

HUNTER and HUNTED

by

Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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I | Killer in the Looking Glass

Shimmering vaguely beyond a curtain of rain and gloom, there is a skyline peppered with glowing embers. Above is a pale moon of terrifying proportions. The moon has twin orbs for eyes. They are rimmed in red and full of loathing.

They are glaring at me.

They are my own eyes, reflected in the rain-drizzled Plexiglass portal of the lifter. Interior illumination and exterior darkness have transformed the portal into a looking glass. A mirror.

I don't like mirrors. Mirrors hurt.

Instinctively, I lift my Recoil pistol and blast the portal away. Cool wind washes in and splashes against my face, tosses my hair. Rain tickles my skin. Broken glass crunches underfoot as I step away from the opening. I feel much better now. Guns are like medicine, and are used as such often.

My Recoil is equipped with a silencer, of course, but the sound of shattering glass may have alerted my quarry above to my approach. It doesn't matter. Still, I ponder the possibility for a time, and conclude that he surely must have heard.

This is a good thing.

He'll have time to pray and collect his thoughts before I kill him. I am a murderer, but I am a thoughtful one.

His name is Tony Orchard, and I've been pursuing him for nearly two hours, ever since he rolled over me like a threshing machine at the notorious 76 Club where I'd found him. I don't even know what he looks like. He spun on me so quickly in the dimly lit jazz cellar, I didn't have time to make out his facial features. The Pentagog doesn't give us photos, only names.

It's a sloppy system.

Mistakes happen. But not tonight. My doomed prey is Tony Orchard. He'd been the only person at the phones, where the bartender had gestured as the Recoil kissed his lips.

In a moment or two I'll be at roof level, where I fully expect to see him standing at the edge of the Lorentz Tower and wishing with frantic desperation he had a parachute. Or a gun, like mine. To the best of my knowledge, he has neither. I would hope for the latter, so long as the gun is not a Recoil. I don't get as sick when I kill an armed man. But I still get sick.

When you kill someone with a Recoil, it is physically impossible not to get sick. It is a bloated, black, sadistic weapon; yet it fires not a single bullet. Instead, it lobs white hot globs of molten steel at the target. And if that target is a man, the globs punch through his skin with a shattering impact. Then they settle inside where they quickly—but not quickly enough for the victim—expand and solidify. And burn. Like white phosphorous. In short, the Recoil likes to turn men inside-out.

The Pentagog tells us, confidentially, that this serves as a fine deterrent. They say it leaves corpses that are "TV Friendly"—twisted, smoldering corpses they tell the public are the work of vigilantes. What they don't tell the public is that these so-called vigilantes are commissioned by the Pentagog. With tax dollars.

My name is Orin. I am a Grimheel and my function is simple. I kill. When the need arises, the cops call me, for I am the hand Law keeps hidden behind its back. I am the black gloved hand with the blued blade in its grip, and my workload is heavy. I work Chinatown and the ghettos. I work the corporate spiderwebs that canopy the city.

I make no public appearances, but if you're a rapist, you might meet me sometime. If you're a child molester or a child pornographer (the latter being redundant, for these are virtually the same term), you might meet me sometime. If you're a murderer, you might meet me sometime. We'll talk shop for awhile. Then I'll murder you. But not before telling you a funny secret.

And for the good citizen, only this: Rest easy. The man who raped your wife and then hacked her into little pieces may have walked away from the trial, but he didn't walk away from me. But also be afraid. Stay home and go nowhere. For should you fall under suspicion, your fate at my hands will be no more humane than your wife's.

I am the Grim Reaper who follows at the heels of those who have sinned, and those who may have sinned. I am a Grimheel and I wear my Hard Mask well.

It's 2038 and the Law's acceptable margin of error has increased along with the crime rate, even as its tolerance has decreased. "Murder is murder," we Grimheels are told by the Pentagonog's morale counselors, "be it premeditated or otherwise."

I've been killing their ghouls for nearly a year now, and they assure me I am an unsung hero. A protector. They tell me I'm saving innocent lives.

But my doubts concerning the ideology I serve increase with every kill. I try not to think about it. At a time when even the lowliest of service jobs is out of reach for the person without connections, killing is my only meal-ticket.

The sudden sound of the lifter's braking struts stirs me from my reverie. I've reached the top. It takes a second for my stomach to realize we've come to a stop. Then there's the butterflies. Trapped inside, suffocating, desperately trying to find a way out, their delicate wingtips brushing sporadically against the lining of my stomach. But there's no escape. They're trapped as I am trapped. As the frantic man above is trapped.

The word "roof" winks into glowing existence above the lifter doors. Instinctive caution grips me, and in turn I grip the foam-covered handle of the Recoil a little tighter. I level it out before me, and prepare to let loose flaming clusters of molten steel once again.

There's a telling hiss and I suddenly find myself gazing out across the rain-slicked rooftop. The rain is obscuring my view, while the lifter's interior light is showcasing me nicely for the cornered animal outside, per-

haps crouched behind one of the many mushroom-shaped ventilators. Perhaps wrapping cold, wet, desperate fingers around the grip of a black-market Recoil.

I side-step hastily out of the illuminated doorway and crouch tensely in the chilly darkness, gun outstretched. The lifter doors slide shut beside me, their subtle, hydraulic hiss all but drowned out by the vast, staccato rhythm of the angry rain.

Despite the storm, I can hear the sounds of cars moving sluggishly through the absurd maze of streets and stoplights below. I can hear the sporadic sounding of horns and the occasional blaring of voices. I can hear angry motorists shooting at each other. I am grateful for the distraction. If not for the constant drone of activity from below, I might realize just how utterly alone I am up here. How detached. All around me, mist. Swirling and churning. Revealing and concealing. I grip the Recoil like a vise and begin to move forward.

Part of the cycle, that's all. I've been here before and I'll be here again. Only ...

Only tonight there's something very different in the air. *What is it?* I ask myself, but I already know. It's initiative's old enemy, doubt. It's the screaming, jumbled voices of indecision.

Clunk—skrrk ...!

Something just fell against metal. My ears have grown very keen in my years as an assassin. Orchard just shifted his weight and lost his balance. Hazy contemplation vanishes. I stop momentarily and listen.

From out of nowhere a buzzcar passes overhead, illuminating the rooftop briefly with its strobing beacon. Through a veil of falling rain and spidery tendrils of fog, I glimpse the fleeting outline of a man. A heartbeat later it is gone.

I fight off the temptation to call out. To assure the fugitive I mean him no harm. To lure him out of the murky darkness and cut him down with one swift shot. But even killers have their own sense of honor. Their own perception of right and wrong. At least, this ... killer ... does.

Instead, I let unseen strings drag me forward.

Something awaits me in the gloom, and be it routine or revelation, I must face it.

I glide like a wraith over the rooftop, concealed from the knees down in a quagmire of listless fog. The rain covers for me. It obscures my form and renders the minute sounds of my passage silent.

I am wearing a black, elk skin coat which extends several inches beyond my knees, nearly to the ankles. It is tiger-striped from top to bottom with jagged bands etched in maroon. It is beautiful yet hideous in equal measure. It has a collar lined with my own amber hair—the long, flowing hair that used to so enchant Belladonna, but was shorn from my head upon my acceptance into the Grimheels. Now it's cropped short and I am utterly alone in the world.

The Recoil is my lover now. And I despise her for it. But ... we need each other. She and I.

Now, only at night, when I walk the city with my Recoil and an onionskin hit list in my pocket, I wear my mane once again. Not a mane of short, bristly, synthetic fur, but a veritable lion's mane of tapering human hair, marred in spots with smears and blots of long-dried blood. I am a murderer, but I am a poetic and well-dressed one.

A large part of being a good Grimheel is knowing how to scare your prey. How to spread your cowl like the cobra and loom over them, leaving nothing but terror-filled eyes gleaming white and wet in the seamless black expanse of your shadow. The shadow that stretches. The long, alien-looking coat helps me do this. It's part of my act, part of my gig. *Modus operandi*.

Suddenly, a shuffling motion, a figure dashing from the refuge of one ventilator to the next. I train my pistol on it, but by the time I've begun to squeeze the trigger, the shape is hidden once again. I ease my finger away from the trigger very, very carefully, rain and sweat beading along my forehead. A round in vain now would be no less dangerous than firing off a flare and allowing it to sift down through the gloom, bathing

the area in its harsh, green-white light. My quarry would still be hidden safely behind a ventilator, and I'd be exposed, if only for an instant, for what I am. Which is just a little guy with a big gun and a long shadow, no different from him in my possession of fear.

You've noticed, of course. My Hard Mask. It's beginning to slip a little. It always does. And the rain isn't helping. Nor is it helping my ability to judge distances correctly. In fact, the downpour is quite obviously playing tricks on my mind. Like a game of shells. I know he's behind a ventilator, but which one?

My arm is growing very tired now. The weight of the Recoil is taking its toll. If the man is armed, and I'm drawn into a fire-fight, I'll be at a disadvantage. Still, I move forward. In a few moments it will be decided. One of us will walk away alive, or neither of us will walk away at all. So be it. Doubt is for reverie. Right now, I have a job to do.

The edge of the building is now within my blurred field of vision. I can see the reflective surfaces of the opposite towers fading down, down, first to darkness, then to the multicolored haze of streetlamps and neon.

Now is the time for caution. If I'm not careful, the fugitive could maneuver around and escape. Or hit me from behind. God knows it's happened before.

The edge. So close now I can see the streets below. If he is indeed behind a ventilator (which he surely must be), I'll know in a matter of seconds. I walk. Slowly. My heart pounds in my chest like an unruly child.

