4 MORE WICKED WINDS

by

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A BOY AND HIS DINOSAUR

We'd been doing so well all day, Shad and I had even helped Grandma prepare Sunday dinner without bickering, when I mentioned that Brown Sugar Meatloaf had always been Mom's favorite—and brought the whole thing crashing down again.

"You just had to do it—didn't you?" said Shad, seething, as Grandma went into full Mr. Bill mode, her voice high and quavering as she began quoting Psalms and disappeared into the kitchen, slamming dishes, banging cupboards. "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the older order of things has passed away—Shad! Come get the salad."

"Jerk," said Shad, glaring at me over the candles.

He untucked his napkin and joined her in the kitchen, leaving me alone with the Boston Pops and the meat loaf.

"I didn't mean to ..." I started to say, intending to add: 'to upset anybody'—but quickly trailed off, mostly because it was a fat-headed lie; a lie as big and fat as Mrs. Carmichael's—my history teacher's—calves, which were big as hams. Then I got up and left the table—ducking out the little-used north entrance and double-timing it to the garage—where our poles stood sentinel near the fender of Grandma's mint, black GTO like skinny green reeds.

There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain ...

I must have bit my lower lip as my fingers hovered near the poles—near mine which was battered and nicked and looked as though it had been used as a whip; near Shad's which was as clean and straight as the day Dad had bought it (and not because he never used it). *For the older order of things has passed away ...* Then I gripped Shad's rod—as well as his tackle box, a fish bonker, and a bucket—and was on my way. Past the kitchen window which I ducked beneath so as not to be seen—and into the California woods. Down to the Mohawk River, the waters of which,

this time of year, were as cold and swift—and as unforgiving, Mom used to say, which was funny—as any ocean.

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I GUESS I WASN'T SURPRISED to find Dillon already there, sitting on the rock usually reserved for my brother (back when he still fished with us; back before he got his license and began driving the GTO—before he met *Wendy* with her jeans so tight she'd been known to pass out), his pole propped on a stick and the bill of his cap touching his nose, as though he were sleeping.

"You're awfully early," he said, having heard my approach, but didn't look up. "How'd you get out?"

I sat down the tackle box and popped it open, chose a lure. "Brought up Mom."

"Oh, man." He lifted the bill of his cap and looked at me. "I bet she started quoting chapter and verse ..." He laughed without much humor. "Matthew, probably. 'Blessed are those who—'"

"Mourn. For they will be comforted." I shook my head. "Nah. Psalms." I cast my line which plopped into the water next to his. "I don't even know why she bothers. They all say the same thing."

We fished, he sitting in Shad's old spot while I sat in his, both of us using our coats for cushions— which was funny, considering it was mid-November. Nor was that the only thing, because there were mosquitoes buzzing about also—mosquitoes, right there on the doorstep of winter, something neither of us could believe or explain. But then there had been a lot of unexplained things that year; like how a United Airlines 747 could vanish without a trace on its way to Honolulu from LAX or how my brother could grow so tall in the space of several months or how Grandma Grace could refuse even to consider that our parents might still be alive. At least that's what we were talking about when my orange and white bobber dipped once, decisively, then twice, and I jerked my rod

(to sink the hook) before quickly beginning to reel whatever it was—a salmon, I hoped—in.

As it turned out, it was just your garden-variety Rainbow trout, albeit a decent-sized one—about 17 inches—which filled the bottom of the bucket nicely even as it thrashed and flopped about; so much so that we were both looking for our bonkers when the foot-long dragonfly whirred past us—its cellophane wings vibrating, its redden eyes glinting—very nearly scaring us both out of our Converse shoes.

"What the—" shouted Dillon.

"Holy mother," I blurted. It was on the tip of my lips to ask, 'What the hell was that?' when a second dragonfly (as big as, if not bigger than, the first) landed on my shoulder—its wings oscillating, blowing my hair, its compound eye only inches from my own.

"Aaah!" I screamed, dropping my pole, slapping my body, dancing like a man on fire, as Dillon sprinted for the trees and the dragonflies buzzed away—back to wherever they came from—until I tripped over a root and fell flat on my face ... a position in which I stayed, too frightened to move, too frightened to breathe, until I was sure there were no more of the things flying around.

Needless to say, by the time I climbed to my feet, Dillon was long gone, having ran straight home to momma without so much as a look back. I wasn't particularly surprised: had I been in his shoes, I would have done the same thing. I don't know about girls, but in Boy-land, in the 1970s, before sensitivity training, it was every kid for himself. All I know is that I couldn't explain what I had just seen—no more than I could explain Shad's sudden growth spurt or Grandma's aversion to any mention of our parents or why Wendy wore such tight pants and so much blue eyeshadow—and quickly gathered my things (or, more properly, my brother's things), reaching, at last, for the bucket—over which I paused, my hand still trembling.

It's funny, because to this day I don't know why I did that—paused to examine the Rainbow trout—when the truth was I had every reason

to flee just like Dillon. Maybe it was because the fear and breathlessness of our brush with the dragonflies was still so fresh; and that, because I had become aware of my own breathing, I became aware of the trout's, or rather, its lack thereof. All I know is that I became fixated on its dying and gasping for air in a way I'd never done before, looking into its great, golden eye as though it were a dog, or a cat—even a person—seeing myself there, seeing the whole world, or at least the sky above Comet's Tail, California—population 9,893, at least back in 1978.

Nor could I bring myself to bonk it, even though the tool was right there in my trembling hand. Partly this was because a Bible passage had come to mind—living with Grandma, they could never be far—Proverbs 12:10, "A righteous man regards the life of his animal, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel." And I guess I just wasn't feeling cruel that day, because instead of bonking it I snatched up the bucket's handle and moved toward the water, where I crouched, tipping it toward the surface—when something *massive* snorted nearby and a huge shadow fell over me. Something I at first took to be a bear, my heart pounding, my blood racing, but quickly realized, upon seeing its reflection in the river, was no such thing.

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WHAT HAPPENED NEXT is difficult to describe, especially now, some forty years later. Best as I can describe it is that I was moving instantly: fleeing from what I saw by diving into the cold, brisk water and paddling—desperately—for the opposite shore; only in my mind alone, so that my body remained frozen—its beating heart having stopped pumping, its leaden limbs refusing to follow commands—its eyes denying the very evidence of what lay before them.

For what lay before them, there in the gurgling, eddying, golden water, was, plain and simple, a *dinosaur*—though not, it must be said, one such as Gwangi or the Beast of Hollow Mountain or anything else I'd seen at the drive-in or on TV. No, this was something as real and smelly

(it smelled like cow; a whole truckload of cows, in the sweltering heat, after eating Grandma's homemade chili con queso) and fly-pestered—flies! In November!—as any true-life beast; its white, leathery skin as cracked and yet smooth as the old single-lane road which ran hidden and forgotten along the Mohawk River, its body covered in a film of peach fuzz—tiny feathers, perhaps, or even quills—its eyes twitchy and alert, curious, like an eagle's, but also pink, soft, vulnerable, like a rabbit's. And then I *was* moving—truly moving, not just imagining it—dashing into the frigid water, shaking off its icy shock, kicking as far away from the thing as I could—not stopping until I was fully one quarter across the river, where I seized upon a deaden tree stump and held on tight—terrified of the white dinosaur, but also of the undertow (which Mom had repeatedly warned me about), toe-scissoring crawdads, blood-sucking leeches, flesh-eating piranhas, corpses stuck in the branches and roots—maybe even the gill man. And then I waited, shivering. Waited for the thing which looked like a small tyrannosaur—though still big as a rhinoceros—to go away. Waited for it to slip back through whatever hole in time it had emerged from and to take the dragonflies with it.

But it *didn't* go away, at least not right away ... and not in what felt like an hour. Rather, it paced back and forth along the river almost as though it were lost; sniffing at the ground across which Dillon had fled; craning its powerfully-muscled neck to look over its shoulder (if it had had one), shaking off the flies. Until at last it simply collapsed onto its haunches and laid down on its belly, looking around almost nonchalantly, blinking its soft, pink, rabbit's eyes.

That was the moment, I think. The moment I realized that it wasn't perhaps the danger I'd assumed, and that I had to get out of the river—before I caught pneumonia or even hypothermia. It was also the moment I realized the fish was still in the bucket—just as still and dead as could be—which was laying on its side at the edge of the water.

Caution was the word as I swam closer to shore and stood up in the shallows, quaking from the cold, my teeth clattering, then slowly ap-

proached the bucket—which action caused the dinosaur to struggle to its feet and strike a threatening pose, and to growl from deep within its throat, like a wolf.

"Easy, easy," I remember saying, holding out a trembling hand, even while stooping—slowly—to pick up the fish; at which the saurian licked its cracked lips—which weren't really lips at all—and seemed to swallow, then took a step closer, its great, talon-like foot sinking in the silt.

"Easy does it," I said, and held the fish out by its tail.

And then it lunged slightly and, panicking, I tossed the trout and retreated, but not before I saw it snatch the fish from the air smartly—its jaws snapping shut like a trap and its curved teeth clacking—before rearing its head back like a seagull and swallowing the trout down completely.

After which it only looked at me and I looked back, and we might have stayed that way for, well, who knows how long, if music hadn't sounded from somewhere in the trees—yes, music, barely perceptible at first but coming closer, growing louder. Coming up the old road.

Why in the world would anybody put chains on me, yeah? I've paid my dues to make it ...

At first it only cocked its head, once to each side, blinking, processing.

Everybody wants me to be what they want me to be ... I'm not happy when I try to fake it—no, ooh.

I heard a slight rumble and looked to see the GTO coming up the road.

That's why I'm easy ...

And then it just fled—*pow,* like that, dashing across the silt and stones toward the trees, moving like a leopard—or even a cheetah—unbelievably graceful, until it barked once and simply vanished, not into the trees, not behind anything, but just, well, into thin air. Into nothing. Into the twilight, now that the sun had largely gone down. After which I could only look on in disbelief as the GTO grumbled to a stop and Shad

approached through the bramble, hollering but sounding relieved, angry and yet not really.

"There you are! I've been looking all over for you!"

But I could only stare after the dinosaur, after 'Ghost,' which I'd decided to name him on the spot. For I knew, even then, that he wasn't really gone. That he'd stepped sideways through time and space, perhaps, like a 747 en route to Honolulu from LAX, but that he couldn't have traveled far; and that, indeed, I could still smell him—just as I could still smell my mother's Aqua-net hairspray; at least on those days when both Shad and Grandma were gone, and the house—which my mom used to say reminded her of a mausoleum—lay quiet as a tomb.

