

TALES FROM THE FLASHBACK

by

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THUNDER LIZARD ROAD

By the time they'd passed Khitomer Butte and were well on their way to Pine Stump Junction, the two beers he'd had at the motel were a distant memory, much less the mescaline from the previous day—at least Sammi thought so until he saw the Tyrannosaurus Rex attacking the big, green tractor combine.

And yet was it the mescaline? Nothing in his field of vision was moving or wiggling, there were no multicolored lines, the sense of euphoria had long since vanished along with the feeling that every cell in his body were somehow orgasming; no, everything seemed perfectly normal to him, from the rumbling of the Harley to the farmland passing by. And yet, there *was* a tyrannosaur. He could see it just as clear as day through his marginally tinted goggles—even as the thing gnawed upon the combine's enclosed cab like a dog with a chew toy, holding the tractor fast beneath its tri-clawed foot as the grain stalks waved in the wind and the sun dipped below the horizon. *Just keep riding*, he told himself. *At least until the next rest stop. It's some kind of after-effect—hadn't Annie's friend said not to drive for at least 24 hours? Just keep riding ...*

That's right, came a voice, wan, disinterested, *her* voice, following him still, as it had followed him since the divorce and the buying of the winning Lotto ticket, as it had followed him since meeting Annie and across the entire country ... *just keep riding. After all, that's what you're good for, Sammi. Riding and driving away.*

"Wow," said Annie, her arms tightening around his waist. "Are you feeling it too?"

He focused on a dark shape hovering just above the wheat—several dark shapes—like hummingbirds, but *big*. Something glinted blue-black in the sun. "What do you mean?"

"The mescaline ... I'm still tripping, baby." Her inner thighs constricted against his hips and he thought of the fantastic shag they'd shared in California—while standing doggie-style amidst the Vasquez Rocks, the famed location of so many westerns—and found the fact that she was hallucinating also reassuring, even if it did mean they were barreling

down the Interstate at 74 mph while still under the influence. “Yeah. Me too. I’m going to pull over at the next rest stop until it passes.”

“DJ is expecting us at five. And it isn’t polite to keep the head of a motorcycle gang waiting. They’re my friends, Sammi. This is important to me.”

“God forbid, we miss a party. We’ll make it.”

“Not if we take too long at the rest stop ... Jesus, I’m seeing dinosaurs back here. What the hell did Jackie give us?”

Her voice had dropped a couple octaves and the wind and engine noise were making it difficult to hear her. *Not gave*, he thought, a little resentfully. *Sold. And the money’s starting to run out.* “Say again?”

“Dude, I’m literally seeing dinosaurs. There’s, like, a T-Rex back there. Trying to eat a tractor.” She laughed.

He turned and looked over his shoulder, saw the tyrannosaur brushing its massive head against the cab of the combine, attempting to roll it over. *There’s no way we can be seeing the same thing. There’s just no way except—*

“Baby ...!”

He spun around in time to see a blue-black *thing*, an insect, a *dragonfly*, which was at least as long as his forearm, hovering directly in their path—before it smashed against the windshield like a rock and splattered like a cantaloupe, hurling watery green blood and guts everywhere, some of which landed in Sammi’s mouth. And then they were careening out of control in the general direction of the gravel shoulder, and while he didn’t experience anything so dramatic as his life flashing before him, he did revisit, in a kind of time-out from time itself, the months since he’d received the Lotto payout and met Annie—a fast-living spitfire who was 29 to his 39 and whom he had nothing in common with beyond how well they got on sexually—and recognized in himself an increasing dissatisfaction with, well, all of it—the gambling, the drugs, the sex—everything. But then the time-out was over and they were laying on their side near the edge of the road—yet still in it—as the 18-wheeler bore down

upon them, close enough so that Sammi could see the driver's face, and thus knew the driver had noticed them too late.

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THERE WAS A SINGLE sharp drum beat followed by a fanfare of trumpets—which always reminded Carina of the opening credits to that old show, *The Love Boat*—as the huge spiral waterslide was activated (marking the beginning of the YMCA's After-school All-swim), and she launched herself into the sluice.

The loudspeakers blared: *Young man, there's no need to feel down / I said, young man, pick yourself off the ground ...*

And then she was sliding and careening down, a little faster than she would have liked, wondering if she would crash headlong into Alex before she even reached the bottom—a thought that was dispelled as she plunged into the four feet of water at the base of the slide ... and surfaced, gasping and disoriented.

"Boo," said Alex, startling her from behind, and laughed.

"Oh ... you!" she said, and splashed water at him.

He splashed her back, his eyes dancing mischievously behind his goggles, before diving beneath the surface and grabbing her ankles—something he'd been doing with annoying regularity lately, ever since her mother had sewn the quilted patch into the crotch of her swimsuit. Indeed, his behavior in general, the behavior of all the boys in the Water Crew, which was what they called their after-school swimming gang, had become annoying: it was as though time stood still for them; they all still acted as though they were in 6th grade and had not moved onto junior high school at all.

She kicked him away and moved toward the edge of the pool, feeling hungry and eager to join the others in the rec room, but he only surfaced and pleaded with her to go down the slide with him one more time.

"Once more," she said, exasperated. "Then I'm out, seriously. I'm hungry."

She couldn't help but to think, as they climbed the stairs to the top: *How many times can you splash down the same stupid slide before it finally loses its appeal?*

I don't know, she asked herself, as Alex launched himself into the jet stream. *How many times can your mother fall in love with the same type of guy?*

She sat down on the slide carefully and eased herself off. *The type of guy who is all presents and attention at first but then disappears like the wind?*

She blew down the slide, rocking between the berms alarmingly in spite of her attempt to take it slow, and had a sudden vision of a great white shark waiting for her at the bottom—its spiny-toothed maw opened wide as a manhole, its pink palate gleaming. Then she exploded out the slide and was beneath the water again—waving her arms and legs for balance desperately—and when she surfaced, fully expecting Alex to pounce upon her immediately, she was surprised to find him nowhere in sight.

And that was odd, considering she'd gone immediately after him. She scanned the water around her even as the late afternoon sun, which had been pouring in through the windows, seemed to disappear completely. She peered outside and saw clouds stacking up in what had been a pure azure dome. *Ah*, she thought, *it's dipped behind a cloud. It'll be back, unlike your long line of stepdads.*

That's when she noticed the blood beginning to spread in the water all around her ... and was gripped with terror.

Omigod.

Omigod, just ... no.

And such was her terror and embarrassment at starting her first period in public that she nearly fainted—but instead backed toward the edge of the pool, groping for the concrete while thinking, *How could there be so much? How could all that possibly be coming from me?*

Her fingers touched a face—Alex, of course; he'd been under the water after all—*Omigod, omigod, what would he say? Would he tell the others? Would it be all over school the very next day?*

And that's when she realized his head was no longer connected to his body. That it had been completely severed and was bobbing in the intake filter. And then there were screams—others as well as her own—and she turned in time to see someone yanked below the surface not twenty feet away, as well as a fin, black as an orca's, which rolled like a log in the deep end of the pool. And she screamed until her voice went raw even as she started to climb from the water—until she saw the velociraptor crouched on the wet concrete with its eyes rolled back in its skull (Mr. Stiller said that predators did that right before striking, to protect their eyes) and its sickle-clawed toes tapping, and knew there would be no escape for her.

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LUCAS TURNED HIS OPEN textbook vertical long enough to flip the page of his comic book, then lay the math-text horizontal and continued reading *Spiderman*. He'd been held after school for not paying attention, yet there he was, lost in his own thoughts, not understanding anything the teacher was saying and already thinking of the excuses he could give his mother as to why he was so late getting home. *It was bullies*, he decided. Never mind that most his bullies were right there in the same room, doing penance just as he was. And never mind that his mother had heard it all before, or that, at this rate, he almost certainly wouldn't be graduating 6th grade. The ugly truth was that the numbers on the chalkboard—having failed to engage his imagination—were as good as invisible to him. And so he read *Spiderman*, which had color and texture, danger, stakes—until the sun passed behind a cloud and directed his attention through the louvered windows: where he saw a flock of seagulls erupt from the playground, beyond which and across the street lay the YMCA, and realized, or perhaps only imagined, that they had scattered before a stampeding triceratops, which was itself being pursued

by a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, which he watched until the creature had disappeared around the edge of the building.

But indeed, he had not imagined it, for some of the other children gasped and rose from their seats, rushing toward the windows even as Mr. Headley shouted at them bewilderedly; at which moment there was screaming in the hallway and Lucas saw the teacher freeze and turn white as a ghost—before fumbling beneath his suitcoat and pulling forth a pistol.

“Everyone get on the floor, now,” he shouted, sprinting for the open door faster than Lucas would have thought him capable, while yelling at the kids running down the hall to get into the room and take cover, although few heeded him in their blind panic. He peered around the jamb as someone or something barked in the corridor—then pulled a student into the room by her arm and shut the door quickly.

He was standing with his back pressed against it, breathing heavily, gripping the gun in both hands, when Sally Meyers asked, “Who is it, Mr. Headley? Is it ... an ‘active shooter?’”

His breath came and went in ragged gasps. “I—I don’t know what’s going on, honey. I ... just saw a blur. Just ... stay put.”

The big IBM clock on the wall ticked as an eerie silence set in, and nobody moved. At last Mr. Headley turned to face the door and gripped the handle.

“Don’t, Mr. Headley, please,” said Sally.

“Yeah, let’s wait for help,” said Thomas.

Mr. Headley eased the door open just enough to peek through, and Lucas tensed ... but breathed a huge sigh of relief when the teacher turned to face them and said, “I can’t see much, but I think it’s clear. Everyone stay put. I’m going to try to—”

And something grabbed him by his ankles—a pair of clawed hands—and yanked, dropping him to the floor on his stomach and causing him to release his grip on the pistol. Then he was being lifted, high enough so that his head struck the top of the doorframe, and nearly

everyone, including Lucas, went rushing to help him. But they couldn't even reach him, much less help, as he gripped the jamb desperately and began to scream, until finally he was torn away completely, although not before grabbing the door handle in a final act of heroism and pulling the entryway shut.

And then there was only the sound, the sounds, of something being eaten or otherwise torn apart—moist sounds, cracking sounds—as a dark pool of blood spread slowly out from the door—flowing around the pistol, congealing around Lucas' tennis shoes—and he'd hardly had time to process this when something barked *inside* the classroom.

And when he looked toward the noise he saw that a pair of velociraptors (as well as a cycad tree) had materialized in the middle of the nearest wall—just materialized, out of thin air—and were jerking and struggling, trying to free themselves from the sheetrock.

Trying ... and succeeding.

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SAMMI COULD LITERALLY see the individual insects stuck in the grill of the Peterbilt when it simply vanished—*pow, like that*. As though it had never existed.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," he said, struggling to get out from under the bike, while Annie did likewise and scrambled to her feet. They both flipped up their visors.

"I think we need help," she said, and, contrary to her character, began crying. "Where's your cellphone? We need to call DJ."

"This is no mescaline trip, Annie," he snapped, grunting as he righted the bike, then tore off his coat and began cleaning the bug guts off the windshield. "Look at this shit. This is *real*."

She moved to respond then paused, staring off down the highway, first north, then south. "Where is everybody? Where are all the other cars?"

He dusted himself off and followed her gaze. “Just vanished, I reckon. Like that truck.”

She looked at the sky forlornly. “Jesus ... look at it.”

He did so, watching as the clouds boiled and spiraled slowly and what appeared to be heat lightning flickered in the distance. But it wasn’t just the otherworldly weather that struck him and filled him with terror, it was the strange lights that seemed to bleed in and out of each other, lights that were of a color he had never seen, and which hurt his mind to behold. “The party is on hold, we need to stop at Pine Stump Junction,” he said, and seated himself on the bike. “They’ll be cops there, radios. *Guns*.” He looked at Annie, who continued to gaze at the sky. “People are going to need our help.”

“Guns,” she whispered absently. “But we have a gun ... right there in the saddlebag. And DJ is expecting us ...”

“Annie, *please*.” He held out a gloved hand.

At last she climbed on behind him and he kicked it into gear.

And then they were on their way, and Sammi was doing his best to focus on the road ahead even as the countryside all around them became a phantasmagoria of prehistoric flora and fauna. And perhaps it was only because he was so intently focused that they didn’t crash when a *Tyrannosaurus rex* lumbered across the road directly in front of them—carrying a dead buck in its mouth.



CARINA LOOKED AT THE water slide and knew it was her only chance. She dove for it even as the velociraptor lunged at her—nearly toppling into the water as it did so—then took its upper edge in her hands and began working her way up its length. That’s when the plesiosaur’s head and neck—she knew it was a plesiosaur because she’d seen one on the Discovery Channel—burst from the water, snapping at her viciously and managing to strike only centimeters from her foot—before she kicked it in its snout and forced it back, albeit momentarily. But it

was enough that she was able to work her way farther up—slipping in the jetstream, fighting the current—until she had escaped its range and was well on her way to the top.

And then she was there, she was out of the water and gripping the platform's railing, and what she saw below was a pool turned virtually red with blood ... as more than one plesiosaur continued to pull people beneath the surface and the "lucky" ones who had escaped were torn to pieces by the raptors.