As he passes into view I level the Recoil at him, so that the sight comes to a rest between his closed eyes. Eyes shut so tightly, one might expect blood to be trickling from their corners. And that's when I realize, through the curtain of rain between us, that I am aiming my pistol at a trembling girl.

I stand in shocked silence for what seems like an eternity.

A girl. No. A child. No more than fourteen, surely. Dressed in rags. Cold. Wet. And terrified.

The steel trigger has become like ice against my finger.

Tony with a "Y." I had assumed that meant a man. An adult. I've never killed a child before.

As I stare down the barrel of the Recoil at her, she opens her eyes. Big, beautiful, brown eyes. And in them a reflection of myself: a gaunt, harsh, cold face, chilling in its indifference, glaring at her from behind a huge, black gun. A mirror image. And mirrors don't lie. Silvered glass is very sincere. The stony-eyed demon with the gun is me. Draped in black and maroon. Repulsive collar of wet, stringy, human hair turned up. I am a pale monster framed in jagged coral with tapering ends. The sight disgusts me. I taste bile rising up in my throat.

(murder is murder. murder is murder. murder is ...)

A sudden onslaught of realization blows through me like a hot wind, shattering my senses and toppling my Hard Mask. My legs buckle under and I fall, head spinning, heart racing. The rooftop rushes to greet me.

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SITTING NOW. SITTING across from her, watching raindrops roll off her nose. I want to ask her something, but I'm not sure I want to know the answer. Still ...

"Why?"

My voice is raw and pained. It hurts to utter a single word. She stares at me through a veil of rain, cold and wet, never-ending.

"I'm a murderer!" she spits out with disgusted irony.

"What?" I bark, rain running in thick ropes down my face, into my mouth.

Around us the storm is escalating, growing louder, hissing and howling.

"I had hungry babies to feed," she begins. "I became a thief out of necessity. When I got caught red-handed, I killed a man to get away. Man happened to be a cop. And we all know how that goes, don't we? Doesn't seem to matter that most the cops in this town are nothin' but hoods themselves. I've never hurt anybody in my life, mister. But I wasn't about

to let them take me away and leave my children abandoned. I loved my children, dammit!"

I squint at her.

"Where are they now? You speak as if they're gone. Did someone take them from you?"

She glares at me with eyes that have suddenly become black glass. I feel a shiver run up my spine.

"There was nothin' to feed em, mister," she says at length. "I did what I had to do. Go ahead and do what you have to do."

Oh, God. God! Butterflies all. Even the children.

I ... I think something is happening to me.

(where's my Hard Mask?)

"A mercy killing?" I ask, finally, choking on the words.

"My kids? What do you think? Same as when you kill me. Do what you have to do and take me away from this cesspool."

I'm crying. #

Infant euthanasia is common among the extremely poor, I know that, okay? I know that.

I swat the tears away savagely.

What the hell is happening to me? I'm a hitman, for God's sake! Where's my backbone?

Here. Right here.

I fumble the Hard Mask back on, and lift the Recoil's fire-blackened muzzle to her head once again.

(murder is murder. murder is ...)

I stare at her through the rain. Somewhere a siren is wailing. From the streets below, angry words rendered unintelligible by distance are being exchanged. Gunshots follow. Then screaming. Car horns are being honked impatiently. Somewhere a baby is crying. The Hard Mask seems to fit much looser than before. In fact, it doesn't seem to want to stay on at all.

"We all do what we must," I say at last.

(murder is murder)

Her huge, brown eyes have welled up in tears.

(murder ...)

"It's a hard world," she says.

(is ...)

"Yes. It is. Goodbye."

(... murder)

I do what I have to do.

I eject the clip from the Recoil's grip and let both objects clatter at my feet, where the weapon seems to smolder like a lover betrayed. I walk away, back toward the dry, waiting lifter.

She'd killed a cop while making a final, frantic attempt to save her children. But her kids had been born trapped, just like her. Just like me. In her mind, anyway, she'd set them free. Did she deserve to die merely because she'd acted?

I don't know. It's not my dance anymore. I'm through.

Behind me, the clattering of metal. I whirl around to see the girl ramming the clip back into the Recoil. She's ... not ... aiming ... at me!

"No, don't!" I hear myself scream.

BLAM! The mirror cracks.

BLAM! The mirror shatters.

Glass flies, hurling into the void, speckling my face. A steaming corpse slumps to the deck.

Again, the eternal drone of rainfall. The distant rumble of colliding thunderheads. And now the whimpering of a man—an eighteen-year-old *man*—who has had the shit kicked out of him and his Hard Mask stolen forever.

Dark, red rain rolls into the drainpipe. Shards of broken glass litter the rooftop. I fall to my knees and hang my head over her smoldering body. Molten steel glows like hot charcoals within the ashy ruins of her ribcage.

"No more, no more, no more," I say, and the rising wind moans in agreement.

Moments pass. A semblance of composure returns.

I wish she had taken me, instead of turning that hideous thing on herself. No. No, I don't. People like to think that. It's a useless thought. And a false one.

As I ride the lifter toward street level, I wonder absently what that tormented young mother might have seen reflected in my eyes, to drive her to do what she did.

But that is simply obvious.

She saw the same thing I did in hers.

She saw a killer in the looking glass.

Moments later the lifter grinds to a halt, and its doors hiss open once again.

I step out into the twilight. The storm is fading, leaving wet, glossy streets and pools of reflected neon in its wake. And with its passing, the city's decadent stench has begun creeping back. The stench of garbage. The stench of exhaust. The stench of every human excretion from sweat to blood.

The world has been falling for a long time now, and Los Angeles is surely no exception. But the cops are wrong in their approach, I no longer doubt that at all. Blind weeding isn't going to save the garden. Because invariably, weeds will be missed, and flowers trampled.

I gather my coat about me and strike off for my car, which is still parked outside the 76 Club several miles away. At least, I hope it's still there.

As I go, I try very hard to ignore the broken glass on the sidewalk.

• • • •

The End

II | That Thing We Killed

I still don't know what it was, that thing we killed. I've seen things like it, in movies and on TV. But those things were made up, or based on the bones of extinct animals. Like monsters. This wasn't like that. This was just an animal, though not one that any of us had ever seen. Not in Halcomb County, that's for sure.

It hadn't threatened us, as far as I can remember. It turned on us, hissing kind of, a limp trout falling from its mouth, because we had startled it. I sure remember that mouth, opened like a wet, black rosebud, showing spiny teeth, a white palate. Maybe it had lunged toward us. Maybe it deserved what it got. I don't even remember who fired first or why. It was a long time ago and everyone involved is dead, except me.

We'd gone out that day to get a trophy for my thirteenth birthday, even though it wasn't hunting season. We made an odd sort of family back then: Uncle Horseshoe (because of his mustache), Hank, and Frank Garstole, who lived in a cabin next door. Uncle Horseshoe owned every kind of gun imaginable, from Scout rifles to muskets, and the walls of his house were covered with every kind of trophy, the great prize being a seven-tine rack of moose over the fireplace, which he said he'd killed alone in the Blue Mountains in December of '62, but which Frank said he stole from a woodpile in Alaska.

Frank laughed at the thought of us going out. "Horseshoe," he said, "Now what do you think a game warden's gonna say when he sees you outfitted like brigands?"

I remember Horseshoe just staring at him—he was huge on staring. "Don't worry about it, Frank," he said.

Frank said to me after they'd gone out, "They're scarin' up their own trouble, boy. Let 'em go."

But I ran after them.

WE STARTLED IT, AS I've said.

We were rounding a deadfall, bitching about how it had been a wasted day, when we saw it. I saw it complete for only an instant; it looked like a snake—not a Rattler or a Moccasin, more like a Python, or one of those Boas you sometimes see in National Geographic, with its giant body held up by an entire hunting party—a snake threaded through a turtle. But then it fled, hissing kind of, slinking back into the water and paddling away, toward the center of the lake.

I wasn't frightened by it. It didn't look or act like The Giant Behemoth, or Reptilicus, or anything else you might see at a matinee or in comic books. It was just an animal, though not one any of us had ever seen. But then bullets went punching through its blubber. Then the thing's blood went spraying in all directions.

There was a rickety dock nearby, which we used to get closer. I remember the spent shells dropping and plinking off its boards. The thing turned on us; I suppose it had to. It tried to hiss but managed only a choked gargle. Blood bubbled from its throat and spilled from its mouth.

"Take the fatal shot," said Horseshoe. He must have laid down his rifle because I remember him helping to steady my own. "Easy now, you'll own this forever—" I stared the thing in the eye and squeezed the trigger.

It threw back its head, rising up. It gasped for breath, spitting more blood. It barked at the sky. Then it fell, head thumping against the deck. Its serpentine neck slumped. The rest of its blood spread over the boards and rolled around our boots and flowed between the planks.

I was the first to step forward, looking down at the thing through drifting smoke.

Its remaining eye seemed to look right back. I got down on my knees to look closer. The thing exhaled, causing the breathing holes at the top of its head, behind its eyes, to bubble. I waited for it to inhale, staring into its eye—I could see myself there as well as the others, could see the sky and the scattered clouds. The whole world seemed contained in that

moist little ball. Then the eye rolled around white—it shrunk, drying, and the thing's neck constricted. And it died.

Horseshoe slapped my back, massaged my neck. "How's it feel, little buddy?"

But I didn't know what I felt. I could only stare at the eye, now empty.