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ONE THING WAS FOR SURE, I hadn't imagined it—the dinosaur's prints ended precisely where it had disappeared.

"Don't go any further," I warned. "The portal—or whatever it is—is right there." I pointed at the final footprint.

Dillon just stood there, his hands on his hips.

"Okay, so there's prints," he said, looking down at the two-foot-long indentations, the sun having really brought out his freckles. "Who's to say you didn't make them yourself?"

I adjusted the strap of my book bag, which was digging into my shoulder. "Because I'm not a liar, like your mother. Besides, the dragonflies. Did you forget about them?"

Dillon dropped his own bag and knelt beside one of the tracks. "Dragonflies are one thing ..." He touched the roughly-compressed silt, which had a pattern of concentric rings, like a fingerprint. "Dinosaurs are something else." He peered along the prints, following them to the water. "There's not even a tail indentation. Tyrannosaurs drag their tails."

"No, they don't," I said, shirking off my pack. I picked up a stick and crouched next to him, drew a triangle with a line over it. "It was like—a teeter-totter, okay? Only perfectly balanced." I pointed at one end of the

line. "This was its head," I slid my finger to the opposite end of the mark. "And this was its spine ... to the tip of its tail." I tapped the triangle. "This was its legs and torso—the center of gravity. See? Besides, it wasn't fully grown."

"What? It was like—it was like a *bird?"* He burst out laughing, rolling in the silt—which had dried in the sun—holding his stomach. "Like Big Bird?"

I think I just looked at him, as though he were mentally disabled. In his defense, it was only 1978. *Jurassic Park* was a long ways off.

"A little—yeah. Like a wild turkey. What are you doing?"

He'd picked up a rock and stood. "You said the portal is right here. I'm going to test your Hypo Thesis."

"Hypothesis."

"Whatever." He stepped back and began to swing his arm back and forth. "Watch out. We don't know what forces this might unleash."

He was being cute, of course; which made it all the more satisfying—and yet no less shocking—when he tossed the stone underhand over the last of the prints—and it vanished without a trace. Just *poof!* It was Gone.

After which, visibly disturbed, he turned to me.

"Bet you're glad we didn't bet," I said.

And then I stood myself—and prepared to do what I'd decided to do even before lunch: which was to enter the portal—the breach, the tear in the fabric of space-time, whatever—myself.

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IT'S A CURIOUS THING, watching your own hand disappear, especially when you lean forward to view what should be a stump and see only your skin infinitely regressing, extending into a kind of invisible fog, vanishing into mist and memory. It's even more curious to walk forward and find yourself in a different place altogether; a place as warm and humid as any sauna and dense with foliage, and not just any foliage but the

kind you might expect to find in Hawaii or South America or the jungles of Vietnam—hothouse foliage, tropical foliage, primordial foliage—not far away but right there, by the Mohawk River, in northern California. In 1978.

It's also curious to find yourself talking to someone you can no longer see, but whom you know is right there—only a few feet away. At least I hoped he was still there.

"Dillon? You there, man?"

Nothing. Not so much as a peep.

Until, finally, "I'm right here. Right on the other side of, whatever this is. You can't see me, either?"

I looked at where he should be, where the sycamore and cottonwood trees should be, the white alder, the Mohawk River, and saw only cycads, only ferns, only a hazy volcano in a red-orange sky.

"Nope." I glanced around, looking for dinosaurs, looking for dragonflies the size of eagles. There was nothing. "But it's all right, really. You can come on through."

"I don't know, man ..."

I reached forward without thinking and snatched him by the coat collar, yanked him through.

"Hey ...!" he protested, then stiffened, looking around.

"Holy mother of ..." He trailed off as something caught his attention deeper in the jungle, something which verily gleamed as I followed his gaze; something I'd completely missed when I'd first scanned my surroundings—a mammoth rib cage, just laying amidst the trees. Baking in the sun.

"Oh, man. Is that what I think it is?"

I didn't need to look at him to tell how frightened he was. And yet I moved forward anyway, as young boys often do, not really caring how he felt, pushing through the warm, moist fronds—where a gaggle of dragonflies erupted into flight and made a beeline straight for Dillon, I don't know why. And then he was yelping, yelping and hollering diminishing-

ly (for he was running away), and he must have stumbled through the portal—for there was no sign of him left anywhere—and I was standing alone.

Alone with the remains of Ghost's family (which I knew in a way I cannot explain—not then, and not now), orphaned amidst a village of bones; which gleamed in the sun like a shattered puzzle, curved symmetrically, too perfect to be natural, like the standing, ivory birdcage in the corner of Grandma Grace's living room. Or the burned out fuselage of a 747—half-buried, perhaps, on a misty island beach—somewhere between LAX and Hawaii.

And then I was following Dillon, through the fronds and back across the transom, where I stopped to take the fish out of my bag and unwrapped it with trembling hands, before placing it halfway into the portal so that only its tail could be seen.

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THOUGH THE AFTER-SCHOOL visit had been scheduled for months—since shortly after my parents' disappearance—it wasn't until I opened the door to the counselor's office that the reality of it really hit. *This was it.* Today would decide if I would be allowed to move on to Junior High or if I would be held back a year—and not, I knew, based strictly on poor grades.

"I'm here for my exam," I said, chewing the last of my Snickers, feeling foolish, mainly because I didn't even know what to call it: this test of my sanity; this test of my maturity and character. Are you even human? they seemed to be asking. Do you belong here in our public schools with our beloved *human* children? Or should you be farmed out—to the insane asylum, maybe, or the traveling carnie, with the rest of your kind?

"Mr. Smith," said the counselor, not unpleasantly. "Let's get this started straight away." She pushed a pencil and some paper at me. "It's college ruled, is that okay?"

I nodded.

"There's a sharpener in the room, on the far side of the cabinet." She tossed the hair out of her eyes, which swung, scintillating, like liquid gold. "Shall we?"

I nodded.

She escorted me into a back room, two walls of which had upper halves made of glass, one facing the hallway and the other facing her office. The room had light brown paneling and a single round table with three chairs, one of which she pulled out. Besides the cabinet on the wall and the pencil sharpener, there was only a framed print of some daisies and an enormous IBM clock, which ticked audibly.

The wooden chair creaked as I settled into it.

"I want you to tell me about your parents—okay? About a page should do. Just, whatever comes into your mind."

"That's it?"

"That's it. No questions this time."

And then she exited, closing the door behind her—firmly, completely.

I squirmed in the chair, the seat of which was hard as concrete, then looked into her office—saw the counselor re-seating herself ... hair scintillating.

The big IBM clock ticked, its seconds hand swinging on its fulcrum.

At last I picked up the pencil and placed its tip—which the counselor had sharpened to a fine point—against the paper, feeling the lead break a little as I wrote, WHAT I'VE LEARNED FROM THE DEATH OF MY PARENTS ...

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"MR. SMITH? COME ON back."

I got up from the hard, wooden chair (the back of which faced the principal's office) and went in.

"Please, have a seat," he said.

He riffled the pages in front of him—lifting his chin on occasion, peering through his readers. A long plaque on his desk read: ROLAND R. BLAIN, SUPERINTENDENT. "You seem to have written us quite a lot," he said, and added, "I understand that wouldn't have been the case a few months ago."

"I've had a long time to think about things," I said.

"Yes, I see that." He took off his reading glasses and slipped a tip of the frames into his mouth. "You sound angry in this. Were you trying to tell us something?"

"Yes sir, I was."

Blain drummed his fingers on the desk. "Well, that explains that."

He put his glasses back on and started scribbling on the page—scratching and pecking, pecking and scratching. "Mr. Smith, do you feel that this was an accurate snapshot of your present emotional state?"

"I do, sir."

"And do you feel that anything was gained from this experience—of writing it down, that is? Anything learned?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which was?"

"That I can grow, sir. That I *have* grown, now that I've accepted the truth."

Blain looked at me over his glasses.

"About my parents, sir."

A final scratch, a final peck.

"Very well." He tossed his reading glasses onto the desk and rocked back in his chair, jauntily, his hands clasped behind his head. "And congratulations. Because you'll be going on to 7th grade."

I must have looked as stunned as I felt.

"Look, son," He glanced out the window as though in deep thought, "Anybody that can go through what you've been through ... and face it down so honestly ..." He looked back at me, appearing altogether dif-

ferent without the reading glasses, younger, more alive. "...has earned his way. Wouldn't you agree?"

I think I blushed.

"Now go on, get out of here. Before I change my mind. Besides, they're waiting for you."

He pointed outside, to where Jenny—the girl I had a crush on—and Dillon were watching, pressed against the glass.

And then it was over and us kids were walking home, Jenny in the middle while Dillon and I pretended to be pinball bumpers, ping-ponging her back and forth, making her laugh, until we reached the intersection at University and Pines and I punched the button to cross north while Jenny punched the button to continue west, and I leaned close and told her I liked her but she didn't say anything, at least not at first—until we were trotting in the opposite direction, when she called, "I like you, too!"

And I felt great, just great, better than I had ever felt before.

Not to mention clever, considering I had just lied my way—lied through my crooked, Snickers-stained teeth—into 7th grade.

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IT WOULD BE HARD TO describe how elated I felt upon returning to our fishing spot and finding the trout gone, though in truth I couldn't be sure if Ghost had gotten to it or some other predator—at least not until I stepped through (having had some difficulty in locating the portal, I confess) and saw the fresh prints.

And yet of Ghost himself there was no trace, even after I'd called out to him—in the hopes he might recognize my voice— and laid the new fish down (a giant halibut which had cost me my entire allowance); positioning it halfway in and out of the portal so I could monitor it even while studying on the nearby rocks.

Nor did I have to wait long, for I'd barely cracked my history book when I just happened to look up and see the halibut yanked all the way

in, at which I stood abruptly and approached—but was beat to the mark by Ghost himself, whose snout emerged out of thin air and was quickly followed by his neck and body—even the entirety of his tail—until we were facing each other next to the Mohawk River: Ghost still swallowing and licking his non-lips, and both of us, I think, chilled by the November wind.

"That's it," I said, rubbing my gloves together, splaying my empty hands. "No more. At least not today."

He cocked his head at this, his pink, rabbit's eyes blinking, before rearing back and barking at the sky—like a sea lion, I thought—just *yark, yark, yark!*

"Nope. All done. You're just going to have to wait until tomorrow—when I'll try to bring more. Can you do that?"

He just looked at me, his little fore-claws opening and closing—a kind of prehistoric hand-wringing, I supposed. And it occurred to me—not for the first time—that, at least in the short-term, I might be his only means of survival; that, indeed, if I didn't feed him he might very well starve.

