

Flammability, Incorporeal Creatures and the Parking Lot of Eternity

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John was the best I'd ever seen with a blowtorch. He wielded it like Da Vinci wielded a god-damn paintbrush. He could do things with it that in many places were certainly illegal and definitely deranged, with the possible exception of Japan and/or Australia.

There was this thing about John and the blue-hot propane flames that bordered - nay, even surpassed - the realm of wonder. If Jesus could come down and visit from Heaven and work with a blowtorch next to John, he'd look like a pyromaniac hobo with a messiah complex and a background in carpentry, while John would just shine with a bright white light from within, turn water into beer and beer into piss with just a *look*. John was just *that* good.

So it was a fucking bummer when I learned that his last words actually were: "Don't be a pussy, oxygen tanks do that hissing sound all the time."

As far as classifying bummers goes, this was a triple-A class bummer, the kind of showstopper that had only been theorised up to John's untimely and gruesome death. The kind of bummer that could make Jim Carey's face flat and emotionless and Bill Clinton sworn to celibacy. It ranked way far above the A-plus bummer of being recently divorced, fired, being fired upon and being set on fire at the same time.

Which was bad in and of itself, but not as bad as John getting blown up a day before the Job. That was a sad state of affairs that meant I was now a very sorry son of a bitch with a life expectancy that made the term "life-time warranty" sound like a tasteless practical joke.

So here I was, melting away in a decrepit diner on route 72, at a swampy nowhere with some supposedly native american though actually gibberish name like 'Alatanoosa' or 'Whahananoka', someplace between Alabama and Tennessee. The coffee tasted like imported dirt, the kind of dirt you read about being very fashionable and exaggeratedly overpriced but at the end of the day, was just dirt. The fried eggs looked like fried eggs, but only in the most rudimentary way: there was an orange bit with some white plastic all around it. I guess my flair for adventure was wearing out so it just sat there, where I happily failed to ingest it.

I really didn't feel like eating at all. Maybe it was the god-damn heat, the stale humid air and the fact that about the same time tomorrow, I would be probably looking at the wrong end of more than a couple of gun barrels because I had promised something I couldn't deliver to some very single-minded people with a propensity for shooting, rather than having coffee and biscuits and sympathizing with the bad card life

dealt you.

The reason I couldn't deliver was I couldn't do the Job. And I couldn't do the Job without John, because John, the flamboyant blowtorch virtuoso with an unmatched record of ninety-two safes, safe-rooms, and bank vaults, an average time of three point three minutes, clean as a germ-obsessed placebo-munching single old lady right before kidney stone surgery and a no-smoking-on-the-job policy that kept my cigarette budget intact, had gone and killed himself in his brother's-in-law chop shop.

I stopped and asked myself at that point whether that unfortunate death, at such a bad time, right before what would now prove to be the last gig in my career was a sign from God to stop doing what I did best: stealing. In a rare know-thyself moment I reminded myself I wasn't half as good at it as some Wall Street people, politicians and the let-me-lend-you-your-own-money cutthroats that roamed the street unabashed.

Logic would then imply that if there was going to be any smiting and all that holier-than-thou business, any God with a sense of perspective, morality and justice wouldn't start dishing it out on my end. And in any case, I decided that if God really had something to tell me, he'd better make a really really good point with lots of compelling arguments, like saving my ass pronto. Or at least point me to a direction, show me the road to salvation that preferably led somewhere warm and sandy in the Pacific, along with a couple of Cayman bank accounts, some instantly gratifying plastic surgery and twelve hundred different driving licenses. I'd have thought about asking for another favor but they said that size didn't matter, bank accounts' notwithstand-

ing.

Realising how God and reality rarely intertwined, I felt some kind of emotional pressure the likes of which I hadn't experienced since high-school and all the awkward parties. A stress relief mechanism kicked in someplace inside me and I sighed deeply before shouting out an expletive, something eloquent like 'Fuck!'.

That made some heads in the diner turn and raised the attached eyebrows apprehensively. It also gained me the attention of the establishment's chef- du-cuisine, a six-foot-three, two-hundred and fifty pound red-haired, bush-bearded wild-eyed man-like Alabama creature with a meat cleaver, a stained apron and a murderous gleam in his eye. He pointed that cleaver towards my direction and said with a slight snarl "Now yo' better watch that god-damn filthy mouth a yours, 'less you got dental, son."

I think I nodded faintly and muttered "I'm sorry" in an absent-minded fashion before I put ten bucks on the table, got up and left. He probably felt that'd given me a good old fashioned run-down, but I was simply in a hurry.

I looked at my watch, one of the few items I had actually bought with honest money from a winning lottery ticket back when I kept saying to myself that heists were 'a temporary thing'. It was half past ten in the morning, and I had more or less twenty two and a half hours to live. As I looked at the bland green and brown Southern scenery, I noticed a couple of dogs humping without a care in the world, oblivious to pretty much everything else.

I was about to think something profound about nature and the will of life to survive and continue, when

I noticed they both had “stuff” dangling underneath. Even nature had a way of giving me the finger. I looked up into the blighting sun and all I could see was white and red dots for the next ten minutes. I’d left my glasses inside the diner. I said to myself, fuck that, I don’t need sunglasses. I’m Bobby. I’m going to do what it takes, and I sure as hell can do it without sunglasses. In retrospect, that might have been a mistake cause those sunglasses had a history of their own, but it was time for action not remembrance. So I acted on impulse, without pausing to ruminate on the outcome of my actions, and especially what those actions might incur precipitate in relation to my person.

Now, thinking back to that particular moment in time, the moment I decided to act was the moment I kept thinking to myself ‘Bobby, that doesn’t mean shit. John blowing up doesn’t mean shit. You can still do this. You can still get rich, or die trying’, that must have been the moment that would probably get the most votes in the ‘Most Regrettable Moment in Your Entire Life’ category. It would also get lots of points in the ‘Shit I Wish I Hadn’t Done’ category, but the real winner in that one was calling up Eileen. I’d done mistakes before, but it always amazed me how impossibly fast I regretted calling Eileen on that particular day. I panicked.

I rang her three times before she picked up. When she did, it sounded like she hadn’t talked to a real person in about three years:

“Mmbby? Mmmby Baahow? My Bobby Bear?”

I took little notice that she had been stuffing herself, probably a bad case of munchies.

I said “Yeah, Eileen,” managing to keep my tone of voice even, normal. It really felt like biting the bul-

let when I said “it’s me, Papa-Bear,”. It also made me cringe as the connotations that old term of endearment implied flashed across my mind’s eye. Jesus Christ, not Eileen. What was I doing? Was there no other way? Was this a possible way out or was it just a faster way under?

“Awwww, Papa-Bear.. Is, this really you Bobby? I miss you so much, you know.”

She sounded quite sincere but then again crazy people always do since they do believe you are actually an ursine humanoid, complete with fur, claws, a fluffy tummy, and an unhealthy hunger for honey and Taco Bell.

“Right, Eileen. That’s, me.. Yeah. Papa-waka-bear. Huh..”

The words seemed to be drip-fed to my brain from some sort of mental black hole that spewed forth nothing that made sense. Fortunately that strongly resonated with Eileen’s sense of reality:

“Oh, Papa-waka-bear, so strong and furry and manly..With lots and lots of furry shouldery hair for me to rub and that sweet tummy..Can I see you Bobby? Just this once, I won’t be a bother, really. We don’t need to go boat-pedaling or skating. Just see you, maybe let me rub your tummy. And have sex?”

I closed my eyes and recalled a picture from the past: myself laden with honey from tip to toe, tied to a bed with a Winnie the Pooh plushie wearing a strap-on dildo and Eileen shouting “Rawr! I’m your honeycomb slice, Papa-Bear!”. I decided then and there that I’d have to appeal to whatever core of sanity remained in her mind, or else I could just go drown myself in a really shallow body of water, like, say, a gutter.

“Listen, Eileen.. We can’t.. I can’t do all that, okay? I wish I could, but..”

That was a lie. That was a lie. That was a lie. I was lying to her, but that’s okay cause she’s crazy.

“Ohh. Why can’t you Papa-Bear? We could have so much fun together! We could ride the tram around the city, and I could feed you cotton candy and berries. Like last time, don’t you remember? Didn’t you have fun? Please, Bobby. Can’t I see you once more? Why did you call me then? Do you really want to hurt me, Bobby?”

Her voice reminded me uncannily of Boy George and that made my eyes hurt just by thinking about it. I felt my stomach knot at the thought of all the things I would have to endure to get on her good side. Or it might have been the coffee-like dirt-brew. I took a deep breath before uttering the words as if they were my last:

“I need to see you Eileen.”

“Oh, Bobby! You really can’t tell how happy that makes me! I feel like leaping outside the window and flying to your arms, Papa-Bear!”

Oh God, shit no. She was crazy enough to actually pop out the window and crack her head open on the street below.

“No, no, Eileen! Don’t do that honey, no. You gotta wait a couple of hours, I’ll drop by your place. Okay?”

“But whoosy-cooshy-huggy of mine, I’ll be fly to you in a jippy if you just say the word!”

“No, no! Just sit tight, will ya? I’ll bring you chocolate chip cookies, your favorite. Just don’t go anywhere. And Eileen, take your meds, please. You’re still on meds, right?”

“Oh, you mean those horrible pills? They were so

bitter and bad for me, unlike you Bobby. No, no, daddy paid off the bad men in white and now I'm home again. Free as a bird. Your little nightingale."

That was probably wrong. No meds, rampant insanity mixed with nymphomaniac tendencies. And ursine fantasies. For a moment I thought it'd be a better bet to just reason with Falconi, but the fact that the last guy who tried that ended up as hand-made soap bars with Falconi's signature on it left me with little doubt about where my chances lay. I'd stick with the looney. At least she seemed to still have this thing for me.

"Okaaaay, Eileen. Now, see Papa-Bear's in trouble and I need your help. So, make sure you can get a hold of daddy and tell him that you might need that jet of his for a trip. And some pocket money too. Tell him you're going shopping in New York, okay?"

I listened myself saying all that and momentarily asked myself 'Are you a bad person for doing this, Bobby?', and then the answer came guilt-free 'No, Falconi is a bad person because he wants you dead for something you didn't even do'. It also helped to think of myself as Papa-Bear and not Bobby Barhoe.

"We're going shopping? Oh, Papa-Bear I always knew you were so much fun!"

"Yeah, I'm a god-damn roaming circus. So, see you in a couple of hours."

"Don't take long, Papa-Bear! I want to squash you in my arms and feel your tummy and tussle your hair and then su--"

Damn you to hell John Staikos, this was all your fault.

"Yeah, yeah, okay Eileen. Anything you like. Bye!"

"Wait, wait!"

“What?”

“Whoopsy-kissy?”

I hesitated just for the tiniest moment and I could almost picture the sad, watery eyes and then the coming onslaught of cries, curses and finely sharpened blades being hurled against me, so I made something like a smooching sound. It might have sounded like a fart, I’m not sure, but she sounded positively satisfied:

“I love you Papa-Bear! I can’t wait to snuggly-wuggly you in my arms and tie you down and -”

“Goodbye!”

I hang up in the nick of time. The ordeal was over for now, but doubts started assaulting me like journalists outside a rehab facility for famous people. Was this my only option? Would she come through? What if she had been waiting for that call, that one call that I might have given her in such a time of extenuating circumstances and dire need, just so I could come running to her for help and then dice me up because I shot the best-man on our wedding day and ran off in her father’s Porsche?

I had to keep reminding myself I wasn’t the bad person here, even as I strode back into my piece-of-shit Taurus. These were desperate times, and they obviously required insanely desperate measures.

I got back on route 72, heading for Memphis. While the radio waves reeked with country, bluegrass and heart-felt messages to the parishioners to pledge their support to the Church of Latter Day Saints With Semi-Automatic Rifles, I casually gazed outside the window and couldn’t help notice that this countryside was so flat and uninteresting that if there was some kind of hell waiting for everyone, this would be it. I was

about to start a self-gratifying rant, using phrases like “Good job right there, Bobby”, “Sure I can vouch for that sleezeball Mr. Falconi”, “Heck no, nothing can go wrong, we’re all pros here. Right?” when a big brown legged thing just popped right in front of the Taurus. I applied pressure to the braking pedal and then the laws of physics worked their magic.

Now, despite appearances I’m a fairly well-educated man and I know that Taurus is just a fancy word for bull. I also know that for a car to decelerate from eighty miles-per-hour to zero, it takes a couple hundred feet, and that’s because no-one in his right mind would design a car that could turn its occupants into mush or tarmac jelly (depending on the seat belt arrangement) when they wanted it to stop.

