

THE BURNING CATHEDRAL OF SUMMER

Stories of Darkness and Youth

by

Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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“*Do it,*” Orley urged, and though I didn’t look at him, I could feel those earnest brown eyes looking at me—eyes that always seemed just a little too intense, as if he might burst into tears or kick your ass at any moment.

“We made a pact, kid,” said Kevin, his voice low, his intonation world-weary—even though he was the same age as the rest of us—Han Solo to the core, at least for today. “Besides, this was your idea.”

I hesitated, the sharpened stick wavering, as the big, green caterpillar inched across the pavement. “I know.” I watched as the insect’s bulbous sections undulated, rising and falling, glistening in the sun. “It’s just that—”

“Here,” said Orley.

He took his own stick and used it to roll the caterpillar onto its back, where it curled into a fetal position and promptly froze, looking like a shrimp at the Chuck Wagon buffet, its multitude of little legs ceasing to move, its tiny antennae holding perfectly still.

“Okay, read that passage. The one about daring to approach the gods. You know, where it talks about blood and danger and becoming like gods ourselves. I saw you bookmark it.”

I looked at the book, *The Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*—which was lying atop my orange nylon schoolbag precisely where I’d left it—and stood, hefting the volume and cutting to the mark. The sun passed behind a cloud as I read, “Participants in blood sacrifice rituals often experience a sense of awe, danger, or exaltation, because they are daring to approach the gods who create, sustain, and destroy life. Therefore, morale is strengthened by the ritual killing, because the group has itself performed the godlike act of destruction—and is now capable of renewing its own existence.”

There was a slight breeze, which seemed to give the proceedings a funereal air, and I continued, “The underlying philosophical assumption is that life must pass through death.”

Orley said, “That’s it. Okay. So.” He looked from me to Kevin—earnestly, intensely—gripping the sharpened stick. “Considering what’s ahead of us ...” He paused, letting that sink in. “I think we all know what we have to do.” He added: “And why.”

We thought about it, the sun beating down, the breeze jostling our hair. The lake. The sword. The visitations in our dreams. We knew.

“So I say we get to it ... before the Valley Boys show up and it’s too late. *Way* too late.”

I looked at Kevin—who just looked at me with that Zen Master expression of his but seemed to confirm—before again crouching by the caterpillar. And then we all gripped our sticks—and prepared to do something really shitty.

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BY THE TIME the sun re-emerged the caterpillar had crawled across the sidewalk and into the grass—leaving us more than a little red-faced, not to mention uncertain as to what had just happened. Mostly, I think, we were just relieved.

“I couldn’t do it,” said Kevin wistfully, “Not with the kid here.”

I raised my eyebrows and looked at him, as if to say: Fucking *what*, dude?

He started to smile but caught it.

Orley elbowed me. “Hey, hey, why didn’t you?” He looked at me earnestly, calmly—as though he were all ears, all understanding. Then he deadpanned, “It was the gay thing, wasn’t it?”

And then they both laughed, falling about on the grass, even as I ignored them, thinking about it.

“I don’t know. It just ... it felt like ...” I looked at them in the sun. “Like we would be killing ourselves ... not the caterpillar. Or a part of ourselves. Like, a version of ourselves. The ideal version.”

They paused, looking at each other, processing this.

“So the gay thing,” said Orley, and held up his hand—which Kevin promptly high-fived.

I must have just stared at them as they bumped fists and swiped palms. “What’s that? Foreplay?”

And then they were both crawling toward me, sneering menacingly, and by the time the Valley Boys rumbled up in their chopped and channeled Chevy (as opposed to our learning permits and BMX bikes), everything had devolved into an out-of-control wrestling match; a match which ended only when Todd Benson, the leader of our bullies, shouted, “Are you faggots finished? Because there’s a lot of miles between here and the lake. And it’s getting late.”

“Jesus,” he said as we clambered into the backseat, the gear in our schoolbags clanking and thumping. “You think you brought enough?”

“Should have charged them by weight,” added Mickelson. He twisted in the front passenger seat and glared at us. “You runts planning on camping there or moving in?”

Just Mickelson. This was going to be easier than we thought.

“Listen,” snapped Orley. “Hearing you run your mouth wasn’t part of the—”

“Money,” said Benson, and reached over his shoulder. “Twenty now, twenty when we get there. As agreed.”

We all looked at each other.

At last we dug into our jeans and pulled out our bills—Orley and I, at any rate (I had a five left over from my allowance and he had some ones, tips from his job at the golf course). Kevin, meanwhile, had reached into his backpack and was fishing around for something, straining. It couldn’t have been easy; he hadn’t taken it off. None of us had.

A moment later he withdrew a purple Crown Royal bag and handed it to Mickelson, whose hand dropped from the weight of it. “Is this a fucking joke?”

“Nope. Seven dollars, counted and rolled.”

Mickelson just stared at him—as though he might jab him right then and there.

“Take it, asshole,” said Benson. He glanced at Kevin through the rear-view mirror. “It’s the money he’s been saving for *Star Wars* figures.”

Mickelson took the bag and appeared to set it on the floor before turning up the stereo and cocking his arm out the window, still shaking his head. Moments later, looking in the side-view mirror, he said, “There they are. Right on time.”

We all glanced at each other—before craning to look through the rear window and seeing Jud Spelvin’s rodded out Ford Falcon bearing down upon us, its chromed stacks glinting and its headlights shining, and its cab virtually crammed with pasty-faced seniors, at least one of whom I recognized as Buddy LaCombe—the *third* biggest asshole at Prosperous High. And, considering twenty was all we’d had and we planned to hit and run, this was a problem.

I looked at Benson through the rearview mirror and saw him smirk at our reaction.

“*Awww*,” he said, and pretended to pout. “Why so sad? You didn’t think it would just be us, did you?”

But nobody said anything, just stared straight ahead at the road, the road that would take us to Mirage Lake and the thing we’d left buried under the brush, as Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band sang *Fire Lake* and the sun crept toward the stark, blue horizon, and shafts of light pierced the trees—*like spears through a sacrifice*, I thought. Or sunlight through a cathedral.

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IT’S STILL HARD TO believe, what happened next. But then, it’s *all* hard to believe, especially now, almost 40 years later. Suffice it to say that we were only minutes from the lake when the deer ran out in front of us and caused Benson to hit the brakes—throwing us against the bucket seats (and Orley, who was in the middle, halfway into the forward cab)

even as Spelvin's Falcon rammed us from behind, knocking us right back. To this day I wonder if she—*it*, our Lady of the Lake, our Thing from Another World—had something to do with it. If she had reached out from her watery tomb and *guided* the animal into our path—to ensure its intended servants reached their destination. To guarantee its release after so many years trapped beneath the lake.

Regardless, they were all gathered around the bumpers when we made our escape, clambering out the driver's side door (which had been left ajar) and scurrying into the trees—our packs and gear jangling, our shoes scraping the gravel—so that Benson at least became aware of our movement and quickly alerted the rest. This touched off a footrace which wound from the side of the road all the way to Beggar's Dead-fall, which we climbed as they went around—before reversing course and backtracking through the brush, eventually stumbling upon the very same trail we'd taken last time. This we followed (after standing for a period with our hands on our knees and laughing, catching our breath) to the far side of the lake.

Where a massive, overgrown, arrowhead-shaped thing, a blue-black thing, an ancient and broken thing—a thing perhaps only we could see—lay half-buried amongst the trees.

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WE'D BEEN STARING AT it for maybe five minutes when Kevin wandered away from us and paused at the water, where he shielded his eyes from the sunset and mumbled, "They're back. The hands, the twelve-string guitar ..."

I followed his gaze, shielding my eyes also, to where the black sword could again be seen in the middle of the lake. As before, it was held aloft by a pair of slim, beautiful hands. "Wrong again—kid. I told you: It's Stormbringer, sister to Mournblade, runesword of Elric, the last emperor of Melniboné."

