

WICKED MESSENGER

Bob Burden Presents

**An All-New
HIT MAN FOR
THE DEAD
Novel**

*SPECIAL Beta version-Marke 11c
Preview and REVIEW Edition*

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Published by BOB BURDEN PRODUCTIONS

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**This EDITION is an Advanced Reading Copy
and Galley proof for review.**

CAUTION:
This book is intended for mature
audiences.

WARNING: Strong Language, gritty realism,
vivid adult situations and edgy characters.

STORY LOG LINE

After losing his soul in a card game, a wayward, young adventurer takes up with a crew of vagabond serial killers roaming America, and administering one of the last, surviving rituals of the Spanish Inquisition, by avenging the wrongfully slain, and freeing their souls to pass on and find peace.

ABOUT THIS STORY

As our story begins, our protagonist – Anthony Harken is a full-fledged assassin (a Traveler or Inquisitor) finalizing an assigned hit-job (Settlement) on his victims (the Clients) for the benefit of the client's victims (the Forlorn).

As the story moves along, Harken enacts a séance (the Dance) to contact the spirit of a dead girl (To Contact: Get in Touch) and launch an investigation (Inquisition) to investigate the murder of a young coed on summer break in Florida.

The story is told in 1st person, which seems to work better with supernatural elements and gives a way we see into Harken's inner concerns about investigating, passing judgement on, and executing strangers.

On another level Harken must navigate dealing and competing with his fellow Travelers (brigands, cutthroats, and murderers all), the Gypsies that work alongside him and in particular, his faithful but recalcitrant assistant and squire, the mysterious Catamuso, a man who traded his soul for candy when he was 8-years-old, sleeps with one eye open, has six fingers on one hand and four on the other and dreams of someday going to New York City to smell the Statue of Liberty's feet.

In a more general sense, 1st person gives us a deeper insight to Anthony's isolation and detachment from the everyday world, as he lives a life parallel to, but at odds with the normal, everyday real world around him, a world he once lived in.

This novel started out as an outline for a comic book story and blossomed into an underlying property for a feature film project. Later it evolved into an 8-to-12-episode TV mini-series (as pilot for a larger franchise).

Bob Burden Summer 2025

CHAPTER ZERO

SOMETHING WHISTLING THIS WAY COMES

If I had followed my better
judgment always,
my life would have been a very dull one.

— Edgar Rice Burroughs

I heard the devil walking down the breezeway right past my motel room the other night. It was him. He was whistling, and by the sloppy, warbly notes, I could tell that he had been drinking again.

The drunken whistling, the stumbles and hesitations, the occasional hacking cough... that's him. And he was whistling *Sweet Violets* again - always just the chorus - sometimes humming it... humming it with that sonorous tone of his: a real slow dirge... yep, that was him.

Sweet Violets.

Whoever it was that he was coming for – poor soul - I send my sincerest condolences, but I'm glad that old, rascal devil, passed me on by again.

Odd little fellow. At least the one I met. I'm told he can be in more than one place all at once, here, there, all over the place, in his own personal multi-verse. I guess that's how he's able to get everything done. Or maybe... everyone has their own devil, and he's like the kind of trees that are all over the place but have only one root system.

According to that old Gypsy last summer that I got drunk with before I wacked her, the Devil come every solstice, to gather souls: the lost, adrift and forgotten souls, that are restless and wandering between the winds.

Also, according to her, he doesn't cast a shadow, loves popping bubble wrap, is a maestro at Karaoke and if you spit in his eye - right in his eye - he will get up and leave you alone.

And he cheats at solitaire.

When she told me that last one, I burst out laughing. She got cross with me and wouldn't tell me anymore. So, sorry but I don't get on well with touchy people or those with a chip on their shoulder.

Ah, such a demented, giggly little flake - not at all what one would expect, and - mark my words - none too bright. A bumbling, muttering wretch who was always so easily duped, tripped up and conned... which explains why I'm still here, running around loose... but I suspect there's more to it than that.

Now my friend Catamuso, now he thinks we're all actually working for the devil.

We have argued about that from time to time.

He may have a point, though. While at first glance, "*avenging the wrongfully slain so their souls can pass on and find peace*" sounds a lot like the Lord's work, I imagine we're sending a whole lot of people

straight to Hell, right down there on the express line. And wouldn't that be helping the Devil?

He thinks that maybe God and the Devil together, have something up their sleeve and we have no idea what that is. No idea.

I just shook my head.

But we're filling up Hell for someone.

And brother, Hell ain't half full.

Which brings me to my latest little adventure here, here on the coast of New England on a full moon night, and sending some three likely candidates – maybe more – straight to hell.

CHAPTER ONE

A COLD DAY IN HELL... READY, SET, GO!

To win any battle,
you must fight as if
you are already dead.

— Miyamoto Musashi

11:30 PM, Thursday night, on the New England coast. A large summer house with a boatyard, on a barrier islet near the shore, but out in the middle of nowhere.

It's not every day that you wind up hiding crouched down, in a four-foot-tall thicket of bushes and overgrowth with a girl in a bikini, a saddle-bag full of gold and silver coins and a gun. But this is no time for a kiss or for fun. Some very angry killers are closing in now.

Desiree', the bikini girl, has been in on this job for four days now, working from the inside – inside of our target's lair – and making an opening for me to come in and waste the three masterminds responsible for the chemical deaths of an entire Kurdish village. A small village. Like 189 people. But a real nasty-bad business. Moe, Larry and Curley I'd been calling them.

The girl, she's a "rental" - a working girl that is – or shall we say escort to be polite about things – but we've used her before, and she has been quite instrumental to the operation that I'm pulling off here. She's very, very good at this kind of thing – a perfect actress – and quite cunning. Perfect to be exact. Until she blew my cover and turned me over to them on a silver platter.

However, when she kinda figured out that she was eventually going to be buried in a shallow grave along with me, she snaked down to where they were holding me and used her slicks and tricks to free me and back into the game.

So, now that I've polished off my three prime targets – Moe, Larry and Curley – I've got to get down to the boathouse, swipe a boat and get out of here. Hopefully along with her, and the loot.

These bodyguards – three or four loaded-for-game gunmen – are pissed and diligently scouring the area. Fortunately, they're also rather loaded and high from the big birthday party they were having about forty five minutes ago.

And though they didn't have time to put all their Star Wars looking, imperial storm troopers, bullet-proof gear and chemical protection headgear on, I'm sorely outgunned.

I was hoping that after I smoked their three bosses that they would just book out of here and vamoose. Along with the rest of the miscellaneous clowns that skinned out, but no such luck this time.

I just blew away their three prize-cash-cows – those three masterminds of evil – and though they have no idea why I did their bosses in, or who I even am, they are out for blood.

Outnumbered, the only serious advantage I have on my side is their dazed minds. About an hour and a half ago the whole crew was

all whooping it up at an open-bar birthday party for one of the head honchos and getting hammered and drunk beyond all fucking recognition so now they're a bit wonky and wobbly.

As the hitmen come up on the large clump of foliage and brush that we are hiding in, I can almost feel their rabid venom and wrath emanating from their sinister hearts. I should be sweating bullets but I fondle the talisman around my neck, as I've done many times before and pray they pass on.

Everything's gone wrong and off the rails up till now and I deserve a break.

I figured five or eight shots and then it would all be over with, done, finished, and I would just get the fuck out of here. But this didn't go how I planned it and now the marbles are rolling all over the place. This is probably going to be a bit of a mess.
You must

We're lying flat down on the ground, hugging it, here in a patch of brush and shrubbery about 40 yards wide and 20 square. She's about 8 or 10 feet off to the right of me. We're not crouching or kneeling but lying down flat on the damp, dead leaves of the floor. I can hear the mosquitos and feel the bugs crawling on and under me in the underbrush. We are holding stiff, silent and frozen with fear.

I hear them murmuring in Spanish. South American hit men. Probably not the kind that take prisoners or hesitate to kill.

But after a few pokes and leers into the bushes, the guards are gone. Not finding us right off, they are rushing off towards some distant noise that just occurred, down the hill, towards the docks and boathouses.

Such a beautiful night. The breeze has picked up and the spring air here, this close to the ocean reminds me of a spring night in high school, making out at the drive in theater. Our poor bikini girl's got to be getting cold now in that outfit and I imagine the fine hairs on her arms and legs are standing up and her nipples are

golden nuggets. Then in my mind's eye I see... a snake for a flickering flash. But how will a snake help us now?

Maybe one of them murmured that there are snakes in the bushes around here.

Do I pop up now and hit them from behind? Maybe if I had a rifle, an AR maybe, and one with a silencer would help. But they already too far off for just a pistol.

Then the unpredictable and impossible happens.

A shriek.

Our girl gets bitten by something and she squeals out in an uncontrollable yelp. Terrified, she pops up out of the foliage that we're hiding in, her arms and fists clenched to her side.

The flashlight on the end of one bodyguard's weapon whips around and spotlights on her face – for a second and a half she is standing there frozen and then – blam, right in the kisser.

She's dead instantly, and crashes backwards, falling heavy, back down into the foliage.

Then silence.

I hold still.

Snakes dammit! A snake bit her maybe. WTF!

Glancing over, I can see through the underbrush that the front half of her head is gone, and the back of her now empty bone-white skull is showing. Adios mujer.

This is the stuff nightmares are made of, only this is real.

There are three or four of them. I have a 9mm pistol and they all have rifles and shotguns. I may be fucked. This – this right here – is how things end for a guy like me.

Slowly they spread out and edge into the bushes wading along, looking for me now. Down below here, it's all branches and stems on the floor of the underbrush and the foliage is all above me, so I

can see their legs and feet moving in and I can see them but they can't see me, like as if I was under water now.

Well, we almost got away with it. They were already 20 feet past us, heading down the hill, when she screamed. This is the clutch now.

Sure, I had to come in and do this myself. Rather than wait for more of our crew. More money for me that way but more risk. But this is what I'm good at. Working alone. Usually I can hit-and-run it better working by myself and having more people can gum things up.

Got to come up with something. Quick now.

I'm pretty much fucked here, so I have to make my move no matter how stupid.

So I manage to silently pull my cell phone out. I type in "rattle-snake rattle sound" and, as they come crunching into the brush, I hit the play command as I slip the phone tossing it off to my right, off towards dead girl. It worked in the movie; I just hope they didn't see the same movie too.

Now they freeze at the unmistakable rattle shake sound.

Now everything happens in only a second or two: as I pop up and begin firing at them, I scream my head off with a deathly howl so loud they may not know where its coming from at first. *Did someone else get bit?* They think. *Maybe?*

A fraction of a second after my bullet hits the furthest one in the head, and as the guy with the shotgun and flashlight pulls up, he does it so frantically that his gun goes off, accidentally firing into the back of the guy standing in front of him. Lucky for me!

His shotgun is a pump rather than an automatic, and in that split second that he takes to rack the gun again, I'm able to get a good bead on him for a double tap into his chest.

I look around. I hear a slight whimper and there's a fourth one who ducked down and disappeared into the brush when the shooting started.

I grab the shotgun. As I rack it, I hear another whimper and slowly... cautiously... crouching low, I'm moving in on the sound, my finger on the trigger, ready.

As I close in, I hear this sad, pathetic and uncontrollable blubbering morph into a high wine like a balloon letting out air. I smile. Now I know who this guy is. I part the bush back a bit with the tip of the shotgun and hit the button on the side that turns the flashlight on. Damn, it's that accountant guy with the suspenders. Poor fellow, they must have dragooned into going along with them to chase me. Smart guy, but no kinda gunman or killer.

The flashlight is on him, but it's light also illuminates me a bit now so he can see my face too. He puts his hands up shaking and dropping his revolver. He looks into my eyes like a puppy dog. Our eyes lock for a second. I shake my head slowly... and smile ever so slightly. He closes his eyes, scrunching them, and I blow his head off. *Sorry. No prisoners tonight.* Letting him go would be a good way to get shot in the back.

I fish down into the foliage for the revolver he had, but don't find it right off.

I do snatch the earphone thing off the now dead shotgun-guy, his shotgun and grab all the shells in his pocket.

I will leave the gold bags in the bushes for the time being. I'm in full-blown, life-and-death combat mode now and will come back for it all later. Hopefully.

I find my cell phone, still making the snake sounds.

In the distance I see one last pursuer who held back and didn't come into the bushes and who doesn't seem to be humping a gun, running frantically off towards the big boathouse down the hill there.

Also, I see that there's someone down there welding in the middle of the night, sparks flying out, and going to town. The running guy approaches him, grabs his shoulder and shake him and then talks frantically to him.

I think for a minute.

If I just run off from the whole scene... will I get away? I was lucky just now. When things happen fast, they can go either way in a second or two. It's not like I'm John Wick. I'm just lucky, lucky and quick. Sometimes the other guy is lucky. Sometimes he's John Wick.

There were, at most, about eight or nine cutthroats, assassinos, and cocaine cowboys around and about when I got here. (Now there's less.) The odds are there's a couple of their best bodyguard guys down at the boathouse watching over that Yayo shipment that came in this afternoon. And now they are alerted and alarmed. Probably down there right now getting geared up in all their fancy hi-tech commando stuff.

Hmmmmm.

Maybe I could go back up to the main house and hotwire one of the cars and book out. Probably no one left up there. But they killed my girl, and though she ratted me out, she did come back for me. Hmmmm. And if I do leave any of these hopped-up killers behind alive they may come after me, even into town.

Fuck it. Finish the job. I will butcher and slaughter all these fucks.

Somehow.

Instead of charging right down there directly for a one-man assault at the boat house, I decide to sneak around back through the tree-line and hit them from behind somehow.

For now, I will have to leave the saddlebag loaded with gold, tucked here in the brush and come back for it later.

The boathouse.

I flank off to the right, running fast and low, and bolting off into the woods *behind* the boathouse, with the idea of coming up on the far side of the building, where hopefully they won't be expecting me.

Got to move – got to snap it up. I want to hit them while they're still all in the boathouse futzing around. I only have the shotgun and the 9mm Glock now. They are both close range weapons. So, I got to get in closer. I don't have a rifle (which is for longer distances). I'm an OK shot but, with a pistol I will need to get in closer. One can easily miss at 50 or 100 feet, especially on a target that's moving.

As I come around the back of the boathouse, there's another longer building – a deserted and abandoned looking warehouse building – on the other side of it, just past it.

I peek in.

It's mostly empty, with a few piles of junk and refuse here and there. But no one inside. Just dust, puddles, spiderwebs and debris. I see a rat running by.

There was no door back there for me to get in on either the sides or the back of the boathouse, all solid wall and a couple small, opaquely grimed over windows, so I am sneaking down the alley between the two buildings, up towards the front area.

At a window I look in. Sure enough, I see that there are three cocaine cowboys in there, gearing up in their hi-tech stuff, with the help of the welder guy. They are chambering weapons, snapping up and strapping on gear and bulletproof shells and helmets, looking like Star Wars troopers.

I sneak on up to the front roll-up bay door and peek again. I've got to close in more. The closer I get with the shotgun, the better my chance of actually doing some damage.

Maybe I can get all three before they are ready to deploy?

I should have grabbed up an AK or an AR back there at the bushes, dammit. Then I could probably pick a couple of them off or maybe all of them off with a few, quick lucky shots. A shotgun however, has a limited range of effectiveness. It's just so far before the buckshot starts to spread out and dissipate. At close range a shotgun is devastating. But at a distance, against guys with helmets and ballistic vests – I would probably just pepper them and make 'em mad.

I move on into the boathouse, fast and low, darting from scrap pile to a boat-on-its-side, to a paint rack on wheels, to right up behind the ping-pong table piled high with kilo bags of coke. The smell of oil and machinery and age is distinct.

Made it. I'm close now.

My first shotgun blast hits the nearest of the three in the neck and almost takes his head off. The second guy is drawing his pistol and chambering it, as the third is drawing down in my direction with an AK. The AK guy gets off a few shots in my direction, as my next blast hits the pistol guy square in the chest. Sadly, for me he has his armor on, and it just knocks him on his ass, but as his shots go wild, one of the bullets plows into the Yayo – not hitting me but blowing a cloud of the cocaine powder up towards my eyes and making me duck.

Well shit!

I pull the pin on a grenade I grabbed off one of the guys that were hunting me in the shrubbery and toss it (as I spot the welder going out the door and running off into the distance) but another 7.62X39 round from the AK nicks the grenade in flight and it falls back into the pile of coke packs on the table.

I bolt back towards where I came from and get far enough away and duck, before the grenade sets off its mushroom cloud explosion in the dope, (and hopefully covering my flight).

LOL, that's really going to make them mad.

But I do fumble and somehow drop the shotgun in my retreat. Not good.

As I reach the far edge of the building, I look back to see them fiddling a sec, putting out the bits of fire in the coke that is still on the table, and thus, giving me time to make it around the corner at the other end of the boat house and hold up there.

I'm hoping they're going to imagine I'm run off to hide in the woods, but I hold up and crouch down there right on the outside edge of the building, by where the massive roll-up door is, waiting in ambush for them. I still have the pistol and I'm ready.

Soon I hear them getting closer and just around the corner from me. There's still two of them left. Sadly, my sneak attack has pretty much fizzled and pooped out and I'm on the defensive now.

The first one peeks his head around. He's all geared up with vest, goggles, a gas mask, headset etc.

I'm trying to avoid the bulletproof vest, so I stick the pistol into his open neck area, right between the mask and the chest armor. Blam! A nasty splatter of blood fills his face mask from the inside and – timber! – he goes down like a log. Unfortunately, my pistol jams in there, getting snagged between the mask and gear, and the gun rips right out of my hand as he goes down with it.

Right.

I run for it.

As soon as his freaked-out partner gets his wits about him, he peeks out from behind the wall and takes a quick shot at me. The shot misses but I can feel the next one coming any second and the sudden mounting fear is like a tingling xylophone of terror, running down my spine.

I make it to a tree halfway between the two buildings. He's cautious now and probably not aware that I no longer have a weapon. He gets hunched down behind an old oil drum that's been cut in half and used as a barbecue smoker that is now standing upright on its end.

I reach in my coat pockets. No more grenades. A handful of peanuts from Five Guys, one now useless Glock magazine.... And the headset....

If I can get to the docks and shoreline, I may have a chance to swim for it. Maybe? Probably not, but still... maybe. The problem is, there is a 90% chance this last guy can wing me or kill me before I get to the water.

My best bet is to make it back to the deserted, junk-filled and rat-infested storage building. With a little luck and an edge, maybe I can make it.

So, it's time for desperation now. I put the head set on, the one I took of the dead guy so I could listen in on the killers all around me.

Turn on and tune it up.

I throw the peanuts at the guy, and... as he peeks up after they pepper him, I throw the magazine at him like a fast-pitch hardball being thrown to home plate. As it hits him – clunk – right on the forehead of his helmet, I scream into the headset mike: *“Yaaahhh! Holy fuck! Look out behind you!!!”*

He startles, stumbles back, almost dropping his gun and falling backwards, as I turn and bolt for the junko warehouse building next to the boathouse.

As I get to it, I’m still screaming hysterical gibberish into the mike, and I look back to see him reaching up, scrambling to turn off his earphones. I have a few seconds till he recovers his wits, and I make it to safety in time.

Inside.

There’s shit and scraps all over the junko warehouse. Piles of shit, shelves of shit. Engines half taken apart and hanging from chains. Boat hulls, scrap metal, welding cylinders and blow torches, tool chests. A pile of kid’s tricycles. Everything is covered in dust, rust and aged patina.

For a tick I consider an oil drum and gas can to use as some kind of time bomb? But I have no matches. It’ll probably blow me up too.

It’s a great place to hide in here, but eventually he’ll get me. If I go down that ladder there into the basement, a couple of grenades will probably do the trick. Maybe I can talk him into surrendering over the headset? But I’ve really got to get this over quick or more guys might come, although I think I got them all – all of them ruthless killers – except the welder who’s probably halfway to Canada by now.

I go through a doorway into another big room – it’s a long warehouse type room, maybe a couple of hundred feet long and 80 feet wide but this place is mostly empty and being prepped to remodel.

I flip a switch on a cable hanging down from the ceiling and the lights come on. I look around. There’s a burn pile, two baskets of rags, some pipes coming out of the walls going nowhere, going to

whatever used to be there. The place is permeated by an industrial smell of machines and oil and rubber and mildew.

Everything is dripping. Water, left over from the last rainfall is coming in through the leaky roof. The door at the other end is chained and locked. There's a door on the side wall but it has a 10-foot deep pile of shit: sharp scrap metal pieces piled and tangled all over in front of it.

I'm trapped. No windows. No way out.

Something moves. A rat. Lookit that fucking thing. A rat the size of a meatloaf.

The attic. There's a ladder going up through a trapdoor into the ceiling. Maybe If I get up in the attic, I can get on the roof? Maybe find a weak spot in the leaky roof and get out and down off into the woods?

Is the roof is slanted or flat? I'll find out....

In the distance I hear a rattle and clunk, likely from the guy clearing the other room. So, I just have a moment. I go up the ladder into the attic. I pull the ladder up behind me, making a racket as it slips and clatters. He has to have heard that, even all the way off in the other room.

It's dark up here now and there's no lights that I can find to turn on but, way over there, there's light coming through some missing parts of the attic roof, the light leaking in from the nearby football-field type spotlights that are lording over the area outside. My cell phone light is all I have.

As I move closer to the opening I hear more rats – disturbed by my intrusion – skuttling and skittering about in the distant darkness.

I peek out the openings in the roof. It's a straight slide down. The metal sheets of the roof are ragged and torn up... and with a lot of loose screws, I'm sure. So, sliding looks very risky. I can picture my weighty 210-pound body zipping down and catching on the sharp, sheet-metal shards and edges.

Everything has gone wrong on this job. Now the hunter is the hunted. Trapped. No weapon. No way out. But I am still alive somehow. How did I get into this spot. Is this the end? I'm impulsive

by nature. I wanted to get this deal settled and go on to the next. Perhaps old Jack was right. I need a woman in my life. A good one. He says that having a woman makes you think twice, not just because you don't want to have to explain your foolish acts to her but because you have someone care about and survive for.

Well... maybe tomorrow, but it's not happening today.

Without thinking, I feel the amulet around my neck. It's warm. That's a good thing. I'm on the right track. From prior experience I know this. The warmth somehow gives me hope if not confidence.

Maybe he will just go off and give up. (I mean, that's what I would do.) However, a couple of shots come up through the floor of the ceiling... but fortunately they are a ways off from where I'm at. He's shooting where the rats are. Thin rays of light come up through the bullet holes. There's a lot of junk up here. Dangerous in the dark. Wish I had a real fucking flashlight. I make my way over onto a rusty, old half inch steel plate about 4-feet-across. It has hinges and must have been a hatch to a boiler or furnace or something. I feel a little safer now, but I'm hoping he's not tricked out with some kind of high-tech bullet that would go through steel plate like butter.

I take a peek through a slight slit in the floor there, between me and to a couple of old, cut off pipes that come rising up out of the attic floor.

I see him, see him off to the side. He has his helmet off, so no more headset trick.

But he's heard me rustling, and he comes over to right below me, looking up at the roof above him, his rifle ready. He hears me accidentally nudge something. A bullet come up through the floor a few feet off. Then another hits the steel plate I'm on, and ricochets zinging off somewhere.

Silence. As we both listen.

I feel the fear rising like the indigestion of a pepper covered hot dog. I am a hot dog. Grilling, fading, waiting. Fear is bad. *"The devil can smell fear."* The old priest told me. *"He thrives on it. Az how he zeroes in on the lost souls. Don't let fear grab ya lad! No. If yer path*

takes you to the gates of hell, walk in like you own the place... as they say."

Whoa! Hold on! I can see that he's right under me now. I get a crazy idea.

There's a couple of rebar rods right by me. You know, those steel rods about four feet long and an inch thick, with a waffle pattern and that they use to reinforce the concrete that they build walls with.

I take a pinch of rubble and debris and trickle it down the mouth of one of the disconnected pipes coming out of roof's the floor right by me.

He edges over to the pipe, puts his gun barrel up his end of the pipe and he... shoots a round. I make a quick, brief moaning sound, for just a second. In the distance a rat rustles. I'm watching him though the thin, little crack... and he looks up the pipe.

He backs up and then looks up the pipe with a small but powerful flashlight.

My fingers edge for the rebar.

But he backs up.

I missed my chance. Got to get him to look up the pipe again.

Now he's fiddling with some kind of device. Maybe a radio to call others to come down here? No. It's a sort of flexible trunked periscope thing, like a doctor would use in a medical operation or a colonoscopy... and he starts it up one of the two pipes.

Out it comes from the pipe now on my end, like something out of *War of The Worlds*, adjusting, looking around, and then it's bright little LED spotlight lights up on it.

Quickly, I take my chewing gum and glob it over the lens as it turns to me. Then I stick a ballpoint pen under the head of the light and between the two cords, trapping it so it can't go back down.

He starts pulling it down on it, but it doesn't go. The ballpoint pen is wedged in good, keeping it from going down. He jiggles it up

and down once or twice but I'm standing ready with the rebar now and looking down the pipe (hoping to God that he doesn't take another pot shot up the pipe).

And he doesn't. I have the rebar rod about six inches into the 2nd pipe – some kind of a plumbing or steam pipe about three or four inches wide – and as soon I see his eye down below peering up through the pipe, I take my shot. I let go of the rebar rod, giving it some push downward, like chucking a spear... and I got him.

Yes!

The sound is a dull thunk, like the heavy rebar is going into a watermelon. Then I hear him fall. A deadfall. Clompf! That's it. I take a chance and look down through the pipe directly. I see his motionless hand on the ground. I peel up some of the plywood of the roof where the crack is. Yep. I got him good. Right through the eye and it came out the back of his head. The blood is spreading into a big puddle.

Whew.

It takes me a bit of effort to jockey the ladder back around into place and to let it down.

I got him good. It occurs to me to wonder if there's any other creeps running around out there and count on my fingers for the kills I've made. There were 8 guys and 8 kills but did that include the welding guy? I remove the dead guy's headset, flick it to get some of the blood off and listen in. Nothing but dead air. I grab the dead, armored cowboy's AK rifle, his pistol and decide to go back for the saddle bags of gold back in the bushes.

I steal one of their cars and don't pick the one with the dead cryptid in the back seat. Fucking thing was bad luck from the start and smelled like the Chicago stockyards.

I call out to the clean-up crew to come in and they'll have things all set and tidy in a day or so. The fish out there will eat well tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWO

IN THE LION'S MOUTH

Life was the bomb...
and I was the target.

Unrecorded Punk Rock song of the early 80s.

And what about me then?

Sure.

Came from a good family, yup, but I was always a smart-ass and I soon found out that it was way too easy to get kicked out of that Ivy-League cookie-cutter world that was going to be my golden-ticket. I mean, I blew it bad. Most of my family will not even talk to me now... but leaving that life was the best thing that ever happened to me. At the time... and later, probably the worst.

Free of the college trap, I quickly made a lot of money. And a name for myself. And guess what? I was almost a millionaire by the age of 24. Did it on my own. No family money or loans. Nope. (Though a million is not what it used to be.)

But with fast wealth and notoriety comes a lot of fast enemies. And I made some doozies. The best that big money can buy. And as time will tell, I was very good at that, making enemies.

So a few bad life-decisions later I was 86'd, totally broke, wanted for a murder I didn't commit (but I should have committed, just didn't get there in time) and then on the run.

I lost my privileges in The City, the good guys and the bad guys were after me both, and I had to leave the country to save my skin.

For a few years I wound up wasting away in the Margaritaville world south of the border. And that's where I managed to make even more enemies... and... lose my soul in a card game, yep, lost my ratchet, bullet riddled, remnant of a soul... in a card game.

A poker game...

Yes.

So the game was rigged to be sure, a midnight stud poker game with a cabal of local hoodlums and professional jerk-offs that I had befriended and not-so-wisely gone into business with, back then, in my two years as an expatriate and all-around rascal down in Tijuana and Matamoros. They got me.

Drunk, drugged and fucked.

Thoughts of their treachery and fuckery occurred to me as I slid down and out, into the haze of my treason induced stupor. Some pals, eh?

And I was fucked literally... which was, as I've since come to understand, a vital and counter-intuitive part of their soul-stealing ritual. At least the hoyden that seduced me was a smoking, hot dame. A Euro-trash Jezebel for sure, but what a knock-out.

The drugs, the ritual, the incredible fucking I got: that's how they stole my soul! That's how they fucking stole my soul.

And I've been looking for that bitch ever since. Not just because she was such a wonderful, sexually magnificent, hellcat of a lover, but I've come to believe that she's one person who may can reverse my misfortune. I'm told that there is some secret from the ritual that may be my long shot of a salvation to get my fucking soul back, even if she herself, is totally unaware of it.

I can remember her face, sure... but a woman can change her hair style, her look, her shape, but there was one thing I'll always remember. that vixen had *I'll Cry Tomorrow* tattooed over her choo-choo... and, if you see her, if you happen to run into her....

Anyways, the next day my housekeeper, she flipped out when I told her all what happened and how I all of a sudden felt strange now, how I felt so empty and all – and she adamantly informed me that those fuckers stole my soul – she was sure of it – and... since she had a thing for me I guess – I'm pretty good looking – not Brad Pitt or Paul Neuman good looking but maybe supporting actor good looking– so she really wanted to help me. And quick.

So, she sent me to this old priest – a worn out, defrocked, renegade Catholic Priest. He was in a run-down area – already hammered when I got there at two in the afternoon - and snoring away. The place was neat but crammed and stacked with stuff: books, old books, mementoes, magazines, tools, newspapers, yellow Post-It notes, cookware, clothes hung up drying, a framed centerfold of a 1966 Playboy bunny... and lots of yo-yos. Yo-yos all over the place.

He was kind of a like sloppy, growling, old Long John Silver type with a hoarse voice in Irish accent and a great and well-kept moustache and sideburns.

My housekeeper had insisted that this character was my only chance. I shook my head. This old sot? Could this be my only hope and salvation? The only one in the area familiar with the old ways and the old gods: the gods and spirits and demons, from ancient times, from the times back before the Christians came to the Americas and laid down the law.

To hear him tell it, he had been down there, south of the border, for nearly 50 years working hard to bring salvation and redemption to all the forgotten, destitute and lost who existed in the furthest edges of that civilization, who as a hobby, had studied and learned the old ways, the ancient cures and legends and scriptures of the old gods.

The old gods?

“The old gods, yeah. And they're still here all right, yes they are, sonny-boy...” he told me as he took another swig from the bottle of whiskey that I had brought along to loosen him up, “Biddin’ their time. Biddin’ their time.” He took another swig. “And son, they’ll be here when all of this shite is done and gone.”

“Shite?”

“All this crap. All of it. All the civilization... the Christianity... and all the gas stations and pesticides... and cigarettes...it *will* be gone ya know.”

I nodded sympathetically as if I agreed with him and had absolutely no suspicions that he was bat-shit crazy. As I continued my story, I watched his face and eyebrows vacillate from amusement, to serious, to shock and back to amusement.

So, when I finished telling him my account of the last two days he shook his head and pulled a crucifix out of a drawer, as I could also see, that the drawer contained a large .455 calibre Webley revolver and some candy bars. He took out a joint from a sliding compartment in the back of the crucifix and lit it.

He explained that I was messed up. Messed up bigtime. I got seriously concerned as I saw how intent and focused he became as I rolled out my story.

I was getting worried. I could feel it in now my bones, and I could feel it down to the soles of my shoes.

What the hell had happened to me?

“Most likely you will never know.” He muttered as if he had read my thoughts. His demeanor was odd: one minute he hated me and the next he was my best friend.

After the joint was halfway smoked down, he handed it to me.

“You’ll need this.” It had a strange scent, not just of pot, something else was in there. It was my first taste of the Yage. The Yage that would be part of my salvation latter on.

In just a minute I could feel the cooling, soothing rivers of Babylon washing over me and the feeling that nothing else mattered, like I was an embryo. I felt like the embryo in the 2001, A SPACE ODYSSEY poster.

A few minutes later he descended into a flurry of rapid gibberish that I strained and reached out to comprehend as it was coming to fast. Or I was too slow. I remember hearing that “though my soul was jinxed-up, bolloxed and banjaxed” that I had until the next solstice a few months away to dodge the mystic shit-bullet coming right at me.

“The next Solstice? What the hell has tha...” I had heard the term before but wasn’t sure of much else.

“Ah, ya start yer period, ya tool, don’t ya know. Ha ha! Yeah, you start having...”

“Well fuck me running, I get periods?!”

“Nah, just havin’ a gas, just coddin’ ya me bucko, ha, ha... no, c’mere to me, see the solstice is when the devil comes to collect the souls.”

“Souls?”

“You lost yer bleedin’ soul right? That’s why yer here right? To him, to that smelly bastard Devil, they’re his souls. His souls now. Sure, he comes for the souls of the evil, the souls of the heretics and blasphemers, suicides... and like you, the souls of the lost, those souls wandering around out there lost and fucked.”

“So I’m fucked.” I said, half believing him and half humoring him.

“It’s more like he’s a garbage truck, come to pick up it all, not just the sinners and villains. So fucked ye be.”

“But, ya know what, I don’t even feel...”

“Azz because ya soul is gone, lad. In bits. Gone and wandering around out there somewhere. You don’t feel nothin’ now do ya!?”

I took another pull on the whiskey. I was getting concerned. This was serious. He was right. I didn’t feel good, and I didn’t feel very much at all. My sense of smell, my sense of taste? Blotto. I couldn’t even hear very well. But most of all I couldn’t feel things. Even now, as concerned as I was I was not panicked or terrified like I should be. I felt detached. Detached and adrift.

“So I have four months to find it?” I asked.

“Aye, or head them off.”

“How?”

“That I cannot say for sure. The soul’s a funny thing. It may come back on its own - your soul - or you may only get it back in dribs and drabs. I don’t know. Maybe. By good luck? By doing good works? By brushing after every meal and combing your hair nicely? I don’t know.”

“Where did it go? Where do I look for it?”

“It’s not that easy. It’s not like someone has it in a jar with holes poked in the lid. Hell, yer soul could be sitting across the room watching you right now.”

“That close?”

“Or down at the beach getting’ a suntan and a cold one. I dunna know.” He said shaking his head and then yawned and began to reach back and fish around in the piled-up junk in the shadows behind him and pulled out a tired and ancient accordion with chipped keys and lovingly duct-taped bellows. He took it gently to his lap and played a few notes from *Lady of Spain*. “Now c’mere to this bud.”

It was time for my lesson.

“So behold, the only remnant of Western Civilization that will probably be here a thousand years from now.” He said, chuckling and drunkenly holding up the tired and worn old accordion to me. “Now this, this the simple accordion... our devil ca’ na’ stand the sound of.” He said nodding and then playing few more notes. “Perhaps he find its merry and whimsical sounds too annoying and unpleasant.” He played a chorus for me.

So the devil can’t stand the fucking accordion.

“Not one bit. He can’t stand bright sunshine, can’t stand jokes and can’t stand flatulence. Not one of it. But now drunkards. See as long as you are drinking, as long as you are lit, and pissed... you’re safe as milk. The demons or ghosts or devils or whatever evil shite was after you, won’t fuck with you.”

“So there is some form of hope then?”

He just shook his head as if annoyed by the question or my presence and worked the accordion a bit more.

He was thinking.

Then he opened his shirt and pulled out some sort of dangling amulet: silver, heavy, patinaed over into a dark, black shade as silver will do. It was about the size of a silver dollar, a little bigger and twice as thick – hanging on a chain, and then he handed it to me, so reverently, so gingerly - like it was nitroglycerine or something.

“This is for me?” I asked.

“Yes, wear this always me boy.” he mumbled. “I am so way too auld now to ever....” He squinted and shook his head. “Too bloody auld.” He seemed to be feeling sorry for himself, shaking his head and looking downward. “Fecking old... now just take this.”

“What is it do?”

He took another swig and winced in a smiling way.

“That you will see. That you will see.”

I nodded, with a patronizing face and a smirk. Then he smacked me on the knee and scolded: “None of that now! Pay attention ya wanker. This is the cat’s pajamas, lad. Grand. Grand as they come.”

It was old, very old too. The inscription was worn and washed out and the only word I could make out was “Enviado”, Spanish for envoy, as I later Googled.

I nod and gently put it around my neck.

I was waiting for him to hit me up for a C-Note, but you know, he never did.

“Ah! You are baptized anew. Look at ya, a born champion and a real winner!”

I stand up and look at myself in the cracked mirror across the room.

“And the accordion?” I ask.

“My son... yeh get your own fucking accordion. This one’s mine.”

He said. “And I may need it. I may need it some night soon.”

Was he for real? Or drunk and just fucking with me, who cares? I blew the whole thing off and went home. But by the next evening it was all real all of a sudden. As they came for me at twilight.

And the amulet, yes, it worked.

Today I’m still wearing it, and the amulet still works. It’s better than my natural born “spider sense” and even watches over me when I’m asleep. One time I woke up and the thing was feeling sort of hot. Woke me just in time too. Almost had a Chinaman slit my throat with a straight razor that night.

Over the years, I still never learned to play the accordion, though I often listen to the local Spanish stations now and then, and yes, it seems the accordion sounds really keep the devil and bad luck away.

That night that the devil came walking by my room, I turned on the clock radio and tuned in a local Mexican station with all the accordion music all the time, I had it on low so as not to keep me awake, under a pillow on the other bed, but on, all night long.

Outfoxing the devil that first solstice was fun (more on that later) but then it all seemed a hollow and empty triumph as I wandered off looking for answers. None of the clerics, mystics or fortunetellers I encountered seemed to have an answer. All the covens and witchcraft clubs seemed to be just a lot of rich people having depraved and bug-nut sex parties. All the books: the forbidden, the sacred, secret, or incunabular, were apocryphal gibberish, whimsical fantasies, and dead ends.

I tried to make sense of it all, but it was useless. Had all the mischief I’ve done, all the heartbreak I’d caused, and all the people I’d hurt and disappointed finally caught up with me now, come to bite me

in the ass? There were a lot more worse, evil transgressors than me out there and they were all fine, going on with their daily lives.

I was drinking a lot - often drinking just to get to sleep - and it seemed to help for a while, but then I would wake up at night in a nightmare sea of all the swirling memories shouting "No! No! I didn't do that!".

And then something curious happened one night. I was out of chips and circling the drain and I felt this was - for sure - my last night on earth. I mean why not give up? Why not just let the devil take me and be done with it? My survival instinct was wearing out and nothing else was working, when something else kicked in. Without thinking I bucked up and wound up saving a human life that night. More on that later too, but the life I saved was a goofy, argumentative little fellow with four fingers on one hand and six on the other.

And, skipping forward, that's how I fell in with this odd little rag-tag group of misfits, renegades, and killers: friendly, quirky, happy-go-lucky serial killers, who were roaming America dispatching all the murderers, psychopaths, deranged lunatics - basically, all the killers who have fallen through the cracks and gotten away with it.

I noticed that making these "settlements" seemed to help me. My "self" seemed to be coming back a little more with each one. And I was enjoying what I did. Eventually I noticed my sense of smell and taste coming back, little by little, and remembering how much I missed it. But I'm still not all there. Maybe in a few years, maybe.

And that's it. I'm stuck in between. Neither in nor out. In my own personal limbo, on the edge of the borderlands between life and death. A leaf in the wind. A snail crawling across the edge of a razor.

For now, I'm a semi-pro serial killer: a modern-day, saddle-tramp, cowboy assassin. Only for me, I'm killing the guilty. At least that's what we all tell ourselves.

And boy it sure seems fun. I mean I'm having a blast. I live outside the straight world, I carry a gun, come and go as I please, and I have a secret life that all the squares that pass me on the sidewalk have no inkling of.

Now my friend Catamuso, (my dedicated and loyal assistant, assigned to me as a sort of personal squire, always helping me out here and

there, now and then...) good old Catamuso, (and probably keeping an eye on me for the people upstairs...) he thinks... now he thinks we're all actually working for the devil.

We argue about that now and then.

He may have a point, though. While at first glance, "*avenging the wrongfully slain so their souls can pass on and find peace*" sounds a lot like the Lord's work, I imagine we're sending a whole lot of people straight to Hell, right down there on the express line. And wouldn't that be helping the Devil?

He thinks that maybe God and the Devil together, have something up their sleeve and we have no idea what that is. No idea.

I just shook my head.

But we're filling up Hell for someone.

And brother, Hell ain't half full.

Which brought me to my latest little adventure here, here on the coast of New England on a full moon night and sending some three likely candidates and all their buddies, straight to hell.

And for sure, there was too much luck there for it to be just me. Ten or eleven killers? Naw, this amulet is my ace in the hole. For sure.

CHAPTER 3

NIGHT AND THE MOTEL ROOM

“No one can give you any answers.
There aren’t any. You have to discover
for yourself-you must learn to
navigate the mystery.”

Bill Hicks

When I get back in town to the out of the way, el-cheapo, dingy, old-school motel I’ve been staying at, I take a shower and then splash myself down with a whole bottle of rubbing alcohol that I bought on the way home. It stings here and there, and the pain tells me that my wounds are getting clean. Got a lot of scratches, cuts and dings while crawling around in the bushes and all the junk and the scraps in the attic.

Clean and fresh, I plop down on the bed and decompress. Action and tension can age you if you don't take time to inventory it all and let it go. I go over the evening and the last few days in my mind.

Arrived here at dawn three days ago. Seagulls squawking. A quaint little fishing town. Took some nice, "New Englandy" pictures. Had some great seafood here. Weather nice and cooling off this last week. Desire (bikini girl) was all personality and tits but no ass and no legs. But she laughed at my subtle and goofy jokes.

Killing three master criminals who gassed the wrong village was kinda fun. The bag-o-gold was heavy, quite heavy, so I should be able to skim about a third of it for myself and they'll still be happy at headquarters with what I turn in. They should rightly get their share since they let me know where it was stashed.

The girl was bad luck, and it was bad luck that killed her. My only other regret was the rush I was in. I was planning to gas them somehow, Moe, Curley and Larry, but had to rush it. Our boss Jack loves hearing about a nice ironic ending choreographed for our clients' settlements. They gassed the Kurds, so I gas them. This would have been perfect. They even had a gas stove up at the big house, but instead I wound up – Bing. Bang, Boom – "yer dead!" on these guys and that was it.

I get up to find the TV remote, can't find it and wind up in the bathroom brushing my teeth. There are times when you look at yourself in the mirror and stare. After I spit out the suds, I stare for a while. I look into my eyes. I have no thoughts. I just stare.

Peeking out, I spot some blue police lights outside there, flashing and coming in through the drapes. WTF. I turn all my lights down. Blue lights at this time of night are usually a pretty bad sign. I prepare for action. I stupidly pulled the car in with the license plate facing out. Lazy. Stupid.

I assemble my AR and lay out a few flash-boom grenades.

The window in the bathroom is too small to get out of without probably getting stuck.

The day runs through my mind.

Got to stop making stupid mistakes. I went in by myself instead of waiting for the rest of the team. I got the gold coins but almost got nailed. Now I don't have to split them with the rest of the crew but was it worth it? Almost not. Was I greedy? Stupid? Half-assed? All of the above?

I crack the door and peek out. The cops are talking to the front desk clerk and he's acting slightly agitated and frantic. In a few ticks of watching, I can conclude that they have come to see him, (not me) or... maybe he called them for some troublesome guests?

As I'm peeking, the lady from the room next door comes walking out in her pajamas and bathrobe, and heads over to the commotion. She talks to one of the cops for a bit – tells him some stuff – and heads back. As she comes up on the room, I crack the door and ask her what's going on.

“Aw, they can't find his wife.”

“What?” I ask.

“She run off 'er something. Gone, he can't find her, and he wants them to find her.”

“Oh.”

“She probably down there with the construction guys on the backside. He wants them to go looking for her.”

“Yeah?”

“Afraid to go looking himself, ya know. Them some rough looking banditos back there.”

“Well, there's more of them than there is of him.” I say as I close the door and lock it.

The desk clerk and his wife are from some foreign country, I'm guessing from Pakistan or maybe Syria or wherever. She's probably running around on him. She was giving me the eye from right behind his back when I was checking in.

The place is the SLEEP TIGHT MOTEL. 79.99 a night with the Triple-A discount. I calm down and take the edge off with some

Buffalo Trace whiskey that I picked up at a settlement a few weeks back. Been making some good scores lately. The gold coins from this hit are mostly bullion coins, Krugerrands, Liberty Heads and a few St. Gaudin's, but all in nice shape. Still, I don't see any that might need grading.

Desire's stuff.

I pick up the Zorro hat that Desire (bikini girl) was wearing when she came sauntering into the room three days ago. And here's all her stuff. I hate this, going through someone dead's effects. But sometimes it's just part of the job. In the Easter Ritual (part of our way to contact the spirits of the wrongfully slain) it helps to go get some of their things – a memento or favorite piece of clothing or a sentimental keepsake – and then burn it during the ritual. For some reason that kind of attracts or draws in the wandering spirit. Gets their attention.

The first time I met Desire'... what, about two years ago, was on a job in Texas we both worked on. I remember she was a little appalled with the room I was staying in at the time, and I sensed her disdain, and I said: *"I'm a killer. This is the kind of place killers stay in. Get used to it."* (I like the old motels where you can pull right up to the door) but the chemistry between us seemed to soon overcome any apprehensions she had.

That job went well, we both made out really good, and we hit it off, and then we spent a few more days together in San Antonio for a little R&R. A wonderful time. Good food, the River Walk was in season, clubbing all night, making love in the wine cellar of a nice restaurant, visiting the Alamo and asking to see the basement....

Now I'm looking through all her shit and sorting things. No names or monograms on the clothes. Some of this stuff will just go to a thrift store. I'll take her wallet and purse and personal effects down to headquarters in The City and turn it over to them.

She probably has a car in the parking deck of an airport that will get ticketed and then hauled away. Maybe an apartment or

condo that will fall into foreclosure and all her shit will be out on the street and be picked through by neighbors and passersby.

As I stand there, I can't help but visualize it all in my head.

Her clothes hanging in the dollar section of a thrift store, the car towed away, the stuff on the curb, picked through and tossed about. Her mother or a daughter getting her wallet and ID in the mail.

So this is death, nothing dramatic, cool or glamorous. Nothing fancy at all. Just another film reel running out in the projection room and slapping over and over until someone flips the switch off.

Probably she'll wind up buried in a common grave by our cleanup crew, buried there forever with a bunch of corpses of international gangsters and hitmen and lying there rotting away with someone's ass in her face until 20 years from now when they go to put in a Walmart and dig them all up.

Ashes to ashes...

I look at the bottle of whiskey on the table lit by the hanging light above it. But I don't go over there for it. No.

It's a distraction.