What did not occur to me, at least until he began sniffing the air between us and slowly moving toward me, is that I myself might be in danger—that, in lieu of more fish or perhaps even a big dragonfly, he might try *kid*. Might try lying little turd-wad who was going to start 7th grade next year. Might try Denial Boy who was still convinced his parents were marooned on a desert isle and would turn up any day.

Which is when, having begun backing away, I tripped over an above-ground root and fell, sprawling, onto my back, at which instant the animal's snout darted for my head and I screamed—only to find, seconds later, that it had not attacked me at all ... but begun licking me; yes, *licking* me, sliding its great, pebbly tongue up and down my face, slathering my cold cheeks in gooey spit, breathing into my nostrils—filling the world with cow. Filling it with heat and musk and stench.

And filling it, too, with something else, something I'd been missing since the last time I'd seen my mother; a thing frowned upon in Grandma's house (where the nape of the rugs always lay left to right and the plastic floor runners always gleamed and the books in their glass-faced cabinets always stood so silent, to be viewed and not read).

Mere touch. Mere contact. Mere things coming into contact with other things. Like what I felt for Jenny or even my favorite T-shirt and wool blanket—the one with the U.S.S. Enterprise on it—like what I felt for my plastic model kits and comic books and beat-up fishing pole (even though I never used it).

Something familiar, something secret. Something, I supposed, like love. Or what a boy could know of it.

I returned many times after that—through the winter and into the spring—always bringing more fish and eventually moving up to chuck steaks and whole chickens (which I bought from the meat market in the strip mall near the school); something, alas, that I soon regretted, especially the chuck steaks, because after eating red meat he began to spurn everything else, and it was getting expensive.

Nor would anything have changed, I think, at least until he outgrew my ability to feed him, if it hadn't been for the escaped convict and the glint of his nicked and worn folding Buck knife—an incident which happened right there behind Larry and Sue Miller's newest 7-11 store just a day after my 13th birthday. Even now, looking back, it's hard to believe what occurred that day, or that it would set in motion a chain of events that would shake not just my world but the town of Comet's Tail—population 9,893—in general; indeed, the entire nation (if the NBC Nightly News was any indication). Mostly, though, it would effect Mrs. Dalton, the Vietnamese wife of my father's best friend, Stuart. Mostly it would make me wonder if I ever wanted to get married, even to Jenny, if it was capable of bringing such pain.

Here's what happened: I'd been playing the stand-up *Space Invaders* game at Larry and Sue's 7-11 (I knew them by name because they were

longtime friends of my parents, who had known everyone, it seemed), mostly just to get out of the rain (a storm had hit while I was riding home from Jenny's), when, by virtue of simply looking up, I realized my bike was being stolen—and gave chase.

But I didn't get far, because by the time I'd followed the blur of my bike around to the back of the store its thief was waiting for me—right there, by the drainpipe—and before I knew it he'd grabbed me by the throat and slammed me against the block wall, where he promptly stuck a knife to my neck.

"Okay—now, don't move, dig?" he breathed, releasing his grip, moving the knife to my throat, and I didn't move, not an inch. "Here's how it's going to be. You're going to reach down and empty your pockets—like, *real* slow, okay? And you're going to put whatever is in them right here, in my free hand. Okay? You dig?"

But the truth was I had nothing in my pockets—except my key to Grandma's house and a couple quarters, maybe—and told him so, my voice quavering, sounding small, and my legs beginning to tremble. "I spent everything on *Space Invad—*"

"Shuttup," he spat, veritably spat, so that his saliva sprinkled my face. "Just *shuttup.* I'll take what you got. Now get on it, let's go, before I swipe this thing straight across your throat."

I could hardly think I was shaking so hard, hardly breathe, but I did as I was told, handing him the key and what turned out to be three quarters— after which I turned out my pockets to show there was nothing left.

At last I stammered: "La-Larry's going to come looking for me, you know. Li—like any minute now." I indicated the back door with a movement of my eyes. "Li—like right through that door."

He didn't waver, didn't bat a Charles Manson eye. "Then I'll *cut* him too, runt. And no, no, he's not; he's too busy counting his money." He pressed the blade still tighter against my throat, hard enough that I felt sure it would break the skin. "You, on the other hand, are someone who

could identify me—now, aren't you?" He paused, his dark eyes seeming to glitter, like so much crude oil. "Say now, you're kind of a pretty thing, aren't you?"

I think my heart must have stopped, if only for an instant.

"Look at all that golden hair; why, you should have been a girl." He fondled my shoulder-length hair with his free hand. "You know, it *shines* is what it does. Yep, shines just like the sun—why, it's almost white." He looked me up and down. "That key—is that for your folks' place? Oh, I bet you got a *preetty* mother, just laid out hot and fresh, like a piz—"

In truth, my fist was impacting his nose before I'd even made a conscious decision to do so—impacting it with a squish, not a smack (like on *Star Trek*), so that he dropped the knife and stumbled back as I bolted for the trees—though why I did that instead of running around to the front of the store remains a mystery to me even to this day.

Regardless, I was well beyond the tree line when I first heard him piling after me, shouting something indiscernible, breaking branches—as though he were a wendigo and not a man at all; as though he were some vengeful spirit and not just an escaped con, which is what he turned out to be. And then I was running, running for our fishing spot, which wasn't far, doing it like the punch, without even thinking about it, until I burst into a familiar clearing and found the Mohawk River, and hurried for the portal—

And could not find it. Not anywhere. For, indeed, I had always found it before by following Ghost's prints, and the rain had washed them completely away. The convict, meanwhile, was almost there—hooting and hollering like a chieftain, emerging into the clearing while brandishing his knife, running at me through the muck and the silt.

"Ghost!" I cried. "Ghost! Where are you?"

But there was no response, no familiar *yark, yark, yark,* nothing so much as a mew, and before I knew it the convict had pile-drived me harder than I had ever been hit in my life and I flew, veritably flew, over the rocks—landing with a grunt; gasping for breath, as the criminal strad-

dled me and pinned me against the sand, as he raised the knife and suddenly paused.

For a shadow had fallen over us both—a shadow as familiar to me by that point as my very own—a shadow which said, in a language older than words: *Your day will come—as it does for us all. But that day is not today.*

And then Ghost's jaws closed about the man's head and he was lifted high into the air, screaming at the top of his lungs (though the sound was muffled, which somehow made it worse), grabbing at the animal's head, kicking his feet like a marionette even as Ghost began shaking him like a rag doll and the sounds intensified—before stopping abruptly; just *bam,* like that, because ... Because—

No. I will not speak of it. Suffice it to say that I saw in that instant the most horrific thing I had ever seen; either before or since. And that, having seen it, I found my breath where I thought there was none and scrambled to my feet, after which I ran from the sound of Ghost eating—the tearing and the cracking, the squelching and the crunching—and did not stop, not until I was home and tracking filthy muck across Grandma's perfect white carpet. Not until I was curled up like a fetus beneath the weight of my wool *Star Trek* blanket and whimpering like a beat dog—coughing and sniveling, crying like a little baby.

• • • •

MAY BECAME JUNE, WHICH became July, which became August, and I didn't see Ghost ... although I left him something every day, something which was always gone when I returned, at least at first. By September, however, he'd stopped taking what I left him completely—nor would he appear when called—and I began to worry. That would have been about the time I started getting serious with Jenny—holding hands at the indoor skating rink, kissing for the first time in the balcony at *The Muppet Movie*—as well as my first growth spurt, all in the legs, which

made me feel gangly and insecure but also made me taller than Jen, which I liked, and which she liked, too.

It was also around the time the murders started happening, and what become known as the Comet's Tail Mangler—at first just in the local paper but soon the national ones as well and finally the NBC Nightly News—started making waves across the country. Nor was that the only national news story to touch me; for my parents' missing flight was back in the spotlight also—primarily because the business tycoon who had resumed the search (after the Coast Guard and Federal Aviation Administration abandoned it) had now given up, too.

For Shad and my grandma, it was case closed—again. For me, it was the beginning of a season of denial that would last clear through September and into the school year; a season in which I became more convinced than ever that my parents were still alive. "Denial can be a powerful thing," my mother had once said (I believe it was in the context of someone's rumored drug and/or alcohol addiction), but for me, in that fear-addled fall of 1979, it became something more; something akin to an obsession or even a psychosis; something which rendered me deaf, dumb, and blind—to the reports of wreckage having been spotted by a private flight out of Honolulu in the wee hours of Christmas morning; to the reports of the victims of the Mangler having been mauled as if by an animal— mauled, and partially eaten. Indeed, I had even begun looking forward to introducing them to Jenny (when they were finally picked up from Gilligan's Island, which is how I imaged their circumstances), had even selected a date: New Years, 1980—the day the call would come. The day the news would be announced that survivors had been found and that they were in good health; the day we would drive to the airport in Grandma's black GTO and watch my parents descend the steps like soldiers returning from Vietnam, their faces tanned from the South Pacific, their necks adorned with leis.

In the end, however, the New Year brought news of a different sort—though news that struck home regardless—for the latest victim of

the Mangler turned out to be Stuart Dalton himself: decorated veteran, local hero (for his service in Vietnam), and a close, personal friend of our parents—so close that we were invited to his funeral; where I ended up in line behind his widow for the viewing of the casket, a casket which had been draped with a veil to prevent scrutiny of the body.

Even now, some forty years later, it would be difficult to describe what I felt that day, as Song Li offered her final words and her husband lay hidden beneath the gauze and the reality of what had occurred—what *had* been occurring, ever since the death of the convict—came crashing down; as Song said goodbye to her "darling Stuart" and I said hello to reality (for the first time in months, possibly even since my parents had disappeared), and knew, though the thought of it tore me down the middle, what had to be done. If, that was, I could even find the portal.

If, that was ... I could find my friend.

• • • •

AS IT TURNED OUT, FINDING the portal wasn't hard—there were smatterings of blood half in and half out of it, human blood, I knew. Finding Ghost, on the other hand, would be a different matter, one I wasn't sure I was up to—even as I stepped over the transom into his world. And yet that too proved unfounded when I sensed something moving almost immediately, something big, something bipedal, crashing through the cycad fronds like an earth mover, vibrating the ground like a tiny earthquake.

"Ghost? Is that you?"