“No,” said Orley, approaching us, “It’s neither of those.” He shouldered between us and stood with his hands on his hips, like a superhero. “It’s Excalibur, obviously. Held aloft by the Lady of the Lake, waiting to be claimed.”

The truth of it was, it was all those things and none of those things, but we didn’t know that yet, didn’t know much of anything—we were only 15. But we knew it was real, whatever it was, and that something associated with it had been visiting us in our dreams. We also knew each other, and so understood that each of us was seeing something totally unique to ourselves: Kevin was learning guitar, his AWOL father’s twelve-string, and thus naturally saw an instrument. I was obsessed with the works of Michael Moorcock—Elric, in particular—and had been trying to write something similar. And Orley had been reading about Camelot (and struggling with Middle English) ever since his mother had brought home a copy of *Le Morte d’Arthur* from the Salvation Army. More than any of that, though, we knew what we had to do—although we still didn’t know why or how—and it was to that end that we set about our work, breaking off spear-length branches from the nearby trees and whittling them as sharp as we could, fashioning still others into makeshift rowing paddles, and each taking turns blowing up the raft by working the little handpump we’d stolen from White Elephant.

By the time we were ready, the sky was completely red, like Mars, or Vulcan, and we were beginning to feel the press of time—perhaps the surest indication that one has moved closer to adulthood than childhood. But then we were adrift, and all such concerns were forgotten, and though we struggled at first to coordinate our paddles, it became evident soon enough that we would reach the swords, the guitar, *the anomaly*, well before dark—and so steeled ourselves as best we could; mostly by talking about our dreams, both those experienced by night and those conceived of by day—for they were pertinent, all of them, to what lie ahead.

"She showed me a vision in which I was being awarded the Medal of Honor," said Orley at last, working his paddle, staring straight ahead. "Carter himself was the one who affixed it around my neck."

The little raft rocked, dark water slapping, but nobody expressed doubt.

"I was a best-selling author," I said, quietly, solemnly. "Like Stephen King. But really, really good-looking."

"I was a rock star," said Kevin. "Bigger even than Elvis."

We rowed, drawing closer to the thing.

"It is the future you see," said Kevin in his best Yoda voice.

Nobody laughed.

"Maybe," said Orley. "That is, if we free her from the lake. If we—I don't know—return her to her ship or something. Leastwise that's how I interpreted it."

"Me too," I said.

Kevin leaned forward, rocking the boat. "But why the swords and the guitar? And why can't she leave the lake? What the hell *is* she, even?"

We all thought about that as a loon cried somewhere across the water.

"Maybe she's too weak," I said. "Maybe her body is ... mutilated or something—from the crash." I looked to where the black sword seemed to hover just above the surface of the water—as sinister as it was eldritch, precisely as I'd always imagined it. And below that, her—the woman in the water's—hand; her thin, beautiful hand, deaden-blue from the depths.

"Maybe that's just how she establishes contact," I said. "How she gets your attention, and holds it. I honestly wouldn't be surprised if all that just goes away—like a mirage—when we get there."

"Nah. Then why—"

But then, as if to confirm, the hand *did* begin to go away, to lower, taking the sword with it—as if, indeed, it *had* been just a prop, just bait to get us closer.

"Fuck!" shouted Orley. He jerked his paddle, doubling his efforts. "Hurry up! Row!"

But it was too late; it was gone. The sword, the deaden-blue hand, all of it.

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I'M NOT SURE HOW LONG we floated there, just looking at each other. All I know is that by the time we busted out the flashlights the color had bled from the hills and the temperature had dropped significantly; enough so that our decision not to bring coats (there was only so much room in our backpacks, after all) seemed foolhardy and brash.

Regardless, it was Kevin who first saw something, jolting as we trained our lights into the murky water and blurting, in a voice that was one part excitement and at least two parts terror, "Holy shit! I saw her! I saw her! She swam right beneath the raft!"

I remember Orley just freezing and staring at me—earnestly, intensely—before we both dropped to our bellies and shoved our flashlights against the water, angling the beams as far beneath the raft as we could while each taking a side—the hope being that we wouldn't upend the entire boat. Kevin meanwhile actually reached into the drink and felt around, which seemed unwise to me at the time and more than a little out of character, reckless, even. Crazy-brave.

That's when it happened. That's when the girl, but really the xenoform, the multi-dimensional being, the *thing*, just floated up: her face emerging like some porcelain doll and her blue-black hair swirling (like tentacles, I thought, or the snakes in Medusa's hair), her drowned, all-white eyes staring. That's also when she reached up with arms as thin as paper dowels—famine arms, Buchenwald arms—and pulled me into the lake.

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WHAT HAPPENED NEXT happened very fast—or so I’ve been told, because it sure didn’t seem fast at the time. Indeed, it felt like the longest dozen seconds of my life. All I know is that the girl-thing sank rapidly, briefly, dragging me along with her, before just as suddenly releasing me—discarding me, as it were—and disappearing.

Except she *didn’t* disappear, not really, which I found out as soon as I burst back to the surface. Rather, she had leapt from the water and tried to beach herself on the raft—but had overshot it—so that she now hung off its opposite side: flopping and struggling, fighting and twisting, like a fish out of water, or an animal against its leash.

For she was connected, you see, to a kind of umbilical cord, which began at her back, stretched taught across the boat, and vanished into the cold, dark water. Nor was the cord at rest but seemed to be contracting like a great rubber band—pulling her back toward the surface, exerting what must have been a great force. That’s when it hit me that I *knew* what the cord was, and that it was neither inorganic material nor biological tissue—if anything, it was both—just as I knew that she had not so much attacked me as merely glommed onto me in desperation.

Because something had happened while we touched beneath the water, something like telepathy, or accelerated osmosis. And I understood suddenly why she had been unable to escape; and why, too, she had called out to us, beckoned us, and suggested we do things like sharpen sticks. More importantly, I understood what she, *it*, was capable of; that the futures she had shown us were not only possible but easily within reach—if we but freed her and reunited her with her ship (which was so much more than a ship!). If we but stayed true to our purpose and did our allotted part. And I knew beyond any doubt what I—*we*—had to do.

“Don’t let her slip back into the water!” I cried suddenly, kicking toward the raft, grabbing one of the hand-holds. “Keep her inside the boat!”

But the pull of the life-line—for that’s what it was and that’s what it was tethered to: a *life-pod*, something which had ejected from the ship

upon crashing and sunk to the bottom of the lake—was too strong, too resistant, and she began to slip backward across the boat.

That's when Orley stood upon his knees in the raft and brought his makeshift spear down as hard as he could, stabbing the cord precisely at its center—causing blue-black ichor to geyser like blood. Kevin quickly joined him, and I after that, so that the cord was weakened even as the girl-thing struggled and screamed—to the point that she was able to free herself at last and slide back into the water, looking, in the instants before she vanished, not like a girl at all, but a gelatinous mass. A thing without limbs or extremities. A kind of blue-black worm.

Needless to say, the raft did not survive the encounter. And yet we were able to paddle at least partly to shore before it deflated completely—enough so that the remaining distance was easily traversed, primarily by floating on our backs while kicking.

And then we were huddled in the tent like sardines, the fire having been left to die and our over-clothes hung from the branches to dry—nobody making gay jokes, nobody saying anything—as our minds raced and dwelt on the future, as our sharpened sticks stood sentinel, canted in the sand.

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I WISH I COULD SAY that when Benson and his gang showed up we drew on some previously unknown strength and kicked their Rich Kid asses; that we chased them all the way back to their fancy cars and tugged and rolled seats and kicked in their doors and fenders; although we really would do that later, not to them personally but to guys like them, in those dog days immediately after high school—when Orley had yet to join the Army and I'd yet to lose my mother, and L.A. was just a twinkle in Kevin's eye.