We went back the next day with Frank Garstole and a bunch of others with the intent of hoisting it out of the lake, but there had been a thunderstorm and whatever it was we had killed was gone, slipped back into the water, I suppose. Old Frank sure had a laugh about that, chiding Horseshoe, "Well, the bigger they are, the more apt they are to vanish without a trace."

Horseshoe just stared, like he might kill him right there on the spot. It was the same look he gave me when, visiting years later, I joked about that rack of moose he'd found in Alaska. We'd been sitting on his back porch which was falling to ruin just like his body, having beers, and—well, it was a look that said it was time to go. I went and never saw him again.

I still think about that thing we killed, from time to time. Sometimes I dream about it. Sometimes in the dreams I am in the water with the thing, where it kills me rather than me killing it. Sometimes, as I sink, I see it hovering high above. I see it through a cloud of blood and a ceiling of water, rimmed in solar fire, beautiful. Other times I am the thing, and I rise, spitting blood, barking at the sky.

The End

III | Red Marillion

"You need to start eating better, Vic-O. You gobble too much candy and soda-pop and stuff. You are what you eat, did you know that? That's what Red Marillion teaches you. Heh. You are what you eat. Or what you take. Or what you do."

— Harry Carter, to his son, Vic

"Insanity is often the logic of an accurate mind overtaxed."

— Oliver Wendell Holmes

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RED MARILLION.

That's what my old man had named the stuff. I found it listed under "R" in his little black book, just as I'd figured. I'd been sitting there on the basement floor—in what was now a very empty house—going through some of his things, when I came across the tome my mom used to call Harry's Cookbook. It'd been neatly tucked away between the middle pages of my folks' wedding album, which had been at the bottom of an ancient, dusty box I'd found beneath the staircase.

My dad had always been a weekend woodsman. Kind of an odd guy. He'd pack up his camping gear and spend every other weekend alone in the mountains. His knowledge of various plants and herbs and the like was phenomenal, and he wrote down everything he knew, including new finds, in his black book. He had an herb or a moss or a fungus for *everything*, from simple cures to hangovers to the deadliest of poisons. The resulting effects of many of the poisonous entries were damn right nasty, while still others were clearly unbelievable. Yet he had always said they all worked, both the cures and the poisons, every time. If you just believed.

The excitement I'd felt upon rediscovering the wretched thing had been incredible, for it'd actually been the real reason—at least, at the subconscious level—that I'd decided to clean out the old rat-haven of a

basement, anyway. My mind had been humming and ticking with the prospect of finding some of the old man's dark delights for weeks, but I suspect the foundations of my interest (obsession?) had been laid much earlier. In those indescribably horrible first few days after my son Mike's death. During Mikey's funeral I'd formulated a bizarre scheme in the back of my head which concerned that little, black book of Dad's. It wasn't until I'd actually found it and was holding it in my hands that the plan became concrete. Red Marillion was to be the very soul of my venture.

I'd gone upstairs shortly after my discovery and built a roaring fire, which I sat in front of until three in the morning, pouring over those lethal memoirs. According to the old man, this mythical, magic plant not only existed, but could be found right here in the Northwest. Easily, he wrote, if you knew where to look and what to look for. After reading the section on Red Marillion, I knew just that.

I prayed he was right about this. After all, I did intend to murder a man—if he could be considered one—and that was certainly not a commitment I was prepared to take lightly. At least, not at first.

The next day, I mailed out a letter to an old friend, Lester Dryer, whom I hadn't spoken to in nearly four years.

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DEAREST LEST,

Hi. How's my favorite woodsman and junkie? Just thought I'd drop you a line (no pun intended) and see how you were doin'. How come you haven't written, asshole? I've been trying (a bit unsuccessfully, I might add) to juggle a career and a social life and raising a kid. What's your excuse? Never mind, Papa John. How goes the habit? I keep praying you'll kick it, like I did. Just between the two of us, though, I hope you have one hell of a good time until you do. So, how's the financial situation? Are you okay? Been turning a profit from your agriculture? Any green from your green? Cash from your

hash? What schools are you working now? Well, I hope you're all-right. Also, I'll be in Oregon on business in about two weeks, so I'm gonna drop in on ya. It's been a long time, and have I got some stories for you. Bullshit over beers, just like the old days. Maybe I'll even smoke a bowl or two with ya, for old time's sake. So, I hope this gets to you, and you haven't moved or anything. Guess that about covers it, Sancho. See ya in a couple weeks.

Your friend always, Vic

Ps.

How's the old cabin doing? Hasn't fallen over yet, has it? Love ya, Old Man.

• • • •

I CALLED HIM OLD MAN because he'd messed himself up so bad on drugs, both mentally and physically, that he'd come to look like a very old man. That, and the fact that he reminded me of my dad.

So far as I knew, Lester still lived in the secluded, backwoods cabin he and I had shared during our heyday in the sixties. It was near the foothills of the Blue Mountains, about fifteen miles southwest of a little town called La Grande.

Lester and I, well, we went way back. Baby boomers both, Lester was now forty to my thirty-nine. While I was sitting around on campus smoking grass and bitching about the war, poor Lester was *fighting* it. Dodging bullets. That was before he got into it, back when he was no different from any other cocky kid. He wasn't there long enough to see much, but he saw some. And that was enough. His ticket home came in the form of a grenade lobbed into his unit's boat by a Viet Cong supporter. It filled him full of shrapnel and the army sent him home to mom.

After that, Lester became the captain of the *Titanic*, and sank reluctantly. He'd bought the cabin with some of his army money, and asked me to move in. I quit college (Brilliant! Brilliant!) and did just that. In time, Lester and I would elevate the act of wasting away to an art. Party

was too ambitious a term for what we did. We sat around and smoked grass and sniffed coke and shot each other up. Or down.

Last I heard, Lester was still at it. Still doing it himself and still pushing. It was the latter that mattered. Lester was a pusher, and a good one. He preyed on the young like a desert hawk in search of rodents. Except these kids weren't rodents, they were *kids*, with mothers and fathers who loved them (usually, dammit, usually) and when somebody like...like Lester came along and coaxed them into giving him their lunch money for a slice of his black pie, well, you just wanted to ...

As for myself, I eventually realized that Jimi Hendrix wasn't God, and got my shit together. I'd packed my bags and left the dope and the shrooms and the heroin and Lester—the Human Vegetable—behind. Since then, we'd kept in loose contact, writing one another only occasionally. I went back to school and now have a rewarding career as a cameraman with a local video production firm. I own a decent home and live a good, clean life. Lester, like time and the elements, never changed. He continued to be the demi-god of drugs.

Mike. God, I miss him. What a rucking waste. Overdosed. Who could know why? Yet there's one thing I do know. It never would have been possible if there hadn't been some sack of shit there to sell him the garbage. I tried, man. I tried so hard to take care of Mike. I mean, when Nancy was killed, I knew it'd become my responsibility to see to it that he was provided for and guided properly. Did I fail in that responsibility? Should I have spent more time with him? Was it really *my fault*?

No. No, it was that fucking drug pusher. The one Mike told me was bugging him. The one I told him not to worry about. That sleazy bastard with his pockets full of grass and his socks full of pills. *It was his fault.*

It was in the weeks before I left Spokane that I began to feel a subtle, whispering metamorphosis of my normally logical and morally valid thought patterns into a shifting, inconsistent state of mind I suspected might be the onset of, well, madness. And time would prove me right.

Dad—

Wish you were here. God, I'm sick. My hearts beating too fast. I took some pills I bought from that dude in the army coat, and either I took too many or he sold me something bad, but I'm in shit-shape now. Really sick, Dad. Too weak to write, and drowsy as hell. Maybe I can sleep it off. But just in case—I love you.

—Mike

• • • •

TWO WEEKS LATER, I arrived at Lester's in the same old '57 Chevy pickup we'd once used to commute back and forth to La Grande. Besides some spare clothing, hiking gear, mostly, I'd brought along only one thing. Nothing that was really vital to my plan—yet something that was sure to enrich my enjoyment of its conclusion, if it should indeed go that far. This item, which I'm not going to reveal just yet, I brought to Lester's in a black, metallic briefcase.

Old Lester came charging out to greet me, looking considerably worse than how I left him (he still wore the same coveralls, I marveled), a bottle of Rainier in one hand. He wore a filthy, sweat-soaked red and green striped thermal undershirt. And he smelled.

We went inside, and I placed my things by the couch before having a seat. Lester got me a beer, and then plopped down across from me. I'll spare you all the bullshitting we did about past adventures, but after awhile, we decided to put on our boots and take a hike together for old time's sake. Just like the old shroom-hunting days, Lester kept babbling.

Yeah, yeah. Shut the fuck up, Lester.

As a matter of fact, he *was* looking for some mushrooms. And I was looking for something, too.

We stopped to rest by a cold, clear creek which twisted aimlessly through the emerald forest, one that proved to have a strangely sweet-tasting water, like there'd been sugar poured into it. That's when I knew we were close. We sat and ate and talked, and after lunch we shared a joint. And then another. It's hard to remember just exactly how and

when—especially when—things happened after that, but afterward we slung our packs back over our shoulders and decided to follow the creek to wherever it might lead us.

It led us, after some time had passed—how much I have no idea; I was stoned—to a small clearing much deeper in the wood. Down, I think.

It was hot that day, and I do mean *hot*. The sweat poured off us in rivers, especially Old Lester. When Lester started to sweat, a guy had better know how to swim. I remember feeling sorry for him (briefly, briefly); just hiking over level ground made him pant and snort like a pig. God, he was out of it. As a result of a lifetime of self-abuse, he had become a mockery of himself. Oh, Lester, how did you ever mess yourself up so bad?

