

Please Evacuate

A gay, partygoing New Yorker unconcerned about the future or the unsustainability of capitalism is hit by a truck and thrust into a straight man's body half a continent away. As Hunter tries to figure out what's happening, he's caught up in another disaster, a wildfire sweeping through a Colorado community, the flames overtaking him and several schoolchildren as they flee.

When he awakens, Hunter finds himself in the body of yet another man, this time in northern Italy, a former missionary about to marry a young Mormon woman. Still piecing together this new reality, and beginning to embrace his latest identity, Hunter fights for his life in a devastating flash flood along with his wife *and* his new husband.

He's an aging worker in drought-stricken Texas, a nurse at an assisted living facility in the direct path of a hurricane, an advocate for the unhoused during a freak Seattle blizzard.

We watch as Hunter is plunged into life after life, finally recognizing the futility of only looking out for #1 and understanding the part he must play in addressing the global climate crisis...if he ever gets another chance.

Praise for Johnny Townsend

In *Zombies for Jesus*, “Townsend isn’t writing satire, but deeply emotional and revealing portraits of people who are, with a few exceptions, quite lovable.”

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

In *Sex among the Saints*, “Townsend writes with a deadpan wit and a supple, realistic prose that’s full of psychological empathy....he takes his protagonists’ moral struggles seriously and invests them with real emotional resonance.”

Kirkus Reviews

Let the Faggots Burn: The Upstairs Lounge Fire is “a gripping account of all the horrors that transpired that night, as well as a respectful remembrance of the victims.”

Terry Firma, Patheos

“Johnny Townsend’s ‘Partying with St. Roch’ [in the anthology *Latter-Gay Saints*] tells a beautiful, haunting tale.”

Kent Brintnall, *Out in Print: Queer Book Reviews*

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Selling the City of Enoch is “sharply intelligent...pleasingly complex...The stories are full of...doubters, but there’s no vindictiveness in these pages; the characters continuously poke holes in Mormonism’s more extravagant absurdities, but they take very little pleasure in doing so....Many of Townsend’s stories...have a provocative edge to them, but this [book] displays a great deal of insight as well...a playful, biting and surprisingly warm collection.”

Kirkus Reviews

Gayrabian Nights is “an allegorical tour de force...a hard-core emotional punch.”

Gay. Guy. Reading and Friends

The Washing of Brains has “A lovely writing style, and each story [is] full of unique, engaging characters...immensely entertaining.”

Rainbow Awards

In *Dead Mankind Walking*, “Townsend writes in an energetic prose that balances crankiness and humor....A rambunctious volume of short, well-crafted essays...”

Kirkus Reviews

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Print ISBN: 978-1-958877-26-5

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-305-6

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, events, and dialogue are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia, U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2022

First Edition

Cover design by Todd Engel

Cover images by Giovanni Muccitelli

2012 specchio delle brame 24x33 acrilico su cartoncino

2015 laguna blu 62x48 acrilico su cartone

Special thanks to Donna Banta
for her editorial assistance

For more of Donna's own work,
please read *Mormon Erotica* and *Seer Stone*.

Johnny Townsend

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Johnny Townsend

Section One: Swept Away

I awoke from a nightmare in which I was drowning and found myself lying next to a naked woman. In the dim light, I could just make out the olive coloring of her skin and her thick, dark hair. The woman's nipples pointed toward the ceiling.

I screamed.

“What!?” The woman beside me sat up with her hand on her bare breasts. I'd never done drag, so I couldn't begin to guess their official size. But they were decidedly large. “What's wrong, honey?”

“Who are you?” I demanded. My eyes darted quickly about the room, the possibility that my dad was somehow behind this flashing insanely through my brain. I could just make out photos in large plastic frames on top of a dresser and a painting of a cow on the far wall. Not a gay man's bedroom.

What kind of folks *did* hang paintings of cows in their bedroom?

“Where am I?”

“Oh, honey!” The woman reached over to caress the side of my head. She had well-manicured nails, belying her

taste in room décor, and her eyebrows were carefully plucked, suggesting a missing isthmus.

Was she trans? A sheet covered potentially useful information.

“Who are you?” I repeated.

“Are you serious?” Her eyes narrowed. “Do we need to get you to the hospital?”

