

Shed

A Novella by
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“There’s a crack in everything;
That’s how the light gets in.”
- Leonard Cohen

I. Simon and Rupert

1.

Simon and I lay in the dark, peering into the blackness of the basement around us. My eyes were opened wide but I couldn’t even make out the lines on the wallboard or the doorway at the foot of the bed. The heat of the day had surrendered and it was cool there in the quiet beneath the earth. I had to hold my breath at times to stop from shivering. There was a small square of hazy, barely visible light coming from behind the window above us but it offered almost no illumination at all. I looked up and imagined the street lamp that stood way down at the end of the drive. Its light was blurred out by the tall weeping willows and the enormous distance between the house and the road. What was to go on down here was beyond that world on the other side of those trees -- beyond the light itself -- and I wished at that moment that those trees were not there so I could see my brother’s face and know what he was thinking. We were both there in that darkness, stripped down to our underwear, laying still on the mattress side by side saying nothing and breathing shallowly. There was only one sheet on the bed and we lay on top of it. Here on the island during the summer, it gets hot but it is substantially cooler down here, especially at night. I don’t know whether it was the night air of the basement pressing in on me or just the waiting but I simply couldn’t help it any longer; I finally began to shiver.

“Don’t move now, Rupe,” Simon told me, “Don’t even shiver. It’s gonna happen soon . . . You can’t even shiver. You hear me, Rupe?”

“Uh-huh. I won’t move, Simon. I promise.”

I looked up to my older brother as little brothers often do. I always had. What he said I didn’t question. He didn’t tell me why we were laying there on a bare sheet with all the other blankets pushed off into the corner of the room. And even though we were laying there in the pitch dark with scarcely a thread of clothing on, I didn’t ask once. I just trusted him.

2.

My memories of my big brother during that time are so clear, even now. Simon was a quiet, unassuming boy. That much was obvious to everyone in town, to everyone at school, to Mama, and even to me. He never felt the need to make his thoughts known to

anyone who didn't want to hear them and he never spoke out of turn. At least, he tried not to after Mama married Everett.

It never really surprised me that my brother was so quiet. I never thought much of it. After Daddy died, we both had little to say, even to each other. Mama started seeing Everett and he was around pretty much all the time starting about two years before Simon began seventh grade. Simon and I hated him from the start.

Everett worked at Ethan's Shop near the docks. He was a hull welder, an odds n' sods man. Whenever boats came in needing hulls patched or equipment re-soldered to decks after a storm Everett was called in for double shifts. Fishing was the lifeblood for most everybody on the island in the late seventies and the fisheries were the heart's blood of our little community, bringing in as many loads as they could. Every other service and industry was secondary in those days and as a result anyone tied to the boats and lobster trawlers -- and the men who worked them -- was regarded almost as a local hero. Everett, by association I suppose, was highly respected for his work, even if he was somewhat lazy. Simon and I didn't understand what everyone saw in him. We didn't really get the silent respect he garnered from the town, but we accepted him as best we could, since he was to be our new dad.

I guess it was the idea of a regular paycheck, at least for our mama, that made him seem appealing. When he proposed marriage to her he promised Mama that she and her two boys would never go hungry and he told her that he loved her more than any man ever could.

But that wasn't true. Our daddy loved Mama, loved her more than life itself and more than Everett ever would. Daddy had been an electrician, his father one before him, and between the two of them they had installed almost every power box and length of wire on the island since early 1942. Daddy took on the family business after granddaddy's death which was a few years before I was even born; he eked out a living for us by taking care of whatever electrical services were needed on the island. Mama arrived from the mainland in 1965 fresh from high school for a job at the newspaper as a typesetter. Her uncle was a newspaper man and had known Edwin Barstow, the editor of 'The Island Press', for some time. She'd had a strong leaning towards books and writing ever since she was a child and seemed a natural at the newspaper. She had even hoped of becoming a respected reporter someday just as her father had been. The two of them, my daddy and my mama, met at Harlow's Grocery on Main Street her first week in town when they both reached for the same filet in the cooler by the checkout. They both laughed at the absurdity and their romance began that summer. Soon they dashed off to the mainland, scooting around the country in a little brown and white bowler trailer towed behind Granddaddy's old Buick. Mama's eyes used to light up when she'd tell Simon and me that story and we loved listening every single time she told it.

Theirs was one of those movie loves, one of those unbreakable ones that you know will never burn out. I knew it even then, even when I was just a little kid. So, what Everett told her wasn't true. Although I can understand why she might have believed it to be at the time. He was awfully sincere for those first few months. And after Daddy had died she was in dire straits, I'll tell you that much. She didn't have any idea how she was going to make the payments on the small house that Daddy and her had bought before Simon was born. And keep us fed by herself. She was sick with

worry and sick with sorrow. The paper had closed down some years before, was replaced by a mainland gazette which was shipped over by boat in the afternoons, and our Mama had no experience in any other line of work. Other than cooking and cleaning, she had no other skills. And, with most everyone at bare wages from shipping and the fishing boats, scarcely anyone at all could afford to hire a cleaning lady. Along came Everett with his shined boots, slicked back hair, some flowers picked out of the neighbor's garden, and his regular paycheck from Ethan's. I guess that was almost all she needed.

3.

Everett was eager to make a good impression right from the start and he let us know just how important we all were to him. After the spring wedding, Everett took a couple of weeks off work during the slow season and started tinkering down in the basement of our lathe and plaster bungalow on the north side of town.

Before his death Daddy had begun teaching Simon the basics of electrical wiring and had framed in a small bedroom down there. He had hoped to have his eldest son wire in the light fixture, two electrical outlets and a light switch as the first lesson in a string that would eventually ensure Simon coming on board at the family business. It would have been a good way for him to start learning the tricks of the trade on a small scale. After all, he was only eleven at the time. But someday, Daddy must have thought, Simon would take over that business as the next generation of island electrician. And he surely wanted my brother prepared for it. Circumstances, as cold as they were, didn't allow Daddy to finish the room and the outlets and switch box sat nailed into the studs of the skeletal bedroom for nearly a year.

Everett saw the unfinished project as a great opportunity to show his new wife how dedicated he'd be to her sons as their new daddy. By finishing the bedroom for Simon and having it ready for him to move into by the summer, he thought Mama would see just how much he cared for her. And for her boys.

The thing was, though, that Everett didn't have the first clue about how to wire in those outlets and light switch. He didn't know a ground wire from his asshole and had no intention of asking for help. When Simon approached him one day after school and suggested that the black ground wire was indeed supposed to connect to the corresponding black wire from the power circuit, Everett exploded at him. He began ranting and raving about how it was impossible that Simon, a mere boy, would presume to know more about anything than he did. The look in his eyes that day was crazed and as he leaned menacingly over my frightened brother I thought he was going to hit him. Up to that day I'd never seen Simon look so small and helpless. He was truly scared of Everett for the first time right then.

As a result of Everett's flaring temper, his ignorance of basic wiring and his laziness, his idea of a finished bedroom was to salvage some damaged wallboard from the discount bin at Parson's Hardware and hammer it up onto the already finished frame – right over the outlet boxes and the unconnected wiring running roughly down from the upstairs breaker box. He threw some scraps of carpet down on the floor and

moved Simon's bunk down to the basement room. Then he pinned a length of copper wire across the doorway with two finishing nails and hung a piece of hastily cut material with little baseball players on it over that. This, I suppose, was to be Simon's new bedroom door.

The switch for the only light in the entire basement was at the top of the stairs on the other side of the door. It turned on and off a light bulb that hung on a wire over Daddy's workbench on the opposite half of the basement, across from the cellar which occupied the northwest corner. When he had moved into the house Everett had assumed this to be his new work area and it was now cluttered with his projects, mostly junk near as Simon and I could tell. The light from that bulb spilled into Simon's room but it was dim and when bedtime came, Everett would click off the switch at the top of the stairwell and close the basement door for the night.

Simon's new bedroom occupied the area between the stairway and the southwest wall. And underneath the stairs, connecting to Simon's room was a makeshift closet. Everett hung a matching piece of baseball fabric across the doorway there and called the matching effect of the two doorways 'interior decorating'. Pleased with himself, he took a swig of his remaining warm beer, put his hammer back in his silver toolkit, locked it, and went upstairs to watch the evening news on the black and white set in the living room. Simon and I looked around the room, at the crooked wallboard and the cloth doors, and we snickered to each other.

4.

The real problem, and the crux of everything, lay behind that second piece of white, pinstriped cloth, the one with the small uniformed baseball players on it, swinging bats and catching fly balls. The island experienced extremely hot summers and cool winters with lots of rain. The frequent rainfall meant that most every one of the bungalows and two-story homes in town had a sump hole which filled with excess run-off from around the foundation. Underground there was a long, narrow corridor of cement which routed directly into the sump hole. This corridor sat about halfway down the depth of the hole and fed it by trickling water into its basin until it was full. The idea was for this excess water to be taken out of the basement area and moved away from the house so it wouldn't seep into the foundation causing pressure cracking and flooding. Set into most of these sump holes was an electric pump to take care of that. Ours had a large cork sinker attached by a wire to the motor which sat above the hole and when the water rose to a level high enough to lift that sinker, the wire would pull a small lever and the engine would turn on.

The sump pump in our old house hadn't been replaced in many years. In fact, I would guess that it was the original pump from when the cindercrete block foundation had been laid more than twenty years earlier. The motor was old, but it never failed. We'd only had a flooded basement once in all the years that I could remember. The pump was as dependable as daddy had been – likely because he had taken such good care of it, removing it from its resting place in the sump hole each spring and giving it a good overhaul. When there was a summer thunderstorm or a brisk spring shower that

motor turned on without hesitation and pumped all the water in the sump hole through the hose that ran out to the field of sweet grass behind the house. It was pretty loud, though. When it ran in the middle of the night it would wake Simon and me in our bunk beds upstairs at the opposite end of the small house.

You could hear almost everything in that little house. The stairs had a tremendous squeak in every board and you could trace every step up or down no matter where you were in the house. Sometimes when mama was cooking dinner, Simon and I would hear her go down to the cellar for some more potatoes or an onion. When she reached the bottom we knew we had at least a minute or so while she rummaged in the cellar bin for some nice sized white potatoes. We would tip-toe as fast as we could out to the kitchen and sneak a couple of cookies or a few uncooked carrots. When her foot fall squeaked on the first stair of her climb back up to the kitchen, we knew we only had a few seconds left before we were caught. As we got older and bigger, she'd hear us racing across the upstairs as the floor boards themselves all had squeaks too. The squeaks would betray our sneaking into the kitchen and mama would appear at the door to our room with hands on her hip and say, "You little rascals! You two've been sneaking cookies. I can see the crumbs on your faces." But she could barely hold the stern look. It would first give way to a small, crooked grin and then quickly become a warm smile. She simply could not hide it from her two boys. She'd rush into the room and wrap her arms around the both of us, pretending to be some kind of a monster, but instead smothering us with kisses and hugs. We loved our mama and as we got older we began to realize that we meant everything to her. She did everything she could to make sure we were brought up right. It became really hard for her the winter Daddy died but it became much more trying for her the summer after she married Everett.

5.

"Let your body feel the cold, Rupe. Let it feel the cold but don't you dare shiver," Simon whispered to me as we lay there that summer night in the dark, waiting. He was adamant but he didn't risk raising his voice. If we woke Everett upstairs we'd have hell to pay. We both knew it, so anything we said was in the lowest possible whisper.

I didn't reply to Simon this time. I couldn't. I didn't know what I could tell him. It's a strange thing: I suppose a body gets used to laying under a sheet at night and when it doesn't feel the familiar weight of fabric pressing down over it, it can suddenly feel exceedingly unnatural. I convinced myself that this alien feeling was the problem, that I really couldn't be cold enough to shiver. Instead of answering, I just bore down on my self and I controlled my shivers. His silence was his praise.

We had been laying there for what seemed an eternity. But there was no clock in that basement room. Even if there had been, we wouldn't have been able to see it. It was darker down there than I could have possibly imagined it would be. I was close to understanding then why Simon had been so unwilling to stay down there after his first horrible night two summers ago. I'd heard him cry out from the basement room, and he bawled as he raced up the stairs all the way to Mama and Everett's bedroom, screaming

about the dark. Mama had put on the light and did her best to comfort him but Everett was too upset to try and understand the problem. We soon learned not to upset Everett.

On the other end of the house, Mama and Everett were presumably sleeping. We'd heard them up there earlier as we lay in the dark trying not to sleep just yet. Everett had told me at supper that I'd be spending the night with my brother in the basement so that he and Mama could have some time alone. It was her birthday, he said, and he had some "special plans" prepared for that evening. I didn't know what that meant, but I hoped, for Mama's sake, that it was better than his anniversary meal. He'd brought home a tin take-out pan of fried chicken from Harvey's Diner on Broadway. Simon and I didn't eat much that night. We love Harvey's chicken and it was a rare treat around our house but Simon told me it would be better if I saved it for lunch the next day. We had to eat light, he told me.

I didn't understand a lot of things back then. I wished that I had. I didn't understand why Mama and Everett wanted time alone. I didn't understand why fried chicken was a no-no when we hadn't had any rain yet by that evening and I didn't understand why we had to lay there in the dark in our underwear. I was about to pipe up and finally ask Simon to tell me why all of these things had to be when the sump pump motor started up.

It was loud and grinding and I could hear it sucking up the water and splashing around down in the hole behind Simon's closet "door." I'd say it lasted a good minute before it finally came to a halt. The grinding motorized whir and splish-splash of water ended and the silence was almost overwhelming in my head again. I felt Simon tense up, and I instinctively did the same. The sump well was empty. We were suddenly waiting for something...and I had no idea what it was.

I had to pee right then. I had gone before we laid down but there it was just the same: my overwhelming urge to go again. This always happened when I was nervous. Right now, though, I began to feel more scared than I had ever been. It was the strangest feeling of my whole life, laying there in the dark waiting and not knowing what was to come or when, but knowing that it would come. I could tell from Simon's quickened breathing that it would be there soon. Looking up towards the ceiling I was aware of my own body again. I told myself to ignore my pressing need to pee, to instead focus on my body, concentrate on my boundaries of space and control my need to shiver. I wanted to so badly; it would have been easy to just let go and feel the wracking shivers course through my legs and my arms, up my back. I wanted to cry out too. I'd never been this scared. I lay there in the blackness with my brother wanting to scream but paralyzed with fear of my own creation.

The silence was maddening. I didn't dare ask Simon now. I was all but ready to just let go and empty my bladder when I heard the first faint sound coming from behind the closet doorway. Under the stairs, beyond the little pump hole, inside that long and narrow concrete corridor, there began a hiss unlike anything I'd ever heard before. I held on to myself a little longer and concentrated towards that noise. What was it?

