

Halfway Down The Stairs

GARY A.
BRAUNBECK

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the
Stairs

by

Gary A. Braunbeck

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“Crybaby Bridge #25” *Original Version Copyright © 2015—Gary A. Braunbeck*
 “He Didn’t Even Leave A Note ...” first appeared in *A Little Orange Book of Odd Stories*
 “Attack of the Giant Deformed Mutant Cannibalistic Gnashing Slobberers from Planet Cygnus X-2.73: A Love Story”
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For Tom Piccirilli
1950—2015



A choir of ill children will always whisper the last kinds words as every place where you drew breath hums with your absence. Miss you like hell, my friend.

Oh, yeah – *fuck* cancer.

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What People are Saying about Gary A. Braunbeck

“Braunbeck’s fiction stirs the mind as it chills the marrow”

--*Publishers Weekly*

“Braunbeck is much more than a superbly-skilled storyteller; he’s a prose poet in action, a consummate composer whose versatile instrument is the English language in all of its colors, shades, and nuances. He is potently aware of its range and power, orchestrating its effects with the sure hand of a master. Popular fiction doesn’t get any better than this.”

—William F. Nolan, author of *Night Shapes*, *The Marble Orchard*, *Helltracks*, and co-author of *Logan’s Run*

“Gary A. Braunbeck is simply one of the finest writers to come along in years. His work is chilling, touching, moving, and above all, compassionate and human. He elevates the genre with everything he writes.”

—Ray Garton, author of *Live Girls* and *Sex and Violence in Hollywood*

“Braunbeck’s writing has enormous range, feeling, surprise, and insight...He mixes pain with humor, tenderness with violence, rage with compassion. He’s going to be one of the big and important ones.”

—Ed Gorman, author of *The Poker Club* and the Sam McCain series

“Gary A. Braunbeck is one of the best and most original writers to emerge in the last several years. His work is powerful, thought-provoking, terrifying, and not for the emotionally stunted.”

—Elizabeth Massie, author of the Bram Stoker Award-winning *Sineater*

“Braunbeck is one of the brightest talents working in the field...his time to be recognized is at hand.”

—Thomas F. Monteleone, author of the Bram Stoker Award-winning *The Blood of the Lamb* and *The Reckoning*

“Part of the pleasure in reading him is a certain amount of suspense in not knowing precisely where he’s going to go next... An intensely gathered writer whose voice is unmistakable and unforgettable.”

—*Locus*

“For years I’ve been a fan of Gary Braunbeck’s fiction. He always writes with grace and style.”

—Rick Hautala, author of *The Mountain King* and *Bedbugs*

“If you need evidence that our field is as vital and challenging as ever, just look to Gary Braunbeck.”

—World Fantasy Award-winner Ramsey Campbell, author of *Ancient Images* and *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*

“Many writers are clever, but few have the talent and heart to expose the weary sorrow that we all feel at times, and that we all fear is lying in wait for us around the next corner of our lives. We may never thank him for it, but connecting us with that sorrow is Braunbeck’s greatest gift, for in its shadow we are always reminded to reach for the light.”

—Christopher Golden, author of *Tin Men*, *The Boys Are Back in Town*, and *Snowblind*

HALFWAY DOWN
THE
STAIRS

Halfway Down the Stairs

Halfway down the stairs
Is a stair
Where i sit.
There isn't any
Other stair
Quite like
It.
I'm not at the bottom,
I'm not at the top;
So this is the stair
Where I always stop.

Halfway up the stairs
Isn't up
And it isn't down.
It isn't in the nursery,
It isn't in town.
And all sorts of funny thoughts
Run round my head.
It isn't really
Anywhere!
It's somewhere else
Instead!
-- A.A. Milne

Foreword

Gary A. Braunbeck

This collection marks a series of firsts for me: it is the first time that the majority of these stories have ever appeared in a collection of mine (not counting the new stories scattered throughout the first section); it is the first time that stories in one of my collections will have introductions—not by me, but by an array of exquisite writers who were kind enough to offer their thoughts on specifically-selected stories (I will be limiting my introductions to the separate sections only); and it is the first time that I have assembled a collection of stories since turning 55, an age I did not think I'd survive long enough to see, hence the title of this collection and the poem from which that line was taken. I'll leave it to you to work out the implications of the metaphor (it isn't that subtle, trust me).

As I assembled these stories and the generous introductions provided for them, I was suddenly struck with the realization that—and I know how silly this is going to sound so no letters or e-mails, please—that there are people out there who *actually read my work*. I know there's a major “Well, *duh!*” factor involved with that statement, but if someone had told me 38 years ago that one day legends like Ramsey Campbell and Graham Masterton would be saying such glowing things about my work, I would have asked them what they'd been smoking and if they had any extra—and these two gentleman (both life-long writing gods of mine) are only 2 of the many writers from the fields of horror, mystery, fantasy, and science fiction who became an enthusiastic part of this project. But here's the thing: every last one of the writers and artists who offer intros herein have read my work—and here's that realization again—*beyond the single story they introduce*. That may not seem like much to you, but it kind of boggles my you-should-excuse-the-expression mind.

I mean, let's face it, Harlan Ellison had it right, when you get right down to it: writers tell lies for a living, so there are readers out there who gladly sacrifice their beer (or pizza, or burgers, or what-have-you) money in order to allow me to spin the *damnedest* yarns, and I cannot tell you how grateful I am for that. I know that what I do isn't all that important in the grand scheme of things; it doesn't help eradicate world hunger, or child abuse, or cancer, or loneliness, or any of the countless little cruelties that we so offhandedly inflict on one another on what seems a quarter-hour basis, but I like to think that it at least provides a brief respite from the weight the knowledge of such things places on our individual shoulders and consciences; I like to think that it gives people their own private spot halfway down the stairs where there is nothing but them and the music of their minds that is perhaps enriched, however briefly, by the stories they take there with them.

I am thankful for and grateful to each and every last one of you who reads my work. Here's a book of offerings you might consider taking to your special place not at the bottom nor at the top, just the special place where you stop to catch a breath and be somewhere else instead.

Part One:

THROW IT AT THE WALL AND SEE WHAT STICKS

“Hey, hey, my my ...”

—Neil Young

“All this I came to report.”

—Patti Smith

“I will take this one window
with its sooty maps and scratches
so that my dreams may remember
one another and so that my eyes will not
become blinded by the new world.”

—James Tate, “Fuck the Astronauts”

I was originally going to call this section *Potpourri* but, when I looked at the overall tone and content of the stories, I decided that it was *way* too cutesy a title. What you're going to find here is a selection of stories that vary from the recent ("Crybaby Bridge #25") to the older ("All The Unlived Moments") to the brand-new (five of these, among which, "Attack of the Giant Deformed Mutant Cannibalistic Gnashing Slobberers from Planet Cygnus X-2.73: A Love Story" is very close to my heart, for reasons that will become obvious). They range from horror to mystery to science fiction to suspense; there are longer pieces and there are short-shorts; there are straightforward narratives and some pieces that are more experimental in nature; in brief, the stories in this section are all over the road. Kind of like my thought processes, but let's not get into my dreadful personality problems this soon

Crybaby Bridge #25

“Little child, take no fright,
In that shadow where you are
The toothless glowworm grants you light ...”
—James Agee, “Song”

The legend says that there are twenty-four ‘Crybaby’ bridges in the state, and many are the numbers of people who have gone to investigate the mystery. It’s a simple, harmless haunting they find once they arrive. There are five steps to each investigation: 1. Park your car in the center of the bridge at midnight; 2. Turn off the ignition; 3. Roll down your windows and listen; 4. Once you hear the sound of a baby crying—sometimes screaming—from below the bridge, close your eyes and count to sixty; 5. Open your eyes and see the hand- and/or footprints of dozens of babies’ ghosts on your hood and your windshield.

Some people find that they can’t start their cars right way after this, but wait a few minutes and it will start. Another variation instructs you to bring an extra set of keys that you leave in the car when you climb out and lock it. Walk away from the bridge for a little while; when you return, you will find that your car is running, its doors unlocked, and an infant’s “binky” lying on the dashboard.

No one knows for certain why these bridges are haunted by the cries of babies, but theories abound: one bridge is not far from the abandoned building that, back in the day, was a home for “wayward girls” whose families sent their unmarried daughter away to have their bastard baby far from the curious eyes of townsfolk—who knows what the matrons of the home did with those children who were stillborn, or came into this world far too sick, or perhaps even deformed?

The legend claims twenty-four, but there is one crybaby bridge that no one ever knew about, save for the middle-aged man who drives there on a rainy October night. This particular bridge has long been condemned but children still ride their bikes over it and the odd teenager will still drive his jalopy across it on a dare. Condemned, forgotten, but the bridge still stands.

The man drives his car slowly toward the middle of the bridge, listening to every creak, every groan. The rain is pelting down, making visibility nearly impossible, even with the windshield wipers going on full power.

For several minutes the man just sits in his car, engine idling, watching the wipers thunk back and forth across his field of vision, clearing the dancing water for only a moment before another wave from above replaces it. Thunder rolls. Lightning flashes and cracks. Below the bridge, the Licking River is raging, swollen well beyond its banks. In town, there is worry of flooding. The man in the car doesn’t care. He is beyond caring.

He turns off the engine and removes the keys from the ignition. He opens the door and steps out into the storm, pushing himself against the wind that has doubled in its intensity. He presses his body against the rickety guardrail and looks down at the angry waters. His face looks as if it's going to collapse back into his skull, pulling all flesh and tissue deep into the shadow of bone. He grips the car keys in his fist, pulls back, and hurls them into the night, not bothering to watch as they are taken and beaten by furious the river below. Gripping the rail, he leans out, listening.

At first there is only the bellowing thunder and snapping lightening, the two seemingly colliding overhead in a Wagnerian explosion of fury. It is underscored by the screaming, rising water below. The man forces himself to tune them out, to ignore them, to expunge them from his awareness. He soon succeeds, and everything within and without him is focused solely on hearing the sound. He doesn't have to wait long.

From below, somewhere between the bottom of the bridge and the surface of the screaming river, he hears it; softly, at first, so softly that it could be mistaken for a siren sounding in the distance, but within a few seconds it becomes the unmistakable sound of a baby crying; perhaps because it's hungry, or cold, or needs its diaper changed, or because it is alone and terrified and confused. The man bends from his center until he is nearly doubled over. Perhaps he cries out in answer to the baby; perhaps he screams from rage or anguish or another form of dark and deep despair; who knows? No one else is there to hear it.

He straightens up, leaning his head back so the rain will wash away something from his face, or maybe even cleanse him of something intangible and unspoken. But he speaks anyway.

"Please," he says, "please forgive me. We were so young, and so scared, and we couldn't tell anyone. Please forgive me—forgive *us*. We were so young and stupid and selfish ... we had no idea what we were doing. No one ever knew. We didn't even give you a name."

He shakes his head with great violence and goes back to the car, climbs in, and closes the door. He waits. Soon he sees the impression of tiny hands, tiny feet, appearing all over the hood, appearing like photographed images revealed for only a second before the film is exposed to the light for too long; there one second, gone the next. But there are so many of them, so many hands and feet, and now, now he can hear that the babies are no longer crying, they are giggling, laughing, squealing with glee. He hears the sounds they make as they crawl all over the car, the hood, the roof, the trunk, bouncing themselves up and down, rocking the car.

The man rolls down the front windows and buckles himself in, then tightens the seatbelt until it hurts, making it difficult to pull in a full breath. He leans back his head and smiles as, outside, the babies jump and roll and giggle and bounce. The car too bounces up and down, rocks from side to side. The sound of the river becomes a near-deafening roar. The man can't help himself, and begins laughing at the growing sound of the babies' happiness and delight. He laughs. Below the car, the bridge groans. The bridge creaks. Wood begins to splinter.

“...He Didn’t Even Leave A Note...”

It has been a long day and the hour is late and you are impatient to get home. You stayed at the office a bit later than usual, tidying up some last-minute paperwork before leaving for the weekend, but as a result you missed your bus and so find yourself walking. Which isn’t really so bad, after all, is it? No, not in the least. It’s been ages since last you walked home from work, and at least the weather is nice.

It has been a long day and the hour is late and you are impatient to get home, despite the lovely weather. You wonder if any of your friends are going to bother calling you to see what plans you have for the weekend. “You work too damned much,” they say; “We never see you anymore,” they say; “It’s not good for you to spend so much time by yourself,” they say, all the while knowing that your job takes a lot out of you—how else could you have secured the recent promotion, had not you put your career first? “And what’s wrong,” you say to them, “with wanting to spend my time away from work watching movies or reading or listening to music?”

“Those are *solitary* activities,” they reply, “and too much of that can alienate you from the people in your life.” You love them all the more for their concern, but wish they’d get it through their heads that there are some people who don’t need the constant companionship of other human beings in order to feel that their life has meaning. It doesn’t mean you don’t care for them, but for some reason they don’t understand that. You are involved with them. You are involved with life.

Still, it has been a long day and the hour is late and you are impatient to get home, but there is a man in the distance running toward you. He is a feeble and ragged creature, a depressing sight. There is another man chasing at his heels, screaming. You step aside to let the first man pass. Perhaps the two are running for their own amusement, a good-natured race; maybe they are both in pursuit of a third man you didn’t notice; it could even be that the second man wishes to harm or even murder the first and any involvement on your part would make you an unwitting accessory. Regardless of the circumstances, you remain standing off to the side, impatient for the whole incident to play itself out so you can get on home, pour a glass of whiskey, and relax to some music, forgetting about the pressures of the week.

The second man nears you and you see that he, must, indeed, have murder in his heart because he’s holding a long and very sharp knife; the early moonlight glints off the blade with an eerie kind of beauty.

The second man runs smack into you, thrusts the blade deep into your belly, and twists.

The pain begins. You grasp the murderer by his shoulders and whisper: “Why?”

He glances in the direction of the running, ragged man, and smiles sadly. “If you hadn’t stayed to tidy up the paperwork, you would not have missed the bus; if you had not missed the bus, you would have been home in time for Beverly’s phone call; if you had been in time for Beverly’s phone call, you would have known that she still loves you and wants to try again.”

The first man stops running, turns, and shouts back: “You probably haven’t even thought of her in months, have you?”

Then, with a last twist of the blade, the second man pulls the knife from your belly and runs back the way he came.

You can no longer see the first man but, still, you call out to whomever may hear: “Don’t I have the right to be tired?” You crumple to the ground and watch your life ooze from your belly, staining the sidewalk. “I didn’t want to get involved. It was none of my affair. I only wanted to get home.”

Then you die.

Everyone calls it suicide.

Attack of the Giant Deformed Mutant Cannibalistic Gnashing Slobberers from Planet Cygnus X-2.73: A Love Story

Viewed through the fish-eye lens of the pod's observation iris, Captain Brick Morgenstern thought the landing area of the *Non Sequitur* looked like a steel diamond peppered with ancient smokestacks, but what else should he have expected from a damn-near ancient mining vessel such as this? The area surrounding the pits and pads and terminal structures was a crazy quilt of rampaging colors—landing lights—to offset the cold blandness of the main terminus attached to it, slate-gray alloys macroscopically homogenized to resemble the space surrounding the massive vessel.

The heavily-armed, one-man transport pod glided down, down, down into a designated pit, and the view from the iris vanished. Once the vessel settled into place, Morgenstern waited for some sign of life; a technician, and ensign, a mouse, anything. He'd come too far, shed too much blood, and seen too much blood shed to start getting the willies now. After several moments of still-life silence, he initiated communications.

* * *

“... Captain Brick Morgenstern calling Command, do you read, Command?”

“This is Command. Go ahead, Captain.”

Morgenstern made his way around the tight enclosed space, albeit with extreme caution. “I have managed to keep possession of the Nonexistium samples from the mines of the planet, but suffered massive casualties.”

“We were afraid of that after the com blackout, Captain. What is the level of casualties?”

“The Away Team is dead, everyone except me. The ship is crippled but there is one functioning Transport Pod the enemy hasn't gotten to yet. I managed to get to it and leave the planet surface. I am now in the landing area of the *Non Sequitur*.”

“Can the Transport Pod be counted on to make the scheduled rendezvous with *The Unity Gain*?”

“Still gathering intel on that, Command. Life Support systems took some damage from hostile forces on the surface.”

“Do you have functioning weapons?”

“Affirmative. Including the last portable plasma canon. I have three shots left before the canon will need recharging.”

“Understood. All right, Captain, your orders are as follows: make your way to Level Five, Sector Nine. That's the ship's library. It is imperative, Captain, that you locate and take possession of the Cygnus Theocracy Log Files that are stored there. There will be twenty-seven non-digital volumes. None are very large, but you'll need something to carry them in.”

“I've got my supply backpack.”

“That will be fine, Captain.”

“Captain?”

“I read you, Command.”

“You are authorized to use one Nonexistium sample to re-power your plasma canon, should the need arise.”

“Thank you.”

“Godspeed, Captain. Contact us again when you’re back at the pod.”

* * *

There was no sign of life anywhere on the ship. It was as if the entire crew had simply vanished in the middle of day-to-day operations. Morgenstern tried not to let memories from the battle on the planet’s surface replay themselves in his mind’s eye, but all this death was just too recent, too close. He saw his team members falling underneath the great elephantine mass of the creatures that had overrun Cygnus, saw them not so much open their mouths as dislodge their jaws—or what he assumed were their jaws—and devour each team nearly whole. The ones who weren’t swallowed at once were ripped in half, bloody half-bodies littering the ground at the creatures’ enormous feet.

Stop it, *he commanded himself*. There’s not a damn thing you can do about it now, so just stop it.

He readied the plasma cannon as the elevator doors opened, revealing Level Five. Sector Nine would be to his right. Pressing his back against the wall, Morgenstern moved stealthily along the hallway, cannon at the ready. He was far too aware of the sound of his own breathing, the beating of his heart, the screaming pain from his unattended wounds.

He arrived at Sector Nine without incident and made his way into the ship’s library. Once there, it was easy to locate the Cygnus Log Files and slip the volumes carefully into his backpack. The things looked, smelled, and felt ancient. Containing all the cultural, scientific, political, and theological information of the now-vanished society of the planet below, these logs were and would always be the only documentation that their race ever existed, that they dreamed, hoped, strove toward ... something. Anything. Before the creatures came and began taking it all away in bloody pieces. But at least these records existed, and the scientists and historians back on Earth would know how to translate them, and what to do with the information. That was something, at least. And in this place, at this moment, it was something that Morgenstern was willing to die for.

Tightening the straps on his backpack so that nothing would accidentally come loose, Morgenstern started toward the door. He was almost there when he became suddenly, inexorably, frighteningly aware of another presence in the room. Activating the light at the end of the canon, he swept the surrounding area and for the first time saw the dozens—hundreds—thousands of cobwebs that fluttered down from the ceiling and attached themselves to every book, every computer, every thing in the room where information and knowledge resided.