Then she was running, bursting through the door to the upper promenade and finding her way to the stairs, which she descended so fast that she nearly fell sprawling, and when she reached her bicycle she immediately went to work on the lock—although her hands trembled furiously—until, at last, she realized the bike's frame had been fused with a cycad bush ... and something in her just quit, gave up.

After which the only thing to do was to shrink into the corner and make herself as small as she possibly could, and hope that someone might come, an adult, perhaps, a cop, her mother, even, with yet another stepdad, one who maybe, just maybe, wouldn't abandon her.

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LUCAS SUPPOSED IT WAS the gun, which he'd picked up and wiped off before they'd squeezed through the classroom windows—all he knew for sure was that everyone had begun looking to him as though he were some kind of leader. And the funny thing was, he *felt* like a leader, or at least as though he were awake—truly awake—for the first time in his life. After all, it had been he who had snatched up the gun and killed the raptors, he who had instructed everyone to quickly climb through the windows, and he who had led them to the corner of the building, where they now stood watching the tyrannosaur as it greedily devoured the triceratops. What he didn't know was what to do next, at least until he saw the big, yellow school bus returning from its rounds, and ordered everyone to make a beeline for it.

This they did, arriving at its doors before it had even come to a complete stop, at which point they began pounding on the glass with their fists and one pistol grip, causing the driver to open the panels and begin shouting, “What the hell’s gotten into you kids? And you, you know toy guns aren’t allowed in school! Why—”

“You don’t know?” asked Sally Meyers, unbelievably.

“He needs glasses worse than Four-eyed Freddy,” said Thomas.

“Hey, go fuck your mother some more,” said Freddy.

“Hey, hey! What kind of language is that?” snapped the driver. “Now get away from this door, all of you, or I’ll—”

A single report rang out without warning, causing everyone to jump—especially the bus driver—and those gathered turned to look at Lucas, who was holding the gun in the air. “With all due respect, Mr. Bus Driver, I’m asking that you direct your attention to the southeast corner of the school, quickly.”

He did so immediately and did a little doubletake, then his face lost all color as he got up from his seat and staggered out the doors, still looking on. At last he said, “Sorry, kids. But you’re on your own.” And then he *ran*.

“Mister, don’t!” shouted Sally—but it was too late; the rex just happened to look up from its meal and apprehended him almost instantly ... and now it was coming, coming *fast*, and the bus driver had scarcely reached his pickup when the beast surged forward and closed its jaws about his head.

Lucas didn’t hesitate. “Everyone get in, let’s go,” he said, and slipped into the driver’s seat even as the rex shook the bus driver violently and threw him to the ground—then turned its attention to them.

They all clambered in after him and he shut the doors, but was horrified when he realized that the bus was an older model with a manual transmission. He pushed in the clutch and jammed it into gear regardless, struggling to reach the pedals and see out the windshield at the same time, trying to remember what his dad had shown him, trying not to

think about whether his mom and dad were even still alive—and killed the engine almost immediately.

He turned the key without delay and there was nothing, then looked up to see the tyrannosaur moving toward them rapidly and tried again, this time pushing in the clutch. Everyone cheered as the old bus sputtered to life. At last he eased off the clutch and they lurched forward, even as the rex snapped at empty air behind them, but the dreary mathematics of their situation was clear even to Lucas—for they would never be able to outrun such an animal in first gear alone, and he didn't think for a minute he'd be able to manage a shift into second.

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FROM THE MOMENT THEY roared into Pine Stump Junction is was obvious to both of them that they would find no help there. Indeed, besides a handful of schools and churches and a YMCA, there was scarcely a “there” there at all—no people, no police presence, not so much as a tumbleweed—or so it seemed until they rumbled past the Y and saw a girl of about 12 huddled near the bicycles, at which point Sammi geared down and brought the Harley to a complete stop.

“What’s going on? Why are we stopping?” asked Annie, suddenly alarmed.

Sammi indicated the girl with a nod of his head. “We seem to have a survivor,” he said, and pushed up his visor. “Hello there! Are you hurt in any way?”

The girl didn’t so much as look up—only curled tighter into a ball as the Harley idled.

“Put it in gear,” said Annie abruptly. “There’s nothing we can do for her.”

“She’s in shock,” said Sammi, and shouted again: “I said hello there! Are you all right?”

“*Sammi*. Put it in gear.”

“I’m not just going to leave—”

"We've no room for her. What we need to do is get to DJ's. He's got guns, food, liquor ... we can come back for her lat—"

And there was a sound, an engine sound, which sputtered and died even as a school bus appeared across the street and finally rolled to a stop. Nor had Sammi even processed the sight before a T. rex emerged into full view—brushing its great head against the vehicle's hull and trying to roll it over, gnashing its teeth. And it was in that very instant that Sammi realized precisely what the hell was going on—for the bus was full of children, and what was more, it was being driven by one, as well.

"Jesus gods, Sammi. Put it in gear, let's go."

And he *did* put it in gear, having realized, at last, that she was right: there was nothing they could do. And he realized, too, as they tore away from the scene, that the girl had looked up at the last instant, looked up and began running after them.

That's right, came a voice, wan, disinterested, *her* voice, following him still, as it had followed him since the divorce and the buying of the winning Lotto ticket, as it had followed him since meeting Annie and across the entire country ... *just keep riding. After all, that's what you're good for, Sammi. Riding and driving away.*

And what of it, bitch? He cycled up through the gears viciously. *At least I'm good for something. I'm good for boning Annie. And I'm good for drinking and smoking and dropping mescaline. What I'm no good for is kids. What I'm no good for is saving anyone from the apocalypse—or anything else. So yes, I'm driving away. Because it's the end of the world as we know it ... and I feel fine.*

Just fine.

I feel ...

He took the bike out of gear and skidded to a halt in the middle of the road, where they just sat and idled for what seemed a long time.

"What are you doing?" protested Annie. "Why are we stopping?"

But he just ignored her and kicked it into gear, tearing back toward Pine Stump Junction—back toward the running girl and the school bus

full of children, back toward the T. rex and its head full of fearsome teeth. And so intent upon his driving was he that he didn't give a thought as to why Annie had opened one of the saddlebags and was rifling through its contents, nor just how truly dangerous throwing in with someone who was essentially a complete stranger to you could ultimately prove to be.

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BY THE TIME THEY ARRIVED back at the YMCA—skidding to a halt behind a stand of newly materialized cycad trees—the girl had taken refuge beneath a nearby pickup ... and the rex, having managed to puncture the roof of the school bus with its teeth, was beginning to peel back the metal.

“Here’s the plan, baby—I’m not saying it’s a good one,” said Sammi, and put out the kickstand. “But I know you can ride a little, right? So here’s the deal: Get the girl and put her on the back of the bike, then make tracks for DJ’s as fast as you can. I’m going to commandeer that bus.”

“I can just barely ride, and you know it,” said Annie. “Just please, for the love of God, get us out of here.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Annie.” He took off his helmet and dropped it to the ground, moving to get off the bike—but froze as something was jammed against his ear—a small gun, he knew, *his* gun.

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to,” said Annie. There was a sound like a ratchet handle as she cocked the weapon. “Now put it in gear.”

“Have you gone insane? You know we can’t just leave a bunch of kids to be torn to pieces. *The party’s over, Annie*—can’t you understand that? It’s time to pay the bill.”

“No, baby. It’s time for *you* to pay the bill.” She pressed the muzzle of the pistol tighter against his ear. “You think I let just any over-the-hill wannabe have his way with me? Did you think it was your cock that’s been keeping me around?” She laughed. “No, baby. It’s been the bike and

it's been the money. It's been the 24-hour party. And now you're going to get me to DJ's—or I'm going to put a bullet through your brain and do it myself."

He looked at the school bus as it lurched forward again and stalled, heard the children scream as the rex continued to peel back the roof.

"Do it yourself, then," he said, and got off the bike. "I'm going to help those kids."

He moved to leave then paused, looking at her over his shoulder. "You were a boring lay, anyway. You bad girls always are. And the money was pretty much shot."

She slid forward to the driver's seat and put up the stand, then shrugged. "It was fun while it lasted."

And then she was gone—not down the road, rumbling and roaring, just gone—replaced by a stand of hoary-looking cycad bushes.

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IT HAD TAKEN SOME DOING, convincing the girl under the truck that he was there to help and wouldn't leave until she crawled out to him and they could join the others in the bus—but she had, and he'd managed to get the bus going and away from the tyrannosaur well before the last of the dying light finally bled from the sky completely.

And now they were back on the Interstate, a highway Lucas had dubbed "Thunder Lizard Road," and they'd gotten what children they could back to what parents remained, and Sammi and Lucas and Carina had gathered at the front of the bus as a sort of redeye flight crew as they motored into the unknown, having not much of a plan but to get to the first major city, where it was hoped they might find someone, anyone, who knew what was going on.

And though their collective fate was uncertain at best, Sammi felt oddly fulfilled as he tuned the radio and tried to find a news broadcast—knowing that, whatever awaited them down the road, it would be

better than the life he had been living ... for a man needed purpose as much as he needed air itself.

And he had found his purpose at last.

RAPTORS ON A PLANE

If Samantha hadn't known better, she would have sworn she'd seen a bat—a *big* one, a very, *very* big one—by the 777's flashing wing lights. Of course, when she blinked it was gone, and not into the inky dark outside the window, she was sure, but back into her own mind, which was still half-asleep and probably hung over with Ambien. What she did see, and *knew* she saw, were a series of strange lights, like lightning amongst the clouds—except there *was* lightning amongst the clouds, they were passing through a storm, and these lights weren't that. No, these were something otherworldly, which shown with colors she could not quite define, and she would have studied them further, even snapped a pic with her cellphone, had she not suddenly realized that the elderly couple next to her were no longer in their seats, nor, for that matter, were the people in the middle row, or the row beyond that.

Her pulse quickened, and she sat up with start.

No one was in their seats, not in the entire rear cabin—at least no one tall enough, or fat enough, to be visible beyond the head and armrests. Wait, no, she could see that wasn't true, there *was* someone, she could just make out their arm on the rest in the front-most seats before the next economy class section. She noticed the “fasten seat belts” pictograph was illuminated and thought, *To hell with that*, then got up and began walking down the darkened aisle, finding it odd that all the TVs were stuck on static. Nor was that all that was odd, for a good portion of the seats contained items that normally wouldn't be left unattended, purses and cellphones, laptops, iPads. Lightning flashed outside the windows as she approached the man in the seat and thunder boomed over the drone of the engines.

“Excuse me, sir, but—”

And then the airliner rocked suddenly and so did the arm on the chair rest, rolling back and forth once before it fell off completely and landed on the floor, dotting the blue carpet with blood.

TWELVE MINUTES. IT had been twelve minutes, according to her watch, since the arm had fallen on the floor, after which she'd collapsed into the nearest chair and just sat—her head spinning, her heart pounding. *Okay*, she thought at last, *here's your options: One. You are still sleeping and are experiencing a nightmare. Two. You've gone completely insane. Or, three ...*

It was really happening.

And if that were the case, there weren't many scenarios that could explain it, other than that terrorists had slaughtered everyone on board and piled their bodies in first class—a possibility she found dubious at best.

The only thing to do was to accept the facts so far and make her way toward the cockpit—where she had at least some chance at finding answers. And so she moved forward slowly, not wanting to look at the seat where the arm had been resting but knowing she must, and when she did she saw that it was empty but splattered with blood, and that entrails had been strewn across the next two seats like unseparated sausage links. And she saw something else too, which was that a hatch had been opened in the floor of the aircraft—a hatch from which jungle vines spread like the branched arms of a basket star, and which steamed as though there were an entirely different climate down there in what she assumed was the cargo hold.

Somehow, she stayed calm, and continued moving forward, remembering something she had learned in zoology class before she'd quit college and decided to fly south to winter with her father, and that was that certain predators—hawks, for example—spurned the stomach and intestinal track.

And that's when she stepped into the premium economy section and realized that it was empty too. No. No, it wasn't. Something was moving. Several somethings, actually—dark, scaly, feathery, almost, swaying and curling above the seats, like huge cat tails.

She froze, looking at them, unable to process just what it was she was seeing, or hearing, for that matter, for it sounded as though something

were being eaten. That's when the TVS, including the projection screen at the front of the cabin, snapped to life, and she saw the CNN logo below images of New York City (Times Square, to be exact), where people were running for cover as police lights flashed and colored smoke billowed—*Jesus, oh Jesus, it is terrorists ... they're striking again just like 911 and they're on this plane right*—before what appeared for all the world to be a Tyrannosaurus rex entered the frame and the cameraman began running. And then something lifted its head amidst the swaying tails and she focused on it—even as it focused on the projection TV—and she realized she was looking at a living, breathing velociraptor, right there on Flight 33 bound for Houston.

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JUST ... DON'T MOVE, she told herself, understanding that if she moved even a little the thing would apprehend her at once, then virtually held her breath as the velociraptor—yes, velociraptor, just like in *Jurassic Park*, only this one was blue-black and had a mohawk of oil slick-colored feathers—cocked its head at the screen. At last it lowered its head and she dropped to the carpeted floor, but waited before drawing so much as a breath.