The fact was, I couldn't be sure, and began backing away—back through the portal to our fishing spot near the Mohawk River, back to what I perceived to be safety—though I should have known by then there was no such thing. Until at last a great, grayish snout emerged and was followed by an equally great neck and trunk, and I knew, as his large feet sunk into the silt before me, that I had found him, even if he'd dou-

bled in size and was no longer pure white (after all, I'd grown too, nor was my hair as light as it used to be). Still, it wasn't until I looked into his dark pink eyes, eyes that had become so dark as to be almost red, that I truly saw the face of my friend—older, yes, and frightening in a way that he hadn't been before, more robust, but, well, still the creature that had saved my life on that rainy day in May of 1979. Still something more than just a dinosaur—at least to me. Still Ghost.

I fumbled for Dad's gun—which I had found in Shad's dresser, as I knew I would—and carefully removed it from my coat pocket, loathing its black, bloated weight, wondering if I would have the strength to pull its trigger (and wondering, too, if it would even be enough, now that Ghost had grown).

Ghost, meanwhile, only cocked his head, his red eyes blinking, his fore-claws opening and closing, his cracked and rutted throat grumbling: *Magrawww ...*

I lifted the pistol and steadied it, wishing he would just turn and go away; that he would just forget me and the portal forever: forget he ever tasted human flesh—forget the world which lie next to his own. It was magical thinking, I knew.

Magrawww ...

I may have trained the weapon on one of his eyes, I don't know, figuring that was the most direct path to his brain. All I know is that he sniffed at the barrel of the gun as I aimed and promptly began licking it—thinking it was a fish, I suppose. Thinking I was feeding him.

"I've missed you, Ghost. I really have," I said, finding the gun heavier than expected, wanting to just lower it and forget the whole thing—to run home to my room (my real room, at Mom and Dad's, not the fake one in Grandma's mausoleum), to run and never stop.

And then he was throwing back his head and roaring—wondering where the fish went, I suppose, wanting to be fed as before—and I *was* lowering the gun (knowing, I think, I could never really do it; that I couldn't even bonk a fish), when there was a rumbling up the road and

I turned to see Shad getting out of the GTO—at which instant Ghost crouched like a tiger and leapt: flashing past me like a phantom, bounding for the car.

And then I did do it—fire, that is—not just once but multiple times, hitting Ghost in the head and back, hitting him in the legs, until at last he stumbled and skidded onto his belly in the rocks—all the way into the river—where I like to think he died before ever touching the water. Where I liked to think he died without ever knowing pain.

And then it was over and Shad just held me (for I'd collapsed by the river), gripping me tighter than I'd ever been gripped before—even by Mom—rocking me like a baby; saying "It's okay" and "Let them go" and that he loved me over and over (and that Grandma did to, in her own peculiar way), comforting me as I cried. Until a considerable time had passed and we stood, watching as Ghost drifted further out—gurgling beneath the dark surface, vanishing without a trace—and I found I was able to say goodbye. To Ghost, yes—whom I had loved as only a boy can; but also to my parents, whom I knew I'd never see again. Also to the life I had known—which was as gone as Ghost and his victims. I accepted it and it was good—because it was the only thing to do. There, with my brother, standing side by side, in the fading, funereal light of the day.

DEATH GRADER

Statement of Ms. Eleanor "Elle" Westbrook (January 17th, 3:30 PM, interviewed by Detective Ollie Rowe)

Detective Rowe: I want you to relax, Ms. Westbrook—is it okay if I call you Eleanor?

Westbrook: I prefer Elle.

Detective Rowe: Elle. Now I want you to relax ... and tell me about the first time you saw the road grader actually move. Can you do that for me?

Westbrook: Sure. It was the day after Christmas—the 26th, I think. It was a Thursday. I remember it because, well, besides the grader moving for the first time, it was movie night in the community room. *Frozen II.* Which—

Detective Rowe: At Farmington Hall. The orphanage. Is that correct?

Westbrook: Yes, but—we don't call it that. An orphanage, that is. The nuns don't like it.

Detective Rowe: But you were home?

Westbrook: Yes. In my room. I'd had a terrible nightmare and was just waking up, when I heard—

Detective Rowe: Talk about that a little. Your nightmare. Do you remember it?

Westbrook: No. Not really. Just bits and pieces. I remember ...

Detective Rowe: Yes?

Westbrook: I remember ... it had the road grader in it. And it—it killed somebody. It ran over him with its front tires and then ...

Detective Rowe: Yes?

Westbrook: I'd rather not say.

Detective Rowe: But I'm asking you to, Elle. It's okay. It ran over him with its front tires and ...?

Westbrook: And then it dropped that big plow it has.

Detective Rowe: The moldboard. The blade it uses to grade the roads.

Westbrook: (inaudible)

Detective Rowe: I'm going to ask you to speak clearly and not just nod, okay? We're recording.

Westbrook: Yes, sir. That one. The big one. It—it dropped it right on him. And then I heard it strike the ground ... I mean, the pavement under the snow.

Detective Rowe: So it—look, I know how difficult this must be, considering ... So it passed clean through him, is that it?

Westbrook: (inaudible)

Detective Rowe: No nodding. Okay. What then?

Westbrook: He opened up. Like ... like a can of spaghetti.

Detective Rowe: (inaudible) Okay. I can see you're upset by this. Let's switch gears a bit. Did you recognize this—this man? You did say it was a he. Was it somebody you recognized from your real life? Your waking life?

Westbrook: No.

Detective Rowe: I see. And you're sure about that?

Westbrook: Yes. Positive. The grader was looking for someone to kill—when the man stumbled out of that bar on 4th Street, the one where all the homeless people hang out.

Detective Rowe: And where were you, in your dream, that is?

Westbrook: That's what's so funny. Because I distinctly remember watching the grader approach from the sidewalk, which was covered in snow. Just standing there, right outside the bar. And yet when I saw him killed I was inside the cab, looking down through the glass. At one point I was even way up above it—the grader, that is—like, like God. I guess I was sort of everywhere and nowhere, if that makes any sense.

Detective Rowe: Yes. Yes, it does. Okay. That's good. That's very good. Thank you. Let's go back now—to when you first saw it move. Is that all right?

Westbrook: Sure. Like I said, I'd just woken up from the dream when I heard it, just rumbling across the field where they'd been working on the road—

Detective Rowe: The I-890–North Schenectady Corridor.

Westbrook: Sure, I guess. So I went to my window—you know, to see what was going on, and saw it sputtering to a stop near the office trailers and other equipment—which were all covered in snow—just shutting down with a rattle, like it had been running for a long time. That's when I first noticed it, how clean it was—there was no snow on it at all. Like—

Detective Rowe: But it was there when you went to sleep, isn't that correct?

Westbrook: Yes, of course. Covered in snow. It hadn't moved since December, when they had that accident—you know, where the worker was killed.

Detective Rowe: Clarke. The foreman. I seem to recall they had several accidents; including when they rammed into that layer of concrete.

Westbrook: (inaudible)

Detective Rowe: What?

Westbrook: The Meyers. James and Mia. That's where the concrete was at. I used to talk with them sometimes, before the accid—

Detective Rowe: You knew them?

Westbrook: Before the traffic accident. The one with the semi. Last summer.

Detective Rowe: Yes, I seem to recall that too. Something about them accelerating out of control—

Westbrook: I think *they* did it.

Detective Rowe: I'm sorry?

Westbrook: The bugs.

Detective Rowe: The ... *bugs.*

Westbrook: (inaudible): In the concrete. Where the Meyers buried them. At least, until the road grader came along.

Detective Rowe: (inaudible) I want you to hold that, okay? Hold that very thought. There's a psychiatrist coming, Ms. Daniels, a very nice lady, who's going to talk with you about all that—when we're finished, okay?

Westbrook: Okay.

Detective Rowe: Now, and this is important, so I want you to think about it very carefully. Did you at any point see anyone get out of the motor grader?

Westbrook: You already asked me that.

Detective Rowe: Once more—for the record. Please.

Westbrook: No. Like I said.

Detective Rowe: But it *was* dark, isn't that right? Dark, and snowing.

Westbrook: Yes, but not like later. The storm was just getting started.

Detective Rowe: I see. And then you went back to—

Westbrook: No.

Detective Rowe: You didn't go back to sleep? What did you do?

Westbrook: I went down to the community room, to tell Sister Bryant.

Detective Rowe: All right. And ... were they still watching the movie ... (inaudible) *Frozen II?*

Westbrook: No. All the girls had gone to bed. It was just Sister Bryant, who had fallen asleep on the couch.

Detective Rowe: Okay. And did you wake her up, to tell her what you had seen?

Westbrook: (inaudible)

Detective Rowe: I'm sorry?

Westbrook: No. She ... she never liked me. So I thought it was a bad idea.

Detective Rowe: Oh. So there was—bad blood between you?

Westbrook: I wouldn't say that. I was fine with her. She just ... didn't like me. I didn't drive the road grader over her—if that's what you mean. That was them.

Detective Rowe: The, ah ... bugs?

Westbrook: Yeah. The ghosts of them. Their bodies are still in the cement.

Detective Rowe: I see. Okay. And then?

Westbrook: I waited for her to wake up.

Detective Rowe: All right. And?

Westbrook: Which took about an hour—I guess, maybe less—I was watching the news. Then she woke up ... and I told her all about it. About the machine.

Detective Rowe: About the grader. Okay. And what did she say?

Westbrook: She didn't believe me, not even for a second. So I led her to the window and we looked out, and sure enough, the snow had re-covered it—the entire road grader. It had even refilled its tracks.

Detective Rowe: I imagine that didn't go over so well.

Westbrook: No. And I got the switch for it. Which is why I didn't mention it again—to anybody—not even when the reports of people finding body parts in the snow started coming out. Of course I knew what was going on because I saw the grader leave every night—after which I would always dream it had killed someone. And then it would just rattle back and park itself, usually about 11 pm.

Detective Rowe: You were alone.

Westbrook: Yeah. But what's new.

Detective Rowe: And you knew something had to be done. At least that's what you told me earlier.

Westbrook: Sure—if I wasn't imaging everything.

Detective Rowe: And you decided you had to get closer. To inspect it yourself.

Westbrook: Yeah. The day after New Years. The day after they found the Smythe lady all chopped up in quarters.

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STATEMENT OF MS. ELEANOR "Elle" Westbrook (January 17th, 5:30 PM, interviewed by Doctor Regina Daniels)

Dr. Daniels: So after you trudged through the snow and reached the road grader—and that must have been quite a task on January 2nd, when there was so much accumulation—you say you used a broom to clean off the moldboard—is that correct?

Westbrook: That big blade, yeah. That's when I noticed the blood—just splashed all over it like dried blackberry syrup. But there was something else, too, which was sort of draped over the plow like a garland, all shiny and pink.