Tracking a few of them with the light beam, Morgenstern turned his attention up toward the ceiling. They weren’t cobwebs, but dozens of small shiny filaments, each one reaching upwards and out to hundreds of dangling membranous sacks. The sacks expanded and contracted in precise rhythm. Then he became aware of the pulsing of the floor; steady, strong, equally rhythmic. A heartbeat. The organic structure of this deck was changing; steel to tissue, wires to veins, fuel to flesh.

Looking closer at the organic sacks, Morgenstern realized what they, as a whole, resembled.

A brain.

What the hell are you? he thought. I saw your kind down on the surface, saw the way those creatures worshiped you, how they ... how they passed my crew members into you through your filaments like children blowing bubbles into glasses of milk through straws. Did you learn from them, from their deaths? Do you even care that you devoured more than knowledge, that you took away lives by the dozens with each victim? Do you think yourself so powerful that you're indestructible? Let's test that theory, shall we?

Slamming the Nonexistium into the power chamber of the canon, Morgenstern opened fire shooting at the thing on the ceiling until he felt its blood and fluids spattering against his face.

He liked the feeling. He liked knowing that he could still, however briefly, fight back.

He continued firing until the canon could fire no more.

* * *

"Excellent work, Captain."

"Thank you, Command. I believe now that I have enough power and air to safely reach my rendezvous with the *Gain*."

"Affirmative. You'll find a hero's welcome waiting for you."

"Thank you, Command. This is Morgenstern, over and out."

* * *

The young man stepped out into the hallway, futilely trying to wipe the water from his face and clothes. A moment later a nurses' aide came beside him with a towel in her hand.

"Looks like he got you good, this time."

"I should have known that giving him a water pellet gun was asking for trouble." He finished drying his face and handed back the towel.

"Well," said the young aide, "no real harm in it, I suppose." She began walking with him as he headed toward the doors.

"Can you do me a small favor?" asked the young man.

"If I can."

"The books in his room. Can you make sure they get covered up at night with a towel or something plastic? Just in case he fires at them accidentally."

The young lady smiled. "We can do that."

They paused at the doors as the young man looked back in the direction of the room.

"It's so sad," said the young aide. "I understand he used to be a famous writer."

"No," said the young man. "He was once an almost semi-popular writer. Almost everyone's forgotten about him now. Those twenty-seven books are his, everything he wrote. I had a helluva time finding some of them. His work is no longer in print. So, please, make sure they get covered at night. Or sneak the toy gun out when he's asleep or ... or something."

"Of course."

The young man nodded his head in thanks, took one last quick look in the direction of the room, and exited the doors, making damn sure as he did—as he always did—to not look at the words **ALZHEIMER'S UNIT** printed on the glass.

"See you next weekend, Dad," he whispered, and quickened his step.

* * *

Safely aboard the Unity Gain, in his private quarters, freshly showered, his wounds tended to, and with a full stomach from a hero's meal, Captain Brick Morgenstern stood in his PJs and bathrobe before the carefully-stacked volumes of the Cygnus Theocracy Log Files, weapon in hand, eyes wide, senses alert. This knowledge the enemy would never get. It was all that remained. It needed a guardian. He was proud to be the one chosen for this most important task. He stood at attention. He would not fail.

For J.N. Williamson

Househunting

The fence is tall.

Good.

The mother is typical white trash, too loud.

But the kids ... they seem frightened and quiet.

Good.

Easier that way.

All the Unlived Moments

“Secret of my universe: imagining God without human immortality.”

—Camus, *Notebook IV*, January 1942-September 1945

I found the guy outside one of the downtown VR cult temples just like the thin-voiced tipster said I would. He was around thirty-two, thirty-three years old, dressed in clothes at least two sizes too small for the cold December dusk. There were blisters on his forehead, face, and neck. One look in his eyes told me that his mind—or what might be left of it—was still lost somewhere in cyberspace, floating without direction down corridors formed wherever electricity runs with intelligence; billowing, coursing, glittering, humming, a Borgesian library filled with volumes he’d never understand, lost in a 3D city; intimate, immense, firm, liquid, recognizable and unrecognizable at once. The 21st Century Schizoid Man, in the flesh.

I gently placed one of my hands on his shoulder. My other hand firmly clasped the butt of my tranquilizer pistol, just in case.

“You okay?”

He turned slowly toward me, his eyes glassy, uncomprehending. “Who’re you, mister?”

“A friend. I’m here to help you.”

“D-d-did...did he ever find that girl?”

“Who?”

“John Wayne?”

He seemed so much like a child, lost, lonely, frightened. A lot of VR cultists end up like this. Sometimes I wondered if the mass-suicides of religious cults in the past were really such a tragedy, after all. At least then the cultists—sad, odd, damaged people who turned to manufactured religions and plasticine gods—were released, were freed forever from the Machiavellian will- and mind-benders who turned them into semi-ignorant, unquestioning, shuffling zomboids. Worse, though, were the families who hired me and my partner to get their kids back and de-program them. They always thought that familial love and compassion would break through the brainwashing—and don’t try to lecture my ass, because brainwashing is the only thing to call it—but then they find out all too soon that you don’t need surgical equipment to perform some lobotomies. Seven times out of ten the kids wound up in private institutions; at least one of the other three are dumped at state-run facilities where they’re snowed on lithium for six months, spoon fed first-year graduate school psychobabble, then put out on the streets to join the other modern ghosts, adorned in rags, living in shadows, extending their hands for some change if you can spare it, and wondering in some part of their mind why the god they had worshiped from the altar of their computer monitor has abandoned them.

“That’s my car over there. C’mon, I’ll take you someplace safe and warm. You can eat.”

“...’kay...” His voice and gestures seemed even more childlike as he started toward my hover-car. “How...how come your car don’t got no wheels?” He seemed genuinely mystified, as if he’d never seen a hover-car before. Okay, so they weren’t exactly commonplace yet, but there were more than enough in the air at any given time that, unless you’d been on Mars since 2026, you’d have seen at least a couple.

“It flies.”

His eyes grew wide, awed. “*Really?*”

I smiled at him. “Sure thing. Why don’t you get in...uh...what’s your name? Mine’s Carl.”

“Mine’s Jimmy Waggoner.”

“Get in, Jimmy Waggoner.”

He did. I locked his door from outside (the passenger-side door cannot be opened from within) and then took my place behind the controls; soon we were airborne, gliding smoothly and quickly over the cityscape.

Jimmy looked out the window and down on the world he was no longer a part of. “This is *sooooooooooooo* neat!”

“Glad you like it.”

“Uh-huh, I really do. This is the best birthday present I ever got, *ever!*”

“It your birthday today, Jimmy? December eighteenth?”

“Uh-huh. Mommy says I was her ‘Christmas Baby.’ She let me watch *The Searchers* on tape and then she gave me some pizza money.”

Something cold and ugly crept up my back. “How, uh...how old are you today, Jimmy?”

“I’m seven,” he said proudly, pointing to his chest.

Then he saw his hand—

—the thick hair on his arms—

—felt the beard on his face—

—and before I could I activate the autopilot and stop him from doing so, he grabbed the rear-view mirror and turned it toward himself, getting a good look at his face.

“*That ain’t me!*” he cried, his voice breaking. “*Where’d I go, mister? Where’d I go?*”

I had to sedate him a few seconds later. If I hadn’t, we would have crashed.

Jimmy was one strong child.

* * *

I put the hover-car down in a clearing right smack in the middle of a patch of woodland that surrounds three-quarters of our safe house. A long time ago Parsons and I agreed that the more remote our workplace, the better. This area was near impossible to get to by standard automobile, and if anyone ever did manage to get this far, there was only one road leading to the house. Even without the hidden security cameras that lined the final stretch of that road, we’d see them coming from three miles away.

I radioed in for a medical team to bring a stretcher. Parsons got on the horn and asked me if I’d managed to get any information from the kid—and *kid* is how I thought of Jimmy, his age be damned.

“Just enough to give me the creeps,” I replied.

Jimmy was still out of it from the tranquilizer shot I’d given him earlier, and as I stared at his peaceful, sleeping form, I figured it was probably for the best.

I didn't know which VR cult this kid had belonged to—there were dozens that had temples in this part of the country—but what I did know was that none of them were in the habit of simply dumping their converts in the street and then calling the likes of us to come and clean up the mess.

The VR cult phenomenon didn't really get going until 2020, though it had its genesis back in the mid 2000's. Back in the 90's, personal VR equipment was bulky, clumsy to use, and expensive—forget that virtual reality itself on the net was more of a curiosity than anything else, and most of the VR worlds were fairly crude by today's standards. Then there were the computers and servers themselves; the 90's saw the beginnings of the ISDN proliferation, the introduction of NFSnet—God bless fiber-optic cable—but even those couldn't manage a transfer rate faster than 2Gb/sec. Then, around 2017, slowly but surely, the faceless Powers-That-Be began giving people a taste of the Next Big Thing, and like lemmings to the sea they lined up.

Now—Christ, *now* you were in the dark ages if your system functioned under 1000 MIPS and transferred less than 4 million polygons/sec. The power required for color- and illumination-rendered, real-time, user-controlled animation of (and interaction with) complex, evolving, three-dimensional scenes and beings was widely available. The VR equipment needed to function in these worlds was streamlined into little more than a pair of thin black gloves, a lightweight pair of headphones, and some slightly oversized black glasses with a small pair of sensory clips; one for your nose (to evoke smell) and one that you tucked into the corner of your mouth (to evoke taste). In a world overrun with people, where personal space was moving its way up the endangered species list, VR worlds and servers offered people the chance to “get away from it all” without leaving the confines of their computer terminal.

Problem was, when you give an apple-pie American something with endless possibilities, they find a quick way to either pervert or trivialize it. It wasn't long before “cyber-diets” were all the rage—Lose Weight Fast! Slim Down For Summer! Log in, and we'll give your senses the *illusion* of being fed. 3D interactive kiddie porn. Sites where you could virtually torture your enemies.

Oh, yeah—and the gods of cyberspace. Any nutcase with a religious manifesto could buy space and set up a virtual temple to beckon worshipers. Create-A-Deity, online 24 hours a day for your salvation, can I get a witness. Some of the bigger ersatz-religions—Mansonism, Gargoylists, Apostles of the Central Motion, Vonnegutionism (my personal favorite, they used a cat's cradle as their symbol), the Resurrected Peoples' Temple, and the Church of the One-Hundred-and-Eightieth Second—were granted licenses to set up their own servers—and because of that, Parsons and me would always have jobs. There would always be lost souls like Jimmy. First get them hooked on the net, alienate them from the world they know, then draw them into your virtual fold, blur the lines between the person they are on the net and the person they are off the net until you trap them forever in the spaceless space between, imprison them in the *consensual loci*.

I was snapped from my reverie by the medical team, who gently loaded Jimmy onto the stretcher and into the ambulance. I signaled them I would walk to the house.

I had a feeling that walk was going to be the last quiet time I'd have for a while.

* * *

Jimmy was still asleep in the recovery area when Parsons met me outside the computer room.

“You say he thinks he's seven?”

“Yes. You should have seen him flip out when he finally got a look at himself.”

“Did he give you any indication what cult he belonged to?”

“None.”

“So where does that leave us?”

“We know his name. Let’s run it through and see if any bells go off.”

“You just love talking in tough-guy clichés, don’t you?”

I grinned. “Watched too many Clint Eastwood movies when I was a kid.”

Parsons laughed. “You were never a kid.”

“I feel so good about myself now.”

I liked Parsons a lot. A former VR cult member himself, there was no scam, no form of reasoning so out there, no logic so convoluted, that he couldn’t work his way through it to awaken what lay at a subject’s core. In the six years we’d been working together I’d only seen him lose two subjects—one to suicide after her family took her away too soon, the other to law school.

Parsons hates that joke, too.

One of our latest residents, Cindy (she wouldn’t yet tell us her last name, even though we already knew what it was), age seventeen, approached Parsons and asked him about Jimmy.

“I saw them bring him in downstairs,” she said.

Parsons put a reassuring hand on her arm. “You don’t need to worry about him, Cindy; Jimmy’ll be fine.”

“You don’t know him, do you?” I asked.

“I don’t think—I mean, I don’t know. Something about him seems familiar, I guess.” She thought about it for a second, then shrugged and said, “I guess not. Sorry.”

Parsons looked at his watch. “Shouldn’t you be helping with dinner preparation in the kitchen?”

“Omigosh, I forgot all about it.” She hurried away toward the elevator.

“She seems a lot friendlier than she did last week.”

“I know,” whispered Parsons. “Amazing how fast she’s progressed, don’t you think?”

We looked at each other.

“Think she’ll try it tonight?” I asked.

“Not tonight, but definitely before Christmas.”

“I’ll double outside security.”

“You do that.”

Escape attempts are commonplace here during the first three weeks; week one, they fight us tooth-and-nail because they see us as the evil ones who took them away from salvation and home; week two, they loosen up a bit, then decide to play along, hoping to give us a false sense of accomplishment; week three, they try to run for it. Cindy was a 3rd-Weeker. Time to try.

We parted after that, Parsons going off to a scheduled session with some twelve-year-old from Indiana we snatched from the Resurrected Peoples’ Temple. I went into the computer room to run down Jimmy’s name.

One of the things I’ve learned over the years is that you must take nothing for granted when tracking down a subject’s past. Not that we have to do it all that often; usually the family provides us with more than enough information to go on. There have been, however, a handful of burnout cases that have simply stumbled into our hands. These always take extra effort, but I rarely mind.

At least with Jimmy Waggoner I had a name—and a possible temple affiliation.

Cindy of the No-Last-Name-Given had been snatched from the Church of the One-Hundred-and-Eightieth Second, who believed that they and they alone postponed the end of the world because they and they alone owned the last three minutes of existence. Their literature even claimed that these last three

minutes were a physical object, one that their Most Holy Timekeeper, Brother Tick-Tock (I'm not kidding) kept safely hidden away, watched over by the One and True God of All Moments, Lord Relativity.

I doubted that Cindy actually knew Jimmy, but at this stage anything was worth a shot. I fed all the information into the system, sat back, and waited.

It took about thirty minutes. I'd guessed about Jimmy having come from the tristate area; most VR cults are localized religions and recruit their members close to home as a rule.

I'd almost nodded off when the computer cleared its throat (a WAV file I installed as a signal) and the words MATCH FOUND appeared on the screen. I rubbed my eyes and pressed the mouse button—
—and there it was.

All the information on Jimmy Waggoner that there was to be found.

* * *

Parsons looked up at me from behind his desk. "Don't bother to knock."

I shoved the printouts in his face. "James Edgar Waggoner, born December 19, 1986. Disappeared on his birthday, 1993, on his way to a pizza parlor half-a-block from his home. It's all there, his kindergarten and first grade report cards, school pictures, health records, dental charts, all of it."

Parsons scanned the printouts, all the time shaking his head. "Dear God in Heaven."

"Do you have the medical report yet?"

"Um...yeah, yes...it's right here." He handed it to me but I didn't take it.

"Why don't you just give me the Readers' Digest version?" I said.

He put down the printouts and rubbed his eyes. "Those marks on his face and neck? There were identical marks on his chest, forearms, and thighs."

"Burns?"

"No. Medical adhesive irritation."

"In English."

"That guy's been hooked up to both an EKG and EEG for a very long time. Plus, there was an unusually high trace of muscle relaxants in his system."

"*Muscle* relaxants?"

"That, and about a half-dozen different types of hypno-therapeutic medications."

We stared at each other.

"Any traces of hallucinogenic?"

"Good old-fashioned Lucy-in-the-Sky-with-Diamonds."

I felt my gut go numb. "So whoever took him has...has—"

"—has kept him more or less snowed out of his skull for the better part of three decades, especially the last year or so," said Parsons. "Tests indicate definite brain damage but we're not yet sure of the extent."

"...jesus..."

"I'll second that. You got an address on his family?"

I nodded my head. "The father died a couple of years ago. Coronary. His mother still lives in town at the same house."

"You suppose she stayed there because she believed he'd come back some day?"

"Seeing as how it was the father who petitioned for the declaration of death, my guess is probably."

"Need anything to take with you?"

"A photograph of the way he looks now."

“I’ll take it myself.”

I stood staring out at I-don’t-know-what.

“You okay, Carl?”

“Almost thirty years,” I whispered. “What the hell were they doing with him for all that time?”

“I’ve got a better question.”

“What’s that?”

“One minute the kid’s seven years old and off to buy a birthday-in-December slice of pizza, and the next—*wham!*—he finds himself in an almost-middle-aged body and doesn’t know how he got there. How do you explain to someone that they’ve been robbed of over one-third of their life and will never get that time back?”

* * *

Joyce Waggoner was fifty-seven but looked seventy. Still, she carried herself with the kind of hard-won dignity that, with the passage of time and accumulation of burdens, becomes a sad sort of grace.

Her reaction to the news that her son was still alive was curiously subdued. I supposed (and rightly so, as it turned out), that she’d been scammed countless times over the years by dozens of so-called “cult busters” who, for a nominal fee, promise quick results. I assured her that I was not after any money, and even went so far as to give her the name and number of our contact on the police force. She told me to wait while she made the call, but then she did the damndest thing—she stopped on her way to the phone, looked at me, smiled, and asked if I’d like some fresh coffee. “It’s really no trouble,” she said in a voice as thin as tissue paper. “I usually have myself some coffee about this time of day.”

“That would be very kind of you,” I replied, suddenly feeling like a welcomed guest.

She made the coffee and then called Sherwood, our police contact, who assured her that Parsons and I were on the level and could be trusted.

“May I see that photograph again?” she asked when she came in with the coffee. I handed it to her and spent several moments adding cream and sugar to my cup while she examined the picture Parsons had taken not two hours ago.

“I guess it could be him,” she whispered, looking up at me. “I’m sorry if I don’t seem overjoyed at your news, but I’ve been duped by a lot of people over the years who claim to’ve had news of Jimmy’s whereabouts.”

“I understand.”

She looked up at the mantel. There were only three framed photographs there: one showed Jimmy as a newborn, still swaddled in his hospital blanket; the next, in the center, was a picture of herself with her late husband that had apparently been taken shortly before his death; and the last, at the far end of the mantel, was of Jimmy, taken on his fifth birthday. I raged at the emptiness up there, for all the photographs that should have been present but hadn’t been and now never would be—Jimmy graduating from grade school, his high school senior picture, college graduation, all the un-lived moments in between, silly moments with Mom and Dad, maybe a picture of himself with his prom date, both of them looking embarrassed as Mom stood in tears while Dad recorded the Historic Moment on film...all the empty spaces where precious memories should have been, filled only with a thin layer of dust and a heavy one of regret. Even with the smell of air-freshener and what I suspected was freshly shampooed carpeting in the air, there was smell underneath everything that had to be grief. It had been clogging my nostrils since I’d come into the house.

“He was watching *The Searchers*,” she said. “You know, that John Wayne movie?”

“Yes, I’ve seen it many times.”