That being said, I wasn’t really suprised when the Taurus hit that horse. I wasn’t really surprised when the airbag tried to rob me of what looked like my early dying breath. Surprise wasn’t achieved even when the car swiveled and landed sideways in a gravelly ditch. It wasn’t the fact that I was still in one piece, nor the fact that the horse - had it been given the oral faculty post-mortem - could not say the same for itself.

It was the shaman.

There I was, still trying to decide whether or not I was still alive and with my brain between my ears, when I saw through the hazy smoke and vapor of the smashed front of the car the figure of a lone man, looking directly at me with a deeply sombre gaze, as if I had just killed his horse. He was dressed in a brown leather jacket, criss-crossed leather vest, and soft tan shoes. I’d have wagered he was some kind of a disco enthusiast with a slightly bent sexual orientation, if it wasn’t for

the feathery hat and the somewhat austere, manly jaw line. He was the spitting image of some Cherokee. Or Navajo. I didn't know, I just knew they name cars after these kinds of people.

He spoke with a peculiar voice that had the impossible qualities of gravel and running water at the same time:

“Are you hurt?”

I would normally have taken the time to think about faking some injury so I could sue the guy for damages. But under the circumstances, namely that if everything went according to plan I had less than a day to live combined with that this guy's entire estate most probably consisted of a dead horse, a tipi and his grandparents in a convenient ash form, I instinctively opted for the truth. Everything felt connected to the proper slots and I literally (and sadly, figuratively as well) saw no great blinding light at the end of a tunnel.

He came closer, shook open my jammed door and helped me get out of the car. He struck me as neither too old and neither too young, kind of exactly like Ronn Moss.

“Yeah, I think I'm okay. Where did you, ahm.. I mean, the horse just popped out of nowhere, and..”

“I know, Bobby.”

His words had a strangely calming effect. They oozed serenity. It was like listening to the voice of a loving grandfather, and by loving I don't mean pedophile. But then it hit me:

How did he know my name?

What did he mean by saying 'I know'? What did he know? I looked blankly at him, wondering briefly if I there was a universal balance being observed right at

that moment. My impending doom, and a horse dying in front of Taurus. Could it be that somehow the cosmic forces of life contrived to tell me something? Had some sort of karmic exchange taken place right in front of my eyes? A horse's life, for my own? An offering, a sacrifice to the powers beyond reach? Was he a holy man? Some sort of shaman? An emissary of fate? Was this the break I so desperately needed?

How did he know my name?

His next words jarred me out of my shocked reverie:

"The plates."

"Excuse me?"

"Says here on the car plates, 'BOBBY B'. Isn't that your name?"

I felt a bit silly, standing right beside him on the side of the road, bending over looking at what must have been horse gut sprayed all over what at some point, had been my Taurus' radiator.

"I'm sorry, I must've been thinking out loud. Well, yeah. Bobby Barhoe."

He looked at me sideways, somehow failing to mask his feelings disappointment. I couldn't know if it was my name or the pool of blood oozing from the horse.

"What kind of a name is that, Barhoe? Seriously?"

It was an odd think to ask, but then again I'd just run over his horse so I felt I should indulge the man. It might have also been an unconscious, fool-hardy effort to steer the discussion away from the dead horse.

"I've never really given it much thought. It's just a name, really. I actually think it sounds sturdy, homely. Like, say -"

"Burroughs?"

He furrowed his left eyebrow in a grimace that

would have normally required a monocle for full effect. I took a closer look at the steaming pile of heap that used to be the engine block. From a long experience in messiness, I could tell changing the tires wouldn't work.

"Yeah, kinda like that one. Or Thibodeau. Sounds dependable, right?"

"That doesn't sound sturdy, homely or dependable. That sounds like someone fell down the stairs."

"I think it's a good name. And so is Barhoe, don't mind me saying," I said and sat in front of the dead horse, arms crossed, trying to sound convivial. I must've come across like a prissy twat.

"Well I really don't think so, Bobby," he said and he scratched his head under the feather hat while grinning profusely as if he was enjoying all this immensely.

"I don't want to sound like a total jerk since I seem to have inadvertently fatally injured your horse over there, but you know who I am, while I don't."

I think I pointed lamely to the dead horse and sounded like a total jerk.

"I'm The Sad Son of A Bitch Whose Horse Runneth Over."

"Wow. Really? That's kind of tragic, isn't it? Talk about karma, huh?"

"Not really. Just because I'm Alabama it doesn't mean.. The name's Steve Johnson."

After all the pointless discussion about names it felt like I'd been cheated.

"What kind of an indian is named like that? I mean, seriously?"

"Now look here, I'm tired of this shit. Just because I'm Alabama it doesn't mean our people live like a hun-

dred and fifty years ago. I went to college. I got into a greek society, got drunk and wedgied and did all that frat-house shit just because I lacked the necessary maturity and personality like every other post-adolescent American male. And on an athletic scholarship, mind you.”

His name, even though it was as common as the cold, sounded oddly familiar.

“Did you by any chance play football at Kentucky?”

“Track and field, Alabama State. Do I look like I could play football?”

He was about five-foot-ten, a bit on the light side, no more than a hundred and thirty, a hundred and forty pounds. In pygmy football he might’ve been a world champion, but I don’t think there is such a thing as pygmy football. Nor should there be.

“Not really, no.”

His back was turned to me, looking at a far part of the sky brimming with timidly approaching dark clouds when he abruptly spun around and said with a beaming smile:

“That doesn’t mean I’m not a shaman though.”

“It doesn’t?”

I suddenly felt the conversation was starting to get a bit light-headed, when he explained:

“Shamanistic rituals form the basis of a hard core of belief in existentialist individualism, a wave breaker of people against the tsunami of pragmatistic atavism of today’s profit-driven societies. Part of the SSSD manifesto stands for -”

I couldn’t resist interrupting the bullshit storm so I told him with a straight face:

“I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with that SS thing. Is it,

like, Hitler's SS?"

"What? No, no. It's the Societe des Shamans et Sorciers-Docteurs."

The man seemed impervious to sarcasm.

"That's german, isn't it?"

"No, it's french for the Society of Shamans and Witch Doctors."

Even though he was probably right, I was pretty convinced that French and German were one and the same.

"So you got your own thing going? Shamanizing? Actually, is that a real word?"

"Well, the internet's helped a lot, you know? Coming together, feeling the buzz, spreading the word, but what's -"

One of the few things that I really feared apart from dying gruesomely in the hands (holding sharp instruments of death implied) of Falconi's goons was being surrounded by miracle workers, televangelists and all sorts of religious yahoo's that sounded just as coherent and sincere as that church of something where rich, famous, short actors used to go to find out the really real truth.

"Listen, I'm in a bit of a hurry. I really have to get to Memphis, like really soon. Actually I should have been almost half way there by now. So, say you wouldn't be on your way to Memphis would you? I'd be very grateful -"

"Dead!" he suddenly exclaimed raising his hands as if a switch had been turned on.

"What?"

"My horse is dead."

"I kind of noticed that. It hasn't moved since it

spewed its - .. What I meant to say was, could you drop me off with your car?"

"I don't have a car."

"Your bike?"

"No bike either," he said, and shook his head.

"Your other horse?" I asked in vain.

"Awatame was my friend and only steed for many years. May he rest in peace," he said with a genuine sadness that quickly passed over his features as well.

"The horse had a name?"

I felt that was the wrong thing to say but he didn't seem to be offended. He rather asked me with a slim smile:

"Have you heard of a horse with no name?"

His question had a curious ring to it but I couldn't quite remember why.

"Look, we could on like this for hours but not today. In about twenty hours or so, give or take, some really pissed off people with very little in the way of ethics considerations concerning the sanctity of human life are going to come looking for me, and my instincts tell me to run and hide, and they're usually right. You might think I'm pulling your leg here, having killed your horse and so on but -"

He took off his feathery hat and straightened his hair. He said with unnerving casualness:

"Yeah, you vouched for Dempsey, and when he vanished into thin air with thirty million in Falconi's bonds, he gave you another shot - the Veteran's Fund job. Problem is, John Staikos blew up along with his brother's-in-law chop shop, and took the job with him down the sinkhole. You're not a gun-crazed ape so you can't deal with Falconi going in, guns blazing. You are

the careful, studied planner who has taken everything into consideration and has mathematically proven you need John to pull off the job. You can't just pretend to do the job and get caught because then Falconi would take care of you in the jail anyhow. You can't find a replacement - no less in such a short notice - because John was the only guy who has cut open a vault like that, ever. You're thinking about flying away with Eileen's help. Maybe hide somewhere in Mexico, or in the Andes. Or maybe someplace real deep in the Amazon."

I watched in stunned silence as flies the size of hummingbirds buzzed around the horse. I managed to ask him with what I believed was a valid question under the circumstances:

"How the fuck do you know all that?"

"I told you, I'm a shaman. I resonate with mother Earth. I communicate with the spirits. I conversed with John, actually. We were drinking buddies back in the college days. He asked me to help a friend in need. So here I am."

Instincts took over so I couldn't believe a god-damn thing he was saying so I reverted to what should be the most logical explanation according to my experience as a fund displacement engineer:

"You're a Fed, right? This is some kind of elaborate setup. You've been monitoring me for some time now and you want me to confess, put Falconi behind bars, put me in witness protection. I can see the snipers. Let me tell you, not a chance. Falconi will find a way to kill me. So I'm not buying. Oh, and I don't know who he is. Or what's his name. I'm talking man. You got nothing on me."

I think I had said pretty much everything I wasn't

supposed to say but once more that wouldn't prove to be much of a problem.

"John said you'd be hard to convince. What if I can answer only something the two of you would ever know?"

"You could have gotten to him, tortured him for every little detail. Heck, you might've blown him up just to put a wrench in Falconi's job."

"I guess you're also thinking we didn't land on the moon."

"Of course we landed on the moon, in '53. The landings in '69 were just a cover-up to discredit all the -"

"I get the picture. What if he told you himself? Would that be enough to make you believe?"

"So it's a ruse? He's alive, right? Working with the Feds? Are we still on, Steve? Or should I call you Agent Johnson?"

I smiled smugly and thought I had him nailed right over there. Things looked like they could still turn out OK in the end. Maybe we'd have a cold one at a strip joint, and laugh about it surrounded by well-endowed professional dancers with allergies to any sort of garment. I couldn't be farther away from reality.

"I'm afraid he's pretty dead. Bought the proverbial farm. But, you're still on."

"We are? How?"

"Like this," Steve said and closed his eyes before he started dancing. At first thought it was part of keeping in par with the whole indian routine, doing the rain dance and shrieking like a baboon. But the way he tip-toed, spun and jumped into the air, then gracefully landing and doing a pirouette reminded me of soft ballerina's shoes, stockings and New York Times articles

on homophobia.

Instinctively I took a couple of steps back watching with increasing horror as Steven pranced around the dead horse with arms extended like paws, and suddenly all I could think of was Michael Jackson and zombies. I was about to break into a hopeless run thinking that nutjobs usually can't afford snipers until they're elected in office and then I saw John as a bluish, thin apparition seeping out from the horse.

He was wearing goggles over his eyes and had a blow torch in hand; he was looking rather pale which under any circumstances seemed only natural. I was about to yell 'Hologram!' when he uncannily zipped right next to me and said:

"Bobby, my man. The Taurus got totalled, huh? Bummer."

"John?"

"Where you expecting someone else?"

Needless to say I did the first thing that came to my ape-descendant brain: I tried to poke him with a finger but it went right through. Then I tried not to faint, and I remember I heard Steve say:

"Tell him it's all true."

Then John, or his apparition, or his astral projection or whatever it was I was technically talking to said:

"It's all true."

"See? I told you," said Steve and smiled encouragingly while my eyes darted back and forth trying to find some point of reference that would explain all this and keep my brain from melting. That mostly failed. My lips moved but nothing came out of my mouth except perhaps some drool.

"Huh?"

John the Ghost, or John the Apparition, or the Spirit Formerly known as John said:

“Don’t try to understand, at least not now. Steve’s a buddy, so do what he says and he’ll fix us both up. I might actually help you live through it and make it in time for the game on Saturday as well.”

Steve popped a question with a frown:

“Buffalo?”

“Nah, Nicks. So, Bobby. I’m counting on you. I gotta run now, some attendant’s busting my balls, says I parked on a handicapped spot.”

And just like that, before I could breathe in and out, he vanished. I managed to make sounds like words again. Almost.

“Uh. Um. That was John?”

Steve nodded ‘yes’ with his head.

“And he wasn’t fucking with me? You aren’t fucking with me?”