Instead they caught us completely by surprise, knocking the tent over and rolling us up in it—like a giant snowball—after which they proceeded to kick and punch us mercilessly—before dragging us out by our feet

and gloating over us in the sun: *Like trolls*, I remember thinking. Or Tolkien's fucking orcs.

"Well now look at this," said Benson, and paused to hawk up phlegm. "If it isn't our little faggots—just cozied up like lemmings." He pursed his lips and spat, causing green slime to splatter my cheek. "Our thievin' little douche-flutes, just letting their freak flags fly."

"And sitting on the rest of our gas money," said Mickelson. "I can guarantee it."

"Oh?" Benson raised his brow, as if he hadn't thought of that. "You're kind of the leader, Orley. Is that true?"

Orley just looked at him, his mouth bleeding, his cheek scuffed and bruised. At last he said, "We used it to pay your mother. She said that's what triple-penetration costs."

A couple of them laughed—Mickelson and Spelvin, I think—and Benson shot them a look. At length he said, "Funny—as always." He paused, cocking his head. "You look thirsty. Buckey. Give me your cup."

He held out his hand without looking and Buckey placed in it a large container, one of those 32-ounce super tankards you get at Zip Trip or 7-11, minus its lid. "The stink bugs are terrible this year, as I'm sure you've noticed. Buckey here left this out in the sun too long," He smelled the cup's contents, wrinkling his nose—then motioned to Spelvin and Mickelson, who snatched Orley up by his arms and held him, even as two others grappled his head and began prying his mouth open. "These will probably tickle a little as they go down. A lot of them are still alive ..."

Then he tipped the cup and its contents poured out onto Orley's face, into his mouth—the soda spattering his cheeks, the little bugs scrambling helter-skelter over his lips—before he chocked once, suddenly, violently, and began *chewing*, jerking his head free of their hands, smiling like a lunatic.

"Protein!" he exclaimed, and spit something out, a shell, maybe, or a leg. "Thank you, sir! May I have another!"

And then there was a commotion which sent a ripple through their ranks and caused them to stand apart—staring toward the lake, into the sun, where a lone figure stood slight as a wraith, its hair sopping wet, clinging to its face, its skinny arms held straight at its sides.

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“WHO’S THAT? IS THAT your mother?” —Spelvin, I think, attempting to sound cocksure but really only sounding frightened and small.

I looked to where the girl-thing stood nude and alone, her hair entwined with seaweed, her one visible eye white as milk. None of us said anything as the Benson Gang approached her and slowly gathered around—triangulating her, isolating her.

“Well, well,” said Benson, “This makes sense.” He turned to face us, regarding us slyly. “So this is what brought you pervs all the way out here. And here I thought you were just queer.”

He looked at the girl again, who couldn’t have been more than 15, same as us, and said, mockingly, “Is that seaweed in your hair, or are you just more experienced than you look?” Everyone tittered; a few of them groaned.

“Careful,” said Mickelson, “Or she’ll sic her boyfriends on us.” He shouted over his shoulder: “Isn’t that right, douche-flutes?”

But none of us said anything, just continued to stare at the girl, whose milky eye regarded Benson plainly, flatly, as though here were a lifeform hardly worth shooing away; a tsetse fly, maybe, or a gnat.

“You know, it might just be me,” said Benson, and moved closer, “but I get the impression she doesn’t want to be friends.”

He started walking around her slowly, checking her out, looking her up and down. “That how it’s going to be, sis? You going to just give us the cold, blue shoulder?”

“Meh, ease off her, Todd,” someone said—Jud Hartman, a sometimes decent guy whom I hadn’t even realized was with them. “She’s obviously

suffered some sort of trauma. Probably thought she was drowning, or something.”

“Drowning, or something,” said Benson, and stepped close to her ear. “What do you say, sis? Were you drowning—or something? Is that why you’re just as naked as a jaybird? Or are you just some coked-out whore, turning tricks in the sticks?” He grabbed her by the shoulder suddenly. “Face me when I’m talking to ...”

And then his hand was burning—burning and crisping away—and he was stumbling back over the sand, screaming, hyperventilating, the blood and bones of his arm gleaming, before the sun dipped behind a cloud and all hell broke loose. Before it became clear to us, so very, very clear, that the time for talking was over.



TO SAY THAT WHAT HAPPENED next was, for all intents, impossible to describe, would be to short you, Reader, in a way I am not prepared to do. More so, it would be to skip or gloss over the most salient aspect of what occurred that day; the day in which we learned just how strange and inexplicable the universe really was, and, more importantly, just how dangerous it had become—not just for us but for everything we had ever known, ever would know.

Suffice it to say that when the lightning-like bolts erupted from the girl-thing’s eyes, they instantly connected with (and paralyzed) virtually everyone present—Kevin, Orley and myself included. And here is where it gets so strange—and difficult to describe—for what happened next was like, a kind of mass hallucination, one in which all of us, I think, felt we could read the thing’s thoughts; not only that, but that we could see where it was from.

And where it was from was hideous beyond measure: a place as barren and blue and seemingly lifeless as the girl’s body itself—a place, a planet, a dimension, where everything that had ever lived had long since

been devoured and consumed, and where the husks of those drained of their lifeforce had, at last, formed piles as high as mountains.

It was, in short, a kind of Hell, and what we learned in those moments—the moments we stood paralyzed and alone, trapped, each of us, by the lightning-like force—was that this was the fate of all the worlds they, her species, had encountered (via scouts, just as she); and that this was simply what they *did*: They *fed*, and more, that they had learned to create entirely new dimensions, entirely new timelines, exactly toward that end—all to satisfy their ever-growing need.

And we learned one thing more: which was that although Earth was next—*our* Earth, the Earth of this particular dimension, this timeline—a thousand more might yet be created, and that one of these would be the Earth upon which Orley would walk as a war hero and I a bestselling author, and where Kevin would be a rock star, bigger even than Elvis. A place where we wouldn't be losers at all but gods, receiving a blowjob from all the world. The place she had promised us in our dreams—and which would now come. Whether we liked it or not.

For, having chosen us for our very softness and empathy, and loving us—insofar as she was able to do so—for rescuing her, she intended to keep her promise.

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ONE THING IS CERTAIN, and that is that everyone who was standing when she let loose the bolts was no longer standing when they disappeared—including, to our surprise, the girl-thing herself, who collapsed even as we collapsed, as the Benson Gang collapsed, their bodies shriveled like prunes and their faces sucked in, as though they'd simply imploded when their life-force had been extracted, which, I suppose, they *had*.

Then it was over and we had climbed to our feet, shaking ourselves off, grateful to be alive, but aghast at the destruction and loss of life all around us. For the Benson Gang was dead, each and every one, and their

nude bodies had become husks— their clothes having burned away in the incident, I supposed—which rattled in the sand as they were buffeted by the breeze and eventually just dis-incorporated, blowing away like dandelion seeds.

As for the thing, we knew *exactly* what had happened (we'd been in her head, after all, at least that's how we interpreted it, just a few moments before): she'd expended all her energy in the extraction of their life-force and yet wouldn't gain from the transfer until it had been converted by her system, a process which might take hours, even days.

Unless, we knew, we could get her to her ship, which had begun to glow amidst the trees like a white-hot iron and which would restore her to full health if she were just able to join with it—an outcome which seemed increasingly unlikely as we watched her try to stand and come crashing back down, her arms barely capable of breaking her fall and her legs all but useless in their compromised condition. So, too, did we know that any attempt to touch her would result in the same type of injury suffered by Benson. And thus we could only watch as she began to crawl toward her ship across the rocks and sand, pleased that she seemed to be gaining strength with each foot traveled—but knowing, also, that it would not be enough.