“It was his father’s favorite movie, you know. Anyway, he was watching it while I was making some last-minute arrangements for his surprise party later that afternoon and...you have to understand, Jimmy was always the sort of child who *liked* being kept in suspense. I guess that way he always had something to look forward to. So, about two-thirds of the way through the movie—and boy, was he immersed in the story—he had to use the bathroom, so he put the tape on “pause” and did his business, and about the time he was coming out of the bathroom his father was coming in the back door with Jimmy’s birthday present—his own VCR. Well, I didn’t want Jimmy to see it, so I gave him a couple of dollars and told him to walk up to Louie’s Pizza and get himself a couple of slices. Louie’s—it’s been gone for a lot of years now—it was right at the end of our block so Jimmy didn’t have to cross the street or anything like that, and he *loved* Louie’s pizza. So he said, ‘Okay. I’ll have it when I watch the rest of the movie,’ and he took off. That’s...that’s the last we ever saw of him.”

“Mrs. Waggoner, I have to ask this question: in the weeks, days, or hours before Jimmy disappeared, do you remember seeing any—”

“Yes.”

The immediacy of her answer surprised me.

She saw my surprise and laughed. “I didn’t mean to stun you, but the police and FBI must have asked me that about a thousand times. Yes, there was a man I saw walking through the neighborhood that I didn’t recognize and, yes, Jimmy once told me about this man trying to talk to him.”

“Did you contact the police?”

“Goddamn right I did. My husband had several friends on the force, and for weeks afterward I noticed more frequent patrols through our area. After Jimmy was taken, my husband started buying all sorts of guns, most of them from his friends on the force—old pieces of evidence, no serial numbers, like that. At one point, he had two guns in every room in our house. After he died I got rid of most of them.”

“How much time elapsed between Jimmy telling you about this man and his disappearing?”

“About five months.”

“Did this man say anything to Jimmy that might—”

“I’m way ahead of you.” She reached into the breast pocket of her blouse and removed a small, age-browned business card. “For years and years I couldn’t find this and then, this morning, I was looking through a few of Jimmy’s old Dr. Seuss books and this fell out of *And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street*. That man had given this to Jimmy.”

She handed me the card. It was sketch of a man meant to resemble Jesus, his face turned heavenward, his arms parted wide, a clock in the center of his chest.

The time on the clock was three minutes until twelve.

The logo for the Church of the One-Hundred-and-Eightieth Second.

She stared at me. “You recognize it, don’t you?”

“Yes.” And I did something then that I’d never done before.

I told her everything.

This is not SOP with me, understand. Usually Parsons and I try to feed the information to the families in bits and pieces so as to make the sordid whole a bit easier to swallow, but this woman, this good, graceful, lonely woman had moved something in me, and I felt she deserved nothing more than the whole truth.

She listened stone-faced, the only sign of her grief and rage the way her folded hands balled slowly into white-knuckled fists.

I finished telling her everything, then poured myself some more coffee while the news set in. I still couldn't get that underneath-things-smell out of my nose.

"The police checked out that church," she said. "I could at least remember some of the details of the card. The church denied that any of their 'apostles' had ever seen or been in contact with Jimmy."

"Can I keep this?" I asked, holding up the card.

"Don't see why not." She stared off in the distance for a minute, then shook herself from her reverie, looked at me, and smiled. She looked like someone had stuck a gun in her back and told her to act natural.

"I still have that damn VCR we got for him," she said. Her voice was so tight I thought the words might shatter like glass before they exited her throat. "Still wrapped up in birthday paper. They don't even make the damn things anymore. Still got that tape of *The Searchers*, too."

I reached over and took hold of one of her hands. It was like gripping a piece of granite. "At least that'll give him something to look forward to."

She nodded, and for the first time I saw the tears forming in her eyes.

"I don't so much mind what they robbed me of," she said. "Seeing him grow up, mature, riding a bike for the first time...I don't mind that so much. But *for him*...I very much mind what those bastards robbed him of. Childhood ends all too soon anyway, but to be...to be *stripped* of it like that, to have it expunged, to never, ever experience it...that's worse than simply robbing a boy of his childhood. It's a hideous form of rape in a way, isn't it?"

"We'll get them for this, Mrs. Waggoner. I swear it."

She wiped her eyes, looked at me, and tried to smile. "I don't doubt it for a minute."

I readied myself to leave and take her back to the safe house. To my surprise, she didn't want to come along.

"I, uh...I don't exactly look my best right now," she said. "I want to clean up a bit, put on a good dress, you know."

"Of course. I'll have someone come for you later this afternoon."

"Around five would be wonderful." She took my hand and kissed me once on the cheek. "Thank you, Carl. I don't know what kind of a life my son and I will have from here on, but at least we'll have one. Together."

I smiled at her as best I could and nodded, then quickly trotted out to the hover-car and took off.

I didn't want her to see how badly I was shaking.

Something had clicked into place while she was speaking to me.

And when she'd craned to kiss my cheek, that underneath-things-smell was on her.

And I recognized it for what it was.

And the implications scared the hell out of me.

* * *

"Detective Sherwood."

"Ian, it's me."

"Carl. How goes the spirit-saving business?"

Usually I'd have had a snappy reply, but not today. Sherwood sensed something in my silence and asked: "Okay, you're in no mood for jokes. How serious is it?"

"It may just be my imagination running wild with me—"

“You don’t *have* an imagination, pal.”

“Everyone’s complimenting me today, first Parsons, now you, I feel giddy.”

“*There* you are.”

“Look, Ian, this might be damned serious. I need you to get your hands on some records for me, can you do that?”

“I’ll need a couple of good reasons.”

I listed three.

Now it was Sherwood’s turn to be silent.

“Still there, Ian?”

“Uh...yeah, yes, I’m just...wow.”

“Like I said, it might just be my imagination, but if it isn’t—”

“—if it isn’t, a lot of people are going to be in deep sewage.”

“I figured.”

“How far back do you want me to check?”

“Start with a week ago, going through today.”

“I’ll dispatch some plain-clothes in an unmarked car to keep an eye on the place.”

“Tell them not to apprehend, just follow.”

“So now you’re my boss?”

“Please, Ian? This one feels bad.”

He sighed in resignation. “That last name was W-A-G-G-O-N-E-R?”

“Must’ve been your junior-high spelling bee champ.”

“National finalist.”

“You’re kidding?”

“I’m kidding...but then *I’m* the one with the sense of humor.”

“I gotta get new friends.”

“No one but us’d have you. Call me back in an hour and I’ll let you know.”

* * *

“Cindy?”

She looked up from the dishes, surprised to see me. “Yes?”

“I want you to tell me about the place where Brother Tick-Tock takes all new apostles.”

She stared. “That’s private. Sacred.”

I came toward her. There must have been something in my eyes, because she turned slightly pale and backed up a few paces.

“You listen to me, Cindy. That boy who came in here today, Jimmy, you *know* him, don’t you?”

“I don’t know, like I said.”

I had her backed to the wall. “Tell me about Lord Relativity, then.”

This caught her off-guard, but at the same time seemed to perk her up a bit. “He is the One and True God of All Moments, available to His followers on-line at all times.”

“And what does He say to His followers?”

“Nothing. We simply log on and become One with His Presence.”

“You...you *feel* him, then?”

“Yes, his thoughts and the beating of his heart. Lord Relativity was inspired by Jesus. It was in His Seventh Year that he became aware of His greatness, and in His thirty-third year, he falls into the ashes of cyberspace and emerges reborn.”

“Reborn. At age seven?”

“Yes. Praise His name and the etherealization of the New World He promises all.”

I grabbed her by the shoulders. “Where does Brother Tick-Tock initiate the new apostles, Cindy?”

“That’s a secret, I told you.”

“Then try this: Unless you tell me where this sacred place is, I think someone is going to try and kill Brother Tick-Tock before the day is over.”

“No! Without Brother Tick-Tock to guide us, to interpret what Lord Relativity thinks in His Cyber Palace, we will be lost and—”

I slapped her. I couldn’t help it.

I didn’t know how much time might be left.

“*Dammit, girl, tell me!*”

“CARL!”

I turned to see Parsons standing in the kitchen doorway. He looked livid. “How dare you strike her like that!”

“I don’t have time for your subtleties, my friend. Have you talked with Jimmy yet?”

“A little.”

“There’s a huge hole in his memory, right?”

“Yes.”

“One that you’re going to have to use hypnosis to fill in?”

“Probably.”

“Let me save you a little guesswork. You’ve got the latest incarnation of Lord Relativity up there.”

Cindy gasped.

Parsons tilted his head, looking confused. “How do you know—what do you mean the *latest* incarnation of—”

“Get on the horn and see if any seven-year-old boys have disappeared in the last three days, then call Detective Sherwood and tell him to get a squad over to the address Cindy is about to tell us.” I glared at her. “Well?”

“How can that man be Lord Relativity? He exists only in cyberspace, where all intellect and electricity meet to form a new consciousness and—”

I drew back to hit her again—I’d use my fist this time.

“Because Brother Tick-Tock and the elders of the church have been kidnapping little boys, drugging them, then hooking them up to medical equipment which is tied into the church’s mainframe server so that followers like you can get online and commune with Lord Relativity. I have no idea how many times they might have done this, or how often your precious lord rises like a phoenix from the ashes of cyberspace, but I *do know* that Brother Tick-Tock may be dead soon, and if you don’t tell me where the sacred initiation site is, it’ll be your fault.”

Parsons must have heard it in my voice, because he did not contradict what I said. We try never to lie to or use threats with people here, but if what I suspected was true, there was no time.

“Are you telling me the truth?” whispered Cindy, looking so scared and broken I almost took her in my arms.

“Yes, Cindy, I am.”

She gave me the address.

* * *

On my way to the address Cindy had given, I put the hover-car on autopilot while I tidied myself up and removed the detective’s shield and ID from the glove compartment—a gift from Sherwood at the police department. Sometimes I had to impersonate a detective in order to gain access to certain people. Thus far I’d never been called on it, and Sherwood had always promised to take care of any problems that might arise should I get busted.

I hoped he was a man of his word.

My phone beeped and, the car still on auto, I answered.

It was Sherwood.

“You nailed it, my friend,” he said. “One call to the church, two from. All within the last twenty hours.”

“Your plain-clothes boys there?”

“They are, but I don’t think anyone’s there.”

“I’m listening.”

“Right after you left, she called the local precinct and was connected to the Records Division.”

“Unlisted phone numbers, legal name changes, private addresses and the like?”

“Two cigars for you.”

“Parsons called you, right?”

“I’ve got two cars on the way, and as soon as I hang up I’m on the way my own self.”

“See you then.”

I broke the connection and landed right in front of the upscale condo and went inside to find the security guard at the desk unconscious.

Not bothering to remove my gloves, I checked the computer for Roger Buchanan’s (a.k.a. Brother Tick-Tock’s) apartment number and then grabbed the first elevator.

The ride to the twentieth-floor penthouse seemed to take forever.

When the door opened, I came out with my gun drawn. Across from me stood the door to Brother Tick-Tock’s personal initiation space where, I suspected, he’d seduced both boys and girls into the fold.

The door was open.

I nudged it farther with my foot and slipped in, my gun in front of me.

There was no sound.

I went from room to room, until at last I came to a large set of oak doors that had to lead into an office.

I opened them slowly and quietly.

Brother Tick-Tock sat in a plush chair behind his desk, a small splotch of blood staining the center of his shirt.

I could still smell the shot in the air.

Not unlike the dying aroma of gunpowder that I’d sniffed in Joyce Waggoner’s sad and hollow home.

I walked over, very slowly, to the person sitting in the chair on the other side of the desk.

Joyce Waggoner was still holding the gun, an automatic with silencer attachment.

There was no doubt in my mind that it was one of the untraceable weapons her husband had bought.

It took a moment for her to register my presence, and when she did she simply shrugged and smiled.

“He didn’t deserve to live, not after all he’s done.”

I stepped behind the desk and felt for a pulse.

Brother Tick-Tock was still very much alive.

I came back around and took the automatic from her hands. "You called in the tip, didn't you?"

"Yes." She lifted up her open handbag. It was stuffed to bursting with platinum credit chips. The smallest one I saw was a thousand.

"Jimmy got away from them somehow," she said. "I was so stunned to see him, to know that he was alive, that I just...I just held him a lot last night. Made cocoa. But then I got mad. I called the church and told them that I knew they'd taken my son from me and I was going to make them pay. They called me back, Brother Tick-Tock himself here. I hung up on him and he called right back. He offered...he offered me a lot of money to keep quiet. I don't have a lot of money to live on anymore, you see, and Jimmy, well, he's going to require a lot of care and...and..."

"So you said yes to a deal?"

"Yes. But then it occurred to me that they might try to...to take Jimmy back when they came with the money."

"So you took him to the VR temple downtown and called us to come get him?"

"I wanted him to be safe, somewhere they wouldn't dare try getting to him."

"How many men from the church showed up at your house with the money?"

"Only two. One of them slapped me, threatened to hurt me if I didn't tell them where Jimmy was."

"So you killed them both? Shot them?"

"How did you know?"

"I caught a whiff of gunpowder on you when you kissed me good-bye."

"I thought you seemed awfully sharp."

"Where are the bodies?"

"In the cellar. I have no idea how I'm going to get rid of them...of course, I guess that's all moot now anyway, isn't it?"

Brother Tick-Tock moaned but did not regain full consciousness.

Then I heard another sound.

A whimper; very small, very thin.

Behind a door to the left of the desk.

Not taking my eyes off Mrs. Waggoner, I backed toward the door and kicked it open with my foot.

On a bed not four feet away lay a small boy, dressed in winter clothes, tied to the bedposts and all-too-obviously drugged.

I looked at the child.

Then Mrs. Waggoner.

Then Brother Tick-Tock.

And I thought then of Jimmy, of the childhood he'd been robbed of, of the dust on Mrs. Waggoner's mantel, of the hysteria that the parents of this new boy must be feeling, and a last thought, unbidden, came to me: How many times had Brother Tick-Tock done this? How many seven-year-old boys had he kidnapped, drugged, and then hooked up to the church's computer so the followers could log on to see the Reborn Lord Relativity?

In this age gods, like their followers, can be easily manufactured.

I stepped into the room and saw all of the children's toys that littered the floor—balls to bounce, fire trucks, tiny robots, puzzles; a kiddie's paradise.

Then I saw the bank of monitors from the corner of my eye.

I turned to face them.

There were eighteen in all, most of them showing very small rooms with very small occupants on medium-sized beds.

None of the children were alone.

I will not describe the depravities these children were being subjected to by their roommates. I had to turn away for a moment before I threw up.

I saw a second door, set between two bookcases on the far side of the room. I walked very slowly over to the door and pushed it open. A winding stone staircase led downward.

On autopilot myself, I picked up one of the small bouncing balls, a blue one, and tossed it down the stairs.

I turned back toward the monitors and stared at the one in the center.

It showed a stone archway where a stone staircase ended.

I waited, forgetting to breathe.

A few seconds later, the blue ball bounced from the stairs onto the monitor screen.

I stared again at the empty, glassy eyes of the children on the other monitors, wondering if they knew their degradations were being recorded.

I had been wrong about what was really going on.

In my worst moments, I'd never imagined that I'd ever encounter anything as unspeakable as this.

I knelt down for a moment and pulled open a set of drawers under the monitors.

Hundreds upon hundreds of digital video discs were stored there, identified only by labels such as: LARRY, age 6, blonde; Little Boy Blue; Jessica, age 4, brunette; Little Miss Muffet.

So all of this, all of it—the church, the temple, the cyber-crusades of Lord Relativity and Brother Tick-Tock—all it was an elaborate front for a child pornography ring.

Then I noticed a label on one of the discs: ONE USE ONLY; red and noisy.

There were at least twenty more with the same label.

ONE USE ONLY: New cyber-speak for snuff movie.

All of this flashed through my mind in a second, and, knowing that Sherwood and his men would be here any minute, I made a decision that I knew would change the man I was for the rest of my life.

I came back into the office. “Mrs. Waggoner? You with me?”

“Of course.”

“Don't ask questions, just listen and answer ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ all right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a heart condition of any sort?”

She looked at me, puzzled. “No...?”

“Do you have any sort of condition that might endanger your life should you suffer a form of body trauma?”

“No.”

I exhaled, nodded my head, made sure my gloves were still firmly covering my hands, then took her gun from her hands and shot her in the shoulder.

She fell off the chair with a shriek.

I stood over her. “Listen to me, Joyce, listen very carefully. You came here to confront Buchanan about what he had done. You were out of your head with anger—that's why you knocked out the security guard downstairs. You came up here and the two of you argued.”

I picked up her handbag and slammed it against the side of Brother Tick-Tock's head. "He came at you and you hit him in the head with your purse." I jumped back over to her and punched her in the nose. "He hit you in the face and you went down right where you are—don't move. Still with me?"

"...yes..." she said through a haze of pain.

"Good." I went behind the desk and began opening the drawers, hoping to find a concealed weapon of some sort. I did, second drawer on the left, in a metal box that was unlocked. I removed the pistol and shoved it through my belt under my coat, then wiped Joyce's gun clean before shoving it into Tick-Tock's hand. "He went for his gun and shot you in the shoulder." I hauled Tick-Tock's limp form from his chair, Joyce's gun still in his hand, and threw him on the floor beside her. "He came around after you went down and you kicked him in the balls."

I kicked Tick-Tock in the balls.

"He went down, and the two of you struggled with the gun." I placed her hands on the pistol as well. "You shot him twice, once in the chest, and then—" I put the gun up to Tick-Tock's face and pulled the trigger. Blood spattered Joyce's face and clothes and my gloves. I dropped their hands and the gun, then quickly removed my gloves and shoved them in my pockets. "You killed him in self-defense, Joyce. I came in here just in time to see the end of it, understand?"

"...yes..."

"Can you remember all that?"

"Yes." She was recovering from the pain somewhat. This was one tough lady.

"I'll get rid of the bodies in your cellar later, don't worry about that. I hate to admit it, but I've got friends who have experience in that area." I scooped up her purse and removed all the credit chips, shoving them into my pockets. There was still enough junk inside—medicine bottles, makeup, checkbook, etcetera—to give it some good weight. "You're going to keep this money, Joyce, because you'll need it."

I heard the elevator bell.

She looked up at me, then at Brother Tick-Tock's body. "Why did you do this?"

"Because you're right, he didn't deserve to live...and every little boy deserves to see whether or not John Wayne rescues Natalie Wood."

She smiled at me, and as Sherwood and his men came running from the elevator, I went into the small room to untie the little boy whose childhood would not be stolen from him for the sake of false gods and their followers.

I held the child in my arms, and in the darkness I wept, thinking, *I can feel you breathe like the ocean, your life burning bright, all the unlived moments before you; may that fire be your friend and the sea rock you gently.*

* * *

I don't do as much fieldwork these days; that I leave to the Sherwood, who retired from the force a few years ago and came to work with us. Mostly I trace cyber-trails, gather info, make calls. Every once in a while I'll go on an assignment with Sherwood, but my conscience always manages to get in the way.

When at last it all becomes personal, you're no good in the field.

And I am a murderer whose greatest guilt is that he feels no remorse for his crime.

Jimmy and his mother are doing fine. I stop by their home frequently, and I'm glad to report it's a happy home.

Happy enough.

Joyce has the mantel filled with photos now of her and Jimmy. It looks like a family has lived their whole life there.