I pulled away from the woman. The nightlight gave off enough of a glow to reveal the worry in her eyes, more suspicious than genuine.

But I’d never gone home with a woman before. Still a virgin at thirty-five as far as that was concerned.

Men, though, I’d awakened beside plenty of times over the past fifteen years. Never enough men, of course, but there were decades left to improve that tally.

The woman reached for me again and this time touched the back of my head. It hurt.

If this was PTSD, it was late in coming. I’d refused grief counseling after Dad’s death.

“You think you have a concussion?” she asked. When I frowned, she returned the look. “You fell and hit your head,” she explained, enunciating carefully, “when we were stepping out of the shower last night.”

“I did?” I asked. “We...we showered together?” Had someone slipped me some LSD?

“Nick, you better not be jerking me around.” The woman’s lips tightened. I wondered if they’d been around my cock earlier. I wondered— “You promised to watch Jamie in the morning so I could do the building inspection.”

“My name’s not Nick.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “For God’s sake, are you role-playing again?” She stole a glance at the clock on the bedside table. “It’s frickin’ 3:00 in the morning.”

“My name’s Hunter,” I said firmly.

“You sure it’s not Peter? ’Cause you’re being a dick. You know I don’t like sex in the middle of the night.”

“I don’t want sex, either,” I told her. I lifted the sheet to see that I was nude, too. How in the world was I going to get out of here?

Wherever here was.

“I want to go home.”

At this, the woman’s frown finally disappeared, replaced by a soft smile. “Little boy lost?” she suggested.

“I’m not little.”

The woman reached for me under the sheet. “You are now but I can change that.”

“Who are you?”

The woman’s smile widened slightly. “Amnesia, huh? We haven’t tried that one yet.” She pulled the sheet up over

her like a cape and straddled me. “Let me see if I can spark some memories.”

Oh, I had memories. Dad giving me monthly testosterone injections starting on my thirteenth birthday. Him groaning every time he’d been forced to introduce me to a friend or acquaintance. “We should never have named you Hunter,” he’d tell me afterward. “But no one wants to name their son Florist or Figure Skater.”

For someone who didn’t like sex in the middle of the night, the naked woman on top of me put in a valiant effort. Given my terror, confusion, and thorough lack of interest, it took a good three minutes before I grew hard and another five before I came.

Afterward, she rolled over and went to sleep. I did, too. Figured this was all a dream, anyway—at least a wet nightmare—and when I woke up later, I’d actually wake up.

I didn’t.

I still seemed to be Nick and still didn’t know this woman’s name, afraid to ask since she’d written off my confusion earlier as a joke. I could hardly start guessing like Jerry Seinfeld had in an old rerun I’d once watched.

“Mulva?”

What if I used to be straight, I wondered, until I bumped my head? What if it was the *other* life I seemed to remember that was the dream? All those visions of dicks... maybe I was a urologist.

And what if the opposite had happened? I didn't think I'd ever been into S&M, but what if I used to be gay and some injury had turned me straight?

Mom had always said she hoped Dad could beat the gay away. I hadn't been charged when I pushed him in front of a gas truck during the last beating he ever gave me. We were on a father-son outing, planning to "rough it" in the woods, but we never reached the state park. When we stopped at a gas station to refuel, he caught me ogling the cashier.

Yikes.

What if *he'd* jumped into another life after I'd killed him and was now beating someone else's kid?

The woman beside me moaned as she slowly awakened. "Can you make sure the kids are up?" she mumbled.

"Sure...sweetie."

"Even Jamie. I know she's sick, but she needs to eat."

First, I headed to the bathroom, en suite so easy to find. I peed before daring to look in the mirror.

That definitely wasn't me. Just urinating a moment earlier had proven that, of course. The head of Nick's dick was larger than mine. Not quite a toadstool, but the instrument would be challenging for some guys to take.

Nick's nose was smaller than my own, almost narrow, his stubble so slight he probably only needed to shave every other day. His hair was straight and sandy, his ears flatter against the side of his head. Nice hair pattern on his chest.

Not bad, I thought, in a dad bod kind of way.

I caressed my right nipple and watched as my penis twitched.