He shook his head in a well-known fashion that in almost any known human culture meant ‘no’. I took a few deep breaths while my mind tried to empty itself. It took a while longer than usual this time around.

“So what did he mean? Why is he counting on me? Can someone else do the job for him? Oh, I get it! Can he possess Falconi, make his head spin around and break his neck? Or do some of that weird ghost shit, scare him shitless and make him jump off the 41st floor? Was that a ghost? Or a ghoul? I can’t tell the difference, you should know that stuff. I mean you can summon the dead, right?”

I think there was a strange gleam of shocked terror when I said that, so Steve sounded a bit apprehensive:

“You’re weird. He’s neither. He’s in an incorporeal

form. His spirit still roams the Earth freely and can be called upon, but his soul is trapped in the Parking Lot of Eternity. If he doesn't find the exit soon, he'll be trapped there, forever searching the ticket for his green Honda Accord."

"That piece of crap? Yeah, okay, I just talked with a dead guy. So, how can he help me? Can he do the job in that condition?"

"He can't, he's dead. We have to bring him back. Well, you actually."

"Bring him back from the dead? As in, raise him from the dead? As in, resurrection?"

"Technically, it's not exactly like that. There have been precedents. Lazarus, Jesus. Disney, Elvis. Hitler. It's more like, re-rolling the last dice."

"What, like in a game?"

"Isn't life but just a game?"

"What's with all the philosophical questions today? The accident.. The dead horse.. I was badly injured. I'm in a coma. And I'm seeing these visions, and you're like a spiritual guide but in reality, you're just a figment of my imagination, a creation of my subconscious mind which is trying to stay alive and-"

And then he suddenly punched me really hard in the face. It made my jaw go numb for like a minute or two, and then I knew that for all intents and purposes this was probably real enough.

"Did you imagine that? I don't think so. And to get down to business, John really wants that second chance. I mean who wouldn't? Except maybe people who owed lots of money. But to do that, someone has to vouch for him. If he fails to get that second chance, he and that someone get to serve at the Parking Lot of

Eternity as attendants for, well, all Eternity.”

“Is that like a valet service for the dead then?”

“You could say so, yes.”

“So how are you going to do it?”

“Do what?”

“You know, save John. Give him his second chance, save my life, all that.”

“I’m not doing anything like that. You are going to.”

“I am? Maybe you are imagining this?”

He looked at me in a funny way that expertly conveyed the message ‘do you want another punch in the face?’.

“Yeah, I think you’re not imagining it any more than I am. Come to think of it, I’m done for either way, right?”

“The smart money’s on that.”

Falconi would scour the Earth to get me. I’d have a considerably shortened expiration date and the overall idea of growing old and senile around scantily clad teens that didn’t speak a word of English would be thrown out of the window.

I was scared. I was panicked. The instinct of fleeing in the face of insurmountable odds and grave danger overcame my cold, calculating sense of reason, even though I was starting to reconsider the wording ‘reason’. If all that were true, if indeed there was the slightest hope of John coming back from the dead, and doing the job, what did I have to lose apart from my sanity?

“Okay. I’ll do it. What do I have to do?”

“Collect spirit shards.”

“What, like Zelda or something?”

Steve looked puzzled.

“What’s Zelda? Some new age Zen crap? Because

the spirits will be angry if-

"No, it's a game on the Nintendo."

"What's a Nintendo?"

"The Wii?"

"We what?"

"Forget about Zelda, she's can be a real bitch anyway. What kind of spirit shards are you talking about?"

"Real spirit shards, from willing souls. I need to perform a certain ritual for each and every soul that is willing to merge a part of it with yours."

Instincts kicked in so I couldn't help asking:

"Will that hurt?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You don't *think* so?"

"I don't. I haven't done it before."

I should have known I'd hear that phrase at some point in the discussion.

"Oh, that's just classic. I mean, what is this, amateur shaman night ? You haven't done it before?"

"Have you talked with lots of dead people?"

"Not really, no. Just John back there."

"Well, that's because it's pretty fucking rare. So are spirit shards. Souls are very fickle and rarely accept such a thing."

"Right. And how are we going to pull that soul-catching off then?"

"I have something in mind. At least someplace we can start."

"Whatever, I'm game as long I get to keep my head and my balls attached. Do you know how to do your stuff?"

"I'm qualified. I've taken classes."

That sounded at least ridiculous. I'd seen stranger

stuff just a couple of minutes earlier but I just spurted the words:

“You can’t be serious. Does it involve dancing like a queer?”

“I am. And if you mean ‘ballet’, it does. We need to act quickly. And you need to get us some transportation. Hitchhiking a ride might do the trick.”

“Why me?”

“You’re the white, respectable-looking guy.”

“I’m a god-damn thief. And I got some Latino blood in me, I’m not all ‘whitey’. I have this thing for salsa and tortillas, someone in the family must’ve been an *hombre*.”

Steve looked at me with a vaguely mixed feeling somewhere between pity and disgust.

“I said respectable-*looking*. Don’t blame me for your society’s prejudice against native americans.”

“I thought it was your society as well. That you had integrated and so on.”

“That’s just what we tell folks at job interviews. Now, remember I’m only doing this as a favor to John. I’m not sure we can be buddies yet, so remember that too.”

A slightly uneasy silence followed as we both looked onto the street, hunting for a passing ride. At some point I felt like I just had to ask:

“He owes you money, right?”

“Yeah. Two hundred bucks. Said he had some debt he needed to pay off fast.”

“That’s funny, he owed me two hundred bucks.”

Steve looked at me wide-eyed and exclaimed:

“Well, dress me up like Custer and shoot me full of arrows. That’s karma, come a lyin’.”

“Don’t sing that, I hate Culture Club.”

“Don’t sing what? You mean like a choir club?”

* * *

A pair of furry dice hang from the rear mirror. Instead of numbers from one to six though, each face sported an extremely detailed depiction of men engaged in activities of a sexual nature, with *sheep* nonetheless. Steve was looking at the dices with mystified awe, as if he was for the first time in his life, challenged to believe people *could* do such things.

The truck driver’s name was Ivan Kerrilov, and when he spoke he never failed to make me think he had picked up english inside a fishing barrel, talking to tuna who couldn’t read or talk but had learned it themselves using a chinese electrical appliance manual for textbook. Needless to say, it sounded like garbage.

“You are to each other? To get there?”

I tried to maintain a conversational tone without giving away the fact that I could not understand what the hell Ivan was saying, while Steve kept touching things that one could never know whether or not they had been inserted into orifices regularly as of late. So I tried to reply:

“We are who we are. Together. What does ‘together’ really mean, you know?”

With safety in mind first and without taking his eyes off the road, Ivan took his hand off the wheel and made two little figures with his fingers that first walked casually next to each other, and then one seemed to bend over only to get the index finger of the other hand repeatedly inserted into an imaginary cavity. At first

I squinted at the little charade, trying to think what could be going on in Ivan's stranger-fiction-mind. And then I saw his leery smile and rhythmical movement of his pelvis I irreversibly knew he was asking whether or not me and Steve were a 'thing'. I answered as delicately as appearances and circumstances allowed:

"The fuck no! We're guys!"

A bump on the road slightly jerked all three of us. Ivan grinned widely seemingly to purposely reflect almost eighty percent of sunlight directly on to my face with his metal teeth. He constantly made me feel I was in a Bond parody film set with the same supporting cast, only slightly bent.

"So?" asked Steve without provocation and without a care, delving deep into the insides of the truck's dashboard and assorted interior extra, like the small cupboard in the back and the impossibly tiny WC. I had seen where this kind of talk could lead and I always regretted rising to the bait. I resolved not to be tempted, especially then, and especially in there.

"I'm not doing that. I'm not getting into a discussion about homo-sex with you."

"Why not? Homo-sex? Who says that?" asked Steve while carefully studying the fine finishing in the beautifully lacquered cupboard doors in the miniscule kitchen area. A smell like vodka permeated the air.

"Look, he's smiling already! This must be some kind of perverted sexual fantasy coming true, two straight men hitching a hike, arguing about gays and sex between gays and animals and straight men like us."

A really big truck with a streamlined design overtook us on the left, blaring his horn all the way. At the end of the huge tank he was carrying, the driver had

put up a neon sign that said 'HONK IF YOU'RE HUNG LIKE AN ARMADILLO'. Before my brain had time to fully explore the possibilities that such a statement entailed and what it really meant (for instance, what is an armadillo hung like? is it hung like an anteater or other thing beginning with 'a'?), I was reflexively covering up my ears because Ivan had just honked, laughing like an immigrant version of the Woodpecker. On the other hand I noticed Steve was browsing through the mini-bar, which invariably seemed to possess enough alcohol to fire up an amateur rocket. Most of the tiny bottles were empty and the rest of them was emptied around the driver's seat.

"Now see why we should just shut up till Memphis?"

"Ivan says talk. Good for pass time, therapy, hum, no? Like Op-Rah. Spring-er?"

"No thank you, we can have some quality time to talk later, mind you."

I thought that comment had put an end to the discussion, but when Steve sat next to me holding a mini bottle of Stolichnaya, he asked something that was a very punch-worthy thing to say:

"Haven't you ever been fingered by a lady?"

Had I the capacity, I would've boiled most of the water in my body into steam, turning my eyes into jelly in the process. But as I recall I simply foamed a bit while trying to restrain myself from actually hurting Steve, the curiously-inclined-to-talk-shit-like-that shaman:

"What the fuck kind of a question is that? Are you asking about whether not I've ever had a finger inserted up my ass? What the fuck's wrong with you?"

"Hey, just making some idle conversation. It's not like I asked if you're sucking-

“Now wait just a minute. That’s just sick.”

“What? Why, women do it all the time!”

“Yeah, well, women do that all the time! Not guys!”

“Why not?”

“Because, women are supposed to suck and men to..”

“Blow?”

“Hell no!”

“So you think you’re so much better than women? Is that why you’re degrading them?”

“What kind of - I didn’t say anything degrading, I just said -”

“That they suck. That they’re not as good at you at-”

“What? Good at sucking cock? Is that what you’re saying?”

I noticed Ivan gave me a very strange look that somehow implied sexual tension to arise would be more than welcome on his part. For someone who couldn’t talk a word of proper english, he communicated quite clearly.

“You bet your sweet ass they’re better at sucking cock than I am!” I said and Steve looked at me straight in the eye, paused for a moment and asked with a flat, serious voice, the voice of someone doing a census:

“You think my ass is sweet? As in, lovely-looking? Perhaps, even, hot?”

“Stop saying shit like that.”

“So you’re just not as good at it as you’d like? Is that why you have this weird fascination and keep saying women ain’t -”

“Not as good at.. The hell.. I do not.. Suck.. Cock! Period!”

I made it pretty certain then that the flustered red on my face was not war paint but blood past its boiling point. But Steve just had to try my limits on the subject:

“I knew you were weird, I just didn’t know you hadn’t come out of the closet yet.”

“Come out of the- what?” I asked and saw my fist involuntarily punching him in the face. A split second later Steve thought it was time for some kind of psychological evaluation.

“See now that’s typical behavior of repressed sexuality. You have a problem opening up to society as a homosexual man, so you become defensive, try to look like the dominating male figure, while in fact you subconsciously hitched a hike with an outspokenly gay man - in a milk truck no less - and just a moment ago admitted you’re worse at sucking cock than most women. And that’s why you punched me, because in this soul-searching quest you are too confined by your own-”

I punched him again, and this time it had the desired effect. He stopped talking shit and looked at me through half-open wary eyes, probably mindful that some things, and especially things concerning Bobby Barhoe’s manliness were better left unsaid for a good reason that involved jarred bones and bruises.

I was visibly seething with anger. My male pride had been hurt. I almost felt like a proud elk being stripped of its horns, an elephant without a trunk, or a stud without its junk. It also felt like Ivan was eyeing me creepily, and grinning incongruously to every mention of a word even remotely related to intercourse, like ‘milk’, ‘butter’, or ‘hoe’. Before abject terror pulled at my instincts and made me leap outside a truck doing eighty, he turned and said to me with an approving

tone, proudly waving a badly groomed finger in the air:

“You talk like man. Ivan like that. Sexy, like a man.”

I tried not to think of that as a compliment, or even a comment of any kind.

Steve looked slightly miffed, sitting somewhat uncomfortably, nursing his jaw. It looked like the last punch had left him a purple-coloured souvenir. It's only reasonable then that he must've unwillingly disconnected his mouth from his brain when he said:

“I hope you are not developing a thing for me, because I'd have you know I'm not into-”

I was about to punch him a third time in that exact same sweet bruised spot and if God was a proponent of applied justice, I would have broken his jaw with the added bonus that that would have probably made him shit up for the rest of the ordeal, when I felt something with the apparent magnitude and force of a giant metal claw tugging at my left shoulder. It was Ivan who said:

“Memphis. We here. Look.”