Jimmy loves his VCR. We have now watched *The Searchers* twenty-six times. He never gets tired of it. Come to think of it, neither do I.

Amen to that, pilgrim.

At the “Pay Here, Please” Table

When he was a child of eight he was taken on a camping trip by three teenaged boys who were friends of the family; all three were either about to ship out to Vietnam or were preparing to go off to boot camp in preparation for Vietnam. He was the youngest and weakest of the five children they'd taken along that weekend, so naturally when the fellows got good and drunk and dared one another to prove that there was nothing they weren't prepared to do, he was the one they grabbed from his sleeping bag and dragged deeper into the woods where the others couldn't hear him scream. Each teenaged boy raped him at both ends, two of them going at him at a time while the third held him still and firmly upright so no one lost their balance; guys readying to ship off to fight the dinks had to learn teamwork, after all. They left him there for the night, naked and bleeding and vomiting on himself. When he was dropped off at his house the next day, it was with a warning that if he told on them, he would be killed. He told no one. In the weeks that followed, each of the three teenaged boys visited him at the house, usually when one or both of his parents were at work. They made him dress up in his mom's clothes and put on make-up and lots of lipstick. Sometimes he had to wear a wig. He did the things they demanded of him because he was too scared and small and weak to think he had a chance to defend himself. Afterward, he'd put his mom's clothes back just as they had been, sometimes ironing them because they'd gotten wrinkled. Sometimes he'd wrap himself in a particular dress so he could smell his mom's perfume in the material and feel protected and loved for a few minutes. The lipstick always tasted terrible; it took him days to get that taste—and other tastes—out of his mouth. He didn't eat much and lost weight but no one asked him why. Eventually the teenaged boys stopped coming around. They went off to Vietnam. One of them was killed there. The other two returned unharmed. The first became a petty criminal who wound up being sent to prison for forty years; the second became a mail carrier whose route, until he shot himself and three co-workers a few years back, included the boy's family home.

Sitting at the Pay Here, Please table outside the garage now, the man who was once a boy of eight looking forward to his first (and only) camping trip watches as various young girls and women impolitely grope every last item remaining from the detritus of his childhood. Twenty-five cents for blouses, fifty cents for shoes and wigs, fifty cents for the dime-store jewelry Mom thought was so exquisite because she never knew better, a dollar for jackets and dresses. An appealing woman of perhaps twenty-seven with luxurious red hair says hello to him as she makes her purchase. He recognizes the dress: it's the one he was most often made to wear and sometimes wrapped himself in afterward. He feels a pang of regret (because it can't be grief, can it?) as the appealing red-head buys it (along with some shoes, some books, a couple of LPs), slips everything into a shopping bag, and leaves for her home.

He wonders what her friends will say when they see her in it. Look, they'll say. Look at _____'s new dress. It's so retro-chic. Have you seen it yet? Have you seen _____'s new dress?

He asks his sister to take over at the table. Rising, he feels sick as he begins following _____. That dress was his favorite. He wonders if she'll look as good in it as he did. The boys always said he looked

pretty when he wore it. He'll wait for her to put it on and see if she's prettier. Then he'll have her take it off. They can maybe go camping there in her house.

He hopes she'll understand afterward. She should have just left it on the table.

Consolation

“The consolation of imaginary things is not imaginary consolation.”

—Roger Scruton, English author, philosopher, and composer

In the early days of Cedar Hill when the Welsh, Scotch, and Irish immigrants worked alongside the Delaware and Wyandot Indians to establish safe shipping lanes, it was decided that a beacon of some sort needed to be erected. Two miles out from the shores of Buckeye Lake was an isolated island twelve miles in circumference; perfect for a lighthouse. Construction began in April of 1805, time and the elements took their toll as they are wont to do, and eventually the lighthouse fell to disrepair and decay. Two hundred years later the island was purchased by the Licking Valley Boaters' Association, the lighthouse was restored, and attached to it now was the Licking Valley Yacht and Boaters' Clubhouse, whose members kept one tradition from the 1800s; every New Year's Eve, regardless of the weather conditions, the tower light came on and circled for one minute as the foghorn sounded.

A few dozen yards from the fishing dock on the Buckeye Lake side, a single Cedar Hill Sheriff's Department vehicle pulled into the parking lot. First its visibar lights shut off (there was no siren tonight; the driver had used Silent Approach); next, the headlights, their beams filled with the swirling mist of fresh snow and the incoming fog, snapped back into darkness; and finally the driver's side door opened and out stepped Sheriff Ted Jackson, zipping up his winter coat and blinking against the vapor-trails of his breath. He unclipped his flashlight, its beam cutting through the night-haze of winter, and shone it in half-circles until its gossamer beam at last stopped. Jackson exhaled, nodded, and snapped off the beam, shaking his head. Reattaching the flashlight back onto his belt, he reached inside the patrol car and removed a medium-sized brown paper bag, tucked it under his arm, closed the door, and walked down to the fishing dock.

He approached the small figure sitting there, careful not to make any sudden loud noises. The figure was rocking back and forth, knees pulled up against its chest, humming a nonsensical and off-key tune and grinning ear to ear as diaphanous bursts of steam exited its nose with the rhythm of smoke from a sleeping dragon. Between its knees and its chest, it clutched a pair of well-read books, covers tattered but still doing their job, yes, indeed.

“Carson,” said Jackson as he squatted down next to the figure. “A lot of people are worried about you.”

“I-I'm s-sorry,” he said.

“How in the heck did you get out here, anyway?”

“I took the Number Forty-Eight express from downtown. I been s-saving my money. I got enough to get back.”

“The Forty-Eight doesn't come through here until six a.m. What were you planning to do until then?”

“I got enough to go to the truck stop and have a nice hamburger and m-malted or something. I was gonna catch the bus there in the morning.”

Jackson nodded. “Well, something told me you’d probably be here.

“I’m w-waiting for McDunn.”

Jackson gave the ghost of a smile. “So you finally gave it a name?”

Carson nodded, still not looking at the sheriff. “Uh-huh. And I figured that m-maybe since it’s gonna be—hey, you know what? It’s gonna be my birthday in a couple days. I want McDunn to come to my party. It’ll be—you know what? It’ll be *great!* I’ll be the only b-boy in Cedar Hill who’s ever had a dinosaur come to his birthday party!”

“You’re right, that *would* be great,” said Jackson as he slipped the paper bag behind him.

It was said of Ted Jackson that his eyes always looked as if he were staring at something a hundred yards away that perpetually broke his heart. They looked no different tonight, save for the distance between them and that at which they stared.

Looking at his watch, Jackson said, “Well, ten till midnight, so what say I wait here with you and we’ll see if McDunn shows up?”

Carson looked at him now, his smile radiant with gratitude. “Oh, that ... th-that’d be real great of you, Sheriff. I ain’t never had n-nobody wait with me before. They all think I’m s-s-stupid.”

Jackson put his hand on Carson’s shoulder. “Well, I didn’t have any plans tonight, anyway—and, besides, I can’t think of anyone I’d rather ring in the new year with.”

Carson’s smile faltered a little, maybe from the cold, maybe from something else. “I always liked you, Sheriff. I’m real g-glad you’re the one they sent.” When he said “they” Carson’s arms tightened around the books. This did not go unnoticed by Jackson.

“Did they try to take away your books again?”

Carson nodded violently, despairingly. “Uh-huh, and they ... they *can’t take them away, Sheriff!* They’re the only ones I ever had. I just ... I j-just l-love them. I d-do.” His eyes began to water, maybe from the cold, maybe from something else. “*P-please* don’t them take away my books. All my friends are here!”

Jackson looked into Carson’s eyes. “I promise you, buddy, that no one is going to take your ... take your friends away from you.”

“You mean it?”

Jackson had to take a deep breath to make sure he could get it out in a steady voice. “I mean it, Carson. I wouldn’t lie to you. I’m a terrible liar, anyway.”

Carson laughed. “Me too.”

Jackson’s radio squawked, startling both him and Carson. Patting the tiny rounded shoulders, Jackson said, “Be right back, buddy.”

“Will you be back before the light comes on and the foghorn sounds?”

“Count on it.” Jackson rose quickly and walked a few yards away, his bad leg reminding him that it wasn’t a good idea in this weather for a man of fifty-one years to squat.

“What is it, Rosie?”

“Sheriff, they’ve been calling here every ten minutes for the last half-hour. You find him?”

“I found him.”

“Oh, *good*. Now I can look forward to them calling every ten minutes to see if you two are on your way *back*. Happy New Year and God bless us, every one.”

“You’re a born poetess, Rosie. Tell them I’m going to wait with him until after the foghorn.”

“They won’t like it.”

“After everything that’s been done to him, all the lousy places he’s been shuffled in and out of, after all he went through at the hands of that sadistic waste of carbon the county called his father—”

“—that was a while ago, you gotta let it go, you’re getting yourself all worked up again and we both know your blood pressure ain’t been the best it’s ever—”

“Well goddammit *someone* ought to get worked up on his behalf, so why not me? It’s not like I got anyone else in my life to worry about, so if he wants to spend time waiting for McDunn to appear—”

“—McDunn?”

“The dinosaur, the sea monster.”

“From that story in one those books of his? Sheriff, that’s such a sad story.”

“They’re trying to take the books away from him again, Rosie.”

“Oh, *dear*. No wonder he ran away.”

Jackson looked back at the tiny figure sitting on the dock. “Hell, I would, too. If somebody threatened to take all my friends away.”

“Beg pardon?”

Jackson closed his eyes, getting hold of himself. “I’ll tell you about it tomorrow. Promise.”

Back with Carson, Jackson decided to sit this time and not tempt fate. “I miss anything?”

Carson giggled. “You’re f-funny.”

“You’re the only one who thinks so, but thanks.”

Carson reached over and took hold of Jackson’s hand. “I’m real sorry about ... about Misses Jackson.”

The sheriff shrugged. “Things happen with married people, Carson.”

“How come she l-left like that?”

“That was a lifetime ago, buddy. I just wasn’t ... very interesting to her anymore.”

“Well, I think that was a t-terrible thing to do. You’re such a nice man.”

Jackson shook his head. “Spread that around, will you? I haven’t had a date in ten years.”

“That’s a l-long time.” He squeezed the sheriff’s hand. “I’ll bet you g-get ... lonely.”

Jackson looked into Carson’s eyes and saw all the deep, sincere sympathy that a child’s eyes always had; he also saw the phantoms of terrible years of a childhood damaged, a childhood taken away, a childhood denied. Yet Carson’s eyes still maintained that spark of hope and wonder, of dreaming of rockets flying above and inspired chicken motels and million-year picnics, of golden apples of the sun and giant mushroom and happiness machines that he probably wished for before falling into his lonely sleep. He saw all of this, yet behind that warm and glimmering they were also eyes that were just sick about something.

“So, Carson ... what do you wish for the new year?”

“Oh, I wish for a lot! When I grow up, I wish that I’ll go to a Halloween party dressed like Stan Laurel and I’ll meet a girl dressed like Oliver Hardy and we’ll fall in love, and I wish to ride in a rocket, and I wish to build a fake mummy out of scraps of paper and old posters and sticks and pots and pans and anything else I can find so that I can play a big joke on everyone so we’ll all laugh, and the town of Cedar Hill, central Ohio, will tell the story over and over to other children so they’ll laugh, and I wish to travel to Mars and meet real Martians, and I wish to meet a fox in the forest who will laugh at me and my girlfriend ‘cause we dress like Laurel and Hardy, and I wish to meet a famous artist on the beach who will draw a picture in the sand and it’ll be only for me, and it’ll be of a world that’s *just* the way I hope it will be, where I can travel back in time and maybe meet knights who sit on railroad tracks, and I wish to say farewell to Lafayette and not be sad, and I wish to meet the parrot who knows every word of Papa’s last book, and I’ll talk to it, and then it will tell them to me ‘cause nobody ever told me stories before, and I wish to write poems and put them into blue bottles and cast them out to sea, and I wish to meet a man all covered in tattoos and each one has a story all its own and he’ll tell them to me ‘cause nobody ever told me stories before, and I wish to find

a button from a Civil War soldier's uniform, one lost downwind from Gettysburg, and that button will whisper stories of great battles to me when I polish it and hold it to my ear, and I wish ... I wish to fall asleep to soft rains and wake to a golden sun, and I wish to play a far-away guitar at midnight in the month of June ... and I wish to be the world's greatest writer so that I can tell stories to other children 'cause everyone should have someone to tell them stories on account it's awful lonely sometimes when you don't have nobody to tell you stories ... and I wish ... I wish ...” His lower lip began trembling, and his voice become much thinner and unsteady as he fought back the tears. “... I wish to have a place called home with my own room and people who love me ...” he pulled the books closer to his chest. “... and I wish that I maybe won't wish so much 'cause it's lonely when you wish and don't got nobody to tell about them ... nobody ever told me stories ...” He hugged the books close to his cheek. “... except here, only here, where all my friends are.” He looked at Jackson. “We should go back, Sheriff. McDunn isn't g-going to show up.”

Jackson blinked, shocked. “But ... but the lighthouse and the foghorn ...”

Carson threw himself against the sheriff and hugged him tightly, the precious books falling onto the dock as the fog crept in on silent cat paws, curling around the books until they could be seen no more. Carson wept, fighting against a great sorrow heavy and vast as he quoted from memory: “It's gone back to the Deeps. It's learned that you can't love anything too much in this world... Waiting out there and waiting out there, while man comes and goes on this pitiful little planet. Waiting and waiting.”

No light came from the tower. No foghorn sounded. The only noise was that of Carson's weeping and whispering: “Waiting and waiting and no one ever comes. N-nobody ever tells stories. Nobody ever tells”

Ted Jackson held the tiny, fragile, weeping figure close. He leaned over and picked up the books before the fog took them forever, gently placing them back in Carson's arms. “You know,” he said, “he wrote other books with lots more stories.”

Sniffling, Carson turned his face upward. “Y-yeah? He did?”

“You bet.” Jackson pulled the brown paper bag from behind him and removed its contents, momentarily unnoticing of the folded, stapled sheets of paper that tumbled out.

Carson's eyes grew wide, the innocent fire reigniting from within, making his cheeks glow. “A *hundred stories?*” he cried out in joy as he took the big, new, red-covered book from Jackson.

“Oh, yeah. And I have more by him, as well. You have hundreds, thousands of new friends waiting for you, Carson. He's given them to you. They've been waiting. You only have to open the book and turn to the first page.”

“Nobody ever gave me a new book.”

“Happy birthday, Carson.”

“... all these new friends, all these n-new stories, all these new places to go” He began reading the first story.

Jackson patted Carson's shoulder and gave him a small kiss on the top of his head, then reached out and grabbed the papers that he noticed had fallen out. The top of the first page read: **Petition for Legal Guardianship.**

“You want to come and stay over at my place tonight, Carson? We got some things to talk about. Maybe we can grab a pizza and—”

“Shhh,” said Carson, flipping the page with great intensity. “This's a *good* one.”

And so the fog danced around them but did not take them into the winter shadows; a sheriff of fifty-one and an old man of seventy-nine who, because of too many blows to the head with cast-iron skillets, would always be seven years old.

As Jackson led him to the vehicle Carson read on, finding worlds of new hope filled with new friends, new more wondrous things to imagine, to dream about, and to wish for. The pages turned, the words drunk in like Bacchus's headiest brew, and a childhood lost, a childhood ruined, and a childhood denied blinked as it woke in the darkness, turned on the lights, and raised its head in glory.

For Ray Bradbury

Bargain

“Then wilt thou not be loth
To leave this Paradise...”

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

The night grew silent, an almost majestic silence, as if every living thing was holding its breath for fear of breaking the purity.

As the silence became deeper, so did the darkness, allowing a massive shadow to detach itself from a corner of the night and move unnoticed over the city, over every building, every house, every church, past the farmers’ fields and the woodlands, until it reached the north and south forks of the Licking River near Raccoon Creek. Here, the North Fork marked the community’s eastern boundary. In this spot the county began to gradually slope from the Mississippian bedrock it rested on to the much trickier Pennsylvanian bedrock; shale lay under the surface of the topsoil from the west where sandstone began mixing in.

A small tributary of the Licking River formed in this spot, and it was here that the shadow hovered as still as the point of an ancient divining rod. This sixty-acre plat had always been extremely weak; the ground here was known to often simply collapse without warning, half-swallowing barns, outhouses, even the corpses of abandoned cars rusting in the nearby automobile graveyard.

This was not a place many visited anymore.

What better spot, then, for a certain corner of Hell to open one of its back doors?

Beneath the clear, still surface of the tributary whose surface was made almost turquoise by the moonlight, lay a series of small, evenly-spaced hollowed boulders, each with a translucent sheet of isinglass covering its front. Inside each of the hollowed objects—which, upon closer examination, the shadow saw were not boulders at all but leathery eggs—huddled a clay-like lump; some were shapeless blobs, others vaguely humanoid in shape; some were skeletal, others so corpulent their shapes could barely be contained; still others were mere hand-sized, featureless fetuses. The figures lay with knees pulled up against their chests. Their dark, sunken eyes stared up blankly at the draping algae and bodies of insects floating on the surface.

The shadow slumped closer to the surface, whispering *Awaken* to any of the figures who could hear.

A set of tiny fingers broke through the gelatinous fronting of one of the eggs and began pulling apart the shell, sections snapping off and flaking away until the featureless fetal face poked through, followed by two pink arms, hands moving slowly through the water as the Unfinished Soul pushed free of its prison and swam through to the surface. It pulled itself onto the ground, crawling toward the tip of the shadow.

The shadow reached out and helped the Unfinished Soul to stand.

I need a guide, little one, whispered the shadow. A debt is being collected tonight.

Lift me up, said the Unfinished Soul. It will be my pleasure to show you the way.

The shadow poured over the figure, ink spreading across a sketch, until it vanished completely.

Do exactly as I say, whispered the Unfinished Soul.

And the shadow began churning in the air; slowly, at first, curling wisps of smoke from a forgotten cigarette, growing thicker, its speed increasing, soon twisting itself into a funnel and dropping low.

The ground rippled, then began sinking inward with heavy, dry sounds as the shadow threaded itself into the center of the chasm like string through a needle's eye. Sections of earth spun outward as the shadow-thread drilled deeper, finally disappearing beneath the surface. The ground shuddered, jumped, then grumbled. The remaining eggs in the tributary swirled like flecks around a drain before vanishing down the chasm.

In the heart of the shadow, the Unfinished Soul glanced upward, just once, out of curiosity, and saw the moon vanish behind a blue-tinged night-cloud, then re-emerge a few moments later to reveal it was no cloud at all, but something much more solid—a balloon.

Beneath its death's-head body and the glowing fire within, his hands gripping the flying wires of the basket, a young man who could no longer remember his name watched as the chasm grew wide, then wider. As he stared into the pit he saw a ring of trees emerge around the perimeter—fingers of the dead pushing upward through forgotten grave-soil—and stood helpless as the balloon moved downward, toward them.

