

Eternity's Grasp

By

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CHAPTER 1

The first time I thought of it was on a Wednesday. I remember it well because it was the day I almost hit the Superfecta. Ak-Sar-Ben only ran the Superfecta on Wednesdays and Saturdays. There was a freak snowstorm that day. Nothing heavy. It didn't stick to the ground. Driving home from the track, I thought about the eighth race. The Four horse got in the way and edged out the Three. It was a photo finish. The favorite, Dream Tango, number Three, hugged the rail. The small, shivering crowd of spectators screamed to the horse and driver, "GO DREAM TANGO, GO!"

I'd swear that their wheels touched in the third turn. Larry thought so too. But there were no objections, merely a photo finish, and Hershey's Kiss won by the hair of her nose. The Superfecta paid twelve-thousand-one-hundred-forty bucks. I had the victors of the previous three races on my ticket. All I needed was Dream Tango to win.

But she didn't.

Nor did I.

I was bitter, hating the cold gray world around me. I chain-smoked about ten cigarettes in a row. Everything bothered me. I cursed the world. "Fucking traffic . . . fucking snow . . . fucking red light . . . fucking jogger."

Out in the middle of a white out, there was a jogger, dressed in white, no less, and running against traffic, I almost hit him. After driving by, I wished that I had. "Would have served the bastard right for being out there in the first place," I muttered. "What kind of an idiot jogs, to begin with? Don't they have anything better to do? It's Wednesday afternoon, damn it. How come that guy's not at work?"

I had never understood jogging. Why would somebody want to do it? It didn't make sense to run away from your house only to return sweaty and tired. You dodged traffic and dogs. You completely ruined your lower legs with shin splints and destroyed your spine with the jolt of every hard step against the pavement. Yet a jogger would argue that it was healthy: you'd have a strong heart was what they said. A lot of good that does if you can't walk.

I don't buy that strong heart stuff for a minute.

There was that guy who wrote a book about running. He ran every day. Then one day, he died of a heart attack while jogging less than a block from his home. He was only forty years old. I'll bet people stopped buying that book.

My mind does wander. I don't know why I let things like that bother me. They should not. A man running for his own health and well-being has no bearing on my life in any way.

Not much of anything has a bearing on my life. I may not have known that then as I do now. Self-preservation was all I knew. Not in any life and death terms. It was simply financial, and I was nowhere near death. Not even close. Not as close to it as others I had met over the years. Some people just seemed to die right after I got to know them a little bit. Sometimes it made me depressed, then at the same time, thrilled to be alive.

I guess you had to be there.

The rest of that week, I was quite depressed. I didn't go to the track again until Saturday. I wanted that Superfecta. It didn't happen for me, though. I missed the winner of the fifth race, not to mention the other three. Larry had the winner of the seventh race. I saw him just before the eighth.

"Larry," I called to him.

He looked up and smiled.

“How’d you do?” I asked.

“I won.”

“Did ya hit big?”

“Had the eight. He won. Paid four-twenty.”

“So what did you have on it?”

“Two bucks.”

“That’s it? You win two dollars and twenty cents, and you look like you hit the jackpot?” I laughed at him.

Larry laughed with me. “I can buy a bag of peanuts now.”

We walked to the mezzanine window together.

“Where have you been lately?” Larry asked. “Find a job?”

“Hell no.”

“Good. Wouldn’t want a decline in workmanship. Moe was around here earlier. I don’t know where he went,” he said.

I watched the horses warming up in the backstretch through my binoculars. “What did he have to say?”

“Nothing. I didn’t talk to him. Had to get to the window before post time.”

“A gambler’s work is never fun.”

The Four looked good. Her sleek black body glistened under the lights of the track. Snow began falling again. The filly trotted briskly through the flakes as they melted into the turf, not sticking.

There was a lot of dusty snow that winter. It is beautiful to watch snow, especially at a racetrack, the light twinkling on each delicate flake. Looking up to the roof of the grandstand, it

appeared as if men were up there, just tossing bagfuls of it down. Somehow my binoculars lost track of the horses and drivers in the backstretch and found their way to the edge of the roof of the grandstand, watching the flurry pour over the edge.

Larry said, "What are you looking at?"

"The snow."

He stared up at it with me.

I didn't have any hits that night. One week before Christmas and I was broke. Rather, I felt broke. I only had fifty bucks on me, but there was plenty of money in the bank. Still, I hadn't made a deposit in nearly three weeks. Such is the life of a professional gambler. You win some, you lose some. You put money into the bank, and you pull money back out. You are just a conduit for money as if it had a mind of its own. Money is completely inanimate, a construct devoid of personal agenda, yet it controls the entire world. We work for it, aspire to have it, and yearn for it when we do not.

The comfort of money should be irrational because it is intangible. You can have money in the bank, and it can get you things, yet money on its own does nothing. Having it, though, that is what means something. The feeling of security it delivers comes naturally. I don't like walking around with less than five hundred in cash, yet making withdrawals to get it abhors me. I feel like I am ripping the flesh off a pig that is being devoured and will soon be gone, so I must keep stuffing the pig to make sure it keeps growing. So there will always be meat. That is what we all do. We keep stuffing the pig, leaving behind more than we consume. It is why bankers love us.

Christmas was coming, not that it mattered. I didn't celebrate the holiday much anyway. But if I went out to shop for something, even if it was just for me, I didn't want to have to go to

the bank to get the money. I just liked having my pockets full, so I could do what I wanted, when I liked. Dropping below one hundred dollars made me a grouch.

I found myself exploring more and more of Omaha those days. Though I had lived there for over forty years, my entire life, I had only in those past few months begun expanding my horizons to newer haunts. Places where I was a stranger, instead of the familiar being that people recognize and trusted for one reason or another. I liked being a stranger. Being unknown was preferable in so many ways. You get the occasional odd look, but for the most part, it was preferable to being recognized and expected to speak and carry on a dull and pointless conversation.

So many are compelled to speak when they see somebody they know. I can't say why. There are regular people, all of them really, who know me at the track. I am a fixture there. Anyone who does not know me from the track is a stranger there themselves.

Throughout the program, I got nods and waves from fellows and old ladies who had rubbed shoulders with me at one time or another over the years. If anyone were asked where I lived, the likely answer would be "*the clubhouse.*"

Some names I recall. Some I don't. But I did know everyone by sight. If they had been around for over a year, we likely had at least one brief conversation, typically relating to the horses, a race at hand, or some odd incident that stirs gossip. Never any real conversation. I try to avoid that.

I was getting tired of the track. I knew it inside out. I could walk through the paddock any time I cared to. Every cop on the beat watched out for me when I cashed tickets. The shoe shine kids knew they could count on me for fifty cents almost every day. The bartenders poured for me before I sat down. All that attention gets nerve-racking after a while.

On my way home, I stopped at a bar I had never been to before. It was quiet and brightly lit. There were only three other people in the bar besides myself. Two women were talking to the barmaid.

I sat at the opposite end of the bar. I knew they were talking about me. I could tell. I just couldn't decide whether what they said was good or bad. They took snooty, quick turns peering over at me. They were fair and pretty young girls. Most likely college students, the school was close by.

Watching them, I sucked down my beer quickly and called for another. I didn't know why, but the bar seemed to get hot. Hotter than it was when I first walked in. The girls laughed hysterically — some private joke, I was sure. From the way they were laughing I was sure it was about me. But probably not.

I pictured myself, in a fantastic way, going over to them and screaming, "What are you laughing at? Why am I so funny? Can't a guy just sit down and have a nice quiet drink without being bothered? What's the matter with you?"

Then I realized what I was thinking and shook myself to reality. They were not laughing at me at all, and my presence probably had not even entered their conversation. I left without finishing my beer because I had had enough, and the cross pollination of thoughts between those girls laughing and not seeing me is what got me miffed.

There are times of crystal clarity when you know you are invisible. When the world goes on about you and you know they see you, but nobody notices. Nobody would be able to say what I was wearing or whom I resemble or whether I wore glasses or a hat.

Most would say they never noticed me at all.

Sometimes, time seems to stand still. Not so much a memory, but a memory of a time I knew exactly what I was thinking. When I hear a song, I remember where I was the first time I heard it. Or, when I drive through a particular intersection, I recall a song I heard when I stopped at the light there. I wonder if other people remember things the same way.

I can remember things my mother told me years ago, and for no particular reason, the images come into my brain with perfect precision. What is odd about these memories is that I don't try to recall them. They just come. Like a welcomed visitor whom you know well, but why are they there? Are they friends?

Not all visions or memories are the best. They are not all ones you want to recall. Some are bothersome. Not that I want to forget; I don't. I just don't know why I think of some things when I do.

When I got back inside my car, I thought about my half-empty beer sitting on the bar. *Maybe I should go back and finish it.* Then I decided not to and drove home.

Once at home, I watched the Iowa lottery results on TV and I didn't have any of the winning numbers. Not one damn number.

I went to bed, laid back, and thought about my losses. The last time I had won anything was a few days before Thanksgiving. *So that means I've had a month-long losing streak.*

I knew there was only forty-five dollars in my wallet. So that means – what? Two withdrawals? I've lost fourteen-hundred-fifty-five dollars in the past thirty days. Maybe a little less when you consider groceries and toothpaste.

I dozed off counting.

In the morning, I drove to the corner store for a loaf of bread and a newspaper. It was cold and frosty, about nine o'clock. I was still feeling pretty lousy. The thoughts of my losses would

not leave me. It was going to be another one of *those days*. One of those days when every little piss-ant thing in the world got on your nerves.

Driving to the store, the sun was in my eyes. It truly disturbed me. The road was icy, and I couldn't drive as fast as I wanted to. Not that there is any need to drive fast, the speed limit is twenty-five, and I certainly had nowhere to rush to. There was no gambling on Sunday.

Then the radio station wouldn't come in clear. They were playing some Neil Diamond song I really wanted to hear. I tried tuning it in but only lost it. "Aww, damn."

Then there was a jogger. Another stinking jogger out for his health. He was on my side of the road heading toward me. He waved.

"Fuck off." I said. "I ought to run you over is what I should do." But I drove right past him.

At the store, I treated myself to a couple custard Bismarcks. They looked good, and as I drove away, I chomped down on what I thought would be a fluffy pastry, but it was stale. Great. I hate stale doughnuts. Then I realized I had forgotten the newspaper. "Damn. Can't I do anything right?"

I was halfway home and decided not to turn around, lamenting about the newspaper, "It's probably all bad news anyway."

Then I saw the jogger again. He must have reached his turnaround point. He was on my side of the road heading toward me. Again. "If you wave at me this time, I'll mow your ass down," I whispered.

He waved. The bastard waved. With one quick jerk of the steering wheel, my right front fender caught him. It happened swiftly, but whenever I recall it, it plays back in slow motion in my mind.

His body spun against my fender, and his arm hit the windshield. His face smacked into the window, his lip and teeth broke, leaving behind a smudge of spit and blood. His brown eyes were ablaze with utter horror and disbelief. He looked at me. Our eyes met. Then he disappeared, and I felt the rear tire drive over him as if he were a large rock in the road.

I straightened out the swerving car and slowed down on the icy pavement. I looked in the rearview mirror. Behind me, lay the body of a man who waved cheerfully to me on a bright Sunday morning.

It took a moment to realize what I had done. I stopped the car. I didn't get out, but I looked back in the mirror. He was not moving. I looked around. The road was deserted. No houses. No other traffic. Who would know? Tire tracks? Snow was not fresh enough.

Don't go home. Just in case.

I could see my house up ahead. I drove right past it, wondering what I should do. *I should go and get a newspaper. I took a deep breath. That's what I came out for to begin with, right? Wait. I have to get off this street. If there's any oncoming traffic and they remember my car and find the body in the road, I'm doomed. I have to make it to 6th Street. I have to make it to 6th Street before there's any other traffic. It's what? A mile? Have to get there, but don't speed.*

I began sweating.

Don't speed. Don't lose your cool, Paul. It was just a jogger, just a jogger. Just like a chipmunk. He got in the way. That's all. He's just like a chipmunk. People won't miss him for long. They'll never know it was you. You won't even be a suspect. You just need to make it to 6th Street.

Yes, 6th Street. It loomed in the distance like the savior land to a lost sailor. Only half a mile now. It was getting closer. *No traffic. No traffic. Please don't let there be traffic. I'll turn the corner fast and disappear. I'll just drive around for a while.*

Then I reached 6th Street and turned the corner. I headed toward Papillion, a suburb of Omaha. After driving another mile, I realized there was traffic all around me. I was just another car on the road. I blended in. Nobody saw me, or what I did. I was free, in the clear. This made me feel better, much better.

A sigh of relief came over me, and I smiled, but only briefly. I was thinking about what the front end of my car would look like when I finally got out to inspect it.

Up ahead was a Mini-Mart. I decided to stop there and get a paper. I backed into a spot, something I rarely do, and walked around the edge to look at the window and door. I wiped the blood and spit off with my doughnut napkin and shoved it in my pocket.

When I walked in, the grocer looked at me and we greeted each other with a cheerful “Good morning.”

I waltzed through the store and bought more than I had intended: orange juice, a package of croissants, a chocolate bar, and of course, the newspaper.

When I took my goods to the counter, the grocer was talking with the customer before me. They apparently knew each other. I wasn't really paying particular attention to the conversation, but it was about somebody's operation. I would probably never have thought about it again if the grocer didn't ask his friend, “Did he live?”

“Oh yeah, he lived. He's living back with his sister now, in Fremont.”

Did he live? Those words rang in my ears for the rest of the morning.

What if the jogger wasn't dead? What if he got up and stumbled over to my neighbor's house and told them what kind of car it was? Jaguar XJ6. Midnight blue. Wire wheel covers. I may have been the only person in Omaha with a car like this. I knew I was the only one on my street.

What will I do? What will I tell the police when they come knocking on my door? Do I deny it? Do I say, "He's crazy. I didn't run him over. You've got the wrong man."

No. I would lose. They would convict me and put me behind bars.

No. I'd say I lost control of the car on the ice, and I hit him accidentally. I'd say that I was too scared to face the consequences and throw myself at the mercy of the court. A judge would believe that. If so, he might even feel sorry for me and give me a light sentence. Or probation.

I got into my car with my newspaper and bag of treats and thought about what I should do. Turning myself in crossed my mind. Spending a good deal of time in prison crossed my mind as well. I decided not to turn myself in. The thought of living in exile was worse than the thought of living with guilt. I decided never to tell anyone. It would be my secret.

What about my car? Was it dented? I cleaned the window, but I had to double-check. But I couldn't just pull over and look at my passenger side. That would be suspicious. What if a policeman drove by and saw me inspecting my car for dents, scratches, and blood? "What seems to be the trouble, sir?"

"Oh, nothing, officer. Seems a jogger got in my way this morning. I killed him, but at least my car isn't dented."

"Well, glad to hear it. You have a good day now, sir."

"You too, officer."

Right. As if that would really happen.

It's amazing what goes through your mind after murdering somebody. Murder. Was it really? It's not as if I planned it far in advance. It was more of a spur-of-the-moment type of thing. It was whimsical. I did it because I felt like it. I didn't want to do it. I just did. Then, the more I thought about it, the more I enjoyed it. It frightened me at first, but then I began to accept it, just like a hit at the track. It felt better when I dwelled on it.

CHAPTER 2

The next day I treated myself to a steak and egg breakfast at the diner. Orange juice. Coffee. Toast. It was good. I read the morning paper. On the lower left of the front page, there was a small article. The headline read: “Jogger killed in hit-and-run.” I read the article with a great deal of curiosity to find out how much they knew.

LA VISTA – Resident George Harris was killed yesterday in an apparent hit-and-run accident while jogging down 72nd Avenue. Harris, 36, was reported dead on arrival at Bergen Hospital at 10:27 AM.

Police report no witnesses to the accident. Harris’ neighbor, Nadine Taylor, was also jogging when she discovered him lying in the road. The coroner reports that Harris may have laid in the road for as long as 45 minutes before being found by Taylor. Harris was still alive when Taylor found him, but unconscious. Police have no clues in the case. Anyone with information pertaining to the accident should contact the Douglas County Sheriff’s Department immediately.

Sure, why don’t I save them a lot of trouble and turn myself in? Because I’m not stupid, that’s why. Only a complete imbecile would admit to having killed someone.

I glanced over the article again. No witnesses. Dead on arrival. This relaxed me. I took a big sip of my coffee. I had absolutely nothing to worry about. Not even Nadine Taylor would suspect me.

Nadine is my next-door neighbor. Her mailbox is out on the road next to mine. Sometimes we see each other there and say “Hello”.

I felt bad for her. Poor Nadine, first on the scene, having to deal with that. What if they come and talk to me next? What would I say?

I would say that I know nothing about it. Not a thing.

Turning to the sports page for the racing picks I found the hunch I had been waiting for. The handicapper chose him as the winner for the first race. There, in bold print, striking me with the surety of a winner was the Seven horse, Sudden Death. If that's not an omen I didn't know what was.

He was the favorite in the first race, going off at four to one. The odds would drop, however, but not much in the first race. Before heading for the track, I went to the bank and made a \$1000 withdrawal. It was necessary since I was down to my last thirty bucks. I intended to bet heavy on Sudden Death.

It was Christmas Eve, and the track was fast. The wind was calm, and it was about twenty degrees fahrenheit. I checked over my program to see what the other horses were like. Every indication pointed toward Sudden Death. I bet all my money, one-thousand-thirty-two dollars, to win. I did it the smart way. I went around to all the Fifty Dollar ticket windows and bet two-hundred at a time. This way, they didn't keep track of you, and the IRS staff, crawling all over the track didn't notice when you cashed out.

I never cash all my tickets at the same window anyway. No sense letting everybody know how much money I have.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaand...theeeey'rrrrre off!”

The pace car pulled in the gate and drove ahead of the horses and buggies. Sudden Death pulled right out in front, leading the pack by at least four lengths. They strolled around the first turn and lined up like reindeer pulling an invisible sleigh. Their gaits were perfectly synchronized. They pulled out of the second turn and into the backstretch.

Sudden Death was more than six lengths ahead of the pack. Going into the third and

fourth turn they lagged behind even more. By the time they were in the homestretch Sudden Death was more than ten lengths ahead when he broke stride. Only a furlong to go and he broke. They were gaining on him. My heart dropped. “No,” I whispered.

There were horses all around him as he crossed the finish line, but he still won by a head.

PHOTO FINISH flashed on the odds board.

What? Photo finish? No. It was obvious. Sudden Death broke and everybody saw it. A horse breaking stride is an automatic disqualification.

How could they call it a photo finish? What was going on here?

But, rules do not always apply to races where the winner is predetermined by corrupt officials. Races can be fixed, and sometimes it happens in your favor.

The odds board proved it. 7 – 4 – 2 OFFICIAL. The crowd erupted in cheers and jeers. The race was fixed, but nothing would be done about it.

Sudden Death paid better than I thought he would. He went off at two-to-one and paid six-dollars-eighty-cents to win. I calculated quickly. That paid me something like thirty-five-hundred dollars, meaning I made about twenty-five-hundred, which actually meant I broke even over the last month. I didn't jump up and down and scream or kiss anybody. I didn't go crazy when I won. I have a great deal of self-control. I just grinned and went to cash my tickets.

Yes, it was a very good Christmas indeed. I had recouped my losses for the past month and the world had one less jogger to deal with. I was feeling quite proud of myself.

Larry spotted me in the clubhouse bar. “Shylock.”

“Larry. You want a drink?” I asked. Larry's given name was Alan Saylor, but just as people called me Shylock, most everyone called him Larry. I don't know how Alan ever became

known as Larry, he just did. Depending on my mood, or however my brain works when it comes to names, I would sometimes call him Al. Just like he would sometimes call me Paul. Everybody at the track had a nickname and if you did not know someones given name, you would use their adopted moniker.

“Are you buying?”

“Well you can pay me back if you want.”

“Seven-Up.” Larry told the bartender.

“Al, why don’t you ever have a real drink?”

“Seven-Up is a real drink.”

“No, I mean something with alcohol in it.”

“You know I never touch the stuff before the eighth race.”

“I never see you touch the stuff at all.”

“Sure you have. Remember the time you gave me that cognac?”

“When?”

“The time I puked up all over your shoes?”

“Is that why you puked on my shoes?”

“Yes.”

“Damn. And I thought it was because you were sick.”

“I was sick.”

“From what?”

“The cognac.”

“How the hell can cognac make you sick?”

Larry changed the subject. “Who’d you have in the first?”

“Sudden Death. Who’d you have?”

“I would have had it but I got here late. What did it pay?”

“Six-eighty. Had thirty bucks on it.” I sipped my scotch, smiling.

“No shit.” Larry finally sat down. “That’s great.” After a short pause he said, “Hey Paul?”

“Hmm?”

“Will you buy me a bag of peanuts?”

I smirked. “Peanuts.” I told the bartender and raised my binoculars to look at the horses.

I did not want to tell him how much money I really had. I deal with people on a need to know basis. If you don’t need to know, I see no need to tell you, and I don’t care who you are.

There was no need to tell Larry that I had three grand in my pocket. He knew I had at least a hundred, and that was all he needed to know. If he needed to borrow ten or twenty, I could accommodate him. I just didn’t need somebody to think I can start passing out C-notes.

My entire life has been spent at Mid-Western tracks. I know them all. I know what kind of people to expect. I’m a pretty good judge of character. I’m forty-two years old, and I haven’t held a job since I was twenty-six. The track has taken care of me. It has bought me my house, my car, my clothes, and my food for the last two decades. But I don’t feel as if I owe the track anything. That is probably why I get so upset when I lose. So much of my time and effort in handicapping each race and paying strict attention to every little remark on the scratch sheet has gone into the track, and now I can’t help but feel that I am owed. Some people would call that a bad attitude to have; that the world owes me a living. But I never said that. I said the track owes me.

Moe owed me too. Ten bucks. *Here he comes now.*

He spotted us sitting in the bar.

Moe and Larry were my best friends at the track. Now that I think about it, they were my best friends, period. I did not seek them out. We just ended up this way. We always seemed to be standing in the same spots when we watched races, and that was all there was to it. I liked Larry because he was funny, and Moe because I thought he was cool. I never knew any other black guys, but when I would see them around, or on TV, to me, black guys always came across as cool. They were entertainers, like jazz musicians or singers, or ball players, and always smiling. With no black people in my neighborhood and only knowing them from TV, I developed an affinity for them. I was always happy that Moe came into my life to fill that void. I enjoyed his slack jaw way of talking.

“Big Moe. What do you know?” I called out.

He was smiling, a grin befitting of the Cheshire cat. I knew he won. “Who’d you have?” I sang out.

“You know I done had dat ovatime ho’se, Sudden Death. Numma Seven.”

“What’dja put on it?”

“You know it’s a Merry Chrissmas fo’ Moe, cause I had me fifty dolla’s on the motha’s nose.”

“Whoa,” said Larry.

“Alright, now you can buy *me* a drink.”

“Naw, naw, he’es the ten dolla’s I owe you – you git ya own drink.” He put a ten on the bar. Because of the way it was creased, it spun around like a top.

“Who do you like in the second?” I asked.

“I got Seven-Seven for the daily double,” said Moe.

We spoke for a while longer. Before post time Moe and Larry went to place their bets. I hadn't even looked at the program but put twenty on the Seven since Moe thought it was a safe bet.

The Seven lost. He crossed the finish line in fifth or sixth place, I'm not really sure. Something about the track was losing its appeal to me that day. I'm not even sure I can explain exactly what it was.

It had been a long time since I had fared so well on the first race alone that I could have gone home for the day a happy and contented gambler. But I didn't go home and I wasn't happy. All this seemed very boring to me.

I took a seat high up in the grandstand overlooking the crowd and the track. I spoke to myself. "What are all these people doing here? Don't they have anything better to do? It's Christmas Eve. Don't they have someplace to be? I'm the only one here who knows what he's doing.

"Look at these people. They don't know how to gamble. They are a bunch of morons and bums who work night jobs and live on welfare. I'm the only one who is actually earning a living by being here every day. These people. They bet numbers. *They don't know*. They don't know what it means to handicap a race, to weigh each horse's records against the rest of the field, and choose the horse that wins.

"These people rely on luck. They think that when and if they ever hit a Trifecta, it will be because of some magical influence on their lives. There goes one now. That old sawed-off bitch that walks around with Lucky Lottie's three digit picks glued to her fist. She doesn't know the first thing about gambling. She plays her 'lucky' numbers every day. And reads her horoscope *every day*. And sometimes she wins. I hate that."

I sat in the grandstand until the sixth race before placing a bet. After looking at the third, fourth, and fifth, I decided that there wasn't a horse worth the risk in any of those races. Then, in the sixth, I saw a horse with promise, Katie's Thunder. It came in third last time out. Second, the time before that. Other horses had better stats this race but she had run against better horses in the past.

The track was fast and it was just getting dark. Snow began to seep down from the roof. I waited until a minute before post time to place my bet. Before I could be sure I had to wait for something to happen. It did. Somebody sank seven grand into the place pool on Katie's Thunder. The odds dropped from twelve-to-one to five-to-one. I put two hundred on her to place.

This is what you call a sure thing. When you are certain the horse can win the race and bet on it to run second.

I wasn't even concerned about losing. I just sat in the grandstand and waited.

The horses went off. They rounded the track. They came down the homestretch in their normal parade, and Katie's Thunder won. She paid five-dollars-twenty-cents to place. I just sat there and looked at the odds board. I knew she was going to win. So why didn't I play her to win? She paid eleven-dollars-eighty-cents to win.

I tossed my program away and picked up the newspaper on the chair two seats away from me. I looked at the article about poor George Harris, who I had killed the day before. I stared at his picture and thought about what I had done.

"Now that was fun. This isn't fun. I know what I'm up against here. All I have to do is pick the right horse and bet on him, and I win. It's not that hard."

I realized I was talking to myself. I looked around to make sure nobody saw. "There's no challenge here. Not anymore. Want a real challenge, folks? Clip a jogger on your way home

tonight without getting caught. Now *that's* what I call a challenge." I could feel myself smiling devilishly. "I . . . I think it's time for some changes . . . I think . . . I think it's time. I think it's time to find . . ." And I could feel myself thinking it, but not wanting to say it. But I forced myself to. "Somebody to play with."

Something about hitting the jogger felt wrong. It was too spontaneous. Not calculated. I needed to think. I needed to do better.

"BLUFF RUN GREYHOUND TRACK KEEP RIGHT"

Wait a minute. Bluff Run is closed. They don't open until March.

"I-80 EAST KEEP RIGHT"

I-80? Where the hell am I? Why am I driving here?

I had no idea why I was in Iowa. I tried to remember leaving the track, but I could not. I reached into my breast pocket for my ticket on Katie's Thunder. "The Two in the sixth," I said to myself.

There it was, my ticket on Katie's Thunder, I had not cashed it. I took the next exit. South Omaha Road. "Now, how in the hell did I get way out here?"

I had no idea.

I stopped at the bottom of the exit and tried recollecting my thoughts. I looked at my ticket in the glow of the dashboard light. "Why didn't I cash you?"

I turned around and went back to Nebraska. Something was not making sense that day. I was wandering for no apparent reason. I was not lost, just driving aimlessly. When I got back into town, mumbling along to a Bruce Springsteen serenade, I found myself on the north side of town.

The sign across the road read “NEBRASKA SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF” with an arrow pointing right. Then I remembered why I had left the track.

“No. Can’t go there.” I turned to the left and drove back home. “No. Not on Christmas Eve.”

CHAPTER 3

The following week was quite a confusing time for me. I mostly stayed at home and cried. I am not even sure if I ever cashed my ticket on Katie's Thunder. I could not find it, so I must have. But I am not sure where I put the money.

Maybe it was my imagination combined with a good deal of guilt, but there seemed to be a lot of news coverage on George Harris. I learned, through the magic of local television, his life story.

He was born in 1953, the youngest of four children, to Jerome and Myrtle Harris. Jerome was a second generation, dry goods merchant whose father opened one of the oldest stores in Omaha in 1890. George went to Central High School and graduated in 1970. Soon he was drafted into the Marines and served in Vietnam. There, he was captured and taken prisoner by the North Vietnamese and, almost dead, broke free from their clutches in a daring, dramatic escape. He came home a hero in 1976, just in time to celebrate Christmas with his family, and take over the business for his father Jerome, who had died while George was a prisoner in Saigon.

George was married and had two children, George, Jr., and Kathy, who will be spending this Christmas without their Daddy.

Turning myself in crossed my mind dozens of times. I felt almost unconquerable remorse. This man was a war hero. He came from wholesome American Presbyterian stock and was a fine upstanding citizen. He even helped coach his son's Little League team. And I mowed him down like a blade of grass.

I was nothing like George Harris. When they called me up for the draft in 1967 I

was just an 18-year old kid, and I was scared. I reported to the draft center like they told me to. Did the whole preliminary examination, the physical where they have all the guys line up and a doctor looks in your ass. I don't know why they needed to do that, but just when they were about to shave my head, I freaked out. I screamed as loud as I could. I was completely out of control and yelled over and over again, "I don't want to go! I don't want to go!" I was scared and bawling and they pulled me out of line to take me to see a psychiatrist or a psychologist. I am not sure which. I don't really know the difference.

They had me sit in an office for about a half hour before the doctor came in. He asked me a couple of simple questions about where I was from and what scared me. I answered truthfully and just told him I was scared. I was truly scared. I broke down and cried and repeated "I don't want to go."

He put up his hand and said "Okay. You can calm down. You don't have to go."

I caught my breath and watched him complete a form.

He turned the paper around and pushed it toward me. "Sign here."

"What is it?"

"You're out. You don't want to go. I'm making it so you don't have to. Personally, I don't blame you. I wouldn't want to go over there. Just sign it, and you're out."

The doctor escorted me out. He handed the evaluation to a waiting guard who took me to a clerk in the lobby, who had me sign something else, gave me a copy, and said "You are free to go."

I exited the indoctrination center and ran.

I still think about that day.

It was dark when I finally left the house. Festivities of all sorts were going on around Omaha. People were blowing their horns and firing bottle rockets into the sky. There was singing and dancing in the street. Downtown was packed with the merriment of the forthcoming New Year. Driving down Dodge Street toward the University campus was like being in a parade. Traffic inched along, and people walked between the cars. A girl spilled her drink on my hood, laughed, smiled, waved, and apologized. I smiled back.

I parked a few blocks from the campus. There were scores of people walking up and down the street, howling and cheering. It wasn't cold enough to stop the hearty, Mid-Western revelry.

I stood next to the Jaguar and watched them for a moment. They were all so happy. The New Year would be here at midnight. Another chapter in their lives was about to unfold. In a few hours, the final digit in the calendar year would change, and it would be 1992. It seemed very stupid to me. This was a reason to celebrate? What was really going to change? What did they expect? Was the world going to become a better and more perfect place to live in at the magical stroke of midnight? No. Nothing was going to change. Some people might quit smoking, but 92% of them would puff their brains out again by the end of February. Another 7% might last until March or April. The other 1% would die of lung cancer. And some non-smokers might start.

Looking around I wondered what I should do. I thought about getting into my car and driving around some more. But traffic was heavy and I was bored with driving. There would be no way to meet anyone without getting out of the car. I guessed that was all I

wanted. I had hoped I would meet a woman I could get drunk and have sex with and forget all this George Harris shit.

I crossed the street to Mullen's Bar.

As I entered the tavern, an old sing-a-long was blasting out of the jukebox. It was not as crowded as I expected it to be, and a lot cleaner too, judging from its outside appearance. It wasn't really the dive I was looking for. I just wanted to be a stranger tonight.

Although it was classier than expected, it sufficed. The barstools were all perfectly arranged along the brass railing, as if an artist had paid meticulous attention to detail. The pool tables were covered with red velvet instead of the traditional green. The balls were racked on all three tables and the sticks were arranged on the wall from short to long.

The bartender was clean cut as well. He wore a bow tie, a party hat and a cheerful smile. "Happy New Year! What will you have, sir?"

The sheer geniality of the place forced me to wear a sparkling grin. I clapped and rubbed my hands together and said, "Crown Royal. Double shot on the rocks."

"Double Crown on the rocks, yes sir!" He poured the drink in front of me.

I took out my wallet.

"Big plans for tonight, sir?"

"No, no plans at all."

"Ready for the New Year?"

I took a big swig of whiskey. "Sure."

“That’ll be five-fifty, sir.”

I set a ten on the bar. “Keep it.”

“Thank you!” He walked to the register and struck the brass bell above him to acknowledge the tip.

I sipped my drink and turned around to gaze at the bar. A young couple had begun shooting pool on the center table. There were now a dozen or so people lined up along the bar that had been empty a moment before. A girl was dancing alone to the music. It spewed forth from the jukebox like a fountain, tumbling through the crowd. Others bobbed their heads or tapped their feet. Then, as the song ended, many of them sang along with the last line. The girl who was dancing alone sat down next to me. She ordered a rum and Coke, brushed back her hair and smiled at me.

“Hi,” I said, smiling back.

She was cute. Brunette. Brown eyes. Dimpled chin. “Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year to you. Could I pay for your drink?”

“Sure, why not?”

I paid the bartender. “My name is Paul.” I extended my hand to her.

She held it softly for a moment and said, “Marcie.”

“Nice to meet you. You were dancing alone.”

She sipped her drink. “Thank you for the drink.”

“You’re welcome. Why do you dance alone?”

A lonesome sexy guitar chord spilled out of the jukebox.

“Nobody asked me to dance.”

“Would you like to dance with me?”

“I’d love to,” she said with a slur.

Marcie grinned and set down her drink. I stood and took her hand as she stepped off the barstool. She was wasted.

We danced our way toward the jukebox, standing apart at first but quickly moving into one another. We inched closer toward each other's wanting eyes. I held her hips. She embraced my neck. We rocked slowly, back and forth, side to side, feeling the music, ignorant of the crowd around us.

“This is a good song,” I said.

“It’s beautiful. Sexy,” she said, hugging me tighter.

I wrapped myself around her. We pressed our groins into each other, still swaying in place next to the jukebox, back and forth, side to side. I loved the way her breasts felt pressed against me.

This was not a rare thing for me. Meeting women has always been easy. I was blessed with good looks. Straight teeth. Nice eyes. So I’ve been told. I don’t want to sound vain. I’m just telling the truth. I’m a little better looking than the average guy. That’s why women dance with me.

“You’re a good dancer,” I told her.

She grinned a wide grin and kissed me. I could taste the sweetness of the rum and sugar on her lips and tongue. We kissed for almost a minute. She was really drunk, and sang along with the music, slurring some words while missing others, “I - I - I wanna . . . love . . . you.” I am not sure if she even knew the song.

I chuckled. She laughed and bowed her head, then kissed me again.

It was dreamlike. Surreal. The music, the people who paid us no countenance, and the bar that was as orderly as a church all created an atmosphere of perfection. There I stood, kissing a woman I had not even known five minutes before and knew nothing more about her than her name, wondering what I was doing.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“Oz.”

“Where is Oz, Dorothy?”

“Windsor, Ontario, Canada.”

I looked above me pondering. “And where is that?”

“It’s across the river from Detroit. The only place in Canada where you can go south and hit the United States.”

“Why do you call it Oz?”

“Because it is. My uncle called it Oz. He lived in Detroit. He said that whenever he came into Windsor to visit us it was like leaving Kansas and visiting Oz.”

“It sounds like a wonderful place,” I said.

The song ended.

“It is.” She kissed me again, this time on the cheek. “Thank you for the dance.”

“Thank you,” I said. I meant it.

We returned to our drinks. I held her hand as she mounted the barstool and then she asked me, “So what is it that you do, Pete?”

“Paul.”

“What’s that?”

“My name. My name is Paul.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. You told me, didn’t you? It’s my fault. I need to hear your name at least a hundred times before I can remember it.”

She slurped down her drink and ordered another. The bartender took my money from the bar to pay for it.

“Paul what?” she asked.

“Pasternak. Paul Pasternak.”

“I’m Marcie.”

“Marcie,” we said in unison.

“I remember,” I said.

“So why are you alone on New Year's Eve, Paul?”

“I’m not alone. I’m with you.”

“You were alone before you met me.”

“I’m always alone.”

“Always?” she said with a raised brow.

“Well, maybe not always. I do have some friends that I see on occasion. But I don’t know where they are tonight.”

A new song blurted out of the jukebox. “Let’s dance again,” she said.

“No. I don’t want to dance right now. Can we just sit here for a minute?”

I downed my drink and ordered another.

She took my hand and I looked into her eyes. She seemed to be overly sober for

the moment and asked with genuine interest, “Why are you alone?”

I had no answer for her at that moment but could have given her a hundred reasons. My recourse was to pose the same question. “Why are you?”

Marcie took a big swallow of her rum and Coke, draining the glass. “Because all my friends are drags. They’re fucking boring. I don’t know one damn person who parties. They’re all Christian nurses and doctors and they don’t drink. I have no idea what they’re doing tonight. Probably sitting around drinking non-alcoholic eggnog and spritzers.” She motioned to the bartender. “Another! Sometimes I wonder what they live for. I see people come into the emergency room cut up from a car accident, sometimes their skulls are completely cracked open, with absolutely no chance of surviving, and we work on them and bring them back to life.” She turned to her drink, clutching it with her fist. “Yup, we’re just a bunch of Frankensteins who bring people back to life so they can go and die later. Some of ‘em end up blind, or crippled, or in a coma. And what’s the fucking point?” She turned back to me. “They’re all going to die anyway. There’s one guy who’s been on life support for six years with a feeding tube shoved down his throat so he won’t die. He fell off a scaffold at a construction site. He’s got permanent brain damage and he’ll never, *never*, lead a productive life. The poor squish-head can’t even think on his own. He’s already dead, but,” she turned back to her drink, “We’ll keep him alive. Because that’s our job.”

“Are you a nurse?”

“Yeah.” She spoke with a disgusted tone. “I’m a nurse.”

“I’m a gambler. I take risks for a living.”

“What kind of risks?”

“Money. I bet on dogs and horses.”

“Is that all you do?”

“Well, I fly out to Vegas once in a while, and I play the lottery.”

“I mean, is that all you do? Gamble?”

“Well,” I thought about it for a moment as if I hadn’t realized it before. “Yeah.”

“You mean you don’t have a job or anything?”

“No. I just gamble. That’s what I do.”

“How long have you been doing this? This, just gambling, living without a job I mean?”

“Twenty years.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, actually I’m being perfectly honest with you, all I do is gamble.”

She finally smiled again. “Wow. That’s amazing! I had no idea that somebody could actually do that.” She put her hand on my knee and leaned forward. “So tell me, what do you tell the IRS?”

“What do you mean?”

“How do you file taxes without a job?”

Just then, I wondered if she wasn’t really an IRS auditor posing as a drunken nurse. “I file them the same way anybody else does.”

“What do you write in the little space that says occupation?”

“Self-employed.” I was becoming annoyed with her now.

“They believe you?”

“They have to. It’s the truth.”

“What if I said I didn’t believe you?” She was turning into a nasty drunk.

“Why wouldn’t you believe me?”

“It’s just hard to believe, that’s all. That somebody could be a full time gambler.”

“Why?”

“It just is. That’s all.”

I had heard that before. Mainly from members of my family who thought I was actually working somewhere and always tried to catch me in a lie.

“Well, you can believe me.” I gulped down the rest of my drink and ordered another round for us. “I don’t have any reason to lie.”

“I never thought you did. You’re too well dressed to be a liar.”

“Thanks.”

“I mean it. Where do you buy your clothes?”

“Oh, uh, the malls. Downtown. Wherever there’s a good sale.”

“I like your taste.”

“I like yours.” I scanned her body and caught myself staring at her thighs at the hem of her blue jean mini-skirt. Then I glanced delightfully at her breasts and worked my way up to her eyes again.

“Paul? Will you take me home tonight...if I get too drunk to drive?”

“I will.”

“Good. Do you have any cigarettes?”

“Nope, actually, I’ve been trying to quit.”

“Save it for midnight. I’ll buy a pack.” She summoned the bartender again.

“Quarters.”

Marcie crossed the bar and pumped the quarters into the cigarette machine. I watched her intently as her ass swayed and her hair flowed over her shoulders. Then she pulled the knob and out popped a pack of smokes.

“Smoke these?” she asked when she returned to her seat.

“It’s a good brand.”

She lit two together and gave me one, blowing smoke in my face.

“So, you work in a hospital, huh? Which one?”

“Bergan. Ever been there?”

“No. I’ve never had to go to the hospital for anything.”

“Mmmmm, you’re a healthy one!” She grinned deliciously.

“Uh-huh. Tell me something.” I leaned toward her on the bar. “You’ve got access to medical supplies, don’t you?”

“What do you want?”

“Condoms. Boxes and boxes of ‘em.”

She laughed out loud hysterically. “I’ve got those!”

“You do?”

“Yeah, boxes and boxes of ‘em.” She laughed again. “Let’s get drunk. Good and drunk. Start the New Year off right!”

She hugged me and kissed me again.

We did get good and drunk. Smashed. Obliterated. She stuck with rum and Coke and I kept hammering Crown Royal. We talked and danced and flirted and kissed and rang in the New Year together.

I really enjoyed myself. I kept thinking how perfect this was. She was exactly who I needed just when I needed her. We were strangers now to everyone, each of us exploring the other.

The other patrons, the barkeep, the bar itself, new to us since neither had ever been there before, and we lived in opposite directions.

Fate is a strange thing, the way it puts you in the right place at the right time, or sometimes the opposite.

Marcie let me know there was an ample supply of condoms awaiting us in the top drawer of her dresser. I learned more about Marcie Penthallow than I wanted to that night. Mostly things you tell a best friend, not a stranger. But we broke the bounds of unfamiliarity and became fast friends.

She told me about how she used to be a topless dancer in Windsor and pulled tricks for fifty dollars a night. This was quite a turn-off.

Marcie told me about how she was once married to a Black guy in Detroit named Luther, about their child, who she didn't want, that they set up for adoption a month after he was born. She told me about her divorce while Luther was in prison and how she used to cheat on him before that. She said she wasn't really a nurse, just a volunteer, and that she took the job of a custodian so that she could steal clean needles for her junkie boyfriend who died last month of AIDS.

She really did it.

She got me to hate her. But I didn't hate all of her, just most of her. It's hard to convey. The rest of the evening continued not as something I can explain, but just something to tell.

A secret is revealed.

After midnight, we left the bar and walked outside. "Where's your car?" she asked.

We were right across the street from it but I lied. "I don't have a car."

"I thought you said you had a Jag."

"I did. It was repossessed."

She put her arm around me. "Then we'll take my car."

I was too drunk to drive and knew she was too, but I didn't care, I let her drive anyway. It's amazing the way some people will sober up the moment they get behind the wheel. I wasn't surprised at all when she did.

I felt completely sober too, despite the fact that I had lost count of my drinks. She drove an old gold Monte Carlo with a ratty white vinyl top. I used the cuff of my jacket to open the door. I plopped down into the bucket seat and shut the door the same way, with my cuff between my palm and the door handle. I made a conscious effort not to touch anything.

She started the car and we were on our way.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"It's not far." She slid her hand between my thighs and said, "Just you wait."

I trembled at her touch, the mass in her hand growing.

Then she removed her hand and reached into her purse in search of her cigarettes, retrieving them.

Marcie pushed in the dashboard lighter. The car was filthy. Butts poured from the ashtray. A fine layer of dust coated the dashboard. Even the windows were coated with a greasy, smoky film.

Trash was on the floor, empty fast food containers and bags. The faint odor of rotting fruit permeated the upholstery. When she lit her cigarette it made me seriously consider quitting.