The cabin was quiet except for the drone of the engines and the wet, gristly eating sound—even the TVs had fallen back into static—and she inhaled slowly. Then, just as slowly, she began crawling forward, toward the closed curtain of business class ... and the cockpit.

Scarcely a moment had passed before she heard labored breathing and saw another raptor lying on its side between the seats, foaming at the mouth, dying. Something went *drip ... drip ... drip* nearby.

It was headless man, his body draped over a seat like so much dirty laundry, his blood falling in droplets to the floor. And there, in the middle of the stained carpet, lay a gun. A revolver. A *big* one.

An air marshal, she thought, and reached for the weapon. *Yes, there. And there.* Gold rings and bullet noses, just visible inside the chamber.

But how many? She found the latch and popped open the gun—she was fortunate to know something about revolvers, having spent much of her youth target shooting with her father—and was disappointed to find only two bullets left. It would have to do. Then she crept forward along the carpet ... until creeping forward more would expose her to the raptors, and peeked around the edge of a seat slowly.

There were three of them, their clawed hands and snouts covered in blood, only one of which had the strange comb of feathers that resembled a mohawk, and it was at precisely that instant that this one raised its head and apprehended her, its oil slick-colored crest rising and falling, its white eyes blinking—before it barked at the others as though issuing orders and rushed toward her, at which instant she climbed to her feet and swatted open the curtain to business class, and was about to sprint forward into first class when she realized there was a door directly next to her—a *restroom!*—and grabbed hold of its latch, which was locked. She pounded upon the door with her left fist even as she brought the revolver up with her right, and was about to squeeze off a shot at Mohawk's snout, which had just appeared around the edge of the curtain, when the door suddenly opened and someone pulled her in—someone who quickly shut the hatch and locked it.

And then she was breathing heavily, trying to slow her heartrate which had raced out of control, as the raptors clawed at the door and gnashed their teeth, and a man in a pilot's uniform placed his palm over her trembling gun hand and lowered the pistol slowly. Then everything just broke inside her and the tears started flowing, as she threw her arms around him and sobbed almost violently, all the while thinking how good it was, how very, very good, to no longer be alone.

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“WHAT,” SHE MANAGED, after she'd finally settled down, “what's going on? Do you know?”

He only shook his head, listening at the door, trying to determine if the raptors had lost interest. From the sound of it, or rather the lack of sound, they had. At least for the moment.

"It all happened so fast," he said, leaning against the wall. "It's possible the pilots don't even know. If there *are* any."

"But you're a pilot ..."

He shook his head again. "Not on this flight." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I was deadheading from San Francisco to Houston—repositioning for another assignment—when everything went crazy. Most the passengers and crew vanished just before we lifted off. I don't know where the, the velociraptors, came from, only that they arrived shortly after everyone disappeared." He looked up slowly, as though he were processing several things at once. "We've got to get to the cockpit—I'm sorry, what is your name?"

"Samantha," she said, offering her hand.

"Peter," he said, and shook it. "Peter Romero." He looked at the gun. "The air marshal's, I presume."

She nodded. "Such as it is; there's only two rounds left in the chamber."

"Two rounds ... and three raptors," he said.

"Right."

"Can you handle it? I've—never fired one."

"I can," she said, simply. "How will we get into the cockpit? I can't imagine anyone just saunters in post-911."

"No, but there's a camera in the forward galley, just above the cockpit door. Plus there's an intercom. Regardless, if anyone's there, they'll see us. If not, I guess you'll have to prove how well you can handle that thing by blowing the lock."

"And the raptors?"

"There's another restroom right next to the cockpit—two of them, actually. The doors open out ... while the cockpit door opens in. If we can get to the restroom, we should be able to open a passageway with cov-

er between it and the cockpit—that’s how close they are. It’ll all have to happen very fast, of course.”

Samantha sighed. “Hopefully they’re still there. Can you fly this thing alone if you have to?”

“As for the pilots, I wouldn’t hold your breath. Because I saw—I saw others disappear after we levelled off, meaning the fact we completed takeoff doesn’t mean a thing. They could have vanished after engaging the autopilot. And yes, I can, with your help.” He looked at her and smiled, warmly, engagingly. “So don’t get yourself eaten along the way, yeah?”

She smiled in spite of herself and they stared at each other for what seemed a long time.

“You sure you’re up to this?” he asked her at last.

“No. Are you?”

“No.”

“Okay, then,” she said, and tensed for what was to come. “Let’s do it.”

• • • •

THEY EASED THE DOOR open and there was nothing, not a raptor in sight. Purple light had begun creeping in the windows, meaning dawn was breaking. They crept out—still nothing—and crawled rapidly toward first class, pausing to peek beneath the curtain before entering the cabin—saw the tail of a raptor swaying and curling above the seats, heard the distinct sound of flesh being gnawed upon. They lowered the curtain and looked at each other.

At length Samantha indicated a magazine rack, which was low to the floor on the cross-wall between classes, and Peter nodded, understanding. Then she removed a sheath of periodicals and threw them back toward the opposite side of the plane, hoping to draw the animal out. It worked, and as the beast barked and burst through the far curtain they shuffled forward into first class—then scrambled to their feet and ran for the forward restroom.

An instant later they were in, having rapped on the cockpit door before closing and locking the hatch, and such was their post-stress euphoria that they began laughing and tittering at the absurdity of it—until a voice could be heard coming from the cockpit ... and they stopped, abruptly, and listened.

The voice came again, scarcely audible over the drone of the engines: “Hello? Hello, can you hear me?”

“Yes, yes, we can hear you,” said Peter immediately, and shuffled closer to the door. “Who are you?”

“Karen,” she said. “Stewardess Karen Agutter. I—I’m having trouble hearing *you*. The pilots. They’re ...”

At last the engine noise and muffling effect of the doors proved too much.

“Karen, can you crack the door? Just a crack, I’ll explain later.”

There was a long pause. At last they heard a latch turn. It was funny how that particular sound carried.

Peter popped their own hatch—about an inch, no more. “Hello,” he said, nonchalantly.

“Hi,” she said.

“The pilots. Are they ...”

She shook her head. “All gone. I—I was deadheading in the jumpseat—Captain Rhodes ... he liked me, I think—when ...” She burst into tears suddenly.

Samantha peeked between the door and the jamb, back at the cabin.

The raptors were there, spearheaded by Mohawk. They had all gathered in first class—four of them, she realized, not three—and were waiting, patiently.

“We’ve got company,” she said.

“What about the passengers?” asked Karen suddenly. “The other flight attendants? My brother, he was serving in first class—”

Peter and Samantha stared at each other: The empty seats. The wet, gristly eating sounds.

“Darling, listen,” said Peter, modulating his voice carefully. “I can explain everything. But we’ve got to get into the cockpit, do you understand?”

There was the briefest of pauses. “Well, come on in, what are you waiting for ...”

And she began opening the door, completely oblivious to the threat, at which instant Peter shoved their hatch open even as Samantha brandished the revolver and the raptors rushed forward.

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SOMEHOW, THEY MADE it—mostly because the restroom door opened out and thus created a barrier in the narrow passageway. And then they were all together in the cockpit and the door had been safely secured, although the raptors continued to assault it for several moments, denting it inward and filling the flight deck with their muffled snarls and barks, until that, too, subsided, and they could see on the monitors next to the steering yokes that the animals had retreated.

Peter wasted no time in seating himself in the pilot’s chair and buckling in, while Samantha took the jumpseat next to the window (there were two of them) and did the same. The cab turned white as a meteor passed them not 200 feet away—and everyone gasped. Dawn, meanwhile, continuing to break.

“We’re just in time,” said Peter, scanning the instruments. “The next airport is coming up. Go ahead and catch your breath, Sam. But remember—I’m going to need your help when we land.” He looked at her over his shoulder and winked. “And that means taking the co-pilot’s seat.”

Sam, she thought, and smiled inwardly. *So he feels it too.* “Is landing a good idea, considering what’s going on?”

“There’s no other choice, we’ve only got so much fuel. We passed Houston while it was on autopilot.”

“Okay, what *is* going on?” asked Karen abruptly. “And how are the passengers and the other flight attendants? You said you’d explain. Jesus, are they even there?”

The cockpit fell silent save for the rumble of the engines, the soft beeping of instruments. “No,” said Peter at last. “I’m sorry.”

Samantha jumped in, reading the look of stark terror on her face. “We don’t know that. There may be people in the aft galley. It’s possible they ...” she trailed off, looking from Karen’s trembling expression to Peter’s disappointed one. She’d just made a terrible mistake, and she knew it.

“I’m going back there,” said Karen immediately, and got up from her seat.

“You can’t do that,” said Samantha. She tightened her grip on the revolver at her side. “There’s ... something back there. Four somethings, to be exact. You see, there’s been some kind of storm ... like, a time-quake or something, and ...”

The stewardess paused with her hand on the latch. “Some kind of storm,” she repeated, scornfully, it seemed. “A time-quake.” She glanced at Peter. “Well that explains everything, doesn’t it?” She faced Samantha again. “Look, I don’t know who you are, or what your *main* problem is, or why you’re carrying a gun ... but my brother is back there, and I’m going to—”

Samantha drew the pistol on her suddenly. “No, actually ... you’re not. You’re going to sit right down and fasten your safety belt, and let Peter—let the pilot—do his thing. Because there’s a whole lot of hell waiting just beyond that door that you know nothing about.”

The engines droned; a meteor flashed past somewhere in the distance. Karen looked at one of the monitors. “No, there’s no one. So shoot me if you have to.”

And she opened the door.

EVERYTHING HAPPENED at once as Samantha saw a blur on the monitor and Mohawk exploded into the cockpit, clamping his jaws about the stewardess' head and forcing her against the instrument panel—his tail whipping about the compartment viciously, his mohawk of oil slick-colored feathers rising and falling.

He jerked his head once and half her face came away, the muscles stretching and snapping, her right eye being drug out by its stalk, her skull winking whitely, as Samantha pointed the gun and it was knocked from her hands. Then all was blood and chaos as Peter attempted to help Karen—who was likely dead already—and Samantha groped for the pistol, gripping it again even as the animal turned on her friend—but was held back, somehow, by his suddenly mighty hands.

And yet such was the violence of their struggle that she couldn't get a clean shot—and so decided, as Karen's hemorrhaging blood splattered the instruments and sprinkled her face and painted the windows with blotches of maroon, to do the only thing left, which was to point the pistol at the side window near Peter and fire.

The result was as instantaneous as it was cataclysmic, as both the raptor and Karen's body were sucked out the shattered window and the oxygen masks dropped, even as Peter began his descent and Samantha took her position in the co-pilot's seat.

But Mohawk wasn't gone. Indeed, he had clung to the window frame and was attempting to work his way back in, attempting to bite at Peter—when Samantha placed the revolver into his fetid mouth and squeezed the trigger, blowing his brains out the back of his head even as they touched down briefly and were pursued by a T. rex, before Peter lifted off amidst a hail of meteorites and they were on their way once more ... to where or when neither he nor Samantha could imagine.

• • • •

THEY FLEW LOW FOR SOME time, taking in the landscape, marveling at the changes.

"Jesus, Peter ... look at it. It's everywhere."

He nodded, saying nothing, and Samantha couldn't help but to notice that his hands were trembling. So, too, had his eyes glazed over ... and she realized that he wasn't merely in a kind of shock, but was tired, too. Simply exhausted.

"How far did you say the next major airport was?" she asked, placing a hand over his on the steering yoke.

"About 45 minutes," he said, then looked at her squarely, his face full of consternation. "But I can't promise you that it's going to be any different."

"It's okay," she said. "Why don't you ... take it up to an appropriate level, and engage the autopilot. You can get a little sleep while I man the fort. What do you say?"

He stared at her a little longer before facing forward at last. At length he said, "I didn't have anyone. I was alone before this ... this flashback. How about you?"

"A father," she said. "In Houston."

"Maybe we can get back there, somehow. After we land."

"Yeah," she said, and laid her head on his shoulder. "Maybe."

Several moments passed before he said, "It's funny, isn't it?"

But she was already fast asleep.

THE DRIVE-IN THAT TIME FORGOT

THIS IS IT. *The Food of the Gods*, which piqued his interest in the TV ad because it contained giant monsters, has come to town: it is playing at the East Mirabeau Drive-in Theater as part of the semi-annual Drive-in Retro Fest—a nostalgic gala spread over two weeks, each night showcasing different movies and old-time ads—the third feature in a triple-bill which includes *Empire of the Ants* and *The Giant Spider Invasion*. They head out after the NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt, which, because it is a slow news day, is full of nothing but generalized doom: sun flares heating the top layers of Earth's atmosphere and increasing the drag on Tiangong-1—China's abandoned space station—potentially causing it to fall anywhere, even Mirabeau Park; the U.S. Geological Survey predicting earthquakes and a possible eruption of Mount Kilauea in Hawaii, only a few thousand miles away; illegal aliens coming up from Mexico, from Central America, from California—all of whom are criminals, even terrorists, according to the President.