It grew louder and louder but not above a whisper. It was not a centralized noise and it did not fade, not even for a second. It sustained and grew and as I listened I realized that it contained almost a warble – it sounded to me like several noises at different pitches all moving about. But they were too numerous to count. The darkness continued to press in around us.

“...Now, Rupe...” Simon whispered, so faint this time that I was barely sure he’d said anything at all. It was the signal he’d instructed me to follow as we’d been pulling the sheets from his bed earlier in the night. I was feeling my vision cloud up with reds and violets and blues all colliding in my sight as I looked towards that ceiling which I could not see. My brain was falling away into an infinity. It felt as though I was going to vanish but I knew better. The fright was in my throat and I felt as though I would choke on it, spewing what little chicken I had eaten at supper across the darkened room. I could barely contain that sheer terror welling up in me but I held. I held because Simon had told me what to do. I stopped my breathing on his command, sucked it all in and clamped my lips down tight. So tight, I almost drew blood. This is what he had told me to do upon hearing his signal.

The next thing I heard was a sudden increase in the hiss. It sound more like a high pitched series of squeals now, thousands of them. There was an almost inaudible rustle as the cotton drape hung over the closet doorway, invisible in the darkness, shifted and I could feel myself falling back towards that multicolored infinity. I closed my eyes and the colors intensified. They swam and swam. I held on and did not dare to look towards that drape of cloth with the baseball men on it. My biggest fear was that I would suddenly be able to see it in the dark, being brushed aside by that terrible thing approaching us.

Without warning a cool wave washed over me, a sensation that I could not place in my mind as anything I’d ever felt before. I could feel it moving, separating and rejoining, swaying up the walls and onto the ceiling, beneath the bed and across my stomach. It moved about the room as a loose pail of water might slosh about the cabin of a fishing boat that found itself tossed across stormy seas, unraveling and combining again haphazardly. It was almost silent except for that variable, high-pitched squeal. It grew louder and fainter slightly as the incongruent waves passed closer to and further from my ears. The wave passed over my body again and again, undulating, resting it seemed near my armpits and my crotch for a split second before moving on. There was a concentration of it around my face and my chest. I fought the urge to look at it. I was terrified of what I would see and caught the words in my mind, the ones Simon had told me before it all began, “At all costs, Rupe, do not open your eyes. Do not exhale until I say so. Do not move.” Do not move. Do not move.

And I didn’t. I couldn’t believe that I hadn’t. I wanted to get up from the bed, push the doorway curtain aside in a flurry and run. I wanted to scream. I wanted so badly to be in my mother’s arms bawling and carrying on about what had been down in that basement, the terrible slick wave of air that washed over my tummy and over my eyelids in the dark. I wanted to not be there. I wanted to be in my own bed, not knowing any of this.

It felt as though my chest was going to explode. The air I’d sucked in pressed on the insides of my chest, threatened to tear in apart in one violent stroke. This wave couldn’t have been in Simon’s room for more than two minutes but I could feel my head again swimming away from Simon and the bed. But I suddenly wanted more than anything to show Simon I could hold my breath until he said to let it go. I just couldn’t though. I knew that any moment I would have to let it out or the burning in my chest would cease and I would simply be crushed by the weight of my own breath. I couldn’t hold on to it any longer.

I was about to give in when I felt the mattress shift at the foot of the bed, The wave that was flowing all over the walls and ceiling felt it too. My ears and my skin could sense it flinch and before I knew it the insides of my eyelids were bathed with bright orange light. I thought that I had passed out or that my chest had finally given way under its own efforts.

But it hadn't. I was still conscious and alive. And I could no longer hold back the urge to open my eyes. In that instant when my eyes fluttered open, I was met with a vision that made my mind sway towards unconsciousness again. I saw Simon's room, completely lit up as though someone had let a firecracker go in the rafters a moment before. That second I saw the worst, more that I'd dared imagine: The walls and the ceiling were covered with a thousands-count swarm of small dark creatures. Their bodies miniature and round, like little beads of polished camel-bone. They were black as pitch, oily and smooth but the intense light didn't reflect from them in a sheen, it was instead absorbed by them. Each had several legs, maybe six, maybe eight, maybe more, and used them in unison to cascade across the brightened walls almost like a thick silky liquid. It felt to me in that flashing moment that there must be thousands of them scouring across our bodies and over the wall board, scavenging, picking at the surfaces with their tiny mandibles at a rate I could barely fathom with my own eyes. This hive, this swarm of tiny beasts, was covering my almost naked form, seeming to float across the flesh merely by clutching the tiny hairs in my skin with delicate black claws. I wanted to scream out. The creatures were scouring me and I felt the suffocation of finally knowing that they were really there, climbing across me. The terror welled up but the creatures had each begun to react to the white light burst: the realization swept through them and they spilled off the walls and off my body, the mass of them bleeding towards the space under the stairs.

Before I could scarcely understand what my eyes had seen, the ordeal was over and the light was gone. Were the stragglers gone? I could see nothing now. My eyes met the sea of black and I couldn't trust my body to move, couldn't trust my mind to believe there weren't more of them still there, still on my stomach or my kneecap. We lay there again in the darkness, and I realized that I was not only sweating in the coolness that had just moments earlier been responsible for making me feel cold, but I had also let my bladder go. There was wetness all around my crotch and on the sheet beneath me. I could smell it. My body stung there too, a bit like vinegar under an opened fingernail. The urge to scream out to Mama was overwhelming, but Simon was suddenly on top of me with his hands over my mouth. "Rupe," he whispered next to my ear with determination. "The hard part's over. We're home free for tonight. Do you hear me? We're home free. It won't be coming back. Just--just don't cry. We can change the sheet...Please, Rupe, just don't cry."

6.

If I had cried, or had run up the stairs bawling to mama, like I so desperately needed to do, all of Simon's efforts would have been wasted. He sat up in bed and I felt the

mattress shift again with his weight. He got off of it and stepped onto the carpet scraps on the floor. I couldn't see where he went but I could feel that he was still in the room.

My eyes had just began to readjust to the total black again after the sudden and overwhelming bright white light; Now some light returned to my eyes but it was dim this time – only enough to illuminate the most basic features of the room. I realized, as shapes gradually faded back into recognizable objects like the doorway and a poster of Reggie Jackson, that Simon was standing across from me near the dresser where his baseball mitt and some scattered baseball cards lay. Above him, where he had just reached with one arm, was a row of three unlit light bulbs protruding from the wall. The wall board had been removed in that section from just below the top of the dresser right to the ceiling. Beneath it were three light fixtures screwed into the studs with wires flopping out behind them. I had helped Simon pull off the section of wallboard that night before we stripped most of the sheets from the bed. We had taken three bulbs from the bottom of his dresser drawer and unwrapped them from their hiding places in a couple of old tee-shirts and then screwed them into the hidden fixtures. There was a fourth bulb which had its own fixture in the open wall lower and nearer to the dresser. Just now, after the oily black hive had disappeared back down the sump pump hole underneath the stairs, Simon had used one of those old tee-shirts to partially unscrew those first three hot bulbs and screw in the fourth which was of a lower wattage. He had done this in the dark, carefully, silently, instinctively knowing where they were located against the sides of the wall studs without his eyesight to help him. The shift in the mattress just before the thousands of tiny creatures flinched and seeped back into the sump hole was Simon tugging on a string that had been tied around his ankle. Jerking on it in such a manner had pulled it taught, allowed for the circuit to be completed between the blaring light bulbs and the wire that ran up to the breaker box in the kitchen.

My heart was beating so fast. Still. It felt almost as though my held breath hadn't allowed my heart to beat at all for those terrifying minutes when the wave was washing over our bodies. Now it seemed to be making up for it. In the moments since Simon had let the string around his ankle go slack to shut off the three lights, I realized that my body was sweating. I was stuck to the sheets in my own pee and I was overtaken by the tremendous tremors I had been fighting off since we had lain down in the dark stillness.

I looked towards that pinstriped sheet of cotton hanging askew over the closet doorway, expecting to see traces of those tiny creatures, or even expecting to see them return from underneath it. As I did this, Simon came towards me with that old blue tee-shirt of his. He dabbed it at the side of my forehead and I realized that I was bleeding. I put my fingers to the spot and traced them across a tiny line that was already starting to scab. It was a fine scratch, caused by the claw or the mandible of one of those little black demons. They had felt smooth and light as air, but this tiny line of blood was proof to me that they could do more than just pass almost unfelt over my body.

"Oh...they got you a little here, Rupert." Simon whispered to me as he dabbed at the cut. He looked concerned, but relieved. "Don't worry. These scratches heal up pretty quick. They won't notice. I used to get them all the time near the start...Mama just believed me when I told her I fell playing ball or--" He cut himself off, dabbed once more at my forehead, then near my crotch and on my legs where other fine lines of

blood were beginning to clot. “Happened to me too, Rupe. The pee. It’s warm. They can sense the warm.”

I couldn’t speak to him. I simply couldn’t bring myself to speak. I was shaking and had begun to cry -- as quietly as I could, mind you. Simon held me and pressed that blue shirt to my head. He pulled one of the covers off the floor and back onto the bed and eased me back to my pillow. Simon drowned out my stiff, jerky sobs against his shoulder and I must have fallen asleep because I don’t remember the rest of that horrible night. I wonder if I really understood at that point, when I fell asleep in my brother’s arms after it all, that things were only going to get worse.

II. Thrive

1.

I suppose that when you live with a secret every day, as Simon did, it affects your life every day. For two years he had kept a secret from every living soul. I suppose that he figured I wouldn’t understand. Was I just too young? After his first night down in the basement two summers ago, I suppose Everett and Mama wouldn’t have either. Everett didn’t take well to waking abruptly in the night and four nights in a row after he’d moved into the new basement bedroom, Simon had come screaming to the top of the stairs, bawling about the dark. Everett, I imagine, had all that he was going to take of Simon’s middle-of-the-night outbursts. The first night, he was merely irritated, the second he yelled at Mama to take care of it -- ‘the situation’ he sometimes called things -- and the third night he screamed at Simon loud enough to make the boy fall backward against the bedroom wall. He hit his head and began bawling even louder.

But the fourth night, Everett tried to be rational with Simon about his childish behavior. In fact his voice was so calm that I almost wasn’t sure what was happening. He reasoned it like this to Simon, standing over the boy after knocking him across the room and against the wall with the back of his closed fist: His work was important and his paycheck paid for Simon and me to eat and have a roof over our heads. Do you want to have Harvey’s every so often? He asked casually, as Simon put a heel of his hand to his bloodied nose and swollen eyes. Well, if you do, you’d better get in line. In order to get to work and be productive there he needed a good night’s rest. Interrupting that night’s rest didn’t allow him to be productive at work which might mean that he wouldn’t get a paycheck. In turn, Simon and me wouldn’t have a place to live or be able to eat Harvey’s. As he hit Simon again and again that night, he tried to make his reasoning clear. Mama held me, clutched me tight against her, crying and begging Everett to stop hitting my big brother. He’s only eleven, she bawled. He can’t take that like me. Everett responded that Simon needed to fully understand what he was telling him. That Everett wouldn’t stand for this night after night just because his sissy son was afraid of the dark. That his sissy son wouldn’t get in line and that his sissy son wouldn’t take care of his own ‘situation’. But Simon was only a boy, he went on, and boys at that age are stupid. He had to make sure Simon understood his higher level reasoning. Everett, on

the other hand, was smart and without him as our father we'd be homeless. We'd be lying in a gutter starving to death. That would be our 'situation'.

When he finally let up on Simon, Mama and I went to him. He was bloody and his eyes wouldn't open. His arms and legs had already begun to swell up. He was past tears, past his wailing, past even having the ability to piece a sentence together. Mama carried him to the bath tub and poured as much ice as she had in there on top of him along with cool water. Everett went back to bed and we stayed up with Simon all night. I asked Mama why Everett had done that and she couldn't explain it to me. Only tears came, and stifled words that made no sense to me. I wondered if they made sense to her. In the morning, she made Everett breakfast and sent him off to work with his steel lunchbox. He acted as though nothing had happened and even gave her a kiss on her tear-stained cheek.

And so it went on like that for most of the summer. That first time was the worst, though. Simon had stayed in our old bedroom for several weeks before coming out to play ball with me and the other kids. Even then his skin was still puffy and bruised in some spots. Mama didn't want the neighborhood kids seeing him when it still looked really bad and school had already let out. I guess he was lucky that way.

But soon enough, Everett questioned why Simon's bunk had been moved back up to the old bedroom. Mama had said that Simon found it difficult to climb up and down the stairs in his condition, but before long Simon was in the basement again. He did the best he could. Determined not to bawl again in the night, I'd hear him creaking up those betraying steps to the kitchen sniveling and crying but trying not be heard. Everett would be there soon enough, scolding him for being such a pussy excuse for a son. He'd hit him. Not as hard as that first time, but enough to scare Simon into staying down there all night.

Eventually, night after night, Everett would actually lock the door at the top of the stairs so Simon couldn't come back up until morning. He told him that it would teach him to be a real man. When he was tucked in at night, Simon would always ask Mama to leave that solitary light on for him, the one that hung over the workbench on the other side of the basement. She would. As discreetly as she could, she'd hit the switch on her way upstairs nearly every night. And if she couldn't manage to turn it on then, she'd tell Everett that she was going back to the kitchen to check and make sure the screen door was hooked securely over the inside one. Every single night, my Mama would make sure that light switch was on. His silence was his thank you.

Some nights, whatever was scaring Simon so much would be so terrible that he'd bang on that locked door until I came to open it for him. I just couldn't stand to hear my brother bawling against the door he could do nothing against. "PleeeeeeeeeeeEEEASE... PLEeeeeaaaaasee...." he'd cry out, but Everett would never come and unlock the door. You can be sure, though, Simon would get whipped with a belt the next morning for his carrying on.

Mama, I think, was too scared of Everett to come and unlock the door herself. She'd tell me, with as strong a voice as she could, sometimes behind red eyes glazed over with wetness, that Everett knew best and we shouldn't question his methods. He was a good provider for this family and we had to abide by his rules. Just the same, she'd also make sure that light switch was turned on. She'd try and reason with Simon about staying down there and not making Everett angry, and I heard him trying to explain to

her, as she cooked dinner one night, why he couldn't stay down there in the basement. Just as every other time he brought it up, Everett intruded. This time, he rushed into the room and grabbed Simon by the scruff of the shirt, got right in his face and yelled that his talk was all nonsense. It was all in his head. He should grow up and try to act like a man for once. Get in line, he told him. Get in line.

2.