"Jesus, look at her face," said Orley at last, and when I followed his gaze I saw that her features had begun to droop and her hair to fall out, so that she was starting to look like Jason Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* (when he bursts from the water at the end of the movie), her brow sagging and her mouth twisting, her head balding, her eyes mismatched.

"She's using all her strength to get to her ship," I said, "and can no longer maintain the ruse. But I don't she's going to make it."

"And yet she might," said Kevin, his freckles standing out harsh and clear in the sun and his red hair a veritable fire. "She might."

At length Orley said, "I feel sorry for them if she does."

I think I just looked at him: at his earnest, intense eyes and his unruly mop of hair, at his shitty, threadbare clothes because his mother was too poor to dress him. “What do you mean?” I said.

“I mean everything—*everyone*. All our parents, all our siblings. Everything we have ever known, just *gone*. Like Benson and his friends.”

We watched as she tried to stand, surer-footed this time, stronger, but then came crashing back down.

“That’s not it,” I said. “You were there. Other timelines will be created, other dimensions, all of them like this one. All of them populated by the same people. It’s just that one of them will—”

“Be modified and left alone, I know. But what about the others? What of the millions, the trillions, whatever, that will exist only to be killed, to be harvested, like cattle? What about this world, right here?”

I looked to where the thing was again crawling to its feet—it was no longer proper to call it a she—its fingers and toes shrinking as I watched.

“But they’re all the same, don’t you see? They’re all the same thing, just replicated a thousand-fold. How can ...” I paused, staring at him.

“Are they?” he said.

I continued looking at him, the sun beating upon our heads, the breeze jostling our hair. When I glanced at Kevin I found him already looking at me.

“She’s going to make it,” he said—calmly, meditatively. “Look.”

We peered beyond him and saw that it was so, that the thing was up again and stumbling toward the trees. Stumbling, not crawling, as the arrowhead-shaped ship glowed and the brush we’d piled atop it caught fire, *poofing* like bags full of air opened too quickly, smoking like fireworks about to explode.

“Jesus,” I mumbled. “Do you think we’re evolved enough to ...”

I glanced at our sticks only several feet away, canted in the sand, their shafts crude but straight— then at the thing, which was nearly to its ship. And the truth of it is I was running before I’d even made a conscious decision to do so, running with the friends I’d had since 4th grade at Broad-

way Elementary, both of whom beat me to the pikes. Nor did we stop to think about it as we chased the thing down like chieftains and Orley delivered the first blow, lancing its back decisively and pinning it to the earth as I slid mine into what would have been its ribcage and Kevin impaled its neck, all of which caused the thing to struggle furiously even as it tried to scream—this most assuredly—but found it had no mouth; as it melted away from our sticks like butter and reconstituted itself on the go, finally closing to within a few feet of its ship before Orley ran it through its back yet again and smashed it to the ground, stopping it in its tracks—even as Kevin and I stabbed it repeatedly—the sun filtering through the pines as it shuddered and bled, its ship beginning to falter, growing cool amidst the shadows.

And yet we kept stabbing as though infected with blood-lust: exhilarated by each blow, hot for the kill, while nonetheless feeling as though we had lost something with each strike. Something of who we were and might have become. Something which felt good and bad at the same time. Like romantic love, I suppose, which we had yet to experience. Or the bite of cigarette smoke into the esophagus and lungs.

Until at last the ship lie dormant and the Thing from Another World was dead, if it had ever lived at all, at least in the way we understood it. And then we just stood there for a time amongst the shafts of light and brooded in our youth and vigor and passion; there in July of 1980 in the sweltering heat and humidity of the day. There in the forest by the lake, which was shot through with orange and gold, in the brief, burning cathedral of summer.

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I'M NOT SURE HOW LONG it took us to get home, although we were able to scramble aboard a freight train at Hunter's Rock—we could tell it was bound for Spokane—which cut the overall time considerably. All I remember is that I became fascinated by my friend's faces as we sat between cars and watched the land pass, the late-afternoon sun painting

everything reddened-gold as the tracks clacked and livestock raised their heads, as we let our minds wander and tried not to think too hard about what had happened, nor our role in it.

Orley for his part was trying to sleep, and though we at first made sport of preventing him from doing so, we eventually relented and let him be. He had a job, after all, unlike either of us. Still, I watched him as the train rocked and he dozed, knowing even then that nothing would ever come easy for him; that he'd been born into the kind of poverty that either perpetuated itself or was overcome by sheer grit and determination. I never told him, later, how much I'd admired his bravery and humor during the whole ordeal, nor how often I'd looked to him as something I might one day like to be: just a skinny guy, perhaps, but one with an indomitable spirit and a spit-in-your-eye confidence; a person as earnest as he was intense and who rose to the occasion and did what had to be done, not to mention one who possessed an incredible head of hair, like one of the Beatles, I remember thinking, or Derick Wildstar.

Kevin meanwhile was watching the landscape pass, his demeanor just as mellow and Zen as could be, as though we hadn't faced the end of the world at all but just enjoyed the great outdoors and built a campfire to bullshit around. Kevin was and remains one of the biggest weavers of bullshit I have ever known—not the least of which is his bullshit about not being very bright—and yet there was a truth to him as he looked out over the fields that could not be denied, for he was also grounded in a way I have never seen, just centered like a rock, accepting life as it was and hacking whatever it dealt him. And what it had dealt him so far was a broken home and poverty not much less than Orley's. And, also not less than Orley, an epic head of hair.

I had to smile a little while looking at that hair: Donny Bonaduce? Why not. With hair like that, Donny could never be far. But Slim Pickens, too. Someone with a big heart and even bigger generosity. And I knew even then what kind of friend he'd be as an adult, which was the kind you could couch-surf with when your wife kicked you out even if

you hadn't seen him in thirty years. That friend. The kind that embodied the very word.

I guess it goes without saying that we never became gods or got a blowjob from the entire world, but then, who does, really? At the end of the day you're lucky if you can just make a few friends. Kevin never became a rock star and Orley never received the Medal of Honor, and I never became a best-selling author, though I've published a few books on Amazon and even took my girlfriend to dinner once on the proceeds, and that included the tip.

But we did save the world once, a long, long time ago. And it was not without cost or sacrifice.

And that should count for something. Even if it is, like us, like you, just one of so many things that might have been.

**THE BURNING CATHEDRAL OF SUMMER: STORIES OF
DARKNESS AND YOUTH**

21

The End

Why did I do it? *Because I was meant to.* Because that's why I had been allowed to live. This was the whole of the affair in one simple statement.

Memory, of course, can be a dodgy thing: why else would my recall of the Benton Boys—and how Old Man Moss had brought their reign of terror to an end—have lain dormant for so long (forty years, to be exact), right up until that moment I saw what I'd at first taken to be a man—but quickly realized was not—ascending the tower crane just beyond our encampment?

The obvious answer is that a lot can happen in forty years. A man could go from being an innocent kid in Benton, Washington (population one-hundred and seventeen) to a scary homeless dude in Seattle—Belltown, to be precise—just as I had. But there's another answer, too, one we don't talk about as much, which is that some things get buried not for any lack of a mental space to put them but for their very unfathomableness and steadfast refusal to make sense. For me, Old Man Moss' handling of the Benton Boys had been just that, something I'd sublimated completely in the years following not because the event—the events—had been forgotten, but because I simply hadn't the means of processing them up until that night; the night I climbed the massive tower crane in downtown Seattle and came face to face with the brute. The night the string of gruesome murders that had plagued the city for months had, at last, come to an end.

"I don't see anything," said Billy the Skid, his boozy breath seeming to billow with each syllable, as he stood beside me and squinted up at the crane. "Who would it be? Construction's been halted for months, even I know that."