It was about a two minute drive, maybe a mile from the bar. "Here we are," she said, turning a corner and parking.

I looked at her dark little house with one light on inside and a frosting of snow on the roof. The moon was full, dancing behind wispy clouds, making the night darker and lighter one moment to the next. When we got to the porch, Marcie staggered, dropping her cigarette. I caught her in my arms.

"Got to find the key." She fumbled through her chain.

Music played inside. "Is somebody home?"

"No. I don't live with anybody. I always leave the stereo on so if there's any robbers around they won't rob me. They'll think somebody's home. See, it works."

"Clever."

She opened the door and we went inside. I closed it and locked it with my knuckles. I just had a sick feeling about touching anything. I didn't want to leave any

trace of my presence. I didn't want a relationship, a connection, just a one-night stand.

I noticed that all the shades were drawn when she flicked on the overhead light. Then she turned and pinned me against the door, forcing her lips against mine. I reached down and beneath her skirt, kneading her buttocks, feeling her soft warm cheeks, then forgot what I was doing.

The thing I can't explain happened.

I could hear my own voice running through my head as we fondled each other. *I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill you.* Then I pulled my lips away from her and said, "Marcie, I need to use your bathroom."

She was breathing heavily, panting, as was I.

"Down there." She pointed to the hallway.

I started toward it.

"You want a drink?" asked Marcie.

"Yeah."

Locking the bathroom door, I braced my back against it and held my head in my hands. I thought, *Oh my GOD! What am I thinking! Where are these thoughts coming from?*

I looked down at my shoes on the blue-green carpet. The bathroom was a mess. It was as bad as her car. My knees shook. It was like standing on water.

In the mirror I looked and found myself, as normal as I had ever been, and breathed a great sigh of relief. "I'm not crazy. I'm still Paul Pasternak," I whispered to my reflection.

I looked at myself in the mirror and then surveyed my hands. When I returned my gaze to my reflection, I smiled delightfully into the mirror and was perfectly at ease. "It's okay," I whispered.

I walked out of the bathroom, back down the hall to the living room, where we entered. Marcie had fallen asleep on the couch. Her shoes, red sandal pumps, were lying on the floor next to her purse. The way she was lying there, she looked . . . dead?

I knelt beside her and stroked her cheek and her breast with a solitary finger. I took her by the wrist and waved her hand. It flopped gently. I checked for a pulse but felt nothing. I wondered. Placing my ear to her nostril I discovered she was not dead, merely asleep, as a small pixie-like whistle blew in my ear.

I picked up her hand and dropped it. The power of gravity proved itself when it fell on her belly. I did it again. Carefully, I opened her eye with my thumb. I looked inside her dead-asleep eyeball. "Mar-cie," I sang to her. "Waa-ke uu-p."

Nothing.

I let her eye fall closed again. I stared at her for a moment and then did what I can not explain. I knew I should not. But I did.

I touched her breasts, reaching into her blouse, finding no brassiere. Soft, warm, tender flesh. I fondled her nipple. Then reached beneath her skirt to explore the rest of her. I pulled down her panties and took them all the way off. They snapped into my hand when they caught and stretched on her toe.

I reached under her skirt again to caress her. I did not poke a finger inside her, only petted. I find rape uncouth and would not want to be considered a rapist. But, there I

was, touching her. Even when I knew I should not.

I adored her. She was so beautiful and softly sleeping, so gentle and innocent. I pondered her, consuming every inch of her with my eyes. I studied her face, her lips, and her toes. Feeling her naked skin in my hands, utopia.

I carefully inspected her panties. They were white with little pink flowers, carnations, I think. I held them to my nostrils and sniffed them, pushing them into my lips. Sweet. Sour. Woman.

I took my hand out from beneath her skirt and turned to sit on the floor, my back against the couch, and looked at the panties again. I threw them to the floor. Looking back to her I sang gently, “Mar-cie. Waa-ke uu-p.”

Then, after staring at her motionless body a few more moments, I stood and proclaimed, “Well this is boring.”

Walking into the kitchen I was careful not to turn on the light. I looked out the window at the New Year. Clouds still made shadow puppets on the white dust of snow that lined the lawns and rooftops. No movement. Other than the shadows from above, the world was asleep. “What am I going to do now?”

I opened the refrigerator and inspected its contents, careful to do so with my sleeve. “Cheese, milk, pickles. Cigarettes? Why does she refrigerate these? Whatever. Go figure. Some people, boy I tell ya.”

I shut the refrigerator door and turned to the sink.

There it was.

A knife. Not a big knife. Its handle was black, and the blade only about five

inches or so. I took an orange from the basket on the counter to test it. Placing the orange on the counter, I held it firmly and sliced. Juice flowed freely on the counter and blade.

I picked up one half and bit into it as juice rolled down my chin and neck. Then I crushed the orange in my palm and let the mutilated piece of fruit drop to the floor. I washed and dried the knife with a dishcloth.

I washed my hands and put on the latex gloves I had in my pocket.

Sometimes I carry latex gloves in my pocket.

Calmly, I walked back toward Marcie with the kitchen knife clenched in my smooth, white fist and stood above her, and watched her. Walking around to the other side of the couch, I kept repeating, “Mar-cie waa-ke uu-p! Maaarr-cie waa-ke uu-p.” And I stood beside her expressionless, with the knife at my side.

Then I noticed something I hadn’t before. The music was off. While I was in the bathroom recollecting myself she must have shut off the stereo. I walked across the room to turn it on. I lowered the volume and found appropriate music to set the mood. Turning the dial was an adventure in itself. Hard rock? No. Rap? Uh-uh. Love ballad? No way. Rap again? Jazz? Gospel? Ah – easy listening, here we go. One of those Mantovani-type songs I used to hear when I was a kid.

I crossed the room again and knelt beside Marcie. Then I set the blade on the back of the couch above her. I whispered, “You are so beautiful.”

She truly was. In her sleep, her skin was vibrant and glowing. She no longer looked like a corpse, the way she had a moment before. Her lips were slightly parted exposing the caps of her front teeth. A haze of peach shadow powdered her eyelids, so

slight I hadn't noticed the entire evening until now.

I dwelled on that fact for a moment. There were a lot of things I didn't notice.

Was there something that I had completely overlooked? Could there have been, at that moment, something so trivial, yet so completely obvious that I would forget about it now and think about it later? Something so small that it could land me in jail? *What am I thinking?*

Turning my back away from Marcie, I crossed my legs to a yoga position and tapped my fingers together. "Is there something I'm forgetting?" I whispered.

"Anything?"

Then I sat and thought for what may have been an hour. Music roamed around the room. I contemplated the entire evening, everything we did from the time we met.

Nobody in the bar knew us. Nobody saw me here. I was invisible.

So I rose to kneel beside her again and took the knife from the top edge of the couch. I stroked her cheek with the point of the blade and brushed it against her ear. Without cutting, I tickled her nose and her neck with the tip and soon worked my way down to her breasts. Still stroking her breasts with the knife I began to wonder, *Am I doing the right thing? Who am I, really, to decide this? Did I really hunt? Who knows? She is everything I was looking for, and everything I love and hate all rolled into one. She won't even make a sound because she is going to die in her sleep.*

But her eyes opened! At that moment her eyes opened and she looked at me. The time of decision came swiftly. I plunged the knife into her belly and she screamed. A shriek so grisly and blood curdling she scared me. My hair stood on end.

I clamped down on her gaping mouth with my palm and crushed her head into the cushion. I buried the blade deeper and deeper into her belly and looked down. All I could see was my fist pressing against her warm bloody shirt. She screamed through my fingers loud enough to drown out the stereo. I twisted her head down into the couch and shoved the knife into her belly even harder. Her blood began to seep through the cracks of my rubbery fingers that struggled to silence her. She began to choke.

I ripped the knife from her torso and pushed back her head to slice her throat. A stream of blood spewed from the ever-popular jugular vein and even more gushed from her windpipe, followed by a gurgling sound, like a bathtub drain. Then she stopped shaking. But I did not.

It all happened so fast.

I quivered and stared at her, blood still flowing, her body settling down to die. The life vanished from her eyes as she stared at me in her final moment, wondering why. I stared back vacantly and wondered the same thing.

I didn't know why. I still can't say why.

Laying the knife down on her chest, I removed my hand from her lips and a mouthful of blood plopped out and down her chin. I knelt still, erectly, and looked down at her. Marcie was a bloody mess.

She looked like a bloody little doll with her head half-twisted off and her fists clenched at her side. She had no chance to defend herself. I was glad. I had not even considered that such a thing might happen. Until now, and now it was too late.

The reality of what had just happened did not hit me then, not like it did with

George Harris.

I lost track of time, lingering over her body.

I stood above her and took the knife again. I sliced her many times. Her arms and legs. Her hands and feet. I cut away slowly, digging in and ripping the skin. Peeling away layer after layer to see what was underneath.

When I realized she could see me I poked out her eyes.

It was the worst I had ever been. I never got this bloody before. The more blood I saw, the more I cut. The smell of sour fear filled me up euphorically. I was high on blood.

After a while I came down, bored with the killing. The mutilation had lost its fascination. I destroyed every part of her I could think of. She no longer looked human. Now she was a grotesque carcass of mush, like an animal hit by a car hours ago, and pounced on repeatedly by uncaring tires.

I felt a little sorry for her. That she had led such a wretched life and had to have it end like this. I sighed deeply. "That's all, folks."

I picked up the knife and wrapped it in her panties. I went to the lamp and turned it off, then headed to the door. I switched out the overhead and opened the door. "Good night Marcie."

I left, locking the door behind me and began the jaunt to my car.

Marcie was right, it wasn't far, perhaps a mile at most. The neighborhood was deathly quiet, except for a small dog yelping somewhere in the distance. It was getting close to daylight and the eastern sky was brightening slowly. There were no clouds. I could see my shadow from the moonlight.

I turned to face it. The Western moon loomed huge, as it was about to sink into the ground and disappear for the day. It had a yellowish tinge to it that morning, like a not quite ripe orange. I turned again to walk into the sunrise. I could feel the moon smiling upon me. I smiled too.

I saw not one person nor any other form of life as I made my way to my car. The only evidence that something was out there was the howling dog and his distant lonesome moan. There was no traffic. Not even a bus.

I walked the yellow line in the center of the street when I saw my car in the distance. As I approached it, I bunched up the panties around the knife, now encrusted with Marcie's blood, and went to a trashcan on the sidewalk for their deposit. The gloves went with them.

"Happy New Year," I said, tossing away yet another life.

CHAPTER 4

When I awoke, the world seemed intensely quiet. I laid in bed and stared at the ceiling. I could not even hear myself breathing.

The light entering my window cast the shadow of a tree on my wall and still, there was no movement. There was no breeze outside and not so much as a creak of a settling house that morning. There was nothing. It was dead quiet. Then I heard the refrigerator kick on. It made a whirring sound. Then I heard a truck drive by. It was no longer dead quiet. The world was alive and I was right there with it.

The colors in my room were vibrant hues and the shadow of the tree began to teeter a bit. I took a deep breath and sat up. "Marcie," I whispered, staring aimlessly at the wall. I could feel my face begin to shake.

Then I moaned. I moaned loud and hard and began to cry. I buried my face in my pillows and cried, "Why! Why! Why did I do it?" choking on the syllables like a breathless child. "I didn't mean to do it! Aasaaauogod! I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I don't know why I did it. I don't know."

It was hard to get out of bed and start functioning. I didn't think about coffee or going out for the Racing Form. I didn't think about eating. I thought about Marcie and what happened to her. I looked at my wrists where the gloves had ended. There were rings of dried blood. Marcie was no dream, nightmare, or fantasy. She was real and she was really dead. I made it happen. I sent Marcie to her grave and didn't know why.

After thinking about this fact for an hour or two I finally got out of bed and made coffee. My head felt a bit grainy from the liquor. Watching the coffee drip into the pot I

let my thoughts wander and I turned on the TV. The weather. Sunny and calm. Highs in the upper 40s to mid-50s. Warm for January first. I was taking my mind off Marcie. Not letting it get to me.

I toasted some Pop-Tarts.

~

That day at the track, I stood near the grandstand window and watched the horses clomping around in front of the odds board. Larry came up from behind me. I heard him before I saw him. “Shylock.”

What an odd thing for him to say. Larry had only recently started calling me that. Others would, but never Larry. His meaning was so genuinely clear to me that I smiled. I knew he wanted money.

“I got something for you,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Eviscerator in the fifth.”

Was this a dream? I stared at Larry. I knew that I heard him clearly but I asked, “What?”

“Eviscerator.” Larry stood beside me and spoke quietly. “Just got the word that he’s fresh out of Detroit. Runs long races.”

“So?”

“Fifth race is six furlongs and they keep him on bute. But the beautiful part is that they’re not giving him any today and at six furlongs he’s usually on top. I need six bucks to get him across the board. So give me ten so I can try him in a perfecta. He’s going off

at forty to one.”

I read my program while Larry talked. I looked at Eviscerator’s record. She was a good horse. “What does eviscerator mean?” I asked.

“That’s a...” he thought for a moment. “That’s where, I know what it means, it’s like when you go hunting and you kill an animal. Like a deer. It’s like taking the skin off?...or no, when you gut an animal, that’s it.”

Larry made me think about my kill. I was afraid that’s what it meant. I changed the subject for my own sake, asking about the muscle relaxant the horse was on, “Who’d you get the word from on the bute?”

“The trainer. Watch the win pool at two minutes to post.”

“Sounds like this race isn’t broken.”

“It’s not. So can I have ten bucks, Shylock?”

“Shylock, again?” I opened my wallet and gave him a ten. “Since when am I Shylock?”

“Won’t you want a pound of my flesh if I don’t pay you back before the sixth race?” He smiled. “Give you even more if you want,” he said, grabbing his fleshy stomach.

“No, that’s okay,” I said, “Eviscerator, huh?” thinking it was an odd name for a horse.

“That’s the one. Keep quiet,” he said, and walked away.

Eviscerator. If that wasn’t an omen what was? I didn’t even bother to handicap the race to see if it was a horse I would pick. I always handicap. Even the surest of horses

was not a sure thing. But this was different. This was different because I was the eviscerator. The hunter. The butcher who worked in the dark.

I put seven-hundred-fifty dollars on Eviscerator to win. In a little over forty seconds I was about twenty-five-thousand dollars richer. It was my biggest hit in six years.

Looking back on the episode I don't think I even blinked when I walked up to the Fifty Dollar Window. I laid the money down without hesitation and took my tickets. I wasn't surprised that Eviscerator was in the lead all the way and my heart did not pound heavily worrying about the wager.

The thrill was gone.

Whether I won or lost made no difference, not really. What I was thinking about when they were coming to the wire was a moth I saw fluttering by in the grandstand. I noticed the way it danced on so slight a breeze and tuned out the roar of the crowd altogether. It amazed me that it awoke from frozen slumber somewhere to drift by me. Certainly strange to see a note of spring in a soggy winter. Before I knew it the race was over and official. Eviscerator paid seventy dollars to win. I cashed my tickets after the tenth race. Until then I avoided Larry by staying in the clubhouse bar and sipping soda.

I soon found myself thinking profoundly.

What does all this mean? What has happened to me? Have I changed in some way?

I was certain that I had, but most assuredly, not for the better.

I thought about George Harris again on the drive home. "Why did I do that?" was

my biggest question.

I sought answers within myself but there were none to be found.

Could it be that I was *meant* to kill these people? *Am I the Grim Reaper or am I an employee?*

Was it meant to be that I would (pun intended) make a killing on Eviscerator? Who would name a horse Eviscerator? Where would I find the answers to these questions?

~

I watched the evening news and carefully checked every channel for news about Marcie. There was none. Surely a crime so brutal in a place as conservative as Omaha demanded attention. Why was it not on the ten o'clock news? Perhaps it never really happened. Maybe it was just a realistic dream, and George Harris was already lying in the road as I drove by ignorantly.

Then I rolled up my sleeves and found the dried blood I had neglected to wash off. I unfolded the cashier's check I had received for my winnings at Ak-Sar-Ben.

I was not dreaming. Everything did happen, just as I remembered. But why?

Why?

I sat and thought for a long time. Quietly. Then at 10 o'clock, I thought why not. I'd gotten away with something most people didn't even dare dream about, let alone consider.

I showered and shaved. Then I went out.

The air was cold and crisp, and the sky was clear. I was dressed sharp, wearing

my tweed sports coat and matching hat. On most men, the outfit would have looked boring, but since my hair was still long and blond and I didn't look as old as I really was, I considered myself rather dashing.

I fired up the Jag and left, peeling out of the driveway, something I rarely do. I felt really good about myself and talked about it out loud. "You know, I feel great! You wanna know why?" I bellowed. "Because I made a killing at the track today! That's why! And I'm going to go out tonight and have a really good time!"

Above the subtle chords and rhythms of some light rock on the radio I was engaged in a full-fledged conversation.

"What are you going to do first?"

"Well, I was thinking, I thought . . ."

"Who gives a damn what you think."

"Where the hell did that come from? What am I doing? Talking to myself?"

"You're having a wise and intelligent conversation with your best friend."

"Right. Well, what I was going to say was I thought I might go have something to eat first and then maybe find a nice bar to go to. Shoot some pool. Maybe Louie's."

"No, not Louie's. Everybody knows you at Louie's. You can't go to Louie's."

"Why not?"

"Because you have to go somewhere nobody knows you. It's important to be a stranger right now. Did you bring the gloves?"

"Of course I brought the gloves."

"Then all you have to do is charm them home and let me do the rest. That's the

last pair isn't it?"

"Yes, maybe I should get more next time I go to the foot doctor. They leave them right on the counter. They never notice them missing."

"Maybe you should."

"What?"

"Maybe you should get more gloves."

"What are you talking about?"

"What do you think I'm talking about, you doughball?"

There was a moment of silence. Then I asked myself "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"What else is there to think about?"

I drove quietly for a few more minutes and said "There."

"What?"

"Right there, Hoovers Showcase Lounge. That's the place. Let's go there." It was a topless bar.

"You're sure this is where you want to go now?" I said as I pulled into the driveway.

The conversation came to an abrupt end. I was two different people, thinking together, wanting things. I watched myself closely to keep out of trouble. If I got drunk I would drive home, but carefully.

The bar was hot and smoky. I had never been there before. Wearing the brim of

my hat pulled toward my eyes, I paid the man at the door three dollars and walked in. It had been years since I was last in a topless bar. I was a bit uncomfortable.

It was a busy place. Lots of customers. Lots of girls. I sat at a table about twenty feet from the stage. The girl performing was petite yet buxom. She had brown hair that flowed generously down her back and around her breasts. She had just taken her top off.

The lights flashed purple and lime green and danced over the sparkles she had strewn across her body. Glitter enhanced her curves. She swayed and weaved around the brass pole at center stage, hugging and caressing it as though she were making love to a thin tree or a stop sign. The crowd raved, uttering shouts of “Ooh, baby!” and “Yeah, do it sugar, do it!”

Waitresses went about the business of serving drinks in slinky, skimpy negligees as the men cavorted about them. The girl on stage kept stroking the brass with her groin urging the crowd to cheer. We did.

A waitress attended to me promptly. “What’ll it be?”

I could feel myself remaining expressionless. “A drink. A . . . ah . . . anything, I don’t care. A . . . a tequila sunrise.”

I heard my voice in my head. *You never drink tequila.*

She walked away, out of sight and I kept watching the girl on stage. She was a really good dancer. She didn’t just jump around and shake her tits. She moved like an artist. Gracefully and with keen precision she stunned us. She epitomized erotica. The way she arched her back and turned her neck, she moved with the music the way a dancer is supposed to.

And she was beautiful.

I leaned my elbow on the table and rested my chin in the palm of my hand to watch her closely. I took in every movement, breathing her essence. Boyish infatuation grew within me and for a brief moment, I pictured myself having a meaningful relationship with this girl. Then my drink came, and another dancer took the stage.

This time she was blonde with large pointed breasts and a nice ass. Her eyes were thin and squinty, and she did not smile much. She seemed to be sneering as she took dollars from the hands of the front row idolaters. I could hear them. It made me wonder how a girl could enjoy this job.

There are three types of front-row patrons. The first, is the safest, the quiet fellow who will sit there and smile, occasionally digging into his pocket for a dollar to slip into the dancer's panties. The next is the shouter, nearly the complete opposite of the first type. He yells, he drools, and he begs the dancers to dip their nipples in his beer. He says rude things in reference to his penis, ignoring that he is in a public place. The third type of patron is a virtual cross between the first two. He is not too loud and not too shy and he tips better than any of the others around him. He compliments the girls without degradation. He never mentions his penis.

Eventually, I moved into the front row and joined category three.

When the lights are on and your glass is empty and they ask you to go home, you do. There are no questions or arguments. You simply put on your hat and leave.

So I did. I just went home and slept.

In the morning, the sky was white with low clouds that ushered the finest of

snowflakes upon the Midwest. They were big, white and fluffy. I looked out my window and watched them tumble to earth. Like magic, they appeared from the sky and danced softly on the ground, accumulating into a pile of cold, white dust.

Watching the snow made me lazy. I wanted coffee, but did not feel like brewing a pot. When the water whistled for me I poured a cup of the instant stuff. I turned on the television and watched *The Price Is Right*. A marine and a nice old Black lady made it into the bonus round. The Black lady won.

The news followed. The headline story was the discovery of Marcie Penthallow's body. I held my breath and watched in horror. There was her house with the car in the driveway. It was surrounded by yellow crime scene tape. They showed police lugging a body bag out of the house and placing it in the coroner's van. The chief investigator refused to divulge any details of the murder other than to say that she was mutilated beyond recognition and that they had no leads in the case.

They went to commercial and I exhaled a deep sigh of relief.

"No leads. No leads."

"Huh."

After finishing my coffee I went right out and bought a newspaper so I could read about the murder. I found a paper that had a front page in really good condition and handled it carefully. Home again, I got the scissors out and snipped happily away at the pages, careful not to rip the article. Then I thought about a scrapbook to paste it into. With the same measure of impulse that it took to buy the paper, I ripped it up into shreds and threw it away.

“No! No! No! You don’t start a scrapbook, that’s stupid! Pauly! What is the matter with you? You don’t just kill people and expect to get away with it.” I slapped myself in the forehead. “Come on man, smell the beans! You don’t keep evidence around the house. You don’t take your work home with you.”

I took the whole paper and shoved it in the kitchen garbage basket. “There! That settles it! No scrapbook! Keeping records is stupid, it’s just dumb. Don’t keep records.”

I lit a cigarette and walked around the house. From that point, I sort of felt like I was chain smoking. Maybe I was.

Looking outside again, I watched a small flock of sparrows playing in the snow. I walked out onto the back porch and threw pieces of bread to them. The sun peeked out from the clouds. I stopped wondering what to do and made a decision. I would shovel the sidewalk. It was only about an inch but I didn’t really have anything else to do.

The shoveling got my mind off Marcie and it soon wandered elsewhere. I thought about the way I used to shovel the snow when I was a boy, first for my mother, and then in the neighborhood down the street. I would knock on doors and charge fifty cents a walk. There was an old man who would refuse to pay fifty cents so I always settled for forty-five. Nowadays, the kids want ten bucks.

The shoveling made my mind reel with memories, and most of all, I thought about my mother. The more I thought about her the more I realized how unfair I had been to her lately and soon I decided to pay her a visit.

Pulling out of my driveway I saw one of my neighbors jogging and they waved to me. I smiled and waved back. “Idiot,” I said.

In about twenty minutes, I was heading up the driveway to the Nebraska School for the Deaf. This is where my mother lives and works. She is deaf and she is the principal. She can read lips, but since I grew up learning American Sign Language (*ASL*) I use it when I speak to her. It makes her happy.

I parked my car and went inside.

The hallways were spic and span and cold and quiet as usual. At the reception desk I was greeted by a charming young girl who spoke. She recognized me and smiled.

“Hello! How are you today?”

“I’m fine, thanks. How about you?”

“Good. You’re Missus Pasternak’s son aren’t you?”

“You remember me. Is she here?”

“Yes. Do you want me to tell her you’re here or do you just want to go down yourself?”

“No, that’s okay. I know where she is. I’ll just go down there.”

“Okay, well, nice to see you again.”

“You too.”

I could never remember that girl’s name. In fact, I wasn’t sure I ever remembered meeting her before, but I must have since she knew who I was.

Yellow lights began to flash in the hallways and children erupted from the classrooms. The final lesson of the day had ended. It always surprised me at how many deaf people there really were. You don’t think about these things unless you come to places like this.

It was a lot different from the school I went to. Obviously, there was no talking. All you heard as you watched these animated quiet people was the opening and closing of lockers and rustling of books and coats. They signed to each other and were completely oblivious to me.

Moving past them, I felt both envy and thanks. Envy that I was no longer a child and that I had no true idea of what it was like to enjoy their silent world. But thankful that I knew what they were missing. It was not every teenager who is lucky enough to blast his stereo as loud as possible because his mother is deaf. I was lucky in that way. I listened to hard rock and heavy metal the way it was meant to be heard.

I found my mother in her office and she smiled when she saw me. At first I let her read my lips, but after two sentences I began to sign.

“Hi Mom!”

“Poll!” she moaned to the best of her ability.

She hugged and kissed me, which was completely out of character for her. Hugs and kisses were never her style. It felt weird. Then she stepped back and signed to me.

“So where has the busy gambler been these days?”

“Gambling, as usual.”

“Have you been winning?”

“Yes.” I nodded and signed. “I have won a bundle.” I produced the check from Ak-Sar-Ben for her.

She took it and smiled wide, then handed it back to me. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Well I thought you might like to go on a vacation.”

“And where would I go? I don’t need to go on a vacation. You’re the one who needs a vacation.”

“Me? Mom, my entire life is a vacation.”

“If you’re always winning so much money and you don’t do anything with it, what is the point?”

I just looked into her deep blue eyes and her old white hair and wondered the same thing. “I don’t know,” I sighed. “Mom, I’m a gambler. That’s what I do.”

“Well, why don’t you try stopping for a while?”

“And what would I do? Look for a job?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I don’t need a job!” I signed, feeling my eyeballs roll back as I grit my teeth with my mouth shut. “That is what being a full-time gambler is all about. Not having to work!”

“There’s no talking to you. You’ll do what you want anyway.”

“Of course, I will. Isn’t that what being an adult is all about?”

“You think you’re grown up? You’re a child with a wallet the size of a bank. You have no responsibilities.”

“Oh, geez. Responsibilities again. I’ve got my responsibilities covered.”

“Have you thought about marriage lately? You’re not getting any younger.”

“Who am I going to marry?” I put my hand to my head and said to myself aloud, “How does she do this? She does this every time!”

She was still signing. “You’d think with all that money you’d have a little more encouragement and enthusiasm in your life.”

“Mom, will you shut up?” I signed. “Mom, shut up.”

“Have you gone to church lately? Maybe that’s what you need to do since I don’t seem to be of any guidance to you.”

I screamed and signed at her, “Mom, shut up!”

She stopped for a moment.

“Where were you on Christmas Eve?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? You had something to do that was more important than visiting your mother on Christmas Eve, and you don’t even know what it was?”

I just stood mute and looked at her for a moment. She was waiting for me to say something.

“Goodbye,” I signed.

I turned and walked away and she started to gobble at me. That’s what I call it, gobbling. She tries to scream and it comes out as unintelligible gibberish and is actually quite shocking to hear. You know she is trying to yell something that makes sense to her, but it sounds like a terribly frightened turkey at Thanksgiving.

As I rushed away I could hear her and like a trip back to boyhood, I understood the gobble.

She said, “Why did you come here?”

I turned and answered her both vocally and physically, “I just stopped to say

hello.” Then I proceeded on my way.

I got on the interstate and drove west. Taking my frustrations out on the Jaguar, I punched it up to about eighty and ripped past several cars simply because I did not care. I had no destination. I just needed to drive. Then, before I knew it, a State trooper was bearing down on me with his lights flashing, and I picked my foot up from the accelerator.

He was pulling me over. “Oh shit,” I whispered. “Don’t panic.”

I pulled over to the side of the road and waited for him. He took his time getting out of the cruiser and waltzing up to me.

I rolled down the window.

The cop was a Black guy. I didn’t know there were any Black cops in Nebraska. I spoke first. “You’re going to give me a speeding ticket, aren’t you?”

“You catch on fast. Step out of the car, please.”

I stepped out and was about a foot taller than him.

“May I see your license, sir?”

I took the license from my wallet and handed it to him.

The way he looked at it made me nervous, and I began to shake. “Step this way, please.”

He walked backward, leading me behind my car. “Stay right there.”

The trooper got into his car and sat there writing the ticket.

My mind raced. Did I meet a description, or was this an ordinary traffic ticket?

Does he have some clue as to who I am?

It was bitterly cold. I blew into my hands to warm them.

In a few minutes, he got out of his cruiser again and presented me with a traffic citation. "I'm not going to give you a ticket for not wearing a seatbelt. However, you were traveling seventy-five miles an hour in a fifty-five. The fine is eighty dollars and is payable to the address on the back of the ticket. "Do you have any questions, Mr. Pasternak?"

I shook my head. "No, sir."

"Sign here, please."

He tore off the front of the ticket and handed it to me with my license. I got back into my car and drove away.

It happened so fast. He stopped me. He gave me a ticket. That was all. No questions about where I was coming from or going to. No warnings. Not so much as the proverbial "Have a nice day." It was over, and I was on my way.

He didn't suspect me of anything at all. They must not have any clues about Marcie, or else he would have asked questions. At that moment, I knew. I've succeeded. I got away with it. Just like the jogger. No one has any idea who the killer is. Nobody knows that it was me.

A sense of relief overcame me, and I was more relaxed than ever. That cop was the best thing that could have happened to me. The fear of being caught was gone, and my fight with Mother was excused from my mind as just being another meaningless talk with a relative. I had nothing to worry about.

I went straight to the bank to cash my check, depositing the bulk of it, and buying

a money order for the speeding ticket. I made it in the door just before they closed.

Leaving the bank, I wondered what I should do. Usually, I would go to the track, but I simply did not feel much like going there. It was losing its appeal. I thought about going to a bar, but I didn't feel like drinking. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I felt like doing something different. Casino gambling.

I entertained the idea of flying to Las Vegas or Atlantic City but decided against it. Too much trouble. I just sat in my car in the bank parking lot with the engine running, listening to the radio, watching the snow fall as the sun went down. It was a blizzard. Soon, my windows were completely covered and I was hidden inside like a peanut in a shell.

I shut the car off. It was cold. I just sat there in my cold, snowy capsule, wondering what to do. Then, as if everything had become clear, I reached into the glove compartment and produced a pair of surgical gloves. Without hesitation, I shoved them into my pocket and removed the keys from the ignition. Then I locked my car and went for a walk.

I had a strong feeling of security and assurance within me. I had stopped asking myself questions and walked down the street without thinking about where I was going, yet feeling I knew.

On my walk, it had occurred to me that I was not dressed to endure a Midwest winter blizzard. I was trudging through the snow in leather dress shoes and a sports coat, and the cold soon made me shiver. In a while, I was walking across the mall parking lot and headed toward JCPenney. I knew it would be warm there. This would be my shelter

from the storm.

The interior of the store warmed me immediately. In a few short breaths, I was back to normal, acclimatized, and dressed appropriately for the occasion. I then did something I had not done for months. I shopped. I looked at things. I read price tags. I tried on clothes. I bought a hot pretzel covered with mustard and sat beside the fountain to eat it. Then I watched the people. They strode through the mall, looking at things in windows and on shelves. They were comparing prices and carrying their purchases home. They ate ice cream cones and cups of French fries.

Some shopped alone and some in groups of family or friends. Some were teenage lovers holding hands, girls sometimes wearing a boyfriend's oversized varsity jacket. Old ladies seemed to shop in sets of three. Never alone, never a duo, never in groups of four or more, always three. Tiny children with their mittens clipped to their cuffs wobbled along beside their mothers while the fathers carried bags.

Everyone's face held a different expression. Most were happy. Some were indifferent, some wondrous, some worried. Yet not one looked afraid. Although, when you think about it, what would they have to fear?

Sitting there watching the people, I realized that nobody's eyes had met mine. I sat there invisible, and nobody noticed me. I brushed my hair back with my hand and looked into the faces of strangers, hoping to find something but not knowing what. I felt strongly nonexistent. I received no looks of approval or the opposite.

Across from me, two teenage girls sat with their bags. They laughed and joked and gossiped about something that happened in school, and I stared at them, looking at

their legs, studying their faces and hair. Although I was less than ten feet away, they paid no attention to me.

I stood and walked to the escalator to continue my survey of the mall. Upstairs, it was the same. A hundred stores where you could find anything you wanted. Railings of chrome and glass adorned the catwalks. A strange brass colored mobile hung from the ceiling. "Art?" I mused.

I soon found a men's store where I bought a wool topcoat with a hat, scarf and gloves. I felt good about my purchase, and good about myself. Like I didn't win money for nothing. I looked good in the outfit too. The salesman was a cheerful sort who helped me pick out just the right thing.

I wore the topcoat out of the store and carried the accessories in a bag. I marched proudly through the mall. The purchase made me happy and I grinned. I could hear my own voice rattle in my head. "I have a new coat."

It pleased me just to think about it. To know that I did something good for myself. I gave myself a present. The mall became a warm, contenting place.

After a while, I found myself in a corridor that led to the movie theaters. There were five features to choose from. Three looked violent. One was a drama. But the one that everyone lined up to see was "Hook." The advertisement looked attractive. "What if Peter Pan grew up?" it asked.

Peter Pan was one of my favorite childhood stories. I remember the ideas of shadow catching and flying that enchanted my young imagination.

There was no hesitation in buying a ticket. In fact, I was a bit eager, like a kid

again. I smiled at the girl who sold me my ticket and I bought popcorn and a Coke. It may have been quite usual for the theater staff, but for me this was a special occasion. It had been years since I went to see a movie in a theater, instead of just renting a tape and falling asleep in front of the TV. I was a customer. A paying patron.

The usher told me to enjoy the show. I told him, "I will!"

I found a seat in the center down toward the front and nobody's head was in my way. The lights dimmed as I was sitting down. *Perfect timing*, I thought.

During the coming attractions I noticed that the floor was sticky where I sat and it aggravated me. So I got up slowly and moved over two seats, careful not to spill my popcorn and soda. The floor was better there. I slid my feet back and forth a few times and tested the surface. It was smooth. I despise a sticky floor. I guess I get it from the track.

As I slid my feet back and forth to test the surface I found a loose piece of metal or wood lying between my heels. I was going to kick it away but curiosity stepped in and made me pick it up. It was a knife. A big folding knife.

I opened it up to examine the blade. It felt sharp. I held it low and looked around to make sure nobody saw me. But of course, no one did. They were too busy stuffing their faces with candy and watching the explosions on the screen to notice what the great nobody Paul Pasternak was doing.

The blade was as long as my hand from my wrist to the end of my middle finger. "Somebody could get killed with this thing," I whispered.

I closed it up and put it in my pocket and forgot about it because the movie was

starting and it was time to go to NeverLand.

For the next few hours the real world was whisked away and I was a child again, watching Peter Pan. There was no racetrack. No bars. No mother. No mall. There was only NeverLand and Tinker Bell and the Lost Boys. Drawn by the screen, I did not see Mork and the Marathon Man, I saw Peter Pan and Captain Hook. For two hours Never Land became a real place and I became part of that place, and it made me happy.

My visit to the mall was the most refreshing thing I had done in years. When I walked out of the theater, I thought about the movie and the wonderful time I had preceding it. I walked along, smiling as the stores were closing. Minimum wage employees were pulling down indoor fences and locking up the sliding glass doors, sweeping floors, and shutting off lights as I walked to the mall entrance. Looking outside from beneath my new fedora I realized that I had walked here and that snow was still falling heavily. It was not bad yet, but would probably be at least a foot deep in a little while.

I was about to call a cab when I saw one parked conveniently at the curb. “I don’t believe it. What luck.”

The driver was smoking a cigarette and tuning the radio when I got in.

“Good evening,” I called out cheerily as I placed my bags in the back seat.

There was no answer.

“Are you on duty?”

A whiny yet delicate little voice answered, “Yes, I am. I’m just trying to get this radio to work. Give me a minute, okay?”

She didn’t turn around at first, she was obsessed with repairing the radio. “Come

on you stupid piece of shit!” she scolded the appliance, banging on it with something. “It worked fine a minute ago.” Then she turned to face me. “But the hell with it.” She sighed deeply. “Where can I take you?”

I just stared at her. She had a sexy look, the way the cigarette dangled from her lip, blonde, flawless skin. Her eyelashes were so long they cast a shadow. She wore a white beret. *Why is a girl this pretty driving a cab?* After taking in her features I said, “Ah, to a, to the bar.”

“Which one?”

“What?” I couldn’t believe I was face to face with a girl this pretty.

“Which bar?”

I tried to be cool. “Oh, the Windmill. On Security Boulevard. You know where that is?”

“Sure do.”

She engaged me in polite conversation. “So you did some late Christmas shopping I see.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Lots of good sales in there right now, I bet.”

“Yeah, I guess there are. I don’t do a whole lot of shopping. I just needed to pick up a few things.”

She was silent, but I really wanted to talk to her, so I thought of something to say. “I went to the movies.”

“What movie?”

“Hook.”

“Hook? The Peter Pan movie? Did you take your kids?”

“No. I went by myself. I don’t have any kids. It’s not really a ‘just for kids’ movie. It was a really good movie.”

“I saw *Silence of the Lambs* last week. Have you seen that yet? It is such a great movie. The way the killer guy murdered people was totally cool. Cinematic, you know? Pretty fucking scary. You should see *that* movie!”

At that moment I felt old, yet not grown up. What does this girl think of me, an old man who watches Walt Disney films? I learned quickly that I had only one thing in common with this girl.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty.”

Even though she wasn’t the most literate of conversationalists, she was friendly, and she took me right to the back door of the Windmill. I tipped her five dollars and got out of the cab. I was about to go into the bar, but then decided I really didn’t want a drink after all.

I scanned the parking lot, watching the snow dance below the streetlights. It was still and deafeningly quiet. I turned toward the side street and walked down the alley. The crunch of snow under my feet and the low puffing of the taxicab engine were the only sounds.

I looked back at the cab for a moment and wondered why she had not yet driven away. Then I put all of my bags into one hand and held the other one up to the light. The

snowflakes melted the moment they touched the warm bloodstained latex.

I walked about three blocks back to my car and stayed in the street most of the time to lose my footprints in the slush and tire tracks. Once again, I had become the invisible man, the nameless face in the crowd.

Halfway to my car, I stopped at a street corner, waiting for the light to change and calmly put down my bags and removed the gloves. I placed them in a nearby garbage can and continued on my way. I was completely alone on a quiet city street, save for a few cars. Nobody saw me get into my car.

I got out and cleared the snow off my windows. Nobody saw that either.

Nobody ever saw me. They couldn't.

I was invisible.

CHAPTER 5

WOMAN CAB DRIVER SLAIN

Robbery Not a Motive, Say Police

That was what it looked like the next day. The newspaper article didn't give all the gruesome details, but it did say that her throat was cut and she was stabbed over forty times. They didn't mention that blood was all over my right sleeve and the side of my new overcoat. There were no helpful hints from Heloise on how to remove blood stains from wool without confronting a dry cleaner. But that was something I already knew anyway.

I put the coat on the kitchen chair and stared at it. Then I fetched a large bottle of hydrogen peroxide and filled the bathtub with it. With the plug in the drain, it only filled up about a quarter inch. But that was enough. I emptied the jacket pockets and dropped the coat and shirt into the tub, flipping them over several times. The tub foamed and turned brown with the blood and peroxide cocktail. Soon my clothes were ready for the dry cleaner. They would need to hang up for a while, but the blood was gone. It spilled down the drain and gurgled. I rinsed it until the water ran clear. "Time for a new bottle."

I watched a movie on TV. It was bloody and violent. It was about a counterfeiter and how he eluded capture. He covered all of his tracks before he made them. When he spoke to the undercover agents, he knew who they were and he knew how to play them.

It occurred to me from watching this film that people are like horses. No two are alike, and they will always behave differently under different circumstances. Different circumstances are the other horses around them, the time of day, the weather, the jockey,

even which stable boy is near him, and how he is dressed. Every race is unpredictable, and that is why the true gambler must rely on tips and hearsay to win. The gambler, like the counterfeiter, must be aware of all the conditions governing a race, and what each horse is most likely to do while knowing what a certain horse would do. When keeping all of these elements in mind, one of them will know exactly what moves to make and when to make them.

I waited three weeks before retrieving my coat from the dry cleaners. I was worried. Worried that it was stained. I just felt like it was. Of course, it was. It was soaked in innocent warm blood. Even if it were undetectable, it was indeed stained, like me, like my memory. Am I growing a conscience?

My life proceeded.

I kept going to the track and winning and losing and drinking in the clubhouse lounge. I didn't make any extreme bets and I didn't win any truly big money. My existence was about as exciting or as boring as it had ever been.

I never went to visit my mother. I tried not to think about the jogger or the girl from New Years Eve or the cab driver. I didn't need that in my life. I didn't want to try and answer why. For the citizens of Omaha who read the newspapers, the killings were senseless, sad, and apparently unrelated. I decided to put it out of my mind. I could just keep my mouth shut and someday people will forget about these things. The jogger had no more chance than a rabbit who dodged beneath my tire, and the girls were like flies buzzing in my face, to be swatted away and forgotten. I never meant to hurt them. At least, I try to tell myself that now.

Back then, I just did what I did and forgot about it. But now, I think about it more often. And I ask myself ‘*why?*’ a lot.

Picking up the coat was frightening. What if the cleaner realized it had been covered with blood and pre-washed? And what if he called the police? My hand shook when I opened the door and walked inside.

I handed the girl my ticket and said, “I’m picking up a coat.”

She mumbled something and went in the back, turning on the carousel rack. It swung around. Garments wrapped in plastic flashed by and waved gently when it stopped. The girl took the coat off the rack and hung it before me. It looked new.

In my freshly pressed cleaned coat, I went to the track, ready to gamble. I walked in feeling powerful and strong. I knew that day I would win. Wearing the overcoat and knowing how I looked in it, I had the feeling that people would be impressed with me. I felt fresh and renewed simply because of the garment. It shared my secret, and kept it.

As I entered the clubhouse, the horses were moving onto the track for the fourth race. It was a cloudy day but somehow sunshine had found its way onto the track. It lit the horses beautifully but it hit the odds board so you couldn’t read it. I stared through my binoculars, trying to get a bead on the win pool when somebody hit me in the back of the head with a peanut and said, “Hey, ya cheapskate!” and laughed.

It didn’t upset me at all because I knew who it was. I turned around smiling. It was Curly, my favorite loser.

“How did you get in here?” I asked.

“I climbed over the banister.”

“You did not.”

“Seriously, it works. You should try it,” Curly insisted.

“You won’t spend an extra buck to get in the clubhouse? Instead, you sneak in like a thief, and call me a cheapskate?”

“That’s a buck I could bet with. Besides, when’s the last time you bought a round?”

“I don’t know.”

“Cheapskate.”

“Eatin’ peanuts?”

“And drinkin’ beer. How about that?”

“What a surprise.” I laced my words with sarcasm.

“Yeah, I don’t know how the peanut thing started.”

“But beer was in the womb?”

“Yup, tap and a keg, right there.” Curly snickered.

“Can you see the odds board?”