We found a couple of big rocks that we figured would make good stools, and sat down. Then we smoked another joint. I had to piss something fierce, so I walked over to the stream and let 'er hang. It was a long and satisfying piss, too, if you don't mind me saying.

Then I smelled something. The odor was like a combination of cinnamon and marijuana. I scanned the trees across the creek for some sign of the odor's origin; and, at first, I didn't see anything— *then I did*. It had been looking right at me the whole time I'd been pissing.

Well, hey, I was stoned, right? And wouldn't you know it—the crazy thing was glowing. I shit you not. That Red Marillion plant was glowing like Rudolf's fucking nose. I hadn't any idea the shit actually *glowed*. After all, I'd only seen a thumbnail sketch of it in Dad's book, where he'd simply noted that the plant was a bright, red color. But it *was* Red Marillion. I knew it. And thus, it was time for some Oscar award-winning acting.

I finished doing my duty and turned to Lester, who was sitting quiet and serene on his rock, his perma-freaked eyes locked on what appeared to be a big, black beetle crawling aimlessly across the sunbaked earth.

"Hey, Lest," I said, indicating the plant's whereabouts with a thumb over my shoulder. "Check this shit out."

Lester looked up, slowly, the bright afternoon sun doing no justice whatsoever to his grotesquely blemished and drug-ravaged face. He looked like a leper. Lester "Old Man" Dryer looked like a corpse—yellowing, decomposing, rotting. A derelict.

"You found some? You found some shrooms?" There was a spark of life in his long dead eyes. "What kind, man?"

"No, man. Sorry. No shrooms. But something you might want to check out anyway." I started to wade across the knee-high water.

Lester brought a boot down on the beetle, then stood with a groan and followed, apparently intrigued. I reached the other side and approached the unearthly-looking plant, its strange, scarlet aura radiating beyond me and painting the front of my clothes a vivid, fluorescent red. Its basic shape was really no different than a good-sized marijuana plant. And, like I said, it even smelled like pot. Glowing red dope. Shit. God must have been in a pretty funky mood when he did *this*.

Lester ran across the stream like a happy, drooling dog chasing a bone, grinning from ear to ear.

Your slimy, yellowed, broken-toothed mouth makes me sick, Lester. You hear me? SICK.

"Pot, man! Holy shit, it's red grass!" He came to a halt beside me. "Jumpin' Jesus, and it's glowing."

"Yeah, Lest. It's red grass. Fuck me like a dog," I said in my best Lester-speak. "Let's take 'er home and smoke it."

I'll never forget how horribly demonic that bastard's face looked within the crimson light of that bizarre, fiery plant.

"You bet your sweet ass, let's do," he said, excitedly. "Uproot that bitch, and let's go. Shit, look at her glow. This here ain't no shit weed, Vic. This here's some real killer stuff. I can feel it. I can feel it in my bones."

The sick, diseased maggot almost had an orgasm over a stupid fuck-ing pot plant, can you believe it?

We uprooted the thing and headed back.

• • • • •

BY THE TIME WE ARRIVED back at the cabin, the sun had pretty much gone down, and the sky had become a breathtaking wash of pastel reds, oranges and yellows. So far, everything was going okay. The fool didn't suspect a thing—and why should he? Still, it didn't give me much of a lift knowing I could fool a moron. That much I'll certainly admit. I was just happy to have found the shit, know what I mean? Pretty lucky, huh?

We went inside, and I went into the bathroom and scrubbed up while Lester got the bong ready. He rapped on the door while I was drying my face and hands.

"Yeah, Lest, what do you want?"

"I'm gonna call it Red Rad, Vic," he said, his voice muffled by the heavy, wooden door. "Because it's red ... and it's radical. How's that?"

Oh, that's good, Lester. That's very good.

I opened the door.

"I like that, Lest," I nodded and smiled. "You bet."

I walked out, pulling off my shirt as I passed, and dropped it on his filthy, grease-stained carpet.

"You're gonna smoke it with me, aren't you, Vic?" he asked, following.

I stopped in the living room and kicked off my hiking boots.

"Huh, Vic? How about it?" He walked around me and plopped himself down on the couch, which was even greasier than the carpet, if that was possible. "It'll be just like old times."

A towering, purple bong sat at his feet, ready to go. I sat down in the easy chair across from him, rubbing my temples.

It's coming, you stinking piece of human garbage. Your clock is ticking. You'll see.

"Sure," I said, finally. "Just like old times."

Lester smiled, again revealing his yellowed, rotting teeth, his sickening, slimy gums.

"I'll always love ya, Vic," he said affectionately, "'Till the day I die. You know it."

"I know you will, Lest. You're—you're a good man. I love you too, bro."

I was full of shit. I didn't love that asshole. Are you crazy? The worthless junkie meant nothing to me—nothing at all. Dog shit on the bottom of my shoe would mean more to me than that has-been ever could. He was a malignant tumor that had to be dealt with, that's all, before he could ruin anymore lives. Before he could spread his disease any further.

The joke's on you, asshole. Ha! Toke up, fuckstick. Take one big hit after another. Go ahead, I can't keep a straight face much longer.

"You want the first hit, Vic?" He handed me the loaded bong. "Go ahead, man. Make it count."

"Nah, Lest." I pushed it back. "You go first, really." An uncontainable grin had begun to spread across my face, but I'm pretty sure I caught it before he noticed. I don't even know why I bothered, man. I could have rolled on the floor laughing and screaming and the stupid fucking basket case wouldn't have noticed anything. But I couldn't risk it. Not when I was so close to doing the world such an incredible favor. I had planned far too carefully to blow it now with some childish outburst of the giggles.

But ... it *was* funny. I mean, if you only knew what was going to happen, you'd see the humor in it, too. I know you would. The entire scheme was just a sick joke.

"No can do, Vic-O," Lester demurred, and pushed the bong back my way. "You take the first blast, I insist."

I shoved it back yet again, and said, firmly: "*No*, Lester. This was your idea, remember? (bullshit) Go ahead. You know me, I've always been the spineless one. You've always been the one with the balls. Go for it, man."

He took the bong and considered.

"You're sure you won't mind, Vic? After all, it was your discovery." He readied his lighter.

"Not at all, Lest. There's plenty here." I smiled casually, pleasantly. "Isn't that right?"

"Bet your sweet ass it is, pal," he agreed, his voice rising to a gleeful soprano. He grinned and trembled, barely able to contain his excitement. I figured he might piss down his leg any second.

He placed a finger over the carb and lit up.

I briefly lost control and let a coughing, nasal laugh escape my nose and mouth. Lester laughed, too. Ha, ha, ha! We're getting stoned. What a gas, dude.

Water bubbled, and the carb hissed. He took a great, sucking hit. He handed the bong to me as he sat bolt upright on the couch, sucking it all in and holding it. I took the bong and the lighter. While he held his hit, which he did for an inhuman amount of time, I put the bong to my lips and faked like I was following suit. Finally, mere seconds before his brain would have been permanently and irreversibly fucked (yes, I do mean worse than it already was) Lester let all the smoke out in a great, heaving exhalation.

He was as white as birdshit. His eyes were bugged out horribly, and they were bloodshot beyond belief. Like they were bleeding.

"Oh, wow, man. That is killer. I'm flying already. Here ..." I handed the bong back. "Let's get fried, man. Totally fried."

He took it and loaded another bowl of Red Marillion.

"Yeah, dude. Let's get stoned. Stoned like never before." He bounced up and down. "Ha! You bet your sweet ass."

I smiled. *Yeah, Lester. Let's get stoned. Just you ... and I. Smoke that ba-by right down to its roots, old friend.*

Lester took another great, gasping hit. By the time he released the smoke from his long blackened and wasted lungs, he looked remarkably like one of George A. Romero's zombies. And ... and this is where it gets funny. Because, well ... he'd started to sprout leaves. Red Marillion leaves.

At this point I could no longer hold back my laughter and I burst out insanely, screaming with hysteria. Seeing this outburst of mine, Lester began roaring with laughter, as well. Which in turn caused me to laugh even harder. I laughed so hard I feared my stomach might burst. He handed me the bong and the lighter, but I simply pushed them back.

Lester didn't notice. Still I continued to laugh uncontrollably, and, finally, still chuckling, good old Lest began to inquire as to just what exactly we were laughing about. Besides being stoned that is, yuk-yuk.

"What's so funny?" he asked stupidly, still smiling. His head and shoulders were becoming grassy and plant-like even as he spoke. "What's so funny, man?" His smile began to fade.

His skin pigment, on his face, on his arms, was becoming blood-red. Oh, Lester, *that's disgusting*.

I stepped laughing for a moment, you know, to take it all in, get the whole experience. I wanted the Big Picture.

"You, man. You're history." I said it simply, coldly. "Go take a look in the mirror."

He thought I was kidding.

I stood and grabbed him by one red, leafy arm, and hauled him to the bathroom mirror. Along the way I banged his mossy head into the walls and doorframes—by accident, of course. I also jabbed him in the nose with my beringed right fist, drawing a spidery river of dark, warm blood, which coursed through his leaves like the creek by which we'd found Red Marillion. Another accident. Lester didn't really seem to mind, though. After all, he was stoned.

I got the quivering worm into his own rancid-smelling bathroom (there were mushroom stools growing around the base of the toilet) and held him up to the mirror. He looked into its polished glass at his perverted reflection and stood mesmerized for a moment. Running it through his mill, you could say. And then he screamed. He screamed so hard and so long that I had to drag him away from the ghastly sight of himself and back through the hall to the living room. He screamed and

writhed all the way. He also had a few more unfortunate collisions with the doorframes.