And I turned and saw the sign that said 'Memphis NEXT EXIT'. I saw the bleak unattractive greenish scenery that reminded me of mosquitoes and moonshine, and I was instantly overcome with agony, because the dreaded moment had arrived. We were about to meet Eileen. Which reminded me then to finish what I had started, and punch Steve in the face. A moment, a grunt and an expletive later he was complaining:

“What the fuck was that for?”

“That's for starting this shard business with Eileen.”

“A close, intimate relationship. Female softness of heart. She's the best candidate.”

“You might want to meet her before having an educated opinion first.”

“I’m sure you’re overreacting, just like with the whole homo thing.”

I only had to slightly give him the eye, and he fell silent again, looking the other way. He then said with conviction:

“I’m pretty sure saying she’s crazy and denouncing your relationship is just another way of coping with the fact that you’re a homo-”

I’m not a violent man per se, and it definitely says something for a person when he’s so eager to punch people in the face and break their legs, but in Steve’s case, I would bet he could get the Pope mad enough to beat him to death with a bible. Before there was time to choke him to death, Ivan effectively disarmed me with but a few words of very special meaning:

“So, who is going to pay Ivan by butt-sex now we here?”

I think my genitalia shrunk to microscopic levels instantly, and my anus clenched itself airtight. I looked at Steve in terror and he simply smiled back, impervious to what the words implied for my gender. Impossibly, trying to ignore the inevitable I smiled back as well and thought that staying alive had its good moments, and its rape moments. This looked like a rape moment. And the funny thing is all I could think of was Nirvana and Kodak.

* * *

Ivan waved his goodbyes as enthusiastically as a little russian kid who got vodka *and* tickets to a bear fight for Christmas. He was holding a small wad of cash in one hand, and his smile shone with the radiant inten-

sity of the finest soviet dentistry had to offer, which is to say not very much unlike nickel.

“‘Buy’ butt-sex! Jesus, what a horror. I thought he’d rape me and you’d just sit by and watch!”

“Would you have enjoyed that? It’s understandable to have a fear of penetration.”

“Steve. Seriously. I don’t want to hear that kind of bullshit. For the last time, I’m not a homo.”

“Nobody is. Not the first time. You’re just experimenting. I can grok that.”

By that time I had mastered my instincts and even though a proper response would have been a punch in the face and a kick in the nuts, I was content to sigh and get on with the job at hand which seemed a lot more likely to test my limits than hearing Steve’s rants about me being gay.

“Just.. Just ring the bell.”

Steve shrugged and rang the bell. We were standing in the front porch of Eileen’s house, a three-story typical southern mansion that reeked of money. If I closed my eyes I could almost hear “Ol’ man river” and smell the corn. A moment or two passed. Nothing happened while we waited. I was looking at the old, thick wooden door idly. Steve rang the bell once more. Still, the buzz didn’t come. So we exchanged a couple of knowing looks and I looked under the door mat while Steve picked up a couple of plant pots and looked underneath. Nothing. No key. Steve said:

“Maybe she popped out for a while.”

“‘Crazy’ Eileen Novorski does not just ‘pop out’ for a while. Crazy people, at least Eileen-crazy people do not ‘pop out’.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s agoraphobic, among many other things.”

Steve’s face froze in a blank expression while he was trying to connect the dots. Failing miserably, he asked nonetheless:

“So she’s on a wheelchair?”

“What? No, no. She’s scared of crowds. I thought you went to college.”

“Business major. Minor in arts. Can barely spell my name, actually.”

“I see. Well, something must’ve happened to her.”

“Maybe she’s taking a dump.”

The intercom buzzed right about then and I heard Eileen positively - and quite literally so - mad with excitement:

“Papa-Bear! Is that you suggah?”

“Yeah, honey-bunny, it’s me. Will you open up now, please?”

“Always, my love! Always!”

The intercom spewed some static as she hang up. The door buzzed and I pushed it open. We got inside and a powerful smell assaulted me: the smell of a shit-load of money. The large entrance hall was just as I remembered. Stately, sparkling clean, filled with incredibly expensive luxury items chosen solely because of their price tag. There was this wide staircase that led to the upper floors, all marble and carpet. Pretty standard stuff for a cotton mogul like Eileen’s father.

Steve was taking in the scenery, seemingly rather anxious all of the sudden and threw me a look I could only think of as ver constipated:

“I’m having this weird feeling,” he said and started searching his pockets.

“You need to go to the bathroom?”

“No, no, that’s not it. There’s something about this place that just doesn’t fit.”

“What do you mean? I know the tiles look all wrong but it’s the tapestry that’s a bit off”

“Not the decor. I actually think what it lacks in finesse, it makes up with a few warm personal touches here and there,” he said while putting on some kind of talisman that looked like a couple of badgers getting it on.

I couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“Really? I actually did some decorating work myself here back in the day. I think it might look better if the panels -”

“Where is everyone? You said her father’s filthy rich. Not a manservant, a helper, or a nurse. A cat litter box right by the entrance, but no cat or hairballs to be seen. See that small table? The vase on it had been moved, but there’s the patina of stale water in it. No one has bothered to change the water. The ceiling? Take a closer look at that chandelier. Cobwebs. Spun by a genus of spider known as *Zoropsis*, mainly found in the Mediterranean. Not native.”

“I thought you were a business major, not a spider biologist.”

“Arachnologist. It’s a hobby of mine. Never mind that, we’re in danger. This house is tainted.”

His eyes had started to shine with a very unhealthy gleam.

“What the hell are you talking about? Listen, let’s just talk to Eileen and get this over with fast. The clock’s ticking, remember. Where the hell is she anyway?”

And that was when I caught Eileen with the corner of my eye, falling down on me from the floor above, wearing a free-fall jumpsuit, arms outstretched looking lying a flying squirrel on drugs, ready to clench me into her death-love-grip. I barely had time to freeze like an idiot at the inane sight of her, so I couldn't dodge her in time (which would have been an instinctive reaction, no harm intended really). She simply fell right on top of me and we both fell on the floor. I was pretty certain I heard something crack, and while I tried to breath again, I heard Steven's voice carrying the unmistakable markings of someone on a cocktail of psychedelic drugs:

"Ninja assassins, man! They're everywhere!", he said and took a few steps backwards, his back always facing the wall.

"No, that's Eileen, Steve. Steve, this is Eileen. Eileen, this is Steve," I said catching my breath and made the introductions as best as I could considering I was being smothered in kisses, lying helplessly on my back.

"Papa-Bear! And uncle-bear, too! Do you remember, how we went sky-diving last time? I suited up, and jumped all the way down from the, just for you! Look, I even have a parachute!" she said and pulled the string, causing the parachute slot to pop open with a fizz before starting to slightly ooze out of its bag and on the floor, quite without reason.

"Well, good thing you opened it in time then, right?" I said trying to sound approving, even as I tried to squirm away from her. I took a look at Steve and it seemed like he was starting to develop some sort of real mental issue. He was hugging the wall, mumbling

something inaudible and had the look of a wide-eyed deer frozen by a couple of approaching headlights. I managed to stand back up after a while, Eileen continuously expressing her endearment, handling me like a stuffed animal and calling me 'booby-woompy', 'etch-a-sketchy' and 'orgasmatron two', among other things. Before I could find a way calm her down enough to try and tell her why we were there, Steve finally blew a fuse and lost his marbles as if Eileen's condition was as catchy as the Embola virus:

"It must burn! Quickly! There's very little time! They're coming!"

For a moment, I thought some real danger had him tripping balls, and peered outside a window.

"Falconi's men?"

"No, the Ninjas!"

I was wrong. I sighed.

"Steve, seriously. Say, let's have a drink. Something stiff. Laced with sedatives?"

"There! Look!"

"What? Where?"

Steve pointed. I looked. He kept pointing, and I kept looking. I couldn't see jack shit. There was nothing there to see other than rich folk stuff.

"Steve, there's nothing there. I see nothing."

"Of course! You can't see Ninjas! That defeats their whole purpose! They're invisible, didn't you know?"

I was about to punch him again just as a stop-gap measure, when I saw Eileen had quickly acclimatized herself to the added craziness: she was doing her best ninja impression, with a length of the parachute wrapped around her face as a mask, wielding a three-pronged candle holder like some sort of dagger, danc-

ing around, blinking wildly and generally looking very much unlike a ninja.

I realised I now had two, instead of just one nutcases to handle, and they were helping each other turn me into one of them. I tried to fold Steve back into some kind reality that might not involve invisible ninja assassins. I grabbed him by the shoulders and unglued him from the well, trying to say something that made sense:

“Maybe you ate something bad on the road? That sandwich? Maybe you put some mushrooms in that one, for the taste I’m sure. Or maybe peyote? That’s kind of the same ain’t it? I’m not being judgmental, I’m sure you can handle your addiction.”

His face looked like splitting for just a moment. He then blurted:

“No chance! Peyote tastes like rabbit pee, that sandwich tasted like snake dung, I’d know the difference! Or is it the other way around?” he said and Eileen hove into view with an aerial kick that managed to overturn a small *commode* (that’s rich-folk lingo for cabinets). It also cost me my meager grip on Steve who just snapped at exactly the wrong moment.

“They’re here, man! We got to torch this place! Let me go man!” he said, kicked me in the nuts and ran away while I collapsed in agony, seeing bright spots of many vivid colours and what might have been the faint image of a nun wearing a bikini and shorts. As I lay down on a persian carpet feeling my balls’ declare their independence, my gaze unwillingly locked out of focus at what must’ve been an original Trego, and had this had happened to someone else, I’d find the coincidence quite charming.

Eileen was all over me in the blink of an eye. Her

eyes looked watery already and she shrieked right into my ear with the overtones of a caring nympho:

“Oh, Bobby! Bad uncle-bear kicked you in the naughty bits! I’ll kiss it better, Papa-Bear!”

While it might’ve been a welcome change in pace, I had to gather my wits, so I motioned a definite no while I felt blood circulation slowly return to the aforementioned bits.

I still lay there panting though, unable to fathom how I’d put myself in a situation that involved a crazy woman, a recently acquainted bonafide shaman able to summon spirits in possession of a definitely disturbed mind. It really felt like a balls-to-the-wall moment. I felt Eileen do something really awkward to my hair and then I saw she was tasting it, an all too well-known dominating her features. I knew then I needed to get up, knock some sense into Steve, preferably force-feeding him some of Eileen’s leftover meds that were bound to be found around the house. The developments though, outpaced me, when Steve came into view shouting:

“Don’t just stand there! Grab the woman!”

He looked every bit as mad as a mad scientist of native american heritage would, complete with his feathery hat on and wildly unkempt hair. Eileen was still hunched right beside me, tracing the carpet with a finger, probably unable to understand why there were no puddles ripping outwards from the fluffy sea.

“Steve, for god’s sake, will you calm down?”

“No time! I turned on the gas! I’ll torch the fuckers, don’t you worry. All it needs is a sparkle, and this nest of evil will be burned down with a cleansing fire!”

Once more in my life, I felt I was on the forefront

of modern psychiatric analysis and treatment. What made things a little different, a bit more urgent and a lot more dangerous than what mental illness professionals faced (more aptly, blabbermouths with a degree and a all-you-can-eat LSD buffet at work). I knew that gas was notoriously known for a tendency to make things explode in flames. So I just used, plain, simple, hard logic to try and put things under control before it was too late. I simply told Steve what I thought of the whole situation:

“Steve, you are one stupid fuck. There are no ninjas, you’re just freaking out on ’shrooms.”

“I’m not freaking on ’shrooms, man. It’s real, you just can’t see them because you aren’t attuned. They’re really very devious. Don’t let that pink suit fool you, man.”

I tried to picture such a pink, fiendishly devious ninja for a moment, but thankfully I failed. I tried to make Steve see things my way:

“Okay, let’s just pretend this place needed some cleansing, and you went and turned on the gas in the kitchen. But you didn’t disconnect the safeties, did you?”

Steve held up a handful of nuts, bolts and valves that looked very out of place. I kept my cool and asked him without trembling, at least not visibly.

“What about that sparkle Steve? You’d have to light it up somehow, man. You wouldn’t be that crazy, say lighting up a match now, would you?”