“Well sure. Right now I can, but don’t count on it after the seventh race.”

“Well, what are the odds on the Four?” I asked, looking through my binoculars.

“Who cares? The Four is a piece of shit anyway.”

“What? Wait - who is the Four anyway?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then why is he a piece of shit?”

“Because he’s the Four. The Four never hits on Tuesday.”

“It’s not Tuesday!”

“Yes, it is,” he argued.

“Is it?”

“Look at your program.”

“Tuesday, February second. It is Tuesday.”

“See? Know what else? It’s Ground Hog day, you know what that means.”

I stared blankly at his mustache and goatee. “What?”

“Seven won’t hit.”

I pulled out a cigarette and lit it. “Okay, okay - why will the Seven - not hit?”

“Seven never hits on Ground Hog Day.”

“Bullshit.”

“Hey, look it up!”

“So, you’re telling me that the Seven, in the history of racing, never hit on Ground Hog Day.”

“No! I didn’t say that! I *didn’t* say that. The Seven never hits on Ground Hog Day here, at this track. Might happen at Arlington or Flamingo, but it’ll never happen here. Never.”

“Never?” I asked.

“Never. Seven never hits on Ground Hog Day at Ak-Sar-Ben. Period.”

“What if it happens today?”

“It won’t.”

“Seven won’t come in all day?”

“No. Why don’t you believe me?”

“Because you’re nuts! Okay?”

Larry walked up with his Cheshire cat grin and asked, “Why is he nuts this time?”

I told him, “He says the Seven never comes in on GroundHog Day.”

“Is it Ground Hog Day?” cried Larry. “I forgot to buy my Mom a gift. Wait a minute - I was thinking of Mother’s Day. Never mind.”

“You have beer in the womb too?” I asked.

“He doesn’t believe me,” Curly told him. “Seven never hits on Ground Hog Day and the Four won’t come in either, because it’s Tuesday.”

Larry stared at him for a moment, trying not to laugh, turned to me and said, “Boy, you really are a skeptic, aren’t you? Have you no faith?”

He put his arm around Curly, who looked almost like a son to him, being about twenty years younger than us. Larry grabbed his face and squeezed his cheeks like a child. “Look! Look at this face! Would this face lie to you? Do you believe that this boy could even utter an untrue word?” They were funny, Curly just went with it. “He is a genius! A *mathemagician* in the truest sense of the word! If he’s right, it’s magic! He’s been coming to the track for what, a year now? And we’ve been comin’ for what? All our lives since we were twelve? How could he be wrong?”

“I’ll bet you,” said Curly.

Larry let go of him and said, “What will you bet?”

”I’ll bet you that the Seven and the Four don’t come in the money today.”

“Ooooooh!” said Larry.

“Whoah!” said I. “The boy wants to put his money where his mouth is!”

“Indeed! And what kind of wager are we talking about, young lad?”

“Betcha ten bucks.”

We laughed hysterically. “You gotta do better than that,” I said.

“You’re playing with the big boys now, son. Money talks, bullshit walks,” Larry told him.

“Well, how much do you want to bet?” Curly asked, looking worried.

“How much have you got?” I asked.

“Ten bucks.”

“That’s all you’ve got? Ten bucks.”

“Yes, that’s all.”

“Okay,” Larry said. “Give me the ten right now and I’ll give Shylock here five and we’ll all be even.”

“No!” Curly told him, backing away.

“You’re going to lose anyway, give us the money now and it will all be over. You won’t have to worry about us coming to look for you later. It will save you embarrassment.”

“No, wait a minute Curly,” I said. “You really think you can win on a bet like this?”

He looked uncertain and answered hesitantly, “Yeah.”

“Then bet us twenty bucks a piece. You win, which is highly improbable, you go home with forty bucks. We win, we promise to give you two days to pay us before you

lose any extremities.”

“So as long as the Four and the Seven don’t come in today, I win. And if they do, I lose?”

“Isn’t that what you envisioned?” asked Larry.

“Makes sense to me,” I said. “If the Four or Seven are in the money today, you pay. Deal?” I held out my hand.

We shook on it.

“Deal,” Curly answered with glee. “I’ll see you gentleman after the program to collect my forty bucks.”

“Pay us you mean.” Larry smirked.

“You ought to find yourself a duck to bet that ten on so you can win enough to cover your losses,” I told him.

“I’m not worried,” he said, walking away.

“He oughtta be,” said Larry. “I can’t believe he would make such a stupid bet.”

“Think we should let him off the hook?”

“Naaaaaaaah,” we said in unison.

The bell for the fourth race sounded and the pace car pulled the gate. They were off.

“Did you bet on this race?” Larry asked me.

“No. Did you?”

“Yup. I got a Four-Seven perfecta.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. There it is.” He held the ticket out for me to see.

“That’s amazing. That is really amazing. Un-be-liev-able!” I watched the race through my binoculars. “You know what, the Four and the Seven are dead last. How long is this race?”

“A mile.”

“Don’t think they’re gonna make it, Larry.”

“I think you’re right.”

We watched the race progress and the Four and the Seven got farther and farther behind. They were running neck and neck for last place. Larry was depressed.

“Hey, Paul.”

“Yeah, Larry?”

“Loan me twenty bucks.”

On my next trip to the betting windows, I stopped to look at the odds board up on the wall. A light slap landed on my bicep. It was my pal Wally, who was about ten years younger than me. I knew him since he was around five years old, and I watched him grow up as a student at the school for the deaf. He did not speak, but he read lips. Being much younger than me, I had nothing to do with him in school, but I knew who he was and still did. He was not a fixture at the track but stopped in a few times every season for a couple of beers and some light gambling.

Wally signed to me, “What’s up, man.”

I signed back without speaking. “Good to see you. How have you been?”

“Same, man. Are you alright? Your Mom?”

“She is still Mom.”

We laughed quietly, in smiles.

“You got a hot tip for me, or what?” asked Wally.

I shook my program. “Not today, man. These horses are shit. I would tell you if I see something, but these odds, today, I just say go with favorites to place. Don't bet a lot.”

“Not me, man. Ten dollars max.”

“Big spender!”

We laughed again.

“See you around, Paul.”

“Later.” I signed out, and Wally went on his way.

I truly had no equine recommendations. I wasn't sure I would stay for the whole program except to see how Curly's prediction panned out. Good thing that Wally was not a serious gambler. He would never be frustrated or anxious when placing a bet. He wouldn't ever catch a fever.

The fever.

Everybody has his own definition of it. They can tell when others have it, but most gamblers can't identify the illness. They just call it a losing streak. The fever is a sense of invincibility that starts with a few simple, easy, lucky winnings. It psychologically breaks down your mortality.

The fever works into your mind slowly but surely, like the boll weevil devours cotton. You come to a point where “you know.” You “*know*” which horse, what number, exactly when to stand on eleven and bust the dealer. When the knowledge swells, it soon

bursts, and ego and overconfidence rule the day.

Then you bet big and lose. The gasoline knowledge is ignited, and the wildfire runs through you. The rage builds pressure. Your head. Your heart. Your guts.

That big loss was your roller coaster going over the top. It kept driving down, gaining speed, and the flames grew higher and higher, and then you crashed.

Beaver was feeling it on Groundhog Day. I'm not sure how he got that nickname, but that is what we called Moe sometimes. The Beaver with the fever bought drinks in the clubhouse lounge. That was how well he was doing. He had hit the daily double, two perfectas, and cashed in on a heavily bet long shot. In that race, he had gambled over two hundred bucks on a single ticket, a trifecta key wheel with a seventy-to-one long shot on top. One of the highest-risk bets one can make. It was something I'd never even tried.

It was inspirational to watch him. The lanky chain-smoker, adorned in thin gold chains, would sometimes gamble his last two dollars at times in hopes of avoiding eviction from his little west side home. He was finally having his day. I hoped things would not go south on him. But the horse he had chosen to win the next race was, in my opinion, an utterly stupid decision. Moe's roller coaster was nearing the highest crest of the ride.

He put his arm around me as he sat down. "Shylock, my man! I got the magic touch to-*day!*"

I smiled at him, for him.

"I am going to buy you a drink!"

"You're going to buy me a drink?" I called out to the rest of the bar, "Is there a

doctor in the house? I think this guy is sick! The Beaver is buying drinks!”

“I’ll buy you two drinks.”

“Boy, you *are* sick.”

“I’m not sick, man.”

“You got the fever.”

“Hell yes, I got the fever, and I’m gonna run wid it, baby. I don’t need no doctor, tho’!”

“Man, I must be in heaven! Moe the Beaver is buying me drinks.”

“What’chyoun mean? I buy drinks for you all the time.”

“All the time? Like when?”

“Man, I *allus*’ buy you drinks.” He smiled so I could see myself reflected in his gold tooth.

“Always?”

“Well, maybe not one hundred percent of the time, but I have, in the past, bought you drinks, have I not?”

“Yes, yes, you have,” He sipped his beer. “In 1978.”

He choked, laughing, trying not to spit, his eyes bugged out. When he swallowed, he guffawed loudly and held my arm, pointing at me. “You got me, Shylock, man. You’re the man. Damn!”

We just kept laughing together when Curly walked up.

“Don’t buy him a drink!” I said.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh races resulted in Curly’s favor, which was something

of a surprise because either the Four, the Seven, or both were favorites for each race.

We were sitting in the clubhouse bar when banister boy approached us. He wore his best shit-eating grin between his whiskers with a cigarette dangling there. He plucked the smoke with his grubby fingers and shouted, “HA!” and ran away.

Larry and I snickered.

“Ha,” said Larry.

“Ha,” said I. “Idiot!”

I waited for a comment, but there was none.

“Have you won anything yet? I asked.

“No – Have you?”

“Well, sure. Just not today.”

Larry grabbed his soda as he stood. “I’m going to play pinball.” He walked over to the machine and plunked in a quarter.

I sipped my drink and a chill went through me.

It was odd. I sensed something. I felt somebody walk into the bar. I don’t know how that happens, but it does. You hear about stuff like this in ghost stories, but it happened to me.

I turned, and there she was. Six feet tall. Silky black hair. Blood red lips. Emerald eyes that could pierce the soul. It was truly a moment of magic if such a time ever existed. From across the almost empty room, I could feel an instant rapport. Something came over me that I couldn’t name or explain.

Simply reacting, I was loud, “Baby, where have you been? I’ve been looking all

over for you!”

Larry just watched.

She walked right over to me. “Sure you have. You boff me and disappear? That’s your idea of a relationship? You don’t call. You don’t write.”

She stood close as I sat on my stool, leaning back on the bar. A deep blue dress held her bosom inside her shiny black raincoat, her knee and thigh pressed against me. “Give me one good reason I should ever straddle you again.”

I reached up behind those shiny locks and felt the nape of her neck, pulling her close for the kiss of a lifetime. It was slow, wet, passionate, and tonguely.

It was like hitting a superfecta with every last dime in the world bet on it. Breaking the bank. It felt like everything had fallen into place from a swell of chaos. And the strangest thing of all, because I was so comfortable with her, holding her, touching her, sharing an intimate moment, was that I did not know who she was.

My opening statement was only a line. Not even a serious one. I was just trying to get my mind off the odds board for a while. But there we were, strangers locked in a kiss. A *great* kiss at that. I only had moments to figure out if I really did know her from somewhere. As our lips parted company, I was certain. I did not.

The moment was as surreal and spooky as life could ever be. *Déjà vu* with a twist. A feeling where I knew this had not happened before, but I knew exactly what to do, to say, as though I had been rehearsing for this one moment my whole life and had the extreme confidence not to blow it.

I stood to help her take off her raincoat, and she sat down. I hung it on the rack

across the bar, only steps away, then decided to hang up mine beside hers. Larry gave me a funny look that read, 'I'm impressed, but you could have told me about her. We are best friends.'

Oh, Larry, there are some things that even best friends don't share. Like murder and mutilation and certain hot tips too far from post time, if at all. But believe me, had I known about her, I certainly would have told you.

She already had a drink when I returned. It looked just like mine.

"What are you drinking?" I asked.

"The same thing you are."

"You like Crown Royal on the rocks?" She smiled sweetly and sipped.

"Who are you?"

"Marlene. Who -" she looked at me up and down, studying my build and my outfit, "are you?" She seemed to sing as she said it.

"Paul," I told her with the glazed elegance of Cupid's latest victim. This time he was a little off the mark. I felt like I'd been hit in the head. "You never answered my question."

"Oh?" Even the way she said that was sexy.

"What's a bad girl like you doing in a nice place like this?"

Then she hit me with the sexiest smile since Ann-Margaret did Vegas. The firm cleft chin, the perfect bottom teeth, the full and quivering lower lip, the corners of her mouth dimpling below those soft high cheekbones. *She does look a little like Ann-Margaret.*

She leaned in close. "I'm here to live. To follow my heart. To chase my dreams. To be deliberate in the finest sense of the word. From now on, I'm going to do whatever I want, whenever I want. Want to come with?"

An odd proposition from a stranger, especially to a monster like me. This woman had obviously broken out from some shell recently and nothing was going to deter her from any goals she might have set. It was dreamlike. That backward sense of *Déjà vu* ruling every move and muttering.

Questions hung in my mind. Namely, *Why me? How?*

But I knew why. Not because I spoke to her first, not just that, but for the same reason the Four and the Seven were not going to come into the money that day. The same reason a jogger was found dead in the middle of a country road shortly before Christmas.

It was destiny. Destiny, pure and simple.

I went along with the act and everything I said came naturally. "Sure. Why not."

A guy would have to be an idiot not to want to follow this woman around in circles. Either an idiot or married.

"Tell me, Paul, what are we betting on today?"

"I would bet . . . that you're running away from something."

"What are you? A psychologist?"

"No, I'm a gambler. I bet to win."

"Then that would be a losing bet. I'm not running away from anything, Paul. On the contrary, I'm just moving right along into the future, and I don't know what that will be, but I'm doing it fast. Today. Now."

Marlene pulled a cigarette from the pack in her purse and held it up for me to light. I guessed it was time for me to quit trying to quit again and lit it for her, then lit one of my own.

“I’ve never seen you here before,” I told her.

“That makes sense. I’ve never been here before. Lived around here my whole life and this is my first time to see the inside of Ak-Sar-Ben.”

“You like it?”

“So far. How do you bet on horses?”

I chuckled. “You study ‘em. Handicap the race.”

“What’s handicap?”

“Figure out which horse is faster than all the rest and bet on it.”

Larry finished his pinball game and sat across the bar from us, keeping his distance so he could watch and listen without interfering. From the point of our introduction, it must have appeared to the bar that we were old friends. To Larry, as to me, she was a mystery woman. However, I gave Larry no indication that our thoughts were related.

She pointed at a program sitting on the bar. “Is that how you handicap?” Marlene asked. “That little book?”

“Yeah, here. The program.” I slid it along the bar to her. “You’ve been to the track before though, haven’t you?”

“Yes, but not here. I saw the Kentucky Derby once. When I was a teenager.” Then her eyes lit up as she delighted in telling me, “Oh, it was one of the years that Secretariat

won.”

“Nineteen-sevety-three,” announced Larry in the background behind his White Owl cigar.

Marlene did not notice.

“That was really fun. What you did when you came in a minute ago. Playing along, I mean. It wasn’t at all what I expected.”

She lingered on her cigarette puff before exhaling slowly. “What did you expect?”

“Nothing,” I said with an appearance of self-doubt that not only I could feel, but knew she could see.

Then she let her guard down too and told me, sincerely, “I’ve never done anything like that before. But . . . I don’t . . . I don’t know what to say.” She blushed. “It just felt right.”

We just sat silent and stared at each other for a moment. Tracing one another’s faces with our eyes, slowly pursing little smiles.

“I don’t want to say destiny,” she told me.

I smiled wide. “I don’t either.”

She held out her hand. “Marlene Riggs.”

I held it warmly. “Paul Pasternak.” I had to ask, “Why me?”

“Why not you? You’re a man, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“You know what I mean, don’t you? Look at yourself. You’re a real man. It shows. You’re rough and tall and strong.” She ran her hand across my shoulder. “The

way you squint, the heat of your breath. You haven't shaved. Your hair is ruffled, you're not all dressed up or trying to be impressive. You're not tainted with cologne or after-shave; you smell like a man. Clean, but like a man." She leaned in and kissed me on the neck and whispered, "Your sweat even. You taste like a man. I can tell things about you. You're quiet and deep and you have secrets."

"What makes you think I have secrets?"

"All men have secrets. Real men. Not like those sissies that rattle off their meager accomplishments one after another as if they've just saved the world, those who tell every last detail of their childhood or share their fears. No, not you. It's in your kiss. You're cold and rugged and fearless. You've used your share of girls and broken the hearts of women. You are in my definition; from first glance and now upon further examination, what I would call a real man. And so hard to find." She zeroed in on my lower lip and bit it gently.

I bit back, gently. *This is crazy.*

The announcer cried, "They're off!"

Although I did not see them, I knew for some we were the center of attention while others studied the race on the TV monitors. Everybody there knew me except her. I wondered what they thought of me now.

It was so nice. And it felt so alien to me as well, like a sort of first date. We just sat and talked for so long, it felt wonderful, to be interesting to somebody other than the small circle of gamblers and bartenders who knew me so well. It almost made me forget things. The things that I didn't want to remember. You know the ones.

The irony of the conversation was this; that I could forget, and that of all the secrets I would have liked to have shared, just to relieve my conscience and ease my mind, were the most horrible of secrets those who carry them dare not utter. So there could be no relief.

Who is Marlene Riggs? A university English professor involved in a great upheaval. A breakup with another instructor at the school whom she had dated for a year. Now he was obsessed with her and won't leave her alone. That was why she was at the racetrack. She was seeking new haunts. Places where he wouldn't suspect she'd go. If he did show up, she would know she was followed.

We sat there at the bar the rest of the day, running off to the betting windows together to place bets on the Four and Seven.

We never won. Larry finally got the gumption to waltz over and find out who she was.

"Marlene, this is my good friend, Larry." I presented her with a wave of my hand. Larry, say hello to Marlene."

"Hi, nice to meet you, I've heard a lot about you."

I glared at Larry, Marlene glared at me, and we were all confused.

"He did? When?"

"Larry, we just met."

"You did?"

"Yeah, what's the matter with you?"

"Oh. I thought - isn't this - ?"

“No, it’s not. Larry, what are you thinking?”

“I - I don’t know.” He backed away slowly. “I’ll see you later.” And then hurried out of the bar.

There was an obligatory moment of awkward silence and then she asked, “Paul, are you married?”

“No!” I said to the ceiling, then looked her in the eye and said it again. “No! He’s an idiot, okay? I got no better explanation than that.”

“You’re really not married?”

“No, that’s one thing I’m definitely not, is married. I can prove it. Boy! Can I prove it! Never even came close. The closest thing I have to a girlfriend is - you, believe it or not. I swear. Do you want to come to my house? I’ll show you. No wife there. Just a cat. That’s not one of my secrets.”

“What are your secrets?”

“They wouldn’t be secrets if I told you.”

She smiled and knocked back the last of her drink. “You are a real man.”

CHAPTER 6

The reality of this relationship came to me quickly. My new friend Marlene could not be ripped into bloody little shreds, especially since ninety percent of those who saw us there knew me. But the strange thing was (and this is an odd thing to be considered strange) that I had no true desire to do her any harm. I relished her company. She really liked being with me and told me so.

I couldn't call it love. That would be overstepping boundaries I knew nothing about. It was more like a crush at first sight. It was mutual. The rest of the day, I showed her around the track and taught her about the horses and how to handicap.

She and I picked horses and went to the windows together to place bets. I only bet tens and twenties now, ever conscious of her opinion. If I bet any more and won, it might be expected that I spend the winnings on her. If I bet a lot and lost, I was an even bigger loser. It was different with her as opposed to the women I met away from the track.

At the track, when on the premises, I could feel the mystique it had. The scent of stale beer, old tickets, horse manure, and cigar smoke blended in a delicate lingering essence that I couldn't get anywhere else; the sound of somebody thumping through the iron grandstand and the screams of the crowd in the last ten seconds of the homestretch. When not at the track, if I tried to tell somebody how great it was without the amenities of its true sounds and odors, it was unappreciated and misunderstood.

I didn't have to sell the track to Marlene. She had bought it on her own. I just happened to be one of the colorful characters that went along with it.

After the program was over, after the tenth race, it was generally a ritual to sit in

the clubhouse bar for an hour or so and bullshit with whoever happened to be there. But today, we were nowhere near the clubhouse bar. We were up in the top row of the grandstand, where it was warm, making out like kids in a car.

Then they shut the lights out. We stopped and let our eyes adjust.

I said, "I think they're closed."

"Think we should go?"

"Where?" I asked.

"My house? Or maybe your house. You could prove to me you don't have a wife."

"I don't have a wife."

"Let's go to my house anyway."

"Okay."

We got up and left. We walked to my car because it was closer to the stands, and I gave her a ride to her car.

"You drive a Jaguar? What kind of work do you do? Are you a lawyer or something?" she asked.

"No, I'm a gambler."

I opened the door for her.

"Huh," she said, getting in.

I sat beside her at the wheel.

"So you drive a Jaguar."

"Yeah. What do you drive?"

“A Dodge Dart!”

I tried to console her. “It’s an old Jaguar.”

Dropping her off at her car, I said, “I’ll follow you.” And held her hand a moment before she stepped out.

I needed some reassurance. “You won’t lose me, will you?”

Her eyes were sincere. “No, I won’t do that. Follow me.” She kissed me.

Following the little car I was excited. Never knowing where she would turn next. I stayed close and we ran yellow lights together. She went to a neighborhood I knew and lived in a little house in the middle of the block. She pulled into a driveway and I followed right behind her.

We exited our vehicles simultaneously and went up the stairs in silence. I had to break it. “My mom works right down the street there at the end of the block.”

“Really? There is nothing down there.”

“Yeah, there is. The school for the deaf. She’s the principal.”

“An educator. Nice. Do you mind waiting out here for a minute? I need to secure the dog. I will put her in the basement.”

“You don’t have to do that. I like dogs.”

“Trust me, I do. She doesn’t know you yet.”

I waited outside while Marlene sent the animal to the basement, and let me in when the pet was fully secure. With that, we settled on the sofa for a long and friendly conversation.

I told her about growing up with my mom, her single and deaf, and me with no

siblings. How I'd never really worked. And what it was like to lose eighteen-thousand dollars in Las Vegas in one night.

She told me about her first failed marriage when she was seventeen. It lasted four weeks. Her second lasted four years. It had been a decade before.

Marlene told me how she put herself through school, eventually earned a master's degree, and was now a college professor, "At Dana College in Blair."

Blair was about thirty miles north.

"Way up there? That's kind of a haul."

"I like the drive. And they treat me nice."

"Even in the winter?"

"They treat me nice all year."

I laughed. "I mean driving in the snow."

"Not that bad. If it is, teachers get snow days, too."

We learned a lot about each other in quite a short time while drinking wine and eating potato chips.

Our talk was absolutely normal and sterile. I was a regular guy, and she was a regular girl. Normal everyday people, like everyone; nothing too spectacular about either of us. It could have been a chat being had in any part of the world between two adults. It was typical.

Until the wine kicked in.

Knowing myself as I did, I would not reveal my secrets. Not the real secrets. But she did. The strangest things she decided to share were the details of her last relationship.

It was odd and disturbing.

He was a psychology professor at her school. His name was Roger Fisher, and he was almost sixty years old. He had sadomasochistic tendencies, and Marlene was not at all attracted to that. “You know, he seemed so charming at first, so leisurely. I was even thinking about moving up to Blair to be closer to his place. Then he started to change. Whenever we were alone he wanted to bite me. And I don’t mean just nibble. The guy bit me! He broke my skin, look.” She hiked up her skirt and showed me a freshly healed wound on her thigh three inches above her knee. “I had to get a tetanus shot. I got tested too. For HIV. I’m negative, thank God! So I told him no more biting, and the next thing he does is show me some handcuffs and wants to chain me to my bathroom sink!”

“The bathroom sink?” It even shook me. “Say what? This guy’s a psychology professor?”

“Oh, yes, and well respected, too.”

“Did you report him?”

“No. For what? Wanting to have kinky sex? It’s not a crime. It’s just something I don’t want to do. Anyway, I’ve completely alienated him now. I told him I wasn’t going to see him again since I got to see his house. I don’t know where he got ‘em and I don’t want to know. In the refrigerator in his basement – he had bottles of blood. Not like surgical bottles, Coke bottles and milk jugs, full of blood.”

“Human blood?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to know. He said he wanted to paint me with it and lick it off. I just couldn’t deal with somebody like that. It probably wasn’t even blood.

But just the idea, to say it was and keep it in milk jugs.” She sneered and shook her head.

“I just couldn’t deal with somebody like that. You know, even though he was really strange, I really liked him.

“Oh – another creepy thing. One time there was hair sticking out of his desk drawer. Blonde hair, like an entire scalp. He said it was a science project. It’s weird because a blonde girl on campus disappeared about the same day. They thought she ran away somewhere at first. But she was in his class! Sometimes, I wonder if it was like her head in that desk or something, but I don’t believe it myself. I never told anyone.

“I hope you don’t think I’m weird for telling you this. I can’t imagine myself being intimate with a killer.

“At the time, if it was *him*, I didn’t want to know. But it turns out it was this Downs kid that did it. Remember that? Last year, the girl who got stabbed up there? What was her name – Mary Webber? That girl was in his class.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“Mary Webber? You don’t remember that? She was stabbed so many times they couldn’t even identify her! Had to use the dental records. They said her face,” she motioned with her fingers over her nose, “was completely gone! She used to tutor or babysit this kid with Downs Syndrome, but they were the same age. He even drove a car. So one night, they go down to the park for ice cream and she tells him about some other guy that she really likes. The Downs kid thought it was a date and they were breaking up so he ran away. That’s what he said. A jogger found her on the riverbank first thing in the morning. He said the seagulls were eating her. If it weren’t for that Downs kid, I would

have thought of Roger as a prime suspect.``

“So he admitted it?”

“Damn. You’d make a hell of a juror! I can’t believe you haven’t heard about this. The trial starts on Monday.”

More talk. More wine. The conversation bounced from murder to infectious diseases to rainforest deforestation to coffee to horses to cars to haircuts to sex. Not once did I mention my first hand experience in the subject of death. I marveled at what was happening to us. I was part of an ordinary conversation, getting to know somebody, telling them about myself as well, and all the time wondering if my victims weren’t just a sick fantasy or dream. The entire time knowing that they were real and so was I, and I didn’t know why I was alive, and they were not.

Now the part of me that was normal sat and sipped wine with a new girlfriend who kissed me occasionally. She suspected nothing. I was just a guy who gambled. I owned stocks and bonds and had invested so wisely and lived so simply that I did not have to work and yet I could have whatever I wanted.

Marlene was amazed. She said so. I was amazed as well. She dumped a psychologist with a vampire fetish and met me, then told me how creepy it would be to know she had known a killer. Yet there I was, marveling at the irony of it all.

Worst of all, the force within me that wanted to do the unthinkable, again needed to be restrained, now more than ever, because we had been witnessed together, and because we were now friends. Friends didn’t kill one another. Being there scared me. What if I forgot we were friends?

Later, when we were good and drunk, she asked, “Would you like to meet Eureka?”

“Eureka?”

“My dog.”

I had forgotten all about the animal in the basement. It never scratched at the door, howled, or made any sound at all. “Sure,” I said.

Marlene went to open the door two rooms behind me, saying, “Come here, girl! Come on!”

I waited on the couch and slowly turned to see her being led by a huge Doberman Pinscher. Marlene was her master, but Eureka owned all within reach.

Eureka greeted me with a guttural hum and a quick lunge at my face. I froze.

Marlene held the leash firmly in her grip and stopped her. “No! Down, Eureka! Be good. Friend!”

The dog took the commands superbly.

“Come, sit.” She led Eureka in front of me.

I was still frozen. The dog’s sharp eyes focused on me, seeming to watch my every breath.

“Eureka is a trained police dog. She’s retired. I adopted her after I broke up with Roger. Don’t make any sudden moves. I want her to get to know you.”

I couldn’t move at all.

Marlene sat right next to me and laid her head on my chest to show Eureka that I was safe. “Good girl,” she said in baby talk. “Shake!”

She held out her hand and Eureka offered a paw. “Good girl!” Then told me, “Now you shake hands with her. Say ‘*Shake*’ first, then put your hand out slowly.”

“Shake?” My voice cracked.

“Say it so she can hear you.”

“Shake?” I said again, this time thrusting an open palm toward her.

She barked and snapped. The loud bark instantly sobered me. I pulled back and clutched my hand to my chest. The hair on my arms stood straight up.

“NO! Be good!” Marlene told Eureka.

She turned to me. “You have to say shake first, then put out your hand. She thought you were attacking her, see?”

“Oh, then it’s mutual.” I stared at the dog.

“Okay, this time say ‘Sha-ake.’”

“Sha-aaake?”

“Now put out your hand.”

I held out my right hand hesitantly with the fear that this would be the last time I would see it. But the dog gave me her paw and took on a friendly disposition. Soon Eureka decided that I was okay and she could curl up and sleep on my legs. My legs went to sleep along with her.

Letting the dog alone we sat and talked some more and once again the subjects curiously faded into one another from dogs to cats to hockey to ice cream and back to Roger.

Marlene could not get over him. Not because of love, but because of fear. He

disappeared. One day he stopped coming to school and never returned. That was when she got the dog.

“His house was abandoned and left as though he would be back later that day. No bags were packed. Dirty dishes were left in the sink. The fish needed to be fed. The alarm clock was set for six the next morning. But Roger was gone. His car was in the driveway. The keys were in his pants pockets by his bed, locked inside the house. There was no sign of bottled blood or handcuffs.”

When we ran out of wine, it was decided that my driving home would be ridiculous. I would stay for the night. In the dark, we pecked and pawed and played upon the cool bed sheets, and soon, they were warm and moist with sweat. Sleep soon surrounded us, and we were held captive by it, welcoming dreams.

~

Where am I? was my first thought when staring at the strange ceiling above me. Along with the photograph of wild horses running through a valley and the morning sun piercing the dresser, the room was entirely alien.

A moment of anxiety touched me before I realized what I had done. I had slept in Marlene’s bed. Looking down, I found blood on the sheets. Not a lot, but enough to be alarming. I trembled. I wiped my eyes and sat up, then focused on my fingers, crusted with dried blood. “Oh no!” I gasped.

Eureka stood to my left, staring at me. A deep, low growl emanated from her throat. My heart raced, and my mind roared in that split second of rude awakening, desperately trying to craft a jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing.

“Eureka!” Marlene cried from the bathroom, then rushed in and commanded,
“No! Go lay down.”

She sat beside me and kissed me on the lips.

My heart stopped and started and stopped again. I needed an explanation.

“Good morning, Paul.”

I was mute.

Marlene repeated, “Good morning, Paul!” as if I had not heard her.

I could feel myself sort of smiling. I looked down at the bloody bed, then up at her. “What - happened?”

She bowed her head and pulled the sheets up over the blood, embarrassed. “I am really sorry,” she told me sincerely. “I didn’t know it was going to happen last night. Oh hell, yes, I did. I just can’t believe my period couldn’t wait until morning.”

“Oh,” I said, relieving myself from that moment of terror in which I had mutilated her body and raped her corpse and was then trapped by Eureka. What to do now?

“You want to go out for breakfast? Waffles or something?”

This made me smile. “Sure. Let’s go. Wherever you want.” I kissed her. “Let’s go!”

And thus, our relationship began.

CHAPTER 7

With a chance Friday night encounter and probable one night of lust, we parlayed Saturday morning brunch into a full-time intimate friendship. By the end of the week, Marlene was a permanent fixture on my arm at the track and in my home. We spent every night together since we met. The following Saturday we went on a date.

I backed into her driveway so she would not have to walk all the way to the street.

Marlene popped out of her front door as I was climbing the steps. "Hey!" she smiled.

"Hi. Ready?"

"I am." She gave me her hand so I could help steady her while she climbed down the stairs in spiky high heels.

Standing together on the sidewalk she was a full three inches taller than me.

"Hello, up there," I said.

We laughed, and she kissed me. "Oh, look at you. Shaved! Just for me?"

"Just for you."

She ran her fingers across my cheeks. "Smooth. What do you shave with, Rambo's knife?"

"Nothing that extreme."

"I should let you do my legs."

We laughed again.

Stepping to the driveway, she noted a missing emblem on the back of my car. It was the number six from the XJ6. "You have a letter missing."

"Do I? Oh, yeah. Like I said, it's an *old* Jaguar." I held the door for her. "My lady."

"Such a gentleman," she teased. "Still looks like James Bond's car."

I got in the driver's seat, popped a cigarette in my mouth, turned to her with a serious look, and spoke in my best Scottish brogue. "Pasternak. Paul Pasternak." I lit the smoke.

"Shaken, not stirred."

We laughed, and I drove away.

"So, where are you taking me, Mister Pasternak?"

"Iowa."

"Iowa! Are you serious? What is in Iowa? We are not really going to Iowa."

"Yes, we are. Council Bluffs. The best steakhouse I know. Believe me, I know them all."

"Steak. That sounds fancy."

"Trust me. It's the best."

~

Well into her third bite of tenderloin, Marlene agreed. "Oh, my God. I have never had meat like this."

"Told you."

"It's incredible." She ate with gusto. "And they know what medium-rare means. Just the right amount of blood. Not too much, just right."

"Glad you like it."

"I love it. Beef just isn't right without blood."

I nearly said something really stupid about her ex-boyfriend and blood, but refrained, countering with only, "Suppose so. Want to know what we're doing after dinner?"

Marlene's eyes lit up as she gulped her wine. "Tell me."

"We're going to the casino."

Her eyes widened. "Casino? What casino? Where is there a casino?"

“Alright, not so loud. It’s not far from here.”

“Get out of Dodge!”

“I’m serious.”

She drummed her fingers on the table. “Oh, my God! This is going to be great.”

I laughed. “Okay - just - just - contain yourself. This information - is not for public consumption. It’s a private club. I have a reservation.”

She smiled wide. “Eeee! So excited.”

I paid and tipped the server. We linked arms as we left the steakhouse and I led her into the dark.

“I think you parked over there. That way.” She pointed in the opposite direction.

“Yes, but the casino is this way.”

“Oh, we can walk from here?”

“Yes, that building. Right across the park.”

“A walk in the park? In the dark? You really know how to show a girl a good time, Paul Pasternak.”

“I do my best work in the dark.”

The city park in the center of downtown was lit with gas lanterns. Just enough light emanated from them to see halfway to the next lantern on the brick walkway. At the center of the park was a big fountain, not yet flowing, as it was still too cold. But the snow was gone. Stony cherubs sat on the edge of the bowls above us.

Marlene stopped to admire it. “That is beautiful,” she said. “I am so glad you brought me here. I would have never seen this. How old is that fountain? It looks like an antique like it should be in a museum, or in Europe, somewhere.”

“Pretty old, I guess.”

It was as old as the rest of the neighborhood, which could have been a hundred years or so. The apartment building which housed the casino was probably that old.

The establishment was illegal, but had been operating steadily for years. Tink, the proprietor, maintained a low-key high class operation. It was not a dirty backroom inside a greasy spoon. It was a taste of old Las Vegas that was cleverly hidden in plain sight and only revealed to a privileged few, because that was how Tink liked it. I didn't know if Tink owned the apartment building, but I suspect that he did. He had never been busted by the cops, and probably had friends on the force, which would explain his long history of flying under the radar.

The only way in was by referral. A friend of a friend of a friend who would vouch for a gambler who knew how to keep quiet. For Marlene, my word was all that was needed for her entry, as I had been gambling at Tink's for close to twenty years.

The doorman buzzed us into the lobby and called Tink on the phone. “Mister Pasternak for Mister Tink.” He asked me, “Plus one, Mister Pasternak?”

“Yes, sir. Plus one.” I held Marlene's hand and kissed her knuckle.

The doorman confirmed my reservation and escorted us to the elevator. He pushed the button for the sixth floor and said, “Have an excellent night, Mister Pasternak.”

I shook his hand and left him with a twenty dollar bill in his palm as he stepped back.

Marlene smiled. “This is like real James Bond shit.”

I just laughed. “Okay.”

Tink's place was no Casino Royale. High stakes were few and far between. But, it was not a poor man's playground by any means. It had a perfect balance, hosting friendly neighborhood card games where pots climbed into the hundreds, but not thousands. Tink did not

want to bankrupt anybody, he just wanted everyone to have a good time. He was known to cut some people off before they went home completely broke. Tink was a good man in that way.

Knocking on the door required five light and melodious taps, renowned as the first section of the tune *Shave and a Haircut*, which was always followed by two taps from the other side of the door to answer *Two Bits*. Then the door opened to a flood of orchestral string music. Tink always had Mancini or Sinatra or some other classy easy listening on the stereo.

Tink's wife, Dorothy, a skinny, sixtyish woman with drooping alcoholic eyes, answered the door, greeting us with her big, happy smile and hugged me. "Paul! Hello, hello, hello!"

"Hi Dorothy, how are you? Nice to see you."

"Excellent. Yourself?"

"I'm just about in heaven now that I'm seeing you."

She loved being flirted with. "Oh, you. And who is this?"

"This is - uh -" For a moment I blanked on her name.

"Marlene," said Marlene.

"I knew that, honest, I did," I insisted.

The women laughed and Tink showed up. He was a big man, wide, not tall, and had a huge nose. It was obvious, but I never realized how prominent his proboscis was until I saw him profiled face to face with Marlene. His nose was at least four times the size of hers. It was like his nose could cover her whole face. He wore a white collared shirt with rolled up sleeves, and a couple of thick gold chains, with two rings on each hand.

"Look who is here. Pasternak. You bring lots of money with you? I'm going broke over here. I need lots of money, so I hope you brought plenty with you," Tink joked.

"Oh, sure. That's all I've been thinking about. How much money should I bring to Tink?"

“All of it,” said Tink, laughing. “Wait a minute, wait a minute now, who is this young lady?” He took her hands into his massive palms.

“Marlene,” I said.

“You remembered,” said Marlene.

Tink smiled at her. “Well, aren’t you nice. And tall. Taller than him. What kind of business are you in, Marlene?”

I jumped in before she could answer. “She is definitely not in real estate.”

“Definitely not?” said Tink.

“No, sir,” I said.

“I teach college English,” said Marlene.

“Oh, is that right?” said Tink. “That’s just wonderful. Wonderful. We are so glad to have you. Here, come on now, let me take your coats.”

We peeled off our overcoats. Tink watched her bosom bounce around inside her skin-tight blue-green dress. He looked me in the eye and discreetly made a happy face for me alone, which Dorothy and Marlene could not see.

Dorothy took the coats and told Marlene, “If you want to take your heels off, you’re welcome to. It is all carpet in here.”

“Really? That would be great,” said Marlene, kicking off her shoes.

“What can we get you to drink?” asked Tink. “I know you’re having Crown rocks. What about you, my dear?”

“What - what do you have?”

“Sweetheart, Tink’s got everything,” said Tink.

She smiled. “White wine?”

“French chablis or California chardonnay?”

“Ooh, chardonnay, please.”

“You’ve got it sweetheart. Make yourselves comfortable, I’ll find you. And welcome to Tink’s.”

Marlene scrunched her stockinged toes into the Berber carpet. “That feels good. So nice to take those heels off.”

“Why do women wear high heels if they hurt their feet?” I asked.

“To make our legs look great.” Marlene could not stop smiling. “This is the best. How did you find this place?”

“I think it found me.”

She marveled at the apartment casino, taking it all in, like a kid at an amusement park. It looked like Las Vegas circa 1965, complete with groovy chandeliers, colored uplighting, and mirrored walls to make it look bigger. One-armed bandit slots and poker machines were a few steps into a sunken floor area. A few women were down there, chatting and dropping coins together. An old man at a machine at the end played alone. The roulette table was still at the moment, but the card tables were busy. Two blackjack dealers had five players each. One of the poker tables had a few players.

“What would you like to play?” I asked.

“What do you want to play? Show me how to play something.”

I suggested we join a couple of guys and their girlfriends who were having fun playing craps. “Want to throw some dice?”

“Sure. Okay.”

In craps, I didn’t bet on a number, I bet on the player, just like I did a horse. That

competitor would either win or lose. When I saw a winner, I bet on him. When I saw a loser, I didn't. But there was no science behind it. Every throw was luck, as pure as it got.

In dice, the winners were just luckier, that was all. They shared the equal opportunity to lose. As long as I knew the cash I walked in with was play money, and I could live without it, I could bet on anything and not even care. So, I just went with my gut. Was the guy throwing the dice a winner, or a loser? I would find out soon enough, but whether I decided to bet for him or against him determined what I ended up with. Either one or both of us were lucky and there was no in-between.

That night I felt kind of lucky. The shooter who was throwing when we stepped up to the craps table tossed out a natural seven, and his friends cheered. I dropped five one-hundred dollar bills on the table.

Marlene asked, "Are you betting five-hundred dollars?"

"Not all at once. He is going to give me chips."

The boxman passed me a tray of chips in denominations from five to fifty dollars.

I gave Marlene a handful. "Now, we bet with these."

I explained the rules to her while betting on the pass line. The shooter was hot, so money was coming at us. After a while he crapped out and the next shooter did the same.

My tutelage on dice, the point, the come line, hard line bets, why there were two dealers, and the independent roles of the stickman and boxman, were a whirlwind of information that confused Marlene. Horses and statistics made much more sense. I did not see the level of confusion on her face at the track that I witnessed at the craps table.

Soon it was our turn. The stickman passed five dice to Marlene.

"I am not sure what to do," said Marlene.

“Just throw the dice.”

She picked up all five dice.

“Whoa! Just two,” I said. “Just take two of the dice and leave the other three. Okay, now toss ‘em all the way over there so they hit the back wall.”

“Okay. Here we go,” said Marlene.

She threw a five and everyone cheered.

“Did we win?” Marlene asked.

“Not yet. We all want you to win. You win, we all win. It’s us against the house. Right guys?”

Somebody said, “Yeah. Throw another five.”

Marlene got the hang of throwing bones, but was unsure of how to bet. Yet, she had quite a run, about a twenty minute roll before she threw boxcars, and crapped out.

Everybody did pretty good betting on her. When her turn passed to me I threw twice and crapped out right away.

Marlene got into a conversation with another woman at the table who asked if she was a realtor.

“No, I’m a teacher. College English. Are you a realtor?”

She made a funny face and said, “Definitely not.”

She and her husband were dairy farmers. They got into talking about hoof rot for some reason, then segued into TV shows, and finally, quilting. I was happy just to stand there and gamble while she talked.

When her turn came around again, Marlene crapped out right away, so we stepped away from the table to play poker.

Most players in the casino were in their mid-fifties and sixties. Only a few players, like Marlene, who were in their thirties. Tink's had a few older dealers on his staff, but his waitresses were the youngest people there, in their late twenties. Tink would never bring in anyone too young. He clearly had an established vetting process that he adhered to for as long as I could recall. When I first came into the casino, I was the youngest player there for several years.

I knew the poker dealer and three of the four players. They had room for two more. I shook hands with a couple of the guys and introduced Marlene.

They politely said, "Hi."

Tink's little barmaid came by with more drinks for us.

To learn the game, Marlene did not play, but sat beside me to watch.

She knew nothing about playing poker, either. I thought it would be fun to teach her. Soon, the reality of trying to do so became abundantly clear when she enthusiastically said, "So, that's a good hand, right?"

I held the cards to my chest. "It could be."