Damn, I kind of wanted to have sex with that guy in the mirror.

Not the first time I realized I was a narcissist.

I slipped through the bedroom, the woman sitting groggily on the edge of the bed, and entered the hallway. Before anyone could catch my ignorance, I started opening doors and peeking inside.

“Rise and shine!”

Three kids. All I could find, at least.

I reached the kitchen first, wondering if I should scramble some eggs. But there weren't any in the fridge. I opened a cabinet and found four types of breakfast cereal. I set them all on the table, along with a stack of bowls and a jug of milk. Anticipating the needs of others wasn't really my forte, but I needed to deflect attention until I could figure out what was going on.

Alien experimentation?

Sometimes, dreams felt real until you woke up, and then you realized instantly how impossible they'd been. I didn't remember ever having a dream this vivid before, but then, who remembered dreams for more than a few minutes? It was impossible to know if they felt this real in the moment.

But I'd learned years ago how to take an active role in my dreams. If I didn't like the way the story was playing out, I would "rewind" the scene and do something different. That all seemed perfectly logical in the dream itself.

So I was a husband and dad for now. But if I was staying home from work today to take care of my sick daughter, perhaps I could give her some alcohol-based cold medicine and tell her to take a nap after everyone else left while I called a plumber or kept an eye out for the mail carrier for some extramarital play.

No point letting a dream go to waste.

As I poured myself some oatmeal crunch, I listened to the sound of the shower in the en suite and light footsteps in the hallway shuffling down to another bathroom. I started chomping on my cereal while trying to reconstruct the events of the previous evening.

Food had never tasted this real in a dream before.

Had it?

I took another bite and chomped some more. Perhaps someone had slipped Rohypnol into my drink last night and this was all a big practical joke. Or revenge for sleeping with someone's husband. A mad scientist's bizarre research project.

I couldn't finish the cereal.

Where were the damn kids?

I licked my spoon dry and struck my head with it several times. Was that a B flat? “Wake up!” I ordered myself out loud.

The last thing I remembered before finding myself in bed with a woman was strutting into a Lamborghini dealership to impress...what was his name?

Jonathan. An attorney I’d met at a professionals bar in Manhattan. We’d gone out a time or two, he had a big dick and a gifted tongue, and I wanted to prove my competitive worth despite my smaller dick.

Slightly smaller.

“You live in Chelsea and you want to buy a gas guzzler like that?”

I wasn’t sure what kind of law Jonathan specialized in. When he started talking about environmental justice, my eyes glazed over.

“We could zip up to the Hamptons,” I said. “Or spend a weekend in Montreal.”

“We could take a train,” he countered, “or rent a more reasonable car.”

The conversation had deteriorated quickly after that. Jonathan began acting all holier-than-thou and I decided I could find a guy with an even bigger dick and more gifted tongue if I started cruising around in a Lamborghini. I’d just been promoted, after all, my new office providing a great view of the Hudson. No reason not to live life to the fullest.

It was time to trade in my Jag anyway.

The last thing I remembered was giving Jonathan the finger as I pulled onto 11th, leaving him to find his own way home.

No.

The last thing I remembered was hearing a horn blaring in my ear and turning to see a tanker truck bearing down on the passenger side of the car.

A girl wandered into the kitchen wearing pajamas covered with yellow butterflies. She looked to be about six. Or four. Maybe seven.

“Morning, pumpkin.”

She frowned and sat at the far end of the table, pouring herself some cereal and milk.

Probably not four.

Only a moment later, two other kids stumbled into the kitchen, a boy about ten and another girl, maybe eight?

“Hey.” I nodded a greeting.

I had a wife and three kids. God was real and I was in hell.

The boy and the older girl started fighting over one of the cereal boxes. “Stop it, Juniper!” the boy called out.

“You stop, Jaren! You finished the box last time.”

“Juniper!”

Eternal damnation. Of all things for my dad to be right about.

“Jaren!”

“Oh. My. God,” I said, and something in my tone made the kids stop and turn toward me. “Did your parents really name you that?”

Juniper pursed her lips just as her mother had a few hours earlier, and the two older children exchanged a look. The younger girl, Jamie, I supposed, seemed oblivious, fishing for one of the multi-colored globs floating in her bowl.