With so much doom in the air and the theater drawing nearer, the Kid feels giddy, maniacal. He ignores his brother who is in the bed of the truck with him, his arm propped on the opposite fender, and instead watches the streetlamps, which, because he is wearing the retro X-Ray Spex he ordered online especially for the occasion (it being a tradition at the Drive-in Retro Fest to dress up) shout X-RAY, X-RAY, X-RAY, because the word has been imprinted into their lenses as a kind of hologram—a cheap effect.

Regardless, he is becoming a different being behind the glasses. Behind the glasses he is becoming ultra-human—an agent of Divine Will—with an agenda having nothing to do with humans. Behind the glasses he has started work toward an inscrutable end that he himself does not understand. There is an incredible power and energy in there, in those oily black lenses. A bass hum. Something *moving*, which races and burns. But there is something else too. Something immutable, solid, like a planet light-years away which scientists recognize only by the echoes

it makes through space-time. An asteroid in the wormhole. It cannot be seen yet but it can be sensed.

It is out there. It is on the horizon. It is coming.

“You look like a douche bag in those,” says Shane as they pull into the East Mirabeau Drive-in, late. They have had to stop at Zip Trip for tranny fluid. The Kid just looks at him. He doesn’t know what to make of Shane either—this new brother who wears gold polyester shirts with stiff collars and pointy lapels, like garden trowels—clamshell necklaces, feathered hair. Who has transformed into Leif Garret seemingly overnight—like in a horror movie; like Lon Chaney turning into the Wolfman in fast-motion. He doesn’t understand why Shane has even come. He is old enough now to drive himself; has a job at Taco Time, his own money. He even has a car, a 1970 Fire-bird, which their father is helping him pay off. But they’ve been going everywhere together lately, his family; everything old is new again—including a black leather-bound Bible which his mother used to tote to Sunday services but which now lies on the truck’s dash. The black leather-bound Bible she has carried everywhere since her diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer.

Everyone honks as the beams of the headlights sweep across the screen. Through her open window he hears his mother say, “*Away* they go!” and laugh. “You’d think the world was at an end.”

He looks at the screen as his father kills the headlights and backs into a stall—takes off the X-ray glasses—sees black ants carrying disproportionately large yellow petals across steppes of chipped bark. As his father sets up the speaker the Kid hears an authoritative voice intone: “Have you ever taken a *good, close look* at what the ant is all about? Like these *Atta cephalotes*—one of the fifteen thousand different species inhabiting our planet. This one cultivates crops of fungus for food. Others herd aphids, just as man herds cattle. And what about the warriors, the builders of bridges, roads, tunnels.... *Frightening*, isn’t it?”

“About as frightening as *The Crater Lake Monster*, I bet,” says Shane. He helps their father set up the lawn chairs. “Your movie choices blow,

bro.” He does a double take as some girls walk by. “*Hellowe honies*,” he says.

“They have a sophisticated communication system,” says the narrator. “Specific messages are transmitted from one ant to another through the use of a chemical substance called *pheromones*. It causes an obligatory response. Did you hear that? *Obligatory*.”

“I’d like to *oblige* her,” says Shane.

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BECAUSE THE MOVIE GETS off to a slow start, the Kid walks to the playground at the base of the screen—but pauses before stepping onto the sand. The swing set seems smaller than the last time they were here. He supposes this shouldn’t surprise him; it has been awhile since they last came to the drive-in, and he has gained several inches, almost entirely in the legs, so that he feels awkward and gangly and tends to slouch. A single girl is there, seated in the swing farthest to the edge. Stringy red hair hangs in her eyes and at the sides of her face, like his. He meets her gaze briefly then sits in the swing furthest from her. He feels silly sitting in the swing, immature, but he also feels dirty—realizes he is dirty, that he has not thought to bathe or to put on clean clothes; that he is still wearing the mustard-stained jeans from earlier in the day, the ones with enormous holes in the knees, and that he is wearing his tatty green shirt also, the one with the pale-yellow horizontal stripes. Neither one of them makes any move to swing; both stir their sneakers listlessly in the sand. The freeway drones somewhere in the distance.

“Come on, you know what it’s all about, baby, come on....”

He cranes his neck to look at the screen, sees a man and woman struggling on the beach, their hair being tossed by a sea wind, waves crashing against the breakers.

“Let me go *you son of a bitch!*”

“*Relax*, relax....”

He looks at the girl in the swing. She's looking up at the screen, face painted in its greenish half-light, mouth hanging open. He looks back at the screen.

"That's it," the man says quietly. He begins unbuttoning her blouse.

"*Okay*," she whispers.

"I just want to get to know ya, that's all."

"*Okay*."

The man cups his hands around the woman's breasts, which strain against her bra. She hangs her head back, sighs. The sighs produce a strange reaction in the Kid, a tightening in his groin, something he has felt before but never in association with anything, just feeling good. For the first time he notices that the screen has a texture, that it's not actually flat but grooved, corrugated, like the metal walls of the lot. He looks at the girl, who glances at him briefly.

"Now just take it easy. That's it. You're gonna be a good—"

He is wondering what the girl is thinking when the woman on the screen knees the man in the groin, causing him to double over, gasping and holding his crotch. The Kid looks at the girl but she is gone. Her swing rocks back and forth, chains rattling.

He scans the parking lot for her but sees only the piercing white light of the projector's beam and the glow of the concessions shack, the ghostly gray speaker stands, the darkened automobiles. It occurs to him quite suddenly that he has no idea where the truck is parked, that he was paying virtually no attention on his way to the playground. He jolts out of the swing and begins walking toward the cars, his shoes slipping in the sand, tripping over one of the railroad ties that box the sand in. He turns this way and that as he walks through the lot, wandering between cars, stepping between speaker stands. The faces of strangers stare out at him everywhere, muted by car windows, softly lit by console lights, by the cherries of cigarettes. When at last he locates the truck it is only because it is parked backward and he can discern the silhouettes of his family; they are seated in their lawn chairs in its bed; *and* because the projec-

tor's beam has set fire to the divots in the windshield, one of which has become a crack and spread—just as his mother said it would—so that it runs half the length of the glass. So that it splits, branching, into new cracks.

He spends the remainder of the movie alone, lying in his sleeping bag atop the truck, watching satellites float past, fancying they are UFOs, until a front rolls in, blotting the stars, and heat-lightning begins flashing, silently, fast as an eye-blink, from cloud to cloud.

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THOUGH *THE GIANT SPIDER INVASION* tries to be comical (it's a bust as a *giant monsters on the attack* movie, there being only one giant spider, not an army as suggested by the title and poster, and this only a Volkswagen Beetle with legs welded onto it and its chassis covered in fake fur), it's the horrific parts that form a knot in the Kid's gut. His mother is not happy either, disapproving—as she disapproved of *Empire of the Ants*—of the sexual content and violence. She is particularly offended by a scene in which a teenage girl in a push-up top responds to a libidinous suggestion by her mother's hillbilly boyfriend that she “ain't no child no more” by waving her breasts back and forth, giggling, “Yeah, now I'm 35-24-35!”

His father doesn't seem to mind too much though, and Shane is *loving* it, especially when the same girl, wrapped in a towel and with wet hair, is startled by her cousin, “Larry”—who causes her to drop the towel, revealing buoyant, pale breasts and nipples the color of acorns. It is not lost on the Kid that each time something like this happens the camera zooms up on the body parts. What compels him so much about the towel scene is the suggestion of something dark beneath the girl's filmy panties, something he has never seen in any other movie.

Ultimately *The Giant Spider Invasion* relies upon explicit grossness to achieve its effect, as when the girl's alcoholic mother unknowingly blenders a tarantula with her Bloody Mary—and drinks it—or lingering

on close-ups of policemen being sucked into the spider's oral cavity, which constricts and expands like a sphincter until red-black blood comes gushing down their trousers—until their crying out to God and cursing and grunting and moaning becomes mere gurgling, mere suffocation.

They decide that they will not go to the concessions stand at intermission, in part because they have brought a cooler, but mostly because *The Giant Spider Invasion* is so disgusting, ending with the spider being superheated from within until its pink-purple eyes explode, causing milky pus to geyser everywhere, and globs of green slime to roll down its shanks like snot, within which the Kid thinks he sees the policemen's remains.

"How about some lasagna?" jokes his mother after, lifting the lid of the cooler, handing out Cokes.

"Oh yes, *please*," says Shane. He looks at the Kid. "*Good* movie."

The Kid is thinking about lasagna, about tomato sauce dripping, ricotta cheese oozing. "You seemed to enjoy it enough," he says. He looks at all the people wandering to the snack bar and the lavatories—equilibrium off balance from sitting, shuffling like zombies. "So did Dad."

His father chuckles. "That last one was pretty rough, buddy. Wasn't it, Sarah Lee?"

"Oh, yeah," she says. She leans back in her chair, holds her Coke in her lap with both hands. It is unusually hot, even for July; her brow is beaded with sweat. She picks up the newspaper and fans her face and neck. "Seems every movie we see at the Retro Fest is full of sex and violence and profanity. Even kid's movies. I liked that *King Kong*, though. And *Close Encounters*."

"Those were family movies," says Shane. "These weren't *even* that." He climbs out of the bed, leans against the fender. "And we're not kids anymore, Mom. Not even *the Albino String-bean*."

The Kid looks at him through his bangs.

"I'm going to wander around a bit," says his brother, looking back at him, then walks away.

They sit in silence, sipping their Cokes.

"I was here when they had that earthquake," says his father, legs outstretched, eyes rheumy. "The whole car went like this..." He gestures palm down, as though his hand were a boat on the waves.

• • • •

THE KNOT IN HIS GUT does not go away during *The Food of the Gods*. It grows. He could not have planned a more perfect storm—horror piling upon horror until he himself hates the movies he has chosen, wonders what could be wrong with him that he wanted to see such things, what *has* gone wrong with him—as a boy, a student, a brother, the Kid.

Shane by contrast loves *The Food of the Gods*; he can see it in his brother's face. It does not hurt that the main character, Morgan, is a professional football player, or that his best friend and sidekick, Davis, is also a football player, or that their rapport is just like Shane and his friends'—large, strapping fellows, working hard and playing hard. When Morgan and Davis are not playing football they're hunting deer on horseback with rifles and dogs—somewhere in the Northwest wilds far from New York and L.A., where they actually live, respectively—where they waste no time drawing pictures or writing stories but wash their sports cars and lounge by pools; where beautiful women are drawn to them because they are men of action and wealth. They do not hesitate or fear or brood, and they never work or play alone but always in a posse, a *team*.

But because the Kid has chosen the movie—not his brother—no one has been carried off the turf on the shoulder pads of their buddies. Shane does Westerns, war movies, sports dramas, white hats defeating black hats. The Kid does rockets, new worlds, the unknown, *Danse Macabres*. The movie will not end with a freeze-frame of Morgan giving the peace sign with both hands. Already a man has died horribly—stumbling

through the bramble with a two-foot long yellow jacket on his back; crying out for his friends, his face swollen purple, the wasp's black legs hooked into his abdomen, stinger pumping, cellophane wings beating. Already an old man has been eaten alive by rats the size of wild boars—his blood hemorrhaging, his face white with terror, screaming, *"Oh God, oh God! Oh dear God! Lord, save me, save me!"*

The Kid asks his mother if he can have some money for a 7-Up—to settle his stomach. She opens her purse and hands him three dollars, says, "Next time I'll pick the movies."

He nods and swings his legs over the bed rail, begins walking toward the snack bar. There is a glint at the periphery of his vision as he passes the front of the car. He looks over his shoulder but keeps walking...it is a stream of transmission fluid, glinting red-black in the vespertine darkness—winding away down the asphalt like blood. And he notices something else, too, also at the periphery of his vision: something between two cars further on down the row. Something which moves when he focuses upon it and is suddenly gone, but which looks, for all the world, and for the brief time he is able to apprehend it, like part of an animal. A crocodile, maybe, or a Komodo dragon, but held high above the asphalt, by four feet at least.

A tail.

• • • •

THEY HAVE MOUNTED A flat screen in the corner of the snack bar, near the ceiling, so that theatergoers can watch the movie as they wait in line. "I know all about delivering babies," says Mrs. Skinner, whose husband has been eaten alive by giant rats. "Living on a farm you get to know those things. Everything's going to be all right." She is talking to a young woman named Rita, who is about to go into labor. They are holed up in a cabin, waiting for the rats.

He weaves through the maze of metal handrails and waits in line, which consists mostly of older teenagers and some people in their forties.

The old-style fluorescent overheads cast everyone in a pale-white light; the floor is covered in sawdust like the hog pens at the Interstate Fair. Everything smells of hot butter and rank perfume and armpits and marijuana—which he is familiar with because he once caught Shane smoking it with his friends. He doesn't recall the first time he was allowed to go to the snack bar alone, but supposes it could not have been long ago. His stomach grumbles and his intestines shift audibly; he looks at the menu by the ceiling as the line moves forward, decides he'll get a hotdog as well as a 7-Up. He wipes the sweat from his forehead, grips the metal railing. His knees feel wobbly. A slight chill crawls over his skin.

A tail. Like a crocodile, maybe, or a Komodo dragon, but held high above the asphalt, by four feet at least.