One of the fellows said, "Should we go all in on you, Pasternak?"

The other guys laughed.

I raised the stakes, just to keep them guessing. Bluffing with a truly serious poker face was my best weapon.

With a woman to distract me, it was impossible for me to bluff the way I needed to. I knew it because it happened before, plenty of times. Pretty faces distracted me so I couldn't bluff.

Poker was not really my game, anyway. I liked it, but I didn't count cards. If not for being able to bluff, raise the stakes, and make other players fold, I would have never won. Getting

really great cards rarely seemed to happen. But it was always fun.

Cards were not like horses. It was thoughtless. A respite from thinking too hard about any one thing. I liked sitting there, sipping whiskey, and just letting my mind wander. When players got deep into the game, they did not speak anyway, so it didn't matter what anybody thought about. When I had a while to sit quietly, I played on autopilot. I knew what I was doing but didn't need to think about it.

Tink saw what was happening. He knew there was no way for me to concentrate, so he saved me. He knew I could not play with Marlene there. "Hey, sweetheart. You doing okay?"

"Yes. This is fun."

"How about you fellows? Everybody good?" he asked.

We all nodded and answered in the affirmative.

"Good, good. Sweetheart, it's Marlene, right?"

"That's right."

"Marlene, I just want to thank you again, so much for coming to see me tonight, so, this is for you." He gave her a big plastic cup full of quarters. "Now, this is fifty dollars in quarters. You ever played slots?"

"Not yet."

"This is Tink's gift to you. You can take this and go and try to pull some money out of the machines over there, and you know what - there's poker machines there, too. So, that's a - it's how lots of folks learn to play poker. You want to give it a try? I mean instead of sitting back here, just watching, you can learn the game over there, and then bring all your winnings back over here and clean these guys' clocks. What do you say?"

She turned to me and smiled. "You want me to leave you alone to gamble with the boys?"

I didn't expect her to be so direct, seeing right through Tink.

"I want what you want," I said, then added a poorly timed and stuttered, "Sweetheart."

She and the guys laughed. She kissed me on the cheek and Tink led her away.

He introduced her to the other women who were playing slots and she quickly joined the chatter. Bells started ringing and they had a good time.

Tink came back and leaned over me, giggling, and said discreetly, yet loud enough for the other poker players, "You know you owe me fifty bucks, right?"

I held up a fifty dollar chip and he took it. Me and the guys all laughed.

"Okay, okay," I said. "We'll see who is laughing in a little while. Let's play."

Finally, I could concentrate. Not that I didn't want to spend time with my date, but a man needs time alone with his thoughts every hour or so, at least I did.

The little barmaid brought me another drink. I asked her name when I tipped her and quickly forgot it. She was new there, and quite pretty. A petite girl with short, curly hair, wearing a choker on her thin neck, making her look taller than she was. She had crystal green eyes. She was just my type. That was what I thought about while I sat there, tossing chips into the pot, winning a hand, losing a hand, bluffing again, folding—that she was small enough to crush.

It was hideous, I knew. But that was how my mind worked. A firework idea popped in my brain, and I could see every streaming trail of light stretching out in perfect synchronicity with my thoughts. The urge to kill was always there, waiting for me.

I could just look at a girl and instantly know what I would do and how to do it, splendidly unseen, as my lone witness, my victim whose eyes met mine, would never rat me out. It was a spark of precision. The mechanics of how to do it and get away, came to me clearly, every option and possibility forging a clear and unimpeded path to the vanishing point. Nobody

would ever know it was me.

That was how it happened every time. Like a flash. I instantly envisioned everything. Then I did it. Inexplicable pure impulse. I just had to.

But I could not. Not with this girl. She worked for Tink and knew who I was, so she was safe.

Marlene was safe, too. She was the missing puzzle piece who clipped into my life to complete it. I briefly thought about what might have happened to her when we walked through the park, but I also knew that she would never be my victim. That foul maxim, *don't shit where you eat*, undoubtedly applied.

I would never harm Marlene, not just because it would be terribly wrong, but because she was not my type. The type I liked to handle with gloves. She was not a bulky woman, but being so tall, and as I knew from nights wrapped up in her arms, she was nearly as strong as me. There was no way she would ever go down without a fight.

Sitting there with my drink and cards in hand, I became content, knowing that I would not have to worry about myself with her. I could be me. Maybe opportunities for inappropriate and dangerous behavior would present themselves less often.

Maybe I would stop.

Or maybe I would not have to.

There was that one guy, who had a regular job, hung out with family and friends, all the while, carrying around somebody's head in a bowling ball bag. He ate his victims. They called him the Milwaukee Cannibal. Nobody suspected him of anything until a half-naked, handcuffed man came running out of his apartment. Then they found a bunch of skulls and body parts. If he had been more conscientious about what he was doing, he might have kept doing it. I thought it

was a shame that he let himself get caught because he must have really disappointed his family.

But he was a psycho. I am not.

My prey were the hapless victims of bad timing. They were in the wrong place at the right time. When opportunity presented itself, I struck. It was as simple as that.

Now, with Marlene in my life, I would not be so bored. I could do less of these terrible things. The momentary thrill lasted just a few minutes. The rest of it was fear and dread and horror. I could go for less of that. I also did not ever want to get caught. I would not want to disappoint anyone.

We played several hands of poker and I left the table with something close to what I came in with. No big win, no big loss.

When I heard Marlene's conversation with the ladies die down, I quit playing and went to join her at the slots. I showed up just as she hit a two-hundred-dollar jackpot. Her smile was all teeth.

"Oh, yeah!" I said.

"I like it here."

Tink had a way of showing up at just the right time to make a silly face for one person alone. A happy smile embedded within a scowl came at me when I told him, "She likes it here, Tink!"

Quarters chinked down out of the machine.

"That's great. Looks like a good hit there. Good for you sweetheart. Another drink?"

Marlene looked down at her full glass. "Not for me. I think I'm done." she asked me, "Got a light?"

My glass was half full, too, so I declined. "We're good, thanks, Tink."

He gave me a thumbs up and I lit Marlene's cigarette.

We played slots for a couple more minutes and decided to call it a night.

Before we left, I made one final bet, which I always did as a ritual. I don't recall how I started it, but once I was done, I would go to the roulette table and place hard bets on the sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen. One ten-dollar chip on each number. I might have started doing it as a way to win back anything I lost in a last ditch effort to recoup. Most of the time this bet was lost, too. But on that night, the little white marble bounced majestically right into the sixteen.

Tink was walking by with drinks.

"What do you think, Tink?"

He stopped to see the dealer sliding chips over to me, made one of his funny faces, and opened his mouth to say something, but did not. It was enough to make me laugh.

Marlene asked. "How much is that?"

"Three-fifty." I laughed. "Let's go home."

We cashed in our chips with Dorothy and our casino date ended with considerably more cash than the five-hundred I started with. It was a fun night.

Marlene was quite drunk.

We made out in the elevator.

She waited in the lobby for me to get the car because she didn't feel like putting on her heels.

On the ride home, Marlene told me about the women she played slots with. "They were really, really nice. And, I had no idea how many realtors gamble. Is that a thing?"

I laughed.

Marlene continued, "And they're so pretty! Real estate. Who knew? They said I could be

a realtor.”

“Trust me. You don’t want to do that.”

“Why not? I could sell a house. I could sell the shit out of houses. Three bedrooms - two baths - you know. Upstairs with a basement and everything. I could. I would show a house and sell it just like that.” She almost snapped her fingers.

“Those ladies don’t sell the kind of real estate you think they sell.”

She pondered what I said for a moment. “They don’t? Oh. They probably sell farms. That makes sense. But I could sell a farm. I could sell the shit out of a farm. Little pigs and cows and stuff. I could sell a farm.”

I laughed again. “I bet you could. But that’s not it either.”

“What isn’t?”

“Those realtors don’t sell real estate.”

“Then what do they sell?”

“Sex. They’re prostitutes.”

“Huh?”

“Ladies of the night. Friendship for sale. Real estate is code for prostitution.”

She glared at me, so quiet, before bursting with, “Get the fuck out of Dodge! You’re lying.”

“Swear to God.”

She marinated her thoughts for another minute and said, “Wow. Those ladies are so pretty. And so friendly, too.”

“They usually are. Wouldn’t sell much real estate if they weren’t.”

She sat quietly for a moment and then said, “You know what I would tell people when I

sell them a farm? I would say, hey man, you just bought the farm.”

We cracked up, laughing all the way home.

CHAPTER 8

My new life was taking shape, Marlene was my first steady girl in twenty years. I would visit her at school for lunch some days. Love softened my heart. I knew it. I no longer got angry when I lost money. I started buying drinks for my friends more freely and eagerly. They noticed the change too, but nobody said anything.

When she wasn't busy after school, she would come to the clubhouse and find me. My friends became her friends and she became quite fond of talking to Moe, listening to him tell stories about the people in his neighborhood. She didn't know any other Black people.

The past grew even more distant now. My victims were no longer victims, just mistakes, the kind of mistakes I wouldn't make again. I could spend the rest of my life analyzing the whole thing and never know why what happened, did. But instead of wondering and testing the realms of repentance, I decided to go the route of denial. Like a former cigarette smoker or reformed shoplifter, the smoker who quits denies himself his habit saying, "That's not me anymore. That's how I used to be."

The shoplifter who couldn't handle the personal consequences of his actions, knowing the possibility of prison, denies that he ever stole anything. They just stop. They decide to change before their mistakes kill them or lock them up.

A personal prison is much more preferable to a real one. Unlike a real prison, however, it is inescapable and remorse is the warden. There is no chance for parole. Memories are haunting things that linger forever, poking their way through to your daily life like needles on your pincushion mind.

I was driving to the School for the Deaf to visit my mother. She had tele-typed me at home and told me to stop by so we could discuss having Easter dinner together. I decided that

would be a good thing and was going to tell her I'd be bringing Marlene.

It was raining lightly that afternoon. A girl was hitchhiking. I stopped. She was pretty, blonde, and dewy with rain. Sparkling blue eyes. "Thank you *so much* for stopping! I thought I'd never get a ride."

"Where are you going?"

"Well, I'm going to L.A., but if you could at least take me to Vegas that would be great."

She peeled off her soaking blue jacket and balled it up at her feet.

"Vegas?"

"Yeah, Las Vegas. That's the only thing on this road for sixty miles."

I looked out the window past the raindrops. I was no longer on the streets of Omaha. I was cruising down a desert road in Nevada. "What's your name?"

"Melissa."

"Melissa, *of course*, I remember you."

"Of course you do! You strangled me on the side of the road right over there and crushed my skull with a big rock, right over there, remember?" She pointed out the window to my left.

"Got a cigarette, Paul?"

I reached into my breast pocket and handed her the pack, looking to my left, then back at her. "I do remember. When was that?"

"Fourteen years ago."

"Fourteen years. Man, time sure does fly, doesn't it?"

"It sure does." She lit the smoke with the car lighter.

"How have you been?"

"Dead. How about yourself?"

“Well, just fine, thanks. Hit a trifecta last week!”

“That’s nice, Paul.” She dragged the cigarette. “So tell me, your new girlfriend, what’s ‘er name..?”

“Marlene.”

“Marlene. That’s a nice name. So, ya gonna kill ‘er?”

“No darlin’, that’s not part of the plan. I gave it up.”

“For what? Lent? Easter’s just a week away!”

“No, no. This time for good! I’m a new man. She’s having Easter dinner with me and Mom.”

“That’s really nice to hear.”

“Say, tell me something, did they ever find your body?”

“As a matter of fact, they did! And know what? I was on Unsolved Mysteries!”

“Really?”

“I was. I swear!”

“Well, how about that! Good for you, Melissa!”

“You really are one of the good ones Paul, you know that?”

“Thanks, darlin’.”

“But you know you’re not covering your tracks like you used to.”

“How’s that?”

“Well for one thing,” she popped open the glove compartment, “you have got to get rid of these goddamned surgical gloves! Don’t you think *that* would raise Marlene’s suspicions?” She spoke with the cigarette dangling from her lips. “You killed the girl that gave ‘em to you. Her fingerprints are all over the box.”

“Who was that?”

“The dental assistant in Cedar Rapids.”

“Oh yeah. She was nice.”

“Good. At least get rid of the box.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Damn right I’m right!”

“You’re right!” I said.

Melissa and I spoke at the same time. “You’re losin’ it, Paul!”

“I’m losing it?”

“You’re gonna slip up and you’re gonna get caught. There’s only one way to get away with this one.”

“I’m not--”

“You’re not what, Paul?”

“I’m not going to kill her.”

“Hell-LOOO! Ghost to Paul! What do you mean you’re not going to kill her? She’s the one, Paul! The big three-Oh! Number Thirty! And your steady girl yet, you’ve got to do this one, Paul!”

“You’re counting now? Why are you counting? I can’t kill her. That just wouldn’t be right.”

“You have to.”

“I won’t!”

“How can you live with yourself if you pass this one up?”

I screamed, “I WON’T DO IT!”

“You have to!”

“I WON’T DO IT”

“You know you want to, Paul.”

“I WON’T DO IT!”

“You have to, Paul.”

“NO!”

“YES, PAUL, YES.”

“STOP IT!”

“YOU CAN DO IT, PAUL, YOU’RE THE BEST.”

“LEAVE ME ALONE!”

“PAUL!”

“GET OUT OF MY CARRRRR!”

She vanished and the cigarette fell to the floor of the car and bounced on the wet coat. It fizzled out next to the box of surgical gloves.

I looked out into the rain at the school and shut off the car. I was shaking.

I hugged the steering wheel and cried. I cried hard, heavy sobs, fighting with myself to maintain control, gasping for air like a distraught child.

CHAPTER 9

There we were, all sitting together in the grandstand, watching the races. Marlene was on my right, and Larry was on my left. Moe sat behind us. He raised his foot to the top of our chairs to rest between Larry's and my shoulders. We did not mind. On a warm spring day with mist rising on the infield pond, it felt strange to sit among them as though we were a family. I was closer to Larry and Moe than I could say I was to any other guys.

Marlene, I could be publicly intimate with. She gripped my thigh with her hand, and I did not protest. This was strange because it was comfortable. And it was uncomfortable for that reason.

I sat there with them, adjusting to the safety of the situation, realizing that these people trusted me and that I had no reason to distrust them. I knew many things about all of them, much more, obviously, than they knew about me. But they must have some secrets of their own. Some things one would never guess.

What went through Larry's mind? Other than horses and beer and dreams of opulence that would never be, did he ever wonder about his place in the world? What about me? Why was I thinking about what Larry thought? What about my place in the world? Why am I a destroyer?

I sat with these people who believed they knew me. They did not. They considered me one of them, harmless and lonely.

What of Marlene? How did we attach? I opened with a sly smart remark and she liked it. She was sober when it started and as far as I can tell, she has been in a drunken stupor ever since. She followed me and hung on as sand on beached wood, sitting

silently, waiting for the wind to blow once more and change her direction, away from me.

Moe smoked a huge cigar and spittle dripped from the end. He sucked beer and thought slowly about what horse to bet on. Yet for all the ideas rushing through his brain, he was not handicapping with sprint times or track conditions, he relied on the numbers in his horoscope and what Lucky Lottie recommended. “That Two ho’se! That the one gonna be in da money.”

I sought the backstretch with binoculars and asked, “Why’s that Moe?”

“Cuz de Seven won de last raced. I see it right here. *And* if there was a Ten horse in de next raced, that a be the one I’m bettin’ on.”

“Next race only has eight horses.”

“I know, that’s why I’m bettin’ the One.”

I looked to Marlene for sanity. She smiled.

Moe continued, “Go ahead an’ laugh. I’ll be da one at de bank.” He buried his face in the program. “Yeah, baby. Gonna be cashin’ some tickets. You know it.” Then he stood up and left to place a bet.

“What do you like in this race?” Larry asked.

“Nothin’.” I felt cold when I said it. “I just looked at the whole stinking program, there isn’t a damn thing worth risking money on today. They’re all too old or slow and unless Pansy has better than seven to one odds in the seventh I’m going home. I just don’t see any way to make money here today.”

“What do you want to do later?” Marlene asked.

I grinned slyly. “I don’t know. What do you want to do?”

I thought she was leaning over to whisper, but she put her tongue in my ear instead. My arm instinctively wrapped around her. We laughed, and I raised the binoculars to scan the backstretch again. “Who do you like in this race, darlin’?”

“I like that white horse.”

“What white horse?”

“That one over there.” She pointed to a horse with a rider on its back, instead of a driver with a buggy.

“That’s the steward. He’s not in the race.”

“Oh.”

Moe leaned over between us. “Excuse me. Actually, can I tell you something, Miss Marlene? My man here don’t know everything.”

“Who me?” I asked.

“Yes, you. You don’t know everything. Dat horse is not de Steward, dat horse is de Outrider. Dat Outrider there cuz he de rescue man. Horse go outta control, break, he be da one chase ‘em down and stop ‘em from hurting demselves. Outrider is the right name for dat one, but the Steward up in da booth. Da Steward watch for bumping. Cheating. On the closed-circuit tee-vee. Dey used to be down on the track riding like the Outriders, but don’t do dat no more. But the name Steward is what dey say, even though he de Outrider. But the name - Steward - it kind of stuck, so old school, here, he say Steward.”

“So, he is the Outrider, not the Steward.”

“Correct.”

“Thanks, Moe. I’m learning stuff.” Marlene told me.

“Thanks for being a pal, Moe.” I said.

“Anytime, my man. I’ll set you straight.” he laughed.

“Bet you will.”

Curly appeared, trouncing from the stairwell, and knelt on the seats directly in front of Marlene, ogling what he could of her thighs slipping into her miniskirt while pretending to have a serious discussion with me. “Don’t bet on the Deuce in this race.”

I wasn’t betting anyway and didn’t really care but was still compelled to learn his reasoning behind this. “Why not?”

“He’s deaf, and he’ll probably break in the home stretch.”

“How do you know he’s deaf?”

“They get hearing tests now?” Larry muttered.

“If he’s deaf, why would he break?”

“BE-Cause! When he sees the other horses in his peripheral, he freaks out and stops.”

“He won his last two races,” Larry piped in.

“What if he’s wearing blinders?” I asked.

“That’s what makes it worse. They get right in front of him, and he throws the rider.”

Larry and I chuckled together, and Larry blurted out, “Look out! There he goes!” waving his finger in a whirling motion.

Everyone laughed except Curly.

“Oh man, you’re so full of baloney you should open a supermarket! What’s the

odds on that horse?" I asked.

Marlene said, "Four to one."

"Thanks, Darlin'. That's a hundred bucks I could use." I pulled the wad out of my breast pocket and peeled off two twenties. "You wanna go make a bet for me, honey?"

"On the Two horse?" she verified.

"Yeah, the Two horse."

"You're going to bet on that horse after what I just told you?"

"Especially after what you just told me. Moe's betting on her anyway. I might as well make some money today."

Marlene stood up. "I'm going to hit the bar after I make the bet. Should I bring you a Crown?" She held my hand.

"Yeah, that sounds good."

She bent over and kissed me with her hair hanging on our lips.

"Thanks, darlin'."

Watching her trot down the stairs, Larry spoke my thoughts aloud. "Man, she is something else."

It startled me. "What?"

"Sorry, Paul." He backed up and looked me in the eye. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I just mean, you're a really lucky dude. That's all."

"That's cool, man. Thanks."

"Where is she from anyway?" Curly wondered.

"She's a schoolteacher. At a college. She teaches English."

“Maybe I ought to think about taking some lessons.”

“Say what?”

“Nothing. I don’t want to know anything.” Curly put up his hands. “I’m outta here.”

He was gone, bouncing up the stairs into the grandstand.

“He’s an idiot,” Larry told me.

“Yeah, I guess he is.”

“But you got to expect that out of him. He’s only twenty.”

“I thought he was twenty-two.”

“Whatever, you know. He’s just too young to know when to shut up.”

“Yeah, like when he talks about horses.”

“Exactly.”

“Deaf horse, my ass.”

“You hear about that deaf pizza guy?”

“What pizza guy?”

“Delivery guy got killed? He was deaf, they said he could read lips,” said Larry.

“What happened?”

“The crooks called in an order to an abandoned house, and they were waiting on the porch for him. So instead of just robbing him and taking the pizza, they had to kill him, too. It’s a damn shame. Same age as Curly. He was deaf, so he couldn’t even scream.”

“How’d they kill him?”

“Stabbed him. Right in the chest. Only had twelve dollars on him. And you know what else? They ate the pizza right there while he was lying there dying.”

“Did they catch ‘em?” I wondered.

“Yeah, they were gangsters. Crackheads.”

“I wonder if my mom knew him.”

“Your Mom?”

“Yeah, you know, she’s the principal—”

“At the school for the deaf, that’s right. You know, she probably did know him.”

“Probably did. I might even know him. You know Wally? I’ve known him for twenty years, at least. He went to the school.”

“Right. Wally. What’s he do?”

“Accountant? Something like that. Not spinning pizza, for sure.”

“But you know what churns my gut? That somebody can sit there and eat a pizza with a bastard just lying there bleeding and dying, and they got the blood on their hands, you know? How can somebody do that? How can anybody be that sick? To be able to kill somebody, stabbing yet. I couldn’t do that. You couldn’t do that. To know that you’re putting a stop to somebody’s future. Ending it right there? And then, the audacity. To eat. To eat over the dead man’s body and laugh and drink and get stoned with his money. What kind of fucking scum could do that? How could somebody eat after they just did that?”

“Well, if it doesn’t bother them to kill somebody, why would it bother them to eat? They eat every day.”

“I guess you’re right. I didn’t think how they would think. Glad I don’t.”

“Larry, did you hear about that jogger?” I realized then that I didn’t know what to say, but having begun, I couldn’t turn back.

“What?”

“There was that guy who was jogging, and he got hit. By a car? Did you hear about that?”

“Yeah, you know who that was, don’t you?”

Chills sharpened my senses. “Who?”

“He was the guy who won the Superfecta for eight grand last year!”

“That was him?”

“Yeah, that was him. What were you gonna say?”

“Uh, you know where that happened, don’t you?”

“Where?”

“Right on my street!”

“No foolin’. Damn!”

In those moments, I realized that I knew George Harris, the jogger. He used to stand far to the left on the fence, watching them come out of the final turn into the home stretch. I remember that day he hit the Superfecta. I hit the daily double that day. Larry won on something, too. Recounting the brief and fatal relationship made me shiver.

“Are you cold?” asked Larry.

“Huh?”

“You’re shivering, man. Are you okay?”

I stood and stretched and shook it off. “Yeah, I’m okay. I just got chilly all of a sudden.”

“Your face is all red. Are you gonna be okay?”

“Yeah.” I sat back down. I faked a smile. “What was that?”

“How’s your chest?”

“I’m okay.”

“You know what you just had? That looked like a stroke.”

“I didn’t have a stroke, Larry.”

“No, but you know what I mean. That’s what a stroke looks like when it starts. You had all those things, the chills, and you got all red. You know, the signs.”

“Symptoms.”

“That’s it! You got all the symptoms. You better see a doctor, man.”

“I don’t need a doctor.” Marlene appeared and handed me my drink. “Finally, sanity.”

“And that shit’s not good for you either.”

“What are you? My mother now?”

“What happened?” Marlene asked.

“He got all short of breath and started shaking like he was having a stroke, and then he turned all red!”

“I was not short of breath! Gimme a cigarette.”

Marlene took them out of her purse, and we sat down. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“I am now. Thanks.”

She sipped her drink and spoke to me quietly and slowly, so the guys would not hear, dragging out her words with a serious tone. “So am I.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Thought I saw something. Somebody I don’t want to see.”

I spoke quietly, too. “You mean that guy? Roger? Where?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know. It was just for a second. You know how sometimes you can feel somebody staring at you? It was like that. I was waiting at the bar, and I just felt that—that quiet stare. I turned around, and then he just turned his back and walked away. But I am not sure if it was him. It might have been.”

“But maybe not?”

“But maybe not. But I just felt creeped out all of a sudden.”

I looked around. “You want me to do something? Say something to him? I will.”

“No. I don’t even want to think about him. Don’t want to hear his name. I just want to sit here and look at the horses.”

The announcer shouted, “They’re off!”

With that, a magical and solemn two minutes took place. The world fell away, and conversations stopped. Eyes glazed over and became transfixed on the animals and their drivers. The moans and goading of the throng escalated in a frenzied rhythm from a few shouts at the start of the race into a pounding rush of adrenaline in the home stretch.

The Two horse, whose name I never knew, broke in the final furlong. Cheers and derision among the crowd were equal. Moe unhappily crumpled his tickets and quietly walked down the stairs where he came from moments before. The young boy who told us

the Two horse was deaf, strode triumphantly toward us. I was obliged to ask, “So who did you have?”

“The Seven.”

“Where was he?”

“Dead last.”

“The Two at least showed.”

“Yeah, but the point is, he broke just like I said he would!”

I sat down. “Oh, yeah. You’re a genius, all right.”

He knelt on the seats before Marlene again. She, Larry, and I sat three abreast.

Marlene asked, “So how much did we win?”

“We didn’t win. Unless you played him to show.”

“Well, I did. The man asked me at the window, and I wasn’t sure. He said win, place, or show? And I wasn’t thinking about it, so I just said show because it was the last thing he said.”

I could feel us all staring in amazement.

“I’m sorry,” Marlene said.

I could feel my grin widening. “Don’t be sorry, Marlene, you did good! Look what it paid.”

“It’s not official yet,” Curly said as the odds board flashed the payouts. “Now it’s official.”

“Three-twenty to show! How much did you bet?” I asked.

“That money that you gave me.” Marlene took the tickets from her sweater pocket

and gave them to me.

“Forty bucks! That’s sixty-four now, sonny!” I held Marlene and looked into her eyes. “Way to go, baby!” Then I kissed her, and she accepted me completely unabashed.

Moe struggled back up the stairwell, anguish dominating his features. My emotions flashed from joy to sorrow, and I realized I empathize with him. He wagered the Two horse, but to win or place, not to show. His wide white eyeballs spoke a sorry hello to each one of us individually, and he quietly sat beside Marlene and sipped his beer.

She was polite and strangely understanding. “We bet on the Two, too.”

He grimaced comically while lighting a fat cigar. “Aw, my goodness.”

We sat there together for a long time in solitude. We watched the odds board and the crowd and the ducks in the infield. Nobody had to ask. We just knew after years of gambling together. Moe had lost a bundle, but we never knew how much. I could never understand why he would risk so much at such low odds on such poor horses. Yet, I ended up betting on the same mare myself, and if not for Marlene’s novice, we wouldn’t have won at all.

Being with my friends on a cold spring day was comforting, even though images in my mind were stirred when Larry brought up the subject of murder. I rarely thought of them as friends, so the sentiments I felt that day, although not new, were alien to me. It seemed as if I were watching us all from above, and I could feel myself caring.

One moment, I wondered what Larry thought, then he told me. Was he always telling me all along? Was I not listening before? I must not have realized that we were as

close as he thought. He trusted me, and I always knew I could trust him, but I also knew that my secrets would have to remain so, even with Larry. Because he trusted that I was not a monster.

Marlene, new and exotic in my life, embodied what most men only fantasized about. She was beautiful, devoted, and horny—a tough combination to beat. My friends shouldered pride and jealousy with every glance. I could tell, and I expected it. Mostly, I couldn't believe she was really with me at all.

Curly, I was not truly fond of him, but his clownish behavior amused us.

Moe completed the trio we naturally dubbed the three stooges. We only started calling the kid “Curly” for that reason alone.

I was known as Shylock. Marlene liked it. She thought it made me sound mysterious and dangerous. And I was. Whether or not they called me Shylock, I would always be mysterious and dangerous.

I don't recall how I earned that label. I had always been known to loan money to those who knew me and never really came down on anyone who didn't pay me back. Nobody ever asked for huge amounts worth worrying about. Ten bucks here and there was the norm. Everybody paid me back, anyway. Maybe because I was so ancient at the track, even for a relatively young man, if under fifty is young, nobody dared not pay me back for fear of unknown consequences. The moniker was enough to scare most into not even asking.

Only Larry borrowed money when he didn't really need it. It was like a game for him. If he only had a big bill on him, like a fifty, he would try to go all day without

breaking it, borrowing money in the meantime, and paying me back later in the day. I did not care about lending, if that was fun for him. I knew he was always good for it. I'd seen him come to the track without his wallet and house keys. He rode the bus, so keys were not a major issue for Larry.

“Did you lock your house?” I asked.

“I hope so. Somebody might walk right in and steal my wallet.”

Other loan applicants were always down to nothing and never asked for more than twenty to get back on their feet. Most paid me back a race later, others a day or two at most.

I was known to deny loans as well. If I didn't know you by sight, the answer was no. Loud and obnoxious applicants were refused as well. I trusted my gut more than anything in the world and if it told me no, I verbalized it.

Nobody asked for money that day. Not even Moe, who stopped gambling altogether after the deaf horse incident. We stayed until the end of the program even though I decided not to bet on Pansy in the seventh and she won anyway. We sent Curly to buy hot dogs while the sun dipped into the clubhouse and drowned the odds board in pink.

CHAPTER 10

I liked sitting and waiting for Marlene to get ready. She took her time in the bathroom while I had a drink and played with the dog.

Eureka accepted me as a friend, and I could toss a ball through the house. Having her bring it back was endless entertainment for the big animal. She also loved her neck and head to be scratched. She was a big, giant baby once she got to know me. I somehow fell into that timbre everyone seems to have with pets. Baby talk. “Good doggie. Yes, you are.”

Marlene came out wearing a white sundress with tiny flowers and red polka dots. “How does this look?”

“Your hair? Perfect.”

“The dress.”

“Oh! Beautiful. Looks great.”

“Easter dinner with Mom. I didn’t want to try and get too sexy. How is your drink?” she asked, going into the kitchen.

“I’m good.”

“How much time do we have?”

“An hour?”

“Really?”

“Won’t take us long to get there. It is right across the street, basically. I mean, I can see it from here. From the front porch. We could walk there in two minutes.”

She returned with a glass of white wine and sat beside me, praising Eureka for

dropping the ball in her lap. “Thank you. What a good girl! Yes, go get it!”

Marlene threw the ball. The dog retrieved it and returned instantly. “That’s way too fast. Okay. Good girl. Nap,” Marlene told her and snapped her fingers.

The dog behaved with military precision, stopping all play and going directly to the large pillow on the floor to lie down, plopping the ball before her.

“Wow. She really listens to you.”

“Yes, she does. So your mom doesn’t drink?”

“No. Goes to church, too. So, let’s make sure we get good and liquored up before we get there.”

We laughed.

“So, you grew up there? Like, did you live at the school?”

“I did. That is where we are going. The principal’s residence. You’ll see.”

“I will be on my best behavior.”

“I’m sure you have nothing to worry about.” I held up my fingers and spelled out, “Do you know any sign language?”

“What is that?”

“I asked if you knew sign language. It is going to be a quiet dinner. If you have never eaten with deaf people before, it can be different.”

“How so?”

“Well, my mom reads lips. But she likes me to translate anyway, just because. And the hearing -- sometimes, they start to get a little loud, they shout. It just comes natural, because the hearing don’t even know they are doing it. But you don’t have to

shout. She won't hear you anyway."

"And she has been the principal of the school for how long, you say? Thirty years?"

"At least. My whole life since I was little. Maybe thirty-five years."

"Quite a career."

"Yeah. But she keeps quiet about it."

It took a moment for Marlene to get the joke before she wailed in laughter.

"Because she doesn't speak. Oh, oh, I'm sorry. You're too funny. I'm so glad you make me laugh. Roger never did that. Not the way you can."

"Make you laugh?"

"After I thought about it, and I've thought about it a lot. I don't know why I was with him. I really don't. He wasn't funny. He was serious. But he was . . . something else. Alluring, I guess. You ever meet anybody like that? It was like he could look right through you. His eyes were -" she paused, thinking about what to say, "- windows to the soul is cliché, I know, but it felt that way. Like he had some brooding secret that he was always just about to share but never did. His hair turned white overnight. Did I tell you that?"

"No."

"It did. He didn't dye it. He didn't go casually gray and then white in a couple weeks. I mean, his hair turned white, completely white, overnight. Even his eyebrows. It was black before. Shiny black. He was like a new person. Same guy, but different person. That was when he said he wanted to handcuff me and all that shit."

“Did he really have bottles of blood?”

“Why would anybody lie about that?”

“I’m not saying you --”

“Oh, I don’t mean me. I mean him. Why would anyone say they have bottles filled with blood if they don’t? Why have bottles filled with anything that looks like blood, to begin with?”

“Uh, ketchup?”

“But then, where did they go? When he disappeared, I mean? Did he take them with him? Is he holed up someplace like a fugitive? I wonder about it. If he is ever just going to show up out of nowhere standing right in front of me. And if he does, then what? I don’t know what he wants. That’s why it was weird when I thought I saw him at the track. If it was him, what would he want? Just to scare me?”

“How sure are you that it was him?”

“I’m not. The more I thought about it, the more I think I was just imagining things. It probably wasn’t him at all. Probably just some guy. Some other guy with white hair who wasn’t looking at me at all. That’s why I didn’t even notice him. He wasn’t even looking at me, and I didn’t see him. So we were invisible to each other.”

~

Mother and I have always shared silent meals at the academy. When I was a small boy, forty years before, I was taught how to eat properly, forcing the fork upside down in my left hand in what seemed a completely unnatural clawlike maneuver while cutting meat or vegetables with the knife in my right. We generally sat with students and faculty who

could speak. At times I would politely place my knife down and sign to a faculty or student so as to be polite, yet never with food in my mouth, even if signing, for that was considered rude.

The school was my first home, and I had never once felt uncomfortable there. Now uneasiness crept in and lingered in my gut because I realized that never before had I brought a guest to school for dinner. We drove up quietly, jazz lilting through the stereo, and I thought about the few friends my mother had ever met. Maybe, Larry, I couldn't be sure. A long time before that, some high school buddies. Never seen again after graduation, and nameless in my mind, strangely and utterly nameless.

I hear others speak fondly of high school years, relishing memories, but for me, it is a blur. No true friends or enemies made. They were just people I happened to know and see every day, much as I consider the people at the track. Just people I know, I don't care about what happens to them or whether I see them again, and knowing this is what disturbs me the most.

Now, driving through the gate with Marlene, it stiffened me to know that I had never brought a girl home to dinner before. How do I explain my feelings for her when I didn't understand them myself? Would I even need to? Mother knew she would be coming, but what would she expect? How would she react? At least, there was one thing they had in common. They were both teachers.

My other concern was what would happen afterward. If everything ran smoothly and Mother could see that I was capable of having a caring relationship, what next? This is Easter. What was next? July fourth? Would we share holidays and events in the days

and years to come? Would they become memories to cherish?

Young people have grandiose visions of what their life is going to be and fantasize about the plans they'll carry through when they attain a certain level of money, power, or skill, and they imagine what it will be like to have children with the person they currently love and how they'll raise them and what they'll teach. They decide early on what they will and won't do, learn their own boiling points, and create their own ideas of how to be. But an older man has already made these decisions and won't learn anything new about himself, refusing to bend like a mighty old tree in a storm. New ideas, like small limbs, bend a little, but old ideas, the ones formed in his youth, are stronger, and an older man would rather dare you to break him than willingly change his ways.

The table was set when we arrived. A young girl, short and small framed, wearing her hair in a pixie cut, greeted us and took our coats, whisking them off to the closet down the hall. She was not mute. She smiled, told us to enjoy dinner, and we did not see her again. On the holidays that I was required to attend dinner with Mother, the academy always took on an atmosphere of personal prosperity for her. She was well respected after thirty years as the principal, and on those occasions, we usually dined with an honor student or faculty member who was far from home.

The elegant place settings shimmered below an oval chandelier, and the dusky midday sun bounced in through the spring blossoms tapping at the window.

An older lady I knew to be one of the teachers, fashionably dressed with large round baubles dangling from her earlobes, walked in from the opposite side of the room and greeted me silently in ASL. "Hello, Paul, how are you?"

“I am good, thank you so much. How are you?” I signed back, and although not recalling her name, I continued, “You teach the fourth graders, don’t you?”

“No, fifth graders. Who is your friend?”

I now spoke while signing so Marlene would understand. I took her by the arm with my left hand and signed with my right. “This is my friend, Marlene. Marlene, this is-”

She quickly signed her name to me, knowing I’d forgotten.

“Missus Dombrowski, yes, of course. Missus Dombrowski teaches the fifth grade here.”

Marlene had no sense of shyness and spoke right up, looking her straight in the eye, somehow knowing Mrs. Dombrowski could read her lips. “Hello, it’s good to know you.” She sounded as genuine as sincerity can sound, truly happy and friendly, and it made her seem alien because I had known so few people before who could express honesty so fully and with such empathy. “I teach at Dana College. English Literature.”

Mrs. Dombrowski, unable to speak even a little, first asked her “Do you sign?”

I answered for her and immediately began translation. “No, she does not sign.”

“What authors do you like?” Marlene glared at me strangely for a moment and I explained quickly, “She’s asking.”

“Oh, okay.”

It did not appear odd to me that I would translate for Marlene, I had signed since I could speak. But for Marlene, it was a novel experience, because like so many other people, she had never considered ASL a language, probably because it is unspoken and

the hearing do not pay attention to silence.

Mrs. Dombrowski and Marlene became fast friends, and if it were any precursor for the evening to follow, everything would continue pleasantly.

Dinners with my Mother, especially during the Holidays, I held akin to sailing the Arctic. No matter how strong and sturdy your ship, and regardless of how carefully one sailed, icebergs were everywhere, and if you said one wrong thing, you were sunk. Because of her strong Christian and industrious beliefs, I had always appeared as a heathen and a bum.

She had worked my entire life while I had not. In monetary terms, I had won more than she would ever earn. I knew this resentment existed side by side with love, which was why it was hard for her, and that was why I always tread carefully in her presence, planning every step and motion with claustrophobic care. Yet at the same time, I was at ease with this tension after spending so much time maneuvering our emotional minefield.

My mother had a way, as most mothers do (or so I'm told), of watching and praising me in some way for some unremarkable thing and building upon it to the point that the feat became notable and the image as impressive as a Persian rug. Then, spying and studying like a cat, she found a single flaw and hooked in for the unraveling. When I bought my house, she had done that. Exclaiming quietly and proudly with her hands that I had finally settled down and would become a decent citizen now that I had the responsibility of home ownership to shoulder.

The description of my procurement turned from triumph to theft. I had won money from hardworking losers and paid cash, thereby cutting out commissions for

people who lived and fed their families based on deposits and closing costs. By the end of the story I wasn't the respectable entrepreneur I thought I was and her friends, the faculty, turned cold. That was Christmas twenty years ago. I had no idea what would happen today.

Marlene and Mrs. Dombrowski finished their conversation with me as their translator. It was apparent they would be getting along splendidly. Marlene needed a trip to the ladies room and Mrs. Dombrowski led her away, down the hall. Alone in the dining room, I quietly poured myself a glass of punch from a crystal bowl, listening to every little tinkle and tap I made. The pace was quiet. Any time I visited the academy, I noticed those quiet, eternal moments, falling into one another, repeating over and over, as if falling through an M.C. Escher drawing that was brought to life. Surreal, I guess you would call it. Like I was stuck there forever.

The silence echoed within my mind, if not within itself, and I could hear every movement about me at that moment. That was what I felt anyway, and that was why I was startled when I turned to see a white-haired man facing me. I spilled my drink, just droplets, over my fingers. He had strikingly clear gray eyes and a fabulous smile. He was well dressed, with his collar unbuttoned and no tie.

He spoke gently. "Hello my friend. Have we met?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm Paul Pasternak." I transferred my drink to my left hand and held my right toward him in greeting.

He took mine with both hands.

"You are Missus Pasternak's son. Here for dinner, yes?"

“Yes. Are you with the faculty?”

“No. No, I’m afraid not. I . . . clean this place.” He spread his arms as though presenting a stage performance, turning about in admiration of the structure, pride expounding from him. “A marvelous complex indeed, is it not?”

“I suppose. It’s a nice building,” I told him, although I had never given it much thought.

“You’ve brought your wife?” He peered down the hall toward the lavatory.

“Girlfriend. I’ve never had a wife.” The compulsion to elaborate on my answers was overwhelming. His stare was intent and vacant, looking into my eyes as if he were trying to see beyond them, beyond them far enough to read my thoughts. It felt as if he could.

“Go on,” he prodded.

“We met at the track. Ak-Sar-Ben. We . . . like the horses.”

“Of course. A horse is a fine animal, so noble and strong. No other beast is so beautiful as a horse. You gamble then do you?”

“Yes, I do.” I snickered.

He kept staring at me and smiling, waiting for me to say more.

“I’ve been known to win a bit,” I added.

“Certainly. Yes, that’s very good, very good indeed. I suppose now that you’ve met Marlene your luck has changed considerably, has it not?”

“I guess so.” Now he wasn’t just familiar, he was mesmerizing. “You sure we haven’t met before? It seems like . . . I know you. From somewhere, I just can’t . . .”

“Do you frequent the bookstores downtown?”

“No,” I said quickly, then thought about it and answered, “Yes, I do go to a place on Dodge where I buy the Racing Form.”

“Ernest’s,” he said positively.

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“They carry some marvelous old editions there, it seems I’m always in one shop or another, browsing. Perhaps we brushed past one another at some time.”

The obvious coincidence set me momentarily at ease about the gentleman. He no longer seemed as strange and menacing as before. But his countenance remained eerie, like a ghost. Then I realized something; he did know me, but I did not know him, and the Escherish thoughts blurred my mind at that moment as to why he would know me without my knowledge of him. Yet this idea I could not prove and there was no reason for my being startled by his explanation of our acquaintance. I answered him with common grace, “Sure, that must be it. I go there all the time.”

He took my hand again, warmly and said, “I must be going now, but it has been wonderful finally speaking with you. Have an excellent dinner, will you?”

“I will, thank you.”

He took two steps back and spun around quickly, exiting through the foyer and out the front door. I could hear it click behind him and watched out the window as he made his way along the sidewalk. At that moment, Mother walked in from the opposite direction. I turned to her immediately.

She signed, “Where is your friend?”

I replied both verbally and visually, “She went with the teacher to the ladies’ room.”

She started prodding immediately. “So you brought a lady with you?”

“Yes, I did. As incredible as that may seem! Now you be nice to her, Mother.”

“I’m nice to everyone, dear.”

“You’re nice when you want to be nice, and today I want you to want to be nice.”

“All right, I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“Thank you.” I felt like a bird unruffling feathers. “So who’s cooking today?”

“We have a new chef, his name is Dominic. I have no idea what he’s doing. The man is from New Orleans and everything reeks of spice. We told him to cut down on that Cajun influence, but he has improved the potatoes.”

“You have a new janitor, too.”

“No, why do you ask?”

In the midst of my bewilderment about the white-haired man, Marlene and Mrs. Dombrowski entered the room, and at the moment the subject was about to change, I realized that the man had never told me his name.

During the introductions, I grappled with recalling what I had told him about Marlene and myself, and why he had asked. Somehow I got the feeling that I told him something he should not have known. But there were no secrets I was trying to keep other than those I’ve shared with you, and I could no longer concentrate on this subject. It was time to move on and keep an eye on Mother for unwanted cynicisms and smart remarks. Luckily, I would be able to curtail anything she said, for Marlene was deaf to

Sign Language. I didn't have to worry about Mrs. Dombrowski, she was a nice old lady who knew how to behave at a nice holiday gathering. Not like Mother.