The morning after my first experience with the skittering wave of black creatures in our basement Simon and I headed out for the field behind our house. The sky was a brilliant blue dome above our heads and the only sounds that could be heard were a slight rustle of the sweet grass beneath our feet as we walked and a similar rustle of the sycamores and willows off in the distance towards the boundaries of the island power compound. We set out for Daddy's old work house, beyond the field just this side of that power plant. It was an old stone building on Predis' field that Granddaddy had paid rent on some years back. Old man Predis let them use the building because he'd had no use for it. When he died it went to Granddaddy out of common law because Predis had had no living relatives. The rest of his property went back to the township and his estate fell into the public coffers. The workhouse, somehow, stayed with us, maybe as a helping hand from the counselors for the tougher times when the electrical work went appreciated but under-utilized. Likewise, that stone house went to our Daddy after Granddaddy's death and he continued to store his electrical supplies there. He'd tinker around with power boxes and the like in that old sagging building, always had something on the go, always had one or two projects to keep him busy. Simon and I hadn't been out this way in quite some time. Least, not this far towards the compound. The last occasion that Simon wandered this way was three and a half years ago, the afternoon of the funeral. Just like that day, I knew he must have a lot to say.

People like Simon need to warm up before they say much of anything. Their innermost thoughts take a while to cook, a bit like a meal in the oven. He didn't offer these up too often, but when he did it required a certain frame of mind on his part – and a certain patience on mine. Setting the stage with an appropriate backdrop for him to begin his thoughts was also needed. I suspected that Daddy's old shed was to be an adequate location and this long walk out there was the path to his 'certain frame of mind'.

He began telling me the straightforward bits, the stuff I'd been curious about for the better part of two years – and the answers to questions which were inevitable after last night's 'encounter'.

That first night, two years earlier, when Simon had blown up the stairs like a hurricane to Mamma and Everett's bedroom bawling like I'd never seen before was the first time he'd seen that throng of beady-looking things crawling out of the sump hole and into his bedroom. He'd heard them coming, that high-pitched squeal was quieter back then but still audible, certainly just as real. When he had pointed the flashlight Mama had given him in the direction of the shifting fabric hung over the closet doorway, he must have

almost peed himself. There were just a few early on but, he told me, as the summer wore on, there came to be more and more black visitors each night.

They didn't come when it was cool though. Simon found that out right away. Nor when it was too damp. I suppose the little critters didn't care for the water. When the sump hole was filled up past the cement corridor that ran off into the ground outside the house, they stayed completely away, and Simon was able to rest easy. He learned quickly when they would be coming and when they wouldn't. That noise they make as a collective brood, crawling through the corridor and up the sump hole into the space under the stairs was a good indicator and Simon eventually heard it in his sleep so often that he sometimes couldn't tell the dream sound from the real one. He'd wake up in a panic, his heart pounding with the prospect that the creatures were returning twice in one night. But the fates were easy on this one point: the creatures only came once a night. One visit per night was it and after it cooled off to a certain point, if they hadn't come yet, they wouldn't.

Naturally, after Everett had taken out his frustrations on Simon for his crying and carrying on that first week, Simon felt that he was utterly alone in his situation. His was truly a secret and one that no soul wanted to hear. Of course, he never tried to tell me. But I suppose that, like he had always done, especially in the time since Daddy had left us, he was just trying to look out for his little brother. Like the Fitzgerald brothers at school, this must have been another set of bullies he tried to shield me from. But unlike the teachers at school, Everett and even Mama, I didn't dismiss his abnormal behavior, the bags under his eyes, and all the small, thin cuts on his body as simply an inability to adjust to his father's death. I knew something was going on.

Instead of taking the beatings from Everett, Simon grew wary of even attempting to make them all believe that there was something down there. Instead, he shut his mouth and retreated into a world of his own. He tried to fend off the hive with every breath he could muster. There had been just a few at first, so he tried to beat them and kill them as they marched forward on him in the dark of his room at night. I remember hearing the thump of the Louisville Slugger of Daddy's, the one he'd actually gotten signed by Reggie Jackson himself on a trip to the mainland when the Yanks had played the Orioles at Memorial Stadium. He struck the wallboard and the cement block floor with that wooden bat early that summer, in a series of dull thuds in the middle of the quiet night. And I finally understood what Simon had been doing. Of course Everett raised a stink over that, so the thuds stopped the very next night. My brother didn't want another beating, that's for sure.

Simon continued to tackle the problem in various and inventive ways. At the time that he related these details to me I didn't understand them all, but in retrospect, I see that he was indeed a smart and determined boy. He was quiet, that's been said, but he was also decidedly meticulous. He tried everything to defend himself from these nightly visitors and he inevitably learned a great deal about them in the process.

Killing them didn't seem to work. They only returned the next night in greater numbers. That, plus Everett's threat to whollop Simon for his continued thuds in the basement each night compounded to force Simon into quieter methods.

At first he tried various ways of blocking the creatures from even getting into his room.

With Daddy's old tools, 'borrowed' from Everett's steel toolbox, and some spare lumber from the woodpile out back by the pit, he built a wooden box to fit over the sump hole. The swarm chewed through that the first night. Then he waited until Everett was working late and welded together a small cylinder with Everett's spare welding torch. He used the cylinder as a makeshift plug, whacking it into the corridor with a mallet. It worked for a few days until the water backed up around the foundation enough to settle in puddles around the exposed portion near the back screen door. Everett had been concerned about all the rain that week and he almost blew a gasket when he saw the standing water. The last thing he wanted to be doing was patching goddamn foundation leaks during his time off and if that water continued to gather around the foundation, fine cracks would inevitably come next. He flew down the stairs to the sump hole in a fury one afternoon after his shift, because his first intuition was that the pump engine had seized. After all, he hadn't heard it run in the night for more than a week of wet weather and he hadn't given it the usual overhaul that spring. I thought for sure that Simon was going to be in for the beating of his life when Everett not only discovered the plugged up corridor but that Simon had been using his tools, his welding gear taken from his toolbox, to create the plug itself.

I don't know what transpired in that half minute as Everett clambered down those squeaky basement stairs to Simon's room, but when he got there the metal plug was nowhere to be found and there was a steady stream of water flowing into the sump hole where the engine was humming and sputtering away. He looked at Simon with this deep and cutting glare and knew the boy had been up to something but couldn't pin it on him. I guess his exhaustion after a day of work had gotten the better of him because instead of raising his hand as he was prone to do, he went past Simon and got a beer from the cellar and went upstairs. He didn't lay a hand on my brother...not that night.

Simon tried putting that plug in just before bed on nights when he expected the wave of creatures was going to pay a visit but he soon learned this would not work either. They must have spat something out of their mouths, he told me, some kind of toxic venom, because that same night when Simon heard the high-pitched squeal coming from under the stairs the room filled with a horrid stench. The sound grew louder and the stench grew more horrendous. In fact, it got so bad that Simon could barely open his eyes. His throat and his eyes stung and itched and he thought we was going to throw up. The creatures were there in the room then, surging up the walls as they had on many previous nights -- only this time they seemed more much more agitated. When they scoured across his body, he supposed that they still had some of the remnants of that acid on their bodies. It burned and seared his white skin. It was all he could do, he told me, to stop from crying out. But he did; somehow had managed to keep quiet, because we didn't hear a peep that night. That morning he had more of those thin cuts across his body than any other night and he had tiny black dots across his flesh, where the drops of acidic venom had dropped and eaten away at him. Like the cuts from before, though, it all vanished after just a few days and left no scarring. Until then, he just covered the tell-tale signs with his clothing and dirt as best he could and to teachers he explained away the rest as falling off a fence or sliding into home plate at recess. I guess no one really wanted to think the worst.

3.

Simon discovered the remnants of his welded plug the next morning, along with his burns and scratches. It appeared to have been eaten away, almost as if it had been exposed to the potent acid, the venom, that he guessed was produced by those little black creatures with mandibles and thin wiry legs. In the previous week, he supposed, the water had backed up enough to prevent the hive from even getting to it and melting it away in such a manner, but Everett's panic over getting new cracks in the house's foundation called for Simon to pull his makeshift plug and let that blessed water spill out of the corridor. On the last night, the corridor was empty and the shiny surface of the plug, shoved into the corridor had been exposed enough for the hive to get at it. Those little critters could do a lot of damage. They could chew through inch-thick wood with their collective mandibles. They could even melt sheer steel with their spit. But one thing was for certain, the damn things couldn't swim.

After trying to stop the creatures from coming in through that corridor, Simon tried drowning them out. At first he tried removing the cork sinker that controlled when the motor would run. Inadvertently, Everett didn't make this too easy. Not only did Everett begin checking on the pump motor at different times almost every day, but the fact that it was so dark down there made it difficult for Simon to even remove the sinker quickly and quietly. Simon needed a pair of needle-nose pliers to attach and remove the cork sinker and he simply couldn't fumble around with them in the dark with any kind of success. In addition to that, he'd have to creep across the cold floor in the dark and replace the pliers in Everett's toolbox so he wouldn't know they'd been moved. Touching Everett's tools was grounds for a 'talking-to'.

I could only imagine Simon on his hands and knees under the stairs with a pair of pliers in one hand, bent over the hole, reaching down towards the cork sinker. What if he suddenly heard that hissing sound? What if the sudden presence of that noise was enough to cause him to fumble his grip on the pliers and drop them into the sump well, all the way to the bottom. I had this hideous vision of Simon reaching all the way down to the bottom of that narrow hole to retrieve them. He'd know that if Everett saw them down there Simon would be in for the beating of his life for tinkering with the motor yet again and for taking them out of his toolbox. He'd have to be taught a lesson for things like that. He'd have to be 'put in line' and the 'situation' would call for a 'talking-to'. Simon was just a boy, after all. And boys are stupid. What if those creatures crept up out of the hole as he was right there, his arm straining down into the hole to retrieve the orange-handled pliers? They'd tear him apart with those mandibles and claws, climb up his arm to his face and tear away at his eyelids. Or maybe they'd spit their hideous saliva on his face so deep the scars would never go away. I think this picture in his mind, plus the fact that Everett often came downstairs now to check the pump motor without notice led Simon to not try removing the cork sinker each night.

He came up with a new idea that seemed much more feasible. If Everett was going to go and check that the sump hole wasn't overflowing, Simon would instead disconnect the motor's power cord in the cellar where it went up through the floor to the breaker box. Everett would see the untouched pump, but he'd never check its power cord. He just wasn't that thorough.

Simon would then empty the hole using a bucket each night. The idea was that he could remove excess water so it wouldn't flood the basement, but still leave the water at a level above the corridor. The water level wouldn't allow the creatures entry into his room at night, and the motor would appear completely intact to Everett's prying eyes. It seemed like the perfect plan.

So, Simon severed the power cord for the sump motor which was wired directly into the circuit box upstairs. His plan worked for several days, as he occasionally took a pail of water out of the house, dumping it when Everett wasn't around. It worked, that is, until a storm swept across the island one afternoon. Simon sat in his desk at school fidgeting and staring out the window at those big fat drops of rain hitting the muddy puddles on the playground. The look on his face was utter despair. Finally free after the school bell, he ran home full-throttle to find the basement flooded, the bottoms of his bed sheets wet, the scraps of rug thoroughly soaked, and even Everett's collection of dirty magazines, stacked in a pile beside his work bench, drenched. I've seldom seen Simon so sick with worry as he sobbed and sobbed that day after school, trying desperately to clean up the flooded basement with pails and rags and Mama's mop. I knew how this episode would end and I helped him as best I could in those few frantic minutes before the back screen door squeaked open on rusted hinges and banged shut against the jamb at the top of the stairs. Completely wet from the waist down and red in the face from all the crying, Simon looked up at Everett who stood over us in the half-inch deep water. Apparently all the rain had also flooded Ethan's low-lying welding shop so he had no other choice but to let his men go for the day. Why oh why had Everett gotten off early just that one day? Simon hadn't even had a chance to re-attach the pump's power cord to the breaker box and I can't imagine how his heart jumped into his chest looking up at Everett who had his greasy, wet hair hanging down over his eyes.

Needless to say, Everett let him have it that afternoon. It was a somewhat subdued 'lesson' that time, but only because Simon had school the following Monday. His punishment included cleaning up the water the next day and sleeping in his wet sheets that night. Simon never disconnected that sump pump again.

4.

It was a hot day, the kind we'd usually spend exploring the north end up past the power compound or playing an elaborate game of pirates with the other boys. But on this Saturday we spent most of the morning in Daddy's old work house, out there in the overgrown sweet grass. Simon had opened his floodgates and the words just kept flowing. He tried to explain the presence of the creatures, as well as their effect on him and Everett as best he could to me. But I was young and I didn't get all of it.

As I mentioned, the temperature itself had a strong impact on whether the creatures would appear in Simon's room. It was much cooler downstairs than upstairs, but it was the hot weather outside that seemed to make the difference. The first summer, Simon always seemed to have mysterious scratches and marks all across his body after the terribly hot nights. Mama questioned him about them but all he said was that they were from playing in the brambles and raspberry patch out in Predis' field.

But I knew that wasn't the reason because I never had scratches and I was always with my brother after school.

The hive, he assumed after all his dealings with them, were scouring the place for food. Almost any food would do – even Simon. But they didn't have eyes, near as he could tell from the early corpses he'd battered with the baseball bat – the one with Reggie's scrawl -- and later studied in the light of day. Instead they seemed to be scavenging around searching in the dark humidity for warm objects. Warm objects and anything that moved. He guessed that they were initially attracted to his room by the warmth of the running sump pump motor in the middle of the night. Once there, they surely discovered the little eleven year old boy's warm presence laying on his mattress. Early on, however, he found that they avoided him more the cooler his body was and the less he moved about.

Mama would tuck him in each night and have him promise her that he wouldn't get scared and upset Everett. After she went upstairs and turned on the light for him, Simon would pull all the sheets off his bed and strip down to his underwear to lower his body temperature as much as he could. He'd lay as still as he could on the mattress with his arms and legs spread way out from the rest of his body. As soon as he learned this little trick it was almost like those little critters couldn't even 'see' his body as they made their way into the room. It was almost as if he became invisible to whatever sense they used if he was cold and completely still. They just crawled right over him, pausing briefly at his forcibly calm heart beat -- since it was the warmest area on his whole body.

As time went on, Simon suspected that he and the creatures developed some kind of relationship between them. They seemed to scour his room looking to be fed, finding a meal in his bed sheets and on his carpet; tiny hairs and bits of dead skin he suspected. After Simon found out all about the wonders of human skin in Mr. Norman's biology class, he was sure of his reasoning behind the creatures' return time after time. Mr. Norman shared an interesting fact in class one day, one that most people don't know: a great deal of the air we breath in domestic settings, places like schools and houses is, in fact, dead skin cells. Our bodies just discard them into the floating void of air around us. Insects, like moths and mosquitoes, can trace the paths of our dead cells through the air to find us. Sweaty warm bodies, too, are ways that insects can find a living source of food.

Sure enough, the roiling, oily-skinned black creatures seemed to scathe up and down the walls devouring these little particles. They passed across Simon's naked chest and legs to pick up any bits of flesh and sweat they could find there.