The movie plays: "If I told how I felt right now you'd think I was crazy..." Lorna, the good-looking biologist. "Tell me," says Morgan.

"I want you to make love to me."

He watches someone behind the counter scoop dregs from the popcorn machine, hears it begin popping fresh kernels, its glass sides shimmering.

"It is crazy, isn't it? At a time like this?"

"Listen, the first thing we'll do when we get back to the mainland is continue this conversation, okay?"

"That's just it. I don't think we'll ever get back."

He reaches the counter where he is met by a pretty girl with dark eyes and shiny black hair. He lays the bills on the counter and looks at the menu. The plastic letters swim in and out of focus. "I'll take a regular hotdog, and..." He rubs at his eyes, swipes at his hair "—and a medium 7-Up. Please."

"What?" She chews her gum.

"A 7-Up. Medium, please."

She begins punching the register's keys. "What else?"

"A hotdog. Regular."

"Two seventy-five." She takes the bills and slides him a quarter. He stares at her a moment before realizing she is waiting for him to get out of the way, that there are others behind him.

He gets out of the way, stands by the popping machine which rattles and shakes. He watches her through the glass, wonders what she looks like beneath her towel; if she has the type of breasts which strain against her bra or small pale ones with nipples the color of acorns. He wonders what kind of panties she wears, what texture, if they are thick like cotton or filmy like silk. He wonders what lies beneath—does she have a darkness, a demonic sublime, like the girl in *The Giant Spider Invasion*? Do all girls? Does the world?

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"THEY'RE ATTACKING AGAIN, I need more shells."

He does not feel strong enough to walk back to the car and so sits on the grass in front of the projection booth. Morgan and the others are making their final stand against the giant rats, breaking out windows with the butts of their shotguns, pumping and firing into the horde, knocking the rats off the porch and the railings, sending them flying, causing them to scream and snarl, to regroup, to attack again and again. The Kid chews his hotdog as the scene shifts to the basement, where Lorna and Mrs. Skinner are acting as midwives to Rita, who lay in the dark, rubbing her belly, listening to the blasts and the growling of the rats, listening to the wood splinter as they tear and gnaw at the cabin, as they claw at the planks and pull on the shingles. "How's it going?" Lorna asks Rita.

He finishes his hotdog and crumples its paper boat, takes a sip of 7-Up. He isn't sure if he feels better or not; he thinks perhaps not.

"I'm laying here thinking about what it's gonna be like when those rats get inside," says Rita.

"Morgan says we're going to be fine."

He lies back on the grass and stares up at the projector's beam.

"Do you believe that?" asks Rita. "You know, I used to think about dying a lot. Sort of lie there, in bed...at night...in the dark. I don't know. I guess I've always had a terrible fear of it."

"Rita, don't."

From this close he realizes that it is not one beam but many; he counts them, 5—6—7—rotating, full of blue-green smoke, as though colored smoke bombs have been lit nearby. He realizes that it is not in fact smoke but steam, issuing from a vent high on the wall, billowing and pluming. The beams are full of insects, gnats and mosquitoes and moths and stick-bugs, which beat their wings in the flickering light, circling aimlessly, chaotically. He hears cars on the freeway somewhere to the south, a constant whooshing, a gray-white noise.

"I could fantasize the most horrible death. You know, the most frightening. None of them come close to being eaten by rats. Funny thing is, now that it's happening...it doesn't really seem to matter."

Something kicks him in the pit of his stomach and he feels like he is going to ralph, is sure of it. Perhaps it can be avoided. Perhaps if he doesn't move, doesn't breathe, it will pass. "This too shall pass," his mother always says, and he hopes she's right, because *puking is the worst thing in the world*.

"What do you think our chances are?" asks Thomas, Rita's husband.

"Pretty good," says Morgan.

"Yeah, *like hell*..."

"Have it your way."

He is going to ralph—he is certain of it now. He climbs to his knees, sees Morgan filling jars with gunpowder and strips of cloth, preparing for the final onslaught. The Kid looks at the side of the building, remembers that the door to the men's room at the East Mirabeau is inside the concessions bar.

"Look, goddammit," says Thomas, "those rats are gonna bust in here and you're still fussing around with some *lousy jars*!"

"It's something to do," says Morgan.

“Something *to do?!?*”

He struggles to his feet, holding his stomach, weaving back and forth. Right here on the grass or halfway to the restroom? Squirting between his fingers or full-throttle ahead?

“That, my dear boy, is what life is all about. From the time you’re born it’s finding something to do while you’re waiting to die, and you try like hell to prevent it. Now you get your ass in gear and get over there and put that strip in that gasoline jar and move it!”

He covers his mouth and hurries through the door, rushes toward the men’s room—*hold the pickle, hold the relish, special orders don’t upset us, all we ever ask is that you*—bursts into a stall and drops to his knees. He grips the toilet seat in both hands—*have it youuur way, at Burger King, have it youuur*—lets fly.

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WHEN HE SWINGS OPEN the door of the men’s room he sees Shane standing at the concessions counter, chatting up the girl with the dark eyes and shiny black hair. Shane looks at him as the door’s hinges squeak. “There you are! Everyone was wondering what the hell happened to you.”

The Kid just stands there, dazed. “I’m okay,” he says.

His brother looks at the girl, hooks a thumb over his shoulder, laughs politely, insincerely. “That’s my little bro.”

“Hi there, Little Bro,” says the girl.

The Kid looks from his brother to the girl. *Hi there, you little whore.* He steadies himself against a pinball machine. He feels a little better—a lot better, in fact—but isn’t sure that he’s out of the woods yet. He can hear the projector rattling in the room next to the lavatories, the old analog projector the East Mirabeau claims is the last of its kind.

“You know where the truck’s at, right?” says Shane. He’s holding a cardboard tray piled with tinfoil-covered hamburgers.

“Yeah, of course.” In fact he has paid no more attention than the first time.

“Okay,” says Shane. He winks at the girl with the dark eyes, gives the counter a little pat.

The Kid watches him go. He supposes he is lucky to have a brother, though he misses the days when they were more alike, when they spent whole afternoons building model kits together—a decidedly retro thing to do, he supposed—Shane’s always coming out so perfect while his came out looking like the mix-matched Bonded vehicles they often saw in Hillyard, gluey messes beyond hope.

“I think we ought to at least talk about it.” —Thomas again, more from the projection room than the speaker on the wall.

“Pick up those jars of gasoline, Thomas.”

The Kid stares at the door to the projection room, which hangs ajar. He walks toward it.

“You’re gonna kill us....”

The rattling of the projector intensifies as he nears, going *tat-tat-tat....*

“And open the front door!”

He pauses outside the projection room, brilliant green-white light flickering through the door crack, painting his shirt and arms and hands. The *TAT-TATTING* of the projector is louder than he expected. A posted sign reads: NO SMOKING IN THIS AREA. He nudges the door enough to see partially into the room—feels a wave of heat wash over his face. Because of the angle he sees nothing complete, only the side of the projector which resembles a phaser cannon he saw on *Star Trek* once: a great, gunmetal gray thing, with cables coming out of it and lights along its side, and beneath those, huge horizontal film platters, grinding slowly, heavily, like the greased stone rollers in *The Ten Commandments*—when Pharaoh’s obelisk is risen in Cairo—and above all that, dryer hoses, only bigger, snaking up from the machine like tentacles, boring into the ceiling—itsself made of stained wooden planks, like the sauna at the YMCA, to combat all the heat, he imagines. The sound of the projector and the sounds of the movie merge to create a cacophony of clicking, whirring

machinery and discharging shotguns, of shattering glass and splintering wood, of the screams of men and women and rats killing and being killed.

That's when he realizes, quite suddenly, that the sounds are not isolated to the movie and the projector. That something else is happening ... a man is grunting and crying out somewhere in the little room. Nor is that room as he first observed it (or perhaps he had only observed it incompletely), for he now sees that it is full of trees—*trees*—not just any variety but prehistoric-looking ones, cycads, the fronds of which quiver and steam. And he sees, too, that moving amongst those trees ... are tails.

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HIS VIEW IS BLOCKED by someone's face—which fills the crack in the door, trains an empty eye socket upon him. In the space of an instant it is gone—drug away by a group of snarling animals (which look for all the world like velociraptors out of *Jurassic World*). He jolts away, staring dumbly, then bolts from the snack bar, shoving through the glass door with both hands, turning and wheeling on the boardwalk, looking for his brother. Surely he could not have gone far; surely he must still be visible, walking toward the truck, his stupid white pants glowing, his feathered hair trailing, his clam-shell necklace glinting. He looks at the screen and sees poor Mrs. Skinner—who reminds him of his mother now that his mother wears only baggy shirts and sweats and has lost most her hair; now that she seems so passive and resigned and carries the leather-bound Bible everywhere—in a death duel with one of the rats. The huge rat has crashed through the window of her kitchen and locked its jaws about her neck, is thrashing its head violently as she punches and struggles and kicks. She grabs hold of a meat cleaver and starts hacking the rat's face—but is knocked to the floor, shrieking, blathering, begging. “Oh, God—*oh, God!*” Until her windpipe is severed and blood gushes everywhere; her hands letting go, the cleaver clattering against the tiles—her

eyes becoming black glass while blood spreads like spilled ink across the floor.

He begins trembling violently, turning this way and that, knowing he cannot find the truck, knowing that if he did it would not make any difference, it would not stop the ground from rolling or the terrorists from coming or Tiangong-1 falling or Mt. Kilauea from erupting. It would not stop the transmission from bleeding or the windshield from cracking. It would not stop the projector from burning out, from leaving them all in blackness, to shiver and die alone. It would not stop *time*, either from marching forward or “flashing back”—nor the T. Rex and triceratops from appearing amongst the parked cars and continuing a fight begun 65-million years ago. It would not stop the strange storm front from rolling across the sky, or the mysterious lights within it—nothing could.

He is incoherent as he stumbles around to the side of the building, pauses against the wall. He looks at the screen even though he knows he shouldn't: sees Lorna the good-looking biologist holding her head—Lorna who has been so cool and determined and unbreakable, who also reminds him of his mother, his old mother, like the Unsinkable Molly Brown on the *Titanic*. *That* Lorna is holding her head, cowering just as he is, mewling, “*Oh, no, no, no...*” as the rats eat through the ceiling and wood splinters and glass showers; as Rita goes into labor, sweating, cursing, pushing in spite of everything. As the truck swims into view suddenly and the Kid bolts toward it.

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“JESUS, WHAT’S HAPPENING?” cries Shane as they careen out of the theater, everyone breathing heavily as their headlights sweep the screen. The Kid remains silent as they exit the gate—the tires of the truck clanking over the ‘no entry’ spikes—peers behind the screen at the rusted iron girders, like the ribs of some giant carcass, and the scaffolding covered in pigeon shit, where a nattily-dressed man and woman have taken refuge. The Kid doesn’t know what the hell is happening, exactly, but

as they motor up the hill overlooking the drive-in he sees the place with fresh eyes, viewing it as a kind of graveyard, its speaker stands like tombstones and its cars like black, shiny coffins, waiting to be returned to the earth, and so also with the concessions stand, its painted wood mutating, fossilizing, and the neon lights, their gas and their filaments breaking down, becoming something else, while the gnats and mosquitoes and stick-bugs and dinosaurs have it their way, multiplying and dividing out of control, as cycads push up through the cracks and the people who are but shadows bleed silently back into shadow. He doesn't know what is going on, other than he'd had a sudden premonition that something terrible was going to happen—to the drive-in, to Mirabeau Park, to all its people, to his mother and father and brother and himself. They were all going to die, *just go away*.

Eventually.

THE ANK WILLIAMS STORY

They were in bad shape, and Williams knew it. The quill raptors had struck just when they were most vulnerable—when they were still waking up—and while they were able to fend them off (Ank did most the fending, because Williams had taken a quill early in the attack), the melee had left them cut up and exhausted. Worse, it had left Williams delirious—no matter that he'd managed to pull out the quill before it could deliver much of its poison. Enough remained that walking was difficult even on the smooth, level highway, plus he'd begun to see things—like the huge, Google-style sign which read: WELCOME TO DEVIL'S GORGE: LIKE THE OLD WEST, ONLY BETTER.

To say its oversized gunslinger and buxom saloon girl statues were incongruous with the bleak, rain-drenched landscape would have been an understatement, but there they were, bidding them welcome to a town “forgotten by time, alone against its hills, where adventure and thrills await!”

“You seeing what I’m seeing, Ank?”

The big ankylosaur didn’t respond, not so much as a mew. His gait, however, had slowed—enough to convince Williams that the sign was real and he was seeing it too. Sure enough, after they had taken the indicated exit, a town appeared—a town straight out of *Gunsmoke*, only this one was surrounded by a tall cyclone fence, its upper edge crudely festooned with concertina wire and its base reinforced with sandbags. Moreover, it was *inhabited*, for Williams could clearly see people rushing to greet them—or so he thought until two of the men took hold of the gates beneath the head arch and swung them shut. After that, all that was left to do was to approach the fence with hat in hand so to speak and inquire if perhaps there were a doctor.

