some rubber, spew gravel in his face, and yell, "Eat shit, mind-fucking motherfucker!" But he'd complied, and somewhere deep down inside himself, he felt better about it.

"I told you before, we are well met. So what just happened here in the last forty-five seconds was just a waste of time. But it doesn't shed any light on our relationship. For one, because we are still well met. For two, you decided not to kick me out, make me eat shit, and note to no one in particular that I mind-funk motherfuckers. I got that right, didn't I?"

Mike just stared at him.

"Well, I don't know about all that mother nonsense. That's a word I haven't used since I was just a kid running around in P.F. Flyers. Don't get me wrong, Mikey. I can talk shit like the rest of 'em. I just don't talk about mothers that way. You seem like a guy who'll stick with the childless chickadees, anyway. But, please note you are beginning to feel the mind-funk. I promise you, it is unintentional. Sometimes it just happens, whatever it is. It's been going on for a long time now ... But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Back to the story, but we still need to get a few things straight.

"There ain't going to be none of this gratuitous I-want-to-get-in-your-pants-fast sex crap you get on the television or in them pulp novels your mammy used to keep under her bed. And there ain't going to be no blown out details of bloodshed and violence neither.

"You kids today seem to want that all the time now, like it's the only thing that gets your pricks up. So I forewarn you now—ain't none of it."

John looked into Mike's eyes, seeking his inner thoughts. He raised himself back up straight on the bench seat and continued.

"Nor am I going to have you asking for it. First time, story's over—the end. And if that makes you want to pack it in for the afternoon, tell me now. I don't have to tell you, don't matter this way nor that to me. I can just get out here and hike on up to Bellingham like I always do to clean that graveyard of tomes with Bernie."

Mike squirmed a bit on the bench. He didn't know what to say; he didn't know if he should say. At this point, he didn't even know what to speak.

"Speak up, boy. It's gonna be one of the last times you get to."

Mike looked at his pale white hands, watching as he unconsciously worked his fists around the steering wheel. He thought his blood pressure was up. His head felt kind of swimmy. Concentrating with all his might, he forced his hands to stop fisting around the steering wheel. The fingers stood out straight, stark white in contrast to the black pulled vinyl of the wheel. With surprising clarity and slowness, Mike heard himself say, "John, I want to hear your story. Really. Tell me. No questions."

"Welladay," John said. "I guess y'are in for it then. Now mind me, no asking for more. You got it?" Mike felt his head bobbed up and down. "Good. Cause I ain't telling you again." The old man's demeanor had changed a bit with that last. Now he didn't seem so steamed. In fact, his tone was becoming softer as he spoke.

"I'm only going to tell you it once, the story that is, so listen up. Later on, I don't want to here this 'Was that part about the' or 'Hold on a sec, go back to.' It's not cause I'm a mean old bastard—and I am, I'll own up to it."

That made Mike grin. He felt his body unwinding, relaxing. Maybe this was going to be all right.

“Nah, it’s cause I ain’t getting any younger and the memories is fading. Nothing crucial’ll be left out, mind you. But if I up something trivial, just let it go. It’s all I ask.” He looked out through the windshield, watching a hawk descend on a down draft, as if waiting to let what he’d just said sink in.

Whatever the intent, it worked. Mike had grown steadily accustomed to his passenger’s voice, now calm and smooth instead of terse as in the beginning. Mike felt he was in for a *Prairie Home Companion* of a story—of a story teller—one of somber tones the like of those that put you to sleep, but don’t—one full of clarity, meaning, and life’s great truths.

“Something I will tell you right away,” the old man with the companionable voice said. “This is a love story.” John caught Mike’s eye, the twitch at the corner of his mouth. “Nah, don’t you go giving me that look. I can see it written all over your face, boy. This ain’t none of that gushy-gushy-I’m-all-mushy stuff. That’s for shit...and pansies. I’m talking about a real love story—the kind that comes from the heart, the kind that gives you that electric feel from the top of your head to the tips of your toes, the kind that wells up emotion so strong you don’t know if you’re to cry or not, the kind that real people feel.

“I hope to God y’are a real person. You look it (most of the students I see on campus don’t look like they know a keyhole from a bunghole, I don’t care how many lectures they attend), but then again, its hard to tell with your generation anyway, with all your glittery face paint and glow in the dark rubbers, body piercings and girls’ skirts no longer’n their panties—if they even decide to wear panties, whatever the color and coverage. Then again, y’are still listening to me.”

Mike was listening, all right. Paying real close attention. And he noted something: his passenger had referred to him as a college student, and Mike was at least four years from

college—on the far side, that is. Either the old man's "mind-funking" was getting bad, or he had some whoppers of cataracts. Come to think of it, the old man's eyes did have a bit of a dark tinge around them.

"Where was I?" John asked, reigning Mike back in, as well. Mike wasn't sure if John was being rhetorical or not, but the length of his pause and the way he glanced around the cab as if in search for his last thought seemed to be answer enough.

"You were talking about the nature of the story."

"Yeah-bob. Now, this here story has action, romance, violence, and tragedy all. It's about innocence lost, first loves, frolicking naked as jaybirds, hmm, a wee bit of drinking—nah, a lot of drinking, actually. Then, accourse, there's rape, murder, and the death of a heart still yet beating. Don't worry, though. There's plenty of good stuff fore the bad come, ain't that how it always is. I just want you to be prepared.

"Now, one more thing before I begin my tale. I've been a telling tales for many years now..." Mike believed him. He was good, the old man. Mike just wondered how much of the persona was real—and how much was false-fronting. The whole mind-reading and all, for one thing. Perhaps the guy just got a lot of -offs from potential drivers. Even so, there was still the thing about the signs. "...So I'm in the habit of making the story descriptive. I've had much practice at it, so sometimes it may sound as if I'm telling a whopper. There's a time element in here that is pretty hard to take in at first. Not like that damned Quentin Tarantino movie everyone likes these days, but damned just the same.

"Time's a funny thing here, along the back roads, hills, and hollers. Sometimes it stretches out. Sometimes it tightens up. I know it does everywhere. I mean, shoot, an hour of any grammar class or Sund'y worship seemed like a whole morning and afternoon when you was kid. On the other hand, a good Frid'y night double at the Bijou would go by crazy-fast; you'd walk in with the sun burning your neck and walk out with the moon cooling your face.

Here, though, in old Creed, time flips-flops, too. It runs backerds and forwards at the same time. I know it sounds peculiar..." *You damn right*, Mike thought. *And not just peculiar—downright crazy*. "...Hell, down right crazy, I know. But you've seen the signs. You've felt the power. You've seen some shit today your already trying to calculate empirically. Deny it happened the way it did."

"Whoa," Mike said, standing up and getting out of the cab. "Whoa, old man." John shook his head and climbed out of the cab. He turned toward Mike, shutting the door and crossing his forearms on the window. He looked through the passenger's side window, the cab, and driver's side windows at Mike.

"Good, kid, good. That cab's no place to talk."

Mike slammed his door and walked out to the double yellow line in the middle of the highway. "How do you know all that? About the signs...about those—."

"Kids in Grist Falls?" John asked.

"Ye-es!" Mike yelled. "And my ca—."

"Your cats, yes. Shame, that one."

Mike turned around in circles, dancing on the yellow hashes. His hands groped above their respective temples, pushing out his hair and digging into his skin.

"It's really quite simple," John said calmly. "It's not something to react to like this."

Mike stopped circling, slowing to a stop and facing the old man. His hands released tufts of hair and fell to his sides. "You," he said. "You put up those signs, put that shit in my head."

"No, not really. I—."

"Yes, it was you. You were there, in that nuthatch, too. How? Explain to me how?"

"I don't know how else to explain it, other than when you got the fear and your stomach flips over on itself."

"What? What are you talking about?" Mike stomped his foot like a child, then began to walk toward John.

"Time, son. Time. Peculiar though it is, it's only time."

"Son of a—," Mike began, but John had raised his hand, and Mike shut up at the silent command. In fact, everything about him halted, except his breathing and the steady beat of his heart. For now, a peculiar paralysis struck him.

"You see, quite peculiar," John said. "With the simple palm-out sign of the hand, it stops. Well, actually, only stutters." He walked over to Mike, standing in the middle of the eastbound lane. "You used to stutter, didn't you, boy? After the cats, right? And when you did, you had to slow it down to get it to work right, while everything else went on its merry way at full speed. I'm still walking around, talking. You are standing still. So damn peculiar."

Mike tried to move, but couldn't. "You've been stuttering, son. Time only wants to correct you." He looked at his feet, told them to move, to *move dammit*, but they would not. John looked off toward the west, his eyes frowning. Mike tried to speak but could not do that either.

"Well, say something, would you?" John asked.

Suddenly, Mike's jaws unclenched and he found his voice: "Wh-wh-whaa..." Mike paused. He hadn't stuttered since seventh grade year when Mrs. Shuman made him stay after school and taught him to slow down. Mike closed his eyes, took a gulp of air, and said: "What've you done now?"

"I've done nothing. It's you, Mike. You alone, in your own time." Mike felt his neck unhinge itself, and he rotated his head as John paced around him. "Like I said, time stretches, grows taut, flip-flops, stutters, and sometimes, only sometimes, it yawns. You ever notice when you yawn, everything around you keeps pace but you yourself—and your body—

slow down. It's another corrective, like stuttering." John looked toward the west again, frowning. "Better look out, kid."

Mike jerked his head to the west. An eighteen-wheeler bore down on him from about twenty yards away. The driver looked like he didn't see them in the middle of his lane. He wasn't slowing down. And Mike wasn't moving out of the way. He couldn't move out of the way. He was still stuck in place. In time, rather.

As the truck barreled straight for Mike, the driver turned and looked at the passenger. "This is all so tiring," John said. He stretched his arms out and arched his back. He craned his neck and opened his mouth wide, taking in the air fully and sighing it out at length. Mike looked back at the truck, blinking his eyes. It appeared the truck moved at roughly the pace of a turtle, edging its way into the westbound lane. It crawled at a distance of about ten inches right behind Mike, although the wind buffeted and rocked him as it went past. John's arm-stretching became an overly dramatic arm-wagging in the contrailing drafts left in the truck's wake. Finally, he closed his mouth.

Mike watched as the truck reentered the eastbound lane, instantly resuming its high speed, rocketing down the highway. Across the rear doors, the company name read CROSS LANES COURIER. He turned to look at his passenger.

"What?" John said, feigning stupidity. "Cross Lanes? Just a coincidence, I assure you."

"I'm beginning to think coincidence is for shit," Mike said.

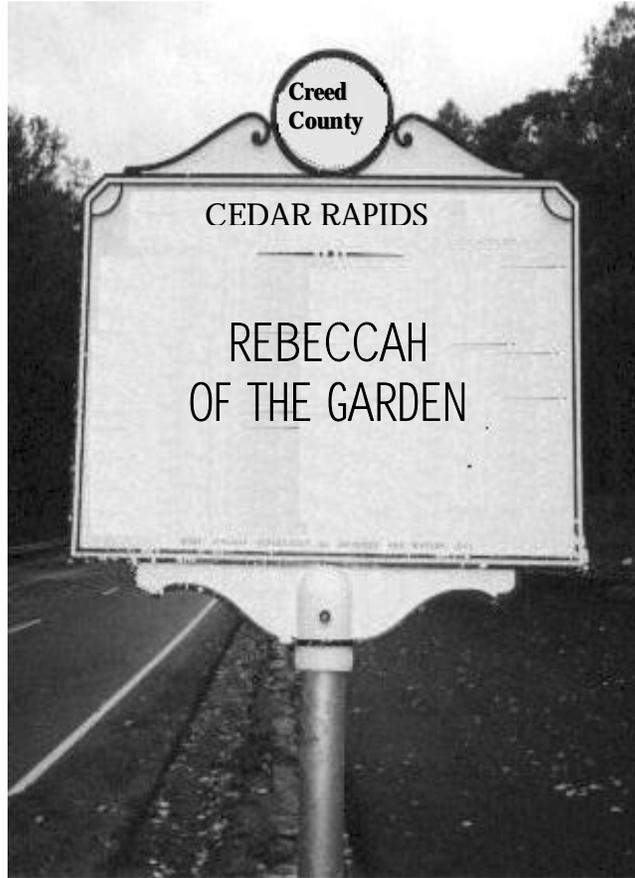
"Good for you, Michael." John came forward and clapped his hands on Mike's shoulders. "Now that you've had your time out, let's get back to the story, shall we? Now, as I said, time plays a rather large role in this story. And it's peculiar. Damn peculiar. Downright crazy. But I'll tell you now, this here story is true, front to back. And cause it is (and also so's to keep your attention) I'll tell it in first person.

"And since I'm on the subject..." John sunk to his knees on the pavement, legs crossed and hunkering over himself again, so that his elbows rested upon his knees and his hands dangled above the ground. "I can't stand up and tell no tale. I got to be down here. You don't mind, do you?"

"Is it—?"

"Oh, yes. It's quite safe. Why don't you join me?" John clipped Mike across his shins. Mike felt all the power that held him motionless instantly leave his body, and he collapsed into a sitting position mimicking John's.

"Now this is the way to hold palaver," John said. "It's the way its been done for centuries. Since time was first wove in the great tapestry. Well, now the time for spinning out tales draweth nigh once again. I'll begin with the first time I met Rebeccah Dujardins..."



I.

I first met Rebeccah Dujardins as she was running through a field near a small town in West Virginia called Friar's Court. It wasn't my field; it wasn't even my day. It was Rebeccah's day. That was obvious.

I was sitting on one of the many hayrolls in the south corner of Parson's Field, watching the day go by without me. I heard some thrashing in the wheat and looked down. Some fifty yards off to the west I spotted her. A young woman in her mid-twenties, surely, running towards me. She was wearing a light sundress round her delicate figure and a pair of

white canvas shoes, and that was about it. It was late afternoon, and with the sun behind her, the latter was quite obvious. If you've ever seen a sundress, you know what I mean.

But it was not her yellow sundress dotted with black eyed susans nor her delicate figure hinting a divine sculptor that caught my eye that sunny Autumn afternoon in Parson's Field. It wasn't her long, beautiful brown tresses flowing breezily past her shoulder either. As the distance closed between her running feet and my motionless hayroll, it was her deep blue eyes upon which I focused. Knowing blue eyes that could see right through anything she sought. Pools of azure bliss piercing me with their bright serenity. I was overcome in such a way that I find mere words lackluster. You understand? Ayuh, so you do.

As if through an impenetrable mist—the sight of her enchanting eyes had clouded my remaining four senses—I realized she was singing. What was it? Something from my past. A child's nursery rhyme? A hymn, mayhaps? As the fog in my head cleared (I had to close my eyes for a brief second and give my head a quick shake) I could tell it wasn't the former. It had to be a hymn, but since I hadn't been to a house of worship from my early teens on, when my parents died, I was at a loss.

If it had been an old Cat'lic hymn, I probably could've guessed it. But *that* I knew for a fact it couldn't be. In nineteen hundred and fifty two this part of southern West Virginia, despite the names of its towns, could've been labeled PROTESTANTS ONLY. I was quite positive this bronzed angel with the mesmerizing blue eyes was singing one of those Methodist traditionals. If she was from Friar's Court or at least the greater Creed County area (I know y'know it as Mercer, but you also know about Creed, which is well; it's more fitting and always has been), it was a good chance she was Methodist, given that there were forty-odd churches in the big county and over two-thirds of them were of that truly prevalent Allegheny denomination.

My mind was clear enough though that I could catch some of the words (I could never carry no tune, so I'll just speak them): *While the dew is still on the roses, he walks with me and tells me I am his own*. Somewhere in the nether regions of my memory, I recognized this song, but could not put a name on it. Twasn't until thirty some years later when I came across it and finally did. I found it in the new *United Methodist Hymnal* when I stopped by a church on my way to Charleston to sneak in—you'd call it crashing—for a pot luck dinner. "In the Garden," it was titled.

The blue eyed naiad stopped short ten feet in front of my hayroll. She just stood there, stock still, staring at me. My guess is, she didn't see me until then. The whole time I had thought she had been gazing at me as I had her, but no. Most likely she hadn't been looking at anything in particular at all, but to me it only looked like she had been staring.

I come to find out later though, that even when she wasn't looking at anything, her eyes were as fixed as ever. And sometimes, only sometimes, they changed color. Sssh. I warned you. Let me continue.

Once the realization come to me—that she had been gazing at nothing—an eerie feeling come over me. A slight chill ran down the length of my body, and even though I tried not to, I quivered visibly.

So she just stood there, staring into my eyes. Then she bent her left leg at the knee, balancing it on her toes, and began to swing it in a slow smooth arc. She brung her right index finger to the like corner of her mouth in such a manner that her forearm ran vertically parallel to her body. She dipped her head slightly forward and her eyelids fluttered open and closed once, briefly. Then she cracked a rue wicked smile and seemed to nibble the tip of her nail. Her whole portrait was nearly childlike.

Finally, I realized I had a voice. As the words crept up that I had been forming subconsciously in my mind for the last few minutes, they caught in the back of my throat,

then crawled out in what was nearly a whisper: "What..." was all I got out. Then she was gone. She had run right past my hayroll and into the woods beyond Parson's Field before the rest came tumbling out, still a *pianissimo* at best. "...was that song you was singing?"

So that was the first time I met Rebeccah Dujardins. Just a brief glimpse of a beautiful woman who was surely one or two years my senior or junior. I myself was twenty nine at the time. Of that I was sure. Of the rest of the events that Autumn so long ago, the Harvest of fifty-two, I am not so sure.

Things happen in Friar's Court, the old-timers say, things that don't happen in other parts of the world, 'cept maybe in the Twelve Mile Road area or the Pleasant Point. It's Creed, they say: it's the place of things happening. Now that I am one, going on seventy-two in the dawning of my own Harvest, I find myself in agreement. And as you have seen for yourself, agreement's the only state to be in, in this country.

Something sure was happening in Fall of '52, and that something was Rebeccah Dujardins. It was *quite* something, I come to find out later, cause Rebeccah Dujardins had been dead for nearly thirty years.

II.

That day I met Rebeccah Dujardins had started out just as any other day. I got up early that morning, as usual. I had a quick spot of breakfast, toast 'n' oats, as usual. I took me a long mid-morning walk through the woods, as usual. I tell you, everything was "as usual". Quite frankly, I had little to do in Friar's Court, except be.

I had graduated four months before from Bellingham. That's right. I ain't no dumb old hick from no back woods CR-whatever. I been up in the American Lit alcove of the library a number times. And not just as some solitary buffer-jockey, either. In May of nineteen hundred and fifty two I became a certified alumnus of old B.C. with a degree in English

Education (primarily nineteenth century AmerLit, if you can dig it). I was even salut'arian at the commencement, believe it or not. Don't give me that look. You can check the archives later if you want. Page 35, column 2, slot B of the class book, alongside eight others on the spread—surrounded by colleagues and technical descriptions of "student character".

I'll tell you this though: Even as I was graduating in a class of one-fifty, I felt I was graduating alone.

I had stood up there at the podium when it was my turn to speak. I'd stood up there and looked out upon my feller classmates, upon their parents an grandparents, upon their friends and lovers. And I had stood up there alone. Just me. I guess that was when I realized I wouldn't have nothing to do with myself in the future except be. Sure, I'd get myself a teaching job somewheres, but I'd be out there on my own.

See, I only had one living relative, and I hadn't seen Uncle John in years. Last I saw of him, to be exact, was at my parents' funeral.

So's I stood there on the dais smiling at the hundreds of family faces, smiled *widely*, to hide the pain: the pain of being alone. People asked me later why my parents hadn't been there. I guess I'd never gotten round to telling no one then, and still haven't to this day. So I'll tell you now.

I was about eleven years old when it happened. Twas New Year's Even, and my ma and pop had gone to a party in Charleston. I was stuck at home with my sixteen year old sitter, Mary Jo Corcoran. It wasn't that bad—staying home, that is; I was just coming of age and, fella, Mary Jo was beginning to fill out her V neck sweater. I kept making sure there was some items on the floor for her to pick up. You know what I mean.

But this isn't about Mary Jo. It's about my ma and pop. Here's the skinny: At 11:45 PM they was well on their way to Charleston. They was to arrive just in time to hear the ball drop on WSAZ. But they didn't quite make it. They was found wrapped around a maple tree on

Marsden Road at 12:10 AM on the first of January, nineteen hundred and thirty seven, surrounded by the cold steel of their Hudson. I can't recollect the model. At 12:12 AM the Plymouth that the drunk CPA who ran my parents off the road was driving was found a half mile down the road. However, it weren't no passersby finding him. Twas the CS&O Midnight Run train # 5 that found him. Found him parked half the way across the tracks, which were a good fifty odd feet from the road. The engineer never saw the Plymouth, that is, not until he felt the collision and saw the guy's blood and guts splatter his windscreen. I guess when the ball dropped and the crowds roared "Auld Lang Syne", he went out with a bang not a whimper. Worst part about the whole thing, son of bitch was my father's second cousin. No shit.

Now, I found myself concluding my address without realizing I begun—just as sure as you forgot I was giving the salu'tary address: "...let us not replay the events of the past. The future holds many opportunities for us. And that future begins today." Future—pah, what future? I was going on to more aloneness, and I knew it. There was no future for me.

I was right to some extent, for what happened in my future a few short months later, actually did happen in the past. And my words come back to haunt me, as I will endeavor to explain...

III.

Oh, I didn't tell you how I happened to be in Friar's Court. You was itching to ask, I could tell. I know, boy, I know you well enough. But you didn't, which is well. I caught myself. I could tell you was wondering, though.

Twas the late morning after graduation that I got this telephone call, see. Accourse, back then we didn't have our own telephones in our rooms. Kids today do, plus you got that

second line for them comm-pooters. Crazy, having two-three lines per room. No sir, back then we only had one telephone for the whole dorm.

I was near sleeping and fantasizing about—can you dig it?—good ole Mary Jo, the babysitter, and suddenly there was this thumping at the door. That upset me, cause Mary Jo was still sweet sixteen and so was I—not eleven. And I was copping a feel under that V neck. No bra, not in the fantasy. I could see my fingers of my left hand above the collar, searching the swell of her cleavage. (Not my right hand though, that was searching for the hemline of her dress.) It also upset me cause I knew that thumping was the police come to tell me my ma and pop was presently being separated from maple leafs and bark.