“Mrs. Howell said we should turn our parents in if they use drugs,” Jaren announced, apropos of nothing.

“Mrs. Howell probably needs to get laid,” I told him.

All three kids stared at me, though they were too young to understand what I’d said. My subconscious was making them more sophisticated than real kids.

But this all *felt* real. What if some metaphysical something-or-other had done this? No one in their right mind would believe me. I’d be locked up and put in a straitjacket.

I was Jennifer Love Hewitt explaining to someone in every episode of *Ghost Whisperer* why they needed to believe the unbelievable.

Only the person I needed to convince of the truth was *me*.

My heart began beating faster and a drop of sweat trickled down my left temple. I heard footsteps approaching and wondered how I was going to keep up this charade. Perhaps it didn't matter if the woman called someone to cart me off to an institution. I was clearly delusional.

But first, goddammit, I was going to have a meal with my family.

I'd always eaten breakfast alone growing up, even when my parents were at the table. They'd have bacon and eggs, maybe some buttered toast, while I was handed an off-brand Pop-Tart. It wasn't that Mom was negligent. She genuinely believed I preferred the dry pastry.

I think.

Dinner, though, that was different. Mom always prepared enough of the good stuff—roast beef with carrots and potatoes, steak and corn on the cob—while also preparing punishment food, usually a can of potted meat, just for me in case she or Dad caught me doing something unmanly before dinner.

Like reading a book. Or listening to the Backstreet Boys.

“Good morning!” my wife said in a faux cheerful tone as she walked into the kitchen. Her half-closed eyelids suggested the shower hadn't been as successful as she'd hoped, but she was still alert enough to see that Jaren and Juniper were both clutching the same box.

“If there’s not enough,” the woman said, “just mix in some other cereal. It’ll make a new flavor. Be adventurous. It’s the only way to get ahead in life.”

Jaren groaned and released his hold on the box. Juniper ripped it away victoriously and poured the last of the contents into her bowl, so much there was hardly any room left for milk.

The woman began asking the kids what their upcoming day at school looked like, and I retreated from the conversation. I could hardly start calling her “Mother” like a dad in a 1950s sit-com. Perhaps when everyone was gone, I’d have a chance to find some addressed mail, a passport maybe. Look up the news online to see what day it was. Call someone.

Not Jonathan.

Jamie sneezed, spraying the table with milk.

“Gross!” Jaren shouted.

“You’re such a baby,” Juniper told her sister.

“Be nice,” the woman said, grabbing a paper towel from the counter and wiping Jamie’s face and then the table. “She’s sick. Your dad’ll be staying home to watch her.”

Damn. How long was this dream going to last?

I knew it wasn’t a dream.

Or it was and it wasn't, like Captain Picard's experience in "The Inner Light," when he witnesses the last days of a world whose sun is dying.

Jamie didn't even seem all that sick. Probably just trying to get out of school.

Or kindergarten. I still didn't know how old she was.

Even if I hadn't been gay, I wouldn't have had any kids. No way I was wasting my youth and my money and my (natural!) testosterone worrying about someone else's future. I had my own now to concentrate on—Halloween in San Francisco, Mardi Gras in Sydney, Southern Decadence in New Orleans.

"Won't you, Nick?" I heard someone say and slowly began noticing again the other people at the table.

I looked at the woman sitting across from me.

"Won't you?" she repeated.

"Um..."

"You will look up some more memory exercises we can try tonight?" she asked.

"Absolutely," I said.

The woman smiled and gave me a wink.

Perhaps this was only Purgatory.

Soon, breakfast was over, the woman was out the door on her way to work, and I still didn't know her name. Jaren

and Jupiter followed soon after, heading to the corner where the school bus would pick them up. We were apparently in suburbia.

Hell. Definitely hell.

I was about to turn on the TV when Jamie held up a hand. “Mom’ll be mad if you don’t put the dishes in the dishwasher.”

Surely, whatever this was couldn’t drag through the whole day, but just in case, I did as Jamie directed while she sat at the table and observed. She didn’t cough or sneeze once.

“Are you really sick?” I asked. “Or was someone mean to you at school?”

Uh-oh. I forgot I didn’t know if she was even in school yet.