Here I am wallowing in mortality. But it's not just hers. Not just mine but the pure concept of mortality in all its power and magnificence and mystery. Sure. And so, my mind instinctively looks around the room for a distraction. I catch myself doing that. That's what we do: we take a peek into hell – into oblivion – and then look around the room for a distraction, a bottle, a deck of cards, a paperback novel on the nightstand...

Distractions.

And the TV.

There you go. The TV. The perfect, quintessential and ubiquitous distraction. The modern-day substitute for the campfire. The hypnotic icon of these modern times.

This time of night the TV channels are bleak. *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. *The Love Boat*. Superstation has a rerun of a spaghetti western that I saw here three days ago. For a while I watch the *Home Shopping Network*, swapping back and forth with cartoons.

And now I go for it. Go for the bottle.

Yes.

What a life.

CHAPTER FOUR

TOMORROW ALWAYS COMES

You've never seen death?
Look in the mirror every day
and you will see it,
like bees working in a glass hive.

Jean Cocteau

Something jolts me out of dreamland, and I jerk awake, spilling the melting ice cubes from my drink into my lap. The test pattern is hissing. Still dark out. My amulet is feeling a little hot.

What time is it? As I trudge over to get another shot, I see that the blue lights outside there are back. I look over to my AR on the table.

Let's take a look.

Across the parking lot I see a flock of blinking blue lights on cop cars.

Looks like they have someone. Someone killed someone, his wife? Shit. Murder. Gonna bet it's the owner's wife the way he was carrying on before. This location here will be getting real hot now. They'll be snooping around. Was it one of the construction crew?

I keep looking, watching....

No, its him. The Husband. The front desk clerk. He's been cuffed. It's him. His in that long, kind of night-shirt clothes and the slippers. His hair is messed up and he's crying now.

I gotta guess that he's the reason his wife is missing.

Fucked up world.

It's not even quite dawn yet. Just a sliver of red on the horizon. But I got to get on the road before all the local news trucks show up.

Also, once I wake up, I usually won't be able go back to sleep. Just toss and turn. If I do fall off to sleep, I'll just doze for a minute and wake wide up.

Now that I know that the cops aren't after me, I'm casually loading the car.

The nosey, next-door lady in the bathrobe comes walking back across the parking lot out of all the crowd and the commotion, back to her room, she lets me know the lowdown. "Fucker killed his wife. That's it. Maybe that shit's OK back in his asshole country but not here. Evil little man is gonna burn."

"No shit." I murmur.

I get the car loaded.

I don't ever turn in the plastic room key. I keep them. I collect them. Put them in the plastic binder sleeves like they were baseball cards.

As I drift on out, glancing over the action, the front desk clerk/owner raises his head and looks across the parking-lot at me, right at me. *Nothing I can do buddy. You're finished now. Toast.*

Out there on the brick abutment in front, under the glowing neon lit SLEEP TIGHT MOTEL sign, I see her. She is crying. Sitting on the edge of the abutment, she is crying, sitting there in white pajamas, and bloody.

It's the wife. The dead wife. There she is.

As I glance, she can feel me looking at her and looks up and looks around a second, but not over at me.

She's a ghost. And now-a-days I see a lot of them. I can see her because of all the Yage I've done on the job, and I've done a lot of it in the last month or so.

The Yage: an ancient concoction that gives our people the ability to exist on the edge, on the borderlands, and see into the other world, into the land of the dead and the lost: those lost, wandering souls who are between this world and the afterlife.

I don't want to look at her. She's none of my business now. The police have her husband, and they will deal with it. Not me.

My work begins when the police fail. Fail to find the criminal. Fail to convict the criminal, and then – only when they have failed – do we come in.

All around me, death now. Death and the horror of death, the smell of death, the dreams of death. The sound of screams sudden then gone. Echoes.

CHAPTER FIVE

These Vagabond Shoes

Who has seen the wind
neither you nor I
but when the trees bow down their heads
the wind is passing by.

Yoko Ono

As I leave New England the nice weather begins to fade and the sun dims in and out of the clouds and then fades into a dull, boring haze. The cold front they've been talking about on the news the last couple of days is hitting us with a last bit of a wintry mix and I'm slapping leather for New York City, hoping to outrun any really bad stuff.

The TV has been touting that this storm is going to be affecting 80 million people. I envision some 6-year-old kid sitting in front of the television, imagining all the 80 million people lined up, staring to the Great Western skies as the doom and perdition comes rolling right at them.

I fart and roll the window down, welcoming the rush of fresh, brisk, winter-to-spring air that washes over me for just a minute.

The day is dark, and I have my headlights on. I remember in Grade School, those rainy days when it was so dark and overcast outside that they turned the neon lights on, above us in the classroom. The memory fascinates me. Why is it so vivid in my mind, like a Polaroid snapshot, and why are so many other things, a vast number of significant moments and memories now distant, gone or vanished.

As I hit Connecticut the storm fades and storms off, zooming up into New England and out into the ocean. I am safe now, and soon the sun is

peeking through the clouds ahead. New York City, with its good food, all the great night clubs, strange smells and parade of interesting faces is ahead and ready for me.

I'm listening to an oldies station and the song THE WANDERER by Dion and the Belmonts come on the radio, and I sing along with it. That's me. I am the wanderer. A rolling stone. An adventurer. A modern-day, cowboy saddle-tramp. Wherever I hang my hat is my home. These vagabond shoes, are longing to stray... I wish somebody else was driving so I could just look at all the trees going by and the sun-lit clouds in the sky. Just sit back and relax.

What would it be like to drive with my feet? Should I take my shoes off first. If I put the seat back far enough... perhaps I could... I try it. I put the seat way back. I get my feet up to the dashboard. But the wheel? It's a bridge too far, and I just can't make it with my feet. Perhaps using my ankles? Sliding. Not enough traction with my socks on. Maybe...

Then the phone rings. I'm in this ridiculous position. What the hell. I answer it, silence for a few ticks, then, "Hello? Hello?"

It's a guy in Pakistan telling me his name is Chip and pretending to be the Canadian Pharmacy. "Perfect timing Chip. So good to hear from you."

He starts his spiel, and I keep interrupting him, asking about the wife and kids, his poor dog that had his ears removed by the Rosicrucians and the murdered, dead bodies that were all in the trees in his back yard last week.

"You're Chip from down the street, right? Chip Chopper, the 52-card-pickup salesman?"

"No. I am Canadian Pharmacy and I..."

But I keep interrupting him, asking about his wife who caught on fire and his daughter, now dating a zombie - the zombie from Bosnia - and the floating golf course that he had invested in with me... that turned out to be a rip-off... and how would we ever get our money back from the guy; and what we would do to him... and as the narrative got more surreal, bloody and gruesome he finally had to hang up. Poor Chip hung up. Poor guy couldn't take it. So long, Chip Chopper. Chop those chips, man.

With the storm passed on and off, and I'm no longer outrunning it, I stop at an exit with a shopping mall - one I've been to before. Is it noon already?

I need a new pair of shoes, but the Clark's Shoes there is closed. Oh well, I can wait till New York. Over the years, my old injuries come back to haunt me like Marley's ghost, moaning and rattling chains. I was a foolhardy daredevil kid and accident-prone. I sprained ankles and messed up

my back stealing home and jumping off roofs enough times to be feeling it now and then, and good shoes keep me going. Good shoes. I ruined and tore up my last good pair of Clarks in the shipyard back there.

Siting at the food court, I watch people all around me, going somewhere, doing things, minding their business... and ignoring me. I am unnoticed, nondescript, invisible. I think about how their safe, structured, rote, mundane world differs from my “outrider, saddle-tramp, vagabond” life. I am the Wanderer. A wanderer unhinged and floating, like an ant on a leaf in the middle of the ocean, a hundred miles from land, a hundred thousand miles from any of them.

You gotta love it.

The smile that slowly grows on my face now is not contempt, not contempt for them, nor is it amusement. The smile is pleasure and contentment. Contentment that I have managed to somehow escape their world, that world all around me now, and how I have been able to somehow hop off the merry-go-round that is the real world and float off like a child’s lost balloon that escaped his clutch, and is now a million miles, and a million lightyears away.

No one sees me. Somehow that Is beautiful. Anonymous. Not all the mud on my shoes is mud. Some of it is blood. They don’t know that and wouldn’t believe me if I grabbed one and screamed the truth in their face. In my life I am a stranger wherever I go. I have blood on my shoes, a gun in my pocket and strange drugs still floating around in my system. Here at the food court. It’s all good.

Wait a minute. Across the food court, a street person sitting at a plastic table like mine with a hot dog and a plate of discarded food in front of him (that he just now filched from the trash) stares at me. Somehow, he knows I don’t belong in this picture. I don’t belong here, any more than he does. He stares and doesn’t look away when I look at him. I wave at him, and he comes out of his trance and then looks away. Then I notice a kid, a kid, who of all the kids there in the food court on their class trip that are chatting, eating and pre-occupied one way or another, stares at me. A dead stare, not sullen or angry but somehow, he sees me, sees I’m different and has noticed me. Someday he may be like me, a wanderer, a stranger wherever he goes, and though he doesn’t know or understand it now, maybe he senses some connection.

I look around the food court. Any ghosts? But no ghosts. None. After doing the Yage and stuff – the stuff we all use to be able to talk to the “Forlorn”, to see the Forlorn and get their stories – the yage induced

detached state of mind lingers and echoes. It's a residual state where we have one foot in this world and one foot in the other. Like the hobo spotting me, I can usually spot the ghosts. They look out of place, look haunted, and are often slightly translucent. No one else can see them, but I see them. Because of the Yage. Even at food courts.

Now, not all the ghosts out there are screaming for vengeance. Only a few here and there are activated and cranked. Most of the rest are just hanging around, not ready to let go yet, but still pretty harmless, maybe enjoying watching other people eat and talk in the food court. The ones who want vengeance, who feel robbed and cheated by their premature death – our “Forlorns” – they're the ones that are our job, our pain in the ass. They're the ones that fuck with people and do the mischief and the haunting. The murdered, the wrongfully slain, the cheated. They're the ones we resolve for.

The guys back there In New England didn't die 'cause they were a criminal gang, or from smuggling dope or killing other gangsters. And they didn't set out intending to kill all those poor Kurds in Kurdland, wherever that is, sure, but... you buy the ticket – you take the ride.

As the kids on the class trip trek off, the one odd kid turns and takes one last look at me. I wave at him. He too just stares back, then turns away.

On to NYC.

CHAPTER SIX

LIKE A LONG WALK ON A SHORT PIER

“There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable.

“There is another theory which states that this has already happened.”

Douglas Adams

Our boy in Greenwich is Jumbo. Jumbo's Auto and Body Shop. I drop my hoopty-mobile off there and take the train into the city, an hour or so ride, not counting waiting for the train to come.

My “hoopty” looks like a real beater on the surface but I keep it mechanically perfect and even better under the hood than any average car. Jumbo is our Gypsy auto genius, and he will check it stem to stern.

These Gypsies exist in their own world, an invisible world, and tend to smoothly blend into ours, but also keep something to themselves, but for

some reason they all seem to have taken a liking to me. I have no explanation for that. Jumbo is overjoyed to see me and gives me a big hug, offers me a cup of coffee and demands to see my cellphone pics of any of the naked girls I've banged lately. Like most of the characters in our little club, Jumbo is a natural, highly functioning at what he does, and he is better diagnosing a car problem over the phone than most mechanics are with their battery of computers and readers.

Maybe I was a Gypsy King in some former life and they recognize that.

Jumbo's actually one of us – a former hit man (Traveler) like me – but one that reached his limit, timed out and went back to the real world, back to car repair, only now for our organization. An ugly motherfucker, with a couple of big scars, and some wicked tattoos, but with the gracious and winning personality of a late-night talk show host. Always makes me feel good to talk to him so I usually take him to lunch. But I'm in a hurry now, so maybe next time.

It's the middle of the day and the train Into the city Is pretty empty. Heading into NYC messes with my head. This is where it all began, my world as a promising young man... and where it all ended. Where I fucked it all up. All the memories good and bad, are buried here, lots of them, and they will stay buried here. No going back. That life, that world seems like a thousand years ago and a million miles back behind me.

I hit Grand Central, and its familiar essence warms me. I remember the echo of the place, the sound of chatter and the smell of it all. No other place like it in the world.

On the way to "headquarters" I stop at St. Patrick's. There is a peace for me here that flows over me and reaches deep inside. I needed this. I drop some dimes in the slot, light a candle, and make the sign of the cross. Dear lord, protect me and forgive me if what I'm doing is wrong.

As I come up on the confessional booth a pretty girl exits and heads to the front to pray. Our eyes meet... but this is church, and I look away. As I pass the booth, I muse about how the priest would faint if I confessed. *Dear Father, forgive my sins. I just killed four or five guys and one of them I blew his head off... man, it was a blast.*

I head uptown to the "Hive". Headquarters. Jack's place. A huge building and a mysterious wonderland that's like a cathedral inside with an open rotunda of an inner core rising up, surrounded by great, rising walls of rooms and offices with walkways and patios. A whole building that owns itself and is somehow tax exempt. This is Jack Ketch's headquarters and the

epicenter of his own personal empire of death and vengeance. This is where his legions of everyday workers, mostly Gypsies, (I have learned that they dislike being call “Roma”, at least these ones) habituate and work daily, processing the sales of the loot we put on eBay, Etsy, Craig’s List, etc. or send off to our flea markets booths and estate sales companies all around the country.

Checking in, I see that there’s an ordination on the board for this afternoon. Always a good spread of food and drink at a celebration like that but it’s for a guy named Stryker, whom I have an ongoing beef with. So, he’s going to be ordained with a double “O”, eh. They must be getting desperate. When a member of the order is ordained, that means he’s an Inquisitor, a hit man, like me. But this guy’s a real piece of work.

On the third floor I check in at Queenie’s office. She’s the direct shot to Jack. And his “gatekeeper”. But Jack’s not in today, or so she tells me. And I believe her as I cannot smell that scent of Christmas tree and burnt whiskey kegs that is Jack’s distinctive trademark.

But Queenie’s niece is here, a real cutie named Tinka.

“What are you here?” Queenie asks, almost annoyed sounding. “What’s up? Should you still be up there on the New England now?”

“All done.” I say, “All tied up. They’re all dead. Called the clean-up crew last night and they’re probably there now.”

She shrugs and smiles.

I say “You should have sent me up there in the first place. The other guys fucked it all up.”

“Yeah, Shorty. Watta bum.” She says, never missing an opportunity to talk shit on anyone. Me, I’m just rude. And blunt. It’s just the way I’m wired these days.

“So I’ve become the fire brigade now? When things get fucked up you send me down the well, right?”

“You and Block.”

“Antonius Block, the Butcher of Buffalo!”

“Eh?”

“That’s what Catamuso calls him. The Butcher of...”

“Catamuso....” She mumbles, shaking her head. “Jack’s not in all week.” She says, changing the subject.

“Why.”

“You don’t know, and I don’t tell you. OK?”

“Sure.”

“But we got something for you.” She rifles through the papers and files, “We got another settlement for you, yeah. A job for you to do. Easy. One, two, three. Jersey shore. You’ll like this one. A Priest.”

Tinka’s looking at me from her desk behind Queenie, smiling at me like Christmas morning, and distracting me.

“A Catholic Priest?”

“You’re Catholic, right?”

“Yeah, but I got no grudge against Priests. I mean no one ever messed with me when I was a kid or nothing.”

“A pretty boy like you? C’mon.”

“Shit. I was an “ugly duckling” when I was a kid, Queenie. Not handsome and dashing like I am now.”

Tinka giggles behind us. “You mean you used to look like a duck?” she says. Tinka and Queenie were both born in Romania as I recall, but only Queenie has any accent still.

“Naw, it’s a saying. Just a saying kiddo. An ugly duckling grows into a beautiful swan someday, or me into a good-looking person.”

“Now look at this guy.” Queenie fans the files and pictures out on the counter like a deck of cards. “See, easy. Old guy like that, not put up no fight. Easy, no?”

“Yeah, wha’d he do? Buggering little boys?”

“No.”

“Little girls?”

“Wrong again genius boy.”

Queenie sees me glancing at Tinka every now and then and looks back at her over her shoulder. She raises her coffee cup up like she’s ready to throw it at Tinka and Tinka giggles and goes back to her work.

“No, but a bad man, a bad Priest. And an easy job it is. The inquest is all done and wrapped up already. All you have to do is show up and do the settlement.”

“Naw, can’t. I got to be at a family event down in Florida in a day or two. Can’t do it.”

“It won’t take a day, not even a day. Pays good.”

I walk in past the counter’s gate and get a cup of coffee from the Starbucks “Traveler -Tub” that’s sitting on Queenie’s desk, and saunter over to Tinka’s desk, taking a seat on the edge and giving a sip up to Tinka, who smiles and giggles.

Normally Queenie would say “Oh, no!” and banish Tinka to the back room or send her downstairs to deliver some documents, but she is thinking that if she wants me on this job – me and not some other, off-the-rack fuck-

up – she has to give up some slack. It took me a while to get my sea-legs with this outfit, but I’m becoming one of the “pros from Dover” to these people, and in the last year, I’ve been gradually gaining a rep around the place as the point-man for tough jobs or fixer for when others fuck things up.

“Tell you what Queenie, I’m taking Tinka here, out for lunch now, so I’ll have time to think about it. To go over it all in my mind some and look over these papers. Figure it out. ‘Zat OK?”

“She’s already have lunch!”

Tinka stands up smiling and willing, “I won’t eat much. I am only a little hungry!”

As I walk out past Queenie with Tinka in tow, Queenie mumbles through and annoyed and slightly grimaced face, “Harken...”

“Shut up, Queenie. You’re next.”

Am I kidding? Maybe not. Queenie’s not bad looking at all, sort of a dark, sultry, 40-year-old Gina Gershon type. Queenie laughs derisively, with her hands on her hips, as we walk out the door. “That’ll be the day!” she mutters. Oh well.

At lunch I discover that Tinka’s got a live-in boyfriend (not that that stops her from having me as desert today, along with the Tiramisu); however, I won’t be shacking up with her this trip. Am I going to have to stay at “the Hive” again? It’s noisy day and night in that place, and I never sleep well there.

Then my old NYC paramour and memorable damsel, Una Fandi, pops into mind. Not a Gypsy and not her real name (but a good name, a fitting name, because she’s a model, an a painter and a performance artist – and wonderfully freaky). An old flame, who goes back to my first days in The City all those hundreds of years ago.

Back at the Hive after lunch, Queenie has spread a pile of gruesome, old and yellowing B&W photos on the table. “Jesus...” I murmur as I sit down at her desk and pour another cup of coffee. People hanging from meat hooks, burned, stabbed, eyes gouged out, purple faces choked with piano wire and various unrecognizable forms of death.

“The people trusted these, their clergymans, and all get sold out.” Says Queenie. “Played.”

“Oh no....”

“All of crimes went down, all the years ago and all of his other holy man pals, they are all dead now. He’s the last one now. We want to get this guy. This is our last chance.”

According to the dossier, these good, Christian shepherds ratted out a whole insurgency of freedom fighters to the dictatorship bad guys and got them all smoked. Horrible pictures. Tortured, burned, murdered... in a weeklong orgy of savage cruelty, perfectly documented by the fiends who did all this.

“Wow.”

“All the homework is here, Harken. It’s been done, and it’s time for this debil to join all his buddies in hell, don’t you think. An easy job for you, you see? So easy. All the paperwork is already all made for you. You just drop in and make the settlement.”

“OK, fuck it. I’m in. Let’s see what we got.”

As we go over the target and his details, Queenie leans with her arm on my shoulder, doing it right in front of Tinka, who giggles slightly. Fortunately, Tinka is not the jealous or possessive type, God bless her.

Knowing that, I don’t brush Queenie away.

I pull out a picture. “Ok. Look here. Here’s a great nephew he hasn’t seen in decades. Kinda looks like me?”

Queenie scrunches her face, turns the picture left and right, closes one eye and nods.

“That’s my foot in the door. I just show up and be him.” Queenie leans further into me and nibbles on my ear for a second, then pulls away and lifts her head sticking her chin out, as she looks down at Tinka. Tinka chortles and puts her hand over her mouth. Looks like I’m in for a penny... and in for a pound.

“Get me all the info on this nephew. I’ll be sticking around The City for a day or two.”

“We get you all what you will need.”

“Can I get Catamuso for my wingman on this? Is he around?”

Catamuso is not a killer himself but a helper in many of my killing missions, sort of a squire/assistant to me really.

“No.” Queenie says firmly and decisively.

“Please?”

“What do you want with that fuckin’ dim-low shit-bird.”

“I take it that he is not one of you, then? Not a gypsy?”

“There’s no fucking gypsy there with that guy!” When Queenie gets mad, her English lapses and becomes even more broken, and more Jabba the

Hut. “He is piece of shit, man! When god sit down to take a shit, he – Catamuso – comes out. Poop! Catamuso!”

“Talking about God taking a shit, that might be a little over the top there.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean that. I don’t mean bad.” She makes the sign of the cross, only a little too, too quick to mean anything.

“You really don’t like the guy.”

Tinka is smiling at me and nodding her head.

“Ahh! He sold his soul to the devil.” She says, waving her hands.

“Now what...?” This is one I’ve not heard before.

“He sold his soul to the debil for candy when he was 8 years old – for candy! Catamuso! You don’t know that? He did do that. He sold his soul to the debil for candy!” she shakes her head, “Anyways he never comes up here to New York. Never seen him here.”

Cool, sign of the cross one minute, and the Yiddish word “debil” next. These Gypsies can be cultural and religious chameleons, absorbing all kinds of cultural fragments and elements of any and all societies as they pass through the centuries.

“Noooo,” I say in mock disbelief, “What kind of candy bar? Snickers? Baby Ruth?”

Queenie shakes her head, disgusted with the subject, “No, I no know that.”

“You know enough about him, you know so much about him... so I think he maybe is one of you guys, maybe he is a gypsy?”

Queenie grumbles and goes back to her desk.

“What’s the payoff on Quickjohn these days?” I ask, changing the subject.

“I don-ah even know that, dim-low boy. He not for you. You watch outa him or you wind up stupid and all amyrah like that dodo Catamu.”

“More than a hundred grand now?” I ask playfully.

“No, not nothing like that my peach.” She says emphatically and shaking her head as Tinka nods affirmatively in the background with a smile on her cute face.

Quickjohn is the “golden ticket” for all of us “Travelers”. Number One on the hit parade, target of opportunity, most-wanted-list, within our organization. A mysterious and almost mythical figure in our little world – Quickjohn is the prevaricator of numerous mass killings and a monstrous sort of super-villain with a price on his head, a price that we are all after.

She is conning me about the reward because she likes me and wants me to stay away from him? Or maybe she wants it to be a Gypsy that nails him?

I change the subject. “Now, this sky pilot, he’s down there on the Jersey Shore. Sure. So, well, he came into the world with a baptism, let’s take him out with a baptism too.”

“What’s that?” ask’s Queenie. She can feel I’m up to something.

“See, Jack likes to have an *ironic twist* to these settlements, right?”

“Ironic. What is ironic?”

“Well... Like if I do something stupid – something very stupid – and you’re... you are upset about it... and Trinko says, “well, that’s probably because he went to college... why he did that, did something so stupid.”

Queenie wrinkles her nose and shrugs. “So you do something stupid and she says something stupid. Bah. And that is irony. Bah!”

I smile and shake my head in wonderment and leave.

I ponder the mysterious Quickjohn and then the confounding Catamuso as I head down to what we call the “Q Room”. My new life has a lot of odd elements and surreal moving parts. And I like that.

The Q Room is nick-named after “Q” in the James Bond movies and his lair of gadgets and weapons. I have an appointment to upgrade the Jammer I have been using to a better, newer one. The Jammer jams and knocks out video surveillance and eavesdropping equipment around me when I’m in a secured and monitored area, and I need to upgrade to the latest. And I need to get another set of lock picks and skeleton keys, as I had to leave my last set behind in Washington office building about a month back.

Our team of experts sets me up with a few other cool things. My favorite is a new Sig 228 to replace the bigger and more cumbersome 226 I’ve been carrying... and this new one has the “can”, a screw-on silencer for late night work when you don’t want to wake anyone up. Also, I get one of the new Sig 365 pocket pistols that holds 10 rounds in the clip and four grip-extended clips that hold 12 rounds. I keep my P-938 because I like the external hammer when I slip it in the driver-side door-pocket of my car. I can keep it chambered and ready to use, where the hammerless guns will have to have the slide pulled back to chamber a round.

Next, I’m upstairs to the sick bay to see Dr. Blouie and give them my long overdue yearly bloodwork. My stigmata’s been acting up again, but I

don't want to be here all day, so I don't mention it. As I lie there hooked up to all the sensors and giving blood, he asks about some psychological stuff,

I mention to him that I've had some odd dreams, and he perks up attentively.

#1 – I go into a corner store and the clerk is covered in bees. I pay for a pack of cigarettes and leave. Outside I open the pack and another bee flies out and harmlessly off.

#2 – I'm at a cocktail party and I spot a hand, a disembodied hand like the one in THE ADAMS FAMILY, scurrying by through the crowd on its fingertips. Later it stops on the floor, right below the pretty girl that I'm talking to and lifts it two index fingers up as if looking up under her dress. She smiles and steps on it as it makes a squeaking, squealing sound.

#3 – I take a wrong turn and encounter a statue of a bear eating his own foot, in someone's front lawn.

He nods and dismisses them as perfectly normal and nothing to be concerned with. Glad to know I'm OK and nothing's wrong with me.

As he writes his notes, I notice that there's what looks like a mummy lying on a gurney across the room. I'll tell you now, I don't like mummies. I'm OK with clowns and walking/whistling past the graveyards, but mummies give me the fucking creeps. On top of that, the damn thing smells something awful. Smells like wet dog and fertilizer and a chicken coop.

"What the fuck is that thing?" I ask the nurse.

"Yeah, stinks, doesn't it."

"Egyptian? Is it an Egyptian mummy?"

She walks over and looks up and down at the chart. "Belgrade." She says.

WTF. A mummy from Serbia.

Later I sneak back in and try to look at the mummy's chart for myself, but the mummy is not there anymore, but the lingering stench repels me away.

Then I'm out the door and on the loose into The City.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AS THE CROW FLIES

ALL DOUBLE STANDARDS STRICTLY ENFORCED.

Sign over my dorm room door,
sophomore year.

Got to find a place to stay tonight. I call Una again. No luck. I leave a message.

I hit an old haunt that I used to hang out in back in the day; one of those dives that's perfect for a rainy afternoon. I used to know the day bartender, a student girl from a good family who had a nice flat in Gramercy Park that her parents paid for. I'm figuring maybe I can shack up with her for a day or two while I'm here in NYC. Shit, no luck. She's going to school in Portland now. I'm striking out on every turn of the cards.

I have a couple of drinks there anyways, musing over the memories, and I start fading a bit. All the action over the last few days, the stress, all the driving, the sex-ersizes of banging Tinka, and all the walking here in New York is catching up with me. And then I remember; *Shit! I forgot my ice cream! Fuck a duck! I was due to get eight scoops!*

I make a couple of phone calls to local hotels, but they are all full or they are asking insane, crazy prices for a room.

I go to a last-minute-hotel-room website, and they want to send me all the way over to the Meadowlands to find a reasonable room. It would probably take me two or three hours to cab or bus there through the rush hour traffic that's about to start up.

Then it dawns on me. Una. *She always has a key to her place hidden somewhere in the hallway outside her door.*

I can remember where she hides the key. And if not, what the hell – I can surely pick the lock. I know her well enough for that. Still, I'd rather use the key. I take a cab down to her apartment down in the meatpacking district. On the way I stop at a liquor store and pick up a six of Una's favorite brand beer.

I bang on the door. Nothing. And the key's not in the place she used to have it. I think for a second. Sure, you know what? She probably hid it somewhere else around here. If she takes it with her, she always loses it, so probably she hid it in a new place. Probably some freeloader friend (some other freeloader friend other than me) or some Ding Dong dufus she brought home drunk one night saw her retrieve the key and she had to re-hide it.

Sure enough, I find her key under a mouse trap behind a plumbing pipe down the hallway. I recognize it because it's still got a little bit of the green sticker from the hardware store from when I made it for her.

I put a note on the door: *Dear Una, I took the liberty of crashing here tonight because there's a convention in town and all the hotel rooms are nuts. So don't be freaked when you come in and find me here. I tried to call you and left a message. I just figured it would be OK. Signed Anthony.* I've found that if the girls call me Anthony instead of Tony, (like Robert instead of Bob, or Michael instead of Mike etc. when I'm working with a fictitious name) I get more stature and I get more slack. Somehow the full-name-thing makes them sort of respect you more. And when I'm staying with a girl, I usually leave them a C-Note or, sometimes, also a bouquet of roses when I leave. Which means when I come back in town, I take priority over other vagabonds and ne'er-do-wells who may be mooching at the trough.

I turn on the lights, look around, holler. No one home. *I'm relieved to see that it's still her place and someone else is not living there.*

Not much in the refrigerator. She's been gone a while. Some stuff is out of date.

Her bed is, as always, made tight and perfectly just like in the Marines, where you can bounce a quarter on it. Pretty good habit for a scatterbrain, artistic type.

I flop down on it, flip the TV on and start running through the channels. I hit a STAR TREK episode I've never seen before, and though its half over, I'm right into it. I am always thinking I've seen them all before over the years, but every now and then I run across one I've never seen.

After a while I doze off for a minute and then catch myself and bolt back awake. Now I'm thinking about going out tonight. *Or maybe it's best to just sit here chilling all night, and watch some TV? That would be nice.*

I look at the fan spinning slowly above the bed and it reminds me of the opening scene from Apocalypse Now. I envision myself getting drunk and smashing a mirror with my hand and rolling around and falling off the bed. Ah, the things we daydream. Maybe I'll have shrimp for dinner tonight at that place down on the corner where the waiter looks like Harrison Ford.

As soon as it gets dark though, the good old New York night scene beckons me. That's it. I'm in The City now, and I have no choice. I'm not waiting for Una. I'll leave her another note on the pillow. I hop up and get ready.

I'm coming out of the shower drying off and I hear the lock on the door turning. There's the temptation to stand there naked, pulling the towel off as she comes in, and holding it high like a toreador, but... what if she's in a bad mood or something? Or has a current boyfriend with her? A libertine like me learns these disastrous possibilities from experience.

But it's not her.

It's a girl, but not Una. Fuck.

"Hi."

She's curious but not shocked to see me standing there with the towel around my waist and hair messy and wet. She remembers to put the key back in the hiding spot in the hallway and comes back in bolting the door behind her.

"I take it you know Una and you are not a burglar." I say, "What's your name?"

"I'm Laser Girl. You're Anthony then." My eyebrows raise. She holds up the note from the door.

I nod.

She has a round head and a thin body, looks like 16 at first glance but probably mid-twenties when I look closer. Odd haircut and no ass or tits to mention. I would have to get her nerd glasses off and let her hair down to make a full assessment, but I'd say there's a slight potential.

“You gay?” she says.

“No. I’m just crashing here for a minute.” I smile. She’s standing right in front of me, looking me up and down. “I’m an old friend of Una’s. I...”

She takes a step forward and pulls my towel off. Just like that. She reaches down taking my junk in her hands – sees it’s not hard, and says: “Yep, yer gay.” And saunters away towards the fridge, laughing.

Amused, I shake my head and tuck the towel back on me. Amused, I stand there smiling. She walks back from the fridge, swigging from a beer – one of my beers – and she’s bringing me one too. Our eyes are locked. I don’t ask her where Una is or when she’s coming back, as my not knowing may make me seem unnecessarily suspicious.

“Who told you to put that towel back on Anthony?” she says as she whips it back off again. Standing there naked now, I cock my head to one side. Then she cocks her head to her side. I smile. I bring my body into hers, her cold belt buckle on my skin, and I gently grab her face. We’re both smiling. I remove her glasses with my other hand and then let her hair down by pulling the nabob on the back of her hair loose.

Just like in the movies. Not bad now. I think some girls dress dumpy or like a kid in order to protect themselves and then it becomes like the Clark Kent/Superman superhero disguise routine: walking around all frumpy and bland, then, rip it off and there it is. The bride in disguise.

And this is her wedding night.

She was a little shy, nerdy moppet at first glance but underneath, there’s a delightful and refreshing full-blown woman and monster-sex-fiend. Despite having barely passing curves, she has those nice, shapely legs, (like all the girls in New York as they do a lot of walking everywhere) and we have a delightful and refreshing interlude.

CHAPTER EIGHT

EXILE ON EASY STREET

*Whatever gets you through the night...
John Lennon*

A quiet evening at home is out of the question now. The night is young – and the night is a beast out there, biding its time and waiting. Waiting for us. Waiting to devour us. As the nights in New York city are wont to do.

“That was nice.” Says the Laser Girl, laying in my arms, lighting a joint and smiling dreamily at the ceiling.

“Excellent and refreshing.” I respond.

“Am I your girlfriend now?”

“No, I won’t be around long enough to have any girlfriends, darling.” I say matter-of-factly (and perfectly diplomatically). She makes a fake frown. “But you can be my sidekick! Tonight.” I have to be careful here, as once a girl defaults to possessive modes it will be hard to turn things around. This one gets right to the point which is great. I always loved NYC girls for their great, shapely legs (from walking everywhere) and their delightful frankness and candor.

“Wow.” She smiles. “Sure.”

In honor to her natural and candid sexual adventurism I'm bound by my own personal gentleman's code. She deserves that. My kind of girl. Blowing her off right now would be churlish and ungentlemanly. But I will have to lay down the rules, the rules of the game tonight – clearly, slowly and in all the detail.

"Hmmm. Maybe having a guide tonight *would* come in handy... but I always like to get the rules down from the start."

"The rules..."

"Yes. I'll have to now go over the rules for sidekick-ery with you. As you surmise, I respect a girl who gets down to business right out of the gate."

"You mean a slut..."

"As you put it, so it is. Sure. Trollop, strumpet, hussy, hoyden... but I prefer "adventuress". "

She smiles for a second as it all sinks in – that it's all a game – and she lunges up, delight and yells: "Yessss!"

I continue: "So, if we hadn't got off to such a good start..."

"...you wouldn't be volunteering to pick up the tab and you probably wouldn't even be taking me along with you tonight."

"Yes."

"Really. You rogue, you. But I think that's the opposite of the way it's supposed to work." She says in a witty, playful tone.

Well, Yes. Er... I am a contrarian..."

"Is that like a monk or something?"

"No, I'm always looking at both the *normal* way and the *contrary* way of doing things. I let everyone else follow the rules and proceed as expected."

Her "Calamity Jane" persona is beginning to grow on me, and though she's not my particular, textbook type woman, her sense of sexual adventure has elevated her now to princess if not quite queen status and she's an official "member of the club".

"OK! The rules. OK. Mmmmm. OK, I buy drinks, admissions, snacks... yes. But it's all on a corporate credit card."

"I mean my cards are all maxed out. End of the month you know, and..." She says theatrically like a flaming version of Blanche Dubois.

I shake my head and smile. "Madame, to make it clear – credit cards and money are not any bit the issue here. Clearly you have honored me with your essence and the flower of your bloom." She giggles at my faux-pedantic and Errol Flynn-ish tone "Sooo... it is my duty as a worldly and sporting gentleman to pick up the tab tonight. After all, a sex fiend like you

should always sit at the head of the table – my table that is – and she shall have... all chivalry and consideration proffered to her, and all doors opened for her. You have graduated from slut to mistress status, by gum.”

“Mistress. I like that. I’ve never been a mistress before. There was a good-looking Wall Street guy once who wanted me to be one, but he threw up all over my bathroom and we never made it to mistress.”

“Really.”

“I kicked him out in his underwear.” He must have been good looking because the memory of it causes her to frown. “But I was pretty krunk that night.”

“Now. The best bars are still expensive I imagine. What’s still here...”

“Mmmmm. We’re going to those places? Expensive? A fancy place. Mmmmm...I don’t have the clothes...”

“Yes, I want to go to a nice place. A nice place this early at night – now – while we can still get in and get a seat at the bar.”

“Right.” She says, thinking. She’s not going to get into the better places dressed as she is now, in the artist/grunge/wastrel format. “Welllll...”

So, comes the age-old “shopping” game again. *Let’s go shopping. Buy me some clothes.* She probably doesn’t even realize she’s playing that game. It just happens instinctively. I laugh to myself. Can’t blame her for trying. And she is right. Her Bohemian clothing would stand out in a nice, upscale cocktail bar.

Not going to happen though. See, the minute I take her shopping I’m no longer a “real man” but a mark or a client. And the girls, they do it – play this game instinctively – and they don’t even know they’re doing it some of the time.

It’s perfected as an old stripper game. You ask to get together after work. No, she’s got a dinner date tonight, or she has to baby-sit her sister’s kid, or she’s too tired... but Sunday she’s off! She will have the whole day. They will have the whole day together and they will have Sunday brunch at the Marriott across from the mall and then go shopping.

“I think it will be nice for you to dress up for a change, young lady.” I say authoritatively as I’m pulling my pants on.

I’m sure that she usually goes to the dingy, grungy punk, artist, loser clubs where everyone mulls around and beefs about their life, but me, I want to hit the golden world of glamor and 12-dollar drinks.

“You can go in disguise.”

“Disguise?”

“You’ll just wear something “Una”. Your disguise is Una!” I say, pointing to Una’s closet. C’mon girl. We’ll make an adventure of it tonight.”

She looks over at the closet and then back at me, smiling impishly. I wave her towards the closet with a nudge of my head and say: “You’re a little smaller than her, yeah, but you can make some of her things in there fit, I’m sure.”

The word “disguise” is a good hook. I think all crazy, young, art-school-girls would love gaming it out and dragging it up in a disguise and going out into the world in Mufti for a night of adventure.

But I still have to lay down the law now. Best to always do it ahead of time. It’s all in the rule book, The Gentleman’s Rulebook, which I have yet to write.

When she comes out of the closet all dolled up now, I nod and smile.

I clap three times.

She sits down next to me on the bed and starts to buckle her footwear. When done, I turn her towards me and give it to her eye-to-eye. “Here’s the deal: right now – right upfront – so we don’t have any misunderstanding later. If it sounds crass, forgive me. If you can’t go along, that’s fine. No harm no foul. We just go our merry ways.” I say firmly. “Sure, I’m buying tonight –drinks, admission... maybe some gum – OK, but that also puts you in on the side.”

“A side chick!? I’ve heard of that.”

“That means... you follow orders girl. Can you handle that?” She nods.

“You mean because we hit it right off the bat, right?”

“Yeah. I guess. Sure. 100%. We both know the game. If you had gone and played a lot of silly games with me, or played hard to get, you’d be fending for yourself tonight. For sure, I wouldn’t be spending a dime on you tonight.”=

“Wow! A new game for me. Cool. That’s the opposite of everything....” She smiles. “I like it.”

“Sorry but I’m probably the opposite of all the men you know.”

“Yeah, Why is that?” she asks.

I shrug.

"I know! You're an alpha!" she says delighted and self-absorbed.

"A what?"

"An alpha-male!"

I shake my head, "you've been reading those women's magazines at the hairdresser."

"I don't go to the hairdresser. I cut my hair myself."

"Whatever." I say, realizing it's obvious she cuts her own hair. "So tonight, you can come along. I've got the tab. And who knows? You may see some hot swinging dick..."

She smiles. "Who just broke up with the girlfriend..."

"And boom, you're gone. Yeah. Cool. Fine. Fine by me. *Bang, bang I got mine.* Good for you, I say. But..."

"But?"

"But if I see a girl, a girl I like... you don't get jealous. You can fade back and watch... or better yet, help me pick her up." Her eyes get wider. I smile and nod a wink at her.

She nods and smiles back. "So, you still wanna come?" I ask.

She nods, a little like she's giving into her darker side and we're fellow criminals now.

"And you'll follow the rules." I say sternly.

She nods her head sideways whimsically. "Maybe the girl's Bi and we can all have fun!"

I'm smiling inside. They don't make girls like this everyday. Maybe she should have her own TV show.

"I'll be a contrarian too. I'll do the opposite of everything..." she says.

"No, a proper contrarian must only consider the normal and the opposite both ... and then choose. Wisely choose. We are not robots following exact and precise rules like: *always do the opposite.*"

"You're so smart." She says, after a few thoughts run through her mind.

"And don't you forget it, youngblood."

"Of course. The human being has freedom of choice. And that makes us different from most animals." She replies.

"And from many humans too." I add.

She does her makeup and we're off. She's done her eyes up like Cleopatra – way over the top – and looks quite sexy and exotic now; a magic transformation from her scruffy art-student look. Perfectly whore-ish, vampy and slutty but also elegant looking, and I'm going to be proudly "wearing" her like a new Armani suit.

The first place we hit is called PHDs right around the corner from Una's. It's a rooftop place. These rooftop bars are all over New York now, rooftop bars on top of hotels or office buildings. It's a nice place. The décor instantly warns you that it's expensive when you walk in.

Not a whole lot of people here yet. A gaggle of girls off down the way having a birthday party. A few businessmen left over from happy hour. We sit at the bar.

The bartender asks me if I want a bar tab and before I can say anything Laser Girl butts right in interrupting politely: "No, no. We'll pay as we go."

The "bar tab" deal, as she informs me, is this new scam I've never heard of before. A "bar tab" is now where you pay one price ahead of time – a rather huge price – but you get to drink all night.

"The *Bar Tab* deal's a slick trick! They take your card and charge like 500 bucks. Now you can drink all night on that, all night for free – but that's it. So, see, if you decide to go somewhere else after you have a few drinks, you got a big bill. That is, if you notice it. If you do, you freak out and so you wind up staying here all night to get your money's worth out of the bar tab. They keep you here that way."

Wow. Laser girl has paid for herself already. "Good girl. We're probably *not* going to be here that long. Hopefully." I say. "I want to hit a number of places tonight Jonni-girl."

"Yeah. Nothing much is going on here." She says.

"No, it's early, but we'll give it a chance. But yer right, look at this crowd. These people are squares."

"Squares. Yeah."

"Might be fun to put some of them on, ya know, have some fun with them." I suggest. I'm not ready to go to the kind of bars she frequents. I still think there's a chance for me to find something at these "beautiful people" bars. Maybe not so much for her. Maybe a dumpy, middle aged boss guy with a gut and a wedding ring for her. Or maybe a shy, nerdy, office-boy kid with glasses and bad breath.

After a few drinks and a platter of sliders, we decide to split.

I go to the bathroom first, and then I flirt with a girl on the way back.

When I come back up on Jonni-girl at the bar, she's got a couple of suits-and-haircut guys hitting on her. They're there on her left side where I was sitting before, and so I belly up on her right, leaning into the bar and tossing down the last slider. One of the guys talking to her glances at me annoyed, (totally not realizing I came with her) and fearing I'm moving in.

Let's have a little fun.

I butt into the conversation: "Excuse me miss?" pretending to be a stranger, and as Jonni turns to me, I say, "Listen, hello there little darlin', um, I was sitting over there looking at you and, ya know, you're pretty cute, so I was wondering... well, I'd like to make love? Can we go down to my car? Wadaya say? Huh?"

She smiles broadly, catching on to the game I'm running. "Sure. What kind of car you got?" the two suitors are wide eyed and stunned.

"A Rolls-Canardly."

"Wow. Yeah, sure. Let's go!" she says. Then she says, "Wait a minute. Let me check your dick." And she gropes my epicenter. As she squeezes, she makes a deep purring sound, I'm tempted to turn my head and cough but don't.

As I help her put her jacket on, one of the civilians says: "Hey, I work at a dealership, now... and I've never heard of a Rolls-Canardly? What kinda game..."

I smile. As we turn to walk away, I say. "Rolls-Canardly: Rolls down one hill and can-hardly get up the next!" She laughs with an uncontrollable shriek and almost trips on her high heel. The guy that was sitting to my left and was eavesdropping everything guffaws with laughter too.

The joke is so old and so corny that these dips have never heard it before. Funny how people don't tell jokes anymore. 20 years ago, people still told jokes. Often memorized verbatim and out of the PLAYBOY jokes section or from HEE-HAW. Now I doubt if any of these kids even know what the fuck a joke is.

I glance over my shoulder as we go around the corner and they are standing there staring at us. "We put on a show for them, eh?" she says.

"It'll give 'em something to talk about at work tomorrow."

On the elevator down she says: "You like to put people on."

"Oh yeah." Seems I came up with a fun way to keep her from zoning out with boredom in these nice, upscale bars.

So, we hit another rooftop bar. It's right around the corner almost. The vibe is a lot more different now than when I was living here in the City

before. Or maybe *I* have changed. No doubt that I have changed. Now I'm outside looking in and seeing "the beast" for what it is. New York city, what a monstrous and banal grind of life.

As I sit there and look around at all the people, some dull and laconic, perhaps hungover from the night before, some animated and hyperactive: people on Espresso, Red Bull, and other systemic stimulants however contraband, I'm glad I escaped this madhouse and am no longer in "the grind". These people all have money or make a lot of it, all are spending it, and all are here because this joint is perceived by everyone else as the place to be. One day it will all be over, and they will have very little or no memory of it. Just a blur.

I learn from Jonni that she lives down the hall from Una, was molested by her history teacher when she was young, loved it, and went to college to study Marxism but it made her head hurt so she majored in Art. From her business card I find that Laser Girl goes by the name Jonni Chiffon but that can't be her real name. Like Una, she's an artist, though she mostly makes it walking dogs for a living. Gotta give it to her: surviving in NYC on a wing and a prayer.

She's broke right now because she invested her life savings, (\$140) with a fellow club kid named Madame Butterfly, (though Una and several of her friends calls him M. Butterfingers because he's always dropping and breaking things).

The 140\$ invention? "Mr. Butterfingers, I mean Butterfly Boy, is inventing a Death Ray!"

"A death ray...."

"...that can vaporize people."

"Vaporize?" I ask.

"Yes, its eco-friendly! Vaporizing leaves no remains to bother with and all the resultant pollution you usually get with a killing? Gone. They're vaporized."

"I get it." The New York artist community! An amazing phenomenon. It occurs to me that there is a whole sort of sub-culture of artistic and literary human curiosities in the city that exists in a world of its own rules, logic, and phenomena.

Turns out that M. Butterfingers is a real prince, a genuine prince from Madagascar. "Though at night he turns into a princess!" She says, giggling a little. She's looking at me out of the side of her eye, for my reaction. I just turn my head sideways, nodding and smiling a little.

"Ah, Butterfly. Yes. The transformation. I see."

She giggles.

Under further discussion I learn that she is addicted to crossword puzzles, and she's afraid to sleep in her apartment right now because of a mouse which ran across her face one night while she was asleep, so she's sleeping at Una's "until the mouse goes away."

"You ever think of getting a cat?"

"Oh, I'm too irresponsible to have a pet of any kind."

"Or you could borrow one?"

"But he might eat the mouse."

"That's the idea."

"Oh. Yeah."