The trees were well over thirty feet tall, each with a thick trunk resembling that of a cactus, only black. The branches of each tree were obscured by heavy onion layers of bleak blue leaves which collectively blossomed outward to form human faces, each turning upward to stare at him through milky, pupilless eyes, each wearing a tight, pinched expression of concentrated grief. As the wind passed through the trees, the faces opened their mouths and moaned; deeply, steadily, mournfully: the sound of cumulative anguish.

The young man felt tears welling in his eyes, and wished he could say something to ease their pain.

After all, he recognized every face.

A strong gust of wind howled, snatching the balloon from within the ring of keening trees and hurtling it into the gale. It bounced across the night sky, turning, dipping, rising, caught in the thermals. It ebbed across roads, spun down streets, and arced over buildings, its cast-off rope whipping back and forth as it was tossed into the pocket of a wind that pulled it down until the tip of its rope touched the sidewalk.

It scooted along until it reached an old but noble-looking house where a single dim light burned in the downstairs window.

The balloon moved with great care, positioning itself so that the young man was given a clear look inside the window.

Murky light from a glowing street lamp snaked across the darkness to press against the glass. The light bled into the room, across a kitchen table, and glinted off the rim of a glass held by a man whose once-powerful body had lost its commanding posture under the weight of compiling years; he was now overweight from too many beers, over-tense from too many worries, and overworked far too long without a reprieve. Whenever this man spoke, his eyes never had you; this much the young man watching from the balloon recalled with morbid clarity. His father's eyes were every lonely journey the young man had ever taken, every unloved place he'd ever visited, every sting of guilt he'd ever felt; he stared into his father's eyes that never had you, only brushed by once, softly, like a cattail or a ghost, then fell shyly toward the ground in some inner contemplation too sad to be touched by a tender thought or the delicate brush of another's care. You'd think God had forgotten his name.

Albert lifted the glass to his mouth. The cool water felt good going down, washing away the remnant of the bad dream. He drained the glass, sighed, then went to the sink and refilled the glass. He was thinking

about his days as a child, about the afternoons now forgotten by everyone but him, afternoons when he'd go to the movies for a nickel and popcorn was only a penny. He thought about how he used to take his son to the movies all the time when his son was still a boy, how much fun they always had, and Albert longed for the chance to do something like that again, something that would put a bright smile on his son's face and make himself feel less of a failure. His son was now a great success, and Albert was still what he'd always been, a factory stooge, a worker on the line. He tried to remember how long it had been since he and his son had last spoken. Seemed a damn shame, it did, the way they never talked anymore, and his son living just the other side of town.

Why hadn't the boy called in so long?

Albert stood at the sink listening to the sounds of his wife sleeping. Janice snored loudly, and though it used to get on Albert's nerves, he now found the sound comforting. He didn't know how he'd be able to face the rest of his life if she weren't by his side. She was a marvel to him. After all the mistakes he'd made—and, God, he'd made a lot, no arguing that—her respect and love for him never lessened.

Albert raised the glass to his lips and found that he was smiling.

The balloon rose higher, then, toward a window on the second floor, giving the young man a chance to look in on the sleeping form of his mother, and smile; even from outside, he could hear her snoring. *Sawing logs like a lumberjack*, his father used to say.

The keening trees had perfectly captured the faces of his parents, as well as the others.

The young man reached out his hand but stopped just short of placing it against the glass.

Would it do any good if you knew how sorry I am?

As if in answer, the wind kicked up once again and the balloon was swept away, up and over the house.

It rode the breeze above the roofs of the town until its nearly-imperceptible shadow fell across the head of a couple climbing out of a car and running toward another house, one the young man recognized all too well.

As he did the couple; their faces, too, had been perfectly reproduced by the keening trees.

The balloon hovered, unseen by Patricia and her husband, Richard, as they rushed toward the front porch of the house. Patricia had been trying to get in touch with her brother for the last week and had finally given over to panic when she'd called Mom and Dad to find they hadn't heard from him for a long while, either.

"He's probably out of town or something," Albert had said to her. "He's been real...busy lately, what with the company taking off like it has."

The explanation wasn't enough for Patricia, who insisted that Richard and she make the one-hour drive from Columbus to Cedar Hill.

Patricia pounded on the front door, calling out her brother's name.

No response.

She began flipping through her keys until she found the spare door key her brother had given her last year when he'd bought the house.

"I don't know if just barging in like this is such a good idea," said Richard.

"Don't start with me again," said Patricia, slipping the key into the lock. "I don't care how great things are going for his company, you *know* how bad his depression can get when he doesn't take his meds. He pulled this disappearing act the last time he went off them, and it damn near killed him."

"I still think you're panicking over nothing."

"I hope so, Richard. I truly hope you'll be saying 'I told you so' to me in a few minutes."

She got the door opened but Richard stepped in front of her.

“Let me go in first, Pat, okay? He might...y’know...have company or something.”

“*Goddammit*, Richard, I’m not going to worry about—”

“Just humor me, all right?”

Patricia exhaled, then nodded her head. “I’ll wait here. But not for long.”

Richard went inside, leaving the door half-opened.

The young man in the balloon wanted to close his eyes, wanted to cover his ears with his hands, wanted the balloon to leave here right this second because he didn’t want to see or hear what was about to happen when—

“*Jesus!*” shouted Richard from inside. “*Oh, good Christ—PAT!*”

As if propelled by the volume of Richard’s shouts, the balloon caught a thermal and glided farther on, reaching the banks of the Licking River. The thermal expanded and the balloon lowered its basket and passenger into the waters, the currents carrying it to the junction of the north and south forks.

It bounced off a section of jutting rocks and spiraled upward, pulled into a pocket of churning wind being sucked into the deep chasm in the center of the field.

The keening trees blinked their pupilless eyes and cried out again; louder, this time, and with a deeper anguish.

The young man felt their cries chew through him as the balloon hung suspended over the chasm of collapsed earth.

The balloon’s tie-off rope began to unroll and lower itself. The rumbling from deep inside the chasm became a whistle. Small sections of hillside crumbled away, giving way to increasingly larger sections sliding toward the chasm and pouring over its edge.

The chasm grew wider. More ground collapsed.

The whistling was replaced by the sound of a million rocks cracking apart from the center.

The tie-off line pulled taut, a fisherman’s line at last making the catch of the day.

The balloon began rising.

An ornate kiosk that might have been a belfry poked up, followed by curling arches that formed the overhang of stained-glass windows where stone gargoyles sat underneath.

A tug, another gust of wind, and the tie-off line snapped tighter, pulling with all its might.

The bulk of the rising church was pulled free of the membranous sac of soil.

The young man looked down and saw the world he’d known—as well as those he’d never know—unfurl before him like wings of a merciless predator.

He saw mountains crumble, the sky change color, and the seas give up their dead.

He saw himself watching a television screen that showed him watching a television screen of himself watching another screen where film of a funeral was shown to him as he watched.

He watched his soul grow wings and take flight.

He watched himself grow older.

He watched himself become a baby once again.

He watched himself never being born.

He watched himself being born a thousand times in a thousand different places.

He watched his soul’s wings catch fire and plummet downward into the Pit.

He watched as everything shifted and changed and faded into shadows, only to be replaced by other, firmer worlds; there were skies filled with fire and songs to be sung; there were ships and seas and fields of green; there were races being born, becoming children at play, growing up, growing old, dying, becoming

ashes, blowing away; he saw a ghost of himself walk through these ashes and stand over the bones of a child who had once been him, and he wept at the sight, at the wasted potential; he saw the bones rise up and grow skin, replacing the ghost of himself, growing up to become young and reckless, grow strong and virile, healthy and pink-cheeked, suddenly a child, a baby once more, a seed in the womb of its mother who snored too loudly, spinning back in time before starting over once again, clicking off the television remote of the funeral scene and struggle to his feet, old, ancient, his grey hair thinning, back bent, legs thin and weak and unstable, wishing for one last kiss from the wife he never had, then hobbling off to a lonely deathbed to lay down, close his eyes, and become ashes that blew away to land in a field of ashes where the next ghost of himself stood weeping over the bones of a child....

The church shook off the dirt and began to glow from within as candles were set aflame.

The doors were unlocked with a loud, creaking groan, and thrown open.

The Dust Witch stepped from behind the doors and gestured up toward the balloon, the bones in her arthritic index finger cracking as she curled it forward, then back, forward, then back: *Get yourself down here, now.*

The balloon lowered. The Dust Witch took hold of the tie-off line and wrapped it around one of the gargoyles.

The basket touched ground, and the young man climbed out, slowly, with much hesitation and even more sadness.

Around him, the keening trees turned their faces downward, screaming.

He touched his lips, then pulled away his fingers to look at the blood covering them; then he reached toward the back of his head, surprised at the size of the exit wound.

He smiled, shrugged, and looked at the hag standing before him.

“A belated word of advice,” said the Dust Witch, taking his hand and leading him through the doors into Hell. “Whenever you sell your soul, don’t sell it so *cheap.*”

Shikata Ga Nai: A Bag Lady's Tale

We find her, as expected, in her favorite place: the iron bench on the courthouse lawn, the one with the sculpted-bronze figures of two old women doing cross-stitch sitting on it. It's fortunate that it's a big bench, because the old lady needs a good deal of room, she does, for her bags and blankets and such. Judging by her face, she's not a day over fifty, yet she claims to be in her early eighties. No one knows her name, or where she lives, or if she has a home at all. But we know her, in a way. As a neutrino has no mass or electrical charge and can pass through the planet in a blink, so this bag lady's existence can pass through this world; she, like the neutrino, is a ghost, yet both are real, both exist and have presence, even if that presence is unseen or ignored.

We take a place near the little garden a few yards behind the bench and watch as she begins to unfold the quilt; we listen as she tells the story to her still bronze companions, who never seem to tire of hearing it:

"Gene got himself shot overseas during the war and it did something to the bones in his leg and the doctors, they had to insert all these pins and build him a new kneecap and calfbone—it was awful. Thing is, when this happened, he only had ten months of service left. He was disabled bad enough that he couldn't return to combat but not so bad that they'd give him an early discharge, so they sent him back home and assigned him guard duty at one of them camps they set up here in the states to hold all those Jap-Americans.

"Gene guarded the gate at the south end of the camp, and I guess it was a pretty big camp, kind of triangle-shaped, with watchtowers and searchlights and barbed wire, the whole shebang. There was this old Jap tailor being held there with his family and this guy, he started talking to Gene during his watch every night. This guy was working on a quilt, you see, and since a needle was considered a weapon he could only work on the thing while a guard watched him, and when he was done for the night he'd have to give the needle back. Well, Gene, he was the guy who pulled 'Needle Patrol.'

"The old guy told Gene that this thing he was working on was a 'memory quilt' that he was making from all the pieces of his family's history. I guess he'd been working on the thing section by section for most of his life—'cording to what he told Gene, it'd been started by his great-great-great-great-grandfather. The tailor—this fellah in the camp with Gene, that is—he had part of the blanket his own mother had used to wrap him in when he was born, plus he had his son's first sleeping gown, the tea-dress his daughter had worn when she was four, a piece of a velvet slipper worn by his wife the night she gave birth to their son....

"What he'd do, see, is he'd cut the material into a certain shape and then use stuff like paint or other pieces of cloth stuffed with cotton in order to make pictures or symbols on each of the patches. Gene said this old Jap'd start at one corner of the quilt with the first patch and tell him who it had belonged to, what they'd done for a living, where they'd lived, what they'd looked like, how many kids they'd had, the names of their kids and their kids' kids, describe the house *they* had lived in, the countryside where the house'd been ... I guess it was really something, all right. Gene said it made him feel good, listening to this old guy's stories, 'cause the guy trusted him enough to tell him these things, you see? Even though he was a prisoner of war and Gene was his guard, he told him these things. Gene said it also made him feel kind of sad, 'cause

he'd get to thinking about how most people don't even know their great-grandma's maiden name, let alone the story of her whole life. But this old Jap—'scuse me, I guess I really oughtn't use that word, should I? Don't show the proper respect for the man or his culture—but you gotta understand, back then, the Japs was the enemy, what with bombing Pearl Harbor and all....

“Where was I? Oh yeah—this old tailor, he knew the history of every last member of his family. He'd finish talking about the first patch, then he'd keep going, talking on about what all the paintings and symbols and shapes meant, and by the time he came round to the last completed patch in the quilt, I guess he'd covered something like six hundred years of his family's history. ‘Every patch has one hundred-hundred stories.’ That's what the old guy said.

“The idea was that the quilt represented all the memories of your life—not just your own, but them ones that was passed down to you from your ancestors, too. The deal was, at the end of your life, you were supposed to give the quilt to a younger member of your family and it'd be up to them to keeping adding to it; that way, the spirit never really died because there'd always be someone and something to remember that you'd existed, that your life'd meant something. This old tailor was really concerned about that. He said that a person dies twice when others forget that you had lived.

“Well, Gene, he starts noticing that this tailor, he seemed really ... I don't know ... scared of something all the time. These camps, they weren't nearly as bad as them ones the Nazis built for the Jews, but that ain't saying much. Some of 'em was filthy and cramped stank to high heaven, but this camp Gene was at—I can't remember its name, dammit—it had this sign tacked up over the entrance gate, and this sign was on the inside of the gate so everyone in the camp could read it, and it said, ‘Shikata ga nai.’ It was this old tailor that had made the sign and hung it up, you see. He told Gee that it meant, ‘It cannot be helped.’ I guess a lot of them poor folks jammed into them camps felt that way, y'know? Like there wasn't nothing they could do about it and never would be.

“Gene finally got around to asking the tailor what his name was. The guards weren't supposed to get too familiar with the prisoners, I guess, and asking one for their name was against the rules something terrible, but Gene was a decorated war hero and figured, what the hell are they gonna try and do to me, anyway? So when he notices that the tailor has been acting real scared, he tries to talk with him, calm him down, right? The tailor tells Gene he needs to tell him a story first, before he tells his name, and then he says—get this—he says that he's older than any piece of land anywhere on Earth. He's crazy, right?

“And then he tells Gene this story. He says that when a child dies its soul has to cross the Sanzu River, that when a person dies, they can cross the river at three different spots—depending on how they lived their lives. Since children ain't lived long enough to have done something with their lives, they can't cross the thing. At the edge of the river, these children's souls are met by this hag named Datsueba, and she takes their clothes and tells them to build a pile of pebbles so they can climb up it to reach paradise. But before the pile can get high enough for the children to reach paradise, the hag and her gang of demons knock it down. If the soul is an adult's, Datsueba makes them take off their clothes, and the old-man Keneo hangs these clothes on a riverside branch, and that branch, it bends against the weight of that soul's sins. If the sinner didn't have no clothes, Datsuba stripped them of their skin.

“That's the part of the story when the old tailor, he told Gene that his name was Keneo, that he'd escaped the underworld and Datsuba because he couldn't take part in her behavior no more. He couldn't watch them poor kids trying to climb their piles of pebbles or them adults stripped of their skin. He said that when he escaped the underworld, he stole every piece of clothing that had ever been left by the Sanzu River, because if he could find a way to make a quilt with one section of cloth from each piece of clothing, them souls would be released and there wouldn't be nothing Datsuba could do about it. But in order to give the

quilt this power, the clothes from them souls in the underworld had to be stitched alongside pieces of clothes from the living, and that's why it was taking the tailor so long to finish it. The guy, it turns out, didn't have any grandfather, or great-grandfather, or great-great-great grandfather. They was *all* him! Gene, he thought the old guy had himself quite the imagination, so he just smiled and handed him a needle and watched him do his work.

"Bout ten months after Gene started Needle Patrol the old tailor came down with a bad case of hepatitis and had to be isolated from everyone else. While this guy was in the infirmary the camp got orders to transfer a hundred or so prisoners, and the old guy's family was in the transfer group. Gene tried to stop it but nobody'd lift a finger to help—one sergeant even threatened to have Gene brought up on charges if he didn't let it drop. In the meantime, the tailor developed a whole damn slew of secondary infections and kept getting worse, feverish and hallucinating, trying to get out of bed and babbling in his sleep. He lingered for about a week, then he died. My Gene, he almost cried when he heard the news.

"The day after the tailor died Gene was typing up all the guards' weekly reports—you know, them hour-by-hour, night-by-night deals. Turned out that the three watchtower guards—and mind you, these towers was quite a distance from each other—but all three of them reported seeing this old tailor at the same time, at exactly 3:47 in the morning. And all three of them said he was carrying his quilt. Gene said he read that and got cold all over, so he called the infirmary to check on what time the tailor had died. He died at 3:47 in the morning, all right, but he died the night *after* the guards reported seeing him—up till then, he'd been in a coma for most of the week.

"Gene tried to track down the tailor's family but didn't have any luck. It wouldn't have mattered much, anyway, 'cause the quilt come up missing.

"He didn't tell me about any of this till our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. He took me to New York City so's I could see a real Broadway show. On our last day there we started wandering around Manhattan, stopping at all these little shops. We came across this one antique store that had all this 'Early Pioneer' stuff displayed in its window. I stopped to take a look at this big ol' ottoman and I asked Gene if he thought there were people fool enough to pay six-hundred dollars for a footstool. He didn't answer me right away so I asked him again and when he didn't answer this time I turned around to see him all white in the face. He let go of my hand and goes running into this store, climbs over some tables and such to get in the window, and he rips this dusty old blanket off a rocking chair.

"It was the quilt that Japanese tailor'd been working on in the camp. They only wanted a hundred dollars for it so you bet your butt my Gene slapped down the cash. We took it back to our hotel room and spread it out on the bed—oh, it was such a beautiful thing. All the colors and pictures, the craftsmanship ... I got teary-eyed when Gene told me the story. But the thing that really got to both of us was that down in the right-hand corner of the quilt was this one patch that had these figures stitched into them. Four figures. Three of them was positioned way up high above the fourth one, and they formed a triangle. The fourth figure was down below, walking kind of all stooped over and carrying what you'd think was a bunch of clothes. But Gene, he took one look and knew what it was—it was a picture of that tailor's soul carrying his quilt, walking around the camp for the last time, looking around for someone to pass his memories on to because he couldn't find his family and he couldn't go back to the underworld on account of what Datsuba would do to him. He was lost forever, and there wasn't nothing he could do about it. It couldn't be helped. Shikata ga nai. Isn't that sad?

"See here, this's the quilt. And this here needle? Gene gave it to me. It was the one that old tailor used. I been adding things to it, 'cause it seemed to me that's what my Gene would want me to do if he was here.

See this? This is part of the suit Gene wore when we got married. And this here come off the baby gown that my mom made for Cindy when I had her. Them things there?—those're the dog tags that the Army sent to us after Jimmy was killed over in Vietnam. The way I figure it, Gene was like family to the tailor, so it's only right that I do this. It's only right.

“Thing is, I'm not as sprightly as I used to be, and except for Cindy all my family's gone—she don't much want to have anything to do with me. I'm not even sure where it is she and her husband are livin' these days. And if—oh, Lord, look at me, will you? Getting all teary-eyed again.

“I don't know what's gonna happen to this after I'm gone, you see? And I don't know where any of them souls' clothes was stored. I can keep adding things from people living in this world, but I got no way to get them souls' clothes. I don't know how I'll know when this quilt is finished, and if it ain't finished and I die and don't pass it on to someone, then them souls will be trapped in the underworld forever. And that scares me something powerful, it does. Right down to the ground.”