Simon received little slashes and cuts from the creatures when they moved in too close or when he perhaps twitched as they scurried across his tight stomach in the middle of the night. But these little slashes from their claws and mandibles healed extremely quickly. He told me that even the bruises and cuts from Everett's outrages healed more quickly than they should. Perhaps, even, the creatures excreted some kind of a chemical which helped him heal fast and continue to provide for them.

These were some pretty elaborate things Simon was telling me -- two separate living creatures benefiting each other like that -- I certainly didn't understand all of it that day. But once we were within the confines of Daddy's old shed, Simon immediately felt comfortable to let all of his ponderings spill forth. And they came like a geyser. He had apparently been giving this a lot of thought.

5.

The creatures didn't come in the winter, the late fall or the early spring. Strictly hot, dry weather prompted the little black visitors. Simon told me that autumn finally coming was a welcome reprieve from staying up half the night waiting for them in the dark. I can imagine he spent many hours down there alone, his eyes peering into the darkness as mine had the night before, never knowing if they'd come, when they'd come, and always that ever-present thought in his mind: I hope the sump pump motor doesn't run. Just not tonight. If I can only get through one more night without it running...

But that threat was always there for him. Sure, the swarm didn't return every night. Only on nights when the conditions were right -- when the corridor was clear of water, or when the motor had just cleared it out and when it was hot and muggy. He must have developed a real sense of when to expect them over those two years. I suppose he just adapted, as people do. He accepted what had to be endured and after that first week, two years ago, we never heard him complain about his basement room again.

The experimentation continued through the second summer when they appeared again on the first hot night. He discovered that not only were the creatures wary of water but they would not go anywhere near light. Simon lay there as they traipsed across his cold and naked body munching on his leg hairs and loose skin at a lightning-quick rate. He opened one eye just out of simple curiosity, I guess, and witnessed a wide gap in the path of the moving wave of creatures where the ball of light from his flashlight lay across the wall. They steered clear of that shaft of light, never touching it, never even coming close. I can only imagine what Simon's meticulous mind made of that.

Immediately Simon began wiring his room for a light bulb and switch. He knew that Everett would take him out in the yard and beat him with his belt if Simon undermined his abilities and wired in that light fixture and switch by himself, so Simon constructed a hidden fixture beneath the wallboard. It was the only way. He ran the wire our Daddy had placed years before back up through the rafters of the basement into the light switch at the top of the stairs and connected it to a new switch in his own room next to the bulb. The current ran from the circuit box in the kitchen to the switch at the stairs down to Simon's new bulb and switch. And he did it all himself, when Everett was at work and Mama was out in the garden.

Daddy was a good electrician, and apparently, a good teacher too. Simon had remembered everything he'd ever told him about electrical current and Simon put the knowledge to good use. He gathered money from every source he could, selling his baseball cards, the records Mama and Daddy had bought each of us, and purchased the necessary fixtures and bulbs from Mr. Parson at the hardware store. Each night, Simon would pull off the section of wallboard that Everett had pounded up the year before. He'd screw in the light bulb and turn on the switch after everyone had gone to bed. It was an ingenious plan for a twelve year old. Granted, it was only a sixty watt bulb, quite dim in that entire space, but it was enough to keep those critters away. For more than a week they didn't venture past the corridor. Simon pushed his closet drape aside and

held his flashlight pointed down into the well and saw them waiting there, the high-pitched squeal emanating from their collective throats. It was a big triumph for him but it wouldn't last.

He supposed that they adapted to the light in some way. Soon, they ventured into the room, in greater numbers than ever before and scratched Simon up pretty good. He was scared of what would happen to him when they exceeded what his little body could provide. They were, after all, numbering in the hundreds at this point.

But what else could Simon do? He couldn't leave the basement. The door was locked each night. His new father would hurt his sissy step-son if he wailed and carried on. It would become yet another situation, and Simon couldn't even think about what that would mean. He couldn't stop the creatures from coming by blocking their pathway nor could he prevent them by flooding them out or shining that sixty watt bulb on them. He was on the verge of giving up for the first time when it occurred to him that he could buy some more time by getting a stronger bulb. That worked -- for a while. Soon, they adapted to that one too. He added a second hundred-watt bulb and a third, running off the same circuit. Each time they adapted. The last night that they came during the unseasonably warm autumn of the year before, the three bulbs in Simon's new defense apparatus plus the other one over the work bench were apparently too much for the breaker in the upstairs breaker box to handle. At about four in the morning, the whole thing blew. It made this huge popping sound and the lights all went off in Simon's room. He knew that Everett would be bounding out of bed any second.

Startled himself, He unscrewed the bulbs as quickly as he could and banged the piece of wallboard up as best he could in the dark with only that dim flashlight to help him see. As he did so, he could hear Everett stamping towards the kitchen from the bedroom above. Upstairs, he stomped across those squeaky floorboards, all the way from the bedroom to the box where the loud pop of the breaker had come from. Simon could trace his path above and could even hear the rising anger in his quickening paces.

When Everett discovered the blown breaker and the smoke coming from the blackened light switch at the top of the stairs he came to the obvious conclusion -- that Mama had been leaving the light on for his scared little son downstairs all this time and it had finally blown. His yelling was so loud I was sure that the neighbors across the creek had heard him. "You," he blared at Mama when she came into the kitchen, "You think I don't know what you've been doing?" He hollered. It was dark but I could see the whites of his eyes bright in the dimness. "That pantywaist boy o' yers has you wrapped around his little finger doesn't he? You couldn't just do what I tell ya. You just had to keep the light on, didn' ya?" Everett suddenly made a mocking voice, mimicking the way Simon must have whined to Mama about leaving the light on, "Mommy, please leave the light on. I'm scared!"

Everett had intended to march down to the basement and haul him up to the kitchen by his ear. But when he unlocked and opened the door, Simon was waiting for him at the top of the stairs. Everett's surprise at this was only momentary. He grabbed my brother and pulled him into the kitchen.

He hit both of them that night, blackened Mama's eyes as well as Simon's, as they tried to sputter apologies through split lips and mouths full of blood. He was livid and all I could do was watch, peering out from behind the kitchen counter. Other than the night the swarm crawled across my tummy in the dark and I wet myself on Simon's

sheet, it was the most scared I'd ever been. I thought he was going to kill them both and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Tired, I guess from his yelling and his swinging, Everett took his bloody knuckles and stained shirt back to bed with him. The two of them, my mama and my brother, lay there on the floor of the kitchen, in the dim early morning gloom, not a word from either of them. Simon's head quivered a little; small drops of blood fell to the linoleum from his face. I remembered the year before when things got this bad and I remembered Mama pouring ice on Simon's swollen parts as he lay unmoving in the bathtub. And, this time it was me who brought ice from the freezer. I went to the sink as Mama had done then for her oldest boy, and brought them moistened dishcloths. Just my presence, I think, awakened Mama out of her silent trance and she took over then. She was in terrible pain but her first instinct was to make sure Simon was okay. She was in shock but she led all of us down to the basement that night. It had cooled off somewhat by after four and she wrapped us all in Simon's blankets, placing ice-filled hankies over his brow and cheeks and one over her own. We slept together that night, all huddled as one. Simon was delirious as he drifted off. He kept saying, "I shouldn't have left it on all night. I should have turned off the light..."

6.

In time they both healed, Simon faster than Mama, but Simon made no effort to ward off the creatures each night. He never took the wallboard out, nor did he screw in the bulbs. As we sat on the table in Daddy's work house he told me that he just didn't care anymore at that point. He had lost all hope that he'd ever be able get away from this place -- this place where Everett could hit him just for sneezing, this place where the oily black hive of creatures would eventually kill him in the night. But, for some unknown reason the cool weather held. We had a wet autumn that year and the swarm didn't come back, not once.

I took homework to Simon and told his teacher, as Mama had instructed me, that Simon had a bad case of the mumps. Everett had the circuit breaker and light switch fixed by a man from the mainland and bitched at Mama about the sixty dollars it cost him. She didn't reply to that nor to anything else he said. She didn't make him any meals and didn't sleep in the same bed as him for more than two weeks. Instead, she slept in Simon's room with him. Scared of sleeping alone up there with Everett, I stayed down there with them too. But Everett did his best to make amends. He made breakfast for us one Saturday and seemed to be in the best mood we'd seen in quite some time. He brought freshly picked flowers to Mama as she ate his runny eggs and dry toast and sipped the juice he poured through a straw. Despite her barely healed lip and the rest of the remnants of that night in the kitchen, what he'd done to her, in those days I suppose she couldn't really help but forgive him. After all, what else could she do?

7.

Simon and I spent most of that day, almost a year after Everett's rant in the kitchen, away from the heat, under the cover of Daddy's old shed. He told me all of these things, things he knew about the creatures from under the ground and the things that he only suspected he knew. He seemed to leave things on a dire note. I wanted to ask him all kinds of questions. What would happen when their numbers eventually climbed so high that he couldn't fend them off, or hide from them by laying there in nothing but his undershorts? They were, after all, already showing signs that they could adapt and thrive. What happens when one little boy's body wasn't enough to satiate them? What happens when they come up those stairs?

Simply put, though, I was too young to verbalize these thoughts or even to articulate them in such a way. But they were real concerns. I think I understood my questions and could feel them -- if only on an instinctual level. And I think Simon did too. His silence was his answer: He didn't know.

But he told me that I shouldn't worry. Just as he had said to me on numerous occasions before this: After the funeral; after we'd seen Mama crying in her bedroom, her tears falling on her open checkbook; the night after Everett beat the living pulp out of him. It was like a safety mechanism for Simon. Whatever there was to worry about he'd carry the burden for both of us.

And so that summer carried on, for the most part just as the last few had. We played in the sun, making up tales of heroes and villains with the other kids on the island. We played games of pick-up ball and pretended we were Jackson and Munson, a dream team if ever they would both play for the Yanks. We ate our dinner with Mama and Everett and raced back out into the evening, thoughts of pirates and cowboys battling it out, on our minds and in our hearts. We played in the creek near the house, in the woods out past that, and out in Predis' field. Doing what I think most boys that age did, we tried to be kids. Although Simon was indisputably not a kid anymore. I think he ceased to be one that first week of terror he'd been subjected to. If not because of that throng of black creatures then in spite of them. That and because of the back of Everett's hand.

Most likely it had been all of those things.

He held his secret and for once, I finally shared it and held onto it just the same. But he held tighter than I, as he always did. It was more pressing on his heart than on mine because he was the one who had to endure it. The creatures were ever-increasing in numbers and they were no longer afraid of his ever-increasing battalion of light bulbs. It was becoming a losing fight for him then. I could see it and I knew that something was going to break. I just hoped that it wouldn't be him. Strange days were coming.

III. A Certain Slant of Light

1.

One night in late July, the calm was disturbed. Ever since I had been made aware of those wall-climbing critters I had thought it an odd bit of irony that Simon was in this position. He'd lay awake at night, undoubtedly hoping for thunderstorms and rain so that he could have a reprieve from his nightly visitors. On the other hand, all those storms made choppy waters off the coast -- choppy enough to increase the number of boats and lobster potters needing hull repairs and the like. It was not uncommon for the many fishing boats to find themselves rammed against the rocks that dotted the shallow waters around the island coming and going to sea. Storms meant cooler weather, no swarms of black critters in the forecast, but they also meant that Everett had some long hours at Ethan's patching the hulls of those boats. And that meant he'd be cranky.

Just less than two full weeks of steady rain and scattered storms, extremely unusual for the island in July, kept Everett at work much of that time. Simon and I helped Mama in the garden on those rare moments of sun between the clouds and the rainy days. We also spent a great deal of time indoors with her, playing games and telling stories. I think she really enjoyed that her sons were getting a little older now. She didn't have to pull as many punches and she didn't have to shield us from as many things she wanted to say. She could talk to us more like she needed to, and not as the little boys of before. One night near the end of the rainy weather, when Everett was working a late shift at the shop, she told us that it felt more in that week like it had when Daddy had been with her than in all the time since he'd been gone.

As we sat that evening in the dim orange glow of sunset falling across our faces and across the walls through the living room window, Mama removed a small object from the front pouch of her apron. It was one of Daddy's old jack-knives. He'd had several of them, I had fuzzy memories of him scraping the bark off saplings behind the house with one years back. The young, wet bark of those little trees made the fire burn bright and smell sweet. We used to spend most hot evenings out there in the summer, roasting marshmallows and hotdogs, our Daddy telling us stories about his own childhood over the fire pit. For more than two years those times had felt like so long ago. But, right then, when Mama pulled out that polished, wood handled knife, I was suddenly thrust back into those old moments. Suddenly no time had passed since Daddy's funeral, since the endless nights by the campfire with him and Mama.

"Here," she said, giving the jack knife to Simon, "Your Daddy wanted you to have this when you were old enough. It was very special to him...his daddy had it engraved for him." He took it and rubbed his fingers over the shiny bronze plate with Daddy's initials, S.T.K.

She looked at me then, her eyes wide and as loving as I'd ever seen them. "I don't want you to feel left out, Rupie. In a few years when you're big enough, you'll get one of your Daddy's knives too. He loved you both so much." She hugged us both, leaning forward and giving us as much affection as we'd probably received since she'd married Everett.

And that's when he made his presence known to us. A voice from the doorway of the living room startled us all. "Well, well, well. Isn't this a love in?" As usual, after spending a day with his welding mask's straps pressing down his hair, it was greasy and hung over his eyes, a dark pile of strands that made him look psychotic amid the orange

glow. He looked to me like a mad man, with his slinky posture and cruel eyes, standing amidst a room engulfed in flames.

I looked at Simon then, his eyes were wide with surprise. Everett flung forward at him, knocking Mama out of the way and sprawling her across the rug. He grabbed at Simon's hands and snatched away his prize. "What's this?" he asked as he looked down at the knife with a grimace of disgust. He'd been drinking, you could tell by his posture, by his mannerisms, and by his smell. It was Johnny Walker Black Label, no doubt about it. Running his own fingers over the engraved initials, he scoffed, "—Ha! Daddy's jackknife, eh?" He seemed to ponder a moment, his head lolling a little in its cradle, looking for the most effective words he could come up with. "Your father wasn't even a man. Is that what she's trying to tell you?" He looked over at Mama, "—that he was a fine, upstanding man who provided well for his family?"

His voice slowed down; it became a smooth, slick drop of oil. His eyes turned to thin lines. His hair was pasted in greasy streaks across his forehead. "Well that wasn't the case at all. If that was so," he said, slipping the blade out from its resting place beneath the handle and turning it around in his big gaunt, dirty hands, and looking at Mama with a narrowed eye, "Why did he leave you without a cent? Hmmm? Why was that?" I don't know that Everett really wanted an answer to his question and Mama didn't give him one. The look on her face was strained and scared. "Why did I have to come in here and fix his situation for him? Hmmm? He was a coward, a wimp. A pantywaist that couldn't get his act together. . ."