Right off the bat I see my credit card has been overcharged on the first round: three drinks instead of two. I guess you can't blame these guys for trying. The bartender is deeply apologetic. I interrupt. "Dude, it's too early to get away with this kind of shit. Wait till everyone's flying." He nods and walks off. Probably new here.

She laughs. "See, I first stayed with Una when I lost my TV clicker – ya know, the thing that changes the channels? And we became best friends."

"Yeah." Ok, I'm mystified. "So..."

"The TV..."

"I couldn't turn it off and I couldn't turn it down. Turn the sound down."

I think for a minute and take a sip from my drink.

"So, I stayed with Una for three days. Until I found it."

"Couldn't you just have unplugged it?"

"I don't know..."

Soon I'm talking to an almost interesting dame on my other side of me. She's in investments and I'm picking her brain for any insider tip that might make sense. I figure 9 out of 10 "tips" are wrong turns, mostly intentional; to get you to buy something that's being pumped up before it goes down. She's OK-looking but I have no interest in her. She's not my type. But, who knows, one of her tips may stand out, and it might be interesting to hear about what junk they're pumping right now. It's going along well and all, but Laser is looking over my shoulder and then she orders a drink and points to me to pay. And I pay.

The girl asks, "Is she with you?"

"Yeah, pretty hot little thing, eh?"

“Is that your girlfriend?”

“She’s my daughter.”

“Your daughter. How... I mean how old are you?”

“Oh, I raped her mother – my 3rd grade teacher – when I was nine. Nine years old. Uh huh.”

“What?”

“I can tell you now because the statute of limitations is up.”

The girl shakes her head and walks off with her drink.

Jonni laughs and slaps me on the back. “That was sweet! You’re fantastic.” Says Jonni. “I love it. Ha! We love putting people on, don’t we! Yezzz!”

In moments, another empty beauty takes investment girl’s seat and soon we’re talking. She’s a Broadway assistant stage-manager and a bit of a club kid, a night life person and a trust fund baby. I ask her about the NYC clubs these days. A lot of the ones she names, I’ve never heard of.

“Good to know that Little Sister’s is still open. Maybe I’ll hit it later, maybe. What about The Barron?”

“Gone.” She says, saddened.

“Cielo?”

“Gone.”

“Ever hear of Finale? Number Eight? The Provocateur?”

“Sure, all gone. Finito. Toast.”

Her date comes over and taps her on the shoulder and she takes hers and his drinks off. As they walk off, he’s grilling her. “Who’s that guy?”

“An old friend.” She says.

The place gets going and soon it’s spinning faster and faster, like some kind of a carnival ride. Over the next few hours, we sit there bemused, and befuddled as we watch the amusement park scene before us fill up and glut with all the beautiful people. But everyone here knows each other, and I get no more nibbles on the fishing pole from any of the female strays and adventuresses.

Fairly hammered on the free drinks, Laser Girl falls halfway out of her chair before she catches herself. *We better get out of here, I think.* While she was dressed sorta sexy when we came in, the stagecoach is turning into a pumpkin here and her clothes are loosening up and looking a little goofy now, her hair is falling and her makeup’s a little smeared here and there. Worst of all, she’s making me look bad. But I’ve grown fond of the Calamity Jane personality and can’t bring myself to just leave her here.

“Where do *you* go to this time of night?”

“There’s some good places, sure... but – hey – I know there’s a good rave-party tonight – super hot – and I got the password to get in free.”

She starts to tell me about the DJ and how she nursed him back to health after he got injured and how he was a criminal before he met her and some of his sexual adventures with her, but I cut her off with: “What time’s it start?” I’m familiar with these floating parties that are held in a different basement or warehouse or soccer field every weekend but wondering how they’ve changed.

“It’s already started!” she says looking at the clock on her phone.

So, a cab ride to Brooklyn. Brooklyn. Well, shit. We’re going to be out all night. In for a penny, in for a pound, I guess.

CHAPTER NINE

CHASING MIDNIGHT

My heart to my mother,
my cock to the whores,
and my head to the hangman.

Jean Genet
Our Lady of the Flowers

At the Rave.

There's a pretty long line at the front door – maybe like 40 or 50 people but this *does* look like a good party. There're some hot looking ladies in line – you know – the kind men like, and some are all dressed out: sexy costumes, space ladies, vampire costumes, strippers, party girls...some are just kids, some are swells, slumming it.

Laser Girl stares at the line, looking it up and down for a few ticks and then takes me by the hand, off and away from the front. *Uh huh*, I'm thinking – *she's seeing too much competition in the line, too many hot chicks and so she wants to go?*

But no, she leads me around back where there's another line, the VIP line she tells me, maybe 20 or so people long. The rear parking lot area is down two floors below the front area so there's a wooden stairs going up to the rear door.

Besides the line to get in, there are people lolling around smoking joints, people sitting on the car hoods, and laughing and cutting up.

We get in line and immediately a girl starts throwing up right in front of us. Looking for the big dipper in the sky I see a shooting star going over. I feel my talisman around my neck but it's not hot. So no danger ahead. But it could be wrong. Laser Girl whispers that she wants me to call her Jonni here.

Laser Girl lights a joint and offers me a hit. "No, I can't get high right now." I beg off. There's too many ghosts floating around loose in NYC and any pills, pot or mushrooms might get me leveled out enough to start seeing them or attracting them.

"So, are you a cop or a drug dealer?" Laser Girl asks me.

"What?"

"C'mon, I saw your gun. Under the pillow."

"Oh yeah."

"Mafia?"

"No, none of that." I smile and pat her on the head reassuringly. "I'm... more of a clergyman."

"A priest?"

"Sort of."

"Cool! Cool, I just fucked a priest!"

"More like a hit-man. For the Vatican." I say. I can see the gears in her mind working. "No, don't worry. Not here on the job. Just passing through."

She takes a jar of peanut butter from her purse and scoops a wad of it out with her finger, licking it into her mouth. She offers me some. No.

The line we're in leads up to a wide, rather rickety wooden staircase going up into the back of the building two stories, with a sort of small landing or back porch at the head of the stairs and then there's a door going into the building with a guy taking money there. The guy is dressed like an executioner, with a black hood and is built like Conan (The R. E. Howard character, not the talk show host). He has studio wrestler arms, a beer gut, and a cat of nine tails hanging from his waist.

On the landing is a rusty, old, dented 50-gallon-drum with holes punched inside and a simmering fire in its pits.

"Fake ID!" the Executioner shouts out, waving the fake ID up high for all in line to see, and throws it into the smoldering trash can. But then he lets the girl in anyways.

As we get closer in line to where the stairs start, two girls try to cut in line a few people up in front of us. Laser Girl shouts at them, “hey! No cutting!” They glance at her but just ignore her, like she’s nothing.

Laser Girl gets pissed! “Hey! Bitches! You cut me? I’ll cut you!” She yells, as she pulls a hatchet, a small hatchet, about 12 or 14 inches long from her purse, and brandishes it at them. Stepping closer towards them, she tries to get a better shot at them, but they run away screaming.

However, the Executioner is striding down the steps now and grabs her hatchet. He cocks back and throws the hatchet up at a tree – a big old elm – and sticking it in good, about 20 feet up there.

“No hatchets!” he says to her, holding a scolding finger up and then goes back upstairs with no more ado. She takes her position back in the line next to me, all put back in her place. “It was them that started it.” She murmurs, and then the stunned crowd starts clapping for her. The executioner is even clapping.

When we get up to the door, she gives him the password.

“That password was last week.” He says sternly. She looks a text up on her cell phone, holds up another password to him and he nods, letting us in.

We enter, passing in through the door right into a big restroom. It’s a men’s room – there are urinals and all – but there are a few girls in there too: girls all over, doing lines, smoking joints, and what sounds like one girl getting her boots knocked hard in one of the stalls.

The bathroom attendant – a giant, 6’7”² Jamaican or Dominican guy – sits in a highchair by the row of sinks with his spread of merch laid out there on the counter below the mirror: candy, condoms, cigarettes, gum, vape stuff... a regular corner store. Jonni buys a cigarette for a dollar. A dollar for a single cigarette? But they do have her brand, Benson & Hedges Menthol Lights. He’s got it all.

Inside it’s a whirlwind-kaleidoscope of fantastic and madcap people. There’s normal people, swells slumming it and student types and the sight-seeing kind. We stop at a stage where naked and half-naked girls are getting painted on by artists, some good, some drunken amateurs.

A topless girl on a unicycle swipes by us. Swinging above on trapezes, glistening with baby oil we have some sexy, scantily clad girls. As we move through the crowd, I spy a fire-eater, vampires, angels with huge wings, a toreador, a guy dressed as a plumber, Han Solo walking arm in arm with a transvestite Chewbacca somehow wearing heels....

Then, right in front us we come upon a thick, mad-eyed, bull-dyke woman dressed as Oliver Hardy with a strap on, giving it to a handcuffed, obviously gay young man dressed as Stan Laurel. Poor Stan is bent down over a pool table, as a gathering of random people watch, curious, amused, and taking sips from their drinks.

His makeup features tears coming out the sides of his eyes and a sad mouth drawn on his face in a scream mode.

We find a place at one of the bars and order drinks. Before the drinks even arrive, Jonni goes over to a table – a hi-top table with three bumble-bee people and a Lego character sitting at it – and tells them something, while pointing off across the room. They get up and leave, going in the direction she was pointing in. She sits down at the table and waves me over. I grab our drinks and join her.

The floor show continues before us. It occurs to me that I might do better solo in this place. I point to a table in the corner, in a dark alcove area and say: “Isn’t that Robert Redford over there, sitting there all alone?”

“The movie star?” and she’s off in that direction, without even saying goodbye. I smile, amused.

After a while, a swatch of normal looking people come up and are giving me the eyeball: I have a table with one person and five chairs. They are obviously slumming, here tonight from up-town or from New Haven and hoping that I would give up the table. Yeah, sure... but one of the girls looks pretty hot and is giving me the eye – maybe sincere, maybe to score the table – but I hold my hands out and say, “Hey folks, join me!”

I manage to get up and pull the chair next to me out, proffering it in a gentlemanly fashion to the hot one.

They’re “slumming it” and I explain that I am too, just visiting here in the big city and enjoying myself. The hot one warms to me, now understanding that “I am a stranger here myself”. I’m getting good eye contact from the hot one, as is the rest of her party - now with a home base - goes out having fun while me and her hold the table down and “stay out of trouble”.

I’m making headway with the hot one, my looks are winning for a change (in NYC one’s looks are often not as powerful a card as one’s attitude), and she’s getting frisky and playing with her hair. She explains that her husband is waiting at home and she’s going to bring a stranger home to make love to while he watches.

“Do you like me?” I ask, right up front. She looks me in the eye amused. Then I say, pointing at her twirling, “When a girl likes you, she plays with her hair.”

Startled, she realizes that she’s unconsciously twirling some strands of her curly, light brown hair with her left hand. She smiles.

She further explains that her husband (who is at home) wants her to bring home a well-endowed Black man... but I finish her sentence with “...but I will do.” I guide her hand under the table to my “manhood” which is now “getting there” with all the sexy talk. “Mmmm.” She purrs.

“Give it a minute,” I say. “you’ll see.”

She looks me in the eyes with her big brown eyes and we hold the stare as she fiddles with me.

After a minute I’m good, and I whisper, “that’s enough.” And I pull her hand away. She gropes back, but I pull it away again. “No.” I say with a winning smile. “We’ll save that for later.” She smiles. Sometimes women love to be told “No!” the sterner the better. And I never miss a chance to do it. In college I used to practice saying no to women. In the mirror. I’d stand there in front of the mirror and say “No!” 30 different ways, just as an exercise. I wasn’t always an arrogant asshole, there was a time when I was shy about girls and terrified I would say something fucked up or clumsy and blow it.

I explain to her that her husband doesn’t have to even see me. That she can tie her husband up in the closet and we can make a lot of noise so he can hear us but not see me.

“Oh, he’ll like that.” She says. She takes a picture of my bulge with her cell phone and texts it to her husband. I kid her about something I don’t quite remember now and – as she laughs – she knocks over my drink and it lands in my lap.

“Well, well. Oh well, I have to go to the bathroom anyways.” I say and head off. However, as soon as I stand up my aroused state makes it hard for me to walk inconspicuously.

A few yards from the table, I ask a waitress (that turns out to be a young boy in drag) to point me to the nearest bathroom. Smiling and high as a kite, he grabs my nipple and pinches it and - looking down at my bulging crotch - asks if I need someone to “hold it for me while I pee.” “Not right now.” I say, diplomatically disentangling myself from the young bounder, who points yonder. “Looks heavy. Are you sure?”

I walk off laughing broadly, but still not knowing where the bathroom is.

Then I recognize a couple of landmarks: *Oh yes. The bathroom in the back – back over there where we first came in, after coming up the back stairs.*

On the way to the bathroom a robed Jedi Knight girl makes eye contact, and changes course right at me, as she looks intently into my eyes, and holds my stare. She's short but simply gorgeous, with thick, flowing, golden-brown hair. I'm a sucker for thick hair and she's got that girl from CHEERS beat, what's her name again? Kristy? Kirstie something? She glances down at my manhood, still aroused some, and then looks back, deep into my eyes.

Holding my stare, she comes directly up on me, intentionally and dramatically plowing right into me. And as she does, she reaches down and grabs me there. Seems like the New York girls have gotten more grabby since I was here years ago. Startled I breathe in deeply and stand there as we're eye-to-eye. "It's all wet." She says.

"Spilled my drink." She grabs my waist and belt and pulls me closer to her and kisses me. Her eyes tell me she means business. "Listen," I say. "I'm going to the can and clean up, and.... Dry off. Where are you sitting at?"

"OK." She says, "I'm over there." She points her thumb back over her shoulder to one of the back bars.

"OK, cool. I'll see you in a minute."

And I head off to the restroom. Halfway there I stop and think a second. She was getting pretty close, pretty quick. I pat my ass and my wallets still there and my cell phone is in its holster on my belt. False alarm.

I have to wait in line. There's a long line. Mostly women are waiting for stalls, the men are using the urinals. I get talking to a girl in a kimono with a Viking helmet. Time passes. Women take a long time to go, but now, we've been stopped here in our line for what seems like a long, long time. Eventually the Jamaican bathroom guy comes over shouting and bangs on the stall door. Two hot-looking lesbos, dizzy and twilighting, come out a few seconds later. "Go make out, out there!" he yells at them, pointing out the door towards the parking lot. "Fucking gat-dam people ha' to piss, you know!"

Joking around, I ask the Viking girl in front of me if she knows Hagar the Horrible. She frowns and stops talking to me. I'm losing it. I look in the mirror across the room, and even from a distance I'm looking shopworn, tired and my hair is sticking up wrong. I pat it down, but I still look like a drunk.

I notice that all the other people in line look 10 years younger than me.

Done and back in the main ballroom, I look around for the Jedi Girl but she's not at the back bar now.

And Laser Girl is no longer sitting with the Robert Redford look-alike.

I pull my cell phone out to call Laser Girl but... *IT'S NOT MY CELL PHONE!* Fuck! The phone in my hand is a piece of shit: cracked screen, five or ten years old, patched up here and there with various types of tape and the screen flickering with the music.

Motherfucker!

That girl. The Jedi. She got my phone. Pickpocketed me and slipped another, old, broke phone in its place. Shit. Fuck. All my shit's on my phone. Fuck. I can't kiss it goodbye. I've got to get it back. I look around.

What a dork I am, thinking that I'm such a hot-shot and all the girls automatically love me. Shit. I don't see the Jedi Knight anywhere. Maybe she's gone and booked out of the club. I'm all over the place looking for her. Nothing. Nowhere. That sinking feeling. Man, I fucked up.

I can call it? I ask someone to use their phone. They look at me like I'm crazy and walk off in a huff like I just asked them to kill their first-born child. I must look a mess and am feeling out of place as I notice again, that most of the people here are younger than me. Where's Jonni? I go back by the Robert Redford table and she's still not there.

"Where'd she go?"

He doesn't know. She went off to buy a cigarette and didn't come back. I go up to the DJ booth. I manage to get up there because of my apparent desperation and because the DJ's Jonni's friend and I remember his name.

He understands my plight, but no one has turned in a cell phone. He suggests they I can get another phone and download what was on my old one from "the cloud?" Fuck that. I want my phone.

"Sure, where do I get a cell phone this time of night anyways?" I murmur sarcastically. "Are there any 24-hour cell phone shops open now?"

He smiles and says: "Yeah." And he then says: "Oh sure. The bathroom back there. Go see Terrance." Pointing to the bathroom I just came from.

"Terrance?"

“Yeah, the bathroom guy. He’s got “burner” phones and sometimes used ones for sale. Yeah! Go ask him!”

I walk into the bathroom and there’s Terrance, with a couple of suburban chicks hitting on him and trying to score some free cigs. I’m standing there waiting to catch his eye and talk to him as the girls keep getting his attention. I look at myself in the mirror – what a sad sack – then my eyes drift down to the cell phones, he has five or six of them for sale, all setting there in a row above the cigarettes.

Then: *My cell phone! My fucking cell phone. Right there. Second from the left.*

I lose it. “Hey! Hey! That’s my cell phone!” and as I reach for it, his hand shoots out and slaps my wrist.

“Hey!”

“That’s my phone dude.”

“Is MY cell phone now!” he says, laughing like the cola nut guy. “heh heh heh!”

Fuck!

“Fuck dude! That one there is mine. It’s got my pictures on it.”

“That phone there, I get 100 dollah for! I mean, how I know it yours? You got a hundred dollar? That’s how!” he laughs. “Eh, mon, I pay good money for that cell phone already. It mine now.”

“Now fuck, that’s...”

To prove its mine, I tell him the code to unlock it and he does. “*Seeeee!*” I say as it comes to life! He laughs. I reach for it, now having proved its mine. He pulls it back and holds it high. “Is now \$200.”

“What?!”

“I have-ah the code! Probably lots of good pictures on here, eh?”

I have the Sig P365 in the small of my back... but I don’t really want to escalate this, not with all his friends and fans around him here, and with his Conan the Executioner buddy just behind him outside on the landing. I know that’s a bad idea from general experience.

But I’ve got to get it back.

Got to figure out a plan.

I’m not going to pay him 200 dollars for my own cell phone. On general principle, I’m not going to pay him a fucking dime now.

“OK motherfucker. I’ll be back. My girl has all our cash on her! And we got the two-fucking-hundred! Lemme go get it! Just hold it – hold it, and I’ll be right back.”

“Yah, yah! I hold it, monnnn.”

I turn and point at him with my finger, “You hold it, mon! Two hundred bucks. I’ll be right back. And no peeking!” I actually have the 200 on me but maybe Jonni knows him and can get it back for me? Maybe I can distract him while I grab my phone? One way or another I’ll need Jonni’s help to make something happen.

I go by the Redford look-alike’s table. I explain my predicament. *I lost my phone. I’m fucked.* “I know how that can be. That’s bad. She’ll be back.” He says reassuringly. He says it during a lull in the music, between songs. *Holy shit. That’s him. That voice. It is Robert Redford. The real one.* Cool.

But the phone, gotta get that phone... *The fucking Sundance Kid.* I murmur as I walk away. *Holy fucking shit.*

From up in the DJ booth (again) overlooking the place, I spot Laser Girl down there in the crowd. She’s sitting at a table with a couple of other young ne’er-do-well club-kids. Her head is lolled back, and she’s nodding out. The person to her left is also “pining for the fjords”, a chubby Black club-kid in a kind in a butterfly outfit with wings and his face painted with white streaks. To her right is a guy with a pirate hat on crooked and talking a speeding blue streak to his two passed-out table mates. Laser Girl has a magic wand in her hand, a nice one, with sparkles and LEDs.

Making my way down below, I try to shake her awake and explain the plan. She’s still woozy though. Out of the side of my eye, I see that the pirate is doing a coke spoon of blow from some kind of pendant he has sitting there on the table. I pick up the antique, silver, picture-pendant that is lying on the table with the face open and put it under Jonni’s nose. “Sniff!” I command! “Jonni, sniff it! Snort that motherfucker!”

The pirate’s head comes back down to eye level from his jolt, and he says “Hey!” reaching for his coke. I pull it back, away from his reach and with my other hand point my finger in his face and say, loudly, “HEY! Don’t grab!”

He rocks back confused.

I say, “It’s not polite!” as I set the neck pendant down on the table, a silver casing made from an old pocket watch. “There.”

He goes to pick it up and take it back, but I stop his hand, taking a firm hold of it.

I point at the picture in the watch face of the pendant. “That... is that your mother?”

He nods. “You are a mess,” I say with whatever scorn I can muster at this point in the long, long night. “You should be ashamed of yourself. A picture of your mother in your coke stash! Indeed.”

Laser Girl comes around and alive with a Calamity Jane whoop and a roll of her head. Alert now, I explain to her all about my loss. When she realizes it’s a stolen cell phone, she becomes as alert and alive as I am. To these kids these days, the loss of a cell phone is tantamount only to losing one’s soul... to losing one’s immortal fucking soul.

CHAPTER TEN

ALL ALONG THE WATCHTOWER...

I stick my finger in the ground
and spin the world around.

Rudy Ray Moore in DOLOMITE

So, my plan is simple. She is to go into the bathroom, buys a cigarette for a dollar (I have to give her a buck now, because she has no cash left at all) and then she is instructed to back up herself up against the wall and light the cigarette. *Right to the left of the door is a row of light switches on the wall.* I explain. She is to lean against the switches with her whole body and then, when I come in – just when I pull out money to give to the Jamaican guy – she is to slide downward, pulling all the switches down with her and pulling them into the off position, thus plunging the bathroom into darkness.

“Why don’t you just give him the two hundred dollars.” She says, as we walk along.

“On general principle, I’m not going to give that greedy pig one red cent. Fuck him! He got greedy, I gave him a chance, but he’s lost his privileges now! And that’s it!”

The plan goes well.

As soon as the lights go off, I pull my left hand out of my pocket with a roll of quarters (that cost me 20 at the bar) and my knuckles wrapped in some of that black duct-tape-stuff that musicians use, and that I nabbed from behind the bar when the bartender went to get the roll... and I haul back and I clock the poor guy right on the jaw. Fast like a snake striking. Wham! Like I'm punching right through his head.

He cries out, and as the light come on, the quarters are splattering all over the floor, people are screaming, Terrance staggers back, back towards the door to the stairs in back and stumbles backwards over the door threshold out onto the porch area and the stairs going down.

Outside there's like, only four or five people waiting to get in but they freak and flee back down the stairs screaming and laughing.

The Executioner there reaches out to grab the stumbling Terrance, but accidentally pokes him in the eye, and now the Jamaican howls and staggers back and falls ass-end into the big 50-gallon drum...

...which now tips over with his top-heavy weight, and rolls.

As the executioner slips, trying to grab out for the drum he – the executioner guy – goes over, slipping over the railing, with a yelp and then a howl of pain in the distance when he lands.

As the now top-heavy and rocking oil drum falls backwards and rolls – it rolls right down the staircase – clean but banging Terrance's head against the posts that are holding up the railing as it goes down, people running down and jumping over the railing to escape the burning drum spitting sparks out the holes in the side with every thump.

A sight to see and a YouTube moment.

I look at Laser Girl across the room. She's wide eyed, wide awake and with a real WTF look on her face.

Gotta go. As I leave, I drag my arm, sweeping all the merchandise off the wash-basin area and onto the floor and shout: "Happy birthday everyone! Everything's free!"

Cheers. Mayhem.

Laser Girl is bending down into the mob to score a pack of cigarettes, but I grab her by the scruff of the neck like you would a puppy and lift her up and out, as the bathroom denizens behind us melt into a scrambling, clawing mob. No way the Jamaican or the Executioner are going to make it back up and through that mélange of pandemonium any time soon.

I set her down outside and she says "That was poppin'! Wow! That was truly poppin'!"

She's looking at her cell phone as we scamper across the dance floor, holding her by her other arm. Cool. She got it all on her cell phone.

As we make it towards the front door to escape, a few bouncer-type security guys rush past us towards the bathroom area. It dawns on me that they may have security cameras in there, and probably cameras all over. And I don't have my security camera scrambler with me. As we move, I reach for my Sig, (now in my pocket) I chamber a round in the darkness and then put it back in my pocket.

When we get to the front door – we're making it out fine – and then one of the doormen – who's listening and nodding to his fucking earphone – reaches out for me and grabs ahold of my shoulder.

Then another doorman is on me and I'm struggling. I start sliding down to the ground. I don't like it. You never let them get you off your feet in a fight. I push one doorman off and back, and then I hit the other one – the one behind me, right into his face with my elbow. A lucky shot, I get him in the throat, and he starts choking and coughing.

Now the first one is back up, coming at me with an electric cattle prod a foot-and-a-half long in one hand and a big can of Mace in the other. It looks like they got me, but Jonni comes at him from behind me, screaming like a banshee and swinging another axe. Another fucking axe. Wow. I musta sure fucked that girl good, with her now jumping in here for me, like a tiger protecting her cubs.

She dives into him like a hellcat but tripping over the choking bouncer that's on the ground and they both – or all three- somehow roll into the crowd, flailing and knocking people over and around, all scrambling frantically.

The second bouncer rises up, squirting blood and screaming like a stuck pig. People are screaming and falling over each other as Laser Girl comes bolting out of the pileup like a Laser. She comes toward me and grabs my hand and we're off.

As she passes the screaming, clawing pile-up she reaches down and picks something up quick. *Damn, she had to get her pack of cigarettes after all*, I think.

As we head away from the maelstrom and the insane explosion of people fleeing the mayhem and bloodshed, I see the New Haven hot wife that had the kinky husband getting into a cab down the street with a Black stud in tow. Well, somebody's going to get laid tonight.

A little further we see some people getting in a car – an Uber: I can tell by the lighted sign on the dashboard – and I pull them out and throw Jonni in the back seat. They're squawking and so I hand them a hundred bucks and shout "Get another one folks! Got an emergency here!" pointing to the blood she has all over her now.

In the car, the Uber driver asks, "What's the emergency?"

When I don't say anything, she spouts out, "I gotta get him home and watch the Judge Wapner reruns! It's on in ten minutes." The Uber driver looks at me sort of confused and upset and I hand him a C-Note too. His face changes from outrage to delight and he says: "Where to?"

"Just drive." I murmur and I reach for the 9mm in my pocket as I'm keeping an eye on some menacing security guys off into the distance behind us who are scanning around me and her.

"What?" he says as he's turning the radio down.

"Just drive, he said!" she says, yelling over the music.

"I've seen that movie." I say, almost under my breath. "Karen Black and Bruce Dern. 1970 or 71."

"Yeah, but Robert Towne too. The screen writer guy!" she says.

"Really, he wrote that?"

Smiling smartly, she lightly donks me on the forehead with her magic wand. Somehow, she still has it after all that, and it's still in good condition. "He *acted* in it."

"No way." Says the cabdriver.

"And with Jack Nicholson directing!" she adds as I notice we're heading the right direction, heading towards the bridge. As we ride off into the night, I have a flashback and can see the cattle prod coming at me with the words "Con Ed" painted on it in silver paint, with lightning bolts surrounding it.

"How'd you get your fucking axe back?" I ask her.

"Oh, I always carry *two* now! They're always taking them away from me."

"Are you OK? What was all that blood? Are you hurt?"

"Oh, I'm good. I'm fine. I cut his ear off." She says holding it up in the dark. I see the cab driver glance in his mirror and squint just as the streetlight hits the ear and lights it up. He shakes his head and says, "Some swell dame ya got there pal."

Back at Una's now... but Una's still not home. "You know when she's coming back?" I ask.

“No. she’s down in... Buck’s County. A modeling shoot.” *She’s a model now, eh?* “The photographer’s pretty cute. So, it may be a few more days.”

“Buck’s County, eh?”

“Hey, you talked to her right? About staying here?”

I exhale. “No. You got me.”

“Breaking and entering. That’s cool.” She looks at me kind of suspicious. “I figured you were a criminal.” She’s looking in Una’s refrigerator. She takes a couple of TV dinners out of the freezer and pops them in the microwave.

“Whew,” she says, “I won’t be able to go to that party again for at least a month.”

“Sure enough.”

“Hey. I’ll be right back.” And she goes out the door.

She’s gonna call the cops? Nope, she left her cell phone right here. I see it right there as I sit down in one of the high standing chairs around the big, long, marble top breakfast-counter in the center of Una’s kitchen.

I check Jonni’s phone, but its password protected. Driver’s license says her name’s Olivia Noomis. Muncie, Indiana. I light a roach that I find in the cellophane of her pack of Kools. I’m figuring, after tonight I need to settle down if I want to get to get any sleep at all. If the ghosts come tonight cause I’m high... fuck ‘em. I’m done.

As Jonni comes back in with a carton of eggs and a loaf of gluten free bread, I notice the ear setting on the other side of the purse – on the counter there.

I hold it up as she walks by me. *Yep, it’s an ear Jeffrey. A human ear.* I think to myself. “This for your scrapbook?” I ask, as she turns around from the eggs sizzling in the frying pan.

“I’m getting good. I took that fucker’s ear right off with the first swing.” She laughs. She takes it out of my hand and hold the ear up to her mouth: “Hello? Hello?”

“Yer lucky you didn’t split his skull.”

She looks at the ear, dangling between her fingers and shrugs.

“Yeah.” Then, “If you weren’t drunk tonight, would you still have done all that?” she asks.

I think for a second. “Yeah.”

“Cool.”

Just before dawn I hear some rustling and look around.

Is Una home finally? I look around and don't see anything. No one there. Oh yeah, maybe a ghost.... Fuck him. Fuck all the ghosts. I'm sleeping. Go away ghost.

A minute later though, I sense someone still standing at the side of the bed. And the smell. Smells like burnt plastic and a gerbil cage. I look up and there's someone there. *A ghost, homing in on me because I burned the roach earlier?* As I roll over, away from the ghost, I bump into my phone, and it lights up.

I hear a gasp and a hick-up and I turn back, looking over my shoulder.

There's a skinny, weird looking Black guy on the other side of Jonni, a Black kid, probably in his teens or early 20s, with an Urkel looking face and glasses, standing there, with some kind of butterfly outfit on, a face painted in the Krumper style and with his junk hanging out. Is he the kid from the club that was at the table with the pirate? Jonni wakes up and is turning over in my direction, grumbling, "whuuuuu..."

"I think it's for you." I say to her and turn back away from the peculiar visitor.

She sees the butterfly boy club-kid and rapidly sits bolt upright, and he's standing there as he says, in a little boy voice, "My wee wee hurts. Make it betterrrr." She lets out a slight yell as she swings her magic wand at him – my back is to it all now, but I can imagine – and hits him, and he lets out a yelp, and takes off.

As he runs off, she scolds him, "Go Princess! Go now! You get out of here right now! Bad, bad Princess! Go away! Be gone!" As he's running out the door he's sobbing and she's screaming "Go! Fly! Fly away oh nasty boy!" He knocks off one of his bigger butterfly wings and lets out a high pitched "Meeep!" as he goes out the door.

Next day I'm heading south towards the Jersey Shore and my next appointment.

At least I didn't get vaporized.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A BAPTISM...

After a while you notice certain things.

The ghosts of drowned people have a balmy, pungent smell, like wet dogs. Gunshot victims come to you with a ringing in your ears. Children are usually baffled and sniffing.

Two men sit alone on the empty beach. Today it is overcast, breezy and barren. Offseason. They sit in folding chairs.

I am one.

My “uncle” is the other.

We are both movie buffs it turns out – me and this old man – which is why we’re not talking about politics or sports.

It’s a dull, boring, dead day: foggy, sullen, and still chilly. There is no one around as far as the eye can see. The Atlantic Ocean is flat, still, and silent. The old man has an orange in his lap.

“Tuco?” The old man shakes his head. “No... Clint Eastwood. Sure, Clint Eastwood is the leading man.”

“Remember uncle, I said: *the protagonist*.”

“No....” he says, shaking his head slightly. “Blondie is the hero. The protagonist. Clint. He is the leading man.

I smile politely. “Tuco is the protagonist because...”

“No....”

“Because he changes. He changes in the course of the story. He has a character arc.” I reply.

The old man gets a quirky look on his face and his head twerks a bit as he runs his finger inside his priest collar in an unconscious, habitual manner as if to softly say, “Well, just what is a *character arc*?”

“The arc,” I continue, “is the change the protagonist goes through in the course of the story. Maybe he learns something that changes him, you know, or maybe *we* see something that changes our perception of him. Say a man, bitten by love once, shuts the world out but then learns to love again. Or a boss who is mean to his workers learns that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

I can see he is thinking.

“The one who changes is the protagonist. The rest are all characters. Characters only. Like statues. Icons.” I tell him. “Moved across the scenery like chess pieces.”

He is looking off into the water, as he nods slightly. Then he smiles and says, “You catch more flies with shit than honey... my great grandmother used to say.”

Fucking smart-ass old man, and I have to love it. Smart. Smart to see that angle to it. Too bad that I have to kill this guy. I’m kinda liking him now.

Sometimes everything you see on the surface with a person is meaningless. People have two sides, sometimes more. Sure, sometimes what you see is what you get, but that’s not often.

And then you have the maturity factor. A person can be a real monster if they enter puberty or adulthood still having the emotional maturity of an eight or 10-year-old.

Of course, this guy was a very mature adult when he and his sky-pilot buddies ratted out the central cell of the rebel freedom fighters and turned them over to the banana-republic tyrants running the reign of Central America terror.

I didn't do the inquest but reading the report got my blood boiling. It's not just the idea that the Priest's rat-out forever changed the history of a nation. But the torture of the patriots and their families – all the innocent women and children – was horrific. Under the influence of the Yage, I could hear the screams as I read and then haunting me all into the night.

Right now, I can feel them watching us on the beach. Waiting. Hoping. Wanting to see the right thing be done and everything that keeps the spirits of the dead caught and chained here and in the border lands between life and death. Off in the distance I see them stirring in the misty, gray sky just above the water.

"Blondie doesn't change." I continue to explain. "But Tuco? Now he changes. He does change."

"Maybe the story is a sermon then." The old man thinks for a second.

"Yeah." I ponder for a bit. "Maybe every story is a sermon then."

He looks down at the orange in his lap but doesn't make a move for it. "But where does Tuco change? I must have seen the movie ten times. He is still a villain at the end?"

"A very good question, Uncle."

"Well then?"

I think for a minute. "Remember the scene where Tuco takes Clint Eastwood to a mission, you know to that monastery, where he takes Blondie to recuperate; to recover from that forced death-march in the desert?"

The old priest seems to be following me. His eyes furrow, in trying to comprehend it all.

"And then later on, Tuco's brother shows up," I say. "His brother who is a monk there at the mission, he shows back up..."

"Yes."

"And then they argue... Tuco and his brother argue."

"Yes, they are in an old place. Adobe and sand. Yeah." He recalls.

"We see them arguing about Tuco being a criminal and all, you know, and they are in this dilapidated basement place, like some storage place under the mission..." The old man nods: he's remembering now.

“...and Clint is watching, watching it all through the clapboards....” The old man pulls loose a couple of sections of orange in his lap and pops them in his mouth, then begins picking at the orange, peeling it further. As a priest I figured he would, of course, remember the only scene in the film with a man of the cloth in it.

“Now, in the beginning... in the beginning of the movie... the story starts with a long litany of Tuco’s crimes being read off, you know, as he is about to be hanged. So, no question that he’s a bad guy.”

Nodding.

“Then, later on in the story, after the basement scene and as they are leaving the mission, Angel Eyes and Tuco are riding off in the wagon –”

“Blondie! Not Angel Eyes. Angel Eyes is Lee Van Cleef,” he corrects me holding his finger up like he is the teacher.

“Right, yer right, I mean Blondie. I’m sorry. Anyways, they’re driving off from the mission – this is where it is – Tuco is bragging grandly about his brother. He doesn’t say anything about his bitter argument with his brother. No. He is telling Clint Eastwood how his brother is a big-shot there at the mission, how his brother is in charge there, like the Pope is in Rome even... and then...”

The wind flies up and the priest’s hat almost blows off, but he grabs It just in time.

“And then Tuco says the thing about – *‘it’s good to know that even for a bum like me, that there’s a brother somewhere who won’t refuse me a bowl of soup.’* And then Clint smiles, and he doesn’t let on that he knows the real deal or anything, how his brother gave him shit about taking off when they were young and how Tuco didn’t go to his mother’s funeral. He didn’t even know she was dead....”

I light a cigarette.

The priest begins to look amused as it all sinks in. “Ahhh... We see Tuco differently – so yes – There is the change there.” He gestures his hand out, “Changed in our perception of him. OK. He is a criminal – yes – but also a human being now... not just the vile, little rascal that we see at the beginning...” He smiles. “So he has an arc, then. Yes. We see his loneliness and his need to be loved, to be respected. That – that there- is the change.”

“I like that part, yes.” I say. “Tuco... his braggadocio is so sad, sooo pathetic. You actually feel sorry for the guy. It makes him *human* to us. He goes from... from being a one-dimensional cardboard caricature – a buffoon, almost a cartoon character villain to – to being a real human

character.” As a renegade and an outsider and vagabond and a bit of a bandit myself, I start feeling a little touched.

“So, why that? Why is it that way?”

I smile. “If you don’t have that, you don’t really have a story. A good one. Without a character arc, a story is just a series of events. A cartoon. A Road Runner cartoon. Its blah. Like bread soaked in milk.”

The old priest nods and smiles. He has learned something today.

“Sergio Leone... He’s the man!” he says, shaking his head and smiling.

“There’s a real professional at work there.” I say, “It’s all so invisible – invisible to the audience as they watch it – but it’s there and we absorb things unconsciously... and that is what makes it all work so well.”

“A true artist,” murmurs the priest, holding up his index finger eruditely. “And all this is not fair, at all.” He protests smirking. “You must have gone to some writing class in college or something.”

“I read a lot.”

The wind tugs on his hat again.

“It’s good you came to see me.” He eyes my cigarettes. “I don’t have much time left.” I feel like offering him one but then think *What’s the use*. He shakes his head slightly, pondering the fragments of the destiny he has left at 81-years-old. “My mind wanders. I can remember what I did 40 years ago, but I can’t remember what I came downstairs for when I get there... or what I had for breakfast.” He slips his silver flask out and takes a swig. “I just don’t think I have much time left. I have strange dreams. I wake up in the middle of the night. I’m swearing. Sweating. Sometimes I hear voices.”

I kind of wince, and squirm in my seat a little, as the irony of his words hit home. *Hear voices? Man, I’ve heard an earful of voices this last week. I think to myself. The dead have been talking. Talking a blue streak and it’s all been about you, dude. You and your cronies. And all the deaths all your big blabber mouths made happen.*

“Voices.” I say solemnly, instead of with surprise or incredulity.

He picks up on that. He thinks for a second, and he says, “You didn’t come here just to see me.”

I shake my head.

He reaches over and takes one of my cigarettes from the pack. Lights it.

“I haven’t had a cigarette in... six years now,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Go ahead,” I say, motioning to the pack. “Why not....”

*I guess any condemned man is entitled to a last cigarette. Even him.
And one last good conversation.*

I look out to the sea. In the distance, I can see a freighter faintly moving down the coast in the morning haze, as the ghostly muses fade and dissipate and then reform as it passes. We’re sitting on beach just north of Boston. It’s the off-season; the weather’s been messy all week and perfect cover for the “haints” out there fading in and out in the haze.

The game of cat and mouse is over, and he feels it. He knows something bad is about to happen. Arrest? Jail? A confrontation and a good scolding? Nope. No such luck for Father Mickey.

“I came to take a walk with you, Father.” He turns to me with stiff, stern look on his face. He looks down at his feet and his head has a slight shake, as if his Parkinson’s starting up.

I rise up from my seat and take a stand in front of him. “C’mon. Let’s walk, Father.”

I hold both my hands out to him – down to him – and pull him up, bringing him up out of the seat.

I knew a little about him from my research of his case but had to hoof it when he asked about his sister (who is supposed to be my mother). He said he hadn’t seen or talked to her in 10 or 15 years but I’m sure there were a few details that were glossed over but didn’t quite ring true.

Standing, he’s a little unsteady and befuddled for a second. Then he takes my hand, and we start walking down along the beach.

I walk a few steps and stop.

He stops.

He turns to me.

I point out to the ocean.

But he looks down. He can’t bring himself to look out at the ocean.

Not now.

“You’re *not* really my nephew, then. You’re not Gracie’s boy.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“This isn’t about the parking in the handicapped zone without a sticker...” he says with a trace of hope in his voice.

I put my right hand over on his shoulder and take his left hand in mine to walk with him, guiding him.

“You were a shepherd of the poor. A shepherd of the people.”

I am walking us into the water now. He looks down at the splashing. His shoes and cuffs are splashing.

“Always. I loved my people,” he says, looking up.

I know that’s a load of shit, and I smirk.

“And you *sold them out*. You. You sold out all those people.” I’m shaking my head, looking down too. “All those brave, wonderful men and women; your people, your friends – people who trusted you.”

“They were traitors, my son. Betrayed... betrayers of the state.”

“They were human beings.” My voice cracks a bit. “And... they were patriots. Patriots and freedom fighters.”

“Maybe we know that now...”

“And you knew that then.” He stops walking and is catching on, as we stand there at the edge of the slightly lapping water. “You know what you did. Your words, you and the words of all your friends – all men of the cloth. Your words sent the death squads. Your words pulled the triggers. Your words dug the mass graves... all those years ago. And all that did not go away.”

The partially peeled orange falls from his hands Into the shallow water, splashing. It was spiked to make this all easier and he’s kind of stoned now, anesthetized.

“And now they are waiting for you.” I say.

I raise my arm and point out to the sea.

“Out there?” His voice sounds soft, thin, and bewildered, like a naïve child, as his head turns from me out to the foggy ocean.

“Yes. You hear them calling now. I can.”

“You can hear them, too?” he says.

I nod.

“And you’re here for them? On their account?”

I nod again.

“Who... who hired you? What is this about?” We’re wading deeper into the water now, and he’s not resisting. The water is cool, even a bit cold today. “They are all dead and gone.” He says, “Everything’s over with. Maybe... shouldn’t the police... are they coming for me?”

I smile. “And the other priests... they’re all dead now too. You’re the last one.”

“You’re here to take me, too...” He hangs his head with resignation, numb to it all now.

“Think of it this way, Father: finally, the waiting is over. You no longer will worry about all those bad things that happened all that long a time ago. You will... be free now.”

We’re up past our knees now. The sound of a seagull passes above. He looks up.

“So, this is revenge, not justice,” he asks.

He looks up into my eyes. I make a clicking sound with the side of my mouth, wink, and point my finger at him. *Yes*.

Earlier, in our “movie buff” conversation, we had talked about revenge. He felt that revenge always made for the best kind of story plot. I agreed. Then we talked about how revenge and justice were different. “*Justice can be merciful... forgiving. But revenge... revenge never is,*” he had said.

Funny how that works.

“So, there’s no mercy for old Father Mickey?”

“The checks already written. Already been cashed. Look, Father, you will be setting them – all your victims – free. You will be ending their anguish, their suffering... and your sacrifice will... set you free, too.”

We are up to our waists now. He’s slowing down. He stops and turns to me.

“You’re not dead. You’re not one of them. You’re from the church then?”

“No.” This *is* an ancient ritual of the Catholic Church. One of the last surviving rituals of the Spanish Inquisition, but I’m here to settle things... for them out there, who are calling you now. I am a sort of ‘hit man for the dead.’ I set things straight so that those unquiet souls out there are released and can pass on.

“You too are a priest?”

“No, I’m no priest.”

He looks at me, confused.

I smile.

“What I do is *not* what a priest can do...” I say. “...or should do. Father, I avenge the dead; the wrongfully slain. I avenge them so that their

innocent souls can pass on and find peace. That is my work, Father.” *And this is my life now.*

The cigarette falls from his mouth, hitting the front of his black coat and sprinkling ash and embers as it trips across the cloth and into the water with a sizzle.

“The innocent, Father. Can you hear them calling now?”

“I hear...”

“No one else can.” I smile into his eyes. “Just you and me.”

“Wow,” he says.

Wow? It seems to me, a strange thing to say right now, and the childlike wonder and the surprised innocence to his tone throws me off. But sometimes people come “off-track” when they are where he is right now.

He’s getting weaker and sliding down in my arms, losing both will and strength. I hold him back up, straighten him.

We’re getting up to our chests now. I slap his face. I don’t want him to faint on me.

“So, there is an afterlife?” He’s staring deep into my eyes, deep and beyond them even. “There *is* an afterlife... and forgiveness?”

I’m silent.

“Forgiveness?” he said faintly.

I smile and shake my head. “God forgives – I don’t.”

He gets a stunned look, his head rocks back and forth from one side to the other, and he blurts out. “Terence Hill, 1967. Bud Spencer, too... I think?”

So much for trivia night on the misty morning beach. I put my hands on his shoulders and take a place in front of him.

“Are you ready, Father?”

He nods.

I push him down. He is resigned to it. Doesn’t fight it at first, but as soon as the bubbles start coming up, the survival instinct kicks in, and he starts bucking and grabbing at me. I’ve done this kind of thing before and understand how it all works. I keep him forced down, bringing my weight to bear.

He expires.

He’s dead. His body is dead and floats up, face down and then flipping over.

“You came into this life with a baptism, and now you go out with one too, eh Father?” I say to the dead man, his eyes, one half closed, the other wide and frightened: kind of like a drunk with his hat on askew, only now just the expression is askew. I wipe my palms across each other in a gesture of finality. I smile at the irony I’ve performed here this day.

I look around, up and down the beach.

No one.

As far as the eye can see, no one. In the far distance a stray fisherman, not much bigger than a dot, casting his line into the water.

No one else. No one saw.

I go back to the car and get the broom, walk down to the waterline, and I sweep my footprints from the sand, leaving only his.

The job is done.

A perfect “suicide.”

His body is floating out to sea. Floating out there to them, his victims. The orange remains in the shallows bobbing slightly, as solitary, adrift and alone – as alone in the world as I am now.

When I get back to the car, I light a cigarette then descend into the front seat.

There is silence and an everyday peacefulness all around me.

As the window rolls down, I blow the first lungful of smoke out.

A seagull in the distance....

Investigation closed.

So, this is my life.

This is an estranged life: killing people that you just met. How do I do it? Traveling here and there. Talking to the dead. Investigating their murders. Creeping, lurking, observing... Up all night examining murder scenes. Picking locks and sneaking into a suspected killer’s condo. Going through their shit. Old receipts, examining their drugs in the medicine cabinet, checking their arrest records on the internet, looking through their porno in the nightstand by their bed, getting DNA from strands of woman’s hair in a shower drain.... Waiting for the right moment. Planning the killing.

I like to make my “settlements” ironic. A life that starts with a baptism and ends with a drowning.

This is a strange, lonely life.

Sometimes I feel like an alien. A creature from another planet visiting here and just drifting about, waking up every morning and taking it as it comes.