I purposely avoided saying, "I'd like you to meet . . ." because it wasn't true, so I simply said, "Marlene, this is my mother," and signing for her I turned and said, "Mom, this is Marlene."

They smiled delightfully at one another. Marlene took my mother's hand and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. Mother backed away an inch, but then accepted the kiss. She was not accustomed to affection, or rather, we were not accustomed to it. The only close relatives we had were each other and we were never the touchy types. However, Marlene was, and knew no other way to be.

"How old is she?" Mother's hands demanded.

"Thirty-something," I signed back quickly.

"Cradle robber," she signed and smiled.

I am only forty-two! I wished I could shout.

Mrs. Dombrowski remained mute. Thankfully, she had no choice.

"Mom thinks you look young," I told Marlene.

"Thank you!" she gushed. "But I'm older than I look, I am a college professor."

Of course, I translated everything for them the entire evening. Everything except Mother's smart remarks. The main thing that let it go well was Marlene's lack of comprehension in ASL. I was able to derail my mother repeatedly and kept everything smooth.

When introductions were through, we went to sit in the dining room. I held the

chair first for Mother, then for Marlene, and Mrs. Dombrowski went to seat herself. I was standing next to her and caught her when the chair buckled and the leg split, almost dropping her to the floor. She winced a small mutish yelp and I helped her to her feet.

Marlene and Mother came to her aid. She was unscathed. I turned the chair over to examine it.

“Yup, it’s broke.” I spoke aloud.

“You don’t think it’s her weight do you?” Marlene whispered, barely moving her lips. Now she was learning to be as stealthy among the deaf as well as they are among the rest of the world.

“No!” I snickered. “It’s just an old chair.”

Mother instructed me to retrieve another chair from the edge of the room. She signed, “I’ll get Roger to fix it.”

“Who’s Roger?” I asked.

“What?” asked Marlene.

“Talking to Mom,” I explained.

Marlene dismissed the question.

“He’s the man you were talking to when I came in. He’s our custodian now. The man is simply fascinating when you get to know him.”

“He signs?” I asked silently.

She rarely hires anyone who does not.

“Yes, of course. He has a nephew here. He moved into the cottage behind the garden.”

“What happened to Zeke?”

“He retired last year. See what happens when you don’t visit? You don’t know what’s going on. Like your girlfriend.” Mother smiled at her and Marlene smiled back.

“She hasn’t got a clue about anything does she?”

I hid my temper and remained defenseless.

The evening was not so terrible in the end. Mother was not so harsh once the kinship of teaching was discussed in length. We taught Marlene some ASL. Upon departure, Mother accepted her hug.

CHAPTER 11

After dinner, I felt uncomfortable taking Marlene home. Maybe it was the sinking feeling of dating a woman who was so much like Mother. The Oedipal sensation was remarkable. They were both teachers, and as the evening continued, I could see those evil little shrieks of sarcasm come across from Marlene as well. But Marlene was more cunning, setting Mother up for tiny pokes into her personality, apparently reading the sign language I had failed to translate. The affinity of attitude between them fueled a catlike tension they obviously both enjoyed, for they were friends at night's end.

Driving to Marlene's house was nearly instantaneous, as her home was so close to the academy. There was light rain. I didn't shut off the engine right away. I sat and waited for Marlene to get out.

"Are you coming in?" she asked.

"I don't know," I told her, staring forward.

I switched off the jazz and the engine, feeling alien again to her and the world outside my car. We listened to heavier raindrops now pattering the roof.

"I thought you'd want to."

I sighed. "Marlene."

"What?"

I brushed back my hair with my hands. "No. I don't. I just feel like -"

"What?" she demanded.

"Driving."

"Where to?"

“Nowhere. Just driving, you know?”

“Well, let’s go.”

“No. I mean by myself. I just want to be by myself.” I had no more to say than that.

I looked at her and couldn’t imagine how that must have hurt her. I realized when I said it that I hadn’t been alone for quite a while, and all I was doing was expressing my feelings. I just needed to be alone. To think.

Marlene took the statement differently than I had intended it. She decided immediately that alone meant ‘not with her,’ not ‘in solitude for the sake of being alone.’ Her lips tightened and her jaw shone an insolent grin. In heated silence, she stepped out of the car and slammed the door. She went into her house and I saw the light go on and I sat there a while longer, wondering what it was I wanted to do. I did not know. Soon I drove away.

~

At the track the next day it rained a little. I sat wedged between Larry and Moe watching steam rise from the turf as the sun dried the sprinkles of dew. The odds board glared in the mist, clicking away as the minutes ticked down to post time.

We sent Curly to buy hot dogs.

Moe told us, “One a ya’s got the farts man.”

“Get your head outta your ass and you won’t smell anything,” Larry told him.

“I don’t smell anything,” I said.

“Then it mus’ be you. Know you don’ smell yo own farts,” Moe said.

“Would you shut up?” I told him. “You’re an idiot. Sometimes I wonder why I talk to you guys.”

“Ain’t nobody else lissen to ya,” Moe answered.

He was right. Nobody else did ever listen to me. Maybe they did, but I wasn’t paying attention. Or maybe it was that I had nobody else to talk to.

I thought about Marlene all day. She hadn’t called me, so I knew she was upset, or angry, or never wanted to see me again. Why did I feel like I had done something wrong for sharing my feelings?

We didn’t fight. We didn’t argue. I told her I wanted to be alone, gave her no explanation for my feelings, and she left me alone.

After nearly a full day of analysis, I thought I discovered my flaw was tact, or the lack of it. There was nothing wrong with my request, and I had no reason or justification for it, to be alone was just something I wanted. I decided to tell my friends about it. They were the only ones who would listen.

“What’s it like to be married?” I asked.

“Whoa shit. Shylock thinkin’ about commitment.” Moe blasted.

“Are you nuts?” Larry asked. “You don’t wanna do that.”

“No. I’m not talking about me, I’m asking you. What’s it like to be married?”

Moe bounced back. “Why you wanna know if you not thinkin’ bout it?”

“Last night I told Marlene I wanted to be alone.”

“Oh, shit. You in trouble now.”

“How did you know?”

“Man, don’ talk about his woman when things going good.”

“Why did you tell her you wanted to be alone?” asked Larry.

“Cause I did.”

“Why, what were you doing?”

“Nothing. I just felt like driving around. Then I went to the bar.”

“So you told her you wanted to be alone? That’s like saying, ‘Go away. I hate you.’ if you do it wrong. What happened? Exactly?”

“We went to my Mom’s for dinner.”

“Wha d’jou have?” asked Moe.

“Turkey.”

“Cool.”

“Anyway, I went to drop her off, right? So we’re there in front of her house, and she asks if I want to come in, and I tell her, ‘No. I don’t feel like it.’”

“So you kiss her good night?” asked Larry.

“No.”

“You just got back in your car and left?”

“No. She got out of the car and went in the house.”

Moe was astounded. “You mean you didn’t even walk her to de door?”

“No.”

“Didn’t walk her to the door?” Larry gasped.

“Oh shit, you in trou-ble, *now*.” Moe insisted.

“And you told her you wanted to be alone?” Larry said.

“Yeah.”

“You dumped her.” Larry wasn’t asking.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did. You dumped her. You might not think so, but as far as she’s concerned, she was dumped.”

“You think so?”

“Damn right.” said Moe. “You better be *buyin’* some flowers you wanna see her again. Wha’s the matter wit chou anyway. I thought you like dis girl.”

“I do.”

“Then you better be *buyin’* some flowers.”

~

They wished me luck when I left in the middle of the program to buy flowers and renew my friendship with Marlene. Both had told me how much they would miss her if I didn’t get her back. They enjoyed her being a part of our group. So did I. Buying flowers, I realized that I had changed. I didn’t think about killing. It was the past. History. Wasn’t going to happen again.

Having Marlene made me realize that I could talk to people, and that I had friends who would share things with me if I let them. I did not know that I was dumping her. That was not my intention. It never occurred to me at that moment that was what I projected.

Larry put it all into perspective for me. She thought that I was upset with her for some reason and perhaps she insulted my mother unknowingly. Although that did not

happen, she may have thought that it did, and that by saying I wanted to be alone, I was saying that “I’d rather be alone than be with you.”

It all made sense after a step-by-step dissection of the entire evening. Not going in with her was the ultimate insult. I changed my pattern, doing something that I had never done before. Usually, I went into her house and visited for a while, even if all we did was talk or watch TV, but not this time. This time I declined, and worst of all, without explanation. Had she given me another moment, perhaps I could have explained the desire for solitude. But she had not. In an instant, I got what I wanted, no fuss, no argument, no question. Maybe she understood.

I just wanted to be alone with my thoughts. To think about her without her around. I was not sure exactly how I felt, but maybe it was love. I was just trying to figure it out.

Maybe she understood all along and she wasn’t upset at all. Maybe her not calling that morning was sheer respect for my solitude. Maybe. In case her decision was to leave me alone for good, I had flowers. I was prepared.

~

There was a commotion down the street when I turned the corner to Marlene’s house. A crowd was gathered in the middle of the block. I drove slowly as I approached the scene. There were police cars parked on both sides of the street. Yellow ribbon held people back. It stretched from the police car antennas all the way to the house. Marlene’s house.

I don’t remember parking my car.

That moment felt as if walking within a dream, fully conscious of the reality

about me, yet unaware of what my next action would be. I walked right past the coroner's dark blue van and never saw it parked there. I got all the way to her door with a bouquet of daffodils and daisies and a policeman stopped me.

His look was one of concern, there was no other way to describe him. "Can I help you, sir?" he asked me.

I was stunned. Unthinking.

"Can I help you, sir?" he demanded again.

Looking past him, into the house I could feel myself crying, whimpering aloud, "No. No. Marlene. Marlene."

I pushed past him and he held me tight, restraining my arms immediately.

"Guys, help me." He yelled at the other policemen.

They rushed me like bodyguards protecting their boss, pushing me away from the house. I could feel hands on every limb. The flowers were crushed and petals decorated the officer in front of me. I briefly saw the bloody walkway, and Eureka lying on the floor. They would carry her body out later.

The police stayed huddled around me until I was safely in the back of a patrol car. They left me there to grieve, which I did openly.

They asked minimal questions.

"Do you live here sir?"

"No."

"Do you know who lives here?"

"Yes."

“For your own protection we are going to keep you here in the car until the detectives get here. They will want to speak with you.”

I cried because I never got to talk to her that day, because I knew she was dead, and finally, because I didn't remember the crime. I remembered buying flowers. I remembered being at the track. I remembered the last time I saw her, the night before. I remembered going for a drive in the rain. I drove down by the river to East Omaha and out by the airport. I listened to the radio. I remembered a lot.

Sitting there in the cruiser, it seemed as if I could account for every minute of the last twenty-four hours up to that point. *No* blank spaces, yet, somehow, and I knew it, my girlfriend was dead. I had no alibi. I also had no motive. What I did have was bloodlust, but only I and I alone knew about that. But, what of the hitchhiker, the girl from the desert? She wasn't real and I remembered her. But she was real. Once.

I sat there silently, watching the house through the raindrops.

There is a feeling you get in the back of your eyeballs when you just don't know something, when you search for an answer without having formulated a question. It was like that feeling would never leave me. Quite simply, I felt ill.

I wanted a cigarette but I could not smoke. I held the pack gently in my fingers and stared at it. Putting the next cancer stick in my mouth and lighting it was the slowest I ever moved in my life. What I remember best about that moment was the utter blankness of it all. Everything was light and dark and gray all at once. There was no clarity or form to my thoughts, but the world around me glowed vibrantly. The police cars shined in the dew and light twinkled in every drop. The fire of the matchstick

screamed with life. Touching it to the tobacco, I drew in deeply, sucking hard on the smoke as it sucked the life out of me.

At that point, there was nothing to do except wait. I was in custody. But they had not yet talked to me. They left me alone to stare at the house. I could feel myself aging.

You don't realize how devastating confinement is until it happens to you. The minutes drag and have a life of their own. The moment a second is gone another is in its place, and instantaneously each second that lives after each one that dies reminds one not of mortality, but of eternity.

I don't know how long I waited, trapped in eternity's grasp, but eventually, a young officer, black fellow I think, sat down in the passenger seat before me and asked, "What is your name, sir?"

"Paul Pasternak."

"Do you know what happened here, Mister Pasternak?"

"No."

"Where do you live, Mister Pasternak?"

"Nineteen-fourteen North Church."

"Thank you, Mister Pasternak." He wrote the information on a little pad and opened the door again, leaning out half way. "Mister Pasternak, a terrible . . . thing has happened here. Since you know the people who live here, our detectives would like to ask you some questions. Would you have any objections to coming downtown?"

"No." I wanted to be clear, so I turned to him. "No. I don't object."

"Okay," he answered bluntly. "Our detectives will be with you momentarily."

He left me alone again and momentarily turned out to be less than a minute. A man in a slicker and a baseball cap got in and slammed the door. The detective lifted the cap and brushed his hair back, sighing and wiping the rain from his cheeks, it started to pour. "Oh, man. It's getting' wet." He turned to look at me. "Mr . . . Pasternak, is it?"

I nodded.

"I'm Lieutenant Fielding. I've been told you know who lives here." He was friendly, but to the point. "Do you know what happened here?"

"Not really, but I got a bad feeling."

"There's a dead woman inside the house. Mid-thirties. Brunette." He stared at me solemnly.

I felt my lip quivering.

"Who else lives here?" he asked.

The tears came again. I looked away from the house to the street. Boys on bicycles stood beyond the tape, pointing at me. I ground my fist into my chin, still holding the cigarette, smoke scalding my teary eyeball. "Nobody. She lives alone." I whimpered my answers, knowing I could never speak to her again, truly sorrowful over her demise.

But I didn't know everything, and if I did, I was hiding it from myself. I cried at the cop, shouting, "What happened to her? What? Tell me. I want to know.

OH-AH-AH-AH-AH!"

I was uncontrollable and became breathless. "WHAT-HUH-Hap-HENNed to Her?"

The cop just watched me without answering.

His partner got in the driver's side and started the car while putting on his seat belt. The next moment we were moving.

It was time to go downtown.

CHAPTER 12

They held the doors for me every time we went through one, from the patrol car to the front of the station, to the interrogation room. All the way there, the only thing anybody said was, “Right this way, sir.”

They did not push me. They asked nothing until I was seated on a brown vinyl sofa, feeling vacant and hungry. I stopped trembling. Probably because I had stopped thinking about what had happened.

But what *did* happen? I really didn't know. I had no idea, no thought, no recollection. I had nothing. But Marlene was dead, and the last time I saw her, she was - what? Confused? Angry? Sad? All of the above? I didn't know because she never told me.

I wasn't mad at her. I knew that. But I didn't know what had happened to her, and they hadn't told me. They must have known that leaving me alone to cry would help me organize my thoughts, and they were right. I replayed every last detail of the day before Easter dinner with Mother, Mrs. Dombrowski, and Marlene. I could repeat our dialogue word for word, but I wasn't ready to answer questions about anything.

An old portly man walked in with two detectives. The uniformed officers left. It was a silent changing of the guards. The detectives sat in chairs on opposite ends of the desk across from us. The older man held out his hand to me while seating himself next to me. “Mister Pasternak, I'm Chief Arnold.”

“Hi.”

He took my hand in both of his like I was a dying man. Maybe I looked that way.

“What’s your first name, Mister Pasternak?”

That question made me think, even though it should have been a reflex answer more than anything else. “Paul.”

“Can I call you Paul? My name is Phil.”

“Sure. Phil.”

“You want something to drink, Paul? Coffee? We got coffee if you want some. Or water. Or a Pepsi.”

“No. That’s okay.”

“Paul, I know you’ve had a shock. And you probably never thought we’d be having this conversation today, you and I. But we have to talk. You know the lady in that house, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Who is she?”

“Marlene. She’s my . . . girlfriend.” I could not remember the last time I formulated that particular sentence.

“Tell me about her.”

I thought before speaking. “What? What do you want to know?”

“Anything. Just . . . tell me about her.”

It took a moment to decide what to say, but then the words flowed with ease. “She is so nice, you know? Everybody likes her. She likes all my friends too. And my mom. She likes her too. We had Easter dinner yesterday. At my mom’s.”

“Do you know what happened to her today?”

“Not really. They didn’t tell me. Are you going to tell me?”

“Yeah. I’m going to tell you.” He looked me right in the eye, and I could feel him reading my mind, and my reactions to whatever he would say. “Somebody killed her. They killed her dog, too.”

“The dog? She was trained to kill. She was a trained attack dog. Nobody could kill that dog. How?”

“That’s what we need to find out. Who would do this to her? Who would hurt that dog? Do you know why anybody would want to hurt Marlene?”

“No. Nobody. She’s so nice. Why? Why would this happen?”

“How long have you known Marlene?”

“I don’t know, like, um, February, I think, about two months.”

“How did you meet her?”

“At the track. In the bar at the track. Ak-Sar-Ben.”

“Why were you at the track?”

“Why? Because I practically live at the track, I go to the track every day.”

“Were you at the track today?”

“Of course.”

“Why were you bringing her flowers today?”

“Well, because why not? I thought she would like it.”

“No special occasion?”

“No.”

“Were they apology flowers?”

“What?”

“You know, a guy and a girl have a disagreement. They yell. The guy buys her flowers, and they make up. Was it something like that?”

How did he know? I decided to lie. “No. I just decided to get her some flowers, all right?”

“And when you got to her house, what happened?”

“What do you mean what happened? I get to her house, and there’s a million police cars all over the place. I don’t know what happened. I mean, I don’t know. Tell me. What happened? Why is my GIRL-FRIEND-DEAD?” I couldn’t help but yell.

“I don’t know that, Paul.” He stood up and walked in a little circle. “See, that’s the tricky thing here. The paperboy found her. He said the door was wide open, and she was lying on the floor. He could see her. So he went inside to try and help her, but it was too late. He tried,“ Phil Arnold paused and took a deep breath, “to give her CPR, but he didn’t know. It wouldn’t have worked.”

“How did she die?”

“Somebody stabbed her, Paul. More than once.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is,” he sat down next to me again. “I mean, it was bad, Paul. Somebody hated this woman, and I need to know why in order to find out who it is. I’m going to level with you, Paul. Right now, you are a suspect. I need you to tell me everything you know right now. And I need you to tell me the truth. Okay?”

It was unbearably quiet save for the rumble of thunder outside and rain plinking at

the window. "Okay."

"Did you kill your girlfriend?"

"No."

"Do you know who did?"

"No."

He reached over and put his arm around me, then pulled back, but kept his hand on my shoulder. "I've got to tell you something, Paul. I want to believe you, really, I do."

From that point on, we never lost eye contact. He looked like he could cry at any moment.

"I hope you're telling me the truth because you seem like a nice guy, and I want you to know I mean that. But I got a job to do, and that job is to find your girlfriend's killer. Okay?"

I said nothing.

"Okay, Paul? I need to know that you understand." He nodded.

"I do. I understand."

"Good. Because these guys are going to ask you some tough questions. And I'm going to tell you something right now. Don't lie to us. We can't afford bullshit right now, and if you lie to us, you're gonna waste our time, and that's gonna piss me off. Are we clear, Paul?"

"Yeah."

The Chief stood up and held out his hand to me. "Thank you, Paul."

I shook his hand. Then I stood up too.

He went to the door and walked out.

The detectives had yellow legal pads and started uncapping their pens.

“Mister Pasternak, I am Detective Ross, and this is Detective Coulter. Can you account for your whereabouts for the last twenty-four hours?”

“Yeah.”

“When was the last time you saw her?” he asked.

“Last night. I dropped her off after dinner.”

The other detective, Coulter, sat behind the desk and asked, “What’s her name?”

“Marlene Riggs.” I could feel my tear ducts welling when I said it. Looking at the officers through misty eyes, their expressions were nothing less than curious.

They moved slowly, and they spoke slowly, writing down everything we said word for word, despite the tape recorder on the desk in front of us. It wasn’t like any interrogation I had ever seen on TV or in the movies where they appease the suspect with a drink or a smoke. There was none of that.

They took turns asking me questions, first Coulter, then Ross, then Coulter again, and then Ross. We never wound up on a first-name basis. It was clear that we were not friends, but I was a murder suspect, and they were only doing their job.

“Where did you go for dinner?” asked Ross.

“We had dinner with my mom at the School for the Deaf. She’s the principal there.”

“Marlene?”

“No – my mom is the principal.”

“What did you have to eat?” asked Ross.

“Turkey. It was Easter dinner.”

“Then what?”

“I took Marlene home, and then I went home.”

“What time was that?”

“I really don’t know.”

Coulter asked, “Don’t you wear a watch?”

“No. Never really had a use for one.”

“When you dropped her off last night, did you go in?” asked Ross.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I just . . . didn’t. I went home.”

“You didn’t have an argument or anything?”

“No.”

Coulter asked, “Where did you first meet Marlene?”

“The clubhouse bar at Ak-Sar-Ben.”

“You said you go to the track a lot. Was she a regular at the track too?”

“Pretty much, after that day. But not before she said the first time she ever went there was the day we met.”

Ross jumped back to the night before. “So you dropped her off, and you went straight home. Is that right?”

“Last night? Pretty much, yeah.”

“What do you mean pretty much? Where else did you go?”

“No place. I went straight home.”

“Were you drunk?” asked Coulter.

“No. My mom doesn’t serve booze. I was sober.”

“What did you do when you got home?”

I paused because I really had to think about it. What did I do? It was so inconsequential that I never thought it out until that moment. “I played with the cat. With a string and a toy mouse.”

“Did you watch TV?”

“No. I listened to the stereo.”

“What station?”

“The jazz station. The Don Kirby show.”

“What did he play?”

“I don’t know. Jazz. Is It A Crime?”

“Is what a crime?”

“No. The song, ‘Is It A Crime’ by Sade. And he had the Rippingtons and Kenny G, Manhattan Transfer. Just good jazz.”

“Then what did you do?” asked Coulter.

“I had a shot of Crown Royal, and I read the Racing Form.”

“Where did you go for the shot?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you go to a bar?”

“No, I have a bottle at home. I’m a big boy.” I could feel myself becoming defensive, and I didn’t like feeling that way. I knew I had to stick to this simple story, playing with the cat, listening to music at home where I had a Racing Form and a half bottle of Crown Royal because even I could not account for my whereabouts on my drive into the darkness.

Cruising away from Marlene’s house, I drove away from the city lights to the farm country of Nebraska, where hills roll gently under soggy skies. All I did was go about thirty or forty miles, and I parked to watch the lightning. It was not as spectacular as I had hoped, but a few significant bursts flared across the sky, flashing a dusky glow over the freshly tilled fields and silent tractors that waited for work.

I recalled now why I drove so far. It was to keep the monster at bay that night. The monster I was trying to suppress and destroy. I could feel that if I didn’t get away from Marlene, I would hurt her. Alone in the storm, I realized that was what I was doing. That was why I had to say I went straight home. Sitting and watching lightning is completely unreasonable to all but the one who is doing so, and then, even that one cannot explain why.

Meditation. Therapy. Reflection. All of the above.

That night, seeing the tractors reminded me of Myra. I was nineteen. We met by chance, right downtown, and she was driving her father’s car, a black ’57 Chevy. A bit rusty because it was almost twenty years old, but it was still cool. We went for a ride out to the heartland. Now, I don’t know where exactly.

We parked near a tractor and played in the hay. The tender groping and disrobing

were something we expected of each other, and it was lovely. Before I even knew it, I was overtaken by an urge and was acting out what felt like fantasy, but was dreadfully real.

I was eerily calm throughout. Her screams, her pleading, somehow felt plastic and unreal, like a movie. She did not expect me to take the pitchfork I had found and jam it into her belly. It was exhilarating to feel that power and to know that her screams were for me alone.

Nobody else could hear her. We were so far away. Her final gasp was barely audible as the tines punctured her lungs. It could be so quiet on a cloudy prairie day. That sound was for me alone as well.

Sometimes I thought back, and I could hear her even now.

I walked all the way home in a funk, unsure of the actual reality of my actions. To be safe, I passed through farmland to the academy, past cows and hopping over barbed wire fences, crossing dirt roads. Soon the light faded, and an hour later, I was home. It was not even late in the day. Nobody saw me, and I knew it.

Hearing about Myra on the news the next day, I had an epiphany. I could never have close friends. I wasn't sure I wanted close friends, but I knew I could never share secrets like this.

I had never been able to make sense of the bloodlust, but I always thought of Myra every time I felt the urge. *Your first one stays with you.*

Trying to relive that moment was what it was all about. That look in their eyes, the disbelief that flared into horror, then faded to stillness. There was a romance to it.

That moment of intimacy cemented the bond between us. I knew it was strange, but I loved every one of them.

That last flicker of knowledge about what was happening to them as their last breaths stopped, that deep inhalation followed by a light, frothy hiss, made it special for both of us. Neither would ever forget the other.

Then, there was the blood. Fresh, red, and sticky. When I inhaled, the scent was hypnotic. Sometimes, I wanted more, so I would go deeper, taking out the insides for a full examination to marvel. Their insides shined. I suppose it was that way with all animals. Sometimes I saw it on a piece of meat in the butcher's case. That special shine. Such a rare sight. The only person they would ever share it with was me.

It was not something to talk about with anyone. Maybe a psychiatrist, but then I would have to lie and say I had fantasies or something like that. I could never share my true passion with anyone. So I followed a path of solitude. Nobody would ever know.

This was why I could never tell the police about my ride out into the rain for an evening of contemplation and solitude. I could not divulge what I thought about. Better to say I was at home with my cat because, in an hour, I was.

Ross then asked, "Did you leave your house for any reason at all last night?"

"No. Once I was home, I stayed in."

"What did you do today?" Coulter asked.

"I just went to the track."

"Did anybody see you there?"

"Yeah, everybody."

“What do you mean, everybody?”

“I mean everybody. Everybody knows me. I probably haven’t missed a day at the track in ten years.”

“So if we go to the track, we can find people who can say for certain that you were there today?” Ross clarified.

“Definitely.”

“Who won the first race?” Coulter demanded.

“The four horse. Paid six-eighty to win.”

“What about the second race?” said Ross.

“The seven.”

“Did you have money on these races?”

“Yeah. I lost on the daily double.” I reached into my coat pocket and produced the losing tickets for them. “I had the four-six.”

“What time did you leave the track?”

“Right after the fourth race.”

“Where did you go?”

“I bought some flowers, and I went straight over to Marlene’s house.”

“Where did you buy the flowers?”

“From the lady who stands in front of the clubhouse entrance.”

Ross changed the subject again. “How well did you know Marlene?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did she use drugs?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“I think she would have told me if she did.”

“Do you use drugs?”

“No. Never.”

“Where did she work?” asked Coulter.

“The university, up in Blair. She’s an English teacher.”

“At college? What’s an English professor going to the track for?”

“What?” I shouted.

“Coulter, be cool,” Ross told him. “It just seems unusual for an English teacher to meet people at the track, that’s all.”

“Why? All kinds of people go to the track. Lawyers. Doctors. Guys who own factories.”

“You know some guys who own factories?”

“Yeah, I do. And I know some lawyers and doctors too.”

“From the track?”

“Yeah, from the track.”

“Did you want to call one of your lawyer friends from the track?” asked Ross pointedly.

There was a momentary silence. “Tryin’ to tell me I need a lawyer?”

Ross looked unconcerned now. “No. Why would you need a lawyer if you haven’t done anything wrong?”

It felt like a trick question, so I didn't answer it. Instead, I asked them, "What do you want from me?"

"All we want is the truth," said Ross. "That's all. If there's something you think we should know, you gotta tell us, or else we'll never know who killed Marlene Riggs."

Coulter spoke up again. "You didn't do it, right?"

"No."

"You don't have to yell. I'm just checking."

"I said *no* already. I shouldn't have to repeat myself."

"How did you decide to buy flowers?" asked Ross.

"I just . . . did. That's all."

They sat silently, waiting for elaboration.

"We had a good time last night. She . . . and my mom . . . got along. And the flowers looked so nice I thought she would like them, that's all."

"How much did you lose at the track today?" asked Coulter.

"Twenty bucks. The ticket I showed you."

"So, where did you get the money to buy the flowers?"

"I didn't lose all my money. I have money. Twenty dollars to me is like a dime for you."

"So you just go to the track, you pay to park, you pay to get in, you lose twenty bucks, and after four races, you call it quits and say, 'Hey, why don't I blow another five bucks on flowers right now?'"

"You are just about the meanest bastard I've ever met," I said slowly and calmly

so it would sink in. “I have a season pass to the track. I also have a season parking pass. I know how to gamble, and I spent twelve-fifty on the flowers, gave the lady fifteen, and told her to keep the change. Then I find out –”

I stiffened and shook, and tears dripped from my eyes. I could feel my tongue swelling up and an inconceivably large lump in my throat because, at that moment, I knew I was telling the truth. I didn't know who killed her or how she died. Every detail was foreign to me. I kept wiping my eyes.

Ross stood up and brought me a box of tissue.

I sat there sobbing, and they both went to the door.

Ross told me, “We'll be right back, Mister Pasternak.”

CHAPTER 13

They left me alone in the captain's office for more than a short while. Checking the clock on the wall, I guessed I had been there for at least forty minutes. There was no mirror on any of the walls, so I guessed I was not being watched. I felt calm despite the situation.

My inner dialogue comforted me to know the truth. *The truth will set you free.*
You didn't do it. So who did?

That was not important, but it was important, but not as important as knowing what really happened last night and today, verifiable facts that couldn't change.

When you left Marlene, that was the last time you saw her. That was the truth. *You drove around for a while. You parked. You watched lightning. Then you went home.*
That's the only thing you're leaving out, and it doesn't make a difference.

You didn't kill Marlene.

You went home and played with the cat, had a shot, and then went to bed. Oh yeah, you looked at the Racing Form for a while.

Today was typical too. Marlene usually showed up around the eighth race unless she had school. *You stopped for coffee at Ernest's and got a new racing form, and then you went to the races.*

Nothing was different.

You saw the same people, the same ushers, the same cashiers, the three stooges.
Then you bought flowers and when you got to her house . . . that was it. But who killed the dog? They must have had a gun. There must have been more than one. Maybe it was a robbery? God, I hope they didn't rape her. I never raped any of them. It was always

beautiful and romantic.

I loved them all. I loved the way they looked when they knew. When they knew that the last thing they would ever see would be my face. The horror that they never thought they would know. Once that look was in their eyes, the whites turn purer than they had ever been, the ball bounces forward out of the skull, and you see the shiny pink membrane in the corner. When you see all that in one gleaming instant, you knew you must continue because they knew they would die. It would be wrong to frighten anyone that way and then let them go on living, only to be plagued by nightmares and constant fear of their fellow man. You do a far better service to their memory by taking them quickly and letting them know they were loved.

But now, what monster took away your Marlene? Who would kill a dog?

Not you.

Sometimes I watched TV shows about serial killers. I hated that phrase: serial killer. It may have been apt, but I still hated it. It made it sound like they were out of control when in fact, it was all control.

I hated the way they were depicted, like there was some formula that turns a person into a monster. There is no formula, no root cause. Some people, like me, are just a certain way, and that is all there is to it. They don't all come from abusive households with punishing parents. They don't all torture animals. They are not all career criminals with long rap sheets.

I grew up with just my Mom because my father was shipped off to fight in Korea, where he was killed in action, right after he got there. I was a baby. I knew him only as a

black and white photo of a young man holding me in his arms. But my mom was a good mom.

I love animals. Cats, dogs, little birds. Horses are about the most beautiful things in the world. I would never hurt an animal. I don't understand those who would. Those are truly sick individuals.

I was never in trouble with the law. I was never arrested or suspected of anything. I did not steal or hang out with the wrong crowd or use drugs.

I was normal. Just a regular guy.

I knew what I was doing every time. I knew every move I would make the moment before I did, and everything played out beautifully. But there was no series to it. While I knew what I was doing, everything was always unpredictable, right to the end. And every single time, I thought it would be the last time, so I did it right. With elegance, precision, and love.

I sat and thought for a long time and decided I would cooperate with them as much as I could because it was true. I did not kill Marlene. I would not ask for a lawyer. I would not ask when I could go home. I would not ask for anything special. If they wanted to search my home, they could because I couldn't think of anything I would be hiding there. Most importantly, they were not asking about any of the other girls I *did* know about, so I waited.

Ross came and got me and took me to another interrogation room. It felt as though he were leading me into a dungeon in the depths of hell. We walked down the stairs in a silent procession to the basement, then down a long corridor to the end.

The heavy iron door was coated with forty or fifty years of paint that peeled and cracked in places. For the most part, it was tan. Under that, it was lime green, and before that, it was red. It was obvious that each time it was painted, they used the cheapest material they could find and a novice to do the work.

Ross tried to open the door. It was locked. He knocked. No answer. "I guess they're not here yet."

We stood facing each other in awkward silence. Ross was a good-looking younger man than I, but with more gray hair.

"My dad goes to the track," he said.

"Oh? Who is he?"

"Well, you probably don't know him."

"I'll bet I do. What's his name?"

"Jimmy Ross."

"Hmm. Can't say that rings a bell. What's he look like?"

"Well, he's ah--" Ross smiled and chuckled. "He's tubby, is what he is. Drinks beer, smokes a cigar."

"Well, son, you've just described about half the guys in the grandstand. Where does he like to watch the races from?"

"Where?"

"Where does he hang around at the track? Everybody always has their own little territory they like to stay in. Like I stay in the clubhouse, some guys hang around the finish line. Where does he go?"

“I don’t know. I never go to the track.”

“You don’t go? Don’t you like horses?”

“I’m not a gambler.”

“I think I might know your dad. What’s he wear?”

“A ball cap. Always wears a ball cap and a blue velvet bowling jacket.”

I knew him. “That sounds like Three-Fingered Jim. He’s got three fingers on his left hand, right?”

Ross’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s right.”

“And sometimes there’s a lady with him. A blonde lady with a white . . . , a white coat with um . . . fur around the neck. Is that your mom? Cause I would say, you look like her.”

“*Yeah*. It is. I can’t believe you know them.”

“I’m telling you. I don’t miss a trick at the track.”

“Do people really call my dad Three-Fingered Jim?” he asked with what sounded like a disappointment.

“Well, not to his face, not to be mean or anything. He knows he has three fingers.”

A trio of detectives in long coats strolled toward us, led by Coulter. He asked, “Why didn’t you go in?”

Ross said, “It’s locked.”

Coulter pushed past us. “No, it’s not.” Putting his shoulder to the door and heaving into it, the door creaked open and scraped against the ceiling. Dust fell on him.

We all walked in behind him. First Ross, then myself, and the other detectives

followed.

The room was indeed a dungeon. There were no windows, and ancient bricks and cobblestones lined the floors and walls. A mighty timber beam hung down across the length of the basement. There were three long tables against one of the walls close to the door, the only entrance. Each was lined with manila folders, envelopes, and papers neatly stacked.

Above the tables were four bulletin boards with crime scene photos tacked to each one. From where I stood, I could not discern detail but knew they were photographs of found bodies and missing women. This was Omaha's HQ for unsolved mysteries.

The room was triangular, so I could see every wall from wherever I stood. Other than the dreary lamps that spot-lit the tables and photographs, there was one single bulb hanging from the beam. It was unlit, but I could see it.

The entire space was poorly lit. I could barely see the walls only twenty feet away. I was staring at the lone bulb when it illuminated and blinded me momentarily. It must have been a 300-watt bulb. At that moment, I heard Coulter say, "Have a seat, Mr. Pasternak."

A single wooden chair sat below the bulb. There was nowhere else to sit. Anxiety began to burrow in. Reluctantly, I went to the chair and sat. I thought about taking off my coat to be more comfortable in this position, but the dungeon was cold, so I left it on.

The bulb was positioned precisely over my forehead so that it was the only thing I could see. Unless one was standing directly between me and the tables, I would not know where they were. It was scary. I thought they were going to beat me.

“What do you guys want from me?” I was compelled to ask.

“We just want to ask you some questions.” I knew it was Coulter.

“Okay, ask away,” I told them. I could feel myself trembling.

Coulter began, “Why did you kill your girlfriend?”

“I didn’t.”

He came close to my face. “I think you did. I think you’re hiding something. I think you got in a fight with her, it got out of hand, and you probably didn’t even mean to do it. It just - happened. Then you spaced it. Didn’t even know what you did, so you went to buy her some flowers, right?”

I was silent. Could he be right? No.

“Is that right?”

“What are you asking? Did I buy flowers? Yes. Did I kill my girlfriend? No. What the hell is this place? The Omaha PD torture chamber?”

Then the door scraped open, and three more men walked in. I could see their silhouettes from the light in the hall. They were silent and made me nervous, so I asked, “What’s going on?”

A man in a suit stepped up to me and crouched a bit into the light where I could see him. He was a light-skinned Black man with piercing green eyes, clean-shaven with a small diamond earring. His suit was expensive, Blass or Armani, pinstriped, three-piece with silk magenta tie. He held out his hand to me. He wore a pinky ring and a gold bracelet. He was definitely not from Omaha.

“Mr. Pasternak. I am Carlton Dove. Special agent F.B.I.” He said it with such

pomp and insolence I couldn't help but be impressed.

I shook his offered hand.

He spoke to the other detectives. "Did somebody forget to pay the light bill? What is going on here?"

"This is where they got you set up, Mr. Dove."

"Agent Dove. Well, this is ridiculous. Where are the cold cuts?"

"The what, sir?" somebody asked.

"The cold cuts. I specifically said I wanted cold cuts. Salami. Ham. Roast beef. Good bread. Rye, marble if they have it, or pumpernickel. And I want some quality cheese too. Havarti with dill. And make sure you get good mustard, too, none of the cheap stuff that comes in a squeeze bottle. Baxter." Dove opened his wallet and produced bills and handed them to Baxter. "Here. Take one of these guys with you and find a Polish Deli. I know there's one around here somewhere. And don't forget to get some whole pickles too, the big kind that comes in a jar. And napkins. Enough for everybody. We'll probably be here all night."

"All night." I protested.

"Chill, Pasternak. You got nowhere to go. We'll feed you. The Dove has landed." He turned toward the hallway. "Baxter, don't forget drinks."

"What kind?"

"Good things," he drawled. Then he looked around and said, to the men, "Don't I get a chair?"

One of them left, but other than the obvious presence of Dove, I could not tell

who else was in there or where they stood.

Dove walked around me in a circle. “Paul Pasternak,” he started, then was silent for a few moments more. “Paul Pasternak. That’s a Polish name, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“You like good Polish deli don’t you?”

“Oh yeah. Of course.”

He kept walking in a circle. “Good.”

The door opened, and one of the men rolled in a big comfortable-looking leather chair. “Here you are, sir.”

“Thank you, my good man.” Dove rolled it before me and sat directly across me about three feet away. “Ah, yes.” He savored the chair. “Now, we can get down to business.”

Dove allowed another long silence. This was his way of taking control. Slow and steady. There was no doubt that he was in command. He made sure everybody knew that.

“You’re from here, aren’t you, Pasternak?”

“Omaha? Oh, yeah.”

“Yeah. Omaha. It seems like everybody in Omaha is from Omaha. The same goes for the rest of Nebraska too. You never meet anyone here that’s from anywhere else, do you?”

“No, not usually.” He was easy to talk to despite his eccentricities. “Unless they’re from Iowa.”

“I’m from Alabama, myself. Slave blood. Dove is a slave name. You know that?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Somewhere along the lines, way back when, they say we had an ancestor who used to raise doves for meat. So it came to be our last name. What does Pasternak mean?”

“I don’t know. I have no idea.”

“You don’t? You should find out. It’s always interesting to uncover your heritage. You learn things that you never thought you would. Did you know that in the nineteen-thirties, the Blacks in Alabama had their own secret police force?”

“No. I never knew that.”

“You know why? Because. It was a secret. That’s why you didn’t know. Now, why don’t you tell me one of your secrets, Paul?”

Now I was Paul, not Pasternak to him. It was a bad feeling. “What secrets?”

“I dunno. Anything. You choose.”

“I don’t have any secrets.”

“You hear that, fellas? Paul don’t have any secrets.” He turned back to me and said, “So whatever you say is the God’s honest truth, is that it?”

“Yeah. I got nothing to hide. I’m not going to lie to you. What type of interrogation is this?”

“This is a Carlton Dove interrogation. Would you prefer another kind?”

I sighed and shook my head. “I guess not.”

“Good.” He leaned back in the big chair and spun around partway. “Hey, fella, what’s your name?”

“Ross.”

“Ross, would you be so kind? Hand me the manila folder with the number one printed on it.”

Ross found it quickly and handed it to him.

“Thank you. Now. Paul. Let me tell you why I am here.” He reached into the folder and produced a photograph. Color. 8 x 10. High school stock. A pretty blonde girl.

“Do you know this woman?”

“No.”

“She died in nineteen-seventy-five on May fifth in Lincoln, Nebraska. They found her body right behind the ticket booth at a drive-in theater. She was stabbed multiple times. The guy nearly cut her head off.” He reached into the folder again and handed me a second photo. “This is what it looked like when we found her.”

I gasped silently, staring at the photo.

“When I say ‘we,’ I don’t mean me and my buddies. I mean the law enforcement community. Two years later, when I joined the law enforcement community, we, meaning me and my fellow officers, discovered this girl -- envelope number two, please, Mr. Ross.”

Ross gave Dove the second manila folder. He produced a photo of another slain body and held it before me. I took it.

“I worked a beat in Kansas City, and we were the first on the scene. It was gruesome, as you can see. The wounds were the same, however, so we knew it was the same man who did the cutting. Of course, we didn’t piece all this together immediately. It took time. Between nineteen-seventy-eight and nineteen-eighty-three, eight more bodies

showed up. Some with names. Some Jane Does. Some were in Lincoln, some in KC. But only one in Omaha. You know what happened next?”

“No. What?”

“Nothing. Until nineteen-eighty-nine. He killed twelve that year. That’s when I joined the Bureau. And I came to Omaha to find him. Now, you probably never heard of these murders on TV, that they were connected anyway. Because there was no suspect. No connection from victim to victim, and of course, they didn’t want to start a panic. But today, a paperboy found your girlfriend laying face down, soaking wet in her own blood. You know -- that’s why I’m here. It was him. I saw what happened today. I was there. Before they took her away before you showed up, I was there when they took her picture.” he said feverishly. “Let me tell you; you think those girls looked bad?”

I sat stone cold staring at him. The first girl I didn’t recognize. The second girl, however, I did. She was a hitchhiker. After meeting on the interstate and having a clandestine encounter at a dark truck stop, I took her to Kansas City. And that was it. I lost control. I knew I was going to do it all along, and I almost let her get away. After dropping her off, I pretended I was somebody else and chased her down an alley.

When I finished her, I drove home. They found her body the next day.

“You think I did all this?”

“Did you?”

“NO. NO. No.”

He leaned over and took the glossies out of my hand. “Then help me find out who did,” he whispered.

“How?” I queried hesitantly.

“The beginning always seems like the proper starting point.” He uncapped an old-fashioned script fountain pen and reached into his breast pocket for a small leatherette journal. “But let’s not do that. Let’s start with yesterday. Tell me everything you did yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” I stopped to think, then said, “There was no racing. Easter Sunday. We went to my mom’s for dinner.”

“No. I mean before that. First thing in the morning. What did you do?”

“I . . . woke up. I . . . had some cereal?”

“Was Marlene with you?”

“Yesterday morning? No. She was at her house.”

“How do you know?”

He confused me. I had not thought of this before. “I don’t. I just . . . guess . . . she must have been.”