And then I heard Eileen’s syrupy voice coming from the direction of the kitchen:

“Papa-bear? Why didn’t you say your tummy was empty? I could’ve cooked you your favorite, honey

apple-pie with salmon and turkey eggs! And you forgot to put some real food along with that tin-foil in the microwave oven, silly Bobby!”

While I tried to make sense of that statement, Steve said the most sensible thing I had heard out of his mouth in quite some time:

“Just run!”

I had this awkward sensation tingling inside my gut. Time seemed to flow much more gently suddenly. And I think I started running like some kind of wild animal that sees the fires approaching, consuming everything, and flees. Only for some inexplicable reason, I wasn’t fleeing. I wasn’t running outside the house. I ran inside the kitchen, and saw Eileen happily glued in front of the microwave with the tin foil inside, waiting for the clock to reach zero. In the sparse few seconds that I envisaged I had yet to live, I grabbed her by the waist and carried her outside like a brat about to get a thorough beating.

I wasn’t paying thorough attention but I believe she was laughing her heart out, flapping her outstretched arms like we were headshowing a very cheap production of *The Valkyrie*.

As I passed through the open door, I could see Steve running in front of me, and realised his athletic scholarship wasn’t just some bullshit he’d made up. I saw the courtyard, and beyond that I could see the path leading to the road, and when I felt this giant hand push me up in the air with an urgency that belied its deadliness, I realised the bird’s-eye view is highly overrated and quite unpleasant if one does not possess the ability to land safely.

A fraction of a second later my ears were ravaged

by the sound of the explosion that had propelled me and Eileen into the air. I had just enough time to think that it was a really shitty thing to die about a day earlier than you were supposed to, right before my face connected with the dirt horribly and everything went pitch black with a terrible thud.

* * *

When I came to, I opened my eyes tentatively, half-expecting John the ghost to greet me with his car's key-chain in hand, and an endless array of parked SUVs blocking the view to my Taurus, forever and ever. Instead, I was cheerfully greeted by Steve who had conveniently propped me up against an apple tree which looked like it might have been as old as the one that led to the discovery of gravity (a non-trivial force which I could vividly remember having challenged with little success).

"So, how are you feeling?"

The list of possible answers was easily narrowed to just one:

"Blown away?"

"That seems normal, since you were in fact blown away. Still, you're in one piece."

I instinctively went about finding out whether that was indeed the case, and when all the body math checked out I happily concurred that indeed I was wholesome. I actually felt great. I thought it must've been a miracle that I hadn't even broken a single bone. It was a most welcome turn of events, surviving a gas explosion intact. So much in fact that I felt compelled to ask without worry:

“Where’s Eileen?”

And then I saw her lying flat on the ground, her hair curled up around her face, tangled like she had just washed her face. She looked insanely serene, and that pun was not intended. She really looked peaceful. Like in a deep sleep or.. The thought just flashed across my mind like it was being stamped with the words by a really fierce customs officer, and my mouth moved of its own:

“Is she dead?

And then I heard this really warm and sensuous voice coming out of nowhere with crystal clarity, as loud as a thought:

“Right here, Bobby.”

I pride myself in thinking that I have extensive experience with using my eyes to look at things. Nevertheless, I was unable to see Eileen’s lips move, not even by hair’s breadth.

“I’m in here with you, Bobby. Don’t be scared,” I heard her voice in my mind and I knew she was telling the truth.

Steve was putting together some twigs and sticks on a small pile, when he said as if on cue:

“Yeah, it worked. There was this slight side-effect though. It’ll wear off once we’re done.”

What the words implied instantly made my brain sent powerful signals accross my body, urging me to go ballistic. Holding my head with one hand I could feel my pulse grow stronger and stronger, to the point where if someone pricked me with a needle I’d probably explode. I heard Eileen’s voice sweet and calming, as if everything was right as pie:

“Don’t worry, Bobby. It’s only temporary. I won’t

be a bother, you'll see."

Somewhere along my mind there was a battle being fought between the impartial, calculating, cold forces of the logical parts of my brain and the mushy, animal-based subconscious mind that always believed it knew better. Beaten time and again, just this once it had won over and its uproar was translated into words coming out of my mouth:

"Damned if I'll be, but I believe her."

Steve looked up to me as if frogs were spewing forth from my mouth and he just blurted:

"I was not ogling your ass when you were unconscious; that's just something troubled spirits might say when outside their bodies, you know because they're confused, can't tell their ass from their elbow usually. I really wasn't; Cross my heart and hope to die. Indian scout's honor."

"You weren't doing what?" I asked but I never really meant to know anything about what he might've been really doing, ever.

I could see the fire trucks and the sheriff's office had done their part, and had extinguished the fire. The mansion had turned into a very big piece of charcoal, and we were safely and quite pertinently almost half a mile away, idly sitting under a tree, looking as innocent as any picknickers. The mansion was pretty much far down the road, so there weren't really any bystanders or eye-witnesses, and that only meant it would merely be a matter of minutes until someone noticed us and thought about coming around and start asking questions. Steve was probably on the same train of thought when he said somewhat hesitantly:

"Shouldn't we be, leaving? I mean, I don't think

you're exactly on good terms with the boys over there."

"Even though I should just tie you up on that tree with a five-gallon of gas and a blowtorch and write 'I LOVE TO WATCH THEM BURN' on their forehead, I won't. And yeah, you could say I avoid law enforcers like the bubonic plague. Yeah, it's time we make ourselves scarce."

"What about me?!" I said and knew it wasn't me saying that. I covered my mouth with one hand in shocked surprise, while the other one was on my waist adding to a very feminine body posture which must've looked very ridiculous and gay, perhaps much to the chagrin of Steve who paused and turned around looking at me like there was overwhelming evidence of something weird going on. He sighed and said:

"Eileen? While he was out, we had a talk. Don't do that, it's not polite."

"You were going to just walk away!"

Steve was motioning slowly with his hands, as if that would calm her down. I was standing there very much like a statue, blinking erratically.

"No we just now decided we should leave. No reason to get upset. We're going to carry you to.."

He looked at me with a helpless expression. I focused on just one name and curiously enough I was able to say it as well:

"Mama Adele!"

"Mama Adele!" echoed Steve quite unconvincingly with a half-witted smile.

I suddenly could move again as if some invisible cords had just snapped. I flexed my muscles as if they had been brand new again, and then I dutifully proceeded to lift Eileen up and carry her on my shoulder.

She was a lithe little thing and she wouldn't be a bother until we could get down to the road and maybe hail a cab. Steve looked a bit worried though, so I asked him:

"What's on your mind?"

"How are we going to walk around carrying her around like that?"

"Oh, that? Just pretend she's my wife to be."

"And does that making it okay for her to be unconscious?"

"Sure it does. It's kind of a tradition around these parts. As the saying goes -"

A grin formed on my mouth and I cocked my head slightly sideways before I said in an exaggerated southern drawl:

"Knock'em down, bag'em up, knock'em up while sherriff's outta town."

"Seriously?"

"Yup. Besides, I've done this before."

"With whom?"

I sighed and tried to look as blunt and blank as possible with little success when I said:

"Eileen."

"Oh, I see. So there's quite some past between the two of you."

"Yeah, you could say that. By the way, what was that shit inside the mansion? What the fuck where you tripping on?"

"Oh, that was just part of the ritual."

I think I frowned really hard when I heard that, almost trying to connect one eyebrow with the other. I was inclined to ask Steve about his thoughts on the strategy of preemptive strikes in general, colloquially known as 'shoot first, ask questions later', and in this

particular instance 'punch first, then punch again'. But somehow I felt it would be a very counterproductive thing to do, at least until this situation with Eileen had been resolved. I'm pretty sure my teeth made a grinding noise when I said:

"You did this on purpose?"

Steve cleared his throat and settled into a calm, even voice. It was what could have passed as the voice of a narrator in a boring documentary about the use of poultry in ballistic forensics. Speaking from experience though, it was just Steve, indirectly admitting he was a huge asshole:

"Part of the ritual involves letting the spirits run wild, and free. Best way to do that, is make you act like yourself, speak with the heart if you will. Normally, we would have spend weeks together in the wild, hunting, bonding, perhaps bathing naked in ice cold streams, with nothing but the cloudy sky for a roof and our knives for shelter. The light of the stars would have shone in our souls, and our spirits would mingle with the Father Wind, the changer of all things not set in stone. And you would learn to feel the currents of Mother Earth flow within you, all living things as one force, separate but not divided, unique but not alone. And your spirit would be ready then. But because we had to do this real quick, I improvised and nearly killed us all. It worked better than I expected."

"You're an asshole, Steve."

As we reached the side of the road, I saw a sign right across the other side advertising cheap food, strong coffee and liquor, and I quote: 'fit for pharmaceutical use'. I was genuinely surprised then to see Steve wet his lips with his tongue, and look at me with an ex-

pression that verged on what I believe mental health professionals (yeah, the overpaid quacks) call bipolar disorder. The left part of his face was contorted in a jarred grimace, the kind of mess that happens to your face when you realise you've put yourself into a situation that can only result in abject, petrifying horror or death-of-the-soul (kinda like visiting the in-laws or watching the eight o'clock news).

The other half, his right half, shone with the intensity and brilliance of a miniscule sun, as if the skin was made from the same stuff as the stars (which - technically speaking - is of course true), the same kind of face that an alcoholic makes at the first whiff of Vix.

He started then to put his one foot in front of the other, when he stopped and looked at me once more.

"I'm.. I am, a bit thirsty. Parched, actually. Don't you think we deserve a drink? Just a refreshment." he said with a fake hoary voice.

Even though I was carrying Eileen on one shoulder, I managed to kick him in the nuts right about when he was about to cross the street anyhow. I looked at him and saw the universally recognisable, painful expression of a man feeling a little smaller.

"That was for before. You can get a drink when I'm alive, the job is done, and Eileen is back where she belongs."

And then I think my left slapped me in the face, probably because I ended that sentence in my mind with "back in her crazy ass" and Eileen was left handed.

"See? You need a drink too, you just won't admit it. Like the fact that you are actually attracted to members of the same -"

"You're getting us a ride to Mama Adele's, and if

you try and finish that sentence the way I think you intended to, I'm gonna make sure you're reminded of that dead horse of yours."

I think he tried to laugh while on his knees, trying to stand back up, still in pain. He asked:

"You're just pissed off, I get that. But you need me, and besides; you wouldn't do that kind of thing."

"No, I'm just gonna make sure you experience some non-consensual animal sex first-hand."

He blinked, vacantly staring me, not being able to connect the dots.

"Gonna horse-rape you."

"Okay..," he said and started looking up and down the road, while I couldn't wipe the smile of my face because I wasn't sure it was me or Eileen who had actually said 'horse-rape'.

I was getting the impression that Eileen's spirit was somehow different, yet the same, from 'Crazy' Eileen. Just without the craziness. It somehow felt right, kinda made me feel a little bad too. But all in all, I felt quite optimistic even though I had less than twenty hours to live, the spirit of my ex-wife trapped in my body, and rested my hopes on a ghost and a shaman with a drinking problem. Who wouldn't think to themselves: "How on Earth could ever, things be any worse?"

* * *

Mama Adele had laid out a really delicate tablecloth, the color of blinding white. A small feast had been laid out on the table, and the overpowering smell of freshly baked cornbread filled the small, homely kitchen. Steve was sitting opposite me, hesitant to

start eating, constantly flicking his gaze between Mama Adele, me, and his plate. I was playing around with my fork, trying to appear as I was ready to start eating any moment now while in fact I was classifying the potatoes on my plate according to size, shape, and complexion (an old habit I inherited while doing time in prison - it really helped with trying to not think about the showers).

Eileen's body was upstairs, comfortably lying in bed. Even though I could use a bit of a nap myself at that point, there was very little precious time to waste, and Mama Adele did not help things by insisting that we sat down and had supper. When she saw Eileen was out cold it seemed as if someone had pulled away the world under her feet. We told her half of the truth: some kind of trouble, the mansion burned to the ground, Eileen knocked unconscious, safe and sound but in need of rest.

She'd known the line of business I was in and that I've had some shady dealings in the past, and that her father wasn't exactly a virgin in the domain of law-breaking, so she knew that whatever it was he had gotten her into, a hospital would be a bad idea.

God bless her soul, she grudgingly took her in, on two conditions nevertheless: one, that we'd sit down, eat supper, have some coffee, a nice long talk and perhaps a couple of beatings. Two, if Eileen didn't wake up soon, she'd put a curse on me so vile, that I'd wish I'd never been conceived, much less born, and so evil, that'd make the devil and all his minions look like pussies (these were, to my recollection, her exact words).