"I didn't say 'who,' I said 'what,' as in what is that, right there?" I pointed to where the gray figure could once again be seen (ascending not the ladder inside the scaffolding but the tower itself, like some kind of huge spider). "Do you see it? Like a man, and yet somehow not a

man. And look, it's got someone thrown over its shoulder. It's right there, damn you!"

Billy only shook his head. "Whatever you say, boss." He chuckled as he made his way back to his shopping cart. "Someone thrown over his shoulder. I say if you can't handle Thunderbird you ought to leave the drinking to me. Who the hell did 'ya think it was? The Belltown Brute? Ha! And I suppose he ..."

But I wasn't listening, not really. I was still watching the gray man, the gray *thing*, ascend the tower—the hammerhead, I've heard them called—its tail swinging like a cobra (yes, yes, it had a *tail*), its ashen skin seeming to catch the lightning and throw it back, its cone-shaped head turning to face me.

Yes. Yes, it could be. Still ... was it even possible? Well, no, to be frank—it wasn't. But then, everything about the summer of '79 and what had happened to the Benton Boys and Old Man Moss' ancient Jewish magik had been impossible. That didn't change the fact that it had happened—and it *had* happened—hadn't it?

I didn't know for sure, no more than I knew whether the entry point to the crane would be locked or if I had the courage to scale the ladder or if lightning would strike as I climbed killing me just as dead as the Benton Boys. In the end I was certain of only one thing—one thing alone as I gazed up at the tower crane and watched its great jib swing in the wind. And that was that if what I suspected was true, I was at least partially responsible—for the Benton Boys, for the string of murders across Seattle and the so-called "Belltown Brute," all of it.

And that meant I had a responsibility to do something. Indeed, that I was the only person who could.

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THEY'D HAD NAMES, OF course. Rusty, Jack, and Colton—otherwise known as the Benton Boys. But their individual identities had long since been subsumed by the group, the pack—I'm sure if you would have

caught any single one of them alone they'd have been just as agreeable as could be. The rub, of course, was that they were never alone—that was something those who challenged them learned quickly. I learned it the day I was to meet Colton at the flagpole after school to settle our differences and he didn't show; which left Aaron and I to hoof it home feeling both victorious and relieved, at least, that is, until we rounded his block—and found them waiting for us. All three of them.

I wish I could say I was shocked that Aaron got the worst of it—it was my fight, after all, not his—but the truth of it was the Benton Boys' race-hatred was well known, and they weren't about to miss a chance to thrash a genuine Jew. Not when his idiot friend had created such a perfect opportunity. And so the racial epitaphs flew, faster even than the Boys' fists—kike, shylock, yid, Christ-killer, a few I'd never even heard before—and poor Aaron bled, and by the time it was done we'd both suffered concussions and Aaron had lost a tooth and Old Man Moss had begun screaming—in Yiddish—from his door, calling the Boys chazers and hitsigers and paskudniks, and informing them the police were already on their way. Which they weren't, actually, because Old Man Moss didn't trust anyone in a uniform.

Regardless, the Benton Boys promptly fled, and after a brief sojourn in the emergency room we were back in Aaron's front yard—just sitting there on the porch with his parents and watching the shadows lengthen across the grass. That's when I first heard his old man utter the word “golem,” which he pronounced *goy-lem*, drawing a stern rebuke from Aaron's mother, who said, quickly, “Feh! And bring tsores upon us? Oy vey! *Mishegas*.”

The Old Man only snorted. “It is Mishegas to do nothing.” He stroked Aaron's hair absently. “No. An eye for an eye. A tooth for an actual tooth.”

“Bubbala ...”

“No. *Meesa masheena*. So it will be.”

And nothing more was said—not by the Old Man or by Aaron’s mother or by anyone present at all.

• • • •

BY THE TIME I SAW OLD Man Moss again, Spring was moving rapidly toward Summer and we’d been out of school for nearly two weeks—long enough to have already tired of jumping into the river and/or bicycling out to Shelly Lake; which, in case you were wondering, were the only things to do in Benton, during that summer or any other. I was luckier than most in that I had a lawn mowing business to occupy my time—mostly for friends and family, the Mosses included—which is what I was doing when Aaron tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I could lend he and his father a quick hand.

“Is it out of this heat?” I remember shouting over the lawnmower—which was louder than most—the sweat running in rivers down my face and arms, “Because I’m dying here, and that’s no joke.”

“It’s right here, in the garage,” he said breezily, but seemed uneasy as I killed the motor and sponged my brow. “Look ... not a word about this, okay? And, please, don’t laugh. Whatever you do. He—he’s touchy about his art.”

I think I just looked at him. It was fine by me; I’d no idea he was even an artist. “Sure, man. No problem.” I must have leaned toward him. “What is it? Some kind of naked pictures?”

He blushed and stepped back. “No, man. Jesus. But it is—strange. Not a word now, okay?”

“Not a word,” I promised, and gave him a salute.

• • • •

IT’S FUNNY—because the first thing I noticed upon stepping into the garage wasn’t the fact that Old Man Moss was holding what appeared to be massive gray arm in his hands. Nor was it the fact that in the middle of the room stood an 8-foot-tall giant—a giant which appeared to have

been fashioned from solid clay and resembled not so much a man but a hulking, naked ape. Nor was it even the thing's frightful visage or stoic, lifeless, outsized eyes.

No, it was the fact that the room was illuminated by candles and candlebrums—as opposed to bulbs or work lights or sun seeping through windows (all of which had been covered with what appeared to be black sheets). It was the fact that the garage didn't look like a garage. It looked—for all intents and purposes—like a temple.

"Ah, Thomas, by boy! *Vus machs da!* You are just in time."

It was on the tips of my lips to ask him what for when he handed me the arm, which was surprisingly heavy. "I'll need you and Aaron to hold this while I sculpt. Can you do that?"

The clay was tacky and moist beneath my fingers. I looked at Aaron, who looked back at me as if to say, *Just go with it. Humor him.*

"Sure, Mr. Moss. But—" I followed Aaron's lead as he positioned the arm against the mock brute's shoulder. "What on earth *is* it?"

His face beamed with pride as he worked the leaden clay. "Why, this is Yossele—but you may call him Josef. And he is what the rabbis of Chelm and Prague called a golem—a being created from inanimate matter. This one is devoted to *tzedakah*, or justice."

At last he stepped back and appeared to scrutinize his work. "And justice is precisely what he will bring—once he is finished. Once the *shem* has been placed in his mouth." He took a deep breath and exhaled, tentatively. "Okay, boys ... you can let go. Slowly."

I didn't know what justice had to do with art, but we did so—the clammy clay wanting to stick to our fingers, its moist touch seeming hesitant to break contact. "Aaron, won't you be a good *boychick* and bring me the *shem*. Easy does it, now. Don't drop it."

I watched as Aaron approached one of the workbenches and fetched an intricately-crafted gold box.

“Ah, yes. The *shem*, you see, is what gives the golem its power—thank you, son, a *sheynem dank*. It is what gives it the ability to move and become animated.”

I glanced at Aaron, who only looked back at me uncertainly, as his father approached the golem and opened the box, the gold plating of which gleamed like a fire before the candelabrum. “This one consists of only one word—one of the Names of God, which is too sacred to be uttered here.” He withdrew a slip of paper and placed it into the golem’s mouth. “I shall only say *emet*, which means ‘truth’ ... and have done with it. And so it is finished. *Tetelestai*.” He turned and looked directly at me, I have no idea why. “The debt will be paid in full.”

Nobody said anything for a long time, even as the birds tweeted outside and a siren wailed somewhere in the distance. We just stood there and stared at his creation.

At last I said, “So are you going to enter in the Fair, Mr. Moss, or what? How will you even move it?”

At which Old Man Moss only smiled, ruffling my hair, and said, “No—it is only for this moment. That is the nature of Art. *Tsaytvaylik*. Tomorrow it will be gone. Now run along and finish your lawn. I’ve involved you enough.”