Detached.

I am detached.

Detached from life, from a normal, everyday life.

I’m like a planet slipping out of its orbit, slowly, and off its axis into space...

...or like the orange back there, floating out to sea and into a meaningless oblivion.

This is the life though. The life of a nameless, invisible, wastrel. Adrift. Unhinged. On the make. A rootless, vagabond serial killer.

I live out of my car, stay in cheap motels, wandering, and bouncing around from place to place, shitty city to shitty city, kill to kill... like a pinball in a pinball machine.

I watch movies in the afternoon all by myself when no one else is in the theater. I judge and decide between life and death for strangers who have no idea who I am.

This is an ugly life, a rotten kind of life... and I love it.

This is me now. And I really like it. This is my own private Idaho. My Rapture. My strange and certain doom. My story. All in slow motion, and Cinemascope.

This is my story, what you are reading here. Or journal really. Yes, my journal. My exploits. My own personal take of what happened in the spring of this last year, and a personal experience, well worth recounting.

But a story is crafted, well thought out, sometimes even a work of art. This thing of mine is more of a mess, a wandering, an escapade than a duty or a vocation. As is my life. My strange and ill-fated life.

I look over at the brown bag sitting next to me in the front seat with two bottles in it. On the way to the beach, jolly Father Mickey had me stop

at a liquor store, and he bought two bottles of Glenlivet. I grab the open one, the one he topped off his flask with, and take a swig.

Good stuff. I look at the label. The 18-year-old stuff. Not bad.

Ahhh... a man of class and distinction.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FOLLOW THE DANCING BALL

*Some people lose their soul in war, some people
sacrifice their soul for love or honor or penultimate
wealth.... I lost my soul in a fucking card game.
In Tijuana.
On a Tuesday night, for the love-a-Mike.*

I'm heading south.
Weather's gone from bad to worse.
Foggy. Waves of rain. Early darkness.
Bad traffic out of NYC and hell around Trenton.

There's a big Memorial Day family-get-together in Jacksonville, Florida this weekend. It's my mother's side of the family. They have a big farm – 'The Ranch,' they call it, because they have a lot of horses and they all like to wear cowboy hats and boots down there, ~~like~~ as if they were in Texas.

As the college radio station I was listening to back in Boston fades in and out, I start to hear a strange and curious song wafting in.

Is it a march? An anthem? It's an old song. Sure sounds old timey. The words are in... Spanish? Sounds like a song I've heard before almost, but the Spanish throws me.

I use my imagination and I can hear them better.

It is a salute to me: a song – however faint – a song of the patriots I avenged back there on the beach. They are singing to me, singing with such gusto and resolve that it touches me deep inside and I am their hero.

A catchy tune.

I start to sing along. Louder and louder. They have died and they are fading, forgotten and into the great unknown – but not unavenged. They are sinking into the waves of history. Fading out of the Borderlands and on up to find peace. Everlasting peace.

Soon the song itself fades back into the darkness of radio static and silence.

Maybe they didn't like my singing.

LOL.

I make it to Baltimore and crash.

Goodbye yesterday, hello tomorrow.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE PALE, WHITE EYES OF A DEAD MOUSE ON A COLD, GRAY DAY

*“There is an infinite amount of hope
in the universe ... but not for us.”*

— Franz Kafka

Waking up.

It’s about noon, and after the maid came in three times – rattling my door and then ducking out when she hears me groan – but I’m now awake.

I’m in a dingy, el-cheapo motel right off the highway exit.

Thin walls.

A dark morning.

I roll out of bed and light a cigarette.

Raining outside.

I have a bit of a hangover. I was sipping on the Glenlivet all the way down the Jersey Turnpike. When I got sleepy, I got settled in here... and then I couldn’t sleep. I watched TV till 4 AM.

The hangover's not that bad though. Not when you have a good bottle like Uncle Mickey's in front of you. It's just kind of a cloudy haze, no throbbing, no bullet-riddled pain.

Why didn't I put up the do-not-disturbo sticker thing on the door handle...? And keep the maid out.

There was something... something I did last night.

I'm trying to remember now. I came in pretty tired. Let's see, there was a dripping sound in the bathroom or somewhere. It was keeping me awake.

So, when I looked under the sink for the drip – what the fuck – there's a dead mouse. So, I had to use the plastic do-not-disturb hang-thing to pick up the mouse and throw him out in the middle of the parking lot.

Then I smoked a cigarette, staring at him in the night rain, and almost fell asleep standing there in the doorway.

Never did find the dripping. Just forgot about it, I guess. It's gone now.

I go to the window.

The window screen almost falls off as I pull the drapes back. Dark day outside. Rain and cold. Shitty, dirty weather. I'm just outside of Baltimore somewhere in the middle of nowhere at some bleak unknown expressway exit.

Across the street: a Phillips 66 gas station and a Waffle House. A truck goes by. A muffled *THUMP* comes from the room upstairs. A drop of condensation rolls down the windowpane in front of me.

No dead mouse lying in the parking lot now. *The cats or the rats musta got it.*

The mouse had white eyes. Guess he was down there under the sink for a while... and then his eyes turned white?

But what if he was blind? And that's why his eyes were white....

Heh heh. Now there's just *two blind mice*, right?

Gotta be dealt a bad, bad hand to be a blind mouse.

Hmmmm.

How does the blind mouse live – a mouse born blind – he's really got to have a tough time of it, don't you think?

And who would bless the poor blind mouse with blindness?

I'd like to believe that all blessings aren't also a curse too.

Seems like most of my blessings were also curses, though. No doubt about it. Perhaps blessings are what you make of them. This trip, I'm going to make the most of it.

I look at myself in the mirror. What a hot mess. Bad hair day. Getting thin again lately, getting all lanky and lean. And shabby looking. Clothes getting loose and hanging. Hair getting wild. Bushy. Need a haircut.

"How the fuck is your character arc doing, Anthony?" I ask to my face in the mirror. I guess that's what I'm really looking for: my own story arc. Maybe that's why I'm wandering around the country bouncing here and there like a pinball. My elusive and mysterious arc. Where will it take me? Love and riches? Oblivion and doom? Sudden death and a shallow grave?

Do I even have a character arc?

Maybe not. But they say that the easier an arc is to see the more worthless it is.

So, why don't I walk across the street to the Waffle House and eat breakfast. Yeah. First some Alka Seltzer for the hangover, though. Brush my teeth. Smoke a cigarette. Strap on the gun. Turn on the TV to keep strangers from bothering the room while I'm gone.

I dance across the street between the raindrops. Three eggs over medium, waffles, iced tea.

The nice smell of coffee.

Windows all fogged up.

The rain.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

INTERESTING VISITORS

“I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die...”

Johnny Cash 1953

I’m two exits down I-95 and I remember that I left my iPad and charger plugged in back there at the fucking motel.

I get back to the motel...

I pull into the parking lot....

But I hesitate. I sit there. I’m thwacking my plastic room key between my fingers. Something’s wrong with the picture. What is it...?

In front of my room there’s a car – a car that doesn’t really belong there.

Why? *It’s a nice car*, clean and big. All the rest of the cars in the place are hoopties and shit-sleds: all banged up, dirty, old, unwashed... faded bumper stickers. Ones with different-colored hood and quarter panels and peeling paints. It’s a cheap motel, I told you that. So, what’s this almost

brand new, polished, creampuff, showroom perfect, beauty doing here? Here in front of my room. My internal radar alarm is going off. My first instinct is that it's some kind of cop car. Detective types, plainclothes....

I pull into a parking spot at the other end of the lot and sit. Eventually a guy comes strolling out of my room. *My room from last night. What kind of fuckery is this?*

He looks pretty straight: suit, tie undone, sunglasses.... not quite a Men-in-Black look but – ya know – he's getting there. Cops? Government boys? Men in Black?

He pulls something I can't make out from their car and goes back in the room.

I sit there, frozen now and watching from the distance for a minute.

The car has one of those fins on the trunk, an antenna fin for some kind of high-shit communication gear inside, and it makes it look like a limo, but the car's not quite big enough to be a limo.

They're coming in and out of the room; one is talking on a cell phone. The other goes into the backseat of the car and gets something electronic-looking – something about the size of a meatloaf – and then he goes back into the room with it.

Then they come out of my room talking sharply, arguing. They are so into the squabble that they don't see me watching from my parking spot off down the way from them. They get something else from the car and walk back into the room again, jabbering away.

The pendant around my neck is acting up now, sending itchy, scratchy electrical surges into my chest like a little kid tugging on you sleeve to get your attention.

I go into my trunk and put together a little surprise of my own for them. I rig up a bomb in a small computer bag. A sort of delightful, explosive cocktail. I can set it off by timer, tripwire, or remote control, and I program the remote function.

I look around. I spot a pushcart that the maids use to clean. I put on a knit cap and an old fleece sweater from my backseat and nab the pushcart while the maid is busy in one of the rooms.

As I pass their car in front of my room, I throw my remote-control bomb surprise right in through a fortuitously open front window, into the back seat of their car.

Made it. They didn't see anything.

I continue to wheel the cart off down the way as I watch out of the side of my eye and stop to sweep up some cigarette butts into the maid's dustpan, the kind of dustpan with a long handle so you don't have to bend down so far.

Finally, they come out, get in the car, and take off.

After they're good and gone, I go in. They didn't even take the iPad, but they messed with it. It's been moved around.

I look over the room. Nothing unusual. But there's a strange smell in the room: a bad, chemical smell. It's worse in the bathroom. I walk around. I smell the sink. It's there, too. It's coming from the toilet too. I flush the toilet. Something burps up and swirls up a bit, and then it all goes down. WTF was that!?

I hear a noise behind me.

It's the maid. Fuck. I almost pulled my gun on her.

I smile and leave, grabbing the iPad on the way out.

Beginning to rain again now.

As I'm heading back to my car across the parking lot, out of the side of my eye I see the sinister black car with the fin antenna lurking, parked across the street. They came back. Who the fuck are those guys? They're watching me, but I pretend that I don't see them, and I get in my car and go.

I'm a pretty good wheelman. They're following me a ways back there for about 10 miles. When we hit some thick traffic, I conjure up a bit of roadway acrobatics and sleight-of-hand. I manage to disappear and slip around and off. Three lanes of traffic. With a little traffic magic, I wind up back behind them.

Now I'm watching them from their rear, and they think they lost me. They're arguing and looking all around for me up in front of them, heh, heh, heh. I enjoy this for a few ticks, and then, as the traffic congestion fades a bit, slide up to right alongside them. I ride there for a bit, with them not noticing me.

Then, after a few major exits, the traffic really thins out and we're both kind of alone on the highway.

So now, I'm just happily riding along beside them; they're talking a mile-a-minute, a bit frantic, and tripping out, then finally, the driver just turns and sees me.

I wave my fingers at him. He grabs his buddy's arm. Now they're both looking at me, stone faced, sinister.

Seriously, I have no idea who the fuck these guys are.

I speed up a little. They accelerate, keeping up with me. I speed up a little more. They keep up. We're doing 80. Then 90. I want to lure them into going at a good clip.

We're parallel again, just speeding along next to each other.

I motion to my backseat and then point at them – and then I point towards their backseat.

They catch on, and the passenger looks over into their backseat. He sees my “surprise package” and he starts reaching back there for it. He pulls the computer bag up front with him, looks inside and starts to roll down the window. He's going to throw it out.

Fun time now. I put one of those paintball grenades in there, similar to the kind that banks put in the bags of cash when they get robbed – but the max one, and I push the remote-control ignition.

The paintball-bomb explodes...but that's not all – I put a couple of cool, hi-tech bottle rocket/roman candle-type devices in there that are going off now, too!

The paint covers the windows perfectly. They cannot see where the fuck they are going. They don't know whether to shit or go blind. The fireworks are bouncing all around in the car. I imagine they are screaming at the top of their lungs.

I am now laughing out loud.

They are trying to slow down, trying to get control, and I'm beginning to move up past them. I swerve and give them a tap, and then I punch it and go on beyond them and off, as they start to fishtail and swerve from my nudge. They catch some of the shoulder – they correct – but correct too much – they're still going fast – and then they correct so much the other way that they start digging into the grass on the side of the road, and the whole car just starts flipping.

I just keep tooling on. Good riddance.

Who the fuck were those guys?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE PASSWORD IS SWORDFISH

Monotony, boredom, death. Millions live like this (or die like this) without knowing it. They work in offices. They drive a car. They picnic with their families. They raise children. And then some shock treatment takes place, a person, a book, a song, and it awakens them and saves them from death.

Some never awaken.
Anais Nin

I'm heading south and feeling good.

I think maybe with each of these "settlements" I get a little piece of my soul back. At least that's what I tell myself. I can sorta feel it... maybe, and I'm feeling better and better almost every time. Maybe my imagination.

When I actually lost my soul three years ago everything seemed to change. Everything changed for me: my dreams, my energy, my connections to humanity, even my sense of smell... for a while there, I

couldn't smell for shit. And I was sort of empty inside, empty and my heart was cold.

It's so easy to take "feeling good" for granted.

Now I think it's all coming back. Little by little.

Sure.

I reach down and finger the ancient amulet that I was given by a Catholic Priest three years ago to protect me in my quest to get my soul back.

Today I have no choice but to believe all that, considering the predicament I'm in.

Outside of Richmond I get a text from Big Red. She's in Hagerstown, Md., and she texts me that there's some good stuff there in the "settlement" she's working on, and that I should come by if I'm in the area. Naw. I'd have to back-track.

But then she shoots me some pics of some cool stuff. The kind of stuff I like: slabbed coins (slabbed: coins in sealed, plastic containers, by companies that assay them to condition and value) and old banknotes, and there in the background, I spot some golden age comics and a couple of real interesting-looking samurai swords.

I'm turning around and I'm on it. I always have good luck when I pick up samurai swords.

It's Sunday so there's no afternoon rush hour traffic in Hagerstown. Weather's cleared up, the rain's blown through and it's a bright, crystal, sunny day, but windy and kind of cold and brisk. The town is quiet. I'm cruising and whistling and blasting the radio with the window down and my hair blowing. I'm going to see Big Red – Big Red – and she's always happy to see me.

I feel good.

See, Big Red, she is a wonderful creature: almost six-foot of woman: all raw shape and form and bounce and curve. Magnificent curves. And a personality like jingling bells, or a lit Christmas tree in a dark room. She makes me feel wow; all young and foolish – kind of like I'm 14 years old again and summer vacation just started.

I was Jones'd on Red since I first saw her, way back when, when I started out on this crazy assassin business – in love/lust since the first time I caught her eye, and she held the gaze. But it took me a while. I was new to

this bunch and this murder-life and, well it took some time, took some time to break the ice and get things going.

Odd how things work sometimes. It's always so easy with someone who I'm just ho-hum about, and a real ordeal with someone that you're smitten head-over-heels with.

So Red and I have managed to keep it on the "low-low" for the last 6 months or so. She gets around, sure, but all off-screen. A sly, smiling stealthy sex-vixen of a girl.

Funny thing is I never really went for redheads before. Especially with the freckles and the orange Ronald McDonald hair thing. All my life, I was down with blondes, brunettes, black-hair, bald, mohawk... but when she's around I'm all 9-foot tall and bulletproof. And the sun rises and sets between her hips for me.

The "settlement" scene is on the third floor of an office building, just outside of downtown, on the perimeter. It's Sunday, and the building is empty, except for our crew. I recognize one of our guys out front by the security guard uniform he's wearing. "Sorry sir, there's a biohazard leak inside. Nobody in or out now."

I give him the password. "Swordfish."

"Sure. Third floor, sir."

As the elevator swooshes opens on the 9th floor, I hear a radio turn off, and I can smell the chemicals, the bleach, the cleaning fluid, disinfectant.... I turn the corner down the hallway and there's Fennix standing there with his gun ready, and behind him three other faces, peeking out of an office doorway at me.

When Fennix sees its me, he holsters the gun and smiles broadly with a "Here's Johnny" delight.

Besides Fennix and Red, there is Bobo and two of our best Gypsies from New York, guys that I've worked with before, Woodlock and Mothman, there helping out with the clean-up.

Bobo Bazan is a killer too, just like me. Big Red used to be one too, but retired after a few fucked up, slippery-slope settlements that went south on her, and she decided to demote down to the clean-up crew thing. She'll have this place sparkling clean and looking ready to rent by Monday morning. And she gets a share of the settlement, making good money on these jobs. Probably at least three grand on a mess like this and maybe five or eight grand sometimes she tells me.

The office is pretty upscale. Expensive furniture and real, hand-painted art on the wall. The boys have cracked the safe, a big one, and cleaned it out. Despite all the cleaning fluids, I can detect the scent of death.

Red smiles at me – but she’s being cool: no hug, no kiss: just playing it all cool-hand and sly. That she is “standing down” means she’s probably banging someone here that’s on site. Not Fennix, of course. Maybe Woodlock. Not bad a looking guy. Maybe Bobo. Red likes either real good-looking guys or downright ugly guys. Either Cary Grant or Charles Bronson. Bobo is more on the Bronson-ish side.

The Gypsies gather round and take a smoke break. Light cigarettes. We don’t shake hands because they’re hands are all bloody.

Bobo comes in from the other room, takes his right glove off and does his usual odd handshake, grasping my palm, and with our arms up like we are arm wrestling, and draws me close and pats me on the back. He’s in a pretty good mood. Hmmm. He’s down-right happy. So, he’s probably the one she’s knocking boots with now.

“Bobo! Mi sangre!” He’s not a Gypsy, but a Cuban actually.

“Hey! Cowboy! What it is, mannn!”

Leaning on a desk behind him, Red smiles and pops the bubblegum she’s chewing.

I laugh and say: “Happy to see you guys, yes, happy to see you all.”

I light a cigarette. “What ‘r we got here?” I’m eyeing the samurai sword out of the side of my eye as I look over the scene. They’re against the wall behind a desk that the boys have a dead guy on, bagged and about to be zipped up. The death rictus on his face is priceless: one of sheer terror.

He looks like a European. Probably French or Italian. You can tell from the shoes. The French Euros always seem to have fancy shoes. Long and skinny. Designer shoes like no one in America wears since the Disco days.

The job is going well. Walls scrubbed and painted, bloody carpet pulled, furniture maneuvered around and about. Still, there’s a lot of work. “Five or six bodies?”

“Seven.”

Red takes Bobo’s shoulder and pulls him aside to talk. I’m pretty sure she’s explaining that their crew owes me a piece of the action from the last job and they’re going to settle with me on the stuff from this job. My share is something like 3 or 4 grand.

He still gets a confused look on his face, and she walks him off, putting her arm around him (in front of me, which of course, will make him feel more secure about *their* relationship) and talks to him some more, with me being out of earshot.

If she's telling him what I think she's telling him: that she can seduce/romance me a bit and get me to leave out with some of the lesser junk to settle the debt... good, then I might get some private fun-time with her this trip, maybe right here in the offices.

See, Bobo's a Mariel boatlift Cuban, and while it's a macho culture, it's also been tempered with years of Communism and poverty. Which means compromise, negotiation, arguing, desperate measures, scrounging, hoarding, conning each other and the like. So, he probably really doesn't give a shit if she gives something away, a few kisses or a hand job. as long as it means they will get something good or valuable out of it, a bigger share of the loot.

After Red finishes lolling him, she comes back into the room past me, and snaps her finger at me as she walks by, leading me out of the room like an obedient dog. Smart girl.

The Gypsies and Bobo turn the radio back on and get back to work cleaning up in earnest. Strangely enough this crew likes Polka music today, which is best when played loud.

We go into a room off to the side and there's the good stuff, the loot, and valuables. I still don't know if I'm gonna be fucked over or if she's gonna let me be the fox in the henhouse.

"Where's Catamuso?" she asks, "Wasn't he supposed to be coming up here on this one?"

I shrug. "Ya know...he comes and goes like the breeze..." she smiles. "He's been helping out on some of Block's jobs lately. He's here one minute...."

"This *is* one of Block's job. Did you see all the blood? What a mess he made of those guys? Blood is a bitch to get up." Antonious Block is a hitman, just like me. "Double O" number. But where I am a bit of an artiste' Block is brutal, draconian, and extremely hard on his clients. I'll add a little irony to my "settlements" if I can – like the "baptism" bit in the last one – but Block is a real fiend with a downright vicious streak.

"They're probably off somewhere out there, skinning someone alive." I say jokingly.

"Fortunately, Block wasn't as bloody on this one. Even put the drop-cloths down this time. We got to have it clean by Monday and

everything looking like the company moved out over the weekend and skipped out on the rent.”

The room we’re in still has a little blood-splatter on the curtains and walls, and there’s a couple of pizza boxes with a few cold slices where they ate lunch, and a mop in a bucket with the smell of disinfectant.

I look around.

The comic books!

A short box with about a hundred golden-age books. I flip through them, get a feel for what’s there, shrug and smile. The grades are mostly pretty high and it’s really a good haul.

I look up at her and nod. “Nice.”

Through the doorway behind her, I see another couple of bags lying on a desk in the next office. Is it bags of cash? I look closer: body bags... and one of them is not even zipped up. Nodding to the bodies behind her, I say: “Block ?”

“Naw. The Gypsies got those two guys. They walked in on us in the middle of all this. So we didn’t even have to go track ’em down.”

“They were on the sheet?” The “sheet” is the list of people to be eliminated.

She nods. “We also have these old-timey Central American thingies.”

“Artifacts?”

“Yeah. These stone dolls and broken pots and stuff.” She pulls a sheet back on the other end of the desk.

“Not for me. I always have bad luck with those things. If they’re not fakes, they break and shit. Naw, go ahead and put them on eBay.”

She closes the door and now we’re alone, cut off from the main office room where everyone is working. She kisses me and then we’re into it, hot and heavy. Bobo’s right in the other room, and could walk in on us any moment, but that’s probably a turn-on for her. Who knows what women think?

Between kisses, we take a breath, and I look down at the box of comics again.

“Waddaya think?” she asks.

“Real nice.”

“And then that takes care of the share we owe you?” she asks.

“Definitely worth three or four grand. And they’re worth more, I think.”

“Then good.”

“Sure. They’re probably worth more. More than the three grand, babe.”

“No, I’m good. I told Bobo that you like comic books.” She smiles. “He thinks you’re, like, a little retarded and you like to read them.”

“You got a kick out of letting him think that didn’t you?” I smile. She laughs. “We got a deal?”

“Yeah, but you can throw in that sword in the other room leaning against the wall there. Just to make sure.”

She smiles. “Sure. There’s three of them. One slid down there but... it’ll cost you!”

I smile broadly and say “Let it ride.” And give her a big kiss.

As she melts, she starts in on me and turns the music in the room up. I figure, what the hell: *let her ride*.

She’s a whole other kind of creature when she’s getting her prowl on. To look at her, she’s a statue of shape and curves that look like a cement truck poured her into those blue jeans. Bright, flashing eyes, smiling eyes: so magnificent she would have to be untouchable. In the heat of passion all that melts away, and she becomes a huffing, sweating animal, greedy with lust and electric with frenzy.

Now we’re going at it, hot and heavy, on and on.

I’m sort of sitting on the edge of the desk there, and something catches my attention out of the side of my eye. I glance over at the two dead guys in the other room. Just as I do, a cell phone rings.

A cell phone....

It’s one of *their* cell phones, one of the dead guys in the next room.

On the second ring I sort of see - out of the side of my eye - the dead body nearest sits upright! On the third ring, he looks down at himself, he’s zipped up from the mid-chest down, and looks confused because he can’t use his arms, or figure out why he can’t. He looks over at me; he’s a Chinese or Korean-looking guy and has to be confused by what he sees: me pulling my gun, aiming it at him, while I’m getting a blow job at the same time.

Smooth as butter, I level my silenced Sig 228 and shoot.

Fortunately, Red doesn’t bite my dick off. (*Didn’t think of that, didja, you moron.*) The shot hits him on the top of the head, some hair or maybe some skin or a bit of skull fly up and off, but he’s still alive and struggling to get

out of the body bag. It's not too tight around him or too zipped up, and he's now getting out of it in seconds.

I got to get him before he gets away.

But he jerks forward, throwing up, just as I get my bead on him, and I miss. My next shot also misses as he rolls off the desk hitting the floor, and then he is up, free, and off and running before I get another good shot. He's naked as a jaybird so it must have been the dead guy next to him whose cell phone went off.

He runs right through the office room where Bobo and the gang are working away, but they're all so startled to see this screaming, blood-smeared dead guy with part of the top of his head nicked off, that they stand there transfixed, and he's able to run right out the door and down the hall.

Of course, the crew is quickly off like the Keystone Cops, shouting and running after him.

Big Red looks around with no idea of what the fuck's happening or what just happened. We're having tender, loving romance one minute – and the next there's all kinds of shooting and screaming going on.

She looks around and she's happy to see that it's not a jealous and enraged Bobo that's shooting at us.

"What happened?"

"One of your dead bodies woke up. He's out there running around somewhere," I say.

"Well, they'll find him."

I nod my head. She shrugs.

"I think we gotta go get him before those knuckleheads shoot each other." I say.

"Yeah, you're right." She heads into the other room to pick up her gun and shit. "You're right about that."

She comes into the room pulling the slide back on some kind of Glock to check that it's chambered. "Then again, they might shoot one of us by mistake, ya know?" she says.

"Yer right about that. Maybe both of us."

I'm looking at her: tight blue jeans, shirt wide open, her small but firm and perky tits standing at attention and the red flush on her chest... *WTF, let's put on a show for the ghosts.* "I mean, it shouldn't be too hard for all of them to find a screaming, naked Chinaman..." I say.

Noooo...." She smiles seductively.

"With part of his head shot off..." I add.

She smiles and comes back to the desk and sets her gun down next to mine.

After a while and we're finished up, and we both take a look out into the hallway to check on things.

The crew is not back yet and so I have to guess they're still looking for the guy, so I figure we better go get him after all. The tricky part is to not get shot by our own guys. All the while I'm still thinking about the comic books.

She looks up and down the hallway and then pulls out her phone. "You know, I swear we killed that same Chinese guy two months ago over in Ohio," she says. She's scrolling through her phone, which annoys me because she should be keeping her eyes peeled for the victim on the loose.

"Yeah?"

"I mean, he looked like the same guy."

"They all look alike to us. The Chinamen."

"Sure, and we all look alike to them, but I mean, he had a scar on his chin that looked like a bunny. They both had the scar."

"A bunny?"

"I like bunnies."

We walk along, every now and then stopping to listen.

She calls her guys. They've cleared the first floor and are on the second. The exits are covered. They spotted him a minute ago on the second.

We get on the elevator and head down to the 3rd floor.

"So a bunny, eh?" I ask.

"A fucking bunny... so I sent a snapshot of his face and his prints up to New York. To Jack. I mean, it couldn't be the same guy. That's crazy. The first guy, Block put a hole the size of your fist into his chest – into his heart. I mean, the heart was *gone*."

"Poor heartless motherfucker."

"But the fingerprints were the same!" She's looking it up on her text messages on the phone. "And I was right! Here look! But I mean...what does that mean?"

We arrive on the third floor.

"Maybe they're not the same guy, maybe they're duplicates of each other."

"Duplicates?"

"Was the guy from China or American born Chinese person?"

“He was from China, both from China, I’m sure.”

“There’s a whole lotta odd things going on....” I say, shaking my head.

“No kidding. A month ago in Wichita, they painted all those bodies silver. Did you hear about that? They painted them with silver paint.”

“No kidding. That’s fucked up. Who painted them?”

“We don’t know!”

I hear something. I stop and listen. Nothing.

As we walk along, I imagine what a dreary, dreadful grind it would be to work in this building. All year, year after year, for decades – the same bathroom, the same lunch place around the corner, the same walls, the carpet, the same smell....

“Speaking of strange, who’s this guy Quickjohn?” she asks.

“A major asshole. A real fuckwad. Where’d you hear Quickjohn?”

“We hear things. Ya know. What’s going on? Why all the fuss?”

“Well, there’s a good reward for him.... He’s a killer. An abominable and maniacal monster. Likes to do mass killings.”

“Really. How much.”

As we walk down towards the front area of the building we stop and listen. I can hear the sound of the all the guys klutzing around up ahead in the distance, the sound of them echoing up from a few floors below.

There’s a big atrium up front where you come in at, through all the glass doors.

We’re walking around the 3rd floor, looking in rooms. Checking doors as I go. All are locked. Then we come around a corner, and there he is!

We’re walking up on the atrium area, inside the glass-windowed front of the building. Hanging down into the atrium is a big, modern-art sheet-metal sculpture-thing. Each floor has a wide hallway leading to a brightly lit, spacious, balcony, a balcony overlooking the atrium.

Our man is standing there, looking down over the balcony, and from below us, I can hear Bobo shouting directions to his Keystone Cop helpers from the lobby or a lower balcony. They’re still looking for him.

Our “client” hasn’t heard or sensed us coming up from behind him; he’s about 100 feet ahead of us.

I nudge Big Red. She looks up from her phone. “Ooooh, shit!” she whispers.

I reach for my gun. Damn! *I left it back in the room on the desk.*
Well. At least I have a good excuse.

“Red, give me your gun.”

She reaches. “Shit! I left it back in the room.”

Well, shit.

“Go get it.”

She tiptoes off.

I stealthily creep up on him. I’m thinking: *what if I use a gun and then miss him, and hit the windows of the lobby... well, we can’t replace all the windows, and, who knows, it might set off an alarm. Maybe I can sneak up on him and grab him? Strangle him? Or push him off the balcony?*

I look around. The balcony is a wide-open area, furnished as a meeting area with a few big, overstuffed chairs and side tables with lamps. Then I notice the modern-art rug, what they call a runner, that’s part of the nice, pleasing décor. The rug is about 12 feet long and about 3 feet wide – and *shit*, he’s standing on it!

I bend down, reaching toward my end of the rug. He sort of senses me getting close – that something’s wrong – and his head begins to turn slightly.

I’ve noticed that some people in a state of heightened awareness seem to adapt a sort of sixth sense for things going around them or for danger coming at them.

As he glances to his left, then his right, I’m getting a real good grip on the rug. Just as his sixth-sense alerts him to turn and look directly behind him, I yank the rug – I mean I grab it and I yank it real, real hard – falling back using all my weight, with the rug tips in my hands – and there he goes, flipping over the balcony and down into the atrium below... with a yelp that sounds like a miniature poodle having his tail stepped on. It works perfectly – a totally pure, perfect Alfred Hitchcock action scene – and one of those moments that will always be frozen in my mind forever, just like a Polaroid picture!

A few seconds later, I hear our boys in the lobby below yelling and awash in commotion.

I walk to the balcony and look down. He hit the marble floor below. At least marble will be easy to clean up. I think the body almost hit one of the Gypsies. They look like they are thinking *What happened? Did he commit suicide?*

I clear my throat.

They all look up at me, their mouths go wide open, and their faces look like little kids caught pulling the cookie jar down on the kitchen floor.

I say nothing. I smile and wipe my hands together, back and forth, in a job-well-done manner. One of my elbows is on the railing and my James Bond smirk bathes down on them as they look up in awe.

I'm one of the Pros from Dover, baby! Actually, more of a Roger Moore smirk now, than a Sean Connery one. If I was doing Connery, I would need a pithy aside or maxim to sail down at them, but one just doesn't come to mind right now.

I hear a pistol click and rack somewhere off there behind me. *Oh shit! Big Red!* I realize that I am standing at the balcony exactly where the victim was standing: a dark figure outlined against the light coming in from the glass façade of the atrium – and probably looking just like our target to her.

I turn and say, “Baby!” real loud.

She lets the gun down.

Whew! That was close.

I think about staying over in town, maybe getting another shot at Big Red tonight, maybe me and her can kill one of the Father Mickey bottles but then, I've got the party to go to in Florida... then I imagine her not probably being able to get away from Bobo or whoever she's got on her dance card here and me sitting in a motel room flipping the channels, bummed out and brooding all night.

Naw.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ANOTHER CLOSE CALL

Boketto
(Japanese)

The art of gazing vacantly into the distance
without thought.

I leave Hagerstown, feeling just a little bit more alive again. Feel like maybe I'm on the right path, I'm doing what I should be doing again. Everything's going to be alright.

I remember we went to visit a Gypsy fortune teller once when I was a drunken freshman. Me and my lacrosse team buddies, on one Friday night. Honestly, I don't remember that much of what she said but one thing haunts me to this day. She warned me about someday following a *false destiny*.

What the "F" is a false destiny, I thought. A destiny is a destiny, if its false then it's not even a destiny; it's something else. And I shrugged it off. But at times – many times since – it has occurred to me that maybe I *was* following a false destiny, a fucked-up-beyond-all-recognition destiny, a doomed and tragic destiny.

So, I feel great now. Sure, I'm feeling this great about killing someone, but this is my life: this is my destiny. If it's a false destiny, then so what. Fuck it. I don't even know who those guys were, or what those guys did... but fuck them, the look on that guy's face and the rug-pull-thing will stay with me forever.

False destiny.

Fuck false destiny.

The comics in the trunk beckon me, and I bring a small stack of them into the Huddle House that I stop at just below Fayetteville, NC.

I order a plate of their *Stuffed Hash Browns*.

Lately I've been addicted to the Huddle House's Stuffed Hash Browns, a southern roadside delicacy: meat of your choice between a sandwich of hash browns and topped with cheese and a scrambled egg patty!

It's about 3 AM and drunk people are drifting in from the local bars. Turns out that three drunk and laughing night-clubbing chicks in the next booth over are eyeballing ~~to~~ me now.

The tall one feigns serious curiosity about the old comic books I'm checking out. Do you have *Gutt Ghost*? Sorry, I don't have any. Never heard of it. *Poison Elves*? No. *Weapon-X*?

"*Weapon-X*?"

"Yeah, Weapon X." she slurs.

I'm not as drunk but I smile and whisper loudly to her: "I'll show you my 'Weapon-X'!" All the girls crack up. "Whenever you want to see it, babe." She smiles and winks at me. It's a sort of slow wink as she's completely hammered.

I've been nipping on Father Mickey's bottle since Raleigh, and I'm flying pretty high myself.

I pay my bill, gather the comics and head out to my car. I stop at their table, look down at her and say, "Follow me." Their food hasn't arrived yet and she takes a sip of her orange juice and follows me out.

She lights a cigarette as soon as she gets out the door.

We get out to my car, and I'm about to kiss her, and I notice the Adam's apple. *Well shit*. The sex-change doctors are doing a pretty good job these days and this one's awful good.

Too bad I'm not Fennix – he'd probably go for it.

Is it? Or am I just being paranoid?

I look at her hands... and I'm sure. Those hands belong to a male, a boy probably, – a boy in his late teens or early 20s. Have to wonder, where do these kids get the money for that stuff.

I've opened the car door already, and then I set the comics down on the seat and I turn to her, put my hands on her arms holding her, and give her/him a soft and tender kiss – the slightest of kisses – on the cheek.

She realizes what's up and looks down and off to the left with a solemn frown. This was a goodbye kiss, she realizes. "Sorry," I say. "You understand."

She laughs it off, turns slowly and trots almost merrily back to the Huddle House. I imagine it happens to her on a regular basis, I'm sure. And I imagine sometimes everything works out fine for her. A guy's real drunk or really drunk and heartbroken, or... just doesn't give a shit.

Two close calls in one day: almost getting shot by Big Red and this.

But things come in threes. Or maybe the car with the Men in Black was one too? Maybe.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LIVING LIKE AN ANIMAL

The old world is dying, and the new world
struggles to be born:
now is the time of monsters.

Antonio Gramsci

I make it to the Florida state-line and hit the Jacksonville outskirts at 1 AM and I crash out, beat from driving. I don't drop in, I get a motel room nearby and will go in tomorrow, when I'm feeling tip top and got a good night's sleep.

Next morning, I try to get a rental car, a classy-looking car to show up in. The "beater" car that I'm driving in nowadays looks like shit. It's mechanically tops but looks like something a retired donut-holer would drive... but then, no one ever tries to break into it.

Today is the big Memorial Day party with my cousins and all, at Uncle Brook's south-side family ranch. When we were kids, it was a big family event and family came from the four corners of the country, wherever we were at.

Uncle Brook's clan are farm and horse people but also a mostly military family and each Memorial Day is my Uncle Brook's birthday. He's pretty much loaded – moneywise, and they usually throw a hell of a good party.

Now we/I had some issues a while ago, back in my asshole days. It's been about 10 years though. And all that is ancient history. But who knows?

So it's not so much will they remember about me...

But can they forget...

The Enterprise location near me is closed for the holiday, and I don't want to drive all the way over to the airport to get a car, so fuck it, I'll go in this heap.

I start heading over, and then I change my mind. I stop and get out of the car. I can see off in the distance that the party's already started up. I can see everything clearly, off across the flat plain of tall grass and I see the farm, almost glistening and shining in the nice sunny day.

I look at my crappy car. I can't help it. I've got to go to the airport and pick up a decent-looking car. I have to show up in a nice car, and not this shit-mobile...and also, I have a coupon! And I'll put it on the company credit card.

Well, I get an impressive Chrysler, head over there to the party, and then I stop in the same place – just stop and get out of the car again.

Hmmmm.

I'm standing there on the side of the road, and I just can't make up my mind. I want to go, but part of me can't – just can't move. Off in the distance I see the party, the fun is going on, the barbeque is smoking up and the kids are on swings laughing and the girls are riding horses and I'm sure they got some fine liquor... but now I'm getting cold feet.

I decide to call my cousin Shelly, but her number's not in my phone – I called it a month or two ago, but I didn't save it – and I'm digging through my trunk to find my database printout of phone numbers.

I call the house, but Aunt Peach picks up the phone. We talk for a second – she always was real fond of me – she always was swell to me, but we haven't talked in a good while. Finally, Shelly figures out it's me and grabs the phone.

I tell her that I'm coming by for the party, going to show up soon...*is that OK? Do you think that's OK? I know we talked about it a month ago, but I just thought I'd still check.*

"Welllll..." she says, hesitating. "I better check around. I'll check – I think so – but I'll call you back. Hold tight and I'll call you right back."

So I sit there for half an hour. Nothing. No call. Should I text her? No, the number I have is a house phone. I just sit there for like 45 more minutes, watching all the fun from a distance. (What a great name for a sad C&W song. *I'm watching all the fun from a distance.*)

Knowing Shelly, she's probably just forgotten about me, getting drunk and – well – I just sit there for a whole 'nother hour and a half... and then I go. I just take off and head back to the motel. I feel so deeply bad inside now that I don't even want to go to the party anymore.

I go back to my motel. Sure, I'll just polish off a bottle-of 18-year-old Glenlivet and try to just ride out Memorial Day in the shitty motel room. Maybe they'll call?

Maybe I should just show up?

But then I picture Shelly sitting there at the picnic table and she mentions, "Anthony called." And everyone sitting there with her, eating barbeque ribs and hot dogs and Aunt Peach's "world famous" potato salad... they all fall silent, and a few look up with solemn stares...and the whole idea of calling me back is gone. Vaporized.

I wake up about 11 or 12 at night, still thinking about going back again. Everybody's probably pretty well lit by now, and probably no one's going to make a fuss about what happened before...

But no, I've got to stay here in the shitty motel room and feel sorry for myself. Who am I kidding? They have nothing to say to me, and I have nothing to say to them anymore.

Why am I being so weird about this now? Maybe it's not about what happened in the past. Maybe I'm just not part of that world – the normal world – the straight world... anymore.

That world is gone for me. Dead. Vanished. Over. Forever. I have a new family now, and all that stuff from the past is no more. What I'm going

through right now is evolution. Graduation. Being born into the future. My future. Dying and being born at the same time.

I can't go back. I can't go home again. That's what this whole pathetic, self-pitying rubbish is about. It is a funeral service for my life as it was, and never more shall be.

So, I'm watching TV, flipping the channels, drunk on my ass, and the scene in *ED WOOD* comes on, where Bela Lugosi does the "*Home? I have no home! Hunted, despised, living like an animal...*" speech and I start welling up, actually feeling sorry for myself, and then I laugh maniacally.

Some swell thing: for a big, bad-ass killer like me to feel sorry for himself. Would Napoleon ever feel sorry for himself? Davy Crockett?

Hmmph.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

QUICKJOHN

Strange... I've seen that face before.

Grace Jones

Catamuso is knocking on my motel room door the next morning, waking me up. My head is throbbing.

He uses his special knock, as always, (so that he doesn't get shot). *How the fuck did he find me here? The company credit card? I thought I paid cash.*

I'm miserable and hung-over but somehow, I am happy to see him this morning. Catamuso is a quixotic and amusing human being. He loves to argue and will argue about anything at the drop of a hat. A little fellow with a curly tipped moustache and bright eyes, and an unfathomable European accent. He has such a dry sense of humor that he often seems to have no sense of humor at all, but he is curious about anything and everything. He has an against-the-grain nature and is always at war with authority, normalcy, and common sense.

When I explain him to people it is easy. He is a man who traded his soul for candy when he was 8-years-old, sleeps with one eye open, has six fingers on one hand and four on the other and dreams of someday going to New York City to smell the Statue of Liberty's feet.

“Where were you in Hagerstown? I dropped by up there, but you were gone already.” I ask.

“I was all done ‘dere.”

“Well, I’m gonna take a vacation now.”

“A vacation.” He smiles.

“Gonna bum around Florida for now. Get drunk, get laid, stay out of trouble and just coast for a while.”

“But no!”

“What?”

I find something down here now! Out ‘dere in the swamps man. Big killing. Lotsa dead bodies... here in Florida now.”

“What’s “lotsa”? How many?”

“Eight... ten or more maybe.”

“Shit. Police?”

“They don’t know.”

“Who killed them? How can I believe this?”

Catamuso pulls out his cell phone and shows me some pictures. WTF. There are a number of people, dead, and buried up to their ankles. I look closer. More off in the distance. It’s in some kind of jungle or swamp. Lots of vegetation. He flips to another picture. Yep, I imagine they’re all dead.

“I gotta see this. That is nuts. All these dead bodies buried upside down, with their feet sticking out?”

“Yes.” Says Catamuso.

“Wow. Yeah. You know what? I gotta see this.”

“Might be Quickjohn. Quickjohn is in Florida now you know.”

“Quickjohn? What do you know about Quickjohn?” I ask laughingly. “You’re not even supposed to know about Quickjohn.”

“He has a good price on his head. That we know.”

As I told Red, Quickjohn is an elusive and mysterious psycho-killer. A mass murderer, killing mostly large groups of people, but often killing *both* guilty and innocent. I have never even seen him. He seems to always kill and then, insidiously, makes it look like an accident or blames it on someone else: anyone else. He plants evidence, and clues, and such to hang the blame on terrorists or corporations or other bad guys, or psychos – so he is never a suspect, never even looked for by law enforcement.

Except by us.

“You know, I think Quickjohn does not even exist.” Says Catamuso.

“Wait a minute. You just told me he was in Florida.” I’m shaving now.

“Ahhh shit.” Catamuso stands behind me straightening his bow tie in my mirror and says, “You know, I’ve been hearing Quickjohn for all the years, man. But who has ever even seen him? No one. This is all made-up stuff, I think. *Un fantasma!* A horse maneuver.”

“He’s out there somewhere. Mark my words.” I say.

“Have you ever seen him? Do you even ever see a picture?”

“Actually, no... actually.”

Catamuso plops down in a chair and picks up the TV Guide thing that they have in all the rooms. “Mr. Block has saw him once.”

“Where? Where did he see him?”

“He saw him in the Goodyear tire store. Quickjohn was in the waiting room, he was there, and he went to stand in a corner, and when he thinks no one was looking and he started biting the hair on his arm.”

“Biting the hair on his arm? Like kids do?”

“This I believe!” said Catamuso, raising one his six fingers on his left hand. He has six fingers on his left hand, and four on the right, but only because two of them got blown off in the Spanish Civil War, or so he tells me. “He is as evil as a monster, and that he would do! Let’s go, then.”

I shake my head. Whatta nut. Oh well....

CHAPTER NINETEEN

VISITORS AT TWILIGHT

*Sometimes the more things change,
the more they become insane.*
Hugo Saltine, 1984

We drive and drive.

As we buzz along across Florida, through all the bleak flatness – with the sugarcane fields and sawgrass and orange groves and Christmas tree farms – I feel the emptiness of it all, absorbing it like some toxic mist.

Here and there, a little town. All the little towns: forgotten and decaying with deteriorated Art Deco gas stations, a dead K-Mart, and a Family Dollar store with one car out front. Trailer parks, used-car lots, a defunct-looking drive-in theater looming off in the distance. These towns – each one an island of lost souls – are seemingly frozen in time and space like museum displays.

“So we are going to find Quickjohn now. Yes! Good price on his head?”

“I’m not calling this in.”

We drive along silently for a while.

“You know, this can be a dangerous.” Murmurs Catamuso.

“Quickjohn is a slippery one, yes.” I reply. “He’s our Moriarty...”

“I mean to us. We’re going off on our own now, you know. No orders from above. On our own.”

I smile. “I figure that if we call this in there’s a good chance the other crews will come down here looking for Quickjohn too... and screw it all up. I told you how Shorty’s bunch fu-bared the whole Greek twins deal for us. Uh uh. So this is just me now.”

“Just us.” Says Catamuso.

“Right. Sorry. Just us. Right.”

We drive along, both of us thinking.

“You know what the bounty is now on Quickjohn?” asks Catamuso.

“A lot.” I reply. “but the feather in our cap for catching him. That’s the prize! The prestige of catching him is... priceless.”

“You move up in the prestige.”

“More respect. Better jobs. More clout.” I smile.

“More jealousy too.”

“Yup.”

“And maybe with someone as high-ticket as Quickjohn, who knows – maybe I get my soul back. Back all the way this time. All of it.”

Catamuso leans his head to the side and looks out his window sadly, slightly shaking his head “no” to himself.

“Quickjohn.” I say. “Yup. Can’t wait to get my hands on Quickjohn.”

Catamuso smiles. We ride along in silence for a bit. “He is one of us I think.” He says.

I think about it.

“We kill too.” Catamuso continues.

“Sure. Yeah. But we have a reason. We have proof. We have evidence and shit.”

“Your proof. Maybe he has his.”

“How the hell does he have proof enough to kill 200 people who don’t know each other in that concert fire in northern Kentucky? What crime would a bus-load of mentally handicapped people have committed that would justify sending them crashing off a cliff. I mean, what the fuck?”

We ride in silence for a minute.

We ride along for a while. “You still think we are all working for the Devil.” I say.

“Sink about this Harken. We are doing just what the Devil does, exactly what the devil does: catching the most evil: catching killers... and sending them to hell.”

“Yeah....”

“Surely the Devil loves us?”

“And now you’re going to tell me that Quickjohn is the devil...this Quickjohn that you, in our previous conversation, insist doesn’t even exist?”

“Or he could be a demon...” he smiles. “...we all could be demons.”