But the knocking was loud, really loud, I mean pounding loud, and I guess I realized then that the police never knocked before—they rung the door bell. Slowly I also come to realize the pounding was coming from outside the fancy, in the real world, so I had to leave ol' Mary Jo. And that didn't just upset me, my friend, that made me royally pissed.

So when I savagely tore open my eyes and sat up, sleep was only in my eyes. I wiped the sandman's remnants away, completely awake, and swung my legs over the cot. Ayuh, that's right. That's another thing: we didn't have the privilege of honest-ta-god beds in the dormitories back then; we got cots.

As I stood up I noticed two things: first of all, I was hung over from the revels of the night before (I'd downed a quart of Jack and a pint of Wild Turkey, threw up, then gulped a couple-three purple jesuses—that's how we got high in college back then, none of this doobie bullshit y'kids've got going now)—my drinking buddies and I had just graduated mind you; second, my john thomas was standing to attention beneath my boxer shorts, and y'know what that means. Yeah bob. I fumbled for my bath robe and when I donned it, I tied a rather loose, rather large half-knot right above my maypole.

All the while, that incessant knocking continued, which was really pounding. But now, oh now, not thirty seconds after I quit trying to erect Mary Jo's nipples and come to be engulfed in the most horrible headache ever, the pounding turned to banging. *Bangbangbang*, quick like that. Not *knock knock knock*, as it had been. And I tell you, and I think y'know exactly what I mean cause you've been there, each bang was like Vulcan's smithy mallet, like Thor's mighty hammer, thundering all sides of my head (leftside, rightside, frontside, backside, upside, downside, outside, inside).

So's I yelled. I hollered "I'M COMING!" and winced back as it sent nails into my tenderized temples. The vein coming down the middle of the forehead, y'know the one, well mine was throbbing an excruciating fast *staccato* and sending flashpoints through my eyes. I put the fingers of my left hand across my brow and seized the doorknob with my right. I opened it.

And that damned prig of a dorm proctor who was banging on my door just continued to do so on my head. Jeezum Crow, can you dig it?: on my frigging screaming skull. I felt my head was to the point of malleability that a soft touch would poke right on through to my brains.

I gripped his hand and turned it down at the wrist. "Yoww," he says. "Whaddy do that for?" As if the prig didn't know, if not by my looks then by his own stubborn insistence on being an ass.

I let go his hand. He cradled that wrist in his other hand, his eyes gauging me up and down. In the sudden quickness of my grabbing him, the knot had slipped out and my prick had decided to have a look-see, its one eye staring up into those of the proctor. That's right, sir, the old horse was heading out the barn door.

I was, let me tell you, quite surprised to feel my member still wide awake, seeing as it felt like all my blood had rushed to my brain. Guess it shows you two things: first, when a guy's thinking bout the ole in-out, no hangover in the world is going to stop him; and second,

Mary Jo Corcoran was one hot cookie. But you know what? Just as I thought about it, my willy begin to wilt. And that, my friend, shows you one more thing: a rationalization will do wonders for your sexual demeanor. Now, I said I was surprised to *feel*, and I mean it, cause my eyes were boring poisoned darts into my proctor's head the whole time he was looking at mine ('scuse the pun).

"Done meat gazing, cockmunch?" I asked in a low voice. I was getting tired of the hammerfalls. At least my question only thrummed in the temples, instead of beat. Well, needless to say he looked up. I asked him in that same voice what he wanted, not even lifting a hand to fix myself. Besides, I had felt the tether tightening, the horse withdrawing into the barn on its own accord. He said the telephone was for me.

There wasn't many of us left in the dorms, but that didn't matter. I inched my way down to the lobby with my shoulders dropped, my arms and hands dangling at my sides as slack as the cinch-belt on my robe now hung. I'm quite sure I looked exactly as I felt—like hell.

I picked up the telephone and spoke softly into the receiver: "Hello?" Immediately I dropped the telephone back onto the lobby desk. I wasn't ready for the blaring sound coming out of the receiver and directly into my auditory canal.

"Johnny?" the voice boomed. "That you, Johnny?" I could hear this from the desk where the handset lay. I tell you, it was loud as hell. I slowly—very slowly and cautiously, mind you—picked it back up. The questioning continued. I didn't hear none of the words cause to me it sounded like a fog horn blowing. I moved the receiver into a position roughly sixteen inches from the front of my face, the ear-piece tilted slightly farther back.

"Please," I said in a hushed, cracked voice. "Speak very softly. I don't feel well. Please. Don't yell. This is John."

"Johnny?" half-boomed the voice. "You sick boy?"

"'Scuse me, sir," I intoned, "it's John. My name...is John. And if you don't whisper...whoever the hell y'are...I'm gonna cradle this here handset...ever-so-softly...and go back to bed...I will have done with you, understand?"

There was a long pause, long enough for me to begin telling my arm to start dropping the handset, long enough for me to watch as my arm began to comply; and right before I cradled and had done with, I barely made out a *draft* coming out the speaker. I slowly, deliberately, returned the handset to the side of my head.

"Pardon?" I says. "I didn't get that."

"John?" A whisper. Thank the gods.

"Yes..." I paused.

"John, this is your uncle." And the conversation went on from there. I ain't going to bore you with the details. Just that there was a lot of hee-hawing and a bit of cussing for a while. I mean, what'd it been? Fifteen years since our last correspondence. As I said before, he had come to my parents' funeral. Probably more out of obligation than will or love. That's how it was with Uncle John, you see. Never liked Pop, did he. So I only saw him, oh, I could count the number of times on my two hands; well, that many times before the funeral.

Eleven years old, kid. Shoot. And I hadn't seen my uncle enough times to average one sighting per annum. Lucky me.

Ayuh, I can tell you now: no love lost. He climbed out of his car at the funeral parlor. And out of obligation he come to me and give me a hug and brief touching of his lips upon my cheek. And out of obligation he give a brilliant eulogy. And out of obligation he rest his hand upon my shoulder as we watched the wooden houses my good ma and pop were to habit throughout eternity be lowered into the ground. And out of obligation he come to me again at the reception, with his perfunct'ry hug and brush of the lips. And then, out of sheer relief, of that I'm sure, he left me.

Left me to become a ward of the state, he did. But I knew he did what he did out of obligation, not will or love, so I never let him see me cry. I did not shed a single frigging tear at my parents' interment. Oh, I cried the hours away in the statehouse where they kept orphans—up there on the outskirts of Bragwell, that was. I cried cause I was alone. For me. I've always been a selfish bastard—nothing on my ma and pop though, just the feeling; got that from my uncle as well as my name.

Come to think of it, I've still yet to drop a tear in honor of my beloved parents. Guess that's why I hated my uncle so much—and why I thought he hated me: I was, and am, just like the son of a bitch. You probably do think I'm a hardass at this point, and I'm starting to feel that way about myself, gawd damn me. I...

I cry yer pardon; no pun intended. I let the tale get away from me a bit. Now. Uncle John had decided to invite his adult nephew, namely me, to enjoy the fruits of a small farmhouse he had out in Friar's Court. (I remember my ma once told me she and Pop met there as kids.) He said it was a graduation present. He offered a full year's lodging plus a stipend of four hundred bucks a month. That was a hell of a lot of money back then, mind you. I thought about it. Time seemed to draw out for me as it did, but I realized I did it all during a two-minute conversation on the telephone. I changed my life forever and signed my fate away.

I was lonely. I had been lonely since that night fifteen years ago when Mary Jo opened the front door for the police and ten minutes later I ended up burying my face in her bosom, eyes gushing enough lacrimae to harden the nipples beneath the thin cotton V neck sweater. Even then I cried because I was already alone. And now my only relative, however much a bastard he had been, was reaching out to the lonely man who was really still a lonely eleven year old boy.

He said the only string attached to the "gift" was that I eat dinner with him twice a month. I insisted on once a week.

So that's how I got to Friar's Court. That's how I ended up on a hayroll in Parson's Field that day I met the luminous Rebecca Dujardins. Now I'm going to skip ahead a bit, back to where I left off before I went into that diatribe. I hope you gleaned something from it. All I'll tell you about those first four months of living my gift before I met the girl I loved (and still do) is that Uncle John and I took a little time getting used to each other, the visits then became more frequent than a seventh-night dinner date, and I got dug in. And not just to the homestead, but to the town, the surroundings, and the people, as well. In those first four months I met only friends, and I was getting over that aloneness. Paddy Billing and Florence Linville, owner, waitress, and sometimes lovers (although Paddy was a good twenty years Flo's senior, give or take) at the Diner on Main. Jerry Flawis, the auto mechanic at Franklin's Garage. Angela Rensom and Joanne Garriton, my favorite old widowed birds at the Library. The Homer Rockingham boys—Homer Jr., Jude, Carl and Connie (the twins)—late teen farmhands that tried to be fresh on various evenings, hanging around outside the Diner, the Pub, or the Bijou with their wet hair in ducktails, their lips parted with unfiltered Pall Malls, and their dusty cycle jackets, but still smelled of manure no matter how often they washed. And Ginny Posey, a sweetheart of a gal, dolled up every day with rose face paint and *Au de Rose* perfume to contrast her stark white completion (everyone called her Rosy Posey behind her back, except me; she was always sweet to me) under her pointed white cap down at Walker Drug and Fountain. And many more. The Court was a small town. I knew everybody, and although I can't say I made friends with all of them, I can say that in those first four months I made no enemies.

Yet something was still not quite right: an empty space in my heart that had yet to be filled. And it was in search of this that I hunted out a place to contemplate my void. That place became Parson's Field.

IV.

That night—the night after I had first met Rebeccah Dujardins—I had a dream. This, in itself, was an oddity. It had been years since I'd dreamt. For two years after Ma and Pop died I had suffered terrible nightmares—macabre visions of their ill-timed end. Finally I had shaken them but had not dreamt since. And here, after fourteen years, a dream.

It had been so long, and the dream so disconcerting, that I wasn't sure of what to call it. Was it a run-of-the-mill dream? A nightmare? Now, as I look back to it, even as I tell you now, my hand is shaking. And not just my hand, my whole body. I know you can feel it, too, Mr. Coogan. I'm shaking like a twig in the wind. But it's okay. Don't worry. It'll pass. It always does. I remember now, awakening in a cold sweat, panting my breath away. It had not been a good dream, that's for sure. Here, I'll just tell you...

(I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses)

It was afternoon. I was sitting on a hayroll in Parson's Field. A beautiful young woman stood before me, singing.

(and the voice I hear falling on my ear)

Then she began to run. I had known she would, she had done it a few hours before. This time I was ready. I followed her. I could barely see her before me, my eyes catching glimpses of yellow through the dim woods. But I could hear her—her feet padding on the needles and leaves of the path, soft but audible. And of course

(he tells me I am his own)

she was singing.

She ran faster and faster, this beautiful creature. I was panting, gasping for air, my knees pumping one-two one-two up to my stomach and back down again as I tried to catch up. Yet I couldn't. The sound of her feet and her singing grew more and more distant, and I

realized that this had to be a dream cause Deacon's Woods were not nearly this large, the trees not so gigantuanly tall.

Then the singing and rustling through the underbrush stopped. There was an eerie silence in the woods for a few moments. A large splashing sound followed by laughter filled the air. As I continued running forward the laughing and splashing grew louder. Finally, I reached the edge of the river I knew was much closer to Parson's Field than this reality/dream allowed. Well, it wasn't really a river; just one of those long tributaries of the Hammersbend, which, coincidentally, was yet another tributary of what they call New River these days.. It was really no more'n a great creek—ten yarn across and twelve feet deep in the middle.

On the bank I saw the sundress and the canvas shoes. In the river I saw.... I cannot describe. I had though she was beautiful fully clothed, but as she floated in the creek on her back, I realized she was more beautiful than I had imagined.

I stood hunched over behind some low brush on the bank, studying her long arms, limber thighs, her—well, I believe I'll keep some things to m'self. I do got at least one decent bone in this here old body.... Yeah, Mike. You right. It's just one. No more, no less.

At that moment she flipped over and made several breaststrokes to the other side of the creek. I looked down, thinking she would be missing her apparel as she exited the water, but her clothes were no longer at my feet. I looked across to see her bending over in sleek sun-struck radiance on the opposite bank, picking up her sundress. As she donned her clothing I realized, a little late, I guess, how immoral I was being and turned my head. Three beats later I looked back. Couldn't help it.

The creek was gone. It had been replaced by a simple stream no wider than three feet and no deeper'n the flat stones through which it wandered. And there she was in her sundress on the other side, heading up a small knoll. I turned around and realized the woods were gone

also. Well, not completely gone, I'll amend. I saw the tree line some fifty yards behind me; I was standing in what I took for a glen.

As I returned to face the young lady, I just caught sight of her golden-brown hair—no longer wet, I noted—going down over the rise. I gave chase once again. As I cleared the top of the knoll, I saw her below. She was walking towards a small cottage. And a strange cottage it was. What I mean is that although it looked like a regular cottage, it seemed, well, *brighter*. The birch of which it was made was of a richer brown than I ever remembered birch being. And the chimney, a deeper gray than I remembered those clay bricks to be. At any rate, she entered the cottage as if she lived there. I gathered that she did.

I crossed over the crest and began trotting toward the cottage. I wanted to see where this beauty lived. It was more'n a want, though; I felt compelled, like some inner or outer force was drawing me closer to the cottage, closer to the girl. I needed to see where she lived. But I wanted to see what her family looked like, where they came together. I wanted to see the room in which she slept, what soft sheets were graced by her touch, if she had a teddy bear on her pillow. So I crept around to the side of the house and peered through the window. Everything was beautiful. An it *was* bright. The upholstered arm chair. The long mahogany table. The pictures mounted on the wall of various persons of varied stature looking at whomever'd painted them. The handmade rug. It all seemed to be emanating from this lovely young woman from the Field who now occupied a space before the hearth, leaning against the mantle. She had reached down and pulled off her right shoe. Now she held the mantle for balance as she bent to slowly rub her heel.

It was then that my hand slipped on some loose wood beneath the windowpane. I looked into my hand and saw a splintered, old, grayed shank of birch. I looked back up and saw the woman turning her head to look on me. I jerked down and crouched directly below the window, spreading myself as thin as possible against the wall. I examined again the shard

of wood in my hand; it was deadwood, completely decayed and even molding a bit. I rubbed my thumb over it, and it broke down, splintered into lengthwise shafts: termite burrows.

Suddenly I began to sense darkness coming on around me. I cast my eyes up to the sky and saw thick cumulo-nimbus clouds forming out of nothing, spreading across the arch of blue sky. It got thicker and thicker as the sky darkened and darkened. No autumn storm ever come up this fast. Then there was a brilliant flash of lightning. And a scream resounded in the cottage. I jumped up and looked in through the window again. My jaw dropped.

The home was in ruins: the armchair, overturned, upholstery chewed out; the long table, cracked down the middle, one leg missing and one split in two, making the table wane to the floor on that side; the pictures, still hanging, lopsided, the glass either cracked or broken out of the frames, depending on which one I looked at. And the rug was in tatters. Worse yet, everything was gray, like the splinters gone to entropy in my still-opened hand, and covered in cobwebs. Dust bunnies skittered about the floor.

And there was no beautiful woman. She was gone. The cottage looked as if no one had lived in it for years. *Ages*. Except, that is, for the footprints leading to the fireplace from the open, canting, bedroom door and then from the hearth to the window where I now stood.

Then another flash of lightning opened the sky, and it began to hail. My back exploded in the pain of malpracticed acupuncture as I was pelted by what felt like a million tiny glass rocks. I turned around to run back to the woods for shelter and she stood before me. Her face was two inches from mine.

But it wasn't the beautiful woman I had encountered in Parson's Field in another dream. It wasn't the lovely lady I had followed through the woods, the creek, and the glen to this wreck of a home. What stood before me was a completely different woman. It was Rebeccah Dujardins, there be no doubt. But she wasn't the same.

"Help me," she pleaded, whispering, and then kissed me on the corner of the mouth. Her lips felt like silk and instantly turned to sandpaper. They tasted like life, so familiar, so fair, and in turn that taste changed to death, so disturbing, so damnably cold. She pulled away and I saw rows of fever blisters, open sores, and pitted pox ringing her mouth, blasting craters on her high cheekbones, constellating her forehead. She then drew her head back and screamed into the day which had turned to night. She screamed, and thunder clapped in that scream. Then I screamed and suddenly was awake, sitting in my bed and shaking uncontrollably.

As I sat there in the dark of my bedroom in Uncle John's farmhouse (the only light a moonbeam cast through the spot where the drapes are supposed to meet, striking me full on the chest), panting, shaken, trying to catch some bit of breath and calm m'self, I felt a swatch of cold goo resting on my cheek. I wiped at it with my hand held it in the moon beam. The dark, brown, wet substance slid through my fingers. Mud. It was mud. I tried to determine where it had come from when I looked down to my feet which rested atop the fitted sheet of the bed. As I realized I had kicked the top sheet to the floor in my struggles, I noted my feet were covered in mud which traced rivulets of dirty brown water all the way to my knees. I tore the fitted sheet roughly from the foot of the bed and wiped my mud-caked legs until only a few remnants of goo remained. Only then did I attempt to come to terms with what I had just experienced, with what had so affrighted me.

It hadn't been the look of the cottage that scared me. Neither was it her banshee's cry. It hadn't even been her appearance, that silver, clumpy hair streaming off every which way, that once-yellow sundress dotted with black-eyed susans ripped to shreds, that emaciated, paled, viral body racked with fever and disease and lingering unto death.

No, it had been none of those things. It had been her eyes. They were no longer the precious blue eyes I had longed to see again since I first met her running through a field near

a small town named Friar's Court. No. In that last moment, her eyes had turned completely black.

V.

Looks like you got the shivers, too, boy. You see, that's how I felt. I was cold and desperate when I awoke that morning. It's all right now. I told you it was true, but just remember—it's story time. There. Ease yourself.

And I know what you're thinking. I told you some of this might be a little strange to take in. But you just got to, nothing said. All right? All right.

As you probably know, I didn't sleep any more that morning. I lay awake in bed, my body damp from the sweats of the night before, contemplating my dream. Surely, that's all it was. A dream.

It was in making myself realize this that I was able to go out to Parson's Field later that afternoon; if I hadn't convinced myself, I wouldn't have gone back at all. But it was only a dream, certainly, a very wicked one at that. I was both anxious and enthralled by it.

So I took to my hayroll at half past one and there remained until nearly six. The woman of my dreams did not return that day. I was a bit upset at this; I had so wanted to see her again (although I doubt I would have been able to speak again). Yet there was a part of me that was glad, quite happy in fact, that she didn't return. Then, I wasn't sure why I was happy, however small a part of me it was; but I *am* sure now.

I went home, ate a spot of dinner, and went to bed. But I did not sleep that night, Nor the next and into the following week. For five days and nights straight I went to the field and waited for the woman who never came, then returned home and lay awake, not wanting to sleep, for fear she might then appear with her hollow eyes and cry out to me.

On the sixth day, which would make it seven since I had last slept, if not peacefully, fitfully, I returned to Person's Field yet again. As I approached my hayroll, I felt the tired weight of despair which had foraged through my body begin to sup on my heart. I stopped just short of the hayroll and looked at it fixedly. Nothing was going to happen there today. I felt that—deep in the rough corners and coarse shadows of myself that the pain of sorrow and strengthlessness had yet to consume. Nothing was going to happen *here* today, I amended.

I hung my head. I looked to the open, cloudless sky. I hung my head. Nope. Nothing at all. I beheld the hayroll in my eyes again. For most of me, it looked so inviting. *Come*, it whispered. *Lie here. Softly come and waste away.* That voice, that deep carnivorous voice beckoned, and I wanted to climb into its hayfilled maw. For the last three days I'd listened to that voice; today, however, something was different. Perhaps because I was not only tired, but had passed beyond the barriers of wakened reality. Something was different, nonetheless. Whatever small part of me that still housed sanity revolted against the greater body, and I pulled away from that needling maw. My eyes fixed on the line of trees above the hayroll and beyond the field. I said aloud: "I need something to do." So I did something.

I set off for the treeline, passing the hayroll without another glance or thought, passing all the other mounded rolls in the same manner, my sole thought of what lay beyond that treeline (*cabin*), and I entered Deacon's Woods.

Pushing through the underbrush and waving off pine and black gum branches, I soon found myself covered in saps from multiple sources and standing in the middle of an overgrown trail. In no way did it resemble the trail I had followed (*in my dream?*) the other day, but I felt that it was the very one. I looked to my left and I looked to my right. I noted the right slinked steadily off into the heart of the Woods, bearing more and more weeds, roots, and grasses reaching higher as it went—the left merely followed the treeline into the distance where it became a dirt path. I looked to the right again, thinking, *and I took the one*

less traveled by. I took one step, then another, then more, and found myself descending into the thick. I strayed off the path a few times in those first minutes. But as I went deeper and deeper into the gloom, I found the trail became easier to see—not because it was less overgrown. Quite the opposite, really. I found maintaining the trail easier because I had grown accustomed to it.

I followed the winding path as it went down an incline. This incline sharply turned into a ravine, and soon I was using the outgrowing roots as rungs on a ladder, walking, as it were, with feet and hands. Shortly, I reached the remains of what must have been the creek/stream from my dream. Unless I had known what it was in its heyday, I would never have guessed it had been anything more than what lay before me: a six foot expanse resembling a miniature muddy marshland. Dark wells of green stagnant water which must have been several feet deep pockmarked the mossed-over strand. Several rocks more-or-less “floated” atop the green-brown goo and proved a less than adequate passage after I carefully placed a foot on one and nearly lost a shoe. My one chance to cross appeared as a lichened hillock squared in the middle of the strand. Knowing my full weight might push through a possibly hollow mound and send me unmercifully into a nice patch of quick-mud, I took my chance. And crossed with ease. It was only on my way back twenty five minutes later when it hit me. It hit me hard, too, like a solid punch to the chest. You know the kind, don’t you, Mike? You’ve taken those hits before. I noted there were only four dark wells of water, that these wells appeared in sequential succession across the mossy strand, that the wells themselves were shaped like human feet, that I had literally crossed this miniature marsh only six nights and still had the sheets to prove it.