“What time did you first see her yesterday?”

“I don’t know. I guess around three-thirty, and then we drove down the street to the academy.”

“What academy?”

“The School for the Deaf, where my mom works. She’s the principal. That’s where we had dinner.”

“At the academy? Why there?”

“My mom lives on the premises. I grew up there.”

“What time did you get up yesterday morning?”

“I don’t know. I usually get up around ten. I don’t set an alarm so I really don’t know.”

“So you got up around ten and you didn’t see your girlfriend until three-thirty. What did you do in the meantime? Between ten and three-thirty?”

I had to think about it first. “I watched TV.”

“What was on?”

“Golf. I watched some golf, and I watched some cartoons.”

“And that’s all you did from ten to three? Watched golf, and cartoons?”

“Yeah, basically. I took a shower, too. And I . . . got dressed for dinner.”

“Did you talk to Marlene at all yesterday prior to seeing her at three-thirty?”

I had to think about that too. “No.”

“You didn’t call her, she didn’t call you?”

“No. I just picked her up at three-thirty and that was it.”

“Okay. Jump back with me now. You met her in February, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Before or after Valentine's Day?”

“After.”

“Did she break up with anybody on Valentine's Day?”

“No. Not that I know of.”

“Did you end a relationship on Valentine's Day?”

“What do you mean?”

“Who was your last girlfriend?”

It was sad to think about but easy to say. “Nobody. I haven’t had a girlfriend . . . since . . . I don’t know. Ten years?”

“Who was she?”

“Becky. Her name was Becky.”

“Tell me about Becky.”

“What?”

“What’d she look like?”

“She was pretty. A pretty girl. Blonde. She was kinda . . . small. Petite.”

“Where did you meet her?”

“At a flower shop. She worked there.”

“At a flower shop? Did you know her from somewhere else? Before that?”

“No.”

“So you weren’t going in there to buy her flowers, because you didn’t even know her before you walked in the door right?”

He spoke quickly and made perfectly good sense, confounding my senses. It was hard to lie to him. “Right.”

“So, why did you go into the flower shop, to begin with?”

“To buy flowers.”

“For whom?”

I hung my head down and scratched my crown. “Man. I . . . can’t remember now. I haven’t thought about it for so long - ”

“Another girl?”

“No. Had to be my mom. She’s the only one I ever buy flowers for.”

“But you bought some for Marlene today right?”

“Right.”

“Marlene must have been pretty special.”

“Yeah. She is.” I could feel his attempts to get me to use the past tense when speaking of Marlene. I just couldn’t.

Even though I knew the past tense was the appropriate verbiage, I knew that if I used it he would try to confound me further. I knew he would ask why I used the past tense. Maybe. Maybe he wouldn’t, but I felt like he would. What did he know? There had to be something. I wasn’t just sitting there in the dungeon for no good reason. They don’t bring in the FBI for no good reason. There was something they knew about me that even I had not suspected. *What? What? What?*

“What happened to Becky?” he asked.

“She died in a car accident. A drunk driver hit her.” It was true. Everything about Becky was true. I dated her for two weeks and that was what happened to Becky.

It was another time when I let the beast rest or sleep or just hide in the cave. I remember trying to beat it. With Becky, I felt secure. Security in myself to the point I didn’t need to go out and hunt for blood.

The bloodlust was just like Gambler’s Fever. It was hard to control and nearly impossible to stop. It just . . . happened. The reason was alien under those influences as it was to any other addiction.

Ask a smoker why they can't stop smoking, even if they want to. It's the same thing. Reason. Why? Because. That's all there is to it.

"Can you tell me the exact day that happened?"

"No." I thought about it. "I don't think so. But it was in summer. That really hot summer, nineteen-eighty-three. Like . . . August. I think. I'm not sure."

"What was Becky's surname?"

"Peterson. She worked at Hill's Flowers by the track. I think they're gone now. I think it's a convenience store."

Dove turned away from me toward the men standing behind him. "Becky Peterson. August, eighty-three. Check July and September, too."

One of them walked out the door of the dungeon.

Dove leaned forward in his chair and rubbed his palms together. "Now. Take me back to yesterday. You had Easter dinner with your mother, right? Was it a good dinner? Everything go okay?"

"Yeah. Everything was fine."

"What did you have?"

"Turkey." *Why does everyone ask that?*

"Oh, man. A home-cooked meal with Mom. Mmm-MMM. Wish I had a home-cooked meal with my mom. But we had real good steak yesterday. Didn't we Charlie?" he called back to the shadows. "Place in Des Moines. Tenderloin. Oooh-MAN. Succulent, you know?"

I snickered because he put me at ease again. "Hard to beat a good steak."

“Yes, it is. It certainly is. Okay. What happened after dinner?”

“Nothing. I took Marlene home. And that was it.”

Silence took over for a moment. We stared at each other. Dove looked down and rubbed his face with his hand. He looked back at me and asked, “What happened when you got back to her house?”

“She got out of the car and went inside.”

“Was that the last time you saw her?”

I didn’t think of that awkward moment saying goodnight as the last time I saw her, but it was. “Yeah,” I said solemnly.

There was more repressive silence to follow as Dove stood up to pace before me. “You told the other detectives that you went straight home. You didn’t go in with her? Sit around, hang around for a while?”

“No.”

“Okay.” He went to the table and shuffled through the manila folders, chose one and sat down again. He crossed his legs at the knee, like a woman, calm and relaxed. He opened the folder and produced a photo. This time a headshot of a pretty girl I had never seen before. Dove held it up for me to look at. “Do you know who this is, Pasternak?”

“No.” I felt myself stiffen when he stopped using my first name.

He looked surprised. “You read the paper, don’t you?”

“I read the racing form. Should I know who that is?”

“Her name is Mary. Was Mary. She was beaten, strangled, and viciously stabbed. Then she was found floating downstream about eighty miles from here. There’s a

retarded boy going on trial today for killing her. You didn't hear about this?"

I shook my head.

"I don't think he did it. I think it was somebody else. Let me show you why." He stood again and went back to the table, returning with another stack of folders and handing them to me. He took one from the top and produced another headshot. "Because this girl's murder was identical to Mary's. She was killed precisely the same way. Stabbed. Strangled. Dumped in a river. You know where? Not the Missouri, my friend. The Colorado."

He took the next folder and repeated the photo ritual. "Four months later, we found this girl's body, floating in the Colorado River too, but further upstream, in Utah. She disappeared in Grand Junction." With the next folder and next picture, he said, "And this girl was found just a few days later washed up on the South Platte River in northeast Colorado. She disappeared from Grand Island. MAP. Please."

Dove ordered the shadows, and they brought a US Highway map taped to a large piece of cardboard and held it up for me. "Now, what's curious about that is that the South Platte flows from Colorado to Nebraska, not the other way around. So this means she was taken all the way to Colorado before being killed. She was hitchhiking."

I remained mute, pondering the map, then looked back at Dove.

He continued, "You see this route here," he pointed, "It's the interstate route from here to Las Vegas. You see that, don't you, Pasternak?"

How did he know? Of course, I knew the route. I had probably driven it twenty or thirty times. Sometimes, I would pick up hitchhikers, only girls, though, and I knew

everyone from the pictures he had just shown me. Yes, they were mine, the ones on the way to Vegas. But not the first one, Mary, the girl from the Missouri River. I knew nothing about her. “Yeah. I see it.”

“When’s the last time you were in Vegas, Pasternak?”

“Last year. In the spring.”

“You drive or fly?”

“Drive.”

“You ever pick up any hitchhikers?”

Of course. I pick them up all the time - and then I kill them. That was the truth, but I would never say that.

The card I held in my sleeve for years, never knowing if I would ever need to play it, flipped quietly into my hand. I needed to lie. It had to be convincing so they would believe me. The same way the army doctors did when I was on the verge of being sent to Vietnam.

“No. Never.”

“Never? Not once? You don’t get lonely? Want someone to talk to on those long trips?”

“Hey, man. What are you trying to say? I didn’t kill anybody.”

“Now, that wasn’t my question, was it? What I asked was, don’t you get lonely and pick up a hitchhiker to talk to once in a while?”

“No. I carry too much cash. I don’t pick up hitchhikers, so they don’t KILL ME.”

“Soup’s on.” a voice called from behind.

The two detectives carried large paper bags and placed them on the tables.

“Alright.” Dove cried delightedly, completely losing track of the conversation to focus on lunch.

Dove walked to the table and started unpacking the bags. “What have we here?”

Baxter told him, “Got some really good-looking pastrami, boss.”

“Good. You got mustard too?”

“Yeah, and red potato salad.”

“Forks?”

“They’re in there.”

“Paul Pasternak. Come on over and get yourself some deli.”

It was the truest surreal moment I had ever experienced. One moment I looked at photographs of women I killed, and then I was breaking bread with law enforcement, the FBI no less.

I went to the table and stood among the detectives, all reaching into the bounty and making their sandwiches. There was salami and head cheese, Havarti, muenster, swiss, and different breads. Beyond the mustard and caraway seed loaf, there was more meat: smoked turkey and baked ham, Thuringer, pepperoni, and pickles. It was like they bought the whole store.

Dove said, “Don’t be shy, Pasternak, step up and make yourself a sandwich.

So I did.

One of them asked, “You got any mayo?”

Dove piped up, “Mayo’s for wimps, Jack. A real sandwich is made with mustard,

isn't that right, Pasternak?"

I chuckled now. "Yeah, I'd say so."

Then I looked up from the bread in my hand to the bulletin board. Every photo displayed a grisly crime scene, and I froze. I was not sure that I recognized anything (or anyone) in the pictures, but it was disturbing. They were all women. All mutilated. A lot like my style.

I studied them closely, and I could feel Dove studying me. Some were bloody. Others were just rotting corpses beached on muddy riverbanks devoid of eyes, nipped away by the fish, with pale gray skin stretched over bone. A corpse is nowhere near as beautiful as a vibrant young woman.

It is not beautiful at all. It is hideous.

But I did not quiver or flinch. I knew what he was doing now. Dove wanted my reaction. Perhaps he was hoping I would break down and confess to something, be appalled and look away, or ask a stupid question. I chose strength to be true to the beast, to remain free, and to be silent save for a single gasp.

I didn't touch the rest of the food yet. I just held a piece of bread and turned to Dove. He nibbled on cheese, staring me down. "God . . ."

He waited for me to say more, but I didn't. I just stared back at him.

"Just make yourself a sandwich, man. Don't look at those yet." But he knew that I would, and that was what he wanted.

I wondered now what I should do. *Do I just eat? Should I act scared? What?*

Guilt is not a question of right or wrong. Nor is it a concept of good and bad.

Guilt is an emotion. One that, after years of practice, I had learned to suppress. To act guilty would be to admit weakness. Such is why an abusive parent denies hitting their child, or a school bully revels in machismo.

I begged myself for answers. If I were to feign innocence, I could not display remorse, fear, or guilt. Especially guilt. I knew that I had made this decision long before ever meeting Carlton Dove, long before ever knowing Marlene. Long before deciding to strike again after that night with the pitchfork. Now was not the time to question, *Why?* I did that every day anyway.

I always asked myself, *Why?* No answer would ever be satisfactory to explain my compulsions, and it would not matter if I could explain. Not to a detective or a court or a jury. To authority, the motive of unnecessary violence is irrelevant, all answering *Why?* does is provides unsettling details that would prompt one to ask yet again, *Why?*

It is unanswerable. Men climb mountains because they are there, and the symbiotic mystery of the chicken and the egg will never be explained. Why is why not is because why, that's how come.

Why?

Because. We can.

This was the answer to everything. All that had ever happened, happened because it could. Because. Somebody could do it.

This is why we do everything. Whether something was right or wrong was not a general consideration in every case. That we did it at all, and the consequences of our actions were what justified it in the end. Or proved that we had made a mistake.

Nobody had ever done something they could not do. Once done, the ability was proven. Whether a person believed they could, was another realm of thought entirely. Many people, whether in times of war or passion, were most likely genuinely surprised that they could kill another person. Just as surprised as the tiny woman who lifted a car off of the man trapped under it. They couldn't do those things. Ever. But they did.

Because. They could.

I built a Thuringer sandwich and sat back down. Dove built himself a hell of a Dagwood and sat across from me. He must have used every piece of meat and cheese available.

Baxter appeared at his side with a can of orange soda. "Here you go, boss. You want a Pepsi or an Orange, Mr. Pasternak?"

I mumbled, "Pepsi," through a full mouth.

He handed me one.

"Thank you."

Dove put his soda on the floor next to his feet and leaned forward to eat. "Guess we should have had plates."

He kept eating and spoke with his mouth half full at all times. "I didn't want to sit at the table, you know. Not the right, ah, scenery. And besides, I never talk business at lunch. But tell me this. You're a horseplayer. How do you decide which horse to bet on? I go to the track, and they all look the same to me. Different colors, just like people, but what makes you pick one horse over another?"

"Handicap the race."

“Handicap? What’s that mean?”

“Look at the horse’s record, stats, jockey. See who picks up in the stretch, who falls behind. That kind of thing. Look at whether the horse is on Bute or Lasix.”

“Bute and Lasix? I thought those drugs were illegal.”

“Not in Nebraska. Not yet, anyway. So, you figure out which one is going to get to the finish line first, and you can. Because somebody has to win. Really, sometimes the best way to do it is to decide who can’t win and go from there.”

“Handicap backwards?”

“Yeah, odds are that you can pick more losers than you can pick winners anyway, so you pick the ones that are most likely to lose and throw ‘em out. Then when you get down to three or four horses, you decide which one of them is the strongest. And you bet.”

“Do you always win that way?”

“No. No way. Nobody always wins. I’ve lost for a week straight before.”

“So what do you do?”

“Stop making real bets. Just watch for a while. It never hurts to watch. Some guys feel like they always have to make a bet, always have to take a chance. Oh, I’ll just play the long shot since I can’t think of anything else, that kind of thing. But if you go to the Clubhouse and look for the guys with the big money, you’ll see they don’t bet on every race.

“I know this one guy who only bets twice, maybe three times a season, that’s it. But he goes to the track every day, every race. He knows the horses. He knows

everything, and if you want a hot tip, he's the man. But when he bets, he doesn't mess around, he bets a couple grand in one shot, on one horse, usually to win."

"Does he always win?" asked Dove.

"No. I've seen him lose before, but only once. That I know of. He bets when he knows a long shot is going to hit twelve to one or better. That way, when the odds drop, he still walks away with a year's salary. And he does it all in two minutes."

Dove smiled. "Wow. That's amazing. What's the most he ever won?"

"I think it was around seventy grand."

He took another big bite of his sandwich. "Damn. The dude is bad."

"Yeah, but you wouldn't know it to look at him."

"Why's that?"

"Drives a beat-up old car. Wears scruffy clothes. Tape on his glasses. Pocket protector. A million pens. But he's alright."

"So he's a geek."

"Yeah, he might be. But he knows how to gamble."

"You must know how to gamble, too, right? That's all you do, isn't it?"

There was something about the way he asked me that I didn't like. It was scornful. But more than that, it was like he knew me from somewhere. Just like the janitor at the academy. Was I being paranoid? Did they know more about me than a stranger should? Who was that old guy anyway? What about Dove? What does he know? I had to ask him, "Why do you ask me that? Is that all I do? Do you presume to know me? You don't know me. My life is more than just the racetrack and dinner with Mom.

I've got all kinds of things to do.”

He was not taken aback. He was a controlled man. Patient and in control. He was waiting for a defensive outburst like that. “What kinds of things?”

Sadly, I realized I had spoken too soon. My life was a dull, cold story of drinking, gambling, and visiting my mother. Maybe that was why I killed people.

I didn't realize that I had not answered until he asked again, “What kinds of things, Paul?”

Now I was Paul, again, not Pasternak. He was playing a card. What I laid down next would be crucial because I knew I had nothing except a bluff.

He stared at me, slowly chomping his sandwich. I could formulate nothing. No bluff. No wild card. I folded. “When you put it like that, I guess I don't do a whole lot, do I? I watch TV. I read. I go out with Marlene.” Saying that felt right and wrong simultaneously. I would not be going out with Marlene again, would I?

I stared down sorrowfully at my sandwich, unable to finish. I picked up my pop and sipped it.

Dove asked, “Did you get a pickle, Pasternak?”

“No. I don't want a pickle.”

“Here, have one.”

He held the unbitten cuke toward me.

“No, thanks.”

“No, really, go ahead, take a bite. It goes with the sandwich. Go ahead.” He shook it at me, insisting.

I took the dill from him and bit the end off, just to appease him, and having no place to set it down, handed it back. “Thanks. It’s pretty good.”

“See. I told you. Goes with the sandwich, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Baxter,” he called out, holding up the pickle.

Baxter approached and took it, and placed it into a plastic bag. “Take this for analysis. I want results pronto.”

Analyzing a pickle was more than a little strange, so I was compelled to ask, “What’s he analyzing?”

Dove had just taken his last bite of sandwich and was wiping his mouth with a napkin when he said, “Your teeth marks.”

It was a serious and sobering revelation. I froze again, and our eyes locked onto each other. “Why?”

“I can see you are ready to get back to business now, but don’t you want to finish your sandwich?”

“No. Here.” I handed it off to the shadows. “What the hell do you want with my teeth marks?”

“Marlene was bitten. In addition to being tortured and stabbed, she was bitten. The teeth penetrated the skin. What I’m looking for is a man who fancies himself a vampire. In addition to that, I’m looking for a man who knew that dog. Its throat was cut, obviously by someone the dog trusted, or else you could never kill the girl, isn’t that right? I’ve been told it was a trained attack dog. They say you provided that bit of

information. Now, as long as your teeth marks match the bites on the victim, that's the only piece of the puzzle I need, and we can put you away." He sipped his pop.

"They won't match. I didn't do this." I felt desperate but remained calm. "I didn't kill Marlene. Now, I don't know why you think so, but I swear, I didn't. I liked her. A lot."

"You didn't love her?"

"Come on, man. What kind of a question is that? I've only known her for a couple months. How would I know if I love her? I don't know. Maybe. Kinda. Sort of. I mean, come on, man. Be for real."

Dove stood. "You want me to show you how real I can be?" He strode to the table and came back with a folder. "Take a look at this shit. I'll show you how real I can be. This is your life, Paul Pasternak. Take a good look."

I opened the folder and found surveillance photos of myself at the track, in my car, and in front of my house. It was creepy. There were my tax returns and phone records. There was a page of my high school yearbook, where a small frame was dedicated to my younger self for all posterity, along with my classmates from Quinlan to Pfifer.

There were copies of unpaid speeding tickets from Utah and copies of hotel receipts from Las Vegas. I was astounded but aware of everything in my hands and what it meant. Extremely aware and utterly careful. Guilt would destroy me, but the shock would not. The shock was to be expected. "What is all this about?" I asked. "Who the hell do you think I am?"

“I think you’re a guy who gets mad when he loses. I think you killed your girlfriend today. I think you’re a biter and a cannibal. I think you like to take your frustrations out on young girls because you don’t have anything better to do with your time. Let me show you something.” He went to the table to retrieve another folder, opened it, and started pacing before me. “In nineteen-eighty-nine, you stayed at the Flamingo Hilton for three days, and on your way back, you got two speeding tickets in southern Utah, both three days apart.

“In the days and weeks to follow, we found bodies all along that route from Vegas. I-fifteen to I-seventy all the way back here to Omaha. Now we find them all over Omaha, Council Bluffs, Sioux City, Kansas City. Anywhere there’s gambling, we seem to find bodies. But not just any bodies.” He rushed to the tables and brought back a stack of photos that he began dealing to me like cards, one after another. “Pretty young girls’ bodies. All mutilated by knifepoint, carved the same way with their throats cut. You used to dump them in alleys and rivers, carrying them around for a while, but then you decided to just take them home and kill ‘em. Do you know how hard we had to work to find you? Forty-two girls in twenty years? You probably didn’t even know there were that many.”

He was right. I couldn’t believe there were that many. More amazing than that, I couldn’t believe he could narrow it down to me. I was so careful. I never left a clue. I never ever took a single souvenir. I calculated it all so perfectly I even let some of them go, but never with any hint of aggression. I never went back and got them, except for that one hitchhiker. I never let there be any reason for me to be a suspect. But something was wrong with his theory. Sioux Falls. I had never been to Sioux Falls for anything in my

life.

“But all I need to convict you is one. All the pieces will fall into place eventually.

The first girl, from Lincoln, do you know what she had in her pocket?”

I shook my head.

“The word Caprice. It was the chrome nameplate from an old Chevy Caprice.

Then, twelve years later, we find something in the pocket of the girl near Bullhead City.

You want to guess what it was?”

I just stared.

“It was this.” He flipped a piece of chrome to me, and I caught it.

It was another car part. A number.

“Nine?” I asked.

“No. It’s a six. he exclaimed, still pacing. “What kind of car do you drive?”

“A Jaguar.”

“What kind of Jaguar?”

“XJ-6”

“Now take a look at the picture of your car.” I looked. The number 6 was missing.

The 6 I held in my hand.

Dove sat again and told me calmly, “That came off your car. In nineteen-eighty-nine, when you killed Marsha Conleyson and put it in her pocket.”

I was devastated and dumbstruck, but I could not admit it. If that was all the evidence he had, it wasn’t enough to make me confess. I didn’t believe that there would ever be anything that would make me confess. Other than knowing the truth within me, I

never said it aloud for that purpose. I never even mentioned this wretched business to my cat when I sulked. Wishing it would go away. Now was my chance to wash away the stains on my soul and repent. But my willpower for freedom was stronger than I had prepared myself for. I was strong. Stronger than any negative emotion that would tear another down had they not been as prepared as I was.

My defense began.

“Are you crazy? I didn’t kill this girl. Get outta here.” I threw my file across the room. “And I certainly didn’t kill my girlfriend. What is the matter with you people? You’ve been following me around taking pictures? You take that piece off my car too? Saying I killed forty people. Forty people. You know how . . . ah . . . rude that is? That’s crazy. I never killed anybody. Why would you think that about me? Me. Of all people. Because I gamble and I mind my own business? I never hurt anybody. I certainly never killed anybody. Now you damn well better get this shit straight, or you assholes are going to be fucked with a lawsuit, I tell you that.”

Dove did not flinch.

Because he did not flinch, I worried. There must have been more evidence, but what? Was I losing my mind? Did I spend the day killing Marlene and her dog and biting her? I don’t ever remember biting any of them. Cannibalism? No. Not me. Sioux Falls? Again, not me. And the girl in Lincoln at the drive-in. Not me. The girl the *retard* killed. Not me.

Something was wrong with his theory. I knew I didn’t kill them, I knew I didn’t kill Marlene, and I knew I didn’t kill forty women. Counting George Harris, the jogger, I

think I topped out around fifteen.

Vegas, Utah, Colorado, that was me, but what proof could he have? Other than the chrome number 6, there must have been something more incriminating. Unless he was just counting on Marlene.

I turned it over and over in my mind and still never figured out how the car part ended up in that girl's pocket. I barely noticed it was missing. I thought it just fell off and was gone.

CHAPTER 14

“Did you want to call a lawyer now?” Dove asked.

“No. I don’t need a lawyer because I DIDN’T DO ANYTHING.” I shouted. “Tell me why. Why do you think this?”

Dove remained calm, smiled, and said, “I can see how you would be curious. They always ask; how did you know? Where did I go wrong? How did I get caught?”

He stood again and returned to the table for a piece of cheese, taking small bites while he explained himself. “Many of these women were drunk when they died. And many of them were identified as frequenting gaming establishments shortly before their subsequent disappearances. Riverboats, dog tracks, casinos, and of course, the horses. Some of them were Jane Does, drifters, probably hitchhiking.

“Their bodies showed up all over the place like a connect-the-dots. But they were all killed the same way. Lots of blood, throats cut, messy, but with precision. Sometimes they had sex before they died. Sometimes they didn’t. Recently, pieces of flesh have been missing in places. Sometimes ears are bitten off. Not cut. Bitten. But you know all that. You want to know how we found you? Now it’s just a coincidence that you killed Marlene, and we found you on her doorstep. I’ll give you that. But we’ve been building this case for a while now.”

“What’s a while?”

“Quite a while.” Dove retrieved another folder, opened it, and handed me a photo. “You remember Peggy Rice. When we found her in her own home in the middle of the afternoon, there were matches from Caesar’s Palace Las Vegas under the table. Nobody

in her family, none of her friends, nobody she knew had ever been to Caesar's Palace."

"I've never been to Caesar's Palace." It was true.

"Come now, Pasternak, how many times have you been to Vegas?"

"I don't know." I shook my head. "Twice a year for . . . my whole life? I don't know. But I've never been to Caesar's Palace."

"Nevertheless, matches from all the casinos are floating all over the place in Vegas. You don't have to go to Caesar's Palace to get some of their matches. You smoke, don't you?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"Nobody in Peggy Rice's household smoked. You know where she lived, don't you?"

I shook my head.

"About five blocks from Marlene. Now she died eight years ago, but it's obvious, whoever killed Peggy killed Marlene. The same goes for Marcie Taylor. You know who she is, don't you?"

I shook my head 'No,' but I knew. I didn't know who Peggy Rice was. I didn't recognize her at all.

Dove produced a photo of Marcie and handed it to me. I felt myself tremble.

"She actually lived right around the corner from Peggy Rice, but her mother found her body on New Year's Day this year. Stabbed in her home with her own paring knife. She was not bitten, but she was ripped apart, so even if she was bitten, maybe we just couldn't tell. She spent most of the evening on a riverboat, gambling before she died.

Same story with Anita Carsovitch.” He brought me another photo of a young woman I didn’t recognize. “She spent a day riverboat gambling last September, Labor Day weekend. Found her strapped to a pole near a cornfield about eighty miles north of here. Her head was gone.” He sat down again and struck me with those punishing green eyes of his. “And now, your girlfriend, Marlene. An English Professor. Students weren’t enough, were they?”

“Listen, mister, I don’t know how you put all this together, but I’m not your guy. I don’t even like riverboats.”

“But you do go to Vegas.”

“Yeah. So do about ten million other people every year, so what?”

“You recall this trip you took when you got two speeding tickets in Utah in three days?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you explain that?”

“I was speeding.”

“No, not that. What happened in those three days? You were on your way back from Vegas, and you got a ticket five miles south of St. George. What happened next?”

“Nothing. I left.”

“Did you go back to Vegas?”

“No.”

“Where did you go?”

“I went home. I kept driving.”

“Then you got another ticket right outside of Green River.”

“So what? I paid the tickets. You ever drive through Utah? There is nothing there. You speed.”

“Three days later. It doesn’t take three days to cross Utah. Between those tickets, where were you?”

I took a second to think about it. “Oh, I know. I was stuck in some little dump-ass town off I-seventy with a busted radiator hose, and I had to wait two days to get it. It sucked.”

“What town was it?”

“I don’t know. Show me that map; I’ll remember the name if I see it.”

Ross appeared now holding the US Highway map. I scanned Utah. “It’s not on this one. It’s a really small town. There is literally *nothing* there. I had to sleep in the car. The mechanic took me to another town to a diner so I could get food.”

“It took two days to get a radiator hose?”

“For an XJ-6 in the middle of the fucking Utah desert? That was fast. At first, they said it was going to take about a week. I was lucky.”

That was the truth. I spent two days sleeping in my car in the middle of Utah, waiting for a radiator hose.

I was awestruck at how I could be a suspect before Marlene died. Sure, I had women in Nevada, Utah, Colorado, and Nebraska, some of which were still undiscovered for all I knew. But what was the key? How did he narrow it down to me? I still didn’t see it.

And what about those decapitations? I never decapitated any of them. That is absolute total insanity. And biting. That was foreign to me too. Girls on riverboats? I didn't gamble on riverboats because I didn't like boats. Floating, water, none of that. That was why I started dropping bodies off bridges. I would never be suspected if I were afraid of water, which I was.

The door scraped open, and a man called out, "Mister Dove."

I could barely see silhouettes but could hear them clearly.

"The test was inconclusive. We just can't get good marks to make a determination."

After a moment of silence, Dove commanded, "Baxter, you keep observing. Mister Ross, take over the interview, please. I'll be back shortly. Take me to forensics," and he left.

Now Ross stepped toward me and smiled. "Hi," he said, looking as if he felt awkward, then he sat in the leather chair.

Ross's expression telegraphed how cushy the chair was. "Guess this is a bigger deal than we knew about." He waited for me to speak, but I declined. "Anything you want to tell me?"

"No. Nothing. I have nothing to say because I don't know anything about any of this, and I'm glad that I don't. So what are you doing now? Playing good cop? He's the bad cop, you're the good cop?"

"I like to think we're all good cops. Do you have any idea at all who would want to hurt Marlene?"

“No. I have no idea at all. I doubt that anybody would ever want to hurt her at all. I don’t have any explanation for you, and I’m not just going to make one up for no good reason. I’m in the dark here.”

Except for that weird white-haired fellow, she dated. *What was his name?*

I thought about him, the story she told me about the bottles of blood and the missing student. *Could he be the guy?*

It was too strange. Too much of a stretch to toss out there and have it bounce back at me as some sort of diversion, so I did not mention him.

I looked around at the shadows. “Quite literally, I’m in the dark here. Now it seems to me that you have no other suspects, or else you’d be giving them the third degree instead of me. And what’s all this crap about Vegas and Utah and bodies on fences and shit? Huh? Why do you people care about ten-year-old speeding tickets anyway?”

“I’ll be glad to tell you that, Mister Pasternak.” A voice filtered out of the darkness.

A figure strolled up behind Ross and tapped him on the shoulder. Ross stood and walked away.

The trench-coated man rolled the leather chair away and stood in its place, facing me. He was tall, balding, with close-cropped hair, sucking on a toothpick he held with his left hand. His presence was daunting.

He was not friendly like Ross or amusing like Dove. Instead, he was down to business, right to the point. His voice was deep and gravelly from years of smoking. The way he held the toothpick said it was a placebo for a cigarette. His expression told me it

was a poor and unsatisfactory substitute.

“Something many of these victims had in common was that they were college students. They went to schools here, Lincoln, K.C., Denver, Grand Junction, Cedar City, Las Vegas. It became a Federal case when a woman attending the University of Denver didn’t show up for work at her part-time job. She worked at the US Mint. A week later, she was found floating in the South Platte, heading toward Nebraska.

“She wasn’t killed for money. She was just killed. She was killed the same way a lot of these Nebraska girls were killed. Stabbed, mutilated, nearly or completely decapitated. Most of them went to the University of Nebraska, right down the street from Ak-Sar-Ben. Some of them may have known each other. They knew their killer. When they died in their homes, there was never forced entry. When they died elsewhere, we assume they went willingly because they were promiscuous.

“Some of them hung out in local bars. Two of them belonged to Gamblers Anonymous. That’s when we made the gambling connection. We staked out the casinos in Vegas, riverboats, the dog track, Indian Casinos, and finally, Ak-Sar-Ben. We watched. We’ve been watching for years. You are not the only suspect. In fact, if it weren’t for your girlfriend today, you wouldn’t have been the prime suspect. But because of her, guess what? You get top honors.

“You fit the profile. You live alone, you have a routine with no agenda, you hang out right down the street from the University, you travel to Vegas frequently, and bodies show up wherever you go. Now you killed your girlfriend the same way you killed forty-one other women, the same way you killed Marsha Conleyson in Vegas, the woman

who had this in her pocket.” He held up the shiny number six from my car. “You are the only person she could have come into contact with the day she died who could explain this little trinket. Now, unless you can come up with an alibi for this afternoon, you’d better think about calling a lawyer.”

The clarity was astounding. I stopped wondering about everything. What amazed me was how accurate so much of his story was, yet how much I had missed. I would have remembered a girl who worked at the US Mint. I would have remembered a lot more than I did at that moment. If it were all true. Were they making things up? Trying to blame me for unsolved crimes, linking things together that had no link? About half of what they told me made sense, and I could remember it one way or another. The rest was not even a blur. If I had anything to do with the other killings at all, then I truly was mad and more dangerous than I had imagined. But my practiced composure protected me from my own conscience. “I can prove where I was today.”

“How?”

“Ask my friends from the track. Ask the girl at the ticket window. Ask the valet who parks my car. Ask the lady I bought flowers from. They’ll tell you.”

The gravel-voiced man sucked hard on his toothpick and went to the table for a folder. He gave me some of the surveillance photos of myself. “Look through these. Can any of these people vouch for your whereabouts this afternoon? I need proof that you were at the track or someplace far away from your girlfriends at approximately 1:34 PM.”

“What’s 1:34 PM?”

He flicked his toothpick with his lips. "Time of death."

I sunk into the chair thinking about that. Time of death. 1:34 PM. They record the moment you are born and they record the moment you die. In between you have to keep track of yourself.

Today was the day I could do that. I was watching the second race with my pals, the three stooges. I found a photo of all of us together sitting in the grandstand, our eyes fixed on the odds board or a race in progress. "These guys will tell you where I was. I was with them."

He stood beside me now and asked, "All four of them?"

"No. Just these three. That's Chili Joe, that guy, he's dead now. When did you take this picture?"

"About a year ago. What did that guy die from?"

"Heart attack."

"Okay, what are these guys' names?"

I pointed as I spoke. "The Black guy is Moe. This young guy, I think his name's Mark, but we call him Curly. And that's Larry Saylor."

He was taken aback. He took the toothpick out of his mouth. "Say again?"

"His name is Larry Saylor."

"Wait a minute." He pointed at them as I had just done. "This guy is named Moe, he's Larry, and he's Curly?"

Reluctantly, I said, "Yeah."

There was laughter in the shadows.

“Shut up.” the man told them. “You’re telling me these guys are the three stooges?”

There was more laughter and the man sneered again.

“You think I don’t know that sounds stupid? That’s their names. Mao is Moe’s real name. That’s Larry,” I pointed, “And we started calling that kid Curly just so we *could* call them the three stooges.”

“Everybody has a nickname at the track, don’t they?”

“Seems like it.”

“Why do they call you Shylock?”

“I don’t know. They just do.”

He turned toward the shadows. “Go find these guys. Bring ‘em in. All of ‘em. Except this one. He’s dead.”

Two men left to find my friends.

CHAPTER 15

The door was shut for about a minute when I asked, "Is there anybody in here?"

"I'm here, Mister Pasternak." Ross walked from the wall to my right and sat down in the big leather chair again.

"Is anybody else in here?"

"Of course," called a voice from my left. "I'm here too." And he lit a cigarette.

"We're not supposed to leave you alone."

"You mind if I have a smoke?"

He reached for his pack, walking toward me.

"I've got my own," I said, taking the pack from my pocket.

The other officer snapped his lighter on for me and lit the cigarette.

"Thanks. You're Ross, right?"

Ross nodded.

"What's your name?" I asked the one smoking.

"John Wilkowski," he said, standing before me. He was a young cop, about twenty. Ross was not much older than him.

"Paul Pasternak." I extended my hand, and we shook.

"You didn't kill anybody, did you?" said Ross.

"No. I didn't."

"These Feds, you believe these guys?" Ross spoke to us both and looked at Wilkowski when he spoke. "I just don't get how they operate, you know?"

"So you guys aren't with the FBI?"

“No,” Wilkowski said. “We’re Omaha P.D.”

“We’re the good guys,” Ross told me. “You know, there really is a serial killer out there, and we’ll find him. I promise you, Mister Pasternak, we’ll find who killed your girlfriend.”

“Thanks.” That was all I could say.

“Where did they come up with this gambling angle?” asked Wilkowski. “Do you even think those murders in Nevada are related?” he asked Ross.

It was clear that I was a bystander to the conversation.

“I don’t know. I just don’t see it. It was so long ago, and all this happened here so recently, they ought to be looking for somebody who lived around there, or a trucker if you ask me. It’s not this guy. I’ll tell you that. He showed up with flowers, for Christ’s sake.”

“So, how long are we going to wait here? It’s freezing in this place.”

“The plan is they find his friends, confirm his story, and they got no reason to hold him.” Ross spoke as though I were not even present.

I couldn’t tell if they were acting or just doing a shoddy job as policemen. Either way, a vague comfort slowed the beat of my heart with every breath. I was nervous all along, most of all, when the gravel-throated man told me the whole wretched story, pointing his finger, ready to send me up the river. Now, every other word from Ross or Wilkowski eased my mind completely. But I had to be careful, in case it was a trick of some kind. I was still a murder suspect.

We all stared at each other for a few moments, and Ross said, “I got an idea. Want

to play cards?" He pulled a deck from his jacket pocket.

Wilkowski was concerned. "Think we should?"

"Don't worry, Wilkowski. The Feds aren't even going to walk back in here. We'll play Twenty-One. Here." He stood up and rolled the chair into position to begin dealing on the seat. "You play Twenty-One, don't you, Mister Pasternak?"

"You mean Black Jack? Sure."

It seemed odd, but that's what we did. There wasn't anything else to do. And from the viewpoint of innocence, they had no reason to hold me, so Ross began dealing.

"You really make a hundred-ninety-seven grand last year?" Ross asked me.

"How did you know that?"

"Saw your tax return. You want a hit?"

I had fifteen. "Yeah, hit me."

I got a nine. Wilkowski was dealt 21.

"I thought professional gamblers didn't pay taxes."

"Oh yes, we do."

"What if you lose?"

"Then you stop gambling and get a job. Why did you see my tax return?"

"I don't know. They had a bunch of stuff on you. You really have forty million in the bank?"

"Yeah, I do."

He began dealing again. "A guy like you - why didn't you call a lawyer the second they hauled you in here?"

“I don’t need a lawyer. I didn’t do anything. How do you know so much about my finances?”

“They told us. The Feds. I don’t know how they access that kind of information, but they do. You got seven showing. You want a hit?”

I had a ten hiding. “Yeah, hit me.” I got a four for 21. “Stand.”

“Hit me,” said Wilkowski.

“Wait a minute. They just went ahead and told you how much money I have? Why?”

“To show you the proper respect, I guess,” said Wilkowski.

“Not too many people in Omaha with that kind of money,” said Ross.

Wilkowski confirmed. “No, sir.”

“You really make it all gambling?” asked Ross.

“You could say that. Put a lot into T-bills, real estate, invested in some high-risk computer stocks about twelve years ago. They paid off. That’s where most of it came from. It’s all gambling one way or another.”

We were in the middle of the next deal. Nobody kept track of who won.

“You want a card?” asked Ross.

“Yeah, hit me.”

“Do you live in a mansion?” Wilkowski asked hopefully.

“No.”

“That’s good,” said Ross. “Then it shouldn’t take long. You’ll be out of here soon enough.”

“What shouldn’t take long?”

Ross looked sorry he had to tell me. Maybe he was not supposed to. “The FBI had a search warrant for your house. They’ve been searching it since they knew you were here.”

“Ross,” Wilkowski muttered.

“He would have found out anyway.”

I slapped my cards back down to the seat of the chair and leaned back, holding my face in my hands. “Why are you telling me this now? Why didn’t they say something before?”

“They probably figured you wouldn’t be going back home, so they didn’t say anything. I’m just telling you because you’re going to find out anyway. Shouldn’t have to be a big secret if you ask me. And I’ve been listening to you for the last two and a half hours, so I think I know. I can tell.”

“What can you tell?”

Ross shuffled the cards. “You’re no slasher. Look at you. Your jacket alone would cost me a week’s pay. Your shoes, your suit, you’re not a killer. I can tell. I don’t know who they’re looking for, but it ain’t you.” He started dealing again.

He was sincere. I knew that he was. So we played cards, and Wilkowski and I smoked cigarettes, and when we heard them coming again, like truant high-schoolers, we fumbled with the cards, and Ross hid them.

The small parade of FBI agents returned, led by the gravel-throated man. Second in line was Carlton Dove. Two more men followed him. Ross and Wilkowski cleared

away from me and flanked the room.

Dove spoke. "Mister Pasternak, the teeth marks on the pickle were inconclusive. We would like to conduct another test."

"Yeah, well, that's real nice." I dropped my cigarette to the floor and crushed it underfoot. "I'd like to know why nobody told me my house was being searched."

Dove looked warily around the room. "Obviously, somebody did. This is a ball of clay." He held it up for me to see and then thrust it toward me. "Would you bite it, please?"

"Are you kidding? No. I'm not going to bite a ball of clay."

"Believe me, Mister Pasternak, you don't want to do this the hard way."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. Now. Bite the clay." He kept holding it out to me.

"No. It's not going to happen, pal."

"I said, BITE THE BALL OF CLAY, NOW."

"I said, NO."

The FBI agents rushed me. As soon as Dove held the ball up in the air, it was instantaneous. The gravel voice man took the ball with his left hand and grabbed my throat with the other. The other agents restrained me from both sides, holding me down in the chair. I clenched my teeth and lips.

Gravel Voice said, "Bite the clay."

I growled through my teeth. "Screw you."

The man on my right twisted my arm to make me scream. With my mouth wide

open, Gravel Voice forced the ball of clay inside, and I bit it. I bit all the way through. Ross and Wilkowski rushed to my aid, Ross shouting, "HEY. GET OFF OF HIM. GET OFF OF HIM, NOW. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

It ended as immediately as it began. All hands were off me now, standing in the shadows like monsters in the closet. I spat the piece of clay into my hand and flung it across the room in the general direction of where I thought Gravel Voice was standing.

"Analyze that too," Dove called out.

Somebody picked it up and left the room.

"You're out of line here, Dove." Ross shouted at him. "This man is not a prisoner. If you're going to treat him as a prisoner, you read him his rights and take him away. This is not a fucking torture chamber."

Dove was cool, as always. "Want to back your ass up out of my face, sunshine? Nobody asked for your opinion of this investigation."

"That is my opinion. And if you or any one of your agents intends to lay a hand on this man, you arrest him, or you better be defending yourself. That was highly uncalled for. Highly unprofessional. As of this moment, I am placing Mister Pasternak into protective custody. My custody."

"Duly noted." Dove remained arrogant. "Let's just wait for the results to get back from forensics now, shall we?"

I could see that Ross was truly on my side. He was a good cop defending a citizen and his rights. It seemed a shame to be able to fool him. Dove was convinced that my teeth marks, no matter how he got them, would serve his purpose as evidence against me.

I was shaken by the incident but remained mute. I paced in a small circle and popped a cigarette between my teeth. Wilkowski lit it for me. Everyone was quiet.

We sat and waited.

It was a long wait, and it was silent.

After several cigarettes and long sighs, the shuffling feet waiting for orders in the darkness grew weary. I became tenser with each passing moment. I didn't know how long it was, maybe ten minutes, maybe an hour. However long it was, soon, the door scraped open. There was whispering.

Dove told Ross, "Okay, then. You handle it."

"I will," said Ross.

He came over to me, hung his head for a second, and then looked me in the eye.

"Mister Pasternak. I need you to strip."

CHAPTER 16

“Say what? You just tell me to strip?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. I need you to strip down to your socks and shorts,” said Ross.

“What the fuck for?”

“Dog bites.”

“I don’t have any dog bites.”

“All you need to do is prove it.”

Ross looked as sad as he was serious. If I were lying about having a dog bite on my body, he would be extremely disappointed with me.

“Okay. Fine.” I said. I stamped out my cigarette.

Ross stretched his arms out and spoke to the shadows. “Let’s give him some room.”

I peeled off my jacket. The air was brisk, and it chilled me. I felt myself moving at a slower pace like I was a marionette, unsure of what to take off next. Nobody had ever forced me to strip before. It was disturbing. I shook.

