

THE GOSPEL OF BUCKY DENNIS

by
J. R. Parks

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The Gospel of Bucky Dennis
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2 And he had in his hand a little book open: and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth,

3 And cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth: and when he had cried, seven thunders uttered their voices.

4 And when the seven thunders had uttered their voices, I was about to write: and I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not.

- Revelation 10:2-4

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MISSISSIPPI SUNSHINE

Mississippi gets damn hot in the summer, the kind of hot that gets stuck in your chest like

gravy and makes you feel sleepy at noon. Hell, it was gonna be dark soon and there I was trying to peel my sticky ass off the vinyl seats of my 69' Charger. I twisted around the steering wheel like a damn fly on glue paper, my ass wetter than a nun on Saint Patty's. Insurance forms were scattered over the back seat. I was late as a Prom Queen. Later, even. Late weren't even the word. I was upside-down fucked by a silverback gorilla. What a mess, I'll tell you what. And that wasn't even the half of it.

I fixed my tie in the rearview mirror, combed down the bushy muttonchops and handlebar 'stache. I took one last shot of Jackie D. from my hip flask, twirling it like Bill Hickok. Had to straighten out my class ring too, Verney High Football 1964. That baby was solid silver and fixed with my mama's birthstone. Fine craftsmanship. I had a lot of pride in that little ring, but I'll be damned if it weren't embarrassing sometimes.

My knuckles still killed me from the brawl the night before. More like a can of ass whoopin' really; I was too drunk. Stumbled over myself like a silly fool. Damn. I made a move on another man's lady. The black eye wasn't good for business either, so I sported some oversized aviators I got in Saigon. Slick too, made me look like a mustachioed Johnny Cash. I was rollin', babe—hell who was I kidding, I looked awful, felt worse—but that certainly weren't sayin' much. Probably why the Ex took the kids to Florida with Casper. Casper? Who in the world names their boy, Casper? Shit, she wasn't the best lady, but better than that sleazy chump. But then again, at least he was there for her.

Yep, I was a deadbeat scofflaw—an old timey dinosaur, drowning in the bottle, spending my days romping around with a suitcase impersonating an insurance salesman. Door to door at first, but I worked my way up to cold calling. Yeah, I'm that guy; the one you hate callin' during that rerun of *Taxi* while you're munching that microwavable lasagna. People get mean when they're hungry too. Like mangy strays fighting over dumpster scraps. Sometimes you get lucky though. That's why I was in the car stewin' in my own ass water. I had a policy to sell.

His name was Jerry Seaver. Yeah, Seaver—you know, like the family from *Growing Pains*? A rich out-of-towner, he built a vacation home or some business. I don't know who takes vacations out here. Frankly, I'd rather build somethin' in Maui, catch a few rays, maybe get me some of that islander tang. But hey, whatever floats your turd, Jerry.

Shitty gig, but steady work with all the hypochondriacs in the world; a lot of new folks in town too, getting work at the Jacksonville Canned Spaghetti Factory. People comin' and goin'.

People you could talk into just about any policy with the right scare tactics. I weren't much of a dooms dayer, but it pays the electricity bills. And back then, when I pushed doorbells for green—when the sun went down, shit man, it stayed dark.

So there I stood, knockin' Jerry Seaver's door, hoping he wouldn't get a glimpse of the wet diamond on the back of my short sleeved dress shirt, two sizes too small. He lived in an old, two story country house, painted blue, built in the forties maybe. Had those classic Southern pillars on it and grimy foliage hanging from the derelict balcony. Looked like the place got renovated or some such, most of the second floor was under plastic tarps, blowing in the wind, shiny in the twilight sun.

Shit, I was late. Jerry was probably just getting' ready to sit down for boob tube. The door opened wickedly fast and there stood Mr. Seaver, damn near four foot high, kind of squirrely, with beady doll's eyes. He had slicked back blonde hair and a buck-toothed grin.

“Good evening, Mr. Seaver, I'm here from Verney Insurance. First of all, I'd like to apologize for being so tardy, traffic was something else.” Traffic? Shit man, after 'bout ten years of makin' excuses, you plum run out of the clever ones. Traffic in a town like Verney was as likely as whores in a monastery. But then again?

“Ah yes, Mr. Dennis is it? No need for apologies we can get started right away,” Jerry said in a thick accent. He sounded English, maybe Aussie.

“Of course, sir. I've got your plan right here in my briefcase, all you need to do is sign a few forms and we'll have this place insured.” I tapped the suitcase, praying to God I didn't leave any forms floatin' around in the backseat of the Charger.

Jerry smiled with tightly pursed lips. He wore a tight, yellow spandex single suit with blue stripes. Man, I hoped he worked out. You know, cardio? Threads like that could get a feller killed in Mississippi.

“Yes, yes. Come right in. You can see I'm having a lot of work done. Bloody contractor's been out for weeks. I'm quite annoyed with him. I think I'll have to hire out a new company.”

“Sorry to hear it, sir. I tell you what, I'll make a few phone calls if you'd like. I know some guys in town that do fixtures.” Still talkin' out of my ass, I'd make up anything. See, you've got to seem like you're really helpful. Clients dig a problem solver, especially one who cares. Not that I did or anything. Shit, I didn't care about tomorrow. I only cared about makin' enough money to drink myself back twenty years. Maybe stock up a few cartons of menthol cigarettes

from Rainbow.

Jerry led me through the door into the house. Nice place, walls decorated with some of that fine china, looked like a collection. There were faces painted on them, like everyday folks you'd see around town. One guy looked like this old fart named Barney that worked a pizza joint in the early mornings. I bummed cigarettes off of him whenever I was by. Bastard looked like a nightmare version of myself—meaner, older, fatter. Anyway, I'd go in there from time to time after a long night, order myself a Hawaiian. That old fucker'd heckle me fierce: "You ever been in a sinkin' ship, boy? You ever mess yourself on the deck of a destroyer?" Old guy served on the U. S. S. Arizona. He survived the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor. That must have been a tough gig too. Anyway, the guy's face hangin' on the wall looked just like him. Spittin' image.

"I make them myself. I enjoy capturing people's faces," Jerry explained. "Alright, we can settle in the kitchen. May I get you something to drink, Mr. Dennis." Jerry eyed the pit stains welling up under my arms.

"Oh gosh, that'd be great, sir. And call me Bucky, all my friends do." Bucky Dennis, after my uncle Mickey "Buck" Dennis—a semi-pro ball player in Kentucky until he was arrested for moperly: moperly with the intent to expose himself. It happened in my teens. Hell of a ball player, almost signed a few times. It's funny how nobody remembers that though—just him streakin' by that senior center with his junk in the breeze.

"Bucky. Hrm, interesting name." Jerry opened the vintage refrigerator and poured me a glass of pineapple juice. Must be a health food nut, but it explained the stretchy threads. Damn, pineapple juice went down smooth and tangy.

"Nice place you got here, sir." Small talk's the way to keep 'em interested. People buy the salesman not the product. Hell, I know I would. There was this one time in Bangkok...

"Yes well, once the place is finished. It's a vacation home really, a place to get some privacy." Jerry waved his arm around. The kitchen had a granite island in the center, looked like all the cabinets needed to be put in though. Cereal boxes and the tin cans of that Jacksonville Spaghetti lined the exposed shelves. That Brit wasn't much for taste, but that's how it was over there. Right? Bad food. Crooked teeth.

"Where you vacationing from?"

"London, actually. I'm a trader there." He was smug about it too.

"Yeah, I bet there's a lot of stress that goes along with that gig."

“Oh yes. It’s killer. But I have my dish painting. And I used to play a great deal of cricket in the spring.” Jerry flicked his fingers trying to communicate something.

Took a swig of pineapple juice. “Yeah cricket, that’s what y’all call soccer out there.”

Jerry picked up the policy folder.

“Well, Mr. Seaver should we get on with the paperwork, so I don’t take up anymore of your time?” I laid the old suitcase onto the kitchen table, opened it up and stacked his policy right next to a vase of petunias. Pineapple juice was really hitting the spot.

“Yes, I’d like to go over some of these if you don’t mind.”

“Not a problem. You go right ahead and give those a once over. Sometimes they’re dense, but hey, so are those claim investigators.” I squeezed out a laugh, weak as it was.

“Yes,” Jerry said abruptly, hardly paying attention. Those Brits are straight to business kinda guys, no nonsense.

A few minutes passed and I started feelin’ the sting in my bladder. I had an abnormally small bladder. I’m talkin’ a freakin’ peanut. Can’t even finish a cup of coffee before I start leaking like a toddler. It made my tweens a nightmare. The ex never cut me any slack and she never let it go. I interrupted our wedding night for a minute pee. She used to call me Tina Tinkle, ‘cause I was like the six year old in my daughter’s Girl Scout Troop. Poor thing pissed herself every God damned meeting, must have been a nervous tick. My ex—what a fuckin’ bitch.

“I’m not seeing flood damage,” Jerry said.

“It is there—right beneath fire.” Guy was a stickler, but my chonies weren’t twisted about it. Fuckin’ pineapple juice was the only thing on my mind. My insides swelled up. And my back teeth weren’t just floatin’ they were damn well going down with the Titanic. Shit on me. I had to pee.

Jerry just sat there thumbing the pages, zippin’ right to left like a coked up typewriter. Quick as a whip, page to page. The man was scrupulous.

“Uh, excuse me. May I use your restroom?”

“Yes, of course. The loo’s upstairs to the left, two doors down.”

“Thanks, much appreciated.” I ran up them stairs lickity split. They creaked and whinnied like a donkey gettin’ friendly with a mare.

The second floor was in serious disrepair and the broken up drywall left wide open crawlspaces. Dingy, turquoise paint peelings slowly sagged, eroding with neglect and soggy

Mississippi humidity. It was worked on, I could tell. Tools scattered about messily; even a brand new, chrome paint sprayer coiled up with about twelve gallons of green wood sealant. I flexed my stomach and walked into the john.

“Jesus Houdini Christ!” My first step into the bathroom and I nearly fell through a six-foot hole in the linoleum. My hearted murmured and everything. That ain’t keen if you drink like a river and smoke like a chimney.

“Mind your step, Mr. Dennis!” Jerry called from the kitchen, “There’s a nasty gap in the flooring—old bathtub crashed right through.”

Dark outside, I watched the moon rise over the weeping willow in the yard. The nasty dent in the hood of my Charger shined in the pale light. I undid my drawers.

“What the—huh?” I flipped on the light to find two, porcelain bowls gleaming under the fluorescents. Hell, I already had my dick in my hand and everything.

“Uh, oh yes, uh Mr. Dennis? Use the toilet on the right, one by the hole isn’t installed. Should have had it hauled out weeks ago!”

I didn’t answer. I just aimed and put a fire out. I whizzed like a champ and let me tell you, there ain’t nothin’ I know that’s as good. The minute pee. Better than sex and pancakes.

Life has a way of pissin’ on just about everybody. We all get tuckered out, battered and broken by our own demons. Feels good to piss back. But don’t get cocky, ‘cause life’ll just shit on you smiling. And when the Ex took the kids—I stank for years. But leaving the Army? That was the candy in my piñata. Things made more sense in the Army. Sleep, fights, and chow. Things got done too. Out here a man can’t even patch up the holes in his john, needless to say, the hole in his heart.

I fidgeted with my tie. Ugly thing made out to be a chessboard or something. I looked at my mug in the mirror. Took a real hard look. The aviator shades had to come off—didn’t want Jerry thinking I was one of those, “I wear my sunglasses at night” hipsters. Ah, hell. I looked like a Jack Russell Terrier with the black eye. Courtesy of the beauty’s beefcake at the bar. He didn’t much like the way I hounded his lady. Who would? Fine thing though, almond, sky blue eyes, nice hourglass figure, dark supple skin. I tell you if I was in my own bathroom I’d have squeezed one off.

I fixed my mustache with the tiny wallet comb I kept nested next to my daughters. I kissed their photograph. Minnie and May, both eight years old—hadn’t seen them in fifteen months. I

washed up, wearing a frown in the mirror. Dried my hands on a lacey towel with a Little Red Riding Hood pattern. Cute stuff. Moon shone pretty too, one big white eyeball in the Mississippi sky. Looked like he'd wink at you after a few shots of Jackie D.

I heard a glass shatter down stairs. Figured I should help clean up, him bein' such a nice feller and all. I peeked through the gaping bathroom hole. "Hey, Mr. Seaver, I'll be right down."

I peered into the upside-down kitchen from the ceiling. The petunia vase was in pieces, watery glass mixed with violets everywhere. I stepped over the hole towards the door when I saw a darting blur move below in the living room.

"Hey, Mr. Seaver, might want to keep that dog away from the glass. You know those mutts, don't know what's good eatin'."

A ruckus broke out downstairs: crashing, thrashing, shattering.

"Jerry? You all right down there?" I whistled to the dog. "Come on, boy. Git out the house!"

The noise stopped. Nothingness buzzed in absolute silence. Blood in my ears thumped like a Huey over a jungle insect symphony. The crickets outside went still. No fiddles. I opened the door and made my way down the hall, poor bastard probably had a heart attack. Shit, he'd be laying there in his yellow spandex single suit, coughing and wheezing. I'd have to do mouth to mouth or something. "You're supposed to give 'em aspirin, right?" I asked myself. Heavy steps made their way up from downstairs.

Damn, what a scare. Thought Jerry was a goner for sure. Jesus Houdini, I thought. The banister groaned, I didn't remember it groanin' before—but it definitely groaned right then, sort of growled too. Stupid mutt, I thought. "Git!"

Furious sniffing followed my scolding. Meanwhile, alls I could think about was Jerry, my client floundering in the kitchen of his brand spankin' new vacation home, wallowing in insurance papers, gasping for air like a goldfish on the sidewalk.

Then I froze. My balls shriveled up like raisins and I felt my heart quiver like one of those vibrating beds at Frank's Motel. Everything I ever knew in my life, all the shady stuff I'd done, it all rose up my throat like bad crawfish and spilled onto the staircase, a flood of vomitous bile, pineapple and booze. I heard the pals I'd left in Vietnam scream in the jungle. "I wanna go home, Buck! I wanna go home!" And as I wretched, my whole perception of the world shook loose—for standing before me, eight-foot high, glaring and baring long chalky fangs, was the honest to God, no bullshit, Wolf Man. Dark fur heaved over rippling muscle and teeth gnashed

like a motorized wheat reaper.

So, I said the first thing that lit up the dusty, old bulb in my mind: “Shit. On. Me.”

Keepin’ cool was out the door when you’re about to be mauled by the beastly hound of Satan himself. I dove into the shitter, slammed it shut and prayed. The monster on the other side scratched and howled. Claws screeched against the wood, carving away my sanctuary. I braced myself, narrowly dodging the hairy fists hammering through the wood like it was wax paper. I heard myself squeal too, like that peanut-bladdered Girl Scout. I was a dead man walking. I knew the score. Goddamn Werewolves. You never think it’ll happen to you.

Barking and snarling, I watched helplessly as the bloody muzzle exploded through the door like an axe head. Rabid. Frothing. To think I went out of my way to bring Jerry his insurance policy. Now this fucked up Londoner was going to slurp my intestines through my own asshole like so much spaghetti. Or worse yet, leave me alive with the curse. “Fuck!” I’d haunt the greater Mississippi area, eatin’ on innocent folks. Bum gig, if you ask me.

I tried keeping the door from swinging open and knocking me through the hole in the floor. It was only one story up, but if I twisted my ankle, I’d be dog food. Had to reach the Charger. Burn rubber. But the stink of the werewolf’s maw surrounded me and a gore matted snout snapped ferociously, fetid teeth clacking together. The howling beast chomped the air, crackin’ like a bear trap, inches from my face. Then suddenly, in the most surprising manner imaginable, the doorbell rang.

Wolfie pulled his snout from the door and stomping feet and claws scrambled down the hall. Silence. The doorbell rang again. Huh, damn thing was workin’ fine for that poor schmuck. Figures. Ding dong.

“Hello?” A woman’s voice. Damn Southern hospitality. The sweet thing probably brought a tray of cookies for her new neighbor. Say what you may, but I wouldn’t trade a good home-style mama for all the salt in the sea.

“My name’s Sally. From next door. I got some cookies to welcome you into the neighborhood.”

“Damn it, lady, get the hell outta Dodge.” Fear for my immortal soul kept me whispering like a kid swappin’ gossip in Sunday school.

“They’re chocolate chip. I can come back later if you’re busy.”

Nosey Southern mama’s always in other people’s business!

My brain was a freight train. I had to do something. Werewolves aren't a discriminating bunch; they kill anybody, even sweet old ladies. So, I shouted from the hole, "Uh, I'm kinda busy right now, lady. I've got some unpacking still!" Okay, you think she'd buy that. Right?

"But you've been moved in for weeks. Let yourself relax a bit," she replied.

"Uh, No! Now's not a good—!" Before I finished there she was, standing beneath the hole in the ceiling. And she damn well took my breath away.

"You're Sally?" I could hardly believe it. Black-eye girl with the beefcake!

"Welcome to Verney, Mississippi!" Her pouty lips were caramel and her wafting perfume made my mustache shiver. There was a looker. The definition of foxy.

"Listen to me—!"

The monstrous howl boomed. Terror painted Sally's face and the cookie tray clattered on the floor. The wolf skulked out of sight, but his stench made it up through the linoleum hole.

She screamed, falling backwards over the couch.

The werewolf approached, dark furry hind legs lifting the enormous bulk, its toenails clicking against the hardwood floor as it strode.

"Sally, baby. Girl of my dreams." My breath ran cold. Then I stood up, gripped the old toilet and shouted like I had a pair: "Hey Jerry! Heads up, hombre!"

I lifted with my legs and heaved the seventy pound bowl up and out. The porcelain projectile rocketed down onto the wolf's back, crashing and shattering into an explosion of bowl fragments and white powdery shards. The beast yelped and tried rising slowly, but collapsed again. I'd bought some time.

I hurried downstairs, crying: "Sally! Sally!"

The monster stirred, dragging itself across the floor like a wino.

"Come on, baby. Move it while he's stunned!"

She was out like a light so I carried her to the Charger. I grabbed her by that cute little waist, no time for courtesy, and lifted her right up over my head.

Jerry's hairy blur stirred amidst the porcelain rubble and Sally woke up screaming and kicking her legs. Her green dress flung right up over my eyes and my feet couldn't keep up with my head. I spilled, headfirst into the door with a thud.

A godforsaken, guttural hiss crackled like folding tinfoil.

Sally, she's hooting and hollering, kickin' me right in the jaw. I flipped up her dress and

there old wolfie crouched, blocking the only exit. It roared, spitting putrid phlegm that stuck to my face like too much shaving cream.

I spit back, snatched a decorative dish, and clocked him right in the kisser.

Dude, he was pissed. He howled and batted me with his paw.

So, I hit him again and again, then darted up the stairs like a damn trapeze artist balancing on a wire. “Quite squirming!” I shouted with my head wedged up Sally’s buns.

Jerry withdrew like dog gettin’ the skunk.

“For the love of Cochise, shut up will ya!?” I felt like I was back in Saigon where just about everyone you know is shouting obscenities at you. Your leather faced CO, your doped up pals, the fanatical enemy, and just about every local tryin’ to sell you counterfeit Levis. I remembered the heat too, jungle humidity. The meat stink.

Damn, that Hellhound needed some Juicy Fruit.

“Do something! He’s comin’ up the stairs,” Sally screamed again, kickin’ wildly at the approaching behemoth.

“Get in the crawl space!” I turned my head and spotted a monkey wrench. I went for it. Wolfie beat me to it. I felt the evening gales from outside blow the plastic drapes like ghosts—that big dark blur, parading through peeling rooms. It really was a half-assed paint job in there.

No time for critiques—a werewolf stalked me. Maybe I’d get lucky, I’d catch it off guard. Would have helped with Sally’s beef-cake last night. Damn she had a fine ass. Shit man, there she was hiding like a squirrel in a tree. I could marry a woman like that; I could settle down and start over. Make up for things.

“You know, you’re sure pretty. You and that feller from last night? Y’all serious or?”

“What!?” Sally exploded, face bunched as a catfish.

The wolf pounced, growling like a chainsaw. I tripped backwards over the paint sprayer, right into the coiled nest of cables. Shit, I thought, Am I minced meat? Or am I the hero?

Jerry’s pompous, British giggle echoed from his wolfen maw.

People’d been laughin’ at me my whole damn life. I weren’t about to let a werewolf do it too. Gripping the chrome sprayer, I let Jerry have it. Green wood sealant shot tinted, waxy goop right into his eyes. It bellowed, clawing at the soaking fluid and grime. Coughing, snorting, sniffing, howling, the werewolf fingered its peepers and dry heaved. Fucker was sick and blind.

“Get away from it!” Sally tugged my collar so hard it ripped halfway to my bellybutton.

I took her hand and the two of us dove like synchronized swimmers into the crawl space. Our hearts pumped fiercely, hers close to mine. Jerry raged, smashing two by fours and tool kits. We navigated the inner walls, squeezing through patchy openings of torn up petunia pattern wallpaper. Looked like we was in the house's rib cage. Blurs of fur and teeth passed us, in and out of sight, while cruel nails grabbed through cracks in the drywall.

"Quick, down the plumbing." I lowered Sally down the crooked tree of copper piping. Slippery, green metal rattled as she moved.

"We'll get underneath the floor. It's too big to follow us." Over my shoulder, hot saliva spilled onto my bare neck.

Sally was almost down. I spied the kitchen through a tiny drill hole.

"I'm almost there," Sally whispered. Voice mousy and sweet, kind of voice you'd expect from one of Santa's elves. I'd have bet a nut she could sing too. "Oh my God!"

"Th' hell is it now? Go, girl!" She stopped up the escape and I weren't ready for another go at wolfie. I mean, I'm tough, babe. But I ain't no Hercules.

Sally screamed as her feet clattered onto the ground beneath us. Examining the situation, I saw something I hadn't seen in a long, long time. The dead. And man oh man, that fucker was dead.

The corpse must've been one of the crew workin' on the house. He was little more than a mangled heap of red soaked sticks wearing a hard hat. One eye squinted in the direction of the splattered mess as if suggesting he'd gotten something on his boots. He sure did, about eight pounds of small intestine. In 'Nam you'd run into poor schmucks like that, all chewed up and spit out by The Man—didn't matter if it was Ho Chi Minh or the suits back home. Hell, we was just kids, man. Bum gig for America's sons. And even after all of it: the fightin', the dyin'—nothing was worse than getting off that plane. No marching band, no flag, just a forest of picket signs callin' me a "baby killer." Th' fuck did those flower fuckin' hemp tokers know, anyway? Just a bunch of apple pie communists who knew as much about real combat as they did about their lubed up peckers. What did they know? I was in Saigon, man. But then again, we was all just kids.

"The contractor don't look too good." I slid down the last pipe. Sally snatched me up like a teddy bear. She smelled like a peach cobbler mixed with hot sex and coconut. "It's alright, girl." I briefly smelled her hair. "He looks like a human pizza."

Sally punched me right in the gut. “Creep!”

“Hey! Tough rocks, babe. I just tell it how it is. Ain’t nothin’ we can do for him now. You’re a real firecracker ain’t ya?” I put the moves on her again.

“You’re sick. Freakin’ redneck pervert!” It appeared I’d pushed a sensitive button. But hell, I was a man of the world, not some backwoods hick from *Deliverance*. I loved stuff like Italian architecture, Vietnamese food, even French music—though I’ll argue that Johnny Cash was the greatest that ever lived.

“I just bailed you out of a heap of trouble, sugar. Least you could do is show some couth, know what I mean, babe?”

“I’m not the one trying to get busy on a corpse.”

“It’s called romance, doll! Who ever said anything about getting busy? Now, I think I deserve some gratitude!” It wasn’t enough to be stalked by an eight-foot, man-eatin’, spawn from tenth flippin’ circle of Hell. Sally was pissed and frankly, I’d have rather dealt with the werewolf.

“Enough, enough. I can’t handle this.” Sally crept through the basement, or sub basement, or wherever we were. Walls of mud and mislaid plywood stacked the shabby walls. Looked like a half-assed catacomb. “You see that?” She shivered.

My lighter sparked at the edge of the gigantic gopher hole. Thousands of white roots tangled from the cloddy dirt, woven like sickly string through the clay and sediment. Deep as a well, my voice echoed.

“Should we take a look?” Puffs of warm air flooded from the hole. Foul, fetid stink permeated like hot, summer trash. Damn thing smelled like an ass oyster omelet.

“No way, you’re frickin’ crazy. We’re safe here.” She grabbed the lighter.

“I don’t know if it occurred to you, but that pile of guts over there didn’t just spontaneously combust.”

She dry heaved.

“Look, I used to be a tunnel rat. I’ll just take a look. Probably just a geothermal well.”

“Wait,” she cautioned, batting those pretty, blue eyes.

“It’s okay, babe. I’m Bucky Dennis, I’ve seen it all.” If only I had. Sure I’d been a tunnel rat. I’d killed a man in one of ‘em. Nothing can prepare you for taking another man’s life in the belly of the earth. Strange thing was, when our eyes locked, glittering in the dim G.I. light—felt

like we was kids diggin', playin' pretend-like explorers at the center in the world. I hardly heard the shots. But I felt the gush of life spill over my forearms. Just two kids in a hole—one dead, one alive.

Sally eyed me.

"I'm going," I grasped the roots and shimmied at a strange angle, back pressed into the firm earth. "I think it's widening." The roots held, cypress for sure. Them were tough ass trees, man. They'll hold firm in a hurricane. I swung lower like a mustachioed orangutan and managed to dig my heels into the mud pretty good.

"I'm there," I hooted, descending onto a soft platform below.

Creepy crawlies of every sort slithered and skittered beneath my boots. Worms were cool. Help things grow, know what I mean? But beetles and spiders and shit? Hell no, babe. I tried keeping cool, but I shrieked—then immediately covered my own mouth. What would Sally think if I couldn't kill a spider in the tub once we were married? You know? Shit, there I was getting ahead of myself again. That's how mistakes are made. You think something is one way but its really another.

"What a bitch!" Suddenly, I lost my footing. Worse. The ground gave out. "Shit-pie. Mother —!" I free-fell twenty yards then BAM! Tree branch. Thing caught me right in the twins. Good thing I froze some jizz in '73. Collapsing into a heap of torn roots and flattened bugs, I stretched my neck. My nuts hurt but I was alive. I sat there a spell, wheezing like an old hound, gripping the muddy walls, covered in muck and mold.

"Bucky?" Sally called from above. "You okay?"

"Tits," I said, just quiet enough for her not to hear.

"Where are you?"

"China, hun! We made it." I swear on my grandpappy's grave, I heard her smirk.

Musky, subterranean gloom glowed like marsh gas and skeletons leaned in every corner like discarded umbrellas. Some of the fresher corpses had hollowed out brainpans, where makeshift candles of fat and sinew burned dimly amidst the shadows. I'd scarcely seen worse. Scarcely.

I stared up the hole. "Safe to come down. But it ain't pretty, okay? Think you can handle that?" I'd hardly noticed the rotten smell of turned meat. Empty husks of men and mounds of jiggling flesh laid out on a writhing bed of maggots, bubbling with rot.

Shaking, Sally slid to me. Her mouth agape, tongue convulsing, she eyed the grinning skulls

and smoking human torches. She wretched into her fists, ralphing tangerine chunks onto my slick, Italian boots.

“Seaver set up shop. Ain’t nobody safe.” I nudged a dried up corpse and his limbs cracked off. Reaching through the beds of maggots, I recognized the bastard’s glum smile—Barney the pizza guy. Him for sure. No bones about it. Me plus forty pounds. “Jerry’s huntin’. Vacation home my ass.” Barney’s grin was painted up on that dish in the kitchen.

“Who is it?”

“Some guy I knew,” I said, half aware of anything. “They’re all trophies, see? I knew that fruity, spandex single-suit was trouble.

“What do we do now?” Sally’s hand clasped mine. She was soft fragrant as flower petals, even over her vomit breath. Fresh perfume, the kind a younger woman wears, lingered in the stale air.

“We make way through there.” Effortlessly, I lifted a smoldering skull from its shoulders. The grim lantern shone brightly, even in the murk. A narrow portal wove into what looked like a mineshaft, though there’d been no mining in Verney to my knowledge since the Civil War. “Too bad we ain’t got a parrot.”

“You mean a canary?” Sally queried.

“Shit, girl! A bird. I don’t know—is that what they used?” I stepped forwards, squishing into the tight passage.

“For what exactly?” Sally asked, eyeing the wriggling halves of worms in the ceiling.

Bubbling flesh sloshed onto my fingers. “Damnit!” I cried, “Honestly, I ain’t even sure I know what they used the birds for.”

“Smooth move, buddy,” she chortled.

“Bucky. Name’s Bucky.” Fifty feet further and still no sign of any exit, the skeletal lanterns lead the way. “How long these things burn you think. I mean, half these are—.”

A darkly hulk shifted in the shadows in front of us. The heavy footprints and crackling snaps of breaking ribcages rattled and echoed towards us.

“Get back up the hole,” I said quietly, afraid of my own words.

The werewolf straddled the pile of skeletons, salivating over one of the lamps until the splatter of its gory maw stamped out the flames. The tattered, yellow jumpsuit beamed blood-red in the failing light.

Tripping over a heap of moldy rope, I busted my lip.

“Bucky!” Sally pulled me from the skatter of bones.

Tying one, I flung it over my head like a cowpoke’s lasso and hurled it up the hole. I boosted Sally’s toosh up the rope and scurried behind her like a frightened spider up a web.

“Climb!”

The wolf clawed at the earthen wall, digging roots out and scattering bugs onto their backs. Feverish eyes bubbled with blood and pierced the darkness like Devil’s high beams. Nothing but his eyes were visible below in the hollow earth.

Over the edge, I kicked backwards and stamped my heavy heel on to its curled fingers. But his fingers were damn tough. Gripping my foot, the beast rose from the hole, giant head swiveling. I shifted my weight and kicked with my free foot, knockin’ a fang from his lower jaw. Jerry seethed.

“Cut the rope!” I yelled, fishin’ for my granddaddy’s pocket knife. “Cut the damn rope!”

Sally went for it, carving clean through the rotten, slime-ridden hemp.

“Cricket’s a sport for pussies!” The severed line slid through my legs faster than a drag car and Jerry howled as he tumbled into the deep of the pit.

“I am up to my hairy ass in bad times, babe.”

Sally nodded, squeezing back through the creaking, leaking copper forest. The groaning water pipes made for an uneasy trek through the bowels of the old house, dredging through mud and misbegotten entrails.

“My Charger’s not thirty feet away. When I give you a whistle, you git *Smokey and the Bandit* right on out of here. We square?”

“Don’t you know anything? That thing’ll run us down. He’s too fast.” Sally was full of all sorts of useful information. “We’ll have to wait out the full moon. The curse ends when the sun comes up.”

“Look, I already knew that,” I said. “Everybody knows the curse goes AWOL at dawn. But we ain’t gonna make it to sun up, got it? So run that pretty ass, fast as you can.”

“This is grave stuff, Buddy. My grandmama was a Hatian Voodoo witch and she—.”

“Look here, tootsie, first and foremost, if you call me Buddy one more time? I’m gonna—.”

“You’re gonna what, tough guy?” She pursed her lips and thumped her foot into the muck.

“First of all, th’ name’s Bucky. Bucky Solomon Dennis. And secondly, I’ve seen enough

movies to know damn well what we're dealin' with. Jerry's a goddamned werewolf from London, on a vacation retreat from his busy job as hellhound across the pond. Probably heard there was plenty of good eats in Verney, Mississippi and decided to carry the curse over seas. The Devil himself pumps in that fucker's veins. He's even collectin' their portraits on the wall—like some fucked up, Satanic arts and crafts time!" I was riled up. And damn that girl had a body on her. "Take our chances in this deathtrap 'til mornin' or get the hell out of Dodge? Frankly, I don't give a damn. I'm voting for the Dodge." A woman needs a man, know what I mean. Nut up and wag them peaches. I weren't some deadbeat good ol' boy, bubba fuckin' redneck. I had heart.

Sally tied her hair back with a violet scrunchie. "Alright, fair enough."

"Damn right. Now, if you have any light bulbs over your head, feel free to divulge." We quieted. In moments of crisis you need time to let it sink in. Don't rush it or you'll blow it. I always think back on a guy I knew, Denny Phelps, Brooklyn boy in 'Nam; he sat through three tours. Somethin' like eight God forsaken years in The Shit. Denny said it didn't bother him, all the killing. He went home and spent two years workin' at a wharf in San Francisco. Well, one day he flipped out while pullin' in a crab net, and I mean *Looney Toons*. Screamin' bloody muder in pidgin Vietnamese, smashin' crustaceans with fists like jack hammers. It took six guys to calm him down and after that he spent the rest of his days diddlin' himself in a county mental ward. Kept things bottled up, didn't take time to address his needs. Sometimes you've got to let things out. Let 'em go. That's just life.

Sally wept into the nook of her inner elbow. I put my arm around her. "It's alright, darlin'," I said. "We're good. We'll hunker down under the living room floor, and keep it real quiet like 'til morning." Sally reminded me of the ex. A lot of times I weren't there for her. You know how it is. Bucky never was an angel, no sir.

The ex cheated on me twice, but I let it slide, me—I had my go around with some fillies in Saigon, war and all. Really it was the kids that kept us civil, 'til the new feller rolled in with his German car.

Minnie and May. My girls. My golden beauties. I wanted to see 'em grow up, go to college, make it better than I had. Wouldn't be tough. But I was two restraining orders too many. Too many missed birthdays, too many sloppy nights at the quarry with Lloyd and some of the others. Boozin' and bakin', cruisin' and shakin'. Weren't no life for two little gals.

“Bucky?” Sally questioned, her pouty lips puckered. “Are you ok?”

I puckered too, ready to plant one on my sweet Sally.

“You look really familiar. Have we met?” She squinted.

Shit on me, I thought. “You don’t freakin’ remember?” How does a woman forget something like that? I was all over her. Debonair, like Don John. Slick as Johnny Cash, hisself. Dude, who could forget a ‘stache like mine?

“Do you work at that pizza place off of Costa and Korb?”

“Christ, lady.”

“You know, that place, parallel to Pearse and Cunningham, right next to Block Here’s Typewriter Repair?”

“Hell no!” I barked. “I’m the cat from last night. Bucky! Your stupid ass beef-cake thrashed me after I asked you to dance. You don’t remember that?”

“Oh,” she muttered. “That was you?”

Yeah. Fuckin’ women, I thought.

“Beef-cake? I didn’t even know the guy. Golly, you alright?”

I pointed to my black and blue eye and said, “I just want to tell ya, he got some lucky shots in. And I’d had a few too many. Okay? You know how it is.”

“Huh, sure didn’t look that way.” She shrugged and sat down, pulling her knees up to her chest. We sat in the dark a long while half cuddling, half listening for the terrifying, motions of the prowling beast. Quiet. Exciting. Pretty girl in the mud. Wolfman on the prowl. Life throws you curve balls, you know? Some times you swing and miss, sometimes well, you know: Homerun.

“I wanted to dance with you,” she said, almost inaudible.

“What was that?” I’d heard her just fine.

“I wanted to dance. You seemed like a nice guy, a chauvinist perv, but nice.” A little smile curled her lips, her white teeth contrasting against her dark skin. Her short hair’d been dyed reddish, looked pretty through the glowing beams of florescent light trickling through the cracks in the floor. It all felt a little like camp.

“Maybe come sun up, we could get some eggs or something?” I asked her out, my innards in knots.

“You think it’s gone?” she asked, looking up through the floorboards.

“Yeah, probably ran off into the woods. That or eating one of the neighbors. You can never figure what they’ll do after the savage takes over. No sirey-bob, not even—,” I talked her ear off when suddenly, in the near distance, the rusty sigh of old nails shattered the moment. Before I could say: “Ass-monkey-tuna-fuck!” light from the living room flooded the crawlspace. The werewolf skulked over the opening, fist fulls of spittle and chunky red doused me like a bucket of chum. I rolled left, Sally right.

“Move, stay beneath the floorboards.” One of the contractors must have had the same idea. Thought he’d be safe. But there I was, elbow to elbow with a slew of chewed up workers, sinking in the sludge. Wish I had my rifle, I thought.

Like hairy shackles, wolfie’s fingers latched my ankles and pulled me with strength inhuman.

“Jesus Christ!” I screamed. He fished me like a grub in a rotten log, holding me upside-down, panting dead breath into my face.

Sally turned around and grabbed my arm. Good girl. She pulled. But damn, Jerry was one strong sucker.

Sally tossed over the contractor’s hardhat. I caught it and went haywire, clobbering the wolf’s head: kickin’, hootin’, hollerin’ like a mental patient. I noticed glistening, green wood sealant matting up his coarse, black whiskers. Saliva dripped from its mouth like a leaky faucet. I reached for my lighter and struck that little metal wheel.

“ROWL!” Jerry howled as sparks lit, spreading over his face, singing and smoldering his unholy beard. The werewolf’s hand gripped me by the belt buckle, hurling me into the kitchen like he were tossin’ a chew toy. I even squeaked when I landed.

I tasted more wet, hot blood streaming down my mustache. My salty life leaked. I was going downtown and fast too. Jerry pummeled me again, razors slicing through me, spinning me like a dradle into the refrigerator. Life as I’d known it slowed down to a baby’s crawl. And I peered at the approaching shadow through blurry eyes. The great beast scowled, teeth gnashing, gnawing. Crooked fangs chattered as that black tongue writhed like a pit viper. Hisses, snarls: but above all—a low and mournful voice called to me. I knew it too. Johnny Cash. “Bury me not on the lone prairie,” he said.