I climbed the other side of the ravine, on hands and knees again, and found myself looking on to a small bald spot (which seemed to be 50 yarn across) in the middle of the wood. There, in its center, stood the remains of a badly aged log cabin. The building was in

such a sad state of repair that it matched the crumbling nightmare vision from my dream. I went to the window where I had watched the girl stand before her mantle rubbing her foot. Strange but true, I tell you, as the rest of the house had decayed around it, the window sill remained pretty much intact—except, that is, for a small ripped away portion which seemed roughly the same size as my curled fist.

Although it filled me with wonder, I only stayed at the cabin another few minutes. I poked around the outside, peered in, but what I saw I had already seen before—in my dreams. My dreams. Huh. That's a good one. I was beginning to think more and more that I hadn't been dreaming—not completely, anyway. Only one thing caught my eye in the short time I remained there. On one of the long since dead posts holding up the porch ceiling, a faded graft of parchment lay tacked on an ironized nail. The words were just as worn as the paper itself. All I could make out was the great letters spelling out CONDEMNED PROP and a reference to DB 187-766.

A low rumbling crawled toward me from the north, and I realized the sky was darkening noticeably. It was too much, I tell you. I was not going to get stuck out here in another storm. Even though I wanted to see the girl again, I knew in my heart (and in my bowels) I would rather see her in Parson's Field than out here in this bald spot quarantined by death.

I set off in the direction I had come. With my realization that I had passed this way before in some strange skewed version of reality and the dream still five minutes ahead of me in the bottom of the ravine, I came to a stop at the edge of the bald spot and turned to look upon the cabin one final time. What I saw caught my breath in my throat: the cabin was not there. Oh, for sure there was a pile of dirty gray lumber, stricken of color by a relentless sun, a pile so large it looked like that beaver dam on Belly Fork outside of Schooner Flats—you know the one. Everybody used to call it Goddam Beavuhdam. Yeah, that's what it looked like,

save the three support beams that jutted up at odd angles above the rest, pointing to the heavens they would never reach.

I closed my eyes and shook my head, trying to clear it. I opened my eyes and looked again, trying to see it. Still a beaver pile of molded deadwood heaped with broken members and decayed memories. Shaking my head again, I backed away from the clearing. I turned round quickly and bounced off a tree. I landed on my ass, shook my head for the third (but not final) time that day, and looked up the sorghum I'd nearly brained myself on. My eyes bobbed wide. I slowly stood up and ran my fingers over the foreign, intricate design etched into the trunk: PB ♡ RD 4-EVER was ensnared by a larger lop-sided heart. The exposed skin around the finely cut inscription showed me three things: whoever'd chiseled on this tree (one) had done so a long time ago, because of the discoloration of the skin, (two) had been very patient, because of the effort ascribed to the lettering and (three) had been a man, because of the heart's lop-sidedness—as if it had been added in a moment of haste as an afterthought.

VI.

That night I had a dream again. I dreamed I was sitting on a hayroll in Parson's Field. I dreamed I heard a soft voice singing. I dreamed of a young girl with bronzed legs and sunlit tresses. I dreamed—hell, you know that one by now, don'tcha, kid. This dream just replayed that first time I met Rebeccah—or the beginning of it did—that whole first meeting where she stood in the shadow of herself against the sun and I just stared and stuttered. A good dream.

And it continued on, this time—again with me following her to creek. She ran just as she had before, and I chased her just as I had before. Only this time, I ran faster. I remembered too well what lay beyond the creek. I ran faster to make sure I caught up to her

before she decided to go back to that house. I wasn't sure what I would do when I caught her, but I planned to catch her just the same.

I kept her in sight the whole time, until I heard her wonderful laugh and saw her wrap her arms across her front, grabbing handfuls of her dress (the one dotted with the black eyed susans) at the waist and pulling it up over her head in one graceful movement. At that point I ducked behind a tree again, my decency getting the best of me. But, like I said before, I wasn't all that decent; almost as soon as I ducked I—how shall I put this—reconsidered without thinking and came out from behind the tree. I watched her backstroke, breaststroke, stand tall and pull her hair back as water dripped from her face and chin onto her chest. Then I made another decision, again without really recognizing I had done so.

My tee shirt and pants were off before I knew I was jumping into the creek. The girl saw me, stopped swimming, and began laughing at me. I waded over to her in the neck-high water. At five feet away, she began splashing me with water. She laughed some more as I batted water from my eyes and blew a fine spray from my mouth. I shook my head and looked deep into her eyes. And began laughing myself. Of course, my laughter was muffled because I kept swallowing the water she splashed into my mouth, her arms working back and forth without pause during the barrage. So I started slapping great waves of water at her as well.

Good lord, we must have kept that up for half an hour or more—just laughing and splashing. And even though I tried to close the distance between, she kept shying away out of reach. I never even thought I should try to speak to her; I just thought “water-laughter,” and that was about it. I mean, I felt like a kid again. So much so, I found myself laughing a little higher in pitch. At one point, I even felt I'd un-grown and gotten shorter, but my feet were heavy in the mud of the bed, so figure it was just part of the unreal quality of the dreams.

Finally, she stopped with the splashing. She wore her pert smile again and turned to swim away. I, of course, swam after her. And I had nearly caught her, too—my hands inches from

her kicking feet—when I blast of buckshot sent nearly a thousand birds into the air above us. I turned to look at the bank and saw a man in shadow standing atop the ridge. He had a wide-brimmed hat on and rested the shoulder of his shotgun on his thigh, the muzzle pointing skyward. “That’s enough, you two,” he called. “It’s time to go home and cook some dinner.”

I looked at the girl; she looked at me, her smile turning upside down, and hollered back at the man on the hill: “Aw-right, Pa. We’re coming.” I looked up the hillside and watched as “Pa” walked away. Before his head disappeared below the crest of the hill, he called back over his shoulder in a gruff voice: “Get on with it, Rebeccah. Time’s wastin.” When I re-focused on the girl, she was out of the water and re-donning her sundress. The susans clung tightly to her torso—and other, um, unmentionable parts of her anatomy—and I couldn’t help but think again just how beautiful she was. And on the heels of that—why hadn’t her Pa shot me? Hell, I was swimming nearly balls-ass nekkid with his daughter, and neither of our skivvies—both white, no less—left much to the imagination.

My answer came less than a minute later as I climbed up the bank behind “Rebeccah,” still watching those susans shimmy, when she turned around and gave me a scolding look. “Now, little brother,” she said. “You know your not supposed to look at your big sister like that. It’s unnatural.” She took a deep breath, her mouth worked a little, and she let out a sigh. “Guess we’re gonna have to quit swimming for a while. Till you get those unnatural urges worked out of your system.” That’s when she pushed me. I fell backwards into the drink and went under the surface, hearing her laughter as I drifted down. My feet found loose purchase on the creek bed and I pushed myself up. When my head broke the water line, I woke up in my bed. *What a strange friggin’ dream*, I thought, and fell back asleep.

The next morning I awoke completely refreshed. My body as well as my mind was running at full capacity, except for my stomach, which was back on track after a hearty breakfast at Billing's Diner on Main Street. About halfway through my meal, Paddy Billing—or Irish, as we called him, the proud owner and operator of the Diner (and had been since time forgot)—was clearing halfway down the counter and I noticed he was eyeing me.

"What are you so keen on, oldtimer?" I asked. "You making eyes at me?" Paddy nearly dropped the plate and saucer he was carrying. He attempted to be furious, but those of us who knew Paddy back then, or thought we did, know he was never of ill humor.

"I'm looking at choo, boy-o," he said. He began walking towards me and I asked him, "What's so special about me this morning. Paddy? I think you quite fancy me."

"Shut yer trap, boy-o. An' lissen. I wuz jus' thinking, I cahnnut rememmer seein' ya in dis light fa' sucha while. Mayhap 'tis you tha' fancy somebody," He gave me a querulous look, then smiled. "Ayuh," he decided after a moment. "I nuwwit, Ya gots a lassie, doan ya, or'n eye fa wan a'leas'?"

"You are right, oldtimer," I said, "I got an eye out for a beautiful lass, blonde, blue eyed, and *baby!* can she hum a tune!"

"Whereja meet hu'?" Paddy asked, interested.

"Parson's Field," I said., and suddenly Paddy's eyes flicked away. He looked out onto Main through the bay window. "Yeah," I said, not knowing at the time why he had looked. "Out there yonder. I was just sitting on a hayroll when this—God, even beauty cannot describe her—wonderful vision came running up singing a song. She looked at me a moment then ran off. I never even got her name." I began eating again and I followed his gaze out the window. "Had a dream about her the other night. Somebody called her Rebeccah. But I don't know. It could be right. It's a beautiful name." Between chews I started singing, unconsciously. You know how you do sometimes.

"He walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own." I looked at Paddy and asked, "You know that song? I can't seem to put a name to it, but...ahh...that's what she'd been singing. It was so wonderful. *And the joy we share as we tarry there.* You've got to know this song, you old goat."

Looking hard at me with his pale gray eyes, Paddy started to speak. Then he turned away and headed toward the other end of the counter. He began wiping off the counter, setting the salt and pepper aside, then replacing them. I went back to eating.

"Oh, by the way—what do you know about that old run-down cabin across the creek?"

Without looking up, old Irish muttered, "Doan know nuttin' bout no cabin."

"Oh, well, I just thought you would cause, damn, you know everything bout Friar's Court. What and I saw a tree out there with a big old PB-hearts-RD scratched in its hide. Shoot, if you'd've been with me to see this girl, you'd've seen me scratching my initials in a tree. That is, if I'd've gotten her name. And a dreamed-Rebeccah wouldn't cut it? Get it? Cut it?"

Paddy threw down his wash cloth and made fists, palms down, on the counter. He looked up with raging eyes and a face that could stop a stampeding heifer, then grounded out words I'll never forget with what seemed a mouth full of coarse stones: "PB? I's not dee on'y PB aroun', y'know. Why's ya got'a lookit me? May'ap it's fa' Po' Bastard, like'n yerse'f."

I sat silent for a minute or two; I just couldn't think of nothing to say to that. I'd never seen him so animated before. Finally, I said, "Jeez, Irish, you don't have to get all hot about it. Just cause you might'a had a girl--." And that's all I got out. In a second, Paddy had swung out his arm and knocked a catsup bottle to the floor. It shattered into a hundred pieces, right there, the sunlight coming in through the bay window twinkling off the lot of them. I sat and watched in awe as Paddy clenched and unclenched his fists for a moment, trying to compose himself.

"Breakfas' on me," he said to the counter. "Go wan 'n' git, lad. Daylight's wastin'." He never looked up when he spoke. Just kept wiping and setting. He never looked at me square again.

VIII.

The day came and went and I struggled with Irish's temperament and tongue. I just couldn't figure out why he got all crazy. Yeah, really crazy: crazy-mad. It wasn't what he said—wasn't even his flailing gestures. I saw it in his eyes, and that's the worst. On the surface he showed no real fury, just a little pissiness. But his eyes'd held me with animosity and contempt.

I'd never seen the old man like that before, not even when the j.d. Haskell gang tossed his tables and dumped all his condiments to the floor earlier that summer. So why that morning; and even more, why me? I'd gotten under his skin before, sure, but only just picking. And he usually just picked right back even harder. This time, however, he wasn't just picking. He'd acted just like a kid who purposely tears away the scab on his knee just to see the crater brim with pus and blood. Was it just penis envy—the old Mick with the limpling crank upset by a love-clouded cocksure youth? Was it the old cabin or the tree? Or, perhaps, did he know of whom I spoke—maybe as a goddaughter or niece? Yet he had called me "bastard," and his eyes told me he meant it.

I'll tell you, I was stumped. And I was getting a little pissed myself. I couldn't help it—the old fogey had me thrown for a loop, spending endless amounts of time and energy and emotion on figuring him out. I realized I needed to stop. I needed reprieve! So I went to Parson's Field, hoping against hope that my girl would make an appearance.

I climbed atop my hayroll and looked to the sky. I smiled a weak, halfhearted insomniac's smile and the sky smiled back. I watched the clouds scoot along in little tufts and turned them into animals, famous people, cars. Something I hadn't done for well over ten

years. Hell, something I hadn't done since I was wearing a kid's tightie-whities instead of man's boxershorts.

I found solace that afternoon. I found solace in the clouds, in the wheat, on the breeze. It was a solace I hadn't felt since that afternoon nearly a week ago when I was sitting on that very same hayroll. Before I met the singing woman. Yet as I look back on it now, what I found that day was not the solace I had had before, but the comfort of some little rest that means so much to an insomniac fearful of sleep. Of dreams.

But I didn't realize it then. That is why I was able to slip off into dark unencumbered sleep. I cannot say if I dreamed or not, but I do know that during that time Rebecca came to me.

I'm not sure when I fell asleep. To tell the truth, I'm not even sure I was asleep. At the time I felt half-awake and only thus so because I was in grave need of rest. Let me amend that statement; it's hard to put it in to words but perhaps you will understand. My body was extremely tired, my body was asleep. My mind was wide awake however.

I had just closed my eyes when a slightly cooler breeze came over me. I remember thinking about my wind jacket hanging over my bedpost when I heard it. It was almost not there, coming softly on the breeze. A gentle low humming. I knew the tune right away, yet I still couldn't name it.

The quiet humming continued, and the breeze blew each breath across my face. I began to whisper the words to the tune: "... and he walks with me and he talks with me ... and he tells me I am his own" The humming paused for a moment, and then came a sound that most excited me. A giggle—a tiny bit of feminine laughter.

At that point I knew it was her. Yet I dared not open my eyes. I feared two things; if I opened my eyes she would either run away again or she would look on me with her own (and

they would not be the baby blues). So I kept my eyes closed and I smiled. The breeze picked up and the humming resumed.

Then the breeze changed directions, and I felt it brush my cheek. Yet it was not the wind I felt. What I felt was a small, smooth hand. I could feel the separation between four fingers, the intricate lines embedded in the skin. And the smell, I could smell lotion, or perhaps soap. It was Ivory, as sure and distinct as the soft touch itself. Then it was in my hair, gingerly running fingers through my engaging locks. I smiled again, and then I did dare. I opened my eyes.

It was twilight. The sky was of an indigo hue; the moon slowly crept in and the stars had begun to burn. And, of course, she was gone.

The mind plays tricks on you sometimes, and it did that day. I thought I had been resting all day, perhaps sleeping, perhaps not, but resting. Was I wrong. As I jumped off the hayroll my legs came out from under me and I landed on my hindquarters. My right leg did a jerk as it went into a muscle spasm. I began to massage below and behind my knee and I finally worked it out. My body was telling me it was extremely tired. I was beginning to believe it. I walked slowly and cautiously back home, stopping frequently to rub an extremity which tried not to work.

When I walked into my bedroom I collapsed on the bed. And, quite literally, I was out when my head hit the pillow.

IX.

I woke up around eight o'clock that morning. My stomach churned. I ate a rather large breakfast—that is, if you call four bowls of toast'n'oats large. I figured I wouldn't be stopping by the diner, but I knew that today called for a trip into town. You see, something had been bothering me ever since the day I went out to the remains of the cabin. Something besides all

the other strange events. I'd had a nagging sensation in the back of my mind, but couldn't put a thought on it until I opened my eyes that morning. That's the way it goes, don't it, kid? Happens to everybody: you got something going on in the old nugget, but you can't wrap your head around it—you just can't touch it. Then one day—a week, a year, six—*poom!*—there it is. What you've been struggling with. But me, I've learned over the years. It's best you don't worry over it; it'll come. And it did.

As if it had been there all along—and it had been, just out of reach—I saw it clear as day. That third set of initials from my excursion: DB. DB followed by 187-766. I might not have known what the other two sets stood for, but I knew the abbreviation here. I'd known a guy at school who majored in law, whose emphasis was in real estate. He always kept his books open, lying around all over the dorm. Most of us just picked them up at random to read. The one I remembered today was the one about land title researching. It'd started out with this list of legal abbreviations in the introduction, see, mostly binary units of letters standing for various terms like PM (purchase money), BP (book/page), TD (trust deed)...and DB (deed book).

Before I'd so much as grabbed a handful of sheets to throw back off me, I'd decided I would be paying a visit by Town Hall this morning. I planned on finding a clerk, the records room, and, most importantly, a particular deed book with 187 inscribed on its smooth gloss binding. There was the plan, and I followed it to a tee. Took me some time to find the archives, though. It was tucked in far corner of the basement, surrounded by unfinished walls of concrete and corrugated steel, exposed pipes dripping with water, and a damp earthy smell that whispered "once was I a root cellar"—and that was just the hallway! I'd decided it was not the ideal location to keep books when I opened the door marked RECORDS and stepped into a dimly lit cave that resembled, even more than smelled like, a root cellar.

A curious little man stood before me with weasel's eyes, a horrible comb-over, and a pair of horn-rimmed glasses that would kill any living person's libido, man or woman. "What do you need, young sir?" he asked.

"Well, I've never done this before," I began, "so I'm not quite sure where to start. But I know I need a deed book."

"Ah, a property search," said the weasel, squinting his beady eyes into even smaller points. He clapped his hands together and cried, "Oh, what fun."

"Um, yes, if you say so."

"I do, I do." Then I guess he read the curious look on my face with a hint of a grin coming on because the energy came right back out of his body, the light dropped from his eyes, and he tilted his head, pretending to examine his spotless penny loafers. "My apologies, young sir," he said and I knew he meant it. "Sometimes it gets away from me, is all. That's why they've banished me to the root cellar."

"Don't bother about it one bit," I said. "How about we just find..."

A hand clamped down on the weasel's shoulder, appearing on the spot from beyond a case of books. A man followed the hand, a man with some authority I gathered. At least over the weasel. "Rondell," said the older authoritarian. "What are you doing? Don't you have some floors to sweep or toilets to scrub?"

The weasel, Rondell, blushed and whispered "Yes" to his loafers.

"Then, by all means, shoo," said the man, hissing out the s and cutting off the oo shortly. Rondell started nearly out of his loafers. If I had to guess, that man was one scare away from wetting himself. He bowed an apology and scurried out the door.

"I'm sorry, there, young sir," said the other man. "I'm Harvey Henry, the clerk. And that little weasel was Rondell Bannion, a bit of a retard but a helluva janitor." Henry put his arm around my shoulders, more conspiratorially than companionably, and whispered, "Got a bit of

the old fairy in him, I figure, between you and me." He raised his hand in the air and flopped it at the wrist. I smiled. His smile broadened. We shared a laugh, then he patted me on the back and walked me toward the counter.

"Now, what can I help you with?"

I removed the scratch of paper from my pocket and handed it to him. He unfolded it and "hmm-ed" over the numbers. "One-eight-seven, eh?" he mused, cocking an eyebrow. "Do you know that's a police descriptor for murdah?" His spoke very seriously, so I answered him thus.

"No, sir, I did not. Does that have any bearing on the document?"

"No, no, young sir. Of course not. That's just a bit of trivia I decided to drop. No, there's no murdah here, of course." He came round from behind the counter and signaled me to follow him as he tracked up and down the aisles of bookcases. "Now, deed books are generally kept at the county court house, but lucky for you, our esteemed clerk decided, well...it's been nigh on ten years now...long ago to get copies made for several of the larger local cities. One-eight-seven. One-eight-seven. Ever hear of Twelve-Fifteen?" He kept talking and talking about other police codes, but I wasn't paying attention. All that jibber-jabber meant nothing to me, you know. I kinda got the feeling ol' Rondell wasn't as queer as this guy, if you'll excuse the pun.

Anyway, Henry finally reached into the shelves and said, "Ah, here we are, sir." He pulled out a thick volume with gold leafing on the front which read: COPIED PROPERTY OF BLAND COUNTY RECORDS DEED BOOK 187; ORIGINAL LOCATED IN BLAND COUNTY COURT HOUSE, BLAND VA. He flipped through the pages. "And seven-thirty, seven-four-five, seven-five-six, seven-six-oh, seven-six-four, seven-six-five...*seven-six-six*. Here we are again." He began skimming the document, reading aloud:

" 'This land ... blah blah blah ... being the sole property of ... blah blah ... now seized ... umm-hmmm ... and the building thereon ... hmmm ... hereby condemned and scheduled for destruction by ... on this day, the 30th of May, Nineteen hundred and twenty eight. ' "

He looked at me and said, "Where'd you come up with this curious thing?"

"I took a walk out in Deacon's Woods and came across this cabin. There was a paper on it, I guess a condemnation notice. All I could read was this reference."

"That's interesting. Out Deacon's Woods, huh? I haven't been out that way in years myself."

"Could you tell me, old timer, how come they never tore that cabin down?"

"Sure, young sir. Twenty-eight was a pretty bad year. Number of fires, deaths, damn near whole town decimated. We had to rebuild a number of houses, even the old Methodist church. So you understand, an old cabin out in the field didn't really stay on our minds for long."

"Who did you say the property belonged to?"

" '...being the sole property of Roderick Dujardins, now deceased, with no living heirs or assigns...' Oh, yes. Rod Dujardins. I hadn't thought about him in years. Tragic story."

"What tragic story is that?"

"An old one, young sir. An old one that has been forgotten as much as this cabin of yours. Before you were born, I'm sure."

Henry snapped the book shut and replaced it on the shelf. "Well, my good sir. I'm glad to have helped you today." He put his hand in the small of my back and pushed me softly but with some urgency, guiding me to the door. "Please come back and tell your friends where we are." He opened the door and urged me into the hallway. I turned around and tried to say something, but he cut me off. "We get very lonely down here." A brilliant smile lit up his face as he finished: "Have a great day!" The smile disappeared and then Harvey Henry disappeared. The door shut solidly, and the sign which read OPEN in the window flipped over to CLOSED. A flat sheet blind came down from the top of the window and blocked any light coming from inside.

I found myself in that dank root cellar of a hallway again, still full of many unanswered questions..

I did the only thing I could do. I started walking.

X.

I went back to the hayroll and lay down on top. I closed my eyes and thought, she'll be back. I opened my eyes again and looked up into her eyes. She was sitting on the hayroll beside me, beautiful as ever. I said "Rebeccah Dujardins?," hoping her response would be wonderful, but she merely hopped down and darted towards the woods.

I cursed under my breath. I was starting to get perturbed. If she kept taunting me, I was definitely going to give chase. But I was suddenly getting to the realization that I wasn't just chasing tail. I might just give her a piece of my mind.

I went into the woods and followed the sound of her footsteps. Suddenly there was a high pitched scream, yet it did not seem like a scream at first, but a strong note in song, I still had no clue who she was, but she had just been affrighted something awful. I raced ahead, not knowing what awaited me. I could not hear her footsteps nor her singing anymore. She wasn't even screaming now. It was all silence.