“Speak for yourself Catamuso.”

Hmmm. Catamuso may have something here. All along I’ve been thinking that my killing adventures were keeping me – me and my soul, (my poor, wayward, lost soul that’s floating around out there somewhere) – out of the devil’s hands, out of hell. But... what if – in the end – what if I *am* working for the devil? What if he is letting me run around killing people for... him? I guess you would call that ironic.

We’re finally rolling into the great Central Florida swamp. The Green Swamp.

We plunge deeper and deeper.

Lonely. Mysterious. Ethereal. It is... another world. Oblivion. Endless nothingness. Nothing but swamp and moss and snakes and murky, stagnant water for as far as the eye can see.

“I think I never want my murdered body to be buried here,” says Catamuso in his heavy accent. “You could take a dead body and bury it in here, and no one would ever find it... for a hundred or a thousand years.”

No one but good old Catamuso. He would find me.

And this time, Catamuso has found a treasure trove. There are bodies everywhere, a mass killing.

All dead. A mystery. A horror. An atrocity of the first order. Buried, off deep in the swamp. Well, mostly buried. All the bodies have been buried head down – headfirst – but with their feet sticking up out of the ground.

We get out of the rented airboat and onto land, finally. I say land, it is a narrow, overgrown islet with spongy ground that squishes and gives way underfoot. It has the feel of something that could be sinking or drifting. He hands me a mask, as we can smell death already. I feel my amulet. It is warm. We go around the side of this islet and into a stand of trees – here they are. The macabre sight is unnerving, even for me – me, a well-seasoned killer with a good lot of notches carved into his soul.

It's the damnedest thing I've ever seen. These guys are planted like mannequins; dotted all around the clearing, here and there and hidden inside the stand of trees. It is kind of mindboggling.

"What kind of twisted..." I mutter.

Catamuso smiles. "A gang of cutthroat smugglers and murderers we have here, boss." He points off at more bodies.

At first, I see like 5 or 6 bodies, but there are at least 8 or 10 human beings planted here.

"How long do you think they have been here? Two days? Maybe three?" I ask.

"No, not that long. Fresh kills. Only few maggots."

I nod.

"I szink zee whole Blue Coyote Gang is here, oui?" he says.

I pick up a stray bit of paper and study it.

"What's the matter with that, boss?"

"I'm not the boss, Catamuso. We're both independent contractors. Remember?"

"Sure, boss."

"I mean, what kind of creepy person would even do something like this?"

"You a-tellin' me. Yeesh! Tabernac! At least he didn't go and skin 'em alive this time, eh?"

"Damn, this took a lot of work. Doing it out here in the middle of nowhere? Who would go to all the trouble to..."? I notice that Catamuso is picking apart something wrapped up and tasting or smelling it.

"Oh hell, don't eat that, Catamuso, you don't know where it's been!"

I bend down and pick up another wrapper, an empty one. "Snickers. All Snickers."

“Oh yah. Wrappers all over d’place here.”
Catamuso spots to a cell phone under a bush and points.
I pick it up and starts fidgeting with the keypad.
Catamuso reach for it – “Lemme see that!” – but I pull away,
playfully.

“Is mine! I saw it first!”

I monkey with it, trying to turn it on. The battery is dead and turns off as soon as it starts to light up. “Battery’s dead.”

“Give me that!” He grabs it.

Catamuso waves it in my face. “Iz a Nokia. I try to remember the code – what the hell is it?”

“Code?”

“Here, see Harken, we press *#4720# and hold it a second.”

“What are you doing?”

“Activating reserve power...”

The phone beeps to life. Catamuso nods approvingly and grunts.

We look around some more. We find where they all ate lunch. A couple of card tables are set up. Crumbs and remains on a plate, icing on a cake knife, some little conical party hats... the remains of a birthday cake.
“*Quickjohn lured them all out here with the promise of a birthday party.*”

Catamuso hears something and listens up. I take the phone out of his hands. “Hey. Something’s out there, boss. You hear that?”

“I’m not the boss...” I mutter as I scroll through the history and call logs on the phone. “Now here ya go... a call to Marlow Killman.”

“Kill-man? Hee hee. Maybe he the one who killa all these men, eh?”

“Maybe. Hmmm. Killman. Sounds like a typical Quickjohn alias!”

“Told you. Quickjohn! Bad news.”

“Good news: we might get another shot at him.” Catamuso has no problem denying that Quickjohn doesn’t exist, and then advocating capturing him with great dispatch. It’s like he has two operating systems going at the same time, both Mac and Windows, and he’s fine with that. I’m fine with that. Sometimes it’s great for an investigation. His spinning, whizzing, multitasking mind often sees both sides of everything and picks up things I’d have never thought of.

“Sure. *Elmer Slaughter, Wilson Kilgore...now Killman!* And, and the Snickers! And Quick’s a total Snickers addict! Quickjohn is here, Catamuso. In Florida.”

Catamuso points off into the wilderness, growing dark now as the sun fades. “See zat, Harken? Eyes out there... We better go.”

The eyes are in the trees and reeds around us now. For sure, the eyes of the dead men we have here before us planted in the ground. “Oh hell, Catamuso. You’ve been getting into the ‘fun stuff’ again, haven’t you?” I’m referring to the Yage concoction that I use to contact the Forlorns, the dead; the ones whom we are always avenging.

Catamuso smiles. “Hee hee. Yeah.”

That stuff is not for recreational use but I’m not going to scold him here, now.

As if they notice we are starting to see them, they slowly edge closer.

“Tabernac! They coming for us now, boss!”

“Those there would be all the dead spirits of these clowns here! But we’re not gonna avenge *them*! No! They can go straight to Hell.”

Catamuso cups his hands and yells: “You go straight to Hell, you guys! Fuck the Coyote Gang! No soup for you! Ha ha ha!”

On the way back, as Catamuso drives, I explore the phone more. “Here you go, Catamuso!” I’m pulling up a text message on the phone. I scroll through the texts. “The Commons? The cafeteria? Flagler Hall. The dorm. Sounds like a college. Sounds like Mr. Quickjohn is hiding out in higher learning now.”

“He is a teacher or a student?”

“Doesn’t say but we have a lead. He might be planning a mass murder at a school or university.”

But the phone is booby trapped. It makes a fizzling sound and starts heating up in my hand. As it bursts into sparks and flame, I toss it overboard. It goes off like a firecracker before it hits the water.

“*Merde...*” says Catamuso.

“Boobytrapped! Quickjohn strikes again. He just loves to boobytrap things.”

“Nooooo...” says Catamuso shaking his head, “I don’t think there even is a Quickjohn even. He is a legendary, a phantasme, a phantasme like Kaiser Soze.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

THROW ME YOUR BABY

What matters most is how
well you walk through the fire...

Charles Bukowski

The next day I've figured out which college it must be – Only one college nearby with both a *Flagler Hall* and a *The Commons* – and I am on it. I would have liked to have gotten more info off that cell phone – I really want to nail this guy Quickjohn, not just for the reward or to improve my status in our little group, but some personal reasons.

But I should have known that it was booby trapped. What if I had been holding it up to my ear? I was too anxious. Going to have to be more careful...

We crashed in a motel that night, and I was hoping Catamuso would be a big help the next day, but he was gone in the morning, who knows where. How can you begin to understand a man whose last wife tried to kill him in his sleep?

The University of North Florida, housing office... I don't even bother to hack the system, knowing that with Quickjohn, there might be

some kind of cyber alarm that he put in the system to tip him off if anyone searches for his name or something.

The lady at the front desk is not supposed to do this, but I charm her enough to get her to pull the name up on her screen. That's it! Marlow Killman. *Turn the screen more, lady.*

However, "He's in our system, but the address and phone number are private information, sir."

"Well. I'm a private detective." I whip out a totally bogus detective ID with picture and gold badge. She looks at it but she's not buying it.

The lady swivels in her seat, the office chair squeaking under her weight. "MARTHA?" she yells.

As she turns, I nudge a notebook that tips her Big Gulp drink over, spilling it all over. "Oops!"

Splash! Glug, glug, glug!

Flustered, she turns back to me. "Now look what you've done!" She looks around her workstation. "Patti, where are the towels?"

"What towels?"

"Paper towels."

And as her back is turned, I turn the screen on the computer so I can see it better and I grab her mouse.

I tap the KILLMAN, MARLOW E. on the list, and his personal info, address, phone numbers, etc., pop up. I slyly, quickly take a screen shot with my cell phone camera.

The lady comes over with the paper towels, and now they are both preoccupied with the flood. "Listen," I say, "I've got to get to a meeting, but I'll be back in a bit. I'll bring you another soda."

"Damn right you will," she mutters under her breath as she cleans up the soda.

"And some fries, too! But eh, say... where is The Commons Apartments?"

"Right across the street. Between Flagler Hall dorm and the Weatherby House. Just walk out the door. It's right there."

As I trip across the street I feel my amulet. It is warm. Jackpot.

The Commons is an old, brown brick apartment building. Student and teacher housing.

At a mall down the street, I buy one of those big red stuffed bears with a happy-birthday ribbon on it, have it tied with a birthday gift-ribbon, and get one of those giant birthday cards.

I return to The Commons, pick the lock on the back door, and slip up the rear stairs.

Third floor. Room 312. I listen outside for a few minutes, and don't hear anything inside. It only takes me 15 seconds to skeleton-key the door, but it takes longer for me to gingerly and silently open it. As I'm working the knob, I see a girl out of the side of my eye, staring at me from down the hallway. I have the birthday stuff under my arm, and I lift my finger to my lips and shush her, like it's a real bona-fide birthday surprise and I'm not wanting her to spoil it. She smiles and goes off.

In the room.

No one here. Whew! Appears to be an ordinary student room. Nothing strange. It's at least a little messy – as a student room is supposed to be – but somehow, also rather spartan and almost museum-like.

I sit down and take a breath. What do I do? Sit here and wait for Quickjohn? Wait outside? But will he come in the back door or the front? I could set up a camera. Stake out the front and put a camera on the rear door?

I wonder what classes he's taking?

Probably best to ~~lay~~ and wait here.

What if he has some sort of alert to tip him off that his inner sanctum has been breached.

I get up and look around. If this is his place there has to be some lethal devices, some traps, a few guns or knives.

But I find nothing.

The clothes in the closet don't look worn. The soap in the bathroom has been used to where the sharp edges are rounded, but it's dry and hard...and the towels are dry as straw. No one has been in this room in a while.

Maybe Quickjohn has been out of town?

The fridge looks normal: stocked and full. I pick up a milk carton, smell it, swish it around: there's water – colored, white water – inside.

Milk goes bad, water doesn't.

There's something wrong here, something wrong with this picture... but I'm trying to figure out what the hell it is...

Maybe I will try to focus on what's not here, rather than what is.

Hmmmm. No computer here. No charging cords. No phone charger in the wall.

Then I find one thing that doesn't really fit at all.

There are some pictures on the wall and a poster of football players. A football-themed calendar. But then I see an expensively framed picture of

Richard Nixon, and he's shaking hands with Spiro Agnew. The picture definitely looks like it has been Photoshopped. The tones and colors have been boosted, a new beautiful sunset sky added in, and... standing between them is a yellow bird. It looks familiar, but it's not Big Bird from Sesame Street.

It's Limu Emu! The fucking bird from the insurance ads.
WTF!

I reach over and lift the picture off the wall to get a better look. I'm thinking *who would do this? Who would make this silly picture? Who would go to so much trouble and expense to frame this silly, fucked-up, totally goofy decorative photo?*

As I lift it off the nail on the wall, I hear a mechanical whirring and then a ticking sound. A dim LED light in each corner of the room starts flashing.

It dawns on me. The whole room is a set-up. A trap. For me. For me or any other detective-type spooking around the room with a sharp eye. And an alarm is going to go off any minute and I'm sure it will be deafening.

As I book out, I spot an electronic keypad next to the door. It's flashing and making intermittent beeps. Of course I don't know the code.

I shudder as I make it out the front door. Made it out. Then down the hall and down the stairs and out the door!

I get across the street and down some; I'm standing there just looking at the building waiting for the alarm... and BLAM! Right in front of me, the whole place blows up: there's an explosion. The air is sucked out of me, people scream, glass is flying.

I put some more distance between me and the building and watch from even further down the block. Debris has been blown out into the street and everyone's running past me.

Eventually people inside are throwing their personal possessions out the windows, jumping out, running out the doors. The cops arrive and everything is nuts.

I come closer back in. A crowd is gathering. We're helping people and dragging their stuff across the street and all. Cars come by and honk, ignoring the fire, they just want us to get out of the way.

The cops push us back.

Another bystander points frantically up towards the roof. “They’re trapped!” Another girl next to me screams, “Oh my God! Isn’t that Rickey?” Someone else says, “Look, there’s kids up there!”

The cops are helping people out of the lower part of the building, but the people on the roof are fucked. I hear a siren in the distance. I sure hope it’s a firetruck. They’ll have a ladder. But there won’t be time. I’ve seen how long it takes to deploy one of those things, and the streets are crowded.

I see one good option. “C’mon! Let’s try get to them from the building next door! C’mon!” A couple of the people around me buck up and follow me.

As we get to the steps of the next-door building, the cops are evacuating the last few people out of it. As we trot up the front steps, one of the cops holds up his hands, shaking his head. “No, no one’s going in.”

The guy behind me starts tripping out on the cop, “My cousin and brother are up there, there next door!!” pointing to the roof next door, “We’ve gotta get them!” The cop shakes his head. “You stay here! I can’t let you up.”

I’m in front and I turn as if to leave, putting a calming hand out toward the freaked guy, then I spin back around with an uppercut and clock the cop hard as I can, right on the jaw.

He goes down, out cold. The freaked guy yells, “YESSSS!” and pumps his arm up and down like he’s at a football game. The girl behind us starts crying. As we’re going up the stairway, the girl is crying and saying something like, “But he was only doing his job!”

“He was only doing his job, and I was only doing mine,” I murmur to myself.

When we get up to the roof, there are already a few people from this building up there, trying to figure out how to help. There’s a lot of people over there on the roof of the burning building. The space between the buildings is too far for someone to jump.

Both apartment buildings are pretty big and have large, flat roofs. There’s signs of some construction work down at the other end of our roof. The space between the buildings isn’t so bad if we just had something... I see some old oil drums, buckets from where the roof was being tarred, I guess, and a ladder... I grab two guys, and we go down and bring up a ladder from down there.

We try sliding it over to the other roof, but when it gets too far out there, it almost falls down, into the alley below. One of the guys rooting through the leftover roof-tarring stuff comes up with a rope. We throw one

end of the rope over and tie the other end to our ladder, pulling that end over to the other side to make a bridge.

Flames and smoke come in billowing from behind them and rise up out of the alley.

People begin to cross on the ladder, creeping on their hands and knees. A section of the roof behind them falls in and some of the people panic, rushing the ladder. I can see the ladder overturning, then everyone on it plunges horribly down into the smoke-filled alley between the buildings.

They're pulling the ladder back up by the rope. I spot a mother with her child, who has moved towards the back of the roof to get away from the madness in the front area.

She sees me coming toward her. She has found a spot near the rear of the buildings where the roofs are closer together, and she's on the edge, waving at me. She has a scarf on her head – maybe she's Spanish or Persian, but I can't tell for sure. Back here, the distance between the roofs is narrower. The ladder would work better back here. And maybe it's even jumpable...?

But the area of the roof behind her is really smoking up now. Flames and smoke start swirling behind her. The smoke is curling up, out of the alley too. I glance back to the front, and they are still trying to pull the ladder back up with the rope.

I point at her baby and yell to the mother, "Throw!"

She hesitates. I plead with her, shouting with my hands cupped around my mouth.

Finally, the mother puts one foot up on the ledge, like she's going to jump across. She's considering... she looks over her shoulder at the smoke behind her.

I yell again: "Throw the baby! C'mon! *THROW!* Throw him like a football!" I make a throwing motion like a quarterback. "I'll catch him!" I make a catching motion like a football player. She looks around her again. "You can't jump with the baby!"

She decides to throw the baby.

She rears back – throws it, heaving it with both hands as hard as she can – with just enough aim and oomph... The baby's flying through the air, flying, flying... but the baby catches on an unseen wire, hangs up – flips around some and then...

The mother is screaming.

And I'm like: *NOOOOoooo.*

And the baby flips around and around and falls down into the alley – into the fiery, smoky chasm between the two buildings.

I'm stunned. I feel sick – so bad... but I don't give up.

But she has.

She has, as any mother would want to do. The poor little mother is standing there – empty, stone-faced – all the life gone out of her. The fire is rising up behind her now.

I yell, "*Lady! Lady! Jummmmp!*"

But she's frozen.

I see the mother's face – she has this 100-mile stare – she's looking right through me. The roof below her starts to give away, flames and smoke are coming up around her – but she's standing there motionless, and as the roof gives way below her, she falls in: stiff, lifeless, emotionless... like a doll; she is falling into the burning building.

A man comes up behind me – he's yelling. The flames are spreading to our building now.

All the other people from our roof and the ones who've made it over from the other roof, are moving toward the back of the building, to the iron fire escape that goes down on the backside of the building.

I'm one of the last ones going down. But there are too many people... as the person behind me gets on, I feel the fire escape shift a bit. A bolt pops loose – people are jostled, I look down at the surprise, fear, and mortal terror in the faces of the people below me. *WTF, we're all going to die.*

Everyone's screaming. Too many people behind me to go back up. I just sit down on the steps and wait for doom, my chin cradled between my hands and looking off across the campus quadrangle before me.

OK. The cops have come around, and people start coming off the bottom of the fire escape quicker, but gingerly, one at a time.

Now stretching off behind the building there's like an open park – the college quadrangle – and crowds have gathered here and there, cars have stopped, some people have their hands up to their mouths, some are holding up their cell phones taking videos...

...as I'm sitting there, I notice one face in the crowd that doesn't fit. Everyone else out across the quadrangle is riveted, horrified, shocked, or stunned.

But there's one guy out there, leaning against a tree. A funny-looking guy. He's way off there... but even from that distance, I can see that he has this grinning, sick smile on his face. And his posture, his stance, looks so different from everyone else down there...

...then I see him do it: he is eating the hair or his arm; biting it off.

Shit! That's him! That's Quickjohn!

The line going down is moving better, and I start to head down now. The people below me are mostly off the fire escape, but not fast enough for me. When I'm close enough to the ground, I jump over the side of the railing. I leap, pulling my pistol and as I land, Quickjohn sees me. He realizes that it's me – someone who's looking for him – and he takes off. The two cops that were at the bottom have left, now that they have things moving, and have gone around to the front to help.

I've got him this time. I take aim. Steady my arm on the railing of the fire escape....

But I just don't have a clean shot. I'll have to give chase.

Then I hear the BABY!

I hear the baby crying. The baby is alive. I make my way into the alley and there he is: hanging in the alley there about 12 feet up, his swaddling baby clothes caught on a vent.

I climb up on a dumpster and snag the little fellow.

As I walk out of the alley with the baby, surrounded by swirling smoke, someone takes my picture. I look around and Quickjohn is long gone now.

I hand the baby to some other police that have just come by, and GTF out of there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A GIRL IN THE MIRROR

*either you eat life or life eats you,
there's no in-between.*

That night I hit it. Hit the streets. Hit the bars in town. I need a drink. The feel of youthful energy and the optimism of a new adventure is coursing through my electrical system.

And I need people around me. I find a nice college bar and proceed to get hammered. The girls in this place are being pretty hard and I'm just having no luck at all. I guess I'm an older guy compared to most of the kids, and maybe I look like a teacher they hated or something?

So, I'm sitting there on a stool at the bar, eating fish and chips. I ask this girl next to me for the salt. "Bite me, you freak!" she says and starts laughing maniacally! I'm a little stunned but I start laughing to. She's drunk, and... I mean who uses the term "bite me" anymore.

“Foo da shah!” I say.

Her laughter arrests, her head bobbles ever so slightly and she turns and looks at me. “Foo da what?”

“It’s glibberish.”

“Glibbbbbb...”

“It’s a new language. Sort of glib-gibberish.”

She stares at me, her head cocked a little to the side, like a dog hearing a funny noise.

“Foo da shah?” I continue, “Means *fuck that shit*... sort of abbreviated and streamlined. It’s a man-made language, sort of like Esperanto or Pig-Latin.”

“Man made?”

“It was created in a lab, it did not naturally develop, unlike most languages... like which expanded and changed over centuries of evolution and natural selection.”

“You mean like slang...”

“Or jive.”

“Jive talking?”

I smile and begin my line of BS in earnest. “Now I know about this because I have a degree in Etymology, the study of words... and Jive and Jive talking are two different things. Jive is a language or dialect, whereas Jive Talking is obfuscating the truth and verbally running rings around someone to confuse them.”

“Isn’t Etymology the study of bugs?”

I smile and say, “See, a perfect example of “Jive Talking” don’t you see?”

She shrieks with an uncontrollable and an almost hysterical sort of delighted laughter, and turns towards her friends, gabbing away and whispers to them. The one sitting next to her leans back from the conversation and looks at me dourly, and as if I have two heads, laughs out loud and goes back to their gurl talk.

Well, I fucked that one up. Now I’m a laughing-stock. I look around but the bar is crowded now. No other place to sit and I have a good spot at the bar.

I turn back to the girls. The one next to me laughs abruptly and uncontrollably at what one of the other girls has just said and laughs so hard she farts. She farts loud enough for me to hear. She looks over her shoulder a bit, not turning far enough around to make eye contact but to see – out of the corner of her eye – that I’m still there and facing her. She starts laughing maniacally again.

She farts again, this time loud and rudely, right at me, and all the girls laugh. All are looking forward and away from me but the one on the other end turns and sees my sour. Grumpy face and – turning back – laughs so hard she almost falls out of her seat. What kind of fuckery is this. Are these girls farting at me now? What's becoming of this younger generation? Not very sexy is it?

I shake my head. "Foo da sha..." I murmur. A generation gap maybe. It seems I often have a gen-gap problem in these college towns. You have to wonder what they are teaching these kids these days. But I do get to have fun messing with their heads now and then.

I look around the barroom.

Not many hot girls nearby. One or two nice ones but they are with guys. Maybe it's just not my night.

For a moment I think about that apartment trap rigged to explode. A strange set up. Strange? I mean... did he live there and just knew not to touch the picture? What if it malfunctioned or he set it off by accident? He could have blown himself up. Or maybe it was a trap.

At least now I know what Quickjohn looks like...sort of...

And now he knows what I look like.

Maybe he has set up some other booby traps out there, somewhere in the town...

...maybe he's watching me right now...

...and my spider sense IS tingling...

I raise my eyes to the enormous, room-wide mirror over the bar.

I'm looking up at the mirror and into the "Where's Waldo" refraction of the horde of people behind me, and I'm scanning. *Which one are you...?*

Can I even recognize him if he's not biting the hair on his arm? I think so.

Then I see a nice-looking girl looking at me in the mirror, making eye contact. I smile. She smiles back with a nice, sly, smirk and a knowing wink. Whoever looks away first loses. She does, but then... she wins. She wins me. I turn and head her way, slowly carving through the crowd.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE GIRL'S GOTTA HAVE IT

*Let's get out of these wet clothes
and into a dry martini.*

Benchley

The girl's name is Tori.

A free spirit. She teaches dance sometimes and aerobics, and that night she taught me some tantra. She's also waitresses, tends bar, a dog-walker... but she is out of work now and selling pot for a living this week. Fine with me. Maybe I'll hang out with her here for a while. Shack up and take a little vacation here in town.

After we got done with the recreational passion of our romantic moonlight activities, she cooked me breakfast (at 2:30 in the morning), and since it was still early, we got out the wine and talked the night away, sitting there at her kitchen table. It was like we were both just a couple of freshmen college students again.

She was at least 28 or 30, maybe 35-years-old. She had wild, dirty-blond hair. Nice, full, thick, luxurious hair and a low hairline. Like Kathleen Turner. Yeah, like her.

"Ah, Tori! This is a breakfast of champions! Now look at this! We got fried eggs here, butternut squash, hummus, macadamia-nut brownies, corn flakes in kefir... what a feast!"

She smiles. "I aim to please."

She's a movie buff and we wind up playing a little drunken trivia game of hers. One of us picks a movie character, and the other would come up with someone that could beat or defeat the other in some sort of battle. Like Hulk vs. Superman.

"Eraserhead!" she says.

"Wait a minute, girl. The last one you picked was Thanos, Dark Lord of the Universe." She smiled. "And now Eraserhead?"

I had to think about it – *Who would beat Eraserhead?* "How about Benny Blanco from the Bronx!"

"Perfect! I win!" she smiles and laughs.

"What?" I asked.

"Eraserhead wins! Yay, Eraserhead!"

"Now girl, how the fuck would Eraserhead ever beat Benny Blanco? Benny, he's a tough New York gangster. He has guns and henchmen and shit!"

"Eraserhead walks up: he erases Benny Blanco's head! *Zoop!* And just like that! Gone! That's what Eraserheads do! They erase your head! Zoop!"

"No, no. Eraserhead, he sits there and looks at the radiator. He cuts up the man-made chicken..."

"But that's *your* Eraserhead!"

"That's everyone's Eraserhead!" I say, betwixed, befuddled and drunkenly flabbergasted.

"My game – my Eraserhead!"

I had to say, she got me there. "OK, you win!"

"What do I get?"

"A kiss." I kiss her.

"I want more."

I smile, and we're heading back into the bedroom again. At 35, she's at her sexual peak, so to speak – just like a horny 16-year-old boy is at his peak.

"Poor Eraserhead," she says.

I smile. “Yeah, they cut his head off and made pencil erasers out of it.”

“Noooo, I mean the real guy. The one that played him in the movie.”

“His name was Jack Nice or something like that. Yeah, he died mysteriously. I read about all that when the new *Twin Peaks* thing came out again. Someone killed him, and they never caught him,” she said, lighting another joint.

“Well, maybe someone did.” Maybe me. Maybe I was in on the inquest and the settlement, back a few years ago, back then when I was starting out. But I can’t tell her about that. She’d think I was making it up anyways.

She offers me a joint. “No, darlin’. I can’t get high.”

“Piss test?”

“No, I actually have to get high sometimes on purpose. Sometimes for my work, see, but...”

“Well. Too late now.” She says.

“What?”

She nods at the plate of brownies that I just took another one of. “It’s in the brownies. Fuck. I should have warned you.”

So, fuck it. “Well, in for a penny, in for a pound.” I reach out for her pipe.

WTF? Now I taste some of my Yage in the bowl.

“Damn girl! This is some of my stuff, right?”

“Oops again. Thought you wouldn’t mind.”

“I do.”

“Hey, I saw the gun in your pants. I thought you might be a cop. Soooo...then I saw that stuff too, so I figured I was wrong – that you’re a dealer, not a cop.”

Yage is an ancient herb, and in the hands of a master alchemist, and mixed with the right sub-elements, makes for a most perfect and quintessential formula. It came out of the Ural Mountains eons ago and was brought to the Americas by the Norse incursions in the centuries before Columbus. There are about 15 or 20 different methods and preparations for distilling and refining it into that which would give your mind wings...or – in some more dangerous mixtures – take the top of your head off.

We – The Travelers – can use many of the Yage formulas – but have our own special formula of it that no one else has – the best formula to “get in touch.” That’s our big secret. If you’re going to avenge the dead, you have to be able to connect with them. When we “get in touch”, we mean that we reach out over into the other side, into the borderlands. Our special words *get in touch*, meaning to get down with the Forlorns, finding out what really happened, conducting an investigation (inquisition, if you will).

“Well, I hope you like to dream. This stuff is the shit for that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

STRANGE DREAM

Being shot out of a cannon will always
be better than squeezed out of a tube.
Hunter S. Thompson 1995

I'm lying in bed.

We're lying in bed, in Tori's bed. And I'm feeling great. Dozing off. I'm thinking that I could get used to this for a while. Tori and I have great chemistry and a nice, easy listening relationship seems to be developing.

We came home tonight and got right to it. No games, no fooling around, no playing coy: and that's the best.

For me, when the girl plays games and all its challenging. Perhaps she wants to be chased, or wants someone else to be responsible and to blame if it turns out funky... I don't know, but relationships that start like that never seem to develop into anything worthwhile for me.

Maybe they're stalling because they have something to hide, because they're defective maybe? Then some people gravitate to the "bird with the broken wing" act: her last boyfriend... her father molested here... she hated her stepmother etc.. I don't know, maybe it makes them feel good to blurt it out, maybe it gives them more control over the other person or maybe they're just defective somewhere deep inside themselves. Maybe they need

a pre-paid excuse if things don't work out. Who knows what goes on in their minds.

All I know is I like the ones who just jump into the pool, laughing and twerking away.

It's been a wacky couple of days and now I'm feeling it. I was looking forward to a good night's sleep. But now.... The Yage – our formula of Yage – with all the special essential oils, mushrooms, botanicals, absinthe, adrenochrome, belladonna, and...a 'secret ingredient usually found in jellyfish...' (just kidding around on that last part) is hitting me hard, mean, and fast.

Soon, I'm seeing the trails above my head and I'm getting "touched". Poked at. Getting the vibes. Hearing distant rumblings and whispers. Nudges and whispers from the other side. From the borderlands.

Tori sits up, looks around like she's hearing it too, and flops back down. "Do you hear that?" she's higher than a kite, on my stuff but receptive and sensitive now.

"Uh..."

"What's that?" she says, as a wave of grainy, wisping light dashes over our heads.

"That's stardust, baby." She's done it too, the Yage formula, and I have an idea of what she's seeing, but no idea what I meant by "stardust".

When you're a Traveler and you get high, particularly while on the Formula, you're susceptible to "Forlorns" (the dead people) hitting you up out of the blue, wherever you may be. You have one foot in this world – the real world – and one foot in the Borderlands and there's a banana peel in there somewhere, yah-suh.

I can feel it all coming down.

I smell death now.

Something's in the room.

Something's above me but I can't look. For a second, I see the reflection in the mirror of the dresser, reflections of hands and feet and tips clothing hanging down. I see the shadow on the floor of a body floating above but can't bring myself to look up at it.

Fuck it. I'm haunted again. A slowly forming vision approaches the bed. I sit up and reach out, but it's like the body is made of smoke and swirls around my fingers floating... blowing.

I sit up on the edge of the bed. Tori is rising up behind me and looking over my shoulder.

“What is itttt...?” she says. “I hear crying...”

“Everything’s OK. Go back to sleep.”

“Don’t go now... Are you leaving?” she says.

“I’ve got to... I’ve got to go do this now. Don’t worry, I’ll be here the whole time.” She’s totally stoned. The pot, and her first Yage trip is fitting her right into the scene. Best to just play it like everything’s fine.

“Mmm’kay...” she murmurs sleepily and lies back down again, smiling and fading out.

The spirit of someone who needs me is here.

Here in the room with us. And the room’s a dreamworld. It’s becoming a dreamworld now. And I’m in the dream. I look around and the bedroom has only one wall now, the wall with a window. Through the window, I see a little girl floating by. I walk to the window, look out for a second, and then crawl out the window into the bleak, dark dream landscape out there that stretches off into oblivion.

The little girl.

There she is.

Over there crying.

She’s on a bench, like a park bench or a bench at a bus stop.

I’m thinking that this case is probably a murder, maybe a murder to cover a sex crime of some kind. Who else but some pervert or serial killer would kill a cute, little, innocent girl like that?

I sit down next to her – careful not to spook her – and give silence a minute.

All the while I’m aware I’m dreaming this. That this is just a dream.

I wait for her to look at me.

“Hey there.” I say. She just looks at me. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Off behind us, I see Tori floating by. She’s floating along like the Dude in *Big Lebowski*, in the bowling scene. She waves at us. The Yage has got her good now too, and she’s caught up in our dream.

I try to talk to the little girl, but she’s not talking yet. “What’s your name? Did someone bring you here?” She shakes her head.

Now Tori floats right in front of me, flat like she’s planking but turning her head and smiling slightly, “This is all a dream, right?”

“Yeah, baby.”

The little girl looks up at me now. Her mouth moves like she wants to talk. Perhaps a nice woman like Tori floating by with her flowing hair and smile and talking to me has made the little girl more comfortable with me.

“Talk to me, little lady.”

“I...”

“What happened? What did they do to you?”

“Where’s my Mommy?”

“Your Mommy’s not here.”

“Please, can you please tell my mom that I’m okay? That I’m here?”

“Honey, you’re not okay.”

She sobs.

“Whattttt...?”

“You’re not alive anymore.”

“Oh no...” she says in a soft, almost faint, little-child voice.

She sits silent for a bit as what I said sinks in, correlates, and she realizes what’s going on.

My name is Anthony.” I say softly. “Can you tell me your name?”

After a good while, the lost little girl leans over and whispers: “Brittany.”

“Tell me your name, honey, your full name. I need your last name, too. Do you know it?”

“I am Brittany Gorkin.”

I nod. The little girl starts sobbing. I hold her in my arms.

“Who killed you? Who did this?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know.”

Now I’m seeing myself sitting there with her. I’m looking down at myself from above, seeing myself in my mind, and slowly the camera’s eye pulls up and away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

DEAD BAT

"How are the kids?"

"Doing well. I lost one the other day."

"How'd that happened?"

"Playing with matches."

"Sorry."

"That's alright I got four left."

Dialog from an old Roger Corman movie

Next Morning.

Tori's place, while not a dump, but is nothing fancy or glamorous, but even less so in the morning's sober light. Overflowing ashtray, dishes piled up in the sink, a line of hung-out-to-dry clothes and underwear running across the middle of the kitchen. Somehow, I don't remember any of this from the night before, but... I do feel right at home.

But I do remember the bat. She has this bat. It was a big one. And it's stuffed. Taxidermized. I remember smelling it last night when she was in the other room. Hey, I was drunk. I was high. OK, I smelled it. I smelled a dead bat.

It had this odd chemical smell. Like liverwurst and burnt motor oil and peppermint. I'm sure Catamuso would like to smell it. He loves to smell

odd things. He may be part bloodhound. He does have a big nose. His lifetime's big bucket-list dream moment is to someday go to New York City and smell the Statue of Liberty's feet.

Coffee.

This girl knows how to make coffee.

I'm on my laptop, researching the little girl. How do I spell her name? Brittany G-O-R-K-H-I-N... Britanie Gerchin... No, no hits. How about Gorkin....

I look up, and on her little kitchen countertop TV, I see myself. *"...and police are now looking for this man for questioning in connection with the explosion yesterday at the university..."* Damn security cameras. I didn't have my signal scrambler on yesterday.

I reach out over the table and turn the TV off just as Tori is coming in the door. She's in cutoffs, no top on and drying her hair. The cutoffs are old ones, and maybe she's gained a little weight, so she's bursting at the seams nicely. I look her up and down, checking out her nice tan Florida aerobics body. I could get used to this.

"Hello, tiger. How 'bout some breakfast now."

"Yeah. Anything but brownies, eh?"

"Yeah, I think we've had enough brownies..."

She hunches down to light a cigarette on the gas stove, and then leans down and kisses me. So easy going, so cheerful. What a great gal.

"You dream loud, eh sugar..." she says.

"Yeah. That pot really got to me."

"That little girl – she was crying all night."

I turn around to her. *The little girl*. She remembers the little girl. "She kept you awake? I'm sorry." I'm playing along.

"Baby, all that was a blast. What was that in your shit? DMT? Mushrooms? I haven't had a trip like that since my last divorce party."

Good, she thinks it was all a trip. "Windex and baloney juice...." I say playfully.

"You're kidding me."

"Of course, I'm kidding you," I say. "Listen. That was... that was a special top-secret formula."

She smiles. "You had a good time last night. Didn't ya?"

That's more like it. "Yeah." *Yeah, let's change the subject.*

But then, "That's so cool! We both had the same dream!"

I fluff it off now, make out like it's nothing. "Now you can go tell all your new-age girlfriends about it!"

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure that they’ll all go to bed tonight with – like – their biggest crystals and a clove of foxfire under their pillows.” I joke.

She’s done with her hair, and she looks over my shoulder at my laptop. “Who is that? Is that her? The girl from last night?”

“Yeah. This is her.”

“The girl from the dream last night. That’s her?”

I nod.

I’m looking at Brittany Gorkin’s face on the screen. *A 19-year-old coed from Towson, MD, killed in auto accident two weeks ago. Let’s see. Four kids dead in all – a car wreck on the way home from spring break at 2 AM. Alachua County, FL. This has to be her.*

Worth checking out. Could be a murder going on here. She came to me in the dream for a reason. A murder reason. But what’s the story. Human trafficking? Drugs? Maybe Quickjohn?

“Now, how is that her...” she asks.

“Oh, ’at’s her all right, the little ghost girl from last night, all grown here. Yeah. See, last night she appeared to us as a little girl. After she was dead, she was scared, and – well...she became a little girl again. A little girl looking for her mommy. And this happens sometimes. People get freaked out when they’re dying.” *I gotta keep talking.* “It’s like guys that got shot in WWII would lay there dying and cry out for their mothers. Big, tough Marines – and they would cry out for Mother on their last breath. Like they were little boys again. Ya know?”

“This girl’s dead, then.”

“Yeah.” I look up at Tori. “Now all this is secret stuff. Top secret. So don’t tell anyone about this shit.”

“At’s fucked up.” She makes a funny face and scratches her arm. “Are you some kind of psychic investigator?”

“I dabble.”

“That’s creepy.”

“Well...” I take another sip of coffee. “...sometimes people get trapped between here and there. Sometimes they need help. Sometimes, maybe they need something more.”

I’m looking at Florida now on Google Maps. Brittany died in Menlo, Florida. About 45 miles from where I’m at now. Only a half hour’s drive (the way I drive.)

“So that girl in the dream was a ghost. Really a ghost. Here in my house.”

“I think so...”

“Oh, shut that off. I can’t look at that stuff.”

“Awww. Don’t get spooked.” I make the laptop screen fold down some.

She leaves out of the room, her shoulders up, in an uptight posture and wringing her hands. “Ghosts! Yaaah!”

“You don’t believe all this shit, do you?”

“No! Not a bit of it! But I’m still going to get my old, family Bible out.”

“Baby, I was just kidding around. I’m sorry I freaked you out. Will you please stop tripping?”

“And my Kabbalah candle!” she says.

“And burn some thyme?”

“Does that help? I have sage!” she screams out to me from the other room.

“Yup. Always does it for me.”

The phone rings, an old hard-wired home phone. The way it rings brings back memories of earlier days and old-B&W movies.

She picks up in the other room, cheerful, but then her tone of voice changes and my ears prick up. Something urgent. Something heavy. Something sad. She closes the door to the room while she’s still talking, and as she gets close to the door, it sounds like she’s about to start crying.

I sit there and look at the wall above the stove. I can see a darkened spot where something she was cooking got a little out of control. Between the dark area and the doorway, there’s an outline of where a wall phone once was and then a holy water angel dish. There’s a phone number or two written on the wall to the side of the wall phone shadow.

I get up and go to the stove and light my cigarette on the gas stove eye. I look closer at the ancient phone numbers on the wall. George Carlin? George Carlin’s phone number is there. *The George Carlin? It is a 310 number. California. Hollywood. Hmmmm.*

I sit back down at the table. I can hear the water dripping in the sink. I can hear her muffled conversation in the other room rising and falling, strained, troubled... not good. I don’t know what’s going on in there, but I feel bad for her. I realize that though I hardly know her, I care about her already. I guess when what you see is what you get, and when the person is pretty real, it’s a lot easier to get attached.

I look back at the phone number on the wall. I imagine George Carlin sitting at this same table that I’m sitting at. I imagine him sitting there in his underwear, drinking coffee, and smoking a joint. It’s a nice thought,

actually. He could have been on the road, done a little comedy-club show here in town, or maybe doing a summer-stock production... who knows.

After a while: quiet. She's not talking anymore. I stand up and go to the bedroom door. I turn the knob and go in. She's sitting at a desk in front of a typewriter with a sheet of paper in the rollers, her face in her hands. I come over and touch her on the shoulder. "What happened?"

She throws her hands up in the air, shakes her head back and forth and goes over and flops down on her bed. *Well shit.*

I sit down at the desk. "What's the matter?" I say somewhat softly.

Turns out her mother just passed. She had cancer, but she died of a stroke. She was in Minneapolis. Dying in Minneapolis. Tory was going to see her but never got around to it. As she talks, I look over the letter in the typewriter on her desk. It's to her mother. She started it over a month ago. Seems she had some issues or bad blood with her mother and her sisters. None of my business, just a glance into her life, a moment of curiosity, like the cigarette burn on the edge of her kitchen table... was it from George Carlin's cigarette? What did she cook him for breakfast in the morning? Did he take a bath or a shower?

I go over to the bed and lie down next to her. Put my arm around her. She takes my hand and pulls it into her comforting warmth.

I start humming a nameless lullaby and rocking her. "Tell me all about your mother, baby... tell me about a long, long time ago... and far, far away."

I booked out while she was at work that afternoon. She got called in to set up for a bartending gig at a banquet that night, and I left her a note. I really enjoyed my time with her – what little it was – and I will be back if I can. As I drive off, I can picture her, a few days later, telling all her stoned friends about the little ghost girl...

But I stole her bat. The stuffed bat – I kidnapped it. I don't know why. Maybe an excuse to come back or something.

Fucking bat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MENLO

*You don't get explanations in real life.
You just get moments that are absolutely,
utterly, inexplicably odd.*
Neil Gaiman

Menlo, Fla.

It's about five or six miles from the freeway exit to the edge of Menlo town.

Weather's cool, sunny, and pleasant. I'm eating a cold Chick-fil-A sandwich and polishing off a mostly melted, but still slightly cold milkshake. I'm breezing along with the radio playing, wearing my sunglasses and a smile.

I figure I'll scout around some before I find a motel.

Just a small, sad town. Menlo, Florida. Five or ten thousand people maybe.

A cement plant, a weed-infested drive-in parking lot (the drive-in screen fell down, but the rusty speakers are still on the poles), a defunct lead-smelting operation, a Waffle House, a deserted Putt-Putt... no Starbucks, no Walmart, not even a Chinese restaurant.

But there are ghosts here. Fresh ones.

Now I've got to find them.

I grab my tape recorder and start making some notes as I enter the outskirts. *“Anthony Harken here. In Menlo, Florida, now. On an Inquest. Arrived 2:20 PM. Today is... April 14th. Or 15th. I am down here in this shit-hole town, investigating the death of one 19-year-old Brittany Gorkin. She and three other students returning from spring break...they all wound up dead. Paper says it was a car accident...but we’re going to see about that. I suspect some kind of cover up. Maybe some local people killed them? The cops? Who knows...? From the clean looks of those kids, the pictures I saw on Facebook, all red cheeks and well-fed looking, it was probably not a meth or coke deal gone wrong. Those four kids did not – in any way - look like any kind of big drug dealers or even heavy users. But this is a drug-running corridor area.... So, who knows. This might even be racial...one of the kids was Black or Indian. India Indian that is. Who knows? The Brittany ghost-girl has shown up – hit me up the other night - but I haven’t seen any of the other kids yet.”*

The report loads up to the “cloud,” and it’s all right there, if anything happens to me.

Ya never know. You start spooking around in these little towns and they never find you again. Not that anyone would really miss me these days.

The town is a trip.

A wave of nostalgia for a bygone era mixed with a despondent “land that time forgot” feeling washes over me as I troll through the bleak and half-abandoned downtown. I’m creeping along, taking it all in. The old store windows. The broken sidewalks. Cracked walls. Peeling paint. Weeds growing in the corners and cracks in the pavement and the walls.

A flip-flop sitting there in front of me, in the middle of the street at the city’s main intersection.

I sit there, staring at that flip-flop in the middle of the road under the red light. If I weren’t so tired, I would probably wonder how it got there. I take a snapshot of the lonely flip-flop. To me, it’s a picture, and in its own way a perfectly beautiful picture.

I take a lot of pictures.

And I’m good at it. Amateur, sure, but good. “F-Stop Fitzgerald” is one of my Twitter names. It’s a hobby, sure, but I often also like to use the photographer angle as a cover. I have a picture scrapbook in the trunk titled LONELY THINGS. If I get caught snooping around, I show ‘em my camera. I can make out like either I’m doing a *Bridges of Madison County* thing, or sometimes I’m a state or govt. inspector taking pictures. I even have some cool fake inspector credentials in the back.

Later, I'll head back and get a shot of the decrepit windmills at the deserted Putt-Putt while I'm here. Might spend an afternoon there and do a photo essay.

A dog trots by in a horrible condition. It has just given birth, but the puppy is stuck, only halfway coming out of the mother, and it's dead, just flopping around.

No picture of that.

It would depress me later. The kids these days thrive on all that dark stuff: skulls and the macabre "day of the dead" stuff. But I've seen enough horror and bad things just doing the job I'm doing now, and I don't need any more.

I remember when I was a kid, the neighbors had an uncle that sort of lived in the attic. When I found out he was a war hero, I went hard on getting him to tell me some of his old war stories. He never could. He was a man who had seen too much. Literally seen too much.

Then one day – this was some years later, and I was a teenager – he was in chemo and dying, and kinda dizzy on a lot of pain pills. Agent Orange had got him and got him good. I was sitting on the front porch with my new laptop, checking out the chat rooms (a big thing back then, and this was the first computer I owned) and some of the crazy porn I'd been hearing about – and he comes staggering up on the porch and sits down next to me. He was dying, and... he was drunk.

He started telling me about the war. He wasn't telling really, he wasn't confessing. I think he was like "downloading". Downloading all his memories and feelings and triumphs and regrets.

Like the dog, he knew he would die soon.

It was all over now, and there was nothing he could do about it. At the end of the rambling but vivid stories, he was shaken. Not crying with the tears all running down but with a look on his face like he need to cry but couldn't. Not now, not in a hundred years. Then silence for a while, and then he asked me if I could drive him down to the liquor store and take him trolling for whores down on Lincoln Street.

I told him I would be honored.

He wanted a certain skinny one called Dynamite, with a big Afro and a crazy laugh.

Sure, why not?

So back in Menlo, I turn off the main drag down onto a side street. I pass by an empty lot with a marshy, infested-looking, stagnant pond, with an old beat-up mattress in the middle, and the delicate scent of raw sewage wafting in through the open window of my car. A Sargasso Sea of trash and debris.

Potholes. Kids playing in an abandoned refrigerator. A long defunct Blockbuster Video. I pass a guy in his bathrobe and bedroom slippers walking along, sipping on a cup of coffee. A now-skeletal Christmas tree is lying in an alley I pass, defined only by a few strands of tinsel and two ornaments.

This town is dead. They just haven't buried it yet. It's just lying here rotting away. Decomposing.

I find this museum-like feel of the town hypnotic: both haunting and kind of romantic. It's not the Saturday Museum feel of like when families come down on weekends or a school class visit feel. But an empty, silent, ethereal weekday afternoon when only two or three people are there in the whole museum – or maybe no one at all. In college, I talked an interesting girl into skipping class with me, and we went to the museum. No one was there. Since my regular girlfriend came by my room in the middle of the afternoons and took a nap in my sheets waiting for me to come back from my classes, the museum was a good place to have some extracurricular romance.