And the next day it *was* gone, at least according to Aaron, and both of us, I think, promptly forgot about it. At least until the first of the Benton Boys turned up dead, Sheriff Donner directing the recovery while his ashen-blue body bobbed listlessly against the Benedict A. Saltweather Dam.

It was June.

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BY JULY, THE BODY OF a second Benton Boy had been discovered—my very own buddy, Colton.

They’d found him in a stone quarry about fifteen miles from town—the Eureka Tile Company, as I recall—his limbs broken and bent

back on themselves (“like some discarded Raggedy Ann,” wrote the local paper) and his head completely gone—which caused a real sensation amongst the townsfolk as each attempted to solve the riddle and at least one woman reported having seen it: “Just floating down the river, like a pale, blue ball.”

But it wasn’t until Rusty was killed that things reached a fever pitch, with Sheriff Donner under attack for failing to solve the case and neighbor turning against neighbor in a kind of collective paranoia—for by this point no one could be trusted, not in such a small town, and the killer or killers might be anyone, even your spouse or best friend.

It was against this backdrop that I was able to break from my lawn duties—which had exploded like gangbusters over the summer—long enough to visit the Mosses: which would have been the day before Independence Day, 1979. A Tuesday, as I recall. It’s funny I should remember that. Aaron’s mother was working in her vegetable garden—just bent over her radishes like an emaciated old crone—when I arrived, and didn’t even look up when I asked if Aaron was around. “He’s in his room—done sick with the flu. Best put on a mask before you go.” She added: “You’ll find some in the kitchen.”

I think I just looked at her—at her curved spine and thin ankles, her tied up hair which had gone gray as a golem. Then I went into the house and made my way toward Aaron’s room, passing his parents’ quarters—upon which had been hung a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign and a Star of David—on the way. I didn’t bother fetching a mask; I’m not sure why—maybe it was because I was already convinced that whatever Aaron had, I had too. Maybe it was because I was already convinced that by participating in the ritual we’d somehow brought a curse upon us—a curse upon Benton—that it had never been just ‘art’ and that it could never be atoned for, not by Aaron or myself or Old Man Moss or anybody. That we’d blasphemed the Name of the Lord and would now have to pay, just as Jack had paid, just as Colton had paid. Just as Rusty had paid when

they'd found him with his intestines wrapped around his throat and his eyeballs gouged out.

"Shut the door, please. Quickly," said Aaron as I stepped into his room—immediately noticing how dark it was, and that the windows had been completely blacked out (with the same sheets from the garage, I presumed). He added: "The light ... It—it's like it eats my eyes."

Christ—I *know*. But that's what he said: *Like it ate his eyes*.

I stumbled into a stool in the dark—it was right next to his bed—and sat down. Nor were the black sheets thick enough to completely choke the light, so that as I looked at him he began to manifest into something with an approximate shape: something I dare say was not entirely human—a thing thick and rounded and gray as the dead, like a huge misshapen rock, perhaps, or a mass of potter's clay, but with eyes. Then again it was dark enough so that I may only have imagined it—who's to say after forty years?

"Jesus, dude. What's happened to you? And where's your dad? I saw a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on his door. Is he—"

"Like me, only worse," choked Aaron, and then coughed—wetly, stickily. "Listen. I haven't much time. Do you remember the ritual ... and how we inserted the *shem* into the golem's mouth?"

"Of course," I said—and immediately started shaking my head. "Now wait a minute. You don't really think—"

"*Shut up, man. Just shut the fuck up.* This is important. The Benton Boys—what's happened to us—it's not a coincidence, okay? Dad—he created a golem ... do you understand? Not a work of art—not what Ms. Dickerson calls a metaphor. But a genuine, animate golem—right out of the folklore. Now, my mother called Rabbi Weiss when the murders started happening and told him what she suspected—that my dad had created Josef to avenge the Benton Boys' attack on us. And do you know what he said?"

"Aaron, Jesus, man—"

“He said this type of golem would go on killing, that it wouldn’t stop with just the Benton Boys but would continue on to different towns and cities—for months, years, even decades. That it could make itself invisible—at least to anyone who hadn’t a hand in creating it—and thus go about killing with complete efficiency; and that not even bullets could stop it, only the hand of its creator or someone who had assisted in that creation—by removing from its mouth the one thing that allowed it to move in the first place ... the Holy Shem, the slip of parchment upon which was written one of the secret Names of God.”

He gripped my arm suddenly and I could tell by his cold, clammy embrace that it wouldn’t be long; that his flesh had become like clay and his blood had turned thick as mud. “It’s you, Thomas, don’t you see? You! Only you can stop it now, only you can—”

But I didn’t hear anything else he had to say, for I’d scrambled to the door and burst back into the hall. And then I ran, ran as though the world could not contain me, faster and faster and further yet—across forty years and from every type of responsibility—into drugs and alcohol and the cold numbness of the streets. Into a dream of forgetfulness which ended only when I saw the man who was not a man scaling the ghostly tower crane near our ramshackle encampment in Belltown. Until I went to the base of it, and, finding its gate lazed open, mounted the ladder at its center. And began to climb.



I WAS NEARING THE TOP—ALTHOUGH still a good fifty feet away—when there was a sound, a series of sounds, actually, *thunk—thunk—thunk*, like a ham bouncing down metal stairs, and something sprinkled my face. That’s when I realized that what had fallen (and bounced off the beams) was in fact a human head. By then, of course, it was gone, and I was continuing my ascent: trying not to acknowledge how the city had become so small or that lightning could strike at any instant or that the shaft of the crane was swaying woozily

in the wind. Trying and mostly succeeding—at least, that is, until I reached the top, whence I climbed onto the platform next to the operator's cab (which was hanging wide open) and proceeded to vomit, although whether it was from a fear of heights or the smell of decomposition from the cab I couldn't have said.

Nor was I surprised to find that the compartment was stuffed full of bodies and body parts, like a veritable meat locker ... filled with arms and legs and heads and torsos ... or that when I turned away to retch again I saw the golem itself at the end of the crane's long jib—just crouched there in a kind of lotus position, as if he—it—were meditating. As if it—he—were waiting for me.

I can see you, Josef, I thought as the American flag crackled at the back of the crane and the great jib swung languidly in the wind ... *Can you see me?*

And then I began moving forward, slowly, tentatively—the rails of the jib like ice beneath my grip.

You can, can't you? I thought, and knew that it was so. *Tell me, Josef. Why is it you think I was spared—why I've been spared all these years—when your other creators were turned into little more than pillars of salt? Have you ever thought about that?*

Lightning flashed in the distance and turned everything white—turned the golem white—so that its monstrous features fell into stark relief; so that its cone-shaped head shown like a knife.

We are bound together, after all—don't pretend I don't know that. Even as I know you can hear me—just as plain as though I were speaking. And I ask you again—have you thought about it? Because I have.

Thunder rumbled as I drew to within twenty feet of him and paused, wondering just how I would go about it, how I would remove the *shem*. At last I said, "You were created not by God but by a man and the sages before him—now you must return to your dust. Do you understand that? It is not now, nor has it ever been—nor will it ever be—your earth to walk. It is time to go, Josef. It is long past time."

He—it—whatever—just looked at me, its slanted gray eyes inert, uninhabited—lifeless—and yet, *not*. And it occurred to me that creation was itself a kind of blasphemy; a fracturing of some perfect, unfathomable thing into something separate and purely reducible—something alone, something apart. That it was, in a sense, a cruelty. And if that were the case—wasn't it at least possible that the golem—

But then it was *moving*—suddenly, impossibly, and I was stumbling back along the gangway, and before I could do much of anything it had leapt upon me and begun gnashing its teeth—at which instant I jammed my fist into its mouth and groped for the *shem*, and whereupon finding it, yanked it free.