Then he added, at Simon, "Just like you're gonna be." He backed away from us then and I saw Simon lower his head. He didn't want to get in a fight tonight. Not after Mama had given him his Daddy's jack knife. There had been a moment, at long last a moment, just a few minutes before, when it seemed to all of us that things were going to be okay again. That things were going to feel better, like they had before. The three of us had probably been the closest in a long time that night on the living room rug, while the sun faded from the sky. Why did Everett have to come in and spoil all that with his loud mouth and his foul presence and his drunken breath?

Everett rolled the opened blade of the knife in his hand and ran his thumb across it, feeling its sharpness against the skin of his finger. Like most of Daddy's things it had been meticulously kept. It was perfectly sharpened and had not one minute spot of rust. He came back at Simon suddenly and without warning, stopping but an inch or so from his face, with the little knife held in his sweaty grip. Simon's eyes widened at the quick movement, and I was afraid that the man was going to cut right through him with that one thrust. He didn't though. He held fast, the blade hovering right in front of Simon's face. "Yeah, just like you're gonna be." Tears began to well up in my brother's eyes and Everett began to laugh at that. His laugh was an insidious little giggle and his hot breath, foul with Black Label, on my brother's face must have made him feel too close.

So fast and so sudden that I wouldn't in a million years have guessed he would do it, Simon swung his arm out against Everett's. The collision, just below the elbow, banged the knife away and it flew across the room bouncing across the rug a few times with dull thuds and finally settling with the blade poking into the thick rug. The handle stuck out almost upright. The next thing we all knew, Simon's mouth was open and his teeth bore down on the arm outstretched in front of him. Everett yelled at this and grabbed at the back of the boy's neck, where his disheveled hair met his scalp. He flung

the boy against the arm of the couch, and we heard a terrible whack as it happened. Mama was almost instantly propelled to her knees thrusting forward against Everett from behind and to the side of him. "Leave him aloooooone!" she wailed. I could see in her eyes that she was shocked this was even happening.

The two of them collided and the impact brought them towards me. I moved out of their path, towards where Simon lay. Everett recoiled his bloodied, bitten arm and swung it towards Mama. It met her temple and she was immediately thrown backwards, with a mottled stain of blood just above her eyelid. That's when the stunned Everett came towards Simon and me again. He lunged and grabbed Daddy's jack knife from where it had pierced the carpet. Those next few moments are hazy for me, but I remember the essence of it. Simon lunged at his step father and was again taken in the man's grip. He picked Simon up off the ground and held the knife to his face, while Simon's legs dangled helplessly above the floor. I truly thought he intended to kill him then. "That's right, boy," He wailed, "Yer daddy was nothing but a coward. He couldn't deal with his petty little bills so he kilt himself. Yeah, that's right, he gone and done himself, too scared to fess up to the fact that he couldn't take care o' his own family no more. . ."

He stared at Simon with a mad look, happy with what he'd said. Simon's own look was that of anger. His eyes were dark and his face was red. It almost seemed like he didn't understand that Everett held his life in his hands. Either that or he suddenly didn't care. What he said next was calm and collected, like most of the things my brother said. His voice was low and it didn't waiver. "My father was a good man. Not like you. You're the coward." And then he added the part that really stung, "A real man wouldn't pick on his wife or his two boys -- two boys and a wife that can't defend themselves."

At that Everett went ballistic. His yell was as loud as I'd ever heard it. I'm sure he would have rammed that blade right into Simon if I hadn't lunged at his legs. For the second time that night, Everett got a surprise he could never have seen coming. He'd never struck me, threatened many times, but never actually took the swing. The fact that he hadn't was almost certainly the reason I had the courage to charge him that night. The orange of the sunset had already faded to just a hint of pink against the walls and the room was quite dim. I don't think he even saw me coming, nor did he suspect I could ever summon the strength or the sheer will.

I rammed into the man right at his crotch, harder than I even thought was possible. He fell back, his grip on Simon instantly loosening enough for him to escape. But just as soon as Simon was away from him, that sweaty, blackened hand found its way around me. Before I knew it, Everett's other hand, the hand with the little polished jack knife, swung against my face. I felt a cool rip across my cheek, starting at the temple, run jaggedly down towards my jawbone. Blood spurted out from my face up across Everett's neck and down his gray shirt. His eyes were suddenly wide and white in the gloom. I fell to the shaggy rug, with my face slit open like a filet from the cooler at Harlow's Grocery.

I didn't cry that night. The shock, I suspect, was too great. Laying on the floor, I saw everything on a strange slant. Everett was wide-eyed and disbelieving, staring down at his bloodied hand holding the knife. Everything had seemed to fade into shades of swirling gray at that point all moving to and fro, on this canted angle from where I lay. I could see Simon's mouth open in extreme exaggeration and could hear a distant holler

coming from him. Mama, too was yelling, her face contorted with half sobs, half screams. I couldn't hear anything, only saw the scene, only hung on to their lips as they moved in slow motion. The whole room seemed so far away...and soon it was gone.

2.

Mama told me in the weeks to come that Everett was sorry. It was a terrible accident, she'd said, but that was all she said. I slept a lot in the days afterwards, slipping into sleep when it was dark, coming to when it was daylight, often never sure if it was the next day or the one after. My face was held tight in a gauze dressing that Mama changed every night after washing my face with a wet cloth. Apparently I had been taken to Dr. Morrow on the mainland that night for fifty-seven stitches across my left cheek but I don't remember any of that.

When Simon came to see me in my room, he seemed even quieter than usual. He was brooding, his head held low, like the night I had lunged at Everett. When we were alone, he came to the bedside and knelt close to me. He had closed the door and whispered so low I could barely hear him. "Rupe. We're gonna get 'im for this."

"We're gonna take care of 'im. Good and proper. He said things about ar Daddy that he ain't gonna get away with. He's done things to Mama. He's done things to me. And now he's done things to you. He ain't gonna hit us no more. He ain't gonna cut you again..."

"But what are we gonna do Simon?" I was scared. I was scared and I didn't know what he meant. Most of all I was tired. It felt like that whollop I'd given Everett had sucked the life out of me. As though it had been all my strength. Or more likely, I had bled all my strength across the living room rug and I'd never get it back.

"You just wait, Rupe. You just get better and wait. We'll get 'im though. We'll get 'im good and proper."

For most of that August, I didn't do much at all. I slept long nights and I ate meals by myself. Mama played some games with me in my room, sang songs to send me off to sleep, and every night she washed my face and re-wrapped me with fresh gauze. I hadn't looked in a mirror without the bandage so I had no idea how bad it had been.

Eventually things returned to a kind of normal. The stitches were taken out in time for school but my scar continued to itch and sting. Although Mama remarked at how fast it seemed to heal, the thin scar that remained was a distinct reminder of that night in July when the sun's gaze fell just so on our living room wallpaper, and Everett swung my Daddy's knife at me.

The days of early September were hot indeed, even hotter than August that year. I gave a lot of thought each night, as I lay my head down on the pillow, to my brother down in the dank basement doing his best with the swarm of cold crawling things moving across his naked body in the dark. I didn't hear anything from down there, not the sump pump, not Simon, nothing.

3.

It was on one of the weekend mornings when he finally shared his plans with me. Mama had been invited for dinner at the Walsh's across town. She politely declined on behalf of Everett who had made a big stink about the affair. "Now why in the hell would I want to go to some goddamned dinner party at the Walsh's in this goddamn heat--" he hollered at dinner the night before. He smacked his hand down on the table hard enough to make the dishes clatter, "--When I can stay here, have some fried chicken and watch the game on my TV?" Mama didn't press him, after all I don't think she wanted him to be there any way. The last time she had gone anywhere was to take me to the doctor for stitches a month earlier. Before that her last outing alone was to the mainland for her mother's funeral. Everett hadn't gone then either.

4.

Mr. Parson, the owner and proprietor of the only hardware store on the island knew Simon quite well. Daddy used to take Simon there when he needed supplies, would prop him up on the counter while he made his rounds, and Simon returned time and time again long after Daddy had been gone. He'd bought wallboard, light fixtures, bulbs, wire, string, all kinds of things. And each time, he just told Mr. Parson that he was making something for his Mama or helping Everett with some repairs.

The day that Mama went to the Walsh's for dinner, Simon and I went to Parson's Hardware looking for something rather unusual, certainly not more fixtures or bulbs. Mr. Parson was by no means a drinker, not by the standards of most folks in town. No, certainly not. But he did keep a bottle behind the counter. On slow afternoons, he'd sit at his stool behind the register and have a shot as he looked out onto Broadway and watched the people meander through the hot day.

He was a pleasant man, that's for sure, and certainly not a man prone to have more than a glassful. But the bottle behind his counter was a constant, and everyone on the island knew of it, just the same.

Parson's bottle of choice was Johnny Walker, Black Label, of which we knew the sweet stench well from Everett's breath when he was in a particularly nasty mood. Everett's favorite hard liquor happened to be the same. When he had a shot, this was his shot of choice.

The plan was simple. Simon and I went to the hardware store to get Mama a pair of gardening sheers. We couldn't afford them, but Parson wouldn't know that. We would need Mr. Parson to unlock the cabinet that held the sheers along with some expensive drill bits and power tools. When he was away from the counter, kept there by me, Simon would lean as far over the counter as he could and snatch the bottle of Black Label from its spot beneath the register.

It all went smoothly. Mr. Parson wanted to know how Mama was doing, as he hadn't seen her in some time. Worried, as he was since Daddy had died, he never failed to ask us about her when we were in the store, "Oh, fine sir," I said to him, as he reached

the sheers out of the cabinet for me. Behind him, I could see Simon standing by the register. He motioned for me to continue talking to Mr. Parson. "She's doing just fine. Just this evening she's going to the Walsh's for supper."

"Oh, good. Good. Those Walsh's are good people. It's good that she's getting out of the house." He answered almost despondently, looking at the jagged scar that ran across my left cheek. I was holding the sheers in my hand and he was standing a little closer now, blocking my view of the front counter and Simon. By now, Simon would surely have the bottle and be out of the store.

"I don't think these are exactly what my Mama wants, Mr. Parson." I said to him then. I looked down at the sheers in my hand for the first time and realized that he had handed me the most expensive pair in the cabinet, not the pair I had asked for. They were shiny and the blade was sharp. I looked up when the realization hit and saw Parson standing over Simon at the counter. Simon was clutching the bottle of hard liquor against his body looking up at him.

"Now, what the devil are you doing, boy?" Simon had been caught.

5.

I suspect that Simon had been letting Everett's words eat away at him. That night when Everett let Daddy's old blade run across my cheek, spilling blood from my face across the living room carpet in the orange dusky light, he had said that our Daddy had been a coward of a man. When Simon came to my room a few days later with his bitter words, Rupe. We're gonna get 'im for this. We're gonna take care of 'im. Good and proper, I think I knew that those words were the reason. Or at least they were a part of the reason. Everett had said a lot of things, done a lot of things, and those words, I suspect, were just the straw on the camel's back, as they say.

The interesting part, though, was that those words had been the truth. That might have been what stung my brother so hard. The murmurs through town, from the south side, across Main Street and Broadway, all the way to where we lived in the north, were all the same after Daddy's death: "Did he kill hisself?" "Was it really true?" And it was. But it wasn't exactly how everyone imagined it had been. Simon had told me how it really was.

Daddy had lost a considerable amount of weight during the weeks leading up to his death. He couldn't keep food down. Mama said that Daddy didn't feel well, and Simon and I both knew it was much more than that. Morrow and the rest of those doctors he went to couldn't tell Mama what was wrong but he had headaches, stomach pains and bad dreams for most of that summer.

November came and the cool weather set in. Soon Daddy was waking up most every night, his gaunt face and wide eyes betraying the terror he felt after whatever nightmare he'd been witnessing. He never spoke of the dreams, only that someone or something was coming to get him. The paranoia became incessant and he couldn't even get any work done. The bills began to pile up. I think the fact that his Daddy had suffered something similar a year or so before I was born was what scared him the most. Watching your father die in front of you is a difficult thing to do, especially when you

know that there's nothing you can do for him. Then, suffering the same fate and feeling helpless yet again must have weighed heavy on Daddy. I was too young to really understand it that well but I think Simon did. Even now I only remember shadows of those events in November of that year.

One thing I do remember, as clearly as if it was today, was the gunshot sounding in the distance.

Daddy had taken some aspirin and told Mama that he'd be out in his work house, the shed out on the edge of Predis' field, waiting for the headache to go. It helped him to be in that shed, I think, where he and his own Daddy had spent so much time tinkering with converters and engines and things. Mama found him that afternoon. After the shot broke the silence of the cold day, she ran out across the brown field of grass, to the shed, thinking the worst and finding it there.

Simon told me the day of the funeral, that I shouldn't believe all the nasty talk in town. Daddy did not kill himself. Something made him do it. There was no note, no sign that he had meant to do it. He told Simon that he had been hearing voices inside his head. They were like the dreams, but instead they came when he was awake and he couldn't stop them. They were worse, so much worse, he said, because he couldn't escape them no matter how hard he tried. He didn't tell Mama about them though, couldn't. She'd just worry. He wouldn't have told her about the dreams either but she was, after all, right there beside him each night when he woke in a sweat, mumbling incoherently or worse, screaming against that unseen force inside his head.

I believed my brother when he told me that Daddy had been driven to fire his own hunting rifle into his mouth, leaning it against the worktable in the shed and pulling the trigger with his toe. "He just wanted the voices to end," Simon said on the afternoon of the funeral, tears in his eyes, "Just wanted them and those bad dreams to go away. It had nothin' to do with no bills or the shop. He was lookin' after us just fine, Rupe. Don't you let no one tell you anythin' else. Ar Daddy loved us and he was takin' care of us just fine until them dreams and them voices."

Simon had begun having dreams too. The hive of oil-black creatures were there when he slept, not just when he was awake and the temperature was right. The wave of them would wash over his body and he couldn't stop them with any number of light bulbs, no matter how strong they were. But there were also other things in the dreams, unseen things, things with no faces that chased him and would not let up. Would they catch him as they had caught our Daddy?

IV. Kept

1.

The same November that Daddy fired his hunting rifle into his own head, the power plant out beyond Predis' Field was shut down. Officials said it was cutbacks and the island just didn't have near enough uranium to make the plant feasible anymore. It had been an experimental housing on the island, a smaller plant than most with only one

cooling tower, constructed and operated to see if it would be a feasible model for the rest of the country.

It had been built some fifteen years earlier when nuclear power was supposed to be the wave of the future. There was a deposit of uranium within the rocky elevation on the north side of the island and the creek that ran between our house and the town wound its way back towards the power compound. It was vital for the cooling of the station. I was only ten when it closed and hadn't been born yet when it opened. Nor did I even fully understand the implications of it closing when it did. People on the island talked of the jobs lost and the blow to the economy, but I remember that things around the island went on pretty much as they had before. Except that our Daddy was gone, and people had to get their electrical work done by companies on the mainland.