“There’s a doctor,” said a man dressed all in black—a man wearing a badge—who reminded Williams for all the world of the gunslinger played by Yul Brynner in *Westworld*. “But care and medicine are rationed, like everything else here. What’s happened? And what are you doing with this ... *thing*?”

Williams started to speak then paused, wondering if he'd finally lost his sanity. For it wasn't just the man in black who looked like he'd stepped out of a western—the entire crowd was dressed in much the same manner, as though they'd raided one of those old-time photography boutiques you used to see at the State Fair. “Quill raptors,” he said at last, and added, “They caught us early this morning, before it was even daylight. I took a quill in the arm, my, ah, playing arm. As for this ‘thing,’” He indicated the ankylosaur. “His name is Ank.”

Ank mewed at the sound of his name and stepped forward, causing a riot of steel as several men aimed their rifles, including the man in black. Williams hurried to place himself between his friend and the weapons. “He's gentle as a cow, I can assure you. Note the eyes ... there's no light in the irises. No presence of ... them.” He indicated the queer lights in the sky, which bled in and out of each other silently. “He hasn't been *touched*, you see. Not like the others.” He turned to face Ank and gestured with his hands. “Sit, Ank. Lay down. It is time to sleep.”

The great beast, which was the size of a small bus, looked at him, flies buzzing about its cow-brown eyes. At last it lowered on its haunches and everyone gasped—everyone, that is, except the man in black, who only tightened his grip on his smoky-barreled weapon and seemed to calculate cold equations.

“That's it, Ank,” said Williams patiently. “Now lay down. It's time to sleep.”

More gasps as the great, armored, turtle-like creature slid its front legs forward—then sloughed over on its side, causing rainwater collected in the mudpuddles of the ruddy road to splash and the fence to rattle slightly from the impact. Someone giggled, a woman—a woman dressed as a saloon girl—whom Williams was attracted to the instant he saw her.

“That's enough,” said the man in black—the Sheriff, the Marshal, whatever—and the tittering stopped. “So you can make it do tricks. My question is—can you make it kill, also? Can you say, ‘Sic ‘em, boy,’ for example, and send him crashing through this fence?”

Williams approached the ankylosaur and stroked him between the eyes. "Crash through the fence—possibly. But kill? No. Not people. Not in a million years. He *likes* people. There's, ah, no accounting for taste." He made eye contact with the Marshal. "I dare say he even likes you."

More titters—from the saloon girl and one other, a ruggedly-hand-some man who was also wearing a badge, but not dressed all in black. "I would remind the deputy of his duties to Devil's Gorge," said the Marshal, and to the saloon girl: "And saloon girl's of their place."

"And I would remind the Marshal that there's a sick man standing hat in hand outside our gates ... and that I've got a duty, as well." A man stepped forward from the crowd—an unarmed man. A mild-mannered man in a trim vest who looked as though he might be a barber ... or a country doctor. "A raptor quill doesn't have to be a big thing if it's removed promptly, which this young man has done. But that wound has to be treated." He looked up at the Marshal with his own cow-brown eyes. "Most of us came to be here through these gates and under similar questioning ... I see no reason why we should turn this one man away."

"I agree," said the deputy.

"So do I," said the saloon girl, clearly not remembering her place. "Can you play that guitar, mister?"

"Williams," he said, and took off his hat. He approached the fence at once cautious and cavalier. "And ma'am, I can play this guitar like the angels sing. Once my arm heals, you understand."

"Well, that settles it," said someone else. "Ain't none of the saloon's been the same since the power went out. A little live music would be good for morale."

"And what about his 'friend?' Are you just going to tie him up with the rest of the horses?" The Marshal was beyond annoyed. "Him in here, *it* out there. Do you see what could go wrong here?"

"I see that that dinosaur would be a site more useful than a mule for getting things done around here," said Someone Else. "Why not let him in? You can see with your own two eyes there's no alien fire in 'im."

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” the Marshal said at last. “You people take the cake, you know that? You really take the fucking cake.” He lowered his weapon at last. “All right. Looks like it’s just not my day. I’ve got two deputies down with the flu and that means I’m not in a position to argue with the whole damn town.” He made eye contact with each and every person who had gone against him, including his own deputy. “But, when you find the time, the more vocal of you might want to take a walk out to Serpent’s Butte ... and remember our shared history.”

He turned to Williams. “You’ve got some time on the inside, I ain’t saying how much. But the *thing* stays outside the fence. The rules of Devil’s Gorge are simple: Make yourself useful. Don’t break the law. And check your weapons at the armory until called upon to use them.” He motioned to his deputy. “Open the man door.”

Williams turned to Ank. “Okay, *stay*. It’s time to sleep. *Back*. I will be back.”

He stepped through the man door but was stopped by the Marshal.

“Your guitar case. I’ll need you to open it up.”

Williams paused as though taken aback. “It’s just a guitar ...”

“Then you’ll have no problem showing it to me.”

Williams looked from the Marshal to the deputy, and finally the saloon girl. Everyone nodded.

“Okay,” he said, and crouched, opening the case. He looked up at the Marshal. “Satisfied?”

“As long as you don’t play it in my company.” He spat upon the ground. “I’ve got no use for a guitar man.”

They all started walking, everyone talking at once (except, of course, the Marshal, who watched Williams’ every move, his lips pressed tightly closed).

“You can stay at the inn above the Long Branch Saloon,” said the girl, “if you’ll agree to play your guitar in the tavern most nights. Can you play anything else? There’s a beautiful piano set up just past—”

“How did you and that beast ever hook up, anyway?” asked Someone Else. “I ain’t never seen anything like it. Say, do you think we could get him to—”

“A raptor quill is nothing to fool with, son, even if it was removed quickly,” said the doctor. “First thing we’ll do is clean up that wound. Then we’ll make sure no remnants got left behind when—”

“Don’t let Marshal Rimshaw here scare you— not too much, anyway,” said the deputy. “Everyone knows he’s just a big pussycat. Decker’s the name, by the way. John Deck—”

There was a tremendous *crash!* behind them and they all turned around, and Williams was horrified to see that Ank had rolled over the security fence like an M1-A1 Abrams tank, and was now plodding to catch up with them.

Marshal Rimshaw wasted no time and had already squeezed off several rounds before Williams was able to holler to the others, “Hold your fire!”—and to his amazement, they did. Rimshaw’s slugs, meanwhile, only bounced off Ank’s armor with complete impotence—until the Marshal got wise to the problem and sighted one of the creature’s eyes. He was just beginning to squeeze when Decker knocked his barrel away with his own and targeted Rimshaw himself. “Not today, Marshal,” he said, adding, “Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the next day. But not today.”

Neither of the men moved or said anything for what seemed a long time. At length Ank lumbered up to them and began licking Rimshaw’s face, knocking his hat off with his great, slimy tongue and lapping at him again and again until it seemed he had been dunked into a trough of fetid water.

And everyone laughed—everyone, that is, except Rimshaw—not out of mean-spiritedness but out of sheer surprise, and because they were convinced the Marshal would begin laughing too. But he did not, and by the time Ank had sated his affection the man who was Marshal appeared to be drenched in anger as well as spit.

“No,” he said at last, and picked up his hat before swatting away Decker’s rifle with surprising violence, “today is just not my day at all.” He wiped his face with his handkerchief and then redonned his cover. “There it is. You’ve all had a good laugh at my expense ... and I’ve had a good reminder of two things I already knew.” He began pacing slowly and everyone gave him a wide girth. “The first is that a 10-ton dinosaur, when left alive to do so, does precisely what it wants to do. In this case, it wanted to get to its master—this man, right here, *fucking Guitar Man*. A man admitted to this encampment against my wishes and in flagrant disregard of my authority. A man whom any asshole could tell you is and will remain nothing but trouble. The second is that there’s but two kinds of people in Devil’s Gorge—those that are the Law, and those that ain’t. Me and those deputies I trust are the Law. You ain’t.” He gestured at the hills, at Serpent’s Butte. “Now I know none of you have forgotten what happened the last time we went through this. What happened the last time you all acted up. And I’m here to tell you, the same thing can happen again.”

He shifted his gaze to Williams, who had crouched low to the ground with his guitar case and remained there throughout the action, and sneered. “Ready to play a song, were ya? Well know this. You’ve got forty-eight hours to heal up and get on down the road with your stupid guitar and your goddamn dinosaur. If you’re here one second longer, so help me God, I’ll have you shot.”

Several people gasped and Williams realized by looking at their faces that they were reliving a nightmare they had all experienced before.

“And I’ll kill the dinosaur, too. Two shots. One through each eye. Let’s see his goddamn armor stop that.” He moved to leave then paused. “Oh, and Decker, give your firearm and badge to Smithson. You’re fired.” He gestured at the downed gates. “Smithson, guard the goddamn hole.”

Then he tipped his hat to everyone present and was gone.

WILLIAMS WANTED THREE things more than anything in the world when he entered the Long Branch Saloon after being treated by Doc Allen and watering Ank—a tall glass of water for himself (or twenty), a cold beer, and the answer to a single question:

“Why do y’all talk and dress like it’s 1865?”

The saloon girl—her name was Katrina—didn’t respond right away, only sat his water and beer in front of him and busied herself by wringing out a bar towel in the basin. At last she said, “You have to remember, Mr. Williams, this place was a tourist attraction before it was a functioning city. Before the Flashback. Those of us who worked here were encouraged to talk that way—it was part of our job.” She laughed. “It’s funny, because we found ourselves talking that way even when we weren’t at work. My mother said it was because dialects are contagious.” She propped her elbows against the bar and leaned toward him, and he had to struggle not to glance at her cleavage. “Listen to you. You’ve only been here a couple of hours and you’re already saying, ‘y’all.’”

Williams smiled and tipped his beer to his lips; it was warm, stale. She was precisely right, of course. Language was contagious. The entire old-time vibe of this place was contagious. He watched as she bent over a bin of beers and began collecting bottles for the shelf. She was contagious.

“But the clothes ... that Marshal ...”

“The clothes,” She laughed again. “Well, there’s a couple of reasons for that. I guess you would have had to have been here right after the Flashback. We lost power sooner than most, is what I understand. So when the clean clothes started running out we turned toward Fly’s Photo Studio; it was easier than washing everything by hand. You have to understand, things were no different here than they were everywhere else during the Flashback: we were fighting for our very survival. Tyrannosaurs, saber-toothed cats, quill raptors— if it had teeth and claws, it wanted a piece of us. That’s how it all began, anyway. As for why it’s continued, well, look no further than Marshal Rimshaw and his

deputies—not Decker, mind you, but his real deputies. The ones who got the illness. Ha! The flu. You should see ‘em: pale and black-eyed as serpents, just lying there in the Rio Grande like zombies.” She leaned toward him over the bar again and he caught a whiff of her fragrance, and there was a stirring in his groin he hadn’t felt since, well, since he couldn’t remember.

“What do you mean, like zombies?”

“I mean like zombies, like men who are dead but still walking, or lying there staring at the ceiling. See, something attacked us only a few weeks after the Flashback ... something ... *new*. At first everyone just assumed it was a rogue raptor, because it didn’t have a pack—that was the first thing. But then it started talking, like a parrot, I suppose, saying things like ‘Pig’ and ‘Eggsucker,’” She laughed her contagious laugh. “Can you imagine? A raptor calling you names as it attacked you? Deputies Creebald and Teller put up one hell of a fight, you can be sure, and they did eventually kill it, with Rimshaw’s help, but all of them were wounded in the fight, and the deputies worst of all. After that, things started changing around here. At first it was just Creebald and Teller acting strangely, abusing their power, you might say, telling me not to forget to paint on my mole, or insisting Doc Allen wear that ridiculous little vest. But then Marshal Rimshaw started getting into the act, as well, and before any of us knew it we were living in a kind of police state. Decker was the only one who didn’t pile on, which is funny, because he was the only one not wounded in the fight with the raptor. It all came to a head when Deputy Teller had his way with one of the saloon girls—Molly, was her name—after which there was a full-blown shootout between the Marshal and his deputies—not Decker, he tried to maintain the peace—and the rest of the town.” She unscrewed the cap from a bottle of beer and took a swig, then concealed it behind the bar. “You didn’t see that. Anyway, the town didn’t fare so well, and now there’s a row of graves out by Serpent’s Butte.” She paused, locking her beautiful brown eyes up in his own. “They were good men, Williams. The best I’ve ever known.

And now they're just as dead as that raptor." She snapped the bar towel in her hands and then wiped the counter. "And that's why we all talk and dress this way." She indicated his empty glass. "You want another?"

"Sure," he said.

She pulled one from the wall and unscrewed its cap, sat it down in front of him.

At last she said, "So what about you? What's your story? And how did you come to be travelling with an armored dinosaur?"

Williams took a swig of his beer and then glanced out the saloon window, where Ank was standing with several horses. "Well, Ank and I don't talk much about it. We just ... sort of crashed into each other at the intersection of his life and mine. As for myself, I guess you might say ... that I'm seeking Tanelorn." He laughed a little to himself. "Do you know what that means? To be seeking Tanelorn?"

She shook her head slowly, her eyes never leaving his own.