After I hung my jacket on the back of the chair, I unbuttoned my cuffs and shirt and hung it over my jacket. Then I peeled off my tee shirt. I kicked off my shoes. The floor felt like ice through my socks. I stood under the light bulb, not knowing what they must have thought of me, unaware of whatever expression I had on my face. I was just a powerless creature with no place to run.

I unbuckled my belt, dropped my pants, and placed them on the chair.

Then I held out my arms. Without being told to, I turned to my right, then to my left. *See, no dog bites*, I thought. I might have said it aloud. I am not sure.

Dove spoke from the doorway. “We have no more questions for Mister Pasternak. Good

day, gentlemen.”

The FBI agents walked swiftly away down the hall.

Ross said, “You can get dressed, Mister Pasternak. I believe you’re free to go.”

I said nothing and got dressed.

We walked to the door, and the hallway lights blinded me. At the end of the hall, I could see Moe twirling his stocking cap in his hands. Larry was to his left, Curly to the right. I was still trembling as I approached them. Trembling because I thought I was going to jail, trembling because I thought that maybe I had killed Marlene and could not remember, trembling because she was dead. Ideas overwhelmed me, and I could feel myself breaking down and whimpering.

Moe was the one to comfort me, reaching out his giant arms and holding me tight. “I know, man, I know. Come on now. Let’s take you home. We gonna take you home, okay?”

We walked out of the station together as a quartet. Larry and Curly remained silent. Moe kept his arm around me all the way to the car. An old black two-door Regal. Moe followed me into the back seat. Curly drove.

“Is this your car?” I asked.

“Yup.”

“I didn’t know you had a car, Curly.”

“You think I ride the bus like these chumps?”

Larry directed him to my house. He had been there before.

We all went inside through the kitchen door. Most of the drawers were left open, and the cabinets, too. The living room sofa had been moved, and the cushions were strewn about. They even took pictures off the wall and looked under the TV.

“Did you get robbed?” Larry asked.

“No. The cops did this. They had a search warrant.”

“How did they get in?”

“It wasn’t locked, so I’m sure they just walked right in. Anybody want a drink?”

“Yeah.”

“Whatever you got.”

“Sure.”

No turn downs with this crowd.

I opened the fridge and passed out beer. Then I took a glass from the cupboard and poured myself a Crown Royal. I drank that shot fast and poured another.

Curly walked into the rest of the house. “Man, they really ransacked the place, didn’t they?”

I walked in behind him to see. “Yeah. Excuse the mess. I always wanted to say that. Oh, my *God*. Sweet Pea. Don’t move, you guys. I have got to find my cat. She’s probably scared shitless. Just don’t move. I don’t want her to be any more scared. Here baby. Swee-pea, where are you? Swee-pea?”

I found her in the closet on the top shelf.

“Come here, baby, it’s okay. Yeah, good kitty, yeah.” I held her and kissed her, but she wanted to return to the sanctuary of the closet. “Okay, okay, you go back there now.”

I went back to find the guys straightening up my house for me. “Hey, you guys. You’re guests, not maids. Have a seat. Don’t worry about it. Have a seat.”

I went to get my drink, and they were sitting on the sofa, reserving my recliner for me. “Saved my seat. Thanks.”

“Why we’re here, man.”

It was getting dark now, but nobody had yet asked me about Marlene. Larry began awkwardly. “They told us what happened. I’m sorry, man.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Curly, chugging his beer and almost crying, wiping his eyes. “I feel bad for ya.”

“It’s a shame, man. Marlene. I can’t believe that happened to Marlene.” Moe began to break down now, crying. “Such a nice lady. She’s so nice.” He put down his beer and wept with his face in his hands. “I’m gonna miss her too, you know?”

“I know,” I said, now with my tears pouring. Wiping my face, I sniffled.

Larry got up and got a roll of toilet paper out of the bathroom for all of us.

I told him, “I have tissues. Somewhere.”

Moe asked, “Did you know her momma?”

“No. Never met her.”

“What’chou gonna tell your momma?”

“Tell her what happened, I guess.”

“She liked Marlene too, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Larry told him, “Of course she did. Everybody liked Marlene.”

“I can’t believe they had you for a suspect,” Larry added.

Curly turned out to show more sensitivity than I would have suspected. “Hey, I know that you probably don’t want to talk about this right now. But should we, like, have a toast or something? In her honor, I mean.”

“Sure.”

“Go ahead.”

Curly was hesitant but then let it out. "Here's to Marlene . . ."

"Riggs," I finished.

"Here's to Marlene Riggs. A real nice lady. A good friend. A lady who we'll miss . . . and here's to putting away the motherfucker who killed her. Amen."

"Amen."

"Amen."

"Amen."

They clinked their bottles into my glass. It was a strange but caring salutation. We sat in silence for a few more moments, all of us unsure about what to do.

"I was just thinking," I said. "My car is probably over there, parked in front of her house. I'm going to have to go back and get it."

"Oh, you don't have to go back there. We'll get your car for you," Larry promised.

"Yeah, we will," said Curly.

"On second thought, it might not be there. They might have impounded it."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I better check with the cops first. I don't even know where my keys are." I reached into my pocket when I said it. "Oh. Here they are. Hey, you know Three-Fingered Jim?"

"Yeah. What about him?" asked Moe.

"You know his son is a cop? Good kid too. These FBI agents got rough with me, and he called 'em off."

"FBI agents?"

"Yeah. Didn't you talk to the FBI?"

"I told you those guys looked like Feds." cried Curly.

Moe asked, “Light-skinned Black dude with the rings?”

“Yeah, he’s FBI.”

“No shit. What the FBI want to know about Marlene for, anyway?”

Then I said it. The only time I ever remember uttering that phrase in my entire life. The last two words I said chilled me. “Looks like she was killed by a serial killer.”

It chilled them too. We all sipped our drinks, trying to absorb the notion.

~

A light drizzle that turned to a fine mist soaked the mourners at Marlene’s funeral. It was a sad affair for a Saturday. Students and faculty from her school paid tribute. Some of her cousins were in attendance. Her parents had come from Arizona, where they lived in a retirement community. They were understandably devastated. The second of their two children was now gone, and they were unimaginably alone, without heirs. They told me that Marlene’s brother had died by suicide years before.

Marlene had never told me anything about her family.

They were kind to me. Her mother hugged me and told me how sorry she was. Her father was stoic and gave me a firm handshake, barely saying a word. Nobody thought I had anything to do with it and considered me a victim as well. I don’t think they knew I spent time in custody as a suspect.

Larry came to the funeral with me. We skipped the track that day. He spent more time talking with Marlene’s friends and family than I did. I was glad he was there. Somehow, death brought out the gift of gab from him. He made it sound like he and Marlene had been friends for years, and he told stories of all of us hanging out at the track. There was no stopping him.

After a while, the sun broke through, and vapor rose from the dewy blades of grass. I got

out from under the tent to take in the light and leave people alone to talk.

I lit a smoke and stared out at the lawn and tombstones. Sunlight bouncing off the mausoleum behind me cast the mourner's shadows into the mist, transforming them into flimsy apparitions with long legs floating over the landscape. The fog grew thicker in some spots, obscuring trees and hedges, making the images appear to walk between, in front, and behind them. One looked like a real person.

Out in the distance, in the middle of the lawn, I could see his face. I knew it was a man, but he was so far away I could not discern his features. *He can't be real*, I thought.

Then he moved. He was not a shadow cast from behind. I saw his profile. He was real. It was a man with white hair. Then I heard my name called from behind me.

“Paul.”

It was Larry. He startled me. I spun around, and the ash flew off my cigarette at him.

“You okay?” he asked.

I turned to look for the white-haired man. He was gone. I turned back to Larry. “Yeah.”

“You want to get going, or what? I’m good to stick around if you want. Whatever you want.”

“I think they want us to come and eat with them.”

We went for a meal at a local buffet. I did not put much on my plate. With no real appetite, most of it stayed there. Larry and I sat together with nobody else at our table. When the crowd began to disperse, we left and said our final goodbyes to the family.

I dropped Larry off at his house and went to visit my mother.

CHAPTER 17

Meeting Marlene's family, her cousins, her students, and friends I never knew she had filled me with a true sense of loss. I hoped that I had not killed her. *I didn't. I know I didn't do it*, was what I kept thinking, but somehow, I felt guilty about what happened, like I could have prevented it somehow.

I didn't know what a great person she was until the funeral. I found out more about her at that gathering than in all the time we spent together.

Marlene Riggs grew up in Scottsdale, Arizona. She was a high school cheerleader who got a college scholarship to attend Arizona State. *Who knew there were scholarships for cheerleading?*

She belonged to a book club that met every other Wednesday. The ladies she met with would read romance novels and drink gallons of wine together. She found a dinosaur bone on a trip to New Mexico. It was right there, sitting on a trail, waiting for her to pick it up. She donated it to a museum.

Marlene was certainly loved, and she would be missed. She was hidden from us in a closed casket and would not be buried in that cemetery where we all stood and cried and said goodbye. Instead, her parents arranged for her to be interred in Arizona, next to her brother.

Mother knew I had come from the funeral and was unusually comforting, saying my name aloud when I saw her, "Poll."

She hugged me, which she rarely did, then signed, "How are you? Are you okay? Did you meet her family? How are they?"

I signed back, "I am okay. They are very nice people. Very sad today. I wish you would have come."

“I didn’t know her. We only met the one time. So sad. Do they know who did it?”

“Not yet.”

“Come with me. I want to check the doors.” Mother led me down the hall.

“The doors?”

“To the school.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

We walked through the halls to all of the exits and made sure they were locked. Mother said, “Maybe I should get chains.”

“Chains?” I signed and said aloud.

“To lock the doors.”

I remained mute and signed, “That would be a fire code violation. Don’t do that.”

“Should we get an alarm system, maybe?”

“I don’t think so, Mom.”

“But, these murders. It is too scary. And she lived right over there? On that block across the street?” She pointed across the hall in the general direction of Marlene’s block.

“Yes. She did.”

“That is too close. Too close. I don’t feel safe here.”

“I am sure you have nothing to worry about.”

“How do you know?”

“Mom, please do not worry. Try not to get upset. I know it is bad, but – try not to be afraid.”

“I thought about why this keeps happening to you. I think I know why.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I signed and spoke aloud.

“Why your girlfriends die so unexpectedly.”

“What?” I spoke as I signed for the rest of our talk. “Are you kidding me?”

“First Becky, now this one -”

“Marlene. Her name is Marlene.”

“I know her name. Don’t you wonder why they were taken?”

“She was killed by a psycho. And Becky was in a car accident. There is no – connection.”

“But you only knew them each for a little while, and then they died.”

“So what. That is called coincidence, Mom. They – it’s not – they are not related events.”

“But if you went to church, maybe this would not keep happening.”

I wanted to scream. Knowing she wouldn’t hear it was supremely frustrating, but I screamed anyway. “Again, with the church? Mom. I don’t go to church. I never went to church. I am never going to church. Do you understand? It is not happening. You need to stop with that shit. Not happening.”

I am sure she could feel the force of my voice bouncing off the brick walls and lockers around us.

She stood still for a moment, then signed, “Alright. I won’t mention it again.”

“Well, hallelujah. A miracle. There is a God. I need to go. See you later, Mom.”

“Goodbye, Paul,” she signed.

I turned on my heel and marched away. I was at the opposite end of the school from the front door, so I had to walk back through the entire building. When I turned the corner in the hallway, the young girl who greeted us at Easter dinner was there, carrying a book and a little shopping bag.

“Are you doing okay?” she asked aloud.

The last thing I expected was to see another person in the school hallway. I shrugged and twisted my neck to loosen up. I blasted her with sarcasm, “Never better.” Then I wiped my eyes and apologized, “I’m sorry. You heard all that?”

“Just what you said. But I knew who you were talking to. She can be kind of –”

“Difficult. I think difficult is the right word.”

“It’s the polite one, anyway.”

She made me laugh a little. “Thanks. Nice to be understood. I’m Paul.”

“I know. We met last week. Easter.”

“That’s right. What do you do here?”

“I am Jade, Missus Pasternak’s girl Friday. I do everything.”

Mother had a girl Friday for as long as I could remember. They served as her speaking liaison to the rest of the world, answering the phone and running errands. They were usually students who worked for college credits.

I fished my cigarette pack out of my pocket and peeled it open. It was empty. “Nice to meet you, Jade. I need to go get some smokes.”

“Here.” Jade reached into her bag and pulled out a pack of long thin cigarettes, the kind I always thought of as ladies’ style. I took one.

“Are you old enough to smoke?”

“I am nineteen.”

“Sorry, again. How old am I, huh? Geez. You look a lot younger.” She looked like a young teen.

We walked together through the school to the exit.

“You live here on the premises?”

“No, I just come here to study. I spend lots of time here because it is so quiet. I’m sorry about your friend. I heard about it. From Missus Pasternak. And on the news.”

“Thank you.”

“She lived right across the street, right?”

“Yes, she did. I guess everybody around here must be talking about it, aren’t they?”

“It is pretty much the only thing anyone is talking about.”

I thought about who else she might have spoken with verbally and remembered the handyman. “Do you know if Roger is somewhere around here?”

“Who?”

“Roger.”

“There is no Roger here.”

“There isn’t?”

“Not that I know of.”

“I thought she had a guy who worked here. Did odd jobs or made repairs.”

“I don’t know about anybody like that.”

Then who the hell was I talking to the other day? I wondered.

I told Jade, “Mom wants to put chains on the doors. If you can stop her from doing that – please stop her. That’s against fire code, I am sure. Thought I would tell that handyman, too.”

I was not truly concerned about fire exits, but at the time, it seemed like the only reasonable way to talk her out of it. I considered it a waste of money.

“I will make it a point to put that in her ear. So to speak.”

We walked out the door together, and I lit the cigarette.

“Thanks,” I said, inhaling deeply, “Oooh. menthol?”

“Yes, menthol.”

“You’re a tough little cookie, aren’t you? What do you study?”

“Architecture. Oh wait – you mean the janitor? Robert?”

“Is his name Robert? I thought it was Roger.”

“Yeah, it is Robert. That must be who you are talking about. He stays in the shed. Kind of a creep. Don’t tell him I said that.”

“Why is he a creep?”

“The way he talks.”

“What did he say?”

“It is not what he says. It is the way he says it. And the way he looks at you. He has got like – super-glassy eyes. I don’t know. And everything he says, even when it is not a question, it feels like he is asking you a question. Told me that if I ever studied anatomy, I should come to him to discuss it. That was weird.”

“If he is making you uncomfortable, I am sure my mom would want to know. Did you report him?”

“No. It isn’t like that. He didn’t say anything wrong. He just gives off this bad vibe. Like dark energy. If that is a thing. I don’t know. Just creepy. You know?”

I felt like I understood and that maybe she was talking about me.

“Do you think I am creepy?”

“You? No. You’re–”

“What?”

She blushed. “I think you’re okay. But you’re old. I have to go. Nice to meet you, bye.”

Jade rushed off to her car and drove away.

“Bye. Thanks . . . for the smoke,” I said, basically to myself. *She must have thought I was flirting with her, but I was not.* “At least I’m not creepy.”

I huddled close to the building to smoke, hiding from the windows like I did when I was a kid, so my mom could not look out the window and see me. She hated cigarettes. Visiting the school, and my home, I could not shake that old habit that came naturally to me.

I had a short conversation with myself. I shook my head. “I was definitely not flirting.”

“Yeah, you kind of were.”

“Well, I wasn’t trying to. That is just what happens.”

“Could make all kinds of things happen with that one.”

“No. No. That’s out of bounds. Too close to home. She is off limits.”

“But she is a perfect size.”

“Stop thinking that.”

“And a woman, not a kid. She likes you.”

“But still, not a perfect match by any means. Off-limits. She is safe.”

“You are no fun.”

“I should definitely reconsider what fun means.”

Now that the FBI had picked up my scent, the logical thing would be to retire that deadly hobby and hide someplace. But then, what would I do?

It was getting dark. The sun dipped behind low clouds, and I noticed light coming from the cottage on the other side of the duck pond. That was where Mother said the handyman was staying.

We had others stay there over the years. It was by no means a permanent residence, just temporary quarters with plumbing and a little stove. Once in a while, when a late-day blizzard

made it too dangerous to drive, a teacher might stay overnight, but it was generally a vacant tool shed with a cot. When the duck pond would freeze over, it served as hot chocolate headquarters for the neighborhood kids who came to skate. The pond was perfectly safe, as it was no more than a foot deep, and half the size of a real ice rink, so it froze solid, and there was no chance of anyone falling through to a chilly demise.

I saw a shadow in the window and wondered, *Is that him?*

I had to find out, so I stubbed out the cigarette and strolled around the edge of the pond to pay a visit.

The ground was soft and squishy from the rain. When I got to the cottage, the light was on inside, but I could not see him through the window. I knocked.

No answer.

Then I heard somebody behind me clap. It was a signal we used at the school for a deaf person to get the attention of a hearing person who had their back turned without startling them by sneaking up from behind. Two soft claps, a pause, then two more soft claps. But it was not a deaf person. It was the white-haired man.

“Hello there,” he said.

“Hi.”

“Oh, Paul, right? I heard about the ah – your lady friend – so sorry. Oh my gosh, what a shame.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you looking for Missus Pasternak?”

“No, I just left her. I saw the light on in the shed. Just wondered about it.”

“Oh, she’s letting me stay here while I get some rooms remodeled. I’m just halfway

between living here, living there, you know. The second you need something, you find out you left it in the other place. Isn't that always the way?"

He came right up to me, closer than I expected, and looked me square in the eye. Jade was right. His eyes were like glass. Gray marbles with a dot of black floating in a pool of milk.

He asked, "So, how are you holding up? I mean, oh, my gosh, you doing okay?"

"Better, thanks," I said.

"It's a real shame. And so close to here."

"Yes, it was."

"Well, come in, please." He pushed open the door and led me inside. It was not a fitting place to live. The light scent of mechanical oil and untreated wood made it smell like a garage. The bed was made, and the place was tidy. A stack of old books sat atop a little dresser beside the bed. Tools hung on the opposite wall. There were two cane chairs and a small wooden table, which I recognized. Nothing had changed in the thirty years since I had last stepped inside the building.

"I was just going to put on some water for tea, would you like some?"

"Tea? Yeah, sure. Thank you."

He poured water from a jug and lit the stove.

"Have a seat. You know, I am so thankful to your mother. The woman is a saint. Taking me in during my time of need. I'll tell you, with my place, it is one thing after another, they tear out the walls, they find mold, then the leaks from the upstairs plumbing, so I have got to get all that fixed. Thank the Lord for insurance, I say. But, I am so glad to be able to put my feet up here, I can't tell you. You grew up here, didn't you? She told me."

"That's right. Your name is Roger, isn't it?"

He paused like he had to think about it. “Roger? No. It’s Robert. Robert Jerome. What made you think my name is Roger?”

“I thought my mother called you Roger.”

“Oh, well, she may have. Not intentionally, of course. The woman talks with her hands. She signs fast sometimes. You know how ASL is.” He put up his hand to symbolize the letter B, the letter G, then the B, and then the G again, to show me the difference. “I mean, B, G, B, G. It can get blurry. But I have been Robert since the day the midwife slapped me on the rear.”

He was right. My mother did sign rather quickly. I could have seen it wrong and thought she said, Roger.

“Where are you from?”

“That is the question, isn’t it? *Where haven’t I been* is the better question. Short answer, the Caribbean Sea. But to be specific, I was born in Aruba, and my parents had a yacht, so we sailed all over. Took people on tours. That was my life, sailing around the islands, everywhere from the Bahamas to Puerto Rico to Martinique, you name it. Caribbean, born and bred, and barefoot at heart. But you, this is your backyard, isn’t it? You must know this place better than anyone.”

“Probably. What brought you here? To Omaha?”

He stared for a moment, studying me. Maybe I just imagined it, but it was like he was formulating an answer that I could accept, and that it should be just the right one, an answer that I would not question. Then he said, “Circumstances. Same as everybody else. Same reason you stayed here, I suppose.”

He got up to prepare two mugs, scooping dried leaves into them and poured the water. “To make perfect tea, you have to get it just right. Bring the water just to a boil, not two-twelve

Fahrenheit, just under that, right when it starts to boil, then it is perfect.”

He placed the mugs on the table. The leaves swirled on top.

“You don’t use tea bags?” I asked.

“No sir. I make this myself, my own special blend. Mail order. This tea is from Tibet. Believe it? Amazing what you can get in the mail. That’s the black tea part, then I put in pennyroyal and tilia flowers, those come from Spain. I don’t have milk, but I have some honey.”

“No, thanks. So, you came to Nebraska – for what?”

He poured honey into his mug and slurped it. “Oh, hot. You know, I wonder that myself sometimes. How life just drags you around by the ear, you know. I was teaching pilots how to fly, and a job opened up here, so I came, and I never left. But then my eyesight went ka-blooey, my distance vision is shot, so I had to give it up.”

“You’re a pilot?”

“I was a pilot. You fly?”

“No, never have.”

“I love it. Being up there in the sky, looking down at the whole world, it’s just the best.”

“Were you a commercial pilot?”

“No, no, just little planes. Light aircraft, props, Cessnas, Beechcraft, and so on. General aviation. No jets. Ten seaters at most. I flew Caribbean airports since I was a kid. Had a job in the Bahamas for about ten years, then I moved to Miami, then I just kept migrating west. Someday I might make it all the way to the Pacific.” He laughed. “So, here I am.”

I sniffed the tea and sipped it. “That’s – uh -- different.”

“Can’t get that in a store.”

It took a moment for my palate to accept the flavor, then I took a big gulp. It tasted like

peppermint, which I attributed to Jade's menthol cigarette. There was a bitter aftertaste.

I noticed a bandage protruding from his left sleeve. I asked, "What happened to your arm?"

He unbuttoned the sleeve and held it up for his own inspection. The bandage was fresh and wrapped all the way around his forearm. "Damndest thing. I'm walking around the house where these guys had torn out the wall, down to the studs, you know. I was talking to the guy, and I wasn't watching, and I just got too close and raked it across the edge. Blood everywhere. Such a mess. But no stitches. No painkillers. I'll heal."

I studied him. He was so convincing. Everything he said made sense like he had rehearsed it in preparation for this specific conversation. But I doubted him. "It's not a dog bite?"

He stopped and sipped his tea, and stared at me like he was formulating an answer. "Why would a dog bite me?"

I took another slug of tea. I had no answer. That aftertaste hit me again. "What's that flavor? In the tea? It's a little bitter."

"You must mean the licorice. I should have said something. You don't like licorice, do you? Have some honey in there. It goes good with the honey."

I suddenly felt slow, like our movements and conversation were dragging. I moved my hand and reached into my jacket pocket for my cigarettes, remembering that I had none. The thought came to me as if I had asked myself a question and answered it; *Where are my cigarettes? You ran out. Oh.*

Then I spoke my next thought. "Did you poison me?"

"What? Boy, you really don't like my tea, do you?"

"You poisoned me."

I stood up. I was lightheaded. Not drunk, not dizzy, but extremely loose, and I was scared.

“No. You’re not poisoned. Maybe a little stoned, but you’re not poisoned. I guess I have a higher tolerance. You will be fine. Just have a seat.”

My gut told me to leave. “No, I have to go.”

I backed up to the door and kept my eye on him. He did not stand.

“Paul. It’s just tea. Nothing to get excited about.”

“I have to go.”

“Be safe,” he said.

I walked out into the night. The streetlights shone brilliantly in the distance, different than I had seen them before. They were all I could see until my eyes adjusted. Then I saw the school and my car in the parking lot on the other side of the duck pond.

Walking toward them, my feet sank into the ground, more so than before. At least, it felt that way. I turned to make sure he wasn’t following me. Robert was Roger. I knew it, but I was incapacitated and could do nothing about it. I just wanted to get back to my car and lock myself inside.

I had only been high once before. I didn’t like it then and hated it, even more, this time. Alcohol was my drug of choice. This was nothing like that.

Halfway around the pond, I heard something behind me. My night vision had finally set in. I turned. Nothing was there. Not a person, not an animal, not even a hallucination to torment me. I was alone.

A few steps later, I felt something grab my leg at the ankle. At the same time, a hand grabbed the back of my head. I was lifted off the ground and slammed face-first into the pond.

Mud gushed into my nose. I felt the hand pushing my head down, deeper into the mud. I was terrified and could not breathe. My hands were stuck in the mud and I could not push my way out. I tasted the grass and dirty water filling my mouth.

And that was it.

I was unconscious.

I don't know how long it lasted, but in retrospect, when I recall that moment, I entered a black void. Nothing existed. Not even me. I do not recall any thoughts. I did not wonder where I was, or what had happened to me. It was eternal. Not only myself, but everything ceased to exist.

It could not have been long, but it was like time travel. One moment I was flailing in the mud, then it all went black, and then I was catching my breath and pushing my way up and out of it. That moment of blackness frightened me.

I got up on my knees and looked around. It was quiet. Nobody was around me. No vehicles drove by. No sounds were in the distance. No lights flickered on or off within buildings. Everything was simply still.

I shivered and looked back at the cottage, then over to the school parking lot. I was too scared to confront anyone.

I slogged over to my car, got inside, and fumbled around, looking for my keys. They were in the ignition. The sound of the engine rumbling to life soothed me. The radio chimed in with soft jazz. I fished half a cigarette out of the ashtray and lit it with the car lighter. I felt better after that puff of tobacco.

CHAPTER 18

The news was out. A serial killer was stalking Omaha and its immediate environs. It was on every TV and radio station, and the saga dominated newspaper headlines. A butcher who decapitated his victims was among us. Although he traveled to points North, South, East, and West, he always seemed to return to Omaha.

Police reported that a man was in custody but later released. That must have been me.

In all, over 40 killings were believed to be the work of one man, and there had never been a witness. Nobody ever saw any of the women disappear. They just did.

I watched the stories unravel on TV, and I knew the truth. The truth was that I had indeed gotten away with murder more times than I recalled. So much of it was senseless, all of it, actually. Watching the stories, the interviews with the victims' families, and how they spoke of their loved ones never to return, quite frankly, choked me up. The other thing that bothered me, and I guessed it was what bothered me most, was how many I had forgotten, and so many faces I could not recall.

But, the decapitations. I didn't cut their heads off. Not one. That was when it occurred to me that *they* were the ones I could not remember. Was it so horrible that I blocked it out completely?

In my memories, I saw the blood and felt life drown into death when watching their eyes lose that sparkle. I even thought about the last little gasps they would make when I kissed them goodbye. But the beheadings I kept hearing about, I could not even imagine, and they were the girls I could not remember.

I was surprised when I heard that the taxi driver's murder was attributed to a drug deal gone bad. And the girl allegedly killed by the retarded boy was now a case being reexamined by

the investigators. Maybe the boy was telling the truth all along.

Maybe, I killed her, and did not recognize her.

Maybe, I didn't.

I didn't decapitate. What if there was some other guy who killed only one, or they picked up the wrong guy who killed nobody at all, as I had claimed, and would suffer for my deeds as well? So, if this was the case, who were those other killers?

I committed myself to eating less and drinking more, and for the next two weeks, I stayed home, emptying every bottle in the house and playing with my cat, Sweet Pea.

I kept replaying what happened to me that night at the academy. I started to wonder if Roger was real. Or, Robert, as he called himself. *Of course he was real. Did he knock me out? Or did I just fall down? Is he the guy they are looking for, besides me?*

Only a tiny particle of thought entered my mind about going to the police to tell them about him. If I did so now they would ask why I waited so long to come forward, as every time I thought it over, more time had passed. Then, what if he was just my imagination, and I reported him to the cops? Then what?

So much speculation trapped me within my own thoughts. I did not know what to do. *How would I deal with him? Should I even bother? What if everything he said was true, and he is not Roger at all?*

There was no good way to find an answer. So, I just sat around and drank.

When I ran out of Crown Royal, Chivas Regal, tequila, and wine, I went to my car and was so drunk I couldn't put the key in the ignition to start it. I walked to the store down the road and bought a half rack of cheap beer, and I returned home on foot.

People stared at me. I couldn't see them, but I could feel their eyes on me. Walking down

the road, I staggered a little, and I hugged the beer, carrying it as if it were an infant. Just when I got to the spot where I had clipped the jogger, I heard a voice.

“Hey, neighbor.”

It was George Harris, the jogger. He was running in step beside me. His nose was bleeding and dripping down his lip. Leaves were in his hair. The warm spring day turned cold and dead like winter. I shivered and could see my breath. I could not see George Harris’s breath.

“I say, hey, neighbor, got some groceries there?”

“It’s beer.”

“Nothin’ like a beer on a hot summer day, huh?”

I could feel my mouth gaping open. “No.”

“Well, I’m sure you’re going to enjoy a lot of beer this summer. What kind is it?”

“Miller.”

“Oh good, I like Miller. Goes good with pretzels. You know those big warm pretzels they sell at the track? That’s a combination you just can’t beat. Boy, I sure do miss beer.”

“Did you want one?”

“No. I gave up drinking when I died. You remember that, don’t you, Paul? I didn’t mean to be in your way that morning. I was just waving hello.” Then he put his arm around me, and it was like a heavy log of ice hefted across my shoulders.

I was ready to cry. “What do you want from me?”

“Nothing, Paul. I don’t want anything from you. I just wanted to do the Christian thing and tell you I forgive you.” He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. It was a dead icy smack.

I shivered and quaked uncontrollably. The ghost let go and jogged away. I dropped the beer and ran home.

I stayed inside a lot more after that. Paranoia confounded me. Checking the locks and windows and peeking through the shades became a daily routine. I could feel myself becoming gaunt. I stopped shaving. I stopped drinking.

I was looking for ghosts.

I was fearful that another invisible man would attack me.

I worried that Roger would kill me the way he killed Marlene.

In my own house, I did not feel alone. Not only could I feel the invisible eyes upon me, but when I looked in the mirror, my face made expressions I could not feel. Strange smirks and grimaces that lasted only a moment, and then I'd look for the expression again, trying to duplicate it, not believing what I saw.

Since I had never grown a beard before, I became alien to myself. My physical appearance had transformed into another person. But I was the same person. I knew who I was. I was only unsure of what I was doing. But it was not the first time I had been unsure of myself.

"Who am I now?" I said to the mirror. "Your eyes are the same. But something is different. Are you older? Wiser? Ha – don't you look regal? A beard? A beard. The girls will be wild for you."

I scrutinized my face as if a third-party observer, studying every line, every whisker, every tiny flaw and mark that four decades could bring.

I kept hearing things. At least, I thought I heard things, noises in the house. But so slight and insignificant that I could be sure it was nothing. Nothing more than my imagination. Or the cat. Or the refrigerator. But what was I seeing? They only appeared in the corner of my eye when I flicked the lights or went through a doorway . . .

"Somebody there?"

Nobody was ever there, but it felt like it. And I kept looking.

I lost track of the days. I ran out of food. I got hungry.

I didn't know how many days I stayed inside. I only opened the door to let the cat in and out. I never even checked the mail. My refrigerator supplied me now with nothing more than cheese and pickles. That must have been the turning point.

I can look back now and see. That was what pushed me out of the house, but what pulled me out was even more remarkable.

Thoreau lived deliberately. I felt as if I were deliberately not living. Doing nothing for the sake of doing nothing. Maybe to save lives, maybe to save myself. But for what?

I stopped doing nothing.

For no particular reason, I stopped doing nothing.

I showered, I shaved, and I was reborn. I looked in the mirror and grinned. I knew who I was and I had a plan.

I dressed in my finest suit and my nicest Italian tie, the silvery blue one I always liked. I shined my shoes, and even put on cufflinks, and I was ready.

It was time to stop thinking about ghosts, and Roger, or Robert, or whoever he was, and go on with my life.

It was time to go to the track.

~

It was only a few days until closing for harness season. They would soon be turning the turf over for thoroughbreds.

I could not find my cohorts, the three stooges. No matter, I followed my routine and gambled.

One guy I had not seen in a while came up and gave me fifteen dollars for the ten I loaned him a few months before. That was nice. I felt welcomed like I was home.

The track was a comfortable place. My place. My territory. My home. I didn't expect anything to rattle me where I lived, but something soon did.

I heard the signal. Two soft claps, a pause, and two more soft claps.

It shook me.

I turned and was relieved to see Wally walking toward me, signing as he approached, "Hey, Paul."

"Hi, Wally. How are you?"

"I'm okay. I thought you should know. I ran into a guy who was looking for you."

"Who is it?"

"He said he was your friend. He came up to me and started signing, but he is not deaf."

"What does he look like?"

"White hair. Really – this is going to sound strange – pretty eyes. You know who I am talking about?"

"I think so. Where is he?"

"This was not today. It was a couple weeks ago. But I never stopped thinking about it because I thought he was weird. Is he with the I.R.S.?"

"I.R.S.? No, not who I am thinking of. How was he weird?"

"He just came up to me and started talking away like we were old friends. Like he knew you and me from way back in the day, but I never saw him before. He signed perfectly."

"This was here? At the track?"

"Yes. You know how nobody here signs? Just the deaf and you, right? So, I thought about

it. I don't know this guy, but he waves, comes over to me, and starts signing like he knew me. He knew that I am deaf. I'm wondering, how do I know this guy? He starts talking about the horses and driver's stats, and, you know, I don't even follow that stuff. I play favorites. Then he is asking me who I like and telling me what he thinks, and it is not like I asked him. It was like he thought I was somebody else. Then he keeps going on about track conditions and breeding lines, and I'm just watching him, not saying a word, and he asks me, 'Have you seen Paul?'

"And I ask him, 'Paul who?'

"He says, 'Paul Pasternak, what other Paul do we know?' That was just weird."

"Yeah, that is weird," I said.

"Who is he?"

"I think he works at the academy for my mom. He is a handyman."

"Oh, okay. But something about him that keeps getting me is this – how did he know me? How did he know we know each other? When I never even met him before. Did you tell him about me or something? Not that I mind, but I just want to know."

"I don't know. Maybe he saw us talking?" I shrugged.

"Maybe. So is he a friend of yours? Because he knew my name."

I paused, thinking about how to answer. "He did? No, I wouldn't say he is a friend. Acquaintance? That's about it. What else did he say?"

"I was going to tell you this next anyway – he says to me, 'Paul is a really lucky guy, isn't he? Sure knows how to get himself out of a jam, doesn't he?'"

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"I don't know. I thought you would. You mean you don't really know this guy?"

"Not really. Know of him is more like it."

“Look, I don’t know what that guy’s deal is, but he just creeped me the fuck out. Like he was trying to find out something, but I don’t know what. I just got the sense that he knows something - or something. Something he shouldn’t know. About us.”

I was speechless.

“Any idea what he was talking about?” asked Wally.

“No.”

“Well, that’s it. I wanted you to know. Something is off about that guy, but I don’t know what. How are you doing otherwise? How’s your Mom?”

“Still, Mom. But wait a minute. Did he have a bandage on his arm?”

Wally hung his head to think it over. “I don’t know. Why?”

“Just – I thought he might be somebody else, but I think he must be that handyman. Did you get his name?”

Wally thought about it before answering. “I am not sure. I don’t think he told me his name. Hey, I want to get in a bet before post time, so I’ll see you.”

“Which horse?”

“The five.”

I looked at my program. The five horse was named Roger’s Folly.

When I went to the track that day I thought I was making a new start, moving on. But now this hint of divine providence informed me that forgetting the past was no longer an option.

I had to find him.

CHAPTER 19

After the program, I sat in the clubhouse and read the newspaper for a while as the cleaning crew swept up losing tickets and trash. There were no articles about murders, just the basics: politics, stocks, sports. I didn't even know what I read because I was not really reading. I was plotting. Thinking about how I would find Roger and what I would do with him.

I sat quietly with the last of my whisky while looking over whatever was fit to print. I soon tossed the paper in the trash and said goodnight to the guards on my way out.

I was startled on my hike across the empty parking lot to my car when a taxi drove near. It did not stop but drove around me in a circle, and then drove away.

"That's weird," I said aloud. "Must be lost."

It drove around the corner of the building out of sight, and a second later, I heard tires squealing. Then it came back, speeding toward me. I thought it was going to hit me, but the driver slammed on the brakes about ten feet away.

I stood still. The late-day sun glared on the window, obscuring my view of the driver. I said, "What's your problem?"

The engine revved and the car came at me. I ran out of the way, and it drove past. I was halfway between my car and the clubhouse.

The driver slammed on the brakes and put it in reverse, spinning around in a circle to aim at me again. I had no protection. I ran toward a light pole and got on the other side of it. The taxi followed me and drove in a tight circle around me and the pole.

I felt safer beside the pole, trying to keep it between me and the car. The driver lay on the pedal, burning rubber and smoking up the lot. It spun around a couple more times, drove away about twenty feet, and then roared back toward me, coming to a stop with the passenger side rear

door inches away from me.

The door swung open. Nobody was in the back seat.

I yelled at the driver, “What the hell, man.”

All I could see was long chestnut hair streaming out from beneath a dark green beret. It looked like a woman. She said nothing.

I had no intention of taking a taxi ride, so I yelled “Get the hell out of here.”

The taxi sped off and the door shut automatically.

Did I just imagine that? I wondered. It felt so real.

Walking up to my car, I studied the spot the missing emblem had been, that silver 6. The lonely XJ sat beside two little rusty holes. I thought about getting a new car.

I got in and I drove automatically. I did not think about where I was going. I just went. Before I knew it, I was backing into Marlene’s driveway. It would be the perfect getaway spot. Only a block from the academy. Police tape had been removed. The house was no longer being studied as a crime scene. Nobody would notice me parked there, and if any neighbor did, they had probably seen my car before, so it would not be suspicious.

I had planned to walk to the academy. But the taxi pulled up in front of the house and the door popped open. I did not yell this time. I got in. I did not even hesitate. I did not even wonder what was happening. I just got in.

She was a young woman. She looked like she was about eighteen, barely old enough to drive a taxi. She put down the flag and started driving.

“You know, I haven’t even told you where I’m going,” I said.

She wore a scarf. I thought it strange that she would be dressed for winter, but then, I could see my breath and not hers. “Want to turn down the AC, hon? It’s kind of brisk back here.”

She did not respond. I could see her eyes in the mirror. I recognized them. They were dreadful and sorry.

“Do I know you?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

She turned to face me and unwrapped her scarf to reveal the slice across her throat. Blood oozed, and she gurgled, bubbled, and murmured unintelligibly. Although she turned back towards the road and kept driving, her eyes reflected in the mirror were focused on me.

Dead eyes.

It was chilling to have dead eyes staring at me. They should not have thoughts behind them, but they did. They knew me. What I did. How I felt. They did not accuse but wonder. Why?

She watched me the entire trip. I could feel her fear. Burning, effervescent fear. She knew what I was capable of. She knew who I was. At one time, she was powerless. And now she chose to face me. And because she could rise from her grave and face me again, I now grew fearful.

I never looked away from her steady gaze in the mirror. She drove plainly, cornering around the block, and stopping at the stop signs. The silent tension was deafening.

I grew colder by the minute. I was unaware of my heartbeat. Whether it pulsed quickly or slowly I could not say. I did not look outside. I just watched her staring at me with vacant fear.

That calm, icy ride brought me to the academy.

We came to a gentle stop, and she raised the flag. I reached into my breast pocket for my wallet. She raised her gloved hand, stained with blood, and spoke into the mirror. I looked directly at her, reading her lips, for she could not vocalize.

“Just go,” she said.

I exited the cab and stood before the pale brick building as she drove away behind me.

All was calm and quiet at the Nebraska School for the Deaf. It was almost sunset. Light misty clouds obscured the horizon with shades of red.

There was nobody around.

Church bells chimed from down the street. Across the field, in one direction, I could see the block where I parked in front of Marlene's house. In the other, the duck pond and the cottage.

I could no better explain why I was there, than I could explain how I got there. I was just there. I had no true control of myself. I was an observer in my own body, as I had been so many times before. I had never lost time, or forgotten who or where I was all those other times I chose to take a life, but now I was powerless to myself. I moved with precision and stealth.

I was compelled to search. It was only a few feet to the front door of the school, but the cottage beckoned. Like the taxi ride that came out of nowhere, that just happened, I went to the shed, watching myself walk past the ducks bedded down on the bank. I was indeed moving, going through the physical motion of walking, but it was deliberately automatic. I had no control of where I was going or what I would do when I got there. I could only watch from within, yet seemed to view myself from a distance, like a ghost.

I went inside the cottage. All was completely quiet. Roger, or Robert, if that was his name, was not there. He had left on a tiny lamp that lit half of the room. His bed was neatly made. He had a small bookshelf and what looked like trinkets, bottlecaps, buttons, and keys sitting on top. A calendar hung on the wall. It was a promotional item from an insurance company, a photo of a mountain lake glistened, making it appear as though there was a window in the shed. He had a small dresser, the table and chairs, and the stove. I did not know what I was looking for, but opened the closet door. It was a small space where some yard tools were kept. I knew I would see a shovel and rake, and an old toboggan that the kids would sometimes use.

Then I saw something I did not expect. He had bottles.

They were filled with something dark, stacked on the tiny shelf inside the closet. Six bottles filled with a dark liquid. They were those clear beer bottles with the flip on tops. I picked one up to examine it and held it toward the light. At first I thought it was oil, but the contents were dry and crusty. And red. They were filled with blood.

I trembled, put the bottle back, and closed the closet door. He was Roger, all right. Marlene's Roger.

I thought I heard something, a yelp, or a scream, but so distant, I could not be sure. I went outside and looked toward the school. It beckoned, welcoming me home.

The side door was unlocked and I walked right in. I didn't think about looking for my mother. I just walked around. First, I walked the long hallway to the left to the end. The school was dark, but enough daylight emanated through the windows to illuminate the building. The hallways were immaculately clean, as always. Classroom doors were propped open with little doorstops. The chalkboards were clean.

At the end of the hall, I walked up the stairs.

On the second floor, I opened the glass vestibule door and looked down the corridor. The floor glistened with wax bathed in the deepening sunset, casting an orange haze around the building. I did not disturb the silence I found there. Instead, I climbed the stairs to the third floor.

The whole time I wondered what would happen. I was my own automaton, watching myself from a distance, yet still within my own body.

The hallways had not changed since I was a kid. It was all the same. The only thing different now was how I arrived and why I was there. It did not make sense. I didn't know where I was going, but I pressed forward, in search of something intangible, pushed, pulled, and moved

by an unseen force.

On the third floor, the shimmering light took on a crimson haze, flooding the hall with a bloody hue. There was something there, someplace to go.

I moved slowly. With my hands in my pockets, I would glance into the classrooms as I passed. As my walk progressed, I would peek farther into each room, analyzing the neatly arranged desks and occasional aquarium holding a garter snake, frog, or turtle. The lockers were all shut, not one ajar.

I went to the end of the hall to the opposite stairwell. Then I felt something behind me. It was only a feeling, however, for there was nothing there.

I turned and looked back, down the hall. There was nothing, nobody there. Instead of returning down this stairwell, I decided to take the elevator.

I pressed the button and waited. I could hear it climbing from the first floor, the pulleys creaking to life.

What am I looking for?

I didn't know. How do I explain anything now? I was just a lost soul wandering around with ghosts as my escorts who brought me back home.

Then the elevator door opened.

Dressed in fine leather loafers and gray slacks, he stood in a pool of blood, with the huge butcher knife in one hand and a head in the other. Jade's head.

He held her by her hair, and her eyes looked right at me; her jaw wobbled, as if trying to scream. Her body, limp and collapsed like a pile of clothes, was crumpled in the corner of the elevator car. The fingers of her hands splayed wildly, and her legs twisted beneath her.

Roger smiled madly.