The girl remained silent, and I was afraid I’d been caught.

“Jamie?”

“Mrs. Forster keeps making me stand in the corner with my nose against the wall.”

“Excuse me?” I stopped and turned to look at her. What *year* was this, anyway? The kitchen appliances looked reasonably contemporary. “Whatever for?”

Jamie shrugged. “I don’t think she likes when people have more than two kids.”

My mouth fell open.

“I’ll have a talk with Mrs. Forster,” I said.

I wouldn’t really. I wouldn’t be here that long. But the promise needed to be made.

Then again, what did I care about this girl I didn’t even know? I closed my eyes.

It wasn’t *fair* for adults to ruin a child’s life.

“What would you like to do today, pumpkin?”

We watched a couple of movies. *Encanto* and *Up*. When Jamie fell asleep on the sofa next to me, I brushed the hair off her forehead and realized she did feel warm. Maybe she *was* sick.

I turned the volume down on the TV and switched to cable to watch some news and get my bearings. The local channels seemed to be centered in Denver.

I’d never bothered to visit this town before.

The Antarctic was 70 degrees warmer than usual for this time of year, the Arctic 60 degrees warmer. A car bomb had exploded in Afghanistan. Lawmakers in Idaho were trying to put parents of trans kids in prison. Oil prices in the U.S. were lower this week but gas prices were higher. Thirteen people had drowned in a subway in China.

My head hurt. I touched the back of my head and winced.

Everyone had seen enough science fiction shows to “believe” weird crap was possible. *Stranger Things*, *Quantum Leap*, *Dr. Who*. No one believed a fairy tale like “Jack and the Beanstalk,” but some of these other scenarios we kept in the part of our brain reserved for “Not really but maybe. Who knows? Why not? No way.”

Perhaps I’d ruptured a blood vessel in that part of my brain and damaged it.

A loud honking screech blared out of the television in repeated bursts. Jamie stirred beside me and slowly sat up. A newscaster appeared off to one side of the screen while the other two thirds showed an aerial view of a massive wildfire sweeping toward a street lined with new construction. A few of the buildings looked freshly completed, with new sod in rectangles and signs posted near the sidewalk. Smoke billowed high into the air.

Three tiny figures ran out of one of the finished houses, the camera zooming in while one of the figures jumped into a car. Jamie stiffened beside me.

“That’s Mom!” she shouted.

I honestly couldn’t recognize the figure in all the commotion, and I hadn’t watched this morning to see what she was driving. Jamie was probably just assuming the worst. It certainly didn’t look good for whoever those people were. Some of the new construction was now burning, the flames jumping and spreading fast. Smoke crossed the road in both directions. We watched as the

woman took off and disappeared into the blackness. The roof of the house she'd exited only moments before caught fire.

“Officials have issued an evacuation order for residents on the west side of Superior. The wildfire is heading toward the McCaslin Boulevard/Coalton Road area.”

“Is that anywhere near us, pumpkin?” I asked quietly.

Jamie looked up at me and shrugged, turning back to stare at the images on the television. I stood and nonchalantly headed to the kitchen for a glass of water, really searching for a cell phone. Jamie's mother would have hers with her, so anything left here would be Nick's.

Yep, there it was, recharging on the counter. I picked it up and turned it on.

Locked.

But it used facial recognition, thank God, and not a pin.

I casually looked out the front window to read the address on the house across the street.

“What street do we live on, pumpkin?” No way to ask that without sounding like an idiot, but I could see smoke from here. It didn't look far away.

This was a suburb, for God's sake, not some rural mining town in the mountains. Folks from the three houses I could see through our front window were throwing a few things into their cars and taking off.

I scrolled through Nick's contacts but didn't know which of the female names was his wife's.

Why wasn't *she* calling?

"They're evacuating the schools!" Jamie squealed from the sofa. "Daddy! What's going to happen to Juniper and Jaren?"

What kind of hell had I found myself in?

"What's the name of your school?" I asked. All three kids must still attend the same one.

"John Moore." She stood in front of the television, leaning forward and staring.

I couldn't find a school with that name but tried "Jon" instead. Nothing. Then "John M." And suddenly "John Muir" popped up. "You know how to get there from here, pumpkin?"

