

# The Unfound

By

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Terribly hungover one summer morning in Manhattan's East Village, Neil Sarrington, finds a loaded gun in his bathroom. Compelled to find its origin, he must finally face his troubled truths. A dark journey of the soul, allowing that even the most damaged hearts can find the light of redemption.

With no memory of the gun's origin, Neil steps into a dangerous and destructive world. When he meets Charlotte, a former model turned high-end sex-worker, his life opens to a complex love that both awakens and breaks his heart. Charlotte's 'manager' unveils a complex world hovering between loving adoration and fierce control. A former boxer, her bodyguard, Vic, stands by to protect her from the demons that haunt her, both real and imagined. Neil turns to his only friend, *The Bar's* owner, Charlie, an old actor suffering penance for having not succeeded—atonement for the sin of dreaming. All are lost in their own way. All have slipped out to the very edge of life and the living of it. And all are seeking absolution at *The Bar*.

From New York City to the coast of California, Neil discovers that the revealing light of life is often hidden deep within its darkness. The novel is completed at 78,000 words.

## 1

God works on a sliding scale.

Long before Neil Sarrington first winces at the overheated noon light, the familiar pain has settled into his dry hollow bones. Already at a distinct disadvantage, his feeling of pain exists prior to conscious recognition. Unlike joy or love, pain is patient.

Pain waits.

Unwilling or unable to face the day, he rolls his mostly naked body over, away from the unsettling and indirect light falling too hard through the open window. So perfectly natural, so unmentionably common, this slight action of a man rolling over in bed - but how terribly Neil now regrets this subtle shifting of his bones and blood. For the movement has triggered a sudden pain so fierce that every spit-fired nerve now marches with bitter revolt. Such anguish used to be called a hangover, but he's long since graduated from so pedestrian a characterization of pain.

And every day is the same, but worse.

He wakes slowly, reluctantly. The details of the night before are vague, or nonexistent. He could not say what time he went to sleep, or passed out. He could not say exactly how or when he returned to his dilapidated apartment. But at some point during the night of his alcohol-induced sleep, one thing is certain: A small group of men broke into his apartment and proceeded to drive a railroad spike into his head.

They likely used a medium-sized sledge hammer to properly drive it. And they must have missed several times, bluntly slamming the hammer directly onto the bone of his skull. But it seems that these spike-drivers are methodical and dedicated to their work, most likely petite but barrel-chested men with sinewy forearms. In general, they seem to have a good attitude about their work - often arriving early and staying late. Thorough and relentless, no doubt they are neatly dressed little men - strictly professional. And they did not leave until the job was done,

the spike buried flush into his skull. He knows there's no blood or tangible evidence, but the spike is there - it's always there at this time of day.

His window, his one window, looks out over the most horrid little back-building area where trash is discarded, sometimes into trash cans. Referred to as 'the pit,' it's a space formed by four buildings backed up into each other. The buildings are five stories high, the square shaft of space that hangs over the pit receives no direct light, the air within the pit is unnaturally still, dead still. Although perhaps not originally intended as an area to discard trash, it has become that, and more. It is a place of transition for the innumerable items of a New York City tenement – roach-infested ovens, door-less refrigerators, broken TV's, legless chairs and cracked tables – all things deemed useless and on route to some final resting place.

It is a kind of wasteland, visually suggesting something close to the end of the world. And yet the pit is not without its interesting mysteries, transcending the common with its inexplicable collection of unusual and untraceable items. For in addition to its standard refuse and trash, the pit contains a boat anchor, an airplane prop and fairly tall dead tree covered mostly by underwear.

And other than the building's superintendent, an unspecified and somewhat intimidating man by the name of Big Jesus, there is only one other human being that can be seen, or heard, rattling around amongst the pit's trash, a seventy-something- year-old blind man by the name of General Gerald Philips - his friends just call him General.

With his black cane in hand, he will on occasion, for reasons known only to the blind man, meander down into the pit, his sightless focus resting clearly upon just two items, the anchor and the propeller. As if seeing them in memory, as if remembering something from a time or place that exists only for him, he will periodically reach out with his cane, rapping hard

against the objects with a distinct – *cank, cank, cank*, sort of sound – as if confirming that the items are still present before him, or perhaps confirming that he is still present before the items.