I continued on, hoping against hope it had just been a screech owl (they had a funny way of popping up in my dreams as a kid), that the melodious voice had merely gotten out of earshot.

I was wrong.

I entered into a great marshy clearing in the trees. It was intense in that clearing. I don't know how to describe it. It was like a static electricity feeling. All the hairs on my arms and neck went to hackles. And it was sticky too, like humid.

Then I heard and saw. The young woman in the yellow sundress was backing slowly into the middle of the clearing from opposite me. I don't think she even knew I was there. As this thought crossed my mind I realized that she also seemed not to be there. Her body, dress, hair, everything that was decidedly her, was translucent, I could nearly see right through her. Her whole form shimmered in the low sun.

Then she began crying. And the words that tumbled out between the tears turned my blood cold.

"Please," she pleaded. "Please don't hurt me. Don't hit me again."

Suddenly her head jerked back and to the left and the sound of a thunderclap rocked the clearing. It was as if she had been backhanded by some invisible force. She began to shimmer a bit more and her translucency became transparent. I could see through her now. Yet I could not see her attacker. And I was rooted to the spot. Something would not let me move.

"Please," she whimpered, nearly defeated. "I won't sing anymore. Just please don't hurt me again."

Another thunderclap and she nearly fell over. There was another sound, a sound which I did not believe I was hearing. It was very distinct, and I knew it instantly. It was a sound I made everyday. An unbuckling, an unzipping.

"No," she cried. And that was when she turned to me and began running straight towards me. Still yet, she could not see me. She came at me and then ran straight through me. My body rocked and my knees buckled. Strange feelings overwhelmed me. Sensuous, passionate longing. Love, Beauty. Anxiety, Fear. Terror. And suddenly there was another feeling. It came pummeling through my chest and rested stolidly for a few seconds in my heart. Anger. Rage. Blackness. Death. Then it was gone. Pulled right out through my chest again.

And as that feeling left, I sank heavily to the ground. My eyes rolled crazily, and I thought I saw the girl being dragged backwards by her hair with invisible hands. Her neck was bent at

an angle that screamed pain. And that she did. My ears exploded in that pain. And then she fixed her blue eyes upon me.

She saw me, I was sure of it. For she reached out her hand to me. "Help me," she cried. And I cried with her. I struck out my hand to her in a drunken, incoherent wave. Suddenly her head jerked on her neck as she was yanked again. But she never took her eyes off me.

Then I heard the most terrible, yet familiar voice I have ever heard in all my life. Perhaps it was that familiarity which made it so terrible.

"No one out heah, 'cept fah you and me," boomed the invisible man. Suddenly her legs flew out from under her and she landed on her stomach on the ground. She looked at me. Her eyes had turned the color of night. Black, iridescent black. "Geaf me wha' Ah want, horr," the man said.

There was that distinct sound of clothes ripping, the sight of her bare back, and a *pop* as a snap came undone. Then she screamed. I woke up on the hayroll and the smell on my clothes overwhelmed me. It was like when lightning zips by somewhere close and the ozone burns a bit in your nostrils. God, I can still smell it now. It was the smell of burning rubber.

XI.

Ever smelled burning rubber? I'm sure you have. It's one of the worst smells in the world. It's worse than skunk, you know.

Well, anyway, I went back home and plopped down on the sofa. I lay there for awhile, contemplating my dream. It wasn't long before I fell asleep again with the smell of burning rubber lingering in my nose.

I found myself in the dream: the bad one. It was the last time I ever dreamed such a dream, and I'm glad. There's a part of me, however, that wishes I never dreamed it to begin with. But I know I needed to see it, you see. If not, my life would have been incomplete.

In this dream I watched Rebeccah Dujardins leave her cabin, perhaps heading into town to visit the library or grab some groceries (or, more probably, to retrieve her old man). She walked along the creek until she found a beaver dam, on the lee side of which someone had made a "path" of large stones through the low water. She lithely toed her way across, then entered the bald spot—that same marshy clearing.

Suddenly a man jumped out from behind a tree and cried "Boo!" Rebeccah started, scared for the moment. Then, realizing who had frightened her, she put her hands on her hips and said, "Paddy Billing, you are a scoundrel."

"Ahh, Ah'm saw-ree, m'lay-dee," Paddy replied, bowing to one knee in a mock show of gallantry. "Twas in jest, ah 'shoor ya." In response, Rebeccah stuck her nose in the air and walked past him. Paddy jumped up, saying "C'mon" with his arms splayed and a big grin on his face. He cantered in long side-steps, half-circling her. "Aw, dearie. Lookit wha' Ah've dun fa' ya." He galloped over to a large tree and held his hands out palms-up, pointing to the crudely carved sign: PB ♥ RD 4 EVER, encircled by a lop-sided heart.

She shook her head, said, "You really shouldn't have done that," and walked past him again. His smile wilted when her back was to him. A cold sneer replaced it. But that was gone in an instant and the smile reappeared. Paddy sidled up to her to try gallantry again.

"Aw, lassie," he said, placing one hand on his heart and holding the other out to her, "Wha' canna do to sho' ya how much ya mean' t'me?"

"Nothing," Rebeccah said, not even looking at him. And then she did turn on him, one hand cinching her shawl close to his chest and the other floating near his face, index finger pointing square between his eyes. "And don't you follow me, Paddy Billing. I've nothing to say to you and have several errands to run." She turned from him again, and he grabbed her arm. "Dammit, garl," he pleaded.

"You're hurting me," she replied, "And if you don't let go, I'll..." She trailed off, looking down the path that led back to the cabin.

"Yo' Pappy ain't back dere," he said. "He down t'Roscoe's inna pint o'whiskey aktin the drunk 'e were barn t'be."

"No," Rebecca said, her voice wavering. Something in that told me she knew it to be true. "Leave me be." And then she began to whimper.

I'll tell you, kid, up until that moment, that was the saddest thing I had seen in my life. I stood there at the edge of the marshy clearing, knowing I could do nothing but wishing I could just hold her. And then *he* did.

He reached his arms around her and said, "Aw, lass. Donna cry." And the son of a bitch began groping her.

She pulled away and said, "Don't you touch me, you dirty bird." Water began to spill from her eyes.

That's when he started getting rough. That's when I realized the dream on the hayroll only hours before would soon replay itself.

From behind her, he wrapped one large arm across her chest in a diagonal, pinning her arms. He pulled her to him, bumping his groin against and between (as he stiffened) her buttocks. His hot breath warmed the skin of her neck, which reddened noticeably. His free hand traversed the front of her body from the exposed swell of breast above her dress's scooped neckline to her soft stomach to the cleft between her legs (pausing there for a moment to revel in her warmth) and back to her breasts again, this time slipping below the scoop to seize and squeeze her flesh.

The whole time tears coursed down her cheeks and she struggled against him. But her flailings seemed futile against his hormone driven power.

"Wha'?" he asked mockingly, hot on her neck. "Ya doona like when Ah touch'a?" His tongue flicked out of his mouth and caressed her jaw line. "Y'know y'do." He kissed her on the pulsing vein in her neck and finished with suckle.

A noise came from the woods—it sounded like thrashing—and I looked about for whomever or whatever had made that sound. I saw no one. I looked back at the hideous dance in the center of the clearing and saw Rebeccah's eyes darting as well, searching the tree line for help. "No one out heah 'cept fa me 'n' you," Paddy breathed in her ear as his hand slipped below her waist to press the folds of her dress into her softest spot.

Then the heel of her shoe was crashing down on his foot and Irish was crying out in shock and disgust. She pulled free of him, backing away, and her shawl came off in his hands. He brought it to his face and inhaled deeply through his nose. She turned and ran straight at me. Paddy threw the shawl to the ground, smiled broadly, and came after her. At that moment Rebeccah passed through my body again, and I was filled with all the lovely emotions I had been filled with before. And then Paddy ran his hand through my chest.

I looked down, seeing a forearm inserted deeply into my sternum. I felt the blackness in this man's heart and veins begin to seep from his wrist into my heart. I fell to the pine-needled, marshy ground as soon as his arm had come clean of me again, the excruciating pain of living hell I felt inside rendering me paralyzed.

I watched helplessly as he dragged her by the hair back into the clearing. I watched helplessly as he slapped and threw her to the ground. I watched hopelessly as he brought his knees down on her back and reached down to hike up her skirts. I watched shamefully as he ripped her panties away and slapped her bare buttocks, laughing and screaming gleefully, "Ba' girl, ba' girl." I watched her mouth open up and let out a series of high screams, I watched her eyes turn to black as tears rushed the color from them, staring me down, spearing into my burning heart through my own eyes, as he took two handfuls of her dress

above the shoulder blades and ripped a jagged line down the center seam, exposing her back. I watched hurtlingly as he flipped her over and stepped on her right thigh, twisting his boot roughly, pinning her to the ground—she crying out again in a tear-clogged wail. I watched desperately as he worked his buckle and unzipped his fly. I watched painfully as he dropped to his knees and belted her across the face. I watched as he grasped the scooped neck line of her dress and jerked it towards her belly (a pretty simple job since he'd already split the fabric down the length of her spine), exposing her pale cream-colored unblemished breasts. I watched as he fumbled with the folds of her skirt, excited, and I watched as he spread her legs. I watched, oh God, I watched. And I watched as he mounted her.

“Geaf me wha’ Ah want, horr,” he said and drove his penis into her as deep as depth would allow. Rebecca screamed again; the earth and heavens shook. Thunder rolled and lightning seared the sky. The smell of ozone filled the air. She screamed until her lungs had no air left, and then she became silent save for a soft, nearly imperceptible whimpering that glided and stretched with the tears rolling down her face.

Paddy thrust away, repeating “...’cept fa *me* and *you*...” over and over again to support his rhythm. It only lasted for about a minute (seemed like an eternity to me, however, lying helpless in a heap across the clearing, dying from the damning poison seeping through me but not nearly dying as much or in the same way as Rececchah was, in a way not I nor you nor any other man could understand, also lying helpless through what must have felt like two eternities). It looked like although Paddy wanted to the spirit out of her, his body, apparently, did not. As if on cue, when that first sixty seconds were up, his shaft wilted instantaneously. He continued ramming his limp penis into the place where her left leg met her hip, but his steam had dwindled nearly as fast as his prick.

A twig snapped behind me. I saw Paddy smile and whisper, "Nah a word on dis last or I keel ya dead," and then he shot a glance directly at me. "Welcome, Johnnie," he called cheerfully. "Gla' t'see ya join de partee."

I was shocked, I tell you, so shocked that all the pain from when he passed through me abated. How could he see me? I just, I just couldn't believe it. I started to rise, thinking, *if that son of a bitch can see me maybe he can feel it, too, when I throttle the life out of him.* I got to my knee, and then I felt another being pass through me. I felt a sort of kindred to this one—something akin to the feeling I had when Rebeccah passed through me—but this one was more of an old familiar hatred. One I had known since I was a child, for fifteen years or more. And before I saw his slightly younger face in profile, and before I heard his voice, I knew who this new being was.

As I stood up I heard "Irish, I don't know about this; Rebeccah looks more hurt than I thought she would; I think she's had enough" come from my uncle's parted lips. He stepped closer to the two of them.

"Na'sense, boy-o. Ya need t'git to it, now."

My uncle raised his hands palms-out to Paddy. "No, really, man. Leave her be. Let's get out of—."

"Dammit, Johnnie. Y'git tuwwit or'n Ah'll bet the livin' shit out't'ya." Paddy raised one fist in the air, grabbed my uncle's left bicep, and pushed him towards Rebeccah, who, without strength left in her, could only look on him with pleading eyes.

"Dewwit," Paddy yelled and grabbed my uncle's neck, forcing him to his knees. My uncle lowered his trousers and mounted Rebeccah. He worked more slowly and more gently than Paddy had, whose hand still held fast to his neck, but he also chanted a mantra into her ear: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

He gave one final thrust and closed his eyes. Rebecca closed her eyes as well. Although her tear ducts should have been dry by now, a fresh batch of water burst forth from them. When she opened her eyes again, she was looking at me. I saw in those glistening eyes and on that wet face something even more horrible and twice more personal than I had seen in the rape itself. Her eyes told me two things: Paddy had made sure her maidenhead had departed and my dear old uncle had completed that action by ejaculating. My eyes now brimmed with tears of sorrow and hatred mixed, and I cried with her and for her.

He now lay flat on top of her, his head resting on her right breast. He lay there, breathing heavily. Paddy laughed. Rebecca continued to stare at me. And suddenly I felt the strangest, most calming, most extraordinary thing. A fourth entity stepped into my body, but this one did not step *through* it. This fourth became completely aligned within me and to me, and I felt as if I were in this new body instead of it in mine. This new body...it felt like home.

My hands clenched and unclenched as this new body worked its fists. I felt a hatred and contempt so severe that it was my own. I felt two sets (*one set of two*) eyes, mine and this Other's, lock tighter on Rebecca's. I felt a loyalty and love so true much stronger than mine had been. Almost like...

And then she screamed at me/us with unbelievable strength: "Run, little brother. Fetch help. Find Pa!" Paddy and my uncle both jerked their heads in my/our direction. Then I felt our bodies separate, and a feeling of incompleteness consumed me. In that one moment I remember thinking, *my God, I am alone again*. I turned to watch him go, but the boy had only retreated two steps backward. I felt as if I was looking into a mirror of my youth for standing before me was a boy who resembled me at fourteen. It was fascinating, wonderful, and eerie at the same time. The boy called out Rebecca's name, pleadingly, in a voice not unlike my own. Finally, with tears streaming from his eyes returned to run. But two sets of hands passed into my vision, a left hand by my left arm and a right hand by my right, neither of the

same man. My body erupted in that hellish pain again, and another right and left hand pushed through my chest, followed by the bodies of Paddy and my uncle. I turned with every inch of me screaming ache to look on Rebecca once more, helpless again, and then the hell-pain was gone as the boy was thrown back into me.

I was spun around by rough hands. Those same hands encircled my throat and my windpipe began to collapse. My eyes locked with he who throttled me. My uncle. I tried to bat his arms away and averted my eyes from his. I focused on the other man. Paddy had found himself a fallen branch and now wielded it like a baseball bat. I heard Rebecca scream again in a drowned, harsh voice pulling from a throat ripped coarse by the forced wind as much as her sex had been by these two men, and then my head exploded in a brilliance of fireworks, stars, galaxies of bright fierce pain. I was torn from the boy's body again; this time, however, the ache of his leaving was incomparable to that of my head and throat. I rolled away gagging and the boy fell straight—dead before he hit the ground.

I continued rolling, away from the boy, away from the evil men, one hand working my throat and one pressed loosely above the knot already rising on my head. The pain was now both inside and out: one pain from the physical abuse I had suffered due to my uncle's strangling and Irish's walloping, the other from my mind itself, which felt split in two.

I watched as my uncle picked up the dead boy's body and dropped it unceremoniously at Rebecca's side. I watched her wail and hitch as she pulled her dead brother into her arms and cradled his bleeding head. I watched as she sent the most fate-filled glare at Irish and my uncle. And I watched as Paddy grabbed her hair again and jerked her head back, bring is face inches away from hers, and say, "Ya tell anee'un an' we keel y'too."

And they were gone. The only souls left in the clearing were Rebecca's and mine, part of which seemed to have already departed. Somehow, I knew why even before she spoke.

The girl of my dreams kissed her brother's face and brushed leaves from his blood-smear hair. I knelt beside of her, crying with her. She lifted her face and looked at me, through me, off into the distance. But I felt she still looked at me. "You were my brother," she said softly. She took her brother's cold dead hand in hers and placed it on her skin below her belly, outlining a single circle there. Then she put the hand to her lips, kissed it, and placed it over her brother's heart. Her own hand now slipped below her belly and she looked at me (through me) again. "You will be my son," she whispered. Then she returned to stroking her brother's hair. She started to hum and then sang. *I come to the garden alone...*

Their bodies began to fade away and soon I was alone in the wood. I closed my weeping eyes tightly and opened them on my living room ceiling, glancing up from my prone position on the couch.

XII.

I decided to seek out Irish; we had some unfinished business to take care of. After that, I would pay a little visit to my uncle's house. Again, unfinished business. Walking down Main I passed the false-fronted offices of *The Town Crier*, Friar's Court's answer to the bi-monthly newspaper. My feet picked up the pace, the destination sought rearing its face half a block up at the corner; but my mind wandered back and settled on that neo-fashionable false-front. I decided to forego the inevitable encounter; I turned around and walked back to the news office. Irish could wait.

I needed answers, see, but I also needed good questions. And *The Town Crier* would supply at the very least the latter, perhaps even both. What I didn't know then was that the paper would not only supply the facts but demand a complete re-visioning of my entire life.

As I pushed the door open, it racked a small hand bell dangling from the frame. I scooted in and shut the door behind me, the bell tinkling once again. The office was a two-

room job. The front room, where I stood, doubled as reception and newsroom. A long, chest-high bar which looked like it had been lifted from the local pub engaged half of the room. Another bell was its only inhabitant. The massive oak desk loomed over the floor in the opposite corner like great dead bison, piled high with carbons, mimeos, and what looked like and ancient battered Underwood. Besides these inanimates, nary a breathing life could be found.

I reached the bar and my fingers closed on the bell. But before I could lift it, a withered liver-spotted hand slithered up on a forearm from behind the countertop. An affirmative “unh-unh-uh” followed closely behind, and then I was looking into the tiny face of the proprietress.

“What canna do you for, young sir?” *What was it*, I thought, *with this damned ‘young sir’ business?*

“Well,” I said. “I’ve been looking for some answers to some questions for several days now, and everybody—I mean, *everybody*—has been giving me the run around. Lady, you are my last resort.” I breathed heavily after getting that out. It felt good.

“I see, young man,” the little lady replied. “I’ll try my best. The *Town Crier* is the source of many answers in this neck of the woods, and as proud owner and proprietress, I can claim to be the most knowledgeable gossip in these parts.” She smiled radiantly, beaming her self-assured pride at me like a light at the end of a dark tunnel.

“Great,” I said, very relieved. “If you’re so good, let’s see what you got.”

“Is that a challenge, young man?”

“Yes, madam, it is. And you better not hold back. I’ve had enough of that.” I think she could tell by my eyes that I was serious about needing answers. And just to ensure she was aware of my intentions (but that she was also scared not, for I thought for a fact a small

woman like this might be a timid one), I added, "I'm not wanting to sound threatening, ma'am. Quite the opposite. I really...I just really don't think I could do with that anymore."

"Well, my good young man," she countered, "You are in luck. First of all, judging by the looks of you, you haven't had a decent night's sleep in over a week and I don't think you could threaten that fly on your arm."

I looked down and she was right: a nasty little black fly lighted there, sending its feelers across the pebbly surface of a small mole. I hadn't even felt the damn thing. She shooed it away and I thanked her.

"And second, I've never held back in my life. Don't think a handsome young man like yourself can make me do it now, either. In fact, it's handsome men like you that've made me melt and tell all for years." She came round from behind the counter and said, "Let's get on with it, then."

"All right, lady. Tell me everything you know about Roderick and Rebecach Dujardins. Skip the boring stuff and give me the goods."

"All right, young man. Let me see...Roderick and Rebecach Dujardins...I haven't thought about that family in years. But I knew them well, and I think I know exactly what you want." She pulled me over to the desk and pushed me into the swivel chair. She then pushed a pile of mimeos to the center of the desk—knocking over another pile onto the floor—and sat on the corner. Her feet dangled in the air but our eyes were now level. "Just promise me one thing."

"What?"

"This story is dear to my heart—dear to this town's heart, believe it or not. Cause it's about the nicest, sweetest girlchild this town ever had. So I need you to bear with me. And when I'm through, keep it dear to you as well."

I nodded and said, "Yes, ma'am. I would have it no other way."

She relaxed noticeably and began: "Roderick Dujardins lived out in a cabin beyond Deacon's Woods. His wife had died during the birth of their second child, Rod Junior. Their oldest was Rebecca, and she was a fine lass. She was about ten years older than her brother and grew fast to be his big sister and a mother to him. I always said that mother of hers was a good woman, and keen on naming her precious child as well. Do you know what a precious name that is?"

"I think it's lovelier than anything I've ever heard, but I'm sure you mean something else."

"Yes, I do. You see, that family, as you know, is French. The rough translation of which is 'of the garden.' So that makes this child..."

"Rebecca of the Garden," I finished. "Beautiful."

"Yes, it is, isn't it. Very much like the first Rebekah. From the Bible, remember?"

"No, ma'am, I do not. Please, refresh my memory."

"The fairest maiden of her time, renowned across the lands for her beauty. She later married Isaac. Her only flaw was her barrenness, and then, miraculously, twenty years after they'd wed, she gave birth to twins, Esau and Jacob. She remained a beauty to the end of her days, another quality shared with our Rebecca of the Garden."

"Amazing."

"Yes, her mother was an amazing woman. That's why Roderick never got over his wife's death and took to hiding his feelings in the bottle. He never got back out. He worked at the grist mill about three miles out of town, made just enough money for food and booze, and lived a drunk's life.

"Rebecca, meanwhile, blossomed into a beautiful young woman. She worked at the library here in town to support herself and her brother during those times their father would go off on drunks and not return home for weeks at a time. Rumor had it that when the

lightning had taken him on hard trip, old Rod tried to turn his pretty girl into his pretty wife. They say he touched her a lot, but never stuck it in her. Except for those drunken caresses, that sad pretty girl remained a virgin until she was twenty-seven.

“Then one day her brother got killed; fell in the creek and busted his skull open on the rocks. That hurt her but good. Hurt her so bad she stopped coming into town. She became a hermit. About nine months later Rod came running into town and dragged old lady Haggerty back to his cabin. Turns out Rebeccah was preggers and about busting out with her child. Haggerty did all she could, but the baby was caught up in the umbilical. She saved the child but lost Rebeccah.

“Unlike the Rebekah of old, our Rebeccah was not barren. And neither was she two-faced. It was the first Rebekah who betrayed her husband and son Esau by planning Jacob’s rise to power. But our Rebeccah—not a single crookt bone in her precious body.

“That same night Rod went out and drown in the creek. People say he did it on purpose. A suicide. But nobody knows for sure. Maybe he just got so drunk he tumbled in. But, maybe, just maybe, he had good reason to do it.