I drug his mossy, leafy, root-covered red form to the middle of the living room floor and dropped it there.

I needed to set up the video camera. Because this was going to get interesting.

I walked over to my things placed neatly next to the couch, drug out the metallic briefcase, popped it open, and removed the camera. It was all ready to go; its battery was charged, and it was loaded with a fresh tape. Then I found my tripod and extended its legs. I mounted the camera on it and set it up so that it was aimed downward at Lester's twisting, squirming shape. Then I turned it on and let her roll.

Lights. Camera. Action! Okay, Lester, now twist to the right, no, not the left, the right. Hold it now. Not so fast. Slow and agonizing-like. There we go, good. Now moan. Come on, Lest, let's have some drama—*moan!* That's good, Lest, yeah! Now once more, with feeling.

I went into the kitchen and grabbed an ice-cold beer from Lesterillion's fridge, popped its top, and plopped down in my favorite chair. The one with a view of the festivities.

And there I sat. What a pleasant night that had been, just sitting there, sipping from my Rainier, listening to the squishy, crumpling noises of dear old Lester's apparently painful transformation from man ... to plant. And wouldn't you know it, it was all over before I ran out of tape.

I got it all on film, man. Every last detail. Right down to the red mucus sliming slowly over his hateful, glaring eyes. Eyes that, until covered, had been staring at me balefully as I sat in my chair, drinking my beer and watching him die.

It's been three days as I write this, and I'm back home now. I don't feel well. There's a bong and a small, plastic bag of Lesterillion on the desk before me.

I think I'll smoke it and see what happens.

The End

IV | Lean Season

Though it was the height of tourist season, the beaches were closed. The canted umbrellas of seasons past with their gay colors and lounging owners were gone, leaving only bottles and cans and a few forgotten sand buckets, which poked up here and there from the smothered shore like broken, scattered tombstones. The billboards along the promenade had long since fallen into disrepair; now they appeared stripped and worn down in the withering sun, their images of soft drinks and gyros peeling. Even "Shady the Sea-monster" seemed to frown, as if the greedy black tide and the oily spray had finally killed what the skeptics couldn't—his ability to feed the imagination.

Before the oil spill the residents had relied on natural means to purge the beaches of waste. After all, for the ambitious scavenger, food could be found there. But since the disaster the number of visiting sea birds had dropped steadily, until, at last, the squawking throngs had all but vanished.

Only the Cathode Ray Cafe, the dingy backside of which extended onto the pier ("As if it were taking a shit in the ocean, someone had once said), and its "World Famous" clams remained. Though the smoky aromas wafting from its vents now were of pig fat and lard, not clams. And those had to compete with the stench of crude oil.

Still, Wen Tsui smiled as he flipped rows of bacon with quick twists of his wrist. The Seattle Mariners were scheduled to play the Boston Red Sox this morning, and his was the only watering-hole in town with a projection TV. Business would be good. Cold beer and cash would flow like white water, and his American Dream would survive another day. Already five orders of hash-browns, crisp bacon, and poached eggs sat in the window, steaming.

"Order up, Sian!" he called.

A barely pubescent girl appeared at the opposite side, gathering up three of the plates. She delivered them to a group in the corner, all men,

woolly and rough-looking. Hunters one might have assumed, had it been hunting season. The men were watching *The War of the Worlds* on Wen's projection TV. They were chuckling as a spindly-necked Martian War Machine fired upon two yokels, reducing them to smoking pork rinds with its Death Ray.

"Holy mother of Christ," muttered one of the men, the youngest. "Martian fuckin' War Machine. That's what time it is."

"Lonny, shut the fuck up."

The girl twisted sideways as she sat the plates down. She wore a Mandarin Red miniskirt—rules of the house—short enough to cause a stir whenever she wiped tables. Her child's face was made-up Geisha-style. As she turned from the booth, one of the men pinched her buttocks.

The man had dark stupid eyes and a handlebar mustache, parts of which drooped into his mouth like Whore's Hair Moss in swamp water. Sian didn't say anything, just kept walking. The man laughed.

Wen watched his daughter. *Business will be good*, he told himself.

There was an enormous crash out back. Steel against wood, as if a boat had collided with the pier. He went to the back door and swung it open.

He saw the massive, filthy-yellow city dumpster first, sprawled upon its side at the edge of the dock. It lay just within the building's shadow, shitting green-brown garbage into the already polluted water.

A cool breeze blew in from the Pacific, causing the sweat along his forehead to chill. He turned away, peering over the low roof, toward the East. The summer sky was azure, draped in frilly clouds. In it the sun climbed its great bell curve, tracing those clouds in gold. He squinted in the glare.

A breeze, yes. But a wind, a superstorm magnitude gale capable of knocking his dumpster over? Hardly.

He turned back toward the dock, the pilings of which pretty much supported the cafe, and peered into the shadows.

There was something else. Assimilation came grudgingly. He realized the dumpster and the sea were *joined* as if by a ribbon. It was huge, this ribbon, curving up from the water's surface to vanish into the container. It shifted, lolling, sunlight glittering along its length. It was painted in Alaskan crude. It was big, whatever it was, and *alive*.

Wen squinted, suppressing a shudder. He inched forward, his corduroy slippers brushing over the planks, and wrinkled his nose. It wasn't the pungent musk of rotted fish or withered greens which assailed him; he was familiar with those. Nor was it the gaseous stench of oil. It was something else, something new. He came to suspect the thing was some sort of eel, albeit a huge one. But after he'd drawn close enough almost to touch it, he knew it was no such thing, and his heart nearly stopped.

Trembling, he peered around the dumpster's rim.

The creature spun upon him, dropping a limp cod from its mouth. It hissed, opening like a black rosebud, showing spiny teeth and a white palate, which flashed toward his face.

He felt its hot breath on his cheeks for an instant and leapt back. The thing's snout collided with the bin's wall. The little man fled flailing and scrambling back into the building.

Crouched inside the entrance, holding the door ajar, Wen peered through the tiny gap. He watched the dumpster scoot this way and that. His heart knocked in his chest, a worn piston in an enduring engine. The thing foraged, ignoring him.

He shut the door.

The man stood, wavering. He reached out a questing, trembling hand and found the dicing table, propped himself against it.

He had never believed in the fabled sea-monster of the Sound—so-called "Shady." Had always thought it a simple ploy to draw tourists—which it had, by the thousands, before the spill. He'd never jumped on the bandwagon, hadn't needed to, because his clams were well-known.

Were. The spill had virtually wiped out his tourist trade. He froze. The serpent's flashing teeth still stung his retinas. Its horrid smell still lingered in his nostrils. But he was beginning to smell something more, as well. Opportunity.

He began shouting—in Chinese, for fear of alarming his customers. His boy, Chin, was first to respond, leaning from the walk-in freezer, empty cardboard box dangling from his hand. His wife, Sui-Ki, and Sian followed, bursting into the room, metal doors flapping behind.

The kitchen became a bilingual bush-blaze, the mania of which could be heard from the dining room.

"These gooks, fucking crazy," said the man with the handlebar mustache. His name was Ben Lewis, but everyone just called him "Handlebar."

Back in the kitchen, Sui-Ki retrieved her husband's camera. He took it from her, returning to the back door. He eased it open as the others crowded behind him.

The dumpster had moved, *was* moving. It was closer to the building and was being nudged still closer. The Tsuis shuffled back—then forward again. The boy moved to speak, was waved to silence. Sweat beaded along Wen's forehead. He glared at the dumpster. It was crawling at them like a huge, yellow bug.

He fondled the camera, his jittery fingers tracing its surface. That he might botch the shot was too much to bear. He spun the camera in his hands: checking focus, adjusting the aperture, removing the lens cap. Suddenly it was no longer in his grip, he was clutching dead air.

The animal reared its head as the Nikon hit the deck. It lifted it just past the top of the bin, jerking to one side as if looking away.

Nobody moved. For an instant Wen wondered why the creature hadn't seen them. Then he realized it did see them, indeed, *was* seeing them. It was watching them right now. Like a snake or a whale, it would have little if any binocular vision. He could just make out its little black lens peeking at him over the dumpster's lid, unblinking.

Wen Tsui reached for the camera slowly.

The serpent snapped face-forward, hissing, and reared up. Everyone shuffled back. From this view its head seemed flatter, more menacing, the narrow snout widening into a broad, mighty-jawed skull. It rose, barring shark-like teeth—up and up like a cobra. At the same time the polluted quay convulsed, black brine splashed, and a huge flipper, tall as a man, broke surface; sunlight danced along its crude contour as it rolled like a log in the water, and was gone.

The thing barked at the sky like a loon. The sun dipped behind a cloud.

Sian screamed.

Again, the hunter-types heard it from the dining room.

"Some service," someone said. "My coffee's getting cold."

"Sounds like a fuckin' *COPS* episode back there," said Handlebar.

"Maybe you shouldn't have pinched his daughter's ass," said someone else.

Outside, the black serpent hovered. Watching.

Wen watched, too, peering at it from inside the doorway. The blood raced through his veins. Only a few feet away his camera lay ... gleaming at him. He took a deep breath.

Daunted but still obsessed, he inched forward again. Sul-Ki rattled on in worried Chinese, groping at his slender arm. He mumbled something in reply and pulled away from her, continued toward the camera.

Again the sea-beast turned an eye on him, grunted. Wen paused, wavering. He glanced from his camera to the creature.