The General claims to have been a WWII Navy fighter pilot, an Army sniper during the Korean War, and finally, a Green Beret with the Marines during the Vietnam War. Additionally, he performed various Black-Op duties preceding and during the Gulf War, but his function there was, admittedly, mostly advisory. At the conclusion of the Gulf War, he was retired with honors.

Over the years, Neil has always given the General the benefit of the doubt. But the General was born blind – has been blind his entire seventy-something years - which seems to suggest a certain discrepancy in his revision of history. His blindness however does not diminish the General's adamant and passionate recollections.

Inexplicably, the pit contains some of the General's greatest triumphs. The plane propeller is purported to be that of a Japanese Zero, and the General's account is very specific: *Somewhere over Hong Kong, Sarrington, that's where I dropped my first Jap. There were more, good Christ they were everywhere. I'll never forget the fear in that dumb bastard's eyes, seeing me in his rearview mirror.*

Setting the unseemly, derogative use of the word 'Jap' aside, Hong Kong, of course, is in China. And although Neil is not a pilot, he's fairly certain that planes do not come equipped with rear-view mirrors – these are just some of the details that seem lost upon the General. It may also be of relevance to point out that the pit's plane propeller is wooden, and looks to be something more of an art project gone bad.

In addition to the plane propeller, there is a boat anchor – not the sort one imagines holding an aircraft carrier at bay, or even a small fishing vessel off the waters of Cape Cod. Rather, it looks to be the sort of thing one might, with a certain futility, perhaps only restrict the

progress of a canoe in still waters. But Neil admits he has no experience with boats and he really has no idea how to gauge the size or function of a boat anchor.

Nevertheless, the General claims the anchor is from a Japanese submarine that he shot down. Again, the logistics were somewhat confusing. The General's exact words were: *I shot the son-of-a bitch down, Sarrington*. When reminded that the laws of physics suggest that it would be challenging to shoot down a submarine, that by definition and unlike a plane, a submarine is already quite down, the General rolls out his standard diatribe regarding the failed state of the world and how his generation was the last great generation, etc. Regardless, there's a boat anchor and a propeller in the pit.

The tree is worth noting. It's not of course a living tree. Instead, it appears as though someone randomly cut down a fairly large tree and then unexplainably hauled it through one of the buildings and propped it up into the pit's corners. Over the years people have tried to make it a sort of desperate, crackhead rendition of a Christmas tree. But the ornaments fell off or were slowly covered by years of underwear people had opted to drop upon the tree, and the underwear seem to somewhat diminish the Christmas spirit.

And yet, the underwear covered tree has achieved a touch of fame. It was photographed by various artists and shown in a couple of neighborhood galleries. Indeed, *The Hell's Kitchen Gazette*, reviewed the work favorably, summarizing the tree's photographs as being: *Decidedly urban, uniquely hopeful and a celebration of commonality*. The eloquently vague review did nothing to diminish the simple fact that – to this day - it remains a tree covered in underwear.

And then there's the dog. The dog that lives down in the pit is a venomous, hateful thing. The dog is owned by Big Jesus and presumably has a name, but the actual name cannot be determined. Some have claimed that the dog's name is Little Jesus, but this cannot be confirmed.

Thus, the dog is referred to by various names, Shithead, being the most common. Fuckhead, is also a favorite. Or sometimes the dog is referred to by action phrase, such as, Shut up, Shithead! or, Shut the fuck up, Fuckhead! Shithead remains its most common calling.

Before certain actions were taken, Shithead used to spend most of his waking hours barking and barking and otherwise raising hell and the ire of all whose window faced the pit. It's assumed that the dog's presence is what inspired people to start throwing their trash down into the pit, hoping perhaps that the cement block hidden amongst the common trash would strike Shithead upon the skull, killing him instantly. But these less-focused efforts failed in delivering the desired results.

Eventually, this was a few years ago, Neil and some of his neighbors got together and organized a gentle, peaceful killing. But it's tough to kill a dog in New York City. That it's against the law and results in possible prison time and certain fines is the least of one's worries. That the dog is owned by Big Jesus - a heavily tattooed, very large former gang-member - this was an altogether more urgent concern.