Dr. Daniels: (inaudible) What on earth was it?

Westbrook: Oh, It was an intestine, though how it got on top of the plow I have no idea. All I know is I wanted to run away after that—as far away as I could, farther even than Farmington Hall—and would have ... if not for the voices.

Dr. Daniels: The voices. Coming from—where, exactly?

Westbrook: Oh, everywhere. And nowhere. Coming from my head. But also from the road grader—from its cab. Like there were people inside—little people, I thought, I don't know why—all talking at the same time. Like they were arguing.

Dr. Daniels: My goodness. Well. That must have been extremely frightening. What on earth did you do?

Westbrook: I wanted to run, like I said—

Dr. Daniels: Yes, I can see why—

Westbrook: But I didn't, because it seemed to be drawing me in, toward itself—the cab, that is. Like a big magnet. Not only that, but there was a weird light inside—not a bright light, like in a house, but sort of a fog, like those pictures you see of distant galaxies, just sort of a green smear. And the next thing I knew I had opened the hatch and climbed in

and the door had slammed shut—which made me jump—and they started talking, just, addressing me directly, as plain and clear as you are now.

Dr. Daniels: Oh, my goodness ... And—and what did they say?

Westbrook: They—they told me that they needed my help. That they were getting too weak to move the grader but that their work wasn't finished and that much infestation remained. That if I helped them they would ... they would spare me. And then they began saying other things, most of which I didn't understand—only the tone, which was hateful. And then I did run, although I had difficulty with the door and banged my hand up real good.

Dr. Daniels: I *see* that.

Westbrook: But it didn't matter because I just had to get away. Because, you see, the whole terrible truth had become clear to me in that instant, clear by a kind of mind transfer, how the grader had cracked the concrete in which the aliens' ship was interred and freed their spirits—despite the Meyers' best effort to contain them—how its owner had been influenced to paint the thing black and write "Black Betty" on its frame (before later using it to run over his co-workers and finally to kill himself), even how they—the aliens, the bugs—had come to be here in the first place! And I couldn't take it— just couldn't take it—and ran through the snow straight back to Farmington, up to my bed, where I stayed all eve and most the next day, refusing to come down—even when they handed out the ice skates for our excursion the next night. Even when they picked the teams for the game at which Sister Bryant was—where Sister Bryant was, oh! Oh! (inaudible)

Dr. Daniels: *Shhh.* It's okay. Everything is okay. Let's just—I think that will be all for today. All right? You must be exhausted.

Westbrook: (inaudible) But it isn't okay. Because the fact is, Sister Bryant is dead. Worse, she's been ... oh, it's too horrible. And although you won't come out and say it ... you think I did it. Don't you?

Dr. Daniels: That's not for me to decide, Elle.

Westbrook: (inaudible) But you have decided— I can see it in your face. And not just for Sister Bryant ... but all of them. I wonder: has it ever occurred to you that I might have saved lives by doing what I did? That I might have even stopped the killing? (inaudible) No? Well, maybe you'll think about that the next time. Goodnight, Ms. Daniels.

Dr. Daniels: Goodnight, Elle. Try to sleep well.

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STATEMENT OF MS. ELEANOR "Elle" Westbrook (January 18th, 3:30 PM, interviewed by Detective Ollie Rowe)

Detective Rowe: Okay. So. You say you had a plan from the instant you woke up—is that correct?

Westbrook: Yes, sir, since the moment Sister Bryant announced the hockey game—even though I pretended not to notice.

Detective Rowe: That would be the hockey game at Fenrow Park, next to Deep Lake—isn't that correct?

Westbrook: Yes, sir.

Detective Rowe: Which is why you returned to where the road grader was parked at on the eve of January 3rd, 2019, and proceeded to board it. Is that right?

Westbrook: Yes, that's right, at which time they began to speak to me just as before—the bugs, you understand—and told me to place my hands on the controls (the keys were still in it!), and that they would guide me from that point on—like a puppet, I suppose, or a marionette. For what they needed more than anything was my musculature, my bone and tendon, to drive the grader they had previously driven only with their minds. And I told them with my thoughts that I knew where many infestations could be killed all at once (for that's how they view us, as infestations, as a kind of cancer of the Earth; a *disease*) and we moved out, the black grader rattling and rumbling, belching plumes of smoke— its work lights winking on. Nor was it long before—

Detective Rowe: You came to Fenrow Park.

Westbrook: Yes. Because it's close to Farmington Hall. And I saw the lights almost immediately—the lights Sister Bryant had rented to light the game—and her, too, trudging through the snow toward the restrooms, bundled up like an Eskimo. And before I knew it the grader had accelerated toward her even though I tried to fight it and chased her all the way into the building, where it smashed into the masonry like a wrecking ball.

Detective Rowe: But she made it, did she not? Made it into the restrooms.

Westbrook: Oh, yes. Thank God. But then the gears started shifting and we were backing up—way up—not backing up and stopping, mind you, but backing up and launching forward again, circling around, so that we were parallel to the front of the building.

Detective Rowe: But, why? Why would you—why would they do that, Elle?

Westbrook: I didn't know! At least, not until the blade changed its orientation and became vertical—something I didn't even know it could do. Looking back I understand; it was going to shave off the front of the building. But then Sister Bryant stuck her head out (to see if it was clear, I suppose) and the gas pedal sunk to the floor, and we launched at her so fast that I didn't even realize what the bugs intended until the blade struck her neck and—and ...

Detective Rowe: And what, Elle? You must go on ...

Westbrook: And ... I don't want to. You know very well what happened after that.

Detective Rowe: I saw the aftermath, yes. If that's what you mean. But in fact, I don't know what happened; that's the point of all this. Now answer the question, please. What happened after the grader struck Sister Bryant?

Westbrook: (inaudible) I don't want ...

Detective Rowe: *What happened?*

Westbrook: She ... her ...

Detective Rowe: Tell me, you little monster! *What happened to Sister Bryant?*

Westbrook: *She was decapitated, okay?* The blade struck her in the neck and she was split like a cantaloupe and her head flew off and bounced off the blocks of the men's room and she ended up with blood all over her clean white habit and one eye staring up at us from the snow, okay? Are you happy now? Is that what you wanted to hear?

Detective Rowe: I want to hear the truth! I want to hear how a 15 year-old girl became a mass murderer over the course of mere weeks, and how she learned to drive that grader, even to expertly maneuver its—

Westbrook: I told you ... it was *them. The bugs.* They were behind everything, not just the grader but the car, too, that car that killed all those people just a few years ago, the black '66, the original Black Betty—the one owned by James Meyers and before that, a man named Crowley. They *bond* with machines, you understand, moving machines, just like they had a bond with their spacecraft, the one that came to Earth in 1966 and which is buried in the cement where the Meyers' house used to be—the one whose magnetic field might have destroyed the planet if they hadn't—

Detective Rowe: Enough! Admit it: You killed all those people and Sister Bryant too, and then you tried to kill the girls playing hockey, your own neighbors at Farmington, other orphans just like you. That's why you steered the grader toward the frozen lake ...

Westbrook: I *steered* it toward the lake precisely to avoid that, knowing it would break the ice before it ever reached them, knowing it would sink to the very bottom! And knowing, too, that without a machine to possess the bugs would simply dissipate, that they would scatter on the wind, never to endanger anyone again. And that's exactly what happened after the grader fell through, moaning like a keeled ship, groaning like a dinosaur—I know because I felt them, screaming and bickering amongst themselves, furious that they had misplayed their hands, their slimy, green, locust's hands!

Detective Rowe: I've heard enough. Just—just get her out of here.

(inaudible)

Detective Rowe: Just go, take her to the juvenile detention center. Hurry up.

(inaudible)

Detective Rowe: Sure. Send her on in.

(inaudible)

Dr. Daniels: Detective Rowe?

Detective Rowe: Yes, please, come on in. Have a seat.

Dr. Daniels: (inaudible) I take it that didn't go very well.

Detective Rowe: On the contrary, it went almost exactly as expected. Jesus. Just ...

Dr. Daniels: I'd try not to dwell on it. It'll make you crazy yourself. Besides (inaudible), I was told to give you this. Read it. It'll give you something to focus on.

Detective Rowe: It's the report on that chunk of concrete. The one at the demolished Meyers residence. Looks like they cracked it open, finally ... and ...

(inaudible)

Dr. Daniels: What?

Detective Rowe: I don't know ... looks like they found something—unusual. Something big. Something made out of ...

Dr. Daniels: What?

Detective Rowe: That's just it. They don't know.

Dr. Daniels: Isn't that strange?

Detective Rowe: Yeah. Yeah, it is.

Dr. Daniels: You look tired. How long has it been since you slept?

Detective Rowe: I don't even remember. (inaudible) What do you say, nightcap at Mortimer's?

Dr. Daniels: That sounds positively heavenly.

Detective Rowe: It does, doesn't it? Oh, and more thing.

Dr. Daniels: What? What is it?

Detective Rowe: You're closer than me: Turn off that fucking tape recorder.

Dr. Daniels: Oh, that. (inaudible) Don't mind if I—

A PORTRAIT OF THE WITCH DOCTOR AS A YOUNG MAN

"Okay, we're going to try this one last time, but with different music. Now, I want you to listen *very* carefully—okay? And say the first thing that comes to mind."

"Okay." He stares at the painting of the man and woman in the moonlight—*The Secret Courtship,* he wants to call it. Or *The Young Lovers.* "But I don't see what—"

"Just do it, Patrobus. Please."

"Okay." He watches as she moves the needle carefully into position and lowers it, then closes his eyes.

You never close your eyes anymore when I kiss your lips ...

"Smoke," he says, seeing a red and black plume—roiling, billowing. "And fire. Rising like the moon, rising in the night. Not cold ... even in winter."

And there's no tenderness like before in your fingertips...

"Good—good. What else? What are you feeling?"

You're trying hard not to show it ...

"Old. Tired. But satisfied, too. A sense of accomplishment. As though—"

(Baby ...)

"... as though I'm in the middle of a difficult job ..."

... but baby, baby I know it ...

"... one that is going well."

"Excellent."

You lost that lovin' feelin' ...

Whoa, that lovin' feeling' ...

She turns the music down slowly, incrementally. "Now I want you to stay exactly as you are—don't open your eyes."

"Okay."

"And I want you to look around ... and tell me what you see. Okay?"

"Okay."

He looks at the men in front of him, one of them tall, strapping, and the other slim, short, girlish almost. "I see two men, both of them dressed the same—all in black and white, like the clothes you say you found me in. They're standing at attention, as though—"

"As though what?"