We had the place to ourselves. We smoked a joint, we kissed, we danced hand-in-hand, and she treated me to an impromptu strip tease – and we finally made love in a backroom with crates and darkness all around us. It was one of the most romantic moments of my youth and of my long-gone student days. I remember that day with her there in the museum storeroom like it was yesterday, but ya know, I can't even remember a single lovemaking session with my main girlfriend at the time. Funny, isn't it.

We walked around the museum after. I remember all the exhibits – all frozen in time, in the air conditioning of the building, and the dust floating in the beams of afternoon sunlight stretching across the room, as time stood still for us. The exhibits had to have enjoyed the show we put on for them that day.

That moment that me and that girl had together that day was a museum display of sorts - in my mind - like a Polaroid snapshot; a brief crazy moment smeared on the long line of time. Just a spot. Don't blink, or you'll miss it. But a Polaroid snapshot none the less.

And our whole lives, everyone's life is really perhaps nothing more than a blink on the face of time: a cigarette smoked and tossed out the window of a moving car, a leaf in the storm, bumping down the gutter and circling the drain and gone. Just gone.

Eventually I'm past downtown and breezing through a broad, long residential area: a neighborhood – kids playing in the yards, water sprinklers, streets named after trees – and I take a turn down a residential, tree-lined street that leads back to the main drag.

Now I pull up to the light and there's some dildo's car, the driver sitting stopped there in front of me, texting.

He's sitting there, texting right through the green light. Yup. Here comes the yellow light. Fuck this guy. The doofus has his left turn signal on – but he's not turning, just sitting there like a turd in the punchbowl. Of course, he's badly situated and a big truck with a winch is parked on the side in the oncoming lane, so there's not enough room for me to just go around him, so I'm sitting there waiting. Waiting, waiting, waiting. What's going on? I look up at the light and it's green and then just turning to red. The guy's still just sitting there. He has no idea that I'm there right behind him. I'm getting livid, then infuriated.

I honk the horn!

He jumps up in his seat, and his frigging phone pops out of his hand and out the window of his car like a watermelon seed. It lands on the pavement, probably broken now. He still doesn't go. He doesn't turn around and look at me. He just sort of huffs and deflates; he's totally pissed. Good. Fuck him. Then he gets out of the car.

He's a fatso guy with that steroid look: shiny face and a shaved, bald head, like a lot of bouncers you see at strip clubs and discos...

...but he's a cop.

He's got his cop tie pulled loose and his uniform shirt unbuttoned. No gun belt on. Looks like he's just off work - coming home in his own civilian car - but he's got the surly-cop smirk on his face. This is not going to end well. He glibly snaps up his phone and shoves it in his shirt pocket. I get out of my car, too. (You never want to be sitting down and vulnerable when a situation gets sticky.)

I tell him, like, "Hey. Sorry. I didn't know you were a cop... but you were sitting there for three or four green lights." As he comes at me, I see he has a lazy eye that sort of points off, that doesn't coordinate with the other eye. And a pointy head.

“Hey now, that was important police business I was on, boy,” he says with rising antagonism.

Sure. Like I really believe him.

He reaches for his gun – or maybe the cuffs or baton – none of which are there now – because he left his service belt in the car. I can smell whiskey and beer and Cheetos on his breath – and then he realizes that the belt’s not there, but the lifting motion tightens his clothing, tightening the pocket until the cell phone pops back out again and hits the ground right in front of me.

I reach down and pick up his cell phone while the drunken sod is still trying to figure out where his cuffs and gun are. I look at the cell-phone’s screen. Angry Birds! *“This is the important police business you were on?!”* Angry fucking Birds!!” I say, laughing my ass off.

As he realizes that he left his gun-belt on the seat of his car and he’s actually helpless – and that I just caught him with Angry Birds on his phone – his face contorts like he doesn’t know whether to scream or throw up. He’s a bit paralyzed and I’m pretty mad, so I just catch him with an uppercut to the jaw and knock him out cold – POW – just like that!

Now I’ve done it, I say to myself.

I look around. Total silence.

No one saw.

The sound of a TV coming out an open window. A dog barking in the distance. It’s a sleepy residential side street.

I bend down over him. A pulse. He’s still alive. I pull out his wallet. Philby. Marcus Wayne Philby. 28 years old. 5 foot 8. 235 pounds. His mouth is smiling in his ID picture, but his eyes are still sad. And out of sync.

I go back to my trunk and dig out some nice “magic tricks.”

I hit him with a hypo that will make him forget everything and should let him get a real good sleep. Rohypnol. I hate to waste it on this fucktard, but at least he will have amnesia.

I drag him into his car seat. I take a swig from his quart of single malt whiskey he has there in the seat – cheap stuff, BTW – and pour a little on him, then let the bottle leak all over the pavement. I feel a leak coming on myself, and think, *“Hmmm, that will be a nice touch. It will look good if he wakes up; or someone finds him, and it looks like he pissed himself.”*

I laugh as I piss on his lap a bit and some down onto the floor. Not too much now. Don’t wanna overdo it.

Never pissed on anyone before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

There are only three stories in literature: A man goes on a journey, a stranger comes to town, and Godzilla vs. Megashark.

Leo Tolstoy

Time to check in somewhere.

The Starlight Motel looks like a real trip.

In the front, there's a nice, neatly laid out garden of dead flowers and shrubs. A ring of painted rocks of various shapes and sizes circles the withered flowers and thriving weeds. There's a dry birdbath over to the left. Nice, big, shady, trees, all painted white around the first four feet of the trunk.

Cool.

Someone threw a pair of sneakers tied together by the shoelaces, onto the powerlines going from the street into the office. A hand-painted sign out front (that looks like it was done by a child with a lot of time and pride) announces that you can buy fireworks inside. Off to the left is another sign that leads to a petting zoo.

Very cool.

I love it. I gotta love this place.

This will be my headquarters, my base of operation for the next few days.

I like to stay in these cheap motels, you know, the ones with the vacancy signs and where you pull your car right up to the door and I can load all my stuff right in the room.

And also, where I can better hear anyone outside messing with my car at night.

And this place is all of that: paper sanitary cover for the toilet seat, mints on the pillow, a tiny bar of wrapped soap the size of two postage stamps. And the smell of emulsified dust – just like in an airport – where the daily vacuum cleaning reduced the dust particles to a microscopic level with a very distinctive scent and probably a slight level of health hazard.

There is no Hilton or Marriott in this town; maybe a Fairfield Inn back up by the expressway... but this is my kind of place. I have chosen well, and it's a beaut. The place is a dump, but if you don't like it, fuck you. If some girl I pick up at the bowling alley doesn't like it, fuck her. It's cheap and easy, and no security cameras.

The lady at the front desk is very short, probably having shrunk a good bit over the years. She has a wig that looks like it may be 20 years old. At least 10 years old. It has been primped, nudged, and lovingly reshaped so many times over the years that she now looks like Cousin Itt from the old *Addams Family* TV show.

The TV behind her is playing *Wheel of Fortune*.

\$39.95 a night, \$189 for a week.

Cool. I give her one of my fake IDs and pay in cash.

A choice of rooms?

The end room - the one on the right down there, with a view of the pool. Great. I'll have a view of the petting zoo out the side window. I also nail the room right above it too.

Cousin Itt is smoking filterless Camels. I didn't know you could even get those anymore. Behind her on the wall, I notice an old, yellowed picture in a Woolworth five-and-dime frame; a picture of a fat guy in a bunny suit holding a hatchet. The fat guy has a certain demented smile on his face, and looks like an insurance salesman with a little Bill Murray thrown in. As a matter of fact, I think it is Bill Murray in a fat suit.

I know it can't be, but I can't stop looking at it.

Do I want to rent a VHS tape player? No.

I notice a stack of rentable, junky-looking videotape players on a rickety rack at the end of the reception desk, then a library shelf full of VHS tapes, their labels faded and bleached of color from the Florida sun.

Cousin Itt was reading a comic book when I came in, but she slid it away under a newspaper. The edge of the comic sticks out, and it looks like an Archie comic. She thinks I didn't see it, but I did. I can imagine for a moment what it would be like to be reading a comic to pass the time in a motel office in the middle of nowhere – that comic; reading the rest of that very comic – was what I had been looking forward to when I got back from lunch earlier this afternoon.

Too lazy to pull the car up in front of the room right now, I walk down to my room.

Since I'm actually walking I get a good look at the girl in cutoffs lounging against the fence around the pool and drinking a Dr Pepper as I go by her.

She has flip-flops on. But I only see one on her. She actually has only one flip-flop on.

"Hey, I know where your other flip-flop is," I say as I walk by, and I'm totally not even looking at her.

I'm not Brad Pitt, but sometimes, women still go for me. Not every girl. Brad is for every girl, but for some, (and all too few mostly) I'm "their type."

Now the ones that do like me – if I pick up on it, I usually still have to run a little game. For their own good of course, I give them the cold shoulder at first, (instead of the whistling, leering wolf act) and I make a real effort to ignore them with a coldly pleasant, courteous, hello, while looking off the other way. Then I do a sort of do the hit and run thing, give them the come-on, then a curt brush off, and then back again.

It's a mating dance perhaps?

And if that gets things revving, then I'm on to something. If they go back to talking to their girlfriends, I'm through and out of there. But....

So maybe she'll follow me down to my room... or not.

Guess not. Maybe next time. Actually, she looks so high right now, she's probably too mellow to do much more than smile. But I can feel the smile on my back as I walk on down to my room.

We'll see.

I go in the room. The motel-room smell. Nonsmoking room, but it's sure been smoked in. A lot. A room like this would have had a crew of roofers staying in it last week, or maybe some seedy, old solitaire-playing traveling salesman. I plop down on the bed. It's good and hard. I like a hard, firm bed - good for my back, which is doing fine right now - but just stretching, I can crack my back in three places.

I think about the single flip-flop girl, her smooth tan skin, the way a hint of young chub pooched out over the front of her tight jeans, the strand of hair slinging around her face and stuck to the corner of her mouth. That whimsical smile in her eyes as she looked up from watching *Crazy Rich Asians* on her cell phone as I walked by.

I doze off. Just for a second now.

The last 24 hours have been fun. I drank a lot last night. Got high. Fucked a 35-year-old out-of-work aerobics instructor/wanna-be actress. Beat up a cop. Got 4 or 5 hours of sleep last night... I drove all afternoon. And don't forget, a kinda interesting séance.

...just need 5 minutes.

About 3 hours later I wake up. What was I dreaming? Where am I? Did I lock the car? Was that girl in the walkway a hooker - truck stop hooker maybe - or someone's girlfriend? Or wife?

The car's fine. Doors tight.

My car's a tired, ragged-out old hooptie anyways, and that's the way I like it. No one wants to break into my heap. Still, I have the car all rigged up to set some alarms off if someone tries to get inside.

No sign of the girl now.

The sun is setting, coming in at low angles - slipping down - a cooling star falling slowly into its own sunset. I light a cigarette and check things out around the pool.

A condom with a dead ant stuck to it is floating in the deep end. I shake my head. The light's hitting it just right, and I take a picture of it with my cell phone.

A seagull sails over, drifting and gently rocking back and forth. Maybe there's a dump nearby? Seagulls do love dumps.

I hear a TV off in the distance, in some room with the window open. A car rolls up on the other side of the fence around the pool, gravel crunching and radio music turning off. Mexican radio. Day workers. I smell a waft of pot smoke. I hear bottles rattling in a paper bag. Someone's going to have a six-pack party in their room tonight...and watch the game.

Fuck it.

I go into town, drive around... grab a bite, float, ride, cruise, check things out.

Darkness is falling, creeping in all around me.

I'm rolling along. Nice and easy.

All is quiet on the Western Front tonight. I pass by a bar called the Collier Room with two drunken old hippies arguing outside. There's a couple of cars at the VFW. Ah ha, a strip club, but all pretty dead and empty looking. Not worth a visit. Maybe it'll all get better on the weekend.

I see the speed trap up ahead: cop car sitting like a waiting shark. I get a bad, sinking feeling as I drift by slowly. Cop lights a cigarette just as I turn my head to look – it's not my new friend Philby though. Tall guy with hair and a Village People moustache.

I'm hitting the edge of the old city proper, and still no rich or upscale neighborhood. Maybe they don't have any in this town. Mayor probably lives in a double-wide.

Then some empty lots in rows. Barren lots of an unfinished subdivision, gone-belly-up-now. The lots are laid out with a few foundations here and there with sprouts of wiring and plumbing coming up out of them.

Past there and outside of town now.

Flat.

Florida flat. Just fields of sawgrass. No mountains or hills. There's some kind of small military base or instillation east of town, a shitty, half-assed junior college over there, a series of Quonset huts in a row, a local radio station with a small one-room structure under a sky-high radio tower.

I get the feeling of being free, free and able to just wander, the kind of feeling you so take for granted until you're locked up or lying in the hospital. I pull over and just sit there a bit, watching the wind plow across the sawgrass in waves.

I sit there in a state of distraction and the haze of a long-road dream state.

Am I a man of destiny? My destiny called, I went. How many others are there out there like me. Most people never go. Never hop off the merry-go-round. They stay safe.

Does that make me a good guy? Maybe I'm no knight in shining armor, after all. I was scared back there when the twin and his guy got into my building. When the lady wouldn't throw her baby to me the idea of me taking a running jump across to the burning building. And in my mind, I could see me hitting the wall and falling down into the abyss of flames and billowing, fucking smoke. No fudging it. I was scared. I was a coward. After I got to my room that night and flipped on the TV and threw down on the bed I started shaking uncontrollably.

I have to wonder where my soul is. Where my soul is right now. Is it in a safe or a sacred cave? Or does some numb-nutz have it. Some kid who bought it off the Dark Net and keeps it under his bed hidden from his mother? I picture him poking holes in the lid so it can breathe and... he's been catching fireflies and has them in the jar too.

All dark now. Night has fallen and twilight is gone. As I drive through downtown again; things are beginning to come to life. Not entirely in a good way... but not all bad either. As I cross below the underpass, I see blue lights – cop's pulling someone over. He's got some college kids. I pull over and watch for a while. Definitely a speed-trap town. It's a cottage industry in a lot of small towns. I hate speed traps. The cop doesn't like something one kid up against the car says and kicks his feet out from under him. The kid tries to crawl under the car, one of the girls starts laughing and the cop backhands her. She goes down and the cop grabs the kid going under the car, grabs him by the feet, but the kid has a good grip on something under there. Then – wow - the girl has gotten back in the car somehow and is driving off and running over the cop's foot and maybe her friend's legs.

A hot mess. I shake my head and drive off.

I get back to the motel and someone is parking in the spot right in front of my room where I wanted to park. Fuck. I still haven't unloaded all my crap out of the trunk. Later, then. In a minute.

But the far-off parking spot is a blessing after all. As I walk the distance past the room that's two doors down from mine, there's the girl – the one from before, watching the Crazy Asians. Her curtains are pulled

closed, but I can still see right between them, and there she is, lying on the bed, going at it with a vibrator and nutting like a fiend. Beautiful.

The female orgasm is perhaps my favorite fetish to voyeurize. It terrifies some men but me? I am addicted, I have to admit.

She definitely dropped acid or MDA by the looks of the way she's going at it. Should I knock? Ask for a cup of sugar?

I hear something and turn to the noise. It's my Forlorn, the lost little girl, the one that I met when I was so fucking high the other night at Tori's. She's there down past my room and the motel walkway. But just for a brief second. Now she's fading away the more I look at her....

Back in the room.

What a day. What a week. What a life.

I'm in Bum-fuck America. Middle of nowhere. In every way possible.

I'm here in Menlo Florida, haunted by a little-girl ghost, smelling a petting zoo when I open my door, watching a girl in a shitty motel pleasure herself, beating up cops and pissing on them... Now how cool is all that, motherfuckers.

CHAPTER -TWENTY-SEVEN

WAFFLE HOUSE

*Some of the worst mistakes
of my life have been haircuts.*

Jim Morrison

Something wakes me up. In the middle of the night, I hear a noise from somewhere. Outside. Upstairs. not sure.

I start thinking about all the good stuff still in the trunk of the car. I do have the alarms on, but you can never be too careful. There's a couple of weapons, some expensive electronic stuff, drugs, loot from the last job, comic books...

I check. The car is fine, but I decide to go ahead and bring most of the stuff into the room. Then I smoke a cigarette outside. Nice night. I walk over to the petting zoo and then past it. A goat bleats at me.

This is my life.

I like being on the road. Always a new, strange place right around the corner. New people. Strangers.

The open road. The open road to nowhere. A blue-collar killer on the open road to nowhere. Yes.

I'm a leaf blowing in the wind...along with all the other leaves. Blowing in the wind, along with all the answers my friend. Drinking,

chasing bimbos, arguing with strangers, wandering through a shopping mall in the middle of the afternoon, killing people and looting their shit.

I am a modern-day cowboy. A saddle-tramp and a rolling stone. I'm the restless wind.

I *AM* the restless wind.

I have to stay on the move now. If ever I settle down, I get stale. The days start to fly by. Weeks. Whole seasons. You begin to fit in. You become an ordinary person. Another robot. Your life goes on and you're just sitting there watching it go by like an afternoon TV show. *Like sands through an hourglass: so are the days of our lives.*

Or is the TV watching you?

I look up at the night sky. The clouds are flying over now. A front is moving in. The air is a bit colder, and the breeze is picking up.

I decide to take a spin and run through the fucking town. Let's see it at night... maybe get a drink, maybe get a bite. Who knows, maybe get laid. No telling what kind of skanks are lurking around this town at this hour of the night.

I pass a bar that looks interesting. Just closing though. Some people in the parking lot. Just a couple of people but.... A hot chick or two. With guys though.

As I drive by the marshy side of a marshy waterway, the frogs are croaking up a storm.

Wandering. I track it out to the expressway and go down an exit. A big Truckstop there. I pull in and sit there, sit there off from the trucks, off on the edge of the parking lot where no one will notice me. Sit and watch.

A few truckers arguing. Drunk. Stupid. Angry.

A girl gets out of a truck's cab. Can't tell if she's naked from the waist down or has a thing on. Yep, a thong. They call them "lot lizards". some more of them over there behind the building. Two more start strolling across the parking lot talking and laughing.

Like watching a TV show. Amusing. But a great place to get rolled or catch the clap. I roll on.

Back in town, everything's gone to ground and quiet. They have rolled the sidewalks up.

There're some people at the Waffle House. I sail in and get a seat at the counter. One of the waitresses is eyeballing me and she beats the other girl to me with the setup: the knife and fork on a napkin.

Cool.

The menu, a smile, then a glass of water. And another smile. Swell.

"Hello there, Princess." She doesn't reply, just smiles back, sort of shyly. Something about a girl getting shy gets me curious sometimes.

Not a bad-looking girl. Cute.

She could be giving me the eye for any number of reasons. Maybe she's just up for a spin tonight. Maybe she's sick of this place and wants to get out of town and I'm a "perfect stranger." Maybe she just broke up with her boyfriend. Or girlfriend. Or maybe she's just broke. She's young so maybe she just wants to get away from her parents. She's probably not a virgin. Virgins are usually more giddy and silly. Then again, ya never know.

I start sketching on some napkins, just doodling like I often do, and I'm drawing some horses and horse heads. Girls love horses.

I eat, I smile, I get my ice water refilled. She looks at my horse.

She turns up her nose with wrinkles and says, "I hate horses. They kicked me once," and turns away.

Just then some cops come in. Four of them. They're all laughing and joking. Probably high. Then my blood runs cold for a second when I notice Philby, the guy I clocked out when I first got to town, is one. He's almost right on me, as I turn, and his eyes meet mine. He looked right through me. Great. *He doesn't recognize me!*

I pay up and hit the road.

Outside, I remember that I wrote my phone number on one of the napkin sketches, but I forgot to give it to her.

I sit outside in my car. I sit there and watch.

Princess beats out another waitress again, this time to the cops, and is waiting on them now. She's flirty with them all and putting her hands on one cop's shoulder as she jokes and laughs with them.

I'm sitting there watching this. Can you believe that? I'm like a jealous high school boyfriend. I don't even have a little pint bottle to sip on like if I was in a movie.

Well shit...

Then I see one of the other waitresses clean up my spot. She bundles the napkins with horses and my cell number on them up in her fist

as she's talking over her shoulder to the cook behind her, and it all just gets thrown out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BEING WATCHED

*Like a bowl of cereal
with water instead of milk....*

Valiant Thor

I get back to my room and I'm still antsy, I can't sleep. I can't find the 2nd bottle of the 18-year either right now, and so – WTF – I do some of the Yage I've got in my pocket. I mean, I'm on a job right now, so I'm not technically doing it for fun. And I've got to get some sleep. For the good of the job.

After I kill the Yage, I now find the bottle and have a swig. I turn on the TV, and there are reruns of *The Love Boat* *click* Home Shopping Network *click* some talk show about the warning signs of alcoholism... and I just turn the TV off when I hit that. I remember reading how alcoholism got rampant among the guards in the concentration camps. Seems like a regular regimen of proximity to death and killing can do a job on you.

Still can't sleep, so it's time to hit the computer.

One good thing, the roofers or whoever stayed in this room before left a bunch of shit in the refrigerator. A half loaf of Arnold Oat Nut bread, a

six-pack of off-brand beer that I've never heard of, breakfast sticks, a bottle of Old Spice cologne, a packet of sliced baloney that's gone shiny and slimy, some double-A batteries, chocolate-flavored peanut butter, a tequila bottle with two fingers left, a whistle....

I crack one of the off-brand beers and sit down.

I Google up Brittany's Facebook page. Such a natural cutie. I watch a cellphone video she had posted of her vacation. Our 19-year-old Brittany Gorkin is walking out of a Vero Beach hotel room with her friends: apparently her boyfriend and another college-age couple that they are traveling together with. They are all happy and kissy, and loading vacation gear into a small SUV. Everyone is beautiful when they're 19. Sure. Most everyone.

There are shots of them on the beach, having dinner, partying, having fun...

Nice girl. Very big, beautiful eyes. So young. Still a little baby fat, shapely, bouncy, bubbly, carefree. The "carefree" reminds me of the phenomenon of how kids in college are still floating in a sort of anesthetized, happy, embryonic fluid of life. Floating and not having any idea of what it all is really like or the fucked-up shit that lies ahead. A small pet terrier dances around her feet as she loads her overnight bag into the car.

In one picture, Brittany is smiling at the camera as she shows off her tan and doffs her summery straw hat to display a new hairstyle. Nice legs. A dolphin tattoo on one ankle, a comical bat or vampire on the other. She had a bat on one of her T-shirts: a bat and the words "FLY BY NIGHT!" A cool design which I've never seen before.

It's weird, looking at this girl, knowing she is dead and gone but so alive in the pictures.

Now let's check the accident report.

I'm in luck – the police department database is updating, and I find an open "back door" to hack in through, accessing the accident report and anything else I want to know about. Got it.

The report seems fishy from the start. Vague in one spot and then verbose in another. Lots of typos. The description of the accident doesn't make sense. It seems to say that the kids were - or may have been - driven off the road by another SUV, and then it implies that there are no witnesses: the other SUV got away. But how do you conclude that if no one saw it?

There is no supporting evidence entered into the report, and – when I think about it – it does sound all made up.

The pictures are no good. Poorly lit and some look like they have condensation or spit on the lens. Intentional?

Well, fuck me running! Look who filed the report – Officer Philby! That dildo cop back there with the Angry Birds. Well, hello, Philby.

I do a google search for Officer Philby, Menlo Florida and get a hit on the city government website. A posed and artificially lit picture, probably taken at Glamour Shots in some shopping mall off down the interstate.

A mite or tiny gnat lands on the screen and pulls me out of the computer trance I'm in. I try and thumb the gnat two or three times before I get him. The crushed gnat is right there on Philby's smiling, fat face.

I hear the bear roar.

Shit, it almost 2 AM. I go out to get some air. Take a walk around.

Got a good Yage buzz going on now, and I'm feeling pretty mellow. There's a vending machine down the way. How about some dessert? I try to buy a candy bar but push the wrong button number and buy a comb. I try again. I'll try a Snickers, in honor of our boy Quickjohn. Hell, I'll try two.

I hear a slight whine, like a balloon squeaking off air, to my left, down the breezeway, and I turn. I look and see a blue glow going around the corner. I look harder and I see a blue glowing entity standing about 20 feet off from that corner, off in the darkness of the parking lot. But I can't see it when I look right at it - only out of the side of my eye.

This is what we call a "Blue Louie." This is a remnant kind of a Forlorn. It's a haunted soul, but one who died a good while ago and is so old and diminished that it probably can't remember who it was or the specific, horrific event that caused it to remain in the Borderlands.

Wooosh. Something gushes by me. The other Blue Louie has made it all around the building and has come up from behind me.

This is perfectly normal and no cause for alarm. When you do the Yage, you have one foot in the real world, and one foot in the nethers.

These Blue Louies are sad things, and I've heard that there's a way to get rid of them, to put them out of their misery, but I've only been with the crew for a year or two and am still learning all the tricks.

I head back to the room, and I'm thinking.

I took Philby for a doofus when we first met: a comical, harmless, Barney Fife-type caricature, but maybe he's the one covering up for whatever happened... or, if this was a murder, he could be protecting some local bigwig, or bigwig's kid, or even another cop.

On the way back to the room, I pass a room with a guy sitting there, watching TV with the curtains wide open. I've noticed that when a room is not occupied, the drapes are wide open and the beds are made, all nice and tight, and while you have to shut the drapes yourself when you check in, it's odd for an occupied room to have the drapes wide open.

This guy just forgot? Looks like he's watching porno when I glance, so I look back to where I'm walking.

I decide to have another cigarette before I go to sleep and to finish my candy bar in a quiet orgy of simple pleasures, so I go and sit by the pool and the petting zoo.

The bear is not looking good, but he's hanging in there. Not a big bear, but not quite a baby.

I pull up one of the cheapo plastic chairs from the swimming pool and watch the bear. "Hi bear. Wanna sip?" I offer him the can of beer in my hand.

The bear roars and lunges at me. He has a lot of froth and slobber flinging from his mouth.

"Easy there, Ace."

I pick up the cigarette that flipped out of my mouth when the bear lunged, and I sit down in the beside-the-pool chair. "Sorry, dude. No Heineken for you today."

The bear lumbers back to the other side of the cage as if he heard and understood me. I think sometimes animals do understand us – well, sort of. They just listen to the tones maybe.

After I finish the cigarette, I saunter back to the vending machines to get a soda. This is a good batch of Yage and I have a floating feeling as I walk. I feel like a feather, tripping down the sidewalk in the night breeze.

I try to not look when I go by the porno man's room, but on the way back he turns his head – I can see him turn out of the side of my eye – and without thinking, I turn and look. Now I can see that his face is awful: all sallow and cracked, and he has a damp, deathly pallor. The eyes are no more than ghastly sockets, hollow and rotten-looking, as if the eyeballs rotted and

insects and birds ate the tasty eyes out of the head. He has a sick grin on his face and waves at me.

I've definitely got one foot in the Borderlands now.

These kinds of rotting ghosts are mostly harmless too but can be trouble sometimes. They are beyond the Blue Louies. These are the ones who never could be avenged, the ones who are not innocent, and are just hanging around waiting to go to Hell.

Satan comes every solstice to collect these souls (found that shit out the hard way actually), but he misses some sometimes. They are pretty harmless. All bumbling and wandering but they can still turn vicious on you, and they still give me the willies.

I go back to sit with the bear.

I'm pretty lonely, I guess.

"Hey there, fella. Full moon tonight." I say to him. Off in the distance a well-timed tire squeals and a glass-packed muffler revs and *ka-putters* into the night. "Lotsa action going on tonight, amigo. We're missing it all, you know – the good stuff at least."

A voice out of nowhere says: "The good stuff's right here now, sweetie...." – but it's not the bear.

I look around behind me, and it's the girl from the room next door. The girl with one flip-flop. She is pulling another chair over to where I'm sitting. She sits down.

She has both her flip-flops now.

"Bear got bit by a raccoon," she says casually. "I told them it has rabies."

"And they don't want to hear it, huh?"

"No, they got someone coming for it."

"That's good. Poor thing's probably suffering."

She lights one of my cigarettes. She did it without asking and I take that as a good sign. Her being familiar.

"I saw you looking last night," she says.

I smile. "You were working on a good one there. It was a beautiful show. Better than Love Boat reruns."

She smiles. She's just woken up and her hair is nice and messy.

"The bear woke you?" I ask.

She smiles demurely and nods, looking me in the eye. She's coming on strong.

I scoot my chair over closer. Maintain silence. Sit there a second. Then I put my hand on top of her hand. She smiles. I lean into her and kiss her. She smiles more. Then we click and I start kissing her in earnest. She melts a bit and then gets more whipped up for a while. She pulls out and leans back and catches her breath.

My eyes wander to the left, and I notice the night-shift kid in the office is watching. Lit from below, (from his laptop probably) he has a sad, frozen look on his face. Got to be a lonely job, night shift duty in this shithole town.

Watching us is just gonna make him feel even lonelier, but I can't help it.

She takes some more deep breaths and then stands up from her chair. She knows what she's doing. She knows what she's gonna do.

She slinks over to right in front of me – self-confident, majestic, brimming with lust – and straddles my lap, smiling and throwing her cigarette away over her shoulder. She descends into my lap and starts kissing me intently now, her hair cascading down on me, and her arms lazily wrapped around my shoulders. My mind goes in five different directions, one of which is; what happens if whatever boyfriend she has comes home or wakes up right now.

She draws back from the kissing, reaches in her shirt pocket, and pulls out a condom, waving it in my face and smiling.

Fuck the boyfriend. Fuck someone driving by seeing us. Fuck the cops driving by. Fuck the ghosts. Fuck the kid in the motel office; I've got a good hand here – a full house – and I'm going all in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

JUST CALL ME ANGEL OF THE MORNING

*No love is great
that makes the truth to suffer,
nor wiser words can fathom
all the racket hearts have borne.*

Not Shakespeare

One thing about this wonderful new life of mine -the one thing that keeps me in the game - is the intrigue of not knowing what's going to happen next. I love that. Most of the time.

Next morning, everything's all fucked when I wake up.

The girl wants me to give her 200 bucks now. I'm half into a cup of coffee, and she's got me on spin dry over the money. I almost spit-take the coffee when she tells me.

I have to laugh at myself. *Some Romeo I am!*

She gets mad. Thinks I'm laughing at her. I have to explain that I'm not laughing at her: I'm laughing at myself. Here I was last night, thinking

what a great lover I am, what an irresistible leading man I am...and now this.

But this is going to be tricky.

Shit, I'm right in the middle of a delicate operation here in Menlo, Florida, and I can't have a squabble or any bad blood to fuck it all up – which can easily happen. If she threatens me, say with rape or it turns out she has a “manager,” what do I do? Kill both of them? I sure don't need some ding-dong pimp or boyfriend gunning for me. But I'm not giving her 200 roses either.

So... I have to talk her down now. Smooth things out. Make everybody happy.

But I've definitely screwed up this time, with all the sensitive, dangerous, and valuable things stashed in the room and in the car, and sometimes on me. I don't need anyone snooping around in my room or breaking into it or the car when I'm not there. For another, I don't need any jilted frail or jealous boyfriend slashing my tires. I don't need anyone trying to jump me in the parking lot or hit me over the head when I'm coming out the door.

I sit her down to talk to her. Gotta do this right. Gotta give her the lowdown.

“Listen girl, 200 is way too crazy for me. Now... you're worth that – don't get me wrong – and you're worth more! Sure, why not. But you have to look at it from my side too. For me, it all kind of becomes more than romance when it gets above a C-note.”

“What's a C-note?”

“A hundred bucks. A ‘C-note’ is a hundred bucks.” She rolls her eyes.

“Don't give me that,” I say, shaking my head. “Now listen to all this. I'm going to give it to you straight. I'm not going to give you the run-around, and I'm going to take my time to say all this. This is where I'm coming from.”

I light a cigarette, take a breath, and think about what I'm gonna say first.

“Ok, let me explain this misunderstanding. See, for me, babe – a hundred bucks – now, that works for me. I'm a good-looking guy and can manage on my own. Sure. Without money I mean. But see, a \$100 gives me freedom. If its business its not love. So I don't have to worry about you getting possessive.” Strangely enough, she seems to be following me. That's great. She lights a joint. “So, let's make it easy. A hundred bucks. For you. Fine. Ya see?”

She nods.

“Now another thing – I gotta tell you – if you *are* going to charge a person for something, you have to tell them up front. You get your hair done: the hairdresser will tell you how much it is first. It’s the American way.”

I put the cigarette out in the ashtray. She crushes the fire out of the joint and sets it on the side of the ashtray for later.

“Run the games on the other guys: they don’t ever get you off, right? And I may be mistaken – but I rarely am in this matter – you did get off last night. I mean all the buzzers and bells? Ya know?” She nods and smiles. “Now there’s something to be said for that. You’re a real, healthy, sensuous woman, not some old dried-up biddy. You had a real good time with me last night, you got to admit. The doofs, they just jerk off in your vagina and run back to their wives or their girlfriends, and there’s nothing else to it.”

I take her leg into my lap and rub on her calf.

“Now thirdly, it can work out better for you sometimes.” I say.

“How is that?”

“A hundred bucks, that keeps it friendly. So then we’re friends. We can talk. Sit and watch the sunset with a six-pack of beer. Go see a movie in the afternoon. And if you don’t want to hang out you just don’t open the door. So, fine, you take off – don’t hang out –no hard feelings. Right? Does all that make sense?”

She shrugs.

I pull out a C-note and drop it in her lap.

“So now, it’s up to you. Up to you... if it was good for you, maybe you wanna go again sometime...ya know, off the books or whatever?”

She nods, stands up, and leaves. I’m sitting there – did it all work? Is she calling her boyfriend? The cops?

The door opens and she comes in. she walks over and takes me by the hand and leads me down to her room again.

“Now this one’s on the house, right?”

She laughs and drags me. “Ok but we do it my way this time.”

“Sure. What’s that?”

I guess I’ll find out.

It’s better to have good friends than bad neighbors.

CHAPTER THIRTY

AN AUTO GRAVE-YARD AFTERNOON

*The process of delving
into the black abyss is to me
the keenest form of fascination.*

H. P. Lovecraft

Afterwards she falls asleep. Just like last night. She's part Cherokee: the cheekbones, the blond hair, and the nice tan. I can't even wake her up. Yep. She's whupped. Unconscious and down for the count.

Her purse is lying there open, next to the bed, with a pack of cigarettes on top. I left mine by the pool or somewhere and I grab one of hers. Under the cigs I see a long pair of scissors. Girl on her own's got to defend herself I guess.

It's a nice morning. So I go for a ride. As I start the car, Barry White is singing "Another Love TKO." I smile and shake my head. That's business as usual for me: more irony and coincidence in a week than most people have in a year.

As I pass the Waffle House, I see some waitresses getting off. But I don't see "Princess." I circle around and come back by for a second look. No. She is not among them.

I head over to the crash site. I stake it out and wait till the cop at the speed trap goes off to lunch. He should be at lunch for at least 45 minutes.

The crash site is a grassy area by the abutment of the overpass. The vehicle hit the abutment and bounded back onto the grass. Must have been going at a good clip.

I take a good, long look at the tire tracks. Find some car fragments in the grass. Blood and gore spots here and there, now a cruddy copper-brown in color...it looks to me like the SUV hit the ground at an angle and hit on the two right-side tires first. I'm not sure what that means, but it brings up more questions than answers. Forensic studies of an accident scene can lead you in wrong directions and down dead ends very easily. Even a real pro can get all snarled up in misinterpreting evidence.

Next, I head out to the auto graveyard.

I finally find the wreckage of the car the kids were driving. "This is it." I climb around in it, up on the roof, look underneath. The smell of death – baked in the Florida sun for the last week – still clings to the car like an aura. My pendant feel warm.

The wreckage is all twisted up and a real holy mess. It's sickening to imagine that there were four people – four human beings – in this thing when it hit the wall at whatever-many-miles-an-hour.

Whoever was driving busted the steering wheel with their chest. One head came through the windshield. Tires good: no blowout.

School notebook. Sunglasses. Blood. Hair. Hello Kitty keychain... A couple of old record albums – Bowie, Doors, Meatloaf, Iggy, Steely Dan, Talking Heads... good taste in vintage vinyl. Still have the price sticker on them from a used record shop they probably hit on the way down. Receipt says Fantasyland Records in Atlanta. I've been there before.

There was an impact on the front left, and signs of paint from impact with another car, but – curious – the paint from the other car has been mostly rubbed, scraped, and scratched off. That tells me something right there.

There are some things that don't jive with the accident report. That's not proof of anything yet, could be sloppy police work, but in my business, it keeps me going on this thing.

I'll take some of the personal items that I will need later. I recognize Brittany's straw hat, all crushed and twisted now, the same one she was wearing in her Facebook video.

I take a few more pictures and go home.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

CATAMUSO BUSTED

“Alone is a world so cold.”

Prince

That afternoon I get a call from Catamuso; a voicemail, actually. He is in town, but he's in jail already. He was coming to hit me up about something and got caught in the speed trap. LOL. Knowing Catamuso, he started something with the cops, too. He can ~~really~~ get on people's nerves in a sometimes amusing and nutty way. His third wife set his bed on fire while he was sleeping in it. I think his nickname for her was Lamb Chop. Lamb Chop tried to incinerate him.

He got one free phone call from jail, and I was it. He didn't call our headquarters because I'm right here, and it might take them a while to get someone else down here.

Now I want to stay as invisible to the police as possible – off their radar screen – so I get the flip-flop girl to go in with the bail. As they come out, I see he's already getting into it with her, arguing, and in front of some cops that are just coming up the steps to the station and he almost gets arrested again.

As we drive back to the motel, I catch Catamuso looking at the girl out of the side of his eye. She's a sexy girl and dressed right. She has these tight cutoff blue-jean shorts, a tight T-shirt – and she smells really good.

After we drop her off, we go across town to the impound to get Catamuso's car.

Catamuso is curious. "Who is that girl?"

"I don't even know her name. I call her the flip-flop girl."

"She's not one of us, then."

"No, no, no. I just keep forgetting to ask her name."

"But I want her. I must have her," he says.

"Then why did you start an argument with her?"

He says nothing back to me, but he pulls out some lotion and starts rubbing it on his hands very methodically. "Old dishpan hands," he says, smiling.

"What, er – you getting ready to feel her up now? Wanna be well prepared, huh?"

"You don't even know her name."

"Strange, isn't it." I smile. "Love is sure strange, don't you think?"

"I am going to eat lunch."

"I'll drop you up here," I say, pointing to the next intersection.

"There's a Dairy Queen and a Krystal and a fish-and-chips place."

"You have to buy me lunch now."

"Why do I buy you lunch?" I chuckle, amused. "Why do I need to buy you lunch? Can't you buy your own lunch?"

"You're loaded. You are flush. Flush from that last score up in Connecticut two weeks ago... and you're argue about buying me lunch?" I *did* score a lot of good stuff up there in Maryland with Red's settlement.

"Yeah, and I had to 'correct' five guys up there in Connecticut. Four of them were well-trained, top-notch guys. So, it is whoever gets there first. The firstest with the mostest gets the bestest. And I got the mostest."

I feel Catamuso frowning at me. "But I guess I can buy you lunch today, Catamuso. Certainly – as I enjoy your company, my friend, and I would be delighted!"

I can feel Catamuso smiling.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

JUNK IN THE TRUNK

She pulled one paperback down out of the top stack on the shelf. Looked at it thoughtfully for a second and murmured: *“Gone with the Wind. Fucking story of my life, don’t ya know....”*

Gypsy Jones.

It’s the middle of the afternoon and the restaurant is not crowded. Of course, Catamuso orders the most expensive thing on the menu. And a \$6.95 deluxe malted milkshake.

“Why did you come down here? What’s up?” I ask.

“This morning when I woke up in my hotel room, I looked out the window. A man dressed as an Egyptian Pharaoh is stood across the street in front of a car lot. He was flipping a sign around and trying to bring customers in. He looked like you from the distance, and so I thought of you.”

“I woke up this morning and looked out the window and saw a toilet seat hanging from a no-parking sign,” I reply.

“No omen there. Just public silliness.” Catamuso looked up from his food.

I smile. “No, never would I associate you, my dear friend, with a toilet seat. Just a coincidence.”

“I’m not sure I like what you just said.”

“Well, you’re saying a pharaoh in front of a car lot looks like me. Insulting? Totally insulting.”

“You know, there was a lot more good stuff in Hagerstown than we thought,” he says, changing the subject.

“You got up there again after me, then. What did I miss?”

“Frozen people.”

“Strange.” I think for a second. “Cryogenic?”

“Frozen. I don’t know ‘cryogenic.’ I don’t know what is that.” And then he added, “But I have one in the trunk.”

“Jeez.” Asking Catamuso WHY he has a frozen body in his trunk would have been confounding.

His milkshake comes.

“You crash in the other room tonight. Its right upstairs from me.”

He knows that when I hole up in one of these cheap motels, I usually have a spare room to fall back on, or change up to, or sleep in if the neighbors are making too much noise or I want to confuse someone. Standard procedure.

“What’s the loot look like on this one, Harken?” asks Catamuso.

I smile and shake my head back and forth.

I take a sip of my coffee.

A few seconds pass.

Catamuso figures it out. “A girl is murdered? By who? What’s the loot Harken?”

“Don’t know. Don’t know yet. Might not be very much.”

We sit there silently a bit as the wheels in Catamuso’s mind whirs and turns.

“Quickjohn is here?” Catamuso guesses.

“No. No sign of him. Trail went dead back at the college there. He’s probably in Alaska by now or Paris or Baghdad or somewhere far off.”

“Shit. We had him.”

“Or he could be here.”

“What ever would he want in a silly place like this town? This is no-wheres-ville.”

“No, probably not here.” I think for a minute: if I want to keep Catamuso around it might be wise to spice it up a bit. “This inquest may be something with drugs. Maybe your friends the local cops are involved. This is a speed trap town – as you found out – but also a drug highway.”

“Bastards. Count me in!” Catamuso has an axe to grind with the speed-trap cops here but he is also well aware that with drugs comes big blocks of cash and valuables. Many of our inquests result in meager loot and valuables to seize.

“You’re going to do this investigation yourself too? Off the books?”

“No, already been calling it in.”

“You know – what we did last week, going for Quickjohn ourselves - that is not a proper procedure. You know I can get in trouble.”

I nod. “Not if we win. Not if I hit paydirt.”

Catamuso makes a face and tilts his head to one side, looking at his milkshake and stirring it with his straw.

“And I think Quickjohn will be back. Back for me.”

“For you?”

I nod.

“I saw him. Our eyes met.”

“Tabernac.” Catamuso mutters one of his foreign cuss words.

We sit there a minute, looking at each other. “I’m still in that we catch him. I am with you Harken. On the books or off.”

Good ole’ Catamuso. I think to myself. I’m sure I will need him now and when the time comes.

Just by luck, I spot the “Princess” girl – the waitress from the Waffle House – eating lunch with her girlfriends there across the room. We are making eyes. She smiles demurely. She looks a lot better now, with her hair down and not all done up for work. I smile at her. She smiles back. I take a sip from my glass. She takes a sip from her glass. I run my hand through my hair. She runs her fingers through her hair. She’s up for it. And knowing that, now I *have* to mess with Catamuso’s head. I can’t help it.

So, I say, “I’m feeling good today, Catamuso.”

He shrugs. He’s chowing down on the food that has arrived.

“What?”

“I have the “kavorka” today, the lure of the animal. Today, my friend, I am irresistible to women.”

“You smell?”

“No,” I laugh. “I do it with my eyes. With a “come hither” look.”

“Good.”

“You don’t believe me, do you.”

“As usual.”

“Look around. Pick out a girl in here. Let me show you how it works.”

Catamuso looks around the room.

"Now don't point. Just tell me who she is. Describe her. And I will pick her up. I'll bet you lunch, double or nothing."

He looks around. All over the place. Princess and her friends are the only ones here that actually look interesting. He points towards her table. "The blonde," he says.

I smile and shake my head. "Now that's a hard one." I look at Catamuso as a slight smile draws across his face. "She's the hottest girl in here. Did you have to pick the hottest girl in the whole town?"

"I doubt you have any chances with her. She is a nice one, Harken. What would she want with you?"

I let a few seconds tick by. I'm smiling at her. I whisper to Catamuso, "Now watch this..."

I beckon at Princess with my index finger and a stern but smirking look. She runs her fingers through her hair, smiling. She looks around her table, picks up her plate and her drink, hoists her purse over her shoulder, and comes walking seductively towards us.

She almost sits down next to me, but I extend my hand indicating for her to sit down next to Catamuso. I want to be able to look her in the eyes, and don't want Catamuso staring at her as he is wont to do.

"What's your name, Princess?" I ask.

She smiles and nods. "I like Princess. Princess is fine."

"Princess, I'm Anthony and this is my uncle Catamuso. I just got him out of jail."

"Oh my." She looks at him with apprehensive surprise and amusement, if not suspicion. "Jail?"

"I am not his uncle," says Catamuso, and leaves it at that, with no further explanation.

"Don't worry, he's no dangerous criminal." I look at Catamuso and smile. "He was arrested in one of your town's wonderful speed traps."

She smiles at Catamuso and pats him on the back. "Awww, poor baby."

I wink at her. "Let's do something today, you and me. Waddaya say? Do you have an opera in this town?" She smiles and shakes her head no. "A zoo?" She shakes her head. "A racetrack?"

"No, but they have a demolition derby over in Impaqua on Saturday night."

I nod approvingly.

"Saturday? Noooo. Let's go back to my hotel room now."

"Your hotel room. What's there?"

“A bed and a TV... and the TV’s broke.” I say matter-of-factly.
Catamuso almost chokes on his food.

“Let’s go!” she says. Catamuso’s eyes roll at what I’ve just said.
I’m loving it.

I can see Catamuso in the window, his eyes following me as we
leave. He shakes his head and wonders what the word “hither” means.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

MORNING OF THE MAGICIAN

. A good shit is better than a bad fuck.

Carlos Maltina Garcia y Torriente

After the Waffle House Princess splits, Catamuso comes up to the spare room upstairs, a mess now. “Sorry, I used up your room, amigo,” I say. “I really had to use this one. The girl in the room next door to mine downstairs might...”

“You had to do that then. No problem, Anthony.” The French in Catamuso – whatever French there is – is sympathetic to matters of love.

“OK.”

He grunts.

“Sad little town, eh?” I say.

“But I saw her boyfriend come home down there just now.”

“The flip-flop girl? Her boyfriend’s here?”