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AT THAT IT HAD SIMPLY collapsed, its full weight pinning me to the gangway, and its body had broken apart like so much old masonry as its arms and legs snapped in two and its head rolled back from its shoulders—to promptly shatter against the steel mesh floor.

That's when the rains came, washing away the clay and drenching my hair and clothes, which were a beggar's clothes, until finally I rolled upon the gangway and peered down at our encampment—which was visible only because of Billy the Skid's battery-powered light—and realized, abruptly, that I still gripped the *shem*. The Holy Shem.

The Secret Name of God.

I didn't move, didn't breath, for what seemed a long time. In the end, I merely turned my fist and opened it—letting the slip of parchment fall. Watching as it fluttered into the void.

And then I slept.

At length I dreamed, of Benton and summer and freshly-cut grass ... and the first time I'd had matzo; as well as of Aaron and his parents and my parents too, whom I hadn't seen or dreamed of in years.

And when at last I awakened I did so not to the gray ceiling of my tent but a swirl of seagulls and the entire sky.

The End

REIGNDEER

The fawn had barely opened its eyes and begun to breathe, Danny having carefully cut open the dead doe's amniotic sac and severed the umbilical cord, when Tucker stepped forward and shot it clean through the eye—splattering the crisp linen snow with blood (more than a little of which sprinkled Danny) and causing everyone to jump, especially me.

To understand what happened next one would have had to been there for the entire trip—for all the jests gone too far and the constant, incessant bickering, for the bitching about where to go and even how to get there, for the bitter rivalry which had developed between the oldest and most experienced of us, Danny and Tucker.

All I know is Danny launched himself at him like there was no tomorrow right there in the middle of the glade, his arms sort of swinging like a windmill and his fists flying like you see in hockey fights, so that Tucker lost his balance almost instantly and tumbled back into the snow. I don't know who would have won if we hadn't broken it up—probably Tucker, who'd always been a mean bastard. If it hadn't been for the appearance of the buck I'm not sure we could have, frankly.

"Hey now, hey, hey, hey!" shouted Billy, who was holding back Tucker as I held Danny. "Holy shit, look!"

"Knock it off, Billy," cursed Danny, who'd begun trying to take off his coat. "No one fires a gun two feet from my fucking head and ..."

But he'd seen it too, just standing there at the edge of the glade: a fully-grown stag—easily a 10-pointer, maybe even a twelve—it was difficult to say considering the distance and the sun's glare.

"Get off me," said Tucker, wrestling with Billy. "I said get off me!" He shoved him hard and Billy fell ass-end into the snow—which should have been enough to startle the buck into flight, but didn't.

"I say it's the Beav's," said Danny, and everyone agreed but Tucker—of course. The Beaver was me, because I was the youngest and had a cowlick. I guess.

"I don't know, Danny. The last time didn't work out so—"

“Just do it,” he said, and handed me his Scout rifle. “Use this. Merry Christmas.”

I took the rifle and handed him my own.

It felt good in my hands, like my Uncle Fred’s guitar, which always seemed to give me something even though I couldn’t play it. It was something about the shape and heft of the thing—it inspired confidence, courage, focus. And its scope was wide and clear so that the buck’s face veritably leapt out at me as I sighted it.

“Easy now ... what do you see?” said Danny.

I moved up one of the buck’s antlers slowly and steadily, counting the tines. “One ... two ... three ... four ... five!”

“On one side?” Billy interjected excitedly.

“Six ... seven. One side.” I moved to the other antler and counted to six. “13 total. A 13-point buck.” I lowered my sites to its head and steadied my grip. That’s when I noticed the unusual mark on its head, like a red diamond, right between its eyes. Its foggy, white eyes.

I must have stared at them for a long time, because I remember Tucker saying, “Well, what are you waiting for?”

“I think its blind,” I said.

“So? All the more reason to put it down. So put it down. Or I will.”

“I thought newborn calves were a bit more your speed,” said Danny.

“Hey, fuck you. Who the hell brought its mother down? You?”

“Hold up, there’s another,” said Billy.

I took my eyes off the buck long enough to try to see what he was talking about. Sure enough, another buck had appeared just beyond the tree line, not ten feet from the first. There was a sudden movement and I squinted through the scope in time to see the first buck vanish in a blur—but squeezed the trigger anyway, on reflex, I suppose. The resulting *crack!* caused the winter birds to explode from the trees and the gathered reindeer to scatter—dozens of them, their movement having betrayed their true numbers. Then they were gone and the gunshot had finished echoing down the valley.

At last Tucker said, "That's great, asshole. That was beautiful."

"Step off him," warned Danny, and handed me my gun back.

"You want to make me?"

"Shut up, Tucker," said Billy. "Let's just pack up and head home ... been a shit-trip, anyway." He added, "At least we got the doe."

"I got the doe," Tucker corrected him. "And the calf."

I can't tell you what was said after that because I was still looking at the tree line and thinking about the buck's foggy, white eyes. And remembering, for whatever reason, a quote from the Bible: *Thou shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk*. And as I did so I remember the scattered deer slowly coming back ... coming back and just watching us as we loaded the doe and its calf—each of which bore a red diamond on its head, just like the buck—into the bed of Danny's truck. As we loaded our cheeks with snuff and our iPods with rock and roll. As we popped open beers and guzzled them before crushing the cans in our cold, blue hands.

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"JESUS, LOOK, THERE'S another one," said Billy, craning his neck as we blew past the deer. I did likewise and saw it step out onto the road, still watching us.

"How many is that? Fifteen? Twenty?" I watched until the buck disappeared around a bend. "I've never seen deer act like that. It's fucking weird. It's like they're all the Shape or something."

"The what?" Tucker was looking at me through the rearview mirror like he always looked at me, which is to say like he wanted to kick my ass.

"The Shape. Michael Myers. You know, stab-stab?" I jerked my fist in the air.

"Sorry, fresh forgot my English/Geek dictionary." He looked out his window at the pine trees rushing past. "We should be shooting them. It's not like we can't come back and get them later."

"Not from my truck, dickhead," snapped Danny. He glanced into his sideview mirror—nervously, it seemed.

“Hey, *eat shit, man*, you want to go again we can just pull over right—”

“*Fuck you, dude.*” Danny stabbed at the air between them with his finger. “Just fuck you. Not a goddamn word, you hear me?”

He’d stepped on the gas considerably—all that adrenalin from feuding with Tucker, I suppose—and no one noticed the buck standing in the middle of the road except me until—

“Jesus, look out!”

—until it struck the grill like an oncoming vehicle and tumbled up against the windshield, breaking it into a thousand spidery rings, and smearing it with blood as the truck careened wildly about the road and finally came to a rest in the ditch.

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IT DIDN’T TAKE LONG to access the damage, and the short of it was: we weren’t going anywhere—other than on foot. The old Ford had a crushed radiator, and, somehow, a flat tire.

I’d never see Danny quite so upset, quite that livid, and I guess I never will again. As for Tucker, he seemed more bemused by the situation than anything, and volunteered to stay with the truck—but really just the kills—while the rest of us hoofed it into town—to fetch a tow truck, I suppose.

It was Billy who first noticed the thing’s eyes, and called us all over. Sure enough, the buck was a dead ringer for the one I’d missed in the clearing, right down to the red diamond above its snout. It even had 13 tines.

After checking the doe in the payload by holding open its eye, Danny said, “Some kind of disease, maybe?”

“I ain’t never seen a disease that turns eyes white,” said Billy.

“Yeah. Me neither,” said Danny. He exhaled sharply, looking down at the thing. “Okay, that settles it.”

“What do you mean,” said Tucker.

“What do you think I mean? I mean it can’t be eaten. We don’t even dare butcher it until someone from fish and game has a look. So guard your prize, asshole. But I wouldn’t get too attached if I was you.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. That’s so.” He turned to the rest of us as if to say, *Ready?* We were.