"As though I—as though—as though they are reporting to me. As though ... I am their leader." He pauses, looking at the men. "Yes, yes, I know them. I even know their names: the tall one is named ... Jeremiah. And the other—the other—Aluka. They are men of good character, both of them."

"Excellent, Patrobus. Excellent. And can you tell me where you are?"

He looks around, at the burning walls and the burning bodies, at the men with muskets spewing clouds of flame retardant. "I don't know, some kind of apartment building, I think. We—we've torched it real good and are trying to put out the fire, but it's fighting us. I think we're afraid it's going to collapse."

"The men in front of you, Jeremiah and Aluka. Are either of them speaking?"

He shakes his head. "No, no—yes, before, not now."

"And what did they say?"

"Jeremiah informed me that two Witch Doctors were missing, I don't remember their names. And Aluka volunteered to make a sweep for them. But I—I said no, that I would do it myself, and that I wanted everybody to get clear."

"You are the Captain, yes?"

"I am the Captain."

"And what does that mean, Patrobus?"

"It means that if anyone must go down with the ship—it should be me."

"As opposed to one of your men."

"Yes."

The room falls silent.

"You love them, don't you?"

"Yes," he says, finally. "They are my brothers. But, because I am so much older—and also their Captain—they are like sons, too."

Yet more silence, the deepest one yet. At last she says, "That'll be all for today, I think. Now, I want you to just breathe deeply ... and count to ten. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes, Sister Sula."

"Aloud, please."

"One, two, thre—"

She snaps her fingers, bringing him back: back to the dirty hospital room and the painting of the young lovers on the wall. Back to the beautiful, clean-faced woman and her pendulum, which is shaped like a labrys, the symbol of female solidarity.

"Now ... what do you remember of the last several moments?"

He only shakes his head, remembering nothing.

"Good," she says. "Then we'll pick it up again tomorrow."

She stands and clicks off his bed-lamp, gathers up his trays. "Goodnight, Patrobus. Sleep well and dream what thou wilt."

"Goodnight, Sister Sula. Blessed be thy Way."

And then she is gone and twenty minutes have passed and he is sleeping, dreaming: of music piped from loudspeakers and an enemy in abject terror; of men in black and women—witches—running for their lives; of fire and smoke rising into the night and the very building collapsing, burying him like a beast in tar, burying him alive.

• • • •

"YOU SAY THAT YOU LOVE your men," she says, swinging the pendulum, her voice smooth, steady, mellifluous.

"Yes," he says, "more than anything in the world. Even New Salem."

"I see. Well, that's natural enough, given your position. But you have loved before, have you not?"

He freezes—resisting the question, resisting the spell, but nonetheless sees *her:* Jadis—as if it were yesterday, as if they'd never parted.

"Yes, Sister Sula."

"And was it the same—a brotherly love, a patriarchal one?"

"No."

"What was it, then?"

"It—it was a romantic love. An affair of the heart. But ... I do not wish to speak of—"

"Oh, but you must," she urges, "you must! It is imperative to your treatment. Who was she, Patrobus? More importantly, *when* was she? Surely it was before—"

"The Pestilence, yes." He struggles to remember, to visualize: sees casualty stats being posted on ticker boards and television screens. "Just before, although some had already died—enough so that people were starting to notice, including the authorities. But Jadis and I ... we were young, and so lived in our own world. Nothing touched us."

"You were isolated?" She lowers the pendulum slowly.

"Yes—well, no, no, not physically, but mentally. Emotionally. We were artists—she was a mood dancer, and I had my poetry and paints. We lived in coffee shops, mostly—beer halls. Anywhere there was art and intellectualism, or what we perceived as those things. That's where we were at when she told me—a beer hall. It's funny because I can see it right now in perfect detail, even though it was thirty-odd years ago."

"But it wasn't thirty-odd years ago; it's right now, Patrobus." She touches his arm, gently, reassuringly. "You are there ... young ... right now. Describe her to me."

He hesitates, not wanting to give in, not wanting to experience any pain. At last he says, "She is beautiful—much like you." He stops staring into space long enough to look at her—at Sula. "I mean the kind of beau-

ty which is born of itself and not arrived at through makeup and guile. Which is to say a natural one, a genuine one. A beauty without effort."

She lowers her head briefly before lifting it again and seeming to nod, as if to say, *Thank you.* Then she refocuses on him abruptly, as though just remembering something. "What did she tell you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"This—Jadis. You said she told you something—in the beer hall. What was it?"

He smiles suddenly, appearing to light up as never before. "That she was pregnant, of course. That I was about to be a father." He laughs abruptly. "Can you imagine?"

"A father? But you said before you had no—"

He waves her criticism away. "But don't you see? That night I *was.* That night I—*we*—had created something, something more than just movements to music or words on paper; something both of us had secretly wished for, prayed for, even. And the next day there was still more, for I'd won a commission to create artwork to celebrate a wealthy patron's marriage—a series of oil paintings and some verse—the proceeds from which would fund our lives, which were extremely modest, for 12 months at least—well beyond when the baby would be born."

"Oh, Patrobus!"

"Yes, yes, it was magical, so magical that we hardly noticed the casualty reports—which were growing, some might even say doubling—nor that quarantines were being established and strange suicides and murders being reported, deaths in which the only victims were men, often at the hands of their own wives or mothers. Still, none of it seemed to concern us until it happened in our very own community—right there in Little Tripoli—when Jadis' stage director was killed—by his own daughters. Only then did we start hearing talk of yet another virus, an entirely new one, called M24—the so-called 'Witch's Virus.' Only then, when it began to effect women uniquely, mostly white women—draining them of color, turning many murderous—did anyone pay attention."

"And the rest, as they say, is history." She stroked his arm once before taking her hand away. "Let's get back to you and Jadis. I want to know more about the pregnancy. Did she carry the child to term, for example? And what sex was it? That sort of thing."

"I'm happy to say we were the parents of a beautiful baby boy," he says, beaming with pride, his eyes appearing to sparkle. "A boy just as rambunctious and full of life as you'd expect; and one whom I dare say took after his father with pen and brush. Indeed, I'd already enrolled him in the Junior Art Academy when—when ..."

"What is it, Patrobus?"

"I—I don't know ... I just ... there's a blank where he should be after this. A kind of dead zone. Like ..."

"Like what? Concentrate, Patrobus. Visualize: his face, his mannerisms. What is his name, for example? You didn't say."

"His name. His name is ..."

"Say it, Patrobus. It's there, that and all the rest. It must be."

"His name is ..."

"Say it."

"His name was ..."

"Say it, by the gods!"

"Lucas. His name was Lucas. And he is no longer with us—because a witch killed him. A witch like you, Sister Sula."

• • • •

"WELL, NOW WE ARE GETTING somewhere," says Sula, glancing him up and down, appearing victorious. "But she was not a witch like me, else she would not have done what she did. For that is exactly what happened, isn't it? Jadis became infected by M24 and slew her own son, and your son too. And then you spent the next year and a half wandering a world you no longer recognized, a world where the dead were stacked on every street corner and the bonfires burned day and night, until you stumbled into a beer hall one night because they were offering free bread

and heard a powerful orator talking about male superiority and cleansing the world; and you listened, at first just because it felt good to have something in your stomach, but later because you were swayed, and that orator's name was Kill-sin, who would go on to found New Salem and rule it with an iron fist. Am I warm, Witch Doctor?"

"Jesus," he says, mostly to himself, his mind reeling, his head spinning, "Tanis Coven ... the collapse ... You must have found me in the rubble and—"

He glares at her knowingly, alertly, then lunges at her suddenly—as she raises a palm and freezes him in place; as she locks him in mid-lunge only inches from her hand. "I think, just now, that you should re-evaluate your course of action—Patrobus of the Witch Doctors. However, as I'm sure you have many questions, I will try to answer them—in advance. Indeed, you *were* found in the rubble of Tanis Coven not three weeks ago: bruised, battered, barely responsive, but *alive,* and bearing marks on your uniform suggestive of rank, something of interest to us. That is the only reason you were not executed on sight. Rather, it was decided you would be used for breeding stock—which fell to me to extract, as well as whatever information I could about you and your men, though you wouldn't have been aware of it and you won't remember it now. As for once those aims had been accomplished: you were to be killed and disposed of—as promptly and unceremoniously as possible. And yet you live, do you not?"

He strains against her spell, against the force thrown out of her hand. "Only until you get everything you want," he growls, wondering what they have done with his uniform and weapon, wondering if they are looking for him—his men—even now.

"Ah, but that's not true," she says, even as the spell seems to lesson, to mutate, to become something else. "Indeed you'll be free to go in a moment, *after* I show you something. Something I think you'll find ... interesting. Would you like to see?"

And, before he can even respond, she waves her hand, and there they are—elsewhere. Just, *elsewhere.* Or, to be more precise, they are in a nursery: only as white and sterile as any laboratory and filled not with bassinets but embryos in glass tubes.

"Beautiful, aren't they? We've used witchcraft, of course, to accelerate gestation—otherwise they will be normal women and girls in a few months, possibly weeks." She laughs a little. "Do you still think your science and reductionist thinking are so superior? Nor will they be lame to the hive-mind, for what we know now that you do not is that M24 is latent, not acquired." She turns to face him and smiles, the ends of her lips curling impishly, elfishly, something he might have found attractive in a different time and place. "We all have it. Even you. Yours just hasn't turned on, hasn't made itself visible, that's all."

"I don't believe you," he says, still trying to resist, still trying to break the spell. "I don't believe anything you say. None of us do; that's how we've survived. Is this why you've kept me alive? To tell me this?"

"I've kept you alive because I see in you an empathy the Sisterhood wholly denies. They tell us the exact opposite, you know. That you are emotionless brutes with only the will to overpower and dominate and that you are incapable of love— and yet I've seen much love in you; first in how you treated me while under a passion spell and later in how you spoke of your men, but most of all in how you spoke of your wife and child—especially the child."

He pauses, looking at the glass tubes, at the embryos floating in fluid. "Are you telling me that ... those are all my daughters?"

Again she just smiles. "What else? Yes, of course, every single one. Not just clones, mind you, but *daughters,* each with their own genetic makeup and individual traits—which will in time give rise to language and syntax, to dance and to art, to rhyme and verse and expression in a thousand forms. Indeed, they are, all of them, in a very real sense, *our* children. An entirely new generation born of both witch and Witch-Doctor, perchance to evolve into something neither of us could have

imagined. Think of it, Patrobus! In the end that is all I ask of you; all that I ask in return for your life. Think of it ... and sleep."