She had the relevant experience in the ju-ju crafts

and all sorts of dead animal parts, as well as all the spunk and the ferocity of a really old black lady that had raised Eileen like she had been her own. Her dry wrinkled face nevertheless sported piercing cougar-like eyes, and if looks could kill, hers would have been a weapon of mass destruction. I noticed she was eyeing me with just that kind of a look, and while Eileen inside me urged me once more to tell her the truth, before I could open my mouth and speak a single word, she motioned me to stay silent, waving a bony arthritis-swollen finger and saying:

“Robert Eugene Barhoe, you’ve got lots of explaining to do, young man.”

I was about to point out that I was only thirty-three and consequently, according to national averages, not even middle-aged yet, but my cautious instincts got the better of me, and I simply braced myself for the beating which was probably where this would soon end.

“First of all, who is this indian? I don’t like him one bit. I think he’s a queer. Just wait and see.”

Steve shot me a look of surprise, like a rabbit popping up from his hiding place only to find out the hunting season is still on. He opened his mouth to speak, but Mama Adele still had the advantage and it didn’t look like she was going to give it up anytime soon. She put up one hand with a warning finger that made us pause and watch as she unbuttoned her blouse with the other hand, slowly and decisively.

Normally the sight of a - probably senile - old woman undressing would have been met with urges and pleas to just stop, but this was Mama Adele and I dared not. Steve on the other hand was trying to politely look away, without appearing positively horrified

at the thought of seeing any sort of tits that had lost any meaningful function since before the moon landing.

There was no other choice but to look away. Some things are better left unseen, and this here was a case of things that cannot be unseen. It was primal instinct that made us flinch and shy away from her bare breasts.

A frying pan connected with my head. Mama Adele then said:

“That was because you’re a son of a bitch. And him?” she said pointing an accusing finger at Steve, her breasts juggling and bobbing like an flag made of jello.

“He’s definitely queer. You’d never dare look at my breasts and I’d try and kill you for it, but any real, hot-blooded man, couldn’t help taking a peep at Mama Adele’s tits,” she said and sat upright in her chair, smiling with all the pride a former professional, well sought-after milkmaid could command.

Eileen kept shouting a singular, persistent ‘no’ inside my head, but I found the courage (and made the mistake) to somehow defend Steve from this atrocious show of lack of any sort of reason, and failing horribly when I said:

“He was just trying to be polite! Please, Mama Adele, button up, for God’s sake. What would if he just stared, like some sick rapist?”

Steve me gave a startled look, and I saw his eyes filled with the gleam of mounting horrors, his face broken like a man who knows he’s lost a battle even before it has been fought. Mama Adele was adamant in her belief and said so with a bang of her hand on the table, her voice craggy but fierce:

“He’d be a devil-worshipping pervert straight from

hell! But at least, he'd be a man! This one's just as gay as Mary Poppins. Believe me, I know. My last husband was gay, and I didn't know it until our wedding night, God bless his soul."

"You got married? And then he died?"

I ineffectively tried not to sound as if these two facts were actually somehow connected. Fortunately, Mama Adele seemed too focused on her tale, actually sounding a bit nostalgic:

"Last spring. He avoided my trappings of sweet love like a fly would a spider's web. Even when I finally cuffed him to the bed, he couldn't get it up. He wouldn't even look at my breasts, or say something sweet about my ass. Gay as a peacock. God bless his soul."

I swallowed with some difficulty. The old woman certainly had been strongly opinionated in the past, having called me a 'beelze-bob' and a 'a peck of a cock' among other less colourful and not as endearing terms. But it looked like she had finally grown really old, and thusly, really weird in many ways, to the point that some courts would probably even deem she had lost her marbles for good. 'Just like Eileen,' I said in my mind and quite without expecting to, I picked up the jar of water and unloaded its contents on my head. 'I'm not crazy!' she said inside my head, and I could feel her recede to a silent corner at the back of my head, as if she was suddenly holding a grudge against me.

Steve was looking at me as if I had just won a wet T-shirt contest. Perhaps he was trying to make some kind of signal the way his eyes seemed to flicker and roll furiously, but since I wasn't very fluent in eyeballing lingo, he only managed to roughly convey the general idea of someone constipated.

Mama Adele had buttoned her blouse when she gave me a remarkably constrained look:

“All the heat gotten to you, Bobby?” she said, and tore up a leg off the roast chicken all of the sudden, careful to chew on just the thick, brown and red crusty skin. I replied while acting as if nothing strange had just happened and cut myself some meat off the chest.

“Yeah, well, it’s hotter in hell, right?” I said and Steve kicked himself back into motion trying to speak with an alarming sense of first-hand knowledge on the subject:

“Funny you should say that, cause actually it’s not as hot as it’s cracked up to be.”

I tried to kick him in the nuts to shut him up before he would say anything to deteriorate the already tenuous atmosphere or broach subjects that would only lead to more questions; I failed though, wildly flailing my leg as if something horrible was chewing on it. Mama Adele’s curiosity was suddenly piqued and she stopped chewing, and started asking the weirdest kind of questions:

“What would you know about hell, queer boy? Last I heard, it’s not just some tourist hotspot, you can just waltz in and out.”

“There are ways to see, hear and feel without being there. One must only be attuned with Mother Earth.”

There was this strange sudden turn in the way they looked at each other. Something had changed; they looked like a couple of gunslingers, carefully measuring each other as if there was going to be blood soon. I leaned back on my chair and unconsciously tried to keep my distance.

“So, you’re Alabama?” said Mama Adele.

“What makes you think I am?” replied Steve with a frown that Dirty Harry would find hard to emulate.

Mama Adele put down the chicken leg, and reached for the large table knife. I watched Steve slowly but deliberately inch his hand to the large fork still stuck on the chicken. Mama Adele said then with an unusual and rather haughtily manner, in a something that sounded very much like gibberish but would prove to be otherwise:

“Ke-tche wake-na la-wonke a-kenai ute-na ke cho-wa demo-na-neka?”

Steve’s eyes went wide before they narrowed to the point of being indistinguishable from a pair of dark-skinned slits. He said then without being able not to sound surprised:

“You speak the Lost Tongue. Ha-tche koi-noi wa-na-neka cho-de?”

“You sound surprised, shaman.”

“You’re not who you say you are. You’re gowa-na-di-tche,” Steve said sounding relieved but rather wary at the same time. His hand was now at the fork.

“Au contraire, little spirit guide. I am Mama Adele. And so much more than you’re able to comprehend,” she said and then I felt Eileen inside me come to the forefront of my mind and take control of every muscle, fibre and bone on my body. I think I shouted something like ‘the fuck you are bitch’ and then the next few moments turned into what could only be described as a pretty impressive show of how old cutlery can be given new life by putting them to outstanding use as lethal weapons. Plus I was surprised to learn that my body could move like, well, like a god-damn ninja.

Mama Adele lunged at me with the table knife, aim-

ing for a good clear cut of my throat. But everything was suddenly felt like we were underwater: her movement was slow and sluggish, even for an eighty year old woman coming at me for a knife, she moved like she was surrounded by jello. And so was Steve, who had picked the fork up and was bringing it down with quite some force from what I could read in his ridiculously taut face, which looked more and more like his real problem was a bad case of constipation. To make matters worse, the fork was still attached to the chicken.

While my body moved in its own ways, in ways that Eileen was probably to thank for, I had all the time in the world to think about what had just happened, seeing as everything seemed to move barely a notch faster than a Jewish snail on a Sabbath.

First of all, Mama Adele had this little weird moment of speaking in tongues, along with Steve who maybe had the bigger picture here. Then Eileen's spirit took control of my body at what must've been a very fortuitous time, because I don't think I could have dodged that knife fast enough to maintain the ability to swallow without getting wet *every single time*.

Not only did I dodge that knife, but I actually craned my neck backwards in a graceful move, with the knife missing me by no more than an inch, and then I thrust the table away with my legs. Even as I fell, I saw my hands extending to touch the wall, and leaving my body lying horizontally in mid-air, between the table and the wall, with Mama Adele realising she had missed and giving her knife another swing, only this time she was apparently - and this was a disturbing and painful thought - aiming for my balls.

With the corner of my eye I could see Steve fi-

nally realising the chicken was still hanging by that damnable fork, and he was duly making some very clumsy efforts at separating the two: he looked very miffed about it though, I'll give him that, and even as he swung the fork and the chicken above his head looking like a world-class hammer thrower, I could see he was quite frustrated but also determined to literally, pull it off.

All that sitting back and watching the fight unfold in front of my eyes like a cheap B-rated film, did nothing to hamper what Eileen was doing with my body. We were quite literally two people in one body, so while I craved for some pop-corn and soda to watch the action, Eileen was making the action happen.

It struck me as odd, that while there was this apparent struggle to the death between the three of us, I felt calm and relaxed, as if this was happening to someone else. From a logical standpoint, there was really nothing I could do, so watching and fretting about it wouldn't be of any help.

So I just watched, as Mama Adele ripped my jeans open with her knife right at the seam of the crotch, missing the holiest of holies by a curly hair's breadth. No worries then I thought, and abruptly saw the room spin, watching the ceiling give its place to the floor and then the ceiling came into view once again, only this time my knee had connected violently with Mama Adele's face and I was surprised to find out there were so many cheap dentures still in the market.

Not only that, but I also put my hands deftly on the floor, kicked out and away hitting her groin, and then before she had time to even breath, I had managed to coil myself like a spring and then use the momentum

to snap back upright, putting all the extra energy into a left-handed fist I swear could have knocked out a hippo on a rampage. Unfortunately though, she wasn't a ram-paging hippo.

I know I felt her jaw crack and the force should have been enough to snap her neck. It was a killing blow, for sure. Whatever Eileen was doing with my body, and she was doing it extremely well, she didn't mean to just stop Mama Adele: she was trying to kill her outright. The problem was that Adele, or the gowa-na-di-tche as Steve had called her, wasn't on the same page.

The hook sent her reeling off the table, but somehow she used her hands like a fourteen year-old gymnast and turned the punch into a somersault that send her almost flying across the kitchen and a few feet away into the small living room where the TV was still on, showing a very familiar guy with wiry hair smiling on a beach wearing silly red shorts and surrounded by a plethora of large boobs.

Steve was finally able to pull the fork free of the chicken. When he talked I noticed that his mouth moved and I couldn't hear a thing. I half expected to hear everything slowed down and sounding badass or perhaps like an amateur satanic ritual, just like when your walkman is running low on batteries. Instead, I heard myself as clear as day:

"You had your chance, bitch. I'm gonna put a whole new meaning on elderly care," to which Adele replied with a toothless grin, licking her lips with what I'd wish wasn't her real tongue:

"Mama's got a brand new bag o' tricks, bitch," and then she came at us with superelderly speed, knife in one hand and a very heavy-looking glass vase in the

other.

I couldn't see what Steven was doing since I had focused on Adele. I stood there motionless as a stone pillar, and I saw in that same slowed down vision Adele coming closer and closer at an alarming pace.

A part of me wanted to duck, run, sprint away, make myself scarce, slide under the table and magically disappear, faster than possible, preferably at some point in the past. Another part of me wanted a sawed-off shotgun loaded with some double-aught buckshot, and an itchy trigger finger would be happily supplied by yours truly. I do not consider myself a violent person who believes armed confrontation is the best way to resolve a clash of interests, but seriously, the bitch tried to cut my throat and then my dick. She'd be so full of lead that the she'd become Radioactive's Man best dead buddy, at least until the next reboot.

But I did nothing of the sort. And Eileen seemed to be doing nothing at all, while I could clearly make out the reddish glow in Adele's eyes, as well as the blinding sheen of the knife in her hand, which was certainly pointed the wrong way, and was certainly past the 'I'm just fucking with you' range. Which was a troubling thing, considering that the large, heavy vase had been launched, and the smart money was that my face was the target.

I thought that something had gone horribly wrong in a very small amount of time, and Eileen's spirit had suddenly remembered that it had let some sort of spiritual stove on, and had duly and without warning left everything hanging, without extending the slightest courtesy of returning control of my body to me, or at least killing the screaming bitch first and *then* doing the

equivalent of laundry.

As I saw her toothless, gaping maw grinning with the excitement of an easy, assured kill, I also felt my body swiveling to the right from the waist up. I arched my back slightly backwards and saw the vase in all its glory from a very prestigious point of view, flying right past my nose, spilling very tiny droplets of water in its path.

Only a foot away, Adele's hand was already half-way through its downward stabbing motion and the knife wasn't missing. She had actually jumped in the air with bent knees, adding her weight to the force of the stab and presenting a somewhat smaller target. That's what it all looked like from my point of view, but I would be willing to bet the proverbial farm that this whole mess of a fight looked like a cheap parody of '300', with old ladies instead of Spartan soldiers.