Seemed to me we’re put on this earth for one reason. Generally it’s a damn good one. Sure, we make our own destiny. Lord knows I had. But who’s to say that all roads don’t lead to the

same place. Hell, we all end up worm feasts somehow, somewhere.

So, I stood up.

The monster's eyelids narrowed.

I adjusted my junk, hocked a bogey, and clenched my fist. "Hey, Jerry? Let's roll, hombre."

The wolf's shaggy nape sprung like a toothed jack-in-the-box. He barked ravenously, snapping and clawing. Jerry's bestial uncircumcised wolf dick swung like a furry pendulum between his powerful haunches.

"Bring it you ass ugly, Euro-trahsin', Dutch Cobra!" I stood my ground, curled my fist and swung right for his peaches. I caught 'em, twisted, and brought down the thunder.

Jerry bellowed, eyes rolled back and white as milk. His tongue slithered like a eel on a hotplate.

But I held on, pinching his hairy stones like an iron vice. I juiced 'em, bub, squeezin' those lycanthropic testicles like a couple of lemons. The werewolf roared, shuttering, and lashing out with every demonic limb. He tore up the place, smashing the sink and raking his claws over the dingy wallpaper. Jerry tore a swinging chandelier from the ceiling, swinging it like a flail, until I finally let go and the wolf collapsed into a pile of rubble, panting and yelping.

Smoke rose, swirling like a fatty drag, curling into a cloud along the ceiling. Fucker's juevos was on fire, bud. Wolfie whimpered. My hand steamed and sweltered. "Verney High Football 1964." Solid silver with my mama's birthstone. I kissed the ring and swear she twinkled like Mississippi sunshine.

Unholy fury shook chips of paint and sawdust off of the walls of the remodel. Jerry wasn't out, just ornery and pissed. Nauseous too apparently, he took two steps and wretched Devil's bile onto the floor. The rush of hot, finger filled vomit flooded over my ankles. He splashed towards me on all fours.

"Toro!" I sang with my bloody grin.

Jerry charged, dishes shook off the walls and all those painted faces shattered. The windows cracked, pipes twisted, spurting water from beneath the floor. And that rancid meat stink bubbled up from the ground like a backed up garbage disposal from Hell. We're talkin' foul.

We collided like jousting knights, each blaring our war cries, wailing, violent. My fist connected sizzling, scorching a patch of fur over the wolf's kidney. Three more blows to his ribs and gut, and a smoking jab to his jaw.

Wading through liquid vileness, we slipped and slid like lubed up Lucys in a skin flick. Jerry gripped me tight and plowed me into the granite counter-top, my head breaching a stack of soggy, cereal boxes and tins of sardines.

I wobbled to my feet, peeking through swollen eyes.

The wolf rose its broad shoulders, brandishing tooth and claw, heaving and steaming.

“Alright,” I said, raising my fists and swayin’ like a title fighter. “Last tango, Jerry. Come on now, get a taste.”

With demonic savagery, Jerry attacked with an embrace of fangs. My head burst through the cabinets and a rain of Lucky Charms lodged into my mutton chops. Reaching for a butcher knife, I fingered desperately, stretching until I clutched something loosely into my ring hand.

“Jacksonville Canned Spaghetti,” I read aloud.

Low, hollow laughter betrayed the presence of a man behind the beast’s dread visage.

“Think that’s funny?” I shouted, smashing the can over his head. And I didn’t stop. I smashed and smashed his face until he spit sharp teeth. “Fuck. You!” Bashing, punching, crushing, cracking, demon’s blood spilled from a soggy skull, squirting up my nose, into my mustache, over my chest. Splinters of bone and brain mulched together with short strand pasta and gooey marinara sauce until nothing but red soaked spandex and a furry, clumped stain remained.

Jerry’s legs twitched in the fog of holy smite.

My ring glowed red hot, but didn’t burn me.

Sally peeked from the crawlspace, hair disheveled, makeup running—a genuine Southern ragamuffin.

Jerry’s head and throat gurgled up fleshy pulp, oozing like a busted sprinkler head.

“Is it?” Sally choked.

“Yeah, sugar. He’s toast.” I knelt forwards, fishing chips of skull from my mustache

Sally stepped over the gory hulk, leaned over and helped me to my feet. I tried to act tough, but groaned. She held me close, holding my hand. The birds chirped a sweet summer melody outside as the sun came up over the willow trees. And she laid me near the Charger.

Sally’s tears dappled my chest as softly as the morning light. Each tear washing clean the stain. I spit pink—fluid in my lungs. Can’t take hits like that without pokin’ a vital.

“I don’t mean to be a pervert—but you look damn fine with that green dress clung over that

little figure of yours.”

She laughed, but I could tell she wasn’t happy.

“I have a mind to ask you to dance,” I coughed.

“I’d love to,” she replied.

We curled up together on the hood of my Charger, watching the sun peer out over the willow trees. Tiny diamonds of light glittered through the lush green of the weeping leaves as they were tossed by the wind. From afar we heard sparrows.

“Bucky?”

I brushed a silky wave of hair behind her ear, cute ear too. “Yeah, I’m here,” I said, quiet-like. My heart quaked. We drew closer and my pants shrank as our lips met tenderly. My whole world wised up. Bam, babe. That enlightening, swift kick to the head, that heart-pumping reminder of just why we strive to clean up our lives—it all smacked me like a paddle. Sure, y’all get a bum wrap here or there. But bum wraps lead to unwrappin’ the gifts to come. So, I kissed Sally hard and she kissed me. Our bodies intertwined, heartbeats boxed. And with a swift tug, I peeled off her top.

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VOODOO WIZARD HONKY TONK

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1

I’d been in that muggy ass, Mississippi bus for two hours. The john in back sloshed like a bowl of devil’s clam chowder, and bubbled up somethin’ ungodly onto the puke-stained bus carpeting. Looked like tuna melt, shit-latke. I held my breath as long as I could, but I kept gettin’ distracted. A freckle-faced, retarded guy sung with spit bubbles dribblin’ out of his mouth. “Heartbreak Hotel.” Nice enough, feller—but, damn he butchered The King. Skeeters buzzed everywhichwhere, suckin’ on my ass. And that fat driver didn’t do nothin’ but chomp his Big Red and laugh at the retard for fifty odd miles. Jeez, man. Some people ain’t got no tact, you know what I mean? That said—it was the saddest automobile trip I’d ever taken. And to think that was my first experience as a free man.

First of all, I’d be better off with my ’69 Charger out of the Police impound. But I didn’t

have twelve grand to get it out again. Maybe if I asked God, real sweet-like, Johnny Cash'll swing by in his sterling Caddy and spot me a dozen Benjamins. Yeah.

Anyway, let me square things. Any of y'all that know me, know I didn't kill no one that didn't need killin'. That Jerry Seaver guy? He had it coming. But that didn't matter, anyhow. Yes, I was free. But I still needed brooding time and still needed a swig of Jack Daniels. Hell, all things said and done, I was lucky no matter which way you spelled it. Police didn't have nothin' on me in the end. I'll thank my high school ring for that one. Yep, they had nothing. So, bam! Bucky Dennis walked, that is, after two fuckin' years.

The court assigned me this mousy, little shortcake named Ms. Dunham. A county parole officer, she stood four foot high even when she wore those ugly ass, polka dot stilettos. Might as well stab me with 'em. No wrinkles on her face to speak of, probably 'cause she didn't smile; she had a button nose, nice thick lips, but crooked-ass pearly whites. I was supposed to meet her for coffee that afternoon to talk about my employment options if I ever got off the damn bus.

Two hours and change in the stink box, all the way down to Claiborne's River Front Café, just north of the Verney County line. My back ached, I needed a barber, and my knuckles were still swollen from all brawling behind-bars. Lot of perverts, bud. More than you'd think, anyway. I'm not a big guy, but I pack punch and got forearms like Popeye. Even so, I wasn't in the slammer two days when the first Nazi-lovin' fuckwit went after my corn-hole. That said, I'm pleased to add he never got any. I cleaned his clock and put the fear of Christ in him. I'm Bucky D. I ain't about to be some nostril flaring, white power pimp's chew toy.

The bus jostled us around. I twiddled my thumbs, watching the street signs change: First Street, Second, Third, Fourth. Not too many folks out. Then again, the humidity lurched over the town like a blimp. The Hindenburg of sticky, Mississippi heat. And heat tends to stir the crazies, at least it did in Verney. One feller in particular, homeless feller, he was bundled up for an ice age and rocking back and forth outside this little fortune teller's shop: Inanna Duval's Tarot. The man cradled what I hoped was a sleeping alley cat and spoke gibberish. Insect-ridden dreadlocks hung from his head like crypt ivy, dangling and swaying as he rocked with the still feline. He flicked flies from the cat with fingers as thin and translucent as fish bones.

The bus brakes screeched. I staggered off, punched in the belly by the sticky Southern air. The homeless feller stared. I lit me a menthol, pulled my wet choners out of my ass and handed him one. "Smoke?"

The bum took the cigarette, eyed it for half a moment and popped the whole thing into his mouth like a stick of gum. He chewed, petting the clearly dead cat.

“Take care now,” I said, noticing a nosey lady staring from her shop window. Big, bright eyes rolled with my heels as I took each step, watching intently through the derelict portal. The building leaned to one side, with a few steel support girders visibly retrofitted to keep the whole thing from crumbling. She tapped the window. I ignored her at first, then she tapped again.

“Yeah?” I stopped in the street, blowing a menthol cloud of smoke against the pane of glass.

“Not come from ‘round here,” she said. “I can see.” Bells clinked when the door opened. A waft of smoldering incense and cinnamon came from the shop. “Don’t want a readin’ from Ianna Duval?”

“Ma’am, no offense. But I’ve been in Verney my whole life. You can’t be much of a psychic.” True, I thought. See, a man don’t just remember the place he comes from—he dreams of home when he’s gone. And bleeds it when he’s hurt.

“Ain’t no psychics here.” Ianna grabbed my wrist and pulled me through a curtain of beads. “Ianna don’t see nothin’. She watches.”

“Ma’am I ain’t a stranger to these—.” She cut me off.

“We play a game.” She hushed me with a short, stubby finger. “I’ll read your way.”

“My way?” It wasn’t my first trip to a fortuneteller. I’d had my palm read a hundred times in ‘Nam. But then again, fortunes out there came with a hand job.

“Your fortune, dumby man,” she scolded. “You ain’t from ‘round here, but thinks you is. We see what the cards say.”

Ianna led me into a small, dimly lit room with wallpaper like snakeskin. We sat down at a cast iron, bistro table without chairs, at the center of which was decorated with a jar. A floating, googly-eyed toad stared through a veil of formaldehyde.

“What’s your name, stranger that say he from ‘round here?” The woman procured a lavish deck of Tarot cards and shuffled them slick as a Riviera croupier.

“So it’s a Tarot reading? How much?” I leaned into my pocket. “Christ,” I said, thumbing open my wallet.”

Ianna slapped my hand. “No money for dis, stranger man! It ain’t Tarot like you knows it. This is Devil’s Tarot, boy. Played by all da lesser imps and demons, ‘round tables of sticks, deep in the Fallen One’s pit. Dis is a special tellin’.” She fanned out the cards and placed three face

down on the table. And I'm certain the formaldehyde bubbled when the first card touched.

"Name, please?" she asked. "All of it, not just some."

"Bucky Solomon Dennis." I stamped my cigarette into my boot with a sizzle.

"Draw now the first, Card of the Mind." Ianna rubbed her hands together, furiously. I saw sweat well in her palms.

I flipped it, revealing a goat-like man with several arms, reaching for swords. The Roman numeral eight was scratched into it.

"Angry are we?" Ianna giggled, "The Arms of Azazel says so. Me thinkin' you be wantin' revenge. Just like that ornery scapegoat from a long time back." The woman's fingernails clicked on the iron table. "Now, flip the Spirit Card, Bucky Solomon."

I did so, turning the second card over to reveal a winged toad in a jar. "Look familiar?" I said, talking entirely to the toad on the table.

"Ah, I'm learnin' much, Bucky," Ianna retorted. "The Familiar Bottle keepin' you cooped up, aint it? But we all have your vices. Don't we, boy?"

I laughed. "Yeah, Lady. Don't I know it."

"Last card. Very important. Flip and let's watch." Ianna licked her lips, rapping her fingernails and rubbing her hands, excited as a child. "Destiny Card! Flip it! Flip it!" Her heavy rolls wobbled and shook as she shimmied in place. The whole thing was off putting.

Revealing the last card, Ianna turned to stone. No movement, no finger clicks, just a stupefied stare into the distance, beyond the image inked onto the cardboard.

"Well?" I queried, tapping the image of an angel holding a golden key. "Mean, I'll unlock opportunities in the future? Maybe my parole officer'll get me a job?"

"Key to the Abyss," she mouthed. "Never seen it." Ianna's quivering hand hovered above the card but she wouldn't touch it. "Ain't even in the deck."

"Its right there," I added.

"No, you don't understand it. Key to the Abyss ain't even in the deck. It don't have a place. You pull it from..."

I stood up and relit the bud of my Rainbow menthol. A curl of smoke spun from my fingertips and I breathed the vapors deep. "How much I owe you, Ma'am?"

"Shut up with your money, boy! You done pulled a card from the other side. You ain't from here! You got a cloud. Dark as a spider's eye. You ain't from here, no sir."

“Lady, I’ve been away a long time. But this is home. I dream it every night. I bleed it. Verney’s my slice of heaven. Far as I’m concerned, there ain’t a single other place on this earth.” The bells jingled as I left, strolling down the street to the café. My head hurt, my feet hurt, and alls I wanted was a cold one and maybe some ribs.

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2

I hadn’t left the Verney County line in over a decade. After the wife left, daughters too, my long bout of bad luck ended when I got hired as an insurance agent. So yeah, I can think back to a of couple years in the late seventies when my life weren’t’ shit. And by shit I mean elephant runs, floodin’ the steps of castles made of cow pies. We’re talkin’ hell, dude. Anyway, that was before the incident, the killing.

First off, clean slate, honest to goodness, I’ll say it twice: I didn’t kill nobody that didn’t need killin’. Jerry Seaver? Well, he had it coming. And ever since, the godforsaken curse of that man had followed me like a rain cloud at a wedding.

Sally wasn’t any help, neither. They took her away too, you know. She did four months in “Titty Block” before they let her off. Good behavior ain’t too hard to achieve on Titty Block. Lots of guards lookin’ for a pull or a blow and if you can handle the abuse, they’ll keep you safe and talk real sweet-like at your parole hearings. As for me? Well, the police presented good ol’ Bucky with two long ones. Sally’d visit sometimes, pressed her luscious Nubian bosoms against the glass and heave. But after a while her visits sputtered out like an old Chevy. Loved her too damn much, I guess. Shame too, ‘cause she was one of the only gals that ever got me. And I mean, the real, no-bullshit, dirty, lousy Bucky D. But hey, tough rocks, babe. Seriously though, her love was decent and fleeting—I’ll get by.

Claiborne’s Café sat on my right overlooking a small, wobbly pier that harbored shrimp boats and a hundred year old tug. They’d chug up river and down into the Gulf, sell their catch over on the Louisiana side too. Good business is my guess, been good rain and better fishin’ despite increase in it. Probably where I’d end up, shrimping or working the pier, maybe packin’ ice. It wasn’t going to be Eddie Herbert’s Insurance, but work was work, know what I mean? Ain’t a damn thing wrong with a man earning his green. Feed your family and yourself. Work hard, honest and Southern. And on Sunday? Beer and football. Take a Sabbath, babe.

Nerves twitched in my chest. Dunham was one tough lady even if she was only as tall as a

sack of taters. Had teeth behind those little red lips, not unlike the prosecutor. I spit in my palm and cleaned up the mustache and chops. Needed some Winchester Wax, but hell, I'd only been a free man for three hours. I passed through the saloon doors.

"Ribs?" Ms. Dunham sat at the bar, fingers red with sauce with four empty shot glasses turned upside-down. Apparently she chased pork with cheap-ass tequila.

"Ain't you on duty?" I pulled up a stool.

"Off the clock, Mr. Dennis," she grumbled, chomping away. I heard the grind of teeth on bone as she suckled each gristly, pulpy joint.

"So, what's the deal? Court said I wasn't supposed to leave Verney. Yet, here I am at the line." It was true. Judge Hawthorne said it himself: "You leave this County, boy. And I'll have your balls for hood ornaments." Tough guy, Judge Hawthorne. One-legged Korean War Vet with a mean lisp and a gut like a rhino. I'll be damned if couldn't help but like the son of a bitch. Reminded me of Pa.

"Relax, cowboy. You're not working the boats. You think I want Hawthorne makin' my balls into hood ornaments?" she beamed. "I got something for you in town. Not much but they don't ask too many questions at this place." Dunham gnawed at the bone, fingers stained with hot Louisiana barbecue. If that wasn't gross enough, she kept using that damn cowboy rhetoric, you know? I mean shit, man. I've seen a few steers in my day, but I've been living my life on the bayou—not some silly ass, open range, John Wayne fuckin' a long horn on the prairie with a Butline, bullshit. The Duke *was* a cool cat though.

"I take it ain't a desk job?" I knew it wasn't. Those days was gone, bud. No more ties and pocket protectors for Bucky D.

Dunham chortled, picking her teeth. "Afraid not, partner."

"What is it then? Tell me it ain't fast food. I'll sell shoes or pack crayfish, but I won't sling Taco meat." I popped the bottle cap off my brewski and sipped. Years since I had a beer, ain't a woman out there can satisfy me like that cold one did. 'Sides, beer don't bitch, moan, leave, or take your daughters away.

"They need some washers down the road. It's on fifth, just passed St. Anthony's. Place used to be this old museum but a Yankee named Vincent LaGuardia moved in and converted it to a car wash: Vin's Wonder Wash," she trailed off or maybe it was the shot of Jackie D.

"Vin's Wonder Wash? It's a damn theme park or what? They need carnies too?" I tried to be

civil. “I bet you a bottle of Maker’s I could guess your weight. Christ, Dunham.”

“Look, Buck. I don’t think you killed the Brit. He probably got drunk and fell into some power tools. But you’re a parolee now. Not exactly an easy hire.”

“I’ll remind you I was never convicted. Bastards caged me without regard of the law.” I hated talking about it, made the fillings in my teeth buzz. “Ah, hell. You don’t know the half of it.”

“Look, I don’t really care. Not my job to care. You’re out on good behavior and it won’t be easy to get anything going. Take what you can.”

Words wouldn’t leave my lips. I had a tongue like a Japanese noodle. One of them big ass, flat ones you get in soup.

“Got it, cowboy?” She put down the bone and finally started wipin’ down that bloody lookin’ mouth of hers with those wet towelettes. Shit man, only in the slammer two years and I forgot about fuckin’ moist towelettes.

“Got it?” Dunham repeated, reapplying her lipstick.

“So, I’m washin’ cars then?” I asked. But I knew the answer.

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3

Vin’s Wonder Wash was a dry-docked riverboat, one with a giant water wheel run by a chugging diesel motor. It sunk on its left side, crumbling into a cheap cement foundation made of rebar pylons and freeway dividers. The wash itself was a tunnel of over-sized mops and sprinkler heads, whirring unevenly in a shadowy tunnel of suds and stinking water. When the cars rolled through, they parked ‘em beneath a wooden trellis with sprung planks and antique moss. They looked like crooked piano keys.

I had a cigarette in the waiting room, examining dingy photos of fisherman and Civil War boys all packed like steers on the deck of the riverboat. None of them waved though. A tattered brochure on an old timey stove said it used to be a Civil War museum and still had some pricey trinkets mounted up here and there to bring in tourists. Worked too. From what I could tell, most of the clientele were vans with purple velvet curtains on the inside—those and Winnebagos. Folks in colorful silk shirts filed from the museum area, wavin’ Confederate flags and sporting brass U.S. Cavalry buckles. Kids with sticky, pink rimmed mouths pulled fluffs of cotton candy from cardboard cones, while ornery teens slumped over the Gettysburg pinball machine,

pinging their way to victory.

Four fellers had already clocked in, business must've been good for scrubbing hubcaps. Too tired, I sighed and scratched my stubbley chin. My cigarette butt sizzled in an ashtray shaped like a cannon. Thing was funny 'cause you stamped your smoke where the cannon fuse was. Boom, you know?

"Heyo! Buck is it?" That was Vin, a stocky Italian Yankee. And I mean *really* Italian. Hairy as a throw rug with a Catholic crucifix and I'll be damned if he didn't smell to high heaven of rigatoni. For sure, babe. Guy definitely had marinara pumpin' through his veins or something.

"Yeah, that's me. You must be Mr. LaGuardia. Fine place. Must be covered good?" Still tryin' to sell insurance. Vin must've had a stellar policy: water damage, fire, hurricane. Hell, even historical landmark preservation coverage. That had to be a thing, right?

"You can bet your ass. This place is a historic landmark, ya know?" LaGuardia had eyebrows like caterpillars, inching up and down with every word and expression

I struggled not to stair. "Yeah? How'd a guy like you end up in Verney?"

"I traded for it straight up. I'm lookin' for real estate down here and the original owner comes to me, he says, you know what he says? He says, 'Eh, I got this museum I'm converting into a carwash franchise. I'm under water. You want it?' And he wants I should trade for one of my joints up north."

Vin was a motor mouth for certain. "Joints?" I squeaked.

"You never heard of Vincent LaGuardia? You know, the hardware chains? You got 'em around here. La Guaria Hardware. So, he says, 'Eh, I'll go all in straight up for a hardware store in Jacksonville.' I says, EH! What am I a fuckwit?" White, foamy specks gathered at the corners of his mouth. I had the urge to wipe them.

"Ha!" I laughed. Felt new to laugh.

"I know right? So! I says, Look, I ain't tradin' Jacksonville for some carwash in Buttfuck Booniesville, ya know? Those fuckin' schleps earn me ten grand a week!"

"Can't pass that up." I watched the other guys scrub away on this monolithic RV, total behemoth like a damned jumbo jet with clipped wings. One feller in particular, a big ass black guy, tall as a flag pole, brawny as a bear with skin as dark as coal, he shimmered in the sunlight. A thick beard wreathed his face and squinty eyes glared up intently through the pane of filthy, sudsy glass. Wheeling a pallet of polish, he made towards us and removing his tattered Saints

ball cap. He revealed a deep, tissue scar on his right arm. The old wound wrapped like a python from his wrist to shoulder.

"I'll be damned," I stammered, ignoring Vinny.

"That's what I said!" continued Vin. "But here I am. Happy as a pig in shit."

"Is that?" I asked aloud. "Lloyd Walters?"

"Bucky Dennis, you son of a bitch." Lloyd grabbed my arm like only a soldier can. That firm, forearm grip and tug. "Boss, tell me you're hirin' this man." Lloyd turned to Vin and slapped his back. "I haven't seen him since..."

"Camp Pendleton," I said. "Bud, you're lookin' fine! Just fine!" Walters was my best mate in basic, followed me half way 'round the globe to the stankiest, wettest, darkest V.C. crawlin' jungles in the whole damned world. Spoke at my wedding in Fayetteville, godfather to my beauties. Hell, if I hadn't have had daughters, though I love 'em dearly, Lloyd would be the name of my son. "How the hell are you?"

"You see my smilin' don't you?" Lloyd knocked my shoulder.

Vinny grinned, unwrapping a candy bar. "Looks like we got a guy, eh? He's cool wit you, he's cool wit me." Mr. LaGuardia patted me on the back and I was made, babe. "Now don't fuck it up or I'll bury you at Wrigley's, capiche?"

"Can count on me, sir." I saluted.

Lloyd unfolded his time card and punched out on a seventy year old, silver ticker machine. "Hot damn!" Walters clattered and continued with a hoot, "Hooah. I'll show you around, let's snag a frosty in the parlor. You got a place you're stayin' at?" Lloyd led me down a rickety staircase with chipped white paint and crooked picture frames. Mustachioed Civil War generals, Union and Confederate, eyed each other rigidly through a screen of faded, amber photo paper.

"No place to stay yet. Just rolled into town. Figured I'd shack up at the local Y or hit up a motel." The basement smelled like the river and buzz with skeeters. The parlor had the stain of Dixie, albeit forgotten. Fine floral wallpaper drooped beneath hand carved, golden crown molding. Bloated by muggy weather and neglected by time, the room hunched, like an old feller, too old to look up from his shoes. Yellow, frilly lace hung from oak tables with empty placements set with tarnished silver and dusty china. Trinkets and trophies were nailed to the walls on plaques, lining nearly every inch of the vaulted ceiling. Rusty muskets and shabby, blue suits stood proudly on hay stuffed mannequins. Sawdust bled from their breeches and collected

on the floor. A glass case presented a triptych assortment of Confederate doilies, each painstakingly stitched to represent a fragment of the Battle at Manassas. Aside from the guns and uniforms, the damn place sparkled with torn America memorabilia, a buff's paradise.

"Jesus Houdini." I sat at a weather-stripped piano with cracked keys that jingled beneath my resting elbows. "Museum, huh? They weren't kidding." Running my finger over the janky keys, a plume of spectral dust curled.

"Those Johnny Reb 'federates sure knew how to live." Lloyd ducked behind an old bar where musty bottles still lined the shelves. Liquor glowed green and orange in the parlor lights.

"How's about a Bud, bud?" Lloyd popped open a mini-fridge behind the counter and beamed with ivory teeth.

And with two pops and a slide, I had me a bottle o' suds.

"You got a place to bed down tonight?" Lloyd swigged.

"No," I said, playing nothing on the piano. Reminded me of when my kids were young. Minnie and May, twins. The ex and I paid for lessons from a one-eyed barber with a knack for keys. And man oh man, those girls laid into them scales like pig-tailed Stevie Wonders.

"Mama's got a spare room in the old house, one down by the river." Lloyd didn't look at me when he talked. Eyes were closed, waitin' for me to play I think.

"Mighty kind of you, but ain't about to intrude." I tickled out a song I'd heard my dad play when I was a kid, a chanty the shrimpers sang, but I didn't remember the words. Oddly, the piano played fine for being so old. Shit, I couldn't even figure how the thing held together at all. The pegs were burnt, ashy, black, crooked. And the split wooden top, housed quivering, red wires—red as sinew.

"Move over and play somthin' with a bit more pep." Lloyd nudged me half-off the bench, strong as an ox.

"Fine, fine." My knuckles cracked and fingers felt lighter as I played an old Gospel hoot. "Well, you gonna sing or what?"

"Scoot your ass over, honky. Let, Walters show you how it's done."

"Well, I'm gonna build right on that shore. Right on that shore. I'm gonna pray right on that shore." We sang and hollered together, for the first time since 'Nam. Sure did stir the soul, I'll tell you what. *"Well, I'm walking down the road, one day when I heard his Master voice, Spirit came upon me, filled my heart with joy!"*

“Hot damn!” I cried, raking my whole hand from end to end. “For a piano that’s older ‘n Mississippi, she tuned up to wicked perfection.”

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4

Next few days stole me away to a better, simpler time. Well, simple in some ways. Lloyd’n me busted our humps washin’ and waxin’ up folks’ cars. Even gave a couple half-hearted tours through the Museum. It weren’t big bucks, but at least we was together again. Thick as thieves, no different from before. See, we used to crew a Huey overseas. Big ugly thing in green with a naked girly painted on the nose—a blushing blonde with knockers like pink watermelons. Army Rangers, both of us, knee deep in The Shit and mean.

We choppered in, uniforms blasted flat against our fuckin’ flawless bodies, blasted by the beat of 1,400 shaft horsepower. Hooah. Lloyd was the .50 Cally Sally and covered my ass like no other. You ain’t lived on this earth ‘til you’ve felt the wind and heat of a .50 screamin’ over your noggin. Hell, I scrambled the reeds a hundred times. And every time I knew my only way home was manning the gun over my head.

Lloyd stepped onto a stool and peeked through a porthole onto the suds line. The spin of the washer and sprits of the stinking sprinkler system created a musky atmosphere all over the place. Lloyd looked far away, staring through the glass hole like a sailor leering into the fog in search of a lighthouse.

“Yo, Buck. Pretty thing out here, I think you should see.” Lloyd chuckled.

Stepping beside him, I peered an obsidian Charger, ’69 with candy apple red accent lines. “Yep, there she is,” I said with a thin-lipped smile. Was a young feller riding her with a goatee and a pair of funny looking shades with open grooves instead of lenses. I hurried up the stairs to help clean her up and when I got there, I sure took my time polishin’ her rims.

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5

The sagging cypress branches clattered like bones against the roof of tin and clay. Light rain pattered the porch as a lonely, wet rocking chair creaked in the wind. But inside the old shack the family teamed and faces beamed.

Mama’s house was a home-cooked, country paradise. Smellin’ to heaven on high of care-crocked pots and sizzling lard. I missed home cookin’ for two years. And that big lady sure knew

her way around a kitchen. Took me in with open arms and fed me like a king, lifting me back on my feet. Mama Walters made me feel like a man again.

Her callused hands chopped and minced daintily, rubbing that meat like a masseuse. Mama Walters peered at me through a veil of steam. “Greens is all you need, son. They’ll flush all that blue right out.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Walters. Awful kind of you,” I said, fishing a carrot from the silver pot.

“Call me, Mama, son. Everybody does. Now get yourself out of them carrots and tell Lloyd and the boys supper’s ready.”

“Thanks, Mama.” I kissed her cheek.

The whole family lined up and took their seats as they always did. Lloyd and Mama at the head, since Winston Walters Senior had passed, while Winston Jr. sat opposite me with a bucked-toothed grin he couldn’t shake.

“Why don’t you say grace, Bucky?” Mama cooed, easing into her chair like it were a hot bath.

I licked my lips with my eye on the country fried steak. “Alright,” I started, “I can do that.” I paused, fishing my brain for old prayers my daddy’d recited. Nothin’ in particular came to mind. “Lord. Y’all made things that were good. And we’re gathered hear to eat ‘em.”

“Amen,” Winston Jr. hollered and shoveled a spoonful of butter beans and sweet potato.

“Winston!” Mama pounded the table and the silverware rattled.

“And Lord? If you’re listening? Look after the Walters Family for bein’ so kind to a scruffy, scoundrel like myself.”

Mama smiled. “Such a nice man.”

We dug into about six hundred pounds of Southern cooking: country fried steak, chicken, catfish, chitlins—collard greens, a whole piping pile of the best, golden biscuits in the whole damned South. After lickin’ my fingers clean twice, I swooped in for thirds.

“Mighty fine, meal, Ma’am. You’ve got a gift.”

“You know you’re always welcome, son.” Mama heaped a mound of sweet potatoes onto my plate.

“Delicious. Mm!” In a way, being release from County was a lot like coming home from Vietnam. Home again, you know what I mean? My own family weren’t nowhere to be found, but the Walters took me in. I pledged then and there, once I made enough to free up my ‘69 Charger,

I'd give a little something to Mama Walters. I'd give back. Green for greens.

We cleaned our plates to the music of Mississippi rain. I helped tidy up, but Mama wouldn't have it, so Lloyd joined me for a smoke on our way to the guesthouse.

I'd been shackled there for a few days, sleeping in a hammock nailed to the rafters. The house leaned against a sleepy willow and near enough to the river to hear the wake of tugboats knock cattails at the shore. Little more than a one-story shanty, held together with iron tacks and plywood, the crisscrossed roof of two-by-fours and cedar shingles leaked. The gutter burped most of the night, running into a muddy ditch. I didn't mind though. The buzz of the bayou and hushed churn of the river were my lullaby.

The screen door sighed and I propped it open with an old, rusty-headed ax. "Smoke?" I queried, already puffing.

"I quit when Daddy died," Lloyd said, waving it away with a half smile.

"I can see that." The hot, drag filled my lungs. "So tell me, bud. Why ain't you hitched yet?"

"Ain't met the right person," Lloyd replied. Droplets of sweat dabbled onto his collar. "See ya in the morning. I'm tuckered out."

"You feelin' alright?" I said, wobbling to a wooden chair. The moment I sat down I felt the pang of a deuce packing my colon. "Didn't mean to bring things up? You hear anything from Cathy?"

Lloyd shook his head. "Just a headache. I'll grab ya in the morning." Lloyd's dark skin faded, pale and bluish, sallow even. Wiry veins wove like roots on his neck, pulsing and pumping. "Wish someone'd quit with the music, though. Been playin' all damn night."

A chorus of frogs belted in the mud, beyond my sight along the riverbed. "What music?"

•

6

Half past midnight I woke to burping turds. I raced to the house, naked feet slipping over themselves in the mud. A desperate dash for the toilet. I'd always had a weak stomach and irritable bowels, but that night my guts twisted like a corkscrew, packed to the brim with a volcanic fecal hurricane. "Christ!" I squeezed my dirty pucker and bit my lower lip. Squatted in a ditch, oblivious to rational thought, I let my ass rip by the woodpile.

My belly ached and bubbled as sweat pooled under the bush of my 'stache. After four minutes of indescribably foul anal expulsions I buttoned up and took to burying the mess with a

shovel in the yard. The night air did me good and the rain'd stopped. Veiled stars and a harvest moon peeked through parting blue clouds. That's when I saw Lloyd, shuffling from the house.

His head was cocked to the side and colorless moisture glistened on his shirt and chest. Before I spoke the poor feller belched, spitting up onto himself this nasty, amber mucous. Hell, I thought, Must have been the beans.

"Hey, Lloyd? You ok, bud?"

Lloyd didn't answer. He shuffled from the steps, into the muck, shoeless and senseless. He bumped into a tree stump, ignored me completely, but made towards the guesthouse.

"Right here, babe!" I spoke up, waving the shit-laden shovel.

Lloyd grunted, dragging his feet up the porch. Once there, he stood motionless, staring in no particular direction—then his head struck the door. A jet of blood streamed from his forehead, oozing along the bridge of his nose.

"Lloyd! Damn fool." Racing toward him, I heard the crack of skull on wood like an iron pile driven into hard, Arizona shale. Wake up before you knock yourself out!"

Lloyd's broad shoulders curled back and with tight black fists he drummed the door knob absent mindedly. Gray-green fluid dribbled down his chin.

"Walters!" I shouted, clanking the shovel against the bottom step. Lloyd turned towards me, eyes bright as stars and glaring. They shifted, searching as though blind to my presence, yet uncannily aware. A string of drool stretched to his feet into a grim puddle.

"Lordy," I mouthed, examining the oily mumps swell on his face and neck. Chalky flakes peeled like snake skin from his body. "Look, buddy. You need a doctor." I twisted the shovel handle and splinters drove into fingers.

Lloyd searched for me, blinking. "Good Papa Limba," he rasped with a voice not his own. "No bodda wif da Wolf-killin' white. Papa Limba ain't got no tarry."

"Th' hell you—?"

"By Jingo anda Saint, by Jingo anda Devil. Time to get callin' on the sleepers." Bile choked from his throat, slithering like a grotesque worm of wretch and spittle. Teary, gray ooze dripped from his eyes. "Time to get callin', mon." Lloyd skulked, reaching for the rusty ax leaning by the screen door. His sickly fingers grasped it clumsily.

"Lloyd?" Fear and diarrhea welled in my gut. Walters weren't Walters no more. Zombified and spitting madness, he continued past me.

“Papa Limba. Your humble root-rola be comin’ home wit da hatchet for da Mastah. Weez gonna get to callin’ sista princesses! Sing, sing, siiiiiing.”

“Lloyd, damn it. Come on now.” I took his arm. Bad idea. The ax head missed my face by mere inches and lodged into the tree stump. Instinct and training kicked in from the old days. See, as a Ranger we’ve got this code. Says: “Someone tries to kill you? You kill ‘em right back.” So, with a swift clang I knocked Lloyd right upside the head with the business end of the Walter’s family shovel.

Lloyd faltered, stumbling backward. The blow was enough to make a grizzly bear think twice, but Lloyd—he just kept on coming. Gurgling and rasping like the motor of a bum ceiling-fan, his words jumbled into little more than grumbling horrors, wet with zombie crud.

Hot, pungent vinegar spewed from his mouth into mine. Viscous revulsions stuck to my mustache like tar, permeating rotten egg stink so vile a skunk would gnaw his own pecker off.

Another swing and crack, Lloyd’s shoulder popped and the ax clinked off of the step. He groaned and fell to his knees, fingering the air, unable to located the handle. His eyes gleamed like high beams.

“Snap out of it, man!” Raising the shovel over my head, the sheen of metal glimmered by the light of the moon. “Wake up!”

Lloyd didn’t listen, nor did he acknowledge me in any way. His hands searched the mud until they connected with the wooden handle, soggy with slime. In the near horizon, frogs ceased their rhythmic song and insect wings went still. Then I heard it, little more than a whisper, a wisp—the janky, honky tonk of a piano.

“What’s all the racket out here, Lordy, Lordy!” Mama stooped over the railing of the farmhouse. “Bucky! Lordy, boy put your trousers on!”

“Just go back to bed, Mrs. Walters. Lloyd and I got this. We was just chasin’ away a pesky opossum.” I struck Lloyd again. “Oop. Got ‘em! Noisy little cuss was scratchin’ on the roof.” Yeah, of course I lied.

“Time to wake up,” Lloyd burred, scratching the soil and breaking off his fingernails. “Wake up, Jumbee come callin’!”