The thing opened its mouth and a thin hiss escaped. It began swaying from side to side, little head bobbing.

Wen lunged for the camera.

Handlebar said: "He shouldn't dress her like that, and maybe I wouldn't."

There was a hissing and a whistling of wind. The monster's head flashed forward and down—a blurred, black arrow. Wen snatched up the

camera, spun on his heels, and dove into the arms of his family. The serpent's jaws snapped shut at his back.

They pulled him into the building, dragging him—as he fought furiously—into the kitchen. "No!" he shouted. He tore away from them.

He scrambled to the door. Stepping outside, he leveled the camera at the beast.

It rocked back as if to strike, hissed. His wife began screaming, "Wen! Wen!"

He snapped the picture.

For a nanosecond the shadows lit up with blue-white light. He saw a dark eye twinkle, the head rear back, and heard the water break as an enormous tail swung up. It impacted against a light pole, breaking the mounts, causing it to sway. The lines attached to it snapped taught. A pole near the cafe toppled, twisting.

The serpent shrieked.

The window beside the hunter-types shattered as the top of the pole fell through it and crashed upon the table in a shower of sparks. The men dove from their chairs. They covered their heads as glass skipped and plinked from the sill, plopping into coffee, landing in egg yolks.

"Son of a *bitch!*" someone cursed. He swished the food around in his mouth. "What the hell was *that?*"

"Fuckin' A," said Handlebar. He spoke around his mustache. "I'm gonna find out."

He swallowed and stood up.

Bells chimed as they headed out the front door, slapped on their ball caps. They walked out into the lot.

Screeeeee! Wump—wump—wump. Ymrrrrrr ...

They turned and saw the supple neck and little head looming behind the cafe. It peered at them over the roof, or so it seemed, tall as the slanting street lamps. Its wide, flat head moved from side to side, slowly, deliberately.

Young Lonny Namen swallowed. "Holy mother of Christ," he said.

Nobody told him to shut the fuck up.

The thing shrieked again, languidly. A trickle of saliva dribbled from its maw. Then it was gone. It had dropped behind the cafe, out of site.

"That—that was Shady," stammered Carl. "He's fucking real."

"Real, and pissed off," said Stanley.

"We gotta call someone," said Ned.

"It looked sick, whatever it was," said Frank. The retired taxidermist was the oldest of the group and the soberest. "What do you think, Handlebar?"

Handlebar stared at where the thing had been. It was the stare of an idiot, a poor man's Jack Palance, with none of the charm or humor of the real McCoy. "The guns," he said. "Get the guns."

"Fuckin' A, right!" exclaimed Carl. He hurried off.

Frank frowned. "Is that a good idea? There's sure to be someone with a badge show up."

Handlebar spat. "There's sure to be someone dead if we don't stop that thing." He slapped Lonny's back, massaged his neck. "Besides, we promised Lonny here his own trophy."

Lonny hesitated. "I Dunno, Handlebar." He glanced at the taxidermist. "Old Frank's been right before."

"Old Frank don't own that seven tine rack you admire so much." He tweaked the kid's nose.

The kid seemed to think about it.

Frank laughed, he couldn't help it. "Handlebar, *it isn't hunting season*. Now what do you think a game warden's gonna say when he sees us outfitted like brigands?"

Handlebar stared at him. He was huge on staring. "Don't worry about it, Frank." He headed for his truck.

Frank took a step after him. "We're poaching, for god's sake!"

Handlebar ignored him, kept walking. Lonny hesitated. He shifted from foot to foot.

"They're scarin' up their own trouble, boy," said Frank. "Let 'em go."

But Lonny ran after them.

They gathered where the trucks were parked—Handlebar's at an absurd angle, on a dirt berm, grill pointed skyward like a missile—and calused hands wrapped around black steel. Shells spilled over eager palms and firing pins were rammed into position, often with the obligatory "Get in there, bitch."

Moments later they returned: hooting, hollering, a jangling parade of gunpowder and sweat. Frank watched disbelieving as the younger men passed. Custer and company were going to war. The only thing missing was a bugle boy.

"Let's go, let's go, let's go," said Lonny.

Bells rang again as the group piled into the café and burst into the kitchen. Sian screamed. Wen began shouting and waving his arms. "No gun! No gun!"

He grabbed Handlebar's rifle, dropping his camera, and tried to wrest the weapon away. The larger man shook him off as the camera hit the floor and shattered. It was kicked aside as the gunmen passed. They burst through the back door and out onto the dock, to where the big, yellow dumpster lay on its side. The beast had begun submerging. It was retreating.

They opened fire, anyway.

Bullets punched through blubber and the creature's blood sprayed in all directions.

Screeeeee! Screeeeee! Screeeeee!

Spent shells dropped like hailstones upon the dock. Gun barrels spat fire, smoked, spat fire again. And again. And again. The thing turned on them at last, howling. Blood bubbled from its throat and spilled from its mouth. It shrieked, but the sound was little more than a choked gargle.

"She's a-huff'n an' a-puff'n," said Handlebar. He ejected his clip and slapped in another. He pumped, chambering a round. "Let's bring her home."

The barrage continued.

"Get some!" belted Handlebar. "Get some, get some, get some!" His hand was a blur as it worked the pump-action. The gun bucked like a jackhammer.

The beast's head darted at them, propelled, still, on the shattering neck. An eye was blown out by shotgun fire. The animal's wail split the air. Blood bubbled and frothed and spurted and sprayed and traced exquisite trajectories in the dawn's early light.

The sea-beast threw back its head, rising up and up. It gasped for breath, spitting blood, and barked at the sky—once, twice. Then it fell. Its head thumped against the deck; the serpentine neck slumped. Blood poured out beneath it, spreading over the boards—it rolled round the men's boots and flowed between the planks.

Lonny Namen was the first to step forward.

He looked at the thing through the drifting smoke, and its remaining eye seemed to look right back. The animal exhaled, causing the breathing holes at the top of its head and behind its eyes to bubble. He waited for it to inhale, gazing at the eye. He could see himself there, as well as the others. Could see the sky also and the scattering clouds. The whole world seemed trapped in that moist little ball.

The eye rolled round white as he watched; it shrunk, drying out. Then the thing's neck constricted, and it died.

Handlebar slapped his back, massaged his neck. "How's it feel, little buddy?"

Lonny just stared. He stared at the eye, now white. "It—it feels good. Yeah, I'm good." He looked around at the others. "Holy shit! We got it."

Handlebar took off his hat, wiped his forehead. He pulled a snuff-tin from his back pocket and packed it. "Fellas," he said, taking a pinch, "I think we just bagged ourselves a dinosaur."

"It's not a dinosaur. "

They all turned around.

Chin Tsui was walking toward them, his face white. Wen and his family had gathered again in the doorway. They stood there now in

shocked silence, watching the smoke clear. Wen's daughter's head was buried in his chest. He stroked her hair.

Chin moved between the poachers and stepped over the thing's bleeding neck. He looked into the water. The creature's body, roughly the size of the Toyota Celica he drove to the University of Puget Sound on Thursdays, hovered just below the surface, huge flippers splayed. It floated there in silence, an oil-smothered island in a sea of tar and blood.

"Plesiosaur family," he said to no one in particular. "Elasmosaur, I think." He turned to the poachers, pushing up his glasses. "Hard to say now that you blow it all to shit."

Handlebar took a step toward him. Chin didn't budge. They glared at each other.

"*Chin!*" Wen waved his arm from the doorway. He was whiter even than his son and his shallow cheeks were tracked with tears. His voice cracked as he shouted, "You come inside! Crime has been committed here! This crime scene!"

The young man scowled at the poacher, sizing him up through his little round glasses. He turned and headed back.

Handlebar called after him: "We're gonna want a round of—what? Beck's? Weinhard's?"

"Beck's," said Carl.

"Beck's! And hot wings."

Something *moved*. Something brushed against the dock and the water splashed. Before anyone could react the unstable light pole toppled and the lines connecting it to the cafe snapped tight and broke.

"Chin!" shrieked Sui-Ki.

He looked up, saw the pole and cables rushing down—jumped clear as they crashed to the deck. The pole fell crosswise, blocking his return.

The power lines curled and undulated like black adders, spitting sparks. He looked at his family on the other side and waved. "I'm all right," he said.

A few yards away, the red-black water bubbled.

"What's that?" asked Lonny. He stepped to the edge.

The bubbles moved closer. Everyone watched as the pockets of air bobbed to the surface and burst.

"Is that another one?" asked Stanley.

"Could be," said Carl. "What do ya say, Handlebar? Bag another?"

Handlebar spat brown slime, like a grasshopper. He pumped his shotgun. "Do gooks eat cat-meat?"

The crowd went wild.

They fired blind into the water and plumes of froth spat skyward. Chin cuffed Handlebar across the mouth, drew blood. He grabbed the man's gun and tried to wrest it away—the others dropped their weapons, piled on top of him. They forced him to the deck, *hard*.

Lonny moved away. He looked at the water. The bubbles had disappeared.

"Wanna die, little man?" said Carl. He had Chin in a half-nelson and was bearing down upon him with all his weight. "Huh? Do you?"

"Blow yourself, you fat piece of shit! *Bai-guei!*"

Carl thumped his head on the boards. "What? What was that? I'm a what?"

Chin gasped for breath, struggled. His forehead bled; his glasses were ruined.

"What am I, Chinkerbell? Hey, Handlebar! Chinkerbell thinks—"

"Shut up," said Handlebar. He wiped his lip. Listen."

The floorboards were shifting beneath their feet.