Patience

“Men always want to be a woman’s first love. That is their clumsy vanity. Women have a more subtle instinct about things: What they like is to be a man’s last romance.”

—Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*

He walked slowly down the hallway, the sound of his footsteps swallowed by the deep golden carpet. He stopped at a door that was an ornate slab of burnished teak set within a bronze frame. He knew who waited on the other side, and what he was going to do once he found them.

He stood in silence, aware of the rhythm of his breathing and the sweat covering his face. He checked to make certain the surgical gloves he wore hadn’t been torn when he’d taken out the two bodyguards downstairs. The first one had been easy—the man was half asleep at his post, it was just a matter of coming up behind him and making sure he punctured the lung from behind with the knife. Puncture the lung, it creates a vacuum, making it impossible for the victim to scream.

The first guard hadn’t screamed. Had barely made a sound while his throat was slit. Easy.

The second guard gave him some trouble, even managed to get his gun out of its holster, but never managed to get off a shot. He’d buried the fillet knife in the guard’s eye. To the hilt. He hated having to leave the knife. It had been an anniversary present.

He almost smiled now, remembering the shocked expression on the second goon’s face when he’d seen him. The man’s eyes had held a thousand questions: *Who the fuck are you? What do you want? How’d you get past the alarms? Does this job pay enough to make it worth dying for?*

At least that last one was answered now.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed gently at the perspiration on his face, then stuffed it into one of the nine pockets of his heavy coat.

The fake beard was itching like hell. The spirit gum he’d used to apply it was burning his skin underneath. He could smell the theatrical hair spray he’d used to make himself grey. And the blue-tinted contacts were causing him to blink more than he liked.

Still, they were necessary precautions.

There was almost no light in the hallway, save for that from the moon which bled in from a large window across from him. Outside it was purple-gray, 4:40 a.m.; dawn just creeping in, night not quite finished with the world. A thin layer of snowy mist enshrouded the yard as a dispirited breeze sloughed through the trees. Frost glistened on every surface, shimmering at the tips of leaves.

She had always loved this time of night, this time of morning. Sometimes, she’d wake and get out of bed, then just sit in her favorite chair and watch the night with infinite patience, just to see a moment of perfect peace.

He felt a rush of renewed love for her. So giving, so kind, so patient.

He'd learned patience from her. He was being patient now. His soul radiated patience.

He checked his watch. 4:42 a.m.

It had taken him three years to find this house and this door.

Three years and nearly fifty thousand dollars, the time and money doled out slowly.

Almost finished, my love, he thought.

He kept his face expressionless, willing the same emptiness into his eyes.

Emptiness was easy now. He had the person on the other side of the door to thank for that.

He checked his watch again.

4:45 a.m.

Time to finish it.

He pressed his ear against the door, listening.

From somewhere deep in the room, he heard a groan. Soft. Then louder.

"Faster, baby...oooooh, that's it, faster, harder...harder...*harder!*"

So he wasn't alone.

That was all right. He'd planned for this possibility.

The noise made by the woman covered the sound of his opening the door. The room was divided into two separate areas, like an expensive hotel suite. He found the sofa and coffee table.

Behind the bedroom door, the woman was screaming like a banshee, squealing and howling.

He took off his coat and began emptying the pockets.

Two pairs of handcuffs. A hypodermic needle filled with a precisely-measured dose of succinylcholine. Ten milligrams for each fifty pounds of body weight. It would cause instant paralysis but not numb the pain or induce unconsciousness.

Surgical bandages. A rubber tourniquet. Pressure tape. A mini blowtorch. Catheter tubing. A small roll of barbed wire. And a battery-powered bone saw.

He laid everything out nice and neat. He unfolded the large rubber apron and put it on over his clothes. He removed the two pistols and double checked the silencer attachment on the semi-automatic.

Ready, steady.

He checked the time again. 4:48 a.m.

He ran the calculations in his head once again.

He'd disabled all the alarms and video cameras, but if anyone happened to glance at the equipment, they'd see all lights on and blinking as usual. If there was a secondary alarm, it would be somewhere in the bedroom. It didn't matter. If a secondary alarm was set off, the security company would call first. Not getting an answer, they'd alert the police. This place was set far back from the main road. The drive to the house was tricky, a lot of twists and turns, not to mention the heavy foliage. You couldn't just *zoom* up here. At best, even if the police cruiser were right at the entrance to the house's private road, it would take them at least four minutes to get here. If the cruiser was dispatched from the station—and out here that would most likely be the case—then it would take them at least thirteen minutes to get here...and that was if they drove at a steady 80 m.p.h. the whole way.

And odds were they'd be on Silent Approach.

If there was a secondary alarm, and if the people behind the door had time to set it off before he could stop them, then once he went through the bedroom door he'd have somewhere between four and thirteen minutes.

He'd choreographed it for twelve minutes.

Time enough. He'd performed enough dry-runs on stolen CPR dummies and mannequins. Last time, he had it down to an even eleven-and-a-half minutes.

If there was a secondary alarm. *If* it was tripped. *If* he had to be fast.

He wished he could have hours.

Days, even.

He walked to the bedroom door.

"Give it to me hard, baby! I like it hard. YES!"

He took a deep breath and remembered the scent of Katie's perfume. The way she smiled during sleep. How she organized her sale coupons before heading out for the grocery store.

His face became a mask of granite.

He lifted the guns, exhaled, and kicked open the unlocked door.

The woman on the bed was on all fours, gripping the sheets in her fists and teeth. Her ass was high in the air. The man behind her was plunging a ridiculously large dildo into her.

They both jerked up their heads in shock as soon as the door crashed into the wall.

The man on the bed was none other than Dr. Barry Brandt, international best-selling author of *Return to Romance: How To Stoke the Fires of Marital Passion*, host of the popular syndicated radio show *Words of Love*, and recent daytime television talk-show star, thanks to the instant ratings success of his *Homefires* program. Add to that his always sold-out seminars for married couples—at a thousand dollars a pop—and his Romance Retreat Institute, and you had yourself a bona fide celebrity approaching pop-culture icon.

It was doubtful most of his followers knew about his adult-film franchise.

Brandt flung himself back against the wall, leaving the dildo inside his bed-mate.

"Who the hell are you?"

He pointed one gun at Brandt's face, the other at the woman on the bed. "It doesn't really matter now. My name's Morgan. My wife and I were just one of God-only-knows how many couples you lured to your Romance Retreat."

"Just tell me what you want and I'll—"

"Keep your hands where I can see them, both of you."

"Can I take this goddamn thing out of me?" said the woman.

"No." He moved closer to the bed, pressing the business end of the silencer against Brandt's upper lip. "Are there any alarms in here?"

"No," said Brandt.

Morgan jerked his arm to the right, firing the semi-automatic into the mattress, just missing the woman's knee.

She shrieked but, to her credit, didn't move.

"Next one goes through something wet and soft," Morgan said, shoving the silencer back up against Brandt's face. "This is very important, *Doctor. Extremely* important. So I'll ask again—are there any alarms in this room?"

"Yes."

"Good boy. Where?"

Brandt's eyes moved to the right. Morgan followed the path. A small pearl button on the right bed-post.

"That the only one?"

"Yes."

Morgan took a step back, looked once at the woman on the bed, and shot her in the thigh with the tranquilizer pistol. Ten seconds later, she was unconscious.

Morgan leaned down to check her breathing. It was fine. “Turn her over on her side in case she pukes,” he said to Brandt. “And prop a couple of pillows behind her so she doesn’t fall over onto her back.”

“Look, w-we can...we can *talk* about this,” said Brandt.

“*Turn her onto her side.*”

Brandt complied.

Afterward, Morgan shoved the silencer under Brandt’s chin; with his other hand, he grabbed the good doctor’s testicles and pulled him along, guiding him to the other room.

“Th-that *hurts!*” shouted Brandt.

“It’s supposed to,” replied Morgan, shoving the other man down onto the sofa. He grabbed the first set of handcuffs and slapped them around Brandt’s ankles. Then he grabbed Brandt’s hair and forced him to bend forward so he could cuff the man’s arms behind his back.

Morgan noted with neither joy nor fury that Brandt’s being naked gave him 45 additional seconds to do what he came here to do.

Of course, with no secondary alarm having been set off, he had all night.

All the time in the world.

Morgan reached over and turned on a lamp.

Brandt got a good look at everything that was laid out on the table. His face turned white. He tried to speak but couldn’t find his voice.

Morgan pulled up a chair and sat in front of Brandt, the gun pointed directly at the good doctor’s genitals. “The blowtorch is for cauterizing. You know, so you don’t bleed to death.”

“I’ve got money. A lot of it. There’s almost a quarter of million in cash right here in the house. And I can get more within an hour. I—”

“The thing is,” said Morgan, “we really *believed* in your methods, Katie and me. Fourteen years we’d been married. Not every moment was filled with the crippling romantic ecstasy that you see in movies, but we loved each other. We were happy—happy enough.” He cocked his head to one side and stared into Brandt’s eyes.

“You have no idea what I mean when I say ‘happy enough,’ do you? I didn’t think so. How could someone like you know what it’s like to totally love someone. Not just their body, their smile, the way they smell in the morning, not just a check-list of countless individual things...but to love the imperfect whole, unquestioningly. The warmth of her lips, the smoothness of her skin, the silly way they hiccupped? I’d always felt that way about her, even if in later years I didn’t show it as often or as well as I should have. Every time I saw her, every time we kissed, every time I caught a whiff of her perfume that entered a room just before she did, I was amazed at the rush of emotions inside me. I never in my life believed I had it in me to love someone so completely.

“Being with her wasn’t like having a fantasy come true before I was ready for it; it was like having a fantasy come true before I’d even had the fantasy.”

He reached up and wiped something from his eye.

“I remember, when we first met, how Katie would always ask me to tell her the story of my life. So I’d tell her, and when I finished, she’d ask me to tell it to her again, and I did. Only the second time, it was the story of *our* life. I—” He stopped himself when he saw the disgust lingering underneath the fear in Brandt’s eyes.

“But you don’t give a shit about that, do you, Doc? Or should I say, Lance Rollins? As in ‘A Lance Rollins Production’?”

Brandt’s eyes flashed something at hearing that name.

“You know that exit packet you give all the couples who attend your weekend Romance Retreat? There’s a suggestion in that list of—what is it, 125 tips? Buried in the middle. *‘Do not be afraid to watch erotic films together; there’s nothing wrong with looking for new fantasies to share with your spouse.’*”

“Well, after our weekend at the Retreat, things were going really good. We made love like we were in our early twenties again. Katie became more ambitious. She even started taking the initiative. It was just...great.”

Morgan rubbed his temple, sighed, then looked at Brandt and shot him in the shoulder.

Brandt threw back his head and tried to scream but the pain was too intense. He barely managed a squeak. Morgan grabbed a small rubber ball from the pocket of his apron and shoved it in Brandt’s mouth, then used a strip of pressure tape to secure it in place.

He waited until Brandt finished thrashing. The good doctor’s head slumped forward. His breath shot hard out of his nose.

Morgan reached out and tipped Brandt’s head up with the edge of the silencer.

“Not gonna pass out on me, are you, Doc?”

Brandt stared at him with hate-filled eyes.

“So I take it then that my narrative isn’t boring you?”

Brandt didn’t even blink.

“I would apologize for shooting you in the shoulder like that, but I suddenly saw Katie’s face. I don’t see it anymore, Doc, and that makes me sad. She’s gone, and it’s your doing, and what should now be the best time of our lives—mine and Katie’s, that is—is just an endless succession of dismal, empty days, followed by dismal, empty nights. She used a garden hose, in case you’re wondering. Ran it from the tailpipe through the trunk and between the fold-down back seats. She did it around 5:16 in the morning.” Morgan checked his watch. “About seven minutes from now. That’s when I’m going to start in on you, Doc. At 5:16. I think you should die as slowly and in as much pain as she did.

“Oh, her pain wasn’t as *physical* as yours is going to be, but her spirit, her heart, everything that made her so loving and kind and decent—that was in unspeakable agony. Had to be to drive her to suicide.

“Where was I?—oh, yeah, the 125 tips For Sustaining the Romantic Flame. Number 87: *‘Do not be afraid to watch erotic films together; there’s nothing wrong with looking for new fantasies to share with your spouse.’*”

“Well, it was about three, four months after our Retreat weekend. God knows that time at the Retreat had helped us—put the spark back into our sex life, but Katie and I were starting to, well...run out of ideas. So we sit down with the cable guide and check out the Pay-Per-View adult movies. We decided to spend an evening watching and taping ‘erotic films.’ The first couple were pretty tame but we enjoyed them, but it was the third film—*Loving Couples, A Lance Rollins Production*—that really caught our attention.”

Morgan rose to his feet. He placed the gun on the coffee table, then picked up the tourniquet and syringe. “Are you so stupid as to think that none of the couples who attend your seminars or go to your retreat will *ever* watch Pay-Per-View adult films? Or does your research show that they prefer to go out and rent? I checked on that, you know—your productions aren’t available for rental, only purchase through the mail. And since you have to have exact titles...well, I guess I can see why you’d think odds were none of the couples you secretly filmed would ever find out.”

He leaned down into Brandt's face. "Well, one of them did, Doc. There we are, sitting naked in front of the television, and all of a sudden *there we are on the television*. First we're making love in the bath tub, then there we are on the bed. Then later on—after you used tape of other couples—we top off the movie with our simultaneous orgasm, the first time we'd ever tried it with me entering her from behind.

"Do you know how that *killed* her? She pulled away from me and covered up her body like it was something *filthy*, something diseased. She wouldn't talk to me for days. She was so afraid that someone we knew might see that movie and recognize us."

He grabbed Brandt's throat and squeezed. "Sex between Katie and me was always something special and intimate, something that left us feeling even closer to one another than we had before, and in *one instant* you ruined it for us forever. You twisted it, made it dirty and shameful and broke her spirit. She couldn't live with what you'd done. *I* wanted to go to the police but she said no. It would have been too humiliating for her. You *made it* humiliating. You took a weekend that was so precious to us, that gave so much back to us, and turned it into...into...God! There's not even a word for what you turned it into!

"You took the most beautiful weekend of our lives and mutilated it. That's what Katie said to me. 'It's all been mutilated for me. My body is ugly. What we do in bed is ugly. I want it to stop.'"

Morgan held the syringe up to the light and flicked it with his finger, making sure there were no bubbles; it wouldn't do to accidentally burst Brandt's heart before he even got started. He wrapped the tourniquet around the other man's arm and pulled it tight, until a juicy vein rose up.

"You mutilated her spirit, Doc. You mutilated her soul. Since I don't think you've got a soul, I'll have to return the favor with the next best thing."

Brandt's eyes grew wide with terror and he began to thrash.

Morgan grabbed one of the guns and slammed the butt against the side of Brandt's skull.

The doctor fell to the side, still conscious but not struggling.

Morgan stuck the needle into Brandt's vein and sank the plunger.

"Just so you won't be too distracted during everything, Doc, I'm going to tell you the story of our life—Katie's and mine.

"Maybe if there's time, I'll tell it to you again. You're in the last part.

"For a little while, anyway."

Morgan lit the blowtorch, then fired up the bone saw.

He was empty now.

Katie had taken the best of him with her. He hoped it would still be waiting for him to reclaim it after he was done. She would be there, waiting for him, thanking him for avenging her death. She would give back to him all the good things that had made him human.

He would be with her soon.

He was saving the Teflon-coated hollow-point round to make sure they'd be together.

Body and soul.

Always.

"Body and soul, Doc. One's useless once the other's been ruined. Remember that. Can't be romance without body *and* soul."

He inserted the catheter tube—none too gently—and then slipped the barbed wire into that.

"You know," he said to Brandt. "I *almost* hope you live through this."

Not rushing things.

It would all come out fine in the end.

All it took was patience.

Always Something There to Remind Me

“Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened...”
—T.S. Eliot, “East Coker”

“The carpeting’s the wrong color.”

Cindy Harris looked away from the television and said, “What?”

Her husband, Randy, pointed to the television.

“The carpeting’s supposed to be light blue. Look at it. It’s *green*, fer chrissakes.”

“So what’s the big deal?”

Randy looked at her with that impatient, condescending expression that told Cindy he expected her to already know the answer. That expression was one of the few things about her husband that Cindy genuinely disliked. She could feel his defensiveness rising and wondered if he’d been forgetting to take his Zoloft lately.

“The big deal,” he said, “is that I remember the way my folks argued about the color. *Dad* wanted green, but Mom insisted on light blue, and like every other time they had an argument, Mom won out.”

Cindy watched him fiddle with the controls on the remote, then flip down the little door at the bottom of the set and start messing with the controls there.

Sighing, Cindy said, “Maybe something went wrong with the transfer. C’mon, Randy. Those home movies were pretty old, y’know? Maybe we waited too long to have them put on DVD. That old eight millimeter film stock, maybe it started to go bad and this was the best they could do. Most of them have turned out fine up until now.”

Randy stopped fiddling with the controls, looked at the picture once more, and then turned toward her, his face losing color.

“What is it?” asked Cindy.

“I, uh...nothing. Nothing.” He rose to his feet, walked across the room, and began heading up stairs. “I gotta make a call. Back in a minute.”

“Hold on,” said Cindy, grabbing hold of his elbow. “What’s *wrong*, honey? This isn’t worth getting upset about.”

He tried smiling at her but didn’t quite pull it off. “I just remembered something—I mean, I *think* I remembered something.”

“Plan on letting me in on it?”

His face softened, but remained slightly pale. “Please let me make the call and then I promise I’ll tell you all about it.” Kissing her cheek, he gently pulled her hand from his elbow and went up to his office, closing the door behind him.

Putting her impatience on hold, Cindy went back to the sofa, sat down, and turned up the volume. Randy never talked much about his childhood—something that annoyed Cindy at times but which she respected, nonetheless—so maybe she could use this as a chance to get a glimpse of him as a child.

She watched for several minutes as Lawrence, Randy’s father, finished setting up a plastic racing track in the middle of the room (with a running and very funny commentary), plugged in the power supply, and then put a small HO-scale car on the track and gave it a test run.

“Think he’ll like it?” asked Lawrence.

“Oh, he’ll just *flip*,” said the voice of Virginia, Randy’s mother, who was holding the camera. Lawrence grinned, obviously proud of himself for having assembled this without bloodshed, and then came the sound of a door opening. Virginia whipped around with the camera, the image blurring for a moment, and came to a stop on the face of a little boy who looked about nine years old. His face was flushed from the cold outside, and he was having trouble unwrapping the heavy wool scarf from around his neck.

“What’s goin’ on?” asked the little boy Randy had once been. “How come Daddy’s home from work so early?”

He finished with the scarf, hung it on the hall tree by the door, and then pulled down his hood to reveal his face, his bangs a little too long and little too shaggy.

“Daddy’s got an early Christmas present for you.”