Smacked him again, “Rascal won’t stay put!” Lloyd went still, slumped forward in the slop of wet earth jewels of puss and blisters rippling like a busted sewage line.

Mama shrugged and returned to bed.

“Lloyd,” I was addressing myself more than I was him. “You gotta work with me now, bud. You ain’t right. This ain’t right. Hell, back in ‘Nam we took an oath—watch each other’s backs.” The music quieted suddenly, vanishing from the still, midnight air. Something smelled awful, repugnant like bloated dead and rotten meat. The clatter of slow, clumsy footsteps paraded down the driveway a hundred yards out. Roving shadows marched, crossing my view. “I’m the .50 Cally Sally now, ok? I got you this, babe.”

Walters stirred, his hands crawling away, pulling his dead weight towards the wobbling mob. I covered my face, huffing into my sleeve to avoid the stench when I realized what it was. The dead. I’d smelled it before, that fetid broiling smell of corpses picked clean by gulls in the jungle sun. Sometimes they swelled in the humidity, full of gas and worms.

Lloyd rose, pulling the ax handle behind him until its rusty blade sparked on the gravel road. The mob enclosed him, ignoring me at first, though some inquisitive faces peered my way.

Jaws unhinged, eye sockets empty, gaping mouths vomited maggots and skittering beetles. Mangled limbs swayed and bent, dripping and flaking as Lloyd disappeared into the writhing mass. And as they vanished into the encroaching mist, one dead man lingered.

My bowels quivered. My heart trembled, skipping beats causing havoc to my breathing. The shovel shook in my fists; I drew it back, ready to fire off a blow, bladed end poised for a messy end.

The revenant swayed, holding one skeletal hand to where its ear should have been. Then its deteriorating lips parted. “What did you say?”

I hadn’t spoken.

The Dead edged nearer, mummified feet clapping against the ground. “What?” it repeated, staggering.

Still, I hadn’t spoken.

With rotten vocal cords, hollow and ghostly, it coughed out a final question. “Who is Bucky Dennis?”

•

Tracing the footsteps of the roving horde, I followed the Dead Man, the talker, down a trail of dismemberment. Lost fingers, shining fillings, slews of rotten teeth and hair all marred the pavement. Though revolting, I felt like a rubberneck on the highway spying for gore as I rolled

past at four miles plus. The odd feller was farther gone than the others walkers, nearly disintegrated. His skeletal, inquisitive head bobbed from side to side like a kind of marionette, staring through cavernous sockets at every house, corner shop, and tree as we drew closer to town. For what I'd known about zombies, he was strangely alert.

"What did you say?" he asked again, amidst the silence.

"Didn't say nothing, bud," I replied, meekly.

The Dead shrugged and continued, turning the corner towards Vinny's Wonder Wash.

The horde had gathered there, passing beneath the spinning washers, spattered by those stanky sprinklers, disappearing into the void with Lloyd in the lead. The mindless lump groped the air with one hand and slung the ax over his shoulder. Floodlights from rocking riverboats and a dilapidated steeple, beamed sickly light onto the gravel parking lot and the parlor porthole glowed brilliantly. And beneath the thump and whirl of the washing machines, I heard the distinct tickle of piano keys.

The dead vanished in the mist of spritsy suds. And as he did, the machines ceased and motors sputtered silent, all earthly lights went out. The music swelled and beneath every clinking note, the hum of choirs rose and fell with the rippling river. A horrible hymn of severed vocal chords and gurgling death sang a song of the damned.

I forced my concentration, drawing out my shallow breaths, reinforcing my faltering courage. The sticky heat and stillness on the air drummed my crawling skin. I needed a cigarette, maybe some Jackie D. I approached the steps leading into the parlor, seemed more uneven than before. It was like someone had nailed the soles of my shoes to the steps. My feet were stone. "Alrighty," I muttered, gripping the cool dog tags beneath my shirt. The aluminum slickness felt good against my sweltering torso. "Alrighty."

Call it a code of honor mixed with the curiosity of stupid-ass man. But, Lloyd was down there, fucked up and freaky. And I weren't about to let my boy get swallowed up by the devilish tunes of some honky tonk piano. So, I feathered back my hair, fixed up the mustache and said a Hail Mary before carefully slinking those squeaky Civil War era steps.

God forsaken, hellish voices croaked like bad plumbing. They sang the old, desperate songs of the cotton fields—hopeful, yet dressed in a wreath of bitter agony. Thankless lashing and shattered feet, bones split like cherry wood. The cranking gin, the quarters filth, and rotten opossum. I heard the jingling of spurs and the hollow hoot of a rider. The piano played the

images over in my mind. It haunted me, a moving picture in my brain: a vivid, living dream in my mind's eye.

Down on my belly, I cracked the door and crawled, careful to stay unseen, stealthy. What I saw next, I'll never forget.

Lined up and chained, stood every employee of Vinny's Wonder Wash, stooped forwards amidst a congregation of living dead. Lloyd was squat and crooked, leathery in skin, with a distorted face, cruel.. Teeth like a gator, fists like anvils, and popping boils like fleshy geysers. He ushered each entranced employee towards the living piano.

Chalky, white powder swirled from the keys as they played themselves. Wood paneling cracked and shifted, heaving in and out. At the piano's base, a wet, red mound of what I could only suspect were body parts were obscured by a soaking sheet. As for the employees, each miserable bastard approached the piano and bathed in the powdered like they was gettin' deloused in County. Voodoo spores clouded the room marking anyone that touched them with boils and growths, and undeathly goop. Seemed to me that once they changed, a devilish hunger overcame them, because each zombie immediately reached for the mound of butchered flesh...and ate.

I palmed my face, rubbing my eyes and blowing my nose. Hell, I'd played that fuckin' piano too! Got the zombie power all over me! But for whatever reason I was A-Okay, unchanged. Hell, maybe I'd shit it out or maybe it was the half-assed and hasty Hail Mary. I blew my nose again for good measure—lookin' back, that was stupid.

"Big King Jumbee wonda why da wolf-killin' white mon gone all sneezy." Lloyd's perverse voice shook my ribcage and flicked my heart like a marble. "Heebee warned. Don't step onda ant hill when dey be swarmin', boy."

"I don't see no ants. Just some zombied up locals." I stood up with the shovel.

"Sniff da snuff and join den," Lloyd replied, jewels of puss opening on his chin.

"I'd rather honey up my balls and toss a fist full of fire-breed on 'em." I swallowed hard, muffling my choking fear. "Y'all better snap out of it, or I'm getting' mean."

"Big King Jumbee say you inda way. And Jumbee still hungry." As the creature spoke, I spied one of the newly mind-fucked zombie-car washers lift up the blood-soaked tarp. The remaining pieces of Vinny LaGuardia quivered with involuntary muscular response. Clearly he was fresh. Some snapped bones were stacked crisscross like Lincoln Logs and his gnawed skin

was folded neatly as a Christmas sweater.

The Dead man turned to me from the corner of the room. He'd been apparently fitting himself with an old Confederate uniform, slowly buttoning the tarnished, brass buttons. "Who is Bucky Dennis?" he asked.

Teeth in Lloyd's bottom jaw pierced his upper lip, unnaturally long and sharp. Looked like a devil-touched warthog. Gray milky, sludge spilled like a drunken prom queen spewing in a cafeteria trashcan after downin' too much party punch. But, those bright eyes glared with hideous intent: to gnaw my bony ass to bits. But, Bucky D. don't go down easy.

The zombie's fist smashed into the bar, splatterin' fine whiskey and shattered glass all over. I dove, rolling into a dummy wearin' a Yankee uniform, holding the flag for the 51st Massachusetts.

King Jumbee's second fist caught my left arm, spinning me like a top into the puddle of Vinny. Standing, I slipped in the crimson slick. I thought for sure the other man-eatin' dead-heads would sink their teeth right into my brain—but the other zombies didn't seem to care one way or another if I ruined their gory feast.

Jumbee hollered, vomiting gray mud as split timbers and paintings shook from the walls. I leapt and limboed under a red velvet rope. But Jumbee plum ripped the rope's stand right from the ground and swung hard, bashing and crushing the glass, knocking all the exhibits onto the floor. Then he brained me with the iron truss post. I dropped the shovel, spit blood, and collapsed into a blanket of broken glass. The undead mask of the creature's face cackled.

"Lloyd," I stammered. He was locked up somewhere beneath the festering horror looming above me. If I could only reach him, I thought, pulling a molar from my gums. "Lloyd, man. It's Bucky! Come on, now. I'm your Buck, dude! Simmer down!" I tired, but there weren't no stoppin' him. I was down and out, belly to the ground, glass biting every soft, pink part of my body. My blurred vision focused on a sprawled glass case with purple velvet backing, crowned by a bronze placard. There it was—loaded for over a hundred years. Primed and ready, locked and cocked.

"I'll be damned." The placard read: *Harriet Tubman's Colt Model 1848 Percussion Army Revolver*. "Hooah."

"Big King Jumbee's all dats inda box, mon. Sed one day, a long time back, I'd be knockin' wit da Devil. Now da day come!"

“You were at my wedding, bud. Best man. You don’t remember that? Hell, you pulled me out of that Huey. I was busted up pretty darn good. Saved my ass just to snuff me?” The pistol box was locked. “I don’t think so, bud. Army oath, you know? Hooah.” Then I saw Lloyd’s eyes, peeking from behind the haze of foggy, gray death. Jumbee or not, boils or no—Lloyd was my friend. “Hoah,” I said again.

He stopped. Dead in his tracks. “Jumbee,” was all he said, lookin’ square and unflinching at that damned self-playing zombie powder spitting, demoniac piano. “Jumbee...” Lloyd struggled.

“Yeah, man. Jumbee. That ain’t you.” He was in there, alright—lost someplace, but I’d find him. “It’s the piano isn’t it?” As I spoke, Lloyd stamped his feet and charged the piano like a bull with a Devil dancin’ between its horns.

The ivory keys danced off of the board, pounding and jumping like Mexican beans. Lloyd, Jumbee stared long and hard at the keys, dusted by Voodoo dander. The zombies shifted my way.

“That’s it, Lloyd—you got ‘im.” I nervously eyed the zombies.

The talker approached me proudly in Johnny Reb regalia, his rusty saber drawn. “What did you say?”

“Come on out, man!” I focused on Lloyd. The music was deafening.

In the next instant, Big King Jumbee lifted up the ax and was an inch from cleaving my hand clean from my wrist.

“Shit!” No hesitation, I smashed the glass of Harriet Tubman’s smoke wagon and skinned it. Locked, cocked, Bang! I planted a .44 caliber slug in Big King Jumbee’s left shoulder. Might as well have hit him with a city bus. Fucker went down quick.

The blast smoked up the parlor and the piano started buzzing, clicking, hissing, and spitting up mahogany wasps. Red stingers swarmed like a Biblical plague, nipping at me, burning my already tender skin with venom. Thank the Lord I wasn’t allergic, but the mumps alone were killer.

I let the piano have it. Four more slugs. But that didn’t stop it from playing. King Jumbee stirred and grunted, bleeding gray, chunky blood from both ends of the bullet wound. I gave him the boots and snatched up the hatchet.

Raising the bloody ax over my head, Lloyd blinked. “Wake up!” Choked up, tears flooded my sight. The piano music wouldn’t stop and the zombies approached, knocking against one

another. The Talker's saber wavered in the air. "Wake up!" I screamed.

"What did you say?"

Rage took over and my arms acted without instruction from my brain. I chopped. Hacked. Splintered the piano to pieces and splintered the splinters, crushing and stomping until little more than a heap of crooked toothpicks remained. The keys screeched. Strings moaned. Wood howled and clattered. One minute the hornets frenzied, the next they dropped dead from the air.

Three more whacks and the piano stopped playing entirely and a dervish of powdery debris burst. The gust of fetid wind rushed over me, tussled my perfect hair and stunk up the place with moss and fish. Maggots spilled from the evil instrument's innards, collecting into a wriggling mound.

"B-Bucky?" Lloyd's familiar voice chimed like church bells. His skin was clean, eyes normal. Hell, he looked like a slippery million bucks. Well, except for the .44 caliber hole I planted in him. "Buck..." he repeated faintly. "Look out..."

The horde moved on me, slow as molasses but in numbers. A nubby hand pummeled me. Another tore my shirt. A quicker feller with one-eye gummed my arm, but couldn't break the skin. I put out his remaining eye with the barrel of Harriet Tubman's pistol, and with one backwards swing of the ax, I dispatched two more.

I was on high, man. Chopping, whacking, chopping, hacking. Bathing in the cadaverous ichors of twenty dead men. "How you like that, you Voodoo Wizard Honky Tonk!" I hollered for Jesus and his fat-bellied angels. That's right, but before I could gloat like an idiot in the graces of my own dumbass, bullshit—See, the zombies was finished, but the ruined piano, well, he answered back.

"YOO BEEN MEDDLIN' INDA DARK PLACES, BUCKY DENNIS, WOLF-KILLAH! HIGH TIME BIG KING JUMBEE WAKE UP AND GET COMIN'! SOULS NEED STICKING, LITTLE SWEETIE FELLA WIT A GUN!" The voice reverberated into a choir of ten thousand voices, pitched high and tearing. And from the splintered remnants of the piano, maggots gathered up, wringing and writhing into an unholy braid of worm. We're talkin' one big ass honkin' grub, babe. If there were any shit left in me, I'd have messed myself. No doubt.

•

I heaved the ax at what I could only guess was the neck. No dice. The ax swept clean

through the ghastly hive. Lurching with fangs of splintered wood fragments, jagged and cruel, the creature rolled closer, impossibly fast for its girth.

“Shit on me.” There wasn’t any time for thinking. So, I did the next best thing. “Run! Lloyd, get he hell out of here!” I pulled Lloyd from his muck sprawl. “Let’s go, bud. I gotcha.”

Scrambling up the stairs, out of the parlor, we hightailed it.

The Wonder Wash scrubbed phantom cars again, the diesel purred like a pussy. I don’t know what possessed me, but I started for the wash. Sure enough, Big King Jumbee slid from the dark, shambling up the parlor staircase on a million maggot legs.

“FOOL! YOO CANNOT ESCAPE. NOBODY GOT THE LUCK, SPECIALLY A WHITE-DEVIL, HONKY MASTAH LIKE YOO!” The worm skidded across the wet, pavement, a lot faster than you’d think a squirming, patchwork horror could.

“I ain’t nobody’s master but my own, babe.” I rapped on the diesel drum. Full and guzzling away at seventy odd gallons. “Sweet, Texan petrol.” I popped the cap, tore off my shirt, and stuffed it inside. The fumes burned my throat, watered my eyes, but my shirt soaked in seconds.

“GONNA BURY MYSELF RIGHT INDA SKIN AND NIBBLE TO THE BONE!” Big King Jumbee squirmed up the wash and perched on the fuel tanks, poised to strike. “I’LL SUCK YOUR MARROW!”

“Yeah, well. I’d eat me cooked!” My lighter flickered flame.

Shifting, the maggot curled around me, a tendril of putrid, carrion filth.

Tossing the lighter, my shirt went off like a Roman candle followed by a deafening blast.

A diesel fireball boomed, hurling me like a ragdoll, rocketing my charred body through the cool, wash of the sudsy spinner as a million maggots sizzled and pooped in the immense heat. Shrieking only for a moment before the fire washed clean any remains.

I shook like a wet dog and hurried to safety as Vinny’s Wonder Wash collapsed into a sunder. The electrical sparked and blew, showering hot sparks.

“Is, uh. Is that thing dead?” Lloyd looked straight up.

I breathed in real deep, filled up the lungs with moist, Southern air. The crickets fiddled and somewhere off I heard an owl hoot. “Fucker’s cooked.”

Lloyd nodded. “Nice night otherwise, huh?”

“Yeah, just lookin’ at the stars.” I said. They twinkled. “You remember anything?”

“You shot me, right?” he asked, nursing his arm.

“Yeah I did.” Luckily it blew clean through, plus he was strong. “You good?”

Lloyd glanced at the wound. “Yeah, looks it.”

We watched the stars. No shooters, but the dipper glittered like pearls on black sackcloth. Lloyd touched my arm. No words or nothing.

“Pretty, ain’t it?” I rolled Harriet’s cool nickel chamber with a dirty thumb. “You’ll never guess whose—.”

From the smoking pyre a burning skeleton emerged. Uniform ablaze, wielding a drooping, red-hot saber. The Dead talker, crumbled to its knees. “Whose is Bucky Dennis? Who is he? What did you say? Who is Bucky—?”

I raised Harriet, pulled back the hammer and fired. Smoldering skull blasted into the wet pavement, hissing as the ashy shards clattered. The saber curled into a heap of orange metal, steaming in the water, until its twisted blade faded into black.

“I’m Bucky Dennis. I didn’t say nothin’.”

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THE UNSETTLING, UNCANNY, UNNERVING, STRANGEST (and only) RECORDED CASE OF SOUTHERN EQUILATERAL AND ABORIGINAL, CANNIBAL PYGMY SHIT-FIEND TERRORIZATIONS AND VAMPIRIC KIDNAPPINGS TO HAVE EMERGED FROM HUNTSVILLE (in Verney County, Mississippi), DURING THE LATTER HALF OF THE 1980 LEAP YEAR, UPON WHICH FOURTEEN SPRY, SOUTHERN YOUTHS WENT MISSING IN THE LAVATORY OF THE HERSHALL T. WEXFORD STREET Y.M.C.A. ON THE NIGHT OF COLONEL PHILLIP ISAAC LEBOWITZ’S RETIREMENT FROM THE CUSTODIAL STAFF OF SAID ESTABLISHMENT, WHEREATER MR. BUCKY SOLOMON DENNIS WAS SWORN IN AS HIS REPLACEMENT, IT BEING NOTED THAT THE AFOREMENTIONED SUCCESSOR WAS IN NO WAY SHAPE OR FORM INVOLVED WITH THE DISAPPEARANCES ON WHICH THIS PIECE OF SHORT NARRATIVE CENTERS UPON, TOOK RESIDENCE AT VERNEY COUNTY’S ONE AND ONLY YOUNG MEN’S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION AND, DID DUTIFULLY AND ADMIRABLY PERFORM: CLEANINGS OF THE SINKS, TOILETS, AND URINALS, AS WELL AS FOCUSED ATTENTION TO STOCKING OF PAPER TOWELS AND VENDING

MACHINES, INCLUDING (but not limited to): A FANTA, MENTHOL CIGARETTE, AND BIG BILLY'S SUNDAY LOTTERY TICKET DISPENSER; THIS WAS ROUTINE, UNTIL THE EVENTS OF FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20th (a date that will never be forgotten amongst the townspeople of Hunstville), WHEN REVEREND MARTIN W. CROON WAS FOUND, EMACIATED AND SALLOW FROM MASSIVE HEAD TRAUMA AND LOSS OF BLOOD AND BODILY FLUIDS, IN THE SAUNA AFTER HAVING PASSED AN UNFLUSHED MOVEMENT OF THE BOWEL IN THE LADIES LAVATORY AT THE HERSHALL T. WEXFORD Y (this not being out of the ordinary as the men's room had been closed for service in response to the previous incidents); HIS BOWEL MOVEMENT WAS TESTED, CONFIRMING THE TIME OF EXPULSION TO BE 7:00PM (Central Standard Time) WHEREAS REV. CROON'S TIME OF DEATH WAS DETERMINE AT 7:14PM (CST) BY MEANS OF LACERATION TO THE CRANIUM, EXPOSURE OF THE FRONTAL LOBE, and MASSIVE PLASMA LOSS, YET NO RESIDUAL (or Excess) FLUID WAS FOUND AT THE SCENE, WHICH WAS BAFFLINGLY CLEAN OF ANY MESS OR NEED FOR LICENSED, BONDED, AND INSURED STATE BIOHAZARD CLEANUP PERSONNEL; TO AVOID A RUCKUS AND KEEP NEARBY RESIDENTS, PATRONS, AND VARIOUS YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS IN SESSION WITH FULL USE OF THE PROPERTY AND FACILITIES, THE AFOREMENTIONED MR. BUCKY DENNIS WAS, THEREAFTER, ENLISTED TO SCRUB DOWN THE SAUNA WITH COMET (among other over the counter, household cleansers) IN AN EFFORT TO MAINTAIN FACE AND PRESTIGE FOR THE VALUED COMMUNITY ESTABLISHMENT, AND THE HISTORICAL FIGURE (author of Confederate Automaton), FROM WHICH COMES SAID ESTABLISHMENT'S NAMESAKE, PROFESSOR HERSHAL T. WEXFORD BEING A PROMINENT CIVIL WAR INVENTOR, RESPECTED AND HONORED NOT ONLY AS A GREAT THINKER, SCIENTIST, AND PHILOSOPHER, BUT ALSO AS A LEADER IN THE FIELD OF PARANORMAL, OCCULT, AND METAHUMAN RESEARCH INTO LESSER KNOWN, ALCHEMICAL AND ECTOPLASMIC SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT, SOME OF WHICH, MR. DENNIS ONCE, CURRENTLY, AND WILL CONTINUE TO BE UNWILLINGLY FAMILIAR WITH, BUT WHOSE COINCIDENTAL PARALLELS HAVE NO CONNECTION TO THE EVENTS CONCERNING THE CANNIBAL PYGMY SHIET-FIEND, OR THE DISAPPEARANCES OF THE PREVIOUSLY REFERENCED FOURTEEN

SOUTHERN TWEENS, OF WHOM TWELVE MANGLED, SKINNED, DRAINED, DISMEMBERED, DISEMBOWELED, AND DEBONED CORPSES WERE RECOVERED IN THE OLYMPIC-SIZED SWIMMING POOL, ON SUCCEEDING DAYS BY ONE MARTHA LENORE GREENBERG-STIRM AT 6:00AM (CST), PROCEEDING THE P.R.S.L.B.C. (Puerto Rican Senior Ladies Badminton Club) DAILY REGIME OF WATER JOGGING, ROMAN WATER CHAIRS, AND LEG SQUAT INTERVALS, OF WHICH RECENTLY RETIRED COLONEL PHIL LEBOWITZ HAD BEEN NOTEABLY FOND OF IN THE LATTER HALF OF HIS EMPLOYMENT AS THE HERSHALL T. WEXFORD CUSTODIAL ASSOCIATE, AND FURTHERMORE, ASKED TO RESIGN OVER, HAVING CREATED AN UNPLEASANT ENVIRONMENT FOR THIRTY ODD, SCANTILY CLAD AND ELDERLY, PUERTO RICAN BADMINTON CHAMPTIONS (Six time champions at City, State, County, and Southern Regionals); UPON LEBOWITZ'S RESIGNATION, BUCKY DENNIS NOT ONLY REPLACED HIM, BUT ON OCCASION, WAS INVITED AS A GUEST TO ASSIST IN THE TEACHING OF BACK-HANDED SHUTTLECOCK TECHNIQUE, AS MR. DENNIS WAS QUITE LEARNED IN THE PLAYFUL ART OF BADMINTON, HAVING DEVELOPED A TASTE FOR THE GAME DURING THE SECOND OF TWO TOURS IN THE VIETNAM WAR, AND THOUGH HIS TEACHING WAS INFREQUENT AT BEST, HE WAS, INDEED SEASONED, WELL-LIKED, AND PREFERRED AMONGST MANY OF THE VOLUNTEER INSTRUCTORS, WHO OF LATE, NO LONGER APPEARED NOR ANSWERED QUERIES, AND AFTER A PERIOD OF FOUR DAYS, WERE DECLARED MISSING BY LOCAL COUNTY AUTHORITIES AND LINKED TO THE HORRIFIC, UNFATHOMABLE, AND INDESCRIBABLY GRUESOME DEATHS ATTRIBUTED TO THE SAME CANNIBAL, PYGMY SHIT-FIEND HAUNTING...

* * * * *

...THE HERSHALL T. WEXFORD Y

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1

My perspective changed the moment I noticed—I weren't bothered by the stink of another man's shit. Hell, I'd be the first to admit there must've been a whole stampede of genius sons of

bitches expandin' their consciousness on the porcelain throne. You don't just wake up and split the atom, you know? You pop a vein and pinch that sucker off. As for me, Bucky D.? Well, there I was pushin' a soggy, fecal-matted mop, wondering just why in holy hell these assholes couldn't pinch into the bowl. Wasn't always that gross, though. That's for darn tootin'. See, folks were scared to use the men's room at the Hershall T. Wexford Y.M.C.A. because of all the killings.

Sheriff Wade Beverly and his bug-eyed, slack-jawed deputies didn't seem to have a clue. Fourteen boys, a librarian, a priest, and the two rookie detectives from Jacksonville they sent to monitor the place at night—all dead from some way or another, sometimes not all in one piece. The case went serial when the detectives bit the dust, so the FBI flew in from D.C. with fancy suits and hats. They left two months later, when the handbook and computer programs pulled up donut. Truckloads of National Guard boys, scanners, trippers, cameras, even a device that tracked pheromones—still nothing. In the end, the suits called it a town matter. Ordered the place closed. Closed until about a year ago. It was decided the killer used the Y.M.C.A. like a trophy room, that the concentration of the murders was elsewhere. Elsewhere? Hell, Verney ain't got but two thousand people. Here, there, or across the street—what's the difference?

Naturally the killer followed the patrons out, did his grim business, and carted the bloodless, gnarled bodies back into the bathroom. Anyhow, things had been quiet for a while. That's about the time they started hiring staff again. Me.

I rang out the mop and hosed off the linoleum floor with a hefty helping of bright blue cleanser. Stuff ate away the grime like acid, potent. I got nosebleeds whenever I whipped out the industrial fluid. Nose itched too. My yellow gloves were too soapy, so I scratched the schnozzle on my sleeve. Looking in the mirror, my hair'd never been worse. I'd been crowned with eternal bed-head since I took that fuckin' job. But, Hell I needed the money, man. Cops still had my '69 Charger impounded and damn it, dude—I needed to cruise. Parole kept me anchored in the County, but that was up in a year. Soon, I'd hightail it out of that Mississippi misery and roar my engine over to Wichita. Maybe get me some.

“Dennis! You're paid to mop the shit, not stare at it?” That was Clayton the boss man. Stocky, little cuss about half my age with hair like a spring chicken; Clay volunteered. Yeah, that's right: a volun-fuckin'-teer that loved gettin' up in my business every damn day. “And trim that mustache if you're gonna sport it, okay, Dennis? You roger that, Dennis?”

“Wilco, sir. Loud and clear.” It was true too. Damn. My 'stache and chops grew together.

Full beard. Ain't proud, but life weren't no breeze. Give it another month and I'd be collecting strays two by two. "Just finishin' up in here."

"Oh, and Dennis?" Clay scratched his head and examined the empty stall. "You ever find that toilet seat?"

"Nope." I wheeled the squeaky bucket to the supply closet beside the pool. Father Louis and Rabbi Weinenbaum stewed in the hot tub, gossiping like usual. Those two troublemakers came every Monday for a soak. Mostly just told dirty jokes, albeit tame jokes. Nice fellers.

"Evenin' Buck," they hailed.

"Father, Rabbi." I nodded back.

"Haven't seen you in church lately," Father Louis always asked.

"Or temple," Rabbi Weinenbaum always added. They laughed, thought it was funny as heck.

"So, you two cats makin' Holy water or what?"

Father Louis did a quick sign of the cross and the Rabbi took a swig of his Perrier.

"Peace be with y'all," I said and gave 'em Spock's live long and prosper finger-fork.

Turning the corner, I unloaded my cart and slipped out of my overalls. God, I hated that job. But when I clocked out it meant I'd be headed home. And I hated home even worse.

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2

Fridge was on the fritz, so I had my Bud warm. Pickle jar was empty, egg carton light as a feather. "Pork and beans it is," I said. The cable fluttered in and out and the only thing the motel manager maintained was his fake tan. Yeah, I said motel. Eddie Peacock's Roadside Inn. Sat outside of town, spitting distance from the Jacksonville Spaghetti Factory. Damn, I'd have given anything for spaghetti over those rancid ass beans.

My answering machine flashed. Eddie Peacock wanting his rent I presumed. I ignored it and dialed what I thought was her number. I always kid myself that I'd forgotten it—but I didn't. Her man picked up. "Christ."

"Sorry?" he queried.

"Hey, bud. Bucky here. Can I talk to her?" I asked, real nice like.

"She's out," he said, breathing hard. "I'll tell her you called."

"Wait, hold on, now. What about the kids?" Minnie and May, my beauties, my twin girls—

the real reason I called. “Can I say hi or?”

“They’re out in the pool with some friends,” he said. “Yeah,” he paused, “Now’s probably not the best time, Buck. We’re about to open presents.”

“Just a quick Happy Birthday. Just one minute, man.” My tears already welled but you can bet your ass there wasn’t a quiver in my voice.

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” He talked real quiet. “Call back a bit later, huh. It’ll be better.”

“Better. Okay. Right. Just—.” The refrigerator sputtered.

“Say that again?”

“Just tell ‘em their daddy called, will ya?” And that was that. When I hung up the phone the little ding knelled like a funeral bell. I dragged my menthol cigarette down to the filter and put it out on my boot. “Call back later,” I repeated. My fingertips felt strange, ghostly and I shrugged off the pangs of loneliness. The buzzing radio wasn’t any kind of help either. Bucky Dennis really was a “Pilgrim of Sorrow.”

•

3

Gutter duty at the Hershall T. Wexford Y.M.C.A. was tough. See, a moderately trained master of the custodial arts can handle anything. Even three stories. Dirty and taxing on the back, the duty meant I’d be sleepin’ on the floor to straighten out, but I had me a new system involving pool cleaning tools. And shit, bud, it almost made the gutter sweeps fun. I’d take them long ass poles and duct tape a garden trowel to the end of it sideways—use that to scrape clean all the leaves and junk. Every once in a while I’d have to toss out a squirrel skeleton. Well, that or a mummified pigeon carcass. Mostly sticks and gunk though. But on that particular day, I needed me a whole new strategy.

“Son of a—.” Tried to watch my language around the kids. They played foursquare in the tennis court. “—gun,” I finished.

The trowel got hung up and clanked around. Climbing the latter, I noticed a sliver of missing tar on the roof and the pole was caught in the gap. Gravel trickled, rattling over my shoulders like coffee beans from a tin can. Small, I thought, Easy patch job.

I examined the rift. Tar dripped from the ceiling. Odd, but Mississippi did get damn hot, even in early autumn. Peering through the portal, I noticed screwed up rafters, cracked down the middle, but holding. Hershall T. Wexford was an older building, prewar and hadn’t had a decent

retro-fit since the 1960s. Wouldn't have given the damages another thought—not with the rest of the crap that was wrong with the damn place. But the claw marks perked my interest.

Deep, sharp grooves tattooed support beams. I squeezed through the gap, my blue overalls black with sticky tar. I sat on a ledge, looking down into the Olympic swimming pool. Some kids in floaters played Marco Polo. “What we got here?” I said, eyein’ Miss Molly’s cleavage and tracing the marks with my fingers.

Dried blood chipped away. “Raccoons again.” A shadow on the other side of the gymnasium, up against the aluminum air duct shifted in the midmorning sunlight.

I inched over the beam carefully. Reminded myself twice if I fell I’d splash into the hot tub with Miss Molly. The shadow at the end of the beam swung back and forth slightly, a pendulum. Probably a loose timber, maybe a broken air duct. A flat, wooden ledge bridged the beams, nailed sturdy. Footing weren’t a problem, so I edged closer confidently, that was, until I met the dark. Wafts of rank methane filled my nose and stunk like a hog house. Flies clung on my arms.

Without a flashlight I couldn’t see nothing. I sparked my lighter. “Son of a bitch!” I spit the words out like a flat beer. “What in the hell?”

It hung upside-down, far as I could tell, swinging from severed electrical cabling like a cadaver in the gallows. Pointy ears, flat snout, and I’ll be damned if that missing toilet seat wasn’t around its neck like a collar.

“Jesus Houdini!” I yelled like the dumbass that I was. But, when I took the Lord’s name in vain—shit, man—the Thing weren’t too pleased. Red, beady eyes flashed open, frenzied and foul. White, leathery wings stretched and fangs spat inky fluid onto my shirt.

I flipped, dude—lost my footing and slid backwards off of the platform, nutting myself on the beam, then down, down, down, plummeting three stories into the hot tub. Splash was so big it left the tub half-empty. I looked up, expecting to see that rapid hell-winged heathen barreling like a boozed up Kamikaze. But it was gone, disappeared in a plume of swampy, green gas. I listened for it, but heard nothing over the laughter of kids.

“Oh, God! Mr. Dennis, you alright?” Molly’s tits bobbed in the water like buoys. “Didn’t knock your head did you? Could’ve gotten a concussion.” Molly’s lisp was endearing. And she was cute as a daisy. Well, cute as a daisy with a lisp.

“I feel like an ornery mule’s been rammin’ my a—.”

Miss Molly frowned.

“Butt’s a little sore, that’s all.”

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4

Y’all that knew me back then, knew Buck Dennis had seen some shit. I ain’t talkin’ ‘Nam, neither. See, there’s the world we know and the world as it is. Five years ago, I’d have explained just about everything away to the Shit Happens Doctrine. But years tick by, people get old and silver knits the beard. You get to thinking, Hell, every damn thing in a man’s life can’t be chalked up to shit happening. Must be purpose. So, I decided to make some. Purpose. Not shit.

Lloyd revved up the engine of his 1963 Pontiac Tempest as we pulled into the only visitor space at Verney County Community College.

“You feel that shimmy?” Lloyd said, furling his brow and biting his pink tongue.

“I feel a bit of a bump when she shifts,” I said with my ear to the dash like a Cherokee listening for buffalo. “Nah, I don’t think feel it.” Lloyd was an old Army buddy. Hooah. Saved my life in ‘Nam and I returned the favor at Vinny’s Wonder Wash about a year earlier. Used to man a Huey and kicked ass for the U.S.A. Now? Shit, bud. Now I pushed a fuckin’ mop and Lloyd mixed sauce for Rao’s Crayfish Curry House.

“So, where is this Doc Chorb?” Lloyd picked his Afro in the mirror.

“Lady on the phone said he teaches in Donald Pearse Hall. The building with the taco stand in front.” I folded up my aviators, brushed up my chops and mustache and slicked back my hair. I may’ve been pushin’ forty, but I still had the charmin’ looks of Johnny Cash. ‘Sides, you gots to look good for them young university type ladies, know what I mean? I hadn’t been intimate with a women in three years.

Ten minutes and two tacos later Lloyd and I stepped into the Zoology office in search of some answers. Stuffed badgers, birds, lizards, and a shit load of bugs pinned to bulletin boards lined the walls, oddly paired with alcohol safety posters. Jars of formaldehyde and critter corpses glimmered ugly, spying from dead, googly eyes with tongues unfurled. They’d seen better days, chief.

“Um, can I help you, gentlemen?” A curly haired dude with chops and a holiday sweater peeked out from a book closet.

“I’m lookin’ for Doc Chorb. The animal guy?” My gaze was stuck on a bullfrog in a jar. I think it blinked.

“I’m Dwayne Chorb.” The little feller struggled to move a strong box.

I sat at one of the desks. “Doc, y’all know about critters. Right?”

He nodded. “Quite a bit, yes. Please, call me Dwayne. And uh, you are?”

“Hey, man. Sorry about that.” My manners were shot. “Name’s Bucky Dennis, Hershall T. Wexford Y.M.C.A. Custodial Associate. This is Lloyd, Chief Saucier at Rao’s Crayfish Curry House.”

Dwayne stood over the strong box. “And...you’ve got some questions about wild life?” He lifted a small, framed caterpillar cadaver from the strong box.

We knelt in for a better look.

“We ordered a few hundred specimens form Papua New Guinea this year. This guy arrived yesterday. It’s been really exciting.” Chorb studied it, opening a leather journal where he traced his fingers over some notes and drawings.

“So, you’re like, just a bug guy or...” I bit my own lip, stupid thing to say.

“No, no. I’m actually focused in the mammalian—but I can’t help my excitement over new species. I’m a bit of a cryptozoologist, you see. No body thought these little fellas were real until about a year ago.”

“So you could, you know, identify stuff.”

“Yes,” he said, abruptly.

“Great! See, I found this big, beefy, weird ass bat-lookin’ thing at the Y—way up in the rafters above the pool.” I’m certain the bullfrog blinked.

“A giant bat?” The professor scratched the tip of his nose with his pen, doodling on his face accidentally. “Sure, bats roost around here all the time. Carry diseases too.”

“It ain’t normal. This bastard’s the size of a Schwinn, man. All white, leathery, burnt up lookin’ with huge, red eyes, and ornery as a gator. Fangs like forks, know what I mean?”

Dwayne Chorb didn’t respond and Lloyd put his hand on my shoulder.

“Maybe I was mistaken,” I said. Clearly, the Doc had himself better things to do. Maybe he was hungry—going to fry his brand new caterpillar on its pushpin and get lunching.

“Wait, now. I’m not discrediting anything that you say you’ve seen. Lots of people see mutant strains of animals they can’t explain. Chupacabras for example are simply mange-ridden coyotes. At least that’s my theory.”

“So you’re thinkin’ we’ve got a rogue, mutant, giganto-bat hanging ‘round the Y.M.C.A.” I

tapped out a cig and lit her up.

“Very unlikely,” he barked, curtly. Chorb adjusted his glasses and ran his fingers through his curly hair. “Lots of mutant strains pop up, you know. In the 1890s a collector found a strange, giant eared bat in New Guinea. Never found a specimen like it since. It was likely to be a strange variant of a native species.

“This chum weren’t a local, Doc.”