His wild white hair and those startling gray eyes stopped me cold.

Roger dropped Jade's head, raised the knife, and came at me.

My defense was swift. I held his wrist and grabbed his throat.

He pressed me against the wall and howled like an animal, holding my face back while I watched the knife. He was older and shorter than me, but he was powerful. I could feel my arms failing, trying to push him back, trying to escape.

The quivering knife edged closer to me. I couldn't hold on.

I broke loose and ducked. The knife stuck in the wall.

I ran to the door. Roger came after me. I was terrified. I was being hunted. He was going to kill me. He pulled me back and dragged me to the elevator. The door slid shut. I slammed him back into the wall, and he cried out as his back popped on the guardrail.

I elbowed him, and he doubled over, but he punched me, knocking my head back into the wall. Then he slipped in the blood and fell.

I tried to open the door, but instead, hit the emergency button that stopped the car and rang the alarm.

I kicked him in the head. I kicked him again, over and over. I kicked him a few more times and stomped on him until he stopped moving. I gasped and was breathless, stunned at the primitive monster inside me.

I watched Roger lying there in the blood next to Jade's headless body. He was lying on her head.

"Oh, God. Oh, God." I was completely confused. *Are they ghosts, too? Are they real? What should I do?*

I just stared at them for a moment before turning off the alarm. Then I pushed the button

for the lobby.

The old Otis car squeaked and crawled down slowly. I backed up against the wall and kept my leg cocked and aimed at Roger's head the entire time, expecting him to spring to life and grab me like a monstrous madman of the cinema. He did not.

The door opened, and I backed out, tracking blood into the hallway, panting deeply.

Now it was dark. No other life was evident in the building. The only light came from the elevator.

The door shut and left me in a void of pitch black. No shapes or shadows anywhere.

I stood still for a moment, wondering again *Are they ghosts? Is this real? Where do I go? What now?*

If I opened the door and they were gone . . .

I pushed the button, and the door buckled open. Roger was not a ghost. Nor was his victim. Both were still there, bathed in blood, illuminated only by the lone fluorescent bulb above. They remained motionless. I did not have a plan or an idea at hand. I simply reacted.

I lifted Roger and pulled his arms out so I could drag him away. I pulled him out of the elevator, and the girl's head was still under him. It popped out and spun around. I could barely see her face and gaping mouth under a mat of bloody hair.

I held Roger and gently kicked Jade's head back into the elevator, like a reluctant soccer player toeing the ball. It was heavier than I expected, like a rock. It splashed and skidded across the blood.

The door shut, and I was now wrapped in darkness again.

I dragged Roger to the front stairs and set him down so I could heft him over my shoulder. Then I carried him like a slab of beef. I did not know I was that strong, but I was.

I took him to the cottage. The door was ajar and I kicked it open. I set him into a chair.

The extension cords on the wall would serve as rope. I tied him securely with tight triple knots. First, his arms on the arms of the chair, then his legs, with the cord winding up behind him to his neck so he would strangle himself when he moved his legs. I didn't plan it like that, but that was how it worked.

Then I slapped him to wake him up.

He came to, quickly, taking only a moment to realize his capture. He bolted and growled, and an evil squeal hissed through his teeth. "You bassss-taaaaaaard."

His eyes popped, and scolded me. He did not blink, staring unwaveringly.

Blood matted the side of his head and face. His white shirt was ripped and bloody. A fine gold chain hung about his neck and disappeared into his sweaty t-shirt.

I was also sweaty and covered in blood, my nice threads were ruined. My favorite tie was a mess. I stepped back and watched him.

"You son of a bitch." He shook his head and looked down at his bindings, pulling and testing the constraints. "I don't believe this. All right. You got me. Now what?"

I was a bit lost and just shrugged.

"You don't know, do you?" he said.

He was right. It was a strange scenario. Kill him and clean up the mess in the school? Call the police and try to explain? What to do? What to do?

"Going to call the cops now, bright boy? You think that would matter? If I went to jail? Look at you. You're a mouse with the biggest piece of cheese he's ever seen in his life, and now you don't know how to handle it."

I began to pace. I didn't pace. It was not something I did. For me to pace required me to

be extremely stressed. I reached a stress level I had never experienced.

“Why don’t you do something, big man.” he taunted.

I reacted again. The first thing I reached was a pair of long garden shears. I just grabbed them and whacked him in the head with the closed blades. “Shut up.”

He got a little calmer. “So, what are you going to do?”

“Wait here.” I put down the shears and went back to the school.

It was completely dark now, but I knew my way around the building well enough to not need light. I could navigate by shadow. I ran up the stairs and over to the elevator, a lone light bulb brightened it from inside. I could feel the sticky slime of blood at my feet.

The door opened to Jade’s body. Her head faced the wall, lying on its ear. She was real. So was Roger. Whatever hallucinations I had previously were now over. I was dealing with real people, living and dead.

What to do?

I closed the elevator door and ran back out to the cottage.

He was still there, slumped over in the chair, his head bleeding from the shears. Then, I saw the barely healed scar on his forearm. It was a dog bite.

He looked up at me, dazed.

“You killed Marlene, didn’t you?”

He half-smiled but answered sadly, “I killed everybody.”

“Everybody?”

“All of them. Everybody.”

I asked “What now?”

“Now? Go to jail. Do not pass Go. Do not collect two hundred dollars. I don’t know.

Don't you know?" He shook his head and continued, "I knew it would get to be a mess. There's only so much a man can do before he has to stop. No matter what you do. Once you do too much, you have to stop. Eating. Drinking. Before it's too late. Life just takes over and gets you in the end." He paused and looked around the shed. "You call the police?"

I nodded.

"Then I guess - that's it then. You'll be a hero now. Fifteen minutes of fame and all that crap. They'll lock me up. I won't resist. No. I won't. I'm tired. I want it over now. Gas chamber? Gas chamber. What would you do if they were going to send you to the gas chamber? What's a good last meal? Corned beef sandwich? No. No. Meatloaf with mashed potatoes, a good old-fashioned meal. Gravy. Cornbread."

Then he fainted. His eyes closed, and his chin dropped to his chest. He breathed lightly.

I was more nervous than I had ever been. A dozen scenarios played themselves out in my mind. Having already been suspected of murder myself, single-handedly capturing a killer would seem highly unlikely. Catching him in the act, tying him up, and then holding him for the police? Could I become more unbelievable? Killing him and then hiding the other body? Was that a choice? Was there room for logic in this? What if I just let him go? What if I let him go and he dies? What if I let him go, and he kills more people? What about my mother?

I decided to wake him. I shook him. "Hey, man. Wake up. Wake up."

He looked at me.

"Where's my mother?" I asked.

"Who?"

"The principal. Missus Pasternak. My mom. Where is she?"

He thought about it first. "Probably home. I haven't seen her all day. Since yesterday."

I was still lost. I was completely unsure about what to do. The universe has a strange way of deciding for you sometimes. Some people call it fate or karma. I didn't know if those things existed. But after riding in cars with ghosts, I found myself more accepting of the impossible.

What happened next changed my outlook completely. Roger started to gurgle like a sink. Not belch, gurgle. I just stepped back and watched him. Then he hiccupped a short disgusting yelp. A strange gas emanated from his mouth. It was a little cloud of mustard-yellow dust. Then he let out a moan, a long mournful squeal. "Oooouuuuuuugggggggghhhhh."

Then his body tensed up, and his head flew back. He screamed again.
"Aaaaaaaaaaaaa-aaaaaaah."

His veins bolted through his skin like tire tread. He was in pain, true agony. He convulsed forward, pulling the extension cord tighter around himself, and his eyes bulged. Then a flame shot from his mouth. A quick silver-blue flash burst forward about a foot and disappeared. He shook.

That was how I played it out in my imagination. That is how I would have preferred it had happened, automatically, instead of taking responsibility for what I did.

I had picked up the little can of lighter fluid he had on the table and started dousing him with it. I poured it over his head and he screamed as it dripped into his eyes.

"No! No, man! No! Please! Stop. Please stop." he begged.

I jumped back and grabbed a shovel off the wall, clutching it like a security blanket, ready for some sort of battle. He looked at me in fear and amazement.

I took the matchsticks off the table and opened the box.

"No. Don't. Don't do that. Please. I'm sorry. You hear me? I'm sorry. Please don't, please."

The spark of the match only hit the vapor and it lit him up. It happened so fast.

I saw him not as a human, but as a thing. A thing that had to be destroyed.

I fantasized that flames were shooting from his mouth like dragon breath, that he was dying of spontaneous human combustion. That he was exploding.

But I had lit him on fire and beat him with the shovel as he burned and I could only watch myself do it.

It was the most horrible thing ever. No matter what I had done before, the memories I had lived with up until that moment paled against the front-row view of a man burning to death and being completely consumed. He was fuel and flame together.

The level of fear Roger exhibited was extremely intense. I had no clue that level existed. The terror in his eyes poured through me.

He leaned over in the chair, pulling the cord tighter, trying to escape. Then his belly distended, and he let out one last yelp.

He struggled to stand but could not. A flame burst right from his gut and began to consume him. It flared through his shirt from the left side of his belly, and the shirt ignited, scouring his head with purple and green flame. He was sweating and crying at once, watching himself being burned alive.

His screams now became primal, unintelligible howls. In a moment, he was consumed and not hollering.

I grasped my face, held my mouth, breathed heavily, and panted. Stale smoke coursed through the shed. I was frozen in place, watching him burn. The fire was so hot it began melting the nails in the ceiling above him, and little drops of molten steel or lead dripped around him like tiny fireballs. I could feel my hair getting dry.

There were little explosions happening inside him. Popping noises that shot little torches from his chest and groin.

In another moment, he was a flame, one big blue flame burning in the chair and flickering away. His arm fell to the floor. It was still tied to his other hand, which disappeared at a charred elbow. His shoes melted around the stumps of his feet. They disappeared at the shins. The rest of him was gone. He was just gone.

That was how I imagined it.

He was now just a charred body sitting in a chair, black with ash. The flames were gone, and a sick oily aroma lingered in the air.

My hands were black with soot. I felt ill but not nauseous. A gasping, nervous sensation like I had just smoked a carton of cigarettes. I could taste it, the taste of man. It is not good.

I dropped the shovel and left the sweltering shed for cool night breezes. I crossed the school field and went back to my car at Marlene's house.

As I walked down the middle of the street, away from the school, I could hear fire truck sirens in the distance. People from the neighborhood, who may have been sitting on their porches, enjoying the summer night, or watching the evening news, were coming out of their houses and running toward the school to see the burning cottage.

I walked right past them and nobody said anything to me. I was covered in sweat and soot and blood and smelled horrible, and nobody noticed.

I was invisible.

CHAPTER 20

I lost track of time.

I know I got into my car and drove away.

It is amazing how silence can make your head throb. How sheer utter silence can echo when that is all there is to hear. In the middle of the night, at the darkest rim of the world, there are a few moments when nothing moves. No animal rustles in the woods. No cars drive by. Stars loom above and somehow, that silence, maybe the sound of the stars themselves, calls you. It is a definite ring or hum, discernible only when the rest of the world is asleep.

I could hear it.

There in the middle of the woods, watching the moonset, I could hear the silence echoing. I sat there for a long time, crouched upon the hood of an abandoned car. It was one of those shells of a sedan, like a gangster-mobile from the thirties. Trees had grown up all around it so it could not be moved. It was a safe place, like a fort.

Twilight soon glinted above, bringing with her little specs of stardust, and a warm velvet glow on the horizon. The birds awoke, little sparrows and orioles singing to their mates. Roosters were off in the distance competing for recognition. No breeze tossed my hair. The earth was warm. The air temperature and humidity were perfect.

It was the last perfect morning I would ever know. How wonderful to not know that at the time. To live in that moment, to savor it, every chirp, every shadow growing into the light and taking shape as a tree or a fence or an old tire, even the touch of my hand against my face, felt so real, so perfect. I finally experienced the ecstasy of life.

I was out all night. From my viewpoint in the woods, I could see my house. Not in the dark, there were no lights on, but I knew it was there. I would have seen lights had they been turned on. I thought I was waiting for *something*. I didn't know what. But *something* never materialized. My house was untouched. No visitors called. It was a safe place. So I could go home.

My first instinct was to turn on the TV. But I rejected it. I put down the remote control as quickly as I had found it. I went to my refrigerator. No food. I did not hunger anyway. In my bathroom, I had no bodily needs. My cat slept on the bed and I let her be. I felt as quiet as a ghost, wandering around my house wondering what to do.

In my mirror, I saw a dirty vagrant in need of a bath. It was me, of course, and my eyes were huge. A dazed disbelief coursed through me. I rejected the thoughts that tried to get me to recall the night before. I just wanted to live in the woods on top of that abandoned car forever. To stay in that moment, detached from the world, listening to the birds and watching the world light up with morning.

Even though that was the image I had tried to force into my mind, the horrors would not escape me. I still saw blood. Body parts. Death. Fire. There was nothing to say.

My shower sounded welcoming, inviting me to wash away the soot and sweat and the debris of the woods. I wanted to cry, but I could not. Instead, I stood in the shower and stared into the rushing flow, bathing my eyes, hoping I could wash away things I had seen. And things I had done. It didn't happen. Nothing disappeared. You don't forget. Nobody does. I believe that.

So, although I had fear and recollection to contend with, I went on now. I went on

with the business of the day. I went on living.

After bathing, I dressed well and made coffee. I trimmed my nails and brushed my teeth. I heard the mailman drive up and putter away in his little truck and I went to retrieve my mail. I could have looked up and down the street, but I did not. I was no longer looking for ghosts.

I drove downtown to shop. I parked on Dodge Street and started walking. I just wanted to shop, to start something new. New clothes always make me feel better. At one of the finer men's clothiers, where they knew me, I stopped in only to visit, but purchased some socks and a nice shirt.

Then I moved down the street. It looked like it was about to rain, so I turned and went back to my car for my umbrella. I was only down the block so it was rather convenient. I placed my goods in the trunk and toted my umbrella firmly as a smart walking stick. When I was looking in the window of an electronics store, looking at the sale prices, a piece of popcorn hit me in the face.

Startled, I turned to see a young boy, probably about fourteen, standing there, eating from a bag of popcorn. He turned to me and said, "What are you looking at, bitch."

It shook me. Why is this child doing this?

"Bitch," he said, throwing another piece of popcorn. It bounced off my chest.

"Come here," I said.

"Hungry bitch?"

I stepped toward him as he backed up at the same pace. I was simply bothered by him. It was upsetting to have a child treat me so shabbily, particularly without reason.

“Have some food, bitch,” he said, throwing another piece.

I grew more angered by the second. He just kept backing up and throwing popcorn as I stepped toward him. We did not run. We did not show fear of one another. He kept moving back, and I kept moving forward.

“You want to call me a bitch? You need to stop that shit right now, kid.”

“What are you gonna do, bitch?”

He started to move faster now, but I maintained a steady gait. He got a few more steps farther away and went inside a restaurant. The door was open, but they were not open for business. It was a nice Italian place that served only dinner. Before he went inside he said, “See ya, bitch.”

I guess he didn’t believe I would really follow him there. I didn’t know what set him off that morning, why he chose me, but I made certain he would not forget it. I kept walking toward him. I guess he thought I would not really harm him.

He was mistaken.

I finally cornered him on the edge of the dining area.

“Get out of here, bitch. You don’t belong here.”

“Neither do you.”

I moved like lightning, striking him on the top of the head with my umbrella handle.

“NO!” he cried.

I struck again. And again. And again. Again. Again. He flailed and raised his arms over his head, cowering on the floor. Again.

“Stop it.”

Again.

“Please stop. I’m sorry. Please don’t hit me.”

Again.

“PLEASE!”

I stopped.

I pushed the umbrella tip into his throat and told him, “You need to show some respect for your elders. Don’t forget that.”

I pushed it deeper for another moment and he cowered and cried and sniffled. Then I stepped back and left.

Whatever possessed that kid to start throwing popcorn and calling me a bitch, I will never be sure, but I felt certain he would never do it again.

I walked back out into the street calmly. A few drops of rain began sprinkling, so I unfolded my umbrella and raised it above me. My stroll was aimless now. I went along unthinking.

I recall that now.

That day, after I beat the boy in the restaurant, I just walked toward the river. I didn’t think about anything in particular. I was not scheming. I was without motive. I just was.

When I got to Heartland Park, the soft sprinkles of rain subsided and the sun warmed Omaha again. I lowered my shelter and sat on a bench facing the river. I recalled another time there in the park. When a girl named Mary was saying goodbye to a

teenaged boy who appeared somewhat retarded. It was almost dark. He went left and she went right. It was such a moment of opportunity. So simple. So quick. So lethal. Strangling her was irresistible. I kissed her goodbye and fed her to the river. It happened so fast.

Just like the boy in the restaurant. It happened so fast.

I sat there for a while and soon realized I was hungry. For what? Just food. Plain, simple food. I turned and moved toward downtown again. I walked past a few different restaurants. Home cooking. Soul food. Gyros. Bistro. Then I saw McDonalds.

There is no mystery at McDonalds. The hamburgers are simple and pure and plain as they were thirty years ago. No surprises or wondering if you are going to like it or not. The fries are fries. The Coke is a Coke. I needed that. I needed to sit there with my plain hamburger and fries and Coke and just enjoy the simplest meal I could. I did. The soft, warm, seedless bun, little bits of onion, mustard, and ketchup was the taste of innocence. It was pure and simple and as I ate, it brought me to tears.

I didn't cry too much there, sitting in the corner of the restaurant with my little tray and napkins, but I welled up enough to need to dry my eyes. Only a monster could devour something so pure. I felt like a monster. I was one. If cattle could think, if they knew how they would become food, devoured by millions of people, they would fear us. If little women walking alone in parks could read minds, they would know when to run. Monsters are out there.

I walked outside into the sun again.

I could turn right. I could turn left. But I could not decide. I didn't know what I

wanted. I just stood there for a moment. I did not think. Then I noticed something.

A little girl was standing by the newspaper machine crying. She was a little blonde girl, maybe about five or six years old. She was lost. I looked around. The street was quiet. I was the only person in sight.

I went to her.

I crouched in front of her. "Hey, little girl. Where is your mommy?"

She cried through her words. "I-I don't know-we are in a store. And-and- then I can't find her."

"Okay." I said, laughing. "Okay, we'll find your mommy. Okay?"

"Okay."

I stood up and held out my hand. "Come on."

She reached up and took two of my fingers in her little palm.

An opportune moment was presenting itself. It would be so easy. It happened so fast.

"What is your name?"

"Andrea."

"Andrea. Do you know what store you were in?"

"A clothes store."

"Okay. Was it over here? Or over there?" I pointed up and down the street.

"I don't *know*." She cried again.

I looked around. There were no other people on the street.

"Did you walk far?"

“I don’t *know*. I was there and then I walked outside.”

“Did you walk across a street?”

“No. I can’t cross the street.”

“Okay, how about if we try that store, right there?”

“Okay.”

“My name is Mister Pasternak.”

She didn’t answer. “How old are you Andrea?”

“I’m this much.” She splayed her fingers for me. “I’m five.”

“Do you go to school?”

“No. I go to school on Labor Day. I’m going to kindergarten.”

“What’s your mommy’s name?”

“My mommy’s name? My mommy’s name is Mommy.”

We walked into the nearest department store. It opened into the men’s section. We went through to the main aisle and could see across the entire floor. Far at the other end was a woman with two other children, speaking to the lady working the counter. She looked frantic. You could hear her voice shrieking a little bit.

“MOMMY!” Little Andrea cried.

She let go of my fingers and ran to her mother. The relief on her mother’s face was loving and beautiful. She was so happy. Andrea ran to her and into her arms. She was probably missing for no more than five minutes, but that was all it took for panic to set in. Especially when the first thing on your mind was that you might never find your child.

I walked calmly toward the family and the store clerk. Andrea’s sisters were older

than her. They stared up at me.

I sensed that an explanation was necessary. "I found her walking around outside."

"Aaaaaaaa-oooooooooooooooooh. Andrea! Never go away from me in the store. Never go outside. I was worried about you. Thank you." Her mother looked up at me. "Thank you so much."

I could feel myself smiling. "Hey, it's okay. Anybody would have got her back to you. I just happened to be the guy who found her first."

She stood up to hug me. "Thank you. Thank you." She wiped her eyes. "Thank you."

I did not hug her back.

She stepped back.

I moved away and started walking. "Anytime."

I moved toward the door and outside and could feel my pace accelerate. Knowing who I was, what I was capable of, labored my breath. I felt as if I needed to hurt someone again. That is a wretched emotion. It is the part of me that I despise. There are many things I hate about myself. I hate that I can be bad. I hate that I can think evil thoughts at the same time I am doing a kind thing. It tore me apart, knowing what I could have done to that little girl, and knowing that I should not, but not knowing if I *would* not.

I suppose it is your conscience that fills your head with tears that won't flow. The overwhelming feeling that I needed to scream but had nothing to scream about other than self-inflicted torment ripped me. I had nothing to say. I had nothing to do. No place to be. All I knew at that moment was how much I reviled myself.

I had felt it before. Absolute self-loathing. I don't know if it was worse than at any other time, but I knew only one remedy. The single most effective way of dealing with an incomprehensible emotion is to deny it. The greatest facilitator of denial, for me, was alcohol.

I began to drink. That afternoon was a flashing haze in my recollection. I probably started with some Crown Royal. Then I probably sipped a few Grand Marniers. Soon I did not care. I walked from one bar to another that afternoon. Once again, as I could obliterate a life so effortlessly, I attempted to obliterate my memory.

It all happened so fast.

CHAPTER 21

When I try to recall that last day, it comes back to me in a haze, as if it were not real, but a manufactured memory. I know I went home for a few minutes and showered and changed clothes again. I had to in case anybody came calling about what happened at the academy.

But I was still drunk when I went back out. I intended to hide. But I did not want to look like I was trying to hide. I went back downtown, going to places I had been before, trying to build an alibi for myself, but it all became so scattered, I am not sure I am explaining this right. My recollection is that I know I went back out, and that is all that I know. I had stuck with my commitment to get drunk and I did.

I did not care.

I was trying to forget about Roger and the fire and everything else I did that day.

I didn't know how many bars I went to. I lost track of my car. I didn't know where I parked it. Someplace on the street. That did not matter anyway. I was wrestling with what did matter. I could not find the answer and was not even sure of the question. The more I thought, the more I drank. The more I drank, the more my thoughts bounced from one subject to another. With focus fading, my thoughts drifted away.

I became more of a consciousness than a physical person, dazed and pondering everything. But nothing made sense. I could not walk a straight line. I could only stagger.

When I finalized my bill in one bar, I moved on to the next. Some barkeeps refused to serve me. Some did not. Finally, I stood over a glass of beer that I could not drink. I could not even lift the glass. The world rolled around me.

I wobbled out of the bar.

It was daylight. Where had I been all night? All morning?

I could feel the horror of my life evident on my face, yet I could only imagine what I looked like at that moment. The late afternoon citizens of Omaha could see me now, and I was ignored not by any one of them. They rushed home, escaping their desks and filling the sidewalks, bustling past me. A drunk leaning against a wall was cause for notice. They looked. They sneered. But they said nothing. Opinions were kept silent. I could read the disgust or complete ignorance in every face. People backed away as I hobbled to the streetlamp post to lean there for refuge.

Dazed, I looked around at everyone staring at me. It was not my imagination at all. I was certain they were all staring at me.

I glanced down at my shoes. Brown penny loafers. They did not particularly match my outfit. I thought about my clothes from the other night. How I dumped everything into a trash bag and threw it into the garbage in my alley. I knew I would miss that tie. It was pretty.

Looking down made me want to vomit, so I shifted my gaze upward again. Above me rose the insurance buildings. I reeled as I peered up at the Woodmen Building, a Midwestern testament to real city skyscrapers. I leaned my head against the post to stare at the monoliths above me, studying the edges of the late afternoon shadows as they scaled the towers. I thought about shouting.

I thought about screaming at the top of my lungs, *Take me. Take me away. I don't want to be here. Do something to me. Do something now before I do something else.*

I thought about this, but I did not verbalize it. Instead, staring at the tip of my cigarette, I whispered, "Just let me die. Turn me to ash. Take me away. Just let me . . . die."

That was the last thing I remembered for a while.

I blacked out.

I couldn't say exactly where I went or what I did. This time, what made it worse than waking up gasping for air at the edge of a muddy pond, was that when I came to I had no idea where I was.

I was in somebody's house. I woke up in a chair in the living room. I was no longer drunk. It was late morning. I did not recognize the furniture or the view out the window. I had never been there before. I didn't know how I got there.

It was perfectly silent. I could hear nothing. Not a hum nor a creak nor a rattle of any kind.

I stayed quiet, got up, and walked around the house. It was on a farm. The home was decorated in simple family fashion. They were neat people. Family photos adorned the walls and tables.

My first thought was that I had killed somebody. But who?

I stepped softly and moved through the house as quietly as I could. Nobody was in any of the rooms adjacent to the hallway. No bodies. Nobody.

Then I stepped into the doorway of the kitchen. A man sat at the table reading a newspaper and eating a sandwich. A woman stood just beyond him. She was at the sink washing dishes with her back to me. I was sure the man should have been able to see me in his peripheral vision, but he did not look at me. They were atypical farm folk, a man taking a break from his tractor, and his dear, sweet wife.

I didn't know who they were.

She turned and gave the man a spoon, placing it on the table before him.

She looked right at me. But she said nothing. There was no acknowledgment of my presence. She looked right through me like I was not there. She turned and went right back to

washing dishes. The man put sugar in his coffee and stirred.

They must be able to see me, I thought. They must know I am standing right here.

But the man did not look at me, and the woman kept her back to me and continued washing dishes.

I backed away from the door.

She did not turn, and he never turned his head. I tiptoed away to the front door, and opened it gingerly, careful for whatever creaks it might make. I walked out and closed it as gently as I had opened it. There was nobody else in sight. I crept down the stairs and ran.

I went past a car and truck in the driveway and ran toward the mailbox at the edge of the road without looking back.

I stayed on the road for a bit, walking toward the skyline of downtown Omaha. There was no traffic. I slowed down and caught my breath. I had cigarettes in my pocket so I lit one and took a quick inventory of myself. I was not particularly disheveled, not dirty, not bloody. I did not feel drunk or hung over. I felt quite fine like I had just arisen from a beautiful sleep that I could not remember. There were no dreams to recall.

I briefly pondered whether I was in a dream, but decided that everything felt real. The road beneath my soles, the sun overhead, and the taste of my cigarette were all quite real. The only thing I did not know was how I got there.

I wondered how those people did not see me. *They must have known I was there, they must have. But why not say anything? Why not even look at me? Who were they?*

The road came to the train tracks, and I recognized the crossing. I knew where I was, on the north side of town, not far from the academy. I knew it from spending my whole life in the vicinity.

I walked the tracks to another road on a little diagonal shortcut. I thought I might walk all the way downtown on the railroad tracks. It occurred to me that I should find my car and the last place I remembered being near it was when I parked downtown.

I thought that if I did something horrible, which was a distinct possibility, authorities might be on the hunt for me, so I stayed on the tracks for a while until I got to a busier street where the country roads gave way to neighborhoods with sidewalks. It was not far.

There was a diner up ahead, so I decided to stop and have coffee and think. *And eat. I should probably eat.*

I was quite visible to the waitress and the few other guests. She brought me a menu, and the fellows at the counter looked over at me, realized they did not know me and went back to their own conversation.

Bacon, eggs, and home fries hit the spot. It was a nice quiet meal. Nobody asked me anything, save for the waitress offering me more coffee.

After the meal, I went back to the street and saw a bus coming toward me. I flagged it down and asked the driver if it went to the Ak-Sar-Ben racetrack. I wanted to go somewhere I felt safe. He told me I would need to transfer downtown.

I hopped on, pulled a buck out of my wallet, and put it in the till. He clicked his changer and gave me back a nickel which I tossed into the coin slot. It occurred to me that I had never taken a city bus before. Not in Omaha, anyway, maybe since I was a kid. I rode the one that ran along the Las Vegas strip when I was out there.

I sat near the back of the bus on the curbside and looked out the window, right in front of the rear exit.

If I did not find my car where I thought it might be, I would catch another bus to the

track. That was my plan. I wanted to go home, but not be alone, and the track was as close as I could get to that feeling. I certainly did not want to go to the academy. Maybe I would catch a ride home from one of my friends and tell them my car was in the shop.

I felt better now, having a plan.

That plan slipped away when the bus got into traffic and slowed down. I started noticing people.

I thought I saw George Harris jog by. I spun around to look. He was gone.

A couple more people got on the bus. Most seats remained empty. An older lady sat across the aisle from me. I nodded at her, and she did not nod back.

“Hello,” I said.

She said nothing.

I spoke again. “Can you see me?”

She looked at me and said, “I see you. Do you need help?”

“No, ma’am. Just – this bus goes downtown, right.”

“Yes, it does.”

A sensation of unrealness clouded my thoughts. I wanted to be sure that what I saw was real, the woman across from me, the bus itself, and my presence within it. I was happy that she could see me.

“Thank you,” I said.

But out on the sidewalk, I saw another ghost. We drove past a girl bleeding from her neck, her arms and chest covered in shiny crimson.

I shuddered and looked at the lady across from me. I alone could see it. I was hallucinating.

Then there was another one. The bus rolled right past another bloody woman.

I closed my eyes. When the bus slowed down and stopped for more passengers, I dared to look outside again.

Another one. This one was decapitated, holding her head in her arms. It smiled at me. Blood everywhere. We rolled right past her.

I got queasy and held my hand to my mouth. I looked at the other riders on the bus. Nobody was paying attention to me. They all looked normal. They were real. No bloody ghosts.

The bus turned a few corners and lumbered through downtown Omaha.

The ghosts were outside. Everywhere. Their bloody bodies stood and walked among the living who paid them no notice. The ghosts were there only for me, and they all looked right at me. I wasn't sure where I would finally stop, but I did not want to go out there. I did not want to see them up close.

Then, the bus stopped and opened the door for another passenger. He stepped up and got on without the driver noticing his appearance. He did not pay a fare. He was burned to a crisp, a skeleton wrapped in black singed flesh, shiny teeth protruding from where his lips had burned away. I could smell him. I knew those eyes. It was Roger.

He walked toward me, gripping the edge of each seat corner as he moved down the aisle, coming closer, looking right at me, saying nothing.

Before he got to me, I shot upright, spun around, and jumped out the back door.

I ran.

I bolted around the back of the bus into the street, right into another oncoming bus, thinking I would outrun it. I smacked into it with outstretched arms as if to embrace it.

People screamed. Passengers stood. It was an unscheduled stop.

The corner of the bus caught me, and I grabbed the side view mirror. I clenched the mirror, and the force of the bus swung me around and smashed my face into the door. I heard a loud 'pop' as I felt my nose snap. Looking through the glass, in that instant, I saw the driver. His eyes bugged out as he crushed the brake pedal, screaming, "Oh no!" Terrified.

Then I saw pavement and the tread of the bus tire approaching my face.

Then I saw black.

Black.

Nothing but black.

Black.

Black.

And Then There Was Light . . .

And from the light, things were brought into focus again. I was no longer of bodily form.

I was a mere consciousness rising above the scene.

A crowd of people gathered around the bus.

I spiraled above them. My body lay motionless in the center of the street. The people had pulled me out from beneath the bus. I was glad to see that my head had not been crushed. Then, someone began administering CPR.

An ambulance arrived.

I floated higher. The scene grew smaller, farther away, and hazy. I felt safe.

Everything went white.

White.

Pure. Solid. White.

Infinite.

Perfect.

White.

It was a calming sensation. No pain. No stress. No questions, but no answers. It was perfect. It was a perfect silence I had experienced only that morning, amplified a million-fold.

Somehow, there was a haze about me, and a man materialized from it. An old, black man. He wore a sweater. Or a sweatshirt. Maybe it was a robe. His face was old. Whiskers? I didn't know. Was he really black? I wasn't sure but I had the sensation that he was black, as for some inexplicable reason, I had always found old black gentlemen to be soothing.

He just frowned and shook his head, hanging it low. He pointed away. A long bony finger stretched out into the eternal void.

I looked out there. He was gone. The void turned gray. Still hazy, but now, a growing gray, like an active haze.

I could not see my body. I felt like I was looking down or holding up my hand, but it was not there. I was nothing, only consciousness, devoid of form and substance.

At first, it was calming. Then I realized what it was to be nothing. I rejected it. My will to live, to be *something*, ruled.

I would not die.

CHAPTER 22

The coma lasted over a week. When I regained consciousness, the doctors were relieved and frustrated. My spinal cord was damaged beyond repair, resulting in the complete loss of my motor skills. A wheelchair would become my home. This was how I became a quadriplegic. At least I could talk, and through the help of a nurse who could sign, interpret, and speak, I could still communicate with my mother.

She was at my side when I awoke. She cried and cried, devastated by everything.

“Poll, Poll, Poll,” she said over and over.

I could not comfort her. I could not touch her, but she laid her head on my chest and wept.

She touched my face and the bandage over my nose. I could feel that, but nothing else, only my face and scalp, and neck. She did not say so, but she was sorry. Sorry for all the times she smacked me or locked me in a closet as punishment for acting out. I escaped sometimes. She stopped doing that when a teenage growth spurt made me bigger than her. I forgave her years ago, but not in words. I just let it slip away. She could have been so much worse.

Mom tried to explain what happened at the academy but could not bring herself to do so. She left the room and gave that job to the interpreter, who explained that her assistant Jade had been killed and decapitated and that the facility caretaker had also been killed, his body burned in the cottage. She told me it was headline news and that there was a manhunt underway for somebody. Mom was not even home at the time of the incidents. She was out and about, at a church bingo with her friends, and learned of the shed fire upon her return home. She did not find Jade’s body until late the next day, as the school was closed for summer.

That must have been tough for her.

I was stunned, wondering why nobody had come for me. Was I not a suspect?

Then Carlton Dove visited me as I thought he would. I supposed that with the murders now on my own turf, they would want to talk with me. I certainly could not go anywhere.

His demeanor surprised me. He came to me not with a sense of gloating, as I expected, but with sorrow. He stood in the doorway and asked, "Mister Pasternak, may I come in?"

"Sure," I said.

"I came to tell you – I'm sorry for your loss – your – situation. May I sit down?"

"Sure."

Dove pulled up a chair to my bedside. He shook his head and smacked his lips like he was trying to figure out what to say, so he took a moment before speaking. "You have heard about what happened at the school for the deaf?"

"Right. I heard."

"I interviewed your mother. It helped fill in some blanks. Put some puzzle pieces together."

"What does that mean? What did you figure out?"

He produced a photo from the folder he carried. Before he showed it to me, he said, "Don't worry. This is not graphic."

He held up a photo of Roger. It was a smiling headshot of him wearing an airline uniform with gold epaulets and buttons and a captain's hat. His hair was brown.

"Do you know this man?"

I lied. "No. Who is he?"

"Robert Jerome. You are going to start seeing him on the news. Mister Jerome is the FBI's most wanted fugitive right now. He killed the people at the school for the deaf, and he

killed Marlene Riggs.”

“Why?” I was truly curious about how he reached that conclusion. I wanted to know more. “What for?”

“First of all, Paul. May I call you Paul?”

“Sure.”

“I want to apologize to you. I know we got rough, but sometimes, you have got to do what you have got to do to get the truth.”

“Okay.”

“Your girlfriend, Marlene Riggs, did you know she kept a diary?”

“She did?”

“She did. She wrote all about her boyfriends, just like a teenager. She was smitten with you. You’re a good guy. But the guy she was seeing before. Bad news. It was him.” He held up the photo of Roger. “Are you sure you have never seen him before?”

“I am sure.”

“Let me just tell you about this, so you get the whole story, not just the bits and pieces you might hear on the news. I owe you that. He kills men about his age and assumes their identities. He also flies airplanes, so he gets around. He killed a college professor at the same school Marlene Riggs worked at the day before the man was due to show up for work. A man they hired over the phone. His name was Roger Fisher.

“So, he took on the identity of Mister Fisher and started a relationship with Marlene. This was months, months before you met her. I don’t like to use the word diabolical, but that is what he is. Robert Jerome is diabolical. We believe he may have assumed up to six different identities now.

“Marlene’s diary — she never told you about him?”

“No.”

“She wrote that she thought he killed a student who went missing. We think she was right. That’s just part of it. I am not going into the details. So, she broke up with him and moved here to Omaha. He followed her and used the school for the deaf as a cover. He worked for your mother as a janitor. Lived in that shed on the property. And he stalked Marlene from there, a stone’s throw away. I don’t know why he killed her, but he did. Then he killed another girl at the school and somebody else we can’t identify because the body is burned beyond recognition. Now, we are going to find him. Bring him to justice.”

“So, you think he killed all those other girls, too?”

“Not exactly. This is going to be tough to explain, but have you heard of DNA?”

“DNA? Yeah. It’s a science thing – like a blood type – what is it?”

“DNA is a biological fingerprint. The FBI just started using it a couple years ago, and it takes a while for results. So, we were able to get Robert Jerome’s DNA from his medical records and matched him to the scene at Marlene Rigg’s house, and it matches multiple murders across the country, but not all of them. We found markers for four different unknown subjects, plus Robert Jerome.”

“Are you saying five people killed Marlene?”

“No, no, no. Let me rephrase. Jerome killed Marlene and others. Then, there are four other killers out there we have yet to identify. And I know you want to ask, so I’ll tell you, your DNA doesn’t match anything on file. So, you are no longer suspected of anything.”

“Where did you get my DNA?”

“All your cigarette butts.”

“They can do that?”

“They can. I know it doesn’t make up for anything, but we had leads to follow, and you were one of them at the time, so . . .”

“So – what does this mean?”

“It means you are off the hook. You didn’t do it. We know that now. So, again, I apologize for your trouble. And I am sorry to see you in this situation now. Your doctor says there is a chance of recovery?”

“Maybe. Too soon to tell.”

“Well, Paul, I hope you do. I am being sincere. I hope you recover.”

“Thanks.”

He stood up to leave and went to the door, then like TV’s detective Columbo, he turned around and said, “You know what though? Even with the DNA of five different killers, there is another one we can’t find. He leaves no trace. None at all. Those were the ones we thought were you. It’s like he is invisible.”

“Okay.”

Then he added one more thing, in a cheerful tone, “By the way, I looked up your name, Pasternak. I found out what it means.”

“What’s that?”

“Parsnip.”

He managed to make me chuckle. “What is a parsnip, anyway?” I asked. “Like an herb?”

“It’s a root vegetable. Like a carrot.”

“Good to know.”

“Take care, Paul,” Dove said and walked out.

I never saw him again.

I guess I am lucky.

Or maybe I am doomed. My chance to escape was thwarted by my own will. I lived because I wanted to.

I did not know at the time that I would have this quality of life. That's what they call it. I am lucky because I have the financial means necessary to support myself and live in a nice home for handicapped people.

My neighbors are friendly. Psychologists help all of us cope. I learned to be fed by hand and how to maneuver a wheelchair with my lips and suction. I have learned the humility of hands-on assistance with my bowel movements. Is it worse than death? Sometimes. Not always.

I stopped smoking. Having somebody hold a cigarette for me was cumbersome and felt weird. It just was not natural to me. I also stopped drinking alcohol. It is not forbidden here, so I sometimes have a glass of champagne at birthday celebrations and holidays, but I no longer crave a drink. The occasional celebratory toast is fun, but getting drunk is no longer for me. I think I was an alcoholic. In sobriety, I see things more clearly and am no longer haunted by ghosts. Never again will I wake up in a strange place and not know how I got there.

I live with the recollections I have shared in this memoir. They seem like a far-off dream now. Sometimes.

At other times, they are bitterly real, and I can recall the finest details. I remember what Marlene looked like. She was so pretty. I remember the way the birds sounded the day I died. That was pretty too. I still see birds every day.

Sometimes, we watch races or billiards on TV. I have a friend named Roland, who is a

male nurse. He changes the channel for me. He bathes me too. I read the Racing Form and tell him what to bet on. He wins sometimes.

I don't look into mirrors. I don't know what I look like anymore. I don't shave. So Roland trims my beard for me too.

I have had a long time to think about what happened.

In the days following the demise of my mobility, my mother hired a security force for the academy. It became a safe place to be but could not fight the stigma of the murders. The school struggled, and deaf students started going to a school across the river in Council Bluffs. She stopped visiting me after that and had to be put in a home of her own. Alzheimer's paid her a visit and moved in. She soon passed away in her sleep. She never knew that the school had closed.

Ak-Sar-Ben race track closed too. The three stooges visited me a couple of times. Curly, only once, when they came as a trio, with another guy from the track. Then Larry called on me a couple of times. He did not stay long.

I don't know what happened to those guys, but Moe arranged for me and some of the others from our facility to visit Ak-Sar-Ben a couple of weeks before it closed down for good. I didn't bet on anything. Moe wheeled me back and forth along the fence so I could see the horses up close, and smell them, and that manure. Foul, beautiful horse manure, I miss it.

I like to sit and look out the window. All the seasons. Wind. Rain. Once I saw a tornado way off in the distance. It hovered over the plains for a while. It did some damage and disappeared. Like me. Like Roger. When it was gone, the sun shone again and chaos was but a memory.

I watch everything. It is all I can really do. I notice the subtle differences in whatever I

can. A sunset, every ray. A light bulb, every flicker. I notice a bug on a wall and watch it go to the ceiling. It falls to the floor and starts back up the wall again. When it reaches the ceiling again it falls once more. Fifteen years sitting in a wheelchair, you notice things like that.

I noticed something else. I could not feel it, but I saw it.

My finger.

It moved.

I saw it. It moved.

But nobody else saw it.

There are a lot of things that nobody sees.

Nobody worries about a man in a wheelchair making phone calls on a headset in the comfort of his room. They don't question why I spend my days looking at a computer.

It was wonderful in those early days of the internet, especially for me, because of how I could spend my fortune. I could afford the best equipment. Once I discovered what I could do with voice activation, I invested in the facility where I lived and got us all computers. They were grateful. I made a lot of friends that way.

I was able to search for things all over the world. I found places to move money to. Places where nobody would suspect I could get to. Places where, as a man of financial means, I could become a whole new person.

I need to become somebody else because I really want to forget. I suppose that is why I wrote it all down in these notebooks and pieces of paper that you have uncovered from deep under my bed springs. I could not tell anyone, but I had to get it out of my head. It is the only way I can cope.

I no longer want to recall everything I did to all those women. And I don't want to think

about how I kicked Jade's head across a bloody elevator floor. Or how I beat Robert Jerome and burned him alive, hearing him beg and scream. I don't want to remember that.

I don't want to remember the boy that threw popcorn at me. I don't know why he did that. But, I don't want to think about how I poked his eye into his skull with my umbrella tip.

And I don't want to think about that little girl anymore. That was the worst of all. I regret that one. I hope they never find her.

Yes, I embellished a bit. I did so because I don't want to be a monster, not really. I would rather think about what happened the way I told you, where I am not as bad as all that, where I am a bit of a nice guy, and that the few acquaintances I knew were true friends.

I know you are wondering where I went. How I was able to disappear so completely. My recovery was slow but steady.

When that old man with the bad memory said he saw the wheelchair-bound fellow walking about in the middle of the night, he was not mistaken. Oh no, it was to steal this notebook you hold in your grip and tell you my story. So, whoever you are, now you know.

I have been fully mobile for a few years, and now that I have written it all down, it is time for me to go. But please don't try to find me. You won't.

I am an invisible man.

THE END