The little boy stared at the camera for a few moments, and then his face came alive with realization and a smile that could have been seen for miles in the dark. “The race car set came?” And with a speed and agility that is the special province of nine-year-old boys, rocketed past the camera and into the living room, where his shouts of delight filled the air.

“Turn it off,” said Randy from behind her.

Cindy turned, smiling, and waved him away. “Oh, get over yourself. Why didn’t you ever tell me you were into racing when you were a kid? God, Randy, you were *adorable*.”

He said nothing as he reached down, pulled the remote from her hand, and turned off the DVD player. The screen turned a bright shade of blue when the picture vanished.

Cindy turned all the way around, kneeling on the sofa so she could better face him. “What did you do *that* for?”

“Something’s wrong.”

“I knew that already. Did you make your call?”

“Yes.”

“Going to let me in on it now?”

Randy nodded, came around, and sat down beside her. Cindy readjusted her position and took hold of his hand.

Randy said, “Just listen to me for a minute, okay? Don’t...don’t say anything or ask any questions, just listen.”

Feeling anxious—God, his face was so *pale*—Cindy nodded her agreement.

Randy hit the remote, returning to the race track scene, then hit the **Pause** button and pointed to the screen.

“I called Mom just to make sure,” he said. “The carpeting was light blue, not green like this. But that’s not...not why I called her.”

“Cindy, look at me. How long have you known me? Ten years, right? We’ve been married for six years—and by the way, I’ve loved every minute of it, if I haven’t told you lately. The thing is, have I ever struck you as someone who’s absent-minded or forgetful?”

“No.”

“Have you ever thought of me as being unstable in any way? The anti-depression medication aside, I mean.”

“Of course not.”

He stared at her with an intensity that made Cindy uncomfortable. *He hasn’t been taking his meds*, she thought. *That has to be it.*

He started the DVD once again. “Look at the screen, Cindy. Tell me what you see.”

“Randy, you’re making me nervous.”

“Please?”

“Okay, babe, okay.” She faced the television. I see you and your dad playing with an electric racing car set on the floor of your folks’ old living room.”

“Look closer.”

It wasn’t until the little boy on the screen ran over to hug his mother—forcing her to set down the still-running camera—that Cindy realized what was wrong.

“What the—?”

“See it now, do you?” asked Randy.

She did. In the bottom right-hand corner of the screen: a small readout giving the time and the date.

3:42 p.m. 12/16/68.

“That’s from a *video* camera,” she said, looking at him. “Did they even have video cameras in 1968?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Randy. “We never owned anything like that when I was a kid. In 1968, Dad was in the middle of a seven-month layoff from the plant. We had a very...inexpensive Christmas that year. It was nice, Mom had been saving money so we’d have a good dinner, but as far as presents went...I got a couple of Aurora monster model kits and some new shoes, that’s it.”

Cindy looked back at the scene on the television, then to her husband once again. “Okay, maybe I’m a little slow here today, baby, but are you telling me—”

“—that we didn’t own a home movie camera, video cameras weren’t available to the public, and what you’re looking at”—he pointed to the happy scene unfolding in all its glory—“*never happened*. Yeah, I *wanted* an HO race set, but that was out of the question.” He looked back at the screen, and when he spoke again, his voice quavered. “This never happened, Cindy. That’s why I called Mom—I wanted to make sure I wasn’t misremembering things. I wasn’t. The carpeting was light blue, we never owned a home movie camera, and I never got a racing set.”

He rubbed his eyes and shook his head. “The thing is, while I was growing up, I used to *pretend* that I *did* get one, y’know? I mean, you do that when you’re a kid, you imagine things that didn’t happen actually did.”

Cindy nodded. “I did that all the time. I still do.”

Randy smiled at her, touching her cheek. “When I used to play that scene out in my head, it looked just like *that*.” He nodded toward the television.

“Except the carpeting was the right color?” asked Cindy.

“Bingo.”

For a minute they both sat watching silently as the scene played out, culminating in Randy beating the pants off his father in the Big Championship Race.

The scene quickly blacked out and a notice reading **End Of Tape** appeared in the middle of the screen.

Randy stopped the DVD player once again and began rummaging around on the coffee table.

“What’re you looking for?” asked Cindy.

“The invoice, the list that came with the discs.”

“I put on my desk. Hang on.” She went into her office and retrieved the paperwork, and came back to find Randy on the floor with all of the discs spread out in front of him (still in their protective sleeves, thank God).

Holding up the papers, Cindy asked, “What are we looking for?”

Randy smiled at her. “You know, you probably don’t notice how you always do that.”

“Do what?”

“That ‘we’ business. Five minutes ago, this was *my* problem, then I tell you about it and suddenly it’s *our* problem. Not ‘me’ but ‘we’.”

“Don’t be silly, baby—*of course* it’s our problem. What bothers you, bothers me.”

He blew her a kiss, then pointed with his thumb at the television. “This is Disc #3. What’s the list say is on it?”

Cindy found the invoice for #3 and read aloud: “Disc #3. Transfers of home movies, Reels 1—5, labeled ‘Prom’, ‘Cindy’s College Graduation’, ‘First Day on the Job’, ‘Mom and Dad’s 40th Anniversary Party’ and ‘Our Wedding Rehearsal.’” She lowered the paper and stared at her husband. “They mislabeled, that’s all.”

“Did they?” Randy picked up the remote, pressed **Previous**, and a moment later the screen showed Cindy, ten years younger and damn near in tears, receive her college diploma. Then he hit the **Next** button not once but twice, and there was Cindy, laughing and waving at the camera as her mother videotaped her walking into the high school on her first day as the newest History teacher. Randy then hit **Previous** once, and there was his father, setting up the HO track in the middle of the living room that had the wrong color—

—both Cindy and Randy started—

—the living room that now had the *correct* light-blue color of carpeting.

Randy’s hand began shaking. “Jesus Christ, honey, what the hell is going on?” He looked at her with an expression of confusion and helplessness that damn near broke her in half.

This time it was Cindy who turned off the disc, but she also ejected the damned thing and turned off the player. “I don’t know, baby, but don’t...don’t let it get to you like this, okay? Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out.” Even to her own ears it sounded like a desperate, empty promise, something to say to Make It All Go Away For Right Now.

But Randy was having none of it. He pointed to the discs spread out in front of him. “There are eight discs here, Cindy, *eight*. We were charged for seven.” He picked up the eighth disc; both the protective sleeve and label on the disc were blank.

“Randy, you need to calm down, baby, okay? I’ll tell you what—let’s get something to eat, let’s go out for a bit, and then we’ll come back and watch all of these from start to finish, okay? Maybe one of us will see something that’ll help us figure out how...how...”

“...how an imagined memory of something that never happened could wind up on these things?”

She couldn’t think of anything to say. Just blurting it out like that made it sound absurd.

“Okay,” she said. “Screw it, then. C’mon, sit down next to me and let’s watch it again. Come on.” She sat on the sofa and patted the spot next to her. “Come on. Let’s do this. You and me.”

He sat beside her and took hold of her hand, and Cindy started the disc once more.

They watched Cindy receive her diploma, and then watched as she walked into her first day as a History teacher.

The race track film was gone.

Silently, anxiously, they started with the first disc and worked their way through all of the first seven. There was nothing on any of the discs that wasn't supposed to be.

Which left only the eighth, unmarked disc.

"Jesus," said Randy, looking at it as Cindy slipped it from its sleeve. "Did we imagine it?"

"Baby, I've *never* believed in 'shared hallucinations' or whatever it is they're called." She examined the last disc under the light as if she expected to find some kind of ancient sigil hidden in the reflection. Looking up at her husband, she tried to smile and almost made it. "I'm game if you are."

Randy silently nodded his head, looking for all the world like a prisoner who'd just been told the hour of his execution was fast approaching.

Cindy slipped the disc into the player and sat very close to her husband as she hit the **Play** button.

The first sequence was the missing race track film, which the two of them watched as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if it were something from the past that Randy had shared with her many times over. At one point, they both even laughed at something Randy's father said as he was assembling the set.

Then came the film of Randy getting ready for his first Cub Scout meeting.

"I don't remember this," he said to her, gripping her hand tighter.

"But you *were* a Cub Scout, right?"

"...no..."

"Oh, God..."

And they watched. They watched as Randy graduated all the way to Eagle Scout; they watched as Randy was lifted onto the shoulders of his football teammates after he'd tackled the quarterback of the opposing team, preventing the touchdown that would have lost Randy's team the state championship (he'd never participated in sports, much to his father's disappointment); they watched as Randy readied himself for his high school prom (to which he did not go because his father had died the previous week); they watched as Randy and his parents moved his belongings into his college dorm room (he'd done this alone); and they watched as Randy's parents embraced both he and Cindy at their wedding.

"Looks like it would have been a nice life," he whispered.

Cindy looked at him. "What's wrong with the one you have now?"

He turned toward her. "Nothing, honey, nothing at all. I love you, you know that, right?"

"Of course I do."

He looked back at the screen. "This is the past I *wish* I'd've had. Look at all this. It's all so...*interesting*. So happy and exciting."

"There's nothing wrong with the life you've had. It's been a good life—it's *still* a good life, baby."

He shook his head. "Look at me, Cindy. I'm a dull little man, and I know it, okay? I don't have any great sports stories to share with the guys I work with, I don't have any great adventures to impress people with, and I sure as hell aren't the most exciting man you could've picked for a husband.

"I used to resent the hell out of that, you know? I hated Dad for dying like he did and leaving me to take care of Mom and the house. I started college three years late because I had to get a job at the plant to help

pay for everything. *God*, I resented it! I resented not having *that* life, the one on the screen. I used to imagine...when I was really angry, I mean really, *really* angry, I used to imagine that—”

His words cut off when he looked back at the screen.

It was a film of a woman giving birth to a child that was obviously dead. The woman insisted on holding the body, and as the camera came in for a close-up, Cindy saw that it was Randy’s mother.

A moment of blackness, and then came the image of a teenaged Randy, looking a decade older than his years, stabbing his parents in their sleep, their blood spattering the walls with every plunge of the knife.

Another moment of blackness, and there was Randy, in his twenties but looking much older, tying a naked and severely-beaten woman to a wooden chair. The woman whimpered and screamed and begged him to stop, but Randy ignored her pleas as he turned away and began selecting tools from a table.

A final moment of blackness, and there was Randy, as he was now, sitting beside Cindy, as she was, the two of them staring at a screen that showed them sitting on a sofa facing a television screen that showed the two of them facing a television screen that showed the two of them facing a television screen...

Randy sat forward and buried his head in his hands. “God, Cindy, the...*thoughts* I had when I was that angry. That’s why I started seeing a psychiatrist—remember that I had to cancel our third date because I’d forgotten about the appointment?”

“I thought you were just trying to let me down easy,” she said. She only now realized that she’d moved away from him, that the last series of images had turned her stomach. How could *this* Randy, this man she loved, ever harbor thoughts so repulsive and violent?

Good God, did she know him at all?

He looked up and saw the expression on her face, saw that she’d moved away from him, and his face went blank. “Just so you know, the girl in the chair was Tammy Wilson, who was the only girlfriend I had during college. She cheated on me with at least three different guys, all of them jocks.” He looked at the screen once more. “I won’t lie to you, Cindy. Thinking about doing that to her...it helped. I’m not proud of those thoughts but I can’t very well deny having them, especially now, can I?”

“And sometimes, honey, when you really disappoint me...I think about doing the same things to you. And it makes me happy. It makes me *feel good*...”

She pulled the remote from his hand and turned off the disc, which she then ejected, pulled from the player, and snapped in two.

“There,” she said to the empty sofa, and then felt herself starting to cry. She quickly got hold of herself, sat down, pulled in a deep breath, and fingered the jagged scar that ran from her left temple to the side of her mouth, a souvenir from her own father—one of many that she carried all over her body.

Goddammit! She’d almost made it work this time, almost had the perfect husband, the perfect marriage, but Daddy’s influence always had a way of creeping back, one way or another.

She rubbed at the burn scars around her wrists, scars now faded with age but still pink enough to remind her of the ropes, of the chair, of Daddy’s tool kit.

She looked at the stack of DVDs with the transferred home movies of families she’d never met and would never know, and decided that she’d start looking for new memories tomorrow. She was always alone in the lab—that was the best place for someone who looked like her, anyway. History teachers with disfigured faces weren’t exactly in demand these days, and never had been.

There were always dozens, hundreds of home movies people wanted transferred to DVD. So she’d say goodbye to Randy and hope that, tomorrow, she could find some new memories that she could hold on to, ones that Daddy couldn’t sneak in and ruin.

She turned off the television set and for a few moments just knelt there, staring at the slightly distorted reflection of her face.

“I’ll miss you, Randy,” she whispered. “You were the best one yet.”

She placed her hand against the screen, imagining that the reflected hand was not hers, but that of a gentle and compassionate man who was reaching out through the glass to take hold of hers and whisper that she was beautiful, the most beautiful woman in the world, and, oh, how he would love her forever....

Return to Mariabronn

There you are. I see you at night.

* * *

Lorena notices right away that Rudy is out of sorts. He always took a stool right smack in the middle of the counter—"I like being close to the action," he'd say. "And if there's no action, I like looking at you and *imagining* some action." Why she hasn't slapped his face after all this time, she can't say. Maybe it's because he always blushes like a little boy who's just told his first dirty joke whenever he tries one of his bad lines on her. There's something sweet about his attempts at crude trucker humor, and that always makes her smile.

But tonight Rudy sits at the far end of the counter, near the bathrooms, the worst seat in the diner. He's been tight-lipped, shaky, and anxious. This is not the same man she's been serving and flirting with for the past couple of years, and she's not sure if it's a good idea to ask him about anything *too* personal. Still, he looks like he's about to crack apart. Lorena finishes refilling everyone's coffee and drifts down to Rudy.

"I gotta tell you, Rude"—the nickname usually gets a grin out of him, but not tonight—"I didn't expect to see you with the weather and the roads the way they been. You musta drove like a bat out of hell."

Rudy attempts a smile, doesn't quite make it, and silently pushes his coffee cup toward her. Lorena fills it again. When Rudy reaches for it, she puts her free hand on top of his and squeezes. "What's up with you tonight, Rude? Usually by this time you've propositioned me at least three times. You never know—tonight I might say 'Yes.'"

Rudy looks at her, at the other customers in the diner and then speaks; his voice is a fragile, sad, frightened thing: "I think I might've done something terrible tonight, Lorena. I didn't *mean* to, but ..." He looks at her with eyes so full of mute pleading that Lorena feels her throat tighten. She can't remember if she's ever seen a man so lonely.

"What is it, Rudy? You can tell me."

"I don't know," he whispers. "I—I kinda really like you—why do you think this is always the first place I stop when I leave on a run and the last place I stop on the way back?"

Lorena feels herself blush a little. "I figured you was just the shy type."

"Your opinion of me means a lot, and I ... I don't want that ruined."

Lorena puts the coffee pot back on the burner and tells the cook and the other waitress that she's taking her fifteen-minute break. She picks up Rudy's coffee cup and half-eaten sandwich and gestures for him to follow her over to one of the far empty booths.

Once they're situated and sitting across from one another, Lorena sits back, folds her arms across her chest, and says, "Okay, Rudy, here it is: I like you, too, and I think a lot of you, think you're an okay guy. I done things that I ain't really proud of, either, so I try not to judge anybody. So, c'mon—out with it."

Rudy doesn't look at her as he begins talking. Even when describing the worst of it, he never makes eye contact. Lorena has to lean forward and turn her good ear in his direction in order to make out the words. It's hard for her to pay attention to his story at one point because she's stunned by the tears that are forming in his eyes. But she listens, and feels sick.

Rudy finishes his story, sips at his now-cold coffee, and finally looks at her. Something in him touches her, and she moves over to sit beside him, using a paper napkin to wipe his face.

"Rudy, you gotta listen to me, hon, okay? If it hadn't been you, it woulda been somebody else. Sounds to me like they was pretty determined."

"But, *Christ*, Lorena, I- I" He takes hold of her hand. "Am I a bad man?"

"No, you're not. A bad man wouldn't be feeling the way you are." She then cups his face in both of her hands. "You listen to this, Rudy, and you listen good.

"*Yes . . .*"

* * *

"Dude, I'm serious—you *gotta* hear what I got on my digital voice recorder last night."

"Oh, for the love of—look, I'm begging you, find a woman, download porn, start collecting Precious Moments figurines—*something else*, all right? This goddamn ghost-chasing of yours is wearing really thin. You're out there alone in the middle of the night and—hell, I worry about you, okay?"

"Please? Just listen, and I swear if you think it's bullshit, if you still think it's a waste of my time and money, I'll drop it, okay?"

"Fine. Let's hear it."

Click. Hiss. *Where have you been? I've missed you.* Hiss. Hiss. (Very softly, sounds of distant traffic nearly obscuring the words) *Dance with me?* Click.

"Well?"

"...Jesus."

* * *

The O'Henry Ballroom is crowded that night, the orchestra in rare form as they play "You Came Along" and "Love in Bloom" and "(I Can't Imagine) Me Without You" (one of her favorite new songs), but her escort for the evening has had far too much to drink and is getting somewhat fresh. She reaches behind her and grabs his left hand, pulling it up to the small of her back where it's supposed to be, and hopes that he understands. He doesn't, and soon his hands are slipping again, touching her in the most inappropriate of ways, and at last she breaks away and slaps his face.

"*Please* stop doing that!"

He glares at her, rubbing his check. Around them several couples have stopped dancing and are staring at them.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean," he says.

She looks around at the staring faces and feels herself turning red. She realizes then that she should have stayed home and listened to *The Shadow* with her parents. That new actor, Orson Welles, oh, his voice! Instead, she was here, being made a spectacle of because her escort was a drunkard and a masher.

"I wish for you to take me home now, if you please."

He steps toward her, gripping her shoulders. When he speaks, his words are thick and slurred. “I am not going to take you anywhere ... ‘cept back to our table. Let’s have another drink an’ settle down.”

She tries to free herself of his grip but he’s quite strong. Finally, she stomps on his right foot. He cries out, releases her, and stumbles backward.

“You will take me home *now!*”

“I will most certainly not. If you wish to go, then *go!* Have a nice walk.” With that, he turns away and stumbles through the dancers until he disappears somewhere in the throng of swaying bodies. Fighting back tears of humiliation and anger, she twirls around and walks off the dance floor toward the doors. Her face is puffy, red, and tear-streaked. Maybe the cold air will help.

She pushes open the doors and glides out into the harsh winter night. Less than a mile. She has strong legs, a dancer’s legs, and knows that she can make it. Yes, she’ll be freezing by the time she comes through the front door, but her mother and father will be there. Warm cocoa, perhaps some soup. Father’s heavy coat and a place by the fire. Soft music on the radio. Is *Gershwin Presents* on tonight? (She hopes so).

Crossing her arms across her midsection, she takes an icy breath and moves out toward the road, her white dress blending into the swirling snow.

* * *

The State Police find the car in the spring, after the first thaw. It’s on its roof far off to the side of Archer Avenue, not far from Resurrection Cemetery, at the bottom of the incline where the winter snow always piles high to hide the carcasses of animals that crawl into the foliage to die, the litter tossed by teenagers as they drive too fast around the bend, and even—sometimes—the bodies of vagrants who curl up with newspaper blankets in the shadows thinking they’ll be on their way in the morning, after they’ve rested.