A long drag of menthol swirled from my mouth and I took three steps out the door.

“Wait, Mr. Dennis I didn’t mean to—.” Chorb betrayed a smug tone, stuffy as the Duke of Pumpernickel.

“Yeah.” I didn’t look back. “Lloyd, lets roll, babe.”

•

5

Clayton wouldn’t listen about the bat. His thin lips smacked over the sticky Clark bar, chocolate smudges at the corners of his mouth. Guess he was too pissed off to eat clean. Far as Clay was concerned, and the rest of the world for that matter, disappearances had ended. The police finished their report. Hell, even arrested a nut job in Georgia, I heard. Squirrely lookin’ guy with a cleft lip and a lazy eye that apparently targeted young men and had a thing for the macabre. Case closed.

Nope. Clay wanted me worrying one thing: the poolside puke that needed mopping before Molly’s next swim class. I sighed. Fat kid running by the pool again, must’ve been the fifth time I’d cleaned up his carrots chunks and cupcake. Who’s feeding their kid that many carrots anyhow?

“Buck, I don’t care if you saw Caesar’s ghost. All you gotta do is keep the place clean and tidy, got it?” Clayton slowed to a crawl. He looked me square in the eye, sober as a preacher. “Look, Buck. If you can’t shape up...you’re gone. It isn’t exactly hard to find a guy to push a mop, ok? It’s not. Get your fuckin’ act together, ok? It’s nothing personal.”

“Yeah,” I said. And he was right. Being useless ain’t personal. That’s for other folks to decide.

•

6

I ran out of Jackie Daniels halfway through dialing her number for maybe the twentieth time. The television blared a cop show; a “who done it” program with this over weight private

eye guy hunting counterfeiters. I watched it most of the night, all the while thumbing the dial of my Minnesota Vikings telephone. Pulling the wheel around, listening to the bing, I didn't notice the credits rolling on the tube. Gumshoe didn't solve the caper for me.

Fish sticks crackled in the oven and some left over curried crayfish bubbled on the stove. Nothing tasted right though.

Around midnight I made the call. Don't know what I was thinking, really. Just wanted to talk to the girls. See if they got their birthday gifts. The phone rang for two minutes. No machine. And no picked up either.

The bottle of Jack Daniels was heavy in my hand. Hell, I was heavy. I smashed the son of a bitch against the wall. Woke the neighbor's dog and got Miss Hadly cursing again. After I cleaned up the broken glass from the carpet shag, I didn't sleep. And the next thing I knew, I'd walked through the doors of Hershall T. Wexford in my skivvies.

I staggered to my locker and thought I heard the pool's heat pump chugging. I wobbled over, stepping on my own feet. Maintaining a pool was work. You've got to be aware of every-damn-thing: chlorine levels, temperature levels, water levels. Sometimes rats get mangled in the pumps: mice, varmints and birds, too—gets pretty gnarly. But, it wasn't the heat pump hollering. It was Clay.

My tool belt clattered as I stumbled into the pool area. Clay screamed, all tore up to hell. At first glance, I thought it were his clothes that were torn, but I soon recognized the floundering pink and red. Flesh from his arms and chest hung off of the muscle like strips of bacon and a good sized tuft of his blonde curly scalp flapped to the right side of his mauled face. When he tried to speak his vocal cords sounded knotted up. Screams echoed off of the walls, rattling in the shadowy corners of the pool hall.

I ran to him, gripping my crescent wrench like a rosary when *It* emerged, swooping from the dark recesses of the crossed rafters. White leathery wings beating, breath stinking of wet iron and fungus. The man-eating fiend struck, tearing the rest of Clay's scalp clean off, gnawing on the curly strip like Copenhagen chew.

I hurled the wrench, striking the creature's forehead. The monstrosity hooked its head, a glowing gaze of horror peered through me. My heart drummed like a tribal timpani. Thump. Boom. Thump. Boom.

The creature presented itself, proudly. It wasn't a bat at all—no bat I'd ever seen. More like

a winged-midget imp with spidery limbs. Vampy's face seemed human enough, but elongated with fangs protruding from two swollen, albino lips. Tusks hung like sickles grinning. The hybrid-pygmy-vampire screeched and reached for me. Fucker had thumbs, too. Long, horrible thumbs with oily, black nails caked with tiny, wet pieces of Clayton.

"Let's go, bud. I gotcha." I hoisted Clay over my shoulder and made for the door. The steam of the sauna at the end of the corridor pooled like marsh gas on the floor. I leapt over inner tubes and foam noodles, but lost my footing on a slippery boogie board. "Crap!"

Clay wheezed, heart beating faintly against my back. Then suddenly, as if woken from a nightmare, Clayton cried out. He jerked and gurgled, then nothing. Still. Vampy's putrid stink flooded my nose. Clay's insides spilled to the floor, snaring me with fecal-packed intestines.

I swear on Mama's birthstone I heard Vampy chuckle with wicked-ass glee as it fluttered up into the darkness with Clay's lower half. Blood spilled from the crawlspace, splashing gory mist like a bloody waterfall. The pool turned pink. Alone again, I lost consciousness to the rhythmic lullaby of Clay's left-over foot plugging the filter.

•

7

Yeah, I had me a rap sheet. Not too long, but marked with the big M. You know, Murder. Did I do it? Sure did. Was it murder? If murder's clubbing a seven-foot tall Hound of Hell into a kitchen floor with a can of spaghetti—I'm guilty as sin. But in the end, after all the hot lights, sweaty recorded serenades, and a mean ass Judge—police dropped the charges. Still lost two good years in County though. And they impounded my Dodge.

"You gonna tell us what happened, Mr. Dennis?" Detective Fat Ass asked with a mouth full of burrito. He stared me down with a lazy eye, scratching that jiggling belly of his. Fat Ass fired down a thousand year old churro and chased it with cold coffee. "Well?" he added, ignoring the beans clumped on his tie.

"When does Sheriff Beverly get in? I'd like to talk to a man with some sense." I needed to take a crap, man. I'd been in the box too long.

"It's a Huntsville matter, Dennis. Beverly's in Wichita anyhow." Fat Ass picked at the wax in his ear.

"You got the wrong guy up in Georgia. That's for damn sure," I told 'em straight.

The interrogation room felt like a smokehouse. Good thing my lungs were accustomed to it.

Shit man, I imagined they were two shriveled up, garbage bags filling and emptying over and over, waiting for the day they'd up and tear. Didn't used to smoke though. Picked up that habit in Vietnam. Figured I'd quit for my babies, but I never seen 'em. Those days smoking kept me even, a little gift to myself. Besides, my perspective on mortality had changed.

"Mind if I bum a cig?" I asked.

"When you start talking, maybe." Fat Ass' stomach grumbled. "Work must be hard to find these days."

"You gonna hold me another two years, man? I told you. Clay was mulched when I found him." The Jack lingered on my breath, knew they could smell it too.

"Drunk. Wandering to work in the dead of night looking for odd jobs? I don't buy it, Dennis." Fat Ass sat down and drummed his pudgy fingers on the table.

"Being a drunk divorcee ain't a crime in Mississippi if I recall."

That must of stirred some pity. He handed me a cigarette, lit it. Three minutes later they pulled the plug. I was just a middle aged, burnt out, ex-con moppin' shit and puke anyhow. I'd joined the rank of Nobodies, a whole slew of worthless souls livin' underground. Like them blue fellers in Time Machine—like the sad fellers hunched over greasy Reuben sammies at the dinner bar on Sunday afternoons. It's hard to watch 'em chat up waitresses with names like: Flo, Blanch, and Mauve. They ain't got nothin'. And I had less. When I stamped out the cigarette ashes sparked bright as the sun. Butt, shit man. Bucky Dennis didn't spark like that no more.

•

8

Squatting under my one, coffee stained lamp, I loaded Harriet's six-round cylinders with .44 caliber custom hollow powder balls. You see, Harriet was an 1848 Colt Percussion Army Revolver, so I cast my own bullets and powdered bags to stuff down the chambers with a leather flask. I said me a Hail Mary for each round. Named 'em too, after my folks, my daughters, Mrs. Tubman of course, and Clay. Yeah, Clay fucked me just about every damn day, and was grade A for asshole to boot—but he paid my rent, stocked my 'fridge, and earned me an honest keep.

My silver Verney High Class Ring twinkled as I polished her. And I kissed Mama's birthstone. "Mama, look at your boy now."

Didn't have no garlic, so I substituted garlic cloves for some garlic sauce from Benny Chong's Noodle Hut. Chong's gave me the burpin' turds fierce, but damn could they fried squid

good. I supposed albino, midget vampires didn't dig squid-garlic, neither? At least they didn't in the Dracula pictures.

My phone rang off the hook. Sheriff's office. I ignored it while I pumped garlic sauce into a handful of condoms and water balloons. I sure didn't need 'em, know what I mean?

I'd gained about eight pounds, so squeezing into my best corduroys was like trying to fit my dick into a bottle of Yoohoo. My Italian boots didn't fit right either. But when those breeches snuggled up against my ass? Hell, I looked good, babe. Bucky D. sure wasn't going shabby to his funeral. Hope Lloyd gets a mariachi band with yellow tuxedos. Hoped that if I did die my ex'd be there with the girls. Let 'em see their dad did somethin' well. Let 'em see. I didn't take no guff. Not from man or the Devil's midget blood-sucker.

•

9

Before dawn, somewhere in the sticks, a lone rooster lamented all the chickens other getting fired. By the sounding of the cock's crow, I knew my time'd come. So, I managed to shimmy through the first twenty feet of Hershall Wexford's air conditioning duct until it widened enough to shuffle on my knees. Harriet at the ready, I flashed my light into the shadowy, silver corridor.

"Gotcha now, buddy boy." My voice reverberated. What better way to grab a snack than skitter above while folks make in the john. Sure, Clay bought it at the pool and Reverend Croon in the Sauna, but Vampy certainly had his way with them fourteen boys in the lavatory.

Violet, glass-speckled insulation bedded the crawlspace. I minded my mouth, but my hands itched. The stench of fish stew and dung clung to the wooden paneling. The little bastard wasn't dangling.

"Yeah," I muttered and gagged a bit, stepping over a hunk of gnawed heel. Clay's other foot no doubt, gooey red gelatine on an oversized, chewed-up pencil. "Where the hell are you, Vampy?" I whispered, flashlight illuminating the pockets of darkness in the ceiling.

A hissing, wheezing sound echoed in the rafters.

"There you are." Harriet's hammer clicked back with the touch of my thumb. I readied a pitch, gripping one of my garlic sauce balloons.

The creature didn't stir in the artificial light. Snoring, chubby, and thirst slated by the juicy meat of good folks. It rocked backwards with white, webby wings heaving up and down, their leathery pinions pumping. Wide-set eyes were sealed shut and its fanged mouth blubbered as it

exhaled rotten breath.

I aimed carefully. “Peace out, babe.” Click. Clack. Bang! Square through the eyes with a flash of fiery powder.

The pygmy erupted from its unholy slumber, head wound gushing black, inky fluid. Vampires don’t drop that easy.

I wound up a fastball but choked. Strong, gnarly claws tore my corduroys like tissue paper and ripped for my meatballs. I struck back, bursting the garlic balloon over its toothy maw. Purple fire blasted, licking my beard and eyebrows.

“Yo,” I shouted at the top of my lungs, holdin’ tight to my meat and veggies. “You go for a man’s tackle. You get burned!” I planted two more slugs and hurled another balloon. It dodged, quick as a whip and scratched up the wall like a cockroach.

“Where the hell?” I mouthed, flashlight beam jumping from shadow to shadow. “Gone.”

The whispery patter of ink dabbled my shoulders from the ceiling. Shit weren’t tar neither. “Look’s like Vampy sprung a leak.” Gun smoke and sulfurous violet steam pumped out of the gap in the room. I edged onto the support beams, sliding over the pool and bubbling hot tub.

“Why the Hell do you smell like fish?” I asked myself.

Spidery fingers snagged my ankle. Splinters raked my face, lodging into my mustached as the vampire pulled me back into his cave and down into the aluminum air duct. Wedged like sardines, the two of us wrestled, squeaking into the tube until we busted a ceiling grate. We splashed into the handicapped toilet bowl, crashed through the stall door. Harriet slid along the wet linoleum and my last balloon exploded in the sink.

The crotchety fiend hobbled towards me, hissing broken words: “Manuval haka kishik isis murshtursh!” The vampire screeched, a choir of demons tearing from its unholy throat.

I faded left. Faded right. And gave ‘im the five fingered Buick.

Vampy cocked its battered head and sneered. “Ashaka Manuval, anglish ek Wahee!”

I grabbed ‘im, perfect headlock, and bashed his ugly ass mug into the sink maybe five times. “No speaketh bullshit, hombre. Eat porcelain!”

Sharp pain rippled down my leg and into my toes. Broken ankle—bad too. My foot swelled up like a honeydew, metatarsals shifting in bruised meat.

Limp in my arms, I dropped the pygmy with a splash and reached for the spinning revolver. Slipping across the floor I snatched it. “Lights out you son of a—.”

Vampy rasped, beating its sickly wings towards the pool.

Dizziness swept over me as I hobbled after him. Emerging, The pool glowed, sparkling under a single sliver of daylight.

“Where you at?” The echo carried into the vaulted ceiling.

Sharp teeth scraped my skull, ripping a good portion from my scalp as the hellish beat of wings lifted my heels from the floor. Blood dripped into my eyes.

The crimson curtain dropped wet and hot. My whole life flooded over me, drowning my lungs, it burned like chlorine. Bucky Dennis was pinched. Pinched and flushed—vanishing from the world like a whirling turd. Hardly a memory.

A muffled voice drew out into a faint echo.

“Good morning?” It was Father Louis.

Then the Rabbi coughed. “Hello!” Sounded like he was yackin’ up a bone. “Anyone here?”

The vampire grinned cruelly. “Thok Rabba!”

I’ll be damned if that blood-sucking, man-eating, bat-fucker was gonna have his way with a holy man. Time to cowboy up.

I kicked the bastard, knocking his flapping wing crooked and we both splashed into the pool. Ghastly crimson light illuminated water. I choked, spittin’ teeth and gasping. Black fingernails raked my shoulder, digging through my ribs, exploring my queasy insides for my beating heart. His slender, pale tongue licked my nose with demonic delight.

Losing consciousness I spied the bubbling hot tub. “Can you swim, sucker? Can you swim!?” Bear hugging the monster, I leapt, plunging into the rippling water. And damn, babe, you ain’t never seen a splash like that.

The water vaporized and the blast came with such incredible force, Old Faithful’d be put to shame. Purple flames screamed from the rim as steam blasted upwards, plastering me three stories into the air. And when I came down? I landed square in a hot tub of warm, purple goop and slippery gunk. There weren’t nothin’ left of the bat but a cartload of vampire soup. To be honest I didn’t get out right away. I sat, stewed, and bled like a stuck duck in a crockpot.

“Bucky?” Father Louis and Rabbi Weinenbaum stood in towels with concerned looks.

“Father, Rabbi,” I said, still out of breath.

“What a...what in the world?”

“Are you all right, son?” They looked like pigeons, bobbing their heads all concerned like.

Didn't have words for them, just a thought that I shared. "Thanks for the blessing."

•

10

Covered in cannibal, vampire and nursing a sore ankle, I hobbled home. The eviction notice taped onto the doorframe of room 12 of Eddie Peacock's Roadside Inn didn't help my mood. Three strikes, man. I mean, sure. I'd done a service for the good folks at Hershall, but clouds didn't part and there weren't no choir of fat bellied cherubs strumming Rickenbackers.

The phone rang off the hook. Over and over. Sheriff Wade, I was sure. I rummaged through my shithole room and collected my things. Warm Bud went down smooth, Hell even the beans tasted like nature's honey. My life weren't much different from a jizz stain. And about fifty rings in, I me enough.

"Yeah! Shit, dude. Buck here!"

"Daddy?" Two sweet voices cooed from the other side.

"Y-yeah, babies." Tears welled as I heard their giggles echo a thousand miles into my heart. "Yeah, sweeties. It's Daddy." And I'll tell ya, it weren't no choir of angels. But, hell. Angles ain't got nothin' on my girls.

* * * * *

MUDDY, BLOODY MIDNIGHT

•

1

Got a dumbass, hog shit, Hallmark card from Sally today. It tore me up somethin' fierce just seeing her damn name in print—ink smudges too. The message wasn't very profound either. One of them, "Hope your life ain't shit cause mine's just fine," sort of letters. I don't know why she'd even send it. Probably some B. S. self-improvement assignment to make her feel better about lettin' me down. To think I ever thought I'd hit a home run...

Tough rocks, babe. Bucky Dennis had himself a catfish to catch and nothin' on God's green earth or the devil's burnin' basement was gonna yank that from me.

So, I tossed the yellow envelope in the crick and strolled down to Delmar's Bait N. Tackle Shoppe, shirt stuck to my back, chops disheveled, and the handlebar 'stache twitchin' for a new

glob of wax. Felt like hell, honestly. But the birch trees swung their bespeckled limbs lazily above me and the glitter of lightning bugs lit up the twilight sky over Natchez, Mississippi. Sight like that really makes a man feel small. But, hell, small ain't always as bad as people make it.

As I rounded the bend on the old trail, a cricket symphony fiddled their miniature hearts out. See, I'd always loved fishin' and all those submerged roots from the rainy season left pockets of mud holes, all stuffed to the brim with whiskered fish. And boy, wasn't 1982 a wet year for the good folks of Verney County.

A hefty, bald feller at the truck stop two miles back told me Delmar's was the place for bait —night crawlers the size of your wang, babe. And after Sally'd chimed in, hell, I figured I needed me a breather.

The screen door swung open on a single rusty hinge. Skeeters buzzed up a storm around the sizzilin' porch light. Delmar's leaned violently to the right, the shack's foundation sinking into the riverbank. Keeping my balance along the wooden planks wasn't easy.

"You'll have to watch your step, son. She's sinking faster these days." A one legged man tapped his rickety crutch against the table. His face wrinkled when he spoke, dark and gnarled as Alabama clay. He scratched his scruffy, white whiskers. And I'll be damned if that smile never left his face.

Gospel music played out of the boxy, 1940s radio. The old man rocked in his chipped wicker chair and tapped his one good leg. "Don't mind the music, now." He turned it down with a roll of his big toe. "Just a little soul in the evenin' time."

"It don't bother me at all, sir. You Delmar?" I liked him immediately, somethin' about that smooth smile. Cool as water. "Pretty soon you'll be fishin' for mullet out the window, though."

Delmar laughed deep and relaxed back into his hundred year old rocker. "Yessir, son. This here shack of mine's been sinkin' a lot of years, but she never gives way. Sure must be tearin' up that devil. But this here's a good foundation." Delmar smiled warmly and I'll be damned if I didn't feel like I'd known him for years.

"I hear you're the man to see about worms." I browsed the dusty shelves. They were stockpiled with canned food, and dusty jars of olives, artichokes, and a whole slew of fishin' tackle and fly gear. Old stuff. Thirties, maybe forties.

"Well, that's what they tell me. You lookin' to get in a midnight cast?"

"Figured I'd pitch a camp way out by the flooded bank. Lots of mud out there, good for

catfish.” I stopped and took in a breath. “Find me a little quiet, maybe.” As we talked, the old man procured a moist, wooden crate. Crawlers wriggled in the black soil.

“Quiet’s a fine thing, son. You’ll find we got a whole lot of it out here,” he said. “What is it you got drummin’ in those ears that brings you to Natchez Trace?”

“Well, I ain’t one to kiss and tell. But, it has to do with lots of tellin’ and less of the kissin’.”

“Got yourself a woman pullin’ on those heart strings?” The old man scooped the earth gently and placed the worms in a tin.

“How’s that?” I just wanted her out of my mind, you know what I mean? Gotta get along with life and be. Even that sweet feller had my bad side brewing.

“I got me one good leg and I’m old as the Mississippi—but I ain’t blind.”

I didn’t reply. I didn’t have anything to say.

“Well, you know?” he cooed, “Whatever’s got you torn up. Just remember it all works out fine. You take these worms and sit by the river. She’ll sing those sorrows away directly. Lordy, she will.”

“How much?” I thumbed open my wallet, had nine dollars and a jangle of change. Times were tough as tin. My ‘69 Charger still languished in the police impound. And those days, I drifted from one motel to the next—haulin’ my bony ass by foot, ferry, and bus all over Verney County. Odd jobs. “I pay my way. How much, old timer?”

“For the worms? Son, worms come from God’s earth.” Delmar rocked back in his chair and turned up the old radio. Darn pretty music too: *“I have a right to the Tree of Life! Lord Jesus said he died, he died and I have a right to the Tree of Life. O, that sweet Tree of Life.”* Humming to the music with a wide ass smile, the old man smirked. “God’s earth, son. He don’t charge a dime. And I ain’t about to either.”

I took the worms and rattled a box of Cracker Jacks. “These belong to God too then?”

“Nope,” he said. “Those’ll run ya forty five cents.”

•

2

The kids screeched into the dusty lot, spilling out of the soft-topped, red Jeep like a young and stupid plague upon the land. A couple of girls with sorority letters, two guys. Engine still humming, the driver hopped out and poked a mockin’ finger my way.

“Hey, Mike, check out the locals,” he said, sneering with a slack-jaw. Jockey Boy wore the

University of Mississippi colors and a ponytail.

“Think his folks were cousins?” Mike squawked, eyes shifty. His overbite was distracting but he had the build of a lineman. Yeah, Rebels football was written all over him—big letters too. Back in my day I’d have gotten torn up tryin’ to pull a blitz under Mike’s watch.

“You didn’t!” Pony Tail laughed it up.

“Ew, Reggie. Don’t be mean!” scoffed the cutesy, blonde. But she still gave me the stink eye. “There aren’t other people sharing the campsite right?” Her curly hair bounced back and forth as she helped Reggie unload the car. “Susan, help me with the tent.”

Susan was a redhead—freckles and all. I had a thing for redheads. Good lookin’ ones were rare as a winter rose. Know what I mean? Sure, you got your few assorted Red Hotties. But most of them look like they’d been beaten fierce with a strawberry golf club.

I played it cool and got a quick peek at her backside—like two Georgia peaches, babe. And she had her a tight, little body to match. Pangs of guilt, age, and a need to breed splashed over me dry as delousing powder. She couldn’t have been more than twenty, yet there I was gawkin’ like a sleaze. When did I get so damn old?

“Why don’t you take a picture, buddy?” Mike stared me down like a bobcat.

I played it cool as I could, but man alive was it sure like gettin’ socked in the face by a preacher. “Y’all stayin’ at the campsite by the river or?”

“Maybe.” Blondie helped Reggie unload the cooler. “Are you?”

“No, sir. I’ll mosey up stream and hit the mud banks.” Damn kids just grinned, hammin’ up the soggy, sorry misfortune of old Bucky D. “Say, there’s good fishin’ this time of year if you’re lookin’ to cast.”

Red Susie’s luscious bounty kept on bursting from her yellow tube top. Soft, fair skin glimmered in the twilight, beads of sweat dripping down her cleavage like glittering gems. I wished I hadn’t lost my lucky aviators. Modern man’s miracle method for scopin’ the breasts of an attractive woman laid in the secrets of UV coated and tinted glass. Shit man, time was running out. Hell, if I did the math, I’d have what? Twenty years, tops? I smoked, drank, ate fried food like a fool—hadn’t even been getting any bedroom cardio. Scopin’ college tots was just about all I had left.

Without even acknowledging that I’d spoken, Reggie and Mike strapped on their packs and made down the campsite trail. “Let’s go, girls.”

“Thanks, mister,” said Susie with a smile.

“Yeah. Thanks.” Blondie chortled and they all disappeared through the cattails and stitch grass. I heard laughing for a good amount of time while I stood in the empty lot. The sun soon fell asleep and Delmar’s last lantern got huffed out. The neon Open sign flickered dark. And so, I decided to mosey on.

•

3

Back in ‘Nam we fished a lot. At least, in my unit we did. Yep, if you weren’t on patrol you sat your ass riverside with one of the company and waited for nibbles. Even after the muddiest, bloodiest days you’d find us suckin’ cold, foamin’ brew and huffin’ ganja with a rod and reel. The weed never calmed my nerves but I’d be lyin’ if I told you fishin’ didn’t.

I waded into the cloudy, brown water up to my knees in my skivvies. The bait wriggled on the hook as I cast my line into the root-woven mud bank of the Mississippi. My only light was the crackling campfire beside my pup tent. The hot, dewy air filled my lungs and my shoulders went limp. I stood for hours, lettin’ my trouble click away with the reel, dreamin’ of those whiskered catfish gliding below.

A woman can bob sideways in your mind for years before you finally right yourself. And in that one moment, probably the only moment that I could clearly remember, Sally didn’t exist at all.

The reel ticked. “What have we got here?” I whispered to myself. I sloshed through, up to my torso, careful not to spook ‘im. The line shook and the bobber leapt up out of the water like a breaching whale. “Got ya!” I hooted. Big one too, twenty incher maybe, but he fought like a fifty. I reeled and the line zipped and sang. And just as I got him within four feet or so, a strong tug pulled me under.

I splashed up. “Damn,” I chuckled, but it wasn’t funny. The line went rigid and pulled me deeper. I tugged hard. My Popeye forearms burned. But whatever wrestled me on the other end of that line was a whole lot stronger. “Come on now, you son of a—.” The line snapped and my momentum plunged me forward straight into a tree. The water whirled and bubbled. Then my monster was gone.

I sat by the fire, dryin’ my socks, sopping to the bone, and scarfing an ancient box of Cracker Jacks. It weren’t much, but a bite’s a bite on the bayou. And before long, I found myself

fantasizing about that Susie girl. In my mind she wore perfume and looked damn good bent over in them Daisy D's. "Mmm, mm." I popped a Cracker Jack and shook the prize free. "Porky Pig Compass, huh? Well alright. That's a fine—." A scream shattered my focus and Cracker Jacks flew everywhichwhere.

"What in the hell?" Between the hootin' and hollerin', I made out mad laughter and whoops. College kids were funnin'. Probably high as kites or drunk as skunks. Back in 'Nam, screwin' around like that only got you one thing: waxed. Noise at night, cigarette smoke—dead giveaway for a Charlie sniper itchin' to pound two inches of lead through my skull. I laid back. "This ain't Vietnam," I said aloud. Either way, those damn kids were havin' more fun than I ever would again. Best let 'em. So, I finished my Jacks, rubbed one out and bedded down.

•

4

I woke at midnight. Branches broke, twigs snapped, and there was splashing in the water. Crickets ceased to sing. Lightning bugs went dark. And there wasn't a toad's ribbit for miles.

I stoked the fire and looked into the trees.

"Somebody help! Please!" Here voice was faint in the bog. "Who's there?" I called. No answer. "Hello? Come on, now!" A chilly shiver rippled up my legs. Silence thundered in my ears. No sound at all, not even skittering swamp rats—just an eerie stillness and the stink of a muggy Mississippi midnight.

"Help!" Susie screamed, tumbling out of a thorn bush, legs and arms all cut to hell. "Please! Please!" She shook all over, wet with perspiration. She gripped my pant legs, pulling me away, scrambling. "We have to go!"

"Calm down. Tell Bucky what's what, girl." I tried to pick her up but she fought me, wrigglin' like a fish.

"No, no. NO. NO. No."

"I gotcha, now. Come on. You're alright." Fear welled in my belly and bubbled up into my speech. "W-we're alright."

"They're dead. She's in the water. She's really in the water!"

"Who?" Susie'd obviously gone off the deep end. That or she was tuned to a radio that weren't broadcasting.

"I don't know. The old woman. She's in the water. Reggie's dead!" Susie clawed at my

shirt, springing buttons. “We gotta go, come on. We gotta go!” Tears fell like rain drops and her makeup ran until her face looked like charcoal.

“What about the others? They dead too?” As I spoke we hurried over to my camp. Fire still burned. That was good. But I couldn’t find my knapsack.

“I don’t know,” she choked out. “I heard...I heard Lucy screaming.”

“Lucy’s the blonde,” I said.

“What?” Susie yelled, slapping my shoulders. “Come on, Mister!”

I fished through my fanny pack, little tie dyed thing I got in San Francisco. “Got it,” I said, relieved to unholster Harriet, my .44 caliber mistress of kick-ass. She was a cool two hundred years old, rusty, but maintained with love. “Stick close. You got pals out there, well we ain’t leavin’ nobody behind. Got it?”

Susie just cried, grasping my wrist. In the distance I swore I heard a Huey’s chopper blades cutting the wind. My head throbbed and I snapped back. More branches cracked and I hurried down the bank and towards the kid’s camp.

Racing through the brush and fallen trees, the canopy sighed and Susie tried her best to stop my every step. The camp was in sight. The fire roared, looked like one of the tents got slashed and went up like a powder keg.

“Please,” she said, shivering. “I don’t want to die!”

I cocked Harriet. “Look. You know what this is? It’s an 1848 Colt model percussion revolver. It belonged to Harriet Tubman. Who knows who that was?”

Susie nodded, perplexed. “W-where did you get it?”

“I lifted it from a Wonder Wash Car Wash and Civil War Museum. See these?” I pointed to the chambers. “These are six reasons why you don’t need to worry none. ‘Cause whatever the hell is on the business end of these—well, they ain’t goin’ to the prom, babe.”

Susie nodded again. Brave girl after all, cool as an iceberg.

“You good? Because I need you.” I looked her square in those blue eyes. “Stay right here and watch my ass. I’m gonna check things out and see if we can’t find your friends.” I used my training to enter the camp without sound. I inched through the leaves like an Apache. If some coked up, psycho swamp lady was out knockin’ off coeds, she’d never know what hit her. Hooah!

The heat blistered, hungry for the dry tree limbs that laid haphazardly around the campsite.

An iron kettle swung lazily from two metal posts, but there weren't no grub. I edged towards the remaining tent. Zipper was torn clean off and a streak of gore painted the side. I couldn't see past the smoke, but something moved on the inside.

"Y'all come out or I start shootin'." I aimed for the smoky portal, poking the barrel through the fluttering tent door. But there weren't no answer.

Against my better judgment I crept in and at the far end of the tent floundered a human heart, pulsing amidst a quivering pile of wet entrails. Liver, spleen, lungs—every organ of the damn body throbbed—still alive.

"Jesus Houdini Christ." I stumbled from the tent, narrowly avoiding the blazing ring of fire. Sharp points dug into my palms. I thought they were rocks, but when I looked down I saw bloody teeth, heaped into ivory piles.

"What is it?" Susie shambled from the bushes.

Before I answered we heard a man screaming in agony, begging for someone—or something—to stop. We ran towards the riverbed as the fire consumed the camp behind us. The woods were dead. No mosquitoes. And somewhere, way off in the distance, faint whispers and the smell of roasting flesh smoked like a demon's cookout.

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5

The green river stirred and a rickety wooden dock bobbed in the current ten yards onto the water. If it weren't for the burning camp there's no way we'd see through the milky darkness. No moon, no stars, not even shimmering swamp gases from the marsh would've lit our way. Susie's pink hand was bolted to my right leg, gripping me like a gorilla.

I held my pistol steady, eye fixed down the iron sight as my feet planted on the wobbly dock. Something floated in the water, a brown lump.

"You hear anything?" I asked Susie.

She didn't answer as she wiped away two strawberry locks that had fallen from a pink scrunchie.

I edged out onto the dock and the water sloshed beneath the planks.

"D-do you see anyone?" Susie whispered.

The water went still as black tar, but across the river I saw movement on the bank. Shadowy and obscured by the night, a gaunt figure stooped amidst the reeds. "Shit, man." I was startled,

spooked by the ugly, tattered clothing and pale skin. Muddy, nappy hair hung from the face like a grim, wedding veil. “Hey you!” I shouted. “I see you!”

“W-what is it?” Susie stamped her feet in place, glancing back at the burning camp and across the river.

Then, before I could answer, one of the boys exploded from the water, sopping and panicked. The shock nearly sent me sailing, but I managed to grab the kid and haul him in.

“Help!” he cried, gasping and crawling into the wooden blanks.

It wasn’t ‘til I pulled him halfway to shore that I noticed the blood spurting from his footless ankles like a busted fire hydrant. His wrists limped up.

Susie damn near passed out at the sight of it. I ripped my sleeves and stitched a makeshift tourniquet to stop the bleeding.

Mike was dazed, eyes rolled back, body in shock. His flesh was torn at the shins, chipped and ripped like he’d stepped into a bear trap. Across the river the rickety figure wasn’t in the reeds. That spooked me too, but there weren’t no time for it.

“Hold on, dude. You’re good.” I tied him off clean and looked to the camp. “Susie, go on and get a branch and light her up. We’ve got to cauterize him right quick.”

Susie didn’t hesitate, not even for a wink. She rushed up the hill and brought back a branch, fire lickin’.

“Now, this’ll pinch, compadre. But it’ll patch you up.” I cupped my hands and tossed water onto the wounds before toastin’ him. “Ready?”

Mike grimaced, chomping his bottom lip.

I drew the flame near his wet stumps; they sizzled and popped. The gory flesh cooked, smoking like Louisiana hotlinks and somewhere above me, I thought I heard that damn Huey again. The noise drummed my ears.

“You watchin’ the river or what? I don’t want some VC peckerwood in a patrol boat poppin’ shots at me,” I said, eyeing the dark horizon. Where was the damn Huey. I heard it clear as Johnny Cash’s steel guitar. “Watch my six, God damn it!” Susie didn’t budge. Typical youngblood. No sense out in the bush. “I said watch my six, Private. We’ve got to get this bastard to Medivac.” Then I heard it. Charlie patrol boat, engine purring like a Yokohama Mama.

“What are you talking about?” Susie cried out, jarring something loose in my mind.

Before I answered, the river stirred behind me. Hard to make out, but I saw a murky shadow bubble up from the gloom.

“Shit!” I howled as an eight-foot gator slid up the bank with a ghastly, gaping mouth of teeth. Green, leathery hide rolled over my legs and stubby claws dug into my calves, bone deep. Chunks of wriggling pink flesh spilled from the gator’s mouth and before taking a bite of me—it hacked up a half digested, slime-ridden foot. Jaws snapped like toothy cymbals. Claws dredged through the black mud.

The gator moved faster than I could and got a firm grip on my toes. “Son of a bitch!” The bastard nipped my three smallest clean off and kept on coming, thirst slate for the blood of Bucky Dennis. With a shaky hand I steered Harriet’s heavy, ebony butt and fired. The crack of the percussion cap shook the trees and smoke flooded the riverbank like a death fog. A sticky, hot splatter of brain and teeth sprayed my face. The gator’s skull split like a rotten jack o’ lantern and Susie’s voice went a mute as a mime.

She rocked in the mud, cradling Mike’s limp and pale head.

“He’s dead.” Favoring my good foot, I hobbled into a thicket of bushy cattails. The night smelled like lavender too, licorice, and cooked pork. “Get up and move,” I said, pushing on. “Can’t save him. But you still got your gal pal out there. You got it? You fuckin’ listenin’ to me?”

She nodded.

“Now, let’s get the hell out of Dodge.”

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6

Hip deep in The Shit, I checked my spinning chambers: five shots and one pistol butt left to wax that nappy bitch squattin’ in the reeds. Blood stains soaked my shredded denim. The milky, black muck of Natchez Trace clung to my clenched fists like tar. I’d seen worse nights in Vietnam. Had the toes on my left foot back then, but I’d seen worse. Starless nights like that were lonely as the surface of the moon. Especially when you’re waitin’ on Evac.

When Susie’s friend Lucy screamed for help, echoing and distant among the willow cypress trees. Well, it weren’t the only time I’d heard some poor son of a bitch lost and dying in the dark.

“What were you talking about back there?” Susie said, calm and even.

“Look, we’ll go back for his body. But we’ve got to secure the perimeter,” I told her

straight.

“That’s what I’m talking about. Are you whacked, Mister?”

I holstered the .44 in my belt and took big helpings of wet mud into my fists. It felt good on my arms, cool and earthy. Smooth as butter.

“Do you even know where you are?” she said, mockingly.

Sad thing was, sometimes I did and sometimes I didn’t. It ain’t an easy thing to explain war to folks that’d never seen it—The Shit. No sense to it. The Shit, that is. It’s more a state of mind than a place. But the place certainly helps put you there, know what I mean?

Can you think back to a time when you were gripping a slippery M-16 in the jungle beneath the shower of endless, whispering rain? Or maybe, elbow deep in the grave of a Commie tunnel rat, flashing spec lights into the eyes of a jacked up Viet Cong whose wired with two pounds of plastique. The whole damn world shrinks to the size of a tactical helmet and the only other person you got in life? The guy next to you—under his.

“Yeah. I know where we’re at,” I said. “The Shit.” I streaked the clay over my face, maskin’ my mug but for the sparkling whites of my eyes. “Now, listen up. I need some intel. Tell me the deal. What in holy hell is going on?”

“We wanted to see if the story was true.” Susie’s lips quivered.

“What story?”

“You’ve heard of Lewis and Clark? The explorers.”

Of course I had. “Yeah, those Yankee boys that got fresh with Sacajawea.”

“Well, yes. Specifically, Meriwether Lewis. He committed suicide on the Natchez Trace, out by Grinder’s Stand seventy miles or so from Nashville.”

“I figured he’d be a pretty famous feller,” I said. “Why’d he go and off himself?”

“Nobody knows for sure. But legend has it he experienced something terrible on Natchez Trace road, near the Witch Dance Picnic Area.” Susie kneaded the mud with her fingers and toes as she spoke. She absentmindedly braided her red hair, rubbing it down with her filthy fingers.