But such things must be resolved, one way or another. So cheap steaks were purchased and laced with arsenic, which the dog proceeded to eat, throw up, and therein return to the scene of the crime with a stony-eyed vengeance and yet greater disregard for mankind. It was later surmised that years of the pit's rat and roach poison had found its way into the dog's digestive system, effectively establishing an uncanny resistance to over-the-counter poisons.

Although impressed by the dog's intestinal fortitude, Neil and his cohorts were not deterred in their mission, and subsequently developed a rather elaborate plan. It occurred to them that electricity may be the solution, something of a more direct measure.

Electrical extension cords were collected, enough that when connected, the distance would extend down into the pit from Neil's third floor apartment. Neil stripped the rubber sheathing off one end of the electric 'rope,' revealing about six inches of the soon-to-be live wire. A ball of hamburger meat was formed whereby the exposed wire was looped and shoved into the meat like some desperate interpretation of C2 putty explosive.

The General was there and beside himself with anticipation, recalling various Black-Op missions from his past. Initially, the General was dead set on napalm. *Light the son-of-bitch up, Sarrington.* But most agreed that napalm would be hard to locate and even more difficult to contain. Eventually the General conceded the point and stood in full support of the electric hamburger technique, suggesting only that they wait for the cover of night: *And then we light him up, like a goddamn Chinese New Year, Sarrington.*

No one had any sort of real reference for the Chinese New Year, or its possible relevance to the dog, but all were happy to have the General so passionately on board. Because if they were discovered, it would be difficult to prosecute a blind man for the dog's death, and all involved were in agreement that the General would be required to take the fall – if the mission failed.

Neil had found a thin rope and tied the end of the rope to a small, open bag and placed the electric hamburger in the bag, gently lowering it down into the pit. The dog of course did not hesitate upon the fresh meat and at the moment his teeth and tongue locked onto the exposed wire a sudden, sweet stillness came over the animal. Indeed, he looked peaceful, just before he pissed himself and fell over, stiff.

. It can be estimated that the dog took one hundred and ten pure volts straight through the chops, down to his anus and back up. Although death was the ultimate goal, the electricity had mysteriously only muted the sounds now more faintly emanating from his throat, so the effort

was generally considered a success. Indeed, the dog had risen from his ostensible death, shook it off like a bad hangover, and proceeded on his way.

And although the dog's posture had been significantly altered - he now walked with a pronounced hitch and limp, accented by a peculiar and pronounced curve in his spine - the dog was otherwise adjusting reasonably well to his altered skeletal structure and indeed his new posture gave him a certain flair that suggested a life of honor and perseverance.

But the time has come for Neil to rise and face the day as best he can. He knows exactly how much this is going to hurt, the pain is part of the life, and the life is unavoidable. Just how other people do it is a mystery to Neil. Just how they rise early every morning and make their way through successful lives is a notion so cryptic and foreign that he has learned to let go of such considerations. The juxtaposition is what kills. Better off to avoid the comparison.

He remembers boyhood. He remembers school. He remembers that he used to get up each morning, he and his sister, and off they would go to school. Off they would go. That was all that was required of him. Get up in the morning, eat something, make sure his sister ate something, catch the bus and off you go. Behave in school. Listen to the teacher. Do what the teacher says. Be nice to others. Come home, do your homework. Play with your friends. Watch TV. Eat dinner with your mom and sister. Go to bed. Sleep. Get up and do it again.

Every day.

The American Dream.

Off you go.

What went wrong?

He could not say.



Summer is the worst time of the year. Summer never ends. The heat permeates everything, searing skin and bone with its hot talons, refusing to let go. He just needs to catch his breath, sync up his breathing with the rest of the world, then he'll make his way up and on with his life.

Until now, his eyes have mostly remained closed. He opens them fully now and stares into the dead air. He used to have an air conditioner. It broke. Now it's in the pit. He thinks every year that he'll buy a new one. But the years have passed and still there is no air conditioner.

Maybe next summer.

Maybe not.

On the floor is a fan. It usually works. But it only has one speed, low. The dial says it should spin at medium and high, but it doesn't. Just low. And so he sits with the soft drone of its dirty blades and contemplates nothing.