Carl looked around. "What is it?"

"Is it under the dock?" said Ned.

Handlebar ignored them, listening. The planks of the pier flexed and fell like piano keys.

Lonny retreated still further. "Maybe we should get back inside."

"You gonna swim for it?" said Stanley. "We're cut off."

Lonny looked at the cedar pole laying across the deck, and the downed lines which popped and frizzled. His lower lip started to tremble.

Suddenly, starting at the apex of the dock, the floorboards *jumped*—rifling and breaking and splintering in a line. The men clamored off Chin, scattering as something split the dock up the middle, like a torpedo. Chin turned, saw a wave of busting boards rushing at him. He scrambled to his feet and dove out of the way, landed at the edge where he saw a dark shape sweep past just below the surface. A *tail*—long as the first creature's entire body.

Everything stopped, and there was a silence.

"Stay alert," shouted Chin. He scrambled away from the edge. "It hasn't gone. It's still under the dock."

Everyone looked at each other as wood creaked and water lapped. Even Handlebar seemed frightened and disheveled.

"Screw this shit, man," said Lonny. He backed toward the cafe, toward the spitting electrical cables. His eyes were bugged out and his flesh had gone white as bird shit. He dropped his rifle.

Handlebar stared at his own boots, which were soaked in blood. He seemed to be having some sort of internal crisis. He reached up with a trembling hand and twisted his mustache repeatedly. He came out of it suddenly and looked at Lonny.

"Hey. Kid. Listen." He walked toward him, changing clips. "You're taking all this too seriously. It's toying with us, that's all."

He held out his shotgun to him. "Here. The goo—*Chin*—he's right. It's still beneath the dock. Probably scared. Why don't you do the honors?"

Lonny hesitated, trembling. "Y-you mean it's just trying to scare us?"

Handlebar tweaked his nose. "That's right."

The fire returned to the young man's eyes—almost. He looked around the shattered dock, at the riddled corpse and the oily, bloody wa-

ter, at the spitting power lines and the dead lights, the peeling boardwalk on the shore.

He shook his head. "No, it's not. It—it doesn't pretend, like you. It's gonna kill us, that's all." He stepped closer. "Can't you see that? You posing hillbilly? The spill's given it a—a *lean season*. It's sick, and it's hungry, and ..."

He glanced at the corpse. "We probably just killed its mate."

Handlebar could only look at him, speechless. It was the first time the kid had ever challenged him; the first time *anyone* in the group had challenged him, except Frank.

"You know he might be right," said Ned. "We don't really know what's down there. It may be something completely different. Might be a bloody orca, for all we know."

Handlebar looked crosswise at him from under the bill of his cap, eyes in shadow. *Mutiny a'foot*, he might have thought. *Watch it*.

He pumped his shotgun. "It's playing with us, I tell you. Get outta the way ..." He pointed the shotgun at a tear in the planks. Everyone moved back.

Blam! Shattered wood and wild water exploded from the hole, rained down upon their shoulders. Blood began bubbling from the opening.

"See?" He pumped again. "It bleeds. Just like the other one."

The dock began rising.

"Jesus Christ!" someone shouted.

Wood *cracked!*—groaning under their feet, buckling. The planks split apart as the center of the dock bulged upward, like a lava-dome. Everyone tumbled into the water. A massive head broke through the wreckage, twice the size of the first, rising upon a muscular neck until it loomed over what was left of the jetty. Its snout poked this way and that, acquiring prey.

There were many targets. It opened wide, revealing rows of teeth which splayed outward like daggers, and wailed at the sky. Then, amidst

a tumult of cracking timbers and splattering water, the entire pier lurched—and collapsed into the spray.

The Cathode Ray leaned toward the water, its dilapidated framework groaning. The cluttered utility pole on the south side of the structure keeled, but held. Freed of the dock's entrapment, the leviathan splashed out into the bay. Its dark head froze, as though locking onto something, then dove beneath the waves.

Lonny Namen broke surface, pumping his arms, coughing up oil-water. All was confusion: the entire world consisted of rollicking surf and too much sky. A chunk of the dock wobbled past. A soaked ball cap swirled nearby. He could hear the others cursing, splashing, but couldn't see them. He swam for the boardwalk with powerful strokes, oil clinging to his limbs.

He became aware of two figures swimming parallel to him, Stanley and Carl, he thought. Looking around he saw others: the Oriental guy, and ahead of him, Ned. Handlebar was nowhere to be seen.

Someone shouted, "It's behind you!"

He craned his neck as he swam, saw a dark hump break behind them—*way* behind. He made eye contact with Stanley; Stanley seemed to grin, as if to say, *Plenty of time*.

And then he was yanked below the surface.

Lonny stopped kicking—he couldn't help it. His heart thudded in his chest as he looked around. There was a commotion to his left—Handlebar dog-paddling toward him, struggling. Shell casings bobbed on the water as he came.

Handlebar couldn't swim.

"Don't look at the hump!" someone cried, someone on the boardwalk. Frank. "Doesn't mean noth'n! The neck's too long!"

Stanley surfaced a few yards away, gasped. He retched oil-water—no, something else. He tried to swim but failed; his arms were severed from the elbows. He called out, choking.

The serpent broke surface, neck coiling. Its jaws closed about his head. It rose, pulling him from the water, shaking him. His arms and legs flailed like a ragdoll's. A boot flew into the air.

His headless body followed, flung into the sun almost playfully. It trailed a ribbon of blood which sparkled. The serpent pointed its snout straight up, swallowing.

There was a lump in its neck.

Lonny screamed until his throat went raw. The beast, eyeing him, screamed, too. Their cries became entwined and rose skyward together. Then it submerged.

"Swim, Lonny!"

He looked toward the boardwalk, saw Frank Garstole and the cook gesturing. Ned Freeman was there, and the busboy had only meters to go.

"Lonny! Lonny, help me!"

He turned. Handlebar was starting to flounder, he was starting to drown. Lonny tread water, gripped by a kind of paralysis. He couldn't just leave him, could he? Could he?

Holy mother of Christ. Martian fuckin' War Machine. That's what time it is.

Lonny, shut the fuck up.

He heard a splash, saw the dark hump surface about fifty feet away, heard Frank yelling, *"Swim, goddammit!"* He looked at Handlebar.

"It's gone, Lonny! Jesus, give me a fucking hand!"

Don't look at the hump. Doesn't mean noth'n.

"Swim for it, Lonny!" Frank again.

Lonny scanned the water, searching for one of the planks. He saw one just a few yards away, swam for it. He grabbed hold of the board and kicked his way back to Handlebar.

"Put your arms over it. Come on."

Handlebar put his arms over it.

"Now come on, kick!" He turned in the water, started to swim ...

Everyone on the boardwalk was jumping up and down, yelling, waving their arms. He saw old Frank Garstole, about to give himself a stroke. He saw the little cook and his little wife, their little daughter in her little skirt. And he saw the great big sun in a great big sky, and couldn't believe how beautiful it all was.

He heard the sea-beast's cry and craned, squinting, in the glare—found it hovering high above him. That was beautiful, too. Backlit Martian War Machine, rimmed in solar fire.

The head bore down, opening wide. Its jaws clamped about his throat. He was pushed below the surface, groping, choking. Blood erupted from his mouth, clouding his vision.

He tasted air, gulped—was above water again. He saw a black orb, its eye. Saw a pallid, screaming face, his own, mirrored there. The eye rolled around white as he spewed blood, gargled—was slammed back down. Blurry bubbles obscured everything.

He died.

Chin Tsui had reached the boardwalk at last. Exhausted, he climbed the nearest piling, using the ropes wound around it for hand and foot holds—found his father already there, reaching for him. Other hands joined in; Frank's, Ned's, his sister's, and they pulled him over the edge. They laid him on the dry planks where Sui-Ki covered him with a blanket. She kissed him all over his face.

The men still in the water weren't so lucky.

It went after Carl first. The flabby steel-worker dove, boots disappearing, as the elasmosaur struck at him. Handlebar continued pumping for the boardwalk. The beast ignored him, and, exactly like a swan, dipped its head forward and down, vanishing from view.

It surfaced an instant later, jaws clasped about Carl's boots. He was screaming, trying, absurdly, to pull loose the laces to shirk himself free. As those ashore looked on the thing began jerking its head up and down, forward and back, again and again, like a bullwhip.

The sound of flesh smacking against water and Carl's occasionally garbled screaming went on for some time, until Wen turned away and vomited over the boardwalk's edge. The animal, meanwhile, gnawed off the steel-worker's legs from the knees and left him to bleed in the depths.

Handlebar didn't make it, either.

In an instant it was over. The thing had surged forward and caught him just before he'd reached shore. Frank and Ned were at the edge of the boardwalk, arms outstretched, when its jaws closed about Handlebar's skull and ripped everything above his mustache away. All that remained was a gaping mouth—and a geyser of blood.

They all scrambled for the door as the serpent swallowed its meat, pulled it shut behind them.

Outside, rifles floated to the bottom of the bay. A new shade of red spread wandering over the water. And bloody baseball hats washed ashore.

The big elasmosaur lowered its beautiful head to that of the smaller one and held it there, sniffing and nudging with its blood-streaked snout.

Wump-wump-wump. Ymrrrrrr ...

Inside the tilted cafe, the Tsui family and the surviving poachers looked at each other. There was a heavy splash behind the building. And then there was silence. Only silence. Wen went to the window and looked out. The corpse, too, was gone. Its mate had taken it back.

"I'll fix some coffee, " Sian almost whispered, and turned away. But there was no power to fix anything.