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WE’D WALKED ABOUT TWO miles when Tucker jogged to catch up with us.

“Twenty dollars says I can get back here before you do,” he said, trying to catch his breath.

“That’s fine,” said Danny. “Fish and game will have your info.”

“And that means your old man’s van down by the river as well as your mamma’s singlewide,” said Billy.

I was laughing when I noticed a handful of deer stepping onto the road ahead of us—which were quickly joined by others until they spanned nearly the entire width of the pavement. It’s funny because I don’t remember feeling scared, only curious. It was comical, frankly, like something from a Far Side cartoon.

“If you’re going to shoot an elephant, Mr. Schneider, you better be prepared to finish the job,” I joked, but no one got it, only gazed off down the road at the line of deer.

“Okay, that is fucking weird,” said Danny, and seemed to grip his rifle tighter. “Anybody else think that’s weird?”

“That’s definitely weird,” said Billy.

Tucker raised his rifle slowly.

“What are you doing?” snapped Danny.

“Chill out, Pussy Galore,” he said. He squinted through his telescope. “Just doing a little reconnaissance.” He tracked his barrel back and forth slowly. “Yeah ... they’ve got the white eyes, just like the others.” He

paused and held steady. “And the red markings. I don’t know, looks almost like a—”

There was a *crack!* as he squeezed his trigger, and I looked up in time to see blood jet from the back of one of the bucks’ heads. Then the life ran from its legs and it collapsed, right there in the middle of the road, as the others scattered and disappeared back into the tree line.

No one said anything for several moments.

“*Boo,*” said Tucker suddenly, spinning on Danny, and to his smug satisfaction the younger man jumped.

Tucker just laughed and slapped his gun barrel against his palm. “Everyone relax. I’ve cleared the threat—”

“*Right now,*” hissed Danny, throwing down his gun and darting at him.

What happened next surprised everyone, even, I think, Tucker himself. For he raised his rifle and pointed it directly at Danny’s head—stopping the younger man in his tracks and causing the rest of us to freeze in place also. Then he just laughed and backed away, saying, “Uh-oh. The Geek Brothers are still armed. Now what do I do?” His face became suddenly serious. “Drop ‘em, faggots. Drop ‘em right where you stand and kick them over here. Do it!”

We did it.

“Now here’s how it’s going to be,” he said, gathering up the rifles while keeping his own trained on Danny. “You’re going to just turn around ... and march your candy asses back to the truck. Okay? And when you get there, you’re going to watch my doe and fawn *real* close. All right? I’ll be back with a truck as soon as I’m done boning your mothers.”

And we started walking.

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I’M NOT SURE HOW LONG it took us to get back, about a half-hour, I reckon. I only know the sun was starting to go down and it was getting cold, like, *real* cold, enough to see our breath and for our fingers

and toes to start going numb. One thing was for sure: it was going to be a hellish night with no radiator and no heat, unless of course Tucker got back—if he was coming back—before the freezing temperatures set in.

I only know that Tucker was the last thing on my mind when Danny told me to search the payload toolbox for a lighter, and it's funny, because when I first saw him stretched out in the bed of the truck I thought he was fooling and had somehow double-timed through the trees and beat us there, just to give us a good scare.

But Tucker wasn't fooling. He was dead. I knew it the moment I laid eyes on him, even though he'd been rolled over on his stomach and might just as well have been sleeping. He was full of holes, for one; holes that looked as though they'd been made with tent stakes, and which covered every inch of him from the tips of his feet (which were frozen at odd angles in rigor mortis) to the crown of his head.

But that wasn't the worst of it. No, the worst of it was when Danny rolled him over and we saw that his face had been almost completely spared—spared, that is, except for a single devastating wound: his right eye, which had been punched out like a raw egg and pushed so deep that the remains of it were now looking out from his brain.

"Where's the doe? Or the fawn, for that matter?"

But I could only look at Danny dumfounded, and I'm embarrassed to say the Bible verses were racing through my mind again: *Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother's milk. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.*

Vengeance is Mine, sayeth the Lord.

"My God," I remember Billy saying. "Danny. What do we do?"

But he didn't say anything for a long time. That was the worst of it, I think. Seeing Danny who was always so stalwart and brave and sure-footed and confident reduced to something like a frightened old lady, something like a wounded, hunted animal. But he recovered himself, as Danny always did, and when at last he spoke he did so calmly and with something of his usual assurance, outlining our options and asking us which we thought was better: to walk back down the road and look for

our guns, or to wait it out here, inside the truck, and pray to God someone happened along, either tonight or in the morning, before we froze to death. Or worse.

To his obvious surprise, we voted unanimously to move on down the road.

I can't vouch for what Billy was thinking; I can only tell you how I felt. And my reasoning was as simple as it was ultimately misguided: The reindeer had gotten what they wanted. *An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth.*

They were finished with us now. *He* was finished with us—God, Yahweh, Jehovah, whatever. We'd boiled a kid in his mother's milk and been punished. Now all that remained was the final part—the denouement—our perp walk through the very garden we'd spoiled. Then we'd be allowed to continue with our lives. Then we'd be allowed to return to our singlewide trailers and our pawnshop guns and our pickup trucks—our pregnant girlfriends, our jobs at the Ace steel foundry. Then we'd be allowed to simply roam the world as we saw fit.



IT WAS DANNY WHO FIRST saw them this time, whispering to us that they were there and slowing his pace until all of us were standing bone-still in the middle of the road.

For they'd come back, all of them (and then some), and the road was blocked just as it had been before. Unlike before, the road was blocked in the direction from which we'd come as well.

"Easy does it," Danny whispered. "Just ... don't make any sudden moves. We'll head into the trees ... and climb them."

But when we moved toward the trees the deer were there also.

Which left only the trees on the other side of the road, which, not surprisingly, were devoid of any animals—all of us, I think, knew why. And then the animals were running—bounding—toward us, both the ones nearby and the ones father down the road, and we were running,

too, into the trees to which we'd been herded and between which we sprinted like pale, frightened ghosts. And it dawned on me that things could not have ended any other way—at least not in a just universe, because that is precisely what we'd stumbled into—for the dogs had become the hunted and the fox was now at their backs. And it seemed to me also that they took as much sport out of chasing us as we had taken out of chasing them, as we had taken out of chasing the pregnant doe (we didn't know that then, I tell you plainly) into the clearing in which it was killed.

A cry went up as I leapt over a deadfall and I looked into the dark next to me to see Danny impaled on a buck's horns, blood gurgling from his mouth and his eyes bugged out in terror before the animal rammed him into a tree with a sickening crunch and my supervisor and friend was lost behind me.

Then it was just me and Billy—the two hopeless dweebs, the ones who should never have been on a hunting trip in the first place—bounding like fucking gazelles through the ponderosa pines, laughing a little, I think, at the stark absurdity of it, hoping, perhaps, that it had all been a dream, that we would wake up momentarily in our shitty, threadbare beds, in our shitty, threadbare trailer parks, our shitty, threadbare lives, and maybe just maybe be grateful that we didn't actually have to hunt for our survival nor forage constantly while being hunted ourselves. That we were just lucky to be soft men living soft lives.

At last one of the bucks reared up next to Billy and jerked its head with an unimaginable violence—enough so that the tips of its tines penetrated clean through his neck—then he too stumbled over a deadfall and was gone behind, and I thought for a moment I'd been impaled myself but of course it was only the pounding of my own convulsing heart.

Then I was falling, tumbling, rolling, down a rocky incline and into a semi-frozen creek bed, where the reindeer fell upon me in full force, stomping me with their cloven hooves, banging their heads like teens at

a death metal concert, punching me full of holes, taking out first one eye then the other.

Filling the world with a light as white as their eyes.

The End

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 get away."

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.

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The End