Five years. Somehow he's been in this little apartment for five years. That doesn't seem possible. This can't be his life. This can't be what people mean by living. But file this as yet another thing that one must not consider for long. There's enough to feel rotten about, no need to add another item to the list.

He sits on the edge of his sallow bed. The humidity so heavy he feels as if he's drowning. Tiny beads of sweat gather on his forehead. His skin hurts. His bones hurt. The walls are dulled with an endless variation of off-white now aged to the color of nothing. The floorboards, stained from the streets, have blown their nailheads and warped out of square. The ceiling's plaster, yellowed and cracked wide open, reveals the building's floor joists.

Three years ago, the crackhead who lived in the apartment above him tried to kill himself. Well, he didn't try - he did kill himself. He filled his tub with water and slipped into the

warm wetness for one last bath. He reached for an old toaster and dropped it into the tub. If he had had enough money he could have just overdosed on cheap crack, heroin and hard booze. But he was broke. Crackheads are always broke, otherwise they'd do lines of sweet, high-end coke and wear fancy suits. But this guy had nothing, and he wanted out. And to his credit, he would not be denied. Neil admires the guy for having a certain flair and sense of tradition, as dropping a toaster into a tub seems like something only disgruntled housewives might do in the nineteen-fifties.

So the guy died. And in dying he wasn't able to turn the water off. In general, it's tough to get things done when you're dead. So the water flooded his apartment and two apartments below his, one of which was Neil's. Neil wasn't home and neither was the lady who lived below him. And so nobody noticed the flood until the fire department came to put out the fire that had started when the toaster hit the water and blew the forty-year-old circuit panel out of the crackheads wall. Again, Neil gives the guy credit. It's hard to start a fire and flood a place, at the same time – while being dead. Even if you're alive, that would take some real planning. But to pull it off dead is something you just tip your cap too. Nice job crackhead. Rest in peace.

Of course Big Jesus was going to repair the ceiling. Of course he was. And that was three years ago. And pieces of the ceiling continue to drop and now plainly visible are the thick, dark wooden joists that separate the floors. Neil knows that the ceiling will never be fixed. Nothing will ever be fixed. Not ever.

Still sitting on the edge of his bed, not yet ready to stand, he finds his mind wandering to the topic of laundry again and wonders how long it's been since he's washed the sheets. His mind can't locate such details. And then it does. He remembers. It was the woman - the woman with the tattoo of the cross in the small of her back.

*Do you carry the burden of Christ?* He can't remember if he asked her that.

She washed his sheets. She washed his clothes. She picked up the place and threw out whatever wasn't going to ever come clean. She scrubbed the bathroom. She lit candles and brought back some flowers.

*A clean house is a clean mind.* He can't remember if she said that.

She was a good person. He wishes she would come over and make things nice again – like they never were. Maybe she thought he had potential, maybe she thought she could clean him up. Maybe he could find her number. Maybe he could call her and see if she wanted to meet for drinks. And maybe she knows some people who could help him. Maybe she comes from a good family. Maybe he could buy some paint for these old walls and give this place a real cleaning. Maybe he could head down to the deli and pick up a *Times* and look for a real job. Maybe she would help him do this. Maybe she would love him and believe in him and know that he was good.

And in such moments amongst the pain and emptiness, he ever so briefly imagines he can do it. Because he yearns for true existence. To exist with specificity, that must be the secret. He so desperately seeks to draw some distinction. This must be the thing. To live within clearly defined lines of action and behavior. There must be nothing of the undefined, nothing of the unknown as a way of living. To live within the unknown is to live so vague as to live dead. It is a perpetual recreation of blurred lines and failed circumstances and spiritless intentions. He seeks his own mark – one that is sharp and consistent and lays out before him with confidence and promise.

The sun at his back.

The future bright, true and lasting.

He yearns for the sunlight of fall. A purifying light that washes the soul clean and airs it out with perfect distinction. He seeks definition. And there, upon the city streets, his shadow is clearly set, strong and undeniable. There, his potential transitions from the abstract to something lived and known. And finally, there exists a life worth living and a joy of spirit that is something more than fiction. A place where he is absolved from the pain, distinguished by hope, set apart – preeminent – *and alive*.