“No one ever knew how Rebeccah had gotten preggers. A lot a people thought maybe old Rod had finally bedded her. Or maybe she just got slutty after her brother died. She knew where Roscoe’s Bar and Inn was anyway, what with having to drag her drunk old man home time and again. But I don’t know, and I sure don’t believe the latter. Rebeccah was a pure girl; harmed no one, not even herself. It wasn’t her fault her father touched her growing up, if’n he really did (and I’m sure he did—what man wouldn’t have, given the situation and that soft innocence begging for warm hand?). She may have gone out one night and ended up doing something she regretted, but it wasn’t her way to make a habit of such things. But that’s all speculation. You wanted what I could tell you true, and you got it.”

"Thank you, ma'am," I said. "Thank you for your honesty." I leaned forward and produced a neatly folded paper from my back pocket. "I've got one more favor to ask you: could you tell me about this?"

The proprietress took the paper from my hands and unfolded it. It was the adoption certificate. "Oh, yes. Yes. I remember this."

"You do?"

"Oh, yes, I was there for that one."

"You were?"

"Yes, my boy. You see, I used to work in the Clerk's Office before I became the Crier. How do you think I got the goods on so many people.? My son works over there now—a little weasel-looking thing I probably dropped too many times when we was but a wee babe, and...oh, I'm sorry. About the adoption. Jeff and Polly were a couple of newlyweds. About a year or so. And they'd been having problems." She leaned over to me and whispered, "*Barren.*" Her eyes danced and she bobbed both her eyebrows up and down. Then she sat back up. "They decided to adopt. Lucky for them, poor Rebeccah Dujardins's little bastard needed a family. They'd seen it in the paper and came down to Town Hall straightaway. Polly's older brother John was there to witness it. It was a bit weird, you know, now that I think about it. Johnnie MacLean had this little smile on his face that looked so fake. He just didn't seem happy at all. He signed off on it, you know, but I had the feeling in the presence of that document was the last place in the world he wanted to be." She paused. "Huh, Johnnie MacLean. He still lives here, you know. And...say." Dawning realization filled her eyes. "Say?" she asked again, blowing all the air out and pitching it higher. "I've seen you around, too, haven't I? Your Johnnie's nephew, aren't you. And..." She paused.

I started to get up, placing my hands on the arms of the chair. "Thank you for your help, ma'am," I said.

She jumped off the desk and stood before me with her hands on her cheeks. "Omigod, omigod, omigod," she said, breathing rapidly and looking like she would hyperventilate soon. "Omigawwwd, you're him. You're Rebeccah's son. Good gracious, boy, I'm so sorry I told you all that."

I gently placed my hands on her forearms and brought her hands down from her face. "I'm not," I said. "I thank you very much."

"What's your name, young man?" She said, and now she had grasped my forearms as well.

"John," I said. "John Larson."

"Well, John Larson," she said, her eyes welling with tears. "It's good to finally meet you. Rebeccah was my best friend, you know." Then she hugged me. And I hugged her. The best hug I'd ever had in my life. The best relief. The best release.

She stepped back after a few minutes with a curious look on her face. "I was so sorry to hear about Jeff and Polly, you know. You were way too young then, but I wonder now why Johnnie never told you. I'm surprised by that."

"I'm not," I said, and kissed her hand. "Madame, you've been most extremely helpful. You take care of yourself and that son of yours. I have to go." And with that, I left.

XIII.

I left Friar's Court that day and never looked back. I went North, and North I stayed until I dreamed of my mother—my real mother—again. I loved my parents, mind you, and I dreamt of them often. But I had not dreamt of my mother since the Autumn of '52. In this dream she held me in her arms and sang to me her favorite song. After that, I realized I could come back here to what used to be known as Creed County. I didn't go back to Friar's Court, though.

Never once set foot in that God-forsaken town again. No, I came here, to Cedar Rapids. Took the job as janitor at the College and I've been here ever since.

I'd like to say I wish I'd've gone back to the diner and had it out with Paddy Billing. I'd like to say I wish I'd've followed that up with a trip to Uncle John's and gave him a serious ribbing. Maybe even punched his ugly mug. Hell, I probably could have killed him if given the chance. But then I would have killed my father. That's the most ed up part about it. My uncle, my father.

I didn't do either of those things and I didn't wish to. Never have, never will. I learned a lot of things in Friar's Court, but most of all I learned that my mother and my adoptive parents never hurt anyone in their lives. They'd been the victims of others, mostly drunks, mostly people they knew and loved. I decided then that, even though I might see the early grave they did, I would follow in their footsteps, bringing kindness wherever I went and leaving all things evil, mean-spirited, and just plain unconscionable behind.

Looks like this here generation broke the mold though. I've seen a lot of death and hardship, but it's never knocked on my door. Not personally. Not yet. And, by the looks of things, it hasn't knocked on yours either. Not yet.

Interlude

They sat there in the middle of the road for several minutes of silence, then Old John stood up and stretched. His mouth opened wide and he yawned. As if on cue, Mike looked up at him.

"Well, come on, kid," John said. "Stand up an' say something."

Mike started to rise, and thought all the muscles in his body would be numb. He looked at his wristwatch and noted it was going on five-thirty. The sun was falling faster from its arc around the open sky; very soon now it would touch the tops of the mountains and begin to burn the treetops and atmosphere with its harsh orange light. *Christ*, Mike thought, *we've been sitting in the road for nearly an hour.*

"Christ nothing," John said. "Get up, I say."

Mike slowly rose to his feet and realized he was not numb at all. Nowhere near it. In fact, he felt as if he'd only sat down three minutes ago. It even could have been three minutes, if not for the location of the sun and accuracy of the quartz in his watch.

"Are you gonna say something or not, kid?" John looked him up and down, then shrugged. "Okay, listen, I'm sorry if I screwed up your time-table or something. But you needed to hear that. And there's more where that came from. But, if you want me to just keep truckin' on up the road on my own, I'll do it. Just say the word."

"I..." Mike began, but he was cut off by a great yawn of his own. The back of his right hand went to his mouth and he stretched myself out with his other arm. Funny thing was,

none of his joints popped when he did it. Everything already seemed limber enough. Why the hell had he stretched anyway?

"Because your mind's been tirelessly running on full power for an hour, son," John answered his thought. "It's not used to it, and so it projects its tiredness to the rest of your body."

As Mike finished his yawn, Old John took ahold of his arm and pulled him back to the side of the road. Mike said, "Damn, that was something," but the end of it was cut off as two cars passed each other on the road, blaring their horns at each other. Mike looked back at the highway and was shocked to see five cars going eastbound and seven heading westbound. The road had been empty only a second ago.

"No," John said, as Mike knew he would. "You only thought it was empty. That was your yawn, remember? I told you you'd be safe, and you were. Forget it."

"All right, old-timer," Mike said, and another set of horns cut off his next words. He looked at the cars passing by again, saw several yahoo kids hanging out the windows, yelling and catcalling. He looked at John.

"Homecoming," the old man said, raising his arms out wide in a *Don't-blame-me-it-ain't-my-to-do* manner.

"You ready to get crackin'?" he asked.

Mike nodded, rubbed the side of his head—he was still a little out of it. His head felt as swimmy as it had before Old John had told his tale. "Sure," he heard himself say. "Get in."

They got in the car and pulled back on to the road. After a few minutes, John spoke up.

"There's a turn up ahead here up a hill on the left, about five more miles up the road. I want you to take it cause there's something I need to show you."

"Look, fella," Mike said. "I don't know what you did back there before, paralyzing me and what not, and I don't know what you wanted me to get out of that story. Don't get me wrong,

I liked it. But I found it seriously fucked up. And, I'm sorry about what happened to you, but I think you are a seriously fucked up person. Moreso than I am. So because of that, I hate to tell you—no, I'm glad to tell you—but I want to get rid of you as soon as possible."

"No, you don't."

"Oh, yes I do."

"No, you don't, or you'd've put me out already."

"Wanna bet?"

"I don't have to bet, kid. I know better, and you do, too. Now will you stop being a hardass for a minute and just drive." It wasn't a question. "I don't want to have to give you another lesson in compliance."

Mike looked in the old man's eyes and saw it was true. He also saw the old man would paralyze him again if he had to, however the hell he'd done it to begin with.

"Fine," Mike said. "It's only a few more miles anyway."

"Yes, you're right. Only a few more miles. And that's exactly all it is."

Mike shot him another look, but John was staring straight ahead out the window. He raised his hand, index finger pointing, and said, "Right up here, take this turnoff."

"Where?"

"Here," said old John, pointing with his finger at the tiny road winding up a hill.

"Here?" Mike asked, slowing down and glancing up through the windshield at the debatable path. At the top was a decrepit looking house that appeared empty of life. It looked like it had been for years.

"Yes, here," John affirmed. "And be quick about it. We've not much time. That which we need



to see is about to begin.”

“All right, old-timer. Whatever you say.” The displeasure in his voice was apparent, and Mike was relieved by that somehow. He shot the car up the short lane and soon crested the hill. A small subdivision lay before them on the carved mountaintop.

“Removal mining at it’s best, Mike” John said. “At least they cleaned this one up for us.” Then he began giving directions and Mike began winding his way through the even narrower lanes lined with six-foot high black street lamps...



At six o'clock on an evening in early April, the sun shines bright over the mountains surrounding the small village of Bellingham near Cedar Rapids. The last remnants of the day's splendor catch in that warm yellow-orange light, sparking the trees and their newly born leaves afire, dashing ardently across the closely cropped lawns of Bermuda grass on Shingleton Square. Outside, the skies paint everything brilliantly, as a beat-up Ford Tempo pulls to a stop and rests its driver's side tires on the upturned curb. But inside an aging Tudor house in Lot 59 where Michael Coogan idles his car, darkness has taken over.

Notice the odd shaped curved windows lining the front of the house, prone to inhaling the sun's warmth and light for the rooms and passages beyond, now merely entertaining the

beams of radiance for unwelcoming draperies clenched together like white swollen fists. Not even the most miniscule thread of day passes through the sallow curtains, turning their inward-facing green—and everything else in the house, for that matter—into mottled blackness.

Beyond those windows, in the darkness of the front room, only one sliver of medium auburn creeps across the brown-carpeted floor, seeping from the cracked jamb of the only mid-hallway door that hosts a small wood-paneled study with a solitary low-wattage desk lamp. Without this thin thread of hope, the house would appear dead. An occasional creak and moan from giving or receiving floor boards and joints would lend to that hope—at least enough to let any visitor know the house had not quite given up the ghost.

But that doesn't matter to us. Not really. That's not what we came here to witness, *is it?* Besides, we won't be staying here long enough to gauge this house's settling. We are here *only* for the house's inhabitants, who, in fact, are dead already—or will be shortly.

• • •

How do you know there's a single desk lamp on in there? Looks black as night to me. I mean, I know you got some sort of thing going on here, with the moving van and what-not, but how can you see what's going on in that house?

All right, son. You've made it through my story without a single question and you've pretty much kept quiet until now. I'll give you credit for that. But don't ask me questions which need not be asked. Just sit here. Listen and learn.

• • •

Ronald Emerick sits at his desk in his mid-hallway office, musing over a pile of word-processed student papers. He is a slight man, lanky and long-limbed, who will always be found wearing the same attire: tan trousers (cuffed and creased to points), white shirt (heavily starched), and blue tweed sports coat (with moleskin elbow pads). The only thing that changes his

appearance (to the naked eye; nobody checks his undergarments, of course) is the necktie. He owns one for each day of the week, mind you—all variants of the same base color and design. Now this habit is manifested not because he's a poor man confined to the single uniform; no, he's got eight sets of the same ensemble (one extra for wash day and emergencies) and he is anal. So anal, in fact, that it would not be cliché to say this man needs to have all his ducks in a row. That would, for Ronald Emerick—Dr. Roland Emerick, according to the plated oblong triangle which bears his name—be an understatement. Just look at this guy, will you?

He's as wan as the light in his office, he's got dark rings under his slightly sunken eyes hinting at sleeplessness, and (dear God!) he has snagged fingernails that have been ravaged by his perfectly straight, perfectly white teeth that have become somewhat unhinged about the gums (loose and slightly movable by his tongue, he has found) due to his inability to eat much of late. He puts all his strength into structuring everything around him and cares not for his own health; as you can see, in this man's life the maintenance of structure takes a lot of work—especially when a great many things threaten that structure. Especially these past few months. Especially today.

As senior professor of Poetics at Bellingham College, Dr. Emerick finds himself in the all-but-horrifying position of grading cheap limericks and dime-store quartets fashioned by his students, and, likewise, finds it rather curious that the one aspect of his life which struggles the most (today, at any rate) to destroy his structure, his routine, happens to be his favored vocation. Writing, and the search for the next great poet, keep him from bringing his anal personal life into his business life, except, that is, in a small number of cases every few semesters. But because that anal side is more familiar, it is therefore stronger, and the struggle to keep it at bay is a hard one. Hard on his health and on his work. He knows

this...and so does his wife and his son. Although Ronnie knows a bit more than Danny, but thank God not all. Thank God indeed.

His latest struggle involves the grading ritual. For several weeks he has resisted the urge to make use of his ever-decreasing, ever-replenished stock of red grease pencils; in an effort to start off this semester anew, he actually banished them to the recesses of the bottom left hand drawer of this very desk—behind a stack of personal writings that have acquired as much dust as the few (*very few*) literary awards that line his bookshelf—where only a very limited number of disused items remain: a half-empty box of Chesterfields he quit smoking three weeks ago, the remains of three Black Beauty writing pencils sharpened nearly to the chewed eraser nubs, an even older multi-colored wad of fossilized chewing gums collected from his youth, and other assorted office detritus. Oh yes: and the never forgotten, non-descript brass key he'd copied at Floyd's Hardware outside of town, adjoined by a gold ring to a diamond-shaped red plastic tab with the number 9 on it painted sloppily in Wite-Out—the key to a roadside motor lodge room, where, until recently, he used to take his students for a bit of extra-credit (never his freshman students, though; just those blonde-haired, blue-eyed, stunning upperclassmen who filled out their jeans so exquisitely). Today, however, and not because of the key, the senior professor has all but decided to access that drawer's recesses and allow his hand to draw from the power of the red grease pencil once more.

Just look at what he has to deal with. Take this sample from one of the "urban scholarship" students, which rests on top of the pile of pages ripped from various notebooks (*retaining the jagged edges of grammar school spirals*, he notes, more proof of the cheapness which predates their contents):

The Dozens: Ranking a Lesser

Who da are U? Why should I care?

U just a silly-stupid square—

Wit a stupid face and silly laugh, a sorry mom an a *dumb*-ass dad.

An while I'm on yo' mom...let me say:

She gots da bestest set of

And he has to stop there.

Dr. Emerick rocks back in his armchair and lets out a snarl of disgust. Here he thought it couldn't get any worse, what with the last "poem" he read, but he realizes now how very wrong he was. He should have expected such material though, coming from this particular student, a young punk from the projects in Richmond dreaming (and speaking to it every chance he got) of becoming the next hip-hop icon. The student who wouldn't even be here if not for the school's decision to bring some "city culture" to the woodsy campus, which he had argued heavily against even unto the end of the debate when Dean Hollenbach won the vote with his "it's high time we make sure Autumn isn't the only color change on campus" argument. His eyes dart to the bottom left-hand drawer ("There Be Pencils Here," he thinks, remembering the old safari adventures he'd read as a child and the sections of the dark continent the mapmakers marked as dangerous with tigers or crazed rhinos) and return quickly to the "Dozens." *Not yet*, he tells himself. *Not just yet*.

He leans forward and draws a paper from a down-turned pile on the extended right arm panel of his desk—the last he graded this morning before heading off to class. He gazes quickly back over the first ill-formed lines from a troubled hand:

Beyond the Muzzle of Madness

Running. Thats wha-what I've b-b-been doing.

For the past fuh-fuh*five* days—just running.

Nowhere to go really. N-nowhere to hide.

They'll fuh-find me. S-soon, I'll be eating a buh-bullet.

He shakes his head slowly and glances past four more stanzas of the same to see his notations: *Try this again without the stuttering. Don't you think this is a moment of clarity in the speaker's madness?* He recalls how hard it was for him to write so positive a criticism,

how he had to think it over for four minutes prior to jotting it down quickly before he lost the conscience to do it.

Without taking time to think about his next task, he returns the page to its previous locale and engages the paper at hand. He carelessly circles the final line, double underlines "bored" and "shit else", and scratches the following epitaph: *I am in total agreement. RE.* He smiles and laughs, congratulating himself on his wit.

"Oh, god!" he exclaims, seizing the pen in his hand. "I needed that," he tells himself, pumping his fist in the air. He looks down at the student's poem and his own comments. "Oh, god," he says again, this time in a low whisper, the reprise expressed without glee. "Oh god oh god oh god," he mutters as he flips the blue pen on its tail and attempts to erase his notations with a nonexistent eraser. In his efforts he shreds the bottom half of the page to strips that do more than justice to the spiral tears on the left edge

"Dammit!" he cries and clenches his raised fist once more. The pen snaps under the new stress, raining ink over his face to splatter on his reading glasses and beard and sending the tepid fluid in streaks over his forehead and in runnels down the arm of his white Arrow shirt.

The professor leaps from his chair in a wholly unprofessional manner of spasming arms and legs and head and blindly tosses the pen across the room to rest on the hardwood floor inches from waste bin. He pulls off his glasses and examines his arm. Frustrated, he attempts shaking his arm in an effort to stop the shirt from sopping up the rest of the ink, realizes this task is futile, reexamines his glasses, decides he must now clean *them*, removes a shirttail from his trousers, begins rubbing the lenses, rubbing the lenses, rubbing the lenses, and—

"Arrr!" he gruffs as it dawns on him this latest action is no solution. Finally, he stops. Stops everything. He takes a deep breath and assesses the situation. He then uses his clean hand to pull out the left arm panel of his desk, sets the eyeglasses down on it. He will worry about them later. He removes his now-worthless shirt and wipes his face and hands with it.

He walks to the waste bin, picks up the broken pen inside the fold of the shirt, and drops them both in the bin. He takes one last look at the stack of poems on his desk before he turns and walks out into the hallway.

• • •

At six-thirty on an evening in early April, the sound of water courses through 2-inch thick pipes set deep under the manicured Bermuda grass of Lot 59. In breathless darkness not unlike that of the closed casket, darkness in which only the blind mole sees everything, the gray PVC cylinders guide the water in a succession of L joints and T junctions, S curves and P loops, through the cement ceiling of the root cellar below the aging Tudor, up between two stories of particle board and plaster walls, and out of the six-setting Teledyne shower head set high on the plastic Tub-Surround bathing capsule. Soon that water will be surrounded by darkness again and trace through more midnight passages of unknown length, but first...first it must breathe. First it must see.

Once the water reaches the myriad of egress points on the plane side of the shower head's dome, it needs no further guidance; it simply leaves the darkness and enters light, cascading in multi-faceted streams of diamond drops to splash on the blue-stained face of a man whose life, like the water which cleanses him momentarily, will also return to darkness. Soon.

Moments later, the hazy umber water swirls around the man's feet, collecting hair, germs, loose skin, and other unuseful organic detritus—both visible and invisible to the human eye—before diving into the eclipsed oubliette of the drain pipe.

• • •

After he's cleaned up, dressed in house clothes, and wiped up the rest of the ink on the floor, the desk, and the eyeglasses, and taken a bit of a break which included a nip or two (or four) of brandy, Dr. Roland Emerick returns to his study to resume grading the student poems. He

figures that, perhaps, since he's taken some time away, he will not lose his composure again so readily. And, just perhaps, he will actually get through these papers tonight and rid his home and thoughts of them forever. But we already know one thing the professor does not: he is right and wrong in his presumptions. First, he will think of these papers no more before the night turns to day. And second, the bulk of the papers will remain on his desk until morning in the upward-facing pile...ungraded.

The man who sits before us reaches into the middle drawer of his desk and draws out a yellow Post-It pad and another blue ink pen. He scratches *fotocpy 2 notebk papr & wit-out comms* onto the top slip and attaches it to the semi-salvageable remains of the "Dozens" poem. Taking great care to cause no more damage, he sets the appendaged page facedown on the secondary (and still much smaller) pile of graded papers. He then reaches for the next page in the ungraded pile and brings it close to his face. He reads *Of Human Frailty* and squints as if viciously stabbed by some unknown needle aimed directly at his optic nerve centers. He notes his displeasure but forces himself to read further.

"What does it mean to be human?" he ask'd.

The question seemed simple; the answer a task:

"To query and ponder, to seek and to find

A wife, a lover, a friend come to mind.

To falter and fumble through failure and strife.

"'What does it mean to be human,' you ask'd?

To live a harrowing life."

So simple. So elegantly stated. So true. It made neither brash statements nor proclaimed to be something more than it was. He loves it. Without a second thought, Dr. Emerick writes *A* at the top of the paper followed by *++* and beneath that *Bravo!*. Finally, finally, he can rest easy; he is getting through to one of his students.

Perhaps, he thinks, he is getting through to more.

He discards the query “Of Human Frailty” and picks up a stanzaic piece entitled “Dare Radiant Eyes Withdraw.” He notes the writer has bolded and underlined the first letter of each word in the title. His face scrunches up for a moment as he thinks about writing *What are you trying to give away?* when he double-checks the heading in the upper-right corner of the page. *Ah*, he thinks and smiles. *Sam wrote this. Sam Brenner. Yes.* His smile broadens. *Why, Sam does spend a lot of time staring at Drew Wassel across the room. She is a rather homely girl, but then again, Sam is quite an ugly chap for that matter.* Anticipating something fresh and interesting—it had been years since someone wrote a song to an unrequited love—and knowing that what followed would be Sam’s best work, he quickly jots *admire your audacity* in a thought bubble that floats to the left of the title, then continues his reading.

Hence casting my Gaze upon Thee
 I chance not look away.
 Thine Eyes entrancing in their Hue
 Lost I in them must stay.

And he can read no further. Our professor knows right away what the rest of this poem will be: an attempt to write in a style so archaic (yet once so loved) that it felt close to blasphemy. Even plagiarism. By capitalizing nouns and using the pronouns of medieval discourse, Sam was basically attempting to show off to his instructor—imploring that he knew how the best poets wrote, so he would write as they did. Such a cheat. Such a cheap cheat of a thing lay before him.