“I don’t know. The girl next door. Oui.”

Boyfriend?

She did mention a boyfriend coming home, but I didn’t think much about it. And his stuff – some “guy stuff” – was in her room. Damn, I was going to try and set up/hire flip-flop girl to take care of Catamuso tonight, but with the newly arrived boyfriend around, I’ll have to put that in the cooler.

I need to take care of Catamuso somehow though; get him laid and squared away. I owe him that, but I also need to keep him around. He’s the one assistant or “squire” that is always on the ball and always comes through. Sure has saved my ass a number of times and he has a real, strange sixth sense about things that I’ve learned to respect. But sometimes he just up and leaves at the drop of a hat. Never even says goodbye. One day he’s there, and the next he’s on his way to Las Vegas to play Keno or Montreal to play being a Mountie or to Stonehenge to say a prayer.

Catamuso is staring intently at the stuffed bat on the TV set now. He doesn’t touch it but bends down to it looking it over carefully.

“Bat?” he asks.

“Bat.” I answer. “A souvenir.”

“Of what then?”

“Of love. Of romance.”

“What kind?”

“A short one. A day and a half.”

He turns and looks at me.

“Sometimes the greatest love lasts only for a week or for a day.” I say.

I send Catamuso downstairs to my other room to hop on my laptop and get to work. You wouldn’t know it just by looking at him, but he is a maestro on the keyboards. He’s pretty good at digging up dirt, cracking secure sites, breaching bank accounts, utilizing closed-off government resources, and fucking with people who piss him off.

I take a nap and doze off. Later I wake up with the feeling that something is in the room. I look around but there’s nothing there. Look out the window. No one outside there. Look in the bathroom. Under the bed.

I flop down on the bed again.

There, on the dresser...I see a white mouse, sitting up on his hind legs and staring right at me. Slowly, I move my hand to the ashtray on the nightstand, touch it, grab it, and then pitch it at the mouse as hard as I can. The mouse moves and dodges so fast I can't tell which way it went, almost as if it disappeared into thin air, as the ashtray bursts into forty-three pieces on the wall.

Fuck it. Fucking shit! I'm not going to sleep in this room tonight. Let Catamuso have it.

I go downstairs to the other room. Catamuso's hot and heavy on the computer.

"Waddaya got, amigo?"

"They write a lot of traffic tickets in this town." he replies.

"You bet. The highway outside there that runs in front of the hotel; it's a shortcut between the 301 and the other highway."

"They have lot of accounts here... and the Bitcoins they have too. Some Bitcoins."

"Bitcoins! I am amazed that they even know what a Bitcoin is in this town. You find any other unusual things? ...deaths, murders, fatal accidents?"

"Nothing unusual. Some things, you know."

"Anything on the girl's accident?"

"I'm downloading all body and dashboard cams now."

"This sitting around and waiting is for the birds." I shake my head.

"Look, I'll be back. Call me when you have something."

Going out the motel room door, I run into the flip-flop girl and her man. He's returned from his travels wherever, and they're just getting back from the grocery store.

I was expecting a big, burly, tattooed redneck, or a pit-bull-faced thug of a motherfucker boyfriend, but this guy is a square: a normal-looking, everyday guy. He looks like a salesman. Probably a nice guy. Unfortunately, he's smart enough to quickly pick up on the concept that something may be going on between me and her. He looks at her for a second. Then me.

She skillfully interrupts his train of thought by introducing him to me.

Archie. He's a magician by profession. Puts on magic shows for those fundraisers, those ones with phone-bank boiler-rooms that raise money for the underprivileged children and the Shrine clubs.

I'm happy for him – that he's got the hot girl – and sad for him because probably he's got more than he can handle. He's not going to start anything with me. Not because he's afraid of me, but because he's not going to start anything just on suspicion.

Apparently, he is just passing through now; sort of came home to eat dinner and get laid, and he's on his way off to another job on the road.

They go into the room, and I wander off to take a walk. I want to go to the deserted Putt-Putt and take some arty pictures of the defunct windmills. I like windmills. The cookies or the real ones.

About half a mile down the 4-lane highway though, I see a baseball game going on and sit down to watch it. I forget about the windmills and put the photos off for now.

It's a good game and I'm getting into it, then 40 minutes later, flip-flop girl comes up and sits down next to me. She must have seen me walk off in this direction maybe?

She has a melancholy air about her. He's gone again. Not much of a life for her: living in a shitty motel room, watching TV, getting high all day, and seeing Archie every week or so. Maybe watching VHS tapes on a rickety, old tape deck. Walking down to the corner to eat where there's a choice of Arby's, Krystal, and the hotdogs rolling in the braiser machine and Big Gulp fountain drinks in RaceTrac.

But now I'm not into it anymore. Not into her. Not right now. Maybe tomorrow. And I kinda knew that would happen. I like being a backdoor man, but I hate to meet the boyfriend or the husband. It spoils it for me somehow.

"He's gone?"

"Yeah."

"He knows?"

"I told him you were a fag."

"Great." I grimace. "And it's gay, not fag anymore."

"Yeah?"

"They changed it."

Loneliness is a hard game. I put my arm around her, and we sit there in peaceful silence for a bit

After a while, she starts telling me her life story.

Her father used to hypnotize her when she was ten, and she went along with it as if it was a secret, pretend game they played. At fourteen, she fell in love with Vanilla Ice and later that year, she tricked her way into a concert and nailed him. Her mother regularly fucked an inner-city basketball

team behind her second husband's back. Her little brother ran away from home and fell asleep on a railroad track and got his head run over. She has a crystal that protects her from all bad luck and evil influences but she can't find it right now.

OK. That is about all I need to know. I don't really want to hear any more. Love is funny. Sometimes the more you know about somebody, the less you want them.

Some of the best loves that I've felt closest to, I just saw across the bar – our eyes meeting – lingering – two smiles and we go off together without any words at all. Do you get closer to someone if you don't know their name? Is that kind of thing shallow or a more pure and perfect love? Two people making love in the muddy, cold basement of a bombed-out Kosovo office building while bullets are flying, mortar shells are going off and dead bodies lying around outside may have a more perfect, more beautiful lovemaking than some Peoria couple in a Disneyland hotel room bored out of their skulls with each other and taking advantage of the kids being down at the pool with grandma and grandpa.

And then there's Woody Allen. When they asked him if sex was dirty, his answer: *only if it's done right.*

She rambles into her relationship, her boyfriend, their cooling and wobbling love affair, his diminishing passion.

I can't handle it. I have to do something.

"Baby, that haircut..."

"What?"

I point to her purse and say, "Give me the scissors... and let your hair down girl." She has to be wondering how I know she has scissors in her purse, but pulls them out.

I cut her hair so that she has bangs now. I fluff it up and trim a bit more. It looks good. "Bangs 'er sexy. We men like bangs. Now get up and *walk* sexy for me..."

She walks but she just doesn't have it. I instruct her. "Grind those hips girl. Like you're trying to grind up a tomato between your thighs, that's it. Swing your hips. Yeah. Now you've got it."

"Really? That's all?"

"So easy huh. Now save that walk for the bedroom babe. Slinky. That's your new name you do it so good. Slinky."

I show her a few more things. I pull her denim cut-offs up tighter. "There ya go. Sew 'em up in back there so they're like a size or two too small."

“Won’t that make me look fat?”

“Yes, of course, but fat in all the right places.”

She smiles.

“Well, I’m turning you into a real sexpot.”

“Sexpot. I like that.” she says, rolling it around in her mind. She’s probably never heard the term before.

“Now try it on him when he comes back in town. No guarantee, but I think that’s got it.” ~~I say.~~

I think I’ve created a monster. I hope.

Now I steer the conversation around to Catamuso. I want to set up a deal for her to go take care of him. I give her explicit instructions: “Just knock on the door – tell him you’re from next door - and ask for some sugar. Just wear this big shirt, but no shorts. Tell him I told you that he might have some sugar. If he blanks on you and won’t open the door, tell him there are some packets next to the empty coffee cup from Waffle House and for him to get them for you. On the nightstand. Once you get inside, ask if he speaks French, and could he translate something for you. When he says ‘What?’, you lift up your shirt and show him your kitty.”

“That’s a lot to remember.”

“And don’t forget to slink! You got it?”

She thinks about it for a tick. “Yeah, I got it now.”

She asks me if she’ll get a “C-note” again and I give her \$200.

Good. I want it done right. Catamuso’s a horny little bastard and he does his job a whole lot better with the edge off.

And off she goes, with a cute little-girl skip in her steps.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

WAVING AT STRANGERS

*So, the darkness shall
be the light, and
the stillness the dancing.*

T. S. Eliot

The ball game ends, the sun goes down and I walk back, alone, and slow.

When I get back to the motel I listen at the door, peek between the curtains, and go in. Catamuso's in a great mood. He's whistling and has made himself a nice cocktail. Love and romance work wonders on the human condition. Not getting love for a while can create a mental form of constipation. Humans should do it more often.

"We need to go get some ice for the man in my trunk." Catamuso announces. OK. I go with him. I don't want him getting in any more trouble. But Catamuso's car won't start, so we go in my car. The RaceTrac is out of ice, so he considers buying packages of frozen food. I shake my head, too expensive and I find him another convenience store.

As he's loading the ice into my backseat, I see a cop go by, eyeballing us.

I saw a couple of those fucked up crush-sided cowboy hats for sale on a rack of hats inside the RaceTrac. I take Catamuso inside, but none of the hats fit him. He has a big head. Not unlike a pollywog.

“Catamuso, we have to get you a cowboy hat.”

“But... I am no cowboy?”

“Yeah, but I am. Just ask Bobo. He’ll tell you I’m a cowboy. And as a cowboy I can ordain you a cowboy, too.”

“Yes?”

“All you have to do is go to Laredo and walk down the streets with your cowboy hat on.”

“Long way from here?”

You don’t have to do it right now, just intend to do it. Someday.”

“Tabernac!” he says. That’s some kind of French swearword.

“A good hat will help you fit in. Disguise you. Camouflage you. From the cops. At a distance at least.” He looks at me like maybe I’m trying to put something over on him. “Look, I’ll pay for it.” He nods OK and smiles a little.

After we get back and pack his trunk with ice – I don’t want to even look at the thing, so he does the dirty work, and even sitting on the hood of his car I can smell the funk coming from the trunk.

Then we go to buy him a cowboy hat.

We roll along through another part of the downtown dismal-land. Most of the stores are boarded up here too but there are some signs of life: an old-school fix-it shop, a used bookstore, a Goodwill-type thrift store in an old Zayre’s building. The letters of the ZAYRE corporate logo are still up there. I haven’t seen that Zayre’s sign since I was a kid. I have to take a good picture of that. I wonder if one of the letters fell off or it was always called Zayre, but everyone pronounced it Zayres... Will have to check that one on the internet.

We find a Family Dollar store and find a squashed California cowboy hat that fits for the “buckaroo.” Catamuso also buys a box of last year’s baseball cards. As we drive along, he’s opening the packets, looking at the cards and throwing them out the window, one pack at a time.

He says, “If you wave to strangers, you know...often they will wave back.” He waves at some people on the street that don’t notice him. When he’s gone through all the B-ball cards he pulls out a nasty-looking blunt, lights it, and hands it to me.

“Have you ever been in love, Harken?”

“Everyone’s been in love. Don’t you think?” The weed is really smooth and almost perfumy. I look at it and nod with approval. He always has pretty good stuff.

“I think they fall in love with you and then one day, it’s not good anymore. And they go on to another. Another man. Then they get tired of that man, then tired of men, all men, and they go onto something else they go. They go on to drugs or religion or sewing a lot of things.”

“Watching TV?”

He nods. “Yes, I think so.”

“You know what I think?” I ask.

He shrugs emphatically.

I smile and say, “I think... we are all just occupying time and space. Living through various specific sequences of time and events. We have no idea why we are here, what we are doing. You know, really...this world – for many of us – is all a series of ridiculous orders, silly chores, pointless rituals, and programmed behavior.”

“Sure.” Catamuso smiles. “A friend of mine was really into Uber, and one time he Ubered all the way to Hawaii...” Catamuso smiles more, “... and he drowned.”

A joke.

Where does he come up with these gags? That’s not the kind of joke you read in the PLAYBOY joke section.

“Catamuso, you’re just a little silhouette-o of a man...” He has to know that I’ve got a good buzz going from the joint, so a little bit of a rude jab won’t bother him. In general, Catamuso is immune to cuts and insults of all kinds. Rolls off him like rain.

He reaches out and turns on the radio. The first few chords of “Bohemian Rhapsody” are just coming on. He smiles broadly.

“Pretty good there, man!” When you do a lot of Yage along with all the other shit and get high, strange coincidences just come at you out of nowhere. “Synchronicity is a bitch.” I say. Catamuso shrugs. I’m sure he has no idea what synchronicity is.

We stop at a red light and sit.

“Harken, why do you have such a beater, beat up, old shit car?”

“I know, look at your car. Spiffy! It’s a year and a half old, and it won’t start.”

“What? What is ‘spiffy’?”

“Nobody’s going to break into my old, piece-of-shit car. Nobody’s going to steal my car. Nobody’s going to expect a deadly and dangerous hit man to be driving around in this beat-up, old hooptie. But you know what?

This car is perfect under the hood. Tip top mechanically. I got it fine-tuned, rally ready, and it'll blow the doors off that full-size creampuff you got back there at the motel."

"I see it, Anthony – you got me there. That's good smarts." He tosses the last bit of roach out the window. "But what is 'spiffy'?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

KARAOKE NIGHT IN MENLO

If your path demands that
you walk through hell,
walk as though you own the place.

tiny buddha

I get some sleep, a nap, and when I come out of my room refreshed and yawning, Catamuso is doing some kind of feng shui/Pilates thing right there, in front of the animals in the petting zoo.

He sees me and heads in.

Coming back into my room he gently pats the stuffed bat on the head for good luck and then looks over the comic books I've got lying about. He picks up a slabbed book and tries to open it up.

"Whooah!" I exclaim and retrieve the book from him. "You don't take it out of the case!"

"How do you read it then?"

"You don't. That's a collector's item. They are slabbed!"

"What is slabbed?"

“Slabbed means it’s been graded by experts and put in a sealed plastic case for collectors. They can’t touch it or even read it.”

“What the fucks.” He says with a confused look.

“It makes it a known quantity for collectors and investors as far as its condition and thus its value and in effect, making it more of a commodity than a delightful collectable. Of course, you can always crack it open, but...” I’m lecturing now and beginning to feel like a teacher or instructor.

“Let’s...”

“No!” and I take all the books up from him. And then I show him on my phone what these comics bring at some of the auction sites I use. “OK. Let’s go to Comicslink.com or Comicconnect.”

His eyes get wide when he sees what some of these books bring.

“You see?”

“You Americans are crazy.”

I shrug. I can’t argue with him there.

“I am going to see the movie tonight,” he says. He’s been talking up the new *Bourne Identity* movie that just came out. “Harken. You want to come and see it?”

“Naw. There’s a bar or two in town I’m going to go hit later, maybe.”

“It’s still early now. Let’s have a drink first.”

“Got some good stuff, amigo. Glenlivet 18-year shit. Got a couple bottles of Remy VSOP from the Hagerstown settlement...”

“Remy.” He thinks some more. “That will be good.”

He drinks with me right through the time for his movie as we look at the comic book that aren’t slabbed. I only let him handle the lesser books, the lower-grade ones, but he’s still a little rough with them, so I pay to add an adult movie channel to the TV in my room.

Great. Now he’s horny and after a while we just have got to hit the bar down the street. But – oops! – a *Seinfeld* rerun comes on and he has to watch that, too.

The bar is full.

“Jackpot!” I say, looking at all the cars as we park. It’s Karaoke night at the bar, and there’s like fifty or sixty people there.

“Is a good night...?” asks Catamuso.

“Great! There were five cars parked here when I drove by last night.”

Inside, we continue to drink. We find an out of the way table in the back. Before he even sits down, Catamuso fixes his sights on a rather thick girl with a Star Trek T-shirt, sitting there in front of us with a flock of other

girls. I saw her give him a glance and now he's surely certain she is destined to be with him.

He says that he wants me to be his wingman and for me to take on one of the other girls, or at least charm them all and break the ice. But this assignment is not for me. I like shapely women, but Catamuso gets a little loose with his standards. Sometimes way out there and over the top. And after watching the Playboy Channel and putting away about four fingers of the Remy he's a loose cannon. But all these girls have been to the Dairy Queen one too many times for me.

"Naw, you don't need me, leave me out of it. I think you're on your own with this one, amigo. But I have faith in you, my man! You have a virtual smorgasbord of girls there. Has to be one that you will hit it with."

Catamuso simmers silently and watches them like a cat that's eyeballing a passing mouse as it gets closer and closer. Then he throws up his hands and caves in. "Ah, this is making me nerves already. I say I just chill the fuck out and enjoy the music. Eh?"

As if on cue, a really bad singer begins croaking her take on McARTHER'S PARK.

"How do I become an Inquisitor then?" he asks.

"Believe me, you don't want to become like me. It's a real mess, it is."

"But what if I do?"

"We will see."

"How many have you killed now, Harken?"

"About as many as I haven't."

"You missed some, eh? I would never miss one," says Catamuso.

"Some, you kill... some don't kill."

"When is that?" he says in a challenging tone.

"If someone is not guilty, for instance." I shrug. "Or if someone is already dead, say they died before we get to him. Or if you can't find the killer... then phffitt! No kill. Not every inquest results..."

"How is somebody not guilty, then? How does that happen?"

"In New York City, there was... well, a certain criminal lawyer; he got shot and tortured to death by one of his clients. A messy business. So he came to us – his unquiet spirit came to us – and he was beside himself, howling to have us set things straight. His murder was in all the papers, but then, he had a lot of enemies, and we couldn't pin it on any particular one of them. So, the inquest failed. The killer skated."

"He didn't know who killed him?"

"No idea. Didn't see him sneaking up behind him."

The waitress comes up, and we order drinks and Catamuso orders two hot dogs. “In another lawyer related case, we judged that the lawyer’s clients was actually all right to kill him.”

“What? You let the killers go?”

“That was my call. My decision. The lawyer had fleeced about half of the poor guy’s grandmother’s estate – something like three-quarters of a million dollars. He just put it all in his pocket. So, fuck it. We let the killer go...”

“He was pissed I bet.”

“Pissed. Yeah, we sent the lawyer straight to Hell. In effect he was the killer: he murdered himself.”

“That is how it can work then... Hmmm.”

“Sometimes there’s not enough evidence. You always have to be totally sure in this business,” I say.

Catamuso points his finger at me. “I think this thing here in Menlo is drug deal gone wrong. These cops are dirty.”

“The cops may be in on it.” I say, just throwing it out there.

“Well, if I find him, find who it is, why not, maybe I can kill him?”

“You know the rules.”

As if I’ve just said nothing: “I could be a good killer, Harken. I would be fantastic killer. I will spring and strike like a cat!” He gestures outward with his hand.

“For one thing, a killer has to be chosen. And Jack Ketch does the choosing, not me. And – for one thing - to be a good inquisitor – to travel around and do these investigations - you have to fit in. Sail invisibly through the crowds...”

“So?”

“...and you don’t fit in.”

“What...?”

“You just look odd. Out of place. And that accent? No. You’ll stick out like a sore thumb.” I shake my head. “And speaking of sore thumbs, four fingers on one hand and six on the other will be noticed.”

“I keep my hands in the pocket.”

“No-no-no, you have to blend in. Be invisible in the crowd.”

I throw a wadded-up cocktail napkin at the back of the girl Catamuso was leering at. It hits her on the shoulder, bounces up in front of her, and lands on her table. She picks it up and looks at it. Looks over her shoulder at us, confused then glaring a bit.

I point to Catamuso, who now sits upright in surprise and apprehension. The woman throws the napkin back at him, hitting him harmlessly on the forehead. She turns away and resumes chattering with her girlfriends, and Catamuso turns and glares at me.

“You ruin it Harken.”

“Maybe not. Let’s wait and see.”

“OK, OK. I take a wait and see attitude then.”

We sit there a minute, saying nothing. Our drinks arrive.

A huge, local guy from a table in front of us and to our left (but still next to, or behind the girls from where he could have seen the napkin thing) stands up and pulls over a chair and sits down next to Catamuso. He wouldn’t have seen me throw the napkin but would have seen it hit the girl and then get thrown back at Catamuso.

“You’re a couple of funny guys, eh?” the local says in a heavy Southern drawl. He’s a burly, bristling, drunken, roughneck with a beer-gut and a Duck Dynasty T-shirt.

He pulls up to our table, and before he can say anything, I lean over some and look him in the eyes. “Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?” I’ve found that for some reason the one who says the *name thing* in a confrontation usually wins. Not always – and in this case – I probably have a dog’s chance in hell – but WTF, you cut the cards and see what you get.

His drunken head twerks back a bit at my words, as he takes a nasty, arrogant, snarling look at me. The cat has his tongue and he’s confused. He simply doesn’t know what to say after my polite but bold and seemingly fearless effrontery. I’m not usually like that, but after a few drinks... and then there’s something that I find amusing and ridiculous about this Jethro Bodine doofus. I can’t resist, but I’m ready if he makes a move.

We both stand up simultaneously, him kicking his chair back. We face off, and then Catamuso – scrawny, little, dog-eared, male-pattern-baldness, harmless-looking Catamuso – stands up between us with his finger raised and a haughty look on his face, as he pushes us away from each other and gets in the middle.

Then it dawns on me what he’s up to. He’s “cutting in.” He is interrupting us – like *he* wants to fight the guy. But then he pushes the roughneck further back and puts up his dukes against *me*, like he’s defending the doofus-Jethro-drunk and I’m the enemy now and he’s here to save the doofus.

I start laughing. The Jethro guy starts laughing, the girls, who are watching everything, are laughing, his friends at the table are laughing... the people on stage’s song ended and I’m smiling.

The brute spins poor Catamuso around, his arm cocking back, Catamuso is about to grab his arm in some judo move, and just in time... the bouncer comes over and intervenes loudly and bluntly: "NO FIGHTING!"

Just then, three guys – the next act – are lit up on stage, and the first notes of "Bohemian Rhapsody" come over the speakers. That song again?

Now the ruffian and Catamuso both turn to the karaoke singers, transfixed. The two men who were about to fight, now seem to slowly ease into peaceful coexistence, talking back and forth between each other and pointing to the stage. They are apparently both big Queen fans, and obviously this is their favorite song.

They sit down, and both reverently listen to the song, occasionally singing along with their favorite parts, just like old friends. At one point, Catamuso – the "little silhouette-o of a man," turns to me and makes a funny, WTF face. I'm pulling my mouth down to keep from laughing at it all.

Pretty soon, Catamuso is buying his new comrade a drink. Not long after, the ruffian's friends have pulled their table over to us and the herd of big girls have joined us, too. Of course, Catamuso is buying everyone their drinks.

Then it dawns on me.

I smile, shake my head, and start laughing. OK, I get it now: The ruffian is a hustler! He's mooching drinks off of Catamuso! Drinks, then popcorn and then hot dogs all around, for him and all his friends. We're strangers in town, and we're targets. He's as big as a house, built like a linebacker, and I am thinking his game is that he starts a row with some random, unfortunate stranger from out of town or passing through... and gets his drinks bought for him free! Catamuso has a credit card and he does like being the life of the party for once, so he invites all his new friends in. Even the bouncer.

He's putting it all on a company credit card, the three Bohemian Rhapsody guys win the contest and Catamuso gets the girl's phone number.

All's well that ends well.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

WAFFLE HOUSE AGAIN

The supreme art of warfare
is to subdue the enemy
without fighting.
Sun Tzu

Catamuso and I hit the Waffle House to eat and sober up some, (and for me to check in on Princess). The first thing I do is get a glass of water – no ice – and pop a couple of Alka Seltzers in.

“The cops – they always sit at this table?” I ask one of the waitresses, pointing at the table right next to ours, and where they sat before.

“There? Yeah. Unless someone is already sitting there, ya know. Yeah.”

I get up and take another spot that’s closer to the door, and away from the “cop table.” Later, when no one is looking, I go over and slip a special ballpoint pen under the napkin dispenser, cover my actions by grabbing a napkin from the dispenser, and go back to my table. The pen will record their conversation. The cops should be in soon.

Princess is in a good mood and very attentive. I catch the other girls looking at me from time to time. She must have been talking me up to them.

From our interplay and the other girls talking between themselves about us, Catamuso begins to catch on that I knew Princess from before. He's suspicious, then sullen, and then properly pissed. He loves to put one over on you, but the idea that someone could put one over on him is sheer anathema.

He glares at me. I smile back, gloating a little. He's about to say something nasty as I hold my finger up, shaking it in his face. "No, no, no! She has girlfriends, dude. They all like to smoke dope and party." He understands. They may like to smoke dope and party: I don't know if they'll like Catamuso.

But strangely enough, Catamuso does sometimes does quite well with the ladies. Counter-intuitive, kind of like with Kramer on SEINFELD. As a matter of fact, I've described him as a Kramer type to people before. Only not as tall.

Eventually the cops come bustling in and head to "their" table. One of them eyeballs Catamuso. "That's the one who pulled you over?" I ask. He nods. Catamuso is watching him, focused on his every move, every step, like a dog ready to pounce.

"How'd they get you, Catamuso? You drive like an old church lady."

Catamuso turns to me. "He got me for not slowing down all the way to the stop sign. There is no one around. No one around for a hundred miles."

"Well maybe not a hundred miles..." I add.

"But I did stop. I will get their dashcam."

"You mean dashcam video. You will request it at the station."

"Yes," says Catamuso, a little annoyed that I corrected him as he will only be able to get the video, not the whole camera.

"I am innocent! I will have the films. And will take it to court! Fucking bobo, I have had no ticket in 15 years! And I did stopped."

"When's your court date?"

"I don't know."

"Probably six months away. You're not going to come back for that."

Catamuso grumbles. Shakes his head and looks over at the cops.

"See, that's the way they get you." I say. "Out-of-town plates. They just want you to pay the fine and go."

"They got me, yeah."

"Catamuso. Just go into their database and erase your fucking ticket!"

"Hah!" he exclaims. He looks back over at the cops. He's smiling like the Cheshire Cat, or maybe an angry, drunk pirate. "Yes!"

The cops sitting over there are looking back. They have no idea what he is smiling about, but they don't like it. They just don't like the looks of it all. And next they're talking amongst themselves about us.

Now me, I never smile at cops. It's like they can't stand to see anyone happy, and if they see you smiling, they immediately will be trying to figure out how to fuck your day up. Just leave 'em alone.

I weigh the possibilities of that wisdom ever absorbing into Catamuso's brain if I tell him that. I shake my head: *Nope!* And spear another breakfast sausage link with my fork.

Sure enough, the cop who pulled Catamuso over comes sauntering up. He's not smiling.

"Hello, Officer Randall. Nice night out there, isn't it," Catamuso says to him.

Randall says, "I've got my eye on you," and starts to walk off.

But Catamuso can't leave it alone. "You know, sir, it is my opinion that using law enforcement activities just to raise money for the city government is total abomination. It is civil disgrace. It should be banned."

The cop turns back around. He's not glaring. He's expressionless, which is even more disturbing to me than if he was smiling.

Catamuso continues. "When the mayor or the police chief tells you to write more tickets or else you lose a job...? You shouldn't write more tickets."

The cop's head turns a little to the side, and he's actually listening for a second now.

"A mayor or police captain who tells his men to do that, he's no man, he is a little pussy-shit."

The cop glances to the side, and then shakes his head ever so slightly.

"What you do with these people, these mayors, and police chiefs then? Maybe tar and feather the mayor is good? Ride them downtown on a rail? Or maybe, someone who is the really good person would want to just shoot them in the face."

The cop glances at me. I shrug like Seinfeld when George does something goofy and say: "Hey, I just met this guy tonight at karaoke! I gave him a ride 'cause he was hammered!" It seems churlish of me, but I have to maintain a peace with the cops for the sake of the mission that I'm on.

At this point one of the other cops comes over and pulls Randall back towards the cop's table, murmuring something. Something like "Not here, not now."

We talk some more about the Block situation, how he's so bloodthirsty and violent, about which waitresses would be perfect for Catamuso, and about the baseball season coming up. Then I get up and go to the bathroom.

When I come out Catamuso and Randall are going at it again like a couple of dogs barking at each other. It's just exploding out loud – and everyone's looking, even the people outside that were just leaving are looking in. There's all kinds of yelling and screaming. As Randall goes for his baton, one of the other cops comes over and intercedes with Randall – and I grab Catamuso. They back down, disengage, and we all slink back to our respective tables.

We sit for a while and get some glances. Catamuso says, "We come back and get the pen later." As if he plans to leave and come back after the cops take off. Then he gets up and goes to the bathroom.

I look at Princess. As she's reaching up to get some coffee filters and displaying her form, her nice ass, and legs for me, she feels me watching and turns her head and smiles like a figure skater. Gotta love it. She's a gem in the rough of a Waffle House world.

Women can feel you looking at them. They are creatures of nature and have instinct and special gifts. Just most men don't ever know it because they don't turn and smile for everyone when they feel you looking.

I order a slice of pie and, as it's just being set down in front of me, Catamuso walks by at a good clip, out of the bathroom and heading for the policemen's table.

As he passes me, I say to him "I'm gonna finish this p..." but he keeps walking, past me, wearing a determined, ornery face worthy of Danny Trejo.

Oh, boy.

I can't bring myself to watch.

I turn around and look anyway, just in time to see Catamuso tap the Randall cop on the shoulder. It looks like he says "outside." And points his thumb over his shoulder towards the door, then he turns and walks out of the place. Well, the cop's a big guy. He's about a foot to a foot-and-a-half taller than Catamuso, but Catamuso is pretty good too, with all his years of Judo and all. And he's best when he's drunk, like now. Fearless and instant.

Catamuso turns smartly and walks out the door.

The cop takes a sip of his coffee. He shakes his head. He stands up and heads towards the door. I'm sitting there about to eat my slice and

watching all this. The rest of the cops are up and out the door after the first cop.

This is not good. First of all, I've got a job to do here in town. I don't want to fuck up the execution of that job with this bullshit. Catamuso didn't start it, no, but he's *not* waiting till the job's over to take care of his personal matters. Plus, I have a slice of hot, pecan pie and white ice cream. But aww.... What the fuck, a pal's a pal.

One for all and all for one, right?

I throw some money down, look up at Princess who's watching and slightly fretting with the other girls, and I head on out.

I come out the door, look around, and the cops are all walking down to the far side of the building. The side of the building away from the road.

The cops all turn the corner to watch the fight, but all suddenly stop and burst out laughing. I run down there. I'm still about ten feet back from the cluster of cops and I see what's going on.

Catamuso is standing there in the middle of the alley with his dukes up, a look of fierce determination on his face, and not one stitch of clothing on. I was expecting to come up and see him wrapped around a drainpipe like a pretzel, but there he is, like some Greek statue in a roadrunner cartoon.

But the cops are all laughing their asses off. Then they start taking pictures with their cell phones. Even Officer Randall is laughing. He says "No way! No way in hell I'm fighting a naked-assed man. That dude is fucking crazy!"

One by one they put up their phones, turn and walk off to their squad cars, laughing. One of them pats me on the shoulder as he walks by. "Nice fucking friend you got there."

I go inside and finish my pie.

One of the waitresses is looking at video one of the cops must have sent her, a video of the "big fight" all on her cell phone already, and the others are gathered around her.

Ahhh. Pie.

And our listening pen.

As we drive away, Paul Simon's "The Boxer" is on the radio. "Catamuso, how do you do that?" I say, as I proffer my hand towards the radio. He shrugs like it's nothing.

"Dude, you got your own special kind of *Fight Club* going on here. I like it. I like it."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

LOOKING AT COMIC BOOKS

ordinary people can never fall over the walls,
because they never dare climb high enough
to see what is beyond the walls
— B. Traven

Next morning, I get out the comic books again. I have a relaxing drink and start going through them as I listen to the recordings of the cop conversations that I've downloaded on my laptop. I've always loved old comic books and movie posters and such. There's something about the art on the covers on old 1940s comics. Not only are they colorful and sort of simple and primitive, but they also give you a peek into the minds, the perceptions, the creativity of another era, into the mentality of a simpler, sometimes more honest, and more goofy time.

Batman #11! This is my favorite Batman cover of all time. Batman and Robin set against a background of giant playing cards punching out a totally sick looking Joker.

The appeal of the Joker is straight across the board these days. Everyone likes him. In some ways, he's a bigger character than Batman. I've often wondered what the big deal was.

I know that for me, killing one of my complexly batshit-crazy victims is a little sticky. I mean, if they don't feel any guilt, are they really guilty? Take someone with Down syndrome. Do they really have a good handle on what they are doing when they do something wrong? Are they really guilty of a crime that maybe they didn't intend or completely understand? In my job we have to use a lot of judgement and leeway with our settlements. This is definitely a conversation to confound Catamuso with sometime.

I start looking up recent auction sales. Wow. Some of these are really good books. There's some nice DCs and Marvel comics here, including the Human Torch/Submariner battle issues of Marvel Mystery Comics, but there's a lot of off-beat titles here too. Some Fox and MLJ comics and even more obscure titles like Whirlwind Comics, Punch Comics, Hyper Mystery, Speed Comics, Cyclone Comics... so cool to look at books I've never seen before.

The ballpoint pen recordings are yielding a mother lode. For a bit they talk about what I'm sure is the accident with the four spring-breakers. It turns out that the killer is probably Philby, the little fat guy with the Angry Birds on his phone.

He's talking about the pretty girl with the bat tattoo, and about what a shame it was because "she was so pretty." And how her face haunts him. He's had dreams about her. It's bugging him, because sometimes he wakes up in the morning in a cold sweat. He confesses that he went to her Facebook page the other night.

Nothing damning there but one of the other cops gives us what we want, what we need to lower the boom. *"Yeah, but you hadda do it. You fucked up, and you took care of it. Did the right thing,"* says one of the other cops. We hear drinking glasses clink as the other cop salutes him.

Had to do what? Did the kids get out of line? Did the kids catch him doing something? He did something serious – murder no doubt – but how do you prove that? Did he kill all the kids, or just Brittany? I sorta doubt it was self-defense.

I love a mystery.

The recordings also tell me that Philby was not eating anything – did not order anything there at Waffle House last night - because it was past midnight, and he was going in for a yearly Police Department physical tomorrow afternoon, and he was fasting for to check on his diabetes. I had to play it back a couple of times because in the recording the first time, "fasting" sounded like "farting".

The rest of the cops are pretty cavalier about the killing. None of them are too bright or savvy. Just regular working Joes, sitting around, eating breakfast at Waffle House. The killing sounds like it was nothing vicious: more of an accident – but for them, killing four kids was no big thing. Just something that happened.

An investigation can be fun, but it can be frustrating, and dangerous. At some point, you may have to either pull the trigger or walk away from it. This is where my being judge and jury is tricky. It's usually all about *motive*. Murders for greed or theft or lust are the easy ones. An accidental death is not what we are going to execute someone for. Now if someone's negligent? Drunk, high, impaired? That's another thing. But it must be proven conclusively. A lot of people can drive fine with a few drinks in them, but then another person can get fatally distracted when they're totally straight and wind up killing someone.

I'm getting close on this case but there are still some pieces of the puzzle missing.

I'm going to have to do a "dance". That's the ritual or séance where I contact the dead ones. The Eastern Ritual. This is the hard part. The dangerous part. This is where the rubber hits the road. At least for me. I'm going to have to talk to that little girl again and get to her as her adult self, the adult self that knows what happened.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

A STEALTH RECONNAISSANCE

Truth is the ultimate power.
When the truth comes around,
all the lies have to run and hide.

Ice Cube

Next day, I hit Philby's apartment. I pick the lock, and go on in.

Because he's at his physical, I figure that it will be easier and safer for me. Walking around in his gated apartment complex during the daytime is safer than going there at night or on the weekend, when all the neighbors are home, and I might get spotted as someone out of place.

I hack into his desktop machine and go at it. It does appear that the speed trap business is good these days.

He likes taking pictures. Lots of pictures; some of it drivel: him goofing around, selfies with dead bodies in the morgue; him with his parents and the family at Thanksgiving; getting blowjobs from college girls that he pulled over; him dressed up as Conan at a comic book convention....

Then I spot what I really need: his cell phone lying there on the charger. It's still on, so I don't need a password. I go to his pictures. Lots of pictures. Finally, I scroll to a shot of him at the accident. I'm taking pictures of his pictures with my own cell phone.

The wrecked SUV. Brittany's crumpled straw hat lying there in the background. Close-ups. Gruesome pictures. Philby and other officers posing with the wreckage. One of him with a dead body. Here's one: it looks like he's standing on a girl's neck and smiling. I'm pretty sure it's Brittany. There's another cop in the picture, off to the side, smiling and holding his own cell phone up and also getting the shot.

That gets me thinking. Maybe it's like he's standing on a "trophy kill". I can't be sure, but maybe it's more like he's putting his weight on her.

As for the booty, there's not much of value here in this apartment. He's just a working guy. All the electronics are cheap Walmart stuff. On the wall, a map of collector's state quarters. If he's monetizing his police job, he must have it all hidden really well somewhere, because it ain't here.

It's creepy sitting in his place – in another man's world – and looking at all his stuff. I'm fingering his personal things – things he never imagined anyone would touch. As appalling and disgusting as all this is, I have to wonder... what if I was born in this shithole, dying, town and grew up here, and this was my only choice: being a speed-trap cop frisking college kids for their pot and pills, and getting blowjobs from drunken teenage girls – how fucked up would I have turned out?

Then a shock of awareness shudders through me. Something doesn't make sense. If he's off at the doctor's getting a physical, what is his cell phone doing, sitting here on the charger next to the laptop?

I listen for a second, listen closely, and I hear a slight, distant wheeze, something like a snore...?

Gingerly, I look around.

My pendant is warming.

Tiptoe time. I look in the bedroom. No one is there. I look down from the bedroom mezzanine on the living room. No one there. Finally, as I go out on the rear porch balcony – there he is, inches from me - sound asleep in a lounge chair, with a beer in his hand and headphones on.

I freeze there and stare at him, transfixed. I can't move for a few seconds.

I'm torn between slipping back out silently, or maybe yelling BOO! as loud as I can in his ear and running away... or lifting the lounge chair up and dumping him over the railing.

But I leave.

I will choose the time and place.

Not in broad daylight and not in an apartment complex where everyone around knows him. I will wait and find the right moment. Make it count. And maybe throw a little irony in.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

TWILIGHT IN A GARBAGE DUMP

All things are strange
which are worth knowing.

Catherynne M. Valente

Time for the “dance.” The dance is our special phrase for a séance of sorts, a talk with the dead. If we can get them to show up and talk. Sometimes they just fade on us in the middle of our inquest. And you’ve got to take your best shot with whatever you have. If you don’t have enough testimony or data and the Forlorns stop talking to you, you may have to close the whole thing down and hit the road.

This séance will involve burning some of the Forlorn’s personal possessions in a special procedure.

I can’t very well conduct the magic show in my room or out in the parking lot. I’ll need a special place, one with some privacy. Some seclusion.

I ask at the motel office: “Say, ma’am, I need a dump. I need to dump some garbage. Where do you do that around here?” I need a place where I can burn stuff, and all these little towns have a dumping place off in the woods somewhere, where people leave their tires and old sofas that they’re too lazy to take to a proper dump.

“Go a mile and a half or so down 138. There’s a gravel road on the right. Just go down it till you’re there.”

Down a gravel road to the dump. A lot of stuff doesn't make it all the way to the dump, and the road is littered here and there with tires, bundles of newspaper, and old shoes with weeds growing through them.

I set up my "altar": a rusty spin-basket from an old destroyed and bullet-riddled washing machine, planted atop a small pile of tires. I gather some kindling into it and bunch up some old newspapers. This is how we summon the Forlorns. This is how we see what the unquiet souls have to tell us. I put the girl's hat in there, her Hello Kitty keychain, a few locks of her hair, and all the stray items and bits of things that I pulled from the car, the personal things of hers, and of her friends.

I roll a big blunt of Yage and I sprinkle some on the burning pyre. This stuff really works... sometimes.

Sure, now and then I do the Yage myself, just for fun of it – we're not supposed to, but sometimes when you're dry, and it's all you have... and sometimes I see a lot of weird things when I do that shit. Sometimes I see these almost clear, see-through, curious, impish beings that look like amoebas – giant, watermelon-sized amoebas – running about all around me, but it's like they are in another dimension, and they swim right through me. Sometimes I see fragments from my past, not important events, but just little things from childhood, like riding my bike or running across the lawn and drinking water from the barrel of my squirt gun; a green German Luger squirt gun. Sometimes I see the worms on the side of the road, coming out of the ground on a rainy day as I'm walking to the school bus stop at the corner of our subdivision. Sometimes I hear my mother crying in the other room. Sometimes I hear the pleasing sound of doves off in the distance as the day's sun goes down behind the trees. Often nothing special and even peaceful.

I look around, and off into the distance. I climb up the side of a tree to get a better view. Sawgrass and brush and trees as far as the eye can see. No houses on the horizon or kids hiding in the bushes or someone might spot my fire and come to investigate. I sit down in a big, discarded sofa-chair with the springs and stuffing coming out. Weeds and brush are growing up around me.

The Eastern Ritual is about to begin.

As the fire dims and twilight falls around me, I'm real mellow and feeling good. I'm buzzing and coasting. Contentment.

Contentment...

When I'm in Vegas, I like playing cards when I feel like this. When I'm in this perfect state of contentment, I'm a killer at the Blackjack table. Believe it or not, I can see a little bit into the future which comes in handy when you have a good hand, and you need to know what the dealer has.

I've figured it out: when we're born, our minds are like on broadband. It's like a needle's not in the groove of a record. Not in a single groove. Rather it's like your mind's perception is like a little sponge on the end of the stylus – and it's going over *a whole lot* of grooves, all at the same time, not just one groove, so not just the present, but also the ones around it, ~~but~~ also a bit into the future and the past.

The main groove that we get into as we grow up is the present – the moment we are actually living in. The other grooves around that single groove are the past and future.

So, the child – to interface with the world – if he wants to eat, or to grab something - to interface with the present moment – he has to focus on that one groove that *is* the present. Get in the groove and ignore the rest; he has to turn off the other grooves, the past and the future.

And when I'm at the table, when I'm in the zone, and I “de-focus”, when I step back, I can feel the cards that are coming – I swear it – I can feel when I need to double down, I can feel when the dealer's gonna go bust, or when I'm gonna make that straight. I'm living in the future – just a toe-dip into it – too. Crazy, huh?

The night is falling, and it is what they call magic hour: the time when the sun has gone down, but it isn't dark yet. The pendant I hung on a nearby branch is beginning to sway back and forth an earthquake is coming.

Off in the distance, they're stirring in the foliage and debris.

Ten minutes later I can see delicate, wispy shapes, faintly moving out there. Twigs crackle. A breeze comes up here and there from random directions. Dimly glowing eyes light up in the shadows.

My head rocks back as something ephemeral flits over me. I sense it on my face and head, and I feel it as my hair is lightly blown back.

The other side is opening up... The souls are whispering, rustling... gathering.

“Can you hear me?”

There's no answer.

I wait a while.

Then a whisper: *"Who are you?"*

"I'm gonna help," I say. "I want to help you."

I look around.

I can see them out there, but how will this all come off? I let it go for a minute and then I say "I need to know. I need to see what happened. Can you help me?"

I wait. I light a cigarette. I finish it.

"The car accident. I need to know what happened." Then I say "Is Brittany with you?"

They're going to talk – I can feel it now.

I tell them "Just picture it in your mind. Think it. Try and think it out loud... from the beginning..."

It always takes a bit of time. I explaining to them what I want to do. I explain to them why I can speak to them and why they can hear me.

They come around, after a while and they're whispering, murmuring closer and closer. Then talking up a storm out there.

Something approaches me. It's a shape. A shape made of ...darkness. The shape stops, wavers a bit and dims.

"We took a short cut," a voice says.

I sit up. I'm listening.

"It was late, we were trying to make Jacksonville by morning. Britto and Chip had a flight, so we were going a little fast, sure, but not crazy fast or anything."

"But that cop came out of nowhere, flying into us – like we were standing still." The words are coming faster now. *"He was going to chase after the guy ahead of us, that just went by him, you know. In front of him...and he didn't see us."*

Another voice breaks in. *"A speed trap. He was waiting in a speed trap, and he is pulling out after that guy, the speeder that had just blown by us a minute ago! The damn cop just pulls out right in front of us without even looking. And we hit him hard. Our car flips... When I came to... I was lying there – under the car. Every breath I took hurt. I could feel my lungs filling up with something – blood! Blood it was. Oh, God... My friends were lying around me. They're all dead?"*

The other voice comes back: *"But Brittany – she was still alive. I could hear her making–"* the voice starts choking up *"–making these gurgling sounds - trying to say words. Then the cops are standing around her – but they weren't doing anything to help her."*

“Then I began to, like, float upwards. Then I was above them. I hear them talking.” He hesitates. *“Then I see the cop put his foot on her, on Brittany – no! She’s still alive! She’s still breathing! And then he brings all his heavy weight right down there on the side of her head, on her neck.”*

“A bald, fat guy?” I ask.

“I heard her neck crunch. It crunched like celery or something, and I heard this sad, sad, sad little gasp... as she gave up.”

“Was it a fat guy? The cop? A little fat guy? Pointy head?” I ask.

“Then I began floating up faster... And as I rose up, I heard a gunshot behind me. I looked down, and there was her little dog, lying dead on the grass. Her dog...they even shot her dog...”

After a while of silence, I ask “You’re sure that’s how it happened?”

No words. I look around. *Did they leave?*

All of a sudden, the former little ghost girl appears, an adult now, whisking up out of nowhere: right up in my face, transforming and growing sharper! I recognize her. It is Brittany.

“YESSS!”

Then she is gone.

“Don’t worry, guys I’ll take good care of this.” I murmur.

Just like that, it is over. They’re gone.

I sit there a minute. I look around me at the garbage and debris as the light of the fire flickers on it all: an old sneaker with a skull-and-crossbones bleached out by the sun, an old wood-console record player like people used to have in their living rooms, a jumbled pile of coat hangers, a vein of old VHS tapes tied together with twine... all this meaningless stuff... and all the meaningless lives that go with them. There’s so much nothingness in the world, so much nothingness... if you just take time to stop and look, you can see it in all its beauty.

Yes. I think we have a case.

CHAPTER FORTY

TIME TO CELEBRATE

*I can usually judge
a lot about a fellow
by what he laughs at.*

Wilson Mizner

That evening, Catamuso makes his detective presentation to me like a good assistant. So far, his investigation has uncovered a bit of a mess here in Menlo, Florida. Sifting between the conversation from the Waffle House last night and the data he has cribbed from the city's databanks, we have a better picture.