“Witch Dance?”

“The Chocktaw and Chickawa tell stories about it. The patches of scorched earth—no plant life will grow there to this day.” Susie blinked and two tears streamed down her face. Hollow laughter clattered in the woods like stones skipping in a quarry.

“Jesus Houdini.” My heart fluttered, missin’ beats like a drunken Eagles cover band.

Susie whimpered as she continued the story. “Indians told Lewis about a haunted glade of dead grass. They told him a coven of old hags danced there by the light of the moon and that children went missing.”

“And let me guess. Y’all thought you’d give yourselves a ganja tokin’ scare—campin’ out at a haunted Picnic Area in Natchez Trace National Park.” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, that’s for darn tootin’. But, I’d seen her, that hag, creaking in the stalks like a scarecrow. “What’s with you damn college kids, anyway?”

“Its not our fault! How could the stories be true? Stories like that aren’t true. They can’t be. They can’t!” Susie spread mud onto her sweet, freckled cleavage and over her face.

“Babe, if there’s one thing I’ve learned it’s that there ain’t no story ever told that don’t got some truth in it.” I picked Susie up by the middle and brushed leaves from her shirt. Her body was springy and youthful, soft and vulnerable. “Truth’s in the eye of the beholder, know what I mean. And Indians don’t lie about what they’ve been beholding. They ain’t got no tongue for it.”

“We’re going to die aren’t we?” Susie’s words came at me like a freight train. Skin cold, she shivered violently.

“No, we ain’t got time to die,” I said. The Porky Pig direction dial on my compass read north-west. “We’re headed to Nashville. Same as Meriwether Lewis.”

“Where did you get that?” Susie asked.

“What? This?” I held up the compass. “Old ass Cracker Jack box, babe. When they gave out useful shit—you know, before the fuckin’ temporary tattoo revolution.”

I searched my pockets for anything else I could use: fishing line, granddaddy’s pocket knife, and a rock-hard stick of Big Red. I gave the gum to Susie. “Chew this. It’ll taste like *normal* and calm those nerves.”

“Mister?” She pursed her lips. “What’s your story, anyway?”

“Ain’t no story. I’m Bucky Dennis. I don’t take guff.”

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Best way to rig a whip trap is to use bamboo: strong, pliable, and quick. Weren’t no bamboo on the bayou, so a young, green willow limb had to do. Trick to get a solid kill was to keep the trap under the thick foliage, nestled deep in a fern or a patch of switch grass. Really low like, but just high enough for a strike to the thigh. A nice hit sent a five-inch wooden spike into the

femoral artery. Puncture him? You're gone in minutes.

I sharpened up some twigs with Pappy's knife and stitched them to the tip like shark's teeth. Fishing line made for a taught, invisible tripwire.

Susie and I set a whip trap every hundred yards or so along a zigzag pattern. We took the harder trails too, weaving across rocky paths, careful to keep clear of the waterfront.

"Lucy!" Susie called into the night. Her voice echoed a dozen times, bouncing off the rocky canyon that lead into the main trail of the Natchez Trace.

"Quiet now," I said. "We've got to keep radio silence. And no cigarettes."

"Damn it, Bucky, we don't have a radio," Susie cried. "Or cigarettes!"

"You want to give our position away?" Stupid kid didn't know a damn thing. "We stay quiet and keep moving." I tied off more fishing line and set a new trap. My fingers were red and swollen, my muddy arms dried up like sandpaper.

"Lucy!" she called again, but this time—no echo. "Lucy!" Again, no echo.

"Shut the hell up, Susan!" I covered her mouth. "Listen."

"I don't hear anything."

"That's what I mean." The echoing rocks fell silent. No frogs either. Then, from two hundred yards behind us, a whip trap triggered with a snap. Then another and another. Snap! Crunch! Thwip!

"Its behind us," she whispered.

Crack!

"And in a big hurry." Without another word we ran to the lip of the canyon. "Shit. It's too steep!"

Susie leapt wildly from the edge of the cliff and rolled down the slope. I lost sight of her, obscured by the tumbling avalanche of pebbles and granite dust. In the impossible dark I saw the trees bend and fold onto themselves as a shadowy horror triggered our last trap.

Fishing line shone like silver thread and I fired two deafening shots into the night. Desperate, I jumped after Susie and fell hollering into the abyss.

As luck would have it, I didn't break my damn spine, but Susie wasn't so fortunate. I found her limping on a sprained ankle, foot bleeding pretty bad too. The trees sighed above us but our hunter wasn't there. Just wind and leaves, floating onto us like dry, dead snow flakes.

"She's toying with us!" Susie cried, shaking over her busted foot.

“Yeah,” I said, eyes fixed on the cliff’s edge. “But we’ve got an edge.”

Susie cocked her head like a puzzled kitten. “What edge is that? You crazy fuck!”

Then I saw it. A glittering sliver of light and shadow lurched among the reeds and roots, whispering dark, roving light and spectral forms.

“Is that?” A blurry, white apparition lingered over a sickly patch of grass beside the main arm of Natchez Trace trail. It was a man in uniform. His face was gaunt and troubled.

“That’s Meriwether Lewis.” Susie inched backwards into my arms.

Lewis hovered in place, displacing a tangle of weeds. He looked at us for a few moments then spoke. “Don’t watch her dance with the children. It will bring only sorrow.” Without flinching, the ghost drew a foggy musket from his holster, placed the gun in his mouth and fired. Spirit smoke lit the darkness like a flare, casting wavering light over a ruined cottage.

Stone bricks crumbled from the walls and the dusty, rotten shingles hung like moss from the collapsed rafters of the roof and ceiling. Sticky fungus sprung from the foundation, and all around the empty, black doorway, piles of leaves, sticks, bones, and eroded animal skins. Flies zipped around the broken carcass of a dismembered buck, his yellow antlers nailed to the arch of the door.

“I don’t want to be here,” Susie said flatly.

A foul gust vomited from the house stinking of some nameless putrescence. Flecks of forgotten vileness speckled the night air like crooked, motionless mosquitoes hung on the wind like ornaments. And upon closer examination, it appeared they were just that: mosquitoes, wingless and dead. They floated in place, impossibly still.

“Susie is that you?” Lucy’s faint voice carried from the cottage doorway. “Susie? Help me, Susie.”

I froze with my nuts nailed to the floor. The tremendous dark thundered from the doorway, pitching midnight blackness so empty I questioned ever knowing the glow of a filament bulb or shine of the western sun.

“Bucky, I can’t go in there.”

“Take my hand.” Stale air flooded my nose as I stepped into a ditch of cobwebs and chicken feathers.

“Susie? Can you hear me?” Lucy rumbled like a gong and the shadowy doorway rippled. “Susie, help me. She’s got me in the basement!”

Something screeched in the treetops. The branches shook. I let out a holler and jumped for the cottage, passing through the void. The cold, inky doorway clung to my clothes like a slick of icy oil. I barreled through like a blind moth buzzing into a burning barn. My heart thumped. Then with brash, fear-swallowing folly, I disappeared with Susie into the ruin.

We found ourselves inside a pristine—and I mean immaculate—reproduction of nineteenth century craftsmanship. Floral crocheted linens dressed a fully laid banquet table and in the corner a piping hot, potbellied stove crackled with fresh coal.

A stone stairway lead into the basement, narrow and shrouded in darkness but for a single, sickly candle burning at the bottom.

“Door’s locked.” I smashed my shoulder into the oak and iron latched door, but no amount of strength could even budge it. The hinges were cast and bolted with thick, square-top nails. “Shit. Place is buttoned up tighter than the Alamo.”

“Where are we?” Susie squeezed me soft and supple like.

“Back in older times. Or at least it’s made to look like as much.” Harriet had two rounds left in her. I didn’t remember taking the shots.

“Susie? Is that you?” Lucy’s voice clamored up the stairs.

“Jesus, Bucky—.”

“Shut up and wait a second, will ya?” A kettle on the stove whistled and I lifted it clear of the heat. My nose got a swift rush of roasted pork from the oven. Smelled damn good: honey glazed, walnut mash, maybe thyme, basil. “Smells good don’t it?”

“She’s downstairs. W-we don’t have to get her.” Susie took a few steps backwards. “Please come with me. Okay?” Her panic set in like somebody’d turned up the nozzle on her menstrual cycle and stole a Snickers right out of her hand. Her cleavage beaded wet with perspiration. And damn, mon frer—he’d have been hot as habanera if she weren’t crying and scared.

“Ah, hell. Sure, we’ll rescue her, just let me...” Peering into the oven, my words fell from my mouth like loose teeth. Two human feet basted in buttery broth, stewed in three inches of boiled carrots. Toenails sizzled and juiced over the fire. I shut the stove abruptly, tasting my own sour ass upchuck.

“What is it?” Susie leaned over my shoulder.

“Let’s go downstairs,” I said, and took her by the hand. The candle below dripped honey-colored wax into little crusty pools. “Ready, now?” I pulled the hempen loop dangling from the

rotten, wooden door.

As the rickety thing swung open, we heard her. Lucy moaned and whispered words I couldn't make out. Lightless, I pulled a candle from the wall and led us into the gloom. The muddy floor gummed up our shoes and clay walls gave under the weight of our hands as we leaned for balance. The basement narrowed into a catacomb's hall. Slots in the walls were filled with tarnished pocket watches, antique eyeglasses, and them funky three pointed, colonial hats.

"Susie?" Lucy's strawberry lotion and teenybopper perfume masked the stench of a foul, stewing permeation from in front of us.

"We're here, darlin'." My voice was nearly inaudible.

Candle wax burned my fingertips and dried stiffly to my fingernails. I held the flickering flame aloft, illuminating the tiny, mud-packed squaller. It was completely empty but for a single, saucer tub with Lucy's pink skeleton soaking in a cold bath of blood. Her kidneys, liver, and lower intestines bobbed in the gory stew like apples in a barrel. Eye balls scooped out like gelato, heart and lungs wrapped neatly with belt sized strips of skin. The horror of Lucy's floating corpse made my worst day in Vietnam look like an episode of Love Boat.

"Wait, Susie. Don't!" But Susie got herself too good of a look. She spit up a warm helping of munched s'mores all over my good foot, heaving yellowy chunks until her belly was empty.

"Lucy?" I queried at the wet skull, eyeing tufts of blonde hair knotted into her skeletal fists. But there weren't no answer but for the clank of the door shutting behind us.

We spun like tops. My trigger finger itched. The sweat pooled. And from the shroud of the catacomb, a wispy, nameless silhouette spoke with a voice like broken glass.

"She...didn't like...to dance." The hag rasped from the darkness and Lucy's skeleton crumbled, splashing into the bloody tub. "Do you?"

Susie stumbled in mud, clawing at the walls, fearful mad. My own heart leapt into my throat, beating on my Adam's apple like a prizefighter poundin' for the heavyweight title.

Impossibly fast, the crone slithered from liquid shadow and snatched Susie's ankle. She squealed, clinging to the doorway, until her fake nails broke and she slid into the black hall.

"Susie!" She was gone before my finger could squeeze back Harriet's trigger. Shaking and scared, I stood beside the bloody, bubbling bathtub. I eyed the quiet void leading upstairs into the cottage. Things got a mite foggy.

My feet slipped with every step and I swore I heard Charlie chatterin' over the radio. I

couldn't find my helmet or rifle. On my hands and knees, I probed the floor, dripping wax plopping onto the damp ground as the candle burned low. "Damn it, Christ! Fuck! Kris Kringle, this is Easter Bunny, over. Do you read, over? Enemy hostiles! Repeat: we have enemy hostiles in sector..." What sector was I in?

I smelled sour noodles brewing down the hall. I tasted the humidity. The chatter hummed like insects swirling, around my head. I swatted them, but they didn't give up. There aren't words enough to describe the terror. The Shit had its own way. It switches off the light, bends you backwards and pumps your ass 'til you're batty. That and stinks.

"Bucky, help me!" a young lady's voice drummed. VA Nurse? Red Cross maybe? Fuckin' Cong.

"This is Easter Bunny. Kringle do you copy, over?" Low on ammo, I searched the catacombs. You find strange stuff in 'Nam. Dozen dusty books all scribbled in French, a wooden peg leg, and a sack full of copper rings—disappointingly, nothing you could gut a man with. Then I gripped it, a weird, robust piece. I pulled a cast iron flintlock wedged in the muddy shelf, beneath some tattered blankets. Old, shitty, and even more obsolete than my Colt '48 hand canon, the flintlock was dry as least. I powdered it up using one of them old horns they had back in older times. No ammo though. I rammed it full with about a dollar's worth of nickels and dimes. Those VC sons of bitches were smart and resourceful. Well, hell—so was I. Hooah.

"Bạn sẽ không bao giờ giết tôi, du ma may! Bạn sẽ không bao giờ giết tôi, du ma may!"

The candle went out on the stairs, but the kitchen still glowed. The witch must've known I was coming, but she didn't even lay punji sticks. I shook my hair like a wet dog.

"Sober up," I said. Breeching the doorway, I saw Susie tied to a chair with strips of pink and red ribbon. She squirmed and spit against the leather gag that fastened her head to the chair. Her eyes were glossy, staring bright as headlights at Mike's roasted feet. The table was set for three.

"Where is she?" I mouthed the words, pistols in each hand. In the mirror I looked like Swamp Thing, muddy war paint covering all but my peepers.

Susie shifted in her seat, blinking wildly.

"Where?" I repeated silently.

Susie's muffled scream spooked me. She rocked and rattled the chair, knocking the floorboards and gesturing with her whole, bound body towards the mirror.

Glancing back, I spied my reflection—but I wasn't alone. The gaunt figure of the Natchez

Crone sulked over my shoulder, face obscured by long strands of dirty black hair. Her skin hung from her bones like loose wool, pale and speckled with moldy spots. And I could taste the red, iron dripping fingernails as she reach for my throat.

Spinning like a dradle, I brought Harriet's hammer down and flooded the room with .44 smoke. But the bitch wasn't there.

"I thought you wanted to dance, God damn it!"

Plunging from the liquid mirror, two cadaverous hands choked me, squeezing like a noose. Lifeless eyes of emerald glass peered into my soul from a sallow, raisin death mask. Her jaw clicked open and her rotten worm-filled mouth spit the words, "God doesn't do the damning." Eyes asunder. "I do."

I gasped helplessly under her steel grip. Shit-caked nails dug into my soft flesh as she pulled me closer. The mirror splashed like pond water. My arm plunged inside. I struggled to wrestle free. My legs kicked wildly from the mirror. I weren't strong enough. And she pulled the rest of me through, torn from world, into the whirling void.

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8

Whispering shadows danced in a shimmering ring. Fingertips combed through my hair. The sensation of falling overwhelmed me despite my feet firmly set on solid ground. My guts in knots, I closed my eyes amidst all that darkness and did something I hadn't done in a long, long time. And I did it the best I knew how.

"Damn you, you cocksuckin' rat-bastard. Get me out of this and I swear I'll shape up." God and me, we went way back.

I felt spidery hands drift over my body. A soft, dry kiss tickled my neck. A tongue like sandpaper tasted my chin. Shallow breath skipped from my throat, nearly suffocated by her mummified perfumes.

"You're so handsome," she said. "Strapping and strong." But then that dried-up hag made a mistake: she touched the 'stache. Scratch that. She touched the 'stache with ill intent.

In the blackness my finger pulled back straight away on the flintlock. The balst of firing coins lit the dark and sent the witch floundering through the shattered.

Susie knocked her head against the stove and spilling fiery coals over the wooden floor. The place caught like a oil rig.

I tugged Susie free of the chair and carried her to the door. “Can you walk?”

Her legs wobbled. “Y-yeah,” she said, groggily.

The latch jangled. Fuckin’ thing was locked and sturdy as a sailor’s boner on Mardi Gras. I lined myself up for a Verney High Football blitz, but the witch blitzed me first.

She had the strength of a Dallas offensive lineman and tossed me across the room like an eight-pound sack of salt. I pistol whipped with the butt of my .44, bashing in her wart-ridden nose. It crumbled like ashy paper, leaving a gaping skeletal hole. “Damn,” I said, lifting back my fist for another go, but I wasn’t fast enough.

Five razor-sharp nails ripped across my upper lip, slicing off a tuft of my handlebar mustache. The violent blow clocked me onto my ass with a thump. I tasted the metallic blood and caught a glimpse of the damages in a shard of broken mirror.

“Holy God,” I said, stunned. “Lady.” I struggled to form sentences. “Lady, you done fucked up my handlebar...”

Now, its one thing to kill a man, chop him up, and scarf him like a bucket of chicken. But it’s another thing entirely to disfigure a Southern man’s ‘stache.

“Alright, bitch. Alright...” I tell ya, fire must’ve flared from my nostrils. “You wanna dance? Huh? You wanna mambo? Is that right? You wanna fuckin’ mambo?”

Her ghastly skin curled back as if invisible fingers pulled the corners of her undead mouth to feign smiling. Hideous, the corpse mask was a crude and terrible puppet.

I gripped her by one of her sagging, grimy tits and shoved that ugly face into the stove. Hot coals belched and hair fizzled. Eyes swelled and popped. Her skull chattered and wailed. I hammered shut the iron stove door. Over and over—open, shut. “This is a fun dance, ain’t it? You havin’ fun yet? You filthy, murderin’ bitch!

Fire spilled onto my knuckles, but the blistering heat didn’t faze me. I smashed and smashed, cracking the witch’s skull to white hot, smoldering splinters until her flailing boney legs jerked still. And the moment she went limp, the cottage darkened like someone’d huffed out the light and we again found ourselves in the wilderness of the Natchez Trace.

Susie and I shivered and panted amidst raining debris. The ruined cottage was falling onto itself, crumbling into a ring of stony foundation. Shingles loosened and split. Timbers ground to dust. And in a swell of stael air, the house released a living sigh and disintegrated as we dove free of the collapse.

Susie laid sprawled over me. Her heart throbbed against mine. Her breasts heaved, squishing my middle aged chest. Her pouty lips pressed firmly against my neck. I'll admit it was a hell of a time to get frisky, but I sure felt it, babe.

"Sally? You alright, girl?" Shit, I thought. Her name weren't Sally.

She didn't answer and her breathing was weak.

"Susie?" I talked louder, you know? Like she misheard me.

No answer.

"Shit," I said, rolling her over. Her eyes glinted green and her face contorted grimly into a familiar smirk. "Jesus Houdini Christ!"

"No Jesus! NO JESUS!" the witch crowed through Susie's sweet lips, her body shivering and fingers bent like meat hooks. The nails stabbed, deep, tearing my shoulder muscles. "NO JESUS!"

"That's enough!" I cried, slapping Susie's possessed body right across that rosie, freckled cheek.

And instantly, the enemy spirit dispersed. Those evil, emerald eyes faded back to crystal blue.

Susie pulled against my torn shirt sleepily, nuzzling my neck once more. Gentle as a spring fawn, her eyelashes batted against me like butterflies. "Are we ok?" she said.

It was my turn to be silent. Soak it in, man. So, I smiled and took in the moment with that beauty in my arms. Bullfrogs croaked near a trickling crick out yonder and lightning bugs flittered in the tall grass. The woods woke, the wind blew, and cool, silver starlight bathed the Natchez Trace, washing clean all that uncertain dark and all that uncertain cold.

•

9

Delmar lounged in his chair, overlooking the Mississippi and puffing on a corncob pipe. His dark shone bright in the morning light as Susie and I sauntered up the bank towards the parking lot.

"Ain't it a fine mornin'?" Delmar blew smoky rings. "Though I suppose every morning's fine someplace."

I wanted to slap him too, but I realized it was true. It was a fine morning. Sunny, fresh, and kissed with sparkling dew—hell, in 'Nam mornings were what we looked forward to. Whether

you shipped out, shaped up, off got off patrol, everything we knew and lived for revolved around that last bad day and a wake up.

Susie opened the passenger door and invited me in. The engine purred for a few minutes and we just sat there quiet like. Didn't say a thing. Then Susie looked over with those eyes, hair tussled, orange like the Mississippi sun. And she said, "I'll do whatever you want."

I swallowed hard. "What?"

"Anything you want. I'll do it for you." Susie, edged closer and the leather seat squeaked.

Now, there comes a time when a choice is made. And I made it. Hell, Susie's apricot ass could crack a crayfish and fry it too—but she was mighty young for an old, scraggily antlered buck.

"Ma'am," I started, sheepishly. "To be honest a ride into town would be good."

I burned her hard. Saw it in her face. The adrenaline got to her. Passion. Instincts ruled and she needed a strong man to give her the kielbasa. She opened her mouth, paused before speaking. Don't say it, I thought. Don't bullshit me like Sally did. Hell, we didn't even know each other for Christ's sake.

"Are you sure you don't want anything?" Her rosy tongue wetted her lips.

I nodded, yes, my pecker at full attention.

"Oh, thank God," she said with a sigh.

I sunk back into the passenger seat before truly hearing her damn response. "Thank God? What the hell is that?" What? I ain't good enough now? Shit, Susan. You jugglin' my stones or what? Thank God, she says."

And that was that. Susie drove me into town and covered the bill at the Denny's. I'll tell ya, sex is good, but a Grand Slam? Babe, y'all can't beat a Grand-fucking-Slam.

* * * * *

EIDOLON

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1

Told myself if I ever woke up from Vietnam, first thing I'd do was buy me a 1969 Dodge Charger. Swore it on my ma, cursed it on my pa, and figured I deserved it. With two tours served

and my lucky ass on a plane home to Jackson-Evers International, I walked the thirty odd miles to Verney, Mississippi before I finally found me a ride.

Ed's Auto Man Emporium hustled cars since 1924 and that particular day he showcased my sparkling, V8, year-end beauty. And so, with a half-centimeter hunk of twisted shrapnel still stuffed up the swollen crack of my ass, I wriggled onto leather seats and pulled my new Charger onto U.S. 45.

I bought a hotel fridge, green label Jack Daniels to christen her and saved the empty bottle in the glove box for luck. But that was seventeen years ago. Before my life tripped over its shoelaces. Before my wang went limp—you know, metaphorically. And as I cupped my last of five ping-pong balls at the Verney County Fair—I put it all out of my mind. 'Cause if I didn't toss that little white ball into that God damned goldfish bowl, I weren't never gonna get my sweet '69 out of impound.

First prize for five out of five balls was a cool six hundo, just enough to square my debts and get my Dodge the hell out. See, I'd lost her some years back—had a run in with the law and a bad habit of bein' pushy. It's all water under the bridge now, but damn, did I need to sink that ping-pong ball.

"You gonna toss or what?" The carnie guzzled his Colt 45.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm concentrating," I said, caressing the ivory orb, doing my best to accommodate for wind speed and humidity. "Wind ain't right."

"The wind?" Carnie croaked. "Who are you? Geronimo?"

Ignorant fool'd never been a G. I. They teach you things, hone your shooting and polish your form. Wind speed meant your ass in the field. Damn civy spit-fuck.

"Jesus, Mister."

"Alright, bud. Watch how it's—." The ball parted from my hands and landed pinging from bowl to bowl, bouncing like a jumpin' bean, until it ricocheted into the mud. "That's it..." I muttered, stroking my handlebar mustache and mutton chops. "Damn it."

"Tough rocks, pal. Hey, at least you win the Second Prize." Carnie rifled through a box spilling foam peanuts. "Feast your eyes," he said. "Knock yourself out. This beauty's authentic."

He handed me a VHS Tape of *Splash* starring Tom Hanks and Darryl Hanna. I'd seen it at the pictures. "What's this?" I asked, pointing to a signature scribbled onto the cover.

"Signed by Eugene Levy. Real deal. I met him at a garlic festival in Gilroy, California."

“Eugene Levy, huh?” His name was circled on the back and everything. “Well, son of a bitch.” I hung around and sulked. Finally, I decided to hit the funnel cake cart. A feller coverin’ Johnny Cash songs strummed his steel guitar as sparklers lit the back up singer’s tiara. Bright lights from the Ferris wheel twinkled like rainbow stars, shimmering onto the orange game-tents and casting a warm, colorful glow over the happy folks at the Verney County Fair.

Kids riding ponies tied to candy cane ribbons, eyed my funnel cake. One of the girls reminded me of my own out in Florida. I had twins, see, Minnie and May, my beauties. The ex took ‘em with her in the divorce. Am I repeating myself? Boy they’d a liked this little shindig, I thought, as fireworks popped in the Southern sky. The girl on the pony smiled. I winked and sallied by.

Night air swept over me like the hush of a Huey. I reclined onto a park bench with an Ed Herbert for Mayor advertisement. I snuck a swig of Jackie D. from my hipflask and just basked beneath the old hickory tree outside city hall on Marvin Street. Funny how quiet it got in town when there was a carnival on.

The bell to Ray’s Books chimed and an older, odd-feller stumbled out in a hurry. He glanced my way. I offered a friendly wave but the guy didn’t wave back, just hurried into the alley between Ray’s place and Marvin’s Salty Dog. That’s right, damn street was named after him and his world famous frankfurters. Just as I polished off the funnel cake, I got an itch for a dog, but a sudden shout startled me.

“Get back, heathen! You can’t have it!”

Jogging around the corner I heard a click and saw the silver flash of a switchblade. A tall man cloaked in a black duster and fedora was poised to strike with a six-inch sticker. The old man from Ray’s Books cowered, gripping tightly to a leather tube.

“Hey! I see you, asshole!” I shouted, thumbing my Levis for my pocketknife. I zipped her open. “Two tours in ‘Nam, hombre. Hooah!” I coaxed the coward with my fingers.

His switchblade stared darkly beneath his hat, then strike! Like a pit viper, he pierced the old man’s ribs twice and slashed him across the belly.

“Jesus Houdini,” I gasped. Before I squared myself, Switchblade had already scaled a fire-ladder.

Writhing in the concrete, the old man rasped. “W-wait. D-don’t go.” Blood pooled, soaking his kaki suit and alligator shoes.

“What’s you’re name, man? I gotta call you an ambulance. Get the police out here.” My knees slid into the red pool and I immediately laid down a hundred and eighty pounds of pressure onto the wound. “Hey!” I cried. “We’ve got a man down over here!”

“Shhh. N-not important,” he coughed. The old man released the leather tube from his grip. Slippery, warm life emptied onto my jeans.

“Evo!” A slick youngster with a milky white buzz cut pushed me aside.

“Isaac...” Evo whispered, but his breath ran out. I’d seen it all before, when the lungs deflated completely. In the Army we’d wonder which end of a compass a man’s soul wound up. Was it a sigh of relief or was it agony?

“Evo?” Isaac the kid replied with a quivering lip. Tears welled, but didn’t fall. He just grimaced and turned to me. “Leave.”

“Isaac is it? Dude, your bud was just attacked. We gotta ring the authorities.”

Quiet rage washed over the albino’s face turning his pasty complexion red as a baboon’s ass. “I’ll take care of it!” Eyes narrow, Isaac’s bellow summoned two men from the still running car. He paused, struggling. “I’m sorry. Thank you. You can leave. We’ll take care of it.”

Men bumped me aside. And not long after, I found myself wandering home along Marvin Street, drunk as a sailor suckin’ off a skunk. Then it hit me. The leather tube! Shit, I had it tucked under my sweaty ass arm.

I knocked over the trash bin outside of the Shipley Donuts and a mess of gooey fritters spilled everywhichway. I felt my boots slide, but the pavement, they I didn’t feel comin’ at all. I bit the dust and rolled into the alley like a whiped out surfer. No one was there. Evo and his boys were gone with the wind and the street’d been mopped clean, traceless as a jizz squirt in your piña colada.

•

2

I woke feeling like the entire western Mississippi Highway Patrol was chasing me. Or at least it sounded like how it might in the pictures. My neighbor licked his banjo like an ornery Ozark and no matter how much I wrestled with my sheets I just couldn’t get back to dreaming. Neighbor’s name was Ted Ford. He had a knack for fast plucking. But I’ll be damned if I didn’t want to knock his block off after a night of heavy drinking.

The Rainbow menthol lit smooth and I took a drag so hard the filter crackled. I lit another

and washed my mouth out with a flat Bud. “I’ve got to take a shit,” I said, trying to rub the headache out of my ears. Wide-eyed, I looked myself over in my second-hand vanity mirror. “Christ and his Apostles.”

Mirrors ceased bein’ gentle on my self-esteem in the mid 1970s. The only time I ever used one was when I shaved. But why bother? My chops bushy, ‘stache unkempt; I took my time pluckin’ straggling grays nestled in my beard. Figured I’d let myself go for a while, natural as Grizzly Adams.

The kitchen stunk fierce of rotten apples and mold-ridden oatmeal. The shower wasn’t much better. Just standing under the steaming water seemed like enough, but the stench of my place clung like a leech. I lived in an above garage loft in a trailer park just outside of Verney. My view was an above ground septic tank and Ted’s dead Winnebago.

Switching on the radio to drown out the banjo, I peeled a banana and peered out the window at Ted’s trailer. Credence Clearwater convinced the hell out of my ass to take a road trip to Lodi. “You know I’ll visit,” I said aloud. “Soon as my Charger’s a free girl.”

Made me some instant coffee and sipped whilst peeping Ted and his wife Deb, smooching under their checkered Winnebago shade. Between her orange scorched, curly hair and his shiny baldness, they looked like two haloed angels in the morning sunlight. Cute couple though, even for seventy. I thought, Will that be me?

Hazelnut aroma filled my nose as I unlatched the leather tube and snuck a peek at Evo’s treasure. Inside, rolled up tight and tied with yarn was this old, weird lookin’ cow hide map. The illustrations were burned onto the hide in some places—in others burgundy ink shone vividly and perfect against the degenerated leather parchment.

“Scoundrel.” Ted had Deb’s shirt half way over her head, stumbling into the cottage. “Ted, you rascal. Seventy fuckin’ years on this earth and he’s still gettin’ fresh.”

Returning to the map, the continents weren’t the right shape. They was mashed up. Where the map’s key should have been was a letter square, some kind of a stone age Sudoku.

The language scribbled along the corners certainly weren’t English. Not French, neither. At least, it didn’t remind me of the little I’d picked up in Vietnam. A lot of the Cong spoke French, you know? Certainly not Spanish or German, maybe it was Latin? Hell, I didn’t know—but the thing appeared to be worth a pretty penny. And if a dead man and his fellers didn’t want it? Shit, man. I needed the green.

Ted's trailer rocked like a shrimp boat in a squall as I rolled up the map and fixed to get me some dough at Everett's Pawn. "You still wearing rubbers, Ted? Should be." I'll admit, I envied the old timer when without warning, his Winnebago exploded.

Fire blasted the sewage tank. My windows shook and my instant coffee mug shattered in my hands from the shockwave. Sewage spewed onto my windowpane.

I unraveled his garden hose frantically and sprayed the flames, trying desperately to contain 'em until the department screamed in. I screamed for Ted or Deb, but I knew from back in 'Nam—there weren't no survivors. My tighty whities clung to my ass crack with wet ash. Cinders swirled in the air like soot-washed moths. The ring of fire roared and heat flooded the air in blurry waves. But from a short distance, and only briefly, I spied a black fedora bobbing clear of the billowing smoke.

•

3

I'll tell it straight—no bull pucky—people had been tryin' to wax my ugly ass for years. And by wax I mean kill, not a dainty tug and spit polish from Brazil. The life of Bucky Solomon Dennis was trouble with a capital R. T plue Rubble, duder. And when ya'll got troubles? Pack heat. That's why Harriet, my 1848 .44 caliber percussion revolver was locked, oiled, and concealed discretely within my three dollar fanny pack. Wax my ass, huh? Y'all go ahead and try. Ain't nobody gonna pluck the fluff of this yeti.

Everett's Pawn had all sorts of treasures shelved on dusty hickory. Twelve generations of Bibles, muskets from places like Yorktown, sabers from Bull Run, and one sandy M1 from the beaches of Normandy. Fifteen hundred Pez machines lined the top of a glass case filled with bundles of Confederate cash, a Babe Ruth homer with missing stitches, and one of F.D.R.'s polio braces.

"When you gonna sell me that pistol?" Everett wheeled himself from the back room with a nine-inch stogy, smoldering from his toothless mouth. "Get something more modern? At least get a piece that uses bullets, for Christ sake."

"I like casting my own," I said.

"Suit yourself, Buck. There's something can be said for a man that sharpens his own sword. Now, what have you got for me? And don't say a Morgan silver dollar. I've got more of those than a monkey's got hair on his nuts." Everett chewed the cigar and adjusted his white, cotton

eye-patch. Older 'n hell, Everett was a veteran of the Battle at Saint-Mihel and one tough son of a bitch.

“Antique map. Looks like Michelangelo inked it. Figured I’d see what I could get.” I popped open the case and unrolled the map onto the counter.

Everett’s smoke poured over the animal skin. “You still after that sweet, ‘69 Charger?”

“Bet you’re ass, old timer.” I pointed to the word puzzle. “That Portuguese or something?”

“Hrm. It’s not a map, really. Well, not like you keep in the glove box,” he said with a grunt and procured a magnifying glass from the drawer beneath the register. He squinted with one good eye and blinked. “It’s called a Mappa Mundi. Generally medieval, religious. The language here’s similar to Latin, but not quite.”

“What about that? Like a riddle or?”

“That’s a word square, from way back. Used to keep secret messages in ‘em. Yeah, bit like a riddle. Way back. Back in antiquity.” He poked the burned letters. “Burned and inked. Unusual. Where’d you find it?”

“Feller in the alley left it behind.” That’s all I was ready to tell.

“You looking to pawn or sell it?”

“Sell it, bud.” I only had twelve dollars in my pocket and I weren’t due another paycheck until Thursday of the next week.

“How’s the Crow’s Nest treatin’ you?”

Ah, Jesus. The Crow’s Nest. I worked shuckin’ oysters over there for nearly a year. Livin’ off three fifty an hour and barely enough tips to cover my Rainbow menthols. “Fine as wine. You know what the map’s worth or what?”

“Buck, to be honest I don’t rightly know what the value may be. Give me a day or so and I’ll ring my colleague in Corinth. You still at Hatter Park?”

“Yeah. You hear about Ted and Debbie?”

“Shame, ain’t it? Fire Department said gas leaked from the stove. Hell of a shame.” Everett itched beneath his eye patch and rolled the map back up. “Well, they lived a full one, know what I mean? Suppose that’s just the way of things.” He handed me the map and patted my rear. “You come back tomorrow, Buck.”

The old timer smiled and his lack of teeth made his chin seem enormous. The bell jingled and I bumped a tall feller on the way out. The man slicked and greased his obsidian hair and

wore slender, rimless glasses above an arched nose. A harsh scar reached from his lower lip to the edge of his chin.

Giving me the stink eye, the man choked up some words. “Pardon me,” he said in heavy, tinhorn German.

First thing I thought was, Damn, he looks meaner than me. I lit a cig outside and took a puff. I didn’t notice it when we’d scrunched through the doorway, but glancing back at the German, I witnessed him fidget with a midnight-black fedora in his hands.

“Son of a bitch.” My cigarette dangled from my mouth and the German bolted.

The bell dinged as I busted through, racing across the store towards the back room.

“Hey, what in holy hell?” Everett cried. Bookshelves toppled and glass ornaments shattered on the floor.

The German made it to the screen door, but it was locked. He punched through the screen and squirmed through the mesh.

Unzipping my fanny pack, I gripped Harriet and pulled back the hammer. “One step and you’re pizza, chief.”

He heard the click and froze. “We are but shadows, Bucky Dennis. And soon those shadows shall be illuminated and we shall cease to be.”

“How in the hell do you know my name?” I pressed my pistol into the meat of his spine. “You better flap them gums, bud.”

“Foolish American cowboy, I could have stopped them!” The German turned and pointed to the map. “I must destroy it while I—!”

Everett shrieked as the glass of the storefront shattered. Two pineapple grenades rolled onto the carpet and clanked together.

“Everybody dow—!” The concussion shook the shop. Glass and fire plumed like a peacock’s tail, knocking us through the drywall and into Shipley’s Donuts. Deputy Jonah sipped his coffee with wide eyes.

The Deputy reached for his side arm, but machinegun fire tore up Shipley’s, blasting the counter to splinters. The German pushed me clear of the first barrage and ducked low beside me. Brass and lead rained like hellfire. Three whole clips from an AK-47 was my guess. You don’t forget that sound, not after Vietnam. Ain’t another thing like it.

The firestorm quieted, a ghostly lull, when suddenly two blue steel, thunderbolts blasted

from a double-barreled Remington. The shots rang from Everett's Pawn as the bloodied, crotchety, hundred year old, hard ass wheeled into the street after the sound of squealing tires.

"Hooligan cock-suckers!" Empty shell casings clinked against on the concrete. "Think an old timer can't rumble?" Shoonk. Shoonk. Blast! The shotgun echoed and blood splattered the passenger side window. Rubber fumes clouded the street.

I counted my nuts and peered over the table. Deputy Jonah quivered like a fish on a line.

"Everett! You alright?"

He slumped in his roller chair.

"No," I whispered. Three belly wounds soaked his shirt and stained the ratty blanket over his legs.

Deputy called in an ambulance, but we all knew the score. Gut shot and a couple of red pints were already on the pavement.

"Everett, you're good, bud," I lied.

"Don't lie to me, boy. I'm done. It's fine though. It'll all be fine." Everett faded, eyes rolled back. We all stood there, even the German.

"Damnit, old man." I held my breath. Poor bastard just couldn't stay clear of a fight. Had too much hound in 'em. Too much grit.