The entire driver’s side of the car is smashed in, the door and part of the front missing.

“Looks like the damn thing got hit with a wrecking ball,” remarks one of the officers.

His partner shakes his head. “Never had a chance. At least the license plate is still attached.”

The officers call in it in. They are instructed to make a search of the immediate area which turns up nothing.

* * *

The old man wakes at four in the morning and lies there staring at the ceiling. He hates the way the patterns in the plaster form an endless overlapping series of swirls. They look too much like snow caught in the merciless winter winds coming at a windshield late at night, an endless assault of white that not even the windshield wipers can fight against. White ... so much white.

He sits up, swings his legs over the side of the bed, and presses his feet against the cold floor. Looking over his shoulder, he stares at the half of the bed where his wife used to sleep. Dear Henrietta, now six years in the grave. She would know what to say, how to rub his shoulders *just so*, relaxing him, whispering *It’s all right, honey, it’s all in the past, you know it was an accident ...* But she’s gone, and the children are grown with kids of their own. Sure, they call and visit often, he has pinochle with the guys at the Eagles on Thursdays, but he’s going to be eighty-nine next birthday—a “spry” eighty-nine, as his children and grandchildren always remind him—but on nights like this, nights that have become more and more frequent the past few months, he wakes at some god-awful hour and is all too aware of his aches, his pains, the little snaps and crackles made by his bones when he moves, the silence of the house and the world outside ... and

he wishes that silence would extend to his conscience. Shouldn't he have started becoming absent-minded by now? An old fart who can't remember if the underwear goes on before the pants. Too bad an old man can't choose *what* to forget.

He shuffles over to the window, pulling back the curtain. It's beginning to snow; not much at the moment, just a few light flurries, but if the Weather Channel is right, this part of the Midwest is going to be under a good nine inches in the next forty-eight hours. He wonders if the snow will be as heavy and merciless as it was on that night. He looks back to the empty place in the bed. "I can't live with it anymore, my dear girl. I have to go back." For a moment he imagines Henrietta sitting there, the covers pulled up around her shoulders—she always did chill easily in winter—smiling at him, a smile tinged with sadness at the edges, and finally he imagines her wonderful voice as she says: *You do what you need to, honey. You deserve some peace.* "Thank you," he whispers to the emptiness. He looks out the window again. "I left a big part of me on Archer Avenue back in '37. I remember Bing Crosby was singing 'Black Moonlight' when I started to go around that bend. I remember all the snow—God, there was so much snow against the windshield. The wipers couldn't keep up.

"I should've slowed down, or pulled off to the side and waited for it to clear up. Lord, I was driving Mom and Dad's Imperial! Chrysler used to make their cars like tanks back then. I could have waited it out. I was just a kid, you know? I shouldn't've ..." His voice fades away as he hears another voice—not that of his wife—whisper from the memory of a dream: *There you are. I see you at night.*

He wanders over to the bookshelf and takes from it an old edition of Hesse's *Narcissus and Goldmund*, one of his favorite novels. He sits on the edge of the bed on Henrietta's side and leafs through the pages, stopping to read a favorite paragraph here, a memorable dialogue exchange there, all the while shaking his head. He looks at his late wife's pillow. "I don't know why, my dear girl, but I just suddenly thought of the two of them—Narcissus and Goldmund, how they became friends and the different paths their lives took, Narcissus remaining at the monastery of Mariabronn to become its Abbot John, while Goldmund set off to live the life of an adventurer and artist.

"I was always moved by the final chapters—I don't know if I ever told you this, so pardon me if I'm repeating myself—but there you have Goldmund, who's squandered and prostituted his artistic talents, led a life of self-indulgence and debauchery, only to wind up waiting to be hanged as a thief. And like the *deus ex machina* I suspect it was intended to be, along comes Narcissus to help him escape and bring him back to Mariabronn where Goldmund, sick and dying, is forgiven by Narcissus. Knowing his time is short, Goldmund sets about creating his last genuine work of art, a Madonna fashioned after the image of Lydia, his one true love, whose heart and spirit he had broken. He finds forgiveness in his heart for himself, my dear girl, because he uses all of his love and regret and guilt to perfectly fashion the Madonna's image. And when Goldmund at last sees Lydia's face again, he knows that he is forgiven, and so can die at peace with himself." He closes the book with a loud snap. "That's probably about as close to sentimentality as Hesse ever came.

"It seems to me now, my dear girl, that unlike fiction, one has to fashion one's own *deus ex machina* if forgiveness is to be found."

He rises from the bed, his hand pushing against Henrietta's pillow, then replaces the book on the shelf and begins preparations for his trip.

* * *

“I got more than just that on here. I talked to a guy who’s seen her.”

“Let’s hear that, too, then.”

Click. Hiss. The sound of muffled voices and the *ting!* of silverware. A louder voice calls “Order up!” A waitress yells, “Hold your horses! I only got two legs, you know!” Hiss. The sound of a man clearing his throat. Then: “Is that thing on?”

“It sure is.”

“Huh. Don’t look like no tape recorder I ever seen.”

“It doesn’t use tape—it’s a digital recorder.”

“You don’t say? Well, I’ll be. Makes you wonder what they’ll come up with next.”

“So ... you said that you met her one night?”

“Oh, I sure did! Told the story many times. Was even on TV once.”

“Would you mind telling it again now?”

“Not at all. Nice of you to not think I’m some kinda kook.”

“I believe the stories. So, please ...”

* * *

As the winch pulls taught and the tow truck begins moving the demolished car up the incline, the State Police detective looks at the man standing next to him and says: “Mind if I ask you another question?”

The other man shakes his head and wipes something from one of his eyes. “I don’t know what else I can tell you but, okay.”

“Do you have any idea what he was doing all the way out here? I mean, a man his age had to’ve known that driving from Ohio to here in the middle of winter was risky. I just can’t help but think he was really determined to do something or see someone. Do you have *any* ideas?”

The other man shakes his head once again. “I swear to you, I don’t have the slightest clue.”

Something in the man’s voice makes it clear to the detective that he’s lying. The detective begins to speak, thinks better of it, and stands in silence. No reason to push the poor guy. The detective thinks, *Does anything good ever last in this pitiful world?* Then decides he’d rather not know the answer.

* * *

She’s made it as far as the bend in Archer Avenue when she hears the sound of a car, but the wind makes it impossible to tell from which direction the vehicle is approaching. She decides it doesn’t matter. She can barely feel her feet or hands. Even if the car is going in the opposite direction, no one with a soul and an ounce of compassion would leave her out in the cold, not on this night.

She moves toward the middle of the road and begins looking both in front of and behind her, then begins waving her arms. Soon, she sees the glow of headlights coming around the bend straight toward her. Oh, how wonderful! They *are* going in her direction. She opens her mouth to shout at the driver and steps to the side, away from the oncoming vehicle, but a sudden gust of wind causes her to lose her balance and her white shoes slip on a patch of black ice and she gasps, spins, and stumbles into the path of the car.

* * *

“Sis? It’s Joseph. Listen, I’m over at Dad’s house and—what?”

“I said, do you know what time it is?”

“Yes, and I’m sorry, but I’ve been trying to call Dad for the last three days and haven’t gotten an answer.”

“Oh, God. Is he all right?”

“He’s not even *here*! The car’s gone. He left an envelope for us with a bunch of stuff in it—a copy of his will, his bank book, his stock certificates, the deed to the house—he made it out to you—and ... and there’s a letter.”

“What’s it say?”

“No, not over the phone. Can you come over? I called the police and I have to wait here.”

“I’ll be there in an hour. Are you okay?”

“*Hell*, no. But thanks for asking.”

“Where do you suppose he could’ve gone?”

“When you get here. I’ll tell you everything when you get here.”

* * *

The driver of the semi doesn’t see the parked car until he’s right on top of it, and by then there’s no time to hit the brakes or swerve, not on this road and not with all the black ice. The front of his truck slams into the car and pushes it along the road for several yards, sparks flying, shattered glass spitting up against his windshield, before finally smashing into a snowman in the middle of the road, splattering it all over before the car at last dislodges and rolls down the incline by the side of the road.

The driver beats his steering wheel and screams a torrent of profanities, but does not stop. The snow and wind are coming in almost full-force now, and if he’s late with this delivery, it’s his ass.

Stupid asshole should’ve known better than to park there in this weather, anyway, he thinks. What kind of nutcase leaves their car and goes to build a fucking snowman in the middle of the road?

A few miles later, the driver notices the blood in a few of the larger, icy clumps of snow that have lodged up against the center of the windshield, in that no man’s land the wipers can never quite reach.

Oh, God, please ... please, no.

He eases off to the side of the road and parks the semi, then grabs a flashlight from under the seat, opens the door, stands on the running board, and shines the light onto the hood.

Blood and hair. There is blood and hair in the clumps of ice and snow. He shakes his head. No, it was just a snowman, that’s all. Snowmen don’t bleed. It must’ve been a bird. Yeah, that’s it. He must have hit a bird and not noticed.

Birds don’t have hair, whispers something in the back of his conscience, where the light doesn’t quite reach.

“No,” Rudy says out loud. “No. It was a bird. Snowmen don’t bleed.” And that helps. Not a lot, but some. So he drives on, his hands shaking, knowing that it couldn’t have been a bird but telling himself it was, anyway, over and over, knowing full well that this is going to haunt him for the rest of his life.

* * *

“—well, she was a sweet thing, no denying that. Long blonde hair and the prettiest face. She kind of reminded me of my youngest daughter. Anyway, she was at the Willowbrook—used to the O’Henry years ago, until the new owners bought it and decided things needed to be, you know, updated and such.

“She come over and asked me for a dance and I figured, why not, she was awful courteous—not like the girls these days—and we had ourselves a nice little dance. Oh, you should’ve seen how she was dressed! Long white dress, real fancy-like, and shoes to match. I know this sounds corny as hell, but she looked like some of them paintings you see of angels.

“Thing was ... she was awful *cold*, even though it was only autumn. The small of her back, her hands, her cheeks. Real cold. My wife, she’s kind of cold-blooded—not in *that* way, she’s a sweetheart, but brother, sometimes her touch is like ice—she says it’s ‘cause of her circulation problems ... shit, where was I? Oh, yeah.

“This gal was *real* cold, so I offer her my jacket. She thanks me for being such a gentleman, and I drape my jacket over her shoulders. She asks me if I could give her a ride home and I say sure thing. We’re driving along a little ways and she asks me to go down Archer Avenue. I oblige her request and we’re driving along and talking about the weather, the way the Willowbrook has changed over the years, stuff like that, and then we come up on Resurrection Cemetery and she asks me to stop. I think it’s a bit odd but I stop anyway.

“She gives me back my coat and thanks me for being a gentleman, then she gets out and starts walking toward the cemetery gates. Here it is, ten-thirty at night, and she’s headin’ into the boneyard. I call to her that the cemetery’s closed and that she really ought to get back in the car so I can take her home. That’s when she turns and looks at me and smiles and says, ‘I am home.’ Then she just ... faded away into nothing.

“That’s when I knew who she was, and believe you me, I damn near wet myself. I mean, you hear all the stories about her, but you never expect that *you’ll* ... you know what I mean. Ain’t a day goes by that I don’t think of her. Makes a body wanna cry, it does, thinking about the way she died, out there all alone on that road, middle of winter. Son-of-a-bitch what hit her didn’t even stop. I hope to hell whoever it was, if they’re still alive, I hope to hell they ain’t had a moment’s peace.

“She was a damned sweet girl, and she deserved better than that, you know?”

* * *

The old man impresses himself; he’s only had to stop twice along the ten-plus hour drive to make water. The last time, he went outside, writing his name in the snow like he used to do when he was a child. He even laughed while doing so, the first real laugh he’s had in at least twenty years.

But he’s made it, despite the damn snow and wind. Three times he’s almost been knocked off the road by the wind. The radio said there were “blizzard-like conditions” coming, but that hasn’t stopped him.

And now he’s finally back here, after all the years, after all the bad dreams, after a lifetime. Archer Avenue. But this time, *this* time he drives slowly. This time he’ll see her before it’s too late. This time he’ll stop. This time he’ll make it right and hope that will be enough.

He turns the radio to a local “beautiful music” station. Truth in advertising, for once. It’s “Big Band” night tonight. Glenn Miller. Stan Kenton. Spike Jones and His City Slickers. This music suits the old man just fine and dandy, yessir. Just as long as they don’t play any Bing Crosby, especially “Black Moonlight.”

He slowly rounds the bend and hits the straight stretch dense with trees on either side, some of them obscuring the steep incline off to the side of the road. He knows that if he’s not careful, he will drive off and fall a good seven feet where no other passing cars can see him. He has to be careful now. Like he should have been back in ’37.

A flicker in the headlights as several swirls of snow dance up onto the hood and skitter across until they explode against the windshield. But this time he's got the defrost on high; this time he's got the expensive wipers that are going a mile a minute; this time, he's careful. He drives up and down the road for one hour, two hours, and only notices the gas gauge nearing E halfway through the third hour.

"Where are you?" he asks the snow and darkness. He wasn't expecting an answer, but, still, he's heard the stories about this road, about the other people who have seen her, talked with her, given her a ride home.

"Where are you?" he asks again, this time much louder than before. He pulls over to the side of the road, taking care to stay as far away from the incline as possible. Too much of the car is still jutting out into the passing lane, but he doesn't care. He presses his forehead against his hands, takes a deep breath, and then turns off the engine.

For a little while he sits there, staring out into the freezing night as the snow whips about the car. He's so tired, so very tired. He imagines that he sees two medieval men on horseback in the distance, making their way back to the monastery where the creation of a final masterpiece patiently waits for one of them.

He opens the car door, climbs out, and begins walking up the road toward Resurrection Cemetery. His knees ache and his legs are weak, but at least he's wearing his good winter coat, his good winter gloves, and the heavenly wool cap Henrietta had given him on the last Christmas she was alive.

He's only a few hundred yards from the cemetery gates when he can't walk any farther. He stops, kneels down, and makes a snowball. The snow is thick and heavy enough to pack well, and with a laugh he sets about making a snowwoman, forgetting that he's now in the middle of the road. It takes him nearly forty minutes to fashion her, and by the time he's finished his hands are nearly frozen, even with the gloves. There is no time for her face, but that's fine because he remembers that face with startling clarity. He's never forgotten even a single detail.

He steps back and smiles at her, then holds out his arms.

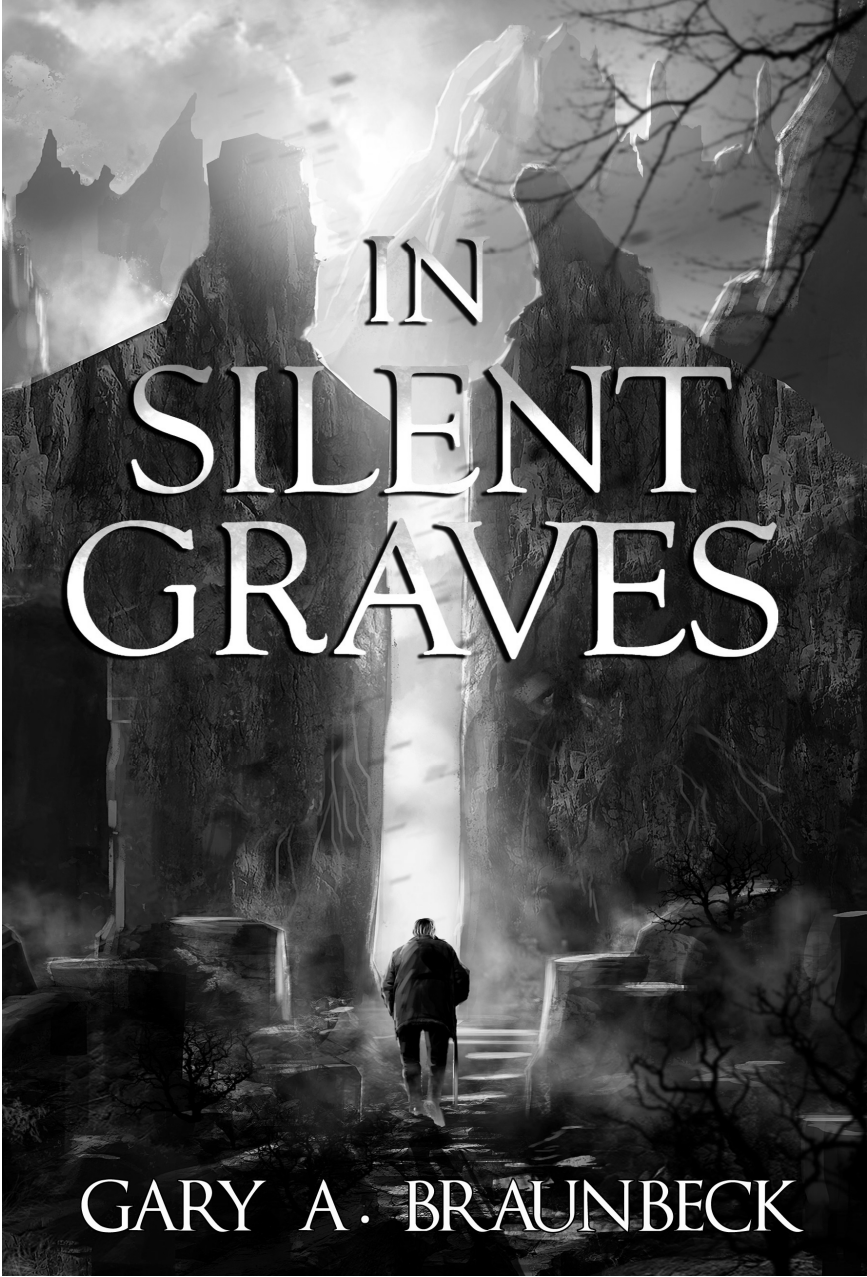
"May I have this dance?" he asks his creation.

And there he stands, arms extended, eyes blinking against the wind and snow, until at last he hears the roar and the collision and the metallic scrape and the shattering of glass. He moves closer to her, touching her cold skin—didn't everyone always say that her touch was cold? Poor girl. Poor little thing.

He stands there, smiling, as the lights and roar and sparks screaming down on them form a marvelous winter aura around her. He closes his eyes. *There you are*, he thinks. He does not tremble. *I see you at night*. He holds his breath. He holds his breath. He holds his breath. He holds



Gary A. Braunbeck is the author of the acclaimed Cedar Hill Cycle of novels and stories, which includes *In Silent Graves*, *Keepers*, *Mr. Hands*, *Coffin County*, and the forthcoming *A Cracked and Broken Path*. He has published over 20 books, evenly split between novels and short-story collections, and his work has earned seven Bram Stoker Awards, an International Horror Guild Award, three Shocker Awards, a Black Quill Award, and a World Fantasy Award nomination. He doesn't get out much, which everyone agrees is probably for the best. Find out more about his work on-line at garybraunbeck.com



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