His eyes dash to the final two stanzas, his eyes dance about the final two stanza, and his eyes go swishy circling the final two stanzas:

Through the Valley of lush Forest
 I search the Dark of Night
 To find there hid thy dewy Rose

In the Gardens call'd Delight.

(*Oh, that damned apostrophed verb!* he thinks.)

I enter the Hall of Cibola

Great City I cannot describe

From whose River I'll drink of thy Nectar

And savor ere the Day I die

--There dwelling in 'lumined eyes.

He nearly loses his lunch and his dinner. He believes he has never read anything quite this ugly. This vulgar. Even the "Dozens" poem was better than this. At least *that* writer knew he was meaning to offend and knew the language with which to do it. But here, Sam tried to metaphorically discuss pubic hair and the birth canal...and call it *literary!*

The professor looks across the room at his glass-encased shelf of favorites (the works of those poets and those who wrote poetically he had sought after to find rare edition): Byron, Keats, Shelley, Shakespeare...Wilde. Oh, let us not forget that brilliant Oscar Wilde and our professor's treasured copy of *Salome*.

Furious. Dr. Emerick is furious. In front of our eyes he is transformed into a raging madman. He grabs for the handle on the bottom left hand drawer and yanks it open, nearly dismembering the heavy drawer from the desk proper. He blindly thrusts his hand into the deep recesses of the drawer, fumbles with several items we can safely assume are either a half-empty box of Chesterfields or some Black Beauty pencils (yes, one item is a sharpened-to-the-nub Black Beauty, because he momentarily removes his hand and sucks on his forefinger, which now has a swell of blood under the cuticle, before continuing his search) or—wait, he removes his hand. In it rests a red grease pencil.

The pencil does not rest for long. Soon it is jumping back and forth over Sam's paper, guided by the hand that knows exactly how hard to press in order to gain the right effect at any moment, guided by the mind that feels so comfortable transferring its red thoughts

through the angry grease, the offended grease, the dirty-feeling grease that releases its filthy stain onto whatever form of filth it covers.

By the time the professor has finished, the page is covered with swirls and loops encircling and enfolding at least half the poem's words. He debates whether or not he should write a paragraph (page, chapter, *book*) of comments, then decides to simply write a large *F* above the upper right heading, bisecting the *a* in *Sam*, the *Emer* in *Dr. Emerick*, and the *09* in *09 April 2001*. He underlines the letter grade for accent, then remands the paper to the discard pile.

Calming and obviously done his outburst, he drops the grease pencil into the drawer, shuts the drawer slowly, closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath. In. Out. In. Out. There, he feels better now. He understands on some level that he just needed to get that out of his system. Now he can just go on, grade, use the blue ink pen (the *new* blue ink pen), and forget about that grease pencil. *You used it once*, he says to himself. *Don't you think it's only fair you use it on a few more of their poems? It's a bit unfair to single someone out, don't'cha know*. He shakes his head and retorts (because he must always debate himself) *No, one is enough. I must not regain the habit. I work better, happier, without it; and more of my students pass the course*.

He reaches for the next ungraded paper, lifts it up, takes one more breath, and opens his eyes. "I am the Last: the Chosen," he says aloud. He wipes sweat from his tired brow, blinks twice, and reads on.

I am the Last: the Chosen.

He sits before dwindling flames of makeshift fire.

He breathes deeply again, thinks *it's not going to happen, I will not get upset*, and skips a few lines ahead.

now no more than mumbled gutturals...

Another breath, swathing of the brow. Skip.

But he knows not of lacrimation and its emotional correspondents.

The professor has no more need of this. With more speed than before, he flings open the drawer, draws the pencil, slashes a giant, murderous red *F* across the entire poem, underlines it three times, circles it and circles it and circles it some more. He wears down the pencil head once, unwraps the paper barrel with the pull string, and goes back at the circling. Again and again, around and around, the pulled paper still dangling from the pencil's barrel. He tosses the pencil back into the drawer, kicks the drawer shut, balls up the page in his hands, rips it to shreds, opens the drawer, drops the shreds in the far back, watches them snowflake down to cap the mountain range of gum wads, and comes up with the pack of Chesterfields. He shakes the box, empties its contents onto the table. He fumbles for a stale cigarette and the matchbook, flips the cigarette between his lips four times before he remembers this brand has no filter, and strikes the match before he catches himself.

Why, he thinks. Why do I subject myself to this year after year? Freshmen cannot fathom what good poetry is, so why do I continue to make my Freshman Comp students write anything other than three to five page themes? He thinks this, and makes a show of it there in his office. A show only for himself, his only audience. Because, you see, he knows why. He knows deep within himself that his search for the next great poet—someone he can mentor, mold, better, someone he will cultivate, guide, touch (*ah, touch*)—never ends.

He is shaken from his revelry by the sharp pain in his left hand. The match has burned itself down to its ends. He sticks his fingers in his mouth and sucks. His eyes trace the top of his desk and rest on the folded piece of typing paper atop the pile of ungraded student writing.

As he reaches for the paper, he shakes out the match, drops it on the floor, and places the Chesterfield behind his ear. He turns the folded page over in his hands and sees one word scrawled in a script not unlike his own at the center of the small square:

Dad

He wonders for a moment why his son would leave a note to him in a pile of papers (or, more importantly, why he would write a note to him to begin with, point being he had not done so since he was twelve). He unfolds the paper in halves twice, then once on the quarter-fold to reveal the top one-fourth of the written page:

Remember when I was a boy—you taught me how to fish
 And hit a baseball, ride a bike, spit, take a piss.
 The spankins and wrasslins, bouncin me on your knee
 And nap times and bath times and afternoon tea.

For the first time in a long time, Ronald Emerick is hit by two contrary emotions: anger, which he knows well, and love, which he has forgotten. His anger and love stem from the same single thought: my son has written a poem because I am a poet. He remembers his love for his son, with whom he has not spoken in the last three months about anything (although they still live in the same house) and finds it an honor that Daniel would choose this method of delivery for whatever important message must break their silence. But he also thrums with anger, for he also remembers how cocky and undisciplined and distant Danny has grown since he and Danny's mother Veronica began sleeping in separate bedrooms four years ago. But, this was written in his son's hand, which meant he had put some effort into it, some thought and time. This must surely meant it was worthy of love. The professor reads on in this light, unfolding one section at a time and dropping his jaw as he progresses through the passages.

Then one day it happened—when I hit puberty
 I started to enjoy takin thermometers rectally.
 I noticed tingly feelins when other boys were near.
 Dad, I think it's time; there's somethin you should hear...
 I'm queer. There, I said it—there's nothin you should fear.
 Don't blame yourself, Dad. Please don't shed a tear.

Dad, it don't mean we can't share another beer

I never meant to hurt you. Sorry, Dad, I'm queer.

I'll understand if you never want to speak to me again.

I'm movin out to 'Frisco with Lance, my special friend.

Please try to forgive me, Dad—I know you must be sore.

But if you can't, don't worry—I won't bother you no more.

I'm queer. Homosexuality—there's nothin you should fear.

Don't blame yourself, Dad. Let me make that perfectly clear.

But, Dad, it don't mean we can't share just one more beer.

I never meant to hurt you. Sorry, Dad, I'm queer.

Danny

• • •

At eight o'clock on a night in early April, a man's secrets are revealed. From the aging Tudor in Lot 59 comes the muffled sound of heart pangs that no one hears: the full-lunged sobs that behoove the diaphragm to release its pressure so the pain of the abdomen will be felt later rather than sooner, the full-throated tremors of the voice box that cause an adult's moans to remember the temblor of pubescent wavery, and the full-eyed welling of lacrimae that ooze, run, glide, and spring from reddened lids that no longer function as lids, can no longer contain the deluge that pours out from within, that merely puff up to create yet another obstacle the tear must overcome before it plummets from the chin to the breast.

• • •

Hey, old man—what's that? Shouldn't we get down or something?

Ssh. Are you watching or not?

Yeah, but I still don't know why we are watching. Why do you have me watching some guy's life go down the shitter? His fag son just wrote him the gayest letter I've heard in my

life, you've got me sitting here through this guy's worst night, crying over his son, and someone's coming now and they're gonna see us parked here—

Ssh. No one's going to see us. No one will hear us or sense us at all, for that matter.

How can that--?

Enough. He's here.

• • •

Everyone in the cul-de-sac hears the glass-pack muffler on the sunset-orange Charger as it races down the road and pulls into the driveway of Lot 59, but everyone knows it's Danny Emerick's car, and Danny Emerick's a nice boy, always has been, even when he was a ten year old brat he was charming, and now he's nineteen and just darling, a fine gentlemen, even in his dark chinos and leather jacket, at least it's a clean jacket and he keeps it scuff free, oh, his hair's a little longer, a little blonder, he's got an earring in both ears but they're just tiny diamond studs; yet he *is* clean-shaven and smells good, no grit under his fingernails, which, by the way, are cut at exactly one millimeter and manicured to the perfection of the front yard, so what if he smokes as much as his father and his parents don't get along anymore, he's Danny and he's all right and it's only eight, it's not like it's after eleven and Jay Leno's on, so that's fine. That's five-by. That's A-OK. Welcome home, Danny. It's good to hear from you.

Yes, Danny, welcome home. Welcome home once again. And for the last time.

• • •

The chain on the desk lamp is pulled and the light goes out before Danny's key slides into the lock on the front door. If he'd already been in the house, perhaps just shutting the door, he may have heard the abrupt cessation of a good long cry, but he doesn't hear that. Nor does he hear the aftershock-like series of snuffles and sighs dying off to nothingness. He doesn't

hear any of these things because he's on the other side of the door still, in the process of tripping the bolt and turning the worn knob on the old door that squeaks as it opens.

But that is well, I guess. There are no more sounds coming from inside the office. Danny wasn't really *meant* to hear any of it anyway. If he had, this story would not have taken place and we wouldn't be here right now. We *are* here, though, and we are waiting patiently to watch the story unfold.

As we speak, it's pitch black inside when he enters the house, but that's nothing new. It's usually like that, with his mother out until late with her girlfriends and his father out equally late at the office at school. He enters the hallway proper, pausing at the door to his father's office and wondering if he's read the letter yet, then makes his way to his bedroom. He's making it an early night because he and Lance have a lot of packing to do tomorrow and a lot of driving to do this weekend. Danny and Lance both know they won't be staying around here, even though Danny hopes against hope that his father will come around.

He flips on the light switch and tumbles onto his bed. He's extremely tired; he's out in five minutes.

He never hears the rummaging around in the garage or, later, his mother's screams. Danny has always slept like a computer: he falls asleep on his own and only wakes when alarmed or touched with the right amount of pressure.

Touched with the right amount of pressure. Hmmph...I guess the same could also be said of a shotgun that's lain dormant in the gun cabinet for a very long time.

The professor is out to the garage before his son's head hits the pillow. His eyes are red and swollen in the intermittent slices of backyard floodlights that cut the dark night from various cornices high on neighbors' houses, but he has quieted the raging storm in his body. Perhaps he has reached the eye of that storm, for although he seems well enough now—despite the blotchy red patches rashing over his face and arms, the pain in his diaphragm

which worsens with each recursive tremor, the drunken way he staggers across the rough-cut, octagonal stepping stones leading from quiet house to still garage—his emotions have far from run their courses this evening.

He drops the key in the lock and turns the knob of the garage door, much in the same manner Danny has just opened the house door. Roland reaches into the the greater darkness of the single room and fumbles for the light switch. The 200-watt halogen lamp ignites briefly, painting brilliant splotches across the professor's vision, then fizzles out with an electric pop.

He mutters something—some swear—and enters the garage. He knows where everything is; he is the one who's arranged this area and rearranged it for going on twenty-five years now. He walks directly towards the small dark room he made ten years ago for Veronica. He enters the room, stretching his arm out before him, finds the string attached to the light switch, and pulls on the silver bulb at the string's end. Instantly, he and everything else in the room are bathed in a low red light.

He reenters the garage proper—his room—and looks down as the red light darts in a widening trail across the floor and then creeps to fill the rest of the room with a burnt-pink glow. There, to the left of that pine; do you see it? The faint light. That's the window on the western wall. Yes...he's moving toward the old wardrobe he's fashioned into a cabinet for larger tools. He opens the French-style doors and reveals a mattock, several hoes and rakes, a post-hole digger. And lining the back of the cabinet is a wire-mesh sheet where various items are tacked up with j-hooks. He removes a thirty-foot length of tri-braid rope and slings it over his shoulder. The doors close on the tools.

The senior professor crosses the floor and runs his hand over the worktable in search of something to cut the rope with. Little trinkets, mechanical parts and bits, screws, wing nuts, 10-penny nails, old bills, receipts, and other personal papers jump from the table and make

their separate ways to the floor. He knocks over a bottle of epoxy and finally places his hand on something sharp: a filet knife. Once the knife is fitted snug in the hip pocket of his trousers, he begins forming a hangman's noose. He—

• • •

Hey, somebody else is pulling in.

Yes, I know. Here she comes.

What, his wife? What's she doing home? You said she wasn't due for—.

She's not. But tonight, Veronica's home early. One of the girls got sick. The rest decided to call it a night. That's it, end of story, she's home.

No, that's not it.

• • •

Veronica drives past the beat up rusty Tempo without even seeing it and pulls her Passport into the carport. She looks at the cruciform Jesus hung on a Celtic cross dangling from the rear-view mirror—"made at the hands of orphan girls in Belfast, Northern Ireland"—and lifts up a good thought for Vicky Sue. She knows Vicky's been dealing with emotional problems lately; when Ronnie's screwing the town shrink at a small bed and breakfast in Mitford, she hears just about everything. And Thom, the shrink who has taken over Ronald's duties lately, tells her that Vicky Sue's been vomiting regularly and sleeping more often than not. Ronnie crosses herself and reaches for the handle; as she glances involuntarily out the driver's window, she first notices the faint pink light leaking out of the garage.

Now why would anyone be out there at this hour, she thinks, especially in my dark room? She gets out of the car, situates her short-strapped taupe purse under her shoulder, and heads over to the garage. She pauses at the door with her hands on either side of the frame and leans in; she watches for a moment, watches Ronald rummaging through his junk in the dark, watches him search in that soft-pink near darkness for something he may never find.

"Ronald, what on earth are you doing out here?" she asks and crosses the threshold into the garage for the last time.

• • •

Quit saying stuff like that, that "for the last time." Just stop trying to tell me it's over for them. What're you trying to do, soften the blow?

Just wait then, and watch the professor.

• • •

"Ronald," Veronica asks again, "I said, 'what are you doing out here?'" She's looking at him with questioning eyes—almost hurt eyes—and he does not know why. He doesn't even think about that, really. He merely pulls the filet knife from his pocket and slices the air in front of her throat with it, the tip digging through the wattled flesh of her neck and cutting into her larynx.

Ronnie tries to speak but has no voice. Her hands come up to her throat and drop again, cupping fresh little puddles of blood. Her eyes, now wide open in large circles, continue questioning her husband. But they now have a new light about them: terror.

The professor looks deep into her eyes, looks at the puddles of blood in her hands, drops his eyes to the blood tipped filet knife in his right hand. He almost drops the knife but her liver spotted hands come up to his cheeks, smear their red rouge on his rough beard, and paint the front of his shirt with the blood that is not paint. He examines her eyes again and then his hand takes over.

He's already plunged the filet through her torso five times to hilt before he realizes what he's doing, and even after that realization strikes him, he continues.

• • •

Get your arm off of me, old man. We've got to help her.

No, we don't. All we can do is watch. Stay in the car.

That's bullshit. You can't hold me here.

Just hold still then and I won't. There's no going out there. Besides, it won't do any good. Just sit, watch, listen, and learn.

• • •

When he has finished, Dr. Emerick steps back, drops the knife, and takes in what he has left of his wife. Her chest is a bloody mess. Serrated strings of her shirt and flesh, only made possible by the angled tooth design of the filet knife, sprout like thick clots of hair from her open wounds. They remind the professor of the paper rippings dangling from the unperforated edge of the poem pages he was grading less than two hours ago.

He wonders what he will do, but he already knows the answer. He crosses over the body and begins rummaging the table again. His hands come back with a sheet of paper and a pencil. He turns the paper over in his hands and catches the following in the bloody light of the dark room: "...we have credible evidence—photographs, voice recordings, telephone logs—suggesting an affair with one of your students. We therefore must inform you that your tenure has been rescinded and your contract will expire at the end of the fiscal year." He flips the page over and begins to write in that same hand we saw earlier.

Son, I've got something to say to you...

• • •

Danny wakes with a start. His upper body has come up as if pulled by a marionette's strings and sits with his head lowered. He was just experiencing a deep sleep—the REM sleep where bodies recuperate—and his brain, which was in the process of shutting down everything unneeded for the next several hours, feels heavy and slow. A hand comes up—again, he thinks of some unknown puppeteer tugging on his strings—and he rubs his face, his eyes, his hair. Sleep starts to draw off of him and his brain begins to function again. There's a small creak to his left—ah, no, it is not the settling of the house, I'm sorry to say; I told you we wouldn't be

here that long. His head begins to pivot on his neck. He first sees a pair of muddy brown shoes—his father’s. His head continues its way along the course of the rotation. He notes something oblong and shiny in his father’s hands...and he notes nothing more except what seemed, in one one-hundredth of a second, the beginning of some loud report. But in that one-hundredth of a second his head and upper body are vaporized into nothingness.

• • •

At nine fifty-eight on a cool April night, a gunshot barks out from the aging Tudor in Lot 59 and destroys the sleepy silence of Shingleton Square. In eight separate houses in twenty separate beds, thirty-three sets of eyelids flutter back, thirty-three sets of eyes stare blankly at twenty different ceilings, and following the cue of that strange puppeteer Danny Emerick—our boy Danny—will never think of again, thirty-three people sit upright simultaneously and turn towards whatever window or hallway door stands between them and Lot 59. Then, slowly, thirty-three people rub their heads and are lowered back into sleep.

Only three—no four—people remain awake at this hour. There’s the two men sitting in a rusty car, fogging up the windows with their conversation of what they see without seeing, observe without observing, but know every nuance of just the same. There’s the man walking out his dead son’s room in the aging Tudor; a shotgun dangles from his tired arms and the warm muzzles bounce against his knees with every cumbersome step back to his garage. Back to his garage...where the fourth person lies against the cold dusty unwelcoming cement floor; her eyes, shiny and semi-lucid, are popping out of her skull and twirling a-go-go in the soft red light enveloping her, and her mouth is gagging and sputtering and struggling for air as her tongue attempts to slide its weighty way down her throat and her leaky windpipe brings a harsh, hollow wind into one working lung (the other has collapsed after filling quickly with the blood of several internal wounds).

• • •

The professor steps over the threshold of the garage door one last time. He walks over to the heaving body of his wife, taking in her miserable state—the mix of blood, tattered skin and clothing, shallow breathing, shimmering bulbous eyes floating in no particular direction, that insane blood bubble enlarging and then collapsing back between her lips. Enlarging.

Collapsing. Enlarging. Collapsing. En—*collapse*—lar—*collapse*—ging. Collapsing. Eh-eh-eh-en.

Collapse. L-la-lala-lar. *Collapse*.

He pumps the shotgun and moves the end of the barrel into position about eighteen inches above her chest. He pulls the trigger and watches the upper one-third of her body—well, what remains of it—shoot away from her torso and legs and come to rest under the table, leaving a sticky track of blood, skin, obliterated bone, and entrail in its wake.

• • •

Again thirty-three bodies are pulled up in bed. Again thirty-three bodies adjust themselves and are lowered to sleep.

• • •

Ronald Emerick, a solitary man, steps into the noose he has made for himself. He pulls the rope snug against the side of his neck and runs the one-way slip knot down to the nape. He advances to the edge of the work stool he has placed in the center of the garage. He looks up one more time and pulls on the rope; it grows taut against the centerline beam of the roof's elegant scaffold-like support structure. He releases the pressure and straightens the note on his chest, the note that begins "Son, I've got something to say to you" and ends with the final stanzas he has added to his son's poem—which, he incidentally, has left tacked to the closed door of Danny's room.

A single tear drops down one cheek as he puts some of his weight over the edge of the stool. It totters precariously on the verge of life and death then falls to the floor. The professor follows it bodily and begins to choke as the rope tightens around his neck. He thinks

of the ever-collapsing bubble of blood on his dead wife's lips, he thinks of the sight of his son without a head on his body and the horrible pulp mass that formed below where his chest met his stomach, he thinks of the young freshman boy he deflowered only weeks ago, and he thinks of how easy it will be to go to Hell.

And then something which he has not thought of occurs. The rope snaps and he collapses to the floor.

God damn it, he thinks but does not say—the rope remains rigid against his burning throat. *Why can't this be as easy as the rest of it was.*

He loosens the knot a single iota—just enough to breathe—and ponders his next step. Ponders long and hard while the rest of the neighborhood ponders not in the sleep of dreams good and ill.

• • •

He dials seven numbers on the wall-mounted phone above his work station, watching the rotary dial tick back slowly each time and leaving bloody print smears along the rims of seven finger holes of the dial. He crouches back down under the table and caresses his wife's sallow cheek, mixing the wet blood dripping from the corner of her mouth with the crusted gritty clotted blood on her jaw. The line rings once and the sleepy voice of an older lady greets him.

"Ethel," he mutters hoarsely. "Send the Chief over here as soon as possible. This is Ronald Emerick and I have just killed my wife and son. Ronnie and Danny are dead. I'm sorry. Please hurry."

He drops the telephone and picks up the muzzle of the shotgun. He peers long into the black hole that will seal his fate while old Ethel Johnson squeals his name and the Chief's through the speaker end of the phone. He then opens the black hole of his mouth and accepts that other black hole, creating a short continuum of darkness between himself and shotgun.

He pulls the trigger, the buckshot rockets through the deep dark steel tunnel much faster than the water had coursed through its own dark canals, and Ronald Emerick falls into his own black hole.

As his lifeless body slumps to the ground, bisecting the blood trail between the two halves of his wife's body, the note he scrawled is caught in the cold pink light emanating from the dark room. Very soon, now, a brighter white light from the bulb in the Chief's Maglite will fall on that note and he will read the most curious suicide note of his life.

Boy, I've had suspicions ever since you were a kid.

You seemed to like the boys more than your sister did.

Leave if you think you must—I won't stand in your way.

But, Son, before you go, there's something I should say...

I'm gay. That's right, boy—me, too.