The German lowered his head in respect. It almost pissed me off. He broke the silence by rummaging through some loose rubble. He procured the map and case from a disjointed, smoldering timber.

"My name is Simon," he said, blue eyes piercing without emotion. "I know you can't understand. But, I need you to listen. I'm sorry for your friend. But this? This is the end."

•

4

Pine trees outside the city limits grew snug as cigars in a box. So tight in some spots it was hard to see into the wilderness. Mississippi twilight peeked through the branches, glittering on the silver rearview mirror of Simon's car. The German drove out of town along East Cunningham for nearly an hour, stopping at turnouts, letting cars pass when they sped behind too close. Now, I'll admit—I didn't trust the oil-slick Kraut, but he saved my scrotum. And if a man saves your scrotum? He gets his word in.

Simon didn't speak. Not a peep until we pulled into a roadside bed and breakfast. Cute little

spot called Murph & Mauve's. Simon went heavy on the brakes and parked behind a tin shed.

Leaning over my lap, he jiggled the glove box and rustled a crinkled manila envelope. A walnut handled Walther .38 was inside. He chambered a round. "Does your antique even fire?"

"She'll punch a fist-sized hole through a steer," I said, unzipping my fanny pack.

"Yes, but how do you reload a hundred fifty year old percussion revolver? They manufacture no ammunition."

We opened our car doors simultaneously, eyeing each other like eager boxers shootin' for champ. Windier than usual for that time of year, Simon's cheap, European aftershave wafted my way.

"Make 'em myself. Custom." I followed him to his room under the trickle of hot, clammy rain.

Keys jingled in his hand and the lock clicked. "Why not use a modern weapon?"

"Come on, dude. Like that Nazi pea shooter's modern." Bucky you asshole, I thought.

Stinky eyes glared from a colorless face as Simon opened the door. The "N" word set him off in that quiet, submissive wrong-side-of-the-iron-curtain kind of way. Understandable. I don't reckon too many Germans want to slice into that blood-soaked cake. But he kept his cool.

"Why not modern? Your .357 Magnum? At least something more efficient?"

I lit a Rainbow menthol. "Because it ain't this one, compadre."

Simon smiled and bummed a cigarette. The spark of the matchbook illuminated the dark room. The Kraut gestured towards my pistol, wriggling his pointer finger.

"Yeah, sure," I said, handing him my .44. There's more than a gun's caliber when you're on Hamburger Hill. There's good medicine, babe. And what better medicine than Harriet Tubman's revolver? Good lady. Good gun. You do the geometry. Hooah, Harriet. Hoo-the fuck-ah!

"Americans have interesting sentimentalities," Simon said, returning the pistol.

"Proud to be, babe." My boots squished soggy carpeting in the dank, dimly lit room. Books lined each wall, stacked neatly and arched against each other into shapes like horseshoes. "No money for shelves, I guess."

"They are sigils of power." Simon dragged on the cigarette and stamped it into a coffee mug. "Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Dennis?"

My silence was answer enough. Yeah, I believed. Shit, man, you wouldn't believe what I believed. They say truth is in the eye of the beholder? Well, I've sure as shit beheld some things

that would turn a magpie milky. As for truth? I'm certain I weren't high. Just buzzed.

"Good, then you won't be so frightened of what I have to tell you." Simon casually pulled the leather map case from me and laid it out over the bed. "This is a ghost, Mr. Dennis. This map and all its markings."

That was about the time things got weird. But I didn't have time. I needed answers and right quick. "Look, man. I don't trust you as far as I can throw your mother. But, before you start rattling off a bunch of spooky hocus pocus—you tell me straight—you tell me true—why'd you save my life back there at Everett's? And why'd you stab that feller?"

"Your stopping me from killing that heretic was unfortunate—perhaps I should have killed you too." Simon wasn't kidding, didn't even smirk.

"I appreciate the sentiment, Dickweed." I sneered.

"You're obviously a damned fool. A brute lacking any understanding of what is happening around you. The world is not as you perceive it." He traced the dark burned markings on the mappa mundi, exploring the oddly shaped continent and the strange, slim figures that decorated the bordering. "The world is old, changed now. Little more than a collection of fragments stitched together to tell a very old story. This map is a chapter in that story. Have you heard of Babylon, Mr. Dennis? The ancient city?"

"Sure, they was like Egypt but not. Pyramids and all that jazz."

"Yes, they were mighty. The Babylonians called them ziggurats. The Tower at Babel was greatest of them. But there were others also—long lost by the shifting of the world." Simon tapped the letters of the word square and continued. "Aborek. Have you heard that name before?"

"Nope. Th' hell you mean by the shifting of the world?" I saw Simon's lips tight like they'd physically stalled him from making words. He cleared his throat and continued, "Pangaea. The grand continent. Long ago, in the time of the beginning, the world's land masses were as one. Over the course of aeons they have split, shifted, changed—the greatest change coming in the time of Noah. Are you familiar with Noah?"

"Yeah, yeah. Folks had themselves a wrath of God type flood. The big drink."

"Yes, exactly. The flood to wash clean the unclean. The Nephilim." Simon shuffled towards an arch of books and lifted the top most volume from the unstable stack. Marked by a faded, violet ribbon, he opened the leather text and showed me one of those olden woodcuts—used to

dip ‘em in ink like stamps. Before rubber, you know?

“Bucky, are you listening?”

“Yeah, bud. Go on.”

“The Nephilim were giants, monstrous spawn of angels fallen and mortal women. Yahweh’s messengers fell from high for a second time. In the age where a great and terrible king ruled Babylon in the City of Zebub. And his name was called: Khulukanezzer. And the horrors of his unholy reign are long since forgotten.”

The figure in the picture gripped a massive, flat-headed spear. Towering, he stood above lesser men in the woodcut, crowning the summit of a pyramid, pointing into a crack in the earth. Locusts spilled in such multitudes they looked as viscous as Texas crude. Khulukanezzer’s gaunt visage housed two unblinking, hollow eyes. Ink on paper or not, his eyes looked straight at me and I swear on my mama’s birthstone...the fucker winked.

“So, a half-angel lunatic named Khulu-kawhatzit got himself washed away by God. Understood. But what’s the deal with the map?”

“You’re looking at the Kingdom of Zebub as it stood ages ago. Washed away. Lost. And as the world shifted over countless millennia, Pangaea was pulled apart by wrenching quakes and volcanic drifts. No trace remains—no trace but this map.” Simon slumped onto the bed and the rain pattered the tin awning stretching over the front door. Dishes rattled in a sink somewhere in the bed and breakfast and a toilet flushed.

“Doesn’t explain why you stabbed somebody for it.” I closed the book.

“My Order sent me.” The German fingered a ring on his right hand, tarnished silver with no jewel or defined insignia.

“What Order? You mean like the Shriners or some such bullshit?”

“The Ordo Uriel. Of which, I am a sworn knight and protector.” Simon patted his Walther .38 in the shoulder holster beneath his black coat. “The man you so clumsily saved from my blade; his name is Evokob Keroba. A fanatic, devil worshiping acolyte of Aborek! The Ancient Babylonian Order of the Eye of Khulukanezzer! Keroba is mad, obsessed with the map and the myth that surrounds it.”

“Christ, Simon. Evokob? That Italian or?”

“It is Nephilic! Language of the Giants.” Simon scoffed and rubbed the arch of his nose. “You spoiled everything. Years of hunting, scouring the globe!”

“Giants? Come on, now. I’m up to my ears in myths, legends and whack-job, occultish social leagues.” An old refrigerator buzzed by the nightstand. I popped her open and snatched a brew. Foreign lager, but I weren’t complaining.

The German sighed and polished his spectacles. “You know nothing of what is at stake!” He stood silently, watching. He suddenly knocked the beer from my hand and the sudsy can erupted onto the already damp carpet. “Aborek wants this map to find Zebub for some purpose that I can only imagine—.” Simon stopped. “Shhh!” he hushed.

Broken plates echoed from another room. A lady screamed. The sink stopped running.

I drew Harriet and rolled the chamber.

Simon followed suit, adjusting his glasses and cocking his peashooter. “My God. They’ve found me.”

•

5

Rain continued to beat the tin awning like war drums. Warm water trickled into a muddy pool outside. I covered the door and eyed the shed as Simon rolled up the map.

“Car’s clear,” I said. The door creaked open. “Once we’re in, start quick and punch her up to eighty.”

“Wait,” Simon whispered and pulled a lawnmower gasoline can from beneath the bed. “Take it for a moment.” He gave me the map and poured diesel over his books and belongings. Strong fumes. “Alright, let’s go.”

A shamefully muddy, black Rolls Royce purred at the inn’s main entrance. A man gripped the wheel with calfskin gloves. Exhaust plumed darkly, obscuring two more men exiting the building, drifting through the wall of fumes like ghosts. A blood splatter marred the tall one’s shirt and tie. The other man had a soaking, red burlap bag in one hand. Lord Almighty knows what was in it.

Pace slow, guns ready, inching our way to Simon’s wheels, another car pulled up: the black caddy from Everett’s shootout. The door locks clicked. We eased into our seats.

“We’ve got the jump on them.” I pressed Harriet’s barrel against the window. “Between the two of us, we could pop ‘em cold, bud.”

“We cannot risk them getting the map. Your friend will be avenged, we need only—.” As Simon started the car a man in a leather coat tapped the windshield casually with the menacing

barrel of an AK-47. He was dark skinned, gray hair buzzed, with a gnarly pink burn on his neck and collarbone.

“Hey now,” I whimpered, pistol rolling upside-down on my finger. “Come on, now. We’re good, hombre. Don’t sweat it.”

“Get out!” The gunman barked, his voice muffled by the glass. His words were weighted by a Mediterranean accent. We did what he said and two more equally threatening fellers approached. They packed AKs and axes.

Then I saw him. “I know you, asshole!”

The albino stood beside the Rolls, hands stuffed into the pockets of his thousand dollar coat.

My hairy eggs quivered from the bad vibes. I half expected my balls’d shrivel to the size of jellybeans and crawl up inside my stomach.

“They will take their time killing us,” Simon whispered.

Staring down the barrel of the Soviet stinger, I motioned to Simon. “Bud, y’all better hit the gas.” I waved to the tall feller, real politely. “I said punch it, dude.”

And he did.

The gunman’s skull popped as we squealed away. And Mississippi mud buried the gory heap of knotted limbs. Rapid fire riddled the chrome bumper. Shattered glass tore the seats. One lucky shot whisked through my sleeve and rattled in the dash like a pinball machine.

The Rolls and Caddy screamed up to eighty behind us, thundering down the slippery backwoods road. The new rain slicked the tar and the wheels slid wildly.

“Fast, man. Fuck the signs. You’re on the Autobahn!” I rolled the window down, unfastened the passenger seatbelt and leaned into the rain. “That’s enough!” I cried. The crack of the .44 shook my arm, but landed sweetly into the grill of the caddy. Smoke spilled from the hood like a dragon’s mouth and the Cadillac swerved into the thick of a two hundred year old tree, splitting like a melon. One bastard flew through the windshield like a raggedy paper doll, all ripped the hell.

I winked to Simon. “Think he made it?” The car blew, cascading fiery debris into the wetlands. “Woo!”

But the Rolls kept rolling, driving from the smoky veil like a pissed off bull after a dumb ass matador. The albino emerged from the roof, railing us with a double banana clip and cradling a bulky, brutal Soviet GP-25 grenade launcher. Encountered those sons of bitches late in the war.

Mean, lean, and keen, babe.

“Simon, bud. You’ve gotta drive faster than you’re driving.” I tried to fire a second shot, but Whitey had his rifle trained and tootin’ dead on. Pinned. I peered over the seat like a mouse from a hole. “Incoming!”

Simon spun the wheel violently.

Foom! The grenade screamed, impacting along the roadside, but the explosive concussion shook us like a snow globe filled with guts and glass. Autumn leaves blew into the car like someone hit the reverse on a vacuum.

“Jesus Houdini!” The second blast ripped through a pine tree and branches bit us like George Washington’s wooden teeth.

The Kraut could drive, but the wet road and explosions didn’t do much for improving his handling. “We have to bail out!” he hollered.

“Yo!” Unbuckled and high on adrenaline, both the lump in my throat and the one in my pants jumped. “Lets do—!”

Another grenade split the car’s trunk in two and flipped us like a mattress. Sparks showered my face. Gravel bit my cheeks, ripped my shirt. The axel snapped, a rubber tire sprung in front of my eyes, and as the car wrapped around the roots of a grandfather oak, a smoky curtain fell faster than I could curse my luck.

•

6

I stirred in the gloom, fiery pain pumping from my fingertips like hot nacho cheese from one of them hot nacho cheese pump things they got at the Get-n-Git. The fire burned hotter when I moved my limp arm. Damn thing broke in two places. Fettered shards struggled beneath my bruised flesh, grinding like chalk. My whole body ached like I’d gotten a prostate exam from an all too eager scrubber with his finger knuckle deep in my asshole. But hell, at least I survived the crash.

Sliding up the wall, I rested against dank stone. “Simon?” I queried, fearful of breaking that deafening silence. “You still kickin’ or what?” If he was there with me, he didn’t respond—or couldn’t. The taste of hot, irony fluid mulled in my mouth and a floundering piece of meat hung loose in my cheek.

Rhythmic drips from a leaky ceiling echoed in the blackness. Pistol was gone of course,

fanny pack too. Hell, I didn't even have my dog tags on. I fumbled blindly through my pockets, desperate for a cig. "Please, baby. Papa needs a menthol," I muttered, digging awkwardly with my one good arm. "Ah, shit!" Bastards took my Rainbows, three quarters of a pack too. But hey, they did me a solid by overlooking the matchbook.

I struck it, illuminating a claustrophobic chamber. No door. No gate. Just brick and moldy mortar stacked from the floor to the four-foot ceiling. Ashes everywhere.

I sighed, snorting blood.

No discernable marks along the walls, I traced my finger along the grooves that separated the stones, desperate for a weak spot; spot where they'd bricked me up.

"Ow!" The flame flickered out and blistered my thumb. "Christ almighty." A red, clay brick with no business lining the wall stared out at me, marked by a familiar symbol: that Aborek word square. Maybe it was my angle, all scrunched in the dark like a pretzel, but for whatever reason, I saw something in the square I hadn't before. Mr. E. Keroba. Prick, sure got his name around. And Evokob was written twice, Keroba—both vertical and horizontal. Ancient Babylonian Order for sure. Those giant-worshipping cultists sure had a thing for puzzles.

"Th' hell you up to, Evo?" The thing that really spooked me was that Keroba spelled Aborek backwards. Shit, man, I should've been on Jeopardy. I'd be suckin' back Margaritas in Cabo with my dick buried in a fine Mamasita.

I fingered the corners of the Aborek brick. Wet concrete mix gobbled my crooked pointer, but I managed to clean it out and slide the grinding stone from its place. I lit another match. "Simon? You there, bud?" A blurry shape motioned in the shadows.

My nose poked through the wall like a hound dog sniffing under a fence. "It's me. Buck. Y'all got a door on that side?"

A blood drenched hand reached from the shadows, palming at the wall. A faceless horror lurched into the pale light, gnashing lipless teeth, staring from empty eye sockets that sloshed with blood. His nose gnawed clean, hair in patches—The Kraut's gooey skull said something in German and slumped forwards.

"Simon!" I kicked in the wall, dislodging the loose stone. "Holy hell, buddy. What'd they do?" I cradled the bastard in my arms. He was truly faceless, skinned naked as gummy red rabbit ready for a stew. He stared blindly in my direction, choking and gurgling.

"Yahweh willing, I am soon dead." He panted.

“Lordy, man.”

“No time. Quiet. Listen.” Simon reached for my hand. “Boreve is the place where it ended and b-began.” Fluid ran between his jaw and wriggling tongue. “Oraxor the speaker, they speak together.”

“Simon, I don’t understand.”

His wet hand slipped from mine.

“The Order of the City speaks to recall him. They know where is Zebub.” A bloody hand explored my mustache. “Rexoko is to recall him. Evokob is Keroba. Keroba is Aborek.”

“Yeah, it’s backwards. Palindromes or some shit. Like racecar. But, recall who? Evo? Recall himself? Like he’s gotta remember something?”

“Zebub. Remember Zebub!” The German’s breath became shallow, voice shrinking. “Khulukanezzer.” Without so much as a shiver, Simon stiffened and the match burned out.

My mind in knots, I digested what I could and belly crawled across Simon’s room towards the wall farthest from him. Rats skittered, a good sign. The reek of wet ashes nearly overwhelmed me, but I found a narrow, coffin-sized tunnel with rollers on it.

They squeaked as I brushed up against them. I was in a crematorium. A cast-iron furnace door barred my easy exit, but peering through the bars I spied Whitey the albino down to his buster browns and easing into a red, silken robe.

Whitey had Simon’s Walther .38 tucked in a white satin sash around his middle. The grenade-launching AK leaned against a metal folding chair. The albino slicked his hair, gumming his hand with saliva. He stepped towards the furnace and I heard a distinct click—then smelled a rush of propane and thought, They torch folks with propane?

“Fuck,” I said aloud, gas pooling around me so quick I felt faint in seconds. I moved fast—with a swift push the iron grate swung open as Whitey strolled away. The clank echoed in the stone room.

The Albino grabbed the pistol grip quick, but I was quicker. I connected a blow to his jaw and pinched his wrist with my dangling arm. “Gotchya now, you stinkin’—!”

With two good arms, Whitey tugged free, wrenching my limp arm until I heard the tell tale crack and pop.

“Fuck!” Panicked, I twirled and fired a punch to his solar plexus. The blow connected with his gut and he weren’t ready. He spit up linguini and collapsed, knocking his head onto the chair.

The pistol spun.

“Not so tough without the machine gun are ya?” I winked groggily as the propane flooded the tiny room, dripping hot like demon spittle.

Diving for the gun we bashed heads and the bastard beat me to it. Three shots zipped and rattled in the crematorium.

“Pitiful. Is this the best Uriel could muster?” Whitey chuckled, baring stained teeth.

“Dude, I don’t know what the hell you’re talkin’ about.” I shook off the gas, but that tell tale sleepiness crept ferociously. “But, I’m gonna knock you here to Sunday.”

The albino paused and give me a once over. “You’re just some hick lowlife aren’t you? You’ve no idea what you’re into. Should I tell I wonder? Would you even believe me?” Cocking the pistol, Whitey smiled.

The albino had too much rhythm on me. Everything went in his favor. A dumb luck, butt-fuck. “I already don’t believe you,” I said with a smirk. “But I’ll tell you something I do know.”

“And what is that? You’ll swoop in and wrestle me to the ground with one arm?”

“You bein’ a shootin’ man should know. It’ll take more than a shot from Simon’s peashooter to slow me up. And you must smell the propane.”

Whitey stopped and sniffed the air cautiously.

“Fire that little beauty and we’ll both light up like the Hindenburg.”

He smelled it all right—that deli mustard funk, boiling cabbage vomitous fart that fuels new American barbeque.

The hiccup I needed. Break in the rhythm. And like a ballet dancer I dipped my body, folding, stepping, until a fist full of albino nuts burst in my vice grip. The fucker’s face looked like a blueberry. Flailing his gun hand, I laid into his wrist with lion’s teeth and shoved him headfirst into the furnace. The rollers did the work for me and Whitey glided into the narrow darkness, wailing. Clink. Clank. I closed her off and hammered the starter. Boom! That bona fide, fuckwit, cult-lovin’ commie fried like chicken, extra crispy.

•

The Aborek boys kept my things stuffed in neon green tote bags up a lonely staircase, the top of which was bricked up like a graveyard funhouse. I examined the dead end and found a disguised nook and passage where another set of stairs led into an echoless room. Walls were

pristine, freshly-dried, city concrete. If it weren't for the red, drippy candlelight I'd have thought I were looking for my Charger in a parking garage and half expected the honk of a car horn.

I rifled through the bags and tried my best to sober up and get mean. Weak light bent over the room. Wax drooped from brass hangings, pointing down a gloomy hall. From what I could tell, there weren't any guards. Whitey must've been the only one. No worries there.

I hugged the cool, flat wall and held fast the AK-47 butt to my shoulder, eye on the steel crosshairs. After all, I ain't a fool. If toting machine guns and skinning folk was business as usual for those fuckos—then hostile take over was scribbled all over that locked, cocked, and rocked Soviet banana clip.

With every step down the shadowy passage the candles dimmed and the hum of voices echoed louder and clearer. When I reached the end, a grotesque mouth shaped doorway barred my way with a black, velvet curtain. As I drew nearer, the curtain rippled unnaturally, like some twelfth century devil's tongue.

"This is my life," I mouthed to myself. "This is my fuckin' life."

The portal weren't made of no concrete. Chipped and chiseled from old granite, the gargoyle's maw yawned rusty fangs like scimitars. Teeth all bunched up like crooked rebar. I swallowed harder.

The devil had two saucer-sized eyes—lidless and unwinking—they followed me like trick busts of Mark Twain or Socrates you'd see in haunted houses at the County Fair. The din of gibberish and backwards talk reverberated against its rocky esophagus. The door moaned as I spread the curtain with the muzzle of the assault rifle.

"Aborek boreve oraxor rexoko Evocob Keroba!" The voices burred.

A dozen cloaked figures stood over aluminum chairs, rocking and chanting. The worshippers swayed in unison, red and black hoods whipping like coked-up, Super Lube motorized, inflatable tube dudes. "Aborek boreve oraxor rexoko Evocob Keroba!" they repeated. "The Order of the City speaks to recall Evokob Keroba."

Simon's mappa mundi stretched over the wall and was nailed to the stone with iron pins. What could only be the Aborek head acolyte, stared up at the map and slouched in his chair like a limp marionette. Two acolytes with finer raiments stitched the slinking figure furiously with shabby sewing kits. No one noticed me creeping. No one noticed my squinty eye targeting through the AK's iron sight—that is until I chambered a round.

Twelve sets of sunken, pale eyes stared from the shade of their blood-colored cowls. Baffled at first—then right pissed—the tallest of the cultists gnashed his teeth like a mad dog. No one said nothing. Instead, the leader’s aluminum chair screeched like nails on a Hemi and his gravely, hollow voice straightened my short and curls.

“Looking to convert, son of Abraham?” Evokob said, face sallow, bloodless, and bobbing forwards. The two cultists continued to sew, stitching a festering, maggot-ridden wound on his belly.

The liquid gore dabbled the stitchers’ hands. Both of them grinned as they licked their master’s blood from their fingers tips, sucking filthy juices from their thumbs.

“I remember you from before. You’re the *good man*, are you not?” Keroba lifted himself feebly from the chair, revealing his nakedness and the horrible task to which his acolytes so diligently focused.

Simon’s severed face stared from Keroba’s belly, but it wasn’t alone.

My eyes deceived me. My thoughts unraveled.

Faces stared from every inch of the demagogue’s body, overlapping one another grotesquely, blinking and mouthing silently, their lidless eyes darting, directionless. They were imprisoned souls, desperate to see the natural world, longing for that which lay beyond their hellish prison.

My hands trembled with the rifle. My mouth dried, throat seized.

“Won’t you join us?” Keroba beckoned and the faces yawned. “Our time,” he said. “Our time is almost upon us.”

Each Acolyte returned their gaze to the mappa mundi. “Aoaooa brx kboeoor vreek! Aoaooa brx kboeoor vreek! Aoaooa brx kboeoor vreek!”

“Show us, Lord! O, Khulukanezzer, Giant of Babylon! I, your highest priest, beseech thee. Deliver unto us the wisdom of the tomb. The faithful return to Zebub!” Keroba cried out and the souls cried with him, spitting venomous, pink ooze from their gaping mouths and shedding tears of dead, black blood.

“Aoaooa brx kboeoor vreek!” said the voices in his skin.

“Simon...” Words spilled from my mouth as my buddy’s lips, curled back. Behind him, the map’s ancient hide and ink rippled, shifting physically. Ink became as blood, dark and murky as the abyss.

“Simon...” His face contorted, a demonic tragedy of muscle memory and pain.

The map grew, continents collapsed unto themselves as ink slithered. I watched it redraw itself, scrapping away old lines and penning new ones. The familiar shapes of circles and squares haunted me.

“Jesus Houdini Christ,” I said. Ink swirled and pooled, drawing the great state of Mississippi and her sweet river rumbling. Louisiana followed, Arkansas, Missouri too. Living ink scribbled west towards Texas and the Rio Grande.

“Evoke not the Lamb of Nazareth,” Keroba said and shut his true eyes. “The savior is coming.” Keroba lifted his gangly arms. The other cultists did the same. “Khulukanezzar has returned unto us! Rejoice! Rejoice!”

Keroba’s head whipped. I heard his spine crunch. The demagogue’s flesh stretched, pulled nearly apart, and the bones beneath squirmed like snakes. Crack! His ribcage busted, split into a sharpened cage. His inside tied themselves in knots. Snap! Arms floundered like tentacles, grinding bone on bone, backward and folding impossibly. Keroba screamed and his many ghastly faces screamed also. Speckled eyelids blinked and like the sound of ripping fabric, Keroba’s throat tore and a blackened, wet arm gripping an enormous eye expelled from the unsewn carpet of the demagogue’s twisted mass.

The Cult of Aborek prostrated themselves, diving to their bellies, piling onto one another like rats in a sewer. “His Eidolon is come!”

The Eidolon’s wrist swiveled my way and the eye stared right at me. Or should I say, into me. Hell, I felt its gaze look deep. Real deep. Down into my darkest, forgotten memories, picking at them like scabs.

“HE choose you?” A thunderous voice rumbled, splitting concrete and showering flecks of debris from the ceiling. The eye tilted in confusion.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t answer. Shit, my mind wasn’t right. The eye knew me. Knew things I’d forgotten. Giant fingernails scratched the inside of the skull, playing cat’s cradle with my memories. Thoughts fell through the fingers like Babylonian sand. The eye saw all. My father. A Preacher. Man didn’t even say goodbye...

I shook my head.

“WHY DID HE CHOOSE YOU?” The voice—the eye—Keroba but not Keroba. The room quaked.

“Papa?” I said aloud. Head spinning, the concrete shrank around me. Red robes balled up together and liquefied, swirling into a single amorphous form.

“I don’t know,” I stood on a flushing drain. Blood and bone whirled into a siphoning chasm beneath my shining Italian boots. My father haunted the illuminated doorway, holding fast his alligator suitcase and King James Bible—the eye saw it, so did Keroba and Simon—the others. Ma cried into her polka dot sleeve in the kitchen. The oven beeped. The toaster dinged. A kettle whistled.

“TELL ME WHY?” The Eidolon boomed with desperation, but I couldn’t hear his heretic ass over the freakin’ whistling kettle. “I LONG TO KNOW THIS. DID HE SPEAK TO YOU?”

Steam whistles weren’t that loud. My eardrums near burst as it grew louder and louder, until the blaring wall of sound blasted like a thousand trumpets, shattering my unholy trance, and severing Khulukanezzer’s sight into my inner-most soul.

I took two steps. The hideous mound of demonic eyes and teeth was devouring each of the acolytes, rending muscle from bone as they hollered and prayed to him. The Eidolon ignored me, its twisted attentions fixed upon a single point in the living map. A town in New Mexico—some place called Chimayo.

Then, suddenly and curiously—I smelled charcoal and sweet, Tennessee pork.

“I’m gonna suck out your fucking eyes, mother fucker!”

Smoking, gummy hands hooked my throat like a noose. The aroma of cooked meat rushed my nose and Whitey reached for the barrel of the AK-47 with a charred hand.

Without thinking I slung the bastard over my shoulder and the skin on his arm peeled off like a glove. He looked like a Baltimore pit roast and the poor bastard’s insides spilled onto my boots steaming. He clawed my ankles, biting and thrashing. So, I planted a mercy shot through his dome, sprayin’ the wall with barbequed brains.

The Eidolon’s shrill bellow thundered, “CHIMAYO!”

Fast talkin’ ain’t as useful as fast thinkin’. Talk’s a drag anyway. So, I nudded up, kissed my ring and checked for one grenade in the chamber. Aiming for the map, I held my breath. Thoonk!

A fireball consumed the wall while the fleshy beast took the shrapnel. The concussion rocked me and tossed an aluminum chair into my thigh—stung like hell, but didn’t break my concentration. Shells clinked onto the floor, rattling like devil’s sleigh bells. Load, lock, cock. I fired off another grenade—knockin’ myself onto my ass. I slid backwards, down the hall and

into a puddle of Whitey. Thoom! Smoke and ash spilled over me like gray surf. And the chamber was still.

I coughed. “That’s right, babe. Y’all can bitch and moan.” Brushin’ clean, I slipped in red and pink goop. “Can’t take the heat? Stay outta the kitchen, know what I mean?”

The grind of metal chairs cackled at me. It stirred beyond my sight, skulking within the smoldering veil. Then I saw it—the long, black arm pulling its own limp carcass from the cinders. Reminded me of Mississippi tugboat haulin’ a supertanker. The jaws and eyes gnashed and blinked, soaked with hellish, runny bile and belching remnants of undigested body parts like a kind of cannibalistic soup.

Jostled by fear, I weren’t sure of what I’d seen. Candles ignited with white light and piercing beams illuminated the passage to the doorway, like reflectors on the highway. I ran, careful and sure-footed. And once through the threshold, I saw the lumbering horror claw nearly free of the devil’s mouth. Hot breath enveloped me. I kicked at the maw furiously, when abruptly the Devil Door woke.

The shambling remains of Khulukanezzer shrieked as the devil’s scimitar teeth fell mercilessly upon the beast. The mouth gnawed and chewed, sucking its demonic feast until the unholy portal locked shut into a prison of fangs, unforgettably terrible and undeniably stoic. In the quiet, the faint words: “Why you?” dripped from liquid darkness.

•

8

Uneven stairs spit me out of a rusty mausoleum gate. The smell of wet moss and fresh rain was welcome. Slivers of twilight peaked from clouds that broke apart, bleeding blue. This magpie squawked at me, perched way up on the swinging iron sign. It crooked its ruffled head at me. Squawked again.

“You and me both, hombre.” I fished for a Rainbow menthol. Lit it with Whitey’s Zippo. I took a drag, but it tasted like an armadillo’s grundel.

Two more magpies joined their crowin’ comrade on the creaking iron sign.

“Hell, I’m in Hayes Cemetery.” I’d cleared weeds there for extra green, you know to get the Charger out of impound. I stamped out my cigarette in the cool mud and squished towards Keroba’s sludge-sparkly Rolls Royce. It wasn’t my ’69 Dodge Charger, but sure as hell beat slogging.

Brit cars got the driver seats on the wrong side. Dumb, I thought. But Keroba's keys still glittered in the ignition. I gave her a turn and she grumbled like Churchill. I adjusted the mirror, fixed my mustache and the radio dial spun between my fingers. I tuned in something with swing. Daddy sang bass and Mama tenor. I settled into the trembling midnight leather interior like a liquored up prom queen.

Two miles from Verney, I pulled into Yes, Ma'am Drive Through to get a corn dog and slaw, but my wallet was bone dry and the only thing Keroba's Rolls had going for it was a bad ass air conditioner. That's when I popped the glove box.

"Hot damn."

A boatload of Benjamin Franklins tumbled into my hands. Twenty thousands bucks wrapped in plastic, crisp and clean as a reverend's sheets, and it weren't two blinks before I ditched that buck-toothed roadster. Figured it was high time to buyback American.

* * * * *

THE FIFTH TRUMPET OF ABADDON

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1

There's more sand in America than people think. The lonesome west is blanketed by it. Hot, dry, living grit. And like a mangy coyote, the damn stuff turns up everywhere. Lungs, engine, crack of my ass. You hate it and love it. Like women—or boozing. But when you find yourself driftin' alone, out on the road, whistling by sleepy, dusty towns like Cuyamungue — sand's the only company you got.

I brushed the passenger seat clean, knocking pamphlets onto my A-Team floor mat. Most of it was tourism lit I picked up in Amarillo, nothin' dazzling: kayak the Rio Grande and some shit about personal enlightenment from a toga totin' Papa Lama. I tussled my hair free of a chittering cricket and tasted desert grit spill from my disheveled mustache. The gas pedal eased beneath my shiny, new Italian boot. I thought about her new paintjob, my Charger's that is. Black with candy apple stripes, draped over the hood like silk. Wondered how she'd hold up under the sun. See, I was from Mississippi and used to all the soggy, sticky heat. Not the bone-dry desolation of a New Mexican afternoon.

I slowed the car to a crawl and lifted my aviators for a better look at a wreck haunting a roadside ditch. The white hippy-dippy VW stood out like a ghost in the night. Bus weren't any older than my Dodge, but sure looked it. Thing was a metal skeleton, bleached and beaten, worse off than the derelict pueblos speckling the cactus-thick countryside. Hollow as an empty grave, missing glass, mirrors, doors—the message spray-painted to the hull read: *Santiago's Bible Bus & Faith Club* bubbled almost illegible by the sun. The body and grill was busted up pretty fierce, like a chain gang'd taken sledge hammers to it. You could tell nobody survived.

I started lighting a cigarette, but one of my tears put out the flicker from my aluminum lighter with a hiss. I pulled behind the wreck, twisted and tugged the key from the ignition.

We're sorry, they told me. We're really sorry, Mr. Dennis.

Why so sorry? Act of God, right?

The wind sang through the crooked sheets of buckled steel. My teeth began to grind and my knuckles turned white, wrenching the steering wheel. Had myself a hard cry into my fist. I choked for almost a minute before talking to the sky. "You can kiss my ass."

The antique pistol in the glove box reached for my hand and a hundred and eleven degrees of New Mexican heat drummed me. But my Colt? She was cool as Cab Calloway.

I didn't hear him coming, but the Mac Truck thundered and laid down on his two-gallon air horn. Good thing, I thought and eyed the cloudless sky. I was pissed. Certain as hell His almighty ass didn't want me rapping on Saint Peter's screen door just yet. I cursed my keys as if the damn things suddenly didn't belong to my car. I revved her twice, lit a menthol and peeled back onto US-84 North.

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2

The road to Chimayo was a windswept wonder of forgotten towns and forgotten folks. Kind of place where all the "no ones" and "nobodies" of the Mid-west go to get themselves forgotten. But then again, that's easy for me to say, being that I was one of them. The highway makes cowards brave like that. Hell, back home in Verney, Mississippi I was *the* nobody. Shit man, I was the king-fuck nobody's nobody: a slack-jawed, redneck, varmint eatin', good ol' boy with a sour 'tude and a mean ass, trash talkin' pie hole. I was Bucky Dennis, the lonely shmo you didn't want to be.

Sundown pulled a violet curtain over the horizon as I pulled into a truck stop in El Valle De

Arroyo Seco. This little diner by name of Roy Hobb's stood off the road a ways. Some cross country rigs and a fifties pickup were parked under a flickering neon sign: *Home of the Lightning Burger*.

I kicked the dust from my feet and sat slumped at the bar, scoping the regulars. It was a clean enough place with dirty clientele. That throwback, fifties style with red, vinyl seats and checkered counter tops sure rubbed me right though—you know, the way a diner *should* look.

"Coffee?" A petite, dirty-blondé poked her pretty head from the kitchen nook. She rested slender arms on the counter and handed me a menu. About my age, the gal had a way about her. Used to call it grace before the eighties hit and turned all the "refined ladies" into "professional women."

"Ma'am." I nodded and tilted my cup her way.

She drew back her hair with steady hands and tied off her ponytail. She winked, bright-eyed with an honest smile—just the way a *woman* should look.

"Much obliged." My coffee was fresh. What a place, I thought.

"Gentleman huh?" She smiled.

"Ain't no other way to be. Now, what's this Lightning Burger?"

She hopped up on the lifted step behind the counter and dipped her luscious bounty. She was buttoned up, all conservative and such, but that sweet perfume and sliver of cleavage panged my belly like a sock to the gut. "That's the special, habanera pepper burger. *Probably* not too spicy for a man like yourself?" She rolled her eyes, real friendly like.

"Mississippians can take the heat, ma'am." I sipped piping coffee, playin' it cool as an iceberg.

"Mississippi huh? And you're traveling for vacation? Business?" she asked, either unaware or careless of my muddy-ass mood.

One of the bikers hanging back by the jukebox started pumping quarters. He gave me a little salute. "Come on now, stranger. What's your name then? Or should I guess?"

My business was my own, I thought. Places to be and people to see. Didn't matter how pretty or how polite she was. "I'll just take a Lightning Burger and a if you've got a fruit salad, that'd be good." So, I changed the subject. Rude, I knew. Hell, I felt my mama's phantom-hand smack me up side the jaw.

"Alright." The waitress shrugged.

I sighed and looked up from my aviators. “Bucky. Name’s Bucky D.”

Her dimples perked into a smile. “Well, Bucky D...” A lock of her hair bobbed like golden ribbon over her green eyes. “Your business is your own. I don’t mean to pry.” She paused, scribbling into the margins of her little booklet. “I’m Trisha by the way—if you need anything let me know, hun.”

“Sure thing, Trish.”

“It’s Trisha.” The gal smirked and pointed to her nametag. It bounced her bosom. Damn, she was cute as button, but I weren’t in the mood.

“Whatever,” I grumbled, averting my eyes like a true Southern gentleman.

“You play it tough, don’t you? But I know you’re really a nice guy at heart.”

“Yeah?” I scoffed. “Well, I hear they finish last.”

She winked at me. “Maybe. But they finish.” Trisha topped off my coffee and twirled through the swinging kitchen doors. “Wait!” She stopped, turning back, nibbling on the cap of her pen. “Let me guess your sign.”