The city has been hanging by a thread financially these last 4 or 5 years, and the speed traps have been ramped up as one of their more promising revenue streams.

"There is also a little bit funny business going on – maybe stealing from impounded cars – a few lawsuits for that – some incidents with drugs, mostly pot, I think... but I think they lost their franchise, a while back. Four or five years ago maybe."

"Franchise..."

“The drugs. The drug lords. Lotsa drugs flowing through here in Florida. This place was once a pit stop on the ‘underground railroad’ until sometime four or five years ago.”

“Wonder what stupid shit these knuckleheads did to get it 86’d...” I say.

“Maybe because they use the drones now?”

“So this inquest was not... probably not a drug angle to it. Any sex? Any scandals?”

“A few things. Some sex, drunk driving, a very few of ze murders covered up. Standard things. Nothing unusual. No, usual stuff. However... here’s the thing – there are a few concerned emails about our girl Brittany – rich family - and also how they will handle things if the parents of any of these dead kids came down to here or send investigators.”

“Ah, ha.”

“Now is the best part, Harken.” says Catamuso. “This is the dash cams!” He pushes the play on the computer desktop.

We study them for a while. Examine. Rewind. Slow motion. Blow it up.

One dashcam is missing some footage, the dashcam that would be directly on the murder scene: it was turned off or edited. But there is another one that has caught part of the scene from one of the cop cars that came up off to the side, so no direct picture, but Catamuso has enhanced the audio.

We clearly hear the other cops tell Philby that it’s his mess. That he has to do it. We even hear the “celery crack” of her neck and her wispy, little animal gasp.

That’s it.” I say. “The death sentence. It checks out with everything the Forlorns told me. It’s Philby.”

Catamuso nods as his eyes are mystically drawn away from mine, wandering to the motel room dresser, and he fixes his gaze on Tori’s stuffed bat. His eyebrows rise up and down. He smells it.

“I borrowed it. It’s not mine.”

“What is it then?”

“A stuffed bat.”

“Smells funny.”

“It’s a stinky bat.”

“What does it do?” He sniffs it again.

“It stinks.”

He sets it back down, shakes his head a little and lights a cigarette. He looks at me. “What we gonna do boss?”

“The die is cast, Catamuso. The gas is floored. Philby is our man. That’s it. Done deal. Mark it and strike it.”

I pace the room, thinking and firm with excitement.

“I have an idea... something I’ve been thinking about. It just might work. I’ll need to get a few more things, though. But if Amazon Prime actually works out here...” I’m pulling my cell phone out. “...and I’ll buy another few knick-knacks locally.”

“What we gonna do Harken?”

It’s bad luck to talk about it. Might jinx it. I wonder what they want for that bear out there....”

We decide to celebrate and order a pizza. The pizza parlor is just now closed because their toilet overflowed, so we decide to hit the strip club down the street.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

THE NAUGHTY NEGLIGEE

*Every time I hear the word culture,
I reach for my revolver.*

Herman Goring

The lights and garish facade outside promise a real den of sin and tons of lurid entertainment, but Naughty Negligee is actually a pretty grim place inside. Dark, pathetic, shoddy, snarky, poorly lit, outdated, and rickety furniture, cigarette burns everywhere and on everything, and a smell in the shadows like a cocktail of microwave-burnt plastic, liverwurst, hair weave, green Jell-O concentrate, and disinfectant.

It's shift-change time, and the girls are tipping out or just now dragging in. SHE RIDES by Danzig is playing as we walk in. Seems I hear it in every strip joint, but rarely do they do the honor of playing it as I enter.

After more than a few stiff drinks (on my tab of course), Catamuso is going off on cops again. Apparently, the idea of local governments using law enforcement and the speed traps to generate income instead of raising taxes is going to be our nation's downfall.

Now and then, the bouncer/doorman looks over at him with the old hairy eyeball.

"If they do these things, soon we will be like third world countries. Like Mexico! They have human heads found in the street. Bodies hanging from the overpass when you go to work in the morning. Bad shit is everywhere."

"Look man, without a doubt, these speed-trap guys are a real bear, no pun intended (referring to the archaic term for such cops and their "Smokey the Bear" hats), but how will it become like Mexico here?" I ask. "Will we have to wear sombreros and ride around on burros?" I know better than to argue with Catamuso, so I just ask a question at this point. He spends a lot of time alone and has had a lot of time to think about this thing.

"Once they start to be pulling you over to make money? To keep their job? That's where it all goes to hell. Bit by bit, one day traffic tickets to get money? And the next a bribe to make it go away, and one little thing then the next, until they are working for all real criminals."

It actually makes sense. The nature of gradual decay.

"If a police captain or a mayor says to give more tickets because the city needs money – because they gonna lose their jobs? Maybe the cop – if he's a real man – maybe he should stick a gun in the mayor's mouth and blow his head off!"

A cute girl has come up behind Catamuso and overhears the end of his tirade. Her eyebrows go up and down, but she's going to give it a try anyway. I look up to her.

"Hi! I'm Bentley!" she says.

"Have a seat, Bentley." I kick a chair out for her to sit in. Catamuso is eyeing her up and down, watching her every move but saying nothing.

"Sorry, my friend here was acting out a scene he saw on TV last night." I say, explaining Catamuso's dramatics and theatrics.

She sits down and smiles. "Netflix?"

Catamuso nods.

"Hi, I'm Bentley." she says again.

"I'm sorry, Bentley." I smile like a used car salesman and reach out to take and kiss her hand. "I'm... Mr. Dow, and this is Mr. Jones." Catamuso shakes her hand.

"You're from out of town, I guess." she says.

"We're in the industrial average business."

"Hey! I think I've heard of you guys."

I've been waiting for Catamuso to do something fucked up again, to start another fight, or insult someone... but he's very placid and quiet tonight.

She kinda likes me (who can blame her) and chats me up, not paying any mind to Catamuso.

She's talking a blue streak, flying on some kind of speed or Red Bull or coffee. She has a dog she got from the pound and she's sure it has amnesia and can't remember who it is. Then all the medicine the dog had to take and how much each thing cost... what food the dog likes and doesn't like.

Ignored and dejected, Catamuso pretends to fall asleep. His head falls into his chest, and he lets out a loud snore. I go along with it. I reach out and tap him. "Wake up, wake up! Jones!"

Another girl sits down and begins watching what's going on. "He might be narcoleptic." She points at Catamuso.

"What's that?" Bentley asks.

"It's kind of like sleepwalking. Someone just falls asleep any time."

"I've heard of that stuff! It's a medical condition." says Bentley.

"And if you wake him up, he'll die." I add in.

"Oh dear!" she says.

"Wow!" I say. "Maybe we better get this fucker out of here! We don't want him to die in your place. Bad press. Maybe he's dead already."

She touches him. Nothing. And then she kind of presses down on him, and then presses harder. And then he farts loudly! "Oh my!" she says.

The other girl immediately gets up and leaves us without even a goodbye.

Now, Fennix and Catamuso are good friends, and (according to Fennix), all you have to do is fart on a woman and she will fall in love with you. I shake my head. Most insane. So, this is what Catamuso is up to, I figure.

Anyways, she turns back to me and starts talking a blue streak again. Her dog was kidnapped by her old boyfriend who tried to train it to hunt and point, but it bit him, so he let it run off. Her car has a squirrel nest under the hood, and she can't bring herself to drive it because she's afraid of cooking the babies. Her roommate loaned her other roommate's boyfriend two thousand dollars for his band to promote their new record and she can't pay the rent this month. She just lost a cap on her tooth and thinks she swallowed it in her sleep because she can feel it in her stomach. She was writing her biography (at the age of 22), had finished 480 pages of it, and

now her computer died. You know, talking up a storm, faster and faster like a merry-go-round whose gears are shot, or a little kid spinning around a maypole until he's so dizzy he falls out of his seat. That's exactly what happens now, right at the moment of her most emphatic point, she literally falls out of her seat. I look over at the seat and there's nothing the matter with it – but there she is, on the floor getting up. I reach over to give her a hand, but she slaps my hand away, and after she gains her feet, she hugs Catamuso. Now, bear in mind that he has not said ten words to her. The *Fennix Scenario* is working.

I buy Catamuso a table dance from Bentley. The dancer has a band-aid on her butt. To me, that indicates that she must be new to this. Almost every stripper you ever meet will always have a curling-iron burn on her ass. They have these hot-curler things that they use to curl their hair, but they all also love to leave lying around hot the dressing room, and it's only a matter of time – of hours, or even minutes, before a new girl sits on one, scarring her forever with a little cigarette butt-sized brown spot on her ass. Most of them only have one, but if you meet a dancer that has two, three, five of them – you've got a special commodity. Someone who has the IQ of a houseplant.

After two dances, they are in love. She kisses Catamuso right on the mouth (something that generally never happens in strip clubs) and then I grab her arm to get her attention, and I give her a C-note, telling her to take Catamuso into one of the VIP suites and give him the works. The VIP is a small, darkly lit series of rooms in back where supposedly anything goes. Sometimes it's a scam and the guy gets nothing, but a hundred bucks in this place should get Catamuso to seventh heaven.

Now for my own fate. There she was, coming right at me after getting down off the back-stage – the “Las Vegas stage,” as the DJ called it; the front being the “Carousel stage,” and the one on the left that nobody's dancing on is God knows what.

As she walks toward me, she grinds her hips in almost predatory fashion, like a vixen approaching – or the girl in *Cat People*. Maybe she's not the prettiest, sexiest girl I've ever seen, but the attitude, the stance, the cadence of her walk...she's ringing all the bells and blowing all the whistles.

She comes over and pulls a chair out – but not to sit in the chair: she's just pulling it out of the way so she can sit in my lap. Then she picks up my drink, kills it and starts twirling a strand of her hair. If a girl likes you, she

touches her hair, or plays with it or whatever. It's a "tell," as they say in poker. She doesn't even know she's doing it, but it telegraphs her intentions.

"You're in the industrial-average business..." Word gets around fast. I nod. She picks up a napkin, unfolds it, and tucks it into her necklace as an impromptu bib, as she pulls over the basket of chicken wings that Catamuso's girl ordered before. As she starts eating the chicken wings with one hand, she reaches down with the other and grabs my genitalia.

Just as I'm thinking that we probably should have come here earlier in our stay in Menlo, I hear a bloodcurdling scream rip out behind me.

I turn around and there's Catamuso's girl, running out of the VIP suite in nothing but her heels. She has a bloody nose, the blood's all down the front of her, and she has something in her hand above her head – and I think it's a gun.

As the object in her hand goes off and fires into the ceiling, I figure out that it *is* a gun! As it goes off, she freaks and throws it – spinning – up in the air. It's coming right at us, and I lean out to the left, almost coming out of my seat, reaching out my hand and catching it.

Catamuso comes out of the VIP suite now, holding up his pants. The bartender is turning back around after pulling out a ball bat from under the bar behind him.

The bouncer/doorman comes trotting out of the bathroom.

Catamuso has buttoned his pants, but he still hasn't zipped them up. He can't. He's still in *flagrante delicto*. Hanging all out. Franks and beans. The bartender and bouncer coming at Catamuso both sort of stop in their tracks, transfixed.

"That thing's huge!" says my girl, as she sucks all the meat off another wing and the robotically spinning house spotlights shines on it for about half a second.

The bouncer murmurs something standing next to him, probably wondering how one should proceed against a man so exposed and yet well equipped.

"I've never seen a honker that big on a human being except in porno movies." says the girl, still casually killing the chicken wings.

"She pickpockets! My wallet! My gun! Tabernac! Where'd she go?" he shouts to me.

I guess she wasn't that much of a newbie after all. I spot his wallet on the floor and point for him to pick it up.

His yelling to me seems to break the "spell", and the two bouncer-guys are coming for him. Catamuso, even with his dick out, is still one hell of a kung-fu judo-master motherfucker. It's a wonder to see him go at it.

I look at my watch as I casually take up a chicken wing too. In about sixteen seconds, he has them both on the floor: one moaning, the other crying. Both have bloody faces; one is literally squirting blood out of his nose with every heartbeat, and the other is staring at his hand where one of his fingers is bent obscenely back.

I go over to them and observe. "You guys have had it."

I toss the chicken bones over my shoulder, bend down, wipe my hands on the bouncer's tie and frisk him. sure enough, he's got a small, hammerless Smith & Wesson .38 - a Sentinel I think they call it - in a waistband holster in the small of his back. I pull it out and throw it all the way across the room. The ball bat guy is probably not packing, but I frisk him anyways.

A customer walks in, right past the front-door kiosk where they take money. There's nobody there, so he just kind of wanders in and sits down at a table not far from us. As the newcomer's eyes adjust to the light, and he sees me and Catamuso standing over the bouncer and the bartender on the floor, he kind of freezes for a second, then calmly lights a cigarette, stands up and walks out.

The bouncer begins to get up, muttering, "You sonofabitch...!" and I kick him right in the face.

Two of the strippers come out of the dressing room. When they see the club's designated protectors lying on the floor with the shit kicked out of them, and me standing there, calmly lighting a cigarette, they let out a couple of high-pitched yelps, and run back into the dressing room.

Hmmm.

I toss Catamuso (who's finally got his tiger back in the tank and zipped up) the ball bat and I walk back into the dressing room. Time for the special damage control bankroll that I always seem to have to use the most when Catamuso's around.

The girls in the brightly lit dressing room stare at me, wondering what the hell is going to happen next. "Hey!" I yell real loud. They quiet down and I say "Listen, girls! Everything's going to be OK... OK... but I got one question: Did any of you call the cops?"

The new girl pulls out her cell phone (an old flip one) and says, "OK! I'll call them now."

The house mom stands up and takes the phone from her. "We always handle our own shit around here, baby." *Good.* And then I take the phone from the house mom.

“OK, watch this!” I yell and pull out the wad and I walk around the room giving each one of the girls a hundred bucks. The House Mom I give two. “Now ladies, I’m not holding the place up or anything. Ya know, no stick-up guy’s going to be handing out hundred-dollar bills. This money is to just keep the peace and see that we all stay friends. No one is gonna talk about this, right?”

As I go out the door, I shake the girl’s cell phone at her and say, “I’ll give you this back in a minute, darling. Just everybody be cool. Everybody be cool and Fonzie now.”

When I come out, Catamuso’s sitting at the table, passing around a joint with the bouncer and bartender. Catamuso still has the bat in his lap, and the doorman’s .38 revolver is sitting on the table in front of him. The house lights are on and nobody else is out here on the floor.

The bouncer looks up at me, and then the bartender looks at me. Just a couple of working guys doing their jobs.

I’m standing there like the boss of things, and I boss Catamuso to give the bouncer back his gun. Catamuso picks the gun up, clicks open the cylinder, and drops all the bullets out into the palm of his hand.

Like any good, experienced revolver handler, he shakes it and looks in the cylinder to make sure all the bullets come out. When you don’t pay attention to that - when you do it cavalierly - sometimes one of the five or six bullets in a revolver can hang up and stay in the gun... and then when someone pulls the trigger thinking it’s empty...! Catamuso snaps the cylinder closed and hands it back to the guy. Then he throws all the bullets off into the rear corner of the room.

The doorman is a Russian and the other looks slightly Jamaican or Haitian. Both are over six feet, but no monsters, just born losers and pretty knocked around right now.

“Listen, guys. I’m sorry about my friend here. But the one thing we don’t need to do right now is call the police. Or your boss. I mean, look...” – holding up Catamuso’s wallet between two fingers and shaking it back and forth – “Fuckin’ bitch stole his wallet and then grabbed his fuckin’ gun. Fuckin’ pickpocket... But I’m not going to call the cops. And you’re not going to call the cops.”

Then I skillfully let some hints drop implying that we work for some big-time international cartel drug-dealers or something, just passing through. “So we both don’t want any trouble or cops or nothin’.”

I pull out my wad of hush-money cash that Jack gives me to carry, and peel off a couple of hundred-dollar bills and stick them in the bouncer's pocket, and then a couple of hundred-dollar bills in the bartender's pocket. Then I stick 200 more in the bouncer's pocket, pointing at his finger. "For the broken finger."

He shrugs agreeably.

I smile and give a thumbs up. "Our board of directors, they wouldn't like it if anybody fucked with us or got us tangled up in some dumbass, stupid bullshit. Tonight someone decided to pickpocket and roll the wrong guys. Hey, it happens. But right now, we all just gotta pick up the pieces as best we can and walk away from it all."

I hand the girl's cell phone to the bartender. "Now take this back there and tell those bitches, each and every one of them, to keep their fuckin' mouths shut about all this. Shut up for at least week or two. This story never happened, see?"

The nod and "yep..." me.

"And you sure don't want anybody to know that that this little scrawny-assed motherfucker, who is old enough to be both your fathers, kicked your motherfucking asses. You mark my words and listen to everything I said, motherfuckers. Agreed?" They both just sit there, nodding – and I grab the bartender and say, "Now look me in the eye and say you agree."

He looks up at me like a hurt little kid and says, "I agree." And as I reach out to the other one, he puts his hand up and looks me in the eyes and says, "Yes sir, I agree."

There you go. *Yes, sir*. I like to hear Yes, sir.

As we drive off, Catamuso counts the money in his wallet.

"Catamuso, that's three fights you've been in these last couple of days. I mean, that's a lotta violence and contention in three days."

"At least I win all my fights, Harken!"

He has a point.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

RIDING IN THE DEATH CAR

As we pull out onto the highway again, the rages of a drunken night fade into the first glints of morning light and behold, we wave to the shit-stained brides of dawn, now wandering off here and there, with their smiles and hot-mess attire: each with a Styrofoam cup of Dr. Pepper and cheap vodka.

WILD HIGHWAYS

Heading back to the motel, we drive by the town's speed trap. The speed trap is open for business and it's a blue-light-festival, with a couple of victims pulled over there.

As we pull in back at the motel (on the other side of town), I spot something funny.

"Is that your car?" I ask Catamuso.

We are driving in my car (his was leaking a bit from the frozen body in the trunk), and I see that there's someone monkeying around inside Catamuso's car.

Catamuso jumps out the door and is off and on it before I even completely stop the car. He's circling around to get behind the guy – behind the open door – then gingerly sneaking up the car hood of the car parked next to his and onto the roof.

I spot something bad.

There's a car off down the parking lot that looks suspicious: slowly pulling out of a parking spot with its lights off. He starts up towards Catamuso.

I have one gun in my pocket, a revolver in the glovebox, and one under the seat, but the one with the silencer is in the room. I take out my pocket gun and chamber a round. I slip out the open window, so I don't make any noise by opening the door.

Catamuso is now grabbing and pulling the burglar guy out of his car, manhandling him, and I'm hearing shit falling out of the car, clattering, and rolling. That's gotta make Catamuso mad, as it's his shit.

I'm coming up on the other guy, sneaking up, as he's sneaking up. I'm almost on him, I start to run at him, and I get hit from my right side by another guy. Tackled! I go flying against the front grill of a parked car. The funny thing is that the tackling guy, a big, beefy 300-pounder, hits the fender so hard that I think he cracks his skull. One way or another, he's out cold or dead, and the other guy is taking aim at Catamuso. I see the silhouette of a Luger in his hand. (I immediately want that Luger.)

I'm reaching for the mouse-gun in my pocket, a Ruger LC9 – but before I can get it out, Catamuso hits the Luger guy with a shovel. No idea where he got the shovel, if it was in his car, or whatever.

I glance into Catamuso's car looking for what's up with the guy who was burglarizing it, but his flattened, deformed face is scrunched forward into the window grotesquely with froth coming out of his mouth.

So.

We have a problem. It's 3 AM and we have three bodies to get rid of.

We place the three bodies in the trunk of the car that they came in. I'm driving Catamuso's car, and he's driving theirs to somewhere outside of town to get rid of the death car. I'm following so I can bring Catamuso back.

We're about eight miles outside of town, and we pick up a cop. First, he's coming down the road toward us, right up on us. He passes us by. Whew.

I glance in the rearview mirror and see him turning around and following us now.

He's holding back, following us like a shark. We come to an intersection, and we split up. I go off one way, and Catamuso the other. I speed off, wheeling it hard and fast, and drawing him after me. Soon I'm burning up the road and he's following me, but still at a safe distance back. It occurs to me that it's odd that he isn't on my bumper with sirens and lights flashing. He's probably calling his little buddies on his radio and setting a trap up ahead. We may be fucked. Actually, *I* may be fucked, and now Catamuso will have to come bail *me* out.

It's not the end of the world if I get arrested, as long as Catamuso doesn't get caught with the carload of bodies. That would sure throw a real monkey wrench into the inquisition that we're conducting.

After a few more miles, I look in my rearview mirror – and there's nothing there! I slow a little and take a better look. Did he turn his lights off? There's a full moon and still I don't see him back there. He must have got called to something more important or ran out of gas or something.

Then, like some bat out of hell, he's right *beside* me, all his lights and siren and even his cab lights on – and he's inside the cab, his head turning towards me and he's got no eyeballs in his eye sockets – he's one of *them*, a Blue-Louie motherfucker - one of the Damned, waiting for the solstice, and just having a little fun tonight fucking with me: nothing more than a phantasm – all in my head - cop car and all!

I look him right in the eyes – er, sockets – and I give him the finger and my war face, and he laughs maniacally and drives off – fading and disappearing as he goes.

After a while Catamuso calls. He's dumped the car, and he gives me directions to pick him up.

“They won't find those guys for a long time,” he tells me.

The Luger is a WWI dated DWM, has been re-blued but the magazine still matches. A nice souvenir from an engagement with a couple of fuck-faces who don't need this gun anymore.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

A PERFECT SET-UP

The day you die is just
like any other, only shorter.

Samuel Beckett

Next morning, Princess - the Waffle House girl - calls me and wants to hook up. Great!

How 'bout this afternoon? How 'bout we meet at her girlfriend's house? Great! Princess has her parents staying with her – in from out of town – and we can't hook-up at her house, and it's not going to be my room because the stuffed bat really "creeps" her out.

"Why? In what way?"

"Well, 'creeps' isn't right the right word, baby, but – I don't know – you like that thing... so much. I think you like it more... I think I'm a little jealous."

Jealous of a stuffed bat? WTF. That's a new one.

"And it smells funny." She takes a breath. "It sorta stinks."

"OK, your girlfriend's place is fine. Two o'clock is fine. Sure."

I leave early so I can stop at the Dollar Tree to get some batteries. I buy some other stuff, including a big, ridiculous plastic flower and some comically oversized novelty sunglasses that are bright orange and about a foot wide. I'm feeling frisky and choose to have some fun with her by showing up with a little flagrant bizarro.

So, I'm about to pull into the apartment complex of Princess's girlfriend. My arm is out the window with a cigarette. I'm relaxed. Sitting back. Waiting for the oncoming traffic to go by.

So, I'm preoccupied. Not on point. I'm thinking about all my options: how am I gonna kill this Philby guy now? At night shift? Hit him while he's asleep at home? During night or during daylight? It would be nice to step on his head and break his neck like he did that girl... but none of those are in the cards right now. I have a madcap scheme – something that I will be telling the gang about for years to come – and I'm going to do it. Fuck yeah, I'm going to do it. Fucking speed trap cops.

Lotsa traffic coming now. What... oh, a school is getting out down the street?

So, I'm sitting there waiting to turn in and thinking *Oh, I hate the gangster that gets off on bullying everyone in his way, the child molester, the bank-ster who has a whistleblower murdered, the corporation that poisons a whole town in India to save 1.34 cents per unit... But man, there's got to be a special place in Hell for the speed-trap cop!*

As I finally turn into the parking lot and am then off the street, sirens suddenly come on out of nowhere. Cop! I look in my rearview mirror and it's like ET has landed. Close Encounters of the Third Fucking Kind. Fuck me running! It's Philby! My man! What are you doing in my rearview mirror?

I notice that even after the car is stopped the pendant which is now hanging from the rearview mirror is swaying.

He comes up to my driver side window and eventually says "Sorry sir, you didn't have your turn signal on when you were pulling in –and sir, you failed to come to a complete stop back there, at the intersection of Langley Highway and Mustard Street."

I'm thinking; *Great, he doesn't recognize me from the other day.*

But at the same time... I did have my turn signal on. It's still on. I get a queasy feeling. It's broad daylight and, of course, I'm not going to be able to take care of this doof right here and now.

"Officer, I'm sure I came to a full stop back there, this is..."

“I’m going to let you off with a warning this time. Now, is this a rental?”

“No, this is my car.” What’s he mean “rental”? No rental company would try to rent an old hooptie-mobile like what I’m sitting in.

“Could you step out of the car please, and show me your license and insurance card?”

As I start to come out, my new joke glasses that were on my lap and I was going to surprise Princess with, fall out on the pavement. I look down at them. He looks down at them, then he looks at me, kind of baffled. Like, what the fuck are those things? What’s a grown man doing with them?

As soon as I’m on my feet and going for my wallet, he hits me with a cheap shot! Philby swings a big haymaker at my jaw. BAM! Cold-cocked.

“Thought I didn’t recognize you huh?”

Shit.

I’m on the ground and he’s kicking me. Gets me in the head pretty hard.

“All right, shitbird! Here’s your warning!” as he kicks me again. “Here’s your fucking warning!”

People from the apartment complex are coming out and gathering.

“You hear me, shitbird!? You hear me loud and clear?!”

It stops, and I kind of fade for a minute. I come to, and now Philby is going through my wallet and tossing various cards up in the air as he rifles through them. I have about 400 bucks cash left in there, and it’s sure as shit gone now.

He has his phone cradled between his chin and his shoulder and he’s talking to someone. “Naw, not a fed, not a private investigator. Card here says he’s in burials and coffins. Name’s Jack Ketch. See if you can run that quick and get back to me.”

He throws the wallet over his shoulder and leans down, pressing a billy-club into me. “This is your first and final warning. It’s time for you to get out of town now, shitbird! And not come back!”

As he walks away, he picks up his hat which has fallen off. I try to muster up and say “*Dude! With a pointy, fucking head like that, you need to wear a hat! All the time!*” but I’m on spin-dry cycle and the words just aren’t coming right now.

I’m lying there a few minutes. The people from the apartments are all looking at me, but no one brings me a bottle of water or tries to help me up. I reach over and put the joke glasses back on. They’re smashed up and kind of crooked on me. I stand up. For the sake of the audience, I dust myself off, try to straighten my glasses on my head – the kids are giggling –

and reach in the car and pull out the joke flower. Now the adults are laughing, too. I mean, I've just had the shit kicked out of me, but I can still have a little fun, right?

I take the napkin with Princess's address on it out of my pocket and look at it. I walk down to the apartment, knock on the door and a late-middle-aged Black lady answers. She looks at me for a second and shakes her head. "We ain't buying anything in this house, motherfucker. Now git." She lets the screen door shut and wanders back into the darkness muttering something about white people.

Princess... I guess Princess set me up.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

THE PRINCESS RETURNS

Imperfection is beauty, madness is genius.
It's better to be ridiculous than boring.
MARILYN

I come into my hotel room with a torn shirt, bleeding lip, and swollen black eye. My head is throbbing. I wonder if I should go to the hospital. No, in this town they would probably try to kill me there too. I look in the mirror and I call Catamuso to come down and check me over. I'm a mess. "No more pussy for you this trip. You ugly now. Heh heh. Ugly just like me." he says.

"The fucking Waffle House girl set me up!"

Catamuso mutters and shakes his head. He's using the liquor and Kleenex from the bathroom to clean me up and wipe the dried blood.

"The Princess, oh boy." He murmurs.

As if on cue there's a knock on the door. I go to open it, pulling my gun.

It's Princess!

I laugh and just slam the door in her face. She darts her foot out and stops the door from closing all the way. She pushes it back open and comes in.

“Hold it boy! You got to...”

“Yeah, what? What’s next? You gonna have the local Klan come by and nail me to a burning cross now? Call the FBI? The CIA? Sure! Real nice girl! Can’t wait.”

Catamuso is enjoying the row like he’s watching a scene on *Days of Our Lives* or some other soap opera.

“Look, I sure as hell did you a big favor, fuck face.” she says irritated and lively.

“Sure. What? Didn’t charge for the iced tea the other night?”

She turns and goes back out the door. Slamming it too.

I look over at Catamuso sitting on the bed and smiling. He shrugs.

I hear her crying on the other side. But I don’t want to hear anything she’s got to say. I’m going over to turn the deadbolt when she bursts back in again.

She puts her finger to her lips, in a shushing maneuver to silence me and sits down. She pulls out a joint and lights it.

She blows the smoke up into the room’s stratosphere. She stares at me with grim and intent eyes. Now I want to hear what she has to say. Not saying I’m not going to laugh out loud, but let’s hear it. “Ok. C#’mon.” I say.

“Fucking cops were going to kill you, motherfucker! KILL! K-I-L-L! Youuuu... Philby and his guys. And they can get away with it in this town.”

“Ya don’t say.”

“You’d be dead as a donut right now...”

“ - or they would be – “ I add.

“If’n it weren’t fer me...an’ buried out there in the sawgrass somewhere. Planted until 20 years from now when they put in a new fucking Walmart.”

“No shit!” I say sarcastically with mock amazement. “Sounds pretty bad.”

“But I talked them out of it. And I did a sweet fucking job.”

“Yeah, right.” I smirk.

“Sure enough. Yessir. I gave them a ‘*how can I ever deal with them again if they murder someone*’ angle.”

I look at Catamuso, sitting there working on a crossword puzzle that I started before, and instead of looking at me – ready to roll his eyes at whatever bullshit story she’s feeding us – I know he’s sitting there thinking about how he can approach banging her now that I’m probably out of the picture – ya know - after she set me up and all.

I pull out my phone which has just beeped with a text message and begin scrolling. “So, you’re fucking one of the cops then?” I say in the best amused tone I can muster. A regular Sherlock Holmes I am.

She walks over to the TV and picks up the stuffed bat and looks at it a tick, smells it, then sets it back down. She turns at me, rubbing her fingers on her pants, and smiles sarcastically. Her pep kicks in and she spits out; “Dude, I’m fucking *all of them*. I’m fucking all the fucking cops... ‘cept Elmo – see he’s a little light in the loafers, if ya know what I mean, but the whole buncha them. The chief on down.”

Silence.

She looks around at both of us. She says “Whhatt!” loudly.

I rub my right hand down across my face and breathe in, as I shake my head with exasperation. Out of the side of my eye I notice Catamuso’s head bob a little as a thin, sly smile comes across his lips.

“What the fuck! I’m a slut! So what! And if you don’t like it, well, just fuck you.”

“Fuck me? Well, I guess you did already, didn’t you? Not that that means anything. To either of us obviously.” I find myself sounding kind of like the normal, pathetic guy now, and cringe a little deep inside.

She stands up and heads to the door. At the door she stops and then pivots around, pointing at me; “Look lover, I fuck who I want, when I want and how I want! Sorry, but I’ve been hooking up with those douchebags since I was in high school, and you know what? I sell off most of the fucking pot the cops take off the fucking dipshit college kids that come short-cutting through town all the time! That’s the deal. And someday I’m going to get out of this flat, dead, worthless, dead-land of a nowhere town...”

I shrug and continue to scroll on my phone feigning cavalier and distracted disinterest.

Not satisfied with my appearance of stoicism, she hauls off and slaps me across the face. She goes to slap me again and I reach out and grab her hand. I hold onto her for a second, stare into her eyes, and then turn her

around and pull her arm up behind her. She snarls and tries to kick me in the balls by bringing her heel up behind her but hits my knee.

Then she reaches around with her free hand, over her shoulder, as if to scratch my eyes out.

I try to grab her other hand with my free hand and get a fistful of her shirt.

As she back-kicks me again, hitting my knee which almost gives out, I start going down, dragging her with me and rip the front of her shirt open. Wide open.

Catamuso gets up now and decides to go for a walk, making a walking motion with the first two fingers on his hand and mouthing his intentions.

She's cursing a blue streak.

I try to pull her up but the shirt rips more and she begins to roll out of it.

I pull her up by the remaining fragments of the shirt and get a grasp on both her hands.

She's panting. I can smell the liquor and pot on her breath. I pull her into me, closer – skin to skin. I even feel her heart beating.

Then – just like in the movies – we kiss.

I don't just kiss her; we both kiss simultaneously.

And it's the best kiss ever.

She spins her head away, revolting against her passion.

Now we're getting somewhere.

I take a handful of her hair in the back, yank it to get her attention and force her face back to me. As I try to kiss her again, she purses her lips and looks to the side with eyes frantic with both passion and self-confusion and fear. I give her a good yank on her hair, she looks me in the eyes now and melts in my arms, like M&Ms in the summer sun.

As we dwindle down onto the motel room bed, a certain, small part of me is aware that this is one of those rare, perfect moments in time that I will remember like a snapshot on my deathbed and the other half is a greedy, ruthless, craven animal, feral, wild and clawing into her heart and mind. For a moment I am a Fabio painting, a Fabio on the cover of a newsstand romance novel, hair in the wind, ship

sails in the background, a puffy pirate shirt half open with the generic, beautiful woman in my, tan, sinewy arms.

Only later, on the freeway heading south to West Palm will it occur to me that I should have used a rubber, considering her familiarity with the town cops and who knows who else.

Afterwards she goes looking around on the floor for something. An earring? No. The joint. It's on the edge of the television, it's gone out, but a little bit of the TV's plastic casing is burned on the edge.

"Wow!" she says, "wow, wow, wow!"

I smile and reach for a cigarette from her pack.

"Was that all... did you do that on purpose?" she asks.

"What?"

"All that! Work me up like that?"

"I wish I could say that. I guess I'm not that smart. I did let it happen though, and that's to my credit."

Catamuso comes back in now. Probably spying all along through a crack in the drapes or listening at the door. If it was his friend Fennix out there, Fennix the sex fiend, he would have whipped it out and probably ~~been~~ watched with great delight on the property security camera by Cousin It at the front desk as he went to town.

Catamuso goes over to the second bed, grabbing the TV clicker and plops down, all in silence and starts flipping the channels.

She looks over at me and shrugs.

"So, all is forgiven?" she asks me.

"Let's just say, you made your point." I really do dig her: my kind of woman – all woman, hardy, wild, robust, blunt, savvy, lusty... "You like me a little don't ya?" I bluntly ask. "I mean, not like the cops or the quarterback on the football team..."

She smiles as she sees I've got her pegged now.

“Well, let’s see....” she drawls. “You are good looking – were good looking – I mean, ya do look like shit now - and you don’t talk too much. You carry a gun and are probably some kind of gangster or secret agent or something. You are a good lover. And you love animals.”

“Animals?”

She points at the stuffed bat.

“That’s a taxidermized bat,” I say, “Not a pet.”

“Yeah, but he probably was a pet, you know, and you loved him so much you had him stuffed, right? So, you’re sentimental too! I loooove that.”

That’s always the first problem with being good in bed. The goo-goo. She’s gone goo-goo eyed now. She’s taking inventory of me, looking it all over and trying to decide if she wants to keep me or not. I can feel it. And how will the cops will react when she tells them that they go back on the shelf next to the canned goods and no more blow jobs. And it might be nice for me to hang out here for a while. But then I have the appointment in a few days. Probably have to skedaddle after I wrap up this Menlo settlement. Could I take her with me? Naw, some flowers don’t last too long when you take them out of their environment.

Catamuso speaks up. “It’s she.”

“What?” ~~what~~ the fuck is he talking about. Is he talking about her? Can he read my mind now?

“It’s a *she* bat,” Catamuso says, barely looking up from his puzzle. “Is a female bat. Not a male bat.”

WTF?

“Look for yourself.”

She’s a bit startled.

Me too.

Why would anyone have examined the sex of a dead bat?

Catamuso, of course.

But who is he? she’s thinking.

By his somber, diminished tone I can tell he has lost all hope of having a “sexual adventure” with this girl now that she loves me again (or something like that).

“Fuck the bat, Catamuso. Now thanks to this young lady we are both alive.” I’m getting up. “If the local gendarmes had come gunning for us... how many cops they got down there, babe?”

Eight. Eight patrol officers, the chief, two desk sergeants....”

“So,” I continue. “Say four or five of them dirty coppers came bashing in our motel door while you and I are asleep or ambush us somewhere out there in the parking lot... it’s dead duck city for us, for sure.”

He nods.

She’s answering her phone and begins a chat with one of her girl friends.

“And now we got someone inside, sort of.” I add. “Yup. See, she’s a damn sharp cookie.”

“Right!” says Catamuso. “Let’s drink a toast to the power of the pussy!”

I agree.

Nodding, I walk across the room and I pull out our bottle of Remy from behind the TV where I hid it and pour three good shots into the motel Styrofoam coffee cups, one for each of us.

Catamuso raises his cup in salute. “Here, here! To power of the pussies! Yes!”

We kill the shots and high-five.

As I handed her a cup, she whispered to me: “Why does he have six fingers?”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

FOR A SPECIAL OCCASION

*No clothes shall dress a man
as well as a good night's sleep.*

Gilligan Remy

For breakfast next morning, I decide to wear a disguise, just in case Philby comes sniffing around and to keep anyone from asking questions about my battle damage. Catamuso remarks, with delight, at how good my moustache, Afro wig, and ~~my~~ makeup to cover the damage... and now he's joking around that he wants a disguise, too, something more than just his cowboy hat.

A disguise.

Later, back at the room, I pull out the bear suit that I ordered the other day from Amazon Prime. As a joke, I lay it out on the bed, as if it is meant for him. As if it is *his* disguise. He looks over at it and dryly says, "I'm not wearing that."

“Just a joke.” He doesn’t laugh, just glances at the bear suit, makes an eyebrow ripple to show his indifference, and goes back to fiddling with his crossword puzzle.

I start putting it back. “What is that? Is it going to be Halloween, Harken?” Catamuso asks.

“This is for tonight. For a very special occasion.”

“For a very special friend, then?”

“Of course. Nothing but the best for this friend.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

A ROAD LESS TRAVELED

*Make no mistake.
Life is not about profound meanings
or undiscovered secrets,
or the kindness of strangers.
No! It's sensible shoes,
comfort food and the Mall.
That's it. The Mall.*

The savvy shoppers

It's a dull, dead night in Menlo.

This will be my last night in town.

I cruise around; say good-bye to the deserted Putt-Putt, the Waffle House, the strip club, the ZAYRE store, the cement plant...

The flip-flop that was in the middle of the downtown intersection is gone but not forgotten.

I'm tooling around the town, wearing a bear suit and working on the last half of the Glenlivet. I feel like a kamikaze that's ready for his first/last big mission, but who really wants to go to go back to his bunkbed and just stay there reading comic books.

No comic books tonight. I'm ready to hit it. Ready for *my* kamikaze mission.

I drive downtown, speed trap coming up.

My car flies by Philby's spot at 80 miles an hour.

But he's sitting there – no doubt three sheets to the wind – and with his face so deep in the cell phone that he doesn't even notice me going by. Damn Angry Birds.

I circle back and drive by him again. No good. Should I stop in the middle of the road right in front of him? Honk? No. That would be too much. Might make him suspicious.

I do have a "Blender" in the trunk. I pass on by him again, driving into a parking lot, to get the Blender out. It's a high-tech cyber weapon that will scramble most any electronic devices that I aim it at. I turn it to a frequency that will specifically disable his radio and cell phone; (but ~~still~~, his car will still start)/

I come up on the speed trap again, barely rolling, lights off, and as I drive by, I hit him with it. I go on down a ways and then come flying back by. I see Philby standing outside the car now, waving his phone up above his head trying to get a signal, and I start laughing.

I honk the horn and now he notices me. And I have my bear head on now. I'm going the wrong direction from what I will need to be going in for my big plan, so down the road, I turn around and come back by him, still flying. I brake hard, screeching right in front of his speed trap as he's scrambling into his car, and I take off flying.

After a while he's catching up with me, and we're burning down the road like two bats out of Hell. He catches up, and then I lose him.

Eventually I turn down into a trailer park.

He follows.

It's cat and mouse.

He comes driving around a corner and I'm sitting there right in front of him leaning out the window... but I'm on the other side of a cyclone fence from him.

In his headlights, he sees a man in a bear suit sitting in a car. I've got a liquor bottle in one hand and a cigarette in the other. I wave at him,

flick the cigarette at him, give him the finger, and take off. He tries to find me, but I make it out of the trailer park and onto the road first.

A bit later, Philby's car pops out onto the road and he chases after me. I would love to have seen his face when he had me in the headlights back there; and I gave him the finger.

I slow down. I let him pull up alongside me. He is motioning and yelling and using his car's loud-speaker to yell at me. I lean towards him, putting my hand to my ear like I'm trying to hear him. He yells and yells. I give him the finger again and take off.

I'm really fucking with him, but it is getting old.

Eventually he has to catch me. It's part of the plan.

We're a good way outside of town. I pretend to run out of gas and coast to a halt on the side of the road. Behind me, Philby's cop car skids to a halt in a spray of gravel.

He jumps out, gets his fucking gun out, and falls prone onto the hood of his car, aiming his service revolver at me with both hands on it. As I step out of my car, I call out to him "You win! I ran out of gas! FUCK! I ran out of fucking gas!" Philby looks kind of astounded and quizzical as he sees the full body bear suit I'm wearing.

"Let me see your face!" he yells.

I take the head of the bear suit off.

"*YOU!*"

I shrug lackadaisically, "Ya got me!"

I'm cuffed and thrown in the back of the squad car. "Shit! I *was* leaving town, just like you said!"

"Drunk 'n' in a bearskin?"

"Yeahhh..." I say in a *what's wrong with that* tone of voice. "So what."

As soon as he shuts the door, I'm already picking the locks on the cuffs. Everything's going according to plan.

As we are coming up on that gravel road going off to the dumping area, I push a button on a remote-control device. In the distance, a great and bright explosion splits the air. Then a whole lot of explosions. The fireworks. I cleaned out the motel's entire stockpile and the show is great.

"Holy shit! What the hell is that!?" Philby exclaims.

There's smoke in the distance, coming up from the explosions.

"Might be a plane crash," I say helpfully. "I dunno, terrorists? ISIS maybe?"

he stops the car abruptly. “Been a lot of strange ISIS activity down south of here. They been pulling shit like this from Coral Gables to St. Augustine lately.” Of course, that’s all bullshit, but Philby’s just the kind of person who would not be informed. He starts back up and makes a hard turn going down the side-road to the dumping area.

We cruise down the dirt road, the car rocking and the gravel crunching. Philby has his gun out and is peering into the darkness all around him ready to shoot any ISIS on sight.

We come up on the smoldering weeds just ahead of us, and Philby gets out to investigate.

“You sit tight now! Stay right there!” he barks at me.

“Don’t leave me here alone! I’m scared!” I slur drunkenly and with my hands behind me as if I’m still cuffed.

“Shut up!”

I make a menacing bear-like face and growl at him.

“Rrrrrawwwrrr!”

He goes off, wandering around in the garbage and the sawgrass with his flashlight looking for clues to terrorists, and I go to work. Every few ticks, I remote-control off another explosion in the distance to keep him occupied.

Finally, he comes back to the car, flustered and shop-worn, dirty from the weeds and the mud. “Damn! Just some damn fireworks! Kids! Some kids with some fireworks.” He slouches sloppily into the driver’s seat. “Ain’t no fuckin’ ISIS,” he says to me.

Only it’s not me in the back seat anymore.

“Fucking kids...” he mutters and drives off.

As he disappears down the road, I emerge from the bushes and stand there proudly relishing a plan well executed. My own car is close by, as the car I drove around in, while wearing the bear suit, was a hot-wired “borrowed” car.

So... as soon as he put me in the car, I picked my cuffs in the backseat – easy, like Houdini. The rabid, raccoon-bit bear? He’s now in Philby’s backseat. Yeah, it took some doing. Last night, I sprung the bear from the petting zoo – got him for \$150. Had to put him to sleep with a couple of injections. Planted the dozing bear in the bushes in the dump area that I led Philby to.

While Philby was off rubbernecking the explosions, I manhandled the groggy bear into the backseat of his squad car (and that took some engineering), then I gave him a couple of shots amphetamines as a wake-up call.

I just figured it would be a nice touch to let the poor, doomed bear enjoy its last dinner in real style and go out in a blaze of glory befitting a great and noble beast.

Lastly, I bugged Philby's squad car with a spy camera, so I could enjoy watching "the last supper" on my cell phone as that drunken ass-hat tries to pull a rabid fucking bear out of his backseat.

Not a bad deal... *\$189 for a bear suit from Amazon Prime overnight. \$150 cash for a rabid bear and cage. \$180 worth of fireworks. Rabid bear devouring a crooked speed-trap cop: PRICELESS!!!*

I can't look away. I watch Philby screaming and howling as he is being torn limb from limb by the bear, watching it all on my hidden camera inside the cab of his car. Ahhhh... modern technology!

I drive off into the wonderful night, laughing out loud. I drain the last drops of Glenlivet and toss the bottle.

I get a text as I get back to my motel room: "*Nice work.*" Then I get a second text: "*You know what you're doing. You're good. Just like me. We should be partners someday.*" And it was signed "*Ricco Delamuerte.*"

Shit, Quickjohn again.

THE END

EPILOGUE

Next day, I'm packing things up.

Catamuso's already gone. He took off in the night, probably on some mission to help some other Traveler clean up an emergency or mess somewhere out there over the rainbow. As usual, he leaves without saying goodbye. As always, a strange bird, that Catamuso.

I listen to my motel room wall hoping Flip-Flop is still there for one last tryst, but I can clearly hear that she's getting nailed (very well BTW) by her magician again. I guess that the new bangs and the sexy walk worked! So, I don't get a chance to say goodbye to her. But as I'm leaving Princess stops by and brings me a foot-long loaf of banana-nut bread that she made herself, special for me.

After she takes off, I sit there with the banana nut bread and a joint thinking about what I've done these last few days. What I have done, what I have learned. Nothing in particular.

Perhaps I have finally graduated from killer to artist with this one. Graduated to fucking artiste'. And my new medium is irony. Perhaps the irony of the "baptism" and the bear scenario for the speed trap "Smokey" is my new trademark? I know that this is not a proper "story", but more of a journal or log of my random and uproarious journey... but perhaps that's my story arc? From the random to the ironic?

As I'm packing up, I notice that the bat is gone now. Princess didn't take it. I had my eye on her and I think she pretty much hated that stinky bat.

No way Catamuso would have taken it. Not without asking me for it. And the cleaning lady hasn't made it to this room yet. I remember seeing it last night, but today its gone.

Very mysterious.

A month later, on one dead, rainy night when I was sitting there, hammered, and lonely in another shitty motel room, I called Tori to chat and maybe talk about old movies or something. I apologized to her about losing the bat. I told

her I was only going to keep it for good luck for a while, and was going to send it back to her, but it just up and disappeared somehow.

She said she didn't know what the fuck I was talking about. She never had a fucking stuffed bat.

"That must have been some other girl, slugger," she said with a slightly surly tone.

I was too perplexed to even respond... so I shrugged and changed the subject.

Interesting.