And then he *does* sleep, and it is good, at least until he awakens near New Salem and finds himself stumbling into it like a ghost; where he is greeted by civilian men and assisted to the Station House, and told by the few Doctors present that everyone else to a man has joined the raiding party, and that it is on its way to rescue him right now.

On its way to something called Blair Coven.

Where they will kill everything in sight.

• • • •

IT WILL STOP WITH HIM, he has decided, stop in this generation, this place. This he vows as he pushes the spare War Wagon to its mechanical limit— hoping he is not too late, praying he can avoid the slaughter. Nor does he go alone for the voice of Sister Sula now follows him everywhere: telling him which direction to go, goading him on incessantly, imploring him to rush—to race—*go, go, they will listen to you, hurry!*

And this he does, feeling young again, *alive,* as though he has slept for thirty years and just now woken up; as though the world *itself* were waking up—how else could a witch such as Sula be accounted for? A witch who would spare him when her own sisters had commanded he be put to death? Who would place her (and his!) humanity over all else, even ideology? How long has it been since anyone, man or woman, has done that? It is enough to make him hope the blood of three decades might yet be washed away—to glimpse a world where male and female alike might yet prosper and thrive. It is—

And that's when he first notices it, the red and black plume; there, on the horizon, roiling, billowing. Smoke and fire. Rising like the moon. Rising in the twilight.

• • • •

HE IS NOT PARTICULARLY surprised, when he gets there, to hear the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" booming from their War Wagons—after all, it's what they were playing on the day he disappeared. What *is* surprising—not to mention infuriating—is the manner in which the trucks have been parked: empty and idling along the perimeter without even so much as a driver to look after them (for on this occasion they have surely joined in the kill). That and Sula's voice, which has become so clear as to be startling, as she speaks directly into his mind, saying, *I am on the third floor. Please. Hurry. I want to see you before* ...

Then she is gone and he is hurrying through the building, winding his way through the flames and smoke, trying not to look at the bodies (which are everywhere), hearing the music from the loudspeakers outside:

Baby (baby), baby (baby)

I beg you please (please), please (please)

—trying and failing, unable to ignore the spread-eagled corpses and blown open heads, the lithe, crumpled forms, the rivers of blood ...

I need your love (need your love)

I need your love (I need your love)

... and not just witches—women—but his own men, some of them nearly boys, twisted from convulsion spells, dead-blue from asphyxiation ...

So bring it on back (so bring it on back)

Bring it on back (bring it on back)

Until he can take it no more and ducks into a stairwell, cutting off the music, allowing himself to focus: on Sula and where she might be; on the embryos—his children!—and where they might be; on ending the war, making certain Sula survives ...

For he is convinced now she is the key; she and other witches—women—like her; and that they must be saved at all costs, even if it means forfeiting his own life.

At which instant he bursts from the stairwell and onto the third floor (which is empty because the slaughter is moving upward, another mistake, because helicopters will be needed to dust them all off), which he dashes down like a madman; trying not to look into the rooms, ignoring the corpses which lie just beyond the kicked-in doors.

Until he rounds the corner of Room 322 (the one she has told him she is in; the one in which he had been recovering) and sees her at last: just lying there crumpled and broken on the floor—her clothes still smoking and her hair partially burned away, and her expression dazed, as though she doesn't quite know where she is.

"Sula ..." he says, before rushing to her and dropping to his knees; before scooping her into his arms and placing a hand over her gaping gut wound. "Hang on, Sister. Just hang on ..."

"Is that you, Patrobus?" she says, jerking suddenly, coughing up blood. "Oh, it is—I feel so sleepy ..."

"Shh, save your strength," he says, holding her tight, holding her together. "I'm going to get you out of here. And then I am coming back. Coming back to save as many as I can."

"No. No. Please. I—"

"Just hang on. We've got work to do. The both of us. But first—"

"No, Patrobus. I—I tested the embryos. They—they're positive. All of them."

He squeezes her—gently, firmly. "What do you mean? You said yourself that it doesn't matter—that the virus is latent; it's in all of us. Just hold on, Sula. I'm going to try and stand ..."

"M24, yes," she manages, grunting suddenly, her whole body beginning to shake. "But not P-1. Not the Pestilence. Oh, don't you see, Patrobus? *They have it."*

He freezes, trying to process this, holding her entrails in. "No, that's not possible. Everyone who survived the first disease is immune. You know that."

She gasps, the pallor of her skin changing, losing its blue-gray color, becoming just gray.

"No. Not ... not to this strain. I—I'm sorry, Patrobus. But they ... they must ..."

And then she convulses, once, twice, shrinking as the air rushes out of her lungs—and dies.

After which the room lies silent, or nearly so (for even the boom of musket fire has subsided), and all that remains is the sound of the flames crackling and distant helicopters.

• • • •

"SIR? ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

—Jeremiah, standing in the doorway, appearing utterly relieved—and utterly stupefied.

"I ... I don't know," says Patrobus, staring straight ahead, staring into space. "I just don't—"

There is a burst of static as Aluka comes over Jeremiah's radio: "I'm still waiting for an answer," he says—stirring Jeremiah from his trance, causing him to look at Patrobus instead of the witch. At last he straightens and offers the Captain his weapon. "Sir, I am officially relinquishing command—and handing it back to you. It has been an honor."

Patrobus just looks at the thing, at the fire-breathing musket, his eyes still distant, his mind clearly elsewhere.

Aluka comes again: "Well, what do I do?"

Patrobus doesn't move. At last he says: "What—what does he want?"

Jeremiah steps forward, saluting smartly. "It's the seventh floor, sir. We've ... we've found what appears to be human embryos. They're ... in a lab of some sort—in glass tubes. Aluka wants to know how to proceed."

"Aluka," mumbles Patrobus, still in a trance.

He looks down at Sula, who is beautiful even in death, then at the painting on the wall, which he recognizes at last. *The Secret Courtship.* Or: *The Young Lovers.* He isn't sure which to call it—it was an untitled

work-for-hire. *How did it ever get here,* he wonders—before laughing at the question. *How does anything, anyone, get anywhere?*

"Burn them" he says at last, letting the body slide to the floor, standing erect. "Burn everything. Burn it to the ground and then we'll drop a daisy-cutter. Just to be sure."

"Sir?" —Jeremiah again.

"You've got your orders."

And then the man is gone, relaying the orders as he goes, and Patrobus is alone; alone with Sula's body and the artwork from his youth; alone as he was in those awful days after the outbreak of P-1 and M24, and the murder of his son; alone as a man must always be—as he dies and is born—as the universe wants it.

Alone with Sula and *The Young Lovers,* he decides, both of which he torches with the musket —the handle of which is still warm from Jeremiah's touch—before pausing in the door and watching as they burn.

Statement of Mrs. Casey Marie Dunn (March 5th, 9:30 AM, interviewed by Detective Lamar Shaw)

Detective Shaw: Okay, now, I want you to focus, and tell me exactly what happened—starting with the landing of the canoe. Can you do that for me?

Dunn: Sure—yeah, I think. (sniffling) I ... we were taking on water, like I said. Not enough to sink—I'm not sure you can sink a canoe, can you? But enough so that we'd become extremely uncomfortable, and wanted to know where it was coming from.

Detective Shaw: So you landed the canoe near the Pyreridge Wind Farm. To inspect it.

Dunn: Yes. Well, we didn't know about the wind farm, not yet. There was only a thin width of beach—or whatever you'd call it—before the cliffs, which climbed straight up and sort of plateaued—and that's where the turbines were, still out of sight.

Detective Shaw: Out of earshot, too?

Dunn: You know, it's funny you should ask me that. I mean, yes—but ... but no, too. Because I remember sensing—a kind of pressure—like, like something heavy was laying on the air itself. Like, you know that feeling you get when you go up in elevation and your ears need to pop? —like that, only softer, more elusive. I honestly thought I was imagining it—at least until Bobby turned the boat over and we saw the hole in its bottom, at which the pressure seemed to increase (to double, actually), though only for a moment. Then it subsided and we were just standing there, looking at that hole. That funny little hole.

Detective Shaw: That's a curious way to describe it ... 'that funny little hole.' Was there something unusual about it?

Dunn: Well—yes. I should say so.

Detective Shaw: What? What was so unusual?

Dunn: It—it was shaped like a spiral. A perfect, proportionate little spiral, just as smooth and perfect as if it had been molded into the boat.

Detective Shaw: You mean drilled into the boat, surely?

Dunn: No. I mean *molded.* Or—I don't know—melted, maybe. But definitely not drilled.

Detective Shaw: And you'd never noticed it before?

Dunn: No, of course not. If that were the case, we'd never have embarked on the trip—much less without our phones.

Detective Shaw: Yes, I've been wondering about that. Help me understand, could you? It seems irresponsible to have left without them, even on such a wide, lazy river. Weren't you concerned about, say, an unexpected weather event? Or having a medical emergency? Being doctors, I can't imagine that—

Dunn: Mr. Shaw, please. You have to understand, the on-call nature of our jobs was precisely why such an excursion had become necessary in the first place. Surely it's the same in police work? No, this once, for our sanity and for our marriage, we were going commando, as they say. No cellphones, no iPads, no anything but nature and each other for the duration of the trip. That—at least that much makes sense ... doesn't it?

Detective Shaw: Of course, Mrs. Dunn. I suppose it does. But, my God, being so far from the nearest town, and not even knowing precisely where you were at, that must have been terrifying. What on earth did you plan to do?

Dunn: Well, the only thing we could do, which was to right the boat and continue on—while doing our best to bail, of course. And that's when I first noticed it: way up there beyond the ridge; something moving, swinging, like the tip of a giant sword—only black against the sun—something which, after we'd scaled a nearby rockfall, turned out to be the blades of an industrial wind turbine—just one out of what seemed an endless array, spread out across the scrublands for as far as the eye could see, casting long shadows, like Cyclopean sentinels.

Detective Shaw: Cyclop—cyclopean—what is that? Is that Latin?

Dunn: Huge, Detective. Massive.

Detective Shaw: Right. And then, what? You returned to your boat?

Dunn: You know we didn't return to the boat.

Detective Shaw: Yes, I understand that, just as I understood they found a spiraled hole exactly one inch in diameter in the bottom of your canoe. But it's better for the record if I pretend I know nothing, okay?

Dunn: Okay. No, then we began walking, because we'd figured out where we were at—the Pyreridge Wind Farm just north of Edgerton, as you said. And we knew, also, that they gave tours there and even had a visitor's center; a center which might still be staffed even though it was extremely late in the day, and which would have a telephone.

Detective Shaw: A wise move.