“My sign?”

“You know, you’re Zodiac.”

“Shoot, Tex.” I sighed, leaning back with my fingers laced.

“You’re tough as nails, maybe even a little brash.” Trish took my hand and stroked my palm.

“Ain’t this somethin’ else?” I asked, thinking of crystal balls and gaudy jewelry.

She laughed, “Helps me get the right vibe.”

I couldn’t hold back a chuckle.

“Shhh!” She giggled. “Gosh, I know what you are.”

“And what’s that?”

“Leo.” Trish winked at me again. She had a habit of winkin’ I guessed.

“Well, twist my whiskers. You sure know your stuff, Ma’am.”

“Don’t I? You know, the stars are more than pretty sparkles in the sky. Least I think so. They tell a story.”

“What story’s that?” I asked, genuinely interested.

“Our story.” Trish looked out over my shoulder. “You know, all of us.”

Clear black sky stretched forever over the desert, a riddle of darkness and twinkling

meaningfulness, I just couldn't grasp. I'd been in Mississippi my whole life and I ain't never seen a sky like that one. "So, what sign are you?" I wondered.

"Aries," she said. "We're a perfect match. Get two fire signs together and things really heat up."

I'd be lying if I told you I didn't feel my pants lump up just a hair. "That right?"

The kitchen dinger chimed like a church bell announcing the birth of my Lightning Burger.

"Say, uh. Ma'am?" Don't know why I kept on, but she didn't hear me. And about that time the biker punched up his pick on the jukebox and it whirled to life with a jazzy, New Orleans funeral romp. Kind of tune I wanted to hear at my own farewell. Hell, maybe if I were luckier, a second wedding.

•

3

In Vietnam I had a lot of bad wake ups. And I ain't gonna sugar coat a God damned thing for you. Tunnel rat Tuesdays, firefight Fridays, and hefty helping of napalm on Sunday. Morning time in Vietnam as like wakin' up in an asshole's asshole. Morning meant trouble, babe. But I'll tell you straight, that Roy Hobbs fire-eatin' son of a bitch and his Lightning Burger? That thing tore me up worse than the Tet Offensive. My sweaty, swollen, cracker ass was stuffed with an M80 covered in American cheese. Shit bud, the devil must've grilled that fucker himself.

I shuffled across the dirt lot and groggily pitied myself over another sleepless night of rolling onto my morning wood in a bucket seat. My peepers played tricks on me and folks pulling into the parking lot looked like blurry, pitchfork toatin' imps. Little demons all line danced, celebrating the finest, fire-spitting ground-beef this side of the San Andreas.

"Hot Mamasita," I said with a cigarette dangling like a limp worm from my bottom lip. "I'm older than hell."

I glanced Trisha smiling from the diner. Girl must've woke before dawn. She finger-painted the specials onto the door with gobs of color covering her hands.

I smiled back, sucking in my colon and firing up the Charger. My car rolled in the dust and near the blistering tar of the road. Heat waves rippled. I sighed.

Pulling out onto the highway, I eyed her in my rearview mirror and watched her small hands glide over the glass, wet with blue, white, and green, she looked pretty in the morning. Bright beams glittered, dappling her hair with soft, living light.

“Not a shadow of a doubt,” I said to myself. Not even a wedge of shade—Trisha was the single most beautiful creature I’d ever seen. The kind of gal that sticks with you and leaves a big hole in your middle. Guilt panged my guts, ‘cause I knew I never felt that way about my ex-wife. I mean my daughters were my beauties. I’d go to hell and back for my Minnie and May. But the ex-wife? It’d been years since we’d spoken. Sure a call here or there, mostly to talk to the girls. But that ain’t *speaking*. It ain’t nothing at all.

My heart sinking, I sniffed and spied my mirror.

Trisha waved from the porch with that new, thumping excitement a person gets when they feel that little something stir. Call it a spark. I wonder what she thought. Maybe that feller ain’t so bad, I hoped. My engine chugged. So, like it weren’t nothing, I offered up a phony salute and rolled out of her life forever.

What if? I thought, What if I was worth something, somewhere? Shit man, I was Bucky Dennis. I’d been through rivers of shit and came out—well, not clean—but given some pomade and a stiff mustache wax, certainly decent enough for a date.

I shook off as much nonsense as I could bear and thought, For Christ’s sake. I don’t even know the girl. But then again, maybe I did. Some people just feel like home. Despite everything, I braced up and took a long, hard drag on my menthol. Smoke drifted.

Some crows clamored over a wooden shed with rotten shingles.

“I dare not dream it,” I coughed. But I knew deep, deep as hell’s bubbling, molten core—I knew that I’d love that fine lady for the rest of my sorry days.

And that was that. I let it go. My V8 hummed. Tires squealed. And waves of heat ebbed over the blistering highway as I rolled on out to nowhere.

•

4

Low on gasoline, I sputtered to a stop under the rusty, tin awning of Dale’s Gas. Two neglected pumps awaited my thirsty Charger and cola machine gurgled like a circular saw with emphysema. A cold anything sounded mighty fine, so I moseyed over to the rickety shack hosting the archaic road sign. A yellow suction-cupped *open* sign beckoned from oily windows. The first pump clicked and a tattered, stick of a man left the store holding a sack and instrument case.

The drifter sported a ratty bomber’s jacket and gave me a once over.

I waved politely.

The grubby feller grinned with crooked teeth and nodded like he knew me. Without diverting his eyes, he unlocked the trunk of his smoky sedan and tossed in his luggage.

Six, bony crows stared like silent sinners from a buzzing telegraph wire. Twelve beady eyes traced my steps into the store.

Dale's place was trashed, torn up as if a drunken giant shook it like a paint can full of liquor dimes. Reeked too, foul and fetid. Rotten eggs, hot vinegar, and burnt paper permeated like a demon's hookah. Empty cola bottles clinked in a bed of ash beneath my boots.

"Uh, ten bucks on number two?" I queried, careful to keep my elbows off of the dirty counter. "Y'all got a mess out here, bud." Mounds of salt packed every crack and floorboard.

I snooped over the counter. The register drawer slid half way open, packed with green and silver. I reached for the cash when I noticed more crystalline piles of loose salt. A trail of the stuff sifted from the supply closet. Grains plinked like sands in an hourglass.

I nudged the doorknob and it creaked open lazily, revealing a room filled flat to the door with a sheet of solid, brackish rock. The crows out front piped up, honking and squawking like an organ.

"Pops? You in there?" My uttered words dribbled from my mouth as I brushed my fingers over the man-shaped contours of the salty pillar. The face was buried in the sea-salt, mouth and eyelids drawn back with terror by the invisible wires of a cadaverous marionette. A cricket skittered from his nostril.

"Jesus Houdini Christ..."

The cola bottles clinked behind me as a shadow loomed, bending the light in the room and cast a billowing shade over me. "Said you'd come," The stranger said.

My blood chilled and my heart quivered as I turned to see the sallow-faced drifter crowding the entry. He held a sawed-off, double shot Remy. "Said you'd see."

"Who said what now?" I swallowed. The shutters knocked the oily glass of the windowpane languidly, raining desert grit from the patchwork roof.

"We knew you'd stagger in sooner or later, didn't we?" The drifter raised his shotgun. Ruffled feathers echoed over the gas station.

"Sure we did." Another voice chimed, but I didn't see the other bastard.

"Look, fellas. I don't want no trouble. I ain't got no money. Hell, I don't even have a job.

You want my wheels? Take ‘em. I did two years in County—I ain’t a snitch.” My blood bubbled up to my neck, my veins popped.

The drifter turned and glanced at my sparkling Dodge Charger.

“Well, you gonna twitch or ditch?” I asked.

The drifter’s finger edged ever so slightly towards the trigger of his shotgun.

Fuck, I thought and reached for my Colt. “Shit!” I cursed myself.

“You left your weapon in the glove box, Bucky,” the drifter said, eyes on the car.

“How the hell do you know my name, asshole?” Fury tagged out fear in the cage-match is was my brain.

“We know.” He smiled, lips tight and eyes hollow as a wishless well.

The click of the trigger roared louder than the gun blast. Shards of white, stinging rock bit my shoulder as the shot shattered the pillar of salt. I dove through the windowpane, rolling over a bed of chicken wire. The second barrel trumpeted, ricocheting off of a silver propane tank in the yard. I almost prayed for it to blow.

“Kill him!” the drifter ordered, storming from Dale’s.

I cranked the ignition and rifled for my pistol. Peeling out, another gunshot pinged my passenger door. “Fast, mother fucker,” I said, eyeing his jalopy. I searched my mirrors, but his was the only car following and fast too. That piece of junkyard scrap kept pace with my Charger like nothing I’d ever seen. God only knows how many horses punched under that rusty hood.

I gripped my one-of-a-kind 1848 Colt Army Revolver; a classic piece of American kick-ass by any standard. Named her Harriet after her original owner. She shined like a Mississippi sunrise and sure knew how to cool me off when life gave me the sweats. Six, custom cast, percussion-capped .44 caliber beauties gave Harriet the stopping power of a runaway Union Pacific.

Squealing, the drifter’s ride collided with mine. Tangled metal sparked as both cars slid wildly from the road and disappeared into a whirling dervish of smoky sand and cactus corpses. Tires burst, shredding into wriggling black, rubber strips. My head thumped the steering wheel, dinging like a maul on a railroad spike. Through a cloud of swirling debris, I spied the drifter aiming his shotgun with reckless abandon, ignorant of our steely knot of eighty-mile-per-hour, automotive death.

“What are you possessed!?” I ducked between my knees, tasting the hot blast of gunpowder

over my back. A violent jolt jostled me upright to see the rapidly approaching hog fence. I braced myself against the wheel, catching a glimpse of the drifter's shock.

Our snarling wreck demolished a rotten, timber fence and our crippled hoods dunked into a muddy watering hole. I heard a wet crunch and watched the drifter's limbs disappear into a plume of splintered two-by-eights. Rank, shit water and sticky pellet feed splashed into my mouth.

"Son of a bitch." My trembling hands wouldn't let go of the wheel.

Shallow oinks echoed through the twisted chassis. I peeled myself from the leather seat and confronted the bulbous, snorting snout of an inquisitive sow.

"Christ." My poor '69 Charger weren't ever gonna see another sunrise that was for darn tootin'.

"Th' hell you lookin' at, Wilbur?" I pulled myself from the wreckage and slipped across the hood. My knuckles throbbed, white with the vice-grip I had on my revolver. Pig squallier marred my boots as I sloshed free.

"Smoke?" I asked, passing my menthol to Porky as I slumped forward, lucky to be living.

Water stirred, ebbing red against my feet.

The pig oinked again.

"You said it. He's lasagna." I spit out a molar.

Bubbles churned from the filth and two, crooked hands clawed up the muddy bank. The drifter's jaw clicked like a bad carburetor. Nothing but blood and spit drooled from his broken face.

Harriet's iron sight marked his brow ridge. "Who are you?" I asked, hocking a red loogie.

"I am..." he gurgled. His voice was stereophonic. The drifter had someone else in there with him, maybe two, maybe three more. "We are," he continued, vocal chords knotted and humming like a drunken barbershop quartet. "Mine is Legion."

"Th' hell kind of name is that?" Uneasiness pinched my sphincter, quaking my bowels.

"Mine is Legion, for we are many." A slew of choking voices burbled from the drifter's mouth. "We are one that is six and six that are one."

"Yeah?" I pulled my thumb back on Harriet's nickel hammer. "Where's your gang at? I heard y'all scheming." In my soul I knew we were alone, lost, and out of sight from any good-willed God. Who does that almighty son of a bitch think He is anyway? Rested on the seventh

day my ass. Fucker's been out on disability for a hundred million years.

"Please..." the demoniac pleaded, writhing in foulness. "Send us not into the Abyss!"

"You killed a man. Turned him into so much garnish. For what?" Despite the desert, chilly wind rustled my hair and my insides curdled, squirming like worms doin' the Frug.

The possessed didn't respond immediately. His tone changed and only one voice spoke, delicately and frightened. "Mercy!" it said, "Mercy of the Lamb, ye Bucky who was sent by—!" With unholy speed, the Drifter snatched the pig. It squealed. "Please," it continued, cradling the pig in its arms. "What love have you for Him? He giveth nothing but sorrow, bestow nothing but dem—."

"Jesus," I mouthed.

The drifter frowned. The pig scrambled, snorting, but unable to break free.

"—Yet what reward do you receive? What was your prize for embracing the darkness?"

My gun was heavy, my heart a brick of lead. "Shut up," I protested.

"We know, Bucky Dennis." The demoniac smiled, stroking the suffocated pig. "He who grants you nothing, taketh all things dearest. Oh yes. We know. We know." The drifter's many voices crackled in unison. They were horrible and inharmonious. "Your daughters and loveless wife, even the man that took care of them when you could not—."

"Shut your mouth," I whimpered. Dry heat rose up from the invisible desert currents. It flogged me like a hot iron, charring my flesh and searing my mind' eye blind.

"Their bodies mangled, Bucky. Unidentifiable in the warped slag." Legion recalled the imagery and made it real in my mind. "May was sliced in two by the passenger side door. Your wife was crushed under the weight of the engine. But Minnie? Minnie lived for six hours before they found her. Compounded bones kept her body stitched together a lone time. Imagine it. Imagine hard." His cruel smile scored like a hot brand. "Mercy, Bucky." He frowned. "Mercy of the Lamb."

My world shrank to the size of a single pistol chamber. Harriet's burnt perfume tickled my nose. I tasted it, bitter as an unfinished life.

I saw my daughters laugh in July of '84, running along the riverbed in polka dot sundresses, pink and yellow. Starlight twinkled and lightning bugs wisped through the woods. Their colorful ribbons danced from their heads as they caught the fluttering lights in marmalade jars. She jars shattered and I was in the canyon floor. Silent and stunning, the canyon walls were traced with

the deadly trails of scored rock and destroyed automobile parts. At the bottom, down in the dark, belly of the cliffs, the Winnebago hissed with burning rubber, wicked steel, and the silent stillness of death and starved fires.

Tears fell, but I didn't weep.

"We know, Bucky. We know." The Fiend's sympathetic frown was false. "Mercy. Mercy of the Lamb."

I eyed him with a stone-cold, iceberg of a stare.

And he knew what was coming. "Wait—!"

"Tough rocks." I squeezed the trigger, unleashing a thundering .44 caliber crack and sendt the drifter's unholy ass to hell with a crispy splatter. "I ain't no Lamb."

My charger sundered behind me, popping and groaning as steel folded in on itself. A cool sheen blinded me, an object. It sparkled in the sand not ten yards off. The drifter's instrument case was unlatched with a shabby, brass trumpet inside.

A weathered look of age and neglect marked it like a tattoo. I picked it up, fingered the valves. They eased beneath my fingertips. A nice trophy, but I didn't know how to play.

•

5

Takes three days to die without a drip of water. Two if you're in the desert. One if you're a boozing, pretty boy from Mississippi and spoiled by all that sweet, Southern humidity. My nomadic wanderings along the road to Chimayo left me dry as a nun's cunt. Without so much as a passing truck or fleabag pit stop, a swill of that shit-curdled, bloodied-up, pig water sounded mighty fine.

Crows circled overhead singin' that unnerving hymn they do so well. Landing in patches of dried corn husks, the bastards skittered behind my heels, bobbing along the cornrows, waiting real patient-like for me to perish.

"Git!" I hollered, firing a blind shot at the sky. They scattered, but not for long. "Damn you!" I fired until my chambers rolled empty and then some. "Git on now! Git!" But it weren't no use. Feathery, doll-eyed shadows haunted my desolate footprints.

I forwent thirst and sobbed without tears. My lips cracked like rice paper, gums raw. Around noon on the third day, my face bled. The skin on my cheeks split and peeled, welting craterous sores. My eyes stung, sealed nearly shut by the arid wind. I figured I should walk at night, but I

could no longer discern the difference. Wander as you will, I thought, Either by the light of the moon or the dark of a blinding sun.

Harriet's steel seared my grip with every agonizing step. I barely held on with my noodley fingers. And when my body gave, I fell at the base of a yellow call box. I dialed the fucker, but like my whole damn life, nobody was on the other end.

A weak man would've given up. He'd have clasped his knobby hands and prayed like sinner. Not me. No prayers. None. If that was to be my final moment? My meaningless end? Let it be so. Let my pickled liver and blacked lungs return to His earth. Let Him choke on my bitter asshole. God, I got all riled up and ready—but then? Then the godforsaken phone rang.

“Yeah?” I rasped.

“Did y'all just ring from box J-1-9? You're aware this is an emergency line, sir?” Woman on the other end was mighty perky and testy as a water moccasin.

“That's right. I need—.”

“Can you state the issue, sir?”

“Yeah, well I'm—.”

“Can we get this resolved? Lines are buzzin' off the hook, sir.”

“Off the hook? Th' hell you talkin' about lady? I need somebody to get on out here and pick me—.”

“Please hold!” She switched me off.

I tilted my aviator sunglasses and squinted over the horizon. Miles of cracked tar slept soundly under blankets of rippling heat and desolation.

“Call box J-1-9. Please, describe the nature of the problem?”

“I need a ride. I've been—I've been on the road two days now.”

“Sir, we're not a towing service.”

“For fuck's sake lady!”

“You need to mind your tone, sir.”

I groaned and wobbled to my feet. “You got a car or somethin' can swing by? There ain't nobody out here.” My tearful, choking laughter made it difficult to speak. “Y'all can either pick me up or clean me up. I'm fryin' like an egg.”

•

Way back, when I was a snot-nosed hoodwink, my father played this game on the road. A memory game. See, whenever we'd sail down the highway and spot a rest stop, I'd have to spell the name out loud, fast as I could. He told me it stoked the coals under my brainpan, kept me sharp.

"There's one," he'd say. "La Bajada Rest Stop."

And I'd scramble. "L-A-B-A-J-A-D-A!" If I got it right he'd toss me a Jujube, green one. If I got it wrong? He'd put out his cigarette on my neck and tell me to try again—to think back hard—to remember with perfect clarity what I'd seen. Lookin' back I can't recall the names of any of the rest stops, but I'll never forget how to play the game.

"La Bajada," I said. "L-A-B-A-J-A-D-A." I spelled.

The truck driver looked me over. "That's the place. Bus rolls in about every three hours." He was a big feller, said his name was John Tuckered—like the sleepy—but everyone called him Johnny the Apache.

Johnny's hard, leathery face was red as Mexican claw and he wore black, horn-rimmed glasses over a wandering fisheye. Funky hulk or not, it sure was thoughtful of him to pick me up with a seat full of burritos and bottled water.

"Say, you wouldn't happen to have a smoke would you, John?" Weak and sickly, water was welcome, but nicotine—damn, I needed a drag.

"Unfiltered?" He tapped the soft-pack and shook out a stubby, black straw-looking smoke. "Or you on the quitting side of the butt?"

"I haven't quit nineteen times. Unfiltered are fine by me, bud. What are these, cigarillos?" I pursed my lips, waving the tip over Johnny's Mets lighter.

"Kretek from Gudang Garam. That's Indonesia." Johnny the Apache lit his own and slowed the truck to a stop in the parking lot at La Bajada. We overlooked the highway, how it steadily climbed into the hills, winding and walled on either side by jagged rocks and dead trees.

"I've got asthma see," Johnny said.

"Don't know a lot of smokers with asthma." I tasted the smoldering tar. "Actually, I'll take that back. I know more than I should."

Johnny laughed. "No kidding. That's why I puff kreteks. Folks in the orient make good medicine," he said. "You mind?" Johnny unwrapped burrito foil and dug in. "That's a nice trumpet."

“What?” I weren’t listening.

“Your trumpet. You play good?” Johnny had rice stuck to the corners of his mouth. “I used to play when I was a kid.” He tuned the radio to a boxy jazz station.

“Nah,” I said. “Ain’t much for music making.”

Johnny burped and took another bite. “Ain’t everybody’s thing. Want another smoke?”

“You really smoke those for medicine? I’d have figured a feller like you’d have good medicine too.”

Mouth full, Johnny stopped. “Why’s that? Because I’m Apache?” His eyes widened. “I get it, right? Hi-How-Are-Ya! We’re tight with the Great Spirit? That it? Me chewum cactus root and BAM! Gonorrhea’s gone.”

I, Bucky Solomon Dennis, fuckwit and ass-hat, cringed quietly with a cold burrito and Indonesian cigarette in my hand. Satchel Mouth Armstrong’s trumpet hummed over the radio waves. Hell, I didn’t mean nothing by it, but then again, maybe that’s the reflex excuse for a Klansman.

“You here for Indian wisdom, little white man? That what you’re doing in the desert? Nibbling peyote on your spirit quest?” Johnny chuckled, snidely. “Ah, fuck it. I’m joshing, brother.”

My shoulders rolled down from my ears.

“Got no insurance. I smoke ‘em for asthma. But really, I just dig Eastern culture, you know? China, Japan. I love ninjas and shit.”

I noticed the wiggling, hula-Buddha on the dash. “They’ve got swagger for sure.” I sipped my water. “Did a couple tours in ‘Nam, myself. Pretty country. Would’ve been prettier if I weren’t being shot at. But hey—Hooah!”

“Amen, brother. Firebase Ripcord.” Johnny the Apache gave me a high-fiver, brandishing his U.S. Airmobile tattoo. “Currahee,” he said, “Stand together alone.”

“On that,” I paused, “the porcelain throne awaits.” I hurried to the toilet, searing my soles on the cement. The restroom was trashed, as one could imagine. Matted, soggy paper with brown stains clumped into corners, leaking pipes overflowing sinks. My stream was weak and yellow as a wasp. The florescent lights flickered. The flush ran a long time as I stared blankly into the mirror and rinsed my face. Stains of blood dotted my collar—funny that Johnny didn’t notice.

I dried my hands with a junky air blower, noting the flickering lights dimming out. Didn’t

make no bones about it, but then the light outside dimmed. Clouds overcame the sun and daylight sank into the night. The air blower whirled quiet and the toilet bowls flowed over with chunky, coagulated blood.

“Johnny?” A buzz swelled and shrank like a symphonic movement outside.

Sloshing through a crimson wake, I went on the lookout for Johnny’s truck. It was still parked in the same spot, but the driver’s seat was empty. The radio droned and a few crickets bounced along the cement, latching to my boots, some caught in the sticky red syrup rushing from the restroom door.

“Ah hell,” I said, squinting to make out a dangling figure beneath a tree, thirty yards off. “Johnny...” Poor bastard’s twisted corpse swung like a pendulum. A cricket hopped to my shoulder.

“Do you not see?” the cricket said to me. “Do you not see the angels?”

The noon sky became as midnight, masking every vestige of illumination save for twinkling stars which glowed far larger and closer than what is natural to the world. Pale light cloaked me in shimmering robes. My Verney High Football Ring glimmered.

“He fell and told us their names. He told us their stories!” the cricket said.

“Who’s that?” I asked, eyes on Johnny’s dangling feet. Locusts prickled over his body like goose pimples. I shooed ‘em off instinctively.

“The Ninth Watcher, Grigori and Father to Nephilim!”

“Yeah?” I wasn’t yet strong enough to undo the knots in the rope. My sickly fingers fumbled, drained by dehydration and fatigue.

“He who second fell and foretold the wisdom of the stars. Baraqiel!” The cricket fluttered, fiddling in the air. “Baraqiel! Baraqiel!”

“Why’d you kill, Johnny?” My thumb flicked the cricket onto the ground. I raised my foot. “Get talkin’ bug.”

“Not I! Not I!” it cried.

“I’ll ask again.” My boot came down.

Before the crunch, another voice, distant and cold, echoed in answer.

“To be my vessel,” Johnny whispered, still hanging from the tree. “Your friend ceases but forever after I continue.”

I stepped back and checked Harriet’s chamber. “You anything like that other guy?”

“The Legion is but the hand. Just as I am but the mouth,” Baraqiel said. His voice was gravely as a spade scooping mud. Johnny’s eyes batted open, pupils like mirrors reflecting the sky.

“You’re saying you killed a decent man to give me a message? You ain’t makin’ a very good case. See, if I were you? I’d be—I don’t know—philosophizin’ pretty darn hard on ways to keep me from eradicating your unholy ass.”

“Bold. But, brash also. Heed my wisdom. Go not to Chimayo.”

“Tough rocks,” I said. My palms clammed up.

Baraqiel smiled, stretching Johnny’s face like a cheap rubber mask. “You were born in the arms of Regulus, swaddled in the warmth of Denebola, crowned by Algieba! Revel in your gift!” The words dribbled like viscous grease and locusts fed upon that grease, skittering through his clothing and loose skin.

“None of that amounts to a hill of beans to me.” I shaded my eyes from the blinding lights beating down on me like a stiff Mississippi rain. Stars drooped, melting like wax.

“Do it for Trisha the Ram,” the demon hissed and Johnny’s fingers jerked stiffly.

“What was that?” I gripped the pistol tighter. “You threatening her, bud?”

“Your twin fire burns not in Chimayo!” Baraqiel motioned to the north. Crickets swarmed into the tree’s canopy. Night faded and the sun peeked through the vanishing cloud of insects, leaving Johnny’s limp body swinging lifelessly from a creaking limb.

I said no prayers for Johnny. Hell, I hardly knew the man. But, I found a shovel in his truc and used it to dig a shallow hole. No more than three feet, but I beat down the dirt tight and flat when I filled him in. Didn’t take enough time for a gravestone, so I left my dog tags on a loose, clay brick and stuffed his pack of kretek’s in my shirt pocket. Not much of a send out, but most satisfactory for a burnt out fightin’ man.

“Currahee,” I said.

Frail wind kicked up a dervish of powder and sand. I hardly heard the engine whir, hardly felt the jolt of the gas under my foot. I drove north, absent of thought and quiet but for the sounding of Louisiana trumpets on a dead man’s radio.

•

There’s an old story my father told about an African prince by name of Amadi in the time of

Sheba. It's the only thing aside from scar tissue he left me after he died. Pop spun tall tales. Wild, outrageous yarns and that filled my head with adventure—both real and imaginary.

Slow, bitter nights driving the road, low on gas and hungry, we slept nuzzled under heaps of Grandma's quilts. I remember the embers of his cigarettes glowing in the blackness of Athens, Corinth, and Wichita. I woke every day to a running engine and dry wind. See, Pops was a preacher and he traveled all over creation. Odd jobs at churches kept him fed and any extra green nursed his sinful appetites. Mean, dirty—a cheat, liar, and womanizing thief—the bastard weren't worth a name. But he did give me one thing. Man gave me stories. And the *Tale of Prince Amadi* was my favorite.

Story told of the dying Kingdom of Orun-Aiye, its dying Queen, and her son Amadi, whose name meant: “destined to die.” Bum rap for a know-nothing newborn if you asked me. Hell, even the Elders wrote him off as a weakling. Sickly, slow, too small for huntin'—Amadi grew up as pitiful as toothless crocodile. A rube,

So one night, the Elders gathered in secret and planned a way to take Amadi's ivory crown for their own. And like a starving murder of crows, the Elders schemed that on Amadi's eleventh birthday he'd be sent on a hunt. The lion hunt. The hunt to prove his royal mettle.

“The Elders meant for Amadi to die, see? Plottin' like Cassius, those ornery bastards wanted him out of the way, son.” My father told as he swept the church with a wooden broom. “But there was this one Elder, some ancient hag with tits that knocked together like wreckin' balls—she protested, recalling a proverb so old, few folks even way back then recalled. “Twice a man is born,” she said, “So twice a man shall die.”

The Elders scoffed and picked boar meat from their yellow teeth. “We'll see what the lions think.” The laughed like hyenas and slapped their boney thighs.

Alone in the wild, surrounded by thundering beast and beaten by an unforgiving sun, Amadi held his princely spear. Folk told of the spear. So sharp in fact, the wind bled as he ran across the savannah.

Quiet and patiently, he crept among tall grass where the water buffalo lapped thirsty tongues into pools of precious rainwater. Amadi drank beside them.

He poised his shining point and walked cautiously, hidden beneath the drumming feet of lumbering elephants. They sounded their trunks as he passed. Many suns rose and fell and the moon-sliver drank of the night sky until it was fat and round, gleaming like a God's eye. Only by

the light of the moon did Amadi see the pride and their King, basking beneath the starlit sky in a bed of whispering grass.

Lion saw Amadi and approached with barred fangs. “I am King,” Lion said, “Yet so are you.”

“I am,” Amadi said, marking the lion with his spear point.

“What are you called, little King who comes to take my crown?” Lion slumped in the dust, licking pink claws.

“I am called Amadi,” he said, “and though I am little, I am fierce.”

“He speaks truth,” Lion growled, for many other lions had come to listen. “Remember him. For though he came to meet his death, Amadi King is greater for it.”

Lion roared, leaping for the Boy King. Teeth like sabers, a juggernaut of fangs and claws, Lion embraced the boy with living knives.

“Amadi braced with his ready spear, point all sparkly. But, with an effortless bite, Lion devoured him, spear and all!” Pops roared with tobacco-stained dentures, glaring down at me with that lazy, glass eye.

“He was eaten? Did he really eat him?” I squeaked out the question.

Pops brushed his broom across my face.

I tasted the cobwebs and clumps of lint and filth.

“Sure was! Th’ hell you think happened, boy? Goin’ up against an African lion—shit, Buck, y’all need more sense than that.” My father laughed, but didn’t think it was funny.

This hidden emotion he had, it eked out as if some strange disappointment surfaced. Something he’d carried with him always. Made me feel smaller than I was. Even years after, I barely understood it. I just felt small.

“Now, what do you think happened after that?” He placed his hand on my shoulder, firm grip squeezing my collarbone. “Think hard, squirt.”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Wrong, boy,” he said without humor. “Wrong, wrong, wrong. Ain’t no such thing as nothing. Ya hear? If you’d been listening you’d know that. Dumbass kid.”

I remember nodding, wishing for I don’t know exactly what—call it a happy ending.

“The prince never lost hold of his spear. He held it damn tight, tighter than this.” My father gripped the broom handle, wrenching it until wooden splinters stuck into his palms. “He split the

lion's belly and spilled from the guts of the jungle that cat."

I waited, imagining Lion's entrails slithering from a fury, yellow underbelly.

"Every man's born twice. Dies twice too." My father handed me a cigarette. "The Prince went on to lead as a King should—didn't die again 'til he was a hundred and ninety-nine." Pops spoke while polishing the stained glass window. Looked like Jesus was listening too, but I knew he weren't. In the quiet, I watched my father shine the colorful window meticulously. And after it was done he took a few steps down the stool and said, "Don't get your panties in a twist, Buck. Piece a shit like you'll get a second chance too."

•

8

The road to Chimayo wound through a ghost town. I had no trouble finding it. The shade of thirsty trees hung over the split tar of neglected streets. Chain-linked fences stitched with sticks reached from parched earth and cracked pavement. Tiny, rainbow windmills squeaked in dead gardens. Crickets chirped on sunken rooftops. And my truck skidded to a stop.

A lazy plume of dust swirled over my Italian boots like a drunken dervish. I adjusted my aviators and tapped free a kretek from its crinkled, paper coffin. A dirt path lead to an arch and gate made from baked adobe and twisted rebar. Something stirred at the foot of the iron portal. I rubbed my eyes.

Six mummified jackrabbits nibbled the fresh, stinking flesh of six bloated vultures in front of that gate. Cheeks packed with maggoty meat, the rabbits spit feathers and looked at me with empty eye sockets. I waited, half expecting them to speak.

I loaded Harriet with pint-sized ball bearings and the last of my home-made percussion caps. Her .44 caliber heft put me at ease like no prayer ever could. I aimed at the rabbits, but didn't fire.

Six crows perched three by three on lopsided adobe steeples, stared like a jury with their minds made up. Golden sunlight dipped into the west behind them.

"Gonna take more than zombie rabbits to turn me back," I told 'em.

The largest crow honked in reply and I passed through the gate and into the silent courtyard where muddy, salty footprints lead me to the chapel. The building was a portrait of ruination. Undone by time, clay bricks oozed beneath the weight of brittle timbers.

Whispering scratched the insides of my ears. I couldn't say what was being said. So I

ignored it, shoving the swinging door open with my shoulder. I hit the wooden vault hard. Door wouldn't budge.

"Not allowed," a cricket chattered. "Not allowed. Not allowed."

"This is America, bud. I'm *allowed* whatever the fuck I want."

"Not America," it said. "Zebub."

"Zebub." In a blink, I was five years back. Washed up river like a wayfarin' salmon against the flow. Memories, mind, and soul mixed up like a bloody, toothy martini. In the shadow of the chapel I saw things I wanted forgotten. Darkness yawned, red candles sparked—the crypt and mausoleum stink permeated like the musky cadaverous perfume at a cowboy's wake.

The albino, his gristly skin cooked beneath my nose—then a scream: "I'm gonna suck out your fucking eyes, motherfucker!"

The chapel shimmied. Walls flaked to pieces.

"Who's there?" I felt a gloomy presence creep behind me. Breath patted my neck and nails bit my skin. Nausea bubbled up and a kind of chilly sickness knotted my balls and dick. My spine stiffened. I hadn't been that high since Vietnam.

"They were searching for this place," I said. They—the cultists—Aborek. A bitter tapestry unfurled in my mind's eye. Stitched in sinew over an easel of bones, I recalled him, the sucking jowls of putrid damnation, a chaotic machine of blood, flesh, and teeth. "They were searching for Zebub."

"And they found it," a wispy voice slithered from beneath my feet. The presence I'd sensed. There the ruined remains of a man writhed in a mound of muscle, skin, and rock salt. Grains spilled from his mouth as he spoke. Rasping and choking each agonizing syllable, each word was an ounce of the man's ending life. "Their prayers were answered. They found Chimayo which was Zebub before the world was split." The man's nubby knees kicked the powder. With weak hands, he touched my feet, but as he did his fingers crumbled away. "Their prayers were answers, but mine never were. Mine never were." His body unmade, the man shifted unnaturally and his rosary rattled.

"Jesus Christ," I knelt beside the monk.

"Not allowed!" The cricket buzzed into the gloom, hovering over bending church pews and dancing shadowy pillars. "You're not allowed."

"I see your daughters," the monk hacked. "They're playing by the river."

My head cleared. “You want help, partner?” It’s damn difficult to lock eyes with dying men. Knew that from the war. Lots of boys burned out. You never forget a thing like that. People ain’t people at the end. Just empty lamps as dark as coal. “Y’all want me to—?” The glint of Harriet cast a mark of light onto the man’s face.

The monk shook his head. “No.”

I glanced the unnatural darkness shrouding the pews in the tiny church. The adobe walls leaned unevenly, sighing inward and exhaling like naked lungs. I shook my head clear to make the movement stop. It did.

Suddenly the monk’s jaw clicked ajar, tongue lashing, and eyes stricken with panic. “What is that case?”

I hadn’t noticed I was carrying it. The trumpet. Shit, it weren’t even heavy. “Nothing,” I said.

“Not a horn?” he queried, hair drifting from his skull. “Or trumpet.”

“No,” I lied.

“Don’t let him take it. The Herald serves the music, not the player.”

“No worries, old timer.” I averted my eyes.

The monk’s face slowly peeled away, flecks of ashy skin wafted into the still air like pollen. “Take this cross, my son.” He handed me a wooden rosary and his fingers disintegrated. On the cross, a Star of David was etched in bronze. “It will lead you...” he choked to silence, but continued forcefully, “...to a hill and beneath it.” The remains of the monk sifted through my hands, powdery and white, leaving behind only a heap of loose ash and sea salt.

The room continued to bend like a funhouse mirror, shambling and rolling, stretching and squeezing. I fumbled for the monk’s rosary.

“Alright, you sorry sack of shit.” I was talking to myself, not the poor bastard on the floor. “So much for fucking enlightenment.”

•

The chapel bell had fallen into the rear cemetery courtyard. It stood perfectly inverted atop of mound of undisturbed earth exposing its hollow mouth, which was not hollow at all. Shriveled corpses of songbirds, mostly larks and jays, spilled from the lip like an overflowing Champagne flute. Aside from the toppled bell, gravestones were stacked on top of one another in odd,

spiraling patterns, marking the way into a maze of tall, coffin walls. Beyond that maze rose a lonely hill.

Some of the coffins were stacked into staircases, while others arched over themselves and formed piecemeal tunnels and passages that wound into the soil deeply. I heard echoes beneath my footsteps. The earth beneath them was hollow.

A lichgate knocked against an unfastened lock at the farthest edge of the courtyard. It sat squarely beneath the hill on the near horizon, framed by two, tombstone obelisks.

“Guess that’s the way in,” I said cheerlessly, shaking salt from Harriet’s barrel.

The gate moaned like a vampire whore, whispering its own hideous language of neglected wrought iron artistry.

I paced between the tombstone towers and read the names of monks, priests, and one bishop. Near by, toppled stones arched over empty pits where splintered coffins bloomed like dead, wooden carnations. I tasted formaldehyde on the air.

“Of course the damn graves are empty,” I said with a sigh, more disappointed than afraid.

Loosened soil made for tricky footwork. “Shit,” I murmured, heel slipping into another man’s footprint. “Double shit, ass fuckin’ fuck now!” More footsteps speckled the cemetery. I didn’t do nothing else but sigh. Then I saw him, slouched beside a wall of mismatched graves stacked vertically.