Jamie shook her head. I'd use GPS.

"Get dressed," I said quietly. "We're going to get your brother and sister." I tried to figure out where Nick might keep his keys and found them next to his wallet in a little nook near the entrance to the laundry room.

There were shouts outside, the sound of tires squealing. By the time we pulled onto the street, traffic was thick but moving.

Too bad this guy didn't have a faster car. It didn't *have* to be a Lamborghini. An Alfa Romeo would do.

"In 500 feet, turn left," a voice on Nick's phone told me. Almost half the sky was black, and the voice was leading me toward the worst of it.

Would it be wrong to just drive away? Even if this was all a bad dream, I'd heard that if you died in your dream, you really did die. Of course, how could there ever have been a study to prove that?

It took almost ten minutes on the increasingly clogged roads to approach the school. Two dozen cars were lined up in front, with parents standing beside open doors and waving at the crowds streaming from the building. A few buses were in the school bus driveway and teachers and staff were running toward their cars in the parking lot.

Several of the teachers ushered small children to hurry along with them. Two middle-aged women wearing orange vests over their regular clothing pushed kids into buses. A handful of parents found their kids and floored their gas pedals getting away.

It was a miracle no one was run over.

There was no such thing as miracles.

"Jaren!" Jamie called out her window. "Juniper!" No one could possibly hear in the midst of all the shouting and yelling and crackling and creaking and groaning. The wind

had picked up and roared all around us. Hot embers flew high overhead.

Could I even remember what the kids looked like? I'd only seen them a few minutes this morning.

I looked over my shoulder and saw several homes burning a block back. Up ahead, a single home was ablaze.

The roof of the gymnasium caught fire. Parents honked their horns and screamed.

“Makisha!”

“Terry!”

“Christopher!”

“Baran!”

Every year, I heard about things like this. Paradise going up in flames. Lytton. Pine City. Gatlinburg. All places no one important lived. And those people knew what risks they were taking when they moved there. Like the idiots who lived in basement apartments that got flooded. Like the morons who lived in avalanche country.

I stepped out of my car. “Just grab a kid and go!” I shouted. But parents wouldn't leave without their own.

What, after all, did I understand about family ties? I didn't even send my mom Christmas cards.

She didn't send me any, either.

I needed to leave with Jamie before we both died. But only a moment later another man shouted from the car behind me. “Fill your car with whatever kids you can and we’ll get yours!”

A mother in front repeated the call, and soon we formed a bucket brigade, people tossing random children into cars and screeching off.

Homes were burning all around us. The main school building erupted into flames. Kids still wearing heavy backpacks began running down the street, no longer waiting for vehicles. The last school bus was near the end of the block. What looked like a young boy hanging onto the door fell into the street.

This couldn’t be happening, I told myself for the thousandth time today, pushing a kid into the front seat of Nick’s car. This couldn’t be happening. How could this be happening? I just wanted to go back to my condo in Chelsea. Kick back with some weed and watch a fun movie. *The Hunger Games. The Day After Tomorrow.*

Jonathan had looked a bit like Jake Gyllenhaal.

Was he a witch? A demon? A devil? Who had put me in this nightmare of a life?

Maybe I was in a coma.

The heat was blistering. I could feel my eyes drying out. Tiny embers no larger than grains of sand pelted us like burning needles.

Jamie screamed.

I grabbed four more kids and crammed them in the back seat next to my daughter, slamming my door and pulling away. The smoke was now so dense I couldn't be sure I wasn't about to run over some other kid. I could see flames on both sides of the street, glowing through the thickening smoke.

“Don't let me die, Daddy!” Jamie shouted, her voice muffled as she shrunk onto the floor. I hoped her mother, whatever her name, was okay. The other kids breathed heavily but said nothing.

The car in front of me stopped, engulfed in flames. Two people staggered out, burning, and collapsed.

“Everyone down!” I shouted.

There were no atheists in foxholes, I remembered, but I still didn't believe in God. What kind of god would allow such a massacre?

And I was no savior, that was for sure.

In the rearview mirror, I saw the street behind me explode into flames. I steered to the side of the car blocking me, ran over a burning, writhing body, and gunned the engine, driving as fast as I could into more of the thick black smoke.