Simon wondered aloud on two occasions whether the power plant's closing and the situation with our Daddy had anything to do with one another. The first was the day of the funeral as we sat in the shade, hoisted up on the workbench. The second was in that same place, two and a half years later, after my first encounter with the hive.

"I wonder if they knew," Simon said, not really to me, not really to anyone. "I wonder if they all knew that the plant was killing people, drivin' them crazy and making them wither away like that. I wonder if they knew that there were some new little critters with no eyes, burrowing around under the ground on this side of the creek. Maybe they just wanted to close the plant and slip away quietly before anyone started noticin'..."

There was only one lane of bungalows on this side of the creek, the north side of town. A wide wooden bridge connected us to the rest of the town and overhead lines brought us our power and telephone. Two street lights, one at each end of the lane were all we had to light up the night and the six lathe and plaster houses all sat in a somewhat straight line running east-west on large, bushy blocks of property filled with trees and wooden sheds. Two of the houses didn't have basements. Instead they sat on concrete bricks, having been the first houses erected on our lane. The four others were sitting empty by last year, having been vacated through the last three years or so. Simon wondered if the people who had lived there knew about the hive. Did they have the little visitors in their basements at night too? Was that what made them leave?

He suspected that out of all the homes on the island, these ones were nearest to the plant, and probably the only ones that were affected by the little critters. Since they didn't like water and they didn't like the cold, Simon thought, the creek that ran between our lane and the rest of the north side of town acted as a barrier for them. In an odd way, after Simon shared his plan with me for the night when Mama was to go to the Walsh's for dinner, I felt lucky about that.

2.

I suppose it shouldn't have really surprised me that Mr. Parson was on to us. Although we figured he saw us as pretty good kids and that he'd never for a moment suspect we'd try to steal from his store, there must have been some doubt in his mind. Our Daddy had shot himself and, well, kids in situations like that tend to have problems. Perhaps in

that moment, when he looked down and saw Simon clutching his bottle of Johnny Walker, grabbed from under his counter, he suddenly realized we were in desperate need of help.

“Please, Mr. Parson!” Simon quickly wailed, “Don’t hurt us. Ar step-daddy sent us to git his liquor. If we don’t come back with a bottle, he’ll beat us!”

The look of shock on Parson’s face was quickly replaced with concern. “Come here, son. No one’s going to hurt you. Listen to me now, you tell me what’s going on.” His stability and calm was remarkable. He took us into the back room and he sat us down in front of the shelves of overstock. I wondered if Simon would tell him everything.

3.

I returned home from Parson’s Hardware, near dinner time -- alone, just as Simon had instructed me. I went down to the cellar while it was still light enough to make my way down the stairs without turning on the switch. It was dim at the bottom of the stairs and the cement block floor was cold on my feet. When I closed the cellar door almost tight behind me, I was met with complete darkness. It was cool and dank in there and smelled of potatoes and dirt. There were shelves of canned corn and pint sealers of peaches and tomatoes. Mama kept it well stocked with as much as she could harvest from our garden because we never knew how much money we’d have for groceries from week to week. Everett worked a lot of extra shifts during the rainier stretches but his work was much slower for the rest of the year. I guess the house payments and all the other expenses were just too much because we often went for long periods of time without any store-bought food.

That was okay, though. Our Mama was smart. She could stretch the twenty dollar bills that Everett gave her every couple of weeks. Simon and me never went hungry, that’s for sure.

I sat down on the small, cool brick floor of the cellar and pulled my knees up to my chin. Again I felt the shivers trying to overtake me and I fought them off as my eyes tried to adjust to the dark.

It was late in the afternoon and Everett was out in the yard trying to get the mower to work. I could hear his muffled swears as he got the engine started. Moments later it would stall and I’d hear him say, “Goddammit. Stupid piece of—” or something like that. I had returned to the house without him seeing, and before creeping down here to the cold cement floor, I had placed a bottle of Johnny Walker Black in the liquor cabinet above the stove just as I had been told.

Before that, Mr. Parson, Simon and I had had a good long talk. After he’d caught Simon with his liquor and taken us back to the stockroom where we thought we’d get the beating of our lives, he said, simply, “Yer Daddy didn’t really ask you to git this bottle for him, did he?” Simon looked at me and then back at Parson. He shook his head, no. We didn’t know what was going to happen to us. He’d caught us red-handed stealing from his store and now he knew that we were lying about it. “Not that I would be surprised, mind you,” he went on, leaning down to us slightly, looking right into Simon’s eyes,

“That bugger ain’t done an honest lick o’ work in his life. It wouldn’t surprise me one bit if he threatened to hit you if you didn’t come back with his liquor for him...” My relief was overwhelming. Mr. Parson was neither angry nor upset. Instead he seemed calm and gentle. “But I know that there’s more to it than that,” he continued on, eyeing my scar, “Much more. Isn’t there?”

“Yessir,” Simon said. He was beginning to calm now. The red was leaving his face and it almost seemed like he was curious about what exactly Mr. Parson was getting at.

Parson had sat us both down on an empty crate. He pulled up another crate for himself opposite us. His voice was even and unwavering as he began to tell about his Uncle Samuel and the terrible fate that had befallen him.

Two years back, around the time that Simon was experiencing his first visits from the swarm in our basement on the north end of town, Mr. Parson’s Uncle Sam died of heart failure. I remembered the coroner’s wagon at his house then, the third bungalow from the other end of our lane, on the same side of the creek. The old man was in his mid-eighties and he refused help from any of his family. Nor would he let himself be placed in one of those nursing homes on the mainland. With his wife long dead, Samuel was bound and determined to remain alone in his house, the house he’d lived in all his adult life, the house he and his brothers had built themselves, years before.

When suspicion that poor old Sammy had died in his sleep or fallen down in the night, the neighbors called Mr. Parson as he was the only relative of Sam’s that still lived on the island. The Sheriff and Parson went to the house and discovered Uncle Sam in his under shorts lying at the top of his basement stairs, dead, apparently from heart failure. The strange part, Mr. Parson told us, was that Sam’s dogs, he must have had six or seven of them, were gone. The neighbors had begun complaining about the big dogs roaming freely about town and the sheriff had nagged him and nagged him to do something about it so Sam started keeping them downstairs in the cool of the basement. He’d go down there to feed them and and Mr. Parson always warned him on his occasional visits, “Sammy, you be careful. Going up and down those stairs like that, what if one of those dogs bounds up at you as you’re carryin’ his supper dish? He’ll knock you clean over and you’ll fall to the concrete, break your hip or somethin’.” Sam was adamant that it would never happen. But when Mr. Parson and the sheriff came to his place that summer day, he was dead just the same, laying there with his fingers dug into the carpet just outside the basement doorway, his legs splayed down the wooden steps and his face in a tight grimace of terror.

“He looked,” said Parson as his brow wriggled, looking down at his own hands in a mock-clawing gesture, still trying to understand, “like he’d been trying to get away from his dogs. Like, I dunno, they’d gone mad and tried to attack him.” He removed a white hanky from his back pocket and dabbed it at his beaded forehead. It was mid-afternoon then, and the temperature was soaring. It was especially hot back there in that little stockroom where we were piled in on stacking crates beside tall rows of shelves, listening as Mr. Parson told about his dead uncle and the strangeness of it.

“But they hadn’t. They hadn’t laid a fang on the old man. He had some scratches on his legs, long thin ones, but nothing like what a dog bite would do...And the weirdest part, the part I just couldn’t figure out, was that the dogs were gone. All of them. Just gone.” When the neighbors reported to Parson that his uncle hadn’t been seen out in

the yard for three days or more and they hadn't even heard a single dog bark in about the same time, they thought the worst.

And they were right.

Old Sammy's house was quite similar to ours, except the basement had no cellar, no rooms or partitions of any kind. Except for the old grate furnace and a similarly aged water heater, it was just a large open space of cold red brick with one light fixture in the rafters near the center and a staircase of open steps that led up to the ground floor. The bare bulb in the fixture had been broken when they found the man's body lying across the stairs. The shattered remnants of glass were scattered on the floor and it hadn't been replaced by the time Parson got to cleaning out his uncle's belongings. He was going through stacks of old receipts and file boxes one night in the basement, using a trouble-light that hung in the beams overhead and ran an extension cord up the stairs to an outlet in the kitchen when he heard a strange hissing noise coming from under the stairs.

The sump hole was under there, he told us. "I took the trouble-light and hung it up on one of the copper pipes near the stairs and peeked my head back there. I expected to find a leak or some water draining out of the hole, that would surely be making the noise, but as I looked down into the hole, I noticed that it was bone dry. The sump motor had strange markings on it. Black, like the whole thing had burnt itself out and spilled a bunch of sparks and smoke out of its vents. It was laying there askew in the hole and I could see the bottom of the shaft, clean and dry. That hissing faded for a moment, then it came back louder than before." It was so sudden that it startled him. He flinched back from the sudden noise and accidentally bumped the trouble-light from its resting place hooked to the rafters on a copper pipe. It rocked back and forth sending light cascading in all directions before it finally fell to the floor, smashing the bulb against the concrete blocks. Mr. Parson found himself disoriented in the sudden darkness and as he tried to step around where he thought the glass was, he fell. The only thing that allowed him to retain his bearings in the almost complete darkness was the thin shaft of light coming from the basement doorway. It was partly ajar to allow the trouble light's extension cord through.

On the floor, as the hissing noise grew louder and more imposing, he scrounged for the flashlight he'd been using to thumb through Sam's old banker boxes of papers. The sound rushed into the basement. It grew all around him, he told us, swelling like a wave stuck to the walls, washing over everything. He clicked on the switch of the flasher after fumbling with it hastily in the dark. And what he saw next, caught in the beam of light as he scoured the red brick of the walls with it, scared the living crap out of him. He was up the stairs as quick as he could manage, stumbling on the wooden steps out of clumsy panic. He yanked that cord out of the way, slammed the basement door shut behind him and has never gone back down there.

Parson's forehead was dotted with beads of sweat but he had stopped dabbing at them with his hanky. "That was the same summer that I really noticed you," he said to Simon, his eyes looked kind and sad, "coming in here every few days to buy light fixtures and bulbs, stronger and brighter ones each time. You had them scratches on yer legs and arms just like Sammy. And you sometimes had bruises and bigger cuts." He paused, looking for some response in my brother's eyes. "You always told me they were errands for your Mama or yer step-daddy, that you were just picking up a spare bulb or

some supplies for them. I wondered if maybe I had gone crazy and what I'd seen in my uncle's basement that night was all in my head. I wasn't too close with him, but maybe the grief over his sudden death was enough to make me see things that weren't there. But maybe you'd seen the same things. Maybe those scratches on you were the same ones as on Sammy. Or maybe that Everett was up to no good on you and your mama...But just as soon as all this happened I didn't see you in the store again. School started and you didn't come 'round no more..." He finished then and just stared at Simon. It was as though he'd just shared the meaning of life with my brother and was waiting for the boy's overwhelming comprehension of it to become absorbed.

Simon didn't meet his gaze. But he finally responded, his head still held down. His tone was serious, slow and deliberate. "Mr. Parson, you know a lot of things. But if you tell anyone, the sheriff or anybody else, ar step-daddy's gonna keep hurtin' us." He looked up then, "He might even kill us."

"You never saw me again last summer," He continued, meeting Mr. Parson's eye, "cuz Everett beat me and my Mama so bad I could barely walk. I was shut up in our house and Rupie here had to bring me my school work. This summer...Everett went and did the same thing to Rupe." He motioned to me and I was suddenly self-conscious of my jagged scar. "We need your help Mr. Parson. We need your help so Everett won't hurt us anymore. So he won't kill us."

4.

Sitting in the cool cellar in the dark after I put the bottle of Black Label in the liquor cabinet upstairs, I thought about Mr. Parson's dead uncle. I wondered if old Samuel ever saw those critters before the night they scared him to death. Maybe he had. Maybe that's why he had his skivvies on when they found him. But maybe he knew how to keep them out. What happened then?

I mentioned that the last time Mama had gone anywhere at all, Everett hadn't gone with her. Likewise, tonight for the dinner party at the Walsh's she had gone alone. It had been hot the last time she'd went away too, and Everett spent the afternoon and the evening in the basement. He carried our little black and white set down there and a case of beer to escape the heat and stuffiness of the upstairs. It was somewhat cooler and certainly shadier, because there was only the one window, the one in Simon's room. On that day, Simon and I stayed far away from the house. When Everett had more than a couple of beers he could be just as angry and prone to getting upset as if he'd had a double shift at the shop. Tonight, for certain, after his ordeal in the sun with the lawnmower, he'd want nothing more than a couple of beers and to watch the Dodgers and the Yankees down by his work bench. But we were to be anywhere but far away this time.

I heard Everett bang the screen door behind him, swearing and sputtering. I could tell he'd had his fill of that heat for one day. Simon came in the house behind him. "You goddamn, lazy kids." Everett said, not really to Simon. I could hear the beak of his cap hit the floor after he peeled it from his sweaty head of black hair. "Where the hell have you been all damn day?" He leaned against the kitchen table and I could hear the

floor above me creak with the weight of him. “Next summer, your ass’ll be out there in the sun mowing the lawn. I work all goddamn week and then gotta spend my weekend cutting the goddamned grass.”

To this Simon responded, which was rather unusual for him, “Well, uhm, maybe you’d like a nice cool drink. Mama bought you a new bottle o’ Johnny Walker.” At this, Everett perked up. “Uh-huh. She put it in the cabinet and she told me to tell you that there’s plenty of ice made in the freezer.”

“...really...” It wasn’t meant as a question, but his disbelief was apparent to me, even as I listened through the floor boards above the cellar. “—Black Label?...Finally did somethin’ right for a change...” His anger at the day’s events and at Simon for being just a boy were forgotten. I could hear him creak across the kitchen floor towards the stove and, simultaneously, I heard Simon’s quick footsteps hurry down the stairs. “I’ll be damned,” I heard Everett say, as the cupboard door over the stove squeaked open. He had discovered the fresh, unopened bottle of liquor I’d placed there. I heard the cupboard door squeak shut then, and realized that Everett had likely snatched the bottle and was holding it in his dirty hands, feeling like the day was finally going to go his way. His hands on that bottle set the plan in motion and there was nothing we could do to stop it now. I prayed that things would happen as they should. As they needed to.

5.

Everett brought one of the lawn chairs from the yard down with him and his bottle of liquor. He went back upstairs for a tub of ice and a six pack of his beer that he’d been cooling off all afternoon in the refrigerator. He went back upstairs for the last time to grab the black and white TV set from the living room. He ran an extension cord from an outlet near the kitchen table down the stairs to the TV, probably in similar fashion to Mr. Parson’s trouble light last summer in his uncle’s basement.