"Yeah, well, who would? It's something from an old novel—one I only partially remember. But what it means to me is to feel homesick ... not just homesick, but homesick for a place you've never been, or don't entirely remember." He toyed with his beer distantly, began peeling the wrapper from its smooth, brown glass. "And to want to find that place. See, I wasn't exactly myself when Ank first found me—rescued me, for all intents. I had, how do you say it? Amnesia. I knew things had been different ... I just wasn't sure how. I guess I just knew that something terrible had happened, not only to me but to the entire world ... and that there hadn't been flesh-eating dinosaurs waiting to eat you around every corner before." Now they both laughed. "And I knew that I'd been separated from something," He glanced up from the bottle. "*Someone*, who had been vitally important to me. Someone who was ... is ... waiting for me even now."

He stared into her eyes which betrayed a hint of disappointment.

"And that they are north of here, somewhere." He quaffed the rest of his beer and sat the empty bottle on the counter, a little too hard. "And

that's it ... that's all I know." He winked at her. "All I want to know, if you want the truth. So long as I'm in your company."

She quickly recomposed herself, staring back at him with something like bedroom eyes, and said, "I've always been a sucker for a man with a guitar. I know you're still healing ... but you're sure you won't play something?"

He didn't respond right away, only continued looking at her. At last he managed, "Look, Katrina, there's something—"

And then there was a scream, a ragged, wet, blood-curdling scream, which came from the general area of the downed gates, and when Williams looked instinctively out the saloon's window he saw that while the horses had remained completely un-phased, Ank had vanished without a trace.

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THE MAN—SMITHSON—WAS dead, all right, but his killer or killers hadn't been content just to carry him away or let him lie. No, whoever or whatever had killed him had felt the need to leave a calling card—his severed head—which they'd sat atop a thick, wooden post so that the vertical railroad tie resembled a grizzly kind of totem pole. Otherwise, save for a nearby pile of spurned entrails, there was no trace of him.

"Now I want you all to take a long, hard look at this," said Rimshaw, projecting his voice so that everyone could hear him, even those in the back of the mob. "And I want you to remember it next time someone gets the wise idea to question my judgement."

Williams scanned the crowd, Katrina beside him, trying to gauge their mood, seeking signs of a lynch tenor. Because Rimshaw had a point: if he hadn't been allowed into the compound the gates would still be standing ... which meant he was responsible, however indirectly, for Smithson's death—assuming the townsfolk even believed the attack had come from outside. If they believed otherwise, that meant the door was

open to blame Ank—regardless if he was herbivorous or not, and regardless of the absurdity that a quadrupedal animal, or any animal, could leave such a gruesome calling card.

Something attacked us only a few weeks after the Flashback ... something ... new.

Something which had talked, she'd said.

"Now the way I see it is there's only two possibilities," continued Rimshaw. "And that is that a man, or men, did this ... or that that armored dinosaur has been touched all along and is not what he appears. If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times: these things are *not* dinosaurs—not animals. They're weapons made of flesh and blood, sent here by *them*"—he indicated the lights in the sky—"to exterminate us no different than we would an infestation of rats. And now we've got one among us—right now—somewhere in Devil's Gorge. Hiding, perhaps, until dark. But that's okay. Because we've got another among us whose true nature must also be suspect. And I think if we were to shackle this man right here, against this very post, and begin whipping him, say ... the beast would show its face."

Williams began to recoil even before Rimshaw pointed him out, and then he was seized suddenly by the men around him as Decker protested and Katrina cried out, his guitar case falling to the pavement as they drug him to the post while still others began shouting for a rope.

"No," he exclaimed, struggling furiously. "Can't you see you've got this all wrong? Can't you see what's really happened? Katrina herself told me you were attacked by something different, something new. Something with the power of speech, that used words like 'pig' and 'eggsucker.' Can't you see that that's what did this? That there was more than just one of them?"

He fell silent and doubled over as someone punched him in the stomach, then toppled completely as someone else shoved him. And then, suddenly, there was a cry—a cry that sounded as though it had come from Ank and yet utterly different from any Williams had ever

heard. A warbling, frightened, pitiful cry—the kind an animal might make if it were sinking into tar while surrounded by predators.

“Marshal?” said someone. “That came from the Lonestar Corral.”

“Then that means we’ve got ‘im cornered,” said Rimshaw, and shouted, “Johnson! Let ‘em into the armory! Let ‘em all in!” And to everyone else he said: “Get your weapons and meet me at the corral. And someone fetch Creebald and Teller. I don’t care how sick they are. I want them by my side.”

“But, Marshal, I just came from there,” said Johnson, pausing. “And they’re plumb gone.”

“What do mean, *gone*?” snapped Rimshaw.

“I mean they ain’t there. They’re not at the Rio Grande. *No one’s* at the Rio Grande.”

Williams craned his neck on the ground to observe Rimshaw’s reaction, and what he saw sent a chill up his spine, for it all but confirmed what he’d begun to suspect. For as Rimshaw stared at the man coldly, his eyes black as coals and his face pale as the dead, his tongue slipped between his lips like a snake’s and was just as quickly sucked back in.

And Williams knew exactly what and who had killed Smithson even as the townsfolk’s boots pounded past him on all sides and he tried to get up but could only grip his stomach in both hands.

• • • •

TO SAY ANK WAS CORNERED would have been an understatement; in fact, he was surrounded: surrounded by the strange, pale raptors who circled him slowly within the corral, surrounded by the corral’s fencing, surrounded by the townsfolk who had pressed against its perimeter and trained their rifles and pistols upon them, and surrounded by the sound of Rimshaw’s voice, which echoed off the nearby buildings, the Papago Cash Store and Bauer’s Union Market, Fly’s Boarding House, the Palace Saloon.

"You only need remember two things," he shouted, aiming his rifle at Ank—and only Ank. "And that is to aim for the armored dinosaur's eyes ... and that he is the bigger threat. Now let loose some hell, and let's take back our town."

His voice cracked and seemed to change tenor as he shouted.

"Belay that order!" belted Decker, leaping onto the first wrung of the fence so that everyone could see him. "Can't you see what's going on here? Look at them! They're the same type of animal that almost killed Creebald and Teller."

"Pig," said one of the raptors, glaring at him.

"Eggsucker," said the other.

"Don't you see? Ank has lured them here to *protect us*, not hurt anyone. *Let them fight*. If you can get a clear shot at the raptors, take it. But let the armored dinosaur be."

There was a *crack!* As Rimshaw squeezed off a shot at him, grazing him in the leg, and he toppled from the fence.

And then everything was chaos and fury as the raptors charged and the townsfolk opened fire—at Ank, apparently, for his great shell sparked and crackled as though strung with firecrackers. And so furious was the combat that few noticed the guns being shot from everyone's hands one by one—nor Decker crawling toward Rimshaw until he was able to grapple with him from the ground—at least until Ank spun suddenly and brought his great, clubbed tail whistling around, knocking one of the raptors clean off its feet and sending it smashing through the boards of the corral ... where Williams stood propped up by Katrina, his guitar case open upon the ground and his hands sighting what appeared to be an exquisitely-crafted rifle, which he pumped and fired again, knocking the weapon from Rimshaw's hands.

His *claws*.

Then the wounded raptor pounced upon both Rimshaw and Decker—or perhaps just Decker, it wasn't entirely clear—and Williams simply took it out, *pow, like that*, right between its eyes. At last he looked at Ank

in time to see the armored dinosaur charge the remaining raptor like a ram—smashing it off its feet so that it blasted through the boards of the corral and took out the window of the Papago Cash Store.

And then it was over, save for the struggle between Rimshaw and Decker—who managed to free himself from the half-man's grip even as the former Marshal completed his transformation into a slathering beast, which circled and paced as the townsfolk gathered around and Williams levelled his rifle.

"Pig," spat the Rimshaw-raptor venomously. "Eggsucker."

Williams squinted, sighting him between the eyes.

"Pig-fucker. Human filth."

Decker stood, bracing himself against the fence. "And behold their latest abomination," he said, and indicated Teller's body, which had reverted to human form and lay dead upon the ground. Someone handed him his rifle. "A dinosaur that will not only tear you to pieces ... but turn you into itself if you survive. Like a werewolf. Or a zombie."

He gazed at the sky, at the alien lights which bled in and out of each other and seemed redder than usual, angrier. "Just their latest attempt to scrub us from the face of the earth. To erase us from time itself." He looked back at the thing that was Rimshaw. "The Marshal, having been wounded the least, took longer to transition. That's all."

"Pestilence!" hissed the raptor. "Ape-man. Evolutionary dead-end. A mistake of your God."

And then its eyes lightened inexplicably and its voice became like that of Rimshaw, the old Rimshaw—only tortured, frightened, alone. "Help me," he—it—whimpered softly, agonizingly. "Please ... God. Shoot me."

But Williams couldn't do it, and only continued staring at him down the length of his barrel.

"Please ... God. Do it." His voice changed yet again. "Pig-fucker. Eggsucker. Human—"

And the thing leapt at him—at which instant there was a *crack!* as Decker fired and a stream of blood shot no less than seven feet from its head. Then it fell, convulsing ... and died. And no one said anything as thunder rumbled in the distance and rain began to spot everyone's faces, including Ank's, which only looked on, grayly, stoically.

• • • •

BY THE TIME EVERYONE gathered at the downed gates to see Ank and Williams off, there were three new graves out at Serpent's Butte and the worst of the rain had passed.

"See?" said Williams, showing someone the hidden compartment beneath the guitar façade in his case for the millionth time. "I don't play. I never have. At least, I don't think I did."

"But how'd you come to be so good with that rifle?" asked Someone Else. "Ain't never seen anything like that in my whole life."

Williams stroked Ank between the eyes. "That's something I hope to find out ..." He glanced at Katrina and smiled. "When I get to Tanelorn."

She approached him slowly and looked up into his eyes, then kissed him softly on the cheek. "You know where we're at, cowboy, if you don't find what you're looking for. Or even if you do."

He smiled down at her, as inexplicably drawn to her as he had been from the beginning. "I will. Take care of yourself, okay?" He looked at Decker, who was wearing a bigger badge than he had before. "Marshal."

And then they were on their way, north toward Washington State and a city called Spokane, leaving Devil's Gorge to brood beneath the rain, forgotten by time, alone against its hills.

AND LET LOOSE THE BEASTS OF PREY

They should be home by now, thought Sheila—even as a pair of headlights flashed across the wall and she rushed to the window, breathing a sigh of relief. But it wasn't Stephen.

It was a police car.

Erik joined her at the sill. "Are Dad and Tammy home? Whoa, a police car!"

She shooed him away from the window quickly. "Honey, I want you to go to your room, okay?"

"But, Mom—"

"Just do it," she snapped. "I don't have time ..." She paused, catching herself—then crouched in front of him and plucked at his hair. "Sweetie, remember how I told you that mommy and daddy would always try to explain things, but that there were times when they couldn't, at least not right away? And that there were special rewards for little boys who were patient and showed a little faith?"

He nodded slowly.

"This is one of those times, okay?"

"But—"

"No buts," She ruffled his hair, trying to appear calm even though her guts were doing loopy-loops. "Now shoo. I'll—we'll explain everything later, okay?"

"Are they here about the dinosaur?"

She ushered him toward his room. "There was no dinosaur. Your father saw a wild turkey, that's all. Now in with you, and no listening at the door. Hurry."

The doorbell rang as she eased his door shut and she hurried toward it. *Bald tires. Bald tires and the worst snowstorm in years, maybe ever. Dear God, Stephen. I told you to put on the studs sooner and not later. I told you and I told you but you didn't listen, you never do, not to me, not to your father, or—*

She felt a panic coming on and seized control of herself. *No, dammit. Just stay calm. It's probably nothing. Maybe Stephen had called them. A di-*

nosaur, Stephen? Really? She laughed a little to herself. *It's the countryside just a few miles out of town, babe, not a Jurassic swamp. I know you weren't fond of moving here, but ...*

She unlocked the door and swung it back. The Sheriff was there, along with his deputy, a young, fit man who seemed altogether too intense. She cinched her bathrobe snugly about her. "Hello? May I help you?"

Her heart ran cold as she noted the Sheriff's expression, which seemed exhausted and strangely forlorn. *Just ... Dear God.* She saw him glance at her ring finger.

"Good evening, Mrs. ...?"

"Were. Sheila Were."

He extended a gloved hand. "Sheriff Whitman, Anchor Rock Police." The glove crackled as they shook. "This is my deputy, Richard Conners."

Conners shook her hand—altogether too firmly. "Pleased to meet—"

"Has there been an accident?" she asked abruptly. "Is that why you're here?"

Whitman smiled and shook his head. "None that I am aware of. But we would like to ask you a few questions. That is, if you're not indisposed."

Sheila exhaled, relief flooding through her like a wave. She touched her chest. "Oh, thank God. Oh, thank heavens. Yes, yes, of course, please, come in."

She held the door for them and shut it once they'd entered. "Please, make yourselves comfortable. Can I get you anything, a diet soda, or—"

"No, no," said Whitman. "We'll only be a few minutes. Mainly we're just doing a welfare check. There's been, ah, a number of reports filed from the surrounding homes in the last 24 hours. It seems ..." He hesitated, as though embarrassed by what he was about to say. "It seems there's

some kind of animal wandering the area. An emu, by the sound of it. Of course, we won't be sure until we've see it for ourselves, but—"

"An emu?" Sheila was amused by the thought. "I knew there were deer and maybe some coyotes here, but ... an *emu*? Really?"