Dunn: Yes, it was as good as any. Or so it seemed—until we came to the wind turbine with the white service truck parked at its base; and saw ... where we saw ...

Detective Shaw: Yes?

Dunn: You've seen the pictures, Detective.

Detective Shaw: But I need to pretend I have not. And I need to hear what you, personally, saw with your very own eyes. For the record, Dr. Dunn. Please.

Dunn: Where we saw a man, a service technician, by his clothes, hung by his neck from his own safety line ... from the back of the wind turbine's nacelle. Just ... just sort of swaying there, in the wind. A man who was missing one shoe. And who ...

Detective Shaw: Go on ...

Dunn: And who had no discernible face. Okay? (inaudible) *He had no face*. Isn't that good enough?

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DETECTIVE SHAW: I DIDN'T mean to upset you. Still, talk about that a little. You say, 'he had no face'—what does that mean? Had it been mutilated or disfigured in some way? Was he wearing a nylon? What?

Dunn: No, no, nothing like that. It was just, dark, somehow. Smudged out. The truth is we couldn't tell; it was like the whole world was in focus except for that one spot, which was blurred, unlit. That's when I noticed all the little holes in in the truck, like it had been riddled with bullets— except on closer inspection they turned out to be spirals, like the one in the boat. I say 'I' because Bobby's attention had drifted to the blades of the wind turbine, which were directly above us, going *woosh, woosh, woosh*. And it was the strangest thing because it was almost as if he'd become hypnotized—as if they were a great swinging pendulum—to the point that he completely ignored me when I pointed out the visitor's center and only continued to watch.

Detective Shaw: Well, that *is* strange. Was he in shock, you think?

Dunn: My husband? The emergency room doctor? (laughter) No. No, this was something—different. Something more meditative. Almost as if—

Detective Shaw: Something spiritual?

Dunn: Yes! As though he were having an epiphany. To the extant that I had to physically drag him away; at which he came out of it and was just Bobby again—just everyone's favorite life-saver.

Detective Shaw: And that's when you went to the visitor's center and called the police.

Dunn: Yes. It—it was unlocked. We just walked right in. But no one was there, even though there was a utility truck out front. And then I called the police but the dispatcher had bad news: they wouldn't be able to get there for a half-hour, at least. And that's when I just, well, broke, for lack of a better term, and the next thing I knew I was waking up while Bobby dabbed at my temples with a moist cloth and the phone rang incessantly and he began telling me to answer it, that it was 911 calling back, and that he'd searched for the keys to the truck out front but hadn't found them and was going to go back to the first truck—the truck with all the holes in it—to see if *its* keys were there.

Detective Shaw: And how did you feel about that? About him returning to the scene? Or you being left alone in the visitor's center, for that matter?

Dunn: Oh, I thought it was a terrible idea! I didn't want to let him out of my sight. There was something so strange about him all of a sudden— so out of character—like he was high on marijuana. And his eyes, they were so distant, so unfocused. I practically begged him not to go. But then he *had* gone and I was answering the phone, and the dispatcher kept me busy with questions for I don't know how long ...

Detective Shaw: You say he wasn't himself and that his eyes were blurry; was there anything else? Was his speech slurred, for example? How about his color?

Dunn: He—he kept scratching himself, like he was covered in insect bites. And he was pulling at his clothes, especially his collar, as though they were suffocating him. It was all so very unusual, and I would have dropped the phone and ran after him if not for ... if not ...

Detective Shaw: If not for what, Dr. Dunn?

Dunn: If not ... for the blood. The blood on the glass case.

Detective Shaw: I'm afraid I don't—

Dunn: Stop. Just, stop, please. You know as well as I do that—

Detective Shaw: But the tape recorder doesn't, Mrs. Dunn. Now, please. Tell me what you saw that prevented you from pursuing your husband. Describe it to me.

Dunn: There—there was a large glass case in the center of the foyer ... it ... it contained a miniature of the wind farm., as you know. And it—someone had written something on top of it. Some kind of a message. In blood.

Detective Shaw: I see. Thank you. Now tell me: what did this message *say?*

Dunn: It ... I don't remember exactly. It was mostly gibberish. Something about 'the Wind' and 'the Way,' and going in to 'Them.' Something about how 'They' had attached themselves to the turbines—whatever

'They' were. And finally just a long scrawl, followed by a warning, all in caps, GET OUT OF HERE AS FAST AS YOU CAN.

Detective Shaw: I see. And I guess it needs to be asked: Did you? Or did you continue to field the 911 operator's questions?

Dunn: No. I dropped the phone as fast as I could and ran out the side door, the one Bobby had went out. And the first thing I saw was Bobby's pale-blue windbreaker, just thrown aside in the dirt, and further out, his T-shirt, white against the sage.

Detective Shaw: It's like he was burning up. Was it hot out? What was the temperature, you think?

Dunn: It was cold! No, like I said, it was if the clothes were suffocating him, cutting off his circulation. All I know it that when I reached the T-shirt I saw his belt further out, and beyond that, his shoes, just lying amidst the cheat-grass. That's when I knew something truly terrible had happened, *was* happening, and that if I didn't find him quickly he might genuinely hurt himself; though I'd scarcely had the thought when I noticed someone crumpled face down in the sage—not Bobby, this man was fully dressed—and ran to him.

Detective Shaw: The other turbine technician.

Dunn: Oh, are we done with the ignorant act?

Detective Shaw: It was a slip; I'm starting to think about lunch. Okay, and, seeing this, what did you do?

Dunn: He wasn't breathing and so I rolled him over. And ...

Detective Shaw: Yes? And what?

Dunn: Jesus, gods, you know what!

Detective Shaw: What did you see when you rolled him over, Dr. Dunn?

Dunn: I saw that he had no face. That it ... that it had just *spiraled* in, like the hole in the boat. That there was a gaping funnel where his eyes and nose and upper lip should have been—mottled red and black, pink and gray—just twisted cartilage and brain tissue. And then his body

spasmed, as though by a reflex, and the funnel seemed to burp, spitting up blood.

Detective Shaw: Jesus.

Dunn: After which, dear God, I can't say, because I was running away as fast as I could; past Bobby's shoes and toward the wind turbine (the one with the truck parked at its base), as well as past a few dozen new funnels in the ground—which grew in size as I approached from an inch or two across to ones the size of manhole covers. Until I came to the turbine and—and stopped dead in my tracks. Because there was Bobby kneeling prone in the dirt, like a Muslim, I suppose, or a Buddhist, but completely nude—bowing before the turbine, the hatch of which was open, seeming almost to pray.

Detective Shaw: But ... but all right, in spite of his behavior.

Dunn: No, Mr. Shaw, not 'all right.' Because when he sat up again I saw that his back was ... It was riddled with those same spiral funnels. There were even some in his arms. But—but that wasn't all. Because, after he'd stood with some difficulty and turned to face me (he must have sensed my presence; that or saw my shadow), I realized something else. And that was that his eyes had gone completely white—rather they had rolled back in his skull enough so that only the whites were visible—at which moment he spoke and said, calmly, "The turbines, don't look at them. They eat your eyes."

Detective Shaw: The turbines ... they ... what did that mean?

Dunn: I'm sure I don't know. All I know is that my husband had become something hardly recognizable ... and that I was terrified. So much so that I began backing away as he approached— which seemed to anger him, enough that when he resumed speaking he sounded vicious—alien—full of disdain.

Detective Shaw: Good lord—what did he *say? Think,* Mrs. Dunn. This is the most vital part of your testimony ...

Dunn: He said that he was taking the way of the wind and the sky, and that he was going in—to *Them*—by which I presume he meant going

into the tower and scaling the ladder. And he said other things: That our thoughts made patterns in their world—left 'prints,' as it were—as did theirs in ours; and that that was how they'd found us, by listening to our thoughts, zeroing in on our patterns. And he said that Bobby was merely a bundle of sensory organs wrapped in a skin of decaying matter and so wasn't important, wasn't needed. That only *they* mattered—they, the beings attached to and inhabiting the turbines. And that ... that ...

Detective Shaw: What, Mrs. Dunn? *Say it*.

Dunn: But ... don't you see? It doesn't matter what he said, because it wasn't him speaking, not really. Bobby would never have described a human being as just a bundle of sensory organs; he truly believed, with every fiber of his being, that we were more than that—more than just the sum of our parts—it was what inspired him to become a doctor in the first place. And knowing what I knew, knowing what kind of man he was, I pressed him, telling him that Bobby *did* matter—that he mattered to his patients and that he mattered to me—more than I would ever be able to describe. And then I approached him and embraced him and told him I loved him—feeling, for the briefest of moments, the spirals beginning to close on his back—and he smiled, his eyes returning to normal, after which he said, or started to say, "I love ..." (room tone)

Detective Shaw: (inaudible) He—he told you he loved you?

Dunn: No. He ... his eyes rolled back ... and then his face, it ... it simply imploded. In a spiral. Like someone had flushed a toilet full of blood and brains.

(room tone)

Dunn: And then his body, which had become light as a feather, like a papery husk, came apart in my arms—and simply blew away. Like so many dandelion seeds.

(room tone)

Detective Shaw: I ... I have to ask. It's—it's my job, you understand. Did—did you ever feel like ... I mean, did—

Dunn: Did I ever feel like I was being targeted myself?

Detective Shaw: (inaudible)

Dunn: Yes, right after that. I'd—I'd turned my palms up, see, because I couldn't comprehend that he could be there one minute and just ... gone the next. And there were spirals in both of them. Not deep, just, just impressions, but it was enough to snap me out of whatever I was feeling and to open the door of the truck, where I found its keys right there in the ignition.

Detective Shaw: And that's when you drove onto the highway and—

Dunn: And didn't stop until I reached Edgerton. Not even when the squad cars started passing me going the other way, their lights flashing.

Detective Shaw: Yes, well. When they got there they found things much as you described ... and photographs were taken. The other men, the turbine technicians, they ... when we tried to move them they, too, were lost to the wind.

Dunn: And the turbines? Have they been inspected?

Detective Shaw: (inaudible) Just turbines. Nor has there been any reports of ... strange occurrences. It would seem, then ... that this was an isolated event.

Dunn: An isolated event ...

Detective Shaw: Yeah.

Dunn: Are—are we done, Mr. Shaw?

Detective Shaw: Yeah. For now. There's ... there's a car downstairs; they'll, ah, take you home.

(inaudible shuffling)

Detective Shaw: Oh, and Mrs. Dunn? Thank you. I know ... it couldn't have been easy.

Dunn: Goodnight, Detective.

Detective Shaw: Goodnight.

(end of recording)