And your uncles, Al and Ray.

That's why your mother "left" on your 19th birthday.

So, please forgive me son; I didn't mean to make you this way.

The last thing in the world I wanted was for you to be gay.

~~Ronald~~ Dad

Interlude

Michael Coogan stared blankly out the driver's window for a long time. He watched as the EMS and FIRE crews from the Cedar Rapids Voluntary Squad pulled their vehicles into the driveway, walked into the house and/or garage, and strode back out toward the side of the house with their hands to their faces, invariably holding back the vomit which rises in their throats and makes their mouths taste of bile. One fireman walked out a bit drunkenly with his arm around a woman paramedics shoulder, his head down to his chest where he has upchucked his Hungry Man TV dinner. The bits of corn and green beans and Salisbury steak danced in the flashing blues and reds and whites of the spinning dome lights which ride the tops of each vehicle. As the woman guided the fireman (Mike noticed now that the fingers of right hand are interlaced with the fingers of his right hand and caught the glints off their wedding rings) to the opened rear doors of the ambulance, they began to fade away. Mike searched the scene and found all the other people and vehicles doing the same. They looked like ghosts. A moment later, they were gone. A FOR SALE sign had manifested right beside of Mike's front tire and two-foot high grasses and weeds had sprouted on Lot 59. Most of the windows were broken and boarded.

Mike finally turned to look at old John.

"Yes," John said. "It didn't happen today. What you just watched was six months ago."

He studied the younger man as Mike studied him. "That's why you could do nothing about it."

Mike just stared at him.

"No questions now, son," John intoned. And, as an afterthought: "I seem them percolating inside you."

They sat regarding each other for a long time. Then Mike returned his gaze to the aging Tudor and John looked up to the sky.

"It's time to move on, kid," the old janitor said. "I've got to get to work."

Mike turned the key in the ignition, put the car in gear, and followed John's directions back down the hill.

They drove along in silence for a few minutes. They passed an old, burnt out market. It also looked like it hadn't been entered in years. *What is it with this county and all the derelict buildings?* Mike thought. *Why don't they just tear that shit down? It's so friggin' depressing.*

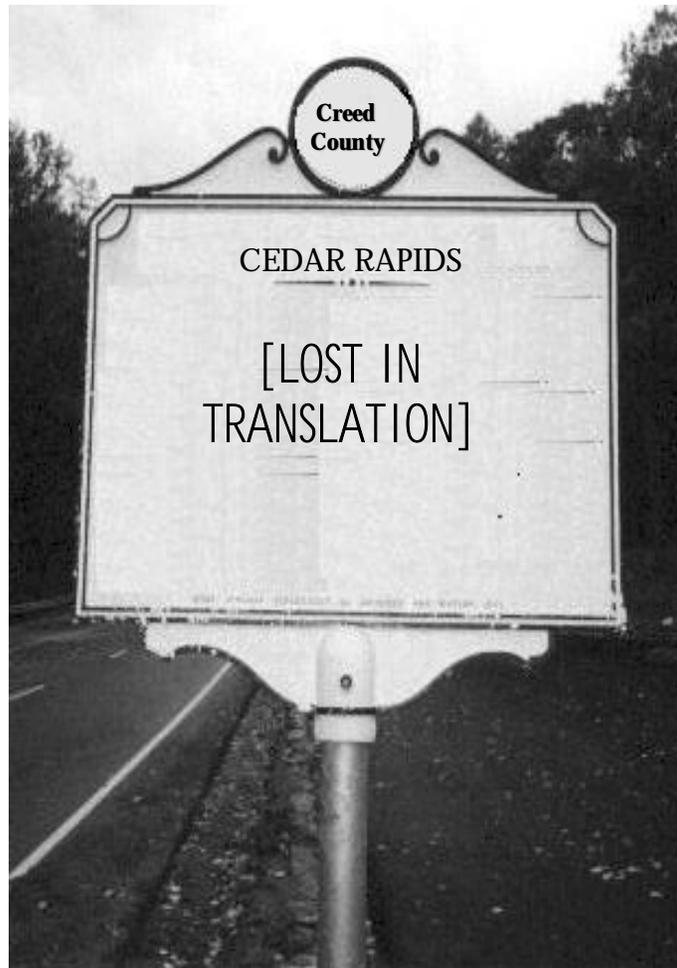
"It is a bit depressing, isn't it?" John asked. Mike flashed him his curious look again, then John asked the question Mike somehow knew he would. That question brought with it his headache. "You have a story to tell, too, don't you, Michael?"



"I don't think so, old man," he replied, his eyes fixed on the double yellow lines of the highway. Silence filled the cab again. Mike was sure John would ask him again, implore him, maybe even use that hypnosis shit again. But John didn't ask again. Although it lasted only a few seconds, that silence became unbearable for Mike.

"All right, old-timer, I'll tell you." Mike sounded a bit disgusted and perhaps he was. He didn't like revealing things about himself. But he did it now for two reasons: first, the old guy *had* told him his story and it had been pretty personal and interesting; second, he had an idea that if he didn't tell it to the old man, the old man would tell it to him, perhaps in more detail that he himself even wanted. He eyed the janitor square and said, "But let me warn

you—I'm no good at sharin' or tellin' stories. I've never been good with detail, so prepare yourself for a straightforward report with no willowy and flowery business. All right? All right."



As the guy who vowed to never live in a dormitory, I lied to myself for six months. True, I never actually lived in the dorms, but for half a year I slept in one. Slept there, showered there; kept a stack of clothes in the corner of the room and an old pencil box—the third-grade standard with *Scooby-doo* to match your favorite *underoos* on its lid—where my razor, soap, and toothbrush resided. And my sheets covered the two twin beds which I had pushed together one evening in January. But I never footed the bill, and if you could roust up those old sign-in sheets the hall monitors kept, you'd see I was only in Howards-Danner Hall three nights a week. Not that they ever knew—or even cared—if you ducked in through the window. But yeah, I stayed there for about six months; the residents would have said I lived there, and

I guess, perhaps, I did. After the last two and a half years of drifting on the highs and lows through life, though, I had a completely different concept of living. And reasons for it.

Her name was Mia—or, at least, I thought it was.

There's only one thing that makes me remember the day I met her. I wish I could say it was the way she looked in her black stockings and skirt and that funny brown mini-parka she always wore with the red ear-muffs and matching scarf, standing in line by the placard reading STUDENT TICKETS ONLY, quaking ever-so-slightly in the midday chill. I wish I could say it was the way her eyes caught the light as they smiled at me surreptitiously above her imperfectly set nose and guileless mouth, through a succession of vapors puffing out with every word or laugh uttered at her gal pals; or how she used her whole *bellissima's* body as she did so: rocking back at the waist to let out a good squeal, resting her hand lightly on one of her girlfriends' arms effecting a shimmer of camaraderie and love.

Hell, I even wish I could say, yeah, it was the day we all stood in line for tickets to Autumnfest. Yet, sadly, it was none of these things. I think of them, sure I do; I wouldn't've been able to recall them here for you now if I didn't think of them. No, the only way I know for sure what day it was I met her is that I had been one-hundred percent, tee-friggin-totally, straight as an arrow, not-ed-at-all sober, and Mia was the first *real* person, place, or thing I had seen in God knows how long.

I'd never been shy with women, but as I walked over toward this group of girls (I noticed one of them was Sherri Ann Mahoney, a girl from my Trig class I'd shot up coke and made out with last semester) I felt a small yellow stripe glide up my back from tail bone to neck line. For the first time in my life I thought I might be at a loss for words. I mean, here's this angelic creature I've been looking for—well, for years—and just when I'm about to introduce myself,

her friend flips her hair back and reveals to me she is a girl I nearly banged (she did cop my joint) and really did get high with. Two things right there you never want a possible-future girlfriend to know, especially if you've gotten the monkey off your back and are no longer a junkie and raving sex-fiend.

All this I thought about before I engaged them...and then I had crossed the bounds of their circle and pawned my way into their conversation.

"Hey, S.A.," I said. "How've you been?" I started to raise my hand for a shake, but before it got six inches from my side Sherri had thrown her arms around me forcing a hug.

"Michael, baby, where've you been?" she asked, and I could feel the big smile on her face.

"Around," I said. "Cleaning my act up."

She released me and took a couple steps back. "That's good to hear, my friend. Have you met Mia yet?" She motioned at her friend—she of the captivating eyes.

"No, I...," I began, then turned to look at Mia. The girl demurred, blushing and dropping her eyes. God, she was cute.

"She's from China," Sherri said. "Her dad's a GI-in-station, you know. She's on scholarship. She's..."

But that's all I heard. I stuck my hand into the girl's field of vision. Her small yellow hand crept up from her side and slid smoothly into mine. My body began tingling all over. She turned her face up and I saw those eyes again, surrounded in soft tones of pink embarrassment.

"Mia," I said, lifting the last syllable in a bit of a question. She shook her head briefly.

"Ming-Na," she said in the softest most wonderful voice I'd heard since I was at my poor dead mother's breast.

"Mina," I said, lifting the last syllable again as well as my eyebrow. I wasn't quite sure this was right either.

She shook her head again. "Ming. Naaa," she said, stressing the syllables.

"Mee-nah," I said, setting the syllables a bit farther apart.

She looked up at me, smiled a little with her lips and eyes, and almost imperceptibly shook her head. I caught it, but I don't think anyone else did. I smiled back. Her face lit up as and her smile widened.

"Mike," I said, and laid a hand on my chest.

"Maaik," she replied. I smiled; she smiled.

Then I heard Sherry say, "Oh-kay." I stared into Mina's eyes a moment longer, then slowly moved them to Sherry. She said, "I guess you're with us tonight."

I looked at her directly this time and said, "I guess so, babe."

Sherry shoved her arm between my elbow and my side, locking mine in hers. She pulled at it and said, "Come on, then. Let's go get some seats." She tugged harder and I felt my whole body pulled in her direction.

It was only then that I realized Mina's hand was still in mine.

We had a good time that night. The game went well for the school. I stared at Mina for hours and she at me. We hardly did any talking, but then Sherry did all the talking for us anyway. She went through the whole story of Trig class and how we met and our study group and how good a guy I was. She never mentioned the night cap, though. Thank God.

I didn't see Mina after that for a couple weeks. And those were some pretty bad weeks, man, because I suffered from all kinds of withdrawal. Pot, hash, coke, Jack Daniels, The Glenlivet, Pall Malls, Macanudos...and Mina. But that's what kept me from throwing it all away and getting back on the junk: the thought of Mina made all those other cravings seem miniscule.

I thought of that girl constantly, and just when I began thinking I would never see her again—Sherri had written me off, I think, and who knew what was up with that Penelope chick—she walked into my office.

Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you that—about the office. See, I *told* you I was no good at storytelling. I'd started working at the Tutors Center earlier that semester. Located in the basement of Coleman Hall down a tight corridor past the boiler room, the office was not much more than an old janitor's hovel where the three rotting cots had been replaced with three rotting desks.

Wait, sorry. I didn't mean anything by hovel. That's just the only word I could think of to call it.

There were six of us posing as tutors. I say "posing" because not much tutoring actually went on down there. I can think of three reasons for this: first, the location, second, the location, and third, most students felt they knew how to do their work, and even when they received low grades they felt too embarrassed to seek us out. We did see our share of English as a Second Language students—these from various Asiatic and Eastern European countries—because, I think, their instructors forced them to visit us. At any rate, we saw only a handful of students per week, and that's why only three of us were working (and by that I mean reading books and magazines with our feet up on the desktops) the day Mina arrived.

I noticed the shadow cross over me first. I closed the copy of *Gentleman's Quarterly* I was reading and saw a pair of white-stockinged thighs running up into a very short plaid, pleated skirt. My eyes wandered upward, slowly (shit, man, it's not every day you get a great pair of legs staring at you from across your desk): an armful of books, a folder, and several loose papers rested at a low angle in the crook of a slender arm; a white shirt covered by an open-front navy sweater; a soft hand, with a Bic pen lying in the webbing of a thumb and between

the first two fingers, running back and forth through shoulder-length black hair; a tiny gold-leafed cross dangling from an equally gold-leafed necklace; a blushingly magnificent face with the perfect mixture of Chinese and American lines and color.

"Oh, Mina," I said as I rose. "It's...um, it's great to see you again."

She bowed her head again, as I was sure she would, and my heart began pounding in my head again. "What's up?" I asked.

"Maaik, I haf problem. My paper need hep."

"Oh, okay, Mina. That's what we are here for." I paused and stared at her. My eyes began to wander and again and I caught them. I knew she was uncomfortable. "It's, um, great to see you again." I felt like a dumbass, I tell you. I'd just said that, you know. But it seemed to break the ice. She moved her hand to her face to stop a giggle and stabbed herself in the cheek. She'd forgotten the pen in her hand.

I was around the desk before she finished her "ouch". I pulled her books from her arm and placed them on the desk. I brought my hands up to the side of her face just as she did, and her hands covered mine for a brief moment. That electric shock ran through my body again, and I'd like to say I felt it go through her, too. Then she dropped her hands and let me examine her. Turned out she was fine; no damage done.

Anyway, we both sat down and I handed her the sign-in form—a document all clients needed to fill out. You know: name, rank, serial number, all that. I watched as the letters flowed from her pen onto the name line in a slightly cursivic hand.

M i n g - N a

"Ah," I said. "*Ming-Na*." She looked up from her writing and her face questioned my words. Then she smiled, realizing what I meant.

"Yes, no MEENAH," she returned and offered me another of those giggles.

Well, we worked for a couple hours after that, harnessing the power of her essay—she wrote well; she just needed a little help with articles, prepositions, and adjectives. She was so cute, I tell you. Every few minutes I'd say something (most often idiomatically), and she'd pull out her pocket translator and start typing in words. Sometimes I'd type them in for her. She was so avid to learn, I decided not to simply explain it to her. By the time we finished, my colleagues had already left. We were the evening shift scheduled until seven o'clock. I hadn't paid much attention to the extra forty-five minutes I'd just put in, and later did not include them on my time sheet.

Before she left, Ming-Na took my hands in hers and said, "Tan-kew, Maaik." She demurred again, blushing, bowing her head, avoiding eye contact. "You hepped me lot."

"You are welcome," I said, squeezing her hands. She squeezed back. "And you are quite stunning." She laughed at that, her face reddened, then she gave me that curious look. "Stunning?" she asked, and turned one hand into a gun.

"Something like that," I said and she shook her head. I guess she didn't think I got it, so she pulled out her translator. She began to type in the word, but I stilled her fingers with one hand and closed the translator with my other. I then took both her hands in mine again, squeezed them, and looked into her eyes. She gazed back just as deeply. "No translator," I told her. "Stunning is pretty. As in, you're so pretty I feel stunned." I pointed my hand at her, palm upturned, then bowed it back towards me. I set my hand on its side and turned it into a gun. I fake-shot myself and pretended to fall over. "See," I said. "So pretty. Stunning."

Her smile brightened and her eyes twinkled. "Tan-kew, Maaik. You preettie too." She leaned forward, pecked me on the cheek, and was on her feet in an instant. A moment later her books were in her hands and she was heading out the door.

"Wait. Ming-Na," I said, getting up and following her out. "Let me walk you. No one's left in this building."

“Oh, tank you, peeze.”

On the way up the stairs, I asked her out. I was the best decision I’d made in years. Probably in my life.

That weekend the college hosted their annual foreign film festival. On Saturday, I met Ming-Na at her dormitory and walked her to Blevins Auditorium across campus. We watched three movies back to back. I’d only intended on taking her to one, but they were so good and we enjoyed them so much I decided I had to spend more time with her.

I don’t remember much about any of them—the first one was some Spanish comedy and the second was a French thriller. The first I found funny, but she didn’t laugh much. Probably because the subtitles (in English only) ran fast. And the second one scared her a bit. By the end of it she’d jumped several times and grabbed my hand thrice. I would squeeze an affirmation—*I’m here, it’s okay*—and she would let go when she’d regained her composure.

The third one, though, that was the kicker. It was in Mandarin, *and* English, with English and Mandarin subtitles throughout the whole thing. The perfect date movie for us, let me tell you. I was able to see and hear her language in a way I never had before: both aurally and visually at the same time along with the written translation of my own. And she was able to share that experience with me from the other angle. It was wonderful. And, even better, a romance. It ran two and a half hours, but I enjoyed every minute because after the first fifteen minutes her hand never left mine. By then end of it, I had my arm around her neck as she snuggled under my shoulder, our fingers intertwined in a lover’s clasp on my leg.

We went out regularly after that and soon enough we were going steady. Even after we’d been dating for several weeks, I noticed that she always kept her translator with her. She

kept breaking it out every time I said something idiomatic or just unknown to her. Eventually the use of this device became rare as we both began giving up crutches.

One night we were making out behind Howards-Danner, and the next thing I knew I was sleeping over more and more often not getting much sleep, if you know what I mean. Before Thanksgiving Break I'd basically moved in with her.

Everything was going exceptionally well; we connected on so many different levels. We realized that although we were from opposite ends of the globe, we came to have the same thoughts, interests, gestures...flesh. Even our words began mirroring each others. Sometimes I'd be checking over one of her essays and notice a particular phrasing or structure I'd been prone to use. And I found sometimes in the middle of night when it was black as pitch in the room, our naked bodies wrapped in each other, momentarily the same color, I began dropping words from my sentences and speaking with the short clipped vocabulary of my girlfriend.

We still had our moments, though—still had those moments when either I said something she didn't quite get or she couldn't think of the English word for something and she would speak in her native tongue (at which point I wouldn't get it). But together we realized that those few moments did not even matter, for what was lost in translation we simply made up in love.

Then came the night they sent word my mother had died, locked away in some padded cell three towns over. I hadn't seen her since I was ten, but I cried just like the child I was on the day they took her away in the ambulance, bruised and broken and bleeding and muttering like a schizophrenic. I hadn't cried that hard since the cats, you know. And there Ming-Na sat at my side. She took me into her arms and rocked me for hours. A weird feeling. Here I was, crying over the woman at whose breast I used to suck as she rocked me to sleep, with my head in the breast of the only woman since who had made me feel whole. Sometime later

that night I realized I could love this angelic being—divined by the hands of a God I personally knew not but knew had to exist just the same because she existed—for the rest of my life and not think twice about any decisions I made after that. Or before, for that matter.

So we made love that night. I'd like to say it was the best love we'd ever made—together or with anyone else. It was for me; of that I am sure. That act of passion marked the one and only night I ever orgasmed simultaneously with anyone.

Six months later it was over.

I was supposed to meet her at a party at Guy Malone's parent's house. I had some studying to do at the library, so Mina suggested we meet at Guy's later; she'd just go on without me. The studying didn't take as long as I'd thought, so I got there a bit earlier than expected. I searched the downstairs for her, dodging in and out of groups standing around tables talking about their screwed-up lives and teachers, gawping around pony kegs watching drunken fools attempting keg stands, cheering on half-naked coeds around the mud-wrestling kiddie pool. Nobody knew where Ming-Na could be found. Some said they'd seen her earlier, but then she'd just disappeared. Finally Mary Swenson told me she'd gone upstairs with Guy.

I thanked her gruffly and inched my way up the staircase passed the dumbasses stair-diving from the landing into another kiddie pool filled with beer and liquor. I opened every door off the hallway, including two walk-in linen closets and a half bath, all of which contained either puking or ing girls and boys, who apparently were so drunk they did not care what sex their partner was.

By the time I reached the door at the far end of the hall, my heart had sunk into my stomach and my balls had crawled back up into my body. That door led to the fabled

“parent’s bedroom,” known by all party-goers throughout history as the holiest of holy places to get laid.

My heart and testicles had a right to retreat. I opened the door and saw a big hairy pimply white ass bobbing up and down in the air with two more darkly tanned legs that were not really tanned stretched out beneath it—legs I had studied and parted many times in the past several months. I stood there, watching for a moment, until I heard the once lovely, now pathetic sobs and cries and Mandarin exclamations I had heard myself so many times before. There was one aspect of this impassioned encounter, however, which I didn’t register at the time but thought of later; Ming-Na seemed to like it rougher than I’d thought. She kept clawing and grabbing and slapping as he worked more and more vigorously and panted, “Give it. Yeah. You whore. That’s what. I want.”

Without any known or detectable shift, the emotional brownout inside me had converted to pure, unadulterated rage. You see, I’d grown up with people screwing me over left and right—my father, my father’s bitch of a second wife, my brother, all of whom beat the shit out of me emotionally or physically more times than I care to recall—and now I’d come to see the one person who I thought was different do the same. This time, however, she chose the most direct route to beat me up in both ways.

So I advanced on the not-so-lily white ass even as it quickened, wrapped my hands around the neck attached to it via a torso, and wrenched the son of a bitch off of her. Ming-Na continued crying and speaking in her native tongue, and out of the corner of my eye I saw her curl up into a tight ball on the bed, shaking and rocking inconsolably. But that didn’t matter one iota to me. I was busy beating the living shit out of Guy Malone, the purveyor of injustice and disrespect and inscrutable disregard for the man who’d helped him pass nearly all of his classes that required research papers—the man who secured his rite of passage into the world—me.

I kicked, I punched, I wailed on the bastard. By the time I was done, we were both covered in blood. I gave one last look of disgust and pain to Ming-Na and then I was out the door. Out of the house. Out of the dorm. Out of her life.

It's been six years since that life-changing night. It's gone downhill ever since. I went through a string of broken relationships, broken dreams, broken images. I actually dropped out of school two weeks after the incident and moved to Cincinnati. I went to the police academy, assured myself that I would spend the rest of my life learning how to know when people were lying to you, covering up their true feelings. My grades were lousy, but that didn't matter.

Three weeks into my second year—one thing I'll say for Cincy, they got extensive training—I found myself the flat mate of three other students who were running a drug ring right out of the basement of our apartment. I didn't like it; I felt screwed again. So I called the Internal Affairs Bureau and became their mole. I helped bust those guys and earned an early graduation, joining the IAB without ever having to wear blues outside of the academy.

I became the meanest motherer dirty cops ever saw. Nobody liked me, not even the other men in the Bureau. They knew I'd nail them to wall if I found out they had the smallest stain on their careers. I spent the next two years weeding out corruption in one precinct after another.

Then about a month ago, I saw her on a bus. I was sitting in the far back, paying little attention to my fellow believers in public transportation as they filed in and out at each stop. I didn't even know she was on the bus until I heard a scream.