"You'd be surprised," said Whitman. "Fella named Bolton used to have some about 10 miles from here—along with some camels, a zebra, some bison ... Anyway, normally we wouldn't be too concerned, but, ah, some of the reports have indicated that the animal is behaving ..." He glanced at Conners, who glanced right back. Intensely. "Aggressively."

Sheila looked back and forth between the two, thinking of their amateur—and illegal—grow in the basement, and finally snorted. "A killer emu, huh?" She put her hands on her hips. "Okay, I'll bite. What really brought you guys out here?"

Whitman looked at her as though weighing his options and finding none of them acceptable. At last he said, "It's a strange situation, I admit. But I assure you, Mrs. Were, there *is* an animal wandering the area. At least one, and possibly more. And we just need to know if you've seen anything."

"No," she said, feeling suddenly distrustful, and just as suddenly remembered Stephen's dinosaur, the one he'd said he saw looking at him from the edge of the back-forty, the one she'd assumed he'd concocted to entertain the kids (it was impossible to tell with his deadpan sense of humor) ... the one he'd said looked like a velociraptor from *Jurassic Park*.

"Yes," she corrected herself. "My husband said he saw a dinosaur today. Out in the back-forty, near the property line. How's that?"

She grinned as though saying, *Two can play this game*.

"You don't say?" said Whitman, again exchanging nervous glances with Conners. "Well, I don't know about you ... but I might mistake an emu for a dinosaur. Did he say if it behaved aggressively in any way?"

"No."

"I see," said Whitman. He nodded at Conners, who excused himself and went outside, briskly, it seemed.

At last Whitman said, “I can see there’s no fooling you, Mrs. Were. So if you’ll be so kind as to sit down, I’m going to tell you why we’re really here.” He hitched his uniform pants and sat on the sofa. “I’ll take that diet soda, by the way.”

“I’ll get it for you ... but remain standing,” she said curtly, and moved to fetch one from the refrigerator.

• • • •

CONNERS BURST FROM the front door and ran to the patrol car, plopping down sideways in the driver’s seat, calling in what they had learned from Sheila, which was bad. Very, very bad. It was still snowing; there was now about a foot of the stuff on the ground. Nor did the storm show any signs of relenting. Meanwhile, through a gap in the clouds, the moon shone bright and silvery ... even as the wind rose and fell and swirled about his boots, which were resting outside the car, and a shadow passed over him stealthily.

A moment later a low-pitched growl came from the trees beyond the patio, catching the wind and reaching Conners’ ears instantly. He looked up, cocking his head, and listened intently—but could hear nothing over the howling of the storm. Large, intricate snowflakes blew into the car as he did so, sticking to his face like lint. The snarl came again as he peered into the dark between trees.

Okay, that’s it, he thought, and reached for the shotgun between the seats. He hung up the mic and stood, pumping the weapon. I don’t know what you are or where you’re from, but you’ve got about five seconds to live, my friend. 4 ...

He walked toward the growls slowly, the air crisp and cold against his cheeks, his breath billowing about him, the steel of the trigger icy against his finger. *Welcome to the twentieth century, killer. Now you’re going to see what real killing is about. 3 ... 2 ... 1 ...*

There was a sudden banging sound and he whipped around, but froze before firing, realizing the reports had all been true, that dinosaurs

somehow walked the earth again, and that a velociraptor had leapt atop the patrol car, denting its roof, and was even now glaring at him with its owl-like, forward-facing eyes.

Then it leapt and he managed to squeeze off a round—one, which missed its mark entirely—before it pounced: striking with its sickle-clawed foot so that and he was smashed to the snow-covered patio and split neck to crotch all in an instant.

• • • •

BY THE TIME SHERIFF Whitman had thrown open the door and levelled his service revolver, the beast had pinned Conners in the snow and was scooping his guts out like jello. So, too, had it torn his upper garments away so that the young deputy was bare-chested and fully exposed as still more raptors clambered over the top of the squad car—and yet more streamed from between the trees—and descended upon him in a bloody free-for-all—even as Whitman opened fire and Sheila screamed and Erik looked out his bedroom window in abject terror.

Crack! Crack! Crack! went Whitman's revolver as the raptors began to fall and Conners continued to scream—until a sickled claw raked the length of his face, ending his screaming forever. At last one of the beasts turned its monstrous head toward Whitman, one of Conners' entrails dangling from its mouth, and barked as if to alert the others. And then they were coming, filing after each other like a coiled rope pulled taut, and Whitman retreated into the house even as Sheila yanked the door shut—which the snarling beasts rammed into with incredible force, all but smashing it off its hinges.

"Hurry up," snapped Whitman, grabbing one of the dining room chairs and lodging it diagonally beneath the knob. "Let's get some furniture against this."

He gripped the sides of the refrigerator and rocked it away from the cupboards, then maneuvered it in front of the door as Sheila drug over the stereo cabinet and Erik, having left his room to be with his moth-

er, began dragging over the coffee table, which Whitman and Sheila grabbed at the same time and heaved atop the stereo cabinet. Within instants there was another impact—several impacts—which knocked the piled furniture back noticeably, causing Whitman to frown.

And yet the barrier held, and a moment later all was silent.

“I think they’re gone,” whispered Sheila at length, and moved to peek between the curtains.

“Don’t do that,” snapped Whitman. “Stay away from the windows. And I wouldn’t count on it.” He glanced at the television, then scanned the cluttered room. “Where’s your remote?”

Sheila just looked at him, confused. “In the kitchen, I think. Why?”

He strode into the kitchen and snatched it from the counter. “Because I want to know how widespread this is.”

She crowded him as he turned on the television. “How widespread what is? What’s going on?”

He cycled through the channels until he came to CNN. “This—the storm. The lights. The dinosaurs. Everything.”

“The lights? What are you talking about?”

She fell silent as the television images spoke precisely to her question, showing the skyline of what appeared to be Chicago, above which a number of strange lights floated and pulsed.

“...know at this hour is that the lights seem to come in two varieties, the corporeal type you see here, which might almost be mistaken for commercial aircraft, and the more amorphous ones observed over Vietnam and other places. We’re going to take you to some footage shot just moments ago on Interstate 90 in Spokane, Washington, which appears to show—and I repeat, this is not joke or a parody—a saber-toothed cat, albeit one larger than any previously known to science, *chasing vehicles* as if they were prey. You’ll note the many cars and trucks that are stopped or have otherwise ran off the road and stalled—this speaks for the most troubling aspect of what scientists are calling ‘the Flashback’: the sudden disappearance of people all over the world, including entire

families. Again, we urge anyone tuning into this broadcast to seek immediate shelter and to stay there until further notice. Joining us now is—”

And the signal was lost to a hail of static even as a velociraptor crashed through the living room window and pounced upon Erik—who had been peeking between the curtains as they watched the TV—and Sheila began screaming as Whitman levelled his revolver, looking for an opening, but could find none.

• • • •

ERIK PEERED OUT THE window at the corpse, noticing how the falling snow was beginning to cover it, as it had his forgotten toys, and noticing, too, that the monsters, the velociraptors, which bore nothing in common with the plush toys he had in his bedroom, were nowhere to be seen. Nor were the lights of his father’s car—or anything, for that matter; there was just the corpse (one hand of which seemed to reach for the sky like a twisted, dead tree branch) and the snow, which had whited out everything, rendered the world void.

“... this speaks for the most troubling aspect of what scientists are calling ‘the Flashback’: the sudden disappearance of people all over the world, including entire families ...”

He looked at the sky, at the ceiling of snow clouds, amidst which the lights mentioned on the TV pulsed and glowed, bleeding in and out of each other, shifting colors, none of which he recognized, and knew in that instant—the instant before the raptor came crashing through the glass with its splayed feet first—that nothing would ever be the same; that he would never see his father and sister again and would never return to school and would never, ever be a boy, not even for an instant. And then the raptor did come, and he was knocked backward against the floor with a violence he could not have imagined, and after a moment there was a flurry of gunshots which blew the back of the animal’s head apart so that its full weight fell upon him and he was spattered with blood and brains. And the last thing he saw before blacking out com-

pletely was the monster's dying eye, which stared into his own, an eye which contained in it the same colors as the lights in the sky—until they, too, faded and became as the dead.

• • • •

TIME PASSED AND THE rest of the raptors, like Stephen and Tammy, did not come. And thus it was decided (after Whitman had ventured outside and observed their tracks heading north) that Sheila and Erik would follow Whitman's patrol car to Anchor Rock in their old Toyota Corolla, at which point Sheila would search for her family while Whitman learned if there was anything left of his police department.

"Try not to look at it, honey," Sheila urged as Whitman covered Conners' body—what was left of it—with the customary blue tarp, then trudged back through the snow toward his idling car and got in. Then they were on their way, Sheila following him closely—but not too closely, as it was slick—down the snow blown road.

It wasn't long before Erik was sound asleep, snoring and sniffing, coughing and swallowing. They were climbing now, up the side of Mount Olive whose peak was enshrouded in a sinister gray mist. On a clear day you could see all of the Anchor Rock valley from here; not so tonight. Tonight it was but a vast pool of nearly impenetrable fog, beneath which Sheila could just make out the glowing, yellow lights of Anchor Rock proper. And she supposed she was grateful—so very, very grateful—for that much. For as long as the power was on and men such as Whitman were still doing their jobs, there was hope. Hope that the world might somehow pass through this day turned to night and this inexplicable time storm, this apocalypse no one saw coming and no one could have imagined. *It was supposed to be zombies*, she thought insanely—even as Whitman's brake lights winked on suddenly and Erik shouted, "Mom, look out!"

She focused forward in time to see the Sheriff's car looming in the windshield, and hit the brake pedal, causing the Toyota to lurch into

a tailspin even as it careened toward Whitman's bumper— which they missed, barely—before sliding into a tree with a resounding crash. And then she was craning her neck to see what had caused him to stop so abruptly, and saw, by the strobing lights of his red and blues (which he had turned on in order to guide them better), what could only be considered a *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

It had crashed through Whitman's driver's side window with its snout and pulled him free—shaking him like a ragdoll, smashing him against the door—after which they could only watch in horror as it gnawed off his head ... which bounced twice across the road and went rolling down the hill, whipping blood as it went.

And then the thing was loping toward *them*, and Sheila had pushed in the clutch and jammed it into first—too late, for the beast pounced upon them instantly, causing the roof to sink beneath its massive weight. She screamed as its claws raked through the thin steel of the car's shell, barely missing her head, then put it in reverse and floored the gas pedal, winding the Toyota's engine as high as it would go, before finally popping the clutch.

The car shot backward, a rear tire spinning wildly, and the dinosaur toppled off, hitting the road with a tremendous thud. Then Sheila slammed on the brakes and whipped it into first, revving the engine as the beast righted itself, and popped the clutch again—sending the car hurtling into the monster with surprising force, knocking it clean off its feet, laying it over on its side. She reversed just as quickly and backed up until their bumper collided with Whitman's, then revved the engine and shot forward yet again—pushing the *T. rex* to the edge of the road and the steep slope, and finally over it, so that it tumbled into the gloom roaring and gnashing its teeth.

They sat there at the edge for what seemed a long time, the Corolla's engine idling choppily, until at last Sheila collapsed against the wheel, physically and emotionally drained. A few more moments passed before Erik asked, "Is it dead, you think?"

Sheila gazed into the darkness and gloom and falling snow. "I think it's gone where it can't hurt us anymore," she said at length, and looked at Whitman's patrol car. *Even without a window, she thought, it'll be better than this Corolla. And there's a radio.*

"Come on, sweetie. We're switching cars."

"Really?" he asked, sounding excited in spite of the grim situation.

"Really," she said. "Consider yourself deputized, Lieutenant."

They trudged to the patrol car and got in: Whitman had ratcheted on the emergency brake and his revolver was laying on the passenger seat. She checked the chamber—there were still bullets in it. She clicked on the safety and eased it between the seats.

"But ... mom," said Erik as she put the Crown Victoria into gear and began easing it forward. "Where will we go?"

"Put on your seatbelt," she said, "and don't even think about fidgeting with that gun. And as for where we're going—what kind of question is that? We're going to find your father and your sister."

He skulked, thinking about this. "But what if they've ... disappeared?"

She drove in silence for several moments and at last glanced down at the glowing lights of Anchor Rock.

"See those lights down there?"

He sat up in his seat and looked. "Yeah. That's Anchor Rock."

"It's more than that," she said. "It's hope. Hope that whatever is going on will end soon. Hope that your father and sister are fine and that we'll be reunited with them soon."

"But what is going—"

"No buts," She ruffled his hair. "Remember how I told you that mommy and daddy would always try to explain things, but that there were times when they couldn't, at least not right away? And that there were special rewards for little boys who were patient and showed a little faith?"

He nodded slowly.

“This is another one of those times, okay?”

“Okay,” he said.

And no more “buts” were forthcoming, not for the entire duration of their trip.