Outside a cool breeze blew, and sirens wailed like far-off loons.

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The End

I awake to the sound of rain on my pod. Lying utterly still in the swollen womb of the willow tree, I listen as the drops plink off the hard bark. It feels as though I have slept a long time, and while I am sure I must have dreamed in that time, I cannot recall what I dreamt about.

I push open the pod and crawl out into the rain. Resealing it behind me, I scurry down the wet bark of the willow tree and hop to the ground.

Looking around, I find the park has not changed during my slumber. The ducks and swans still sleep on their little island near the center of the pond. The pale woman's house still stands on the corner, warm, amber light spilling from its windows. The small animal in her yard—who's hind legs seem so much like my own—remains quiet. That will change when I begin my rounds, but he will fall silent as always once he recognizes me.

I will bound the fence and peer in through the window. If the pale woman sleeps, perhaps I will slip in through the basement window as I have done before and find my way to her room. I will squat hunched on her parlor chair and stare over her as she sleeps. I want so badly to talk to her, just as I do the small animal. Perhaps one time I will tug on her sleeve and try to rouse her.

I have many visits to make. I must hurry.

Relishing the sweet scent of the rain, I hurry along the wet, broken sidewalk. There is no lightning this night, no thunder. Only the rain, and it is good.

I have a friend in the green house ahead. I leap the fence and squat still in the back yard. There is a blur in the corner of my eye and my gaze darts to the movement. A chipmunk is running along the length of the clothesline.

A vignette of dream shimmers briefly in my mind. I remember I was crouched in a dark yard, this yard—staring at that same clothesline. I was cold, so cold, and frightened, and I didn't know why. It was far too dark

to see anything clearly. I could tell only that there was something hung from the line. Approaching it, I saw how it swung back and forth in the night-wind heavily. It wasn't until I was close enough almost to touch it that I realized what it was.

It was the pale woman's head.

... but I don't want to think about that. It is a dream best forgotten.

I hope my friend in the green house has not gone away like so many others. Crouched beneath his window, I reach up and tap three times. There is no response. I notice the curtains are not fully closed. There is a slight breach between them, perhaps enough to peer through. I rise on my haunches and look in.

There is a stranger glaring back at me!

I scamper away, my heart pounding. Hurling the fence, I flee into the night.

I hope that when I sleep again, I will have no nightmares.

Cutting through the dark of the park, I find a girl lying beneath a tree. Squatting beside her, I cock my head back and forth, perplexed. I like to watch it when their chests slowly rise and fall, as the pale woman's does. I have always wondered why my own chest does not rise and fall in such a manner. But this girl, her chest does not rise and fall at all.

I tap her on the shoulder. Still she lies unmoving. Finally, I lift her head in my hands. Nothing. I let it drop to the wet grass. It seems odd that she should be without her fur in such chilly weather. I wonder why it is that I should be able to see the grass beneath her head without looking around it. My hands have grown sticky and red.

There is something on her head other than hair and the sticky red stuff. It makes a strange sound as I listen. I remove it and place it on my own head. It is connected somehow to a little silver box. I pull the box to my unmoving chest and press it to me. I have found another friend that makes soothing sounds as I listen.

I leave the girl behind and move on. Perhaps I will visit the pale woman soon. Perhaps I will put the thing to her head and let her listen, too.

There is a fountain in the courtyard on the hill. I like to sit at its edge and gaze into the water. I do so now with the sounds of the little box filling my head.

I have a friend here, too. He is unlike my other friends. He lives in the water. When I gaze into the pool, he is always there to gaze back at me. We play little games. If I smile, so does he. If I frown, so does he.

I like him though his appearance sometimes frightens me. His face seems to push out toward me, not so much as the little animal's but more than a man's. I wish this wasn't so. It only brings his teeth closer to me, which are long and curved, like those of the big animal who had once frightened the smaller one ... but who now sleeps.

My fountain-friend's ears have changed since last time we met. They now look like the caps of mushrooms and are the color of the sticky fluid matting the sleeping girl's hair.

All else, however, remains the same. His skin is covered in hair—long hair like the pale woman, though it is not the color of mushroom stools but gray. It is not like the hair of the girl in the park, either. It is more like the leafy vines which dangle from my tree to float in the murky water of the pond.

His yellow eyes are huge and slanting—yet sad, like the little animal's. It seems to me he must get terribly lonely in the fountain, even as I am lonely in my pod. Before moving on, I try to touch my friend's face as I so often have. Again, he shies away and is gone. Somethings must wait to happen.

I run through the park once again. As I pass the girl, I notice there are little insects swarming about her body.

Go away, I tell them. You waste your time; her chest does not rise and fall but is still. I cock my head. My chest does not rise and fall either, yet still they enjoy my company. I decide to let them be and move on.

The pale woman's house is close. It no longer glows from within but is dark. As I scamper across the street I hope that she, too, has not gone away.

I leap the fence and greet the little animal. He is sleeping, that is why he was so silent. I try to wake him by scratching his underbelly. I notice immediately that his chest no longer lifts and falls either. When I lift my hand I notice it is once again sticky with red fluid.

The little animal's snout is buried in his food dish. Chewed food has spilled from his throat and onto the wet grass. It is sticky red like my hand, which is dark and fuzzy like the face of my fountain-friend, or the tree of which my pod is a part of.

I stand erect to peer into the pale woman's window.

She is there! Unlike the girl and the small animal, her chest lifts up and down just as always. There is a man in the room with her. He sits where I usually sit; in the lap of the chair beside her bed, leaning over her much as I do. Perhaps he is a friend to her, as the face in the fountain is a friend to me.

I drop back down because it hurts to stand so straight, and try the basement window. My hand passes further into the darkness there than usual, and when I withdraw it, there is dark fluid running from it just as the Stickyred ran from the girl and the dog. I find the latch and twist.

The window opens inward easily. I squeeze through and drop to the floor below.

I bolt through the darkened house much faster than usual, for I am eager to meet this friend of the pale woman's. I charge up the steps and enter the hall leading to her little room. I can hear a strange voice even from here, and when I near the door I pause to listen:

"You wanna die, you bitch? Hey bitch, you wanna die?"

"W-what do you want ...? There's no money here—there's food in the fridge, if you're hungry ..."

"See this, bitch? This is what I want ..."

"Please ..."

"Shut the fuck up. Okay? Just shut the fuck up. I'm going to fuck you and then I'm going to kill you ..."

I am confused by the sound of these words. I cock my head and listen further.

"Oh, God—"

"Shuttup!"

"Oh, God, help me!"

"Shut the fuck up—you want the knife instead?"

"Godhelpme!"

"Okay, fuck it then, bitch. Fuck it. You're dead, you—"

I feel cold and scared as I enter the room.

The man spins around to face me. I want to run from the man. He is not right, somehow. He makes no more sounds now, but stumbles backward toward the window. I look to the pale woman and she whimpers like the little animal used to before we became friends.

This is not how I wanted us to meet. I will not try to touch her now. Her chest is lifting up and down more than usual.

I turn to the man. He is shorter than myself, but only slightly. His arms are gangling and sinewy, as are my own. But they are pink and soft-looking, not hard and hairy and knotted. He has something in his hand. It is long and pointed and moonlight runs along it as I stare at it—just as moonlight lays on the water of the pond. I shuffle closer to him. I will touch him instead of the pale woman.

He swings the object in his hand at my chest. Some of my hair flays off me and falls to the floor. I touch the area and find it sticky with red fluid.

I reach out and touch the man's face.

He squirms and writhes as do the worms in my tree and in my pod. I cock my head. His chest is lifting up and down wildly, more so even than the pale woman's. The sound he makes hurts my ears.

It was so quiet before this new friend came. The noise grows louder and louder. I am not accustomed to it at all. He will wake everyone, and I will not be able to watch their chests rise up and down.

I have never thought to change anything about the park or the pond. I have always liked it the way it is. But so many things have changed since last I woke. So many are gone, and there is no one to replace them but this man, and he is no fun to watch. He makes it difficult to hear the voices from the little box.

He is trying to pry my hand from his face. He reaches up and pulls the object from my head. Now there is nothing but the sounds he is making. Clearly, these sounds are disturbing the pale woman as much as I.

Outside the window, the moon hangs fat and lazy. If such sounds must exist, they should exist outside, where they will not bother the pale woman further.

I make it so and the sounds stop. Stickyred is showering the walls. It is spilling and spraying from the man's throat just as the food spilled from the little animal's. The man is gargling and trying to pry something from his throat. It is only part of the window.

I hope the pale woman will not get too cold now. Rain is slanting in through the opening and soaking the room. The man's chest has stopped heaving. I can hear all my friends outside again, both the big ones and the small ones, and it is good.

I look to the pale woman. She is sleeping, propped against the wall behind her. Her chest goes up and down at a normal pace, just as before. I will visit her again, when this man is not here. Silently, I return to the basement and crawl out the window.

I crouch one last time to say goodbye to the little animal. I lift his head from the bowl and lay it on the grass. The grass is soft and that is where I lay a friend when they sleep.

I dash across the street and clamber up the tree to my pod. I pull it open and slide inside, closing it behind me.

I lie awake for awhile and listen to the rain.

I will sleep now, and dream of my friends. I hope that the little animal will have no nightmares in his long sleep. My chest does not move as does my friends', and my sleep is long, so I can only assume that the little animal's and the girl's sleep will be long also, now that their chests are still.

The man in the old woman's room will sleep long, as well.

And we will all awake to the smell of wet bark.

• • • •

The End