Still, it looked real enough when I suddenly swooped under her arching arm with a superbly fluid motion and punched her straight in the nose with the back of my hand, while with my other arm I blocked her strike and gripped her arm in a vice. It was superbly executed and though I know nothing about martial arts, I instantly knew this would have looked great on Jackie Chan film. There was though, a small mistake that complicated things at the last possible moment and gave Adele a fighting chance, and that was a plain and simple, standard knee-in-the-nuts move.

First of all, I was in pain, and even though Eileen was in control of my body, I could sure as hell feel it reaching every inch of my body, spreading like a wild-fire from the groin outwards. Secondly, I had little time to reflect on why or how Eileen's spirit had proven to be

so adept at unarmed combat, but I was pretty sure that it had been conditioned in a woman's body because the way I moved left the precious stones quite vulnerable to someone with a cause.

While I reflexively released Adele's arm from my grip with one hand, my other one reached for my nuts, a reflex that never served any purpose other than leaving one unable to block any kind of hit, unless using one's head counted.

As I started to slowly but surely fall down on my knees in an ironically dangerous example of the saying 'the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak', I saw the sinister look on Adele's face and thought that it all felt suddenly very much like game over, with no credits left and all the pocket money gone, forever. I saw Adele's knife hand swooping down from a corner of my eye, going in for my throat once more, not to cut, but to stab.

One of her legs was about to meet my jawline and her free hand was just standing there, looking somewhat left out of the whole action. On a closer inspection, having nothing else to do while my body was unable to save us from a deadly stab and the many others like it that would probably ensue, I noticed her hand had gone slightly limp. And then I saw in great, shining detail a pitched fork squarely stuck between her forehead and an eye that seemed to be incredibly soft and squishy.

The other end of the fork was connected to Steve's hand, which in turn was thankfully still connected to the rest of Steve. I felt the pain numbing my senses, and the time flow normally once more. I was panting from the exertion feeling too weak to even attempt to get up, while Steve kept uttering the same kind of gibberish

from before, the fork in his hand glowing with a bluish, white-hot intensity that seemed definitely wrong.

Adele was now frozen in place, her knife lying on the floor. Steve's veins were jutting out like someone had run a thick cable through them, and he was generally looking very fierce, pissed off and quite certain that Adele was a bad person, seeing how he kept trying to twist the fork deeper into her skull.

A moment later, she threw her hands into the air felt on her lifeless, arthritis-ridden knees, but not before she could speak with a venomous quality that reminded me of snake bites and show-biz journalists:

"Ka-che-tne, ka-weka-te, boy," she said and slumped on the floor, appearing to be, for all intents and purposes, dead as a dodo.

Steven was panting as well, his face marked with the signs of incredible effort but immense relief as well. I felt I could try using the table as something to use as a standing aid, and did so with moderate success, while the pain receded with each passing moment, turning into a numbing sensation.

There was some silence while Steven pulled up a chair and just sat there, looking at the floor, his long hair in front of his face waving slightly by the wind of his breath. He reached for the inside of his jacket then, brought out his feathery hat, unfolded it and put it on his head all curled up still, looking shoddy and wrecked, as if someone had been carrying it in a pocket this whole time.

He looked at Adele's body with a degree of disdain that could only be comparable that shown towards a pile of dog poo, and said with a gloating roar:

"Who's the queer boy now, bitch?"

I felt the enormous sorrow in Eileen's spirit when she said inside my head:

"Now I remember everything."

Speaking for myself I said:

"What do you mean everything?"

"She means everything, man. Every single thing," replied Steve whose hard gaze fell solely on the old woman's body lying on the floor, looking inappropriately gruesome with the fork sticking out of her forehead.

"What does that even mean? For starters, what the fuck was that all about?" I said with just the right tone of indignation considering I had almost died. That was the third time that day, and the sun hadn't even began to set.

"Ask her," said Steve with a weary voice.

Though thought is advertised as instant, it does take a little time to formulate in a thing as rudimentary as the human brain. In that time, Eileen had already spoken to me, saying the exact same thing.

"Ask him."

I sighed. I sounded a bit confused, and understandably so I would believe, when I said with the slightest hint of ennui in my voice:

"She says, I should ask you. And you say, I should ask her? Is there possibly a way for you to sort it out and just give me the gist of it when you're done?"

My eyes caught the mess on the table, and I singled out the single salvageable thing: the chicken. My stomach made all the sounds usually associated with being starved, and then some. I sat down, dug in, and ripped a wing off the chicken. I immediately started munching away like someone set to enter into the Guinness World

Book of Records as the human eating machine.

Then I heard Steve say:

“All right. You know, it’s a bit complicated.”

I sucked the soft bits of flesh still stuck around the bone joints and said after I swallowed and while I reached for the leg:

“I can handle complicated, so long as it’s not trying to stab me.”

Eileen had gone silent inside me, but I could tell she was listening.

“Some of the things, you might not like. Some of it, I’m pretty sure you won’t,” Steve said looking thoughtful.

My stomach was churning like the Atlantic Sea, and I let out a small, rather polite little burp before replying:

“I don’t think personal preference is an option. If it were, I’d taken my chances with Falconi.”

“Right. Where should I begin?” Steve asked rhetorically.

“The start is always a good place,” I replied smartly and smiled encouragingly.

“No, that would be very confusing. I’ll start with something that’s been bothering me for a while.”

“Yeah, well?” I said, and though I had some suspicions, I couldn’t believe it even when I heard it from his own mouth:

“Well. Here goes.. I’m gay,” Steve said with a bright smile, I choked on a chicken bone and almost died, for the fourth time that day.

* * *

I was sipping at some sludge that Steve had made, insisting it was coffee, and though a large array of scientific tests could factually prove he was telling the truth, I could not think of it as anything other than a cup of swamp water with some mud thrown in for flavor. Fortunately for me, he made lousy coffee but perfect Heimlich maneuvers.

We had been talking for the better part of an hour, old Mama Adele still lying on the floor since no-one had bothered to even move it out of the way, just for the sake of appearances and good taste. I'd learned that there was some solid reasoning behind that as well. Some of the things Steve had said though still didn't fit, so I asked more questions, expecting some kind of answers. You'd be surprised how more often than not, the answers bring about more questions.

"So who turned Eileen into a crazy person?"

"Mama Adele was the agent, that's for sure. But she was just an instrument. A tool. Someone else was behind that. She, it, whatever you want to call the go-wa-na-ditche, was doing it on behalf of someone else, for sure."

"And Eileen is in fact this powerful guardian spirit?"

"Yes, it is clear to me now, as it is painfully clear to her. She's an aka-ne-wha-dhe, a guardian of the spirit-world."

"And you're gay? Really, gay? I mean, like, you're into men?"

Steve sighed and rolled his eyes before answering with some hesitation:

"Yes. I like men. Sexually."

"How come you're not wearing leather and feathery hats and that kind of.. Oh, I see."

He smiled and nodded, twiddling his thumbs with some nervousness. I had to know so I asked:

“You’re not into me, are you? I mean.. I can’t say this, but do you -”

“Get a hard on when I see your ass?”

“Sweet Jesus and Virgin Mary, don’t say that!”

“I don’t, Bob. I was just messing with your head. Can we get on to the important stuff now? Like why was Eileen caged by that demon?”

“So, you’re saying you’re not gay?”

“I’m saying I don’t have the hots for you, man. Just get past that, and focus, please?”

“Yeah, okay, I can stop thinking about you might have been thinking about my ass.”

“Good. What has Eileen been saying to you?”

“Not much. She’s pretty withdrawn. Feels like she’s in shock. So, she wasn’t really crazy?”

“No, not really crazy. That was just her imprisonment spell. A lock on her spirit. Even someone as powerful as her needs time to realise she had been living under a spell for decades. Played like a puppet, and by none other than the one person she felt cared the most. Must’ve been like a backstab through the heart.”

“But she’s not really Eileen then either. At least not the Eileen I knew. Hasn’t called me papa-bear either since she’s been inside me.”

“I guess not. Though some of her, the real Eileen, must have been part of that persona that limited her true self, the Eileen you knew and married. It’s not something airtight, something deterministic.”

“So, whom was I married too for two weeks?”

“Two weeks? That was the entire duration of your marriage. That’s not even a honey moon.”

“By Las Vegas standards, it’s like half a lifetime. Yeah, I know what you’re thinking, and this might sound like something a cheap son of a bitch would say, but hear me out. I was young, rash, and adventurous, and had just done this job at a small but profitable motel. I had gate crashed this wild party where anything seems normal enough, and while I was drunk off my mind, mostly on the feeling of success of a job well done, I saw Eileen wearing a silly red hat, painted blue, and wearing a bikini made of less cloth than the standard handkerchief. I just felt I had to do papa-Smurf before I died, so I used my charm on her and before I knew it, I was wearing a ring, and singing the Smurfs theme, doing 80 in a rented Lincoln convertible headed for Memphis to meet my in-laws.”

“And that’s how you got married? How come you didn’t run off when the drinks wore off the next morning?”

“As I said, I was feeling adventurous, and rash.”

“Her father was pretty loaded, right?”

“Well, yeah. That might’ve played a small part. You know, base human instincts like greed can turn a good man into a shadow of his former self. Plus, at first I found the whole craziness kind of charming. And the sex was awesome. Weird, pretty fucking weird at times, but awesome.”

“And then what happened?”

I slapped myself hard on the face, and went rigid. Then Eileen took over and she didn’t sound very happy about what she could remember, in lucid detail:

“I’ll tell you what happened, mani-chi-kwa, spirit guide of the Alabama. Bobby here, sweet ol’ Bobby, took advantage of my weakened mental state, and led

me to believe he really cared. Like this dead bitch here who had been my captor and jailer for all these mournful years. Let her spirit be carried away to the void, when the time of reckoning comes.”

I placed my hands on the table, and felt Eileen’s anger pulsate through my veins:

“I searched inside this man’s mind and soul, and found out some shred of love for me was true. But his wickedness overcame his better human nature, and wealth blinded him. That was why he took off with whatever he could find in that safe, and why he has to repay me for this act of mine: Bobby Barhoe, I forgive you. I only feel loss and sorrow for the mother that bore this child you call Eileen into this world, for she had a sweet soul, and was an innocent creature. But the father.. The father must burn.”

Steve looked rather concerned and wary suddenly, fearing that a guardian spirit to say such thing was perhaps going to far in the pursuit of justice and spiritual balance. He asked then:

“Surely aka-ne-wha-de, you have been wronged terribly and justice must be served, and balanced restored. But we killed this demon’s host, and you’re awakened and free. What good will come of that burning that you speak?”

“Mani-chi-kwa, you are an example to your people and your tribe. But you are but an infant, a small child caught in a terrible wind. I fear I have been too late to wake. I have to thank you, and even Bobby here, for what you started. But do not make the mistake and think of me as a plagued human spirit anymore. I am Aka-ne-wha-de, and I shine brighter on the lonely path each soul must take.”

With that being said, I was released from her grip and felt a great burden fall away from me. I tried to talk to her, but I felt nothing. She wasn't there. I sounded a bit panicked when I said to Steve:

"Did you know this would happen?"

"Wild spirits such as hers are fickle, and rarely converse with mortals so candidly. We should be thankful that she shared all that with us."

"But, I don't feel her inside me, at all. Is that normal?"

"I do not know. Perhaps she has returned to the spirit world. Perhaps she roams."

"So, what does that mean? Was she serious about burning her father? I mean, Eileen's father? Novorski, anyhow."

"I can't say."

"So, where does that leave us with the shards? I mean, doesn't all this count as extra? How many more do we need? How do we get into the afterworld?"

"Easy now, Bobby, take a breath. You could be collecting shards from ants, and mice, and even rocks. But then you'd need a lifetime. That's why I thought your best bet was Eileen, a living, breathing human being, who seemed to love you truly, and freely give her soul. It looks like I was both wrong and right at the same time."

"How do you mean?"

"The guardian's spirit saw the good in you, and the ritual I performed allowed her to free herself from her bonds, and find shelter in your body. But her true self lay dormant, and didn't wake up until she had to face the demon, the gowa-na-di-tche. That was when she realised who she really was, and what had happened

to her. It seems that now she might want to do something about setting things right before returning to the spirit-world where she belongs.”