Five gangbangers had gotten on. Now they were waving clubs and knives, ripping jewelry and watches off necks and arms and demanding wallets. I saw two of them attack this poor

Chinese woman, kissing, groping, and searching her for goods, and remembered Guy Malone and the dirty whore who ruined my life. Then I realized it was Ming-Na sitting there. And again, I did nothing to her. I did stand right up and put a bullet in both of the perps heads, however, then shot three more at their pallies who went right down with them.

I went to the woman and stared at her hard for a long minute or two. Then I exited the bus, went to the nearest pay phone, and reported the incident.

I know now it wasn't really her. Just some other China doll that triggered a memory. But I'm not sorry for wasting those bastards, even though the commissioner suspended me without pay during the investigation which always follows shootings that distress the public (hell, I scared the shit out of all those bus riders more than the gangbangers did, and even though I got blood all over their nice clothes and faces, they never thought I'd just saved their sordid lives); they deserved what they got as much as Guy Malone deserved his righteous beating.

Like my father deserved for sending my mother to an early grave—the cemetery of her own mind. Like he should have got a long time ago.

Interlude

"There's my story, old timer," Mike finished. His eyes met John's, whose own eyes held them firmly. Mike sniffed back some tears he would not let spill; he was too old for that baby business. "I hope you're happy with it. I hope the receiving end was a lot better than the delivery."

They were parked outside the library at Bellingham. Mike hadn't even noticed the new rose of day creeping above the eastern horizon.

The older man remained quiet for a short time and let the younger man's anger abate. Then he spoke in the voice of a mentor Michael Coogan never knew.

"Michael, there's one fundamental thing here you don't understand. Ming-Na wasn't screwing around on you. That night you went in and pulled Guy Malone off of her...you stopped a rape in progress." He paused momentarily, gauging Mike's reaction, which, in this case, was as severe as he had known it would be. "That's right, boy. He was raping her. And you stopped it. But you stopped yourself, too. You just thought she was another person running out on you, like your father, your mother, everyone. She wasn't. Although you saved her from being completely screwed up by her attack, you left her screwed up in another way: she thought you were mad at her for getting raped. And she still thinks that today.

"And you were wrong about another thing; not everything you two shared was known. Some things actually did get lost in translation."

Mike reacted as he has always reacted. With rage. "This is bullshit. Why are you telling me all this bullshit? Why are you showing me all this *bull shit?*"

"I'm lending you all this 'bullshit' as you refer to it (although I know you don't believe it to be such) because there are certain things you need to know before you leave this place. Not every life is as bad as another; some are better, some are worse; but every life has some meaning; every person has some specific reason to live. Even those committed to live their lives deaf and dumb or wheelchair-bound have some reason for living.

"And others, even those who seem to be given all the gifts in the world—a full life, easy living, minimal tax payments—have some specific reason for dying. They themselves may not know what that reason is, but it's there.

"Tommy Bracken is one who needed to die at such a young age. If he hadn't had, Benjamin Hoban would've been the one in the well. And although his life also ended sourly, and despite his embezzlement of the town's petty cash, he helped rebuild the James Street Church, which housed a hundred and fifty people during a harrowing ice storm three months after his disappearance.

"And Pete Jenkins—his mother caused a big stink about *his* death, and the townspeople eventually ran the Romeros out of town—out of county, actually, thanks to Sheriff Perkins and his politically minded habit of supporting those who support him.

"And you, Michael. You must now realize that yours is not the worst experience ever. You've actually done good things. Do you know what happened to Brad Witherspoon after you left?"

"Yeah, he got better after staying in the hospital for several weeks and home for several months adjusting to the medication, had to repeat senior year, but graduated. Last I heard he'd gone into political science somewhere."

"He actually ran for the state legislature. He didn't win, but he jangled the vote so much that the runner up didn't make office—and that one would have if he'd only run against the

incumbent (and not Brad, too). That runner up would've given more power to the coal companies when the state was up in arms about mountain top removal and restoration.

"And Ming-Na, well, Ming-Na is alive and well and playing mother to a brilliant young prodigy named, believe it or not, after you. He's only thirteen and he's tested high above college-level expectations in DNA sequencing and other areas of biotechnology. He may very well cure some diseases one of these days."

"Okay, so some good things have happened," Mike said. "But what about that kid who killed his friends on Hick's Run, or the professor who axed his family?"

"Son, I hate to break it to you, but even I don't know everything. As far as I can say on those two counts, they just go to show you that you haven't been the most beshitted in life."

"Okay, mister, I'll let those slide. But what about my father? What about that son of a bitch?"

"Now that one's easy, boy. Your father had to die to bring you here. Why, that's the reason you came back to Creed, isn't it? To bury your old man and all those hard feelings pent up for so long? You bury your old man, you bury those, your life only gets better, right?"

Mike had no response to that, and they rode on another five minutes or so in silence.

"Well," John said. "I guess it's time you let me go."

"I let you go?" Mike asked.

"Yeah, kid." John grinned. "You've kept up this jibber-jabber too long. I've only got about three hours left until the students start pouring into the library. It ain't too big, but it's big enough."

Could it really be that early/late? Mike wondered.

"Yes, it could, boy, and it is."

John double-checked his wristwatch just to be sure. Truth be told, it was about ten after five. *Jesus, did that time go by.*

“Yes, it did.” John winked at him, climbed out of the car, and shut the door. He turned and started walking towards the library, and that was that. He disappeared through the doors and was gone.

• • •

Now Mike drove along the main street (52 itself) that ran through the heart of the town of Bland. He and the rusty Tempo went on past the small burg and out into the farmland surrounding it. Another five minutes and he was heading up an old one-lane dirt road with deep ruts. He didn't know how he remembered how to get to the old family homestead—the farm where his father, his grandfather, and his grandfather's grandfather had all grown up; every generation except for Mike—but he found it just the same.



When he got out of the car, he looked up and noticed the peculiar hang of the clouds. For the most part, they stretched to cover the entire sky with their slightly yellowed canvas. But below that, even below the closest of the larger hills, another stream of clouds hung below the ridgeline—between the ground and the canopy clouds. Maybe that was common in this region, but he didn't remember. Hell, he'd been living in Cincy for the last several years. There not really too many hills to get that effect.

Well, what better way to end a strange couple of days than with a strange cloud overlay? *No better*, Mike thought, and grabbed a cheap plastic bag from under the driver's seat. He

shut the door and set off for the cemetery, which was just below the pasture on the north side of the field.

When he got there, he stood before the graves of his father and his Bitch. Both stones gave the same date of death. Nothing spectacular about that, really. Mike remembered the day seven weeks ago when Uncle Lew had called him with the news. "They're dead, Mike," he'd said. "Your father's dead...and the Bitch, too." Everybody called her that. Mike often wondered why her mother hadn't simply told the attending physician at her birth to write Bitch on the line of the certificate. It would have made things a lot easier. "They died in bed," he'd said. "Your father from the drink and her from the pills. Both O.D.'ed: Overdrank and overdosed."

Mike had thought of asking his uncle if they could include an epitaph on the stones that read GOOD RIDDANCE TO BAD RUBBISH but in the end had thought better of it. They may all have felt it, but it didn't need to be depicted for generations to come. Not that there would be any more generations.

Mike thought of Ming-Na, of what Old John had said about her...about her son. He pushed them both from his mind and redirected his attention to the graves. He reached into the plastic bag and removed a blackened, wilted, scarred and burned rose. He tossed it to the ground before the bitch's stone, thinking of some word to say. Nothing fancy, just something.

"I want to thank you," he said. "Believe it or not. There's one thing you did that made up for all the bad shit." He paused. "You never touched me. You never touched me with an inappropriate caress. Nothing sexual at all. I thank you for that. Because if you had touched me, I would have cut off my penis and bled myself out on your dirty, whoring face, you nasty twat."

He spit on her grave and sidestepped to his father's. "And you," he said, pulling the second and only remaining item from the bag: a Ball jar full of the lightning. "I want to thank

you for ruining my life. For being the asshole you are. For teaching me to drink. For encouraging that Bitch beat me. For screwing me out of my mother. For turning me into the stinking shitbag I am today. Thank you, sir, for all that." He unscrewed the lid of the canning jar and dumped the contents on the still freshly upturned dirt. "And you very much." He carefully screwed the lid back on the jar. "To think I ever loved you...that's the worst rip of all." He drew his arm back, cocking his hand back on the wrist as he palmed the jar. "I hope you and yours burn copiously in Hell together." With that, he launched the jar at the headstone, where it shattered into a million twinkling stars.

Then he knelt and began to cry.

LEAVING CREED COUNTY

The beat-up rusty Ford Tempo chugged its way back into the heart of Bland. The car stopped moving in front of the county court house, its driver staring out the window. For the passerby, it would be hard to say whether or not he was inspecting the courthouse, the Confederate statue in the right quadrangle, or the new south wing in construction. Actually, the driver was looking at none of those things. In fact, he was looking at nothing at all. He was staring right through the court house, beyond its back door, far past the farm and cemetery which lay behind it, and into the deep recesses of the his own soul.

Mike Coogan kept running over the things John had shown him and spoken of. He tried to put it together into some logical truth, but he could not.

"Rough road, eh?" he'd asked him, moments after he got in the car.

"Yessir. A couple of spills and washouts, too. A couple of places we might just have to get out and get a better perspective. A couple required stops."

"How do you know all that? About the signs...about those—."

"Kids in Grist Falls?"

"Ye-es! And my ca—."

"Your cats, yes. Shame, that one."

"This is bullshit. Why are you telling me all this bullshit? Why are you showing me all this bull shit?"

"I'm lending you all this 'bullshit' because there are certain things you need to know before you leave this place. Not every life is as bad as others; some are better, some are

worse; but every life has some meaning; every person has some specific reason to live. Even those committed to live their lives deaf and dumb or wheelchair-bound have some reason for living. And others, even those who seem to be given all the gifts in the world—a full life, easy living, minimal tax payments—have some set reason for dying. They themselves may not know what that reason is, but it's there."

"Okay, mister, I'll let those slide. But what about my father? What about that son of a bitch?"

"Now that one's easy, boy. Your father had to die to bring you here. Why, that's the reason you came back to Creed, isn't it? To bury your old man and all those hard feelings pent up for so long? You bury your old man, you bury those, and your life only gets better, right?"

Is that what this was all about? His life getting better? He sure as hell felt better, now that the burial had taken place. After he'd had it out with his old man one last time. After he'd had a good cry. Mike actually felt as if the last fifteen years had been lifted from him. Instead of a hole filled with black things—bad thoughts, bad lives, and bad dreams—there was a hole unfilled with nothingness. A big empty hole that was cleansed and ready to be filled by something else. Maybe that's what the old man meant, whoever the *fuck* he was (Mike still had a problem with that; something he would never get over—not knowing who that kook with the magic was). Maybe it was as simple as letting his old, troubled life die with his father...be buried with his father.

Rough road. Better perspective. Required stops. Meaning. Reason. Death. Life.

That all sounded right in his head, but in the "for real" it didn't. It just didn't.

"Speak up, boy. It's gonna be one of the last times you get to."

And what the hell had *that* been about?

He didn't know and he didn't care. It was time to check out of Bland and get back on a real four-lane interstate highway. Mike got the car moving again and followed the signs to I-77 out of town. Just before he started up the last rise, he saw one final set of signs: the first green reading LEAVING BLAND COUNTY and the second white, a final historical note on Bland County. He drove slowly by, skimming the sign. Right before it slipped from view, he raised his right hand and extended his bowfinger. " yew-hoooooo," he called cheerfully.

He was laughing so hard he didn't notice the change in the rear view—how the words seemed readable when they should have been reversed. As he focused his attention on the heading which read EDGE OF CREED, his laughter ebbed and stopped. He hit the brake pedal.

Read the sign:

Where Michael Coogan buried his father and his lost soul. Where Michael Coogan realized he had new life. Where Michael Coogan sent a big YOU to Creed. And where Creed sent a big YOU back. In sum, where Michael Coogan died in a car accident on September 19, 2002.

"Ah, shit you don't," Mike yelled. "I've had it." He spun the tires of the car and sent it in to a u-turn across the middle of the road. Righting himself in the westbound lane, he headed back towards Bland. "What do you want? What the very essence of do you want?" He kept asking, but the land, the air, and the waters gave no response.

Seconds later, however, Mike received the human response. His rear-view captured the flashing blues and reds first. Then he heard the siren. And then: "Driver of piece of shit Found-On-Road-Dead Tempo. Pull over now. I repeat, pull over now." He pulled off onto the side of the road and waited.

He watched in the side view mirror as the trooper moseyed on up to his window. "Excuse me, sir," the trooper said. "Do you know why I pulled you over?"

"Sure," Michael said, agitated. "U-turn."

"Hey, good, we're on the same page here. May I see your license and regis?"

"No."

"Excuse me, sir."

"No, I said," Mike told him. Mike was tired of this county now. He believed he needn't offer it anything anymore. Not even his license and registration.

"Sir, step out of the car," the trooper said, putting his right hand over the butt of his holstered sidearm.

"Thought you'd never ask," Mike said. "You know, that's a great idea, too. I can't very well be in a car accident outside my car."

"Sir, are you delusional? What are you talking about?"

Mike didn't answer him. He stared into the great nothing across the road. There was a small shack where a poor family apparently lived. A clothesline ran the length of the slipshod front porch, covered with four different sizes and shapes of undergarments. A young girl ran from around the side of the house chasing a gertie ball. She had to be no more than three and was cute as a button. Her blond hair flew back from her freckled face as she ran—chasing, grabbing, and accidentally kicking the ball. Michael thought, *Maybe this place isn't all that bad; if it can produce something so innocent, something so—*

The state trooper's snapping fingers cut off his train of thought. The young troop would say "Hey," then snap; say "Hey," then snap. Over and over, he must have repeated the lines five times or more before Mike shook his head and looked at him. He pointed at the kid and started to say "cute," but all he got out was "Que." The trooper clipped his arm and said, "Hey, mister. Quit moving and waiving your arms like that. I don't want to shoot you."

"Hey, great, I don't either. But don't ing hit me, all right?"

"Excuse me, sir. But you could have been going for a gun."

"Yeah," Mike laughed. "And I could have been going for your cock, too. But I wasn't, was I?"

"Watch your mouth, sir." The trooper began shuffling from foot to foot.

"And how do you suggest I do that?"

That one stopped the cop for a minute, but Mike kept going: "So you gonna write me a ticket or do I have to suck you off?"

"Sir, that is way enough, now, all right. Calm down."

Mike waved his hand in the air, shooing the trooper, who kept talking and making threats. Mike leaned back against his car and began fumbling in his pockets. Not finding what he was looking for, he asked the cop, "Hey, you got a smoke?"

"What? Sir, this is getting ridiculous." Mike agreed, even moreso after he had a good look at the trooper's license plate on the front of his squad car.

"Your car there says Wythe County," Mike said matter-of-factly. "How come you're up here hassling me in Bland? Isn't there a law against that shit?"

"Hey, I'm the cop here," the trooper said. "I'm a state officer, that means I can go into what ever county I want to. Doesn't matter what my car says." He paused for a minute and then threw his hands in the air in a *What gives?* salute. "Why the hell am I justifying this to you anyway?"

"I don't know," Mike answered, but he really wasn't paying attention to the trooper anymore. As "Are you gonna play nice now and let me write you up or am I gonna have to haul you?" fell on Mike's deaf ears (actually, what he heard was a garble reminiscent of the *Peanuts* teacher), he watched the little girl again. This time she managed to kick the ball into the highway. It stopped on the double yellow line. And just like any three year old, she paid no heed to her surroundings and gave chase, her ice blue eyes as big as the red gertie ball on which they were transfixed.

"Hey!" Mike yelled at the kid.

"Hey, what," the trooper said, still unaware of the third party.

"Hey!" Mike yelled again, and waved his hands in the air.

The trooper pulled his gun. "Don't give me that 'hey,' man. Just stand there."

The child finally looked up at Mike. Mike said, "Get out of the road, kid."

The child just looked at him.

Mike waved his hands; the child waved back.

Mike looked at the trooper, at the gun. "Put that shit down, can't you see—."

His words were cut off by the blare of an air horn. He looked down the westbound lane and saw a tractor-trailer hurrying down the hillside.

He waved his hands and yelled at the girl again. The girl waved back. Then she cupped her hands and placed them to her ears and shook her head. Then she cupped them over her mouth and shook her head.

Deaf and dumb. Deaf and dumb. Even those committed to live their lives deaf and dumb have some reason for living.

"Ah shit!" Mike said and darted into the road.

"Ah ," the trooper said when he finally realized—not a moment too *late*—what was happening. He watched the crazy man kick the red ball as if he was David Beckham come over from England and then he was pushing the little girl out of the road. He didn't even see if the girl cleared or not. The semi barreled past him, smacking the guy he'd just pulled over head-on and then plowing right over him. When the semi had passed, the trooper saw the little girl crying in her front yard and he saw a man in a mass of blood with two nearly flat legs.

The trooper raced over to the man and lifted his head up. He heard the screech of tires and watched as the trailer jackknifed and came to a stop no longer parallel with the road. The truck driver was out of the cab and running over to them.

"That was, that was, that was very heroic, sir," the trooper said to Mike.

Mike choked on blood. He looked past the trooper and eyed the man running towards him. He was fat, a keg-belly bobbing up and down in front of him, and by the looks of him, tired and scared shitless.

"There are certain things you need to know before you leave this place."

He choked again, and caught a fleeting glimpse of the trailer. Along the panels on the side in great letters read CROSS LANES COURIER.

He tried to laugh, but he only choked up more blood.

The little girl was now standing over him, too. Crying her eyes out.

"Speak up, boy. It's gonna be one of the last times you get to," he heard John say.

But he couldn't speak. He couldn't speak for shit. He was dying and had been robbed of communication. He felt shafted, screwed again. This time by God. He had one more thing he needed to say, one thing he needed to tell this little girl. She pointed at him, and he at her. He remembered she was deaf and wouldn't have heard him anyway. Tears welled in his eyes around the blood already welling there. He looked away and sighed. He could think of nothing. And then he opened his eyes on his bloody finger, still pointing at her.

With the last vestige of strength left in him, he threw his other hand into the air and grabbed the little girl. The truck driver and the state trooper screamed. The little girl became silent. He drew her closer until his extended finger rested firmly on the front of the girl's yellow shirt. He moved his finger down, then to the right. He removed it from the shirt, raised it, then dropped a slash line. He picked up again, then drew an upside-down triangle without the base. He scrawled once more and his hand dropped.

Standing tall on the brightest yellow in the brightest red below the palest face ever were four letters: LIVE.

From the daily report signed by State Trooper B.C. Carr:

The moment the guy died, the sky filled with a fluttering of wings and the call of many birds. The van driver and I looked up and noted what seemed like a thousand crows circling in a dark cloud and descending to roost on my cruiser, the deceased's car, and the power lines running the length of the westbound lane. Before I looked, though, I saw that deaf girl snap her eyes at the sound of the crows. But then they were coming down, surrounding the deceased, and chattering like a bunch of old cronies after supper. I'd never heard anything so loud and horrible. The little girl began to scream (ref: I didn't know deaf-mutes could do that). The van driver kicked a few crows. I drew my sidearm and fired a single shot into the sky. The crows dispersed....

Epilogue

Come now, my friends. Why do you act so? We must return to our place of silent observation above. You really are acting like birdlings today. Trying to be a part of the goings-on below, to get in on a bit of the action. But that is not our place. Our place is above, as watchers.

Ascend, my friends. Rejoin me up here where we belong. Riding the currents. Waiting for another good story to come along. Watching only, as we have done for time out of mind.

I've got a treat for you...if you promise not to interfere with the human events. All right. You agree it's getting chilly these days, and it is about time we headed for warmer climes.

Well, we've got two choices: we can wait here and freeze—not knowing when another good story will come along (although I'm sure it will, as long as that old man is still rambling around these hills and playing games with travelers)... or... we can head South and catch up on some juicy events that are already taking place. Maybe get out of these hills for a while and get nearer to ocean. I've heard the Romeros have taken up residence in a small town in South Carolina. And there's many a headstone to break in around their new home.

Any takers?

Credits

All photographs presented herein were captured and adapted by the author.

Unpublished lyrics from the country-western ballad "Sorry, Dad, I'm Queer," written by Matthew L Jarrett, used and adapted by permission.

This collection was processed in Microsoft Word. The bulk of the text is presented in Trebuchet font, with minor portions presented in Baskerville, Bookman Old Style, Comic Sans, Chiller, and Schindler fonts.

Curriculum Vita

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- EDUCATION:** 2001-2003: MA, English, Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia
 Major field of study: Writing (Creative)
 1996-2001: BA, cum laude, Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia
 Major: Criminal Justice (Legal Studies); minor: English
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- THESIS:** "East Fifty-Two." A multi-genre collection, this creative thesis provides a commentary on irreconcilable acts of moral depravity (homicide, suicide, adultery, sexual assault, etc.) connected by the title story of one traveler's final journey along U.S. Route 52 to bury his father as well as his memories.
- ACADEMIC HONORS:** Sigma Phi Omega, Academic Honorary Society, Potomac State College, 1996-97
 John Marshall Scholar, Marshall University, 1997-2001
 President's List, Potomac State College, 1997
 Dean's List, Marshall University and Potomac State College, 1996-2001
- TEACHING EXPERIENCE:** Freshman Composition, Marshall University, 2 semesters (as Teaching Assistant)
 Freshman Composition, West Virginia State College, 1 semester (as Part Time Faculty)
- TEACHING INTERESTS:** Grammar and Linguistics, Composition and Rhetoric, Post-Apocalyptic Literature and Film, Banned Books, Contemporary American Authors
- PUBLICATIONS:** "Jesus In a Sidecar," short fiction (writing as Jackie Shaub), awarded second prize for best short work and accepted for publication in *Et Cetera*, Marshall University's literary magazine, Spring 2003
- ACADEMIC SERVICE:** Fiction Editor, *Et Cetera* literary magazine, Marshall University, 2003
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 Graduate Assistant, Special Collections Department, Marshall University, 2001-02
 Panelist and Presenter, First Annual College of Liberal Arts Research and Creativity Conference, 2001
- LANGUAGES:** German: reading knowledge
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- MEMBERSHIPS:** United Methodist Student Movement, *Et Cetera* Literary Guild
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