I watched all of this through the crack between the cellar door and the jamb. Daddy had built this cellar shortly after Mama and he bought the house. It had one of those metal gate latches on the outside of the door to make it easy to open and close with one hand. Simon had unscrewed the latch bracket and placed it, instead, on the inside of the cellar door so that I could close it tightly but get out if I needed to. The door, when closed, was flush against the outside cellar walls; no one could get in unless I popped the latch.

Everett set up his chair over by the workbench opposite the old iron furnace and the water heater which stood roughly in the center of the whole space. He balanced the TV on a stack of metal scraps, like the ones Simon had used to construct his plug for the sump corridor last summer. There was plenty of them, a huge pile of junk and scraps stacked up against the south wall of the basement behind the furnace, facing the door of Simon’s bedroom.

It was that pile of shadows that hid Simon now. He had crept down there, mouthing a ‘shhh’ with his finger against his lips in the direction of the cellar after Everett had gone to get the bottle of Black from the liquor cabinet. And there he sat, quiet and patient, just like always.

I sat in that cold space for an extremely long time, listening to the announcer and the crowds from the little black and white set. It was the second game of the World Series, the Dodgers against the Yankees. Game one had been taken by the Yanks and Everett had laughed the night before at the supper table about how that had happened. Just a lucky break, he told Simon and me, just luck that the Yanks won against Lasorda's L.A. team. Everett was originally from Los Angeles, had grown up there, and thought his team could do no wrong. Me and Simon, we knew better, New York had signed Reggie Jackson this season and he'd helped bring home the pennant from a game against Kansas City. We just knew our man, Reggie, was going to land the series, too. Just knew it.

By the time the game had reached the fourth inning, Everett was flying high. The Dodgers were winning and he'd downed nearly half the bottle of Crown Royal. It must have been before nine still, because he left the basement then and returned a while later with a pan of chicken from Harvey's.

His hunger had likely gotten the better of him because Mama hadn't been there to make him his supper. She was still at the Walsh's. When he returned he didn't really give any thought to us or where we might be. I don't think he much cared, to be honest, and I wasn't all that surprised or upset. I had an empty stomach since lunch and that was just fine. Everett sat there on the lawn chair, with its nylon straps sagging under his weight. In the dim light between the furnace and the workbench, with the brightness of the set flashing across his ponch, his pale complexion, and the brick wall behind him, he chewed on chicken bones and strips of fat from the cardboard and tin tray on his lap. He alternated between swigs of a beer and a shot of that Johnny Walker nestled between his legs and resting on the metal frame of his chair. He was hunched forward this early on, still watching with intensity. He let out the odd whoop or Goddamn right when his L.A. Dodgers got a double or kept a man on base.

It was getting close now. I was careful not to make any noise. I just sat there, on the cold floor of the cellar, a crack of dim light across my face, watching my step-daddy drink and eat. He began looking tired. His outbursts and comments at the umpire and the players had stopped. His mood was now sullen and disconnected. He sat back in the lawn chair, his head sagging a little. The day out in the sun, combined with all the alcohol and the lengthy game was almost too much for him I think. I hoped that he wouldn't decide to go to bed and skip the end. I was sure that it wasn't too likely -- he was a die-hard fan and would want to rub it into Simon when the Dodgers wiped the floor with the Yanks. I wondered what was going through his mind then. Did he know what was to go on down here? In the darkness, I looked across the basement to that pile of wood and metal scraps where Simon sat crouched, hidden from Everett. I wished that I could see his face and know what he was thinking. Was he scared? Would it all go like he had planned?

Some time later, I heard the back screen door creak open and bang shut. It startled me so much I nearly fell backwards into the cellar bin on which I now sat precariously balancing, leaning forward with my face at the crack of the door. Footfalls traced up the three steps from the back landing and into the kitchen. They waited there. Everett was surprised too. He had fallen asleep with the bottle between his legs and his head lolling back in the chair. When the door banged shut he nearly fell off the chair

toppling the bottle to the floor. He was suddenly awake and his bleary eyes looked around to try and focus on something.

The game had ended with cheers from that little set and the L.A. team had indeed taken the win. Some nights I still wake up with the thought in my mind that Reggie Jackson helped us out on that one, didn't do his magic so that the Yankees would lose and Everett would stay and watch the end. Maybe Burt Hooton's knuckle curve was superior to every batter the Yanks threw at him that night for a reason. And maybe, I thought childishly, maybe that reason was Simon and me.

Announcers were doing the game wrap-up, interviewing Burt, asking him what sort of charmed night he was having, and asking Jackson how come his own game seemed off. The tinny voices emanated from the set into the hollow cavern of the basement.

Everett had been sitting in that chair so long that his movement nearly caught me off guard. After rubbing his eyes and focusing for a second on the flashes from the post-game he got up from his chair to go find his wife and undoubtedly see why the hell she'd been out so damn long. The next set of noises came in quick succession. If I'd messed up what I was about to do it would have ruined the whole plan. I tugged at the two sets of wire I'd been clutching for at least two hours. My hand had grown a sweaty cramp as I held on to them, trying to make sure I'd be ready when I needed to be. One wire was connected to the sump motor under the stairs. It ran under the wall of the cellar to the space in Simon's closet. The other ran up through kitchen floor boards above my head to the breaker box in the kitchen. I pressed the ends of the two wires together just as Simon had shown me, wary to keep the plastic insulation between my fingers and the bare parts of the wire. Almost instantly that noisy motor sputtered to life on the other side of the cellar wall and the sump well began to make echoed splish-splash noises as it had done on so many other nights.

As Everett came towards the stairway next to the cellar I pulled my head out of the crack of light so he wouldn't notice me there. He'd never realize the door to the cellar was open, not in this amount of light. And he wouldn't notice the missing gate latch either. At least I hoped he wouldn't. The moment the grinding sump motor began its work, I saw him look in the direction of Simon's bedroom doorway where the pinstriped baseball drape hung. He sort of grunted. He was visibly tired. I saw his eyelids were heavy and he surely was ready to go up to bed. The next noise I heard was that of the footsteps above me; they traced a hasty route back to the landing where the door to the basement stairs was. I heard the thump of the end of Everett's extension cord hit the wood of the top step, followed by the door slamming shut. The black and white TV set facing away from me was instantly off and it made no more flickering light and no more noise. Next was the sound of the swivel lock that so many times had been turned on Simon as he lay on his mattress down here.

"What the hell. . ." Everett's confusion was only going to get worse. He began climbing the stairs, and I could hear his rings and his knuckles against the handrail on the wall the stairwell shared with the cellar. When he got to the top he pushed against the door but it would not open. "Goddammit," he swore at the door. "Hon, is that you?" He was met with silence. "Is that you? I'm down here, you know! What in the hell are you doing?" Again, silence. There was a pause as he undoubtedly thought about who it could have been that had locked the door. He began pounding on the door with his fists.

Loud, noisy pounds amid the silence. “You goddamned lil bastards. You open this door right now! You hear me?”

Still, there was no voice from upstairs. There was a long pause and then I heard the squeak of a kitchen chair pulled from the table across the floor towards the back door followed by the brief sound of its legs scuffling against wood. “What the hell?” he muttered under his breath again. “Simon, I’m gonna kick your ass from here to the mainland if you don’t come and open this door!” He hollered again. “I’m gonna take your lil brother out back and tan his hide too. You think that last time was bad, Rupe, this one’s gonna be worse!”

I could picture Everett’s face as he strained against the locked door to the upstairs. His anger was growing and the alcohol coursing in his veins was driving him to an inevitable explosion. If there had been enough light to see, I bet he’d have been red-faced with the arteries on his neck standing out. And there’d be little drops of spittle flying from his mouth as he yelled.

After another brief silence, during which he undoubtedly thought that we boys would smarten up and unlock the basement door, he finally banged against it with his body weight. It shuddered, but the kitchen chair now propped under the handle and against the floor boards was enough to hold it. Good solid construction. It held Simon on numerous nights when he banged against it, bawling and terrified, it would surely hold his drunken stepfather with a chair behind it.

The sump motor continued to pump away. Earlier Simon and I had removed the pump’s hose from its regular housing in the foundation where it ran out to a place behind the house to drain. We placed the end of it, instead, pointing into the cellar bin where I now sat perched holding the wires together. The cellar bin was lined with a large sheet of industrial plastic which was allowing the bin to fill up quickly; the water splashed against my body a little. Simon warned me how careful I had to be not to let the live wire in my left hand anywhere near that tub of water. If I did, I’d be fried. The realization of that mesmerized me and I was turned to stone. I sat there listening to the engine rumble away and the water pour into the cellar.

When the hose finally stopped bringing water into the cellar bin, the motor switched off and I let the wires go. I tucked the live wire from the breaker box into the rafters as I stood on the edge of the narrow bin wall and let the other go somewhere under the shelves stacked with corn, tomatoes and beets.

It was silent again. Still, calm. Everett began pounding his fists on the door some more, honestly believing that it was his wife up there or one of his sons and they would come to their senses and unlock the door.

“That ain’t Mama up there, Everett.” I heard Simon’s voice from across the basement and, with my heart beating in my throat so hard I thought Everett would surely hear it, I tried to convince myself to look back through that doorway crack. This was it. Simon had made his presence known. We were locked down here with Everett and that was it. Everett had downed several beers, and half a bottle of hard liquor; if he wanted to take a strip out of Simon now, he was in prime shape for it. And this time, Simon wouldn’t heal up.

I finally brought my eyes back to the cellar doorway where I could see a good portion of the basement. There Simon stood, having come out of his hiding place in the shadows behind the furnace. He’d peeled off his shirt and his shorts, his socks and his

shoes. He stood there in the puddle of dim light from the bare bulb that hung over his head to his right. His body was pale, even in that light and he looked not only naked, but helpless and alone. I finally realized how truly frightening all of this was: my brother locked down here with Everett, truly in a maddened state of mind, with liquor in his blood and a foul stench of anger in his body.

Everett came down the stairs, slowly. I saw him appear at the foot of them in the farthest corner of my vision with his fists clenched by his sides. His body was bent, crooked, the realization that his step-boy was standing there on the cold cement floor in his skivvies behind his eyes.\

“Now, we seem to have ourselves a little ‘situation’.” He seethed. “You been down here all this time, boy?” He asked him. Even from this angle I could see his brow wrinkled in confusion and distemper. “What the hell is your brother doin’ up there? Doesn’t he know I’m gonna whip him for this?” He looked Simon up and down, realizing that he was nearly naked. In his hand, Simon held a small wire torch sparker, and Everett squinted in the dark to see what it was. “What were you doin’? Jackin’ off to my magazines over there behind the furnace. Why ain’t you got yer clothes on?” He laughed then and he held out his hands in an expression of helplessness, as though he was commenting to the world at large. “Jeezus H. Christ, my boy’s a goddamned perv—down here jerkin’ off in the basement with his pop’s skin rags...” He looked back at Simon again who was standing stone-faced and silent. “Where’s yer lil brother, boy, ‘se back there too?” He laughed then,

“Rupe? Put yer peter back in yer shorts and come on out here—”

“I ain’t yer boy,” Simon interrupted him. His voice was shaking.

“You...ain’t...my boy?” His face was strained with comprehension and growing frustration.

“What the hell you talkin’ ‘bout?” His mind was fuzzy from the booze, from his fatigue. He straightened up, put his hands on his hips to put his sore back at ease, and lolled his head back on his neck. It was as though this all was distant from Everett, not even enough to conjure a faint glimmer of care.

“That’s right, Everett. I ain’t never been yer boy.”

Then Everett got downright angry. He took several steps forward, closing the gap between them. “What did you call me?”

Simon waited. He looked to me like he was getting up the guts to say what came next.

“You ain’t my Daddy. My Daddy’s gone. Dead. He ain’t never coming back but he was good to us. Good to Mama. You ain’t never been good to her. I ain’t never gonna call you ‘daddy’.”

Everett was a little slow on the uptake before this, but he seemed in tip-top shape again. He bolted at Simon after he spoke these words. It was a quick movement, concise and straight, surprising considering the alcohol he’d consumed and the long drawn out way he was speaking.

“Goddamn little—”

“Mr. Parson!” Simon called out suddenly towards the upstairs, surprising me, even though I had known it was to happen. In that instant the whole basement fell into darkness. Mr. Parson, standing in the kitchen above, had thrown the main circuit breaker, plunging the entire house into a state of powerlessness. Simon must have

moved out of the way of the man's lunge because I heard a crash as someone hit a pile of junk. The odd pieces clanged against each other and against the floor. Some of them whirled and spun and finally came to rest and then it was utterly silent. I couldn't even hear footsteps, Everett's socks or Simon's bare feet brushing against the concrete. Nothing at all except the sound of my own hard panting.

6.

After Mr. Parson had caught us trying to steal the bottle of Johnny Walker from behind his counter at the hardware store, Simon had told him the entire situation. I wasn't surprised, really. Mr. Parson, after all, had told us all about his dead uncle Samuel, how he was found nearly in the nude, clutching at his living room carpet with bloody legs dangling into his basement. The man's dogs had completely disappeared in a house where there were no open windows, no open doors, and no signs of forced entry. It had been a mystery to Mr. Parson and the wave of black skittering creatures he'd witnessed didn't come close to explaining the reason why Simon and I were there to get the bottle of liquor from him.

When Parson told us of Samuel, it seemed to be like a beacon on the dark horizon for us. I only hoped that Simon would feel the same. He did and old Parson, perhaps in a strange way, felt obligated to help us. In an interesting turn of irony, we needed his help anyway. Simon's plan didn't quite work without a third person and so this seemed like it was our only hope.

When Simon had said, "We need your help so Everett won't hurt us anymore. So he won't kill us," Parson was understandably shocked. How could it have been this bad? This bad without anyone really knowing about it? And as Simon told him the details of the last few years, of how Everett took out his frustrations on him and on Mama, of how we could rarely even buy groceries anymore because of Everett's tight purse strings, he became even more disturbed. He also confirmed what Mr. Parson had seen in the basement of his uncle's house last summer when that hissing noise filtered up from behind the stairs. The man sat in silence on his empty crate when Simon was done, wiping his brow with the hanky that was already damp with sweat. He looked like he was going over in his mind how all of this could have gotten so out of hand, how any of it could have happened in the first place. He cupped his hand to his mouth, "I'm sorry, boys. I'm so sorry."

He went on and on about how he should have realized what had been happening and should have done something. Quietly, Simon told him that now was his chance to make up for it.

His contemplation ended quickly then, when he realized that it wasn't too late to do something about the mess of Everett and the mess of that swarm tormenting my brother. Looking back, I see that he agreed to help us rather quickly -- with whatever we needed him to do. The first thing he did was go and buy a fresh bottle of Black before the liquor store closed -- out of his own pocket, even. He cautioned that the story Simon was going to tell his step-daddy would be more believable if the bottle was unopened, not half empty already. The second thing he did was go to the Walsh's where

Mama was having dinner. He was to make like he had no idea she was there, that he was just popping in for a spur-of-the-moment visit. He was then to take Mrs. Walsh aside when he could find a chance and insist that she keep our Mama there for as long as she could, well past midnight if at all possible. He was to tell Mrs. Walsh that Everett had been drinking and that it would be best if Mama returned long after he'd gone to bed for he feared that our step-daddy might get "up to no good." Apparently, Mr. Parson told us, although every detail about our household was not common knowledge, Everett's drinking habits were not a secret on the island, by any means.