“Alright, that’s cool. That’s her thing, happy to help and all, but where do I stand? I mean, that’s really fucking mind-blowing, guardian spirits, demons, spirit-prisons, Eileen not being crazy, me somewhere amidst all that supernatural mayhem, but Falconi will have my ass, and you know very well that no matter how long and hard I run and hide, my days will be considerably shorter and miserable to the point I’ll likely just show up and let him put me to the ground sooner rather than later. So, I’m asking you? Are we good? Are we still on, like John said? Are we going to get to the damn parking lot, bring John back do the job and get Falconi off my back, or have I almost died four times just for the laughs?”

And right about that time, I saw Eileen, the flesh and blood Eileen, looking like she’d been run over by a truck. She was walking again then, which meant she had woken up, and there was some spirit inside her. I saw Steve reach for a large spoon, idly sitting inside a bowl of gravy and then I heard the sound of Eileen’s laughter, which I was honestly glad to hear:

“Put that down, Steve. It’s me, the Aka-ne-wha-de, you don’t have to make a complete ass of yourself.”

“How can I know you’re not the demon who robbed that flesh once more for himself?”

“Steve I thought you were good at this sort of thing. One, the ‘demon’ as you call him wouldn’t have to wait all this time to get inside this body. And two, which is I’m really surprised you forgot but I’m eager to believe is due to the shock and stress of all this, you killed

the host so you send the spirit to the spirit-world, and now he can't come back unless he's summoned. Anyone did any summoning while I changed bodies? I wouldn't think so. I mean come on, no one watches Supernatural? Buffy the Vampire Slayer? You know, that sort of nonsense?"

"You talk funny," said Steve sounding like a ten-year old boy who wanted to know but feared to ask.

"Yeah, well that's because before I wanted to feel like Aka-ne-wha-de again? You know, sound bad-ass, really unforgiving, regal, that sort of thing. Plus, I really wanted to make Bobby here know I was serious. The hard-ass guardian spirit that won't take any bullshit is something to be feared and respected, while Eileen is just, well, Eileen."

"So, how should we address you, great guardian spirit?"

She looked spiteful, youthful and bossy all-in-one. Her face was familiar, but this was a whole new other person.

"First thing, stop sucking up. Second thing. Bobby, are you sorry for what you did to Eileen?"

I kinda hoped that sort of a question wouldn't pop up, but I that's just my string of luck.

"Wha-at? Well, yeah, of course. No, really. I mean, she.. You.. She, I'm pretty sure it was she, meaning another person, well technically the same but--"

"Stop behaving like an ass. Are you sorry?"

I paused for just one moment and said just what really came to mind:

"Yeah. I am. She wasn't that bad. Or that crazy. Maybe she was that crazy, but I shouldn't have taken advantage of her like that. That's just like stealing

candy from a baby, and believe me, I've been there, I've done that, and it's not all it's cracked up to be."

"I'll take that as a yes. You can call me Eileen. I'll call you Steve and Bobby, or whatever I damn well please at the time. Are we cool?"

Me and Steve nodded with some apprehension before I added:

"Yeah, positively, but listen, I'm in a bit of a spot, I'm sure you'll have noticed by now. So could you lend a hand, or should we just be on our way 'cause the clock's ticking and-"

"I don't like that tone. I didn't hear you say 'please'."

"Right, sure. Please?"

She beamed with a smile and said:

"I was going to anyway. We're in this together anyhow. I'll scratch your back and you'll scratch mine. It's only fair."

"So, what do we have to do?"

Her happy face turned into an angry scowl when she said:

"Burn this bitch. The daemon host's body can't return to mother Earth. And then burn my father."

My propensity to see the larger picture and innovate came to the fore when I proposed:

"Do we really need to resort to something that base? Couldn't we just shoot the poor bastard?"

Steve couldn't believe I'd suggest such a thing and stabbed me with his eyes.

"No, we need to burn him," she said and sounded quite adamant about it.

"Why so much hatred, Eileen?" asked Steve trying to straighten out his sorry-looking feathery hat, while I

took the opening and popped my own much more pertinent and important question?

"I can think of some reasons, but to tell you the truth I don't care so much about the sorry son of a bitch. I haven't killed a man yet, but there's a first time for everything. How long will that take? I need to be at Topeca tomorrow, and have John ready to go at an epic vault with a blowtorch."

"I'm fascinated by your willingness Bobby, and though I should be concerned, I think that's instinct talking. You won't have to kill anyone. Not a human, at any length. Novorski's a demon, just like she was," said Eileen and tasted the sour cream before spitting it out on the floor.

"No shit?" I asked with genuine interest.

"No shit," she replied as she opened the fridge and rummaged about.

"So, what does that mean?" said Steve, still trying to save what little remained of his feather hat.

"I hope you can help me find out. And I can help you get your friend John back. Isn't that what you want?" Eileen said, and unscrewed a bottle of iced tea.

"Well, yeah."

"Don't just stand there then, burn this thing."

"What, right here?" I said, feeling awkward.

"Do you want the neighbors to say a few last words?" she said and gave me the eye.

"I guess not."

"Good. I'll watch some TV while you go about it. Then we can visit Novorski."

"Watch TV?" I said, thinking I had simply misheard, and in fact she had said 'become one with mother earth and all the living spirits' or something along these lines.

Her answer flattened me:

“Yeah, ‘Married with children’ is on.”

I thought that there was something seriously wrong with the world at large at that point, but then again, who was I to judge people, never mind guardian spirits of the afterworld no less.

“Never mind. Pretend I didn’t ask. Hey Steve, any ideas on how to torch this thing?”

Steve’s eyes were out of focus, lost somewhere between the TV and Eileen, gazing something far beyond mere mortals eyes. Or it might’ve been that he was just woolgathering. Nevertheless, he managed an answer of sorts:

“Yeah. With something flammable. Like, gasoline. Or maybe bourbon. No, not bourbon.”

“You have a drinking problem, you know that, don’t you?” I said, put a finger in the bowl of sour cream, tasted it, and found out it was delicious.

* * *

Sometimes, the human mind has the propensity to eschew the really important stuff that pass through it, oblivious to the larger picture, indifferent to what’s going on beyond it’s comfort zone. Instead of being troubled by a crisis in the economy and a future without seeming hope, it fiddles with a remote, not being able to choose between American Idol and Hell’s Kitchen.

There’s a very good explanation for that and it usually has to do with the way these matters are disembodied, intangible and nefarious. What I cannot see and I cannot touch, is probably of no interest to me, and definitely somebody else’s problem if it comes to that. And

that's why, I couldn't think I had about twelve hours to live. That's why it didn't bother me that I had already almost died four times. Because I couldn't stop staring at Eileen's ass.

I'm not sure whether it was good old fashioned women's intuition or the fact that she was a guardian spirit of the afterworld, but she turned around and gave me that knowing look that was definitely meant to silently but effectively convey the general idea of being roasted on a spit, *alive*.

Then I heard this deafening burst of static from the PA that didn't seem to trouble by anyone else but me. I'd bet some good money that the announcer was wearing a Bud baseball cap and his actual name was 'Bubba'. He talked in that giggly, wholesome, isn't-this-fun kind of way that deserves a punch in the face *and* a kick in the nuts, and the echo from the PA system was pure gold:

"Well, isn't this fun folks? Now remember, the "Knit that Sucker" contest begins at 9 o'clock, along with the Bellevue Home for the Elderly Cottonball Machine Technicians' ball right by the riverside. Now y'all have some ribs, courtesy of NovoCotton and Co., and definitely don't miss the "Married my Cousin" event coming right up!"

The Country Cotton Candy fair did not involve any kind of cotton candy whatsoever, despite its name. It mainly involved lots of people consuming large quantities of left-over soon-to-go-bad pork ribs, of whom most were drunk or definitely in the process of becoming so. As a bonus, most of them seemed to be relatives in all sorts of ways that were illegal in twenty-three states. On top of that, a significant percentage of

the crowd seemed eager to perpetuate the tradition of keeping things in the family, and was eagerly working on making more relatives in situ, and in public.

We were there because Eileen had made a couple of calls. I thought she would just woosh about in some sort of tasteless ghost and frighten people out of their minds to get the info we needed, but it seems that in most cases just picking up the phone and lying your ass off to certain people with a straight face works miracles. Some people actually believed we were calling on behalf of the Elvis' Secret Moon Base Society, and a few of them could actually remember having attended one of balls. On the moon.

However, all that bullshit paid off and we learned that Novorski was sponsoring the fair -a highly prestigious event considering the amount of vomit already visible- and had been scheduled to appear right about midnight, say a couple of words to the gathered crowd and then probably go back to counting cottonballs in his well-guarded warehouse complex, complete with electric fences, a minefield, and a piranha-filled moat, with trained alligators for guards, riding sharks armed with lasers and rocket jets. That last bit of information could not be easily confirmed and was a bit doubtful, seeing as it came from a member of the local press, the same one who had insisted that he had attended an Elvis' Secret Moon Base Society ball, on the moon.

Eileen's original plan had been based around a simple, easy to follow strategy that had proven extremely popular in the past, with the foremost memorable example being the Charge of the Light Brigade: Just barge in his warehouse office, and burn him with some gasoline, or any other flammable material, except perhaps

bourbon. It's useful to remember that even though the Light Brigade went down in history, sadly none of the men involved were available for a comment at the time.

Being a professional thief, one of the job requirements is being able to examine the many minutiae that comprise a plan and make an assessment of the plan's viability and chance of success, based on experience and preferably dependable, current information, taking into consideration the chance of acceptable losses.

Having taken all that into account, and after prolonged and thoughtful deliberation, the idea of barging in Novorski's office could only be compared to a village of natives in the Amazon waking up one day, deciding they were the rightful rulers of the entire world, and setting out to conquer everyone else armed with sticks, spears, stones, and the occasional sharp tropical fruit, arguing amongst themselves that the one hiccup in their plan was whether or not their canoes would be able to provide enough logistics support.

In other words, it was silly. So, we'd gone with plan B, which was to kill Novorski -who was in fact a demon I had to keep reminding myself- right there, at the fair. It wasn't that much better than plan A, but it did not involve sharks, piranhas, trained alligators, lasers, machine gun fire and assaulting what was in effect, a small fortress.

What it did involve though getting close enough to Novorski to lure him someplace quiet away from the crowd, doing what had to be done and then burning the host without people getting in the way and asking questions like 'why are you trying to stab that nice man?', or hearing the announcer say 'oh golly, someone's shot Mr. Novorski in the head! What a show folks, eh? Now,

y'all have some of those ribs'. As the saying goes, discretion is the better part of valor. Since my idea of valor was staying in the shadows and creeping silently up to the enemy at the exact right moment, I was a big fan of discretion as well.

It was hot, damp, and dusk had just fallen. The fair was taking place at this large old barge station right by the riverside. We were wading through the crowds, searching for a good spot to carry out our plan, being careful not to attract unwanted attention.

That translated into avoiding the usual hotspots in the gathered crowd, namely blind drinking contests (named so because the winner usually ends up with optic nerve damage), prostitutes (sex workers is a more catchy term, but in Memphis they still call them whores), and alligator fights (popular opinion is that the losing 'gator is turned into women's accessories, but some local news outlets circulate more sinister rumors).

Shorts were the practical attire of choice for women, and since somehow they always looked shorter, and therefore better on women, I had one more reason to stay transfixed on Eileen's behinds as she waded through the crowd, surveying the place and filling in the gaps in the details of our little plan. She turned around suddenly once more and knew I had been focusing my attention on her butt once again. I smiled reflexively without bothering to think this was the new Eileen, and promptly enough I was in a position to try and remember the constellations of the northern hemisphere.

"You go girl!" I heard someone say, and then I realised that it was Steve who was unfortunately as

drunk as a skunk. If one needed proof of that, all he had to do was take a look at him and notice the actual shiny, embalmed skunk he was holding in one hand, the obscenely shaped carrot dangling from his laminated feathery hat in front of his nose, and last but not least the fact that he had been carrying a ten-gallon beer can strapped on his back, with a regulator valve hanging over his shoulder, wearing nothing other than rubber boots and some boxer shorts sporting the american bald eagle, front and back.

That kinda caught Eileen's attention and while I certainly wasn't exactly gaining any points with her, Steve had just lost the whole pot.

"Steve! Where the hell have you been?" asked Eileen, seemingly unable to believe the sight.

"I think I just killed a ninja with my skunk. Does it bleed?"

"What?" said Eileen, unable to comprehend, and rightly so because even though she wasn't herself, she wasn't mad anymore either.

"No, don't do that, not here not now," I said when I got back up on my feet.

Steve turned and looked at me as if gazing through thick fog. He then pointed with the skunk towards me and said, apparently confused:

"Elvis, man, I love you."

"I told you he had a drinking problem," I said and noticed Eileen was looking at Steve with a cold, hard measuring stare.