The crooked skeleton scribbled queer poetry onto the tomb-wall. Clothed in moldy, but eerily sparkling, sequenced chaps and roping shirt, the skeleton grinned under a wide-brimmed hat, the front of which was turned upwards like a cookie ‘49er Miner. His leather boots with rusty spurs rattled as he worked, and on his hip he wore a mud-packed gun belt, an ace of clubs stamped on the holster.

“You’re him?” the skeleton chattered. “Said you’d have a decent mustache.”

I nodded with my gun poised, mind fixated on the scrawls of unfamiliar symbols marking every available surface.

“Holster it. I’m a damned waste of ammo.” The skeleton drew his bony finger over his ribcage. To my utter amusement it sounded exactly like a fucking xylophone.

“So,” I said, “what’s your deal, Roy Rogers?” My finger itched to pull the trigger, but I weren’t about to shoot a man in the back. Didn’t matter how dead he already was.

“Name’s Perry Carleton.” He outstretched his hand for a shake. “Jimmy Stewart shot me in

‘54 on the set of *The Man From Laramie*.’

“Jimmy Stewart shot you? What are you kidding me?” Despite everything, I laughed.

“Yep. Over a heavy woman named Blanch.” Perry turned from his labors and eyed me without eyes. A moth fluttered in the shadow of his brow ridge. “I woke up about ten minutes ago with all this chicken scratch on my mind.” The skeleton returned to scribbling. “Say, Mister. You got a cigarette?”

“Just kreteks,” I held up the pack of black smokes.

“What the heck’s a kretek?” Perry asked.

“It’s sort of a Chinese cigarette or something.”

“I ain’t complain’, Mister. Lordy knows those Orientals can cook a duck.” The skeleton sniffed the kretek. “Gosh darnit!” Perry cried. “Nothing! Can’t smell a gull darn thing.” He sniffed again. “You got a match or what?”

“Yeah.” I lit him up. “So, you knew I was coming, huh?”

“Cricket told me. Guess I forgot they could talk.”

“He say anything else?”

“That I was supposed to stop you—that is, after I finished my chore here.” Perry’s skeletal hand clacked against the butt of his holstered revolver. Another pale moth fluttered from one of the chambers and into the gaping blackness of an exposed trench.

“You’re gonna shoot me?” Palm sweat dripped along the oak paneling of my 1848’s handle. My finger twitched.

“Yeah—Well, no—Well, yes! But not right away. I’ve got to finish scribblin’ the gibberish,” Perry chuckled and traced the glyphs with a dead finger. “Sure looks like Egyptian to me.”

“Can’t just let me pass, huh?”

“Wish I could, Partner. But I made a deal with the cricket. Drove a pretty hard bargain too.” Perry shook his skull. Salt rattled from his crooked jaw and he continued to chisel scripts into stone. The glyphs smoldered like stoked embers as he wrote them.

I stepped away and sauntered towards the clanking gate up the maze of graves. A web of shadows obscured the summit of the hill, but my belly told me something stirred there.

“Wait!” Perry chattered angrily. “You can’t go up there!” The skeleton palmed his pistol and drew. Two booms echoed in the cemetery, but only one slug connected, shattering Perry’s dusty

skull. His bones went rigid and clattered into a pile. And moths went on floating away.

•

10

The lichgate yawned ajar and cruel, cast-iron bars grinned. The sound of skittering insects welcomed my boots onto a crunchy carpet of beetles. A rat hissed under my heel.

I asked myself, *Why?* *Why'd* I come to Chimayo? Had no answer though. No real questions beyond the *Why* either. Th' hell is *why* anyhow. The only real question is *When?* Maybe *How?* Made no difference to me as I passed further through the labyrinth of twisted stone and living floor. Oddly, I heard the rush of clear water and smelled the sweet, muggy summer of pure Mississippi. And then, as if from a dream, I woke up.

"Dad!" their little voices chimed.

Laid out on the quilt my mama made, I watched Minnie and May splash each other on the shore.

"Y'all watch for turtles, now!" My words danced on the bayou breeze like daylily pedals. "And there's chicken when you two get peckish." Forgot I'd packed the chicken. I fished through the basket for a drumstick and a beer. Damn, Miss Lee sure could fry a bird and there weren't nothin' like a cold one in July.

"We're skipping stones, Dad!" May cried, racing along the water, twirling like a shot-putter. Her auburn hair bounced beneath the slinking branches of the trees.

"Get a jar!" Minnie replied, eyes bright. Her freckles bunched up over her nose as she examined the plume of lightning bugs weaving through the air. "It's like a hug of bugs, Dad." She giggled as they curled around her.

I shuffled down the bank with my breeches folded up. I dumped the pickle juice from our only jar and used my granddad's folding knife to punch holes in the lid. "Don't catch too many, now. Those little fellers need breathin' room."

"Okay, Dad," the girls said in unison.

I held 'em both close as we wandered, stepping over driftwood and watching the trees change as the sun fell down. Starlight twinkled in the water, peeking out in the showering twilight. We laid on the blanket together and I told 'em the names I knew. "There's Scorpio. He's sorta like a bug but with pinchers like a crayfish. And there's Casa de pita."

"Cassiopeia" Minnie nibbled from a box of raisins.

“She was Andromeda’s mom,” May added, reaching for Minnie’s raisins.

“She made the ocean guy mad cause she was really pretty,” Minnie continued.

“Then Perseus saved her from that one guy. Kinda like the monster.” May finished the raisins. “Is there chocolate?”

My girls were smarter than their old man by bounds of the globe. I figured maybe I’d finally lived up to the moment. A man’s man. Hell, a womanizing, piss-ant like myself only got so many shots—figured I’d taken mine and hit the target deadeye, big.

A star plummeted. Blue light streaked across the sky.

The girls wrestled in the blankets and tried their best to keep awake.

I’d done right by ‘em. It was all so damned picturesque. My beauties. The river.

I backstroked across the sky, gliding above the shimmering Mississippi evening. Minnie and May blinked and tried their best to count the stars. Before long we fell asleep beneath them. And then, without so much as a horn or a whistle, I woke up on the hill overlooking Chimayo.

Dry, flaky loam pressed under my heels as I came upon a crater, scarred by a long and narrow pit. Smoke belched from crack like a busted steam pipe and alls I could think was, That don’t look natural.

“It surely isn’t. Natural.”

My short and curlies unfurled themselves, strait as pipe cleaners.

The voice was ghastly. “But then again, what is natural, really?” It boomed like a tremendous bolt of thunder, swelling and receding.

Language failed me. The words written in my brain all the years of my life had been suddenly unwritten. Erased. Emptied. I gripped the cross in my hand, gripped my revolver even tighter—but I couldn’t remember her name.

“The pistol’s name is Harriet.”

He knew her name, but what was mine? I couldn’t recall. It’d been told to me, repeated a thousand times. My name was gone, pulled into the smoking well of sulfur and pumice. Without words I asked him, What’s my name?

“That I can’t say. Yours is not written in the Book of Life—or the Book of Death. I wonder,” he said and paused, “what star are you that falls before me? Come with my trumpet are you?”

The case was heavier. A phantom hand pulled upon it.

“Perhaps it’s a gift? Or is it a clever ploy?” The shadows pooled. “I think it’s a ploy. I’ll permit that, little spark. But, I assure you—you’ll fail.” A figure emerged darkly as a drawn cowl. A midnight shroud, obscured by a cindering cloak of blackened soot and amber fire. He was taller than me, much taller, with a bare chest, and tattooed by the familiar marks on the tomb-walls below. It wasn’t until he stepped closer that I noticed folded wings, black as a crow, charred and smoldering.

“Speak, Angel. For we are brothers.” Onyx pinions outstretched as his bare-feet rested on shambling earth. “You aren’t familiar to me, yet you carry my instrument. Come in His name no doubt. Don’t be bashful. Be Proud.”

“I can’t say,” I said.

“Tell me your name. Mine is surely known to you.”

I dropped the trumpet case in the dust and raised my pistol. “It sure ain’t familiar. Who you supposed to be? Another whack job munster? Let me guess, a fuckin’ possessed choirboy? I seen it all, bud. What the fuck is it now?”

Veins of molten fire flashed amidst feathers of ash. “I am the King of Zebub. Lord of the Flies, God of Ekron who was a sentinel of Hesperus and Bane to Hebrew Kings.”

The sky shrank to the size of a pinhead.

“By my word priests shall lust and tyrants shall rise. The heavens shall quake at the sounding of my name. King, I am equal to Leviathan...though humbled only before Morning Star. I am Abraham’s thirsty blade, Ahaziah’s Council. I am the Carpenter’s Nails.”

I paused. “Nope, it ain’t dinging.”

“Mine is Ba’al Zebub!” Once twinkling stars above the hill at Chimayo went dark and the midnight vale of an everlasting night revealed to me an utter emptiness. The world sighed as though weeping for the whole of her lost flock. And I knew to my core, to the pink rug of my quivering organs—I was in some deep ass shit.

“I tire, little spark! What star are you that would challenge? I long to know thy name, that I may sing it at thy fall.”

“Name’s Bucky Solomon Dennis. And I’m a Leo, bud.”

Ba’al Zebub laughed entirely to himself. “He sends another man? And not even a son.” His eyes narrowed, brilliant as baleful charms. “I hate your name,” he said. “Give me the trumpet. The time is upon us to hasten the end of all things.”

“What you want with it anyway? Your cronies killed decent folks, you know?” My eyes locked the dusty case. Each brass latch snapped open. The lid flung back and the trumpet was naked to the desert wind.

“Try it, bud. And I’ll grease the pavement with your brains. I’ll show you what a man can do.” I played it bold. Fuck him and his unholy, pompous, bull pucky.

“You are not a man,” Ba’al Zebub cooed. “You’re a pillar of salt.”

A pang of searing heat scorched my spine, constricting my muscles and squeezing my organs. I’d never felt my spleen before, nor my alcohol soaked kidneys or blackened lungs. They spoke to me then, and each one asked: “What the fuck is going on?”

I was a Molotov martini. Pain shook me like a paint mixer on fire. “Ain’t you gonna offer me a plea bargain or something—soul for a break? C’mon now!” I choked, feeling my fingers bend backwards.

“Not my department, I’m afraid.” Ba’al Zebub’s gaze turned to the grubby trumpet. “Now the instrument,” he said. “Your God has written your fate already and hidden it behind Seven Seals. Seven Vials. And Seven Sterling Trumpets.”

“Don’t look too sterling to me.” My guts started to pickle. I knew it because my breath smelled like vinegar.

“Even in death you’re defiant. I almost admire you chimps. So brief, but so passionate.” The demon’s finger reached to the trumpet and it soared into his hands.

“Ain’t the end, yet. World’s not done. There’s lots a folks ain’t even seen Hawaii.”

“I hold in my hand the instrument of doom. Bask in the ruin of His work. Listen carefully, little spark. Listen to the World’s Lullaby, for it shall be the last that’s ever heard.”

Ba’al Zebub pursed his colorless lips and blew. And the trumpet sounded, blaring over the hill and into the sky, beyond the milky curtain drawn over the heavens and the earth. The sky became as a looking glass and I peered beyond into a brightness I can’t dutifully describe. And from that glass an angel came and in his right hand he brought a golden key that burned brightly as the New Mexican sun.

Salty spittle dribbled from my cottonmouth. I fired my .44—a wild, reckless shot into the blinding luminosity. My bullet vanished. The sky went dark. But the angel approached still, floating gracefully as a flake of snow.

Ba’al Zebub watched the angel, but the angel didn’t, or wouldn’t, look at him. Instead, the

angel tilted his head to me, expressionless. He was the prettiest man I'd ever seen.

Lifting the golden key with great effort, he placed it into the sulfurous fissure. The crack bubbled.

Ba'al Zebub tossed the trumpet. "Unleash him!" he shouted.

And the angel did.

The bottomless pit yawned a carnivorous maw, smoke flooding from it, and locusts with tails like scorpions.

Ba'al Zebub ushered them forth, conducting with a black sword drawn from shadows cast by a tower of fire.

"Abaddon is come! Watch, mortal. See the world consumed!" Ba'al Zebub chided, eyes fixed on the angel. But, the angel didn't speak, nor did he yet acknowledge the demon's gaze.

White robes drew back and ivory wings carried the angel into a sparkling ascension.

God, I thought, You rat bastard, ill-mannered, son of a bitch. My bleeding tongue wriggled like a worm on a hot sidewalk. Fuck off, I told Him. Turn your back on me? See if I give a damn. Fate my ass. Ain't no fate but what I make, babe. Fuck off, chief. This joker's mine.

Locusts vomited from the abyss, buzzing in incomprehensible multitudes. Their scream split the sky and ground my ears like ten, hundred million mulched up coffee beans.

I dredged. My good fist grasped the monk's lucky cross. I almost pitched the damn thing. I almost chucked it into the horrible chasm. But a hoarse, loveless voice in the back of my mind stayed my hand. I don't know if it were real or fabricated, but I heard my daddy's words. And he said all gruff-like, "Piece a shit like you'll get a second chance too."

The rosary beads rumbled my fist like hot, holy maracas and a good vibe hit me, real sudden-like and without much warning. I got mean, real ornery, and my insides calmed a bit.

"Gonna take more than a pinch of salt to knock me out." I smiled meanly, sucking white grit from between my clenched teeth. My knees knocked together in the wind and I dusted my hands clean. "That all you got?"

The horror of antiquity swiveled his ghastly head, crowned by a halo of fire.

I walked the rosary like a yo-yo. "Holy wood, babe."

He gawked at me.

"Now." I paused for effect. "Y'all gonna *man* up? Or ain't you got the stones?"

The fallen fiend drew back wings of blinding flame and the foul, angelic marks sizzled in his

chest. The light within his eyes went dark like two candles stamped out by wet fingers. His thundering feet split the earth. “Man? MAN?” he bellowed.

“Man,” I hooted, smirkin’ like a rodeo clown.

Ba’al Zebub moved impossibly fast, fingers stabbing into my throat, hot as fire-pokers. No time to stick up my mitts, no time for a sucker jab, the demon meant business. He tossed me like a ragdoll, shaking my limp body and whipping me to the ground. Ribs cracked, shoulder popped, and globs of blood blinded me in one eye. When he let go, I felt the steaming pressure of the bursting abyss—a blistering, crackling rush of hell’s stinking breath.

The locusts skittered over me, each poised to sting.

I squinted towards Ba’al.

He stared almost tenderly.

“That it? That all you got?” I hocked a bloody loogie.

Ba’al Zebub sneered and with little effort the towering demon nudged me over the lip of the fall. And I fell drowning into volcanic fury.

Hell swallowed me. Bucky Dennis was little more than a floundering mackerel in the mouth of a satanic pelican. I can’t say how long it took. The fall seemed like forever. But eventually, eventually I hit rock bottom.

Stifling heat pressed my chest like the weight of an invisible anvil. Despite the scorching heat of the place, I saw no fire. Sharp pains in my back knocked me like steel toe boots.

Bones writhed, grinding together beneath me. Stiff, skeletal fingers tore at my clothes. Darkness blanketed me like my dead mama’s quilt. Then I saw them, drifting closely—short, shadowy specters. My daughters.

“No,” I wept. My tears evaporated. “My beauties. Y’all don’t belong here. Not here.”

Skeleton jaws gaped like begging dogs, gumming at my ankles, tugging at my breeches, weak, wobbling—they were a symphony of hopeless desperation.

“Babies, y’all don’t belong here.” I’d have shot myself, sure as I was shaking. I’d have shot myself in the head and painted the floor with my mad mind.

The skeletons scratched broken syllables, words unraveling like kite string into the sinking spiral of their mingling cadavers.

Minnie and May were closer than they’d been in years. I smelled their hair, felt the cool touch of tiny hands stroking my soaking face. They kissed my head and hands, held me. I wept,

my shambling body empty of reason, my quivering soul shrunken into a colorless pellet.

And then they spoke. “Take it, Daddy.” May kissed my hand.

The skeletons clawed each other, pulling furiously, reaching—each fighting the other to stay aloft in the vortex.

The closest one mumbled, “Who is Bucky Dennis?”

A glint birthed from the sinking mound. It was the golden key.

The skeletons sacrificed one another to keep the key from sinking into themselves, offering what little was left of themselves, giving up the fleeting reprieve of the surface.

“Take it, Daddy,” Minnie urged me. The key burned brightly, untarnished by the unyielding curtain of damnation.

I reached for the blinking world above, that brilliantly shrinking doorway. I was carried higher and found sure footing on uneven ground.

Skeletons wailed silently, embracing one another, interlocking their shambling pieces into a grim puzzle of steps. I pulled the key from the murk and my daughter’s voices were suddenly hushed by the turmoil of storming hellfire.

I climbed the undead staircase. The skeletons helped, pushing, giving their last efforts to me. The further I ascended, the more violently the key vibrated. It hummed like a tuning fork, ringing and singing. In that shining instant, I climbed from the ultimate brink to the harrowing brim—back into the world.

The bottomless pit groused and wretched, drawing in breaths of scrambling swarms. Without the key, the abyss hungered. Desperate critters tore my boots off as the gaping mouth devoured them. The rift sealed and a great weight lifted from me as the earth was sewn again—that is before another great weight damn near busted my ribs.

“Beware my sight, filthy chimp of Abraham!” Ba’al Zebub growled. “Self-righteous fuck!”

I sank into the ground, crushed into a sinking hole by the demon’s tremendous strength. Smoldering toes seared my chest hair. My ‘stache curled backward.

“I’ll sow sorrows indescribable and starve your mind of sanity.” Hot, cinnamon breath rushed my nose. “Behold hidden places! Realms maddening! Hushed only by shallow gasps of despair!” Ba’al Zebub peered into my eyes.

I saw only myself. Fights I’d been in, women I’d shed like rattler skin. Boozing, cheating at cards—I saw my foulest moments. My wife took the girls. I saw the crashing Winnebago, hurled

like a matchbox car to a fiery, mangled mess of meat, steel, and Plexiglas.

“Gaze your reflection in the veracious pool. Never unsee your flesh through the eyes of a Fallen God.”

I stared into a vacuum of horrors beyond my imagining. Mountains fell, crumbling like sandcastles into the sea. The plains of America cracked and I heard a million cries as the shadow of a lumbering colossus sulked somberly over the dead west. Earth and soil disappeared into the plummeting depths of chasms and quakes. Men swung from every burning tree, dangling like severed piano wire. They were dried up like mummies devoid of life, devoid of soul. A smoking skull cackled. A gaunt hound howled. Every grave sat empty.

Tendrils of darkness wrapped around my thumping heart, slithering into each pumping chamber like parasites. Bloody seas breeched the levies and spilled boiling death onto the streets and into houses. The moonlight faded and trees toppled like dominoes. Tears showered me from the sky. A lone child staggered from an open hole with bloody feet and knees.

“I shall embrace you with knives,” whispered the Fallen. He scratched like an old timey radio. “And you shall thank me before the end.”

Holding my breath, I plunged into milky water. The depths squeezed me, my lungs filled with fluid—I was drowning, sinking into the nothingness from whence we’d all came. My juevoes ached. Then suddenly, I felt a stiff jolt. And like a sober coffee smackin’ your tongue, I woke up.

“Impossible,” Ba’al Zebub muttered.

Seething heat pumped my heart. I took a long breath.

“Filthy chimp!” He who second only to the Morning Star blinked tears of ash.

“Quit callin’ me chimp!” Strength returned to my fists and with a right hook, I damn near gauged out the demon’s eye. My five-fingered Buick connected again. Black blood spurted from Ba’al’s kisser. He let me go.

“Defiant and brash!” Ba’al Zebub raked my chest, slicing fabric and drawing life. He pummeled as hard as one of them hammer bell-dingers at the fair.

I dodged left and stepped up to bat like the late, great Bambino. I whirled up a swing except it weren’t no Louisville Slugger in my hands, it was the shimmering Key to the Bottomless Pit.

The demon squinted, shielding his eyes as he thundered nearer. “Insignificant fle--!”

I swung the key and motherfuckin’ BOOM! What a hit. “Homerun, babe.”

Black feathers scattered as the fiend tumbled head over heels backwards towards the smoking pit. Astonishment painted his face, disbelief and utter perplexity.

Ancient blood spilled onto the earth in sizzling bursts of blue flame.

With reckless abandon the demon stormed through the hurricane of hellfire and insects. The tumultuous gyre exhaled sulfurous spouts and skittering madness. Smoking destruction split the cinderling hill in two.

“You ain’t so bad!” I cried, swinging again.

BOOM! The demon’s arm snapped. Black bone broke, through his colorless flesh and spilled unholy life into the pit. BOOM! BOOM!

Ba’al Zebub roared, inhuman and monstrous, baring fangs of molten pitch. Swooping, he snatched my arm. “Eye for an eye!” he said, and snapped my forearm like a Popsicle stick.

I yelped and lost my limp hold on the key. “God, Almighty!” I moaned, crippled with pain.

“God won’t save you, worm! He pokes and prods, but never grips!” The demon took my other arm, wrenching it with a pop from my shoulder socket. “Where is your defiance now? Where is the MAN?”

Arms like noodles, I fingered the shining tooth of the key; it vibrated and hummed.

“You’re spent.” The demon pierced my cheek with one of his nails. It bled and burned. “So soft and brief. So flawed. How could your Trisha ever love such a wretched thing?”

“Th’ hell did you just say?” One of my teeth wobbled in my jaw. My mustache twitched. And my heart ignited like an atom bomb, just twelve inches from where my brass balls clacked together like pineapple grenades.

“I’ll visit her flesh for you. I’ll grip! And I’ll twist!” He broke my dangling limb. Shards of bone tore muscle, ripped tissue, and damn near sprung from my bruised skin.

“And once I’ve spent her? I’ll wear her supple skin like a cloak and visit you!”

No feeling left in either hand, I couldn’t feel my fists ball up—only my iron will told me they’d done so. Fire scored my ankles. The hill quaked to pieces beneath my toes. The sky warped, floundering like a ragged flag as starless and sad as infinite space. In that moment the world ended amidst a maelstrom of ravenous chaos. My soul ignited like a poolside sparkler, erupted like a roman candle, and blasted like an claymore mine on PCP. So, I kicked up a fuss and grabbed Ba’al Zebub by the neck.

“Hey!” I stared into his cavernous pupils. “Now you’ve really pissed me off.”

Throwing him into the dust, his wings crumpled, I fished for the golden key and swung like a wildman. I beat hard, fast, and furious—striking Ba'al Zebub's wits out, cracking his left wing until it broke clean off in a flare of smoldering soot.

"Where you gonna fly now? You ain't so bad! You ain't so fuckin' bad!" I lashed, crushed and blasted the fallen angel back into the choking chasm.

The demon looked himself over in the mirror finished of my aviator glasses. The fear of wrathful God reflected back at him. His own damn fear. And in that stifling instant Ba'al Zebub, Enemy of Abraham knew his goose was cooked.

The Fallen clawed the lip of the pit, scrambling desperately. "Wait!" he pleaded. Liquid midnight oozed from his nose. "Mercy! Mercy of the La—!"

I steadied myself and swung away, casting out the hollering horror. Hell swallowed him and slurped the remaining apocalyptic swarm of Abaddon into the harrowing inferno.

I dropped to my knees. My breaths were few and fettered. "I ain't no Lamb." I laid back into the soft earth. "I ain't no Lamb."

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11

My lungs filled too fast. They sputtered in my chest cavity like deflating balloons—felt a lot like drowning. Swallowing each breath was like gulping a fist full of nails. I tasted warm iron on my tongue and my sensation of touch dulled. Couldn't feel my hands no more, pecker neither. The summit was starless.

I craved a Rainbow menthol. Beer too, but I weren't about to dream. One bitter puff of a cancer stick, that tangy menthol—then maybe that hill wouldn't have seemed so damn cold.

Well, I thought. What to think about when your last moments come haulin' in? I took count of things, deeds and such. Horrors too. Wound my self up with a fantasy about Trish—wearing something skimpy. Hell, even food crawled in, a heaping pile of Cajun crawdads. But really, I flushed myself clean of worldly pleasures right quick and focused on my babies.

In the distance, past the cemetery yard where the old chapel stood stoutly, the gentle strum of a steel guitar wafted like a velvet feather into my ear. And I thought, Damn, I'm goin' down and darkly.

"Looks that way, don't it?" The silhouette of a tall man rose over the hill, backlit by a dreamy, white sheen. "But that's alright."

I nudged my aviators off of my nose with a jolt. “Is that?” My heart fluttered. “Are you?” Cringing, I sat up and leaned against a mound of clay. “Mr. Cash?”

Emerging from the glow, Johnny Cash plucked a chord and sat down on an old stone beside me. Damndest thing I’d ever seen. His perfect hair waved at me, framed by perfect chops and a pearly smile. He wore a black suit, Texas tie, and wielded a shining, silver guitar.

“I ain’t Johnny Cash,” he said. “Figured I’d pop in though.”

“Yeah? Then who are you?”

The man smiled. “You know. At least you should, after all them shenanigans.” Johnny Cash strummed, pointing his ivory frets towards the golden key. “You did a man’s job, Buck. I’m darn proud.”

“What are you doin’ here?” I strained for the softpack in my rear pocket. “Shit.”

“Well, the man comes around every now and again,” Johnny said, and at that time, I didn’t get the joke. “How you doin’, compadre?”

“I could use a smoke.” I nodded in the direction of my jeans.

“Yeah?” Cupping my butt, He pulled the cigarette pack free. He tapped it against a wrinkled palm and placed the filter in my mouth tenderly.

“God, damn it.” I searched for a light. “You got a—?”

Johnny Cash’s etched pewter lighter flickered under his bejeweled thumb. “Don’t blaspheme, now,” he said, smiling. “You feelin’ alright about things? You know, circumstances aside.”

“Shit, bud,” I mumbled, cig hanging. “No offense, but, th’ hell you think?”

Johnny laughed. “Yeah, I hear you. Things are tough. Don’t think I don’t know it. But Life’s darn rewardin’ when you’ve got the lyrics right.”

The soft murmur of a choir floated from above us, like none I’d ever heard, like none I’d hear again.

“What is that?” I blew smoked into the lightless sky.

“Those are my back up singers. Just doin’ a little ditty for you, Buck.”

My chest buckled, lungs sloshing with smoke and blood. “God damn.” I choked and spit red onto the dirt.

Johnny Cash wiped my lips clean of blood with a white handkerchief, but the stain didn’t take. “I’ll let that one slide, okay?” He was still nothing but smiles.

“I’m dying,” I said, emotionless.

Johnny knelt closer. “Yeah, you are. But that’s okay.” His gentle strings sung and angels on high accompanied with a most perfect harmony. “You wanna know one of my favorite secrets to the universe?”

I didn’t answer.

“It ain’t half bad, either. Promise.” Johnny Cash crossed his heart. “This one always cheers me up when I’m blue.”

I just listened, watching his kind wrinkles squish and stretch as he squinted.

“See, there’s a whole lot of want. Whole lot of need. And whole lot that don’t go right for folks—good and bad alike,” Cash paused and played, his calloused fingers danced over the strings like cattails strumming the river. “The great thing is,” he whispered, quieter than a mouse so as no one else would ever hear. “Everything works out in the end—Every little thing.”

Under the giant sky I stretched, content beneath the sparkling lights springing amidst the clouds like candles. “God...” I said, swept away by the celestial vigil.

“I’m listening,” He said.

“I want my family back.”

“I know you do.” The song quieted.

When I spoke again there weren’t any words to follow. I flickered out, no longer drowning. I swam in deep, haunting waters as fresh as dew and warm as the summer. Falling sleepily into the silken darkness, I embraced a blanketing vastness I cannot here describe. And as the final piper piped and His golden strings went still, I’d be lying if I told you I didn’t see a light.

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OTHERS

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A DATE WITH EDWARD HERBERT

Edward Herbert ate his thumb, a thumb he’d had within a pie. The pie was colder than his

apartment, though not as cold as the weather, which could have been debated, depending. His thumb was bulbous, gourdish and tough: it looked rather like a turnip, though not quite unlike a truffle. It was salty sweet, as turnips go, though bitter as a daisy. He wasn't entirely sure of this however, though he'd eaten one of those in his youth.

Edward's chins shook wildly, all dozen-teen or so. They were patched with graying stubble, some long some short, though all unkempt and soiled. If he had eagle's eyes he'd be able to see them tightly curled about the carpet, imbedded like the roots of tiny trees planted firmly in fields of shaggy Kentucky bluegrass. The record player skipped: Ain't got a worry down in Verny. Ain't got a worry down in Verny.

The knocker knocked and Edward scuffled out of bed, the sheets like chains, floor like ice. His shoeless feet were swollen and smelled of fish and garlic powder. They were two enormous bass, the toes waggling as they strode, floundering as though Mr. Herbert hadn't control over them in the least. His belly pressed against the door as a lonely beady eye peered through the peephole. There was a woman, elder, trim, toothless, though sporting, what Edward always suspected to be, two of the falsest breasts to be implanted in a human being. They could have been carved from cedar and still maintain the effect. In her arms she held a child, round, pink, and wailing like a banshee.

Knock. Knock. Edward tapped back. It was a jest of course, some modicum of humor; a pitiful attempt at flirtation with a woman, whose body had dwelled on the earth, undeniably, as long or longer than Imhotep. She was not amused in the least, rather, she was haunted, and her face twinged as she smiled emptily. The smile was ever so subtle, though still enough to crack the dried makeup on her face, as though large ravines and fissures had slid open by the work of some ungodly quake. She shifted in the doorway, her face distorted and corpulent as she peered into the miniature window hole; it was not unlike some trick mirror locked deep in the belly of some carnies' beat up ford.

Edward unlatched the door and the hinges stiffly creaked open. The battered exterior of the door shone lavender against the dim light in the hall. The woman asked him to keep it down. She cursed him for waking the baby. And said some other things, and asked questions. The burble of her voice strung out in high and low tones, as his droopy sunken eyes, weighted by desire, fell upon her plastic chest. They were painted, he could see, like her face, but they were smooth and buoyant. He found himself beginning to tense as he closed the door on her- she was still

chattering like an old crow.

Eight digits left; and a pinkie. He counted and swallowed. He tossed away the can of soup and opened another. He'd long disliked the taste of hot soup, or perhaps he simply didn't care. The gas had not been on for nearly a month. The crumbs of crackers amassed like a sandy shore on his belly, several boxes worth. And as he slurped up the remainder of the second can, he sniffled and cleared his throat. He pressed the red button on his recorder and sat a moment. He thought. And he waited.

He stood up and wobbled towards the windowsill. There was a plant there, long dead, a dried up shrub of some species he'd never know the name. He raised the recorder to his mouth, and peering out of the dusty blinds he said nothing. He looked down and examined the stagnant water in the watering can, then he sat back down, this time on the edge of his bed.

There was a pile of unopened mail and a large parcel wrapped tight with a white cord. On it he read his name: Mr. Edward Herbert. He lifted it up and put it back down, then lifted it again. The weight of it was heavy, though not unwieldy, yet still he could not lift it for long. He shook it near his ear like some child probing beneath a Christmas tree for a set of building blocks, or a pop gun. He listened to the rattling parts for some time, until at last his massive arm began to tremble and wobble like a gelatinous tendril. He dropped it on the bed and it bounced and shook a moment. He then devoured two middles, two fores, and a ring.

Lounging on his sofa, the constant cooing of pigeons kept the corpulent man sleepless. The little monsters never ceased to roost beneath the gutters that shaded his balcony. He despised the little things, as they fluttered and defecated, reproduced and again defecated. It was as though, that place, cluttered with old magazines and soggy card board boxes, had some otherworldly calling to them. Edward counted sheep for a while, but was unable to sleep.

Sheep counting was an interesting notion. He'd never once given it thought until that moment, when instead of sheep he decided to count pigeons. What was the purpose of sheep? He didn't know. He only knew that in the animal kingdom, on a scale of which he was unsure, sheep were very stupid. Pigeons were stupid too. He pondered and scratched under his belly, probing at an age-old scab that never healed. One, two, three, four...until at long last, he fell suddenly asleep. He dreamed of many odd and curious things: of kingdoms, and candy, and soup. He was in a perfect state then. He could bend the dream to his will, and he could choose to devour what he wished: and that's a rare thing. He could dream himself strolling in pastures and fields; he

could dream himself making love to whomever. He could dream himself flying, though falling was much easier, and he could dream in the dream until he'd died. Pigeons, he recalled, could damage the roofs of houses if not kept in check. And behold there stood a gargantuan bird, with a mane of white pluff vibrating at high speeds in the wind. Edward gasped and looked into the demoniac as it spoke in something not unlike Spanish or Portuguese. He chuckled, though petrified, he stood, a stone, steadfast but not in courage, more incapacitated. It pecked and probed and shat upon huge magazines with T.V. faces and breasts; and it nested in monolithic soggy boxes, where once bicycle parts or a swing set had been. Mr. Herbert heard his name, Mr. Edward Phillip Herbert. He replied but from that reply there came no reply. The telephone needed picking up.

He rose from the sofa and near the nightstand, next to an old can of soup, there rang an older telephone. He looked at it and lifted it to his ear. He could hear the shrill voice of a man on the other end. The man seemed as distant as though he were speaking from a dream. Edward didn't respond to his questions. He just listened, listened to see what the man may say. Trusting strangers can be stranger than trusting dreams, unless of course it's a stranger's dream, and that's a strange idea. The man raised his voice and rambled for a time, and Edward hung up.

The chimes of the cathedral droned on and on for a minute or so, and coupled with the skipping record, Edward Herbert found himself out of character. He was annoyed. He removed the record and placed his hands over his ears. They were moist and oily, and they slid back and forth, in strife he plucked them off and devoured them. They were delicious he noticed, seemingly brimming with the essence of thyme, but the greatest, the most breathtaking part was the silence. Edward could see the shaking front door, he could feel the vibrations of the knocker, thwacking, and clacking. He probed the door with his remaining fingers and peered out to see the putrid face. He couldn't hear himself tapping back, and after a few moments past before he left the door and crept into his bed.

The graying wrappers of ancient candy filled the sheets like the feathery down stuffing in a pillow, and as Edward Herbert slid his body in, innumerable wrinkled wax papers fell onto the floor. He glanced down, seeing the mounds and then laid his head back upon his pillow. On the ceiling water spots and cracks danced across the surface as he tugged the lamp light off. The shadowy figures made faces at him and he felt frightened briefly. His stomach rumbled as it did, and he passed wind. It made him chuckle, but he couldn't hear it.

He opened a jar of Spanish olives and put them on his fingers, clumsily. He sucked each one off, finger and all, and swallowed them whole. The salty vinaigrette taste lingered metallic, and he belched. The scent was hideous and he felt ill so he ate his nose and shut his eyes tightly as he lay silent and distant. Springs coiled so tightly that, on occasion they would crook and buckle under his weight. It happened more frequently in the last few days and it seemed funny, if not a trifle sad. Edward looked at the ceiling, trying to listen to the springs, and he probed with uncanny effort beneath his enormous body to feel the springs but could not. He shifted, and shifted again, his movements playing tricks on the mind. Shadowy pigeons fluttered above him, feathers seaming to float all about him. He ate his eyes, not unlike the olives and he felt at peace again, in the darkness.

Salty sweet, vinegar pungent, metal mouth and brandy, finger licking New England grade, quail's eyes or monkey? He couldn't quite make out the rolling tongue within his chattering teeth, its tiny follicles-or something else-were questioning his mind. He thought on it, for a few minutes, wondering what breast milk was like, and tried to remember, though there was no answer for that. It may be worms or something earthy, something vile sick or foul: this was an interesting feeling. Like licking blood from paper cuts, or tin can lids, or from a shirt or wrist band, these were all possibilities. It was more interesting than music, he decided; he was contented. Edward Phillip Herbert shivered and pulled phantom sheets filled with waxy butterflies, up to his portly neck. He tried to clean his teeth with his extraordinarily strong tongue, but it was little use. He managed to dislodge particles of something, plaque or crud or something, and he swallowed it down. He swallowed spittle over and again, but soon the spittle ran dry. So, Edward Herbert swallowed his tongue.

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ON SOUTHERN GOTHIC

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SOUTHERN GOTHIC

Southern Gothic is the slow cooked, bloody-nosed mistress that gets even with a pick ax and

a .44. Watch her bubble up from Louisiana swamps with grime under her immaculate fingernails. Watch her kick-ass. She's the blood, sweat, and sugary grits at the ass end of a train wreck, all wrapped up neatly by an intestinal ribbon of macabre. Her mummified remnants muddy up the waters of classic American Literature. And for that reason, Southern Gothic is the sticky, homey, soul food slithering down your throat in 100-degree humidity.

That's what she means to me, anyhow. Ultimately, she's the American genre that isn't afraid to wade knee-deep through murky water. She climbs out onto perfectly sturdy tree limbs and starts sawing at the knot. Southern Gothic lets us get damn personal with the anti-hero and experience the hero's journey from a profoundly flawed place. And its flaws that make things appealing. Imperfection is perfection.

Now, take Southern Gothic farther. Whir up a paint mixer and sniff. Mix it good and let her ferment with genres like Horror, Pulp, and Splatterpunk. Then you've got Southern-fried Gothic with a gator's bite—a rotten, festering hunk of meat, spiced up with a pinch of Dixie and peppered by the unique tradition of the American South.

cheers,

J. R. Parks

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born at 11:11 on the 22nd of September in the hot, dry town of Mission Viejo, California, J. R. Parks was weaned on monster flicks, ghost stories, wizards, and lightsabers. He's seen Jaws

over a hundred times, can't get enough of Clive Barker's mad scratching, and dreamt, from the beginning, of the day he'd take pen to paper and show those monsters what for.

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