That was where we left it with Mr. Parson. He was to instruct Mrs. Walsh not to tell Mama any of this, only to keep her there well past midnight. Then he was to return to our house across the creek near the end of the ballgame and lock the basement door when he heard the pump motor finish running. Then he was to throw the main breaker when Simon shouted up at him. If everything went afoul, he was standing near both the breaker box and the telephone in the kitchen to call the Sheriff. When I went down to the cellar to wait for it all to begin, I had no idea if the man would follow through on his end. Simon didn't know either and when we left the hardware store that hot afternoon, I could tell by his silence that he had his doubts. He had entrusted a crucial portion of his plan to Mr. Parson and had no idea whether he could count on him or whether he'd just go directly to the sheriff and rat us out for stealing. By the time Everett's hand reached into the cupboard above the stove and pulled out the bottle of Black Label, it was far too late to even question whether Parson would be there for us. The plan had begun by then and there would be no turning back.

7.

My body was tense, like a thick old rubber band pulled taught but not allowed to snap. I realized that my head was throbbing in the back where it met my neck. My shoulders were bunched up and my fingers were tightly clenched over the edge of the cellar bin, dipping into the cold water inside the bunched up sheet of plastic. I was cold, shivering. I hadn't eaten anything in hours and I felt completely exhausted. It was immediately dark at the moment when Simon called out to Mr. Parson. The light over the bench had gone out in that instant and I felt the swimmy blue and purple sensation crawl into my blackened vision. I wanted so much for this all to be over. Crazy as it was, in that instant, it almost felt like Everett finding me there in the cellar and giving me the beating of my life, ten times worse than anything he'd dished out to Simon, would be better than this -- just because I would know it was coming and then it would be done.

That morning, when Simon and I had set out for the hardware store, felt like it had been a year ago. This had already been the longest night of my life, beating out the last time I'd spent a night down here in Simon's bed with him. And now, all this time later, after straining to remain silent in the cellar so as not to be discovered, I was nearing all that I could handle. The waiting and the watching had been terrible but this silence, this blackness, this inability to see where Everett was in the darkness around me, it was horrendous.

The silence was interrupted by a low rumble of thunder off in the distance and then another soon after. Earlier, I had heard what I thought was thunder but it was so low that I dismissed it as my imagination. This time it was assuredly thunder and I was immediately struck with the worry that a storm would sweep across the island. Rain would begin to fall in a few moments, cooling the temperature enough to ruin things. What would happen then? What if it was suddenly too cool to finish this. Only moments earlier I was prepared to have Everett do his worst to me, just so this would be over, but now I was terrified that we wouldn't be able to see this to its end. I was going mad down there in the dark.

In the silence between rumbles, I finally heard Everett's sock-feet brushing against the concrete floor. "Parson..." I heard him mutter, "What the hell is that drunk ass doing here?" Then he raised his voice to holler, "Come 'ere, boy. I know you're down here somewhere. I didn't hear you on the stairs and that door's still locked. Parson! If that's you up there, you better unlock that goddamned door, or you'll have hell to pay! I'm sure the sheriff would love to hear about all this." After a moment of quiet and another, louder strike of thunder, I was caught off guard when the voice of my step-daddy was incredibly close, "I'm tired, Simon. I think you've learned your lesson, I won't even hurt you tonight. If you just come out I'll—" I heard something brush against the cellar door and my heart began thumping wildly, realizing that he must be directly in front of me, the two of us separated by only the few flimsy boards that made up the cellar door. Almost without realizing it, I grabbed the gate latch and pulled the door shut. It clinked down into place, audibly, locking the door from the inside. The relief was overwhelming, until I heard Everett's voice in the distance. It sounded like he was closer to the furnace than to me then. "Ahhh ...the cellar," Everett said in a mock tone. I heard Simon let out a quick puffy breath on the other side of the door. Oh no. And before I knew it there was a bigger bang against the cellar door. I shrunk back from it. "You're in the cellar, you little maggot! I got you now!" Everett fumbled for where the gate latch had been removed, expecting it to be there. His body weight fell against the little door and I moved away from it. My heart was pounding, he was right there in front of me.

Then I heard Simon, "I'm not in the cellar, Everett. I'm over here." His voice was now distant and I realized that he'd moved away in the instant that I'd pulled the cellar door shut. Good God, what had I done? Simon was supposed to be in here with me. Now what was he going to do? He was trapped out there now, on the other side of the basement and it was all my fault. I was so scared, thinking that it was Everett, but it had been my brother, gently looking for the cracked doorway so he could slip inside with me and latch the door behind us, safe. I had ruined it. The sickness of the realization welled up inside me.

It seemed like an eternity was passing with each breath I took. I couldn't calm my heart and I couldn't strain any harder to hear where the two of them were. Should I open the door again? I couldn't hear Everett right outside the cellar but what if it was a trick? What if he knew I was in there?

"Yer a quick bugger ain't ya?" He said aloud, this time a little further out towards Simon's voice. "I'm gettin' real tired o' this game...I'm gonna be beatin' you for a month o' Sundy's... when I grab hold o' ya."

“Everett,” Simon responded, from a different location, “I’ve spent three years down here in the dark, locked up like this. I know every step of this place, blindfolded. You won’t catch me tonight.”

A flash of lightning lit the basement followed closely by a thunder strike. They were getting closer but there was still no rain. Would there be rain? Even I saw the flash of light through the crack of the door jamb. It must have lit up the rest of the space enough for them to see each other.

Everett’s voice broke in again, “— lil prick! There y’are!” I heard more feet scuffling quickly across the cold floor and then I heard someone bang into Everett’s lawn chair. The tin frame scuffed across the cement floor and Everett swore as it clattered to a halt. Had Simon seen him coming and thrown it at him? I was swimming again in a silence that I couldn’t interpret. What was happening? Had he caught my brother?

The silence was finally broken, but this time it was not thunder that I could hear and it was not Simon or Everett. It was a growing hiss coming from beneath the stairway beside me. In the darkness, I looked in that direction, realizing what it was and I was instantly terrified of what was to happen. Simon was supposed to be in here with me. It began growing louder and into a warble as I had remembered it from the only other time I’d heard it. I hoped that Simon heard it too and I remembered that he was holding the torch light in his hand. It was time.

As gently and as quietly as I could, I lowered myself into the cellar bin, filled with water. I sat down in the water, my knees pulled up under my chin. Only my nose and eyes and the top of my head were above the surface. It was cold, so cold. I could barely hold off my shivers. With my right hand, I reached out in the blackness to the gate latch, straining to touch it. I eased the metal rod up with my first finger and pushed open the door of the cellar with the tips of my fingers. Could Everett hear the slight creak of the door? It was a risk I had to take. That door needed to be open if there was any way that Simon could make it here before that hissing grew into a its full warble.

A loud crack of thunder occurred simultaneously with a brilliant flash of light. I saw Simon there, between the furnace and the bench. But where was Everett? The space faded back to blackness from the sudden light.

I heard Everett from somewhere near the bedroom door, “I can see you now. I’m gonna give you the whoopin’ of yer life.” His voice was pleased, that much I could tell. In that moment, when the stroboscopic light flared, instantaneously betraying my brother’s position, Everett surely felt he’d won.

It was the warble now, no doubt about it. There was no mistaking the sound coming from under the stairs. And I could hear it rapidly growing. There were a few sock-footed and unsure steps towards Simon and the torch, but they paused. Another bolt of lightning combined with the angle of the cellar door finally allowed me to see Everett’s figure suddenly and briefly, “What is that?” He was turned around then, towards Simon’s bedroom door, ignoring him for a moment to concentrate on the sound. It must have sounded like nothing he’d ever heard before. “You been buggerin’ with that sump again, Simon? I warned you about that...”

His voice trailed off as the sound became much louder. It turned into a thousand different pitches all swarming at once. I smelled the first telltale hints of propane gas.

“Yeah,” said Simon, “I’ve been ‘buggerin’ with it again. Me and Rupe, both. But I must have messed it up pretty good. . .”

With that, I heard the sound of Everett's torch spurting to life. I looked through the crack across the room where Simon stood in a new faint glow of blue from it. During the silence and the darkness between the lightning, he'd found it in the dark and propped it against the stack of metal scraps and machine parts under the television set. He'd suspended Everett's spare welding mask by the straps from the toolbox over the flame and the parts of the metal that were beginning to glow orange. The light was nearly hidden, just a dull glow of orange and blue. Almost all the light from that low flame was dampened. "Must have messed it up real good. Because we Everett, you and me Everett, got a bit of situation here."

The horrible thought that came to me next was almost overwhelming: there was no way Simon could cross the distance from near the furnace all the way to the cellar and seal himself up here with me in time. There was just no way.

"I'm a boy, Everett," he finally finished, "and boys are stupid." Through the crack I saw Simon's blue hazed form step out of the space in front of the bench and into the shadows. There, he undoubtedly pressed his almost naked body against the cold brick wall, doing his best to hold off the shivers, remain calm and still. I couldn't see my brother's face but I knew what he was thinking.

Only a moment after I comprehended all this, the warbling extended itself out of the sump hole. I was concentrating on it so hard, on it and where Everett was standing, but I didn't hear anything from him—only that noise of the wave, pulsing over the walls, washing through the space as it had done on so many other nights.

"God! What the—" I saw Everett's form again, illuminated by a series of light pulses. During the short burst of light I saw him take several steps from the doorway towards the blue light of the propane torch which was hooded by his own mask. But the creatures, the oily black skinned things with all the legs, headed for it too. They'd bled out of the sump hole under the stairs and into Simon's bedroom searching for the warmth of a body. Instead of finding my brother there, their little blind eyes sensed a pinprick hole of heat on the far side of the basement. They headed for that point of heat, the propane torch with its blue flame shielded by the welding mask, the growing heat of the melting scraps beneath it -- and in their path stood Everett. His body was warm from his anger, from the fried chicken in his stomach, from the half-bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label he'd downed. And he didn't know enough to keep still. I saw that wave overtake him in those moments of flashing light. I crouched, nearly shivering in the cold water, safe from harm while my step-daddy writhed and hollered under that wave as it crawled across him, amongst the crashes. The swarm completely covered him, not an inch of his body was visible -- just a form in the flashes, thrashing about. My body was tense, my fingers poked above the surface and gripped the edges of the cellar bin ...and I listened to his muffled screams against the thunder and the rain that had finally begun to come down. The basement fell into blackness and my mind fell away to silence.

8.

Mr. Parson never spoke of that night. And neither did Simon.

Simon told me that Parson didn't come downstairs at all, not even after switching the main breaker back on. He only looked down from the top of the stairs, to make sure we were alright. He didn't say anything about the hollering or the fact that Everett was nowhere to be found. Everett was gone. Only a pile of tattered rags that once were the clothes he wore remained, in scattered piles strewn across the cold cement floor. Other than that, there was no sign whatsoever that he'd even been down there, no sign that he'd even been alive and walking around like a real person. If Mr. Parson fully understood what had happened and the implications of his involvement, he never said a word about it -- to me or Simon or any one else. Nor did I want him to.

I must have fainted. I remembered the swirling colors in my eyes atop the blackness that had swallowed Everett, but that was it. I didn't question it, or push myself to recollect any more of it, because I simply didn't want to.

As the storm raged outside, I helped Simon clean up the basement. There wasn't much to do, really. The scattered pan of chicken was empty, likewise was the last of the alcohol in the glass bottle. We doused the flame of the torch and let the metal scraps cool. We put the black and white set upstairs and ran through the rain to put the lawn chair out in the shed where it belonged. The cellar bin was emptied of water and the sump cable was reattached properly. All the reminders of what had happened were gone.

When Mama returned from the Walsh's she was a bit tipsy from a few glasses of wine. I think it had been one of the most enjoyable evenings she'd had in a good long while. She'd spent it laughing and listening to stories and I was glad for her. She was startled and confused when Simon told her that Everett had gone out and wouldn't be coming back, but I don't think that she was scared. Not even for a moment.

She waited for him. Waited for him for days and days, fully expecting that he'd come back from wherever he'd went in a mood more foul than she'd ever seen. But he didn't.

Months passed.

And still he stayed away.

When Mama finally came to terms with the fact that he wouldn't be coming back she positively wasn't scared. Especially not after Simon went and got Everett's bank passbook from out of the locked silver toolkit in the basement. Everett had protected that silver box more than anything else and I finally understood why. He'd been holding out on our Mama. The balance of that passbook added up to his wages for the last fourteen and a half years, plus there were regular deposits for the last three years, minus the monthly house payments, the cost of several cases of beer, and the few twenties he'd given her. All of it had been compounding interest in an account at the First Savings and Loan on Main Street the whole time that he'd been telling her we couldn't afford any luxuries. It was a substantial lump of money and long after the night of the big storm, Mama took us to the court house for a hearing to get that money.

The needy wife of a man who'd been declared a missing person, our Mama was granted the money by the town's judge, who happened to be a good friend of Mr. Parson's. On occasion, the two of them, the judge and Mr. Parson, would be seen in the afternoons, each of them enjoying a shot of Black Label in the shade of Parson's shop doorway, watching the people go by in the heat.

In the World Series, the New York Yankees beat the L.A. Dodgers that year, four games to two. Reggie stepped up in the sixth game and knocked a two-run homer off Burt Hooton in the fourth, and another two run shot off Sosa in the sixth. Finally, he got a solo clout off Charlie Hough in the eighth propelling his team to victory and taking the series. Reggie Jackson was named MVP that year and his new moniker, "Mr. October" was born.

Soon after collecting Everett's hefty bank balance, Mama sold our little lathe and plaster bungalow north of the creek, just this side of the old power station. Surprisingly, she got a substantial amount for it. It turns out that Old Man Predis had left nearly all of his land, not just Daddy's old work shed, to us and a mainland company was apparently eager to begin construction on a new power plant, even bigger than the last – one that would solve energy problems up and down the coast for years to come. Our little island was soon going to be swimming in jobs, income and prosperity. Or so the locals said. I guessed life would pretty much go on the same as it had before. Except we wouldn't be there to see it.

January of the following year, the three of us, my Mama, my brother Simon, and me, left the island. Simon's dreams stopped for good and we never went back.

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About The Author // Jason McIntyre

Born on the prairies, Jason McIntyre eventually lived and worked on Vancouver Island where the vibrant characters and vivid surroundings stayed with him and coalesced into what would become his novel, "On The Gathering Storm". Before his time as an editor, writer and communications professional, he spent several years as a graphic designer and commercial artist. His novel, "On The Gathering Storm" is available now.

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